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This article provides a comprehensive overview of the architectural typology and intricate design features of Ancient Greek theatres. Delving into their historical significance and cultural importance, we unravel the ingenuity behind these iconic structures that were the epicentres of dramatic performances in Greece. Discover how these theatres not only served as venues for entertainment but also as social and political hubs that shaped the course of Hellenic civilization. I. The Orchestra The Orchestra in Ancient Greek theatre was a central, circular area where the main action of the plays took place. Positioned at the foot of the auditorium (theatron), it was the focal point for the audience. The term “Orchestra” translates to “dancing place,” reflecting its primary use as the performance space for the chorus, a group of actors who provided commentary on the events of the play through song and dance. The presence of the chorus in the Orchestra helped to bridge the gap between the audience and the actors, involving the audience more directly in the performance and enhancing the emotional impact of the play. In many theatres, an altar dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and theatre, was placed at the center of the Orchestra. This altar served as a reminder of the religious origins and function of theatre in ancient Greece. Over time, the Orchestra evolved from a full circle into a semi-circular shape, providing more room for other elements such as the skene – a backdrop building used for scene changes and housing props. In conclusion, the Orchestra played a crucial role in ancient Greek theatre. Its central position and function as the main performance space made it a key component in Greek drama, contributing to the overall theatrical experience and emotional engagement of the audience. II. The Scene The ‘Skene’ or ‘Scene’ in ancient Greek theatre was a crucial architectural element that greatly enhanced the theatrical experience. The term ‘Skene’ translates to ‘tent’ or ‘hut’, indicative of its early and humble beginnings as a simple structure, possibly made from wood or cloth. Initially, the Skene was likely used as a dressing room for actors, but over time, its function evolved dramatically. By the 5th century BC, the Skene had become an integral part of the theatre’s backdrop. It was a permanent, substantial building behind the Orchestra, often decorated with painted panels (pinakes) to serve as scenery, providing context and setting for the plays. The Skene typically had multiple doors, which allowed for dynamic entrances and exits of the actors. In tragedies, the central door often symbolized the royal palace or the home of the play’s protagonist. In comedies, the doors could represent different houses or locations within the city. One significant development was the addition of a second story to the Skene, known as the episkenion. This provided an elevated acting area, further expanding the opportunities for dramatic action. The Skene also housed machinery like the ‘mekane’ for lifting actors, and the ‘Ekeclema’, a wheeled platform for revealing tableaux such as the aftermath of violent acts. These innovations added depth to the storytelling, creating dramatic visual effects that heightened the theatrical experience. In terms of cultural significance, the Skene reflects the Greeks’ innovative spirit and their commitment to enhancing the theatrical experience. The evolution of the Skene from a simple tent to a complex, multi-functional building mirrors the development of Greek drama itself, from basic choral performances to sophisticated theatrical productions. In conclusion, the Skene was a vital component of Ancient Greek theatre, serving not just as a backdrop, but as a dynamic, functional part of the performance, contributing to the visual spectacle, narrative context, and dramatic impact of the plays. III. The Koilon The Koilon, also known as the Theatron, is an essential component of the Greek theatre typology. It refers to the seating area where the audience sat to watch performances. The term “Koilon” translates to “hollow” or “cavity,” indicative of its structure. Located on the slope of a hill, the Koilon was typically semi-circular and terraced, taking advantage of the natural contours of the landscape for both construction convenience and acoustics. The audience seats were usually made from stone or wood and were arranged in tiers, divided by stairways into sections for easier access. The size of the Koilon varied among different theatres, but it could often accommodate several thousand spectators, reflecting the popularity and societal importance of theatre in ancient Greece. An excellent example is the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, which could seat around 15,000 spectators. One notable feature of the Koilon is the ‘orchestra’, the circular performance area at the bottom of the Koilon. This arrangement allowed for a close connection between the performers and the audience, enhancing the communal experience of the performance. The front row of the Koilon often consisted of stone thrones, reserved for priests and public officials, reflecting the intertwined nature of religious, political, and cultural life in ancient Greece. In terms of cultural significance, the Koilon is a testament to the democratic nature of Greek society. Unlike modern theatres, there were no private boxes; all viewers, regardless of their