

FROM THE CULT OF DIONYSUS TO THE THEATRICAL ACT



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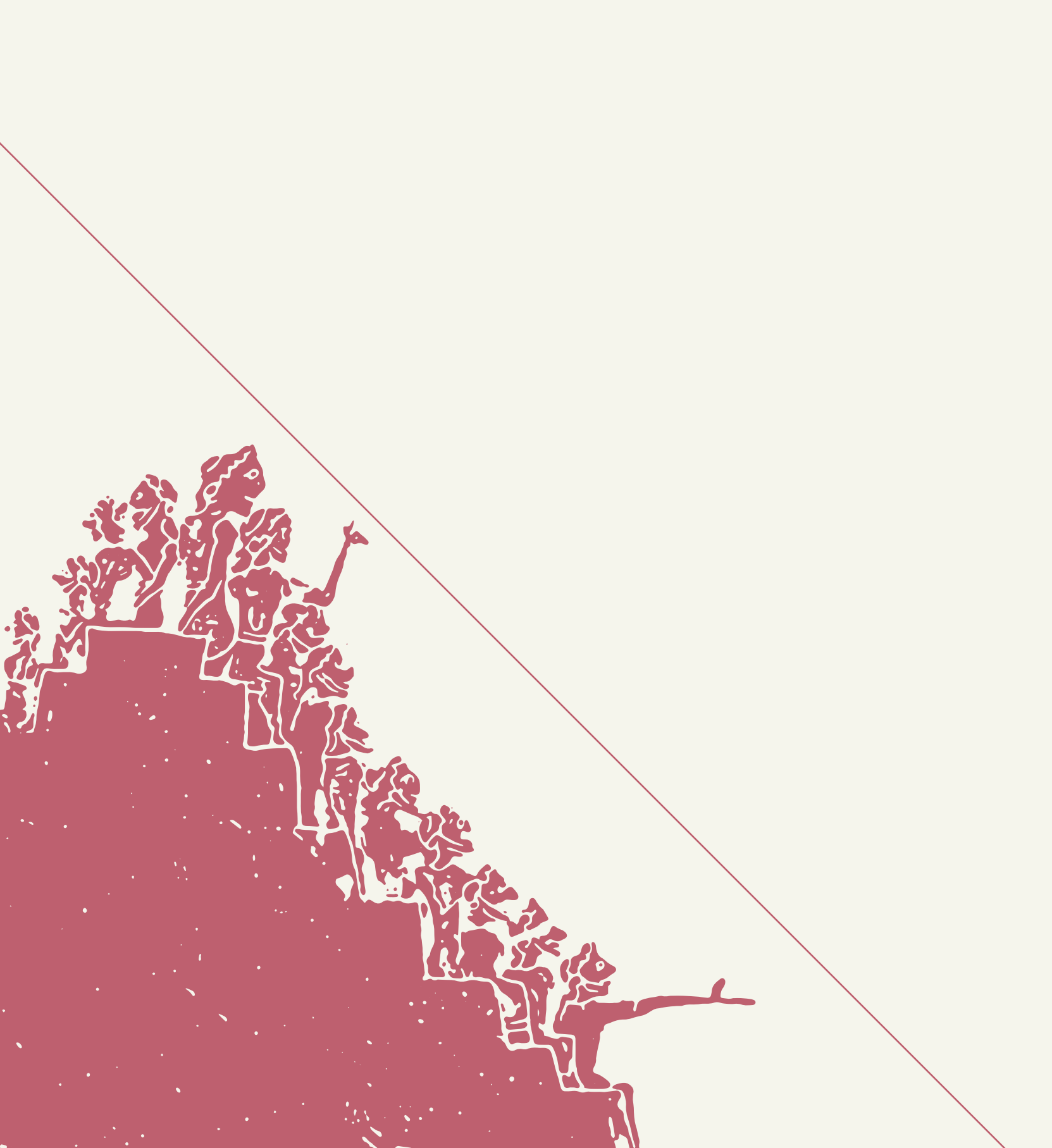
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INTRODUCTION

“Theatre, as a form of art, offers us the possibility to be connected and moved, to touch one another, to feel the truth together. This is why we have chosen theatre as a manifestation of our inner world”.

(Karolos Koun, 1943)

In order to trace the origin of theatre one should look into the depths of the human soul and time, into the need of humans for expression and interpretation of the world, centuries ago.

However, even if theatre is considered to be the result of a long-lasting evolution, lost in time, in the western world, its birth can actually be determined in space and in time: Athens, 6th century B.C. Here, the drama was born in the form of tragedy. It was an original creation with its own rules and characteristics but also a special form which expressed many ideas, values and political preoccupations, by combining verse, music and myth.

It is not easy to answer to how humans invented the dramatic poetry, as the information from the ancient sources may be ample but at the same time its pieces are brief and often quite dense. It is thus difficult to detect the conditions under which the ancient drama was born and developed 2,500 years ago. Therefore, we come to conclusions based on data provided by various sciences, such as philology, archaeology, anthropology, ethnology or even religious studies.

The background is a solid dark red color. A thin, light-colored diagonal line runs from the top-left corner towards the bottom-right corner. In the upper-left area, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent triangles in various shades of red and pink, creating a layered effect. A large, bold, light-colored number '1' is positioned in the center-right area, partially overlapping the diagonal line.

1

CHAPTER

Tracing the origins
of theatre

Aristotle on the birth of poetry

The art of poetry greatly preoccupied Aristotle. In his work *Poetics*, he searched the reason for poetry's existence and the laws of poetic creation. Although he wrote it almost two centuries after the birth of drama, *Poetics* had a dominant position in the research of drama's birth and evolution already since antiquity. Besides, this is the first systematic study of the issue. According to Aristotle, poetry stems from two natural human skills.

The power of imitation and the sense of melody and rhythm

According to Aristotle, all forms of poetry (epic poems, tragedies, comedies, dithyrambs) and the largest part of *kithara* [stringed musical instrument related to the lyre] and *aulos* (flute) playing are imitations, that is, representations of reality. He considers imitation –this innate skill of humans to express everything that impresses them through representations– as great creative power. This is why he associates it directly with the beginning of dramatic poetry. The instinct of imitation is more developed in humans and it is demonstrated since their childhood. The children see gestures and listen to voices, and then try to imitate them, thus forming their own speech and gestures: they acquire the first skills and knowledge about life, and as they get older these skills become intentional imitations, expressed through playing games.

As imitation leads to knowledge, says Aristotle, all people are pleased to see imitations, especially by other people, because by watching them they learn. Consequently, while humans tried to understand the world around them through imitation, the first spectacle was spontaneously created. More than any other form of art, theatre is born to be presented to people and evolves thanks to the human need for spectacle (=θέαμα, θεώμαι=to watch, θέα=view, θέατρο=theatre). So, imitation is not enough for the theatre to exist; the recognition and appreciation on behalf of the audience is also necessary.

Moreover, Aristotle believes that another necessary condition for poetry is the melody - rhythm. It is another natural human vocation, thanks to which people produce their imitations.

The “sacred spectacle”

Already since the prehistoric societies, humans have used myths and imitation in an effort to understand and interpret the world and the

mysterious forces of nature, to express fear, joy and desire, and to be protected by imaginary or real dangers. So, through this need for expression people unconsciously created the first spectacles, which were rough and improvised creations.

What connection could be found between theatre and the magical and cult rituals in the form of dances? The research into the prehistory of theatre has led us down this road, as humans have communicated and expressed themselves through music and dance since prehistoric times. Groups of people organized rituals and they reproduced stories and emotions through the same mimic gestures and movements. This way, they tried to communicate with divine forces, and with their favour, to ensure land fertility, success in hunting or even their own appearance!

The cult of these deities -as forged by human imagination- was not simple. The myths were created in order to explain the natural phenomena and, in fact, the circle of life. The need for dramatization of these myths was great, thus the fear of death was expressed through the reproduction of “mournful” sacred spectacles, while the triumph of fertility and rebirth through joyful celebrations.

Starting in Minoan Crete

In Greece, the first theatrical events probably took place in Crete during the Minoan period. They were sacred rituals, part of the Minoan worship. The Minoans had associated the mystery of life and creation with female nature, which they had deified. In their imagination they had created the image of Great Goddess, who symbolized the fertility of nature, in other words the source of life itself.

They organized cult ceremonies where, among others, groups of women danced ecstatically. Their goal was to provoke the appearance of the Great Goddess on earth, who would see to the flourishing of nature. With circular dances, their hands above the head and their body leaning back, they made their invocations.

Such cult events mainly appear on seal rings of the time, like the one in figure 1, which depicts four women in a field of flowers. The women seem to be dancing in ecstasy; they are turned towards the small female figure on the top left part of the ring that is hovering in the sky. The Minoan artist wanted to depict women celebrating the appearance of the Great Goddess at the climax of their ecstasy. During the following centuries, similar rituals in honour of female deities associated with vegetation and fertility took place in other areas of Greece as well, with the circular dance always present.



Fig. 1: Gold seal ring from the Isopata tomb of Knossos (1600 B.C. – 1400 B.C., Heraklion Archaeological Museum).

The bronze model in figure 2, made in the Geometric period, also depicts women forming a circle. With dancing steps, they may have been praying to a deity, for good crops, livestock reproduction, and the blessing for many children.

The magic of transformation

Many times, a necessary “tool” for a successful imitation was the transformation of a person with the help of a mask, like those in

figures 3 and 4. The actual masks, made of wearable materials, leather or wood, haven’t survived, but we assume their form by the clay copies that are preserved.

All of these rituals may have had cult characteristics but they channeled the vocation of humans for creating spectacles, which were sometimes expressed through the rhythmical movement of the body accompanied with music or songs, and other times through pantomime. Therefore, theatre must be associated with such kinds of magical and cult ceremonies, born by human impulses and needs.

Ending in the Dionysian cult events

Regardless of its origins, the birth of drama was associated with religious ceremonies and cult events in honour of god Dionysus. The questions on how the dramatic art was born through these sacred ceremonies, when and under which circumstances, remain unanswered. According to Aristotle, this took place when exceptionally gifted people developed inner skills, and from their rough, improvised works they intentionally passed to masterly art, the dramatic poetry.



Fig. 2: Bronze group of seven nude female figures attached by the shoulders, forming circular dance (9th c. B.C. National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 3, 4: Clay masks from the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta. They are worshippers' dedications to the Goddess (7th and 6th c. B.C. respectively, Sparta Archaeological Museum).



2

CHAPTER

The god of theatre

When the archaeological finds reveal.

Why was the drama associated with Dionysus' events and not with another god of the Greek pantheon? What did he represent for humans and which were the characteristics of his cult? Are there reliable answers? The archaeological finds are the means that lead to knowledge through the interpretation of images and symbols. Besides, the depiction of Dionysus was as popular among artists in ancient times, as was the god among humans.

A very old god with several forms

As the other gods of the Greek pantheon, Dionysus had many aspects and this is why we find him in the written sources with various names, which isn't odd, as he had been worshipped in Greece at least since the 13th century B.C.! His name was inscribed -among that of other deities- on clay tablets of Linear II from Pylos and Chania. It was logical that as the years went by and his worship became more solid, people attributed to him different forms and characteristics.

In our effort to interpret the myths and worship of Dionysus, we also discover the image of the god in prehistoric times: he was associated with fertility and vegetation, and he was also one of the several deities that people had invented at the time in order to interpret the seasons, the flourishing and the withering of nature. Trying to rationalize these mysteries, people created myths where the god died and was reborn.

Dionysus of wine and vegetation

"...For two things, young man, are first among men: the goddess Demeter -she is the earth, but call her whatever name you wish; she nourishes mortals with dry food; but he who came afterwards, the offspring of Semele, discovered a match to it, the liquid drink of the grape, and introduced it to mortals. It releases wretched mortals from grief, whenever they are filled with the stream of the vine, and gives them sleep, a means of forgetting their daily troubles, nor is there another cure for hardships. He who is a god is poured out in offerings to the gods, so that by his means men may have good things".

Euripides, *Bacchae*, lines 274-285 (translated by T. A. Buckley)



Fig. 5: Wine jug (*chous*, a type of *oinochoe*) depicting Dionysus and a Satyr (520-510 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 6: Wine jug (*chous*, a type of *oinochoe*) depicting a satyr supporting drunken Dionysus. In front of them there is a maenad walking and holding a flute, and behind them a small satyr with a torch (ca. 425 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 7: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*). Satyrs transport the grapes and stomp them in a winepress, in the presence of Dionysus (450-440 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

Dionysus has always been associated with wine, since prehistoric times. According to the myth, he arrived in the Aegean Sea to teach people the secrets of viticulture. Drinking wine was very common in the oldest festival in honour of Dionysus in Attica, the *Anthesteria*, which Thucydides calls “the oldest Dionysia” and mentions that this festival was celebrated by the Ionians of Asia Minor. So, it seems that Dionysus was worshipped before the immigration of the Ionic tribes from Asia Minor to Greece (early 1st millennium B.C.)

He was the god who offered people abundant wine and the joy of the symposium, intoxication, ecstasy but also violence. Apart from the vines and the wine he generally represented fertility and vegetation in people’s conscience, this is why they called him *Anthios* [of the flowers], *Kissophoros* [ivy-bearing] or *Dendrites* [of the trees].

Naturally, as god of wine, Dionysus was also a favourite subject for the decoration of vessels used for the preparation, serving and drinking of wine, such as the *krater*, *oinochoe*, *skyphos*, *kantharos*, etc.

The **Satyrs** and the **Sileni** (singular: Silenus), the loyal servants and companions of Dionysus, were depicted on many vessels taking care of the vines, as demons of nature, and dealing with winemaking, that is harvesting the vines, stomping the grapes and storing the wine.

Dionysus of the dead and of the souls

Dionysus was also associated with the underworld, with the dead and their souls, even with people’s anxiety for their fate after death. He is Dionysus **Zagreus** or **Liknites** [of the winnowing fan], the god who according to myth dies and resurrects. The chthonic character of Dionysus is associated with the 3rd day of the *Anthesteria* festival, the *Chytroi* [Pots], dedicated to the dead who were believed to rise from the underworld on that day. It was then that the women performed a specific ceremonial act in order to wake the dead Dionysus. In this case Dionysus was worshipped as *Liknites*, that is



Fig. 8: Wine jug (*chous*, a type of *oinochoe*) depicting a scene from the cult of Dionysus *Liknites* (425-420 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

as a baby in the cradle (*liknon*), whom the women tried to wake up. The scene of the vessel in fig. 8 depicting the ceremony of “wakening” the dead Dionysus is characteristic. Two women are standing on either side of a table on which there is a cradle with the mask of the god. The one is holding a drinking cup (*kantharos*) filled with wine, and the other a tray with fruits; they will both give their offerings to the god when he wakes up.

Dionysus of ecstasy and transformation.

Apart from anything else, Dionysus was the god of ecstasy and mania. He was *Bacchus* [riotous] and *Lysius* [liberator], the god who provoked to his worshippers an unprecedented religious thrill. He was the one who released their innermost instincts and temporarily made them forget the obligations, established rules and conformities



Fig. 9: Clay object used by women while weaving, which they wore on the thigh (*epinetron*). It depicts Maenads bearing ivy wreaths and holding *thyrsi*, while dancing ecstatically with the head turned down (510-490 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

of everyday life. The wild dance of his devotees, with the dizziness and frenzy that it caused, as well as the intoxication by the great quantities of wine led the dancers to a state of rapture. It was then that they felt the spirit of the god entering their body.

