

NEW ARGUMENTS FOR A SKENE BUILDING IN EARLY GREEK TRAGEDY

PROF. DR EGERT PÖHLMANN

Πανεπιστήμιο Erlangen

The earliest preserved stone skene buildings are not older than the 4th century BC. Compelling arguments for a wooden skene are found in the comedies of Aristophanes, in the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles and in the *Oresteia* of Aischylos (458 B.C.). According to Wilamowitz, Aischylos in his earlier plays (*Persai*, 472 BC, *Seven against Thebes*, 467 BC, *Hiketides*, 463 BC and the *Prometheus*) did not dispose of a skene building. Instead of, Wilamowitz invented in the centre of a circular orchestra a mound (the “pagos”) which could be used as a tomb, a council chamber, an altar or a rock. The pagos - theory was modified by Hammond, who thought that an outcrop of rock in the east wing of the Dionysos Theatre was the “pagos”¹.

But it can be demonstrated that in his early plays Aischylos is obeying conventions, which are obligatory for all tragedies of the 5th century (except Euripides’ *Helena*), conventions which can only be explained if we suppose the existence of a (wooden) skene building from the beginnings of Greek tragedy. Such a building is already indispensable for the tragedy before Aischylos, namely plays with only one actor, who had to change his mask from episode to episode unseen by the spectators. The foresaid conventions can be seen easily in a series of examples².

1. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die Bühne des Aischylos*, Hermes 21 (1886) 597-622, *Aischylos. Interpretationen*, Berlin 1914, 114-118, N.G.L. Hammond, *The Condition of Dramatic Production to the Death of Aeschylus*, GRBS 13 (1972) 387-450, *More on Conditions of Dramatic Production to the Death of Aeschylus*, GRBS 29 (1988) 5-33.
2. See W.G. Arnott, ‘Off-Stage Cries and the Choral Presence: Some Challenges to Theatrical Conventions in Euripides’, *Antichthon* 16 (1982) 35-43; -, ‘Tension, Frustration and Surprise: A Study of Theatrical Techniques in some Scenes of Euripides’ *Orestes*,’ *Antichthon* 17 (1983), 13-28; M. Hose, *Studien zum Chor bei Euripides*, Bd. 1/2, Stuttgart 1990/91 (= *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 10/20) in the chapter ‘Der Chor und das Nicht-Inszenierbare’ (Bd. 1, 257-86).

1. Aeschylus

Let us begin with an extraordinary scene from *Agamemnon*. After Cassandra has entered the palace (1330), the chorus hear both of Agamemnon's death cries from within (1343, 1345) and immediately enter into a discussion as to whether to call for help, storm the palace or await further developments (1345 - 1372). A decision is finally taken to storm the palace in order to find out what is afoot, but then the doors open and the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra appear on a wheeled platform, the *Eccyclema*³, followed by Clytaimnestra, who explains her evil deed.

A parallel scene from *Choephoroi* will serve as a counterexample. Aigisthos is enticed by the chorus into the palace (848), whereupon his death cry is heard (869). But here the chorus does not consider intervening, even though it is on the side of the siblings. And as Clytaimnestra is in her death throes, the chorus extoll the liberating crime of Orestes and in so doing prepare the way for the appearance of the *Eccyclema*⁴ with the bodies of Aigisthos and Clytaimnestra (972/73).

The situation after the death cry of Agamemnon in itself makes it imperative that the chorus, which is closely associated with Agamemnon, come immediately to his rescue⁵. However, a dramatic convention appears to stand in its way. The chorus clearly may not enter the Skene. Aeschylus neatly sidesteps this conflict between the demands of the situation and dramatic technique by means of the remarkable aforementioned discussion scene: it cleverly avoids the intended entry of the chorus into the palace.

There is a related scene, albeit differently motivated in *Persai*: after its *Parodos* (65 - 139), the chorus explain its wish to take up position in the Skene and discuss the situation there⁶:

3. It is controversial, if Aeschylus used the Ekkyklema; see O. Taplin (1977) 442 f. und 325-27.

4. See O. Taplin (1977) 357 (corpses brought out by mutes)

5. See E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus Agamemnon*, ed. with a comm. Vol. III, Oxford 1950, 642-644; R. Thiel, *Chor und tragische Handlung im 'Agamemnon' des Aischylos*, Stuttgart 1993 (= *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 35) 359-362.

6. See M.L. West, *Studies in Aeschylus*, Stuttgart 1990 (= *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 1) 11-13.

