

Using Greek Folk Dances for the Reconstruction of Ancient Greek Dances

Is it possible to use the greek folk dances for reconstruction of ancient greek dance ? this idea is very interesting but not always easy to put into practice. First, we must remember that it is very difficult to reconstruct ancient greek dance. We are familiar with ancient greek texts, pictures and music but often this is not enough. So every reconstruction of ancient greek dance is based on information we have but we must create the movements and the choreography. Secondly, we know the traditional greek dance. It is impossible to prove that greek folk dance goes back to Antiquity but it often goes back a long way, sometimes to Middle Ages as the *hasapico* which was the dance of the butchers from Constantinople (XIIIc. AD). Dora Stratou was the first to show that some resemblances exists between ancient greek dance, and traditional greek dances, for example the way the dancers hold on to each other of the dancers, or the energy of the dance¹. So we can hypothesize that some elements of ancient greek dances lived on in greek folk dances and we can use them for reconstruction of ancient greek dance.

We must think about 3 ideas. The first is to know what type of dance can be reconstructed and what type of dance cannot be reconstructed. The second is to elaborate a method for reconstruction, with consciousness of resemblances and differences between greek folk dances and ancient greek dance (difference in rhythms, steps, movement of the arms ; resemblance in liaison of bodies, spirit of dance, energy of dance). The third is comparing my method with other methods (Costas Tsianos' method, Anna Lazou's method).

I- What type of dance can be reconstructed and what type of dance cannot be reconstructed

Dora Stratou noted that the liaisons were often the same in greek folk dances and in ancient greek dances. She gave several examples : the skyphos of Rodin Museum in Paris and the *zonaradikos* (thracian folk dance), where the dancers hold their neighbour's belt² ; a painting in a greek tomb from Ruvo and

¹ Dora Stratou, *The Greek Dances. Our Living with Antiquity*, Athens, 1966 ; Δοροα Ν Στρατου, Ελληνικοι παραδοσιακοι χοροι, οργανισμος εκδοσεως διδακτικων βιβλιων Αθηνων, 1979.

² Δοροα Ν Στρατου, Ελληνικοι παραδοσιακοι χοροι, οργανισμος εκδοσεως διδακτικων

all the greek traditional dances (*trata megaron, stavrotos, sousta dodekanisou, syrta salaminos, zervos karpathou...*) where the dancers hold their neighbour's hand in a crossed chain : they don't give their hand to their near neighbour but to the person which is after their neighbour³ ; all the sculptures which represent ancient choir dancing in a circle with the arms on the neighbour's shoulder and all the folk dances where it is the same position (*kots, hasapico, zaramo...*)⁴. Dora Stratou thought that the energy of the steps was the same in greek folk dances and ancient greek dances. This energy is always founded on bent knees but the work of the feet is different for each area of Greece : on little half-toe in Crete and on some islands, on heels in pontic dances, on all the feet in other part of Greece as Thessaly, Thracia, or Macedonia. Sometimes, it is possible to connect some steps : movements of the legs in folk greek male dances and the same type in pictures of *komos* on ancient greek vases⁵ ; or the technique of the turns on traditional dance from Kato Panagia and crater from Tarentum by Karneia Painter⁶. And Dora Stratou wrote an other idea : it is possible to connect greek labyrinth folk dances (*tsakonikos* from Tsakonia in Peloponnese, *siganos* or Theseus'dance from Crete, *ageranos* from Paros, *vlara* from Naxos and other dances⁷) with ancient *geranos* which commemorates Theseus' victory on the Minotaure which was murdered and the coming back from the labyrinth⁸

Present day researchers and producers used Dora Stratou's work to reconstruct ancient greek dances. The problem is to know if we can reconstruct all the ancient greek dances with greek folk dances. We know that in ancient greek dance, as says Plato, there were three types of dance : war dances, peaceful dances, and dionysiac dances. In greek folk dances, there are no many war dances, for example the *serra* and the *pitchakoi* which are pontic dances. So reconstruction is not easy because we don't have much material to compare, but it is not impossible. In greek folk dances, there are many peaceful dances and we can use them to reconstruct ancient greek dances. Costas Tsianos⁹ and Anna

β ι β λ ι ω ν Α θ η ν α, 1979, p. 171, about skyphos Musée Rodin TC 644, VI c. BC, CVA France 16/ Paris, Musée Rodin fasc. unique, pl. 13(701), 7-8 ; M.H. Delavaud-Roux, *Les danses pacifiques en Grèce antique*, n° 47 p. 110.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 172

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36-40.

