A primeval urge stimulates man to respond to music and song with bodily movements and to mark the rhythm by clapping his hands or tapping his feet. For the ancient Greeks dance was the quintessence of the union of rhythm and harmony. Greek dance comprised two elements: the *phores*, that is the movements, and the *schemata*, that is the gestures. From the appropriate combination of movements and gestures - fast or slow execution and strict or loose harmony between them - the various genres of dance arose. Aesthetic and moral qualities were ascribed to various rhythms, in part according to their actual relations with dances of a special character, such as the lively and lewd *kordax*, and in part according to the current social conventions.

The greater the ratio of long to short syllables, the more formal and respectable the rhythm was considered to be. From the imitation of speech, which is done in ‘*schemata*, the art of dance derived. Plato in his *Laws* dedicates one book to music education and argues that in each dance the dancer should comply with the movements of the lovely dance and with his demeanour show himself to be a man who has been brought up with good laws. In the *Republic* and in the *Laws* too, he develops the theory of the positive power of music, in order to define the Classical forms of music and dance.

It seems that all the dances originated from Crete and Asia Minor, regions in which the earliest cult was that of the Mother Goddess, which is why the first performance of dance was attributed to Rhea, the Mother of the Gods. Embodied in Greek thought of the Classical period was the idea that each dance transported a specific past, which dated back to prehistoric times. Thanks to vase-painting and the other ancient works of art, we are able to proceed to the identification of various dances and their technique.

In Geometric and Archaic vase-painting, the choreography is organized either in linear arrangement or in a circle - open or closed. For the dances in procession, the young girls are in ‘Indian file’. However, for the more motional dances the dancers form a circle around the focal point of the cult statue, the altar or the musician (see cat. nos 99, 102, 117 and *Μουσών Δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 139).

Plato classifies dances into war, religious and peaceful, according to their character.

*War dances*. This is the earliest form of dance, aim of which was to prepare the Greeks for wars and contests. The most ancient dance is that ‘of the Curetes’, who, brandishing swords and stamping the ground with their jumps, evoked enthusiasm and bellicose wrath. The *pyrrhiche* dance was taught to the Cretan Curetes by Rhea and from Crete spread to the rest of Greece. It was named after Pyrrhos, son of Achilles, or the homonymous Cretan hero, even though others present it as a Lacedaemonian invention. In Sparta it constituted a preparatory exercise for war and everyone learnt ‘to dance *pyrrhiche*’ from the age of five. In Athens it appeared in the 6th century BC, in remembrance of the goddess Athena’s victory over the Giants. According to Plato,
the dance is a war mime which reenacts the various phases of the battle, when the
pyrrhichistes shoots the arrow or throws the javelin or sinks the spear into the body of
his adversary. To the accompaniment of the aulos or the lyre, the panoplied dancers,
always men or ephebes or boys, performed some kind of parade, with turns to the side
(ekneusis), with retreats (hypaxis), with leaps (ekpedesis en hypsei) and with
lowerings (tapeinosis). The movements were executed with rhythmical steps and to
the clamour of weapons (Μοσσών Δόρα 2003, cat. no. 145). Ephebes were taught the
pyrrhiche by the tutors-trainers, in the gymnasia and the palaistrai. We read in Plato
that most of the women of Athens, if not of the entire Hellenic world, did not know
how to dance the pyrrhiche, because they have nothing to do with the art of warfare.
In the Gymnopaidiai at Sparta, held in honour of those who fell at Thermo- pylai,
naked and unarmed men and boys, singing paeans, performed a mimetic dance, with
rhythmical movement of the legs, so as to re-enact scenes from the palaistra and the
pankration (a mixture of boxing and wrestling).

Religious dances. No ancient mysteries or religious rituals existed that were not
accompanied by dance. Indeed, the founders of such mysteries adopted rhythm and
dance as essential element for initiation. The religious dances were serene, serious and
performed by the devotees, male and female, around the altar to the accompaniment
of hymns.

The paean was chanted and danced in honour of Apollo at the Hyakinthia only by
men. The hyporchema originated from Crete and was a combination of music, dance
and mimetic movements to the accompaniment of musical instruments. It was
performed by two groups, young boys who sang and young girls who danced. The
former sang immobile or dancing a simple circular dance, while the latter performed a
silent mimetic dance in explanation of the hymn being sung.

