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to the ancient  
theatre of Messene

# Ancient Messene, a city that endured through time

If you want to see an ancient Greek city almost in its entirety, you can visit ancient Messene, the capital of ancient Messenia. The enormous archaeological park, located next to the village Mavromati, to the northwest of Kalamata, is not very different from what Messene probably looked like in the antiquity. Among olive trees, vineyards and fields, there are the formerly powerful walls of the city and within them, the well-preserved sanctuaries and public buildings, the houses of its residents, as well as the luxurious graves of its prominent citizens.

The history of the city starts in 369 B.C. when the Theban general Epaminondas liberated the Messenians from the Spartan rule. In order to decisively limit the enemy to his territory, he founded Messene as the new powerful capital of the country. Apart from the liberated Messenians, exiled citizens also came to live in the city, after an invitation by Epaminondas.

Messene, which took its name from the first mythical queen of the country, was built at the foot of the Mount Ithome, a sacred and symbolic area, ideal in every way. At the top of the mount there was the sanctuary of Zeus Ithomata, who was worshipped in Messenia since the 9<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. On the citadel of Ithome, the Messenians fought the last battle for their liberation from the Spartans (464 B.C.). Most importantly, Ithome protected Messene as a natural fortification. The huge area of the city –even larger than Athens– was surrounded by a powerful wall almost 9 ½ km long, with towers and imposing gates. Its fortification walls were so impressive that when the traveler Pausanias visited the city (155-160 A.D.), he compared them with the fortification of Byzantium (the colony founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. by the Megarians), and that of Rhodes, which was considered as a model at the time.

Messene was built based on the Hippodameian system: its roads were horizontal and vertical, forming equal blocks. Even more noteworthy is the fact that the



Fig. 1: View of the archaeological site of Messene.

land plots of the citizens were all equal and equivalent.

The capital developed much more than the other cities of Messenia, which all connected with it in one federation, the Messenian League. During the Hellenistic period, although not in the spotlight, it flourished financially thanks to the trade with Italy, Crete and Egypt.

In 192 B.C., under the pressure of Rome, Messene became a member of the Achaean League. In 183 B.C. it tried to become independent, but because of a crime committed by fanatic Messenian politicians, it lost its autonomy and power. Urged by the general Deinocrates, they poisoned the general of the League, Philopoemen of Megalopolis, whom they had captured as a reaction to the inclusion of their city in the League. As a result, Messenia lost most of its ports, while some of its territory was

given to Megalopolis and Sparta that had been claiming them.

After the conquest of Greece by the Romans (146 B.C.), Roman settlers as well as refugees from other Greek countries went to live to Messene. Thanks to the always good relations between the Messenians and the Romans, the city prospered again. Therefore, its residents honoured many Roman emperors placing their statues in the forum and the theatre of the city.

In the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., Messene started declining. Its buildings were abandoned and collapsed one after another, until a great earthquake in 365 A.D. caused the city's definite shrinkage. Very soon, in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., a new, Byzantine settlement was created in a large part of the ancient Messenian capital and life in the area continued until the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.



# The theatre of Messene

The first monument seen when entering the archaeological site of Messene is the theatre (fig. 2, 3). Close to it there is the Arsinoe fountain, which supplied the city with water, the agora and the Asklepieion, the most important area of the city. Here Asklepios was worshipped not only as a healer god, but mainly as the mythical king of the Messenians. Its great unroofed yard, with the temple and the altar in the centre, was surrounded by stoas, behind which there were the great public and sacred buildings of Messene, such as the *Ecclesiasterion* or Odeion, the Council chamber or *Bouleuterion*, the Archive etc.

The theatre was built in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. and it was one of the largest theatres of antiquity. Its estimated capacity was almost 10,000 spectators, thus covering not only the needs of the city, but also of the whole Messenia. Its final form is the result of repairs and modifications that were made in time. The most important ones took place around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. From inscriptions discovered we learn that the works expenses were funded by the Messenian benefactor of the city Tiberius Claudius Saithidas and his family.

We do not know whether the theatre hosted performances of ancient drama. Local drama performances were probably presented there, but surely the theatre was used for various other occasions: from events in the framework of religious festivals and political gatherings to wild animal fights and mock naval battles –popular spectacles for the Romans– and even slaves liberations,



Fig. 2: The ancient theatre of Messene.

as we learn from inscriptions carved on seats. It is likely that the freedmen were Dionysian artists, that is, artists of the theatre, such as actors, musicians, etc., who formed a special class in the society of Messene. This is what we conclude from the inscriptions discovered on seats of the *cavea* or on statues' socles: on their surface there were incised the names of the *agonothetes*, the wealthy citizens who assumed the organization of the events in the festivals in honour of god Dionysus. So, the slaves were freed by their masters, who thus put them under the protection of Dionysus.

