ARCHITECTURAL PLANNING AND BUILDING PRACTICES
AT THE BASILICA OF THE THEATER IN MESSENE

Nikos Tsivikis

Based on the basilica of the Theater in Messene the architectural planning and building practices in provincial monuments of the sixth century is examined. In the basilica’s impost capitals, the use of positioning marks for the correct setting of the colonnades is observed and on the paved floor of the sanctuary auxiliary etchings are visible for the proper setting of the liturgical furnishing. This evidence offers insight into the process of building monuments like the Messenian basilica.

Keywords
6th century; Early Byzantine architecture; building techniques; workshop organization; architectural planning; basilica of the Theater of Messene; Messene; Peloponnese.

The study of Early Byzantine (4th-6th c. AD) architectural planning has seen major breakthroughs in the past decades, and issues of building techniques, site organization and job specialization have received intense scrutiny. The work of Charalambos Bouras, who pioneered many aspects of documenting and interpreting the function of architectural planning and design in Byzantine architecture, has been of paramount importance to its study. Still, many questions about the ways that Byzantine architects and masons conceived architectural plans and then applied them remain.

Part of this paper is based on a presentation first delivered at the Workshop Masons at Work organized by Robert Ousterhout, Renata Holod and Lothar Haselberger at the University of Pennsylvania in 2012 but never published; partially because a lot has changed since then in our understanding and dating of the monument.

Some of the most important studies of the recent decades are: R. Ousterhout, Master Builders of Byzantium, Princeton 1999. Ch. Bouras, “Master Craftsmen, and Building Activities in Byzantium”, A. Laïou–Ch. Bouras (eds), The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh Through the Fifteenth Century, 2, Washington, D.C.
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unanswered. Traditionally most of the discussion on architectural planning during the Early Byzantine period has been limited to major monuments in cities like Constantinople and Ravenna of the fifth and sixth centuries AD. The aim of this paper is to explore some of these issues, both in terms of chronology and the gradual “disappearance” of ancient architectural building traditions after the sixth century, and in terms of the spatial distribution of monuments that are located far from the important urban centers of the Empire. These questions are closely connected with the relative scarcity of discussion in the bibliography on building processes of humble and more provincial Byzantine architectural monuments.

My analysis is based on unpublished material from the excavation of the Early Byzantine town of Messene in the SW Peloponnese. The paper evaluates the dissemination of certain building techniques (fitters’ marks, auxiliary lines, incisions, measurements) by the masons responsible for constructing ecclesiastical monuments in the Peloponnesian city of the 6th c. AD.

Messene was an important Hellenistic and Roman city of the Peloponnese and southern Greece in general, and continued to be of some significance in early Byzantine times as attested by the contemporary sources. From the second half of the sixth century historical information about the site becomes literally non-existent, and we only hear about Messene again as a village or town named Vourkano in sources of the tenth-eleventh centuries. This situation is generally attributed to the migration of Slavic populations into the area by the last decades of the sixth century and the loosening of imperial control in large portions of the Peloponnese.

By contrast, systematic excavation in Messene has been uncovering a settlement that continued its existence, even after the sources fall silent. Next to the early Byzantine residential remains and the extended cemeteries, three Early Christian church buildings have


been located, and one of them has been fully excavated. This church, conventionally named: the basilica of the Theater, is a three-aisled basilica and was erected directly to the east of the Hellenistic and Roman theater of Messene (Fig. 1). It was founded on and partially re-uses a preexisting Roman building in the same location with long open stoas and a monopteros temple in the middle. The main building was timber-roofed and the superstructure was supported by just the outside walls and the two colonnades crowned by semicircular arches (Fig. 2). The plan of the building is extremely simple following the general trends of local Early Christian arch-itecture in the southwest Peloponnes: a wide central nave, narrow side aisles, a semi-circular apse protruding at the east end, and a rectangular narthex (Fig. 3).


