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**DANCES IN DAILY LIFE OF ANCIENT GREEKS**

**Key words:** dance, music, orchesis, κώμος, dancers.

ABSTRACT

Dancing comprised a significant aspect of life of ancient Greeks. Together with music and poetry, it was an essential component of the proper education of the young and formation of the *'καλού καθαού'*, i.e. citizen. Apart from their worshipping and educational character, dances also comprised an important part of everyday life in Greece. Ancient Greeks used to perform spontaneous dances for no specific purposes, as a reflection of their changing moods. The dancers sought entertainment, carefreeness and, especially, different ways to express themselves freely. One of the most characteristic dances of this category was *κώμος* – a dance accompanied by wine. It was performed to the sounds of the flute and comprised a type of amusement. Ancient historians also provide us with some data on a variety of orcheses (dances), which accompanied the daily life in ancient Greece.

INTRODUCTION

A key concept in a person's life is rhythm, which is expressed through three most significant arts: poetry, music and dance. Like in present-day society, so it was in ancient Greece that the art of dancing played an important part in people's lives. The Greeks had a close relationship with this art, and all their worries and concerns were expressed through hymns, dances, and music [25, 62]. The conscious art of dancing was born out of the impulsive and instinctive human need to express oneself creatively [59]. According to preserved ancient written sources, dancing was accompanied by music, while dancers executed steps and hand movements. Later on dancing later took on a religious and public character and it was in this manner that circular dances were created, which were performed publicly around the shrines.

Dance, with its diversity of rhythmic movements [35], was considered the best and most direct means for people to communicate with others and to express their wishes and feelings. It was otherwise difficult enough to express it in any other way, either because people were unaware of or could not find the appropriate words for every circumstance.

The art of orchesis (dancing) was highly significant and presented great difficulties in its execution since it required the combination of perfect technique with spirituality. Apart from enjoying very good physical condition, one also needed to possess great spirituality, experience in music and rhythm, as well as in physics, philosophy and ethics. While the other arts are a work of either the heart or the body, orchesis is a product of both, since the physical and spiritual elements become merged, forming thoughts, notions, and imagination, while at the same time they display strength,

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endurance and litheness. According to ancient historians, therefore, through dance it is not only beauty and physical wellbeing which is being achieved, but also memory, intelligence, principles and virtue are being greatly enhanced. In this way the prototype of the ancient Greek citizen “καλός καγαθός πολίτης” was shaped.

Research on dancing in ancient Greece has provided ample data on different types of dances. Through the accounts of ancient historians we encounter dances of worship, drama and war, as well as orcheses related to the education of the young or held in honour of animals.

Further studies on ancient orchesis disclosed a wealth of much more spontaneous dances, performed for no specific occasions or any particular purposes, which simply reflected people’s changing moods. In these situations dancers sought an air of festivity and abandon, but most importantly an opportunity to express oneself freely. Plato [51] considered pleasure and sorrow of both the soul and the body to be a single movement.

Epiharmos and Homer taught that movement was the only reality of the entire universe, since even the gods were born in the Ocean and thus all was ‘έγκονα ροής τε και κινήσεως’ [50].

### ΚΩΜΟΣ (KOMOS)

The most characteristic example of free expression in dance is the *κόμος*. The *κόμος* (komos) was a form of entertainment where the participants drank wine, sang and danced to flute music, wore garlands of flowers and leaves on their heads and held torches. Aristophanes [13] wrote that ‘Αι πανηγύρεις αυταί γινόμεναι εν ημέραις εορτών ως επί το πλείστον κατέληγον εις πομπώδη παρέλασιν των διασκεδαζόντων εν ταις οδοίς εστεμμένων και μετά λαμπάδων’. Most times, the celebrations took place on feast days, which ended in a parade.

Homer’s Hymn [33] to Hermes states: ‘ες δαίτα θάλειαν και χορόν μερόεντα και ες φιλοκυδέα κόμον’. The participants in the *κόμος* drank wine to quickly reach a state of high spirits [26, 52]. Such a gathering, which often occurred at night, resulted in rollicking festivities accompanied by jokes and teasing among the dancers [37].

