

# Ancient Greek Theatre

## Unit Objectives:

- Students will expand their vocabulary of ancient Greek theatre.
- Students will understand the impact of ancient Greek theatre on modern society through analysis of historical trends from the period.
- Students will acquire the appropriate skills to accurately and consistently perform ancient Greek theatre within the specific historical and cultural context of the era.

## CA Theatre Content Standards:

### Artistic Perception

- 1.1

### Historical/Cultural Context

- 3.1
- 3.2
- 3.3

### Aesthetic Valuing

- 4.1

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## Overview – Theatre of Ancient Greece

The theatre of ancient Greece, or ancient Greek drama, is a theatrical culture that flourished in ancient Greece between c. 550 and c. 220 BCE.

The city-state of Athens, which became a significant cultural, political, and military power during this period, was its center, where it was institutionalized as part of a festival called the **Dionysia**, which honored the god **Dionysus**.

**Tragedy**, **comedy**, and the **satyr play** were the three dramatic genres to emerge there. Athens exported the

festival to its numerous colonies and allies in order to promote a common cultural identity. Western theatre originates in Athens and its drama has had a significant and sustained impact on Western culture as a whole.

The word *tragoidia*, from which the English word "tragedy" is derived, is a portmanteau of two Greek words: *tragos* or "goat" and *ode* meaning "song", from *aeideion*, "to sing". This etymology indicates a link with the practices of the ancient Dionysian cults.

## Origins

Greek tragedy was created in Athens before 532 BCE, when **Thespis** was the earliest recorded playwright. Being a winner of the first theatrical contest held at Athens, he was the leader of the **dithyrambs** performed in and around Attica, especially at the rural Dionysia.

Thespis aided in the final transition from dithyramb to tragedy by adding characters who speak (rather than sing) with their own voice (rather than a single narrative chorus). Because of these, Thespis is often called the "Father of Tragedy"; however, his importance is disputed, and Thespis is sometimes listed as late as 16th in the chronological order of Greek tragedians.

Thus, Thespis's true contribution to drama is unclear at best, but his name has been immortalized as a common term for performer—a "**thespian**." The dramatic performances were

important to the Athenians - this is made clear by the creation of a tragedy competition and festival in the city of Dionysia. The festival was created roughly around 508 B.C.

While no drama texts exist from the sixth century BCE, we do know the names of three competitors besides Thespis: Choerilus, Pratinas, and Phrynichus. Each is credited with different innovations in the field.

More is known about Phrynichus. He won his first competition between 511 BCE and 508 BCE. He was the first poet we know of to use a historical subject - his *Fall of Miletus* chronicled the fate of the town of Miletus after it was conquered by the Persians. He is also thought to be the first to use female characters (though not female performers).



The stage of the South theatre in Jerash Jordan, the structure at the back is the skene

*Aristotle states that Aeschylus added the second actor, and that Sophocles added the third actor – in any event, the Greek playwrights never put more than three actors on stage at once.*



Tragic Comic Masks

## Origins – The Golden Age

After the Great Destruction of Athens by the Persian Empire in 480 BCE, the town was rebuilt, and theatre became formalized and an even more major part of Athenian culture and civic pride.

This century is normally regarded as the Golden Age of Greek drama. The centerpiece of the annual Dionysia, which took

place once in winter and once in spring, was a competition between three tragic playwrights at the Theatre of Dionysus.

Each submitted three tragedies, plus a satyr play (a comic, burlesque version of a mythological subject). Beginning in a first competition in 486 BCE, each playwright also submitted a comedy.

## Origins – The Hellenistic Period

The power of Athens declined following its defeat in the Peloponnesian War against the Spartans. From that time on, the theatre started performing old tragedies again.

Although its theatrical traditions seem to have lost their vitality, Greek theatre continued into the Hellenistic period (the period following Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century BCE).

However, the primary Hellenistic theatrical form was not tragedy but 'New Comedy', comic episodes about the lives of ordinary citizens. The only extant playwright from the period is Menander.

One of New Comedy's most important contributions was its influence on Roman comedy, an influence that can be seen in the surviving works of Plautus and Terence.

## Performers

Because the Greek outdoor theatre was so large, actors could not depend on facial expressions or vocal inflections to convey their characters. Instead, they had to rely on large, simple physical gestures, costumes, and even masks.

