

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

GREEK THEATRE

AH 15

Going to the theatre to watch plays was a popular pastime in ancient Greece. It began in Athens as a festival for Dionysus, the god of wine but then developed into an arena for staging plays and competitions between writers.

Performances were held in large open-air theatres like the model you can see in this box.



The first stone theatre ever constructed was the Theatre of Dionysus, built into the hill of the Acropolis in Athens during the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Not much of the original survives as it was altered and rebuilt over many years. The picture on the right shows a view of the remains from the top of the Acropolis, which you can still visit today. The picture below



shows the theatre at Epidauros in eastern Greece, which has an amazing panoramic backdrop behind the performance area. It also went through several stages of construction, the first being at the end of the fourth century BC. You can see very clearly the rows of seats sloping away from the central area.



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The Greek theatre had some similarities to our modern theatres today. The stage was made of wood but was later replaced with stone versions. The building behind the stage was called the skene. As with the stage, the skene was initially made out of wood but later became a stone structure. The actors got changed and stored their props in the skene and in later times scenery was painted on the outside. The circle at the front of the stage was called the orchestra and this was where the singing and dancing took place, performed by a group called the chorus. This group also helped to tell the story and reinforce the morals for the audience. Some theatres had a crane called a mekhane, which allowed actors to be suspended in the air when playing mythical creatures. The seating area, called the theatron, usually took advantage of a sloping hillside and some could accommodate 10,000 people or more. The first few rows were reserved for priests, the best seat in the theatre at Athens being given to the high priest of Dionysus. Behind them were other important people and officials. The rest of the seats at the back were for ordinary people. The shape of the theatre meant that sound travelled well and even the people at the back could hear what was being said.

Plays were divided into two main groups - comedy and tragedy. The two emotions were never included in the same play. However, there was also another type of play called a satyr, which took the serious subjects in mythology and told them in a purely comical way. The actors were always men who played the parts of both male and female characters. By looking at the model you can see that the theatre was huge, so wearing costumes and masks helped the audience to identify the characters and their moods, even if they were sitting quite far back.

Many plays from ancient Greece have survived and are still performed today - 2,500 years later. In fact, there is a replica Greek theatre near Reading at Bradfield College (in the picture below). It was built in 1890 by Dr Herbert Branston Gray, the headmaster at the time. A Greek play is still performed there once a year.

