

## The Significance of Number Seven in the Theater of Sabratha

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**Abstract:** *This paper identifies a unique architectural and artistic phenomenon in the Theater of Sabratha, Libya. The number seven constantly appear in the number of doors, Cavea, and even in sculpture. The authors try to investigate the reason behind this phenomenon by adopting a religious-political approach. Moreover, a new proposed dating is given to the theatre by considering the significance of the number seven and its relativity to the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Sabratha is located on the northwest coast of Libya, about 68 km to the west of the modern city of Tripoli. It is one of the three ancient cities of the province of Tripoli – Lebda, Oya "Tripoli now" and Sabratha.<sup>1</sup> The city of Sabratha was established by the Phoenicians around the end of the sixth century B.C. and the beginning of the fifth century B.C. to be one of the commercial stations - Emporia - of the Phoenician fleet on the Mediterranean coast. Rapidly, these commercial stations became cities and Sabratha among the most important of those cities.

It became under the rule of the Romans during the reign of Julius Caesar (100 – 44 B.C.) when he established a province called New Africa, which included East Numidia in addition to the three cities. During the reign of Antonius Pius around 157 A.D. the cities became Roman colonies. These cities witnessed an unprecedented defensive in Severan era (193 – 235 A.D.), where there were three defensive lines that kept these cities safe and secure and then stability and prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

The theater goes back to the Roman era which makes it richer from the architectural point of view. As Romans inherited the idea of the theater from the Greeks and developed it in terms of sound technique and clarity of vision. As a result, the Roman theater differed from the Greek theater in certain aspects. To begin with, the Roman theater was built inside the city and the Cavea lifted on arches instead of building it within a mountain or a hill outside the city as the Greek one. Thus, the Romans enjoyed the privilege of being able to choose the most appropriate location for the construction of the theater.

Another architectural modification made by the Romans is the creation of multiple entrances and exits within the seats of the Cavea in order to solve the problem of crowding before and after theater performances.<sup>(3)</sup> Moreover, they improved the Scaenae frons<sup>(4)</sup> that became more permanent, richer, and ornamented in Roman theaters.

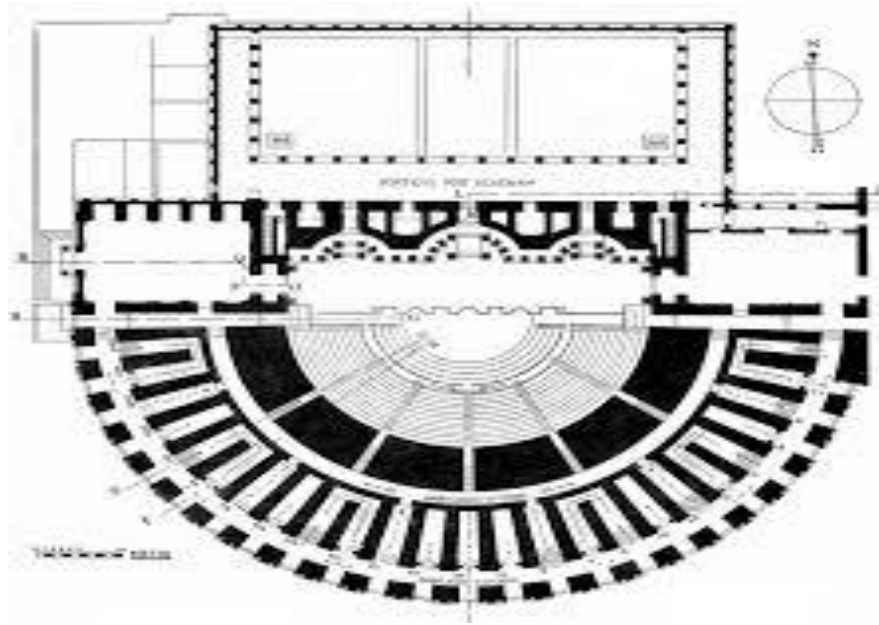
<sup>1</sup>For more information about the city: Romanelli 1925, .8, 17; Mattingly 1995, 116; Divita- Evard 1996, 120-123; Matthews 1957, 33- 47.

