

Between Magna Graecia and Rome^{*}

Towards an Archaeological Approach to Dance Performance in Cults

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Abstract: The study of material evidence on dance, combined with a particular attention to the contexts of discovery, sheds light on the uses of dance performances in ancient societies, allowing us to reconstruct the function and meaning of dance in the ancient world. Based on this approach, this chapter investigates the representations of female intertwined dancers painted or carved on various media in the Roman Empire. The most fruitful comparisons can be made in Southern Italy, where intertwined dances seem to be connected with the cycle of death and rebirth. The chapter argues that the dance scenes on Roman votive artefacts, along with the epigraphic dedications, point not only to a specific idea of ritual and dance performances in local cults, but also to an explicit preservation of their memory.

Introduction

Dance was a central element of Roman religion, and dance performances were typical of many Roman rituals, which were influenced by a range of cultural practices from regions across the Empire.¹ Rituals accompanied by dance and music were part of Roman daily life, and structured around the city temporally as well as spatially, as certain sounds, movements, gestures, and behaviours were regularly repeated according to the festival calendar. Aside from foreign cults, evidence of dance in traditional Roman cults is relatively sparse,² but ancient written sources claim that dances in armour in particular had a long tradition dating back to the royal period. Thus dance was consid-

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¹ Fless/Moede 2007, 249–262.

² Giannotta 2004, 342–343.

ered by ancient sources to be a traditional and noteworthy element of Roman ritual, even though the style changed over time with the introduction of new cults.³

Written and figurative sources securely document two Roman cults that involved dancing: rituals devoted to the *Salii*, when the dance was a great public spectacle, and to the Arval Brethren.⁴ The form of the dance in the latter ritual remains uncertain, since this dance was performed without audience. The only indigenous Roman figures whose dances are well attested in the visual arts are the Lares, but we lack the written sources to interpret their meaning.⁵

According to Friederike Fless and Katja Moede,⁶ scholarship is limited in how far it can describe the specific formal qualities of dance in Roman religion. Dance is a human bodily movement, intentional, rhythmical and patterned, with some sound as a cue, usually performed communally with any number of active and passive participants.⁷ Whichever way we seek to understand the function and meaning of dance in a sacred context, it should be clear that it is an indispensable part of the education of a member of society. Choreography – by which I mean “a sequence of dance movements that is considered to be a distinct, bounded unit of performance”⁸ – cannot be reconstructed for different rituals: written sources simply do not contain that kind of information and detail, and the actual movement is almost completely lost to us. As Frederick Naerebout has noted, since “we have no examples of actual dances, we cannot say to what extent descriptions and images are documenting existing dances and, if they do, whether they do so in a more or less reliable way, i. e., documenting observable reality in a manner we can relate to.”⁹

Archaeological and ethnographic research shows that dance is prone to change, similarly to any other phenomenon in human society, since it is a dynamic element of ritual. This implies that the common practice of combining evidence from sources ranging from the Bronze Age to Byzantium in a single picture of dance, or of individual dances, in ancient society, cannot be anything other than misleading. This is also true in the Roman Empire: according to Naerebout, the “multiculturalism” of the Empire meant that “rituals changed and were exchanged with the concomitant music, song, dance and other nonverbal communication”,¹⁰ thereby enhancing the power of dance

3 Naerebout 2009, 143–158; Naerebout 2013.

4 Giannotta 2004, 337–340. See also Torelli 1990, 93–106; Torelli 1997, 227–255; Prescendi in this volume.

5 Cruccas/Parodo 2015, 141–159.

6 Fless/Moede 2007, 249.

7 Naerebout 1997, 155–165; Naerebout 2019, 32.

8 Naerebout 2017, 41.

9 Naerebout 2015, 109.

10 Naerebout 2009, 143.

in religious practice and its multisensory and symbolic capacity according to different geographical and temporal locations and social organisation.¹¹

However, the archaeological evidence related to dance is potentially quite informative about the movements that appeared in practice. Ancient dance scenes depicted on stone, pottery, or any other material are archaeological objects that can tell us about dance practice and the context of its performance,¹² and so these artefacts are the archaeological correlates of actual performance:¹³ they allow us firstly to examine the context of the archaeological evidence of dance related to the sacred and/or funerary sphere, and secondly, to examine performance spaces.¹⁴

Consequently, analysing the contexts and spaces of dance performances allows us to examine the function of dance and the role of dancers in a ritual setting, even if the religious dimension of the dance is not always accessible to us. Indeed, studying the context and the specific qualities of media (like images) can offer insights into the importance and relevance of dance performances for rituals and ceremonies, as well as the roles of musicians and specialised musical instruments. In this respect, dance should no longer be considered as something distinct that can be studied in isolation, but rather as a specific manifestation of a general type of human behaviour.¹⁵ Moreover, the archaeological evidence allows us to decipher which ritual dance sequences once appeared in a performative space and in a particular sacred sphere.

There were several kinds of locations where dancing regularly took place for sacred events, including boundary stones, springs, groves, and fields. Of course, dance performances most typically took place in shrines, either in the sacred spaces around the altar or in front of the buildings where the altar or the statue stood.¹⁶ As Clemente Marconi has argued,¹⁷ ritual activities took place in special locations, which were closer to the other world than to this one. Although dancers might perform ceremonial movements anywhere, many chose to perform dances at the shrines or sacred spaces where the deity seemed especially present.¹⁸ These performers often stood before the statues themselves, or around them, to make their dances visible to the deities: in both cases, the dance performance could be considered as an offering to the divinities.

