

# Introduction to Greek Drama



# **The Different Types of Greek Drama and their importance**

- **Gain an insight into Greek tragedy and such concepts such as fate, hubris, and (dramatic) irony.**
- **Recognize the Greeks concern with fate, self-determination and the role of gods and oracles in everyday life.**
- **Learn about the origin and development of drama in Athens in the 6th and 5th centuries BC.**
- **Analyze and critically assess the specific role of characters within the play and role of the chorus.**
- **Discover some of the social concerns of the ancient Greeks by knowing the themes of some of their plays.**
- **The Ancient Greeks took their entertainment very seriously and used drama as a way of investigating the world they lived in, and what it meant to be human.**

## The Three Types of Greek Drama

**Comedy:** The first comedies were mainly satirical and mocked men in power for their vanity and foolishness. The first master of comedy was the playwright Aristophanes. Much later Menander wrote comedies about ordinary people and made his plays more like sit-coms.

## The Three Types of Greek Drama

**Tragedy:** Tragedy dealt with the big themes of love, loss, pride, the abuse of power and the fraught relationships between men and gods. Typically the main protagonist of a tragedy commits some terrible crime without realizing how foolish and arrogant he has been. Then, as he slowly realizes his error, the world crumbles around him. The three great playwrights of tragedy were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Aristotle argued that tragedy cleansed the heart through pity and terror, purging us of our petty concerns and worries by making us aware that there can be nobility in **suffering**. He called this experience '**catharsis**'.

## The Three Types of Greek Drama

**Satyr Plays:** These short plays were performed between the acts of tragedies and made fun of the plight of the tragedy's characters.

The satyrs were mythical half human, half-goat figures and actors in these plays wore large phalluses for comic effect. Few examples of these

plays are classified by some authors as either tragedy or comedy dramas.



A Satyr & Dionysus



A Satyr & a Nymph

## Hubris

**Hubris or hybris** (Greek ὕβρις), according to its modern usage, is exaggerated self pride or self-confidence (overbearing pride), often resulting in fatal retribution. In Ancient Greece, "hubris" referred to actions taken in order to shame the victim, thereby making oneself seem superior.

Hubris was a crime in classical Athens. The category of acts constituting hubris for the ancient Greeks apparently broadened from the original specific reference to molestation of a corpse, or a humiliation of a defeated foe, to molestation, or "outrageous treatment", in general. The meaning was further generalized in its modern English usage to apply to any outrageous act or exhibition of pride or disregard for basic moral law. Such an act may be referred to as an "act of hubris", or the person committing the act may be said to be hubristic.

Another example is that of Oedipus.

- In *Oedipus the King*, while on the road to Thebes, Oedipus meets King Laius of Thebes who is unknown to him as his biological father. Oedipus kills Laius out of hubris over which has the right of way, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of the oracle Loxias that Oedipus is destined to murder his own father.

- Creon commits hubris in refusing to bury Polynices in Sophocles' *Antigone*.



**FATE: the will or principle or determining cause by which things in general are believed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do : destiny**

**The Greeks believed that everything happened for a reason and that the path they led in life, was prescribed for them by the Gods and that there was no escaping their fate or destiny.**



## Irony & Dramatic Irony

**IRONY:** a pretense of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other's false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning

**DRAMATIC IRONY:** incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play —called also *dramatic irony* *tragic irony*

# Ritual and Theatre **The Evolution of Actor-Audience Relationship**

## **Agrarian and Fertility Rites-**

**Early cultures tried to find ways to appease the seemingly supernatural or godlike forces that controlled the food supply.**

**Stories began to grow out of the "performance" of the ritual to explain why the ritual was important.**

**As humanistic thought and knowledge developed, rituals became less important for ensuring food and fertility for the society.**

**Like modern Theatre, these rituals contained enactment, imitation and seasonal performances**



photo by Melissa Byrd

**Entertainment is a bonus for the ritual audience; the goal is to gain prosperity from the gods. Modern Theatre must entertain.**

## **Ritual Performance differs from Modern Theatre in several ways:**

**Actors now create fictional characters.**

**Actors use the playwrights words to create a sense of life and place.**

**Modern Theatre tends to provoke thought rather than provide concrete answers.**

## **Ritual and Theatre employ some of the same characteristics:**

**Music-** early ritual used rhythmical music.

**Dance-** ritual incorporated pantomimic dance.

**Speech-** vocal sounds were used more than formal speech.

**Masks-** many felt that masks had the ability to attract the spirit of the character.

**Costumes-** costumes were looked upon the same way masks were.

**Performers-** ritual enforced highly trained actors that did not change the ritual.

**Audience-** spectators came to watch the ritual.

**Stage-** most spaces were circular but not all were.

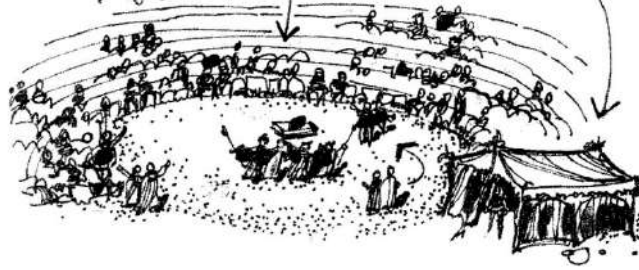
# The Evolution of the Early Theatrical Space

A CIRCULAR PLAYING SPACE IS ONE OF THE EARLIEST THEATRICAL AREAS...



