

# Classical Greek Theatre: Tragedy and Comedy

Academus Easter Crash Course 2021

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# The Origins of Ancient Theatre

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2nd century CE  
marble statue  
of Dionysus,  
God of the vine,  
grape-harvest,  
wine-making,  
wine, fertility,  
ritual madness,  
religious  
ecstasy,  
theatre.



Ancient Greek theatre was a significant cultural, religious, and political practice in addition to being a form of entertainment.

Theatre productions flourished in [Classical Greece](#) from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, with the city of [Athens](#) becoming a particularly important centre for drama.

The most important events in the theatrical calendar were the festivals of the [Panathenaia](#) and the [Dionysia](#), both held in Athens. The [Panathenaia](#) honoured the goddess Athena while the [Dionysia](#) honoured [Dionysus](#). The [Panathenaia](#) began in 566BCE and lasted until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.

The [Dionysia](#) was split into two festivals: the [Rural Dionysia](#) and the [City Dionysia](#). The [Rural Dionysia](#) was likely an ancient celebration that predated theatre as a celebration of cultivation and harvest. The [City Dionysia](#) was established in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE during the tyranny of [Peisistratus](#) in Athens.

# Process of the Festival

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Remains of the Theatre of Dionysus on the slope of the Acropolis, Athens.

The [City Dionysia](#) was prepared by the archon of [Athens](#), a political figure who was elected every year.

The festival featured a procession, known as a *pompe* where citizens, residents, and representatives of the city marched to the [Theatre of Dionysus](#) carrying a wooden statue of Dionysus. They also carried *phalloi*, and water and wine carries.

During the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century weapons and gifts showcasing Athens' military might were also carried.

Bulls were also led as part of the procession as they were to be ritually sacrificed prior to the start of events.

Chorus leaders were a prominent part of this procession, dressed in expensive and ornate clothing. Often these would include famous musicians and poets.

# Genres of Theatre

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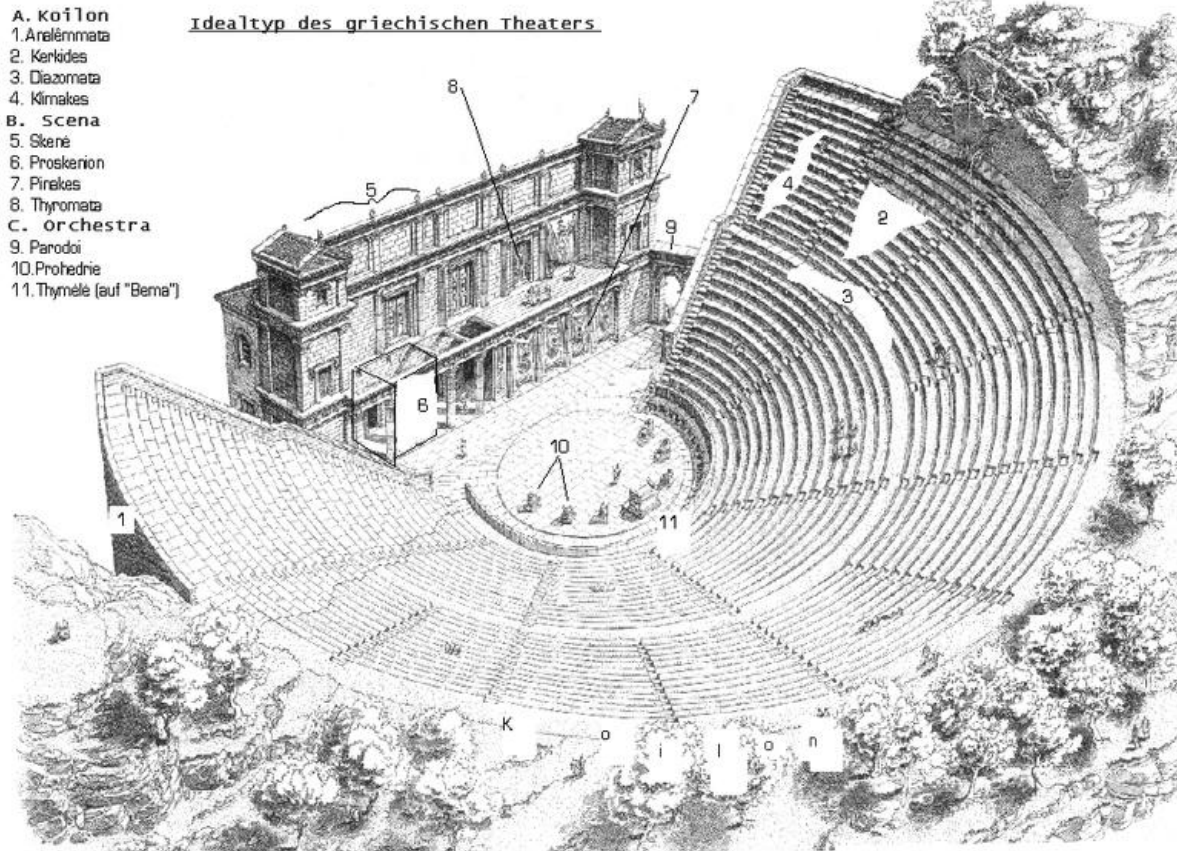
1<sup>st</sup> century BCE Roman relief of a seated playwright with tragic and comedic masks.

