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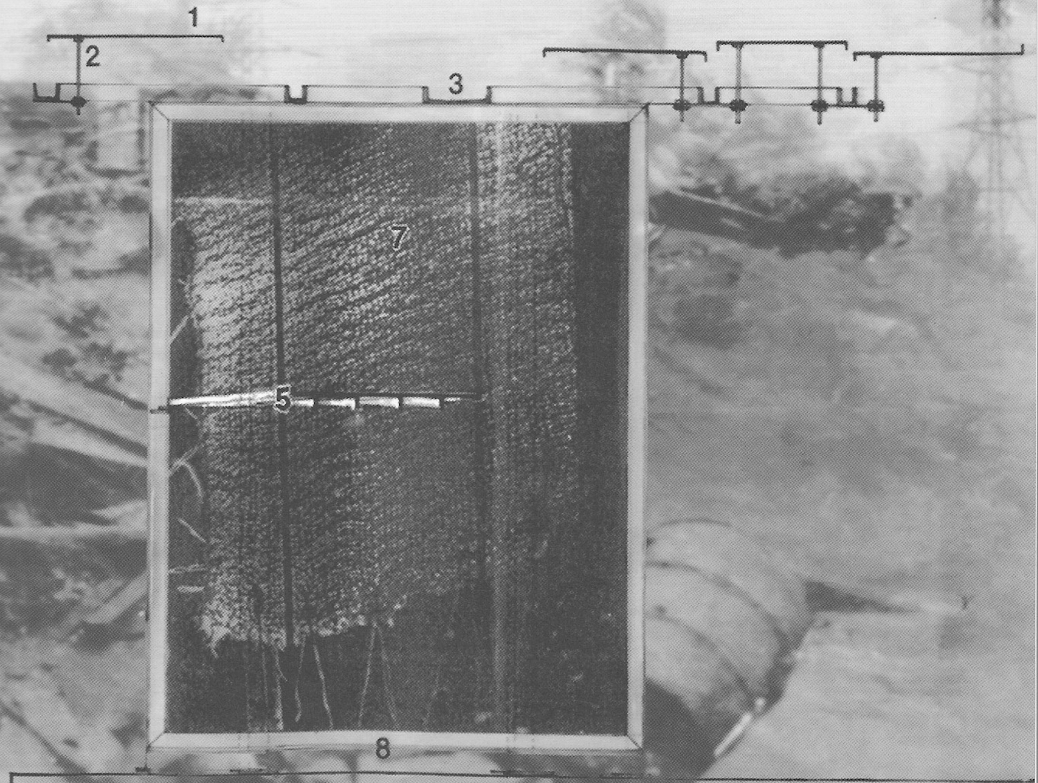

# Theatre of the Athenian Agora

Lorna McNeur



The Greek Agora was a physical manifestation of the dramatic shift in the perception of reality that accompanied the transformation of politics from tyranny to democracy, which came to fruition in Athens between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. Since the people, rather than one ruler, were deciding the structure of their own societal, political, spiritual and philosophical organisation, they required a public place in which to manifest this newly emerging society. The public space of the Agora was the essence of this manifestation and it became the stage upon which the people could gather, meet, discuss and debate in the presence of an audience of citizens, and gain strength in perceiving the physical presence of the polis.

Concurrently, politics and social values were also being formulated on the stage of Greek theatre. The gradual transformation from ritualistic festivals to the development of tragedy and comedy paralleled the dramatic changes that were being experienced in the Agora. As in the Agora, the audience in the theatre were perceived as the citizens of the polis to which lessons of political, social, and spiritual morality were administered. The chorus represented the voice of wisdom of tradition, "the cogency of the laws, the precepts of religion – in sum, the codes of value that lie at the heart of the polis."[1]

The politics of life in the Theatre of Dionysus and the theatre of life in the political arena of the Agora existed on many different levels: the Orchestra and the Panathenaic Way where the festivals, processions, contests and victories were celebrated; the stoas with jugglers, sword–swallowers, philosophers, orators, bankers, and money changers; the Tholos and New Bouleuterion where the Senators discussed and debated the foundations and future of the polis. From the comedy of the market stall bartering to the tragedies of the high courts of law, we witness the drama of life in its many guises. They were all settings created to encourage individuals to act out their lives as part of a democratic community.

