War-dances in Ancient Greece

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"One must no longer neglect the appropriate subject of imitation that these dances offer as in the war dances of Curetes and, at Lacedaemon, Dioscure's war dances. Here, the Virgin, our sovereign, enjoying choric games, did not wish to dance with her hands empty, but equipped herself from top to toe and, dressed that way, she danced her dance. This is what young men and young girls together could imitate in perfect decency, honoring the game which charmed the goddess, getting ready for war, celebrating the festivals. As for children, from the first year until they go to war, they should always, armed and on horseback, enter all processions and orderly successions in honor rhythm of their gods, chanting in a more or less quick rhythm of their dance or of their march, their entreaties to the gods and sons of the gods. Such is the purpose, and the only purpose, that one should pursue as take part in gymnastic fights and preparations. They are useful for peace and for war, for public life as for domestic life. All other exercises, be they done by game or by passion, are unworthy of free citizens" [1].

Such is the respect that Plato has for dances of war. For him, they are team activities the most useful for the society at large. This judgment is easy to understand in a world where war was a permanent risk and where only military victory allowed survival and the development of cities: "…no other possession, no other activity will be of any value if we don't have the upper hand at war. All properties from the conquered go to the conquerors" [2].

Under these conditions, preparation for battle becomes indispensable. The imperatives of military strategy, essentially founded on perfect cohesion between foot soldiers, require rigorous bodily discipline, since the movements of each soldier must be efficient and coordinated with those of his neighbors. More than any other exercise (wrestling, armed runs), war-dances serve this purpose. Some of them, those of collective type, accustom the fighter to react in groups; others, practiced in solo or duets, develop suppleness and quickness of reflexes. In either case, they accompany individuals from their early childhood to their death. They take place in multiple circumstances, either gymnastic training in the palestra, or religious ceremonies or theatrical performances or even some entertainments, such as banquets. Because of that, the dances are various and numerous. There are at least 15 different kinds. [3]

We know war-dances through two kinds of documents:
- Iconography: we find a few figurative representations belonging to the end of geometrical period (7th c. B.C.) but most belong essentially to the classical period (end of 6th c. B.C. and 5th c. B.C.)
- Written sources: the most ancient appear in the 4th c. BC (Plato, Xenophon, Euripide) and in the 2nd c. AD (Athenaeus and Lucian); the most recent appear in the 5th c. AD (Nonnos). In view of such a long time span, it is necessary to approach the study of war-dances with prudence. Thus, those evoked by Plato at his time cannot be compared with the one transmitted by Athenaeus or Lucian two centuries later.

1. The origins of war-dances

1.1. Sources

Sources mention legends of collective dances, characterized by clashes of weapons, jumping as feet hammer the ground in order to hide a birth: Couretes's dance around baby Zeus [4], Corybantes's dance around the child Dionysos [5], Amazones's dance around the first statue of Artemis [6]. These mythic dances are the beginning of many initiation rituals concerning adolescents: the dances of Cretan Couroi which are similar to Couretes's dances [7], feminine dances for Artemis which remind us of Amazones's dances [8]. The dancers attempt to prove they can overcome the forces of life and death and enter the adult world. These dances have an apotropaïc goal, one, bound to fecundity and to the renewal of the society; they are a public demonstration celebrating the divinities (Zeus Couros and Artemis) in order to solemnize adolescents of both sexes becoming adults. These dances have two geographical origins: Ephese (Couretes's dance and Amazones's dance) and Crete (Corybantes and Couretes's dances), but the Cretan origin seems more ancient [9].

1.2. Iconography

We find two types of documents:
- Figurative representations to illustrate mythic dances of Couretes from the Roman period [10].
- Figurative representations from the 8th c. B.C. evoking different events: group dances [11] often for funerals and duet dances in the Palestra [12].

1.3. Development of war-dances in their civic and military sense (7th c. B.C. - 5th c. B.C.). In the 7th c. B.C. there is an important change in military art, as the part of cavalry is reduced to the benefit of foot soldiers [13]. This causes the developments of war-dances in Continental Greece, most often through Cretan poets and musicians. An artist from Gortyne, Thaletas, makes known the pyrrhic dance in Laconia through the songs and flute music he composes [14]. From there, the pyrrhic-dance is transmitted to Athens and the rest of the Greek world. Another Cretan dance, the "telesias", is adopted in Macedonia [15].

