The earliest written records that describe religious ceremonies using some kind of dramatic performance date back to 3000 bc. The Sumerian civilization that developed in Mesopotamia (the area around modern-day Iraq) held festivals in spring and autumn each year, and the celebrations included different kinds of performances. The Babylonians, who borrowed much of their culture from the Sumerians, celebrated the new year with processions, recitations and pantomime performances.

Of all the early civilizations before the Greeks, it is the Egyptians who left behind the most detailed accounts of their use of drama. A number of the pyramids, some of them dating from 2400 bc, have writing on their walls that could almost be described as play scripts. One of them, named the Abydos Passion Play, was performed regularly. We know this because the official responsible for staging it between 1887 and 1849 bc left behind a detailed description. This myth was acted out by the Egyptians in order to worship their god—a public performance that was also a religious ceremony.

The theatre as we know it today began 2500 years ago in Ancient Greece. Within a century, Greek theatre achieved heights that have only been reached a few times since in the history of the theatre. The great Greek tragedies have inspired writers ever since and are still performed today. Some of them are among the greatest plays ever written. The incredible achievement of Greek theatre was to give us everything that is still fundamental to theatre today. We may have developed technical resources that the Greeks never dreamed of, but the whole nature of theatre was essentially created in Greece in the fifth century bc.

## GREEK THEATRE

Greek theatre grew out of the celebrations held at religious festivals. The festivals honoured the nature god, Dionysus, who was particularly associated with wine. There were three great festivals held every year and the most important was the one in Athens in April, known as the City Dionysia.

In the early festivals, an important part of the celebration was the performance of a hymn sung by a chorus of townpeople. Originally it was a hymn to honour Dionysus, but over the years the hymns developed and changed, telling the stories of other gods as well, and describing the adventures of legendary Greek heroes such as Jason and the Argonauts.

The chorus hymns were called tragedies from the Greek word tragōidia, literally meaning 'goat song'. The reason for this is simple: at the start of the festival a goat was sacrificed to the god and at the end of the festival a goat was given as a prize to the best chorus. These tragedies were powerful and serious stories, describing how the gods punished men for their pride or recounting the legend of a great battle, such as the destruction of Troy. However, they were still religious ceremonies rather than theatre; hymns and not plays.

The man who has been given the credit for turning them into theatre was a chorus leader named Thespis. He took the revolutionary step of leaving the chorus and taking on the character of the god or hero in the story. In character, he talked to the chorus, creating a dialogue with them. Not surprisingly, he became the first man to win a prize at the dramatic festival of the City Dionysia in 534 bc.

During the fifth century bc, the City Dionysia became a major event in the lives of the people of Athens, attended by every citizen, as well as by representatives from the other states of Greece. To enter the competition, a writer had to submit three tragedies or one comedy. The tragedies were performed on the first three days of the festival, and the comedies on the fourth day. Prizes were awarded to the best tragedy, the best comedy, the best production and, in later years, the best tragic actor.
THE GREEK STAGE

Before there were any theatres, the first performing areas were just large dancing areas called orchestra in Greek. A wooden dressing room was built at the back, called a skene, from which we get the word 'scene'.

The theatres built by the Greeks were open-air, cut into hillside in a curve, and the largest could seat 20000 people. Because of their design, these amphitheatres had outstanding acoustics and an actor standing in the centre of the circular, floor-level stage could be heard from any of the seats.

The skene at the back of the stage had special revolving panels attached to it, with pictures painted on the panels so that they could be turned to create different scenes during the play. There were huge doors in the centre of the skene, with smaller ones on either side, and these were used for exits and entrances. Behind the skene was a crane that was used to lift up the actor playing a god and 'fly' him onto the stage. There was also a machine for making the sound of thunder, and a movable platform or cart that could be wheeled on for indoor scenes.

![Diagram of a typical Greek stage](image)

GREEK ACTORS

Just three male actors made up the acting cast of a Greek play, playing up to ten characters between them—male and female. The chorus numbered fifteen for a tragedy and twenty-four for a comedy.

Everyone on stage wore masks: simple ones for the chorus and much more elaborate ones for the actors. The masks were made of wood, cork or linen, and showed the age and sex of the character as well as their dominant emotion: pride or anger for a king, rage or suffering for a daughter seeking revenge. We know that there were at least thirty different kinds of masks, some of them used for generations.

Because they wore masks, Greek actors needed superb vocal skills. They were required to speak with the voices of many different characters—men and women—and convey a whole range of emotions just through the spoken word. It has been suggested that some of the masks acted like megaphones, with the mouthpieces carefully carved to amplify the human voice.
The actors also had to be physically strong and fit. Many of the costumes for the tragedies were extremely elaborate and heavy, and some were actually hung on frames that fitted over the actors’ shoulders. The costumes included a headdress, called an onkos, which made the actor look larger and more impressive. There were also built-up boots, called coturni, to make the actor taller. These costumes were extremely heavy and restricting, so there was very little action on-stage in the tragedies. The murders, battles and triumphs took place off-stage, and were described by the chorus or an eyewitness.

