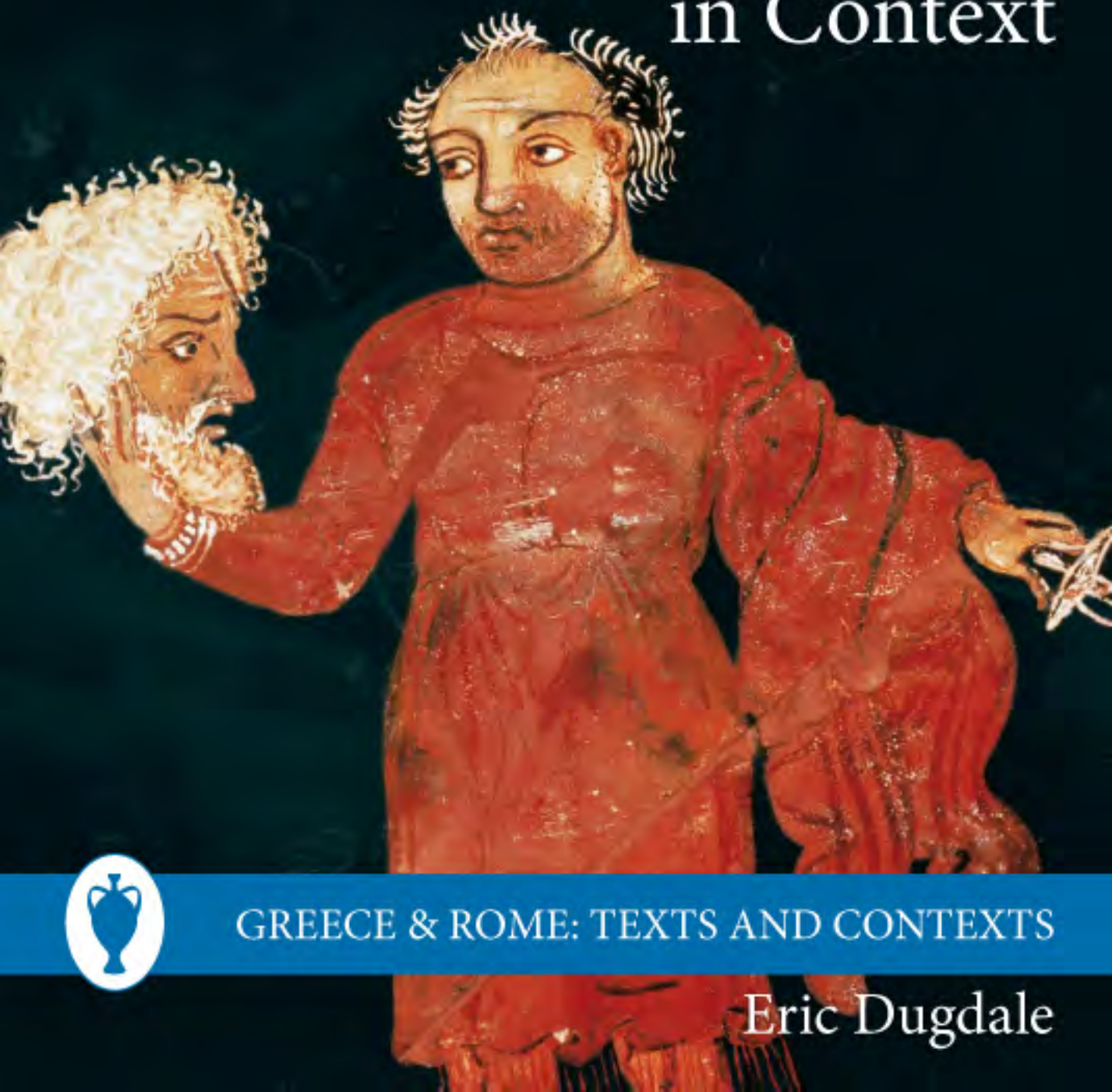


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# Greek Theatre in Context



GREECE & ROME: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Eric Dugdale

# Greek Theatre in Context

Eric Dugdale



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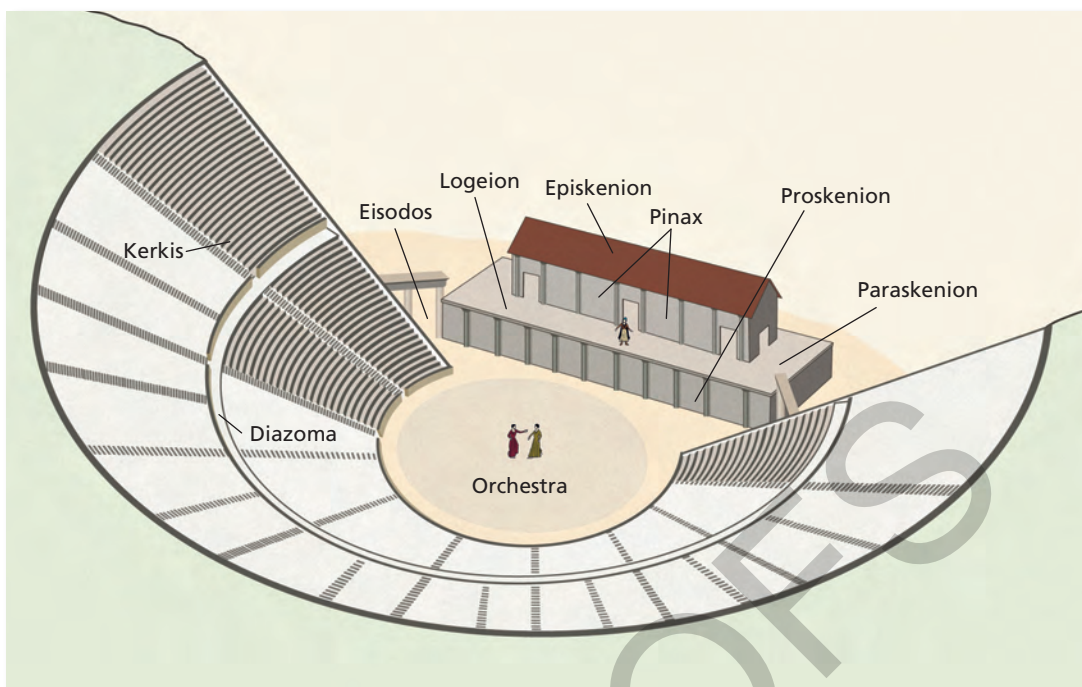
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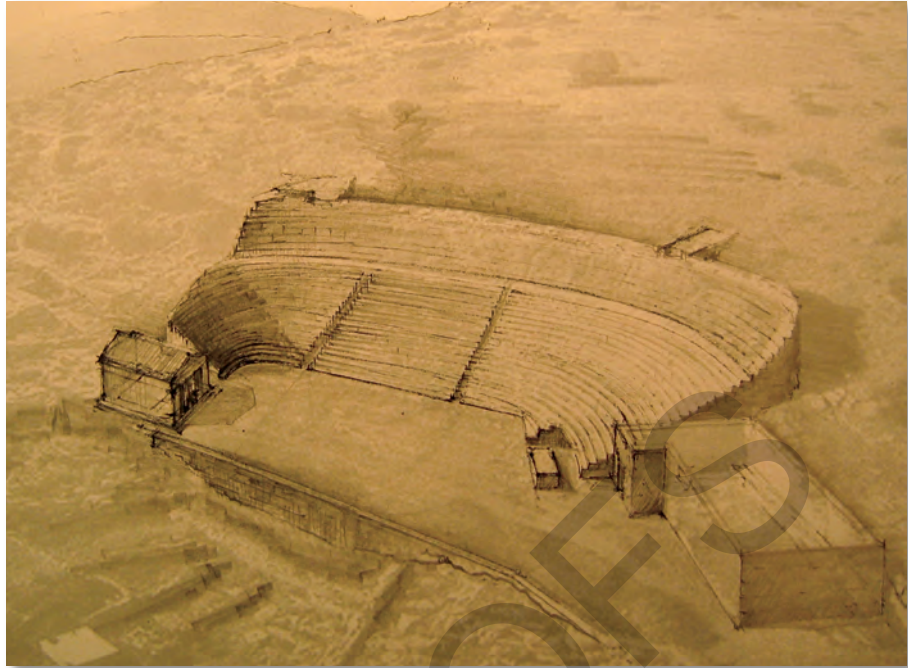
*Elevation of a typical Hellenistic theatre, after Malyon (in Csapo and Slater 1994).*

## Other theatres

### Thorikos

The theatre that served the coastal deme of Thorikos has been quite well preserved. It dates back to the early fifth century and so gives us a good idea of what one early theatre looked like (see p. 54). It has a roughly rectangular *orchestra* lined by a stretch of straight stone seating that curves around at both ends. Its shape is irregular and asymmetrical, the altar is off to one side of the *orchestra* instead of at its centre, and the small temple bounding the west end of the *orchestra* is not particularly aligned with the theatre proper. Its orientation and shape respond to the physical terrain and are partly a result of the expansion of its seating area over time (the original central stretch of seats was first expanded laterally, then later the upper rows were added, reaching a final capacity of c. 6,000 spectators); it is therefore dangerous to make the unwarranted assumption that other early theatres which did not face the same topographical constraints would have looked similar. Holes bored into the rock-face have been interpreted as sockets for the supporting framework of a wooden stage. The theatre was probably also used for holding public assemblies and may have originally been built for this purpose. In fact, many ancient theatres served multiple functions in this way. When the apostle Paul visited Ephesus, a mob was roused to oppose his teachings; they seized two of his companions and held an impromptu town meeting in the theatre (Acts 19).





*The theatre at  
Thorikos.*

Many towns in the ancient world had their own theatre, and sites such as the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and of Asclepius at Epidaurus also offered theatrical performances and other forms of entertainment for visitors in large theatres built within the sanctuary complex. Unfortunately, many theatres had their stone plundered for reuse as building material in later centuries; other theatres were modified and reused for new purposes, were buried by the accumulation of deposits, or were built over. Nevertheless, a sizeable number of theatres survive and new discoveries continue to be made. In 2007, for example, substantial remains of what appears to be the theatre of Acharnae (a deme important to the cult of Dionysus and celebrated in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*) were unearthed during construction of an apartment complex in Menidi, a northern suburb of Athens.

