

CLCS4007 ATHENS VS. ROME
LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL
ANTIQUITY
LECTURE 23: GREEK THEATRE



The Contexts of Drama and Theatre in the Ancient World

- The theatre of Dionysos in Athens, costumes and masks, stage and scenery.
- The dramatic festivals; their origins; their programmes.
- Greek Comedy
- Greek Tragedy: Euripides' *Trojan Women* (*Troades*)

Theatre of Dionysos, Athens



Theatre of Dionysos, Athens



Theatre at Epidauros



Brett Walton 2003

Theatre at Epidauros



Patrick Branson 2001

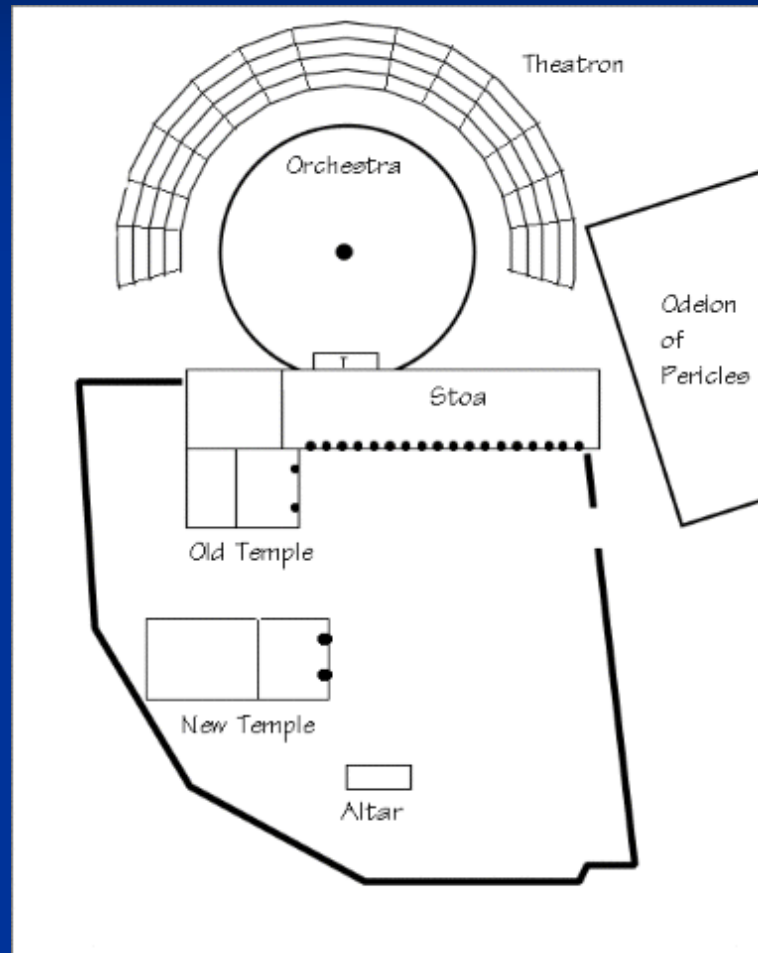
Modern performance in theatre at Epidauros



Theatre at Delphi



Theatre and sanctuary of Dionysos, Athens



Theatre of Dionysos, Athens: Hypothetical reconstruction of the earliest theatre with square wooden benches

