



Two Notes on the Greek Dance

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TWO NOTES ON THE GREEK DANCE.

I. "THE FOX."

In Greek and Roman literature a female Dionysiac dancer is sometimes called a *βασσάρα*, or *βασσάρη*, or *βασσαρίς* (Athenaeus, V, 198 E; Aeschylus, II, pp. 386-7 [Loeb]; Anacreon, frag. 57 [Loeb]). The word *βασσάρα*, *βασσάρη* also denotes a fox (Lycophron, 771; Hesychius, *s. v.* *βασσάρη*; *Et. Mag.*, 190, 52). Herodotus, in naming the animals of Libya (IV, 192) uses *βασσάριον* with similar meaning. Again, *βασσάρα* means the characteristic garment of the Thracian Bacchantes, probably originally made of fox-skins (Anacreon, frag. 29 [Loeb]; Hesychius, *s. v.* *βασσάραι*). Anacreon (frag. 76, line 6 [Loeb]) uses *βασσαρέω* to mean "take part in a Dionysiac dance."

On a highly significant inscription of the second century of the Christian era, discovered recently near Tusculum, and now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, there is a list of members of a Dionysiac *thiasos*, in which not only names, but also "degrees" or grades of initiation are given. Among the members, four are ranked as "Chief Foxes"; two are men (*ἀρχιβασσάροι*), two are women (*ἀρχιβασσάραι*).¹

The ancient writers are aware that *βασσάρα* is a non-Greek word, and they speak of it variously as Thracian, Phrygian, Cyrenian, Libyan, or Lydian. In general, they seem to favor a Thracian origin. In Thrace, of course, the fox was a particularly sacred animal. It figured not only in the cult of Dionysus, but as a totem animal as well. The fox-skin garments and caps affected by Thracian worshippers were not merely warm clothes; for the skin of an animal, when worn in primitive religious ceremonies, is always of ritualistic significance.

It is known that the Thracians practiced tattooing.² Fre-

¹ Achille Vogliano, "La grande iscrizione Bacchica del Metropolitan Museum," *A. J. A.*, XXXVII (1933), pp. 215-31.

² Herodotus, V, 6; Cicero, *De Off.*, II, 25; Pausanias, IX, 30; cf. Wilhelm Tomaschek, "Die alten Thraker," *Wien. Sitzb.*, CXXVIII (1893), No. IV, pp. 101, 117; William Ridgeway, *The Early Age of Greece* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1901-31), II, pp. 482-98; Gawril Kazarow, *R.-E.*, *s. v.* "Thrake, Religion."

quently the device used was an animal, with totemistic or ritualistic implications. A fragmentary cylix of the fifth century, found on the Acropolis at Athens, depicts a Thracian woman attacking Orpheus.³ Upon her right upper arm is tattooed a schematic representation of an animal variously interpreted as a stag or a goat. The legs of the creature, as depicted, are certainly too short for a stag. Beyond that, the identity of the animal is difficult to determine; but the head and neck do not resemble those of a goat. It seems to me that the drawing rather suggests a fox.

As it happens, we have a record of a Greek dance called "the fox"—*άλωπήξ*. Hesychius defines it as follows: *ὄρχησις τις. καὶ ἀλωπεκία μύμων, ὡς Σοφοκλῆς (usually emended to ὡς Σοφοκλῆς Μώμῳ). ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἐν σώματι πάθος γινόμενον.* Commentators have generally agreed that the last clause is an intrusion, and that it probably indicates a confusion of *ἀλωπεκίας*, -ου, with *ἀλωπεκία*, "mange" (common to foxes and other animals). The word *ἀλωπεκίας* is used also by Lucian (*Pisc.* 47), in a passage referring to the proposed branding of false philosophers with the representation of a fox or an ape: Parrhesiades tells Philosophy that she will soon see a great many *ἀλωπεκίας ἢ πιθηκοφόρους*. It seems to me that in Greek the word *ἀλωπεκία* must denote "wearers of the representation of a fox," whether they be branded or tattooed or masked. Perhaps Lucian's usage is even a sort of pun, with a side reference to the Bacchantes. I believe that the gloss of Hesychius, corrupt as it is, permits us to infer that Sophocles used the plural *ἀλωπεκία* to denote dancers—i. e., "fox dancers"—or the dance itself. It is not uncommon to find a plural noun used as the name of a dance—for instance, *πινακίδες* (Pollux, IV, 103), *δάκτυλοι* (Athenaeus, XIV, 629 E); and, named for the participants, *σκῶπες* (Hesychius, s. v.), *ὑαλκάδαι* (Hesychius, s. v.), *καλλιβάντες* (Hesychius, s. v.), *ὑπογύπωνες* (Pollux, IV, 104).

On the marble drapery found in the shrine of Despoina at Lycosura,⁴ eleven female figures wearing animal masks and footgear run along in a rapid processional dance, to the music of

³ A. B. Cook, *Zeus* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1914-40), II, pp. 121-3 and Fig. 76; Furtwaengler-Reichhold, *Gr. Vasenmalerei*, I, 284.

⁴ Guy Dickins, "Damophon of Messene," *B. S. A.*, XIII (1906-7), pp. 392-5 and Plate 14.

lyre and double flute. The marble drapery seems to be a reproduction of actual embroidered drapery offered to the goddess in earlier times, and to reflect ritual practices of great antiquity. Despoina, "the Lady," is an old deity of fertility, a "Mistress of Animals," among other things. We know that mystery rituals had a place in her cult; probably the "dancing beasts" of the drapery participated in them. At least one of the figures on the drapery (and perhaps two) wears a fox-mask.

