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The cover illustration depicts the theatre of Delphi.  
Photo by R. Frederiksen, see p. 135, Fig. 1.

# Cultic Theatres and Ritual Drama in Ancient Greece<sup>1</sup>

Inge Nielsen

## Introduction:

The subject of this article is to illuminate an obscure aspect of Greek religion, namely the ritual drama, by studying an installation, which is often present in Greek sanctuaries, namely the cultic theatre. I shall argue that this structure primarily constituted the setting for ritual dramas, rather than only for well-known rituals such as sacrifices or, sometimes, for literary drama, that is, basically, tragedy, comedy, and satyr play. The ritual drama may be defined as a dramatic ritual based on the myth of the god and thus furnished with a plot, performed at the great seasonal feasts. In contrast to the literary drama, the ritual drama *must* treat the myth of the god at whose feast it was performed. The reason why the ritual drama was so important in ancient religions is that it constituted a good way to learn and to understand the contents of the cults in a basically non-literary society.

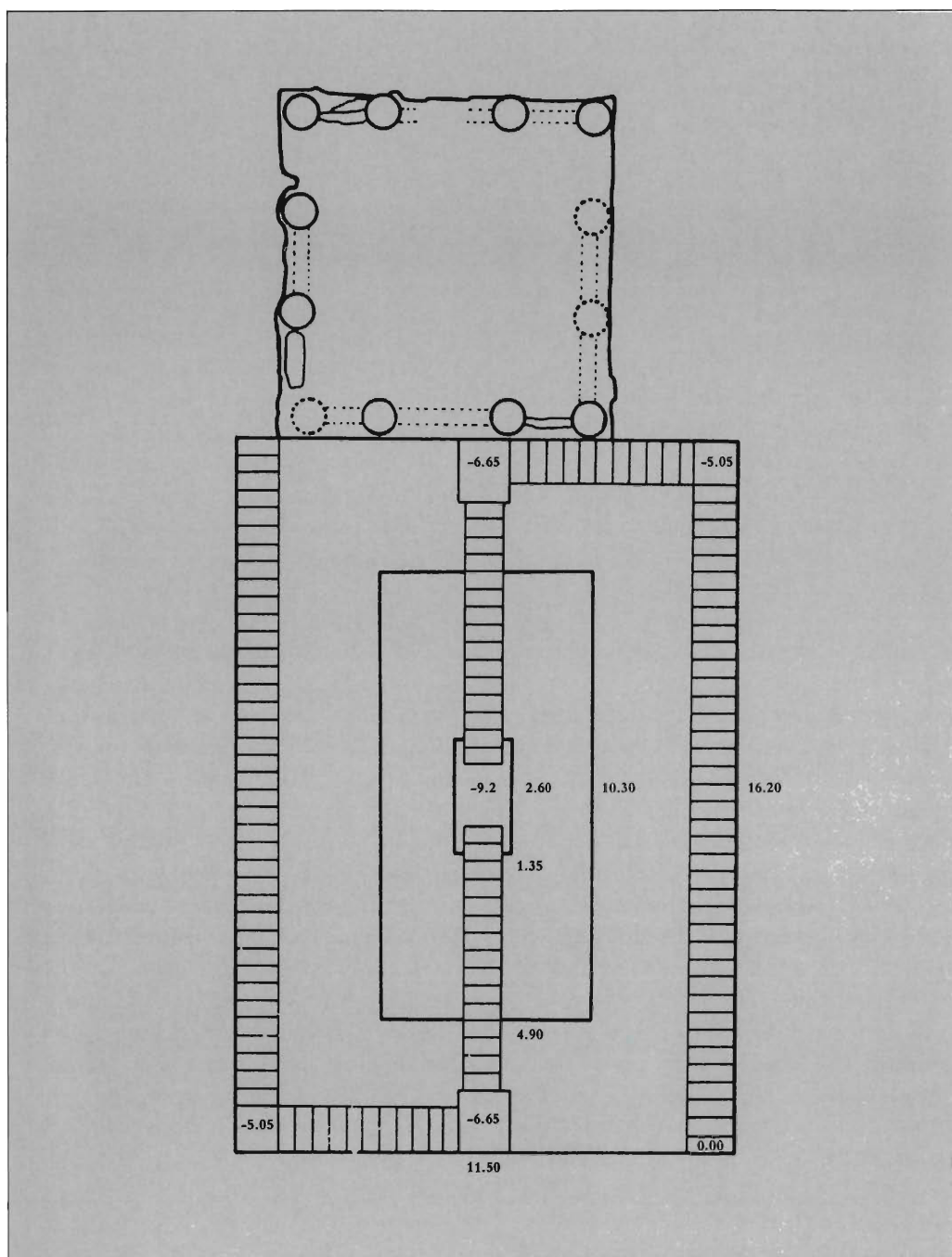
Ritual dramas were first performed at the great agrarian feasts of the fertility gods in the Near East and in Egypt. It is thus no coincidence that it was exactly in connection with this type of gods that we have the first signs of the ritual drama in Greece, and neither that it was in connection with one of them, Dionysos, that the literary drama was developed. That such ritual dramas continued to be performed also in the poleis may not surprise us, since most of the inhabitants were still occupied on the land. Besides, these gods might change and enlarge their repertoire when the society to which they belonged, changed. For example was this the case in the orientalizing period, that is, the Late

8th - 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, when contacts with the Orient were re-established after the Dark Ages. Another such time of change was the Hellenistic period (330-30 BC), when the basically agrarian society developed into a cosmopolitan one, with travelling merchants and slaves dispersing all over the known world.

As far as Greek drama is concerned, it is almost exclusively the literary drama that comes to mind, and for very good reasons, since Greece was the place where this unique drama form originated. Of course scholars have also focused on the origin/s of tragedy, comedy and satyr plays, the most common opinion being that they originated from Greek chorus performances at the great feasts.<sup>2</sup> Only a few scholars, and then mostly historians of religion and anthropologists, have compared the early stages of Greek drama with drama forms existing in other cultures in antiquity.<sup>3</sup> I shall argue that it is very important to include the Oriental, that is, Egyptian, Near Eastern and Anatolian, drama forms in this connection, too. For although the ultimate result of the development of drama in Greece was the unique literary drama, the early stages were by no means unique, indeed, they seem to constitute a loan during the prolific orientalizing period from the Oriental ritual drama, which was known in these areas from early on.

*In Egypt*, such dramas are documented as early as the Old Kingdom, in the form of texts constituting librettos as well as of depictions showing such performances.<sup>4</sup> They were especially connected to the myth of Osiris. From the Ptolemaic peri-

Fig. 1. The sacred lake in the sanctuary in Tod in the Nile delta. To this lake, a well-preserved pavilion was attached (from Gessler-Löhr 1983, Abb. 68).



od we even have an entire ritual drama preserved with illustrations in relief from the temple of Edfou, taking as its theme the fight between Horus, the owner of the sanctuary, and Seth, disguised as a hippopotamus.<sup>5</sup> This drama, the Triumph of Horus, constituted at the same time a symbol of the first beginning of Egyptian kingship and Egypt's perpetual triumph over her enemies. These Egyptian dramas

were normally enacted around the sacred lakes in the great temenoi. Related to these lakes were pavilions and platforms, on which the acting priests and priestesses, many of whom were carrying masks, stood, and where the images of the gods were placed during the performances<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1). The chorus stood around the lake, as did the worshippers, who participated with outcries etc. in the drama as well.

Fig. 2. Sparta. One of the grotesque masks found in the sanctuary of Artemis Ortheia. (foto, mus.)



In the Near East, the documents recording such dramas are primarily written on clay tablets, and may be in the form of literary adaptations of such drama texts and of librettos, as well as constitute a kind of book of words for the rituals.<sup>7</sup> But also the presence of masks of various types indicates dramatic performances here from as early as the early 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BC.<sup>8</sup> There is evidence for the performance of ritual dramas already in Sumeria, and they were well-known also by the Assyrians, the Canaanites, the Israelites, and the Phoenicians. The subjects were normally myths related to the great fertility goddess, Inanna/Ishar/Asherah/Astarte, and her paretroi, young gods of crises, whether called Dumuzi, Tammuz, Baal or Adonis. They were mostly performed at the great feasts in the spring, that is, the New Year feasts. Finally the Hittites in Anatolia apparently also included such dramas in the rituals of their gods, primarily, to judge from the texts preserved on clay-tablets, in connection with the Purulli feast.<sup>9</sup> Here, the fertility god Telipinu playing the main role, as a god who in anger disappeared with the corn, a theme also known from the myth of Demeter. Other subjects typical of ritual dramas are fights between gods and daemons or monsters, and the disappearance

and return of the young gods signifying the renewal of life in plants as well as animals and humans. Finally the sacred marriage rite, *hieros gamos*, between goddess and young god, often impersonated by the king, signified the beginning of a new fruitful year. Thus kings played a central role in these dramas all over the Orient.

In the Greek area, the direct sources for the existence of ritual dramas are fewer. In return, much information may be gleaned from liturgical hymns, from epic poems, and from the literary drama texts.<sup>10</sup> Also, masks of a special type have been found in the Greek sanctuaries, and vase paintings often show masked mythical figures<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 2). Last, but not least, a permanent setting for these dramas, the cultic theatre was developed in these sanctuaries. While this setting, as we shall see, differed considerably from the Oriental ones, the subjects for the ritual dramas in Greece were rather similar. Thus the ritual drama was always based on the myth of the god and dependent on the feast at which it was performed. In Athens, for example, one may mention the myth of the *hieros gamos* between Dionysos and Ariadne played by the archon basileus and his wife, the basilinna, at the Anthesteria feast. This was originally a vine grower's festival, and probably also a kind of transitional feast for the youth.<sup>12</sup> The feasts of the Thesmophoria, for Demeter, apparently included the disappearance of the corn due to the anger of the goddess, as recounted in the Homeric hymn, as well as the abduction and return of Persephone.<sup>13</sup> In the sanctuary of Artemis Ortheia in Sparta, the drama was, like the goddess, apparently of Oriental origin. It included a fight between monster and young paretros, according to the masks found there, and also, to judge from the hymns of Alkman, the *hieros gamos*.<sup>14</sup> Also in Samothrace, there are indications for a ritual drama including a *hieros gamos*, this time with Kadmos and Harmoneia as protagonists, as well as, probably, a fight with the dragon.<sup>15</sup> A similar fight is recorded in Delphi, this time between Apollo and Python at the

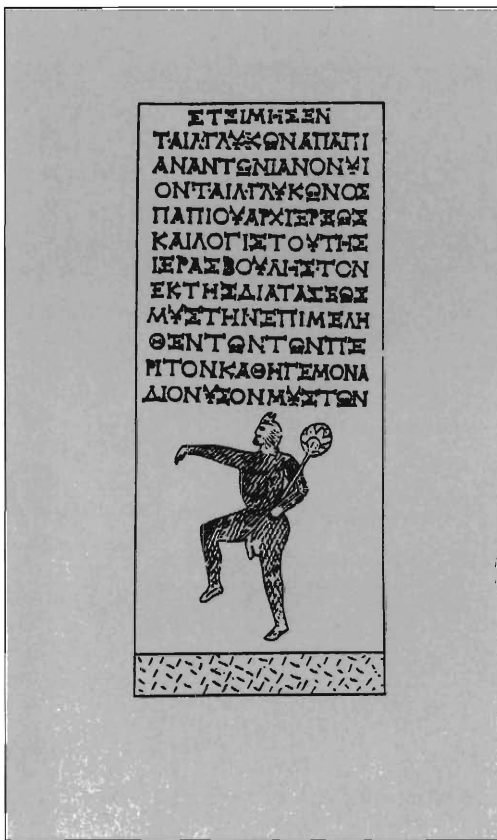


Fig. 3. Grave stele from Magnesia in Asia Minor showing a member of a Dionysian boukoloi koina. He is clad in bukskin and carries a mask (from Merkelbach 1988, Zeichnung 3).

feast called Septarion. We hear from Plutarch that Apollo was played by a youth followed by young men with torches. A table was set up in front of the hut of Python. The table was then turned over and the hut set on fire, and when Python was killed, they ran away to all sides.<sup>16</sup> Finally, of the many myths related to Dionysos we have evidence that at least some were used for ritual dramas as well, including his childhood on Mount Nysa and the Pentheus story (v.i.).

