The city of theater was Athens. Athens birthed drama, bred drama, and ultimately was responsible for cultivating it into the premiere art of the Classical world—at least according to Greek philosopher Aristotle. Famous playwrights such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, and Euripides all came from this city. And from Athens drama spread throughout the Greek world. No city-state ever took the moniker of the "city of theater" from Athens.

The word "theater" comes from the Greek word *theatron*. The Greek "-tron" loosely translates as "an instrument for", while "thea-" means "viewing." Thus literally, a *theatron* is a place or instrument for viewing purposes—i.e., a theater. It seems fitting that theater would have thus evolved in ancient Athens: from the Acropolis, the highest point in the city, dedicated to the goddess Athena and the central space of the sacred Dionysian festivals, one can view almost the entirety of Greece's golden age.
Thespis of Athens and the Origins of Greek Theater
Greek theater is believed to have been born in the 6th century BC, with arguments that Thespis of Athens initially created the art (though this is still up for debate).

- Ancient Greek Theater and the Monumental Amphitheaters in Honor of Dionysus
- Christians Buried the ‘Immoral’ Theater of Emerita Augusta, But the Grand Monument Would Rise Again

While the exact origins of the practice are uncertain, the relationship between acts and props of tragic performances have been examined under the microscope of the ecstatic rites associated with the god Dionysus. Dionysus, god of wine, pleasure, fertility of the earth, and frenzied spiritual enlightenment, was considered even by the ancient Greeks to have been a foreign import—either a god sent on a journey of discovery, or one of exotic import with strange, unusual rituals. These rituals consisted of heavy intoxication of both men and women—though women became more commonly associated with Dionysus—who paraded around in the dark of the night in costume and masks, indulging sexual pleasures alongside their god. At Dionysus’ base, he is believed to have been merely a god of drunkenness. At his core, however, there is much research (by this author as well) into his worship as a means to attain a higher level of spirituality.
Important Elements to Greek Theater

While the extent to which early tragedy borrowed from Dionysus’ traditions remains unclear, the basics are evident: performers (who danced as much as they acted) donned masks and costumes and followed a mythological script that relied heavily on the dichotomy between gods and men. The catharsis at the end of tragic plays—a resolution that, while not always pleasant, brought an end to the crisis depicted in the play—can be associated with the enlightenment that participation in Dionysus’ cult was intended to bring.

However, the aforementioned masks were especially important in the practice of performance—maybe more-so than in the Dionysian rituals—as they were a way to ensure with absolute certainty that the actors could take on any guise necessary. Whether this guise was human, god, demi-god, or monster was valuable to the tale being told, and thus masks were central to the theatrics of all performances.

Many masks survive, as well as literary descriptions of the masks and artistic recreations in frescoes and vase paintings. One can see the evidence of the importance of masks at almost any surviving theater—Greek or Roman (as the Romans borrowed heavily from Greek drama before devising their own). Statues depicting the grotesquely laughing, crying, or raging masks stare down at innocent viewers, their lips largely engorged and eyes so rounded and saucer-like, one would think the mask itself had a mind of its own.
The sections of the ancient Greek theater were as follows:

- **Orchestra:** the "dancing space" in which the chorus, responsible for the narration of the text, would sing, dance, and interact with the actors.
- **Theatron:** the location of the audience.
- **Skene:** translated literally as the "tent"; this is the building that stands behind the stage that usually serves as a backdrop.
- **Parados:** the pathways between the chorus and the actors.

Sculptures of theater masks dating from the Hellenistic period. Currently on display in Room 30 of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. (CC BY-SA 3.0)
Tragedy, Comedy, and Short Satyr Plays

Yet drama in ancient Greece was not only tragic. In fact, it had three basic forms: tragedy, comedy, and shorter satyr plays. Tragedy and comedy were at the core of ancient theater, however tragedy dealt primarily with the human condition depicted through mythological scenes, while comedy dared to question and mock the political leaders in its early years. Tragedy originated before comedy, explaining again the Dionysian elements that permeate the comedic shows as well, while satyr plays incorporated elements of both.

