

The ATHENA Story of Ancient Theaters

“ATHENA” is an acronym for the Ancient Theaters Enhancement for New Actualities, commonly named as the ATHENA Project. It was created in 2009 and concerned with the innovation, protection and preservation of ancient theaters across the Euromed region. Inherent as well is making the people, local communities, diverse actors across the Mediterranean more appreciative of the value of these theaters to making them more sustainable for future generations.

A Euromed initiative

ATHENA Project is funded by the European Union under its Euromed Heritage 4 Program. It operates under the Regional, Monitoring and Support Unit (RMSU) which provides support, technical assistance and advice to the regional partners in the Euromed Heritage program through the European Aid Cooperation Office of the European Commission. It committed 57 million euros to fund partnership projects since 1998 (1).

Countries, sites and partners

The ATHENA Project involves five countries across the Mediterranean. In each country there are specific sites under study which are Petra and Jarash in Jordan, Carthage in Tunisia, Siracusa in Italy, Merida in Spain and Cherchell in Algeria (2).

The Project is administered through different regional partner institutions. The Department of Antiquities (DoA) in Jordan is the “leader” of this project, a first time development for a country in the "south" to lead a European funded project (3).

The DoA's role is mainly involved in coordinating with the other partners and see the work process related to ancient theaters is run on time. Under its new management beginning in November 2011, and in appointing a new Project Manager, Nizar Al Adarbeh, the ATHENA Project become much more robust with major activities taking place throughout 2012.

Now coordination is more systematic with the rest of the consortium countries that include the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia - Instituto Universitario de Restauración del Patrimonio (Institute of Heritage Restoration of the Polytechnic University of Valencia), Dipartimento di Storia dell'Architettura, Restauro e Conservazione dei Beni Architettonici e stato of the Sapienza Università di Roma (Department of History of Architecture, Restoration and Conservation of Heritage of Sapienza University of Rome), Labo Bati Dans l'Environment—University of Science and Technology, Houari Boumediene (Laboratory of the Built in Environment of the University of Science and Technology, Houari Boumediene) and the Institut aux Etudes Littéraires et de Sciences Humaines de Tunis of University of Tunis (Institute for Literary Studies and Human Sciences in the University of Tunis) (4).

More “tangible” actions have taking in 2012 through direct communications between ATHENA/Jordan and the rest of the partners. These included presentations, documents, work surveys, and questionnaires for the overall work process.

Associate partners

Involved in the Project is four associate partners including CyArk High Definition Heritage Network based in California, Centro Regionale Progettazione e Restauro (Regional Planning and Restoration Center) in Sicily, the Kuwait-based Arab Towns Organization and the Instituto de Arqueología, Mérida (Institute of Archaeology in Merida).

Work packages

The ATHENA Project has objectives, working through methodologies of six Work Packages that are divided into tasks and actions related to ancient theaters. Work Package 1 include the setting up what is termed a common and scientific cultural framework for the project and is led by the Tunisian partner.

Work Package 2 involves the building up of a knowledge-based database and is lead by the Italian partner and includes documentation and classification of raw scientific data of the digitally scanning theaters through the Jordanian partner. The aim here is to slow down their erosion through the laser scanner which can identify different problems (5).

Work Package 3 involves drawing up a possible sustainability strategy for ancient theaters that involve risk perception and mitigation and knowledge gathering to allow the creation of tools to enable sites to have greater long-term potentials.

This is all brought together in Work Package 4 that is concerned with the drawing up of a 'management plan' that would serve as a general framework for the rest of the partner countries and is lead by Spain. Along the management plan is a user manual concerned with the utilization of theaters. The management plan, which is going to be made by the Spanish partner, is the result of data sent to its Institute of Heritage Restoration of the Polytechnic University of Valencia by the member countries of the ATHENA collective to be analyzed and put in a framework.

This is while Work Package 5 visibility and dissemination is concerned with putting the project upfront in both the different sections of society and communities and in the communications world, in print, audiovisual and online through writing about it, blog-posting and making sure it has a high profile.