11Among the few early Byzantine ecclesiastical monuments known from Messenia the best documented ones are: the now destroyed Ayioleos basilica near Methone (Ch. Bouras, “Επανεξέταση του λεγόμενου ‘Αγιολέου’ κοντά στην Μεθώνη”, Φίλια ἔπη εἰς Γ. Ε. Μυλωνᾶς, 3, Athens 1989, 302-322), the Drakaki plot three-aisled basilica in Methone (E. Chalkia, “Παλαιοχριστιανική Μυλωνή. Αρχαίοι λόγοι εις το χώρο της Μυλωνής”, Χριστιανική Μεσσηνία. Μνημεία και Ιστορία της Ιερᾶς Μητρόπολις Μεσσηνίας, Athens 2010,
The architectural elements of the Messenian basilica consist mostly of recycled material from pre-existing buildings. The main exception are the marble capitals from the colonnades and the liturgical furnishings. In earlier publications of sculptural material from the building and in preliminary excavation reports before the conclusion of the excavation a dating for the building in the 7th or 8th century based mainly on this architectural sculpture had been suggested.12

84) and the five-aisled basilica of Philiatra (D. Pallas, “Ἀνασκαφὴ ἐς Φιλιατρὰ τῆς Τριφυλλίας”, PraktArchEt 1960, 177-194).

12 A dating of the construction of the basilica in the 8th c. was suggested by: Penna – Lambropoulou – Anagnostakis, op.cit. (n. 9), 382-385; a dating of the basilica in the 7th c. was later suggested by: Tsivikis, op.cit. (n. 8), 68-69; while the annual excavation reports refrained from assigning a fixed date P. Themelis, “Ἀνασκαφὴ Μεσσήνης”, PraktArchEt 1998, 106-108; PraktArchEt 1999, 81-86; PraktArchEt 2000, 82-84; PraktArchEt 2001, 79-82; PraktArchEt 2002, 34-38; PraktArchEt 2003, 33-34; PraktArchEt 2004, 47-48.

The continuation of the excavation of the basilica of Messene and further research into old and new material has provided evidence that a dating of the building in the middle of the sixth century is more likely.13 The main arguments are: 1) the architectural plan of the three-aisled columnar basilica (Figs 2, 3) with the elongated proportions and a single apse at its east ending would be very difficult to be attributed to Byzantine architectural tradition after the end of the sixth

13 A lengthy discussion of the sum of the archaeological material from the basilica of the Theater of Messene in: N. Tsivikis, Ο βυζαντινός οικισμός της Μεσσήνης (300-800 μ.Χ.). Μετάβαση από την Αρχαιότητα στον Μεσαίωνα, Phd dissertation (unpublished), University of Crete, Rethymno 2016, 208-255; a dating for the basilica of the Theater of Messene in the sixth century was first suggested by: M. Karras, «Η εκκλησιαστική αρχιτεκτονική στη Μεσσηνία, 7ος-12ος αιώνας», Χριστιανική Μεσογεία. Μνημεία και Ιστορία της Ιεράς Μητροπόλεως Μεσσηνίας, Athens 2010, 147-149.
sixth century bronze coins hidden under the earth floor of one of the north annexes further supports a dating of Kyparissos in Mani that caused confusion to the excavator of the basilica who dated the building in the 6th c. and the sculpture in the 7th c.: N. Drandakis, "Σκαφικαί ἔρευναι ἐν Κυπαρίσσῳ Μανής", PraktArchEt 1958, 199-219. Soon after Pallas ["Ἀνασκαφή εἰς Ἀργος", AD 16 (1960), Chronika, Athens 1962, 98] argued that the architectural sculpture of Kyparissos should be dated along with the construction of the Mani basilica in the 6th c. This older but still interesting broader discussion of such material in: D. Pallas, "«Ἰουστινιάνεια» γλυπτά αἰσθητικῶς ἀνεπέργαστα", Εἱς μνήμην Παναγιώτου Α.Μιχελῆ, Athens 1972, 420-441 (= Συναγωγή Μελετῶν Βυζαντινῆς Ἀρχαιολογίας, 2, Athens 1987-1988, 497-524.)

