

AMBRACIA

If you are in picturesque Arta, you will not need to travel to visit glorious Ambracia of ancient times. It is at your feet. Of course modern buildings hide a large part of its magnificence. The rest is sufficient however, as it is just as attractive and significant.

King Pyrrhus of Epirus should have loved Ambracia, maybe because it was the most important Corinthian colony after Kerkyra (Corfu). He held the Corinthians in great regard for their commercial prowess and the economic policy of expansion they practiced. In 625 BC Corinthian colonials had followed Gorgon, the illegitimate son of the tyrant of Corinth Kypselos, and settled on the banks of the River Arachthos, where beautiful Arta lies today. Their settlement was part of an intelligent plan conceived by the Kypselides to build colonies and commercial and naval posts in appropriate positions, in order to dominate the West by monopolizing trade, the driving force of the economy. This is why we will find them in Lefkada, Corfu, Epidamnus etc. Gorgos and the Corinthian colonials pushed out of the region the Dryopes, but retained the name of the place which, according to mythology, is attributed to Ambracus, son of Thesprotos or to Ambracia, daughter of Melaneas, King of the Dryopes.



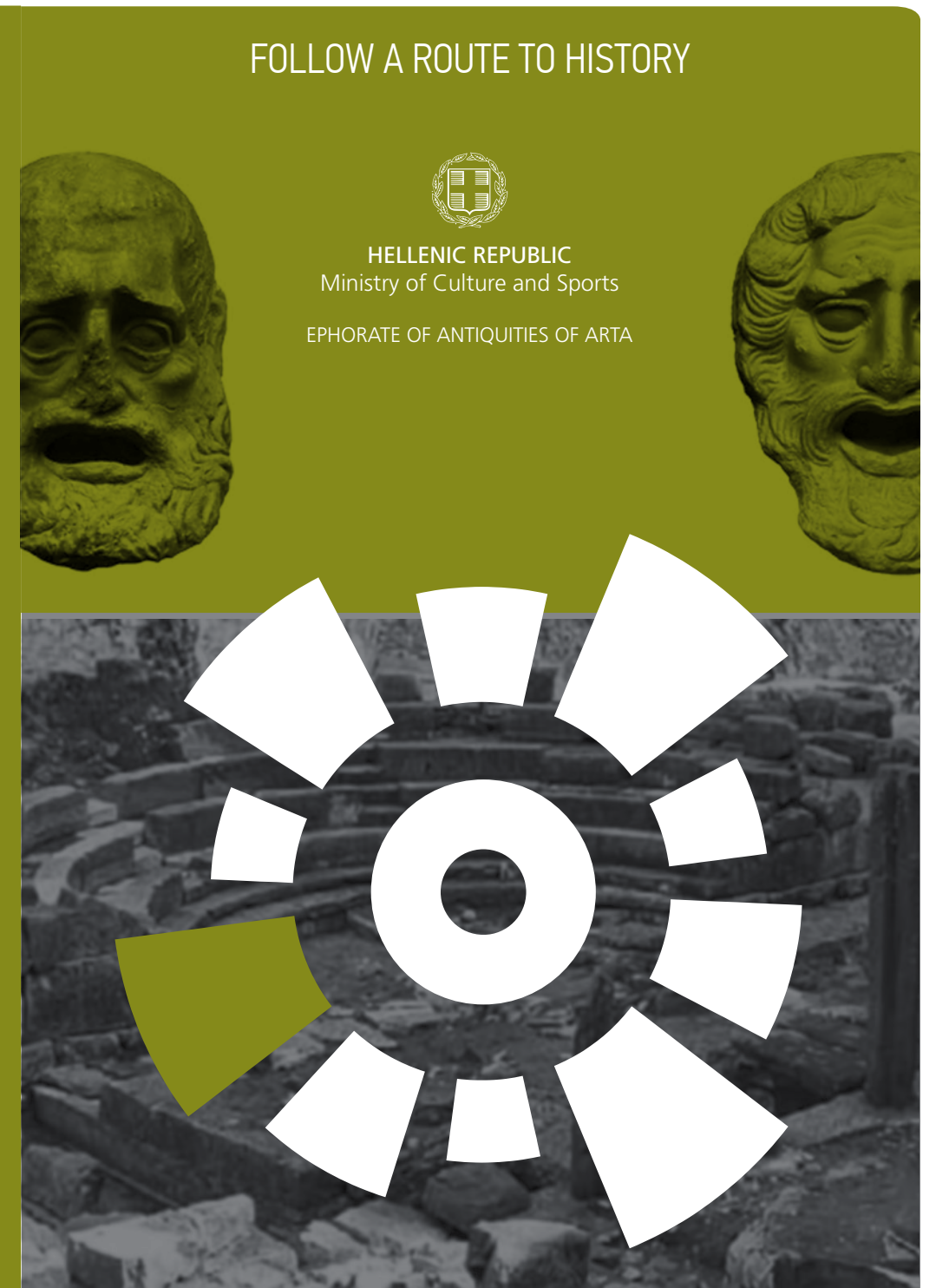
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FOLLOW A ROUTE TO HISTORY



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Culture and Sports
EPHORATE OF ANTIQUITIES OF ARTA





The Corinthians did not choose this place to found their colony by chance.

