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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD, BY CHARLES BATEY
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY
AND PUBLISHED BY
THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY
2 HINDE STREET, MANCHESTER SQUARE, LONDON, W. 1
ALSO SOLD BY BERNARD QUARTICH, 11 GRAFTON ST., NEW BOND ST., W. 1; GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE,
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, AMEN HOUSE, WARWICK SQ., E.C. 4, AND 114 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK, U.S.A.;
KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, TRUBNER & CO., 43 GREAT RUSSELL ST., W.C. 1;
GEORGE SALBY, 65 GREAT RUSSELL ST., W.C. 1

THE JOURNAL OF Egyptian Archaeology

VOLUME 41
DECEMBER 1955

PUBLISHED BY
THE EGYPT EXPLORATION SOCIETY
2 HINDE STREET, MANCHESTER SQUARE, LONDON, W. 1
Price to non-members 50s. or \$10.00

THE ORIGIN OF THE GREEK THEATRE¹

By B. H. STRICKER

THE building which we call by the Greek term theatre, *θέατρον*, has a history that goes back to the first centuries of the ancient classic civilization. The modern theatre is, generally speaking, the same as the Roman (fig. 1) and the latter is a younger variant,

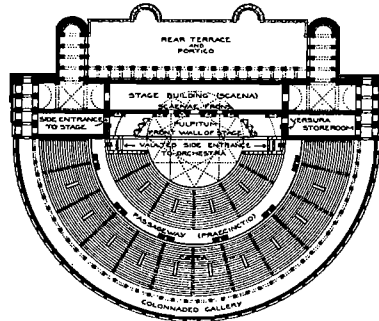


FIG. 1. The Theatre of Marcellus, Rome.

and undoubtedly no more than a variant, of the theatre in which in Greece the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes were produced (fig. 2). In whatever style the building may be constructed, it always consists of three easily distinguishable parts: a stage, on which the actors play their roles; an intervening space, where the choir or the orchestra is placed; and an amphitheatre for the spectators. Following its historic development rather more closely, we find that in the distant past the theatre, without for one moment repudiating its proper character, presented an aspect somewhat different from its present one. The Roman theatre is a closed piece of architecture, in which the three parts communicate with each other and have sacrificed their individual independence for the sake of the unity of the whole. The Greek theatre, on the other hand, is invariably a structure of three completely independent elements, only partly deserving the name of building, which lie spread out in the open over a considerable area.

We see this change of character even more clearly when we consider the separate

¹ Lecture given at the 23rd International Congress of Orientalists, Cambridge, on August 23, 1954. We have to express our gratitude to Mr. G. Daux, Director of the French School at Athens, who kindly allowed us to reproduce his new plan of the temenos of Apollo at Delphi (fig. 3, p. 40). A good introduction to the antique theatre is given by M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*, Princeton, 1939.

developments of the three parts. Originally the stage was much less prominent than it is today. Although the Roman stage was even bigger than ours, the Greek one was a relatively insignificant building. The intervening space or orchestra, which still in

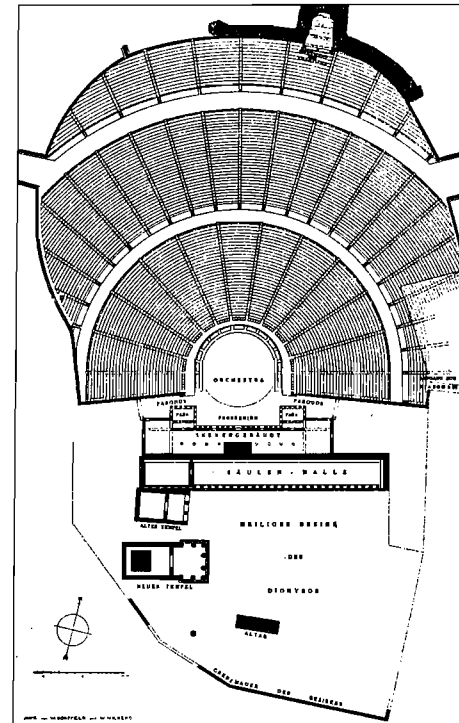


FIG. 2. The Theatre of Dionysus, Athens.

modern times keeps its slightly curved form, was shaped like a semicircle or arc of a circle in the Roman theatre, whereas the Greek theatre had always a complete circle, a space of considerable dimensions, which separated the spectators in the most drastic way from the stage. In ancient times, moreover, the amphitheatre was bigger than ours and it was biggest of all amongst the Greeks. The theatre at Athens, for instance, provided accommodation for no less than fourteen thousand persons. This theatre, which

is considered as the prototype of all others, leads us back to the sixth century before the beginning of our era, when it did not yet possess its existing shape, though the general scheme was already in being. We cannot reach any farther back in history. What therefore is the origin of this building? Did the Athenians create from nothing, or did they copy some existing model?