The performers of these dramas were, in the beginning, primarily the priests and officials of the sanctuaries, as was the case in the Orient. From the Hellenistic period, however, it became increasingly the members of the cultic groups, *koina*, related to the god and/or the sanctuary, who performed. Especially well known are the Dionysian Technitai, groups of professional actors who first appear in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and who primarily performed in the literary dramas; but there were many oth-

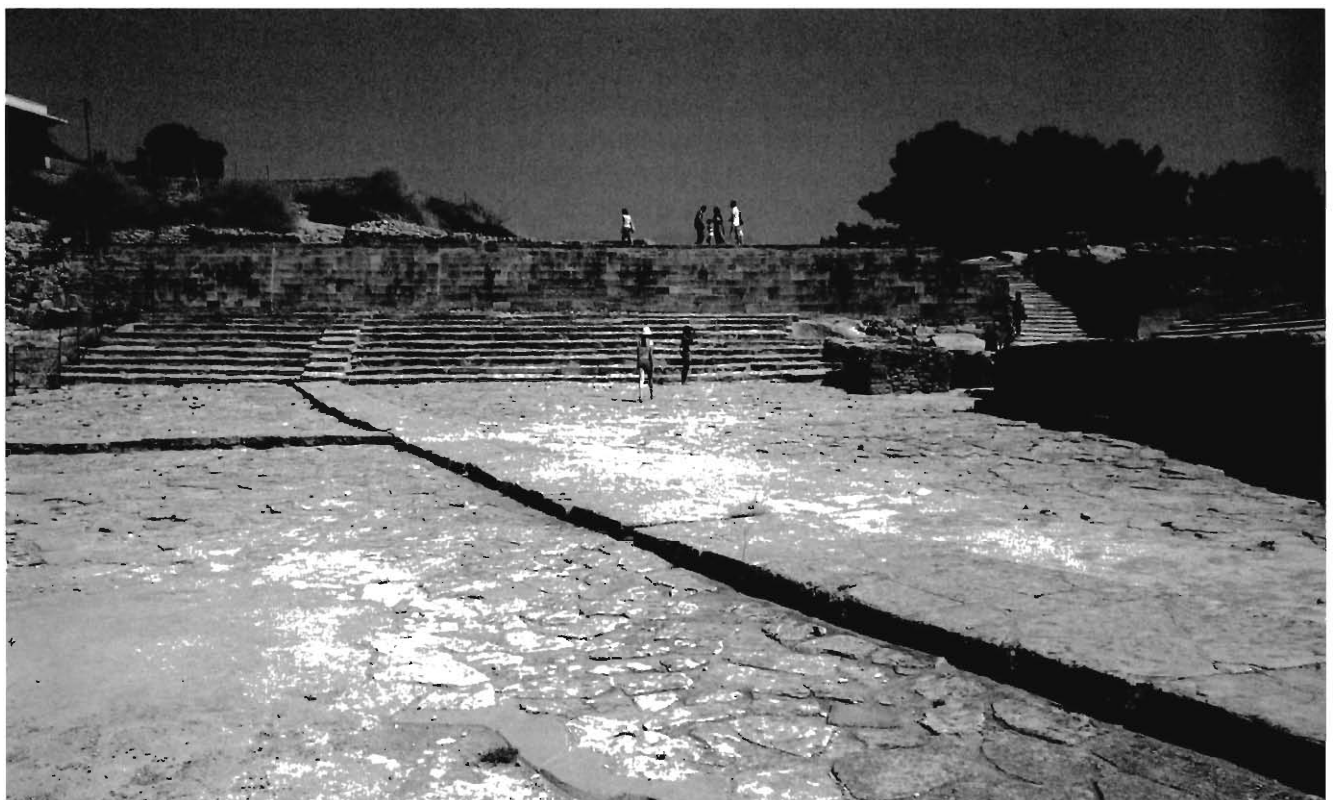
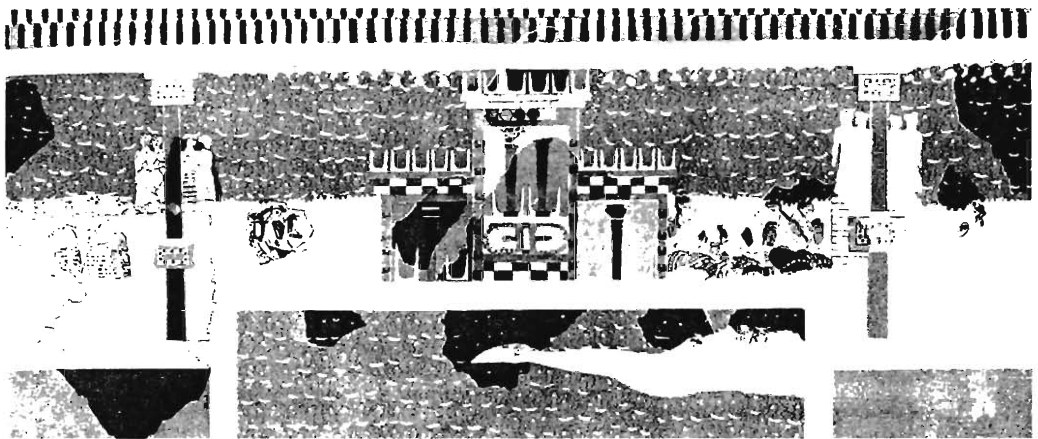


Fig. 4. The "theatre" in the west court of the palace of Phaistos, dating from the first palatial period (1900-1700 BC (photo IN).

Fig. 5. Drawing of the Grand Stand Fresco from the palace of Knossos, where at least some of the audience surveying ceremonies in the courtyard is represented as seated (from Marinatos 1993, fig. 5).



ers. These koina are among the most interesting and characteristic institutions in the Hellenistic and Roman world.<sup>17</sup> For example, the members of the famous Iobacchoi koinon in Athens apparently participated in dramatic performances, since various roles as gods played by them are mentioned in the inscription recording the rules of this association. Also, we have an inscription of such a *thiasos* from Magnesia in Asia Minor, which refers to a performance of the childhood of Dionysos. Thus the parts of *pappas*, that is, foster-father, undoubtedly Silenus, and of *hypotrophos*, that is nurse, which might be Ino or one of the Nymphs of Nysa are mentioned. And Lucian, who wrote in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, recounts that the Ionians witnessed performances with corybants, satyrs, and *bukoloi* (that is, initiates into the mysteries of Dionysos), at a public Dionysos feast (Fig. 3). He states that the performers were men of a high esteem in the city, and not professionals; one may imagine that they were members of Dionysian thiasoi.<sup>18</sup>

## The Setting

A very important source for the existence of ritual dramas in Greece is the presence of a setting for them, the cultic theatre.<sup>19</sup> While in the Orient these settings were rather ephemeral or multi-functional, a specific building was apparently regarded as necessary in Greece, and was to become a very visible element in the Greek sanc-

tuaries. I shall in this connection only briefly mention the interesting theatrical structures found in some Minoan palaces, since they may well be a result of an early contact with the Near East and with Egypt, if, which seems possible, ritual dramas were indeed performed in them<sup>20</sup> (Fig. 4). What is interesting as far as these structures and the depictions of them in the wall paintings are concerned, is that they reveal a tradition for the spectators to be seated on such occasions, documented here for the first time; in the Near East and in Egypt worshippers stood during the rituals (Fig. 5). This difference persists during the entire antiquity.

In the Greek mainland, there are no signs of theatrical installations neither in the Mycaenean palaces, nor in the sanctuaries of the Dark Ages. Thus it was apparently in the orientalizing period, when contacts with the Near East and Egypt were re-established, that the first signs of ritual dramas and settings for them, turn up in the Greek sanctuaries, although there may well already have existed some kind of dramatic performances in the local cults. The Phoenician traders who roamed the Mediterranean did not only deal in merchandise, but also settled in trading colonies in the Greek area, and introduced their own gods, such as Asherah, Astarte, Adonis and Melchart, to this new environment. These gods then underwent a Greek interpretation, to Artemis Ortheia and Aphrodite, to a Greek Adonis, and to

