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BEES AND BIRDS IN AEGEAN EPIPHANIC DANCE

Epiphanic dance was one of the principal aspects of ritual performance in the Aegean Bronze Age. The pictorial evidence from seals, seal impressions, wall paintings, and other works shows (mostly) women dancing, usually in open-air settings, to induce divine apparitions or to engender such visions in their audiences. The present study proposes that the hive dances of the honey bee and the aerial acrobatics of the barn swallow served as models for costumes and choreography, whose memory may well be preserved on Homer's shield of Achilles, with its dancing space that "Daedalus made at Knossos for Ariadne" (Iliad 18:590-606).

For Sir Arthur Evans, the site of Knossos was no empty, echoing vestige of remote antiquity. On a moonlit night, the Grand Staircase «seemed to awake awhile to life and movement», as Minoan men and women «passed and re-passed on the flights below» (*PM III*: 301). In the brightness of day, the yellow-and-blue swallowtail butterflies by the stream below the palace seemed to him in the “magic of the spot” to become the fresco dancers, dressed in the same colors (*PM III*: 80).

Criticized for such expressions of «unfettered imagination» (MacGillivray 2000: 5), as well as accused of shaping in text, image, and reconstitution a Knossian and Minoan past more Art Nouveau and Art Deco than ancient, more fraudulent and Eurocentrically biased than authentic (Chi 2017; Schoep 2018), Evans and his intuition have been regularly substantiated by subsequent finds on Crete, Santorini, and elsewhere (Marinatos 2015; Blakolmer 2017). The editors' kind invitation to contribute to this thematic journal number on performance has prompted me to think afresh about those Minoan dancers he saw so gracefully moving to music now unheard. Admittedly, I enter “the labyrinth of conjecture” (Evans 1912: 277). There are, nevertheless, some threads to follow.

The Dance of Ariadne

Ariadne herself sets us on our path. Among the vignettes on the *Iliad*'s new shield for Achilles is a scene of dancing (Book 18: 590-606), which Homer describes as taking place in a circular space «like the one Daedalus made at Knossos for Ariadne». Garlanded maidens and youths wearing golden daggers in their silver belts dance together before an audience. As so often in Homer, Bronze Age details surface. Here, the young men's tunics are said to gleam with oil, reflecting the actual practice



attested in Linear B documents of oiling linen and wool textiles to make them glossy and fragrant (Shelmerdine 1999).

Given this, I propose viewing the dance patterns as equally Bronze Age in origin. Homer's dancers execute two choreographies, the first a circle dance done in rings, and the other a crisscrossing dance done in rows. In the last line, the bard tells us that two tumblers lead the dance. Do these acrobats «puckishly promote the erotic undercurrents of the mixed dance», with Daedalus' project perhaps connected with the courtship of Ariadne by Theseus (Lonsdale 1999: 273)? I believe the tumblers have a different role, a point to which I return in my discussion of a possible model for them from the avian world.

The idea that a round dancing place at Knossos veritably existed was bolstered by the unexpected discovery in 1978-82 of three circular stone platforms about 350 meters west of the palace's northern edge (Warren 1984). The largest, dubbed the Great Circle, was likely for the dancers, while the two smaller may have been for musicians, priestesses, or other important persons. The lines and zigzags carved on the visible faces of a significant proportion of the Great Circle's surviving ashlar blocks may well denote the dance movements to be performed. The location of the platforms encourages us to visualize a procession making its way from the palace, bringing offerings and eager to watch the show.

And first-rate spectacle it must have been, to judge from the high esteem in which Homer and later classical writers held Cretan dance and dancers, notably from Knossos (German 2005: 53-54). Their reputation carried into modern times (*PM* III: 75-78), as witnessed by the impressive *choros* performances that Evans organized in the early years of excavation to encourage reconciliation among his Christian and Muslim workers (Brown 1983). Already in 1883 while traveling through the mainland near Delphi, Evans had felt that dance bridged the millennia: «It is hard to imagine a more beautiful picture than this chain of girls in white and scarlet, slowly and stately in measure, as becoming the antiquity of their dance, tripping across the green» (quoted in MacGillivray 2000: 63).

