

Chapter 8

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The Asklepieia and Epidauros

Introduction

The Epidaurians had enough. They had caught the cheaters (again) and were unwilling to let it pass this time. Thus they decided to set up a stele with an inscription communicating the names of the scammers for everybody to know. This is what they wrote:

ἐπὶ ἀγωνοθέτα τῶν Ἀσκληπιείων Κλεαυχμίδα τοῦ | Ἀριστοκλέος κατὰδικοὶ
οἱ γενόμενοι τῶν ἀθλη|τῶν διὰ τὸ φθεῖρειν τὸν ἀγῶνα ἕκαστον στατῆρ|σι
χιλίοις Ταυρίδης Τελεσίου Σολεὺς ἀνὴρ στα|διαδρόμος, Φίλιστος
Καλλισθένους Ἀργεῖος ἀπ' Ἀ|χαΐας, ἀνὴρ πένταθλος, Σίμακος Φαλακρίωνος
Ἑπει|ρώτης ἀπὸ Θεσπρω-τῶν ἀνὴρ πανκρατιαστής.

When Kleaichmidas son of Aristokles was *agōnothētēs* of the Asklepieia, the following athletes have been fined 1,000 *statères* each of them for corrupting the competition: Taurides son of Telesios from Soloi, *stádion* runner, Philistos son of Kallisthenes, Achaian from Argos, pentathlete; Simakos son of Phalakrion, Epirotan from the Thesprotians, pankratiast.¹

This inscription dating to the second century BC is one of the rare cases which attest to the public condemnation of cheating in Greek athletics beyond Olympia.² It shows that the famous Zanes had local counterparts elsewhere in the Greek world, namely in

¹ IG IV² 1.99 II (Epidauros, second century BC); cf. Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 334–337.

² With a recently published “contract to lose a wrestling match” (*POxy.* LXXIX 5209; 23 February AD 267; cf. Rathbone 2014, Decker 2014 [2019]), there is intriguing new evidence on athletic cheating in Late Antiquity (for a similar case, Philostr. *gym.* 45).

Epidauros.³ Beyond that, it is striking where the athletes who had “corrupted the competition” (φθείρειν τὸν ἀγῶνα) came from. Two of them originated from rather distant places from a Peloponnesian point of view: Simakos was an Epirotan, and Taurides even stemmed from Soloi in Cicilia. Thus the catchment area of the contest transcended the local as well as the regional level in the second century BC.

Another picture emerges, however, if we take a look at the origin of the successful horse owners in a victor list of the same contest dating to AD 32/33 who all hailed from Epidauros. Had the Asklepieia ceased to attract strong competitors from outside the city and became a truly ‘local’ contest in terms of their catchment area in the first century AD?⁴ Of course, both cases only represent two snapshots in the long and varied history of the games, and catchment areas are generally difficult to determine. Yet the evidence for the Asklepieia appears to be comparatively good,⁵ which is why the first part of this chapter will focus on a comparison between the catchment area of the athletic festival of the Asklepieia and that of the sanctuary’s healing cult.

In doing so this chapter profits from a seminal article by Michel Sève on the festival which still represents the current state of research on the topic.⁶ Yet Sève was primarily interested in the ‘agonistic realities’ of the games: their development, history, and organization.⁷ Inspired by recent research on ancient (and modern) localism this chapter will focus on the relevance and meaning the games gained for those involved instead.⁸ It will ask what the Asklepieia meant to the Epidaurians and how the games were perceived from an outer point of view, that is from the perspective of the athletes coming to Epidauros.⁹ I cannot help but wonder: what was the relationship between Epidauros and

3 Paus. 5.21.2–17; cf. Weiler 1991, Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 335–336, Matthews 2007: 88–90.

4 *IG* IV² 1.101, l. 43–49. Yet we must not jump to conclusions here bearing in mind that even the most renowned athletic festival the Olympic Games underwent a period in the first century BC for which only Elia victors in the equestrian contests are attested and which cannot be interpreted in terms of a general decline of interest in the festival anymore, as recent research has shown (contra earlier positions Scharff 2019; cf. Freitag 2011). For a different explanation of what might have happened in Epidauros see below.

5 There is a broad variety of instructive material on the games that sheds light on such important aspects as female athletics and corruption which remain in the dark for most other athletic festivals. What is more, the remaining evidence of the healing cult (esp. the famous *iáματα*) offers the chance to compare with other findings beyond the field of athletics.

6 Sève 1993; cf. Ringwood 1927: 70–71, Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002, Miller 2004: 129–132, Valavanis 2017: 397–398, and Nielsen 2018: 43–44, 89, 129–130, 165, 203–204.

7 Sève 1993: 304.

8 Ancient localism: Hodos 2006, Beck 2020; modern localism: Robertson 1995 (“glocalization”), Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o 2012.

9 The following analysis profits also from important new epigraphic material on the sanctuary (esp. the so-called ‘stele of the punishments’: Kritzas and Prignitz 2020) and the games (Petzl and Schwertheim 2006; for an agonistic inscription not to be found in Sève 1993, see *IG* IV 673) and is informed by significant new work on the sanctuary which established a new chronology of the building program of the fourth century BC (Prignitz 2014 and 2022; see on Asklepios sanctuaries in general, Riethmüller 2005 and Melfi 2007; on incubation sanctuaries: Renberg 2017).

its most important athletic festival? But let us begin with a short overview of the history of the games.

