



Cultural Formation and Transference Processes of Ancient Greek Theatre

Antik Yunan Tiyatrosunun Kltrel Oluřum ve Aktarım Sreleri

Haluk EMİR

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8508-7210>

R. Eser KORTANOĐLU

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7903-9498>



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Cultural Formation and Transference Processes of Ancient Greek Theatre

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Haluk EMİR* R. Eser KORTANOĞLU**

Abstract: Ancient Hellenic theatre, as a central element of the polis life, serves as the focal point of societal actions. The concept of the theatrical, however, is a phenomenon that extends far beyond Hellenic culture, predating the tangible manifestation of theatre by a considerable margin. Although the collective consciousness and ritual practices observed in the Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Ages predate the emergence of Hellenic thought, they played a crucial role in the birth of theatre as a mental concept. The symbolic imagery, and ritual practices encountered in the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Ages, although predating Hellenic thought and the emergence of tragedy, serve a determinative function in the genesis of theatre as a mental concept. This interdisciplinary research aims to analyze the roots and developmental stages of ancient Hellenic theatre on a broad scale, without limiting it to the geography of Hellas. The study takes an approach that covers the early cognitive evolution and socio-cultural structuring of humanity. This will enable an understanding of the position of ancient Hellenic theatre within the broader context of human experience.

Keywords: Cult, Ritual, Ancient Theatre, Dionysos, Religious Festivals, Mask

Öz: Eski Hellen tiyatrosu, polis yaşamının merkezi unsuru olarak toplumsal eylemlerin odak noktasındadır. Teatral kavram ise, tiyatronun somut bir biçimde ortaya çıkmasından oldukça önceye, Hellas kültürünün ötesine uzanan bir olgudur. Bu bağlamda, tiyatronun somut form kazanana değin geçen süreç, insanın bilişsel ve toplumsal evrimiyle paralel bir seyir göstermiştir. Paleolitik, Neolitik ve Bronz çağlarda karşılaşılan sembolik imge ve ritüel pratikler, Hellen düşüncesi ve tragedyanın ortaya çıkışından daha erken dönemlere dayansa da tiyatronun zihinsel bir kavram olarak doğuşunda belirleyici fonksiyondadır. Bu interdisipliner araştırma eski Hellen tiyatrosunun köklerini ve gelişim evrelerini, Hellas coğrafyasıyla sınırlamaksızın geniş bir ölçekte analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, insanlığın erken dönemdeki bilişsel evrimi ve sosyo-kültürel yapılanmasını da kapsayan bir geniş yaklaşım benimsemiştir. Böylece, antik Hellen tiyatrosunun evrensel insan deneyimindeki yerini daha iyi kavramak mümkün olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kült, Ritüel, Antik Tiyatro, Dionysos, Dinsel Bayramlar, Maske

Introduction

The concept of theatre, by its very nature, possesses a meaning that transcends the boundaries of physical space and maintains a close relationship with social dynamics. The usage of the word in ancient Hellen and its etymological meaning also point to a parallel situation. The etymological origin of the word theatre is

* PhD. Cand., Anadolu University, School of Graduate Studies, Program in Classical Archaeology, Eskişehir. emirhaluk@outlook.com | <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8508-7210>

** Prof. Dr., Anadolu University, Faculty of Humanities, Archaeology Department, Eskişehir. rekortan@anadolu.edu.tr | <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7903-9498>

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based on the Ancient Hellen word *theatron* (θέατρον) which means a place of viewing. When considering the theatre purely as a space, it can be said that it exists within the interaction between the audience and the performers during a performance. In this context, the conceptual history of theatre can be traced back to prehistoric times¹. The emergence of theatre as a performative activity is generally believed to date back to the Upper Paleolithic Era². The first major development in this period is the control and utilization of fire in daily life. Fire was not only a source of heat and light but also a tool that brought Prehistoric humans together, enabling them to share a common experience. It is possible to say that people gathering around fire strengthened group bonds through cooking and social activities³. Another significant detail is that fire, due to its mystical significance for prehistoric people, is thought to have catalysed abstract thinking. Archaic human communities gathering around fire on dark nights likely experienced a mystical atmosphere, conducive to performing ritual acts⁴. Some scholars posit that these primitive fire-centered rituals may be the precursors to later ritualistic behaviors and various forms of theatrical performance⁵. Fire did not merely serve a functional purpose but transformed into a form that nourished imagination and attained a structure that fed the mythical world. This situation shows similarity with one of the fundamental features of theatre, which is bringing a community together and providing a shared experience.

The most significant development of the Paleolithic Period was, without question, the emergence of caves as ritual spaces. During this era, caves evolved beyond their purely utilitarian function as shelters to become spaces where religious and symbolic practices were performed⁶. The artistic manifestations found in caves, comprising drawings, abstract symbols, and figurative representations, have been evaluated as evidence of the community's established relationship with supernatural powers.⁷ Additionally according to some specialists in cave art and theatre history, the cave drawings were rendered in dynamic profile perspectives, and the placement of fire sources may have created what could be interpreted as a primitive form of sequential scenic⁸. In Paleolithic ritual practices, shamans, analogous to the priests and participants of the Dionysian cult, entered altered states of consciousness to assume alternative identities and establish connections with otherworldly realms. In

¹ Archaeological evidence suggests that prehistoric social groups used various areas as gathering spaces, similar to theatres, serving as centers of attraction for communal activities (Clark *et al.* 2022).

² Ancient theatres should not be regarded merely as venues for artistic performances, but primarily as gathering spaces and public areas where social activities were conducted. These theatres were significant centres of society, where social integration was achieved, while also serving as forums for the discussion of religious and political issues. It is important to note that the function of theatres was not limited to the performing arts alone; rather, they played a critical role in the construction of public life and collective memory within a broader social context. The archetypes of theatrical actions should be associated with cave rituals from the Paleolithic period, shamanic traditions, and mystical sessions conducted around fire. Thus, it is essential to consider the origins of performing arts not merely as an aesthetic experience, but rather as a continuation of communal religious and cultural practices that carried deep symbolic significance. Durkheim, through his examination of the direct correlation between religious organizations and collective gatherings and social phenomena, indicated an experience that extends beyond individual circumstances, emphasizing its collective nature (Durkheim 2010, 32). Durkheim's theory of religious societies can be applied to understand the dual religious and social functions of Hellen theatre. The festivals and plays served to reinforce the collective conscience, bringing the community together and reaffirming shared values. The religious context of the theatre, with its focus on the divine and the moral order, would have been crucial in maintaining social cohesion. His notion of collective effervescence, originally applied to religious rituals, can be extended to theatrical experiences.

³ Goussblom 1992, 1-12.

⁴ According to Rappaport, religious rituals, athletic competitions, festivals, and theatrical performances are all members of the same broad family and are interconnected (Rappaport 1999, 45-46).

⁵ Eliade 2017, 18.

⁶ Gourhan 1964, 80; Eliade 2017, 32.

⁷ Archaeological evidence indicates that artistic representations were created in the most remote chambers of specific cave systems, specifically in zones that bear evidence of predator occupation, thereby supporting theories regarding ritualistic practices (Braidwood 2008, 105).