In addition, the three structures augment architecturally the sizable corpus of Minoan and Mycenaean dance representations, which includes terracotta models, seals and seal impressions, wall paintings, and Kamares ware (Warren 1984: 318-320; German 2005). Yet how can we be certain that dancing is shown, as opposed to, say, static gesturing? In her seminal study, *Arrest and Movement*, Groenewegen-Frankfort speaks of Minoan art's «joyous ease of creatures at play», stressing that she means objective, serious play within ritual contexts, which encompass dance (1951: 186). Walberg, however, credits an underlying basis in older, ceramic motifs of abstract revolving, whirling, and *Zweipass* elements for the perception we have of dancing and other dynamic motions in later art (1986: 99, 114). Recently, German has identified seven arm positions in the depictions, which definitely «might be called dance steps», if we had corresponding leg movements illustrated, but which, in their absence, still appear to be reliable indicators that dance is intended (2005: 56).



In this regard, it is instructive to look at the pictorial records of the early 20th century ballets inspired by the Minoan art emerging from Knossos and other sites. Images of scenes from *L'Après-Midi d'un Faun* (1911) of the Ballets Russes, for instance, show Nijinsky with Minoan-style nymphs whose bent-arm gestures brought to life the “Sacred Grove and Dance” fresco from Knossos (Momigliano 2017: fig. 5.15A). For his *Gnossienne* piece (1919), Ted Shawn conceived and danced the solo role of a priest worshipping before the unseen altar of an imagined Snake Goddess, his arms and legs stiffly angular in a photographic postcard of his performance (Morris 2017: fig. 6.1). And in the balletic presentation (1906) of Mariano Fortuny’s first series of Knossos scarves, a photograph captures the models positioned on two levels, their arms outstretched to showcase the diaphanous, Minoan-patterned silks (Caloi 2017: fig 4.1). In each case, were it not for eyewitness and other descriptions, we would be hard put to recognize that the figures dance.

Why do (mostly) women dance in the Aegean Bronze Age? The consensus is that a principal reason «was to reverence or induce the presence of a divinity» (Warren 1984: 319). This often seems to have entailed ecstatic possession, with the participants’ aniconic heads credibly the first images of an altered state of consciousness (Morris and Peatfield). Dancing was doubtless one aspect of a shamanistic panoply of vision-provoking actions, ranging from substance ingestion to sensory deprivation or overload (Tully and Crooks 2015). Designs verging on the psychedelic in textile patterns and wall borders must also have contributed to the epiphanic experience (Vlachopoulos 2016; Shaw and Chapin 2016).

Lately, some Aegeanists have suggested that there was a political dimension too. Social anthropologists regard this as a major theme for dance, owing to its ability to serve as a cathartic safety valve, organ of social control, and boundary marker (Spencer 1985). Applying this to the Minoans, German (2005) posits that dancing, processions, and bull-leaping emerged in the period of the second palaces on Crete in order to relieve the putative social pressures caused by the change from a kinship-based system to a palatial hierarchy. She ascribes further stress on Crete’s social fabric to post-Thera eruption strains. Whether or not these constructs obtained, we may recall that dance helped heal at post-Ottoman Knossos, as noted above.

Taking parallel approaches, others have argued that Minoan landscape in art is not a mute backdrop for performance, but a «politicised, active agent in the enactment of power» (Crooks, Tully, and Hitchcock 2016: 163). Indeed, as Soles (2016) convincingly puts it, any Minoan religious pageantry that demonstrated control of the supernatural thereby sustained its own power, possibly by dispatching priestess-enactors from Knossos throughout Crete, maybe to Thera and beyond.

But social anthropologists are fortunate to have performances and informants at their disposal. Take, for instance, the fertility dances and related rituals enacted in a cluster of villages in Papua New Guinea. Detailed, long-term observation of them resulted in the monograph *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries*, which elucidates all the subtle variations in body paint, mask type, dance style, and so



forth, across a 24-hour period and other time-frames (Gell 1975). For several dances, analysis of upper and lower leg angles generated their precise step cycles (Gell 1985).

