
"FLAT HAND" IN THE GREEK DANCE

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his headstrong colleague Minucius being outgeneraled and worsted by Hannibal (Plut., *Fab.*, xii, 1-2). When Pompey the Great learned that he had been appointed to carry on the war with Mithridates and Tigranes he hit his thigh with his hand to dissemble his real feelings (Plut., *Pomp.*, xxv, 5).

Greek and Roman authors preserve records of similar use of the hand among other nations. Xenophon (*Cyr.*, vii, 3, 6) tells us that Cyrus the Great struck his thigh upon learning of the death in battle of his devoted friend Abradatas. In 147 B.C. Hasdrubal, the leader of the Carthaginians, smote his thigh again and again as he heard the peace terms that meant the destruction of his country (Polyb., xxxix, 2, 8). Some of the Mediterranean pirates against whom the Gabinian law was directed struck their thighs in mock alarm as their captives held before them the threat of retribution (Plut., *Pomp.*, xxiv, 7). The nationality of these offenders is not given, but the pirates in general were made up of "the ruined men of all nations" (Mommson), and there is no reason to doubt that the gesture was understood by them all. It is also attributed to grieving Thracian women by Ovid (*Met.*, xi, 81); "Et conata femur maerenti plangere dextra."

Other references to the gesture are given by C. Sittl, *Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer*, p. 21, and by the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, under the word *femur*.

The Hebrews, too, expressed anguish in this way: "Cry and howl, son of man; for it shall be upon my people, it shall be upon all the princes of Israel: terrors by reason of the sword shall be upon my people: smite therefore upon thy thigh" (Ezekiel, xxi: 12). In commenting upon "percussi femur meum" in the Vulgate rendering of Jeremiah, xxxi: 19, Saint Jerome says: "Quod dolentis et plangentis et super errore pristino plorantis indicium est ut femur manu percussat . . ."

An amusing story over a hundred years old shows that the gesture has survived in modern Italy. A Neapolitan girl who was far from elated by a proposal of marriage brought to her by a foreign lady acting as a go-between struck her thigh several times with her right hand. Being more intimately acquainted with Italian entomology than with Italian gestures, the lady exclaimed: "Di grazia, we are by ourselves. You may feel free to rid yourself of that pest." (Andrea de Jorio, *La Mimica degli Antichi Investigata nel Gestire Napoletano* [Naples, 1832], p. 150.)

It may be noted also that Sam Weller "smote his leg" on seeing the sad plight of an old friend (Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, Chap. 45).

Although many peoples of antiquity

instinctively struck the thigh or thighs in times of distress or anxiety, the gesture may not have been instinctive originally, but may have had its basis in a folk belief or popular psychology. Many of our mental and physical attributes were supposed to have their seats in definite parts of the body, for instance, courage and other qualities in the heart, memory in the ear, and laughter in the spleen. The head, beard, and knees were touched or clasped under various circumstances. Such considerations have led to the guarded suggestion that the knees, which suppliants appealed to and grasped, were, together with the thigh bones, one of the seats of the soul. A person in distress



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might strike the thighs rather than the knees because it was more convenient to do so.

The gesture of striking the thigh was frequently employed by the ancients in public speaking (Lucian, *Rh. Pr.*, 19; Cic., *Brut.*, lxxx, 278; Sen., *Dial.*, iii, 19, 4; Quint., *Inst. Orat.*, xi, 3, 123). It had more than one meaning when employed in the dance, as we may see from Dr. Lillian B. Lawler's article, "Flat Hand" in the Greek Dance," in this issue of THE CLASSICAL OUTLOOK, which gives additional examples of this method of indicating grief.

(The suggestion made at the end of the next to the last paragraph is taken from an advance review copy of a book by R. B. Onians, *Origins of Greek and Roman Thought, Mainly concerning the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, and Fate* [Cambridge: at the University Press], pp. 174-175. Publication will doubtless be delayed until world affairs become more settled. The volume is strikingly original and should prove to be one of the most important classical books of this decade.)

"FLAT HAND" IN THE GREEK DANCE

By LILLIAN B. LAWLER
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ODDLY ENOUGH, one of the most neglected of all phases of ancient civilization in the research of scholars, up to comparatively recent years, at least, has been the Greek dance. As a result, one who would attempt to understand that dance, or to envisage some of its greatness, must constantly encounter a great array of unsolved or half-solved problems touching the basic elements of the art. He must wrestle, for instance, with innumerable difficulties of terminology; he must be forever stopping to ferret out just what the Greeks really meant by this or that phrase or dance-name, turning over various possibilities, seeking literary, linguistic, metrical, and archaeological enlightenment, and looking for analogies in the dances of other peoples, ancient and modern. In this way, slowly and with infinite care, he may lay a foundation for an appreciation of what must have been as great an art of the dance as the world has ever seen.