<sup>2</sup>Raven 1993, 9; Mattingly 1994, 50; Mattingly & Hitchner 1995, 165-213 .

<sup>3</sup>Cavea or Auditorium is the area in which people gathered, all theatres built within the city of Rome were completely man-made without the use of earthworks. Cavea was not roofed; rarely, awnings could be pulled overhead to provide shelter from rain or sunlight. Ross 1996, 450.

<sup>4</sup>Scaenae frons is a high back wall of the stage floor, supported by columns, and pulpitum or the stage especially in North African theaters are three entrances to the stage, including a grand central entrance, known as the porta regia or royal door. The high of scaenae frons is usually equal the numbers of floors of Auditorium, or seating shelves, in the same theatre. Wheeler 1964, 116; Henig 1983, 57; Boardman 1993, 262-263.

The Sabratha City Theater is unique in terms of architectural and decorative features and in terms of the genius of the site and location as well (fig. 1, pl.1), whence of its architectural layout, whence of the principle of balance between the architectural and decorative elements that abound in it. It also corresponds to the conformity of the architectural standards recommended by Vitruvius his famous book "On Architecture" in regard to theatre's architecture.<sup>(5)</sup>



**Fig1**

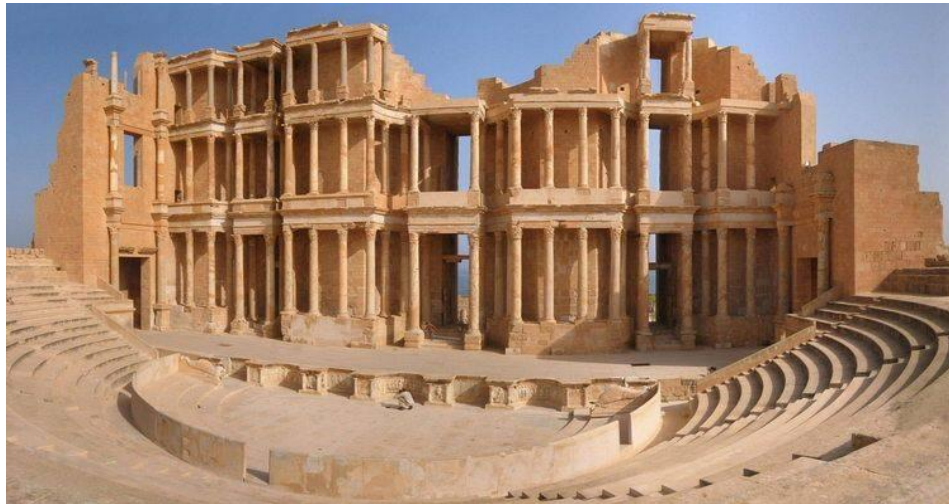


**pl.1**

The stage of this theater is decorated with marble high reliefs on the opposite side of the orchestra. Then, the stage is decorated with a marble edge which is half circles within which various scenes are characterized by the diversity of their subjects and their artistic value. These scenes are also separated by various architectural and plant motifs. The scaenae frons of the theater included a collection of columns of various styles that represent decorative elements characterized by diversity, beauty and richness. Both the scaenae frons and the orchestra square have significant decorative elements, as well as decorative elements that adorn the entrances of the theater. Fortunately, the Sabratha Theater is one of the most complete theaters in North Africa and has an unrivaled theater scene in the Roman world as a whole (pl. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Vitruvius, V, VI, ii.





pl.2

## 2. DISCUSSION

The study identifies a new and unique phenomenon in this theater, the phenomenon of repeating the number seven, whether in the field of its architecture or sculpture; the number of doors of the theater are seven where there are two doors left and right can enter the orchestra from outside the theater, and there are two doors left and right to access the pulpitum, or The stage, as well as the three doors in the background wall, and it seems that the doors of the orchestra, and the two doors of the stage was apparently elite or notable people where the stage is connected to the orchestra through two staircases on both ends of the stage, can be access to the wooden seats in the orchestra, after filling the vacant seats in theca via from common people.

