Greek Tragedy

- Introduction: The Sixth Century BCE, or the End of the Pre-Classical Age
- The Birth and Nature of Tragedy
- *Theatron*: Performance Space
- Actors and Acting in Greek Tragedy
- Conclusion: Euripides' *Orestes*, or Why the Greeks Went to the Theatre

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

- oral epic opened the door for lyric poetry
- in turn, oral epic and lyric poetry together paved the way for **drama**
- these changes were part of the ancient Greek spirit of innovation
- this restless urge to experiment propelled the Greeks into the Classical Age (500-400 BCE)

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

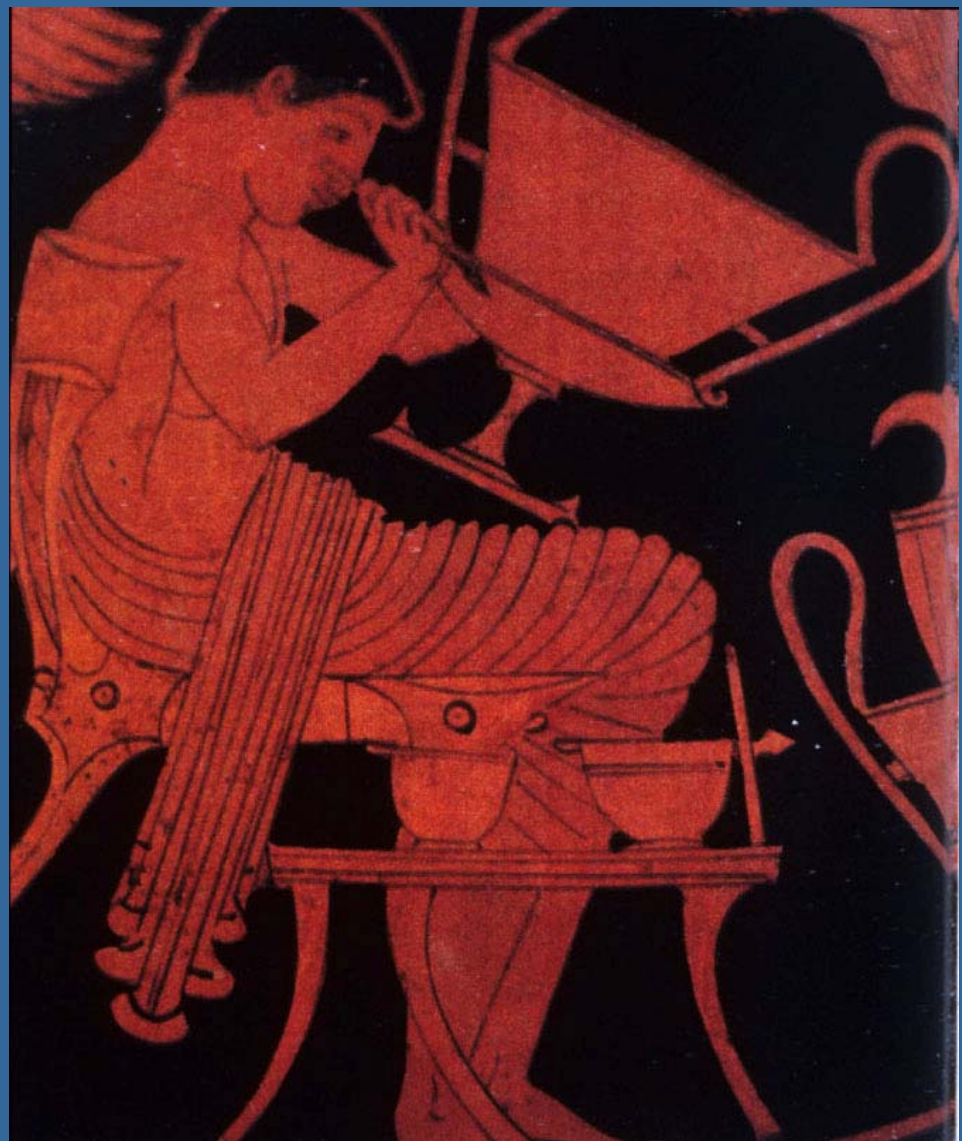
- drama is hardly the only art form to undergo radical change during the last stages of the Pre-Classical Age (800-500 BCE)
- the Greeks of the sixth century (600-500 BCE) also revolutionized statuary and architecture
- vase-painting, in particular, was turned inside out, literally

