

THE DANCERS OF ARICCIA



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

Jo Hirons

(originally published as a series of three articles for NADA, 2007)

Part 3

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3 - Kiss of the Scorpion

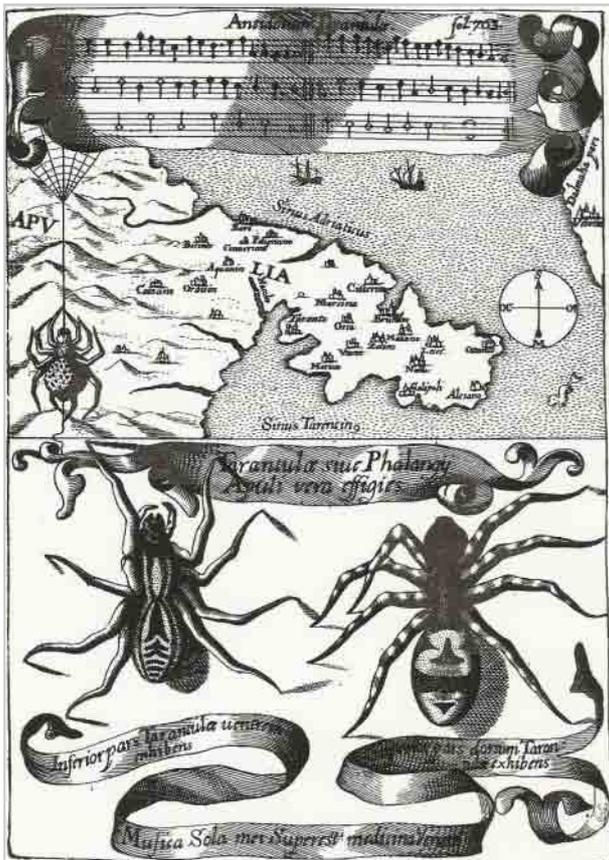
There are three dances associated with the tarantella of Southern Italy. The first, the most well-known, is a courtship dance, a dance for men and women, performed at Italian weddings the world over. The second is the *scherma*, or *szerma*, a combative dance between two men that is sometimes said to have originated with the gypsies. Today's *scherma* dancers hold out their arms, make fists with their hands, and raise the first two fingers stiffly to mimic the knives that they are no longer allowed to carry. Although the dance is intended to show the skill and bravery of its participants, it is said to have once been a dance to the death. Evidence would appear to support this assertion, since there are numerous historical accounts of dancers performing with knives, short swords, and cudgels. The third dance of the trilogy is the least understood – this is the women's trance dance, the *pizzica*.

The name "tarantella" means "from the region of Taranto". Taranto, the old Graeco-Roman port of Tarentum, is located on the inside of the "heel" of Italy, but the dances which bear its name can be found all across the south, in Sicily, and Sardinia. Popular folklore instead derives tarantella from the tarantula, a name given originally to a local type of wolf-spider.

According to belief – which has been recorded since the Middle Ages – the tarantula spider was once more prevalent in the region than it is today, and its poison was far more deadly. Children, the old, and infirm could perish from a single bite, but the spider of Taranto was far more dangerous to those who survived, for its venom carried an incurable disease which tormented those bitten by it for the rest of their lives. The disease, *tarantism*, compelled those who suffered from it, *tarantati*, to act in a peculiar manner: "some sing, others laugh, others weep, others again cry out unceasingly: some sleep whilst others are unable to sleep; some vomit, or sweat, or tremble; others fall into continual terrors, or into frenzies, rages, and furies. This poison provokes passions for different colours, so that some take pleasure in red, others in green, yet others in yellow" (1690). The only cure for the inflicted *tarantati* was to dance.

Dancing was believed to build up heat within the body, which burnt off the excess poison in the blood; the poison could then lie dormant for months or years, but it would never truly leave its victim. Those bitten by the tarantula were marked for life.

The form the dancing took differed from person to person. Some responded to slow rhythms, others to quicker beats; some chose songs of mourning, others were attracted by livelier music. Men inflicted by the disease could become belligerent, and they danced with sticks and swords. Women danced with wedding veils and child-like dolls to show the hopes of which the spider had robbed them. Some men became so confused by the poison that they dressed themselves like women, and young girls could believe themselves soldiers. Sometimes the *tarantati* danced in a lewd and provocative manner, but they could not be blamed, for they were powerless to resist the torment of their disease. When there were great outbreaks of tarantism – during the harvest season when many working in the fields could be bitten, or during particularly hot summers when the spiders were active – the inflicted were brought together so that the local musicians could run through their whole repertoire in search of a cure. The most efficacious melodies were passed from town to town; the composers were rewarded, and the tunes written down to preserve their healing power.