The answer which we shall give to these questions is to be found in a direction that may be indicated first in general terms.¹ The oldest theatres are all situated in the vicinity of a sanctuary, and in the temenos of it, the one at Athens immediately next to the temple of the god Dionysus. In each theatre an altar was set up in the middle of the orchestra, on which a sacrifice was made before and after the ceremony. The performance took place, not as with us over a period of time, but only once a year, on the festival-day of the god worshipped in the temple. This god was personally present at the meeting, which lasted from morning till night, one whole day. His idol was conveyed to the theatre by the priest, and the latter had a seat of honour reserved for him there. The performance was not an act of free will, but was considered a religious duty and the cost was defrayed by well-to-do citizens designated by the state for this special occasion. The actors were in a state of purity. They were, it is true, not persons of priestly rank, but they had sanctified themselves by fasting before the ceremony and by abstaining from sexual intercourse. Originally they could not be foreigners, and they were exempt from military service, so that they could not defile themselves by worship of foreign gods or by manslaughter. They were inviolable, too, both in person and in property, and any transgression against them was judged as sacrilege. When acting, they stood, generally with a staff in their hands and, in order to stress the transcendental character of their profession, with a wreath on their heads. Their cloaks, which belonged to the treasure of the sanctuary, were red in colour, worked with cosmic representations, such as figures of stars, animals, flowers, and set off with gold. In one case they were copies of the cloak of the high priest. And not only the actors, but the other participants likewise were in a state of purity. The choreges, who paid the expenses of the day, had the same duties and the same rights as the players. The public, from which in early times foreigners and possibly women were excluded, was cleansed by a purificatory offering, and the people were wreathed and dressed in festive attire. Putting together all these details, we get a clear picture. The theatre was a sacred place, the actors were sacred persons, their action was sacred action, and it was performed at a sacred time. Therefore the theatrical institution was a part of divine worship. It was liturgy and it had the function of liturgy. We recall Aristotle's statement, that the theatrical performance effects purification, *κάθαρσις*, of those present.²

Let us now analyse the building, starting with the most conspicuous part of it, the amphitheatre. This is an enormous stone structure, that completely dominates the rest. But it is not of great age and, as appears from investigations on the spot, it is found

¹ References for the following paragraph can be found in A. Müller, *Lehrbuch der Griechischen Bühnenaltertümer*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1886. A systematic collection of them in my forthcoming study *De Brief van Aristoteles*.

² Aristot., *Poetic.* 6,2; Jambl., *De Myster.* 1,11.

nowhere before the middle of the fourth century B.C. From the texts we know what preceded it. It was likewise an amphitheatre, but an amphitheatre made of wood, which could be taken down after the end of the performance¹ and was only replaced by a stone one when the public became more numerous and collapses were the order of the day.² And even this wooden amphitheatre was not very old, as we infer from a passage in the work of the writer Valerius Maximus,³ who tells us, how towards the middle of the second century B.C. 'a decree of the Senate forbade the Roman citizens to place benches in the town or within the distance of a mile therefrom and to look at the plays while seated.' Because, he explains, they undoubtedly wished the spectators to persevere in standing, perseverance being a quality especially belonging to the Roman people and which it was desirable to maintain even during public amusements. We do not possess any such statements about Greece and we might indeed consider this a typically Roman institution, were it not that parallels can be adduced contradicting Valerius's opinion and making his information also applicable to the old Greek theatre. The theatrical performance was a religious ceremony and the standing attitude was the attitude of reverence. The servant stood before his lord,⁴ the wife before her husband.⁵ The praying person,⁶ the one who sought an oracle,⁷ the prophet,⁸ the priest,⁹ and even the king¹⁰ stood before God. On Sinai the people stood waiting for the divine miracles¹¹ and so too they stood before Ezra, when he read the Holy Scriptures to them.¹² When the priest of God, Moses, judged the nation, he himself was seated, but the people stood before him.¹³ Sitting was forbidden to the inferior, and there is even a Jewish tradition that Satan is involved whenever in the text of the Bible the word 'sitting' is used.¹⁴ The wooden or stone amphitheatre is therefore a secondary element, that could develop only when the religious content of the theatrical institution had been lost, and it was kept away by the authorities as long as possible. The oldest public simply stood round the play. However, just as Moses when judging was seated, and as the Egyptian king during religious ceremonies did not leave his throne, in Greece seats may have been reserved for some few prominent persons, as for instance the priest of the god or the magistrates. As time went on, there came more claimants and the number of seats increased continuously until, at last, the whole public had abandoned the original pious

¹ Dio Chrysost., *Orat.* 33,9; Liban., *Argum Demosth. Olynth.* 1,8; *Lexic. Sud.*, sub voce *'Inpla'*; Schol. in Aristoph. *Thesmophor.* 395. Cf. the references in p. 41, n. 4.

² *Lexic. Sud.*, sub voce *Αιγυλιος* cñ *Παρβινας*.

³ Valer. Maxim., *Fact. et Dict. Memor.* II, 4,2. So also Liv., *Epitom.* 48; Vell. Patern., *Hist. Rom.* I, 15,3; Tacit., *Annal.* 14,20; Appian., *Bell. Civ.* 1,28; Augustin., *De Civ. Dei.* 1,31; 2,5; Oros., *Hist.* IV, 21,4. No hats in the theatre: Dio Cass., *Hist. Rom.* LIX, 7,8.

⁴ 1 Sam. 16,21; 22,6; 1 Kings 12,8.

⁵ 1 Kings 1,2,28 (the king).

⁶ 1 Sam. 1,26; Jer. 7,10; Ps. 134,1; 135,2; Job, 30,20.

⁷ 1 Kings 17,1; 18,15; 19,11; 2 Kings 3,14; 5,16; Jer. 15,19; 18,20.

⁸ Deut. 10,8; 17,12; 18,5,7; Neh. 12,44; 1 Chron. 6,17 (= 32), 18 (= 33), 23,30.

⁹ 1 Kings 8,22; 2 Kings 11,14; 23,3; 2 Chron. 6,12,13; 20,5,9; 34,31.

¹⁰ Exod. 20,18,21; Deut. 4,10.

