

A tour of the Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidavros

On the plain stretching northwest of Mt Kynortion, some 1000 m distant from the mountain sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas, the sanctuary of his son Asklepios flourished from the 7th to the 6th centuries BC. He was the healing god of antiquity, who possessed the power of prolonging the life of believers through his treatment. This centre of healing people continued at Epidavros for almost 12 centuries, a longer period of time than any of the other ones in the different regions until the ancient religion was prohibited in 426 AD, precisely because of the belief men had in their healing god.

With the growth of the sanctuary in the different chronological periods of antiquity, chiefly the 4th and 3rd c. BC, the buildings that were erected there are considered to be great architectural achievements which have enriched humanity to this day.

Today's visitor who tours the sacred site of the Asklepieion at Epidavros will not only encounter outstanding examples of Greek architecture, but will also acquire an understanding of the healing rites of the ancient world which are attested by both the function of these buildings and by the accounts given in the inscriptions that are kept in the local Museum.

The architectural testaments and the reason they functioned led UNESCO to include the 'magic' site of Epidavros in the list of mankind's most important monuments.

The believers who came to visit the Asklepieion entered the Sanctuary by Great Propylon on the north side and followed the Sacred Way, which ended at the Temenos of the god with its great Temple, the Tholos and the Sanctum.

Nowadays, however, the visitor enters the archaeological site from the south side and after passing the Museum follows the road leading either to the buildings that constitute the Asklepieion nowadays or to the Theatre.

The **Theatre**, constructed on the northwest side of Mt Kynortion, was the most perfect theatrical building in antiquity. It was a unique artistic achievement, in harmony with the wonderful natural environment, and possessing outstanding acoustics due to its architectural design and overall construction. The architect is thought to have been Polykleitos the Younger from Argos, who also built the Tholos.

The Theatre was built in two phases: the first at the end of the 4th c. BC and the second in the middle of the 2nd c. BC. The perfection of its proportions is ascribed to its parts: the auditorium, the orchestra and the stage.

The orchestra of the theatre is circular with the diameter of 20.30 m and with the altar in the centre. The auditorium was originally designed with thirty-four rows of grey limestone benches for 6,000 spectators. It is divided into twelve tiers of fourteen stepped gangways radiating outwards from the central altar. In the 2nd century BC the so-called epitheatre was added to the end, giving another 21 rows of benches divided into twenty-two gangways, and increasing the capacity to 12,000 – 14,000 spectators.

The two passageways leading to the auditorium and orchestra, which have double limestone door-frames recently restored, separate the stage structure from the other parts of the theatre. Of the stage structure only the foundation has survived. It was in the shape of hypostyle stoa with a row of piers and parapets at the back, four internal supports and double rooms at the two ends. The proscenium, 22 m long and 3.17 m wide, had two side wings and fourteen Ionian half-columns on the façade. Between them were revolving panels, known as *periakta*, with painted scenery which formed the area where the events of the drama being enacted took place.

Leaving the lower slopes of Mt Kynortion and the theatre of Epidavros, the visitor turns to the northwest beyond the Museum to find the first buildings of the Sanctuary of Asklepios.

The first one he arrives at is the largest building in the Sanctuary, the **Hostel** or **Katagogion**. It was erected in the 4th c. BC to welcome the votaries. It was a two-storey building, 76 x 76 m with four courts, each of them surrounded by a row of 160 rooms. West of the **Hostel** and a little further north various edifices were built, the first in order being the **Greek Baths**, a two-storey square 4th c. BC structure with a central court and rooms around it, with baths and a water supply system. During the period of Roman domination two swimming pools and cisterns were added.

After the baths comes the **Gymnasium** complex with the monumental Propylon and the Gymnasium proper or Ceremonial Dining Hall, which were erected in the 4th c. beginning of the 3rd c. BC. The building, 69 x 75 m, is one of the biggest in

the Asklepieion and comprises a large colonnaded court with halls arranged around it and a double colonnade on the north side. The colonnade was Doric in style while the columns of the halls were Ionic, as were those of the secondary colonnade. The position, size and layout as well as the furnishing lead to the conclusion that it was a **ceremonial dining hall** where the devotees held the Dinners in which they invited the god to participate, according to the inscriptions. There was a little **Odeon** in the peristyle court of the original 2nd c. BC building, when the Propylon was converted into a temple of Hygeia.

The next building to the north, also 2nd c. BC, was dedicated to Apollo, Asklepios and Hygeia who, Pausanias writes (II, 27, 6-7) were worshipped as Egyptian deities. The older interpretation of the building as the **stoa of Kotys** and its construction in the Roman period had cast doubt on its identification as the Sanctuary of the Egyptians.