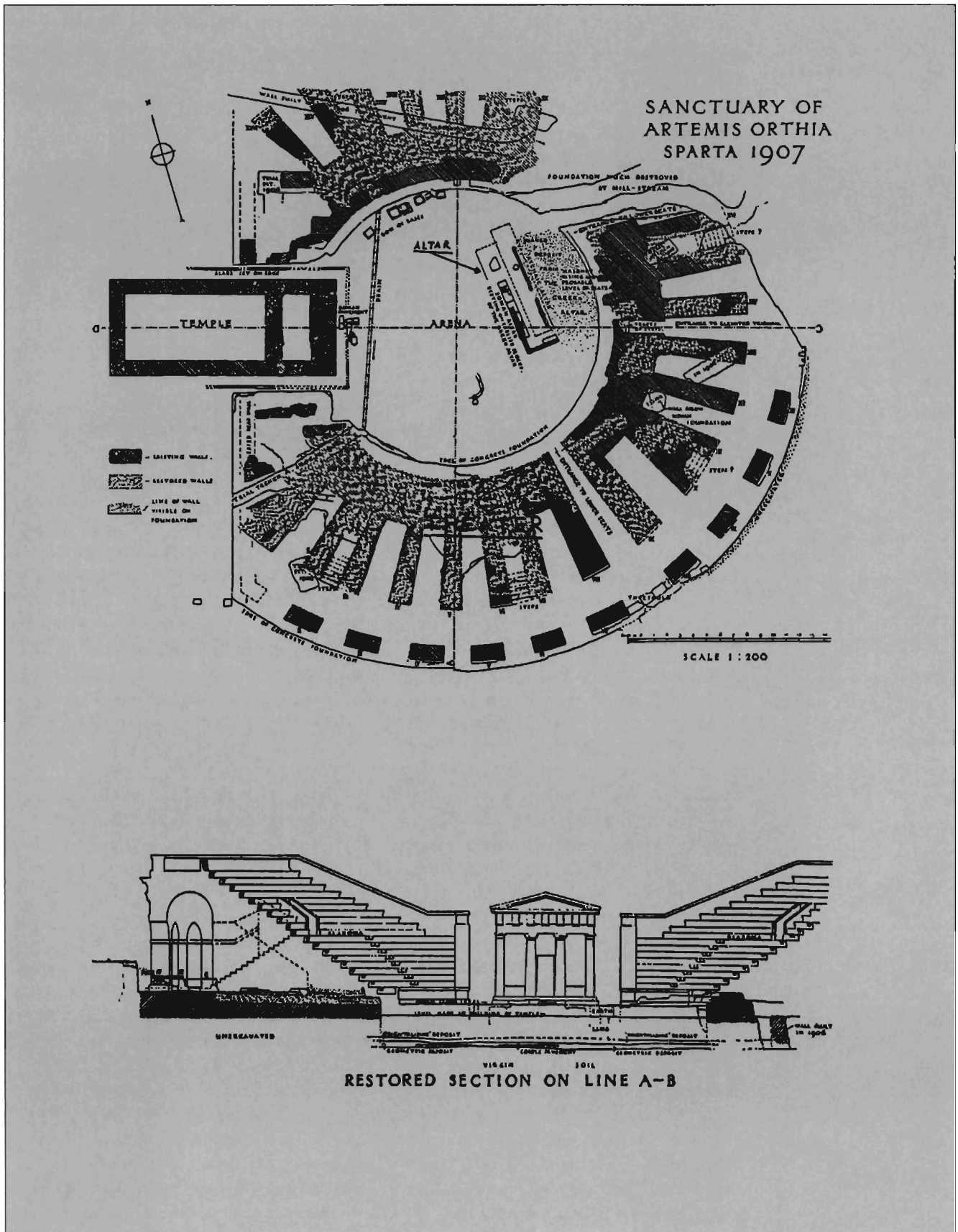


Fig. 6. Plan of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, above, and below, a section also showing the various pavements (Dawkins 1929, Taf. 3f).





Fig. 7. Sparta. The round structure with steps and orthostates, situated on the southern slope of the Acropolis (photo IN).

Heracles. It was precisely in the sanctuary of one of these gods, (Artemis) Ortheia, that we have the first indication that ritual dramas were performed. Thus it has recently been shown that the hymns, which Alkman wrote to this goddess already in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, have a great similarity to hymns reflecting ritual dramas in Sumeria.<sup>21</sup> Also, masks of the two types common also in the Near East, namely a demonic mask and one of a young man, have been found in this sanctuary, on and below a round area with a pavement dating to around 600 BC<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 2). That this area flanked by the altar was, in fact, an orchestra from the beginning is indicated by its having been transformed into a proper cultic theatre in the late Hellenistic period, although it is only monumentally preserved from the Roman period (Fig. 6). Another indication that there was, indeed, an early theatre there is the presence of a similar, round, structure

in Sparta itself, on the southern slope of the Acropolis, dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and probably i.a. used for ritual purposes, perhaps in connection with the feast of Apollo Karneios<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 7).

Many cultic theatres were like the one in the sanctuary of Ortheia transformed in later times, so that their original form remains uncertain, although we are positive that they existed. This is the case with two cultic theatres in Athens. The oldest one existed already in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC on the Agora. This *hieros kyklos*, a designation proving that this structure, or orchestra, was round, was situated near the altar of the Twelve gods west of the Panathenaic Way.<sup>24</sup> It was used both for political purposes and for rituals in connection, undoubtedly, with the sanctuary of Dionysos Lenaios, to which cult ritual dramas were often related, as were, later, literary ones. Although there

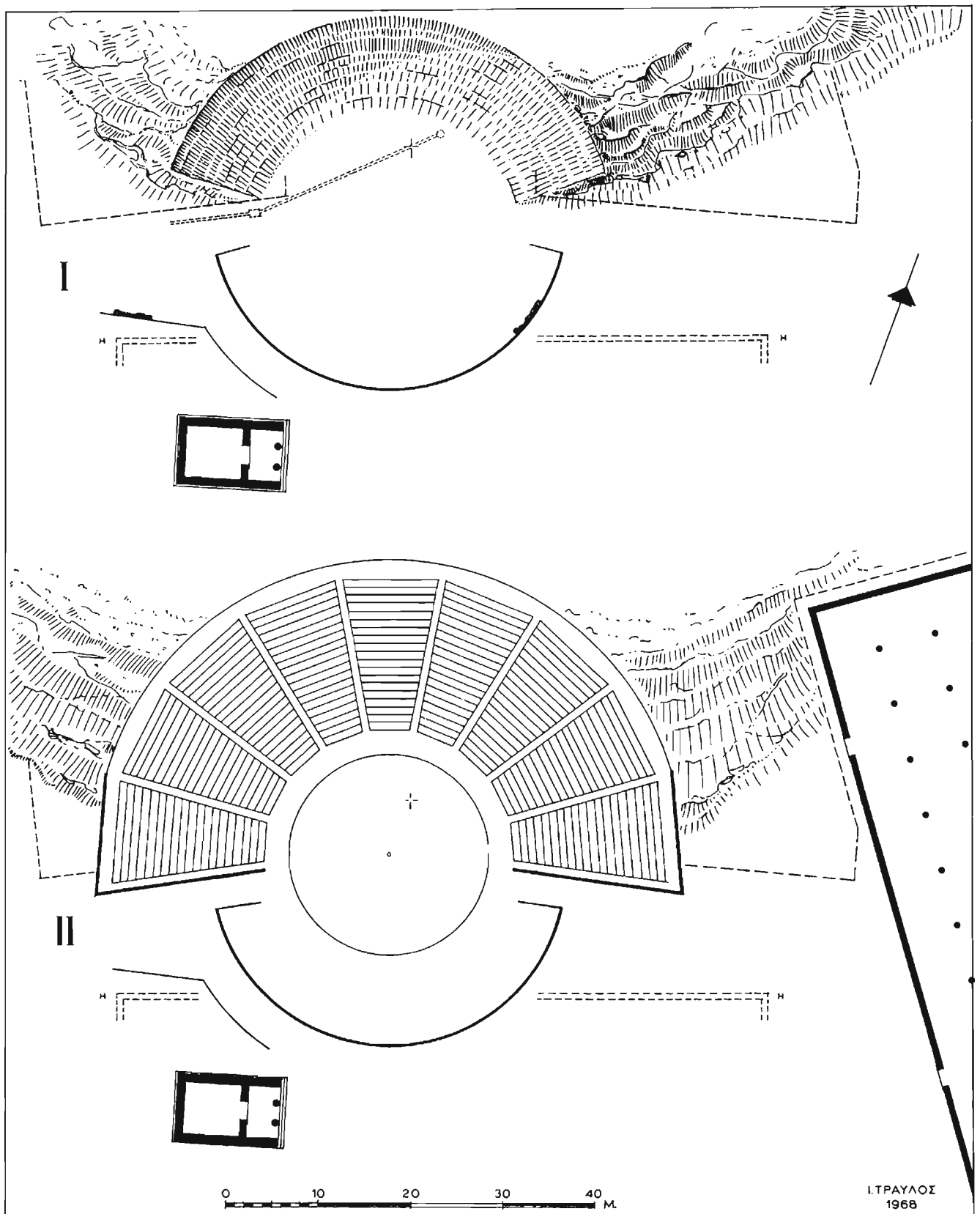


Fig. 8. Athens. Plan of the sanctuary of Dionysos before the restoration by Lycurgus. In fact, the orchestra may well have been rectangular in these early phases. (from Travlos 1971, fig. 677).

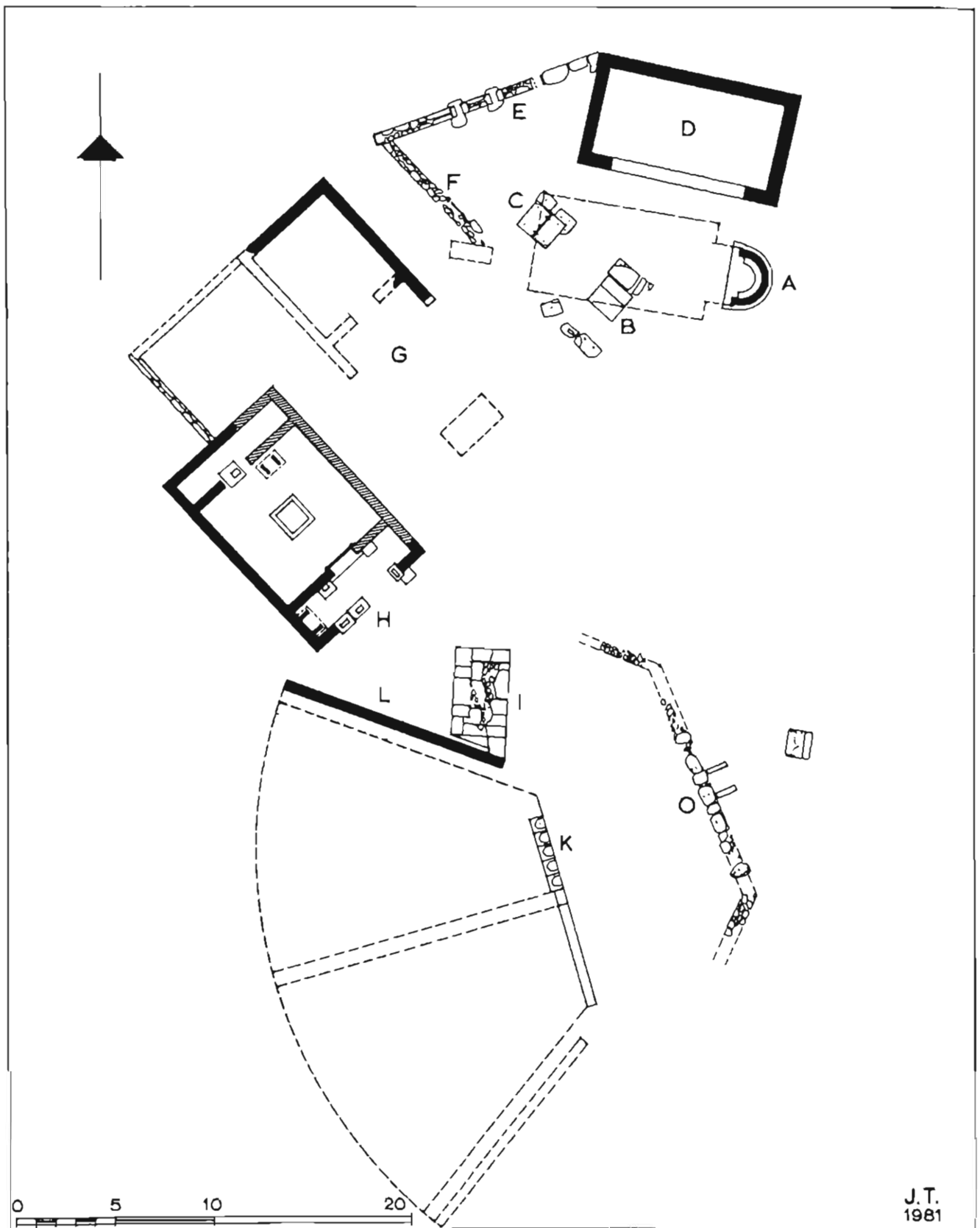


Fig. 9. Icaria. Plan of the agora with the cultic theatre, with prohedria, and probably the temple of Dionysos in building G. That of Apollo Pythios is building H (from Travlos 1988, fig. 98)

