

# Methodological Preliminaries to the Study of Dance Practices in Ancient Greek Culture

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## Abstract

In the context of the research effort of the Ancient Orchesis Study Group to reconstitute the philosophical and wider cultural presuppositions that define the ancient Greek dance culture, from which the Greek-speaking and Roman world was removed, to return with the Renaissance in a new European context, along with the recognition of the basic anthropological, on the one hand, aesthetic, on the other hand, criteria and principles of art and, in particular, of dance expression, we attempt a review of certain concepts like χορός & ὄρχησις -which stand for characteristic phenomena of ancient Greek culture. This article plays the role of an introduction into the philosophical-historical investigation and understanding of concepts of intrinsic importance in the question about relating philosophy with art, therapy and sports in the ancient world.

**Keywords:** Orchesis; Embodiment; Dance; Therapy-Catharsis; Interdisciplinarity; Education; Ancient Greek Culture; Athletic Dances; Agonistic Spirit

## Introduction

### Towards an interdisciplinary approach of ancient greek culture

In the beginning of human civilization, art and philosophy were incorporated in the established efforts of therapy & healing of the suffering man. This practically meant that the 'therapist' of the community or tribe used all mental and physical skills available in combination with every art form that was available (music, painting and dance in particular), with its unique intention to 'cure'. Later, with the progress and increase of knowledge in human societies, these branches were separated. Philosophy became mainly a logical search of truth through concepts, art became autonomous with the main goal of aesthetic pleasure and the healing practices became medicine. We reached the 21st century AD, to 'rediscover' and state once more the ancient bonds that unite philosophy, art and healing. So, for example, now there are psychoanalytic methods in use of the creative writing aiming at a psychological kind of therapy, there are also plays conveying philosophical ideas, which they implement on stage (let us remember here Sartre e.g.), but there are also trends in the medical community who talk about the need for a more 'holistic' approach to therapy, beyond the strict confines of biochemistry and pharmaceutical medicine.

In my opinion, the constant and uninterrupted history of the interest for the understanding, interpretation and knowledge of all the elements that illuminate the values and deeds of ancient Greek culture can be explained by the perspective of its physicality, the uses and functions of the human body in relation to them. Studying and understanding this perspective is not limited to access to the literary sources of ancient writers, even in a wide historical spectrum, but also involves other sciences and methods, which will be briefly presented as an attempt to find a systematic methodological approach in this area of research (Lazou, 2019) [1]. In this regard, one of the essential tools for the philosophical understanding of the subject, I consider to be provided by the interdisciplinary or interpretive archaeological research that focuses on how the art of depicting the body conveys or translates structures and functions of human society and the era that produces these artistic forms. The method of interpretive archaeology (IA) e.g., uses concepts produced by power relations and by the ways that culture incorporates human activity (agency) and tangible experience. In contrast to the semantic and linguistic expression of kinetic systems as relations of bodies in space and by reference to wider environments -abstract systems of continuously changing relations, IA provides physicality with the historical

depth and perspective of changes in social life forms, but at the same time watching the solid or static object of the image, that is preserved as it is, even worn or broken in the excavation soil. We will then see an application of this interpretive approach to ancient or -even- lost dance descriptions, with the example of one of the many monuments depicting dance, the famous Oinochoi of Dipyllos (Annibaldis, Vox, 1976; Powell, 1988) [2].

To return to the methods of Interpretive Archaeology that considers images and objects as supposed vehicles of description- 'translation' of authentic realities, and how it is applied in the case of the understanding of the Oinochoi of Dipyllos, the interest is transferred from the epigraphic text to the construction of Oinochoi itself, in its very shape and image. The working hypothesis here is that in earlier historical eras where these works were produced, there were simultaneously changing perceptions and practices of the body associated with the changing forms of life-biocosms or 'lifeworlds' [3]. In a thorough approach of the archaic Corinthian angiography by Michael Shanks (1995), the work of the archaeologist is presented as a description of different techniques of depicting the bodily self, at that time, which should be explicitly correlated with the ideological structure underneath the dominant technology of power. Therefore, this technology of power is always alive in human societies as a struggle with violence, barbarism, threatening alienation or inferiority and social exclusion, according to interpretations of anthropologists such as Jean-Pierre Vernant and René Girard and thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, etc., relevant explanations float on an inaccessible ocean of movements and actions of the human bodies, but also animals, as well as gods and monsters. While the complexity of the meanings of the movements remains as high as the complexity of the language codes, it is the power of the object, the material rescued product, that allows the world of agents to survive through time and conveys valuable information of their expressive aesthetic values to the present. We attempt a theoretical approach of these concepts as representative but also as phenomena characteristic of the ancient Greek dancing and therapeutic culture.

