The Odeion Excavated in Hippos-Sussita
In spite of the fact that the **odeion** (Greek: οδείον; Latin: *odeum*) is a thoroughly Roman type of structure, it bears a Greek name that became the source of much confusion and misrepresentations in ancient times. The **odeion** belongs to a group of Roman structures such as the basilica or amphitheatre which were given Greek names. We do not know why the Romans did not think it wiser to give them Latin names since these names have caused, and still cause, misunderstandings and errors in defining the exact function of these structures.

What, then, is the **odeion**? What is its definition? Simply and precisely, the **odeion** is a theatre-like structure with a roof. We have here a public entertainment building that resembles a theatre, although the latter is always an unroofed, open-air structure. The **odeion** is far smaller than a theatre and therefore could be roofed. It was intended for holding public events for an audience of hundreds rather than thousands. The name **odeion** derives from the Greek word οδή which means a song, thus indicating that it was meant mainly for the reading of poetry accompanied by music.

The earliest structure to be called an **odeion** has nothing in common with the Roman **odeion** except for its name. The reference here is to the “Odeion of Pericles” which was erected between the years 446–442 BCE close to and east of the Theatre of Dionysus at the foot of the Athenian Acropolis.¹ This huge building (68 x 62m) with its roof support by a forest of columns that filled the internal space was meant for ceremonies and events associated with the Great Dionysia, the main festival celebrated by Athenians. In the framework of this festival various types of plays were performed in competition at the Theatre of Dionysus. Some of the events of the festival, mainly competitions in poetry and oratory, were conducted in the Odeion of Pericles. Architecturally, there is no connection between the Odeion of Pericles and the **odeia** (pl. of **odeion**) that were built throughout the Graeco-Roman world beginning from the First century BCE. The Odeion of Pericles was simply a large rectangular hall with scores of columns set up inside it to bear the weight of the roof. But most important of all is the fact that it did not contain either a stage or a seating complex, while the interior of Roman **odeia** was designed like a theatre in all respects. Every Roman **odeion** had semicircular tiers of seats, a stage building and a stage. Dividing the stage from the seats was a semicircular *orchestra*. This means that the Roman **odeion** looked exactly like a theatre, except for being smaller in size and roofed over.

The earliest **odeion** that has so far been excavated is that of Pompeii which was erected in the first quarter of the First century BCE. It seems that the architectural source of inspiration for the **odeion** of Pompeii and of other **odeia** was the structure of the *bouleuterion* (pl. bouleuteria), the city council building (*boule* – city council) which existed in every *polis*.² The *bouleuteria*, such as those in Priene or Miletos, which were erected during the Third and Second centuries BCE, do indeed look like small theatres but what differentiates

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them from the Roman *odeia* is the lack of a stage building (*scaena*) and a stage (*pulpitum*).³ While excavating the *odeion* in Sussita, we were not sure if the structure that lay before us was an *odeion* or a *bouleuterion*. The exposure of the stage building (see below) confirmed that this was an *odeion* and not a *bouleuterion*.

**COURSE OF THE EXCAVATION**

The excavation of the *odeion* was begun in the summer of 2008, during the course of the ninth season of excavations in Sussita.⁴ Its exposure was completed in the summer of 2010 at the end of the eleventh excavation season.⁵ The initiative to dig in this particular spot came from Michael Eisenberg, my colleague and co-director of the Sussita Excavation Project. While examining an aerial photograph of the excavation site, he noticed a small hill with a clearly recognizable semicircular concavity on its eastern side. The small dimensions of this indentation led me to the conclusion that this could not be the seating complex (*cavea*) of a theatre. Therefore, even though we had not yet begun excavating at this site, we decided to call it the BLT area, indicating that this would be either a *bouleuterion* or an *odeion*. The excavation in this area was conducted by Eyal Dan, an M.A. student in the Department of Archaeology at Haifa University.

**LOCATION OF THE *ODEION***

The *odeion* of Sussita is located in the western part of the city, in the plateau that slopes gradually from the east towards the west. The structure is at a distance of about 80m to the west of the *forum* or *agora* and about 21m north of the *decumanus maximus*, the main colonnaded street of Sussita (Figs 1 and 8). The lengthwise axis of the *odeion* is north-south, with its straight side facing eastward towards the city center, while the semicircular side faces westward (Fig. 2). The very distance of the structure from the *forum* of the city was an added reason for thinking that this was an *odeion* and not a *bouleuterion*, which is always located in immediate proximity to the *agora* or *forum*.


⁴ The excavations in Sussita are being carried out by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa. So far there eleven excavation seasons (2000–2010) were conducted. The expedition is headed by Arthur Segal and Michael Eisenberg. Two research institutions abroad are participants in the excavations: The Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw and Concordia University in St Paul, Minnesota, USA.

