

# Introduction to Western Greece

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Collaborative Digitization of Natural and Cultural Heritage( CD-ETA) Interreg Europe  
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Dear Director of the Ephorate of Antiquities of Achaia Mrs Koumoussi,

Dear Professor Papadaki,

Dear Mr Papachristopoule,

Distinguished Guests and Project Partners of CD-ETA,

It is a great honour for me to give you this introduction to Western Greece, here in Patras at the beautiful space of the Patras Museum.

A few details about me: I am an economic geographer working in sustainable regional development and scientific collaborator of the Department of Environmental and Natural Resources.

My aim in this presentation is to talk through what I believe are the main elements of a strategy for local economic potential, based on natural and cultural resources: the Territories, Identities, the Places and their Dynamics, as these can be seen from within the region and in relation to the outside world.

The territorial aspect is a defining element of any approach to culture and development. The territoriality of Western Greece is at the same time clear, set in law and vague, because the region is defined by a recent administrative boundary. As a geographical term western Greece refers to the wider area of the Ionian littoral of the Greek peninsula, which includes Epirus, Peloponnese, Western Sterea, and the

Ionian Islands. The region of Western Greece is a relatively new administrative region—not a geographical region—one of the 13 planning regions that were set up by the Greek state as the second tier of local government in 1981, above the level of municipalities and below the government's decentralised administrations. Since the local administrative reform of 2010 (Kallikratis) the region has a publicly elected council and secretary general.

In this map you can see the area of the region of aprox. 11,000 sq. km, which covers the Northeastern part of the Peloponnese peninsula and the Western Part of the Greek mainland area of Sterea Ellada. These lands are connected through the narrow strait and bridge of Rio-Antirrio.

As a whole the region of Western Greece covers a rich, diverse part of the land with 700,000 inhabitants comprising three historical and naturally endowed provinces: Achaia, Ileia and Aitolokarnania. It is those three that have their own distinct territories, landscapes, local cultures and histories. For example, the mountain shepherd communities of Kalavryta and Aitolokarnania continue a tradition of human-animal relations that has shaped the land since the times of Homer, with practices like transhumance existing to the present day. Similarly the city dwellers in Patras and the other cities of the region occupy lands, where the ancient Greek, Roman and Medieval past is visible and sometimes surviving to the present day, as in some religious rituals, common habits of Mediterranean diet, and their relation to the sea, for example through fisheries and marine sport activities.

Dear guests, you are visiting Patras and Western Greece at the exact moment when the long-awaited road transport improvement has been completed. The connection to Athens now takes 2 hours, and Ioannina in Northern Greece via the impressive Rio bridge can also be reached in 2 hours. It has been a meme of local tourism and development planning to suggest Patras is the hub of an imaginary

Western axis and therefore the ideal location for experiencing ancient sites as it is roughly equidistant to Olympia, Mycenae-Argos, Corinth and Delphi. Yet as space becomes less important, places become more important, and so does the need to prepare the places and sites of cultural heritage so that the benefits from the improved accessibility can drive regional development in a sustainable and equitable manner. The improved road access is addressing one part of the issue of peripherality that has long affected Western Greece. The challenge for policy now lies in creating opportunities for upgrading in the cultural and tourism sector, which is the main driver of regional growth elsewhere in the country but represents only a small share of economic activity in Western Greece.

As the region's motto suggests Western Greece is "full of contrasts". It's a region of small local places. It contains some of the most diverse and fragile Mediterranean ecosystems. Here contrasts the small with the big, the highland with the lowland, the arable riverside land in Alpheios, with the mountain pasturelands, the deep sea in the Corinth gulf and the Ionian with the alpine summits in Achaia and Aitolokarnania, wetlands and estuaries, the country's biggest internal river Acheloos and lakes like Trichonida, islands and coasts, dense forests of pines, oaks, firs and Mediterranean shrubs and the most productive plain in the Peloponnese, together with the longest stretch of sandy coastline, which is found in the Ionian coast of Ileia.

