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Dance in Ancient Greece

All authors writing about the dances of the modern Greeks invariably feel obliged to state that these are the same as those of their illustrious forebears. Usually they quote an excerpt from an ancient text or include a representation from a Classical vase in support of the claimed continuity of the race, as if this needed proving. Such naivety merely seeks to conceal beneath a mantle of patriotism the lack of serious studies of modern Greek dance.

One could only argue in favour of choreographic continuity if it were demonstrated that the dances of ancient Greece included traits not found in those of other peoples and maintained in the dances of today. No such traits have been observed. All aspects of the dance of the Greeks, in both Classical and modern times, are paralleled in the dances of other peoples, whether in ancient civilisations, primitive societies or contemporary ones. This in no way detracts from the distinctiveness of the dances of Greece, for continuity and distinctiveness coexist in the dances of all people at all times and in all places.

Our information about dance in ancient Greece is sufficient to enable us to appreciate its role in society but totally inadequate for us to form any idea of how the dances were actually danced. Apparently several texts existed describing dances, classifying them according to type and explaining their provenance, but very few have survived and these only from late antiquity. They include Plutarch's "Banquet Topics" (Themata Symposiou) (90 AD), Lucian's "Dialogue on Dance" (160 AD), Athenaeus' "Deipnosophistae" (215 AD) and Nonnus' "Dionysiaca" (500 AD). Phrases and names connected with dance, as well as references to dance occasions occur sporadically in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Xenophon, Aristophanes and the tragic poets.

These diverse facts gleaned from the texts are supplemented by representations of dancers on vases and reliefs, what little we know about the music and metre of the ancient Greeks, as well as by general knowledge about dance in other ancient societies. This material is so disjointed that it lends itself to a variety of hypotheses, interpretations and conclusions and only systematic and comprehensive research will shed light on what is essentially an enigma.

Since no Greek historians have dealt with ancient Greek dance we must rely on the studies by foreign scholars, the most important of which are those of Lillian Lawler and Germaine Praudhommeau. Both scholars have studied the iconographic material and literary sources, from the historical and the choreographic point of view respectively, and have reached quite different conclusions.

It seems, nevertheless, that neither the representations nor the texts and inscriptions refer to what we would define as traditional dance. Quite the opposite, they all deal

with classical dances performed in the cities by well-trained amateur or professional dancers. Though we have no evidence about dance in the villages, it is quite possible that the spectacular ceremonial dances of the cities would have been based on contemporary folk dances.

When considering ancient Greek dance it is first essential to define certain terms for there is an innate danger, when confronting another culture, of attributing to it notions intrinsic to our own culture. For example, to the ancient Greeks the verb "chorevo" meant to take part in a chorus and did not have a kinetic dimension as it does today since in demotic Greek it means "to dance". It is the ancient Greek verb "orchoumai" which is actually semantically much closer to the concept of dance as we know it. The interpretation of representations of dance on vases, reliefs and in sculpture should also be approached with circumspection since these are not entirely realistic but subject to certain technical and aesthetic conventions.

The concept of dance is much narrower nowadays than it was for the ancient Greeks. For us the centre of gravity is the feet, which is why when we want to learn a dance we ask to be taught the steps. In ancient and primitive societies, however, dance has a broader sense that is not restricted to movements of the body. One may dance solely with the hands or even the head and face (as in the dances of the Far East), one may dance by simply standing upright (like the end dancers in our tsámiko), one may also dance without the movements being in any way rhythmic.

Another aspect of ancient dance still retained today is expressed by the use of the verb "to dance" in the active voice. This is expressed in such phrases as "she dances the baby on her knees" or "we dance the bride's dowry" or "come on and dance the in-laws". In other words a person or thing can dance, we dance in honour of a person or thing. This peculiar use of the verb is unique to the Greek language and is not found in any other European tongue.