The archaeological evidence of dance performances, like all images related to cults, including reliefs, may have contributed to the overall goal of the ritual performances that used dance, music, sacred verbal formulas, and material offerings to the gods: that is, to induce a sense of the numinous in the participants. Choral and musical perfor-

11 Hanna 1987, 203; Soar/Aamodt 2014, 2.

12 Hanna 1988, 281–306.

13 Estienne 2015, 379–383.

14 Hölscher 2018, 24–27. See also Garfinkel 2014, 6.

15 Naerebout 2019, 32.

16 Giannotta 2004, 342.

17 Marconi 2007, 28.

18 Giannotta 2004, 339.

mances during sacred events could be considered a favourite language of communication with, and an offering to, the gods, which were carried out in the framework of the ritual ceremony: so in a sacred context, dance and sonic events contributed to the enactment of rituals.¹⁹ As Catherine Bell has highlighted,²⁰ gestures of touch, sacrifices, prayers, specific clothing and postures, songs and chants, and dances and music are all important aspects of rituals²¹ and indispensable to the rhythm and frame of a ceremony. Moreover, dances in this context may also be called performative in the sense that they were dramatic performances, involving dancers, an audience, a set-apart space and time, and conventional movements.²²

If sound and music, in Roman rituals, formed an acoustic background (the form of which was widely heard and engraved in the memory of every worshipper), then dance, which effectively disrupted the ideal of solemn walking, could only be observed by actual spectators: sound and ritualised movements, together with the burning or distribution of scents, the illumination and decoration of the routes or the sacred space, and the decoration of participants, may have given shape to the ritual setting. On sacred occasions, the performers of ritualised movements were usually priests or priestesses, although women or children may have been specially selected to perform a dance. But just as in dramatic performances, dance, often accompanied by music or sounds, may also have been performed by professional dancers and musicians. Moreover, as Karin Schlapbach puts it,²³ dance spectacles typically involve dancing and singing, which opens up new avenues in creating and defining cultural knowledge. Choral performances would have seemed even more dramatic for their use of multiple instruments and the frequent addition of accompanying movement. On certain occasions, the chorus walked in a solemn manner, in a ritual procession reminiscent of Greek cult practices and the closely related dramatic performances.²⁴

Although some facets of this performative dimension of ritual are not suitable for visual representations, there is much interesting archaeological evidence from the Roman period that is worth analysing. It is, however, necessary to remember that local repertoires changed and grew over time. In this paper we will focus on performances related to a choral dance that seems to be related to female divinities in the Cisalpine area of North Italy. As we will see, this dance, which was performed by female dancers holding and alternating their intertwined arms, appears to be associated with the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, deities of fertility, birth, and death, although we lack written sources concerning their worship (Fig. 1);²⁵ we only have information about festivals

