

INTRODUCTION TO

ELECTRA

SOPHOCLES

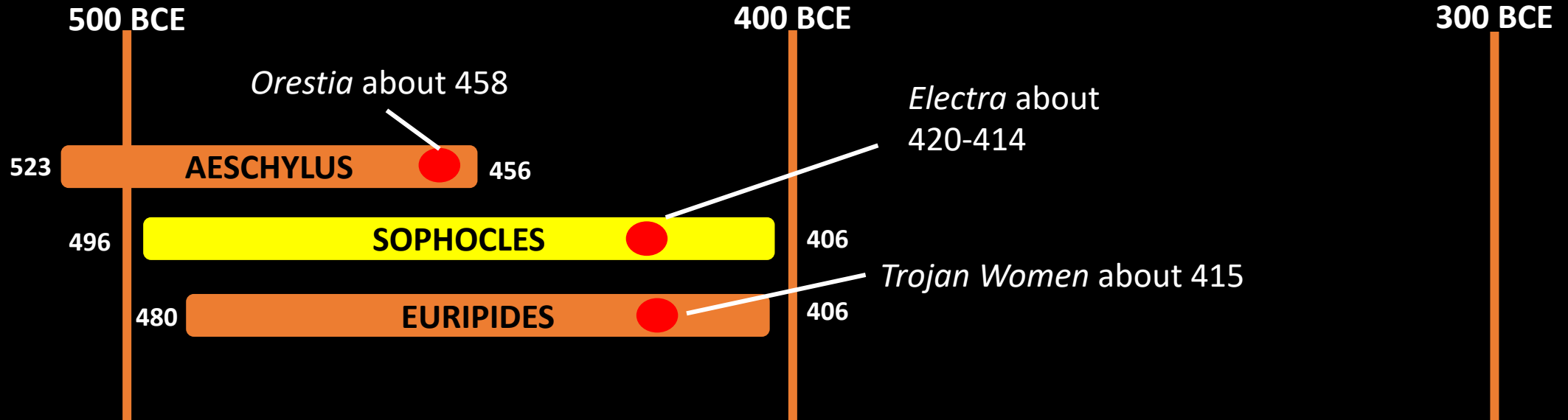


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THE CLASSICAL AGE OF GREECE

SURVIVING GREEK PLAYS



432 ● PARTHENON COMPLETED ● DEATH OF SOCRATES 399

499 449
PERSIAN WARS

431 404
PELOPONNESIAN WAR

Empty yellow box

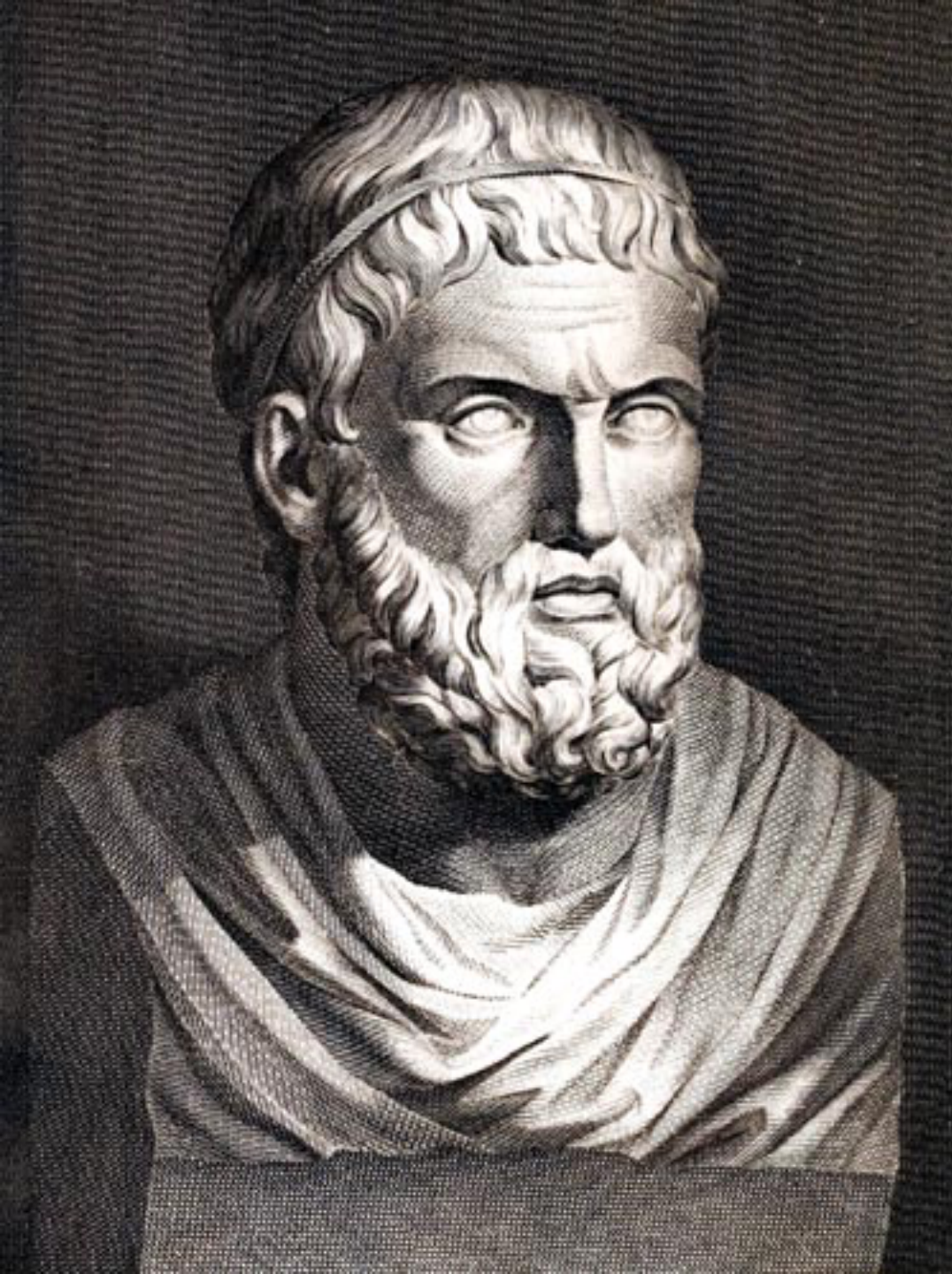
356 323
ALEXANDER THE GREAT

CORINTHIAN WAR
395 - 387

Classical Greece

- Overthrow of the tyrants and the development of Athenian self-government known as *demokratia* (507 BCE)
- Frequent warfare - As prominent citizens, playwrights and philosophers participated in warfare
 - Persian Wars
 - Corinthian War
 - Peloponnesian Wars
- In the 450s the general Pericles consolidated power and used tribute payments from the Delian League to fund massive building projects (Parthenon) and supported philosophers, artists, and playwrights
- There is a tremendous expansion of the theater, architecture, and the arts
- After losing political primacy in the Peloponnesian Wars, Athens remained the cultural heart of classical Greece and became a cornerstone of Greek culture under Alexander the Great's empire





Sophocles Basics

Along with Euripides and Aeschylus, Sophocles is considered among the greatest of the Greek tragic playwrights

Author of more than 120 plays. Only seven survive in their entirety.

He competed in at least 30 competitions, won 24, and never placed worse than second.

Known for introducing three speaking characters on stage in a single scene, enabling more sophisticated dialogue

Abandons the idea of a trilogy (such as *Orestia*) to tell a story and instead produces single plays to convey the tragedy