In the early 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the theatre was left to its fate after almost 6 centuries, before any other building of the ancient Messenian capital. The few residents of the deserted city used its stones for new constructions; this never ceased throughout the Venetian domination and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century A.D.



Fig. 3: View of the theatre.

## 1st stop: the cavea

While in antiquity the theatre hosted a large number of spectators, when it came to light only some seats of the lower part of the *cavea* were found in their original place (fig. 11). The *cavea*'s destruction had already taken place in the Byzantine times, when the city's residents removed the seats to use them in the construction of other buildings, many of which were even built on the upper part of the *cavea* (fig. 4)! Nevertheless, in the framework of the theatre's restoration works, several seats were put in their original place and today the theatre can host more than 1,500 spectators (fig. 2, 3). Although the theatre was built during the Hellenistic period, the way it was constructed reminds very much of the Roman theatres. Because the ground was rather flat, more soil was added to increase its inclination, so, a part of the *cavea* was supported by this artificial slope. A wall that retained the soil -called retaining wall- was built around the *cavea* with gates that served as entrances for the people. Today, much of this wall is destroyed because of the Byzantine structures built on the *cavea*. The attention paid to its sturdiness is seen in the way its exterior was built, like the city walls. Finally, the tall and narrow gates opened along the wall, probably gave the impression of a fortress.

Stairways started from these gates. They were secret, as they passed under the *cavea*, and led to its upper part (fig. 5). From there started other staircases, which facilitated the access and the descending of the spectators. They went down the seats of the *cavea* and led to the orchestra, dividing the seating area into 11 vertical sections, the *kerkides*. The *cavea* was also divided horizontally in 3 zones. What is more, a spectator could go directly to the middle zone through a paved ramp behind the retaining wall, at the right end of the *cavea*.

The *cavea* had one more particularity. In order to see it, you will need to go out of the theatre and walk along the retaining wall. On the back of the *cavea* you will see

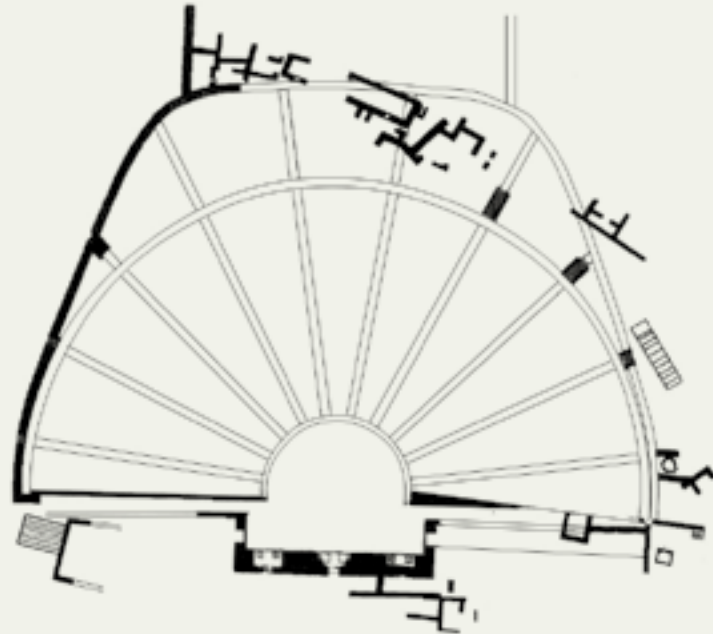


Fig. 4: The plan of the theatre. Remains of the Byzantine settlement are visible on the upper part of the *cavea*.



Fig. 5: Entrance on the wall of the *cavea*.

a large staircase that ends on the wall. You might think this is one more staircase used by the spectators to enter the theatre. However, it served as an upper *parodos* for the

actors: every time the plot demanded their sudden entrance, the actors went at the top of the *cavea* through the staircase and from there they could go down the *skene*.



## 2nd stop: the orchestra

The orchestra's diameter reaches the 23.56 m. It is one of the largest orchestras of ancient theatres (fig. 2, 3). Its final form is the result of modifications that took place in the theatre building in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. During this period the orchestra was covered with coloured slabs, but only a small part of them is still preserved.

Under the structure with the wooden boards you will see around the orchestra, there is the drain pipe of the theatre, covered with slabs (fig. 6). It gathered the rain-water from the *cavea*, passed under the *skene*, and transferred the water into a second large underground pipe. Holes can be seen in some of the slabs, where the wooden sticks of a railing were placed, which protected the spectators during the gladiator fights in the Roman period. However, the favourite spectacles of the Romans mainly took place at the Stadium of the city.