social status, watched the performance from the same general area, fostering a sense of community and equality. In conclusion, the Koilon was not just a physical structure but a crucial component of the social and cultural fabric of ancient Greek society. It facilitated the communal experience of theatre, reinforcing societal values and norms, and reflecting the democratic ethos of Greek civilization. IV. Machines and Equipment The ancient Greek theatre also featured a variety of machines and equipment to enhance the performances. These included the Aeorema, a platform that allowed actors to fly in and out of scenes; the Periactoi, which rotated to reveal different scenes to the audience, and the Ekeclema, a wheeled platform used to bring out bodies and other props. These machines and equipment were essential to creating a fully immersive and engaging theatrical experience for the audience. The Aeorema The Aeorema is a fascinating part of ancient Greek theatre history. It was a mechanical device, often referred to as a crane, used to create the illusion of flight for actors and props during performances. The Aeorema played a significant role in manifesting the divine intervention, a common trope in Greek tragedies. The Aeorema was typically a large, sturdy structure, capable of lifting and moving significant weight. It was lever-operated, with one end anchored to the skene – the backdrop building of the theatre – and the other extending out over the orchestra, the circular performing space. When in use, it would hoist an actor, usually playing a god or goddess, into the air, creating a dramatic effect of divine beings descending from the heavens to intervene in the earthly affairs taking place on stage[3][4]. The Aeorema was integral to the theatrical performances of its time, contributing to the spectacle and grandeur of Greek theatre. It was especially prevalent in tragedy genre, where divine intervention was a common plot device. The Aeorema allowed the gods to appear suddenly and unexpectedly, reinforcing the concept of ‘deus ex machina’ – literally, ‘god from the machine’ – a term still used in modern storytelling to denote a sudden, unexpected solution to a seemingly insurmountable problem. While the exact origins of the Aeorema are unclear, it likely evolved alongside other elements of Greek theatre during the 5th century BC, a period when theatre was becoming increasingly sophisticated and popular. The Aeorema, along with other devices like the ekkyklema (a wheeled platform for revealing ‘dead’ characters), demonstrated the Greeks’ ingenuity and willingness to incorporate technology into the arts. Despite its cultural significance and technological innovation, the use of the Aeorema gradually declined as Greek theatre evolved and tastes changed. As Roman influence grew, theatre became less focused on the divine and more on human drama, reducing the need for such dramatic mechanical effects. However, the concept of ‘deus ex machina’ lives on in storytelling today, a testament to the enduring impact of Greek theatre. The This article provides a comprehensive overview of the architectural typology and intricate design features of Ancient Greek theatres. Delving into their historical significance and cultural importance, we unravel the ingenuity behind these iconic structures that were the epicentres of dramatic performances in Greece. Discover how these theatres not only served as venues for entertainment but also as social and political hubs that shaped the course of Hellenic civilization. I. The Orchestra The Orchestra in Ancient Greek theatre was a central, circular area where the main action of the plays took place. Positioned at the foot of the auditorium (theatron), it was the focal point for the audience. 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Despite its size, it could be quickly and quietly rotated by stagehands, making transitions between scenes smooth and unobtrusive. This feature was essential in maintaining the flow of the performance and keeping the audience engaged in the unfolding drama. The periactoi’s origin can be traced back to the classical era of ancient Greece, around the 5th century BC. Its use became widespread during this time, as Greek theatre began to incorporate more complex sets and scene changes into performances. One of the best examples of the use of periactoi is in the play “Oedipus Rex” by Sophocles. Here, the periactoi was used to depict the different locations within the city of Thebes where the action took place, such as the royal palace and the city gates. By simply rotating the periactoi, the stage was transformed, transporting the audience to a new location within the story. In conclusion, the periactoi was an innovative and effective device in ancient Greek theatre, enabling swift scene changes and enhancing the visual storytelling process. Although no original periactoi survive today, their impact on theatre set design and stagecraft is undeniable. The Ekeclema The Ekeclema, hailing from ancient Greek theatre, was a critical piece of stage machinery ingeniously designed to display interior scenes or props, most often ‘dead bodies’, to the audience. Due to the conventions of Greek drama, acts of violence, murder, or suicide were not portrayed directly on stage. Instead, these events would occur offstage and the aftermath, typically in the form of ‘dead bodies’, would be revealed using the Ekeclema. This wheeled platform was rolled out through a door in the skene, the