At the Asclepieion of Epidaurus with Pausanius as a guide...
When you strike a match in Epidaurus,
You can hear it flare in the first rows,
And in the ones further up,
And in the last ones where people appear
to be mere possibilities.
When you make a sound at Epidaurus,
You can hear it higher up,
amongst the trees, in the air.
When you sing in Epidaurus,
The mountains, clouds, the bay know of it,
The islands lend an ear,
The other countries lean a bit closer,
To listen to singing in Epidaurus.

Roberto Fernández Retamar
The sacred land of Epidaurus provides an idyllic landscape with rich vegetation and running water, restful for the eyes and peaceful for the mind. Centuries ago the Asclepieion of Epidaurus, the most important healing centre of the Greco-Roman world, flourished there.

The land of Epidaurus has been associated with the world of health and healing since time immemorial. Healing deities were worshipped on Kynortion hill. In the Mycenaean era, there was a temple dedicated to a goddess associated with health. Around 800 BC, a new temple in honour of the god Apollo Maleatas was erected on its ruins.

Patients and suppliants would arrive guided by their faith and the sole hope of being healed and overcoming the health problem that tormented them. The number of patients increased steadily and around 600 BC a new sanctuary dedicated to Asclepius was founded about one kilometre to the northwest, on a flat area. The two sanctuaries grew and flourished simultaneously establishing Epidaurus as a cradle of healing. People from all corners of the known world at the time would come hoping for a cure. Thus the Asclepieion of Epidaurus become the most reputed of all Asclepieia in Greece. Rich offerings from the followers made the sanctuary prosper and grow over time, as an ever greater number of new buildings were added. The buildings in this major healing centre
The sacred grove of Asclepius is surrounded by mountains on every side. Within the enclosure no death takes place, the same rule is observed on the island of Delos.

Pausanias II, 27.1 (Translation by James George Razar)
INSTRUCTIONS TO THE VISITOR

Upon entering the archaeological site visitors come across the archaeological Museum first and then start their tour, in the opposite direction than visitors would in ancient times. If someone would like to follow the Ancient visit, they would have go the other way around, i.e. start at the Propylaea, the ancient majestic entrance and leave the archaeological museum and ancient Theatre for last. So let us follow the footsteps of Pausanias and start at the Propylaea.
In ancient times two roads led to the Asclepieion: From ancient Epidaurus after a tiring three hour journey or from Argos. Upon arriving the visitor was impressed by the majestic gateway on the northern side of the Asclepieion, the Propylaea. Today only the ramp leading upwards and scattered ruins remain. A sense of its initial form is given by the reconstructed portion of the Propylaea in the archaeological museum of Epidaurus.

The Temple of Asclepius was the first and most important building of the Asclepieion. However, only traces of it can be seen today. It was erected around 380 BC by Theodotus and constituted the most sacred part of the site. The temple of Doric order had six columns on its narrow sides and a magnificently decorated exterior. The eastern pediment depicted scenes from the Sack of Troy and the western pediment scenes from the battle of the Amazons.
The monumental gold ivory of Asclepius made by sculptor Thrasymedes from the island of Paros was housed in the Temple. Visitors must have been filled with awe upon seeing the statue. This was Pausanias’ description upon viewing it for the first time:

The god is seated on a throne grasping a staff in one hand and holding the other over the head of the serpents. A dog crouches at his side. On the throne are carved in relief the deeds of Argive heroes, Bellerophon killing the Chimaera and Perseus after he has cut off Medusa’s head.

Pausanias II, 27,2 (Translation by James George Razer)
The Tholos was the work of the eminent architect Polyclitus the Younger and was the most perfect circular building of ancient times. The monument’s round shape was created by three rings of limestone, traces of which are still visible today.

The 26 outer Doric columns gave the building its good proportions and austerity, while the inner columns of Corinthian order bestowed lightness and grace to the monument.

Inside the Tholos, black and white paving created a unique geometric design, reminiscent of a diamond, which drew the gaze. There were beautiful painted scenes all around the wall.

The god’s dwelling was underground, below the floor, in dark maze-like corridors. Asclepius offered healing and relief from there.

The Tholos was the centre of chthonic cult of Asclepius (i.e. related to the underworld). We have not yet uncovered its secrets and it remains one of the most enigmatic buildings of ancient times.
Pausanias visited the Tholos and was most impressed. He wrote:

Near it is a round building of white marble, called Tholos, which is worth seeing.
It contains a picture of Love by Pausias: the god has thrown away his bow and arrows and has picked up his lyre instead.
Here too is another painting by Pausias: it represents Drunkeness drinking out of a crystal goblet: in the picture you can see the crystal goblet and the woman's face through it.

_Pausanias II, 27.3 (Translation by James George Razer)_
In the course of our visit we come across the remains of the ancient baths complex. Baths were very important in the functioning of the sanctuary, as well as a necessary precondition for cleansing the body. A stone pipe, portions of which can be seen today, carried water to the bathtubs and basins in the rooms around the large courtyard. In Roman times, two pools were added, as well as sufficient water cisterns to serve the water needs.