The Asklepieia of Epidauros: a Short History of the Sanctuary and the Games

The first attestation of the games which took place every four years in spring in the second year of an Olympic circle goes back to the 530s BC.¹⁰ It is in the work of Pindar that three agonistic victories in Epidauros are mentioned, all in odes on young pankratiasts from Aigina.¹¹ But while the victories of Aristokleides and Kleandros date to the 480s or 470s, the successes of Themistios in Epidauros must refer to a period two generations before the Nemean victory of his grandson Pytheas who won in the 480s and who is praised by *Nemean Five*.¹² Themistios was a pugilist, but is explicitly said to have won the *pankrátion* in Epidauros. Thus the *pankrátion* is the first attested athletic event in Epidauros, but we have no reason to assume that it was the only discipline in which athletes competed in Epidauros in the sixth century BC. Although the name of the contest is not explicitly mentioned by Pindar, it is likely that the games were called Asklepieia right from the beginning.¹³

That the earliest attested victors all stem from Aigina is not surprising given the geographical proximity of the island and the fact that the Aiginetans had a highly developed agonistic culture already in the sixth and fifth century BC.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that two of the three known Pindaric victors in Epidauros also succeeded at the Alkatholia of Megara.¹⁵ In addition to the evident attractiveness of the most renowned

10 Nielsen 2018: 89.

11 Pind. *Nem.* 3.144; 5.94–96; *Isthm.* 8.147–150; Kramer 1970: 37.

12 Pind. *Nem.* 5.91–98:

εἰ δὲ Θεμιστίων ἴκεις, ὥστ' αἰεῖδεν, μηκέτι ῥίγῃ: δίδοι
φωνάν, ἀνὰ δ' ἰστίᾳ τείνον πρὸς ζυγὸν καρχασίον,
πύκταν τέ νιν καὶ παγκρατίῳ φθέγγξαι ἐλεῖν Ἐπιδαύρῳ διπλόαν
νικῶντ' ἀρετάν, προθύροισιν δ' Αἰακοῦ
ἀνθέων ποιάεντα φέρε στεφανώματα σὺν ξανθαῖς Χάρισσιν.

But if you come to Themistios, let there be no more coldness! Lift up your voice, and hoist the sails to the top-most yard; proclaim him as a boxer, and tell how he claimed double excellence with his victory in the pankration at Epidauros. Bring to the porch of Aiaikos green garlands of flowers, in company with the golden-haired Graces. (Transl. D. Arnson Svarlien).

13 The earliest epigraphical attestation for the cult of Asklepios in Epidauros is *IG IV*² 1.136 dating to ca. 500 BC. Archaeological evidence, however, shows that Asklepios was venerated at least since the middle of the sixth century, probably even since 600 BC as a newly found building structure in the area of the Asklepieion may suggest (<https://archaeologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/2020/01/archaic-building-found-at-asclepeion.html>), although, of course, we have to wait for final publication here.

14 On the successes of Aiginetan athletes in this period which were based upon a strong aristocracy, Mann 2001: 192–235. Note that the Aiginetans even engaged athletic coaches from Athens (Pind. *Nem.* 5.89–90; see Fisher 2015).

15 Pind. *Nem.* 3.144–145 (Aristokleides from Aigina, *pankrátion* 475? BC):

τὶν γε μὲν, εὐθρόνου Κλεοῦς ἐθελοίσας, ἀθλοφόρου λήματος ἔνεκεν
Νεμέας Ἐπιδαυρόθεν τ' ἄπο καὶ Μεγάρων δέδορκεν φάος.

By the grace of Clio on her lovely throne and because of your victorious spirit, the light has shone on you from Nemea and Epidauros and Megara. (transl. D. Arnson Svarlien).

athletic festivals of the grand four, it was the Saronic region that gave orientation and meaning to the agonistic activities of Aiginetan athletes.

In the course of the fifth century BC, then, we find at least two top athletes active in Epidauros: the *stádion* runner and multiple victor at holy crown games Nikoladas of Corinth¹⁶ and the even more successful pankratiast and *periodoníkēs* Dorieus of Rhodes, a member of the city's most prominent agonistic clan who achieved four victories at the Asklepieia, between 440 and 420 BC.¹⁷ Given all the surviving late-Archaic and early-Classical evidence of the Asklepieia,¹⁸ it is a fair assumption that the festival (like the Lykaia, the Hekatomboia of Argos or the Aleaia of Tegea) belonged to the second category of athletic games just behind the level of the 'grand four' (and probably after the Panathenaia) in this period.¹⁹

It is the end of the fifth century BC at the latest that saw a substantial extension of the agonistic program of the festival. A fifth-century BC inscription mentions a [ᾠ]ος ἱπ|[π]οδρομ[ο] which is the earliest attestation of equestrian facilities, and thus of horse and chariot races, in Epidauros.²⁰ The earliest attested victor in a hippic competition the horse owner Akestorides son of Hermokreon from the Troad belongs to the third century BC and succeeded in the two- or four-horse chariot race for colts.²¹ Only slightly later appears to be a passage at the very beginning of Plato's *Ion*, a dialogue which is usually dated to 395/94 BC. Having been asked by Sokrates where he came from the rhapsode Ion replied:

Ion: From Epidauros and the festival there of Asklepios.

Pind. *Isthm.* 8.147–150 (Kleandros from Aigina, *pankrátion*, 478 BC):

ἀλίκων τῷ τις ἄβρὸν
ἀμφὶ παγκρατίου Κλεάνδρῳ πλεκέτω
μυρσίνας στέφανον, ἐπεὶ νιν Ἀλκαθόου τ' ἄγων σὺν τύχῃ
ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ τε νεότας δέκετο πρὶν:

Therefore let another young man weave for Kleandros a garland of tender myrtle in honor of the pankration, since the contest of Alkathoos and the young men (*neótai*) of Epidauros welcomed him before in his success. (transl. D. Arnson Svarlien).

16 *Anth. Pal.* 13.19 (Ebert 1972: no. 26); Sève 1993: no. 25. According to the surviving epigram, Nikoladas won once in Delphi, five times at the Panathenaia, thrice at the Isthmos and in Nemea, four times at the Theoxenia of Pellene, twice at the Lykaia on Mount Lykaion, at the Aleaia of Tegea, the Aiakeia of Aigina, the Asklepieia of Epidauros, the Herakleia of Thebes, the Alkathoia of Megara and at a festival in Phleious – a veritable agonistic landscape. It is striking that the Panathenaia are referred to before the Isthmia and Nemeia are mentioned. This is unusual and may only be in part explained by the particularly high of victories Nikoladas achieved in Athens.

17 *Syll.*³ 82, l. 3–4; Sève 1993: no. 14; cf. Perlman 2000: 67. The inscription was re-inscribed in Delphi between 370 and 360 BC. On the Diagorids, David 1986, Cairns 2005, and Scharff 2022: 301n13, 319–320.

