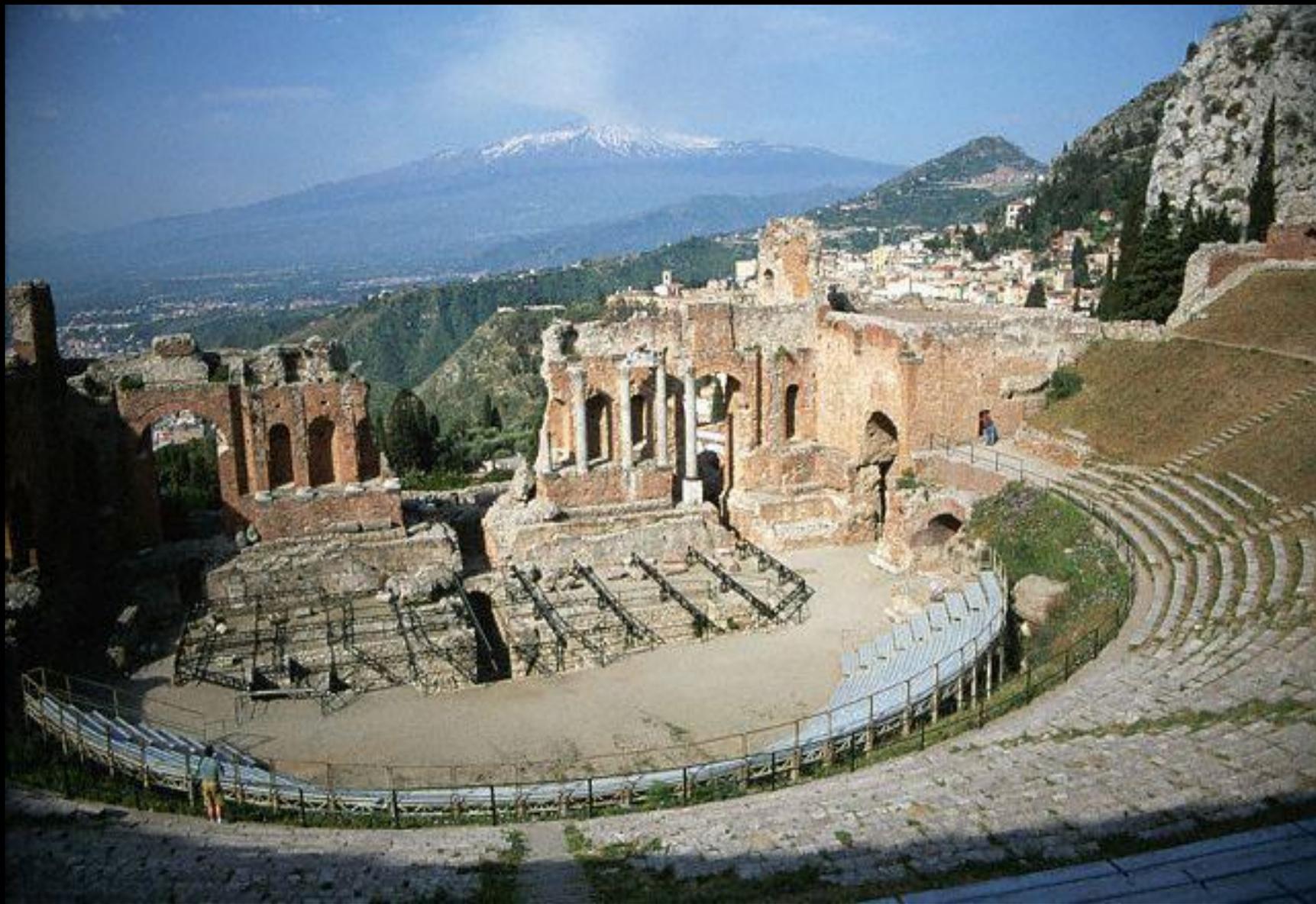




Greek Tragedy



What is a myth?