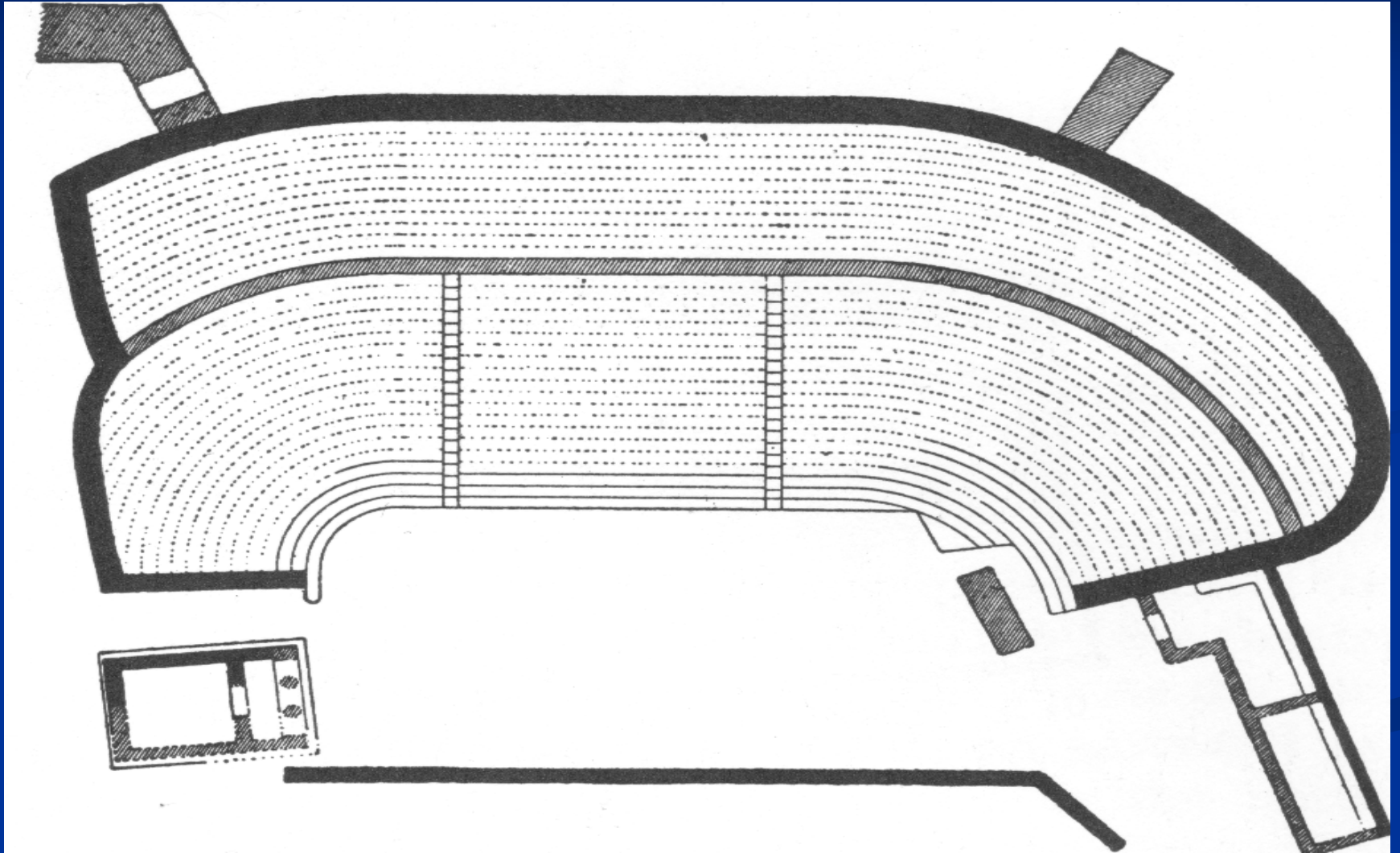


The Theatre at Thorikos

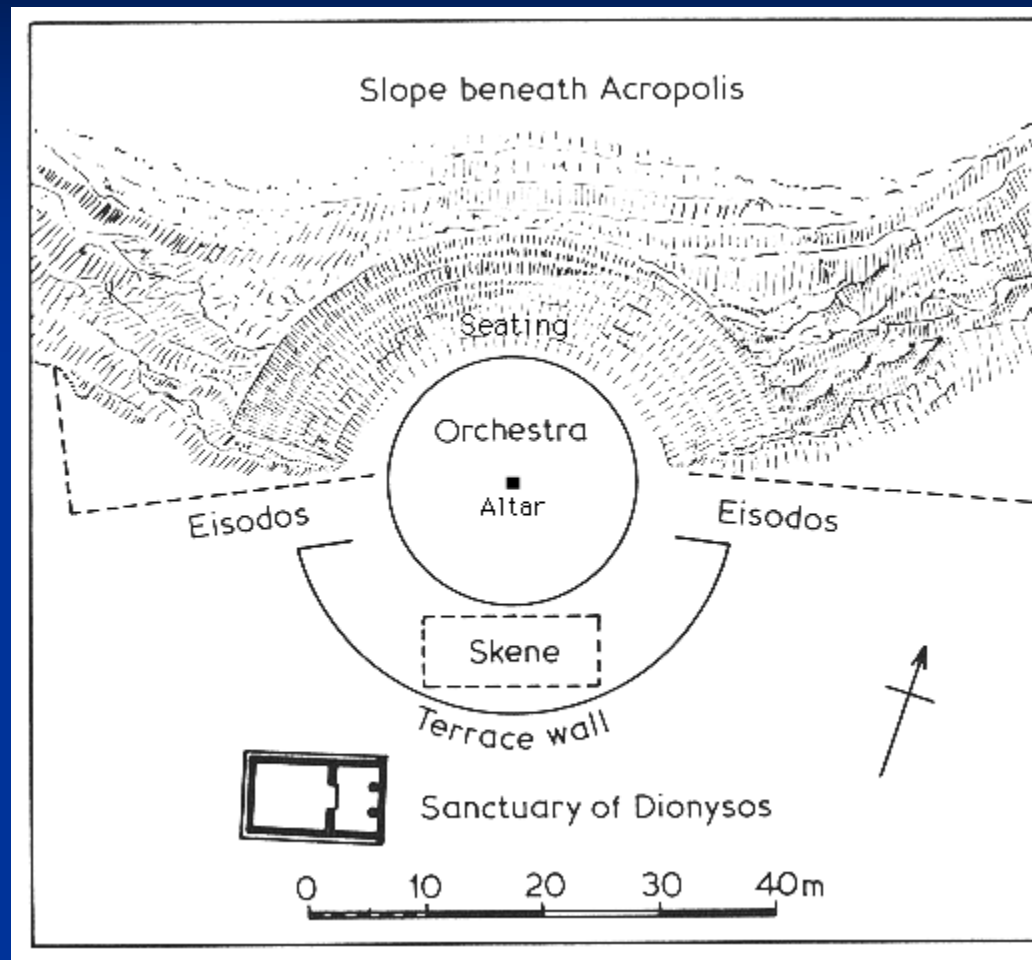


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Plan: Theatre at Thorikos



Plan: theatre of Dionysos, Athens



Theatre at Epidaurus showing *eisodoi*



Theatre of Dionysos, Athens: Hypothetical reconstruction of the earliest *skene* with curved wooden benches



Dramatic Festivals: the religious context

- The dramatic festivals were held in honour of the god Dionysus – and cultic rituals were carried out both before the performances and in the preceding days before the performances.
- In Greece ‘the sacred and the secular were intermingled in a manner which is sometimes astonishing to us.’ (MP Nilsson)

Athenian Dramatic Festivals

- 1/ City Dionysia in Elaphebolion = springtime, March.
- 2/ Lenaia, in January - fewer plays
- 3/ Rural Dionysia, mostly in winter/December:
productions, and therefore some form of theatre or at least open space with seating - in certainly 15 demes, probably more, but surely not all the 139 demes – they put on repeat productions of popular plays. Further opportunities for troupes of actors – how they did the choruses very unclear.

