

## GREEK THEATRE BETWEEN ANTIQUITY AND INDEPENDENCE

This first general history of Greek theatre from Hellenistic times to the foundation of the modern Greek state in 1830 marks a radical departure from traditional methods of historiography. We like to think of history unfolding continuously, in an evolutionary form, but the story of Greek theatre is rather different. After traditional theatre ended in the sixth and seventh centuries, no traditional drama was written or performed on stage throughout the Greek-speaking world for centuries because of the Orthodox Church's hostile attitude toward spectacles. With the reinvention of theatre in Renaissance Italy, however, Greek theatre was revived in Crete under Venetian rule in the late sixteenth century. The following centuries saw the restoration of Greek theatre at various locations, albeit characterized by numerous ruptures and discontinuities in terms of geography, stylistics, thematic approaches and ideologies. These diverse developments were only 'normalized' with the establishment of the Greek nation state.

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Walter Puchner, Assisted by Andrew White  
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GREEK THEATRE  
BETWEEN ANTIQUITY  
AND INDEPENDENCE

*A History of Reinvention from the Third  
Century BC to 1830*

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## *Preface*

If the story of Greek theatre from Hellenistic times to Independence, also known as the period of National Romanticism (third century BC–AD 1830), has not yet been told it is because it is utterly unique. It is not a conventional master narrative with the evidence organized in a convenient, self-developing evolutionary scheme because it must in some ways be a study in discontinuities. This may disappoint some readers' expectations because even though European theatre histories usually admit to a gap in the evidence between the seventh and tenth centuries AD, there is still a general consensus that there was some sort of continuous evolution in Western theatre from the early Middle Ages to our own times. There have been efforts recently to bridge this centuries-long gap methodologically, but the case of Greece is different. For although there is ample evidence for continuity of Greek as a spoken language, and to some extent of Greek-speaking culture from antiquity to the modern era, there is no hard evidence of continuity in traditional theatre. Accordingly, this study will serve to demonstrate why evolutionary theory has lost its prominence, and recommend a new approach to cultural historiography based on a closer, contextual analysis of the evidence.

Claims of continuity in Greek theatre and Greek culture have their roots in the appropriation of the Classical past for purposes of Greek state ideology in the nineteenth century – an appropriation that has attracted a lot of criticism. But the counter-theory, set up in its place, of complete cultural discontinuity ignores the fact that the culture of the Byzantine Empire (AD 330–1453) was rooted almost exclusively in Greek Antiquity. The present study will include a broader discussion of the issues underlying the concept of cultural continuity, which lies at the heart of evolutionary cultural theory. This study will also discuss the methodologies used in theatre historiography in general, because discontinuities like the ones addressed here should serve as an opportunity for reflection on our work.

With this in mind, the present study has two chief purposes: a) to explore the fate of Greek theatre between antiquity and the foundation of the Greek state in 1830, interrupted as it is by ruptures and discontinuities; and b) to create a solid framework for theoretical discussion of the continuity issue in the Greek cultural tradition. The goal will be to emphasize the exceptional nature of theatre and drama, which are seemingly not among those cultural sectors which can claim continuity down through the centuries. The history of Greek theatre after antiquity simply cannot be told using the traditional evolutionary methodology; rather it must be narrated by focusing on discrete, independent times and places, each of which operates along its own unique lines.

The point of departure for this study, the Hellenistic period, may in fact be a unique case in that we can observe how a theatrical tradition begins to fall into a state of decline. It is perhaps ironic that the period when Greek power and influence were at their height also represents a phase of cultural decay, and contradicts the chief assumption of evolutionary theory: that all cultural phenomena develop from primitive origins to perfection, from simplicity to sophistication. Upon closer examination, after a period of initial development the ancient theatre seems to head in the opposite direction, or at the very least develop differently: for although there is evidence of improvement in *opsis* (spectacle) and *hypocrisis* (the art of acting), the same does not necessarily hold true for dramatic poetry.

To establish where and how to post the chronological milestones in the present study, it begins by tracing the gradual dissolution of traditional Greek theatre and drama, followed by a description of its re-invention and complex, disjointed re-development from the Renaissance and Baroque eras to the nineteenth century. For it is only in the nineteenth century that Greek theatre history acquires a more 'normal' status, resembling that of other national theatre histories in Europe.

