

RITUAL SPACES AND PERFORMANCES IN THE ASKLEPIEIA OF ROMAN GREECE¹

PERFORMATIVE rituals have been mostly studied by religious historians and only in recent years have they appeared in the archaeological literature.² Such rituals are based on the performance of precise dramatic sequences of language and actions in the presence of an audience called to a collective participation. They may consist either of public actions such as processions, dances, songs, and sacrificial rites, or of theatrical performances, such as dramatic enactments of divine myths and genealogies. In most ancient sanctuaries specific areas were devoted to their performance: theatrical buildings, or structures only occasionally qualified as processional or sacrificial.

In Greece, performative rituals and spaces are especially well known for the sanctuaries of the Classical and Hellenistic period. Festivals and annual celebrations evoked the presence of the gods in order to obtain their favours and help mortals overcome crucial moments either of the agricultural year or of human life. This is the case, for example, of the celebrations in the Attic sanctuaries of Eleusis and Brauron. In this respect, recent studies have demonstrated that public rituals performed in sanctuaries acted as strong means of communication and contributed to forming and enforcing political ideologies in Classical Greece (Goldhill and Osborne 1999; Kowalzig 2008).

From the beginning of the Roman presence, the importance of festivals, processions, and collective rituals in the sanctuaries of Greece is stressed by ancient authors and suggested by the epigraphic evidence. It is often suggested that their role—rather than political—was one of preservation of the collective memory in provincial Greece, when this was threatened by external circumstances (Auffarth 1997, 219–38; 1999, 31–42). The archaeological counterpart of this phenomenon—that is to say where these large collective celebrations actually took place—is still not fully emerging. Susan Alcock was the first to point out that dramatization, procession, and ritual left an archaeological mark on the sacred space of Roman Greece (Alcock 1993, 172–214). A few recent studies constitute the only attempt of further developing this concept (Galli 2001, 43–77; 2005, 253–90; Petsalis Diomidis 2005, 183–218). Therefore the aim of this paper is to identify, through the study of some of the sanctuaries of Roman Greece, the existence of performative rituals and to assign to them a topographical space within the sacred precinct on the basis of the extant archaeological evidence.

The period under consideration here mostly coincides with the reign of the Antonine emperors, when the relatively peaceful environment allowed for a cultural revival, sometimes

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² For a history of the relation between ritual and performance see Kowalzig 2008, 32–55. From an archaeological point of view the problem has been only sporadically explored in publications such as Nielsen 2002, where the category of 'cultic theatres' or theatrical spaces for musical or dramatic performative rituals is defined for the first time.

referred to as a 'Greek renaissance' within the Roman empire (Walker and Cameron 1989). Such a revival affected every sector of cultural life, from the visual arts to literature and was built around a strong intellectual core: the aim being that of re-appropriating the ancient Greek tradition and creating continuity with it (Woolf 1994; Goldhill 2001; Alcock 2002). The emperors and the local elites, often educated according to the *paideia*, the highest form of education within the cultural phenomenon known as the Second Sophistic, took a leading role in shaping this process.³ By virtue of their political and cultural positions, wealthy patrons were therefore able to transform traditional religious spaces, refounding entire building complexes and forgotten religious festivals (Alcock 1993, 172–214; 1994, 247–61; Galli 2001, 43–4).

ASKLEPIEIA: A CASE-STUDY

Because of their long life and their well-documented ritual practice, the sanctuaries of Asklepios constitute an ideal case-study for this investigation. Cult places for the healing god are uninterruptedly frequented in the Greek world, from the late Classical to the late Imperial period. The traditional rituals performed therein are well attested in the epigraphic and literary sources, and their existence is often confirmed by the archaeological evidence.

Within the traditional rituals practiced in honour of Asklepios from the late Classical period onwards, the most typical was undoubtedly the incubation, the sleep that ideally led to the miraculous healing. It mostly consisted of direct communication between the god and the individual in a space defined by the sources as the *abaton*—the inaccessible hall. This ritual was therefore confined to a personal, individual level, and reached a wider public only through the dedications of the faithful in the form of tales of healing inscribed on stone (Li Donnici 1995; Girone 1998; Melfi 2007a, 155–96), anatomical *ex-votos* (Forsén 1996) and sculptural representations of different kinds (Hausmann 1948; Vorster 1983; Bobou 2008).

The evidence for the ritual actions performed in public as part of the cult of Asklepios is fragmentary and often obscure for the late Classical and Hellenistic periods. Archaeological and epigraphic documents suggest the existence of preliminary rites, including sacrifices (e.g. Sokolowski 1962, no. 22; Habicht 1969, 167–90) and money offerings (Gorrini and Melfi 2002, 247–57), that had to be performed in public by the faithful in order to obtain access to the healing rite. Precise ritual routes can sometimes be archaeologically identified, owing to the presence of altars, offertory boxes (*thesauroi*), lustral basins, and votive dedications.⁴ In a few sanctuaries, the textual sources attest to the existence of processions and festivals, but their archaeological and topographical impact on the sacred space is nevertheless difficult to assess (e.g. Isyllos' paeon: *IG* iv². 128, see below).

This situation seems to change decidedly in the Roman period and, in particular, during the second century AD, when the available data document a growing number of performative rituals in sanctuaries of Asklepios. Poetic and theatrical performances, dramatizations, ritual enactments, and collective celebrations, widely attested by the sources, give a new distinctive shape to the sacred space and the monuments within it.

³ On the Second Sophistic in Roman Greece: Bowersock 1969; Bowie 1970; Sirago 1989, 57–9; Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001. For the definition of *paideia* and *pepaideumenoi*: Anderson 1989, 104–6, and more recently Borg 2004, *passim*.

⁴ Compare, for example, the ritual routes of the Asklepieia of Epidauros (Melfi 2007b, 40–5, 56–63) and Corinth (*ibid.* 299–302; Ginouvès 1994, 237–46).

The best known and most studied case is that of the Asklepieion of Pergamon, where the second-century buildings have been recently interpreted as inspired by the performance of collective rituals, such as the processions and choirs described in the works of Aristides (Galli 2005; Petsalis Diomidis 2005). Here the Antonine propylon provided a large porticoed space where pilgrims could gather, in the words of Aristides: 'I thought that I stood within the propylon of the sanctuary and that many others had assembled, just as when purification takes place, and that they were clad in white [...]' (Aristid. *Or.* xlvi. 27, transl. Edelstein and Edelstein). The theatre of the newly built complex could host poetic and musical performances: 'In the sacred theatre there was a crowd of people clad in white, gathering in honour of the god; and standing among them I made a speech and sang the praises of the god' (Aristid. *Or.* xlvi. 30, transl. Edelstein and Edelstein). Such performances often were a summons to collective participation: 'And the loud cry both of those who are present and of those who are coming, shouting this widely renowned refrain: Great is Asklepios' (Aristid. *Or.* xlvi. 21, transl. Edelstein and Edelstein).

Like Pergamon, in many Asklepieia of Roman Greece it is now possible to identify a range of performative rituals and spaces using different documents: (i) the archaeological data, providing evidence for the construction of theatrical structures and the monumentalization of processional routes; (ii) the epigraphic sources, such as hymns, paeans, healing tales, sacred laws, and dedications; (iii) the literary sources which, in the second and third centuries AD, give particularly abundant accounts of festivals, myths, and rituals practiced in Greece. I have chosen to examine the sites of three Asklepieia, Epidaurus, Athens, and Messene, which have the obvious advantage of being rich in epigraphic and archaeological data, but also offer us quite different scenarios and developments that can stand as prime examples for the phenomena under examination.

SINGING FOR ASKLEPIOS

Poetic and musical performances, especially in the form of hymns and paeans, are well attested in sanctuaries of Asklepios from the Hellenistic period, but they seem to become particularly popular from the mid-second century AD, judging from the number of epigraphic and literary sources which preserve poetic texts, and in consideration of the widespread monumentalization of theatrical spaces.

