
ICONS REVEAL: THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN IN DANCE IN THE BYZANTINE PERIOD THROUGH THE CHURCHES' AND MONASTERIES' DEPICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Dance as a form of art is the mirror of particular social, political and economic circumstances of each era. It reflects the ideologies, the beliefs and the society of each era, but also of each region. In the past, icons and depictions in general, served as a kind of photography or a clip form cinematographic film, which unraveled in front of us. Through these depictions we can see how the relations between the two genders are formed both in society and, more specifically, through dance. Therefore, this research aims at giving prominence to the position of women in dance in that period. The data collection was based on secondary sources and more particularly on the principles of literature and historical archival research. The representations of dance will be interpreted under the conditions of visual anthropology, where the representations work exactly as a film, in which we can observe various component elements of the dance. In conclusion, the depictions of the Byzantine period reveal data of the dance tradition of the Byzantine people and reveal to us that the presence of woman was real, intense and sometimes essential during the dance events of the Byzantium.

KEYWORDS: history, visual anthropology, gender relations, component elements of dance

INTRODUCTION

Dance as a form of art is the mirror of particular social, political and economic circumstances of each era. It reflects the ideologies, the beliefs and the society of each era, but also of each region. The social structures, in turn, are in discourse with gender relations and with the way they appear through performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997), meaning dance (Hanna, 1988). From the aforementioned it appears that the performative procedures and more specifically dance can provide us with information on the social life of each region.

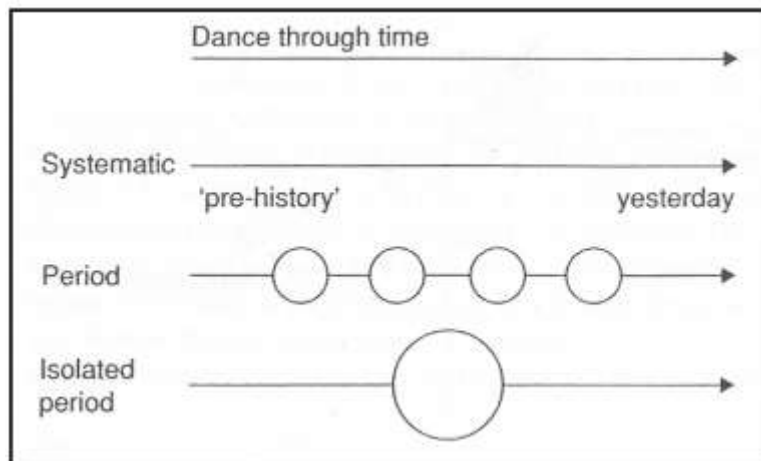
What happens when we want to refer to the past, though, where there is not enough information and also, we cannot interview as in the ethnographic field work, so as to observe how dance functioned in the past as well as the gender relations that were present in dance, and in society by extension? It is obvious that in the past there were not any sound sources, or videography documents. At this point it would be useful to turn to secondary sources, and more specifically, books, historical sources and articles, which have to do with the subject under research. We can also address to icons, murals, items

containing icons and other presentations, so as to extract some data which will help us research and interpret the information provided, since depictions used to be the news agency of the time.

In the past, icons and depictions in general, served as a kind of photography or a clip form cinematographic film, which unraveled in front of us. They contained themes which “...refer to the circumstances describing each era and the people’s lives...” (Papadopoulou, 2010:10). Thus, through these depictions we can see how the relations between the two genders are formed both in society and, more specifically, through dance. The depictions serve as a kind of film with all its elements.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to observe the structure of gender relations through dance procedures of a specific period of time, the Byzantine period. In particular, this research aims at giving prominence to the position of women in dance and the dance performativities through the depictions, icons and murals of the Byzantine period. The data collection was based on secondary sources and more particularly on the principles of literature and historical archival research (Adshead & Layson, 1994; Thomas & Nelson 2002). One of the scientific historical approaches of Adshead & Layson, (1994) was used for the presentation and interpretation of the data, which refers to the focus on the study of dance in an isolated period of time, where for the researcher (Table 1) “... it is possible to work in detail and to pay attention to single events and their relation to the time-span of the selected area...” (pp. 6).