The architecture of the Agora not only embodied the culture of its creators but was also the vehicle which helped the Athenians to formulate their ideas. This article discusses the Athenian Agora as the stage of democracy, and aims to reveal the human inhabitation of these spaces, given that architecture is the stage for the theatre of human existence.

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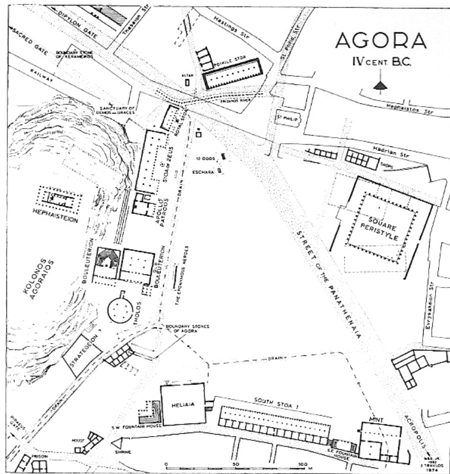
Under the monarchical rule of Mycenaean Royalty which lasted until about 1300 BC, the people had little or no say in the government or the structuring of society. The Royal temple stood in the centre of the city, walled against the plebeians living outside. Their lives were aimed at sustaining the extraordinarily grand lifestyle of the priest–king who controlled the religious, political, military, administrative, economic, and social activities of his sovereignty. This priest–king was perceived as the mediator between the divine realm and life on earth, communicating the laws and spiritual life of the city and sovereignty which were considered to be of divine origin and were undisputed.

After the collapse of Mycenaean Rule in the 14th century BC, Greece fell into the Dark Ages. Self governing states were simultaneously ruled by individual kings, small groups, or by majority rule (tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy). The resulting social crisis and political upheaval during the 8th and 7th centuries left Greece in a position to confront every aspect of its social structure. The notion of the polis had been alive in the city–states during this period and found its physical manifestation during the 6th and 4th centuries.

The polis was not a physical place but a body of people who shared political, spiritual, and cultural concerns. The new centre of reality was the polis which was the cohesive spirit of the democratic city, and the spiritual 'centre' (*en mesoi*) was the Acropolis. This remained the sacred precinct where the royal citadel once stood, but became the site for the temples of the goddess and gods of the city, accessible to all citizens of the polis. Just below the Acropolis, 'closer to earth,' was established the precinct in which to engage in the more 'secular' activities of restructuring society, the Agora. Thus the centre of the city shifted from the citadel to the Agora, the central space of which was defined by the surrounding civic buildings. Beyond this was the residential area containing the homes of the citizens of the city, now protected by walls from outside invasion, and within walking distance to the centre and heart of the city. The city itself became the architectural embodiment of a people–centred society, as compared to tyrannical or oligarchic rule which had clearly stated, politically and architecturally, that the people of the city were dispensable.[2] This new formation of the people–centred city reinforced the citizen's awareness of themselves, continually reminding them of their elevated status in the structure of society, and ultimately in the cosmological order.

The Agora was comprised of those spaces and buildings which housed the functions connected with the public life of




the citizens and served the growing needs of a society becoming rapidly aware of itself as a cosmopolitan urban centre of knowledge and authority. The buildings surrounded the public space of the square similar to the way that the Athenian house or houses were grouped around a central courtyard. Plato's description of the house as a little city quickly comes to mind in this context. "If men are to have a city wall at all, the private houses should be constructed right from the foundations so that the whole city forms in effect a single wall: ... A whole city looking like a single house will be quite a pretty sight."[3] Vernant, in *The Origins of Greek Thought,* describes the Athenian citizens as members of one big family – the city.[4]

The family home with the hearth at the centre, was a microcosm of the organisation of the city. The hearth offered nourishment and warmth from the centre of the house, and was the vertical connection between the earth and the skies, burning the earth's wood in the fires and dematerialising it into smoke moving heavenwards. The visitor entering the house was expected to touch the hearth respectfully in order to be accepted into the home. Like the hearth, the Agora was seen as the 'centre,' the heart of the city, the home of the spirit of the polis. Oddly enough, the actual hearth of the Athenian Agora has not been discovered although agoras normally had a hearth to keep the **original** flame and spirit of the city alive.

