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to the ancient
theatres of the
Asklepieion and of
the city of Epidaurus

Epidaurus, a small city with a renowned sanctuary

Every summer people from all over the world visit the ancient theatre of Epidaurus to watch ancient drama performances. The same theatre was full of life in ancient times too, when crowds of people from all over Greece visited it for other purposes. The theatre was built within the renowned sanctuary of the healer god Asklepios and people who suffered from any kind of illness, as well as the blind, the physically handicapped or the deaf who had lost hope dedicated to the god their valuable votives and implored for their salvation. An integral part of the god's cult in the sanctuary was the drama and music competitions, which were held in the theatre and offered the patients exaltation and peace of mind.

The faith to the miraculous power of Asklepios was enormous therefore his cult in the Asklepieion of Epidaurus ("Asklepieia" were the sanctuaries of Asklepios) continued for many more years. Not only after the healing became the science called medicine (2nd c. B.C.), but even after the prohibition of the ancient religion (426 A.D.). The god was worshipped until the 6th century A.D., when his sanctuary was abandoned.

Despite the large importance of the sanctuary of Asklepios for the healing of the sick, the role of the nearby small coastal city of Epidaurus where it belonged was unimportant throughout the antiquity. It was built next to the modern village of Palaia Epidaurus, on the two hills of the small pen-

insula "Nisi" that creates the village's port from the south. Nevertheless, thanks to the fame of the sanctuary, Epidaurus became known and remained alive even during the first years of Christianity, that is, until the 4th century A.D.

Although a small city, Epidaurus had its own theatre, different from that of the sanctuary. It was built earlier than the end of the 4th century B.C., when the theatre of the Asklepieion was erected. But it was much smaller and more simply constructed. It was dedicated to god Dionysus, and as it was located within the urban tissue it did not only host the events of the Dionysian cult, but also drama performances and political gatherings.



Fig. 1: The ancient theatre in the Asklepieion of Epidaurus.



Fig. 2: The theatre of the ancient city of Epidaurus.

Two separate theatres

The differences of the two theatres, which are known as the "Great Theatre" and the "Small Theatre", are explained by the reasons and the conditions under which they were constructed. The Great Theatre received a large number of pilgrims from all over Greece. On the contrary, the Small Theatre was created to cover the needs of a small society. Moreover, the theatre in the Asklepieion, which stands out compared to other ancient Greek theatre for the perfection of its construction, was one of the many

impressive buildings that were constructed in the sanctuary thanks to the huge amounts of money gathered by the patients who flocked there to be healed by the god. On the other hand, the theatre of the city was built gradually in three centuries, from the 4th to the 2nd century B.C. This is the reason why the *cavea* has no uniform structure, as we will see below, because its building advanced depending on the money that the city had at its disposal.

The ancient theatre of the Asklepieion of Epidaurus

“The Arcadian theater at Megalopolis is unequalled for size, but what architect could seriously rival Polycleitus in symmetry and beauty?”

Pausanias, *Description of Greece*,
Corinth, 27, 5 (translated by W. H. S. Jones)

Towards the end of the 4th century B.C., sometime after the construction of the first stone theatre of Dionysus in Athens (ca. 330 B.C.), the theatre of the Asklepieion of Epidaurus was built, which would be the largest and most brilliant theatre of its time. The location chosen for its construction was at the south end of the sanctuary, as the natural cavity formed by the Mount Kynortion was appropriate for the *cavea*. Designed by the famous architect Polycleitos the Younger, according to tradition, the theatre was admired for its aesthetics and functionality, and it seems that it was a model for many of the theatres constructed in Greece from the late 4th century B.C. onwards. Today it still impresses the visitors with the perfection of its proportions and acoustics, the result of a well-prepared design.

Although it was used at least until the 3rd century A.D., unlike other theatres it did not undergo many changes as time went by. Thus, in the theatre of Epidaurus one can understand today the form of ancient Greek theatres.



Fig. 4: The gates of the two parodoi.



Fig. 5: The remains of the skene.

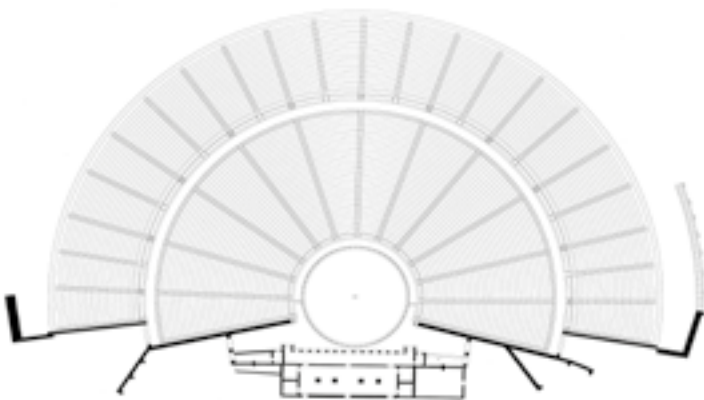


Fig. 3: Plan of the theatre.



