Greek Theatre

Learning Outcomes

2.4 Examine the audience experience of Athenian tragedy considering the design of the theatre and production aspects (such as costumes, masks, props, actors and chorus)

2.5 Examine the religious festival of the Dionysia as context for the performance of Athenian tragedy, considering its programme, organisation, audience and political relevance.

2.6 Explore how the characters in the studied Greek tragedy, including the Chorus, reflect social roles in Greek society.

2.7 Discuss why theatres are found throughout the eastern Mediterranean and near east world and explain their role as focal points for civic life in Hellenic cities.

Introduction

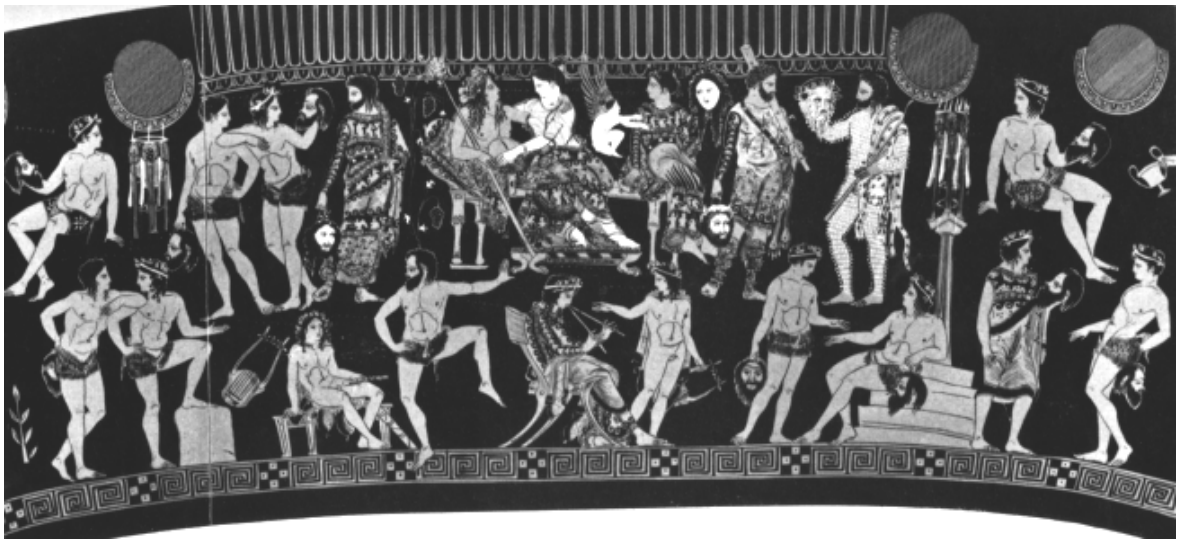
What do you think of when you think of the *theatre*? What was your own experience of visiting the theatre? Have you ever been to the theatre? If not, what was your experience of the cinema?

Most cultures have some kind of entertainment or festivals that include aspects of drama or theatrics. These traditions vary – they could be dance with music, or just music, or a blend of acting, dancing, and music, or just acting. Today when we think of drama we most likely think of acting – be it on stage or on the screen.

The western tradition of drama has its origins in Ancient Greek theatre – these plays influenced Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and modern cinema. Most of what we experience in dramatic performances comes from this Greek tradition. However, Greek theatre was *very* different to our experience.

In this section you will have a look the origins, architecture, artistry and performance of Ancient Theatre.

The Dionysia Festival



Dionysia Festival

Task: Study the vase painting above depicting the Dionysia festival. Describe what you see (see an enlarged version at the end of this section). What impression do you get of Dionysus' festival?

Ancient Greek theatre was more that just entertainment. First and foremost – as with much of Ancient Greek life – it was a religious activity. The origins lie with the god Dionysus – what can you remember about Dionysus from *chapter 1*?

Dionysus' cult was a newer cult that 'invaded' the Greek pantheon. His mythical origins lie in Thebes where he was born to the mortal Semele through Zeus. Born beautiful and inventor of the vine, he travelled the world with his wild followers, *the Maeneds* – wild women who would be intoxicated and go into wild frenzies. Dionysus – or so the myths go – was not welcomed back in his hometown of Thebes upon his return. In Euripides play, *the Bacchae*, he tells the story of Dionysus' return to Thebes. Dionysus' mortal cousin Pentheus rules Thebes; Pentheus, his mother Agave and his aunts Ino and Autonoe, don't believe that Dionysus has a divine birth and refuse him worship in their city. The famous prophet Tiresias warns them to pay the divine Dionysus respect, but they do not listen.

Dionysus uses his power to make Pentheus insane and invites him to witness the rituals of the Maenads in the woods of Mount Cithaeron. Pentheus hides himself in the trees hoping to witness a sexual orgy, but he is spotted. Dionysus maddens the Maenads – now including Pentheus' mother and aunts – who take Pentheus and attack him with their bare hands ripping him limb from limb and mounting his head on a pike.

