
I. Nielsen has set out an ambitious task for herself in this book: the history of Mediterranean cultic dramas starting with Mesopotamia and Egypt in the second millennium BCE and ending with Italy in the late Roman period. She mostly concentrates on the Greco-Roman world of the Classical and Roman eras, however. The book is divided into three sections I. Regional Development: the East. II. Regional Development: the West. III. Religious Interchange: The Oriental Gods Move West.

In Part I, N. investigates the evidence for ritual drama in the Near East, Egypt and Anatolia. There she finds plenty of evidence for ritual drama but no theatres proper, although some areas within the temenoi (sic, she means ἑμένη) of Egyptian temples may have been used for performance (p. 31). In the second part she investigates Minoan Crete, Greece and Italy. Here we have theatres but no firm evidence for myth enactment (for the mysteries see below). This may pose a problem for the correlation of theatre with cultic drama.

Part II is a unit put together somewhat artificially. It comprises the Bronze Age Aegean, Archaic and Classical Greece and Italy. It is hard to see why the theatrical area of Knossos of the sixteenth cent. BCE on Crete would be classified together with Greek theatres, not to mention Roman ones. Its function may have been elucidated had it been compared to similar palatial structures in the Near East in the second millennium. Her division of East-West corresponds to modern classifications and is not historically meaningful.

In Part III, Religious Interchange: The gods move west, N. reviews the historical evidence for cultic dramas from the Hellenistic and Roman periods and establishes the presence of Eastern cults in the west. She is on secure grounds here. She notes that western type theatres appear in the Near East at this time (140). The cultural homogenization of the East Mediterranean in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (a really vast region) makes her thesis archaeologically demonstrable. There is a pattern to be detected here. The author knows herself that she is at her strongest in this section of the book: «While the inspiration from the East in the Orientalizing period was mostly indirect in the sense that only a few cults and gods took root in the West at that time, the situation was very different in the Hellenistic period, when gods and cults were introduced directly and sanctuaries were founded in their own name, a development that carried on to the Roman period.» (207).


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The book is supplemented by a wealth of plans of theatres and pictures. It contains a table of cultic theatres, an index locorum, a geographical index and a rich bibliography. It is very thorough and carefully compiled. Moreover, the undertaking must be praised because broad perspectives make individual cultural phenomena comprehensible.

The major problem lies in the methodological approach. Some specific issues will be discussed first. N. postulates that the concept of Near Eastern drama arrived from the East and required a setting. Theatres in various forms (not necessarily the round shape) began to emerge. She proceeds by reviewing the evidence for ritual performance by referring to iconographical and archaeological evidence of masks and costumes (Ch. IV). Then she cites theatres and theatrical areas starting from the south of Greece and moving north, to the Peloponnese, Attica, Euboea, Central and Northern Greece, finally reaching Magna Grecia. Problem: the masks and costumes testify to cultic performances in Greece and who would contest that? Yet they do not testify to the specific type of drama that N. tries to demonstrate.

As far as the theatres go, despite the wealth of evidence complied, few if any theatres can be shown to have hosted cultic drama of the Near Eastern type. Theatres may be used for so many types of social and cult ceremonies, that it is hard to prove that they were conceived for cult drama, even if they were situated close to a temple.

Take the case of the sixth cent. BCE theatre at Dreros, Crete. There is a theatrical arrangement near the temple. However, its steps were unsuitable for sitting. Most importantly, it faces the agora, rather than the temple. How can we thus know that it was built for cultic performances rather than for a political assembly? Another ‘theatre’ exists at the Cretan town of Lato and dates to the fourth cent. BCE. It too faces the agora and has steps unsuitable for sitting. Similarly to Dreros it may have been designed for social congregations. One must conclude that the evidence for ritual drama in Crete is flimsy.

Another type of problem relating to cultic drama is posited by the Attic sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia. N. discusses the iconographical and textual evidence for ritual drama emphasizing especially the transformation of Callisto into a bear. She agrees with L. Kähil that the priestesses must have been masked as bears. In this case we seem to have some evidence of ritual drama performance. Unfortunately, no theatre has been found (as yet) at Brauron, as N. herself admits. The correlation cult drama/theatre is thus very difficult to sustain.