Hesychius [27] defines the *κόμος* as ‘είδος ορχήσεως ή μέλους χορού’ since it ‘ασεληγή άσματα πορνικά, συμπόσια, ωδαι’. It was, therefore, a type

of dance, which was sometimes accompanied by obscene songs and odes during a symposium.

The accompaniment of wine is confirmed by Souda [60], in which the *κόμος* is referred to as drunkenness and dancing, as well as an intoxicating flute. In both Homeric epics there are numerous references to the *κόμος* as a dance of entertainment [29, 32].

The dance steps were very similar to those of the Satyrs’. The dancers usually performed naked or lightly dressed, while sometimes they wore clothes of the opposite sex [46]. The dancers made intense, explicit movements, taking large strides; while they danced they kicked their legs, twirled in the air, and pretended fights, which at times, were real.

The dance was always accompanied by flute music. Athenaeus [1] refers to the *κόμος* as a type of flute music, which gave rhythm to the dance. The examples of dances and flute music called *κόμος* are numerous.

There was another form of the *κόμος*, which was performed to honour the victors of games. Pindar [48] writes that ‘τελώ κόμον’, means ‘I perform *κόμος* in honour of the victors’. In addition, many of Pindar’s extant odes were sung during such celebrations. These odes were named *κόμοι*, whereas the people who took part in the celebrations were called *κωμαστές*.

According to Aristophanes [15] the *κόμος* took place during the day, while the steps were more like walking or running with hand movements matching the hymn and the accompanying music [37]. Moreover, for ancient Greeks every rhythmic movement constituted a dance.

In the ‘Εν Άσει Διονύσια’ (Athenian festival), the *κόμος* is presented as an accompaniment to the festivity and entertainment shortly before the presentation of the dithyramb, most probably in the afternoon of the tenth day of the month *Ελαφηβολιώνα* [47] (mid-March to mid-April). These *κόμοι* were men’s dances [49] while in Demosthenes [22] the *κόμος* is performed separately by the children: ‘τοις εν άσει Διονυσίοις η πομπή και οι παίδες και ο κόμος και οι κωμωδοί και οι τραγωδοί’. Many researchers are of the opinion that the phrase ‘αι παίδες’ is followed by a reference to the men, which most probably, however, has been lost [34].

There are significant findings on Attica black figure vases [16] constituting what is known as the Group of *Κωμαστών* [19], which usually portray

cheerful, comical dancers with sun burnt faces and chests, naked or with long, red, tunics sometimes accompanied by women. A beloved theme of artists was to depict the performers dancing striking their buttocks and throwing up their legs, often holding an ancient Greek kylix or a horn in their hand. Sometimes they were shown wearing short, closefitting, tunics, which appear to be padded.

One of the Attic black figure amphora [23] dated 500 B.C. from the Art Museum of Los Angeles [17] depicts many different images of the *κόμος*. A *κόμος* is depicted around the neck of the vessel with seventeen figures in six configurations consisting of two to five figures each. On the A side, in the center, a woman with cymbals is filling her oinochoi, while a group of friends around her are dancing, drinking, flirting and playing musical instruments. They are wearing tunics, hemations and saks; some are moving to the left while others to the right. Also participants in the *κόμος* include bearded men with hemations, boots, bands in their hair or wearing caps, dancing, holding ancient Greek kylix and playing the lyre. The A side of the body of the vessel depicts two men and two women playing the guitar and banging the cymbals, while a male figure on the right is watching them. On the B-side, a *κόμος* is depicted with three women and three men dancing, holding ancient Greek kylix, playing the guitar and cymbals.

#### AFTER-DINNER DANCES

*Μεταδείπνιοι χοροί* (after-dinner dances), are related to the *κόμος*, and were spontaneously performed either by professional entertainers or by guests. Athenaeus [2] describes this type of dance at symposiums. The Athenians would always have wine with them, so that they could get in the dancing mood easily. Apparently, they merely smelled the wine in order to get into the right mood. At one point the author makes a comment on the gracefulness of the young people dancing under the influence of wine, whereas older dancers were not a pretty sight. Antiphanes made fun of a Sophist who was dancing during a feast saying: *‘ουχ οράς ορχούμενον ταις χερσί τον βάκλον’*.