¹¹ Neh. 8,5. Cf. Josh. 8,33; Neh. 9,2; 2 Chron. 34,32.

¹² Exod. 18,13,14. Cf. Deut. 19,17; Isa. 50,8.

¹³ T. B. Sanh. 106a; Midr. Gen. Rabb. 38,7; 84,3; Midr. Ex. Rabb. 41,7; Midr. Sifr. on Num. 25,1, § 131.

⁷ Judges 20,28.

attitude and was seated. Even then the priestly chair was distinguished from the others by its more elaborate adornment.

The stage, too, is an element of the theatre that has developed only gradually. According to the authority of writers like Vitruvius¹ and Pollux² the Greek actor was long supposed to have played his role as the Roman did, either on the stage or immediately before it, but at the end of the last century it came to be understood that he really did so within the circle of the orchestra, a theory suggested by the architect W. Dörpfeld, after close investigation, which has since been accepted in all quarters.³ The arguments are the following: (1) In the earliest times the stone stage is lacking. Its name, σκηνή, literally 'tent', indicates that originally temporary arrangements sufficed. (2) In the extant ancient tragedies and comedies, passages occur where the actors and chorus are supposed to stand in each other's immediate vicinity and on the same level. Now there is no doubt whatever that the chorus was placed on the orchestra. (3) The amphitheatre was constructed so as to have a full view of the orchestra, whereas in some theatres the stage cannot be seen at all from the seats in the extreme corners. (4) The λογείον, the platform before the stage, on which the acting was thought to have taken place, had a height of no less than 10-15 feet and could not be surveyed from the seats of honour in the front row, while it had so little depth—some 7-12 feet only—that there could scarcely have been room for acting. Nevertheless, if originally the acting was done on the orchestra, in later times it was certainly removed to the stage. The actors and the chorus, who in early days walked to and fro on the orchestra and could be seen from all sides by the public standing around, had of necessity to be distinguishable. The actor, as long as he was the only participant, probably spent most of his time near or on the steps of the altar in the middle, but when more actors came to take part a platform had to be built. The stage came to birth at the decisive moment that an axis developed in the playing either because the 'tent', which stood on one side and possibly contained the stage-properties, came to be used as a background, or because the actors formed the habit of playing with their faces directed towards the seats of honour. The platform was then gradually shifted to the edge of the circle, the surface of which thereby became foreground, and so it more or less developed into a stage. It is a point of controversy whether this stage ever crossed the circumference of the circle. We do not think it very probable. In some theatres, it is true, the λογείον lies at a distance of some feet from the orchestra; in most Greek and in all Roman theatres, however, the actor undoubtedly stood within the circle, as the stage was constructed over the back part of it. We conclude that the stage, as 'tent', may be of a certain age, but was never an essential element in the original theatre.

Amphitheatre and stage having been eliminated, the orchestra remains, the circular space on which the performer of those centuries not only acted, but, judging from the name, derived from the verb ὀρχέομαι, 'to dance', danced his part. The oldest theatres so far excavated actually consist of nothing beyond such a piece of ground. Since both

¹ Vitruv., *De Archit.* v, 6, 1-2, 7, 2.

² Poll., *Onomast.* 4, 123.

³ W. Dörpfeld and E. Reisch, *Das Griechische Theater*, Athens, 1896.

See H. Oberly, *Early Christian Prayer Circles*

for the amphitheatre and for the stage only occasional provision was made, one expects the much simpler orchestra to have been originally designated by drawing a circular line on the ground whenever required. However, this is not the case, the orchestra being marked by a row of rough-hewn stones. It therefore had a permanent site and was, in short, sacred ground. Within the row of stones it was made of stamped earth,¹ occasionally whitewashed² and in Roman times covered with marble. According to Aristotle³ the orchestra was strewn with chaff. Plutarch,⁴ who borrows this assertion, adds earth (χρῶς) to the chaff, and Pliny the Roman,⁵ writing about the custom in his day, when bloody spectacles were performed in the theatres, mentions the same practice, but speaks of sawdust and sand. Such was the primitive appearance of the orchestra, the prototype of the later theatre. It was an extremely simple construction, almost without any characteristic features and composed of parts that seem to be completely adapted to their function. For all that, we think we can indicate an irrational element in it, which allows us to penetrate into a phase in the development of the building, older even than can be laid bare by the excavator's spade. If the orchestra was originally strewn with chaff, this presumably came about simply because it had once been a place where chaff is naturally present, that is to say a threshing-floor. Otherwise the use of sand, as was normal later, would have been more to the purpose, more economical, and more effective. It is a fact, that up to the present day the round-dances in the Greek villages are performed on the threshing-floor and that this threshing-floor strikingly often is situated in the immediate neighbourhood of a church.⁶ There is in Greece even a common superstition that during hot summer days the Nereides and other mysterious beings come out at noon to execute their dances there.⁷ Meagre as these data are, they seem to confirm each other. Turning aside, therefore, from the orchestra and Greek archaeology, we may consider the threshing-floor in ancient literature, in order to ascertain how far our supposition is corroborated by the texts.⁸

In the classical texts the threshing-floor is not mentioned very often, but from the few quotations available it appears to have been a place of considerable importance. Among the Greeks, Homer⁹ already speaks of the 'sacred threshing-floors' of Demeter, and this can be compared with a statement of Hesiod¹⁰ about the 'sacred grain' of the same goddess. When the grain had been threshed, the festival of the Thalsyia was

¹ Jer. 51, 33.

