

## **Making Movements and Dances from Illustrated Dancing Bodies on Vases from the Geometric Period & Ancient Texts**

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Dance was part of Greek social life, connected with worship, fertility, orgiastic events, daily life celebrations and war preparation. In modern Greece, traditional dances are still an integral part of social life and they often constitute symbolic representations of Greek history and identity throughout the years. Is the significance of Greek folk dances partly grounded on their assumed links with the antiquity?

Various local and foreign researchers have tried to identify these links and shed light on the role of dance in Ancient Greece in order to find any remnants of it in modern life. Nevertheless, is it possible to say that the dances we practise today in Greece are similar to the ones danced in Ancient Greece? Is it even possible to prove through research that there is, indeed, a link between modern and Ancient Greek dance? Dora Stratou, one of the most important researchers for traditional Greek dance argues that “when we say that our popular folk-dances embrace our entire history, obviously we do not mean that they are danced exactly as they were danced 2500 years ago. One would be mad to even consider such a thing” (Stratou,1992:13)

Quite an intriguing issue, ancient Greek dance became a field of research and the interest of artists and researchers focused on finding answers to those conjectures. For the field of art and dance, it appeared as an inspiration to create imaginable links with the past and to reconstruct ancient dance as it could have been. The on-going dialogue between Greece’s tangible and intangible culture provide us with certain data that can be effective in a discussion about possible links or inherited dance elements.

The fact is that we do not have any description of a particular dance in ancient Greece. However, we have various references to dance scenes and descriptions of dancing situations in Ancient Greek texts and on ancient vase-paintings.

### **Ancient Greek Vases as a Source for Ancient Dance**

The art of pottery was very popular in Ancient Greece and vases were an integral part of daily life. Pottery may be considered by some as low art, because of its popularity and its main purpose, which was to serve and facilitate everyday household needs. However, the decorations on the vases constitute great works of art and simultaneously an important source for our knowledge of the past. Due to the abundance of clay in Greece, pottery remained highly productive through all antiquity, and vase-paintings and techniques differentiate each historical period, reflecting historic shifts and cultural transformations.

As said before, pottery as an art was meant to serve domestic needs. Each type of vase was given a name-identifier of its use. Usually the vases were used for storage and transport of fluids, for offerings and rituals to Gods and as drinking cups. Characteristic types of vases are the following: The *Amphora* (for the storage and transport of oil or water); the *Hydria* (three handled vases to hold the ashes of the dead or for drawing water); the *Krater* (for mixing wine with water); the *Pithos* (storage of products); the *Kantharos* (drinking wine at symposiums) and the *Oenochoe* (a

wine pourer, also used as an offering to the dead), (Cartwright and Cartwright, 2016).

The very nature of a vase to be used for a specific need communicates to us important aspects of Greek culture and daily life. However, it is not only about the object and its use that vases hold great interest for researchers, but primarily because of the paintings and works of art they are decorated with. Vase paintings can tell many stories through their pictures. There has been a debate between archaeologists, dance researchers and historians about how it is really possible to gain information relating to dance in Ancient Greece from vase-paintings and to what degree we can be certain that they indeed portray dance.

The fact is that there is no particular dance depicted in vase paintings. We can only say that in these paintings, we see situations that we may interpret as dancing events. The American-British dance critic Marcelle Azra Hincks (c.1874 - 1938) argues that:

In studying the dance movements from the vases we are looking at a highly conventionalized art through the medium of another conventional art, as the vase painting [...] Dance is already a formula, it is an artistic interpretation of movement, and the picture is a further formula interpreting the first one.(Hincks, 1909:352)

The historian, Frits Naerebout, in his work, *Attractive Performances*, argues that a vase painting may portray dance as a concept but not any specific dance. Most particularly, he reflects on the fact that the restrictions imposed by a medium with no three-dimensional qualities, such as a vase painting, cannot give us enough information in order to recognise an isolated depiction of movement such as dance. As he argues, the movement depicted could be a fragment of actions such as standing, running, jumping or turning or portray a part of an athletic scene rather than dance - and thus, he wonders how far movement can be reconstructed on the basis of static images. Naerebout suggests that once movements have been isolated, it would better to ask in what conditions these movements could be incorporated within that

particular category of human behaviour that is covered by our definition of dance. We decide that a movement portrayed belongs to dance when it cannot be reasonably interpreted as anything else, and/or because of some contextual clues that disambiguate the image. (Naerebout 1997:217)