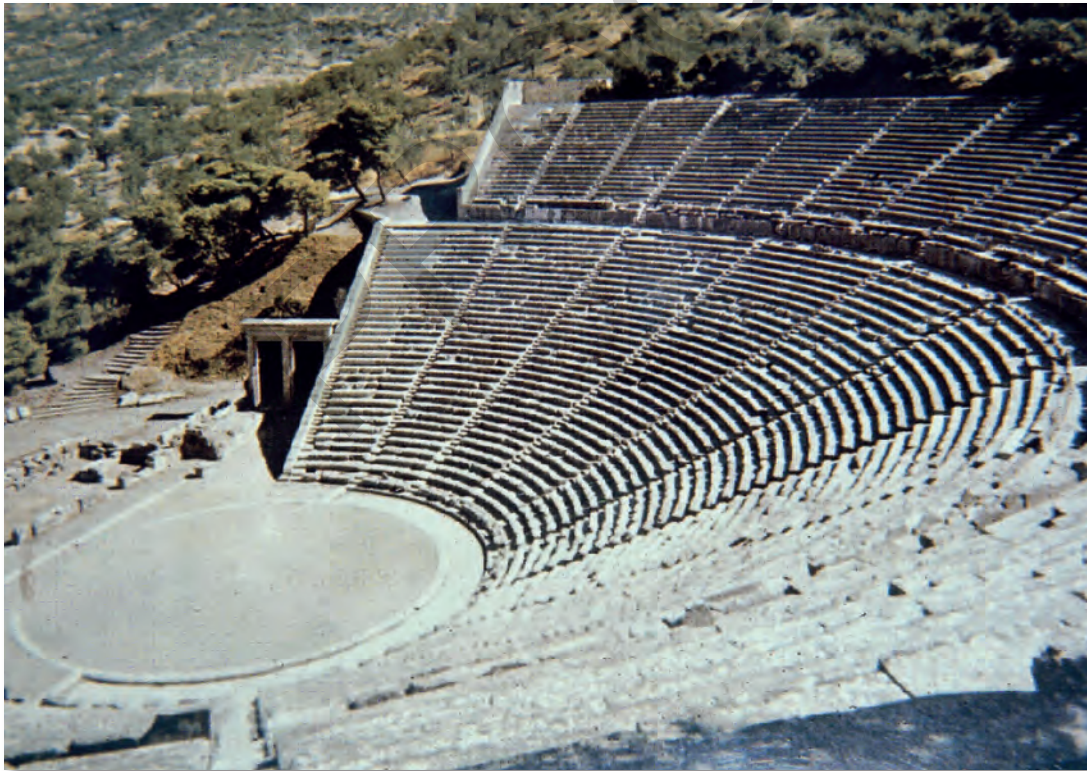
### **Epidaurus**

The theatre at Epidaurus (built in the late fourth or early third century BC) is rightly famous. It is a marvel of architectural perfection, incorporating architectural refinements that rival the Parthenon. It is also one of the largest theatres in Greece (it seated around 14,000 spectators) and the best preserved. The theatre was designed as a perfect study in mathematical proportions based on the cubit, a unit of measurement taken from the human lower arm. To the Greeks, the human body, whose various parts relate to the whole according to precise mathematical proportions, exemplified the order of the cosmos and therefore carried religious significance. Thus the refinements of the theatre of Epidaurus may have been a specific tribute to Asclepius, god of healing, beside whose sanctuary it was located, and were not typical of theatres in general.

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The photograph offers an oblique view of the theatre: the original lower section of the *theatron* is divided into twelve wedges (*kerkides*) by radial staircases; to this was added an upper tier of seating in the second century BC, separated from the lower by a broad passageway known as the *diazoma* ('girdle') and in turn divided into twenty-two wedges (since the wedges got increasingly wide as they radiated from the *orchestra*, having more staircases in the upper section helped avoid congestion). The *orchestra* is perfectly round and has its circumference marked out in stone. Its centre point where the altar (the *thymelē*) would have stood is also marked, allowing modern visitors to conduct an experiment testing the theatre's remarkable acoustics. If you drop a coin onto the ground at the centre of the *orchestra*, the clink will be heard perfectly from the very back row! A study by acousticians from Georgia Institute of Technology published in 2007 determined that the limestone seating functions as a filter for low-frequency background noises. The two *eisodoi* are framed by monumental gateways.

Unlike the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens, which developed piecemeal from rather primitive beginnings, the theatre at Epidauros was built out of stone from the start. In its final phase, the *skene* building was two storeys high, and actors would have stood on the projecting roof of the ground-floor *proskenion*, as is typical in theatres of the late Hellenistic period (see drawing on p. 53).



*The theatre at Epidauros, where performances of ancient plays are still put on every summer.*

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## Syracuse

In its heyday, the city of Syracuse on the south-east coast of Sicily rivalled Athens in power and wealth. It was also a hotbed of creative talent, home to Simonides, Pindar, Theocritus and the scientist Archimedes, and host to the theatrical talents of Aeschylus, Epicharmus (comic playwright) and Sophron (writer of mimes).

One of the ways in which it displayed its influence was by building a large theatre. This new theatre, constructed c. 230 BC under Hieron II, replaced the earlier theatre in which Aeschylus performed his plays when he lived at the court of Hieron I. Much of the seating of the new theatre, which could hold around 15,000 theatre-goers, was quarried out of the live rock that is a natural feature of the area, in itself a massive feat of construction. Carved into the wall of the *diazoma* or walkway half-way up can still be seen inscriptions dedicating the theatre to Olympian Zeus and to members of the royal family; above the *theatron* was a covered portico offering shelter from the elements. Like many Greek theatres, this one faces south: if, as in Athens, plays were put on in the late winter and early spring, this orientation would have allowed the audience to enjoy the warming rays of the sun.

The evidence of the original stage-building and stage that survived the inevitable Roman alterations suggests that in Hellenistic times it consisted of a *skene* at least two storeys high, fronted by a *proskenion* with projecting *paraskenia*. In the area in front of this, a trench and some cuttings in the rock have been interpreted as evidence of a wooden stage.

## Greek theatre and the proscenium theatre

Modern theatres offer increasingly varied and flexible performance spaces. In fact, large theatres may have a large proscenium stage, a smaller thrust stage, and a flexible studio space, allowing them to put on any given piece in the space that most suits its artistic needs. It is rare, however, that we experience theatre as the Greeks did, performed in a huge, open-air theatre. Most of the great works of modern drama were written for the proscenium stage, and generations of actors have been trained for performing on this stage. Even today, budding actors are often taught the first principles of blocking (movement on stage) on it and learn to head downstage for the moments of greatest intensity. The characteristics of the Greek playing space are very different, and these differences have an important effect not only on the kind of plays that were produced but also on the relationship between actors and audience.

