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# Investigations at a Small Greek City

Ancient Greece contained a multitude of small towns and cities about which we know little compared with their larger and more famous neighbors such as Athens, Corinth or Sparta. One of these, Phlius, is situated in the northern Peloponnesus, just west of ancient Nemea, where the famous Nemean Games were held. The ancient acropolis occupied a rocky spine-like hill, while the city proper was placed in the plain around the west foot of the ridge.

Little is known of the history of Phlius. Dionysus, the god of wine, is associated with the city's prosperity, and the wine of Phlius was well known in antiquity, as it is in the area today.<sup>1</sup> Phlius participated in the defense of Greece against the Persians, sending two hundred men to Thermopylae and as many as a thousand to Plataea, and it plays an honorable part in Xenophon's narrative of the political and military events in the Peloponnesus in the fourth century B.C.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most famous of Phlius' native sons was Pratinas, the composer of satyr plays, who introduced this form of dramatic performance to Athens probably at the end of the sixth century and is said to have competed there with Aeschylus himself.<sup>3</sup>

It is only in the Roman period that we are able to get an idea of the physical layout of the ancient city. In the second century of our era the traveler Pausanias visited the city and mentioned a large number of buildings and monuments, including the tomb of Aristias, Pratinas' son (also a playwright), which was placed in the agora of the city.<sup>4</sup> In all, the author mentions some twelve sanctuaries, buildings and monuments including, on the acropolis, a sanctuary sacred to Hebe, and temples of Hera and Demeter. Upon leaving the acropolis he mentions a temple of Asclepius and a theater below it.

In 1924 the American School of Classi-

cal Studies at Athens undertook an excavation at the site, locating at least eight buildings and providing evidence for occupation from Neolithic to Byzantine times.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the excavation was not continued.

The 1924 investigations cleared a section at the southwest foot of the hill which must have been the area of the ancient agora. Here they partially uncovered a large rectangular building with an interior colonnade consisting of eight bases on the flanks and five across the ends. The building, known locally as the "Palati" (= palace), was then thought to be Hellenistic. To the north of this building, between it and the hill, lay a rectangular structure apparently facing the concave slope. Striations on the bedrock of the hill and a test trench cut into the fill of the slope indicated that a theater may have been located there.<sup>6</sup>

In 1970 further work was carried out at Phlius by the University of Missouri in cooperation with the American School of Classical Studies.<sup>7</sup> Work was centered in the area of the Palati. The goals of the excavation were, first, to clean and study the 1924 trenches in the area, second, to re-investigate the Palati, and third, to clean the building to the north of the Palati and to determine, if possible, whether there was indeed a theater *cavea*. Approximately two weeks were required to remove the dump of the 1924 excavation and clean out the old trenches.

The depth of fill and dump, together with the many late walls and graves, unfortunately made it impossible to clear the Palati completely. Sections of the floor were, however, identified, and a column base was uncovered *in situ*. All but one of the bases of the interior colonnade have now been cleared. This base, like the others of the colonnade, consists of a Doric drum with twenty flutes, cut in one piece with a block



*The countryside around ancient Phlius, seen from the north. In the foreground is a partially cleared trench of the 1924 excavations, beyond that the remains of the ancient theater and, still farther, the Palati. The modern town appears in the left background. At the extreme right grapes are being dried.*

which forms a low base. This unusual feature gives the impression of a Doric column on a plinth. Cuttings on the interior faces of these plinths indicate that paving slabs were once slipped into them. Thus, the floor identified this season was probably packing for this pavement which most likely covered the whole interior within the colonnade.

On the east side of the Palati, the only area investigated to any extent, there seems to have been a mud-brick construction extending from the column bases to just short of the building's east wall. This construction (which has only just begun to be defined) is cut in several places by late walls and Early Christian and Byzantine graves. It is clear, however, that at least four courses of mud bricks existed. As yet we have no idea of the building's use, or even of its total extent. Over the mud brick

and the floor packing a thick layer of tiles and burnt debris indicated a destruction datable to the third or fourth century of our era. A number of architectural fragments were recovered, including part of a terracotta lion-head spout, several pieces of Doric columns and capitals and various other fragments probably belonging to the Palati. These date in the fifth century B.C. A fragment of a Greek inscription was also found; it contains part of the imperial titles of the Roman emperor Trajan and dates to A.D. 116-117.

