



Follow me

to the ancient
theatre of Dionysus

Where everything started...

If you ever find yourself in the Dionysiou Areopagitou pedestrian walkway, do not miss the Theatre of Dionysus, one of the most important ancient theatre buildings. There, in the south slope of the Acropolis, over the sanctuary of Dionysus whose cult gave birth to the ancient drama in the 5th century B.C., were presented for the first time the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.

The "*didaskalia*" (teaching), that is, the presentation of the plays to the audience, had a competitive character. It took place in the framework of theatre competitions during the five-day festival of the Great Dionysia, the official and most popular celebration in honour of god Dionysus, held every year from the 9th to the 13th day of the ancient month of *Elaphebolion* (late March to early April).

The form of the theatre today has nothing to do with the theater in ancient times. It used to be very different. During the almost nine centuries that the theatre was used, from early 5th century B.C. until the 4th century A.D., it certainly could not maintain its initial form without any change. The more the ancient drama evolved -from the 5th century onwards- in different directions, the more changes were made in the theatre building. So, as the drama became more popular, it was natural that the number of the spectators increased, and so did the capacity of the theatre. In addition, the more the theatrical building was improved, the more the demands for better view and acoustics increased. And during the centuries, the more the needs and preferences of people in spectacles changed, the more the form of the theatre adapted to them.

The history of the theatre

For all the above reasons, the Athenians built three successive theatres in honour of god Dionysus. The theatre, as we see it today, is closer to the form of the third building, whose construction started around 350 B.C.

Unfortunately, only traces of the first two buildings survive today, which were constructed in the beginning and sometime after the middle of the 5th century B.C., respectively. So, while we know many of the plays of the great drama poets that were staged there, we only know little on the space where they were presented for the first time.



Fig. 1: The ancient theatre of Dionysus at the south slope of the Acropolis.

From the first theatre...

An unfortunate incident that happened in the early 5th century B.C. was the reason for the creation of the first theatre of Dionysus. This theatre was the first structure in the history of civilisation which was made exclusively in order to host theatrical performances. Until then, the performances were held in a flat space called *orchestra*, which, according to the written sources, was situated in the agora of the city. Wooden bleachers, called *ikria*, were placed there for the spectators. During one drama competition the *ikria* collapsed and many spectators were injured. After that the Athenian theatre acquired a permanent space next to the sanctuary of god Dionysus. The choice was ideal. The drama competitions, which formed part of the celebrations in honour of the god, took place in an environment closely related to his cult. The location of the theatre was also ideal for one more reason: the

natural inclination of the ground made the place the most suitable for the spectators to have a good view of what happened in the centre of the orchestra.

The first theatre must have been very simple: in the lower part of the *cavea* there were probably wooden benches for the officials, but the rest of the spectators must have watched the performances sitting on the ground of the slope. Also, it is concluded from the texts of the first tragedies that the *skene* (scene building) was not necessary for the theatrical act. If there was one, it must have been very simple, like a wooden hut, so that the only two actors of the time would change their costumes and masks without being seen by the audience. It seems though that in 458 B.C. that Aeschylus' *Oresteia* was staged, there must have been a very simple scene building that looked like the Mycenaean palace where the plot unraveled.



Fig. 2: View of the theatre from the Acropolis Rock.

...to the theatre of Pericles...

Sometime after the middle of the 5th century B.C., when the Athenian democracy was at its peak, the construction of a new theatre began in the place of the old one, with the initiative of Pericles. It is possible that the second theatre of Dionysus was constructed at the same time with the odeion of Pericles, situated next to the theatre. In any case, its significance is great, as it was built in the period when the theatre became one of the most important means of education of the citizens.

The second theatre was also simply constructed, but it seems that it was larger than the first one. In the *cavea*, the wooden seats for the officials must have been replaced by stone *proedria* (seats of honour in the first row) while wooden benches must have been constructed for the rest of the spectators. We also learn from the sources that the *skene* of the theatre had 3 entrances in its façade (the wall facing the audience from the *cavea*) as well as a flat roof on which the *hypocrites* (actors) made their appearance. We do not know whether it was made of wood or stone.

...and then to the theatre of Lycurgus

After almost 100 years, around 350 B.C., the third theatre started being constructed. It is known as the theatre of Lycurgus because when it was completed, between 340 and 330 B.C., the orator and politician Lycurgus was archon of Athens. Lycurgus, an advocate of the Classical past of Athens, wanted to enhance the institution of theatre and he ordered the first official cataloguing of the plays of the three tragedians. To honour them, he put their statues in the new theatre. Apart from these great poets of the 5th century B.C., he later honoured a poet of the 4th century B.C., the comic playwright Menander.

