

# The Shape of the Athenian *Theatron* in the Fifth Century: Overlooked Evidence

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EVERY SERIOUS STUDENT of Attic drama knows of the controversy about the form of the orchestra and the *theatron* of the Theatre of Dionysus in the fifth century: Was it circular or rectangular/trapezoidal?<sup>1</sup> Archaeological evidence cannot at the moment settle the matter and the ancient literary evidence tends to blur the picture even more. Recently H. Goette has presented a reconstruction of a trapezoidal *theatron* and orchestra on the basis of the latest archaeological research at the site,<sup>2</sup> and what I present here is an overlooked piece of literary evidence to support the idea of a rectangular/trapezoidal *theatron* constructed of wooden benches (*ikria*).<sup>3</sup> It does not, however, throw any light on the form of the orchestra.

<sup>1</sup> See M. Revermann, “The Shape of the Athenian Orchestra in the Fifth Century: Forgotten Evidence,” *ZPE* 128 (1999) 25–28, at 25 n.1; for a short bibliography on the discussion, see now also R. Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton 2002) 37–41. Revermann’s argument, however, is refuted by M. L. West, “Heniochus and the Shape of the Athenian Orchestra,” *ZPE* 130 (2000) 12.

<sup>2</sup> In E. Csapo, “The Men Who Build the Theatres: *Theatropolai*, *Theatronai*, and *Arkhitektones*,” in P. Wilson (ed.), *Epigraphy of the Greek Theatre* (Oxford 2007) 87–115.

<sup>3</sup> ἀπὸ ἰκρίων: Ar. *Thesm.* 395. ἀπὸ ἰκρίων might be the colloquial term for the seatings of the audience as opposed to the στίχες which clearly has a metaphorical and thematic use here, see below. On *ikria* S. Scullion, *Three Studies in Athenian Dramaturgy* (Stuttgart 1994) 52 ff., at 57: “Before the construction of the Lykourgan theatre the audience were accommodated on wooden seats built on the slope of the Akropolis.” At 38 ff. he vigorously criticizes the rectangular consensus, but does not consider the passage under consideration here.

The overlooked passage is in Aristophanes' *Knights*, which was performed in 424 at the Lenaia. On the reasonable assumption that in the second half of the fifth century this festival was in fact celebrated at the same physical space as the Great Dionysia,<sup>4</sup> i.e. the Theatre of Dionysos on the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis, it is, I believe, a valuable piece of contemporary evidence on the form of the *theatron*. One of the Slaves tells the Sausage-seller (163):

δευρὶ βλέπε. τὰς στίχας ὄρας τὰς τῶνδε τῶν λαῶν;

Look over there! Do you see the rows of this host?

At issue here is the word *στίχας*, *rows*, which refers meta-theatrically to the packed audience seated on the *ikria*, but also clearly alludes to the formation of an army through echoes of Homeric passages.<sup>5</sup> The epic word *στίξ* is connected with the later *στίχος* and *στοίχος*, but while the latter words have a greater variety of uses (the emphasis is still on order, so applied to verse-lines, the alphabet, the cosmos, etc.), the use of *στίξ* in this passage is clearly marked with Homeric colouring, so that there can be no doubt that the word is used in a martial sense.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Scullion, *Three Studies* 63.

<sup>5</sup> *Il.* 4.90–91, and e.g. 2.686–687, 7.61, 11.188, 13.680, 20.362. The use of non-attic *λαῶν* equally enforces both the Homeric echoing and the military metaphor.

<sup>6</sup> Only once in Homer does the word refer to something other than lines of battle, namely *Il.* 18.602 where it is a kind of dance of two lines (straight?) running towards each other. Note that the dance is contrasted with some other kind of dance, possibly circular as is shown by the simile (600–601). The martial use is also prevalent in tragedy, e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 924, Eur. *Supp.* 669, but in a passage in Hesiod (*Scut.* 168 ff.) swine and lions ὀμληδὸν *στίχες ἦσαν*, which might seem to run counter to my argument, but the passage is clearly martial and comparable to *Il.* 15.277–280. Even the metaphorical use by Pindar in *Pyth.* 4.210 of gushing winds is not exempt from the martial use, compare *Pyth.* 6.10–14. The later use by Aratus of the flight of cranes (1031) and of trees (334) owes its presence in his poem to the epic vocabulary, but flying cranes actually form a V (see N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes Birds* [Oxford 1995] 451, and perhaps he was inspired by the “new” tactical manoeuvre *embolon* (for this manoeuvre see e.g. Arr. *An.* 16.3; A. M. Devine, “EMBOΛON: A Study in Tactical Terminology,” *Phoenix* 37 [1983] 201–217) or by the similar “wedge” formation used by cavalry (see L. J. Worley,

This is also confirmed later: when the Sausage-seller, fearing the Paphlagon, asks who will be his ally, the Slave replies (225–228):

ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ἰππῆς ἄνδρες ἀγαθοὶ χίλιοι  
μισοῦντες αὐτόν, οἱ βοηθήσουσί σοι,  
καὶ τῶν πολιτῶν οἱ καλοὶ τε καὶ ἀγαθοί.  
καὶ τῶν θεατῶν ὅστις ἐστὶ δεξιός

But there are the horsemen, a thousand brave men,  
who hate him and will aid you,  
and the decent among the citizens,  
and those of intelligence among the audience.

Together the chorus of Horsemen, who have not yet entered, and the audience are the fighting force and ally of the Sausage-seller against the hated Paphlagon.

Thus I believe that the *στίχας* in line 163 cannot signify a curved *theatron*, for a curved line of battle was something no *strategos* wished for. A battle line was envisioned as a straight coherent line, not something curved or otherwise irregular, though completely straight was in practice nearly impossible to achieve.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, I suggest that for the Athenian spectators τὰς στίχας ... τὰς τῶνδε τῶν λαῶν can only mean a straight horizontal row of a tightly-packed crowd—e.g. of soldiers or as here spectators. Thus the form of the wooden benches of the Theatre of Dionysus at the year of the first performance of *Knights* could not have been curved, but rather rows as in the Theatre of Argos—perhaps with straight side-seatings as well, but this cannot be inferred from the passage under scrutiny. The form of the orchestra may have been circular,<sup>8</sup> though this is unlikely. As E. Gebhard said: “In no case is there evidence that the orchestra had a form different from that of the space

<sup>6</sup> *Hippias: The Cavalry of Ancient Greece* [Oxford 1994] 157–158). Of trees, compare the use of *στοῖχος* at Xen. *Oec.* 4.21.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Thuc. 5.70–71, Xen. *Hel.* 4.2.18.

<sup>8</sup> Revermann, *ZPE* 128 (1999) 27–28.

defined by seats and terrace. This is most often a space with a slightly irregular rectilinear outline.”<sup>9</sup>

To conclude: While the Aristophanic verse is not proof of a rectilinear *theatron*, it is evidence supporting the notion of one.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “The Form of the Orchestra in the Early Greek Theater,” *Hesperia* 43 (1974) 428–440, at 440.

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous referee of *GRBS*, T. H. Nielsen, J. Mejer, and D. Jacobson for valuable suggestions.