After the initial procession, the next day began with the *proagon*. Playwrights would announce the title of their plays and the judges were selected. The *proagon* could also be used to make important announcements.

The next five days of the festival were dedicated to the performances. Playwrights would produce three kinds of plays: **tragedies**, **satyr plays**, and **comedy**. Originally **dithyrambic contests** were held until 487BCE when comedy was officially entered into the contest.

The first performance of a tragedy was by actor and playwright **Thespis** in 534BCE. The prize for his performance was a goat, an animal often attributed to **Dionysus**. Allegedly this is where the word tragedy originates: from *tragos* (goat) and *ode* (song)

# Architecture of Theatre



All Greek theatre was open air and used both architecture and natural landscape for optimum acoustics.

The seating area was the **theatron**, often built into the natural hillside, where the audience would sit.

The **orchestra** was the circular flattened space where the chorus and dancers would perform.

The **skene** was a structure that would act as the backdrop for the play while concealing the actors from view.

Additional elements could include a **mechane**, a crane to give the impression of flight, and an **ekkyklema**, a wheeled platform often used to bring dead characters back on stage.

# Props and Costumes



Tragic Comic Masks Mosaic, in Hadrian's Villa c. 120 CE.

All actors in Greek Theatre were men, which made props and costumes particularly important to conveying the plot details and characters.

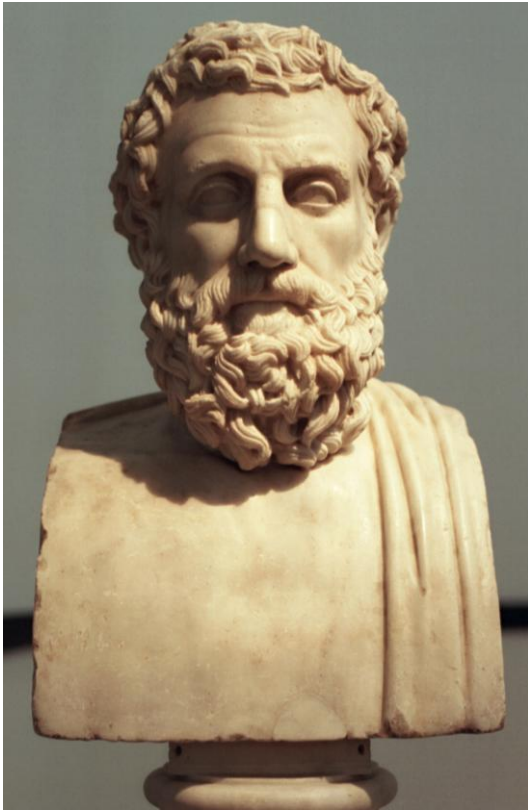
Most theatrical masks were made of organic materials and so none survive to this day. However, we can reconstruct what they looked at based on artistic depictions of masks.

Masks used exaggerated features to assist with conveying emotion, for both tragedy and comedy, so that these intense feelings could be recognised by those sat even furthest away.

Masks were worn not just by the principal actors but also by chorus members.

# Famous Playwrights: Aeschylus

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[Aeschylus](#) (c. 525/524 – c. 456/455 BCE) is often described as the father of tragedy. According to legend, the god [Dionysus](#) visited him in his sleep and commanded that he begin a career as a playwright.

