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Dance at the Beginning of Agriculture

Research into the annals of dance is usually limited to historical periods and relies on written sources or graphic representations of dancing images. Research into dance in the ancient world has focused mainly on the drawings on Greek pottery of the mid-first millennium B.C.E. Some attention has been devoted to the description of dancing in the Egyptian culture of the Pharaohs (the second and third millennia B.C.E.). It now appears possible to extend systematic research of the history of dance by approximately five thousand years and to commence as early as the eighth millennium B.C.E., during the Neolithic period, the time of the beginnings of agriculture. The most ancient art scenes in our region principally depict dancing images. There are more than four hundred examples of these, found in archaeological excavations and surveys in all countries of the Middle East and its adjacent areas. Because of lack of awareness

of this phenomenon, the various facts have never been put together but have remained concealed in scholarly excavation reports or buried in the basements of museums. Approximately ten years ago, my attention was drawn to ancient dancing scenes and I began to research them. I systematically examined tens of thousands of archaeological publications from all over the ancient Near East and southeastern Europe and also visited various archaeological collections, two of which proved especially fruitful for me: the Department of Anthropology at Yale University and the Louvre in Paris. Initial summaries of this work have appeared as articles

in archaeological publications and a book surveying the subject is now being printed. The purpose of this article is to present the main issues to readers who are interested in dance, archaeology and the annals of art.

Dancing Scenes

When dealing with the dancing motif in drawing or engraving, two principal difficulties in expressing the subject have to be considered. Firstly, in its very nature, dancing is a dynamic activity that takes place in a certain space and time, while drawing or engraving are static means of expression. How is it possible to depict the activity of dancing by a static means of expression? Secondly, dancing is usually characterized by a richness of detail: the position of body parts, dress and make-up accessories and accompanying objects. Painting or engraving, especially when executed on a small scale, have limited abilities of expressing a range of qualities and therefore have a great degree of schematization.

Even in the present, when we have various choreographical methods and sophisticated photographic and cinematic accessories at our disposal, documenting these aspects is problematical. It was much harder in the past when the documentation was done by paintings on pottery or stone engravings. Therefore, as will be seen from the examples presented below, no attempt was made to express dancing positions realistically. Rather, the opposite was the case: the approach was severely limited, to the point of making the subject completely abstract. The artists concentrated on a minimal number of features in order to symbolize dancing positions:

The circle – On pottery objects, the images are usually arranged around the circumference of the item in a single line, parallel to the rim, and not randomly or freely on the entire surface. Whether tens of images or only two images are painted, they are arranged around the circumference of the vessel. When the images hold hands, the circle is closed physically.

The direction of movement – The dancers' movement in each scene is uniform; each image faces the same direction.

Beat – The rhythmic effect that is so characteristic of dancing is expressed by the fact that the images are at a constant distance from each other.