² *Inscriptiones Graecae*, vol. XI, fasc. 2 (F. Dürbach), Berlin, 1912, p. 88, No. 203, A 79 (καταχρίσας).

³ Aristot., *Probl.* 11, 25.

⁴ Plutarch., *Nom. Posse*, 13, 7.

⁵ Plin., *Nat. Hist.* 11, 270.

⁶ Information given by Prof. S. Antoniadis, Leyden. An example in J. G. Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, III, 437 (Dr. H. Brunsting).

⁷ Prof. G. A. Megaw, Athens, refers me to a study by N. G. Politis, *Παραδόσεις*, Athens, 1904, vol. 1, p. 37, no. 61; p. 412, nos. 700 and 701; vol. II, p. 705, no. 61.

⁸ Cf. A. J. Wensinck, *Some Semitic Rites of Mourning and Religion*, Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afdeling Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, deel XVIII, Amsterdam, 1918, pp. 1-11. In the still unedited poem Bahr ed-Dumî of the Berber poet Muḥammad el-Awzālî the threshing-floor is mentioned in lines 486 and 507 as the place of the last judgement. Cf. Midr. Eccles. Rabb. 1, 11.

⁹ Homer, *Il.* 5, 499.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Oper.* 597-8; 805-6. Cf. Homer., *Il.* 11, 631.

See Altars
Hustings

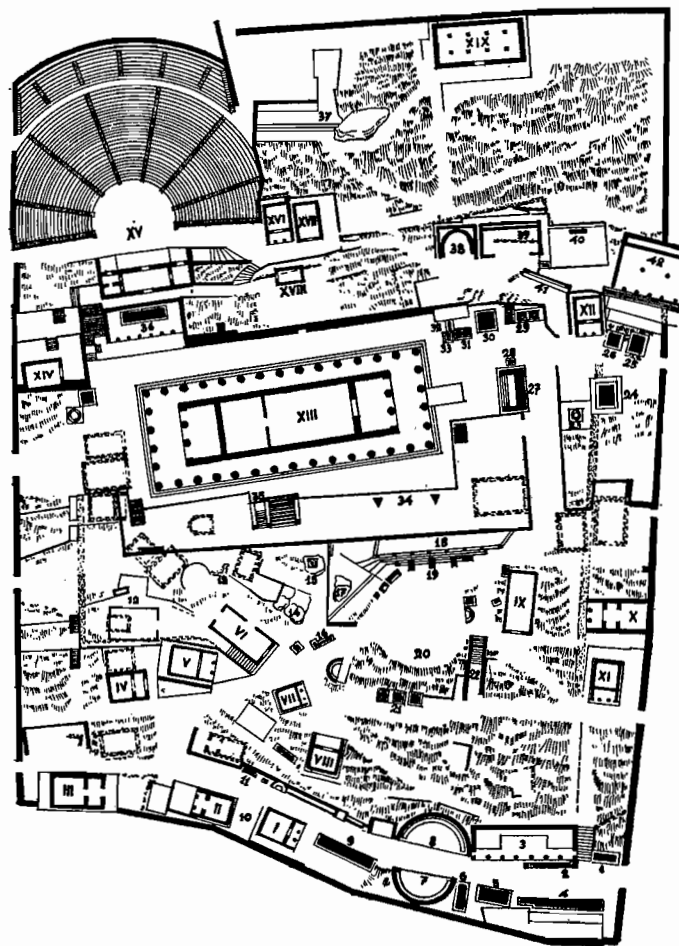


FIG. 3. Temenos of Apollo at Delphi restored.
The threshing-floor is the empty circular space, no. 20; the staircase Doloneia immediately to the right, no. 22; the temple of Apollo, no. XIII; the theatre, no. XV.

With acknowledgements to Mr. G. Daux.

THE ORIGIN OF THE GREEK THEATRE

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celebrated on the threshing-floor, and an offering of first-fruits was brought to Demeter.¹ An important sanctuary of the goddess was found at Eleusis, where she was venerated together with her protégé, Triptolemus. The Raric Plain situated there was supposed² to have been the first sown and the first fruit-bearing field of primeval times. 'Therefore he³ had ordered the inhabitants to take the sacrificial barley and to make the cakes for the sacrifices out of its produce. Here is shown what is called the threshing-floor of Triptolemus and the altar.' The plain was situated within the temenos, and the ancient writers, who are very diffident about discussing the mysteries, are unwilling to tell us what holy actions took place there. At Athens, where besides the orchestra near the temple of Dionysus another one was found in the market-place,⁴ the Odeum built by Pericles deserves mention. It was a circular hall, formed in the shape of a tent,⁵ perhaps for cosmic reasons. There poetic and musical meetings were held, as well as the opening ceremony of the dramatic performance to be given in the theatre. At the same time the building was used as a shed for grain, as a tribunal for disputes over corn, and as a meeting-room for officers.⁶ A 'sacred threshing-floor' was found in the temenos of the sanctuary at Delphi, next to the temple of Apollo (fig. 3). Priests and laymen assembled there for the great procession that set out for the shrine of the god on festive days.⁷ But there is more. 'For the hut, which is erected here near the threshing-floor every eight years, is not a nest-like serpent's den, but a copy of the dwelling of a despot or king. The attack on it, which is made in silence by the stairs called Doloneia, by which the priests⁸ with lighted torches conduct the boy, who must have two parents living, and after applying fire to the hut and upsetting the table, flee through the doors of the temple without looking back, and finally, the wanderings and servitude of the boy and the purifications that take place at Tempe—all prompt a suspicion of some great and extraordinary deed of daring.' The quotation is from Plutarch.⁹ The struggle is the struggle of the god Apollo against his foe the cosmic serpent, vanquished by him in primeval times.¹⁰ It is still a mystery play, but if anywhere, we have here drawn close to a theatrical performance, and the writer adds that the theologians at Delphi permitted poets and prose-writers to tell of this struggle in the theatres.¹¹ Finally, we find

¹ Theocrit., *Idyll.* 7,155; Add., in *Anthol. Palatin.* 6,258.