The Abaton Stoa was located near the temple of Asclepius. Patients who had not yet found a cure underwent incubation in this two-storey stoa. Purified in body, but mainly mentally and spiritually revitalized, they were ready, far from all eyes, to sleep for a night on sacred ground, in the hope of finding the coveted cure. After their healing, their inscriptions describing the miraculous manner in which they were cured by Asclepius were dedicated there.
Where a river once flowed, over time a natural depression was created in the land, which in the 5th century BC was utilised to construct a stadium. Crowds of visitors would come every four years to attend the Greater Asclepieian Games, the glorious festival of Asclepius. Sporting events, as well as rhapsody, musical and drama contests were some of the many events held there.

The traces of the largest building of the Asclepieion, the Katagogion, stand out. This building was a hostel for the patients, their escorts, as well as pilgrims to the sanctuary during their stay at the Asclepieion. The two-storey building had 160 rooms, as people would come in large numbers. In fact many rooms had their own inner courtyards!
In the Epidaurian sanctuary there is a theatre, which in my opinion is most especially worth seeing.

It is true that in size the theatre at Megalopolis in Arcadia surpasses it and that in splendour the Roman theatres far transcend all the theatres in the world; but for symmetry and beauty what architect could vie with Polyclitus? For it was Polyclitus who made this theatre and the round building also.

Pausanias II, 27.5. (Translation by James George Raper)

In ancient times the beneficial effect of theatrical performances on the mental and physical health of the patients at the Asclepieion were already known. That is the reason why a theatre was added to the healing centre at the end of the 4th century BC, which according to Pausanias' testimony, was built by Polyclitus the Younger. Visitors today are impressed at the sight of one of the most perfect theatres in the ancient world. Completely in harmony with the landscape, it was built on the natural slope of the Kynortion hill in local limestone. The theatre was so large that it could fit 13,000 spectators! The theatre's beauty and grace, as...
well unrivalled acoustics are the result of exquisite design. Even today in the furthest seats, spectators are still able to hear the slightest sound.
The theatre continued to flourish until the 3rd century AD. Two earthquakes in 522 and 551 AD contributed to the theatre gradually being abandoned. With the passage of time shrubs and weeds took root where performances had once lifted the spirits of patients and visitors alike.
At the end of the 19th century excavations brought to light the ancient theatre once again. As of 1954 to the present day, the ancient theatre comes alive during the summer months with theatrical performances staged as part of the Athens and Epidaurus Festival.

Pic. 15: Plan of the Theatre.
In 1881, the first excavations were carried out in the area by archaeologist P. Kavvadias. Over time archaeological digs brought to light many significant finds. Inscriptions with patient testimonies, medical instruments, votive offerings and other valuable finds required a space to be housed and presented to the public. In 1888 the Archaeological Museum was created. Its three rooms present the visitor with a rare insight into the history of healing as documented by inscriptions with stories of cures, bronze medical instruments, as well as the remains of buildings on the site.
Remarkable Stories of Cures

Tablets stood within the enclosure. There used to be more of them: in my time six were left. On these tablets are engraved the names of men and the women who have been healed by Asclepius, together with the disease from which each suffered, and the manner of the cure. The inscriptions are in the Doric dialect. Apart from the others stands an ancient tablet with an inscription stating that Hippolytus dedicated twenty horses to the god.

Asclepius was generous and cured all kinds of diseases. In many instances, even chronic diseases such as paralysis, blindness, deafness and mental disorders were miraculously cured. The votive stele still recount these stories. These once stood in the enclosure of the Tholos and the Abaton Stoa. Inscribed on them are the names of patients and the disease of which they were cured by the miraculous power of the god. However, certain ones may have been imaginary and cautionary, intentionally placed by the priests, so that even the most suspicious people would place their faith in god. In any event, the remarkable stories inscribed on these stones bear witness to the manner in which medicine was practiced in the Asclepieion in Epidaurus.
At the Asclepieion of Epidaurus with Pausanius as a guide

Project coordinator: Maria Lagogianni, Ph.D. archaeologist
Souzana Choulia - Kapeloni, archaeologist

General editors: Tonia Koutsouraki, archaeologist
Alexandra Seleli, archaeologist/museologist

Graphic Design editor: Spilios Pistas, graphic artist

Text: Elena Fragkaki, archaeology

Graphic Design: Sophia Deligiannii, graphic artist

Cover Illustration: Manolis Tsambourakis, artist

Translation into English: Katerina Apostolaki, Translator - Interpreter

Copyright © 2015 MINISTRY OF CULTURE, EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS
ISBN 978-960-386-211-6

The leaflet “At the Asclepieion of Epidaurus with Pausanius as a guide” for the theme “Health and Healing in antiquity” was created and digitised in 2015, within the framework of Action code no. MIS 339815 “Updating and digitizing educational material to support the educational process, which is implemented by the Directorate of Museums as part of the Operational Programme “Education and Lifelong Learning” and jointly funded by the European Union (European Social Fund) and national resources."