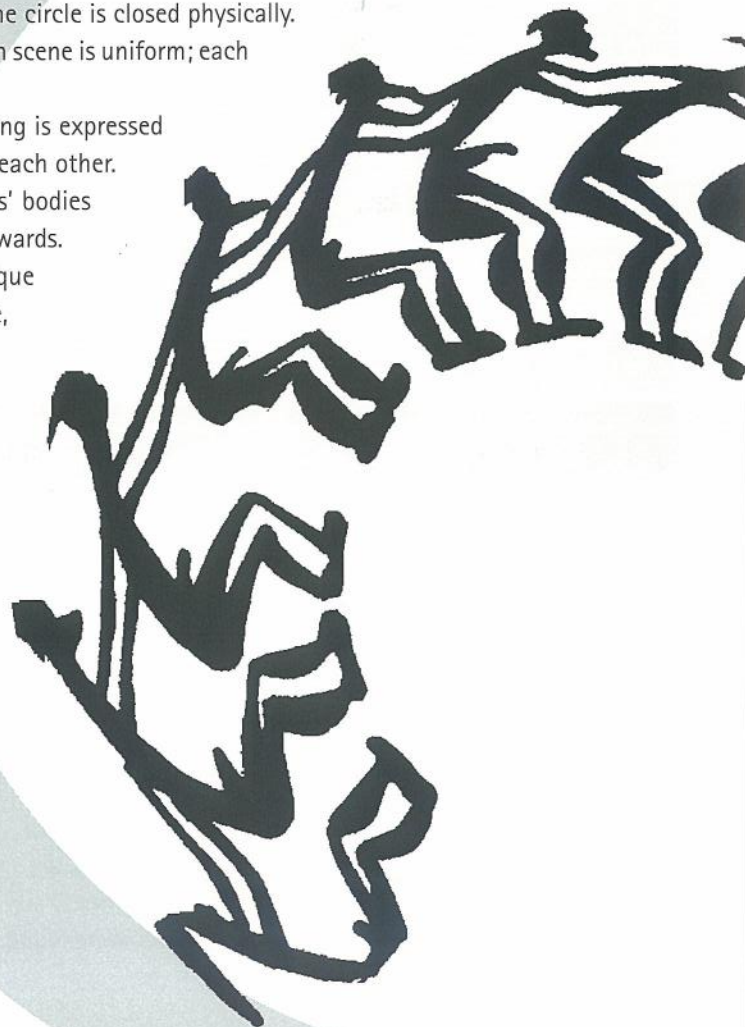
Body position – In a large number of examples the dancers' bodies are depicted with hands folded upwards and feet folded downwards.

This is not a static sitting or standing body posture, but a unique dynamic position that depicts a special effort. Furthermore, despite the numerous scenes laden with dancing images, the fingers are given expression in many cases. To this day, palm and finger movements form an important element of many dance traditions and this is apparently the reason for their inclusion in paintings of dancing images.

Dramatization – This is given expression both in exceptional body positions and in special items of apparel such as hats, belts, shoes and sometimes masks. All of these reinforce the event's ceremonial and dramatic aspect.

In conclusion, despite the formidable limitations involved in expressing dancing positions during the initial period of agriculture, an artistic perception was formed that succeeded in transmitting complex messages with minimum means of expression.

Dancing scenes from the 6th and 5th millennia BC from various sites in Iran and west Pakistan



The First Artistic Scenes in the Ancient Near East

While various artistic artifacts, such as human or animal figurines, occur as archaeological finds in the ancient Near East in the twelfth millennium B.C.E., artistic scenes appear for the first time only in the eighth millennium B.C.E. The earliest examples were found in the Levant, in southern Turkey, Syria and Jordan. One of them is a fragment of an engraved stone vessel from Nevali Cori in eastern Turkey, on which three dancing images, two males on either side of a short rounded female figure, appear. An additional example, from the earliest stage, is a painting in red on a plastered floor at Tell Halula in Syria, in which twenty-three female images are seen.

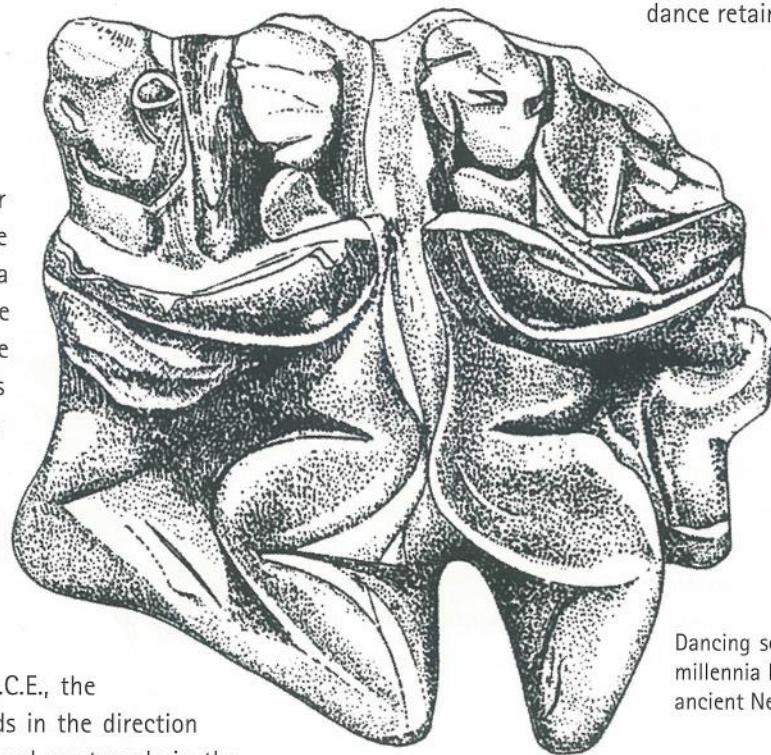
During the sixth millennium B.C.E., the number of known examples rises and their geographical dispersion broadens to Anatolia, Mesopotamia (the cultures of Halaf and Samarra) and Iran. At this stage pottery vessels were first produced, and most of the dancing scenes known to us were painted, incised or modeled on these vessels. Three painting styles appear simultaneously: naturalistic, linear and geometric. In the naturalistic style, human images are depicted as black shadows that stress the dancers' general contours. In the linear style, human images are portrayed by means of a triangular head, two or three vertical lines symbolizing the body and two horizontal lines symbolizing hands. In the geometric style, the human image is depicted by a triangle or rhombus, with hands folded upwards and feet folded downwards.

