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On "Suspended" Dancers

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## ON "SUSPENDED" DANCERS

Not infrequently the student of the ancient dance comes across vase paintings or reliefs bearing representations of dancing figures which apparently are suspended in mid-air. The interpretation of such figures is not always easy. One group of them, four in number, upon a fifth-century astragalos in the British Museum (E 783),<sup>1</sup> is associated with other figures which seem highly suggestive of comedy. It is just possible that these particular figures are to be thought of as actually suspended, with the aid of some sort of stage machinery. Others<sup>2</sup> merely lack a "floor-line," in the common convention of vase painting, and are to be interpreted as in direct contact with the earth, but a little to the rear of other objects in the same scene, or on a higher level. Still others<sup>3</sup> have been interpreted—wrongly, I believe—as engaged in elaborate turns in the air, in the manner of the French ballet.

New light upon some of the "suspended" figures has, I think, been shed, all unconsciously, by the author of a recent book on travel in Ireland. Dorothy Hartley, in *Irish Holiday* (New York, Robert McBride & Co., 1940), says:

You have not been to Ireland till you have watched an Irish reel. . . . The Irish, "sure, it's not touching the ground at all they are!" An Irishman dancing an Irish reel appears to be suspended by his square shoulders upon an invisible hook, from which his lank spare frame and dangling feet barely touch the ground. Indeed, a really skilled Irish dancer gives the impression of swinging immobile in the air while with his toes he tries to pat the sliding earth (p. 145). It was the most controlled piece of balance I ever saw. Forbye, it looked all as loose as seaweed flapping (p. 147).

It seems to me not unlikely that many of the ancient representations of "suspended" figures are meant to portray dances similar in effect.<sup>4</sup> The Greeks were fond of rapid dances, and we have

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Six, "Arae," *Jour. Hell. Stud.* XIII (1893), 131-136, for illustrations of the astragalos. Six prefers a mythological interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the two dancers in Louis Séchan, *La Danse Grecque Antique*: Paris, De Boccard (1930), 62, Fig. 7.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Maurice Emmanuel, *Essai sur l'Orchestrique Grecque*: Paris, Hachette (1895), 214, Fig. 475.

<sup>4</sup> Among these might be included the dancers shown in Figs. 475, 304, and 318 in Emmanuel—all, as it happens, of the third century B.C. In each of these cases Emman-

frequent references in their literature to the twinkling of the feet in the dance; cf., e.g., the description of the rapid dance in Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 1482–1537; also, the use of such words as *ταχύπους*, *εὐποδία*, etc., Pollux iv, 97. Specifically one may wonder if such words as *ὕγρός* (*ὕγροισι ποσσίν*) and *κοῦφος*, with their compounds, so commonly used of the dance (Pollux iv, 96–98), may not on occasion refer to just such a dance technique as that described by Miss Hartley. The verb *κουφίζω* in particular, which means “to be nimble, to be light,” and, in the passive, “to be lifted up, to be raised,” might logically be used of just such a technique; and this verb is very commonly used in connection with dancing (Pollux iv, 98). The technique may well have been a feature of the Hellenistic age; for in that period there was an increasing interest in professional dancing, and in highly developed technical skill.

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uel has arbitrarily sketched in a “floor-line,” the position of which may or may not be correct.