

The role and significance of dance in the Dionysian Mysteries

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of dance in the Dionysian cult of Classical Greece and, in particular, the significance of dance as a means of mental elevation in the Dionysian Mysteries. In classical times, the religious sentiment acted as a trigger for dancing. The function of dance was essential during the Dionysian Mysteries, and dance was not a series of simple movement of the legs, arms and body. It was an explosion of mental impulses – a mental response to a variety of religious sentiments. Thus, dance served as a means of expressing mental states and as a sign of religious faith and devotion through rhythmic movements. In the Dionysian cult, the honor and the rendering of respect to God was expressed in joyful dances, while the believers thought that they acquired healing properties through sacred fury, lawlessness and abolition of their moral inhibitions. With the help of orgiastic dances, the initiate was becoming “en-theos” (Greek: *ένθεος*, inspired, theopneustic), i.e. reaching a state of ecstasy and thus mental release. Dance played an important role in the Dionysian Mysteries and held a prominent position in the initiation of the believers; people felt completed and were mentally and physically perfected, purified and united with the Divine, gaining spiritual freedom and mental elevation.

KEY WORDS

dance, cult of Dionysus, Dionysian Mysteries, ancient Greece.

Introduction

In ancient Greece dance was part of the folkways; it was a ritual and was used as a means of protecting people and avoiding evil. Kraus described dance as a means of religious worship, a form of rite and direct communication with the gods [1]. In classical times, the Greeks ceased to worship animals and began to worship anthropomorphic deities in honor of whom they performed dancing festivals. There was no ancient rite without dancing, as this was the foundation of the ancient religion [2, 3]. At that time, people were dancing to plead, propitiate or please some divine entity or to acquire some animal properties by mimicking their movements [4]. The basic principle of dance was movement transmitted to the body by the mental forces which rule the human behavior [5]. Thus, dance as energy of semiological character, was a turning point towards the extra-human, the super-human and the Unknown [6]. Once the Greeks became able to conceive the idea of the powerful gods and the transcendental world, they sought help through secret religious rituals known as the “mysteries”.

The word *mystery* in ancient Greece meant the confidential, the secret and the unspeakable part of a rite or a cult, closed to uninitiated people [7]. Etymologically, the word derived from the verb *myein* (Greek: *Μυέιν*), meaning *to close* and referred mainly to the eyes and lips [7]. Those initiated

into the mysteries of the transcendent were forbidden to disclose them to the uninitiated. In this sense they preserved – at a symbolic level – their mouth and eyes closed; in other words, they were behaving as mutes and blinds when they were asked about what they saw and heard. The chorus in Bacchae says: “Let every lip be hushed in solemn silence; for I will raise a hymn to Dionysus, as custom aye ordains” [8].

The initiation rites in ancient times consisted of the preliminary rites of purification and the public preparatory sacrifices, followed by songs, dances and processions, and finally, the initiation. In the initiatory process of the mysteries, a kind of divine drama was used, “mobilizing” figurines of the deity, thereby attempting to bring man into contact with his divine virtue [9]. With the help of those rites, people went through a higher level of perception, were spiritually and mentally elevated, communicating with the divine spark that was hidden inside them, what the Greek ancestors called “daemon” [10]. The whole process constituted the initiation, namely the broadening of consciousness, and the approach of the hidden divine aspects of man [6]. During the mysteries, particular emphasis was given to the spiritual elevation of man: the aim was his spiritual completion and perfection through cleansing and purification, in order for the initiate to attain love and spiritual freedom through his soul. Thus, the conception of the notion of gods, spirits

and of a transcendent world that exists beyond the sensory abilities of man, were the necessary conditions for the existence of the mysteries [9]. Dance played a decisive role in this process, as it was an integral part of the mysteries [3]. Lucian testifies that there was no rite and mystery that did not involve dancing [11].