18 Note that the earliest phase of the stadion of Epidauros also dates to the fifth century BC (Patrullo 1976: 122).

19 Cf. Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 330.

20 *IG IV*² 1.153; cf. Sève 1993: 311–312; Nielsen 2018: 44.

21 Ebert 1972: no. 68.

Sokrates: Do you mean to say that the Epidaurians honor the god with a contest of rhapsodes also?

Ion: Certainly, and of music in general.²²

Thus we have positive evidence that by the beginning of the fourth century BC (and probably earlier) the program of the Asklepieia also included musical contests. No doubt, the games had a very broad set of events at least from the fourth century BC onwards.

It was the same century that also saw a significant innovation in the way the festival was announced. An elaborate system of *epangelía* that included at least 85 poleis is attested from the middle of the fourth century BC onwards.²³ The two surviving lists of *theōrodókoι* ('hosts of sacred envoys') mention the announcement of the festival in the cities of Sicily and Southern Italy, of Epeiros, Akarnania and Aitolia, of West Lokris and Phokis, of Boiotia, the Isthmos and Attika, of Thessaly, the Aegean, Makedonia, the Chalkidike, and Thrace.²⁴ However, the surviving evidence does not reflect the entire system that existed in the fourth century BC: one of the stelae is fragmentary, and we must certainly assume that there were more inscribed *theōrodókoι* lists in the sanctuary of Epidauros than we have today. Proxeny decrees from Epidauros show that the sacred envoys of the Asklepieia additionally went to Argos, Astypalaia, Lampsakos, Kardia, Cyprus –²⁵ and probably many other cities including most of the Peloponnesian poleis.

The introduction of the system of *epangelía* in Epidauros in about 360 BC followed a massive building program that started already at the beginning of the century, as Sebastian Prignitz has shown.²⁶ Although the work on the temple of Asklepios commenced 20 years earlier than had been generally thought and was quickly finished in four years and nine months, other buildings were not erected at the same speed.²⁷ Thus when the Epidaurians decided to intensify their efforts with regard to the announcement of their games in the Greek world, there was still construction work going on in the

22 Plat. *Ion* 530a:

Σωκράτης: τὸν Ἴωνα χαίρειν. πόθεν τὰ νῦν ἡμῖν ἐπιεδέδημκας; ἢ οἴκοθεν ἐξ Ἐφέσου;

Ἴων: οὐδαμῶς, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἀλλ' ἐξ Ἐπιδαύρου ἐκ τῶν Ἀσκληπιείων.

Σωκράτης: μῶν καὶ ῥαψωδῶν ἀγῶνα τιθέασιν τῷ θεῷ οἱ Ἐπιδαύριοι;

Ἴων: πάνυ γε, καὶ τῆς ἄλλης γε μουσικῆς. (Transl. J. Burnet).

23 IG IV² 1.94–95; see Perlman 2000: 67–97; Nielsen 2007: 63–68 (cf. Nielsen 2018: 44).

24 The sequence of the regions follows the overview in Nielsen 2007: 64–66; cf. Rutherford 2013: 73. On the cities of Epeiros and Makedonia, see Daubner 2018: 139–141.

25 Argos: SEG 26.445 (ca. 350 BC); Astypalaia: IG IV² 1.48 (ca. 350–275 BC), Lampsakos: IG IV² 1.51, Kardia: IG IV² 1.49 (323–309 BC), city on Cyprus – Soloi (?): IG IV² 1.53 (350–275 BC). For these additions, cf. Nielsen 2007: 68n226.

26 Prignitz 2014: 250. On the date of the *theōrodókoι* lists and hence the introduction of the *epangelía* system, see Perlman 2000: 67; 69–74.

27 For instance, it took 25 to 40 years to build the Tholos (sometime between 380 and 340 BC; Prignitz 2014: 248).

sanctuary²⁸ – and part of this work included the athletic facilities as well as those for the musical competitions. The famous theater, for instance, was built at the end of the fourth/ beginning of the third century BC;²⁹ and although the stadion goes back to the fifth century BC already, the last third of the fourth century saw spectator stands built on the south and north sides and the installation of a stone border laid around the track to channel and drain rainwater. A complex starting device (*hýsplēx*) followed in the third century BC,³⁰ and finally, as in Olympia and Nemea, a vaulted entranceway to the stadion was built in the third or second century BC.³¹

Apart from the mere chronology, it is striking how much time and effort the Epidaurians invested to improve the facilities and to make their festival known.³² With regard to the athletic facilities, Epidauros' building program is more or less contemporaneous with that at the big four and must have been part of a larger trend. Note that the point of reference is the big four! Even more so, the geographical scope of Epidauros' *epangelia* system stood out among the small and medium-sized games and was comparable to that of the four grand. The Asklepieia clearly exceeded the local level in this regard. But why is it that they tried so hard?

One of the most interesting features of the surviving lists from Epidauros is that at times even very small and insignificant communities appear,³³ especially in Aitolia and Akarnania, regions which were in general far from being well known for their vital agonistic cultures.³⁴ Thus it is not very probable that the Epidaurians went there to attract the most talented athletes possible. Rather, it shows how much the announcement of the games was about politics. Contests were “connecting the Greeks” and the Epidaurians clearly wanted to expand their political networks.³⁵

The years following the massive building program in the sanctuary saw the heyday of the contest which became renamed as Asklepieia kai Apollonia,³⁶ and it was probably in the

28 For the building program of the second half of the century, see Prignitz 2022.

29 Prignitz 2022: 163–172; on the theatre: von Gerkan and Müller-Wiener 1961.

30 It is first attested for the third century BC. On the fines for the constructor Philon, see *IG IV² 1.98 I* (cf. Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 331–334).

31 Patrucco 1976: 122; Sève 1993: 310–311.

32 Although some *theōrodókoι* are also known for athletic festivals like those of Lousoi and Hermione (Perlman 2000: 157–166), the lists from Epidauros are considerably more extensive which seems not simply to be due to the state of the surviving evidence.