THE PERFORMERS ARE VIEWED FROM ALL SIDES AND A SCENIC BACKGROUND IS NOT CONSIDERED...

the audience sat on sloping ground



the earliest SKENE was a simple shed or even a "tent" for actors' use, but had no SCENIC function...

*From Religious Ceremony to Performance*

THE EARLY SCENE BUILDING WAS MADE OF WOOD AND WAS BRIGHTLY PAINTED & DECORATED... PARTLY DUE TO A GREAT INTEREST IN PAINTING OF LANDSCAPE AND PERSPECTIVE...

DOORWAYS AT THE REAR ALLOWED ENTRANCES AND EXITS AT VARIOUS "HOUSES" OR LOCALES...



OPEN AREAS OF THE COLONNAGE WERE EVENTUALLY FILLED IN IN VARIOUS WAYS TO SUGGEST CERTAIN "SCENIC BACKGROUNDS"



# The Beginning of Modern Theatre

Theater was first officially recognized in 534 B.C. when the Athenian Government began to subsidize drama.

Some of the first accounts of Greek Drama are documented by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his book *Poetics*.

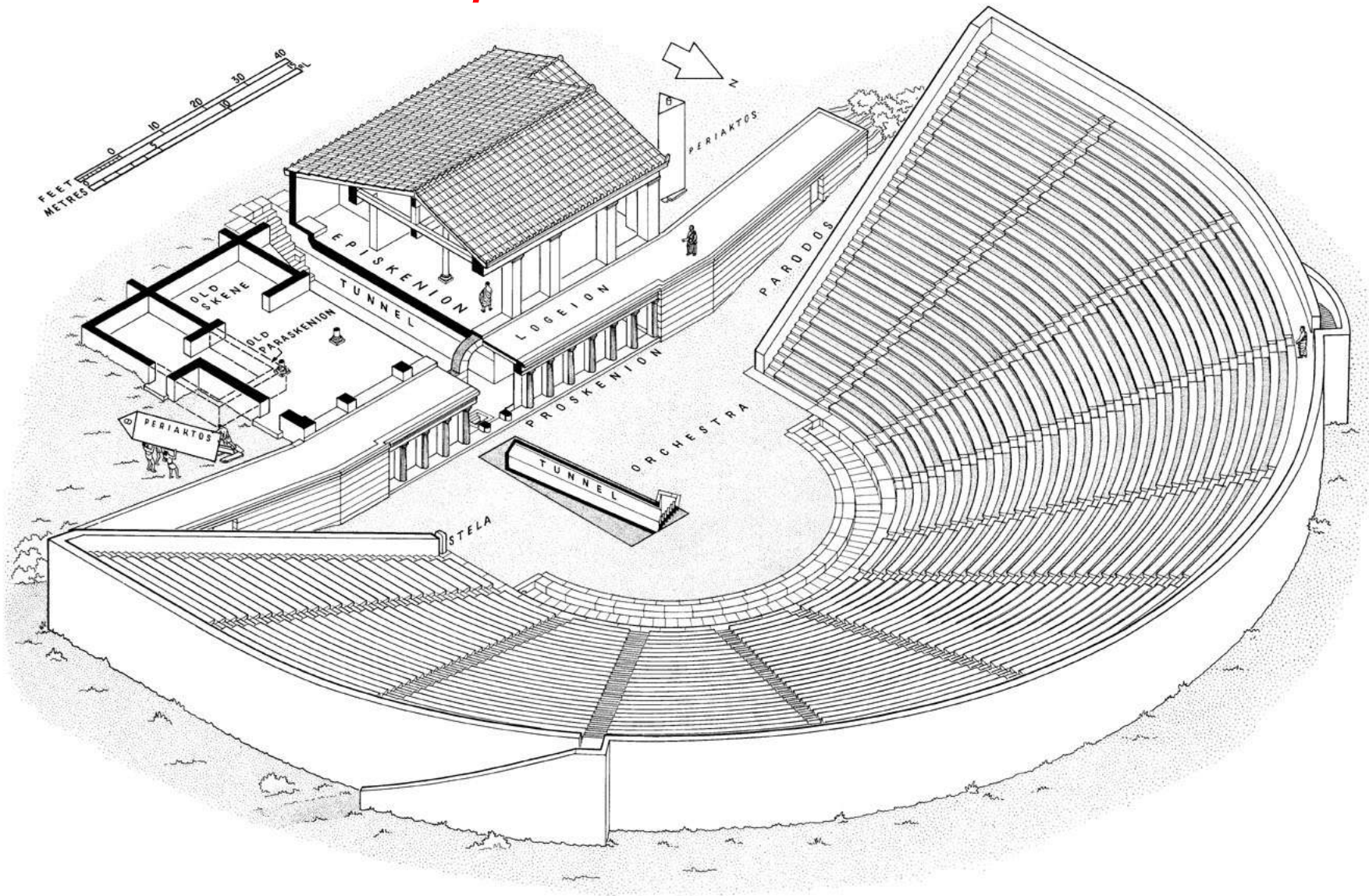
A **dithyramb** is a hymn that was sung and danced for the god of wine and fertility.