The proscenium stage is, in essence, an enclosed space. The proscenium arch, from which the curtain is dropped, frames the acting space and marks a clear line of separation between actors and audience. For the audience looking through the arch at the stage behind it, the acting space is a rectangular box closed in on three sides, and the strong lines of the arch accentuate the sense that the audience





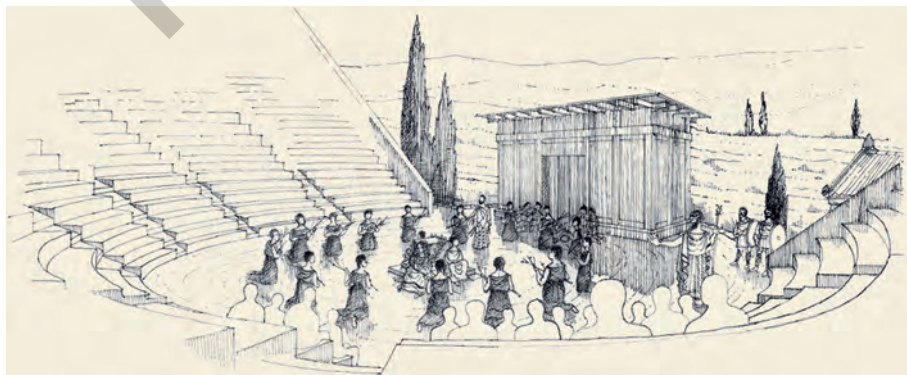
A modern proscenium stage.

is looking in at an interior scene through a transparent fourth wall. It is hardly surprising that in modern drama many scenes are set indoors, in the intimate setting of a kitchen or living room, and that a door at the back of the set will often open out onto an imagined street.

The Greek theatre was fundamentally different. Performances took place *al fresco*. Even when a permanent stage-building was built, spectators in many of the seats would enjoy clear sight lines beyond it into the surrounding landscape. Plays were generally set in the open, and characters usually emerged from the stage-building to

report interior scenes. There was no pronounced separation between the acting space of the *orchestra* and the *theatron* that encircled it. Those sitting in the front rows could at any time find themselves targets of direct address in comedy (see 6.9). Those looking down at the scene from the back or occupying seats in the side wedges would have seen the chorus and actors enfolded by the mass of audience members. Unlike the proscenium theatre, which is primarily frontal, the Greek *theatron* wrapped around more than half of the *orchestra* or performance space, so that audience members could see each other and each other's reactions. David Wiles, in his book *Greek Theatre Performance* (2000: 112), cogently expresses the effect this would have had:

Many modern performers feel that performance in a huge space is a constraint upon subtle delivery and the development of an actor–audience relationship ... This is to miss what lent Greek theatre its power. The spectator 100 metres away was part of a single crowd, bonded by a space that created no vertical or horizontal boundaries, and concealed no group from all the rest. If all 15,000-plus tightly packed people were listening to the same words at the same time, and shared the same broad response, the power of emotion generated would have been quite unlike that created today in a studio theatre.



A reconstruction of the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens in the late fifth century BC.

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There is no modern theatrical equivalent – even performances on thrust stages or in theatres in the round usually perform to much smaller audiences (3,000 is a large audience nowadays) and take the audience out of the equation through the use of stage lighting that focuses attention solely on the stage. Watching a Shakespeare play in the reconstructed Globe theatre on the South Bank in London may allow a modern audience to experience a comparable immediacy. But even here, those standing in the Pit and nearest the action are looking up at actors performing on a raised stage, while those in the galleries are separated from the stage by the expanse of the Pit. The ideological implications of layout are perhaps best seen in the many church congregations that have moved away from front-facing pews in favour of seating arrangements that eliminate the architectural division between clergy and laity and characterize worship as a collective experience.

- 1 Does your school or university theatre have a proscenium stage or an open stage?
- 2 What type of dramatic action might be best suited to performance in a Greek theatre? You might approach this question by thinking about what would *not* work in such a setting.
- 3 On a proscenium stage, the dominant position is downstage at centre, where the apron projects out beyond the proscenium arch. If an Athenian actor occupied a similar downstage position right at the front of the *orchestra*, his voice would be muffled by the heads of those sitting in the front rows. Where in the *orchestra* of a Greek theatre do you think the dominant position might be, both visually and acoustically?
- 4 In a Greek theatre, most of the audience-members look down on the action instead of up. What effect does this bird's-eye view have on the general use of space? For example, what kinds of choreography would be most effective for the chorus?
- 5 Given the scale of the Theatre of Dionysus at Athens, with a seating capacity of c. 15,000 by its Lycurgan phase, what forms of modern entertainment are most comparable? Can you think of large-scale events nowadays in which audience-members being able to see each other has an effect on the atmosphere?
- 6 Have you ever attended an open-air performance? If so, did you find it gripping or distracting to be outdoors?
- 7 Think back to theatrical performances that you have attended: what different kinds of venues and acting spaces have you seen? Has any stage design struck you as particularly innovative?

– **Shall we drag out our lives** by letting those  
 Who defile the house rule over us?  
 – **That I could not bear** – death is better:  
 It is a milder fate than tyranny. 1365  
 – Are we to divine that our master has been killed  
 With these screams as our proof?  
 – We must have certain knowledge when we speak about this,  
 For having certain knowledge is different from guessing.  
 – I feel, then, that we all agree to this, 1370  
 To find out for sure what has happened to Atreus' son.