Fig. 6: Reconstruction of the skene (by S. Gogos).

1st stop: the parodoi and the orchestra

Arriving at the theatre the visitor can see two imposing gates (fig. 4). They are the *parodoi*, that is, the passageways formed between the *cavea* and the *skene*. Every gate has two openings: from the larger one entered the spectators and after crossing the orchestra they went to their seats on the *cavea*. The smaller opening was for the *hypocrites* (actors).

With its diameter reaching almost 20m, the orchestra is one of the largest orchestras of ancient theatres (fig. 7). It is a full circle with a floor of beaten earth; The stone frame surrounding it defined its space and kept in place the soil that was used for the orchestra, as the bedrock there was very deep. Under the paved corridor formed between the orchestra and the *cavea* there is the drain pipe of the theatre, which was covered to facilitate the circulation of the spectators.

Each of its two ends passed down the respective *parodos* and ended behind the *skene*, where it disposed of the rainwater. The low circular base seen today in the middle of the orchestra was, according to some scholars, the base of the *thymele*, the altar of Dionysus. However, it is also believed that the measuring for the designing of the theatre was made from this spot.

2nd stop: the skene

Today, only remains of the scene building can be seen behind the orchestra (fig. 5), but they were enough to help the archaeologists conclude that the *skene* had all the characteristics of a Hellenistic *skene*: two floors, a *proskenion* (a stoa in front of the *skene*), a *logeion* (a kind of platform on the wooden roof of the *proskenion* where the actors appeared), but also *paraskenia* (auxiliary spaces for the actors) on the right and left side of the building. It probably resembled to the reconstruction of fig. 6.

In order for the actors to appear on the *logeion*, which in fact was a kind of extension of the second storey of the *skene*, they went on a ramp which was next to the gate of every *parodos* (fig. 6). The façade of the storey must have been the scenery of every performance. In big openings on the wall, which were called *thyromata*, wooden paintings were probably placed with various depictions, so the *skene* must have been lavishly decorated. However, the statues discovered by the archaeologists in the excavations are probably only a fraction of this decoration.

The scene building took its final form in the 2nd century B.C. When the theatre was constructed the *skene* was one-storied and quite simpler.



Fig. 7: View of the theatre.

3rd stop: the cavea

The giant *cavea* of the theatre (fig. 1, 7) could host around 12,000 to 14,000 spectators. It was horseshoe-shaped, built in a natural cavity of the hill. For the seating area to be better supported, tall vertical walls were built in both ends of the *cavea*, to keep the soil in place (fig. 8).

Staircases divide the *cavea* in vertical sections (*kerkides*), while a paved corridor (*diazoma*) creates two horizontal zones, the *ima cavea* and the *summa cavea*, or the *theatron* and the *epitheatron* (fig. 7). One can go directly up to the *summa cavea* without passing from the orchestra, as there are separate entrances in the two ends of the *summa cavea*. Like many theatres, special seats (the *proedries*) were reserved for the officials, in the first and last row of the *ima cavea* and in the first row of the *summa cavea* (fig. 9).

The excellent acoustics of the theatre is due to the original way the *cavea* was designed, resembling to a huge funnel, able to absorb every sound that comes from the orchestra. To see that this is true you can make an experiment: sit on the highest part of the *cavea* while one of you is in the middle of the orchestra and drops a coin or says a word. You will be impressed! Think how clearer you would hear everything if there was also the *skene* to retain the sounds!



Fig. 8: Retaining wall of the *summa cavea*.



Fig. 9: *Proedries* in the first row of the *cavea*.

From then to now

Until 1881 when the excavation began, the theatre had remained buried for many centuries under layers of soil that had collapsed from the Mount Kynortion, and trees that had grown in the area. Efforts to consolidate parts of the building that were not well preserved, or to build new ones in the place of the demolished ruins were made for the first time in the early 20th century. In 1938, *Electra* by Sophocles, directed by Dimitris Rontiris, was the first performance of ancient drama presented in this theatre in modern times. Since 1954, the theatre performances staged every summer in the framework of the Epidaurus festival have made the theatre famous all over the world.

Nevertheless, the damage caused in the monument by time and by its systematic use imposed works that started in 1988 aiming at its protection and conservation. In the same year, the archaeological site of the Asklepieion was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Today, thanks to the efforts made by specialists, the theatre has largely acquired its original form.

One more thing...

Until recently the archaeologists believed that the *ima cavea* and the *summa cavea* were constructed in different periods, in the 4th and the 2nd century B.C. respectively. However, an interesting discovery made during the repairs of the *cavea* changed this belief.

When the archaeologists started putting the seats of the last rows back in their proper place—they had been removed by the rainwater over the centuries—they discovered a very significant find: under a seat there was a vessel broken into pieces. What could this mean? In the antiquity, when large-scale constructions were completed, thanking rituals took place. So, it seems that where the broken vessel was found, a bloodless sacrifice had been made to Asklepios for helping with the construction of the theatre. According to the archaeologists, this vessel was manufactured in the 4th century B.C. and thus they concluded that the whole *cavea* of the theatre was built in this century.

