

Minoan Archaeology

Perspectives for the 21st Century

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(A) Choreographed Frenzy

A Sequence of Steps Towards Understanding Movement and Dance in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography

Céline Murphy

Seemingly moving figures are very common occurrences in Aegean Bronze Age iconography. The vividness of the images is such that, often, these figures have been described as engaged in “ritual”, “religious” and “ecstatic” choreographies. These interpretations, first advanced in the early twentieth century, have been widely adopted throughout the years and, in certain cases, have consisted of the foundations for wide and long-lasting views on Minoan ritual. However, since the publication of later twentieth century stylistically-orientated analyses of Minoan imagery, new light has been cast on the essence of movement in various representative media. Since, it has been agreed that movement is a ubiquitous compositional feature of Aegean Bronze Age depictions, which might possess a predominantly stylistic function over a narrative one. Archaeologists are therefore faced with a range of questions related to the realities of identifying dance in Aegean two-dimensional imagery. Are the figures actually depicted as dancing, or is it their stylistic rendering which leads us to think so? Moreover, the subsequent and inevitable accumulation of further questions regarding the essence of dance, its distinction from other types of performance and the dynamics of representing it in still imagery demonstrate that some rather large assumptions were made about Minoan dance in the initial studies on the subject. This paper outlines and addresses some problems these accounts currently present, while briefly suggesting some alternative possibilities for what the studied glyptic scenes might have depicted, if not dance. Given the scope of this chapter, this article consists of more of a commentary than a deep analysis; some preliminary thoughts on whether it is indeed possible to identify dance in still two-dimensional Aegean Bronze Age iconography are advanced.

“Elizabeth McCausland voiced the paradox when she called for ‘an image which though it cannot move and never can hope to move, yet will seem about to move’.”

William Ewing (1987)¹

Identifications of Dance in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography

During the early twentieth century, Evans, Persson and Nilsson identified the presence of dance in a range of Minoan frescoes and Aegean Bronze Age glyptic depictions. Alongside the “Sacred Grove and Dance” and the “Dancing Lady” frescoes from Knossos, Evans qualified the Isopata, Vapheio, Second Kalyvia Rings, the Ring of Mycenae, and a gem from Vapheio (fig. 1) as dance scenes.² Persson and Nilsson additionally noted the presence of this activity in the Dendra-Midea, Hagia Triada, Mycenae, Ashmolean rings and in a seal impression from Hagia Triada (fig. 2).³ All three authors agreed that the scenes represented ritual events, carried out in celebration of the annual rebirth of agrarian fertility. Moreover, owing to the figures’ seemingly euphoric and ecstatic bodily demeanour, the ritual dances were interpreted as orgiastic in nature.⁴

Three overarching criteria allowed Evans, Persson and Nilsson to identify dance in these scenes. The first consisted of the depiction of movement in the figures’ clothes and hair. Evans argued that these features indicated “quick, rhythmic movement” characteristic of dance moves.⁵ Similarly, Persson’s and Nilsson’s respective observations of “violent motion” and “tresses tossed about” contributed to their conclusions.⁶ The second was their performance of a range of recurrent gestures. Consisting of positioning the palms in a parallel position to the hips, raising them up and outwards in a variety of angles, or clenching one or both fists over the chest or the abdomen, these gestures were regarded as elements of ritual dance. Lastly, the third criterion for identifying dance was

¹ Ewing 1987, 27–8.

² Evans 1901, 176–78; 1930, 66–80.

³ Persson 1942, 37–50; Nilsson 1950, 275–77.

⁴ Evans 1901, 176–78; Persson 1942, 37–50; Nilsson 1950, 275–77.

⁵ Evans 1930, 67.

⁶ Persson, 37; Nilsson, 275.