The ancient Greeks attributed the setting up of the anamix dance, the geranos, in
which the two sexes danced together for the first time, to the hero Theseus (cat. nos 98, 118). Theseus performed this Delian dance when, on his return voyage to Athens,
he stopped on Delos with the youths and maidens he had saved from the labyrinth of
King Minos. The dancers, young men and women, danced forward and backward
formations, imitating either the maze-like course of the hero Theseus through the
labyrinth or, according to others, the undulating flight and turns of cranes (Gr.
geranoi) in the sky.

In the parthenoeia, characteristic dance of the Dorian cities, there was a synoptic
reference to religious rituals, while the main emphasis was placed on the actual
participants in the dance, on their songs and their virginal (Gr. parthena = virgin)
sentiments. Sweet and beautiful girls dancing hand in hand or separately, sometimes
lightly covered with a veil or shawl, while the wavy folds of their garments add to the
charm of the choreography, are frequently encountered in Greek art. Dance with ‘wrist
hold’ is the most common female dance in Geometric or Archaic representations (cat.
no. 117). At Argos, maidens with flowers (anthe) danced the antheia in honour of
Hera. The ‘dance of the Hours’ (cat. no. 137) was performed by girls in imitation of
the mythical dances of the Hours, who danced with the arms interlocked.

A solo dance was that of the ‘peplophoroi women’ who danced at the festivals of
Demeter, in remembrance of her, covered with a peplos just as the goddess was when
she was seeking for her daughter Kore. The peplophoroi dances emanated an air of
grace and good taste, but they also had their cultic significance (cat. nos 128, 130). In
the festive procession in honour of fertility deities - Athena, Artemis Karyatis, Apollo Karneios, Demeter - lovely young girls from noble families danced the kalathiskos, with a basket (kalathiskos) containing sacred objects, like a hat on the head (cat. no. 130).

A variation of this dance was that of the Karyatides, girls from Karyes in Laconia, in honour of Artemis Karyatis. The dance started from Laconia and spread to various places in Greece. In it the female dancers apparently glided airily on the ground with tiny steps. The Dionysiac dances were religious dances but orgiastic (see cat. no. 125 and Μουσών Δόρα 2003, cat. no. 151). Men and women with loosened hair and wreathed with ivy, gyrated forwards or backwards, shaking their head vehemently. In the dance of the ‘joined hands’ the dancers raised the arms bent and clasped hands above the head.

Peaceful dances. These included the theatrical dances and the dances in private life which frequently accompanied major junctures in the life cycle. The theatrical dances are distinguished according to the three genres of dramatic poetry. In tragedy there was the emmeleia. In comedy there were the kordax and the komos, vigorous dances with twirls, jumps and many immodest gestures. The most characteristic dance of the satyr play was the sikinnis, which was performed by the Sikinnistai, Satyrs and Silenoi, to the accompaniment of mirthful and mocking songs reminiscent of shricks and whistles (Μουσών Δόρα 2003, cat. no. 120).

At the symposia some hosts hired professional dancers to entertain their guests. Usually they were dancing girls (orchestrides), who performed various acrobatic tricks or mimetic dances, whilst simultaneously playing clappers (cat. nos 75,135). Professional female dancers, in a display of great accomplishment, sometimes performed the pyrrhiche, solo or in group, at symposia (cat. no. 113). This was the only occasion for the appearance of female pyrrhichistriai, who were courtesans (hetairai) as is seen in Attic vase-painting. The female pyrrhiche dancers made the same moves as their male counterparts, but in a more dancing manner. Also depicted in symposium scenes is the oklasma a dance of Oriental provenance (cat. no. 114).

Already in the Iliad, in the description of Achilles’ Shield, there is reference to a wedding procession in which hymenaios songs were heard, while young men danced to the accompaniment of aulos or lyre, as in the Classical iconography, before and after the appearance of the newly-married couple. Dances were performed at various moments in the marriage ceremony: dance processions during the ritual bath of the bride and when the bride and groom were led to their new home, other dances at the wedding feasts that followed and then the krousthyron when they reached the door of their bedchamber. At dawn the hymenaios or the epidialamion egertikon was danced for the couple to awake them after consummation of the marriage.

Mourning dances were rhythmical steps of the lamenters, who with their hands above the head or with one hand on the head and the other raised, sang dirges for the dead during the carrying of the bier. Special dances accompanied special occasions. The anthemia, a fast and merry dance was performed at the beginning of spring by dancers divided into two groups. The epilenios orchesis was a gleeful dance imitating stages of the vintage. The hormos was a kind of syrtos which, according to Lucian, was danced by virgins and ephebes in a chain.
Dance in one form or another served to consolidate social ties. There was no one who did not consider it by definition a bounty, even if he disapproved of certain genres.


Charikleia Lanara-Voyatzi
Archaeologist