
“GLIDING STEPS”: DANCE AS A PERFORMING ART IN LATE ANTIQUE EGYPT

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ABSTRACT:

Dance scenes are found on many Coptic artefacts of daily life use, most prominently combs, earrings, candlesticks, inlays of caskets, tunics, and wall decoration. This paper explores these scenes in the light of contemporary textual evidence from Egypt and elsewhere. It aims at reconstructing a clear picture of dance in Late Antique Egypt as a performing art. Through an art historical approach, the study explores dancers' movements, poses, gestures, and patterns of performance. It analyses representations of solo, duet, and group dances. It also reveals how dance was formalized in numerous types of performance according to its dramatic context: Bacchic, Pyrrhic, geranos, pantomime, and mime dances. The paper also sheds some light on everyday scenarios which were presented in theatrical drama and involved dance. The study proposes a hypothesis that dance scenes on Coptic artefacts do not merely represent mythological or imaginary characters. They provide priceless information about actual performance. It also highlights how dance in Late Antique Egypt was part of a global profession.

KEYWORDS: Women, Dance; Late Antiquity; Coptic Art; Theatre; Global Byzantium.

INTRODUCTION

As a performing art, dance involves a variety of conditions and characteristics: human movement that is formalized (e.g., by being stylized or performed in certain patterns), with such qualities as grace, elegance, and beauty, to the accompaniment of music or other rhythmic sounds, for the purpose of telling a story and/or communicating or expressing human emotions, themes, or ideas, with the aid of mime, costumes, scenery, and lighting (van Camp 1981: 22). Unfortunately, our information about dance as a performing art in Late Antiquity is fragmentary. While hiring

contracts from Egypt shed some light on its practicalities, many aspects of dancers' performance remain unclear. In this paper, I aim to present a picture of the characteristics of the dance profession in Egypt in Late Antiquity by bringing together the visual representations of dance in Coptic art and textual evidence.

Two terms need to be defined before embarking upon the study. The term 'Late Antiquity' describes the age of transition from Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages, in both mainland Europe and the Mediterranean world. The chronological frame of this period extends from the third to the seventh century AD.¹ In Egypt, this period was framed by two prominent events. The first was Diocletian's reorganization of the imperial administration of the country in AD 297; this event marked the end of the peculiar status of the Egyptian province as a private domain of the emperors with administrative equality to the other provinces of the Roman Empire. The second event was the Arab re-conquest of Alexandria in AD 646, and with it the definite end of Byzantine rule in Egypt.² The second term is 'Coptic art'. It simply refers to the dominant style of art in Late Antique Egypt (Gabra and Eaton-Krauss 2007: xiii).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Dancers have been frequently discussed in the context of the prejudices of the surviving literary sources and in the contexts of gender roles and perceptions of the female body. Dominic Montserrat's *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt* explores the socially rejected practices of individual dancers among other classes (Montserrat 1996). Some scholars have discussed dancers' class all over the empire through the early life of Empress Theodora, the wife of Emperor Justinian, as a dancer; these include James A. S. Evans' *Procopius*, Averil Cameron's *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, and Judith Herrin's 'The Byzantine Secrets of Procopius' (Evans 1972; Cameron 1985; Herrin 1988: 36–42). Some studies have considered the performance itself. These studies focused on pantomime specifically, as the main form of theatre arts. William J. Slater's *Roman Theater and Society* discusses theatre in Rome and the east with a definition of dance performance incorporating not only stage performances but also banquet entertainment, sporting events, and political

¹ This chronological frame has been widely approved by 20th-century scholars: Weitzmann 1979; Fuhrmann 1994; Hannestad 2001: 9–19.

² Many scholars have defined this period as the 'Coptic period': Bosson 1999: 23. Thelma Thomas believes the Coptic period to be 'coeval with Late Antiquity': Thomas 2000: xxiv. Krause considers it to have lasted up to the ninth century: Krause 1974: 110.

events (Slater 1996). A few art books handled the visual representations of dance in Coptic art from the perspective of performance. Eunice Dauterman Maguire's *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Egypt* is an exhibition catalogue (Maguire 1999). It presents Coptic textiles that carry representations of dance. The catalogue offers numerous representations of dancers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Through an art-historical approach I will analyse representations of dance in Coptic art in the light of the remarks of contemporary authors. I will examine the iconographic, iconological and semiotic features of these representations. This approach is based on two main hypotheses. Firstly, though dance scenes on Coptic artefacts are composed of abstract figures and typical traditional poses, they reflect some kind of reality about actual performance.³ Secondly, since dance was a global profession in Late Antiquity, many realities about performance in Egypt can be learned from literary evidence from other provinces.⁴ The present study proceeds in several steps: dancers' movements, poses, and gestures; dance patterns; dance within mythological contexts; dance within daily life drama (mime dance); and dancers and music.