> *His mother first, as priestess, led the rite of death, and fell upon him, he tore the headband from his hair, that his wretched mother might recognise him and not kill him. 'Mother,' he cried, touching her cheek, 'It is I, your own son Pentheus, whom you bore*

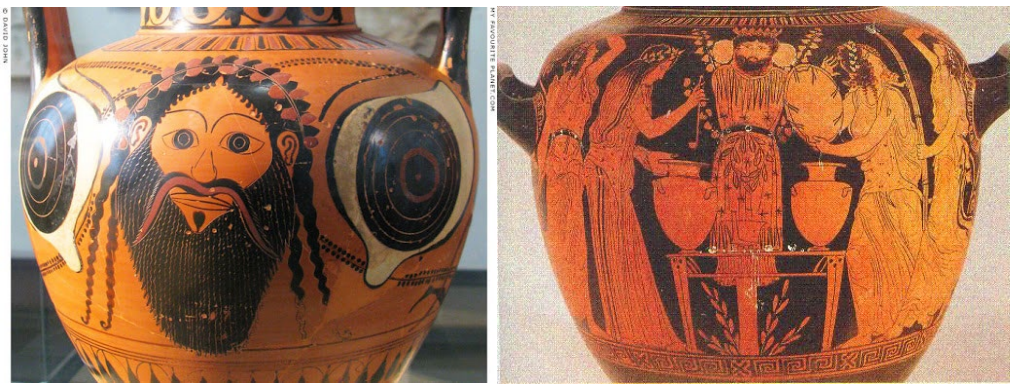
to Echion. Mother, have mercy; I have sinned, but I am still your own son. Do not take my life!'

Agave was foaming at the mouth; her rolling eyes were wild; she was not in her right mind, but possessed by Bacchus, and she paid no heed to him [Pentheus]. She grasped his left arm between wrist and elbow, set her foot against his ribs, and tore his arm off by the shoulder. It was no strength of her that did it, but the god filled her and made it easy.

Extract from Euripides' *The Bacchae* – the death of Pentheus.

Note: Bacchus is the Roman name for Dionysus, but it has origins in Ancient Greek and at times is used there too for Dionysus.

Dionysus then was in many ways a violent 'newer' god that had its roots in the life of the countryside and was in conflict with the city life. Stories of his initial rejection by Greek Kings, then divine repercussions, and then reconciliation are common throughout the Greek world. He was also much more than *simply* the god of wine – his cult was connected to wildness and madness, to **possession**, to **impersonation**, to **dance** and to **performance**. In fact, Dionysus himself is often depicted wearing a mask or as a mask. So, in many ways he was the perfect god to inspire theatre and acting.



Vase paintings of the Mask of Dionysus.

The fact that Dionysus is depicted as a mask is significant because masks were used in Ancient Greek theatre – all performers, actors and chorus, would wear masks. But further to this, the worship of Dionysus can produce state of ecstatic possession, a loss of individual identity in the communal dance, and so perhaps may serve as a divine model for the actor's assumption of an alien personality as well as the audience's temporary identification with the masked figures on stage.

Dionysus' cult was given official status in Ancient Athens in the 6th century by the tyrant, Pisistratus. This was likely because the origins of the cult were in a small rural community of Eleutherai which lay between Boeotia (the land of Thebes and Dionysus' mythical city of origin) and Attica (the land of Athens). This is why the god Dionysus has the epithet Eleuthereus and was **represented by a primitive wooden image.** In the 6th century B.C. Pausanias tells us that a man called Pegasos transferred the region of Eleuthereus and the

cult (including the statue) to Athens rather than Boeotia (with whom they were in conflict) – the archaeology of the Dionysia theatre support this with the earliest temples dating to this period.

A mythical origin for this transfer was also invented. Pausanias tells us of a terracotta statue in a building in the Kerameikos in Dionysia, which shows Amphictyon hosting the god Dionysus and Pegasos in the crowd. The story goes that the Athenians didn't originally pay honour to Dionysus and thus were struck by a severe disease to their male genitals. Upon appealing to the oracle at Delphi they were told to pay honour to Dionysus and particularly to hold a procession with phallus in his honour.

But it was not until the Athenians established democracy, and a radical direct democracy at that, that the theatre and the worship of Dionysus truly came into itself. This could be partially because Dionysus was a god of the people rather than the aristocracy (look at the tale of Pentheus for example). This is also the kind of god and festival that a tyrant like Pisistratus would encourage – increasing his own popularity. But, by the time of Cleisthenes' reforms in 507 B.C. and the inception of democracy in Athens, the cult of Dionysus Eleuthereus was developed and grew into a popular festival with the Athenian citizenry.

Note: Athenian democracy didn't work anything like modern-western democracy. While most magistrates were allotted rather than elected their positions, any citizen could vote on decrees and laws at the Pynx in Athens; the first 6,000 to arrive would be allowed to vote on the laws proposed by the speakers.

The original festival of Dionysus would likely have been some sort of communal dance replicating the wild dances of Dionysus followers, the Maenads. We do not know the details but can see elements of this in the **Chorus** and the dithyramb which were mythical hymns sung by a singular singer, often on the stories of Dionysus himself, with choral refrains danced by a chorus of fifty.

