

The dance mirrored all of Greek life,  
Greek thought, and Greek disposition

by Lillian Brady Lawler

## The Dance in Ancient Greece

"O divine Muse, join with me in the festival dance!"—Aristophanes, *Peace*, 816-817

THE Bright Greek sun was high in the flawless blue heavens. It was spring, many centuries before the Christian era. In the little Greek village, on the lower slopes of the great rock that was its citadel and the dwelling-place of its king, the humble houses of sun-dried brick stood open and deserted, and the goats clambered unrestrained up and down the steep, narrow streets; for it was the festival of Artemis, goddess who gives success in the hunt and increase among the flocks and herds, and all the villagers had gone to the celebration.

OUT ON a shoulder of a low hill, a mile or so from the citadel, was the village threshing-floor. Here, on the great round circle of beaten earth, the precious grain would be trampled and winnowed, later in the year. Now, on this spring festival day, it swarmed with joyous villagers, their long hair oiled and garlanded, their woolen, home-woven "chitons" (or tunics) clean and bright, their massive armlets and brooches gleaming in the sun.

In the very center of the threshing-floor a small, crude altar of wood had been set up in honor of Artemis; and around it had been

twined a garland made of early violets. The crowd milled about it, chattering happily, or eating figs, sticky candy made of honey, or cakes baked in the shape of the animals of Artemis.

Beside the threshing-floor, a few booths had been erected, of rough, canvas-like cloth and green boughs. Beneath one, a village musician was playing a minor strain on his squealing little Pan-pipe, while a cluster of admiring neighbors listened and gaped. In another booth a circle of old men sat, their white beards and long braided white hair contrasting sharply with their wrinkled, weather-reddened skin. One of their number was chanting a lay of heroic deeds of bygone times, his gnarled hands "dancing out" his story in symbolic gesture as he went along. His cracked old voice rose and fell, and his hearers nodded approval, sometimes even muttering an accompaniment to his words. In an adjacent booth a young woman offered fragrant garlands of spring flowers, to be worn on the head or around the neck. In the booth just beyond, thick, sweet wine and clear, cold water were being dispensed. The vendor, something of a village wag, kept up a flow of witticisms in a loud, compelling voice, to the intense delight of the young men among his customers, who now and then joined in the jesting, often to their own discomfort, when the wine-seller turned the barb of his wit upon them, naming names.

### The Dancers Come

TWO OF THE BOOTHS were closed, but from both came sounds of voices and of subdued, scrambling activity. From time to time the villagers stopped to stare at them in hopeful anticipation. Finally their patience was re-

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(It is a distinct pleasure to welcome Miss Lawler back to the pages of *CJ*. Readers will recall her "Portrait of a Dancer" in our March issue last year—"Pylades, Idol of the Roman Empire.")

Miss Lawler informs us that she once studied dancing herself, ballet, folk, and interpretative. In addition to having the necessary grounding in classical scholarship for the study of the ancient dance, she has traveled herself pretty much all over the world to gain an acquaintance with native dances—Greece and Italy, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Central and South America, Cuba, China, Japan, Philippines, Hawaii, Fiji Islands, Samoa, New Zealand . . . without neglecting the American Indian, either.

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warded. A flap in the larger booth was suddenly raised, and, with a loud roar that was a composite of numerous animal cries, a rout of masked dancers burst upon the scene. Each wore a short woolen chiton and rough sandal-like shoes; but these purely human attributes were cast into oblivion by the great mask-wig combinations that covered head and neck, turning the dancer into a stag, a lion, a bird, a panther, a boar, a wolf, a griffin, a fish. At the end of the line a musician, clad in the long, ungirt robe of his profession, drew his hand across the strings of his cithara, or hand-harp, and moved with the dancers out upon the threshing-floor.

Children squealed with excitement, and clung to their mothers' or their nurses' chitons, as the crowd fell back along the perimeter of the circular dancing-place, and prepared to watch the sacred mummery in honor of Artemis, "Mistress of Animals." A moment later, from the other closed booth, several small figures in shaggy yellow-brown bear-costumes, with eared hoods, lumbered forth in assumed awkwardness, amid the laughter and shouts of the spectators. These were the "bears," the young maidens of the village, who must all "dance the bear" for Artemis once in their lives, before they came to the age for marriage.

