



Introduction to Greek drama

Development of drama

- ▶ Near-parallel in time with the development of Greek non-epic poetry
- ▶ Similarly tied to changes in society both in terms of the move from dominance by aristocratic groups to tyranny to democracy (or similar forms of rule)
- ▶ Several tyrants are known to have played a part in the institution (or reconfiguration) of religious cult of Dionysus celebrated (among other things) through theatrical performance
 - ▶ e.g. the links of Athenian tyrant Peisistratus to the Great Dionysia in Athens (contested, but the existence of the tradition is significant!) in the mid-6th century BC
 - ▶ In Athens, such festivals later become closely connected to the democratic rule (more on this later!)

Drama: Why Dionysus?

- ▶ The god of wine: Cult practices included drinking and celebrating – good crowd appeal
- ▶ Forms of Dionysus worship overrode social divisions, available to all
- ▶ Therefore such festivals helped display and create the identity of a (new? changed?) city state available to everyone



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- ▶ Song, dance, potential element of acting, procession...
- ▶ *For I know how to lead off the beautiful dithyramb song of the lord Dionysus, my mind blasted by wine*
(Archilochus, Fr. 120W)
- ▶ Archaeological evidence (vase paintings) show us trains of singing and dancing characters from 630 BC
 - ▶ First texts of drama from the 480s BC
- ▶ Lack of texts means speculation – is there a link... ...or not?

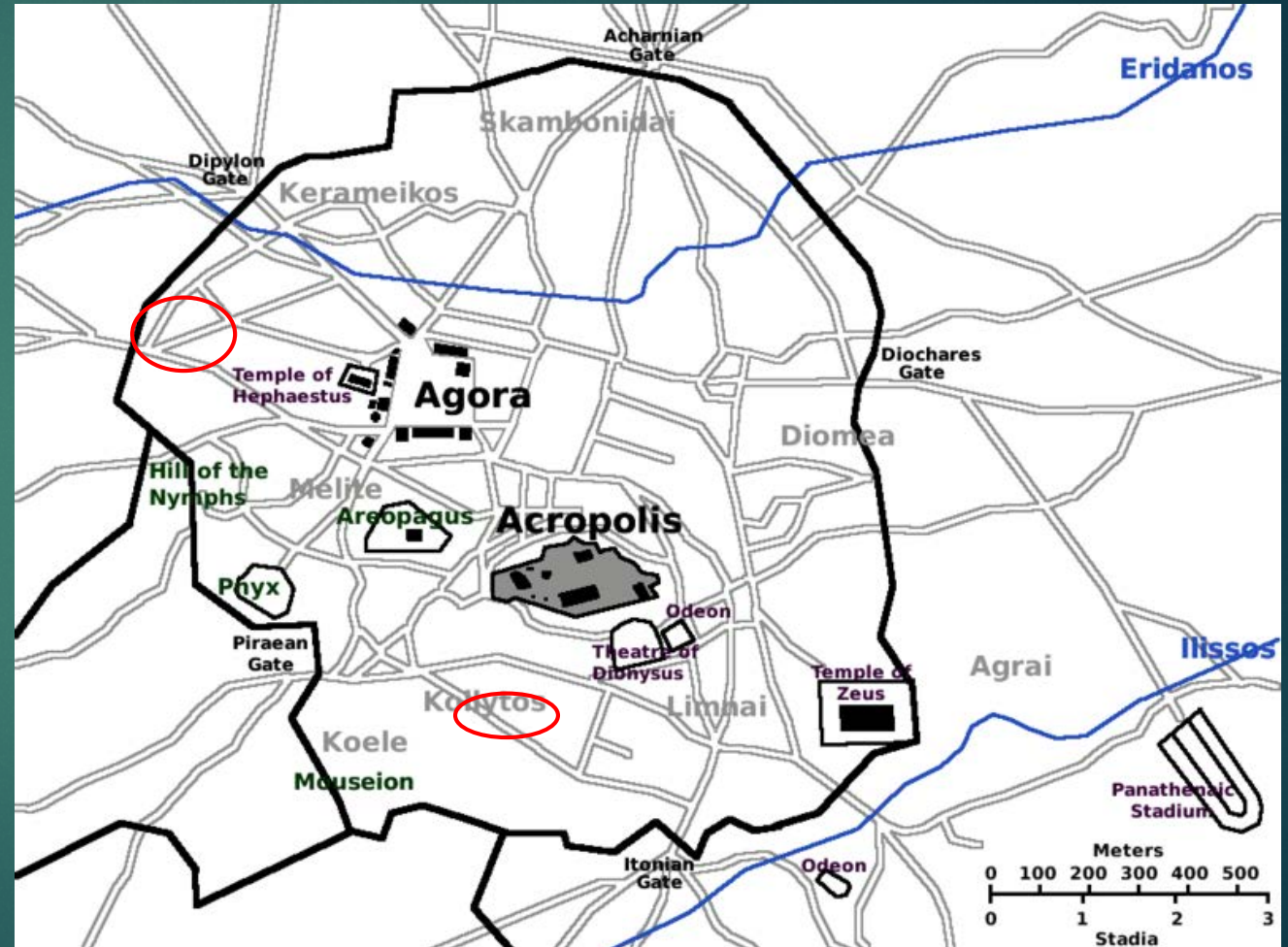
Early beginnings of drama?