Symbolic of democracy itself, the arrangement of buildings surrounding the central space of the Agora, suggests the gathering of people to participate in the activity of the centre. The very 'centre' of the space was the *orchestra* that was originally the public gathering space for theatre and political meetings. During the 6th century BC the orchestra and the Street of Panathena (the ancient sacred way) were used for elections and meetings, theatrical events such as plays, dancing, and singing, Dionysiac contests, festivals, processions, athletic events, military training, celebrations in victorious cavalry displays, and even chariot racing in which contestants wore full armour and leapt on and off the racing horses. The comic poet, Euboulos summarises the cacophony of life in the Agora as one in which everything, from figs, summoners, grapes, witnesses, roses, medlars, haggis, honeycombs, lawsuits, lambs, water clocks, laws, and indictments were sold together in the same place.[5] John Camp describes the simultaneity of life in the Agora as the place where "the business of the city was conducted, and here the great figures of Classical Athens could be found, serving in the Senate or as a magistrate, pleading or acting as a juror in a law court, pursuing the notices or records at the archives, arguing business, politics, or philosophy in the shade of the stoas, or simply doing the daily shopping."[6] While it may be possible to understand the Agora through contemporary writings, Greek society was not so overtly self conscious that it was unable to experience and even enjoy the chaos and spontaneous interactions of everyday life, simultaneous to political and spiritual existence.



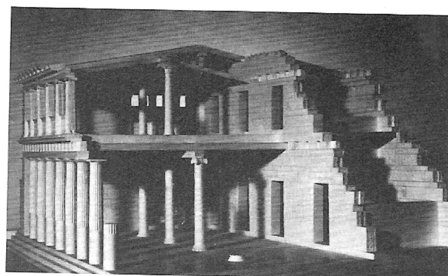
Myth and ritual were also vital forces in Athenian life, and the spiritual 'centre' of the Agora was manifested in the altars and temples. The Altar of the Twelve Gods reinforced the centralising spirit of the Agora on many different levels: a sacred place of refuge for those seeking political asylum and also marking the point from which road distances were measured.[7] While myth and religion are inextricably linked, Vernant tells us how Greek philosophy appears to have taken over from Greek religion in that philosophical enquiry took place within the framework which religion had provided. The secrecy with which religion was practised was exposed to the light of day and the mysteries of the cosmos were scrutinised and given articulate expression in the spoken word.[8]

Philosophical discussion took place in the gymnasium, the academia, and the Agora which was reputed "as the chief place to which men would drift in moments of leisure to find congenial company, in the stoas, under the plane trees, in the barbers' shops or the wine shops or by the smiths' fires."[9] The Painted Stoa was a convenient and sheltered meeting place just off the Agora square. It was frequented by philosophers of many kinds but specifically those engaged in cynicism; and most particularly the stoics, from which the name derives. The philosophers knew that they could always find a ready audience at the Painted Stoa because it was where

people were watching sword–swallowers, jugglers, beggars, parasites and fish–mongers who parked themselves in the stoa each day. Camp tells us that "the stoa, filled with crowds from the Agora and frequented by philosophers, fits well the picture of the kind of liberal and elegant resorts ... a popular *lesche* where the Athenians came together to discourse, argue, and learn."[10] It was also used for legal proceedings with full courts of up to 501 jurors at one time.