² Pausan., *Graec. Descr.* 1, 38,6, with commentary by Frazer. On the 'holy threshing-floor', see G. Dittenberger, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, vol. II, Leipzig, 1900, p. 311, no. 587,233.

³ Triptolemus.

⁴ Arrian., *Anab.* III, 16,8; Poll., *Onomast.* 7,125; Tim., *Lexic. Platon.*, sub voce 'Ἰσχυροτρα; Hesych., *Lexic.*, sub voce 'Ἰσχυροτρα; Eustath., *Comment. in Homer. Odys.* 3,350; Phot., *Lexic.*, sub voce 'Ἰσχυροτρα.

⁵ Plutarch., *Vit. Pericl.* 13; Pausan., *Graec. Descr.* 1, 20,3. For the cosmic relation, cf. R. Eisler, *Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt*, Munich, 1910.

⁶ Demosth., *Orat.* 34,37, 59,52,54; Xenoph., *Hellen.* II, 4,9-10,24; Poll., *Onomast.* 8,33; Phot., *Lexic.*, sub voce 'Ἰσχυροτρα; *Lexic. Sud.*, sub voce 'Ἰσχυροτρα; Schol. in Aristoph. *Vesp.* 1109; I. Bekker, *Anecdota Graeca*, vol. I, Berlin, 1814, pp. 317-18.

⁷ Dittenberger, op. cit., 3rd edn., vol. II, p. 178, no. 631,7; p. 245, no. 671, A9; p. 251, no. 672,58.

⁸ *Λαβυδάρι*. Cf. Pauly's *Realencyclopädie*, XII, 307 ff.

⁹ Plutarch., *De Defect. Orac.* 15.

¹⁰ See my study on 'De Grote Zeeslang' (the great sea-serpent), *Mededelingen en Verhandelingen van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptische Genootschap 'Ex Oriente Lux'*, No. 10, Leyden, 1953.

¹¹ In later days a separate theatre was built at Delphi, not on the place of the threshing-floor, but north of the temple and within the walls of the temenos, cf. fig. 3. Liturgy and drama had gone their separate ways.

two passages where it is stated that on certain occasions people used to dance and make speeches on threshing-floors.¹


In ancient Egypt the threshing-floor had a shape  well-known from the hieroglyph used in writing the word, see fig. 4.² It was a circular plot of land on which the grain was spread in order to be trodden by oxen and asses, after the oriental custom. When the work was going on, its circumference was defined by the circle of piled up stalks, and perhaps some floors were surrounded by a row of stones. On the reliefs of the Old Kingdom it is represented as a rectangle under the feet of the treading asses.³ Later, the raising of



FIG. 4. The Egyptian sign of the threshing-floor.

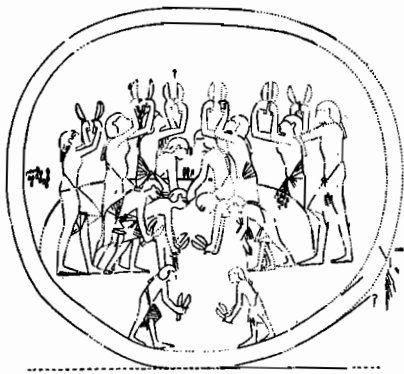



FIG. 5. An Egyptian threshing-floor.

the circumference is clearly indicated on both sides, the diameter of the floor generally being reduced in order to fit better within the surrounding relief, so that the plot takes the shape of the hieroglyph , the cosmic mountain.⁴ We find the threshing-floor mentioned in Egyptian texts in two interesting passages.⁵ In the Ramesseum dramatic papyrus a scene occurs in which spelt, and another in which barley, are laid on the threshing-floor. Sethe has shown in a well-known study that this text can be considered as an old Egyptian instance of what in a somewhat modified form is

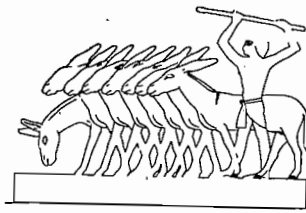
¹ Harpocrat., *Lexic.*, sub voce *Ἀλάρα*; Eustath., *Comment. in Homer. Il.* 9,530. An oracle on a threshing-floor perhaps in Pausan., *Graec. Descr.* ix, 39,5. For the festival of the Halos, cf. Schol. in Lucian. *Dial. Meretr.* 7,4.

² Fig. 4 after Griffith, *Hieroglyphs*, pp. 27, 67, with pls. 3, no. 32; 7, no. 87. Fig. 5 after Davies, *Two Ramesside Tombs at Thebes*, pl. 40, cf. pl. 30.

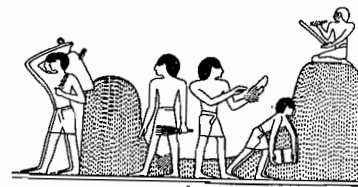
³ Fig. 6a, after Davies, *The Mastaba of Ptahhetep and Akhetetep*, II, pl. 8. Other instances in Klebs, *Die Reliefs des Alten Reiches*, 50 f.; Montet, *Vie privée*, 212 ff., with pl. 18.