backdrop building of the theatre. It was a large, sturdy structure that could support the weight of several actors or substantial props. The Ekeclema was designed to move smoothly and quietly, ensuring a seamless transition and maintaining the flow of the performance. In terms of its role in storytelling, the Ekeclema was crucial for conveying key plot developments that occurred offstage. For example, in Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex”, the Ekeclema was used to display the body of Jocasta, Oedipus’ wife, after her offstage suicide. This revelation, made possible by the Ekeclema, dramatically underscored the tragic climax of the play. Overall, the Ekeclema was a testament to the innovative spirit of ancient Greek theatre, showcasing the Greeks’ ability to enhance their dramatic storytelling through clever stagecraft. Despite its specific use for revealing ‘dead bodies’, the Ekeclema contributed significantly to the visual and emotional impact of Greek drama. V. Odeia The Odeia was a smaller, enclosed theatre used for musical and tragic performances. Unlike the Koilon, the Odeia was built with better acoustics and a more intimate setting. While Koilons were used for larger, more grand performances, the Odeia was reserved for smaller productions. However, both types of theatres played essential roles in Greek culture and helped to popularize the art of theatre throughout Greece. Conclusion The ancient Greek theatre and its three major parts, the Orchestra, the Scene, and the Koilon, have had a profound influence on modern theatre. Through the use of innovative machines and equipment and the unique design of the Odeia and Koilon, the Greeks created an immersive theatrical experience that captured the imaginations of audiences for centuries. As you explore Athens and its many famous historical sites, don’t miss the opportunity to learn more about this rich cultural legacy. The periactoi was a vital scene-changing device in ancient Greek theatre, contributing greatly to the dynamics of storytelling. 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Many believe that the ancient Greeks were the first to invent theater.Although stories have been passed down from generation to generation since the beginning of time, it was the Greeks who were the first to record and perform these tales for audiences in formal theaters.These social spaces were constructed with three distinct sections for these gatherings.The ancient Greek theater was divided into three sections: the Orchestra, the Scene, and the Theatron, which was known as the Koilon.Theaters were established by the ancient Greeks for the public to see satyr, tragedy, and comedy acts.They subsequently spread the notion throughout their colonies in the Aegean, resulting in the widespread presence of theaters in Greek cities across the country.The orchestra was positioned in front of the stage, facing the audience, in a nearly circular arrangement.The Thymeli, in the orchestra’s middle, served as both an altar and a platform for the chorus’s conductor, Coryphaeus, in its early years.An archaeological investigation in the Athenian area provided some evidence for rectangular orchestras, but the circular design was the most common and most closely linked to Dionysiac cult practices in ancient Greek theaters (they believed the circle possessed metaphysical power).Even though the orchestra used to be where actors performed, the action eventually migrated to the stage and, to be more specific, to a section called Proscenio since it was located at the front of the stage (pro+scene).Performers were able to enter the scene by one or more entrances. A Palace or Temple-like backdrop was used on the sides of the stage facing the audience.Paintings depicting different topics, such as woods, army camps, etc., were afterward added to the scenography (i.e. theatrical painting).On either side of each seat were two additional entrances, known as Parodoi, from where the chorus and others who had come from outside of the Temple or Palace were joining the scene.If arriving from the metropolis or a harbor, someone would enter the parodos from the right.They were expected to have come from the countryside or another country if they were arriving from the left parodos.Two structures with doors leading into the Proscenio were located toward the rear of the scene, and depending on their ornamentation, they could serve to further develop the scene’s theme or present a whole new one.The Logeion, a narrow but elevated platform, was constructed along the Scene’s back wall. The actors had a designated area where they could be isolated from the rest of the cast.In traditional theater, there was no logeion, so the presentation took place solely inside the orchestra.Hence, this construction may have emerged in the Hellenistic era.Theos (the Greek word for deity) was the Greek name for the flat roof that sat atop the set.The audience was seated in the Theatron (or Koilon) of a Greek theater. Due to its shape, it was known as a “koilon.”It had a semi-circular form and was constructed around an orchestra. The upper and lower Diazoma were separated from each other.The audience initially gathered around the orchestra in a semicircle. Eventually, the Greeks began construction on the Koilon.Spectators are said to have brought pillows to sit on in the 5th century. The Koilon was divided into wedge-shaped portions by radial staircases to make it easier for spectators to enter and exit.Proedria chairs