The Chorus was a large group of *male* citizens selected by random allotment from the Athenian citizenry. These citizens were paid to take part in the religious festival of Dionysus, *the Dionysia*. It was also a tradition that a rich Athenian aristocrat, chosen by the Archon, would fund each of the plays – he was called the *Choregos*. These aristocrats would be expected to fund either a play or a fully equipped Greek ship, called a Trireme, supporting the Athenian war effort against Sparta – so you can see the importance of drama if it was seen as the equivalent of the war effort. If the rich patron was stingy with his funding of the chorus it would lose him popularity and would usually mean he would lose the festival. Winning the competition was a sign of great prestige and the shrewd politician would know that funding the chorus was a good way to curry favour. For example, Demosthenes when *choregos* for a dithyrambic chorus provided all fifty of them with golden crowns and himself with a gold crown and gold embroidered robe. This would clearly pay for itself, as Demosthenes was a very successful

Note: The Satyr plays may have had origins that predate the Dionysia Festival itself – a more primitive performance with comic and chaotic elements in honour of the chaotic god.

politician in his time. Typically, the Chorus would be dressed in elaborate clothing and given masks to wear. Whether they were performing a dithyramb or a tragedy or comedy, their dress and masks would have differed to fit the context. For example, in *Medea* they would be dressed as Corinthian women, in *the Bacchae* as oriental women, in Aristophanes' *Frogs* as frogs, in his *Wasps* as wasps, or in the 'Satyr plays', which would be performed after the three tragedies at the Dionysia festival, the chorus would be a chorus of satyrs (half-goat, beastly, with exaggerated phalloi).

Satyr and Maenad

Chorus of Elders

Comic Chorus men on horses.

While we can imagine the beginning of Greek Drama as a festival of Choruses, formed from the *male* citizenry, dancing and singing, dressing in wild costumes and masks, possessed by different characters, this is not how it remained. According to tradition the first 'actor' (a singular person who would impersonate someone) was called Thespis (circa 535 B.C.) – often dubbed the *Inventor of Tragedy*. Thespis was originally a singer of dithyramb, but he apparently invented the idea of taking on the persona of the characters in the mythical song – he was the first to put on a mask and act out the mythological characters of his song and interact with the chorus of dancers. This was an important step to allow drama as we know it to begin.

The next important innovation was by the playwright Aeschylus (525-455 B.C.) (it is worth noting that the playwright would often be the playwright, composer, and performer in their plays). Aeschylus invented the idea of more than one characters which the actors could perform, thus creating dialogue, conflict, and plot – the beginnings of what we call 'plays'. Aeschylus' plays were limited in dialogue and continued to rely heavily on long Choral songs or **stasimon** as they are called in Greek. Sophocles (497-406/5 B.C.) a contemporary and successor of Aeschylus' – and one of the most celebrated playwrights winning 24 out of 30 Dionysia competitions – was credited with the invention of the third actor; thus, the role of the chorus was reduced and the importance of the acting on stage grew in significance. Euripides (480-406 B.C.) was the third 'Great' playwright of 5th century Athens and was credited with the 'humanising' of his characters – the mortal heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles were now more 'ordinary' with many more flaws. He is also often connected with the new and often controversial thinking of the philosopher Socrates which challenged traditional thought.

Note: Comedies were the last type of dramatic performance added to the Dionysia festival in 486 B.C. The most famous comic playwright being Aristophanes.

Programme for the Dionysia Festival
Pre-festival The month of Elaphebolion (9th month of the year) the festival takes place. Some days before the beginning of the festival on the 9th day of the month, the wooden image of Dionysus is taken out of the temple, placed outside the city walls on the road to Boeotia, and into a small shrine in the gymnasium – sanctuary of the Academy; the last convenient stopping place coming from Eleutherai. It would be housed some days and then returned to the temple of Dionysus beside the Dionysiac theatre. This was called '*Bringing in from the sacrificial hearth*'.
The Preliminary – Proagon On the 9th of Elaphebolion, the *choregoi* – or those who fund each play – together with their teams were paraded before the public on a platform which from the 5th century was set up in Pericles' new Odeion. This was a way to show everyone what the festival would contain. The actors would appear out of costume. While there is no evidence that the plays would be announced at this point. But it would be logical: when the plays are started, actors would be in costume and mask, thus there would be no way to know which character they are.
***Pompe* opening procession** On the 10th of the month, the central procession or *pompe* was held: sacrificial bulls would have been taken into the city to be sacrificed to Dionysus and the procession of the *phalloi* which were carried by the *phallopharoi*. Also included in this were the *kanephoroi* (young girls carrying baskets), the *obelaiphoroi* (carrying special long loaves of bread on their shoulders), the resident foreigners of Athens (the *metoikoi*) who wore purple robes and carried *skaphia* or trays of offerings thus called *skaphephoroi*, and the citizens who wore

what they wanted and carried leather bottles on their shoulders or *askoi* and were thus called *askophoroi*. The route of the procession is unknown, but the climax came at the altar near the Dionysiac theatre, and the sacrifices made there (For 333BC. it has been calculated that 240 bulls were sacrificed meaning an abundant of meat and wine for the participants).

Komos night of revelry.

The evening of the 10th was the time of the *Komos*. After dark, men accompanied by torches and music by flutes and harps would take to the streets singing and dancing with further revelry and drinking of course.

