

New Archaeological and Topographical Observations on the Sanctuary of Asklepios in Alipheira (Arcadia)*

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The aim of the paper is to propose a new reading of the sanctuary of Asklepios in Alipheira, based principally on an extensive survey of the monuments still *in situ* following the excavations of the 1960s. Our observations pertain to the functions and dates of the individual buildings and their relations to one another, and within the larger context of the *polis*. In conclusion, the Asklepieion at Alipheira might be inserted into a group of other sanctuaries which demonstrate the existence and the success of the cult in Arcadia from a relatively early date, at the very beginning of the general diffusion of the cult from Epidauros to the rest of the Peloponnese.

The ancient site of Alipheira is located in the south-western district of ancient Arcadia, and is nowadays included in the *nomos* of Ilia. The site, already known from the ancient sources and from the accounts of travellers,¹ was excavated in the years 1932-35 and published by Orlandos in 1968.² The *polis* was founded in an easily defended position, consisting of a series of hills, which were soon surrounded by strong fortification walls. The monuments which are to be considered as the most important, mentioned by Pausanias³ and re-discovered during the modern excavations, are the sanctuaries of Athena⁴ and Asklepios;⁵ they are located on the two opposite, north-western and south-eastern extremities of the oblong area included in the city walls. (Fig. 1)

* In the context of the present cooperative work Sofoklis Alevridis elaborated the plans of the site and the monuments, matching them with Orlandos' drawing, provided the photographic documentation and the technical support required during the survey; Milena Melfi conducted the bibliographical research and authored the final version of the paper.

1. Orlandos 1968, 7-8.

2. Orlandos 1968, *passim*.

3. Paus. 8.26.4-6.

4. Orlandos 1968, 43-168.

5. Orlandos 1968, 169-202.

The survey, which took place in the area of the Asklepieion in 2002, thanks to the permit issued by Mrs Xenia Arapogianni, director of the 7th Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, led us to a better understanding of the cult place studied by Orlandos. A brief report on the accomplished work will be presented here.

The sanctuary seems to be located in an extra-urban area, immediately outside of the city walls and probably near the entrance of the town. (Figs. 1 and 4) This is indeed the lowest (34 m lower than the level of the acropolis) and most accessible side of the extremely steep slopes of Alipheira, even today approached only by a track reaching the ancient site from the modern road. The city walls run south of the sanctuary, providing a border for the sacred area. (Fig. 4) The connections between the inside and the outside of the town in this area are not clear, because of the great difference in level, ca. 7 m, between the area included in the city walls and the Asklepieion itself. It is nevertheless likely that the access from the sanctuary to the town and *vice versa* took place through a gate located on the north-eastern stretch of this section of the city walls. Here the terrain slopes more gently and the entrance seems facilitated by a gap in the walls. Such a topographical position recalls the similar position of the Asklepieion *du haut* at nearby Gortys, located next to the city walls and accessible through the so-called *Porte C*; this probably implies the same cultic function for the gate itself.⁶

The terrain, naturally sloping down from south-east to north-west, was apparently arranged in two terraces, enclosed in *analemma* walls. In particular the northern and southern walls of what was interpreted by Orlandos as the *temenos*⁷ of the temple and altar of Asklepios, seem to be identifiable as terrace walls with the purpose of creating two large platforms for the monuments: the lower for the temple and the altar, the higher for the *τετράγωνο κτίριο*⁸ and maybe other buildings nowadays unknown. (Figs. 2-4)

The lower terrace, the temple and the altar, the latter studied in detail and reconstructed by Orlandos, seem to be part of the same building programme, to be placed in the second half of the 4th century B.C.⁹

The temple, measuring 9.30 x 5.75 m, is very simple in plan.¹⁰ It consists of a *pronaos*, paved with limestone slabs, and a *cella*, inside which Orlandos found an offering table or *trapeza* and what seemed to be the basis for the cult statue.¹¹ Nothing is left of the architectural members decorating the building, but on the

6. Martin and Metzger 1941; Martin 1948, 105-12.

7. Orlandos 1968, 170-1.

8. According to the definition given to the building by Orlandos 1968, 199-202.

9. This date is mainly based on the analysis of the decoration and typology of the altar, to which Orlandos relates all the extant buildings (Orlandos 1968, 182-99).