were allocated for high-ranking officials and clergy. The priests of Eleftherios Dionysus, seated on a marble pedestal, were the theater’s most esteemed audience.Other than the orchestra, which was made of stone, all of the theater’s pieces were made of wood and could be moved.Toward the end of the 5th century BC, the Greeks began to construct stone-built Scenes and Koilons (as a replacement for the previous wooden structures).The instruments used in the performance were maintained in the permanent scene:The ekeclema: On a wheeled platform, the bodies of the dead were displayed (since spectators were not supposed to see a killing or a suicide scene).The Periaktoi: These two prismatic pillars are used to change a scene’s background by rotating in the direction of its axons, which are placed on either side of the scene.Aroma: A crane known as deus ex machina that brought the gods to the scene.Theaters that were located indoors were called Odelias, and typically only music and sad Proagones were performed in these.There were three types of plays in Greek theaters: satyrs, tragedies, and comedies.Not all Greek comedies were amusing. When we talk about a “comedy,” we’re talking about a play with a happy conclusion.The “everyman hero” is the focus of many comedies. When it comes to the first-ever situational comedies, we can look no further than ancient Greek playwright Menander, who created several of the world’s earliest plays in an episodic style.Political satire was a specialty of Aristophanes, who was classical Greece’s preeminent comic author.Aristophanes’ plays, unlike most comedies, focused on the vices and scandals of the wealthy and powerful, like in his best-known comedy, “Lysistrata.”Tragedies in Greek literature focused on the darker sides of human nature, like love as well as bereavement.As the term “terrible hero” suggests, the protagonists of these plays are typically excellent people who commit a tragic error out of arrogance.Often, he and the people he cares about are destroyed by his error. It’s not uncommon for the tragic hero to be wealthy, influential, or otherwise “above normal.”By identifying with imagined anguish, the Greek spectator could forget for a moment about their issues and focus on the fictional characters’ plight.This was known as “catharsis.”When the tragedy was performed, Aristotle argued, it “purified the soul.” Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles were among the most well-known polished tragedians.Several of their masterpieces, such as “The Bacchae,” “Oedipus Rex,” as well as “The Orchestra,” also persevered into the contemporary age.In Greek theatre, a brief play known as a satyr was a humorous play occurring between the acts of a tragic play.When it comes to Greek mythology, the satyr was a half-goat, half-man creature. Satyr plays sometimes featured performers donning huge artificial penises for comic effect.They would make fun of the unfortunate circumstances of the personalities in the play. To entertain the audience, the satyr plays operated as a form of levity.Because of their satirical nature, these plays have inspired the term “satire”.The structure of all Greek plays, regardless of whether they were comedy or tragic, was the same.A prologue was read by one or two performers at the start of the play. The chorus would then enter and begin singing.The chorus introduced every one of the show’s three scenes with a tribute. Rather than a distraction, their songs functioned as a catalyst for action.Each play was acted out by a cast of up to three actors, all of whom were male. It was common for actors to don masks and play various roles.Choral conductor, choreographer, and composer were all roles played by the dramatist himself. In some cases, they even performed in their plays.When it came to public spectacles, the Romans were huge admirers of Greek architecture and replicated and improved upon it in their style.They expanded the fixed background surrounding the Greek theater sets.The Dionysos Eleuthereus theater’s marble stage was decreased to its current semi-circular shape by Nero’s addition of magnificent Roman-style stage construction.Also, in the second or third century CE, the stage was expanded to include a low podium for the presenter (bema).The orchestra was also concreted by the Romans, and then an awning roof (vela) was sometimes erected, as were substructures beneath the seats, and theaters were generally decorated with monumental sculptures, unusual marble pillars, as well as solace carvings on the stage.The Roman theater’s enclosed and even suffocating atmosphere would more closely resemble modern theaters as their backstages and roofs rose in height.On the island of Crete, a Minoan open area with tiered seats can still be seen in Phaistos, where the first Greek theaters can be found.Beginning in the sixth century BCE, the first theaters were constructed entirely of wood and made with a stage made of trudged soil placed in front of a natural hill, where people might sit and attend religious activities.Even while it may have started in the form of a rectangular configuration of seats, the semicircular configuration soon became the norm, making it possible for more people to see and enjoy the shows.Stages were roughly one meter above the surface and had stairs at the front, as per Greek pottery depictions of theaters from the 5th to the 4th century BCE.It was common for actors to enter the stage via a single central entryway in the backdrop behind