During the fifth millennium B.C.E., the distribution expanded eastwards in the direction of Iran and Western Pakistan and westwards in the direction of the Balkans and Greece. Especially beautiful examples were found at the Tepe Sialk excavations in central Iran. In southeastern Europe, most of the examples were made by modeling dancing images and attaching them to the surfaces of pottery vessels. On the surface of a large pottery vessel found at one of the sites in Romania, a man and woman dancing are depicted; inside the vessel, twelve clay figurines, six women and six men also depicted as dancers, were found.

At the conclusion of the fifth millennium B.C.E., the dancing motif reached Egypt, where it is recognized on a variety of pottery vessels, rock carvings and painted cloth. These Egyptian scenes, which precede the era of the Pharaohs, are characterized by the image of a tall woman with hands elevated upward in an arc, and palms facing inward towards the head. Sometimes short men appear beside her. Contemporary clay images of the female form in the same posture are known in Egypt.

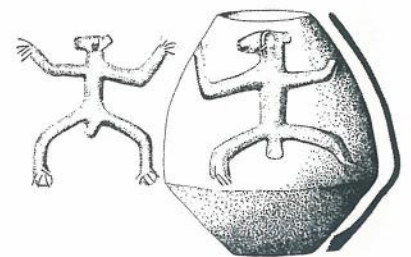
In the third millennium B.C.E., with the birth of the ancient states in Mesopotamia and Egypt and with them the establishment of cities, the invention of writing, and the institutionalization of social and economic stratification, dancing scenes lost some of their importance and almost completely disappeared from the art of the ancient Near East. New subjects replaced them, such as depictions of battles and wars, sacrificial offerings and mythological scenes. Only in the Levant, the Land of Israel, Lebanon and Syria did the dancing motif remain popular, engraved on seals that were stamped onto pottery vessels. It would seem

that in this region, in which writing, rich royal graves and a complex urban array had not as yet appeared, dance retained a certain importance.



In addition to gathering data, I have examined three principal aspects of dancing scenes: dancing structure, the social function of dance and the cognitive element of paintings of dance. Following are brief paragraphs devoted to each of these aspects.

Dancing scene from the 8th and 7th millennia BC from various sites in the ancient Near East



Dancing scenes from the 6th and 7th millennia BC from various sites in the ancient Near East

In my opinion, an additional aspect of dance structure, which should be viewed as being of immense importance, is the connection between rotary movement in a circle for some time and the onset of vertigo, sensory confusion and trance. Trance constitutes an alteration of the state of consciousness and the participants perceive it as a direct link between the group of dancers and the forces that rule the world. From a ritual aspect, this phenomenon has a mystical power and is the core of religious experience. Continuous dancing in a circle is thus a simple technique that enables the inducing of a state of trance, and this quality has certainly imparted it with a central position in cult ceremonies.