- 1 What is the purpose of the chorus' words in the stasimon which opens this extract? What is the effect of having these sentiments expressed *before* the killing of Agamemnon?
- 2 Does the chorus in this scene become a participant in the action or does it remain an observer?
- 3 How do you think this scene might have been choreographed? Would the abrupt shift from choral unison to agitated discussion have been reflected in a striking change in movement?
- 4 In the final scene of the play, the chorus of elders face off against Aegisthus, who is rejoicing at the death of Agamemnon, though their feeble old age is no match for the tyrant. How do you think the chorus' helplessness is conveyed by their words and movements?

In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the chorus of Furies pursue Orestes, who has killed his mother Clytemnestra to avenge his father Agamemnon's death. Tracking the scent of shed blood, they follow him to Athens; they proceed to perform a 'binding dance' on him, of which this extract (303–33) includes the first part.

4.9 CHORUS So you won't answer me, but scorn my words, you who have been  
 fattened and set apart for me as a victim? You won't be slain at an 305  
 altar; I will eat you alive. So listen to this song that will bind you.  
 Come now, let us link the dance, since we are intent on performing  
 our grim art and declaring the right by which our company oversees 310  
 the affairs of men. We deem that we deliver just verdicts: the man  
 who holds out hands that are pure is safe from the violence of our

**Shall we drag out our lives ... That I could not bear** the chorus convey important lessons about the relationship between individual and community. Through them we see how the actions of individuals can have a terrible impact on the community at large; they also teach us, through their words and movements, how individuals can cooperate harmoniously. Even when individual voices can be discerned, as in this passage, the chorus still comprises individuals who have chosen to cooperate and communicate as a collective body of citizens. Thus choruses are, in a fundamental sense, civic performances.

	anger, and lives out his life unharmed; but whenever someone transgresses, as this man has, and tries to conceal hands that are bloody, we present ourselves as just witnesses for the slain, and appear against him as avengers of bloodshed right through to the end.	315 320
<b>Strophe 1</b>	O mother Night, mother who bore me to punish the dead and the living, hear me! <b>Leto's son</b> deprives me of my honour, taking away from me that miserable wretch who must offer fitting atonement for his mother's blood.	325
<b>Refrain</b>	Over our sacrificial victim we sing this song – crazed, frenzied, maddening the mind, the chant of the Furies, <b>accompanied by no lyre</b> , which binds the wits and shrivels up a man.	330

*Antistrophe 1 is then followed by a repetition of the Refrain.*

The binding dance of the Furies illustrates a number of elements of ancient magic such as the use of chant and of repetition (in the recurring refrain). The ancients believed that such spells had to be performed aloud to be effective. Although rituals in plays are often dramatic interpretations rather than exact re-enactments of such rituals as performed in real life, they are nevertheless frequently represented as achieving their goal. In this instance, Orestes is protected from the savage power of the Furies by Athena, to whose statue he is clinging, and the primary purpose of the song is to heighten the potential threat posed by the terrifying Furies.

This choral ode is particularly suggestive in its recurring references to the acts of singing and dancing. In lines 370–1, for example, the chorus sing of the effect on their victims 'of our black-clad attacks and the vindictive dances of our feet'. They then intone the following refrain (372–6): 'Leaping up high I bear down from above with the heavy force of my foot, limbs that trip even those in full flight, a dire fate.'

- The Furies' words are frightening, and their appearance, according to the colourful if fanciful anecdote in the *Life of Aeschylus* (9), preserved by an anonymous ancient biographer, was so fearsome that women in the audience miscarried! What might their movements have looked like, and how might their grim dance have been choreographed in relation to their intended victim?

**Leto's son** Apollo, who has instructed Orestes to kill his mother and has promised to protect him.

**accompanied by no lyre** the lyre, whose strings are tuned to each other according to precise musical ratios, was seen as a symbol of harmony and grace, and its music was considered to be noble (in contrast to other instruments, such as the cymbal and double-pipe). The wild dance of the Furies aims to disorder its victim's wits and drive him to distraction.



This scene on an Attic red-figure krater dating to c. 500–490 BC is unusual in that it shows a tragic chorus in action. The identical open-mouthed expressions of the faces suggest that these are masked actors, and the coordinated steps and gestures portray a choreographed dance. They are wearing military costume, so this may be the *pyrrichē*, an energetic war-dance often mentioned by ancient sources.

The six choreuts approach what appears to be a stepped altar, on which ribbons and garlands have been placed as offerings. This could be a representation of the *thymele* or altar in the middle of the *orchestra* and, given the size and placement of the shrouded figure behind the altar, it may be doubling as a tomb, from which the spirit of a dead hero is rising out of the earth (as in Aeschylus' *Persians*). In a similar scene in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the chorus join with Electra in a rite of libation at the tomb of her father Agamemnon. Electra appeals to her father to bring Orestes home, and the chorus join in with their own invocation. At the beginning of the scene, the chorus-leader sets the sacral tone when she says to Electra: 'I revere the tomb of your father like an altar' (106). It may well be that the altar, prominently positioned in the centre of the *orchestra*, doubled as the tomb of Agamemnon in this play. Certainly this would facilitate the staging of the subsequent scene, in which Electra, reunited with her brother Orestes and his companion Pylades, joins with the chorus to rouse her dead father to action, a scene that would seem to call for all to congregate around the tomb.

4.10





- 1 Do you believe that the vase-painting shows a chorus summoning the spirit of a dead hero from his tomb? If not, what other interpretation might you suggest?
- 2 Choral dance seems to have used hand gestures to full effect. In fact, movement of the arms was mentioned by Athenaeus (*Learned Banqueters* 629b–c) as one of the defining graces of early dance forms. What might the gestures of the chorus-members in this vase-painting be communicating, and what would have been the visual effect of such movements in a large outdoor theatre?
- 3 Do you think that it makes a difference to the interpretation of scenes such as this that they were performed in the context of a religious festival?

