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## **Who Invented the Theater? Reflections on the Most Ancient Layer of Our Cultural Vocabulary**

### Abstract

The article shows that many words from the world of ancient Greek theater (drama performances in a specific architectural form) actually go back to pre-Greek religious activity.

### Sommaire

L'article illustre que beaucoup de termes du monde du théâtre grec ancien (des spectacles dramatiques dans une certaine forme architecturale) remontent en effet à des activités religieuses pré-grecques.

### Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel zeigt, dass viele Wörter aus der Welt des antiken griechischen Theaters (dramaturgische Aufführungen in einer bestimmten architektonischen Form) letztlich auf vorgriechische religiöse Aktivitäten zurückgeht.

### Introduction

The world of theater is familiar to all Europeans and, in our cultural vocabulary, we find borrowings from either Greek *theatron* or Latin *theatrum*. As part of the canon of our European education we learn that the ancient Greeks were the first to introduce the theater, including the associated terminology. This view, however, needs to be revised in light of new findings and insights in the study of pre-Greek cultures, of Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe. The Greeks are not indigenous to the land that came to be called *Hellas* in antiquity. Their ancestors, Indo-European pastoralists, migrated to Greece from the northern Balkans, in the course of the third millennium BCE (Anthony 2007: 361ff.).

In their Helladic homeland, the newcomers encountered the descendants of the ancient indigenous population (i.e. the Palaeo-Europeans or native Europeans) who, with respect to their culture and language, differed markedly from the immigrating Greeks. As to the language of the native Europeans it has been recently clarified that “pre-Greek is non-Indo-European” (Beekes 2010: xlii). The Indo-European migrants merged with the natives. Many generations later, in a milieu of culture and language contacts, the tribal profile of the Greek population of antiquity consolidated.

The newcomers absorbed much of the ancient knowledge of the pre-Greek population and the impact of the culture of the ancients on Greek civilization became manifested in the transfer of advanced technologies and of markers of high culture, for example, the know-how of wine cultivation, smelting techniques in metallurgy, architecture, ship-building, ancient rituals and cult practices (e.g. the worship of the pre-Greek goddess Athena); (Haarmann 2012, 2013). The Greeks assimilated many expressions associated with the arts and crafts, in the process of their adoption. Those borrowed terms of pre-Greek origin were integrated in the lexical structures of ancient Greek and, in Greek transformation, they were transferred to the cultural vocabulary of our modern languages. Among those linguistic indicators of the pre-Greek substratum are well-known terms such as *anchor*, *aroma*, *olive*, *ceramics*, *chemistry*, *chimney*, *metal*, *hymn*, *lyre*, *myth*, *psyche*, *wine* and others.

Among the pre-Greek institutions that impressed the Greeks were rituals and festive processions. In light of the intensive social interaction of native Europeans and ancient Greeks it is not surprising that the pre-Greek ritual heritage, too, had an impact on the formative process of Greek civilization. Rituals are at the very core of the functioning of culture. All cultures of the world, whether historical or recent, operate with a certain category of behavioral strategies that enhance in-group solidarity, maintain the rigidity of the knowledge obtained from previous generations, and reassure the sustainability of society. "In general a ritual is an act involving performative uses of language (for example, in blessing, praising, cursing, consecrating, purifying) (...) and a formal pattern of behaviour either closely or more loosely followed" (Smart 1997: 72).

There is consensus among scholars that ritual preceded theater, that ritualistic performance provides the mind frame for the reworking of eternal human matters (i.e. love, hatred, liberty, power, death) projected into the fictional world of theater. If this is true, then it is reasonable to assert that theater is ritualistic healing and that the impression of a play goes far beyond entertainment, for example, with the experience of "drama as therapy" (Jones 1996).

"Rituals are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions. The functions of theatre identified by Aristotle and Horace - entertainment, celebration, enhancement of social solidarity, education (including political education), and healing - are also functions of ritual. The difference lies in context and emphasis." (Schechner 1994: 613)

The linkage between ritual and theatrical performance in the Greek world has been investigated with some scrutiny (e.g. Kowalzig 2007a, b). However, the historical depth of this linkage has not yet been fully perceived by classical scholars. Some would look for the origins of theatrical performance but, following Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990: 23) "it would be better to speak of antecedents." The symbiotic interplay between drama and ritual can be reconstructed for a world where the early Greeks vividly interacted with the native Europeans. Processions in the archaic period were more comprehensive than in the classical era since they included theatrical performances in which both men and women participated. In ancient Athens, processions ended on the Agora which played an important role as a political meeting place and cult center. Theatrical performances, in the archaic period, marked the final phase of processions, and it is important to perceive "the position of the 'theatre' as end-point of a procession. The procession was the core of the rural Dionysia, and theatrical performances an addendum" (Wiles 1997: 26).