19 Connelly 2011, 320. See also Bellia 2020, 75–79.

20 Bell 1997, 159–164.

21 Fless/Moede 2007, 259–262.

22 Sklar 2007, 38–42.

23 Schlapbach 2018, 19–21.

24 Gianvittorio 2017, 104–113.

25 Bauchhenss/Neumann 1987, *passim*; Bauchhenss 1997, 808–816; Mekacher 2005, 108–110.

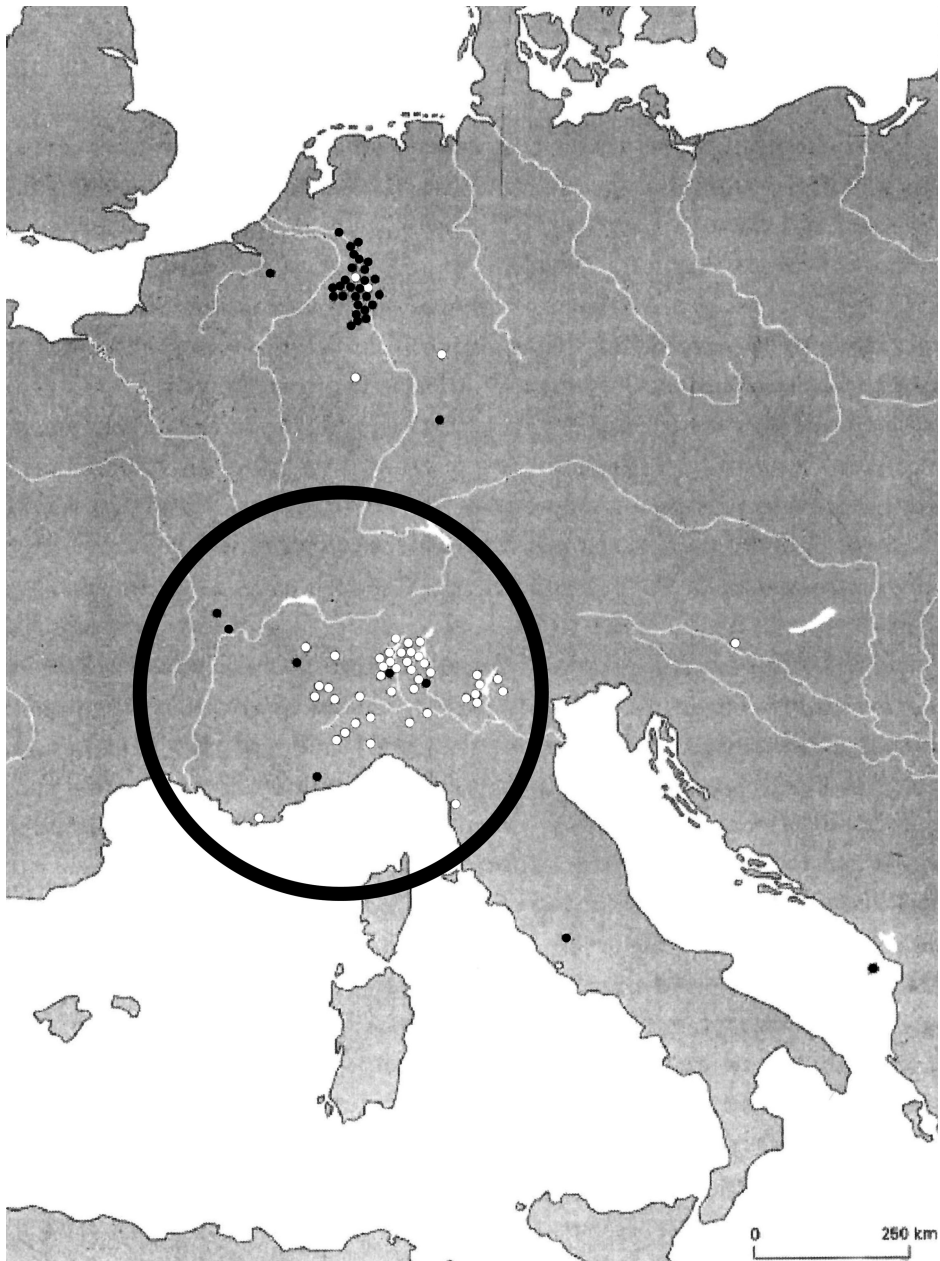


Fig. 1 Map showing the distribution of dedications to the *Matres* and *Matronae* (with and without epithets) and the spread of their cult in North Italy.

that celebrated the renewal and the awakening of nature, and that honoured these goddesses, who kept a special watch over all aspects of women's lives.²⁶ The reliefs, which generally represent the goddesses in groups of three bearing attributes of sovereignty and fertility, are clearly modelled on the Classical figurings of mother goddesses.²⁷

Images depicting groups of intertwined female dancers in a ritual setting seem to have figurative parallels with the groups of dancers that were represented in Magna Graecia from the seventh century BCE until the third century BCE, when South Italy was undergoing a process of Romanisation which, according to Strabo,²⁸ ended during the Augustan Age, or in the late first century BCE. While most of the small cultic sites disappeared from South Italy's cities, this did not necessarily (as has generally been thought) occur around 273–272 BCE (as deduced from the Latin colony of Paestum: the conquest of Taranto was the emblematic date of the “end” of Magna Grecia).²⁹ Some sacred places were maintained into the second century BCE, and even up to the Empire: the cult continued and spread throughout the Roman world, but also changed. An older god may often lurk behind a god of the Roman pantheon: this god would have been assimilated, by the process of the so-called *interpretatio Romana*,³⁰ into a Roman deity with some similar characteristics. But conversely, it is also possible that the Roman deity was accepted by the local people,³¹ who may have imitated the Roman cult practice.

Dance Depictions on Roman Reliefs in the Cisalpine Area

Although no surviving literary sources refer to the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, nonetheless epigraphs, reliefs and terracotta figurines found in Spain, France, Great Britain, Germany, and particularly in North Italy, act as archaeological evidence of its spread between the first and the fifth centuries CE. The cult can be traced back to the second millennium BCE. Some evidence even from the third century BCE has been attributed to these goddesses. Moreover, deities were already being represented in orinthomorphic triads as early as the sixth/fifth century BCE.

According to Noémie Beck,³² the Romans adapted a pre-existing cult for a cultural context where the representation of anthropomorphic divinities was otherwise still unknown. Thanks to Etruscan-Italic influences, the anthropomorphic figures of the

26 Torelli 1984, 31–50; Brelich 2015, 224.

27 Terracotta groups of female dancers and instruments players were discovered in sacred places and sanctuaries in Magna Graecia and in Sicily. Bellia 2014, 13–46.

28 *Geographia*, VI, 1, 2.

29 Pedley 1990, 55–58. See also de Cazanove 2007, 53–56.

30 Rüpke 2014, 472–473. See also Derks 1998, 94–118.

31 Lolos 2009, 264–266.

32 Beck 2009, 35–38. See also Miedico 2016, 205.

goddesses seem to appear for the first time in North Italy, while the first actual human representation of the *Matres* and *Matronae* appeared during the Roman occupation. It is worth noting that hundreds of inscribed votive reliefs with the representation of a group of female figures only began to appear in the Cisalpine area after the Roman conquest.

Epigraphic and figurative sources from North Italy reveal a cult devoted to three deities. Judging by dedications to the *Matres* and *Matronae*, the cult was popular among the legions, and soldiers of various ranks participated in their cult.³³ It was common to call them *Matres* or *Matronae* in this area, and their cult was related not only to fertility and the worship of water, but also to birth, death, and re-birth. While some cultic places and many sanctuaries devoted to these deities have been found beyond the Alps in Northern Europe, no such site has been identified in the Cisalpine area. However, isolated discoveries of single altars at springs and grottoes, and at crossroads and commercial routes, allow us to speculate on a relationship between the *Matres* and *Matronae* and Nymphs, Juno, Mercury or the Lares.

