

Dance in Prehistoric Europe

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ABSTRACT – *Indications for dancing activities in prehistoric Europe appeared as early as modern humans, at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic era. However, only limited data are available for this stage. In the Neolithic period, evidence for dancing appeared at many more sites, but the territory is confined to south-eastern Europe. The dancing in this case is probably part of the 'Neolithic package', which diffused from the Near East.*

IZVLEČEK – *Prvi indici in omejeni podatki o plesu so v prazgodovinski Evropi povezani s pojavom modernega človeka v starejšem paleolitiku. V neolitiku je podatkov mnogo več in vsi so omejeni na prostor jugovzhodne Evrope. Ples je bil verjetno del neolitskega paketa, ki se je širil iz Bližnjega Vzhoda.*

KEY WORDS – *prehistoric dance; Upper Paleolithic; Neolithic; decorated pottery; figurines*

Introduction

This study presents and analyses dancing activities in prehistoric Europe. This subject covers such a vast geographical area and large span of time, that we must limit our discussion to a number of case studies in order to demonstrate the types of evidence that we have on this very elusive aspect of human behaviour. Researching the dance of past societies is usually limited to historical periods, and relies on written sources or graphic representations of dancing. The history of dance in the ancient world has focused mainly on drawings on Greek pottery of the mid-first millennium BC. Some attention has been devoted to the description of dancing in Pharaonic Egyptian (the second and third millennia BC). In my previous work, I enlarged the historical perspective of dance to include the Early Neolithic period in the Near East, up to c. 9000 BC. Recently, however, it can be shown that the history of dance can be started as early as the first appearance of modern humans in Europe, nearly 40 000 years ago.

Ancient human dance is a very neglected topic of study. Seldom can one find articles dealing with

dance, while books are almost non-existent. The study of dance by archaeologists is challenging for two main reasons:

❶ Dancing activity does not leave visible remains, so the chances of finding foot-prints in a circle, or a group of human skeletons trapped and buried during a dance are minimal. Until relevant data become available, we are dealing with a very fragmented record.

❷ Modern archaeological and anthropological research evolved in western civilization, which is dominated by a Christian point of view. Unlike most other religions, its attitude to dance is negative. In the New Testament, the term is mentioned only once, in the extremely dramatic dance of Salome, which concluded with the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6, 21–26). In contrast, the Old Testament described dancing dozens of times, using ten different verbs (*Gruber 1981*). Indeed, dance is not part of any official Christian liturgy. The unawareness of western scholarship of the importance of

dance in human activity must be seen against this background. This unawareness combined with fragmentary evidence resulted in dance being overlooked even in the very few cases in which it can be recognized. Thus, the first step in developing dance research is to create the intellectual environment which recognizes dance as an important human activity, and opens our mind to the evidence available to reconstruct dance in the past.

Dance is a rhythmical movement which can be classified as a form of non-verbal communication. It is not limited to humans and is preformed by various animals such as bees, birds and mammals. In the animal world, it is always performed by a solo individual. In human society, dance is usually preformed by groups of people, and in a variety of situations. The importance of dance in human evolution has been specifically emphasized by McNeill (1995), while many other scholars have written general introductions as well as discussions of various aspects of dance (see, for example, Sachs 1952; Lange 1976; Royce 1977; Hanna 1987). In traditional societies, dance is a major social activity, as demonstrated by the many dancing activities of the San Bushmen of South Africa (Marshall 1969; Biesele 1978; Katz 1982). Part of this rich ethnographic data, as well as of other human groups, was summarised in *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture* (Garfinkel 2003). An important observation is that, after hours of rhythmical circular dancing, a few of the participants often fell into a trance. The trance was understood to be a form of contact between the community and supernatural powers; in other words, a mystical event, the core of religious experience. The clear connection between dance and trance is probably the main reason for the depiction of intense dancing in many religions ceremonies.

Elsewhere, I have summarised the implications of various ethnographic observations for the study of dance (Garfinkel 2003), some of which have direct implications for the archaeological data:

- ❶ Dancing is an activity done at the community level and reflects interaction between people.