The architect created a privacy for the elite through the wall surrounding the orchestra, which may have been used for two purposes; the first is to create a frequency of sound, and in the same time as a privacy for the elite in the orchestra square. for the three doors in the background wall of the stage were used naturally for the actors each according to its importance.

The number of stairs in the first floor of cavia (pl. 3) is seven, and the conical sections on the second floor are seven, and the number seven may also be repeated in any of the features of the third floor, which only a few parts have been discovered. The number of niches at the edge of the stage opposite for the orchestra (pl. 4) is also seven and the number of vertical arcades in the back wall of the stage in the three floors of the scaenae frons (pl. 5) is also seven; by its Variety of symmetrical marble. It's amazing even the number of stones in the all arches, it's called architecturally Key Stone, inside the theater are also seven stones (pl. 6).



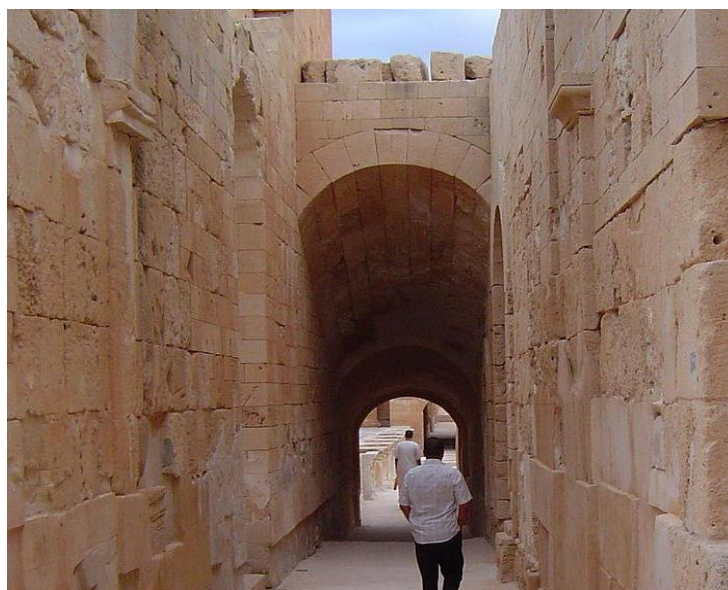
pl.3



pl.4



pl.5



pl.6

The same phenomenon was repeated in the high reliefs of the seven niches; It was noted that the number of rays in the solar sundial in the first niche is also seven (pl.7), the number of soldiers in the central niche surrounding personification of Rome and Sabratha also seven (pl. 8, a, b, c), three on the right beside personification Sabratha, four on left side beside personification Rome. The main Characters in the purification and sacrifice scene (pl. 9, 10) also are seven, and gods in the Sixth



Niche, a niche depicting the legend of Paris judgment (pl. 11) is seven also; four Olympic gods, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Hermes, in addition to Charites, or the three goddesses of graces.

Based on the above presented, it can be said that the number seven was sacred in the Severan age, which is the proposed dating of this theater by the study, because this number is linked to two important things, Mithraism on the one hand, and astronomy/astrology on the other.<sup>(6)</sup> Both of them are closely related to each other, and had a great reputation at that time, due to the spread of Mithraism throughout the Roman Empire during the Severan age<sup>(7)</sup>, it was particularly spread among the Roman army unprecedentedly<sup>(8)</sup>. Since Mithraism was the main religion of the Roman army, especially in the second and third centuries A.D., Septimius Severus exalted the army and supported its staff<sup>(9)</sup>. He ensured the loyalty of the army<sup>(10)</sup>, which was the first guarantee in consolidating power for him and his family after him<sup>(11)</sup>. Thus, astronomy and astrology, it was one of the most prominent features of the Eastern religions, its origins of the Severan Emperors and their wives.