⁸ Schechner 1994, 620; Azéma & Rivère 2012, 319. However, it is essential to avoid over-hasty interpretations.

these ceremonial contexts, shamans functioned as spiritual mediators for their communities through their communication with supernatural entities⁹ (Fig. 1). Parallel to the Dionysian cult practices, ritual participants were collectively integrated into this transformative process, seeking communion with deities and supernatural powers by transcending their individual identities through states of trance and ecstatic experience. The scenes depicted in cave paintings, which feature various therianthrope¹⁰ characters and hybrid beings, suggest that ritual or theatrical acts were being performed¹¹. French anthropologist René Girard likened such shamanistic and totemic acts to a theatre stage, stating the following:

“During the rituals, the shaman plays all the roles. He is the one who will defeat the evil spirits and ensure that the good spirits gain dominance. In this respect, it is similar to ancient Hellen tragedy. The drama performed in the theatre is also a kind of ritual and consists of the recurrence of a religious perception¹²”.

In this cultural context, the archaeological evidence extends beyond cave paintings and drawings¹³. Archaeological excavations have yielded numerous artifacts including bone flutes, diverse musical instruments, scrapers, and ceremonial implements known as bullroarers within cave environments. Research suggests that hunter-gatherer populations likely conducted ritualistic ceremonies with proto-theatrical elements in cave settings, where the interplay of fire illumination, torch-cast shadows, atmospheric conditions, and the distinct spatial characteristics of subterranean environments may have contributed to the creation of cave art and associated ceremonial activities.



Fig. 1. The Cave Art Portrayal of a Transformed Shaman with Costume at a French Paleolithic Site (Brockett 2000, fig. 1.3)

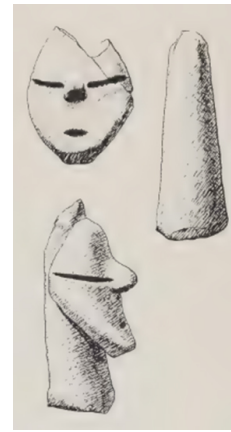


Fig. 2. Mask and Phallic Stand from Neolithic Thessaly (Gimbutas 1982, fig. 18)

Beginning in the Neolithic period, agriculture gradually entered human life and fundamentally changed social organizations. Archaeological and anthropological findings reveal a substantial increase in organized communal activities and formalized social structures, evidenced by the emergence of ceremonial spaces and collective gathering sites during this period¹⁴. The adoption of agricultural practices constitutes a critical

⁹ Eliade 2017, 32.

¹⁰ The depiction of therianthropes is significant. These figures blend human and animal characteristics, much like many figures in Hellen mythology (e.g., satyrs, centaurs, minotaurs).

¹¹ Recent archaeological investigations have demonstrated that cave art specimens are not confined to the Mediterranean region, with evidence indicating the existence of earlier examples elsewhere. Notably, a cave painting discovered in Asia has been recognized as one of humanity's earliest known abstract representations. This discovery is significant because it contains complex scene compositions that suggest the presence of early storytelling capabilities. Analysis of these scenes has identified clear indicators of narrative presence. The depiction includes part-human, part-animal figures, which researchers believe may represent mythological beings or spiritual narratives, offering critical insights into the symbolic thinking and narrative skills of Paleolithic humans (Aubert *et al.* 2019, 442-445).

¹² Girard 2003, 420-421.

¹³ Renfrew & Bahn 2017, 428.

¹⁴ Childe 2001, 22.

turning point in human-environmental interactions during the Neolithic period. The establishment of systematic cultivation cycles, characterized by predictable seasonal patterns and sustained food production, fundamentally altered societies' perception and interaction with their natural environment¹⁵. Material evidence indicates that the animistic belief systems characteristic of Paleolithic societies underwent a significant transformation during the Neolithic transition, evolving into more complex cosmological frameworks centred on the sacred relationship between human communities and agricultural cycles. It can be said that Neolithic populations attributed profound cosmological significance to the cyclical regeneration of cultivated crops, interpreting the annual processes of vegetative renewal as manifestations of sacred forces in their emerging agricultural world-view.¹⁶ The cyclical patterns of vegetative decay and regeneration had a significant impact on the development of early human cognitive frameworks for comprehending existence and natural order. The imperative to comprehend and maintain agricultural and climatic cycles led to the emergence of sophisticated mythological systems and cosmological interpretations, reflecting humanity's early attempts to systematize their understanding of natural phenomena¹⁷. For instance, archaeological investigations at Göbekli Tepe¹⁸, one of the earliest known cultic centers¹⁹, have revealed that ritual activities were conducted in a purpose-built communal space prior to the full adoption of agricultural production and sedentary lifestyle. One of the most remarkable developments in the rituals of this period is evidenced by the widespread adoption of masks²⁰ in Mediterranean, Aegean (Fig. 2) and Mesopotamian cult sites²¹. Neolithic visual images function as manifestations of social identity while simultaneously reinforcing the cohesion of emergent communal bonds. The discovery of a small clay mask at Achilleion in Thessaly, is a intriguing example of early Neolithic symbolic and ritual practices²².

Walter Burkert, in his influential work on ancient Hellen religious practices, suggests that this mask, which was found hanging on a pillar-like stand, evokes striking parallels with later depictions of Dionysian masks in Hellen vase paintings, where masks of the god Dionysos were often displayed on columns during ceremonies²³. The wall paintings in the houses at Çatalhöyük, another example from Anatolia, have been associated with social gatherings like cults and rituals. The discovery of special-purpose belief structures in village settlements supports this hypothesis²⁴.

The archaeological evidence from Göbekli Tepe and Çatalhöyük suggests that religious practices served as a central organizing principle, fundamentally shaping societal interactions. According to Jacques Derrida, the eminent French philosopher, contemporary societal frameworks—encompassing social, economic,

¹⁵ Hodder 1990.

¹⁶ Eliade 2017, 62.

¹⁷ Eliade 2017, 63.

¹⁸ For further information: Schmidt 2007.

¹⁹ Curry 2008, 278-280.

²⁰ The mask has been examined in detail, as it is one of the most important components of the concept of theatre and the cult of Dionysos.

²¹ Dietrich *et al.* 2018, 3-21.

²² Marija Gimbutas's research on ritual masks and masked figurines presents compelling evidence for their interpretation within an early theatrical framework. Her comprehensive analysis of artifacts from mainland Hellas, Minoan Crete, and Old Europe suggests the existence of a shared ritualistic-dramatic tradition. These objects, hypothesized to have served both liturgical and dramatic functions, indicate potential cultural continuity across these three regions. The masked figurines appear to have functioned as mimetic instruments, facilitating the performative representation of ritual and mythological narratives (Fig. 2). These artefacts enabled ceremonial participants to achieve symbolic embodiment of divine entities, spiritual forces, and mythological personae, thereby materializing these supernatural beings within proto-theatrical contexts (Gimbutas 1982, 66).

²³ Walter Burkert also suggested that the *Thesmophoria*, one of the ancient Hellenic agrarian festivals, could have Neolithic origins. He referenced the similarity between clay pig votive offerings adorned with wheat, found in Nea Makri and dated to the Early Neolithic, and the terracotta votive pigs frequently encountered in Demeter shrine (Burkert 1985, 13).

