



## **Greek Theatre**

*How the plays survived*

### **Felix Budelmann**

The vast majority of the dramas performed in fifth-century Athens are lost today. Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin explain how Aeschylus' *Persians*, together with a precious handful of other texts, survived for two thousand five hundred years.

### **Edith Hall, Royal Holloway, University of London**

The story of the preservation of the texts of Greek tragedy from antiquity to our own day is – is really one of extraordinary survival against all odds. The actual plays of Aeschylus were probably first written down in – in an edition that sought to find out what the authentic words were as opposed to actors just memorising it and passing it down through generations, towards the end of the fourth century BC, that is about 150 years after Aeschylus himself was working.

There was a movement in Athens run by the government of the day to make sure that texts were actually written down and recorded. Thereafter important libraries over the Mediterranean would ensure that they had their own copies.

### **Oliver Taplin, University of Oxford**

The tragedies, as time went on, probably less and less were performed as wholes. They were still being performed as complete tragedies, we know, in the 200s BC.

As time went on, you got more and more performers performing extracts of them. But the texts were still copied. And we get texts of tragedies which not longer survive to us which were copied in the third century AD, the fourth century AD, even the fifth century AD. So there are plays of Aeschylus, of which we have fragments preserved on papyrus, which is the ancient type of paper, preserved in the sands of Egypt. We have quite a few of those fragments.

Certain plays were selected for the school syllabuses. Certain plays are selected for A Level, the equivalent, and *Persians* was one of those. So it was a play that was more copied than most of Aeschylus' plays in antiquity, and that certainly helps to explain why it survived.

Once the ancient Greek world comes to an end, it comes to an end in several different ways, in a kind of mixture. One is that a church culture takes over, the beginning of the Byzantine era. Another is that the spread of the Arab nations, including the Arab conquest of Egypt, which is where the biggest libraries were.

So these plays in that era after about 500, these plays were copied less, if at all. After 800, in the next 200 years after 800, you get a revival of interest in ancient Greek culture in the Byzantine world. And the plays were recopied.

And our earliest manuscript of Aeschylus, which has most of the seven plays, not all, but most of the seven plays that survive, including the *Persians*, was copied in about 900, into a very beautiful Byzantine Greek script. And that is the earliest, and we still have it, it's in a library in Florence. And there's desultory copying of the plays across the next three or four hundred years.

And basically what happens is that from about 13, between about 1350 and 1450, there's a huge revival in western Europe, in Italy, France, Spain, even remote Britain, there's a huge revival in interest in ancient Greece and ancient Greeks.

People start learning Greek. And people go, so-called humanists go to the east to try to find manuscripts of ancient Greek. And they find quite a few manuscripts of Aeschylus. They bring them to the libraries of France and Italy, above all. And that happens before the Turkish

conquest of Greece in the mid fifteenth century. And so, perhaps in some ways by the skin of its teeth, but ancient Greek literature makes it and once its made it into the, into Italy in the fifteenth century, we're on the verge of printing.

And the first printed text of Aeschylus dates from the late fifteenth century, and once a work of ancient Greek is printed, we have it. We don't know of any work of ancient Greek that got as far as being printed and doesn't survive down to us today.

### **Edith Hall**

The Aldine edition, the printed edition of Aeschylus, is clearly crucial. Pretty good copies of the whole thing could be mass-produced and would circulate throughout the libraries of the educated west. However, I do think that the most important point here was that it got translated into Latin. Far more people could read Latin, mainly as a result of their church training, than could read Greek at this time.

And a man called Sanravi, or Sanravius, is how he was known in his Latinised version, actually translated all of Aeschylus, at least six of the plays, including Persians, into Latin in the mid 1550s. And that was the version of Aeschylus that spread throughout the entire humanist movement in the Italian Renaissance.

The Sanravius version of Aeschylus in Latin explains why so many people think they can feel Aeschylean plots and archetypes and language underlying for example even Shakespearean tragedy and Marlowe and much of Italian literature, it's because a lot of people had read a bit of Aeschylus in Latin, so he had affected the way they wrote plays and the way they wrote poetry, but they weren't actually directly imitating his Greek at all.

The first post-Renaissance production of Persians is, as it happens, also the first known production of any Greek tragedy since the Renaissance. It's the earliest known play from ancient Greece and it's the earliest one to get a performance in Renaissance Europe.

In 1571 some people, probably Venetian nobility on the island of Zakynthos which is off the western side of the Peloponnese in Greece put on some kind of recital or recitation or performance of Aeschylus' Persians.

Shortly before this performance of Persians there'd been a big naval battle between a western alliance of Christians, John of Austria and some Spanish contingents against the Ottoman Turks at the Battle of Lepanto. Now this was a fairly important naval engagement though apparently rather indecisive in result, but it was immediately jumped on by the western alliance as a crucial victory over the Ottoman Turk.

If we're to imagine this recited performance of the Persians on the islands of Zakynthos, we have to see the Venetian nobility who enjoyed it as identifying themselves very powerfully with the Athenians who aren't actually in the play at all. They acted the role of the eastern defeated enemy and through them vicariously saw the magnificent victory of the west.

Now this is a crucial moment in the history of the reception of Aeschylus' Persians. This is the point at which the Greeks from antiquity, the pagan Greeks of Athens, actually get specifically identified with post-Renaissance Christians and at which they identified Xerxes and his Persians, who were from the ancient Achaemenid Empire and certainly not Muslims, because Islam had not yet happened, as the Ottoman Turks.

Once that identification has been made, it's become very, very difficult for us ever to escape from its legacy of identifying western liberty somehow as the opposite of Islam.