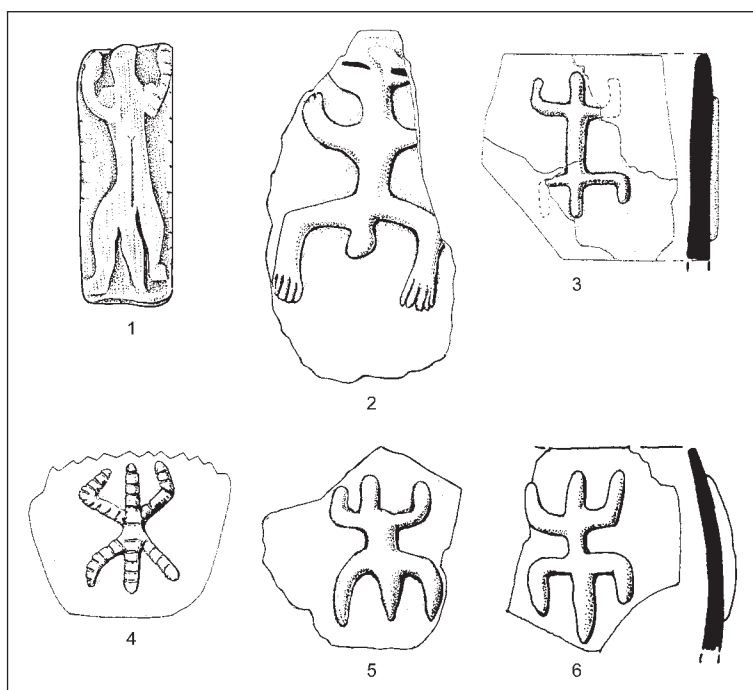


Fig. 1. Dancing male figures. 1. An engraved ivory from Geissenklösterle (after Conard et al. 2006.Fig. 16.2). Applied human figures on pottery vessels from: 2. Villanykovesd (after Kalicz 1970.Pl. 52); 3. Scinteia (after Mantu 1992.Fig. 1.2); 4. Holasovice (after Gimbutas 1982.Fig. 143); 5. Trusești (after Gimbutas 1982.Fig. 144); 6. Trusești (after Nitu 1968.Fig. 1.1).

- ❷ Dancing is performed in an open space, and not within any structure.
- ❸ The activity involves men and women in close proximity, although they do not mix in the same row or circle.
- ❹ The dancing is often performed with special decorative elements: coiffure, head coverings, masks, body paintings and dress. In many cases, the dancers use very elaborate accessories whose preparation begins months before the event itself.
- ❺ Dancing is usually performed at night.
- ❻ Dancing is accompanied by rhythmic music: singing, clapping hands, or musical instruments such as drums or rattles.
- ❼ Dance is an ecstatic event, involving an altered state of consciousness (trance) and is considered a deep spiritual experience by the participants.

The central role of dance in modern hunter-gatherer societies, like the Bushmen of South Africa or Australian Aboriginals, clearly indicates that dance must have been a primal form of human behaviour in prehistory, and played a major role in human evolution (McNeill 1995). Thus, if we wish to have a better understanding of prehistoric societies, it is our duty to trace dance activities when possible. The identification of dance on ancient depictions is not always

clear, but there are a few factors which help us to recognise dance when it appeared. Complete scenes, on either stone slabs or pottery vessels, usually bear the following characteristics:

- ❶ More than one figure is depicted on the item.
- ❷ The figures in any particular scene are usually identical.
- ❸ The figures are portrayed in a dynamic posture, sometimes with bent body, or bent arms and legs.

In light of the above mentioned factors obtained from ethnographic observations, and the artistic criteria, we will examine some samples of dancing activities in Prehistoric Europe, first from the Upper Palaeolithic era and then from the Neolithic.

The Palaeolithic

Upper Palaeolithic (Aurignacian)

In recent years, it became apparent that the earliest modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) in Europe lived in the Swabian Jura region of southwestern Germany, and dated to c. 40 000 years BP (Conard and Bolus 2003; Conard et al. 2006). In the caves of Geissenklösterle, Hohle Fels and Bocksteinhöhle,

remarkable numbers of symbolic artifacts were found, including anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, an engraved human figure with bent hands and legs, eight bone and ivory flutes, and large quantities of ornaments (Conard 2009; Conard et al. 2006; 2009).