At this point, the linguistic aspect may be introduced. It is interesting to note that, in a number of Semitic languages, there are common semantic fields for dancing and other ceremonial activities. In Hebrew the word "hag" means a good day (festival) as well as walking in a circle. In the Bible, the word is linked to pilgrimage events to the religious centers in Jerusalem, Shiloh and Bethel. In Arabic, the word "haj" relates to the pilgrimage to Mecca and to walking around the Holy Rock.

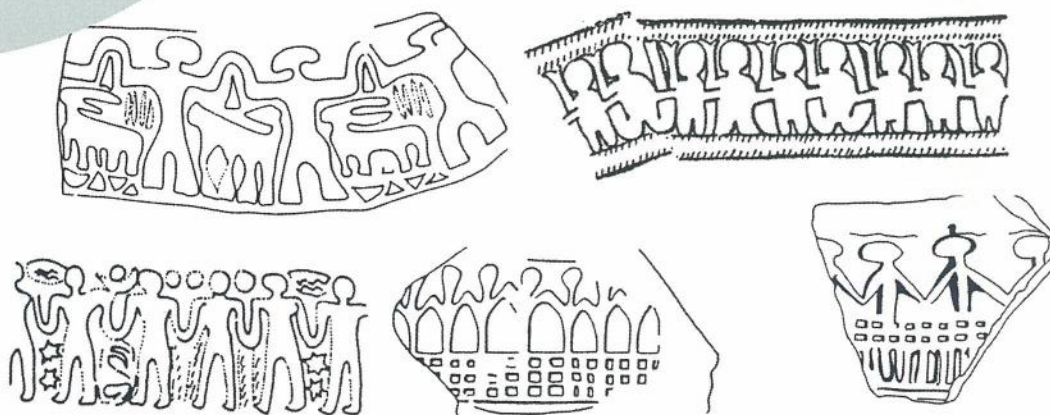
The Function of Dance

Why were dancing scenes the almost exclusive means of depicting the interaction between human beings in the protohistoric period? Why did they lose their power with the foundation of urban society? Undoubtedly, human beings continued to conduct ritual dance ceremonies during each period, and there are a few dance scenes in artistic expressions from the Bronze and Iron Ages, but these are extremely rare. Widespread use was made of the dance motif both in the Near East and in southeastern Europe during the period when the lifestyle in large villages, supported by the controlled production of food, crystallized. How did dance function in tribal village society, before the advent of monarchy and writing? Two factors especially important to this period can be singled out:

The economic background – The principal change in the economics of the Neolithic period was the transition from hunting and gathering to the controlled production of food, i.e. the beginning of agriculture. This represents a major revolution in economic perception. Hunters and gatherers obtain their food immediately. In exchange for the work invested, the necessary nourishment is received. In contrast, with agricultural labor

produce is received only after a number of months or years. There is no immediate connection between the work invested and the receipt of the product at the end of a lengthy process. The harvest may be under threat from climatic problems, pests and even robbery by other people. At present, agricultural produce is perceived as the way of the world, but how were things seen during the transition stage? How did a man whose father and grandfather were hunters and gatherers take on the burden of agriculture? How did he know when to work the soil, to sow, to protect against pests and eventually to harvest, all at the correct time?

As soon as a direct dependence between agricultural work and the seasons was created, agrarian societies had to organize themselves accordingly. From an evolutionary aspect, it is likely that at this stage there were societies or settlements that lacked the intelligence to conduct religious ceremonies and dances according to the seasons and agricultural requirements. These societies were the first to suffer economic crises, starvation and death and became physically extinct. In contrast, societies that knew how to organize the members of the community during



Dancing scenes from the 4th and 3rd millennia BC from various sites in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant

the critical times of the agricultural season succeeded in producing more food, gained an evolutionary advantage and survived.

The social background – One of the characteristics of the outset of agriculture, in contrast to the preceding period, was the process of concentration into large communities. Over time, we see a transition from settlements with tens of inhabitants to settlements with hundreds of inhabitants and, even later,

Dancing Structure

Dancing scenes must be examined from the viewpoint of the individual dancer as well as that of group activity. At the individual level, it is possible to examine body posture, comprising the positions of hand and feet. An additional element is the use of diverse dancing accessories: hairstyles, hats, masks, costumes, accessory items and animals. These show that in the Neolithic period, as in modern dances prevalent in the tribal societies of Africa and Papua-New Guinea, dancing was an event that required extensive preparation and was very colorful.

