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

**By Ruth Webb**

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In Egypt in particular it is clear that professional dancers travelled from village to village giving performances at local festivals and must also have performed in private houses. Professional performers do sometimes leave traces of their activities behind – in the form of contracts, for example – but it is more difficult to find out what place dance had in the lives of ordinary women in the past. Private, domestic activities are rarely recorded and rarely leave any trace behind for the historian to find. When we look back at the distant past we are rather like the early male Western travellers to Egypt who could see the public dancers, but who could not see ordinary women in the privacy of their own houses.

We can be fairly sure that women saw the professional dancers – a woman was responsible for hiring the group of dancers whose contract I mentioned in Part One. They would also have seen them at weddings, as we know from the sermons of Christian preachers, not surprisingly, are against dance in any form, whether by hired entertainers or by ordinary people. It is clear from their complaints that weddings were one type of event where both men and women could dance, and where the carefully sheltered bride could see professional dancers. Women also used song and dance in their religious celebrations at the tombs of Christian martyrs in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). All these references are highly critical, insinuating that these uses of dance are totally immoral. We have to be careful about taking the preachers' claims

literally, but, by complaining about what was obviously a common place practice, they open up an otherwise closed world.

We owe one of the most compelling depictions of dance within the home and the family to Christian sources: this is the story of the princess who danced in front of her stepfather, Herod, and claimed as her reward the head of a prisoner, John the Baptist. This girl, who is not named in the New Testament, later acquired the name of Salome and became a byword for seductive dancing for two millennia. The whole episode may well be a complete fiction, and all the later embroideries, like the 'dance of the seven veils' certainly are. But fictions like these can reflect reality, as well as fantasy, and, if we go back to the earliest sources for the Salome story, some surprising features emerge.

The New Testament accounts are far from the lurid imaginings of later centuries. We are simply told that the princess danced and pleased Herod who then, famously and foolishly, offered her whatever she wanted. So when one 4<sup>th</sup> century preacher describes her dancing 'with her shameless glance, her twisting body, pouring out her emotions, raising her hands in the air, lifting up her feet', he is using his own imagination and probably basing his description on dance he has seen (one wonders where!) If we ignore all the loaded language, the details of the raised hands and the twisting motion of the body, not to mention the emotion

of her dance, strongly suggest a dance like Raqs Sharqi.

The most intriguing aspect of the Salome story is not, however, the description of her dance. It is the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. 'Salome' is persuaded to trick Herod by her mother, Herod's new wife, who wants revenge on John the Baptist for daring to criticise her. Behind the story is the age-old idea of the battle of the sexes, but in this version the woman's weapon is the power of dance. If the story reveals a fear of this power, it also reveals the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in preserving and passing on dancing skills. Christian authors of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and later certainly understood the story this way, most probably because this is what they know from their own society. They elaborate on the women's relationship, stating that it was Salome's mother who taught her daughter to dance and using her as an example of why women should teach their daughters to pray rather than to dance! What all suggests is that, for writers of this period, it seemed natural that women should be involved in passing on dance skills to their daughters and that, as in modern Egypt, dance was a strong tradition passed on within the privacy of the family. The story of the dysfunctional Herod family clearly reveals men's fears about this tradition, and about the strength of the mother-daughter relationship. But, if we take away the lurid details, it also suggests that dance was an important aspect of women's lives and an important means of expression for them.

Soon after the period I have been discussing, the Arabs invaded Egypt and neighbouring countries, bringing with them a new language, the new religion of Islam, and their own music and dance (the Prophet, Mohammed is said to have had music and dancing at his wedding). These artistic and cultural traditions merged with the existing ones to lay the foundations of modern Middle Eastern culture. And gradually, over the next centuries, Asia Minor fell little by little to the Turks, leading to the Ottoman Empire and eventually to the creation of modern Turkey. What my researches suggest is that a strong tradition of female professional and non-professional dance, resembling Raqs Sharqi, survived all these dramatic changes in the Eastern Mediterranean from pre-Islamic times until now, developing into the distinct regional traditions we see today.

*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*

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