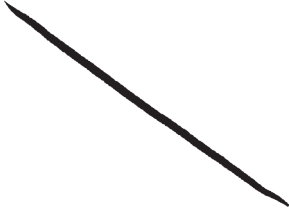


EARLY VENTURES AND IDEAS LEADING TO THE **GREEK FESTIVAL OF ANCIENT DRAMA**

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Abstract: During the 19th century, as the newly formed Greek state was shaping its national identity, the concept of Greekness emerged in a compelling, almost existential way. Gradually, the preservation and restoration of the ancient monuments, theatres, odea, and stadiums where the events, feasts, and dramatic and athletic competitions of antiquity were held became a matter of great national importance. The use of ancient monuments and their connection with the events of modern Greece surged during the first international extroversion action: the organisation of the first Olympic Games of 1896 at the Panathenaic Stadium¹¹, reflecting the same ideological point of view. The emergence of the first Greek stage directors saw the dissociation of the interest in ancient drama from its national calling and its inclusion in the repertoire of professional troupes. In the years that followed, amidst the difficulties generated by the Asia Minor disaster and the distant vision of cultural development and international promotion, the couple Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos organised and financed the Delphic Festivals (1927 and 1930). The “sanctity of the space,” specifically for Epidauros, raised concerns regarding the limitations on the use of the “monument.” Since its inception, the Epidauros Festival has been associated with performances of ancient drama, reigniting the debate about this theatrical genre.

Keywords: Greek festival, revival of ancient Greek drama, Delphic Festivals, Ancient Theatre of Epidauros, National Theatre of Greece, Constantinos Kyriakos Aristias, Georgios Mistriotis, Eva Palmer – Angelos Sikelianos, Dimitris Rondiris.

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As early as ancient times, the idea of large city festivals in which tragic contests were to be included created a primordial tradition. Artistic events of occasionally competitive nature are held at regular intervals, usually every year in designated places and during the same time period. Since ancient times, as H.C. Baldry points out in his well-known study *The Greek Tragic Theatre*, drama contests have been a pole of attraction for visitors from all over the Hellenophone world to attend the Great Dionysia (Baldry, 1971, p. 34-35). Furthermore, Sociology of Tourism scholar Andrew Holden points out that, despite the difficulty of travel and the peril involved thereupon, the ancient Greeks travelled frequently to visit divination, attend artistic and sporting events with special reference to the widely acclaimed Oracle of Delphi as well as the Asklepieion at Epidauros as a healing centre attracting great numbers of patients (Holden, 2008, p. 29). The temperate climate favoured outdoor performances that expanded in the ancient world, thus encouraging the creation of great theatres in which ancient Greek drama was performed. Their rescue and restoration has sparked off the institutionalisation of the country’s Festivals. Since the 19th century, when the newly formed Greek state was shaping its national identity, the narrative of Greekness has emerged in

a compelling, almost existential way. The discovery and rescue of the antiquities of Greece during the 19th century had many motives: the connection of the new Greek state and the young Greeks with classical Greek antiquity, of which they were the direct descendants and successors (Kavvadias, 1900, pp. 16-17)

The direct relationship between ancient and modern Greece was strengthened by the foundation of the Archaeological Society at Athens. The establishment of the Society was approved by the Royal Decree of January 5/27, 1837 and the members first convened on the Acropolis on April 28, 1837 they appointed the first administrative board, the Ephorate. The convention was chaired by the Minister of Education Iakovos Pizos Neroulos (*Jacovaky Rizo Neroulos*). Alexandros Rizos Rangavis spoke enthusiastically about the future projects of the Society, the excavations and restorations that would take place and emphasised that European scientists had fixed their attention on those from whom they expected new scientific material for their studies (Kastorchis, 1879, pp.7-9). Gradually the preservation and restoration of the ancient monuments, theatres, odea, stadiums where the events, feasts, dramatic and athletic competitions of antiquity were held became a matter of great national importance. In particular, the issue of ancient theatres was a key pillar on which the *spectacle* was structured and its projection in modern Greece, with the ultimate aim of highlighting the past that strengthened the national profile oriented towards the West and the humanistic values of antiquity, which formed the background of the Neo-Hellenic and European Enlightenment. In this context, the performances of ancient Greek drama, which were already gathering the interest of artists and spectators in Europe, were a fertile ground.