Other Peloponnesian examples of crude 6th c. architectural sculptures include e.g. the capitals from Tegea, that are also the closest parallels to the Messenian ones [A. Orlandos, "Παλαιοχριστιανικά καὶ βυζαντινά μνημεία Τεγέας-Νυκλίου", ABME 12 (1973), 18-19, fig. 15, and 92-94, figs 54a-γ] or some capitals and impost from Argos (A. Oikonomou-Laniado, Argos paléochrétiennne: contribution à l'étude du Péloponnèse byzantin, Oxford 2003, 18, fig. 27).

Fig. 3. Ancient Messene. Basilica of the Theater, ground plan.

14 The three-aisled basilica of the Episkopi at Mastros, which has been dated in the 7th c. still differs significantly from earlier buildings like the Messenian basilica as it completely lacks the “Hellenistic” style colonnades with stylobates and free supports (P. L. Vouisopoulou, Ἡ ἐκκλησιαστικὴ ἀρχιτεκτονικὴ εἰς τὴν Δευτεραύην Ελλάδα καὶ τὴν Ἡπείρον ἀπὸ τὸ τέλος τοῦ 7ου μέχρι τοῦ τέλους τοῦ 10ου αἰώνος Thessaloniki 1992, 11-20). This is further attested in the broader study of Byzantine basiliicas from the 7th c. and through the Middle Byzantine period: M. Altripp, Die Basilika in Byzanz: Gestalt, Ausstattung und Funktion sowie das Verhältnis zur Kreuzkuppelkirche, Berlin 2013, 8-12.

15 There is a large group of early Byzantine architectural sculptures with provincial and rough execution originating from various sites in the Peloponnes. Characteristic are the pieces from...
the construction of the building before the middle of the sixth century\textsuperscript{18}.

Thus, the basilica of Messene, although a rather simple and modest building, poses a series of questions regarding the architectural design of a provincial small scale monument and its execution in the middle of the sixth century in a Byzantine town of the periphery\textsuperscript{17}.

Special focus should be given to the marble capitals that crowned the columns dividing the three aisles of the church. In contrast to their crude incised decoration, the impost capitals show a very interesting and precise articulation of volumes (Fig. 6). From top to bottom we observe first the impost part, properly expressed by an inverse elongated truncated pyramid, sitting on a well-defined flattened cubical volume that represents a schematic version of the ionic capital with a short cylindrical drum attached to the bottom to carry it onto the column shaft. The only decorated surface is consistently on just one of the diagonal sides of the impost. The stone-mason has paid special attention to keeping the three volumes distinct even when it would have been very easy to render them continuously or even omit the flattened cube. This is emphatically evident where the cubic capital meets the impost – the cube is made slightly larger than the impost, in order to define the separated volumes.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the schematic rendering of the ionic impost capital is a conscious and meaningful translation of the early Byzantine original containing in simplification all the elements of the ionic impost capital.

These capitals are actually the only elements of the colonnades carved anew specifically for their use in the basilica. Stylobates, column bases and columns are all in second use from nearby Roman and Hellenistic edifices that lay in ruins at the time of the church’s construction (Fig. 4). The capitals were created locally in Messene by reusing and re-carving older marble and we can even identify the exact source of this material.

