

mail:  
Bill Thayer

 Italiano

 Help

 Up

 Home

## Saltatio

p1004

Unsigned article on pp1004-1006 of

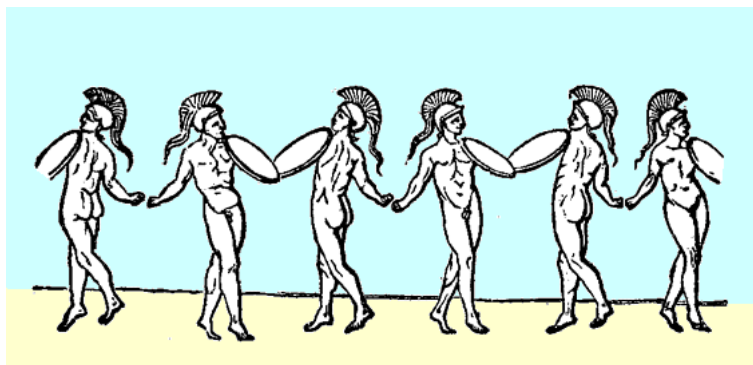
William Smith, D.C.L., LL.D.:

A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities, John Murray, London, 1875.

**SALTA'TIO** (ὄρχησις, ὄρχηστὺς), dancing. The dancing of the Greeks as well as of the Romans had very little in common with the exercise which goes by that name in modern times.<sup>a</sup> It may be divided into two kinds, gymnastic and mimetic; that is, it was intended either to represent bodily activity, or to express by gestures, movements and attitudes certain ideas or feelings, and also single events or a series of events, as in the modern ballet. All these movements, however, were accompanied by music; but the terms ὄρχησις and **saltatio** were used in so much wider a sense than our word **dancing**, that they were applied to designate gestures, even when the body did not move at all (Ovid *Art. Am.* 1.595, II.305; *saltare solis oculis*, *Apul. Met.* X. p251, ed. Bip.; comp. Grote, *Hist. of Greece*, vol. IV p114).

We find dancing prevalent among the Greeks from the earliest times. It is frequently mentioned in the Homeric poems: the suitors of Penelope delight themselves with music and dancing (*Od.* I.152, 421, XVIII.304): and Ulysses is entertained at the court of Alcinous with the exhibitions of very skilful dancers, the rapid movements of whose feet excite his admiration (*Od.* VIII.265). Skilful dancers were at all times highly prized by the Greeks: we read of some who were presented with golden crowns, and had statues erected to their honour, and their memory celebrated by inscriptions (*Plut. de Pyth. Orac.* 8; *Anthol. Pal.* IV. n283, &c.).

The lively imagination and mimetic powers of the Greeks found abundant subjects for various kinds of dances, and accordingly the names of no less than 200 different dances have come down to us (Meursius, *Orchestr.*; Athen. XIV. pp627-630; *Pollux*, IV.95-111; Liban. *ὑπὲρ τῶν ὀρχ.*). It would be inconsistent with the nature of this work to give a description of all that are known; only the most important can be mentioned, and such as will give some idea of the dancing of the ancients.



Dancing was originally closely connected with religion: Plato (*Leg.* VII. pp798, 799) thought that all dancing should be based on religion, as it was, he says, among the Egyptians.<sup>b</sup> The dances of the Chorus at Sparta and in other Doric states were intimately connected with the worship of Apollo, as has been shown at length elsewhere [*CHORUS*; *HYPORCHEMA*]; and in all the public festivals, which were so numerous among the Greeks, dancing formed a very prominent part. All the religious dances, with the exception of the Bacchic and the Corybantian, were very simple, and consisted of gentle movements of the body with various turnings and windings around the altar; such a dance was the γέρανος, which Theseus is said to have performed at Delos on his return from Crete (*Plut. Thes.* 21). The Dionysiac or Bacchic and the Corybantian were of a very different nature. In the former the life and adventures of the god were represented by mimetic dancing [*DIONYSIA*]: the dance called βακχική by Lucian (*de Salt.* 79), was a Satyric dance and chiefly prevailed in Ionia and Pontus; the most illustrious men in the state danced in it,<sup>c</sup> representing Titans, Corybantians, Satyrs, and husbandmen; and the spectators

were so delighted with the exhibition, that they remained sitting the whole day to witness it, forgetful of everything else. The Corybantian was of a very wild character; it was chiefly danced in Phrygia and in Crete; the dancers were armed, struck their swords against their shields, and displayed most extravagant fury; it was accompanied chiefly by the flute (Lucian, *Ib.* 8; Strab. X. p473; Plat. *Crit.* p54). The preceding woodcut from the Museo Pio Clementino (vol. IV pl. 2) is supposed to represent a Corybantian dance. Respecting the dances in the theatre, see CHORUS.

