

# THE DANCERS OF ARICCIA



An investigation into the depiction of three dancing women on a Roman tomb relief dating from the first century AD

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## Part 1

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Above: The Ariccia Relief, from a Roman grave of the first century AD

# THE DANCERS of ARICCIA

## I - IN THE SERVICE OF ISIS

The Appian Way, the first and greatest of the Roman roads, travels south from Rome to Capua, to Benevento, and eventually to Brindisium, the chief port in ancient times for sailing to Greece. Throughout the Roman republic and later empire, it was the practice, then as now, to build along the route of newly-constructed roads. Close to the city, in addition to taverns, temples and public buildings, statues, inscribed stele, and drinking fountains were set up by the roadside to record the works of officials drawn from the great families, and to preserve the good example of their actions for the edification of others. Further out, between the city and the country-estates of rich landowners, it became customary to treat the side of the road as a kind of elongated cemetery and funeral garden where family graves could be built, where memorials could be erected to those who had perished far from home, and where, given the continuing Roman ancestor-cult, these monuments could be regularly visited and honoured in the course of carrying out everyday business. Moreover, the names of the revered dead could be perpetuated by the curiosity of passing travellers.

Over the intervening centuries the larger *memento mori* have been plundered wholesale, not least for grand and fashionable gardens, and more portable items have provided rich and easy pickings for collectors of antiquities. What remains has been collated and catalogued, but from time to time, however, surprising and unguessed things may still be found.

In the early part of the twentieth century, workers carrying out structural repairs on the Church of Santa Maria della Stella near Ariccia, uncovered a Roman burial dating from the second century AD. This was a relatively simple tile-topped grave which had been lined with pieces of high-quality marble taken from a far more elaborate first century tomb. With the exception of the Ariccia fragments, and the records of what may have been another piece unfortunately lost from the Berlin Museum during WWII, no trace of this earlier monument remains. Had the tomb survived, the scenes depicted thereon would doubtless now be more widely known, as would their implication for students of the early origins of Arabic dance.

In Summer 2001 the Ariccia tomb panel came to the British Museum as part of the *Cleopatra of Egypt* exhibition, where it was included as an interesting example of the hybrid Egypto-classical art style, and as a footnote to the enduring legend that Cleopatra VII first introduced the worship of Isis to Rome. I had previously known of the panel's existence, but for the first time I could examine the stone itself. Up close, I noted certain details, generally carved in very light relief, and not always visible in photographic representation, that I had never seen described or explained. These details aroused my curiosity, and convinced me that I was looking at something far more interesting than the accompanying catalogue notes suggested.



**Above: A fanciful interpretation of the funerary monuments along the Appian Way, by Piranesi**



**Above: The Upper Register, showing the seated Goddess, the side-chapels of Thoth and Bes, hawk-like birds, and gardens**



**Above: The seated Egyptian Goddess believed to be intended for Isis**

I believe that the Ariccia tomb relief is one of the most important artefacts in the study of ancient dance. I hope to demonstrate that this is one of the earliest undoubted depictions of what we would today recognise as Arabic dance, and that this dance is being performed by women inside a temple, probably in honour of the Egyptian goddess Isis, as part of a ritual that involves the participants entering a trance-like state.

Whilst it is often claimed that belly-dance began in the age of the pharaohs, despite numerous depictions of dancers from the three thousand years of Pharaonic history, and still more from the preceding four thousand years of pre-dynastic archaeological record, there is, alas, no evidence beyond wishful thinking that any one of them is performing the earliest ancestress of today's dance.

Although the lost tomb of Ariccia was constructed in Italy maybe a hundred years after the death of Cleopatra, I believe that it shows Egyptian dance, and expresses powerful ideas about ritual dance that are still to be found in North Africa.