Epidaurus

A musical inscription and a corpus of hymns were found in the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus during the early excavations (*IG* iv². 129–35; Mitsos 1980; Bonefas 1989). The hymns were sung in honour of the many gods worshipped in the sanctuary and consisted of religious texts used during the rituals and poems associated with musical competitions. Together with Asklepios, they celebrated Zeus, the Mother of the Gods, Hygieia, Athena, the 'untiring Sun, the waxing moon, and all the stars that crown the sky', 'all the immortal gods and immortal goddesses, that will always be' (*IG* iv². 129. 8–9, 11–12), and, finally, Pan Nymphagetes, who 'reaches the starred Olympus, with the echo of all songs and sprinkles with immortal music the assembly of the gods' (*IG* iv². 130. 8–10).

The texts, even though of mixed origin and date, were transcribed at the end of the third century AD on blocks belonging to a building of the late Classical or Hellenistic age (Wagman 1995, 35–9). This building seems to be identifiable with the monumental banqueting-hall

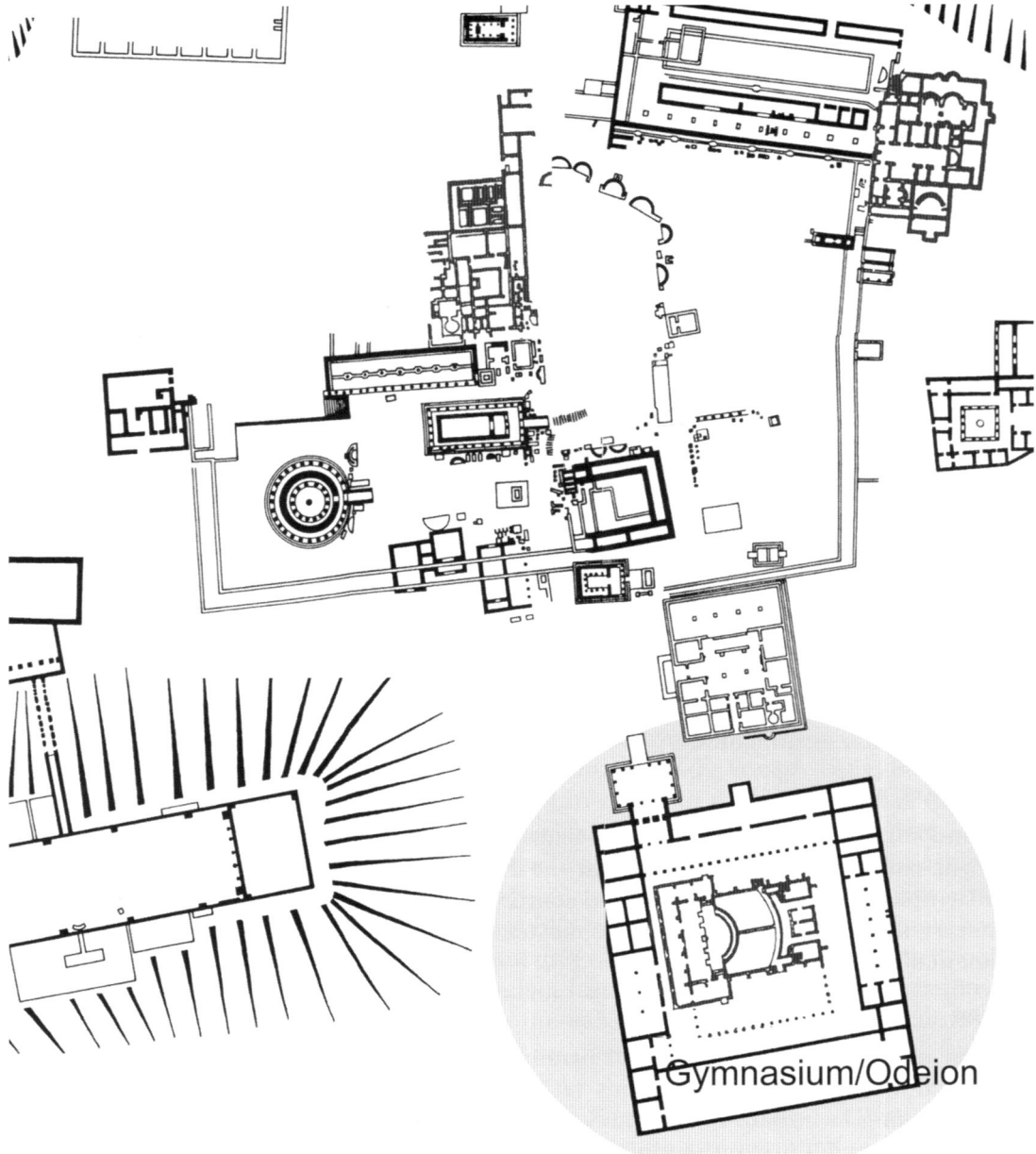


FIG. 1. The Asklepieion of Epidauros in the Roman period (grey circle: gymnasium–odeion complex). After Kavvadias 1900.

(Wagman 1999, 873–80; Galli 2004, 342–3), the so-called gymnasium, located south of the temple of Asklepios and built at the end of the fourth or at the beginning of the third century BC (FIG. 1). The banqueting-hall was heavily damaged during the destructions affecting the sanctuary in the first century BC, but it was only in the Imperial period that inside its central

courtyard a small covered theatre, an odeion, was built (Lambrinoudakis 1988, 22–35). The building technique of the odeion, in bricks with courses of stones, similar to that of the baths completed between 160 and 180 AD under the patronage of the senator Antoninus, suggests a date in the second half of the second century AD (Melfi 2007*b*, 124).

The construction of the odeion marked a definitive change in the function of the Hellenistic banqueting-hall, whose structures were substantially reused for the Roman building. If at the end of the third century AD hymns were transcribed on the walls of the Hellenistic portico surrounding the odeion, it is likely that they were sung in the same odeion, probably right from the time of its construction in the Antonine period. A theatre-like structure was, in fact, the most appropriate place for the performance of the Epidaurian hymns, as it is confirmed by their very articulate dramatic structure, featuring a choir and soloist singers. We can then conclude that in Epidauros—as much as in second-century Pergamon—a theatre was specifically built for hosting ritual performances in the form of music and drama in honour or thanksgiving of Asklepios.

Athens

The situation at the Asklepieion of Athens in Roman times appears to be somewhat different from that of Epidauros. The Athenian sanctuary, located on the south slopes of the Acropolis between the theatre of Dionysos and the odeion of Herodes Atticus, accessible by way of the Peripatos, had always played a peculiar public role, possibly by virtue of its central position within the urban topography (FIGS. 2 and 10). In such a confined space, new theatrical structures could not have been accommodated, but a special connection with the pre-existing theatre of Dionysos seems to be attested from the earliest periods and will be further clarified here below (Melfi 2007*b*, 348–9; 2003, 183–8). In addition to this, a number of dedications to Asklepios attest to the performance of poetic and musical texts in the sanctuary between the second and third centuries AD.

The dedication by Sarapion, from a prominent family of Roman Athens, the Statii of Cholleidai, dates to this period (Oliver 1936; Geagan 1991, 145–65; Aleshire 1991, 49–74). It was found east of the Asklepieion and consists of a reused triangular base, originally designed for the erection of a tripod. Around the mid-second century AD, the tripod was removed and Sarapion's statue erected in its place. The statue base was then inscribed to bear the dedication to Sarapion—described as 'poet and philosopher'—accompanied by a poem on a medical-religious subject, composed by Sarapion himself (*SEG* 28. 225). The dedicant of the monument in this later phase was Sarapion's grandson, *zakoros* or sacred official of the cult of Asklepios.

At the end of the second or the beginning of the third century AD, two more texts were inscribed on the remaining sides of the triangular base: a catalogue of *παιανιστῆς*, that is to say the singers in charge of performing the hymns in the sanctuary (Aleshire 1991, 49–70), and the Paean of Sophocles (*IG* ii². 4510; Oliver 1936, 91–122). The latter is mentioned by Philostratos as the most common hymn sung in Athens in honour of Asklepios: 'Sophokles' hymn of praise that is sung to Asclepius at Athens' (Philostr. *VA* iii. 17. 2, transl. C.P. Jones). Similarly, Lucian states: 'For no less honour comes to Asklepios if, in case his worshippers composed no paeans of their own, the songs of Isodemus of Troizen and of Sophocles are sung' (Ps.-Lucian. *Dem. Enc.* 27, transl. Edelstein and Edelstein).

