

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 2

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Stripped of all its many refinements, the quintessence of belly-dance – the one characteristic that defines its nature amongst all other dance forms – is the freedom of the hips to move whilst the rest of the body remains poised. This freedom is achieved by two means. In the first, what we now think of as the “traditional” method, the dancer is flat-footed, bending at the knees to release the hips, and powering her movements with the muscles of her thighs and calves. In the second method, the dancer comes up onto her toes, sometimes aided by the use of heeled foot-ware. Her movements now require even greater strength from her leg-muscles, and she may keep her balance by adopting a narrower stance. Less obviously, the belly-dancer’s torso is also lengthened, her shoulders are relaxed, and the forward-tipping slouch of her pelvis is “corrected” to give greater poise and elegance, and to further release the muscles of her buttocks and upper thighs.

Searching for the ancestress of belly-dance in the many images of dancing women from the 3,000 years of Pharaonic history is a vain pursuit. Ancestry is easy to claim, but more than difficult to prove, and the chief reason for this is the Egyptian artistic convention. Until very recently, representational art has always been, by its very nature, a static principle – there is no life or movement in what we see. The artist may lead us by certain tricks, or we may know enough about a certain artistic style to understand their vision, but all sense of a living, breathing, moving, feeling human being is engendered by *us*. We look at something which may have very little of the real sense and proportion of a living being, but our eyes have been trained to interpret the artistic conventions, and life is indeed what we see.

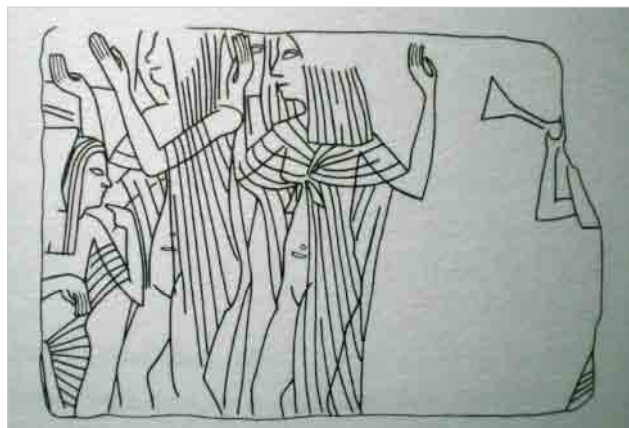
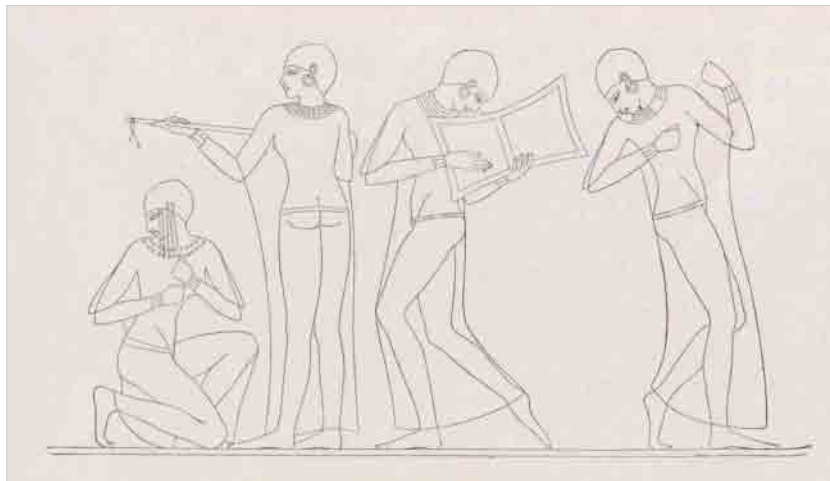
The basic precepts of Egyptian art had already been sketched out before the pharaohs ruled. From the earliest figures loosely inscribed onto pre-dynastic pottery, to the first writing found on wine labels, and to the ponderous bulk of a Ptolemaic queen (5,000BC to 30BC), it was always *cartoon art*. Even when sculpting in the round, the Egyptian artist gave paramount importance to the *outline* of the object. The area within these defining lines would then be left bare, or filled in with colour and texture. Although an Egyptian painting can seem to be teeming with detail, the human figures, their clothing, jewellery, and other attributes have actually been reduced to their simplest forms, and to the singular beauty of perfect outlines. This simplicity – shorthand, if you like – particularly applies to representations of retainers, servants, and persons of a lesser social importance. This grouping includes, with very few exceptions, entertainers, musicians, and dancers.

