

archaeological site

# ROMAN THEATRE OF MÁLAGA



Agencia Andaluza de Instituciones Culturales  
CONSEJERÍA DE CULTURA



A performance in the Roman theatre of Málaga

## MÁLAGA IN ANTIQUITY

The city of Málaga was originally founded on what is now known as the hill of the Alcazaba or Moorish citadel. While uncovering the Roman theatre, researchers recently made an exceptional discovery: the hillside was found to contain archaeological evidence of the stable presence of Phoenician colonists from at least the 7th century BCE.

This early settlement was probably arranged on terraces from the summit to the foot of the hill. In the 6th century BCE an important walled enclosure was built around the entire inhabited area. The town extended westward as far as the present-day location of the Picasso Museum, while its southern boundary stood on the site of the old post office.

On the north face of this hill, workers digging a new tunnel stumbled upon one of the Phoenician town's cemeteries, revealing several ashlar-lined tombs containing rich personal ornaments, including magnificent gold earrings, buried with the deceased.

The Roman city, especially in the years immediately following its conquest or integration in the Roman Republic, must have maintained its traditional eastern urban layout and culture, a theory borne out by the fact that archaeological excavations on the hillside have uncovered Punic inscriptions on imported Roman pottery and coins issued in the city in Roman times that still used Punic script and iconography.

The visible ruins of a Roman-style building, once used as a public bathhouse, date from the 1st century CE. This structure was demolished in Antiquity to make room for the theatre.

## THE ROMAN THEATRE

The **theatre of Málaga** is the most important surviving vestige of Rome's presence in the city. It dates from the early years of the empire, when theatres were being built in practically every Roman town and city as effective vehicles for imperial propaganda. The theatre was both an entertainment venue and a political stage, the ideal public setting for driving home the idea of Roman authority and social hierarchy. Málaga's well-preserved, medium-sized theatre, located in the heart of the city's historic quarter, was discovered by accident in 1951 when construction work on the new Cultural Centre revealed part of the ruins. The history of this building and its recent discovery and restoration for public enjoyment can be seen in the Visitors' Centre, illustrated by selected archaeological artefacts retrieved during different dig campaigns on the site.



Discovery of the Roman theatre of Málaga in the summer of 1951 during the construction of the Cultural Centre



General view of the different sections of the theatre: seats, orchestra and stage

The Roman theatre of Málaga was built according to the standard model proposed by Roman architect Vitruvius. It used a combination of constructive methods, with a large part of the *cavea* (tiered seating area) supported by the natural incline of the hill and the rest standing on artificial foundations. Today we can see the *ima* and *media* (lower and middle) *cavea*, but no trace has been found of the upper tier, the *summa cavea*, or of its portico, except for the steps that once led to this seating section. This is where the masts and rigging of the *velum*, a system of cloth awnings for shading the audience, would have been.

At the foot of the *cavea* lies the semicircular orchestra, where a select group of spectators—usually prominent citizens—could sit on marble seats like the one preserved at the theatre of Málaga. This space was richly decorated with massive marble slabs that extended into the vaulted side corridors.

Between the orchestra and the *scaena* we find a marble inscription from the Flavian period, although the stone itself is older as the text was carved over an earlier inscription. Constructing such buildings required substantial amounts of hard cash, and the local elite usually footed the bill. Their philanthropic donations were publicly acknowledged in inscriptions on the buildings they sponsored, increasing their prestige and popularity and justifying the exercise of political power in the eyes of the people.

The *scaena* was a large rectangular space raised above the orchestra and divided from it by a low wall with decorative exedras. The stage area was backed by an ornamental facade, the *scaenae frons*, embellished with openings, columns and images of the emperors, members of the imperial family and the



Epigraphic inscription on marble from the 3rd century CE, found at the theatre during archaeological excavations and now on display at the Visitors' Centre

principal deities of the city. According to standard architectural practice, this wall would have had three doors: the *valva regia* in the middle and two *valvae hospitalium* symmetrically flanking the central doorway.

The early construction of theatres in Hispania and the western provinces in general was probably not due to the rapid popularisation of theatre as a genre. They were not built by popular demand, either of the local inhabitants or the Italic minority, but as a state-mandated means of exerting socio-political control. The people's need for entertainment and amusement was a minor consideration; in fact, few events held in theatres could be considered entertaining, and the pre-Roman peoples probably had their own form of theatre.

Another fascinating aspect of the Roman theatre since late Republican times, as legal texts from that period show, was the careful attention paid to the arrangement of spectators in the *cavea*. Every social class, including non-citizens, was represented in the seating area, with a strict hierarchy that reflected the structure of society and each person's role in it. Individual seats on the *proedria* in the orchestra were reserved for municipal magistrates, priests and honoured guests. Other distinguished spectators would have sat in the *tribunalia*, perched like box seats over the covered corridors or *itineria*.