pl.7

<sup>6</sup>The origin of the word Astronomy is the Greek ἀστρονομία from ἄστρον, meaning "star" and -νομία - from νόμος meaning "law" means "law of the stars", but The word "astrology" comes from the Greek ἀστρολογία- from ἄστρον "star" and λογία "study" means "study of the stars". The Greeks and Romans used both astronomia and astrologia to refer to the 'study of the stars, both of them were considered as one thing and were actually used synonymously. The astrology was only separated from astronomy in modern times. Astrology is one of divination kinds which it bases on the interpretation of planetary configuration predicting of the future of human. Unlike astronomy bases on the scientific measurement of all celestial objects and phenomena, It is concerned with the evolution, physics, chemistry, meteorology, and motion of celestial objects, as well as the formation and development of the universe. For more details: Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v.astrologia, astronomia; Cramer 1954,3; Waite 1971,18; Hoskin 1999; Lewis 2003, 313; Volk 2009, 14; Losev 2012, 42-46.

<sup>7</sup> Godwin 1983,98-109; Griffith 1993; Adrych& Others 2017,15-81.

<sup>8</sup>The Mithraism transferred from Persia, or rather from the ancient Near East, Persia and Mesopotamia to Rome through soldiers, who carried it with them as they traveled around the empire. it was one of the most popular religions in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries A.D., which was widespread and popular in the Roman army especially in the Severan age; So Emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla encouraged this cult, in general this cult was peak flourishing in the Severan age(193 – 235 A.D.), The Mithraea found throughout the empire, notably Rome and Ostia, the most famous Mithraeum was Trajan's house (97-117 A.D.) which was converted into a Mithraeum, by the emperor Septimius Severus, later became the main Mithraeum of the Roman empire, Under the church of Santa Prisca on Aventinus Hill in Rome is the remains of a Mithraeum till now. For more details: Griffith 1993, 132-138; Chomiak 2008,51-70; Panagiotidou 2016, 48,56,63.

<sup>9</sup> Chomiak 2008, 19.

<sup>10</sup> There is no evidence of the strength of the army and its prominent role in the doctrine of Septimius Severus in preserving the throne from his advice to his sons on his deathbed in York on February 4, 211 should always appease the army and care only about the soldiers. Raven1993, 138.

<sup>11</sup> About the role of the Roman army in the Severan era, see Bouchier 1926 ,95- 97; Parker 1958,83– 86; Chomiak 2008, 19-47.



pl.8 a



PL8 b



PL8 c



PL9





pl.10



pl.11

In the Mithraic cult the number seven played a dominant and holy role. As the Mithraism followers had a complex system of seven grades of initiation, the number of grades, seven, connected to the seven planets<sup>(12)</sup>, as protectors of the seven grades<sup>(13)</sup> Therefore, we sometime find, the Mithras Tauroctonos with seven planets gods on the Mithraic monuments<sup>(14)</sup>For example,a bronze plate found in Budapest, in Pannonia, at Magyar Nemzeti museum (fig. 2), depicting Mithras sacrificing a bull in the center, below the busts of seven planets with their attributes. The planets from left to right are: Saturnus with a falx - Sol with a whip- Luna with a torch and crescent- Mars wearing his helmet and cuirass with a lance – Mercury with the caduceus – Jupiter with the lightning- Venus with a mirror<sup>(15)</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>The Greeks and the Romans knew seven planets and believed that these planets move around the Earth, which is the center of the universe, according to Ptolemaic system in the second century A.D., who placed the planets in order, closest to Earth to furthest, as the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. the planets represented the will of the gods and their direct influence upon human affairs. For more details: Schimmel 1993, 129; Goldstein, Bernard 1997,1–12; Toomer 1998; Chomiak 2008, 55.

<sup>13</sup> The seven grades of initiation into the mysteries: Raven, Bridegroom, Soldier, Lion, Persian, Herald (Runner) of the Sun, and Father. Each also corresponded to what were considered the seven planets, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, the Moon, the Sun, and Saturn.For more details:Vermaseren 1959,138-153; Beck 1988,1-3; Dowden 1992, 76f; Barton 1994,199;Chomiak 2008,54-55; Chalupa 2008,180-200; Drummond 2013, 24;Panagiotidou 2016,48:65.