The engraved human figure with bent hands and legs was found at Geissenklösterle (Fig. 1.1; Conard et al. 2006, Fig. 16:2). At the time of discovery, the early date of the item was not yet determined and did not receive much attention. About ten years ago, it was suggested that the figure shows the constellation Orion combined with a pregnancy calendar (Rappenglück 2003). However, before jumping to explanations in the sky, we should try to find explanations on the ground. The elongated human figure is presented as a silhouette. It has an elongated head, neck and torso, all much longer than in actual human anatomy. The two arms bend upwards and end at the same height as the head. This is clearly a non-functional position and the hands do not hold any object. The proportions of the lower body, in contrast to the upper part, are shorter than in humans. The pelvic area is wider than the torso.

The legs are bent slightly downwards, and are not symmetrical with each other. A protruding element between the legs seems to be the male organ, but since it is as long as the legs, it may be understood as an animal tail. Artistically, the figure is symmetrically balanced from both left to right, and the upper part to the lower. This may explain the distortion of the actual anatomy of the head and sex organ. The general impression is created by the bent hands and legs, which give the figure a dynamic appearance, as if it were dancing. Many similar representations of dancing male figures are known from the Neolithic period of Southeast Europe and the Near East (Fig. 1. 2–6; Garfinkel 2003). With its general masculine outline, the engraved figure from Geissenklösterle appears to be male, and is clearly different

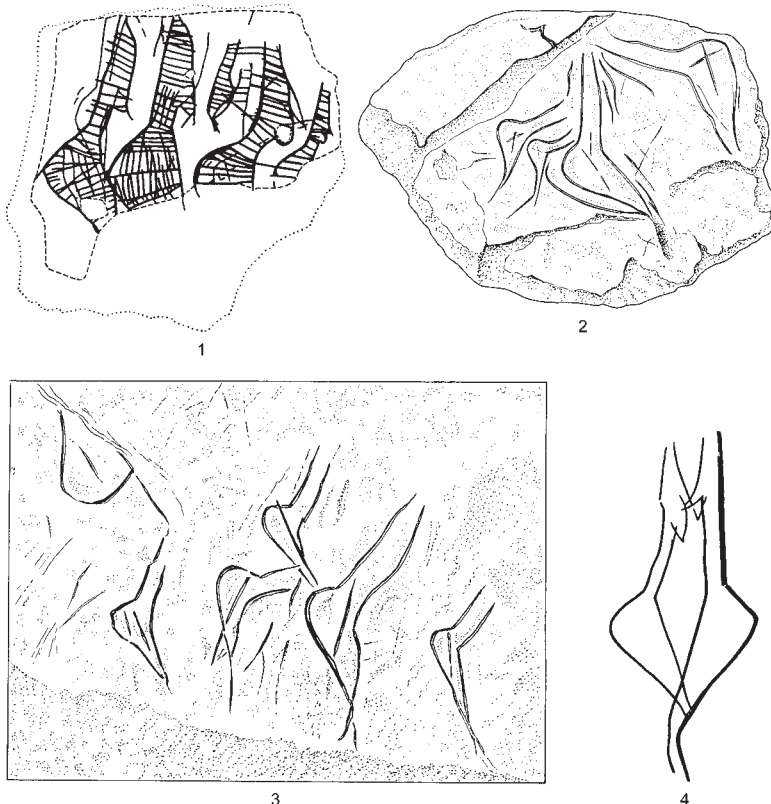


Fig. 2. Engraved stone slabs with dancing female figures: 1, 4. Gönnerdorf (after Bosinski and Fischer 1974); 2–4. Lalinde (after Marshack 1972:308–309).

from typical representations of females in Palaeolithic art. These 'Venus' type female figurines are presented with extremely emphasized breasts and buttocks, as can be clearly seen in the recently discovered ivory statuette from the nearby and contemporary site of Hohle fels (Conard 2009). This engraving presents the earliest known representation of a dancing human figure.

Remains of eight flutes were found in these same caves at the Swabian Jura, some made of animal bones and some of ivory (Conard et al. 2009). These musical instruments were not played at concerts, but were probably used in dance ceremonies. The combination of music and dance is very common, and appeared in every human society: hunters and gatherers, farmers, pastoralists and urban dwellers. Even the Bushmen of South Africa, whose material culture is rather simple, without elaborate music instruments, use plain rattles in dance ceremonies (Marshall 1969; Biesele 1978; Katz 1982).