In the spirit of discussion rather than monologue, the nature of Plato's dialogue influenced the tone of philosophical enquiry in the Agora, and the form of public debate "opened the way for Aristotle's inquiries" and provided the opportunity to share knowledge, discuss values, and exercise mental techniques of persuasion; "discussion, debate, polemic became the rules of the intellectual as well as the political game."[11] We are reminded of Plato's philosophical discussions of democracy, tyranny, and oligarchy in the *Republic*, simultaneous to the political formulation of democracy. Plato and Xenophon tell us that Socrates met his friends and students in the Stoa of Zeus which seems to have been both a religious structure as well as, among other things, an informal meeting place and a gallery for paintings of the twelve gods and triumphs of the Athenian cavalry. This non–verbal level of theatre, of paintings depicting the Athenian mythological and historical military exploits, can also be found in the Painted Stoa. The stoas were also considered to be a suitable setting for the theatrically social ceremony of communal dining. The Tholos served as a dining chamber for fifty senators at a time, seventeen of whom slept there in case of any emergencies which could cause high drama in events of local or national crisis. It was from the Tholos that Socrates was summoned by the Thirty Tyrants in their initially futile attempt to implicate him. However, from trials in the Painted Stoa they succeeded in creating a highly dramatic situation by condemning 1,400 people to death.

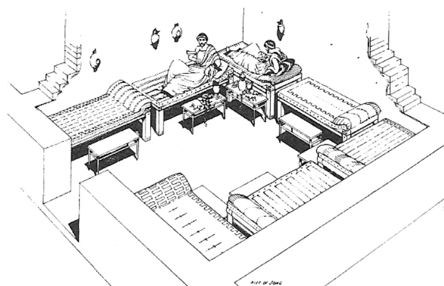
Socrates, in the opening words of *The Last Days of Socrates*, informs his jurors in the court of law, "if you see me defending myself in the open spaces of the city (where many of you have heard me) and elsewhere, please do not be surprised ..."12 Hugh Tredennick, the translator, mentions in a footnote that 'the open spaces of the city' literally refers to 'the bankers' counters in the market place' which was considered a good place to meet people. The South Stoa seemed to be the official point for commercial activity such as small business exchanges, market stalls, bankers stalls, and money changers. Several shops, taverns and wine shops

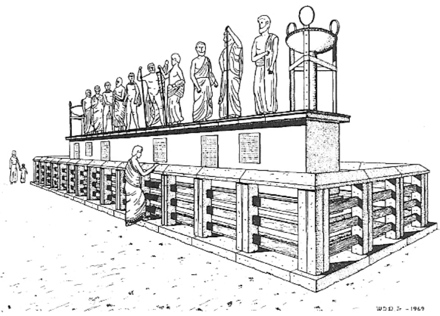


were located around town and close to the south west corner of the square, and were frequented for social reasons as well as commercial. There was a famous shoemaker's shop very close to the Agora which was a favourite haunt for Socrates to meet his friends and students who were too young to go to the square; hence the dialogues called "The Shoemaker's."[13] John Camp suggests that this shop, also visited by Perikles, was used by Socrates as an informal classroom.

The exposure of writing to the public was another dramatic departure from the past which marked the presence of democracy. Writing was emancipated from its earlier role of secrecy and knowledge; the work and property of royal scribes and the secret wisdom of priests, and was made public for all to benefit. Thoughts were written down and submitted to political debate and judgement. Consequently, the priesthoods were also transformed into public cults and all their associated icons put in the temples for public display. The power of secrecy, in writing and priestly cults, was thoroughly exposed and distinguished in the public domain. By around 400 BC the Athenian constitution was placed in the Royal Stoa, for all to see and discuss. Outside in front of the Royal Stoa is a large block of hard limestone where magistrates ceremonially took the oath to guard the laws. This Stoa was also the setting for events which eventually led to the highly dramatic trial and finally to the conviction of death for Socrates.

Another example of continuous written communication between the governing bodies and the citizens can be found in the Monument to the Eponymous Heros. In 508–507 BC, Kleisthenes instituted another reform in support of democracy, which was to create a ten tribe system, thus abolishing the old power structure of four tribes. To reinforce this political move, he erected a monument which quite literally embodied the ten tribes by the placement of the statue of one hero for each tribe standing on a long podium. John Camp's reconstruction appears remarkably like the later Rostrum of





the Roman Forum that, among many things, was the platform from which Roman statesmen communicated political statements to the public. Here, on the Monument to the Eponymous Heroes, public messages were communicated to the Athenian citizens, by placing written notices to each tribe on the base beneath the statue of the appropriate tribal hero. The notices might include public honours, upcoming court hearings, or lists for military conscription.[14] As newspapers report daily news in contemporary society, the Agora was where the Athenians were daily drawn to keep up with the latest news. Naturally much talk would arise from the news being disseminated in the place where all were conveniently gathered.