That singing hymns in honour of Asklepios was common practice in the Asklepieion of

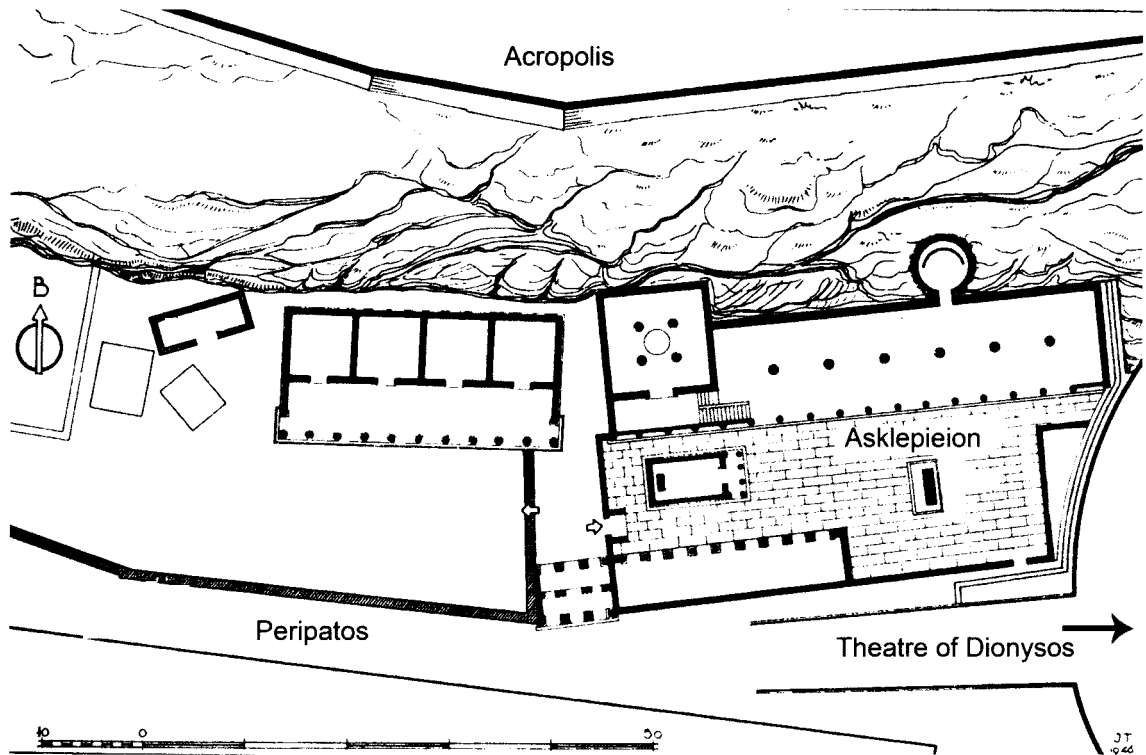


FIG. 2. The Athenian Asklepieion in the Roman period (in grey: area of tripod dedications).
After Travlos 1971.

Athens in the second and third centuries AD, is further confirmed by the existence therein of a second catalogue of *πατανισταί* (*IG ii². 2481*; Aleshire 1991, 33–40), and a fragment of another famous paean, the Paean of Erythrai (*IG ii². 4509*), copies of which were found in many of the known Asklepieia.⁵ In addition to this, the Paean dedicated by Diophantos of Sphettos, *zakoros* of Asklepios, was also found in the sanctuary (*IG ii². 4514*; Aleshire 1991, 111; Girone 1998, 31–5). This contains a tale of healing designed to be performed in a theatrical space, judging from its dramatic and metric structure. In the first part of the poetic text, the illness is described using *apokrota*, to suggest the supplicant's limping walk; in the second part, more fluid dactylic hexameters are used to indicate the accomplished healing. Singing or reciting the paean would have resulted in a re-enactment of the miraculous healing, similar to those that took place, for example, in the Asklepieion of Rome on Tiber Island (Melfi 2007*b*, 384). Here the inscriptions record how the patients publicly declaimed, or performed, their healing on a 'sacred stage'—*ἱερόν βῆμα*—in front of a festive *demos* (Moretti 1968, no. 148. 2; Girone 1998, 157–68).

Finally, an inscription dating to the end of the second century AD on the epistyle of the Augustan stoa south of the temple of Asklepios (Melfi 2007*b*, 367–71) records the dedication

⁵ The paean of Erythrae (*IG ii². 4509*) contains a text that originated in Asia Minor in the Hellenistic period, and known from later transcriptions at the Asklepieia of

Dion (Edelstein and Edelstein 1945, t. 592 a) and Rome (Moretti 1968, no. 149).

of a tripod to the god (FIG. 3). The epigraphic text was inscribed on an epistyle originally dedicated to Asklepios, Hygieia, and Augustus (*IG ii². 3120 A and B*; Aleshire 1991, 100). This suggests that in Athens the same procedure as attested in Pergamon might be found. At Pergamon, musical and poetical performances in honour of Asklepios were closed by the dedication of a tripod (Galli 2005, 272–3), as is attested in the writings of Aelius Aristides: ‘I also gave choral performances, ten in total, some of men, some of boys (...). It therefore seemed fitting to dedicate a silver tripod, as thank-offering to the god, and at the same time, as memorial of the choral performances which we gave, and I prepared an elegiac couplet (...) There were also two more verses, one of which contained my name’ (Aristid. *Or.* 1. 43–5). The Athenian tripod, in particular, must have been erected on the roof of the stoa, in a particularly prominent position, at the entrance of the sanctuary. Anybody approaching the theatre from the Peripatos would have been able to see it. This dedication represented the appropriation of a pre-existing building, possibly playing a specific role within the cult, and originally dedicated to Asklepios, Hygieia, and Augustus, for the exhibition of an entirely private monumental offering. It suggests the growing importance of tripods and choregic dedications within the sacred precinct, and consequently the centrality of the rituals they commemorated.

Since poetic and musical performances are undoubtedly attested in the Asklepieion of



FIG. 3. Athenian Asklepieion, epistyle of the Augustan stoa with inscription *IG ii². 3120*. Author's photo.

Athens, where could they have taken place within the rather restricted sacred precinct? The monument of Sarapion was found at the east end of the Asklepieion, near the analemma of the theatre (Levensohn 1947, 71). In the same area, a second dedication by the Statii of Cholleidai mentioning the presence of a tripod came to light (*IG ii². 3704*; Koumanoudes 1876, 198–9). Here an uninscribed monumental tripod base is also visible today (FIGS. 2 and 4). This means that in the area where the Asklepieion precinct meets that of the theatre, at least four documents dated to the second and third centuries AD were discovered, and attest the performance and dedication of poetic texts.

The location of these monuments suggests that performative rituals in honour of Asklepios could have taken place in the theatre of Dionysos, especially in view of the limitations of space imposed by the urban setting of the sanctuary of the healing god. This type of interaction between the Asklepieion and the theatre of Dionysos was not unusual, since the close relation of the buildings is clearly attested from the earliest periods. On the one hand, the archaeological evidence that the Doric stoa of the Asklepieion was built around 300 BC against the west analemma of the theatre led Townsend to hypothesize the existence of a passage leading from the upper floor of the stoa directly to the theatre auditorium (Townsend 1982, 70). On the other hand, the literary and epigraphic sources point towards a special connection between Asklepios and Dionysos in Athens (Melfi 2007*b*, 348). According to Aeschines, 8



FIG. 4. Athenian Asklepieion, uninscribed tripod base. Author's photo.

