



Follow me

to the ancient
theatre of Delphi

Delphi, myth and history

At the foot of Mount Parnassos, in a rocky and imposing landscape, you will find Delphi. There lies the sanctuary of Apollo, and the most famous oracle of ancient Greece: the Delphic oracle. According to mythology, Delphi was the navel (omphalos) of the earth, that is, the centre of the world. The myth says that Zeus sent out two eagles to find the centre of the world, the one towards the East and the other towards the West, and they met in Delphi. The area has been inhabited since the Mycenaean period (14th-12th c. B.C.) according to the excavations, but Delphi gained Pan-Hellenic fame in the 8th century B.C., when Apollo's cult was established and his sanctuary was already developed.

The myth tells us that after wandering in various areas of central Greece, Apollo reached an area called Pytho, which was

guarded by the terrible serpent Python. Apollo killed it and took control of the area. Therefore, the god was named Pythian Apollo and his priestess Pythia. Moreover, the great festival that was established in his honour was named "Pythian Games". At first, the god was worshipped outdoors. The first temple of Apollo was built in the late 7th century B.C. Since then, the fame of the sanctuary constantly increased attracting believers from far away. In the 6th century B.C., responsible for the function of the oracle was the Delphic Amphictyonic League, an association of tribes of Central Greece and Thessaly. Thanks to it, the religious and political influence of Delphi expanded throughout Greece, while the Pythian Games were rearranged, took place every four years and gained a Pan-Hellenic character.

Music for Apollo

Because of the special relation of Apollo with music, the cult events of the Pythian Games were accompanied by music competitions: singing accompanied by *kithara* (an instrument related to the lyre), and singing accompanied by *aulos* (flute). The main event of the competition though, was a hymn dedicated to Apollo regarding his fight with Python, called the "Pythian nome". Later on, choral music contests were introduced, as well as contests of poetry recitation. The contestants came from all areas of Greece, the colonies in Asia Minor, Pontus (south coast of Black Sea) and Italy.

Already since the 6th century B.C. athletic events were added to the Pythian Games, in accordance with the model of the games of ancient Olympia. However, the music contests always remained the most important part of the festival. It was them that made the Pythian Games differ from the Olympic Games, and the other Pan-Hellenic games.

In Delphi, apart from the Pythian Games there were also the Soteria Games, a festival dedicated to Zeus Soter and Apollo. The festival was established after the historic victory of the Aetolians against the Gauls, in 279 B.C., in Delphi. From inscriptions we learn that this festival included both music and drama competitions.

The scholars believe that the music and theatre events of the Pythian and the Soteria Games initially were held in the free spaces of the sanctuary or even where the *cavea* of the theatre was later built. Occasionally they might have also been hosted in the stadium of Delphi, which was built in the 3rd century B.C. In the 2nd century B.C., the music and theatre competitions acquired their own space, a stone theatre inside the sanctuary of Apollo (fig. 1, 2).



Fig. 1: The sanctuary of Apollo and the theatre.



Fig. 2: Model of the sanctuary according to Pomtow.



Fig. 3: General view of the theatre.

The ancient theatre of Delphi

Entering the sanctuary you will follow the Sacred Way, the road that led to the temple of Apollo. On a small hill, very close to the temple, there is the ancient theatre (fig. 3). It is one of the largest buildings of the sanctuary and lies on the most beautiful location, as it seems to contemplate the unique landscape of Delphi from above. It belongs to the type of theatres that formed part of a sanctuary, as the theatre of Epidauros. However, it is not among the largest ancient theatres of Greece because of the limitations imposed by its location, so its estimated capacity was of 4,200-4,600 seats.

The archaeologists have different opinions on when exactly it was constructed. The most probable version is that initially the hillside was carved so that the spectators could watch the music competitions of the Pythian Games, sitting on the ground or on wooden seats. The construction works of the stone theatre must have started during the Hellenistic period, in the first half of the 2nd century B.C., but it seems that they stopped because of an earthquake. Finally, the theatre was completed with funds and workforce provided by the king of Pergamon, Eumenes II, in 159-158 B.C. The main building material used for its construction was limestone from Mount Parnassos. The form of the theatre became monumental, while some alterations took place during the Roman period.