DANCERS' MOVEMENTS, POSES, AND GESTURES

Dancers are most frequently depicted on Coptic artefacts standing with one leg crossed over the other, with one arm up and the other down. This is

³ Most of the representations of dancers on Coptic artefacts have been traditionally interpreted as generic representations of the god Dionysus and his retinue of maenads, satyrs, musicians and dancers. Auth 2004: 1143. Whilst this is highly likely, because of the evident popularity of the cult of Dionysus in Hellenistic Egypt, there is no reason why dancers' images on Coptic artefacts should not also refer to actual aspects of dance, including dancers performing the roles of mythological characters. Literary evidence from Late Antiquity, from authors such as Lucian and Libanios, testifies that pantomime dancers mimed the roles of mythological characters. They were attired in special costumes and wigs, to look like these characters. Lucian 1972: 210–89; Libanios 1903–27: 420–98; Wyles 2008: 65–66. Additional literary evidence for the use of a scarf as a prop for miming mythological characters is found in Marcus Cornelius Fronto, *On Orations*, 5: "As actors when they dance in a scarf represent a swan's tail, the tresses of Venus, a Fury's scourge, so these writers make up one and the same thought in a thousand ways." Csapo and Slater 1995: 383 n. 38.

⁴ Interestingly, dance in the capital Byzantium and other provinces shared many characteristics, like legal boundaries, dance themes, dancers' appearance, and dance props. Professionals evidently performed behind the borders of their home provinces. Cf. Webb 2008).

apparent in a tapestry fragment from the Abegg Stiftung Museum (fig. 1), a tapestry medallion from the Louvre (fig. 2), and the handle of a bronze *patera* from the Louvre (fig. 3).⁵ Usually, they are holding percussion instruments, like a pair of crotolla (fig. 1) or cymbals (fig. 4), or other dancing props, like a wreath (fig. 5) or a shield (fig. 6).⁶ The pose corresponds to a characteristic dance step in modern belly dancing in the Middle East, known as *al-raqs al-sharqi* (Webb 2002). Literary accounts from Late Antiquity designate the dance by the Greek word *lugisma*. According to Ruth Webb, this word refers to the winding movements of the torso (Webb 1997: 122).

On some objects, dancers are represented standing with both feet apart while raising both arms in an attitude like that of prayer (the orans gesture), whilst holding a pair of crotollas, as in the bronze statuette in the Louvre (fig. 7), or a pair of cymbals, as in the tapestry medallion from Rose Choron's collection (fig. 8). This pose has been interpreted as orant figurines in a prayer attitude, almost Christianized figures of maenads, the dancing devotees of Dionysus (du Bourguet 1991a: 2:536–38). However, since the dancers are represented nude and holding musical instruments, it is difficult to believe such a Christian reading. More probably it refers to an actual dance step, where the dancer jumped or hopped in the air, leaps incorporated in well-known choreographies such as the Pyrrhic and Geranos dances, as will be discussed later in detail (Borthwick 1967: 18–23).

⁵ A tapestry fragment showing a dancer. Linen and wool. H 58 cm, W 25 cm. 7th century, Egypt. Abegg Stiftung Museum, Bern, inv. 1158. After M.-H. Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1990), 111; Tapestry medallion showing a dancing pair. Linen and wool. H 15 cm, W 14.4 cm. 6th century, Egypt. Louvre Museum, inv. AF 5607. After Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, 108; Detail of the handle of a patera. Bronze. H 5.5 cm, L 34.6 cm, W 20.5 cm. 5th–7th century, Egypt: al-Fayyoun. Louvre Museum, E 16900. After Bénazeth, *L'art du métal*, 79.

⁶ Statuette of a castanet dancer. Bronze. H. 10 cm (?). 3rd century, Egypt: Lower Egypt. After P. Perdrizet, *Bronzes grecs d'Égypte de la Collection Fouquet* (Paris: La Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archéologie, 1911), 63–64, pl. 29; Comb with representations of three mime dancers. Ivory. H 17 cm, W 6.7 cm. 5th–6th century, Egypt: Antinopolis. Louvre Museum, no. E.11874. After M. H. Rutschowskaya, "Peigne à coiffer." In *L'Art copte en Égypte: 2000 ans de christianisme* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe and Éditions Gallimard, 2000), 222, no. 277; Detail of a tapestry square (fig. 2). After Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, 108.

