



## **Performance, Tourism, and Movement in the Theatres of Epidaurus, Syracuse, and Ostia**

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Space is dynamic; it is lived in and is constantly changing and is also experienced differently by each individual. One of the factors by which space can be altered is through tourism, where a space can be created, abandoned or reimagined (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 242). One of the causes for this is increased mobility as people travel further and faster than before (Urry, 2007: 3-4). Tourism interacts with the characteristics of a space, shaping this while at the same time being formed by it (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 186). Each site has a unique identity and character which is formed both by local and tourist interaction with a place (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 186). There are numerous factors such as age, cultural background as well the frequency with which a site has been visited which can affect the movement of a tourist to and in a site (Dejbakhsh, Arrowsmith and Jackson, 2011: 93). However, while tourism can bring many benefits to a site, for example, increased publicity and revenues, it can also have a negative effect on the surroundings as well as on the site itself (see Popp, 2012). The aim of this article is to examine the effect of tourism on the ancient Graeco-Roman theatres of Epidaurus (UNESCO, n.d.a) in Greece, and Syracuse (UNESCO, n.d. b) and Ostia (UNESCO, n.d. c) in Italy. The first two sites have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List but the city of Ostia has received a deferred nomination. A recommendation was given to the site of Ostia that the appointment should be postponed until 'the Italian authorities have formally adopted the safeguarding measures which the development of the archaeological park entails' (UNESCO, 1987). While the theatres at Epidaurus and Syracuse are predominantly original, the theatre at Ostia was rebuilt in 1927 by order of the fascist leader Benito Mussolini (Ostia Antica, n.d.). Little of the ancient structure was extant and the modern theatre was almost completely reconstructed, bearing little resemblance to the ancient theatre (Fig. 1). It will be examined here how the performance of plays in these theatres can affect tourist flows to a site and how these places are protected against damage.



Fig. 1. The Theatre at Ostia (Source: Ghislaine van der Ploeg)

The theatre in Ostia is advertised as one of the main attractions of the site. It is located on the Decumanus Maximus, the main street of the city, both in antiquity and nowadays. After a tourist has bought an entrance ticket they are forced upon a route along the Decumanus until they walk past the theatre. The movement of visitors is guided and controlled to walk along this road, to the theatre, and from there to the restaurant, gift shop, and museum. While the tourist has come to visit the city of Ostia, they are guided towards the theatre. The other sites discussed here also place a great emphasis on their theatres yet the location of these sites has a different effect on tourist rhythms (Edensor, 2010). For the theatre at Syracuse, located apart from other archaeological sites, the tourist has to make a conscious decision to visit this place. The theatre at Epidaurus (Fig. 2) is located the sanctuary of Asclepius which is located some kilometres outside of the ancient city of Epidaurus. The theatre at Ostia is, then, remarkable in this study as it is located within the heart of the city. This has a great effect on the movement of tourists within the site. It has been argued how analysing the activities of tourists plays an important part in understanding the behaviour of people visiting a site (McKercher and Lau, 2008: 355). Analysing the effect that performances have on tourist movements to and within these sites is important for an understanding of how these places are experienced and also how they can be used to increase visitor numbers.



Fig. 2. The Theatre at Epidaurus (Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greece\\_Epidauros\\_-\\_ancient\\_theatre.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greece_Epidauros_-_ancient_theatre.jpg), CC-BY-SA-3.0-migrated )

These theatres are all marketed at the tourists as the main attractions of these sites. While the Ostian theatre is a modern reimagining of the ancient theatre, the one at Epidaurus has been singled out by UNESCO:

*The Theatre of Epidaurus is an architectural masterpiece designed by the architect from Argos, Polykleitos the Younger, and represents a unique artistic achievement through its admirable integration into the site as well as the perfection of its proportions and acoustics. The Theatre has been revived thanks to an annual festival held there since 1955 (UNESCO, n.d.a).*

The theatre is privileged because of its excellent state of conservation and its architectural nature but also a festival is held here which attracts tourists and draws attention to the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus which it might not have garnered otherwise. The theatre is actively used to introduce visitors to the ancient context in which it was constructed which is significant due to the obligation for the values of World Heritage Sites to be communicated. The visitor can increase their knowledge of antiquity via another medium, namely the ancient Greek plays which are performed here and which serve to situate the theatre in the ancient Greek world in which it was constructed. This festival is connected with other performances, though of a more modern nature, which are held in Athens, creating an overarching national resonance and connecting these cities in modernity as well as in antiquity. While perhaps not directly obvious to the visitor, the theatrical performances here are used to demonstrate ascribed criteria as given in the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (SOUV). They also serve to draw people to this remote site and bring awareness to visitors of the other important aspects of the site, for example its pre-eminence among the healing sanctuaries of antiquity. The integrity of the theatre is also

protected as a special management committee is appointed in order to ensure the good running of these events. This includes providing clear guidelines for the visitors which are aimed at both the enjoyment of the performance and the protection of the structure:

*Please note that discarded food and drink - and especially chewing gum - can damage this historical monument irreparably. As you leave, therefore, be sure to put all litter and rubbish in the waste baskets provided (Greek Festival, 2017).*

Great care is taken to preserve the monument but also to emphasise that:

*The long-term goal is to offer to the public a legible and understandable monumental complex that will reveal the operation of the Sanctuary during ancient times. Through constant care and gradual enhancement of all its monuments, the site will provide a natural, cultural and archaeological park with high level visitor services (UNESCO, 2015).*

People are drawn to the site via the theatre, at which point their presence in and movement through the site is used to increase awareness as to how the site functioned in antiquity and why it was such an important sanctuary. Tourism here serves both to amuse and educate the people, while indirectly presenting the aspects of the site which contribute to its Outstanding Universal Value, as inscribed on the World Heritage List. Additionally the UNESCO conservation ideology is communicated to tourists as a moral issue.



Fig. 3. The Theatre at Syracuse (Source: Ghislaine van der Ploeg)

The performances at the theatre at Syracuse (Fig. 3) are utilised in a similar way. The UNESCO SOUV states that the site of the theatre and the necropolis at Pantalica offer an important testimony as to ancient Mediterranean culture and that ancient Syracuse 'was directly linked to events, ideas and literary works of outstanding universal significance' (UNESCO, n.d. b). Here an annual festival has also been held since 1914 which runs from mid-May to the end of June. Three plays are performed at this time, which are chosen from the extant corpus of ancient Greek plays, and are directed and performed by specialists. (The Thinking Traveller, n.d.). During the 2015 season the *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico*, which organises the festival, put on plays from both Greek and Roman worlds, namely Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*, Seneca's *Medea*, and Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In 2016 Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Alcestes*, and Seneca's *Phaedra* were performed, again showing a great diversity in place of origin as well as the time period in which they were written (INDA, 2015). For the modern tourist, Sicily is a part of Italy. However, in antiquity the name given by the Romans to Sicily and the coastal regions of Southern Italy, which included modern Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, and Campania, was *Magna Graecia*. This name was given to this region as a result of the large number of Greeks who had settled here. Thus, there was already a considerable overlap between Greek and Roman cultures in Sicily in antiquity, something which is also reflected in the temple architecture of the region. As such, the performance of both Greek and Roman plays at the theatre at Syracuse actually adds to the tourist's understanding of the historical resonance and reality of this site. Indirectly, again, this echoes the second element of the SOUV in which the site is said to be 'an exceptional testimony to the development of civilization over some three millennia' (UNESCO, n.d.b). The theatre is used to perform ancient Graeco-Roman plays, and in doing so, is used to broaden people's knowledge and understanding of antiquity. Tourists visit the site as it is one of the most impressive theatres from antiquity. They then seek to enhance their experience by also enjoying a play while visiting this place. For many people it will be the visual experience of the performance rather than the spoken word which is the more important as the plays are performed in Italian, without sub- or supra titles, making the language impenetrable for many viewers from outside of Italy who have to rely on the visual language of the performance to guide their understanding of events. However, the use of smartphones and tablets allows for viewers to provide their own guide to the events performed as many outlines and texts of these plays are available online. At Syracuse the already present movement and flow of tourists is used to enlighten them on further aspects of the ancient world via these performances.