Two stratigraphic tests down to the bottom of the wall were made on either side of the east wall of the building. A level of working chips and a footing trench were isolated; the pottery from these tests, together with the architectural fragments, gives a tentative date in the second half of the fifth century B.C. for the building of the

Palati. Another test indicated that the building's north wall was entirely robbed out in Late Roman times.

North of the Palati lies the long rectangular structure partially uncovered in 1924. Our investigations revealed more of the structure, which consists of a line of poros limestone blocks and several large square blocks north of them. The former have rectangular holes cut into the upper surfaces, suggesting that wooden posts or supports were once placed there. Three floor levels were found within the building and the beginning of a possible extension at the southeast end, running to the east and then returning north. The earliest floor level predates the building and the two upper probably also do. The building itself appears to be late Hellenistic or Early Roman.

To the north we began to clear the test trench which ran into the concave slope of the hill. Upon cleaning out its northern end, we came upon theater seats of poros limestone *in situ*. South of them a cutting was found, probably for a drain. Farther to the south bedrock was reached. This slopes down toward the south and is probably the floor of the orchestra, although its slope is somewhat peculiar. Apparently throne-like seats were also used in the theater at Phlius, for several are scattered about the general area. They are of typical form, high-backed, with arm rests, but none found so far are inscribed or decorated except for a simple incised line running around the exterior surface which emphasizes the arms and back of the chair.

To the east the area is delimited by a NE-SW retaining wall, cleared in 1924. Slightly south of the western end of this wall was found the corner of another poros seat also *in situ* and obviously the last of the row to which belong the seats in the middle of the hill. This, then, was the eastern end of the cavea, perhaps the retaining wall lining the entrance to the theater.

Although we have not found the theater's western end, we are able to determine the arc of the seats in relation to the rectangular building north of the Palati, which must surely be considered a scene building. The space thus calculated for the orchestra would not allow a circular area but more likely an oval or rectangular one. This is particularly interesting in regard to Phlius' possible connection with the beginnings of drama. It would not be at all surprising that the home of Pratinas in an area which honored Dionysus might have had an early theater of peculiar form.

The exact identification of the theater gives us a fixed point in Pausanias' description of the city and bears out the conjectures of the previous excavators. Most modern writers have placed the theater in a hollow below a small chapel farther to the east and higher up the hill. Our research, although it has not yet determined the theater's exact size, shape or date, has at least shown that ideas of the topography of the ancient city of Phlius must be revised.

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<sup>1</sup>Athenaeus I27d.

<sup>2</sup>Herodotus 7.202; 9.28.4; Xenophon, *Hellenica*, books 4, 5, 6, 7 *passim*.

<sup>3</sup>Suidas, s.v. Pratinas.

<sup>4</sup>Pausanias, 2.12.3—13.8.

<sup>5</sup>C. W. Blegen, "Excavations at Phlius 1924," *Art and Archaeology* 20 (1925) 23-33; W. Biers, "Excavations at Phlius, 1924. The Prehistoric Deposits," *Hesperia* 38 (1969) 443-458; W. Biers, "Excavations at Phlius, 1924. The Votive Deposit," *Hesperia* 41 (1971) 397-423.

<sup>6</sup>The test trench referred to was dug in 1925 and so was not mentioned in the publication of the 1924 ex-

cavation. There, however, the suggestion was made that the *cavea* of a theater existed in this fold of the hill. See Blegen *op. cit.*, 29.

<sup>7</sup>The excavation extended from August 10 to September 5. William Biers of the University of Missouri-Columbia was Director; trench masters were Jane Biers and Harriet Anne Weis, a graduate student at the University of Missouri and a Ford Foundation archaeological trainee. W. W. Cummer was the architect and Nancy Shepard acted as his assistant. The entire project was funded by the Research Council of the University of Missouri-Columbia.