Dramatic performances

The following days from the 11th usually till the 15th (4 days but at times of war 3 days and during the Hellenistic period for 5 days) would see the dramatic performances of the Dionysia festival which would be held on the hillside of the Acropolis beside Dionysus' temple. This site would later have wooden seats and then a stone theatre built by the statesman Lycurgus. Approximately, 17,000 to 30,000 people could attend these performance including foreigners or metoikoi. It seems likely that in the 5th century women could attend the tragedies but not the comedies. To attend, one must buy a ticket costing two obols, a minimum day's wage in Athens and so excluding many of the poor attending. Pericles is credited with giving funds so more citizens could attend. Front seats were reserved for magistrates, officials, various priests and priestess of the gods and goddesses and visitors from overseas. The presiding person would have been the priest of Dionysus. It is also suggested that at times the wooden statue of Dionysus was taken out to view the performances.

The first performances of the day in the morning were a group of three tragedies, followed by a Satyr play, and then after a considerable interval in the afternoon by a comedy. It is likely that the audience would have had food, perhaps sweet things or nuts, sometimes thrown to them from the stage. Likewise, the audience were expected to bring their own cushions to ensure comfort for the long days of performances.

The competition

Not only was the *Dionysia* a festival, it was also a drama competition. The organisation of the programme of competitors was quite complex. The *archon* (the leader of the festival) chose three wealthy individuals each year, one from each of the three tribes of Athens, to act as *choregos* for the tragedies, and 5 for the comedies (when 5 were produced). *Choregoi* were also appointed for the dithyramb, three for those sung by men and three for those by boys. The choosing of the members of the choruses, their training, and finally their fitting-out were the most time-consuming and expensive part of production by the *choregoi*. Each *choregos* also had actors assigned to him to a maximum of three, and each had a poet/playwright assigned him. It was the archon who would choose the panel of poets, interviewing them and requiring them to submit samples of their work. There was also a panel of judges – which was done so to avoid favouritism and bribery. The names of the candidates to act as judges were put into 10 jars, which were sealed and placed on the Acropolis until the start of the festival. At the festival, 10 names would be drawn, one from each jar. At the end of the contest the judges would write out the names of the poets

in order of merit. Once more the archon would draw 5 of the written verdicts from a jar. The majority decision of these five was accepted. The winners would win a prize and great renown for their *choregos'* tribe.

Closing ceremonies

The closing ceremonies for the festival varied depending on the period. The closing date for the festival was the same day as the beginning of sailing season and the day for the tribute from the empire to arrive in Athens. This gold was divided into sacks and brought before the public on the orchestra floor. During the Peloponnesian War of the 5th century, there was also a rather grim ceremony – balancing the display of Athens wealth and power in the former. The orphans of those who had died in the war were reared by the state; they would be paraded out in full hoplite/military uniform while a herald would proclaim that these were the sons of those who had died in battle. Thus, the state had funded them and made them ready for battle – to follow their fathers.

In the 4th century, the political and imperial power of Athens had diminished. Instead, there was a practice of offering a golden crown to a popular politician or a benefactor of the city while a herald would pronounce the winner through word of mouth. There is also a record of this period of a herald being paid to pronounce a slave who has been freed – thus ensuring that this slave could remain free.

These closing ceremonies were very significant for the political prestige of Athens. This was mainly because the *Dionysia* festival was one of the only Athenian festivals which allowed metoikoi/foreigners to attend – and VIPs from abroad. So, it was a time for Athens to 'show-off' its success, its *timé*/Honour and *kleos*/renown.

Aftermath

Finally, in one of the days immediately after the festival there would be a public meeting held in the theatre, presided over by the Council of Five Hundred. If it was decided that the Archon had done a good job with the festival, he would be awarded a golden crown. But it also gave the opportunity for any citizen to come forward and lodge a complaint. When we consider the peculiar devotion of the Athenians to *parrhesia* or 'freedom of expression' we can imagine that this was a vital political function of the Dionysia festival – allowing the ordinary citizen to challenge the privileged.

Questions

I. Explain the religious and mythical origins of the *Dionysia Festival*.

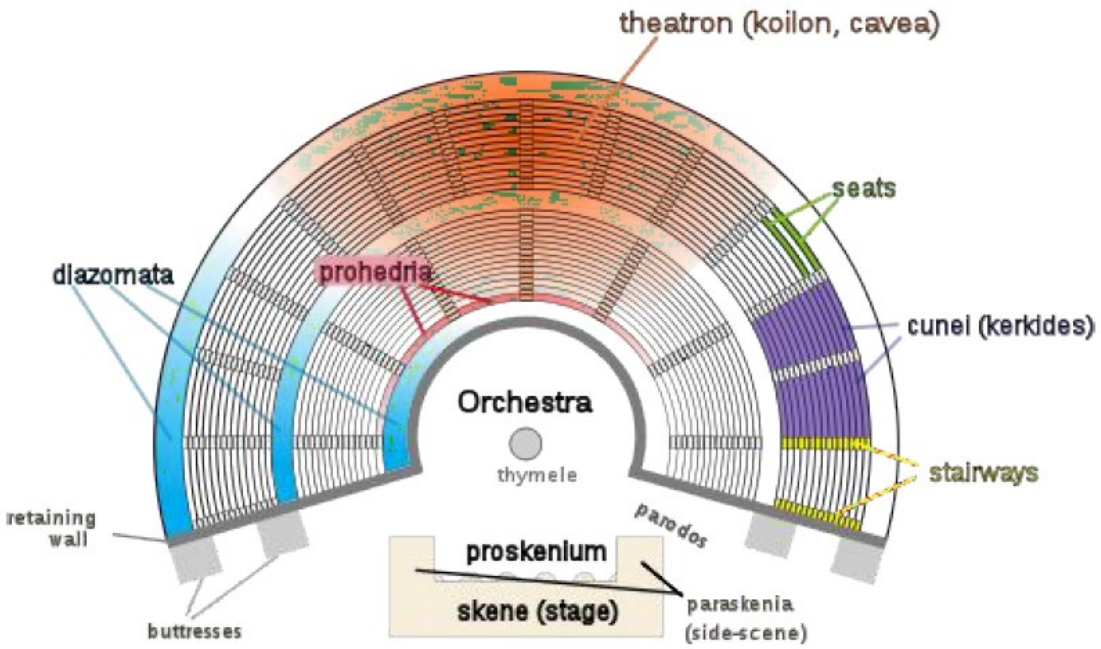
II. What role did the Chorus play in Ancient Drama?

