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THE EASTER DANCES AT MEGARA

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Every spring, at the season of the Greek Easter, and notably on Easter Monday, a handful of tourists take the dusty journey from Athens to the little town of Megara to see the famous Easter dances. One can see them in other cities; but the tradition has grown up that the Megarians of today have more of the ancient Greek in them than the inhabitants of any other district of Greece. It was with this in view, and in the hope that we might possibly get a clue as to what some of the ancient Greek dances were like, that five of us set out early on Easter Monday, 1926, from Athens — in a Ford car with a Greek negro driver!

The town was singularly quiet and un-festive in appearance as we drove into the narrow, dusty little main street; and the few wide-eyed children who came out of the sundried brick houses to stare at us apparently had never heard of the dances, for to our driver's reiterated queries as to where and when they were to take place, the reply was invariably either a continued stare or a polite "καλή 'μέρα σας!" ("Good day!"). After several minutes of aimless wandering and questioning, we at last encountered a group of young men, one of whom, in answer to our usual inquiry, jumped to the running-board and proceeded to guide us to the "dancing-place" himself.

The road led through a tiny street or two lined with peasant homes, then turned, passed the modest little town square, and climbed straight up, up, much to our driver's disgust, until it ended in a broad, flat plain on the summit of the hill. Our guide slipped away, scorning any reward, apparently feeling well repaid by his ride, and by the resultant distinction which he instantly attained among his fellow townsmen already assembled at the "dancing-place."

Perhaps we were mistaken; but it seemed to us that even with our first glance at the dancing-place we caught some of the spirit of ancient Greece. What we saw was merely an open space, made roughly circular by a surrounding ring of booths, within which vendors were making ready to sell to the crowds such simple wares as fruit, sesame cakes, honey cakes, cheese, and nuts; while under one or two trees on the edge of the circle rude wooden benches had been set up where the thirsty might buy and consume resinated wine or cool water.

A small crowd, consisting chiefly of men and children, idled about, waiting for the festivities to begin, and in the intervals of waiting strolled over to where we had parked and watched us with open eyes and mouths as we proceeded to eat our lunch. I offered a honey cake, and one of my companions a piece of Turkish paste, to one of the children, then to another and another, always with the same result — the dignified, reproachful upward jerk of the head which means “No!” in modern Greek. Our lunch finished, we strolled about the dancing-place, followed by a troop of youngsters, and tried to act as inconspicuous and unconcerned as the only foreigners in a small Greek town can well succeed in doing. Meanwhile, by combining all the resources of our meagre modern Greek, we managed to deduce from remarks we heard about us that the women, the center of interest in the day’s ceremony, had spent the morning in church and would appear immediately after their noon meal.

It was half-past twelve when the first of the dancers arrived; but once started, they came in scores. We missed somewhat the much vaunted beauty of face which we had been expecting, but the costumes left nothing to be desired — creamy yellow silken veils, over tight caps covered with small gold coins; tight bodices, heavy with embroidery, and cut low in the neck like the dresses of ancient Cretan ladies in frescoes from Cnossus, but with the opening over the breast closed by fine white vestees heavy with gold coins; striped silk aprons; and long, full woolen or satin skirts, often looped back to show richly embroidered silk petticoats. All this, together with fine, massive old rings, earrings,

necklaces, and brooches that made some of our group green with envy, enabled us well to believe the story that a Megarian woman, in her holiday dress, often carries a large share of the family wealth with her.

By now a few other foreigners had arrived, and we began to feel a little less uncomfortable. And now music began to strike up in one of the booths — an eerie strain produced by a shrill little pipe and a hand drum, with apparently no rhyme or reason beyond a minor, wandering wail punctuated at very irregular intervals with the “Thump! Thump!” of the drum. The musicians, two elderly Megarians in clean, belted white smocks and trousers, played themselves red in the face, but still no dancing began.

