

Messene is a significant ancient city in terms of its size, form, and state of preservation, and still has much to offer. It possesses not only sanctuaries and public buildings, but also imposing fortifications, and houses and tombs. It enjoys, amongst other things, the advantage of never having been destroyed or covered by later settlements, and is located on an unspoiled inland site.

Messene was worshipped as a goddess. She was one of the principal deities of the city together with Zeus Ithomatas and, in the Hellenistic times (3rd-2nd c. B.C.) when the Asklepieion was built, she was worshipped probably together with Asclepius who was also a chthonic deity of fertility, of life and death historically linked to the pre-Dorian past of the land of Messene.

The buildings of the city of Ancient Messene have the same orientation and follow up the grid which is formed by parallel (orientation EW) and perpendicular (orientation NS) roads. This system of city planning is the so called Hippodameian system named after its original inventor, Hippodamus from Miletus, an architect, geometrician and astronomer of the 5th c. B.C. This plan was pre-determined, strictly geometric in nature, and based on the virtues of the democratic constitution, that is, the principles of isonomy (equality before the law), of isopolity (equal civic rights) and of isomoiria (equal share in landownership); still, it could afford to adapt to the peculiarities of the landscape and the particular climatic conditions of each site so that it conformed smoothly with the natural environment. It is according to these very principles that Ancient Messene, the new capital of the free and independent Messenia, was built in 369 B.C. by Epameinondas from Thebes.

THE THEATRE

The first monument one encounters on the way from the Museum to the archaeological site is the theatre. The theatre was used for large scale assemblies of political character. In this theatre was held the meeting between King Philipp V Macedon and Aratos the Sikyonian in 214B.C, the day following the revolt of the Messenian people. According to the testimony of Livius (39.49.6-12), many Messenians preceded to the theatre of Messene and demanded that the great general of the Achaean League Philopoimen from Megalopolis captured by the Messenians in 183B.C. be transferred there and exposed to common view. Stone blocks belonging to the retaining wall of the theatre seem to have been built into the nearby fountain house Arsinoe during its last phase of constructions in the time of Diocletian; thus the theatre must have been abandoned around that time, that is, in the end of the 3rd or beginning of the 4th c. A.D.

The cavea of the theatre sits on an artificial fill supported by a strong semicircular wall. A large part of the western retaining wall of the cavea survives. The wall is interrupted at regular intervals by entrances with pitched arches which led via stairways to the upper corridor; from there, other stairways provided access to the orchestra and also defined the wedge-shaped divisions of seats. The exterior of the retaining wall is built in exactly the same way as the fortification walls and towers of the city. The fort like impression is accentuated by the arched entrances and ascending stairways. These elements and the fact that the retaining wall of the cavea is visible and accessible from

the outside make the Theatre of Messene an exceptional building anticipating the theatres and amphitheatres of the Roman period.

THE ARSINOE FOUNTAIN HOUSE

Traveller Pausanias (4.31.6) informs us that the fountain house of the Agora was named after Arsinoe, the daughter of Leukippos (the mythical king of Messenia) and mother of Asklepios. Pausanias also notes that Arsinoe fountain house received the water from the Klepsydra spring. Arsinoe fountain house includes a cistern of 40m. long, located at a short distance in front of the rear wall. Between the cistern and the rear wall was a facade with ionic half columns. A semicircular exedra situated exactly at the centre of the cistern supported a group of bronze statues. Two more cisterns are located at a slightly lower level and symmetrically on each side of a paved court. The facade of the fountain house during its first phase was screened by a doric colonnade which was removed during the monument's second phase in the 1st c. A.D. The third and final phase of restoration and reconstruction activities that took place at the Arsinoe fountain house including the addition of two identical projections at the two ends at the front side, is dated to the years of Diocletian (284-305 A.D.). The Arsinoe fountain house had the same fate as the other secular and sacred buildings of the city of Messene; they were all abandoned c. 360-70 A.D. due to the economic decline of the Roman Empire and the final disintegration which was aggravated by barbaric raids and earthquakes. The eastern section of Arsinoe fountain house remained standing and was used during the Early Christian period, as suggested by additional constructions on the upper cistern and a building, possibly a water-mill, added in front of the fountain house in the first half of the 6th c. A.D. The discovery of a coin of Leo VI (886-912 A.D.) indicates that after a certain period of abandonment the area is inhabited again in the beginning of the 10th c. A.D. This hypothesis is further corroborated by the large quantities of Byzantine pottery dated from the 10th to the 13th c. A.D.