Among the words and phrases still only partly understood by modern students of the Greek dance are many names of schemata, or dance figures. Schemata were brief of execution; some of them, in fact, would require but a few seconds. They were, however, distinctive; and sometimes one schema, repeated frequently, gave a whole dance its essential character. In a way, the names of schemata are even more important than are the names of dances proper. Schemata are, so to speak "candid camera shots" of the dance in action. Names given to them are almost invariably meant to be descriptive; they can, if we endeavor to comprehend them correctly, give us a quick and vivid glimpse of the Greek dancer, as more formal names of full dances can never do.

In the list of dance schemata the exact significance of which has never been completely established there is one called by the Greeks "cheir kataprenes." Literally, the words seem to mean "hand flat down." But just what was this schema? How was it used, and in what sort of dance? Did it have a symbolic significance, or was it purely for aesthetic effect? Let us look into the ancient record and see what can be found.

Our two best and most specific informants on the Greek dance are Pollux (of the second century after Christ) and Athenaeus (of the late second and early third centuries). Both of these writers mention our schema. Pollux (iv, 105) says definitely that it belongs to the tragic dance; Athenaeus (xiv, 630 a)

merely lists it among other dance schemata.

For the most part, commentators on the Greek dance have not discussed "cheir kataprenes" extensively, nor made many suggestions as to its use. They have interpreted it variously as "hand-slanting," "with the hand turned down," and even, by faulty reading of the Greek

Apollo thrice strikes Patroclus "cheiressi athanatesi," and Patroclus withdraws from combat, "fearful of the wrath of the archer-god." In *Odyssey* xiii, 164, Poseidon in anger strikes the ship of Odysseus "cheiri kataprenei" and fastens it firmly to the bottom of the sea by the blow. In the same book, lines 198-199, Odysseus, back in his own country,

often does in the epic, a slap with the flat of the hand, directed at some part of the dancer's own person, or at some other person or thing.

But is there any precedent in the Greek dance for so humble an action as a slap? There is, indeed. In the same list of schemata in Athenaeus (xiv, 630 a), and in fact just two words before "cheir kataprenes," is listed *hekaterides*, a schema variously interpreted as alternate slapping of the thighs (cf. Pollux iv, 102) or alternate kicking of the thighs (cf. Hesychius, s.v. *hekaterin*). It would seem likely that the essence of *hekaterides* is the idea of *alternation*, whether of hands or of feet. In that case, "cheir kataprenes" might denote a slap or slaps with one hand, *hekaterides* alternating slaps with one hand after the other, or alternating kicks. Incidentally, in the list of schemata given by Pollux, "cheir kataprenes" immediately precedes "xylou paralepsis," which has recently been interpreted as a gesture of beating with a club. In the corresponding list of Athenaeus (xiv, 630 a) the same two schemata appear also, although not in juxtaposition.

There are innumerable ancient art representations of dancing figures which seem to show a slapping gesture. An Ionic black-figured *deinos* in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, for instance (No. 13.205), shows a flute-player and six dancers, most of whom slap their own heads, backs, thighs, and legs, or slap one another, as they perform a "step-hop" dance near an altar. In the Metropolitan Museum in New York City the gesture is used by three komast dancers on an early sixth-century *kylix* (22.139.-22); also, by numerous Dionysiac dancers — by a *Maenad* and a *satyr* on a mid-sixth-century *kylix* (17.230.5); by two *satyrs* and a *Maenad* on a column crater of about 530 B.C. (24.97.95); and by two *satyrs* on an Athenian amphora of the late sixth century (26.60.29).