Without doubt, the cultural achievements of Western Europe affected to a large degree people of the theatre and more notably intellectuals, who through the revival of ancient tragedy sought from the early stages of the Greek nation-state a means of asserting their national identity and, at the same time, of resisting “Westernisation”. Indeed, this was done in a way that at a cursory glance seems paradoxical, yet is rather typical of nations under direct but inconspicuous dependence on more powerful forces, for the Greeks of the 19th century sought the intellectual defences against European cultural invasion in Europe itself. (Andreadis, 2005, p. 77).

From that period until the first Greek performance of ancient drama we find various minor but at the same time important theatrical events that had intervened, such as the various performances in the Principalities upon the

Danube directed by the first Greek woman director, Rallou Karatza (1799-1870), who, in 1817, in Bucharest (Wallachia) presented *Ecavi* with a group of Greek students, some of which were heroically killed, while fighting for the Sacred Command (“Ieros Lochos”) in the battle of Dragatsani. When the revolution was over, discussion on the revival of Greek drama was on the one hand affected by European performances and, on the other hand, by the need to create a national state on European standards. The domination of the Italian melodrama on the poor Greek theatrical stages urged a few intellectuals to seek artistic defences against a possible Westernisation in ancient drama, which would prevent Greek civilization from losing its identity and becoming “Westernised” (Mavroleon, 2005, pp. 122-123).

The first amateur stage attempts were made in 1840 by the “Philodrama Society” (The Greek Drama Lovers Society) led by Constantinos Kyriakos Aristias (*Costache Aristia/Constantinŭ Aristia*), one of *Rallou Karatza’s* (*Ralu Caragea’s*) troupe and eminent artist of Bucharest as well as a Sacred Band Trooper. The Philodrama Society saw the ancient drama as the “antidote to the Westernisation” of the Greeks by the melodrama that had overwhelmed the meagre Greek stage:

Because of this, therefore, this, and because the Italian theatre was now introduced on the one hand, in order to release our youth’s excessive indulgence of languor, contrasting the mollicoddle melodies of Italian melodramas with the short, useful and masculine charms of the venerable serious Greek tragedy and high comedy; on the other hand, to see our mother tongue refined and beautified on stage, in front of the Parthenon and the Pnyx, in that same sacred and primary cradle of the fine arts floating on the winds of recitation and resting on the rod of imitation.¹ (Laskaris, 1939, pp. 268-273)

But the efforts of The Philodrama Society did not pay off. The ancient drama will be performed for the first time in 1867, with *Antigone* by Sophocles in the recently excavated Herodium (Mavroleon, 2003, pp. 62-65) (see images on the next page) as part of the celebrations for the royal weddings of George I and Olga, daughter of the Grand Duke of Russia.

1 *Vide* Appeal for the Greek Theatre, Athens (Kon. Garpolas print shop). The appeal, made by K. K. Aristias himself, is signed by: G. Leventis, I. Rizos, Panagiotis Soutsos, Sp. P. Triantaphyllis, P. S. Omiridis, K. Garpolas, K.N. Galatis, Loukas Pyrros, G. Gennadios, I.An. Somakis, A.R. Ragavis, D. Drosos, K. Domnatos, P.K. Ipitis, N.D. Fotilas, K. Kokkidis.