And thus, in the cartoon art of the ancient Egyptians we cannot see any of the muscle movement which would prove the existence of belly-dance. We cannot see the required skeletal adjustments. Nor can we see any clear evidence of where the dancer is controlling her moving weight. The Pharaoh may be shown with simple calf and bicep lines to demonstrate his required god-like strength, or with worry-lines across his brow to show his weighty concerns: but such refinements were not required in the depictions of entertainers. Apart from the occasional line of an ankle bone, or softly-rounded belly-crease, indications of working muscles in dancers are totally absent.

And this is why, for all our wishing otherwise, we cannot say that we have found belly-dancing in the tombs and temples of Egypt.



Above: The justly-famous “Dancer of Turin”, with her gravity-defying hoop earrings



Above: Two very different scenes of Egyptian dancers. In the first scene, the girls, professional dancers, wear hip belts, but show no musculature to indicate how they are dancing, and whether the hips are ornamented to add something to their performance or merely for their pleasing aesthetic. In the second, from Amarna, the less formally-drawn women seem to show belly creases. Although it is tempting to view these as evidence of movements similar to North African pelvic drops, we do not know exactly what the artist intended these markings to show. They may have nothing whatsoever to do with dancing.

In the declining years of Pharaonic Egypt, the northern reaches of the country were colonised by Greek settlers, who established their Mediterranean trading posts on the many branches of the Nile delta. These colonists formed alliances with the Princes of Sais, the last native rulers of Egypt, and held their ground throughout the subsequent Persian invasions. The Macedonian Alexander the Great sent the last Persian governor into honourable exile, and, after his death in 323BC, his foremost general Ptolemy successfully annexed Egypt as his own. For the next 300 years, the country was ruled by Ptolemy's descendants, and Lower Egypt adopted more and more Greek language and culture. A string of weak rulers eventually mortgaged the country to the Romans, and the death of Cleopatra VII in 30BC effectively ended any pretence that Egypt was anything other than a province of Rome.

Throughout all these long centuries the Egyptian artists maintained their age-old artistic conventions. Roman emperors – Augustus, Nero, Trajan, Domitian and the rest – continued to be portrayed as archetypal pharaohs on the walls of newly-built temples, and the dancing goddesses and female entertainers who were shown attending their birth-feasts and festival days continued to be shown as lithe, elegant cartoons.

The Greeks and Romans, however, had their own artistic conventions, in which the verity of the human form was not in its mere outline. Instead realistic representations of flesh, muscle, bone and sinew were required to give the verisimilitude of life and movement.

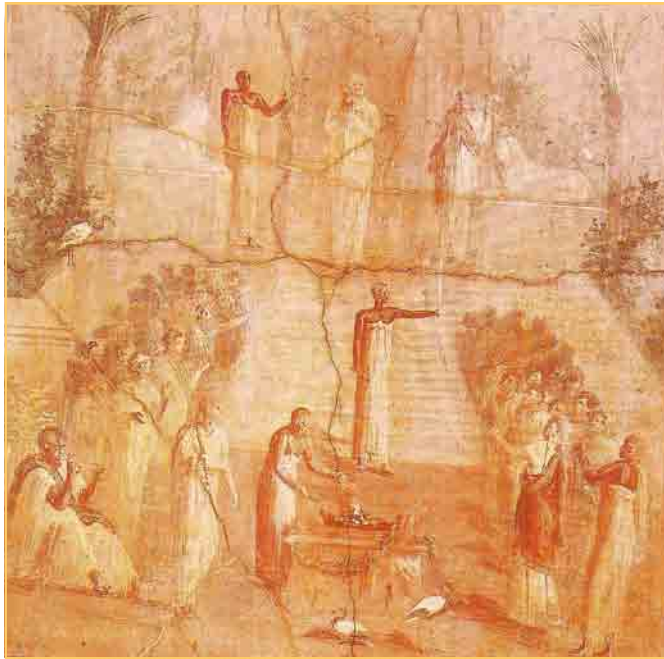
It is therefore fair to assume that a *Graeco-Roman* depiction of a belly-dancer would show working muscles, balanced weight, and body positions which we would recognise today. If such a depiction were to exist, we would have no hesitation in claiming that elusive ancestry.