Three of the surviving capitals preserve traces of decoration from their previous use on their upper or lower sides, that was not removed later as these sides would not be visible (Fig. 5). On these surfaces, there are segments of a deeply carved inwards-curving band of fascia with foliage and lotus flowers, a typical Roman decoration in both theme and style\textsuperscript{19}. One of the capitals carries additionally an inscription in Greek (SEG 51-491) on its upper non-re-worked side, next to the garland, reading:  

\[ΕΠΩΝΟΜΑ \ ΙΩΑΝΔΟΣ\]

The inscription is written in informal large lettering (0.07 m.) with characteristic lunate sigmas typical of late Roman and early Byzantine inscriptions in Messene\textsuperscript{20}. Themelis has dated the inscription in the late 4th c. and has interpreted the text as referring most probably to the original spot of the architectural member that was later cut down and reshaped into a capital for use in the church. This must have been a marble door-jamb located probably in a niche at the Roman scenea frontis of the theater of Messene hosting the statue of Isis\textsuperscript{21}.

\textsuperscript{18} P. Themelis, “Ανασκαφή Μεσσήνης”, PraktArchEt 2014, 93.

\textsuperscript{17} Pottery finds suggest imports of wares until at least the 5th c. AD, albeit declining in numbers: A. Yangaki, “Late Roman Pottery from Funerary Monument 18 and the adjacent monuments of the Arcadian Gate (Ancient Messene, Peloponnese)”, LRWC 4 - Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry, The Mediterranean: Archaeology and Archaeometry, The Mediterranean, a market without frontiers, eds N. Poukos-Papadimitriou – E. Nodarou – V. Klikoglou, 1, Oxford 2014, 769-776.

\textsuperscript{19} Analogous emphasis on the morphological distinction between the impost and the capital on the sides can be seen in an ironic impost capital from the Archaeological Museum of Lamia dated “in the end of the Early Christian period, or maybe even later”: V. Sythiakaki-Kritisimalli, Ο ανάγλυφος αρχαιοτεχνικός διάκοσμος στη Θεσσαλία και Φθιώτιδα. Παλαιοχριστιανικά και πρωτοχριστιανικά χρόνια, Volos 2012, 245-248, cat. n. 36, pl. 17, fig. 94-96.


\textsuperscript{21} Themelis, op.cit. (n. 27), 102, fig. 13, for the statue of Isis Pelagia, 98-102; also for the Isis niche: P. Themelis with a contribution on the masons’ marks by Kl. Sidirooulos, “The Theater at Messene: Building phases and Masons’ Marks, The Architecture of the Ancient Greek Theatre. Acts of an International Conference at the

\textsuperscript{18} P. Themelis, “Some aspects of Messene”, PraktArchEt 2014, 93.
Excavation at the theater has shown that by the fifth-sixth century a lively and organized quarry was in operation in parts of the theater with the cutting down older architectural elements for the building needs of the early Byzantine city\(^2\). Already since late Roman times it is known that the exploitation of ‘ancient’ architectural monuments for reusing their material was a common and organised process, occasionally highly regulated by imperial legislation connected to special individuals who could own or profit from the old material\(^2\). Roman theaters in the Greek peninsula that soon after the beginning of the fourth century started falling into disuse were among the first monuments to be dismantled for their material\(^2\). The theater of Messene is a good example of this process, and the architectural fragment with the name of Isis, its “quarrying” and reuse in the basilica attests to details of this process.

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Fig. 5. Ancient Messene. Basilica of the Theater, capital Λ178.

Fig. 6. Ancient Messene. Basilica of the Theater, capital Λ134.
The practice of recycling older building material for the creation of new architectural sculptures was quite common in the early Byzantine period. Two examples from important early Byzantine architectural monuments where the same principle is employed offer a useful comparison. In the Acheiropoietos basilica of Thessaloniki built in the fifth century some of the original pilaster capitals are reworked from Roman *spolia* that retained parts of their original decoration or inscriptions on the non-visible upper side. In the basilica of St. John in Ephesus among the Justinianic architectural sculptures a number of ionic impost capitals were also created out of older Roman marble elements that still bear the traces of their original decoration on the upper or rear sides. In all cases we see that the initial decoration did not pose a hindrance for the reuse as long as it could be hidden inside the masonry of the new building. These pieces also provide evidence for the work of itinerant or local workshops that would be able to create the needed architectural members using local material, either in addition to imported members like in Thessaloniki or Ephesus, or working exclusively with the local reused material like in Messene.

