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## **ANCIENT THEATRES: HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT, SPREAD AND USE**

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### **Abstract**

The ancient Greek theatre building materialised without having historical predecessors. In order to perform religious rites, such as the dithyrambus, a hymn sung and danced in honour of the god Dionysus, believers needed a specific, architecturally-shaped place to assemble. According to the philosopher Aristotle, tragedy developed out of dithyrambus. Spectators followed the presentation seated on a gentle slope in an auditorium located around an orchestra, the area for the spatial arrangement of the performers. As soon as the performances had reached the need of actors, a stage building, too, was constructed. These are the three constituents of the ancient theatre, until its end in Late Antiquity.

It is amazing that, once the theatre as architectural form had developed in the beginning of the fifth century BC, nearly every Greek and Roman town felt obliged to erect such a building. Frank Sear, in his study on the ancient theatre as a whole, published in 2006, counts about 700 such theatres. Donors paid for (parts of) these buildings, for the sculptural decoration and so on, those being the emperors and their agents, but also private citizens as benefactors. Theatrical performances depended on sponsors, the so-called choregoi, and the theatre served also as a dignified framework for the announcement of honours granted by the people's assembly and given to fellow citizens but also foreign representatives during the festival.

Of course, an architectural form with a life-span of over 900 years was undergoing a certain process of development, which will be described briefly in my lecture. The appearance changed only slightly from East to West, from Asia Minor to Spain, but between the Greek and the Roman type of theatres there were important differences.

Finally, it did not seem reasonable to spend a relatively big amount of money for a building that should be used only once a year, at the god's festival. Therefore, theatres also served as meeting places for people's assemblies, for royal wedding ceremonies, for public banquets paid by town officials in favour of the citizens and foreign sacred envoys, for courts, and for celebrations of the Roman Emperor's cult. The above can give only a first impression of the importance of this architectural form, which primarily served as vehicle for the cultural phenomenon called ancient tragedy and comedy. It is to be welcomed that specialists gathering at the University of Patras will discuss the acoustics in such ancient theatres—noting that no cultural phenomenon would have been possible to exist without the relevant technical substructure.