In addition to poses and movements, visual representations suggest that dancers mastered the art of gestures. This was regarded in classical Greece as an art on its own merit, the *kheironomia* (Evans 2005: 64). In this respect, the main source of information is the description of the first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, he specifically addressed the gestures used by pantomime dancers. Echoing Cicero, he talked about the intimate connection perceived in Roman culture between emotions and the way these emotions found their physical expression in gestures, movements, tone of voice and bodily attitudes in general (Aldrete 1999: 69). He paid the greatest attention to the gestures of the hands and the fingers. Some of the gestures described by Quintilian can be traced in dance scenes on Coptic artefacts, such as the nodding head, the hand bending upwards, or outstretched with the fingers bent backwards away from the palm, the palm turned down, the palm turned towards the dancer's body, and the hand before the dancer's face (Quintilian 1922: 297–99).

Depictions of dancers indicate that dance could involve soloists, pairs and groups. Dancers are frequently represented dancing alone, as depicted on the tapestry fragment in the Abegg Stiftung Museum (fig. 1). These representations may refer to solo dancers. Dancing in pairs is also seen in Coptic representations, where the pairs are composed of a female and a male, as in the tapestry medallion from the Louvre (fig. 2), a tapestry medallion from Rose Choron's collection and a wall hanging from the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo (figs. 9, 10).⁷ Although the figures are highly stylized, one can distinguish male and female dancers by their costumes and poses. The male dancer is represented in a variety of costumes: trousers of shaggy panther skin with a front central tab (fig. 2), or shorts and a shirt with one shoulder strap (fig. 10). He is often portrayed standing or jumping with his feet apart. He is usually represented to the left side of the viewer, while the female dancer is to the right. Although the female dancer is portrayed with a different pose and movement, she follows the male dancer in measured steps and gestures, nodding her head and twisting her body.

Another pattern of dance depicted in Coptic art is group dance. Some representations show dancers performing in large groups (ten or more) or small groups (between three and seven). It is notable that some of these

⁷ Tapestry roundel. Linen and wool. H 6.7 cm, W 7 cm. 5th–7th century, Egypt. After E. Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt*, 106, cat. B10; Detail of a wall hanging (fig. 13) showing a dancing pair. After Gabra and Kraus, *The Treasures of Coptic Art*, 175, no. 111.

groups could be entirely made up of female dancers, as in a tapestry fragment displayed at an auction in London. Other representations show dance groups consisting of both male and female performers, as in a tapestry band of a tunic from Rose Choron's collection (fig. 11).⁸ In this example, the group consists of two male and five female dancers with colourful wigs, arranged alternately in a line. Female dancers are represented completely naked except for a pallium thrown on their shoulders, while the male dancers are wearing loincloths, standing with their feet apart, and jumping up and kicking their heels against the floor.

How far this preponderance of female dancers reflected reality is unclear, for there is hardly any literary evidence on the composition of dance groups. However, some hints are given by hiring contracts. For example, a third-century hiring contract from the village of Philadelphia in Egypt, now preserved in the library archives in Cornell University, shows a dance troupe consisting of three female castanet-dancers. They are hired to perform at a family occasion, without any reference to male dancers (P.Corn. 9 1974: 56; Rowlandson 1998: 216). John Chrysostom indicates that, in his time, the whole dance troupe in Antioch was made up of women, with a single male singer (Webb 2008: 62). So, despite the evident participation of male dancers, the dance profession was dominated by women.

It seems that each group had a principal or a leading dancer, frequently a female. James the Deacon, in *The Life of Pelagia the Harlot*, described Pelagia as 'the leading mime actress' (*mimas*) of Antioch and 'the leader of the chorus girls', *chorcutriai* (James the Deacon 1987: 35–56). In the previously mentioned hiring contract from Philadelphia, a woman named Artemisia arranges for a dancer named Isidora to come to the village with two other dancers. Judging from the text, it seems that Isidora was more significant than the other two dancers. Perhaps she was a leading dancer. This leading role may have been visualized in Coptic art by highlighting a distinctive pose, costume or location. For example, the portrayal of a female dancer on an ivory comb from Antinopolis, now exhibited at the Louvre (fig. 5), displays some signs of her distinguished role. The central zone of the comb is decorated with a representation of three mime dancers engaged in a play, two female and one male, highlighted by network technique. One of the two female dancers is shown centrally positioned underneath a monumental arch, wearing a sash that rests on one shoulder

⁸Detail of a decorative band from a tunic depicting a dance troupe. Wool. Tunic H 175.3 cm, W 115 cm. 7th–8th century, Egypt. Rose Choron's collection. After E. Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Egypt*, 108, cat. B12.

and crosses the chest, and holding a wreath high. The comb is engraved with an invocation that gives her name: ‘Long live Helladia’s fortune and the Blues! Amen!’ (Rutschowscaya 2000: 222; Starks 2008: 112). The Blues was one of the dance factions in Late Antiquity. The distinguished portrayal and the association between her name and a dance faction suggest that she was a leading dancer.