It may surprise you to know that we have several hundred years of *written* accounts from the Greeks and Romans in praise – and occasional condemnation – of public entertainers: women *and* men, who belly-danced. Belly-dancers were painted onto the walls of bath-houses and brothels, and, in mosaic form, adorned the floors of elegant dining rooms. To the Greeks and Romans, however, this dance came, not from Egypt, but from Syria, from Phoenician North Africa, and from Levantine trading ports in Southern Spain.

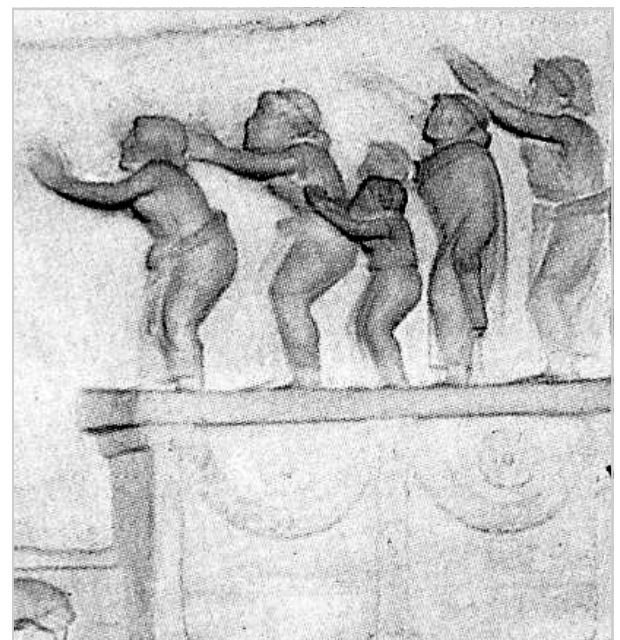
There is, though, one very unusual depiction of dancers in an undoubted Egyptian scenario. And what it shows us about early Egyptian dance is far more surprising than we might ever have guessed.

Nearly a hundred years ago, a broken marble panel was found in a collapsed 2nd century AD tomb, at Ariccia outside the old city boundaries of Rome. The anonymous grave was a simple affair, which had been strengthened and refined by re-using expensive materials scavenged from a far more elaborate *first century* tomb. The damaged panel is part of a relief showing audience and dancers in a stylised Egyptian temple, replete with divine statues and Nilotic symbolism. Unless more pieces of the original tomb come to light – and one has, and been tantalisingly lost – we will probably never know for whom it was designed and constructed, but, whoever they were, they left us an intriguing mystery, contained in one small detail.





Above: Scenes from Herculaneum showing activities in the temple of Isis. In the first scene the worshippers line up on either side, just as they appear to have done in the Ariccia relief. In the second scene musicians and dancers entertain the goddess in the inner sanctum. Sistra, frame-drums and hand-clapping provide the music



Above: The Ariccia “audience” and an enhanced image of the clapping figures. The “fillets of Isis” and bound hair can be clearly seen, as can the situla or “ceremonial bucket” carried by the Graeco-Roman Isis. The situla, which may derive from misinterpretation of the *tet*, or symbolic “knot of Isis” associated with the ancient form of the goddess, was believed to be both a receptacle in which her tears were collected and the mystical source of the Nile whose rise and fall was governed by her sistrum. Later devotees sprinkled the attendant crowds with water as an expression of the blessings to be conferred by Isis.



The Ariccia tomb-panel would once have measured around 150cm long, by 50cm deep. Only the right-hand side of the design remains intact. The panel has been broken along a diagonal crack, which means that we have lost just less than a third of the upper design, and a little more than half of the lower. From the symmetry of the upper part, which shows the temple columns and courtyard, we can guess that there would have been a similar sense of balance to the lower scenes. Let us look at what remains:

We would seem to be looking at events taking place during a festival. On the far right of the scene, standing on a raised platform, are at least five persons of various heights and ages. We can imagine that there would once have been a similar podium on the lost left hand side of the scene – indeed, a wall-painting of the temple of Isis in Herculaneum shows music and rituals performed in the temple courtyard, with the audience, or possibly choir, arranged on either side of the priests and musicians. In our scene, we can imagine that the platform, adorned with swagged garlands and rosettes, is probably outside the temple, is probably made of wood, and has been raised specifically for the audience's enjoyment of the activities taking place.

