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DANCE MANIA IN PREHISTORIC GREECE

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IN times of catastrophic upheaval, of war, of plague, of famine and deprivation, of deep and prolonged fear and distress, when the strains and tensions of life prove too much for human endurance, whole communities have been known to fall suddenly into the hysterical form of monomania known as *chorea hysterica rhythmica*, or dance mania. Best documented of all the known instances of *chorea* in world history are those of central Europe from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. However, there have been striking instances in modern times as well. Travelers of this and the last century have reported cases in the Malay States and in neighboring lands. In our own country, such religious groups as the Shakers, the "Angel Dancers," the devotees of Father Divine, the Holiness Sect in Virginia, and the members of the Church of God in Tennessee have displayed their fervor in ecstatic "dances" and rhythmic movements which are of an involuntary and hysterical nature. Of a more secular type, but hardly less frenzied, seem to have been some of the "marathon" exhibitions of the hysterical post-war era of the 1920's. And, within very recent years, in the trying depression period immediately preceding the outbreak of the recent war, the newspapers carried the amazing story of a wave of uncontrollable dance mania in a Chicago stadium, during a concert by a "swing" band. As a matter of fact, the whole "jitterbug" movement is probably nothing more than a very mild form of dance mania, induced by the depression, and prolonged by the war.

In Greek legend there is a persistent tradition of something that looks very much like dance mania, occurring within the "mythological" or Mycenaean period. Practically all of the mythographers preserve a record of it, with much detail; and at least five separate stories are told of it, with five different "sets of characters." The three daughters of Proetus, king of Tiryns, for instance, are said to have been punished with madness because they offended the gods in some way—by laughing at the rites of Hera, or boasting of their own beauty, or refusing to worship the god Dionysus, or in some other way, according to different authors. The maidens sang weird songs, tore their garments, and went raving over the countryside in a wild dance. They believed that they were being changed into cows, and they were in deep distress, but they could not stop dancing. Other women, watching them, were seized with the same madness. Homes were aban-

doned, and children were deserted or even slain by their frenzied mothers. Nothing could put an end to the mania until Melampus and Bias, with a company of strong young men, pursued the women, seized them, and literally ran them off their feet. The eldest of the princesses (and presumably others among the women) actually died of this harsh treatment. The rest fell exhausted, one after another. When Melampus had "purified" them with water and prayers and sacrifices, they recovered, and were returned to their homes.

Similar stories of dance mania, in several cases said to have been incited by Dionysus, are told of the daughters of Minyas, of the daughters of Eleuther, of the women of Thebes, Sparta, and Chios, and of the daughters of Eteocles, in Or-



CONTEST CLOSING

Readers are reminded that this year's Verse Writing Contest will close on February 1. Rules of the contest may be found in our November issue, page 19. Entries may be sent to Prof. Lillian B. Lawler, Hunter College, 695 Park Ave., New York 21, N. Y., or to Prof. W. L. Carr, Colby College, Waterville, Maine.



chomenus. The last-named were worshiped after death in the guise of the Charites, or Graces, patronesses of charm, grace, and beauty, but particularly of the dance; and their worship spread to all parts of the Greek world.

These stories of crazed women dancers seem to have impressed the Greeks very much, for their literature abounds in references to them. Modern scholars have studied the stories with great care, but have disagreed in their interpretations. Some have declared that we are here dealing with mere legends, having no basis in fact. Others have seen the stories as imaginative accounts of real events of remote antiquity. The stories are all much alike, and in most of them three women are involved; this fact has led some writers to the belief that all the stories are versions of one tale, told with local embellishments and local names in various parts of Greece. Other writers see the legends as telescoped versions, so to speak, of outbreaks of dance mania that continued for many years over the whole of the territory occupied by the Mycenaean. Some scholars regard the stories as distorted accounts of ecstatic ritual dances of the Cretans, particularly in their worship of their male divinity, son of the Great Goddess, who in the form of a bull is said to have been torn to pieces annually by

frenzied votaries. Other scholars look upon the stories as an actual record of the introduction into Greek lands of the wild Thraco-Phrygian worship of Dionysus—although the legends definitely have their setting in the Mycenaean period, and most students place the coming of Dionysus to Greece considerably later. Still other writers think the stories refer to priestesses of some nature goddess, in the Mycenaean period, who habitually engaged in weird, frenzied rituals, perhaps wearing masks shaped like cows' heads. Psychologists with great unanimity recognize in the stories unmistakable symptoms of *chorea*.