## The chorus in satyr-play

The satyrs that formed the chorus of every satyr-play seem from the surviving evidence to have been central to the plot. In fact, satyr-plays are sometimes referred to as simply ‘the satyrs’. The late Hellenistic author Demetrius (*On Style* 169) described satyr-play as ‘tragedy at play’, and the many titles and fragments of satyr-plays that survive do suggest that the genre treated many of the same mythological figures as did tragedy (e.g. Odysseus, Heracles, Theseus), but that the myths were treated in a playful manner and the heroes, who acted in tragic costume and spoke using a similarly elevated diction, were surrounded by a riotous and raunchy chorus of satyrs.

This raunchiness is reflected in the satyrs’ comments, which often voice their appetites for food, wine and sex, the basic instincts of these half-animals/half-men. However, it must have been most apparent in their physicalities (i.e. their postures, gestures and movements).

An Attic vase dating to c. 480–470 BC shows a satyr chorus in action. Although there are many vase-paintings of satyrs behaving outrageously (e.g. performing sexual acrobatics or groping maenads), many of them have no discernible connection with the theatre, depicting the satyrs not as men in satyr costume but as ‘real’ satyrs. In this scene, the presence of the piper, who wears an elaborate full-length robe, marks this out as a performance, as do the woolly breeches that the satyrs are wearing, complete with trademark erect leather phallus, and their identical masks. Behind the piper stands a younger man, who may be the playwright. The five satyrs are carrying pieces of what appears to be an ornate banqueting couch, which they are perhaps getting ready to assemble on a low stage at the front. They are all shown in lively postures, and it seems as if the painter was interested in showing a variety of movements. Their footwork, expressive hand gestures and entire body language contribute to their obvious excitement at the festivities that await

them once they have set up the banquet. If the piece of furniture is a throne rather than a banqueting couch, then it may be that they are preparing for a joyful reunion with Dionysus, the god they worship.

#### 4.11



- 1 What impressions do you get from the body language of the satyrs?
- 2 Do you think that Athenaeus (see 4.6) would have approved of this form of dancing? Why, or why not?

In the following extracts from Sophocles' *Trackers* (Greek *Ichneutai*) (124–60, 176–212), the chorus of satyrs are searching for Apollo's stolen cattle, enticed by the promise of a finder's bounty. They have split into three search-parties, and are tracking the scent of the cows with their noses. They must have presented a comical sight, scurrying about the *orchestra* with their noses to the ground and jumping at the slightest sound. Silenus, father to the satyrs (who functioned as chorus-leader in early satyr-plays, but has by now been given a separate role, played by an actor), pokes fun at them and gives us clues as to what their antics might have looked like.

4.12	SILENUS	What is this technique then that you've invented for yourselves, what novelty is this: the way you hunt, lying flat on the ground? What kind of behaviour is that? <i>I</i> certainly don't know! You lie face down like hedgehogs in a thicket, or like a monkey bending over to let off a fart. What is this? Where on earth did you pick it up? Where? Tell me! That kind of behaviour is <b>entirely foreign to me</b> .	125 130
	CHORUS	Oo-oo-oo-ooh!	
	SILENUS	Why are you howling like that? Who is scaring you? What do you see? Who is throwing you into a tizzy? Why on earth do you keep acting crazy? Are you <b>trying to find millet</b> ? Why are you now silent – till this moment you were such chatterboxes!	135
	CHORUS	Be quiet!	
	SILENUS	What is that over there that keeps making you jump?	
	CHORUS	Just listen!	
	SILENUS	How can I listen when I hear nothing?	
	CHORUS	Do as I ask!	140
	SILENUS	You will be no help to me in my hunt.	
	CHORUS	Listen for yourself, father, just for a moment, to the noise that terrifies us and drives us mad, a <b>sound never before heard</b> by mortal man.	
	SILENUS	Why on earth are you so scared of a sound? You mannequins moulded from wax, you dirty pieces of animal dung! You see terror in every shadow, you are afraid of everything. You are spineless, slovenly and slavish attendants, nothing but bodies, tongues and phalluses! If you're ever needed, you sound loyal, but run away from the action. And yet, you worthless beasts, you have such a father as me – who, when young, graced the dwellings of the nymphs with <b>many monuments to his manliness</b> . He did not turn in flight, he feared nothing; he never cowered at the sound of cattle grazing in the hills; instead, he wrought with his spear glorious deeds, which you now tarnish as soon as you hear some shepherd's coaxing call...	145 150 155 160

*In the next few lines, Silenus persuades the satyrs to regroup under his command and approach the cave. Suddenly the noise repeats.*

**entirely foreign to me** Silenus' behaviour is usually just as ludicrous and outrageous as that of his satyrs.

**trying to find millet** millet was kept in underground storage pits; when satyrs are this excited, they are usually looking for food!

**sound never before heard** the sound that frightens them is the infant Hermes playing the lyre that he fashioned from a tortoise shell. The primitive satyrs have no experience of such refinements as lyre-playing.

**many monuments to his manliness** Silenus describes trophies normally set up to commemorate courage in battle, but here the wording suggests that he is claiming to have shown his 'manly courage' through his sexual prowess in encounters with nymphs.

CHORUS Oo-oo-oooh, psss, aaah – tell us what is the matter? Why do you groan and gibber and glower at me for no reason? **Who is this caught at the first turn?** You're caught! He's here, he's here! You're mine, I'm taking you prisoner. Who is this at the second... 180

*There is a break of twenty lines that are mostly lost...*

SILENUS Ah! 205

CHORUS What is it?

