

## Satyr dance in ancient Greece

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### Satyrs in myth

In the iconography of ancient Greece Dionysos is often seen surrounded by maenads and satyrs dancing and playing music. This band of followers is known as Dionysus' *thiasos*. A prominent motif in the imagery associated with Dionysos and satyrs is wine—which produces vertigo and transformation. The satyrs may be seen as agents of this transformation—creatures that dissolve boundaries between what is real and imaginary—something with they achieve through mask and dance.

In this essay I shall sketch a description of satyrs, their participation in public festivals, in cult and in satyr drama. I shall then give a brief account of the literary and iconographic evidence for satyric dance.

Satyrs, also known as silens, are horse-man hybrids somewhat like centaurs except that they have only two legs and are more human than equine. Most satyrs have only the ears and tail of a horse. In very early depictions they have hooves and after the classical period (i.e. from about 300 BC) they tend to resemble the goat. The characteristic face or mask of the satyr-silen in portrayals from the early 5th century is bearded and balding, with a snub nose and pointed ears.

In both literature and iconography satyrs appear lustful and bestial. On vase paintings the satyr's phallus is usually in a state of erection and the first mention in literature of satyrs (Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 262-3) is as making love to nymphs in caves. In Hesiod (fragment 123) the satyrs are described as worthless and lazy. On the other hand these dissolute unrestrained satyrs are also associated with learning and wisdom: Plato, in the *Symposium* compares Socrates with a satyr, and king Midas captured a satyr in his garden in order to extract a more than human wisdom from him. The satyr is thus an ambiguous creature, cruder than a man and wiser, combining mischief with wisdom and animality with divinity. The Greeks divided living beings into three separate kinds: gods, humans and animals. The satyrs dissolved these boundaries, for they combined in themselves all three.

### Satyrs in dance and drama

People dressed, wore masks and danced as satyrs in cult, festivals and in the theatre (satyr plays). There is evidence of people dressing up and dancing as satyrs on the wine-jugs used in the ancient Attic spring festival of Dionysos, the Anthesteria. These wine jugs were called *Choes* and were painted with scenes of the festival where men and boys are depicted revelling and frolicking in the same way as the satyrs. The citizens of many Greek cities participated in spring festivals which included a procession said to be bringing back

Dionysus after the winter in a ship. Several Athenian vases show the ship-cart procession being accompanied by satyrs. Since these vases represent historical rather than mythical scenes, we can assume that the satyrs depicted are local citizens in disguise. And Plato, about fifty years later, refers to a kind of dancing in which people dress up as nymphs, pans and satyrs in order to enact mystic initiation (*Laws*). Like drama, mystic initiation involves the assumption of an alien identity (as well as the enactment of myth). These satyrs would have acted as the attendants of the god Dionysus and the initiated custodians of a solemn and secret tradition. Though distinct, the two kinds of celebration—mystic ritual and public festival—would have occurred together since the mysteries were often part of a festival. However, at the celebrated City Dionysia of Athens (also a spring festival) the division between the mystic ritual and the public celebration was dissolved, and this was a crucial phase in the genesis of drama.

The City Dionysia at about the beginning of the fifth century BC marked the institution of Greek theatre performance as we know it: it became the occasion for the well known performances of the three genres of Greek drama: tragedy, comedy and satyr play. Each trilogy of tragedy was followed by a satyr play.

Only one satyr play survives in its entirety, Euripides' *Cyclops*. But a number of fragments combine to present us with several features that are typical of the genre.

The structure of the satyr play was like tragedy in language, structure and even in the subject matter of heroic myth and legend. However, the final tone was the very opposite. Satyr plays were humorous and light-hearted due to the presence of the satyrs, who in this genre were boisterous, hedonistic lazy and cowardly. Characteristic themes of satyr plays are the captivity and rescue of the satyrs, invention and creation, and sex.

