What do we know for sure about "kordax"?
Essay on the origin and execution of an ancient dance

(Translator: Anastasia Anastasopoulou)

_Ulf Buchheld_


In his recent translation of the comedy "Nefele" of Aristophanes (1992) in modern Greek, Vasilios Mandilaras translates in the verse 540 the word "kordax" with "belly dance" [1]. The same definition (shamefully moving the belly) we find as an interpretation that P.N. Papas uses for "kordax" at the Great Greek Encyclopaedia (around 1930) [2]. Generally the "kordax" dance is considered the forerunner of the belly dance.

This opinion is also supported by a number of articles of the 19th century philologists. I discovered i.e. in the article of Hans Flach, professor at Tiviggi, "The Greek dance" (1881), the following cute passage: "Because just like in ancient times, today also at the fairs - honouring the Virgin or a Saint, they are celebrated by peasant men and women with songs and dances, but as all witnesses say, the context of the songs is usually serious - that is why they are called "tragoudia", and the corresponding dances are fitting and decent, never reckless or impudent... Only one and only dance is exceptional, that Greece has received by the vile and wicked Orientals, the Phrygic dance of Dionysos, that was danced according to tradition at "Dionysia" under the heavy influence of wine" [3]. "That "kordax", which the Greeks received along with everything mean from the east was a whirling dance where the heaps mainly move and whirl [4]."

So it must be straightened out whether the heap dance corresponds to the idea we have about "kordax". For that cause we must investigate since when are these two dances known in Greece, where they come from, where they were danced and where we should systematise them. The fact that dance in the life of Greeks has always played a great part, is revealed by the pictorial art and the saved texts. Plato (427-347 B.C.) states that Apollo, the Muses and Dionysos are the first responsible for the rhythm and harmony [5], that the Gods send to the people the Muses, Apollo and Dionysos to escort at the feasts and dances [6], and that he who doesn't know how to dance is illiterate [7].

The earlier saved systematisation of dance is found in the seventh book of "Laws" [8], the last work of Plato. Under the general meaning "gymnastic art", Plato distinguishes between dance and wrestling [9]. But both these two come together, something springing from the myth that Hera trained Mars first to become a perfect dancer and
Later taught him the fighting art [10]. And as Socrates states, "the ones that better honour the Gods with dances are the best in war" [11].

From the point of the body motions Plato defines two forms of dance, the good (beautiful) and the ugly. Every form is then split in two resulting in having four forms of dance [12]. Here tragedy is included among the decent moves of the body [13], the comedy among the disputed dances [14] and the circular dances among the peaceful forms of dance [15].

On the other hand Aristoxenos (354-300 B.C.) about thirty years later tried a different classification of the dances. First of all he divides the dances in dramatic (on stage dances) and lyric (lyric dances) forms [16]. Each form is then divided in three, that he opposes by comparing them. But he uses different criteria, so that his forms do not agree with the ones of Plato [17-18]. Plato distinguishes the disputed dances in those that are executed in comedy, thus belong to the poetic art and are "canonised by laws and definitions" [19] on one side, and on the other side in those bachic dances of the people, the slaves and the foreigners, that means the dances where the dancers under the influence of wine name themselves Nymphs, Pans, Silens and Satyrs, miming, as they say, and sometimes performing purification and ceremonies [20]. These dances are not further commented by Plato, but are put aside as being unworthy by the policy [21]. From that negative attitude of Plato also comes the seclusion of satyric drama, although he doesn't specifically mention it.

