

The dance in Minoan Crete

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This is an attempt at an iconographical study of dance in the Minoan period, without proceeding further to later historical times. Evans was the first to study the Minoan dance in the Palace of Minos.[1] Basing his observations on finds, he assumed that there was a close relation between dance and religion. Since then, all the students of religion [2] have made few references to the problem giving special interest to circle and ecstatic dance. These types of dance were better justified by the archaeological evidence. Lillian Lawler [3] made the first serious attempt to approach the question with the help of later written sources. She used anthropological-sociological observations in a series of articles in order to explain the orchestric forms. All the other students of dance" [4] were mostly concerned with the dance of historical times for which the archaeological and literary sources give us much evidence (scenes on vases, idols, statues, inscriptions). The absence of specific studies on the field of the Minoan period can be explained by the small number of clear, comprehensible representations. The known orchestric scenes, which are generally accepted by the majority of scholars, are really very few and familiar to everybody concerned with dance. We mention for example the idols from Palaikastro and Kamilari [5] with the representation of a circle dance, the miniature fresco of "Sacred Grove and Dance" from Knossos, the golden rings with the so called "ecstatic" dance, the Harvesters' Vase, the stone larnax and the musician's fresco from Agia Triada. Suggestions for many other orchestric scenes have been expressed by some scholars. [6]

In spite of the lack of justified archaeological evidence, there are many indications leading to the conclusion that the dance was not only performed in Minoan times, but that it was also necessary for every ceremony. At first, the later written sources, from Homer to Athenaeus [7] point to this direction. Cretans are mentioned everywhere as famous dancers, with a long tradition, which begins in prehistoric times. Apart from this, the influence of the East and Egypt in the development of Minoan civilisation, suggests a close relation in the field of religion. We can study archaeological and written sources about Egypt that justify the performance of orchesis and the distinction of different dances or "schemata" [8] there. For these reasons, we find it necessary to study the representations again, in the light of new perspectives, and to distinguish the iconographical types of orchesis. At a later stage, we may be able to recognize specific dances, known from the later written sources. In this attempt we shall examine idols, frescoes, vases, sarcophagi, rings, seals and sealing.

The material can be divided, at first, into three main categories. Each category consists of more than one iconographical type. The first category is the orchesis. We have assigned iconographical types where the figures have a free disposal in space, move rapidly and make different movements or gestures. The second category is the processional orchesis. Here the figures are characterized by a unity of movements. They follow one behind the other and give the impression of a slow, solemn

procession. In the third category we have assigned representations of animal-headed figures, which are usually considered as dancing masked priests or followers.

1. Orchesis

1.1. Circle dance

Finds: Idols from Palaikastro and Kamilari. [9] This is by far the most familiar iconographical orchestic type in Minoan Crete. The figures perform a closed circle dance. They raise their arms to the height of the shoulders and hold each other. Both sexes can participate in the orchesis, but they are never mixed together. In the group from Kamilari only men dance, while in the group from Palaikastro only women dance. The idea of a circle is accentuated by the circle base on which the figures move and it probably represents the place of the performance. Recently, Warren found three circle stone platforms at Knossos, which he considered as dancing-places (chores). [10] There are also horns of consecration and a dove in each of the two groups, which suggest close connection with religion. In the group from Palaikastro there is a woman in the centre of the circle playing the lyre. It is noted that she is the unique example of a female musician among the Minoan-Mycenaean representations. This figure probably shows that it was not allowed for both sexes to take part in the same circle.

Many scholars assign the representation of three women on a Proto-palatial bowl from Phaistos to this iconographical type. [11] The figures however are much stylized, so that it is not easy to determine if they are performing a circle dance.

1.2. Orchesis as part of public festivals

Finds: Miniature fresco of Sacred Grove and Dance from Knossos. [12] In the miniature fresco from Knossos, the dancing women are part of the composition, but not the central one. The action and the focus of the ceremony are located in the left part of the scene, which unfortunately has not survived. Only women take part in the dance. They wear rich Minoan skirts and tight bodices. Their arrangement seems to be free, in two almost parallel lines. Evans considered that they form a sinuous line reminding us of the labyrinth, [13] while Lawler suggested that the dancing women form the orchestic shape of the lily. [14] However they give the impression that they are not submitted to a specific form. At least two of the figures face right, while all the others face left. Two of them raise the left arm, while the others raise the right. The whole scene might represent the preparation for the dance that is to take place in the missing left part of the composition. [15] This suggestion explains the differentiations in the movements of the figures. The artist probably wanted to show this pre-orchestic stage of the ceremony, and not a clear dancing scheme.