However, the basic component of performing the mysteries was the circle of the initiates [12]. The mysteries consisted of four elements: the mystic (Greek: *μυστικόν*, *mystikon*), the sacrifice, the dances of mimetic representations and the announcement of the sacred speech of immortality. In these secret cults, into which one had to follow this specific ritual in order to be initiated, dance had always played an active role. The follower of this cult was called "Mystic" (Greek: *Mystes*), and the person that introduced him to it was called the "Initiator" (Greek: *Mystagogos*) [7]. Each mystic community had common meals, dances and rites, where people who joined the same dance and participated in the same proceedings felt united with one another forever [12]. Dance was sacred; it was a prayer, a rite; it was perfection. "Tetelestai" (*It is finished*) cried the mystic who had been initiated and performed the dance through which "God" had been revealed to him. The area around the altar was purified by symbolic steps and movements performed by the circle of dancers around it. Typical are the words of the heroine in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, who says: "Close to the altar we will set up a dance around" [13]. Dance was a way of praying, of uniting with the Divine and of being purified. Through dance, people were completed and were mentally and physically perfected in order to purify themselves and unite with the Divine, gaining spiritual freedom [14]. Among the most important mysteries in which dance played a significant role in believers' initiation were the Dionysian Mysteries.

God Dionysus

The ancient Greeks worshiped Dionysus, god of wine and entertainment [15], who was associated with the experience of intoxication, delirium and flushing [16]. According to the myth, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele, daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes.

Dionysus was the god of vegetation, the vines and generally the juices that gave life to plants during the hot months of the year. His cult began in northwest Asia Minor, Lydia and Phrygia of Hellespont. It had already been known and spread to Thrace in prehistoric times and from there passed to Greece, along with other Thrace-Phrygian cults that existed under the shadow of the Olympic religion during the historic times. Dionysus was still "the psychopompos (leader of the souls), the divine musician, the master of ecstasy, the shepherd calling people's souls back to light; he was the spiritual vibration awakening all the hidden forces, vibrating them with his life and joining them in a sacred dance" [17]. There were three main forms in which Dionysus appeared in his cult. In his first form as a fertility god and protector of crops and vines, he was symbolized by the phallus, the tree (hence the epithet *dendrites*- Greek word for tree: *dendro*) or the bull. His believers associated this form as a tree god and a god of the plants, with their wish to return to the "animalistic passion" of nature, away

from the constraints of rationalization [18]. This was affirmed also in ancient Greek literature, where Dionysus was characterized as "the beginning of animal life, bull and tavorfagos (meaning *bull eater*); "the prey and the hunter, the unbridled power that man envies animals and asks to absorb and unite with it" [8, 19]. In his second form he was the so-called "enthusiastic" Dionysus, who brought the symbols of the thyrsus and the torch, while his followers – in mythology – were the Maenads, Bacchantes, Thyiades, Lines and Vassarides. In his third and oldest form he was an entity of the underworld who bore the title *Zagreus* (the Great Hunter). He was the son of the infernal Zeus and Persephone.

Through ecstatic music and dance Dionysus brought together the existence of his mortal believers with its elusive depths, initiating people in the mystic games of the gods [8]. The festivals that were held in his honor were perpetual feasts, where everyone got drunk, sang and danced, trying to communicate with him in this way [14]. The followers of the god consisted of groups of Satyrs, Sileni and Maenads, who ran to the woods and dells, played music, danced, drank wine and achieved sacred fury. In addition, their enthusiasm and joy also infected all those who they met on their way [2] (Figure 1, 2).



Figure 1. Dionysus and two dancing Maenads. Black-figure amphora, c. 530 B.C., Paris, Cabinet des Medailles, 222



Figure 2. Altar and idol of Dionysus Lynaius with Maenads around. Attica red-figure kylix, exterior, c. 480 B.C., Makron. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, 2290

Maenads

The Maenads represented the feminine element of Dionysus's company. They were crowned with vine leaves or ivy and held a thyrsus (a pole wrapped in vine leaves or ivy) in their hand – like the god did – and sometimes snakes or other animals.

The ancient Greek tragedians, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, inform us about the Maenads, Dionysus's mates [8], raging, and disporting in the mountains, as the cult of Dionysus, and thus the presence of the Maenads, were among the most important features of the ancient Greek religion [8, 19]. Throughout Greece the Maenads participated continuously in the festivals in honor of Dionysus, while their epithets varied from place to place: In Attica, they were known from the homonymous work of Euripides, as *Bacchae* (referred to as followers of Dionysus adoring him, gripped by divine fury and madness) [20]; in Delphi, where, according to Pausanias, "they walk capering in the night", they were referred to as *Thyiades* (from the Greek verb: θύω, μανίζω, thyo, manezo, which means go mad, rage) [21]; in Peloponnese they were called *Dysmaenae* (which means over-mad women or women very likely to go mad); in Macedonia they were the *Mimallonidae*, in Thrace *Bassaridae* and *Aedonidae* (with violent movements as the basic feature of their dance) [10]. The most "enthusiastic" organs were the flute, the drums, the gongs and the cymbals [22].