The aristoxenic classification comes from a lost work of his "about dancing" and the sources are indirect. That is the cause for the false characterisation of "pyrrihi" as the lyric satiric drama. Although this dance belongs to the satiric drama, it has no such lyric style. "Pyrrihi" was a name widespread in Greece for armed dancing [22]. It is even less suiting the classification of subsances at "kordax". Also it can't be true that "emmeleia" was named in Ithaka "alitir" [23], since "alitir" was an indecent dance [24]. But apart from all these the aristoxenic system is preferred to that of Plato. Plato is oriented towards the aesthetic criteria of "good" and "bad", that hide utilitarianistic beliefs and are therefore connected to moral values. He confuses the ritual, dramatic and popular dance, doesn't take under consideration the origin and the historical evolution of the dances and states only tragedy and comedy. He doesn't mention "kordax". Aristoxenos though: Differentiates consistently three categories, tragedy, comedy and satiric drama, their corresponding lyrics and their three characteristic dances. This cut in three was finally imposed to the future writers [25], dominated Italy and was also imposed except from to the dramatic and lyric poetry, to popular dances, feasts and dance representations. This must also be mentioned: Since "emmelia" was the dance in tragedy, "sikkinis" was the dance of the satyrs, "kordax" should also be the dance in comedy, otherwise Aristoxenos would not have mentioned it as a characteristic dance of comedy [26].

Lucian (120-200 A.C.) in his essay "About dancing" expresses the opinion that the dance categories, expressed through "kordax", "sikkinis" and "emmelia" are the creations of the followers of Dionysos, the Satyrs [27], and he is right in this since the origin and essence of dance is ecstasies, revelling, as the word "orheomai" testifies, in ancient Indian rghayate, meaning "I rage, I am in ecstasy" [28]. His opinions on the
other hand are consistent with the generally proved opinions about the origin of the three forms of drama: tragedy, satiric and comedy. Already in ancient times the dithyramb was in force, a widespread form of choral poetry, as a ceremonial song honouring Dionysos [29]. This is proved by his first reference through Arhilohos (around 650 B.C.) extract 77 D. [30] and is confirmed by Aeschylus [31] and Euripides (485-407 B.C.) [32].

According to Aristoteles (384-322 B.C.) tragedy evolved by it [33]. But he also mentions the satiric as an early form of tragedy [34]. Since the satiric is jointly connected with Dionysos and his followers we can imagine the evolution from the dithyramb through the satiric to tragedy. It was born, that is, by "improvisations of small fables" [36], that were performed with dances. That has been preserved in some Greek villages. It is referred in 1803 by Bartholdy[37] a place near Sardes, in 1906 by Dawkins [38] a place (Vizye) in Thrace and in 1955 by Mourrai-Velloudio [39] among others a place called Monoklisia Dramas in Macedonia. Tragedy, with time, was released from the satiric getting its serious and functional form. The dithyramb and the satiric retained their autonomy. Aristoteles says about the origin of comedy that its beginning is unexplored [40]. To his opinion it comes from improvisations and phallus pomp [41]. Its official entrance at the ceremonies of the great Dionysians in Athens dates back in 486 B.C. that is 50 years later than tragedy. Science supposes that comedy evolved by "komos", a vivid celebration pomp with songs, pipes and guitars and any kind of loss of self-control, in honour of Dionysos.