Pioneered the use of elaborately painted panels to create onstage scenery

Highlights of the Life of Sophocles

- Sophocles was born about 496 B.C. at Colonus, a village just outside Athens
- His father, Sophillus, was a wealthy weapons-maker and a leading citizen
- At 15, Sophocles was chosen to lead a boys chorus (*paean*) in celebration of the Athenian naval victory over the Persians at Salamis
- Sophocles likely studied under Aeschylus. Interestingly his first dramatic success, at age 28 with a play titled *Triptolemus*, won first prize over an offering by Aeschylus who came in second at the Delphian festival. After this Aeschylus departed for Sicily
- Besides his notoriety as a playwright, Sophocles served as general, chosen by Pericles to be treasurer of Delian League, frequently acted as a diplomat for Athens, and served as a priest for the gods of medicine
- After his death in 406, the same year Euripides died, a national cult was formed to worship his work at a shrine



Origins of Electra (and other plays)

- *Nostos* is a theme in ancient Greek literature that depicts an epic hero returning home from sea
- An epic poem from the 8th century BCE titled *Nostoi* (Return of the Greeks) describes the return of the heroes of the Trojan war, including the story of Agamemnon as laid out in the *Orestia*
- Author is unknown but some ancient writers attribute it to Homer
- The book is lost and only five lines remain today
- Likely that the three tragedians were familiar with the *Nostoi* and used it as the backstory for their plays about the aftermath of the Trojan War