10. Orlandos 1968, 171-82 and fig. 111.

basis of the extant remains Orlandos was able to hypothesize an *in antis* façade with two columns on the front. The stone basis without inscription located left of the entrance seems, rather than bearing a statue, to recall the setting of *perirhanteria* or lustral basins at the entrance of sacred buildings, as at the temples of Asklepios¹² and Artemis¹³ in Epidauros.

The shape of the building and its internal arrangement recall those of the temple of Phigalia dedicated to Athena and Zeus Soter, recently discovered by Mrs. Arapogianni during her excavations of 1996 and 1997.¹⁴ Even if they have different dimensions and building techniques, both temples show the same division in two rooms, originally paved with stone slabs, and the presence on the main axis of the building of a *trapeza* and a statue basis, the latter abnormally distant from the rear wall, leaving a gap of 1.80 m in the case of Phigalia, 1.00 m at Alipheira. The *trapeza* found in Phigalia¹⁵ also shows interesting similarities with that recorded in Alipheira by Orlandos and today lying in pieces inside the temple of Asklepios. Both feet of the offering tables are shaped as lion legs, more sketchy in the case of Alipheira, and they have nearly the same dimensions (82 x 94 cm in Phigalia; 86 x 95 cm in Alipheira). The feet of the Phigalian *trapeza* were inserted in two stone bases and sealed with lead, a set-up which we might reconstruct also for Alipheira, where a later paving of stone chips and cement concealed the previous arrangement. Moreover, a similar type of *trapeza* is attested in Arcadia itself in the sanctuary of Pheneos attributed to Asklepios.¹⁶

In summary, the data obtained by the comparison of the two temples allow some considerations on their date and mutual relations.

1. The date in the second half of the 4th century B.C. proposed by Orlandos for the temple of Alipheira on the basis of the architecture, the style of the altar and a few coin finds, can be confirmed by the comparison with the similar temple of Phigalia, where the main phase has been firmly dated to the 4th century by the archaeological material.

2. The similarities in the shape and internal arrangement of the two buildings might be related to analogous cult practices, even if the presence, in Alipheira, of a monumental altar outside the temple suggests a shift to the open air of the sacrifices which, according to the archaeological evidence, took place inside the temple of Phigalia; consequently the *trapeza* would have been used only for bloodless offerings.

11. Orlandos 1968, figs. 117-20.

12. Kavvadias 1905, 46-50.

13. Kavvadias 1906, 94-6.

14. Arapogianni 1996, 130-2; *ead.* 1997, 115-6.

15. Arapogianni 1996, 132-3, fig. 3.

16. Protonotariou-Deilaki 1962, 59-60.

3. In more general terms, the collected evidence points to a close relation of cultural exchange between the two sites during the 4th century B.C. The geographical – and probably political – proximity of the two cities could also provide an explanation for the choice of identical typologies of tombs in Alipheira and Phigalia. Their temple-shaped façades¹⁷ seem to be unique in the archaeology of the region and, to our knowledge, of all Greece.

The only monument surviving on the partially excavated upper terrace is the *τετράγωνο κτίριο*, so named by Orlandos.¹⁸ (Figs. 3 and 5) It consists of two courses of blocks of pinkish limestone enclosing an almost square area (3.95 x 3.87 m). Some of the technical characteristics of the building, such as the *taenia* carved on the internal face of the upper course, forming a sort of indented step, can be observed in the temple itself, in particular on the only surviving stylobate block identified by Orlandos.¹⁹ It is consequently reasonable to include both monuments in the same building phase.

The discovery of a few column drums next to the building, and the presence of a drainage channel, suggested to Orlandos and Roesch an interpretation as an open courtyard, a sort of peristyle,²⁰ surrounded by rooms which have not been uncovered, but are still evident from the scattered remains. This interpretation seems to be correct, even if the working of the bottom of the columns, ending with an indented band and provided with holes for nails or clamps, suggests that they were inserted in a stylobate or individual bases; it excludes that they were located on the row of blocks which is visible today, where no signs of such assemblage can be detected.²¹ In particular, the presence of a flat band and clamps together points toward individual bases, possibly located along the sides of the presently visible square structure, as in the case, for example, of the *hestiatorion* of Troizen.²²

Given the existence of an open courtyard, provided with columns and, consequently, porticoes on the sides, various interpretations of the building as a *xenon*, a priest's house or an *enkoimiaterion* have been proposed.²³ In this respect some new elements can be added to our knowledge of the building. During the recent surveys we were able to discover several feet of a bench, possibly the same which had already been observed by Roesch and tentatively associated with the

17. Orlandos 1968, 203-43.

18. Orlandos 1968, 199-202.

19. Orlandos 1968, 175, fig. 115.

20. Orlandos 1968, 201-2; Roesch 1985.

21. Such a reconstruction, based on the columns standing directly on the visible row of blocks of the *τετράγωνο κτίριο*, coincides with the one proposed by Orlandos, who even attempted an *anastylosis* of the building (Orlandos 1968, 201, fig. 140).