⁴ The numbers b-f in fig. 6 all date from the New Kingdom and are borrowed from Tylor and Griffith, *The Tomb of Paheri*, pl. 3 (figs. b and c); Wreszinski, *Atlas*, I, pls. 231, 233, 234 (figs. d, e, and f). The last-mentioned are reproduced in colours in Mekhitarian, *La Peinture égyptienne*, 76 f. For a representation from the Middle Kingdom see Newberry, *Beni Hasan*, I, pl. 11. Others from the New Kingdom are found in Lepsius, *Denkm.* III, pl. 232; Wilkinson, *Manners and Customs*, 2nd ed., II, 419 ff.; Lanzoni, *Dizionario*, pl. 6; Tylor, *The Tomb of Renni*, pl. 5; Davies, *Five Theban Tombs*, pl. 19; Id., *The Tomb of Antefoker*, pl. 3; Capart, *JEA* 7, pl. 5; Wreszinski, op. cit. I, pls. 279, 346.

⁵ Construction of a temple on a threshing-floor (*httu*): Lefebvre, *Le Tombeau de Petosiris*, I, 105; II, 37.



a



b



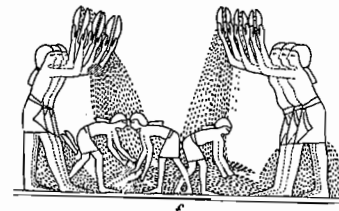
c



d



e



f

FIG. 6. Ancient Egyptian threshing-floors.

later called tragedy at Athens.¹ The place where this play was enacted is not clearly indicated. Besides the threshing-floor, mention is made of two ships, of the erection of a *qd*-column, of the presentation of several offerings and of a divine palace.² Of the first scene nothing remains but the title.³ In the second, certain animals, oxen and asses, are being driven on to the threshing-floor to tread the corn.⁴ The god Horus addresses them as servants of the wicked Seth and prohibits the slaying of Osiris, who in this context must be represented by the grain to be trodden. But they do it, nevertheless, and thereupon Horus, the avenger of his father, says to Osiris: 'I strike for thee those that have struck thee', which must mean that he sacrifices the animals.⁵ The play was performed at the accession to the throne of King Sesostri I of the Twelfth Dynasty, who took the role of the god Horus in it.⁶ The other passage concerns a similar ceremony and was treated some years ago by A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman in this *Journal*.⁷ It occurs in a number of variants on the walls of Egyptian temples, in most detail at Edfu, but in a more summary form on other sanctuaries, and is to be dated as early as the Old Kingdom. Here, too, the king plays the part of the god Horus and he drives four calves of different colours on to the threshing-floor to tread the grain, called by him the grave of his father Osiris. These animals have the task of expelling enemies from the grave and of concealing it from them. The enemies, it is explained, are snakes and worms, that affect the grain. The ceremony is therefore intended to make the grain-harvest a rich one, and it is perpetuated on the temple-wall so that thereby the cosmic order and the power of the Pharaoh may be established.⁸

In the Old Testament the threshing-floor is likewise spoken of, and in some cases in situations that have little to do with agriculture. On the threshing-floor, situated in a high place on account of the wind,⁹ an altar stood.¹⁰ On this first-fruits were offered at the end of the harvest, and this ceremony was in some way related to the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated at the same date.¹¹ On such a threshing-floor King David made an offering, intended, somewhat as in the Egyptian ceremony treated above, to bring his people recovery from an epidemic. For that purpose he bought the threshing-floor of Arauna the Jebusite at Jerusalem, erected a stone altar on it, killed, as in Egypt, the oxen that had done the threshing, and burned them with a fire fed by the wood of the threshing-sledge and the harness. The epidemic ceased, and in remembrance of this happy event the great temple of Jerusalem was built on this plot.¹² The threshing-floor

¹ Sethe, *Dramatische Texte*. Cf. also Drioton, *Le Théâtre égyptien*; Id., 'Théâtres et Mystères', in *L'Amour de l'art*, 28, 200 ff.; Id., 'Le Théâtre à l'époque pharaonique', in *Revue des Conférences françaises en Orient*, 13, 459 ff.; 'A la Recherche du Théâtre de l'ancienne Egypte', in *Arts asiatiques*, 1, 96 ff.; 'Le Théâtre dans l'ancienne Egypte', in *Revue d'Histoire du Théâtre*, VI, 7 ff.

² Sethe, op. cit. 96 ff.

³ Ibid. 119.

⁴ Ibid. 134.

⁵ The word for 'to strike' is *hwt*. The Coptic word for 'to thresh', *ḡt*, is to be distinguished from *ḡwḡt* 'to strike', but both are derived from Egyptian *ḡud*. Cf. *Wb.* III, 47, 11; Crum, *Coptic Dictionary*, 643, 732.

⁶ Sethe, op. cit. 94 f. A representation in the tomb of Kheruef at Thebes, cf. Fakhr, *Ann. Serv.* 42, pl. 39.

⁷ Blackman and Fairman, 'The Significance of the Ceremony *Hwt Bhsu* in the Temple of Horus at Edfu', *JEA*, 35, 98 ff.; 36, 63 ff.

⁸ Cf. Ammian. Marcellin., *Res Gest.* xxviii, 5, 14: (The king of the Burgundians) 'according to an ancient custom, lays down his power and is deposed, if under him the fortune of war has wavered or the earth has denied sufficient crops, just as the Egyptians commonly blame their rulers for such occurrences'.