⁸ For the connection between the *geranos* and the *tsakonikos*, Dora Stratou, *The Greek Dances. Our Living with Antiquity*, Athens, 1966, p. 18, gives the example of the *candiot*, described by Mrs Chenier in her letters, cf. Mrs Chénier 'letter to Mr Guys in Robert de Bonnières, *Lettres grecques de Madame Chénier précédées d'une étude sur sa vie*, éditions Charavay Frères, Paris, 1879, p. 196.

⁹ Thessaliko theatre. Costas Tsianos is a former of Dora Stratou Theater dancer. He produced Euripides' *Iphigenia in Taurid* in 1990. For the stasima of the choir, he used *seitata* and

Lazou work on this basis. The case of the dionysiac dance is not easy and there are a lot of discussions about it. For Anna Lazou, who studied the connection with dionysiac dances in Aristophanes, proposing forms of Greek traditional dances for reconstructing parts of ancient Greek chorus and Aristophanes more particularly is quite interesting and fertile and perhaps could be supported by research; She also has worked like this in her productions such as *Nekyia*¹⁰, *Antigone*¹¹ etc... Aristophanes is a very good example for this combination ... traditional dances and ancient meters. She also remarks that this type of work is much more liberated since older versions of reconstructions influenced more or less by modern dance, or classical ballet. Her sole objection is that this type of reconstruction misses the Dionysian and ecstatic aspect of movement and dance which she thinks underlies chorus dancing according to a more philosophical-religious reading of ancient greek dance (see Nietzsche, Lucian etc)¹². So the formalistic and textual reconstructions are restricted to a more or less schematic result...

For me, I think use of traditional dances does not always miss the Dionysian and ecstatic aspect. But you need to use greek folk dances which are connected with ecstatic energy : 1) you can use tarentella dance from Salento¹³ (where people speak greek language) to reconstruct a dionysian dance. But Tarentella dance is an exceptional case... ; 2) if you use all the pontic dances with trembling, you can reconstruct dionysian energy. But there is a very important difference : folk pontic dances often used very little steps and ancient greek dionysian dances used often large steps 3) I think you can use cretan dances such as *pentozalis* or *sousta* to reconstruct *sikinnis*, the dance of satyric drama. But after, you must create energy for movement of the arms which not does exist

mantilia which are danced in Pharassa (village in Cappadocia). This use gives an oriental character to his choir, but not from Crimea.

¹⁰ Performed in Athens in 2005. See also *Wild Roses*, performed in 20th Congress on Dance Research, Athens, 25-29 october 2006.

¹¹ Performed in Athens in 2005 and 2006.

¹² See also A. Lazou, "Apollonian and Dionysian Katharsis 2 : Remarks on the Diachronic Aspect of the Ancient Greek Dance Culture", 20th Congress on Dance Research, Athens, 25-29 october 2006 (published on DVD); A. Lazou, "The Diachronic Character of the Dionysian", *Musiques, rythmes et danses dans l'Antiquité, colloque international, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, 29-30 septembre 2006*, ed. by MH Delavaud-Roux (will be soon published)

¹³ Α λ κ η ς Ρ α φ τ η ς, Enkukopaiuideia tou ellenikou chorou, Athènes, 1995, p. 658, sv. Τα ρ α ν τ έ λ α, χο ρ ό ς τ η ν ε λ λ η ν ό φ ω ν ω ν τ η ς Κ ά τ ω Ι τ α λ ί α ς ; listen the disk "η ε λ λ ε ν ι κ η μ ο υ σ ι κ η π α ρ α δ ο σ η τ η ς Κ α τ ω Ι τ α λ ι α ς" ed. by Peloponnesian folklore foundation, 1983-1984 ; and see the group Arakne Mediterranea which is specialized in dances from south Italy, <http://www.araknemediterranea.com/>

in *pentozalis* or *sousta*. So, my conclusion is that you can use the steps or the trembling of some dances to reconstruct a dionysiac choreography, but you must create new elements which do not exist in greek folk dances