Top left: Athanasius Kircher's fascination with all things mysterious led him inevitably to the legend of the tarantella.
 Top right: Leon Perrault's more picturesque representation of peasant dancers.



Left: Older images show how the madness of spider bites led to the wild and disordered dances of Taranto. Note the sword dancer and worryingly large spiders! Right: Duret's celebrated bronze from the Louvre shows a Neapolitan fisherman dancing the tarantella. Note the continued use of wooden clappers or castanets from Roman times

Pizzica, the name of the women's dance, means "sting", or "little bite". The dancers, mostly, but not exclusively, women, dance until they lose consciousness, and, when they awake, find themselves healed, albeit temporarily, of the spider's malign influence. The last of the true *tarantati*, a *pizzicata*, died in the 1990s: those bitten in the early part of the twentieth century – before, so it is said, modern pesticides curbed the virulence of the spider – took their mysteries to the grave, and we will perhaps never know what truly compelled them to dance.

The disordered behaviour of the *tarantati* may show the passions of depressed, unhappy, and disaffected people. In times where temporary and permanent mental disharmony was little understood, public dancing could give sufferers the chance to give vent to their emotions. Their troubles could be expressed, brought out into the open, and accepted by the community at large. Some symptoms of the *tarantati* do, however, suggest a certain level of intoxication, although whether this is through external influence or auto-suggestion is unknown. Synaesthesia – the confusion of the senses whereby it becomes possible, for example, to hear and taste colours – is reported in the age-old trance ceremonies of the Gnawa tribes of Algeria and Morocco, and by those who take Ecstasy and similar substances to enhance their very modern experience of music and dance.

Modern commentators have suggested that the excesses of tarantism may owe more to ergotism than the bite of a spider. Bread and grain stored in damp conditions can sprout a mould – ergot – which, if ingested, may produce hallucinogenic symptoms, and a sensation of burning nerves which could be relieved by dancing. Others suggest that the farming people of Southern Italy invented the myth of the tarantula to enable them to continue their ancient harvest traditions in the face of church opposition. By this subterfuge, those who might ordinarily be offended by their dancing would see the stamping gestures of the tarantella dance as the fervent desire of the afflicted to rid themselves of the cursed spider, and could therefore overlook the darker *scherma* and dangerous *pizzica*.

The legend of the tarantula may very well pre-date Christianity – but could it possibly be older still?



As the Greeks told her story, Io was the daughter of the river-god Inachos, and a priestess in the temple of Hera, who was unfortunate enough to attract the amorous attentions of Zeus. Fearing the jealousy of his wife, Zeus first hid Io beneath a rain-cloud, and then transformed the pregnant girl into a white cow to hide her on the plains of Argos. Hera was not to be fooled. She sent a stinging fly to torment her rival, driving Io away from Greece forever, and poor Io was doomed to wander the world in the shape of a cow.

Some tales tell of the wanderings of the white cow in Thrace, in Asia Minor, and the lands around the Black Sea; others say that Joppa, Iopolis (Antioch), and the Ionian Sea are named after her. She went to Arabia, to Syria, and as far away as India, changing colour from white, to red, and to black with the waning of the moon. Arriving at its source in Ethiopia, Io travelled down the Nile until she came to Egypt. There she gave birth to the bull Apis, son of Zeus, and regained her human shape. Io then married the king of Egypt, and was revered as the goddess Isis after her death.

It used to be thought that the *purpose* of this myth was a demonstration by the later Greeks that *their* gods were of a far superior lineage to the latterly popular Egyptian Isis. Archaeo-historians now believe that Io was the name of an ancient Argive cow-goddess whose worship was preserved in the Greek settlements that bordered the Eastern Mediterranean. As the Greeks travelled, they saw the cow-goddesses of other lands as different forms of the one they knew from their own stories, none more so that the ancient Egyptian cow-goddess Hathor. In Egypt, Hathor and Isis were two separate goddesses with their own priesthoods and cult-centres, but, to the incoming Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples, they were interchangeable. Isis was mother and lover, and, like Hathor, a midwife and mourner of the dead. Together they would become the most powerful goddess of late antiquity. The cow-goddess became Mistress of Magic and Queen of the World.