All of the above is underlined by Work Package 6 of managing and quality controlling the project and making sure it is running smoothly through the leader partner, the Department of Antiquities in Jordan (6).

Website

Today the ATHENA Project has a website where different kinds of information related to

ancient theaters can be obtained on the venture through its (www.athenaproject.eu) platform. It has many sections that deal with the different aspects and objectives of the project through easy language and with pictures. The website has a media section with a blogging subsection on activities and news related to ancient theaters, enabling the readers to air their views, write opinions and comment (7).

This is made more visible through social media networking as the ATHENA Project website has a facebook (www.facebook.com/athenapro), Twitter (@athenaproject_Euromed) and LinkedIn accounts which are active and interactive. There are more than 3200 facebook likes and 1100 ATHENA tweets on twitter as of mid-October, 2012.

Newsletter

The ATHENA Project Newsletter covers all activities and work process undertaken in the venture the previous month. The newsletter has a glossy colour print edition and is distributed via mail to local, regional and international institutions concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, development and sustainability. It can also be accessed online at the ATHENA Project website (8).

Messages

The Project has specific messages for the public to know the importance of taking care of ancient theaters. After being formulated now they are being implemented by the partner countries. Firstly, ancient theaters have cultural, aesthetic, artistic, heritage and civilizational values and not only economic or income generating. Secondly, each citizen has a stake in the theater, and these ancient structures are part of the community and should be seen within the wider context of society. Thirdly, ancient theaters should be used in a correct and proper ways and theater management is a complex activity that should create a balance between conservation and enhancement. Fourthly, for this to happen the collection of scientific and cultural information is required, at the end of which must be the creation of a management plan. Fifthly theaters are not for the privileged class but for everyone. Sixth, ancient theaters should not only be used for artistic performances but for many others to generate sustainable activities (9).

An educational event

To prove the point that theaters are not just for star performances and festivals, the DoA/Athena Project held a two-hour morning educational activity on 5 May, 2012 at the South Theater attended by over 1500 pupils from 25 schools in Jarash, its surrounding areas, and from other Jordanian cities as Amman, Salt and Zarqa (10).

It was an "edutainment" activity with performances, mostly amateurs and youths entertained the school children and their teachers under the slogan of "Theaters for All"--one of the messages of the ATHENA Project. The activity was organized in cooperation with Rahaf for Development and pupils came through the Madrasati Initiative. Some pupils attended from physically-challenged schools and a pedestrian play was made by blind and partially blind students (11).

One of the points of the performances was to show these structures can be utilized for a variety of things and be used throughout the year and enjoyed by people from all social sectors, and make these ancient structures more community-oriented. As well as members of the Jordan Tourist Police Department and the Central Traffic Department in Amman who participated in the event and took the opportunity in displaying their traffic exhibition banners about road safety and traffic awareness, a number of institutions and NGOs from the public and private sectors and companies participated to make the educational activity a success.

Amman meeting

This educational activity coincided with an ATHENA regional partners meetings in Amman held on 6-7 May 2012, to pinpoint what has been done so far, and to provide better direction. Delegates came from all partner countries to listen and discuss a fully prepared agenda related to knowledge-gathering, issues of technology in restorations and the ancient theater management.

In addition power-point presentations were given by respected delegates on their theater sites, what has been achieved so far by way of work activities, and what is still to be done.

The meetings were preceded by scientific visits to Umm Qais, an archaeological city in the north of Jordan, and to the South Theater, Jarash which is the site under study in ATHENA. The aim was to give a comparative view of the theaters (12). The meetings provided focus and direction.

Tunis Activities

On 1-2 July, 2012 ATHENA delegates meet again in Tunis to follow up on the course of the ATHENA Project as an extension of the Amman meetings. It was part of a set of activities

were delegates were taken to the Carthage Theater as part of their scientific visit and to the Dougga ruins, north west of the Tunisia capital (13).

The meetings were a revamping of the activities and work processes that already started to take place.