THE AGORA - TEMPLES OF ZEUS SOTER AND POSEIDON

Fragments of a balustrade slab of local sandstone faced with poros, with a representation of winged thunderbolt of Zeus set in a lozenge-shaped border are connected with the Agora and the temple of Zeus Soter, whose statue is mentioned by Pausanias (4.31.6). The Doric temple of Zeus Soter has been recently uncovered. A number of scattered Doric architectural members and relief metopes come from the temple of Poseidon mentioned by Pausanias. One of them, dating from the 3rd century B.C, depicts Andromeda tied to a rock and the dragon guarding her. Another, also of the 3rd c. BC, is carved in high relief with a representation of a sea-horse with a huge twisted fishtail, carrying a Triton or a Nereid on its back. The Agora covers a huge area of about 40 acres; it is surrounded by stoas on all its four sides. Only the western part of the North long stoa has been brought to light.

THE SANCTUARY OF DEMETER AND THE DIOSKOUROI

To the SW of the Agora a building has been discovered with dimensions of 24 X 24 m. Excavation brought to light the foundations of a cult building of the 4th-3rd century BC, surrounded by annexes. A vast number of terracotta votive plaques and figurines was found beneath the floor of the main building, where they had been thrown along

with fragments of pottery and animal bones in hollows in the bedrock. A wide variety of subjects is depicted on them, including funerary banquets, horsemen, seated or standing female or male figures, warriors, and three frontal female figures. Pausanias (4.31.10) mentions a sanctuary of Demeter and statues of the Dioskouroi in Messene which, according to the order that he follows in his description of the monuments, these should be located to the south of the agora near the Asklepieion, where the sanctuary described above is located. The sanctuary of Demeter is also mentioned among the buildings that were to be repaired in the inscription from the Sebasteion of the Tiberan period.

Asklepieion

Pausanias represents the Asklepieion as a museum of art works, mainly statues, rather than the more usual sanatorium for sick patients. It was the most conspicuous site in Messene and the center of the public life of the city, functioning as such alongside the nearby Agora. The temple and altar are closely hedged about by about 140 bases for bronze statues, mainly of political figures, and five exedras, and many other statues were erected along the stoas. The Asklepieion consists of an almost square area measuring 71.91 x 66.67 m., with four internal stoas opening on to the central open-air courtyard. Each of the stoas on the north and south sides had 23 Corinthian columns on the facade, supporting an entablature that consisted of an Ionic architrave and a frieze with relief bull's heads adorned alternately with floral scrolls and bowls. There were similar stoas on the east and west sides, though these each had 21 columns. All the stoas had a second, inner colonnade with fourteen columns on the north and south sides and thirteen on the east and west. In the east wing of this peristyle courtyard is a complex of three buildings: the small, roofed, theatre-like Ekklesiasterion A, the imposing Propylon B, and the Synedrion or Bouleuterion (Γ) together with the hall of the Archive (Γ-Γ). Along the west wing is a row of rooms or oikoi (K-Σ) which, according to Pausanias's description, contained statues of the following deities, from south to north: Apollo and the Muses (oikos Ξ), Herakles, Thebes, Epaminondas (oikos N), Fortune (oikos M), Artemis Phosphoros (oikos K).

The north wing of the Asklepieion is framed by a large bipartite building erected on a high podium and accessed by way of a central monumental staircase, the north end of which leads to a propylon with a pedimental facade. The two enormous halls of this structure, which extend either side of the north staircase and are divided in identical fashion into five rooms, have been identified with the Sebasteion or Caesareum of the inscriptions and were devoted to the cults of the goddess Roma (personification of the city) and the emperors. At the east end of the north side, at the level of the stoa, stands the carefully constructed oikos H with a pedestal-cistern for exhibiting statues probably of Asklepios and his sons.