In this fresco and in another of the same technique - the Tripartite Shrine - the artist has illustrated many people watching the ritual. This factor is very important because the dance is shown to be performed in public, probably during religious festivals. As we can see the spectators had specific arrangement according to their status. Standing life-sized men are represented in the right part of the composition. Some of them

make the gesture of adoration and some others hold javelins. These groups are separated from the rest of the crowd. The place of the performance of the public festival is located by the majority of scholars in the West Court or the open theatrical area of the palace at Knossos. [16]

1.3. Ecstatic dance

With this term a specific iconographical type is identified in the bibliography, because it usually consists of the same main features. Finds: Golden rings [17] from Kalyvia, Arkhanes, Sellopoulo. Similar rings are known from Mycenaean Greece. [18] Sealing [19] from Agia Triada 522, 523, 595-596 H.M. Two seals [20] from the Stratigraphic Museum at Knossos.

The main features of this iconographical type are the following: [21]

- a) a tree behind a small building which is considered to be an altar, a shrine or a sacred enclosure,
- b) a number of smaller stones gathered together (boetyl), near the tree or away from it. Sometimes another sacred building is represented instead;
- c) three figures of both sexes perform different movements. One embraces the stones, the other touches or pulls a branch of the tree and the central one dances. The three figures are rarely illustrated all together (e.g. the ring of Arkhanes). In some specimens there are two and in some others only one. Sometimes the boetyl is presented without the tree (e.g. sealing 595-596 from Agia Triada, seals from Stratigraphic Museum). The worship of boetyls and sacred trees is known in the religions of the East [22] and in the rituals of primitive communities. The dancers who participate in these ceremonies feel an ecstasy which gradually increases. [23] Rituals of this type are usually considered part of the vegetation cycle and the purpose of their performance is the fertility of the earth. It seems that ecstatic dances were known in Minoan Crete and probably represented a myth. L. Lawler suggests that the dance of the ancient mariners which is mentioned in written sources has a Minoan prototype and it is figured on the gold rings with the ecstatic dance. [24]

1.4. Snake dance

Finds: Snake goddesses from Knossos. [25] The snake was considered sacred in Minoan Crete and it was used in the cult. [26] The idols which represent female figures (priestesses or goddesses) with snakes crawling around their arms, probably testify to the existence of an ecstatic dance of chthonic character. The fact that the Maenads used snakes during Dionysian festivals, in a similar way - as we can see from Dionysian scenes on classical vases - suggests the ecstatic nature of the dance. [27] It is noted that only women can participate, while in the ecstatic dance which was examined above, men play an important role during the ritual. This observation makes us conclude that the snake dance had a different character from the so called "ecstatic".

1.5. Orchesis for the goddess's epiphany

In this category we have assigned the golden ring from Isopata. [28] The epiphany of the goddess and the ecstatic dance of the worshippers are depicted on it, according to the majority of scholars. [29] The scene represents the religious gestures of the dancers after the epiphany. The goddess is illustrated in a smaller scale in the air.

1.6. Acrobatic orchesis

Finds: Sword from Mallia [30] seal from Knossos . Another seal with the same iconography is known from Mycenae. [31] Although acrobatics are not assigned in the field of orchesis nowadays, the acrobats were considered dancers and are often mentioned in the symposia in antiquity. [32] In ancient Egypt the ideogram of an acrobat was used to denote the verb “dance” [33]. Dancers-acrobats are also often depicted in funeral and religious processions. [34] Apart from the Egyptian evidence, Homer, in his description of Achilles’ shield, mentions the “kybisteteres” who dance in front of the circle at Ariadne’s “chores”. [35]

In Minoan Crete we are not able to define clearly the character of the acrobatic orchesis and its relation with the ritual, as in Egypt. But taking into consideration the ritual character of the bull-games, where the bull-leapers perform acrobatic movements, we can conclude that there is a close connection with religion. The acrobatics took place in the open air. The influence of Egypt in the formation of the dance is very probable if the flowers, which indicate the place of the performance on the seals, are papyrus.

1.7. Orchesis with attributes

Finds: Sealing from Agia Triada 485 H.M. [36] Seal from Vathia. A seal with the same iconography is known from Vapheio. [37] The sealing from Agia Triada is the only specimen where three figures are depicted with a free arrangement in space (just one figure is presented on the seals). The right figure holds a long stick with both hands in front of the chest. The other two make vivid gestures. The central figure wears a Minoan skirt, while the other two have hide skirts with tail, known from the Agia Triada sarcophagus. There is a conical cap on the central and right figure's head. The central figure is probably a woman, the others probably men. The dancing area is not indicated.

