

The *krētikē* – So one day Cretan girls danced

Nathalie M Choubineh

Dancing the *krētikē*

The *krētikē*, meaning the Cretan (dance step/style), is one of the most ancient dance steps known to us. As suggested by its name, it is originated in Crete, and we can trace its existence back in both written and painted/sculpted material from the ancient Greek world since the Homeric times around the eighth century BC. In iconography, the *krētikē* is identified through the outstretched position of the arms and the forward-moving legs. The dancers' torsos are shown in full view, while their heads, sometimes turned back, are in profile.



Campanian stemless cup, c. 350-325 BC

The *krētikē* in myths and cults

According to Plutarch, Theseus, on his return from defeating the minotaur in Crete, celebrated his victory through performing a labyrinth-form chain dance with the Athenian youths and maidens he had saved. In *Iliad*, Homer describes a line dance of this kind, performed by a unisex group who hold hands and take rhythmical steps. It appears on the shield that Hephaistos crafts for Achilles on his return to the battle against the Trojans. Around this time, silhouette depictions of line dancers begin to decorate terracotta pots. On the prominent François Vase, Theseus and his dance regiment are not only painted but have their personal names inscribed next to their depictions.



Fragment of the Attic volute-krater known as the François Vase, c. 575 BC

This line dance is identified as *geranos* (crane-dance) or *hormos* (chain-dance) by ancient authors. Its Cretan origin, however, is clear enough to secure the name of *krētikē* for its basic step. In Thesean tradition, *krētikē* dancers perform the impression of a labyrinth through circulating around the horned altar of Aphrodite, stepping uniformly to the beats of the music played on the *aulos* (double-pipe).



Attic white-ground plate, c.450 BC

By the end of the sixth century BC, Attic vase-painters began to apply the popular composition of unisex line-dance to the *thiasos*, the dancing companions/worshippers of Dionysos. Satyrs and maenads in such regiments danced individually, i.e. free from physical attachments and uniform movements. The *krētikē* was now one of the conventional motifs to represent dance, predominantly performed by the female characters.



Attic band-cup, 550-525 BC

Meanings/functions of the *krētikē*

The Greek vase-painting of the fifth century BC introduced the new convention of illustrating individual pictures of women. In Athens, *krētikē* solo dancers began to decorate small, funerary pots, on the one hand, and drinking bowls and cups, on the other. As they were no longer seen in a *thiasos*, the dancers often carried objects representative of their connection to Dionysos as the deity of wine and of resurrection. These attributive objects include drinking vessels and vine branches, clappers and torches.



Attic lekythos, c. 450 BC

Carrying ritual objects in vase-painting can also imply the attendance in a cultic procession. Accordingly, *krētikē* dancers began to take the role of offering bearers to Dionysos. The most popular offerings were boxes containing mysterious items and/or pictures of the god, and large dishes of sacrificial cakes. In the first decades of the fourth century BC, this group of offering bearers were paired with Eros to form a composition implying nuptial ceremonies.



Attic calyx-krater, c. 375 BC

The *krētikē* in Italy: picturing the unknown

The formulaic combination of Eros/ *krētikē* performer was adopted synchronically in the Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily.

The Italian variations of *krētikē* dancers, accompanied or on their own, exist in several different formats. The most popular format consists of a nude youth and a maiden, both performing the *krētikē* and carrying the objects attributive of *krētikē* scenes. The addition of flower baskets and the *tympanon* to the repertoire of such objects suggests an expansion of meanings, now covering a kind of spring festival and celebration, with Dionysiac and nuptial themes still perceptible.



Apulian bell-krater, c. 375-350 BC

The satyric tail of the nude youths in some of these scenes, on the other hand, may suggest the idea of role-playing and executing the impression of satyrs in the context of drama. This hypothesis connects the conventional composition of *krētikē* dancer/satyric youth to the dramatic festival of City Dionysia or its local South Italian variation. In this respect, the *krētikē* operates as an example of those aspects of ancient life, whose reflections become observable through iconography, beyond the limits of textual sources.

So one day Cretan girls danced

To the rhythm with tender feet around the beautiful altar

Lightly pressing the tender grass flower

Sappho, sixth century BC, inc. auct 16 (Voigt)

Primary Sources

- Homer, *Iliad* 18. 590-606
- Plutarch, *Theseus* 21

- Pictures are free to access/download on the web

Contact information

- Department of Classics, Edith Morley Building, University of Reading, Whiteknights, RG6 6AH
- Email: n.m.choubineh@pgr.reading.ac.uk
- www.reading.ac.uk/classics