Naturally, this joy and salvation offered by Dionysus attracted women to his worship. Confined to domestic activities, excluded from the social and political life, they embraced his cult and so he became the god of women.

The symbols of the god

The main symbols of Dionysus were the vine and the ivy (among plants), the goat, bull, panther and donkey (among animals), as well as the *thyrsus*, that is the sacred rod of the god, decorated with vine leaves, ivy and a pine cone at the top, and the *phallus*, the symbol of fertility. However, as god of transformation, his symbol was also



Fig. 10: Part of a marble mask of Dionysus. It was unearthed at the south slope of the Acropolis and it is one of the few cult masks of the god ever discovered (1st c. B.C. Acropolis Museum).



Fig. 11: A vessel for storing perfumed oil (*lekythos*). It depicts a Dionysian mask among the god himself, a satyr and a maenad (500-490 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

the mask. His worshipers often placed a mask representing Dionysus on tall tree trunks or columns, which they covered with fabric. Then they proceeded in ecstatic dance and rituals around the mask so as to provoke his appearance.

Many vessels (from late 6th c. B.C to early 5th c. B.C) depict cult dances around the mask of god Dionysus. They are normally connected with two important festivals of Dionysus in Athens, the *Lenaia* and the *Anthesteria*.

One of these vessels can be seen in figure 13, showing Dionysus' worship during *Lenaia*. On the one side of the vessel there is a man disguised as **Satyr** (wearing boots and animal skin) and a **Maenad** dancing, each one holding a thyrsus; between them there is a column covered in fabric, with the ivy-wreathed mask of Dionysus on it. On the other side of the vessel there is a Dionysian procession, consisting



Fig. 12: A vessel for storing perfumed oil (*lekythos*). Dionysus is probably worshipped in the centre, in the form of *Dendrites*, that is as a deity of the nature. Around him there are Maenads and Satyrs (490-480 B.C., Polygyros Archaeological Museum).

of three *komastes*: during the festival of Lenaea, ceremonies took place where the *komastes* went around the city on carts and made fun of the people they met on the streets. The Lenaea have been identified as the fest of the Maenads who were also called Lenae. They would first prepare the wooden statue of the god and then dance around it ecstatically, in order to provoke his appearance (*epiphany*).

A religious epidemic!

The recounting of legends on the life and adventures of Dionysus has “staged” the episodes of his cult, and at the same time his cult rendered the myths even more seductive. According to tradition,



a



b

Fig. 13: Drinking cup (*skyphos*) with scenes from cult ceremonies in honour of Dionysus (500-495 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 14: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*dinos*). It depicts Dionysus with his troupe (420-410 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

Dionysus' cult sometimes spread peacefully and other times violently, but in any case with such speed that many scholars compare it with a "religious epidemic".

This cult demanded from people to organize in groups and was almost contagious, like in the myths where Dionysus was always accompanied by his frantic followers: the *Sileni* and the Satyrs, demons of the country who were half humans and half animals (horses), and represented nature's power of fertility, along with the Maenads, the nymphs who raised god Dionysus. So, those who devoted themselves to the god and participated in the Dionysian dances, reached such levels of liberation that proceeded to follies and orgies.

Numerous ancient vessels convey to us a sensation of the ambience of the Dionysian cult. The Maenads, the women seized by the divinely inspired mania, are usually depicted wreathed in ivy leaves. They hold *thyrsi*, flaming torches, musical instruments, such as *auloi* flutes, *tympana* (tambourins), *krotala* (clappers) and *kymvala* (cymbals), or even a wild animal, and dance ecstatically with the head tilted forward or stretched backward. The Satyrs drink wine, dance frantically and sexually flirt with the Maenads.

The menace of the "different"

Although the cult of Dionysus is very old, during the Archaic period it was overshadowed by the Olympian gods, whose worship demanded respect and prudence on behalf of the believers. This is why they wanted Dionysus to be considered as foreign, and

maybe this is why Homer (through his epic poems we get the first information on the Olympian gods) rarely mentions him, and seems not to include him among the other gods of Olympus.

Tracing the myths

The effort to hinder the rapidly spread of the Dionysian cult left its traces in the god's myths. The most renowned story is that of



Fig. 15: Drinking cup mainly used in symposia (*kylix*). The seated Dionysus is holding a vessel, listening to the melodies of a Satyr playing the double-flute. On the other side of the vessel, Maenads are dismembering Pentheus' body in religious hysteria. A second Satyr is watching them (ca. 480 B.C., Kimbell Art Museum, Texas).

the mythical king of Thebes, Pentheus, which was presented to the public by Euripides in his tragedy the *Bacchae*. Pentheus, like other kings, tried to prevent the cult of Dionysus in Boeotia, so he ordered the arrest and the imprisonment of the god. But Dionysus managed to escape and get revenge: he drove the king secretly out of the city -supposedly in order to help him spy on the Maenads' rituals and celebrations-, but in their dancing frenzy the Maenads mauled him to death thinking he was a wild animal. His mother, Agave, is said to have entered the city afterwards, holding the head of her son triumphantly. Perseus' dismemberment is only one of the elements highlighting the frantic cult of the god and its consequences, in the Dionysian myths.

The magic of the new

Although it seems that Dionysus was not yet recognized as a great god at the time, his cult continued to spread around Greece as a sect, among those who needed to express their faith with more passion; even the sanctuary of Delphi recognized it -the greatest and more respected religious centre-, and Dionysus was worshipped there along with Apollo.

So, every two years, at the beginning of December, very old ceremonies called *orgia* (orgies), with very old roots in Thrace (northern Greece), were celebrated at the slopes and peaks of Mount Parnassos. The participants were only women organized in troupes, called **Maenads** but also **Bacchae** or **Thyiads**, name that derives from the first priestess of Dionysus at Delphi, Thyia. Holding flaming torches and *thyrsi*, they danced to the sounds of drums and flutes, whirling until they were too exhausted and dropped on the ground unconscious. Sometimes, their ecstasy and mania were such that in their desire to identify with the god, they would tear to pieces the first animal they found and ate it, as they believed it was an incarnation of the god!

The worship out of the city walls.

Dionysus became the most popular god especially in the agricultural areas of Greece. His cult spread very quickly among the people who honoured him with rituals and orgy ceremonies, during which groups of drunken young men strolled around the settlement, dancing and



Fig. 16: Small perfume bottle (*alabastron*) depicting dancing *komastes* (ca. 600 B.C., Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum).



Fig. 17: High-handled drinking cup (*kantharos*) decorated with a scene of *komastes*. On the one side, three *komastes* are dancing accompanied by the music of a flute-player, while on the other side a female dancer painted in white colour dances along two *komastes* (560-550 B.C., Thebes Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 18: Votive relief. According to some scholars, it was dedicated to god Dionysus by a group of tragedy actors, after a performance (ca. 400 B.C. National Archaeological Museum).

singing improvised songs with sexual and playful content, the *phallic songs*, teasing one another. These young men, called *komastes*, were disguised in animals wearing masks and fleeces, as symbols of the transformation caused by the god, and held the *phallus*. The worshippers of Dionysus also sang *dithyrambs*, the improvised songs which honoured the god.

Around 600 B.C., groups of happy dancers (the *komastes*), appear in vessel decoration, firstly in Corinth and gradually in Attica and elsewhere. They are sometimes depicted naked and other times wearing short tight *chitons*, while they are often shown dancing with women. Their characteristics are the big bottoms or bellies and their dance which is accompanied by the hitting of buttocks and flipping of legs. The identity of the *komastes* remains unknown. Some scholars believe they are demons of fertility and others identify them with members of cult dances in honour of goddess Artemis.

Others see in them the *komastes* of the Dionysian celebrations, that is, humans who drank wine, danced and sang. Their frantic behaviour reminds of the mischievous Satyrs.

The tyrants establish Dionysus

Finally, in the 6th century B.C., Dionysus of the rural areas became one of the most important Greek gods, not only among common people, but also among the aristocracy. His cult was recognized as an official religion along with the Olympians. The tyrants of some Greek cities greatly contributed to this, because they promoted the Dionysian cult in order to satisfy the people who supported them. In Athens and in Corinth, glorious celebrations were established in honour of the god and thus his cult was established in the cities as well.

Periander, Corinth, early 6th c. B.C.

The tyrant of Corinth, Periander, invited in his court the poet and musician, Arion of Methymna, Lesbos. Possibly encouraged by the tyrant, Arion composed for the first time dithyrambs which he presented to the public with a group of singers-dancers that he had trained. This is how the dithyramb was transformed by Arion from an improvised song to a literary composition. Its content was almost always inspired by the myths of Dionysus, and according to tradition, Arion made his dancers disguise as Satyrs imitating the loyal companions of Dionysus.

Cleisthenes, Sicyon, early 6th c. B.C.

During the same period, the tyrant of Sicyon, Cleisthenes, wanted to erase from his city anything that reminded of the city of Argos, so he decided to eliminate the traditional cult of the mythical hero Adrastus of Argos. By doing so, he helped establish the cult of Dionysus.

Peisistratus, Athens, mid-6th c. B.C.

The dithyramb quickly became popular in the *demoi* (municipalities) of Attica, whose inhabitants honoured god Dionysus with fests and celebrations. It appears that in the middle of the 6th century the tyrant of Athens, Peisistratus, also choosing populist policies, reorganized the **City Dionysia**, a festival in honour of Dionysus Eleuthereus, adding the dithyramb contest in the festival. Thanks to his policy, the City Dionysia (also known as the Great Dionysia) became an institution in Athens and later evolved into the greatest celebration of Dionysus and of the theatre.

From imitation to action

It was in Attica that the dithyramb would transform to drama, that is, it would pass from imitation to action. Around the middle of the 6th c. B.C., Thespis, a poet from the Attic *demos* of Icaria (modern municipality of Dionysos) made a revolutionary step in the execution of the dithyramb: the first person of the chorus (*exarchon*), who until then led the group, was separated from the chorus and as a person of the story wore a mask and became a

“*hypocrites*”, that is he either conversed with the chorus or he explained the story to the public, saying for example what happened to him or to another person. This conversation was repeated and gradually a dialogue was created between the person and the group. According to tradition, the first *exarchon* who spoke with the chorus was Thespis himself. So, he became the first *hypocrites*, that is the first actor. This innovation of Thespis paved the way for a more direct imitation. The myths stopped being narrations of acts and became action, imitation and representation of acts. In this innovation Aristotle detected the birth of tragedy, which was nevertheless still crude and unrefined.

Thespis, the first actor, the first trouper.

The new artistic form introduced by Thespis immediately became popular and spread around Attica. According to the written sources, he travelled with his group on a carriage and performed in various festivals and fairs. It seems that from the first actor he turned into the first “trouper”. The tyrant Peisistratus recognized the popularity of the new poetic kind and in 534 B.C. he established it in the framework of the Great Dionysia, the most famous Dionysian festival. This year, according to the sources, the first tragedy contest took place and the winner was Thespis.

Dionysus, the god of theatre

The drama started as a popular event deriving from the ceremonies and festivals in honour of the god of land fertility, Dionysus. The first form of theatrical act resulted from the disguise of the god's devotees and the cult song they sang while dancing. And this is very important because while the other cult dances honouring other gods in Greece remained simple religious events, only the dance in honour of Dionysus-Dithyramb evolved into theatrical drama. Unlike what happened in the cult of other gods, the participation in the Dionysian ceremonies demanded the change of identity and everyday role of the devotee, as well as his/her transformation and identification with the god. Thus, Dionysus became the god of theatre, and even when the theatrical performances ceased to be connected with his cult, the people of the theatre never stopped honouring their patron god.

3

CHAPTER

The theatre
in democratic Athens



Fig. 19: Drawing reconstruction of the Athenian Agora in the late 5th c. B.C. The agora was the focal point of the city. It was an open square surrounded by public and sacred buildings, where the Athenians gathered everyday for political and philosophical discussions, judicial conflicts, administrative issues, cult, commerce and entertainment.

Peisistratus (6th c. B.C.) may have promoted the art of tragedy and established the performances, but the dramatic poetry became an institution in Athens in the 5th century B.C. It was then that democracy was also founded and Athens became the richest and more powerful city of Greece. The drama was influenced by developments that took place in the Athenian society and it came to be a medium of democratic expression. It was within this historic environment that the ancient dramatic poets found the necessary conditions to express their ideas and make drama a supreme artistic genre.

Democracy is founded

Between the 6th and 5th century B.C., the life of the Athenian citizens started to change. After they overthrew the tyranny, thanks to the reforms of Cleisthenes, the middle class obtained the right to decisively participate in politics. This was the basis for the democratic regime.

Later on, in 462 B.C., the leader of the democratic party, Ephialtes, reinforced the council of citizens (*boule*) and the people's court (*Eliaia*), and thanks to Pericles democracy reached its peak. He gave

to all the citizens, rich and poor, the opportunity to participate as much as possible in common affairs. As a result, the citizens *were* the state, they governed, they legislated and they judged through the assembly (*ecclesia of demos*), the council of citizens and the public courts.

Athens becomes the most powerful city of the Greek world.

At the same time, Athens acquired military power and supremacy: its fleet became the most powerful in the Aegean Sea and gradually the city evolved into a leading power, Head of the Delian League, with control over of its city-members.

The city of Athens saw an unprecedented level of economic and cultural development. Craftsmen, merchants and goods travelled here from all over the world, making Athens a reference point for arts and letters. In the 5th century B.C. Athens was the focal point and the dominant power of Greece.

The theatre is liberated...

The theatre was of course influenced by the developments. After the reforms of Cleisthenes, the Great Dionysia acquired a more democratic character. The two other popular kinds were incorporated in its program: the *satirical drama* (ca. 500 B.C.) and the *comedy* (486 B.C.). During the same period, the tragedies were “liberated” by their religious nature and the poets felt the need –as active citizens– to deal with the social and political issues, and democracy gave them the freedom to cast a critical eye over reality. They were able to freely express their opinion, and even to question institutions and old values or to criticize people and situations.

...it becomes an important institution of the city...

Through the ideological confrontations of the theatrical characters, the authors presented to the public preoccupations and ethical dilemmas concerning issues well known to all, as they were dealt

with at the assemblies, the courts and the discussions that took place at the agora. Thus, the theatre became one more space of dialogue and communication, preoccupation and confrontation, which contributed to the formation of better informed citizens with critical judgment and political conscience. And this was an essential pedagogical activity for the citizens, the majority of whom were uneducated without a public educational system. They had to actively participate in the local government, deal with every problem of the internal and external affairs, judge the reasons and the actions of the politicians and express their opinion.

For these reasons, the state assumed the responsibility for organizing the theatrical performances, and it assigned their financial support to rich citizens, who sponsored the plays. It even made a step forward by the decision to grant part of the public revenue to the poor so that they could pay their ticket. In other words, the state urged the citizens to attend the performances, exactly as it urged them to take part in political activities, in assemblies, courts and councils. The research has not yet reached a certain conclusion on whether the women were allowed to watch the performances. Nevertheless, it is very important that thousands of citizens had the right to participate and no one was excluded for reasons pertaining to class, family, hometown, wealth or education.

...and it enters the centre of its activities.

Even the location of the theatre building in the city shows us a lot. The performances, with the great participation of the citizens, were held at the theatre of Dionysus, below the Acropolis. In its shadow, the ancient Agora, the centre of political and economic activities of the city, and nearby the Pnyx, the meeting place of the assembly. All the important activities of democratic Athens were gathered in its centre.

