



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Epidaurus Festival as Cultural Capital: Theoretical Reflections on Tourism, Heritage and Identity

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Abstract

The Epidaurus Festival, a cornerstone of Greece's cultural heritage since 1955, serves as a pivotal case study in the intersection of performing arts and tourism development. This paper presents a theoretical exploration of the relationship between cultural tourism and the Epidaurus Festival in Greece, with a focus on its symbolic, cultural, and developmental significance. The festival, held in the iconic Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, serves as a paradigm of how performative heritage can support tourism narratives and regional identity. While the Epidaurus Festival has attracted substantial audiences-reports indicate approximately 220,000 spectators in 2008 and over 195,000 in 2006-consistent and detailed data on visitor trends remain limited and fragmented. This scarcity of systematic statistics highlights a broader gap in evaluating the long-term socio-economic and cultural impact of such festivals on local development and tourism policy. By drawing on theoretical frameworks in cultural tourism, heritage commodification, and festivalization, this paper examines the role of the Epidaurus Festival as a driver of place branding and cultural prestige, while also considering challenges related to authenticity, sustainability, and the tension between cultural integrity and tourism pressures. The study argues that even in the absence of comprehensive empirical data, cultural festivals like Epidaurus can be understood as complex cultural phenomena that reflect and shape broader narratives of national identity, heritage discourse, and touristic value creation.

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Introduction

The Athens & Epidaurus Festival (Hereafter AEF) occupies a privileged position within Greece's cultural-tourism ecosystem. Established in 1955, it takes place across Athens and the legendary Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus in the Peloponnese, providing both

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a locus of high art (Opera, theatre, concerts) and an emblematic connection to the classical past. As such, it can be read as a case study in how cultural capital is produced, distributed and contested in the context of heritage tourism and national identity. Drawing on academic and journalistic sources, this article explores AEF through three intersecting lenses: tourism and heritage management; spatiality and performance; and national and transnational identity formation. To underpin the analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's [1] theory of cultural capital (1986) is employed, as well as the concepts of the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) [2] and the theory of heritage as a process [3].

Methodologically, this paper is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and media coverage, combined with theoretical interpretation rather than original empirical fieldwork

The Athens & Epidauros Festival: Origins and Evolution

The AEF was founded in 1955 as part of a broader effort by the Greek state, principally via the Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNTO), to promote Greece as a cultural as well as a natural-tourism destination [4]. Over the decades, it has grown into one of Europe's longest running and most prestigious summer festivals, spanning the period from late May or June to August or early autumn [5].

Its venues are numerous: in Athens, the renowned open-air Odeon of Herodes Atticus at the Acropolis; modern cultural spaces such as Pireos 260; and in Epidauros, the ancient theatre (Capacity ~13,000–14,000) and its surrounding archaeological sanctuary [6].

In recent years, the Festival has undergone strategic renewal-introducing a new visual identity in 2021 under artistic director Katerina Evangelatos-the stated goal of reinforcing its

international profile and appeal [7]. Therefore, the 70th anniversary edition (2025) featured 107 productions and nearly 3,000 artists [8].

The Festival thus offers a rich site for analysing how cultural performance, heritage management and tourism intertwine.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's framework

Bourdieu (1986) characterises cultural capital in three forms: embodied (knowledge, skills, cultural fluency), objectified (cultural goods or monuments), and institutionalised (recognition through credentials or honours) which can be applied to the performances hosted by the AEF.

- Embodied: Attending a performance of ancient tragedy or a contemporary opera within a monumental venue conveys and reproduces cultural literacy and distinction.
- Objectified: The Ancient Theatre of Epidauros is itself a manifestation of objectified capital: a material heritage asset activated through artistic use.
- Institutionalised: The Festival as an institution trades on its prestige, long history, and recognition by the Greek state and international cultural networks.

This framework highlights how performance at heritage venues serves not only entertainment but social distinction and identity formation: to "be seen" attending Epidauros is to participate in a cultural economy of taste.

Authorized heritage discourse and heritage as process

Smith L. [2] describes the AHD as privileging elite, classical and Western forms of heritage-monuments and canonical art forms-and producing narratives of national identity



emphasizing continuity with a celebrated past. The AEF, in staging high art in monumental venues, participates in this discourse: the classical past is invoked, enacted and commodified as part of Greece's heritage-tourism narrative.

Macdonald S. [3] notion of heritage as a process underscores that heritage is not static but continuously reinterpreted through performance and engagement. AEF actively mediates that process: ancient drama is re-staged in contemporary contexts, new audiences participate, and the festival itself evolves. Thus, AEF does not merely reproduce past narratives but actively produces new meanings around heritage, identity and tourism.

These frameworks provide an analytical lens through which the Athens & Epidaurus Festival can be interpreted as a dynamic site where cultural capital, heritage discourse, and tourism intersect.

Tourism, Economic Impact and Regional Development

Tourism context in Greece

Tourism remains a major pillar of the Greek economy, accounting for around 20% of GDP. The country welcomed over 30 million international tourists in 2022, and about 40.7 million in 2024, generating €21.6 billion—a 12.8% increase in arrivals and a 4.8% rise in revenues compared with 2023. Overnight stays exceeded 152 million in 2024, 84% by international visitors [4,9].

Heritage-driven and cultural tourism play a significant role: monuments, archaeological sites and festivals are central to Greece's tourism strategy [4].

Impact of AEF on local economies

Available attendance figures, drawn primarily from media reports and institutional

communications rather than systematic longitudinal studies, suggest that at Epidaurus alone in 2018, over 93,400 people attended performances, and at the Odeon of Herodes Atticus over 102,560 [10]. The 2025 edition exceeded 250,000 total attendees.