Fig. 1 The glyptic scenes Evans described as containing dance. Left to right: Isopata Ring (CMS II.3, no. 510), Vapheio Ring (CMS I, no. 219), Vapheio gem (CMS I, no. 226), Kalyvia Ring (CMS II.3, no. 103), Ring of Mycenae (CMS I, no. 126). Images courtesy of CMS.

ried into the beginning of the twenty-first. For example, it has been argued that the “ecstatic or orgiastic dance” performed by the male figure in the Ring of Mycenae was best rendered by the movement of his body and his flailing gestures.⁸ Similarly, the occurrence of a circular dance in two sealings from Isopata and Khandia has been recognised from two figures holding hands near a cult building.⁹

the symbolically and ritually laden contexts in which the figures were depicted. The settings, such as paved courtyards containing one or several trees, baetyls or shrines, in which floating symbols such as the eye, ear, butterfly or double axe appear, were regarded as adding to the cultic character of the activity and therefore allowed it to be differentiated from more practical tasks represented in other glyptic depictions.

It is conspicuous that the aforementioned authors’ interpretations strongly influenced other views on the nature of ritual performance in Minoan archaeology. In fact, Evans’ account on the Isopata Ring served as a basis for many discussions on Minoan epiphany rituals.⁷ Moreover, it is noticeable that Evans’, Persson’s and Nilsson’s use of criteria for identifying dance prevailed throughout the rest of the century and car-

Revisiting Evansian Theories and an Art-Historical Approach to Movement

In recent years, however, Evansian theories, and particularly those related to ritual, have become increasingly revisited. While dance itself has been parsimoniously discussed in this field, the nature and purpose of Minoan performances has nevertheless been subjected to some debate.¹⁰ Many of Evans’ views on the Minoan past, such as those related to the Mother-Goddess, and his methodological approaches, largely consisting of universal comparisons between different cultures, are presently outdated. Hence, reading Evans’ interpretation through the lens of current theory and practice, some of his approaches to and statements on Minoan glyptic – such as the ring of Mycenae representing a dance in celebration of the Goddess given the gestures’ parallel with American Indian ones – are becoming increasingly difficult to justify.¹¹ While trance and ecstatic behaviour continue to be topics of interest, perspectives on what altered states of consciousness consist of are changing. Morris and Peatfield, for example, suggested that rather than symbolising ritual situations such as the occurrence of an epiphany, certain Aegean Bronze Age images might have instead represented the techniques for achieving trance. These techniques, in the authors’ view, involve slow repetitive movement or stillness rather than dance. In remarking upon the Isopata Ring, Morris and Peatfield argued that while the figures’ bodies are expressive of movement rather than rest, in the absence of other indicators for ecstasy, “a more limited rhythmic movement or swaying might be suggested”.¹²

Moreover, stylistically-orientated explorations of Minoan iconography have shed some new light on the representation of movement, and consequently allow for Evans’, Persson’s and Nilsson’s interpretations to be challenged. Essentially, these studies highlighted the ubiquity of the “unexpectedly daring” movement in Aegean Bronze Age iconography.¹³ Groenewegen-Frankfort, for example, noted that the intrinsic kinetic energy contained within the motifs of the petaloid loop, the circle and the dot, amongst others, created a strong impression of movement in the depictions.¹⁴ She moreover argued that these impressions might not necessarily have been rendered with a narrative purpose, and might have been of a stylistic and aesthetic nature. Thus, the presence of the aforementioned – highly recurrent and typically Minoan – motifs in figurative narrative scenes may not have

⁷ Cain 2001, 46.

⁸ Ulanowska 1993, 117.

⁹ Krattenmaker 1995, 120.

¹⁰ See e.g. Wedde 2004; Cain 2001; German 2005.

¹¹ Evans 1901, 177–78.

¹² Morris and Peatfield 2004, 43.

¹³ Walberg 1976, 42; 1986, 68; Gill 1985, 75; Patrianakou-Iliaki 1983, 247; Matz 1985.

¹⁴ Walberg 1986.

had a narrative purpose, but simply pertained to matters of style and convention.¹⁵ Indeed, in discussing the depiction of human figures, Groenewegen-Frankfort noted that the curves of the Minoan body convey a strong illusion of lightness and fluidity which can lead the onlooker to perceiving movement in the images.¹⁶

These observations on the stylistic nature of movement consequently allow for new views to be generated on the glyptic depictions studied by Evans, Persson and Nilsson. In consideration of the above, it appears that some rather large assumptions were made about the nature of dance and the criteria employed to identify it during the early twentieth century. A brief exploration of four main questionable suppositions and some alternatives to the original interpretations on dance are presented below.