2. Duet and solo dances

These dances reproduce fight movements of defense and attack. For most, we know only their name [16], and only the pyrrhic dance is really known: "It imitates, on one hand, movements made to escape blows sent from near or far, to jump to the side, backwards, or high in the air, or to bend down; on the other hand, it imitates the complementary movements, which lead to offensive attitudes and imitates the using of bow and arrow, the javelin, or the striking of blows."[17]

What is more, we have a great number of figurative representations of the pyrrhic dances; we can classify them according to defense or attack acting, as evoked by Plato [18]. Even, in some representations, we find intermediate movements between the two types of actions [19]. The Spartans practiced it daily and the other Greeks [20] too, but in a less intensive way. The pyrrhic dance took place to the sound of "diaulos" [21] and the singing called πυρριχιστικόν [22]. The rhythm was very quick and could have a diverse pattern based on either iambic or anapestes or pyrrhic or a combination of pyrrhic and anapestes or a combination of pyrrhic. The pyrrhic dance was executed in various circumstances: training in palestra, religious ceremonies [23], competitions or theatre stages [24]. The iconography shows it could be executed alone (with an imaginary protagonist) or with two people.

3. Group dances

Generally they are less agitated than the former manifestations. These dances belong more to the military marches or processions than to simulations of fights, though we find in them certain offensive attitudes [25]. They are used in various occasions, before a real conflict, to rush on the enemy spiritedly (εμβατήριος) [26], religious manifestations in honor of divinities such as Hermes or Artemis [28], manifestations of private life during funerals [29]. Less of warlike meaning and development of war-dances as a form of performance and entertainment. This evolution starts with the classical period:

3.1. Parody of the pyrrhic dance in the satirical drama. From the 5th c. B.C. "pyrrhichistic satyrs are pictured on iconography. This proves that the pyrrhic dance, up until, then a serious matter, is subject to parodies [30] (mostly in satirical dramas).

3.2. Pyrrhic dance as entertainment during banquets. "Seeing their amazement, the Mysian, with permission of an Arcadian who had bought a dancing girl, introduced her after having dressed her to his best, and after sitting a light shield in her hand. She dances the pyrrhic with suppleness."[31] This is a typical evocation of the pyrrhic dance, performed by a professional dancer for entertainment. In the iconography, we find a certain number of women executing the pyrrhic dance either at banquets or in dance schools specialized in this style. The movements are about the same as in masculine pyrrhic dance. They are defensive attitudes and ambush attitudes but the female posture will be much more graceful than the male posture [32]. In one iconography, a detail shows us that training for fight is no longer the purpose of the dance. The spear held by the pyrrhichist often resembles an ordinary stick [33].

3.3. War-dances in relation to pantomimes. The dance called "καρπαία" belongs to this kind of manifestation: "[…] a man deposits his weapons beside him and then he sows and drives a pair of oxen, turning back often as if he was scared. Then a brigand comes in. As soon as the other sees him, he jumps to his weapons, goes to meet

him, and they fight in front of the oxen. These movements were executed to the rhythm and the sound of the flute. At the end the brigand binds the ploughman and takes the oxen or on the contrary, the farmer takes the brigand away tied next to his oxen, his hands behind him."[34] We have no iconographic illustration of this dance. But there are many representations of pantomime ambush where the dancers hold a shield and pretend to hold a lance [35].

4. War-dances with acrobatic prowess

We have an example in Xenophon: "A Mysian came in holding a shield on each arm. He started to dance and sometimes he held his shields as if he had only one, and sometimes, he turned around and jumped in somersaults without letting go of his weapons. It was a beautiful performance". [36] Two figurative representations correspond to this description, one showing a woman with two shields, the other showing an acrobat dressed up like a hoplite (without the lance) and executing a perilous jump. The study of war-dances in ancient Greece has three important parts: The original purpose to be magical and religious: noisy dances, punctuated by apotropaïc leaps, sometimes in association with rituals of transaction (initiation, funerals).