The translation was by Alexandros Rizos Rangavis, the first secretary of the Archaeological Society, and the teaching by Athanasios Roussopoulos (Roussopoulos, 1885) professor of Archaeology. While Mendelssohn's famous choir music was accompanied by "a full-scale harmonium". The troupe was made up of students and some professional actors, such as Pipina Bonasera as Antigone, and Demosthenes Alexiadis as Teiresias. The *Antigone of the Royal Weddings* was the first performance at the Odeon of Herodus Atticus in the modern era (Sideris, 1976, pp. 43-44), on 7/12/1867 at 11:30 am, where "... it was never taught in ancient times" ... because it was Roman as stated by *Palingenesis* newspaper... "There can be no other greater mockery than this..." (*Palingenesis* newspaper, 17/11/1867, Athens: Sideris 1976, pp. 42-43). However, the beginning was made and the performances of ancient drama enhanced the profile of the small country with its long history. The revival of ancient drama has been connected with the search for national identity in Greece, through the speculation over theatrical codes as well as the values that would support the newly-formed Greek nation-state in its first steps.

The issue of the use of ancient monuments and their connection with the events of modern Greece will escalate in the first international movement of extroversion: organising the first Olympic Games of 1896 at the Panathenaic Stadium² from the same ideological point of view. In his inaugural speech, King George I, expressed his desire to see Greece "an international centre for peace" (*The History of the Olympic Games*, 1976, p. 308). At that time, the performances of ancient drama were characterised by "enlightened amateurism" aiming at museum representation.

² Sports competitions had previously been organised in 1870 and 1875 at the Panathenaic Stadium within the frame of the Zappeian Olympiads, funded by the national benefactor Zappas.



Odeon of Herodus Atticus
(on the southwest slope of the Acropolis of Athens) © Thomas_Daskalakis
Source: <https://aefestival.gr/venues/odeon-of-herodes-atticus/?lang=en>



Then the Society for the Teaching of Ancient Drama will make its debut, founded by the University professor Georgios Mistriotis, with various prominent members of the time, among them Panagiotis Kavadias, the archaeologist who excavated the Theatre of Epidauros in 1881. Mistriotis was a controversial figure. He remained in the history of the language issue for the hard position he took, and for his involvement in the “Oresteia riots,” on the occasion of staging the *Oresteia* at the Royal Theatre in 1903. In the confusion of linguistic bigotry, he formulated interesting proposals about the ancient drama, which in his time were considered paradoxical and dismissed as the ravings of a fanatic. Mistriotis considered that ancient theatres are the natural milieu for ancient drama, in fact he notes in the company’s announcement – the Proclamation published by the Society for the Teaching of Ancient Drama: “We are going to do the same (ancient drama performances) especially in springtime, when music-loving travellers flock to our country. And many more will flock if this theatre thrives” (Sideris, 1976, pp. 116-125).

The appearance of the first Greek stage directors saw the dissociation of the interest in the ancient drama from its national calling and its inclusion in the repertoire of professional troupes. Konstantinos Christomanos at the New Scene, Thomas Oikonomou at the Royal Theatre, but also professional troupes such as those of Kyveli and Kotopouli produced ancient drama. As a matter of fact, Kotopouli staged *Antigone* at the Odeon of Herodus Atticus and *Hecuba of Troy* at the Panathenaic Stadium horseshoe-shaped cavea (see images on the next page). The period featured the issue of extravagant events, the Athens 1896 Olympic Games and the 1906 Intercalated Games were followed by various events, such as the celebration of the Centenary of Independence. Especially the Panathenaic Stadium allowed the organisation of large spectacles, due to its capacity (45,000 spectators) often with the aim of strengthening the patriotism of the Hellenes. In 1930, a big spectacle is presented belatedly at the Panathenaic Stadium for the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Revolution of 1821. The ill-fated Asia Minor military expedition prevented the planned celebration of 1921, and so, in 1930, it was no longer the start of the Revolution but the Greek independence that was celebrated with festivities led by the President of the Republic, Alexander Zaimis.