Research on epigraphic and iconographic sources related to the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae* in the Cisalpine area has revealed that most of the dedications come from the area around Milan, Como, Varese, Novara and Vercelli. The theonym was frequently accompanied by cultural epithets (*epiclesis*) that drew explicit limits to the deity's field of action, as was the case in Milan, where the cult of the *Matronis Dervonnis* – a term probably of Celtic origin designating oak –³⁴ was worshipped. While their generic name *Matres* and *Matronae* seems to be Latin, their epithets are exclusively of Celtic or Germanic origin. It is noteworthy that the same epithet can be associated with both the terms *Matres* and *Matronae* in the inscriptions, which proves that these two forms are interchangeable and equivalent in meaning.³⁵ In this area of North Italy, this resulted in a peculiar iconography on Roman votive artefacts with Latin inscriptions, as well as rituals that combine elements of both local and Roman religious traditions.³⁶

According to Gambari,³⁷ the most ancient image related to the three goddesses may appear on a relief from the third/second century BCE. This relief, found on the Masso Falchero in Tubergengo of Viù di Lanzo (Ninin Mills) near Turin, depicts three anthropomorphic figures with raised arms, perhaps recalling a dancing group (Fig. 2): this image could indicate the pre-Roman origin of the *Matres* and *Matronae* cult in this area. It is interesting to note that there is no archaeological evidence of *Matres* and *Matronae* representations in the Cisalpine area over the two following centuries, at least until the Julio-Claudian era in the first century CE.

33 Phang 2001, 187. See also Tagliamonte 1994, 188.

34 Landucci Gattinoni 1986, 33–35; Soldati Forcella / Antico Gallina 1979–1980, 216–217; Viglienghi 1976, 147–153.

35 Derks 1998, 120; Beck 2009, 47–48.

36 Haensch 2007, 180–185. Van Andringa 2007, 83–95; Moede 2007, 164–170. See also Hölscher 2018, 35–40.

37 Gambari 2007, 39–45.

Though we cannot assume that such images are precise representations, we can nevertheless reflect on ritual actions and dance performances, and glean some information from these depictions.



Fig. 2 Anthropomorphic figures with raised arms. Image related to the *Matres* and *Matronae* on the relief discovered on the Masso Falchero in Tuberghengo of Viù di Lanzo (Ninin Mills) near Turin (Italy). Third-second century BCE. From Gambari 2007, 40.

In 1982, Gemma Sena Chiesa completed her study on the altars dedicated to the worship of the *Matres* and *Matronae* in the Cisalpine area.³⁸ Firstly, her research considers the so-called *Ara delle Matrone*, which dates from the first century CE and was found in Angera in April 1909, and is currently kept at the Museum of Varese (Fig. 3).³⁹ Carved in a Candoglia relief, on the front side of the fragmented marble block are three women in an arrangement that suggests a dance. They hold hands, alternating their intertwined arms, and moving to the right. The three figures wear long dresses, with their hair gathered in a simple bun on the neck. In front of them, to the right, there is a fourth, male figure: he could be the lead dancer of the group. The dance seems to be performed in a sacred space around an oak tree, at the foot of which is an amphora. On the top right, the ends of a ribbon seem to belong to a festoon, similar to the leaf festoon carved on one side of the altar. On the other side, a fragmentary epigraphic dedication to the *Matronae* is carved. There also seems to be a carving of a bovine horn and a human head, which probably represent the remnants of a sacrifice scene.⁴⁰

38 Sena Chiesa 1982, 116–125; Tocchetti Pollini 1983, 171–174.

39 Varese, Musei Civici, inv. 5001. Guzzo/Moscato/Sartori 1994, 262–263, n. 758; Sartori 2009, 368, nr. ANG10.06.

40 Miedico 2016, 211–212.



Fig. 3 Varese, Musei Civici, inv. 5001. Relief with three women in an intertwined dance and a man on the so-called *Ara delle Matrone* discovered in Angera (Italy). The three figures wear long dresses. On the right, the fourth, male figure could be the lead dancer of the group. First or second century CE. From Sartori 2009, 368, nr. ANG10.06. Fragmentary epigraphic dedication: *VÓTO [SOLVTO] MA [TRONIS] SEX(tus) S [-----] DIO [-----]*

Surrounded by a dancing female group, the lead dancer, perhaps representing a priest or a sacrificer, seems to move around the altar where the actual sacrificial ceremony may have started with an offering of wine. The rite represented here may have been accompanied by music,⁴¹ most likely played on a *tibia*, the most common instrument in all Roman sacrificial ceremonies, or on a lyre.⁴²

An intertwined dance is also depicted on the altar from Pallanza, in the same geographical area, dedicated to the Emperor Caligula by *Narcissus*. An epigraphic dedication to the *Matronae* has also been carved into the altar.⁴³ This relief, from the first century CE, features a scene very similar to that on the *Ara delle Matrone*: three women

41 Hickson Hahn 2007, 237–245.

42 Vendries/Péché 2004, 406–410; Fless/Moede 2015, 257–259. See also Scheid 2007, 143.

43 Pallanza, Church of St. Stephen. Moreno 2001, 128–129, fig. 125; Garman 2008, 39–42, fig. 1.

are dancing and moving to the right, similarly dressed (Fig. 4). They are holding hands and performing a dance in a sacred space, and surrounded by a vegetable wreath, perhaps of oak, that ends in ribbons: this was an emblem recalling the numinous character of the grove and spring, and the chthonic quality of the sacrificial gifts linked to the springtime cult of female divinities.⁴⁴ The dance scene continues on the left side of the altar, depicting a woman who seems to be following the group; on the right side, a fifth woman seems to lead the dancing group. On the fourth side, under the inscription, a sacrifice scene features a musician holding a *tibia*.⁴⁵ The depiction of dancers in scenes of this type suggest that ritualised movements and sounds played a significant role in all stages of the ritual, including the moment of sacrifice itself.



