



Follow me

to the ancient
theatre of Dodona



Fig. 1: General view of the theatre.

Ancient Dodona, the sanctuary and the oracle

The sanctuary of Dodona was founded in a valley under the mountain Tomaros, only 15km from Ioannina. As it was located in a beautiful landscape it was firstly associated with nature. It was dedicated to the cult of the sky and of the earth or of Zeus and Dione. According to the local tradition, Dione was Zeus' wife and possibly Dodona was named after her. The ancient cult wanted the divine couple to live on an oak tree, considered as sacred. By the ancient Greek verb "naio", which means "reside", Zeus was called Naïos (resident of the sanctuary).

For many centuries the rituals took place outdoors, around the sacred oak tree. The priests delivered oracles by interpreting the rustling of the leaves on the tree and the sounds of the birds nesting on its branches. Thus, the sanctuary also functioned as an oracle, which according to Herodotus, was the oldest in Greece. This oracle is mentioned for the first time in the epic poems of Homer.

In the 4th century B.C., temples were built around the oak tree to honour Zeus (fig. 2, No. 1) and Dione (fig. 2, No. 2). As time went by the sanctuary acquired a Pan-Hellenic character. Dodona was not only a religious centre but also an administrative centre of Epirus, and it flourished in the 3rd century B.C., when king of Epirus was Pyrrhus. Public buildings were built at the sanctuary then, such as the *Bouleuterion* (or Council house, fig. 2, No. 3), the *Prytaneum* (fig. 2, No. 4), the theatre (fig. 2, No. 5) and the stadium (fig. 2, No. 6). Moreover, the Naïa festival was established, in honour of Zeus Naïos, and was held every 4 years. The sanctuary was protected by a *peribolos* (enclosure, fig. 2, No. 7), while next to it there was the walled citadel (fig. 2, No. 8), dwelling of the archons.

The sanctuary was destroyed by the Aetolians in 219 B.C., a military and political power of central Greece that wished to expand in the territories of Epirus. However, the buildings of the sanctuary

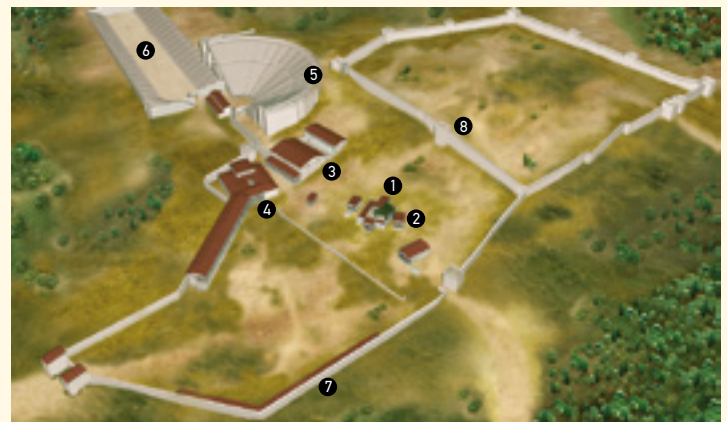
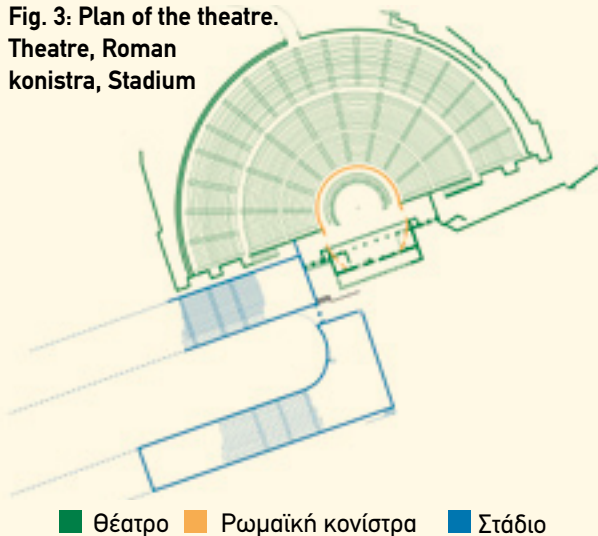


Fig. 2: 3D reconstruction of the sanctuary in the 3rd century B.C.

were quickly rebuilt and Dodona flourished again until 167 B.C., when it was burned by the Romans. Nevertheless, after the victory of emperor Augustus in the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C., the city turned again into an important religious and administrative centre of Epirus and at the same time it acquired a Roman character.

The sanctuary and the oracle functioned until the 4th century A.D. and then they were abandoned because Christianity had already started replacing the ancient cult. Thus, an early Christian temple -a basilica as it is called- was built in the place of the sanctuary. Today, in the archaeological site of Dodona, visitors can see the remains of the buildings that once gave life to the sanctuary. The largest building in the sanctuary, which stands out even today in the archaeological site, is the ancient theatre.

