Dance in Prehistoric Greece

Arts and Humanities Through the Eras

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Minoan Crete.

The Bronze-Age civilizations of Greece bear labels applied to them in modern times. The Minoan civilization on Crete, which flourished from 2000 to shortly before 1400 b.c.e., was a non-Greek culture with an indecipherable language likely linked to contemporary societies in Asia Minor. The Mycenaean civilization on mainland Greece developed a few centuries after the Minoan civilization began and ended at about the same time. Its name comes from the first site of its discovery: Mycenae, the legendary capital of Agamemnon who led the Greek coalition in the Trojan War. Since the initial archeological discoveries, at Mycenae in the 1870s and on Crete at the so-called Palace of Minos at Knossos at the start of the twentieth century, archaeologists and historians have discovered a great deal of information about these Bronze-Age cultures. For instance, at a Minoan site in eastern Crete, Palaikastro, archeologists discovered a primitive figurine made of earthenware, portraying women dancing in a circle in the center of which stood a man playing a lyre. Found with the figurine were six clay birds. The figurine dates to after 1400 b.c.e. when Greek-speaking immigrants from mainland Greece had already invaded the island, and it is the earliest portrayal that has survived of a musician playing the lyre, surrounded by dancers in a circle. Harvesting was a time for dance on Crete; as evidenced by the so-called "Harvester Vase"—a small vase of black soapstone showing a procession of harvesters, which was discovered at Hagia Triadha on Crete. The "Harvester Vase" gives scholars a glimpse of a harvest dance performed on Crete around 1500 b.c.e. The vase shows harvesters striding along, four abreast, singing and lifting their knees high with every step. They carry long objects over their shoulders that have been identified as flails or winnows, tools used to separate grain. The lead harvester is a man who shakes a *sistrum*, a kind of rattle used in Egyptian religious ceremonies, and appears to be singing heartily. Another Cretan dance ceremony is shown on a gold seal-ring, discovered in tombs dating to the fifteenth century b.c.e. at Vapheio close to Sparta in Greece. The seal-ring depicts a woman dancing under a tree wearing the fashionable court dress worn by ladies in the Palace of Minos on Crete. To her right a youth leaps to pluck either fruit or a flower from the tree. While visual references are clues to dance in ancient Cretan civilization, the best evidence of the tradition of dance comes not from archaeology, but from Greek literature centuries later.

The Evidence of Literature.

One of the first literary texts dealing with the Cretan tradition of dance after the collapse of the Bronze-Age civilization came from the poets of the island of Lesbos. One poem, from seventh century b.c.e., attributed to either Sappho or Alcaeus, reads "Once upon a time the girls of Crete / were wont to dance in harmony like this / their soft foot beats circling the fair altar. …" Other examples of the reputed Cretan dance rituals came from the Homeric epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* tells how the blacksmith god Hephaestus made new armor for the hero Achilles so that he could rejoin the battle after his best friend, Patroclus, was killed while wearing Achilles' armor. The shield that Hephaestus made showed scenes from the everyday life of early Greece, at peace or war, and among them were two dance scenes. One portrayed a dance as the grapes were harvested from the vineyard, which is reminiscent of the "Harvester Vase." The other depicted a dance on a dancing floor that Homer explicitly likens to one which the legendary craftsman Daedalus built at Knossos for Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete. The *Odyssey* tells how the hero Odysseus in his wanderings reached the island of Phaeacia. Phaeacia, ruled by a generous king and a wise queen, is thought to be based on folk memories of the world of ancient Crete, though the *Odyssey* was written at least six centuries after the peak of the Minoan civilization. King Alcinous of Phaeacia had five sons and they all need clean clothes to wear at dances. Alcinous' daughter, Nausicaa, took the laundry to the seashore where she met Odysseus and directed him to her father's palace. There he attended a banquet where the Phaeacians displayed their special skill at dancing. The dancing floor was swept clean, the minstrel took his place in the center of the floor with his lyre, and the young dancers performed in a circle around him. Then two dancers showed off their expertise at dancing with a ball. The one threw the ball into the air; the other leaped up and caught it before his feet touched the ground. Then they danced, the one throwing the ball to the other, who caught it and threw it back. From this example, it appears that ancient Cretan dance covered a broad range of movement: juggling, turning somersaults, and making gestures with arms and hands. It was all part of *mousike*, the arts sacred to the muses of dance, music, and poetry.

