Chapter 1

Dance at the Dawn of Time

# Overview

Prehistory is the period of human history before the advent of writing that marks the beginning of recorded history. It is classified into three time periods: the Stone Age (Old and New), the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age. In the Stone Age, the earth was populated with nomadic peoples, from which expanded families developed into agrarian village communities.

Dance was an important means of communication in these nonliterate communities. Early art works capture dance poses, like signposts for studying body designs. Dancing scenes found as rock art and other artifacts served as records of the dance and also as a memory aid for dancers who knew the dance.

Men, women, and children in the community danced for life celebrations, ceremonies and rituals, tribal or village unity and power, and spiritual reasons. The shaman was a physician, a religious leader, a person with magical powers, and the lead dancer.

Dances in prehistory used everyday movements that served as a means of communication, were part of celebrations and rites, and were central to worship and special events. The following are dance themes that were woven through community life:

* Fertility dances (several strands to ensure the tribe’s continuance: human, animal, and plant)
* Life-span celebrations (births, initiations, marriages, funeral dances)
* Weapons and war dances (gaining skill with weapons, preparing for the hunt or war, celebrating victory, and mourning the dead)
* Medicine (healing) dances to ensure the health of the tribe or heal the sick or wounded
* Supernatural or spiritual and religious dances (praise and appeasement of the gods, ancestors, ghosts, and other elements that influenced the environment, individuals, and the community)

Dance design describes the number of people performing, the formation, and other elements of the dance structure. Dance formations were predominantly circle and line dances with variations, such as serpentine, columns (military), and labyrinth (used for secret initiations and societies). Accompaniment included both self-accompaniment and use of percussive and wind instruments. Costumes and adornment used natural elements based on the theme of ceremony, body decorations, and masks.

Early dance works have been researched by 20th-century scholar and ethnomusicologist Curt Sachs. Dance anthropologists Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Gertrude Kurath (mother of dance ethnology), and the next generation of researchers and writers who expanded the field studied aboriginal societies. Yosef Garfinkel’s studies and theories of rock art reveal much about dance in early society.

Prehistoric dance provides the authentic and nonliterate roots for dance as part of individual or community endeavors in the life span, rituals, and religion that humans have participated in for millennia.

# Activities and Assignments

## Activity 1. Rock Art Dances

Using Garfinkel’s identified poses (arm and leg gestures from rock art; see figure 1.3 in the textbook) as a research basis, develop a dance that you believe could have been performed in an early society that would meet the requirements of a dance from one of the following theme categories:

* Fertility
* Life span
* Weapon or war
* Medicine or healing
* Supernatural or spiritual
* Ceremony, ritual, or celebration

Create dance designs with formations and participants. Identify roles, movements, transitions, beginnings, and endings for the dance. You can use self-accompaniment or musical accompaniment. Choose a place for the dance.

* Write a two-page summary about the dance you have created that justifies and relates your selection of each element as support for a specific dance theme or reason.
* Draw the series of movements in their sequence of the dance in a rock art style for others to reproduce your dance.
* Design and draw an illustration of the dancers’ costumes, body adornment, or mask.

## Activity 2. 21st-Century Preliterate Societies

Research a 21st-century aboriginal society. Find an article from a dance researcher who has studied this society and their dance. Compare and contrast the aboriginal society’s dance themes, designs, and dances with those of early societies. Write a three- to five-page paper about the selected society; include photos, cite sources, and check your library or the Internet for video or DVD resources that include dances and music.

## Activity 3. Prehistoric Dance Art

Visit Internet sites on early peoples and societies to find art examples from at least three places in the world that exemplify at least three dance themes or dance designs. Using these examples, write a three- to five-page paper with pictorial examples that show why these examples support the criteria of theme and design.

* Provide information about the artwork: type of artwork, age, location found, and other pertinent information.
* If an art historian, archeologist, or anthropologist has written a critical statement about the artworks, synthesize this information and cite the person and the source.
* Relate the artwork to the dance theme, and summarize your conclusions.

For a more extensive project, select two works for each theme, then compare and contrast them. Consider selecting art works from various places.

### Extended Activity

Three predominant styles of early painting included naturalistic, linear, and geometric styles of dance figures. Choose one style to draw a series of dance figures to depict your dance sequence that relates to one of the dance themes and designs.

# Web Links

Historical time clock  
<https://flowingdata.com/2012/10/09/history-of-earth-in-24-hour-clock>

Overview of prehistory and time line  
[www.ushistory.org/civ/2.asp](http://www.ushistory.org/civ/2.asp)

Prehistory: before Lucy (the famous 3.2 million-year-old hominid) came Ardi  
<http://besthistorysites.net/prehistory>

Ardi: the oldest human ancestor  
<http://news.discovery.com/history/archaeology/ardi-human-ancestor.htm>

Paleolithic art and culture  
<http://visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric/paleolithic-art-culture.htm>

Prehistoric art time line  
[www.visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric-art-timeline.htm](http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/prehistoric-art-timeline.htm)

Clovis spear  
[www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-clovis-point-and-the-discovery-of-americas-first-culture-3825828/?no-ist](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-clovis-point-and-the-discovery-of-americas-first-culture-3825828/?no-ist)

Digital image processing and prehistoric art  
[www.oocities.org/athens/3857/levant.html](http://www.oocities.org/athens/3857/levant.html)

Digital processing of rock art  
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305440315000199](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305440315000199)

# Review Questions

1. What was the society like during prehistoric times?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the relationships like between the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dances and dance themes of the period?

# Vocabulary

anthropologist

archaeologist

Bronze Age

ceremony

choral

closed dance

column

couple

dance themes

ethnochoreologist

ethnography

expanded dance

image dance

imageless dance

in-harmony dance

Iron Age

labyrinth

mask

matriarchal

Neolithic

out-of-harmony dance

Paleolithic

patriarchal

polyandry

polygyny

prehistory

pure convulsive dances

rites of passage

ritual

rock art

serpentine

shaman

Stone Age

totemism

trance

weakened convulsive dances