Meanwhile, one of our group tried to photograph a cluster of the costumed women and met with an unmistakable and decided rebuff. This surprised us a great deal, for Greeks usually like to have their pictures taken and often beg the traveler to get out his camera. The experiences of a newspaper photographer later proved similar; and we soon learned that the Megarians, whatever be their attitude on normal occasions, regard their Easter dances as a solemn religious affair, at which the tourist is only barely tolerated, and at which the camera is banned. In shops in Athens we later found postcards purporting to be pictures of the Megara dances; but an examination of the costumes on these showed that the dancers were not the upper-class Megarian women in full regalia, but the poor peasants in much simpler garb, who hover around the edges of the dancing-place and occasionally have a dance of their own.

Presently, quite casually and informally, a half dozen of the richly dressed women joined hands and began a few steps of the famous dance, moving unconcernedly through the throng. Others did the same, danced a few moments, then broke line and mingled with the crowd again. However, the lines grew steadily in numbers, the dances became steadily more lengthy, and presently the ceremonies were on in full swing, with three or four long lines constantly in motion through the crowd, going in different directions. It was then that we realized that the eerie music had no

connection whatsoever with the dances of the women, but that the latter went their own gait serenely whether the music did or did not play.

We had often heard of "the dance of the Megarians." We learned that day that it is not *a* dance, but several dances. Before the afternoon was over, so many different dances were being performed in various parts of the field that it was almost impossible to see and record all of them. The typical varieties, however, proved to be the following:

I. Dances of the women alone — the famous "tratta." These dances, of which there are two kinds, are both done with the same formation: The women stand side by side in a row, with hands joined as three or more skaters side by side would do — i.e., Nos. 1 and 3, 3 and 5, etc., and Nos. 2 and 4, 4 and 6, etc., clasp hands in front of the body, so that there is a mesh of crossed arms all down the line. The step is a slow, dignified, and very deliberate walk, on the whole of the foot, with no swaying or bending of the body whatsoever, and with the head up and the face perfectly immobile. It looks not at all like our idea of a dance (least of all like much of what passes for Greek dancing in our theaters), but much more like a solemn, processional walk. In both dances the movement was in general to the right, with secondary movement obliquely backward and forward; and the line of direction was more or less according to the will of the first dancer and the exigencies of the surrounding throng, and was now almost circular, now almost a straight line, but was usually roughly elliptical.

The first dance, and the one which proved to be the general favorite throughout the day, began with the weight on the right foot. The left foot was then brought obliquely forward and across the right, with no turning movement of the body, and set down firmly, to an imaginary count "One." The right foot then stepped side right to count "Two"; the left foot was brought up to the right, and the weight transferred, to count "Three." The first part of this step, then, may be summarized by "Front, side, hold." Next, the right foot was set obliquely back and right, to count "Four" — again with no sway of the body, but with the

foot firmly planted and the torso erect; the left now crosses back of the right, count "Five"; and the right foot steps diagonally forward and right, count "Six." This part of the step, in turn, may be summarized, "Back, cross, front." With repetitions of this "Front, side, hold; back, cross, front," the dance goes on indefinitely.

The second form of the "tratta" began in the same way, with the weight on the right foot. The left foot was brought obliquely forward and across the right, to count "One." This was followed by four walking steps diagonally forward and right, to counts two to five, with the weight on the left foot at the end of the fourth step. Next, the right foot steps diagonally back and to the right, count "Six," followed by two walking steps back, left and then right, counts seven and eight. Thus, the dance is, schematically, "Front, step, step, step, step; back, back, back." Like the former version of the "tratta," it goes on at the will of the dancers.

In both forms of the "tratta," dancers as they join the line attach themselves at the head of the line; for there are usually at the end of the line four women who do not dance at all, but walk in single file in such a formation that they always form a little curved hook at the end of the line of dancers. These are the singers, who chant a minor, wandering strain and follow the dancers in a manner strongly reminiscent of the Greek vase paintings in which the musician is not seated as is customary among us but follows the dancers as they move about. Often they divide by two's and answer one another in song. In any case, their music seems to bear no relation to the rhythm of the dance but goes on and stops, resumes and continues, as a thing apart.