The whole of the new theatre was made of stone and it was an enormous project for its time. The *cavea* increased and became imposing. Imagine that the state had to buy the houses of dozens of residents so that the *cavea* could expand in every direction. But most importantly, the construction of this theatre was a turning point on the evolution of the theatrical building. Its stone form was established in all theatres that started being built after that in every city and sanctuary.

During the Hellenistic period, the *skene* was the only part of the theatre that changed and became completely different. In 86 B.C.

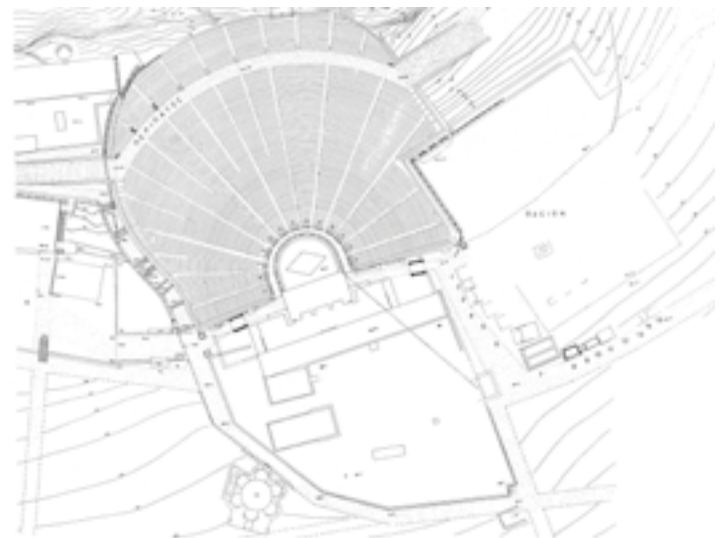


Fig. 3: Plan of the theatre and the sanctuary of Dionysus (by M. Korres).

the invasion of the Romans under Sulla caused severe damage to the building, and later, in the reign of emperor Nero (around 60/61 A.D.) the Romans made changes to the theatrical building until the end of the Roman period.



Fig. 4: General view of the cavea.



Fig. 5: The lower rows of the cavea with the preserved seats.



Fig. 6: The thronos of the Priest of Dionysus.

1st stop: the cavea

The *cavea* (fig. 4) is the part of the theatre that maintained most of the elements since the time of Lycurgus. Today, only the lower rows of its stone seats area preserved (fig. 5). Nevertheless, we know that its size was enormous, as the remains of the *kerkides* (the vertical sections of the seating area) reach the foot of the Acropolis Rock. The *cavea* became so impressive that it incorporated part of the *Peripatos* of the Acropolis, the path around the foot of the Sacred Rock. This path is actually the horizontal corridor seen on the upper part of the *cavea*. The *Peripatos* became a *diazoma* dividing the *cavea* in two uneven parts: the theatre -the lower part- and the very smaller *summa cavea* (or *epitheatron*) in the upper part. So many seats were created that the theatre's estimated capacity was almost 16,000 spectators. Imagine that the theatres of Epidaurus and Dodoni, which were subsequent, had 14,000 and 18,000 seats respectively!

If you look carefully at the plan of the theatre (fig. 3), you will see one particularity. Its shape is unusual compared to other theatres. While the seats are placed in semicircular rows, the outline of the *cavea* is irregular. This particularity is due to the theatre's adjustment to the available space, as to the right stood the odeion of Pericles, and to the left there was a road that met the *Peripatos*. So, the two ends of the *cavea* had to be shorter.

The most noteworthy element in the seating area is the 67 *thronoi* (seats) of the *proedria* (the first row of the *cavea*). Unlike the simple seats made of stone, the *thronoi* were lavishly made of marble. The priests and the 10 archons of the Athenian state used to sit there, and their names were incised on the marble. The most distinguished one is the central *thronos*, reserved for the priest of the temple of Dionysus Eleuthereus (fig. 6). It is elaborate and its lower part seems to end in animal feet. Later on, the needs for reserving seats increased and it became necessary to use more seats from the lower rows of the central *kerkida* by incising inscriptions on them. It also seems that depending on the needs, the inscriptions would be erased and new ones would be carved.