From ethnographic observations, it is clear that dancing ceremonies are usually characterized by elaborate body decoration, clothing and dance accesso-

ries. The preparation of these accessories was sometimes begun months ahead. Indeed, many body ornaments and a rich assemblage of beads and pendants were found in excavations at these caves (Conard et al. 2006, Fig. 17; Hahn 1972). The combination of the three elements – music, a human figure presented in a dynamic body posture, and rich beads for body decoration – is not accidental, and can be taken as a clear indication of the existence of elaborate rituals involving dancing ceremonies among early modern humans in Europe.

Upper Palaeolithic (Magdalenian)

In the much later Magdalenian period, c. 14–12 millennia BC, an unusual assemblage of dancing figures was found at Gönnerdorf, an open-air site on the eastern bank of the Rhine near Koblenz in Germany (Bosinski 1970; Bosinski and Fischer 1974). This rich artistic assemblage is composed of 224 anthropomorphic figures engraved on 87 stone plaques and 11 anthropomorphic figurines. The engravings on the stone plaques usually present groups of figures, while the isolated representations occurred on broken plaques, so they are probably a part of a larger group. Usually, the figures were depicted in a row,

one behind the other, in profile, most often facing to the right, with up to 10 such figures in a row (Fig. 2.1). Another type of engraving presents only two figures in each scene, facing each other (Fig. 2.2). All these engravings are of girls or young women in half crouching positions, sometimes with their arms partly raised. The excavators suggested that these figures are dancing (Bosinski 1970, 93–94; Bosinski and Fischer 1974). Indeed, these groups of figures are not presented in a daily activity, like hunting, fighting, or holding a baby. The female figures are presented in rows, posed in a dynamic body gesture, both features of dancing.

Dance research commonly classifies dance into three basic types: circle dance, line dance and couple dance (Garfinkel 2003, 41–43). It seems



Fig. 3. Neolithic sites in southeast Europe with dancing figures.

that at Gönnerdorf, we can see two different types of dance. The figures presented one behind the other in profile may indicate a line or a circle dance. But as they are usually depicted facing to the right, this is probably a circle dance with a counter-clockwise movement, typical of dancers in a circle (Garfinkel 2003.44–47). The scenes with only two figures facing each other probably indicate a couples' dance.

Eleven pendant figurines, some 5% of the human representations at Gönnerdorf, were found, posing young females in the same gesture as on the engravings. Sometimes, a few such pendants were found in a pit, indicating that they were meant to represent groups of young females dancing together.

Several similar depictions have been reported from the site of Lalinde in the Dordogne, France (Fig. 2.3–4). In each, a number of female figures appear in the same general silhouette that characterised the female figures from Gönnerdorf. They appear one behind the other, in a row, which indicate that they are following each other, probably in a circle. In his detailed discussion on these engravings, as well as similar items from other sites, Marshack (1972.305–313) defined them as 'buttocks form'. However, the possibility that these engravings represent dancing figures has not been taken into consideration. This is not surprising, as in most of the classic books on

the art of Palaeolithic Europe the term dance is not found in the index at the end of the book. However, the dynamic body gesture, the appearance of a number of identical human figures, their arrangement in a row, clearly indicate a group of dancing females.

The dancing characteristic of these scenes and figurines is achieved by a few aspects:

- a. The same body gestures are repeated for all the individuals.
- b. In each row of figures, all the individuals face the same direction of movement.
- c. Most of the rows are moving to the right, which in a circle would create a counter clockwise movement.
- d. Heads were not portrayed, as the scenes emphasise the group, rather than the individual. This characterised most of the dancing scenes (Garfinkel 2003).