Elaphebolion, προαγών of the celebrations for the Great Dionysia, was devoted to the sacrifice for Asklepios (Aeschin. *In Ctes.* iii. 66–8). A fourth-century BC decree found in the Asklepieion honoured a priest of Asklepios, who was in charge of maintaining εὐκοσμία—public order—in the theatre of Dionysos too (*IG* ii². 354; Hubbe 1959, 151–4, no. 2; Schwenk 1985, no. 54). In the third century BC, at least one choregic dedication was exhibited in the Asklepieion (*IG* ii². 3081). Finally, in the first century BC, Diokles from Kephissia, priest of Asklepios and mint magistrate, struck New Style coins featuring the symbols of Asklepios, Hygieia, and Dionysos (Melfi 2003).

If the theatre of Dionysos was thus, as it seems likely, actually used for performative rituals in honour of Asklepios, the Athenian sanctuary would therefore be no different from those of Epidauros and Pergamon, with their second-century AD ‘sacred theatres’ (in the words of Aristides).

Messene

Less documented but similarly revealing is the case of the Asklepieion of Messene, often interpreted as a civic and political rather than religious centre (FIG. 5).⁶ The complex appears nevertheless to be clearly identified as a sacred precinct with a well-defined sacrificial area and structures devoted to the healing practice (Melfi 2007b, 265–8).

Here, the building, normally interpreted as an ekklesiasterion for the meetings of the σύνεδροι of the Messenian state (Birtacha 2008), must have been used in the Roman period as an odeion for poetic and musical performances. This is demonstrated by the discovery of at least one musical inscription (Themelis 1994, 90–2), generally dated to the Imperial period, and by the existence of musical competitions in the sanctuary from the late second century AD, on the occasion of the festivals in honour of the god, the Asklepieia (Themelis 1990, 85–6). If such musical performances took place in the sanctuary, it appears the most likely that they were staged in the theatrical building known as the ekklesiasterion.

According to Themelis (1996, 147–8), a proper stage was added to the small theatre only in the late second or early third century AD. This seems to confirm this hypothesis (Melfi 2007b, 271). The construction of the new stage might have been paid for by the descendants of the wealthy Messenian Tiberios Klaudios Saithidas Kailianos I, a member of the most influential family of Roman Messene (Themelis 2000, 78–81). His equestrian statue was placed inside the auditorium of the theatre, and, judging from the inscription on its base (*IG* v. 1455), was probably dedicated by his grandson Tiberios Klaudios Saithidas Kailianos II—a contemporary of Marcus Aurelius.⁷ The monument was displayed in such a prominent position that it changed the function of the building, since it partially blocked its access from

⁶ The problem of the choice between a political and a religious function of the Messenian Asklepieion arose immediately after Orlandos’s first excavations in the 1950s, because of the uncharacteristic presence of buildings such as a bouleterion and an ekklesiasterion in the complex. The issue has been tackled by many scholars, but the proposed explanations are still unsatisfactory. For the *status quaestionis* see Melfi 2007b, 248–9.

⁷ Tiberios Claudios Saithidas Kailianos II is known for his dedication of a bronze statue of Marcus Aurelius in the agora of Messene (*IG* v. 1451). The statue must date

to the years of the reign of Antoninus Pius, when Marcus Aurelius was still Caesar (139–61) and offers an important element for the chronology of the descendants of Saithidas I. The fact that Saithidas II was a contemporary of Marcus Aurelius led Themelis to suggest that he might have been the Saithidas known to Pausanias in his description of Messene (Themelis 2001, 69–70, Paus. vi. 32. 2). Saithidas II might well have been the dedicant of the statue of Saithidas I in the ekklesiasterion, since the honorand is remembered as father of Frontinus I and grandfather of Saithidas II.

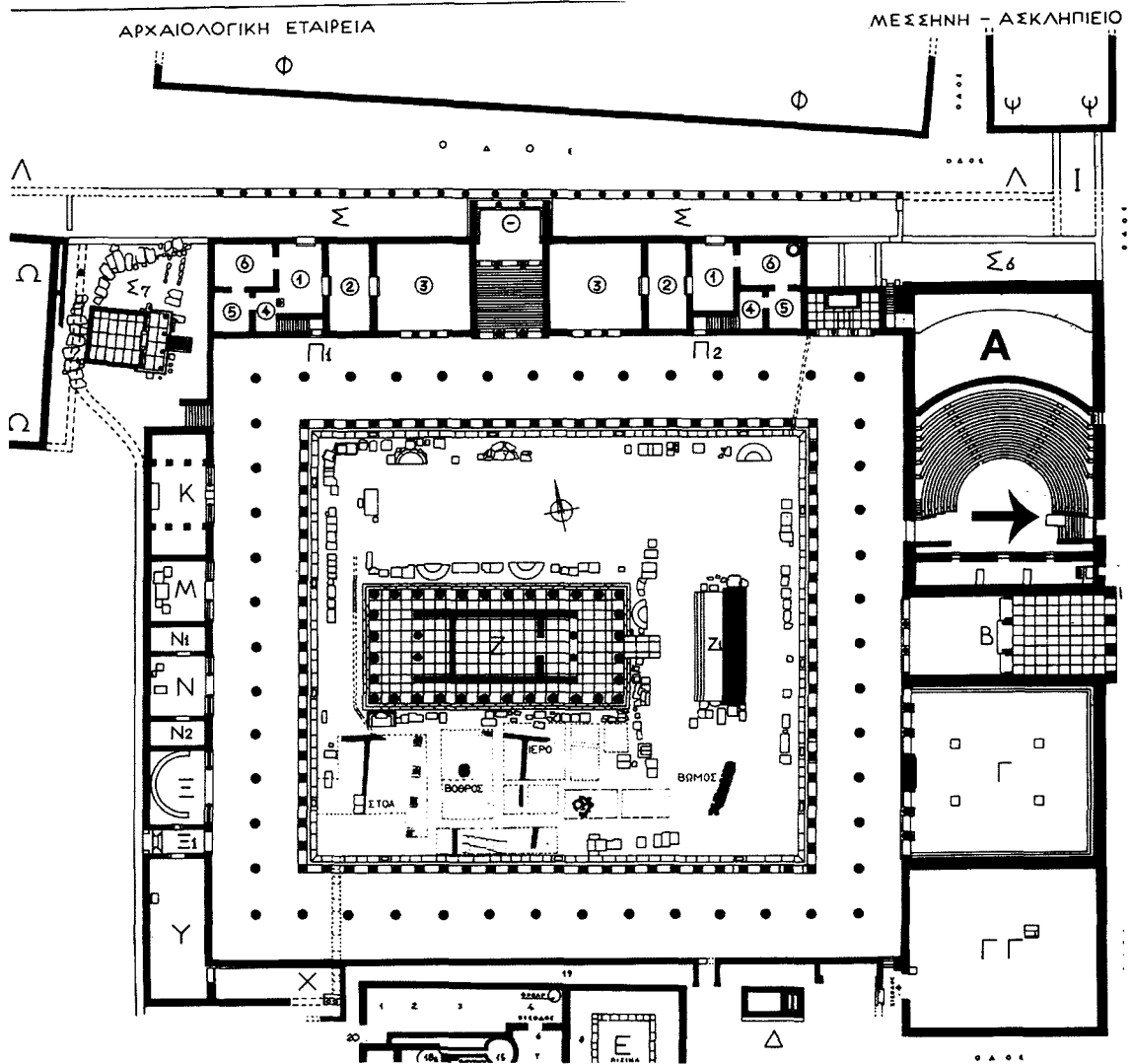


FIG. 5. Asklepieion of Messene (A = ekklesiasterion; the arrow indicates the statue of Saithidas).
After Themelis 2000.

the east. The implication is that, at the time, the ekklesiasterion was accessible only from the sanctuary precinct to which it belonged: not differently from Aristides' 'sacred theatre' at Pergamon and the odeion of Epidauros.