Table 1: The isolated period of history (Adshead & Layson, 1994:6)



In addition, the representations of dance will be interpreted under the conditions of visual anthropology. In the present research the representations will be regarded as a film “which presents an inherently imperfect mode of knowledge, which produces gaps as it fills them” (Barnes, 2010:124). The representations work exactly as a film since there is no language and “...movement is forced to replace language, in other words movements must evoke for the spectator...” (Hickethier, 2011:152). What is more, just like in films, the depictions constitute “...places of memory, demanding the reconceptualisations of the present through the parameters of the past...” (Dermetzopoulos

2015:652), allowing “...the presence of the past in the present...” (Somdahl-Sands & Finn, 2015:819). There is also a form of communication since the “...visual anthropology is about the visual and about visual communication, even if this is reasserted in terms of a relationship between visual and other elements of experience, practice, material culture, fieldwork and representation...” (Pink, 2006:131), entailing the material culture through which visual communication can be achieved as well. In short, we can see at the table below (Table 2) that from the theories of visual anthropology, as interpretative approaches and as functions, they can be implemented in depictions the same way that they were implemented in cinematography.

Table 2: Common function and interpretative approach of cinematography and depictions through the theories of visual Anthropology

Common function and interpretative approach of cinematography and depictions through the theories of visual Anthropology
Language is replaced by picture
They constitute <i>places of memory</i>
They can transfer the presence of the past in the present
They constitute material culture through which visual communication can be achieved

Finally, according to Seebas (1991), a picture can be useful in the studies of dance, because

- it represents a dance position;
- it represents a synchronic summary of a succession of movements;
- it depicts physical expressions of emotion;
- it represents concretely o concept of dance, such as the Dance of Death;
- it represents, symbolically or abstractly, the idea of dance;
- It portrays a dancer, in action or as a sitter;
- It includes elements related to dance, such as the costume, headdress, or objects held;

- It depicts the physical location (dance floor, stage, ball house, etc.), where dance takes place. (p. 34)

The depictions of woman in dance during the Byzantine period

It can be noted at first that through the depictions and the murals, most of which are placed inside churches and monasteries, one can observe pictures of women dancing. The history and the depiction of Salome's dance (Image 1) is known, and so is Mariam's (Image 2) (Voutsas, 2004; Moutzali, 2004; Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004).



**Image 1: The beheading of John the Baptist
(Source: Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004;51)**



**Image 2: Mariam's dance (9th century, Mount Athos)
(Source: Voutsas, 2004;45)**

It is important to observe the pictures of that time because “...through the depictions we distinguish the evolution of both dance and clothing...” (Voutsas, 2004;48). Furthermore, “in the depictions of dance a complex of notions, sentiments and practices is recorded, since the dancing body experiences the effect of society of that time...” (Moutzali, 2004;20). In general, we can identify several categories in the depictions of dance during the Byzantine period. Parcharidou-Anagnostou, (2004) divided the (re)presentations into four categories, based on the dancers' handhold. It is worth mentioning that women's representations are present in all categories. Therefore, the categories are divided as such:

1. dancers are held by the wrists with relative distance among their bodies. A number of depictions are included in this category, where women or men perform chain dance, syrtos dance [...]. The cases of the chapel of Koukouzelissa in Great Lavra monastery are special [...], where the lead dancer is a man and of Agios Nikolaos in Kozani [...], where young girls, in double dance, are held by the wrists with a handkerchief linking their hands.
2. dancers are held by the hands arm in arm, establishing almost a wall from the dancers. Circle dances of women are included in this category as in the monasteries of Vathia in Euboea, Megali Panagia in Samos, Agios Georgios of Arma, et al.
3. dancers are held crosswise by the wrists with the previous and the next dancer. In this category a lot of monuments of Mani, and the churches of Agia Sofia in Gournitsa, of Agios Nikolaos in Proastio, of Zoodochos Pigi in Zartana Castle and of Koimisis tis Theotokou in

Stavropigi are included. The repetition of the same pattern happens either because of the fact that the composition is created by the same group of painters, or because the pattern reflects a specific local dance.