A precise date for the ultimate 'decline and fall' of traditional theatre, which occurs in the early centuries of the Byzantine Empire, is difficult to confirm. There is evidence of decline in civic euergetism and an increased reliance on imperial funds for local festivals – funds which could be easily withdrawn for political purposes. By this time the administration of theatre shows was largely in the hands of the Factions, politically connected organizations whose vast bureaucracy kept the stages and hippodromes running. It is clear that at some point, most likely in the early sixth century AD, funding for public games disappears – possibly as a cost-cutting measure under Emperor Justinian, who decimated the imperial treasury

with foreign wars and massive construction projects such as the cathedral of Hagia Sophia.

The consolidation of Modern Greek theatre, comparable to what happens in other European countries, is easier to fix chronologically: the foundation of the Greek nation as an independent state with its own territory and autonomous administration in 1830 is a significant milestone, coinciding as it does with the creation and publication of two highly influential dramas: *The Wanderer* by Panayotis Soutsos, a chief exponent of the ‘Athenian’ school of Greek Romanticism, which uses a more erudite language; and *Vasilikos* by Antonios Matesis, exponent of the Heptanesian, or ‘Ionian’ school (so called because of its origins in the Ionian islands), which used a less-sophisticated, demotic language. The uniqueness of Modern Greek theatre history lies in its geographical dispersion, thematic variety, stylistic shifts and diverse linguistic registers; these features, together with Greek theatre’s diverse modes of organization, would remain characteristic of Greece for much of the nineteenth century.

The chapters unfold in rough chronological order, but because of the diverse geographical locations involved, the content and structure of the chapters will be quite different. The Introduction, ‘Imagined Continuities’, discusses the concept of cultural continuity in the context of Greek state ideology in the nineteenth century, when Modern Greece presented itself as the heir of its ancient glory, giving it a position that was a priori superior to that of its Balkan neighbours as well as every other nation in Europe. Academic and political support for this concept was provided through folkloric studies and historiography, as well as the Philhellenism movement that swept through much of Europe. This ideological abuse of the past has been criticized severely, primarily by scholars in the field of social anthropology; their critiques, however, fail to consider Greece’s unique historical position, together with the political instability of this small, newly created nation, dependent as it was on the great powers for its survival. Moreover, the ideological use of mythical origins and glorious pasts was common to all European nation-states, and was practiced by all the Balkan countries during this period of national awakening. Still the fact remains that of all these national myths, Greek Antiquity was a reality recognized by everyone.

Criticism of Greece’s claims of cultural continuity has led to counter-claims of absolute discontinuity, which fail to account for the unique character of the Greek tradition in Europe. The orientation of Byzantine culture towards the Greek past and the absence of major cultural changes during the subsequent centuries of Ottoman rule contributed to a

situation in which numerous practices described in our sources from the nineteenth century onward – Greek folk culture, customs, institutions, magical practices, superstitions and *Weltanschauung* – actually had their roots in the first millennium AD if not before. Another unique feature of Greek cultural dynamics is the stability of the Orthodox Church, which (apart from the Iconoclastic crisis of the eighth and ninth centuries) endured without any Reformation or Counter-Reformation, let alone any of the reforms or restrictions on folk culture that are associated with the European Enlightenment. In fact, among the Greek community the Enlightenment was not as hostile to clerics or the church as it was in Catholic and Protestant countries. Evidence of Greek culture's uniqueness, its divergence from Western norms, is not taken seriously enough by the critics of Greece's nationalistic assertions of continuity. Although a critical re-examination of Modern Greece's arts and sciences is imperative, even within the context of nineteenth century state ideology it need not degenerate into counter-assertions of absolute discontinuity, since such assertions can be easily refuted.

There must be a critical survey of continuity theory and a differentiation of its modes, in order to understand the controversy over whether Byzantine culture – the vital link between the Hellenistic and National periods – had a theatre and a drama. In spite of continual efforts to convince readers of these genres' continuity, the lack of hard evidence in the primary sources argues strongly to the contrary. And yet, in spite of evidence for discontinuity in these specific genres, there is evidence that other, related aspects of Greek culture – i.e. language, eschatological imagination (i.e., visions of the underworld or afterlife), funeral rites, proverbs, etc. – survived intact both before and after Byzantine times.

The wide gap in evidence for traditional theatre, much longer than that in Western Europe, raises questions about our methodology and especially our concept of continuous evolution in theatre history. Greece offers a new paradigm of non-evolutionary theatre historiography, an approach made necessary in part because of our lack of evidence. This situation has consequences for cultural historiography in general, because in situations where there is a less significant gap in evidence, continuity is still either assumed or constructed, in order to justify an evolutionary theory that we regard, for some reason, as essential to telling the 'history' of anything.

