Greek Theatre in Sicily and South Italy

In Sicily and Southern Italy, evidence for Greek theatrical activity – understood as performances in Greek in which the performers impersonate a character other than themselves – seems to go back to the early fifth century, predating Roman conquest by centuries (see Bosher 2012). It is, for instance, hard to overestimate the impact of Epicharmus, active in Syracuse at the time of the tyrant Hieron I (478-466 BC), on Attic comedy. Two-way literary interactions between Sicily/Magna Graecia and Athens are clearly attested for this period. The Athenian tragic poet Aeschylus probably travelled several times to the court of Hieron I and was even commissioned by the tyrant to write a play (Aetnae). While travelling poets started to spread Athenian theatrical culture outside Athens at an early stage, movement took place in both directions, and Sicilian and South Italian poets also travelled to Greece to compete in dramatic festivals.

Greek theatrical culture in the fifth century thus evolved in the midst of mutual influence between South Italy and the Greek mainland. While the importance of Athens in the development of Greek theatre was immense, it is clear that Sicily and South Italy developed their own theatrical tradition early on; this was an environment in which non-democratic regimes and contacts between Greek and local populations, among other elements, encouraged innovation and forms of theatrical activity different from those of Athens and mainland Greece. This distinct theatrical culture has also left material traces in the form of depictions of dramatic scenes on vases; not all of these can simply be interpreted as reflections of Athenian practices or plays.

Greek theatre and the origins of Roman theatre

The role of Greek drama in the emergence of Latin theatre was fundamental. As Roman power in Italy increased, so (from as early as the 4th century BC) did Roman contact with local forms of theatrical entertainment, including Etruscan performances (Livy 7.2) and Oscan farces (Atellanae). It is difficult to gauge how much such theatrical entertainment owed to contact between local populations and the Greeks present in Sicily and Southern Italy, but it is very likely that those local theatrical activities developed alongside, and in close interaction with, the Greek theatrical activities taking place in Italy and in Greece itself. A number of Latin words relating to the theatre, for example, demonstrably stem from Greek terms, but only indirectly, as they have been mediated through Etruscan (Szemerényi 1975). From an early stage, therefore, Romans were already in contact with dramatic entertainments somehow connected to Greek theatre.

When Latin theatre – namely tragedies and comedies performed in Latin – did emerge, however, its debt to Greek theatre was clear and must be seen within the context of the Roman conquest of the Greek regions of Southern Italy and Sicily: according to Cicero (Brutus, 72-74), the first play in Latin was composed in 240 BC by Livius Andronicus, who translated a Greek play (probably a tragedy) into Latin. It seems likely that Livius Andronicus was captured in Tarentum when the city surrendered to Rome in 272 BC. Given the lively Greek theatrical culture in Magna Graecia at the time it is not surprising that a figure like Livius Andronicus, who can be seen as a bridge between the two cultures, should have innovated by adapting a Greek tragedy for a Latin audience. Although adaptations into Latin of other, less complex, forms of theatrical entertainment had
probably already taken place earlier, Livius Andronicus remains to our knowledge the first figure to have composed Latin tragedies and comedies that followed the complex structures and plots of their Greek models.

The survival of Greek theatre in Italy during the Roman Republic and Early Empire

Even after Latin theatre had acquired an independent existence, Greek theatre continued to be performed in Italy. Both literary and documentary sources provide evidence of performances, in Greek, of theatrical pieces from a range of literary genres, including tragedies and comedies, often as extracts, as well as pantomimes accompanied by Greek libretti, in addition to less complex forms of theatrical entertainment, such as mimes, accompanied by songs or short speaking parts.

Romans in Italy were exposed to Greek theatrical culture through indirect sources (artistic representations, including wall-paintings and mosaics; readings, both private and public; school material; quotations, and so forth), but, more importantly, there were also opportunities to attend public performances of theatrical pieces in Greek. Greek New Comedy – especially the plays of Menander (see Nervegna 2013) – seems to have been much in favour amongst the Romans, but Greek tragedies were also reperformed, although frequently in abridged or slightly modified versions. In the Roman world, theatre increasingly became a form of popular entertainment rather than the religious ritual that it had been in Classical Athens. As a cultural object, Greek theatre evolved in this new context, and in addition to reperformances of Classical pieces, new dramatic pieces in Greek continued to be composed and performed, even in Italy, where Latin was now largely the official language. Unfortunately only fragments of those late Greek dramatic works are extant. It is thus difficult to reconstruct exactly what was performed in Greek in Roman Italy, whether in theatres or other performance contexts. Contemporary literary sources record, at best, that performances in Greek took place or preserve the names of the authors of late Greek plays, while epigraphic evidence offers a glimpse into the material conditions of those performances. The case of pantomime is especially frustrating. Although often considered a Roman form of theatrical performance, the first pantomime libretti, from the early Empire, are likely to have been composed in Greek. There is also good evidence that, even later on, some pantomime dancers performed to texts sung in Greek, but none of these late Greek libretti seems to have survived in full.

