Chapter 2

Dance in Ancient Civilizations

# Overview

The ancient cultures of Egypt, Crete, Greece, and Rome provide a sequential look at the foundations of what was later to emerge as Western culture. Each culture contributed to dance within its unique historical development, sometimes originating new directions, other times amalgamating strands from the past and other cultures. In the ancient world, power transferred from Egypt across the Mediterranean and around its northern shore until the vast Roman Empire crumbled, signaling the end of ancient times.

# Egypt

## Activity 1. Analyzing Egyptian Dance

In groups, using Egyptian pictorial evidence (Lexova and other authors), find positions and movements of the arms, legs, and body that are identified with various types of Egyptian dance. Make a chart or infographic that relates this information to the various dances, such as cosmic or religious, funeral, or entertainment.

The following outline lists the arm, leg, and body positions and movements of Egyptian dance as a basis for activities 1 and 2.

1. Religious and ritualistic
2. Education of youth
3. Mysteries of the Nile
4. The legend of Osiris
5. Funeral
6. Stance
7. Trunk as a single unit
8. Walking in a procession
9. Bridge
10. Kneeling and sitting poses
11. Leg gestures and movements
12. Leg lifts
13. Leg thrusts (legs cross as preparation for thrust)
14. Leg throws
15. Knee lifts
16. Hops
17. Arm gestures
18. Extended forward, bent at the elbows, palms on the head
19. One arm extended upward, the other bent at the elbow
20. Arms stretched forward or to the side, bent at the elbow; forearm creates a right angle upward or reversed so palms touch the ground
21. Waving or lashing branches to chase away evil spirits
22. Hand gestures with fingers outstretched or fists clenched
23. Cosmic dance
24. Walking processionals
25. Circular paths
26. Whirling and turning
27. Leg lifts and thrusts
28. Arms in opposition corresponding to leg gestures and movements
29. Free arm movements
30. Hand gestures: signs of the stars
31. Entertainment
32. Acrobatic
33. Belly dances
34. Wrench dances
35. Pair dances
36. Body positions
37. Upright
38. Bent forward, backward, or sideways
39. Kneeling
40. Couple facings
41. Symmetrical
42. Tableaux
43. Facing one another
44. Backs to each other
45. One person turning a half turn away and returning
46. Twisting away and returning
47. Movements
48. Running
49. Skipping
50. Jumps
51. Low
52. Legs together
53. Knees bent
54. Legs drawn up to the body
55. Shoulder, waist, or hip circles
56. Leg gestures
57. Leg extensions either straight or bent at various levels
58. Large extension while leaning back
59. Leg thrusts
60. Stork poses
61. Feet
62. Rhythmic patterns marking time
63. Pointed or flexed on the floor at shin height
64. Arms
65. Symmetrical
66. Swinging
67. Stretched, curved, or bent at right angles
68. Oppositional
69. Self-accompaniment
70. Castanets
71. Double clappers
72. Double pipes

Source: Lexova, Irena. *Ancient Egyptian Dances.* Translated by K. Haltman. Prague, Czechoslovakia: Oriental Institute, 1935.

## Activity 2. Dance Like an Egyptian

Create a dance that would have been performed for

* a religious ritual such as a dance drama of one of the Osiris stories or a cosmic dance,
* a life-span celebration such as a funeral dance, or
* a dance as entertainment at a banquet or similar social function.

## Activity 3. Dance Hieroglyphics

Draw Egyptian figures in the major poses in the sequence of the dance. Use Egyptian drawing techniques and title the dance using hieroglyphics. The Web Links section contains a link with examples of hieroglyphics, and you can also search for other hieroglyphics sites online.

# Crete

## Activity 1. Cretan Archaeology

Using the Internet, research archaeological evidence of religious and armored Cretan dance. Print a copy of the artifact or archaeological evidence and then write a one-page summary of your findings about the topic.

## Activity 2. Bull Dancing

Using the Internet, research the bull dancers and their sport. Create a short dance, based on your research and your imagination, demonstrating how the bull dancers performed this gymnastic dance.

# Greece

## Activity 1. Dance Like an Ancient Greek

Using the Internet, the library, or Lawler’s two books (*The Dance in Ancient Greece* and *The Dance of the Ancient Greek Theater*), research ancient Greek dance.

