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FEMALE PYRRHIC DANCERS IN ANCIENT GREECE

Key words: dance, orchesis, πυρρίχιος, πυρρικήστριες, worship.

ABSTRACT

Ancient Greeks considered the art form of dance the greatest possession and for this reason dance always was of tremendous importance in their lives. They understood ‘music’, i.e. the art of the Muses, not in its literal sense: making of musical sound, but as a holistic concept of music, poetry and dance, which were regarded as components of the same substance. Music also included education of the mind as well as the essence of civilization, both of which were exclusive privileges of humankind. An important dance for the ancient Greeks was the war dance *πυρρίχιος*, an imitative dance that re-enacted combat movements of defense and attack during battle, either with or without the use of weapons. Despite the fact that most historical information is concerned with the *πυρρίχιος* as a male dance, the available data confirm the significance of this orchesis as it was also being performed by women. According to the accounts of ancient historians and studies of vase paintings, the female *πυρρίχιος*, was performed in honour of certain gods and goddesses and involved a worshipping element; it was performed at symposiums for the participants’ pleasure and entertainment and it was taught at dance schools for didactic purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Dance and music in antiquity was one of the most important elements in the life and education of the Greeks.

Most researchers dealing with the study of dance as well as more specifically with the orcheses of ancient Greece, discuss mainly the war dances, i.e. all dances performed with weapons, which imitate combat movements. There are dances executed without the use of weapons, but these remain in far greater minority.

War orcheses were accompanied by songs, poems and odes, whose purpose was to arouse fearlessness and courage, as well as foster an ardent instinctive spirit. The poems often scorn cowardice and praise valour, so that at all times the minds of

the young men were imbued with the proper sense of military behaviour. The intense physical training throughout the year was so grueling that war was often perceived as a respite. The preparations for war involved sacrifices, dances and hymns performed with the accompaniment of flute music as well as rhythmical walking in perfect alignment [6].

Thucydides [31] makes a reference to a war dance of the Laconians during which they chanted war songs ‘*πολεμικών νόμων*’ accompanied by many flutists while executing steps in an unbroken line, representing a large body of soldiers advancing to attack ‘*Ὅπερ φιλεί τα μεγάλα στρατόπεδα εν ταις προσόδοις ποιείν*’.

Plato [24] divides the orchesis into two categories: the one he terms serious dance, which

portrays fine and noble physiques; and the other which depicts ugly figures in all their aggressiveness. In the former, the youths trained to the peace loving ‘*ἀπόλεμος μούσα*’, while in the latter they imitated combat drills of defense and attack. However, the accuracy of the movements depended on how well the dancers were able to emulate the purity of body and soul. For this reason, it was essential that the young people were taught both orcheses under the conditions set by the philosopher.

Apart from the execution of war dances by men, ancient sources inform us about the war dances of women [9]. In ancient Sparta, Lycurgus considered education his biggest and most important task. Since women were often left on their own due to the military undertakings of their men the eminent legislator put every conceivable care and consideration into their education. It was imperative that women trained to have strong constitutions in order to facilitate the birth of healthy, beautiful offspring. Womanliness and feminine nature had to be eliminated, for this reason Lycurgus imposed measures that required maidens to take part in rituals naked, dancing and singing at festivals before audiences comprising young men. The intention of the young girls dancing naked was to accustom them to simplicity and to preserve them in good health [28]. Plato [25] informs us that also in Athens war songs and dances for women were different from those for men; however, unlike their Spartan counterparts, the Athenian women were taught the use of weaponry and horse riding.

PYRRHIC DANCE

The most significant of the war dances was the *πυρρίχιος*, which originated in ancient Greece. The opinions of ancient Greek scholars, however, vary as to the precise place of its origin. Plato [26] considered this dance an orchesis of imitation, which re-enacted a battle. The dance is comprised of the following parts: ‘*ἐκνευσις*’(ekneusis) – turns with the head inclined in a position that implies avoiding being hit; ‘*ἐκπήδησις*’(ekpidisis) – jumps and leaps; ‘*ταπεινώσις*’(tapinosis) – slackening and relaxation; and ‘*ὑπειξις*’(ipixis) – dancers’ leave-taking [27]. He further elaborates that this dance was considered on Crete to have been initiated by the Curetes; in Sparta it was believed to be invented

by the Dioscuri; and in Athens by the goddess Athena.

Dionysus of Hallicarnassus [7] regarded the dance as being of Greek origin and claimed that it was performed by the goddess Athena during the Battle of the Titans, where she danced wearing her armour, triumphant, immersed in glory. In addition, he wrote that even earlier the dance was probably performed by the Curetes, whose task was to safeguard baby Zeus from his father Cronus.