So what are the wanderings of Io to the history of Egyptian dance?

In the fifth century BC, a Greek playwright, long thought to be Aeschylus, introduced Io as a character in his *Prometheus Bound*. Here Prometheus, the Titan who repeatedly tricked the gods to aid mankind, endures their eternal cruel punishments, chained to a mountain in the Caucasus, and Io, the cow-girl who would become Isis, is one of a series of travellers who briefly cease their own journeys to converse with the god. Prometheus makes prophesies, but Io can only bewail her own fate. "Eleleleleleu! Eleleleleleu!" she cries, one of the earliest attempts to transcribe the mourning *zaghareet*.

It is thought that the Greek Io was a moon-goddess, from the sympathy of her curving horns with the horns of the crescent moon. The waxing and waning of the moon marked the turning seasons, and governed the tides: the first ways of measuring time. Stories link Io with the arrival of the spring rains, just as her Egyptian equivalent Isis governed the rising of the Ethiopian Nile that brought the annual floods, and the start of the growing season. The Argive cow-priestesses danced to bring the rains, but, far from being the innocent victim of later stories, their goddess *flaunted* her charms to woo the distant sky-god. Their dances began with flirtation, and ended with the stinging fly driving them to madness, dances of despair and ecstasy.

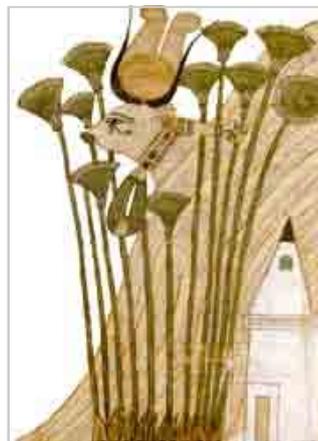
The word used for the fly is *oestrus*, the root of our word "oestrogen", the female hormone. *Oestrus* originally meant "frenzy" and "madness". It was used for a female animal "on heat", and "in season", and for the frantic desire of creatures of either sex to mate. It was also used for the despairing madness of the lovesick, and for the predatory sexual madness of the many female demons and monsters which inhabited the shadowy lands of the Greek Underworld. It is also to be found in the frenzied dances of the Maenads, priestesses of the vine-god Dionysus.

Is there a link between the stinging Grecian fly, and the biting Italian spider? And if there is, what does this link tell us about trance dance, and the Mysteries of Isis?





Above left: Fresco showing the horned Io brought to Isis in Egypt
 Above right: Io shown as a priestess of Isis



Above left: Predynastic female figure, usually interpreted as a goddess or priestess. Her raised and curved arms recall the unusual horns of the ancient Egyptian cow-goddess Bat (above right). The equally ancient cow-goddess Hathor is often depicted with the face of Bat, or as the divine cow Hesat or Meret-Weret welcoming the dead to the Afterlife. Bottom right: Isis at Abydos is shown with the horns of Hathor and the face of Bat upon her time-measuring sistrum

In this series of three articles, I have introduced you to a marble relief from Roman Ariccia. It dates from the first century AD, a time when the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis was gaining widespread popularity in countries north of the Mediterranean. Her many devotees openly took part in her temple rituals, and her festivals and processions could be attended by both the poorest citizens and members of the Imperial family. The Ariccia relief shows activities taking place during one such festival which include an eager audience, and male and female dancers. The female dancers have all the characteristics of the professional dancing girls of Rome, who, according to contemporary poets and other writers, came from Syria, North Africa and Southern Spain. I have demonstrated that one of the female dancers is entering a trance-like state, and that there are other persons present who expect the trance-state to happen, and whose role is to care for those who enter it.

I believe that the Ariccia relief shows one of the earliest undoubted examples of belly-dance in an Egyptian setting. I also believe that there is evidence within the Ariccia relief which shows how we may at last link belly-dance with the worship of Isis and with temple rituals of trance and healing.

I have presented my evidence thus far, but, if you wish to proceed with my argument, you will need to abandon any notion you may have of belly-dance being an entirely *and exclusively* female mystery. Belly-dance can be a chaste and beautiful paean of praise to the Goddess, but it can also be rude and lewd, dark, and exuberant, and dangerous.