The incidence of dance mania is usually very sudden. One person (generally a woman), with no warning at all, begins to twitch and jerk convulsively. Her arms and feet fling out in a grotesque caricature of dance movements. Her face displays a tense, fixed, deeply troubled expression. She begins to wail, or to laugh, or to sing a weird chant, or to utter frightful animal-like cries. She obviously sees visions, and hears imaginary voices or music. She looks and acts as if a supernatural power has indeed taken possession of her soul. She tears her clothing, writhes on the ground, foams at the mouth. She runs away, and will resist all efforts to stop her, even seizing weapons and using them, if she can get them. If she is held back by main force, her arms and legs continue to jerk violently; and if they are restrained by bonds, she exhibits signs of extreme exhaustion. If unrestrained, she continues her wandering and her convulsive twitching, night and day, without pause, sometimes for weeks on end, until she drops, exhausted or dead, with the skin literally worn off the soles of her feet. Nor is the seizure ever, apparently, confined to one sufferer. Many of those watching her are suddenly seized with the same irresistible urge to dance; and soon a large portion of the community is affected—men and women, both, but with women always in the majority.

Various types of cure have been tried, over the ages, for the sufferers. Some of these were in the nature of incantations and charms, while others involved plunging the victims into cold water, or binding them tightly. Sometimes musical instruments were played to their convulsive motions, and then were deliberately and firmly slowed in tempo. Sometimes strong male partners took hold of them, and, dancing with them in relays, forced them to dance to exhaustion—a remedy like that used in the case of the daughters of Proetus, incidentally. Many of the sufferers in all ages must have perished miserably. The story that the daughters of Minyas did not return from their mad

dance, but were changed into a crow, a bat, and an owl, implies death in the forest.

If, as seems likely, the Greek legends do reflect real manifestations of dance mania in prehistoric Greece, it might be possible to conjecture the cause which produced them. Apparently the Mycenaean period was characterized by much upheaval and turmoil, migration, pestilence, famine, the overthrow of cities, the killing and enslaving of large groups of people. Any of these factors might have driven the people of a given area beyond the point of human endurance, and produced mass hysteria. It is interesting that one of the stories of the Proetides mentions a disease of the scalp—a "fearful itch," *knynos*. "Their fair hair dropped from their heads," says the ancient chronicler, "and their scalps were laid bare." Such an affliction, descending upon young women famed for their beauty, would be an unbalancing force, even apart from the maddening itch of the disease itself. Among the names of ancient dances handed down to us is one called *knismos*, "itch," from *knynos*, the very word used in the story of the Proetides. In later times the *knismos* had become an obscene dance; but its original significance fits in well with our legend. Further, the river in which the maidens were purified was used in historical times to cure leprosy and scabies.

Many writers have speculated on the historical possibilities in the legend of the daughters of Proetus. Persson excavated a royal tomb not far from Tiryns—a tomb which he implies could have been that of Proetus with his wife and eldest daughter; he dates the tomb in the first half of the fourteenth century B.C. Other writers date the walls of Tiryns in the twelfth century. Excavations at Orchomenus tend to connect Minyas and his daughters with the fourteenth century.