Taking as a basis the ternary system: "emmelia (chorion, syrtos, tragedy dance), "sikkinis" (war/satiric dance) and "kordax" (comic dance) we must examine if, and if true, in which of the three choral types we can include the belly dance. In order to do that we must describe the details of this dance. For the dance research, according to the ancient theory, we must pay attention to the following points: course, shapes and pointings [42], that is move of the feet, the body and the arms. These basic points are valid even today. The belly dance belongs to the category of spasmic dances. Their characteristic feature is, apart from the spasmic quakes of the upper body and the wavelike moves of the body, the throbbing, pivoting moves of the belly, bridgelike bends of the whole body with simultaneous inversions of the arms and the hands. Mostly and rightly it is danced by women since the vibration of the breasts, the whirling of the heaps and the bending of the body find their meaning in stimulating men. It is also important that it is a lonely dance although danced by many at the same time, without taking the form of a circular dance. Already at this point we can see that the belly dance, dew to its indisputably erotic style, can be excluded as a tragedy dance. Since the heap dance is an erotic, mainly danced by women, dance we must wonder if and where existed in ancient times such a dance. Here it is offered the Dionysian religion on one hand and the worship of Artemis on the other hand, since only these two deities had escorts [43], not only of men [44] but also of women [45]. Besides Dionysios only Artemis is called "keladini", that is a maenad, drunk goddess [46]. Common between these two worships are the revelling and phallic dances. Both worships are also deeply rooted in the popular religion. Artemis is the wild dancer [47]. The great goddess of nature is present everywhere, her joy is dancing [48]. Dionysios calls for feminence. Only it climbs with him, only selins and satyrs dance with them - no mortals [49]. Many dance names in honour to Dionysios have been
preserved. Except from "sikkini" [50] there is "sikkinotyrvi" [51], "tyrvasia", dithyramb [52], "ithymvoi", "ithyphaloi", "epiphallos", "konisalo", "vachie", "thermasfeis", "thriakios", "mogas", "kyklops", "titanes", "glafx", "nympha", "komos", "skops", "seilinos", "satyro" [53] etc. Dance names, belonging to the worship of Artemis, that have been preserved are "kordax", "mothon", "korythalia", "kalavis", "angeliki" and one impudent dance danced by the "vryllihistes" while wearing masks, that caused laughter. Specifically as heap dances are mentioned the "vaktrismos", "apokinos", "aposeisis" [54], "kalavis", "mothon" and "kordax" [55].

The characterisation of "kordax" as a heap dance seeks further investigation, since it is supposed to be exceptionally the comedy dance. For that we must seek through the relative comedy passages, whether the described dances can bring a picture of how "kordax" was danced in ancient times. For the first time the word "kordax" appears in 423 B.C. at the comedy "Nepheles" of Aristophanes at the performance during the games of the Great Dionysians in Athens, and in fact twice: "kordax attracted nobody" [56], under the comment RV an ugly form of comedy dance, under the comment EMMat a comic dance where the heaps move shamefully [57]. The second reference is fifteen verses below, where Aristophanes laughs at Epolis for placing an elderly drunk woman in his comedy "Marikas", only to dance the "kordax" [58]. Aristoteles mentions the "trohai tetrametro" as the most characteristic dance rhythm of the "kordax" [59]. The next, chronologically, mention to "kordax" is found in Demosthenes' (384-328 B.C.) second olympian speech against Philip from the year 349/348, where we read: Philip is a reviler; everyday he yields in debauchery and wine-mania with shameful dances and "kordax" [60]. From the comic poet Misimahos (around 365-350 B.C.) has been preserved a part where "kordax" is mentioned [61]. From Theophrastus (371-287 B.C) we learn that "kordax" was a popular dance [62], danced while in a brainless condition and also shamefully. References from the 2nd A.C. century follow. We have two letters of Alcifron, where the "kordax" was danced by drunkards at their gatherings [63], Lucian marks that a silene danced the "kordax" [64], Pausania testifying the worship of "kordax Artemis" at Ilida [65], and multiple references of Athinaios [66] [67]. Isihios (5th century A.C.) finally characterises "kordax" as impudent and indecent dance. The word "kordax" comes from the word "kradao, kradaino" (hold) [68], also appears as a verb "kordakizein" [69]. There is also another option, that of "skordax" from "skordao"=having sexual intercourse [70]. In ancient comedy, specifically, in Kratinos (around 450 B.C.) the following moves are described: We the legs close together jump moves are executed with the body leaning forward and the arms extended like a sword forward and upwards [71] [72]. To these three moves, also mentioned by Aristophanes, we should add the gathering like a rooster [73] and the jerk [74], of one leg forward or aside and upwards, so as the bottom to protrude ostentatiously [75], and with a jump the heels to touch the bottom [77].