Fig. 4 Pallanza, Church of St. Stephen. Intertwined dance depicted on the altar, dedicated to Caligula Emperor by Narcissus. The female dancers are represented in a sacred space surrounded by a vegetable wreath ending with ribbons. First century CE.

From Moreno 2001, 128, fig. 125.

Two other reliefs with representations of an intertwined dance, performed by five female figures, have been discovered in Avignana in the *Statio ad Fines* area (near Turin), on the way to the *Matronae Vertex*, at the crossroads of ancient paths. As with the previous examples, they feature a carved dedication to the *Matronae* (Fig. 5).⁴⁶

44 De Cazanove 2015, 186–188.

45 Miedico 2016, 212.

46 Turin, Museum of antiquity. Inv. ST 548. Guzzo/Moscatti/Sartori 1994, 262, n. 757.



Fig. 5 Turin, Museum of antiquity. Inv. ST 548. Relief with the representation of an intertwined dance performed by five female figures. From Avignana (Italy). First century CE.

Epigraphic dedication: *MATRONIS/TI(berius) IVLIVS PRISCIL(ibertus)/ACESTES*

From Guzzo/Moscatti/Sartori 1994, 177, cat. 757

There are many other examples of such scenes on altars. One, found at Sommariva del Bosco, near Cuneo, depicts a group of three intertwined female dancers, a female divinity, possibly Minerva, and a worshipper.⁴⁷ It is worth noting that the intertwined dance appears not only on carved reliefs, but also on fragmented pottery from the same area (Fig. 6).⁴⁸

As with the altars, the recurrent figurative element in these scenes is a group of figures holding hands and performing an intertwined dance in a sacred space, often around an oak tree, which is also an ancient symbol of fertility, and linked to the Celtic

⁴⁷ Miedico 2016, 212–213.

⁴⁸ Moreno 2001, 127, fig. 124.

sacred sphere as a medium between the human and divine worlds.⁴⁹ This depiction could recall an actual dancing procession making its way toward the altar of the divinities to be honoured. The continuous sequence of this dance had to be structured as a discernible unit so that the participants in a ceremony could identify this ritual action and adapt their behaviour accordingly.⁵⁰ It is worth noting that dance is an important structuring element, since movement in a ritual space can introduce a new moment of the ritual.



Fig. 6 Intertwined female figures on fragmented pottery.
From Vercelli (Italy). First century CE. From Moreno 2001, 127, fig. 124.

However, it is very difficult for modern observers fully to enter the cultural and symbolic dimension of these ancient dance imageries. The images show only a snapshot of a moment, marking the main protagonists and items, but they do not say anything about the temporal features and the sequence of ritual events. Some questions emerge as a result. Since the reliefs are accompanied by carved inscriptions and dedications,

49 Spagnolo Garzoli 1996, 89–112. For the sacred function of the oak tree, see Miles 2016, 170–175.

50 Burkert 2003, 223–225.

there is no doubt that the carved choruses are linked to the religious sphere of the *Matres* and *Matronae*:⁵¹ so what is the ritual function and the meaning of the intertwined dance in their worship? The second issue concerns the roles of the dancers: are they divinities, or simply female worshippers dancing an intertwined dance as an integral part of a religious festival performed in a sacred space? There is also a third issue, related to the practicalities of dance performances: do these figures represent actual dancers in a sacred setting during a particular festive occasion? And if so, are they situated in a public or private space? In order to answer some of these questions, it is necessary to consider other representations of intertwined dances, to investigate the relationship between the dance movements and ritual performance, and to ask why these particular dance representations were chosen for the worship of these female deities, and why these ceremonial movements were depicted around their altars.

The best comparisons can be made in South Italy, where groups of female intertwined dancers are depicted on and/or carved into various media: given the archaeological contexts of their discovery, these representations seem related not only to female and wedding spheres, but also to the dualism of life and death, and to the sacred and funerary ideology that was widespread throughout Magna Graecia.⁵²

Intertwined Dancing Groups in Magna Graecia

As we have seen, like most choral dancing, intertwined dance was linked to religious rituals and performed in a sacred space. So, this dance can be defined as a group of choral dancers moving synchronously in a dancescape, sometimes led by a lead dancer. To reference Naerebout,⁵³ we can consider a dancescape as a sacred space or a ritual space where bodily movements take place, but also where other senses, especially hearing and sight, are involved. However, the complexity of the related rituals means that it was quite difficult to reproduce them in images: it is almost impossible to produce a narrative within a single image.

The images related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matronae* give the impression that the intertwined dance was performed by female dancers arranged in single file, but it is possible that this dance could also have been performed in multiple files or circular formation.⁵⁴ However, intertwined dancing was different from the type of dances that was widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world, which involved groups of dancers arranged in a circle or rows of female and male dancers moving towards each other (Fig. 7).

⁵¹ Beck 2009, 54–57.

⁵² Wonder 2014, 517–520.

⁵³ Naerebout 2017, 39.

⁵⁴ Naerebout 2017, 50.



Fig. 7 Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Row of female and male dancers depicted on a *perriranthērion*. Sixth cent. BCE. From Lippolis 1997, 535, tav. XXIX,1.

The intertwined dance was characterised by the figures' interlocking hands, where each female dancer grasped the hand of the previous or next figure. In this way a chain was formed with a leader at both ends, allowing a reversal in the dance's direction. This type of choreography, which is found to this day in traditional dances,⁵⁵ creates a sort of labyrinthine winding path.

