



SNAKE DANCES

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By Lillian B. Lawler



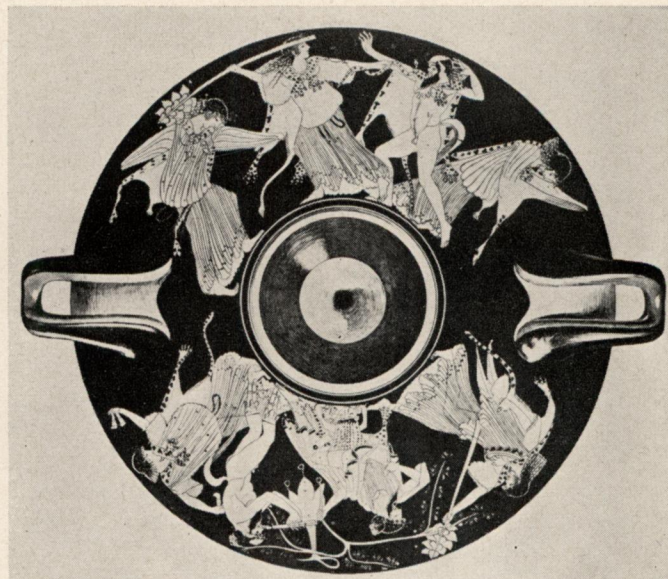
WE READ MUCH THESE DAYS OF RELIGIOUS SECTS THE MEMBERS OF WHICH HANDLE POISONOUS SNAKES. SNAKE-HANDLING IN RELIGIOUS RITUALS IS A VERY ANCIENT PRACTICE. ON THE ISLAND OF CRETE, AS LONG AGO AS THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BEFORE CHRIST, AND PROBABLY EVEN EARLIER, SNAKE-HANDLING SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN PRACTICED BY WOMEN VOTARIES OR PRIESTESSES OF THE GREAT NATURE GODDESS OF THE CRETANS, TO WHOM THE SNAKE WAS SACRED. THE STATUETTE SHOWN HERE, IN THE CANDIA MUSEUM, IS ONE OF SEVERAL FOUND BY SIR ARTHUR EVANS IN THE RUINS OF THE PALACE AT CNOSSUS, IN NORTHERN CRETE. SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT IT REPRESENTS THE GODDESS HERSELF; BUT MOST WRITERS SEE IN IT A WORSHIPPER OF THE GODDESS. PERSONS WHO HAVE WITNESSED MODERN SNAKE-HANDLING RITUALS USUALLY COMMENT ON THE FIXED, HYPNOTIC STARE WHICH CHARACTERIZES THE FACES OF THE WORSHIPPERS. ALTHOUGH ALLOWANCE MUST BE MADE FOR PRIMITIVE TECHNIQUE IN THE CRETAN FIGURE, YET THE FACE DOES SUGGEST JUST SUCH A STATE OF ECSTASY. SNAKE-HANDLING RITUALS ARE ALMOST ALWAYS ACCOMPANIED WITH SHOUTS OR HYMNS, AND WITH A SHUFFLING SORT OF DANCE. USUALLY SNAKE-HANDLING IS FOUND AMONG PRIMITIVE OR UNEDUCATED PEOPLES. IN CRETE THE EARLY PRACTICE SEEMS TO HAVE BECOME FIXED IN CULT RITUAL, AND PRESERVED, PROBABLY THROUGH THE AGENCY OF SPECIAL PRIESTESSES, DOWN INTO THE ERA OF HIGH CIVILIZATION.

