Dialoghi sull'Archeologia della Magna Grecia e del Mediterraneo
Rassegna annuale di studi, ricerche e notizie di scoperte promossa dalla Fondazione Paestum

Dance in Phoenicia (The Spirituality of Gestures and Cultural Legacy)

Sarah El Banna
Lebanese University Faculty of Literature and Humanities Department of Archaeology

Ancient Phoenician civilization have regarded dance, at least since the Iron Age, as intimately linked to religious practices. It served as a privileged means of communication, enabling contact with the divine.

Dance is conceived as a spontaneous activity, an innate response of the body to music, and a gift from the gods to humans (Plato, Laws, II, 653e-654a), aimed at imitating the original divine choirs (Plato, Laws, VII, 816a 3-5). What Plato conveys is a form of mythical and poetic imagery, a pre-formed idea of behavior and a state of mind associated with Dionysian enthusiasm, whether in the cultic reality of a danced ritual or the poetic imagery of a mental state.

To avoid being confined to this Platonic perspective, I seek to explore, through iconography - specifically terracotta artifacts and sculptures from Phoenicia depicting young girls and women performing dance steps or engaging in frenetic dance - an approach to identifying the different types of gestures expressed by Phoenician women from Iron Age III to the end of the Roman period.

Various gestures and movements observed in these Phoenician artworks reveal elements of Dionysian enthusiasm. These include: leaps (both the initial movement associated with running and in-place jumps accompanied by foot stamping), torso inclinations (forward or backward), spinning on the spot and head tilting (during whirls), hair tossing, and falling to the ground (a symptom of loss of consciousness rather than a voluntary action).

Fig. 1 – Figurines of Dancers from Kharayeb

Analysis of these gestures, symptomatic of both female and male behavior, provides insight into the roles and significance of dance in ancient Phoenician society.

Focus: The evolutional Path of ancient dance and performance in Phoenicia, and exploring the Spiritual dimension of Gestures in Young Girls, Women, and Maenads.

Others objectives:

- "Sculpting dance in the limestone of the Bekaa Valley.
- "Dancing for Dyonizos. Rites and cults in the sanctuary of Bacchus and the Temple of Eshmun".
- The Bodies on stage and The forms of dance: male dancer, female dancer.

The investigation of dance in Phoenicia in the light of archaeological discoveries, is about to be rethought according to cultural and receptive perspectives that allow us to grasp aspects closely linked to the archaeological, historical, artistic and performing arts fields, but also to relate this past and its evolution in modern and contemporary dance, through the analysis of dancers that, from the twentieth century onwards, [Caracalla Group case study] have used and use the types of ancient dance. And yes, to allow a dialogue between complementary research fields through architectural sources (temples) and iconographic (terra cotta statues or stone sculptures).

Fig. 2 - Marble tribune, Sanctuary of Echmoun.

Possible connections to modern Dabké-Dance:

Phoenician musical traditions, likely building upon Canaanite foundations, continued to be influenced by religious and cultural practices. The Dabké-dance, a folk dance with roots in the region, is another example of a cultural tradition that has been passed down through generations and continues to be performed today.

Archaeological Evidence:

Excavations and the recovery of figurines with musicals instruments and sculptor's dancers provide valuable evidence of the musical landscape of the period.

Statuary:

"The contribution of terracotta statuettes to the knowledge of ancient Phoenician dance";

Architecture:

- Temple of Baalmarcod: God of dance.
- The sculptor's dancers from the Temple of Bacchus.
- The sculpture of Dionysian thiasos (Dionysus's ecstatic revenue) dancing, on the Tribune of Echmoun.

Fig. 3 - Dabké-dancers at the Baalbek International Festival 2016