The grave discovered at Ariccia re-used two pieces of uninscribed stone, and one piece of a larger relief showing a detailed scene. All three pieces are of the same smooth white marble, and are carved in what appears at first sight to be a provincial, curiously-proportioned style. Closer inspection reveals this to be individual workmanship of the highest quality – we are simply unused to the once-fashionable amalgamation of Egyptian and Roman iconography. The large relief would originally have formed a panel along one side of the lost first-century tomb, which was doubtless once situated close by. From the design, we can surmise that the panel measured 50cm high and 150cm long, classically-pleasing 1:3 proportions. As extant, the Ariccia relief is 111cm in length: the right side of the panel is preserved, but the rest is broken along a diagonal fracture so that we have lost just less than a third of the upper part of the scene, and slightly more than half of the lower part. Although we cannot guess at the design of the earlier tomb, since monuments are known that contain many marble panels, it is tempting to surmise from the relatively small size of the panel, from the lightness of its design, and from its unusual subject matter, that it once belonged to a woman who was, if not directly connected to the worship of Isis, then at least sufficiently attracted to the cult for her earthly remains to be contained within the continuance of rituals in honour of the Egyptian goddess. All we can say for certain is that whoever was buried in the tomb – male or female – enjoyed sufficiently high status to command high quality materials, and employ superior craftsmanship.

The scene executed on the relief is in two registers. The upper register, occupying one third of the design, portrays the interior and exterior of a Graeco-Roman temple. It is depicted, according to artistic convention, much like the sort of trick photography performed using early panoramic cameras where a 360degree view could be rendered as a continual image. Thus we see the walls of the temple opened up, like a strip cartoon.

The temple is dedicated to an enthroned and crowned goddess – her statue sits at the end of a columned hall surrounded by fountains. There are side chapels dedicated to the dwarf-god Bes, flanked by the seated baboons of the god Thoth. Above these side chapels are several hawk-like birds, which may be Horus falcons, the kites of Isis and Nephthys, or perhaps even royal vultures. On the right of the scene we can see the outside of the temple – a garden with palm trees, a statue to the sacred Apis bull, and a covered circular canopy beneath which is a female figure in Roman dress. This may represent a *mamisi* chapel, celebrating the birth of Horus as the son of Isis, and, by extension, of the pharaoh/emperor as

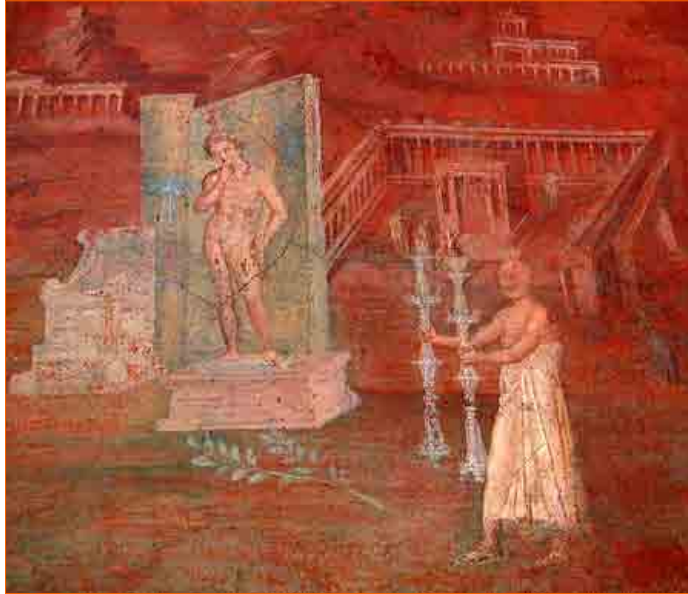
the living embodiment of Horus. Alternatively, it may represent a temporary chapel set up for a particular festival or celebration. We can also see the Osirid (mummiform) statue guarding the entrance to the temple, and possibly just make out, on the far right, what might be an obelisk. The smaller Berlin fragment seems to have shown the same temple garden, now holding a sphinx, another female figure, a second bull, and a palm tree.

Some scholars have chosen to interpret these scenes as representing the elevation of an actual Italian temple dedicated to the Egyptian goddess, possibly the great temple to Isis (Iseum) in the Campus Martius in Rome, or one of the older temples, such as Benevento. There were other smaller temples about which we presently know very little. Unfortunately, with the exception of the Iseum at Pompeii, very little archaeological evidence of these buildings has survived, and we therefore cannot compare the Ariccia relief to any known temple.