As you will notice, the main parts of the theatre are the orchestra, the *skene* (scene building) and the *cavea* (or *koilon*). The best preserved parts are the *cavea* and the orchestra. If you wish to find out more on the construction and the parts of the theatre, you may take the following route.

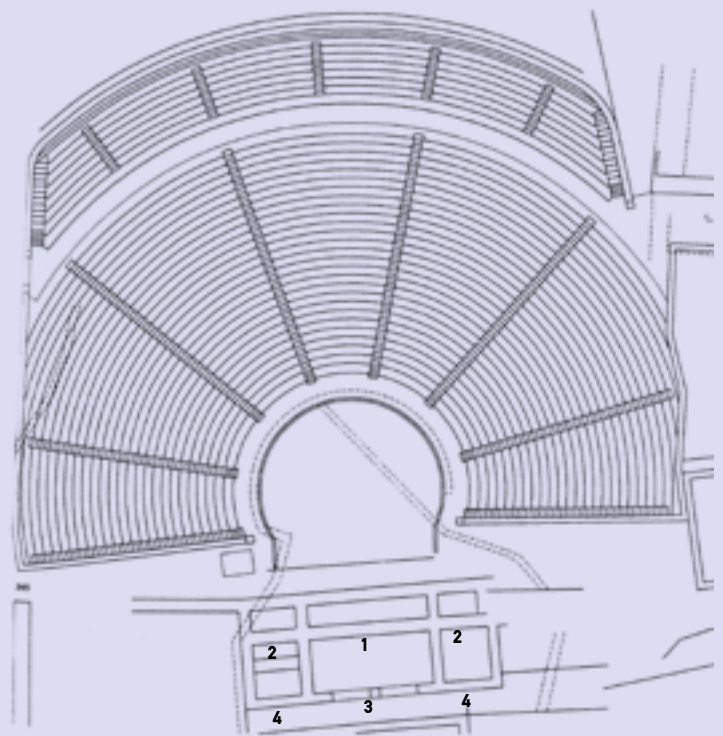


Fig. 4: Plan of the theatre.



Fig. 5: The cavea, the orchestra and the western parodos.

1st stop: the cavea

At first glance, the whole *cavea* seems carved into hillside. But the archaeologists have discovered that some of its parts were supported by an artificial hill formed by a large quantity of soil. This was necessary, as in some points the ground level was lower. Equally necessary was the support of the *cavea* by the walls you see in its two ends, which are called *retaining walls* (fig. 5).

There is one more thing that is noteworthy. If you stand in the middle of the orchestra and observe the *cavea*, you will realize that it is larger in height than in width. This did not happen by chance. Where the theatre was

built, there were already other structures that imposed some limitations. So, the *cavea* could not expand to the left (west side) because there was the *peribolos* of the sanctuary, that is, the wall that surrounded it, while to the right (east side) there was an older structure (fig. 4).

The seating area is divided in two uneven parts. The lower part contains 27 rows of seats, and 7 wedge-shaped sections (*kerkides*) divided by staircases used by the spectators to reach their seats. The upper part of the *cavea* is quite smaller with only 7 rows of seats and 6 more narrow *kerkides*. Between the two parts of the *cavea* there is a

horizontal corridor, the *diazoma*, with gates at its two ends for the spectators to be able to circulate (fig. 4). As you may notice, the first row of seats after the *diazoma* is somewhat raised, so that those who sat there had a better view (fig. 3). Generally, it seems that the architects of the theatre have taken into consideration the physical comfort of the spectators. Thus, on the back side of every seat there was a cavity for the legs of the spectators who sat behind.

The upper part of the *cavea* ended in a wall that held the slope soil in place. Between the wall and the last row of seats there was a channel that carried away the rainwater.