Worship of Dionysus was achieved through intoxication, sexual orgy and sacrificial offerings-sometimes human.

The Greeks created the first permanent theatre structure called “Theatre of Dionysus” in honor the fertility god. It is located in Athens.



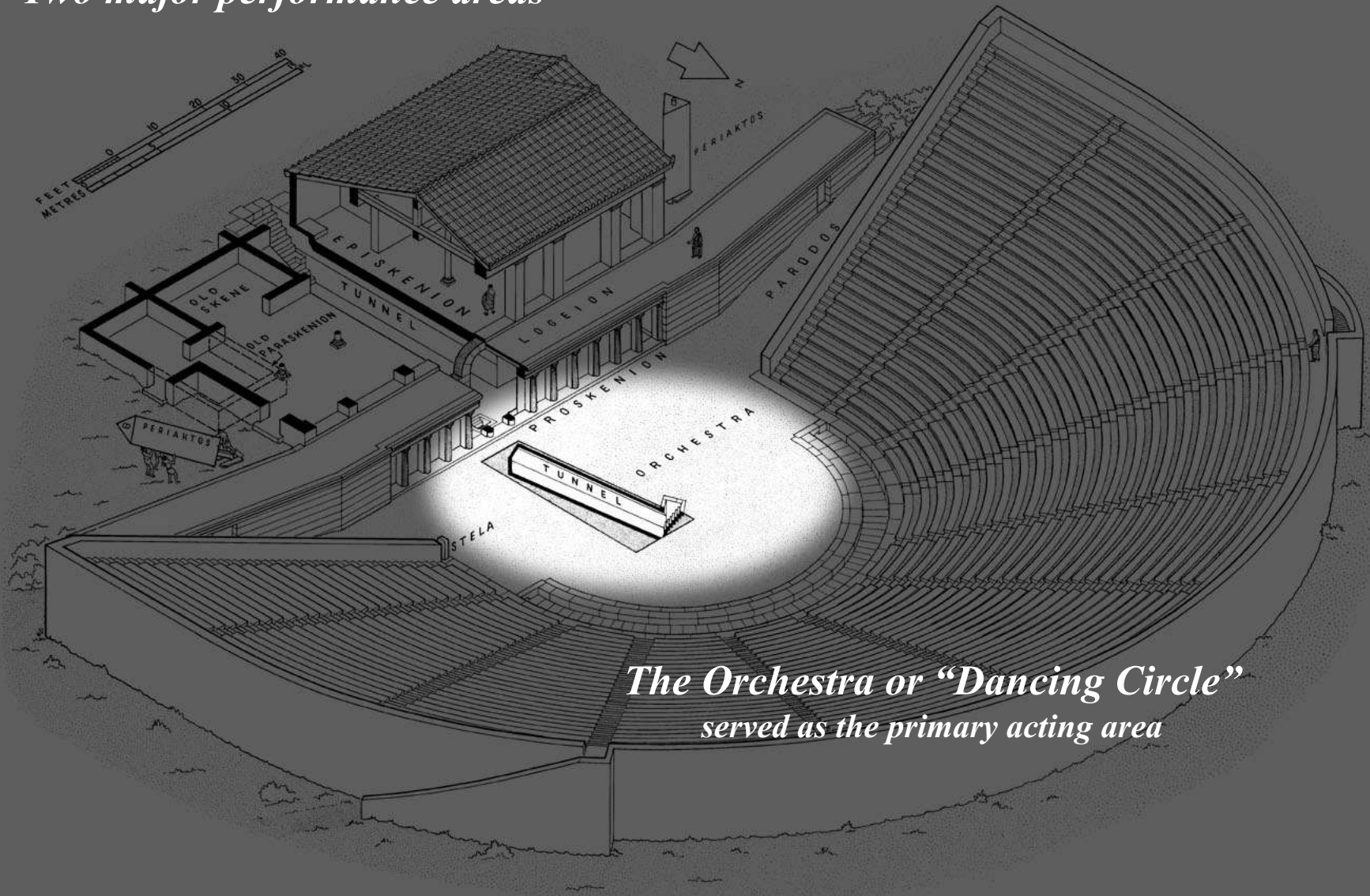
# *The Greek Outdoor Amphitheatre*



Eretria, Greece. The Hellenistic theatre

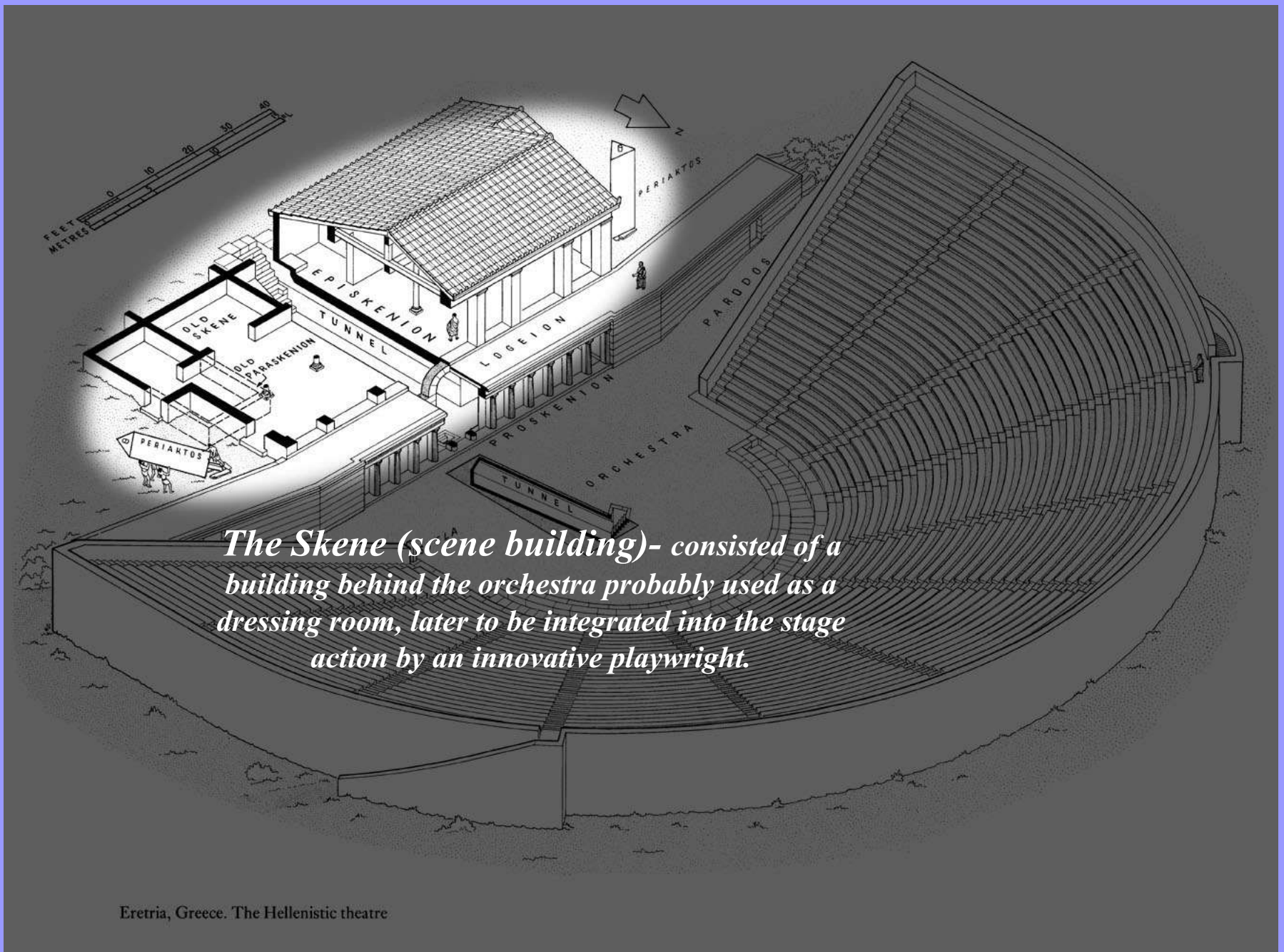


*Two major performance areas-*

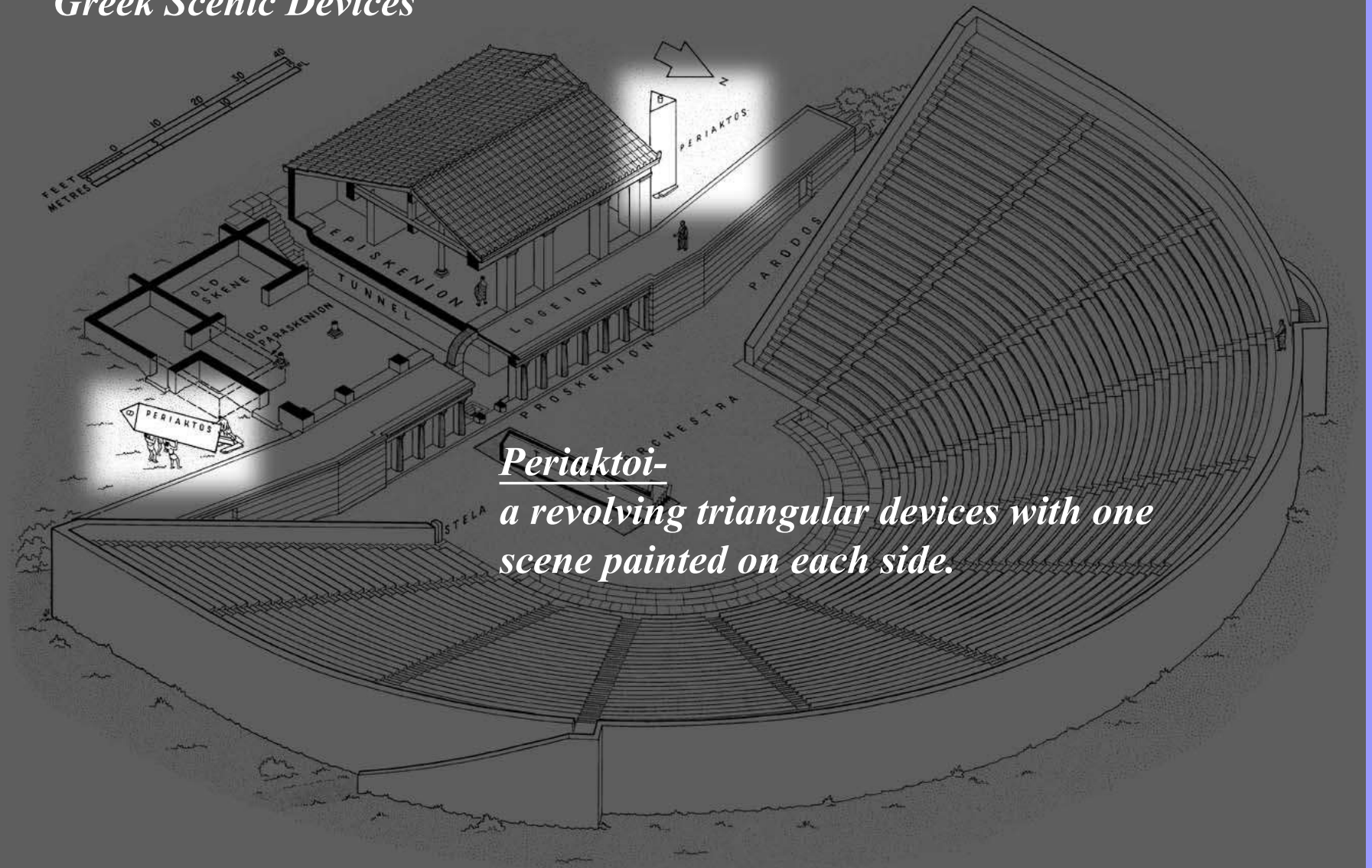


*The Orchestra or “Dancing Circle”  
served as the primary acting area*





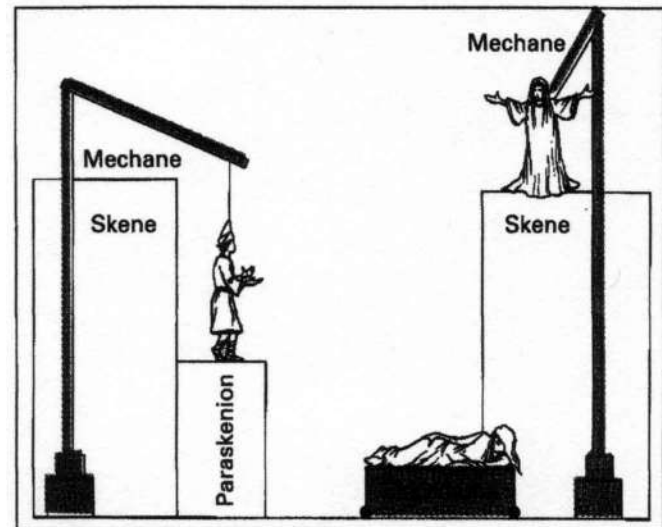
## *Greek Scenic Devices*



Periaktoi-  
*a revolving triangular devices with one  
scene painted on each side.*

*Deus ex Machina-*  
*“God From the Machine”*

**The Machina-** a crane that was  
used to represent characters  
who were flying or lifted off of  
the earth.



**Greek mechane and ekkyklema** A conjectural reconstruction of Greek stage machinery: on the left, a crane used for flying in characters located on a side wing (paraskenion) of the scene building. On the right, a mechane higher up on the roof of the skene. The ekkyklema below was a platform on wheels used to bring out characters from inside the building.



# Where and how were the dramas performed?



**...In an amphitheatre**

**...With a *chorus* who described most of the action.**

**...With masks**

**...With all the fighting and movement going on off stage.**

**....With tragedy first, then comedy later.**

# The Greek Chorus

The chorus was dominant because there was usually one actor and that actor had to leave the stage several times during a show to change characters.

The chorus was to be a representation of society, they often served as the “ideal spectator” by providing advice, opinions, questions to the audience and actors.

The main actor(s) stood apart in the performance space because they typically played heroic figure that would realistically be separated from normal mortal beings.

Their costumes and masks added spectacle and their movement and dance heightened the dramatic effect.

Great actors were characterized by their voice quality and the ability to adopt their manner of speaking to the character.

