

Dance in Hittite Culture: Choreography and Setting

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Abstract Dance played a significant role in the performance of Hittite cult festivals. Evidence on dance comes from the cuneiform tablets discovered in Anatolia, but also from images depicted on some cult-vases. After having very briefly presented the main characters of Hittite dancing, we will deal with the so-called narrative dances, and with a dance that accompanies the movements of an acrobat who leaps on a bull. Narrative dances, which mostly occur in Old Hittite texts, stage mimetic representations of hunting scenes. The bull-leaping performance is documented from the frieze on a decorated vase and possibly from two Hittite tablets. In both cases, the performed actions, which are manifestations of the oldest intangible heritage of Anatolia and the Mediterranean regions, likely symbolize the superiority of humans over the wild animals.

Keywords Bull-leaping. Cult festivals. Dance. Hittites. Narrative dances.

Summary 1 Introductory Remarks. – 2 Narrative Dances. – 3 Dance and Bull-Leaping.

1 Introductory Remarks

The greatest part of the cuneiform tablets, which have been discovered in the capital of the Hittite kingdom, Ḫattuša, as well in other Anatolian sites, belong to the *genre* of the ‘festival texts’. These tablets contain information on the main aspects of the performance of the religious festivals, such as the participants in the ceremony, the time and place, the offerings, etc.¹ Some of these documents are

¹ See Klinger 2022, 135-8.

very detailed and mention other more specific elements,² such as the presence of singers and dancers, the played musical instruments, the songs, and the performed dances.

Thus, our knowledge of the Hittite dance mostly depends on the cult texts, and we have very little information concerning dance performances in other contexts; nevertheless, the available documents support the assumption that dance also played a role in daily life of the Hittites, for example on the occasion of banquets and court feasts.³

Hittite terminology for dancing is varied; the verb *tar(k)u-* generically means ‘to dance’,⁴ but other verbs more specifically define different kinds of dancing, such as *nai-* ‘to turn’, *wahnu-* ‘to turn around’, and *weh-* ‘to turn’.

In addition to textual sources, visual representations of dance, though rare, give further information, and the best example comes from the images on the İnandik vase, which depicts various moments during a religious ceremony. The four friezes that decorate this vase represent the official rites performed in and out the temple, as well as the joy of the people who celebrate the festival.⁵

Dances could be executed with or without musical accompaniment, but usually the sound of percussion instruments, such as tambourines and cymbals, accompanied the dancers. As far as the steps executed by the performers, some texts simply say that dancers enter the stage and dance, but other documents provide more details. Particularly interesting is the tablet KUB 4.1, which collects three texts on various subjects and preserves in the fourth column a description of a series of steps and dances. This tablet is likely a scholarly text,⁶ and the part that refers to dancing does not give any information on the ritual context in which the listed dances were performed. Some of them, which are labeled according to the towns where they were usually performed, are clearly folk dances.⁷ Thus, we assume that delegations from Anatolian towns likely took part in the state ceremonies and performed dances belonging to their cultural traditions.⁸

The most common ‘Anatolian dances’ seem to consist of two series of movements, namely, steps completed in place (*pedi*), and others

² For an overview of the different grade of detail of cult festival texts and their functional differentiation see Schwemer 2016; Christiansen 2016; Klinger 2022, 135-8.

³ See for example the dance performed by the goddess Allani at the banquet held in honor of God Teššob in the literary composition known as *Song of Release*, see de Martino 2019, 149.

⁴ See Kloekhorst 2008, 842-5.

⁵ See Özgüç 1988; de Martino 2016.

⁶ Waal 2015, 301.

⁷ de Martino 1989, 36-9.