III. What political significance did the Festival of Dionysia hold in Ancient Athens and its democracy?

IV. Outline the programme for the *Dionysia Festival*.

Vase painting of Dionysia Festival

Theatres: the building & distribution



ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE

Ancient Greek theatres have a lot in common with their temples: they were both centres of religious and political significance, they can both be found across the Mediterranean world, and they have had a profound influence on modern architecture.

The theatre design was built around the chorus: the orchestra with an altar in the centre and then the curved circular auditorium (*theatron*) surrounded this orchestra. Usually, the *theatron* was situated on a sloping hill – it would be the Romans who would engineer vaulted substructures allowing theatres to be built of an already existing slope.

Later, with the introduction of the actor, there was a need to facilitate the actors coming and going and changing of costume. A stage (*skene*) was added separated from the auditorium by two side passages (*paradoi*). Initially this stage was level with the orchestra but was soon raised and provided with a colonnade backdrop.

Initially, all theatres were made from wood and were temporary to begin with – they would be raised for the *Dionysia* and then taken down afterwards. However, by the Hellenistic period more stone structures had been built and would continue to be built. For examples in 333 B.C. the *Dionysiac* theatre on the Acropolis in Athens would be at last constructed with stone by Lycurgus (a Hellenistic politician of significance).

Theatre of Dionysus

Digital reconstruction of the 'wooden' Theatre of Dionysus

The theatre of Dionysus in Athens was particularly designed for the religious festival – the front row seats reserved for the politicians of importance on which you can still read 'Reserved for the priest of Dionysus'. So, the design was both functional, sitting the max 30,000 citizens who attended, and purposeful, in both the religious and political senses. However, it was certainly not comfortable – no cushions, no shelter from the sun or protection from the elements, and a long day of plays.

Another stone theatre built around this time – in 350 B.C. – by Polykleitos the Younger, was the *Theatre of Epidaurus*:

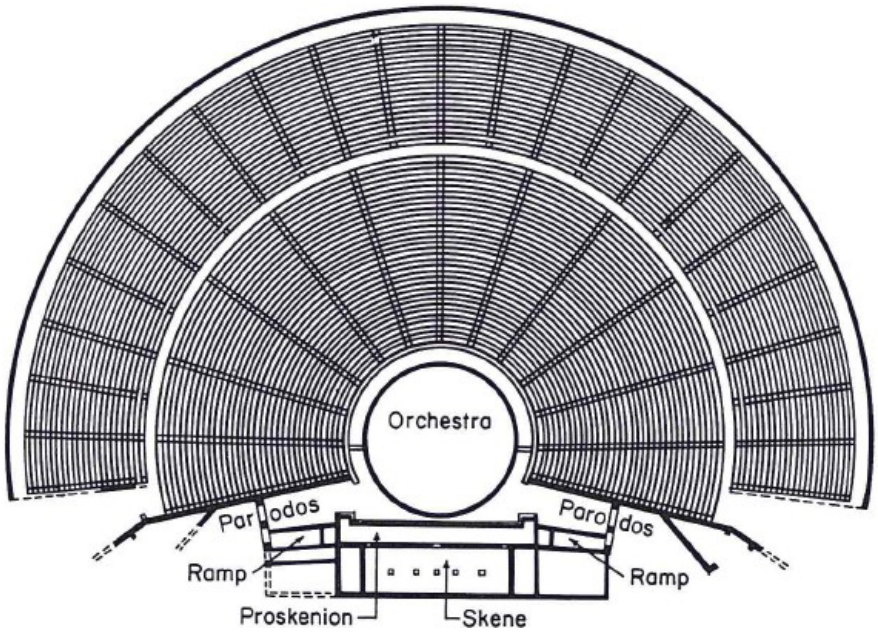
- The orchestra is 80 feet in diameter, with an altar to Dionysus in the centre.
- Behind the orchestra rises the auditorium, in a shape little more than a semi-circle. The auditorium was divided by an ambulatory (***diazoma***) into two storeys. It is also divided by radiating stairways into wedge-shaped sectors (***kerkides***); 12 divide the

lower level and 23 divide the upper level.