TYPES OF DANCE

When analysing dance scenes on Coptic art in the light of literary descriptions of dance in Late Antiquity, it becomes clear that they display numerous types of actual performance, which revolved around stories from Greek mythology: Bacchic, Pyrrhic, Geranos, grape-gathering dances, and pantomime. These dance themes lost their pagan connotations and continued into Late Antiquity for mere entertainment purposes.

A fourth- to fifth-century bone plaque, now in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (fig. 12), provides some hints about the mythological context of dance. It depicts a nude dancer. Her head is thrown back, her hair cascading in waves, her arms raised, and her torso thrust forward. The youthful appearance of her body is emphasized by the fullness of her figure, and the apparent firmness of her flesh.⁹ The dancer’s nudity, pose, and gestures highlight the sensuality and ecstasy of performance. These features, according to Diodorus of Sicily, are characteristic of the Bacchic dance, which sprang from the cult of Bacchos, the Roman equivalent of Dionysus (Euripides 1981: 296–97). These features can be traced in the representations of maenads in a large Coptic tapestry fragment in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In myth, female dancers who performed this dance are known as maenads, the female devotees of Dionysus. They used their bodies as instruments to communicate with divinities by entering into a state of rapture.¹⁰

The image may also make reference to what people actually saw in the theatre, a professional dancer miming the role of mythological characters

⁹ Inlay with a representation of a dancer. Bone. H 9 cm, W 5 cm. 4th–5th century, Egypt. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 71.1097. After J. L. Heuser, “Plaque with a Maenad,” in *Byzantine Women and Their World*, ed. I. Kalavrezou (New Haven and London: Harvard University Art Museum and Yale University Press, 2003), 168, cat. 87.

¹⁰ Evans 2005: 66. In myth, Dionysus mounted his chariot and departed on a path of conquest. He was attended by a cortege of silenoi, maenads (female devotees) and satyrs. Dionysus’ attendants performed Bacchic dance, which was mainly about passion, desire and ecstasy, to please the god in his travels. Otto 1965: 82; Herrero de Jáuregui 2010: 49–50.

(maenads). Literary evidence testifies to the survival of Bacchic dance into Late Antiquity. Clement of Alexandria, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, says: ‘The actors of the dramas are a sight that gladdens your heart ... while they are performing the mad revels of the Bacchic rite’ (Clement of Alexandria 1919). Clement’s speech suggests that Bacchic dance, in spite of its pagan origin, continued into the early centuries of Christianity. According to Lucian’s description of Bacchic dance in his *De saltatione*, the dance was a show for mere entertainment rather than a cult ritual (Lucian 1972: 210–89).

The writings of Christian polemicists also provide some hints about the continuity of Bacchic dance into Late Antiquity. Though they do not specify Bacchic dance by name, they imply some characteristics of this sort of dance. For example, Chrysostom in his homily *In sanctum Barlaam martyrem* described the sensuous movements of dancers, such as ‘rolling eyes, turning hands, and circling feet ... the twisting of the sinuous body [of the dancer]’ (John Chrysostom 2006: 179–89). Hence, it seems clear that although the cult of Dionysus had ceased by the end of the third century, Bacchic dance continued to be popular in Christian communities. Moreover, its representations are abundantly found on Coptic artefacts even in the seventh century and later.

Coptic objects present evidence for other forms of mythologised dance. A wall hanging from Antinopolis, now in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo (fig. 13), is decorated with a composite dance scene. On the right-hand side, there is a representation of a flute player woven on a large scale. He is dressed in decorated shorts and a shirt with one shoulder strap. On the left side, there is a dance scene surrounded by a rectangular frame. The scene comprises groups of armed warriors, dancing with female dancers arranged alternately in vertical and horizontal lines framing a smaller rectangle. The latter is filled with circular and square medallions decorated alternately with representations of horsemen and dancing pairs (du Bourguet 1991b: 7:2223). It is interpreted as representing a Pyrrhic dance—an imitation war-dance, which originated in classical Greece but continued into Roman times as a kind of dramatic ballet. The dance involved mythological features taken frequently from the myth of Dionysus, such as the march of the god against the Indians (Borthwick 1967; Borthwick 1970). According to literary descriptions of this dance, male warriors were arranged alternately with female dancers, as in the wall hanging, in circles, diagonals, and squares. The dancers demonstrated defensive and offensive movement sequences, accompanied by the flute. Movements included cutting, thrusting, dodging, stooping, springing, and pantomiming of the skills used in battle (Kassing 2007: 54).