<sup>14</sup> For more of the examples about Mithras Tauroctonos with seven planets gods: CIMRM 1959,252-253; CIMRM 1960,225;Merkelbach 1984,320,378; Beck 1988,17-18.

<sup>15</sup> CIMRM 1960,225, fig.448;Merkelbach 1984,378, fig.143.



fig.2

This association between Mithraic cult and seven planets led to the repeated appearance of the number seven in the Mithraea and Mithraic monuments, for example Mithraeum Dura Europos, in Syria, where a stair of seven steps was built in front of the cult niche (fig.3)<sup>(16)</sup>. In Mithraeum of the seven gates at Ostia, there is black and white mosaic on the central floor, representing a large gateway with pinnacles, flanked on either side by three smaller gates (fig.4)<sup>(17)</sup>. Once again, the seven gates are represented in Mithraeum of the Seven Spheres at Ostia (fig.5), seven gates are depicted in mosaic on the central floor; they are constructed of semicircles, representing the gateways through which the soul's celestial journey after death<sup>(18)</sup>.



fig.3

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<sup>16</sup>Vermaseren 1963,158; Campbell 1968, fig.34; Roll 1977, 55.

<sup>17</sup>Nock 1925,98; Vermaseren 1963, 157-158; Campbell 1968, fig.19; Gundel 1992, 266-268.

<sup>18</sup>Vermaseren 1963,157-158; Campbell 1968, fig.20.