The five audience members appear to be all male. It is possible that the fourth figure in the group is female. He, or she, is swathed in a mantle, with hair that appears to be tied back into a bun. A cloaked figure in a public place may sometimes be artistic shorthand for a male traveller, or a female prostitute. All five figures wear the everyday clothes of ordinary people – although the Ariccia tomb would have been an expensive item, the people shown here are not nobility. All five figures *do*, however, appear to have their hair tied back with a band or fillet. A white fillet, popularised by Cleopatra who is shown wearing it in many of her supposed portraits, is particularly associated with those actively engaged in the worship of Isis. This would again suggest that we are looking at an event taking place during a festival of Isis. All five figures are clapping enthusiastically – it is tempting to imagine them singing lustily, and clicking their fingers in appreciation.

From these five energetic figures, it seems that we are being asked by the sculptor to envisage crowds of eager and excited devotees of the goddess. We know that the late first century Romans were avid followers of mystery cults drawn from outside their own traditions, and that these new and exotic “foreign” religions attracted worshippers from all walks of life. Given that their state religion espoused very public displays of morality, austerity, and piety by the great and the good, one can see the attractions of cults which promised to reveal great secrets and mysteries to their most devoted initiates, and pledged to even the poorest a blissful existence in the next world. One can also see the attractions of a religion which offered active participation in music and dance.



Above: A child-priestess of Isis and a portrait bust believed to show the young Cleopatra. Both wear the white fillet associated with the goddess



**Above left: Sosibia, 2nd century CE priestess of Isis carries a sistrum and situla-bucket . Her knotted robe again seems to suggest a devotee of Isis: compare her robe with that of the Capitoline Isis. Inset: Tet symbol or "knot of Isis"
Above right: Close-up of worshippers from Herculaneum**

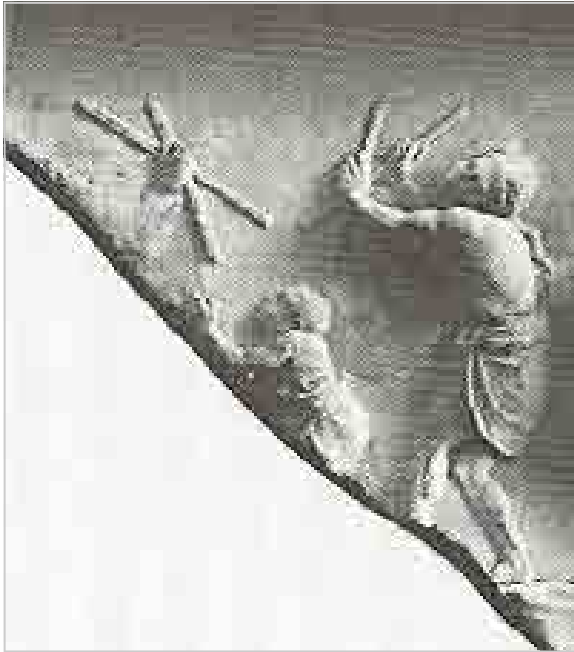
There are no musicians shown in the Ariccia relief. We have, however, two groups of dancers, and three other figures whose importance will become clear. The first group of two dancers were once in the centre of the scene, but they are now badly damaged. One is reduced to hands and the ghost of an arm; the other has lost but a foot. This remaining male figure is kilted in a skirted tunic, and, like his lost partner, seems to be dancing with a short stick in each hand. So very little of this pair remains that it is difficult to see them in context, and to understand what is meant by their dance. One could see a type of Morris dancer, or see something like the complex patterns and conversations of the Indian dances associated with the spring festival of Vaisakhi. Short skirts were often associated with comic figures on the Roman stage, and these dancers could be intended for clowns.