⁸ See Rutherford 2005.

that presuppose a leap from the original position to a distant point (*tuwaz*). We argue that a group of dancers, likely arranged in rows, first danced in place, and then caught up with the row in front.⁹

2 Narrative Dances

Some cult festival texts also report the performance of narrative dances that mostly dramatize hunting scenes. In these cases, the performers wear animal masks and play the role of animals. Dance narrativity and the representation of ancient mythical narratives are also documented in Greek tradition.¹⁰

As was already said, cult festival texts vary in the degree of detail they supply; some of them very accurately outline each action and rite performed during the celebration of the festival, while other tablets are less detailed. In the case of mimetic representations, sometimes texts only mention that performers come onto the stage at a particular moment during the celebration. Only in a very few cases do texts report who the performers are and what they do. This limits our possibility of understanding how the dramatic representation was realized; nevertheless, we will consider here some of the most detailed descriptions of animal dance.

Animals played a significant role in the daily life of the ancient Anatolian peoples, not only in the pastoral and agricultural context, but also in religion.¹¹ Even the Hittite gods were seen in a theriomorphic way: the bull represented the Storm-god, and the stag was the sacred animal of God Kuruntiya. The latter, who was of Luwian origin and tradition, was the protector of the countryside, where stags lived. In addition, bears, and great felines, who inhabited the rural landscape and the mountain forests, are mentioned in Hittite texts.¹²

The dramatic representations of hunting scenes in dance occur in the cult festivals that belong to the oldest Anatolian religious tradition. They presumably derive from local cults that were celebrated by the village communities. Some of them had been absorbed into the official state religion, mostly in the KI.LAM festival¹³ and in the cults related to the Hattian deities, while others, particularly those documented in the so-called 'Cult Inventories', were practiced only at the local level.¹⁴ The scenes of hunting inserted in the celebration

⁹ See de Martino 1995, 2665.

¹⁰ See Gianvittorio-Ungar, Schlapbach 2021.

¹¹ See Archi 2023.

¹² See Erskine 2021.

¹³ On this festival see Burgin 2019.

¹⁴ See Cammarosano 2018; 2021.

of festivals are the best examples of human-animal interactions and of the survival of the most ancient religious practices.

Let's move on to examine tablet KBo 17.43, which belongs to the group of the oldest preserved Hittite texts,¹⁵ and documents a very interesting description of a mimetic dance. A passage in this text describes the performance of a festival that has generally been identified with the Hattian *purulli*-festival and more specifically with the ceremonies in honor of the goddess Tetešḫapi.¹⁶ Steitler, however, has recently attributed this tablet to the KI.LAM, which is another Hittite cult festival of ancient tradition.¹⁷

The performance is introduced by the priest of the city of Tawiniya, located not far from the Hittite capital Ḫattuša,¹⁸ which played a significant role in the religious tradition of the Hittites.¹⁹ The priest of Tawiniya takes a silver vessel and approaches a singer²⁰ who libates from this vessel. Then, the singer gets up and 'dances' (*tarukzi*) while crouching (*ganenantaš*). He sprinkles something from a leather flask (*šarazzi*).²¹ A 'hunter' (LÚ*meneya*-) comes on stage and walks behind him. He draws an arrow and aims it at one side and the other, but he does not release it. Several times he cries "i, i". He (= the singer) initially moves forwards toward the king, but he turns back and strikes the 'hunter' with the leather container; then he goes forwards again and strikes the 'performers' (LÚ^{MES} ALAN.ZU₉). Then a man wearing a bear mask (LÚ*hartagga*-)²² wipes the feet of the performers with a piece of textile²³ and dances.²⁴

Among the performers of this scene, we do not find a professional dancer, but a singer. This is not an exceptional case; in fact, in Hittite ceremonies dances are executed not only by professional dancers (LÚ^{MES}ḪUB.BI), but also by cult officials who apparently did not have any training.²⁵

15 See Neu 1980, 103-6.

16 See Pecchioli Daddi 1988; Haas 1994, 734-5.

17 See Steitler, Hethitologie Portal Mainz, Konkordanz, KBo 17.43: www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de.