Even less rigorous records of ritual dance provide a wealth of information. As an example, we may consider the 19th-century reports by the missionaries and explorers who saw or heard about the manhood initiation ceremonies of the indigenous peoples (now extinct) of Tierra del Fuego. Over the course of a month, the initiate was exposed to increasingly frightening apparitions, intended to test progressively his fortitude. Photographs taken in 1923 corroborate the early accounts, which otherwise might seem «unbelievable and the fruit of invention» (Coiazzi 1914/1999: 32). The series depicts masked dancers in dark body paint with light-colored dots and stripes, each a different design, ready to play their parts in the epiphanic dramas.

While such nuances of Bronze Age ritual dance will always elude us Aegeanists, I suggest that some sense of them may be gleaned from a look at selected behaviors of honey bees and barn swallows.

The Dance of the Honey Bee

For thousands of years, people have hunted honey and kept bees (Crane 1999). The fullest evidence from the Bronze Age world comes, not surprisingly, from Egypt, where it was thought that the sun-god's tears fell upon the ground and became bees (Kritsky 2015). The numerous representations of apiculture from the Old Kingdom on show men tending stacks of horizontal, convex-sided hives, as well as collecting, processing, and offering honey. A few texts hint at female producers. A beekeeping bureaucracy supervised, inspected, and graded the honey. Beeswax, mainly used medicinally and in lost-wax casting, was considered to have magical properties, for, among other characteristics, it was not affected by water, never discolored, and left no ash when burned.

From the Aegean, we have examples of horizontal ceramic hives up to a meter long, as well as smoking pots and covered containers for honey combs (Crane 1999: 199; Harissis and Harissis 2009). There are also small (30 cm high) upright beehives, some with inner lattice incisions, spiral grooves, or finger impressions, possibly functional for the bees or in imitation of skeps, whose basketry would not have survived in the archaeological record (d'Agata and de Angelis 2014; Melas 1999). Recent iconographic studies have argued that apiculture was more frequently depicted in Aegean glyptic than previously recognized (Harissis and Harissis 2009; Crowley 2014). Most compelling is the idea that the people shown pulling on trees are gathering swarms.

It is also plausible that the pithoslike objects, often depicted as though they were leaning against the ring bezel sides, are beehives, especially as bees (tiny pockmarks) seem to enter or issue from them. My concern here is that this sort of large, upright hive is a feature of the cooler, wetter regions of Europe, where beekeeping methods in northern forests were the precursors for this apicultural tradition



(Crane 1983: 77-90). If these Minoan glyptic images are hives, we would need to view them as standard horizontal hives, temporarily propped up and exaggerated in size for reasons unclear to us. Seeing the vertical line on some of them as possible strapping (Crowley 2014: 132) is a bit bothersome too, since horizontal hives are either easily shifted by hand, or if moved by water or land in the common practice of migratory beekeeping, would be more securely fastened about their middles, as a ridge on a modern Cycladic hive appears to indicate (Crane 1983: fig. 24). The line may instead show the split in a log hollowed out for a hive, such as photographed a century ago in the Caucasus (Crane 1999: fig. 25.6a), with plane trees the preferred species back then in eastern Crete, according to historical memory (Crane 1999: 192).

Beekeeping has always had a certain mystique, down to the present time. In the woods of rural England, for example, a Bee Master's assistant will vigorously shake a tree branch to dislodge a swarm so it lands upon the bare head of the Master, who, unstung, carries it there to a new hive (Buxton 2004: 28). In Bulgaria on Lazarus Day (the day before Palm Sunday), a woman beekeeper magically retains her bees by spinning white wool within a circle of girl dancers, then tying the yarn around her hives: «as the dance and the spindle whirled about, so would the swarms of bees whirl around the hives» (ethnographic report quoted in Barber 2013: 47).