### Ὀρχησις ('Dancing with Song')

What is orchesis and why is it important for the study of the ancient Greek drama? Human dancing, which, in ancient Greece represented every kind of movement of the feet, hands, head or even the eyes, did not constitute a self-contained art. It was combined with music and the recitation of lyrics, even with an individual or a collective dramatic action. Literature and more specifically, poetry, was tightly linked with music and dance, from the earliest eras of its existence. Greek poetry's evolution was very much influenced by the appearance of dance -as the use of the word πούς, which means foot, indicates, among other elements, a part or a metrical unit of a verse. Regarding to this, a fragment of Libanius, a Greek teacher of rhetoric of the Sophistic school, is frequently cited: "Dancing is not made complete by songs, rather it is for the sake of dancing that the songs are worked out" [4]. Recent research [5] about ὄρχησις focuses on the poetic as well as on the philosophical

texts of antiquity but also taking into account more principles and criteria of the interdisciplinary investigations, such as

- i) Religious and cult rituals and myths,
- ii) Various dance practical skills and dexterities,
- iii) Aesthetic excellence,
- iv) Social, educational and therapeutic functions of body and dance practices
- v) Self knowledge and personal development and
- vi) The philosophical interpretation of human dancing activity and other theoretical presuppositions.

As the working hypothesis of this research approach is to be taken the significance of the organic unity of three elements -spoken word (λόγος), melody (μέλος) and physical movement (κίνησις)- that incorporates in rhythmic forms of spoken word the primary identity of these three aspects appearing in the ancient Greek civilization that is expressed both in the forms and the way of life (athletics, education, politics, medicine, everyday life), as well as in specific artistic creations (theatre, sculptures, paintings and poetry). Secondly, philosophical thought emerges to seal the summit and unprecedented three-dimensional identity of ancient Greek art and culture.

### Orchesis Studies in Athletic Practice

Another aspect of ancient theories of dance is emerged by those studies - in Greek and foreign languages - that attempt a theoretical, philosophical, but also interdisciplinary interpretation and analysis of the agonistic spirit of the ancient Greek cultural forms of human expression, highlight their moral and political symbolism, their social and individual mind body balancing action and their aesthetic -therapeutic value; underlying the multifaceted role of athletics and gymnastic in ancient Greece, its spectacular character, but also the creative human spirit that inspires it [6].

Light and darkness, fear and freedom, death and rebirth, oblivion and memory, war and peace, friendship and strife - these sensational contradictions that make up human experience were uniquely captured by the ancient Greek agonistic art, which embraces beyond the narrow series of sports that we know today and every other art form: first and foremost martial arts, then the 'most skillful' art of dance (αταλώτατη), but also music, drama, rhetoric, philosophy, weaving, politics and more.

As Konstantina Gongaki emphasizes, this historical cultural reality must be taken into account in the problems that arise from the commercialization of sports in today's world, but also the abuse of human health either from lack of physical exercise or in the opposite, because of excessive mechanical muscle exercise, far from the wholeness and moral-aesthetic comprehensiveness of the ancient Greek athletic spirit. Aiming at a better life for modern life and society, we support that today's Greece "can focus on another Olympic philosophy, which will not have competitive,

individualistic and market elements that devalue sport, but moral values, of classical heritage, measure and education". In 1932, Ioannis Chrysafis, a pioneer athlete and gymnast and a leading figure of sports science (1873-1932) "was the great apostle of life ... Since we met him, he did nothing but create life around him. This was his job, his mission, and his dream. To make all Greek youth immortal" (Pavlos Nirvanas, Hestia, October 14, 1932). He asserted that "Greece should not claim any winner in any Olympic games; it only reaches all millions of Greeks, free and unredeemed, to flock to the gyms to train."