Spectacles with a view

Thanks to the location and steep inclination of the *cavea*, all the spectators could enjoy the view of the Pleistos valley in front of them, and the Mount Kirfi in the background (fig. 6). There were, however, restrictions on where every spectator would choose to seat. Letters incised on many seats denote that they were numbered in a way that was common during the Roman period. In some cases, we even know who sat in specific seats: there are either incised names of wealthy Roman citizens, or titles as "consultant" and "amphictyon", which means that they were reserved for specific officials, such as the members of the Delphic Amphictyonic League.

During the Roman period a *theoreion* was also constructed, reserved for the officials, the priests and the high officers. Although it is not preserved, you can imagine it as a small roofed section in the central *kerkida*, in the middle of the first rows, where the view of the scene building was very good.

2nd stop: the skene (scene building)

Only the foundations of the *skene* are preserved today (fig. 6, 7). According to the archaeologists, it was built in two levels because of the ground inclination. So, the spectators from the *cavea* could only see its front part with the *proskenion*, an elongated stoa supported by columns (fig. 4, No. 1). The archaeologists suppose that the roof of the *proskenion* would be the space where the actors made their appearance. On either side of the *proskenion* there were two smaller rooms used as dressing rooms and storage areas (fig. 4, No. 2), where the actors got prepared and the equipment of the performances was stored. At a lower level there was the main scene building, which was a rectangular room (fig. 4, No. 3). Two compact and almost square structures that held the slope soil in place were to the right and left of this room (fig. 4, No. 4). This interior division was not visible on the exterior wall of the *skene* that faced the temple of Apollo; this wall was undivided and had probably 2 doors that led outside the theatre (fig. 2).

During the Roman period several changes were made in the *skene*. The *proskenion* was replaced by a lower platform, the *logeion*. In the 1st century A.D., the façade of the *logeion* was decorated with relief depictions of the Labours of Hercules. This decoration was probably related to the visit of the Roman emperor Nero in 67 A.D. and his participation in the music competitions of the Pythian Games. Nero used to identify himself with Hercules, thus, the officials of the sanctuary depicted the achievements of his favourite hero in the theatre, in order to please him.



Fig. 6: The theatre from above.

3rd stop: the orchestra

The orchestra is horseshoe-shaped and paved with irregularly-shaped slabs. This form was acquired during the Roman period, while initially, its shape was circular. If you stand in the middle of the orchestra looking at the *cavea*, you will see the remains of a low wall at its

right end (fig. 7), which is what has been left from the wall built in Roman times to separate the orchestra from the *cavea*.

A corridor around the orchestra facilitated the movement of the spectators. Next to the corridor there is a drain pipe. When the theatre functioned, the pipe was

open to gather the rainwater from the seats, and only where it crossed the staircases of the *cavea* it was covered by slabs, in order to create a passage for the spectators. Then it went underground leading the water under the *skene* and away from the theatre.



Fig. 7: The orchestra. The western parodos visible in the back left.

4th stop: the parodoi

To the right and left of the orchestra you will see two passageways, the *parodoi*, through which the spectators entered the *cavea* (fig. 5). In the theatre of Delphi the walls of the *parodoi* still survive at their full length, in contrast with most theatres. There is another interesting element regarding these walls: many inscriptions have been discovered on their surface referring to freed slaves. According to the inscriptions dating to the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century A.D., some slaves were

freed after having been "bought" by Apollo through his priest. In ancient times, it was common to place such inscriptions in the sanctuaries because the god was believed to guarantee the freedom of the slaves. At the same time, the inscriptions were a copy of the liberation acts, which were put in public view. Particularly in Delphi, an ancient law has come to light, which stipulated that when a slave was freed it should be incised on the theatre. According to some scholars, perhaps the liberations

were announced at the theatre during the festivals or other public gatherings. Today, it is very difficult to make out the inscriptions on the *parodoi* of the theatre because of the worn stones of the walls.