### *Simplicity to Sophistication*

THE DANCERS circled the threshing-floor, roaring, rearing, pivoting, darting suddenly at the spectators, sometimes even bowling them over. The little "bears" stamped about with their "paws" extended, imitating their wild prototypes, to the delight of the villagers. These cheered their favorites among the "animals," laughed, shouted witticisms, threw flowers and cakes, and half-consciously swayed and gestured in imitation of the dancers. The twanging of the cithara was drowned in the general uproar; and the "animals" went each his own way, settling his own rhythm, and abandoning it only when, as frequently happened, he collided with another dancer. Bedlam reigned; and over it all, presumably, Artemis watched, and was pleased.

It was in some such setting as this that the dance developed in early Greece. Not all of its manifestations consisted in animal mummery, of course; but animal dances among the Greeks are very old and very numerous, and they underlie more of the dances of the classical period than even the Greeks themselves suspected. Greek dances passed from primitive simplicity to complex sophistication, down through the centuries, and became infinitely varied.

*Dances ultimately mirrored all of Greek life, Greek thought, and the Greek disposition; and to study the progress of the Greek dance is, in a sense, to study the Greeks themselves.*

To the Greek, the dance was intensely important, ritualistically, personally, socially. Much of his religious activity included dancing. In the dance he endeavored to enter into spiritual kinship with his gods. With the magic of the dance he warded off vague but dangerous evil beings, or famine and disease. By dancing he sought to obtain good crops, to ensure fertility among his flocks and in his own household, to be fortunate in the hunt, to gain victories in war. With the dance he hallowed his dramatic festivals, or revealed solemn mysteries to neophytes. Dancing had a definite place in his education, and it played an important part in his physical and emotional development. With the dance he cured nervous disorders. With the dance he created abstract beauty for its own sake, or amused himself. A great deal of his military training took the form of dancing. By means of the dance he expressed all his personal and communal emotions of joy and sorrow, and marked all the great events of his own life and that of his city. With the dance he entertained his guests. With joyous dance he greeted the return of spring; with dance he celebrated harvest and vintage, increase among flocks and herds, births and weddings in his home, success in the hunt and in battle. In a very particular way, the dance symbolized to him the joy of peace, after the terror of war—"dances are ours," says Tryphiodorus (427-429), "and honey-breathing music, and no more war."



FIGURE 1. DANCES IN HONOR OF DIONYSUS. THE PICTURE SHOWS THE "WING-SLEEVED" DANCE OF WOMEN, PECULIAR TO THE RITUAL OF DIONYSUS. THE DANCE MAY HAVE ORIGINATED IN A BIRD DANCE OF GREAT ANTIQUITY. (LONDON, BRITISH MUSEUM, E 75).

Among the Greeks, the dance was a social activity in the truest sense of the word. However, our very common form of the "social" dance, performed by a man and a woman together, for amusement, seems not to have appealed to them; for we have no certain evidence of anything quite like it in Greek times.

#### Ancient and Modern Dance

ALL OF THIS emphasizes another point of great significance—viz., that the ancient Greek concept of the dance differs considerably from our own. An approach to any phase of an ancient civilization requires some mental adjustment on the part of the reader—some deliberate casting off of modern ideas, and conscious orientation to points of view essentially different from those of his own day and age. In no aspect of classical studies is

this more strikingly true than in the field of the dance. To the Greek of the classical period, for instance, *orchesthai*, his word for "to dance," seems to have connoted something like "to make any series of movements, however simple, and involving any part or parts of the body, provided the movements be rhythmical." The Greek could dance with his hands, with his head, with his eyes. He quite often danced without moving his feet at all—indeed, even in a sitting position! There is a classic instance (Herodotus 6. 129) of a Greek who danced with his legs while standing on his head; and at times the Greek actually speaks of "standing in a dance" (Euripides, *Iph. Taur.* 1143; cf. Callistratus 14. 5). What we call a parade or a military drill they would call a dance; a funeral or wedding procession, or a procession of any sort, a rhythmic game

of ball, an exhibition of juggling or tumbling, a tightrope performance, children's games, the measured gesticulations of the tragic actor, all were dances to him.