Since this area of the city that extends to the west of the forum has not yet been excavated, we do not know the interrelations between the odeion and the street network of the city (Figs 1, 8). It is reasonable to assume that one of the cardines (pl. of cardo) that run in a north-south direction may have branched off from the decumanus maximus, which runs from east to west and led towards the odeion. It is not unlikely that the odeion of Sussita is placed not far from the theatre of the city, since odeia were usually erected in close proximity to theatres. See, for example, the odeion in Philadelphia, the Amman of today, where it stands very near the theatre, with both structures facing the agora.6

The theatre of Sussita has not yet been located, but it is difficult to suppose that Sussita, one of the cities of the Decapolis, did not have a theatre. Let us recall here that Gadara, which neighbors Sussita on the south, had two theatres, Gerasa had three, while Beth Shean (Seythopolis) had two theatres and an odeion. Furthermore, the writer of these lines does not know of a single Roman city in which an odeion was discovered that did not have a theatre as well. Finally we should note that in the area of the North-East Church which

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2. Hippos, the *odeion* as exposed in July 2010, aerial photograph (Phot. M. Eisenberg).

3. Hippos, the *odeion*, a plan (Drawing: D. Porotski, V. Pinsky & T. Meltsen).
is situated to the east of the odeion and north of the forum of Sussita, a theatre seat was found in secondary use. Seats of this kind were also found in the theatres of Hammat-Gader and Gadara.

Where, therefore, should one look for the theatre of Sussita? Vasillios Tzaferis once suggested that the theatre should be sought in the northwestern part of the city where the surface slopes steeply towards the north-northwest.7 Another possibility is the area that extends between the Hellenistic temenos, on which the North-West Church was built during the Byzantine period and the odeion (Figs 1, 8). We have here a gradual incline sloping from east to west. It should be stressed that both of these proposals have not yet been tested and at this stage they are merely suppositions.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ODEION

This is a public building carefully constructed of high quality ashlars. The building materials are basalt and limestone. The lengthwise axis of the odeion (27m) is north-south, while the lateral axis (21m) is east-west (Figs 2–3). The eastern side of the odeion is rectangular while its shape on the western side is semicircular. The odeion and its two main parts consist of a stage building (scaena) and a seating complex (cavea or auditorium), built as a single unit. Extending at the foot of the seating complex, which is bordered on the east by the stage itself (pulpitum), is the semicircular orchestra and two roofed entrance passageways (aditus maximi). Below is a brief description of the odeion and its three components: a. the seating complex (cavea); b. the stage building (scaena); c. the orchestra and the two entrance passageways (aditus maximi).

THE SEATING COMPLEX (CAVEA)

The seating complex is semicircular in shape with a perimeter of 41m and a radius of 8.60m (Figs 3–4). In spite of the fact that the seats did not survive the passage of time, it may reasonably be determined that the angle of declivity of the seating complex was 40 degrees and that there were 11 tiers of seats with a total length of about 282m. If we assume that the average spectator would need 0.50m to sit comfortably, we calculate that about 540 spectators could be seated in the odeion (Figs 3, 7). The seating complex is bordered on its western side by a solid encompassing wall which is 1.85m thick and on the eastern side by two sturdy walls, the analemmata, one of them at the northern end of the seating complex and the other at the southern one (Figs 2–3). Between these walls and the fronts of the stage building wings (versurae) were vaulted passageways called aditus maximi. These were the sole entrances to the odeion through which the spectators entered the orchestra and mounted from there to the seating complex by means of three stairways (see below).

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7 V. TZAFERIS, Sussita Awaits the Spade, Biblical Archaeology Review 16/5, 1990, pp. 50–58.
The seating complex (*cavea*) is separated from the *orchestra* by a low semicircular wall called the *podium*. The course of this wall that borders the *orchestra* is breached in three places by three radial stairways (*scalaria*) spaced symmetrically (Figs 3–4). One of these stairways mounts exactly in the middle of the seating complex in an east-west line. Of this stairway only five steps smoothly dressed still remain *in situ*. The two other stairways which are less well preserved rose adjacent to the *analemmata* walls and were ranged symmetrically opposite each other, one in the north and the other in the south. This means that the seating complex had three radial stairways with two wedge-shaped segments of seats (*cunei*) between them.

The semicircular encompassing wall (1.85m thick) that encloses the seating complex excels in its solid construction (Figs 2–3). The six lower courses of the wall are built of high quality basalt ashlars that have been well preserved. The courses are arranged in a mixed pattern, with alternating layers of stretchers and of headers one above the other. The facings of the stone were not completely smoothed but were left rough, which gave the curved wall an impression of immense strength. Rising over this basis of six basalt courses were limestone courses which were not as well preserved as the basalt ones. In the southern section of this encompassing wall four limestone courses remain *in situ*, but in the northern section not a single one has remained. Unlike the basalt courses, the limestone courses are arranged in an unusual and exceptional manner with their narrow sides (headers) facing outward. A method of construction of this kind has few parallels in our region. The limestone ashlars are dressed with particular care. We do not know the original height of the encompassing wall, but may assume that it rose at least as high as 15m.