Linkages

Many linkages have been established by the ATHENA Project within the DoA and outside. Meetings and discussions took place within the Royal Geographic Center in Amman with a view to strengthening cooperation in March 2012.

Similarly stronger relations were struck with the Ministry of Tourism. Together with the ATHENA Project, the Ministry held staged three major events at the Roman Theater in Amman to celebrate the Eid festivities on 21- 23 August, 2012.

It was a tourism event within the 12-month long “Beautiful Jordan” campaign to increase domestic and international tourism in Jordan, and perfectly fits with the ATHENA Project of Ancient Theaters Enhancement for New Actualities to promote local communities to visit and take part in the development of ancient ruins and show ancient theaters can be used for many purposes as about 3000 people attended the shows.

Documentation

As part of the role to sustain ancient theaters is to laser scan them with the latest technologies for documentation and renovation.

This has been one of the objectives of the ATHENA Project from the beginnings when a laser scanner and total station were presented to the DoA in Jordan for use not just in Petra and Jarash but throughout the Euromed region and elsewhere in Middle Eastern countries (14).

Two Jordanian surveyors were trained by the Italian partner, the Department of History of Architecture, Restoration and Conservation of Heritage of Sapienza University of Rome on the new equipment, taking the sites of Petra and Jarash as case studies in March 2011.

The Jordanian team travelled to Rome in March 2012 to complete their training which is to analyze and document the data already collected. It was a 10-day training in Sapienza University where the two-man team Jamal Safi and Tawfiq Hunaiti were trained on 3D data processing and modelling. (15)

Soon after that scanning theaters and sites began in earnest with work on actual surveying work to profile, document and eventual use in restoration works with World Heritage Sites like Qusair Amra, Umm Qais and Tell Emmiri undergoing full 3D profiling.

The benefit is being seen as long-term for with scanning, the idea of training further personnel was born in mind. Hence such training took place in the Odeon Theater in Amman in which 16 employees from the DoA took part in between 20-24 May, 2012. (16)

Staff from the DoA were allowed to see and practice on the equipment while the scanning was made to enhance the preservation of theaters in Jordan, through the ATHENA consortium, and enable other personnel in the region to be trained on the technologies (17).

As an example to that a three-day training workshop on New Technology Applications in Archaeological Documentations took place on 2-4 September, 2012, by the ATHENA Project for DoA personnel in its offices in the different governorates of Jordan.

The training, which was part theoretical in the DoA and part practical in the Amman Roman Theater, included managers, administrators, archeological inspectors, and curators, decision-makers that would go back to their offices and spread the word about the new technologies for these directorates represent many sites which may need scanning.

The regional value of scanning was emphasized during the Tunisia visit when the two Jordanian surveyors together with two of their Italian colleagues scanned the Carthage Theater and its amphitheater between 27 June - 2 July, 2012 as part of the Tunisia activities, and proving the cooperative nature of the project.

In the initial stages of the ATHENA Project, the Merida Theaters were scanned and today, there is the scanning of Cherchell and Tipaeza (14-24 October, 2011) and the Sircusa scanning (21-26 October, 2012). All these may signify the success of the ATHENA Project.

Publications

An important deliverable is coming out of this as well. Already a coursework has been prepared by DoA surveyors, it's in draft form and awaiting editing and publication, another objective put forward by the ATHENA Project.

Publications are being seen as important because they ensure sustainability of the ancient theaters concept through visibility and dissemination. The course work is important because another part of the ATHENA objective, is to embed it, that is seeking for its adoption by different societies and educational institutions and even curricula in the countries involved in the Project.

For awareness sake and a source of dissemination in the public educational sector, a narrative for children titled Aladdin's Magical Travels to Ancient Theaters in Euromed Region written and illustrated by Mohammad Al Thaher, a specialist, who has produced many books and winner of Jordan's State Prize for Children Literature is awaiting printing.

The book tells the "ATHENA Story" through Aladdin, his magic carpet and faithful genie, travelling from Baghdad to the ancient sites of Jarash and Petra in Jordan, Cherchell in

Algeria, Carthage in Tunisia, Merida in Spain and Siracusa in Italy and back to his hometown.