FIG. 2 The glyptic scenes Persson and Nilsson describe as containing dance. Left to right: Vapheio Ring (CMS I, no. 219), Hagia Triada Ring (CMS II.6, no. 9), Dendra-Midea Ring (CMS I, no. 191), Ring of Mycenae (CMS I, no. 126), a ring from the Ashmolean Museum (CMS VI, no. 278) and a seal impression from Hagia Triada (CMS II.6, no. 1). Images courtesy of CMS.

Some Early Twentieth-Century Assumptions on Dance in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography

Most remarkable is the assumption that movement possessed a narrative value. Evans, Persson and Nilsson perceived movement as a means for demonstrating that the figures were engaged in a specific and identifiable activity. When depicted in conjunction with the human body in two-dimensional imagery, movement was therefore associated with action by these authors. As a result, the figures have often been described as “protagonists”,¹⁷ implying that they are engaged in a process leading to a recognisable end.

As was noted above, however, movement may be a stylistic or a compositional element rather than a narrative one. Moreover, it is also conceivable that movement was only an auxiliary feature to the scenes, applied to the body for aesthetic reasons. The figures’ bodies may not have been the main focus of the scenes despite their central position; it may have been their depiction alongside other features such as paved courtyards, buildings, trees, baetyls and hovering objects which allowed the scenes to communicate their contents. The human figure and human actions alone might not have held as much direct significance as we assume it did today.

The second assumption transpiring from the aforementioned studies is that movement equated with dance. It is conspicuous that the authors did not advance any clear discussion on why movement could not belong to another type of activity. Certainly, the images convey an impression of unity and balance; the figures in the Isopata, Dendra-Midea and Hagia Triada Rings parallel each other’s gestures and bodily postures. Harmony, however, can also exist in other performances. It is not more fanciful to suggest that the women in the Dendra-Midea Ring, Hagia Triada Ring and the Hagia Triada seal impression, for example, were involved in a procession, as might also have been the case for the women in the “Sacred Grove and Dance” fresco.¹⁸ It is also plausible that the women in the Vapheio Ring were reciting or chanting.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the identification of dance specifically, rather than performance in general, demonstrates an assumption that dance and other performative acts were considered as altogether different activities during the Aegean Bronze Age. It is possible that our present distinctions did not exist. In her analysis of

¹⁵ Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 186.

¹⁶ Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, 186.

¹⁷ Krzyszkowska 2005, 137.

¹⁸ See also German 2005, 55.

Minoan performance, German noted that “if dance and procession are so similar visually, perhaps, to the Minoans and Mycenaeans, there was no difference”.¹⁹ Younger, in fact, previously chose to also consider these two activities as one and the same in his analysis of Aegean seals.²⁰

The fourth assumption relates to gestures. The gestures performed by the figures were interpreted as being part of a sequence of gestures rather than consisting of individual poses. It is, however, possible that the figures were intended to be seen as still. They may have been held in check as part of the scene’s subject. If these glyptic depictions served to represent Aegean Bronze Age experience, it is possible that certain activities required one to stand still in a specific position for a select amount of time. One such situation would be at the beginning of a performance when – before the music or recital begins – the figures place themselves in a preparatory position in

the space designated for performance. Or, equally, stillness may be required in respect or honour of a non-depicted individual or of a descending figure, as can be seen in the Isopata Ring.

Furthermore, in taking a closer look at the gestures of the two figures depicted on the right side of the Isopata Ring, it appears that it is reminiscent of the rightmost figure in the “Toreador Fresco” from Knossos (fig. 3). Evans described the figure as “stretch[ing] out both her hands *as if about to catch the flying figure*”.²¹ Upon closer observation, the figure does not appear to be moving, nor does his/her stance directly imply movement, instead he/she stands in a preparatory posture with a view to moving to catch the leaper if needs be. It is worth mentioning that the figure was reconstructed by Gilliéron with pointed feet as if he/she was jumping, yet it is possible that his/her feet were depicted as flat on a presently unpreserved ground-line. Incidentally, this figure is lower on the fresco’s surface than the figure to the left of the scene who appears directly engaged with the bull. Additionally, as Morris and Peatfield also noted,²² unlike the figure in the “Bull Leaper” fresco, this character’s hair is not depicted as flying, thus reducing the likeness of him/her being depicted as animated.