Fig. 3: Plan of the theatre.
Theatre, Roman
konistra, Stadium



The theatre of Dodona

The theatre of Dodona is one of the largest ancient theatres of Greece. It was built in the early 3rd B.C., under Pyrrhus, to host the drama and music competitions of the *Naia* festival. The athletic competitions of the festival took place in the stadium, next to the theatre (fig. 3). In the late 3rd century B.C., after the damage caused by the Aetolians to the whole of the sanctuary, the theatre needed to be rebuilt. During the Roman period, under emperor Augustus (27 B.C.-14 A.D.), it became an arena that hosted gladiators and wild animals fights. We do not know exactly when it was abandoned, but according to an inscription, it must have functioned until the 3rd century A.D.

The main architectural parts of the theatre are the *skene* (scene building), the orchestra and the *cavea*. To discover each one of them, you can take the following route.

1st stop: the parodoi

To reach the orchestra, follow one of the two entrances on either side of the *skene*. In each entrance there is a double gate, that is, with two openings; today, only the lower part of the columns that supported these gates is preserved (fig. 4). From there the visitors could go to the *parodoi*, the two corridors between the *skene* and the *cavea*. In ancient times, the chorus of the theatrical performances entered the orchestra through the *parodoi*, as well as the spectators who would sit in the front rows of the *cavea*.



Fig. 4: The double gate that led to the eastern parodos.

2nd stop: the orchestra

Originally, the orchestra had a diameter of around 19m, and in the middle there was the *thymele*, the altar of Dionysus. Around the orchestra one can see the drain pipe that gathered the rainwater (fig. 6). From there, through a second underground pipe, the rainwater went under the *skene* and was driven away. When the theatre became a Roman arena, the orchestra was covered with soil which also covered the pipe and the *thymele*. Since then, the orchestra was named *konistra* from the word "*konis*" which in ancient Greek means "dust". For the enlargement of the *konistra*, the two first rows of seats were removed from the *cavea* and in their place a wall was built, the *thorakion*, to protect the spectators from the wild animals. If you carefully look at the centre of the *thorakion*, you will see a wall recess (fig. 6). It seems that it was created in case those who fought in the arena needed a shelter. But the *thorakion* did not only protect the *cavea*, it also continued on the side of the *skene* (fig. 7). Thus, the shape of the *konistra* was oval, that is, it looked like the shape of an egg (fig. 3).

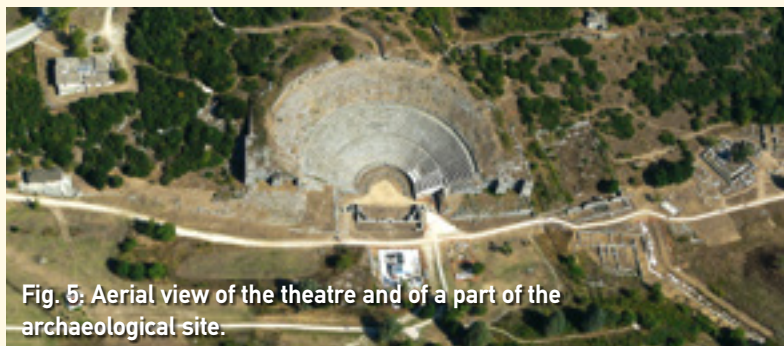


Fig. 5: Aerial view of the theatre and of a part of the archaeological site.



Fig. 6: The orchestra.

3rd stop: the skene

The *skene* of the theatre is interesting as its form has changed several times over the centuries. However, only the lower part of its walls survives today (fig. 7). When the theatre was built, the *skene* was a rectangular hall with two square rooms on either side (fig. 3). These were the *paraskenia*, where the actors prepared themselves before the performances. Initially, the *skene* had only one floor, but in the late 3rd century B.C. it became two-storied. Then, the *proskenion* was built, that is, a stoa in front of the *skene*. Between the *skene* wall and the orchestra, parts of the columns that supported the *proskenion* survive today (fig. 7). On the roof of the *proskenion*, which is called *logeion*, the actors made their appearances. You should imagine that they went out of the doors that opened at the second floor of the *skene*, and in the empty spaces between the doors there were paintings, that is, the scenery of the ancient performances.

In the middle of the *skene* wall there is still a gate that led to a stoa (fig. 8). Today you can see there parts of the columns that supported it. Through this stoa passed



Fig. 7: The skene; traces of the thorakion are visible.

those who wanted to follow the Sacred Way, that is, the road that led to the temples and to the rest of the sanctuary's buildings.