Unlike the lyric poetry which was only addressed to the elite during their symposia behind closed doors, the theatre was an open gathering. Under the sunlight, the people watched together the same spectacle. Even the sacrifices and prayers that took place before the performances and the assemblies demonstrate how much their experience in theatre and in public life was similar. The theatre was one more space in the city, where the Athenians felt members of the same religious and political community.



Fig. 20: The theatre of Dionysus, under the Acropolis, was one more open space for gathering, where all important issues were discussed.

4

HAPTER

Theatrical competitions
and performances
in the antiquity

Religious festivals with political character in 5th century-Athens.

“...we provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure and helps to banish the spleen...”

Thucydides, *Pericles' Epitaph*, 38
(translated by Richard Crawley)

In 430 B.C., in the speech of Pericles on the dead of the Peloponnesian war, he praised Athens because, among others, it offers many opportunities to its citizens for rest from the everyday tension, through the organization of competitions.

He mainly refers to musical competitions (of poetry and singing), which took place during the religious festivals. In the 5th century B.C., the festivals formed an integral part of the lives of the Athenians. Athens hosted more festivals than any other Greek city. The more its success, wealth and power increased, the more the city ought to thank and honour the gods. And the more the festivals, the more reinforced was the confidence of the Athenians, who became aware of the importance of being citizens of this city, and they renewed their relations with the gods.

So, the festivals were another occasion for gathering and mass participation of the citizens in a common activity that united them even more. During the festivals, the everyday conflicts diminished, and they were an exceptional opportunity for Athens to show its grandeur.

Dionysian festivals and theatrical competitions.

The drama contests were particularly popular. We may speak today of playwrights who write texts that turn into theatrical performances, however, when the dramatic poetry flourished, the authors were the poets who always wrote their works in order to take part in contest and win.

In the 5th c. B.C., theatrical performances were held almost exclusively in Athens, but they were not separate artistic events that one could enjoy any time – as it happens today. On the contrary, they took place in the framework of three festivals in honour of god Dionysus: the *City (or Great) Dionysia*, the *Lenaea*, and the *Rural (or Small) Dionysia*.

So, the opportunities to watch a theatrical performance within a year were specific, and the non Athenians could attend them only if they happened to be in Athens during one of these three festivals.

The most important festival was the Great Dionysia. Nonetheless, since 440 B.C. the first theatrical performances of the year were held during the *Lenaea*, in the month of *Gamelion* (today mid-January/ mid-February). This was the year when the tragedy and comedy competitions started. The tragic poets rarely participated, because the main genre presented at the *Lenaea* was comedy. However, it seems that even the comic poets preferred a victory in the Great Dionysia due to the prestige of this festival.

The Rural or Small Dionysia were celebrated in the *demos* (municipalities) of Attica in the month of Poseideon, (between the middle of December and the middle of January). The day this festival took place varied from *demos* to *demos* so that people could attend it when they wanted. The richest *demos* municipalities, such as Piraeus which was famous for its Rural Dionysia, could also include drama competitions, although the season was not suitable for open air performances. Normally, the plays participating in the contest had already been staged in one of the two Athens festivals. Despite its local character, the famous poets such as Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes did not consider it as inferior.

The City or Great Dionysia, the great theatre festival.

“...and with the approach of spring the Bacchic festivity, and the rousings of melodious choruses, and the loud-sounding music of flutes”.

Aristophanes, *Clouds*, lines 311-313

At the end of the winter, while waiting for spring, the Athenians honoured god Dionysus with joy and solemnity. They organized the City or Great Dionysia, which was the last festival in honour of the god to be established. It became important thanks to Peisistratus, and in the 5th century B.C. it was the most glorious festival of Athens after the Panathenaea. From the 9th to the 14th day of the ancient month of *Elaphebolion*, that is around the end of March (Elaphebolion corresponded to the time between mid-March and mid-April), the city celebrated in the rhythm of Dionysus Eleuthereus.

His cult had come to Athens from Eleutherae, a village at the border between Attica and Boeotia. There, the people worshipped their

favourite god in the form of a wooden statue. According to tradition, a priest, Pegasus, was told by the Delphi oracle to take the statue of the god from Eleutherae to Athens. The Athenians gave to the god the name "Eleuthereus" and built for him a sanctuary with an altar and a small temple as dedications, at the south slope of the Acropolis.

The Great Dionysia differed from the other Dionysian festivals. It was political and open to all Greeks, not only to the Athenians. Their organization was assumed by the *Eponymous archon* (chief magistrate) of the city, who had political competences, and not the *Archon basileus* (king magistrate) who was responsible for the organization of religious celebrations and events.

A festive mood and a joyful atmosphere must have dominated the city during the days of the festival. Over a thousand citizens took part in it, as members of choruses, actors, extras, and assistants. For most of them this was the event of the year. There were also many non-Athenians who came to Athens -at least when it flourished- in order to see the festival and of course the famous theatrical performances. The good weather also facilitated travelling and the visitors who came from all over Greece.

It was during this period that the member of the Athenian coalition sent their annual contribution, and the Athenians took the opportunity to impress the foreigners. In front of a crowd that gathered at the Theatre of Dionysus Eleuthereus, they presented the collected taxes of their allies in baskets, and they also showed how the city honoured its citizens: they offered a wreath to its important citizens, and armour to the young men who had lost their father in battle. What is more, during this festival, the prisoners were freed on bail, and no confiscation for debt took place.

As if we were there...

The calendar of the festival

8th day of the Elaphebolion, the "proagon"

Two days before the drama contest were presented the plays that would compete. This procedure is called the "proagon" and since the middle of the 5th century (444 B.C.) it took place in the Odeon of Pericles, right next to the theatre of Dionysus. The poets and their troupe, the chorus, the hypocrites (actors) and the sponsors appeared wreathed in front of the public, and announced the title and the subject or a small summary of their plays.

9th day of the Elaphebolion, reenacting the god's coming to the city

One day before the festival, the Athenians reenacted the coming of Dionysus to their city. In accordance with the myth, the priests carried the wooden statue of the god from his sanctuary to a small temple in Academy (today's area of Plato's Academy), out of the city walls, on the road to Eleutherae. When the sun set, the statue of the god returned triumphantly to the city with a procession of young men holding lit candles.

10th day of the Elaphebolion, the festival begins

This is when the festival actually begins. Early in the morning the sacrificial procession starts. It is overly crowded... Citizens divided in tribes, *metoikoi* (foreign residents), and even women participate in one of the rare occasions they have to get out of the house. The Athenians are dressed in white, and the *metoikoi* in red. Most impressive of all are the sponsors who attract people's attention with their luxury. The procession ends at the temple of Dionysus Eleuthereus. It is time for the sacrifice. Bulls are sacrificed and along with them there are many other offerings. After these ceremonies are completed everyone goes to the nearby theatre. It is time to watch the awards ceremony and the demonstration of the Athenian grandeur. The city honours its important citizens and shows off its wealth and power.

But the day isn't over. In the afternoon there is the dithyramb contest of the ten tribes of Attica: every tribe has chosen a chorus of 50 men and one of 50 young boys to compete, thus the spectators watch in total 20 dithyramb choruses! Sometimes choosing the winner is easy and other times rather difficult. The sponsors are offered awards -as representatives of their tribe-, as well as the poets. The sponsors are given a tripod-lebes (large vessel in a three-legged stand) and the poets are probably given a bull which will be dedicated to Dionysus. The schedule is exhausting and the day comes to its end. The people are very tired and they need to blow off some steam. Perhaps a *komos* (a revel) is the right way. Jolly parades in the streets, laughter and teasing, fun all around. A small break before the theatrical competitions that will be take place in the following 4 days...

11th – 14th day of the Elaphebolion, the drama competitions

It is peacetime and the competitions last for 4 days. The performances start at sunrise -the more the sunlight the better- and they end at sunset. There is not much time for breaks. The spectators need to have some food, cushions to sit comfortably and of course warm clothes. They do not forget to make sacrifices to Dionysus before the performances. Besides, these formed part of a religious festival hence they are also a religious act. Even the high-ranking generals make libations (liquid offerings).

The contestants' order of appearance is decided after drawing lots, like in the dithyrambs. The luckiest contestant is the one who will be presented in the end, as the audience will better remember his play. The first day always starts with the competition of 5 comic poets. Each one presents a play. The following three days are for three tragic poets. Each day corresponds to one of them, who must present 4 of their plays: 3 tragedies and one satirical drama. It's the 5th century B.C. and during the

Great Dionysia the spectators have an amazing experience. They see in total 20 dithyramb choruses and 17 plays; all new and only once! The number of the people who participate in the festival is impressive. In all categories there are around 1,160 members of choruses, 24 actors and 28 auletes (flute-players)!

The evening of the 5th day is the moment of choosing the winners of the drama contest. The end of the Great Dionysia is approaching. In the following days (normally the 16th of Elaphebolion), the assembly will gather at the theatre, in order to evaluate the organization of the festival by the Eponymous Archon. In case of complaints for offences or bad behaviour of other citizens during the festival, they must also be discussed.

In case of war, how different does it get? During the tumultuous Peloponnesian war for instance, the drama competitions did not stop! (In such times, the Athenians needed to put aside money for their military operations). Only the duration was reduced from 4 days to 3. So, 3 comedies were presented, one after each day of tragedy performance.



Fig. 21: Vessel for storing perfumed oils (*pelike*). Two *Nikes* (winged female figures) are depicted in front of a *tripod-lebes* (vessel offered as trophy to the sponsors who won the dithyramb competitions), who are about to sacrifice a bull after a dithyramb win. The sacrifice of the bull by the *Nikes* and not by the poet stresses the significance of the win (late 5th c. B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

The organizers and participants

The Eponymous Archon

The organization of the Great Dionysia was one of the main duties of the *Eponymous Archon*. He was one of the 9 archons appointed annually in Athens and as we have already mentioned he had political competences. The preparation of the festival took more than 6 months, so the *Eponymous archon* started it right after his appointment, in July or August.

First of all, he had to choose which of the candidate poets would take part in the competition, but we do not know on what criteria. Did he read all the plays and chose accordingly or he read only their summaries? Did he consult people he trusted? Did he choose based on the personality of the candidate and the opinion of the public on him? Did the political views and ideology of the candidate matter?

However they were chosen, it is certain that the most recognized poets would not be easily rejected, while the new poets would need support from people who could influence the archon.

The organization of a festival in the city was as important as the organization of military operations, thus the *Eponymous archon* was also responsible for appointing the sponsors who funded the performances, just as he did with the funding of the fleet.

From the middle of the 5th century B.C. onwards, when the awarding of the best tragic actor was established, the *Eponymous archon* tried to fairly distribute the leading actor for each of the three tragic poets, by drawing lots.

The poets

At first, it was the poets who prepared almost the whole of a performance. Before the establishment of *sponsorship*, they were



Fig. 22: Scene depicted on a wine jug (*chous*, a type of *oinochoe*): two men are seated in front of a wooden platform and watch a comedian impersonating the mythical hero Perseus. According to some scholars, they may be the poet and the sponsor of the performance (ca. 420 B.C., National Archaeological Museum). Drawing by E. Gilliéron.

responsible for the chorus, the covering of its expenses during the preparation of the performance and of course its teaching of their play, therefore they were called “teachers” (*didascalloi*). They also had to compose the music, and to impersonate the roles of the plays. Gradually though, when the sponsorship was established and the *hypocrites* (actors) made their appearance, their work was limited to the direction of the play, leaving the rest to the relevant professionals; Aristophanes however, used to assign to other poets even the direction of his plays. The prize for the winner was an ivy wreath.

The role of the dramatic poets was above all else didactic, and this was a well-accepted belief in the antiquity, already since the time of the first poet, Homer. Through their play and the messages they conveyed, the tragic poets tried to cultivate civic consciousness as well as educate the spectators. Even the comic poets did not hesitate to openly present the drawbacks and mistakes of the Athenian society, while entertaining the public with their jokes.

When the most successful plays of theatre’s golden age started being staged repeatedly (mid-4th c. B.C.), the poets became secondary to the leading actors who took over the direction of the plays.

The sponsors

The archon also had to find the sponsor (*choregus*), that is the rich citizen who covered the expenses of the chorus’ education, costumes, shoes and masks. The sponsor also funded the teaching of the dithyrambs. For the competitions of the Great Dionysia, 28 sponsors were necessary in total.

The sponsorship (*choregia*) was enacted along with other public services (*liturgies*) of the Athenian state, during the years of democracy, as a kind of indirect taxation to wealthy Athenians, who paid for various needs of the city. Since it was both a very honourary service and an excellent opportunity for showing off, there were always citizens willing to cover the costs, or -in times of recession- to share the burden of a sponsorship with another citizen.

Not everyone was always willing though, but the archon had to designate a sponsor for every poet. Those who refused on the grounds of not being rich enough could propose a richer citizen as replacement. But they had to be sure about his financial state, because he could propose an exchange of their property.

The first thing a sponsor had to take care of was the choice of the members of the chorus. For the dithyramb he had to search within his own tribe, but for the drama he could also search among all free citizens, as everyone was able to take part.

The sponsor paid for all the expenses of the chorus members. First of all, the daily remuneration for all the preparation period, because they were amateurs and they had to stop their everyday work. The sponsor also paid for their food, clothes, and even for a flute-player and a *chorus-trainer*, when the poet asked for the help of an expert, but also for a space for rehearsals if not granted by the state. He often seems to have been responsible for the *parachoregema* (see page 31).

So, if the poet was the essential part of the performance success, the sponsor was the decisive factor, since the lack of generosity on his behalf could lead to failure.

The institution of sponsorship (*choregia*) was banned around 315 B.C. by Demetrios Falireus, and the role of the sponsor was indirectly assumed by the state. The competitions were organized by an *agonothetes* who was elected every year and funded by the state.

The choragic prizes

The example of Lysicrates

As representatives of the performance organizers, the *choregoi* (sponsors) received prizes by the state for winning the competitions. For the tragedy and comedy contests the trophy was an ivy wreath, while for the dithyrambs it was a tripod-lebes, that is a large bronze vessel supported by a bronze tripod. Often, both of them were gilded. The sponsors used to build small monuments to place the lebetes, in order to perpetuate their success. In the 5th century B.C. these monuments were usually simple with rectangular bases or columns, but later, in the 4th century B.C., they became more impressive and looked like small temples.

The *choragic monuments*, as they were named, were erected around the Dionysian theatre, as well as at both sides of one of the most central streets of the city, which was named after them: “Tripods”. According to Pausanias, the ancient geographer and traveller, the road started from the *Prytaneion*, at the Agora -a space where the *Prytaneis*, the official guests and the honoured citizens were fed at public expense. It ended at the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus. A large part of the ancient road -today in the area of Plaka-, is still called “Tripodon” (of tripods) street, while a smaller part, before that is the Shelley street. At the beginning of this street, one may see the Lysicrates square, which took its name from the monument built by the sponsor Lysicrates for winning in 335-334 B.C., on behalf of his tribe, the *Akamantis* tribe. It is the only choragic monument wholly preserved. Other known choragic monuments are that of *Thrasyllus*, above the koilon of the Dionysian theatre, at the entrance of a small



Fig. 23: The choragic monument of Lysicrates (335/334 B.C.)

shallow cave half way up the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis, and that of Nicias, to the west of the theatre. They were erected around 320 B.C., but only traces of them are still preserved today.