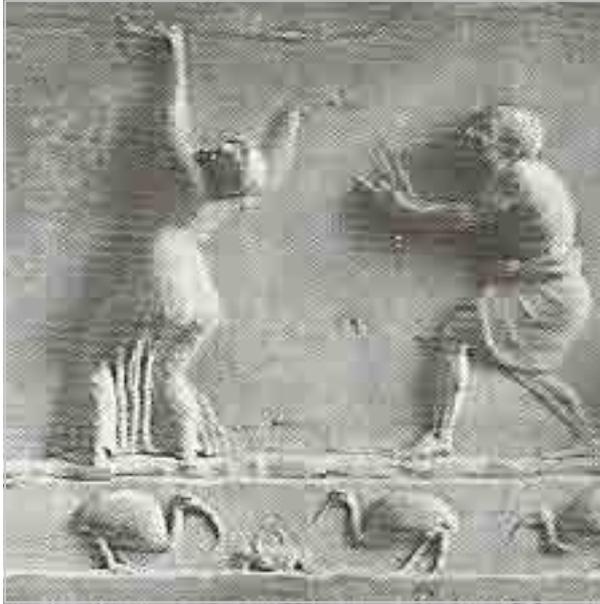
If you want to understand the mystery of the Dancers of Ariccia, you will need to be able to look sex in the face.

Will you accept the kiss of the scorpion?

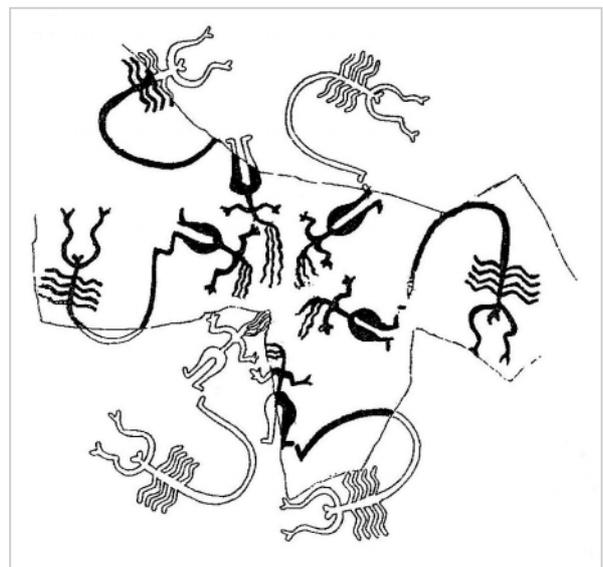
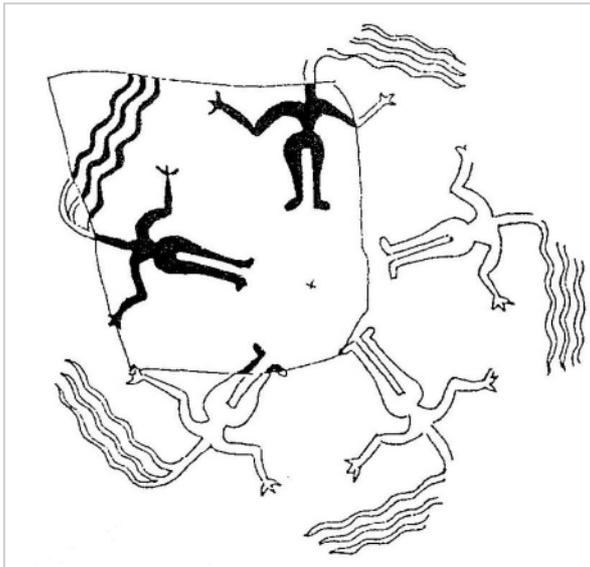
It is hard to make out, just an incongruous mass amongst the frieze of ibis, but, if you were to stand in front of the Ariccia relief, you would see that, just beneath the buckling right leg of the trancing dancer, the sculptor has placed a crouching scorpion, its tail raised and full of venom. Distracted by the dancers above, you might pass this by, but the *scorpion* is the key to the whole mystery.

The ancestors of scorpions first roamed the earth some 250 million years ago, and, highly successful, they have seen very little need to evolve, or to adapt their primitive ways. Even today, when we have examined and explained the various stages of its life-cycle, the scorpion continues to appal and fascinate in equal measure. For ancient peoples, this dangerous and potentially fatal creature entered their mythology at a very early stage: Scorpio has been one of the zodiacal signs for at least 4,000 years; one of the first identifiable kings of Egypt, ruling around 3,100BC, is named "Scorpion"; scorpion warriors guard the Mountain of Light in the Epic of Gilgamesh; and a panel from a Mesopotamian lyre of 2,600BC depicts a topsy-turvy story-teller's world of dancing bears and singing donkeys, where a tipsy gazelle carouses with a jovial scorpion. The ancients studied the scorpion and told stories to explain what they saw: night-roaming scorpions could read the stars; they stung themselves to death rather than cross fire; and went mad if made to drink alcohol.