Emmanuel, considering all the relevant reports and findings, concludes that the Maenads were playing flutes and drums, wore long robes that waved in their movements, while their dance was synonymous with ecstatic fury that "transposed them elsewhere" [23]. It is important to mention here the Bacchic dance that occurs in the Palatine Anthology. There, a group of dancers led by a Bacchic rhythm, performed ecstatic movements, while the Thyiades danced on a tumulus, beating drums to the accompaniment of the flute [24]. The key step of the Maenad dancing was originally zestful walking, which was becoming a run as the ebullience of the dance increased. The direction of the dancers was mostly forwards, backwards and often rotations on the spot. Some additional figures were the capers and the bending of the body, while the hands had more freedom in their movements. Also, the dancers seemed to start with their hair well-groomed and, as dance increased in rhythm and passion, their hair slipped and went back and forth in the air, a fact that defined the enthusiasm of dance [25, 26].

Jeanmaire argues that Bacchic dance was mostly characterized by the body and the head attitudes rather than the steps only. A Bacchante had to lift his right foot as he lifted the thyrsus in his right hand [8]. This "bouncing" dance led one's body to be dominated by a bouncing pulse (a feature of ecstasy), detached from himself and seduced by his indomitable vehemence [27].

The dancers manifested a rare hyperactivity and were full of hallucinations and disorders of memory, judgment and vision. Drunkenness and ecstasy led their steps, and frenzy and delirium were accompanied by cymbals, tambourines and Lydian flutes [28]. Their dance was sometimes savage and frightening to ordinary people, while their insanity led them to outrageous acts [29, 30]. The actual behavior of these women could be defined as an expression of a crazy mind in over-excitation. Towards this direction leads also the etymology of their name, since "*maenas*" means mania and furiousness, while the verb *bacchaevo* (to revel) means to celebrate the feast of Bacchus, fall into a religious hysteria dance, get excited, rage, get drunk [7, 8]. It is said that the Maenads' fury knew no bounds, because during the

phase of Dionysian intoxication they used to tear apart animals and eat their flesh raw [8]. Not even men escaped their murderous absurdity, as shown by the myth of Orpheus who was torn by the maddening Bacchante.

As regards the term "*enthusiasm*" mentioned above, there have been various opinions from different scholars. According to Mouratidou, enthusiasm "derives from *En-theos-iasmos* which ultimately can be attributed to 'cure of God'" [31]. Lekatsas says that enthusiasm is one of the ways we are united with God and the basic means of it are music and dance. For Jeanmaire, what the ancients called enthusiasm was the intense feeling of personality alienation and the ego's occupation by a foreign person [10]. Finally, Plato describes enthusiasm as a condition that can lead to clairvoyance (Plato, *Timaeus*). "The Bacchic and manic state has augury inside it" says Teiresias in *Bacchae*, and indeed much augury, because "When God floods the bodies, makes the beaten from his mania to prophesy the future" [8].

Sileni and Satyrs

Apart from the Maenads Dionysus's escort also included creatures of special kind (half man and half animal) called Satyrs and Sileni, who were originally distinct from each other, but later became confused and matched. Sophocles wants Satyrs to look like goats in appearance and their lustful nature [32]. Euripides in *Bacchae* [8] shows satyrs set up a dance in fury, while in *Iphigenia in Aulis* they are presented with boughs, wreaths and herb garlands, attending the feast of the gods and the wine of Bacchus [13].