# ***Greek and Roman Theatre share the following elements:***

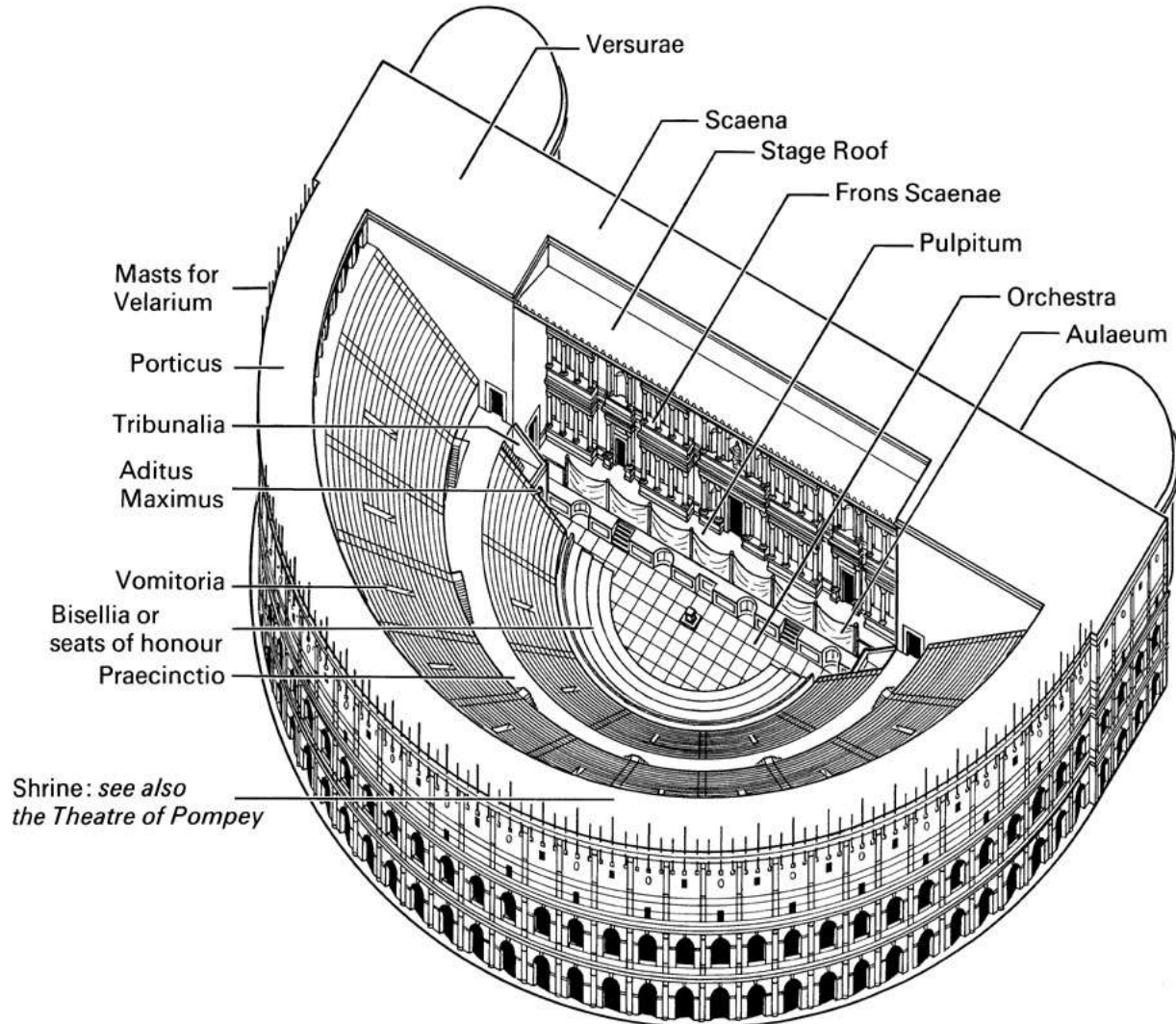
***A facade stage-*** actors performed in front of a neutral background

***Relationship with religion-*** plays were presented as part of a larger celebration

***Special Occasion-*** theatre was held on special occasions and not often enough to be taken for granted.

***Noncommercial environment-*** the wealthy citizens or the state picked up the costs as part of the obligation of citizenship.