II. Dances of women and men together. Contrary to the general assumption, the Megara dances are not all performed exclusively by women. Seven different types of dance were observed in which a man led a line of women. In all of these the singers were absent. These types are:

1. One in which the women performed the first form of the

“tratta,” moving in a circle, while the male leader sometimes went through a series of individual and spontaneous steps such as turning completely around, raising his foot high front or rear, etc., now releasing the hand of the woman next him, now regaining it.

2. The same as the foregoing, but with the women performing the second type of “tratta.”

3. One similar to the foregoing, but with a catch-step substituted for the first of the two backward steps: Front, step, step, step, step; catch, back, back.

In the following types, the dancers moved separately, hands not joined:

4. One in which the women stood in a circle and did a waltz-step first right, then left, in place, while the male leader cut rather crude capers at will.

5. One in which all the dancers turned in place first to the right and then to the left with a two-step followed by a touch of the toe to the ground — Right, left, right, touch toe of left foot; left, right, left, touch toe of right foot, etc.

6. One identical with the preceding, except that a stamp took the place of the touching of the toe.

7. One in which the line swayed from side to side to a scheme consisting of a step followed by a quick change of feet, then a step again — *Left*, right, left, *right*, left, right, *left*, etc.

It is interesting to speculate on the possible classical antecedents of dances of these first two groups, and especially of the “tratta.” The famous Greek tomb from Ruvo,¹ dating from the third century, shows women with headcoverings somewhat like those of Megarian women, in a formation exactly similar, with the exception that a man leads each group of women. This has troubled writers who have associated the painting with the “tratta,” but who have been unaware that at Megara, also, versions of the dance appear in which men lead lines of women. There is in Lucian²

¹ Raoul Rochette, *Peintures antiques inédites*, xv.

² *De Saltatione*, 12: ὁ δὲ ὄρχημος ὄρχησις ἐστὶ κοινὴ ἐφήθων τε καὶ παρθένων, παρ’ ἑνα χορευόντων καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὄρχημ ἐουκότων· καὶ ἡγεῖται μὲν ὁ ἔφηβος

the description of a dance, the ὄρμος or chain, which seems to bear a striking resemblance to the "tratta." We may translate it as follows: "The Chain is a dance common to youths and maidens dancing one beside the other, and thus truly resembling a chain. And the youth leads, dancing agile steps and such movements as he will later use in war, and the maiden follows, displaying the method of dancing modestly, in womanly fashion, so that the chain is woven of sobriety and manliness." The Greek words παρ' ἕνα, here translated "dancing one beside the other," are usually rendered "youths and maidens alternating." Such an interpretation is not necessitated, as some writers seem to think, by the idea of the chain — the interwoven arms are sufficient explanation for that. Furthermore, if the chain were to be made up of youths and maidens alternating, hands joined, with the youths doing one kind of step and the maidens another, the result would be a disjointed and decidedly arhythmical jumble. It seems much more probable that the dance described in Lucian, the dance painted on the Ruvo tomb, and the form of "tratta" in which a youth leads and a line of women follow, are very much alike, and possibly identical. It is just barely possible, also, that the dance depicted, e.g., on the famous Villa Giulia crater,³ in which a line of women hold hands and move obliquely forward and sideward, may be a variant of the same type of dance. Of this we cannot be sure, of course, but the thought seems worthy of consideration.

III. Dances by men alone. Of far less importance, on this great "ladies' day," are the dances performed solely by men. These seemed to center around one spot — the little shed where the weird music of pipe and drum was being produced. Interrupted by the impromptu bantering of a portly local comedian, and watched exclusively by men, the dances began slowly, proceeded with many lapses, and ceased altogether whenever the dancers became aware that a foreign woman was looking at them.