22. Welter 1941, 31-3 and pl. 11.

23. For a survey of the different opinions expressed by scholars see Jost 1985, 82.

square building.²⁴ They consist of limestone slabs, squared on the top, bottom and rear sides. The lower ends of their protruding, swung fronts are fashioned in the shape of lion's paws. They supported a stone bench and were probably set against the walls of a building. (Fig. 6)

A stone bench in an Asklepieion such as the sanctuary of Alipheira seems to suggest two possibilities: the presence of an *enkoimiaterion*, for the sick people, or a *hestiatorion*, for sacred meals.

The bench supported by the feet mentioned above would have a height of 38-40 cm and a width of 50 cm, much less than the 0.80-1.20 m known from the benches of *hestiatoria* attested elsewhere.²⁵ But the bench from Alipheira has the same dimensions, both in height and width, as those found in the *stoai* of Epidauros²⁶ and Oropos,²⁷ used for incubation. Since all these sanctuaries are connected with Asklepios and healing practices, it is tempting to assume that the benches were used for similar purposes also in Alipheira.

On the other hand, the existence of a *hestiatorion*, even if not directly connected to the bench, might be supported by the characteristics of the square building, since a central open-air courtyard and appropriate devices for draining the water are considered to be essential features of this type of buildings.²⁸ *Hestiatoria* in sanctuaries of Asklepios are now well attested by archaeological and epigraphical evidence. The most monumental examples of the type are the buildings found in Troizen²⁹ and Corinth,³⁰ to which the so-called *Gymnasium* of Epidauros, today considered to have functioned as an extremely large dining hall, should be added.³¹ There is evidence also from the smaller sanctuaries: the best known inscription records the *hestiatorion* of the Asklepieion on Delos,³² but also in Athens decrees in honour of priests of Asklepios celebrate their successful arrangement of the *klinai*.³³ Of particular interest to us are the data from Arcadia itself, where several sanctuaries for Asklepios known from epigraphical, archaeological or literary sources seem to include a building for ritual meals, even if only in later times. This is the case of the Asklepieion of Mantinea, where

24. Roesch 1985, 28-32, figs. 4-5.

25. See the table presented by Goldstein 1978, 356, tab. A, in which all the *hestiatoria* known at the time of the publication are included.

26. *Stoa* 1987, 11-7; *Epidauros* 1999, 28-33.

27. Petrakos 1968, 77-84.

28. Tomlinson 1969; Goldstein 1978, 296-307; Armpis 1998.

29. Welter 1941, 31-3.

30. Roebuck 1952, 51-7.

31. *Gymnasium* 1988, 21-35; *Epidauros* 1999, 34-9.

32. *IG XI.2*, 144.

33. *IG II²* 974, 975, 976 and 1033 (= *SEG* 18, 1962, nos. 26, 27, 28, 29).

deipnoi are recorded by the inscription in honour of Ioulia Eudia,³⁴ and of the better known Asklepieion on the river Gortynios, where a building defined à *oikoi* was found.³⁵ It had a central courtyard surrounded by rooms, in some of which the preparation for a bench could be detected. Moreover, an inscription from the same site, dating to the Roman period, mentions the dedication of a *triclinium* by M. Turpilius Philotas.³⁶

In concluding, in Alipheira, the association of the square building with the stone bench, with dimensions different from those of dining beds of *hestiatoria* and similar to the *enkoimeteria* benches, might create some problems of interpretation. Given that:

1. – most of the square building is actually unknown, as well as all the structures which might have been located east of it,

2. – the bench, considering also the number of supports found, would be more suitable in a long hall or *stoa*, such as those of Epidauros and Oropos, than in the small rooms which could have surrounded the small courtyard,

it is possible to propose either that the two groups of evidence relate to two different buildings, respectively an *enkoimeterion* and a *hestiatorion*, or, given the small scale of the sanctuary, that the two functions were exercised by the same building, where a long hall was possibly located on one of the sides. In this case a hypothetical restoration of such a building might be proposed, using the structure which can be detected on the west side of the *τετράγωνο κτίριο* as the rear wall of the long hall. (Fig. 5)