The Lysicrates Monument was a circular marble building -with 6 Corinthian columns around it-, which rested on a tall rectangular stone socle (fig. 23). The tripod was placed on the marble flower that protrudes from its roof. On the upper part of the monument there is an inscription which includes the name of the sponsor and his tribe, of the poet and of the Eponymous archon in the year of the win. Above the inscription, there is a relief depicting one of the most famous myths from the life of Dionysus: his adventure with the Tyrrhenian pirates.

The chorus trainers

Although at the beginning the poets were those who trained the choruses, since the 5th century B.C. there were many poets who hired professional chorus trainers called *hypodidascalloi*, *chorodidascalloi* or just *didascalloi* (teachers), like the poets, also paid by the sponsors. After the middle of the 4th century B.C. when earlier plays were mainly staged, the chorus trainers -and even the leading actors- would also direct the plays. It seems that at the time the term "*chorodidascallos*" started being used for the chorus trainers.

The *hypocrites* (actors)

The protagonist, the deuteragonist and the tritagonist (leading and supporting actors)

Only Athenian citizens could become actors and they also played the female characters. In the first years after Thespis (the first actor), the poets continued to impersonate the roles of their plays. Gradually, it became necessary to introduce a second actor. Aeschylus was the one who added the deuteragonist, and this resulted in an increase in dialogues and the right conditions for a dramatic plot. Later on, Sophocles added a third actor (tritagonist), thus creating plays with more complicated scenes. The 3 actors became established in the tragedies as a rule. It seems that the protagonist was the one who chose the other two actors, while the state paid all of them.

During a performance, the three actors could play more than one role each, and sometimes they would share the same role. These conditions apparently created many difficulties and demands. The characters they would successively impersonate could be very different, while an actor needed to change his voice in order to make it sound similar to that of the actor with whom he shared a role. The masks surely helped them to play various roles, but in any case the



Fig. 24: Marble vessel used to mark the tombs of those who died unmarried (funerary *loutrophoros-hydria*). On the right side of its base a *hypocrites* is holding a theatrical mask (380-370 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

most important thing about the actors was their acting talent.

The rule of the 3 actors also applied to the satirical plays, however, in comedies it wasn't always followed. Some of the plays of Aristophanes seem to have demanded 4 or even 5 actors. Perhaps the same number was necessary later on, during the *Middle* and the *New Comedy*. In the case of the *New Comedy* the actors may have increased up to 5 or even 7.

Choice and distribution of the protagonists

Before the hypocrites became professionals, it was the poets who chose them. Quite often, the poets wanted to cooperate with

specific hypocrites. Sophocles, for example, seems to have written the roles bearing in mind the abilities of the actors with whom he usually collaborated.

When the choice of the actors was still personal, it is logical that many poets would choose the best actors. So, when the tragic actors' competitions were established (449 B.C.), the Eponymous archon drew lots for picking one protagonist for every poet; the protagonist took part in all 4 plays of one tragic poet, which means that he was on stage for about 6 to 8 hours!

Later on, this procedure became even fairer: the protagonist offered his service to all three competing tragic poets. He took the leading



Fig. 25: A child figurine holding a comic mask (late 4th c. B.C.-early 3rd c. B.C., National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 26: Fragment from a vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*). A tragedy *hypocrites* is observing the mask of an elderly man, which he is holding in his right hand (ca. 350 B.C., Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg).

role in one play of every poet, so he was the protagonist once a day. Consequently, the poets shared equal opportunity for victory, as they all had the advantage of the best actor. The same probably was the case for the comic actors as well.

The supporting actors

Because of the rule of the three hypocrites, no more than 3 actors could speak on stage. If the plot demanded one more character that should be impersonated by one of the 3 hypocrites, then the role he played until then was assumed by another actor, who had to remain silent. This silent actor along with other background actors (slaves, nurses, old men, soldiers etc.), children, as well as the additional chorus of a play composed the so-called *parachoregema*.

From the amateurs...

At the beginning, the hypocrites were amateurs, simple citizens, chosen by the poets for their loud voice, clear articulation, good physique, knowledge of music and dance, as well as for their ability to memorize a large number of verses. It is possible that they were picked from the chorus.

...to the professional hypocrites

As the drama became more and more complicated, the contribution of the hypocrites to the success of a play became more and more important. From the middle of the 5th century B.C., the number of the experts in acting increased, forming a class of professionals who aspired to the recognition of their contribution. In 447 B.C., the state established the competition of tragic actors -which actually took place among the protagonists- and the winner, apart from his trophy would be honoured by seeing his name inscribed next to that of the poet and sponsor who also won the competition. What is more, his win ensured his participation in the following year's contest with two more actors.

The same competition for the comic actors was established much later, between 329 and 312 B.C. However, in Lenaea which mainly honoured the comedy, the comic actors' contests had already started since 442 B.C., the year when comic poets' contests also took place for the first time.

In the 4th century B.C., the hypocrites gained more power compared to poets. When in the middle of the century the old dramas were staged and gradually the protagonists directed the performances, they did not hesitate to cut or change scenes so as to draw more attention to themselves. The acting became so important that the protagonists could even intervene to the new plays while they were being written.

The best actors saw important salary increase and widespread reputation beyond the boundaries of Attica. Their popularity offered them many privileges, such as the exemption from military service and the immunity in all Greek cities. Finally, as the public thought very highly of them, the cities often used them as ambassadors in diplomatic delegations.

The chorus

"It is right and just for our sacred chorus to advise and teach what's good for the city".

Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 686-687
(translated by Matthew Dillon)

One of the most essential parts of a theatrical performance was the *chorus*, which was a group of people usually divided in two. They imitated characters, sang and danced in the orchestra of the theatre and they even conversed with the hypocrites. Their leader was called *coryphaeus* and it was him who represented the chorus in the dialogues.



Fig. 27: Drinking cup mainly used in symposia (*kylix*) depicting members of a chorus impersonating elderly men (ca. 350 B.C., Thebes Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 28: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*). Three couples of dancers are heading to the left in dancing movements, towards a tomb from which emerges a man probably wearing a mask. Unclear words come out of the dancers' open mouths. Their identical movements and the impression that they are wearing masks (because of the similarity in hair, head cover and facial features) show that they belong to a tragedy chorus. By their costumes it seems that they are impersonating soldiers (ca. 490 B.C., Basel Museum of Ancient Art).

The members of the chorus were Athenian citizens, men or male teens, who were exempted from military service. They were chosen on the same criteria with the hypocrites, but unlike them they remained amateurs. They may have become specialized though, participated either in tragedies, or in satires, or in comedies.

As time went by, toward the late 5th c. B.C or the early 4th c. B.C., the dialogues of a performance were given so much more attention that the hypocrites became the stars, while the chorus lost its importance. At the end of the 4th c. B.C, this change influenced even the theatre building: while until then both the chorus and the hypocrites moved on the orchestra, from then on the hypocrites appeared on the *logeion*, a raised platform in front of the *skene* (stage building), so that the spectators could better see them.

The chorus in tragedy

At first, the members of the tragedy chorus were 12. Sophocles raised their number to 15 and this remained the same until the end of the 5th century B.C. We don't know whether the same chorus participated in all four plays of a tragic poet.

The members of the tragic chorus had to recite passages, sing and dance in a synchronized way, as if they were one person. The rehearsals started months before the performance and the chorus members had to stop any other work or everyday occupation. Because their training was demanding and tiring, it formed part of the education of a man.

Unlike the heroes of the play impersonated by the hypocrites, who were the known characters of the myths, the chorus represented an anonymous crowd, usually of old men or women. With their dialogical or singing passages, the members of the chorus got involved in the action to a certain extent. They expressed opinions on what happened, they advised the heroes on their behaviour and decisions, interpreted their choices and actions or intervened in the story, without however influencing it. Sometimes their role was so important, almost leading, that the play was named after them, for instance Aeschylus' *Hiketides* (the Suppliants) or *Eumenides* (favourable deities).

With the characteristics of their role's nature (e.g old men or women), such as wisdom, experience, emotion and sensitivity, they demonstrated the deeper meaning of the plays. In their own way, they provoked powerful emotions to the spectators, and helped them interpret the facts of the plot, while the spectators felt that thanks to the chorus, the opinion of the community was heard. Therefore, the participation in the tragic chorus was a very high

honour, and the citizens chosen for it could not refuse or they were be fined.

At first, the chorus participated in a large part of the play. For example, half of Aeschylus' *Hiketides* consisted of singing passages. When there was only one hypocrites, he conversed with the coryphaeus (the leader of the chorus). With the addition of the second hypocrites, the poets started focusing on the dialogues of the hypocrites, thus reducing the part of the chorus to 1/4 of the play. The chorus did not necessarily participate in the dialogues. It normally intervened, if needed, in a conflict between two characters. With the introduction of the third hypocrites, the plot evolved even more thanks to the actions of the hypocrites, while the presence of the chorus was not important for the evolution of the story. What its members mainly did was to announce the characters who arrived at the action field and to make general comments.

At the end of the 5th century B.C., the members of the chorus were reduced and so did their participation in the plays' action. In time, the *chorika* (choral parts) were replaced by the *embolima*, which were songs without any relation with the plot, and resembled more to musical intervals.

The chorus in comedy

The composition, the role and the appearance of the comic chorus in a performance was completely different. First of all, it consisted of more people. In Old Comedy, perhaps even in Middle Comedy, the number of its members reached the 24. So, while the tragic chorus moved harmonically on the orchestra as one person, the comic chorus created a loud and chaotic atmosphere, in accordance with the nature of the comedy.

But it wasn't only the moving around which caused disorder during the performance. In the comic chorus there was no uniformity, in general. Half of its members could impersonate male characters and the rest female ones, like in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, or they wore different costumes, like in *Ornithes* (the Birds), where they played different birds. The chorus intervened in the dialogue of the hypocrites, either to participate in the conversation, or to sing short songs. Many times, it took sides supporting one character. While in tragedies the chorus tried to stop a conflict, in comedies it did whatever possible to make it escalate, in order to create a playful and funny atmosphere.

The participation of the chorus was so active that many of Aristophanes' comedies, such as the "Wasps" (*Sphekes*), the "Birds" and the "Frogs", were named after the creatures impersonated by



Fig. 29: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*dinos*). Male actors who play the Satyrs are moving around a flute-player who is standing in the centre; probably a scene from a satirical play of the poet Pratinas. According to the plot, the Satyrs' chorus rushed into the orchestra to take the place of another chorus that did not match the Dionysian atmosphere of the play (ca. 430 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

the chorus. The parabasis for example, which held a special place in Aristophanes' comedies, was a choral part: after the hypocrites had left the stage, the chorus members addressed the audience with songs and recitations (this never happened in tragedies). They commented on issues that had little or no relation with the plot, thus interrupting the play. This way, the spectators came back to reality and realized that the play was imaginary. In the parabasis, the chorus normally praised the poet for his value and social contribution, since he educated the audience through his plays. It also referred to the unfair attitude of the judges toward the poet in the past, it satirized situations and famous people and it advised the audience on socio-political issues. In other words, the chorus was the voice of the poet.

Since the late 5th century B.C., the comic chorus followed the fate of the tragic chorus. Its members were gradually reduced and they only sang embolima between the dialogues. In other plays the chorus was even abolished.

The chorus in the satirical drama

In the satirical drama (satire) the members of the chorus imitated

the Satyrs, the followers of god Dionysus. Their leader was Silenus, their father and the educator of the god, according to the myths. Although the Satyrs were not related to the myths from which the poets drew their themes, their presence in the plays was decisive. The satirical drama, presented the funny aspect of the heroes' adventures. In an inventive way, the poets implicated the Satyrs in the plot, who would contribute with their cheerfulness, mischievousness and vulgar language to a light-hearted and funny performance. With their frenetic dancing and songs, the Satyrs created a Dionysian ambience in the theatre, fulfilling the goal of the *satire*, to lighten the atmosphere after three successive tragedies.

The judges

The last stage in the preparation of the competitions was the choice of the judges who would vote for the competing poets and hypocrites. We do not know whether the same judges took part in all kinds of contests (dithyrambs, tragedies and comedies), but it is certain that they weren't theatre experts. They were simple citizens who voted based on their personal taste and preference,



Fig. 30: Fragment from vessel for mixing wine with water (*dinos*). The spectators are watching enthusiastically the chariot racing in honour of the dead Patroclus. It is one of the rare ancient depictions of spectators (580-570 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

nevertheless, they were definitely influenced by the reactions of the audience.

The procedure of their choice was quite complicated and aimed at deterring bribery, although the sponsors were also involved in the procedure and thus promoted the judges who would favour them. The candidates were chosen from every tribe, and their name was put in a ballot box. The ten ballot boxes were sealed and guarded at the Acropolis until the day of the contest. On that day they were brought to the theatre and in front of the audience, the honoured guests and high officials, the archon would draw a lot from every box.

At the end of the competition, the judges inscribed the name of the competitors they preferred on tablets and deposited them in one ballot box. The archon drew five tablets and the winner was the one with the majority of the votes.

The audience

Thousands of spectators attended the theatrical competitions in the Great Dionysia. Undoubtedly, their response to a play determined its success. The audience's understanding of the plays, its preferences, and positive or negative reaction -especially that of the Athenians for whom the plays were written- certainly influenced the judges. Therefore, it seems that the poets took into consideration the tastes of the public, the limits of its tolerance on various issues, as well as its degree of perception regarding the deeper meanings of the plays, while they were writing them. They also tried to connect the myths with contemporary issues or events, in order to convey their messages more easily.

Who attended the competitions

The audience mostly consisted of Athenian citizens, rich and poor, intellectuals but also illiterate citizens, mainly peasants who formed the largest part of the population. The *metoikoi* (foreign residents) also attended in large numbers, as well as visitors from all over Greece, as the reputation of the festival increased. Ambassadors from the allying cities, who visited Athens for their annual contribution, also watched the plays.

Whether women, children of slaves were included in the audience, is a question that remains unanswered. The relevant sources are not always reliable, but it is a fact that these three population groups were not allowed to participate in political events, and the Great Dionysia were definitely political.

Seating arrangements

The audience sat in specific places: the priests, the archons and the generals, the sponsors and the ambassadors, the orphans of men who died in battle and other distinguished persons, such as the benefactors of the city, sat in the front row (these seats were called *proedries*), and generally in the lowest part of the koilon. Perhaps the *bouleutai* (members of the council of citizens, the *Boule*), the representatives of each tribe and the foreigners sat in a special part of the theatre. The simple citizens surely sat on its upper part, and if women and slaves were allowed to watch the plays, they would probably sit at the most remote places of the theatre, that is the highest seats or the side sitting sections (*kerkides*).

How the audience responded to the plays

In the 5th century B.C., the theatrical performances of the Great Dionysia were a rare opportunity for recreation and the Athenians

seem to greatly anticipate it each time. The more they learnt about it by relatives, friends and acquaintances who took part in the preparations, the more their anticipation escalated.

The experience was even more exciting because each play was presented only once. But what thrilled them the most was the competition itself. They demonstrated their emotion, approval or discontent very vividly, by applauding and whistling, shouting and bursting into laughter as if they didn't realize that what they saw was an imaginary story or myth. They didn't even hesitate to throw items to a bad actor, for example, to force him to leave the stage. Apart from recreation, the theatre also offered the Athenians very important intellectual experiences. The plays addressed issues that concerned them and so they learnt to exercise their political judgement and formed their morals.

Drama competitions and theatrical performances outside the city of Athens.