Heinz Schnabel, in his *Kordax* (Munich, Beck, 1910, pp. 27-28), refers to several representations on Corinthian vases of slapping the thighs with the open hand; he regards this form of slapping as characteristic of the dance of comedy, the *kordax*. Vincenzo Festa ("Sikinnis," in *Memorie della R. Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere, e Belle Arti di Napoli*, III 1918, Part II, pp. 35-74), cites vase paintings which illustrate a "flat hand" in settings which suggest the *sikinnis*, the dance of the *satyr* play. Festa interprets this "flat hand" in the *sikinnis* not as a slap, but as a very, very old gesture of pointing towards the *pudenda*, for the magical warding off of evil. Louis Séchan, likewise (*La danse grecque antique*, Paris, de Boccard, 1930, p. 82, note 49), points out the frequency with which the flat hand is shown in repre-

A HOMEMADE CATAPULT

The illustration shows a model of a catapult made by the students of Miss Mildred Simmons, of the Pierce Junior High School, Grosse Pointe, Michigan. It is taken from the University of Michigan publication, "Latin Week in Michigan," and is reproduced here by courtesy of the Department of Latin of the University of Michigan. The bulletin, which is a report on the activities of Michigan teachers in 1941, was prepared by Professor James E. Dunlap from letters, photographs of exhibits, and newspaper clippings which were sent in by Michigan Latin teachers. Copies may be obtained from the Latin Department, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



texts, "hand wandering down" or "hand placed under hand." Kurt Latte ("De Saltationibus Graecorum Capita Quinque," *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, Band XIII, Giessen, 1913, pp. 19-20) devotes more attention to the schema than do most modern writers. He interprets it as meaning "with the hand turned palm to the ground," and regards it as the antithesis to another schema, the one known as "cheir sime."

To try to get some new light on the meaning of the schema, we must scrutinize closely the exact significance of *kataprenes* elsewhere in Greek literature. We find it very common, for example, in epic poetry. In *Iliad* xv, 113-114, Ares smites his own thighs "chersi kataprenesi," in deep grief for his dead son Ascalaphus. Likewise, in the same book, lines 397-398, Patroclus grieves at the sight of the Trojans near the Greek ships, and smites his own thighs "chersi kataprenesi." Line 398 is, in fact, a duplication of line 114. In *Iliad* xvi, 792, Apollo stands behind Patroclus, and smites the mortal's back and shoulders violently "cheiri kataprenei," to prevent him from gaining a victory over the Trojans. Frequently in the *Iliad* the same gesture is indicated without the actual use of *kataprenes* — as, for example, in xvi, 125, where Achilles, in grief and distress as the Trojans set fire to a Greek ship, smites his thighs (*mero plexamenos*); or in xvi, 702-711, where

and failing to recognize anything he sees, groans in distress and smites both thighs "chersi kataprenesi." Later, in *Odyssey* xix, 467, Odysseus' old nurse takes his scarred foot in her flattened palms, "cheiressi kataprenesi." Several of these passages, and many others as well, are discussed by Dr. Eugene S. McCartney, in his article, "Smiting the Thigh, a Widespread Gesture of Grief," in this issue of THE CLASSICAL OUTLOOK.

Outside of the epic, we find the word in various connotations. Hippocrates, for instance, *On Fractures*, 40, recommends that in dislocations of the arm the joint be pushed back into place and the forearm turned to a flat position ("es to kataprenes"). Hesychius, a lexicographer of unknown date, defines *kataprenes* as "kata prosopon, epi stoma, katopheres" — "towards the face, to the mouth, turned down."

Quite evidently, as can be seen from these examples, the idea of "flatness" is an essential one in the interpretation of the word. Also, it would seem to be clear that there is usually implicit in the word the concept of flatness toward something else — toward some part of one's own or another's body, or toward some external object. The idea of "downward" seems present at times, but absent at others.

Translated into terms of the dance, then, the expression "cheir kataprenes" might well seem to denote, as it most

sentations of dancing satyrs. Again, illustrations in numerous works on the dance (among them Fig. 49 in Séchan) show the use of the gesture to denote the smiting of the top of the head with the open hand in the funeral dance.

As one looks over the many representations of the slapping gesture in ancient art, he notes that in most cases the performer using the gesture is male. However, in Dionysiac and funereal connotations female dancers also use the gesture.

We come now to the significance of the schema. It is certainly very old. In funeral dances its meaning is, of course, self-evident — the beating of the head or of the breast in grief (cf., e.g., Euripides, *Suppliants* 72, 87, 604; *Phoen. Women* 1351). Dr. Eugene S. McCartney, in his article on "Smiting the Thigh," shows clearly that the slapping of the thigh, in the period of the Greek epic, and also among peoples ancient and modern, in all parts of the world, denotes distress, grief, displeasure, or anger. The slapping of another person obviously indicates anger or hostility. Strangely enough, the same gesture could be used to denote joy. Carl Sittl (*Die Gebärden der Griechen und Römer*, Leipzig, Teubner, 1890, Ch. II, 1, e) lists repeated slapping of one's own thigh with the palms as a gesture indicating great glee; and as we have seen, it is found frequently — as is also the slapping of the chest — in art representations of komastic dances. In the same type of dance the gesture is found in the sportive slapping of other persons by the dancer. Other uses of the gesture might be implicit in the fact that among the ancient Greeks ritualistic beatings, to induce fertility and to drive evil or sin out of the person so beaten, were often performed, rhythmically and to music, in the manner of a dance, as they have been from prehistoric times among many other peoples of the world.