***Male-only performers-*** women sat in the audience only.



Theatre of Marcellus, Rome, 13–11 BC

## *Major Greek Dramatists*

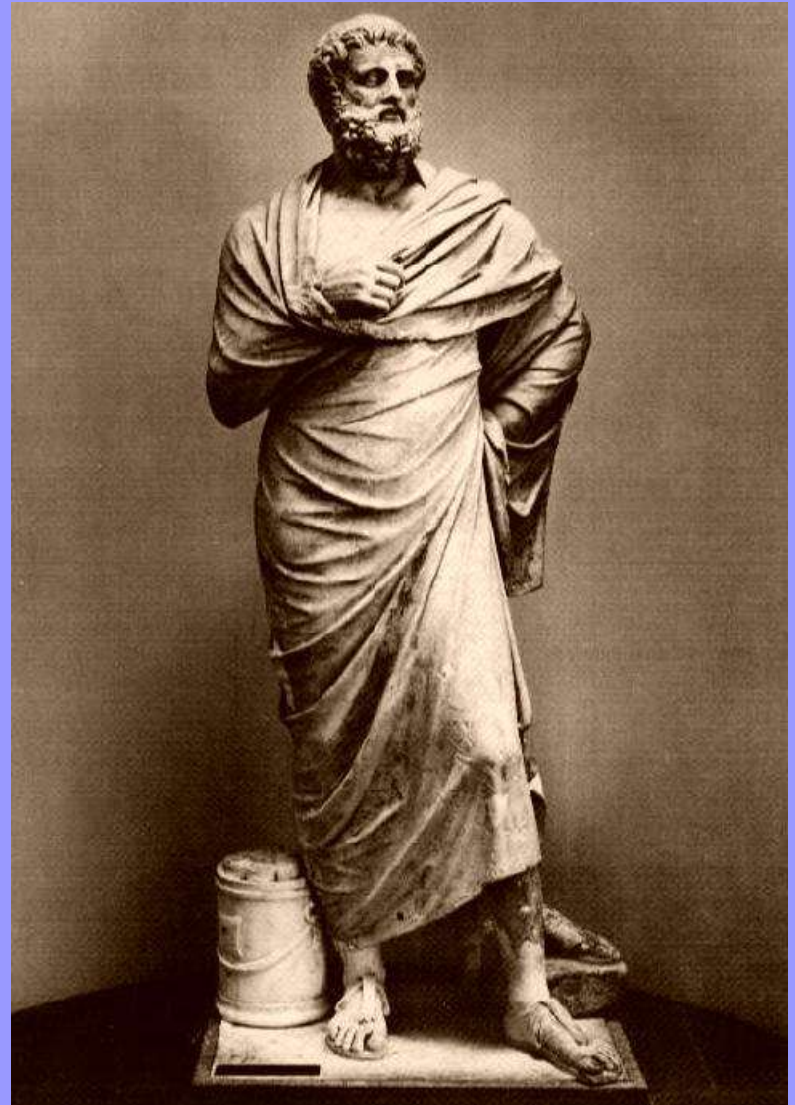
<b>Dramatist</b>	<b>Born</b>	<b>Wrote</b>
<b>Aeschylus</b>	<b>524 B.C.</b>	<i>Seven Against Thebes</i>
<b>Sophocles</b>	<b>496 B.C.</b>	<i>Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, &amp; Antigone</i>
<b>Euripides</b>	<b>480 B.C.</b>	<b>Medea</b>



# *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays (Oedipus Rex)*

*Sophocles: (496- 406 B.C.E.)*

- *He wrote 123 or more plays during the course of his life*
- *For almost 50 years, he was the dominant competitor in the dramatic competitions of ancient Athens that took place during the religious festivals of the Lenaea and the Dionysia.*
- *His first victory was in 468 BC, although scholars are no longer certain that this was the first time that he competed.*