Verbal articulation naturally existed on a much more formal level in the form of oration. What the citizens shared in the Agora was the ability to provide an account of the world through speech that was highly articulate and prepared for public presentation. *Logos*, the story or the account, enabled the phenomenon of accounting for the world through logic and speech. The sharing of the *logos*, at the centre of the Greek city, disclosed the order of the city. The verb 'to speak' in this kind of debate is *agoreuo,* hence the name of the place, Agora. In this case the trading back and forth that occurs in the Agora is verbal, the exchanging of stories, of the *logos*. *Agon* means an assembly of people to see a contest and the *agon* took place in the Agora.[15] *Isonomia* was also integral to the life of the polis, and thus the Agora, meaning the equal participation of 'all' citizens in the exercise of power.[16] The ability to argue persuasively, presenting arguments for or against certain situations was of utmost importance if one were to convince the gathering of people, the assumed audience, who could be swayed in either direction. Verbal articulation became the highest virtue in a society that was in the process of discovering rhetoric. "Speech became the political tool *par excellence*, the key to all authority in the state, the means of commanding and dominating others."[17]

This was especially true in relation to orators either arguing for their clients or debating the new structure of the democratic reality. Gathering and debating in this way finds its origins in the meetings of warriors to discuss battle strategies and formations. In Book Two of the *Iliad*, Homer offers an example of Agamemnon calling a council with his peers, and then with his troops to consult them about finally waging battle on Troy. However, while the troops believe they are being consulted, Agamemnon actually secretly steered the result of the meeting towards his own favoured outcome.[18] Nevertheless, with debate having its origins in the battlefield, one could say that the tone of the conversation in the Agora inadvertently assimilated an aggressive stance of debate, stating and defending one's position rather than assuming an investigative discussion.



*The entire sphere of protolaw, which governed the relations between families, itself constituted a sort of* agon*: an oratorical contest, a battle of arguments whose theatre was the Agora, the public square, which had been a meeting place before it was a marketplace. Those who contended with words, who opposed speech with speech, became in this hierarchical society a class of equals.*[19]

Public debate assumed at least two orators and an audience – those citizens of the polis who happened to be in the Agora at the time. The oratorical debates were often highly charged situations in which, for instance, orators may be debating a land dispute concerning two opposing families or individuals. Thus the Agora was a highly theatrical setting, playing out the real drama of peoples lives, to the audience of the polis. Concurrent with this was the drama of the actual Theatre of Dionysus. As Dora Pozzi explains in *Myth and Polis*, 'Ideological *agones*, contests, took place everywhere where men gathered and acted 'politically;' this included the theatre, the *Agora*, and the courts of law.'[20] According to Glynne Wickham:

*Change within Athenian society played a major part in persuading all tragic dramatists during the fifth century BC to alter their style. What this required of them was first to gauge the scale and quality of changes in political and social outlook, and then to choose either to stand by traditional values or to move forward with those advocating new stances.*[21]

Another form of meeting took place in the Agora in the form of the round dance called a *chorus*. It was a pre–classical ritual integrated into the life of the Agora in which a group of people would dance around a person in the centre who represented the voice of the polis. This stage for dancing was called the orchestra, and means dancing place. This theatrical event within the Agora eventually required a more specific

space of its own: thus the round shape created by the dancers gave rise to the architectural shape of the stage which allowed for the chorus to surround the protagonist as the centre of attention. Meeting in a circle, whether for social, political, and/or religious reasons, naturally encouraged communal participation, and this was eventually incorporated into the actual formation of the circular stage which in turn gave rise to the architectural structure of Greek theatre. Geometrically, the circle was perceived as the most perfect and sacred of shapes, embodying in microcosm, the world and the heavenly cosmos. We are reminded of the spirit with which the citizens and buildings gravitated around the 'centre' of the polis, the Agora.