But the information provided by the capitals of Messene extends also to the building conditions and application of architectural planning. Out of the six fully preserved capitals of the basilica of the Theater four of them have inscribed Greek numerals on their lower circular surfaces. These numerals were made by the sculptors and/or the masons and were connected to the production process of the capitals and the assembly process of the colonnades. These marks should be considered *positioning marks* since they are parts of an information transfer code on the handling of each member and its correct final position in the building.

If the capitals were identical it would not make much sense to have specially designated positions in the building. So, although the articulation of the volumes of the capitals is quite remarkable and well planned, the capitals demonstrate a peculiar differentiation in height, varying from 0.23 m. to 0.35 m. This is not an error in design or execution, rather the contrary: with this variation in height the capitals besides their obvious function of carrying the weight from the arches to the columns serve a secondary and equally important function. As the only pieces of the colonnade that were carved anew, they were utilized by the builders to harmonize the differences in height caused by the reuse of an odd collection of columns and bases.

The numbering was extremely important, as each capital could have only one position in the triple combination of architectural elements (base-column-capital). Each component had a different height, but then they all added up to the same total height in their final positions in the colonnades. The impost capitals thus functioned as a means for the masons to establish a viable

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27 Penna – Anagnostakis – Lambropoulou, op.cit. (n. 9), 377-379, cat. no. 1, 3-5.
28 Jonathan Bardill suggests the use of the term *positioning marks* [Bardill, op.cit. (n. 2), 182], while Andrea Paribeni has suggested as more accurate the term *fitters' marks* [Paribeni, op.cit. (n. 20), 662].
solution for the most crucial element of a timber-roofed basilica, the colonnades carrying the roof.

By focusing on these small positioning marks on the capitals we open a window into the understanding of the building conditions. The procedure reconstructed here from the initial design of the building, to the acquisition of the needed materials, and finally to the carving of the new architectural members, suggests that the whole project was overseen and executed by one group of people who transmitted information and guidelines through given measurements. The stonemason knew from the architect exactly how high a capital should be, and through positioning marks the stonemason could indicate in a fixed and clear way its correct position in the building. One can imagine the master builder, after collecting the material and halfway through the building process, handing some kind of written instructions to the stonemasons, and then the masons being literate enough to carve into the capitals they had just created, where exactly they were supposed to be placed according to the instructions.

The second characteristic connected with the implementation of precise architectural planning and also attesting to a unified building process is the evidence of incised marks and guidelines on the building’s paved floor. On the floor of the bema a shallow incised tracing line was recorded extending to a total length of app. 2 m. (figs. 3 and 9). The straight line is centered on the East-West axis of the building and the central aisle. It runs west beginning from the step of the raised semicircular exedra of the apse extending along three or four flagstones up to the center of the sanctuary.

Around this axial line, perfectly centered and symmetrical to it, a number of low sockets have been carved out (Fig. 8). Four smaller ones form a narrow rectangular shape and they should be interpreted as the placements for the legs of the altar table. These are framed by a wider square formed by larger sockets for the four bases of the altar’s ciborium supports. Based on its position and its relation with the rectangular sockets the incised line should be considered as an auxiliary mark created by the masons during the creation of the building and its immovable architectural furnishing and especially the altar table and its ciborium, as it does not extend to the west beyond the area covered by the ciborium.

It is quite interesting that such a permanent and irreversible solution was implemented here. Byzantine builders used various auxiliary lines in ground plans and vertical views, usually in the form of string lines fixed onto nails called σπαρτία. We can also imagine other less permanent media that could have been used for auxiliary lines, such as chalk or charcoal. It would have been easy also in the basilica of Messene to use a simple string cord, without having a permanent and indelible marking on the Sanctuary’s pavement. However, the solution adopted with the incised line might be connected with a number of possible reasons: the training of the craftsmen and the forms of collaboration between the team members or maybe the transmission of information between two different teams of artisans, the builders and the sculptors.