**Comedy and tragedy masks** have their origin in the theatre of ancient Greece. Masks were used to help show emotions and also helped just three actors to play all the roles in a play, including female characters – there were no actresses.

In addition to the leading actors, there was a **chorus** of up to fifteen actors who performed the plays in verse accompanied by music, beginning in the morning and lasting until the evening.

The chorus represented townspeople or other groups, and remained in the orchestra where they sang, danced, and commented on the action.

The **choragos** was the head chorus member who could enter the story as a character able to interact with the characters of a play.

Costumes also played a significant role in helping convey characters from afar. For instance, the actors in these plays that had tragic roles wore boots called cothurnuses that elevated them above the other actors. The actors with comedic roles only wore a thin soled shoe called a sock.

## Stage Characteristics

The performance space was a simple semi-circular space, the **orchestra**, where the chorus danced and sang.

The orchestra, which had an average diameter of 78 feet, was situated on a flattened terrace at the foot of a hill, the slope of which produced a natural **theatron**, literally "watching place". Later, the term "theatre" came to be applied to the whole area of theatron, orchestra, and skené.

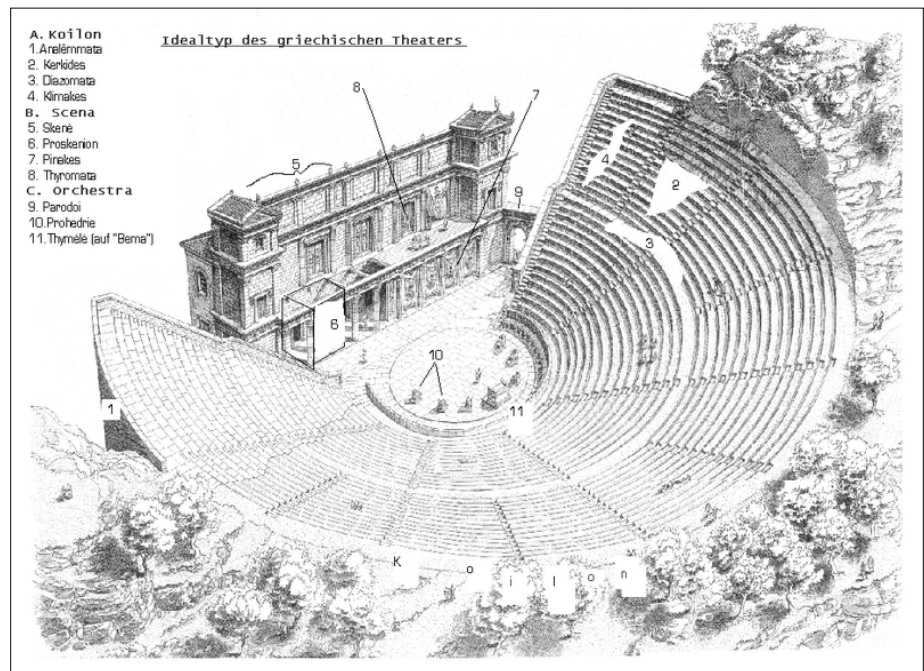
The theatres were originally built on a very large scale to accommodate the large number of people on stage, as well as the large number of people in the audience, up to fourteen thousand.

Mathematics played a large role in the construction of these theatres, as their designers had to be able to create acoustics in them such that the actors' voices could be heard throughout the theatre, including the very top row of seats.

In 465 BCE, the playwrights began using a backdrop or scenic wall, which hung or stood behind the orchestra, which also served as an area where actors could change their costumes. It was known as the **skéné**, or scene.

The death of a character was always heard behind the skéné, for it was considered inappropriate to show a killing in view of the audience.

In 425 BCE a stone scene wall, called a paraskenia, became a common supplement to skenes in the theatres. A paraskenia was a long wall with projecting sides, which may have had doorways for entrances and exits.



A blueprint of an Ancient Theatre.  
Terms are in Greek language and Latin letters.

Just behind the paraskenia was the proskenion. The proskenion ("in front of the scene") was columned, and was similar to the modern day proscenium.

Today's proscenium is what separates the audience from the stage. It is the frame around the stage that makes it look like the action is taking place in a picture frame.

Greek theatres also had entrances for the actors and chorus members called parodoi. The parodoi (plural of parodos) were tall arches that opened onto the orchestra, through which the performers entered.

By the end of the 5th century BCE, around the time of the Peloponnesian War, the skene, the was two stories high. The upper story was called the episkenion.