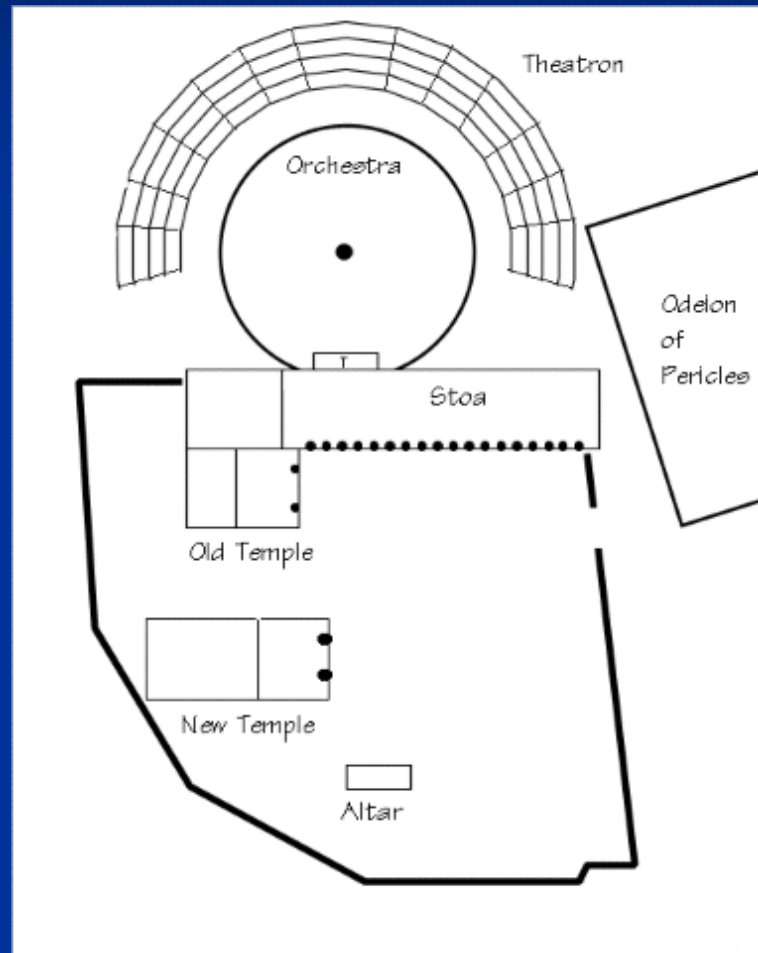
Dionysos

- Why was Dionysos the god of drama (especially tragic drama)?
- Comedy: appropriate for performance at festivals for the god of wine.
- Was it a matter of stories about Dionysos shaping the mythological groundwork and plot patterns of tragedy, as used to be the standard view, or of the god's symbolic characteristics – as the Other, the outsider, sexually ambivalent, transformative, elusive – making him good to think with, or of the distinctively dramatic features of his rituals (the mask, ecstatic possession, mystic initiation)?

Vase depicting statue of Dionysos of Eleutherae



Theatre and sanctuary of Dionysos, Athens



The City Dionysia: Programme

- *Proagon* = the previews (pre-contest) (8th Elaphebolion)
- Procession (*Pompe*): sacrifice of cows and feast (10th Elaphebolion)
- Opening ceremonies before the dramatic performances (11th Elaphebolion) (tribute from allies; parade of war orphans and the crowning of great citizens)
- Dramatic performances and competition (*agon*): judged by a panel of judges

The Audience and the Choruses: Nature and Composition

- Many foreigners attended but the majority of the audience would be citizens – perhaps a quarter to a third of the total number of Athenian male citizens watched plays.
- Very large numbers of citizens also participated as choruses. Approximately 1000 a year in the dithyrambs (song and dances) and about 170 or 300 in the plays.
- The *ephebes* (young men) may have been used in choruses (see Winkler).
- Social, civic, political and religious implications.

The Nature and Composition of the audience

- Target audience were the adult male citizens of Athens.
- But the City Dionysia also faced other city-states as well – foreigners – both representatives of other city-states and visiting friends – were welcome.
- Educational aspects of plays: boys also attended the plays.
- Were women permitted? Uncertain.

