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**Review of Inge Nielsen, Cultic Theatres and Ritual  
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## CULTIC THEATRES AND RITUAL DRAMA: A STUDY IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND RELIGIOUS INTERCHANGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST IN ANTIQUITY

BY INGE NIELSEN (AARHUS STUDIES IN MEDITERRANEAN ANTIQUITY 4). PP. 395, FIGS. 128, PLS. 71, TABLE 1. AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS, AARHUS 2002. €53.95. ISBN 87-7288-879-2 (CLOTH).

Ritual drama was an important feature in antiquity—more important than the paucity of evidence suggests. No scripts have survived, since they were generally unnecessary, though we have a few accounts from inscriptions or literary sources about what was done and said. Ritual drama might typically be a reenactment of a myth, such as a fight between a king/god and a monster; the disappearance, return, and sacred marriage of a young god; or wanderings in the underworld. Historians of Greek and Roman drama would naturally like to know much more. A few paintings and reliefs seem to depict costumed performers of ritual drama; often they were priests or cult members, not professional actors. Masks discovered at religious sanctuaries certainly indicate the existence of religious performances.

Even more suggestive is the existence of the theaters themselves. Nielsen has done us a great service by collecting the considerable evidence for cultic performance spaces in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, Asia Minor, Crete, Greece, Sicily, and Italy. A table (340–41) gives an index of the 58 best-preserved theaters, but dozens of others are discussed as well. Although some of the theaters could also have been used for “secular” literary drama, this volume focuses on cultic use. Nielsen’s observations should be of great interest to students of theater, religion, and ancient architecture.

In Egypt, ritual dramas were evidently performed in the temene of temple complexes.

Sacred lakes were incorporated into the performances. Inscriptions tell of a lake at Edfou at which a ritual drama, the *Triumph of Horus* (1300–1200 B.C.E.), was performed. There were no specific seating structures, so it seems that the audience watched from the edges of the lake. Nor did spectators have seats at dramas for various gods in Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, or Anatolia, where performances seem to have taken place in the forecourts of the temples.

It was in Greece that seating arrangements first appeared, perhaps because performances there were longer. Minoan palaces (1900–1450 B.C.E.) had courtyards that were suitable for performances and had adjacent, low steps on which audience members could stand or place chairs. Formal seating became more regularized in the Archaic and Classical periods. There are dozens of examples, and Nielsen seems to have conducted an exhaustive survey. I did wonder about the omission of Dodona: was it felt to be insufficiently cultic for inclusion? Many performances were in local sanctuaries, where the number of spectators might be in the hundreds rather than the thousands. At Lycosura, where dancers in animal costumes were sculpted in relief on a statue, a series of steps adjacent to the temple could have been used as seats. At the sanctuary of the Megaloi Theoi at Samothrace, there was a formal *theatron* with semicircular seating, which, sadly, was not published after excavation and was later plundered. Interestingly, inscriptions

name poets who had written dramas on myths pertinent to the sanctuary, perhaps straddling the line between literary and cultic. Both Lycosura and Samothrace had structures from the second century B.C.E., though the festivals seem to have predated the architecture by two centuries. Other than the fact that they all had seating, Greek cultic theaters had no prescribed pattern. Orchestras did not have to be round, and the seating area could be made up of linear rows.

Moreover, for Greek cultic theaters, the temple was often situated beyond the seating and orchestra, as a kind of backdrop to the stage, and sometimes facing the audience. By contrast, in the distinctive Italic theater-temple complex, of which the sanctuary at Praeneste (late second century B.C.E.) is perhaps the best-known example, the temple was set above and behind the semicircular seating area, facing the stage and lying on a symmetrical axis with the seats and orchestra. Because the altar could be positioned behind the cavea, it is clear that the audience was there to witness not a sacrifice but a ritual drama. This pattern is also essentially that of the Temple of Magna Mater on the Palatine (late third–early second century B.C.E.), though spectators sat on the broad steps of the temple to view a performance in the open area in front of them. The literary comedies of Plautus and Terence were performed here, at the *Ludi Megalenses*, yet the same space evidently was also the venue of a ritual drama reenacting the myth of the introduction of the cult of the Anatolian goddess Cybele.

The Temple of Magna Mater thus illustrates a further feature of ritual drama: the introduction of oriental cults and architectural forms into the West. At Pyrgi, as early as the sixth century B.C.E., rituals to Astarte-Uni (the Etruscan goddess with whom Astarte was locally identified) may have been enacted in a courtyard between two temples, a practice that would suggest Phoenician influence. Rome, as early as the Late Republic, had an Egyptianized Iseum in the Campus Martius that resembled the Serapeum at Alexandria, with a pool like the sacred lakes of Egyptian temene. Influence could also work from West to East, although less often; in the Imperial period, Western-style theatrical seating can be identified in Seleucia, Dura Europos, and the temple to Atargatis-Syria Dea on Delos.

Several broader issues, especially those suggested by the book's subtitle, emerge from

this account. Some conclusions are negative. Nielsen does not find, as had Anti, that there was an uninterrupted development from Minoan theaters to those of archaic Greece, such as at Lato and Dreros. She also concludes that the Italic theater-temple complex derives from earlier Etruscan ritual structures, such as an elliptical open space adjacent to a theater in Caere (fifth century B.C.E.). Therefore, the theater-temple need not have been inspired by the theater-temple complex on Delos dedicated to Atargatis-Syria Dea, as Coarelli had suggested.

Other examples of interchange between East and West are nevertheless affirmed. The more persuasive instances are from Italy, such as the suggestion that an area between two temples at Pyrgi witnessed rituals to Phoenician Astarte-Uni. There is no evidence for ritual drama in Etruria before the Orientalizing period, and it may have been contact with the Phoenicians that introduced it to Italy. Less persuasive, though of course still plausible, is Nielsen's belief that exposure to Eastern rituals inspired Greek ritual dramas, which in turn would have required theatrical spaces. True, intimations of ritual drama only occur in Greece in the Orientalizing period, but unfortunately, archaeological traces of the exact process by which the Greeks would have imported ritual drama are lost to us. Almost nothing is known of indigenous Greek ritual drama before the Orientalizing period, but new practices must in some way have built on old ones.

Nielsen relies heavily on phrases and terms such as "may well have," "probably," and "possibly." For example, the very existence of some of the Egyptian rituals is open to doubt. A broad set of stairs may have been used as a seating area, or it may simply have been a broad set of stairs. Morgantina, to choose one instance, has a seating area in its agora that can best be considered multifunctional. It is suitable for ritual drama as well as for public assemblies, and its existence proves nothing about ritual performances. Moreover, although one goal of the book is to clarify the relationship between form and function, in practice we can only speculate about the correlation between the layout of performance space and the requirements of the rituals themselves. We generally know next to nothing about one or the other. Then again, evidence is always inadequate. Nielsen is honest about the difficulties of identifying cultic theaters and ritual drama, and is sensible in her suggestions.

The book is well produced, with generous site plans, elevations, and plates showing archaeological remains. Problems are rare. Only after rereading page 223 several times was it clear that the structure in the middle of figure 100 was the temple under discussion (at Syracuse). The English is usually idiomatic and lucid, with few typographical errors, though the sentence “the goddess became her own temple” (155) was probably meant to be “the goddess received her own temple” (German *bekam* perhaps being a *faux ami*).

In sum, despite the loss of much evidence that would be helpful, this important book opens up a fascinating area of investigation into a wealth of overlooked archaeological material.

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