The Sileni differed in appearance from the Satyrs and looked very similar to the Centaurs, as they had ears, tails, hooves and sometimes even horse feet. In Homer, they are presented with manes and hairy bodies, while they are often depicted dancing with the Maenads, or working as musicians, accompanying their songs with a lyre or a double pipe [33]. They were later linked to the Dionysian cult and its rites and were the secondary spirits of water, forests and springs. These rites caused seizures of ecstasy and enthusiasm to the believers. For the believer, ecstasy was a prerequisite to reach enthusiasm. Moreover, in the Dionysian cult, as in other cults too, the ultimate aim was the union of the believer with the god [34]. Through these rites, the believers thought that they were possessed by their god and were transformed into sacred animals, goats and horses, or that they imitated the Sileni, Satyrs, Nymphs and Maenads [35, 36, 37]. These rites are known for their ecstatic fury as well as for arrhythmia and improvised dancing movements, which may, according to Emmanuel, be paralleled with the modern entertainment dance [23] (Figure 3).

Mysteries and rites in honor of Dionysus

With the help of the sources and ancient texts, it seems that dancing was an integral part of the cult of Dionysus. This was confirmed by major festivals in honor of Dionysus, in which dance played an important role. Particularly, at the feast of *Oschoforia*, part of the rite was a chorus of youngsters led by two boys holding vine branches. In *Linea* the main feature was the dance of the Lin-maenads, who fell



Figure 3. Dionysus in sacred drunkenness, with Satyrs of his escort. Red-figure kylix interior c. 480 B.C. Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, 576

into ecstasy, as shown by the disheveled Maenads of these festivals. Dance had also a dominant role in other festivals of Dionysus such as the “Anthestiria” and the “Minor and Major Dionysia” [9].

The cult of Dionysus was therefore synonymous with dance and took place in the forests and mountains during the night hours, attracting both men and women [38]. The key components of these orgiastic festivals in his honor were the sound of drums, the brass cymbals, the flute, the clapping, as well as the cries, furious dance, jumping and manic tosses of hands, while music erupted suddenly in the silence of the mountains and the night [22]. This nightly worship of the god was the reason why he bore the epithet “Nightly” [39]. Euripides calls Dionysus a “celebrating god leading the dance” – a dance that consists of convulsive movements (with pauses, tightening and relaxing of the muscles and a few figures) [8, 10, 27]. Finally, another epithet of the god was *Bromius* [20], because the festivals and the rituals performed in his honor were noisy (*Bromius* comes from the verb *bromo* which means to echo, clatter, create noise) [7].

Dances and festivals in Dionysus’s honor expressed his orgiastic nature and led his believers to fury, enthusiasm, ecstasy and psycho-frenzy consternations. Dionysus was a cause of joy for mortals as shown in references from Homer and Hesiod [40, 41]. He made all sorrows disappear, brought sleep and forgetfulness of daily suffering, and made the soul grow “when the vine bow came across it” [8, 42]. He made his believers possessed and excited by fury, drunkenness, and dancing madness. No one could resist the scary dance that threw everyone into the most terrible consternation, even the most logical and serious individuals, who left themselves in the end to be enraptured despite their resistance [22]. This led to the Dionysian choral fury that brought all hidden forces of the unconscious world to the forefront of consciousness, in order to be purified under the sunlight and become part of an integrated existence [18].

Hence, the worship of Dionysus was associated both with vegetation festivals and the sacred fury caused by wine, ecstasy and dance, since ecstasy was the result of the frantic dance. Dodds understands “ecstasy” as a situation of getting out of the self, but also as a profound change of personality [5]. Correspondingly, Kakridis argues that what characterizes the Dionysian religion is ecstasy, getting out of the self, not only with the help of wine, but also through passionate dance [35]. The ecstatic man is transported to the world of

the spirits and the dead, and communicates with the spirit that seizes him. Thus, Dionysus was worshiped as the initiator of ecstasy and of supreme exaltation, and this is why his main epithet was “Bacchus or Iacchus”, meaning a god in the state of fury, frenzy and savagery [8, 22].

However, Dionysus was also the cause of fury and its redeemer. Hence his believers also called him “*Lysius*”, referring to the ecstatic-cathartic nature of the Dionysian dance, during which people lose their temporary earthly identity and then are redeemed [27, 43, 44]. Their phobias were cured, people were redeemed from the anxieties and troubles of everyday life through dance and feast, while all the stress caused by soul and mind disappeared [45]. Those afflicted by psychophrenic disorders were considered rapped by the god, who had chosen to communicate with them and, through this communication, clean and heal them. Moreover, the followers of Dionysus were able to speak quite freely, because the god was able to release the language from their inhibitions and give complete freedom in speech [46]. Therefore the “*Lysius* or *Lyaius*” Dionysus had the capacity to treat fury through its nourishing; in other words, he was, a *fury redeemer-god* just because he was a “*fury giver-god*” [8]. According to another version, his classification as *Lysius* was associated with his divine ability to redeem [7].

