

It is not very often that new forms of art, clearly distinguishable from any that have gone before, develop among human societies. When they do, it is even more rare for them to lead to the development of a new and dedicated form of architecture for their execution. The development of theatre in Greece did just this, and although the architecture, like the art form, drew on extant forms placed in close proximity, the combination of these forms came to constitute a spatial whole that was emulated throughout the Hellenistic world, with few innovations until the Romans combined them in a single architectural structure. There is a degree of conjecture, however, about how the various elements of this new space came to be viewed as a single unit and the arrangement emulated throughout the Hellenistic world. It is my purpose in this paper to establish a picture, as blurred as parts of it may be, of how the Greek theatre evolved from a primitive circle of rocks arranged to define a dancing space to an enormous auditorium facing a skene building across an orchestra circle.

By the late Hellenistic period theatres were generally built with a more than semicircular auditorium—the theatron—set into a cavea in a hillside. Persons seated in the theatron would look across a circular orchestra to a skene—a building on which was often painted the scenery that localised the dramatic action. At the front door of this skene, facing the theatron, was a portico—the proskenion—and on top of it, if it had a second storey, was a speaking place—the logeion—also with a painted background. Between the skene and the ends of the theatron were two corridors—the parodoi—which gave the chorus and sometimes the actors access to the orchestra. This arrangement took two centuries to become the conventional form of the theatre, and even then there were of course exceptions.

The drama, as distinct from the theatre, grew out of both artistic and technological developments. This does not conflict with the common assertion that protodrama was associated with the worship of Dionysus, but it does put that over-cited connection into perspective. Poetry had been a part of Greek life long before the Greeks were able to write it down. Using rhyme and meter allowed the Greeks to preserve their oral culture more effectively than telling stories in prose, which begged much more of the memory¹. In the eighth century BC, when the Greeks began to use as vowels consonantal graphemes from the

¹ Jennifer Wise, *Dionysus Writes: the invention of theatre in ancient Greece*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998, p.25ff.

Phoenician alphabet that had no use in their own language², writing suddenly became useful to the rhapsodes. It was at the end of the eighth century that Homer set his stories down for posterity, and it was work such as his that slowly allowed a greater number of people to participate in the art of poetry, leading ultimately to the literacy revolution of the fifth century. Earlier than this, however, someone struck upon the idea of using the character's voice to tell the story. Kallias is the first known to have done this, late in the sixth century³. From here, it is not difficult to see how one may have taken one step at a time to introduce multiple voices to the verse, and for a performer to be seen to visually represent the character whose words he spoke. By the end of the sixth century, drama was established as something distinct from other forms of poetry⁴.

So much for drama, but how does a new art form go about creating its own space? Although space is crucial to drama, it does not need its own dedicated space, but can operate wherever an audience can be assembled and view a performer. Melic poetry, with its choral and dance elements, shared its space on the agora with the emerging art form, and both were used in the Lenaean Festival from the early sixth century, which was held on the agora. During the reign of the tyrant Pisistratus (540-528), the Temple of Dionysus was constructed on the south-eastern slope of the acropolis. When the bretas of Dionysus Eleuthera was moved to this temple, the area became the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleutherae, and a dancing circle, of which seven stones remain, was set up near the temple, and a space on the slope of the hill was reserved for the audience⁵. This precinct was the focus of the events of the Festival of Dionysus Eleutherae, which was to become a significant international event. An ancient source describes ikria—wooden seating—in the agora, which collapsed around 500 BC, and their subsequent removal to the sanctuary of Dionysus⁶. By the latter part of the fifth century, the theatre had been rebuilt and moved slightly to the north and west, this time with stone supports for the seats. The rebuilding and moving of the theatre at this point illustrates how significant the new art form had become in the space of a century. The dancing circle had become formally recognised as the orchestra, and delineated by the planned and orderly theatron.

² Charles Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p.86.

³ Jennifer Wise, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴ Richard Green and Eric Handley, *Images of the Greek Theatre*, British Museum Press, London, 1995, p.15.

⁵ David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p.100.

⁶ Elizabeth R. Gebhard, *The Theatre at Isthmia*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1973, p.xiii.

The ruins at Epidauros include a large theatre with a fully circular orchestra; a theatron seating 13 000, built into a cavea pitched steeper at the upper ranges to assist with vocal projection; and the remains of a two-storey skene building with several rooms, a proskenion before, and a logeion above. Built late in the fourth century, Pausanias described it as the most beautifully proportioned of all Greek theatres⁷, and it was perhaps with this in mind that the site was excavated in the nineteenth century. Until its excavation, information about the Greek theatre was limited to the brief descriptions of the Romans Pausanias and Vitruvius, a few words of theory from Plato and Aeschylus, and the surviving dramatic texts. The excavation having revealed a circular orchestra and a round cavea, and this matching the expectations produced by the idealistic writers mentioned, the notion of Epidauros as an exemplar of the structure of Greek theatres gained common acceptance. By the time Wilhelm Dörpfeld excavated the early remains of the theatre in the precinct of Dionysus at Athens and discovered evidence of a very different arrangement from that at Epidauros, the accepted notion of a circular arrangement was so deeply ingrained that even Dörpfeld himself did not entertain the notion that the orchestra could have been anything but circular at any point in its development. It was his measurements of the orchestra's radius that caused confusion. He measured and remeasured, and conjectured about the location of the skene building, but could not explain the evidence presented to him that the original orchestra could have been ovoid or even rectilinear. At a later date, when straight stone supports for the ikria were found, these were thought to indicate an octagonal layout for the theatron⁸. It now seems clear, however, that Pisistratus' facility for drama in the sanctuary of Dionysus, from the later sixth century and into the fifth, boasted a rectilinear orchestra and straight rows of wooden seats—possibly angled at the ends—resting on the hillside.

The earliest date for an extant theatre is that of Thorikos, a southern deme of Attica. It was built in the sixth century and has a rectilinear orchestra, and an theatron with stone benches that curve asymmetrically around the orchestra at the ends. Since there was a vital relationship

⁷ Pausanias (translated by W.H.S.Jones), *Descriptions of Greece* [I.xvii.5], Heinemann, London, 1969, p.393.

⁸ Elizabeth Gebhard, *op. cit.*, p.138.

between the performances in Athens and those in the rural centres⁹, it is not unlikely that Thorikos was modelled on its Athenian predecessor.

Extensive excavations at Isthmia have provided stronger evidence yet of a pattern for the early theatres to have had a trapezoidal orchestra and theatron. The theatre was first constructed in the late fifth or early fourth century BC, and its sunken orchestra meant that retaining walls had to be constructed to support the front row of seats. Although the walls were later removed, evidence of their location, and evidence of drainage channels that corresponded to the outline of the orchestra give the impression of a trapezoidal shaped orchestra¹⁰. At Tegea, Rhamnous and Ikaria, straight stone benches have been uncovered, and at these locations there is no evidence of a later circular orchestra, as there is at Isthmia. Elizabeth Gebhard asserts that 'the orchestra would have been the open area between the cavea and the skene, or its equivalent, delimited only by the drainage channel or curb where these were present'¹¹. It seems odd, though, to think that the Greeks would have allowed something as pragmatic as the shape of the cavea to define the shape of the orchestra. The orchestra was, throughout the classical and Hellenistic periods, the focal point where action was centred. It seems odd, then, to think of the shape of the orchestra as an accident and not a choice.

The theatres at Athens, Isthmia, Argos, and Syracuse, though all starting with a rectilinear orchestra, were remodelled with circular ones. New theatres were universally built with semicircular (or more-than-semicircular) auditoria around circular orchestras. The reason for this change is explained best by the understanding that sound travelled in expanding circles like ripples on the surface of water. The circular theatron utilised this natural phenomenon, obviously quite successfully, since modern tourists to these theatres still enjoy testing the acoustics. It should also be noted, however, that the lines of sight are more uniform across a semicircular theatron than in a rectilinear one. With the increasing popularity of drama, more people had to be fitted into the theatres, since plays were not normally repeated in the same festival. The semicircle also allowed theatres to remain serviceable for larger crowds.

M. Bieber, writing in 1939 made the succinct summation that the orchestra was an archaic development, the theatron was a classical development, and the skene was a Hellenistic

⁹ Oliver Taplin, *Spreading the Word Through Performance*, in Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.37

¹⁰ Elizabeth Gebhard, *op. cit.*, pp.9-17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

development¹². This is true insofar as it identifies the time when these various elements were conventionalised, but the innovations through which the forms that now seem conventional developed are generally much earlier. The precursor of the skene can be traced back significantly beyond the archaeological evidence. In the middle of the fourth century, Plato makes a passing reference in the laws to temporary scaffolds erected in the agora, and makes it in such a way as to suggest that it was a long established practice¹³. Vases from slightly earlier also suggest the existence of wooden stages¹⁴. The archaeological evidence from the earliest theatres, however, brings to light neither a stage, nor space for one. Together, this evidence suggests that in the early years, although raised platforms were used, they were not considered necessary when a theatron raised the audience to see the action. Furthermore, the fact that the theatron of the Hellenistic period tended to encompass more than a semicircle, even when a skene was in place, suggests that the orchestra continued as the focal point of the theatre, and the most significant action was performed on it.

The plays of Aeschylus give the most convincing evidence that a wooden skene was built at the Theatre of Dionysus Eleutherae at Athens by 465 BC¹⁵. Since the plays written for this theatre were performed at many others, skene buildings soon started to appear in other theatres. With an initial build date near 400 BC, Isthmia is not an early theatre nor a late one, and while its first theatron was in the early trapezoidal shape, the skene building that faced it was built on a stone foundation¹⁶. This suggests that by the end of the fifth century, skene buildings were starting to be viewed as an important feature of a theatre. The basic structure of the dramatic space had taken shape, and the earliest structure of the theatre at Isthmia was not far removed from that of the grand theatres built at Epidauros, less than a hundred years later, or that built at Pergamum in the second century.

Beginning with a circle of rocks—much like a dancing circle seen in many other parts of the world—the theatre took on a shape that characterises the Greek landscape to this day. It also characterises theatre to this day, with modern theatres more nearly resembling their ancient

¹² M. Bieber, quoted in R.E.Wycherly, *How the Greeks Built Cities*, Macmillan, London, 2nd edition, 1962, p.165.

¹³ Plato (translated by R.G.Bury), *Laws* [817B-C], Heinemann, London, 1926, Book II, p.99

¹⁴ Richard Green and Eric Handley, *op. cit.*, p.63.

¹⁵ Roy C. Flickinger, *The Greek Theatre and its Drama*, University of Chicago Press, fourth edition 1936, p.66, 228. Also, C.W.Dearden, *The Stage of Aristophanes*, The Athlone Press, London, 1976, pp.50-3.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Gebhard, *op. cit.*, pp.9-28.

counterparts than those of merely fifty years ago. And just as it was in ancient Greece, the theatre remains one of the few forms of architecture wholly dedicated to the service of an art form.

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