τὰ νεανικά ὀρχούμενος καὶ ὄσοις ὕστερον ἐν πολέμῳ χρήσεται, ἡ παρθένος δὲ ἔπεται κοσμίως τὸ θῆλυ χορεύειν διδάσκουσα, ὡς εἶναι τὸν ὄρμον ἐκ σωφροσύνης καὶ ἀνδρείας πλεκόμενον.

³ Curt Moreck, *Der Tanz in der Kunst*, S. 1, Abb. 2.

All five of the types observed had features in common — a motion circular, but with the circle not closed; a leader for each dance, who performed impromptu flourishes and capers in utter disregard of the others; and, throughout, much sprightliness and marked rhythm. Often the dancers held handkerchiefs, each taking hold of the corner of his neighbor's — perhaps a relic of the ancient custom of holding the garment of one's dancing companion. Sometimes two or three, often more, danced together. Some of the varieties of dance observed were:

1. Each man (except the leader and the man at the other end of the line) holding an end of his neighbor's handkerchief, the dancers curve into a formation that is roughly an open circle. They perform a quick step which consists in touching to the ground the heel of the left foot, then the toe of the same foot, then the heel of the right foot, and then stamping the left foot. This is followed by the reverse — toe of right foot, heel of left, toe of left, stamp right, etc. After a few moments of this, the line passes under the handkerchief held by the leader and the man behind him, the leader capers, and the dance repeats.

2. The dancers dance in a circle, arms out and on one another's to the elbows. The movement is to the right, step, step, step, balance, back one, balance, and repeat. A variant of this substitutes a strong swing of the leg across the body for the balance step. In this dance the leader introduced constant changes — turns in place, squatting, capers with one arm held up in the air and fingers snapping, etc.

3. The dancers move individually in a circle with hands not joined. The arms are out at the shoulders or one is up in the air, the other behind the back. The step is a two-step, moving backward, followed by a "heel, toe (right), heel, toe (left), stamp."

4. Three dancers hold one another's handkerchiefs so as to make a circle open at one point. The leader invents turns and capers at will, often passing under the handkerchief which he and the dancer next to him hold; the others merely perform a rapid walking step.

5. Two dancers clasp arms, the right of one and the left of the

other, to the elbow. The step is a simple one, on the balls of the feet — Step back right, step side left, step front right, and pause. This is done quickly, with marked rhythm.

Into these dances of men alone there has undoubtedly crept much that is Albanian; nevertheless, it may well be that there lie buried in them the germs of old Greek dances, less obvious than in the dances of the women. For though in general tone they differ greatly from the women's dances, yet they bear some resemblance to the steps of the male leader in the form of the "tratta" described under II. Unfortunately the information handed down to us by the Greek writers is insufficient for the identification of any of the men's dances with ancient ones.

Until late in the afternoon the dancing went on. Then we became conscious of a slow but general movement away from the plain. Following the crowd, we descended the narrow streets to the town square, where already the young men of the town had assembled, and some of the best dressed and youngest of the women were already forming, for the "marriage parade" — in which the marriageable women dance the "tratta" all around the square before the eyes of prospective suitors. It is said that the men take the affair quite seriously; and that, if they see a girl with a display of wealth to their liking, they lose no time in calling upon her the next day!

We watched the proceedings for a few minutes with some interest — but not for long. The young ladies of the town soon perceived that the men persisted in staring open-mouthed at us foreign freaks, with our queer dress and short hair, instead of dutifully watching the ceremonies. Several of the women not actually dancing began to vent their displeasure upon us by means of surreptitious jostling, pinching, and treading upon our toes. Glancing about us, and observing that the other foreigners had already left, we decided upon ignominious retreat. With as little ado as possible, we made our way back to the Ford, woke up the chauffeur, threaded our way down the deserted back streets of Megara, and turned towards Athens, just as the sun began to set.