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

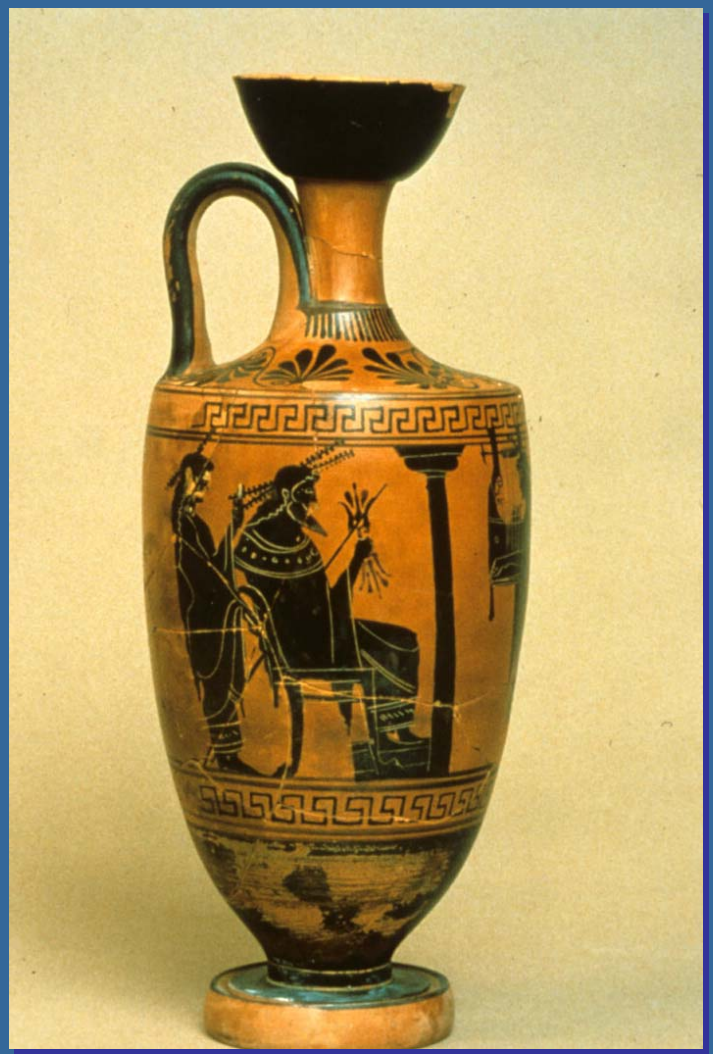
Greek Tragedy

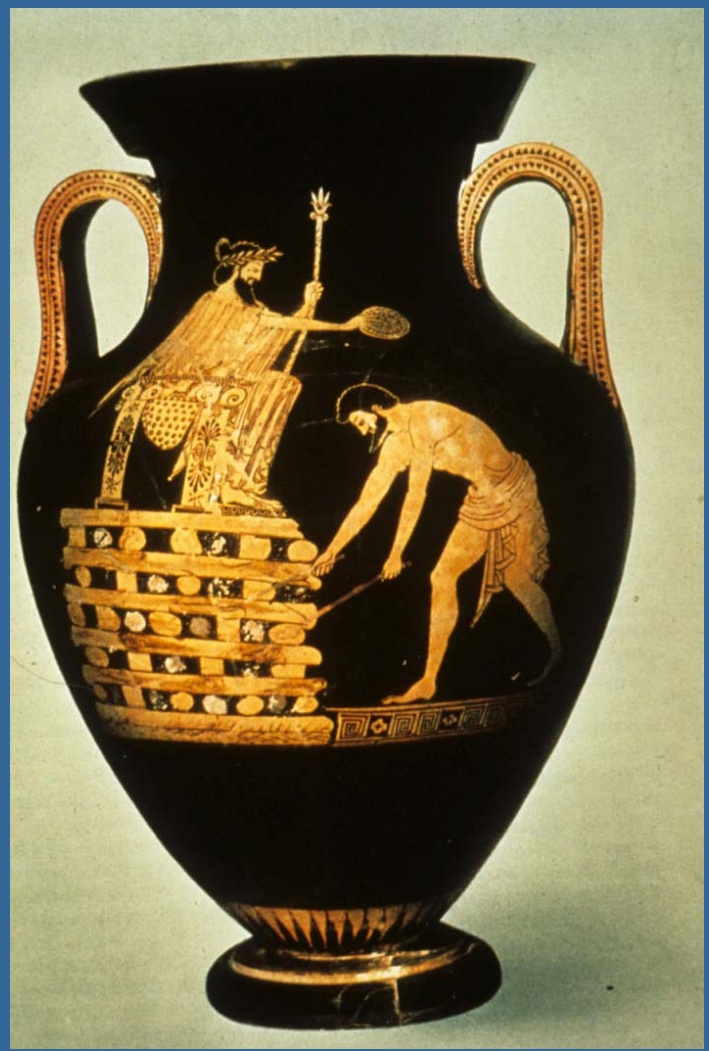
The Sixth Century BCE



Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE





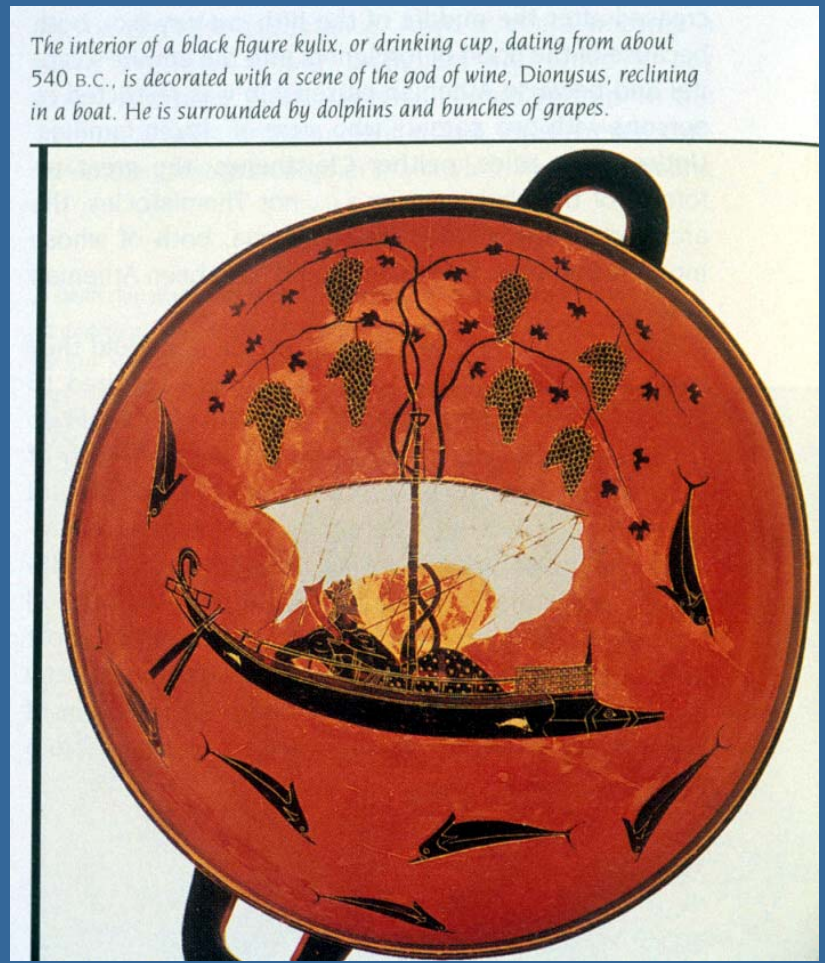
Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