Above: The Panathenaic Stadium in Athens

Source: <https://ftrc.blog/panathenaic-stadium-in-athens/> © Fotostrasse

Below: The opening ceremony of the 1896 Olympics
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panathenaic_Stadium



In the years that followed, with all the woes of the Asia Minor disaster plaguing the country and the vision of cultural development and international promotion seeming distant, the couple Eva Palmer and Angelos Sikelianos organised and financed the Delphic Festivals. The Delphic Festivals involved a holistic presentation of the “cultural reserve”: a revival of ancient Greek drama, Olympic sports, a presentation of traditional dances, an exhibition of works of folk art and a concert of Byzantine Music (Sideris, 1976, pp. 342-367). The Delphic Idea, which was inspired by the institution of the Amphictyones³ summarised in its vision the emergence of Delphi as a place of universal, modern “navel of the Earth,” a meeting point of spiritual people, who could achieve the synthesis of opposing ideologies and mitigate the clash of views. Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* and *The Suppliant Maidens* were performed in the ancient theatre of Delphi (Sideris, 1976, pp. 320-366 & 403-425). Performances based on Eva Palmer’s thorough research and feeling for language, the chanting, the setting, the costume, the dance of the ancient drama. The project also included the financing of numerous infrastructure projects in order to ensure the positive impressions of a large number of Greek and especially prominent foreigner visitors.

Delphi was at the time a small traditional village which acquired a road network connecting Athens and Itea, to which visitors would travel by boat (which they also used as a floating hotel, due to a lack of accommodation). They also took care to clean and arrange the settlement of Delphi, so that the natural landscape and archaeological wealth of the area could be highlighted. (Palmer-Sikelianou, 1992, pp. 120-135). The venture was successful, and, despite its universal acclaim, it was discontinued without state support, however it cultivated the idea of the festival because it highlighted the connection of ancient drama performances in ancient theatres with international outreach and the tourist phenomenon, which at the time was in an early phase, and above all it provided expertise in the matter of organisation and the high aesthetics of the shows for the time.

3 It should be noted that the term “Amphictyony” is an institution so old, that the founding of the first Amphictyony is confused with legend. The myth claims that it had been founded by Amphictyon, son of Deucalion and Pyrrha and brother of Hellen, the common ancestor of all Greeks. The Delphic Amphictyony, which took place twice a year, was a conference event where the league of the then twelve tribes of Central Greece and Thessaly participated. The Amphictyonic representatives, having both judiciary powers and possibly following the ancient written laws of “Amphictyon” (based on Dionysius of Halicarnassus), solved disputes and regulated relations between city-states of the then known world. This means that the Amphictyonies of Ancient Greece, by establishing the first rules of International Law, may be soundly paralleled to the League of Nations and the UN. (Constantine Paparrigopoulos, *History of the Hellenic Nation* v.2 “Early Historic Times; Vassilios C. Petrakos, “Delphi”; Petros Kolonaros, “History of Amfissa Town”) *Vide* http://history-pages.blogspot.gr/2012/04/blog-post_5489.html. Posted on Hellenic International Scientific Institute Amfiktionies <https://www.amfiktionies.org>. (15/10/2023).

As has been noted, beginning with the Delphic Celebrations of the Sikelianos couple, the issue of space was fundamental in relation to voice, emotion and ethos as well as other aspects of staging. The very important scenic experiments tried in the closed theatres of Western Europe since the 19th century had offered solutions that could only partly be appropriated in Greece from the moment Angelos and Eva Sikelianos opened the way for use of ancient, and more generally open theatres, as the privileged place for performances of ancient tragedies in Greece. Indeed, an ancient theatre provides an almost complete stage set, a given relation among actors, chorus and spectators, its own acoustics and other elements which decisively affect the acting and also the spoken dialogue and song. (Andreadis, 2005, p 104) The Delphic Festival is probably of the outmost importance in the history of the revival of ancient drama. The “Delphic idea,” as Angelos Sikelianos envisioned it, apart from the messages for universal unity, focused on Greece as the “Cultural Centre of the world”. Obviously, the tremendous amounts of money needed for the realisation of this dream allowed the Sikelianos – Palmer couple to only stage the Delphic Festival in 1927 and 1930.