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*Munich 2344*

THE GREEKS, ALSO, KNEW AND SOMETIMES PRACTICED THE SNAKE-HANDLING DANCE. "IT WAS FOUND PARTICULARLY IN THE FRENZIED WORSHIP OF THE VEGETATION GOD DIONYSUS, WHICH WAS BROUGHT INTO GREECE IN THE PREHISTORIC PERIOD, FROM LANDS TO THE NORTH AND EAST. SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE DANCES IN HONOR OF DIONYSUS SEEM TO HAVE GARBED THEMSELVES TO REPRESENT THE MYTHOLOGICAL MAENADS, OR FEMALE ATTENDANTS OF DIONYSUS, AND SATYRS OR SILENES, BEAST-MEN, FOLLOWERS OF THE GOD. ON DIONYSIAC VASES IT IS OFTEN DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE WHETHER THE GREEK ARTIST IS PORTRAYING REAL DANCERS OR MYTHOLOGICAL PERSONAGES. SOMETIMES THE DIONYSIAC DANCERS CARRIED THE SNAKES CASUALLY (ABOVE); SOMETIMES THEY THRUST THEM AT THEIR COMPANIONS (ABOVE, RIGHT); FREQUENTLY, IN DANCES OF PARTICULAR FRENZY, THEY TORE THE LIVING SNAKES APART. IN LATER TIMES, THE SNAKE-HANDLING DANCES MAY HAVE BEEN PERFORMED WITH "DUMMY" SNAKES.

THE FINE VASE SHOWN HERE (RIGHT), DATING FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C., PORTRAYS WOMEN DANCERS ENGAGED IN A FRENZIED SNAKE-HANDLING DANCE. SUCH WILD RITUALS WERE MORE COMMON IN THE NORTHERN DISTRICTS OF THRACE AND MACEDONIA THAN IN GREECE PROPER; AND THE COSTUME OF THE FIGURE AT THE EXTREME RIGHT IS SUGGESTIVE OF THRACE. OLYMPIAS, MOTHER OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT, AND QUEEN OF MACEDONIA, IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY FOND OF SUCH DANCES, AND TO HAVE KEPT PET SNAKES FOR USE IN THEM. THE DANCES WERE USUALLY, THOUGH NOT ALWAYS, ASSOCIATED WITH THE WORSHIP OF DIONYSUS OR A SIMILAR DIVINITY. HOWEVER, THERE WERE "SNAKE MYSTERIES," APPARENTLY WITH SNAKE-HANDLING, IN HONOR OF THE GODDESS ATHENA, ON THE ACROPOLIS AT ATHENS, DOWN TO A LATE PERIOD; AND THE CHRISTIAN ST. CYPRIAN SPEAKS OF HAVING BEEN INITIATED INTO THESE "MYSTERIES" AT THE AGE OF TEN.

*Munich 332**Museo Civico, Bologna*



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art.

AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT TYPE OF SNAKE DANCE IS ONE IN WHICH THE DANCERS, IN A LONG LINE, IMITATE THE CRAWLING OF A SERPENT. OF THIS SORT WAS THE FUNERAL DANCE OF THE HOMERIC PERIOD. IN IT, MOURNERS "CRAWLED" (THE GREEK WORD USED IN THIS CONNECTION IMPLIES A COMPARISON WITH A SNAKE) AROUND THE BIER OR THE TOMB, BEATING THEIR BREASTS, TEARING THEIR HAIR, AND UTTERING LOUD LAMENTATIONS. A LINE OF ARMED MEN AND CHARIOTS ALSO "CRAWLED" AROUND THE BIER. IT WAS BELIEVED THAT THE SOUL OF THE DEAD MAN PASSED INTO THE FORM OF A SNAKE; AND WHEN A SNAKE WAS SEEN NEAR A TOMB IT WAS FED AND HONORED. THIS GREAT DIPYLON URN, IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, DEPICTS FUNERARY DANCES. TO THE LEFT OF THE HANDLE, ADJACENT TO THE FRIEZE OF DANCERS, IS SEEN A WINDING SNAKE DESIGN. SUCH DESIGNS ARE SELDOM PURELY DECORATIVE, BUT RATHER ARE SYMBOLICAL. THE FRET AT THE TOP OF THE VASE AND THE CHEVRON DESIGN ON THE STEM ARE ALSO, IN ALL PROBABILITY, CONVENTIONALIZED SNAKE PATTERNS.