We rarely read in the sources about performances that took place in other cities, in the 5th century B.C. We know for example that the tyrant of Syracuse, Hieron, invited Aeschylus in his city, in 470 B.C., to present plays in its newly built theatre. Moreover, we learn from Aristophanes that plays of Euripides had been staged in various cities already since 411 B.C. In 408 B.C., Euripides visited Macedonia and passed the last 2 years of his life in king's Archelaus court, staging theatrical performances. There, he seems to have written his last plays, the most famous one being *Bacchae*.

The theatre becomes a panhellenic form of art.

Since the 4th century B.C. and during the whole Hellenistic period, the situation changed radically. The theatre flourished and expanded all over Greece, but outside Athens the performances and the drama contests were held in honour of other gods than Dionysus, even semi-gods and local heroes. Thus, the drama was disconnected from the Dionysian cult. Gradually, the cult character of theatre was weakened and the performances took place even on the occasion of various events, such as royal marriages.



Fig. 31: Inscribed marble *stèle* with honorary decree of the *demos* (municipality) of Aexoni (modern Glyfada) regarding two sponsors of theatrical performances. Five comic masks are visible at the top of the *stèle*. Above the inscription a Satyr is about to pour wine in Dionysus' cup and at the base of the inscription there are two wreaths (313/312 B.C., Epigraphic and Numismatic Museum).

► The inhabitants of the *demos* wanted to thank the sponsors Auteas and Philoxenides for their generosity to cover the expenses of the plays that won the theatrical competitions of the Small Dionysia among the Attic *demes*. As the inscription reads, they decided to offer the sponsors a gold wreath, to pay for the necessary sacrifice and to write their decree on a stone *stèle* that would be placed in the theatre.



Fig. 32, 33: Drama competitions took place at the theatres of Epidauros and Delphi, within the framework of Asklepios and Apollo's cult respectively.

The theater became a necessary social institution and every small or big city from the West and the old Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily to the East and the Hellenistic kingdoms in Asia acquired its own theatre building.

The itinerant troupes...

Since the 4th century B.C., with the proliferation of theatres and drama competitions, the hypocrites who could not live up to the high expectations of the Athenian audience were accepted in the theatres of the other *demoi* municipalities of Athens or in other Greek cities where there weren't enough local artists to cover the increased demand. Therefore, itinerant troupes were formed who staged popular plays of the 5th century B.C., or remakes.

...and the Dionysian artists

At the beginning of the 3rd century B.C., the enormous demand for drama performances in every small or big Greek city created the necessary conditions for the professional organization of all artists who participated in the competitions. It was then that the first unions were created, that is groups of artists like the troupes, forming the *Koinon* (Union) of the Dionysian artists", because as people of the theatre they were protected by the patron god of theatre, Dionysus. Four of these unions are known: the Koinon of Athens, which was the first, the Koinon of Isthmus and Nemea, the Koinon of Ionia and the Hellespont in Asia Minor, and the Koinon of Egypt.

These Unions, presided over by a priest of Dionysus, ensured privileges to their members, while they also protected their rights and interests; as a result, a high level was maintained in the art of acting. At the same time, they contributed to the preservation and dissemination of plays and safeguarded the theatrical competitions from arbitrariness and alterations.

The cities asked from the Unions to send artists to participate in the competitions, facilitating them, so that they could live up to their contracts. At the same time though, there were penalties for those who would breach a contract, like the confiscation of their property. Sometimes, a Union not only funded its members to help with their participation, but the whole of the competitions. So, this institution protected the artists, as well as the organizers through the contracts they signed, while the latter could also find easily and quickly participants for the competitions.



Fig. 34: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*) which originates from southern Italy. Its depiction reminds of a scene from the comedy *Thesmophoriazuse* by Aristophanes (lines 689-759), which probably was staged in Magna Graecia. In the 4th c. B.C., the performances of Athenian comedies (both of the Middle Comedy and of the 5th c. B.C. Old Comedy) were very popular in the area (380-370 B.C., Martin von Wagner Museum, Würzburg).

► To the right there is Mnesilochus, a relative of Euripides, disguised as a woman to take part in the women's festival *Thesmophoria*. His goal was to discover the plans of women against the poet who criticizes them in his plays. When his identity is revealed, to save himself, he goes to an altar and threatens to kill a baby. To the left there is the mother of the baby who runs holding a basin to gather the blood of her child. She has deceived Mnesilochus though, as the supposed swaddled baby he is holding is actually a wine flask.

5

CHAPTER

From Aeschylus
to Menander

The birth of tragedy, the beginning of dramatic poetry.

Born in the middle of the 6th century B.C. in Attica, the tragedy is the first theatrical form. The original inspiration of Thespis to make a dithyramb unfold with the alternation of recited and musical parts, through the action of a *hypocrites* and the chorus, was the essential structure of tragedy, followed by all tragic poets.

A song for the goat

The etymology of the word “tragedy” is “*tragos*” (goat) + “*ode*” (hymn). But how are the goats related? According to the most probable theory, the word “tragedy” derives from the sacrifice of a goat by the worshippers of Dionysus in his honour, before they sang the dithyramb. Their song was a song for the goat, so the new poetic kind was named after it.

Premiere

In 534 B.C., with a decision of the Athenian state, the new kind of spectacle created by Thespis was presented for the first time at the Great Dionysia. Since then, the tragedies were established as part of the official programme of the great religious festival.

From the *Persians* to *Oedipus at Colonus* and the *Bacchae*.

From the estimated 1,000 tragedies that have been presented at the Great Dionysia in the 5th century B.C., only 32 have survived to date. The oldest one is the *Persians* by Aeschylus, which was staged in 472 B.C. Based on this, we consider this year as the beginning of the ancient Greek tragedy, although other important poets, such as Cherillus, Pratinas and Phrynichus, preceded Aeschylus or were his contemporaries. In Aeschylus' play, the tragedy already has all of its essential characteristics, maintained until the end of the 5th century B.C., when the last two extant tragedies were written: *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles and *Bacchae* by Euripides. Both were staged in 406 B.C., after the death of their creators. In the following years, many more tragedies were produced, nonetheless,



Fig. 35: Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, on the mosaic of the Nine Muses (1st c. B.C., Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes).

the three most important tragedians of the 5th century B.C., Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, remained popular and their works were never surpassed.

The plots of the tragedies

History

After the defeat of the Persians by the Greeks in 478 B.C., the accomplishments of the Greeks became a source of inspiration for the poets, equal to the heroic acts of the mythical heroes of the Trojan War. First, Phrynichus was inspired by the contemporary historical facts in his play the *Capture of Miletus*, regarding the sack of Miletus by the Persians in 494 B.C., while the defeat of the Persians during the Salamis battle, in 480 B.C., was the topic of his *Phoenissae*. This tragedy inspired Aeschylus to write the *Persians*, the only extant tragedy whose plot is truly based on history, the last tragedy of this kind ever written, and the oldest of the tragedies still preserved.

It is possible that certain Athenian politicians, such as Themistocles who was sponsor of Phrynichus, or Pericles who was sponsor of



Fig. 36: Part of the hammered bronze interior handle of a shield (*choanon*) decorated with three scenes, from top to bottom. *Prometheus Bound* is depicted in the middle with the eagle eating his liver. Aeschylus dealt with the myth of Titan Prometheus, who was punished by Zeus because he stole the fire from the gods to give it to people, in his tragedy *Prometheus Bound* (550-525 B.C., Olympia Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 37: "Melian relief" (type of clay reliefs mainly found on the island of Melos) depicting the encounter of Electra and Orestes, accompanied by his friend Pylades in their father's (Agamemnon) tomb. The recognition scene of Orestes and Electra is found in Aeschylus' tragedy *Choephoroi* (or *Libation Bearers*), the second tragedy of the trilogy *Oresteia* (470-460 B.C., Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum).

Aeschylus, urged the poets to deal with these issues, as a way of boosting the Athenians' morale or as advice on the mistakes of the past.

The myths

Normally, the tragedians drew their subjects from the Greek mythological cycles (Trojan, Theban, Argonautic, Argolic, etc.) which included the adventures of heroes who represented the distant past of Greeks. Wars, conflicts -mainly domestic-, thirst for vengeance and restoration of honour and dignity at all costs, uncontrollable passion, ethical dilemmas and other painful and extreme situations experienced by the heroes, were the ingredients of the tragedies. The gods played secondary roles, although there were plays connected with the Dionysian myths; the only one preserved today is *Bacchae* by Euripides.

One myth, many stories, different interpretations!

The audience may have known the myths from the traditions and the poems, mainly the epic poems of Homer from which the

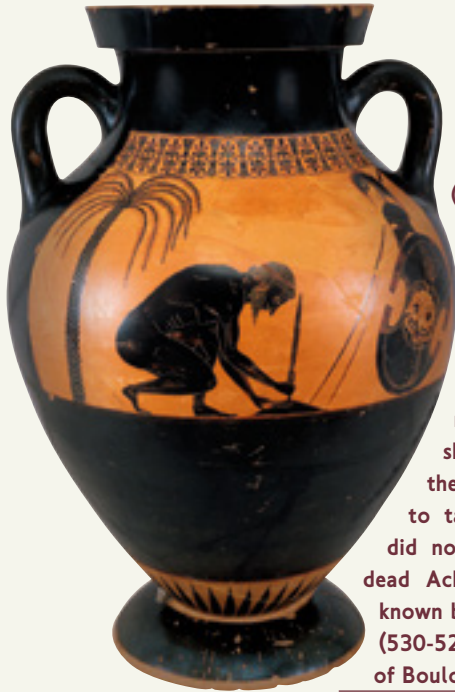


Fig. 38: Vessel for storing wine, oil, cereal etc. (*amphora*) depicting Ajax who places his sword on the ground in order to fall upon it. According to the myth, the hero decided to commit suicide out of shame, when he realized that he killed sheep instead of Greeks in their camp in Troy. He wanted to take revenge because they did not give him the armor of dead Achilles. This myth became known by Sophocles' tragedy *Ajax* (530-525 n.X., Municipal Museum of Boulogne-sur-Mer).

poets borrowed many elements, or they might have seen earlier performances. But this didn't necessarily mean that they knew details on the plot of the play they watched or what was about to happen every time. The myths spread orally, so those who narrated them could alter some elements; as a result, several variations circulated. Most of all, it was the personal interpretation of a poet which made every play unique and could surprise and mesmerize the audience.

The poets could highlight different aspects of a myth and recreate a plot by modifying it, transferring the focus from one person to another or presenting and evaluating the actions in a different way. Their goal was to promote meanings that nobody had detected before them, but also to express new ethical dilemmas. Thus, they could create an unlimited number of variations.

Oedipus Tyrannus:

Sophocles' view on the myth of the Theban king.

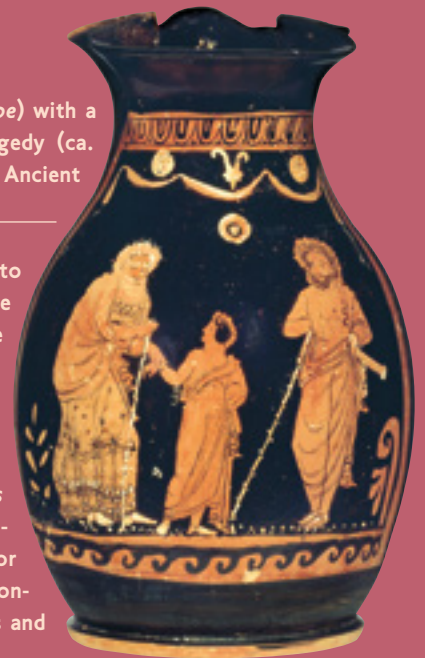
In his tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* ("Oedipus the King"), Sophocles presented the king of Thebes loosing his throne after the discovery of his incest (without knowing it, he had married his mother Jocasta and sired four children) and gouging out his own eyes. However, in Homer we encounter the earlier tale about Oedipus, where the hero remained king even after the revelation of the horrible truth.



Fig. 39: Part of wall painting from the "House of the Comedians" in Delos. Antigone is depicted guiding her blind father, Oedipus (Delos, 2nd-1st c. B.C.).

Fig. 40: Wine jug (*oinochoe*) with a scene inspired from a tragedy (ca. 330 B.C., Basel Museum of Ancient Art).

▶ The blind old man to the left reminds of the seer Teiresias, and the man on the right looks like a king. The scene is probably inspired by plays of Sophocles, such as *Oedipus Tyrannus* (when Teiresias meets Oedipus), or *Antigone* (during the conflict between Teiresias and Kreon).



Why did Sophocles give his own version? In his time, the radical views of the sophists became very popular. According to their theory, the world was created by natural procedures and not by the gods. So, humans were able to understand the world, as well as to form it. Within this mental atmosphere, and being more conservative, Sophocles wanted to show that humans endanger themselves when they only trust their own powers and disregard the gods. For the poet, the gods control life in ways that humans cannot understand. Oedipus, who did not duly consider the oracles on his true identity, but only trusted his own judgement, was led to decline and self-destruction when he realized the truth.

The past speaks about the present and the future.

Through the reproduction of myths, the poets addressed political and religious issues, social phenomena, philosophical movements, fundamental ideas and beliefs of their time: timely issues which preoccupied the public in their daily life, and in general, as they were timeless questions and anxieties.

They addressed issues such as war and peace, institutions, values and perceptions of their time, such as the unwritten or written laws, the nature of gods and their relation with humans, the rules that govern the world, fate and personal responsibility, and the prestige of the institutions. Moreover, they portrayed the relationships between men and women, as well as between rulers and ruled, while they presented vital problems, such as the limits of human initiative and freedom, and they expressed hopes and fears regarding the political and social situation of their time.

Although the plot took place in a distant time and place, different than the Athenian society of the 5th century B.C., the audience realized that what they watched concerned them directly. The poets added to the myths events and beliefs of their time, they used terms from the contemporary socio-political and religious life and they referred to contemporary situations and persons. All this, brought the world of tragedy closer to the audience, which associated the plots with their own experiences. So, the myth, even if it was an imaginary story, it was also the medium through which spectators would think on human existence. On the other hand, the distance between the two worlds helped them sympathise

with the heroes, without identifying with them. Thus, the audience could judge the heroes' actions uninfluenced think and envision their future.

Aeschylus' *Eumenides*: how the myth approaches the world of the audience.

The trilogy *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (458 B.C.) is a very characteristic example of the way a tragedian could talk about facts or situations of his time through the mythical past. The last tragedy (*Eumenides*) of this trilogy is especially influenced by the Athenian affairs of that time. The timely references of the poet, although indirect, are numerous and we imagine that the audience must have associated them with their own experiences.

According to the plot, Orestes followed the order of god Apollo, and killed his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, to take revenge for his father's (Agamemnon) death. After the murder, the *Erinyes*, female chthonic deities of vengeance on domestic crimes, pursued Orestes. He sought refuge at the temple of Apollo in Delphi. Then, the god urged him to go to Athens, where he would be judged and saved. At this point begins the story of *Eumenides*. Goddess Athena decides to form a jury of Athenian citizens to judge the matricide. The jury vote ends up in a tie and Athena casts her vote for Orestes' acquittal. The *Erinyes* get angry and start threatening and cursing Athena, but in the end the goddess prevails. She promises them that they will have their own sanctuary in Athens, in a cave under the Areopagus (the Hill of Ares), where the Athenians would honour and worship them as "*Semnai*" (Venerable Ones). The *Erinyes* are persuaded and start singing chants and wishes for Athena, thus becoming *Eumenides*.