THE MINOANS WERE FAMOUS DANCERS

introduction: Homer's *Iliad* reflects the tradition that the Minoans in Bronze Age Crete were famous dancers. The passage quoted here describes how the blacksmith god, Hephaestus, made new armor for Achilles, for Achilles had loaned his armor to his friend Patroclus who was killed by the Trojan hero Hector. The shield that Hephaestus fashioned was a work of art. On it he depicted scenes from Greek life, including two dance scenes, one of which specifically recalls the dances that were once held at the Palace of Minos in Knossos. The first scene is of a vintage dance where youths, both men and women, dance as they harvest the grapes, while in their midst a boy plays the lyre and sings the Linus-song, which is a dirge that marked not joy but sadness. Perhaps here it was a lament for the passing of the summer and the

advent of winter. The second dance scene, which is described below, showed boys with daggers and girls wearing garlands on their heads. Both are dressed in their best clothes—the men have rubbed theirs with olive oil to make them gleam—and they perform an intricate dance, first forming a circle and dancing a round dance, and then reforming into two ranks which moved to meet each other. In the middle of the circle were two gymnasts or tumblers, who performed somersaults and made great leaps into the air. This sort of acrobatic dance was considered a Cretan specialty. Homer makes the point that this was like the dances that were danced at Knossos in Crete, on the dancing floor of Ariadne, who in Greek mythology, was the daughter of King Minos of Crete. Homer is recalling the tradition that Minoan Crete, where a pre-Greek civilization reached its height in 1700–1450 b.c.e., was famous for dancing.

Also did the glorious lame god depict a dancing floor like unto that which once upon a time, Daedalus fashioned for Ariadne of the lovely tresses in broad Knossos. On it were youths dancing, and maidens whom it would cost many oxen to wed, their hands holding one another's wrists. The maidens were clad in fine linen, and the youths had well-woven doublets faintly glistening with olive oil. Fair garlands the maidens wore, and the youths had daggers of gold hanging from silver baldrics. And now they would dance round in a circle, light and deftly on their feet, as when a potter sits by his potter's wheel which fits neatly between his hands and tries it out, to see whether it spins smoothly; and then they would form into lines and move quickly to meet each other. A large crowd stood joyously round about the lovely dancing-floor, [and among them a god-like minstrel was making music on his lyre], and in the midst of the dancers, leading their dance steps were two acrobats swooping and doing somersaults.

source: Homer, *The Iliad,* ix, 689–709. Trans. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers (London: Macmillan, 1911). Text revised by James Allan Evans.

The Geranos Dance.

One dance that originated on Crete was the *geranos*. Many scholars originally translated *geranos* as the Greek word for "crane," creating speculation that the *geranos* was a dance where performers imitated the flight of cranes, or costumed themselves as cranes. Animal and bird dances of this variety were well known in Greek culture. However, from portrayals of the geranos that have been discovered on pottery, it is clear that the dancers did not costume themselves as cranes. One attempt to explain the title of the dance suggests that the dance merely simulated the migratory flight of the cranes. A more widely accepted theory suggests that the word *geranos* was mistranslated as "crane." Rather it is derived from a word meaning "to wind" in Indo-European, the ancient language from which most modern European languages were derived. This idea of winding is backed up by visual representations of the geranos that show dancers with joined hands forming a row that wound back

and forth, sometimes even reversing direction, as if it was making its way through a maze. Many scholars began to speculate that the geranos was a "winding dance," meant to represent a snake, and was done in rituals to honor a great serpent such as a python. There is archaeological evidence for rituals involving snakes in Minoan Crete, and Greek mythology relates that Apollo killed a sacred python which was worshipped at Delphi when he took over the shrine and made it his own.

Mythical Origin.

