

## The Greek Theatre

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A visit to Greece inevitably brings one into contact with the ancient theatre: almost every major archaeological site, from Crete in the south to Dodona in the north, includes the remains of these impressive structures. Indeed, the great number of theatres found today throughout Greece bears eloquent witness to the ancient Greeks' appreciation of dramatic literature.

The word itself, theatron, means a "watching place" in Greek, and to these watching places, cut deeply into the sides of hills, came thousands of Greeks to watch the best plays their nation produced. The one site today that best offers a view of this phenomenon is Epidauros in the Peloponnesus. Here the ancient tradition continues, as each summer during July and August ancient plays are performed (in modern Greek) in the finest preserved theatre known. The theatre at Epidauros is, in fact, part of a large sanctuary dedicated to Asklepios, the ancient god of healing; the entire precinct was in effect a kind of "hospital" to which the sick and weak would come in search of healing at the hands of the god. It is significant to realize that the ancient Greeks believed that the theatre was an appropriate part of this sanctuary, for it too could furnish healing, especially of a mental sort.

The theatre at Epidauros is typical in form of most theatres in ancient Greece: the focal point is the round "dancing area" which the Greeks called the orchestra. In this circle, with a normal radius of 45 feet, the Chorus of a play (usually composed of twelve men) would sing and dance to the music of flutes and drums. The movements of the Chorus tended to be quite formal, as they danced in unison around their circular floor. On each wing of this orchestra was a formal entrance and exit passage for the use of the Chorus, the parados.

Behind the orchestra stood the skene, or stage area. This area served as the formal stage for the actors in the play and was not generally used by the Chorus. In the earliest theatres of Greece, the skene was simply a tent,

in which the actors could change their costumes and masks as they moved from one role to another; as time passed, however, these basic tents gave way to more elaborate structures which furnished a true setting, or backdrop, to the play. Into the doors of this backdrop the actors could exit, and from them could make a return to the action. The actual stage upon which the actors stood was in front of this skene, and was consequently called the proskenenion.

The third basic part of the ancient theatre was, of course, the auditorium. Here concentric tiers of stone seats rose around most of the orchestra and gave the spectators a clear view of the action below. The seats themselves, being of stone, were quite uncomfortable, and someone going to the theatre for the day, both in antiquity and now, would be well advised to take along a cushion! The auditorium area was usually the largest single part of the theatre, and could hold well over 12,000 people at most sites.

To the ancient Greeks the theatre was much more than a form of entertainment: it was, in fact, a form of education and of worship. In the former case, education was thought of as a basic function of drama; in Greece poets were considered to be teachers who had a duty to impart wise lessons to their audiences. Although the subject matter of most plays was taken directly from traditional myth, the ancient dramatists always managed to make their plays relevant to their contemporaries; a myth, after all, could easily be manipulated to make a political or social point. In this way, for example, the poet Aeschylus could compose a trilogy of three plays about the legendary house of the hero Agamemnon and thereby make a very relevant statement about the evolution of justice in a civilized society such as his own Athens. The audience would leave the theatre somewhat wiser than they had entered it.

The theatre, however, was also a form of worship: plays were presented in honour of a god, usually Dionysus, the official 'patron' of Greek drama. The production of plays in fact only took place during religious festivals, and the ancient Greeks attended to show their respect for the higher powers in the universe. Moreover, in most theatres a special seat was reserved for the priest of Dionysus, who came to represent the god and to bestow his blessing on the production.

The theatre and drama are both legacies of ancient Greece to the western world. Even if the theatre today is not as integrated into the fabric of our lives as it was for the Greeks, we can still appreciate, and enjoy, the Greek accomplishment in this area of art.