- Myth comes from the word “mythos” meaning *story*.
- Gods /goddesses /supernatural entities AND human relationships with them.
- Explain universal truths or values of a particular culture.
- Part of an oral tradition.

Why bother studying myth? Because myths:

- Define social customs and beliefs
- Are **allegories**, similar to parables in the Christian bible
- Explain natural phenomena
- Explain psychological phenomena such as anger toward one's parents
- Contain **archetypes**

Dionysus – god of wine, mystery, theater.



- Plays presented at festivals **to honor Dionysus**
- Tragedies dealt with the relationship of man and the “gods.”
- Chorus dressed in goat skins; goats were prizes awarded for the best plays.
- Tragedy – derived from the Greek word: **“tragoidia” which means “goat songs.”**

Origins of Tragedy

Aristotle's Poetics: Defines the rules of great tragedy. The “how to” guide.

- Earlier than the satyr plays and comedies.
- Grew out of dithyrambs
 - (songs sung in praise of **Dionysus** at the Dionysia each year.)
- Dithyrambs
 - Start as frenzied improvisations.
 - Later - In the 600s (BCE), the poet Arion- credited with developing dithyramb formalized narrative, sung by a chorus.

THE FIRST GREEK ACTOR

•534 BCE – 6th century - Thespis – the father of drama

- is credited with playing the role of the main character in a narrative.

- spoke and acted as if he were the character

- he interacted with the chorus, who acted as narrators and commentators.

- used different masks to distinguish between characters.

THE **GOLDEN** AGE OF GREECE

5th century BCE, theatre

- Became formalized and was a major part of Athenian culture and civic pride.
- The centerpiece of the **annual Dionysia** - a competition among three playwrights at the Theatre of Dionysus.
- Each submitted **a trilogy of connected tragedies**, plus a satyr play.
- **Subject matter of the plays expanded** so that rather than just Dionysus, they treated the whole body of Greek mythology.

The Golden Age – the spreading of theater

- **Greek theatre spread outside of Athens.** Athens' Dionysia remained the most important theatrical event in Greece, but every major Greek city built itself a theatre.
- Only four playwrights from this period have complete plays that survive extant.
- **All are from Athens.**
- They are the tragic writers Aeschylus, Sophocles (who added a third actor to his plays), and Euripides and the comic writer Aristophanes.

WHY WAS TRAGEDY BORN?

The reason for this sudden interest in man and his position in the order of the universe:

- Fifth century BCE = the “Greek Age of Enlightenment”.
- Civilization developed.
- Numerous changes in the fields of Greek social and political life.
- Political independence = a flowering independence of thought.
- Philosophy flourishes.
- The idea of harmony = the ruling principle of the cosmos.

How “harmony” connected to the “climate” of Greek tragedy:

- Happiness = a harmonious balance in his life. +
- In an age of growing individualism = harder than ever before to maintain a balance. +
- Traditional values now questioned +
- The authority of antiquity was not enough. +
- A growing independence from traditional gods was developing =
- This is the “climate” = Greek tragedy emerged.