Isis is a popular patroness-of-choice for today's goddess-worshipper, but it would probably come as a surprise to learn that the form of Isis recognised today has far more to do with Graeco-Roman mystery cults than with ancient Egypt. The state religion of Egypt, for which there is evidence from at least 3,000BC, favoured the divine family, containing equal measure of male and female elements, as the one true model of the ordered universe. The notion of a single Mother Goddess would have seemed to them to be odd and unbalanced. Greek sailors and merchants who had had their own trading ports in the Egyptian delta since 600BC adopted Isis as a form of their own protecting goddess, Aphrodite, and exported her cult via Delos to the rest of the Aegean and eventually to mainland Greece, during which journey she absorbed the darker cultic elements of goddesses such as Athena, Ceres, Artemis, Hecate, Cybele and Ishtar. It is a simple fact that, although honoured since before the pyramids were built, Isis did not have her own Egyptian temple until around 400BC, after her cult had been boosted by further waves of goddess-worshipping settlers coming in to Egypt from Greece and Asia Minor. It is likely that Isis came to Rome with the trading Greeks rather than directly from Egypt, and it has been suggested that the Egyptians belatedly began building Isis temples only when this started to make good economic sense.

The Ptolemaic pharaohs, of whom Cleopatra VII was the last, were Macedonian Greeks who ruled Egypt from the death of Alexander in 323BC. By the time of the late Ptolemies, the Egyptian Osiris had evolved from the green-faced, partially-mummified King of the Underworld into a powerful bearded figure called Serapis whose temple promised daily rituals of magic and miracles, and Isis had become the Queen of the World. This is the form of the goddess that the Romans knew, and who is depicted on the Ariccia relief.

We know that Isis enjoyed a tremendous wave of popularity in first century Rome. We know that the young Domitian was an initiate of the mysteries, and that in AD69, during the power struggles following the death of the Emperor Nero he survived an attempt on his life through the timely intervention of the priests of Isis. His father Vespasian, who would eventually become emperor, actively promoted the worship of Isis and Serapis, and claimed to have witnessed miracles in the temple of Serapis during a visit to Egypt. With the support of the emperor, Egyptian influence on Roman art and design was everywhere, and it is for this reason that most experts suggest that the temple shown on the Ariccia relief is not a real temple at all. Instead, they argue, the Egyptian elements of the design should be taken as just that, as pleasing, contemporary designs of no meaning whatsoever, and this is perhaps one of the reasons why the dancers of Ariccia have never been taken seriously.



Above: A relief from Pompeii showing a priest of Isis, bearing two candlesticks, from the Ariccia-like Isis temple to the shrine of Horus



Above left: Isis imagined as Queen of the World by Athanasius Kircher  
Right: The Capitoline Isis, a Roman statue of the Egyptian goddess

When the grave at Ariccia was uncovered, nothing quite like the carved relief had ever been seen before. Beneath the outspread colonnades of a temple dedicated to the goddess Isis were the figures of dancing men and women, but these weren't the sort of dancers anyone was used to seeing.

Since the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum had begun in earnest nearly two hundred years previously the whole spectrum of Roman popular entertainment had been opened up by new discoveries. For the first time the works of the Latin authors, both the great and the less, could be illustrated by wall paintings, devotional statues, small carved figures, children's toys, and personal keepsakes. The wealthiest collectors could afford to purchase artefacts direct from excavations in Italy, and some of the most popular acquisitions were the Romans' much-loved images of dancers, prostitutes, mimes, and acrobats. For two hundred years tidy sums had been paid by collectors of *erotes*, the often-dancing grotesques of Roman pornography. The dancers of Ariccia were called grotesque, but they were not pornography.

The early years of the twentieth century espoused new ideals of bodily aesthetics that called back to artificial, or at best selective, notions of Classical Greece and Rome. This was the age of dancers such as Ruth St Denis, who recreated costumed worlds from lost civilizations for her popular and, most importantly, *new style* of ballet, and of Isadora Duncan who proposed a barefoot simplicity of costume in order to return to the true nature of dance. Almost forgotten today are dance teachers such as Ruby Ginner, responsible for the Grecian tableaux of white dresses and floral garlands that may still be found today on old and faded postcards. All these took as their inspiration the draped female dancers of antiquity, the delicate and aesthetically pleasing dances of the Hours, of the Seasons, and of the eternally youthful nymphs. The dancers of Ariccia do not adopt elegantly Grecian attitudes. They are not particularly young, nor beautiful. They jut, bend, sag, and droop. They have strong legs, and breasts, and bellies, and bottoms –what an eternal disappointment they must have been.