Many Greek performers and poets enjoyed considerable fame during the Republic and Empire. Yet Romans often had ambiguous feelings toward Greek culture (which could be considered both a precursor and a competitor) and towards theatre in general; the fate of Greek theatre in Roman Italy, where Latin had become the official language, is thus a complex object of study. Some of the reasons for its continued performance will be outlined here. Although probably conveying a biased picture, the literary sources at our disposal suggest that theatrical performances in Greek during the Republic, and especially when Rome was in the process of conquering Greece, were not greatly appreciated either by Roman crowds or by at least certain members of the Roman elite. Cicero (e.g., Letters to Atticus XVI.5.1), for instance, does not hide his dislike of Greek public performances (although he seems not to have found private readings of Greek plays problematic). Public performances in Greek were organized by elite Romans in the Republic partly in order to demonstrate the superiority of Roman culture to Greek: Greek artists were invited to Rome to give theatrical performances, only to be asked to perform in a manner different to their usual practice. This was demanded, for instance, by the general Lucius Anicius Gallus in 167 BC during the celebrations organized for his triumph over the Illyrians (if one believes the anecdote reported by Polybius, cited in Athenaeus XIV.615). At other times these artists were invited so that Roman elites could be seen conspicuously criticizing or even leaving those performances, as Marius did in 101 BC (Plutarch, Life of Caius Marius II.2). Greek theatre in Republican Italy might thus have served as a sort of ‘counter-performance’ designed to demonstrate Roman cultural superiority over their predecessors. It is nonetheless very clear that in private settings Greek theatre was considered a valuable object of study, reading, and even re-performance.

Roman emperors also organized public performances of Greek dramatic pieces. During the Empire, theatre in general became a convenient means of mass communication, and Roman emperors were adept at using it efficiently. The increasing number of theatres built during the Early Empire offers good evidence for the importance of theatrical performances to Roman emperors. But why, after Italy and Sicily had fallen under Roman domination, and after Latin theatre had acquired its independence, did emperors keep organizing
performances in Greek? Beside the obvious role played by the personal tastes of each emperor, three more general and significant reasons can be mentioned here.

First, Greek theatre never lost its appeal to Roman cultivated elite, even at a time when Latin theatrical culture was well established. During Roman imperial times, in spite of the constant rivalry between Roman and Greek cultures, and the desire of the former to demonstrate its independence and innovation, Greek culture still retained its prestige. For young members of the Roman elite, writing tragedies in Greek was a highly regarded pastime, and the Greek comedy staged by Claudius in AD 42 in Naples had probably been written, in Greek, by his brother Germanicus (Suetonius, Life of Claudius XI.2, and Life of Caligula III.2). Greek actors were still considered the best performers, and organizing dramatic performances in Greek would also encourage them to come to Italy to perform. Likewise, the fact that Roman emperors established several competitions on Italian territory featuring contests for theatrical pieces in Greek clearly indicates that they were trying to include Rome, and Roman Italy, within the still-influential circuit of Greek sacred games.

The second reason why Roman emperors might have organized dramatic performances in which Greek was spoken and/or sung in Rome and Italy was the fact that Greek was the "lingua franca" in much of the Empire, including parts of Italy. By organizing spectacles in Greek, the emperors could demonstrate their benevolence towards a larger audience, part of which might not speak Latin fluently enough to enjoy Latin theatre. Both Caesar (in 46 BC) and Augustus are said to have organized performances in Rome’s suburbs in which actors performed in a variety of languages, no doubt including Greek (Suetonius, Life of Caesar XXXIX.1 and Life of Augustus XLIII.1). The influx of Greek speakers into Rome and Italy as a result of Roman territorial conquests may also explain in part the renewed will to stage plays in Greek.

Finally, the organization of dramatic performances in Greek might also have been a vehicle for imperial propaganda. Greek theatre was associated with Athens, and while Classical Athens was of course known for its democratic regime, the Athenian empire could also be seen as an illustrious predecessor for Roman imperial policy. By showing that Rome was able to master Greek culture, emperors could both align themselves with Classical Athens and also legitimize Rome’s place at the head of an empire that extended across populations around the Mediterranean and beyond. The links between philhellenism and hegemony in Roman times have been clearly demonstrated by J.-L. Ferrary (1988 and 1996) and others.

Theatre, as a medium of mass communication, was an excellent tool for conveying to the greatest number of subjects the notion that Rome possessed the requisite cultural prestige to be deemed master of the inhabited world. As Strabo (9.2.2) remarks: "[T]he Romans too, in ancient times, when carrying on war with savage tribes, needed no training of this kind [i.e. in culture, and especially Greek culture – intellectual education as opposed to mere military training], but from the time that they began to have dealings with more civilised tribes and races, they applied themselves to this training also, and so established themselves as lords of all." (Translation Jones 1927)

References

O. Szemerényi, "The Origins of Roman Drama and Greek Tragedy", Hermes 103, 1974, 300-332.