Ulysses and the Sirens
John Waterhouse, c. 1890

Electra Plot Summary

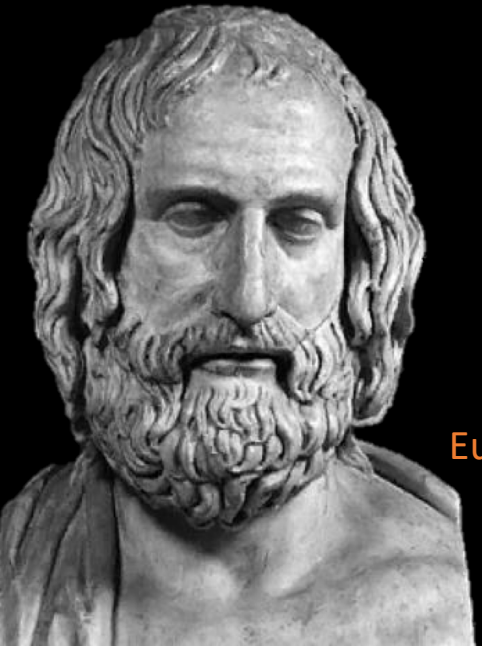
- Set at the city of Argos after the end of the Trojan War
- Orestes returns home several years after the murder of his father, Agamemnon by his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover Aegisthus
- While Orestes was in exile, his sister Electra has continued to mourn the death of her father and nurtures a hate of her mother
- Bent on extracting revenge for the murder of King Agamemnon, Orestes pretends to be only a messenger returning the ashes of Orestes who was killed in a chariot race
- Neither Electra nor Orestes recognize each other after so many years and Electra's grief at hearing news of her brother's is doubled
- Soon Orestes reveals himself and Electra is overjoyed. The siblings eagerly join forces to plot the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and complete their long delayed revenge



Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon
Fredrick Leighton, c. 1869

Electra As A Character: Sophocles Vs. Euripides

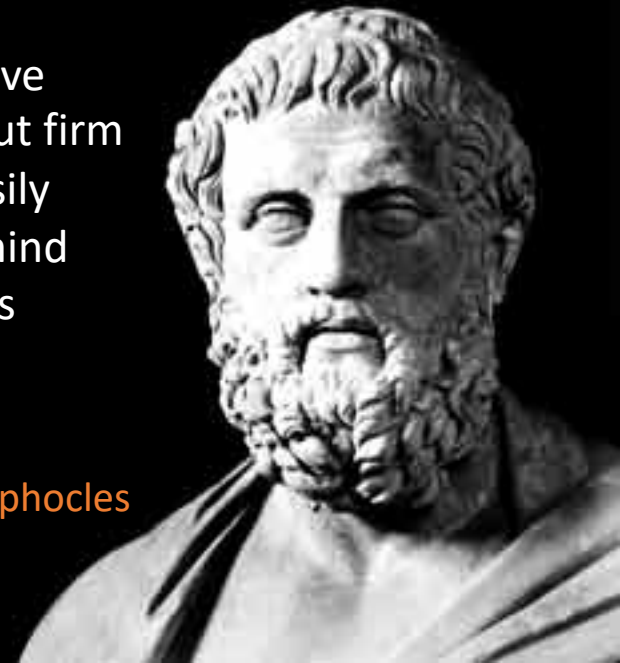
- Besides Aeschylus, who wrote of Electra in the *Orestia* as a minor character at least 40 years earlier, both Sophocles and Euripides write plays where Electra is the major character
- The two *Electra* plays were likely written between 410 and 415 BCE
- Both plays follow the same general plot: Orestes returns to Argos after an absence of several years and with the aid of Electra, murders his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover/regent Aegisthus in revenge for the murder of Agamemnon, the father of Orestes and Electra
- Both plots follow the general storyline laid out by Aeschylus in the *Orestia*, which was first performed in 458 BCE but add different details
- The two plays differ primarily in how the character Electra is portrayed



Electra is portrayed as an extremely lethal woman who actively participates in the murder of her mother