How many events must have this plot reminded the spectators? When Orestes asked for the help of Athena and gave an oath of eternal friendship between his city, Argos, and Athens, he must have reminded them of the treaty signed by the two cities some years earlier (462 B.C.). When Athena established the worship of *Semnai* and in the end she guided them to their residence by a ceremonial procession, the audience must have thought of the sanctuary of *Semnai* and the religious customs through which the deities were worshipped and honoured.

Above all though, the most timely hint of Aeschylus is the decision of Athena to set up a court of citizens who would judge Orestes' crime. This way the poet refers to the radical reforms of Ephialtes in 462 B.C. regarding the Areopagus, the important legal institution which was composed of aristocrats. Areopagus then lost most

of its jurisdiction, which was given to the public, and its role was limited to cases of intentional murder. This was a major blow to aristocracy. The reforms caused conflict between the advocates of the progressive and the conservative side which seem to have led to the assassination of Ephialtes. So, when Athena asked from the *Erinyes* –who threatened to provoke a civil war because of Orestes’ acquittal– not to cause strife, the memories of the city’ civil conflicts were still fresh to the public’s memory.

Why did Aeschylus combine the myth with reality placing an Athenian institution in the world of gods and heroes? When he staged *Oresteia*, the direct democracy had just started being used in Athens. So, the poet wanted to promote the public justice and the primacy of reason as cohesive elements of a democratic city. The reconciliation between the old and the new, represented by the *Erinyes* and Athena, was what Aeschylus hoped for: that the different political views could coexist peacefully in Athens.

The tragedy forms the citizens

“For cleverness, and giving good advice, since we improve the people in the cities”.

Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 1009-1010

This is the answer of Euripides to Aeschylus when the latter asked why one should respect the poets, during their contest for the wiser poet which took place in the Underworld, judged by Dionysus. Most of all, the poets were wise men and educators.

The emotional involvement of the audience in the problems and calamities of the heroes was the medium for teaching a tragedy. The spectators identified with the heroes and they thought of how they would react to similar situations. This way, they formed their political consciousness and took valuable lessons regarding their attitude as responsible citizens. At a time with no official public education, the tragedy covered a real need, which along with the main institutions of the city (the assembly, the council and the courts), constituted a multi-faceted source of education for the average citizen. For this reason, the state gave money to the needy, as it did for the participation of the Athenians in the abovementioned institutions. It established the *Theorica* (or Theoric Fund) so that the poorer citizens could watch the performances.

The aim of the tragedy was what Aristotle expressed in his *Poetics*:

the fear and pity that the spectators felt for what menaced the heroes, as the same or somewhat similar could also happen to them. So, the heroes’ sufferings made them understand meanings and morals and so they left the theatre stronger and richer in experiences.



Fig. 41: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*), depicting Orestes as suppliant at the temple of Apollo in Delphi, after he murdered his mother and her lover Aegisthus. In the middle, Orestes is holding his sword, kneeling in front of the sacred *omphalos* (navel of the world). At the bottom, the *Erinyes* who were after him have fallen asleep, and to the right a priestess flees in alarm (ca. 360-350 B.C., State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg).

► The scene is probably inspired by the Delphi scene as described in Aeschylus’ tragedy *Eumenides*. The temple reminds of a play scenery, while the depiction of the *Erinyes* as women and not demons, with black and white hair, dressed identically as members of a tragic chorus, remind of the poet’s description (lines 46-47, 52, 72): “Before this man an extraordinary band of women slept, seated on thrones. [...] these are wingless in appearance, black, [...] they live in evil gloom” (translated by Herbert Weir Smyth).

Aeschylus' ideas: divine justice and human responsibility.

"Justice inclines her scales so that wisdom comes at the price of suffering".

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, lines 250-251

The personal experience that Aeschylus gained from the Persian Wars (he fought in Marathon and Salamis), the political situation and the religious beliefs of his time left their mark on his poetry. The war was a subject that greatly preoccupied him. In the *Persians*, he chose to highlight the misery of the war and the causes that led the Persians to their defeat than to glorify the victory of the Greeks. He also experienced the transition from the Peisistratid tyranny to radical democracy (462/461 B.C.) and in his works he promoted people's sovereignty and power. Above all though, he believed that the gods determined the world's order and thus guided the people even despite their will. So, although Aeschylus's characters are dynamic, the course of action in his plays depends on the gods.

The struggle for justice dominates all of his work. As guards of ethics, order, and justice, the gods punish *hubris*, the arrogance and extreme self-confidence that derives from power and thirst for authority, the insult and disrespect. But this punishment was the medium through which the man attained knowledge. The restoration of justice could take place through the actions of humans, by taking revenge for wrongs done to them or even by accepting a fate that leads them to criminal actions. Nevertheless, Aeschylus also promoted the supremacy of law against the primitive vigilantism, and the need for consensus for the well-functioning of life.

In the mythical and real characters of his plays, Aeschylus described the values and virtues he considered as most important: piety, respect for human life, dedication to the city and its democratic government.

Sophocles ideas: divine will and human action.

"Residents of our native Thebes, behold, this is Oedipus, who knew the renowned riddle, and was a most mighty man. What citizen

did not gaze on his fortune with envy? See into what a stormy sea of troubles he has come! Therefore, while our eyes wait to see the final destined day, we must call no mortal happy until he has crossed life's border free from pain".

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, lines 1524-1530
(translated by Sir Richard Jebb)

Sophocles believed that the gods predetermine the fate of people, but people can shape their life by their choices. Within this framework, he was interested in promoting the incentives and

Aeschylus

- He gave the tragedy its essential qualities.
- His first participation in the Great Dionysia was in 499 B.C., when he competed with Pratinas and Cherillus.
- His first win was in 484 B.C.
- He wrote between 73 and 90 plays.
7 of his tragedies survive today.
- He won 13 times; the last time was in 458 B.C. with his trilogy *Oresteia*.
- The reputation of his poetic value reached Sicily and after the performance of the *Persians* king Hieron I invited him to present his plays.
- After his death (he died in Sicily in 456 B.C.) his plays were staged again winning the first prize.
- Aristotle considers him as the "father" of tragedy.
- His participation in the Persian Wars greatly influenced his ideas. In a poem inscribed on his gravestone -said to have been written by him- he is commemorated as a warrior and not as a poet.

Innovations and particularities

- He added the second hypocrites.
- He established the trilogy, that is, the three tragedies which dealt with successive stages of one myth.



Fig. 42: Silver seal ring and its impression (right). It depicts the murder of Clytemnestra by her son, Orestes. Orestes has already stabbed her in the chest with his sword and rushes to stab her again. The scene reminds of Sophocles' *Electra* (line 1415), where Electra urges her brother: "Stab her doubly, if you can!" (late 5th - early 4th c. B.C., Ioannina Archaeological Museum).

emotions which guided them, as well as the way they dealt with their troubles.

He believed in decency, kindness, bravery, intelligence and the ability for great actions. In his tragedies we see heroes, even the female figures, such as Antigone, determined to do their duty or to defend their honour and dignity at all costs, and not compromise, even if everybody has abandoned them and the gods mock them.

On the other hand, Sophocles could see the human weaknesses. He showed characters that made mistakes out of arrogance and extreme confidence or denial of oracles due to their blurred logic, like Oedipus. The gods might set traps, but the heroes completed their plans with their own choices.

The gods however punished the human errors; even so, Sophocles presented his characters enduring their downfall patiently and generously. The divine will stood above and beyond humans and Sophocles believed that humans had to accept and respect it, even though they did not understand it.

He promoted the ideal man, who was brave, kind and wise, patient and great-hearted, aware of his limits and abilities, as well as respectful towards the gods and their laws, the foundation of the human society.

Sophocles

- His plays portray the ideals of classical Athens.
- He participated in the Great Dionysia for the first time in 468 B.C.
- In the same year he won the first prize. Aeschylus was his rival.
- He won 18 times at the Great Dionysia and was never third.
- He wrote more than 120 plays. Only 7 tragedies have survived.
- He was called a "Bee" (for the sweetness of his tongue), which was the biggest praise for a poet or orator.
- Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Tyrannus* ("Oedipus the King") was a model tragedy for Aristotle.
- He is considered as the "rule" of the Greek tragedy.

Innovations and particularities

- He added the third hypocrites.
- He increased the chorus members from 12 to 15.
- He introduced the trilogy in the form of thematically independent tragedies.
- He placed more emphasis on the dialogues of the characters.
- He used the *tragic irony* (dramatic irony) very much: he presented his heroes ignoring things that the audience knew in order to cause an intense dramatic result.

Euripides ideas: humans as victims of passion and circumstances.

"And I know well what pain I am about to undergo, but my wrath overbears my calculation, wrath that brings mortal men their gravest hurt".

Euripides, *Medea*, lines 1078-1080
(translated by David Kovacs)

Euripides

- His first participation in the Great Dionysia was in 455 B.C., where he won the third place.
- He wrote approximately 90 plays. 18 tragedies and one satirical drama survive today.
- He won the first prize only four times, probably because of his misunderstood views.
- Towards the end of his life he staged tragedies in Macedonia, after an invitation of king Archelaus, where he died in 406 B.C.
- His contemporaries fought against him.
- After his death he received recognition and respect. During the repeated staging of the classical tragedies in the 4th century B.C. he was the public's favourite tragedian and he remained extremely popular until the end of the antiquity.
- Aristotle characterized him as "the most tragic of the tragedians".
- His plays were adapted by the Latin poet Seneca and became models for the Renaissance writers.
- He influenced the New Comedy.

Innovations and particularities

- He presented scenes from everyday life that touched the limits of comedy, thus bringing the tragedy closer to people.
- He liked the "agones" (arguments-speeches).
- He used to replace the satirical dramas with tragedies.
- He invented the "deus ex machina", that is, the god who appeared to give a solution to an impasse.

Euripides believed that humans are free to make decisions, therefore responsible for their actions. He presented the mythical heroes as ordinary people, prone to their vices, led to destruction, causing trouble to themselves and to others. In his plays, the gods intervene only when they are needed to give an end in misery. However, he believed that people cannot determine their fate because luck spins the thread of life.

Although he led an isolated life, he closely observed all issues of the Athenian society, such as the Peloponnesian War or the subversive teaching of the sophists on established values and perceptions. He spoke about the war, criticized the dangerous ambitions of the politicians, he questioned the traditional religious beliefs, such as the trust in prophecies, as well as the social discriminations. He was concerned for the youth (their intellectual pursuits or their exercise of political rights) and the role of women. Often, the discussions of his heroes on these issues were so intense -they even reminded of speeches in the assembly or the courts, or the arguments of the sophists- that they interrupted the dramatic action. This is why his contemporaries named him "stage philosopher".

Euripides' plays are characterized by variety. He praised the sovereignty of the people, but he also stressed how easily people are manipulated by clever politicians. He may also have been considered as an atheist or a sophist, because he spoke of religious beliefs with irony, while in fact, he turned against people because they accepted gods as they were presented in the myths: unfaithful, envious, vindictive and cruel.

He was accused of being misogynist because he presented women overwhelmed by erotic passion. The truth is, however, that he showed sympathy and understanding for this weakness. Besides, he addressed sensitive women issues, such as their being limited to the home, the dowry as a requirement for getting married, etc. He also wrote dramas that were deemed too patriotic, supporting the war of Athens against Sparta, and others seen as anti-war ones. It seems that Euripides followed the facts and as he saw that the war went on spreading pain and death, he could not remain unmoved and not promote his desire for peace. Generally, his desire for a better life was something that he often expressed in his plays.

More tragedies and their decline

In the 4th century B.C., new tragedies were continuously being written. The poets worked again on myths and historical issues, but

unfortunately, only the names of some of them and titles or verses of their plays have survived. It seems though that in the plays and in the acting there was a tendency to exaggeration. The focus was transferred from the text to the direction and to the *hypocrites*, who did not hesitate to intervene to the plays and make changes that promoted their acting talent. Within this atmosphere, the value of the classic plays remained insurmountable and there was

great interest in their restaging in Athens as well as in every Greek city. Thus, every year since 386 B.C. an old tragedy was presented at the Great Dionysia along with the new plays.

In 322 B.C., the commander of Macedonian forces in Greece, Antipater, overthrew democracy in Athens. The tragedy found itself out of the environment where it was born and grown, so it stopped evolving. In the Hellenistic period it lost its vitality, unlike comedy



Fig. 43: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*) depicting a scene inspired by the final scene of Euripides' *Medea* (ca. 400 n.X., Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio).

► Medea killed her children to take revenge on Jason, who abandoned her for another woman. On the vessel the painter has captured her fleeing on the winged chariot of her grandfather *Helios* (Sun), to get away with Jason's revenge. The nurse and the educator of the children mourn over their dead bodies, in an altar to the bottom right, while Jason, to the left, devastated and incapable of reacting, is looking at Medea escaping. To either side of Medea there are probably the *Erinyes*, lurking for revenge. The scene may not be exactly the same with Euripides' play but it reflects the same image: Medea appears triumphantly over the stage, on a vehicle representing the chariot of *Helios*, despising Jason's plea.

which flourished again (New Comedy). Alexandria became the new centre of tragic poetry; although scarce extracts have survived, it seems that the poets continued the tradition of the old subjects, while they dealt with modern, historical but also imaginary ones. The *mime*, which included many everyday life scenes, became very popular from this period until the Roman times, but it was more of a recitation rather than a performance.

Impact

When the Romans were acquainted with the Greek theatre, they wanted to incorporate it to their activities. So, they translated the most important tragedies and comedies in Latin, in order to present them to the public. Livius Andronicus was the first who translated plays, which would be staged in 240 B.C. at the “*Ludi Romani*” (the annual chariot games honouring Jupiter), celebrating the Romans’ victory over Carthage.

Very quickly the Romans embraced the drama. The performances were organized on the occasion of various public and private festivals, such as triumphs or funeral ceremonies, while several poets wrote tragedies based on the Attic plays and drew their subjects from the Greek myths. Music and singing dominated their works, while there was no reference to current affairs, as public criticism was forbidden. A new kind of tragedy was used by the Roman authorities as medium of national propaganda and its imposing to the public; its subjects were drawn from the myths on the foundation of Rome and from Roman history.

Towards the end of the 1st century B.C. the drama started to decline. The mimes and the pantomimes became very popular, as lighter kinds and beloved by the wider public that respectively replaced the comedy and the tragedy. Nevertheless, in the 1st century AD important new tragic poets appeared. The most important of them was Seneca, who drew the plot of his plays mainly from the works of Euripides, without them being passive imitations. His tragedies are the only ones that have survived and have great value as they constituted the transition between ancient tragedy and the medieval theatre.

The satirical drama

A Dionysian performance

Until the first half of the 4th century B.C., the tragic poets presented

at the Great Dionysia a *tetralogy*: three successive tragedies and one satirical drama. The satirical dramas were shorter than the tragedies but more evidently connected with Dionysus, in comparison with any other performance (dithyrambs, tragedies, comedies). The members of the chorus imitated the playful and unashamed Satyrs, who named this dramatical genre. The Satyrs with their lively dance and songs, intoxication and lust for women must have created a Dionysian atmosphere in the theatre, promoting the cult character of the festival.