Another possible origin for the geranos comes from Greek mythology. According to one myth, King Minos of Crete forced Athens to send him tribute every year of seven youths and maidens who would be fed to the Minotaur, a half-human and half-bull monster who was kept in the Labyrinth, a maze of winding paths and corridors, at Knossos. Whether the Labyrinth was a building, or an open-air area, or even a dancing floor, as one scholar suggested, is not clear. The hero Theseus, the son of the king of Athens, insisted on going to Knossos as one of the seven youths to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, and once there, he killed the Minotaur and escaped the twists and turns of the Labyrinth by following a cord which the daughter of Minos, Ariadne, had given him. On his way back to Athens, Theseus stopped at the sacred island of Delos, where he and the rest of the young Athenian youths who had escaped with him danced the geranos. This scene from the myth is depicted on the François Vase, a famous vase painted in black-figure style, named after the excavator who discovered it in an Etruscan grave in Italy in the early part of the nineteenth century. On one side of the vase, under the rim, Theseus and his companions are shown disembarking from the boat, and forming a row of dancers, hands joined, alternating by gender. The dancers then wound back and forth to commemorate the twists and turns that they faced in the Labyrinth. Records exist showing the geranos was performed yearly on the island of Delos around a horned altar, similar to those found in the Palace of Minos on Crete, lending even more credence to the theory that the geranos was Cretan in origin.

The Geranos in the Classical Period.

Regardless of the origin of the geranos, it continued to be danced on the sacred island of Delos into the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The dancers were both male and female and they formed a sort of chorus line with a leader at each end who were known as *geranoulkoi* ("ones that pull the crane"). Some inscriptions from Delos survive which furnish other evidence about the dance. It was usually performed during a festival held in the month which the Greeks called *Hekatombaion*—equivalent to July on the modern calendar—and it was danced at night by the light of lamps and torches. The inscriptions show payments for torches, wicks for lamps, and olive oil to fuel the lamps. They also show that the dancers were paid ten drachmas each, not a small sum when a stonemason might make between one and two drachmas a day. The inscriptions also state that the dancers were supplied with branches, which were tokens of victory, and ropes or cords which the dancers carried, props that point back to the Labyrinth myth. Because the geranos was danced at night, it was most likely part of rituals that were performed to honor the deities of the Underworld, the *chthonic* ("earth") deities. Some scholars believed this is further

proof that the geranos was a ritual snake dance, for snakes were creatures of the Underworld. The geranos survived into the early Roman period of Greek history, but was no longer performed after the first century b.c.e.

THESEUS DANCES THE GERANOS

introduction: The lifetime of Plutarch of Chaeronea stretched from the forties of the first century c.e. into the reign of Hadrian (117–138 c.e.) He is best known for his *Parallel Lives* which matched biographies of eminent Greeks with eminent Romans. He devoted one biography to the hero Theseus, and in the excerpt below, he describes how the dance called the "Crane" came to Crete. Dicearchus, whom Plutarch cites as a source, was a pupil of Aristotle.

On his way back from Crete, Theseus touched at Delos. There, when he had sacrificed to Apollo and dedicated in his temple the statue of Aphrodite which he had received from Ariadne, he and the Athenian youths with him executed a dance, which they say is still performed by the people of Delos, and which consists of a series of serpentine figures danced in regular time and representing the winding passages of the Labyrinth. The Delians call this kind of dance the Crane, according to Dicaearchus, and Theseus danced it round the altar known as the Keraton, which is made of horns all taken from the left side of the head. They also say that Theseus founded games at Delos and that he began there the practice of giving a palm to the victors.

source: Plutarch, "Theseus," in *The Rise and Fall of Athens; Nine Greek Lives by Plutarch*. Trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1960): 27.

Other Ancient Dances.

There were other dances as well that the Greeks thought originated from Crete. One was the *hyporchema*, a lively choral hymn sung to the god Apollo which included interpretative dancing. The *paean* was also attributed to Crete; it was a hymn of supplication to Apollo similar to the hyporchema. When festivals and sacrifices to Apollo were held on the sacred island of Delos, choirs of boys danced and sang both the hyporchema and the paean to the accompaniment of the *aulos*, a woodwind instrument similar to an oboe, and the lyre. The *nomoi*, poems telling the adventures of heroes or gods, which also had a Cretan origin, were sung to the music of the lyre or the double-*aulos*. In early Greece, the nomoi were only accompanied by a series of gestures, but later versions included dance steps as well. Dances that involved men bearing their arms—originally war dances—were widespread in the Greek world, but the traditional war dance of Sparta, known as the *pyrrhike* or "Pyrrhic Dance," had a Cretan origin. A Spartan myth surrounding the founder of the Spartan constitution, Lycurgus, told of Lycurgus's desire for dances that befitted a society of warriors and so he persuaded a musician and choreographer named Thaletas to come from Crete and instruct the Spartans in song and dance. Thaletas of Crete was an historical figure: he was a musician and teacher of dance who was known to have practiced his profession in Sparta in the seventh century b.c.e. He may have given new shape to pyrrhic dance in Sparta, but records show that Sparta had the pyrrhike warrior dance