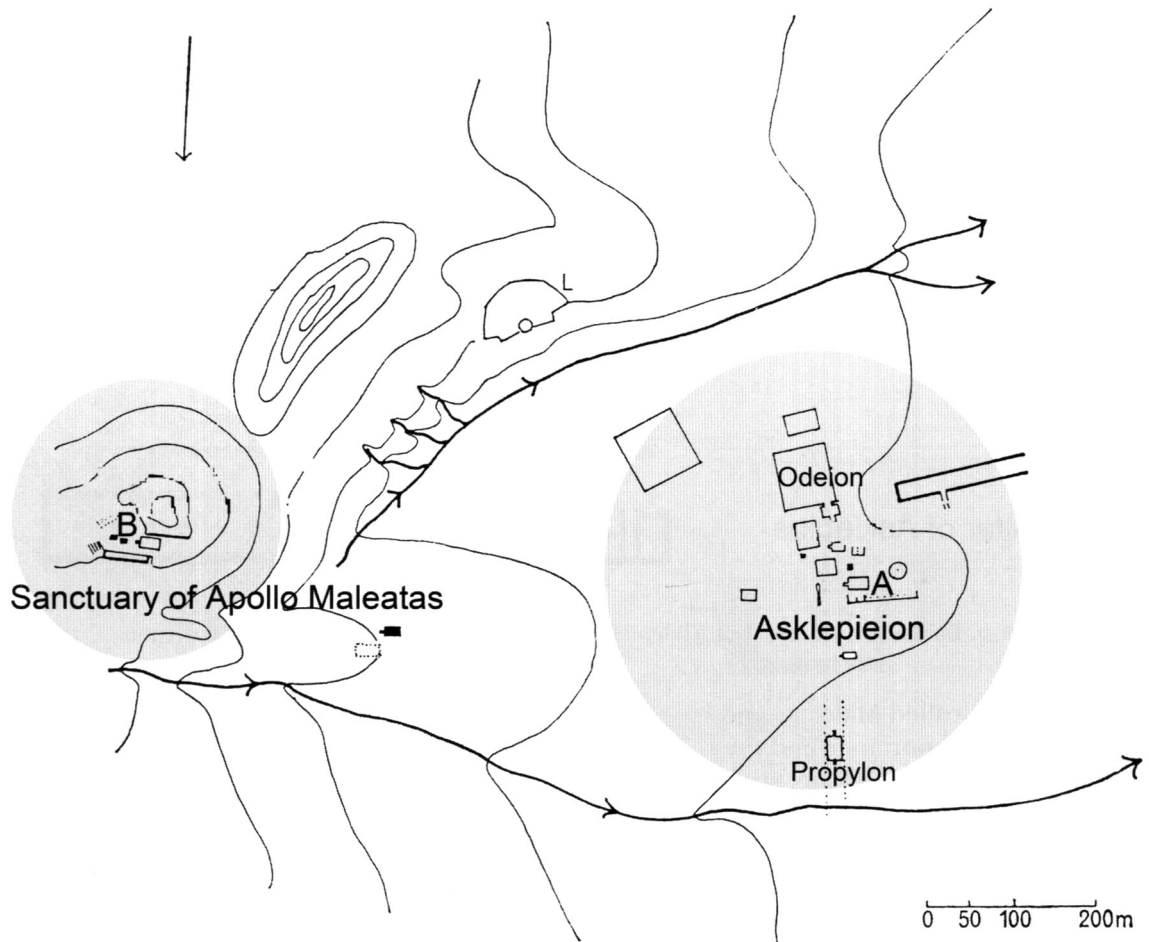


FIG. 6. Epidauros, sanctuaries of Asklepios and Apollo Maleatas. After Burford 1969.

RE-ENACTING THE MYTH

Some of the performative rituals that took place in the sanctuaries of Asklepios were re-enactments of myths regarding the god and the foundation of his cult. The best-documented examples of this kind are to be found in the sanctuaries of Epidauros and Athens.

Epidauros

One of the oldest performative rituals attested in the sanctuary of Epidauros is that recorded by the Paean of Isyllos (*IG iv*². 128; Girone 1998, 46–5). At the beginning of the third century BC, Isyllos, an Epidaurian aristocrat, established a new ritual in honour of Asklepios (Sineux 1999, 153–64; Melfi 2007*b*, 52–4). The ritual consisted of a procession and the performance of a hymn on the myth of the birth of Asklepios, son of Apollo and Epidaurian Koronis. The hymn was sung during the procession between the cult-place of Apollo on the top of Mount Kynortion and that of Asklepios in the plain (FIG. 6). The text affirmed clearly that the

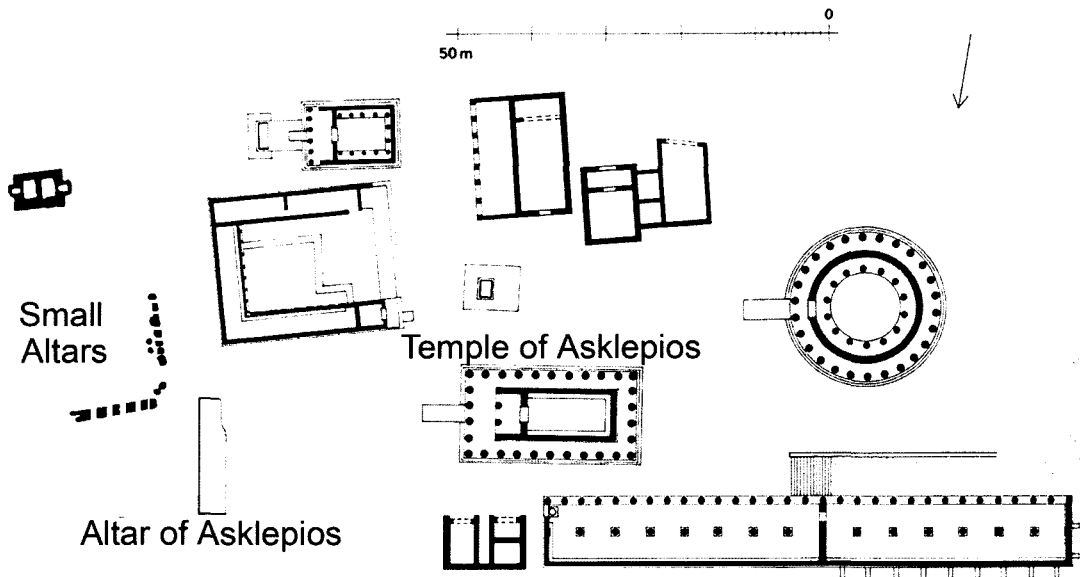


FIG. 7. Epidauros, sanctuary of Asklepios, central area (FIG. 6, A). After Kavvadias 1900.

cult of Apollo, called Maleatas and based on Mount Kynortion, preceded that of Asklepios in the plain. The importance and the role of Apollo's sacred precinct in the establishment of the cult of Asklepios were further stressed by the fact that in the same precinct Asklepios was born to Koronis. Amongst the gods featuring in the hymn as part of Asklepios' genealogy and taking part in the myth were also Zeus, Leto, the Muses, and the Moirai (Melfi 2007*b*, 53).

It is likely that the procession left the Asklepieion from the area south-east of the main altar of Asklepios, which was normally devoted to προθυσία or sacrifices preliminary to the main healing rituals (FIG. 7). This area, bordered and defined by two perpendicular rows of small rectangular stone altars of roughly equal dimensions, was noticed for the first time by George Roux (Roux 1961, 398–400), and only later identified as devoted to preliminary sacrifices (Melfi 2007*b*, 49–51). The altars were dedicated to most of the deities mentioned in Isyllos' hymn, Zeus, Leto, the Muses, the Moirai, but also members of Asklepios' family and healing heroes.

The arrival point, in the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas on Mount Kynortion (FIG. 8), was probably the monumental altar of Apollo and the Mousaion—a precinct sacred to those Muses involved in Asklepios' birth-myth (Lambrinoudakis 1999, 67–8; Melfi 2007*b*, 44–5).