There have also been mentioned the following moves: whirling moves of the heaps/bottom [78], jump on one foot [79], belly strokes [80]. It's about dances where every dancer rotates around himself [81], and at the same time massive general moves forming a big circle [82]. These dances were danced regularly only by men and in some cases wearing women's clothing [83]. When danced by women they wore phalluses in front. It is surprising the fact that all the dance names, that is "kordax",
"mothon", "kallavis" and "karydan", are not of a Greek origin [84], but come from pre-greek tribes, from the pre-doric era, and the Dorians used them later. The name "mothon" refers for sure to Peloponnisos. The Mothons were the primary population, that the Dorians subdued and suppressed [85] and named them Eilotes [86]. This dance is characterised at the comments of the comedy "Ploutos" of Aristophanes as a dance of the slaves [87], by Polydefkis as a dance of the porters and the sailors [88] and by Fotios as a kind of "kordax" [89]. This name has been preserved up to now with the name of the city Methoni south-west of Messinia. That explains the numerous known sanctuaries and temples of Artemis in Peloponnisos. At Methoni there was a sanctuary of Artemis [90]. At Ilida, near Sipilos there was one even called Artemis Kordaka, where at its ceremony the men danced "kordax" [91]. This place is not far from the Mycenaic Pylos. From the deciphering of the Grammik Beta we know that Artemis was worshipped since the Mycenaic era at Pylos [92]. Deep in Taygetos in one of its ravines she was worshipped as Artemis Dereatis [93] with the dance "kallavis" [94]. At Sparta masked men, the Kyrittians [95] celebrated Artemis Korythalia. Sanctuaries of Artemis Orthia were at the mountain Lykon near Tegea and at the place Limnai of Laconia [96]. At Karyes of Lakonia Artemis Karyatis, the "karydenia" [97] was worshipped.

Finally, there were at Peloponnisos, but even at Attika, numerous sanctuaries of Artemis Agrotera, protector of the wildlife [98]. From Lakonia are also known the "Vrylyhistes". The dancers of an audacious dance, wearing women' clothing and masks [100]. Mainly by the numerous information of Pausania it can be understood how great was the worship of this goddess in this area of Greece. The connection of "kordax" with a deity it is mentioned two more times. We have a sign from the 2nd century B.C. at Minoa of Amorgos, were "kordakistai" appear as an escort of Pythios Apollo [101]. Also the second sign refers to the Pythios Apollo [102]. One strong explanation for this relevance is the fact that Apollo was the brother of Artemis.

"Kordax" in its initial form represents consistently a predoric earth dance of the peloponnnesian land, dedicated to the worship of Artemis, goddess of vegetation, birth and death. Now lets take a look at the paintings: Georgia Franzius examined in her essay "Dancers and dances in the representations on ancient pottery" Gottygi 1973, a total of 348 pieces from the period of 7th and 6th century B.C. with representations of dances and she described them systematically. Analytically there are 79 from Corinth, 144 from Attika, 11 from Laconia, 30 from Boeotia, 21 from eastern Greece, 25 women' dances from Corinth, 29 women's dances from Attica, 9 representations of statues and engravings. They are representations on alabaster, arivallos, craters, amphorae, kantharos, skyfos, basins, compasses, water-pots, tripods etc. At the end of the essay there are 46 drawings of the representations. They are mainly representations of male dances, depicting the already known basic moves of comedy. Georgia Franzius used for her essay the results of the essay (1910) of Heinz Schnabel "Kordax, archaeological studies on the history of an ancient dance and on the origin of greek comedy". Heinz Schnabel tried to prove at the first part of his work that a depiction on an amphora of the first half of the 5th century B.C. shows three dancers dancing "kordax", and that according to the descriptions of Kratinos and Aristophanes, mainly in "Sphikes" and "Nepheles", "kordax" should have been danced that way.
At the second part of his work, Shnabel examined the origin of "kordax" and traced it in the worship of Artemis in Peloponnisos. While the second part, about the origin of "kordax", was greeted by the experts (Korte), the first part was heavily criticised. Especially we mention Alfred Korte, who the same year shoe in his essay that all this is unproved hypothesis [103]. The view of Korte is the present view of the philological science [104].