The lower section of the *cavea* was reserved for members of the *ordo equester* order, men whose status was defined by property ownership. The rest of the population occupied the remaining



View of the *proedria* with a *subsellium* or bench in the Málaga theatre



Vats from the fish-salting factory in the Roman theatre (mid 4<sup>th</sup> century-mid 5<sup>th</sup> century CE)

sections and were seated according to different criteria: for example, members of a professional association might be grouped together, or a master would be placed with his disciples. Women and slaves were relegated to the uppermost seats in the *summa cavea*.

The theatre building was used until late in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, when it was abandoned. A factory for processing salted fish and manufacturing fish-based sauces was established on this spot and remained active until the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when the salting vats began to be used as graves and the site became a necropolis. Commercial prosperity returned under Byzantine rule, although



Burial from the early 6<sup>th</sup> century CE found on the slope of the Roman theatre and exhibited at the Visitors' Centre

this boom period would end in the 7th century. After the Muslim conquest in 711, a military enclosure and a mosque were built on this site.

The decision to tear down the Cultural Centre in order to recover the ruins of Málaga's Roman theatre and turn Calle Alcazabilla into a pedestrian street created a broad esplanade in front of the monument. A Visitors' Centre for the Roman theatre was built as part of the new design for this space, enhancing the visibility and spatial connection of the ruins with its immediate surroundings and establishing itineraries and privileged viewpoints from which to admire this fascinating piece of history.

Today the theatre has recovered its original function as part of the circuit of Roman Theatres of Andalusia, an initiative that shines a spotlight on these ancient theatres and their associated archaeological sites, reviving and celebrating our Roman past, while also supporting the Andalusian network of professional performing artists.

Visitors' Centre of the Roman Theatre of Málaga



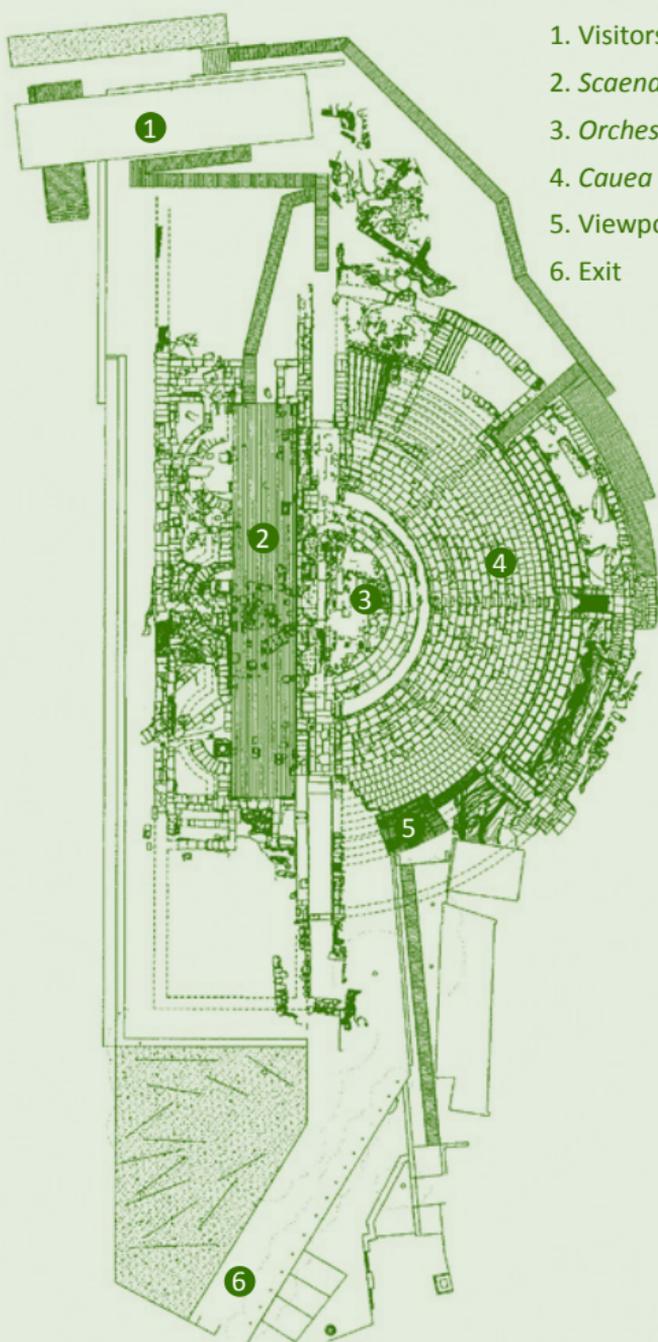
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## FREE ADMISSION



1. Visitors' Centre
2. *Scaena*
3. *Orchestra*
4. *Caeca*
5. Viewpoint
6. Exit