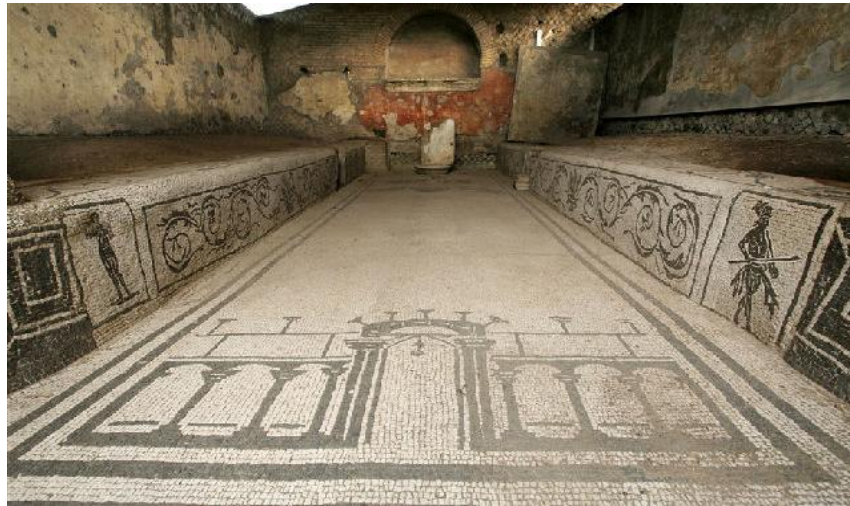


fig.4

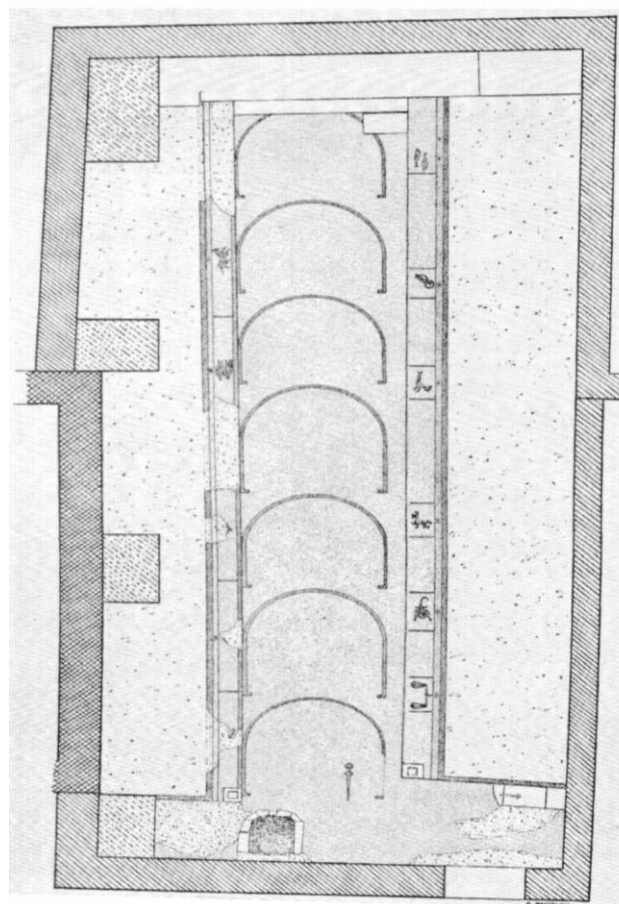


fig.5

Moreover, the number seven appeared in Mithraic monuments, we sometimes find, on reliefs seven cypresses, seven stars, seven alters with Mithras Tauroctonos, for example a marble relief depicting Mithras sacrificing a bull, from Rome, Vatican Museum (fig.6), on the top of the cave there are seven trees, seven alters on the bottom, beside Mithras' head seven stars, four on left side, three on the right<sup>(19)</sup>. All these evidences are clearly referring to the reverence of the Mithraic cult to the planets and, its close association with astrology<sup>(20)</sup>, whereas the astrology is based on a relationship between human being and the seven planets.

<sup>19</sup>CIMRM 1959,163; Merkelbach 1984, 304.

<sup>20</sup>For more details about the Mithraic mysteries connected to astrology:Speidel 1980,4-18; Ulansey 1989,25-67; Gery 2012, 1-10.



fig.6

Then, the fate is the twin of astrology, that the course of the stars determines the inevitable fate of humans. Astrology was quasi-science and its close association with astronomy, so astrologers were called mathematicians<sup>(21)</sup>.

The literary and archaeological resources refer to a wide-spread of astrology among the lower, upper and intellectual classes of Severian age; Emperor Septimius Severus and his wife Julia Domna interested in astrology, and they consulted astrologers several times<sup>(22)</sup>. According to Dio Cassius<sup>(23)</sup>, Septimius wrote his autobiography, or Curriculum vitae, in which he mentioned all omens that predicted his imperial future. Septimius Severus horoscope's depicted on the ceiling of the rooms in his palace at Rome<sup>(24)</sup>, also he built Septizodium "seven planetary house", this building has been the subject of debate amongst scholars about its name and function, it is missing now, the term Septizodium probably has a connection to the seven planetary deities, archaeological studies refer to be the statue of Septimius Severus as the sun god Sol "cosmocrator" stood at the center of this building as the master scene between planetary deities, therefore the Septizodium has astrological importance<sup>(25)</sup>.

The association of Septimius Severus with the seven planets appeared also on Octagonal marble altar from Vienne, in Roman Gaul (fig.7), dated to 198 A.D., depicting busts of seven planetary gods appear in the week-day order and a bust of Septimius appears between Venus and Saturn busts<sup>(26)</sup>, Turcan<sup>(27)</sup> proposed that the bust of Septimius Severus at this place, may indicate to the birth of emperor on Friday, "Saturday night", 11 April 145 A.D.

<sup>21</sup>Cramer 1954,174,184-198; Macmullen 1966,128; Syme 1972-1974,303-309; Hegedus 2000,10; Holden 2006,44-59.

<sup>22</sup>According to Historia Augusta, Septimius Severus consulted diviners and astrologers about the imperial power in 189 A.D., also his second marriage Since he had heard that there was a woman in Syria whose horoscope predicted that she would be married to a king, he sought her as his wife—it was, of course, Julia Domna. For more details: Historia Augusta, Septimius, 2,8-9;3,9; 4,3;Cramer 1954,209-211; Syme 1972-1974, 298-299; Scarre 1995,133; Barton 1994,46,51; Birly 2002,52,75; Zahran 2000,164.

<sup>23</sup>Dio Cassius, 77, 11,1; Cramer 1954,211-213; Barton 1994,46; Birly 2002,41.