The man depicted on the seal from Vathia wears a long robe with horizontal and oblique bands. He also holds a type of awe [38] and he steps to the left, while he faces right. The woman on the seal from Vapheio wears a hide skirt and holds two sticks (?) in her raised hands. Evans suggests that these sticks are flutes [39] and that the woman performs an ecstatic dance. Because of the lack of sufficient evidence, it is not possible to connect this dance with specific ceremonies, as on other occasions.

2. Processional orchesis

In Minoan Crete few monuments are preserved with clear presentations of processions, accompanied by musical instruments.

2.1. Processions with offerings

Finds: Processional fresco from Knossos. [40] Fresco from Agia Triada, a small fragment of a steatite rhyton from Knossos. Processional frescoes with offerings are also known from Mycenaean Greece. [41]

In the well known processional fresco from Knossos which decorated the corridor of the west of the palace, young men are represented bringing vases as offerings to the goddess (or priestess). Recently, based on Evans' hypothesis, Boulotis proved that the goddess also receives a sacred robe. [42] Unfortunately the bad preservation of the fresco does not allow detailed analysis. Evans however, noted the differentiations of the clothes and suggested that musicians also participated in the procession. [43] In this restored part of the composition with the musicians, the figures are closer to each other and the edges of their clothes indicate long, ritual chitons. In the larnax from Agia Triada, the musicians wear the same robe. All these indications make it probable that the processions were accompanied by musical instruments. [44]

In the steatite rhyton from Knossos two men who are not close to each other, bring bowls in a processional way. Their movements are identical. The body has the typical attitude of adoration, so the man may participate in a religious procession, similar to the Processional fresco from Knossos.

In the fresco from Agia Triada, which is also not in good condition, a musician is presented, wearing the typical long robe and playing the lyre. Behind him another figure, dressed in the same way, holds over his shoulder two buckets at either end of a pole. The whole scene reminds one of parts of the bull sacrifice from the Agia Triada sarcophagus and especially the emptying of the blood into buckets. It is probable though, that this procession also has a sacrificial character. Finally, representations on seals and sealings with women holding a sacred robe or a double axe could be considered ritual processions. [45]

2.2. Military processions

Finds: Sealings from Knossos [46] 362, 260 H.M., Seal from Mavro Spelio Cemetery 1315 H.M. It seems that military processions with soldiers holding figure of eight shields, helmets and javelins were performed in Minoan Crete. This does not necessarily conflict with the peaceful character of Minoan civilisation. Military processions were mainly performed for exhibition of power or for respect to the dead at funerals. [47]

2.3. Funeral processions

The Minoan larnakes, in contrast to the Mycenaean ones, are rarely decorated with pictorial representations. The orchestric scenes are mainly of two kinds: mourners and chariot processions. There are also representations that cannot be assigned to these categories. Finds: Larnakes from Agia Triada, [48] Milatos, Knossos, Episkopi of Hierapetra, Zapher Papoura.

Chariot processions are represented on the short sides of the Agia Triada sarcophagus, and on the sarcophagi from Zapher Papoura and Episcapi. [49] On the last one, six men are figured in the chariot. A long shaft with a circular disc on its end is raised among them. It might be a ritual emblem that was used in funeral ceremonies. [50] Mourning is indicated only on the sarcophagus from Knossos, where two women are represented on one of the long sides. The gestures are reminiscent of those of mourners on Mycenaean sarcophagi [51]. Their hair also is uncombed and falls down on the shoulders. A curl is represented in front of the first woman's face.

On the long sides of the Agia Triada sarcophagus, the illustrated funeral sacrifices are accompanied by the lyre and double flute. Accompanied by the sounds of music, the women, who mainly had the responsibility for the sacrifices, probably performed rhythmical ritual movements. The Milatos sarcophagus is decorated with a male figure holding a figure of eight shield. Glotz suggested that the Kouretes' dance is here illustrated. [52] The evidence however is not sufficient to justify such a hypothesis.

2.4. Processions of rural character

All the evidence is illustrated on the Harvesters' Vase from Agia Triada. [53] The procession is crowded and has a distinctive arrangement. An old man in a scaly ritual cloak, probably a priest, leads the harvesters who follow, holding winnowing forks. The chorus is distinguished in the middle of the procession and consists of four men. One of them is playing the sistrum, while they are all singing.