It is significant that the dedicatory inscriptions of most of the small προθυσία altars (FIG. 9) range from the fifth to the third century BC (*IG* iv². 269; 270; 273–5; 282–3; 294–6; 301; 304–5; 311). After a gap of more than three centuries, in the second century AD, a number of new altars appear next to the old ones in precisely the same style and dedicated to the same gods, the cults of which had not been attested for more than four centuries (e.g. *IG* iv². 383; 397; 500; 567). One of them (*IG* iv². 567), perfectly in line with the older specimens, bears the dedication of a slave of the Roman senator Iulius Antoninus Pythodorus (Hiller von Gaertringen 1929), responsible for the mid-second-century reconstruction of many

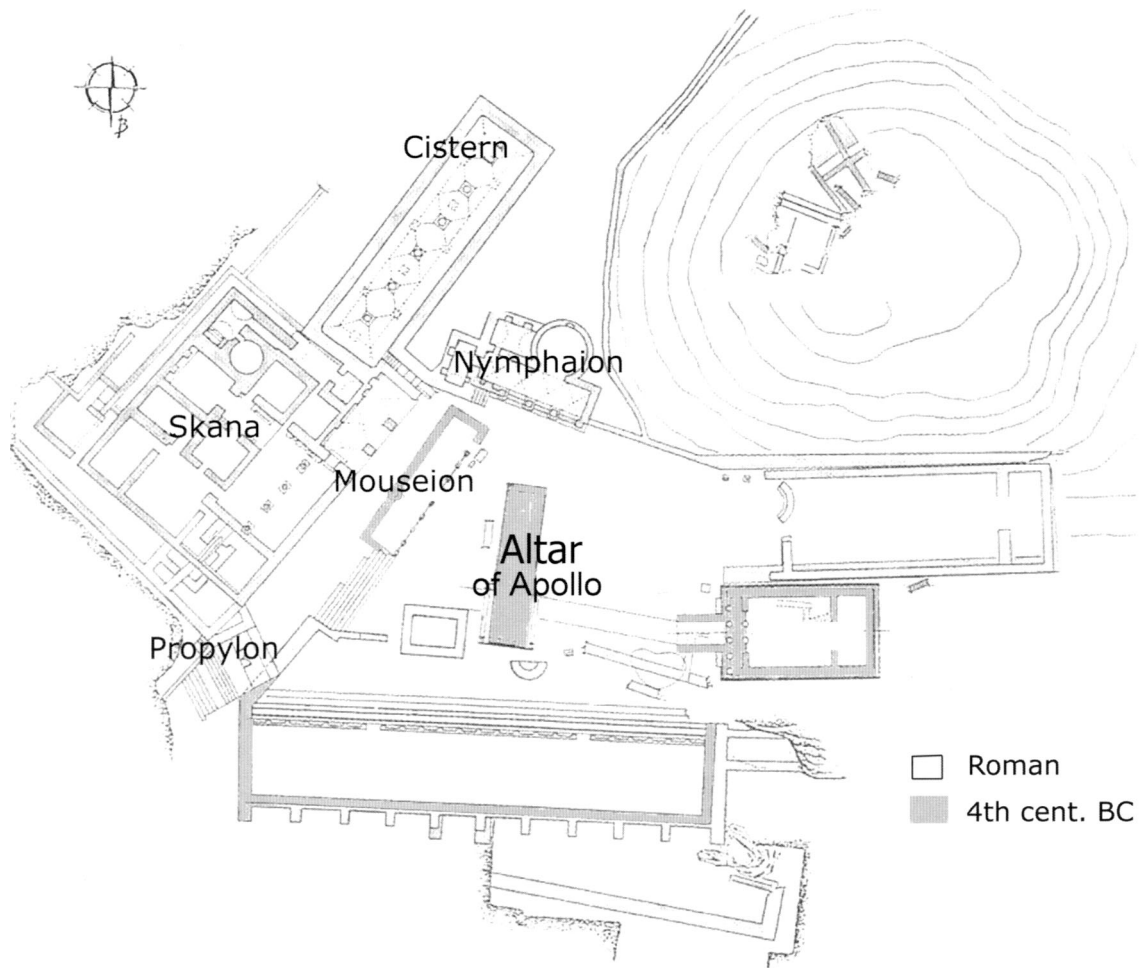


FIG. 8. Epidauros, sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas (FIG. 6, B). After Lambrinoudakis 1988.

important buildings of the sanctuary (Galli 2001, 52–6; Melfi 2007*b*, 121–2). It is therefore likely that the new dedications were intended to revive the old altar precinct—probably fallen into disuse in the late Hellenistic period, when many structures of the sanctuary suffered serious damage⁸—and thus to evoke the cults which accompanied that of Asklepios in the early years of the sanctuary (Melfi 2007*b*, 106–11).

A similar phenomenon is to be identified in the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas on Mount Kynortion. The name of Maleatas, traditionally attributed to the god and the cult place by the

⁸ In the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas, 1st-c. BC damage is reported by Lambrinoudakis in *PAE* 1983, 152–4, 1988, 299–300. In the Asklepieion, the so-called gymnasium (Lambrinoudakis (ed) 1988, 22–35 and n. 21), the monumental *katagion* (Kraynak 1991, 1–4), and the

water-supply system (Peppa-Papaioannou 1990, 553–4) suffered major damage, differently attributed by the excavators to the incursions of Sulla or the Cilician pirates. For an overview of the 1st-c.-BC events, see Melfi 2007*b*, 68–70.

archaeological literature, is not attested in the votive dedications of the Classical and Hellenistic period, except for the third-century BC Paean of Isyllos. The first votive dedications to mention the god with the epithet of Maleatas are those dated to the second century AD and associated with Antoninus' reconstruction of the sanctuary (*IG iv*². 25; 391; 454; 456; 479; Peek 1969, nos. 177, 178, 191). According to Pausanias, the senator had the whole sanctuary of Apollo on Mount Kynortion rebuilt (Paus. ii. 27). Recent archaeological investigations demonstrated that this reconstruction took place in the context of near-complete abandonment of the site, because all the buildings of the cult place had been destroyed in the first century BC and never rebuilt.

Here the cult seems to have been restored on the basis of the indications given by Isyllos in his paean, where Apollo was defined as Maleatas for the first and only time. The senator's reconstruction was inspired by local traditions, no doubt upheld by the contemporary Epidaurian elite. These same traditions were received and recounted by Pausanias, who describes the sacred Epidaurian landscape in its ancient details—'above the grove are the mount Titthion and another called Kynortion; on the latter is a sanctuary of Maleatas Apollo' (Paus. ii. 27.7, transl. W.H.S. Jones)—and the birth of Asklepios as transmitted by Isyllos—'in the country of the Epidaurians, Coronis bore a son and exposed him on the mountain (...) As the child lay exposed he was given milk by one of the goats that pastured about the mountain and was guarded by the watch-dog of the herd' (Paus. ii. 26. 4, transl. W.H.S. Jones). This latter myth proved to be very popular in the Antonine period, as is demonstrated by the issue of Epidaurian coins representing the previously unattested iconography of the birth-myth of the baby Asklepios, nursed by a goat, on the mountains of Epidauros (Holzmann 1984, 868, no. 4).

The restoration of both the ἱερόν for the preliminary sacrifices and the sanctuary of Apollo Maleatas suggests the existence of a concerted plan of reconstruction: not only of buildings, but also of rituals and religious practice. Judging from the literary sources and the epigraphical evidence, the program was paid for by the senator Antoninus (Melfi 2007*b*, 99–101). Its inspiration must have come from the Paean of Isyllos, the only document that enforces the centrality of Apollo Maleatas and his sanctuary in the cult of Asklepios, and the role of the minor deities, such as the Muses and the Moirai, within the genealogy of the younger god. Antoninus' patronage of the Epidaurian reconstruction reflects therefore the engagement of the contemporary intellectual and political elite in the restoration of traditional cult places and rituals—best exemplified by the Asklepieion of Pergamon (Habicht 1969, 9–11; Le Glay 1976, 347–72; Hoffmann 1998, 49–50)—and appears to be motivated by the desire of promoting and redefining the religious context after a period of historical disruptions (cf. Galli 2002, 207–50).