The American classicist, Lillian B. Lawler (1898-1990), in her work, *The Dance in Ancient Greece*, stresses that frequently only context can determine whether the figure is standing, walking or dancing. (Lawler, 1965) Because of all the previous mentioned restrictions, we may not be able to identify particular steps or gestures or a particular dance on the vases but we may form an idea about the “general principles” of dance during that era. (Hincks, 1909)

In order to create a vase painting, the Greek vase-painter was inspired by a situation that he lived in. The actual scene happened and was interpreted by the painter and thus resulted as an image on a vase. The vase painter creates images from his memory and his personal interpretation. It is possible that what he decides to work with were the most dominant or most characteristic elements of the dance, or something that really impressed him. We can use this personal creation as a point of departure to consider the vase as a source of knowledge for dance in Ancient Greece. It is indeed an evidence of the general outline of dance during that period. Of course, we arrive at this conclusion taking into consideration other sources, such written descriptions for dance that seem to share a common ground.

This idea of the vases presenting ancient people as if they are frozen into a frame, in the middle of a situation, stimulates the imagination to wonder what the scene might have looked like before or after it was “frozen”. That idea seems to be the basis of the project 'Stories of the World', run at the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology in 2012. There, local teenagers worked with the project team and they tried to interpret the illustrations on the vases and develop stories from them. The story that the vases "could tell" the students became video animations by Steve K. Simons who runs the Panoply Vase

Animation Project. (Panoply.org.uk, 2016)<sup>1</sup> His animations are created from the actual scenes which decorate the vases, trying to be as close as possible to the original. The teenagers in this case, brought ancient, traditional and modern dance elements together to construct a dance scene as they imagine it could be. This is a good example on how we can make, create or recreate dance through interaction with the ancient sources.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned before, vase paintings may not be enough as a source to investigate dance in Ancient Greece. However, any information we may gain from them, in combination with ancient texts and other testimonies from the same era, may give us a better understanding. For instance, the Geometric Period offers a combination of sources such as vases and contemporary texts that provide information about dance. The Geometric Period (1100 until 800 BC), (Anon, 2016) took its name from a new method and style in the art of pottery. The innovation of a faster potter's wheel and the use of compasses resulted in the characteristic for this style decoration with perfect circles and semicircles. The Geometric Period is also known as the "Greek Dark Ages" or "Homeric Age". Dark Ages because of the collapse of Bronze Age civilization and Homeric because the two epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are the only historic sources for that period.

In Geometric Pottery, humans and animals were depicted geometrically in dark colour and the remaining space of the vase was all decorated and covered by strict zones of meanders, crooked lines, circles, zigzags, triangles and swastikas, in the same geometrical concept. The figures are simpler than the previous Mycenaean style and human beings are illustrated in a non-naturalistic way, without depth and usually with the upper body in the form of a triangle. The hair is depicted as a series of lines and linear designs are the principal motif of the geometric period. Later, the geometric shapes have become freer, and areas with animals, birds, scenes of shipwrecks, hunting scenes, and themes from mythology or the Homeric epics led Geometric Pottery into expressions that

are more naturalistic. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016)

The very characteristic repeated motif of circles and semicircles on geometric vase paintings have been associated with the form that Greek dances appear to have maintained until today. Not only as a geometrical shape, we can also assume that circles have also appeared as dance formations on the vases. "In many ancient vases we can see this same circular dance and this same hand-grip" (...) "The joining of hands and the formation of an unbroken circle" is still in the dance tradition. (Stratou, 1996:14). Lillian Lawler (1965) speaks about the circle and hand holding as a sense of incorporating giving, receiving and excluding, a mystical significance among ancient people, often performed around an altar, a tree or pillar, some sacred object or a musician.