A cause for the occurrence of such uncertainties on the existence of dance in Aegean Bronze Age depictions most likely relates to a shortage of consideration on the essence of this type of performance. While dance has been strongly connected to Minoan culture in the popular, artistic and academic spheres,²³ and despite its association with other archaeological remains such as the Theatral Area and

the dancing platforms in Knossos,²⁴ the courtyards of tholos tombs,²⁵ and the clay models from Kamilarí and Palaikastro,²⁶ for example, little discussion on the dynamics of representing dance in two-dimensions and in still form exists. It is therefore time to consider the subject more closely, and to ask some new questions about this type of performance, most especially about its relationship to the studied scenes. Particularly pressing is the need for an investigation into how dance can be identified in Aegean Bronze Age iconography, and if it can indeed be distinguished from other types of activities. Thus, in the following section, some preliminary explorations of these issues are exposed.



Fig. 3 The Toreador Fresco from Knossos, showing the figure’s preserved fragments and Gilliéron’s reconstructions. Author’s drawing.

¹⁹ German 2005, 55.

²⁰ Younger 1988, 53–4.

²¹ Evans 1901, 212 (my italics).

²² Morris and Peatfield 2004, 43.

²³ See Momigliano (2013) regarding Knossos and Minoan iconography as a source of inspiration for choreographies.

²⁴ See Evans 1930, 99–112; Warren 1984, 319–23.

²⁵ Branigan 1993, 130–31.

²⁶ See Levi 1962; Evans 1930, 72.

New Questions on Still Two-Dimensional Representations of Dance

The first question to be explored in this section consists of whether a frozen image can effectively render dance and movement. As a still medium, the image inevitably stalls the fleeting temporality inherent to the dance movement and consequently artificially isolates it from the rest of its process. Art historians have argued that life in movement “is too rich and manifold to allow imitation without some selective principle”,²⁷ and thus the transformation of a three-dimensional entity into a still-dimensional form involves a process of deconstruction. Representing movement in its entirety in still imagery is paradoxical and impossible.

It is nevertheless conspicuous that, despite the process of deconstruction that dance and movement undergo in their transformation into a still two-dimensional form, an image can convey an impression of their presence. Some insight into how this might happen can here be gained from studies on dance in still-photography. It has been argued that an impression of movement can be created through the presence of indexical information in an image. Indeed, the dance movements captured by the camera, which in real life are ephemeral and almost impossible to see owing to their fluidity, are not accurate representations, but simple indicators to the existence of a larger sequence of movements.²⁸ The static image can therefore be read as an index for the dance, as a reference to a whole, as a mere fragment, but not as a representation.

In the light of this theory, it may therefore be more accurate to argue that the Aegean Bronze Age glyptic scenes discussed by Evans, Persson and Nilsson make reference to movement and dance rather than represent it (if movement is not uniquely a stylistic feature). Consequently, these scenes ought not to be perceived as documentations of real choreographies nor as stills of “a motion film suddenly brought to a halt”.²⁹ It is not unreasonable to suggest that figures in glyptic depictions are frequently mistaken as representing a process when they are, in truth, only making reference to it. Thus, to answer the question asked above, an image cannot represent movement and dance, but can successfully make reference to it.

The second question to be asked here is whether dance can be differentiated from other types of actions. How do we recognise dance? The views of two dance theorists are here consulted to explore this issue. The first, advanced by Francis, posits that purpose of movement is what allows us to differentiate dance from other types of activities.³⁰ In a cognitive study on cross-cultural perceptions of dance, Francis noted that candidates, subjected to film-clips representing ballet, fire-fighting, wrestling and ice-skating amongst others, identified ballet as dance for its minimal competitive and socially and economically contributing nature, which were features displayed by the other activities. Candidates did not regard the movements represented by ballet as serving a strictly professional and necessary purpose like those performed during fire-fighting, for example.