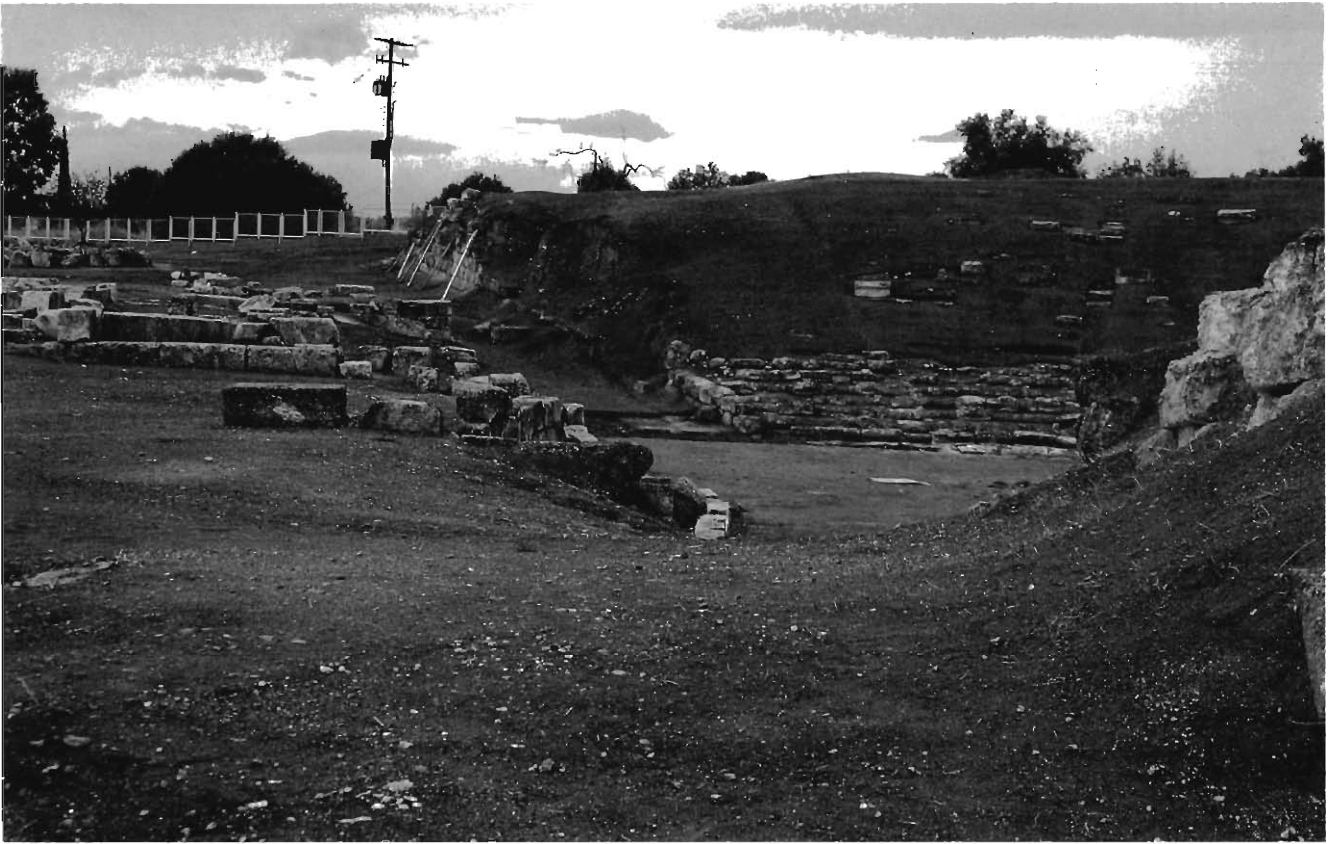


were no permanent seats in this theatre, we hear of scaffoldings with seats in wood, *ikria*, from the written sources, and traces of such seats have, in fact, been found even earlier in the Achaean colony of Metapontum in Southern Italy.<sup>25</sup> It was on an occasion of the collapse of these Athenian *ikria* that the dramatic performances were finally moved to the sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus on the southern slope of the Acropolis. In its first phases this famous theatre consisted only of an orchestra of uncertain form, but probably rectangular in shape, and a slope and later wooden seats for the spectators, and there was no barrier between the theatre and the old temple of Dionysos, whose statue we know surveyed the performances<sup>26</sup> (Fig. 8). But when this theatre was finally monumentalized with stone seats and a permanent stage building in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, it became at the same time isolated from the sanctuary of Dionysos and placed outside the temenos wall. It was now used exclusively for liter-

ary dramas in connection with the pan-hellenic festival of the Great Dionysia and for popular assemblies. One may imagine that the ritual dramas, which were undoubtedly still performed in connection with this cult, now took place in front of the new temple in the temenos itself.

At the same time as the first cultic theatres were built in Athens, similar structures were raised in the Attic demes. They were related to the same cult, that of Dionysos Lenaios, whose main feast, the rural Dionysia, a very old agrarian festival, was the scene of ritual dramas from far back. The earliest cultic theatres have been found in the demes which were traditionally closely related to the myth of Dionysos, namely his arrival in Attica, taking place in Thorikos, and his first introduction of vine there, which happened in Ikaria. The latter deme was also said to be the home of the first “literary” tragedian, Thespis, as well as of Susarion, connected with the early stages of the comedy, both

*Fig. 10. The cultic theatre of Thorikos. In front, the altar, and in the distance, the temple. The temple court, in the middle, was flanked by the seats on one side, and supported by a terrace wall on the other (photo IN).*



*Fig. 11. Eretria. The theatre with the temple and altar to the left. This theatre had a skene (photo IN).*

belonging to the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The cultic theatre of Ikaria goes back at least to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and is situated in the agora, where Dionysos Lenaios was traditionally worshipped.<sup>27</sup> It is a very primitive structure, consisting only of a slope and a supporting wall for the orchestra. Later, prohedria seats were added, but there is no trace of a stage (Fig. 9). One may compare with the cultic theatre in Rhamnous, from the same period.<sup>28</sup> The same is also the case in Thorikos, where, however, the theatre developed further than that of Ikaria, for although the first theatre consisted only of a slope facing a terrace with the temple at one end, stone seats were added in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 10). In all instances, the seats always remained basically linear, something which is typical of many cultic theatres, undoubtedly a reflection of the early ikria of wood placed at one side of the orchestra, as in the agora of Athens. Also dedicated to Dionysos and closely related to those of Thorikos and Athens,

was the theatre of Eretria, in Euboea, which dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and is placed perpendicular to the temple, which in its present form dates from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 11).

It is, however, worth noting that although Dionysos was the god of literary drama par excellence, this was not the case with ritual drama, in fact only rather few theatres have been found in his sanctuaries outside Attica. Even in Attica, the sanctuaries of other gods were furnished with cultic theatres from an early period, too. This was for example the case with Amphiaraos, a healing god, in whose sanctuary a primitive cultic theatre with stone seats was built in its first phase in the centre of the sanctuary facing the altars (Fig. 12). It was later almost entirely pulled down and replaced by another, more canonical festival theatre at the edge of the sanctuary.<sup>31</sup> Also Apollo was furnished with such rites from early on. This was as mentioned the case in Delphi, where an

archaic ritual drama, mentioned by Plutarch, took as its theme the god's fight over the sanctuary with its original owner, the snake-god Python, son of Gaia. This took place on an orchestra placed just below the temple, in the area in front of the Stoa of the Athenians, whose steps could thus be used by the spectators. Later, other seats, in form of exedrae, were put up around this area.<sup>32</sup> Another example is the cultic theatre from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in the sanctuary of Apollo Temitis in Syracuse<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 13).

From the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards, quite a lot of cultic theatres have been preserved in Greek sanctuaries all over the Greek world, belonging to many different gods and with a great variety of shapes. These cultic theatres differed both in architecture and in function from the canonic theatres, which at this time were being built in



