



Greek Theatre

Attending the theatre in Athens

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What was it like to go to the Greek theatre nearly two and a half thousand five years ago?

Oliver Taplin and Edith Hall discuss what early Greek theatres looked like, who went to them, and why.

The images are mostly of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens. What remains today dates from a mix of periods, but much of it was built a century or more after the first performance of Aeschylus' Persians.

Oliver Taplin, University of Oxford

Well the fundamental form of the Greek theatre, of the ancient Greek theatre is a hillside, with a flat space at the bottom of the hillside, so that the audience sit up the hillside and they all look down on the same area where the actors and the chorus perform the play.

In the flat area at the bottom there is a sanctuary of Dionysus, including a temple of Dionysus, and a large area in which the chorus and the actors could perform.

The main problem with talking about the seating and the physical form of the theatre is that archeologically we have scarcely anything that goes back to the era of Aeschylus, or scarcely anything that goes back to the fifth century.

Nearly everything we have date from the fourth century, the next century, by which time theatre has become really big business and people are building really fine stone theatres.

In Athens, back in the days of Aeschylus, I think a lot of people actually would have been sitting on the ground, and a lot of people would be sitting on wooden seating. Just how the wooden seating was arranged, we can't say, except that we know that the fundamental form of the theatre is that it wraps around the acting space, so that you've got people coming in from at least a kind of semi-circle of hillside.

Was there a building in the background? There's no doubt that for most of the fifth century, from the time of Sophocles and Euripides, there was a building at the background representing a palace, or representing a temple or representing a cave even.

But it's one of those things that theatre historians dispute about: was there a background building for Persians or not? And I'm inclined to think that in the early days there was no background building. In other words, that the audience would look down the slope, across the acting space, and behind it they'd see the temple of Dionysus. They'd see the view going way down to the sea a few miles away.

Edith Hall, Royal Holloway, University of London

We know very little about what the theatre actually looked like at this time, but it is fairly clear from the text that the scene was supposed to change somehow in the course of the play. It has to represent both some kind of council building where this chorus of Persian old men, elders of the city meet, and also there's a tomb of Darius, but it's quite unspecific as to exactly where in the city of the Persians the play's actually being played.

Oliver Taplin

A lot of imagination is required of the audience. You know, we're in something totally different from the modern, pretty intimate theatre. Even the largest modern indoor theatres are pretty intimate. You can see facial expressions. You can see small details of costume. You can see small details of props.

That obviously isn't the case in a theatre that's holding at least 10,000. And some people are way up the slope, towards the wall of the Acropolis. So anything that needs to be seen is going to have to be made very clearly visible. And a lot of the kind of detail that we expect from naturalism, from realism, is left to the imagination.

As far as we know, the theatre was open to all citizens, so the question is just who counts as a citizen?

People reckon that the total population of Athens, or Athens and Attica, this very large area of countryside that surrounds Athens, was around two or three hundred thousand at this time. And the number of actual qualified adult male citizens is likely to have been about ten percent of that, about 30,000.

The theatre, by the time we can archeologically count the number of seats there, it looks as if it probably holds about 15,000.

Maybe back in the days of Persians, back in the early days of Aeschylus it wasn't as big as that. But I would be surprised if there were fewer than 10,000 citizens. That's about a third of every citizen in the entire nation present at the first performance of Persians in 472.

So it is a participatory activity for all those qualified of a kind which we just don't have any modern parallel for. Women were citizens as well as men, but they were a different kind of citizen.

Most of the significant civic activities are exclusive to men.

There is a question of whether women went to the theatre. I'm inclined to think that they didn't. I'm inclined to think that the original audience was entirely male.

Edith Hall

I think the average person in the audience at the City Dionysia, the Festival of Dionysus in Athens in 472 BC, the first audience who ever saw Aeschylus' Persians, was probably a middle-aged man, he was an Athenian citizen, he had probably actually rowed a boat in the Battle of Salamis himself in 480, and he went to see the theatre, the theatrical productions every year as part of the Festival of Dionysus at Athens.

It was partly a civic occasion, a political occasion where he met all the other citizens, It was partly a religious occasion where they met to celebrate the god together.

Oliver Taplin

In some ways the most fundamental question about the Greek theatre is why did people go to it? Why did people put so much trouble and expense into putting theatre on? And why did people then take a really significant proportion of their lives, several days a year, going to watch these plays?

I suppose there are going to be two levels to this. One is actually a kind of civic participation, that it's this sense of belonging to the community, and going to this very important prestige activity, which was especially associated with the cultural and political and economic achievements of Athens.

But nonetheless, they're not going to go there for four days to be bored.

Clearly theatre in some sense captivated them, in some sense engaged their attention, both their aesthetic and physical attention and their mental attention in a way that made them feel it was worth spending all this time going to it.

I mean they went to be told stories. They went to see the stories of the great heroes of the distant past told in a fresh way. Told actually usually in a new way, a slightly unpredictable way. But also told with all the spectacle of the costumes, the props, the chorus' activity, the

music, the dancing, and told in this very novel, still certainly back in the days of Persians, novel way of impersonation. We're used to the theatre now.

We're used to actors impersonating roles. But that was quite new in fifth century Athens. Before then, stories had been told by solo performers, or they'd been told by choruses. But they hadn't actually been told by people who were actually pretending to be the people in the play.

Edith Hall

I think for the average Athenian citizen theatre goer, Aeschylus' Persians would have been tremendously heart warming. I think that it allowed him to undergo again all the great fear and terror and – and excitement of the Persian Wars, full in the knowledge that they'd actually been won safely, and enjoy the spectacle tinged with quite a strong sense of patriotic pride.

Oliver Taplin

I think one can say that in some sense or other they thought that they were being made better. A phrase that Aristophanes uses towards the end of the fifth century is that poets make people better citizens in their cities. Now in what sense does it make them better citizens? The easy answer to that is to say it's got moral lessons in it, like 'don't be over-confident', or 'be careful how women behave' or things of this kind.

But you don't need to go to a theatre for a whole day in order to learn a lesson like that. There's got to be something more pervasive, more profound in the way it affects people than that. And it seems to me that if I had to put in a nutshell, what I'd say is the tragic theatre reaches parts of human activity, parts of human experience and parts of human suffering that can't be reached in other way. That it gives people experiences which in real life you hope to God you will never have.

It broadens the experience of the audience. It broadens their experience in a way that is very total. It kind of takes them over so that after the play has finished, they can say 'I am a person who now knows more about the world, who knows more about the possibilities of the world, the possibilities of suffering than I did before I see the plays'. That's what I see as if you like the enlargement of the experience of the audience.