4. dancers hold the belt of the previous and the next dancer (zonaradikos dance). A dance performed by three women holding a handkerchief is included in this category. What is worth mentioning in this category is the women’s dance of two groups consisting of three women each with crosswise hands [...], where the movements are reminiscent of the dance “Trata” and, in general, dances of the wider region of Attica and Corinthia, as well as of the Argo-Saronic Gulf islands. (pp. 54-55).

In short, in the table (Table 3) and the image (Image 3) below the categories of women’s dances in Byzantium according to the handhold are briefly mentioned, through the depictions:

Table 3: *Women’s handholds in dance events in Byzantium through depictions*

Women’s handholds in dance events in Byzantium through depictions
Wrist handhold and distance among dancers’ bodies
Wrist handhold, but arm in arm, with no distance among them
Crosswise handhold (X handhold) using the hands
Crosswise handhold (X handhold) using the belts



Image 3: Women's handholds in dance events in Byzantium through depictions

Apart from the purely female dances though, there are depictions which show women dancing together with men in mixed dances. As mentioned by Voutsas (2004) (Image 4) "...mixed dances add to purely female dances. A dance as such is found in the katholikon of the Holy Monastery of Saint Gregory in Mount Athos [...]. Three men lead the chain dance and three women wearing traditional costumes follow..." (p. 48).



Image 4: Praises. Entreaty mural, 1779

(Source: Voutsas, 2004:48)

In addition, Parcharidou-Anagnostou (2004) (Image 5), writes that the dance performed in Arbore (1503/4) Romania about the Life of Saint George is even more realistic. During the dance, the dancers – three women and one man – are held by the shoulders and move in a circle, to the sound of the string instrument, the tambourine and the drum and, possibly, based on the chant gesture and the half-open lips of the figures, of the group song sung by the group of women on the right. (p.52)



Image 5: A female dance with a man holding each other in a circle
(Source: Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004:51)

Parcharidou-Anagnostou (2004), also mentions that a depiction of a group, festive dance – on a negative way – is found in the once illustrated topic of the Allegory of the Upper City of Jerusalem in an icon of Platytera in Corfu (circa 1500), where a group of young women dressed provocatively, possibly prostitutes, come out of a residence dancing. These women personify the human passions of altercation, hatred, etc. (pp.52-53)

The 11th century was a century of major social changes for the Byzantine Empire, leading to changes in every aspect of the Byzantines' everyday lives, mainly of women. It was the century, when women gained access to power ("the century of the Empresses") and education. The evolution of dance was directly affected by this, since the depictions denote that the 11th century is the milestone of change in the way women danced.

She becomes detached from the traditional model and embraces another, closer to the modern society she lived in "...from the 11th century onwards the depictions of women seize to embrace standardized models and are being replaced by a new one, that of a woman integrated in modern society's activities..." (Voutsas, 2004;45). During this century individual dances are gradually replaced by group dances. According to Voutsas (2004), "...a change in the dance habits is being distinguished over the centuries. Women no longer dance individually but in groups..." (p. 47), and also "...dance passes from individual, predominately, with intense movement and body maneuvers to being performed in groups..." (p. 48). This was clearly because there is a replacement by the dances of professional female dancers to a new kind, which is obvious through their depictions. In particular:

Most dance depictions until the 11th century depict the professional female dancers. Since the 11th century women's depictions seize to embrace standardized models and are being replaced by a new one, that of a woman integrated in modern society's activities. (Voutsas, p.45)

Therefore, we see depictions of circle dances, which can be performed in an enclosed circle shape. In the depiction of the illustrated 13th century New Testament from the monastery of Great Lavra (Image 6), it is revealed that «six women are dancing, forming an enclosed circle, held crosswise by the hands [...]. There are no musical instruments in the miniature, although according to the description "women singing, let us sing to the Lord"» (Voutsas, 2004;47).