ANOTHER TYPE OF SNAKE DANCE IS ONE IN WHICH A LINE OF DANCERS, STANDING SIDE BY SIDE, CARRIES, IN A SINUOUS, WINDING PATH, A REPLICA OF A HUGE SNAKE—PARTICULARLY IN THE WORSHIP OF A DIVINITY BELIEVED TO APPEAR ON EARTH IN THE FORM OF A SERPENT. SUCH DIVINITIES ARE FOUND IN INDIA, SIAM, AND AFRICA TODAY, AND WERE KNOWN IN ANCIENT EGYPT, GREECE, AND CRETE. THE VERY OLD DANCE KNOWN AS THE *geranos*, PERFORMED ON THE ISLAND OF DELOS, BELONGS TO THIS GROUP. SUCH SNAKE-CARRYING DANCES OFTEN BECOME GARLAND-CARRYING DANCES; THEN, SOMETIMES, ROPE-CARRYING DANCES; AND, FINALLY, DANCES IN WHICH THE DANCERS' HANDS ARE ENMESHED IN FRONT OF THE BODY. THIS SCENE, FROM A GREEK TOMB IN RUVO, AND HERE REPRODUCED FROM R. ROCHETTE, *Peintures antiques inédites*, PLATE XV, PORTRAYS A DANCE OF THIS NATURE. A VASE FOUND IN VULCI, THE "POLLEDRARA HYDRIA," DEPICTS A SIMILAR DANCE, WITH THE PERFORMERS CARRYING A THICK, ROPELIKE OBJECT.



DANCES WITH ENMESHED HANDS, AND WITH SNAKE-LIKE TWISTING, WINDING CHOREOGRAPHY, HAVE PERSISTED IN GREECE AND ITALY FROM REMOTE ANTIQUITY TO THE PRESENT DAY. A FINE EXAMPLE IS THE *tratta* OF THE WOMEN OF MODERN MEGARA, PERFORMED ON EASTER MONDAY. DANCES OF THIS TYPE OFTEN SIGNALIZE JOY OR VICTORY. OUR OWN FOOTBALL "SNAKE DANCE" MAY BE A DESCENDANT OF THE OLD GREEK SNAKE-LIKE DANCE.

ALL OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION, AND LATER IN NORTHERN EUROPE AS WELL, THERE ARE STORIES OF SNAKE-KILLING GODS OR HEROES OR SAINTS. APOLLO, HERACLES, AND ST. GEORGE ARE OF THIS GROUP. FREQUENTLY IN ANTIQUITY A SNAKE-KILLING HERO WAS HONORED WITH A DANCE-DRAMA IN WHICH THE STRUGGLE WITH THE GREAT SERPENT WAS ENACTED. THIS MIMETIC PERFORMANCE GIVES US ANOTHER TYPE OF ANCIENT SNAKE DANCE. AMONG THE GREEKS IT WAS A FEATURE OF THE FESTIVAL KNOWN AS THE SEPTERION, PARTICULARLY AT DELPHI. IT MUST HAVE BEEN USED ALSO IN THE CULT OF HERACLES. ON A BLACK-FIGURED CYLIX, OR LARGE, SHALLOW CUP (BELOW), FOUND IN TARQUINIA AND NOW IN THE MUSEUM OF CORNETO, THERE IS PORTRAYED THE STRUGGLE OF HERACLES WITH THE OLD MAN OF THE SEA, PART MAN AND PART SERPENT. THE GREEK PAINTING GIVES US SOME IDEA OF HOW DANCES OF THIS TYPE MAY HAVE LOOKED, AS PRODUCED AT A FESTIVAL. THE DANCERS CIRCLING AROUND THE RIM OF THE CUP ARE MEN IN WOMEN'S DRESS, AND ARE PROBABLY INITIATES INTO THE "MYSTERIES" OF HERACLES.



Underwood-Stratton.