Whatever the solution may be, it is worth noting that the Asklepieion of Alipheira appears, from the second half of the 4th century B.C., to be furnished with all the buildings necessary for the healing cult: the temple, with the altar and the *trapeza* for sanguinary and bloodless offerings; the *enkoimiaterion*, and probably a *hestiatorion*. What seems to be missing is, of course, a water source, which is not so far attested. Nevertheless the location of the site itself, surrounded by rivers and streams, and certainly related to sources mentioned by the ancient authors,³⁷ such as the Tritonis, and the many others exploited nowadays by the inhabitants of modern Alipheira, will not exclude that canalisation was employed to lead the water uphill. The situation would not be so different from what we have on the nearby site of Gortys, where the *loutron* of the so called Asklepieion *du haut*, far from water sources, was fed by water-pipes.³⁸

34. *IG V.2*, 269.

35. Metzger and Courbin 1951, 132-4.

36. *SEG* 11.2, 1954, no. 1165.

37. Paus. 8.26.3; Orlandos 1968, 24. The position of the source is located on the maps of the site sketched by Leake and Curtius and collected in Orlandos 1968, 8, fig. 6.

38. Martin and Metzger 1941, 280-2; Ginouvès 1962, 349-61.

Therefore the Asklepieion of Alipheira can be considered part of a group of sanctuaries – known from archaeological or only from literary sources – which demonstrate the existence and the success of the Asklepios cult in Arcadia from a relatively early date, at the very beginning of the general diffusion of the cult from Epidauros into the rest of the Peloponnese.

It cannot be considered a coincidence that the earliest sanctuaries known from the literary sources, at Mantinea³⁹ and Tegea,⁴⁰ are also those geographically closest to Epidauros, located at the border with Argolis. All the other early testimonies⁴¹ regarding the establishment of sanctuaries of Asklepios in Arcadia – Gortys and Alipheira, known archaeologically, Thelpousa⁴², Heraia⁴³ and Megalopolis,⁴⁴ known from literary and epigraphical sources – seem to indicate a diffusion of the cult along the Alpheios river and its affluents. (Fig. 7) Such an observation would confirm in itself the Epidaurian character, evidenced by the strong emphasis placed on water in the healing process, of the development of Asklepios cult in the region under consideration. In this process the Asklepieion *du haut* at Gortys and the sanctuary of Alipheira seem to hold key positions, by virtue of the close similarity of their internal arrangements to one another and in turn to the Epidaurian prototype.

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39. According to Pausanias (8.9.1), in the Asklepieion of Mantinea there was a statue of the god made by Alkamenes, which would suggest a date between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 4th century B.C. for the foundation of the cult.

40. Also for the sanctuary of Tegea Pausanias (8.47.1) recalls the existence of a statue of Asklepios made by a major artist of the classical times, Skopas of Paros.

41. We exclude here the cults of Kleitor, Kaphiai and Orchomenos, since they are known only from Roman imperial sources according to the collection of testimonies published in Jost 1985, 493-4.

42. Paus. 8.25.3.

43. *IG V.2*, 416.

44. *IG V.2*, 449.

