



Follow me

to the Odeion
of Herodes Atticus



Fig. 1: The odeion of Herodes Atticus.

“The Odeion [of Patras] is in every way the finest in Greece, except, of course, the one at Athens. This is unrivalled in size and magnificence”

*Pausanias, Description of Greece, Achaean 20.6
(translated by W. H. S. Jones)*

The Athenian odeion mentioned by the traveler Pausanias, is mostly known as Herodion. It is located on the south slope of the Acropolis, very close to the ancient theatre of Dionysus. Many of you may have already visited it to attend a theatrical performance, a concert or another artistic event and perhaps you have been impressed by the special feeling it provokes. But how known is the story of this monument and what secrets are hidden in this outstanding edifice?

It was the latest odeion built in ancient Athens after the odeion of Pericles in the same area (mid-5th c. B.C.), and the odeion of Agrippa in the city's agora (1st c. B.C.). These are three iconic buildings in the history of ancient odeia architecture because through the study of their special characteristics we can see their evolution from the earliest to the latest architectural type. Starting from the odeion of Pericles in the form of a “columned hall”, we go on to the “rectangular odeia” with seats developing in a semicircle, and we end up at the “semicircular odeia”, which are in fact theatres of smaller size.

The latest odeion of Athens was semicircular and was built after the middle of the 2nd century A.D. (between 160 and 169 A.D.). It was funded by Herodes Atticus, a wealthy Athenian politician, orator and teacher, in memory of his wife Regilla. It was mainly used for music events, as well as other kinds of performances, and it was an imposing monument for its time, famous for its size and grandeur. Today it reminds of a theatre -as most semicircular odeia of the Roman period- but in the antiquity we should imagine it roofed (fig. 2). However, its construction does not follow the Roman model, as it was not built on a flat ground, but carved on the rock of the Acropolis like the Greek theatres. Consequently, it wasn't necessary to build arched structures, that is, walls connected with arcs and arches to support the *cavea*.

The brilliant history of the odeion was terminated about one century later, in 267 A.D., by the invasion of the Herulians, a barbaric tribe immigrated from Scandinavia, that sacked several cities in ancient Greece. The building was burned,

as many other public and sacred edifices of Athens, and its destroyed parts were never rebuilt. Towards the end of the Roman period, in the 3rd century A.D., it was incorporated in the city wall. After many centuries, in the 13th century A.D., it was again used in fortification works of Athens. The tall wall of its *skene* (scene building) became part of the so-called "Rizokastro", the fortification wall surrounding the foot of the Acropolis hill. Gradually the odeion was covered with enormous amounts of soil, and it was barely visible.

Today, when going up from the Dionysiou Areopagitou street to the paved square outside the odeion, the façade of the edifice appears imposing (fig. 3, 4). The tall walls, the big arched openings, the niches and the gates create an impressive image. Of course the façade is not wholly preserved; parts of it have collapsed and as a result much of its initial height has diminished, while other parts have only left their traces. In fig. 2 you can see how it was in ancient times. How much has it changed from then to date? According to calculations by the scholars who study the odeion, the peak of the façade (fig. 2) reached almost 44m, while today the highest preserved point (fig. 3, 4) is almost 28m. Moreover, looking at fig. 2 you will see that in front of the *skene* wall there was an elongated hall with arched openings. This is the *metaskenion*, which -as we will see below- was used for the preparation of the artists. Today, only ruins of it are visible (fig. 3, 4).

The entrances of the edifice were also on the façade, which is a particularity of the Herodion. As it was built on the slope of the Acropolis, the architect could not make openings on the wall of the *cavea*, as normally in the Roman theatres. So, he found this original solution creating 4 gates, two on either side of the *skene* wall (fig. 2). Today those next to the *skene* wall are better preserved than the other two, few parts of which only survive (fig. 3, 4).

We will begin our walk into the odeion from these gates.



Εικ. 2



Εικ. 3



Εικ. 4

Fig. 2: Model of the odeion (by M. Korres).
Fig. 3, 4: The façade of the odeion. Its highest preserved part is visible (right), as well as the wall of the skene and the remains of the metaskenion (middle).