This was also an age that had been scandalized and eventually bored by the abandoned dances of Mata Hari, of Ida Rubenstein, and a whole troupe of shameless Salomes. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, in which a primitive tribal girl dances herself to death in an ancient pagan ceremony, had already offended the ears and eyes of many, and the excesses of the Edwardian era had been swept away by the horrors of war. This was not an age which would either understand, or appreciate the dancers of Ariccia, and its prejudices have followed them ever since.

Here is the Ariccia relief described in a standard text: "In front of a row of images of the gods, men and women are dancing with grotesque contortions; their knees are all bent, their heads thrown back and their arms upraised; they are holding castanets or the double flute. An aged choirmaster and a group of spectators mark time by clapping their hands." The commentator has already decided that the scene "derides a ceremony of Isis", finding the dancers not only unattractive, but clearly blasphemous as well.

A few years ago, I attended a lecture by a well-known American scholar who used the Ariccia relief to illustrate her fervently held belief that the Romans had, since their subjugation of Egypt, made a mockery of the once sacred temple dances. The Ariccia relief, she claimed, at best showed the Romans making fun of Egyptian religion, or at worst, was a piece of ugly propaganda warning the unwary against falling into unnatural, un-Roman practices.



**Above: A fashionable Grecian tableau**



**Above left: Ruth St Denis as the Goddess Isis  
Right: Classical Graeco-Roman dancers, and Tanagra statuettes**

Although impassioned, her argument did not stand up to the application of common sense. We know that, following the death of Cleopatra, Augustus and his immediate successors tried to stem the growth of “dangerous” foreign cults in Rome. A probably spurious passage in the chronicles of Josephus tells of the destruction of the temple of Isis and the crucifixion of her priests after their complicity in an infamous sex scandal. The Ariccia relief, however, dates from the first century AD, when we know that the cult of Isis enjoyed imperial support and promotion. The relief panels were *re-used* in the second century when the Isis temple at Benevento was rebuilt, and when Lucius Apuleius penned the most beautiful portrait of his adored goddess in *The Golden Ass*. The Emperor Hadrian (117 – 138AD) took an extended jaunt around the antiquities of Egypt, and was so impressed that he had his name carved into many of them. His empress, Sabina, professed herself to be the High Priestess of Isis in Rome. Commodus (180-192AD) took such an active role in the worship of Isis that he shaved his head to carry the sacred images around the streets of Rome with the other priests. (The somewhat deranged emperor also had an unfortunate tendency to confer the gods’ blessing on unlucky members of the crowd by striking them with the statue of Anubis...) Evidence for Isis worship by the Roman legions has been found in Morocco, in France, in the Rhineland, and as far distant as the legionary station in York. Indeed, images of the Roman emperors continued to be carved onto the walls of Egyptian temples in the guise of Horus, son of Isis, and goddess-worship continued to flourish under the Romans right up until the Christian Emperor Theodosius ordered the closing of the temples in 384AD. One should also remember that it was the early scholars of Christianity, founded in the Middle East, and centred in Cleopatra’s own city of Alexandria, who were the most outspoken opponents of the ways of the goddess.

It is time to go back to simple observation. Somebody – who they were, we will probably never know – paid a tidy sum of money for a tomb to be built on the Appian Way with scenes carved upon the very best marble panels. It was a task unlikely to have been taken lightly, and we have no evidence to suggest that the design of the tomb was undertaken with anything other than love and respect for the deceased. The scenes appear unusual to us, because very little like them has survived. We know that, at the time of their execution, the panels would have been very fashionable; we also know that belief in the goddess was, for many, both fervent and profound. We need to look at them with first century eyes, and forget the prejudices of the following centuries.

Maybe then we will truly understand the significance of the Dancers of Ariccia.