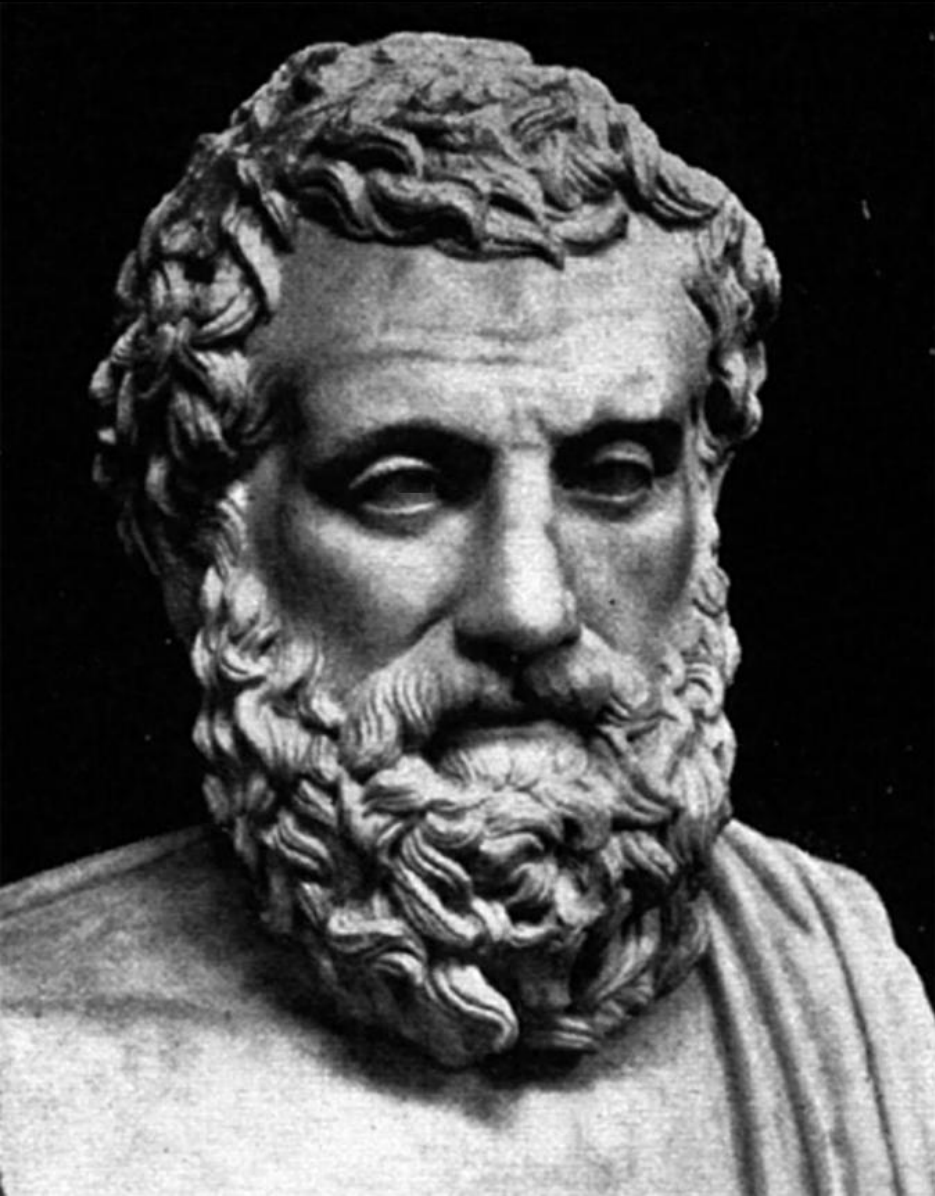
Euripides

Electra is a naive woman without firm values and easily changes her mind and her morals



Sophocles

Death of Sophocles



Fortunate Sophocles! His life was long, -
An artist still, and happy, to the last
Many the noble tragedies he wrought
Blessed his end. No sorrow he endured.

Phrynichus

One must wait until the evening to see
how splendid the day has been.