ἀλλ' ἄγε, Πέρσαι, τόδ' ἐνεζόμενοι
 στέγος ἀρχαῖον
 φροντίδα κεδνὴν καὶ βαθύβουλον
 θώμεθα,... (140-43).

Wilamowitz allowed the chorus to take up position on the steps of the outer edge of the στέγος ἀρχαῖον, which the wording does not indicate⁷. T.G. Tucker's translation, which suggests the meaning: "let us go sit within this venerable hall", renders both the wording and the situation precisely⁸. All the same, Oliver Taplin, who along with Wilamowitz allows a Skene not earlier than the *Oresteia*, remarks of Tucker's translation: "this is ingenious, but it would mean that their intention was never fulfilled"⁹. This is the precise sense of the passage, indeed: the chorus advance in Anapests towards the central door of the Skene and express its vain wish to enter the palace and discuss the situation. It is, of course, prevented from doing so by the convention which is already familiar from *Agamemnon* and which will be confirmed by a series of parallel instances, denying the chorus access to the Skene. So the chorus must once more be diverted from its intention in some way. This happens here when Queen Atossa comes in in her chariot. The chorus notices her (150 -154), falls to its knees in welcome and enters into a dialogue with her. In this way its intention to enter the Skene, which could not have been carried out in any case, is rendered obsolete.

2. Sophocles

In the plays of Sophocles which have been preserved the chorus would often have a motive for entering the Skene. But Sophocles understands how to reconcile the conflict between the *πιθανόν* and the convention in a thoroughly inobtrusive way. The clearest example of this comes in *Aiix*: after the Parodos (134 - 200) Tecmessa informs the chorus in great detail of Aiix' madness and goes so far as to urge the sailors of Salamis to enter the tent and support their master:

7. U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aischylos, Interpretationen*, Berlin 1914, 43.

8. *Aeschylus, The Persians*, trans. by T.G. Tucker, Melbourne UP & London 1935.

9. O. Taplin (1977) 454 n.2.

ἀρῆξαι' εἰσελθόντες, εἰ δύνασθ' ἐτι (329).

Immediately after this Ajax' cries of anguish are heard coming from the Skene (333, 336, 339, 342 ff.), and the chorus prepare to open the door of the tent (344 ff.), instead of which Tecmessa does so (346 ff.), and Ajax is carried out on the *Eccyclema* amidst the slaughtered cattle. In this way the interior of the Skene is transferred out onto the performance area for a lengthy period of time (348 - 595) and the chorus is able to offer Ajax its support, according to the wishes of Tecmessa, without contravening a convention¹⁰.

In *Antigone* the titular heroine dies off-stage, Queen Eurydice by contrast in the palace. The latter has heard from a messenger of the end of Antigone and her son (1192 - 1243) and without further ado goes off into the Skene in silence. The chorus fears the worst and represents its concern to the messenger (1244 ff., 1251), who goes off into the palace instead of the chorus to see what is afoot (1255), whereupon Creon appears bearing the dead body of Haimon (1257 ff.) and the messenger returns from the palace to report Eurydice's suicide (1277 - 1283). Finally the gate opens and the corpse of Eurydice is brought out on the *Eccyclema*¹¹ (1293, cf. 1298). Sophocles here has preserved the convention by allowing the messenger to enter the Skene in place of the chorus.

Like Eurydice, Iocaste, too, in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, enters the palace with a deeply significant *Aposiopesis* (1072) after she has failed to prevent the interrogation of the shepherd, and she must now anticipate that the secret about Oedipus, which she has seen through, will inevitably come to light. Her behaviour troubles the chorus. Just as in *Antigone*, the silent exit makes the chorus fear the worst (1073 - 75). However Oedipus, misunderstanding the situation, dismisses the fears of the chorus (1076) and, after a chorus song, interrogates the shepherd (1110-1181), who explains to him the predicament he is in. Promising disaster, he goes into the palace. After a further chorus song, a servant emerges from the house to tell how Iocaste has taken her own life and how Oedipus has blinded himself (1232 - 1285). A clear signal for the *Eccyclema* (1287 ff., 1294 ff.)

10. See H. J. Newiger, 'Ekkyklema und Mechane in der Inszenierung des griechischen Dramas,' *WuJbb* 16 (1990) 39 f.

11. Vgl. G. Müller, *Sophokles Antigone*, erläutert und mit einer Einleitung versehen, Heidelberg 1967, 264.

prepares the audience for the entry of the wheeled platform bearing the bodies of mother and son, but instead the blinded Oedipus is led out of the palace (cf. 1429)¹².