Dancing was applied to gymnastic purposes and to training for war, especially in the Doric states, and was believed to have contributed very much to the success of the Dorians in war, as it enabled them to perform their evolutions simultaneously and in order. Hence the poet Socrates (Athen. XIV. p629F) says,

οἱ δὲ χοροῖς κάλλιστα θεοῦς τιμῶσιν, ἄριστοι  
ἐν πολέμῳ.

There were various dances in early times, which served as a preparation for war: hence Homer (*Il.* XI.49, XII.77) calls the Hoplites *πυρλέες*, a war-dance having been called *πρύλις* by the Cretans (Müller, *Dor.* III.12 §10). Of such dances the most celebrated was the Pyrrhic (ἡ Πυρρήχη), of which the *πρύλις* was probably only another name: this Plato (*Leg.* VII. p815) takes as the representative of all war dances. The invention of this dance is placed in the mythical age, and is usually assigned to one Pyrrhicos, but most of the accounts agree in assigning it a Cretan or Spartan origin; though others refer it to Pyrrhus or Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, apparently misled by the name, for it was undoubtedly of Doric origin (Athen. XIV. p630E; Strab. X. p466; Plat. *Leg.* p796; Lucian, *Ib.* 9). It was danced to the sound of the flute, and its time was very quick and light, as is shown by the name of the Pyrrhic foot (☞), which must be connected with this dance: and from the same source came also the Proceleusmatic (☞☞) or challenging foot (Müller, *Hist. of the Literat. of Greece*, p161). The Pyrrhic dance was performed in different ways at various times and in various countries, for it was by no means confined to the Doric states. Plato (*Leg.* VII. p815) describes it as representing by rapid movements of the body the way in which missiles and blows from weapons were avoided, and also the mode in which the enemy were attacked. In the non-Doric states it was probably not practised as a training for war, but only as a mimetic dance: thus we read of its being danced by women to entertain a company (Xen. *Anab.* VI.1 §12). It was also performed at Athens at the greater and lesser Panathenaea by Ephebi, who were called Pyrrhichists (Πυρρήχισταί) and were trained at the expense of the Choragus (Schol. *ad Aristoph. Nub.* 988; Lysias, *ἄπολ. δωροδοκ.* p698, Reiske). In the mountainous parts of Thessaly and Macedon dances are performed at the present day by men armed with muskets and swords (Dodwell, *Tour through Greece*, vol. II. pp21, 22).

The following woodcut, taken from Sir W. Hamilton's vases (ed. Tischbein, vol. I. pl. 60), represents three Pyrrhichists, two of whom with shield and sword are engaged in the dance, while the third is standing with a sword. Above them is a female balancing herself on the head of one, and apparently in the act of performing a somerset; she no doubt is taking part in the dance, and performing a very artistic kind of *κυβίστησις* or tumbling, for the Greek performances of this kind surpass anything we can imagine in modern times. Her danger is increased by the person below, who holds a sword pointing towards her.<sup>d</sup> A female spectator sitting looks on astonished at the exhibition.



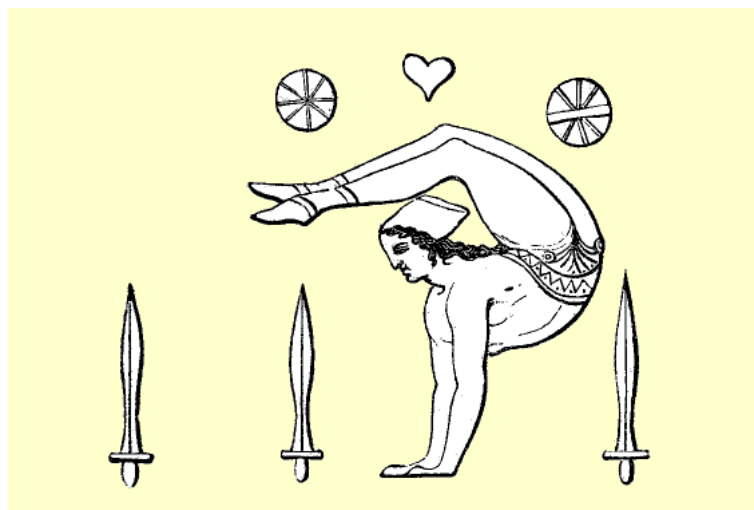
The Pyrrhic dance was introduced in the public games at Rome by Julius Caesar, when it was danced by the children of the leading men in Asia and Bithynia (Suet. *Jul. Caes.* 39). It seem to have been much liked by the Romans; it was exhibited both by Caligula and Nero (Dion Cass. LX.7; Suet. *Ner.* 12), and also frequently by Hadrian (Spartian. *Hadr.* i9). Athenaeus (XIV. p631A) says that the Pyrrhic dance was still practised in his time (the third century A.D.) at Sparta, where it was danced by boys from the