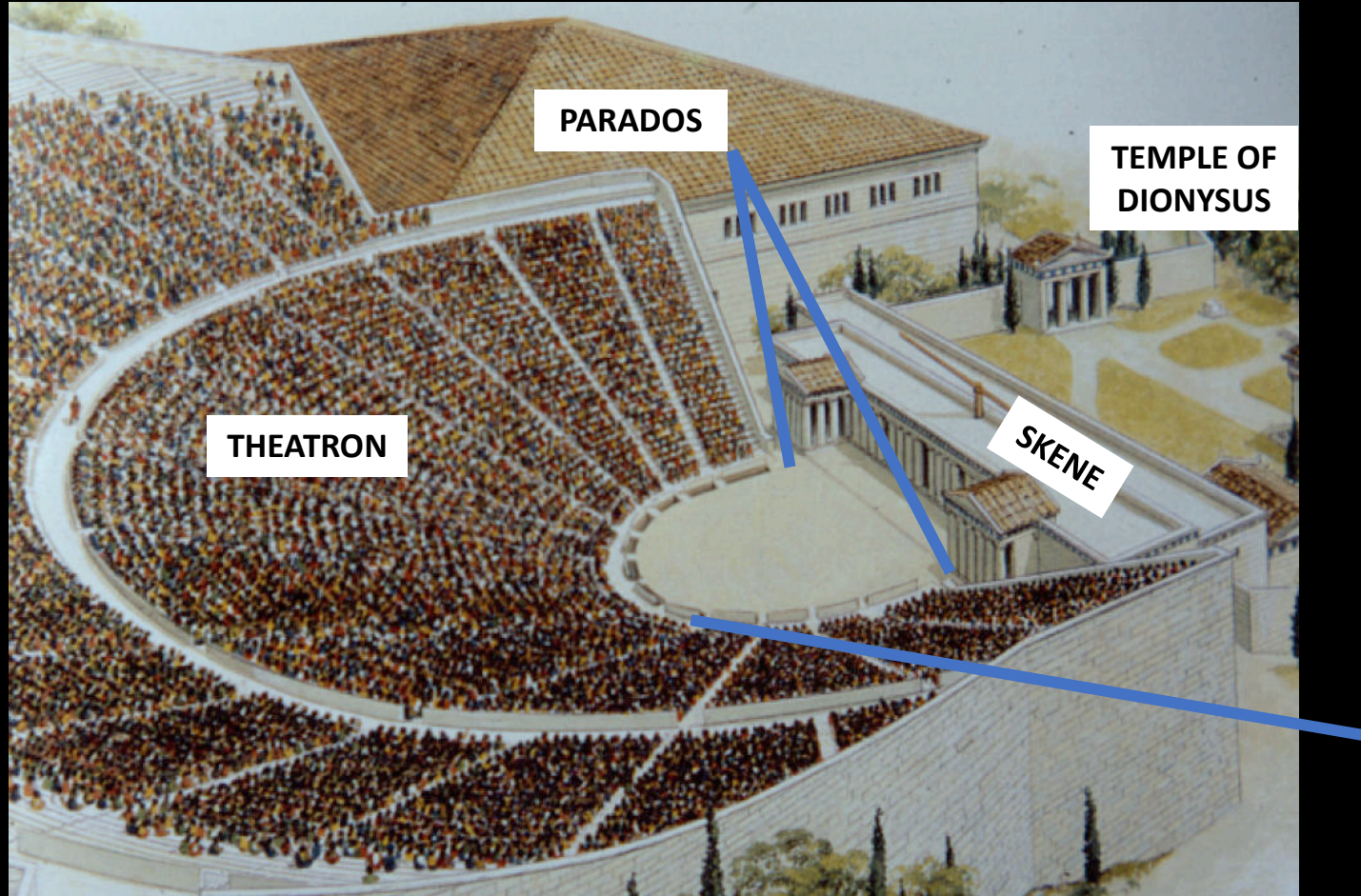
-Sophocles

Sophocles died in 406 BCE at the age of 91. Some stories say he choked on a grape, others suggest he died while reading a part of *Antigone*, and another says he died as he learned he'd won another award

Greek Theater Overview



Theater of Dionysus in Athens



Roman Era



Greek Theater Masks



- Masks were made of stiffened and painted linen (sometimes cork or light wood was used)
- Allowed for a single actor to play multiple roles
- Masks were painted with exaggerated expressions that could be recognized from a distance and easily identify the character
- Open mouth holes allowed for clear enunciation and provided somewhat of a megaphone effect to project the voice