long before Thaletas arrived there. Because of their widespread influence, the Cretans deserved the reputation for dancing that they had among the ancient Greeks. Long after the Minoan civilization on Crete receded into the shadows of mythology, the tradition of their ancient dances continued.

The Paean and the Hyporchema.

The paean was named for a ritual shout of worshipers invoking the god Apollo: "ie ie paian." It was a rhythmic cry accompanied by a dance: three short syllables followed by a long, or in musical notation, three quarter notes followed by a half note. This rhythmic beat came to be known as the "paean." The paean was sung to drive out pestilence or celebrate victory, though it probably began as a hymn to Apollo. Paeans were also sung and danced to Artemis and Ares, and also to Poseidon in his capacity as "Earth-Shaker," the god of the earthquake. Fragments survive of more than 22 paeans written by Pindar, providing scholars with evidence that these dances and songs were part of religious rituals. Sometimes confused with the paean, the hyporchema also played an important role in religious ceremonies. The choir singing the hyporchema was divided into two sections: one sang without dancing, or if it danced, it used a simple dance-step, whereas the other did not sing, but instead danced an interpretative dance adapted to the text of the song. It used a rhythm similar to the paean, though the hyporchema seems to have been the livelier of the two. Sometimes the term "hyporchema" simply means a lively dance when mentioned in literature.

Animal Dances.

Another type of dance with prehistoric roots was the animal dance, where the dancers wore animal masks, or even impersonated wild animals without wearing masks. One animal dance was performed at Brauron outside Athens at a shrine to Artemis. During the Brauronia festival held every four years, girls between the ages of five and ten danced a dance of little bears. The founding legend for the Brauronia told that a band of Athenian youths killed a bear at Brauron, thus provoking the anger of Artemis who sent a plague; the Brauronia with its choral dances of young girls expiated the sacrilege. Another animal dance focused on bulls. A Greek vase in the British Museum depicts in black silhouette three dancers who wear bull masks, the tails of bulls, and hoof-like coverings on their hands. This scene is reminiscent of the legend of the Minotaur who was kept by King Minos in the Labyrinth at Knossos on Crete. Further proof of bull dances comes from the Palace of Minos where a fresco depicts acrobats, both male and female, leaping over the back of a charging bull in graceful somersaults. The Greeks would have considered acrobatic stunts like this a form of dance, and on Crete, the tradition of acrobatic dancing lived on into later periods. Greek literature makes mention of owl dances—the owl was sacred to Athena—and a wine jug in the British Museum shows two dancers costumed as birds dancing as a piper plays the *aulos*. Another piece of archaeological evidence for animal dances comes from the sanctuary of the goddess known as *Despoina* at Lycosura, in the mountainous region of Arcadia. *Despoina* is not a proper name; it means "Mistress," or "Lady" and probably this goddess was a manifestation of the ancient goddess called the "Mistress of the Wild Animals," who was honored with animal dances. A broken piece of marble carved in low relief on the colossal statue of Desponia at Lycosura

shows ornamental motifs such as eagles, thunderbolts, and girls riding on dolphins. Also included is a group of female dancers wearing animal masks. Several wear masks portraying rams' heads; at least one wears a horse's head. More evidence comes from finds near an altar on the slope above the temple of Despoina. Some exploratory digging turned up a large number of earthenware figurines of dancers wearing animal heads that were buried there. Lycosura was visited in the second century c.e. by the Greek traveler Pausanias who described what was left of it in his day, and noted that it was the oldest of all the cities on earth, leading scholars to believe that the worship of the "Mistress" with her animal dances was an ancient rite that was still recognized in later Greek periods.

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