### *Dance and Music*

FURTHER, the ancient Greek did not think of dancing as an art complete in itself. In his mind it was inseparably connected not only with music (an association entirely comprehensible to us today), but also with poetry. As a matter of fact, he often "danced" poetry, interpreting the verses with rhythmic movements of his arms, body, and head; and an ancient poet (Ausonius, *Id.* 20. 6) speaks of dancing with the foot, with the voice, and with the countenance, simultaneously. In such activity the Greek evolved what he called *cheironomia*—a whole code of gestures and symbolic movements the extent and complexity of which are almost beyond our comprehension, but the effect of which even upon foreigners was immediate and convincing. Music, poetry, the dance—to the Greek they were all facets of the same thing, the art which he called *mousiké*, the "art of the Muses." In its broadest sense it signified to him all of the education of the mind, and, indeed, the very essence of civilization. He says of a barbarous enemy tribe, "For them there is no significance in life; they have no dancing, no Helicon, no Muse."<sup>1</sup>

For the modern student who wishes to learn something about the dancing of the ancient Greeks there are several avenues of approach. Our "sources" of information are, in fact, of at least seven different types—literary, metrical, musical, archaeological, epigraphical, linguistic, and anthropological.

The most obvious are literary sources—specific statements about the dance made by ancient writers. Almost the whole of Greek literature is an informal source for the study of the dance. Mortals, supernatural beings, even animals, dance through its pages; and its very figures of speech abound in echoes of the dance. Accordingly, the student who would understand the Greek dance would do well to read widely and deeply in Greek literature, of all periods and all genres, prose

and poetry, greater and lesser works alike. In general, Homer, Xenophon, Pollux, Lucian, Athenaeus, and Libanius will be found to be most useful.

Metrical sources are of two kinds—treatises on metrics, by ancient grammarians; and the actual lines of verse to which the ancients danced, wherever these have come down to us. Metrical sources are primary sources; and, especially where they corroborate information from literary and other sources, they cannot be ignored.

Musical sources comprise treatises on music, by ancient writers; remains of the music itself; and a few of the actual musical instruments of antiquity, which survive in a good state of preservation. What is known of Greek music must be taken into account in any thoroughgoing study of the ancient dance.

### *Archaeological Sources*

ARCHAEOLOGICAL sources on the dance include tangible objects which have survived from antiquity to the present time, and which furnish representations of dancing and dancers, or of objects used by dancers. Such objects are extant in large numbers. They include statues in marble and in bronze; figurines in terracotta and in metal; reliefs on plaques, on urns, and on the sides of buildings; choregic monuments, especially that of Lysicrates; votive cymbals set up in shrines; delicate carvings on gems, on ivory, on gold and silver jewelry, and on moulds to be used in the making of seals; mosaic floors and stuccoed ceilings; an occasional coin; and paintings, both on walls and on pottery. Archaeological sources are of the first importance to the student of the ancient dance, and serve to render that dance strikingly vivid. But, on the other hand, no sources are so capable of serious misinterpretation as are these ancient pictures of the dance, in part because of the damaged condition of most of the objects involved, in part because of the artistic conventions employed by the ancient artist.

In a broad sense, epigraphical sources are really archaeological, because they are actual survivals from antiquity; but so distinctive are they that they may be considered apart.

They comprise the various ancient inscriptions dealing with dancing and dancers which have come down to us. One of these, the oldest known Attic inscription, is scratched upon a wine-jug which was an award in a dancing contest. The great official inscriptions on the island of Delos, where dancing was of tremendous ritualistic importance, are a treasure trove for the student of the dance. When used carefully, and when checked with evidence obtained from other sources, inscriptions are of great significance for the history of the dance.

"Linguistic sources" are the technical words and expressions used by the ancients in speaking of their dances. In many cases the only knowledge which we have of an ancient dance or figure or step or gesture is its name. The Greek language, as it happens, is rich and flexible. Names given to dances and figures are usually meant to be descriptive; they can, if we strive to comprehend them correctly and

etymologically, give us a quick and vivid glimpse of the dancer in action. Linguistic study frequently furnishes almost startling corroboration of suggestions given by other sources. It must be remembered, however, that faulty etymologies are easy to come upon, and can serve as dangerous pitfalls for the unwary.

Anthropological sources are comparative materials obtained from a study of the dance among various peoples of the world. For such a study small and remote villages are particularly suitable. Modern Greece, Spain, southern Italy, Sicily, Crete, and Asia Minor show interesting survivals of the Greek dances which were once performed there. Even lands farther afield furnish material for comparison—Ireland, Cambodia, Japan, Samoa, Africa, India. Also, scattered records of the dances of ancient races contemporary with the Greeks—the Egyptians, Hebrews, Phrygians, Thracians—can be illuminating and instructive.