The geographer Strabo held the same view [30]. He regarded the dance as a military orchesis, since its objective was to prepare for war with weapons such as crossbows. The chronicler considered the dance’s founder to be Thales (*Θάλητας*), although he also expressed the view that the founder was Pyrrichus (*Πύρριχος*) from Crete: ‘*η δε ενόπλιος όρχησις στρατιωτική, και η πυρρίχη δηλοί και ο Πύρριχος, ον φασίν ευρετήν είναι της τοιαύτης ασκήσεως των νέων και τα στρατιωτικά*’.

In Pindar’s comments [22], the music of Castor (*Καστόρειον μέλος*) is referred to for the first time, which was a tune of a Laconian military march [11]. The Pyrrhic dance was accompanied by music, founded by the Dioscuri: Castor and Pollux. According to the Pindar’s excerpt, the Curetes were the creators of the dance and were the first to perform it; Pyrrichus the Cretan improved it and Thales composed it based on the hyporcheme (*υπόρχημα*).

Lucian [16] was of the opinion that it was Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, who devised this kind of dance named Pyrrhic. What is more, Neoptolemus was called Pyrrhus (*Πύρρος*), meaning blonde haired. According to the Sophist Lucian, Achilles’ son was a hero who was well-versed in the art of orchesis and who excelled as a dancer in this particular dance. When Achilles heard of his son’s achievement he was especially pleased and took pride in his beauty, grace and skill. The Greeks believed that Neoptolemus’ dancing skills made a contribution to the siege and bringing about the ultimate destruction of the city of Troy.

The orchesis achieved a great prominence throughout antiquity and in Sparta [4] it was revered as a State dance, which was preserved for many centuries. In the 6th century B.C. it was introduced to Athens and performed at important festivals, including the Great and Lesser Panathenaic, where it was danced by adolescents under their patrons’ care [32] and later on developed into a dance of worship in honour of the

god Dionysus, where the dancers depicted events from the god's life [12].

FEMALE PYRRHIC DANCERS

Not only did men and adolescents perform this particular dance, but also female dancers [4], called *πυρριχίστριες* whose presence was also of major significance. Indeed, at this point it is necessary to briefly describe the legend connected with the dance origins. It was the goddess Rhea, mother of Zeus and wife of Cronus, who became so impressed with the art of dance that she taught it to the Cretan Curetes who were her priests. The young warriors, through their unceasing war dance saved Zeus from his father's wrath; and for this reason the god rightly considered them his saviours [15]. Rhea had assigned the care of the newborn infant to the Curetes, who in order to drown out the baby's cries performed the war dance taught to them by the goddess herself, which was wild and clamorous. Jumping around, they gave out loud war cries while clashing their spears and shields together. Later they became the priests of Zeus and along with their descendents performed this war dance as part of a worshipping ritual.

An important account of the Pyrrhic dance is given in the legend about the birth of the goddess Athena, daughter of Zeus and Metis. When Zeus learnt from Uranus and Gaea that Metis would bear him first Athena who would resemble him in mind and then also a son who would threaten to supplant him, Zeus swallowed Metis and kept her inside of him. In this way, when the time came for the births, Zeus commanded either Prometheus or Hephaestus to strike him with an axe and open his head up from where the goddess Athena sprang [10] *πυρριχίζουσα*, e.g. dancing the Pyrrhic dance [14], executing rhythmic movements and imitating an attack or defense in battle. The goddess Athena fully dressed in her shining, gold battle armour performed the dance, which was the dance of victory. It symbolized the struggle and the just rewards of earthly life. The female Pyrrhic dancers also performed their dance at the Panathenaic Festival, which represented the notion of victory [23].

In addition to the dance being performed at the Panathenaia in honour of the goddess Athena, it was also often presented by female Pyrrhic dancers at symposiums. A most significant account is that

by Xenophon [33], who described an afternoon with the Thracians, Aenianians and Magnesians and the manner in which their preparations for battle were combined with songs and dances. More specifically, the scene opens with young men dancing to the accompaniment of a paeon played on the flute, and sung by the Thracians. One of the dancers falls down and pretends to have been fatally wounded; this is followed by the other dancers lifting him in their arms as though he were dead. The best soldier who was also considered to be the best dancer [17], after taking the weapons of the person next to him, started the rhythmical movements while singing the *Sitalkas* (*Σιτάλκα*), which was a Thracian war song in honour of the king of the same name. In addition, the Aenianians and the Magnesians danced the *carpaea* (*καρπαία*), a dance that depicted the stealing of cattle. After the dance, a Mysian (*Μύσος*) performed a war dance with acrobatic movements, imitating the way he defended himself against two men with the use of his shield; he finished his performance with the Persian dance *oklasma* (*όκλασμα*), which was also a war dance. The Mantineans (*Μαντινείς*) were reported to be dancing fully armed while singing a paeon to the battle rhythm of the flute, a theme that brings to mind the dances in the processions honouring the gods. The scene closes with a female Pyrrhic dancer partially armed, making an impression with her magnificent dance.

