

Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

The Phases of Roman Theatre and Drama

- **Native Italian drama** (pre-240 BCE)
 - Fescennine verses, *phlyaces*, Atellan farce
- **Literary Drama** (240-100 BCE)
 - Plautus and Terence, Republican tragedians
- **Popular Entertainment** (100 BCE-476 CE)
 - circuses, spectacles, mime (Seneca)

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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

- there is a major discrepancy between the textual and material evidence
 - the majority of Roman drama comes from the late Republic (late 200's/early 100's **BCE**)
 - Seneca's tragedies are later but it is questionable whether they were designed for performance
 - all existing Roman theatres—and depictions of them!—date to after the 100's **BCE**

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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

- there is a major discrepancy between the textual and material evidence
 - moreover, the shows presented in Roman theatres were aimed at the lower classes
 - those interested in sports, circuses, mimes
 - conversely, all existing dramas—even those of Plautus—were aimed at the higher social strata of Roman society

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The Evidence for Roman Theatre and Drama

- it comes down to a difference between “readers” and “viewers”
 - that is, a literate nobility as opposed to an uncultured mob
 - cf. Greece where the aristocrats and Intelligentsia ruled the stage
- thus, Roman literary drama rose and fell quickly

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Native Italian Drama

- the earliest attested forms of Roman entertainment come from the Etruscans, e.g. gladiatorial combat
 - Etruscan *ister* > Latin **histrion** (cf. histrionics)
 - Etruscan *phersu* > Latin **persona** (cf. person, personality)
- n.b. the Etruscans dominated the early Romans (600's/500's BCE)

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Native Italian Drama

cf. scenes of merriment on Etruscan tombs



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Native Italian Drama

- **Fescennine verses** (from **Fescennium**)
 - crude clowns improvising alternating verses
 - cf. early Greek *komos*—is this a “history” concocted in the absence of real data?

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Native Italian Drama

- ***hilarotragodia*** (or ***phlyaces/phlyax plays***)
 - no scripts preserved
 - and only one author's name and play titles are cited: **Rhinthon of Syracuse**
 - but he lived in southern Italy and wrote in Greek, so how "Roman" can he have been?

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Native Italian Drama

cf. vases from southern Italy



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Native Italian Drama

- *phlyax plays* or Aristophanes exported?



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Atellan Farce

- also at this time, **Atellan farce**
 - from the Oscan city of **Atella**
- focus: Atella's crazy ways
- repeating cast of characters
 - very broadly drawn, e.g.
 - **Maccus** the clown
 - **Bucco** the braggart
 - **Dossenus** the glutton



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Atellan Farce

- also **Pappus**, the foolish old man
 - cf. Pantalone in *commedia dell'arte*



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Atellan Farce

- cf. scenarios as well, e.g. balcony scenes



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Atellan Farce

- how could *Atellanae* have been preserved from antiquity until the early modern age?
 - very popular in early Rome
 - only eclipsed during the height of *fabulae palliatae* (“Greek-attired [literary] drama”)
 - revived in the first century BCE by **Novius** and **Pomponius**
 - literary Atellan farce?
 - again during the reign of Hadrian (2nd c. CE)

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Native Italian Drama

- after *Atellanae*, “Literary Drama” arose
- we’ll study this in greater depth in the next chapter when we examine Plautus and Terence

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Roman Theatre

- no permanent (stone/concrete) theatre in the city of Rome until **55 BCE**
 - the Theatre of Pompey
- before that, all theatres were “temporary”
 - i.e. made of wood, but not necessarily cheap!
 - these are now impossible to reconstruct
- all the same, theatres existed throughout the rest of the Roman world