33 Three out of five Aitolian communities (Akripos, Phyleia, Therminia) are exclusively known from this list. Hyporeiai in Akarnania remains unlocated and is only referred to in one other ancient source, Nielsen 2007: 66.

34 Scharff 2023: 212–214.

35 But note that it may have been in 368 BC that a pankratiast from Akarnania succeeded for the first time in Olympia (Paus. 6.2.1). However, the date of victory of this heavy athlete from Stratos is uncertain (Moretti 1957: no. 416) to say the least. Moretti 1957: no. 409 also places a victorious boy pugilist from Korkyra four years earlier.

36 *IG IV² 1.100, l. 5* (Epidauros, second / first century BC); on the title, Sève 1993: 312–313.

third or second century BC that the status of the games was elevated to that of an *agōn stephanitēs*.³⁷ When, in roughly about the same time, a boy wrestler from Priene had his Epidaurian success celebrated, “(all of) Hellas heard the news” of his victory and became the imagined audience of his epigram.³⁸ Like him, other victorious athletes at the Asklepieia kai Apollonia regularly hailed from Asia Minor in this century. Yet it is interesting to note that all top athletes successful in Epidauros in the Hellenistic period succeeded in the age class of boys and did not return as a man.³⁹ Did the top athletes of the Hellenistic period preferred to participate in the Asklepieia just at the beginning of their career? If so, this would mean that they followed some kind of career planning: avoid the strongest competitors possible as a youth in order to have the chance to learn from your mistakes, while nevertheless competing at a very high competitive level.⁴⁰

With the Roman imperial period, a difficult time dawned for the games in Epidauros. The Peloponnese no more constituted the center of Greek athletics. Contests in other parts of the ancient world flourished and were founded and supported by Roman emperors. In consequence, no top athletes are attested at the Asklepieia for almost two centuries. Yet the Epidaurians may have tried to take countermeasures at an early stage including the introduction of running events for female athletes in the first half of the first century AD.⁴¹ However, the competition from festivals in Rome, Italy, and Asia Minor remained strong and the games did not succeed in recovering immediately. The prestige of the contest declined; and when the emperor Hadrian wrote his famous second letter to the synod of *technítai* around Dionysos in AD 133/34 and ordered a ‘new circuit’ of games, the Asklepieia did not form part of the picture.⁴²

And yet, by the end of the second century AD, the *periodoníkai* returned and the games succeeded in securing themselves a firm place in the agonistic landscape of relevant Greek

37 A “green branch/crown” (θαλλός) as victory prize is attested in a mid-second century BC agonistic epigram from Priene (Ebert 1972: no. 73 A, l. 5; B, l. 4; cf. Sève 1993: 324–326). The fact that the games of Epidauros belonged to the ‘holy crown games’ is probably also referred to in *LAG* 63.3, l. 5–6 (Delphi, ca. AD 45), when Epidauros is called “holy” (Ἀσκληπεία ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ | τῇ ἱερᾷ). On the status of the Asklepieia, see also Robert 1984: 37, Chaniotis 1995: 164.

38 Ebert 1972: no. 73 A, l. 5–6 (Priene, mid-second century BC). No doubt, the formulation is generic but it is one that is usually reserved for victories at the big four.

39 *LAG* 40 (Kallistratos of Sikyon, ‘heavy athlete’, ca. 260–220 BC), 44 (Damatrios of Tegea, *dólichos* runner; end of the third century BC), 48 (Athenopolis of Priene, wrestler, mid-second century BC), 53 (Sokrates of Epidauros, runner, ca. 100 BC), 56 (Drakontomenes of Halikarnassos, runner, ca. mid-first century BC). Another example is the late-Hellenistic wrestler Athanippos of Corinth (Peek 1972: no. 39; cf. Sève 1993: 327).

40 If this interpretation is correct, the behavior of top athletes changed at least at the end of the second century AD: a champion like M. Aurelius Asklepiades (*LAG* 79) won in Epidauros in the age class of men.

41 *LAG* 63 C, l. 3 (Delphi, ca. AD 45).

42 Petzl and Schwertheim 2006 (Alexandria Troas, AD 133/34), l. 62–74. In addition to the remarks in *SEG* 56.1359, see esp. Slater 2008. The literature on this inscription has now become something of an industry unto itself. On Hadrian’s ‘new *períodos*’ see Gouw 2008, Gordillo Hervás 2011, and Strasser 2016.

contests.⁴³ It was also around the same time that the games received a new name again and were called, sometimes exclusively, sometimes additionally, ‘Olympia’.⁴⁴ When the games were last held is not exactly clear. The latest more or less securely dated victory at the games in Epidauros was won by the herald Valerius Eklektos between AD 253 and 257.⁴⁵ Finally, the games met a fate similar to that of most other Greek *agōnes*: they came to an abrupt end in the fourth century AD (or shortly thereafter).⁴⁶

The Catchment Areas of the Games and the Healing Cult Compared. Snapshots from the Fourth Century BC

One of the aspects which make the Epidaurian evidence stand out is that relevant information on the catchment area(s) of the sanctuary and the games came down to us on three different levels. In addition to the *theōrodókoι* lists and victor inscriptions, the famous miracle reports (*iámata*) constitute a unique piece of evidence.⁴⁷ However, there are some methodological caveats. As the *theōrodókoι* lists, the *iámata* do not simply represent “transcriptions of actual itineraries, but (...) also serve the purpose of (...) advertising the size of the sanctuary’s catchment area”⁴⁸ which was at least in part an “imagined community”.⁴⁹ Hence from a methodological point of view, the *iámata* are not necessarily representative of the catchment area of the healing cult in the fourth century BC. Yet they must at least represent what the Epidaurian priests believed or wanted the catchment area to be. But note that we do not possess the entire documentation of miracle reports, as it existed in the fourth century BC.⁵⁰ Thus we have to bear in mind that, although there is a richer documentation than for any other festival beyond the ‘big

43 IAG 79 (‘heavy weight’ M. Aurelius Asklepiades, ca. AD 200), 81 (anonymous *aulētēs*, beginning of the third century AD), 88 (anonymous athlete of an unknown discipline; Megara, mid-third century AD), 90 (Athens, AD 253–257).