In the first rows of the seats one can see inscribed socles. They were added during the Roman period and on them stood statues of emperors, oracles, poets and other important persons. During the same period, probably under the emperor Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), it seems that the *proedria* was provided with something very rare for the Greek theatres: wooden beams must have been placed in holes that were discovered, to support an awning for the protection of the officials from the sun.



Fig. 7: The orchestra.

2nd stop: the orchestra

Unlike the *cavea*, the impressive orchestra of the theatre (fig. 7) is the result of radical repairs by the Romans. It does not remind of its form at the time of Lycurgus, when it was a simple semicircular orchestra of beaten earth, accessed by the *parodoi*, that is, the two corridors between the *cavea* and the *skene*. It also seems that in the two entrances there were marble gates. Around 60/61

A.D., the orchestra became horseshoe-shaped and was covered with coloured marble slabs. However, the changes made by the Romans were also practical. From a certain point onward they used the theatre for their favourite spectacles, which were gladiator and wild animal fights, as well as mock naval battles. Thus, the orchestra would become an arena or a pool. Around it they built the low marble wall that can be

seen today, so that the spectators would be protected from the animals. They probably put railings for better protection. Moreover, they seem to have used plaster in the orchestra (a material which makes things waterproof) for the needs of the naval battles. During the same period, the drain pipe around the orchestra was covered with marble to facilitate its use as an arena and a pool.



Fig. 8: Reconstruction of the skene at the time of Lycurgus (by S. Gogos).



Fig. 9: Reconstruction of the Hellenistic skene (by S. Gogos).

3rd stop: the skene (scene building)

While the above-mentioned parts of the theatre either remained unchanged through time or they changed once, the *skene* changed several times. The *skene* of the time of Lycurgus was succeeded by a structure during the Hellenistic period, which again changed during the Roman period, twice. Unfortunately, only a few parts of all these structures have survived. Despite the difficulties though, the archaeologists and the architects who study the space of this theatre have been able to reconstruct the form of the *skene* in every period, although with many assumptions and even disagreements at times.

So, even if only the foundation of the *skene* of the time of Lycurgus survives, it is a valuable piece of information which helps us conclude that the *skene* was made of stone. It was 50 metres long; in front of its façade it probably had a row of columns and behind them 3 or 5 doors which led to its interior. It also seems that it had *paraskenia* in its two ends, that is, auxiliary spaces for the preparation of the actors, and a flat roof which served as *theologeion*, on which the actors impersonated gods.

The new *skene* of the theatre during the Hellenistic period was probably two-storied. At the time, the role of the actors had acquired much more importance, so they attracted the audience's attention. In order for them to be better seen, a *proskenion* (a stoa) was built in front of the ground floor of the *skene*, and its flat roof, the *logeion*, at the height of the second floor, became the space where they made their appearance.

Around 60-61 A.D., the Romans created a new two-storey *skene* in the place of the old one. As they had the habit to construct impressive scene buildings, it seems that they lavishly decorated the new *skene*. You can see sculptures from there, in the shed slightly to the north of the entrance of the archaeological site. A low and large socle was constructed in front of the *skene* for the appearance of the actors.

Towards the end of the Roman period some more changes took place in the *skene*. In particular, around the 3rd century A.D., when the theatre declined, a tall *logeion* was constructed in front



Fig. 10: The Bema of Phaedrus.

of the *skene*, known as the "Bema of Phaedrus", parts of which still survive (fig. 8). It was a platform-wall where the orators presented their oral arguments, decorated with relief slabs depicting the myths of Dionysus. Among them you will see two sitting male figures. They are Satyrs, the followers of god Dionysus.

From then to now

After such a brilliant history, in the late antiquity the theatre fell into disuse and it was abandoned. Great quantities of stones were removed from it to be used in new constructions. Gradually, the layers of soil that covered the theatre also erased it from the memory of people.

Thus, in modern times, the location of the theatre was unknown. Finally, in 1841 the monument was discovered and after almost 20 years, in 1862, Greek and German archaeologists started the excavations to unearth it. Its remains gradually came to light until the end of the 19th century when the theatre was fully uncovered. Many years later, in the late 1970s, the first conservation and consolidation works started, in order to protect the parts of the theatre building which were at immediate risk. The need to protect it led, in 1984, to the formation of a special scientific committee, responsible for the monument. Another committee continues this work since 2002. Scientists of various fields, archeologists, architects and conservators who have been working at the theatre, try to give life to the monument with works aiming at its restoration, enhancement and protection. However, because of its state of preservation, the theatre is not used for theatrical performances or other cultural events.