Korte [105], Warnecke [106] and Roos [107] suggest that we know nothing about "kordax", because there is no description on its execution. Which dances are described by Kratinos and Aristophanes and which dance describes the so called pot is unknown. Science agrees that the only remark on verse 540 of "Nepheles" that Korte already mentions in 1910, is missing from the more important manuscripts and that it is basically of Byzantine origin [108]. All the other sources testify only that "kordax" was a shameful, silly, improper, rude and ridiculous dance and that it was danced in a condition of drunkenness. But that was also true for the bacchic dances. But even in the after Christ era, among those who describe heap dances, Martialis and Iouwenalis (1st century), Polydefkis (2nd century), Arnovios (about 300), Isihios (5th century) and Fotios (9th century), only Polydefkis correlates the heap dance with "kordax".

Martialis (40-100 a.C.) in the paragraph 5,38,26, describes: "It is painful when impertiment women from Gades [109] dance ceaselessly, with trembling movements and turn round their hips". There are mainly mentioned lady dancers and the usual equipment is (always wearing women's clothing) cymbals [110], drums [111] (tambourine) and copper rattles [112]. All these are even today used in Greece especially with the belly dance. The fact that we have descriptions of the hip dances from the after Christ era and everybody agrees that the moves were shameful and indecent, demands an explanation. A general reason is that it has been preserved only a fraction of the ancient literature so we cannot exclude the possibility that these dances were characterised as rude at earlier centuries. But that seems very unlikely to me, since we have numerous depiction of dancing Maeanads.

An extended notifications of such dances we find at the essay Les danses Dionysiaques en Grece Antique, Toulouse 1995, of Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux, especially within the pages 22, 24-29, 37-41, 139, 140, 158, 160-163, 167, 170, 174, 181 and 184-188. That is why we can assume that the dance was considered shameful and rude when it lost its contact with the religious worship. Heracleous (550-480 B.C.) made, regarding the phallus pomp, the following remark: If they didn't do the pomp and didn't sing the song of the vagina in honour of Dionysios the play would have been very impudent [113]. As a result we must keep the fact that the characteristic moves of the hips are not encountered in comedy. "Kordax", thus, is excluded as a forerunner of the hip dance. So that leaves out only the last possibility, the satiric dance, and, indeed, that is where we can find the most common marks.

The way and the meaning of the moves of this dance state its direct contact with the Dionysiac worship and not only in relation to Nymphs, Vaches and Maeanads who, one way or the other, belong to the troupe of Dionysios, but mainly in relation to the
Ellinides, who did the famous mountain climbing during the winter, worshipping the god, as Euripides presents them at his "Vaches", having sexual intercourse with the Selens and the Satyrs, who welcomed the women' appetites with their phalluses raised. Already we can conclude that the hip dance was the dance of the satiric drama, and also it has no basis to consider "kordax", which under the scheme of Aristoxenos was the comedy dance, the forerunner of the hip dance and call it a belly dance.