The building contained a three-aisled chamber with a hearth, initiation room and statue bases as well as a hypostyle stoa on its north side and a purification bath on the south.

West of the building and outside the precinct of the temenos of Asklepios is the foundation of the 4th c. BC temple of Artemis, a small prostyle temple with six Doric columns at the front, a vestibule, cella and a colonnade of ten Corinthian columns surrounding the statue of the goddess.

East of the temple of Artemis is preserved part of a two-room parallelogram in the form of a Sanctuary (**building Y**) dating to the end of the 4th c. BC. A surrounding wall two courses high stood on the plinth of the sanctuary. This consisted of two back-to-back chambers with entrances at each end. Evidently the cult practiced here had a double nature (chthonian and celestial?).

East of the Sacred Square, **Sanctuary II**, a building from the beginning of the 3rd c. BC, consists of a square hall with a portico and a fountain structure in the south part associating the place with purificatory rites. South of Sanctuary II is a complex of Roman houses with two atria flanked by halls built of various materials.

From Sanctuary II, if the visitor turns west, he will enter the **Sacred Grove**, bordered in antiquity by 'MARKERS', forbidding the birth or death of any mortal

within its precincts, which formed the oldest and most sacred part of the Sanctuary.

The first establishments in the Sanctuary of Asklepios were around a **well**, which was later incorporated into the single-storey stoa of the Abaton and also into the so-called **Building E**, which contained the first **ash altar** for holocausts in honour of Apollo initially and later of Asklepios. The first **enkoimeterion** was housed in the oblong halls of a rectangular building 24.30 x 20.70 m with a colonnade on the front and with halls on the other sides: on the northwest corner was the naiskos of the god with a vestibule and cella. Both these focal points, the well and the ash altar, where apparently the ritual dinners first appeared, where the healing processes with the bath and incubation were performed, and also the purification rites, with participation in the divine meal, which originated with Apollo and Asklepios. In the 4th c. BC, during the most important building period, the Sacred building was turned into a residence for priests.

In the 4th c. BC, which saw the heyday of the Sanctuary, the most important buildings were erected within the temenos of the god: The **Temple of Asklepios**, the Tholos and the Abaton (Sanctum).

The **Temple of the god** was built in 380-375 BC. It was a work by the architect Theodotos and was one of the most progressive examples of Doric Architecture. The temple, measuring 13.21 x 24.30 m, with a vestibule and cella, is Doric peripteral in style with six columns at the ends and eleven on the sides. It stands on a podium with three steps and the entrance on the east was accessible by a large ramp. Today the poros foundation survives in situ, and part of its superstructure has been reconstructed in the Local Museum.

The sculptures on the pediments, by the Epidaurian sculptor Timotheos, are considered among the most typical creations of the 4th c. BC. Today they are to be found in the National Archaeological Museum, but there are casts of them in the Local Museum of Epidavros. The east pediment depicts the capture of Troy, the west one an Amazonomachy, and the acroteria were adorned with Nikes and Nereids on horses. The chryselephantine statue of Asklepios by the Parian sculptor Thrasymedes stood in the cella of the temple.

The altar of the god, which is connected to the temple by a paved passageway, was in the shape of a long table on a podium. It was protected by a light roof or entablature.

The second important building in the main temenos is the Tholos, a round peristyle building with a circular underground chamber, which was also known as a *thymele*, or altar. It was built in 365-335 BC by the architect and sculptor Polykleitos. Whether it was the dwelling of the god or his monumental tomb, it is considered the most perfect circular monument in the history of Greek architecture.

The superstructure of the building rested on three concentric rings. The outer one supported a circular Doric peripteral colonnade of 26 limestone columns, the middle one a circular limestone cella and the inner one a colonnade of 14 Corinthian columns. The latter surrounded a marble inlay floor with alternate white and black rhombs. Below the floor there was also a tripartite space in the shape of a labyrinth. The exceptional marble decoration of the superstructure of the Tholos complements the morphological composition. The outer colonnade supported the entablature of the building with metopes of relief rosettes. The doorway of the cella was also richly decorated, and the ceiling had marble coffers with palmettes in the round in their centres. The inside surface of the cella wall had painted decorations by the painter Pausias. The exact purpose of the Tholos is unknown, but it must have had to do with the chthonic character of the god.