The Neolithic

Dancing figures appeared in many Neolithic sites in southeast Europe (Fig. 3). This is part of a larger Neolithic artistic tradition whose earlier manifestation is known as early as the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B of the Levant in the 9th millennium BC (Bienert and Fritz 1989; Molist 1998; Garfinkel 2003). Later dancing figures appeared at Neolithic and Chalcolithic

sites throughout the Near East: Mesopotamia, Iran, Anatolia, Cyprus and Egypt (Garfinkel 2003). In the 6th millennium BC, dancing figures appeared in Southeast Europe as well (Figs. 1.2–6, 4–7). In my book, published in 2003, examples from 41 sites were presented from Greece (4 sites), Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia (5 sites), Romania and the Dniester Basin (17 sites) and Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (15 sites). The other parts of Europe were not included in that study, since dancing figures are not a characteristic feature of sites there, although some extremely rare examples are known (see, for example, Nitu 1970.Fig. 5.3; Müller-Karpe 1968.Pl. 199. G, 222.6–7, 223.1; Von Rimute 1994.Fig. 41, Pl. 52.1–2).

Over the years, three different interpretations have been suggested for these depictions:

- ① Representations of supernatural powers, gods and goddesses. The most influential scholar supporting this interpretation was

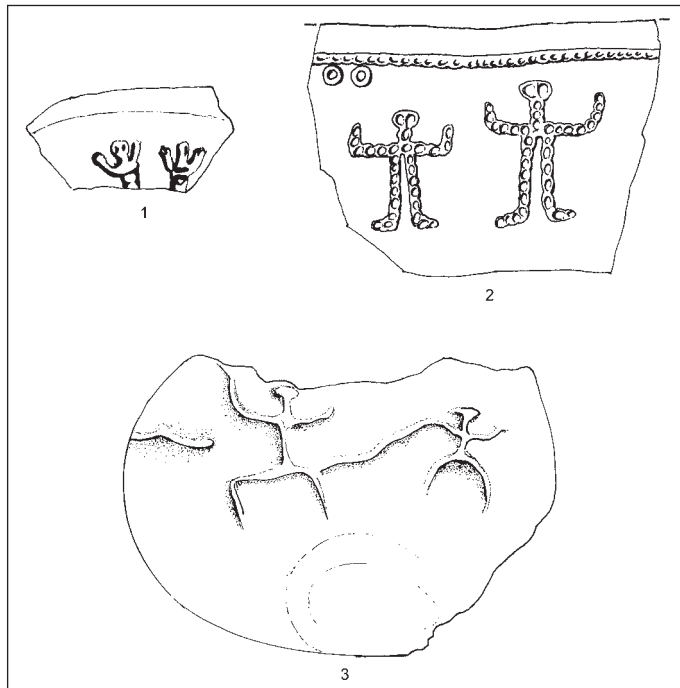


Fig. 4. Applied human figures on pottery vessels: 1. Szegvár-Tüzköves (after Korek 1987.Fig. 24); 2. Gumelnița (after Ionescu 1974.Fig. 1.1); 3. Gomolava (after Gimbutas 1982. Pl. 172).

M. Gimbutas, who created a whole pantheon of prehistoric goddesses: 'birth-giving goddess', 'birth-giving goddess in the shape of a toad', 'bee goddess', 'bird goddess' and 'snake goddess' (Gimbutas 1982; 1989). This interpretation has been accepted by others (see, for example, Kalicz 1970. 52, Pl. 52; Mantu 1992.315). As a result, the two human figures on a large pottery vessel from Dumesti in Moldavia, Romania, relating to the Cucuteni A3 culture, have been interpreted as two goddesses, one of them in a birth-giving position (Maxim-Alaiba 1987.270).

② Representations of dancing figures, basically humans, in cultic activity (Nitu 1970; Marinescu-Bîlcu 1974; Garfinkel 2003).

③ Representation of cultic marriage has been suggested in one case. A large pottery jar from Scinteia, attributed to the Cucuteni culture, was decorated with two applied human figures, a male and a female, and was understood as representing 'the great goddess' and her acolyte or the divine couple: 'hieros gamos' (Mantu 1992.315).