A stone *thronos* stands out in the centre of the first row of the *cavea* (fig. 6). Its



Fig. 6: View of the orchestra.

legs remind of a lion's legs, while its back ends up in a goose head. It seems that the priest of Dionysus or the *agonothetes* of the Dionysia festival used to sit there. One more similar *thronos* has been discovered, but at least four more *thronoi* must have been in

the theatre, all reserved for the high officials of the city. Apart from the *thronoi*, honorary statues (mainly bronze statues of emperors, prominent citizens and benefactors of Messene) were placed on socles around the orchestra (fig. 6).



Fig. 7: The remains of the scene building.

## 3rd stop: the skene

Most of the changes in the theatre were made at the *skene*, during the almost six centuries it functioned. What we see today (fig. 7) is the result of the radical changes mainly made in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Until the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., the *skene* was wooden and movable. But how can we know this and which are the elements that lead us to this conclusion? To find out, stand across the *skene* and move to the left. In front of the retaining wall of the *cavea*, three parallel stone grooves were uncovered, which can still be seen today (fig. 8). This is where stood the *skenotheke*, a large rectangular building where the movable *skene* was stored. The *skene* was a structure with wheels that moved through the grooves, and every time it should appear in the orchestra for a performance, it was pushed to the centre (fig. 10). When it wasn't needed anymore, it was pulled into



Fig. 8: The grooves through which the movable skene was pulled.



Fig. 9: The façade of the logeion.

the *skenotheke* and was stored again.

The building of the Roman *skene* is partly preserved today (fig. 7), helping us imagine its initial form. We know that on the back there was the *skene*, and in front, between the *skene* and the orchestra, there was the *logeion*, a wide platform on which appeared the actors. It also seems that the scene building was impressive, as the excavation has brought to light many of its decorative elements.

The *logeion* was constructed around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. and it was funded by the Saithidas family. It was supported by columns and semi-columns, part of which can be seen today in front of the remains of the *skene* (fig. 7), which were constructed for the first permanent *skene* of the theatre, in the early Roman period (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.). They formed the front view of the *proskenion*, the stoa in front of the *skene* which also served for the appearance of the actors. The façade of the *logeion* was decorated with semi-circular niches (fig. 9) and it was covered with marble slabs, as well as the walls of the *skene*, on which there were reliefs and engraved actors masks, animals etc. On some of the slabs, like the one that can be seen today in the centre of the façade, there is an inscription with the name of the honoured sponsor Tiberius Claudius Saithidas (fig. 9).

Behind the *logeion* the spectators could see the façade of the *skene* (fig. 7). Only the

lower part of the *skene* is preserved today, but in the antiquity it was a three-storey building. On the façade of every storey there were doors, columns and niches decorated with statues of Roman emperors and prominent citizens. The three niches of the ground floor were the tallest. They each had one door that led to a series of rooms on the back of the *skene* and were decorated with impressive statues. In the central niche, which was semicircular, the audience would see the huge statues of the Roman emperors Hadrian and Trajan.

The other two niches were rectangular. In the one stood honorary statues of Tiberius Claudius Saithidas and his mother, and in the other there was a colossal statue of Lucius Verus, co-emperor of Marcus Aurelius (161 - 169 A.D.).

The *paraskenia*, the auxiliary spaces for the actors, were constructed where initially was the one of the two *parodoi* of the theatre, to your right as you stand across the *skene*. In the place of the left *parodos*, a more impressive entrance was formed with an arched roof.



Fig. 10: Reconstruction drawing of the movable skene (by H. Bulle).





Fig. 11: The theatre before the restoration.

## From then to now...

The first excavations in ancient Messene were conducted in 1895 by the archaeologist and later politician Themistocles Sofoulis. The excavations continue today, while in 1986 also began the works for the conservation, consolidation and restoration of the brilliant monuments of the ancient city. During this project the ancient theatre was also brought to light. Its restoration still continues, as the works on the *cavea* are not completed. Nevertheless, almost after 1,700 years of silence the theatre hosted again spectators on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2013, when it reopened with an evening of Italian opera in the framework of the Greek Festival.

Fig. 12: Marble statue of Isis Pelagia.

## One more thing...

It wasn't only the statues of the ground floor of the *skene* that were brought to light by the excavation, helping us imagine the form of the building in ancient times. In the space of the *proskenion*, the archaeologists also found almost whole marble statues and other sculptures that seem to have fallen from the niches of the second floor. One of them depicts the protector of the sailors, Isis Pelagia, standing on the prow of a ship (fig. 12). It is however possible that the statue had been transferred from the sanctuary built in her honour, and of Serapis (both Greek-Egyptian gods), next to the theatre.

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Fig. 2-4, 6-9, 12: Archive of the Society of Messenian Archaeological Studies (Prof. P. Themelis)

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