The Three Playwrights of Tragedy

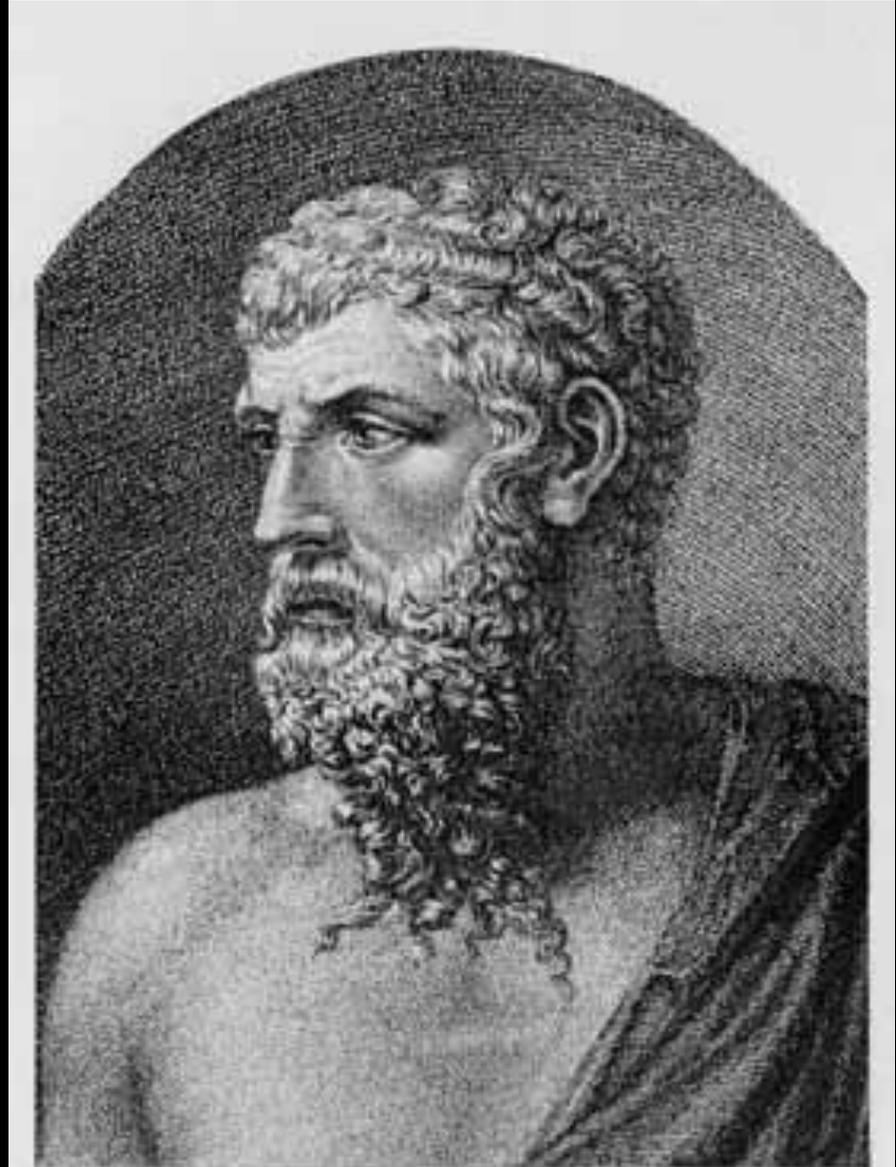
Aeschylus - 525-456 B.C. - 80 plays, 7 extant

Sophocles - 495-406 B.C.-100 plus plays, 7 extant

Euripides - 480-406 B.C. - 90 plays, 18 or 19 extant

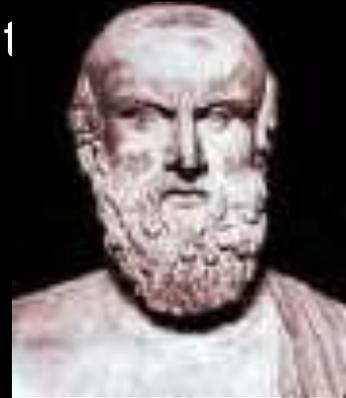
Aristophanes

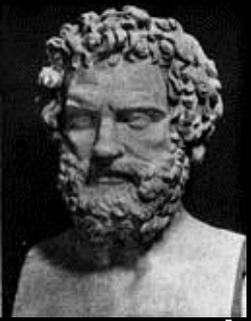
- Father of Comedy and the Prince of Ancient Comedy



Aeschylus – (Es'-ka-las)

- His are the oldest surviving plays - began competing 449 at Dionysus Theatre.
- Most of his plays were part of trilogies; the only extant Greek 1 *The Oresteia*.
- He is believed to have introduced the 2nd actor
- **Characteristics of Aeschylus's plays:**
 - emphasizes forces beyond human control
 - power of state eventually replacing personal revenge
 - chain of private guilt and punishment - all reconciled at end
 - He best evokes Athenian power and grandeur
 - Is deeply concerned with the moral issues that power and grandeur raise
 - examines the dangers of excessive arrogance, the ancient rule of blood for blood, the inevitability of the misuse of power