age of fifteen, but that in other places it had become a species of Dionysiac dance, in which the history of Dionysus was represented, and where the dancers instead of arms carried the **thyrsus** and torches.

Another important gymnastic dance was performed at the festival of **γυμνοπαίδια** at Sparta in commemoration of the battle at Thyrea, where the chief object according to Müller (*Dor.* IV.6 §8) was to represent gymnastic exercises and dancing in intimate union: respecting the dance at this festival, see **GYMNOPAEDIA**.

There were other dances, besides the Pyrrhic, in which the performers had arms, but these seem to have been entirely mimetic, and not practised with any view to training for war. Such was the **Καρπαία** peculiar to the Aenianians and Magnetes, which was performed by two armed men in the following manner: one lays down his arms, sows the ground, and ploughs with a yoke of oxen, frequently looking around as if afraid; then comes a robber, whom as soon as the other sees, he snatches up his arms and fights with him for the oxen. All these movements are rhythmical, accompanied by the flute. At last the robber binds the man and drives away the oxen, but sometimes the husbandman conquers (Xen. *Anab.* VI.1 §§7, 8; *Athen.* I pp15F, 16A; Maxim. Tyr. *Diss.* XXVIII.4). Similar dances by persons with arms are mentioned by Xenophon on the same occasion. These dances were frequently performed at banquets for the entertainment of the guests (*Athen.* IV. p155B). At banquets likewise the **κυβιστητήρες** or tumblers were frequently introduced. These tumblers, in the course of their dance, flung themselves on their heads and alighted again on their feet (*ὡσπερ οἱ κυβιστώντες καὶ εἰς ὀρθρὸν τὰ σκέλη περιφερόμενοι κυβιστῶσι κύκλω*, Plat. *Symp.* c16, p190). We read of **κυβιστητήρες** as early as the time of Homer (*Il.* XVIII.605, *Od.* IV.18). They were also accustomed to make their somerset over knives or swords, which was called **κυβιστῶν εἰς μαχαίρας** (Plato, *Euthyd.* c55 p294; Xen. *Mem.* I.3 §9, *Symp.* II.14; *Athen.* IV. p129D; *Pollux.* III.134). The way in which this feat was performed is described by Xenophon, who says (*Symp.* II.11) that a circle was made quite full of upright swords, and that the dancer *εἰς ταῦτα ἐκυβίστα τε καὶ ἐξεκυβίστα ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν*; and it is well illustrated by the following cut taken from the *Museo Borbonico*, vol. VII. tav. 58 (Becker, *Charikles*, vol. I. p499, vol. II p287). We learn from Tacitus (*Germ.* 24) that the German youths also used to dance among swords and spears pointed at them.

p1006



Other kinds of dances were frequently performed at entertainments, in Rome as well as in Greece, by courtezans, many of which were of a very indecent and lascivious nature (*Macrob. Sat.* II.1.6; *Plaut. Stich.* V.2.11). The dancer seem to have frequently represented Bacchanals: many such dancers occur in the paintings found at Herculaneum and Pompeii in a variety of graceful attitudes (see *Museo Borbonico*, vol. VII. tav. 34-40, vol. IX tav. 17, vol. X. tav. 5, 6, 54).

Among the dances performed without arms one of the most important was the **ὄρμος**, which was danced at Sparta by youths and maidens together; the youth danced first some movements suited to his age, and of a military nature; the maiden followed in measured steps and with feminine gestures. Lucian (*de Salt.* 12) says that it was similar to the dance performed at the Gymnopaedia (compare Müller, *Dor.* IV.6 §5). Another common dance at Sparta was the **Bibasis** (**βίβασις**), which was much practised both by men and women. The dance consisted in springing rapidly from the ground, and striking the feet behind; a feat of which a Spartan woman in Aristophanes (*Lysistr.* 28) prides herself (*γυμναδομαί γα καὶ ποτὶ πυγᾶν ἄλλομαι*). The number of successful strokes was counted, and the most skilful received prizes. We are told by a verse which has been preserved by Pollux (*IV.102*), that a Laconian girl had danced the **bibasis** a thousand times, which was more than had ever been done before (Müller, *Dorians*, IV.6 §8).