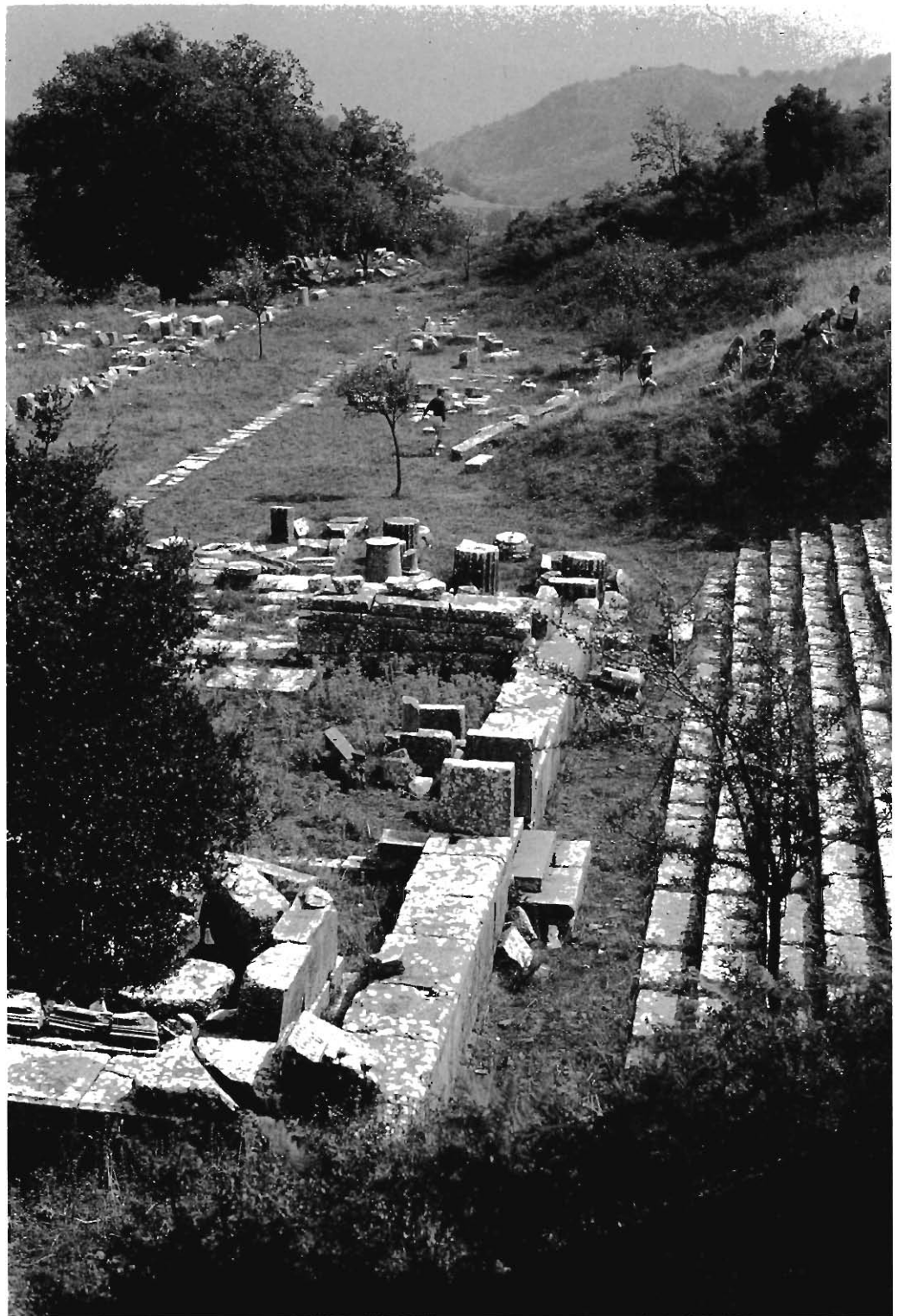
many Greek cities, partly for the literary drama festivals, and partly to accommodate popular assemblies. Thus the cultic theatres always remained rather primitive

*Fig. 12. Oropos. The old cultic theatre facing the altars of the sanctuary of Amphieraros (photo IN).*



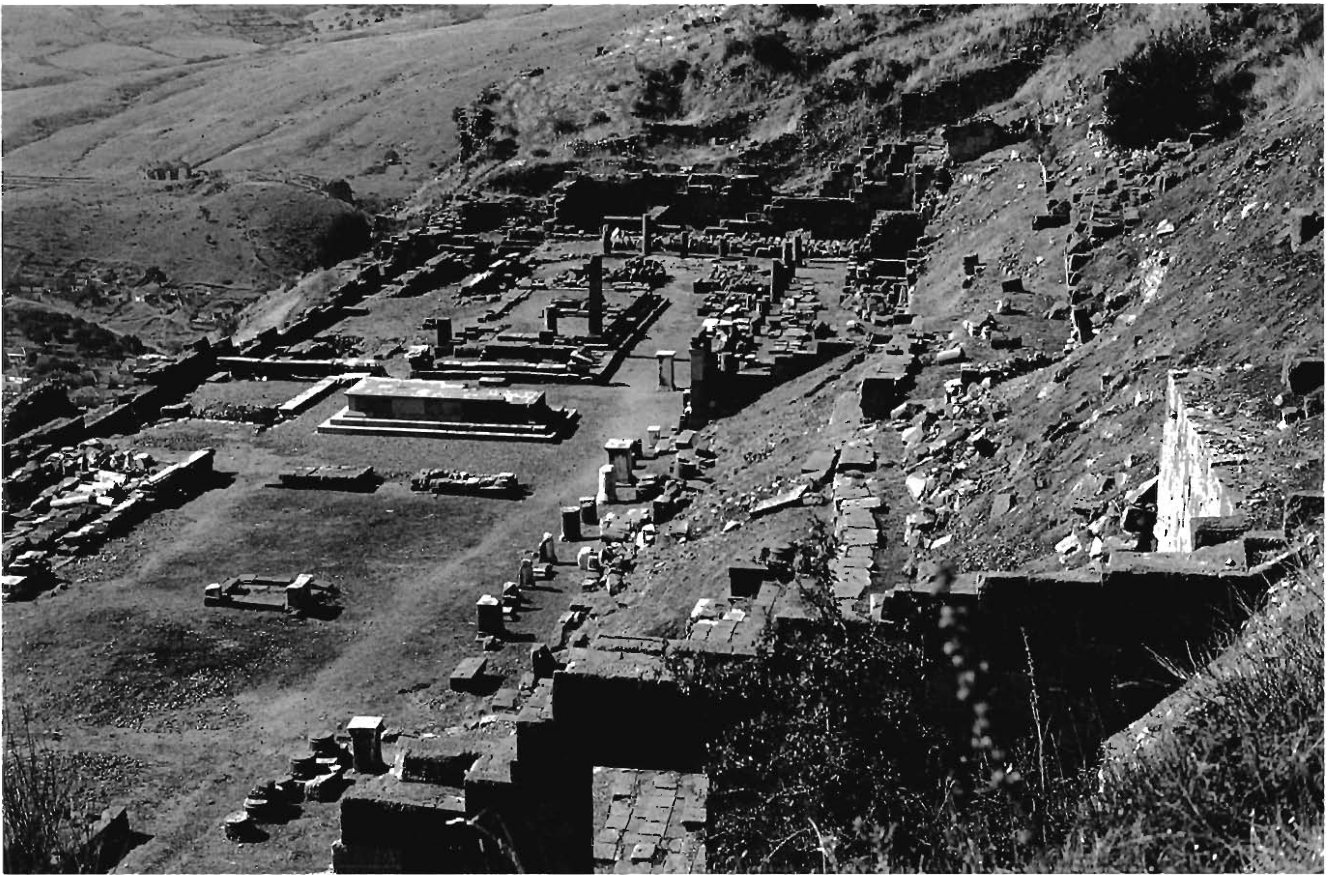
*Fig. 13. Syracuse. The cultic theatre placed on the slope of the Acropolis, just beside the great theatre. It belonged to the sanctuary of Apollo Temitis. The orchestra has disappeared, only the rock-cut seats are left (photo IN).*

Fig. 14. Lycosura. The sanctuary of Despoina, with a theatron which at the same time functioned as a terrace wall. The temple was placed very close to the theatron (photo IN).



in form, and are sometimes even difficult to distinguish from terrace walls and staircases, since it is the *theatron*, that is, literally, the place from where one sees, which is normally preserved. But it was not these

seats which were the main thing in the cultic theatre, but the area on which the chorus and the priests and officials performed, namely the orchestra. This indicates the great importance of the chorus,



which had ultimately developed from the worshippers themselves performing in the ritual drama. In most sanctuaries, the central area with the altar in front of the temple and with the seats (theatron) facing it constituted the orchestra. Stages were seldom present, instead, the temple facade could sometimes be used as a backdrop, and its steps and pronaos, as well as the altar could constitute a multiple stage. The relationship between temple and theatron never became systematically organized in the Greek sanctuaries, although cultic theatres continued to exist until late Antiquity, this was only to happen in Italy.

A good example of such a theatron, well preserved since it is cut into the rock, is the small one recently found in Corinth, in the sanctuary of the old agrarian goddesses Demeter and Kore, to whose cult ritual dramas had belonged from an early period. The theatron was placed on the uppermost terrace and could only house

c. 85 spectators. The performance was probably set on the terrace below, constituting the main terrace of the sanctuary, where the temple and their altar was situated.<sup>34</sup> Another theatron has been found in Lykousura, for related goddesses, Despoina, Demeter, and Artemis, in the form of a terrace-like structure along the side of the temple and further along the narrow temenos<sup>35</sup> (Fig. 14). A similar placement is also seen in Demeter's sanctuary in Pergamon, and from the same period, i.e. late 4<sup>th</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This large structure, which was 30 m long and had 11 rows of seats, functioned at the same time as a terrace wall<sup>36</sup> (Fig. 15). Whether the interesting structure with seats in Eleusis, facing the Southern Court, belonged to this period or only to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, is uncertain. In any case it is clearly a theatron for watching what went on in this court. The rites may have had connections to the mysteries, where we know that dramas were per-

*Fig. 15. Pergamon. A similar situation as in Lycosura applies in this monumental sanctuary of Demeter; here, however, the theatron faced a great altar and continued along the entire length of the sanctuary (photo IN).*



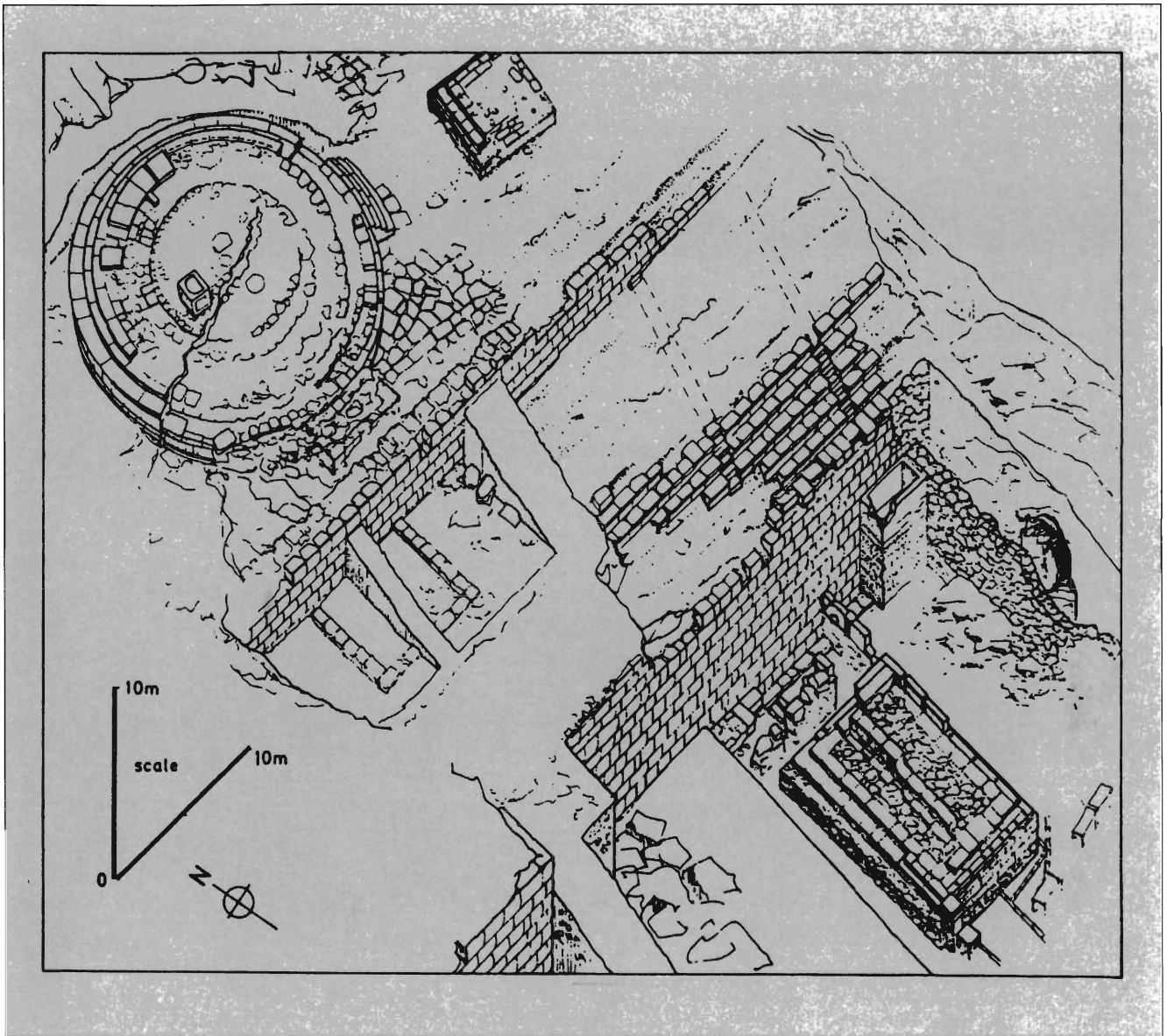


Fig. 16. Knidos. Reconstruction of the theatron, which is here situated on a terrace wall spanning the level between the upper sanctuary of Aphrodite and the lower one of Apollo Karneios. It faced the latter's altar (from Bankel 1997, Abb. 1).