In the west *parodos*, the one you see to your left as you look at the *cavea*, you can see a large statue base (fig. 5), where stood the statue of Dionysus, god of theatre, also worshipped in Delphi. We know this thanks to the 2nd century A.D. traveler Pausanias.



Fig. 8: Photographs from the performances “Suppliants” and “Prometheus Bound” at the Delphic Festival (1930).

From abandonment to revival

The theatre was probably abandoned at the end of the Roman period, but it was in a good state of preservation until the 15th century A.D., according to the descriptions of the European travelers who visited it. Nevertheless, during the following centuries it was gradually buried under tons of soil and it was deserted. A whole village, called Kastri, was built where used to be the theatre and the sanctuary of Apollo.

The theatre was unearthed thanks to excavations conducted by French archaeologists between 1892 and 1903. Some years afterwards, the place revived. It was the first ancient theatre of Greece where a tragedy

was staged after centuries. The play was *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, which was presented in the framework of the first Delphic Festival in 1927.

The Delphic Festival was an initiative of the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos and his wife, Eva Palmer, with the goal not only to revive the ancient theatre, but something much bigger. The dream of the organizers was to make again Delphi the “centre of the world” and a symbol of universal reconciliation. However, the Delphic Festival took place only twice, in 1927 and in 1930 (fig. 8).

Since then, the theatre has hosted a few theatre and music events, the most recent

one being in the summer of 2012. Within the framework of International Meetings of Ancient Greek Drama, performances are staged firstly in the ancient stadium of Delphi and then in the open-air theatre “*Frynichos*”.

The use of the theatre is limited also for reasons of protection. Unfortunately, during the 20th century much damage was caused by rocks that fell due to earthquakes, but the restoration works at the theatre are still carried out until today. Its universal value has been recognized by UNESCO and the theatre, as well as the whole archaeological site of Delphi, is inscribed on the World Heritage List.

One more thing...

On your way to the theatre, you will see the remains of the temple of Apollo, which was built in the 4th century B.C. in the place of the first temple (fig. 1). Inside it there was the *adyton*, where people weren't allowed to enter and where Pythia delivered the oracular statements. The Delphic oracle thrived between the 6th and the 4th century B.C. and its reputation spread all over the world. Apollo's advice was not only asked by ordinary people, but also by

kings and governors of cities. In order to thank the god, the cities dedicated works of art and structures which gradually filled the sanctuary. In front of the temple's entrance, to the east, you will see the altar of Apollo, dedicated by the Chians. Walking down the Sacred Way, you will also meet the Treasury of the Athenians, a small building that looks like a temple. The Athenians placed in it the works of art that they dedicated to the sanctuary. Of course,

along the Sacred Way, there were also the treasuries of other cities, which have not been restored yet. The ancient stadium of Delphi, built in the 3rd century B.C., lies at a higher level than the theatre. It hosted the athletic events of the Pythian Games and is considered as one of the best preserved ancient stadiums. Finally, do not miss the Castalian fountain, the sacred spring where all those who came to consult the god washed, as well as Pythia herself.

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Fig. 1, 3, 5, 6, 7: Ephorate of Antiquities of Phocis

Fig. 2: Κολώνια, Ρ. (2013), «Μουσικά και θεατρικά δρώμενα στους Δελφούς», in: Κολώνια, Ρ. (ed.), *Αρχαία θέατρα της Στερεάς Ελλάδας* (pp. 113-130), Athens: Diazoma - Central Greece Region

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Fig. 8: Photographic Archive of the Benaki Museum

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Translation: Maria Michalarou, Translator - Interpreter

ISBN: 978-960-386-225-3

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The project "Design and production of educational tools for the enhancement of the importance of theatre in the antiquity and today" (code MIS 339817) is implemented within the framework of the Operational Program "Education and Lifelong Learning" and is co-funded by the European Union (European Social Fund) and by national funds.



HELLENIC MINISTRY OF CULTURE, EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS
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Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



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