Above: Ibis frieze
Left: Modern scherma dancers
whose pointed hand-gestures
recall lost knives

A very real possibility is that these dancers are performing an ancestor of the Italian *scherma* dance, a combative male dance once performed in conjunction with the female *tarantella*. Today, the *scherma* is performed with hand gestures only, but older accounts suggest that the dancers used knives, short-swords, or cudgels.

Beneath all the dancing figures runs a low frieze of Egyptian ibis, the ugly black and white birds held sacred to the gods of the Nile. There are many different explanations given for the honour awarded to this noisy and rather pungent creature. Its white plumage and leathery, featherless head and neck reminded the Egyptians of the shrouded dead. They also believed that it could fly far longer and higher than any other bird, excepting the Horus falcon, and could therefore be relied upon to carry messages to the gods. Egyptian temples ran a lucrative business in dedicating mummified ibis to the gods, together with the prayers of whoever had purchased them. Tombs around Saqqara are stuffed to the roof with the wrapped remains of dead birds. The most important proof of the ibis' divinity, however, was its annual arrival in Egypt a few days before the rising autumn flood-waters came down from Ethiopia, bringing with them the life-giving, fertile mud. Isis, as Mistress of the Nile, ordained when and how high the waters would rise, and hence how rich the harvest to come in the following spring. Most commentators dismiss the presence of the ibis and the other Egyptian elements on the relief as merely fashionable first-century decoration, with little or no relevance to the context of the rest of the scene. I disagree with this standpoint, and would suggest that the ibis are included to reinforce the artist's assertion that the scene is taking place within the precinct of the temple. It is possible that they are also there to represent the ceaseless cycle of fertility, for it is my belief that the Ariccia tomb panel shows – to those who can read it – the eternal transcendence of human love and sexual desire over human mortality. This is the brazen challenge of the Dancers of Ariccia, and perhaps why they have made their commentators so uncomfortable.



Above left: All that remains of the Ariccia stick dances
Above right: Stick dancers from the New Kingdom tomb of Kheruef



Above: Egyptian ibis in the temple of Isis
The presence of these birds on the Herculaneum frescoes is clearly intended to evoke and indicate the temple of the Egyptian goddess

The Dancers of Ariccia are three voluptuous women. They do not gaze up at the heavens, nor coyly lower their glances after the fashion of classical Graeco-Roman dancers. Instead, they present their backs to us, more particularly their beautiful, rounded *bottoms*. They appear nude, but if you look closely, you can see that they are wearing long, diaphanous dresses, cut to enhance their swaying figures. Curious fingers, doubtless separated by nineteen centuries, have polished their pleasing curves to a surprising sheen. Their hair is fashionably draped and curled, and all three of them stretch their arms high above their heads, holding castanets in their hands.

When the Ariccia relief came to London with the *Cleopatra of Egypt* exhibition, I stood in front of it, with the Dancers at eye-level. I saw for the first time, bent knees and the full roundness of working calf and thigh muscles. Two of the Dancers stand with their legs “hip-width apart”; their centres-of-gravity are lowered; their pelvic slouch is corrected and their torsos are lengthened, with relaxed, and lowered shoulders. Moreover, in realistically portraying their admired curves, the sculptor shows us three dancers whose hips are free to twist and turn and tremble. These women know and enjoy their own bodies: we can almost see them move.

The dancers we failed to find in Egypt, were waiting for us in Rome, for they are, without doubt, *belly-dancers*.

We know that there were troops of professional female belly-dancers in Rome, of slave status, but highly prized for the revenue they could bring to their owner-managers. In Egypt too, the temples had always had their troops of trained dancers, acrobats and musicians. It is therefore possible that a troop of Levantine dancers was attached to the Isis temple shown in the Ariccia relief, or else that their services were employed for the duration of the festival. The prime instruments of these dancing girls were various forms of hand percussion such as clappers, crotales, finger-cymbals, and castanets.