Comments

4. Hans Flach, as ab. 23.
5. Plato, Laws, 672d, 673d.
6. Plato, as ab. 653d, e, 654a, 665a.
7. Plato, as ab. 654a, b.
8. Plato, as ab. 813a bis 817e.
9. Plato, as ab. 795d, e, 815a.
11. Athinaeos, 628f.
12. Plato, Laws, 814e, the continuous bisection of the pieceful dances (815e) I don't take it under consideration.
13. Plato, as ab. 817a.
14. Plato, as ab. 816d, e, 817a.
15. Plato, as ab. 815b.
17. Athinaeos, 621c.
18. Athinaeos, 621d.
20. Plato, as ab. 815c.
21. Plato, as ab. 815d.
22. Archilohos, extr. 190 Bgk 88.
24. from "alitis", the word appears for the first time at Ebedoklis (485-425 B.C) Diels/Kranz 31B 115.
27. Lucian, as ab. 22.
28. Hjalmar Frisk, Griechisches Etymologisches Worterbuch, II 433, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Meollendorff, Der Glaube der Hellenen, Darmstadt 1994, II70, suggest the contact with "ergon". Plato's version from "hara" (Laws 654a) is wrong.
29. Eratosthenes (228-202 B.C.) Irigoni frg.22: peri tragon orhisanto
30. Dithyrambs are delivered from Pindarus, Vachylidis and Timotheos. They have no relation to any worship but are of a heroic character: Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Meollendorff, Griechische Verskunst, Berlin 1921, 107 Anm 1.
32. Euripedes, Vacchai, 526.
33. Aristoteles, Peri poitikis 4, 1449a 10.
34. Aristoteles, as ab. 20.
35. Aristoteles, as ab. 10.
36. Aristoteles, as ab. 19.
40. Aristoteles, Peri poiitikis 5, 1449b, 10.
41. Aristoteles, as ab. 4,1449a, 10.
42. Plutarch, moralia 747.
44. Pausanias 6.22.1, Artemis kordaka at Sipylon.
45. Pausanias 3.10.7, Artemis Karyatis at Karyai.
46. Homer, Eis Afrodittin, verse 19.
47. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Der Glaube der Hellenen II 145.
49. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Der Glaube der Hellenen II 66.
50. Euripides, Kyklopes 27.
51. Athinaeos, 618c.
52. Aeschylus, Edonoi, extr. 16, 2.
54. Polydefkis IV 101.
56. Aristophanes, Nephelai 540.
57. See page 9, comments 105-107.
58. Aristophanes, Nephelai 555.
59. Aristoteles, Ritoriki 1408b, chracterizes the trohaic terametro: "esti gar troheros rythmos".
60. Demosthenes, Olynthiakos B18.
61. Mnisimahos, frg.4, 18 Kock II 437.
63. Alkifron, Epistoleis II 115 und 20.
64. Lucian, Ikaropenipp 27.
65. Pausanias, 6.22.1.
66. Athinaeos, 20e, 629d, 630e.
67. Athinaeos, 631d.
68. Frisk, as ab. suggests that in ancient indian "kurdati"=pidao (jump) and that it is a doric word of uncertain origin.
70. Heinz Schnabel, Kordax, Archaeologische Studien zur Geschichte eines antiken Tanzes und zum Ursprung der griechischen Komodie, Munich 1910, 4 Anm.1.
71. See also Aristophanes' Lysistrati 1306, "podon ktypein" and 1309, "pyknai podoin".
72. Kratinos, extr. 219 Kock.
73. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1490.
74. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1525.
75. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1492, 1530, 1493, Eirini 332.
76. Aristophanes, Ippis 697.
77. Aristophanes, Lysistrati 83, corresponds to Polydefkis IV 102.
79. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1520.
80. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1529.
81. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1517, 1530, 1529.
82. Aristophanes, Sphikes 1523, 1529.
83. Athinaeos, 139a, d.
84. Schnabel 62.
85. Pausanias, 4.35.1.
86. Pausanias, 3.20.6.
87. Sholia Aristophanes, Ploutos 279.
88. Polydefkis IV 101.
89. Fotios.
90. Pausanias 4.35.8.
91. Pausanias 6.22.1.
93. Pausanias 3.20.7.
94. Nilsson Giechische Feste, 185. Doesn't clear up whether it was danced by men or women.
95. Athinaeos 149a, b. kerythallia= korous thallein "zum Gedeihen der Buden", M.P.Nilsson, a.a. O.184.
96. Pausanias 2.24.5 and 3.16.7.
97. Pausanias 3.10.7.
     Ilisos and 1.41.3 Megara.
100. Nilsson, Der Ursprung der Tragödie, 673 ff.
101. IS XII 7, 246.
102. CIG II S, 1035 Nr 22640
105. Alfred Korte, as ab. column 2787.
106. Warnecke at RE, Volume XI, column 1384.
107. Ervin Roos, as ab. 41.145.
108. Alfred Korte, as ab. 2788.
109. Cadiz at south Andalousia.
110. Athinaeos 621c.
111. Aeschylus, Edonoi, extr. 115, 10. Euripides Vacchai 59, 156; Kyklops 205.
113. Herakleitos, (DK22 B15) Ulf Buchheld Darmstadt Germany