18 See Kryszewski 2016, 111-41.

19 See de Martino 2006.

20 The semi-logographic writing LÚNAR-šiya- likely corresponds to the Hittite word LÚ*tarašiya*- and refers to a performer of music and songs, see CHD Š.2 (1980), 249-50.

21 See CHD Š.2 (2005), 249-50.

22 This word can be restored thanks to the duplicates, see CHD Š.3 (1980), 437.

23 The word *šerḫa*- likely refers to a piece of textile, see Kloekhorst 2008, 745-6; CHD Š.3 (1980), 437.

24 KBo 17.43 obv. i 8'-14', see Neu 1980, 104-5; de Martino 1989, 69-71; Mouton 2021, 86.

25 See de Martino 1989, 8-10; 1995, 2666.

The Hittite term ^{LÜ}*meneya*- occurs in festival rituals belonging to the oldest traditions and in passages that describe the performance of scenes of bear and leopard hunting, in which the *meneya*-actor hunts with a bow. This is not the word for ‘hunter’ that usually occurs in the Hittite texts; the meaning of ‘hunter’ for the term ^{LÜ}*meneya*- was only inferred from the contexts of the cult texts where it is documented. As far as the etymology of this word, it was assumed a derivation from *meni*- ‘face’; thus, the epithet ‘face-man’ could allude to a mask that this personage wore.²⁶

The logogram ^{LÜ}ALAN.ZU₉ refers to cult attendants who often take part in the Hittite festivals. They do not play a specific role but can sing and dance.²⁷ Lastly the ^{LÜ}*hartagga*-performer plays the role of a bear, and we assume that he wore a mask. Animal masks are documented in other Hittite cult festivals, although we cannot say what they looked like.²⁸

The text specifies that the singer dances in a crouch and sprinkles a liquid from a leather flask, but it does not name the substance that is sprinkled; given the content, we assume that it served as bait for attracting the prey. The singer and the ‘hunter’ here play the role of a hunting team in which the former, crouching, puts bait on the ground, and the latter shoots the arrow. Since they are hunting a bear, the bait may have been some honey. The singer’s cry of “i!!!” may have been intended to attract the bear. The ‘hunter’ mimes an archer who is ready to shoot the arrow every time the prey is in range. Thus, the first part of the storyline is purely descriptive and realistically mimes a hunting trip.

The arrival of the dancer with the bear mask signals the passage to a different dramatic register; suddenly the bear-man becomes human and wipes the feet of the ‘performers’ with a piece of textile; lastly, he dances. We assume that this last part of the scene, in which the bear-man submits himself to the ‘performers’, metaphorically expresses the supremacy of the urban and civilized world over the inhabitants of the wild countryside, where ancient hunters risked their life. As Collins argued, this scene may be interpreted as a “ritualized removal of forces of destruction from a vulnerable village”.²⁹

As was said, the mimetic representation ends with the dance of the bear-man, but unfortunately there is no description of it. We can only assume that the dancer imitated the movements of a real bear. Hittite documents do not preserve any information on bears that were trained to dance, as was the custom in Turkey until recent years, but

²⁶ See Tischler 1990, 198; Puhvel 2004, 147-8; differently see Kloekhorst 2008, 576-7.

²⁷ See Weeden 2011, 142-4.

²⁸ See Ünal 2016, 396.

²⁹ Collins 2002, 329.

we cannot exclude that the bear-man imitated a real dancing bear.

The dancing *meneya*-hunter, together with an animal-man, is featured in other Hittite festivals, as documented for example from KUB 25.51 i 2'-11'.³⁰ In this tablet³¹ a performer who wears a leopard mask is followed by a 'hunter' who holds the 'bow of the deity'. When these two figures stand before the deity, the cupbearer offers them a drink. They drink and then dance. Unfortunately, there is no description of the dance they perform.