At both Epidauros and Syracuse great effort is taken to inform viewers about the rest of the site, more so than just the theatre, and also situate the theatre within the wider ancient Graeco-Roman world, via these plays and also promotional material which uses imagery from the rest of the sites. In Ostia, tourist movement is centred on the area around the *Decumanus Maximus*, leading to the theatre. A festival is also held here yet while the performances at Epidauros and Syracuse are marketed at an international audience, the performances at Ostia only draw a local Italian crowd due to marketing issues. In fact, as tourism is highly connected with globalisation this would allow for a world-wide distribution of images and events (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 6). The marketing imagery from Ostia focuses almost exclusively on the theatre itself and not on the wider site. There is little connection with antiquity as the

majority of these festival performances have a contemporary resonance rather than an ancient one. As the theatre itself is a reconstruction and the shows performed here have little classical resonance, the historical value and reality of the site will be hard to understand for the tourist. There are connections with the theatre at Syracuse though as Seneca's *Phaedra* was performed in Ostia, this had first been performed in Syracuse and then moved to Ostia for a special performance during their festival. Ugo Ughi, an Italian violinist, was invited to perform, a newly choreographed ballet by an Italian-African choreographer Mvula Sungani was shown, and the *Carmina Burana* was staged. A remarkable performance was from 'Pink Floyd Legend' a Pink Floyd tribute band. Their presence here directly recalls Pink Floyd's film 'Live at Pompeii', shot in 1971, where the band performed a set in the amphitheatre in Pompeii without any audience. This tribute band shows the global interconnectedness of these places in the modern mind as does the movement of the performance of *Phaedra* between theatres (Shaw and Williams, 2004: 5). Pink Floyd interspersed imagery of themselves performing with other images of the site in this film including buildings, roads, statues, and mosaics. They also connect the ancient with the modern and continuously refer to the volcanic eruption in AD 79 which enveloped the city via images of molten lava as well as hot springs and ashen rocks. This death imagery is especially visible during the song 'Careful with that Axe Eugene' where shots of flowing magma are connected to mosaics depicting skulls and also tragic theatre masks which have the appearance of shock and horror.

Pompeii itself is also a World Heritage Site, though, unsurprisingly, this is not advertised in the Pink Floyd film as this was not their aim in creating this film. However, the work could provide an excellent paradigm of how Ostia could increase awareness of the site. The ancient harbour city was a remarkable fusion of cultures with people coming, working, and settling here from all across the Roman Empire (Meiggs, 1971: 214). As an ancient melting pot of cultures it would be appropriate to utilise a fusion of modern and ancient cultures in order to increase awareness of the site and also attract more visitors. 'Live at Pompeii' serves as a good example as to how this can be achieved. Modern bands and other performers could use the theatre at Ostia and perform shows which resonate with the site and increase historical awareness of Ostia. The presence of Pink Floyd Legend at the festival at Ostia recalls this important Pink Floyd film and not so much the actual city of Ostia. Tourist flows in Ostia are not increased by the presence of such an event as they are not marketed at outsiders. This is an issue with the site in general where too many tourists remain unaware of its existence and prefer to travel a far greater distance to Pompeii rather than to Ostia. The site of Ostia is far larger in size than Pompeii and offers many of the same amenities. However, for tourists without any great knowledge of antiquity, Pompeii is the more familiar place and the one they choose to visit. Events such as this festival could do more to attract tourists and also affect their flows of movement through the city by highlighting remarkable aspects of Ostia, such as the many houses and blocks of flats which are present on site as well religious sites such as temples to the god Mithras; the focus in Ostia is on this theatre, built in 1927. While there are no conservation issues with this structure, the rest of Ostia itself needs better preservation and the rhythms of tourists in Ostia should be better studied, analysed, and altered in order for them to move through more of the city and increase their understanding (Edensor, 2010: 4). The promotional material seems to treat the

theatre as if it were separate from the rest of the site whereas with Epidaurus and Syracuse these sites manage to combine PR, tourist movements, and the ancient site in order to promote the site as well as its historical context and increase the number of visitors as well as augmenting tourist movement around the site. The UNESCO values are, thereby, indirectly showcased to the tourist and affect their experience of these places.

Being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List matters greatly for these sites, something which is reflected in the remarks of Giovanni Zannola, a Democratic Party candidate, who believes that Ostia should be included (Roma Today, 2016). While politically motivated, his statement clearly shows that there is a perceived increase in status for sites which are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Conservation issues are cited and it is perhaps curious that the focus of so much promotional material related to Ostia is focused on the theatre. Other important theatre sites have been analysed here in order to show how they use modern festivals and performances to attract visitors, affect tourist movement on site, and draw attention to these monuments while not allowing these events to affect the conservation of the site. Ostia has taken the first steps in order to increase awareness of the site but a more national and international focus, as well as a wider appreciation for the rest of the site would improve visitor experiences. The festival could be used for to alter tourist movements in order to get people to move beyond the immediate area of the Decumaus Maximus and the theatre.

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