

## Seven Against Conventions: Rethinking The Number of the Tragic Chorus

This paper argues against the rigidity typically ascribed to the number of chorus members in a classical Athenian tragic chorus. The attestations found in the *Vitae*, Suda, and scholia are repeated often—Sophocles increased the number of the tragic chorus from twelve to fifteen (see also Pollux 4.108-10). We can recognize that in the formalized competitive context of the City Dionysia, it makes sense for there to be a set number of choreuts allotted to each production, for the sake of fairness. Thus, we might wonder: a) Why would Sophocles be allowed to change the number, if he was just one competitor of many bound by the same convention? And b) Why even would he, especially rather insignificantly? The notion that the difference of three is composed of the *koryphaios* and two *parastatai* (leader and bystanders) cannot be correct, as these positions were apparent much earlier, already in Aeschylus' plays (cf. Wiles 1997, Sansone 2016).

One might posit that the prescribed number was meant to cap the maximum number of choreuts a *choregos* would be expected to feed, train, and outfit. If the limit was indeed for financial considerations, might a particular sponsor happily bear the extra expenses of an especially lavish spectacle? Many have wondered whether a chorus of twelve could possibly play the fifty Danaids of Aeschylus' *Suppliants*. While we imagine they can, a chorus of fifty would certainly be more striking, if not merely realistic (Fitton-Brown 1957). Given that conspicuous consumption was of the essence for such festival liturgies, one can envision an exceedingly ambitious *choregos* willing to pay up for such a spectacular production. However, if the supposition is that more choreuts automatically means a greater spectacle, then this could be seen as an unfair advantage, perhaps even anti-democratic.

If the foregoing is correct, why alternatively would a producer not be allowed to have less than twelve or fifteen choreuts? Theoretically, plenty of *choregoi* would welcome expending less than expected, and competitors would be pleased to thusly gain the advantage. With this paper, I offer close readings of Euripides' *Suppliants*, which features a chorus of the mothers of the seven slain Argives, who are beseeching Athens to retrieve the unburied corpses of their sons. Throughout the play, the number seven recurs, as it is made explicit that there were seven sons, who stormed seven gates, and hence seven mourning mothers seeking seven burials (12, 102, 636, 755, 963, 1207). Others have pointed out this recurrence, and I echo that the play would be staged most effectively with a chorus of seven (Pickard-Cambridge 1988, Storey 2009).

To substantiate further this dramaturgical preference, I offer the evidence of a court case, an inscription, and a vase. In Antiphon's *Peri Choreutes*, the young Diodotus dies while training to perform in a tragic chorus. So, what would have happened in such an instance—would the group perform with one less, or be disqualified for featuring a number below the standard convention? A choregic inscription found on a dedicatory statue base in Anagyrous celebrates a victorious tragic chorus, but lists only fourteen choreuts. While some read this as eliding the *koryphaios* for one reason or another (Csapo/Slater 1995, Wilson 2000), their arguments are unconvincing, especially in light of another piece of material culture. The Pronomos Vase celebrates a troupe victorious in a satyr-play, but features only eleven choreuts. While some use this to argue that Papposilenos was the *koryphaios* (Taplin/Wyles 2010), though he sometimes converses in iambic trimeters with the chorus leader, the bigger issue is that by 400 BCE the standard number was set at fifteen.

I marshal this evidence to problematize the received rigidity concerning the number of the tragic chorus. Throughout my paper, I ask a variety of questions in challenge of the general

consensus about a prescribed convention. Ultimately, I believe their unanswerability leads us to the satisfying conclusion that producers were allowed flexibility in their choice of number.

### Bibliography

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