Sophocles

- He was born about **495 BC** in Colonus Hippius (now part of Athens),
- One of the great playwrights of the golden age of GREECE
- **The son of a wealthy merchant**, he would enjoy all the comforts of a thriving Greek empire. He studied all of the arts.
- By the age of sixteen, he was already **known for his beauty and grace** and was chosen to lead a choir of boys at a celebration of the victory of Salamis in 480 BC.
- **In 468 BC, at the age of 28, he defeated Aeschylus**, whose pre-eminence as a tragic poet had long been undisputed, in a dramatic competition.

SOPHOCLES

- In 441 BC he was in turn defeated in one of the annual Athenian dramatic competitions by Euripides.
- From 468 BC, however, Sophocles won first prize about 20 times and many second prizes.
- His life, which ended in 406 BC at about the age of 90, coincided with the period of Athenian greatness.
- Sophocles wrote more than 100 plays of which seven complete tragedies and fragments of 80 or 90 others are preserved.
- Sophocles marks the passage from the drama as a religious institution to the drama as a work of pure art
- Sophocles wrote *Antigone* in 411 B.C.

Sophocles



- Added third actor
- Fixed number of Chorus to fifteen
- Introduced painted scenery
- Treats gods with awe and reverence.
- He examines the accepted view of some problem and from it draws its central truth.
- Any violation of the cosmic order creates suffering, but suffering can redeem and exalt.
- His power lies in his compassion, in his sympathy for his characters, however deluded or broken they may be.
- One of the best examples of this is his treatment of Oedipus in Oedipus Rex. (a good-hearted but headstrong young man)
When he discovers what he has done, he blinds himself in a paroxysm of horror and remorse.

Euripides

(480-406 B.C.) very popular in later Greek times, little appreciated during his life

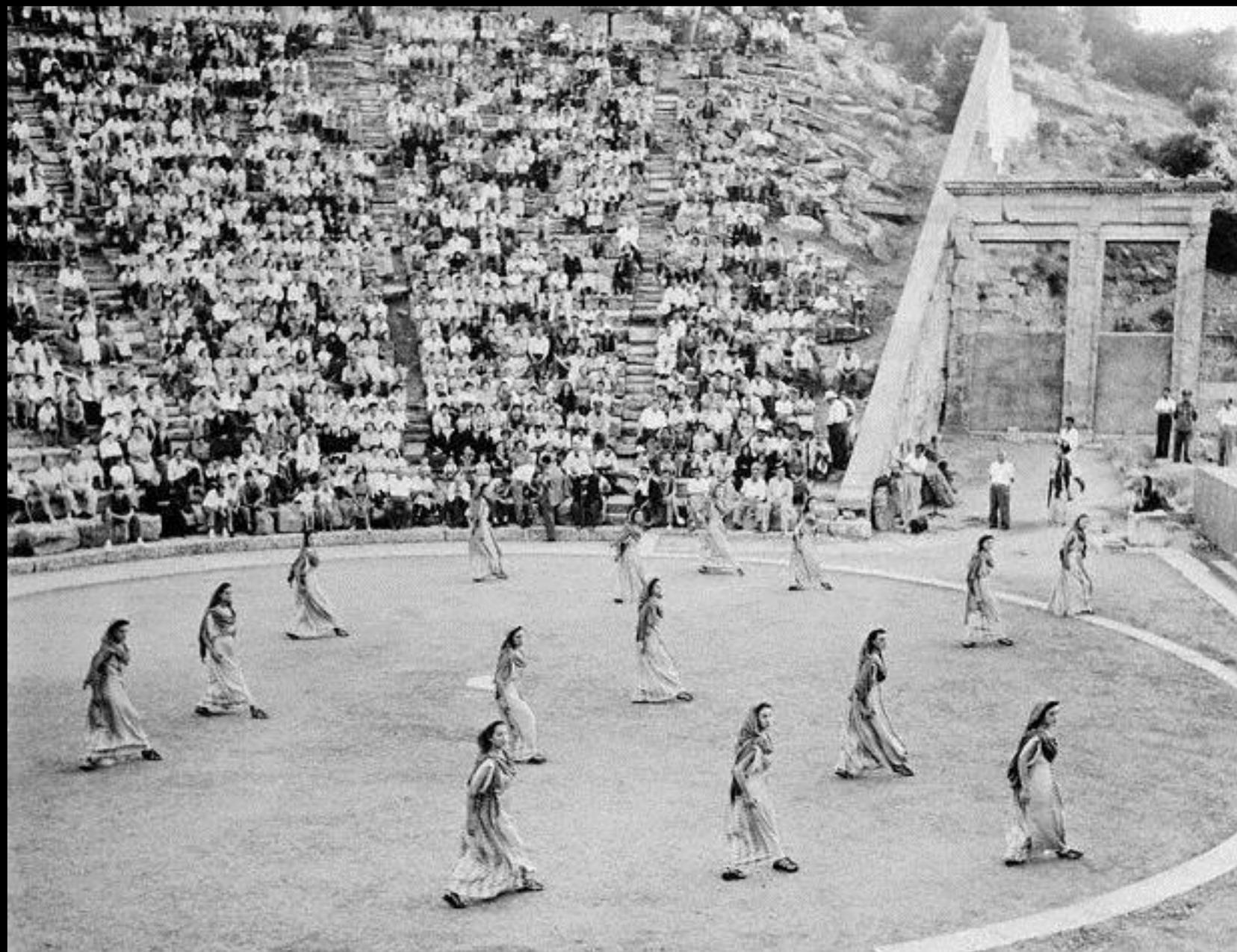
sometimes known as "the father of melodrama"