²⁴ Fred & Hodder 2017, 73.

technological, and political structures—can be traced to their Neolithic origins²⁵. This theoretical perspective finds significant correspondence with Gordon Childe's concept of the 'Neolithic Revolution', which delineates the transformative transition from hunter-gatherer societies to sedentary agricultural communities²⁶.

There are two subtle details about the origins of theatre in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods that are very important. First, the performative elements within Paleolithic totemic rituals and ceremonies demonstrate early manifestations of theatrical practice. The presence of proto-theatrical actions within these ritualistic contexts evidences humanity's longstanding propensity for dramatic enactment. Second, the emergence of formalized social organizations during the Neolithic period established foundational structures for communal gathering spaces—a crucial element in the development of theatrical traditions. These collective assemblies represent an essential precursor to formalized theatrical spaces²⁷.

In the Bronze Age, belief systems and rituals underwent significant development, progressing toward a more systematic structure. Religion and rituals became integral to the political mechanisms of states and empires, often serving as tools to legitimize authority and unify communities under centralized rule²⁸. Ritual practices and ceremonial celebrations have transcended their origins in agrarian and quotidian activities to become central elements in sociopolitical gatherings and formalized civic ceremonies. The architectural development of temple complexes, coupled with the evolution of sophisticated organizational hierarchies, has necessitated the institutionalization of festival traditions. This transformation reflects the increasing complexity of social structures and the formalization of communal religious practices in early urban societies. The agricultural calendar's cyclical nature has fundamentally structured celebratory events, establishing their periodic recurrence. Bronze Age cosmology predominantly centred on archetypal agrarian concepts—fertility, mortality, and vitality—which formed the ideological foundation of these societies. Ceremonial observations marking terrestrial seasonal cycles, particularly evident in New Year festivities, became institutionalized practices²⁹. This pattern is exemplified by archaeological evidence from Liman Tepe in Western Anatolia, where the discovery of a phallic idol suggests continuity with fertility and agricultural cultic practices, demonstrating parallels with later Dionysian ritualistic tradition³⁰.



Fig. 3. Masked Ritual Procession Scene from Mycenae (Vassilicou 2000, fig. 4a)



Fig. 4. Phoenician Male Mask, ca. IXth Century BCE (Orsingher 2019, fig. 6.3)



Fig. 5. Punic Grinning Mask, ca. VIIth Century BCE (Orsingher 2019, fig. 9)

²⁵ Derrida 1976, 128.

²⁶ Childe 2001, 66.

²⁷ Emir 2020, 56.

²⁸ Eliade 2017, 73.

²⁹ In Minoan culture, significant importance was attributed to communal ceremonies, and gathering spaces were built in close proximity to palatial structures. This led Sir Arthur John Evans, a prominent archaeologist who worked in the region, to an erroneous conclusion, as he interpreted these gathering areas as the earliest forms of theatres (Stanley 1970, 6).

³⁰ Erkanal & Günel 1995, 245-246.

These ceremonial practices incorporated sophisticated ritualistic elements, including choreographic expressions, musical performances, agonistic activities, communal commensality, and sacrificial rites (Fig. 3). This particular complex of ritual behaviours demonstrates significant parallels with the later codified practices of Dionysiac ceremonies, especially in their choreographic structure, communal aspects, and sacrificial elements, suggesting long-term continuity about these traditions. One of the most significant developments in this period occurred in ritual practices. The widespread use of masks as cult objects in Old Egyptian³¹, Mycenaean³², Mediterranean³³, and other Near-Eastern³⁴ cults forms the backbone of the material basis for the belief that worshippers assumed a different identity and performed a mythological representation³⁵. The adoption of masks in religious rites during this era suggests a shift in how practitioners engaged with the divine and supernatural realms. By donning masks, devotees could temporarily embody alternate personas, possibly those of deities, mythical figures, or ancestral spirits. This practice likely facilitated a more immersive and experiential form of worship, allowing participants to transcend their everyday identities and connect with the sacred on a deeper level (Fig. 4).

It is noteworthy that the rituals of the Bronze and Iron Ages were increasingly conducted in a theatrical atmosphere. Participants and believers in these ceremonies, assuming various identities, sometimes took on the roles of different characters and at other times disguised themselves as mythical figures, possibly of

³¹ There is limited evidence that scenes depicting the death and resurrection of Osiris were reenacted, albeit to a limited extent, during festivals such as Khoiak. According to some scholars, the origins of theatre may be traced back to these rituals; however, this remains a subject of debate (Leprohon 2007, 261).

³² Use of masks in burial customs has been occasionally observed, and this practice was typically found in the tombs of elite individuals. Additionally, the presence of similar practices has also been identified in certain sacrificial rituals (Dickinson 1976, 166).

³³ The utilization of masks in ceremonial contexts held profound significance in this geographical area, as exemplified by the enduring legacy of Phoenician mask-making traditions. Spanning approximately one thousand years, from the advent of the Late Bronze Age to the midpoint of the IInd century BCE, the Phoenicians employed masks as integral components of their ritual practices (Orsingher 2019, 51). Masks were worn in this context for a dual purpose: to conceal the wearer's mortal identity, thereby facilitating a transcendent connection with the divine or supernatural realm, while simultaneously revealing the countenance of a superhuman being, imbued with sacred or mystical powers. The mask enabled the wearer to embody and channel the attributes of the depicted deity, ancestor, or mythological figure, blurring the boundaries between the human and superhuman spheres. This act of concealment and revelation demonstrates the complex interplay between the mundane and the sacred, highlighting the masks role as a threshold between the worlds of the ordinary and the extraordinary (Orsingher 2019, 52). The Phoenicians' pivotal role in maritime commerce transcended mere economic significance, establishing them as a civilization of profound cultural influence. Their extensive nautical networks, spanning the Mediterranean and Aegean littoral zones, served as conduits for the transmission of various cultural elements, including complex ritual practices. Some scholars have advanced the hypothesis that the masks discovered at the Sanctuary of Artemis Ortheia in Sparta were influenced by Phoenician antecedents (Carter 1987, 379).

³⁴ The mask culture in the Levant region has been encountered since the Neolithic Period and possesses a rich symbolism. The collection of 9,000-year-old stone masks from the Judean Hills represents one of the earliest known examples of mask-making in human history, dating back to the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B period (PPNB). These artefacts provide crucial insights into the cultural and spiritual practices of early agricultural societies (Hershman 2014, 33). Subsequent archaeological discoveries from later periods have revealed masks in public spaces and large-scale gatherings. These findings suggest that the use of masks, often referred to as a 'mask cult' by archaeologists, was not limited to religious and funerary rituals but also became a broader social phenomenon. The evidence indicates that masks served multiple functions: they were used in ritualistic contexts, and also as a means for individuals to assume different identities and specific roles within the social hierarchy. These dual-purpose underscores the complex and multipurpose nature of mask usage in Levantine societies throughout history (Orsingher 2019, 53-54).