SILENUS I'm not staying.

CHORUS Please stay!

SILENUS Can't be done. If you want, *you* search for them and track them down and get rich by catching the cattle and getting the gold. I've decided not to stay here any longer and waste my time.

CHORUS No, I won't allow you to desert me or to sneak off from the job before we know for sure who is in this chamber. 210

*The mountain-nymph Cyllene, who is rearing the infant Hermes, emerges from her cave (i.e. the skene) and scolds the satyrs for disturbing the peace with all their stomping and twirling.*

- Below is a list of various types of humour. Which do you see operating in this scene?

### Verbal humour

- wit: clever comments
- verbal creativity: using words in unusual and humorous ways (e.g. puns and other word-play)
- verbal disjuncture: when tone and subject-matter don't match (e.g. use of mock heroism, bathos)
- use of hyperbole (exaggeration for the sake of effect) and other rhetorical devices

### Visual humour

- comic movement and gesture (the physicality of the clown or the mime)
- comic blunders (e.g. tripping and falling – see also *Schadenfreude* on p. 91)

**Who is this caught at the first turn** the satyrs, frightened by the sound coming from the cave represented by the *skene*, seem to be milling about in pandemonium, grabbing each other as they think they are catching their assailants.

### Situational humour

- ludicrous or bizarre situations, sometimes taken to absurdity
- conspiratorial humour (the audience is in the know about a character's misconception)
- comedy of errors (mistaken identities)
- recovery: someone is put into a difficult situation and has to adapt on the spot

### Transgressive humour

- lavatorial humour: crude sexual jokes
- breaking of taboos (e.g. sacrilege, insults)
- *Schadenfreude* (pleasure gained through witnessing someone else's discomfort)

## The chorus in Old Comedy

The following extract from Aristophanes' *Birds* (performed in 414 BC) forms part of the initial entry of the chorus of birds (260–96). Two Athenians, Peisetaerus and Euelpides, have arrived at the kingdom of the birds, hoping to persuade them to found a new colony with them in the sky. So the birds are summoned to council by Tereus, a human transformed into a hoopoe, who is now ruling as king of the birds. The extract begins with the last lines of his song, in which words are interspersed with sounds that imitate bird calls.

4.13	TEREUS	Come now, all of you, to our council, hither, hither, hither, hither!	
		Torotorotorotorotix, kikkabau kikkabau, torotorotorolililix!	260
	PEISETAERUS	Do you see a bird anywhere?	
	EUELPIDES	By Apollo, I sure don't, though I'm gaping up at the sky trying to spot one.	
	PEISETAERUS	So the Hoopoe, it seems, did his whooping for nothing when he entered the thicket and copied the curlew.	265
	TEREUS	Torotix torotix!	
	EUELPIDES	Hey, mate, look over here, there's a bird coming!	
	PEISETAERUS	By Zeus, it <i>is</i> a bird. What kind of bird? Surely not a peacock?	
	EUELPIDES	The Hoopoe here will tell us. What bird is that?	270
	TEREUS	That isn't just the common variety of bird that you humans see every day: he's a marsh bird.	



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EUELPIDES	<b>Wow, how beautiful he is</b> , all flaming pink!	
TEREUS	Of course – that’s why he’s called Flamingo!	
EUELPIDES	You there – hey – yes, you!	
PEISETAERUS	What is it?	
EUELPIDES	Over here there’s another bird!	
PEISETAERUS	By Zeus, you’re right, there <i>is</i> another one. He too is decked out in extraordinary colour. <b>Who on earth is this musical prophet</b> , this exotic mountain bird?	275
TEREUS	This one’s called Mede.	
EUELPIDES	Mede? Lord Heracles! Then if he’s a <b>Mede</b> , how did he fly here without a camel?	
PEISETAERUS	Here’s yet another bird – he’s got himself a crest.	
EUELPIDES	What marvel is this? So you are not the only hoopoe, but he is one too?	280
TEREUS	This one is the son of <b>Philocles’ hoopoe</b> , and I am his grandfather, just as you might say Hipponicus son of Callias, and then Callias son of Hipponicus.	
PEISETAERUS	So this bird is Callias. He’s losing a lot of feathers!	
TEREUS	That’s because he’s a pure-bred, so he gets plucked by money-grabbers, and the females also pull out his plumage.	285
EUELPIDES	By Poseidon, here’s yet another brightly coloured bird. What is his name, I wonder?	

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**Wow, how beautiful he is** the spectacle offered by the chorus – its costumes and masks, dancing, song and musical accompaniment – must have had a strong visual as well as auditory impact on the audience members. Aristotle identifies spectacle (*opsis*) as an element of tragedy that is missing in epic (*Poetics* 1462a), and Plutarch states (*Moralia* 1095c) that even the philosopher Epicurus acknowledged that the wise person is a ‘lover of sights’ and enjoys hearing and seeing Dionysiac performances as much as anyone else.

**Who on earth is this musical prophet** a quotation from Aeschylus’ *Edonians*. Aristophanes liked to transplant lines from tragedy, often into contexts where they seem humorously out of place.

**Mede** Greeks often referred to Medes and Persians interchangeably. The Persian expedition against Greece in 480 BC had used camels. The bird in question is probably a cock, referred to as the ‘Persian bird’.

**Philocles’ hoopoe** Aristophanes seems to be making a joke about the many plays that feature Tereus as a character. The Tereus in this play may identify himself with the protagonist of Sophocles’ *Tereus*; ‘Philocles’ hoopoe’ refers to a play about Tereus written by Philocles, a nephew of Aeschylus. Perhaps Aristophanes is suggesting that Philocles plagiarized from Sophocles by including a Tereus (and so Philocles’ hoopoe is the next generation). The young hoopoe that Aristophanes has just brought on stage would then be the third generation of hoopoes. He is also poking fun at a rich aristocratic family who for several generations had kept calling their sons either Callias or Hipponicus.