Unlike other cities that feared the arrival of the notorious Dionysus, Athens seems to have welcomed the foreign god as an inspiration to the city's mythic history and the dramatic festivals. As a microcosm of a city dedicated to this fearsome but much revered god, this singular space of the theatre of Athens was called the City Dionysia; dedicated to Dionysus, god of wine, youth, fertility, and the mythic spirit of energy, violence, and action. Friedrich Nietzsche captures this fear quite essentially in his text on Dionysian revellers in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

*It is with them that nature for the first time attains her artistic jubilee; it is with them that the destruction of the* principium individuationis *for the first time becomes an artistic phenomenon... the curious blending and duality in the emotions of the Dionysian revellers remind us – as medicines remind us of deadly poisons – of the phenomenon that pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us. At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror or a yearning lamentation for an irretrievable loss. In these Greek festivals, nature seems to reveal a sentimental trait; it is as if she were heaving a sigh at her dismemberment into individuals. The song and pantomime of such dually–minded revellers was something new and unheard–of in the Homeric–Greek world; and the Dionysian* music *in particular excited awe and terror.*[22]

Ritual sacrifice was at the core of the development of tragedy as the Greek word *drao*, which is closely associated to the word drama, means to 'offer a sacrifice' or 'perform mystical rites.'[23] Consequently, the associations with myth, ritual, and tragedy (or Greek drama) are intertwined. The actors' talent was based on the degree in which they were able to intoxicate the audience into something of an hypnotic state, captured and inspired by their performance and the message conveyed. While Pozzi acknowledges the interrelationships between myth, cult, politics, and culture, she also explains how the theatre eventually absorbed the struggles between them rather than using the medium to help in the resolution of conflict.

*The Institution of the theatre of Dionysus created a centre for the codification of myth, cult, and ideology. The organisation of the festival could have made of the dramatic performances an unmitigated instrument of Athenian cultural and political hegemony. Yet in the latter years of the fifth century, drama echoed the deep politico cultural conflicts of the polis; for the polis, in the time of crisis, turned upon itself critically in the theatre.*[24]

In 510 BC, after the overthrow of Hippias and the murder of his son Hipparchos, both sons of the tyrant Peisistratus, Kleisthenes stepped in and instituted reforms that further strengthened the developing democratic form of government.[25] Under this new democratic 'leader,' the competition for the performance of tragic plays, held as part of the spring festival in honour of Dionysus, gained more of a civic and political dimension, while its religious significance was sublimated.[26] The drama competitions were coordinated with the agricultural calendar festivals which, notably in honour of Dionysos, were marked by singing, dancing, and mystic ceremonies that were religiously ecstatic and sexual in expression. The origins of Greek drama (tragedy, comedy, and satire), were rooted in the seasonal agricultural festivals and rituals, celebrating the harvesting in Autumn after the maturing of crops in the Summer, and the birth of Spring after the dormancy of Winter.[27] Nietzsche speaks of the Dionysian chorus as the 'primal ground of tragedy,' and goes on to say that "the choral parts with which tragedy is interlaced are, as it were, the womb that gave birth to the whole of the so–called dialogue, that is, the entire world of the stage, the real drama."[28]

As the period of transition between earlier pagan Greece and the newly emerging democratic society, Greek theatre embodied the religiosity of the ancient sacred ceremonies and rituals, as well as incorporating the political struggles of the day. The actors *impersonated* certain age groups, social classes, or communities in order to convey universal truths with which the entire audience could empathise. While the chorus spoke the moral tone of the polis and the audience represented the citizens, the actors played the part of the citizens caught in the interminable struggle of life. The distinction between this drama and that of the pre–demo-

cratic seasonal festivals was the emphasis on the spoken word of the chorus and the newly invented actor, there to persuade the audience through rhetorical oration, not unlike that which we have witnessed in the Agora. The introduction of the plot into tragedy and new comedy also served to transform the rituals towards a more social and political orientation, although never fully losing a sacred presence.