- The entire structure was built from stone. Seats of honour (***proedria***) had backs and arm rails (other theatres might decorate these seats with relief). Other seats were backless with hollowed out front surfaces allowing occupants to pull back their legs as people passed. Each seat was 2 feet 5 ¼ inches; the height varied from 13 inches in the lower story to 17 inches in the upper. The back parts of the seats were slightly depressed. These ensured that all spectators were accommodated with comfort.
- There is also the usual stage (***Skene***) with colonnade, a ***proskenion*** – a narrower stage at the front of the *skene* allowing for solo actors to stand out. Ramps led up to the stage from each side, and the two *parodoi* ran between the stage and the auditorium.

The *theatre of Epidaurus* is highly functional and comfortable compared to the Dionysiac one. It is purposefully built so that the maximum enjoyment can be attained by all.

Theatre of Epidaurus

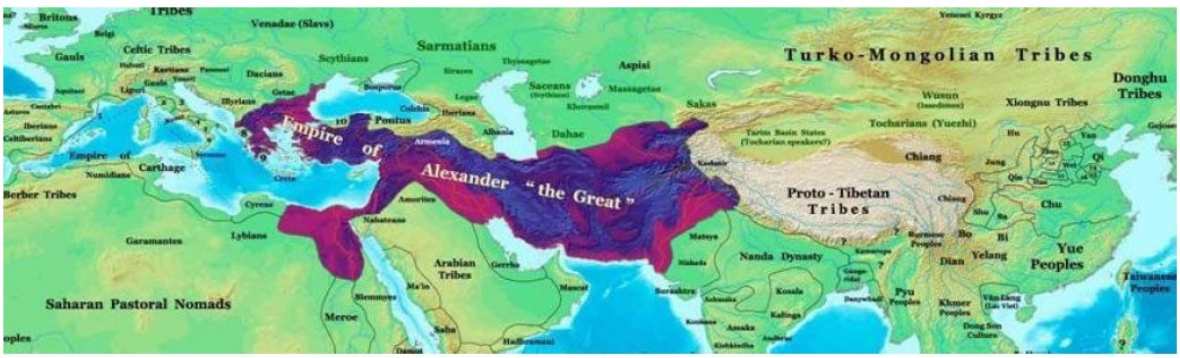


Once more, however, the theatre is situated on a hill rather than an independently supported structure.

It is important to remember that Greek civilization is not confined to small period but rather to several hundred years. The Archaic beginnings of drama with Pisistratus shifted to the democratic competition of the 5th and 4th century *Dionysia*. However, even by the time of the 4th century things had changed. New plays were less often produced, and instead old tragedies were reproduced – reusing the old tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. There was also the invention of 'Middle Comedy' which was dramatically different from the old comedy of Aristophanes: the role of the chorus was dramatically decreased, there objects of ridicule were general rather than specific, literary rather than political, and public persons where not characterised. This was mainly due to a change in Athenian society which saw a diminishing of their radical 5th century democracy and 'free-speech'.

It is also important to remember that the Greek world was not confined to the nation we call Greece today. It in fact was a culture and civilization that spread across the Mediterranean world, from Spain, to North Africa, to the middle east, and to Russia. The Greeks colonised much of this world in the 7th and 6th century B.C. Then in 336 B.C. Alexander the Great – king of Macedon – conquered the Greek cities and spread Greek culture across thee Middle-east, from what is today Turkey, to Iran, to Afghanistan and India.

