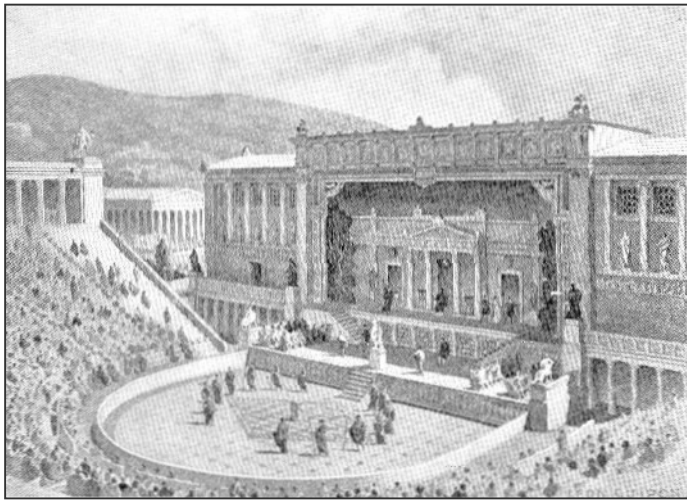


XXXV. THE FIRST PLAYS.

IN the days of Solon, men were often to be seen wandering around the streets during the festival of Di-o-ny´sus, god of wine. They were clad in goatskins, were smeared with the dregs of wine, and danced and sang rude songs in honor of their god.

These songs were called tragedies, which in Greek means “goat songs,” because the goat was sacred to the god whom they thus worshiped. The people were greatly amused by the rude songs and dances of these worshipers of Dionysus, and crowds gathered about them to listen to their singing and to watch their antics.

Thes´pis, a Greek of great intelligence, noticed how popular these amusements were, and to please the public taste he set up the first rude theater. In the beginning it was only a few boards raised on trestles to form a sort of stage in the open air; but Thespis



Theater of Dionysus.

soon built a booth, so that the actors, when not on the stage, could be hidden from public view.

The first plays, as already stated, were very simple, and consisted of popular songs rudely acted. Little by little, however, the plays became more and more elaborate, and the actors tried to represent some of the tales which the story-tellers had told.

Some people did not approve of this kind of amusement; and among them was Solon, who said that Thespis was teaching the Athenians to love a lie, because they liked the plays, which, of course, were not true.

In spite of Solon’s displeasure, the actors went on playing, and soon the best poets began to write works for the stage. The actors became more and more skillful, and had many spectators, although no women were allowed on the stage, their parts being taken by men.

Finally, to make room for the ever-increasing number of theater goers, a huge amphitheater was built. It was so large, we are told, that there were seats for thirty thousand spectators. These seats were in semicircular rows or tiers, of which there were one hundred, rising one above another. The lowest row of all, near the orchestra, was composed of sixty huge marble chairs. The amphitheater was open to the sky, the stage alone being covered with a roof; and all the plays were given by daylight. The ruins of this building, which is known as the Theater of Dionysus, were dug out in 1862, and are now often visited by people who go to Athens.

The Greek actors soon dressed in costume, and all wore masks expressing the various emotions they wished to represent. The principal parts of the play were recited; but from time to time singers came on the stage, and chanted parts of the play in chorus.

Some of these plays were so sad that the whole audience was melted to tears; others were so funny that the people shouted with laughter. When you learn Greek, you will be able to read the grand tragedies which were written by Aes'chy-lus, Soph'o-cles, and Eu-rip'i-des, and the comedies or funny plays of Ar-is-toph'a-nes.



Sophocles.

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XXXVI. THE TYRANT PISISTRATUS.

NOT very long after Solon had given the new laws to the Athenians, the two political parties of the city again began to quarrel. One of these parties was composed wholly of rich men and nobles, or *aristoi*, from which Greek word is formed our English word "aristocrat;" the other party included the farmers and poor people, or *demos*, the Greek term which has given rise to the word "democrat."

Among the aristocrats, or nobles, there was a nephew of Solon called Pi-sis'tra-tus. He was very rich; but, instead of upholding his own party, he seemed to scorn the rich,