Literary evidence suggests that Pyrrhic dances continued into Late Antiquity. According to Dio Cassius, they were performed in official celebrations held in the hippodromes, as a sideshow between horse races (Dio Cassius 2000: 225). The dance could have been performed by female dancers and warriors, as suggested by the Coptic Museum's hanging (fig. 13).¹¹ This assumption is supported by the base of the Theodosian obelisk in Constantinople (fig. 14). It shows the emperor honouring victors, surrounded by members of the dance troupe (Safran 1993: 434). Both classes, dancers and warriors, participated in official celebrations such as the 'sacred crowns contests', so they could also have co-performed Pyrrhic dances (Webb 2008: 30). The dance could also have been performed in theatres, solely by professional dancers. Apuleius of Madauros in his *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*, states that Pyrrhic dance was performed by boys and girls on the stage of a theatre at Corinth (Apuleius 1995: 10:29–34; see Finkelppearl 1991: 221–36). Also at the end of the second century, Athenaeus, the author of *Learned Men at a Banquet*, states that the dance was performed as a kind of Dionysiac pantomime at banquets (Athenaeus 1854: 33). Hence, Pyrrhic dance in Late Antiquity developed from a mythological theme, and was practiced as a kind of dramatic ballet.

A third type of dance with mythological features is depicted in a tapestry band of a tunic in Rose Choron's Collection (fig. 11). It shows a dance group of male and female dancers, arranged alternately in a line and joined together by a rope. The figures are highly stylized. The sex of the dancers can be recognized only by their traditional poses. Female dancers are naked except for red scarves wrapped around their necks and thrown behind their shoulders. They stand with their legs crossed. The male dancers are dressed in loincloths covering the waist and stand with their feet apart while kicking their heels against the ground. These dancers are believed to represent the Greek victory dance called the *geranos* (Lawler 1946: 112). Many scholars have translated *geranos* as 'crane'. However, a more widely accepted theory suggests that it is derived from a word

¹¹ This relation could be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, they could be analogous to satyrs and nymphs from the myth of Dionysus, who celebrated the triumph of Dionysus by dance. Secondly, they were associated together for the characteristics they have in common: both professions are physically demanding, and require the development of muscle memory in motion; also, both dancers and warriors must be agile and strong, and have the physical stamina to persist, which drives them to move. Thus, for warriors, Pyrrhic dance could have been used as a combat training exercise, helping the body to move faster, build endurance, and perform difficult physical manoeuvres. Cf. Zay 2012.

meaning 'to wind' (Evans 2005: 49). The dance re-enacts the story of Ariadne helping Theseus to escape the labyrinth of Crete after killing the Minotaur. The young people flee to the island of Delos, where they erect a monument to Aphrodite and dance hand in hand in her honour (Eaverly 1996: 66). The *geranos* dance was performed in many places in the Mediterranean as a part of Labyrinth rituals (Curry 2000: 29). Like Bacchic and Pyrrhic dances, the *geranos* was developed from a ritualistic feature to a mere entertaining dance (Lucian 1972). The dance is also mentioned by the twelfth-century novelist Eustathios Makrembolites. He said that many people, 'especially seafarers', perform a winding, sinuous dance imitative of the twists and turns of the ancient Labyrinth (Alexiou 1977; Lawler 1946: 114).

These descriptions of *geranos* dance suggest that it was an imitation of the crawling of a snake, where the line of dancers twisted or snaked as if through a maze (Lawler 1946: 112). These movements could be traced in visual representations. The tapestry band of a tunic (fig. 11) shows dancers joined by a rope. Male dancers are portrayed facing forward with their feet apart as if doing small or large successive leaps, while female dancers are crossing one leg over the other and turning their bodies in different directions as if moving through a maze. Within this context, the representations of the dance on visual media may also refer to actual dancers miming the roles of Ariadne and Theseus performing the ritual of the Labyrinth. This representation of *geranos* dance on such a tunic may have acted as a visual amulet evoking the victory of the wearer, since the *geranos* dance commemorated the victory of Theseus (Plutarch 1960: 21; Lawler 1946: 112). It could also signify peace after war, as pointed out by Eustathius. He viewed the *geranos* dance as a synthesis of two major forms: a dance of war, represented in the war steps of the male dancers, and a dance of peace, represented in the sensuality of the movements of the female dancers (Lawler 1946: 114).

Another iconography, which could refer to actual performance, is the representation of solo dancers holding laurel wreaths. This iconography is seen on a tapestry fragment from Rose Choron's collection (fig. 15) and the handle of the *patera* from the Louvre (fig. 3). Judging from the pose and the laurel wreath, the figure makes reference to the goddess Nike/Victoria, as seen on a bronze statue in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Vermeule and Comstock 1988: 68). It may also refer to professional dancers miming the role of the goddess, like Helladia who is portrayed dancing with a wreath on the ivory comb. This reading could be also supported by a similar representation of a pantomime dancer on the bronze contorniate medallion of Valentinian III (Webb 2008: 94, fig. 5).