Chapter 1 highlights different aspects of Greek theatre from the Hellenistic period to its gradual disappearance, which coincided with the condemnation of the Fathers of the early church. The process is a long one, but in the end it was not Christianity that succeeded in closing the public

theatres; rather, the cause can be traced to a fundamental restructuring of the institutional framework for festivals and performances. These changes reflected a radically changing cosmopolitan environment marked by, among other things, a change from polis to empire; a change from amateur citizens as actors to professional and itinerant ‘Artisans of Dionysus’; from once-only productions to repertory theatre; and last but not least, the change from tragedy and comedy to less-sophisticated and less literary forms of popular theatre such as mime and pantomime. Meanwhile there is ample evidence for an awareness of the theatricality of public life from the Hellenistic period onward, for this was the period when the metaphor of the world as a theatre and life as a drama was first articulated.

Chapter 2 addresses the issue of Byzantine theatre and drama, providing a detailed analysis of the various reasons, theological and otherwise, for a decline of ancient theatre and its diminishing significance. If the ecumenical councils can be taken as evidence of theatrical activity, long after Justinian’s closure of state-funded theatres a certain class of artists continues to flourish – on the streets and possibly in private venues – until at least the Quinisext Council, also known as *In Trullo* (691 BC–AD 2). During the early church’s struggles, show business and theatrical performances were positioned as the last bastion of paganism, and were therefore attacked mercilessly. But beyond these theological issues, the question of theatre and drama’s existence in Byzantine times is complicated by semantic shifts in the usage of basic theatre vocabulary – *theatron*, *drama*, *skēnē*, etc. The epigraphic evidence for the decline of show business in the first centuries AD is substantial: for centuries, no real drama was written in Greek, and even dialogic *cento* poems like the *Christos Paschōn* have little relation to stage production. There is evidence for a variety of forms of performativity in other cultural sectors, but there is no trace of organized public theatre performances.

The re-invention of Greek theatre can be credited to Crete under Venetian rule at some point during the sixteenth century, the subject of Chapter 3. It begins with a brief analysis of this complex society situated at the crossroads of East and West, a bilingual and bi-confessional culture which nurtured artists and scholars such as the painter El Greco, the musician Nikolaos Leontaritis, the philologist Francesco Porto, the dramatist Georgios Chortatsis, and the poet Vincenzo Cornaros. Theatre and drama were imported to Crete from the Italy of the late Renaissance and early Baroque, along with some elements of the Mannerist school. Although the way in which they were imported remains unclear, from the end of the sixteenth century to 1669 (when Crete fell to the Ottoman Empire after

the twenty-four-year siege of Candia, modern-day Iraklio), a large number of plays were written and produced. The list includes tragedies, comedies, pastoral dramas, religious dramas and even interludes. Only eight plays from this period are extant, and they constitute the most important legacy of Cretan literature. Some of these plays had important after-lives in the oral tradition, but evidence for their performances is rare and both theatre performances and dramatic literature ended with the fall of Crete to the Ottomans in 1669. Still, because of their literary qualities these surviving plays have been the subject of significant scholarship.

The Ionian islands are the subject of Chapter 4; they were in some way the heirs of Cretan theatre, and there is possible evidence for theatre there in the sixteenth century. This leads us to assume that there was theatrical activity in this seven-island region (hence their other name, 'Heptanesos') contemporaneously with Crete, both being under Venetian rule. After the fall of the Cretan capital of Candia in 1669 many refugees travelled to the Ionian islands and settled there, taking their theatrical traditions with them. The islands of Corfu, Zante and Cefalonia are the only places in Greece with a stable local theatre tradition from the sixteenth century until the eve of World War II. Here the Venetian influence is even more intense because the islands of the Ionian Sea were never a part of the Ottoman Empire. Although their beginnings are uncertain, dramatic literature and theatrical performances seem to be well established by the seventeenth century and are linked to Carnival time, along with folk theatre and performative rites and spectacles such as the *giostra*. In the eighteenth century, performances of Italian opera and Commedia dell'Arte were added. All of these forms of theatre and drama continued under British rule beginning in the nineteenth century, with the Ionian drama being part of the second important school of Greek Romanticism, and with Corfu being a more important centre for Italian opera than Athens.