TEREUS	That one's Gobbler!	
PEISETAERUS	You mean Cleonymus is not the only gobbler?	
EUELPIDES	This one can't be Cleonymus – <b>Cleonymus</b> would have thrown away his crest.	290
PEISETAERUS	Actually, what is the reason for the crests on these birds? Have they come to race in full armour?	
TEREUS	No, my dear fellow, they're like the Carians: <b>they live on crests</b> , for security.	
PEISETAERUS	By Poseidon, just look at the number of damn birds that have congregated!	
EUELPIDES	Lord Apollo, what a cloud! Whoa, whoa! You can't see the <i>eisodos</i> any more for all the birds flitting around.	295

By now the remainder of the twenty-four chorus-members have hopped in, and in the following lines Peisetaerus and Euelpides start calling out bird names in rapid succession. The birds quickly realize that two humans have invaded their territory. They line up in battle-formation and start 'nose-diving' their enemies, who try to shield themselves from attack with the pots they are carrying.

- 1 What is the term used to describe comments such as Euelpides' remark about the chorus blocking the *eisodos* that deliberately call attention to the fact that this is all a performance?
- 2 What types of humour does this scene use that were not present in the earlier scene from satyr-play?
- 3 How might you choreograph the scene? Think about the placement of Euelpides, Peisetaerus and Tereus, where the birds enter from, what they might do on stage, and how these birds may behave as chorus-members (are they coordinating their movements or not?).
- 4 What elements of this scene might have surprised its original audience?

**Cleonymus** an Athenian politician accused of greed (hence 'the gobbler') who fled after the battle of Delion (424 BC). Since helmets were often crowned by a crest, Aristophanes is saying that this crested bird cannot be Cleonymus, who threw away his helmet in flight.

**they live on crests** Carians lived in a mountainous region of Turkey; they built their settlements on the crests of hills, which allows Aristophanes to get in yet another pun on the word 'crest'.

A number of early Attic vase-paintings show scenes of animal choruses in performance. This black-figure oinochoe (wine-jug) dates to c. 480 BC, around the time that comedy was first introduced into the City Dionysia; but others date back half a century earlier, suggesting that comedy was already a thriving art-form at Athens before it was incorporated into this festival.

In this painting, two chorus-members dressed in identical bird costumes dance to the accompaniment of the *aulos* or double-pipe. With the left figure, the underside of the wings is shown, so that we can see the performer's arms strapped to the wings, while with the other the arms are visible in silhouette through the wings. On their heads, both choreuts wear a crest or cock's comb; their beards have been painted a fiery red to match, and they have pointed noses suggesting a beak. The body-tights they wear carry a pattern that represents feathers. Attached to their knees are bright red extensions. Richard Green (2007: 168) offers an attractive interpretation of their function. They represent the birds' feet, he argues. While dancing, these feet would have been raised high off the ground, indicating that the birds were flying; when the birds came to rest, the performers would have knelt down, allowing the feet to perch on the ground. Certainly on this vase, the painter shows the performers in mid-flight, with wings outstretched and legs leaping into the air. Both turn their heads back towards the music of the piper (just visible on the far left).

4.14



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# Glossary

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Words in italics are transliterations of Greek words; those without italics are in common use in English. A mark over a vowel (e.g. *ō*) indicates that the Greek vowel is long and should be extended.

***agōn*** literally ‘contest’; used of competitions (athletic, musical, dramatic), of formal debates (in lawcourt and political assembly) and also of contests between two antagonists in drama

***agōnothetēs*** official appointed to organize the festivals from the fourth century BC onwards; also used of a judge in the competitions

***anagnōrisis*** literally ‘recognition’; the moment in drama when a character discovers his or someone else’s true identity, or realizes the true nature of his or her situation

***Anthesteria*** festival of Dionysus at Athens in late February

***antistrophe*** *see under* ‘strophe’

***archaic*** term used to describe the period of Greek history from 776 BC (traditional date for the first Olympic Games) to 479 BC (end of the Persian Wars)

***architektōn*** theatre manager; he leased a theatre and paid its operating expenses

***archōn*** annually appointed official; at Athens, the chief *archon* gave his name to the year

***Artists of Dionysus*** guild of actors, securing for its members special privileges

***Attic*** belonging to Attica, the region of Greece of which Athens was the *polis*

***aulētēs*** piper or player of the *aulos*, a reed instrument accompanying dithyrambic and dramatic performances

***boulē*** chief executive council at Athens composed of 500 members, fifty from each tribe

***chitōn*** tunic worn by men and women (knee-length for men, ankle-length for women)

***chlamys*** cloak, often worn by soldiers and messengers, fastened with a brooch

***chorēgos*** rich citizen who funded and organized a chorus (*see* ‘liturgy’)

***choreut*** member of a chorus, usually a young man

***chorodidaskalos*** professional chorus-trainer

***City Dionysia*** (also referred to as the ***Great Dionysia*** or simply the ***Dionysia***) festival of Dionysus at Athens in March / early April; most important occasion for drama

***classical*** term used to describe the period of Greek history from 479 BC (Greek victory over the Persians) to 323 BC (death of Alexander the Great)

***demarch*** chief official of a deme

***deme*** a village or township of Attica; the word refers to the settlement, its inhabitants and the surrounding land

***deus ex machina*** Latin meaning ‘god from the machine’; a god who flies in on the *mēchanē* and contrives a solution to a seemingly impossible situation

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