44 Exclusively: SEG 17.843, (Ankyra, third century AD), l. 13–14 (Ὀλ[ύ]μπια | ἐν Ἐπιδαύρῳ), IAG 90 (Athens, AD 253–257), l. 17–18 (Ὀλύμπια ἐν | Ἐπιδαύρῳ); additionally: IAG 87 (Delphi, mid-third century AD), l. 9 (Ἀσκληπεία Ὀλύμπια ἐν Ἐπιδα[ύρ]ῳ).

45 IAG 90, l. 17–18 (Athens, AD 253–257).

46 On the reasons, Remijsen 2015.

47 For the text of the inscriptions which date to the second half of the fourth century BC: Herzog 1931; LiDonnici 1995. The inscriptions have initially intrigued scholarly attention mainly due to the obvious parallels to Christian miracle tales. More recently, however, the focus shifted on aspects such as the composition of the *iámata* (LiDonnici 1992), emotions (Martzavou 2012), and different ‘voices’ in the text (Prêtre 2019).

48 Rutherford 2013: 73.

49 Rutherford 2013: 87; on the advertising strategy as to be found in the *iámata*: Prêtre 2019: “propaganda polyphonique”.

50 In the second century AD, Pausanias saw six stelae (Paus. 2.27.3) which appeared “ancient” to him, but only three (reporting 70 miracles) survived from antiquity (LiDonnici 1995 = IG IV² 1.121–123).

four’ in this period, a comparison between the catchment area of the *theōrodókoi* lists and that of the *iámata* still starts from two incomplete sets of evidence.⁵¹

We have already seen that the catchment area of the *epangelía* system reached as far as the Hellespontos in the north, Cyprus in the southeast, and Sicily and Southern Italy in the west. What remains difficult to determine is why Asia Minor remains almost completely absent from the picture.⁵² On the one hand, this is in line with a general trend in Greek athletics according to which the regular participation of athletes from Asia Minor in the games of the *períodos* only started in the Hellenistic age,⁵³ on the other hand, the agonistic evidence analyzed so far included a pankratiast from Rhodes and a rhapsode from Ephesos both active in the second half of the fifth century BC already.⁵⁴ Yet it was no earlier than from the third century BC onwards that athletes from Asia Minor competed at the Asklepieia on a more regular basis.⁵⁵

In the surviving *iámata*, out of a total of 24 poleis and three regions, four cities from Asia Minor and the Eastern Aegean appear as places of origin of the people healed in the sanctuary.⁵⁶ Thus Asia Minor was not out of sight for the Epidaurians, and it is a fair assumption that at least some cities in Asia Minor formed part of the *epangelía* system of the Asklepieia, especially since we have positive evidence that the games were not only announced in Lampsakos, but as far east as on Cyprus.⁵⁷ However, we do not know in how many cities this was the case and if the athletes followed the announcement on a regular basis before the third century BC.

What is safe to assume is that both the *theōrodókoi* lists as well as the *iámata* formed part of a comprehensive advertising strategy of the sanctuary: in the miracle reports, this strategy

51 This is why, despite more matches with regard to regions referred to, only three poleis are mentioned in the *iámata* as well as in the *theōrodókoi* lists: Athens, Thebes, and Thasos. If we include the evidence of the Epidaurian proxeny decrees we must also add Argos and Lampsakos. Note that Lampsakos had its own Asklepieia by the second century BC (*LSAM* 8 = *ILampsakos* 9; cf. Chaniotis 1995: 168).

52 See table of poleis compiled by Nielsen 2007: 64–67 including the addenda in 68n226.

53 Scharff 2024: 66–98, esp. 66; on Olympia, Farrington 2014.

54 A member of the Diagorid family would not necessarily have needed the invitation of a sacred envoy to participate in the Asklepieia since the clan had friends and acquaintances all over the Greek world which means that they must have known what was going on in terms of athletics very well; on the Diagorids, see n. 17.

55 Ebert 1972: no. 68 (Olympia, end of the third century BC) praises a successful horse owner from the Troad, Ebert 1972: no. 73 (Priene, mid-second century BC) refers to a victorious wrestler from Priene, and *LAG* 56 (Halikarnassos, mid-first century BC) commemorates the victories of a runner from Halikarnassos.

56 The cities are Lampsakos, Mytilene, Knidos, and Kios. See *Table 1*.

57 The same must be true for most of the cities of the Peloponnese which constitute a major part of the poleis named in the *iámata* and which certainly belonged to a *theōrodókoi* list which did not survive. In the *iámata*, nine poleis (plus one region) out of a total of 24 (27) were located in the Peloponnese. From the nine Peloponnesian poleis, five (Epidauros, Halieis, Hermione, Troizen, and Argos) were situated in the Argolid, two in Arkadia (Tegea, Kaphyai), and one each in Achaia (Pellene) and Messenia (Messene). Among the multiple mentions, Epidauros (five), Troizen (four) and Halieis (three) stand out. See *Table 1*.

can be seen very clearly in the story of Thersandros of Halieis by which the authority of Asklepios of Epidauros over the neighboring healing cult of Halieis is established.⁵⁸ Other miracles narrate epiphanies of the god and advocate his power by stories in which he punishes unbelieving or audacious supplicants.⁵⁹ Going hand in hand with the massive building program, such stories helped establish and secure the leading role of the Asklepieion of Epidauros among the healing cults of the Greek world in the fourth century BC.⁶⁰

The success of the healing cult in the fourth century may have somewhat predated that of the games whose status was elevated to that of crown games probably no earlier than in the third or second century BC,⁶¹ but the miracle reports show that athletics were integrated into the advertising strategy of the healing cult already in the fourth century BC. Healed by the god of his headache, a certain Hegestratos is said to have successfully competed as a pugilist in Nemea later.⁶² The message is: come to Epidauros and Asklepios will not only heal you but make you succeed. This may be interpreted as an attempt to attract talented athletes. No doubt, the games in Epidauros also profited from the success of the advertising strategy of the healing cult.