1st stop: the entrance halls

Each of the four gates led to a rectangular hall. If you look at the plan of the odeion (fig. 5), you will see the halls with the letters A, B, Γ and Δ. From there one could go to different areas of the building. For example, the halls B and Γ led the artists to the *logeion*, the raised platform in front of the *skene* where they appeared. The same halls also led the spectators to the *parodoi*, the roofed passageways formed between the *cavea* and the *logeion* and lead to the orchestra. The four halls even served those who wanted to go to the upper part of the *cavea*. The architect made sure that between the halls of each side (A, B and Γ, Δ) there were staircases which led to the *diazoma*, the horizontal corridor that divides the *cavea* in lower and upper part (*ima cavea* and *summa cavea*). These are the same staircases that we still use today to get into the odeion. But the audience could also go towards the city streets, such as the *Peripatos* that surrounded the foot of the Acropolis, or the second floor of the stoa of Eumenes, to the right of the odeion (fig. 2). Only the remains of a wall with arched openings survives today from the stoa of Eumenes. It was constructed around three centuries earlier than the Herodion, thanks to a donation to the Athenians by the king of Pergamon, Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.). The stoa served the needs of the performances held in the theatre of Dionysus. It was a space where the spectators could go during the intervals -like the foyer of the modern theatres-, and a shelter in case it rained very much, as the days when the Great Dionysia took place (end March-beginning April) was the most rainy period of the year.

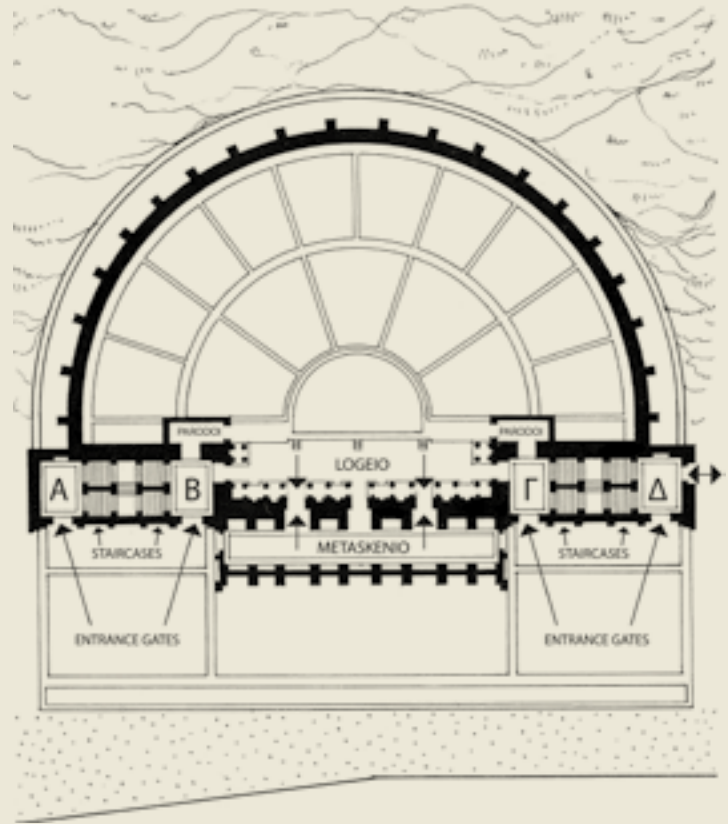


Fig. 5: Plan of the odeion.

2nd stop: the cavea

The rows of the seats constructed above the *parodoi* connected the *cavea* with the scene building (fig. 6). The lower part of the *cavea* has 20 rows of seats, but the first row differs from the rest. It is called *proedria* and was reserved for the officials; therefore, its seats were constructed with special care. They have back support, while those at the end of each *kerkida* (the *kerkides* were vertical sections of the *cavea* divided by steps) have also arm supports, with decoration at their base in the form of lion feet. A corridor divides the *proedria* from the rest of the rows, which were reserved for the ordinary spectators. The last row of the low part of the *cavea* is also elaborate. It also had back support thus forming a second *proedria*. It is estimated that the upper part of the *cavea* had 19 rows



Fig. 6: The cavea.

of simple seats, but the last ones of these have not been restored yet. Thus, in antiquity the odeion could host 6,000 spectators, while today its capacity reaches

the 5,000 seats. Its size can only be compared to that of ancient theatres, as the odeia of the Roman period were much smaller.

