

Dear dancing friends,

I was inspired by the recent questions about the Hymn to Apollo and John Bear's wondering aloud whether it is possible to know if dancing was a part of ancient ritual at Delphi.

It would be most interesting to read what Gabriele Wosien and Bernhard Wosien have to say about this, but since I'm in Greece and their books are in my house in Findhorn, I've written down a few of my thoughts. It's long, so you might want to get a cup of tea before reading this!

Since ancient times, ritual dances were associated with the worship of the Earth Mother, Ge, to whom the earliest shrines at Delphi were dedicated and who was the first source of prophetic power. Both the site of the oracle, where the Apollo temple now stands, and the earlier temple of Athena Pronaia were originally associated with worship of the Earth Mother from 5000 BCE onwards. It seems likely that dancing took place at these shrines to the Earth Mother.

After Apollo entered the scene, about 1000 BCE, ritual dancing may have been more prevalent at the temple of Athena Pronaia (across the road and below the larger site) given that goddesses tended to be served by women as priestesses, and gods by men as priests. (This was a very ancient service; the first mention of either is a reference to a priestess in a Mycenaean Linear B inscription from about 1400 BCE.) The archaeological record in ceramics and sculpture, at Delphi as elsewhere, shows many more representations of women worshippers or priestesses dancing in circles or lines than of men.

There is no archaeological evidence, so far as I am aware, of the Pythia (Delphic oracles) shown dancing, although the Acanthus Column placed by the Athenians in the mid-fourth century BCE depicts three stately dancing women with ritual headdresses carrying the Pythia's tripod. (Interestingly, during the classical period there were up to three Pythias working at once.)

Other key finds at Delphi emphasise aspects of women's dance and ritual, for instance various libation bowls and the round stone altar carved in relief with the figures of an older and younger women hanging up the sacred ritual cloths or ribbons (more about this in my article 'The Dance of Life: It's in the Blood')

There is a round 'halos', a threshing ground, in a prominent place in the sanctuary to Apollo, where a ritual drama called the Stepteria took place every 8 years. Since ancient times, and still today, these stone-floored, round threshing places ('allonia') have served as places to dance; not only because of the association with fertility that both grain and dance are believed to bestow, but from a purely practical viewpoint, they provide a circular, flat, smooth-floored place in terrain which is otherwise usually rocky, uneven or mountainous.

Apollo was, of course, the God of music, and Delphi is the place where the great mytho-historic reconciliation between Apollo and Dionysus is said to have taken place. Dionysus was associated with revelry including dancing (mainly by his female followers, the maenads) and the origins of theatre.

There was an amphitheatre in the sacred precinct of Delphi, seating 5,000, where theatre, sacred to Dionysos, and music contests dedicated to Apollo, were performed during the Pythian Games and on other ritual occasions. We now know that choral dance and song were performed by women priestesses as well as by men and boys as part of ritual festivities in the ancient world; Kyriakos Moisides places the origin of men's dancing in the first choruses of ancient Greek theater, which would be the middle of the 6th C BCE. Female lyric chorus for the purposes of ritual worship are mentioned as early as the 7th C BCE.

Who were these priestesses, those women who danced on behalf of their people in the service of the deities?

It is worth noting that an abundance of recent research confirms the powerful role that priestesses held in ancient Greek civilisation, directly contradicting the outdated picture handed down by history of women excluded from civil life. While women did not have the vote in ancient Athenian democracy (and neither did most men), they did have the opportunity - perhaps even the obligation - to serve as priestesses in a variety of shrines. This service included ritual processions, dramatic enactments and, centrally, choral dance.

Some priestesshoods were lifetime appointments, handed down in families (and these women could grow so famous and powerful that historical events in the ancient world were dated by the years of their reign). Most often, however, sacred

office was periodic and temporary; unlike 'our' monks and nuns, women of a certain status commonly spent a few months or years in ritual service one at least one occasion. Unmarried girls, wives, mothers and widows all had opportunities to enter the service of a particular goddess (usually one corresponding to their age group), returning afterward to their normal lives.

Scholars such as Robert Parker and Joan Breton Connelly have given us to understand that religious and secular matters were not seen as separate; the sacred laws with which these priestesses were concerned were no different from other laws, and therefore 'the positions of leadership held by priestly women were primary, not peripheral, to the centres of power and influence.' (Joan Breton Connelly, Portrait of a Priestess, p. 5)

(There is an excellent exhibition, 'Worshipping Women: Ritual and Reality in Classical Athens', which started at the Onassis Foundation in New York and is just finishing its run at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. From here it will travel to other major cities and is well worth a visit, not least for its many depictions of priestesses, both dancing and otherwise.)

Plato states in his *Laws* (672e) that 'Choral dancing constituted the entirety of education.' We can surmise from this and other evidence that dance was indeed central, both to the ceremonies that took place in sanctuaries such as those at Delphi, and to the lives of those who were trained to enact those ceremonies.

A final clue to our mystery may be found in the precepts of Apollo, inscribed over the entrance to the sacred precinct at Delphi: 'Know Thyself' and 'Nothing In Excess'. These guidelines are just as apt for the art of dancing well as they are for living well, and just as valid today as they were 2500 years ago. Even more so, perhaps, since they are the key to living with responsibility and sustainability, skills which we human beings need to activate - quickly - if we want our history to continue as far into the future as it stretches into the past.