Another basic observation, equally applicable to the dances of primitive and ancient peoples, is the unity of dance, music and song, which are but facets of a single phenomenon. In ancient Greece one could dance a poem, that is one could express through body movements those sentiments aroused by the verses. This also explains why instrumental music had neither the autonomy nor the dissemination it enjoys today.

This concept has been preserved to a degree in traditional society where it is not at all uncommon for a song to have its own special dance and never to be sung without being danced. Similarly, music which does not accompany a song or dance, or both, is very rare. Furthermore, when a dancer in a village is asked to show the steps of a dance, he cannot do so without also singing the appropriate song.

It is not known whether there was any feature of ancient Greek dance which was an exclusively hellenic invention. No matter, it is not essential to attribute everything to a specific progenitor. Cultural innovations are not like technological inventions which can be patented. There is a continuous and constant interchange and assimilation of ideas and practices between neighbouring peoples, augmented too by independent

discovery or invention. It was the ancient Greeks, however, who pioneered the logical approach to dance, classifying its elements and, with their unique rationalism, organising its components into a unified system. We know a little about this system from surviving written testimonies. Three categories of dance movements were distinguished: *phorá*, *schema* and *deíxis*, though on what criteria these were based is not clear and may be guessed at from disparate data. *Phorá* was evidently analogous with the balletic concept of *port*, the deportment or posture, the mien, the manner in which the dancer carries his head or body (*port de tête*, *port de corps*) when standing or moving.

Deíxis refers to the dancer's use of his arms or body to convey messages in sign language, through symbolic movements. The simplest example of *deíxis* would be to point to something, to make a gesture. *Schemata* were equivalent to the movements or poses in dance today. There were many, each with its own name and description, several of which have survived.

The foregoing classification is not particularly clear nor convincing. Nevertheless, from extant information on ancient Greek dance, phrases here and there in the texts and even the rare brief description of a dance scene, it seems that it was held in high regard, in particular for its educative qualities. It was generally agreed that dance was essential for the moulding of personality, as well as preparation for battle. Dance, along with writing, music and bodily exercise, was basic to the education system and many authors extol its virtues as a means of cultivating both body and soul.

The young men in all the cities of ancient Greece were taught dance. Indeed, according to Athenaeus, in Arcadia the expenses were met from the civic purse and the pupils staged an annual display of their accomplished skills which all citizens attended. Lucian tells us that the Thessalians had such a high regard for the art of dance that they dubbed their eminent citizens (*árchons*) *proorchestéres* (lead dancers).

In Sparta bodily exercise was tantamount to a political creed and, indeed, in his "Politics" Aristotle censures Lacedaemonian training as being so harsh that it produced beasts and not men. They danced mainly martial dances and drilled to the rhythm of *emvatíria* (marches). Girls too were taught similar dance exercises which they performed in public. The Spartans not only danced before battle, they also fought with rhythmic movements to the strains of flutes.

All Athenian citizens were taught the art of dance and the youths of wealthier families had private tuition in dance, music and poetry from renowned instructors, *orchestodidáskaloi*. The famous general Epameinondas had received such lessons in Thebes and was a talented flautist, lyre-player and, like the tragic poet Sophocles, an accomplished singer and dancer. In the "Symposium" Socrates not only declares his love of dance but his desire to perfect his skill. The early poets were also known as *orchestés* since they not only trained the chorus in their plays but also gave private dance lessons.

In both the "Laws" and the "State" Plato eloquently expresses his belief in the virtues of dance. For him a man who cannot dance is uneducated and unrefined, while an

accomplished dancer is the epitome of a cultured man. In his detailed exposition on the education of the young men, bodily exercise and dance hold pride of place. He advocates that girls should be taught the same dance movements as boys, stressing that their teacher should be a woman and her instruction not tempered with Spartan severity. He mentions two mimic dances he considers suitable for boys and girls: the armed dance of the Curates, and the Spartan dance honouring the Dioskouroi.

