



# ANCIENT MESSENE

MESSINIA



Messene is one of the most important cities of antiquity in terms of its size, form and state of preservation, and still has much to offer. It had not only sanctuaries and public buildings, but also impressive fortifications, houses, and funerary monuments. In addition, it has the rare privilege of never having been destroyed or covered by more recent settlements, and of being situated in an intact, eminently Mediterranean natural environment, dominated by the bare mass of Ithomi where its acropolis was, and the low-lying fertile valley surrounding the ancient city.

It was founded as the capital of the independent state of Messenia by the Theban general Epameinondas in 369 BC following his victory at Leuctra, simultaneously with the Arcadian city of Megalopolis.

During the period of Pausanias' visit (2nd c. AD) Messene was still one of the most important political and cultural centers in Greece.

The Archaeological Society at Athens first started systematic investigations at Ancient Messene in 1895 under the direction

of Themistokles Sophoulis. Excavations there continued in 1909 and 1925 by Georgios Oikonomos and from 1957 to 1975 by Anastasios Orlandos. The Council of the Archaeological Society in 1986 entrusted professor Petros Themelis with the direction of the Messene excavation and restoration project which is still in progress financed by the European Community and the Greek State.

Its fortification walls were built with stone blocks up to the battlements. Fortified with a separate wall was also the acropolis on the summit of mount Ithome where the sanctuary of Zeus Ithomatas was situated close to the abandoned Monastery of Voulcano. The eastern Laconian Gate is not preserved. Well-preserved is the western Arcadian Gate constructed with huge impressive limestone blocks. It consists of a circular inner court with two entrances. Two rectangular towers protect the exterior entrance.

Two sanctuaries are located on the southwestern slope of mount Ithome isolated above the city, one of them dedicated to the cult of Artemis Limnatis.



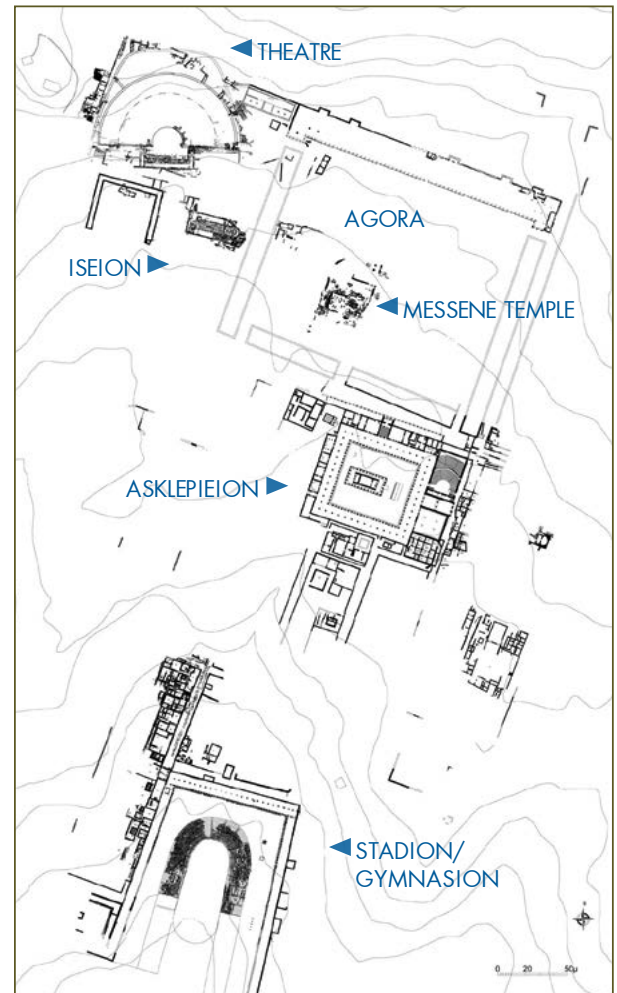




The strong exterior retaining wall of the Theatre is constructed with stone blocks imitating the fortifications. The retaining wall is interrupted at regular intervals by gates and staircases leading to the upper corridor. In the Roman period the Theatre was extensively repaired and acquired a three-storied stage.

The long portico of the north side of the Agora area is better preserved than the porticoes of the other sides. Close to the western side of the north portico is the Fountain House called Arsinoe Fountain. In the center of the Agora a ruined Doric temple dedicated to the cult of Messene, the deified mythical queen of the land.

Most important and impressive was the sanctuary of Asklepios decorated with numerous bronze statues erected around the temple of the god and in front of the porticoes. In the center of the courtyard the imposing Doric temple of Asklepios and its altar are placed.



A theatrical building called Ekklesiasterion, as well as the Main Entrance (Propylon), the Council House and the Archive Hall are to be seen on the eastern side of the Asklepieion.

A series of five Rooms decorated with marble statues are attached to the western wing of the Asklepieion. Walking from south to north along the western wing the statues you see at your left are Apollo with the nine Muses, Heracles, Thebes (the personified city), Epameinondas, Bona Fortuna (Tyche), Artemis Orthia as Phosphoros. The two-storied building occupying the north wing of the Asklepieion is the Sebasteion dedicated to the cult of Dea Roma and the Roman emperors. A Doric column standing in front of the south portico carries the decrees of seven cities paying high honors to the famous Messenian sculptor Damophon for his generosity and the construction of statues in their sanctuaries.

The architectural ensemble of the Stadion and Gymnasion is located at the south end of the city and touching the fortification wall. Behind the western portico of the Gymnasion was the precinct of Herakles and Hermes. A considerable number of funerary monuments is located along the back part of the western portico of the Gymnasion. Further to the south lie the ruins of the Palaistra and close to it are the Latrines. A building in the form of a Doric temple with four columns on the front is standing on top of an imposing podium at the south end of the race-course of the Stadion. It is the Mausoleum (funerary monument) of a powerful Messenian family highly honoured during the athletic games.









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