The earliest depiction (Fig. 8a–c) of this interweaving dance being performed solely by women is found on a sixth-century BCE Etruscan vase from Vulci, discovered in the Tomb of Isis, known as “Polledrara *hydria*”.⁵⁶ Many scholars have linked the intertwined dance on this vase with the Theseic dance, not only because the first female dancer is holding the thread in her left hand, but also because it shows a female figure, perhaps Ariadne, standing behind the hero killing the Minotaur.⁵⁷ This is an exceptional example of intertwined dance related to the Theseus myth: all the choral dances represented in other scenes associated with this myth always involve both boys and girls dancing together. One example is an interweaving dance on a clay triad group dating from the seventh/sixth century BCE, which depicts one male and two female dancing figures (Fig. 9).⁵⁸

55 Buttitta 2008, 159–160; Gould/Tahmasebian 2019, 64–68.

56 London, British Museum, H 228. Todisco 1996, 126, tavv. LX–LXI,2.

57 Todisco 1999, 444 (previous bibliography at note 38). See also Gadaleta 2002, 137.

58 Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Lippolis 1995, 87, tav. XXX,3.

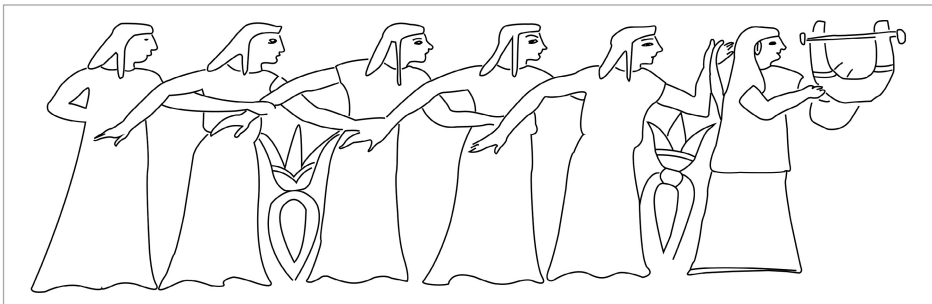


Fig. 8a–c London, British Museum, H 228. Interweaving dance depicted on the “Polledrara Hydria” from Vulci (Italy). Sixth cent. BCE. From Todisco 1996, 126, tavv. LX–LXI.2.



Fig. 9 Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Interweaving dance on a clay triad group, depicting male and female dancers. From the Satyrion Sanctuary near Taranto. Seventh/sixth century BCE. From Lippolis 1995, 87, tav. XXX,3.

These figurines discovered in Satyrion near Taranto, in a sanctuary associated with a spring – most likely devoted to the Nymph Satyria – could be considered as evidence that the intertwined dances of the Theseus myth and *geranos* were performed in Magna Graecia as early as the Archaic Age. Although many aspects of the *geranos* dance have already been extensively discussed,⁵⁹ it is useful to recall the symbolic meaning of this dance related to the labyrinth and its reference not only to prenuptial rites of passage and changes of status,⁶⁰ but also to the cycle of life and death, and the hope of life after death, symbolised by the changing of the dance direction, which seems to be a particularity of the intertwined dance.⁶¹

59 On the *geranos* dance, see Lawler 1946, 112–130; Delavaud-Roux 1994, 78–79; Moreno 2001, 120–129; Gadaleta 2002, 144; Mancini 2004–2005, 158–160. Written sources related to *gheranos* are collected in Todisco 1996, 128–130, and in Todisco 1999, 445–447. Philostratus the Younger (*Imagines*, X, 18) quotes a depiction of an intertwining dance.

60 Buttitta 2008, 161–163.

61 An intertwined dance is depicted on an attic *lebes gamikos* attributed to the Syrikos Painter (470–450 a. C.). Museum of Mykonos, inv. 970. Todisco 1999, 444; Gadaleta 2002, 142–143, figg. 63–67.

As Luigi Todisco⁶² and other scholars have highlighted, the most interesting example of intertwined dance comes from Magna Graecia (Fig. 10). The “Dancers’ Tomb” in Ruvo, Apulia, features images in a bi-dimensional space on the four interior walls, which are dated to the fifth century BCE, and preserved at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. It depicts a group of female choral dancers performing an intertwined dance, accompanied by a lyre player: they are ready to change the direction of movement, ideally around the dead.⁶³



Fig. 10 Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Invv. 9352–9357.
Particular of the “Dancers’ Tomb” of Ruvo in Apulia. Fifth cent. BCE.
From Todisco 1996, 127–126, tavv. LIII–LIX.

The neck of an Apulian volute krater from the fourth century BCE features another intertwined dance, performed by four female dancers in a sacred space – as indicated by the two *boukrania* (skulls) at the sides, typical iconographical markers of a sacred space (Fig. 11).⁶⁴ This vase, attributed to the De Schultess painter, may have originated in the area surrounding Taranto, and is preserved at the White and Levy Collection in New York.⁶⁵ Todisco⁶⁶ and Paolo Moreno⁶⁷ identify the symbolic meaning of the intertwined dance scene on the krater as connected to the relationship between birth

⁶² See also Todisco 1996, 435–465; Todisco 1999, 123–132; Gadaleta 2002, 135–156.

⁶³ Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Invv. 9352–9357. Todisco 1996, 127–126, tavv. LIII–LIX; Gadaleta 2002, 8–13, figg. 1–6.

⁶⁴ New York, Shelby White and Leon Levy Collection. Inv. 381. Todisco 1996, 127–128; Todisco 1999, 444, fig. 14; Gadaleta 2002, 146–147, figg. 69–71.

⁶⁵ Trendall/Cambitoglou 1991, 133–135, n. 78.

⁶⁶ Todisco 1996, 127–128; Todisco 1999, 444–445.