- **Belongs to a somewhat later generation of Greek thought**
- **Is a far more troubled, questioning and unsatisfied spirit**
- **Is the most direct of the three in his questioning of established beliefs.**
- **dealt with subjects usually considered unsuited to the stage which questioned traditional values (Medea loving her stepson, Medea murdering her children)**
- **dramatic method often unclear -not always clearly causally related episodes, with many reversals, deus ex machina endings**
- **less poetic language, realistic characterizations and dialogue**



Traits of A Tragic Hero:

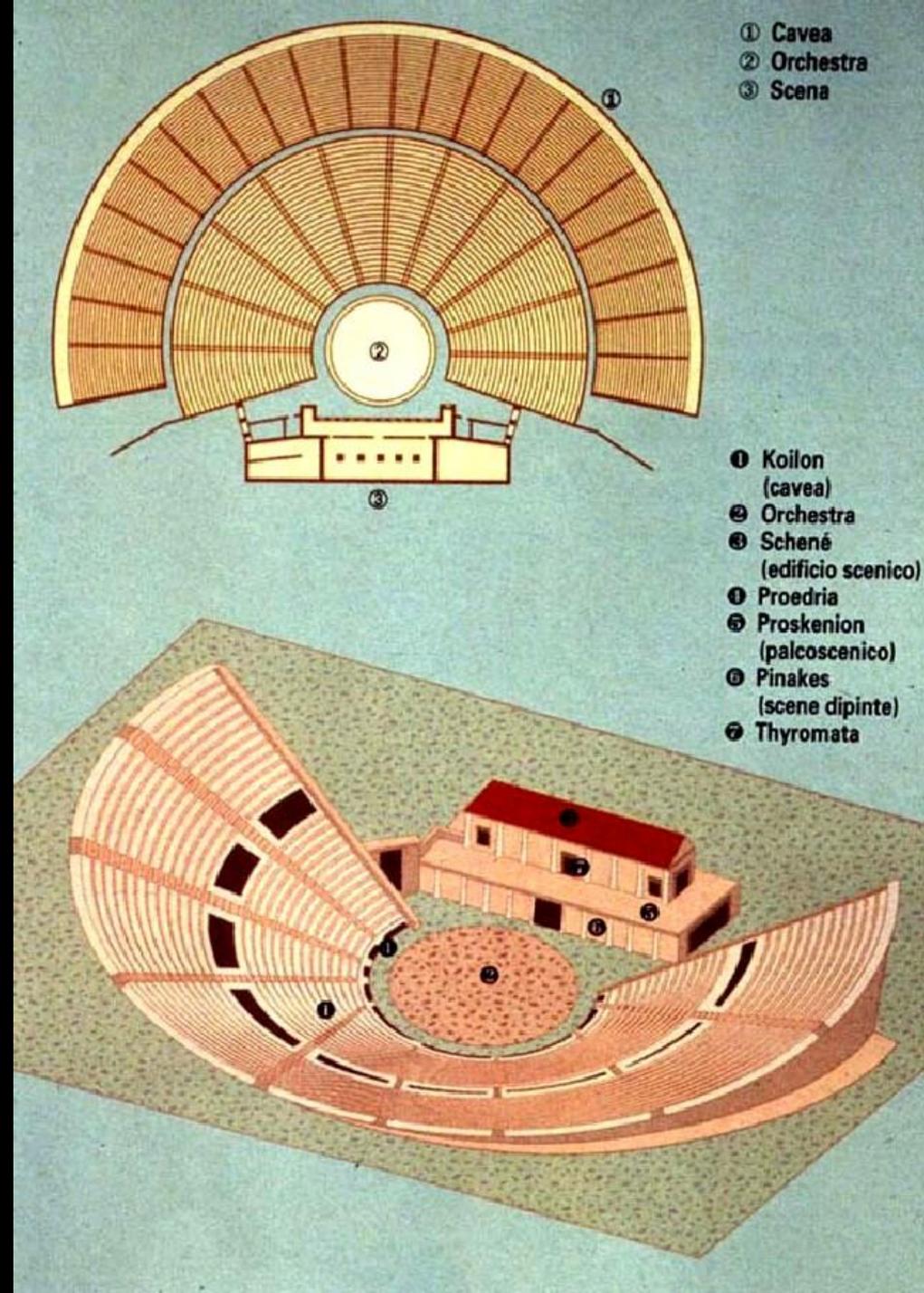
- We call Antigone and Oedipus, tragic heroes.
- The Greek tragedy always involves catharsis and the hero always has a character flaw.
- A man or woman pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him/her by some error in judgment.
- Has a fatal flaw or weakness (**hamartia**)-- often excessive pride (**hubris**) He/she falls from high position because of hamartia.
- Has a powerful will to adhere to a principle, a cause, a tradition, a sense of duty, which brings him/her to an ethical or moral dilemma. Dilemma leads to a catastrophe



The Structure

http://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/tragedy_theater.html

- **Theatron – Audience seating**
- **Orchestra – circular dancing place where actors and Chorus performed**
- **Thymele – altar to Dionysus in center of orchestra**
- **Skene – building used as a dressing room**
- **Proscenium – façade of skene which served as a backdrop**
- **Parados – entrance to the theater used by the Chorus**





Theater at Orange. Notice the elaborate skene.



As we can see from the picture above, Greek theatres, like this modern performance at Epidaurus, "one of the finest of many Greek auditoriums, built during the third and second centuries, B.C," (Brown, pg. 18) were massive. The performers would have to play to audiences as big as 14,000 people. It is because of this that the mask was of the utmost importance. It allowed the actors to be seen and have their emotions understood. The subtle gestures of an actor's face would be little farther than the people in the first two or three rows. The mask was adopted as a tool to help them be more visible to all of the audience. This is one of the uses of masks in Greek theatre.