Returning to a comparison between the *iámata* and the *theōrodókoι* lists, the most striking difference is the total absence of Southern Italy and Sicily in the *iámata*.⁶³ Since we do not know of an agonistic victor from these regions at the Asklepieia before the Roman Imperial period either, the inclusion of cities from Magna Graecia in the *theōrodókoι* list is probably not indicative of a significant number of participants from Southern Italy and Sicily, but of the wishes of the organizers of the games. It was well-known in the Greek world that many Olympic victors of the past (esp. of the sixth and fifth century, but also of the fourth century BC) had hailed from Magna Graecia.⁶⁴ If you wanted to organize a prestigious athletic festival in the fourth century BC, you had to announce the games there.

58 The healing cult of neighboring Halieis as a branch of Epidauros: LiDonnici 1995: §33 (*IG* IV² 1.122, l. 69–82).

59 Epiphany: LiDonnici 1995: §25 (*IG* IV² 1.122, l. 26–35); the unbelieving supplicant: LiDonnici 1995: §3 (*IG* IV² 1.121, l. 22–33); Kaphisias laughing at Asklepios: LiDonnici 1995: §36 (*IG* IV² 1.122, l. 95–101).

60 Riethmüller 2005; Melfi 2007.

61 Sève 1993.

62 Note that there actually is a Hegestratos son of Philon from Athens who won in Nemea at the beginning of the fourth century BC (*IG* II² 3122; Kostouros 2008: no. 71; Nielsen 2018: 197). Yet the event of his victory is not mentioned.

63 Also note that the cities of Akarnania and Aitolia which appear so frequently in the *theōrodókoι* lists are not mentioned in the *iámata*.

64 On Olympic victors from Magna Graecia: Mann 2001: 164–191 (Kroton), and 236–291, Mann 2013 (Sicily).

It is probably no coincidence that neither Trikka nor Kos or Pergamon appear in the *iámata* or in the *theōrodókoι* lists. Trikka in Thessaly hosted the most ancient sanctuary of Asklepios which is indirectly referred to in the *Iliad* already. The fame of the sanctuary is still emphasized by Strabo.⁶⁵ Since Epidauros strived for becoming the most important Asklepios sanctuary in the Greek world, Trikka was competition,⁶⁶ as later became Kos and Pergamon.⁶⁷ With other Asklepios sanctuaries situated in the vicinity of the city in the Saronic-Gulf region, however, Epidauros closely interacted,⁶⁸ if they accepted Epidauros' eminent status, as it seems to have been in the case of Halieis.

To put it in a nutshell, the fourth century BC clearly constituted a time when the Epidaurians invested the most in the development and advertisement of their sanctuary – and those efforts included the athletic festival held in honor of Asklepios. No doubt, Epidauros' advertising strategy was first and foremost directed to be perceived as the most eminent sanctuary of the healing cult of Asklepios in the Greek world; and yet, in order to achieve this goal, the fields of religion, athletics, and medicine intermingled and cross-fertilized each other in a special way.⁶⁹

The City and Its Festival

But how was the athletic festival perceived from an external point of view and what did the Epidaurians themselves think about their games? The etic perspective can be best deduced from the study of agonistic epigrams which reveals at least one characteristic feature of Epidauros' presentation in these poems: the place is repeatedly characterized by a descriptive epithet referring to its geographical position on a rock. Epidauros is called “rocky” (κρανά)⁷⁰ or “towering” (αἰπινά),⁷¹ a characterization that is obviously plain wrong with regard to the athletic facilities of the festival which were situated in a hollow. From the perspective of external victors, the topography of the city seems to have overshadowed that of the sanctuary which lay some 13 kilometers away from the polis.

65 Hom. *Il.* 2.729–733; 4.200–219; Strab. 9.5.17 (most renowned in the Greek world); 14.1.39 (birthplace of Asklepios).

66 The effort to replace Trikka was successful according to Paus. 2.26.1–28.1, but it was not according to a tradition reported by Strab. 9.5.17.

67 Kos' fame as a sanctuary of Asklepios depended not the least on its school of physicians. Yet the city also hosted the second-most important athletic festival in honor of Asklepios in the Greek world since 242/41 BC: for the victor lists from Kos (*IG* XII 4.2.451–454), see still Klee 1918, on *theōroi* of the Asklepieia Rigsby 2004.

68 For a map of Asklepios sanctuaries in the Saronic-Gulf region, see van Wijk forthcoming; fig. 2.

69 Clearly in another way than it had in Archaic Kroton where the local school of physicians, according to Hdt. 3.131 the best in the Greek world at the time, has been interpreted as one of the reasons for the impressive chain of Olympic victories won by athletes from the city between 588 and 488 BC (Mann 2001: 164, 171–181).

70 *Anth. Pal.* 13.19 (Ebert 1972: no. 26 [fifth century BC]), l. 9.

71 Ebert 1972: no. 73 A, l. 5; B, l. 3–4 (Priene, mid-second century BC).

This is all the more striking, as “rocky” is a Homeric epithet, but not of the city of Epidauros. In the *Iliad*, the place is called “vine-clad” (ἀμπελόεις) instead.⁷²

Two explanations for this observation which are not mutually exclusive suggest themselves. First, the epithet can be interpreted as a Saronic perspective of the participants arriving at Epidauros by the sea. The acropolis of the city towering over the bay was what visitors coming to Epidauros saw first (fig. 1). It must have shaped their impression and obviously had a lasting impact on the way they remembered the city and its games.

However, there is also a more generic dimension to the use of the epithet, since other cities are called “high-lying” in agonistic poetry as well, even in one of the epigrams in which Epidauros is referred to as “rocky”.⁷³ Therefore, one may assume at first glance that the topography of the organizing cities may have been highlighted at times in order to emphasize the troubles athletes had to go through just to reach the place of competition. Yet, this would be contrary to the concept of agonistic praise which is all about stressing the extraordinary deeds of the successful athlete. Simply getting to a place of competition, though certainly much more troublesome as today,⁷⁴ did not set oneself apart but was something everybody could achieve. So this cannot be the reason why Epidauros’ position on a rock was highlighted.