them, which was sometimes designed to mimic a temple, castle, or cave.It’s also extremely possible that painted scenery was used. There may also have been a platform at the top of the stage where actors could assume the role of gods and speak to the audience from.It was common practice to utilize an ekkylema (a wheeled platform) to expose new scenery as well as a crane to raise actors portraying deities or heroes out through the entryway.All of the seating in the fourth century BCE were made from stone, and pathways were built to connect portions of benches.Stone ramps were installed at the theater’s entryways to make it easier for the audience to exit.Finally, stone and semi-columns were used to construct the stage background or backdrop. The theatre had now taken on the architectural shape that would become the norm in the Greek and Roman empires in the centuries following. They consisted of three main elements: the orchestra, the skene, and the audience. What are three Greek Theatre characteristics? The four major qualities of Greek drama were that they were performed for special occasions (such as festivals), they were competitive (prizes were awarded for the best show), they were choral (singing was a large part of drama, and the chorus was all men, about 3 to 50 of them), and they were closely associated with … What are the 3 components of ancient Greek tragedy? ‘” Aristotle defined three key elements which make a tragedy: harmartia, anagnorisis, and peripeteia. Hamartia is a hero’s tragic flaw; the aspect of the character which ultimately leads to their downfall. What are the parts of Greek Theatre? The architecture of the ancient greek theatre consists of three major parts: the Orchestra, the Scene and the main theatre, called Koilon. The Orchestra was the almost circular place, situated in front of the scene (stage) facing the audience. What are the elements of Greek drama? According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and song (music), of which the first two are primary. What was the architecture of the Greek Theatre? Description of a Theater of 5th Century B.C. The architecture of the ancient greek theatre consists of three major parts: the Orchestra, the Scene and the main theatre, called Koilon. The Orchestra was the almost circular place, situated in front of the scene (stage) facing the audience. What is the structure of a Greek play? Prologue:As in tragedies. Parode (Entrance Ode):As in tragedies, but the chorus takes up a position either for or against the hero. Agôn (Contest):Two speakers debate the issue (typically with eight feet per line), and the first speaker loses. Choral songs may occur towards the end. How many plays were there in the Greek Theater? Drama is a Greek word meaning ‘action’, related to the verb dran ‘to do’. Many dramas were presented in the theater in Athens, yet only 43 plays have been found intact. There were, however, many plays, comedies, and commentaries left in fragments. Where was the orchestra located in Greek Theatre? The Orchestra was the almost circular place, situated in front of the scene (stage) facing the audience. At the center of the orchestra was situated the Thymeli, which at the early years was meant to be an altar and later on, a place, where the leader of the chorus (koryphaios) was standing. 06-10-2015 by (gr) The word Theatre comes from the ancient Greek and originally meant the total number of viewers. Later it meant the space and the performance itself. The first Greek theatres were associated with the worship of Dionysus. Open circular space that worshiped God over time gradually transformed in this architectural form of the ancient theatre. There were three basic parts of the ancient theatre: The theatron or koilon mainly , the part that was intended for viewers. The Orchestra, the circular or semicircular space where there were the dancers (choros). The scene, the space of hypocrites (actors). The Greek Tragedy The Western-style theater was born in ancient Greece, with the tragedy. This theatrical form started with the rituals of the worship of Dionysus, God of fertility and wine. The ceremonies emphasized on the intense and painful sides of life so the tragedy in finished form (5th century BC) dealt with problems of conscience sending a violent, mournful and moral message. Aeschylus, Sophocles , and Euripides were the largest Greek tragic poets. The tragedy in sophisticated form has the following structure: beginning with a "preface" usually, that introduces the Viewer to the affair, continues with "parodos", the song that sings the chorus while entering the Orchestra and follow the "episodes" interactive parts, where the faces of tragedy collide, committing the tragic error and cause the intervention of higher power. The "episodes" alternated with choral chants, the "stasima", where members of the dance sing, philosophizing about life, advise, hope the disaster won’t happen, but fail to prevent it. The last part of the tragedy is the «exit». Typical, also, for the narrative and dramatic value are the scenes of recognition, where a person recognizes another, which had been lost. The Comedy In ancient Greece the tragedy was accompanied by the comedy, which was lighter and more entertaining. The main representative is Aristophanes. Throughout the last 80 years, many Greek and international troupes have staged countless tragedies and comedies, reviving the spirit and culture of ancient Greece. Subscribe to topic Subscribe to author Print Article