Alongside this as well is the upcoming thesaurus publication of terms, primarily architectural, of ancient theaters that is also in the pipeline to be printed in English and Arabic with word definitions in French, Spanish and Italian to serve as a standard reference that combines all of the major languages in the regional collective.

The ATHENA Project is moving forward. There is a final crowning of the cake so to speak when the Spanish partner delivers the general management plan by the end of November, 2012. It will then be pilot tested in Jarash and serve as a document for the rest of the ATHENA consortium.

Its Project Management in Amman is still moving ahead on scanning, documentation, holding a press conference for visibility, a five-day training venue and taking part in a major conference on archaeology in the Dead Sea.

There is lots more work till the end of January 2013 when Euromed Heritage 4 comes to an end.

Footnotes

- 1) <http://www.euromedheritage.net/intern.cfm?menuID=7&submenuID=1>.
- 2) <http://www.euromedheritage.net/intern.cfm?menuID=12&submenuID=13&idproject=41>.
- 3) <http://www.hackwriters.com/AthenaProject.htm>.
- 4) <http://www.hackwriters.com/AthenaProject.htm>.
- 5) <http://www.euromedheritage.net/intern.cfm?menuID=12&submenuID=13&idproject=41>.
- 6) A summary of the Work Packages is found in <http://www.athenaproject.eu/athena-project/work-packages>.
- 7) <http://www.athenaproject.eu>.
- 8) <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/newsletter/>
- 9) See Communications Plan ATHENA--ENPI 2008/150/86
- 10) A full feature article appeared on the Euromed Heritage website as 'story of the month' titled This theater is mine, and I protect it! <http://www.euromedp.org/2012/05/31/this-theater-is-mine-and-i-protect-it/>
- 11) Many features appeared online and/or various versions of the 'edutainment' taste in Jarash including:
www.hackwriters.com/athenaproject2.htm; <http://worldmathaba.net/items/getting-an-edutainment-taste-in-jarash-jordan>; http://www.arabworldbooks.com/Articles/marwan_asmar_edutainment_in_jarash.htm
- 12) Full coverage of activities appeared in ATHENA Project Newsletter, Issue no 4 (April-May 2012), see <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/newsletter/>
- 13) Full coverage of the visit appeared in <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/blog/>; see article Carthage: Standing Structurally Proud, <http://www.hackwriters.com/CarthageMA.htm>;

also <http://digitaljournal.com/user/874557>.

14) See background stories to laser scanner see January and March issues of ATHENA Project Newsletter, <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/newsletter/>.

15) ATHENA Project Newsletter Issue 3 (March, 2012), see <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/newsletter/>

16) ATHENA Project Newsletter Issue no 5 (April-May, 2012). See <http://www.athenaproject.eu/media/newsletter/>

17) See feature 'Digital Imagery Provides a Living Past', <http://www.tagitnews.com/en/news/1496-digital-imagery-provides-a-living-past.html>

External links

* [<http://www.euromedheritage.net/intern.cfm?menuID=12&submenuID=13&idproject=41> Euromed Heritage]

* [http://www.caa2009.org/CAA2009_FinalProgram.pdf CAA 2009 Program and Abstracts]

* [<http://www.hackwriters.com/AthenaProject.htm> Hackwriters.com]

* [<http://archive.cyark.org/cyark-helps-kickoff-euromed-heritage-athena-project-blog> CyArk Helps Kick-Off Euromed Heritage ATHENA Project]

* [<http://www.digitalmeetsculture.net/article/athena-project-for-ancient-theatres/> ATHENA Project for Ancient Theaters]

* [<http://www.tagitnews.com/en/news/1496-digital-imagery-provides-a-living-past.html> Tagit News]

* [<http://jordantimes.com/kingdom-leading-mediterranean-initiative-to-preserve-ancient-theatres> Jordan Times]

* [<http://blogjordan.com/2012/05/13/jarash-welcomes-1500-pupils-under-slogan-of-theaters-for-all-3/> Blog Jordan]