⁹ Job 5, 26.

¹⁰ 2 Sam. 24, 18; 1 Chron. 21, 18.

¹¹ Deut. 16, 13.

¹² 2 Sam. 24, 14-25; 1 Chron. 21, 13-30. See above, p. 42, n. 5.

is the place where from the death of the ear the life of the grain originates,¹ and therefore, it was supposed, it could present man with life or with recovery from illness or revival from death.² 'Rejoice not, O Israel, for joy, as other people; for thou hast gone a-whoring from thy God, thou hast loved a reward upon every threshing-floor.' Ruth, the Moabite, resorts during the night to the threshing-floor, to lie down next to Boaz,

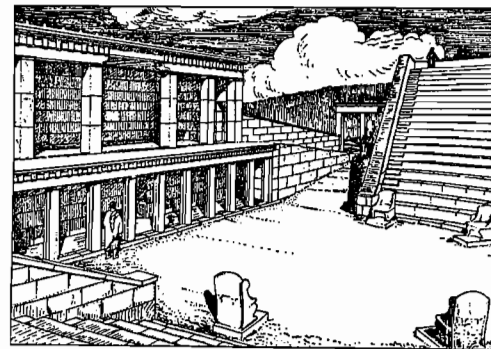


FIG. 7. The Theatre at Oropos. The seats of honour on the orchestra.

the man of her choice,³ Palestinian farmers today celebrate the marriage-ceremony there.⁴ But mourning takes place there too.⁵ 'And they came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond Jordan, and there they mourned with a great and very sore lamentation.' Goren-ha-Atad, 'threshing-floor of thorns', is not to be taken here as the name of a village, for again it is on the threshing-floor that the modern Palestinian farmer does his mourning.⁶ Above all the threshing-floor is a place of miracles and miraculous apparitions. On the threshing-floor which he bought King David saw the angel that brought the plague to Israel, standing between heaven and earth, his sword stretched out over Jerusalem.⁷ The judge Gideon gets an oracle by laying a fleece on the threshing-floor and by examining this the next morning as to its humidity.⁸ Uzzah is killed by Jahwe in a miraculous way when he lays hands upon the holy ark, that is carried over Nachon's threshing-floor.⁹ Even the prophets seek inspiration there.¹⁰ 'And the king of Israel and the king of Judah, Jehosaphat, sat each on his throne, having put on their robes, on a threshing-floor outside the gate of Samaria, and all the prophets prophesied before them.' They were no less than four hundred in number. One is strikingly reminded here of the fact that in some Greek theatres the seats of honour are placed, not immediately before the orchestra, but on it (fig. 7).¹¹

¹ Cf. Job 5, 26.

² Hos. 9, 1.

³ Ruth 3.

⁴ P. Volz, *Die biblischen Altertümer*, Stuttgart, 1925, p. 337.

⁵ Gen. 50, 10.

⁶ P. Volz, op. cit. 325.

⁷ 2 Sam. 24, 17; 1 Chron. 21, 16.

⁸ Judges 6, 33-40.

⁹ 2 Sam. 6, 6-7; 1 Chron. 13, 9-10.

¹⁰ 1 Kings 22, 10 (LXX: ἐν ταῖς πύλαις Σ.); 2 Chron. 18, 9 (LXX: ἐν τῷ εὐρυχωρῷ θύρας πόλεως Σ.).

¹¹ As at Oropos and at Priene. Cf. Vitruv., *De Archit.* v, 6, 2; Sueton., *Div. August.*, 35, 2; *Div. Claud.*, 25, 4.

Whence does the threshing-floor borrow its sacred character? In part certainly from the mystery-play of death and life, that was enacted on it in the threshing of the ears and in the liberation of the grain. But there is another reason for its holiness, and in order to make this understood we quote a passage from the romance of Alexander, erroneously attributed to Callisthenes.¹ On his journey to the far east, it is told there, Alexander the Great wished to visit heaven, and so he let himself be drawn upwards by two birds. Arrived at a certain height, he cast a glance downwards and saw a huge serpent in the form of a circle, surrounding a *άλως* or threshing-floor. A bird in human shape who happened to fly past him gave the explanation. 'Dost thou know what this is? The threshing-floor is the world, the serpent is the Ocean that surrounds the earth.' We should be extremely cautious in drawing conclusions. The Greek word *άλως* can, like the Hebrew *אֵל*, signify not only 'threshing-floor', but also 'circular space',² and a translation 'disk' would certainly fit well in this passage. Nevertheless, we believe that a threshing-floor is really intended here and that the threshing-floor therefore was considered by the ancients as an image of the world, this being thought of as a flat circular disk.³ In the play at Delphi the Python that was being vanquished was clearly the cosmic serpent that guards the world. In the Greek theatre the orchestra is surrounded by a channel with an average breadth of 2-3 feet and the same depth. This channel is generally taken as an outlet for rainwater, but the enormous volume conclusively speaks against this. A gutter of a few inches wide would have been amply sufficient. It is rather a representation of the Ocean that surrounds the earth. On the Egyptian reliefs the threshing-floor is, we think intentionally, pressed together, so as to make it resemble as much as possible the hieroglyph *ⲛⲟ*, an image of the eschatological mountain surrounding the Ocean and the world we live on.⁴ The Egyptian god is standing with his feet placed on the world and his head touching the ceiling of heaven above, exactly like the angel with the drawn sword seen by King David on the threshing-floor of Arauna.⁵ The world is a threshing-floor. So Jahwe says to his prophet Isaiah: 'Behold, I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth. Thou shalt thresh the mountains and beat them small and shalt make the hills a chaff.' And even more than by these details the cosmic character of threshing-floor and orchestra is indicated by the nature of the actions performed there.