Although this kind of permanent etchings on the surfaces of early Byzantine architectural monuments is not common, our example is not unique. In the sixth-century church of the Holy Cross in Resafa a group of similar incisions located on the paved floor has been documented. The Messene mark is more closely related to the middle axial line of the Resafa monument. But if the Syrian monument’s incisions show evidence of higher complexity, as there are also curved lines that would have been used for fashioning key-stones for the arches and other dome elements, the Messene example is more akin to the simpler setting marks on the stylobates of the Studios Basilica in Constantinople used for the proper positioning of the columns. Such setting marks

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21 Bouras, op.cit. (n. 1), 28.

22 Ousterhout, op.cit. (n. 1), 64.


on stylobates are commonly found in many fifth- and sixth-century monuments, like in the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or in Basilica A in Amorium. It is difficult to sufficiently explain the existence of so highly visible incised auxiliary lines on the floor of the Messenian basilica; however, whatever the explanation might be, it certainly is telling of the anxiety of the masons and the stonecutters to avoid mistakes during the execution of the building and its furnishings.

The Messenian monument stands in this way on an interesting crossroads both temporally and geographically. On the one hand, dating the basilica to approximately the middle of the 6th century places it at the meeting point of traditional Early Christian architectural forms and new transitional architectural forms that would culminate in subsequent centuries. On the other hand, Messene is in the interior of the Peloponnese, away from the main sea routes of the Empire where the commerce in architectural elements and the transfer of traditions and craftsmen was mainly conducted up to the late sixth century. In this way, the solutions adopted here offer precious insight into conditions that usually pass unnoticed, but which pertained to a large part of the Byzantine Empire.

In the Messenian basilica, many questions remain. Why are these marks and lines present and in what way do they facilitate the building’s construction? Are they part of a typical method of construction, or is this a rare case? Are the marks connected with the skills of a well-trained group of masons, or rather the contrary, are they evidence of an insecure *protomastoras* (masterbuilder) and a less able labor unit? Could the emphasis on positioning marks in this simple and straightforward monument mean an extended construction period and the need for the guidelines to be actually set in stone instead of marked with another more ephemeral material? Or could it imply a gap in communication between the various groups of masons and stone masons, who needed explicit signs to guide one another? Or could this all be part of a system for recording the work; a system also corresponding to some payment at the end of the construction\(^{37}\)?

The church of Messene itself and the insight it can offer us into building techniques stand as a good example of things fading away and things rising. At the same moment, it poses as an example of the highest possible achievement with the fewest available means, an outstanding moment for the local Messenian community. Almost all of its stylistic solutions come from a rich tradition of ancient forms, elements and rhythms, but, under the new circumstances prevalent in the Peloponnese and much of the Empire by the middle of the sixth century, all of them acquire a new character, closer to what will come to be called transitional or medieval in the following centuries. The same is true for the techniques: the architectural elements are all spolia, the decorated capitals become mainly functional components, the ancient technique of positioning marks is used mainly to facilitate the economizing of material and stability of the building, and the setting lines make no effort to hide themselves\(^{37}\).


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Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies Archive.
Νίκος Τσιβίκης

ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝΙΚΟΥ ΣΧΕΔΙΑΣΜΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΟΙΚΟΔΟΜΙΚΕΣ ΠΡΑΚΤΙΚΕΣ ΣΤΗ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΑΤΡΟΥ ΤΗΣ ΜΕΣΣΗΝΗΣ

Σ το άρθρο εξετάζονται ζητήματα αρχιτεκτονικού σχεδιασμού, κατασκευαστικών πρακτικών και οργάνωσης εργασιών στην πρωτοβυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική, ως προς την εφαρμογή τους σε επαρχιακά και λιγότερο φιλόδοξα μνημεία.