## Theater as Performance

The sixth century BCE saw a breaking away from older ritual traditions and a remodeling of cultural life. The major occurrence was the separation of the theatrical performances from the organization of the processions that continued to be held. The consequences of the separation were of a formal rather than of a contextual nature. The performances remained ritualistic and religiously connotated. From observations in the study of oral literature in a traditional culture, one may conclude that the impact of the verbal strategies that came to bear in theatrical performances in archaic Greece were most probably characterized by similar functions and structures, both in the context of processions and in the newly devised space, the theater. This means that the texts were oriented at formulaic language use typical of rituals. The use of formulaic language made it easier for the spectators in the theater to identify with the contents of the scenes since they were accustomed to formulaic presentations from previous events of processions.

"Structural familiarity and conventionality are those factors in the process of memorisation which are also apparent when studying the complex composed of formulaic systems and families of formulae, typical scenes

and themes. The supply of formulaic vocabulary, scenes and plots is structured with the help of interconnecting links in the same way as information stored in the memory generally. Particular formulae and the systems formed from them are grouped together thematically, some image elements and ideas link up with each other, some scenes have a tendency to attract certain details, etc. Tradition-oriented members of a culture (both performers and listeners) are thus more easily able to assimilate and reproduce elements organised formulaically” (Harvilahti 2000: 59f.).

Another conclusion is evident. In the early stage of development of theatrical performance, independent of processions, the spoken texts and the scenical arrangements were much simpler than what the Greek theater produced in the classical period. Elaboration and sophistication of language use and narrative lay in the future, with great names such as Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Sophocles and Euripides (Mastromarco and Totaro 2012: 68ff., 94ff., 120ff., 192ff.).

There is another aspect in the early tradition of theater as performance that points to the festive events of processions as antecedents, and that is the lively interaction between performers (actors) and audience (spectators). The crowd that watched processions in antiquity was no passive agent, but people communicated with the participants in the parade by shouting, hailing and commenting on the performance. This behavior was transferred also to the performance in the theaters. “Compared with modern spectators, ancient audiences who attended dramatic festivals were also rowdier, more vocal, and frequently hailed as the true arbiters of dramatic competitions at which plays were performed” (Roselli 2011: 1).

Even when theatrical performance had been separated from the performance of ritual processions it remained associated with the tradition of mythical narration. The ancient links with ritual processions can be readily identified in the genre of Greek tragedies. Aeschylus, who is regarded by many to be the father of European drama, carefully preserves the memory of the old roots of Greek theater, that is ritualistic performance of dance and song.

“Fifth-century Attic tragedy, like archaic epic poetry, took its subjects almost exclusively from myth. Tragedies on nonmythical themes were never more than experimental. [...] Tragedy was also influenced by the treatment of myth in epic poetry. Even ancient authors called Homer the father of tragedy, and Aeschylus reportedly said that he worked with the crumbs from Homer's table (TrGF vol. 3, T 112a-b). The tragic poet deliberately situated himself in the epic tradition of mythical narration.” (Graf 1993: 142)

The theater as a space with specific functions of performance is a secondary innovation. This can be illustrated by the etymology of the Greek term *theatron*. The stem *thea* points at a word of the pre-Greek substratum, meaning “theatrical performance” (Beekes 2010: 536). The suffix *-tron* (denoting a means for achieving an effect – in this case devising a space for display) was added later, once the architectural form of theaters was introduced. “As a literary genre with its own rules and characteristics tragedy introduces a new type of spectacle into the system of the city-state's public festivals” (Vernant/Vidal-Naquet 1990: 23).