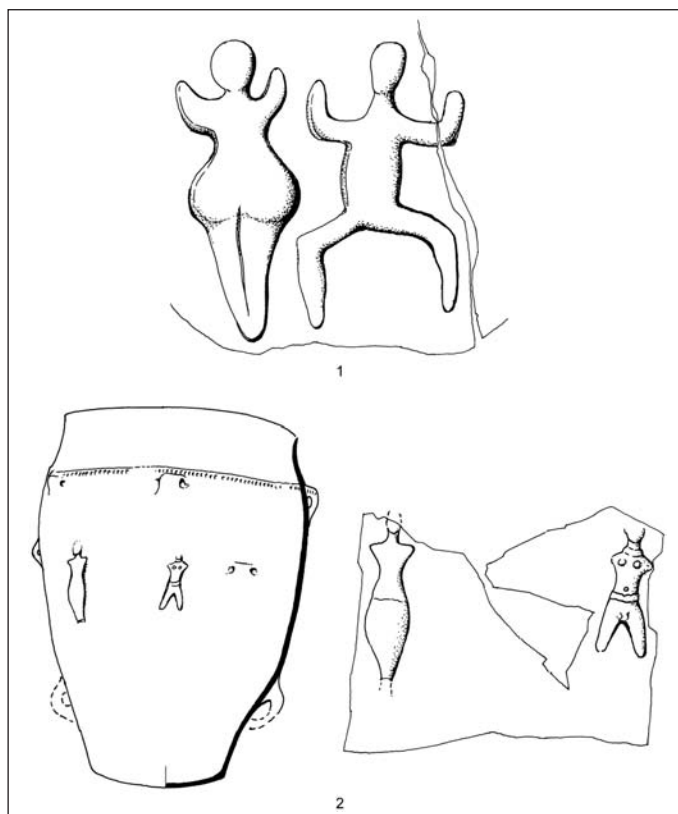


Fig. 5. Applied human figures on pottery vessels: 1. Dumesti (after Maxim-Alaiba 1987.Fig. 13); 2. Scinteia (after Mantu 1993.Figs 2-3).

The early agricultural communities of Southeast Europe in the 6th-4th millennia BC produced large quantities of art and cult objects, such as figurines, statues, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic jars, architectural models and decorated pottery vessels. Dancing figures are a common motif on decorated pottery vessels and have been reported from at least 41 sites. From a technical point of view, most of the items from southeast Europe were decorated with plastic applications. Only a few items were incised, and still fewer were painted. The most common find was a broken sherd with one figure. The complete vessels that have been discovered bear the following characteristics (Fig. 4):

- ① More than one figure is depicted on the item's perimeter.
- ② The figures on the same vessel are usually identical. Only when we have representations of mixed gender, are males and females portrayed differently (Fig. 5).
- ③ The figures are portrayed in a dynamic posture, usually with bent arms and legs.
- ④ No other scenes depicting interaction between people have been reported.

These features suggest the following points:

① A single anthropomorphic figure on a sherd should be interpreted as part of a dancing scene, with several identical figures originally having been depicted around the vessel.

② The scenes represent ordinary human beings in dancing positions and not supernatural powers, as sometimes suggested - e.g. 'male gods', 'the great goddess' (Kalicz 1970.52, Pl. 52; Mantu 1992.315), or the female pantheon created by Gimbutas, with her 'birth-giving goddess', 'birth-giving goddess in the shape of a toad', 'bee goddess', 'bird goddess' and 'snake goddess'.

Close connections existed between the Near Eastern and the European artistic traditions, as was emphasised by Nitu (1970):

- ① The dancing figures appear in the area of Europe closest to Anatolia.
- ② This motif appears in the sixth and fifth millennia BC in both regions.
- ③ In this period, both regions underwent a similar socio-economic development - the process of 'Neolithisation', i.e. the adoption of subsistence strategies for food production and the clustering of large communities into village-type settlements.

- ④ In stylistic terms, many of the European figures appear in the same dynamic postures used in the Near East, and in cases where large parts of the vessels have been preserved, more than one figure appears.

On the basis of these points, it seems that the dancing motif should be interpreted similarly both in the Near East and in Europe. During the process of Neolithisation, some Near Eastern myths and religious practices were adopted by European communities (Garfinkel 1998). The dancing-figure motif is one aspect of this complicated and protracted process.

Dance scenes on pottery vessels

The examples in Figures 1.2–6, 4–5, 6.1–2 illustrate the most common way in which dancing figures were depicted on pottery vessels in the Neolithic period. In southeast Europe, the figures were usually applied to the vessel before firing. In the Near East, the depiction of the motif was done mainly by painting.