This solo dance where the dancer mimes mythological characters perhaps refers to a distinctive form of dance, pantomime, which is nonverbal masked performance, telling a story through body language and gestures (Hall and Wyles 2008). A rare representation of a female pantomime dancer is found on an ivory plaque probably from Alexandria, now in the Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen, in Berlin (fig. 16) (Bell 1979: 262, no. 245). The plaque shows a female pantomime dancer holding several masks, each representing a distinct character. According to Lucian, a pantomime dancer was said to have five masks laid out, one for each act of the drama (Lucian 1972; Webb 2008: 79). Some scenes in Coptic art, which have been traditionally labelled as mythological scenes, may refer to actual pantomime dancers playing mythological roles. They could be recognized by means of the theme, dancers' gestures, and/or the dance props. For example, a fragment of a Coptic frieze in the Brooklyn Museum depicts a nude woman lying down beside a bird.¹² The scene has been identified as a representation of the story of Leda and Zeus, the latter disguised as a swan. While this interpretation is highly likely, the frieze could also represent a pantomime dancer telling the story of Leda and the Swan, as this was a popular theme for pantomime performance in Late Antique theatres. The future empress Theodora was said to be a pantomime dancer best known for telling the myth of the rape of Leda by the god Zeus disguised as a swan (Evans 2005: 48).

A tapestry fragment in Rose Choron's collection offers another example of the features of pantomime performance. It portrays a female dancer, wearing a seat-shaped crown, raising her left hand, which bears a bowl, and holding a torch in her right hand (Maguire 1999: 88). The dancer is bending her body slightly, lowering her head, and staring at the ground. This pose and these gestures are reminiscent of Apuleius' account of pantomime; they seem to depict the dancer's iconic pauses, which interrupted the flow of movement (Webb 2008: 78; Cairns 2005: 180). Libanius used the word 'image' to refer to these pauses. Elsewhere, he compares them to statues.¹³ It seems that these pauses and their associated poses were transferred into visual media. This explains why ancient authors frequently describe these pauses in visual artistic terms.

Another field of performance was the mime, an unmasked performance taken from everyday scenarios (Marshall 2006: 8–9). Mime involved

¹² Brooklyn Museum Collection database, www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/69289/Frieze_Fragment

¹³ For more on this analogy, see Lada-Richards 2003.

acting and singing. Some authors described dancers' performance in mimes as rushed and disordered movements, which stood at the opposite pole from the measured ideal of elite posture and gesture that characterised pantomime (Hunter 2002). Therefore, mimes were perceived as a form of low art. Nevertheless, it seems that this type of art enjoyed an immense popularity among theatre audiences, which may well have led to mimes being depicted on objects of daily life.

A tapestry medallion from a tunic in the Brooklyn Museum shows a woman swimming naked. The image has been identified as a representation of a sea nereid. While this reading is highly likely, the scene could also refer to a mime dancer performing an aquatic mime onstage, a popular type of mime in Late Antiquity (Martial 2008: 101; Traversari 1960: 50). Chrysostom describes this type of mime, reporting that women swam naked in the theatre (Traversari 1960: 50). According to this reading, representations of dancers on Coptic objects that depict features of the scenic décor of theatres could refer instead to mime dancers performing onstage. Other features of scenic décor can be traced in Coptic art. For example, dancers are frequently depicted standing underneath a double-tiered arcade, as on a tunic at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow (fig. 17) (Carroll 1989: 69, nos. 15, 16). This background recalls the arched porticos (*scaenae frons*) in ancient Roman theatres, like the theatre in Mérida, Spain (fig. 18) (Low 2015: 23). The presence of this element in Coptic representations of dancers can identify the figures as mime dancers.

Representations of mime dancers can be also identified through the subject of the show. For example, the central zone of Helladia's comb (fig. 5) could represent a scene from a mime play. It depicts three mime dancers, two women and a man, engaged in a play. The two women are raising their hands up in a display of acclamation. The one in the center, probably Helladia, is standing in front of an archway wearing a sash or a pallium. The man on the left side is standing in profile, turning towards the left in the direction of the other two. He is dressed in a short tunic and one shoe, while his other foot is bare. He is putting something on a small wooden chair; it seems to be the other shoe (Rutschowscaya 2000: 222, no. 277). The scene perhaps evoked a satiric mime play known as *The Shoemaker*. The original script of this mime dates back to the third century BC. Like other theatre spectacles, it could have continued into Late Antiquity. The original mime was written by the famous Alexandrian poet and mime-writer Herodas. The main characters are the shoemaker, called Kerdon, and two female clients. The scene unfolds in Kerdon's shop. One of the two women, Metro, brings in another female client and Kerdon makes a pitch for her shoes. Metro takes the floor and negotiates the price with Kerdon.

Kerdon finalizes the sale, agrees to a small discount, and performs a fitting (Bossan 2007: 211). The man putting one shoe on the chair could be Kerdon, showing the female clients the fine workmanship of his products. According to this reading, the mime, although originating in the Ptolomaic period, continued into Late Antiquity because of its timeless applicability in all periods.