There is a description by Athenaeus referring to an black figure skyphos from Attica dated 490 B.C. in the National Museum of Prague [18] which depicts three youths on each side of the vessel dancing under the influence of wine, to the

accompaniment of flute music; everyone is dancing just by having smelt the wine *‘άπαντες ορχούντ’ ευθύς αν οίνον μόνον οσμήν ιδωσι’*.

In Xenophon’s Symposium [63] there is a description of an after-dinner dance performed by a certain Philip accompanied by flute music. He imitates a boy and a girl dancing together. After the audience had commended on the natural beauty and graceful execution of the dance, Philip started a parody, giving a farcical performance of a dance with grotesque body movements. While imitating the girl doing backward rolls, he started doing forward rolls. When as the boy he was applauded for his movement and his physique, Philip told the flutist to play a faster rhythm and danced flinging around arms, legs and head all at the same time.

The *Ιωνική όρχηση* (Ionic orchesis) was an intense group dance, which was also accompanied by wine, and constituted a State orchesis [3, 4]. The Ionic orchesis is considered a dance of daily life; however, it was also a dance of worship in honour of the goddess Artemis.

The same dance is also called *παροίνιος* (paroinios) [4]. According to Lucian [42], it was a Phrygian dance involving drunken or uncouth dancers, who made high jumps, accompanied by music on the flute played by women. Furthermore, the historian states that the dance survived in his day in the countryside, however, it was in no way related to the original.

The connection of the dance to symposiums is also confirmed by the etymology of the word *παροίνιος* [40], since this is the name given to the person who takes part in a symposium, while *παροίνια* is also the name of the songs sung at such gatherings. Hesychius holds the view that *παροίνιος* is an *‘αμαρτωλός, μεθυστής, υβριστής λοιδορος έκλυτος’*. Aristophanes [14] calls a person named Αρμόδιο *‘παροινικό’*, i.e. ‘surrendered to wine’.

The *Άνθεμα* (Anthema) is a daily dance but it is also performed for worshipping purposes. These two uses of the dance are hard to differentiate. The Anthema was executed, according to Athenaeus [4], as *‘παρά ταις ιδιώταις’*, i.e. with dancers making mimicking gestures while simultaneously reciting poems referring to flowers:

*‘που μοι τα ρόδα, που μοι τα ία, που μοι τα καλά σέλινα’*

*ταδί τα ρόδα, ταδί τα ία, ταδί τα καλά σέλινα’* [55]  
(‘Where are my roses, where are my violets, where is my good celery?’)

Here are my roses, here are my violets, here is my celery'.)

However, the possible worshipping character of the dance cannot be overlooked, since in Ancient Greece groups of young girls carrying flowers or wreaths danced at the *Ανθεσφόρια*, [56, 61, 5], i.e. a feast in honour of Persephone. The dancers themselves were called *ανθεσφόροι* [57] and they danced to flute music. There were also festivities in honour of Ἡρας Ανθείας (Hera Antheas) [45, 57], during which these dances were, in all likelihood performed.

The dance *άνθεμα* might be related to the month of *Ανθεστηριώνα* (mid-February to mid-March) and the feast of *Ανθεστήρια* (11th, 12th and 13th of the month), which was a festival of flowers and was composed of a big, three-day celebration held by the Athenians in honour of Dionysus [38].

A Laconian orchesis performed by boys and girls was *βίβασις* (*vivasis*). The dancers jumped high and tried to tap their feet against their buttocks, counting the jumps they made, as stated in the inscription: 'χίλια πόκα βίβατι, πλείστα των πη ποκά' [58]. In Aristophanes [12] there is a similar description of dance jumps, where the dancers' feet reach the buttocks in a display of dancing skills and fitness.

The *μογγάς* (*moggas*) is also classified as a dance of daily life, characterized by its frenzied nature [6]. Pollux [58] refers to the same dance as *γίγγρα* (*giggra*) and believes it was accompanied by flute music. This was also the name given to both a small Phoenician flute and the sound it made, which resembled a high pitch wail [28].

According to Xenophon [7], the Phoenicians played the *γίγγρας*, which was an nine-inch-long instrument producing a high pitch sound. In addition, in Karya, it was played during periods of mourning and lamentation. Antiphanes, likewise, makes references to these flutes; Menandros associated them with funeral dirges, as well as with someone called Ἄμφι [21]. The latter refers to a dialogue about the *γίγγρα*, in which the musical instrument is considered a new invention, which although has not yet been used in the theatre, it is already a fashion at the Athenian symposiums. Consequently, the dance, accompanied by flute music bore the same name and was often performed at symposiums.