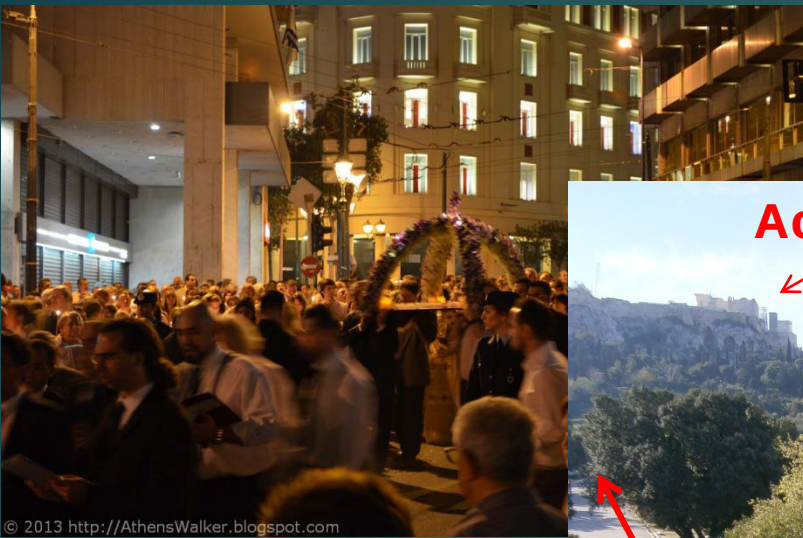


Athenian skyphos (drinking cup) from 600-550 BC linking drinking and music

Theatre in context: Athens

- ▶ The City/Great Dionysia took place (roughly) in March
 - ▶ Weather reasons?
- ▶ [Day before start] Procession with an image of Dionysus into Attica
- ▶ [1] Procession through city centre involving most strata of Athenian society (including metics!) in different functions, sacrifice, contest of dithyrambos
 - ▶ Sacrifices performed by civic heads of state
- ▶ *[2] Day of comedies*
- ▶ *[3] Day of first tragedian showing 3 tragedies and 1 satyr play*
- ▶ *[4] Day of 2nd tragedian*
- ▶ *[5] Day of 3rd tragedian*





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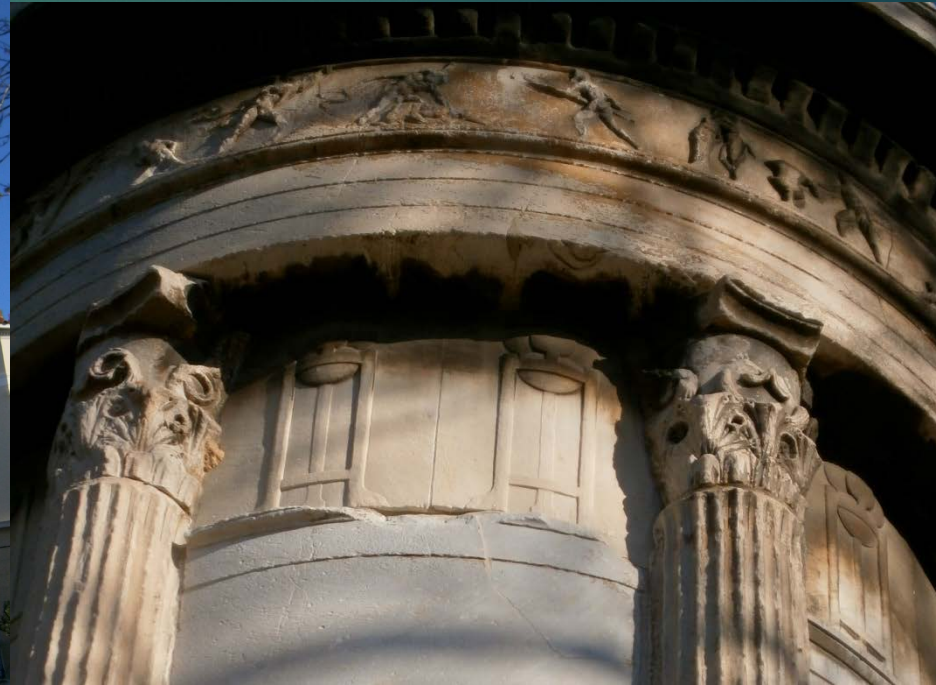