- Masks were "originally made from stiffened linen, but it was later found that cork or wood had better acoustic properties" (Cleaver, pg. 34)
- They provided acoustic assistance. What this means is that the mask served as a device to help make the actors voice be heard.
- The mask and superb acoustic elements of the theatres made having "clearness of voice and enunciation, more important than a strong voice." (Beiber, pg 81-82)
- It is thought that some masks had a small megaphone-like arrangement concealed in the mouth of the mask. It is thought that this amplified the actor's voice. Another take on this notion is that:
- "The mouth had to be larger for the actor to sing or speak without difficulty. A few masks, especially those of old men, and slave, in comedy, show such large, fish like lips that we wonder if some masks gave the voice a slight support like a megaphone." (Kernodle, pg 128)



Few Actors, Many Roles

- Masks were used to help actors be many characters within the same play.
- This wouldn't be possible unless the mask did something about the characterization of each role.
- The masks had to represent the outstanding features of the personality of the character.
- By this, the audience saw an actor who was a representational image of the dramatist's vision. The mask was how this was achieved.
- Actors were have said to have sat and studied masks in order to make a connection with their characters feelings.

ACTORS :

- Could not be seen by everyone due to the theater size
- All were male performers.
- Wore long, flowing robes and high boots—colored symbolically, **green** = mourning, white bordered with **purple** = royalty, travelers were indicated with hats.
- Larger than life masks made of linen, wood, cork
- Masks identified age, gender, and emotion They had exaggerated features—large eyes, open mouth.
- Many say a standard costume: sleeved, decorated tunic, full-length usually, derived from robes of Dionysian priests - called a ***chiton***.
- ***Cotharnus*** is a high boot or soft shoe, perhaps elevated with a thick sole.
- Perhaps there were symbolic uses of some costumes/props - warrior with a spear, king with a scepter, etc.
- **Function of the Messenger:** Tells what is happening away from the scene (what happens off stage) Elaborate and vivid messenger speeches Reports acts of violence not allowed to be seen

Scenic Elements

There were several scenic elements commonly used in Greek theatre:

- *machina*, a crane that gave the impression of a flying actor (thus, deus ex machina).
- *ekeclema*, a wheeled wagon used to bring dead characters into view for the audience
- trap doors, or similar openings in the ground to lift people onto the stage
- Pinakes, pictures hung into the scene to show a scene's scenery

Limitations of the THEATER

- Continuous presence of the Chorus
- No intermissions: continuous flow of action and choral odes
- No lighting, no curtains.
- The stage faced west to allow midday sun to illuminate faces of the actors.



The Structure

The basic structure of a Greek tragedy is fairly simple. After a prologue spoken by one or more characters, the chorus enters, singing and dancing. Scenes then alternate between spoken sections (dialogue between characters, and between characters and chorus) and sung sections (during which the chorus danced). Here are the basic parts of a Greek Tragedy:

- a. **Prologue:** Spoken by one or two characters before the chorus appears. The prologue usually gives the mythological background necessary for understanding the events of the play.
- b. **Parodos:** This is the song sung by the chorus as it first enters the orchestra and dances.
- c. **First Episode:** This is the first of many "episodes", when the characters and chorus talk.
- d. **First Stasimon:** At the end of each episode, the other characters usually leave the stage and the chorus dances and sings a stasimon, or choral ode. The ode usually reflects on the things said and done in the episodes, and puts it into some kind of larger mythological framework.

For the rest of the play, there is alternation between episodes and stasima, until the final scene, called the...

- e. **Exodos:** At the end of play, the chorus exits singing a processional song which usually offers words of wisdom related to the actions and outcome of the play.

Final Thoughts

- **Chorus: (the ideal spectator to inform and tell us what we should feel)**
 - Adds aesthetic beauty through music and dance
 - Sets overall mood and expresses theme
 - Gives background information
 - Divides the action and offers reflections on events
Questions, advises, expresses opinion
 - During the strophe and the antistrophe the chorus walks up and down.

Artist: Charles Francois Jalabeat

Antigone leads Oedipus out of Thebes ; Musée des Beaux Arts, Marseilles