The main precinct of the god contained, in addition to the Temple and Tholos, a third notable building, the Enkoimeterion or Abaton, where the sick prepared themselves to meet the god and his cure. An oblong colonnade, some 74m long, formed the northern boundary of the sanctuary. It was built in that place in order to enclose the sacred well, whose water had therapeutic properties.

The eastern ground-floor part of the colonnade of the Abaton, which was first built in 375 BC (1st building phase) occupied in length half the overall area. The building was divided into two parts. The façade had an Ionic colonnade of 17 columns and consisted of an open waiting area for the sick, and the back, closed and dark, was accessible only to those who had undergone purification and were ready to receive the divine treatment. Here the devotees, sleeping on the ground, waited to see in a dream the god himself, who would indicate the proper therapy

to them. The growth of the fame of the sanctuary and the arrival of ever more devotees made it necessary to extend the colonnade further west at the end of the 4th century BC. The differences in the height of the terrain led to the construction of a low ground floor on which the first floor of the colonnade was built. The whole edifice had a façade with 31 Ionic columns, whose shafts in the upper floor had gratings between them. The west side of the ground floor had 11 pillars and two engaged pillars and the intermediate gaps were closed by a wall, except for two openings for an entrance and an exit. The colonnade was crowned by a Doric entablature. Another row of six Doric pillars in the middle of the ground floor supported the upper floor with wooden beams. There were stone benches in the interior of the ground floor. The difference in levels between the two parts of the colonnade was masked by a monumental staircase at their point of contact.

The Abaton survived for eight centuries, until the end of the 4th century AD. During the Late Roman period it was incorporated in the perimetric colonnade that surrounded the two basic squares in the sacred precinct, the small one with the Temple and Tholos, and the large one with the Altar and votive offerings.

North of the Abaton, on the west side of the Sacred Way are the remains of a large 2nd century AD complex. It had four rooms comprising a *library* and bathhouse installations, which the inscriptions identify as the Baths of Asklepios. They replaced a rectangular bathhouse of the Classical period. The remains of it can be detected to the east of the Abaton.

On the large square in the direction of the Great Propylon can be seen the remains of the **votive offerings**, which begin from the large altar and extend to the north and northwest. On the south there is another series of impressive offerings in front of the north side of the earlier enkoimeterion.

Proceeding north to the Propylaia we can see the limestone foundations of a small Ionic prostyle temple of the late 4th century BC, which is identified as the temple either of **Aphrodite** or of **Themis**.

Some distance to the north are the **Propylaia**, the monumental entrance to the sanctuary, which was built in around 300 BC and is among the most important works of Greek architecture. Its stone crepis is still in situ and parts of the superstructure are exhibited in the local Museum. The two facades of the

building are formed by prostyle six-column Ionic colonnades with an entablature of lions' heads. On the inside Corinthian columns form a square with corresponding bucrania and rosettes.

The ruins of the large three-aisled Basilica of Agios Ioannis built in the 5th century AD lie outside the Precinct east of the Propylaia.

In order to visit the ancient Stadium of Epidavros and lastly the Museum it is necessary to return southwards. On the way one can see the monuments to the east of the Sanctuary.

The big square is bounded on the north by a large building complex of the 3rd century BC. An oblong central courtyard is surrounded by shops and Doric stoas with interior Ionic colonnades on the three sides. Some scholars identify these with the **Stoa of Kotys** which, according to Pausanias, was repaired by Antoninus in the 2nd c. AD.

To the east of this commercial complex a large **Bath** was built in Roman times, which served as a place in which to collect the rainwater and channel it to the sanctuary. The inscriptions refer to it as '**Akoiaia**' (**Aquae**). A small 4th century BC sanctuary, the **Epidoteion**, dedicated to the gods who provide men with goods, is incorporated in the south part of the baths.

The tour of the Asklepieion ends with a visit to the **Stadium**, which lies southwest of the sanctuary and outside the main precinct. Orientated in an east-west direction, it extends to the west of the Gymnasium complex, and is formed between two low banks of earth. The Stadium has a rectangular shape with an overall length of 196.44 m and a width of 23 m, with a running track of 181.30 m. The track was surrounded by a channel for the rainwater and pillars every 32 m along the sides. At the turning point and on both sides there were stone seats (14 rows have survived on the south, 22 on the north and five at the turning post) divided into tiers. On the north side below the seats in Hellenistic times a vaulted underground passage connected the Stadium with two buildings, a square peristyle and another one divided into **rooms for accommodation** and **an arena** for training the athletes.

Today, after its new modifications, special events are held in the Stadium.