II- method for reconstruction : consciousness of resemblances and differences between greek folk dances and ancient greek dance

With Dora Stratous' works, we have already studied the resemblance between the two types of dance : dancers' liaisons, spirit of dance, energy of dance, some steps of dance. But the differences are important in rhythms, steps, and movements of the arms. There are four steps to my empirical method for reconstructing dances by using Greek traditional forms :

1) listening to traditional folk dance music that I need to use and compare it to the rhythm of the ancient text or the ancient music that I use for choreography. Often the traditional rhythms and the ancient rhythms are different. For example rhythm of *kalamatianos* is not regular (7/8) and dactylic or anapestic rhythms are regular (2/4). I tried an experiment with the thracian *sigathistos* which is a 7/8 and the verses 327-330 of Aristophanes' *Birds* which are based on anapaestic rhythm (2/4)¹⁴. I listen to the two rhythms and I practiced steps of *sigathistos*.

2) thinking how to use steps of an irregular rhythm-dance for a dance on regular rhythm. It is not difficult for the body because, naturally, the body will often even out an irregular rhythm. It is more difficult for the body to change an irregular rhythm into a regular rhythm. So it was not very difficult to transfer the steps of *sigathistos* on the verses 327-330 of Aristophanes' *Birds* and to change their rhythm. For my experiment on Aristophanes, I wanted people to hear the two rhythms. So the dance began by the *sigathistos*, then after having done the steps four times, the music stopped, and the choir cried "Ea ! Ea !", then the choir said the verses 327-330 while dancing at the same time the steps of the *sigathistos*, and then the choreography changed and the choir danced other steps than folk dance steps.

3) thinking about gestures for the arms. Reading again the ancient greek text and following the actions and motions of the text. Trying to express action and motion with gestures very easy and ancient (as in Pollux or Athenaeus¹⁵). In the experiment with Aristophanes' *Birds* we worked on two gestures. First, on "Ea, Ea", the gesture of moving the arms as wings and finish that gesture in a *threnos* attitude, the two hands on the head. This gesture is inspired by the character of

¹⁴ M-H. Delavaud-Roux, le chœur des Oiseaux d'Aristophane peut-il danser la pyrrhique dans les vers 344- 355 ? *Présence de l'Antiquité dans la danse. Colloque international, Univ. de Clermont-Ferrand 11-13 décembre 2008*, ed. par R. Poignault (sent to press), n. 41.

¹⁵ Athenaeus, XIV, 629f-630a ; Pollux , IV, 105.

the birds and by the plaint "Ea ! Ea!" which is the cry of the *threnos*. The traditional funeral gestures are shown on the greek vases¹⁶.

4) thinking about the liaison of the people in the traditional dance (arms in v, arms down, arms crossed in chain, arms on the shoulders of neighbour) and thinking how to use it and add an original ancient gesture (see *supra* § 3). On some parts of the dance, the arms are in traditional positions, in some other parts of the dance, the arms are free with original ancient gestures (as in Pollux or Athenaeus). In our experiment on Aristophanes' *Birds*, after the gesture of *threnos*, the dancers the hands (in a "V" position) to dance 327-330 and finished 330 by letting go of the hands and crossing arms front of the forehead, in apotropaic gesture as *cheir simè*, where the palm of the hand is facing the public¹⁷. So it is not incompatible to used traditional liaison of folk dances and create an original ancient gesture. The ancient gesture must be connected to the characters that the dancers are playing.