Premiere

The satirical drama is closely associated with tragedy, therefore, its creation and first stages are equally obscure. According to tradition, the poet Pratinas of Phleious, a city near Argos, was the one who created the satirical drama around 520/510 B.C. Thanks to him, the satirical drama became popular and towards the end of the 6th century B.C. it was incorporated in the drama competitions of the Great Dionysia. Of all the satyr plays that were written in the 5th century B.C., only the *Cyclops* by Euripides has survived, while a large part of Sophocles’ *Trackers* is also preserved, and very few extracts of Aeschylus’ plays.

Between the tragedy and the comedy

The satirical drama also drew its subjects from the Greek mythology. It had the same language, structure and style with the tragedy. The difference was that the poets parodied the myths, sometimes even the subjects or scenes of the tragedies that had just been presented to the public, while occasionally they used bad language, cursing and coarse jokes. As a result, the serious seemed funny and by extension, comic. The funny atmosphere and the happy ending of the plots brought the satirical drama closer to the comedy and away from the tragedy.

One more important difference from tragedy was that satirical dramas described carefree tales from the life of less serious tragic heroes, and thus did not mock the heroes with the serious moral dilemmas. For example, Aeschylus in his satirical drama the *Sphinx* chose the solving of the riddle from the myth of Oedipus.

Usual subjects of the satirical dramas were the cunning plans of the heroes to kill demons and monsters like the Cyclops Polyphemus, or issues of magic and miracles like the transformation of Io into a cow, and generally stories that reminded popular tales. The enslavement and liberation of the Satyrs was another frequent subject, as well as their being forced to do things they didn’t want to or didn’t know.

A happy epilogue!

The poets created a dramatic atmosphere in their plays and then they reversed it. They presented the characters as serious, even if the atmosphere was funny, and because they mismatched, they caused laughter. On the other hand, the heroes may have been presented as comic figures or with everyday traits, like Hercules, a favourite hero of the satirical dramas, who constantly thought of food or behaved like a slave. They also used as protagonists heroes from tragedies, who were presented as cunning and crafty, like Odysseus.

The Satyrs played a decisive role in the creation of a funny atmosphere. The poets found imaginative ways to integrate them in the plots of the plays and to make them create a pleasant and funny spectacle with their dancing, frauds and tricks, their swearing and generally their behaviour. Although their role in the myth wasn't very significant, their actions became the main body of the performance and they turned out to be the protagonists. The

stories usually took place in the country or in exotic places, that is, in their natural environment. In Euripides' *Cyclops* for example, the Satyrs play the slaves of Polyphemus along with Odysseus' men. Their adventures cover a large part of the play, making the heroes look out of place with their serious and pompous speech.

All these special elements of the satirical drama gave the plays a carefree touch as opposed to the grim world of tragedy. The satirical drama must have been a happy epilogue for the spectators, who would feel relieved and relaxed after the tension and the anxiety experienced by the three successive tragedies.

A turn to the comedy

Since 340 B.C., the satirical dramas have been presented independently of the tragedies. Then, a new genre was created, which approached more to the comedy, as it turned to the satire of contemporary affairs and followed the techniques of the comedy. In the Hellenistic period the satirical drama flourished again.



Fig. 44: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*). Its main side depicts Prometheus with Satyrs. The scene is probably inspired by the satirical drama of Aeschylus *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer* (ca. 430 n.X., National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 45: Thaleia, the muse of comedy, on the mosaic of the Nine Muses (1st c. B.C., Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes).



Fig. 46: Bronze figurine of a comic *hypocrites*. He is wearing a mask and under his garment appears a protruding *phallus* (350-325 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

The comedy

The misunderstood comedy

The comedy also had a long history before it became a literary kind. At the beginning, nobody took it seriously, according to Aristotle in *Poetics* (1449b, 1), so it is difficult to detect its roots. Aristotle claims that -like tragedy- it derived from improvised songs of festive popular events.

The song of the komos

Such events were the *komoi* (revels), which as we have already seen were festive processions of drunken people, who walked through the streets of the city and danced, sang, teased the others and made jokes. The comedy seems to derive from the words *komos* and *ode*, the song of the *komos*.

Or from the phallic komoi?

According to Aristotle, the comedy specifically derived from the *phallic komoi* (groups of people who took part in processions holding a large phallus, the symbol of fertility, as they greatly anticipated good crops). By singing obscene songs, teasing and making fun of the public they thought to be averting evil.

Aristotle believed that the comedy was formed by the dialogue between the leader of the chorus and the chorus, and their creative improvisations. In any case, these phallic customs are encountered in Old Comedy, where the *hypocrites* wore a leather phallus underneath their costumes. Their satire was personalized, that is, it mocked famous persons, offering the audience emotional release and joy.

From the animal dances?

Other popular events must have influenced the formation of the comedy. For example, the *animal dances*, with the participants wearing animal costumes or riding on animals, or other times carrying them. Such dances can be seen on vessels of the 6th-early 5th century B.C. which depict the members of a chorus dancing, accompanied by an *auletes* (flute-player). We do not know which cult they represent, but they certainly remind of the chorus in many comedies of Aristophanes, where its members appear disguised in animals (birds, wasps, etc).

Or from the popular farce?

Farces appeared very early in various parts of Greece, like Sparta

and Corinth. They were improvised comic scenes where 2-3 people imitated funny incidents of everyday life: somebody stealing food or the funny accent of a doctor from a foreign area; such scenes were used by Aristophanes in the *Acharnians* and the *Knights*.

It seems though, that the Attic comedy was more influenced by the famous *Megarian farce*, as the city of Megara was near Athens and the Athenians could easily watch these performances. Its characteristic was the coarse jokes; this is why the Athenian comedians criticised it in their texts. Nevertheless, they often used elements from the Megarian farce, such as slaves throwing food to the audience, of Hercules appearing always hungry (e.g. in Aristophanes' *Peace* and *Birds*).

Many believed that the comedy was born in Megara, and above all the Megarians, who said that the birth of the comedy took place during democracy, that is after 581 B.C., when the tyrant Theagenes was overthrown. This claim probably caused reactions and perhaps this is how the Megarian poet Sousarion was "created". According to tradition, he lived in the Attic deme of Icaria, like Thespis, and was considered as the inventor of the Attic comedy.

Influences from Sicily and Magna Graecia

In the late 6th century B.C., a kind of comedy was invented in the colonies founded in Sicily and Southern Italy by the Greeks, which probably influenced the evolution of the Attic comedy. The poet Epicharmus gave a literary form to the popular farce that the settlers had brought with them, creating works which were called "dramas".

Their plot was structured and their content joyful. They normally parodied famous myths on gods or heroes, preferably the always hungry Hercules and the cunning Odysseus. They also addressed modern issues, criticizing human characters like the flatterers, who were also used by the comic poets of the 4th century B.C., with great success.

Premiere

It took some time to the Athenian state to make the comic performances official, perhaps because its unconcealed boldness was considered dangerous for social and political order. Unofficially, amateur actors staged comic performances, and finally, in 486 B.C., almost half a century after tragedy and 14 years after satirical drama, the comedy was integrated in the drama competitions of the Great Dionysia. Its official recognition as a kind of drama is identified today with the beginning of its history.

The Old Comedy: 486 - 400 B.C.

With the exception of Aristophanes, no whole play of other comic poet of the Old Comedy has survived. Everything we know is almost exclusively from Aristophanes' works, which, however, cover only a small period of Old Comedy, from 426 B.C. (*Acharnians*) to 388 B.C. (*Wealth*). His comedies date in the end of a longstanding course of comedy's formation, which starts with the works of other, equally important, poets. The most eminent ones were Magnes, from the first generation of the comic poets, and most importantly Kratinos, who appeared later on. There were also noteworthy poets in Aristophanes' generation, with Eupolis being his main rival.

Satire of contemporary affairs

The comic poets directly dealt with the daily problems that preoccupied them and their fellow citizens. Contemporary affairs and persons of the political, intellectual and social life were targeted. They were satirically presented, with harsh words, thanks to the freedom of speech ensured by the democratic regime. Their goal was to highlight, through their satire, what led the city to decline, and they believed that this way they would urge Athenians to change their life. For these reasons the Old Comedy is characterized as "political comedy".

The first poet to address these issues was Kratinos, who, following Epicharmus, used the *mythological parody* as a tool for his satire. He parodied that is, the traditional myths, implicating persons and situations of his contemporary reality. In general, the myths of gods and heroes inspired the poets of Old Comedy, who used them either entirely (the whole plot was based on a myth), or partly (incorporating some mythical figures in their plays).

Guided by imagination

If the myths fed the tragedy, fiction was the tool used by the poets of Old Comedy for their satire. Influenced by popular imagination and the world of tales, the poets created plays with true persons of their time living in imaginary worlds.

Worlds where everything is ideal, or inhabited by animals and peculiar creatures, with objects that come to life, notions that become humans and other imaginary elements create a funny environment for the main characters. For example, in Aristophanes' *Peace* the leading character flies to mount Olympus on a giant beetle in order to bring back to earth the goddess of peace, who has been captured by god Ares (Mars). In the *Birds*, two Athenians,

fed up with the political situation in Athens, abandon their city and along with the birds set up a new state between the sky and the earth. By satirizing affairs and important persons of their time, the poets offered the audience laughter and relaxation from everyday stress. Perhaps the solutions they suggested were not realistic, but the audience identified with the actors and, even for a while, they felt free from their burdens.

Aristophanes

“And I, although so excellent a poet, do not give myself airs, nor do I seek to deceive you by twice and thrice bringing forward the same pieces; but I am always clever at introducing new fashions, not at all resembling each other, and all of them clever”.

Aristophanes, *Clouds*, lines 545-548
(translated by William James Hickie)

Aristophanes wrote most of his comedies during the Peloponnesian War. At the time, democracy had been weakened and in the city there was tumult and political instability. In his plays he openly spoke about what he believed harmed the peace and the city's progress. He criticized the bad functioning of the democratic institutions, e.g. the people's courts. He accused the politicians of benefiting from perpetual warmaking, and of becoming richer at the expense of the people, especially the farmers and the craftsmen who were mostly affected. His characters were everyday people, in contrast with the characters of tragedies who belonged to the upper class. He was concerned about the sophists and their impact on the youth. He identified them with Socrates and his revolutionary philosophical ideas, which he considered dangerous. Even Euripides was often targeted by Aristophanes. Aristophanes appreciated him, however he considered Euripides' innovations dangerous. He adjusted whole scenes of Euripides' tragedies to his comedies in order to mock them; he presented them so that the serious scenes were ridiculed and produced a comic result.

The data and information that survive thanks to the 11 plays of Aristophanes are very important because they shed light to the political and social life of Athens of his time, as well as to the everyday life. Of course, we can only imagine the reactions to his jokes and hints on persons and incidents, as we ignore the communication code between the playwright and his audience.

Other subjects

During the same period there were other poets, such as Crates and

Pherecrates, who did not deal with the political satire, but rather with daily issues, writing comedies with romantic or completely imaginary plots.

The Middle Comedy: 400 - 320 B.C.

Ecclesiazusae (Assembly women), *Ploutos* (Wealth): Aristophanes changes

In the last two extant plays of Aristophanes (staged in 392 B.C. and in 388 B.C. respectively) the form and the content of comedy have changed. The songs of the chorus have been reduced and its participation in the plays' action is limited to a few dialogues. It seems though that the style of the poet had also changed. His political satire and audacious jokes were now fewer, and most importantly, the subjects of his comedies were now different. His satire turned from the socio-politics to private life and became milder.

These changes are closely connected with the political situation in Athens after the Peloponnesian war. The city was defeated, the democracy weakened and new powerful cities had appeared. Thus, the Athenians, disappointed by public life preferred to turn to the joys and sorrows of their everyday life.

Myth and reality

Apart from *Wealth* and the *Ecclesiazusae* by Aristophanes, everything we know on the Middle Comedy is exclusively based on plays' extracts. At the time, the form and the content of the comedy changed dramatically. The chorus lost its significance, the political satire faded, the audacious jokes diminished and the imaginary stories became scarce. The *mythological comedy* became the most popular kind, which had appeared at the end of the 5th century B.C. Its subject was the world of gods and heroes, where the poets added elements from everyday life, creating a comic result. The poets mocked the gods and heroes, presenting them with human weaknesses and drawbacks.

At the same time, many poets followed the example of Pherecrates, and wrote comedies with romantic plots, which became the dominant kind in the middle of the 4th century B.C. Finally, during this period some basic comic types appeared in the plays: the *cunning* or *moral slave*, the *parasite* or the *flatterer*, the *arrogant soldier*, the *savage* or *uneducated*, the *young lover*, the *good* or *bad hetaera*, the *boastful cook* and others. Some of them had already appeared in the plays of the poets of the Old Comedy, and later they starred in the plays of the New Comedy.

The most important poets of this transitional period of the Attic comedy were Anaxandrides, Euboulos, Antiphanes, Alexis, Ehippos, Mnesimachus and Timocles.

The New Comedy: 320 - 200 B.C.

The comedy imitates life

During the Hellenistic period, the theatre expanded in every big and small city of Greece and the theatrical performances became the most popular kind of entertainment. The dramatic plays of the 5th century B.C. went on being staged everywhere. At the same time, the comedy flourished as well.

The comic poets of this period did not deal with the political life. The political conditions were now different. Athens subjected to the Macedonian power. New economical and intellectual centres appeared in the East. Civil wars broke out and a large upper class appeared. The power of the citizens was reduced, their involvement in public affairs was limited, and people cared more about their



Fig. 47: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*) with a comic scene: geese are attacking cooks (380-370 B.C., National Archaeological Museum).

Fig. 48: Clay figurine of a *hypocrites* impersonating a soldier (375-350 B.C., Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum).



Fig. 49: Clay figurine of a *hypocrites* impersonating a slave. His posture with the finger on the mouth implies that he is plotting his next act of mischief (late 5th - early 4th c. B.C., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

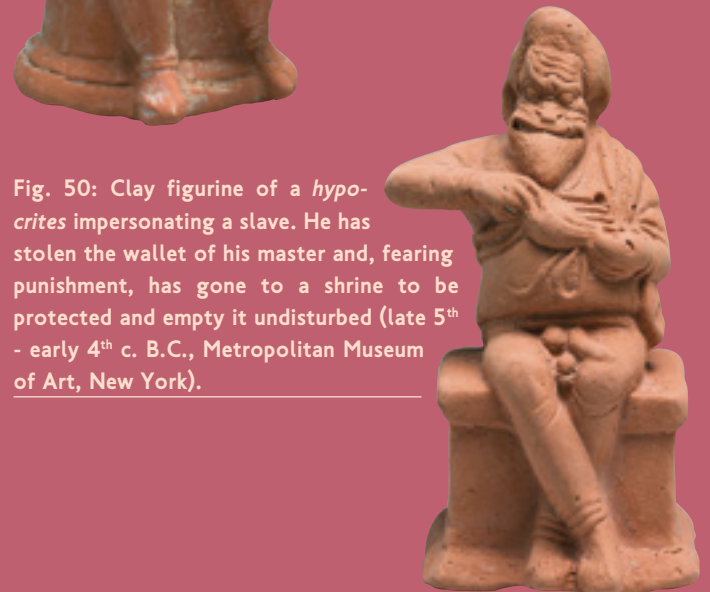


Fig. 50: Clay figurine of a *hypocrites* impersonating a slave. He has stolen the wallet of his master and, fearing punishment, has gone to a shrine to be protected and empty it undisturbed (late 5th - early 4th c. B.C., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



Fig. 51: Bronze figurine of a *hypocrites* of the New Comedy, impersonating a slave who seeks refuge in a shrine to avoid punishment from his master (150-50 B.C., Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum).