Honey bees themselves are the ultimate dancers. While the earliest extant description comes from a mid-17th century English manuscript (Crane 1999: 567), it is likely that anyone who watched bees closely would have noticed their dance behavior. Systematic investigation began in the early 20th century with the experiments of the Austrian scientist Karl von Frisch, who received a Nobel Prize in 1973 for his discoveries (Munz 2016; Gould and Gould 1988). He demonstrated that a worker bee returning to the hive excitedly dances to communicate the precise location of a fine food source she has found. If this is nearby, she does a round dance, making alternating clockwise and counterclockwise circles. For a more distant source, she executes a waggle dance in an ovoid figure-eight whose orientation with respect to the sun, as well as acoustic and durational components, encode the information needed for other bees to find the same food. In addition, during swarming the waggle dance points to potential nesting places with good food and water.

I believe that all this sheds new light on Aegean epiphany dance. As already noted, apicultural glyptic imagery includes swarms, tree shaking, beehives, and bees. These nearly always occur in conjunction with dancing women and apparitions of figurative and nonfigurative ilk. Harissis and Harissis suggest that the women are beekeepers and wonder if «it is just a remarkable coincidence» that their tiered skirts, both flounced and frilled, so strongly remind us of the honey bee's segmented abdomen (2009: 51). Small differences in skirt design may, they further suggest, denote hierarchies of beekeeping responsibility.

While these women may have been beekeepers, I propose that here they are primarily performers in bee dances. Of particular note are the diminutive Epiphany Ladies who descend or hover, toes pointed and tresses streaming. They, and several of the dancers, wear a frilled skirt whose



horizontal layers are slightly rolled, rather than falling straight down to the next tier. Examples include *CMS II.6.1* from Haghia Triada; *CMS VI.2.280* from an unknown provenance; *CMS II.3.51* from Knossos, Isopata Tomb 1; and HM 1629 from Poros. In profile and bell shape, one is struck by how closely these skirts resemble traditional skeps of coiled basketry. I think this is surely more than coincidence.

Do the bee-women dance ecstatically in circles and figure-eights to engender the apparitions? Or do the Epiphany Ladies, dressed in their special hive costumes, twirl round and round to inspire the dancers? Or do the two work in concert, following the model of honey bee cooperation, as rendered so perfectly on the well-known Mallia bee pendant (Harissis and Harissis 2009: 9-11)?

The Dance of the Barn Swallow

What of Homer's crisscrossing dancers and tumblers? For these, let us turn to the European barn swallow. Some years ago, I drew attention to the fact that the swallows painted on the walls of Delta 2 at Thera exhibit the classic signs of aggressive, high intensity display (Foster 1995). Contrary to previous interpretations, they neither court partners nor feed fledglings, but wheel and dive, feet and claws extended, beaks agape, as they contest for territory and compete for nest-lining feathers.

Other swallows, many displaying, appear in dozens of Aegean contexts. To the list of sightings compiled for my 1995 article should be added the following: a carnelian seal, swallow carrying beads, provenance unknown (*CMS V*, suppl. 1A, 337; a gold foil cut-out, Tholos Tomb 1, Peristeria, Messenia (Vlachopoulos and Georma 2012: 38); the Lady of the Landscape's dress, at least five swallows, Xeste 3, Thera (Chapin 2008); a gold bead/pendant, chance find, Chrysolakkos, Mallia (Simandiraki-Grimshaw and Stevens 2012: 603); a landscape fresco, at least four swallows, west of the palace, Knossos (Roussaki 2014).

These new sightings lend further support to my view that the swallow was a key element in Aegean avian epiphany. Several factors made the bird eminently suitable for this role. Its high aspect ratio wings, low wing loading, streamlined body, and deeply forked tail providing high lift and low drag create a flier of exceptional agility and speed (Turner 2006: 27-32; Videler 2005: 89). As a result, flight is dramatic, accompanied by much vocalization. In addition, as a swallow pursues insects, its upper (deep blue) and lower (creamy white) body parts gyrate, rapidly showing in alternation, now dark, now light, and so on, which appealed to the Minoans' interest in countershading and other fur and feather transitions (Foster 2014). Above all, this swallow theater unfolds entirely within sight of people, since these birds live and forage near human habitation. At Bronze Age Knossos, as today in the Mediterranean region, their presence was encouraged by affixing clay nesting bottles to walls (*PM II.1*: fig. 177).