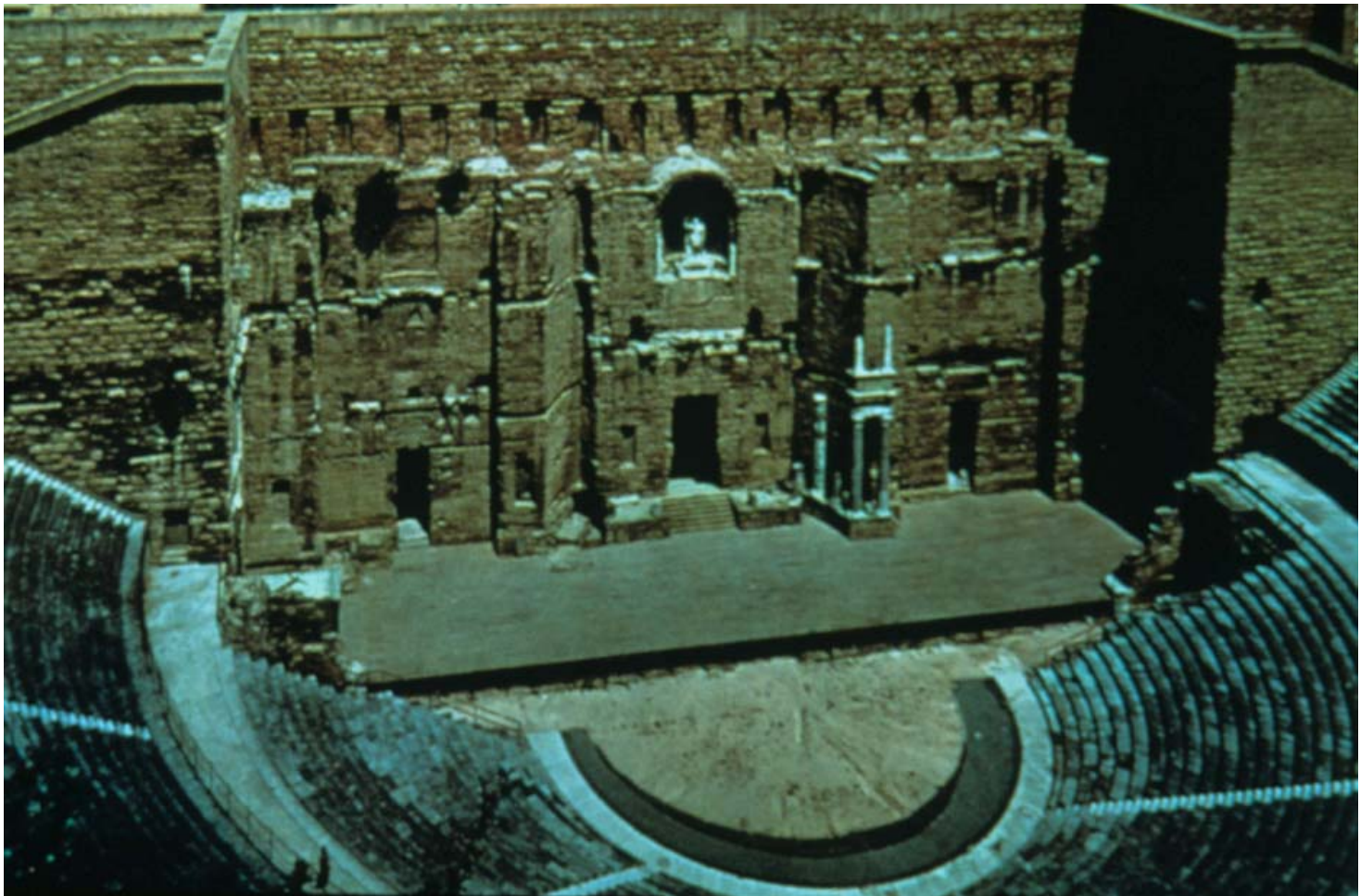
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Roman Theatre

- all extant theatres date to the first century **BCE** and later
- when the Romans began to use **concrete**
- thus, they could be situated downtown
- major question: how representative are the extant structures of Roman theatre design in general?

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Roman Theatre



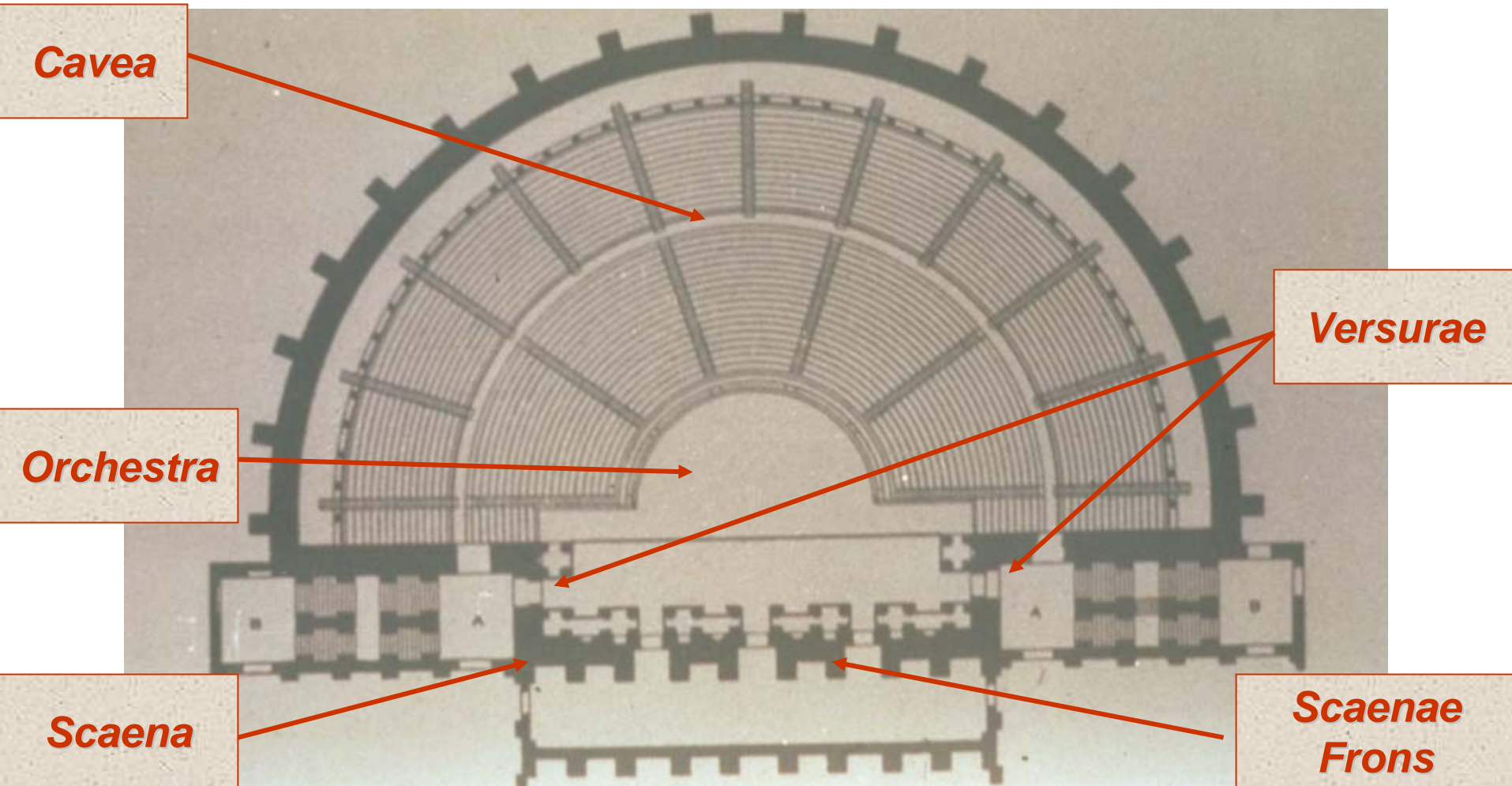
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Roman Theatre