3. Animal dances

There are many seals and sealings - especially those from Zakro [54] - illustrated with monsters, which are usually interpreted as the artist's mythical device. In some cases however, the figures are human and only the head reminds us of an animal or a bird. (E.g. seal from Knossos 1411 H.M. [55], sealing from Khania 2097. It is very probable that in these cases, priests or worshippers perform orchestic rituals while wearing masks [56]. Animal dances are also known from the East [57] and the later historical period [58].

From the above survey, we think that it became clear that the dance was an integral part of the ceremonies in Minoan times and was expressed in a variety of orchestic forms, according to the occasion. All the iconographical types that have been examined are not necessarily different dances. Some of them with few differentiations represent similar schemata of the same dance, but even these, which seem to be totally different, might belong to the same orchestic procedure.

Abbreviations

AAA	Αρχαιολογικά Ανάλεκτα εξ Αεηνών.
Acta Ath-4o	Function of the Minoan Palaces, Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 10-16 June 1984, edited by Hagg-Marinatos 1987.
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology.
Annuario	Annuario della regia scuola Archaeologica de Atene.
BSA	Annual of the British School of Athens.
CMS	Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel.

Notes

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3. L.B. Lawler, The Dance in Ancient Crete, Studies presented to David Moore Robinson, (Washington University 1951), with references to her articles on the subject. Of the same author, The Dance in Ancient Greece, (London 1964). [Greek translation. Ο χορός στην Αρχαία Ελλάδα έκδοση εκπαιδευτικού σωματείου ελληνικών χορών, Αθήνα 1984].
4. For a bibliography of the dance in general, see Άλκης Ράφτης, Ο κόσμος του ελληνικού χορού, (Αθήνα 1985), 233-235.
5. Idol from Kamilari: D. Levi, “La tomba à tholos di Kamilari presso a Festòs”, Annuario 39-40 (1961-62) 139-45, fig. 174a-b. Idol from Palaikastro: R.M. Dawkins, “Excavations at Palaikastro III”, BSA 10 (1903-4) 216-25, fig. 6. Fresco from Knossos: Evans, op.cit. (n.1.) 66-69, pl.xviii. Ring from Kalyvia: L. Savignoni, “Scavi e Scoperte nella Necropoli di Phaestos” Monumenti Antichi 14 (1904) 577-85, fig. 50. Ring from Arkhanes: J.A. Sakellarakis, “Minoan Cemeteries at Arkhanes”, Archaeology 20 (1967) 280 fig. 13. Ring from Sellopoulo: Popham M & H.W. Catling, “Sellopoulo Tombs 3 and 4. Two Late Minoan Graves near Knossos”, BSA 69 (1974) 195-258. Harvester’s Vase: J. Forsdyke, “The Harvester Vase of Hagia Triada, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes” 17 (1954) 1-9. The Hagia Triada Sarc.: R. Paribeni “Il Sarcophago Dipinto di Hagia Triada”, Monumeti Antichi 19 (1908) 60-86. Fresco from Hagia Triada: op.cit. 68, fig. 21.
6. I.A. Παπαποστόλου Τα Σφραγίσματα των Χανίων, (Αθήνα 1977), 69-85.
7. Lawler, The Dance in Ancient Crete 23. Όμηρος, Σ Ιλιάδας 590-606 Λουκιανός, Περί ορχήσεως 8. Αθήναιος V, 181β.
8. Emma Brunner-Traut, Der Tanz im Alten Agypten, (New York 1938).
9. Op.cit. (n.5)
10. P. Warren, “Circular Platform at Minoan Knossos”, BSA 79 (1984) 307-323.
11. D. Levi, Festos e la civiltà minoica (Incunabula Graeca 60, 1976), testo I, 96, Fig. 120, pls 1xviiia, 160b-c. Warren ο.π., 319.
12. Op.cit. (n.5)
13. Op.cit., 67
14. L.B. Lawler, “The Lily in the Dance”, American Journal of Philosophy 65 (1944) 75-80.
15. E.N. Davis, “The Knossos Miniature Frescoes and the Function of the Central Courts” in Acta Ath.-40, 158. N. Marinatos, “Public Festivals in the West Courts of the Palaces”, op.cit. 141. But these scholars however, justify their opinion considering as indications the quiet movement of the figures and their unwaved hair.
16. Davis op.cit. Marinatos op.cit.
17. Op.cit. (n.5)
18. CMS I, Nr 126, Nr 219.
19. D. Levi, “Le cretule di Haghia Triada” Annuario 8-9 (1925-26) 140, fig. 154 and 155, 143, fig. 159.
20. Warren op.cit. (n.2), 16, fig. 8, 9.
21. C. Sourvinou, “On the authenticity of the Ashmolean ring 1919. 56”, Kadmos 9-10 (1971) 60-69. Of the same author “On the lost “boat” ring from Mochlos”, Kadmos 12 (1973) 149-158.
22. A.J. Evans, “The Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult”, JHS 21 (1901) 130-135.
23. Warren op.cit. (n.2), 18.
24. L.B. Lawler, “The Dance of the Ancient Mariners”, American Philological Association. Transactions Proceedings 75 (1944) 27.
25. PM I 500-510.
26. J.D.S. Pendlebury, The Archaeology of Crete, (London 1939), 274. Picard op.cit. (n.2), 113-114.
27. L.B. Lawler, The Meanads, Memories of the American Academy in Rome 6 (1927) 69-112.
28. CMS II3 Nr 51 with selected bibliography.
29. Nilsson op.cit. (n.2), 280. B. Rutkowski, Cult places in the Aegean World, (Krakow 1972), 61, 206, 209, fig.