If we accept that the Antonine revival of the Epidaurian pantheon was inspired by Isyllos' text, it is likely that within the second century AD rituals a central position was occupied by a re-enactment of the ancient procession. Along the route leading from the plain to the hilltop, the ancient hymn might have been sung to evoke the birth of Asklepios in the land of the Epidaurians and consequently re-establish the ancestral connection of the god with his sanctuary. The processional way, from the altars in the plain and along the side of the new odeion, which was probably purposefully inserted into the ritual route, would have reached the top of the hill, where a new stepped propylon gave access to the sacred precinct (FIG. 6). Here the altar of Apollo and the open-air space around it would have provided the perfect

stage for the ritual enactment (FIG. 8); while the spectators could have sat on the steps facing the *σκανά* and the restored Mousaion (Lambrinoudakis 1999, 71–3; Melfi 2007*b*, 116–21).

Athens

As at Epidauros, the evocation of myths that strengthened the association of the god with his sanctuary seems to be attested in the Athenian Asklepieion. Here, from the mid-second century AD, the evidence for the festival of the Epidauria increases considerably. According to the ancient sources (Philostr. *VA*. iv. 18; Paus. ii. 26. 8), the Epidauria commemorated the foundation-myth of the cult on the day of Asklepios' arrival in Athens from Epidauros, and the god's accommodation in the city Eleusinion, before the establishment of his sanctuary on the slopes of the Acropolis. While this foundation-myth is known from the inscription and relief dedicated at the end of the fifth century BC by Telemachos of Acharnai, founder of the sanctuary (Beschi 1968, 381–436), the nature of the Athenian Epidauria as a festival remains obscure. A few second-century BC decrees honour priests of Asklepios in charge of the organization of the Epidauria (*IG* ii². 974–5; *SEG* 18. 21–8), but do not provide any detail of the ritual taking place during the festival. Only an inscribed fragment recently found in the Athenian Agora (*SEG* 47. 71), and dated to the years around 410 BC, has been associated by Kevin Clinton with the functioning of the Epidauria (Clinton 1994). The fragment preserves the word Epidauria followed by a list of at least four sacred officials. According to Clinton's



FIG. 9. Asklepieion of Epidauros, *prothysia* altars. Author's photo.

reconstruction of the text, the inscription reads that the priestess of Demeter and some cult attendants from Epidauros led the procession of the Epidauria. Clinton identifies such a procession with that commemorating the first journey of Asklepios from Epidauros to Athens, and hypothesizes that in the city Eleusinion, before reaching his own sanctuary on the Acropolis' slopes (FIG. 10), Asklepios, or more likely his statue, was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries. The problem with this reconstruction is that it relies entirely on a ritual preserved only in the late literary sources, which has left no evidence in the documents of the Classical and Hellenistic periods.

A ritual initiation of Asklepios is, in fact, described only in the texts of Philostratus and Pausanias (Philostr. *VA*. iv. 18; Paus. ii. 26. 8). There is also a single inscription from the Athenian Asklepieion, which records a μῆσις or initiation of Asklepios, and it is similarly dated to the reign of Hadrian (*JG* ii². 3195; Aleshire 1991, 101–3). This is the dedication of a Demetrios from Gargettos, who claims to have paid for the reception (ὑποδοχή) and the initiation (μῆσις) of Asklepios. Demetrios' dedication and the literary descriptions of Philostratos and Pausanias therefore form a coherent body of evidence, which can hardly be put in any relation with the epigraphic documents from the Classical period that never mention an initiation for Asklepios (as proposed in Clinton 1994). Philostratos gives the following account of the Epidauria: 'It was the day of the Epidauria. At the Epidauria, after an announcement and sacrifice of victims it is customary for the Athenians, even now, to give induction accompanied by a secondary sacrifice. This practice they instituted in honour of Asklepios, because they inducted him when he had arrived from Epidauros too late for the Mysteries' (Philostr. *VA*. iv. 17, transl. C.P. Jones). This description is confirmed by Pausanias: 'Indeed the Athenians, who say they let Asclepius participate in their mysteries call this day Epidauria and they say that from that moment Asclepius was worshipped by them' (Paus. ii. 26. 8, transl. W.H.S. Jones).

The conclusion is straightforward: whether or not the initiation of Asklepios was practised from an early date, it is clear that the event was considered an extremely relevant stage of the foundation myth of the Athenian cult by second and third century authors, whilst it had no or very little importance in the early sources. This suggests, again, that we might be dealing with a later reconstruction of the ritual practice, which translated the Eleusinian connection of Asklepios into a proper ritual of initiation, to take place during the well-established Epidauria.

The inspiration for the Eleusinian connection might have been offered by the inscription of Telemachos, whilst the choice of performing a ritual of initiation might be explained by the popularity of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the second century AD. In particular, the idea of an initiated Asklepios must have been popular among contemporary authors, because it appeared particularly relevant on the occasion of the initiation of Hadrian to the Eleusinian Mysteries. The emperor, being initiated to the Mysteries as a foreigner, found his predecessors in illustrious μύσται such as Asklepios and Dionysos (cf. Graindor 1934, 8 n. 2–3; Calandra 199, 106). In this same line, we should interpret both the statue of Asklepios as a μύστης dedicated by Herodes Atticus in Eleusis and the portrait of Antinoos in the iconography of Asklepios found at the same site (Galli 2001, 65–7; 2002, 212). All these data confirm that from the Hadrianic period onwards the Eleusinian ritual became fundamental for the festival of the Epidauria, because it evoked the stages of foundation of the Athenian sanctuary and guaranteed its connection with one of the most important cults of contemporary Greece.

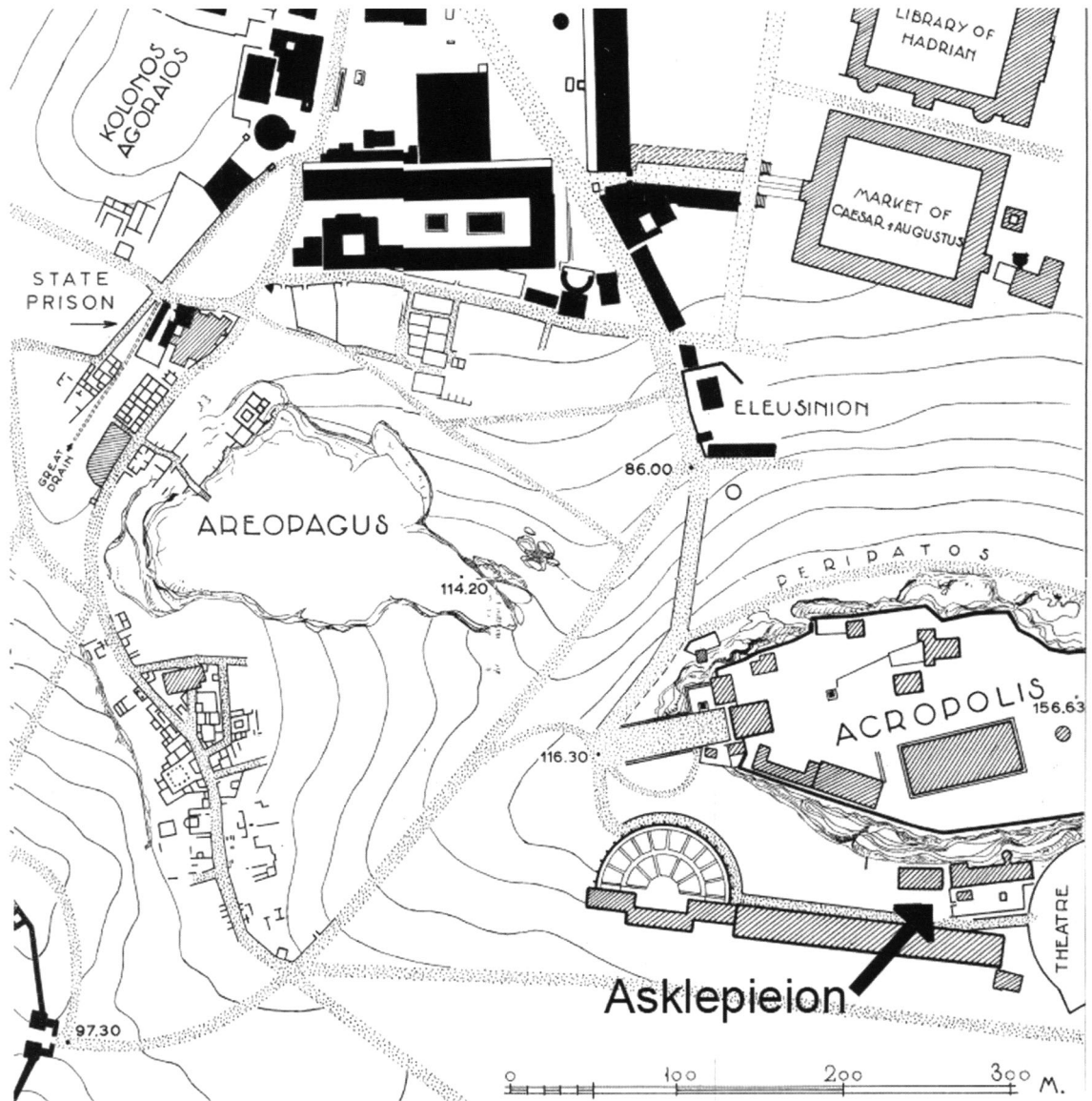


FIG. 10. The Athenian agora and its environs in the second century AD. From Travlos 1971.