The Shield of Achilles is the shield that Achilles uses in his fight with Hector, famously described in a passage in Book 18, lines 478–608 of Homer's *Iliad*. The intricately detailed imagery on the shield has inspired many different interpretations of its significance, with no definitive answer. Homer gives a detailed description of the imagery which decorates the new shield. Starting from the shield's centre and moving outward, circle layer by circle layer, the shield is laid out in five circles which representing the basic elements of life, including dance. It is one of the most ancient texts referring to dance and specifically a circle dance (Homer, 2016):

A figured dance succeeds; such once was seen  
In lofty Gnosus for the Cretan queen,  
Form'd by Daedalean art; a comely band  
Of youths and maidens, bounding hand in hand.  
The maids in soft simars of linen dress'd;  
The youths all graceful in the glossy vest:  
Of those the locks with flowery wreath inroll'd;  
Of these the sides adorn'd with swords of gold,  
That glittering gay, from silver belts depend.  
Now all at once they rise, at once descend,  
With well-taught feet: now shape in oblique ways,  
Confusedly regular, the moving maze:  
Now forth at once, too swift for sight, they spring,  
And undistinguish'd blend the flying ring:

So whirls a wheel, in giddy circle toss'd,  
And, rapid as it runs, the single spokes are lost.  
The gazing multitudes admire around:  
Two active tumblers in the centre bound;  
Now high, now low, their pliant limbs they bend:  
And general songs the sprightly revel end.

Tsakonikos is a popular Greek folk dance, especially danced today in Tsakonia (where it get its name from), in the southern mainland of Greece. Tradition says that the Tsakonikos dance re-enacts the exodus of Theseus from the Labyrinth at Knossos. In Plutarch's "Life of Theseus", there is a description considered by many to be most illuminating for this historic dance:

*on his way back from Crete, Theseus touched at Delos. There, when he had sacrificed to Apollo and dedicated in his temple the statue of Aphrodite which he had received from Ariadne, he and the Athenian youths with him executed a dance, which they say is still performed by the people of Delos, and which consists of a series of serpentine figures danced in regular time and representing the winding passages of the Labyrinth. The Delians call this kind of dance the Crane, according to Dicæarchus, and Theseus danced it round the altar...* (Stratou, 1966: 15)

Madame Chenier lived approximately 200 years ago in Istanbul and gives us some descriptions about a dance performed by the Greeks there, called Candiot. As Madame Chenier describes it, Candiot was their most important dance and was performed by dancers "holding a piece of rope in their hands". Dora Stratou argues that the rope "must be a reminder of Ariadne's spool of thread, which she had given Theseus to help him find his way out of the Labyrinth."(Stratou, 1966:14). The connection of Candiot with the myth is made through the very name of the dance. Between the 13th and 17th centuries, while the Venetians occupied Crete, Heracleion, the city of Crete where the palace of Knossos and the labyrinth were sited, was named Candia. Candiot has the same movements as the Tsakonikos. Dora Stratou argues:

How did the name Candiot die out? For the Tsakonikos was certainly always danced in Tsakonia. Perhaps Madame Chenier could not

have been aware of this. However, the fact is that Tsakonia was always the natural place for this dance to be performed because of the frequent migrations from Crete to the Peloponnese and from Peloponnese to Crete, according to the various wars and disasters (Stratou, 1966:18)

The Tsakonikos is a symbolic example of dance, with formations that remind us of shapes depicted on ancient vases, written references, stories and historic sources. All this kind of information may be combined to research ancient dance and its remains, if they exist nowadays.

(The lecture was followed by a 20 min workshop during which the participants tried to recreate movements from pictures depicted in the vase paintings and to form a movement sequence. In the end they learned to dance Tsakonikos and tried to identify the potential similarities on formation and body posture, with the pictures shown to them from vases.)

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Vase used here is a black figure *Oinochoe* vase, depicting male dancers around the whole vessel. It is from the late Archaic period c.525-500 B.C.E and is housed at the Ure Museum.