In addition to the key concept *thea(tron)* the terminology of Greek theater contains other core expressions of pre-Greek origin:

- *brikeloi* characters in tragedy
- *thea* ‘sight, theatrical spectacle’
- *kerkis* ‘wedge-shaped division of the seats in the theater’ (metaphorical after the original meaning ‘weaver's shuttle’)
- *kokyma* ‘lamenting (tragedy)’
- *mimos* ‘mime (name of an actor)’
- *pitylos* ‘rhythmical, heavy beat (tragedy)’

## Theater as Architectural Form

The layer of pre-Greek terms in the lexical domain of house-construction is extensive. And yet, there are no known borrowings relating to the construction of theaters. This is not surprising since there were no theaters in Greece before the sixth century BCE, and there are no architectural remains of earlier periods that would resemble Greek theaters. According to the traditions of the pre-Greek era, there was no need for a separate architectural form since theatrical spectacles were performed along the routes of processions.

It is not clear whether the rectangular shape of theaters is older than the theater with a circular space for the audience. In any case, it has been emphasized that the round shape was the preferred model since the period when democracy was introduced (i.e. since the fifth century BCE), and this form originated in Athens (Ober 2008: 200 ff.).

The circular shape of the space for the audience offers a practical as well as a symbolic advantage over rectangular constructions. “An inward-facing circle allows maximum eye-contact; each person knows that other people know because each person can visually verify that others are paying attention” (Chwe 2001: 5). Each spectators has a chance, not only to follow how the plot unfolds but to also observe the reactions of other spectators to what happens on the stage. Intervisibility is given priority, not only in the construction of theaters, but also of other public buildings.

“There is a historical association between democracy in Athens and architecture promoting intervisibility. Like the Greek theater, the *ekklesiasterion* (theater-like public meeting place for gatherings of a city assembly; in Athens, the Pnyx), the *bouleuterion* (large-scale roofed public building for a large probouleutic council), and the *prutanikon* (public building intended for public gatherings of several dozen magistrates; in Athens, the Tholos) may be Athenian architectural innovations” (Ober 2008: 209).

The most perfected form of the circular theater is the amphitheater. Most of the amphitheaters of antiquity were constructed by the Romans (Bomgardner 2000). The best-known amphitheater of the Roman world is perhaps the Colosseum in Rome. This monumental building, erected between 72 and 80 CE, ranges among the greatest works of Roman architecture. At the same time it is the biggest building which Jewish people have ever constructed. Those who built the Colosseum were Jewish prisoners of war who had been brought to Italy by Vespasian after his victory over the Jewish army in Iudaea, ending the first Jewish-Roman war.

The popularity of the theater—as a place of social contact and an environment for a reaffirmation of Greek cultural traditions through artistic interaction—increased in the course of time, and this can be inferred from the growing capacities to accommodate spectators. The history of the Theater of Dionysus, located on the southern slope of the Acropolis in Athens, is quite informative in this regard. The original version of this particular theater, built in the classical period (fifth century BCE), had seats for some 4,000 spectators while the enlarged version of the Hellenistic era (fourth century BCE) offered space for a maximum of 17,000 spectators (Gogos 2008).

## Outlook

The development that has been outlined for the transition from pre-Greek religious activity to Greek performance in a specific architectural form, the theater, repeated itself, once again, in the renewal of the genre of theater plays in medieval Europe. The theaters of antiquity with their pagan tradition of performances were abandoned by the Christians. And yet, the idea of dramatizing plots

and performing them for a public that was in need of spiritual guidance did not die, but was revived. The pagan agenda of human drama was replaced by stories from the Bible. And just like theatrical performances served the purpose to enhance group cohesion among the native Europeans and early Greeks, they did so for medieval people.

“In traditional guild theater, which was performed in, by, and for specific local communities, actors and audience were known to one another. On religious holidays a series of plays based on stories from the Old and New Testaments was performed sequentially at various stations or places within a medieval town. Rather than formal theaters, the place of performance was often a pageant wagon. Numerous members of the community were involved in these productions, each of which was sponsored by one of the town guilds. Those who were not actors in the performance helped with preparation or participated as audience members watching the enactment of the timeless truths of biblical history.” (Howard and Rackin 1997: 31)

And just like the Greeks designed a specific form of architecture—as a space reserved for theatrical performances (i.e. rectangular and semi-circular theaters)—in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, special buildings for theater plays were constructed, once again, in the sixteenth century. The oldest theater in western Europe was The Theatre, built by James Burbage on the south bank of the Thames in 1576. That was some ten years before Shakespeare came to London.

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