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## **Dance in the Ancient Mediterranean: the Roman Period – Part One**

**By Ruth Webb**

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Dance History is often very difficult to research. Unlike other arts, like painting, sculpture, architecture or poetry, dance takes place in the moment and leaves no trace behind for future generations to see. So when I started to get interested in Raqs Sharqi and its origins, I really didn't expect to find anything relevant in the texts and documents of the period I study: the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, when the whole Mediterranean world, including Egypt and much of the Middle East, was part of the Roman Empire. But, when you start to look, it's amazing what you find! Although the references I have come across are very scattered, and come from texts written all over the Mediterranean – Rome, Egypt, Syria, Constantinople – and date from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD they do present a coherent picture. Writers from across this spectrum of time and space mention dances involving sinuous movements of the torso, shivering hips, cymbals and castanets. Depictions of dancers from Egypt and elsewhere on mosaics and textiles and terracotta figurines show twisting movements, often accentuated by long garments, or show the dancer with her weight on one foot, thrusting the hip out as in the side-to-side. A sure sign that a particular figure is a dancer is when she's shown holding cymbals (called 'krotala' in Greek) which can look just like modern sagat, or pairs of wooden clappers, or pairs of sticks with sagat on the ends (these look like pairs of spoons) – there's an example of this type on display in the British Museum. One mosaic from Madaba in Jordan

even shows a dancer with one half of each pair of bell-like cymbals attached to each ankle and the other half in each hand, so that she has to bend backwards and lift her foot behind her to play them.

So, with regional variations, something like Raqs Sharqi seems to have been known throughout the Mediterranean and certainly flourished in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean before the arrival of the Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It's also clear that there were professional female dancers who performed at parties and festivals. Here, the evidence from Egypt itself is particularly interesting as we have a contract between a dancer and a woman who is hiring her, miraculously preserved on a piece of papyrus.

That contract is fascinating as it one of the rare pieces of evidence that tells us about dancers' lives. Otherwise we are dealing with descriptions written by men, from a totally different social class. There's no need to doubt the kernel of what they say. When Roman poets like Horace or Juvenal mention dancers from Cadiz (Gades) or Libya shivering their hips at upper class parties we can assume they and their readers knew what they were talking about and that these women were familiar figures in Rome. But for the Romans, as for later Western travellers in to nineteenth-century Egypt, these dancers were exotic, and immoral, a sign of the decadence that their culture had fallen into under the influence of the nations they had conquered. Upper

class Romans tended to assume that any woman who performed in public was a prostitute, so we have to take a lot of what they say or imply about the immorality of the dance and the dancers with a pinch of salt.

The papyrus contract, by contrast, gives us a glimpse into the down to earth practicalities of life as a professional dancer in 3<sup>rd</sup> century Egypt. We owe its survival to the dry climate of Egypt which preserves a fragile material like papyrus that elsewhere would have rotted away centuries ago. It's written in Greek, the official language of Egypt since the Ptolemies, and in it, a woman named Artemisia arranges for a dancer named Isidora (many Egyptians at this period had Greek names) to come to her village to perform at a festival with two other dancers. She specifies the amount they'll be paid, promises to ensure that any gold ornaments they bring with them will be kept safe and to arrange transport (two donkeys for three dancers!). Isidora is described as a 'krotola dancer' suggesting that her special skill was to accompany herself with sagat or wooden clappers. What this contract tells us is that dancers in Egypt were well organised, Isidora seems to act as a manager for the dancers she brings along, and that dance was a way for women to earn a reasonable living. Such performances must have been common. Another papyrus document, a letter, tells us about one that went tragically wrong when a young slave boy fell out of an upstairs window as he tried to watch the dancers performing outside the

house and died. Egypt is practically the only place that we find everyday documents like these, so we're much better informed about daily life there than in other regions. After Artemisia's contract we don't have any more official records of dancers (though more could still emerge from the sands) but I think it's reasonable to assume that Egypt had an unbroken tradition of professional female dancers and that the performers seen by the first western travellers were carrying on in the footsteps of Isidora and her colleagues.

It's far more difficult to know place dance had in the lives of ordinary women at this period, but there are some clues. This is the subject of *Dance in the Ancient Mediterranean: the Roman Period – Part Two*.

*For more details see: Ruth Webb, 'Salome's Sisters: The Rhetoric and Realities of Dance in Late Antiquity and Byzantium' in Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium, ed. L. James, London, 1997*

*Ruth Webb is Honorary Research Fellow at Birkbeck College, University of London and Professeur associé in the Department of Greek, Université de Paris X Nanterre. She has taught Ancient Greek language and literature in London and Princeton. She has also studied Raqs Sharqi since 1986. One of her current research projects is a book on theatrical performance in the Eastern Mediterranean between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.*

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**Raqs Sharqi Society, PO Box 42021, London E5 8WJ, UK  
Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 20 8980 6778  
E-mail: [dance@raqssharqisociety.org](mailto:dance@raqssharqisociety.org)  
[www.raqssharqisociety.org](http://www.raqssharqisociety.org)**