[Aeschylus'](#) first performance took place in 499 BC, when he was 26 years old. He won his first victory at the [City Dionysia](#) in 484 BC. Aeschylus was responsible for innovations in the dramatic genre, such as adding an additional character, resulting in two main characters and the chorus.

Aeschylus was a prolific playwright, with as many as 90 plays attributed to him. Only 7 tragedies attributed to him have survived intact: [The Persians](#), [Seven Against Thebes](#), [The Suppliants](#), the trilogy known as [The Oresteia](#) (the three tragedies [Agamemnon](#), [The Libation Bearers](#) and [The Eumenides](#)), and [Prometheus Bound](#) . Aside from [Prometheus Bound](#), all of Aeschylus's extant tragedies are known to have won first prize at the City Dionysia.

# Famous Playwrights: Sophocles

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[Sophocles](#) (497/96 – 406/5 BCE) is one of three ancient Greek tragedians whose plays have survived.

His first plays were written later than, or contemporary with, those of [Aeschylus](#); and earlier than, or contemporary with, those of [Euripides](#). Over 120 plays are attributed to [Sophocles](#), but only 7 have survived complete: [Ajax](#), [Antigone](#), [Women of Trachis](#), [Oedipus Rex](#), [Electra](#), [Philoctetes](#) and [Oedipus at Colonus](#).

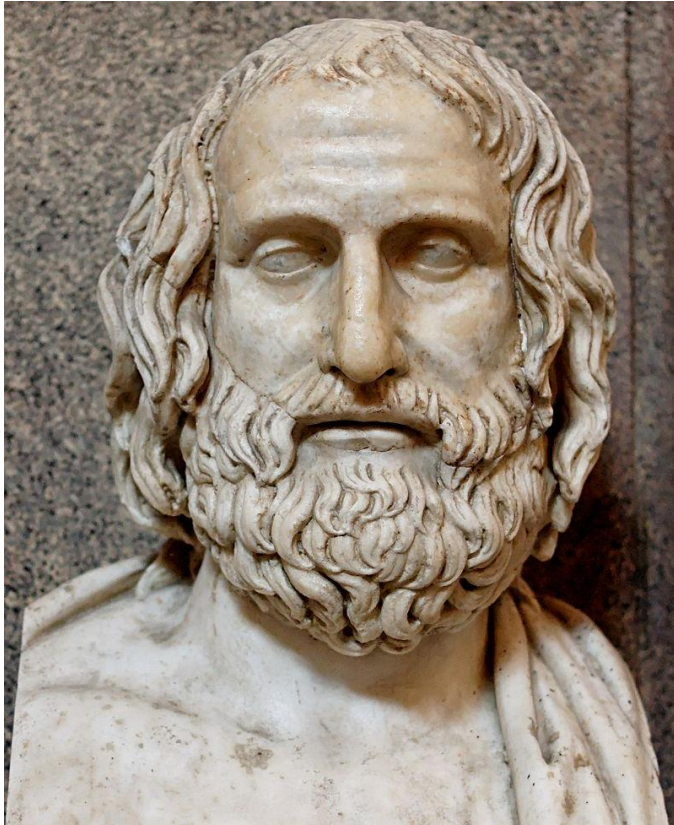
Sophocles was responsible for another innovation in the genre as he added roles for an additional character, bringing the total to three while minimising the role of the chorus.

Sophocles had a successful career and was considered the favourite Athenian playwright for many decades. He competed in thirty competitions, won twenty-four, and was never judged lower than second place.



# Famous Playwrights: Euripides

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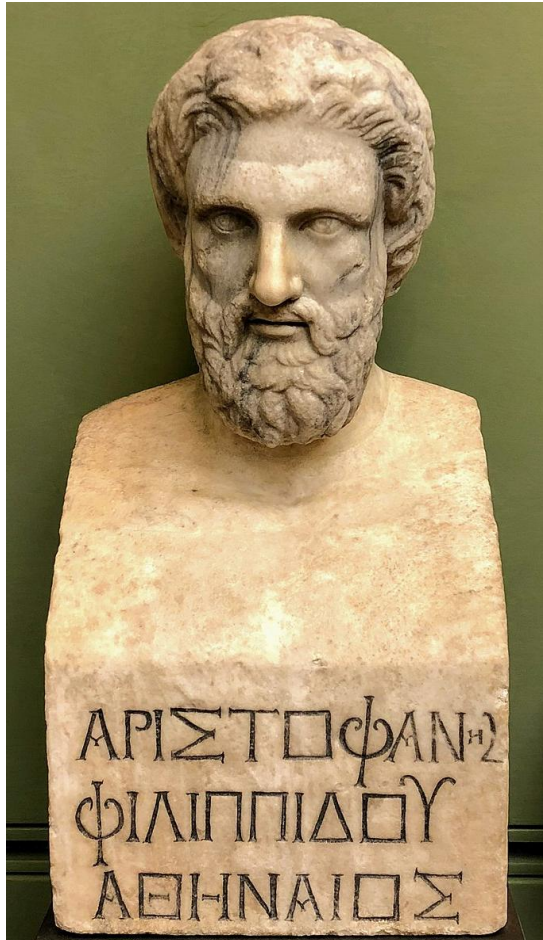