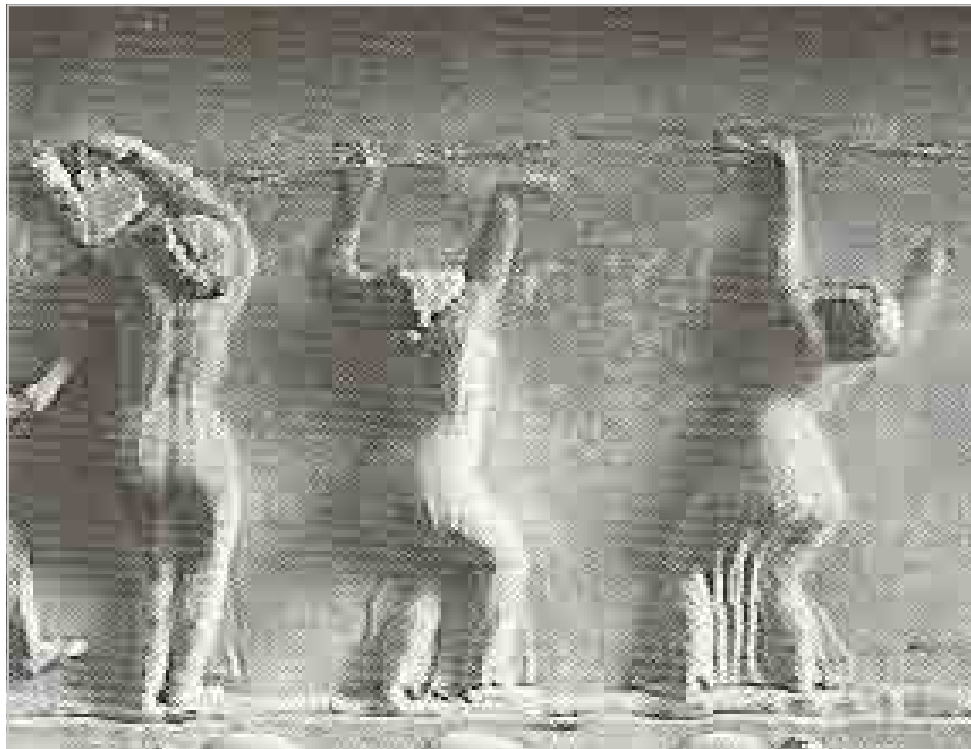
Intriguingly, we also know from the literature of the time, that belly-dancing was not just practised by the professionals – women from housemaids to high-class courtesans were eager to learn the secrets of this fashionable art, and to demonstrate their own proficiency. Such marginalised women were very often to be found amongst the followers of Isis. The acerbic and misanthropic poet Juvenal suggests that Isis temples were little better than brothels, and that women, far more corruptible than men, eagerly ensnared themselves in foreign cults which allowed them to drink, dance, and generally behave in a debauched manner. The Ariccia Dancers are therefore *probably*, but not *necessarily*, professionals.

The poet Martial tells of one dancer, Telethusa, who earned so much money for her manager that he sold her for an exorbitant price, only to swiftly buy her back and make her his wife. We know of other dancers who earned their freedom: some left the profession to get married or become courtesans, others returned to train dancers, or to manage their own troops of girls. Could the Ariccia tomb have belonged to someone who funded the sort of public entertainment that featured belly-dancers? Could it have belonged to a wealthy troop-manager? Could it even have belonged to someone who was once a dancer herself?

Looking at them with a dancer’s eyes, I tell myself that the first Dancer is a tease and a flirt: she prizes her small, subtle movements and her body’s fluidity. The second Dancer is boisterous, an extrovert; she makes herself larger than life in wonderful “look-at-me” exuberance. The third Dancer loses herself in a music we cannot hear: she is something else entirely...



Above : The Dancers of Ariccia



Above : More detail in black and white

The third Dancer stands on widely-spaced legs. Her upraised arms hang with their own weight: she is no longer capable of moving them. Her head rolls back onto her shoulders. Her upper body sags backwards. Her eyes are closed. Her dress clings to the muscles in her back: she has reached the point of utter abandonment. Her breasts are raised in one last, despairing gasp. Tracing the muscles in her right leg, I can see that her knee is about to buckle. She is about to fall backwards.

In a little visual trick, the sculptor has shown her heels rolling over the line that marks the floor. There is no doubt that this woman has danced herself to a state of collapse.