Despite the promised efficacy of many surviving spells, Pliny the Elder reports that scorpion bites are always fatal to women and young girls. In truth, scorpion venom is not always fatal, and its potency varies from species to species, and from scorpion to scorpion. It is, however, a neuro-toxin, and those who have survived powerful doses report coma, paralysis, tremors, frenetic behaviour, hallucinations, and synaesthesia.



Left: The scorpion in the Ariccia relief, below the buckling leg of the dancing dancer. Right: Bowl from Samarra which seems to show the frenzied dance of male scorpions stinging themselves when exposed to the heat of the sun. The central motif is an ancient sun-symbol used by many Indo-European cultures



Above left: A Samarran bowl fragment showing five women tossing their hair as they dance.

Above right: Another bowl fragment in which the dancing scorpions are seen to sting the feet of the dancing women, an indication that a trance-state or quivering frenzy is implied



Left: Dancers in the 19th Dynasty Egyptian tomb of Kheruef performing at a spring festival. Is there a link between their strange posture and tossing hair and the dancing women of Samarra?

The most pertinent tale about scorpions, however, as any desert-dweller knows, is that they are one of the few creatures who *dance*.

The male scorpion of certain species judders, shakes, and stamps to draw the attention of nearby females. Males contending for a single female will spar with each other, claws raised, attempting to drive their rival away before they inevitably fight. Sometimes many male scorpions will gather in one place searching for a mate: exposure to the hot sun can affect their cold-blooded metabolism, causing them to judder and dance, and, eventually, to appear to sting themselves in their continued frustration. Although we now know that a scorpion cannot be killed by its own poison, it was believed that the madness of a frustrated male could lead to this suicidal despair.

A male scorpion who successfully locates a receptive female then engages in a protracted courtship dance, pincers locked. As this dance progresses, one scorpion may appear to sting the other in the mouth – the so-called “scorpion kiss”. We now know that scorpion mating takes place outside the body: the male deposits a spermatophore and the purpose of the courtship dance is to manoeuvre the female into a position where she may take this up. Before this process was fully understood, however, it was believed that mating actually took place *during* the dance and kiss. To confuse matters still further, female scorpions held in captivity reproduce through parthenogenesis, without the need of a mate.

We know that dancing scorpions and dancing women were inextricably linked thousands of years before the Ariccia relief, and long before Pliny recalled a half-remembered story. There are numerous examples in pottery fragments dating from the sixth millennium BC found in modern-day Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Armenia. As particular evidence, I would present three fine examples of bowl fragments from Samarra in Iraq. The first shows frenzied scorpions stinging themselves when exposed to the heat of the sun. The second shows stylised dancing women: these women toss their long hair as they dance in the manner of today’s Khaleeji dancers, and more particularly in that of the trance-dancing women of North Africa. The third example shows the same dancing women, and each one is being stung on the foot by a dancing scorpion.

So what exactly is happening in the Ariccia relief?

We have a Roman tomb from the first century AD, where a professional belly-dancing girl, possibly from Syria or Levantine trading posts around the Mediterranean, is taking part in a temple ritual in honour of an Egyptian goddess. We also know that, by this point in history, Isis had not only adopted many of the characteristics of the cow-goddess Hathor, but also those of the great mother-goddesses of Asia Minor. The girl is shown to be entering a trance-like state from the sting of a scorpion: this is a significant part of the unknown ritual, as there are temple servants, wearing Egyptian clothing, who are ready to catch her as she falls.

None of the contemporary accounts of Roman dancing-girls explains what is happening in the Ariccia relief, but, in parallel scenes from different times and different places, we see Greek priestesses dancing for a sky-god and driven mad by a stinging fly, and we see Italian women trance-dancing from the early Middle Ages to near present-day through the poisonous bite of a spider. The Samarran pottery shows us that the image of the scorpion and the dancer has been with us almost since the dawn of history.

So what is the lost meaning of the women who dance with scorpions?

To answer this we must return to Egypt and examine the beliefs surrounding the scorpion goddess Selket, or Serqet.