The chorus of satyrs, unlike the chorus of tragedy, interferes and often leads the action. Scenes from the myth are blown up to give satyrs a central role. In Sophocles' *Ichneutai* (*Trackers*) the songs and dances of the satyrs grow directly out of their search for the cattle tracks and, in the same play, the satyrs dance and sing their consternation and then their delight at the sound of the lyre invented by the infant Hermes. In Aeschylus' *Diktyoukoi* (*Netpullers*), during the rescuing of Danae from the sea, the hauling in of the net and opening of the catch suggests the performance of a mimetic dance.

In the opening of Euripides' *Cyclops* the satyrs sing and dance as herdsmen and drive Polyphemos' sheep back

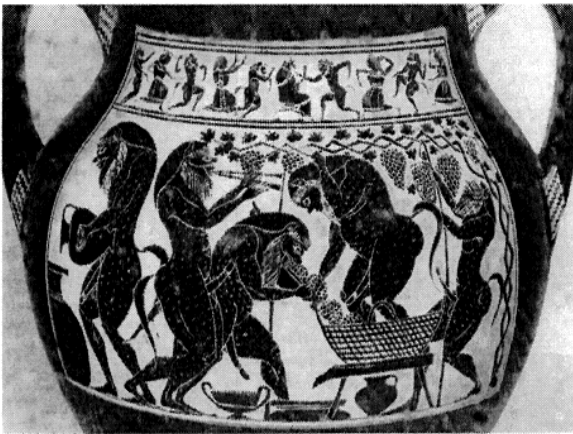
to the cave. And in lines 217-20 of the *Ichneutai*, the chorus declare their intent to  
*quickly make the ground ring  
with repeated jumps and kicks, and force him*

*to hear me, however deaf he may be.*  
Jumps and kicks pounding the ground would be characteristic of several fertility dances across time and place.<sup>1</sup>

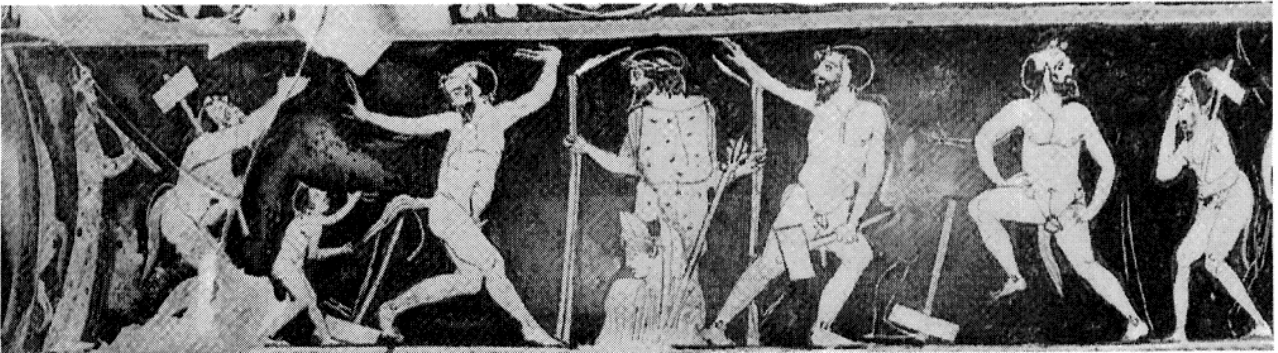
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### Satyrs painted on vases

Surviving text combines with vase paintings to portray satyrs engaged in characteristic actions and dance-like movements.



Numerous vase paintings such as the black-figure painting above associate satyrs dancing and music with harvesting. The harvesting of grapes is an activity that brings on enthusiasm, transforming the existential status of man and placing him in contact with the divine.



*Satyrs (with piper) reacting to the emergence of a goddess from the earth. Attic red-figure krater, ca. 450*

Rescuing deities from the underworld is another typical activity involving satyrs. In the painting above the presence of the pipe-player on the left indicates that the scene involves dancing, and we can also observe a characteristic movement performed by satyrs with arm/s akimbo and one leg with bended knee lifted off the ground.