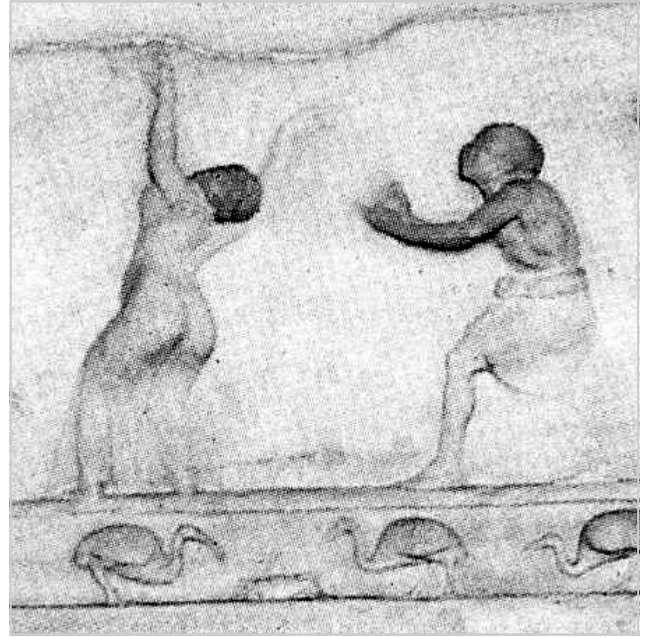
This is not, however, from mere exhaustion. With a dancer's eyes, I know that I have seen the same loss of consciousness in archive film footage from Egypt and North Africa. I have seen and taken part in similar rituals in northern Morocco. I have seen the same falling shapes, in men and in women. The third Dancer is collapsing because she has entered a *state of trance*.

Once you realise this, it is immediately apparent that the additional male figures who appear amongst the dancers are not themselves performers; nor are they enthusiastic members of the audience unable to keep to their seats. These men *know* that the dancers may enter a trance state. They are the same watchers and waiters who are an essential part of trance ceremonies all over the world. Their trusted role is to catch the trance dancer, to make sure she does not hurt herself in falling, to draw her gently away from those who are still dancing and, being lost in the rhythm, may be unaware of someone lying unconscious at their feet.

The catchers seem to be wearing Egyptian kilts, and their presence tells us that the Ariccia relief is not just an interesting representation of a popular entertainment in first century Rome. The Dancers of Ariccia are engaged in a trance ritual. Trance-dancing is, to its advocates, a deeply spiritual act in which the participants confront the terrors of the demonic world, and, growing stronger in their faith, are released from the restraining earth into a different state. Some are content to stay in the euphoria of this altered state, and some demonstrate that they can now withstand physical pain, such as burning fire. Others forge ahead, striving to reach a further, unobtainable plane of consciousness. Momentarily, through the repeating patterns of rhythm, music, and dance, they believe they can reach the realm of the gods. But no mortal being can look into the face of forever and survive: the very instant they reach the highest state of total awareness, their bodies shut down. They collapse, and fall away into a dreamless sleep. They awake healed: those who have watched them come away blessed, and able to begin their own journeys towards healing.

The scurrilous verses in which the professional belly-dancers of Rome are most often found portray these dancing-girls as only scarcely better than common prostitutes, hired out by managers as debauched as they. They hitch up their skirts to show off their trembling limbs. They strike lewd poses, and sing vulgar songs. They are the perfect acquisition for a protracted bachelor party. Low taverns in the seedier districts find work for "retired dancers" as bar-girls for the amusement of their patrons. If, however, the Dancers of Ariccia *are* professional dancing-girls, then the relief shows that these women were not just public entertainers. There is something of their story that is not being told by the poets and playwrights.

Could it be that, for all our vain searching in Egypt, and for all the hopes of wishful thinkers, we have finally found the link between belly-dance and the temples of Isis?



Above : Close-ups of the third dancer and catcher



Above left: First dancer and catcher. Right: Graeco-Roman figurine of Isis as *Krotalistris* or castanet-player (note also her headdress and knotted robe)

And here is where I must tell you what is meant by the scorpion.

For all that we have thus far learned about the Dancers of Ariccia, the age-old question remains: the question that we must always ask when presented with a mystery.

What is this thing, and what does it mean?

I am going to offer you a solution to the mystery. I will show you an Italian spider, and a stinging Grecian fly: and I will ask you to exchange both of them for the kiss of an Egyptian scorpion.