The prime function of this goddess is usually seen to be the personification of the dangerous nature of the scorpion and other stinging creatures. Offerings could be made to Selket to pray for protection from injury, and to ensure that no harm would come to one's children and livestock. One could also pray for Selket to send her poisons to bring harm to one's enemies, or to drive off demons. As a goddess of magic, she is usually associated with Isis, and her best-known image is the beautiful little golden goddess from the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Her name means "she who holds open the throat", and she was believed to bring back breath to those who have entered the Afterlife. Egyptologists are at a loss to explain why this belief should be attached to a scorpion whose venom could kill and paralyze. If we now factor in what we have learned from studying the Ariccia relief, we can see that death might be considered a trance-like state from which a follower of the goddess might awaken and breathe again. We might also recall that the Maenads, the trance-dancing priestesses of Dionysus, were also believed to "hold open the throat". By repeatedly tipping the head backwards in dance they could reach a state of *ex stasis* – ecstasy, being outside – where they could be entered by the spirit of the god.

Another aspect of Selket may now also be understood – her presence in scenes of divine marriage. The best example of this is at Deir el-Bahri, the mortuary temple of the pharaoh-queen Hatshepsut (1,473 – 1,458BC). In this scene, the very moment of Hatshepsut's conception is shown: on the left we see her mother, Queen Ahmose, in all her royal regalia, and, on the right, not, as one might think, her actual *human* father Tuthmosis, but the king of the gods, Amun-Ra. The god does not touch Ahmose: instead, he reaches out to her hands and her mouth with an ankh, the symbol of life. Presiding over this divine union is Hathor, in her guise as Goddess of the West and of eternal life, and Selket, the scorpion.

The same iconography is seen over a thousand years earlier in a Sumerian seal from 2800 to 2600BC which shows the goddess Inanna and her mortal lover Dumuzi sharing a marriage bed beneath which lies the scorpion sacred to the goddess. Other Mesopotamian seals show scorpions dancing around the star-flower symbol of the goddess Ishtar.

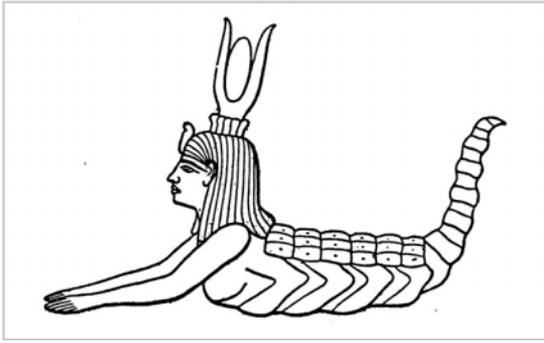
In the correspondences of astrology, whereby the well-being of the various component parts of the human body are governed by the influence of the stars, Scorpio presides over both male and female genitalia.

So here we have, at last, the secret of the Ariccia relief.

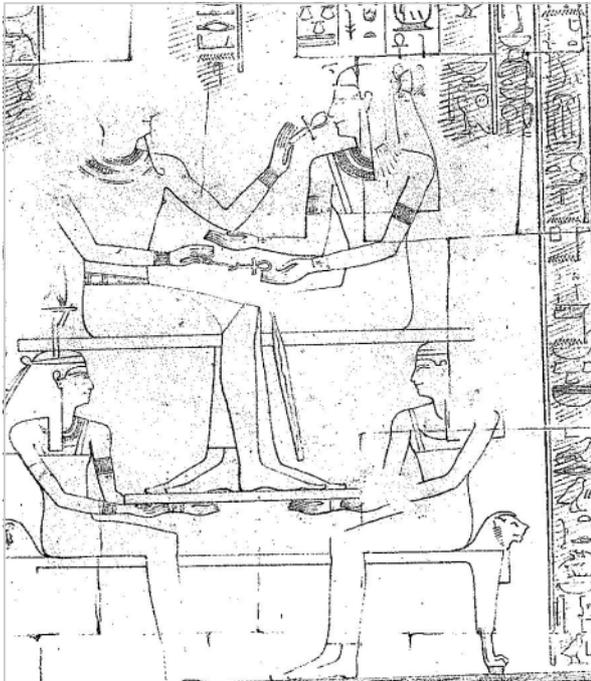
The scorpion is, if you like, shorthand for sex, for love, for human sexuality that transcends death.

It is a story the ancients knew well: the lost, hidden, forgotten story of the dancing girls. There was a time when a public performer, a woman who knew every nuance of her own body, and its effect upon others, even though that body may have been a commodity to be bought and sold and bartered for, may still have been a type of priestess.