Comedy changed rather drastically through the centuries. Early plays such as Aristophanes’ Lysistrata made a mockery of the supposed lack in leaders and warriors because comedies “legally” made fun of and insulted leaders in the early years (referred to as “Old Comedy”). The 4th century saw a shift from a focus on the powerful to an emphasis on the common. Menander (342-290 BC) is credited with this new form of comedy, from which it has been argued the genre of “sitcom” was born.
The significance of theater in Classical Athens (in particular) grew stronger following the war with the Persian Empire. After Persia essentially decimated Athens in 480 BC, Athens rebuilt the agora to be what it is remembered today: a work of unequivocal artistry, representing their patron goddess Athena in all her golden glory inside the mighty Parthenon. With this reconstruction process, set into motion by the tyrant and former strategos (general) Pericles, the emphasis on theater was further heightened. Theater became one of the central aspects of social and religious festivals in Athens. The festival of Dionysus in Athens set three playwrights against one another each year, and whoever won the favor of the judges went home with a prize worth more than gold by ancient Athenian standards: a bronze tripod cauldron, and more prestige than he could handle.
The playwrights most often discussed by Classical scholars—and with good reason—are Aeschylus (524-456 BC), Sophocles (496-406 BC), Euripides (484-407 BC) and Aristophanes. Each of these playwrights introduced something new to Athenian drama when their plays were chosen as the best, and it is largely because of these writers that theater developed into the way it is now. For example, performances of Shakespeare’s plays might have only consisted of one actor playing a variety of roles behind masks if not for Aeschylus’ addition of a second actor, and then Sophocles’ addition of a third. Scenery might have been entirely left to the audience’s imagination if Sophocles had not also begun to add painted backgrounds to his works.

- Ancient History of Cross-Dressing: From Ancient Religions to the Theaters
- The Controversial Plays of Aristophanes: How the Ancient Greek Father of Comedy Created a Legacy

A marble relief of a poet, perhaps the playwright Sophocles. (Public Domain)

Disappointingly, Euripides’ body of work from the 5th century BC is the last fully preserved corpus of ancient Greek dramatic material discovered to date; this makes tracing the various stages in which drama changed over the centuries harder to track.

Thanks in large part to the Romans’ appreciation for Greek culture, much of early Greek drama was translated into Latin for reuse before or around 240 BC. Soon after this, the date is once again uncertain. Romans began developing their own forms of tragedy and comedy, albeit less philosophically inclined. When Christianity took hold of the Empire, Roman theater—the last remnant of Greek theater—played its last performance, essentially closing the book on ancient drama.
Top image: Mosaic, shown Gargoyles in form of Theatrical masks of Tragedy and Comedy. Roman artwork, 2nd century AD. Source: Public Domain

By Ryan Stone

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Riley Winters is a recent graduate from Christopher Newport University with a degree in Classical Studies and Art History, and a Medieval and Renaissance Studies minor. She will be attending the University of Glasgow in 2015 for Celtic and Viking Archaeology... Read More

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ANCIENT IMAGE GALLERIES
Theater played an important role in ancient Greece. History of the Greek theatre started with festivals held in honor of their gods honoring their gods. A god, Dionysus, was honored with a festival called by “City Dionysia”. In the days of Solon, people were often to be seen wandering around the streets during the festival of Dionysus, god of wine. Unfortunately, there are no physical remains of ancient Greek masks as they were made of organic materials and not considered permanent objects. Nevertheless, the mask is known to have been used since the time of Aeschylus, an ancient Greek tragedian and considered to be one of the iconic conventions of classical Greek theatre. Greek theater is believed to have been born in the 6th century BC, with arguments that Thespis of Athens initially created the art (though this is still up for debate). Ancient Greek Theater and the Monumental Amphitheaters in Honor of Dionysus. Christians Buried the ‘Immoral’ Theater of Emerita Augusta, But the Grand Monument Would Rise Again. Disappointingly, Euripides’ body of work from the 5th century BC is the last fully preserved corpus of ancient Greek dramatic material discovered to date; this makes tracing the various stages in which drama changed over the centuries harder to track. Thanks in large part to the Romans’ appreciation for Greek culture, much of early Greek drama was translated into Latin for reuse before or around 240 BC. Ancient Greek drama was a theatrical culture that flourished in ancient Greece from 600 BC. The city-state of Athens, which became a significant cultural, political, and military power during this period, was its centre, where the theatre was institutionalised as part of a festival called the Dionysia, which honoured the god Dionysus. Tragedy (late 500 BC), comedy (490 BC), and the satyr play were the three dramatic genres to emerge there. Athens exported the festival to its numerous colonies. The use of masks in ancient Greek theater draw their origin from the ancient Dionysian cult. Thespis was the first writer, who used a mask. The members of the chorus wore masks, usually similar to each other but completely different from the leading actors. Picture 1 portrays a sort of mask suitable for the chorus. Some people claim that the masks had one more significance: they added resonance to the voice of an actor so that everyone in the huge ancient theater could hear him (Baldry 1971). I do not quite agree with that point of view. I think it’s enough for someone to attend a modern performance of a play in the ancient theater of Epidaurus to feel the perfection of the acoustics in an ancient theater. Even the audience of the last
row can hear a whisper from the orchestra. Log in. Get started. Ancient Greek Theatre: Masks and Costumes. HH. Published with reusable license by Hannah H. Because they were not made to last, no masks have survived the test of time. We know they were used from depictions such as on pieces of pottery. Masks. • Used to enhance emotions and expressions.