Other Greek communities that saw significant theatrical activity were the islands of the Archipelago and Ottoman Constantinople. This recently discovered episode in theatre history, as well as in Modern Greek literature, is the subject of Chapter 5. It is unique in that both the French mission in Constantinople (as well as the Cyclades islands) and the Italian mission in Chios used Modern Greek, as opposed to the ecclesiastical Greek of the Orthodox Church. Jesuit theatre, established in as many as 500 colleges throughout Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century, was both an instrument for pedagogy and a means of producing public testimonials of the high quality of the school. In the peripheral regions of the Catholic world, religious plays performed by students were not written in Latin

but in the local vernacular; hence on the islands of the Aegean Sea and in Constantinople, where the targets for conversion were Orthodox Greeks, they were written in Modern Greek. Through the texts of ten newly discovered Baroque era dramas we now have a wealth of information about these school performances and their participants. One performance of particular interest was in Constantinople in November 1623, when the son of the French ambassador played the leading role in a play about the young (St.) John Chrysostom. Among the spectators were the ambassadors of the great powers; Ecumenical Patriarch Kyrillos I Loukaris wanted to see the performance as well, but was not allowed. Because of the decline of the Jesuit order and Catholicism in general during the first half of the eighteenth century, little has survived from this later period apart from a few plays and reviews.

Constantinople's influence continued into the eighteenth century, but it was during this period that other centre of Hellenism now played a pivotal role in Greek theatre history, although distant from Greece itself; Chapter 6 discusses the Transdanubian Principalities of Valachia and Moldavia, ruled by Phanariot courts in Bucharest and Jassy. The Phanariots, so called because they were residents of the Phanar district in Constantinople (where the Ecumenical patriarchate is still located), consisted of a dozen old and extended Greek families who held important positions in the Ottoman hierarchy; they were designated by the sultan to serve on the throne as Hospodars ('lords') in Valachia and Moldavia. These families established an elite Greek-speaking culture during the eighteenth century, known in Romanian history as *epoca fanarioșilor*, 'the Phanariot Age.' It was also fashionable for the local boyars there to speak and write Greek, and both Bucharest and Jassy became centres of Hellenic culture in the eastern Balkans. The chief focus during this period was on translating Western dramas by figures such as Molière and Goldoni, who were of interest to Enlightenment thinkers for their potential role in moral education. Metastasio was also prized for his classicized tragedy, as well as Voltaire and later Alfieri, and for political reasons: to contrast the glorious past with the miserable present. The humorous nature of comedy was not accepted without resistance, for laughter in this milieu both had to teach and to correct. Accordingly satiric dialogues on clerical, political, social and mythological themes held prominent positions in Phanariot literature, which used a more sophisticated idiom of Greek than both the Cretan writers and the demotic authors of the Ionian school.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, before the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821, some of these Phanariot tragedies were staged

in amateur theatres in Bucharest, Jassy and the Russian harbour city of Odessa. This is the subject of Chapter 7, which begins with a description of the arguments during the Greek Enlightenment for and against theatrical performances: although they were acceptable as a didactic tool, there were concerns about the corporality of the actors and their incitement to sensuality (female roles on the Phanariot stage were usually played by men). In all three cities, amateur performances are linked to Greek-language schools; but now, in addition to translations of French and Italian drama, original Greek plays are produced as well. Most of these plays were based on ancient themes, with tyrannicide their favourite subject. Under the influence of members of Filiki Etairia ('Society of Friends'), a secret political organization that was preparing for the revolution, school performances were transformed rapidly into political and patriotic demonstrations against Ottoman rule. The theatre played a significant role in preparing audiences mentally and psychologically for the military uprising against the Ottoman Empire, as seen by the participation of these amateur players in the 'holy troupe' that started the revolution in Moldavia and was defeated immediately in Drăgășani. One actor was killed there, another wounded, a third imprisoned; others managed to escape. Playwrights, actors, and theatrical performances played an important role throughout the years of the uprising. Episodes from the revolution were transformed immediately into patriotic dramas, featuring its heroes as protagonists, and these plays remained popular with Greek audiences throughout the nineteenth century.