State business

- ▶ The drama competition itself opened with a number of ceremonies, many of which were civic rather than religious:
 - ▶ No other public business during these days (e.g. no assembly, no legal proceedings)
 - ▶ Allies were required to send tribute to Athens at this time – it was displayed to the theatre audience
 - ▶ This changes in the move into the 4th century
- ▶ Following the announcement of the winner, he and the choregoi were followed home in a victory procession
 - ▶ Similar treatment of the winners in the dithyramb contest

Organisation

- ▶ Citizens picked by the archon as *choregoi* were responsible for the organisation of the Great Dionysia
 - ▶ “The choregos’ principal responsibility was to foot the bill for equipping and training a tragic, comic, and dithyrambic chorus...” (Csapo/Slater, 1995, 139)
- ▶ Chorus paid and trained, chorus and actors fed and housed, costumes and props...
- ▶ Generally, this job therefore fell to the rich:
 - ▶ Part of a system of ‘liturgies’, ‘taxes’ for designated purposes ranging from theatre to equipment/upkeep of warships
 - ▶ Some age restrictions in place (>40 years in the 4th century BC)
- ▶ The expenditure was very large and could be a point of pride
 - ▶ cf. Plutarch *On the Glory of Athens* 348d-349b



Choregic monument of Lysicrates, winning choregos in 335/334 (Plaka, Athens)

Audience

- ▶ The audience make-up was mixed: Athenians, likely metics and foreign visitors
 - ▶ Cf. the composition of the initial procession into Athens
- ▶ The presence of women in the audience is contested
 - ▶ Cf. the role of women in other religious ceremonies
 - ▶ Depends partly on whether the Great Dionysia (especially) is seen as a mainly political or mainly religious occasion



Parthenon frieze: women bringing the new peplos for the cult statue of Athena

Women and the Great Dionysia

- ▶ So now we have found a kind of rhetoric addressed to such a public as is compounded of **children and women and men, and slaves as well as free**; an art that we do not quite approve of, since we call it a flattering one. (Socrates on tragedy in Plato, *Gorgias* 502d)
- ▶ Do not imagine, then, that we will ever thus lightly allow you to set up your stage beside us in the marketplace, and give permission to those imported actors of yours, with their dulcet tones and their voices louder than ours, to harangue **women and children and the whole populace**, and to say not the same things as we say about the same institutions, but, on the contrary, things that are, for the most part, just the opposite. (Plato, *Laws* 817c)
- ▶ Anecdotes preserved in the *Life of Aeschylus* and the grammarian Pollux that women in the audience of the Eumenides were terrified by the appearance of the furies
 - ▶ Primary sources here only from 5th C CE – may aim to denigrate theatre due to new cultural climate

Audience and space

“The essential point is that the audience was more like a moderate-sized football crowd than a modern indoor theatre-full.”

(Green, R. and E. Handley, 1995, 35)

Right: Theatre of Dionysus, Athens
(from the top of Acropolis)



Cast

- ▶ Chorus:
 - ▶ Initially 12, then 15 dancers and singers
 - ▶ Choral passages accompanied by the flute (aulos) – cf. choral lyric
 - ▶ The involvement of the chorus increases gradually
- ▶ Actors:
 - ▶ At the height of attic tragedy still only three actors: the same actor would play multiple characters
 - ▶ How might this limit/prompt development of plots?
 - ▶ Note the need for masks and costumes