We have explain to our four with the experiment about Aristophanes. Since we have made one other experiment to create a choreography on the *Hymn to the Muse* by Mesomede of Crete¹⁸. The music was performed by the group Kerylos dir. by Annie Belis¹⁹. We used the steps of *itia* dance which is performed by Saraktsaneses and belongs to the family of *tsamikos* dance (3/4 or 6/4) but we transfered them on Mesomede's music which can interpreted as 6/8 or 12/8, that is not incompatible with 3/4 or 6/4²⁰. Then after we used the V liaison and create some original gestures, according to Mesomede's song. The first line of this songs says : sing Muse my friend, so I created a gesture of offering, as we can

¹⁶ M.H. Delavaud-Roux, "Gestuelle du deuil et danses funéraires", (Actes de la Rencontre "Musiques et danses antiques", Université de Nantes, 10 février 1996), *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 80, 2002-1, p. 199-220.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* ; "La gestuelle de l'absence dans la tragédie grecque : un exemple extrait d'«Iphigénie à Aulis» d'Euripide", *Amadis. L'absence & l'effacement*, 3, 1999, p. 283-297, republié dans *O AYXNOΣ, Connaissance Hellénique*, N°92, juillet 2002 ; Athenaeus, XIV, 630a ; Pollux , IV, 105, la *cheir simè* is the palm of the hand facing public

¹⁸ I created this choreography for Valery Rybakov's production about Stanislavski and *Odyssey*, Brest, 5-6 june 2009.

¹⁹ CD *Musiques de l'Antiquité grecque. De la pierre au son*, Ensemble Kérylos avec la participation des chœurs de l'ALAM, Direction Annie Bélis, 1993 ; CD *Musiques de l'Antiquité grecque. De la pierre au son*, Ensemble Kérylos, Direction Annie Bélis, K617, 1996.

²⁰ Samuel Baud-Bovy, "Chansons populaires de la Grèce antique", *Revue de Musicologie*, t. 69, 1, 1983, p. 5-20 connects the peloponnesian *tsamikos* with Seikilos' song, cf. summary p. 20 : "The verses of the song engraved on the gravestone of Seikilos (Ex 5) don't belong to the classical metrics ; they are rather similar to nursery rhymes. A dance-song of Pelonnesus (Ex. 6) retains the same type and we find the same shape and the sama last gliding to low fourth in Rumania folk songs of Maramures (E, 7,8) (...)" . See also S. Baud-Bovy, *Essai sur la chanson populaire grecque*, Fondation ethnographique du Péloponnèse, 1983.

see on greek vases²¹. The third line of the song says : a light breeze comes from grove, so I created very soft movements of arms to imitate the wind.

III- Comparing my method with other methods (Costas Tsianos' method, Anna Lazou's method)

Using the greek folk dances for reconstruction of ancient greek dances is really original. Some people think that all reconstructions are impossible and don't work on the movement. Some people think that reconstruction is possible but use other ways for reconstruction, for example Ruby Ginner created a method of classical greek dances between 1930 and 1960. This method is taught in all the countries of the world but is not used by producers. The producers who work on ancient greek theatre, often create original music and original choreography with their mental representation of the ancient greek dance. Producers who work with greek folk dances are often near Dora Stratou Theatre. Costas Tsianos is a former of Dora Stratou Theatre dancer, Anna Lazou teaches ancient Philosophy in University of Athens, manages the "Study group of ancient greek orchèsis" which exists in the Dora Stratou Theatre, and she is the director of the Dryos Topi group. Her method follows six steps :

- "1) analyzing text by its meaning and theatre use or social function**
- 2) discovering rhythmical patterns of the text and relating it with musical patterns**
- 3) organizing the dancing group (number, sex, age of the dancers)**
- 4) selecting among possible traditional dances according to the criteria of meaning, use and function of the dance**
- 5) preparing the members of the dance group in relation to their dancing background and theatre experience**
- 6) trying to formalize steps, movements and bigger choreographic patterns in relation to the required function of the dance in performance..."**

Costas Tsianos and Anna Lazou's method always use traditional music and no ancient greek music. So they use the greek folk dance, with his music, without change, and then they use ancient greek text with other steps or without dance. So the traditional text of the song and ancient greek theatrical text keep their own type. My method is different because I adapt the steps of the greek folk dances to ancient greek music or to ancient greek text without music.