Another dance or dance composition based on jumps was *εκατερίδης* (*ekateridis*). It was an intense dance accompanied by hand movements [8,

58]. Hesychius explains that in this dance the dancers tapped their hips with their heels: 'εκατερείν. Το προς τα ισχία πηδάν εκατέραις ταις πτέρναις'. Perhaps it was a dance where the dancers jumped high and hit their buttocks with their heels, at the same time making lively movements with their arms and hands [36]. It might, however, have been performed in two different ways, either with vigorous gesticulation of the hands or with energetic leg movements.

A popular dance among Greek adolescents was the *όρμος* (*ormos*). According to Lucian [43], the young people danced next to each other forming an *Όρμος*, i.e. a chain, or necklace [39]. The dance was led by an adolescent boy, who with his youthful movements demonstrated the deeds he will do at war. An adolescent girl followed him and showed to the other maidens how to dance decorously '*κοσμίως*'. In this way, a chain of male and female dancers was formed, who with their dancing abilities displayed prudence and valor. More generally, *όρμος* was a circular dance, which was executed *αναμίζ*, that is boys and girls alternating; for this reason numerous researchers associated it with the circular dance from the Iliad [30] as well as with the dance *γέρανο* (*gerano*) [44, 20].

Plutarch [54] refers to a maidens' dance *χορό παρθένων* (*Parthenon orchesis*) performed in Sparta, without, however, giving us a specific name. The Spartan legislator Lycurgus implemented measures so that the girls in his city had the best possible physical upbringing in order to ensure that their offspring came from strong, healthy bodies. Firstly, the females were made to exercise their bodies by running races, wrestling and discus and javelin throwing, whose aim was to eliminate any traces of weakness, womanliness, and feminine nature in young girls. Following this, they were required to take part in rituals naked, dancing and singing, whereas the audience watching them comprised of young men. Often, the young women while dancing, sang songs to ingratiate the young men, or they provoked them by teasing them. A similar dance is also described by Euripides [24].

Athenaeus [9], in a reference to a symposium, writes about the *συρβηνέων χορόν* (*syrvineon orchesis*). This dance was noisy, tumultuous, bewildering and vibrating [41]. Kynouklos the Syrian wondered about the characteristics of this dance, and Kratin the Younger associated it with happiness, wine, and

raucousness. The dance was probably performed to flute music, since, according to Hesychius, *σὺρβη* was the name given to the sheath in which the flute was kept.

The *Φρυγικοί χοροί* (Phrygian dances) were mainly associated with the worship of gods; however, Lucian, as mentioned above, associates them with countryside, peasant dances, in which high jumps were executed, while accompanied by female flute players. Despite the fact that overall Plato [53] praises these dances, he condemns the obscenities and ugliness present in some of them.

Hesychius refers to the *Κρητικό* (Kritiko) as a dance, though we are more familiar with it as music in Cretan dances of the Cretans: *‘ούτω Κρήτες ρυθμοί ἐλέγοντο ἀπὸ Κρητῶν . και γένος ορχήσεως’*. In Souda, it is referred to as the name of a particular rhythm. Aristophanes describes this dance as stimulating young girls to go to the dinner with songs, moving their feet to the Cretan rhythm. Athenaeus [10] giving a detailed description of the dance believes that the Kritiko, which Homer describes on Achilles' shield [31] was danced at symposiums. Another circular dance was a dance similar to *γέρανο*, where boys and girls were dancing holding each other's wrists. They were surrounded by people, among them two acrobats and a minstrel with a lyre. Athenaeus does not consider only the circular dance to be Cretan but also the acrobats' dance, and he characterizes both as lively. It is likely that his description refers to a number of dances of the Cretan people rather than one dance, contrary to Hesychius who believes that the Kritiko was one particular orchesis. Undeniably, most of the available data refers to dance music, which appears to have been used for entertainment purposes. Moreover, they were dances accompanied by songs and lyre and flute music.

The abundance of orchises and their diversity shows that ancient Greeks expressed every type of emotion through dancing and singing at symposiums, during festivities, and generally during events attended by masses of participants.

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