PDF Greek theatre began in the 6th century BCE in Athens with the performance of tragedy plays at religious festivals. These, in turn, inspired the genre of Greek comedy plays. The two types of Greek drama would be hugely popular and performances spread around the Mediterranean and influenced Hellenistic and Roman theatre. As a consequence of their lasting popularity, the works of such great playwrights as Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes formed the foundation upon which all modern theatre is based. In a similar way, the architecture of the ancient Greek theatre has continued to inspire the design of theatres today. The Origins of Tragedy The exact origins of tragedy (tragōida) are debated amongst scholars. Some have linked the rise of the genre to an earlier art form, the lyrical performance of epic poetry. Others suggest a strong link with the rituals performed in the worship of Dionysos such as the sacrifice of goats - a song ritual called trag-ōdia - and the wearing of masks. Indeed, Dionysos became known as the god of theatre and perhaps there is another connection - the drinking rites which resulted in the worshippers losing full control of their emotions and in effect becoming another person, much as actors (hupokritai) hope to do when performing. The music and dance of Dionysiac ritual was most evident in the role of the chorus and the music provided by an aulos player, but rhythmic elements were also preserved in the use of first, trochaic tetrameter and then iambic trimeter in the delivery of the spoken words. A Greek Tragedy Play Plays were performed in an open-air theatre (theatron) with wonderful acoustics and seemingly open to all of the male populace (the presence of women is contested). From the mid-5th century BCE entrance was free. The plot of a tragedy was almost always inspired by episodes from Greek mythology, which we must remember were often a part of Greek religion. As a consequence of this serious subject matter, which often dealt with moral right and wrongs and tragic no-win dilemmas, violence was not permitted on the stage, and the death of a character had to be heard from offstage and not seen. Similarly, at least in the early stages of the genre, the poet could not make comments or political statements through his play. Due to the restricted number of actors each performer had to take on multiple roles where the use of masks, costumes, voice & gesture became extremely important. The early tragedies had only one actor who would perform in costume and wear a mask, allowing him to impersonate gods. Here we can see perhaps the link to earlier religious ritual where proceedings might have been carried out by a priest. Later, the actor would often speak to the leader of the chorus, a group of up to 15 actors (all male) who sang and danced but did not speak. This innovation is credited to Thespis c. 520 BCE (origin of the word thespian). The actor also changed costumes during the performance (using a small tent behind the stage, the skēne, which would later develop into a monumental façade) and so break the play into distinct episodes. Later, these would develop into musical interludes. Eventually, three actors were permitted on stage but no more - a limitation which allowed for equality between poets in competition. However, a play could have as many non-speaking performers as required, so that plays with greater financial backing could put on a more spectacular production. Due to the restricted number of actors then, each performer had to take on multiple roles where the use of masks, costumes, voice, and gesture became extremely important. Competition & Celebrated Playwrights The most famous competition for the performance of tragedy was as part of the spring festival of Dionysos Eleuthereus or the City Dionysia in Athens. The archon, a high-ranking official of the city, decided which plays would be performed in competition and which citizens would act as chorēgoi and have the honour of funding their production while the state paid the poet and lead actors. Each selected poet would submit three tragedies and one satyr play, a type of short parody performance on a theme from mythology with a chorus of satyrs, the wild followers of Dionysos. The plays were judged on the day by a panel, and the prize for the winner of such competitions, besides honour and prestige, was often a bronze tripod cauldron. From 449 BCE there were also prizes for the leading actors (prōtagōnistēs). Theatre of Dionysos Eleuthereus, Athens Playwrights who regularly wrote plays in competition became famous, and the three most successful were Aeschylus (c. 525 - c. 456 BCE), Sophocles (c. 496-406 BCE), and Euripides (c. 484-407 BCE). Aeschylus was known for his innovation, adding a second actor and more dialogue, and even creating sequels. He described his work as 'morsels from the feast of Homer' (Burn 206). Sophocles was extremely popular and added a third actor to the performance as wells as painted scenery. Euripides was celebrated for his clever dialogues, realism, and habit of posing awkward questions to the audience with his thought-provoking treatment of common themes. The plays of these three were re-performed and even copied into scripts for 'mass' publication and study as part of every child's education. Greek Comedy - Origins The precise origins of Greek comedy plays are lost in the mists of prehistory, but the activity of men dressing as and mimicking others must surely go back a long way before