Image 6: *Mariam and the virgins dancing*

(Source: Voutsas, 2004:47)

Another icon (a depiction of the Praises of 1620 inside the church of Saint Menas in Monodendri in Zagori) depicts

an enclosed circle dance of eight women in the countryside held by the wrists [...]. They are all wearing white headscarves, traditional dresses and they are looking up. In the middle of the circle two musicians playing the davul and the multi-stringed psaltery, the zither according to the classification of musical instruments [...], are accompanying their dance. (Voutsas, 2004:47)

Also, "...lastly, the lady with the Western costume leading the circle dance of females wearing local costumes in Arbanassi (1646) is memorable..." (Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004:54).

At the same time though women's individual dances or face-to-face dances do not seem to exist.

the dancer is usually a skinny woman standing in three quarters posture, as in the Filanthropinon monastery [...] where she moves intensely, holding handkerchiefs in both hands and turning her head up and back, towards Christ of Epiphany. The depiction in the Archbishopric of Nicosia (1735-1756) is unique, where two women holding handkerchiefs in their hands are dancing face-to-face as in the Karsilamas dance, is unique. (Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004:53)

In addition, apart from the religious depictions, there are also formal imperial objects or even everyday objects depicting such individual dances. Such a formal object is the crown of Constantine IX Monomachos, which "...consists of seven arched plates [...] On the next plates, smaller in size, two dancers are depicted on either side of the two women..." (Voutsas, p.45). An example of an everyday object is "...the dancing figure depicted at the bottom of a clay plate [...] which dates back to the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th. It is probably about a woman looking right..." (Image 7). (Voutsas, p.46)



Image 7: *Depiction of a female dancer at the bottom of a clay plate (end of 13th century-14th century)*

(Source: Voutsas, 2004, 44)

The change in the way female dancers is depicted adds to the abovementioned changes. Women seem to dance more subtly and calmly than vividly and wildly. They dance in a way that is "...*calm and modest, holding each other's' hands by the wrists and the shoulders. There is no longer the element of wildness even in vivid dances ...*" (Voutsas, 2004:48). Their dance now "...*is performed in slow, calm steps sharing nothing with its former wild nature...*" (Voutsas, 2004:47) which is obvious from the depictions, where "...*calmly moving dancers are also depicted in the illustrated 13th century New Testament from the Great Lavra monastery...*" (Voutsas, 2004:47). Furthermore, there is an icon in the katholikon of the Holy Monastery of Saint Gregory in Mount Athos, where "...*the vivid rhythm, set by a davul player leading the dance, is shown by the bouncing step of both the musician and the male dancers, something that females do not follow since they are moving calmly...*" (Voutsas, 2004:48).

Finally, it is obvious from the depictions that information about the dancers' costumes in the Byzantine period will be extracted. Female dancers seem to dress modestly and covering almost their whole body. Therefore «there are many cases where female dancers are represented with a head cover – as in the works of art of painters or in certain sites of Mani, while their costumes, without exception, reveal only their elbows» (Image 8) (Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004:55-56).



Image 8: *Female dance from the Monastery of Saint Nicetas*

(Source: Parcharidou-Anagnostou, 2004:56)

In addition, we can observe the costume of professional female dancers from the everyday objects, where “...she wears a short frilled skirt and a tight, embroidered garment with long sleeves hanging from her raised arms. Long sleeves indicate the professional dancers of that time...” (Voutsas, p.46) As mentioned above, we can also observe depictions of dance and women dancing on imperial objects or even on monuments, and therefore draw a lot of useful information. For example,

On the lower part (on the basis of the sculptural decoration on Theodosius's obelisk) there is a depiction of a crowd watching the chain dance of young women dancing gracefully (in a smaller depiction), forming two groups, accompanied by various musical instruments including the two multi-pipe instruments placed in the Hippodrome. On the left the dance is vivid with dance

maneuvers, which is obvious from the women's bodies leaning intensely, whereas on the right the dance is calmer. The female dancers, held by the hands and holding the end of their veil, are moving gracefully and elegantly. Their garment, the veil held from the end by the female dancers and their poise, lead us to depictions of ancient Greek devotional dances. (Voutsas, 2004:45)