Create a short dance that would have been performed by any of these dancers or in any of these situations:

* A male Athenian warrior or a female Spartan warrior
* A group of maenads or satyrs
* A wedding party ritual dance
* A choral dance from a tragedy and one from a comedy

Following is a list of Greek dance forms and movements as a basis for activity 1.

*Greek Dance Forms and Movements*

* Processionals
* Walking steps
* Types of walks: processional walks, athletic walks, tragic walks
* Running: the long run, the quick run, the beaten run, running on relevé
* Skips: cross skips, beaten skips, dotted skips
* Leaps
* Triplets
* Open turns
* Lilting steps
* Funeral: slow and heavy walking
* Ritual for Athena or Zeus: austere
* Kore or Artemis: light and joyous
* Pyrrhic: done by men generally
* Gymnopaedic dances: imitative dances of sports such as wrestling

Source: *The Revived Greek Dance: Its Art and Technique,* by Ruby Ginner. London: Methusen, 1933, pages 52, 120.

## Activity 2. Perceptions of Ancient Greek Dance

Write and then give an oral presentation of a synopsis with visual examples, or develop a PowerPoint presentation about the purpose of the dance, the dance design and its significance, and its accompaniment. Describe the dancers and what they wore or carried in the dance, the dance space, and time of day. Try to re-create it as a step back in history for the audience.

# Rome

## Activity 1. Dance Like an Ancient Roman

This activity is similar to the activities for Egypt, Crete, and Greece. Create a dance of one of the following:

* A warrior
* An entertainer
* A life-span celebration
* A priest

## Activity 2. Perceptions of Ancient Roman Dance

Write a one-page summary about the dancer, the dance, and the dance performance in Rome. Use the same prompts as listed for the Greek dance. Compare and contrast to the dance for Greece or Egypt.

# Web Links

## Egypt

Egypt websites  
<http://besthistorysites.net/ancient-biblical-history/egypt/#sites>

Discovering ancient Egypt  
<http://discoveringegypt.com>

Nile River and the desert  
[www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgeo2e.shtml](http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgeo2e.shtml)

Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics  
[www.ancient-egypt-online.com/ancient-egyptian-hieroglyphics.html](http://www.ancient-egypt-online.com/ancient-egyptian-hieroglyphics.html)

Understanding hieroglyphics  
<https://discoveringegypt.com/egyptian-hieroglyphic-writing/>

Online translator into hieroglyphics  
[www.quizland.com/hiero.htm](http://www.quizland.com/hiero.htm)

## Crete

Traditional dances of Crete  
[www.crete.org.uk/dances.html](http://www.crete.org.uk/dances.html)

Ancient designs for labyrinths  
[www.crystalinks.com/labyrinths.html](http://www.crystalinks.com/labyrinths.html)

Bull-leaping fresco  
<http://nationalgeographic.org/media/bull-leaping>

## Greece

Ancient Greece websites  
<http://besthistorysites.net/ancient-biblical-history/greece/#sites>

Ancient Greece: history, arts, and culture  
[www.ancientgreece.com/s/Main\_Page](http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/Main_Page)

Homer’s Odyssey  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/odyssey.html>

The golden age of Greece  
[www.watson.org/~leigh/history.html](http://www.watson.org/~leigh/history.html)

Ancient Greek dance  
[www.carnaval.com/greece/dance](http://www.carnaval.com/greece/dance)

## Rome

Rome websites  
<http://besthistorysites.net/ancient-biblical-history/rome/#sites>

Ancient Roman theaters  
<http://crystalinks.com/rometheaters.html>

# Review Questions

1. What was the society like in ancient Egypt, Crete, Greece, and Rome?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dances and dance literature of the period?

# Vocabulary

## Ancient Egypt

animal dances

Book of the Dead

entertainment

funeral dances

hieroglyphics

Isis

Nile

Osiris

pharaoh

priests

## Crete

animal dances

bull dancing

labyrinth

Minotaur

## Greece

Aeschylus

animal dances

Aristophanes

armed dances

Artists of Dionysus

cheironomia

choragus

choreutae

choros

chorus

coryphaeus

deixis

Dionysus

dithyramb

emmelia

enthousiasmos

Euripides

funeral dances

geranos

graphos

Hellenistic

kordax

maenads

orchestra

oreibasia

pyrrhic

schemata

sikinis

skene

Sophocles

Terpsichore

Thespis

wedding dances

## Rome

Bathyllus of Alexandria

ludi Romani

Lupercalia

mime

pantomime

Pylades of Cilicia

salii

saltio

Saturnalia

Theodora