Another mimed representation of a hunt occurs in the fragmentary tablet KBo 7.37 (and in the duplicate tablet KUB 58.14), which describes the performance of a cult festival, possibly related to the cults of the city of Zippalanda, one of the main sanctuaries of the Storm-god.³² Performers masked as wolves and bears take part in the festival. This time the hunter is an archer-woman (MUNUS ^{GI}SPAN) who shoots an arrow at the bear-man but misses him. Then she shoots a second time and hits the bear-man, who cries "*awaiya, awaiya!*". This clearly is a cry of pain,³³ and this passage shows "the hybrid character" of the animal-masked performers; they behave as animals, but they are indeed humans and, in this case, cry out like a human, as Mouton argued.³⁴

The presence of a woman who plays the role of an archer is particularly interesting, because hunting traditionally was a male activity. An archer-woman occurs in other Hittite cult festivals, but only text KBo 7.37 presents her in the act of shooting an arrow. We assume that the episode mocked the poor bear-man, whom even a woman could take as prey and who cried desperately when wounded.

3 Dance and Bull-Leaping

As was already said, Hittite dance is not only documented in written evidence, for the images depicted on some vases decorated in relief add pieces of information. The most significant visual representation of the human-animal interaction in dancing appears on the vase discovered in 1997 at the site of Hüseyindede, which lies in northern Anatolia in the province of Sungurlu.

The vase, 52 cm high, comes from the country residence of a member of the Hittite élite,³⁵ and dates to the Old Hittite Kingdom.³⁶ This

³⁰ See de Martino 1989, 68-9.

³¹ KUB 25.51 joins KBo 37.51, KUB 11.32, KUB 20.17, and IBoT 3.68.

³² See de Martino 2001; Mouton 2021, 86.

³³ As argued by Klinger 1996, 228 no. 401.

³⁴ Mouton 2021, 86.

³⁵ See Mielke 2017, 125-6.

³⁶ See Sipahi 2000; 2001.

vase, unlike the İnanlık vase, shows only one decorated frieze. The figures are in relief and colored in brown, black, red, and grey.

The frieze depicts fourteen figures in a single row. The first figures on the left edge are two women represented frontally who dance hand in hand.³⁷ A dance of this kind is also documented in the already mentioned text KUB 20.38 obv. 10'-17' where six women dance in a row, holding hands. The figures to the right of the two dancers play cymbals and a stringed instrument like a *saz*. The following figures represent two men, who dance in a crouching position facing each other and play cymbals.

The series of dancers and musicians leads up to the central image in the scene: a man prepares to attach a halter to a bull. Three personages are represented close to the bull: one of them balances on the bull's back, another one is performing a somersault, and the third one is preparing to jump. We agree with Decker³⁸ that these three figures represent three stages of a single jump executed by an acrobat leaping on the bull. The three figures are identical in their dress and features, which supports Decker's assumption. The acrobat's leap onto the bull is neatly framed by two musicians, a cymbal player, on the left, and a *saz* player, on the right, who admire the ability of the acrobat and accompany his movements with music.

The publication of the Hüseyindede vase had a strong impact on researchers of Mediterranean civilizations, since bull leaping and acrobatic performances on the back of a bull are very well documented in the Aegean world, in Egypt and Syria.³⁹ Unfortunately, this practice is not clearly documented in the Hittite textual evidence. Nevertheless, there are three texts, admittedly fragmentary, that seem to allude to such a performance.

Firstly, we mention text KUB 25.37+ that belongs to the corpus of cult festivals of Luwian tradition.⁴⁰ A delegation from the town of Lallupiya takes part in the celebration of the rites described in this text. We are unable to locate this town precisely, but it presumably was in central Anatolia around the Sakarya river.⁴¹

In the first lines of this text (i 4'-10'), the chief of the delegation of Lallupiya calls out in Luwian to the cupbearer, who starts dancing, and the cook also dances in the same way. A man of Lallupiya dances repetitively, turning in place, while another Lallupiya man holds a cloak behind the dancer. This passage seems to refer to two dancers who start out facing each other, but then one of them turns his

³⁷ See Sipahi 2000, 72.

