

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ROMAN DANCE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Ancient Roman dance had its origins in religious rite, in the early Republic, and in that resembled both Greek and Etruscan dance, the two regional traditions from which the Romans first inherited their own skills in this art. Throughout the millennium of Roman history, however, dance rarely occupied the central position familiar to it in its regional neighbors. With the exception of its use in ritual, the dance came on in ancient Rome as an inferior human action, typically associated with burlesque or licentious behavior, and as such came to an undignified end with the strictures applied to it by Christian theologians in the later centuries of the Empire.

Dance as religious ritual in Rome In the relatively 'rustic' age of the Roman Republic, through the Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.E.), dance played a part in the countryside ceremonies in celebration of seasonal return and good harvest. In the ceremonies of the Lupercalia semi nude rural dancing processions could be found crossing the land--we talk of a Roman culture which was still almost entirely agricultural. In the Ambarvalia, groups of young dancers could be found crossing fields and villages, celebrating the energies of springtime. (Ample vase paintings remain, to illustrate the importance of these deeply rural events, which cut into the social fabric at a level far deeper than the rather mechanized system of the Olympian Gods, as the Roman had translated them from Greece.) We are in an era, here, where unique historical conditions promoted ceremonial dances by the elders, and even by high priests wearing full battle armor, in organized promptings of a rich harvest.

Dance legend There was the current legend that the founder of the Roman Republic, Romulus, had instituted a bacchanalian dance which mimed the rape of the Sabine virgins, as a cautionary action to remind the Romans not to let such vicious action repeat itself. Finally, the use of masks in the theater of Roman comedy meant that much of the expressive burden of the drama had to be carried by gesture and ritual--dance of the body. Dance served thus as a necessary signifier in a ritual culture.

Dance as entertainment Dancers in Roman culture, like actors in Roman comedy, were for the most part scorned and marginalized members of society, treated as vulgar producers of entertainment. When you thought of dancers you thought of hired entertainers at festivals or noblemen's get togethers, or, say, at orgies like that of Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*. On such occasions dance served as burlesque and frequently lascivious fascination for the male libido. The guys would lean back on their triclinia, slurp their Falernian, and ogle to the ladies from Etruria, Syria, or even Black Africa. The same male and often patrician audience would commonly patronize the Circus Maximus, City Center's entertainment hot spot, for such entertainment as tight rope walking, or dancing on elephant backs--that is, on the backs of elephants who had been given stimulants sufficient to set them too into a dancing mode. From such high jinks, the reputation of dancing, throughout Roman culture, maintained its status as the dangerous amusement of fools, though that amusement remained seductive to some, and in Augustan Rome one of the most popular entertainments was the pantomime, in which a masked pair would dance and act out in gesture, carrying on an enchanted mute dialogue with one another. Though the always sober Cicero observed that 'nemo fere saltat sobrius, nisi forte insanit,' 'no one in his right mind dances, unless perhaps he is truly insane,' there was an evolving middle class out there which found entertainment dancing one of the pleasures of life.

Christianity and dancing While Jewish practice included celebratory dancing, as at the Festival of Tabernacles, the early Christian fathers, from the second century B.C.E., were critical of dancing, and avoided it. This attitude was not without exceptions, and the Fathers were well aware of examples like David, the King and Dancer who occupied the eminence of the earliest Christian tradition. It was not until later in its history, from the Protestant Reformation on, that Christian thinking turned against dancing as diabolical. It is worth noting that nowhere in antiquity was couples dancing, 'cheek to cheek,' even imagined.

Roman kinesthetic The kinesthetic of Roman culture contrasts with that of its Greek forerunners. The difference in the two cultures is evident in their architectures: Roman arches, temples, aqueducts, roads are all built of concrete, massive and forceful testimonies to the power of the state that funded them; Greek temples, shrines, city layouts, garments, all testify to a culture drawn to the fluid and flexible. It is in this optic, then, that we might want to view the Roman attitude toward dance. For the Romans, except in the earlier period of the Republic, when something like a genuinely rustic ethos prevailed, the organic movements of the body were hardly a source of aesthetic celebration. One has but to look at the portrait sculptures of the first Roman centuries to appreciate the stress on formality, dignity, restraint, even harshness. Vase paintings and murals--such as we see from the walls of Pompeii and Herculaneum--make plain that the Romans could excel in depicting the flow of dancing bodies, but the broad orientation of Roman sensitivity was toward weight, dignity, and restraint.

Reading

Rust, Frances, *Dance in Society*, London, 1969.

Sachs, Curt, *A World History of the Dance*, New York, 1965.

Discussion questions

Is there a fundamental unity between dance and the expression of religious feelings? Did the Romans feel that unity? Do we feel it today in the industrialized West?

What are the roots of the Roman scorn for the profession of dancing? Are they the same as the Roman scorn for theater actors?

What made pantomime such a popular entertainment in the Roman Empire? What kind of dancing was involved in the stage versions of pantomime?