Instead, it is important to note that ‘rocky’ had generally good connotations when referring to a city and was simply considered a positive attribute in this context.⁷⁵ In a fifth-century BC poem celebrating a Corinthian victor, there may also be a political meaning attached, since, in this century, ἡ Κραναὰ πόλις was Athens,⁷⁶ the city’s inhabitants were called αἱ Κρανααί,⁷⁷ and there existed even a mythic king Kranaos of Athens in the Athenian imagination.⁷⁸ Thus referring to Sparta’s loyal ally Epidauros as κραναά may have included a jibe directed towards Athenian self-presentation. What is more, “rocky” meant having good natural defenses,⁷⁹ a quality highly useful in a situation of armed conflicts. In sum, the epithet was used as a positive attribute reflecting the

72 Hom. *Il.* 2.561: ἀμπελόεντ’ Ἐπίδauρον. However, other cities like Aulis or Kalydon are well described by the poet as “steep” or “stony” (Hom. *Il.* 2.496: Αὐλίδα πετρήεσσαν; 2.640: Καλυδωνά τε πετρήεσσαν); cf. Beck 2020: 80. But also note the oracle quoted by Paus. 2.26.7, which may go back to Hesiod and in which Epidauros is explicitly called “rocky” (ἐνὶ κραναῇ Ἐπιδάuρω).

73 *Anth. Pal.* 13.19 (Ebert 1972: no. 26), l. 7–8: ἄκρα Πελλάνᾳ (“in high-lying Pellene”).

74 Just think, for instance, of the location of the stadion in Delphi which is situated at the most-elevated level of the sanctuary.

75 It was already in the later sixth century BC that Phokylides of Miletus had praised “a small and orderly polis on a rock” in contrast to “foolish Nineveh” (Phokylides F 4 Gentili/Prato); see Beck 2020: 11; 43–44; 106–107.

76 Ar. *Ach.* 75; for ἡ Κραναά as used for the Acropolis, Ar. *Lys.* 481.

77 Ar. *Av.* 123; cf. Κραναοί for the people of Attika (Hdt. 8.44, Str. 9.1.18).

78 In A. *Eu.* 1011 the Athenians become παῖδες Κραναοῦ.

79 Beck 2020: 43.

Saronic perspective of the competitors arriving in Epidauros, a meaning that could be turned, in a particular historical situation, into a jibe against Athens.

But how was the festival perceived from an Epidaurian point of view? Unfortunately, we do not have an agonistic epigram praising the success of an Epidaurian athlete at the Asklepieia. Yet it is clear from the surviving epigraphic and archaeological evidence that the games strongly mattered to the Epidaurians. Take the fines referred to at the very beginning of this chapter. The three athletes who were accused of having “corrupted the competition”⁸⁰ had to pay 1,000 stateres each. Yet they also received another penalty in the form of public humiliation: their names and athletic specialty were published together with the verdict in the sanctuary for everyone to see.⁸¹ No doubt, the Epidaurians took care of their games as they did for the sanctuary as a whole.⁸²

It is interesting to note that all the Epidaurian investment in the sanctuary and the games seems not to have gone hand in hand with a similar investment in local athletes.⁸³ At least, it did not result in a relevant track record of Epidaurian athletes at the most important Greek contests: while five Olympic victories of Epidaurian athletes of the Archaic and Classical periods are known, there is no secure mention of an Olympic champion from the city in the entire Hellenistic age and just one Epidaurian *Olympioníkēs* of the Roman imperial period that we know of.⁸⁴

80 IG IV² 1.99 II, l. 3 (Epidauros, second century BC): φθείρειν τὸν ἀγῶνα. But what does this mean exactly? What had they done? Due to the rather common nature of bribing in Greek athletics (cf. n. 2–3) and the fact that Plutarch used the same wording with regard to the Kallippos scandal (Plut. *Vit. dec. or.* 850 B), it is usually assumed with good reason that the three athletes had bribed or tried to bribe their opponents. But note that they competed in different disciplines. Thus we have three individual cases of bribery.

81 On this and other possible reasons for the publication of the names of the wrongdoers, Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 337.

82 Just think of the building program, the *epangelía*, and the *íamata* as part of a comprehensive advertising strategy for the sanctuary. At first glance, one might also refer in this context to the money the participants in the musical contests received in advance of their participation (IG IV² 1.99 II; 100), although this is probably not to be interpreted as a measure to attract the strongest competitors possible in the sense of an ‘Antrittsgeld’. Rather the parallels to the contracts used in construction work at the sanctuary show that the money was paid for a service which had to be performed in the future (‘Werkvertrag’). Evidence from Eretria (IG XII 9.207) suggests that this was general practice with regard to *technítai*. See Harter-Uibopuu 2001–2002: 337–338.

83 At least, we do not hear of talent promotion in the surviving evidence from Epidauros. The active promotion of athletic talents with the aim at participating in their future successes is good attested on different levels (kings, poleis, private benefactors) in the Greek world from the third century BC onwards (Mann 2017).

84 The Archaic and Classical victors include the *stádion* runners Polos in 712 BC (Moretti 1957: no. 19), Kleon in 608 BC (Moretti 1957: no. 74), and Antikrates in 600 (Moretti 1957: no. 77), the *diaulodrómos* (...)ges in 473 BC (Moretti 1957: no. 223), and the pugilist Aristion in 368 BC (Moretti 1957: no. 415). The champion of the Roman imperial period is a certain Apollonios (Moretti 1957: no. 758), again a *stádion* runner. However, an anonymous *stádion* runner, wrestler and pentathlete who had his victor inscription set up in the Asklepieion (Peek 1969: no. 210 [2] [Epidauros, third century BC]) is a good candidate for a Hellenistic Olympic victor from the city. Due to the fragmentary state of the inscription, the name of his hometown did not survive, but since the Asklepieia are not mentioned among his victories the place of publication is hard to explain other than by the athlete hailing from Epidauros.