THE GREAT DORIC TEMPLE

The greatest part of the central open area of the Asklepieion is occupied by the imposing temple of Asklepios and its large altar. The temple is doric and peripteral (6x12 columns) with porch (prodomos) and rear porch (opisthodomos) each one with two columns in antis. The exterior of the monument measures 13.67m. X27.94m., its original height was approximately 9m. resting on a three course stepped krepis. On

the eastern side access is provided to the entrance via a ramp. The cella, the pronaos (or porch), and the opisthodomos (or rear porch) are built of local limestone, while the colonnade is built of coated sand stone. Sand stone is also used for the non visible parts of the foundation. The adyton (the innermost room of a temple which was not to be entered) was screened by a stone parapet and in its far end stood the cult statue of the god. Restoration and renovation activities in the temple and in the surrounding buildings were taking place until Late Antiquity (3rd c. A.D.). In the last decades of the 4th c. A.D. the sanctuary was abandoned. No dedications appropriate to the worship of the healer god Asklepios have been found. This probably confirms the view that at Messene, Asklepios was not prominently a healer god, but a civic deity, a 'Messenian citizen', in Pausanias's expression (4.26.7). He had his place in the genealogical tree of the legendary kings of Messene, both before and after the arrival of the Herakleidai in the Peloponnese (Pausanias 4.31.11-12) Herakleidai in the Peloponnese (Pausanias 4.31.11-12)

THE EKKLESIASTERION (ASSEMBLY HALL)

It is a small theatre-like construction with its cavea enclosed within a rectangular structure and with a semicircular orchestra. The scene (width: 21m.) possessed a proscenium with three openings in the front and an exit stairway at its eastern side. The cavea, slightly larger than a semicircle, is divided by means of a corridor into an upper and lower part. The better preserved lower part of the cavea comprises eleven rows of seats and is divided into three wedge-shaped divisions of seats by two stairways. Two more ascending stairways can be found at the two ends of the cavea near the parodoi. There are two entrances to the east, on the side of the adjacent ascending road, one leading to the orchestra via a descending stairway, and the other giving directly to the corridor between the upper and lower part of the cavea. It is surrounded by a strong retaining wall with its lower part of its eastern and northern side built with orthostats while its upper part was built in the so called pseudoisodomic curved system common in Priene in Asia Minor. A roofed staircase situated at the NW corner of the retaining wall gave access from the north to the uppermost corridor of the cavea. This elegant theatre hall seems to have been used for assemblies of political nature as well as for theatrical and musical performances in honor of Messene and Asklepius who were worshipped probably side by side in the Asklepieion. The PROPYLON leads from the uphill road at the east of the sanctuary down to the Asklepieion. About halfway along it there is a transverse wall with three doorways, a larger central one flanked by two smaller doorways. The thresholds of these are preserved in situ with the sockets for the bolts and hinges, as are the cuttings used in attaching the wooden lacing. On the east side of the wall there was a porch consisting of four square pillars supporting Ionic columns. The pillars have bases carved with mouldings and are crowned by impost capitals. Between the outer face and the transverse wall with the triple doorway is preserved a floor consisting of large square stone slabs. The porch that opened on to the Asklepieion had two poros Corinthian columns. This west porch was hastily repaired in late antiquity (3rd-4th c. AD). The two dissimilar bases of the Corinthian columns that are preserved in situ come from this later repair.

THE BOULEUTERION

The third hall from the north in the east wing of the Asklepieion served as the main assembly room for the synedroi who represented the cities of independent, federal Messenia. It is almost square in shape, with dimensions of 20.80 x 21.60 m., and had a hipped roof supported on four internal columns. A small part of the paving with limestone slabs has been preserved. Three of the sides (north, east and south) were closed by walls 1.20 m. thick, built of two large stone blocks, and the only entrance was on the west side, by way of two large triple doorways. Along the three closed sides is preserved a continuous stone bench with backrest and carved lion's paws at each end. The total length of this bench was 56 m., which would comfortably seat 76 synedroi - the number of representatives of the cities that constituted the federal council of Messenia.

THE ARCHIVE OF THE SECRETARY AND THE SYNEDROI

The large hall at the south-east corner of the Asklepieion complex has dimensions of 16.45 x 19.75 m. and is full of structures dating from the Early Byzantine period, in which almost all the Hellenistic remains have either been reused or have been completely destroyed. In view of the public, political character of the areas in the east wing of the Asklepieion and the proximity of this hall the city Bouleuterion, it is highly probable that this room also had a public function. The evidence of an inscription found in front of the east entrance to it suggests that it probably housed the Archive of the Secretary of the Synedroi.