The ancient mystery-play was a sacrificial rite that was considered as a reiteration of the creation and not only imitated this eschatological fact but was wholly identical with it. In however many variants it may have been produced, it occurs in two fundamental types. In the one the struggle of the god against the powers of evil and his victory over them in primeval times were represented, in the second the performance concerned the creation of the world and the procreation of life. To speak more clearly, the first play was ritual murder, the second ritual violation. Actors and spectators were

¹ Pseudo-Callisth., *Vit. Alexandr.* 2,41. The same in Talm. Jer., 'Ab. Zar., III, 42c; Midr. Num. Rabb. 13,14.
² The Greek word is also used for the 'nest' of an animal, cf. Aelian., *De Natur. Animal.* 3,16, or for the 'coils' of a serpent, cf. Aeschyl., *Sept. Conty. Theb.* 489; Nicander, *Theo.* 166; Schol. in Aristoph. *Vesp.* 18. For the Hebrew word, see Mišn., *Sanh.* 4,3; Midd. 2,5 and perhaps Epiphani., *Panar.* 80,1,6.

³ The Egyptian ideas on the configuration of the world are treated in the study referred to above, p. 41, n. 10. Eustathius, *Comment. in Homer. Odys.* 17,209, mentions the disk-shaped form of earth, heaven, theatre, and threshing-floor in one breath.

⁴ *De Grote Zeeslang*, 10 f.

⁵ *Ibid.* 7.

⁶ Isa. 41,15.

all members of the religious community. Participation in the play or presence at the performance imparted a share in the god's victory and therefore produced 'purification'.¹ The main role was in the known cases reserved for the king, for the bad roles in the instances cited above oxen and asses were used, but in olden days undoubtedly human beings, such as foreigners, slaves, or criminals under sentence of death. Actual executions occurred even in historic times. Ptolemy Philopator, who wished to exterminate the Jews in his realm, had them transported to the hippodrome at Alexandria, to be trampled there by his elephants.² His successor slaughtered the Egyptian rebels he had vanquished at Lycopolis in the Delta 'with the same ritual, with which in primeval times at this very place the gods Rē and Horus, son of Isis, had put their enemies to death.'³ Other insurgents were sacrificed by him at Memphis, on the anniversary of his accession to the throne, that is at the festival, at which the Egyptian Pharaoh performed the play of the threshing-floor in this town.⁴ The Jewish king David put his vanquished adversaries 'under harrows of iron',⁵ his god Jahwe in his anger threshes both Israelites and heathens, as if they were a threshing-floor.⁶ An actual execution is rarely mentioned to have happened in a Greek theatre. The citizens of the town of Messene disposed of their tyrant Hippo in this way,⁷ while in the Roman period gladiatorial fights were introduced into Greece and enacted in the theatres.⁸ The gladiatorial fight is supposed to be a typically Roman institution, but a prototype of it was found at Sparta, where boys in a state of purity fought a ritual combat in all seriousness, and this happened on a plot of land called 'Plane-tree Grove', surrounded by a circular moat on all sides, into which the boys tried to push each other.⁹

The mystery-play survived not only as such, but also in several derived forms, e.g. the sacrificial rite, the gymnastic match, the judicial ordeal, the marriage ceremony, and, finally, the theatrical performance. The Attic tragedy is still located in primeval times, if not in the time of the gods at least in the time of the heroes. The actors have put on heroic stature by tying on cothurns, wearing elongated masks, and by padding their clothes. The theme of action is mythological, the hero fights evil and comes out of this struggle triumphant. The old cult-community, which originally carried the entire action, has given way to the actors and has transformed itself into a chorus, which only serves as an accompaniment and tends gradually to disappear altogether. The tragedy, as well as the gladiatorial fight, is performed on the festival of a god, but also after a victory over an enemy, at a marriage ceremony, and at burials. Like the four hundred Jewish prophets at Samaria, the actors have the gift of prophecy, at least utterances of prophetic purport are frequent in all Greek tragedies.

¹ Cf. above, p. 36, n. 2.

² 3 Macc. 4,11, 5,1-2.

³ Decree of Rosetta, Demotic version, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.* 16. Cf. above, p. 44, n. 6.

⁵ 2 Sam. 12,31; 1 Chron. 20,3. Cf. Judges 8,7; 2 Kings 13,7; Amos 1,3.

⁶ Isa. 21,9-10, 27,12; Jer. 51,33; Mic. 4,12; Hab. 3,12.

⁷ Plutarch., *Timol.* 34. Cf. Phil. Jud., *Flacc.* 84-85; Plutarch., *Crass.* 33; Polyæn., *Strateg.* VII, 41.

⁸ Dio Chrysost., *Orat.* 31,121; Philostrat., *Vit. Apollon.* 4,22.

⁹ Pausan., *Graec. Descr.* III, 14,8-9, cf. VIII, 47,3 and Cicero., *Tuscul. Disput.* v, 27,77; Lucian., *Anachars.*

38. Something of this kind in Herod., *Hist.* 2,63. In the mediaeval legend the hero Digenis Acritas contends

with the angel of death Charos on a threshing-floor of marble. Prof. Antoniadis refers us to N. G. Politis,

Ἐκλογαὶ ἀπὸ τῶν Τραγωιδιῶν τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Λαοῦ, Athens, 1914, 104-5.