3rd stop: the orchestra

The orchestra, with a diameter of 19m, is horseshoe-shaped and is covered with black and white diamond-shaped marble slabs. Around it, a pipe was formed, which was also covered with marble slabs. In order to carry the water away from the theatre, holes were opened on these slabs. Moreover, to help the artists go from the orchestra to the *logeion*, there were staircases on the front wall of the platform.

4th stop: the skene

Although the *skene* is not preserved today as it would be in ancient times, by looking at it we can understand that it was one of the most impressive parts of the odeion (fig. 1). Indeed, the artists on the *logeion* must have been moving in front of a grandiose background. The façade of the *skene*, that is the wall of the *skene* facing the spectators in the *cavea*, was covered with coloured marble slabs and it was decorated with small rectangular and large arched niches where we should imagine statues. In front of the niches formed next to the three doors, there were socles with columns. Today only their lower part is preserved, but in fig. 7 you can see how they must have been in the antiquity. It seems that the socles with the columns resembled to small temples, so the statues were enhanced. And if you wonder why the façade had so many arched openings, remember that the odeia were roofed buildings so they needed much natural light in their interior. The only way to achieve this was with many windows. The three doors led to the *metaskenion*, which as we saw above, was used by the artists. Its floor was decorated by an impressive mosaic. Similar mosaics that have been unearthed in other parts of the odeion (e.g. in the rectangular halls next to the *skene*) denote that every part of the building -even the interior spaces- was luxurious.

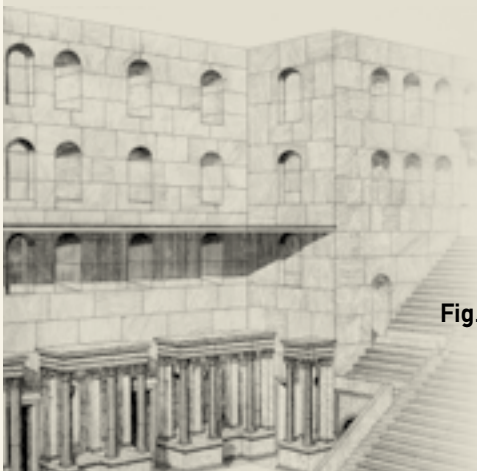


Fig. 7: Reproduction drawing of the socles at the façade of the skene (by F. Versakis).

From then to now

The excavations at the odeion, which lasted from 1847 to 1857, completely revealed the monument which was largely covered by soil, but they also brought to light its violent destruction. For example, the *cavea* did not remind of what we see today, as most of it was destroyed. After its excavation the odeion was probably abandoned again and many years had to pass until the conservation of some of its parts.

In the beginning of the 1950s the interest in the use of the Herodian in the framework of the Athens Festival, which began then, led to extensive works aiming at the consolidation of parts of the monument that were not well preserved, and at the restoration of its original form as much as possible. In 1957, the odeion regained its lost prestige and since then it has been used every summer for various artistic events, mainly in the framework of the Athens Festival. In 2002, a new programme of works started regarding the systematic protection, restoration and enhancement of the odeion and of the Stoa of Eumenes.

One more thing...

The roof of the odeion must have been a great technological achievement not only for its time but also for ours. As we learn from the written sources, it was constructed with cedar wood, which was very costly, and it seems that it didn't have any vertical support, which is quite impressive given that the roof covered a large area. Perhaps this justifies the extremely thick walls of the odeion, which had to support the enormous weight of the roof.



Fig. 8: The restoration of the one parodos.

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Sources of photographs and illustrations

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