The dance cited most frequently in the ancient texts is the pyrrhic which, Plato claims, faithfully replicates the hoplite's movements in battle: he moves sideways to avoid his opponent's blows, he withdraws to gather momentum, he attacks by leaping forward and doubles over to present only a small target. The pyrrhic seems to have been outstanding among the other known armed dances (such as the funerary *pyrrhos*, the Cretan *orsites*, the noisy dances of the Curetes and Corybantes) on account of its formalised offensive and defensive movements, particularly important in training for combat. It evidently developed into a spectacular dance in later times incorporating many bacchic elements and eventually all traces of its martial origin were lost.

The parallel drawn today between the Pontic dance known as the *Sera* and the ancient pyrrhic is entirely arbitrary and untenable. The *Sera* is a group dance with strong movements and sudden changes, often followed by another dance performed by two dancers, the *Pitshák-oïn* (Turkish for dagger-play). Neither of these dances justify its renaming as the "pyrrhicheion". Similar spirited dances are found among ancient and primitive peoples, without necessarily being martial in intent. In some armed dances the weapons are brandished and clashed in order to ward off evil spirits (apotropaic dances). There are also dances with leaps, shrieks and synchronised movements designed to project the corporate strength of a group of males yet without obviously bellicose elements. Last but not least, it is quite common for dances depicting a duel between two men to be transformed into erotic dances when performed by a couple and vice-versa.

Another didactic dance with formalised movements was the "gymnopaedia" which must have been very like present-day eurhythmics or gymnastics (not aerobics because it was a slow dance). The gymnopaedia was the main dance of the Lacedaemonians and was performed annually in the *choros* a special site in the centre of the agora at Sparta. It must have been very similar to the pyrrhic except that it imitated the movements of a wrestler and not of a warrior, the dancers being unarmed and naked.

Both these dances were performed by youths and maidens, separately, to the accompaniment of the flute. Another dance, the *hypórchema*, on the other hand, was danced by boys and girls together, singing choric poems. Plutarch speaks of Pindar as a composer of paeans and *hyporchemata*, stressing that the arts of poetry and dance go hand in hand and that the *hypórchema* embodies both since it mimics reality in movement and words. But Athenaeus describes the *hypórchema* as a kind of dance-game, not unlike the comic dance known as the *kórdax*.

The *kórdax*, the dance associated with Comedy was looked down on and generally regarded as unworthy of serious men. It was danced by one or more persons,

separately, making ridiculous and vulgar gestures to the music of the double flute. The later dance, the síkkinis, associated with satyric drama must have resembled the kórdax but was much faster with effeminate gestures and devoid of symbolic content. The third type of drama, Tragedy, also had its own particular dance, the emmélia which presumably enhanced the events enacted on stage with apposite expressive gestures, measured and stately movements.

The names of many other dances are known but we have no idea how they were danced. For example, the hymnénaios, danced by the bride with her mother and friends, was quick with many twists and turns. The géranos danced on Delos by Theseus and his companions whom he had saved from the Minotaur, is described by Homer in the Iliad. Dances were performed in honour of the dead and of different gods. Local and bacchic dances were danced on feast days and at special ceremonies, such as the Panathenaea in Athens and others at Delos and Delphi, at symposia, during the vintage and a host of other occasions.

The dominant formation in all ancient Greek dances seems to have been the circle, open, closed or spiralling. Only Athenaeus refers to dancers in straight lines, as well as a "square-dance" on which he does not elaborate. As a rule men and women danced separately, rarely together. In the theatre the members of the chorus and the principal actors were all men. Women danced women's dances among themselves and dionysiac dances in the course of orgiastic bacchic festivals. Dancers were mainly amateurs, excepting those engaged to entertain the diners at symposia and who were considered to be of low social status.

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Original in Greek

LATER NOTES

REVIVAL

<http://www.istd.org/documents/classical-greek-dance-syllabus-outline/>

<http://www.dance-archives.ac.uk/about/bellairs>

<http://barnard.edu/blogs/new-exhibition-daughters-hekate-ushering-classical-revival>

http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/4717/1/Carter-archives_of_the_dance.pdf

