

GREECE

The Ancient Diolkos

The Diolkos, the unique paved way that enabled Greek warships and merchantmen to be moved overland across the Isthmus of Corinth from sea to sea, has been crumbling into the water at its western end for decades. Neglect and total absence of remediation actions have caused its deterioration.

The Diolkos was probably first built by Periander (625-585 B.C.). Excavations carried out between 1956 and 1962 by Nikos Verdelis enable us to trace the course of the Diolkos for about one kilometer on both banks of the Corinth Canal; its eastern end, reported by Strabo to be at Schoenus (modern Kalamaki), has not been found.

The surface of the Diolkos, varying in width from about 3.5 to about 5 metres, bears the grooves made by the wheels of the trolleys onto which the ships were loaded. There is a part of the monument (today again covered by natural growth) where ruts cut into the blocks were clearly visible.

After its excavation, the Diolkos was abandoned in its exposed position near the Corinth Canal. The wake of the vessels passing through the Canal and the waves coming in from the Corinthian Gulf first eroded the land between the Canal and Diolkos and then proceeded to "demolish" the monument. A photo taken in 1978 by Walter Werner already shows quite a serious erosion front. Today the erosion has swept over the whole width of the monument at a length of several tens of meters. The decay is all the more concerning since the monument has never been properly recorded. Only the German researcher Walter Werner proceeded to make detailed drawings of the vestiges of the Diolkos in, and following, 1988.

Today, an extended paved area of square blocks in front (and to the side) of the Diolkos proper, is also ruined. Neglect has taken its toll also on the part of the Diolkos excavated on the Attica side of the Canal, on the grounds of the Military Engineers' School. Here, a double row of stones resting upon the course of the Diolkos suffered extensive mechanical damage sometime between 1978 and 1984.

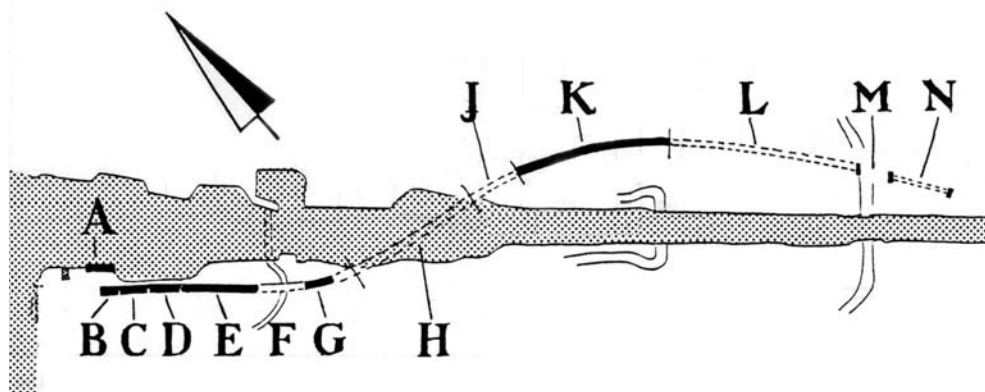
Although documents for almost three decades after 1956 are missing from the local ephorate's archives, it seems that the Canal

Company was never held responsible for damaging the Diolkos. On the contrary, in 1985, with the Diolkos already heavily eroded, the Canal Company was permitted to build a nearby bridge although the initial permit called for a prior study for the conservation of the monument. This obligation was "forgotten" by the Ministry of Culture, which quickly sent a commission and gave the go-ahead for the bridge upon the demand of the Canal Company's President.

Around 1989 the local Ephorate took part in a small study that proposed to embellish with plants, lighting and benches the then "intact" part of the monument, disregarding the quite extensive damaged part of the Diolkos. In 1999, after four decades of abandonment and with the initial part of the Diolkos already heavily devastated, two local members of Parliament presented written questions about the Diolkos. The official answer of the Minister of Culture was that the local ephorate had asked the Canal Company for a "study of the currents", after which measures would be proposed for the monument. Such incidents are only peaks in a constant background of neglect. At the beginning of March 2007 the Direction for the Restoration of Ancient Monuments (DAAM) finally proceeded with the first small rescue action, by supporting two precarious points of the long erosion front. At the end of May, in a meeting at the Ministry of Culture, there was a new understanding according to which the DAAM should have a first study ready and approved within two months. Extended protection measures are expected to follow. This first study will be used as the base for further studies and funding for the protection and restoration of the monument.

The petition for saving and restoring Diolkos has already received more than 5,300 signatures originating from 81 countries (see www.thepetitionsite.com/petition/870477005).

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A plan of the Diolkos by Walter Werner. The letters C and D correspond to different states of disruption at the time the plan was drawn.

The Diolkos around 1960, in a photo of the En Athinais Arhaiologiki Etairia and the same part in 2006.



Sector "G" (according to Werner's description) as it was after the excavations (in a photo of the En Athinais Arhaiologiki Etairia) and in 2007. An internal report by an antiquities' guard in 1992, saying that the erosion was approaching this part of the monument and urging the local ephorate to take measures, was disregarded.



An interesting feature of the Diolkos, engraved letters which appear with increasing frequency near its western terminal (as can be seen in a photo of the En Athinais Arhaiologiki Etairia taken during the excavations), lies in the sea.



Two preserved parts of the monument, on the Sholi Mihanikou grounds, in images taken by Walter Werner (in color, 1978) and the En Athinais Arhaiologiki Etairia (around 1960). This second part is visible today only in its general form, since it has been covered by natural growth.





An image taken in 1978 by the German researcher Walter Werner shows already serious erosion.



The extended platform which once constituted a part of the western terminus of the Diolkos today lies in ruins.

One of the two points supported at the beginning of March 2006 by the Direction for the Restoration of Ancient Monuments.



Satellite photo of the fires in Greece (Photo: NASA)

Summer fires in Greece (2007)

(see also special focus on global climate change, pp. 220-223)

Message from ICOMOS Greece of 10 September 2007:

Dear President,

Thank you for your interest regarding the latest news from Greece. Our Cultural and Natural Heritage are running a serious risk. In the last two months the fires have threatened firstly the population, the traditional agricultural production, the natural environment and mainly the Hellenic Cultural Heritage.

Today, the situation improved, even though the danger is not completely removed.

Now we are optimistic, because the State is taking measures. At the same time all the scientific associations and between them the Technical Chamber of Greece and the ICOMOS Hellenic are collaborating with the universities, coordinating and organising proposals for the confrontation of the crisis.

We will keep you informed.

*Best regards
Nikos Agriantonis
President of ICOMOS Hellenic*