

## ANCIENT GREECE

### Background Information 17:

### Theatre

#### The physical structure

- Built into the side of a hill with the ground at the foot of the hill levelled out for the stage area.
- Open to the sky: plays staged in daylight.
- Stage possibly slightly raised.
- In front of the stage was the circular *orchestra*, where the chorus sang and danced.
- A passageway (called the *parados*) ran either side of the stage to allow performers to enter and exit the orchestra.
- The seating area could hold 15000 people and sloped down to the orchestra.
- Behind the stage was an area for a stage building, called a 'skene'.
- The semi-circular bowl shape of theatres provided good views and amplified sound.
- Stone theatres were built after the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

#### The plays

- Most plays known today were written and performed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- Plays developed in 6<sup>th</sup> century Athens from ritual drama performances for Dionysos.
- Plays were performed in competitions between playwrights at the annual Athenian festival of Dionysos.
- By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, tragedies and comedies being performed.

- The actors were all men.
- No more than three actors could talk to each other at one time.
- The chorus commented on the action of the play and addressed the audience more directly.
- The play would be acted out in the orchestra.
- Plays were accompanied by music.
- Actors wore masks with exaggerated features to suggest their character and to be seen.

## The playwrights: tragedy

- Three great dramatists that dominated Athenian tragic theatre in the 5<sup>th</sup> century: Aeschylus (earliest), Sophokles and Euripides.
- Euripides (Athenian) dealt with serious subjects including the horrors of war.
- Euripides plays upset Athenians as they suggested the savage treatment of enemies by Athens and were daring in the treatment of myth.
- Sophokles' plays dealt with royal and legendary families and their tragic lives e.g. King Oedipus and Electra, daughter of Agamemnon.
- Aeschylus' 3 plays, 'The Oresteia', also dealt with death of Agamemnon and how his son Orestes avenged him.

## The playwrights: comedy

- Comedies dealt with contemporary themes and people, not myths.
- Aristophanes lived in Athens and 'wrote' during the time of the Peloponnesian War: often criticised war politicians.
- His plays discuss controversial issues e.g. role of women, value of war.
- His comedies make use of comic slaves and servants who were favourite figures in Athenian comedy.
- His are the only complete comedies from 5<sup>th</sup> century Greece.