In the 7th c. B.C. the civic and military aspects will immortalize the pyrrhic dance. War-dances develop suppleness and rapidity of reflexes and coordination with other soldiers. They help the Greek citizen to protect his freedom and possessions. This way, he can honor his city. Most of these manifestations are masculine except in the case of the executed as gymnic training by young Spartan girls [39] and the feminine war-dances dedicated to the cult of Artemis [40].

As early as the 5th c. B.C. the military meaning is less important. The military purpose is the same but there are other reasons for this kind of dances: performance and entertainment during which the most serious manifestations may be parodied. From the Peloponnesian war, the cult of Dionysus takes a more important place in the Greek world and honors new modes of orchestic expressions founded upon trances and drunkenness. Over centuries, war-dances undergo this influence to such a point that the pyrrhic dance, originally a war-dance, is soon unrecognizable: "Here, the pyrrhic dance seems to be more dionysian; it takes on more moderate rhythm than the old one. The pyrrhic dancers now have thyrsi instead of lances. They throw them to each other. They also hold sticks and torches. They dance to represent the exploits of Bacchus, the conquest of India and Pentheus' torture" [41].

References

[1] Plato, Laws, VII, 796b-d, translation according to A. Dies' translation, collection des Universités de France, Les Belles Lettres, Paris.
[2] Ibid., II, 626b.
[3] πυρρίχη (Lucian, On the Dance, 8 and Plato, Laws, VII, 796b); πρύλις (Callimachus, Hymn to Artemis, 240 and Hymn to Zeus, 50); τελεσιάς (Athenaeus, XIV, 629c and Pollux, IV, 99); ἐπικρήδιος (Athenaeus, XIV, 629c); ορσίτης (Athenaeus, XIV, 629c); κουρητισμός (Dionysius of Halicarnasse, II, 7I); περσικόν (Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, 10 and Aristophanes, Thesmophories, II75); καρπαία (Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, 7-8); κολαβρισμός (Athenaeus, XIV, 629d); ξιφισμός (Athenaeus, XIV, 629f); χειρονομία (Plutarch, Moralia, 997c; Lucian, On the Dance, 7-8; used as a synonym for πυρρίχη in Athenaeus, XIV, 629d); τριτογένεια (scholia to Aristophanes' Clouds, 956); απόκινος (Aristophanes, fragment 275 and Athenaeus, XIV, 629c); εμβατήριος (Athenaeus, 21f); ενόπλιος (Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, II; Plato, Republic, 400b); προσόδιον.
[4] Ephesian legend; Strabo, X, III, 2; Lucian, On the Dance, 8; Dionysius of Halicarnasse, VII, 72. Cretan legend: Strabo, XIV, I, 20.
[5] Nonnos, Dionysiaca, IX, 162-166; Lucian, On the Dance, 8.
[6] Callimachus, Hymn to Artemis, 240.
[7] Hymn to Zeus Dictaios, cf. Henri Jeanmaire, Couroi et Courètes: Essai sur l'éducation spartiate et les rites d'adolescence dans l'Antiquité Classique, Bibliothèque universitaire, Paris / Lille, 1939.
[8] Dances in Ephesia: Autocrates, fragment I (Kock).
[9] Many war-dances take their origin in Crete: πυρρίχη, πρύλις, τελεσιάς, ορσίτης, ἐπικρήδιος: see note 3 of this work.
[10] terra-cotta relief, London British Museum D50I; terra-cotta relief, Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptoteck in 1699; terra-cotta relief, Copenhagen, National Museum ABb 232: cf. A.H. Borbein, Campana reliefs, Typologische und Stilkrische unter Suchugen, F.H. Kerle Verlag, Heidelberg, 1968, pl.29-30 et pp.143-144. Bas

relief of a square altar, Musée du Capitole, cf. Dictionaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines, sous la direction de Daremberg et Saglio, Hachette, Paris, 1877-1919, p.220, fig.246.

[11] Crater Basel, Antikenmuseum BS 406.1963, in CVA Basel I / Switzerland 4, III, pl.3(149)8, pl.4(150)I; cup Munich, Antikensammlungen 6029, in CVA Deutschland 9 / Munchen 3, taf.124 (406)3-4; oinochoe Paris, Louvre CA3283 in CVA France 25 / Louvre 16, III H b, pl.28(1095)1-2, pl.29(1096)1-2, pl.56(1123)1-2-3; hydrye Paris Louvre A 575, in CVA France 26 / Louvre 17, pl.4(1127)1-2-3-4, pl.5(1128)4-5; amphora Hamburg, Museum fur Kunst und Gewerbe 1966.89 in CVA Deutschland 41 / Hamburg 1, pl.10(1976)I, pl.II(1977)1-2.