Προκειμένου να επιτευχθεί ο στόχος αυτός, εξετάζεται ένα παλαιοχριστιανικό μνημείο εντός του πρωτοβυζαντινού οικισμού της Μεσσήνης, που έχει ανασκαφεί συστηματικά και βρίσκεται υπό αναλυτική μελέτη. Το εν λόγω μνημείο, που συμβατικά ονομάζεται «βασιλική του Θεάτρου» εξαιτίας της εγγύτητας που έχει με το ελληνιστικό και ρωμαϊκό θέατρο της Μεσσήνης, είναι μια τρικλιτή ξυλόστεγη βασιλική με επιμήκεις αναλογίες, η οποία σώζεται στο επίπεδο του δαπέδου (Εικ. 1-3).

Από τα αρχιτεκτονικά γλυπτά ξεχωρίζουν τα κιονόκρανα με συμφυές επίθημα που, παρά τη συνοπτικότητα της μορφής τους, αποδίδουν με πληρότητα όλα τα επιμέρους χαρακτηριστικά του προτύπου τους, του ιωνικού κιονοκράνου με επίθημα (Εικ. 6). Τα κιονόκρανα αυτά σκάλιστηκαν όλα επί τόπου και ως πρώτη ύλη χρησιμοποιήθηκαν μαρμάρινα μέλη από το παρακείμενο θέατρο, όπου μετά τον 5ο αιώνα λειτουργούσε οργανωμένο λατομείο. Ορισμένα από τα κιονόκρανα της βασιλικής σώζουν μάλιστα ίχνη διακόσμησης ή και επιγραφές από την προηγούμενη χρήση τους στο ρωμαϊκό προσκήνιο του θεάτρου (Εικ. 5).

Η υπογράμμιση της παρουσίας των μικρών αυτών σημαδιών ανοίγει ένα παράθυρο στην κατανόηση των συνθηκών κατασκευής. Η διαδικασία οικοδόμησης μπορεί να ανασυντεθεί από την αρχική σύλληψη και τον σχεδιασμό έως την εξασφάλιση των αναγκαίων πρώτων υλών και υλικών, και τέλος τη λάξευση των νέων αρχιτεκτονικών μελών, και υποδεικνύει έτσι ότι το όλο εγχείρημα βρισκόταν υπό την καθοδήγηση και εκτέλεση μιας ομάδας ανθρώπων που μοιράζονταν πληροφορίες και οδηγίες μέσω μιας συγκεκριμένης διαδικασίας ενόποιησης στη βασιλική του Θεάτρου, εντοπίζεται στο λίθινο δάπεδο του ερεύνητου κλίτους.
ιερού βήματος εντοπίστηκε αβαθής ευθύγραμμη χάραξη που εκτείνεται σε τρεις τουλάχιστον συνεχόμενες πλάκες του δαπέδου και σε μήκος 2 μ. περίπου (Εικ. 8). Η χάραξη αυτή αντιπροσώπευε απόλυτα με τον κατά μήκος αξόνα του κεντρικού κλίτους και ολόκληρο τον ναό. Συμμετρικά τοποθετημένες προς τον αξόνικο αυτό οδηγό, ανακαλύφθηκαν ρηχές ορθογώνιες λαξεύσεις που είχαν κατασκευαστεί για την ένθεση των στηριγμάτων της αγίας τράπεζας και των τεσσάρων κιονίσκων κιβωτίων, που κάλυπταν την τράπεζα. Βάσει της θέσης που κατέχει η χάραξη αυτή και της σχέσης με τις ορθογώνιες λαξεύσεις, πρέπει να ερμηνευθεί ως βοηθητική γραμμή χαραγμένη από τους τεχνίτες κατά τη δημιουργία του κτηρίου ή του μόνιμου λειτουργικού εξοπλισμού του. Είναι γνωστό ότι προκειμένου να εφαρμόσει η προσχεδιασμένη γεωμετρία συμμετρία στα κτήρια, την ώρα της οικοδόμησης χρησιμοποιούνταν στην κάτοψη αλλά και στις όψεις διάφορες βοηθητικές μέθοδοι, όπως τα σπαρτία, τα σημερινά κιονόκρανα, ευθείες δηλαδή από σπάγκους στερωμένους σε δύο σημεία. Και μπορούμε να υποθέσουμε ότι και άλλες, λιγότερο μόνιμες λύσεις μπορούσαν να εφαρμοζόταν κατά καιρούς για τις βοηθητικές αυτές γραμμές, όπως κιμωλία ή κάρβουνο. Θα μπορούσε εύκολα και στην περίπτωση της βασιλικής του Θεάτρου της Μεσσήνης να είχε χρησιμοποιηθεί ένα τέτοιο σπαρτίο, για να επιτευχθεί το ίδιο αποτέλεσμα, χωρίς να χρειάζεται μόνιμο ίχνος στο πλακόστρωτο δάπεδο, όπως έγινε με τη χάραξη. Προτιμήθηκε όμως η λάξευση, τελικά, της άξονικής αυτής βοηθητικής γραμμής, για λόγους που ενδεχομένως σχετίζονται με την τεχνική κατάρτιση των μαστόρων και τη μετάξι τους συνεργασία με τη μετάδοση της πληροφορίας ανάμεσα στο διόδιο διαφορετικές ομάδες μαστών, των χτιστών και των μαρμαράδων.