In accordance with the above mentioned Blagojević (2012) suggests that

On the Theodosius's obelisk which was raised in 390 in the Hippodrome in Constantinople, the Emperor Theodosius is shown in the middle, among his sons and soldiers, wreathing the winner. Underneath them there's a number of spectators watching two groups of young girls holding hands and dancing to the accompaniment of musical instruments (pp. 88-89)

and adds another depiction, this time in an imperial crown (2012):

one of the most beautiful surveys is that on the crown of Constantine IX Monomachos, which is now placed in Budapest. In some of them girls dancing an oriental dance holding headscarves above their heads are shown. A miniature from the famous Chludov manuscript, which is located in Russia, is very expressive. Dancing Mariam is presented in it. It is necessary to underline that in most cases oriental dances were shown in miniatures. Tamara Rice Talbot concluded that skinny girls dancing with body moves reminding to the art of Syria, Persia or India, were more gladly seen, than dancing Greek or South European dances. (pp. 89)

CONCLUSION

Useful conclusions can be drawn about the position of woman in dance during the Byzantine period through the depictions considering the aforementioned data. The depictions from the imperial monuments and objects such as the crowns, to the objects of everyday use, denote the intense presence of women in the dancing events of Byzantium.

Apart from these, depictions are found in churches and monasteries, with dance events on icons and murals. The presence of women is apparent and intense on these depictions, meaning that the woman herself is present and in fact, in certain cases, she was the lead in these dance events of Byzantium. Therefore, many component elements of dance come to light through the depictions. As we analyze the table (Table 4) of the component elements of the dance (Giurchescu, 1992; Karfis, 2018; Koutsouba, 2019; Tyrovola, 2001, 2009, 2019), we conclude that the depictions help us gather a lot of information. With regard to movement, the dancers are depicted to dance in a modest and calm way, since "...*calmly moving dancers are depicted...*" (Voutsas, 2004:47), and since there is an icon where "...*women are moving calmly...*" (Voutsas, 2004:48). The component elements of dancers can be observed through the purely female dances and the mixed, single and group dances as well. As for the component elements of the visual environment, the dances seem to take place in fairs, formal palace ceremonies, and their garment is also apparent. Last but not least, as for the acoustic component elements, there are clearly no sounds, since depictions do not produce sounds. However, they provide

us with information on the musical instruments of that time and region. The information drawn from the Byzantine depictions is briefly reported in the following table (Table 4):

Table 4: Component elements of female dances, through the Byzantine depictions

Component elements of female dances, through the Byzantine depictions	
Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modest and calm movement • In a circle (enclosed or open) • Multiple handholds (by the wrists, arm in arm, X handhold by the hands, X handhold by the belts)
Dancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female and mixed dances • Single, face-to-face , group, embrace dances
Visual Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairs, formal palace ceremonies • Garments, covering almost their whole body, or short skirts with long sleeves (professional dancers)
Acoustic compositional elements	Variety of depictions of musical instruments

We do not know for sure the exact choreography or the exact melody or even the dance songs and any interpretation is risky since it will come from arbitrary assumptions. However, we can conclude that the depictions can function an «arena of inquiry» (Hughes-Freeland, 1999:111) and also as a text, in which picture replaces words and enables us to “read” it or “study” it. Furthermore, these depictions function as *places of memory*, through which we recollect the past and we reflect again on dance events through the historical dance documents presented on them. They carry the presence of the past in the present through the visual contact, and therefore they transfer us to the dance events of the Byzantine period through picture. Last but not least, as an element of material culture, they provide us with data and evidence, through which the visual communication can be achieved and the viewer can thus “communicate” and “interact” with the picture.

In conclusion, the depictions of the Byzantine period reveal data of the dance tradition of the Byzantine people, “communicate” with us, bring the past into the present and reveal to us that the presence of woman was real, intense and sometimes essential during the dance events of the Byzantium.

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