formed in the temenos, but it is also a possibility that the ritual dramas performed here were connected to the Thesmophoria festival.<sup>37</sup> For related chthonic gods, a cultic theatre was also built in Morgantina in Sicily at that time, while on Rhodes, Dionysos Smintheus probably had a sanctuary in Lindos with a fine theatre resting on the slope of the acropolis. At least the Danish expedition related this theatre to a building, which may well have belonged to this god. In nearby Asia Minor ritual dramas connected to Dionysos are well documented.<sup>38</sup> And in the Sanctuary of Apollo Karneios in Knidos, a

cultic theatre was built on the terrace wall dividing it from the sanctuary of Aphrodite with the round temple housing Praxiteles' famous statue of the goddess<sup>39</sup> (Fig. 16). Apollo Karneios was a pan-Doric god who was famous for his feasts, which seem to have included performances of various kinds, to judge from the sources on them especially from Sparta.

In the later Hellenistic period, a cultic theatre was built in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC in the famous sanctuary on Samothrace, which was dedicated to Electra, a relative of Cybele, together with other Megaloi

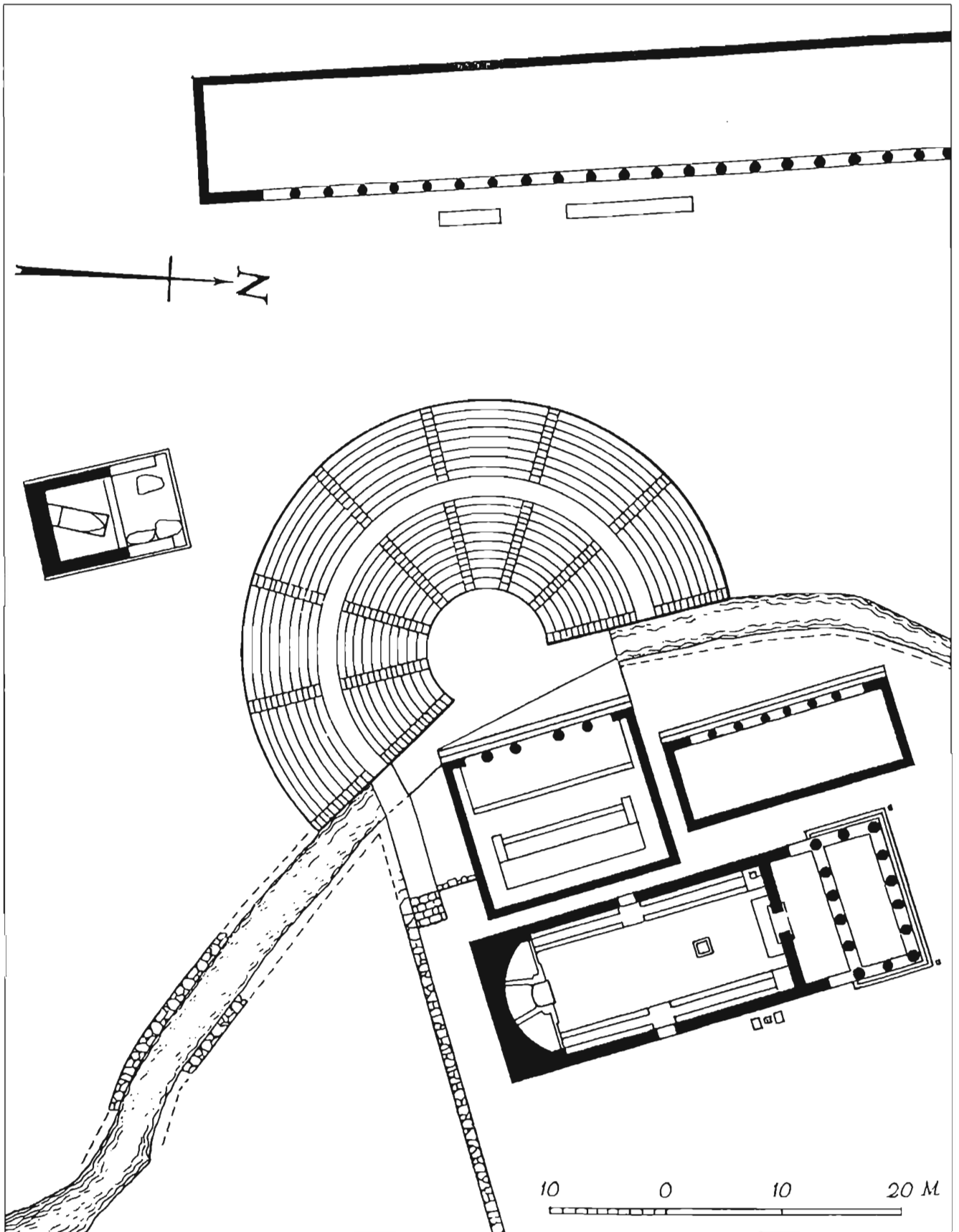


Fig. 17. Samothrace. Plan of the theatron built just across the wadi from the Altar Court, which functioned as a backdrop (from Lehmann 1964, fig. 117).

Theoi. The theatron faced the so-called Altar Court, functioning as a backdrop, on the other side of a brook, which ran dry in the summer<sup>40</sup> (Fig. 17). Closely attached to this cult were Kadmos, the Tyrian prince and later king of Thebes, and Harmonia, the daughter of Electra and wife of Kadmos. In fact their myth seemingly constituted the subject of a ritual drama which was performed here, during the summer festival (see n. 15). Whether the same or a related subject was also used in the cultic theatre found in the sanctuary of the related gods Kabeiros and Pais near Thebes is unknown. This cultic theatre was coeval with the one on Samothrace, but locally made vases from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC found in the sanctuary showed grotesque figures in dramatic scenes, indicating that the tradition to perform ritual dramas went further back in time in this sanctuary.<sup>41</sup> As in the sanctuary of Ortheia of Sparta, it was the temple itself that functioned as a backdrop for the theatron in Thebes.

## The Oriental Cults in the West

In the Hellenistic period a new wave of Oriental cults invaded the Greek area. Although not the main topic of this article, it is, all the same, worth mentioning how these new cults, that is, from Egypt Isis, Osiris, Harpocrates, Anubis and Sarapis, from the Near East Atargatis and Hadad, and from Anatolia Cybele and Attis, adapted to their new homelands in this regard.<sup>42</sup> If ritual dramas were important for the indigenous cults, this was, as already the Phoenicians had experienced, even more the case with the foreign gods, trying to find new worshippers. These cults had to be presented in the most favourable light to prospective new adepts. Since the liturgy was often in a foreign language, at least in the beginning, and since the contents would seem exotic for a Greek, which was indeed one of the reasons why he would be attracted to them, it was very important to be able to explain the cult and its contents, and this

could for example be done through the performance of ritual dramas. The parts of the liturgies that were kept and the parts that were left out show to what extent the cult had to adapt to the new society.

Again, this development may be gleaned from the literary religious texts, including hymns and aretalogies, connected to these cults. At the same time, new subjects were added, including myths on how the cult was introduced into the Greek area. The question here is whether the Oriental cults took over the setting for ritual dramas developed in the previous centuries in the Greek sanctuaries, i.e. the cultic theatres, or whether they kept the settings normally used in their sanctuaries in the homelands. This has also to do with the status of the worshippers. The Greek tradition to be seated on these occasions in a certain way made an audience out of the worshippers to a greater extent than when these remained standing in the temenos. At the same time, such a standing audience necessitated that the actors/priests were raised to be seen, often by means of platforms and the like. This was less necessary if the audience was seated on a slope, and in fact stages are seldom present in the early cultic theatres, although there may have been single platforms there.

When studying the sanctuaries of the Oriental cults in the west it is interesting to note that only three of them with certainty included a theatron. The earliest known theatron in a sanctuary for a foreign deity was also the most primitive, namely the one in the sanctuary of Cybele in Rome, where it formed an integral part from the beginning, that is, around 200 BC, when this goddess was invited to Rome to help against Hannibal.<sup>43</sup> Here, the temple was placed behind the theatron, a model, which was later developed to perfection in the great sanctuaries in central Italy, among others that of Praeneste (Fig. 18). The next example is found on Delos. Here, a cultic theatre was built into the sanctuary of the Syrian gods Atargatis and Hadad in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> centu-