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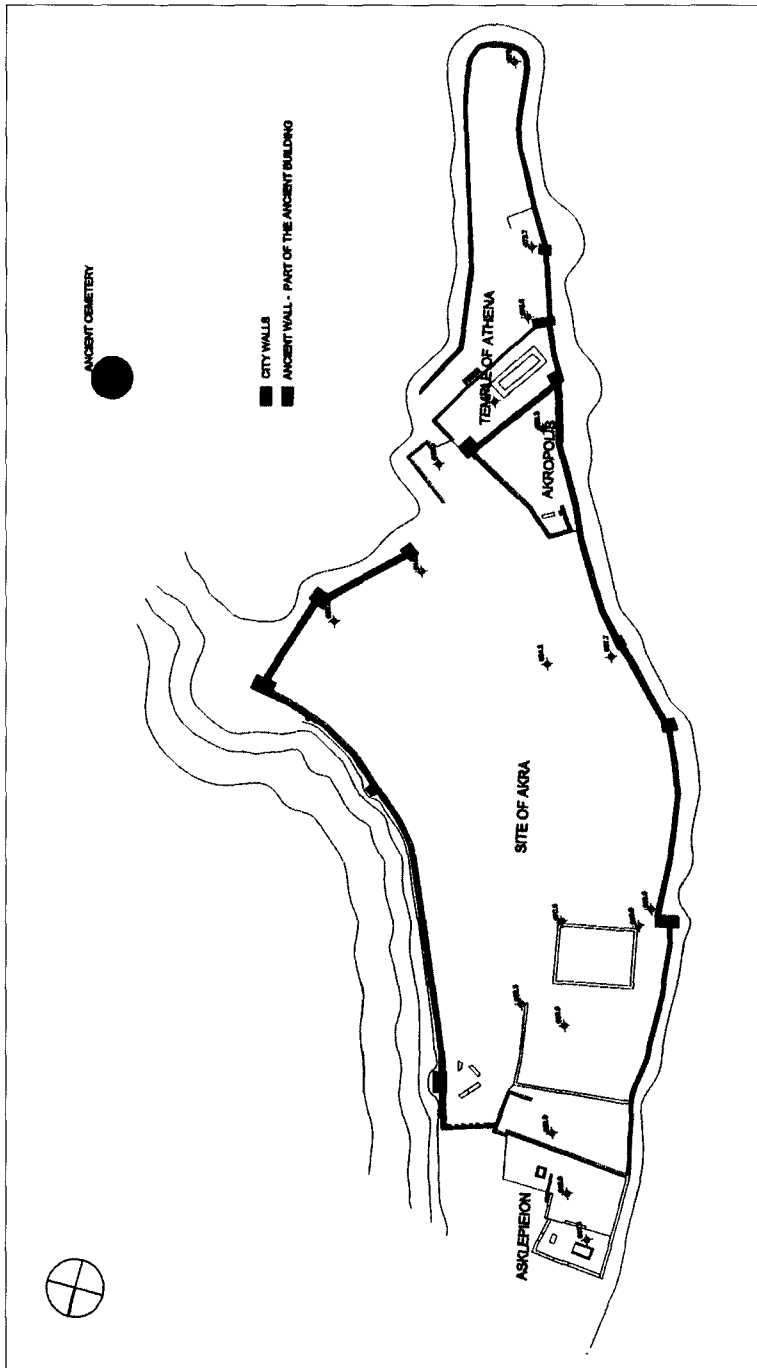


Fig. 1. General plan of the ancient town. (Reworked from Orlandos 1968, pl. 2.)



Fig. 2. The temple of Asklepios. (Photo: S. Alevridis.)



Fig. 3. The τετράγωνο κτίριο in the sanctuary of Asklepios. (Photo: S. Alevridis.)

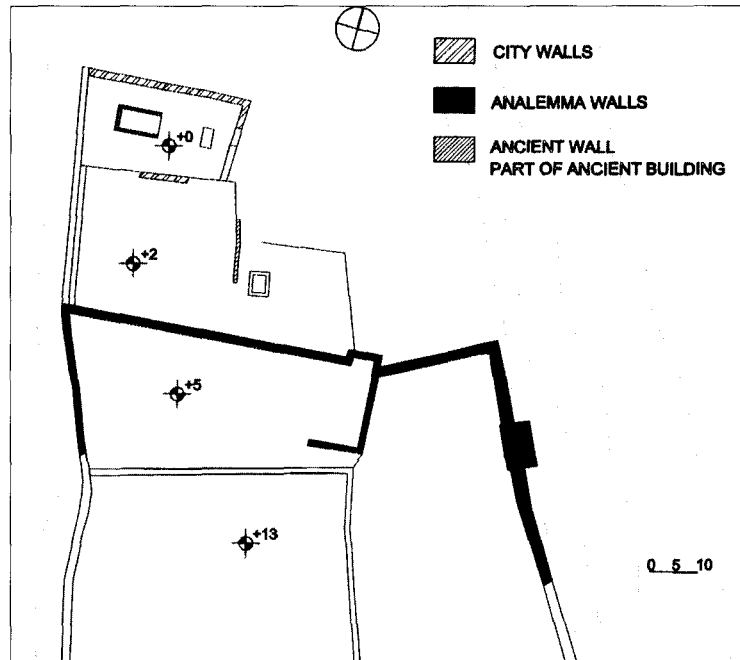


Fig. 4. Site plan of the sanctuary of Asklepios. (Redrawn from Orlandos 1968.)