The significant thickness of the encompassing wall (1.85m) and its solid construction clearly indicate that it had to withstand considerable pressure from the seating complex and also to support the weight of the roofing (on the subject of roofing, see below). It is well known that in Roman theatres the seating complex is supported by an intricate system of semicircular barrel-vaulted corridors (*ambulacra*) that intersected with radial sloping barrel-vaulted corridors (*vomitoria*). Because of the small dimensions of the *odeion* in Sussita, there was no need for such a complex system upon which the seating complex had to rest. It was sufficient to have a sloping foundation of well pressed filling of small stones mixed with binding material. On this foundation, supported by the solid encompassing wall, the seating complex and the three stairways (*scalaria*) were firmly grounded.

**THE STAGE BUILDING (Scaena)**

The stage building which measures 27x4.80m is rectangular in shape and is constructed of four walls founded on bedrock (Figs 3–5). The eastern wall (W1709) did not only border the stage building but also constituted the exterior wall of the *odeion*. Between the eastern wall and its western parallel (W1735) there is a space of 2.20m. This area between the two long walls was divided by two short perpendicular walls into three sections symmetrically arranged, with the larger section in the centre and the smaller ones on either side of it.
4. Hippos, the odeion, general view of the stage building (scaena), the orchestra and the cavea. View to the north (Phot. M. Eisenberg).

5. Hippos, the odeion. View from the orchestra towards the stage building (scaena). Note the remains of the marble pavement of the orchestra and the decorative moulding adorning the lower part of the proscaenium (Phot. M. Eisenberg).
Only one course of the western wall (W1735) of the stage building still remains above the level of the orchestra. This wall bordered the orchestra area on its eastern side and also constituted the front wall of the stage, the proscaenium. Attention should be given to the fine and carefully dressed moulding that extends along the lower part of the proscaenium (Fig. 5). The central section of the stage building measuring 11.50x2.20m is simply the space underneath the stage (hyposcaenium). The stage itself was made of wooden boards that were placed between the two long walls of the stage building (Figs 4, 7).

On either side of the stage (pulpitum) were the two stage building wings (versurae) in symmetrical arrangement and designed as rectangular rooms (internal dimensions: 4.60x2.20m) from which openings led into the stage itself (Figs 2–3, 7). These openings (itinera versurarum) were used by the actors, with the opening in the northern wing located in its southern wall and the opening in the southern wing located in its northern wall (Fig. 7).

The eastern wall of the stage building (W1709) which bordered the stage on its eastern side served as the scaenae frons of the odeion, a kind of fixed scenery or décor that served as a backdrop for the actors appearing on the stage. Of this wall only the foundations remain and therefore we do not know how it was designed (Figs 2, 5, 7). A few architectural decorative items that were discovered in the vicinity of the odeion indicate that the architectural decorations in the odeion were of excellent quality.

THE ORCHESTRA AND THE TWO ENTRANCE PASSAGEWAYS (ADITUS MAXIMI)

The orchestra was semicircular in shape. Its diameter along a north-south axis was 7.70m, while its radius was 4.55m (Figs 2–3). The floor of the orchestra was paved with rectangular marble flagstones, some of which have remained in situ (Figs 4–5). The orchestra floor opened out towards the east and merged with the floor of the two entrance passageways (aditus maximi), the northern and the southern ones. These passageways were also paved with the same kind of rectangular marble flagstones as in the orchestra (Fig. 6). The flagstones were made of two types of marble. One was a greenish-gray with black veins while the other was a yellowish-white. The flagstones were laid on a basis made of high quality binding material that was well preserved. During the exposure of the orchestra we did not overlook the fact that it lacked a drainage system. This very lack has far-reaching implications with regard to the existence or non-existence of roofing for the structure. In other words, the existence of a roof obviated the need for a drainage system that can be found in all Greek or Roman theatres.

Very little remains of the two walls that border the northern passageway. The southern passageway was far better preserved. On the floor of the latter a few arch-stones were found among the debris that confirmed the fact that both entrance passageways (aditus maximi) were roofed with barrel vaults. It is worth mentioning here that during the Byzantine period a small chapel was erected above the southern entrance passageway which had a floor decorated with a mosaic of geometrical patterns. Under the floor of this chapel we found a built tomb. The funerary chapel which contained the tomb was dismantled during the eleventh season in order to expose the southern passageway. The dismantling
of the chapel and especially its conservation and the transfer of the mosaic floor entailed considerable work.8