The fact that the name of Dionysus appears in many of the legends is perhaps not too significant chronologically. Hera, Earth, and Artemis are the divinities concerned in other versions of the stories. These divinities are earlier than Dionysus in Greece; all three are, in fact, goddesses equated by the later Greeks with the Great Goddess of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans; and the nearness of Tiryns to the very ancient shrine of Hera, the Argive Heraeum, originally the site of a prehistoric shrine of the Great Goddess, would lend color to the supposition that the earliest evidence for dance mania in that vicinity long antedates the coming of Dionysus into Greece. The later Greeks would naturally substitute in the stories the name of a god in whose ritual there were wild and wandering dances. Some scholars, in fact, think

that the impulse that produced the madness of the daughters of Proetus and Minyas was the same as that which created the rituals of Dionysus; and that such rituals were basically nothing but dance mania. The two phenomena actually do have much in common; but the ritual ecstasies of classical times, at least, apparently were consciously induced, with the aid of alcohol and other drugs, music of a stimulating and arousing nature, and dizzy, whirling steps in the dance, whereas the convulsive twitchings of mass hysteria are largely involuntary.

That the Greeks, and the Mycenaeans before them, thought of the visitations of dance mania as calamities to be averted is well attested. Altars, shrines, and votive offerings were dedicated, and sacrifices offered, so that the madness might not recur. The cult of the Charites, said to



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have been instituted after the "death by dancing" of the maddened daughters of Eteocles, became a very important one at Orchomenus. Clearly that city, at least, suffered in prehistoric times a deeply moving experience connected with dancing, and by religious rites strove throughout its corporate life to prevent a recurrence of the calamity. Athens, also, had a very old cult of the Graces, with a shrine at the very entrance to the Acropolis. In classical times statues of the Graces stood in this spot, and tradition said they were the work of the great Socrates, who was by trade a sculptor. In front of the statues certain mystic ceremonies took place—perhaps stemming from Mycenaean times. Their mysterious nature would suggest apotropaic rites, designed to ward off a recurrence of dance mania. Likewise, a famous shrine of the Maniae, in Megalopolis (Pausanias viii, 34, 1) may have been consecrated during an especially frightening epidemic of dance mania.

There is, then, reason to believe that Mycenaean Greece suffered one or more severe outbreaks of dance mania in the period from 1400 to 1100 B.C. The experience was particularly shattering psychologically, and made a profound impression upon the Mycenaeans and upon their successors, the Greeks of classical times. The mania seems to have been felt in most of the great centers of the

Mycenaean civilization, but particularly in Tiryns, Orchomenus, and Thebes. Archaeologists have shown, incidentally, that these are the very cities which in this period had strongest cultural and economic connections with one another.



JULIAN THE APOSTATE

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FLAVIUS CLAUDIUS JULIANUS, commonly known as Julian the Apostate, was born in Constantinople, now Istanbul, in the year 331, during the reign of his uncle, Constantine the Great. Julian's father was Julius Constantius and his mother was Basilina, who died a few months after the birth of her son. He had a half-brother, Gallus, who a few years later was murdered by the soldiers to insure the succession to some one of Constantine's sons. When in his early life Gallus was banished, Julian was allowed to remain in Constantinople. Here he was carefully educated under the supervision of a family eunuch, Mardonius, and Eusebius the bishop of Nicomedia. For some obscure reason Gallus was recalled from banishment in 341, and both he and Julian were removed to Macellum, a far distant castle in Cappadocia.

In his youth Julian was trained as a Christian, but he later broke with Christianity and embraced the old pagan faith which some of his teachers professed. This old Hellenic religion claimed his loyalty and had a special appeal for him. Thus he became an avowed devotee of the ancient pagan religion, especially after he came under the influence of Libanius, during his second banishment to Nicomedia.

In the year 354 Gallus was put to death, and even Julian came under suspicion and was confined in Milan. Somewhat later, however, he was released through the intercession of Eusebia, the empress, and given permission to take up his residence in Athens. Here he became interested in the strange and mystic doctrine of Mithraism, and was initiated into the rites of that oriental cult in the year 355. With the Emperor Constantius, Julian was now one of the two surviving male members of the family of Constantine. At this juncture Constantius, who had become sole ruler of the Roman world, was hard pressed by the cares of state and sought some relief of his office by inviting Julian to share in the government. Accordingly, Constantius summoned Julian to Milan and bestowed upon him the title of Caesar, giving him his daughter Helena for wife, and appointed him governor of the province of Gaul.

Julian forthwith accepted, and with alacrity proceeded to his province to take