⁶⁷ Moreno 2001, 126–128.

and death as a ritual of passage: this in turn can be compared with youth initiation and prenuptial rites.⁶⁸

Another example of a group of female dancers performing an intertwining dance, this time accompanied by an *aulos* player, is found on an Apulian *Thymiaterion*, a vase used for burning incense during rituals and wedding ceremonies (Fig. 12).⁶⁹ It is worth noting, too, that an unpublished terracotta group of three female intertwined dancers has been discovered in the tomb of a little girl from Herakleia, a Greek *polis* founded by Taranto. Other objects related to the female sphere and nuptial rites have been found in the same grave (dating to the end of fourth century BCE), and are preserved at the National Museum of Siritide-Policoro, on the Gulf of Taranto (Fig. 13).⁷⁰

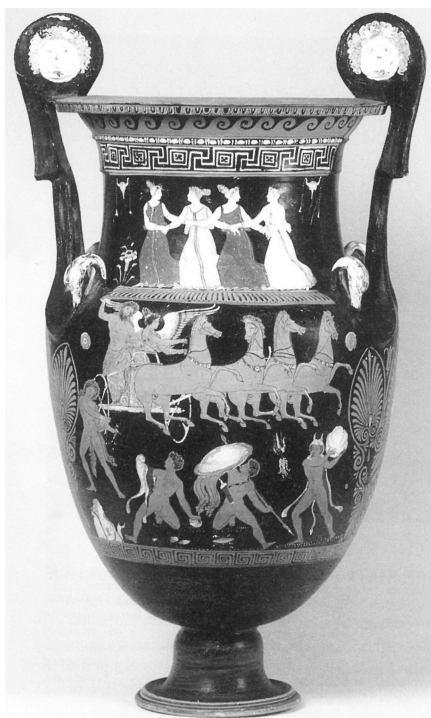


Fig. 11 New York, Shelby White and Leon Levy Collection. Inv. 381. Intertwined dance performed by four female dancers in a sacred space depicted on the neck of an Apulian volute krater (from Taranto?). Fourth cent. BCE. From Todisco 1999, 444, fig. 14.

68 Lonsdale 1993, 72–73.

69 Beverly Hills, Antiquities trade. Todisco/Sisto 1998, 603, fig. 30; Todisco 1999, 447, fig. 15; Gadaleta 2002, 150, fig. 72.

70 Policoro (MT), National Archaeological Museum of Siritide. Inv. 216374. Unpublished.



Fig. 12 Beverly Hills, Antiquities trade. An intertwining dance accompanied by an *aulos* player depicted on an Apulian *Thymiaterion*, fourth cent. BCE.

Graphic reworking of image from Todisco 1999, 447, fig. 15 (image courtesy of Luigi Todisco).

Archaeo Design and Drawing: Orazio Pulvirenti



Fig. 13 Policoro (MT), National Archaeological Museum of Sirinide. Inv. 216374.

Terracotta group with the representation of three female intertwined. End of fourth cent. BCE.

As Mario Torelli notes,⁷¹ the symbolic meaning of this particular dance appears to address an ideal symmetry between two transitions: marriage and death. Thus, depict-

⁷¹ Torelli 1992, 12.

tions of the intertwined dance seem to be related to these important phases of life, which may explain the presence of images of intertwined dancing groups in Magna Graecia, where this dance could be recalling performances related to the female sphere and rites of passage.

On the basis of this set of evidence and the contexts of their discovery, it should be considered that the intertwined dance and its particular movement, which allows the dancers to change the direction, symbolically signifies a change (of status, of life, of human condition): this symbolic meaning may explain its depiction on various media in different geographical areas and periods, as well as its association, in North Italy, with cults and rituals related to the female divinities, who were patronesses of fertility for both humans and nature.

Taken together, the archaeological evidence found in Magna Graecia and in the Cisalpine area suggests that intertwined dance was closely allied with ceremonies involving rites of passage and initiation, and with nuptial rites, linking intertwined dance with the cycle of death and rebirth. What remains to be understood is how these rituals were connected with events and marital unions promoted by Romans in an area on the border of Celtic and German regions at a moment when the Empire needed to establish and reinforce alliances in this area.⁷²

A Dancing Festival in the Cisalpine Area?

Religious ritual was a favourite subject for Roman sculptors and painters; we possess countless images of sacred events, but only a few that explicitly show a worshiper in the act of dancing. This is not surprising, given the difficulties of depicting movement. We have not distinguished between human and non-human dancers in the images of intertwined dances related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matronae*, but it is possible to consider them as reflective of human dance in honour of these divinities and their retinue. Therefore, the images present us at least with an idea of which dance was appropriate for which context.

As Naerebout has highlighted,⁷³ images were intended to portray “dance” but not any particular event. For this reason, the depictions (just like written sources) do not allow us to reconstruct actual performances, especially since we also lack the music and song texts. Not only can we never see or hear these performances, but we must also consider that a dance and a particular movement are never fixed but are constantly evolving, and even if a dance can be localised and pinned down in time, every performance is unique and can never be repeated in exactly the same way. Therefore, images

⁷² Beck 2009, 17–20.