How the ritual was actually performed from the mid-second century onwards we cannot say, but it is evident that during the procession from the city Eleusinion in the agora (Miles 1998) to the Asklepieion at the foot of the Acropolis the reception and initiation of Asklepios took place (FIG. 10). In the Eleusinion, an impressive propylon rebuilt in the second century to resemble that of Eleusis—with two caryatids and a Doric frieze bearing depictions of cult objects—would have eased the passage of the procession and reminded the viewer of the connection with the main Eleusinian sanctuary (Miles 1998, 89–91 and cat. iii, nos. 15–16).

The actual ritual, organized and paid for by private citizens such as Demetrios of Gargettos, probably consisted of a dramatic enactment of the reception and initiation of Asklepios. The absence of a theatrical space in the neighbourhood and the space restrictions in both the Eleusinion and the Asklepieion leads us to hypothesize the exploitation of the adjacent theatre of Dionysus. Here a theatrical re-enactment could have been performed, in a manner similar to that attested by the inscription of the Iobakchoi (*IG ii*². 1368). This text, dated to 178 AD, records the parts played by different members of the religious community in the enactment of a ritual drama featuring Dionysos, Kore, Palaimon, and Aphrodite.

Even though the examples examined above are mostly limited to the sanctuaries of Athens and Epidauros, where the epigraphic and literary documentation is more abundant, performative rituals are nevertheless attested in a number of other Asklepieia. Other examples of second-century AD restored or newly built theatrical spaces might be mentioned—such as those of Lebena (Melfi 2007*a*) and Butrint (Melfi 2007*d*)—but at this point I prefer to draw some conclusions on the significance and role of performative rituals in the Asklepieia of Roman Greece.⁹

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the data presented above, I propose two different levels of interpretation: one within the cult of Asklepios, the other in the larger historical context of second-century culture.

The spread of poetic and musical performances in the cult of Asklepios might be explained by the fact that these were believed to have a therapeutic function, at least from the second century AD. Important testimonies of this phenomenon are the writings of Aelius Aristides, who composed a number of hymns after the commandment of the god, and Galen, who prescribed such a practice as a cure for states of anxiety. He writes:

and not a few men, however many years they were ill through the disposition of their souls, we have made healthy by correcting the disproportion of their emotions. No slight witness of the statement is also our ancestral god Asklepios, who ordered not a few to have odes written as well as to compose comical mimes and certain songs—for the motions of their passions having become more vehement, have made the mixture of the body warmer than it should be (*Gal. De San. Tuenda* i. 8. 19–21, transl. Edelstein and Edelstein).

On the other hand, poetic and musical performances often shared with dramatic enactments the aim of reconstructing the earliest phases of the sanctuaries, especially those associated with myths of foundation. While the same existence of these rituals might be generally explained with the antiquarian approach to religiosity that characterized the culture of Roman Greece from the first century BC onwards, their systematic promotion finds a wider significance within the revival of the past operated by the wealthy intellectual elites in the cultural environment of the Second Sophistic.¹⁰ In the Greek province of Imperial times,

⁹ The Asklepieion of Lebena in Crete was entirely rebuilt in the 2nd c. AD, with a large theatrical space framed by a monumental staircase (Melfi 2007*a*); at the Asklepieion of Butrint, the Hellenistic theatre was enlarged and completely enclosed in the sacred space in the same period (Melfi 2007*d*).

¹⁰ On the Second Sophistic as an elite habitus in Roman Greece see Bowersock 1969, 30; Bowie 1970; Sirago 1989, 57–9; Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001; Borg 2004, *passim*. In the specific case of the sanctuaries of Asklepios: Petsalis Diomidis 2005, 189–98; Melfi 2007*c*, 241–54.

myths and history played a fundamental role in the preservation of the collective memory and, in the specific case of these sanctuaries, allowed the maintenance of a strong association of the god with his cult places. In this context, performative rituals must have played a major role because they evoked not only the god and his favour, as in the earlier periods, but also confirmed and asserted the continuation of the divine presence on the site, despite the discontinuity of the historical events.

Such an interpretation is confirmed by the fact that all the dedicants of poetic texts and theatrical structures in the sanctuaries of Asklepios of Imperial age belonged to the same class of wealthy intellectuals. Sarapion of Cholleidai, dedicant of poetic texts and honoured in the Athenian Asklepieion as a poet and a philosopher, came from a prominent family of rhetors and intellectuals, won the dramatic competitions of the Dionysia under the choregia of Antiochos Philopappos, and was known to the sources as a friend of Plutarch.¹¹ Sextus Iulius Antoninus Pythodoros, responsible for the Epidaurian reconstructions, came from an extremely wealthy family of Nysa on the Maeander (Hiller von Gaertringen 1929, 63–8; Halfmann 1979, 171), where he carried out euergetic activities (Kouroniotes 1922, 68–72). His personal relation with Pausanias and his frequentation of the Asklepieion of Pergamon together with Aelius Aristides are well known (Habicht 1969, 64–6). Tiberios Klaudios Saithidas Kailianos II, probably responsible for the transformation of the ekklesiasterion of Messene into a sacred theatre, similarly belonged to an extremely wealthy and influential family (Themelis 2000, 78–81; 2001, 64–70). He was also known to Pausanias and probably mentioned in the latter's account of Messene (Paus. iv. 32. 2).

All these individuals undoubtedly adhered to the intellectual model of *paideia* that characterised the cultural environment of the Second Sophistic (cf. Anderson 1978, 104–6; Borg 2004, *passim*). For them *paideia* was a deep knowledge of the past and of traditions—history, landscapes, myths, and rituals—eventually translated into a value system and a mode of thought. *Paideia* in second- and third-century Greece allowed euergetai, emperors, and office-holders to recognize themselves as taking part in the same intellectual communication, and, consequently, to negotiate power relations. In this perspective, the interventions of wealthy patrons in the Asklepieia were not different, for example, from those of Herodes Atticus at Olympia and Delphi, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus at Eleusis, and Licinius Priscus Juventianus in Isthmia (Galli 2002, 205–50). They were only part and parcel of a broader employment of the past in imperial Greece, aimed at enforcing a sense of Greek identity, while at the same time creating a symbolic—and elitist—discourse.

To conclude, the promotion of performative spaces and rituals in sanctuaries of Asklepios seems to be completely understandable as a product of the culture of second and early third century Greece. Moreover, in this period a tendency towards dramatization and theatricality in religious and public life met with a special sensitivity for all matters concerning health, as the emergence of literary figures such as Aelius Aristides and Galen demonstrates. Therefore writing, singing, and performing for Asklepios would have been the perfect way to attain good health while actively participating in the contemporary cultural environment.

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¹¹ On the family of Sarapion: Aleshire 1991, 52–9. The choregia of Philopappos is probably recorded in an inventory from the Athenian Asklepieion (IG ii². 4511)

and in the text of Plutarch (*Quaest. Conv.* 628 A–B; Teodorsson 1989, 156–7).

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