Although the evidence for athletes and performers from Epidauros who succeeded at the Asklepieia is not overly impressive either, there is good reason to believe that the lack of Olympic victories from the Hellenistic period onwards is not simply due to the state of the surviving evidence in Epidauros, but that another explanation suggests itself. The only victor list from the Asklepieia that came down to us includes remarkably many local victors.⁸⁵ Thus it constitutes a fair assumption that the Epidaurians went local with regard to the participation in athletic contests in the Hellenistic age. At least, this is exactly what the Athenians did in the same period: they engaged in their own games (in this case the Panathenaia, Theseia, and Eleusinia) but did not participate very often in the Olympics or other crown games with a supra-regional catchment area.⁸⁶

Such a ‘local-first’ attitude is even to be found in the case of the only known Hellenistic athlete from Epidauros who competed successfully on ‘big-four’ level. The inscription honoring the Epidaurian runner Sokrates son of Sokrates begins as follows:

ἡ πόλις τῶν Ἐπιδαυρίων ἀνέθηκε Σωκράτη
Σωκράτεος τοῦ Ἀπολλωνίου Ἐπιδαύριον
νικάσαντα παῖδας μὲν Ἀσκληπίεια ἵππιον,
Νέμεα ἵππιον, (...).

The polis of the Epidaurians dedicated Sokrates son of Sokrates grandson of Apollonios from Epidauros victorious in the *híppios* run for boys at the Asklepieia and in Nemea, (...).⁸⁷

The erection of the agonistic monument is presented as an initiative of the polis. It is explicitly the city of the polis which did not only honor the athlete by setting up the inscription but “dedicated” his statue.⁸⁸ No doubt, the polis and the games take center stage at the beginning of the inscription (four mentions in three lines). Having this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the Asklepieia appear as the first contest in the list and are referred to even before the prestigious Nemean Games. Most of this – the initiative of the polis, the ‘dedicatory’ formula, the local contest listed first – is not restricted to Epidauros, but can be found at many other places in the second and first centuries BC.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ IG IV² 1.101, l. 43–49 (Epidauros, AD 32/33).

⁸⁶ See Scharff 2024: 112–133.

⁸⁷ IAG 53 (IG IV² 1.629; Epidauros, ca. 100 BC), l. 1–4. Sokrates’ victories in different running events in the age class of men achieved at various contests on the Peloponnese (Lykaia, Aleaia of Tegea, Poseidaia and Rhomaia in Antigoneia/Mantineia), at the Isthmos (Pythaea and Rhomaia in Megara), in Boiotia (Eleutheria of Plataiai) and Lokris (Dia, Aiantaia and Rhomaia in Opous) follow.

⁸⁸ On the ‘dedicatory’ formula of late-Hellenistic honorary inscriptions, Ma 2013: 24–30.

⁸⁹ A well-documented parallel is the case of late-Hellenistic Messene (Scharff 2024: 169–183, esp. 180–182).

It nevertheless clearly speaks to the local relevance of (contests like) the Asklepieia in this time. It was at home that the local victory counted the most.

Conclusion

Under different names, the games of Asklepios were of crucial importance to the people of Epidauros. As an athletic festival, they enjoyed a long and varied history of at least 800 years. Already in the sixth century BC among the most prestigious games on the level behind the big four, the catchment area of the Asklepieia expanded in the Hellenistic period following a comprehensive advertising strategy of the fourth century BC. The Hellenistic age saw the heyday of the contest.⁹⁰ Two trends came together: while the catchment area of the Asklepieia expanded to Asia Minor and beyond, Epidaurian athletes became more local. Both developments should not be interpreted as opposing trends, but as cross-fertilizing each other. For the Epidaurians, there probably was not much need to compete elsewhere in this period. The festival had achieved a remarkable status and a victory at home had the advantage of being won in front of one's own peers. After having gone through a rough patch in the first and second centuries AD, the festival flourished again at the end of the second century AD, when some of the most renowned athletes and performers returned to Epidauros. It was only from the end of the third onwards that the games disappeared in our record.

The surviving evidence allowed various insights into very different aspects of life at an athletic festival: female athletics, the miraculous healing of an athlete, fraud scandals resulting in public humiliation of the cheaters. The Asklepieia clearly constitute a grand-four candidate with regard to the most colorful character of the surviving evidence.

From an outer perspective, it was the Saronic region that gave orientation and meaning to athletes competing at the Asklepieia. Saronic perspectives already shone through in Pindar and continued to do so under different auspices in the agonistic epigrams. While epinicians on Aiginetan victors highlighted the embeddedness of the Asklepieia in a Saronic landscape of athletic festivals, agonistic epigrams stressed Epidauros' 'rocky' nature that is the perspective Epidauros was seen by competitors arriving from the sea. To put it in a nutshell, the athletic facilities of the Asklepieia were not situated on a rock, but they clearly represented a pillar in the agonistic landscape of the Greek world.

⁹⁰ Epidauros' increased relevance is also indicated by the fact that it became a place for the erection of important treaties like the re-establishment of the Hellenic League under Antigonos Monophthalmos and Demetrios Poliorketes in 302 BC (*Staatsverträge* III 446).

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Table 1

Place as listed in the <i>iámata</i>	Region	Frequency	Evidence
1. Epidauros	Argolid	5	§8, 35, 49, 56, 66
2. Troizen		4	§23, 34, 48
3. Halieis		3	§18, 24, 33
4. Argos		2	§37, 62
5. Hermione		1	§20
6. Aigina	Saronic Gulf	1	§26
7. Pellene	Achaia	1	§2
8. Kaphyai	Arkadia	1	§41
9. Tegea		1	§47
10. Lakonia	Lakonia	2	§21, 60
11. Messene	Messenia	1	§42
12. Athens	Attika	1	§4
13. Thebes	Boiotia	1	§28
14. Kirrha	Phokis	1	§38
15. Epeiros	Epeiros	1	§31
16. Pherai	Thessaly	1	§25
17. Thessaly		1	§6
18. Torone	Chalkidike	1	§13
19. Thasos	The Aegean	1	§22
20. Chios		1	§63
21. Keos		1	§39
22. Crete		1	§68
23. Mytilene	Lesbos	1	§19
24. Lampsakos	Mysia	1	§15
25. Knidos	Caria	1	§32
26. Kios		1	§43
27. Herakleia	Unclear	1	§30



Fig. 1: Epidauros as seen from the Saronic Gulf.