The second theory of relevance here relates to the importance of contextual information for identifying dance. It has been argued that context is what helps us understand whether an activity is dance or not. Depending on the context in which a movement is produced, it is possible to understand its significance, especially in the case of a movement belonging to a dance repertoire while also being a common gesture.³¹

In the light of these theories, dance can therefore be differentiated from other activities by analysing the purpose of the movements and the contexts in which they were produced. Although Francis and McFee’s studies concern dance itself and not images, their theories can nevertheless also be applied to still two-dimensional scenes. However, are these theories enlightening for a study on Aegean Bronze Age glyptic iconography? And more importantly, can theoretical research on dance provide us with any conclusive information on the presence of dance in the studied scenes? The answers to these questions are unfortunately negative. The purpose of movement and contextual elements are too highly debated issues in Minoan iconography to serve as founding criteria for the identification of dance. Too little is securely known about the significance of courtyards, trees and shrines in Aegean Bronze Age glyptic to encourage contextual analyses. The utility of this method has in fact been previously discussed; such approaches allow too much “room for erroneous identification of images of dance” despite

²⁷ Gombrich 1966, 395.

²⁸ Reason 2003, 49.

²⁹ Furumark 1965.

³⁰ Francis 1996, 52.

³¹ McFee 1992.

the salience of their context.³² Similarly, in an analysis of the archaeology of dance, Lopez y Royo argued that too much attention to costume and ornament can mean that dance is “deal[t] with in a cursory manner, in order to concentrate on context”.³³

Can We Confidently Identify Dance in Aegean Bronze Age Iconography?



FIG. 4 “Bull Leaper” from the “School Room” fresco from Knossos. Courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

In the light of the above statement, it may therefore be asked how dance, movement and the studied scenes are to be approached if not through the means outlined above. Unfortunately, no simple answer nor method of analysis can be so readily offered. Closer examinations of the orientation of the figures’ bodies, alongside comparisons with their rendering in other depictions and media, might allow for some further enlightenment on the communicative, indexical and iconic nature of the Aegean Bronze Age two-dimensional body. Moreover, the creation of gesture typologies in association with observations on the angles at which the bodies are rendered might considerably alter and deepen views on the nature of glyptic scenes.

Having argued that it is not presently possible to confirm or disprove the presence of movement and dance in the nine glyptic scenes, it must nevertheless be noted that some more convincing Aegean Bronze Age depictions of movement and action do nevertheless exist. In glyptic, the small floating figures – interpreted as epiphanies – can be recognised as moving, or more precisely descending from the sky – by reason of their pointed feet and their floating hair.³⁴ For example, the female figure in the Isopata Ring demonstrates downwards movement as a result of the approximately 35° angle of her feet compared to the 90° angle of the larger figures’ feet, and due to the horizontal depiction of her hair, in contrast to the larger figures’ dangling locks. Similar conclusions may also be reached for figures in frescoes such as the “Bull Leaper” fragment from the Knossos School Room whose “pointed” feet are not in contact with the floor-line, and the “Dancing Lady” from the Queen’s Megaron whose horizontally rendered hair indicates that she is moving (fig. 4).

To conclude, this brief commentary has demonstrated that dance is a much more complex topic to study in Aegean Bronze Age two-dimensional iconography than was previously supposed. While, time and again, dance has been associated with Minoan culture, little is known about it, especially since Evans’, Persson’s and Nilsson’s attribution of movement can be questioned. It can nevertheless be observed that, be movement a stylistic or a narrative feature, the figures studied above undeniably present a “readiness” for movement. They do convey the impression that they are about to move. The kinetic energy encapsulated in the fluidity of the bodies and the apparent continuity between the latter and their surroundings is powerfully compelling. Such is the richness of these scenes.

³² German 2005, 55–6.

³³ Lopez y Royo 2007, n. p.

³⁴ See Kyriakidis 2005, 146.

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