

## DANCE IN PREHISTORIC GREECE

Dance and music accompany man from his appearance on earth to this day. With rhythmical movement man expresses his emotions, consolidates his social identity as member of a group, worships his gods by expressing religious awe, learns his limitations and the possibilities of expanding them, is socialized.

The special significance of dance from the prehistoric era is confirmed by the finds from archaeological excavations. Even though representations of dance are identified in Greece, specifically Minoan Crete, from the early 2nd millennium BC, the discovery of bone auloi in Neolithic settlements and figurines of musicians in the Early Bronze Age Cyclades, point to the development of the art of music, and in all probability to the existence of dance performances, in much earlier times.

Important factors in the formation of the dance tradition of any culture are social organization, religion, everyday occupations, the intellectual level and the idiosyncrasy of each people. Thus, several differentiations are observed in dance formations, as well as different content in similar dance formations, from culture to culture. In prehistoric societies dance was associated directly with religion. Nevertheless, it is very likely that dance for enjoyment and entertainment also existed, even though clear indications of this are lacking.

In prehistoric Crete dance representations occur from the Protopalatial to the Postpalatial period (1900-1100 BC), indicating a variety of dances. The most important Minoan dance, which very possibly continued right until the end of the Minoan world, is the female circular dance performed in the context of the epiphany of the deity, during open-air religious rituals (fig. 1). This was of open type with freely moving female dancers and the most characteristic gesture was the raising of the arms above the head, accompanied by a slight backwards inclination of the torso and elevation of the head. This was a gesture of invocation, which is part of the ceremonial of epiphany. Apart from the raised arms, centrifugal circular motion and outstretched arms (cat. no. 11) also occur during the Protopalatial and the Postpalatial period respectively. On the basis of the iconography, the provenance of the finds and their context, it is possible that the content of the dance changed over time, with less emphasis on the invocatory character, as is usual in traditional dance formations of long duration. Thus, the discovery, in the shrine at Palaikastro, of a dance model together with vessels for offerings of bowl type might point to the association of dance with offerings of first fruits during the Postpalatial period. In this same period, the female circular dance was performed in cemeteries too, during the funerary rites of distinguished dead persons, as is deduced from the depiction on a sarcophagus from Knossos.

The introductory part of the aforesaid female dance in the palace environment, and specifically in the west court, is illustrated on the wall-painting of the Sacred Grove from Knossos (fig. 2). This is a rhythmical entrance of the female dancers onto the main dance floor (*chorostasion*), with sedate step, in two parallel rows but not strictly in line, and with one hand raised. The circular dance and the epiphany of the deity followed.

Of different content is the circular dance represented in the clay model from the Kamilari tholos tomb (cat. no. 12), which is performed by men with arms interlinked, inside a low circular enclosure. Apart from the fact of the exclusive participation of men, the find differs in the shape of the circle,

Fig. 1 / Εικ. 1



which is closed with interdependence of dancers, as well as in its provenance. The discovery of the model in a tomb advocates the funerary character of the dance. The nudity of the dancers (they wear only a low conical cap on the head) is possibly associated with the mortuary role of the dance or indicates the inclusion of the performance in wider rites for the fertility of the earth. A similar circular dance seems to have been performed by men in the Cyclades too, during Late Mycenaean times (1200-1100 BC), as is surmised from a relevant depiction on an hydria from Naxos, which also comes from a cemetery context.

Perhaps the most spectacular Minoan dance event was the dance with sacred trees and stones (baetyls) (fig. 3), which combined dance per se with two concurrent or alternating dance-mime activities, the embracing of a natural boulder and the shaking of a sacred tree, in order to achieve the epiphany of a male or a female deity of fertility.

Comparable subjects of dramatic character with a highly theatrical element, which were principally re-enactments of some myth, are known to have been performed in the ancient civilizations of the East and of Egypt, on the occasion of religious festivals. Variations of the embraced stone are encountered (natural rock, rudimentarily carved column, two identical ovoid stones with vegetal shoots between them) and this practice seems to have had greater semantic gravitas than tree shaking. The sanctity of the stone is related to its frequent presence in the Minoan landscape and especially to its significance for demarcating open-air loci of cult. The tree, which is not self-sown, is shaken strongly by the dancer so that the fruits fall. The meaning of this specific movement cannot be clarified precisely, except for its general inclusion in a ritual of tree worship, which is associated with a divine epiphany. The individual acts are co-ordinated by the head of the dance, who is distinguished by the particular figure she executes (contraction of the body, one arm lowered, the other bent on the shoulder of the same or the opposite side).

The aforementioned dance was danced in Mycenaean Greece too, as can be seen on the bezels of finger rings from Vapheio and Mycenae, but with several divergences from the Minoan type, which indicate either that the component elements of the dance were not sufficiently understood by the Mycenaeans or that they were intentionally adapted to Mycenaean ideology. In the Mycenaean version particular importance is attached to the shaking of the tree, whereas the embracing of the stone is absent.

Another female dance, known in Minoan Crete, Mycenaean Greece and possibly the Cyclades, with identical performance, was a processional movement in triangular arrangement of the female dancers, with the lead dancer in the foreground. The female dancers had the arms bent on the hips, wore a necklace with characteristic ribbons which fluttered as they moved and performed pirouettes.

In the context of vegetation rituals performed in Minoan Crete, there was a dance in which a pair of women rotated around a sacred tree.

Possibly there was also a dance with display of rod-shaped emblems, as well as religious processions accompanied by music. The holding of such musical processions seems to have been more usual in mainland Greece, as is apparent from the frequent presence of



Fig. 2 / Εικ. 2

the subject in the iconography. In most cases the musical instrument is not illustrated, but its use is supposed by analogy with its depiction in specific musical processions, such as the rural procession on the 'Harvester Vase' (cat. no. 7), with an unmistakable chorus and a musician with sistrum, on the Hagia Triada sarcophagus (cat. no. 13), on which the blood of the sacrificed bull is carried in procession and offered to the deity, to kithara accompaniment, and in the wall-painting of the same subject, also from Hagia Triada.

Common in Mycenaean Greece, in contrast to Minoan Crete, are funerary processions, mainly of women, but also of men, walking in line with characteristic gestures of lamentation. The rhythmical movement was most probably accompanied by dirges. Mycenaean mortuary ceremonial, as depicted primarily on the sarcophagi from Tanagra (*prothesis, threnos, ekphora*), is similar in many ways to the corresponding one of Geometric times.

The gestures of some adorant figurines, mainly female, from shrines, are also suggestive of dance (cat. no. 9). Some of them can be associated with the dances already mentioned, such as the gesture of the bent arms on the hips – represented on a figurine from Palaikastro (cat. no. 10) and on female figurines from Kea – which is characteristic of a women's dance in triangular arrangement.

Dance rituals were organized by the Palace and were open, public events. They were held in palatial shrines, rural sanctuaries and in the palace courts. Some circular constructions located in the environs of the palace of Knossos and on Kea might have been used as dance floors.

The performance of official dance rituals, in which members of the priesthood participated, ceased after the destruction of the palaces. Even so, some Minoan and Mycenaean traits seem to have survived in the dances of historical times, while the existence of dances for entertainment and enjoyment should be considered certain, despite the absence of related finds. In the Mycenaean palaces in particular, banquets were held at which the musician with his kithara had pride of place, presaging the model of the later Homeric bard. The descriptions in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in which there are references to nuptial dances, dances celebrating the vintage, love dances in which both sexes took part and dances with high leaps, point in the same direction. Most of these dances are of the Geometric period (10th-8th century BC), but certain elements echo Mycenaean tradition.

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