[12] Cantharus, in Copenhagen National Museum 727, in CVA Danemark 2 / Copenhague 2, III H, pl.73(74)5 and pl.74(75)2-3-4 and 6.

[13] Pierre Roussel, Sparte, second edition, 1960, p.37ss.

[14] Plutarch, De Musica, 9 and 28.

[15] Athenaeus, XIV, 629d; Plutarch, De Musica, 31.

[16] cf. Note 3 of this work.

[17] Plato, Laws, VII, 815a, translation according to A. Dies's translation in Collection des Universités de France, Les Belles Lettres, Paris.

[18] Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux, "La pyrrhique en Grèce antique", dans Ο Λύχνος, Connaissance Hellénique, N°32, Juillet 1987, pp.5-27 et Recherches sur la danse dans l'Antiquité grecque, Thèse de Doctorat, Université d'Aix-Marseille I, 1991, pp.86-111.

[19] Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux, Recherches sur la danse dans l'Antiquité grecque, op. cit., pp.104-108.

[20] Ibid., pp.77-86.

[21] sometimes we find the use of lyre: cf. Crater Copenhagen 727 in CVA Danemark 2 / Copenhague 2, III H, pl.73(74)5 and pl.74(75)2-3-4 and 6.

[22] Pollux, IV, 73.

[23] Dioscuri fest in Sparta: Athenaeus, XIV, 631e; Panathenaea fest in Athens: Lysias, Defense of anonym, XXI, 4.

[24] ISEE, V, 36; Jean-Claude Poursat, "Une base signée du Musée National d'Athènes: pyrrhichistes victorieux", dans BCH, 1967, pp.102-110.

[25] Cantharus Cabinet des Médailles 355, in CVA France 10 / Bibliothèque Nationale 2, III H e, pl.71(457)2 and 4 and 6, pl.72(458)1-2-3-4.

[26] Plutarch, Lycurge, 22, 4-6.

[27] Skyphos Limenas in Jean-Claude Poursat, "Les représentations de danse armées dans la céramique attique" in BCH, 1968, pp.550-615, cf. N°°1, pp.555, fig.1, p.554.

[28] Pyxis Neaple 3010, in Poursat, op. cit., N°51, p.599, fig.54-55, p.601; skyphos Berlin, in op. cit., N°56, p.610, fig.58-60; lecythe USA, private collection, in op. cit., N°57, p.610, fig.61-62, p.612.

[29] See note 25 of this work.

[30] Lecythus Athens 18567, cup Florence 4B28 and Louvre CII255, lecythes Athens, National Museum; in Poursat, op. cit., N°27-28-29, pp.583-584, fig.34 and 36-37, pp.584-585.

[31] Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, 12, translation according to Paul Masqueray's translation, in Collection des Universités de France, Les Belles Lettres, Paris.

[32] Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux, Recherches sur la danse dans l'Antiquité grecque, op. cit., pp.124-153.

[33] Crater Louvre G 480, in CVA France 8 / Louvre 5, III I d, pl. 31(372)7-8.

[34] Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, 7-8, translation op. cit.; see also description of the κολαβρισμός dance in Xenophon, Anabasis VI, I, 5-6.

[35] M-H Delavaud-Roux, Recherches sur la danse dans l'Antiquité grecque, op. cit., pp.156-158.

[36] Xenophon, Anabasis, VI, I, 9, translation op. cit.

[37] choe Oxfrod, in Poursat, op. cit., N°55, p.609.

[38] Kylix Boston 67.861, in CVA USA 19 / Boston Museum of Fine Arts 2, III H, pl.106(940)1-2-3.

[39] Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne, sous la direction de J.-P. Vernant, Mouton, Paris / La Haye, 1968, p.15.

[40] Cf. Note 28 of this work.

[41] Athenaeus, XIV, 632: according to the translation mentioned by Germaine Prudhommeau in La danse grecque antique, CNRS, Paris, 1965, p. 305. Even later, the origin of war-dances will be attributed to Dionysus.

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