In *Oedipus* Sophocles prevents the intervention of the chorus by means of Oedipus' objection. He uses a similar device in *the Trachinia*: Deianeira has realized that she had sent Heracles not a love philtre, but a deadly poison with the 'Nessos garment'. She takes the chorus into her confidence, and they try to console her (663 - 733), whereupon Hyllos enters with a report of the agonies of Heracles and curses his mother (734 - 812). Deianeira goes without a word into the palace in spite of the attempts of the chorus to defend her (813/14). Yet Hyllos deflects the intervention of the chorus (815 - 820) and wishes on her the same agonies as those of Heracles. For that reason the chorus does not intervene again and hears cries of pain coming from the house (863 - 867). Finally a nurse emerges from the house to report Deianeira's suicide (871 - 946).

In *Oedipus on Colonos* the Skene, as in the 2nd part of *Ajax* or in Aristophanes' *Birds*, represents a grove which can be entered by a central door. Oedipus and Antigone conceal themselves therein (113 - 116). The chorus, searching for the pair, does not follow them inside, choosing instead to persuade them at length to leave their hiding-place (138 - 169). The reason for this is the fact that the Eumenidai grove is taboo for inhabitants of Colonus (125 ff., 130 ff., 153 - 156): a faint trace of the convention which forbids the chorus to enter the Skene.

The search scene in *Ichneutai* has technical similarities with the above: here the central door of the Skene represents, as it does in *Philoctetes* and *the Cyclops*, the entrance to a cave. The satyrs are in search of Apollo's cattle (39 ff., 58 ff.), having already discovered the tracks of a herd (94 - 108). Suddenly, instead of the braying of the cattle (107 ff.), they are surprised to hear the sound of a lyre and are scared of the unidentified noise (118 - 124). Old Silen cannot initially hear a thing (125 - 169) and rejoins the Satyrs in their search (170 - 196). Arriving at the cave, he too hears the lyre and wishes to hide. However, he is restrained by the Satyrs (197 - 210), who are anxious to know what is lurking in the cave. When an attempt to call someone out of the cave fails, Silen, instead of dispatching the chorus, calls for a cacophonous dance, after which the nymph Cyllene

12. See H. J. Newiger (1990) 40. Euripides too is frustrating the expectation of the spectators in *Medea* and *Orestes*.

emerges from the interior (211 - 214). As the parallel scene in *the Cyclops* demonstrates, the chorus is also denied access to the Skene in a Satyr Play, a convention which is easily disguised by the traditional cowardice of the satyrs themselves¹³.

3. Euripides

The chorus occasionally has cause to enter the Skene in Euripides, too. But, unlike Sophocles, Euripides uses the conflict between convention and situation to create dramatic effects, occasionally drawing on Aeschylus, as in the following scene from *Hippolytos*:

Phaedra, having been rejected by Hippolytos, has informed the chorus of her resolve to commit suicide as a means of punishing Hippolytos (722 - 31). The chorus song which follows ends with a vision of Phaedra hanged in her bridal chamber (767-75), after which the nurse rushes out of the house and calls for help (776/77)¹⁴. At first, however, the chorus remain unmoved (778/79). Now the nurse demands a knife with which to cut Phaedra free (780 /81), whereupon the chorus embark on a discussion, reminiscent of that in *Agamemnon*¹⁵: some of the girls wish to go into the house and release Phaedra from the noose (782/83), others would rather leave this task to the men (784) or else warn against over-eagerness (785). The corpse has, in the meantime, long since been taken off and laid on the bier, according to the nurse's instructions (786/87). The chorus can do no more than take note of this (788/89). Then Theseus appears (790), and, after a clear signal for the *Eccyclema* (808 - 10), the wheeled platform carries the body out of the palace.

Just as in *Agamemnon*, the chorus in *Hippolytos* is employed to inform the audience of the action taking place in the Skene¹⁶. The resulting conflicts are averted on both occasions by the aforementioned discussion scenes, which have a delaying function.

The infanticide in *Medea* is prepared for in a similar way to the suicide

13. See B. Seidensticker, 'Das Satyrspiel,' in G.A. Seeck (Hrsg.), *Das griechische Drama*, Darmstadt 1979, pp. 237; 239.