Bringing the agenda of cultural experience forward—digital or otherwise—can be founded on the region's strong identities and cultural capital. Historically the region has played its part in the formation of the Greek ethnic culture from its origins in pre-history to the present day. All major historical periods have left their traces here. This is a powerful heritage that is worth of rethinking and reinventing.

Strong also is the link with legend. The region is shrouded in myth. Styx, the mythical river and passage to the Underworld, still flows from Mount Aroania. Hercules accomplished three of his labours in this land. He captured the Erymanthian boar, the Cerynean hind, and cleaned Augea's stables in a single day. The creative reconstruction of ancient myths—part of universal heritage with worldwide appeal—can find here novel applications that are linked to the landscape and its physical, social and environmental elements that gave rise to the myth in the first place.

There is a strong imprint of historical processes in the regional monuments. Findings from the nearby Mycenaean citadel are exhibited in the next room. Through antiquity, the Roman conquest, the Byzantine times, the Slavic descent, the Latin and Frankish conquests and the Ottoman rule, cities and the region thrived and fell. Two of the world's greatest naval battles were fought here: the battle of Actium in 31 BC, between Octavian August and the combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra; the battle of Lepanto in the Gulf of Patras in 1571, between the forces of the Holy League and the Ottoman fleet. The nearby city of Nafpaktos known as Lepanto in Venetian times, is hosting a successful festival and re-enactment of the historical naval battle which draws outside visitors.

But there were also tragic moments in history, whose memory is still preserved. The lagoon town of Messolonghi, some 35 km across the Gulf, was the battle ground of the long Siege and Sortie of 22 April 1826. It was this struggle that drew Lord Byron to Greece, where he gave his life. The events of the Sortie prompted Romantic Europe to support Greece's cause for independence and inspired Eugene Delacroix to paint in 1827 "Greece Expiring on the Ruins of Missolonghi". The anniversary event of the Sortie is an important event in the calendar of Messolonghi.

More than a century later, during the Second World War the region and country suffered under Axis occupation. Hideous war crimes were committed by the Nazi German armed forces in 1943, with the Massacre of Kalavryta. The martyr heritage of the town is today commemorated in the Hill of Remembrance and the municipal Museum of Kalavryta holocaust. It was thanks to its resourceful people and a charismatic mayor that the town of Kalavryta managed to change its fate from the devastation of war, to become a successful centre for winter tourism based on the Ski resort, the heritage railway and a strong brand name in dairy production with the PDO Kalavryta feta cheese.

But Western Greece and Ileia is also the land of Peace. The Olympic Games were held in the sacred town of Olympia between 776 BC and 393 AD. Today's Olympic torch relay and Olympic Truce continue to act as a living global symbol of reconciliation between peoples. However, a question that remains is how to animate this important heritage in today's world that is led by globalisation and flexible consumption, and with the increasingly corporate and technological character of sport in the modern Games. This is a hard question, with which the Greek state is struggling following the successful hosting of the 2004 Athens Olympics. There is demand among the public in Ileia for a bigger role for Olympia in the Olympic movement and patrimony.

Ileia's natural and cultural heritage is unparalleled. Apart from Olympia, it also hosts a second world heritage site, the temple of Apollo Epicurios in Figaleia, which is thought to be designed by Iktinos, the architect of the Parthenon. The remains are impressive, towering over the mountain landscape. But sadly, the temple's frieze was looted in 1814 and is now exhibited under poor conditions, in the British museum in London. Another jewel of Ileia, the Kaiafa spa town is famous since antiquity for its thermal springs. Similarly Kyllini, with its Frankish castle at Chlemoutsi, its thermal

springs, national park of the wetlands and ferry link to the Ionian islands, carries a large potential for heritage-led development.