written records. The first indications of such activity in the Greek world come from pottery, where decoration in the 6th century BCE frequently represented actors dressed as horses, satyrs, and dancers in exaggerated costumes. Another early source of comedy is the poems of Archilochus (7th century BCE) and Hipponax (6th century BCE) which contain crude and explicit sexual humour. A third origin, and cited as such by Aristotle, lies in the phallic songs which were sung during Dionysiac festivals. A Greek Comedy Play Although innovations occurred, a comedy play followed a conventional structure. The first part was the parados where the Chorus of as many as 24 performers entered and performed a number of song and dance routines. Dressed to impress, their outlandish costumes could represent anything from giant bees with huge stingers to knights riding another man in imitation of a horse or even a variety of kitchen utensils. In many cases the play was actually named after the Chorus, e.g., Aristophanes' The Wasps. The second phase of the show was the agon which was often a witty verbal contest or debate between the principal actors with fantastical plot elements and the fast changing of scenes which may have included some improvisation. The third part of the play was the parabasis, when the Chorus spoke directly to the audience and even directly spoke for the poet. The show-stopping finale of a comedy play was the exodos when the Chorus gave another rousing song and dance routine. As in tragedy plays, all performers were male actors, singers, and dancers. One star performer and two other actors performed all of the speaking parts. On occasion, a fourth actor was permitted but only if non-instrumental to the plot. Comedy plays allowed the playwright to address more directly events of the moment than the formal genre of tragedy. The most famous comedy playwrights were Aristophanes (460 - 380 BCE) and Menander (c. 342-291 BCE) who won festival competitions just like the great tragedians. Their works frequently poked fun at politicians, philosophers, and fellow artists, some of whom were sometimes even in the audience. Menander was also credited with helping to create a different version of comedy plays known as New Comedy (so that previous plays became known as Old Comedy). He introduced a young romantic lead to plays, which became, along with several other stock types such as a cook and a cunning slave, a popular staple character. New Comedy also saw more plot twists, suspense, and treatment of common people and their daily problems. Legacy New plays were continuously being written and performed, and with the formation of actors' guilds in the 3rd century BCE and the mobility of professional troupes, Greek theatre continued to spread across the Mediterranean with theatres becoming a common feature of the urban landscape from Magna Graecia to Asia Minor. In the Roman world plays were translated and imitated in Latin, and the genre gave rise to a new art form from the 1st century BCE, pantomime, which drew inspiration from the presentation and subject matter of Greek tragedy. Theatre was now firmly established as a popular form of entertainment and it would endure right up to the present day. Even the original 5th-century BCE plays have continued to inspire modern theatre audiences with their timeless examination of universal themes as they are regularly re-performed around the world, sometimes, as at Epidaurus, in the original theatres of ancient Greece. Did you like this definition? This human-authored article has been reviewed by our editorial team before publication to ensure accuracy, reliability and adherence to academic standards in accordance with our editorial policy. Aeschylus. Prometheus Bound and Other Plays. Penguin Classics, 1961. Aristophanes. Aristophanes. Loeb Classical Library/Harvard, 2000. Aristophanes. The Wasps, The Poet and the Women & The Frogs Mass Market Paperback. Penguin Classics, 2016. Bagnall, R. et al. The Encyclopedia of Ancient History. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012 Burn, A.R. The Penguin History of Greece. Penguin Books, 1966. Harris, N. History of Ancient Greece by Nathaniel Harris. Hamlyn, 2016. Hornblower, S. The Oxford Classical Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 2012. Kinzl, H. et al. A Companion to the Classical Greek World. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. Nichols, D.L. et al. The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies. Oxford University Press, 2016. Sophocles. The Three Theban Plays. Penguin Classics; 1st edition (2000-01-03), 2016. World History Encyclopedia is an Amazon Associate and earns a commission on qualifying book purchases. Greek theatre is a form of performance art where a limited number of actors and a chorus conduct a tragedy or comedy based on the works of ancient playwrights. Greek theatre typically has as its theme stories from Greek mythology or comedic situations where real ancient Greek politicians and others are made fun of. Greek theatre evolved from religious ceremonies where participants wore masks and sang songs in honour of gods like Dionysos. The actor Thespis (c. 520 BCE) is credited with being the first actor to speak to the audience and change costumes during the performance. This is why actors are sometimes called 'thespians' even today. Greek theatre was either tragedy or comedy. Tragedy plays saw three actors and a 15-person chorus perform stories from Greek mythology and