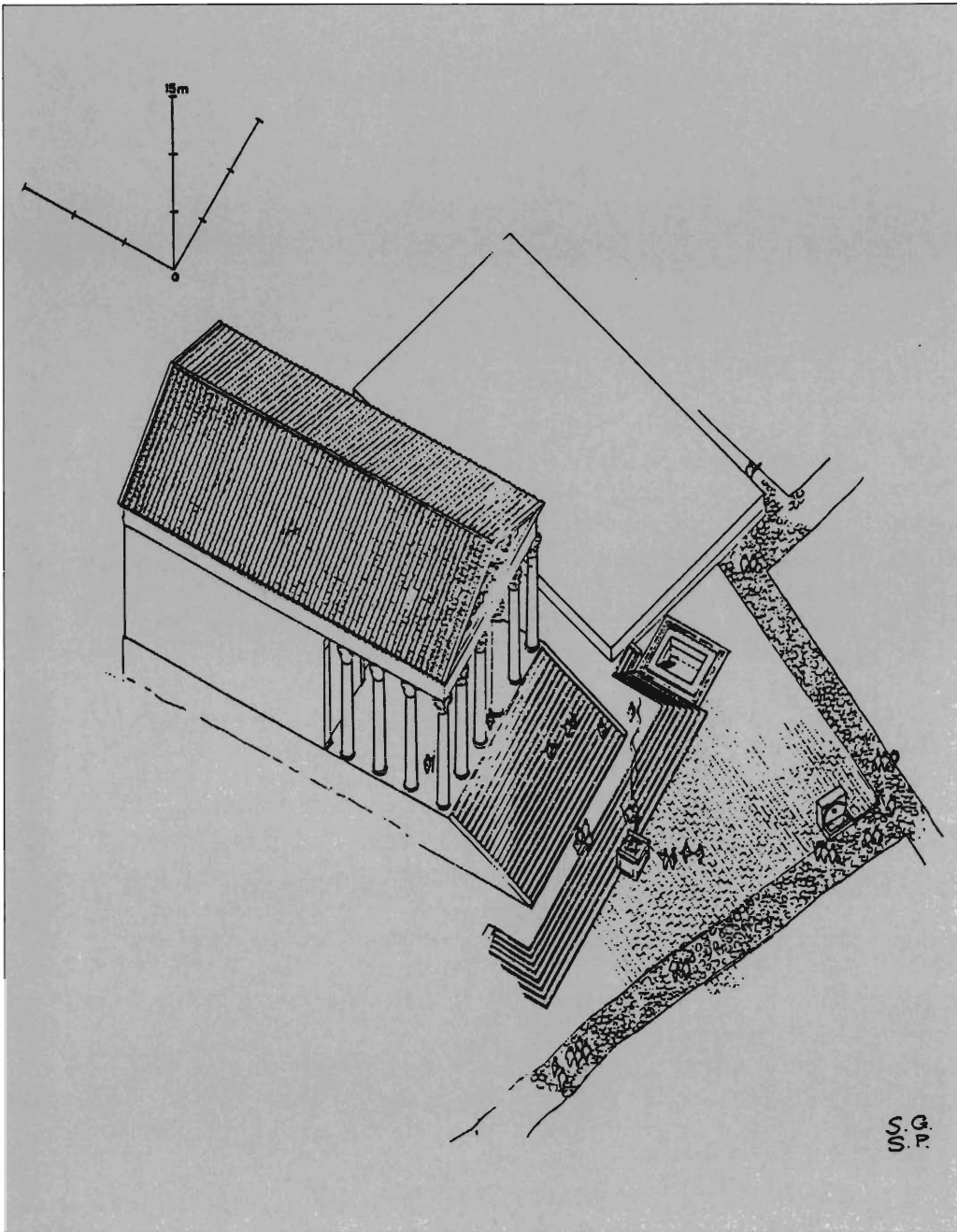


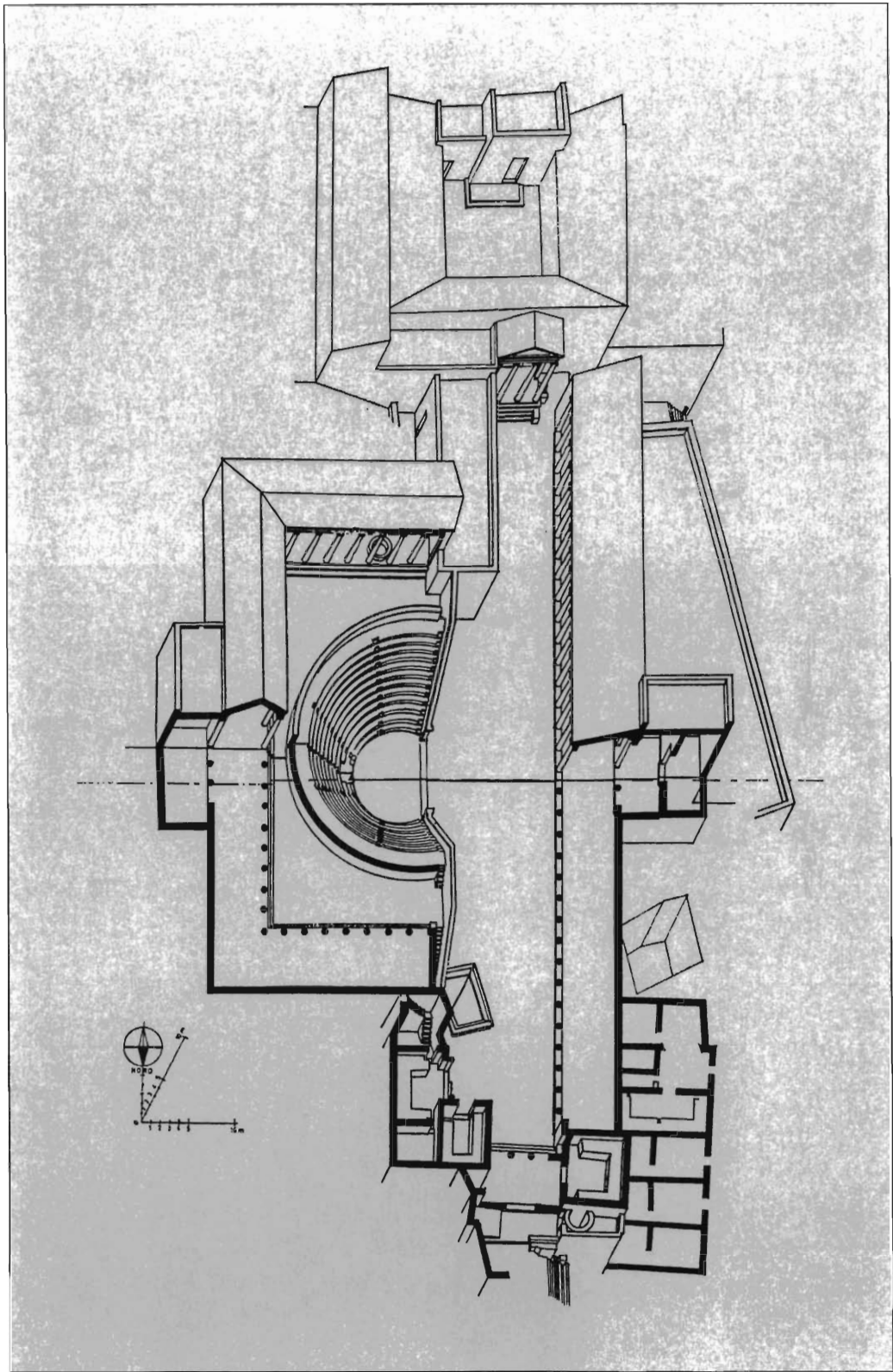
Fig. 18. Rome. Reconstruction of the sanctuary of Cybele on the Palatine. Its first phase included a theatron placed in front of the temple, as was the rule in Italy, with this one constituting the first example (from Pensabene 1982).

ry BC<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 19). It is interesting that this happened in connection with the Athenian conquest of the island, when the sanctuary became official and received annual Greek priests. The third example is to be found in connection with yet another deity, namely Isis, in what is probably her sanctuary in the centre of Syracuse (Fig. 20). Although this sanctuary may go back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the cultic theatre, here uncharacteristically placed behind the

temple, was first added in the 1st or 2nd century AD, when the sanctuary apparently changed its status.<sup>45</sup> In all three cases it thus seems that these western style drama installations were first added when the sanctuary in question became official, and thus heavily hellenized or romanized.

This could indicate that in most cases, the Oriental cults chose not to include settings from the host countries for the per-

Fig. 19. Delos. Reconstruction of the sanctuary of the Syrian gods. Here, the fine theatron faced the large oblong courtyard, and the throne of the goddess



formance of their old ritual dramas in their new sanctuaries. Rather, it seems that they kept their traditional way of per-

forming these dramas, whether in the dromos, on a sacred lake, or on platforms, often in front of the temple, in the sanctu-

aries of the Egyptian gods, or around the altars in the temenoi of the Phoenicio-Syrian gods. On the other hand there are, in fact, examples of an introduction of such theatra in the sanctuaries of these gods even in their homelands. Although this did not happen often, and not until the late Hellenistic period, it is all the same interesting that these structures were used in sanctuaries where the rituals performed were undoubtedly of an only little hellenized type. Such theatra have been found in Anatolia in the main city of Cybele, Pessinus, dating from Tiberian times (Fig. 21), and in Syria in the Hellenistic colony of Dura Europos, from 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Fig. 22), and in the Hauran, a Nabataean area, from the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. Lately such a cultic theatre has also been found inside a temple in Petra.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

In general, one may say that the cultic theatres, which were built in the sanctuaries in Greece, whether they belonged to the Greek or the Oriental gods, never became truly monumental. Thus they

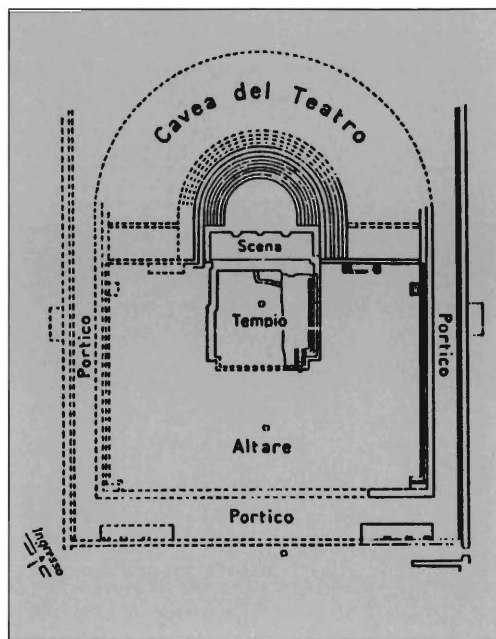


Fig. 20. Syracuse. Plan of the sanctuary, which was probably dedicated to Isis. Here, the theatron is uncharacteristically placed behind the temple (from Coarelli & Torelli 1984).

were normally not of the canonical kind with horseshoe or semicircular formed auditorium, round orchestra, and elaborate stage building. It is clear that what was needed was a place from where the worshippers, when seated, could see what went on in the central area of the sanctu-