Several terracotta figurines of the early Iron Age, found in Cyprus, portray votaries wearing or removing animal masks. Some of these figures wear a rough, shaggy garment suggestive of an animal's skin. At least one of the votaries wears a mask which looks very much like the head of a fox.⁵

There seems to have been a great deal of animal mummery, with or without masks, in primitive worship throughout the Mediterranean region. Sometimes, as on the Lycosura drapery, various animals are imitated in one procession, and at other times all the mummers portray one type of animal. Evidently there was fawn, goat, horse, bird, and other mummery in the Greek worship of Dionysus. Among the names of Greek dances which are preserved, several are the names of animals—"lion," "owl," "boar," etc. In like manner, a dancer is sometimes called a "bear," a "raven," a "griffin," etc., and certain priests and priestesses (presumably dancers also) are called "bees," "colts," "bulls," "doves," etc. Titles of comedies are frequently animal names, usually with reference to a singing and dancing chorus of animal mummers. Evidently participation in ritualistic mummery was from earliest times considered and called a dance.

I believe, then, that, in the terminology of the dance, *βασσάρα* and *άλώπηξ* may be two different words, one native Greek and one foreign, for virtually the same thing—participation in, or a participant in, fox mummery in honor of a divinity of fertility and animal life. Variant terms for the participants seem to have been the plural nouns *βασσάραι*, *βασσάροι*, *βασσαρίδες*, *άλωπεκίαι*. The mummery may have contained little actual mimicry of the animal—cf. our "fox trot." As in other types of beast mum-

⁵ John L. Myres, *Handbook of the Cesnola Collection of Antiquities from Cyprus* (Metropolitan Museum, 1914), p. 342, No. 2077.

mery, the participant, in early times at least, must have identified himself with the animal whose skin or mask or attributes he wore, and hoped to acquire some of the animal's characteristics for himself. In later times the mask would disappear or become a cap, the garment would become merely a conventionalized representation of the animal's skin, and the mummery would be rather symbolical than realistic.

One odd bit of corroboration for our hypothesis may be seen in the fact that a city of the Thracian Chersonese was called *Ἄλωπεκόννησος*, and that a coin-type of the city was a *βασσάρα*—a dancing Bacchante.⁶

Quite evidently the fox and fox mummery were of more importance in Thracian religion than they were in that of Greece. This would be natural in view of the fact that the fox is more of a northern than a southern animal; however, the fox was common enough in Africa and in the Peloponnesus, as we are aware from Greek literature. *Lycosura*, of course, is in the Peloponnesus; and Cyprus had cultural connections with Africa.

It is an arresting thought that the legend of the Thracian Orpheus, playing and singing so beautifully that wild animals followed him (Euripides, *Bacch.* 561-4; Pausanias, IX, 30, 3-4), may be merely a poetic record of primitive beast mummery in Thrace, in which the masked and skin-clad performers, representing beasts of many types, followed a musician. The rocks and trees which also are said to have followed Orpheus may be a later elaboration.

II. "POURING OUT THE BARLEY."

Among the obscure names of Greek dances which have been handed down to us is *ἀλφίτων ἐκχύσεις*—"the pouring out of the barley meal." Athenaeus (XIV, 629 F) includes it in a list of "comical" dances of various sorts, but gives no further information on it.

In India, at a festival of the Nāgas, or serpent divinities, bruised rice is poured out on the ground, and the figure of a snake is molded or traced in it. An all-night dance then takes place, over and around the meal, during which the leader of the dance

⁶ Lewis R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1896), II, p. 335.

imitates the writhing of a serpent.¹ In other parts of India, sandalwood powder or turmeric is used in much the same way.²

A similar element is found in the snake dance of the Hopi Indians. Before they take the snakes out of the "snake pit," the Hopi sprinkle corn meal on the ground or on the plank covering the pit, in such a way that the meal looks like a snake; and they then proceed to dance upon and around the corn meal, stamping heavily. Also, corn meal is poured on the ground after the snake-carrying, and the snakes are thrown on it.³

The physician Galen once visited the island of Lemnos to test stories that the earth of that place was efficacious in curing snake-bite and the bites of savage beasts, and in offsetting the effects of poisonous drugs (*De Temp. et Fac.*, IX, 1, 2). He found the priestess gathering the earth with various ceremonies, including throwing wheat and barley on the ground, and "doing certain other things prescribed by the ritual of the place." Surely among these must have been rhythmical movements around the poured-out grain. The rite looks like sympathetic magic, performed to invoke serpent-power in the earth to combat the poison of a wound or bite.

The dance called "the pouring out of the barley meal," then, could be an old serpent dance. It would have been originally of deep and dread significance. Later, as civilization developed, and as the fear of poisonous serpents lessened, it would have become merely a *tour de force*—one of the many "dances over a pattern on the floor" which are found in various parts of the world. With its exaggerated writhings and contortions of the body, it could have become Athenaeus' "comical" dance. It may have developed ultimately into a mere game—as our hop-scotch has done, although it, too, was originally a snake dance over a pattern on the floor.

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¹ J. P. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore* (London, Probsthain, 1926), p. 275.

² *Ibid.*, p. 279.

³ D. H. Lawrence, *Mornings in Mexico* (New York, 1931), pp. 156, 170; Walter Hough, *The Moki Snake Dance* (Santa Fe Railroad, 1901), pp. 6, 9; John G. Bourke, *The Snake Dance of the Moquis of Arizona* (Scribner's, 1884), pp. 165-6.