FIGURE 2. A GRACEFUL DANCE OF THREE WOMEN. THIS ILLUSTRATES THE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES OF GREEK VASE PAINTING. THE ARTIST ENDEAVORS TO SHOW THREE WOMEN DANCING IN A CIRCLE. THE FIGURE IN THE REAR, APPARENTLY ELEVATED, IS THOUGHT OF AS ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE CIRCLE. NOTE THE ARTIST'S DIFFICULTY IN PORTRAYING A HEAD BENT BACK OR FORWARD. (LOUVRE ARYBALLOS, *Mon. Gr.* 1889-90, Pl. 9-10).



FIGURE 3. A CEREMONIAL DANCE OF GREEK WOMEN.

It would be ideal to have for each phase of the dance a combination of all types of source; but that is seldom possible. When a difficulty of interpretation arises in the study of the ancient dance, one must seek a solution by using as many different types of evidence as he can find.

### *Modern Studies*

MODERN INTEREST in the Greek dance, and attempts to restore and understand it, go back as far as the sixteenth century. The great scholar, Julius Caesar Scaliger, in his treatise *On Comedy and Tragedy*, devoted much space to ancient Greek dances and figures. A little later, Johannes Meursius, a Dutch scholar, put together an alphabetical catalogue of more than two hundred dances and figures, to form his *Orchestra*, or *On the Dances of the Ancients*. From the days of Scaliger and Meursius to the present, there has been a more or less constant interest in the ancient dance, although that interest has not resulted in voluminous publication. In general, the subject has been pursued by two groups—professional dancers, and classical scholars. However, the former, who aim

avowedly at a restoration in visible form of the Greek dance, seem conscious of the fact that their lack of knowledge of Greek and archaeology will inevitably force them into historical errors. The latter, very well grounded in archaeology and ancient literature, seem to feel an inability to cope with the technical aspects of the dance. This situation has undoubtedly limited work in the field. Further, attempts at collaboration between the two groups have not been successful.

### *Neo-Greek Dances*

DURING the present century, certain new forms of the dance which owe some of their inspiration to the dance of the ancient Greeks have come to the fore, and have attracted wide attention. Many of these have been in the nature of a reaction from the rigorous discipline of the formal ballet dance, from the futility and sterility of the dances of ballroom and theater, and, incidentally, from the restraints of clothing and manners of the dancers' own day. Among these Neo-Greek dance forms have been those of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, and their followers, and the "Eurhythmics" of Jaques-

Dalcroze. There is no question but that the Neo-Greek dance movement has been productive of much that is good, especially in its educational aspects. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Neo-Greek dance is not a facsimile of the ancient Greek dance, and that much of it would probably astonish an ancient Greek beyond measure. On the other hand, if a modern spectator could see any one of several genuinely ancient dances as performed by a Greek of the sixth, fifth, or fourth century before the Christian era, he would be even more astonished. He would hardly regard it as a dance at all, in any modern sense of the word; and he probably would neither understand nor like it—at first sight, at any rate.

The Greek dance, then, confronts us as quite a problem. There is nothing just like it in existence today, and it must be studied

as a distinct entity, with all the aids at our disposal. We shall never, in all probability, be able to restore any ancient dance in its entirety; for the very essence of the dance is movement, and movement can be transmitted from antiquity only indirectly. The best we can hope to do is to study all the evidence available, from as many angles as possible; to put together as many facts as we can find, and to make reasonable deductions from those facts. In this way, proceeding slowly and with infinite care, we may attain ultimately to an appreciation of what must have been as great an art of the dance as the world has ever seen.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> D. L. Page, *Greek Literary Papyri*, Vol. I, Poetry. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1942. No. 143, p. 598, lines 18-19. Fifth century after Christ, anonymous.



FIGURE 4. KOMOS DANCERS OF THE SIXTH CENTURY. A KOMOS DANCE IS A DANCE OF JOY AND HIGH SPIRITS, AND IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH DRINKING. THE ATTITUDES OF THE FIGURES ARE PHYSICALLY IMPOSSIBLE IF ONE ATTEMPTS TO INTERPRET THEM EXACTLY AS DRAWN, BUT ARE QUITE UNDERSTANDABLE IF ONE INTERPRETS THEM IN THE LIGHT OF ARTISTIC CONVENTION AND GENERAL COMMON SENSE.