The Ariccia relief shows the very moment a devotee of the goddess slips into a trance-like state, and, in accepting the kiss of the scorpion, passes through the gates of death into the healing house of forever. Her devotion is expressed not through prayer or piety, but by an ecstatic dance of sexual union without physical contact. In dancing for the goddess, she becomes the goddess, and the god is awoken to her presence. Io and Selket show her the way. She truly asks: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, thy victory?"



Left: The scorpion-goddess Selket. Right: A Graeco-Phoenician seal from the 6th century BC, showing the winged Egyptian goddess Isis as scorpion.



**Left: The divine marriage of Queen Ahmose and the god Amun witnessed by the goddesses Hathor and Selket. Right: Scorpions engage in courtship dances about the star-flower of Ishtar-Inanna, goddess of love.
Below: The goddess's scorpion below the marriage-bed of Inanna and Dumuzi**



This is why the Dancers of Ariccia appear on the wall of a tomb: whoever was buried in their marble embrace knew and rejoiced in their story. Of course, being professional performers and a valuable commodity, the Dancers may very well have risen the following morning after their trance-induced sleep, and gone about their usual business. Maybe weeks or months could pass before they were employed again for a temple feast day, to lead the faithful with their dances of piquant beauty, of lusty exuberance, and of healing trance.

The trance dances of North Africa, which many see as the poor relation of belly-dance, an unacceptably-primitive undercurrent somehow associated with their refined art-form through a freak of geography, are inextricably given a shared parentage through the Ariccia relief. We can perhaps also see that the origins of the tarantella dances began not with a biting spider but with transferred folk-memories of the scorpion, brought to Italy with Isis by the trading Greeks.

It is still said that the spider-bitten Italian *pizzicata* must dance for joy, and only for joy if she is not to awake in her grave.

But what does solving the mystery of the Ariccia relief *mean* for today's belly-dancer? It must first be stated, categorically, that the Ariccia relief does not provide any evidence for belly-dancing forming part of the temple-worship of Isis – or any other Egyptian goddess – any earlier than the first century AD. Although we have found circumstantial suggestions, that is a search that must remain in the realms of wishful thinking, at least for the time being. Secondly, the Ariccia relief does not provide any evidence that belly-dancing is Egyptian in origin – it is still tempting to concur with the Greek and Roman writers that the dance came from Syria, Iraq, and the Levant, and was introduced by colonists from these countries into Egypt, North Africa, and Spain.

The relief *does*, however, tell us that we should change some of our fixed mind-sets. For the last thirty years or so, those who have sought a spiritual origin for belly-dance have been encouraged to believe that this is an exclusively female dance; that priestesses danced for the Great Mother before unthinking men destroyed her benign rule and healing mysteries. The women who danced with scorpions show us that we should take a more balanced view, that female exclusivity is just as sterile as male dominance.

If you choose to envisage priestesses dancing for the goddess, then you must also accept that women danced for the pleasure of the god. We should perhaps understand that, even as a religious experience, the attractions of temple dancing may have been very little different to that of a modern night-club. Like the Ariccia dancers and their audience, some dance for the beauty of dancing, others for the sheer enjoyment of their own physicality; for some it is a ritual of dance-induced oblivion, and for some it is just about sex.

Belly-dance is all of these things – and more. And not one of them is wrong, for each in its separate way is an expression of love. In dancing, and in watching dancers, we experience something that is inexpressible: a fleeting, transient, perfect moment that cannot be captured. It is that sudden start of breath that holds open the throat: a glimpse of immortality. The kiss of a scorpion.

The Ariccia relief should not lie unrecognised in a Roman museum. It should be known and embraced by every woman – and man – who dances. It is the first fixed point in datable history where we can demonstrate that Egypt, belly-dancing, trance-dancing, and temple-worship once came together. It has given “the oldest dance” a 2,000 year pedigree. Everything before this is, as yet, unguessed, unproven, untranslated. Possible. Asleep. Waiting.

It is our Rosetta Stone. Everything starts from here.



Above: A bacchante, follower of Dionysus sleeps having danced herself to a state of exhaustion. Below: A Roman funeral procession.