It will be recalled that Pollux (iv, 105) specifically says that "cheir kataprenes" was a gesture used in the dance of tragedy. In this connection we must bear in mind the fact that gesture was regarded by the Greeks as a part of the dance; and that, especially in the artificial medium of Greek drama, the gesture of a character, accompanying rhythmical speech, would be thought of as identical with a dance gesture. There is, then, in Greek tragedy, abundant opportunity for the use of the gesture. On the analogy of the epic, we may assume that the slapping of the performer's thigh was used frequently to express distress or displeasure. This we may doubtless regard as the tragic form of the gesture, par excellence. Furthermore, there often appears in tragedy what is known as a *kommos*—a dirge or lament, chanted by a character or the chorus, or

both, with an accompaniment of gestures of mourning, conspicuous among which, as we have noted, is the smiting of the breast or the head. In fact, the word *kommos* is derived from *koptein*, "to strike." In addition, we find occasional opportunity in tragedy for the use of the hostile form of the gesture — a real or threatened striking of another person.

Greek comedy frequently burlesqued tragedy, in the dance as well as in plot and dialogue. In addition to a burlesque form of the tragic gesture, there would be in comedy ample opportunity for the use of the hostile or sportive form of the gesture. Readers of Aristophanes will recall several plays in which vigorous slapping has a part. Here, of course, we call to mind the slapping gestures in art representations usually identified as portrayals of the *kordax*, the dance of comedy.

It would seem fairly certain, from the art objects and from the nature of the

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gesture itself, that the satyr play made most extensive use of our schema. Unfortunately, so little of the satyr drama has come down to us that we are unable to strengthen this conclusion with the aid of literary evidence. It may be significant, however, that in the *Cyclops* of Euripides (228), Silenus tells, obviously with illustrative gestures, of a fictitious beating which he has received at the hands of imaginary thieves.

Closely akin to the use of the gesture in the satyr play would be its use in Dionysiac rituals and dances. Here the underlying significance might well be the stimulation of fertility and the averting of evil, not exactly in the manner of Festa's suggestion, but rather by an extension of the idea of ritualistic beating.

One question remains: Are there parallels for a slapping gesture in the dances of other races? There are, in great numbers. In fact, one author, Curt Sachs (in *World History of the Dance*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1937, 28, 38-39) recognizes the "slap-dance" as a definite type, and sees in it the working off of excessive energy, particularly among primitive tribes. "Slap-

dances" may be seen today in New Zealand, the Caroline and Andaman Islands, and Samoa, as well as in parts of central Europe.

There seems good evidence, then, linguistic, literary, archaeological, and anthropological, that the dance schema which the Greeks called "cheir kataprenes" was a gesture of smiting or of slapping one's own body or that of another with the flat, open hand.

BOOK NOTES

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Latin for Americans: First Book. By B. L. Ullman and Norman E. Henry. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941. Pp. xv + 422 + xxxi. \$1.68.

The present book, the fourth edition of a beginner's Latin book prepared by these authors, is more than a revision of previous editions. In format, in typography, and in the style of its illustrations, it is obviously something "different." To this reviewer a still more important difference is the change from a formal to a functional approach in the teaching of vocabulary, inflections, and syntax. That is to say, the Latin reading selection comes first in each lesson, while the discussion of and drill on vocabulary and grammar follows and is based on the Latin story. Furthermore, the total amount of Latin reading material has been considerably increased. "Thought Questions" in English follow each Latin passage. Also, the number of English essays entitled "Glimpses of Roman Life" has been increased. Each of these essays is followed by "Questions for Discussion" and references for supplementary reading. The illustrations, which are more numerous and more attractive than those of any former edition, "are an essential part of the instructional material," whether that instruction is directed toward learning Latin or toward achieving a better understanding of contemporary American life through an increased knowledge of our classical heritage. Some fifty of these illustrations are in color. English derivations from Latin and other Latin elements in English have a desirably large place in the present edition. In short, the book as a whole would seem to justify its title and the implication of that title to the effect that Latin, as presented in this book, has something for Americans of today — and something very good for them. A Second Book is in preparation.

—W. L. C.

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