In the 1st century A.D., when the theatre became an arena, the form and the use of the *skene* changed. The *paraskenia* at the

two ends of the *skene* became the almost triangular rooms that we can see today (fig. 7), where the wild animals that took part in the fights (bulls and boars) were kept. The doors through which the animals were led to the orchestra are still preserved.



Fig. 8: The stoa and the gate at the back of the skene.

4th stop: the cavea

The *cavea* of the theatre is carved on the hillside. It is impressively large, with a capacity of 17,000 spectators. Because of its size its two ends are supported by tall walls, which are called retaining walls. On the side of the *skene* the retaining walls form 4 rectangular towers, two on each side, offering more support to the whole structure (fig. 5). Next to the towers you can see the exterior staircases that led the spectators to the higher parts of the *cavea*.

The *cavea* is divided in 3 horizontal zones by two corridors, the *diazomata*, and in vertical sections, the *kerkides*. Between the *kerkides* there are staircases that facilitated the circulation of the spectators. The first and the second zone of the *cavea* are better preserved because the seats have been restored, while the highest zone remains destroyed.

In the first rows of the *cavea* there were the *proedries*, the seats for the officials. The reason there are no *proedries* today is because they were removed at the end of



Fig. 9: Aerial photography of the theatre. The kerkides of the stadium are visible at the bottom left.

the 1st century B.C., when the theatre became an arena.

The stadium of Dodona was almost

unified with the *cavea* of the theatre; today some parts of the stadium's *kerkides* still survive (fig. 3, 9).

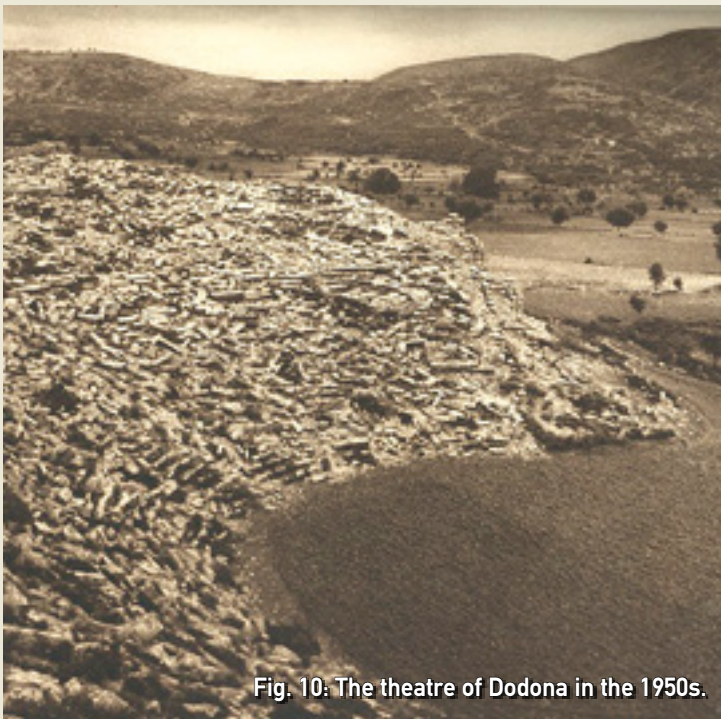


Fig. 10: The theatre of Dodona in the 1950s.

From then to now

After the theatre was abandoned in the 3rd century A.D., the damage caused by time to its material and by human activity to the area changed its form so much that it was difficult to understand that in the past there was a theatre! So, until around 1960 the *cavea* seemed like having been destroyed by an earthquake, while a field had covered the *skene* and the orchestra (fig.10). Although a first excavation had taken place in the late 19th century, systematic excavations were conducted in the area in 1959.

The first restoration works started quickly and already in the summer of 1960 the theatre hosted again, after centuries, ancient drama performances. More performances and events took place in the theatre until 1999, when the Ministry of Culture forbade its use. Consolidation and conservation works have been taking place since then and as a result, the theatre is still not in use. Nevertheless, in July 2015 it functioned symbolically, hosting Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound* by the Municipal and Regional Theatre of Ioannina, only for 3 performances and for a limited number of spectators.

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Other sources

Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina

Sources of photographs and illustrations

Fig. 1: Directorate of Museums

Fig. 2: Archaeological Museum of Ioannina

Fig. 3-4, 6-10: Ephorate of Antiquities of Ioannina

Fig. 5: Personal archive of S. Lontos

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Educational editing: Chrysa Athianou, Educator

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
GENERAL DIRECTORATE OF ANTIQUITIES AND CULTURAL HERITAGE
DIRECTORATE OF MUSEUMS
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES AND COMMUNICATION



European Union
European Social Fund



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS
MANAGING AUTHORITY

Co-financed by Greece and the European Union



programme for development
EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND