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The Development, function, and significance of Greek Theatres

By the end of the Archaic period through the Roman period, theatres played a significant role in Greek society.¹ They were becoming important structures in mainland Greece, Asia Minor, and southern Italy and Sicily, where the Greeks held religious ceremonies, performances, and political meetings.² Greek theatres' construction and development depended on their functions, with their form, plan, and layout reflecting Greek religion and culture.³ This essay will explore the development, elements, functions, and significance of Greek theatre in Greek society. Theatres have recently become a topic of interest to scholars; therefore, it is still under much investigation. However, some of the discoveries made about the theatres are worth exploring.

Most early Greek theatres had a rectilinear plan at the beginning of the 5th century BCE. The reason was to provide a space for dramatic plays and other activities.⁴ This layout is evident in Tegea, Isthmia, and Thorikos theatres in Attica.⁵ The Greeks used this layout extensively throughout the 5th century in both the Greek mainland and Sicily. However, the circular form began to replace the rectilinear plan in the early Hellenistic period.⁶

¹ Jessica Paga, "The Greek Theatre," in *A Companion to Greek Architecture*, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 360.

² Rune Frederiksen, Elizabeth R. Gebhard, and Alexander Sokolicek, *The Architecture of the Ancient Greek Theatre* 17, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2015): 11.

³ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 360, 367.

⁴ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 365.

⁵ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 365.

⁶ Frederick E. Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 97, <https://books-scholarsportal-info.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/uri/ebooks/ebooks3/utpress/2015-01-14/1/9781442657595>.

Due to extensive changes made through the centuries, especially in the Roman period, it is not easy to find much information about the early Greek theatre forms and their functions.⁷ However, evidence shows that rectilinear theatres were for cultic and dramatic performances. Meanwhile, the round theatres were for political meetings and ritual events.⁸ The transition from a rectilinear plan to a circular plan could have been motivated by economic reasons.⁹ For example, a semi-circular plan can accommodate a more substantial capacity of people. Furthermore, adopting a circular layout in the 4th century allowed a wider variety of functions and accommodated a more significant number of people as the attraction of theatre performances increased.¹⁰ Another reason was the increased interest in geometry and its application to architectural structures.¹¹

Theatres were becoming more popular during the Hellenistic period, influencing a new theatre structure layout and a new choice and use of materials.¹² Therefore, the Greeks began to approach stone construction instead of timber to ensure extended durability as the number of seats expanded.¹³ A semi-circular orchestra was also established to ensure good vision and acoustics for viewers from the seating area.¹⁴

⁷ Rhys F. Townsend, "The Fourth Century Skene of the Theatre of Dionysos at Athens," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 55, no.4 (1986): 423, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/148177>.

⁸ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 97.

⁹ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 380.

¹⁰ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 97.

¹¹ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 380.

¹² Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 367.

¹³ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 367.

¹⁴ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, page 97.

As for theatre construction, Vitruvius clarified in his *De Architectura* some rules that could have been important to the Greeks.¹⁵ The choice of site was necessary since the foundations depended on the landscape.¹⁶ He explained that the area where a theatre would situate should not be unhealthy or muddy.¹⁷ It also should not face south and be built on a level piece of ground.¹⁸ Although, the direction in which a theatre faced did not matter in the 5th century.¹⁹ The planning of a theatre was also important, where the Greeks would roughly draw a centre and round orchestra as a starting point.²⁰ For example, a circular stone marked the centre of the theatre at Epidauros to achieve exactness in the measurements and proportions.²¹ The Greeks also took advantage of the landscape in which they constructed their theatres based on the hill's shape.²² The Persian War's victory could have also influenced the interest in large sizing as the sizes of the temples and sanctuaries grew in the 5th or 4th century.²³

Regardless of the conversion from rectilinear to circular plan, three main elements of the theatre's structure remained the same: cavea, orchestra, and skene.

¹⁵ O.A.W. Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 43, (1948): 132, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30104428>.

¹⁶ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 132.

¹⁷ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 132.

¹⁸ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 132.

¹⁹ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 132.

²⁰ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 133.

²¹ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 134.

²² Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 361.

²³ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

The cavea, known as the koilon in Greek, translates to “hollow.”²⁴ It is sunk into a natural hillside to reduce material cost and labour time.²⁵ Its construction depended on the landscape conditions and varying hill slopes.²⁶ The slope can affect the seats’ steepness, the number of rows, and the theatre’s overall height.²⁷ The cavea also referred to as “Theatron,” is the viewing area with a seating area.²⁸ The seating area is divided into horizontal tiers by girdles or wedges of seating with vertical access stairways.²⁹ Materials used to construct the cavea seats were mudbrick and timber, which did not last long and made it challenging to identify the form and design of the theatre.³⁰

Secondly, the orchestra is the performing area, also known as the dancing place.³¹ The ancient term orchestra means a place for dancing.³² Early Greek theatre research focused on the early Greek orchestra’s forms and their significance.³³ The research concluded that the first ritual dances were performed in circles, while the dramatic singing group appeared in a square.³⁴ Greek drama was associated with round dances performed in round spaces for many years.³⁵ However, whether rectangular or circular, the space’s form did not matter for the dances since they did not

²⁴ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 360.

²⁵ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 361.

²⁶ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 361.

²⁷ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 361.

²⁸ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 360.

²⁹ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 360.

³⁰ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 364.

³¹ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

³² Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 364.

³³ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 97.

³⁴ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 97.

³⁵ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 97.

need to correspond to the area where they performed.³⁶ The orchestra did not need to resemble the cavea either since a rectilinear cavea could also have a circular orchestra.³⁷

Thirdly, the skene, called “scaenae frons” in Greek, was the scene building that acted as a background or an interior space façade for dramatic performances.³⁸ The skene was highly changeable and reconstructed each year.³⁹ Therefore, determining the early theatre’s construction was uncertain and not an easy task due to the temporary materials used.⁴⁰ The skene and cavea seats were made of timber and required annual maintenance or reconstruction.⁴¹ In his book, Vitruvius described that the skenes varied based on the performance’s genre, which included the tragic, the comic, and the satyric.⁴² Each genre possessed different decorations. Tragic scenes included columns, pediments, and statues suited to the kings, whereas the comic scenes reflected ordinary or private dwellings by including balconies and views presenting windows.⁴³ Meanwhile, satyric scenes were scenery based focused on the landscape by presenting trees, caverns, mountains and other rural decorations.⁴⁴

³⁶ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 364.

³⁷ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 364.

³⁸ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 360.

³⁹ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 364.

⁴⁰ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 367.

⁴¹ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 370.

⁴² James Turney Allen, *The Greek Theatre of the Fifth Century Before Christ*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1919), 47,
https://www.forgottenbooks.com/en/readbook/TheGreekTheateroftheFifthCenturyBeforeChrist_10094241#4.

⁴³ Allen, “The Greek Theatre,” 47.

⁴⁴ Allen, “The Greek Theatre,” 47-48.

Additionally, the orchestra was essential for early Greek vocal dances.⁴⁵ It needed to be large enough to accommodate the dances and movements of the performers.⁴⁶ The skene acted as a backstage that provided a temporary dressing room in the form of a wooden hut where the performers could dress for their parts.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the seating area would be on the opposite side of the orchestra from the skene.⁴⁸

Finally, the ancient theatres found in Attica and Athens are worth noting. Some of the earliest theatres in rectilinear forms are at Thorikos and Rhamnous in Attica.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the circular layout of the Theatre of Dionysos is the most famous in Athens. Pergamon, considered one of the Hellenistic period's magnificent theatres, was in Asia Minor.

Firstly, the Thorikos theatre in Attica is considered one of the earliest and oldest theatres from the end of the 6th century.⁵⁰ It was constructed using stone.⁵¹ The theatre was an integrated part of the sanctuary and had shrines and altars nearby to highlight the combination of theatrical and religious space.⁵² It also was felt sufficient as a dancing place despite its rectangular layout.⁵³ Thorikos was an ancient mining town where they exported silver that formed the basis of the

⁴⁵ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

⁴⁶ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

⁴⁷ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

⁴⁸ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

⁴⁹ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 98.

⁵⁰ Jessica Paga, "Deme Theaters in Attica and the Tritty's System," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 79, no. 3 (2010): 355, www.jstor.org/stable/40981054.

⁵¹ Paga, "Deme Theaters," 375.

⁵² Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 368.

⁵³ Dilke, "The Greek Theatre Cavea," 127.

Athenian economy.⁵⁴ Excavations of the theatre provide evidence that it consisted of a small rectilinear orchestra constructed and used by the end of the 6th century.⁵⁵ The theatre had wooden “ikria” or benches used for the cavea, although there are no remains to indicate the placement of a cavea.⁵⁶ However, the landscape proves that it was most likely used for the seating area.⁵⁷ The theatre also consisted of tiers that appeared intentional for seated spectators.⁵⁸ Wooden seats or “ikria” were used in early theatres but replaced with stone.⁵⁹ The Thorikos theatre provides a clear example of the overall form and layout of the theatrical space.⁶⁰ It is considered the oldest stone-built theatre of the ancient world.⁶¹

Secondly, the theatre of Rhamnous in Attica is located near the acropolis within the fortress.⁶² Few remains of the cavea that was made of stone were found.⁶³ The seating area included three or seven thrones.⁶⁴ The theatre’s orchestra faces the south, with the cavea facing the north.⁶⁵ The cavea was made of temporary materials and built on a rough slope of acropolis hill.⁶⁶

⁵⁴ Belgian School of Athens, “Theatre of Thorikos,” Accessed April 15, 2020, http://www.ebsa.info/pages/data/doc/Thorikos_ENG.pdf.

⁵⁵ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 355.

⁵⁶ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 355.

⁵⁷ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 355.

⁵⁸ Dilke, “The Greek Theatre Cavea,” 128.

⁵⁹ Dilke, “The Greek Theatre Cavea,” 128.

⁶⁰ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 355.

⁶¹ Belgian School of Athens, “Theatre of Thorikos.”

⁶² Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 361.

⁶³ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 361.

⁶⁴ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 361.

⁶⁵ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 361.

⁶⁶ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 361.

Thirdly, the Dionysos theatre in Athens is one of the most investigated theatres.⁶⁷ The dating of the theatre is much debated. However, Wilhelm Dorpfeld, an architect and architectural historian known in the archaeological world, offers a theory from the remains found that the theatre could be dated from the 4th century or later.⁶⁸ Acropolis, the city where the theatre is situated, was used as a place of refuge during hard times after the Persian wars.⁶⁹ The city was pivotal as part of the tremendous Periklean rebuilding program to replace the temples destroyed in the 5th century by the Persians.⁷⁰ Athens is considered the birthplace of theatrical production, and the theatre was considered home to the great plays of early western drama.⁷¹ Famous plays were performed at the theatre of Dionysos.⁷² It included the works of three great tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comic playwright Aristophanes of the classical period.⁷³

The Dionysos theatre is part of the architectural investigations, in which historians examine how its three elements (cavea, orchestra, skene) interact,⁷⁴ providing an interesting study into the evolution of the cavea, orchestra, and form of the skene.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 40.

⁶⁸ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 20,22-23.

⁶⁹ John M. Camp, "Athens," in *The Archaeology of Athens*, (Yale University Press, 2001): 248, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npxgm?turn_away=true.

⁷⁰ Camp, "Athens," 250.

⁷¹ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 15.

⁷² Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 15.

⁷³ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 22.

⁷⁴ Rune Frederiksen, Elizabeth Gebhard, and Alexander Sokolicek, *The Architecture of the Ancient Greek Theatre*, Review by Margaret M. Miles, 2017, <http://caareviews.org/reviews/2816#.XqK9yfhKhPb>.

⁷⁵ Frederiksen, Gebhard, Sokolicek, *The Architecture*.

The Dionysos theatre is a large marble superstructure that consists of a semi-circular cavea with stone seats and a circular orchestra that both appeared and became the standard design in the 4th century.⁷⁶ These theatre elements reflect the Greeks' increasing interest in acoustics and applied geometry.⁷⁷ It is assumed that the theatre went through a phase before transforming into a circular plan. The first phase perhaps followed the older Greek design of a rectilinear plan before being reconstructed into a round layout to accommodate a larger audience as the interest in theatre increased.⁷⁸ The cavea of this phase perhaps also consisted of temporary wooden bleachers known as "Ikria" in Greek.⁷⁹ Overall, the theatre of Dionysos has had a significant position in architectural and archaeological studies since the 18th century.⁸⁰

The festivals and performances at the Dionysos theatre were associated with religion, especially with the wine god Dionysos.⁸¹ The theatre celebrated dance festivals, public performances, and plays.⁸² The plays would be written for past shows at the festival in which the year is held. Since the festival was considered religious, altars would be present where one would sacrifice to the god Dionysos.⁸³ The altars within the orchestra would transform the performances into ritualized performances and provide divine approval for these performances.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 97.

⁷⁷ Frederiksen, Gebhard, Sokolicek, *The Architecture*.

⁷⁸ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 365.

⁷⁹ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, page 97.

⁸⁰ Frederiksen, Gebhard, and Sokolicek, *The Architecture*, 15.

⁸¹ Winter, *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture*, 96.

⁸² Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 368.

⁸³ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 369.

⁸⁴ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 369.

Another reason for the religious performances is that the theatre was considered a part of the sanctuary.⁸⁵

The first festival, called Lenaia, was celebrated in January or “Gamelion” in Greek.⁸⁶ Little evidence is found about this festival, but it is possible that its performances were comedy rather than tragedy and lasted for a few days.⁸⁷ In contrast, the festival of City Dionysia or Great Dionysia was celebrated in late March or “Elaphebolion” and would last seven days with multiple processions and enormous sacrifices.⁸⁸ The festival consisted of both comic and tragic plays, as well as early Greek dance performances. Another festival that occurred annually in December, or “Poseideon,” was called the Rural Dionysia that would last no more than one or two days, with performances held in some villages or demes in Attica.⁸⁹ The rural Dionysia is considered the motivation for constructing theatrical areas that were important both on a cultic and administrative level.⁹⁰ The festival was celebrated differently based on the theatre used. The day and the festival’s organization, administration, and structure varied.⁹¹

This evidence about the festivals demonstrates that the theatres in Athens and Attica were used for two or three weeks out of three months.⁹² The little use of the theatres for festival celebrations shows that perhaps the theatres were easily altered in terms of construction, material

⁸⁵ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 369.

⁸⁶ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 368.

⁸⁷ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 368.

⁸⁸ Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 368.

⁸⁹ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 372.

⁹⁰ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 372.

⁹¹ Paga, “Deme Theaters,” 372.

⁹² Paga, “The Greek Theatre,” 368.

use, sizes, and capacities.⁹³ It also shows an understanding of the theatre's uses for other reasons, such as political assemblies, mainly due to their large size in holding many people.⁹⁴

Lastly, the theatre of Pergamene in Asia Minor provides an interesting integration between human-made and topographic conditions.⁹⁵ An image of the theatre presents a steeped and sloped cavea within the landscape facing downhill to provide a downward view of the orchestra where the performers would be. This theatre is considered a hallmark of Greek architectural design.⁹⁶

Although the rectilinear layout was considered the standard in the initial construction of the Greek theatre, they are labelled as "primitive" in historical discussions.⁹⁷ However, it is believed that the circular orchestra, such as in Athens, is considered unusual because the circular layout was introduced and used widely in the 4th century BCE. In contrast, the rectilinear layout has been used extensively since the 6th century BCE.⁹⁸ Perhaps the reason architectural historians and archaeologists see the rectilinear plan as unusual is the Roman architecture takeover and the extensive use of circular or semi-circular layouts for today's arenas.

Overall, theatres' history, development, and functions are worth studying. Interestingly, today's theatres are similar to ancient ones and share some old elements. Perhaps, the ancient theatres have gradually influenced how humans construct and shape their theatres today.

Although not all of today's theatres and avenues are open in the air or follow a specific layout as

⁹³ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 368.

⁹⁴ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 369.

⁹⁵ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 361.

⁹⁶ Paga, "The Greek Theatre," 361.

⁹⁷ Paga, "Deme Theaters," 366.

⁹⁸ Paga, "Deme Theaters," 366.

the ancient theatres, nor are they related to religious performances or political assemblies anymore. However, the cavea, orchestra, and skene have remained present in theatres' construction today.

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