

Archaeological Excavations conducted by the Australian Archaeological Mission to Nea Pafos in 2011

The Ministry of Communications and Works, Department of Antiquities, announces the completion of the fourteenth season of archaeological investigations of the precinct of the ancient Hellenistic-Roman theatre of Nea Pafos. The excavations, which took place between the 1st and 28th October 2011, were conducted by the University of Sydney under the direction of Dr Craig Barker, Dr Smadar Gabrieli and Emeritus Professor Richard Green for the University of Sydney. The Australian archaeological excavations in Pafos are supported by the Nicholson Museum and by the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens.



Trench 11B located behind the stage building of the theatre

In 2011, a team of 20 Australian archaeologists and students worked in the precinct of the ancient theatre of Nea Pafos; the World Heritage listed capital city of Cyprus in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Over the past sixteen years the Australian Mission has uncovered evidence of a theatre, which was a significant centre of culture and performance for the city and surrounding district. The theatre was used for over six and a half centuries between its construction at the time of the foundation of the city of Nea Pafos around 300 BC, and its destruction as the result of earth quakes in the late fourth century AD. Over five distinct architectural phases have been identified through study, each representing changing tastes in Hellenistic and Roman performances and entertainment. Most of the stonework of the theatre however was robbed away and the site was quarried following its destruction, leaving only scant architectural remains of the structure.

Two trenches were opened by the Australians in 2011. The first was located in the centre of the nymphaeum to the south of the theatre, which has been the main focus of excavations over the past three years. A nymphaeum was a water fountain house, popular in the Roman Empire for providing fresh water and a cooling environment for the urban population. The Pafos nymphaeum is located between the theatre and the northernmost main east-west Roman road. The nymphaeum was probably constructed in the first century AD and would have been perfectly positioned as it was located close to the ancient north-eastern city gates and near the main entrances of the theatre. The nymphaeum was over 20 metres long and five metres wide. Facing onto the road and on a different alignment to the theatre, the nymphaeum has thick masonry walls, includes a carved niche for sculpture, and was covered with a simply designed mosaic (containing a star pattern) and a waterproofed chamfered plastered wall. An outlet for water led into a drainage channel underneath the Roman road. Once the water supply system was blocked as a result of the late 4th century AD earthquake, the ruins of the nymphaeum became a convenient dumping ground for architectural elements from nearby buildings including the theatre, the nymphaeum itself and possibly other nearby buildings. Marble Corinthian capitals, column fragments, and architrave blocks were recovered from the debris dumped inside the building. Pottery finds dating from the 5th to the 7th centuries AD seem to confirm this use of the building to the period of the stone-quarrying of the theatre.



The Pafos nymphaeum

A second trench was opened to the west of the nymphaeum and south of the theatre and was an expansion of a trench begun in 2010. A series of medieval walls from the Crusader period buildings constructed on top of the remains of the theatre were revealed. Beneath them are a series of bedrock cuts that suggest there was an attempt to landscape the area between the back of the theatre's stage building and the Roman road. A wall built alongside the road suggests a deliberate attempt by Roman civic planners to create a built urban environment in spaces of empty land between major public buildings.

The main focus of the work by the team in 2011 however was a study season designed to complete recording and interpretation of finds from previous seasons of excavation, with final academic publication of the architectural history of the theatre expected in the next couple of years.

The theatre, the nymphaeum and the road provide invaluable insight into the urban layout of the ancient capital city of the island and will become important archaeological tourist attractions for Pafos in the future. The Australian team hopes to excavate the entire length of the Roman road in future seasons.