

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Paleontology

- the biological counterpart of history
- must build off a fragmentary record of the past and non-randomly selected data
- e.g. bias in favor of hard-bodied creatures like trilobites

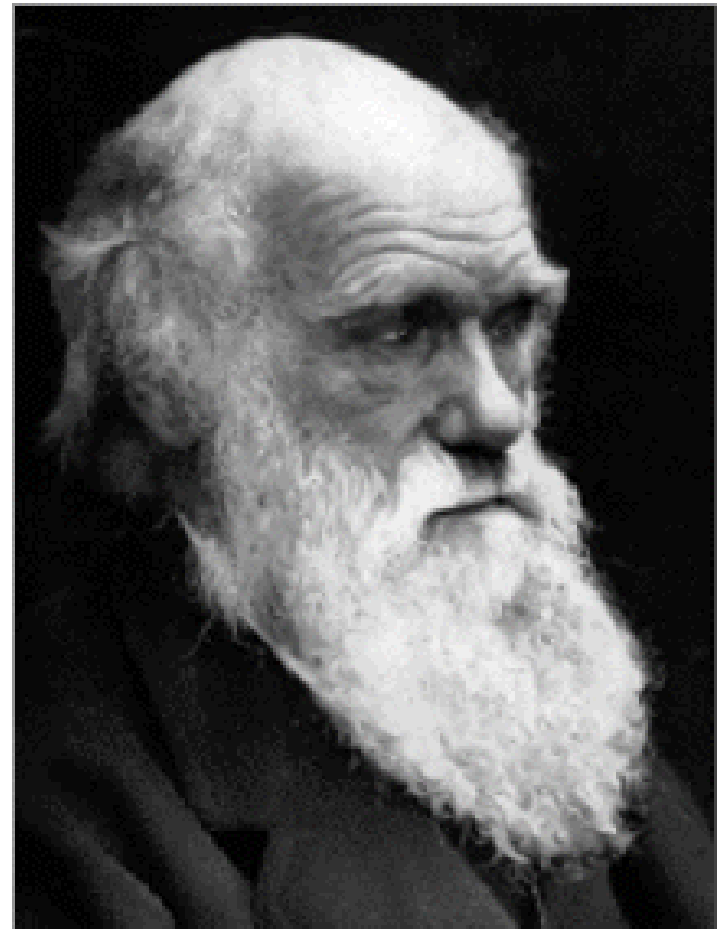


Pseudocybele nasuta
Fillmore Fm., L. Ordovician
Utah and Nevada
from the collection of Sam Stubbs

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Charles Darwin

- British naturalist (1809-1882)
- “father of evolution”
- posited a model of evolution based on gradual change over time



Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Transitional Forms

- **gradualism** predicates the existence of “**transitional forms**” bridging changes in evolution
- but these are very few in number, especially near critical junctures like the Permian/Triassic boundary
- is it right to use a model of change based on gradualism here or in theatre history?

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punctuated Equilibrium

- a different model of evolution championed by the late **Steven Jay Gould**
- “punk eek” seeks to address how evolution occurs at the great watershed moments in evolutionary history
 - **equilibrium**: long periods of relative stability
 - **punctuation**: quick and dramatic disruptions

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punctuated Equilibrium

- when crises like that at the Permian-Triassic boundary occur, how do species survive at all?
- even if individuals are not threatened, their environment and food source/s (**niches**) are endangered
- they must adapt quickly or starve
 - cf. cats/dogs/squirrels model in Chapter 4

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Fitness

- in such a case, what constitutes “**fitness**” for survival
- sometimes it is just a fortuitous habit like the “deep sleep” of **nautiloids**
- it can also be nothing more than flexibility and luck



Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- if Frazer can apply Darwinian gradualism in reconstructing cultural history, can we not apply a punk-eek model?
- we can if we see Greek tragedy as fitting into an entertainment “niche”
 - it was one of many genres which over time served the needs of the ancient Greeks for diversion and entertainment

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- the Greek entertainment “niche” seen evolutionarily:
 - early dominance of epic, especially Homer
 - but epic collapses ca. 650 BCE



Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- the Greek entertainment “niche” seen evolutionarily:
 - lyric poetry rises to fill the “niche”
 - but its limitations proved fatal in the long run
 - for instance, lyric poets could not tell long and complex stories the way Homer could



Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- the Greek entertainment “niche” seen evolutionarily:
 - worse yet, without reinforcement the stories upon which epic had been built could lapse entirely from public conscience and memory
 - the “niche” was open for a form of entertainment which could be both “lyric” (fast, complex, intense) and “epic” (stately, built around traditional myth, full of gravity)

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- when applied to the rise of Greek tragedy, a punk-eek model explains our failure to uncover transitional forms
- there were very few transitional forms since the change had to happen quickly
 - they aren't likely to leave traces because there weren't very many to begin with

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- punk eek also allows us to avoid “cultural Darwinism”
 - the tendency to see modern art as the inevitable and predictable consequence of a civilization’s evolution over time
- we can avoid the fallacy of “final forms”
 - cf. Aristotle’s claim that “tragedy came to a stop, when it attained its own nature”

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Punk Eek and Theatre History

- it also explains the presence of dithyramb
- so Aristotle was correct to some extent about the importance of dithyramb
- but dithyramb is not the progenitor of tragedy, rather an ultimately unsuccessful rival for the pre-Classical Greek entertainment niche
 - choruses at heroes' tombs is another example

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Conclusion

- Greek tragedy was cobbled together from elements already present in the pre-Classical Greek world
 - complex singing (from lyric poetry)
 - impersonation and masks (from Dionysus worship)
 - traditional myth (from epic)
- and it had to happen very quickly

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Conclusion

- it was *not* a direct outgrowth of any of its cultural forebears (Frazer, Murray, Bieber)
- but at the same time it owed much to all of them
- it also depended on the “genius” of its early founders (Else)

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Conclusion

- but **Pisistratus** is the most important founder of early tragedy because he gave it official sanction and financial backing
- the **City Dionysia** was part of his program to build the Athenian economy
- free to rich foreign merchants visiting Athens and buying Attic wares at the outset of the **annual trading season**

Chapter 4.2: Origins of Greek Theatre

Conclusion

- thus, Greek tragedy was the product of a political compromise engineered by a savvy aging Athenian tyrant
 - it allowed the worship of Dionysus but in an acceptable way
 - it gave the public a hot, new form of entertainment
 - it boosted the Athenian economy