- there were significant changes occurring in religion, too
- e.g. during the Pre-Classical Age, the rites of the god **Dionysus** were imported into many Greek cities from the East (Asia Minor)
- these "ecstatic" celebrations were more licentious than those to which the ancient Greeks were accustomed

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE



The interior of a black figure kylix, or drinking cup, dating from about 540 B.C., is decorated with a scene of the god of wine, Dionysus, reclining in a boat. He is surrounded by dolphins and bunches of grapes.

The God Dionysus

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

- instead of ecstatic rituals, the Greeks introduced theatre as a way of worshipping Dionysus
- theatre was better suited to Greek tastes than unruly celebrations like those of Dionysiac rituals imported into Greece from the East

Greek Tragedy

The Sixth Century BCE

- historians are able to follow the development of tragedy better than that of earlier epic like Homer's
- the reason for that is that theatre evolved later than epic (much closer to the Classical Age), when there are more and better records available

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- indeed, historical sources suggest there was a particular place, founder and date for the first presentation of tragedy
- in Athens by the tyrant **Pisistratus**
- in **534 BCE** at the Dionysia, a festival Pisistratus inaugurated that year in honor of Dionysus whose rites had recently been imported to Athens

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- there is some evidence that theatre had already begun before this
- it was coming to public attention as an exciting and novel way of presenting traditional stories
- what Pisistratus did, then, was to graft drama onto the celebration of the god Dionysus

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- it was a very artificial and highly innovative union of art and religion
- by passing off theatre as a better way of worshipping the god, Pisistratus hoped to tone down the orgiastic celebrations of Dionysus
- thus, the introduction of drama at the Dionysia was a political compromise

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- **tragedy** comes from the Greek word ***tragoidos*** ("goat-song")
- the etymology (i.e. historical origin) of that word is unclear to us today
- there are no goats in tragedy
- perhaps it is a joke name like "soap opera"?

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- Greek tragedies are not simply or only "sad plays"
- several surviving tragedies have comic scenes and happy endings
- cf. Euripides' *Orestes* (below)
- all in all, Greek tragedy in its day was very different from the way most people see it today, i.e. old men wearing sheets and bewailing fate

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- no early Greek tragedies survive
- but we have later tragedies
- and we know that drama derived in part from earlier epic which is also extant
- by examining these, it is possible to make reasonable guesses about the nature of early Greek tragedy

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- early Greek tragedy would surely look slow and cumbersome to us
- but to the ancient Greeks it would have been startlingly revolutionary
- poet-performers who dressed up and spoke as if they were figures from myth must have been shocking to people who were used only to oral and lyric poetry in performance

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- but at heart, tragedy is a mixture of older, traditional art forms blended together in a new way
- from epic were borrowed the classical myths which Homer and other oral poets had narrated in epic
- from lyric poetry came the use of various poetic meters and density of expression

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- from the Greek tradition of singing and dancing in groups came **choruses**

PLATE 6. Red-figure column-krater in the Mannerist style, ca. 500–490 B.C.E. Six choristers and muffled figure at tomb.

Greek Tragedy

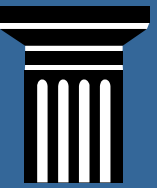
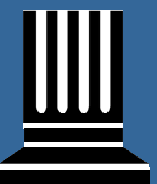
The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- from Dionysiac ritual was borrowed impersonation via mask and costume

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy

- originally, there was only one actor called a ***hypocrites*** ("answerer")
- cf. English *hypocrite* and *hypocrisy* (originally "acting")
- the *hypocrites* "answered" the chorus
- he wore a costume and mask and portrayed characters from myth
- he could do this by changing mask and costume offstage

Greek Tragedy

The Birth and Nature of Tragedy