The representation on a fragment of red-figure alabastron [1, 3] similar to the Megairas painter, 470 B.C. [2] provides significant data on the execution of the dance. On the A side two females, one a flutist and the other a Pyrrhic dancer are depicted. Both women are at a symposium and the flutist is sitting facing right, playing a double-flute. The Pyrrhic dancer is executing the dance with her head turned in the opposite direction to her body. She is wearing a tunic and her armour consists of an Attic helmet and a round shield, which she is holding in her left hand. Her dance movements reveal that she is maintaining a defensive stance while at the same time she is ready to attack. The performer is executing an imitation dance since she is re-enacting the various scenes of a battle at different chronological times.

Symposiums are thus presented in this depiction where the female Pyrrhic dancer holds an important position. With this dance the female dancers and musicians both entertained and aroused the men participating in the symposiums. It must be

noted, however, that in all the surviving representations of female Pyrrhic dancers, their performance is an imitation and consequently in contrast to the male Pyrrhic dancers there are no realistic elements in their expression of passion, struggle, and combat since the female dancers had never taken part in or experienced an actual battle.

Poursat [29] has conducted significant research on the presence of female Pyrrhic dancers at symposiums and dance rooms [34]. In his study he recorded the figures in the following scenes: a female Pyrrhic dancer; a female flutist and a female Pyrrhic dancer; a female flutist, a female Pyrrhic dancer with men watching them; a female flutist and a female Pyrrhic dancer among other female dancers. All the figures have the common element of an armed female Pyrrhic dancer, performing the *πυρρίχιος* at times fully or half naked [8]. The chronological period of most of the representations is not very long and extends between 470 and 400 B.C. Furthermore, it has not been ascertained if this time period coincides with the initial appearance of the female Pyrrhic dance or whether it had survived an earlier form and was thus presented somewhat differently.

Not only was the female Pyrrhic dance related to the birth of the goddess Athena and performed at symposiums and in dance rooms, but its presence was also significant for the veneration of the goddess Artemis, who was worshipped in all regions of the Hellenistic world with these dances being performed in her honour. The dance *kordax* (*κόρδαξ*) was performed at the Temple dedicated to her in Helida; at the Temple of Artemis Limnatis groups of young girls sang and danced in her honour; in Sparta maidens performed ecstatic dances at the goddess' temple; at the Temples of Artemis Munichias [18] and Vrauronias in Attica, the young females danced in honour of the goddess as a plea for fertility [13, 20, 21]. According to tradition, the daughters of the god of war, Ares, the Amazons, founded the goddess' temple in Ephesus [19], where statues of wounded Amazons were erected in classical antiquity. The Amazons [5] danced a war dance similar to or perhaps even the same as the Pyrrhic dance, called the *prylin* (*πρύλιν*), *περί πρύλιν ωρχήσαντο*. Firstly, the dancers were armed holding shields and then they continued dancing in a circular formation from the goddess's temple, to the accompaniment of small, thin flutes *‘ὕπηεισαν δε λίγεια λεπταλέον σύριγγες’*.

On a red figure pyxis from 440 B.C. in the National Museum of Naples (H3010) a female Pyrrhic dancer is depicted in front of the temple of Artemis, dancing towards the shrine where the statue of the goddess can be found, while wearing the Attic helmet and holding a round shield and a spear in a horizontal position. She is depicted in a defensive stance with her legs in a wide stride while at the same time she is ready to attack; other female figures are also present.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the female Pyrrhic dance, according to the preserved written sources and figures appeared in themes related to the goddess Athena, the worship of the goddess Artemis, at symposiums where they were performed with the aim of entertaining the participants and as part of dance instruction where the women were taught and trained in war dances. It is apparent from the study of vase paintings [29] that the execution of the dance is a purely individual act, which does not require the presence of the opponent, whose being is usually imagined. Even when two female Pyrrhic dancers appear in a representation, they never execute the *orchesis* simultaneously, but each waits her turn. In sum, the female Pyrrhic dance in ancient Greece was a noteworthy *orchesis* used for entertainment and teaching purposes, as well as displaying characteristics of worship, being performed in honour of gods and goddesses.

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