Another category of dancing figure is the ‘vessel of the reel type’, known from a number of sites in Ro-

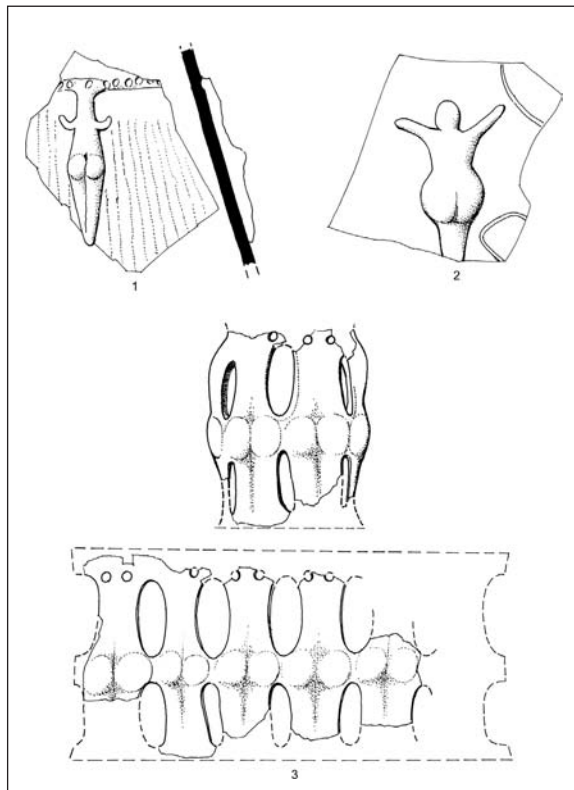


Fig. 6. Applied female figures on pottery vessels: 1. Traian (after Dumitrescu 1974.Fig. 232.1, Nitu 1970.Fig. 10.1); 2. Birlalești (after Nitu 1968.Fig. 3.1); 3. Pottery ‘reel vessel’ from Frumușica (after Marinescu-Bîlcu 1974.Fig. 3.1a–b).

mania related to the Cucuteni A3 culture of the late-fifth millennium BC (Fig. 6.3; *Marinescu-Bîlcu 1974. Figs. 1–3; Dragomir 1987.Fig. 1; Mantu 1993.131–132*). These are either stands or high pedestal bowls, with four to six identical schematic anthropomorphic figures around their circumference. The areas between the openings are identical to each other, and were designed in the shape of a schematic anthropomorphic torso and emphasised buttocks, as seen from the back. The heads, arms and sometimes the legs are not portrayed. These items concentrate on the circle of dancers rather than specific individuals.

Dancing figurines

One of the outstanding phenomena in southeast Europe is the appearance of anthropomorphic figurines that depict dancing figures. The clearest example is known from Dumesti, Moldavia, Romania, related to the Cucuteni A3 culture and dated to the late-fifth millennium BC. A large pottery jar was found buried with 12 figurines, six females and six males. They are depicted in dynamic postures, and were interpreted as dancing figures (Fig. 7; *Maxim-Alaiba 1987. 270*). It is curious that the shape of both the female and male figurines resemble the shape of the female and the male figure found on the pithos from Scintea (Fig. 5.2).

Before being buried, the 12 figurines were probably used as three-dimensional models to show dancing. Ethnographic observations clearly indicate that mixed dances are not common in traditional societies, so it is hard to believe that the 12 figurines were arranged together in a circle. They may have been used for two different purposes. They could have been used to represent two separate dancing circles, one male, and the other female. Or perhaps a couples’ dance was represented, with six mixed couples. Many similar anthropomorphic figurines were found in very large quantities in numerous Cucuteni sites, and possibly a good number of these also represent dancing figures. Since dancing is a large group activity, the association of these figurines with dancing can explain why so many are found.

In the Near East, no dancing figurines are known to date. Only in pre-dynastic Egyptian graves have a number of dancing female figurines been found. At Ma’ mariya, two items were found in Grave 2 and 16 items in Grave 186 (*Needler 1984.336–343*). As in the European examples, the Egyptian clay figurines were depicted in the same body pose as the dancing figures on pottery vessels. In both cases, the figures

had their arms lifted upwards, with hands curving inwards.