The main feature of this cult was ecstasy, unusual in the official religion, and the ritual dance, which had been customary in many previous local cults associated with vegetation [47]. It is worth noticing that the cult of Dionysus was also followed in Delphi, where during the winter months the *Apollonian hymn* (paean) hushed and the *Dionysian dithyramb* sounded. In addition, in Delphi, on the slopes and peaks of Parnassus, every two years the *Dionysian orgies* took place. They were rites or ceremonies which offered the believers the charm of ecstatic worship and also animated the mystical powers of vegetation [17]. The believers held a simple reed, a pine twig or flexible stems, which they waved at the brisk pace of music and dance [10].

It is known that the women of Attica who were about to attend the festival of Parnassus were known as *Thyiades*, *Maenads* or *Bacchae*. The name Maenads (mad or furious) derived from their appearance during the celebration of the orgies; they were also called the Bacchae, because they were followers of Dionysus, who had the epithet Bacchus. Plato in *Phaedo* says that “The thyrsus-bearers are many, but the mystics few”, to show that in the initiation rites there were few attendees who could be initiated [48]. Thus, the Dionysian rites performed before the vernal resurrection of nature in the heart of winter, in early December, were attended almost exclusively by women [49].

The women who participated in the rituals started their march all together and, on their way, performed ritual dances, making stops in intermediate towns, a fact that contributed to the growth of vegetation. In Delphi, they met the women of Phocis and all, at night, holding a torch in one hand and a thyrsus in the other, spread out on the slopes of Parnassus [50]. The glowing of the torches in the winter darkness and the sound of drums and flutes that accompanied dance, often led to ecstasy [16]. Euripides, in *Bacchae*, refers to the phenomenon of *alpinism* or the *oreivasia*, during which every two years the Maenads resorted to the

mountains in a state of ecstasy through music and orgiastic dances, holding sticks crowned with ivy, snakes and deer, and tearing up any animal found in front them [7, 8]. In this situation the Maenads dismembered the first goat they met on their way, referred to as *omophagion* (raw food). They believed that the animal was an incarnation of god Dionysus. The meat of the animal gave the eater the power of the god. By devouring it the Maenads were “enthaees” (Greek: *ἐνθαιες*, inspired, theopneustic), a fact that provided them with a bliss unknown to other cults [51].

Conclusions

It is, therefore, absolutely clear that the main feature of the Dionysian Mysteries was ecstasy. The women of Attica who were to take part in religious mysteries were performing the ritual dance that contributed to the success of vegetation. In Delphi, they met the women of Phocis and all together, through the night, arrived at a state of ecstasy by dancing and becoming the Maenads. The structure of the rites in the Dionysian Mysteries was such as to elevate man from the earthly to the divine state, where he would be completely detached from the bonds of mortal thoughts and actions, something that was achieved through ecstasy and dance [52]. The flute, the drums and the cymbals, the shouts of joy and excitement, the stamping of the feet, cheerfulness, furious enthusiasm and dance were the main features of the Dionysian Mysteries. And while all the cultic dances in Greece in honor of gods or heroes were simple religious events, the great Dionysian dance in Athens was the only one that evolved from a cultic event to a theatrical drama [10]. Apparently the Dionysian Mysteries were of particular importance and value in the classical period. Dance had a semiotic character since people were trying to succeed to their elevation through it and their – conscious or unconscious – contact with the Divine. Believers, while dancing, felt the *aidemon* fear (Greek: *αἰδήμων*, demure) that is born in the soul of every man when he approaches supernatural forces. The mimic dancing movements played an important role in the initiation into the Dionysian Mysteries because through it the “non-apparent” was revealed to men.

It can be concluded that the metaphysical concerns of believers have been always associated with dancing and music. They were the most popular arts of their times and continue to play an important role in human life. Their necessity in emotional elevation and balance appears even in the events they accompanied in almost all the Dionysian scenes. Hence, the mental deliverance attained through the participants’ ritual dance, music and involvement in the mystic religious rituals, was in fact the whole philosophy of that era.

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