Greek colonies



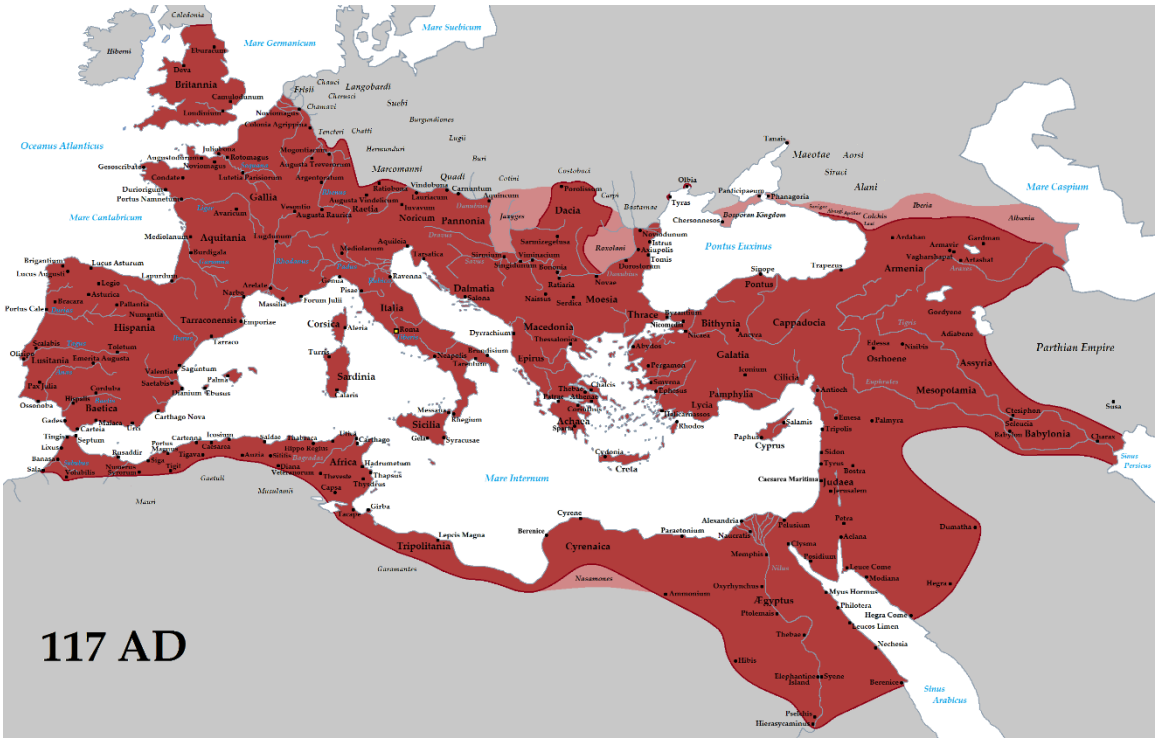
Alexander's Empire

These expansion and conquests meant that Greek culture became highly influential in these regions. After the death of Alexander, the Great, his empire soon split up. It was divided among his generals who would strive to show that they were his rightful successor and that they inherited his leadership of the Greeks and Greek culture. And thus begins the Hellenistic Kingdoms.

Note: We will learn more about the significance of Alexander the Great and his influence on the Greek world later in this course.

The Hellenistic period (326 B.C. to mid-2nd century B.C.) is a time when Greek culture was somewhat standardised to conform to *koine* Greek language and culture. In Hellenistic cities like Pergamon there was an attempt to create universal styles of sculpture, and in Egypt and the Ptolemaic kings another sfumato style of art. As part of this cultural program, the Greek theatres were more often constructed from stone – due to the increased wealth of the kings and an attempt to centralise culture. It also became popular to 're-run' ancient tragedies from the Classical Period (particularly from Ancient Athens) and cease new tragedies being written at all. Claiming some of this glory of the Classical period was a way to reinforce their right to rule the Greeks. New Comedy was invented differing both from Middle and Old Comedy: now there was no chorus, and the stories were romantic stories dealing with ordinary people's lives and littered with slapstick humour.

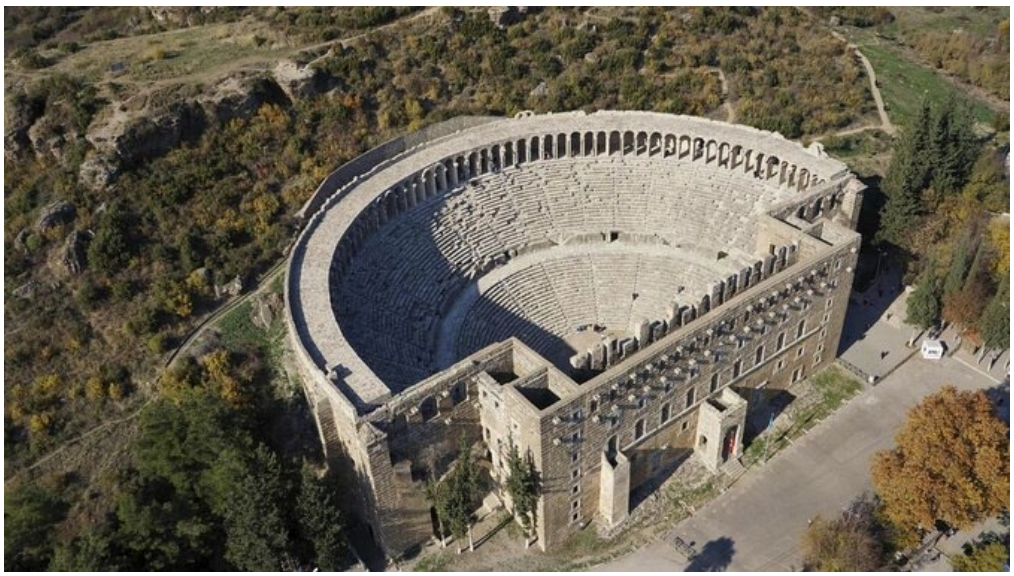
During the Hellenistic Period we also see the expansion of the Roman Empire. The Romans conquered most of the Hellenistic world by the mid-2nd century (circa 140 B.C.) Within another century they would conquer the last Hellenistic Kingdom in Egypt – Cleopatra's Egypt. However, Greek culture had taken root in the middle east with the Hellenistic kingdoms. And so, the Roman Empire was cultural split east and west – east was Greek and west Latin/Roman.



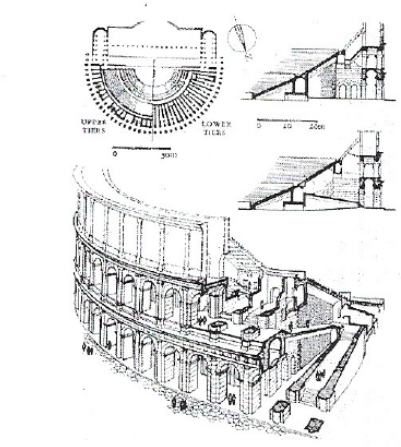
Roman Empire at greatest extent.

Roman Engineering allowed for more complex theatres to be built in the Hellenistic kingdoms – theatres with elaborate backdrops of varying colonnades, side walls that would surround the auditorium, and awnings that could cover the auditorium acting as a roof and shielding the audience from the weather. An excellent example of this shift can be found in the *Theatre of Aspendos*, in Turkey.