The law courts were the stages of real life drama as witnessed in the case of Socrates who was tried by 501 jurors and condemned to death; his life in the hands of the jury, as the 'lives' which the actors played were in the hands of the gods. The New Bouleuterion, where the Senate met, looked very much like a theatre to house a rather large audience facing the actors (the senators) in the centre. Another theatrical setting, apparently used as a law court and other official functions, was the 'Synedrion' (meeting–place). It comprised four rows of seats set into the east slope of Kolonos Agoraios and could seat well over 200 people. Although various buildings were used as law courts, it is possible that the Helaia was the largest law court in Athens. Able to hold at least 1500 jurors, it was probably open to the sky as most law courts were, thus allowing other citizens to overhear the proceedings from just outside the building in the Agora. Thus we witness an inversion where the citizens were the audience, in contrast to the theatre where the audience was perceived as the citizens of the polis. We are also reminded of the dramatic setting of the out–of–doors Greek theatre, exposed to the drama of the landscape and the heavens, when we hear that although some courts were actually covered, others had to be unroofed for cases of homicide which had to meet in the open;[29] presumably to allow the bad omens to escape and the accused to be judged by the gods.

Oration was one of the most obvious connections between the two theatrical worlds of the Agora and the City Dionysia. Whether the magistrate was arguing to redeem the life and credibility of his client or the protagonist aiming to convince the gods of the innocence of his mythical hero caught in the web of a diabolical plot, we are witnessing the angst of life as seen in the specific or the universal condition. We could say that Nietzsche's discussion of the Dionysian chorus as the "the womb that gave birth to the .... entire world of the stage" might find a parallel in the phenomenon of the polis and the birth of democracy on the stage of the Agora.

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1 Dora Pozzi, *Myth and the Polis*, Ithica, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991, p.130.
2 Marked, for example in the peoples' lack of say in government as well as having to live outside the citadel walls.
3 Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Trevor J. Saunders, Penguin Books, VI, 779, p. 260,
4 Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, London, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1982,pp.64-5.
5 Athenaeus, 14.640 b-c.
6 John Camp, *The Athenian Agora, Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens*, London, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1986, pp. 65-66.
7 Camp, *The Athenian Agora,* pp.41-42.
8 Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, translated by Janet Lloyd, New York, Zone Books, 1990, p.98.
9 W.E Wycherley, *How the Greeks Built Cities , the relationship of architecture and town planning to everyday life in ancient Greece*, New York, Norton, 1976, p.67.
10 Camp, *The Athenian Agora,* p.72
11 ". . . which in turn defined the rules of proof along with the technique of persuasion, and thus laid down a logic of the verifiably true, a matter of theoretical understanding, as opposed to the logic of the apparent or probable, which presided over the hazardous debates on practical questions."Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, p.50-52.
12 Plato, *Last Days of Socrates* , transl. Hugh Tredennick, Penguin Classics, 1984, Middlesex, p.45
13 Diogenes Laertius II.13.122
14 Camp, *The Athenian Agora,* pp.97-99.
15 From a seminar given by William Loftis and Robert Ferguson on The Agora and Greek Theatre, Cambridge University, Department of Architecture, 1992.
16 Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, p.61.
17 Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, p.49.
17 Although it has not been possible to date the *Iliad*, some believe it to have taken place between the 9th and 7th centuries BC.
18 Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, p.46.
19 Pozzi, *Myth and the Polis*, p.131.
20 Glynne Wickham, *A History of Theatre*, Oxford, Phaidon, 1985, p 37.
21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* , Vintage Books, New York, 1967, p.40.
22 Pozzi, *Myth and the Polis*, p.131.
23 Pozzi, *Myth and the Polis*, p.163.
24 Wickham, *A History of Theatre*, p 31.
25 *ibid*
26 The order of the origins of tragedy, comedy, and satire are still being disputed. While Pozzi states that comedy might have begun as early or earlier than tragedy (*Myth and the Polis*, p.147) Wickham suggests that it might have begun fifty years later than tragedy, while also including that Aristotle seemed to believe that comedy might have preceded tragedy, in that tragedy was inspired from dithyramb and comedy from the phallic processions. (Poetics 1449a9-13). See also *The Birth of Tragedy* , Nietzsche.
27 See *Birth of Tragedy* , p. 65
28 Aristotle, *Athenaionn Politeia* , 67.2