



# The Asclepieion of Epidaurus: Past, present and future

*In the last five years, an ambitious plan is being implemented, aiming to transform the site into an archaeological and environmental park, which will illustrate the identity of the whole Epidaurus area and connect its monuments with modern life*

By Professor Vassilis Labrinoudakis

**F**ortune brought me as a young researcher, back in 1974, in Epidaurus and its Asclepieion [the Sanctuary of Asclepius, the god of Medicine in ancient Greek religion and mythology]. Ever since, and for 44 years, I have never ceased studying, continuously and intensively, the monuments of Epidaurus, while simultaneously discovering the enormous importance of this place for our history and the formation of our civilization.

Epidaurus is widely known for its ancient theatre, which is indeed a unique centre for modern theatrical education and high quality tourism. However, the

ancient Sanctuary of Asclepius, as a whole, is far more important for civilization and mankind, because it was the largest, most archaic, and most respected health centre; the biggest hospital of antiquity, through which the worship of health and the act of healing was spread throughout the ancient world. Epidaurus, directly or indirectly, set up around 170 Asclepieia in the Mediterranean. In Epidaurus itself, the evolution of healthcare is exhibited in monuments from a period beginning in the third millennium b.C., which lasted up until the end of antiquity, without interruption. In Epidaurus, one can observe all of the gradual stages in medicine's long evolution

from the magical to the scientific. The medical knowledge that was acquired there over the years, which was practiced as "the work of god [Asclepius]"; in the hands of his mortal, experienced servants, up until recently, was the basis of medical science, which now tends to return to the holistic approach of illness; first conceptualised within the ancient curative process.

### **A unique cultural treasure**

In order to showcase the importance of this unique cultural treasure, restoration works on the main structures of the Sanctuary began in 1984. Among the enhanced buildings were the 'eg-



koimitirion', (dormitory hall), or adytum, the place where the patients slept and where treated, and the 'estiatorion', (banquet hall), where Asclepius' supplicants consumed meat from sacrifice—in the supposed immaterial presence of the god himself, who gave them his blessing; and the 'stadium', where, in addition to the various celebratory races, the patients ran as part of their treatment.

The enhancements done to the theatre provided an extra 200 seats.. At the same time, began the restoration of the 'Tholos', a magnificent circular building with subterranean corridors, the second most elegant edifice of antiquity after the Erechtheion, which was, in a way, Asclepius' cenotaph, since the god used it to heal from inside the ground, according to the legend. The works on the Tholos are being continued towards completing the approved study. Other minor monuments were enhanced in parallel. The number of visitors has skyrocketed as the visibility dramatically increased as a result of the work done on the Sanctuary, which is now vying for second place in the ranking of Greece's most popular monuments, right after the Acropolis.

### Bringing the Asclepieion to modern times

All this, however, is not enough to thoroughly highlight the importance

of the Asclepieion and to integrate its monuments with the society. In the last five years, an ambitious plan is being implemented, aiming to transform the site into an archaeological and environmental park, which will illustrate the identity of the whole Epidauros area and connect its monuments with modern life.

Among other things, the plan foresees: a new entrance through the ancient gateway ('propylaia') and passageways appropriated so as to efficiently lead the visitor to the buildings that facilitated the Sanctuary's operation, footpath and road connection of the older sanctuary (behind the theatre) to the Asclepieion, the exhibition of findings presenting the healing process in detail in

a new building that will also include a spacious convention centre for medical and theatrical conferences, the creation of a garden of therapeutic plants, and a pavilion for the promotion of typical local products.

The Ephorate of Antiquities is already carrying on with the restoration. At the same time, the Ministry for Environment and Energy is allocating 985,000 euros from the current *Stability and Growth Pact* funds for the implementation of the first, fundamental steps of the Park plan (passageways, connecting routes, garden) through a soon to be signed contract between the Ministry of Culture, the Municipality of Epidauros, and the Prefecture of the Peloponnese.





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### The public and private sector join hands

However, the contribution of the private sector is also instrumental in the completion of this ambitious plan. Interamerican (insurance company) has financed the Passageway study, ApiVita (cosmetics company) provided the Healing Plants Garden study at no cost, and DROMOS Consulting has drawn up the study for the route which will connect the ancient and newer parts of the Sanctuary. Secured thanks to DIAZOMA Society's mediation, the participation of the private sector in the promotion of the programme is extremely important as it produces the necessary studies, not just free of charge but also the in high quality and the required high speed than the public sector rarely delivers. The case of Epidauros is a prime example of how positive and efficient the collaboration between the public and private sectors can be, in the promotion of cultural heritage.

The vision for the enhancement of the Asclepieion and its integration with the modern society includes another simultaneous action which has already

become reality: we have achieved the creation of an International Network of Ancient Asclepieia located in cities where Sanctuaries exist as well as scientific bodies that are involved with the issue. The Municipalities of Trikala, Epidauros, Kos, the Archaeological and Medical School of the University of Athens, and the International Hippocratic Foundation of Kos are already members of the Network, and invitations have been extended to the municipalities of Athens, Pafos, Rome, and Marseille. The objective is the participation of all Mediterranean cities where Asclepieia have been salvaged. The Network's focus will, of course, be research and, more importantly, cultural contacts, events (ie student and scientist awards), exchanges of persons and ideas, and through these actions, the targeted promotion of medical and high quality tourism.

All these actions aim to disseminate the value and the importance of the monuments to the wider public in an understandable, attractive, and, above all, entertaining manner. They do, how-

ever, also work towards incorporating the monuments in the daily life of the locals. The example of Epidauros shows how the monuments can become levers of growth for the local economy. Apart from the obvious benefits from the development of a high quality and economically efficient tourism, the involvement in the tours and the tourist packages that include promotion of regional products, will be very of great help to the local companies. For example, there already exist oil mills in Epidauros that are trying to "spread the word" on the excellent quality of the locally produced oil. Imagine how quickly they would achieve this if they used the ancient symbol of the gods of olive trees who were worshipped in the Asclepieion in their Brand Logos! The same goes for local honey and cheese—Asclepius was raised by a goat. After all, when a society benefits from regional monuments, it becomes their best guardian.