Some theatres also had a raised speaking place on the orchestra called the logeion.

There were several scenic elements commonly used in Greek theatre:

- *Machina* - a crane that gave the impression of a flying actor (thus, deus ex machina).
- *Ekkyklema* - a wheeled wagon used to bring dead characters into view for the audience trap doors, or similar openings in the ground to lift people onto the stage.
- *Pinakes* - pictures hung into the scene to show a scene's scenery.
- *Thyromata* - more complex pictures built into the second-level scene (3rd level from ground)

## Timeline

### 7th Century BCE

**625 (c)** Arion produces dithyrambic choruses

### 6th Century BCE

**600-570** Cleisthenes transfers "tragic choruses" to Dionysus

**540-527** Pisistratus founds the festival of the Dionysia

**536-533** Thespis puts on a tragedy at festival of the Dionysia

**525** Aeschylus born

**511-508** Phrynichus' first victory in tragedy

**500 (c)** Pratinus introduces the satyr play to Athens

### 5th Century BCE

**499-496** Aeschylus' first dramatic competition

**496 (c)** Sophocles born

**485** Euripides born

**484** Aeschylus' first dramatic victory

**456** Aeschylus dies

**450 (c)** Aristophanes born

**447** Parthenon begun in Athens

**431-404** Peloponnesian War

**406** Euripides dies; Sophocles dies

**404** Athens loses Peloponnesian War to Sparta

### 4th Century BCE

**399** Trial and death of Socrates

**380 (c)** Plato's Republic includes critique of Greek tragedy and comedy

**330 (c)** Aristotle's Poetics includes defense of Greek tragedy and comedy

## Significant Artists/Works

### Tragedies:

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BCE):  
*The Persians* (472 BCE)  
*Seven Against Thebes* (467 BCE)  
*The Suppliants* (463 BCE)  
*The Oresteia* (458 BCE, a trilogy comprising *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*.)

Phrynichus (~511 BCE):  
*The Fall of Miletus* (late 500 BCE)

Sophocles (c. 495-406 BCE):  
*Antigone* (c. 442 BCE)  
*Oedipus the King* (c. 429 BCE)  
*Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BCE)  
*The Trachiniae* (unknown)  
*Electra* (unknown)  
*Philoctetes* (409 BCE)

Euripides (c. 480–406 BCE):  
*Alcestis* (438 BCE)  
*Medea* (431 BCE)  
*Hippolytus* (428 BCE)  
*Electra* (420 BCE)  
*Sisyphos* (415 BCE)  
*The Bacchae* (405 BCE)

### Comedies:

Aristophanes (c. 446-388 BCE):  
*The Acharnians* (425 BCE)  
*The Knights* (424 BCE)  
*The Clouds* (423 BCE)  
*The Wasps* (422 BCE)  
*Peace* (421 BCE)  
*The Birds* (414 BCE)  
*Lysistrata* (411 BCE)

Menander (c. 342-291 BCE):  
*Dyskolos* (317 BCE)

## Vocabulary/Key Terms

**Chorus** – a group of performers who functioned as a commentary on and as an accompaniment to the action of the play

**Choragos** – the head chorus member who could enter the story as a character able to interact with the characters of a play

**Comedy** – one of two principal dramatic forms of theatre in ancient Greece – divided into three periods: Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy

**Comedy and tragedy masks** – used to show the emotions, switch between roles, and play characters of a different gender

**Dithyramb** – an emotional choric hymn or speech sung by a group of men to honor Dionysus

**Dionysia** – a festival in ancient Athens in honor of the god Dionysus where a theatrical competition between 3 playwrights was the main event

**Dionysus** – the god of wine, fertility, and revelry

**Orchestra** – “dancing place” – flat terrace where the chorus performed

**Satyr Play** – a genre that deals with the mythological subject matter of the tragedies, but in a purely comedic manner

**Skené** – changing hut (the source for the word “scene”) which eventually became the backdrop/setting

**Theatron** – slope – “watching place” – from which the word “theatre” was derived

**Thespis** – credited as the first writer of tragedy (won the first playwright contest at Dionysia) as well as the first actor (stepped out of the chorus and impersonated a character)

**Thespian** – a common term for “performer,” derived from “Thespis”

**Tragedy** – (literally “goat-song”) is a form of art based on human suffering that offers its audience pleasure