

Nea Paphos Theatre Excavations 2014

by Craig Barker



Fig. 1: Sunrise over Fabrika Hill

The University of Sydney conducted its sixteenth season of excavations in the precinct of the Hellenistic-Roman theatre of Nea Paphos, between 16 August and 20 September 2014. Although smaller in scale than other recent field seasons, the work achieved during this year was significant. This was particularly pleasing given the hot and humid conditions the team worked under.

The fieldwork, conducted under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus, was directed by Dr Craig Barker. The project's season was again sponsored by the AAIA and the Nicholson Museum.



Fig. 2: View to the orchestra down the theatre seating

Nea Paphos served as the capital of Cyprus during the Ptolemaic and Roman occupation of the island. The theatre was one of the earliest and largest public buildings constructed in the town (fig. 2). Nea Paphos was founded in the late 4th century BC, and as the city grew and prospered, the theatre was expanded, enlarged and renovated several times over. For six centuries it was used as a venue for performance and spectacles, and each renovation kept up with contemporary theatrical design. At least five architectural phases of the theatre have been identified by the excavations, each demonstrating clear cultural and architectural links first with Alexandria and then with Rome. The monumental 2nd century AD stage building was faced with marble blocks imported from across the Mediterranean and was marked by a twelve-metre long dedicatory inscription. The theatre could have seated over 8500 spectators at its maximum extent, before a slow decline and the eventual destruction of the theatre site following devastating earthquakes in the late 4th century AD. The destruction wrought on the town is referenced in St Jerome's account of the visit to Paphos by St Hilarion a mere decade after the theatre's end: "that city so celebrated by the poets, which, destroyed by frequent earthquakes, has now only its ruins to show what once it was". There is considerable archaeological evidence of stone robbing and then quarrying at the site of the former theatre, along with industrial production in the area. Eventually farmsteads and other mediaeval structures were built over the remains of the former theatre, as Paphos underwent an economic renaissance as a result of the Crusades. Domestic occupation in the area of the theatre, now known as Fabrika, continued until the 20th century. This rich post-antique history of the site has enabled the project to shed new light on the archaeology of mediaeval Cyprus.



Fig. 3. Professor Green sorting finds with student volunteers

As work on the publication of the theatre architecture and associated finds from the first decade of the project's work continues under the direction of Emeritus Professor J Richard Green AM (fig. 3), the excavations in more recent years have focused on the larger theatre precinct and questions of Hellenistic and Roman urbanism. The team has excavated a Roman paved road and a Roman nymphaeum, and is investigating the nature of colonnaded streets of the town.

The Australian expedition of 20 archaeologists, students and volunteers (including a number of students from the University of Jena in Germany) worked in two areas of the site in 2014, geographically separated and chronologically differing. One trench, directed by archaeologist Kerrie Grant, was located on the top of Fabrika to the rear of the theatre's seating (figs. 1–2, 4–5). This continued upon past excavations, where foundations of a 20 metre long building were revealed. The building with its well-constructed masonry is seemingly divided into three long rooms with the southern edge right over the ruins of the ancient theatre and had spectacular views over the town of Paphos. It seems to date to the 15–16th centuries, based upon preliminary ceramic analysis. The building will be excavated further in the future to determine its function—it may have been defensive or perhaps a storage facility.

A second team, led by Helen Nicholson, excavated to the south of the Roman road, where a number of stone-walled rooms were revealed (fig. 6). At this stage we speculate that they may have been small shops, but again further investigation is required. Some Roman ceramics were revealed in this area, including a number of coarseware objects that were intact or nearly intact.

Some interesting finds were recovered during the season that will undergo full study in future field seasons: a fragmentary large marble bowl was found, which may have been ecclesiastic; also a small Hellenistic terracotta head, plucked from the remains of a post-mediaeval fire pit (fig. 7).

The Australian team will continue excavations in 2016, but in the meantime work on publication of various aspects of the excavations continues. Recently the Leventis Foundation published a volume on material recovered from a mediaeval well excavated on the site titled, *Paphos 8 August 1303 Snapshot of a Destruction* by J.R. Green, R.S. Gabrieli, H.K.A. Cook, E.J. Stern, B. McCall and E. Lazer.



Fig. 4: Excavations above the theatre



Fig. 5: Plastered walls in the large building revealed in the trench above the cavea



Fig. 6: A series of small shops (?) along the Roman road



Fig. 7: Hellenistic terracotta head