<sup>24</sup>Dio Cassius,77,11,1; Cramer 1954,211; Syme 1972-1974, 300;Barton 1994,46; Barton 1994(a),57;Scarre 1995,134; Polk 2008, 262.

<sup>25</sup>The Septizodium was built in 203 A.D., was part of a large planning of Severian urban development. it located at southeast corner of the Palatine Hill. Renaissance drawings illustrating the building with a facade consisting of three colonnaded stories. The excavations have revealed that fragments of a large porphyry basin was located in the central exedra and fragmentary statue of a reclining River God which confirm that the Septizodium was a nymphaeum, In addition, Comparison of this building with other nymphaeum at many cities of Asia Minor and North Africa, some scholars also confirm that was a large nymphaeum. For more details: Odom 1944,25-26,35-36; Gorrie 1997,182-195; Gorrie 2001,653-670; Lusnia 2004,517-543.

<sup>26</sup>Turcan 1972, 132;Lusnia 2004, 526-529.

<sup>27</sup>Turcan 1972, 132-133.





fig.7

Notable for why have been chosen the myth of Paris arbitration exclusively to depict it in the seven niche of the seven theater niches; It is maybe for the sanctification of Aphrodite/Venus, who is the patron god of the Venus planetary<sup>(28)</sup>, and in the same time god pteron of the month of April in the Roman calendar<sup>(29)</sup>, the same month that Emperor Septimius Severus and his son Caracalla were born in; wherever, Septimius was born on 11 April, 145 A.D., in Leptis Magna<sup>(30)</sup>, while Caracalla was born on 4 April, 189 A.D., in Lyon<sup>(31)</sup>.

This interpretation may be in line with reliefs of the first niche (pl. 12, 13, 14), which the study suggests that was a school for studying astronomy and astrology, as well as depicting the Nine Muses, Μοῦσαι, reliefs of the second niche (pl. 15) and sponsoring sciences and the arts, especially astronomy and astrology. The depiction of Venus in the seventh niche is also consistent with the portrayal of Septimius and his son Caracalla only in the Fourth Niche (pl. 9), but not other members of the Septimius family, who depicted on the Arch of Leptis Magna<sup>(32)</sup>, where depicting with them both of Geta and Julia Domna May before the importance of Venus astronomically, Venus with her followers, Charites, were depicted in the complete niche, and it had been also sculptured two dolphins in the orchestra; and it's known the relationship between Venus and dolphin in the ancient classical concept<sup>(33)</sup>.



pl.12

<sup>28</sup>Granger 1903, 87; Neugebauer, Van Hoesen 1959, 21-28.

<sup>29</sup>Gillman 1997, 63-95.

<sup>30</sup>Dio Cassius 76,15,6; Reven 1993,133-134; Scarre 1995,130-131;Cherry, Kyle 2005, 370.

<sup>31</sup>DioCassus 79, 3, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Hannestad 1986,270- 273; Broquier 1992, 270.

<sup>33</sup>The dolphin represents the marine environment in which Aphrodite originated and from which she came out, or perhaps as some say that it is an Eros alternative and that the main form depicted with Aphrodite is Eros. For details, see Gardener 1924, 69; Edgar 1974, 11-12, pl.VI, 27454.



pl.13



pl.14



pl.15

Interestingly, the name of the founding Emperor of the Severanage is essentially derived from the root of the word *septem* means seven<sup>34</sup>, and the word *septimus* means in Latin the seventh<sup>(35)</sup>, which

<sup>34</sup>Cassell's Latin Dictionary, s.v. *septem*.

<sup>35</sup>Cassell's Latin Dictionary, s.v. *septimus*.



refers to the symbolism of the number seven in the theater of Sabratha, it means that the Mithraism and the prevalence of its spread, especially in the army, who is the main pillar of the Severan family to consolidate the throne.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As shown above, the number seven appeared constantly as an architectural and artistic phenomenon in the Theater of Sabratha. This phenomenon corresponds to the holy significance of number seven in Mithraism, a religion spreading across the Roman empire at that time. Moreover, it is related to the spread of astronomy and astrology in society, and its emanation from the Eastern religions, which were adopted by the members of the Severan family. Moreover, the correlation of astrology and seven planets, so the number seven was intentional and not coincidental within the components of the theater Sabratha architectural and sculptural.

