

Herodes Attius, Polydeukion, and Health at Brauron

The Classical sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron on the coast of southeast Attica was probably the site of initiation rituals for Athenian girls, but more broadly Artemis Brauronia nurtured and protected children of both sexes. Athenian interventions at Brauron occurred even in the second half of the fifth century, while the city was preoccupied by war and natural disasters. The Athenians themselves might have developed the central pi-shaped stoa in the late fifth century, reacting to devastating outbreaks of plague, appealing to Artemis as an averter of disease.

A fourth-century Athenian inscription mentions several buildings that have not yet been discovered. They included a Parthenon, stables, a palaestra, and assistants' accommodations. What went on at Brauron in late Hellenistic and Roman times is unknown. The Athenians abandoned the site in the third century B.C.E. because of the nearby river Erasinos' frequent flooding.

One of the few Roman objects recovered is a large marble relief depicting Vibullius Polydeukion as a reclining banqueter. Companion of Attic tycoon Herodes Atticus, who made his mark on cities and sanctuaries across the Mediterranean, Polydeukion died young, ca C.E. 165, possibly of a virulent plague brought back by Roman troops from Smyrna. Herodes' concerns with health were apparent near his villa at Loukou in Arcadia. He rededicated two classical banquet reliefs, probably from the Asklepios sanctuary in Athens, at the shrine of a local healing god, Polemakrates, Asklepios' grandson. Pausanias' mention of this shrine is the only reference to Asklepios' grandson. A Roman votive relief from Loukou depicts Polydeukion surrounded by many heroic attributes, including a horse, weapons, and a snake. Inscribed herms

and statue bases found throughout Attica commemorate Herodes' friendship with Polydeukion; some even call him a hero.

The relief at Brauron has been explained as a memorial for one of the Attic places where Herodes and Polydeukion hunted or walked together. But instead, perhaps Herodes Atticus recognized the old Greek tradition of Artemis at this site, nurturer of children and averter of sickness, and established a new rural shrine dedicated to his friend Polydeukion, now a hero and healing deity. Another Roman relief, very unusual, depicts Philoctetes reclining in a cave. Although it is displayed at the Brauron Museum, it was found at nearby Merenda, in the cistern of a water feature, along with a fragmentary inscription lacking the name of the dedicant but mentioning a fountain and the things that went with it. A Byzantine church at Merenda preserves in its walls several inscriptions naming Herodes Atticus. It is just possible that the second century Greek philanthropist and his interest in health and heroes extended beyond the precinct of Brauron itself.