THE CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

On the basis of an analysis of the building methods and materials, and according to the numismatic and pottery finds, it may be determined to a great degree of certainty that the odeion was erected during the second half of the First century CE. It appears that the odeion was in use during the first three centuries of the Common Era. Its condition as revealed during its exposure by the excavators clearly indicates that it was not destroyed by fire or earthquake but was dismantled. This conclusion is based on the preserved uniform height of the walls, two or three courses, not including the encompassing wall of which six courses have survived. The lack of decorative items that were broken or burnt, the absence of tiles and sooty remains of the ceiling and roof, all testify that the structure was systematically dismantled. It is safe to assume, on the basis of the numismatic and pottery finds, that the dismantling of the structure was carried out during the Fourth century CE,

8 The conservation and transfer of the mosaic floor were carried out by two senior conservators: Ms. Ewa Radziejowska and Ms. Julia Burdajewicz.
7. Hippos, the *odeion*. Suggested reconstruction of the interior. View towards the stage (*pulpitum*) (Drawing: Y. Israel & D. Knafo).

8. Hippos, the *odeion* as it might have looked in the city landscape of Hippos. View from the southwest (Drawing: Y. Israel & D. Knafo. Aerial phot. A. Graicer).
apparently before the earthquake of 363 CE. However, we cannot negate the possibility that the odeion was damaged during this earthquake and it was therefore decided not to renovate it but rather to dismantle it.

DISCUSSION

We mentioned earlier that even before the first stages of excavation, while exposing the semicircular encompassing wall, we were aware that this was a theatre-like structure. Our main uncertainty was whether this structure that was gradually being exposed was a bouleuterion or an odeion. Both structures are known to have a tiered seating complex that is semicircular in shape and that both the odeion and the bouleuterion were roofed buildings. Yet the partial preservation of the structure we had exposed made it difficult to decide the issue of its roofing. Could we determine to a great degree of certainty whether this theatre-like structure was roofed?

We list below the lines of reasoning that may decide this issue:

1. The structure before us, with its seating complex, faces eastward. It is reasonable to suppose that if it had been unroofed, the seating complex would have faced either northward or westward in order to minimize exposure to the sun as was the customary practice in building Greek or Roman theatres.

2. The encompassing wall that encloses and supports the seating complex is exceptionally solid. Even the walls of the stage building excel in their sturdy construction. The significant thickness of the walls can be explained, among other things, by the need to support the weight of the roof.

3. The lack of a drainage system in the orchestra indicates that the building was roofed.

What remains to be clarified is the exact identity of the structure. Is this a bouleuterion or an odeion? As already noted above, there is a great resemblance between the two, since both the bouleuterion and the odeion are roofed buildings that contain within them a tiered and semicircular seating complex. These are the two decisive arguments for identifying the building as an odeion:

1. The very existence of a stage building can decide the issue. If this had been a bouleuterion there would be no need for a stage building.

2. The location of this structure at a considerable distance from the forum (about 80m) negates the possibility that this is a bouleuterion. The scores of bouleuteria that we know about in the cities of Greece and Asia Minor are always located in close proximity to the agora or forum.
CONCLUSIONS

Odeia are fairly rare structures. In the region of the Decapolis only two other odeia have been found so far in addition to the one in Sussita, one in Amman (Philadelphia) and the other in Beth Shean (Scythopolis). In other regions of the Graeco-Roman world there are only a few score of such buildings as compared with the hundreds of theatres known to us in the classical world. The reason for the limited dissemination of the odeion lies in its essentially cultural character. Odeia were erected in the period between the First century BCE and the end of the Second century CE, when Greek culture in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire had reached its zenith. Another important factor is that they were mainly to be found in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in those areas that were settled by a Greek or Hellenized population.

In contrast with theatres where thousands of spectators could be seated, the odeia were intended for an audience of a few hundred who wanted a different kind of entertainment than that which was offered in the theatres. This means that the very existence of an odeion in a city had far-reaching cultural implications. As noted above, in every city of the Decapolis region we find at least one theatre and there are cities that have two or even three theatres. In comparison with the 35 theatres so far discovered in Syria, Judaea-Palaestina and Provincia Arabia, we know of only three odeia. This is certainly not fortuitous and implies the special status of the odeion for the cultural elite of the urban population in the region of the Decapolis. It is worth remembering that during the first centuries of the Common Era the performances staged in the theatres were mainly mime and pantomime, a dubious type of mass entertainment to say the least. Theatre performances were therefore hardly suited to the more refined tastes of the cultural elite of the Hellenized urban population. In the small and more intimate enclosure of the odeion, on the other hand, the works of classical literature and drama were presented to a select and sophisticated audience. Thus it was not the theatres but the odeia, such as those found in Scythopolis, Philadelphia and Hippos-Sussita, that truly expressed the refined taste and cultural identity of the Hellenized elite among the city dwellers in the region of the Decapolis during the early centuries of the Common Era.

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