After comparing my method to other methods of reconstruction, I ask the question : for a reconstruction of ancient greek dances, how can we use traditional greek dances ? Must we adapt the steps of greek folk dances to ancient greek music ? If we do that, we lose the irregular original rhythm of the

²¹ Greek vases with offering gesture, see G. Neuman, *Gesten und Gebärden in der Griechischen Kunst*, Walter de Gruyter and co, Berlin, 1965, p. 82-85 ; see *The Beazley Archive* with advanced research at "offering", <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk>.

traditional greek dances. Must we adapt the ancient greek text and the ancient music to the irregular rhythm of the greek traditional music ? The idea is interesting but it is a heresy for ancient greek scholars : the dactylic rhythm is a 2/4 or a 4/4 but never a 7/8. Hypothesize we do it. What would be the consequences ?

1) the dactylic rhythm is based on long and shorts syllables. The long syllable is equal in time to the two short syllables²². So the long is one crotchet and the sharps syllables are quarvers. To create a 7/8 rhythm, we have to make a long longer than one crotchet. This is not impossible to imagine because Dionysius of Halicarnassus said that some longs syllables which are longer than others²³. But it is difficult to practice this idea.

2) If we recite, according to a 7/8, an ancient text which does not have music but which is written in dactylic or anapaestic rhythm, and if we want to dance at the same time, it is not easy to do, because the body, naturally, evens out the rhythm.

3) If we sing an ancient greek music, we have to change the rhythm of the music, that is problematic, because ancient greek music was written and we cannot change the sources

4) If we want to compose music for an ancient greek text which has no music, it is easier to follow the rhythm which is given by the metric. F. Cam who composed music for ancient greek texts as Sophokles' *Antigone* always follows the metric of the ancient text²⁴.

So our conclusion is that the binary rhythms are not good for this experiment and that, in the present, it is too difficult to adapt ancient greek text in dactylic hexameters or in anapestic rhythm to the traditional and irregular rhythm of *kalamatianos* or *sigathistos*. It is easier to adapt a 6/8 or 12/8 ancient rhythm to a 3/4 traditional rhythm, although still difficult. The same remark applies to adapting an ancient ionic rhythm (3/4) to a traditional 3/4 or 6/4 of *tsamikos*, because the accents of the two rhythms are not the same. We will certainly have the same problem with Delphic hymns to Apollo and *tsakonikos* which are 5/4

²² listening to dactylic rhythm, see S. Daitz 's records (New York, USA), <http://www.rhapsodes.fl.vt.edu/Greek.html>. See Performances of Demodocos Theatre (Paris, France), <http://cpta.free.fr>. For bibliography and works about dactylic rhythm, see Damon, <http://www2.unil.ch/damon>. ; see Ph. Brunet, [homeros.fr-atelier de métrique grecque et latine](http://homeros.fr-atelier), <http://www.homeros.fr>

²³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum*, VI, 15, 3.

²⁴ Even if Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *De compositione verborum*, VI, 11, 19-23 explains that it was possible for the composer to change the metric values of the syllables and gives the example of Euripides, *Orestes*, 140-144. See F. Cam, "La musique des anciens Grecs, une source éternelle d'inspiration", *Damon XII, Harmonia, réunion sur la métrique antique, Les Diablerets*, 2-3 novembre 2007, dir. M. Steinrück et A. Lukinovitch (sent to press)

rhythm. We didn't work with complex rhythm such as Pindare to make other comparisons

To preserve the quality of the greek traditional dance, if we use it for reconstruction, is very important. As Dora Stratou and Anna Lazou said, we can use the ways of dancers holding on to each other, the energy of the steps (bent the knees), the spirit of the dance (it is not a good idea to use *tsanikos* for Delphic hymn to Apollo because the spirit of the two dances are too much different). I was very interested in S. Baud-Bovy's works for the use of the music, but I cannot resolve the rhythm problem and the musical problem. It is impossible to adapt the ancient rhythm to the traditional rhythm, but we can adapt the steps of a traditional rhythm on an ancient rhythm. When we do that we must keep the consciousness of the differences and try to preserve some other things of traditional greek dances, as the ways of dancers holding on to each other, the energy of the steps and the spirit of the dance. Or, if we want to preserve the quality of the greek traditional dances without change, we can introduce the greek folk dance with its music for some parts of the movements of the choir, and then create another part with original choreography for ancient greek text.