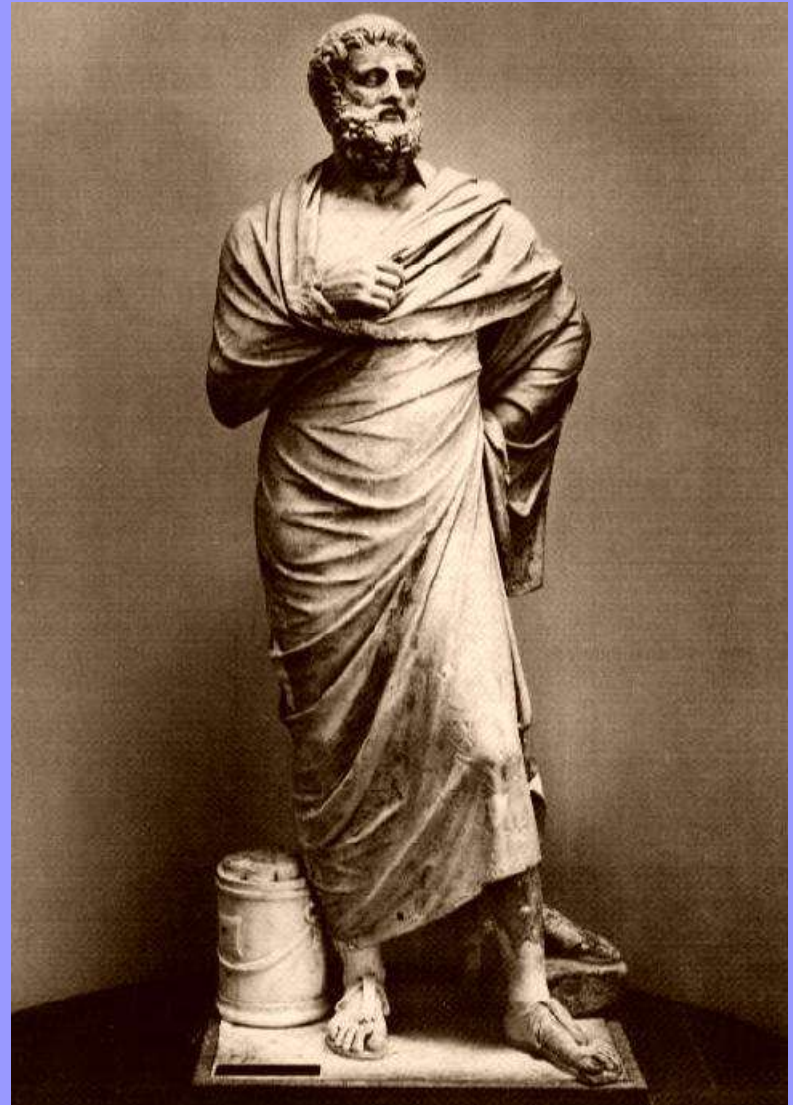


*Sophocles: (496- 406 B.C.E.)*

# *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays (Oedipus Rex)*

*Sophocles: (496- 406 B.C.E.)*

- *Only seven of his tragedies have survived into modern times with their text completely known.*
- *The most famous of these are the three tragedies concerning Oedipus and Antigone: these are often known as the Theban plays or The Oedipus Cycle, (**Oedipus the King**, **Oedipus at Colonus**, & **Antigone**) although they were not originally written or performed as a single trilogy.*
- *Sophocles influenced the development of the drama, most importantly by adding a third character and thereby reducing the importance of the chorus in the presentation of the plot.*
- *He also developed his characters to a greater extent than earlier playwrights such as Aeschylus.*



*Sophocles: (496- 406 B.C.E.)*

# *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays (Oedipus Rex)*

## *Background:*

### *•Plays are set in Thebes (General Overview)*

#### *•Oedipus the King:*

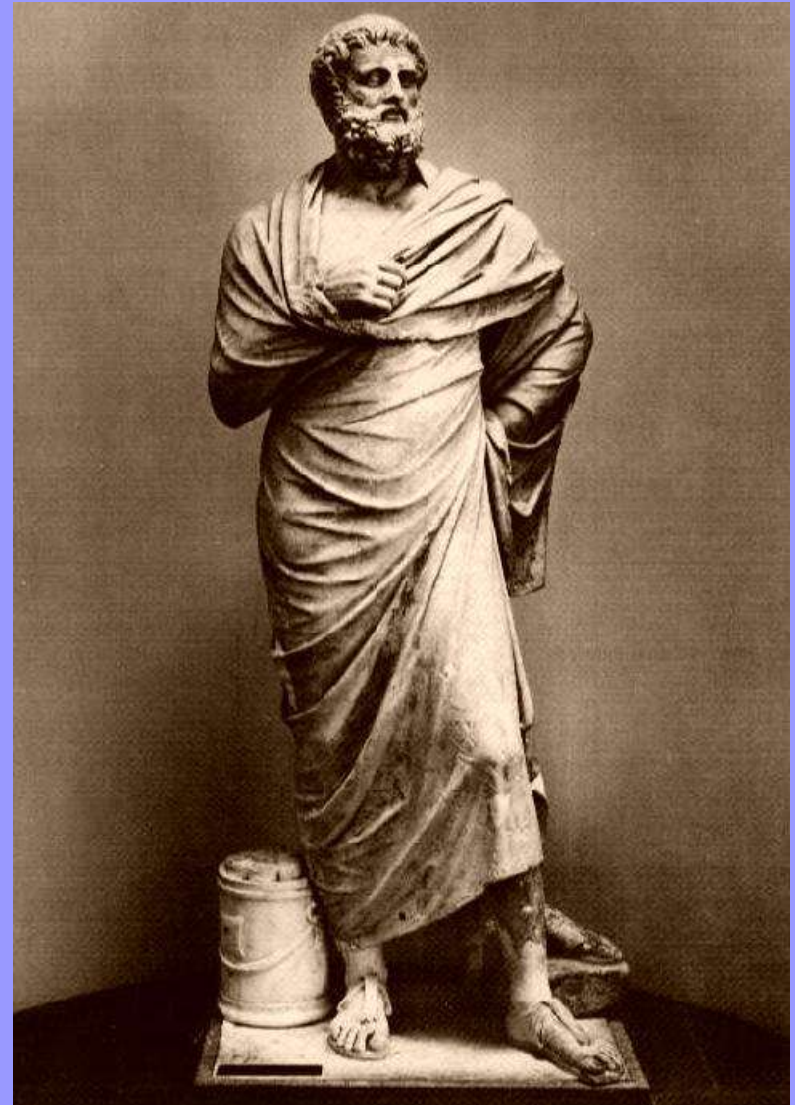
- Oedipus unknowingly kills his father, King Laius, marries his mother and fathers four children with her.*
- Upon discovering he murdered his father, he gouges his eyes out; Jocasta commits suicide; Creon (Jocasta's brother) becomes King of Thebes and banishes Oedipus*

#### *•Oedipus at Colonus:*

- Antigone cares for her blind father*
- Oedipus's sons (Polynices & Eteocles) fight over control of Thebes and kill each other in Battle; Oedipus mysteriously dies*

#### *•Antigone:*

- Antigone and sister Ismene try to persuade Creon to properly bury Polynices, but refuses; Antigone commits suicide as well as Creon's wife after she sees her dead son in the arms of Creon*



*Sophocles: (496- 406 B.C.E.)*

# THE ROYAL HOUSE OF THEBES