The 'Pronomos' Vase, c. 400 BC

Of particular interest is the frequently depicted Attic Pronomos Vase above, which shows the cast of a satyr play. In the centre the artist has imagined Dionysos and his bride Ariadne. On either side of the divine pair are three figures—representing Herakles, and perhaps Laomedon (king of Troy, father of Priam) and his daughter Hesione—carrying masks. The chorus is composed of young beardless men, each carrying an identical bearded, slightly balding satyr-mask with its characteristic pointed ears and snub nose. Most of them are crowned, and they are all wearing a horse's tail and a furry loin cloth with phallus; except that one (top left) is wearing the smooth loin-cloth found on some other depictions of theatrical satyrs, and another (bottom, second from right) probably the chorus leader, is wearing an ornamented chiton and a himation. Most of the satyrs are labelled with ordinary Athenian names, which indicates that the vase depicts a specific chorus. Next to Herakles is the satyrs' father, Silenos, played by an older, bearded man carrying in one hand a staff, in the other a white-bearded mask and over his shoulder a leopard skin. A white-tufted, tightly fitting costume covers his whole body.

Pronomos the pipe player occupies a central place, indicating the importance of music, and the lyre player Charinos, and the poet Demetrios are on the same level as him. The lyre also appears next to the poet—another sign of the importance of music in poetic composition.

I would like to draw attention to the satyr—the fourth figure from the left on the lower row. The two elements of disguise—the dance and the mask—have transformed the actor into a real satyr as opposed to an actor with a mask. Moreover, in dancing he has adopted the 'arm akimbo' posture familiar in satyr iconography which also appears in the previous picture.

#### Satyr dances as described by lexicographers

In addition to evidence for dancing from texts and from iconography there is evidence from ancient scholars who collected descriptions and names from divergent

times and places and were interested in classification of dances rather than observable dances in their social context. There seems to be consensus however that the typical dance of the satyr play was the *sikinnis*. An entry by Pollux (rhetorician, lexicographer of 2nd-century AD) covering the three dramatic genres designates the *sikinnis* as the satyric genre *par excellence*. 'Kinds of dances (are) tragic *emmeleia*, comic *cordaxes*, satyric *sikinnis*'.

Another scholar, (Athenaeus, 2nd-century AD) describes the *sikinnis* as a fast and unrelentingly vigorous dance involving shaking.

Athenaeus also records the traditions that the inventor of the dance was a barbarian and that he was Cretan. Most recent opinion gives the word *sikinnis* a Thraco-Phrygian origin and compares it to *kēkiō* and to the Lithuanian *szokti* meaning 'dance' or 'leap'—the satyrs are associated with leaping (*Cyclops* 221). Some commentators claim that the word derives from *seiō* (shake), others from *kinesis*, the latter derivation being based on the great speed of the dance and because it never slows down and has no depth of feeling—*pathos* (Athenaeus). Hesychius (lexicographer of the 5th-century AD) describes the satyr dance as *syntonos* (intense). There is a kind of pipe-playing called *sikynnoturbē* and *turbē* means tumult. Words in the fragments of satyric plays referring to noise and movement applied to the dance are *ktupos pedortos* (knocking the ground), *pedēmata kraipna* (rapid leaps) and *laktismata* (trampling). It would seem therefore that the defining characteristics of the *sikinnis* dance were speed, intensity and shaking.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, why did men dress up and dance as satyrs? In order to be transformed into a special kind of being that transcends the normal rigid division of the world into gods, humans, and animals. This liberating transformation occurred in three contexts. Firstly in festivals, in order to participate temporarily in the hedonistic licence associated with the god Dionysos.

Secondly, and more seriously, in mystic ritual, in which dressing as a satyr was a rehearsal for becoming a satyr for all eternity in the retinue of Dionysos. And thirdly, to be in the chorus of a satyr play, a genre that derived from the impersonation of satyrs in festival and in mystic ritual. In all these contexts dance is central. In particular, the next world is—for those initiated into the thiasos of Dionysos—a place in which to dance.

**Notes**

1. For example, in the spring festival of Skiros in present-day Greece, participants mask their faces with goatskins and dance through the town wearing metal bells round their waists pounding the earth with repeated jumps and kicks.