⁷³ Naerebout 2019, 35.

can profitably be scrutinised in terms of the function and social role of dance as it marks an occasion as out of the ordinary, mobilises an audience, and conveys ideas about the community and about social relations.⁷⁴

As Beck has argued,⁷⁵ archaeological evidence related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matronae* has been most notably discovered in places connected with springs and water sources in the Cisalpine area, where the ritual use of grottoes dates back to pre-history.⁷⁶ There is evidence that caves were often used for celebrations related to the female and nuptial sphere:⁷⁷ the presence of springs and water sources, their protected entrances, and their liminality made grottoes particularly attractive as locations for the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, who have often been identified with Nymphs, and, as Torelli notes,⁷⁸ are connected with the rites of passage of women and some seasonal festive occasions, perhaps similar to the *Matronalia*, a festival of nature's renewal and a New Year's celebration observed in Rome since the Archaic period, in honour of Juno Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, but also Roman mothers and wives.⁷⁹

Protecting women and embodying fertility were also functions of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, which would explain why they were compared and assimilated to the *Junones* in four inscriptions from Cisalpine area.⁸⁰ These various instances show that the term *Junones* was believed to be identical to the term *Matronae*: it may even have completely replaced it in some areas, including large parts of North Italy, after the Roman invasion.

A possible reference to such a festival in the scenes of female dances in the Cisalpine area could mean that women had their own particular religious roles, and suggest that the women were vital in the spread of the *Matres* and *Matronae* cult.⁸¹ It is worth considering that in this cult *elite* women, both local and Roman, had the chance to lead religious rituals and celebrations, as various forms of archaeological evidence seem to indicate. Like the *Matronalia*, *Matres* and *Matronae* worship allowed women to have a presence, specifically one that brought the Romans and local populations together.

This cult could serve as an example of a mixed culture that emerged in the Cisalpine area.⁸² Roman legal reforms made marriages much more viable, which helped to create social interactions and blood ties between Romans and local populations:⁸³ in particular, those Romans who married local women were exposed to the *Matronae*, and

74 Naerebout 2019, 49.

75 Beck 2009, 334–344.

76 David 2014, 180–181.

77 Larson 2001, 211–225; Buttitta 2013, 247–290.

78 Torelli 1984, 67.

79 Estienne 2011, 245–246; Brelich 2015, 224.

80 Epigraphic sources are collected in Beck 2009, 84.

81 Lomas 2014, 485–487.

82 Arslan 1994, 66.

83 Torelli 1988, 53–74.

gravitated towards the cult both to get closer to the locals and to win over the deities for protection.⁸⁴

The Roman presence – formed by soldiers and Italic immigrants⁸⁵ – did indeed use coercive imperialistic power in North Italy, but the participation across socio-cultural exchanges between both groups, which created the mixed ritual and iconography, suggests an active mutual participation in religious behaviour.⁸⁶ The opportunities related to the cult, as well as the family ties of marriage between Romans and locals, fostered this religious community. The *Matres* and *Matronae* cult in the Cisalpine area provides an example of Romans and locals forming communities together in the frontiers. In this case, a common religious worship brought the groups together in a social organisation.⁸⁷

Within this context, dance performances could function as a means of social control, helping to establish and maintain new social groupings.⁸⁸ The study of dance performances and their ritual contexts related to the Roman votive artefacts found in the Cisalpine area may help us to understand how social relations could be marked, shaped, and introduced by bodily and ritualised movement in special festivals and ritual acts.

Conclusion

Depictions of intertwined dances performed by groups of worshippers are not simply dedications and material objects but dynamic and expressive products of human behaviour in cult. Taking into account the communicative nature of dance, which carries a great deal of significance beyond that represented by everyday movement, these objects may have been conceived as remembrances of rituals that involved not only dancers (and, obviously, singers and musicians who formed an acoustic background), but usually also priests, priestesses, or cult personnel in special events who were all relevant for the community. Thus, it is necessary to consider the representations of intertwined dancers, and their relationship with the religious sphere, on a case-by-case basis, while keeping in mind the different uses of the same type of representations for different sacred occasions, and, where possible, the differing archaeological contexts in which these depictions were found.

The images might themselves “participate” in these ceremonies, most likely related to rituals of social transformation. These sacred occasions were privileged moments

84 Rothe 2014, 506–507.

85 Sartori 1994, 120.

86 Rüpke 2014, 475–479.

87 Sartori 1994, 121. See also Lee-Stecum 2014, 464–467.

88 Slofstra 1983, 71–81.

for the consecration of these images to the divinities that ensured these passages. The worshippers might incorporate their offering into the ritual as a tool for illustrating proper behaviour during the sacred events.⁸⁹

Dance, alongside music and sound as inseparable components in the sacred sphere, strengthens the power of performances,⁹⁰ which relies in great part on the effect of a heightened multisensory experience:⁹¹ dancing performed in sacred settings was intended to maximise the effects of the ceremony, and to reinforce the solidarity engendered by these practices. Active participation in processing, listening, and viewing, created a *communitas* of shared experience.⁹² The desire to retain a tangible memento of a dance performance in a sacred setting could have led worshippers to offer particular dedications that depicted dancing performances: this may have contributed to evoking the experience of cult by recalling bodily movements and sounds in a sacred setting.⁹³ Keeping this perspective in mind, the dance scenes on Roman votive artefacts and the epigraphic dedications could be associated not only with a specific idea of ritual and dance performances in the local cult of *Matres* and *Matronae* in the Cisalpine area, but also with an explicit preservation of their memory.⁹⁴

The link between sacred events and dance performances during their celebrations is the key to understanding the symbolic meanings and the production of depictions of intertwined dancers on altars and images, which are spread across a broad geographical space and a wide chronological spectrum in the ancient world, particularly between Magna Graecia and Rome.

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89 Chaniotis 2009, 3–4.

90 Bell 1997, 159–164.

91 Betts 2017, 26–28.

92 Buttà 2014, 7–8.

93 Bellia 2018, 94–95.

94 Spickermann 2015, 412–414.

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