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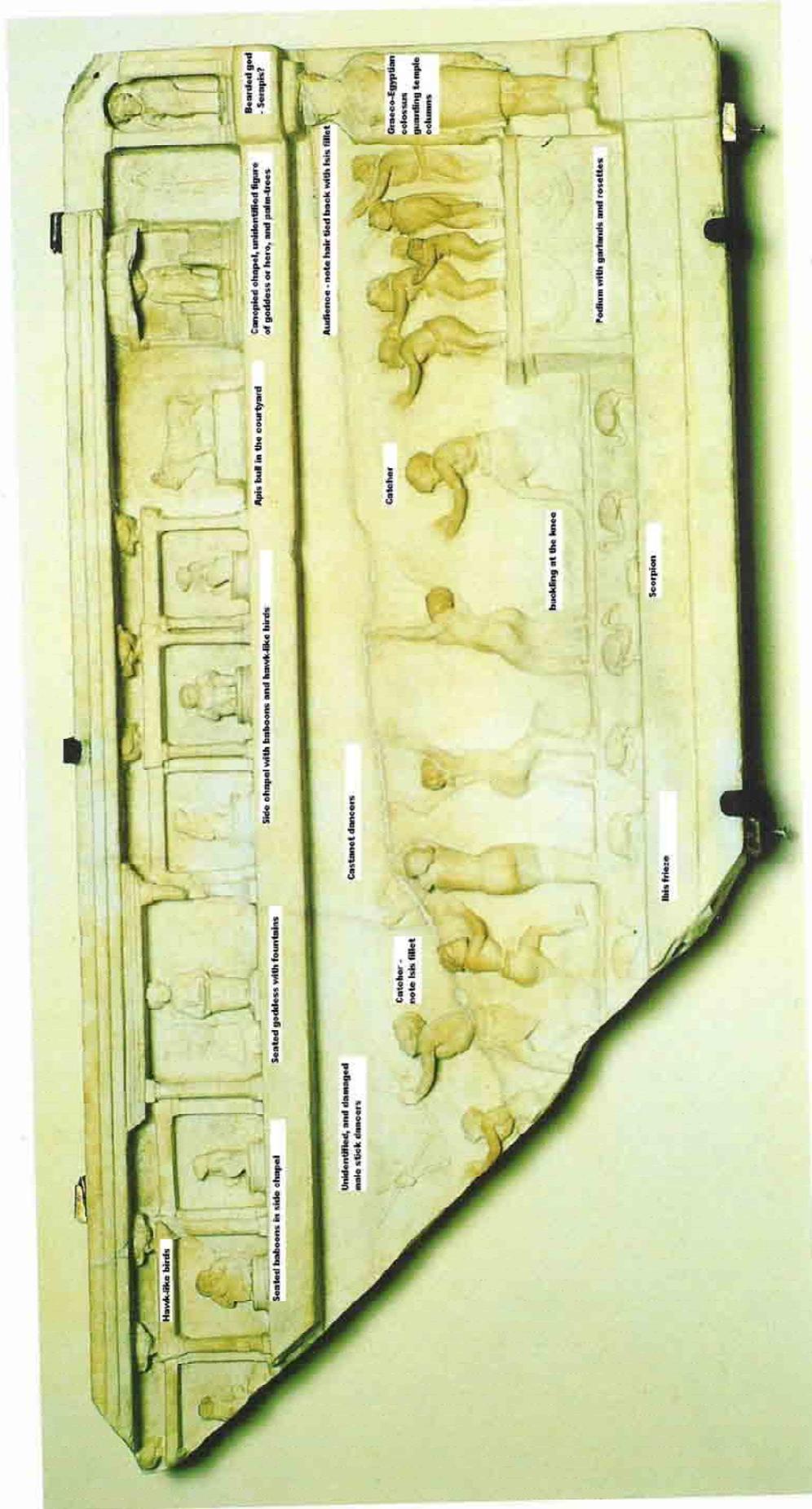
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**Note: Images of Samarran-ware taken from Garfinkel above;
coloured representations of the Ariccia relief from Walker &
Higgs above; all other images from Internet searches**





Hawk-like birds

Seated baboons in side chapel

Seated goddess with fountains

Side chapel with baboons and hawk-like birds

Apis bull in the courtyard

Carved chapel, unidentified figure of goddess or hero, and palm-trees

Bearded god - Serapis?

Unidentified, and damaged male stick dancers

Catcher - note like fillet

Costumed dancers

Catcher

Audience - note hair tied back with his fillet

Graeco-Egyptian colossus guarding temple columns

hooking at the knee

this frieze

Scorpion

Podium with garlands and rosettes