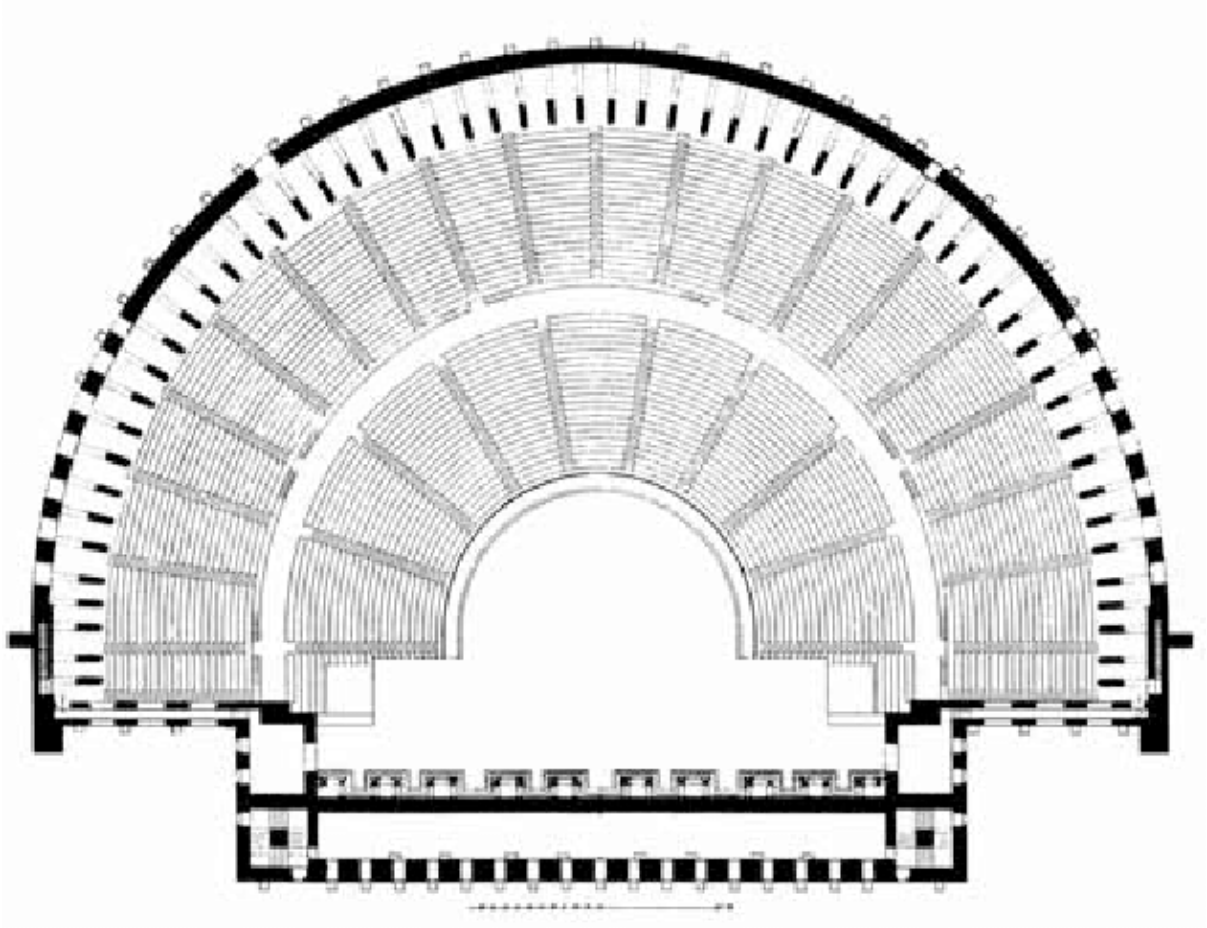
The *Theatre of Aspendos* was built in 155 B.C. (at a period of transition from Hellenic to Roman) by the Greek architect Zenon, a native of the city. It has a width of 96 metres and provides seating for 12,000. A small part of the theatre was built against a hill were the Acropolis stood, while the remainder was built on vaulted arches. The high stage served to isolate the audience from the rest of the world. The '**scaenae frons**'/backdrop is intact. An 8.1 metre wooden ceiling of the backdrop has been lost over time. 58 holes for masts can be found on the upper level which would have supported the velarium or awning. It is also significant that these later theatres had only a semi-circle for the *orchestra* – emphasising the diminished use of the chorus.



Theatre of Aspendos



Vault system



Theatre of Aspendos Plan

Questions

I. Explain these key terms:
Orchestra *Skene* *Scaenae Frons* *Theatron* *Paradoi* *Prohedria*

II. Choose **one** Greek theatre you have studied. Describe this theatre using the technical terminology.

III. Explain the significance the Ancient Greek theatre had in Ancient Greek society from the Classical Period to the Hellenistic Period.

IV. Compare the construction of the *Theatre of Epidaurus* to the *Theatre of Aspendos*. (Use the pictures to help).

V. From your study of Greek Drama, its performance, and the architecture of Greek theatre, write an account describing the experience of the audience of an Ancient Greek dramatic performance.