

GREEK SONG-DANCE

by

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DANCE was an art which the Greeks cultivated with love and passion from very remote times. According to Greek mythology, Rhea, the mother of the Olympic Gods, was the first to be enchanted by this art. She, in her turn, taught the dance to her priests, the Kouretes (*Κουρήτες*) in Crete and the Korybants (*Κορύβαντες*) in Phrygia. Thanks to Kouretes' dance Jupiter was saved from his father (Lucian: *On dancing*). Dancers can be seen on frescoes of Knossos and other monuments of the Cretomycenian Era which means that the dance was playing a part in the societies of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries B.C. In Homeric times both song and dance were the indispensable embellishments of every religious ceremony and of every national or private feast. Even in ancient mysteries dance was a means of initiation. It was considered an exceptional advantage for everybody, especially for those of the higher classes and even of royal descent to be initiated in the secrets of Terpsichore's art. Neoptolemos (or Pyrrhos), son of the famous Homeric hero Achilles, excelled as a dancer and was considered as the inventor of a well-known war-dance, called after his name Pyrrhichos (Lucian). The two sons of the king Alkinoos danced with admirable art at the feast given in Ulysses's honour (*Odyssey*, IX, 370-380). Even gods were praised for their skill in dancing (Apollo, Dionysus). Hesiodus wrote that he saw at dawn the Muses themselves admirably dancing. Ancient writers, such as Plato and Lucian, claimed that dancing exercised a beneficial influence on the health and prevented the early coming of old age. Lucian especially says that dancing is something panharmonic, cultivating the soul and training the body, entertaining and teaching the spectators, offering in one word a spectacle of a higher moral value.

In classical times the art of dancing was developed to its highest degree. Young men and maidens in Athens, Sparta, Delos, almost everywhere, were taking active part in religious or national manifestations. We get an idea of the steps, movements, choreographic combinations and generally of the character of various dances from vase-paintings, bas-reliefs, frescoes, inscriptions, as well as from a few ancient writers who deal with the art of dancing and of various well-known social and popular dances of their time (Plato: *Laws*, VII, Xenophon: *Banquet*, II, IX, Plutarch: *Symposial problems*, IX, 15, Lucian: *On dancing*, etc.).

We may place their dances in three categories: religious, theatrical and social, some of which, as described, present many analogies to modern Greek folk dances.

Dances were danced either by a group or by a pair or even by a single person. It seems that at the beginning groups or pairs of dancers were all of the same sex: but in later times mixed groups were accepted. Such a typical example was the "Ghéranos," a dance invented, according to ancient tradition, by Theseus; it was danced by seven lads and seven maidens who by their movements tried to express the escape from the labyrinth in Crete.

Poetry—and consequently song—was combined with the dance. Famous poets, like Aeschylus and Phrynichos, were accredited with the creation of new forms of dances or, like Sophocles, were praised as excellent dancers.

At the beginning, the dancers themselves used to sing while dancing. But later