To μεσσηνιακό μνημείο στέκεται σε ένα σταυροδρόμι, χρονικό και γεωγραφικό. Από την χρονολόγηση της βασιλικής στα μέσα του 6ου αιώνα την τοποθέτησε στο σημείο επαφής ανάμεσα στις παλαιοχριστιανικές και στις μεταβατικές (μεσαιωνικές), που θα διαμορφωθούν τα έπομενα αιώνια από την άλλη, η Μεσσήνη βρίσκεται στο εσωτερικό της Πελοπόννησου, σχετικά απομακρυσμένη από τις θαλάσσιες γραμμές της αυτοκρατορίας, όπου διακινούνταν ο μεγάλος όγκος αρχιτεκτονικών μελών μαζί με παραδόσεις και μάστορες μέχρι και τα τέλη του 6ου αιώνα. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο οι λύσεις που υιοθετήθηκαν εδώ, προσφέρουν πολύτιμη γνώση για συνθήκες που συνήθως περνούν απαρατήρητες.

Η βασιλική της Μεσσήνης στέκεται ως ένα παράδειγμα του μέγιστου δυνατού αποτελέσματος με τα ελάχιστα δυνατά μέσα, ένα ιδιαίτερο επίτευγμα για την τοπική κοινότητα. Σχεδόν όλες οι καλλιτεχνικές λύσεις και επιλογές έρχονται από αρχαίο ρεπερτορίο μορφών, στοιχείων και ρυθμών, αλλά μέσα στις νέες συνθήκες που έχουν διαμορφωθεί στην Πελοπόννησο και γενικότερα στην αυτοκρατορία, ήδη από τα μέσα του 6ου αιώνα, όλα αποκτούν νέο χαρακτήρα, πιο κοντά ίσως σε αυτόν που θα ονομαστεί σύντομα μεσαιωνικό. Το ίδιο ισχύει και για τις τεχνικές: τα αρχιτεκτονικά μέλη είναι spolia σε δεύτερη χρήση, τα διακοσμημένα κιονόκρανα γίνονται απλά δομικά στοιχεία, η αρχαία τεχνική της χρήσης χαραγμάτων τοποθέτησης εφαρμόζεται εδώ κυρίως για να διευκολύνει την εξοικονόμηση υλικού, τον περιορισμό των απωλειών και τη βελτίωση της στατικής επάρκειας του κτηρίου.

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