The position was strategic because it was located at the crossroads of significant arteries connecting the Ambracian Gulf and the Ionian Sea with Thessaly, Macedonia and Illyria. So, from early on the area attracted the attention of foreign incomers who had come there and mingled with the local Dryopes and Thesproteans. This is clearly shown by archaeological findings, according to which an Epirote settlement producing its own handmade pottery had been established there since as early as the 9th century BC. Thus, Corinthian colonists, exploiting to the full their advantage of a strong tradition in all areas, and having a closed harbor, Ambracus (known today as Feidokastro), created a very important commercial port of transit for products made in the famous workshops of the metropolis of Corinth. The products were then transported via Ambracia Gulf to Illyria, Epirus and other colonies of theirs in the north (Apollonia and Epidamnus. In return, raw materials exported from those places, traveled the same route and were taken to Corinth.

The wealth which was obtained was immense and influenced the town's image, as was expected.

Even though Ambracia had natural fortifications because of the River Arachthos which surrounds it on three sides and Perranthi hill, which provided rocky protection on the fourth side, the colonists surrounded it with a strong wall 4.5 km long to protect it both from catastrophic floods of the forceful River Arachthos and enemy invasion. There's no doubt that its most important jewel was the rectangular system of town planning, with its parallel streets crossed by wide paved avenues, thereby creating regular city blocks. Residents or visitors of the city of Arta today might feel emotional if they knew that when travelling on a main arterial road in the city, they are at the same time travelling into the past, as this was the exact site of antiquity's most important avenue which connected the two main entrances of Ambracia in the east and the west.



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But it was not just the fortification and exemplary city planning that distinguished Ambracia. The houses were comfortable and included a courtyard, an "andron", or dining room, lodge and ancillary areas. As far as a water supply was concerned, there were stone-built wells on almost every city block. What more could anybody ask for? Nevertheless, it seems that there was room and intention to create more. There were all these monuments of great artistic value, created during Pyrrhus' reign. Beautiful temples, great public and private buildings with the most exquisite works of art, statues and paintings for decoration, constituted a model city because the inhabitants aimed not only to make a living but also have a good life.

Unfortunately, most of the remains of the town are buried today under Arta's contemporary buildings. The only visible monuments are the great Roman walls which triggered the admiration of travelers for their size and stone masonry, the Late Archaic Doric temple of Apollo Pythios Soter, near today's Kilkis Square (of which only the crepis [stone base] and the euthynteria [levelling course just above the walking surface] remain), the western graveyard outside the walls on the south-west outskirts of the town by the foothills of Peranthi, and the two theatres.

In 1976, during salvaging archaeological excavations, an elegant theatre near Saint Constantine's church was brought to light. It was identified thanks to a testimony by historian and teacher of rhetoric Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC – after 7 AD), who cites "...in Ambracia at the sanctuary to the honour of the goddess (Aeneid Aphrodite) and the monument to Aeneas near the small theatre, there is a small statue to Aineias from the archaic period," (op. "Roman Archaeology).

It is the smallest, ancient Greek theatre to be found to date. Its biggest part was revealed during excavations, directed by the 12th Ephorate of Antiquities and includes the whole orchestra, which forms a perfect circle and has a diameter of 6.7m, part of the auditorium and passageways, as well as the western part of the proscenium pillar.



This small theatre, dating to the end of the 4th – beginning of the 3rd century BC, is interesting because it was not built at a natural higher ground, as was the usual at the time, but on an embanked slope. In fact, its reinforcement was done on top of foundations and mosaic floors from baths dating to the middle of the 4th century BC. Below the orchestra, whose floor was probably laid with limestone slabs, foundations from older buildings of the ancient and classical periods were discovered. The auditorium is divided by two stairways in three stands. Four rows of seats survive from the central one and the infrastructure of a fifth one is evident, whilst three rows of seats can be seen at the sides. They were hewn from hard limestone blocks. No seats or presidential thrones for officials in the first row, common in ancient Greek theatres, were found, however. During excavations, a drain pipe (11m long, 1m wide and 60cm deep) was found covered by slabs, which were there to hide rainwater. Significant findings from the filling of the auditorium and the reinforcement of the proscenium in the small theatre can be seen at the New Archaeological Museum in "Trigono" near the legendary bridge. The visitor can meet the glorious past of the town as his eye embraces findings such as earthenware urns, figurines, coins, copper urns, weapons, gold, silver and bronze jewelry, small bronze, iron, lead, bone and glass objects, stone objects, such as tomb stones, votive pedestals, architectural parts and a few works of sculpture, from the two cemeteries in the town, public building which have been revealed, homes, workshops, the temple of Pythian Apollo Savior and the Chancellory as well as the great theatre which was discovered in Tsakalof Street.

A few parts of this theatre have been revealed (most of it is under adjacent buildings and the surface of the present road). Some of the orchestra (it had a diameter of 9m), from the west passage, from the retaining wall in the auditorium on the same side, from the stage (part of the proscenium column and a small part of the foundation wall) as well as remnants of its benches (some limestone bases) have been revealed. Despite all these finds, no one doubts that it must have been an impressive theatre comparable to the Dodona theatre.

It dates to the end of the 4th and beginning of the 3rd century BC, when Ambracia was fast entering its second period of prosperity and wanted to provide its residents with both the wealth and intellectual culture with the blessings of the gods. It is no accident that the theatre was built in a sacred place, partly hewn from the western side of the slight elevation from which towers the Late Archaic temple of Apollo Pythios Soter, the most important temple of Ancient Ambracia and link with the metropolis of Corinth.

The Ambracians took part in the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War. There were victories and defeats in the long history of Ambracia until the final blow to the town by the Romans of Aemilius Paulus in 167 BC. The walls were demolished. The town was burnt down. Works of art were pillaged. Residents, like zombies, took the memories of their brilliant past to the roads of a new town that they had to colonize in 31 BC, the neighbouring Nicopolis. .