Tragedy and Comedy

The Actors

- **Actors** - limited by competition- 2, then 3, but not more in tragedies; 4 in comedies. Hence no more than that number of speaking actors on stage at any one time and actors played several different roles during plays, swapping masks and costumes.
- All male - members of community -only possible women on stage are some extras.

Red-figure pelike vase: tragic performers
dressing for their role as maenads, ca. 430



The Chorus in Tragedy and Comedy

- Tragedy: collective of 15 (probably 12 until after Aeschylus - looks like 12 in *Oresteia*) speaking as a group with mostly one mind, although they occasionally disagree; usually as one, whether singing together, or their leader speaking verse for them.
- **Comic choruses were 24, and much more exotic - often animals or birds; or men/animal combinations**, like wasps/jurymen; or men on horses, dolphins etc.; or abstractions, like Clouds, or cities; or representatives of Athenian groups, Archarnians, all Greeks, peasants, women, dead etc.
- Great freedom, and scope for exotic and exciting costumes, masks etc.

The *Choregoi*-vase: a scene from an unknown Old Comedy



Red-figure bell-krater: bird choristers and aulos-player (*auletes*)



Vase depicting an aulos-player (*auletes*)



Aulos-player (*auletes*)



The Themes of Tragedy and Comedy

Tragedy

- Tragedy's concentration on mythical stories and noble characters.
- The themes of tragedy are almost entirely from heroic myth, Oedipus and the Theban cycle, Trojan cycle, Herakles etc.
- The influence of Homer.

Old Comedy (486- c. 385)

- Old Comedy presents 'real' people and ordinary Athenians.
- Comedy of the city-state (*polis*).
- Contemporary satire, political and social debate.

Euripides' Trojan Trilogy

- The *Trojan Women* is part of a trilogy - though we only have the last play - but 3 Trojan plays apparently connected.
- Trilogy: *Alexandros* – *Palamedes* – *Troades*
- The accompanying satyr play was entitled *Sisyphus*
- *Alexandros*: This play showed Troy before the war, making a crucial first error in rejecting, then accepting back, Paris.
- *Palamedes*: as the *Trojan Women*, this play depicted Greeks as deceitful and nasty Odysseus was the leading character - the sophisticated and devious politician; he outwitted the intellectual inventor Palamedes, on a fictitious charge.