The ancient theatre of the city of Epidaurus

The “speaking theatre”

The theatre of Epidaurus was built in the south slope of the peninsula, very close to the point where Nisi is connected with the mainland, and near the agora. It was founded in the 4th century B.C., but the construction of the *cavea* was completed after two centuries. It took the form we see today mainly during the Roman period. Over a thousand inscriptions which were found carved on the seats of the *cavea* convey important information from yesterday to today. Thanks to them, the archaeologists not only estimated the period during which the theatre was constructed, but also concluded that it was built in a sanctuary of god Dionysus; the words inscribed on the seats were actually the names of officials and important personalities of the city, who sponsored the construction of the theatre. This is why the theatre is known as the “speaking theatre”!

1st stop: the cavea

The *cavea* is divided in 9 *kerkides* and it has 18 rows of seats with a capacity of almost 2,000 spectators (fig. 11, 12). The archaeologists believe that there was also a *summa cavea* thus the capacity would increase up to 5,000. In the 3rd and the 4th century A.D. over 200 seats from their total initial number were dismantled, because of the raids of the Herulians and the Goths, Scandinavian and Germanic tribes respectively, which made the residents of Epidaurus reinforce their defense. Therefore, they built a small fortifying wall on top of the hill, towards the land, using as building material also seats of the *cavea*.

The *proedries* (honourary seats for the officials) occupied the first row of every *kerkida* (fig. 10, 11). These seats have back supports and at the ends of each *kerkida* arm supports. The rest of the seats, for the ordinary citizens, are not uniform. Some are more coarsely made like simple square stones, while others are more elaborate with a cavity at the bottom part so that the spectators could pull their legs and rest them. As we have already mentioned, this was the result of a gradual construction of the *cavea*. Depending on the money available, the construction of the seats was either more elaborate or coarser.



Fig. 10: Inscriptions on the *proedries* of the cavea.



Fig. 11: The cavea.



Fig. 12: View of the theatre. Remains of the skene are visible in the background.



Εικ. 13 The altar and the metal ring through which the animals were pulled.

2nd stop: the orchestra

The orchestra we see today is semicircular (fig. 11, 12), but when the theatre was built the orchestra was horseshoe-shaped. Its surface was limited during the Roman period, as part of it was covered by the new *skene* which was constructed at the time. During the same period the *parodoi* were transformed into ramps that led the actors to the *logeion*.

The drain pipe of the theatre began at the one end of the orchestra, which the spectator from the *cavea* sees to his right. It was covered with slabs, it passed through the wall and it ended at the south side of the peninsula, where it disposed of the rainwater. What attracts our attention in the orchestra though is a stone altar and behind it, towards the *skene*, a stone put in the ground with a metal ring on its surface (fig. 13). These two elements attest to sacrifices taking place in the theatre. Indeed, in the 4th or the 5th century A.D., when the theatre declined, private associations –the *troupes*– gathered there to honour their gods, that is, the patron-gods of their profession, with rituals and cult acts. They would bring an animal for sacrifice, put the rope where it was tied through the ring and pulled it so that the animal would bend its head on the altar and be killed.

One more thing...

The old stone house you will see behind the *skene*, serves today the needs of the performances of the "Musical July" festival. However, in the future it is planned to be repaired and function as a museum that will host finds brought to light by the excavations conducted in the ancient city of Epidauros, as well as a space for the scientists who work there (fig. 12).

3rd stop: the skene

Although only the lower part of the Roman *skene* is preserved today, it is helpful enough for us to imagine the form it had in the antiquity (fig. 12). On the back, there was the main scene building. From what has survived it seems that its façade was decorated with stone slabs and columns (fig. 14). In front of the *skene*, the *logeion* was created for the actors. The low wall seen behind the orchestra was its façade (fig. 12). The steps in the middle of the wall would help the actors go on to the platform. Finally, the building also had *paraskenia*: the square rooms seen on either side of the *skene*.



Εικ. 14 The columns of the skene

From then to now

The theatre functioned almost until the 5th century A.D. and then fell into disuse. When it was discovered by the archaeologists in 1970, it was covered with olive trees and only some of its seats were visible. Its excavation started in 1972, but in the following years it went on intermittently. In 1995, after some protective measures were taken, music events started being hosted in the theatre every July, with the help of the "Friends of Music" Society and of the Athens Concert Hall. Since 2002, the "Musical July" is being organized by the Greek Festival.

Since 1998, the excavation, conservation and restoration of the theatre and its surrounding monuments have been assumed by the group of scientists responsible for the sanctuary of Asklepios. Although the works are taking place with difficulties, as the archaeological site is largely covered with private arable lands, the excavation has almost been completed. The theatre has mostly regained its initial form after the consolidation of some parts which were not well preserved and the rebuilding of other parts which were ruined.

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Fig. 2, 3: Ephorate of Antiquities of Argolida

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