³⁵ Another significant cult center where mask usage was prevalent is located in Cyprus, which has strengthened its position in the Mediterranean since the Late Bronze Age. It seems probable that Cypriot masks served as symbolic objects in the construction of social identities, particularly within the context of ancient religious and societal structures. These masks were not merely decorative; they were powerful tools for individuals and groups to engage with sacred spaces, define their roles, and connect with the divine (Averett 2015, 25).

supernatural nature. Through the use of masks³⁶, costumes, and various intoxicating substances, participants were able to transcend their physical limits, becoming part of a different narrative (Fig. 5). Given that the symbolic meanings of mask and costume usage vary significantly depending on cultural context, it is difficult—based on the available evidence—to directly trace the origins of Hellenic theatre to these practices. However, despite the significant chronological and material gap, it is equally challenging to dismiss the presence of a collective and indirect influence.

Post-Hellen dark ages

When Dionysos' myths, the festivals inspired by them, and supporting ritual practices are considered, it becomes possible to make judgments about the cultural context of theatre³⁷. To understand how theatre acquired a concrete existence and evolved into a form, it is necessary to examine this cult deeply. This in-depth examination reveals the intricate relationship between religious practices and the development of theatrical conventions, shedding light on the origins and evolution of ancient Hellen drama.

Classical Hellen religion is a composite culture that is characterized by the interplay of ritual practices and religious beliefs. The fundamental philosophy of religious belief is based on a complex ritual organization that reflects and reinforces social and cosmic order. Both moral and ritual practices regulated the daily life of Hellen people. This intricate system of belief and practice formed the cornerstone of Classical Hellen society, influencing every aspect of life from personal conduct to state governance (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Singing Chorus, Early Attic Vase VIIIth Century BCE (Bieber 1961, fig. 12)

Homer also mentions various rituals and competitions in the *Iliad*³⁸. Although Dionysos was later added to

³⁶ Although the use of masks holds quite different symbolic meanings from a cultural perspective, it is generally associated with the concept of identity transformation. The individual or group participating in the ritual undergoes a transition to a different state through the use of the mask. For this reason, masks hold special significance in the history of theatre.

³⁷ In the post-Hellenic Dark Age period, scholarly inquiry into the origins of Hellen theatre has predominantly centred on the cult of Dionysos. However, while not directly associated with Dionysian worship, certain pre-theatrical practices and artefacts from this era remain significant for a comprehensive understanding of theatrical development. Following the Hellenic Dark Age (c. 1200-800 BCE), archaeological evidence has suggested the use of masks in both ritual and daily life throughout mainland Hellas and regions influenced by Hellenic culture. This widespread use suggests the importance of masks in various aspects of ancient Hellen society. A notable example comes from the archaic temple of the Artemis Orthia cult in Sparta, where archaeologists have discovered grotesque and exuberantly expressive mask types (Fig. 7). Some of these typological masks are characterized by exaggerated and intense facial expressions, potentially indicating their use in ritualistic drama performances. The absence of masks made from organic materials such as linen and wood that have survived to the present day poses a significant challenge in establishing a direct connection between these artefacts and the origins of tragedy. Furthermore, the lack of expressive facial forms typical of sensory depiction in most extant masks compounds this difficulty. Nonetheless, the development of a mask tradition predating the institutionalization of theatre remains a noteworthy phenomenon of scholarly attention (Rosenberg 2015, 257-258).

The Gorgoneion, or Gorgon Head, presents another significant pre-theatrical example from the Archaic Period, notable for its apotropaic properties. Characterized by grotesque, vivid, and exaggerated expressions, Gorgoneion depictions were widely utilized from the early Archaic period onwards, appearing on temples, ceramics, reliefs, and armour. While its use as a mask remains a subject of debate, the Gorgoneion's resemblance to 'grinning masks' has attracted scholarly attention. Some archaeologists posit that it may have also served as a mask. The connection between the Gorgoneion and chthonic religion has been established in archaeological discourse. Furthermore, the hypothesis that the Gorgon-head originated as an apotropaic mask worn in chthonic ritual contexts has gained consideration among scholars (Croon 1955, 15; Riccioni 1960, 137; Bieber 1961, 22). It is plausible that Thespis' unadorned or unpainted masks, like the evolving iconography of Medusa which culminated in a visage of terror, may have exhibited grotesque features (Fig. 8). However, the precise nature of these early theatrical masks remains a subject of scholarly debate due to limited extant evidence (Bieber 1961, 22).

³⁸ Hom. *Il.* XXII. 159-166.

the ancient Hellen mythology and pantheon, he is one of the most important and cult characters with rich celebration and ritual practices. The ceremonies and festivals organized in Dionysos' name centred on the complex relationship between nature and humanity. These events were celebrated with great enthusiasm, often challenging traditional societal norms and religious practices. Festival and ritual practices included dramatic performances, dithyrambic competitions, ecstatic transformative rites involving intoxication, bloody sacrifice rituals, and the ceremonial carrying and displaying of Dionysos' idol³⁹. Through these varied activities, participants sought to explore and embody the wild, transformative aspects of nature personified by Dionysos⁴⁰.

The worship rituals of the god of fertility and wine are complex due to the dosage of the drinks consumed and the behavioural patterns of the believers that may reach excess. At the centre of the cult are the ecstatic behaviours of Dionysos and female believers similarly moving to the rhythm. The tragic downfall of Dionysos in the myth has revealed itself in ritual acts that involve bloody and unrestrained violence⁴¹. However, experiences during rituals have gone beyond the state of intoxication and acquired an independent structure. The harmony arising from the meeting of Dionysian rituals with abstract thoughts has paved the way for the independent development of stage plays with the involvement of mythological stories. The participants of the festival wore masks and assumed different mythological characters, which gradually allowed the hymns, songs, and choruses to become independent when evaluated with ecstasy, turning the festival environment into a stage for a mythological theatre play⁴². Mythology functions as an element that nourishes religion and supports its spread through the imaginative worldview it creates. Myth has had a significant effect on religious understanding as well as poetry, music, decorative arts, literature, philosophy, and tragedy. With the paradigm shift created by religion, new identities belonging to different perspectives were accessed. At the core of ritual practices lies the understanding that the individual breaks away from their own persona and daily life routine to become part of the mythological narrative⁴³. The ecstasy, sensorial exhilaration, and loss of consciousness brought by the Dionysian cult resulted in a unique form of worship diverging from traditional Hellen religious practices. The concepts of Apollo's inspiration and Dionysos' ecstasy have emerged as opposing ideas.⁴⁴ In the cult of Apollo, there are more restrained celebrations, such as the *Paeon* (a type of hymn) and other poems sung in choruses for victory or to express gratitude⁴⁵. The cult of Dionysos, in contrast to Apollo's, is based on devotion as the basis of its beliefs and rituals. The euphoria that results

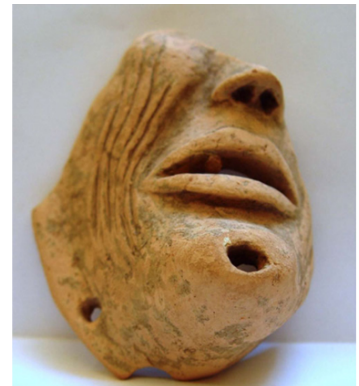


Fig. 7. Terracotta Mask Fragment from Orthia in Lacedaemonia, ca. VIIth Century BCE (Rosenberg 2015, fig. 1)



Fig. 8. The Gorgoneion a mask-like head, ca. Early VIth Century BCE (Picón & De Puma 2007, fig. 86)

³⁹ Grimal 1990, 129.