religion. Greek comedy plays poked fun at Greek culture and personalities; they involved actors and the chorus wearing extravagant and amusing costumes. Greek theatre has influenced modern entertainment in many areas. Actors with costumes, special effects, the use of satire, and even the shape of the theatre itself are all lasting influences. World History Encyclopedia is a non-profit organization. Please support free history education for millions of learners worldwide for only $5 per month by becoming a member. Thank you! World History Encyclopedia is a non-profit organization. Please support free history education for millions of learners worldwide for only $5 per month by becoming a member. Thank you! Become a Member Donate Submitted by Mark Cartwright, published on 14 July 2016. The copyright holder has published this content under the following license: Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike. This license lets others remix, tweak, and build upon this content non-commercially, as long as they credit the author and license their new creations under the identical terms. When republishing on the web a hyperlink back to the original content source URL must be included. Please note that content linked from this page may have different licensing terms. Ancient Greek Theatre plan Description of a Theater of 5th Century B.C. The architecture of the ancient greek theatre consists of three major parts: the Orchestra, the Scene and the main theatre, called Koilon. The Orchestra was the almost circular place, situated in front of the scene (stage) facing the audience. At the center of the orchestra was situated the Thymeli, which at the early years was meant to be an altar and later on, a place, where the leader of the chorus (koryphaios) was standing. Some archaeological researches in the Athens area gave some clues for the existance of rectangular orchestras in some ancient greek theaters, but the circular shape was the dominant one and also the closest to the dionysiac cult (the circle was supposed to have supernatural power). The orchestra was the acting place, especially in the early years, although gradually the action moved from the orchestra to the scene and -if we want to be more specific-to front side of the scene, which part was called Proscenio, because it was situated in front of the scene (pro+scene). The scene had one or three entrances for the actors. The sides of the Scene facing the audience, served for background as were decorated as a Palace or a Temple. Later on, as scenography (i.e. theatrical painting) developped, painted panels with other themes, such as woods, army camps etc were placed as background. Between the scene and the seats, there were two more entrances, called Parodoi, one on the right and one on the left, from which the chorus and the persons coming from the outside (i.e. not from the Temple nor the Palace) were enering the scene. If someone was entering from the right parodos, that meant that he was coming from the city or the port. If he was coming from the left parodos, he was supposed to come from the fields or abroad. At the back of the scene one could find two buildings with doors, that let on the Proscenio and as far as their decoration is concerned, they might extend the theme of the scene or even present another theme. Along the back wall of the scene was built a narrow but raised plattform, the Logeion. It was a place designed just for the actors, by which they got separatad from the chorus. This structure probably developed sometime in the hellenistic period, because in the classical theater there were no logeion and the performance was taking place strictly on the orchestra. The flat roof of the scene was dedicated to gods and it was called Theologion (theos=god). The Koilon (or Theatron) was the auditorium of the greek theater, where the spectators sat. It was called koilon because of its shape. Its shape was semi-circular, built around the orchestra. It was divided in two Diazoma, the upper and the lower. At first the spectators were sitting around the orchestra. Later the Greeks started building the Koilon. It is believed that during the 5th century, the spectators carried along cushions to sit on. Radial staircases separated the Koilon into wedge shaped sections, in order to make the entrance and exit of the spectators easier. The front seats were called Proedria and were reserved for officials and priests. The most honorable spectator of the theater was the priest of Elefthereos Dionysus, who was sitting in a throne made of marble. In the 5th century B.C. with the exeption of the orchestra, the other parts of the theatre were wooden and mobile. At the end of the 5th century the Greeks started building permanent Scenes and Koilons made of stone, (replacing the earlier wooden constructions). Inside the permanent scene were kept the machines used during the performance: a) The Aeorema. It was a crane by which the gods were appearing on the scene (deus ex machina). b) The Periactoi: Two prismatic pillars, put on the left and right side of the scene, turning around their axon, for changing the background of the scene. c)The Ekeclema: a wheeled-plattform on which bodies of dead persons were presented (because a murder or a suicide never takes place in front of the spectators). The indoor theatres were called Odeia. They were reserved for musical performances and for tragical Proagones (a kind of contest qualifications).

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