86.

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31. PM op.cit. 502, fig. 444.
32. Ξενοφώντα Συμπόσιο VII, 11.
33. W. Deonna, Le Symbolisme de l'acrobatie antique, (Collection Latomus IX. Bruxelles 1953), 80.
34. Op.cit., 7.
35. Op.cit. (n.7).
36. Sealing from Ag. Triada: op.cit. (n.19), 138. Sealing from Vathia: PM IV 414, fig. 343a and 946, fig. 914.
37. PM III 69, fig. 39.
38. Evans suggests an origin from the East PM IV 414-19, 946.
39. PM III 69.
40. Proc. fresco from Knossos: PM II 660-755, fig. 450, pls XXV-XXVII. Fresco from Ag. Triada: op.cit. (n.5) Rhyton from Knossos: PM II 752, fig. 486.
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42. Ch. Boulotis, Nochmals Zum Prozession fresco von Knossos: Palast und Darbringung von Prestige-Objekten, Acta Ath.-40, 145.
43. PM II 721-22, fig. 450 group A.
44. Similar processions are also known from Egypt. Brunner op.cit. (n.8), Abb. 3.
45. Warren op.cit. (n.2), 20.
46. Sealings from Knossos: PM I and III 313. Seal from Mavro Spelio: E.J. Forsdyke, "The Mavro Spelio Cemetery at Knossos" BSA 28 (1926-27) 263, pl. XIX VIIB5.
47. N. Marinatos, Minoan Sacrificial Ritual, (Stockholm 1986), 32-35.
48. From Ag. Triada op.cit. (n.5). From Milatos: Evans, op.cit. (n.22), 76, fig. 50 from Knossos: L. Morgan, "A Minoan Larnax from Knossos", BSA 82 (1987) 171-200. From Episkopi: A.Kanta, The Late Minoan III Period in Crete. SIMA 58 (Goteborg 1980), fig. 63 1-5. From Zapher Papoura: A. Evans, The Prehistoric Tombs of Knossos, (London 1906), fig. 26a.
49. Chariot procession is also illustrated on a larnax from Tanagra 8. Σπυρόπουλος, "Ανασκαφαί εις το μυκηναϊκόν νεκροταφείον της Τανάγρας" AAA 3 (1970) 184-197, εκ. 17.
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51. Σπυρόπουλος op.cit. (n.49).
52. Glotz op.cit. (n.2), 335.
53. Op.cit. (n.5). For different interpretations see S. Hood, The Arts in Prehistoric Greece, (Great Britain 1978), 145-146.
54. D.G. Hogarth, "The Zakro Sealing", JHS 22 (1902) 76-93.
55. Seal from Knossos, CMS II4, Nr 136. Sealing from Khania: op.cit. (n.6), 30, 42.
56. A.B. Cook, "Animal Worship in the Mycenaean Age", JHS 14 (1894) 81-169. Lawler, The Dance in Ancient Crete 33-34.
57. R. Barnett, A Catalogue of the Nimrud ivories with other examples of ancient Near Eastern ivories in the British Museum, (London 1975), 35.
58. Lawler, op.cit. (n.56).

Illustrations

- a: after Levi, Annuario 39-40 (1961-62) fig. 174a.
b, e, h, j: after Hallager, The Master Impression fig. 27b, h, d, j.
f, g: op.cit fig. 28d, h.
c: after CMS II3, Nr 51.
d: after PM IV fig. 443.
I: after CMS II4, Nr 136.

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