Back to Achaia, the region's capital, Patras with 220,000 people, is the third city in Greece and a center for science, technology, education, commerce and industry, with a long heritage in the wine and spirits sector, and in textiles. It's the country's Western seaport—historic port of migration and of raisin export and host of cultural festivities, such as the famous Carnival and the International festival. The city is linked to the formation of Modern Greece since the 1820s, which is evidenced in its urban plan, in the many monuments and buildings. Patras was Europe's cultural capital in 2006. The city is still looking for a successful approach to cultural regeneration. There is a vibrant theatre and music scene, arts workshops and local eateries. But urban policy remains unstructured, fragmented and underfunded. There are obvious examples where former industrial buildings, elements of the city's identity are left unexploited due to rigid ownership structures and lack of vigour in the local economy. But there is also optimism that the high-speed train connection, the ongoing unification of antique monuments, and the opening up of the car-dominated city centre through sustainable mobility plans, will make Patras a desirable place to live and visit.

Similarly the second city of Western Greece, Agrinio in Aitolokarnania is facing the challenge of ensuring liveability and preserving a proud local identity. For decades the heritage of Agrinio was linked to tobacco plantations and processing, which has now diminished, but efforts from local groups and the municipality are under way to preserve it. Despite the difficulties of population decline in the hinterland, the local businesses are on an upward path that is supported by investment in high value agriculture and food products, such as olives and olive oil, meat and dairy products.

Of course the region of Western Greece faces development challenges. The economic crisis has affected the area disproportionately. The regional income per head remains low at 14,000 EUR per head per year, and unemployment rate during the last years is persistently over 25 percent. Societal issues are prominent.

Addressing inequality, poverty and in-work poverty is an issue. The main urban areas have been hit hard by economic change, with a massive wave of plant closures since the 1980s and limited growth areas in services such as food, health, agriculture and tourism. In Patras and in the hinterland the ageing of society is another issue. The city and citizen services must be redesigned to accommodate elderly citizens, as well as support women, families, young children and young adults to fully enjoy their right to the city. New economy tools such as digitization and digital technologies are helpful in this effort, in the cultural sector and outside.

Equally important climate change is causing environmental degradation and habitat loss. Man-made and natural hazards are affecting communities, heritage sites and monuments across the region. Earthquakes are often and in the warm Mediterranean climate forest fires are also a common threat. The management of natural and cultural resources requires reform to enhance the region's capacity in managing culture, spatial planning within the devolved functions of local self-government.

On a different note, as Europe and Greece are exiting the crisis, the redesigned spatial policies have to become more equitable and more attuned to regional and local issues. For years the EU and national governments had been misallocating funds away from the weighted share of Western Greece into a system that was based on representational rather than developmental terms. Local services here (telecom, urban transport etc) are not on par with the rest of the country, and this is an issue.

A lot remains to be done. The experiences of European regions dealing with similar issues are important for designing applicable, effective policies that tackle natural and cultural heritage successfully. Your role is very important in this.

The Regional Operational Program 2014-2020 of Western Greece has included ambitious aims to protect the natural environment, preserve cultural heritage, maintain areas of particular environmental and aesthetic value and develop the natural and cultural resources of the area.

Technological change is sweeping the world. The sharing economy, the Internet of Things and the factory of the future, are led by widespread adoption of automation, and cause a redefinition of spatial relationships through the digital media, and digitized social relations. This is an opportunity for growth and local upgrading as much as a threat for local jobs, identities and sense of place.

All this showcases the need for prudent cultural and natural heritage preservation policies, of which digitization can be an important part. One such effort is underway within the frame of the Regional Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation. Thanks to the Universities the region has a strong community and talent pool of software engineers, programmers, experts in electronics and communication technologies, that are essential to collaborative digitization efforts. For the first time these important groups are included in the frame of RIS3 strategies, where of course innovative collaborations can be developed.

By upgrading the region's heritage and tourism offering, documenting and informing the preservation of cultural and natural monuments, new sustainable growth areas and activities can be created. The local resources can be enhanced and valorised, assisting in employment creation and the regeneration of communities and local economies.



With these thoughts I welcome you to Western Greece, and wish you enjoy your stay and have a productive meeting.