In comedy, however, frantic action was part of the play. Comedy actors needed to be acrobats and be able to tumble, fall, engage in desperate chases and act out mock fights. Their costumes—soft slippers called socci, flesh-coloured tights and a short jacket—allowed them complete freedom of movement. Their masks were grotesque and exaggerated.

At the beginning of the first century AD, the library at Alexandria in Egypt contained scrolls of thousands of plays by Greek playwrights as part of its collection of approximately 750,000 scrolls. The destruction of the library is a mystery. Some historians think Julius Caesar burned the library in an attack on Alexandria in 48 AD. Others think it happened in 415 AD when Christian monks murdered Hypatia, a brilliant pagan female philosopher, and burned her body in the library. The Muslim invasion of Alexandria in the seventh century has also been blamed.

Sketches of two Greek tragedy masks, one male and one female. Note the emotions etched on the faces.

GREEK PLAYS

Thousands of plays were written and performed during the golden age of Greek theatre from 500 to 300 BC. Of all those plays, less than fifty have survived in their complete form. What we have left today is the work of just five men: the three great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and two writers of comedy, Aristophanes and Menander.

Aeschylus was the first great writer of tragedies. Born around 525 BC, he was a soldier as well as a poet, and fought at the famous battle of Marathon. He died in 456 BC and of his eighty or ninety plays, only seven complete works survive.

It was Aeschylus who introduced a second actor onto the Greek stage and required his two actors to play a number of different parts. These innovations made dramatic conflict and the development of character possible for the first time. His plays were essentially religious in nature, dealing with the relationships between people and the gods. They were, and still are, great drama, written in powerful and striking language.

The playwright who followed him was Sophocles. Again, only seven of his ninety or so plays survive. Sophocles was born around 506 BC and lived to the age of ninety. As a dramatist, he was extremely successful, winning eighteen prizes for his plays during his lifetime.

Sophocles introduced a third actor into performances and increased the number of characters in his plays. He also reduced the importance of the chorus; in his work
the dialogue and action of the play are more important than the voice of the chorus. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles was more interested in human relationships than the effect of the gods on people. His plays involved carefully developed plots and complex characterisation. In his two great plays about King Oedipus, he investigates the causes of human actions and the nature of suffering through the character of Oedipus.

The last and most realistic of the tragic writers was Euripides, who was born around 484 BC and died in 406 BC. Of the ninety-two plays he wrote, eight survived. He introduced the idea of a prologue, a spoken introduction to a play, and relegated the chorus to a very minor role, using them mainly to fill in the breaks between scenes.

The plays Euripides wrote are complex and modern, and are often revived today. They are unusually realistic, no longer just pure tragedy but with elements of comedy and even melodrama in them. Several of the plays deal with different forms of human madness. Most interestingly, Euripides wrote about women—their relationships, their place in society, and, most of all, their beliefs and passions. The plot of his play Electra concerns Electra’s vengeance on her mother for the murder of her father. The core of the drama revolves around Electra’s intense emotions and her relationships with her father, mother and brother.

The great comedy writer whose work has survived is Aristophanes (448-380 BC). We have access to eleven of the forty plays he wrote, most of them named for the disguises used by the chorus in the plays, such as The Wasps, The Birds, The Clouds and The Frogs. These comedies are an extraordinary mixture. They bristle with insults, obscenities, personal attacks on people Aristophanes knew, and clownish action. Yet they also contain brilliant, savage satire and real wit as well. Most of the comedy has dated and does not translate well, but some of the real humour of the plays still emerges on stage, even today.

The other comedy writer whose work has survived was Menander (342-292 BC). Only five of his plays have survived and they are incomplete. They are comedies of manners, dealing with family matters such as missing children or a lost fortune, and the main character is usually a cunning servant.

By the time Menander was writing, the golden age of Greek theatre was over. The next phase in the history of the theatre belonged to the Romans. Unfortunately, this was a time of decline and finally death for classical theatre.

WORKSHOP: WORKING WITH TEXTS

**Agamemnon**

by Aeschylus

*Agamemnon*, by Aeschylus, is set around the events of the Trojan War. Agamemnon goes to Troy as the leader of the Achaeans. When he returns from Troy, he is murdered by his wife’s lover, Aegisthus. The play is set before Agamemnon returns, just as Troy falls. In this opening scene, the chorus provides the audience with a background to the story.

**Exercise 1:** Identify points where the script can be said in unison, as duets and as solo parts.

**Exercise 2:** Identify actions that would enhance the words spoken by the chorus; for example when saying ‘Ten years have passed’ you may move your arms like a ticking clock.

**Exercise 3:** Rehearse and realise your performance for the rest of the group.

**Exercise 4:** After watching the performances, discuss how playing with the ‘voice’ of the chorus as well as the use of movement added to or detracted from the audience’s interpretation of the scene.