Interestingly, valuable information about mime plays in Late Antique Egypt is offered by two mime scripts inscribed on a papyrus found in Oxyrhynchus.¹⁵ One script tells a well-known mime, known as the *Moicheutria*, or ‘Adulteress’, mime. Its basic plot is a dark tale of frustrated longing. The main character, played by a female mime dancer, is in love with her slave. A tapestry medallion from the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo (fig. 19) could be inspired by this mime play. It shows a well-dressed woman seducing a naked man. He seems to be a servant, judging from his nudity and the spindle at his feet (Saleh 2006: 174).

The second mime on the Oxyrhynchus papyrus is known as the *Charition* mime, named after the main female character. It tells about the heroine’s rescue by her brother and other characters, including the buffoon. The latter plays with bodily functions, mocks barbarians with their intricate and incomprehensible babble, and defends the heroine and her brother by comic moves (Santelia and Andreassi 2002). The buffoon is portrayed on a remarkable wooden relief in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo (Habib 1967: 114, no. 279). It shows a musical band and a figure who looks like a buffoon (fig. 20). On the extreme edge of the scene, the buffoon is standing on a dome above a niche and leaning backwards, holding a rope (fig. 21). Although the figure is crudely carved, a big smile on the face of the buffoon is remarkably highlighted. Another rare representation of buffoons can be seen on a Coptic terracotta incense burner in the Newark Museum (fig. 22) (Auth 1998: 15). The burner is in the shape of a laughing buffoon wearing a mask and a long robe and sitting on an altar. The scene could have been inspired by a popular mime character (the slave) from the Greek New Comedy (Auth 1989: 15–19).

Normally, buffoons mocked situations from daily life, playing a central role next to the female mime dancer. In the context of Late Antiquity, the buffoon was known as the *kordax* dancer or the *gelōtopoios* (‘laughter-maker’).¹⁶ He performed suggestive dance, like the ‘bumps and grinds’ of

¹⁵ P.Oxy. 413 (2011). These two scripts were first published in Grenfell and Hunt 1903: 3:41–57.

¹⁶ Webb 2008: 96. Chariton mime involved a *kordax* dancer; see P.Oxy 413 (2011).

dancers in modern-day burlesque theatre, rotating his buttocks and abdomen, sometimes bending forward at the hips. The dancer might also hop, as if his feet were tied together, or leap into the air, or simply wiggle suggestively (Evans 2005: 65).

DANCERS AND MUSIC

Music was an important part of the dance performance. We can also see something of the range of instruments that were played either by dancers themselves or by professional musicians in their depictions in art. Most frequently dancers are represented while playing crotolas, as in the tapestry fragment from the Abegg Stiftung Art Museum (fig. 1) and the bronze statuette from the Louvre (fig. 7). The crotola is a percussion instrument that is believed to have been introduced to Egypt by the Romans (Anderson 1976: 27). It takes the form of pincers and is often made of bronze, or more rarely wood. Between its arms, two small bronze cymbals are fixed, producing a percussion sound when the fork is shaken. Two pairs of crotolas are now exhibited in the British Museum and the Louvre. The Louvre crotolas are provided with tiny bells, which produce a sound like serpents rustling when they are shaken (Bénazeth 2000: 227, no. 286). Less frequently, dancers are represented with small cymbals attached to the fingers of one hand, as in the tapestry medallion from the Louvre (fig. 2), or in both hands, as in the tapestry roundel from Rose Choron's collection (fig. 8). These take the shape of two flat circular metal discs that produce sound when struck against each other. Their central depressions are always pierced with a hole, and sometimes provided with a linen cord to be attached to the dancers' fingers in a manner similar to the cymbals used in contemporary belly dance. The diameter of the central depression is often more than half the overall diameter and the rims are slightly turned up at the edge (Anderson 1976: 23).

Dancers also played castanets, as depicted on the tapestry band from the Louvre. It seems that some dancers specialized in playing castanets. Isidora's hiring contract specifies that she was a castanet dancer: 'To Isadora, castanet dancer, from Artemisia'. The instrument is inherited from ancient Egypt, but took its characteristic form in the second century (Moftah 1991). A wooden example, now exhibited in the Louvre, has a trapezoidal shape with a circular cavity. It is attached to a handle at right angles, where there are two small bronze hinges for hanging the other half of the castanets, now missing (Rutschowskaya 1986: 94). These three instruments—crotolas, cymbals, and castanets—were intended to produce a constant rhythm that regulated the dancers' steps. Their percussion sound is described in literary accounts in association with the popularity of dance shows. For example, Augustine, in his work *The City of God*, commented

on theatre shows: ‘Let there be everywhere heard the rustling of dancers’ (Augustine 426) Clement of Alexandria and Origen both wrote strict injunctions forbidding the use of these instruments, considering them improper music that incited fury and lust (Moftah 1991: 1739). They tolerated only hand cymbals (Hickman 1958–60: 79–80).