⁴⁰ Vernant & Naquet 1988, 250.

⁴¹ Hom. *Il.* VI. 130.

⁴² Emir 2020, 103.

⁴³ The mask used in the cult, along with the costumes representing different mythological characters, the roles of madness, and the altered perception of reality induced by intoxication, is related to the adoption of a different persona. This, in turn, imparted a theatrical atmosphere to the rituals.

⁴⁴ Burkert 1985, 164.

⁴⁵ Grimal 1990, 49.

from the harmony of drink and belief, and the subsequent unlocking of consciousness limited by everyday life or rules, is a vital factor⁴⁶. The rituals of the faith appealed to primitive emotions. The enthusiasm and dedication involved in the Dionysian cult contain primitivism, similar to the totemic rituals of hunter-gatherers in the Paleolithic period. The worshippers, influenced by the effects of wine, reached ecstasy, and the cult of Dionysos became widespread, especially among women. The enthusiasm experienced during the rituals provided a release from the routine pressures of daily life for the believers, and they relaxed with the help of the intoxicating effects of wine.

Rites are predominantly another dimension due to intoxication. In some celebrations, *maenads*⁴⁷, who were intoxicated and dancing under torchlight, were represented by wearing masks, and the rituals shifted to a theatrical element (Fig. 9). The aim was to reach the divine through the neutralization of consciousness with wine and drunkenness. Wine triggered change and creativity. Being drunk and the emotions that come with it are associated with deep reflection on life. The presence of death diminishes the life force. From the deep thoughts based on the concrete events of life, Dionysian music emerged, providing an escape from the destructive reality of death that erodes human consciousness as a tangible reality⁴⁸. Through the fervour of rituals and music, worldly concerns were transcended. Art has arisen from these roots and dared to confront death.



Fig. 9. Dionysos among Satyr and Maenads, ca. 550 BCE (Picón & De Puma 2007, fig. 86)

Various arts, poetry, mythical, and religious arguments derived from Dionysian actions have supported this. Dionysiac perception, characterized by ecstatic and transformative experiences, has significantly influenced various forms of cultural expression, including diverse arts, poetry, mythology, and philosophy.

There were five main festivals dedicated to Dionysos in the mainland Hellenic World⁴⁹. *Lenaia* (Λήναια) celebrations can be mentioned as the first one. The festival was associated with the myth of Dionysos' return from the underworld and his reunion with his female followers, the *maenads*. During the festival, women would perform rituals and sacrifices to ensure fertility and prosperity⁵⁰. Festive celebrations evolved significantly over time. In its early years, small groups of performers put on various improvisational shows, while in the first half of the Vth century BCE, examples of comedy began to emerge. Tragic shows were also seen, although they were rare. During the 416 BCE Athens Lenaia festival, Sophocles notably staged a tragedy⁵¹. This festival, like other Dionysian celebrations, often involved ritualistic re-enactments of mythic elements. The believers who wandered in the mountains and hills, entering ecstatic states, attempted to revive the myth of Dionysos roaming with *nymphs*⁵². Common elements in Dionysian festivals, frequently depicted in pottery paintings, included night ceremonies, musical competitions, and orgiastic rites involving

⁴⁶ Emir 2020, 102.

⁴⁷ Dionysos' female followers were known as *Maenads* or *Bacchantes*. They are derived from *Nymphs* and are driven mad by the god of ecstasy. Female followers of the cult of Dionysos attempted to imitate the erratic behaviour of their deity (Grimal 1990, 255). Festival participants, much like in a theatrical performance, would dress as mythological beings and behave like them. Each sequence of the rituals was enacted as if it were a different scene, embodying a distinct stage of the performance.

⁴⁸ Otto 1954, 140.

⁴⁹ Dionysian Festivals: Lenaia (Λήναια), Anthesteria (Ἀνθεστήρια), Agrionia (ἀγρώνια), Rural Dionysia (Διονύσια τὰ κατ' ἄγρους), City Dionysia (Διονύσια τὰ ἐν ἄστει).

⁵⁰ Pickard 1968, 29.

⁵¹ Pickard 1968, 41.

⁵² Otto 1954, 80-81.

maenads and *satyrs*. These artistic representations often portrayed women dancing passionately around altars, accompanied by flute and tambourine players, and individuals bearing the thyrsus, a staff associated with Dionysos and his followers⁵³.

Another important religious event is the feast of *Anthesteria* (Ἀνθεστήρια). During the celebration, samples of the new wine were offered to Dionysos in his temple⁵⁴. Notably, slaves were allowed to participate in the feast, ensuring the involvement of all social class in the festival. A key element of the festival was a ship procession, organized as a re-enactment of the myth of Dionysos' ascent from the sea—a story symbolizing the god's arrival and the introduction of viticulture⁵⁵. This procession, along with other ritualistic elements, contributed to the theatrical nature of the festival, making Anthesteria another significant event featuring performative aspects in ancient Hellen religious practice.

The *Agrionia* (ἄγριώνια) Festival consisted of a series of rituals characterized by ecstatic behaviour among female participants. Some scholars have speculated that early forms of the festival may have involved human sacrifice⁵⁶, possibly including cannibalism, though concrete evidence for this is limited. The festival's mythological foundation lies in the story of the three daughters of Minyas, who, according to legend, lost their minds and developed a desire to consume human flesh. In their frenzy, they allegedly cut up and ate one of their own children, mirroring events depicted in Euripides' play *The Bacchae*. This myth was ritually re-enacted in Orchomenus⁵⁷, where each year, the priest of Dionysos, wielding a sword, would chase the purported descendants of Minyas during the ritual night⁵⁸. Tradition held that if the priest caught one of these descendants, he would kill them as punishment for their ancestors' actions. However, given the theatrical nature of many Dionysian rituals, it is possible to interpret this chase as a dramatic performance rather than an actual act of violence. The dramatic elements of this ritual - the chase, the threat of violence, and the reenactment of mythological events - suggest that the *Agrionia* Festival, like many Dionysian celebrations, had strong theatrical components. This interpretation aligns with the broader understanding of ancient Hellen religious festivals as precursors to formalized theatrical performances.

The *Rural Dionysia* (Διονύσια τὰ κατ' ἄγρου) was celebrated in the countryside of Athens. The festival was celebrated in a theatrical setting, harmonized with local elements, in the villages of Athens and Attica's rural areas for long periods. Local communities gathered for processions, theatrical performances, and feasting. After the procession, ritualistic drinking parties called *kōmos* (κῶμος) were organized to honour Dionysos. According to Aristotle, comedy originated from these drinking parties⁵⁹. Comedy and tragedy plays, thought to have originated from the *Rural Dionysia*, were received with great interest in urban life. Thus, the importance of festivals increased rapidly. Tragedy playwrights acquired a large-scale environment to showcase their plays in



Fig. 10. Theatrical ensemble in costume and tragic masks as satyrs, accompanied by actors surrounding an aulos player, ca. IVth Century BCE (Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples NM 81673)

⁵³ Parke 1977, 106.