14. See M. Hose (1991) 278-86.

15. See above n.9.

16. See below n. 18.

of Phaedra: after Medea has learned of the deaths of Creusa and Creon, she explains to the chorus that she must now kill her children (1236 - 50) and goes off into the house. After two chorus stanzas, the children are heard crying for help (1271 ff., 1277 ff.)¹⁷, and the chorus considers whether to force its way into the house:

παρέλθω δόμους; ἀρῆξαι φόνον
δοκεῖ μοι τέκνοις (1275 ff.).

However, Jason's entrance after the end of the *Commos* (1271 - 92) renders such an intervention pointless. Shortly after this the chorus pronounce the children dead (1306 - 09), and, after a clear signal for the *Eccyclema* (1313 - 16: Jason wishes to break open the gate and kill Medea), Medea appears to the surprise of the audience¹⁸ in a suspended winged chariot with the dead children (1320 - 22).

In *Medea* the determination of the chorus to enter the Skene loses its impetus because of an unexpected entrance. We know this device from Aeschylus' *Persai* and Sophocles' *Aiāx*¹⁹. Euripides uses the device on two subsequent occasions. In *Andromache* the chorus is urged by the nurse to enter the palace to prevent Hermione from committing suicide (815 - 19), a request which becomes redundant when, shortly afterwards, Hermione rushes out of the house, wailing but alive (822 - 24). And in *Hecuba* the chorus is considering forcing its way into the tent to lend its support to Hecuba against Polymestor (1042 ff.), when Hecuba herself appears, having committed the deed (1044 - 48), followed by the blinded Polymestor (1060 ff.) and the bodies of his children on the *Eccyclema* (1051 ff.). This renders the intention of the chorus superfluous.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus on Colonos* a ritual ban prevents the chorus from forcing its way into the Skene²⁰. In *Ion* Euripides follows a similar practice: having admired the works of art at the Temple of Apollo (184-218), the chorus expresses its desire to view the interior of the temple (220 ff.). However *Ion* is forced to prohibit this, the chorus not yet having made a sacrifice (228 ff.). Euripides could easily have spared himself this extra

17. As to the Off-stage-cries' see W.G. Arnott (1982)38-43.

18. See n. 16. In the *Orestes* (1296 ff.) too the expectation of the spectators is deceived; see W.G. Arnott (1982) 41-43; W.G. Arnott (1983) 25-27.

19. See above.

20. See above.

complication, but the curiosity of the chorus allows him to have Ion describe the interior of the temple (222 - 25).

The cowardly Satyrs from Sophocles' *Ichneutai*²¹ crop up again in Euripides' *Cyclops*. Odysseus has explained to the chorus how he wishes to blind Polyphem. The satyrs are impressed and offer their support (469 - 75; 483 - 86; 596 - 99), but when Odysseus urges them to accompany him into the cave (630 - 32), they have second thoughts: the leader of the chorus asks Odysseus to nominate the first of them (632 - 34), but a section of the chorus gratefully declines (635 ff.). Others suddenly become lame (637 - 39), whilst a further group are blinded by flying ashes (640 ff.). As an alternative they offer to perform a magic song, which can be sung at the entrance to the cave (643 - 48) and which obviously has the function of conveying the action in the cave to the audience (656 - 662).

4. Comedy

The chorus in the 'Ancient Comedy' is also prevented by the foresaid convention from entering the Skene, even though it occasionally has good cause to do so. But Comedy, unlike Tragedy and the Satyr Play, makes no use of those tragic plot elements, which at least maintain the *πιθανόν*. Rather it ignores the conflict between credibility and convention, as it sets little store by the consistent sustaining of illusion²². And in the 'New Comedy' the problem no longer occurs, as here the chorus leaves the stage for each of the five acts and only sings entr'acte songs²³. Thus the 'Ancient Comedy' on the one hand and Tragedy and the Satyr Play on the other obey the same convention, and yet they respond to it in different ways, as befits the respective genres.

5. Rule and Exception

In 12 out of 32 Tragedies and in 2 Satyr Plays it has been seen that the chorus is prevented from entering the Skene by a dramatic convention,

21. See above.

22. See O. Taplin, 'Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy: a Syncretism', *JHS* 106 (1986) 163-174.

23. See E. Pöhlmann, 'Die Funktion des Chores in der Neuen Komödie,' in: *Studi di Filologia Classica in onore di Giusto Monaco*, Palermo 1991, 349-359.

even when its motive to do so could not be more urgent. The plot features used to disguise this conflict between convention and credibility can be categorised thus:

1. The chorus deliberates the advisability of entering the Skene in order to prevent a murder or suicide, and does so for such a long time that the death takes place (*Agamemnon*; *Hippolytos*).