Greek Theater Costumes



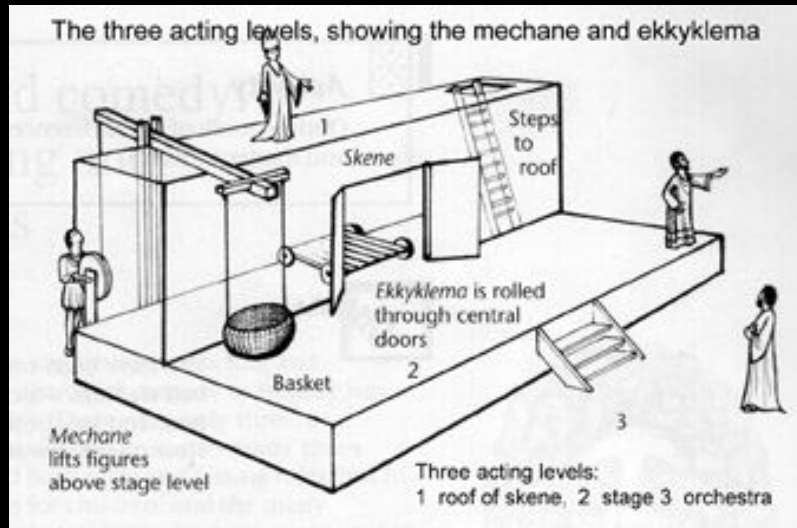
- Costumes helped define the social status, gender, and age of the character
- Women costumes contained padding to present a feminine appearance
- The chiton and himation were common garments used on stage

Greek Theater Props



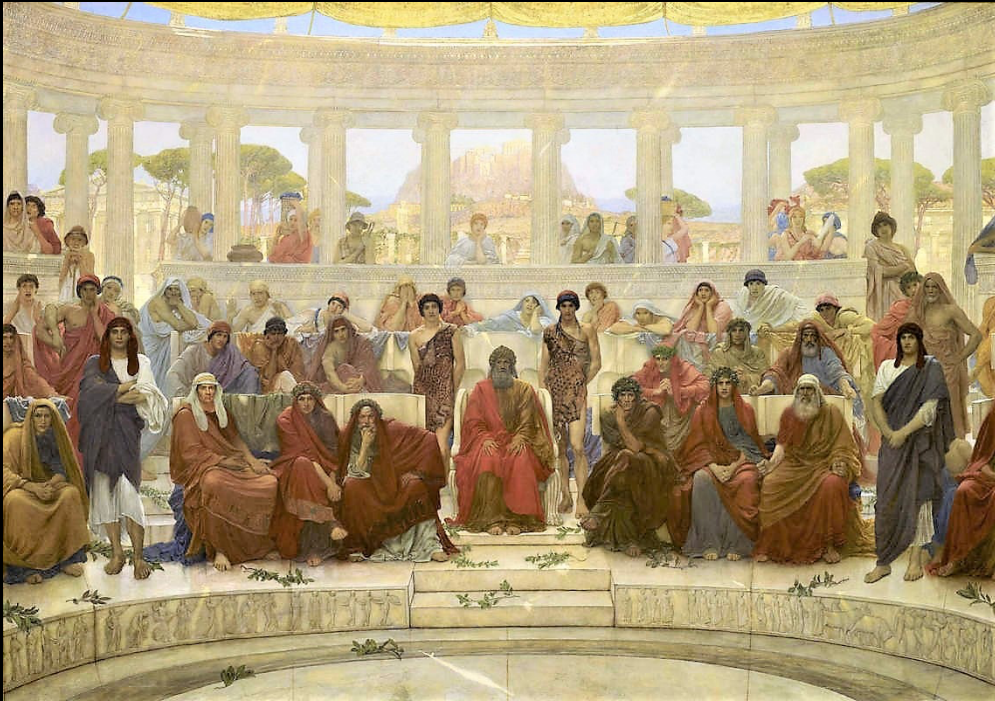
- The use of special props helped reinforce the roles of various characters
- Shield = warrior
- Crown = king
- Lyre = musician
- Caduceus = messenger
- Cane = old character

Greek Theater Special Effects



- Many special effects
- Sound: horses, sword play, thunder, rain
- Machines that could move objects about the stage to simulate flying
- Trap doors to allow mystical appearances
- Painted panels to depict changing scenery (According to Aristotle, Sophocles invented this technique)
- Rolling platforms that brought out various objects
- Chariots would be driven across stage
- Musical instruments

The Greek Audience



- Some controversy as to whether women attended ... let's assume they did. Plenty of anecdotal evidence that women attended and no writing exists that specifically prohibit the attendance of women
- Plays performed in the daytime
- Huge crowds...the theater in Athens could seat 15,000
- Playwrights frequently flattered the audience and even distributed small gifts to win affection
- The audience would display unhappiness with a performance by mocking the actors, yelling, and even throwing food or stones
- Cost of performances were underwritten by the state and by wealthy Athenians who received a tax break
- Cost of admission was either free or 1/6 of a drachma (equivalent to about \$4)