⁵⁴ Simon 1983, 92.

⁵⁵ Pickard 1968, 10-11.

⁵⁶ Burkert 1985, 163.

⁵⁷ Orchomenos (Ορχομενός): A city in ancient Boeotia, Hellas, which was said to be the birthplace of the Minyans, a mythical tribe.

⁵⁸ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 112.

⁵⁹ Arist. *Poet.* IV. 15.

many regions. *Rural Dionysia* is probably a reinterpretation of a primitive harvest festival within local and temporal conditions. Comedy and tragedy plays could be a systematic form of the shows performed at Dionysian festivals and celebrations⁶⁰ (Fig. 10). In the Vth century BCE, the systematic showcasing of comedy and tragedy elements to the public during festivals confirms this idea as an organized event⁶¹.

City Dionysia (Διονύσια τὰ ἐν ἄστει), which was the largest and latest celebrated festival compared to the rural Dionysia in Athens, is much more grand and large-scale. During the festival celebrations, organized choral songs, dances, and mythical narratives were brought to life, which were performed at the Lenaia and the *Rural Dionysia* festivals. However, it is believed that the Dionysos Eleuthrai cult and the *City Dionysia* festival ceremonies evolved into stage performances and the birth of theatre culture⁶². The famous poet of the time, Thespis⁶³, allocated a significant portion of dialogues in the texts he wrote for the *City Dionysia* festival plays and managed to create a character structure by dressing the chorus in appropriate costumes and masks⁶⁴. Character development resulted in the concept of an actor finding a field of existence, and stage development triggered the development dynamics of the theatre. The emergence and development of the theatre on the southern slope of the Acropolis and right next to the temple of Dionysos should not be considered a coincidence⁶⁵. As part of the festival and holiday organization, announcements were sent to poets and writers in the Hellenic region requesting them to write play scripts. The selection was made from the scripts received from the writers, and the one that was appropriate for the festival was adapted into a theatrical production. The shows featured comedy, tragedy, satyr, and various competitions. Since stage performances were open to everyone, a budget was allocated from the funds collected by the festival participants to cover the entrance fee for those who could not afford it⁶⁶. Therefore, the theatre productions had a large group of spectators. Within the framework of the construction programme initiated by Pericles after the Hellenic League-Persian Wars, agons were organised in the Odeon structure built in 446 BCE. The artists who would participate on stage performed their ceremonial and publicity walks in the Odeon complex under wearing ornate dresses. In the urban Dionysian musicals, like in the *Pythian* plays organised in the name of Apollo, numerous musicians such as flautists, singers and kithara players participated.

The Theatre: Architectural manifestation of a socio-mythological concept

Throughout biological evolution, humans have increasingly lived in communities, both in the primate phase and after the transition to Homo Sapiens. Living in communities has led to socialization and, subsequently, the phenomenon of cultural evolution. Art, undeniably, stands as a cornerstone of this cultural progression. In the prehistoric era, before the advent of writing, artistic expression manifested through cave paintings, melodies played on primitive instruments, and elements of oral literature. After the introduction of writing to human life, literary genres gradually emerged. As civilizations grew more complex, so did their artistic

⁶⁰ Pickard 1968, 58.

⁶¹ Margarete Bieber asserts that Greek tragic drama fundamentally constituted a sacred ritual observance conducted in reverence of the divine (Bieber 1961, 22).

⁶² Parke 1977, 105.

⁶³ He was the first person to introduce a character distinct from the chorus in a dramatic performance, a revolutionary step in the development of Hellenic theatre. This novelty is thought to have taken place in the VIth century BCE (c. 534 BCE), during the rule of the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus. Prior to his time, dramatic performances were primarily choral, with a group of singers narrating the action through song and dance. He revolutionized the art form by introducing a single actor who would step out from the chorus and engage in dialogue with it, allowing for more vivid portrayals of dramatic interaction and conflict. Innovation enabled the development of more complex storytelling and character creation, as Thespis also utilized masks to allow actors to play multiple roles and differentiate between characters. By doing so, he paved the way for the evolution of tragedy and the creation of fully realized characters and narratives (Bieber 1961, 19).

⁶⁴ Parke 1977, 105.

⁶⁵ Simon 1983, 104.

⁶⁶ Nilsson 1949, 254-255.

expressions. Tragedy, one of the most significant cultural branches of ancient times in the ancient Hellen world, emerged after religious rituals and was crowned with the concept of theatre. Due to its social nature and formation, the theatre has drawn a profile closely related to the experiences of society. Ancient Hellas' cosmopolitan structure also influenced theatre and led to a similar evolutionary path⁶⁷.

Theatre is a social structure, both architecturally and intellectually. At its most basic level, it involves a gathering ceremony followed by a cultural activity. After acquiring architectural norms, theatre evolved into a cultural and urban unit serving the purpose of collective gathering and communal events. It directly interacts with the socio-cultural fabric of its time. The concept of socio-cultural structure is the whole of traditions, norms, understandings and rules that emerge as a result of human social interaction. It is defined as the series of relationships that arise as a result of this whole's control over social life. Socio-cultural structures can be considered as institutional structures that synthesise social and cultural norms within themselves⁶⁸. Numerous individuals act according to behavioural patterns created by social parameters. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explained this phenomenon with the concept of habitus⁶⁹, which is translated as internalized tendencies.⁷⁰ According to Bourdieu, every action individuals take has reflections created by social structures in their subconscious mind⁷¹. Every behavioural tendency from daily life to politics, architecture, and culture is under the influence of habitus. The individual now turns into a social form and puts their thoughts into action within its sphere of influence. It is impossible to think of theatre as a product of social and cultural harmony independent of this concept. Many socio-cultural phenomena, products of ancient Hellen society, have presented the idea and concrete existence of theatre as a form of social production within the framework of structural action theory⁷². The stages of socio-cultural formation emerged through the combination of various fragmented and composite structures to form a meaningful unity. The ancient Hellen theatrical form is the result of different cultural and sociological fragments coming together to create a meaningful whole. Structuralist thought, which focuses on constructing a meaningful structure by incorporating elements that lack significance on their own but attain significance when paired with other components, is analogous to the emergence of any element that lacks significance on its own but contributes to the meaningful structure when paired with other components⁷³. A theatre is a structural form that embodies both abstract and tangible elements in a structuralist fashion. The socio-cultural stages of development and production are an expanded schema of the practicalities of ancient life. They reflect the societal manifestations of moral, political, and everyday behaviours and activities. Key concepts within these stages include agricultural society and economy, rituals and practices related to fertility, ceremonial gatherings, political elements, the concepts of *arete* and *praxis*, the urban way of life, and the ancient Hellen idea of polis governance. In the structure of theatre, these elements contribute to semantic production and meaning-making processes. Therefore, the socio-cultural roots of theatre's development and production can be traced back to the essential aspects of human existence, such as place and its resulting urbanism, as well as religious beliefs.⁷⁴ The concept of theatre is not only architectural but also a cultural process since

⁶⁷ Emir 2020, 145-146.