Moreover, the followers of the widely spread religion, were eager to show their belief. For example, the commander of the Pretoria guards was depicted with seven of his soldiers in the main niche to denote the army and then his Mithraism. Similarly, Septimius Severus depicted himself in the same niche to inaugurate the theater with a ritual of cleansing and slaughter, perhaps during his historical visit to the region of Tripolitania in 203 A.D.

Based on that, the study suggests that Sabratha Theater dates back to the Severan Age 193-235 A.D., specifically the Septimius Severus era 193 - 211 A.D., possibly the year 203 A.D., which is the date of the historic visit of Septimius to the region. Most of the previous studies<sup>(36)</sup> dated the theater building to the last quarter of the second century A.D., specifically the era of Commodus (161–180 A.D.), while Mattingly<sup>(37)</sup> out of context in that he stated that the theater was one of the achievements of the second century A.D. and perhaps from the Age of the Antonines (138 – 180 A.D.).

Frank Sear<sup>(38)</sup> was only alone who dated building of the theater to the Severan age, without mentioning any evidence. For the dating, While all previous studies have dated the reliefs of the theater to the end of the Severan age<sup>(39)</sup>, based on the attributes' reliefs, and it's compared with reliefs of the Severan age, especially on the Arch of Septimius at Leptis Magna and Severan basilica in the city itself; whereas the drill was used deeply to shape the head's hair, it was manifested property of the light and shadow as the Severan age's attributes<sup>(40)</sup>, as in the formulation of the head's hair of all figures portrayed, especially the teacher in the first niche (pl. 14) or the formulation of the head hair of Septimius Severus and his companions in the fourth niche (pl. 9).

The sculptor used the two-dimensional pattern to depict the persons on all niches of the theater, instead of using the three dimensions, or perspective<sup>(41)</sup>, and this was reflected in the scene of the sacrifice (pl. 10) and the procession of the Emperor (pl. 9), which is the 3rd century's attributes<sup>(42)</sup>.

The Syrian artistic influences appear in the theater reliefs, where attribute of frontality, regardless of the orientation of the faces as it appears in the three niches (pls. 8-11-15)<sup>(43)</sup>, which was the common attribute reliefs of the Septimius arch in Leptis Magna<sup>(44)</sup>. The study suggests that the artists of Aphrodisias who made these reliefs at the Sabratha Theater<sup>(45)</sup>, because this is the same technique of Leptis Magna's reliefs.

Thus, previous studies reported that the theater of Sabratha was built in the Antonine age or in the last quarter of the second century A.D., while the reliefs were attached to it at the end of the Severan period. But the study does not support this vision at all and emphasizes the integrative unit of the theater and its architectural and sculptural harmony, especially in the symbolism of the number seven. In all components of the theater, thus the theater dates back to the age of Septimius Severus and does

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<sup>36</sup>Haynes 1965,129; Small 1983,63;Bacchielli 1999,173; Di Vita 1999, 158; Raabe 2007,9.

<sup>37</sup>Mattingly 1994, 52.

<sup>38</sup>Sear 2006, 284.

<sup>39</sup>Caputo 1959, 57; Bieber 1961, 191, 202; Sear 2006,308-309; Raabe 2007.

<sup>40</sup>Raabe 2007.

<sup>41</sup>Grant 1996, 69.

<sup>42</sup>Strong 1980, 64; Kleiner 1992, 319-328.

<sup>43</sup>Ball 2002, 424.

<sup>44</sup>Ball 2002, 424.

<sup>45</sup>Ward-perkins 1948, 74; Bacchielli 1999, 116; Raabe 2007,42-43.

not exclude its history at the beginning of the third century A.D., or rather in 203 A.D. on the occasion of the emperor's historical visit to the region, and perhaps the theater was built in the new neighborhood of the city east on the ruins of the old theater.

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