## Discussion

The scope of Chrysafis' writings is huge. For Chrysafis, the solid infrastructure knowledge of the treasure of ancient Greek writers and philosophers was the key to an approach and a conquest of the general concept of Physical Education, in a multifaceted and inspiring way. The product of this education of Chrysafis is the writing of many books that refer to sports in Ancient Greece. His works on Gymnastics and Physical Education are landmarks for his time, while his book Contemporary International Olympic Games is an inexhaustible source of knowledge (published in 1930). His language skills and sensitivity led him to 69 translations of foreign dramas and literary works, while his contribution through newspapers and magazines is amazing. The ideas of Galen (physician) about gymnastics, The agonistic of the Homeric heroes, The orchesis of the ancients etc. Concerning Plato's legacy more specifically, and in contrast to the enumerated and abbreviated way of presenting the dances by previous dance dictionaries like that of Sir William Smith in 1875, 60 years later, in the publication of the Diary of Greater Greece, Chrysafis, signing as Director of the Ministry of Education, already a well-known leading athlete, educator and writer and one of the pioneers of the organization of the first Olympic Games of 1896 in Athens, develops in 28 pages a visibly more complete and conceptually more complex presentation entitled The Orchesis of Ancient Greeks.

Chrysafis not only lists the dances and selectively cites literary sources, but adds a more extensive commentary on their significance, comparing the historical and cultural present with antiquity, but further attempting - albeit a representative of sports science - a philosophical type of their analysis, too, with emphasis on the aesthetic classic ideal. At the same time, however, his text is possessed with enthusiasm and laudatory remarks that are intensified by his respect for the practical experience of dance, since he does not write as a phlegmatic observer and composer of a purely theoretical compilation. He dares to present both naked and even daring female dances in more detail than other monographs of ancient dance, exhibiting the aesthetic therapeutic effect of pantomime and other uses of dance, based on Lucian, but also links with notions of goodness and education, starting with Homer and ending with Plutarch. Of interest is the classification of ancient Greek dances by Chrysafis into three types, "the stage orchesis, the gymnastic or plastic orchesis and the folk or private orchesis" and then the integration of the other types he stands out

in these three basic ones [7]. Chrysafis, in this text which bears as year of publication the year of his death (1932), like Sir William Smith in 1875, does not show much interest in the dance of the drama or the religious and cult character of the dances, attributing more importance in the types of orchesis related to contests and gymnastics, or in the social expressions of entertainment at banquets and pantomime shows. Chrysafis' work illuminates an important aspect of ancient orchesis as well as its research: gymnastics and its healing properties, due to the fact that "it was part of the most important ones of ancient physical education [8]."

## Conclusion

According to Chrysafis, whose work historically coincides with a series of practical revival efforts of antiquity in Europe and America, by personalities such as Eva Palmer, Isadora & Raymond Duncan and Angelos Sikelianos, the disadvantage of all previous studies is that in their majority are produced by theorists, historians and lexicographers and not by those who can dance, a problem that in our modern age is partly underestimated. Dance, as the rhythmical action accompanied by music and song, as Chrysafis concludes in his study, was according to Homer "the most common and beloved custom of the time and that there were various types of dances both circular and in pairs". However, Homer also has the first derogatory meaning of the term "orchest", as synonymous with a liar and a thief, entertainer and looter of foreign property. In the classical centuries, according to the customs of the great cities of Athens and Sparta, Chrysafis states that "the verbal terms orchesis, dance and chorea had a much more general meaning than that which the grammarians and commentators of the various ancient writers had thought examining their etymology. Their importance has also become even greater and more important, and their use and application so general, that they are now essential elements not only of the education of citizens and private life but also of public life and seriously concerning the greatest of philosophers and politicians".

Chrysafis' study closes with his very interesting comment on the possibilities of revival that can exist as a subject not only artistic but also gymnastic, implying in my opinion the technical knowledge requested for the articulation and shaping of postures in the contemporary body and not a matter of choreography and inspiration that we mostly see even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the issue of ancient physicality or - in another sense - the integration of ancient Greek culture as a basis for its modern understanding is being researched with such persistence and so great depth at the global level, it implies that our national policy on culture-sports and education should make use of and intensify the importance of these researches with special programs, training of athletes and trainers in these subjects, in order to enlighten their soul and spirit and to give to their practice the glamour of our ancient immortal culture and in fact in its research-scientific dimension. And certainly not to obey to the commercial-pharmacological mentality of the big for-profit companies that is only sensitized mainly by the numerically measurable performance of the athletes.

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