⁶⁸ Emir 2020, 145-146.

⁶⁹ Bourdieu's concept of habitus explains how individuals internalize social structures, which then guide their actions and perceptions. This is formed through a process of internalizing external social structures. This means that as individuals grow up and interact with their environment, they absorb and incorporate the norms, values, and practices of their social context. Internalization happens largely unconsciously, through repeated experiences and observations. Theatrical practices and audience behaviours are shaped by internalized social norms. Theatre itself becomes a space where habitus is both expressed and reinforced.

⁷⁰ Bourdieu 1980, 37.

⁷¹ Bourdieu 1980, 37-38.

⁷² Emir 2020, 146-147.

⁷³ Lévi-Strauss 2012.

⁷⁴ Emir 2020, 146.

its beginning. There was a need for a space to host gatherings and festivals, and Hellen city planners and architects added the theatre structure to the founding elements of the polis.

The structure is the concretisation of an abstract idea and its placement on an existential base. It is the bringing together of the whole and harmoniously fitting it into a certain system. The connected parts in the system are harmonised by becoming integrated with the concept of structure⁷⁵. Architectural elements were born due to the need of human society to express itself in a concrete form. These architectural structures have been made for a specific purpose and the goal is to create a barrier between people and the chaotic environment of the outside world in the area in question⁷⁶. Distancing from the ordinary and being able to touch a spiritual dimension are essential dynamics of religious or cultural structures that break the daily routine cycle. Concepts exist due to human needs and find their meaning in human perception. The social structure, which is an abstract concept, gains cultural function and becomes concrete by transforming into an architectural construction, creating harmony where abstract and concrete mix⁷⁷. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one of the famous phenomenological and existentialist thinkers, explained the fragile existence of man in the world with the idea that existence is spatial⁷⁸. The conceptual and concrete existences converge in a single structure, much like consciousness and the body. Theatre can serve as an example of this intersection between art and architecture. As humans have become more detached from nature, they have drawn subjective boundaries for themselves through structures. From a biological standpoint, humans are short-lived and unable to leave a physical mark on the world. This transience has prompted different interpretations of permanence. The creation of structures is linked to the desire to leave a mark, as well as to draw subjective boundaries. Abstract conceptual structures and concrete architectural structures are among the most significant symbolic markers of human existence. Structures built consciously serve as a subjective boundary between humans and what is deemed to be the unconsciousness of nature. As a result, humans have developed a way of life independent of nature. Structure, which is embodied by abstract thought, has become a concept that separates humans from nature or places them in a special position by distinguishing them. The concept of structure, as one of the most important symbols representing the new order created by humans, has established an alternative living space to nature⁷⁹.

The theatre in the ancient world had a significant connection to the urban fabric, beyond its relationship with structure and architecture. The emergence of specialization and division of labour in urban life resulted in a theatrical social structure. As a result, people were able to transcend uniform or limited identities and achieve a variety of perspectives. According to the principle of diversity in the city, structures with specific functions emerged⁸⁰. Socio-cultural developments positively affected the architecture of material civilisation. It has already been mentioned that the origin of urban rituals, one of the representatives of the socio-cultural structure, is based on seasonal rituals and fertility rites in the village. Village inhabitants transitioned from simple, isolated identities to becoming part of a broader socio-political cycle. Role ownership in society resulted in a more actualised social identity. As a result, a suitable environment for the development of the theatre was already established when the rituals were systematically brought to the urban stage.

The primary element that shaped the concept of theatre is religion. In the ancient social structure, religion and the rituals that can be considered as the practical aspect of religion served as the mortar. Rituals have been a major part of life in both ancient and modern times. The understanding of rituals, which

⁷⁵ Kortanoğlu 2015, 86-87.

⁷⁶ Emir 2020, 147.

⁷⁷ Emir 2020, 147.

⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty 2013, 22.

⁷⁹ Emir 2020, 147-149.

⁸⁰ Mumford 2007, 140.

originated from a religious paradigm, has evolved into a multifaceted concept today. Various modern practices, such as dancing, athletes' celebratory movements during competitions, military parades, and other celebrations, can be considered theatrical, whether participants realize it or not⁸¹. Since the Upper Paleolithic period, humans who were intensively affected by nature have sought ways to distance themselves from it through various actions. As a result of their lack of epistemological knowledge about the workings of nature, they came to believe that the orders of the world were controlled by superior forces. They engaged in various actions to please and gain the approval of the supernatural beings they believed had powers over nature. These actions, such as ensuring a successful hunt, became repeated and advanced into the basic starting point of rituals. Myths were often created to enrich and establish a specific foundation for rituals. As myths were passed down through generations and enacted by real people, belief in the worshipped superior powers grew, expanding mythology's influence. Societies and belief practices became more complex, leading to audience integration in rituals. Mythological stories developed alongside increasingly sophisticated rituals, eventually giving rise to a need for theatrical performances independent of religious ceremonies⁸². Consequently, the earliest and most primitive examples of theatre began to emerge. Elements used in rituals such as music, dance, masks, costumes, participants, and spectators accelerated the formation of theatre as a distinct art form⁸³.

The main point where theatre interacts with religion is through the cult and ritual understanding of Dionysos, widely recognized as the source of theatre's birth. It can be said that understanding the Dionysian worldview is the key to comprehending theatre dynamics, rather than focusing solely on the content or application of rituals. From this perspective, concentrating on Dionysianism, rather than the rituals' details, seems to be a more appropriate approach. Apollo, in contrast, represents the tangible manifestation of the Hellen ideal in thought. In Hellen mythology, Apollo symbolizes moderation, serenity born of knowledge, and enlightenment. However, some philosophers argue that the harmony with nature imposed by Apollonian thought cannot go beyond imitation⁸⁴. The notion that the sharp boundaries of Apollonian thought may not be sufficient stems from recognizing the limits of consciousness, which are not fully predictable. Concepts like "know yourself" and "maintain boundaries" from the ancient Hellen world are embodied in Apollo, the god of light. In this way, Apollo represents the elite, saturated, and aristocratic thinking of the time. Apollo acts as a guide to traditional understandings of ancient Hellen culture. Dionysos, on the other hand, is characterized by an entirely opposite nature. The key concept for the god of wine is "ecstasy." Ecstasy occurs when an individual transcends the limits of the perceivable, tangible world and merges their existence with the divine. In this state, individuals lose themselves, assuming a new identity, much like in a theatrical performance. Through the consumption of wine, participation in orgies, or indulgence in lust, worshippers eliminate all boundaries, becoming one with Dionysos and nature⁸⁵. At this stage, individuality disappears, replaced by collective unity with Dionysos. The breaking down of these boundaries allows individuals to escape the societal pressures of daily life by participating in cult rituals. Dionysian ecstasy dissolves the class distinctions between humans and gods. The *Maenads'* madness births a new Dionysos within them, as the god captures minds through wine⁸⁶. Nietzsche suggests that the exuberance, indulgence, intoxication, and emotional release encouraged by the Dionysian approach are more in line with the spirit of music and tragedy. Theatre, which requires emotional intensity, finds its embodiment in Dionysos, who takes control of the mind through wine⁸⁷. Despite being seen as foreign and

⁸¹ Emir 2020, 151.