In many of the Greek states the art of dancing was carried to great perfection by females, who were frequently engaged to add to the pleasures and enjoyment of men at their symposia. These dancers

always belonged to the hetaerae. Xenophon (*Symp.* IX.2-7) describes a mimetic dance which was represented at a symposium, where Socrates was present. It was performed by a maiden and a youth, belonging to a Syracusan,<sup>o</sup> who is called the ὄρχηστοδιδάσκαλος, and represented the loves of Dionysus and Ariadne.

Respecting the dancers on the tight-rope see [FUNAMBULUS](#).

Dancing was common among the Romans in ancient times in connection with religious festivals and rites, and was practised according to Servius (*ad Virg. Ecl.* V.73), because the ancients thought that no part of the body should be free from the influence of religion. The dances of the Sali, which were performed by men of patrician families, are spoken of elsewhere [[SALI](#)]. Olysius (VII.72) mentions a dance with arms at the Ludi Magni, which, according to his usual plan of referring all old Roman usages to a Greek origin, he calls the Pyrrhic. There was another old Roman dance of a military nature, called **Bellicrepa Saltatio**, which is said to have been instituted by Romulus, after he had carried off the Sabine virgins, in order that a like misfortune might not befall his state (Festus, *s.v.*). Dancing, however, was not performed by any Roman citizen except in connection with religion; and it is only in reference to such dancing that we are to understand the statements, that the ancient Romans did not consider dancing disgraceful, and that not only freemen, but the sons of senators and noble matrons practised it ([Quintil. Inst. Orat.](#) I.11 §18; [Macrob. Sat.](#) III.14<sup>o</sup>). In the latter times of the republic we know that it was considered highly disgraceful for a freeman to dance: Cicero reproaches Cato for calling Murena a dancer (*saltator*), and adds "**nemo fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit**" (*Pro Muren.* 6; compare in *Pison.* 10).

The mimetic dances of the Romans, which were carried to such perfection under the empire, are described under [PANTOMIMUS](#) (Meursius, *Orchestra*; Bürette,<sup>o</sup> *de la Danse des Anciens*; Krause, *Gymnastic und Agon. d. Hell.* p807, &c.).

---

### Thayer's Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Our dictionary was compiled and its articles written in the middle of the nineteenth century: times have of course changed again, and interestingly, modern Western popular dance, stressing expression, violent movement, and group participation (with a corresponding de-emphasis of the couple), is far closer to ancient Greco-Roman dance than were the polka, the Schottische or the waltz.

Better modern analogies include many forms of Oriental dance — and even kabuki if we take **saltare solis oculis** seriously; maybe the closest approach commonly seen in the West is figure skating with its athleticism, self-expression, exhibitionism; and all too often, very bad taste, at least in the post-Torvill-and-Dean era.



<sup>b</sup> With his usual sagacity, Dr. Smith does well to insert "he says". By the sheer number of unsubstantiated asseverations and dubious theories, Plato may well rank as the mother of all von Dänikens (a minority opinion, I grant you, but **one already held in Antiquity**, even if some modern scholars don't like it and try to emend their way out of it). Although dance seems to have had its place in Egyptian religion, this particular statement is nonsense.



<sup>c</sup> As did the "Sun-King" Louis XIV, France's greatest monarch, many centuries later — seen to the right as a 15-year-old, but already King, in "Le Ballet de la nuit"; and in case you're wondering, the famous contemporary engraving (1653) reproduced here is, like anything else published so long ago, in the public domain.



<sup>d</sup> We might take this apparent danger for an artifact of the confused composition of the vase design, and so it might be here: but women did perform tumbling acts among swords (*Athen.* 129D).

Images with borders lead to more information.  
The thicker the border, the more information. (*Details here.*)

UP TO:



Smith's Dictionary:  
Daily Life



Smith's Dictionary



LacusCurtius



Home



Search This Site

A page or image on this site is in the public domain ONLY  
if its URL has a total of one \*asterisk.  
If the URL has two \*\*asterisks,  
the item is copyright someone else, and used by permission or fair use.  
If the URL has none the item is © Bill Thayer.  
See [my copyright page](#) for details and contact information.



Page updated: 1 Jul 13