At the communal level, a number of aspects can be examined:

The form of the dance – Circular dances appear clearly in more than 90% of the examples. Simultaneously, examples of dancing in rows and as couples are known. In my opinion, dancing in rows is depicted in a number of examples discovered in western Iran, where the images are painted on pottery vessels in vertical rows that descend from the vessel's rim to its base. Clearly, this is an attempt to break the circle created when the images are painted around the vessel's circumference.

The dancers' relationships with each other – A number of levels of proximity between the dancers can be discerned (described here in ascending order): the images stand parallel to one another without physical contact; each image holds the hand of the image standing beside it; the images stand in facing rows and each grasps the image in front of it with both hands; the images stand next to each other shoulder to shoulder.

Gender – An additional dimension for comprehending interaction at community level is the identification of the dancers' sex. In most cases the dancers are exclusively male, and in fewer cases female. In even fewer cases (mostly from Egypt), mixed male and female dancers are found. However, it should be noted that in both the linear and the geometric painting styles, the images are so schematic that in most dancing scenes it is impossible to determine the dancers' sex at all.

The direction of movement – When the images are painted in profile on a round object, the direction of movement in the circle can be determined. In most examples, movement is in an anti-clockwise direction. Scenes in which the movement is in a

Dancing scene from the 6th and 5th millennia BC from various sites in Iran and west Pakistan

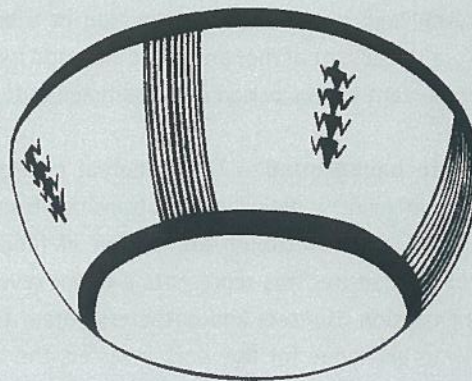
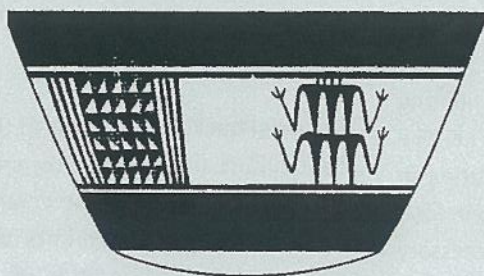


clockwise direction have been found on pottery vessels in burials, raising the question of whether these examples depict mourning dances.

The dance venue – The dance required that the community gather at an agreed venue. On rare occasions, a building or tree around which the dance is taking place can be seen in the scene.

The time of the dance – Time was an additional aspect that required coordination between the members of a group. During prehistoric periods, the principal factor in determining dates was the phase of the moon. The middle of the month could be clearly noticed with the appearance of a full moon. One should note at this time many events in the Jewish tradition, such as Tu B'shvat (the New Year of the trees), Purim, Passover Eve and Tu B'av (the Festival of Love), take place. Does the naturalistic painting style, in which images are depicted as shadows, in fact reflect nocturnal dancing in the light of the moon or of a bonfire?

Extremely strict rules govern the dancing scenes of the dawn of agriculture. In each of them, we find that all the dancers have the same body posture, all face the same direction, the distance from image to image is constant, dress is uniform, all are equipped with the same accessories, all appear at the same place and all dance at the same time. This is an extremely rigid framework in which individuals cannot perform actions at will, but are bound by behavioral codes that are common to all members of the community. This is precisely what characterizes a religious ceremony, in which all the participants strictly reiterate various speech, dress, movement and eating customs in a defined time and place.