Lastly, Chapter 8 offers an overview of later developments: in 1830 Greece became an absolute monarchy like all other European nations on the continent, whose royal families had been restored with the fall of Napoleon and whose hold on power had been strengthened further by the Congress of Vienna in 1814/1815. This new Greek nation was small, shaky, weak, and heavily dependent on the policies of Europe's major powers – who viewed Greece not as an equal but as a figure on the geographic chessboard that was the Eastern Question, the question of the fate of the Ottoman Empire and its European subjects. Most Greeks at this time still lived outside the new nation's borders, and so the better part of theatrical activity was outside the country. Communities in Corfu, Syra, Smyrna, Constantinople (after 1860), Alexandria, etc., became more important theatre centres than the capital of Athens itself. The historic Diaspora of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Balkans (after 1860) witnessed the re-creation of theatre as a public institution and the development of a class

of professional actors; these communities also formed an emerging market for itinerant ensembles that travelled throughout the Mediterranean to perform plays in Greek for Greek-speaking communities outside the country. Thanks to its policy of re-unification of Greek-speaking territory, and the increasing weakness of the Ottoman Empire, the 'Free Kingdom' grew; but with it a clash between *Helladism* (the culture and ideology of the new kingdom) and *Hellenism* (the culture and ideology of the Greek-speaking Diaspora). By the beginning of the twentieth century there was a marked decline in the historical Diaspora, brought on by the revolution of the Young Turks; the Balkan Wars; the Russian Revolution, culminating in the disastrous Greek military campaign in Asia Minor which led to the expulsion of more than one million Greeks from ancient Ionia in 1922. Taken together the history of Modern Greek theatre in the nineteenth century represents, on the one hand, a gradual development of a 'normal' European-style theatre scene; on the other hand, this process of normalization was complicated by the decentralized nature of the theatre scene and its audiences. Creating a professional class of performers had its challenges, and equally challenging was the language question: by this time Greek functioned at two distinct registers, the elite *katharevousa* ('purified') used by the educated classes and the *demotic* Greek of folk culture, used by the less educated.

The Epilogue, 'Implications for Theatre Historiography', tries to summarize this book's findings and identify what they imply for theatre historiography in general. Traditional scenarios may be possible for the Classical and Hellenistic periods, and from the late nineteenth century onwards – in both cases, with Athens as its centre. But for more than one thousand years in between not only is it methodologically hazardous to assume continuity: the lack of evidence makes such an assumption impossible. Even after the sixteenth century, there are numerous ruptures and discontinuities in Greek theatre: geographical, thematic, stylistic and linguistic, not to mention the organizational challenges and lack of consistency from one theatre scene to the next. These ruptures render the application of a simple scenario even more problematic.

Greek theatre history demonstrates the need for an alternative to the current model of master narrative, which relies on our ability to assemble the evidence in the most agreeable and integrated manner possible. Because there is no single narrative of this history to date we have an opportunity to avoid constructing it as a single continuous unit – the continuity of Greek as a spoken and written language notwithstanding. This

does not diminish the uniqueness and fascination of Greek theatre and drama – to the contrary, it helps us to understand the artificiality of other theatre histories that adopt this evolutionary narrative conceit. Although the history of Greek theatre remains largely unknown internationally, this book offers a broad array of evidence and reflects on the critical methods that have been applied to it.

## *Acknowledgements*

This book, based on numerous studies of specific aspects of the Greek theatrical tradition, has passed through numerous stages of re-structuring and elaboration. I must express my gratitude to many for their support and inspiration – beginning with my family, to whom I must apologize for being such an absent-minded father and husband. I also wish to extend a special thanks to my colleagues in the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Athens: for the past twenty years I have been immersed in their ongoing, inspiring discussions, the scholarly atmosphere they have created and nurtured, and their dedication to research on the history of Greek theatre and drama; they have been a limitless reservoir of spiritual strength and intellectual innovation.

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## *Notes on the Text*

The names of Greek authors are transliterated phonetically, but ancient names are written in the conventional way. Quotations in Greek that were written prior to AD 1453 use the polytonic system familiar to Classicists, while texts after 1453 use the monotonic system, which has been the official method for writing Greek since the 1980s.

In addition, because the chapters of this book are independent of each other, scattered as they are over a wide geographical area and a time span of some two thousand years, I have provided separate bibliographies at the end of each chapter instead of organizing the references at the end of the book. It is hoped this arrangement will make it easier for the reader to follow, and I have tried to keep repetitions in the bibliography to a minimum. At the end of nearly every chapter there is also a section ‘Scholarship and Further Readings’, designed for those interested in special topics and providing access to more sources and bibliography than given in the footnotes.