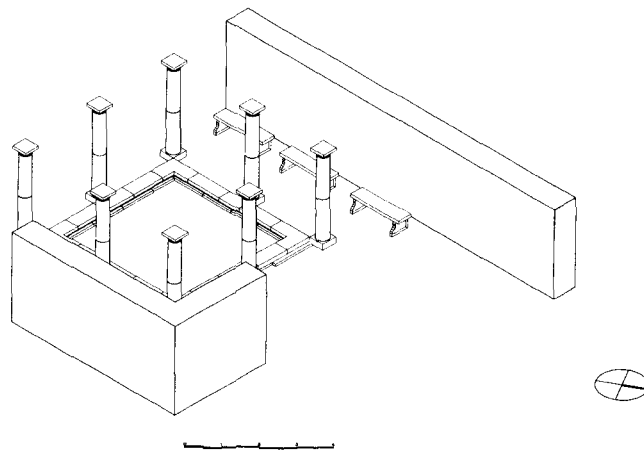


Fig. 5. Hypothetical restoration of the τετράγωνο κτίριο. (Drawing: S. Alevridis.)

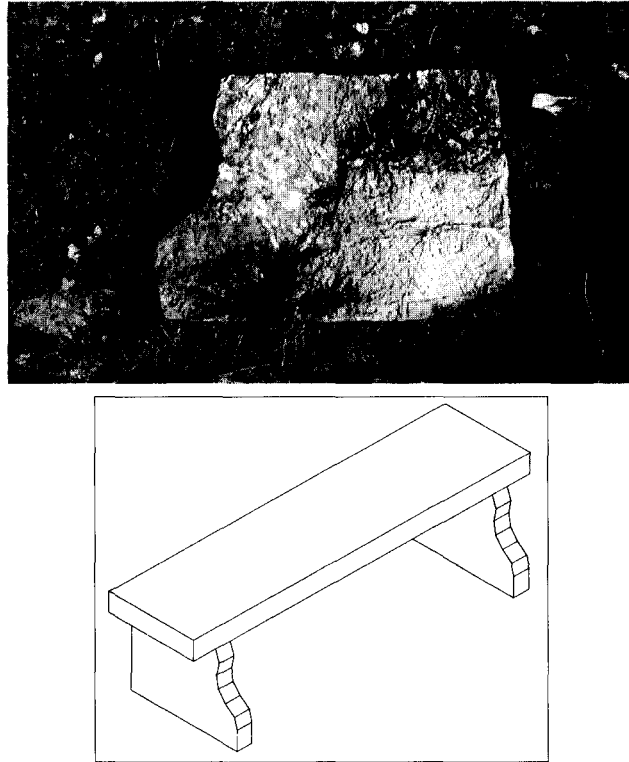


Fig. 6a-b. Foot of the bench and a hypothetical reconstruction. (Photo and drawing: S. Alevridis.)

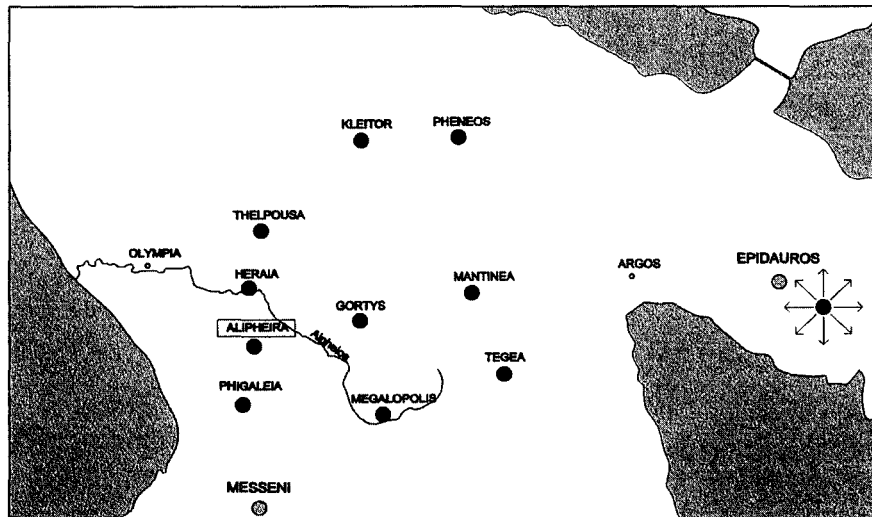


Fig. 7. Distribution map of Asklepios sanctuaries in Arcadia. (Drawing: S. Alevridis.)