⁸² Emir 2020, 152.

⁸³ Brockett 2000, 18.

⁸⁴ Nietzsche 2018, 23.

⁸⁵ Nietzsche 2018, 22-23.

⁸⁶ Girard 2003, 183.

⁸⁷ Nietzsche 2018, 32.

initially facing resistance and being labeled barbaric, the Dionysian belief system eventually gained widespread acceptance, in contrast to the limited reach of the Apollonian approach. The inclusion of women and slaves in the Dionysian cult, the reduction of social pressures, and the creation of a relatively free environment are some factors that help explain its extensive influence. In Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, the breakdown of social hierarchies such as age, gender, and wealth within the Dionysian cult is emphasized⁸⁸. In cult practices, traditional hierarchies lost their significance, creating a relatively free environment where individuals could express themselves without the societal pressures of everyday life⁸⁹.

Conclusion

Throughout human history, rituals have always been a part of societies and have played important roles in the continuation of daily life. Another benefit of rituals is that they accelerate the dynamics of social solidarity and instill a sense of belonging in people living in the same settlement. Thus, ritual actions have served as the cement that holds and strengthens the social structure together. The importance of rituals has increased the pace of development of cults and religions, resulting in the establishment of systematic and institutional infrastructures for them. The ancient Hellen world also benefited from these developments and acquired a deep mythological foundation⁹⁰.

Rituals are a means for archaic humans to imitate the gods and transcend the mundane world to reach divine thought. The ritual space is transformed into a symbolically sacred centre, where believers perform their actions in a theatrical atmosphere. Every ritual is based on an archetypal divine model: "In the beginning, we must repeat what the gods did." This Indian idiom summarizes the fundamental idea behind various cultures' rituals. The Ancient Hellenes also followed this approach and transformed myths and rituals into practical. In their staged plays, they embodied characters through mask, dance, music, and costumes. Theatrical performances were traditionally recognized events presented in a predetermined space to audiences, whether as personal or group activities. The need for ritual space could be one of the underlying reasons for the development of theatre.

Starting from the VIth century BCE, Dionysos and his followers, who kept his ideas alive, gained a powerful position in both social and political terms in mainland Hellas. Despite entering the mythological universe quite late, the wine god, whose number of believers increased rapidly, reached a level where he could challenge Apollo, the manifestation of the idealized Hellen identity. Despite Apollo, the owner of Delphi; which shaped the Hellenic geography and claimed to be the centre of the world, and his strong push, Dionysos' rise could not be stopped, despite the politicized oracle power. The increasing power and nonconformist identity of the god of ecstasy may have rendered the classical Hellen temple format, with its relatively oppressive atmosphere and representational structure of traditional myths, insufficient. The relationship between the orchestra and its connection to Dionysian rituals, which is considered the heart of the early theatre structure, along with the *thymele*⁹¹ located near the edge of the orchestra's circumference and the priests, who were the earthly representatives of the wine god, being hosted in the most magnificent *prohedra*⁹² seats closest to the plays hierarchically, all support this idea. Grand celebrations and contests were arranged in ancient Hellas to honour significant Olympian deities, such as Athena, Apollo, Demeter, Dionysos, Poseidon, and Zeus. However, festivals dedicated solely to Dionysos, with their rituals and

⁸⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* IV-22.

⁸⁹ Girard 2003, 180.

⁹⁰ Emir 2020, 199.

⁹¹ In the ancient Hellen theatre, the platform situated at the center or at the periphery of the orchestra served as a venue for ritualistic offerings, referred to as an altar.

⁹² In the ancient Hellen theatre, a distinctive and elaborately designed seat of distinction was reserved for esteemed individuals, including high-ranking officials, dignitaries, and members of the Dionysian priesthood. This privileged seating arrangement served as a visible manifestation of the honored guests elevated social status, underscoring their importance within the community and their connection to the sacred rituals associated with the worship of Dionysos.

characters, went beyond the routine annual re-enactments. The key to the cult was hidden in the ecstatic rituals. Ecstasy, in its dictionary meaning, refers to an individual transcending the limits of the tangible world that can be perceived through the senses and integrating their existence with the divine dimension. It is like assuming the profile of a different identity, like actors in theatre, by extinguishing one's own existence.

Moreover, the concepts of religion and art have primarily been fueled by the same fear. As the only species aware of death, humans have been motivated to devise things that will help lessen this fear. Similar existential problems can be found in the ancient Hellen world as well. Tragedy and mythology have caused a significant impact on the subconscious, creating a sense of transience stemming from the fear of death. For example, Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex" deals with similar ideas. Oedipus can be seen as a metaphor used by the famous tragedian to describe the predicament of humanity. In the play, Sophocles expresses this idea through the following quote:

"You have thrust your own eyes out so that you cannot see the evil you have done, or where you dwell, or with whom; your eyes will never again behold the light of day. A creature with a fate as terrible as yours has never walked on the earth".

Nietzsche expressed a parallel idea through the dialogue between King Midas and Silenus. The Phrygian king asked Silenos, who was one of Dionysos' friends, what the ideal thing for a human being is. Silenus responded as follows:

"Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? The very best thing for you is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. The second best thing for you, however, is within your reach—to die soon".

One possible reason behind the exaggerated actions performed in Dionysian rituals could be related to the fears and anxieties that the participants had to confront. The wine god, like humans, has a mythology that portrays him as a figure who faces his own existence, suffers, and confronts death. He is a figure that is contrary to the nature of the divine. Similar fears and anxieties were often discussed in Hellen culture. The dynamic plotlines of the Dionysian mythology and its significance as a source for literary forms such as dithyrambs and tragedies have contributed to its enduring legacy. Behind a concrete architectural element such as the theatre, there are abstract concepts such as Dionysos, his cult, attributed rituals and mythology, the biggest socio-cultural factor. The god continued his presence in the theatre architecture. The altar attributed to him, called *thymele*, was positioned in or near the circular orchestra. Dionysian priests were allocated places in the ornate *prohedria* seats, or, as in the Priene theatre, seats were dedicated directly to the god.

Some theatre buildings were connected to the temple of Dionysos through a direct passage. In this way, the triangle of Dionysian festivals, tragedy and theatre developed by feeding each other cyclically⁹³. The theatre building could also be viewed as a cult building devoted to Dionysos, both abstractly and concretely, based on the existing proof. The emergence of theatre from the Hellenic world was not surprising. The policy of the city administration to encourage tragedy plays, the development of dialogue and polyphony after the emergence of democracy, the possession of mythological elements that can be a rich source of plays, the mild climate that encourages open-air organizations, the performance and competition culture of the ancient Hellen people, the intensity of holiday celebrations and religious rituals that converge to theatrical performance, such as the cult of Dionysos, stand out as the main socio-cultural reasons for the

⁹³ The passage suggests that Dionysian festivals, tragedy, and theatre developed in a cyclical manner, each feeding into the others.

theatre to find a field of existence⁹⁴.

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