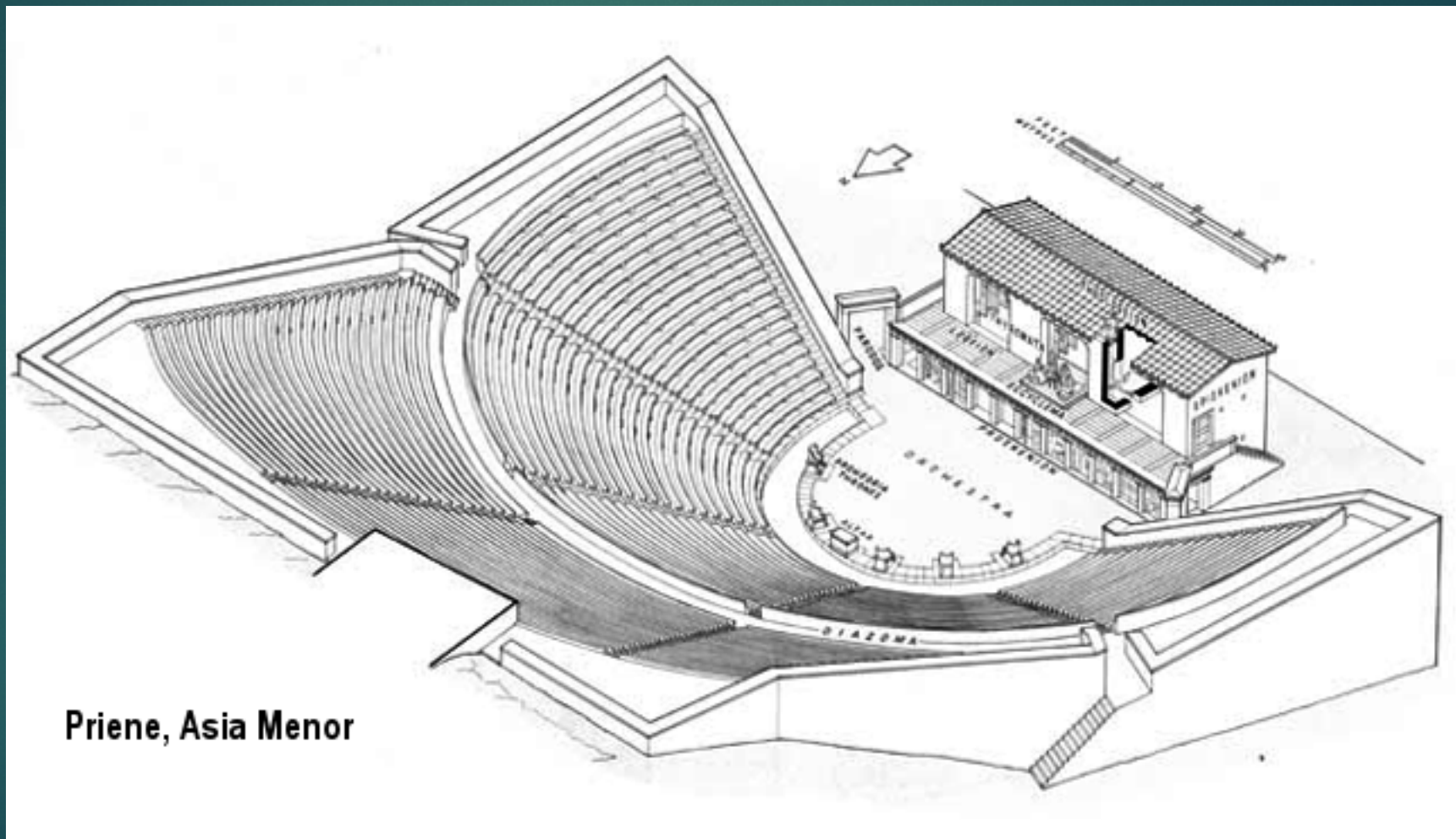


Plaster cast of statue of an actor in satyr costume

Theatre space

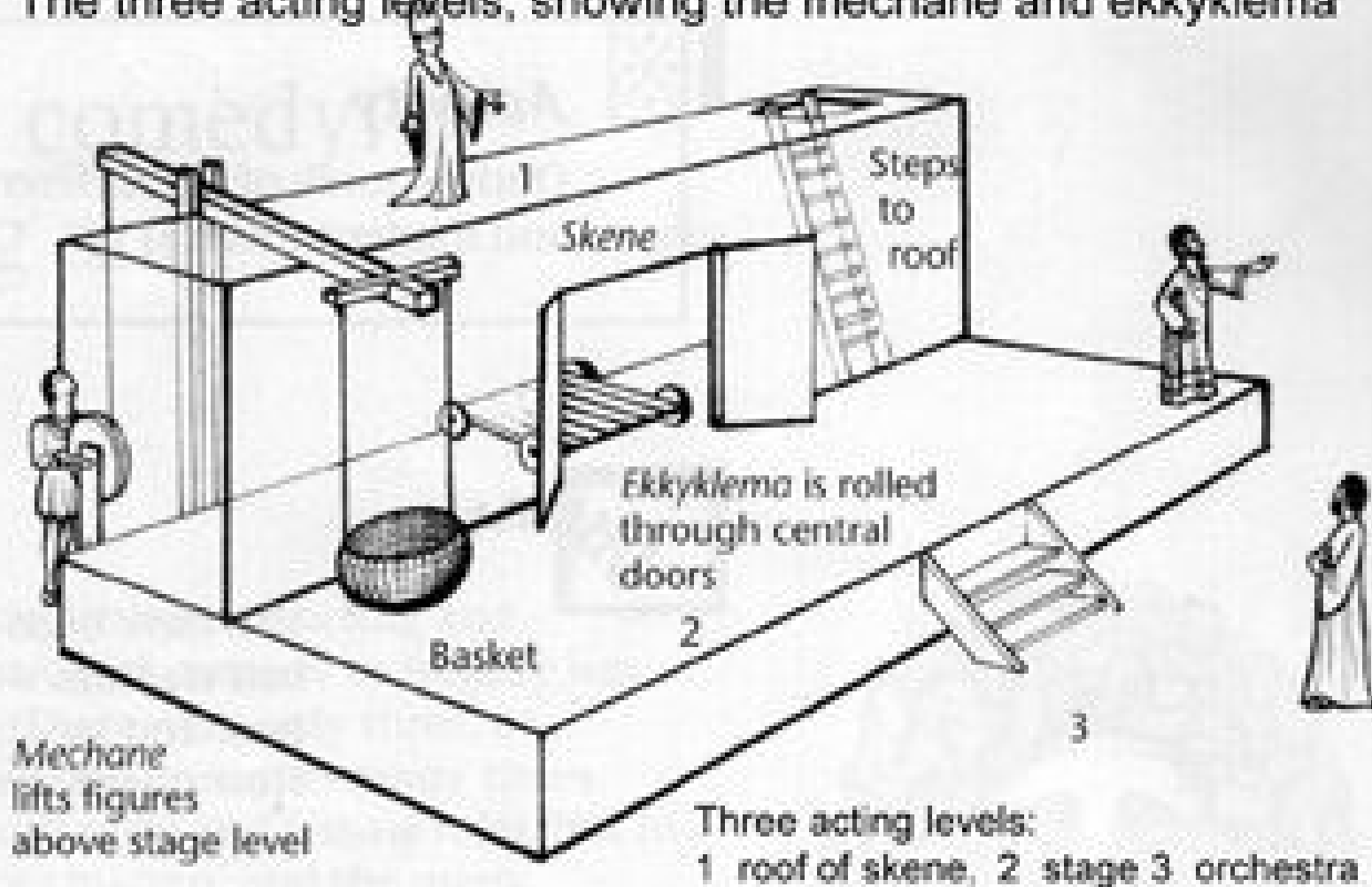
- ▶ Parts of the theatre:
 - ▶ Orchestra
 - ▶ Logeion
 - ▶ Skene
 - ▶ Stage front showing houses, with time increasingly complex
 - ▶ Top of: theologeion
 - ▶ Theatron
 - ▶ Parodoi
- ▶ Theatre props:
 - ▶ Stage machinery
 - ▶ Cranes
 - ▶ Ekkylema (platform on wheels for showing interior scenes)





Priene, Asia Menor

The three acting levels, showing the mechane and ekkyklema





**Theatre at Thorikos,
Attica**



**Theatre at the
sanctuary of
Amphiaros, Boetia**



Epidaurus

Issues to consider

- ▶ What were the other Athenian festivals featuring theatre performances?
 - ▶ The rural Dionysia
 - ▶ The Lenaea
 - ▶ The Athisteria
- ▶ The source book by Csapo and Slater is helpful here, as is Allan and Storey's *Guide to Ancient Greek Drama* – both hard-copy in the library.
- ▶ Where was theatre performed outside Athens, and when?
- ▶ For what other gatherings were the theatres used, outside of the theatre season?
- ▶ How did ancient performances differ from modern theatre performances? Think pragmatically!