Fig. 52: Theatrical mask of young woman or *hetaera* of the New Comedy (Late Hellenistic period, National Archaeological Museum).



Fig. 53 and 54: Scenes of Menander's comedies on a mosaic which decorated the floor of the symposium room at the "House of Menander", in Mytilene (250-300 B.C., Mytilene Archaeological Museum).

► The scenes of Menander's comedies in a late antiquity building shows how popular his plays were until that period.

individual problems. Thus, the comic poets were inspired by everyday life: family affairs, romance, poverty, money hunting, intrigues, misunderstandings and illusions, while they particularly focused on the portrayal of human characters of their time. For all these characteristics, the New Comedy was also called *comedy of morals* or *urban comedy*.

Menander

"...a man who has good sense shouldn't completely give up ever. Everything can be gotten with attention and hard work, everything".

Menander, *Dyskolos*, lines 860-862

(translated by Vincent J. Rosivach)

Menander is the main representative of the New Comedy and the last important representative of the Attic drama. He wrote over 100 comedies, from which only the *Dyskolos* (the Grouch) survives in a complete form. Relatively complete is another one of his comedies, the *Samia* (The Girl from Samos), while *Aspis* (the Shield) is partially preserved.

Menander did not use bad language in his plays like Aristophanes did. The behaviour and the mistakes of people were the elements that caused laughter. His characters were commoners, urban residents or peasants, fool young men and unfortunate young women, cunning *hetairae*, stingy and grouch old men, slaves and overly talkative cooks or snobby military men. His plots are focused on love, and the poet's priority was the description of the people's psychology and not the plots of his plays.

In essence, Menander used the comic characters of the Middle Comedy; the difference is that he put aside their comic elements and emphasized on their special features. He made them more familiar and more real, always examining their acts in relation with their personality. Thus, the audience identified with the heroes, and his plays had a strong appeal and success. Menander also treated his heroes with sympathy, as he presented them being unjust not because they were predisposed to evil, but unintentionally. And while he portrayed the reality, his plays always had a happy ending because his characters regretted and improved themselves. He believed in the kindness of people. Although goddess *Tyche* (fortune) –who according to the beliefs of the time determined the happiness of humans– had a dominant role in his plays, he believed that the human happiness primarily depends on the *ethos* (moral values) and the qualities of every person.

Menander was not only influenced by the earlier comic poetry, but

also by Euripides, from whom he borrowed many elements, such as the plots with conspiracies and misdirections or the topic of recognizing an abandoned child and its return to the biological family.

Following the traces of Attic comedy

The phlyax plays of southern Italy

Around the 4th century B.C. a popular dramatic form developed in southern Italy, related to the Attic comedy of the time. It was named “phlyax” after the name of its actors (*phlyakes*=gossip players). At first, these plays were probably improvised events. Thanks to a series of 4th c. B.C. vases from southern Italy depicting phlyax plays scenes, we are able to know some basic characteristics of this dramatic genre. The vases were also called phlyax vases.

Their central theme was the parody of the myths, known by oral tradition, but also by versions of the tragic poets. It is possible though that they also mocked daily life events, such as quarrels, thefts, the fraud or gluttony, or they were a form of burlesque.

The movements and other comic elements of the actors are typical, such as the stuffed costumes or the leather *phallus* worn by almost all the male figures, which remind of the *hypocrites* of the Attic comedy. It also seems that there were some permanent comic characters who remind those of the Attic comedy of the same period, such as the slaves.

Around 300 B.C. the poet Rhinthon of Sicily, based on the phlyax plays (*phlyakes*), wrote literary plays called *hilarotragedies*, that is cheerful tragedies. Apparently, they were plays which mocked the mythological subjects of the tragedies.

The Latin comedy

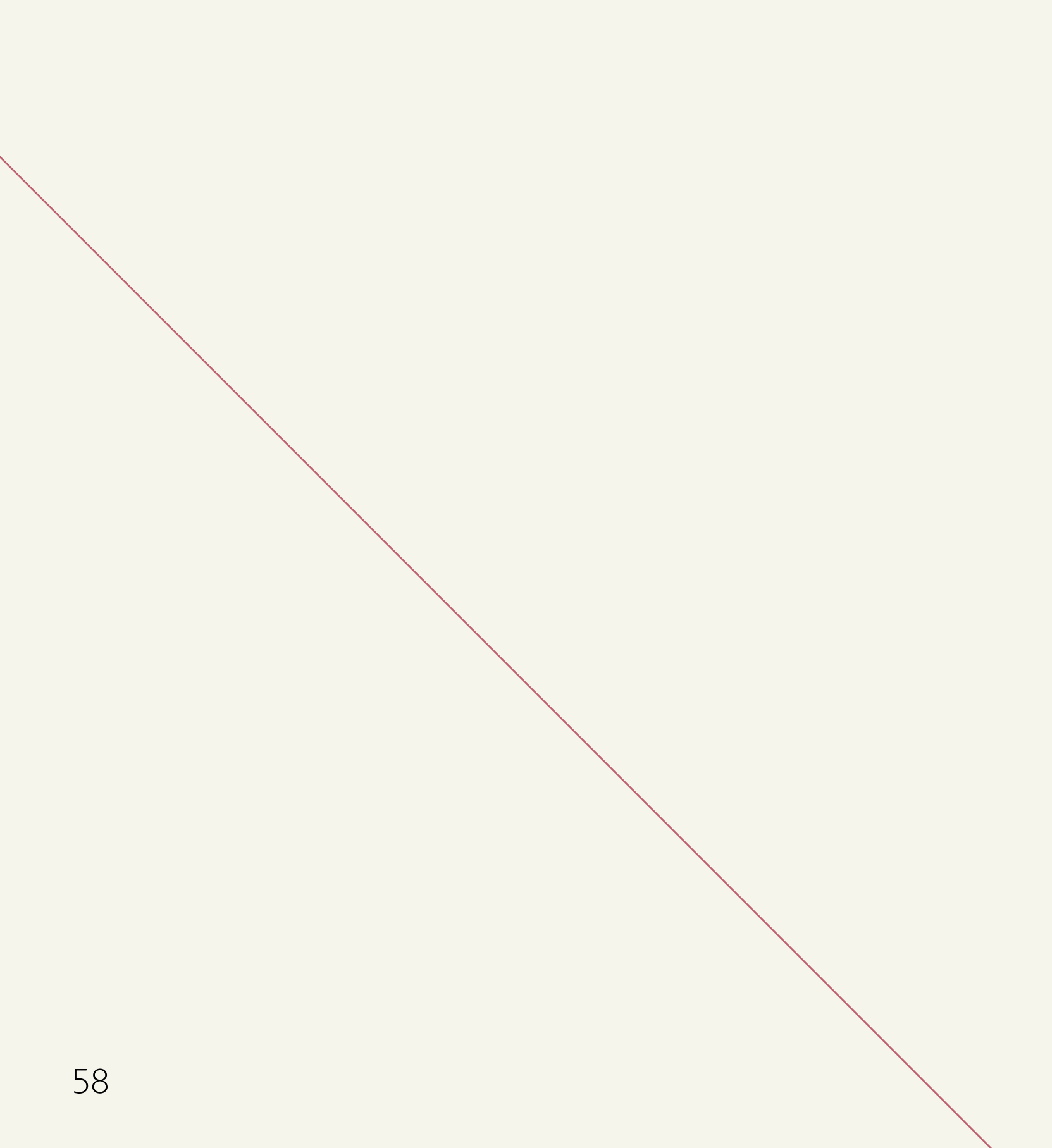
Like the tragedy, the Attic comedy was a model for the Roman poets. Everything we know on the Latin comedies mainly comes from the works of two poets, Plautus and Terence, because only extracts or titles survive from most of the other poets.

By adapting the plays of the New Comedy or by using them as models for the plots and characters of their plays, Plautus and Terence formed a new kind of comedy with references to contemporary social issues, which however, included much music and dance, unlike the respective Attic plays. Their comedies are particularly significant because they constitute a valuable source of information on the New Comedy and because they decisively contributed to the evolution of the comic art during the Renaissance and of the subsequent European drama.



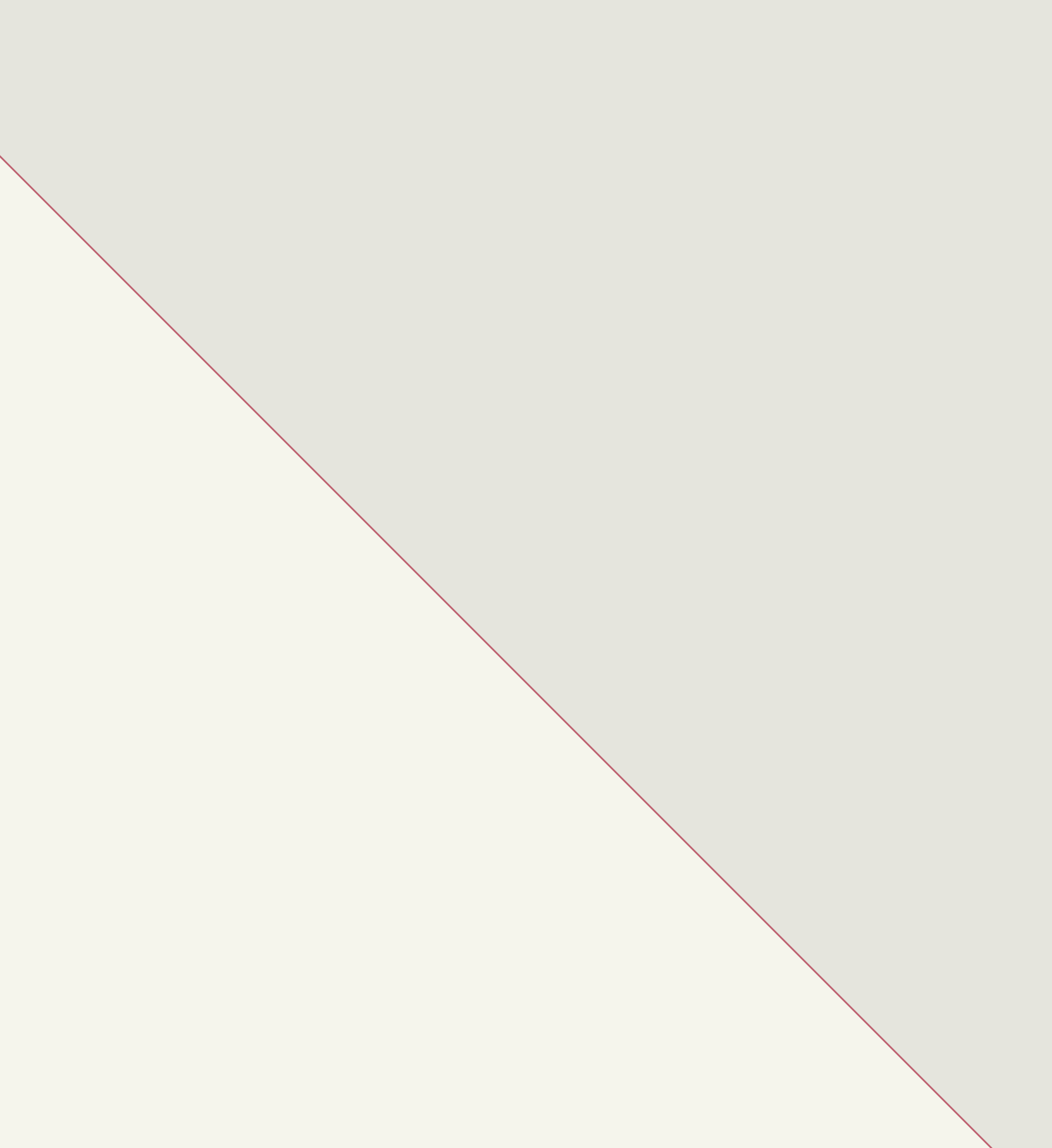
Fig. 55: Vessel for mixing wine with water (*krater*) from southern Italy. Actors with the typical equipment of the *phlyakes* (masks, costumes and *phalluses*) perform, as usual, on an *exedra* where they went through a small staircase. They play a scene from a comedy on the myth of the Centaur Chiron (380-370 B.C., British Museum, London).

► According to the myth, Chiron went to the sanctuary of the Nymphs to heal the wound accidentally inflicted by one of Hercules' poisoned arrows. In the scene, the powerless Chiron tries to go on the steps of the sanctuary supported by his stick and two slaves. The one is pushing him and the other, Xanthias, as we read on the inscription above, is pulling him. To the right there is a man wrapped in his clothes; he is probably Achilles, who was pupil of the wise centaur. At the top right there are two female figures talking to each other. According to the accompanying inscription, they are the Nymphs.



EPILOGUE

Many more pages could have been written on the ancient drama. It is not only its different aspects (religious, political, social) and its multiple layers (origin and evolution, the texts and their teaching, their presentation and interpretation, etc) that render its study limitless and the choice of what to present difficult. It is also the rich bibliography, the variety of the views and interpretations on the theatrical phenomenon in ancient Greece. The discussions are endless and it is very hard to put a full stop. The more research goes on, the more data come to light. New knowledge adds up, the preoccupation strengthens and the search for the secrets of ancient theatre continues. Above all, it is the always timely nature of the dramatic plays that engages the ancient drama in a lively dialogue with today. The timeless questions presented by the dramatic poets to the Athenians in the 5th century B.C. continue to inspire not only the philologists, historians and sociologists, but also the people of the theatre -directors, actors, musicians, set designers, etc-, who still suggest new solutions to problems and interpretative impasses, constantly revitalising the art.



HOW TO USE THE HANDBOOK

What is it? Starting with an effort to approach the conditions which, centuries ago, led to the creation of theatre, the present document focuses on the birth of the ancient drama, in Athens of the 6th century B.C., and on its evolution in the following centuries.

In these pages the reader can find interesting information regarding the cult ceremonies of god Dionysus -from which the dramatic art and its typical features derived-, read about the role of the tyrants in theatre's promotion, and understand the contribution of democracy to its establishment and evolution. The educational value of drama is enhanced within this framework, as well as its central role in the Athenian society of the 5th century B.C. Information on the organization and staging of theatrical performances in the antiquity offer basic knowledge regarding the special characteristics of the ancient theatre and its differences from the modern theatrical performances. Finally, the genres of ancient drama are concisely presented as well as their characteristics.

To whom is it addressed? Mainly, to the teachers of primary and secondary schools. They can use it as a useful tool for teaching ancient drama and other relevant information (e.g. ceremonial theatrical events and Dionysian cult). The unknown terms (*thyrsus*, *komastes*, *phallic*) are written in italics and explained in simple words.

How can it be used? The handbook is organized so as to be useful and handy for the reader. It is divided in 5 chapters. Through the first 4 chapters the reader can watch the history of the ancient theatre unfold, from the birth of ancient drama in Greece, in the 6th century B.C. and the first theatrical events until its development in the years of democracy, as well as its expansion in the rest of Greece after the 5th century B.C. Every chapter follows its previous one in the course of history, but at the same time it can be read separately, depending on the information the reader is searching.

The fifth chapter focuses on the genres of ancient drama, and is more independent than the rest. It offers concise but interesting information on the content and development of each genre, as well as its representatives, which can be additional to the school syllabus.

Finally, photos of vases and other archaeological finds in every chapter complete the relevant information and make it more lively, while the captions help their better understanding.

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