The Festival fuels local accommodation, restaurants, transport and cultural-goods expenditure. The village of Lygourio near Epidaurus (Population ~2,200) experiences a sharp seasonal influx of thousands of attendees, while nearby city, Nafplio, benefits through linked itineraries. This spill-over helps spread tourism into rural and peri-urban zones, counterbalancing concentration on island destinations [9].

While these figures indicate significant economic spill-over, they should be read as indicative rather than exhaustive evidence of impact.

Challenges: Sustainability, capacity and access

The influx of visitors, especially in July–August, strains infrastructure: accommodation capacity, public transport and traffic. Rising energy and travel costs have impacted attendance, while mass tourism and site conservation present ecological challenges. Research emphasises the importance of digitalization, community involvement and environmental management for sustainable cultural tourism [9].

Performance Experience Spaces, and Visitor Narratives and Cultural

Site and spectacle: The theatre as pilgrimage

The Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus is central to the Festival's allure. Its architectural and acoustic perfection create a powerful



“destination experience”: Performance merges with the journey, landscape and ritual of arrival. The spatial dimension reinforces cultural narrative—attending Epidaurus becomes a ritual of connection with the classical past [11].

Accessibility and audience composition

Although the Festival retains prestige, it seeks to broaden reach. English surtitles, international programming and co-productions help accessibility [6]. The 2025 programme was positioned as for “everyone—from devoted art lovers to first-time visitors” [7].

Yet the distribution of cultural capital remains uneven: attending Epidaurus still implies economic and educational privilege. Bourdieu’s framework highlights how access and distinction persist as issues to be treated, as participation often requires prior cultural capital.

Cultural narrative: Nation, heritage, identity

AEF’s programming emphasises continuity with classical Greece, signalling national identity and global cultural relevance. The Festival becomes a vehicle for positioning Greece within global networks, while projecting “Greekness” rooted in antiquity and modern dynamism [10].

Through performances of tragedy, site-specific works and international collaborations, AEF participates in heritage narratives: Greece as cradle of western drama, continuity between ancient and modern, culture as national resource. Yet, as Smith L. [2] and Macdonald S. [3] note, such narratives privilege elite discourses. The challenge lies in balancing prestige, authenticity and inclusivity.

Strategic Sustainability and Future Directions

Institutional and financial sustainability

AEF’s financial performance has strengthened: sponsorship revenues rose from €147,000 in 2019 to €3.25 million in 2025, while ticket receipts climbed from €5 million to €7.5 million [10]. Audience numbers grew from ~170,000 to ~225,000.

Key strategies include:

- Diversifying income of productions (State, private, international co-productions)
- Strengthening international branding (70th anniversary, global outreach)
- Emphasising sustainability initiatives

Audience diversification and participation

To remain relevant, AEF targets younger, low-income and international audiences through discounted tickets, multilingual surtitles and educational programmes. The “Little Inventors” initiative for children is one such scheme [12]. Expanding access helps democratise participation and mitigate elitism.

Environmental sustainability and responsible tourism

AEF acknowledges the ecological footprint of cultural performance. Its “Sustainable Culture Toolkit” conference (July 2025), part of an Erasmus+ project, addressed environmental management in cultural organizations [12].

Future infrastructure—such as a planned multipurpose pavilion at the Ancient Epidaurus site (~2026)—demonstrates investment in sustainable place-making [13].

Programmatic innovation and artistic depth

While audience growth matters, artistic integrity remains vital. Risks include diluting quality through over-commercialisation. AEF’s renewal strategy emphasises contemporary reinterpretations and international co-



productions of high quality [14]. To summarise, according to AEF's overall policy it is crucial that the artistic mission—using heritage sites for authentic cultural engagement—prevails over mere spectacle.

Critical Reflections: Contradictions and Tensions

Heritage vs. commercialization

AEF straddles two logics: Heritage conservation and high-art performance on one side; tourism development and branding on the other. The tension between authenticity and commercialisation persists, particularly as international marketing grows.

Access, inequality and cultural capital

Cultural participation remains stratified. Those with economic and cultural resources are most able to attend, though AEF's inclusion efforts attempt to redress this imbalance.

Authenticity, locality and global reach

As the Festival expands globally, questions arise about the “local”: does internationalisation risk standardisation or loss of rootedness? AEF must balance global appeal with genuine cultural depth.

Environmental and infrastructural pressures

Increased visitors and rural logistics pose challenges—transport, crowding, conservation. Without careful management, such pressures may undermine both heritage and visitor experience.

Conclusion

This study is subject to methodological limitations. It relies primarily on secondary data sources, including academic literature, institutional reports, and media publications,

due to the absence of comprehensive, publicly available longitudinal datasets on festival-specific impacts. While this limits the precision of economic and visitor analyses, the approach remains appropriate for a theoretically driven examination of cultural meaning, heritage discourse, and tourism narratives

The Athens & Epidaurus Festival exemplifies how an arts festival anchored in heritage venues can generate cultural capital, tourism growth and national branding. Thus, rather than merely illustrating established theoretical models, the Athens & Epidaurus Festival demonstrates how cultural capital is actively produced and negotiated through contemporary heritage performance under tourism pressures.

Economically, it contributes to regional development and enhances Greece's global profile. Yet it faces enduring tensions: heritage vs. tourism, exclusivity vs. access, globalisation vs. locality, sustainability vs. growth.

AEF's future depends on navigating these tensions—sustaining artistic integrity, broadening inclusion, and ensuring environmental responsibility. With thoughtful management, it can remain a vital site of performance, pilgrimage, identity and cultural capital.

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