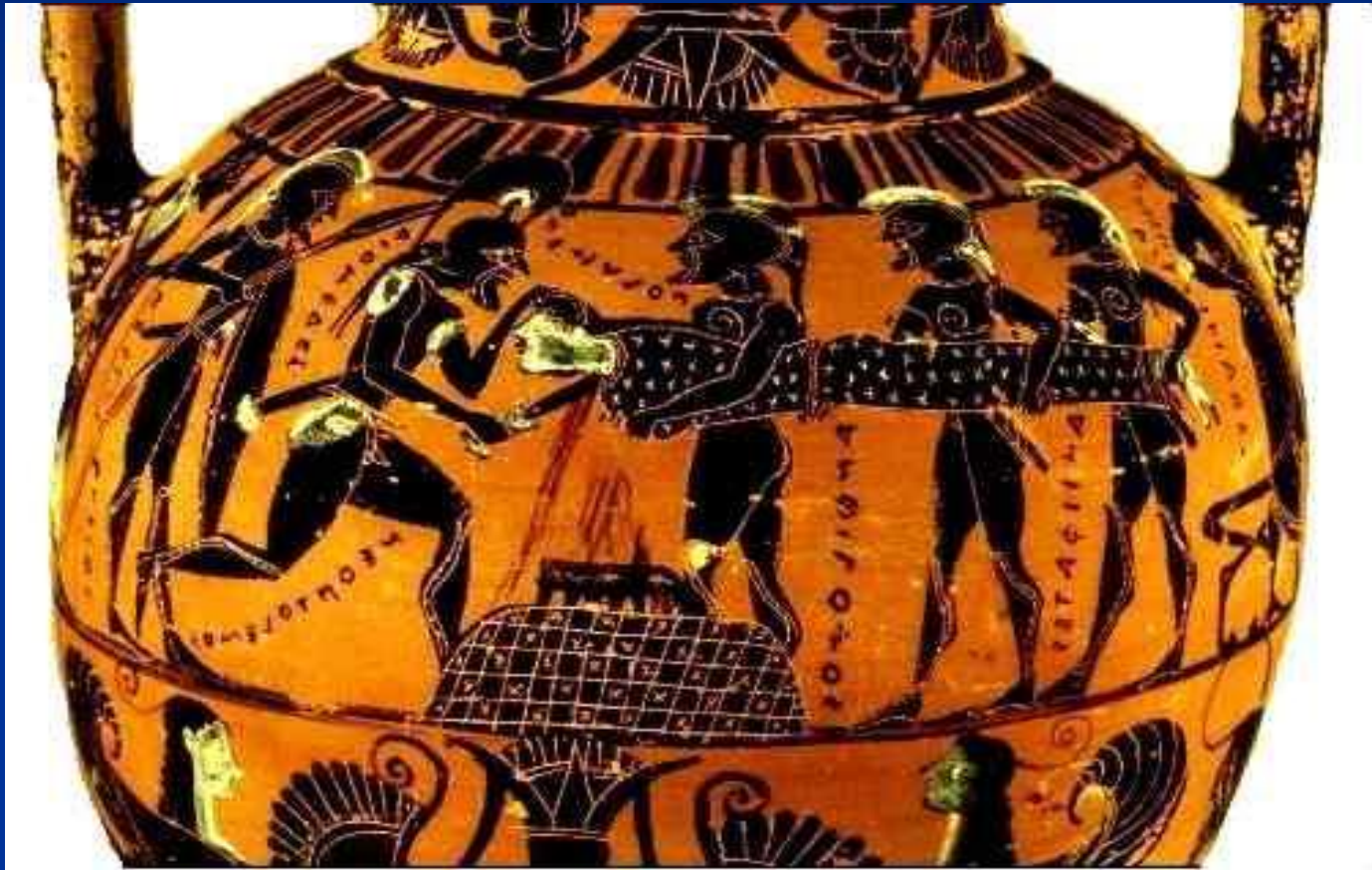
Euripides' *Trojan Women*: the Plot

- This is an incredibly bleak play, depicting the sufferings of the Trojan women after Troy has fallen. Hecuba is the central character and remains on stage throughout the action.
- Prologue: Poseidon and Athena.
- Chorus of Trojan women and Hecuba: laments.
- Talthybius gives them the results of the divisions: which Greeks they are assigned to as slaves.
- Cassandra scene.
- Andromache and Hecuba: Astyanax is taken away to be killed by the Greek army.
- Helen and Menelaus: *agon* (trial?) scene
- The body of Astyanax is brought back to be buried, Troy is burnt and the women are taken off.

The representation of war and the treatment of the defeated

- The horrors of the Sack of Troy: pity and horror from the point of view of the women on stage, especially Hecuba. Play as a succession of appalling sufferings on defenceless victims.
- Enslavement of women
- Horrors of the sack that they all witness: brutal murders, houses set on fire etc.
- First extra horrific crime - the killing of Polyxena.
- Second, fresh horror – the killing of the son of the Hector, Astyanax – a young child.

Death of Polyxena



The impiety and shame of the Greeks' actions in war

- Challenge to epic values (war is depicted as heroic in Homeric epic) and ideals of war and victory as the prime locus of glory, honour and masculinity.
- No hint anywhere in the play of the glory of war - no balance as in *Iliad* or *Agamemnon*, but only the unnecessarily cruel vindictiveness and massacres of the cruel, cynical, godless Greek commanders.
- The message seems to be that long wars destroy values, and ideals.
- The horror is especially focused on the treatment of women and children, and the enslavement of people who, though 'Asians', are not presented as any worse morally than the Greeks - though they had similar faults.