³⁸ Decker 2003, 50-1.

³⁹ See Decker 2003.

⁴⁰ See Starke 1985, 342-50.

⁴¹ de Martino 2017, 258.

back to the other, who shakes a cloak. This same dance also occurs in another passage of this text.⁴²

A fragmentary passage in the third column in KUB 25.37+ (iii 1) preserves the sentence *w]atkuzi nu ANA GUD.MAḪ* (he [j]umps and towards the bull). As Taracha wrote, the interpretation of this passage as a description of an acrobatic performance over a bull seems to be confirmed by another fragmentary text, Bo 3817, that belongs to the north-Anatolian religious tradition. Here we read as follows:⁴³ *[n=ašt]a GUD.MAḪ parā [pennianzi]. watkuanzi* ([and th]en [they drive] the bull they jump).⁴⁴

A third Hittite text may also refer to bull leaping. Tablet KBo 19.138 describes the cult ceremonies in honor of the goddess Teteshapi, a deity we have already mentioned; she is of Hattian origin and plays the role of mistress of wild animals.⁴⁵ Pecchioli Daddi quoted a passage in this text where a performer (^{LÚ}ALAN.ZU₉) ‘mocks’ (*ḥaḥḥarš*)⁴⁶ the Hurrian bull of the god.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, since this text too is fragmentary, we are in the dark as to what the act of mocking the bull entailed. Pecchioli Daddi argued that this passage may refer to leaping onto the bull, though this is not explicitly stated here as it is in KUB 25.37+ and Bo 3817. In our opinion, it could also allude to an action that echoed some lost literary narrative concerning the two Hurrian bulls, Hurri and Sherri, who drove the chariot of the Storm-god.

Thus, as far as the textual evidence is concerned, we concede that we are dealing with very badly damaged tablets, and we cannot exclude that the scene depicted on the Hüseyindede vase does not in fact correspond to any cult practice performed in Hittite Anatolia. The Hüseyindede vase was a luxury product acquired by a wealthy Anatolian person. As is well known, scenes of bull leaping were diffused in the ancient Near East during the second millennium BCE, as the frescos of Tell el-Dab’a and some Syrian seals show,⁴⁸ and the artisan who manufactured the vase and realized the frieze may have been inspired by models known to him from sealings and seals. The owner of the vase may have appreciated it for its exotic character.

In short, the two aforementioned Hittite texts, though fragmentary, cannot be ignored, and we are inclined to assume that acrobatic leaps onto the back of a bull were performed in Anatolia. The different cultural backgrounds of the two texts, one referring to the

⁴² See ii 10'-18', de Martino 1989, 76-8; Mouton 2016, 128-9.

⁴³ ii 20'-22'.

⁴⁴ Taracha 2004

⁴⁵ See Taracha 2009.

⁴⁶ See see HW² 3, 11:10-11.

⁴⁷ Pecchioli Daddi 2010, 124-9.

⁴⁸ See Sipahi 2001; Decker 2003.

Luwian tradition of the region of Lallupiya, and the other one to north-Anatolian cults,⁴⁹ witness the possible diffusion of this practice in the Hittite kingdom.

We wonder what the meaning of such a performance was; we know that the bull was the sacred animal of the Storm-god, who was imagined and represented as a bull. Bull-shaped vessels have been found in several Anatolian temples. We argue that the scene depicted on the Hüseyindede vase and possibly described in the aforementioned texts does not refer to the bull as the animal dear to the Storm-god, but more broadly to the oxen and bulls that the most ancient inhabitants of Anatolia encountered in the country, hunted, and learnt to herd. As in the case of the narrative representation of a bear hunt, the bull-leaping performance may symbolize the superiority of humans over the animals, as if the wild and ferocious bulls had been brought from their original environment into the urban space controlled by the men.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ See Lamante 2014, 448.

⁵⁰ See Shapland 2013, 199-200.

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