In 1936 (3-18/10) Sophocles’ *Electra* was performed by the troupe of the National Theatre directed by Dimitris Rondiris at the Odeon of Herodus Atticus adding wooden linings to facilitate the audience, inaugurating the “Ancient Drama Week” while, in 1938 (11/9) the performance was also presented at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus.⁴ These performances were the forerunner of the Festival. Especially for Epidaurus, it was the first performance at the ancient theatre since antiquity.⁵ Sophocles’ *Electra* was staged without sets of scenes or artificial lighting at the orchestra of the theatre of Epidaurus, but in the natural afternoon light only. The role of Electra was played by Katina Paxinou, while the role of Clytemnestra was played by Eleni Papadaki (Georgopoulou, 2008, pp. 244-245). The aim was to establish an “Epidavros Season” of the National Theatre, but the declaration of World War II and the civil war that followed led to suspension of efforts.

Several years later, in 1954, when Georgios Rallis was Minister of the Presidency in Papagos government, it was decided to organise a “high arts festival” in Athens. In 1954 *Hippolytus* was presented at Epidaurus, directed by Dimitris Rondiris whereas the following year the Epidaurus Festival officially became an institution devoted exclusively to the tragedy productions of the National Theatre

⁴ *Vide* posted programmes and publications in the digital archive of the National Theatre of Greece <http://www.nt-archive.gr/playDetails.aspx?playID=831> (15/10/2023).

⁵ In 1921, the Hellenic Mountaineering Association was founded, which evolved into the Hellenic Touring Club (EPL) in 1937. *Vide* the official website of the ELP, posted at <https://periigitiki.com> (2/4/2023).

of Greece. The first performance of the Festival in 1955 was *Ecavi* with Katina Paxinou. In 1957 Comedy was included in the Festival. Twenty years passed before the monopoly of the National Theatre of Greece broke, but those years remain the cradle of revival. Legendary personalities co-operated in the creation of excellent landmark-performances. The successes of the National Theatre created a formidable tradition and a constructive competition. Many theatrical companies turned to ancient drama and staged remarkable performances. Since 1975, Epidauros hospitality accommodated the major theatrical companies of the country, trying to maintain a high quality of performance and the interest of spectators.

However, the decades-long management of the Festival by the Greek National Tourism Organisation (EOT) has included it as part of the tourism development. Both the Odeon of Herodus Atticus in the wider area of the Sacred Rock and the ancient theatre of Epidauros and the wider archaeological area of the Asklepion, attracted visitors from far and wide. But their use, both as musical and theatrical scenes, took the cultural projection to its apex. The issue required a number of interventions that created the conditions so that they could receive thousands of spectators, but also provide musical groups and troupes with the possibility of performances. The “sanctity of the space,” specifically for Epidauros, raised concerns regarding the limitations on the use of the monument. Since its foundation, the Epidauros Festival has been associated with the performances of ancient drama and has renewed the debate about this theatrical genre. Epidauros is one of the most important theatres in the world, and the growth of the Festival should be primarily linked to the evolution of theatrical art. It has become a meeting place for international figures and troupes. For many years it has been and still is a dream for many artists, despite its being a theatre stage with various particularities.

The performances of tragedy in modern Greece not only expressed the ethos of the society from which its spectators came, but also reached impressive numbers of many thousands creating a theatrically educated audience that has acquired a remarkable culturally-constituted specialisation since the time Epidauros and other open theatres first functioned. (Andreadis, 2005, p. 106).

However, the Festival has always addressed the international theatre community, even when the only troupe presented was the National Theatre of Greece.



The ancient theatre of Epidauros

Source: <https://aefestival.gr/venues/ancient-theatre-of-epidauros/?lang=en>

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