In addition to the constant rhythm of percussion instruments, music was played by professional musicians. Flute or pipe players are most frequently represented in dance scenes, as in the wall hanging (fig. 13) and the bronze flagon from the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo. On some representations, dancers are accompanied by a trumpet player and a cymbal player, as in the wooden relief in the Coptic Museum in Old Cairo (fig. 20). Other representations show tambourine players, including the same wooden relief and the tapestry band in the Louvre. In pantomime and mime, the dancers’ performance was accompanied by another type of rhythm, which regulated their steps and movements. This rhythm was produced by a distinctive instrument known as the *scabellum*. It is an ‘iron shoe’ attached to the foot of musicians or other performers (Lucian 1972; John Chrysostom 407; Jory 1996: 4–5).

CONCLUSION

The previous analysis supports the conclusion that dance scenes on Coptic artefacts do not merely reflect mythological or imaginary characters. They provide valuable information about actual performance in Late Antique Egypt. They suggest that dance was a feminine performing art, with limited male participation. Bacchic, Pyrrhic, and Geranos dancing started as pagan rituals inspired by Greek mythology and gradually developed into entertainment performances. Pantomime revolved around Greek mythology. Mime plays were taken from daily life scenarios. The performance in all types of dance demanded numerous physical communication and cognitive skills, such as sensuous poses and steps, showing the grace, elegance, and beauty of the feminine form, and communicating internal emotions through body language and gestures. It could be assumed that most of these types of dance evoked social rejection of dance and dancers because of the sensuous nature of the dancers’ appearance and performance.

The study also highlights how dance in Late Antique Egypt as a performing art was a part of a global profession, where dance themes and patterns all over the empire shared the same characteristics. This perspective emphasizes the significance of Coptic art as a historical source for restoring the lost lives in the social history of the whole empire.

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FIGURES:



Fig. 1 Tapestry fragment showing a dancer, after Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, 111.



Fig. 2 Tapestry medallion showing a dancing pair, after Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, 108.



Fig. 3 Detail of the handle of a patera, after Bénazeth, *L'art du métal*, 79.



Fig. 4 Statuette of a castanet dancer, after Perdrizet, *Bronzes grecs d'Égypte*, 63–64, pl. 29.



Fig. 5 Left: Comb with representations of three mime dancers, after Rutschowskaya, “*Peigne à coiffer*,” 222, no. 277.



Right Detail of the dancer who is standing in the middle



Fig. 6 Detail of a tapestry medallion (fig.2), after Rutschowskaya, *Coptic Fabrics*, 108.



Fig.7 A statuette (probably a pillar of a candlestick), after Santrot, *Au fil du Nil*, p.157, no.116.



Fig. 8 Detail of a tapestry roundel, after Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt*, 131, cat. B31.



Fig. 9 Tapestry roundel, after Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt*, 106, cat. B10.



Fig. 10 Detail of a wall hanging (fig. 14) showing a dancing pair.



Fig. 11 Detail of a decorative band adorning the collar of a tunic, after Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Egypt*, 108, cat. B12.



Fig. 12 Inlay with a representation of a dancer, after Heuser, “Plaque with a Maenad,” 168, cat. 87.



Fig. 13 Part of a tapestry wall hanging, after Gabra and Kraus, *The Treasures of Coptic Art*, 175, no. 111.



Fig.14 The Southeast Face of the Obelisk of Theodosius I in the İstanbul Hippodrome, after Brilliant, 'Relief with Prize Presentation Scene from the Theodosian Obelisk', no. 99, pp. 107, 108.



Fig. 15 Fragment of textile showing a dancer with wreaths, after Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Egypt*, 108, cat. B13.



Fig.16 Plaque with pantomime Dancer, after Bell, 'Plaque with pantomime Actress', p. 262, No. 245.



Fig. 17. Tunic decorated with figures of dancers standing underneath double-tiered arcades, after Carroll, Looms and Textiles of the Copts, 69, nos. 15, 16.



Fig. 18. Roman theatre of Mérida, Spain, after Low, *Dramatic Spaces*, 23.



Fig. 19. Tapestry square, after Saleh, "Copts," 174.



Fig. 20 Decorative wooden relief depicting a musical band, after Habib, *The Coptic Museum: A General Guide*, 114, no 279.



Fig. 21 Detail of a decorative relief showing a clown (fig.20).



Fig. 22 Incense burner in the form of a comic dancer, after Auth, "A Romano-Egyptian Statuette of a Comic Actor," 15.