Their proximity to people and remarkable aerodynamics have made swallows among the most studied birds of the world. Modern, high-speed filming has enabled scientists to quantify and diagram what the human eye perceives more impressionistically when watching swallows dance through the air. A swallow making a sharp pivot, for instance, can complete the manoeuvre in 110 milliseconds, spreading and lowering its tail, bending its streamers up and down, and raising its alulae to act as the leading edge flaps of the wings (Turner 2006: 30-32). Sophisticated videography using time blend effect software to visualize flight pattern data has made it possible to see the dense, crisscrossing lines made by groups of flying swallows (Hynsky 2014).

I propose that barn swallow aerial dance finds reflection in three areas of Aegean art and iconography. The first involves the glyptic scenes of tumblers, among them *CMS VI*, 184, said to be from Knossos; *CMS II.2*, 230b, said to be from Mallia; *CMS I*, 131, from Mycenae; and *CMS I*, Suppl, 169a, provenance unknown. My notion that the pairs, especially, evoke displaying swallows is strengthened by the double plumed headdresses worn by the acrobats on *CMS VI*, 184. Shall we go so far as to picture a touch of scarlet worn round their necks to evoke the bird's red throat patch?

This leads us to swallow costuming, for which there is both firm and speculative evidence. The finest example comes from the skirt worn by one of the women, named the Lady of the Landscape, painted on the south wall of an upper corridor in Xeste 3 at Thera (Chapin 2008). Five swallows are preserved, flying in a rocky, vividly colored setting. The textile technique used to adorn this and other pictorial clothing may have entailed tapestry, embroidery, appliqué, or brush work, or some combination thereof.

An intimation of swallows, rather than their explicit representation, may perhaps be found in Aegean sleeve patterning. I am thinking of their dark, often blue, bands, so similar to the way the swallow wings are painted in Delta 2 and elsewhere. Some of these bands swoop across the sleeve and down the bodice, as on some of the faience dress models and snake handlers from the Temple Repositories at Knossos (Foster 1979: pls. 10, 11, 17; figs. 17, 18). We have a happy chance to see how swallowlike these sleeves look in motion, thanks to the *tableaux vivants* of Greek art and culture staged for the opening ceremonies of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens (Klepsydra 2004; Simandiraki 2005). Led by a snake handler, the Bronze Age floats featured Aegean-costumed dancers animating wall paintings and other works from Knossos and Thera.

But for unambiguously avian sleeves, we have the Bird Ladies. On over thirty seals and seal impressions, they morph from human to avian and back, with a wide assortment of masks or other head ornaments, flounced skirts or fanning tails, and long, carinated sleeves. It is these sleeves that best convey the swallow illusion, since the human arm is proportioned very like the swallow's in terms of its distances from shoulder to elbow to wrist to fingertips. My 2016 study on masks and masques left open the matter of gender; I am now inclined to concur with the general opinion that these are Bird Ladies, given the overwhelming presence of women in Aegean epiphanic dance.



For centuries throughout Eurasia, women have worn ultra-long sleeves to perform the bird-dances found in many folk traditions (Barber 1999). An Attic red-figure vase shaped like a knucklebone provides a good, more ancient parallel, with winged-arm damsels pirouetting as though airborne (Barber 1999: 126). Were Daedalus' wings inspired by such bird-dancers? (Simon 1995: 409).

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With this, we come full circle, as it were, back to the shield of Achilles, and thence to the platform stages of Knossos. Round the dancers go, as honey bees; swiftly crisscrossing, as swallows. Both engender epiphanic experiences in wondrous spectacles of color, pattern, sound, and movement. And so they emerge from their Bronze Age labyrinth, those dancers of Evans' imagination, brought forth by the threads of new discoveries and ideas.

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