[Euripides](#) (c. 480 – 406 BCE) is the last of the most prominent Athenian tragedians. Like his counterparts, [Euripides](#) was a prolific playwright with between 92 and 95 plays attributed to him. Of these plays, 18 or 19 plays have survived.

Euripides is credited with theatrical innovations that have profoundly influenced the tragic genre. Euripides' work is seen as representing mythological heroes in more realistic terms, as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. His work focused on the inner lives and motives of his characters in a way that hadn't been done previously.

Euripides first competed in the [City Dionysia](#) in 455 BC, one year after the death of [Aeschylus](#). Euripides was less successful than his counterparts, winning a prize only five times. He did not win first prize until 441 BCE, and his final competition in Athens was in 408 BC. [The Bacchae](#) and [Iphigenia in Aulis](#) were performed in 405 BC, and first prize was awarded posthumously.

# Famous Playwrights: Aristophanes



[Aristophanes](#) (c. 446 – 386 BCE) was the most prominent Comic playwright in Classical Greece. [Aristophanes](#) is often known as the ‘Father of Comedy’ as it’s believed that his plays captured the essence of Athenian city better than any of his contemporaries. 40 plays are attributed to [Aristophanes](#), of which we have 11 surviving intact and several others in fragments. Aristophanes mostly wrote in the traditional style of ‘Old Comedy’ which was highly structured, making use of the chorus in a way that parodied tragedy.

[Aristophanes](#)’ powers for mockery were well known and feared by some. [The Clouds](#) mocked the philosopher [Socrates](#) and lines from this play were used in Socrates’ trial. Prominent Athenian politician [Cleon](#) accused [Aristophanes](#)’ of slander for his negative depiction of him and this matter was taken to court. Although details of this trial do not survive, [Aristophanes](#) continued to mock [Cleon](#) in subsequent plays.

# Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*



*Lysistrata*, a name which has meaning as 'Army Disbander' is an ancient Greek comedy by [Aristophanes](#), originally performed in 411 BCE. The plot of this comedy centres on the ambitions of Lysistrata, an Athenian woman, to bring an end to [Peloponnesian War](#), which had been raging for several decades.

To do this, *Lysistrata* convinces a coalition of both [Athenian](#) and [Spartan](#) women to withhold all sexual contact from their male lovers, effectively a 'sex strike,' in order to pressure their men into seeking a peaceful resolution to the war.

While the women become increasingly frustrated with this arrangement, with many except Lysistrata characterised as amorous, weak willed, and wild, there is ultimately a positive conclusion as the men of Athens and Sparta, frustrated by the lack of affection from their wives and lovers, agree to peace.

# Sophocles' Philoctetes:



Philoctetes on the Island of Lemnos  
(1798) by Guillaume Guillon-Lethière

Produced some time in 408/409BCE, [Philoctetes](#) details the quest of [Odysseus](#) and [Neoptolemus](#), the son of [Achilles](#), in their task to retrieve the bow of [Herakles](#) and the famed archer [Philoctetes](#). They undertake this task as it is prophesied that without the return of Philoctetes to battle, the Greeks will be unable to capture the city of [Troy](#).

The conflict of the play arises as a decade earlier [Philoctetes](#) had sustained a cursed wound that left him in agony and emitted a putrid smell, for which he had been abandoned on the island of [Lemnos](#) by the order of [Odysseus](#), [Agamemnon](#), and [Menelaus](#).

Realising that he is hated by Philoctetes, who will not come willingly, Odysseus enlists the help of young Neoptolemus to use rhetoric and trickery in order to convince Philoctetes to return to the war with the sacred bow.