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Roman Theatre



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Roman Theatre: *Scaenae Frons*



Chapter 13: Early Roman Theatre

Roman Theatre: *Scaenae Frons*



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Roman Theatre: *Versurae*



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Roman Theatre

- do the plays which have been preserved tell us anything about the theatres in which they were performed?
 - and do the data which the plays provide accord with the structures which survive?
- e.g., was there an **altar** on stage?
 - no altars in surviving Roman theatres!
 - but cf. the end of Plautus' *Mostellaria*

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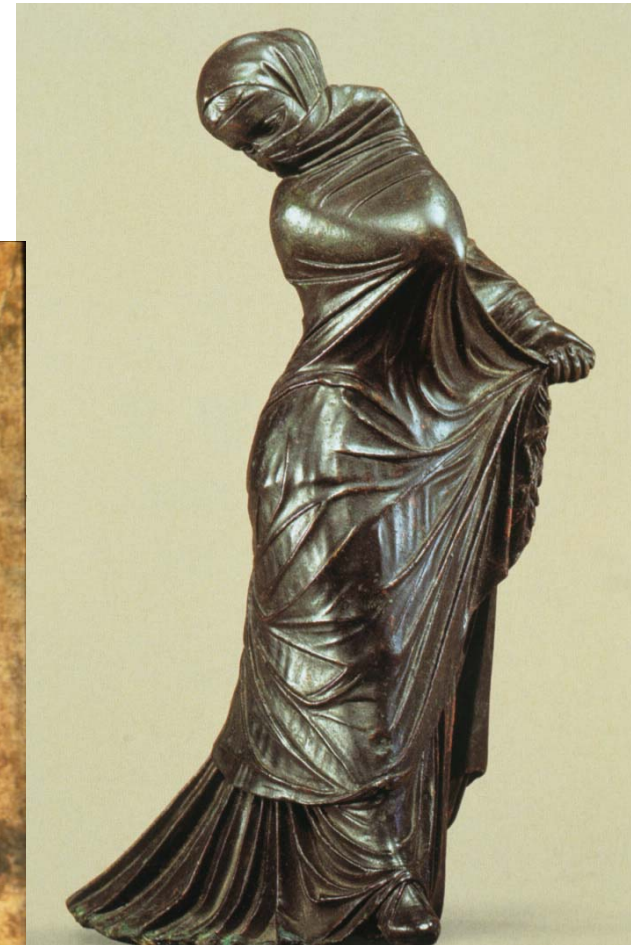
Roman Theatre

- in general, Roman theatre reflects the age in which it lived, i.e. Hellenistic tastes
 - focus on spectacle
 - cf. late Republican *scaenae* which rotated or were made of marble/glass/gilded wood
- also, Roman plays were produced at a number of festivals, even funerals
 - and huge budgets — but for sets, not drama!

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Roman Theatre

- acting was also Hellenistic
 - with emphasis on pathos



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Roman Theatre

- actors were often slaves
 - belonged to a **grex** (“flock”)
 - led/owned by a **dominus** (“master”)
- no three-actor rule!
- thus, were masks used?
 - Yes! masks allowed some role-sharing, though nothing as regimented as in Greece