2. The unexpected entrance of a character restrains the chorus in its intention (*Persae*; *Medea*; *Hecuba*).

3. The entrance of the victim renders the intention of the chorus pointless (*Aias*; *Andromache*; *Hecuba*).

4. An actor opposes the intention of the chorus (*Trachiniai* > *Oedipus Tyrannos*).

5. An actor enters the Skene in place of the chorus (*Antigone*).

6. A ritual ban prohibits entry into the Skene (*Oedipus on Colonos*; *Ion*).

7. The traditional cowardice of the satyrs weakens their intention to enter the Skene (*Ichneutai*; *Cyclops*).

These respective plot elements usually serve to prepare the way for entrances from the Skene at the climactic moment of the plot, whether through the door, or with the help of the *Eccyclema*, or alternatively the *Mechane* (*Medea*). Often they are provoked by cries from within the Skene²⁴. The chorus can, together with other actors, indirectly convey to the audience the off-stage action, which would otherwise be inaccessible to them²⁵. These features can be noted as early as in *Agamemnon*.

Admittedly, the question of the purpose of this convention is still open. The one exception to the rule can help us further here: in Euripides' *Helena* the chorus accompanies Helena into the palace to consult an oracle (327 - 33; 385). The performance area becomes empty, whereupon Menelaus enters to give an exposition of his situation in a new prologue (386 - 482). The chorus then reappears with the second *Parodos* Song (515 -27); Helena follows.

As this example reveals, the exit of the chorus into the Skene represents a deep caesura, after which the play must in effect begin anew with a second Prologue and an *Epiparodos*. This also goes for the exit and

24. See W.G. Arnott (1982) 38-43.

25. M. Hose (1990) 257-86.

reappearance of the chorus by means of the *Parodoi*²⁶. Richard Kannicht has shown that the exit of the chorus in *Helena* seeks to achieve the same dramaturgical goal as in *Ajax*, *Alceste* and *Rhesos*, in that “it facilitates an entrance which would not be feasible if the chorus were present”²⁷.

In the case of *Helena* this would be the second prologue, in which Menelaus can initially describe his position without witnesses (386 - 434), and the necessity of this justifies not only the exit and re-entrance of the chorus, but also its entrance into the Skene, which had previously been completely avoided.

6. The Skene - Building before 472 BC.

If we dismiss the exception of *Helena*, we must acknowledge that the Attic Stage of the 5th century clearly strives to prevent the repetition of Prologue and *Parodos* caused by the exit and re-entry of the chorus and to keep the chorus on stage from the *Parodos* to the Exodos. Not until the ‘New Comedy’ is this striving for continuity given up and replaced by a new structure. Once such a convention is available, however, it can be used figuratively, indeed playfully. An example of this would be the curiosity of the chorus in *Ion* to view the forbidden interior of the Temple of Apollo, which is completely unnecessary for the plot. And yet the oldest example of all, the intention of the chorus in the *Persai* to enter the στεῖγος ἀρχαῖον which is averted by Atossa’s entrance belongs to the category of figurative, playful use of the foresaid convention, the origin of which must be obviously much older than the *Persai* of Aeschylus. But the convention, which forbids the chorus the entrance into the skene-building, is of course inextricably linked with the existence itself of a Skene-building. Therefore we are forced to admit that the skene-building belongs to the oldest inventory of dramatic technique, which developed decades earlier than Aeschylus’ *Persai*, *Seven* and *Hiketides*²⁸.

26. Sophocles *Ajax* 814-66; Euripides *Alceste* 746-861; *Rhesos* 564-674; Aristophanes *Ecclesiazusae* 311-477. As to Aeschylus *Eumenides* (231-44), see E. Pöhlmann, ‘Sucheszenen auf der attischen Bühne des 5. und 4. Jh., Zur Bühnentechnik der *Eumeniden*, des *Aias*, der *Achamer* und des *Rhesos*’, in: *Xenia* 22, Konstanz 1989, 41-61.

27. R. Kannicht, *Euripides Helena*, hrsg. und erklärt, Bd. 2, Heidelberg 1969, 121; 146.

W.G. Arnott (1982) 35-37.

28. See A.M. Dale (1969) 260 f.