Discussion

Dance is not performed in isolation, but as part of a more complex ritualistic activity. Rituals and ceremonies are elaborate events, with a complex set of actions, involving talking (praying, blessing, story telling), eating (drinking, feasting), physical gestures (clapping hands, putting one hands on others' heads) and movement (dancing, moving in procession, circling). While feasting does leave clear and direct archaeological remains (see, for example, *Dieller and Hayden 2001; Goring-Morris and Horwitz 2007; Ben-Shlomo et al. 2009*), dancing leaves only elusive evidence. Thus, researching dancing activities of the past is mainly dependent on the identification and analysis of dancing scenes, many of which have not even been recognised as displaying dance.

Two basic patterns can be observed in prehistoric European dance. For the hunter-gatherer societies of the Upper Palaeolithic, evidence is very sporadic. The few depictions which do exist are spread over a vast geographical area and an immense time span, almost 30 000 years. Nevertheless, they include two significant case studies. The earlier finds, from the Aurignacian caves of Swabian Jura are the earliest known confirmation of modern human figures in Europe, and they are alongside a dancing figure, musical instruments and body decorations. These finds relate to all the basic aspects of dancing: dynamic body gestures, with the hands bent upward and the legs bent downward, musical instruments in the form of eight flutes and elaborate body ornaments used as dance accessories. The later case study is the Magdalenian site of Gönnerdorf, where 224 young female dancing figures were found engraved on stone slabs, plus an additional 11 figurines of young dancing females. This site produced more dancing figures than all the other prehistoric sites combined. Clearly, intensive ceremonies involving dance took place at this location, perhaps initiation rites for girls. The site of Lalinde in the Dordogne produced a few

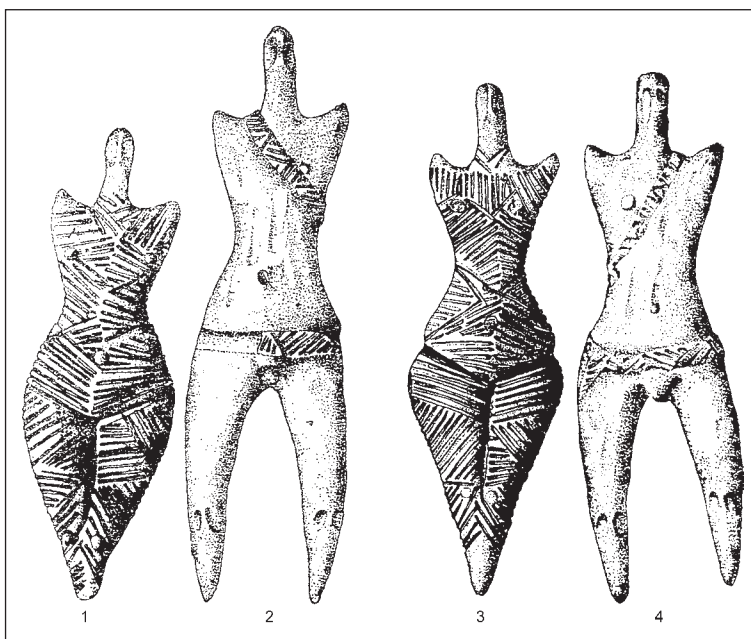


Fig. 7. Four dancing clay figurine from Dumesti, part of 12 items found buried together in a pottery jar (after Maxim-Alaiba 1987).

similar engravings, but no more than 10 young female dancers were presented.

In the Neolithic period, dancing figures were commonly depicted on pottery vessels. The rounded vessel creates an ideal three-dimensional surface on which to present a circle of dancing figures. Sometimes, the figures were applied or painted, and sometimes the clay was melded to create human figures in the round. In one example, 12 dancing figurines were buried together, apparently having been used as a three-dimensional model for dancing. The dancing activity of the Neolithic period is much more limited in time and space than the Upper Palaeolithic. It is concentrated in southeast Europe, and lasted around 3000 years.

In the Upper Palaeolithic period, there are no earlier or contemporary dance depictions in the Near East. In the Neolithic period, however, the dance motif first developed in the Near East, and then, with the diffusion of agriculture, moved into Europe. It first appeared in Greece and Bulgaria, the areas closest to Anatolia, and later spread north, to sites in the former Yugoslavia, Rumania, Hungary, and up to the Czech Republic. Dance was part of the 'Neolithic package' and was probably closely associated with rituals connected with the agricultural cycle of seeding and harvesting.

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