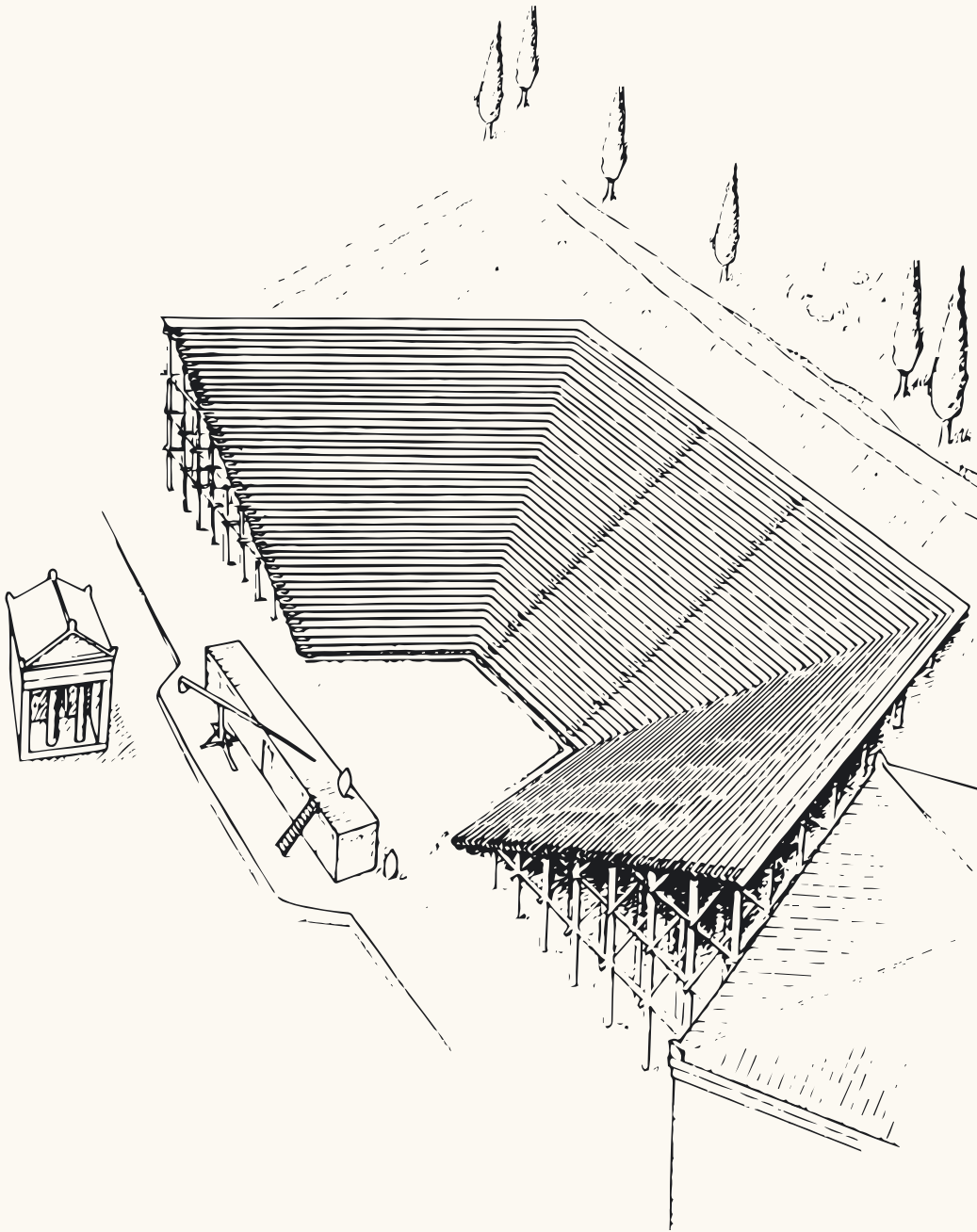


Fig. 11: Reconstruction of the theatre of Dionysus in the second half of the 5th c. B.C.
(by J. Ch. Moretti).

One more thing...

Regarding the form of the first two theatres of Dionysus, the scholars are divided in two main groups: according to the first ones, the *cavea* was semicircular and the orchestra circular, while the second group believes that the theatre was probably rectangular or almost rectangular. Unfortunately the traces of the theatres cannot lead to a safe conclusion. It is true though that many of the first theatres found in Attica and in other areas of Greece have their *cavea* and orchestra arranged in straight lines.

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