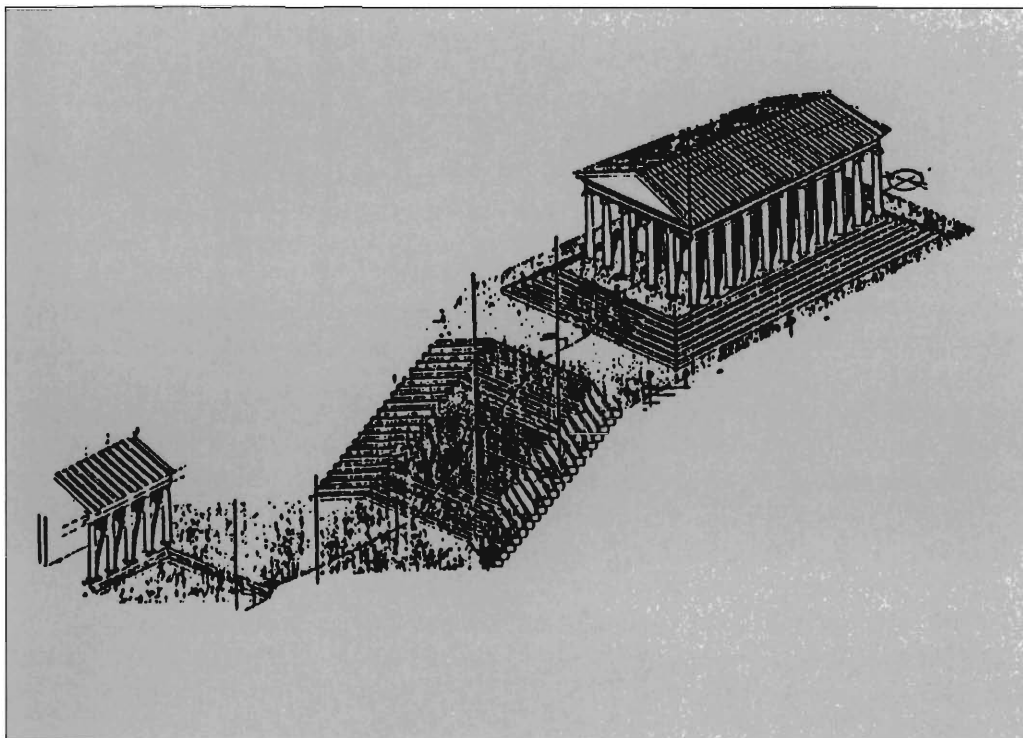


Fig. 21. Pessinus. Reconstruction of the temple and theatre of, probably, Cybele, the main goddess here. Note that the situation is the same as in Italy (from Polacco 1987, fig. 2).

*Fig. 22. Dura Europos. One of the peculiar cultic theatres placed in the pronaos of many of the temples of goddesses in this town (photo IN).*



ary, around the altar and in front of the temple. Whether this theatron was constructed in wood, cut into the rock, or built in stone, was a matter of economy; its function did not change. Also, these theatra always remained rather small, generally housing a maximum of 500-1000 adepts, and often even fewer. Stage buildings were only rarely present. The props needed for the performance of a ritual drama were already present in the sanctuary in the form of the temple and the altar, which could also be used as platform as could, sometimes, the frontal staircase of the temple. In fact this was still the kind of theatre in which the first and most

famous tragedies, comedies and satyr plays were performed in Athens during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in the sanctuary of Dionysos Eleuthereus. At this time, the same theatron could undoubtedly also still be used for ritual dramas, since it had not yet been isolated from the sanctuary by a supporting wall. This happened in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, in a period when the city theatres reached their canonical form. But in parallel with the construction of these great theatres, so characteristic of ancient Greece, the primitive cultic theatres continued to function in many Greek sanctuaries until late antiquity.





# Notes

## NOTE 1

This Article is a summary of part of my book on Cultic theatres and Ritual Drama, (Nielsen forthcoming). A short version was held as a lecture at the annual meeting of the Danish Institute at Athens in March, 1999, and at the international seminar on *Celebrations. Sanctuaries and the Vestiges of Cult Activity*, held by the Norwegian Institute at Athens, May 1999.

## NOTE 2

See for a good survey of the enormous scholarship in this field, e.g. Pickard-Cambridge 1962, 60ff; Adrados 1975; Kolb 1981, 26ff; Friedrich 1983; Polacco 1990, 23ff.

## NOTE 3

This was i.a. done by the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, ultimately based on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, J. Harrison (1912), G. Murray, (1912) and F.M. Cornford (1914), and later, in a moderated form, by Polacco 1987, 1990, and Adrados, 1975, and in the seminar entitled *L'Anthropologie et Théâtre Antique*, published 1987. For the tendency in later years to reconcile these theories, see the good summary by Friedrich 1983.

## NOTE 4

See Sethe 1928; Drioton 1942; Gaster 1966.

## NOTE 5

See Fairman 1974, who has made a reconstruction of this drama and even arranged for it to be performed in several cities in Britain. Cf. Podemann Sørensen 1986.

## NOTE 6

See for these lakes, Gessler-Löhr 1983; she does not, however, combine them specifically with dramatic performances.

## NOTE 7

See for these texts, Gaster 1966, de Moor 1971.

## NOTE 8

See Carter 1987.

## NOTE 9

See for these texts, Gaster 1966.

## NOTE 10

Thus according to Polacco 1987, the Greek *hymnologi*, especially those of the Homeric hymns, did nothing but "translate" liturgical dramatic forms, which were older, as was the case in the Orient.

## NOTE 11

See for the masks, which have i.a. been found in the sanctuary of Artemis Ortheia in Sparta, and in the Heraia of Tiryns, Argos and Samos, Carter 1987; for the vase-paintings, see Bieber 1961 and Pickard-Cambridge 1962.

## NOTE 12

See for this feast, Pickard-Cambridge 1968, 1ff; Burkert 1985, 237ff. This enactment is depicted on the choes vases, which belonged to this feast; i.a. a procession to the sanctuary with wedding cart is seen, in which the *archon basilicus*, clad as Dionysos, is sitting while the *basilissa* is about to enter it (see Bieber 1961, fig. 218).

## NOTE 13

This was undoubtedly a liturgical hymn song at the seasonal feasts of Demeter, cf. Gaster 1966, 452ff.

## NOTE 14

See Carter 1987, 1988.

## NOTE 15

See Scholia to Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 7; Nonnus, *Dion.* 3.61-78. One may mention also two decrees with names of the poets Dymas of Iasos (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC) and Herodes of Priene (2<sup>nd</sup> century BC), who both (according to Salviat in Charpouhier, Salac and Salviat 1956), or at least the former (according to Lehmann 1964) had written plays to be performed at the great summer feast. The former is honoured for

having written a drama on Dardanos' myth, the latter for having written two new works for this occasion, one on the myth of the brothers Dardanos and Iasion (sons of the main goddess Electra and brothers of Harmonia), and the other on Kadmos and Harmonia.

## NOTE 16

See for this drama, Plut. *De def. or.* 418 A-B, cf. Laurens 1987.

## NOTE 17

Such koina were also of a very great importance in a society that moved from the locally based polis society towards the cosmopolitan milieu of the Hellenistic and Roman world. In this period, the many merchants, officials and slaves that travelled all over the known world needed a place where they could feel at home and find friends and assistants in a foreign city. These associations could have more or less specific functions, and be both basically secular and basically religious. But most often they were both. Such associations were especially typical of the foreign, mostly Oriental gods, whose worshippers more than others needed a basis since they were often, at least in the beginning, foreign to the society in which they lived (v.i.). See for these koina, Poland 1909.

## NOTE 18

See for the Iobacchoi, *JG* II-III, 1.2, 1368 = *SEG* 3, 1109, dated to c. 178 AD. The inscription from Magnesia, *I Magn.* 117; Lucian, *de Salt.* 79.1

## NOTE 19

See for these structures, which have not always been identified as cultic theatres, in general Anti 1947; Anti and Polacco 1969; Ginouvès 1972; Kolb 1981.

## NOTE 20

See for these Minoan structures in general, Anti 1947; Ginouvès 1972, 53f; Kolb 1981, 103f; Stoessel 1987, 4ff; Marinatos 1993, 46ff, with references.

NOTE 21

See Carter 1988.

NOTE 22

See for the masks, Dickens in Dawkins 1929 and Carter 1987; for the excavations in the sanctuary, where more than 3000 fragments of masks have been found, see Dawkins 1929.

NOTE 23

See for this structure, Waldstein & Meader 1893; Christou in *BCH* 89, 1965, 717-723, v. G Daux. For the feast, Kolb 1981, 79ff.

NOTE 24

See Kolb 1981, with references.

NOTE 25

See Mertens 1982.

NOTE 26

See Dörpfeld and Reich 1896, who regarded the orchestra as being round, an opinion challenged first by Anti 1947, 55ff; and later i.a. by Gebhardt 1974; Würster 1979.

NOTE 27

See for this theatre, preliminary reports in *AJA* 4, 1888, 421; 5, 1889, 154ff, 354ff; Ginouvès 1972, 64; Kolb 1981, 72ff; Biers and Boyd 1982; Rossetto & Sartorio II, 199.

NOTE 28

See for Rhamnous, Pouilloux 1954, chpt. VI; B. Petrakos in *Praktika* 1975ff; Kolb 1981, 66ff; Rossetto & Sartorio II, 221.

NOTE 29

See Mussche 1967 and 1968; Ginouvès 1972, 59; Kolb 1981, 63ff.; Rossetto & Sartorio II, 308.

NOTE 30

See Fiechter 1937; Auberson & Schefold 1982, 46-52; Rossetto & Sartorio II, 215.

NOTE 31

See Petrakos 1968, 98-99; Ginouvès 1972, 66ff. The old theatron, which goes back at least to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, is recorded in an inscription mentioning: *ek tou theatrou tou kata ton bomon* (*IG VII* 4255, 29).

NOTE 32

See for this area, which is now difficult to imagine because of the late paved street crossing it, *FD III*, 3, 87f, 207-13; Amandry in *BCH* 63, 1939, 89-119; Bomelaer & Laroche 1991, 146f.

NOTE 33

See for this sanctuary, Gentili 1952; Kolb 1981, 91ff.

NOTE 34

See the recent publication by Bookidis & Stroud 1997, 254ff.

NOTE 35

See Orlandini 1969-70; Leonardos 1986.

NOTE 36

See Bohtz 1981; Radt 1988, 206ff.

NOTE 37

See Mylonas 1961, 137ff; Travlos 1988, 97.

NOTE 38

See for Morgantina, Ginouvès 1972, 71ff; Stillwell 1967; Kolb 1975, 226ff.; Rossetto & Sartorio III 26. For Lindos, see Dyggve 1960; Rossetto & Sartorio III, 26.

NOTE 39

See Love 1972 and 1973; latest Bankel 1997.

NOTE 40

Chapouthier, Salac & Salviat 1956; Lehmann 1964.

NOTE 41

See Heyder & Mallwitz 1978.

NOTE 42

See for a detailed treatment of this phenomenon, Turcan 1989; Nielsen forthcoming.

NOTE 43

See for this sanctuary, Pensabene 1982, 1988, and 1996. These seats were removed in the rebuilding of 111 BC, instead the frontal staircase was probably used.

NOTE 44

See Will 1985, 150ff.

NOTE 45

See Coarelli & Torelli 1984, 242f; Wilson 1988.

NOTE 46

See for Pessinus, Waelkens 1986; Polacco 1987; Devreker & Vermeulen 1998; for Dura Europos, Downey 1988; for Hauran, Butler 1916; for Petra, M. Sharp Joukowsky in *JDAI* 1995ff.

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