THE FIRST SANCTUARY OF ORTHIA

A prostyle temple measuring 8.42 x 5.62 m. has come to light to the north-west of the Asklepieion. It has an almost square cella, a shallow, wider prodomos, and a ramp in the middle of the tetrastyle facade. Statue bases and inscribed stelai were found around the facade of this temple. Along the north side, where the earth deposits contained large quantities of pottery, were found two hoards, of bronze coins issued by Messene and of silver coins of the Achaean Confederacy, dating from the middle of the 2nd century BC, and also a large number of terracotta figurines, most of them depicting Artemis as Huntress and Torchbearer (Phosphoros). The fragments found to the north of the temple probably belong to the marble cult statue of Orthia dating from the late 4th century BC. After the construction of the Asklepieion, the precinct of Orthia ceased to function and the cult of the goddess was transferred to oikos K in the west wing of the new Artemision described above

STADIUM AND GYMNASIUM - Heroon

The Stadium and Gymnasium count among the most impressive and well preserved building complexes of the site. The northern horse shoe-shaped end of the Stadium includes 18 wedge-shaped divisions of seats with 18 rows of seats divided by stairways. It is enclosed on its three sides by doric stoas with most of their columns standing in place. The northern colonnade is double, while the eastern and western ones are simple. The colonnades belong to the Gymnasium which together with the Stadium formed one single architectural unit. The western stoa terminated at a distance of 110m. from its northern end. At this point a doric peristyle court is located which is identified as the palaistra. Bases with honorary inscriptions are located between the columns of the western stoa and used to bear statues of gymnasiarchs

(Gymnasium officials). Also other inscriptions bearing lists of ephebes were found in the area. Behind the western colonnade was the sanctuary of Heracles and of Hermes with their cult statues.

Behind the west stoa of the Gymnasium a funerary monument came to light (K3) including eight cist graves in its interior axially arranged around a small cist. The numerous surviving members of its upper structure suggest that it had the form of a square-shaped chamber (approximately 4.80m. X 4.80m.) with a conical roof which bore on its top a column probably supporting an ex voto. On the geison around the chamber appear the names of the deceased, both of men and women honored with this impressive monument.

A Π- shaped monument (K1) located further to the north of K3 is also funerary; its eastern side was crowned with an animal frieze and a sculptured complex representing a lion devouring a deer. In the interior of the chamber of monument K1 which had a stone door (like the Macedonian tombs), seven cist graves were revealed; they were plundered but they still preserved important terracotta, metal and glass grave offerings.

THE HEROON AT THE STADIUM

The Heroon is part of the Stadium, with which it is connected both architecturally and in terms of its function. The building is a Doric temple with four columns in front, made entirely of local limestone. It stands on the south side of the Stadium, just to the right of the axis of the race-course, on a rectangular podium that projects like a bastion from the city wall. The building in the form of a temple was a funerary monument, a kind of Heroon-Mausoleum. It belongs to the tradition of similar monuments from Asia Minor, like the monument of the Nereids at Xanthos and the Mausoleum of Halikarnassos. Some of its features also relate it to the Heroon at Kalydon. According to the testimony of Pausanias (4.32.2), one personality of great wealth and influence to whom the Messenians accorded the honours appropriate to a hero, was the Messenian life high priest and helladarches Saithidas. The Heroon-Mausoleum in the Stadium belonged most likely to the family of the Saithidai. Distinguished members of this family were buried in it and received a hero's honours from the date of the foundation of the Heroon in the 1st century BC, at least down to the time of Pausanias's visit to Messene (AD 155-160).

Museum

The Museum includes findings of the excavations conducted by the Archaeological Society in ancient Messene. These originally date from 1895 by Themistokles Sofoulis George Oikonomou (1905 and 1926), Anastasios Orlandos (1957-1975) and Petros Themelis (from 1986 to today). The museum was built between 1968 to 1972 on the western side of the village of Mavromati, on property donated by the D.Latzounis.