Finally, the sanctuary of the Kabiroi in Samothrace. We are fairly sure that a cult drama related to initiation into the cult was enacted, but where did it take place? There are two candidates. There is a theatre but, as N. herself observes, it was evidently used for public performances and poetic dramas not for the ritual enactment connected with initiation. The building that most likely housed the cultic drama is the Hall of Chorus dancers (which is large: 34x20.7m). She bases her interpretation on the frieze of the Hall, which shows eighty dancing girls and which seems to relate to a celebration of an ζήμος γάμως. She may be in fact right and this would coincide with K. Clinton’s recent analysis of

the rituals performed in the context of mysteries and initiation. Clinton arrives at the conclusion that the Hall of the dancers was the τελευτη ημων of the Samothracian sanctuary; its size and the centrality of its position seems to warrant this assumption.

The best case for enacted cult drama is the Eleusinian mysteries but N. is not up to date with the status of the discussion. By classifying Demeter and Kore as agrarian deities (127), she simplifies the nature of the sacred drama and the problems associated with it: who took part and in which building.

Observations on some of the theatres discussed are interesting. For example, at Lykosoura near Megalopolis in the Peloponnese, a 30 m. long structure with ten steps resembling a theatre has been excavated in the sanctuary of Despoina. It dates to the second cent. BC. The relationship of this theatrical area to the temple may be significant: one could sit in the theatre, watch a performance and have the temple as a scenic backdrop. The topographical situation makes it likely that some cult ceremony took place and that it was watched by spectators. Whether an enacted epiphany was performed (108), must remain speculation. N. suggests a similar scenario for the Theban Kabeirion. The spectators sat on the slope facing the temple that formed a backdrop. U. Sinn has come to similar conclusions in his investigation of Olympia: temple facades may have formed the scenic backdrop for religious ceremonies.

Some general remarks now. The case for cultic theatres and ritual drama would have been made stronger had N. organized her material by the type of evidence. Primary written sources are seldom discussed in their context, both literary and historical; the reader is frequently referred to secondary sources. The iconographical evidence too would have been more useful, had it constituted a body of evidence in its own right. As it stands now it is subsumed under regional categories. Finally, a list of inscriptions that relate to ritual drama would have been useful, if they had been collected and divided chronologically as well as regionally.

A historian of religion may additionally note the following methodological problems.

It is difficult to translate the plans into evidence for rituals, especially the specific drama enactments that N. has in mind.

The concepts ‘cycle of nature’, ‘agrarian’, ‘seedtime and harvest crisis’ are used much too frequently as an explanatory frame of her thesis. Although allegorical interpretations of deities was current already in the late Roman period, it was mostly the Frazerian school of the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th century which developed the theory of vegetation deities. The role of J. Harrison and the Cambridge school is prominent in introducing this approach into Classics. N. relies too much on these theories for her assessment of sacred drama. This is not a problem in itself: no theoretical frame, however old, need be totally rejected. However, it is an inadequate frame when it is used as the main tool of interpretation; after all societies have preoccupations other that agriculture. N. states this

herself on p. 15, and she seems to be fully aware of alternative ways of reading ancient religions.

Another problem is how does one define sacred drama? Is it mimhsiw or is it a group action in which the participants take part? To cite K. Clinton «In some teletai the participants performed the ritual act, as at the Thesmophoria; in other cases ritual acts were performed by and on the participants, as at the Mysteria.»

The relationship between myth and ritual does not entail the simple enactment of a sacred myth. As W. Burkert has shown, the two have independent contents but coexist in the same festival because they reinforce each other’s message. As an example we may take the Tòa at Samos during which the cult statue of Hera was searched, found and then bound onto a tree. The myth relates how the cult image was abducted by pirates. We need not postulate a sacred enactment of this very myth at the Heraion sanctuary of Samos as N. implies (137). A simple procession to the shore, where the statue would have been taken temporarily, would have sufficed as a reference to the mythical disappearance of Hera.

The book has to be commended for its scope and for raising an important question that pertains to how we interpret archaeological evidence. It has to be conceded that N. has drawn attention to the wealth of cultic performances that characterized the entire E. Mediterranean and the Near East.

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