Dancing scenes in the linear and geometric styles from the 6th and 5th millennia BC from various sites in the ancient Near East

settlements that housed thousands of people. Population pressure stressed the intimate networks that characterized small communities, provoking suspicion, competition and alienation. When individuals meet growing competition, the solidarity of the group progressively disintegrates. In order to prevent the disintegration of the social framework, the ranks have to be bound together and the communal ties strengthened. In the circle of dancers, all holding hands, the individual disappears and the circle, in which everyone is identical in body movement, rhythm of movement, dress and accessories, is created. The immense energy required here is directed not to the productive work of hunting or food production, but rather to unity and formulating a sense of identity. Dancing is an activity by which society tames individuals for collective discipline. Those who participate in the dance accept the rules of the community and its values. The acceptance is accomplished not by agencies of power and force such as the army, police or prison, but by physical activity – group occupational therapy.

The Cognitive Aspects of Paintings of Dancing

It should be remembered that we have not found objective “photographs” of dancing activity, but rather drawings that, in addition to the dance activity itself, reflect an artistic perception. Two aspects appear to me to be central here, since they are characteristic of most dance scenes from western Pakistan to Greece and from the northern Balkans to Egypt for about five thousand years. In each scene, the images are identical to each other. Differences occur only when men and women dance together. The absolute similarity between all the dancers in dress and body movement stresses the unity and equality of all members of the community. No single image is emphasized in relation to the others. This perception is markedly expressed in the linear style of painting, in which the isolated images are so schematic that the major emphasis is the circle itself. On the one hand, this approach is completely different from the perception that appears in the art of the historical periods, in which the important images, a king or priest, are depicted as larger than the images around them. On the other hand, it is also completely different from the artistic perception of the rock paintings of the Bushmen of South Africa (an egalitarian society of hunters and gatherers), in which large and small images appear next to each other, without maintaining a uniform direction of movement or identical body poses. Therefore, the consistent presentation of images as uniform and equal in the art of the ancient village societies is an exceptional phenomenon and stands out in its uniqueness.

From a cognitive aspect and on an ideological plane, our dancing scenes express equality and integration between the members of a community. On a practical plane, during this period there

are revolutionary changes in social organization and human societies become increasingly stratified. Disparities between people deepen over the period, until the formal crystallization of monarchy, nobility, priesthood, civil service, army and police is completed. In the egalitarian Bushman society, it is unnecessary to stress the relative equality between people, since this is a natural situation. Similarly, with the establishment of centralized kingdoms in the ancient Near East, social stratification was already set in rigid patterns and backed up by power and the physical force represented by the army and police. Here, there is a clear contrast between the actual situation and the ideology reflected in artistic artifacts. Dancing scenes are used as a means of concealing and camouflaging the increasing social stratification.

There is a clear preference for drawing dancing images on circular objects such as pottery vessels and cylinder seals. The inhabitants of ancient villages perceived dancing in a circle as the most outstanding symbol of ritual. From a cognitive aspect, the essence of the process and the ritualistic experience is a circle of dancers. This is supported by iconographic and linguistic analyses.

Conclusion

In ancient agricultural societies, dance was invested with special importance on a number of parallel levels, and this was the secret of its success. On an individual level, it enabled self-expression and active participation in ritual. It enabled entry into trance states, which are the core of religious-mystical activity, and the creation of a relationship with divine powers. It was utilized as a method of creating social solidarity. Religious ceremonies were also a means of coordinating agricultural activities. The need for timely plowing, sowing and harvesting to prevent the agricultural community from facing starvation and death was a central existential requisite, and consequently dance was a dominant element for thousands of years. Only with the development of writing and the establishment of kingdoms with bureaucratic institutions did the focus move to urban shrines, organized calendars and royal decrees. By then there was no further existential need for tribal ceremonies and the dancing motif disappeared from the art of the period.

For additional reading see:

- Y. Garfinkel, “Dancing and the Beginning of Art Scenes in the Early Village Communities of the Near East and Southeast Europe,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 8/2 (1998), pp. 207–237.
- Y. Garfinkel, “The Khazineh Painted Style of Western Iran,” *Iran* 38 (2000) pp. 57–70.
- Y. Garfinkel, “Dancing or Fighting – A Recently Discovered Predynastic Scene from Abydos, Egypt,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (in press).