ANASTASIS
Research in Medieval Culture and Art

DOI: 10.35218/armca.2025.2.07

The art of dance in the biblical people of the East in the period of the Ancient World and the Middle Ages

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Abstract: The ancient cultures of the East have been famous for the perfect art of dance. However, due to certain historical circumstances, it is understudied in Ukrainian scientific thought, principally those nations mentioned in the Bible. Obviously, this gap is a legacy of the totalitarian regime, when everything that was not part of its ideology was not tolerated.

As far as can be judged from biblical descriptions, ancient written monuments (Mesopotamian, Egyptian and others), images on ancient paintings, works of decorative and applied art and other artistic monuments or the art of dance among the ancient biblical peoples were all widespread and developed at a high level.

This is evidenced by passages from the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, ancient Mesopotamian reliefs from the tomb of A Bar Gi, ancient Egyptian paintings from Beni-Hasan, Coptic textiles from the era of the Sassanid dynasty, and a number of other images. We have some information about the art of dance among biblical peoples from certain parts of texts in the Bible, such as the parable of the prodigal son, the dance of King David, the dance of Solomia, the daughter of Herodias and a number of other texts.

In the dances of the biblical peoples of the East, great importance was attached to the female dance itself. After all, a woman in the East is an aspect of the manifestation of God, the presence of God in the world. Therefore, the female figure embodied many mystical Eastern ideas that a woman is the last divine truth and radiates His light. Thus, it becomes clear why so much attention was paid to women's dance in Eastern cultures.

One of the most common compositional solutions of the choreography of the biblical peoples of the East was a dance in a circle around the temple altar, hearth or human figure (Mesopotamian dance of the priest with jumping, Egyptian dances of the zodiac, the sun and others, Jewish dances around the golden body, etc.).

Many dance compositions are difficult to reconstruct, since their detailed descriptions have not been preserved. Their reconstruction can be carried out on the basis of images, some texts and last but not least the author's conjecture.

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This topic is promising in the context of further research into the dance art of each of the biblical peoples, in particular Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Jews, and others.

Keywords: art of dance, dancer, countries of the East, clothes, images of dances, religious cult, sports dances, choreography.

Introduction

Dance is one of the ancient forms of art. It has accompanied men since ancient times. Due to certain historical circumstances, the art of oriental dance is understudied, especially the most ancient Eastern cultures, which are mentioned, in particular, in the Bible.

The oriental dance is distinguished by its unique feature in the rhythm of the music, by a special long oriental melody, a refined silhouette of the dancers and a certain symbolism of movements. His research is becoming increasingly popular in science. Therefore, the topic of studying the dances of the peoples of the East, mentioned in the Bible, is entirely relevant. The peculiarity of this article is that it covers the period from the earliest biblical times.

For Christian cultures, the study of the dance of the countries in the Middle East is special, because as the researchers note

> It is known that the spiritual culture of Christianity was born as a result of the interpenetration of two opposite, self-contained, most mature and integral cultures of the ancient world - Greco-Roman and Middle Eastern.[1]

Scientists raised the issue of researching the dance mentioned in the Bible in accordance with its relationship with their Christianity, in particular A. Bogorod[2], V. Volchukova.[3] However, in these works, biblical dances are analyzed, mostly Jewish dances, and only occasionally in the context of their connection with Christianity. There is no consideration of the dance art of other Biblical Eastern peoples, such as the Sumerians, Egyptians, and others. The purpose of the research is to cover the peculiarities of the dance art of the biblical peoples of the East.

In addition, the authors of many biblical texts preached in the countries of today's Middle East. This very activity is reflected in many texts

[1] Viktoriia Volchukova *Problems of development and the role of ritual dance in early Christian culture: Author's abstract. dis... cand. in art history: 17.00.01* / V.M. Volchukova ; Khark. derzh. akad. kultury. Kharkiv, 2002, p. 3.
[2] Anatolii Bohorod, *Problems of ritual dance in the Christian religion. Abrahamic religions in Ukraine: history, ethnocultural interactions, interfaith relations. Proceedings of the scientific conference,* Halych, 25 travnia 2013 roku, 2013, pp. 228-236.
[3] Viktoriia Volchukova, *Problems of development and the role of ritual dance in early Christian culture: Author's abstract. dis... cand. in art history: 17.00.01* / V.M. Volchukova ; Khark. derzh. akad. Kultury, Kharkiv, 2002, pp. 6-7.

of the Bible. Therefore, the Middle Eastern choreographic culture has had a certain influence on the early Christian consciousness and on the dance culture of the early Christians. It is not for nothing that it is written in the Bible Psalms:

> Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!
> Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!
> Let them praise his name with the dance; let them sing praises to him with the timbrel and harp.
> [Psalm 149: *1, 2, 3*],
> 1 Praise God in his sanctuary;
> praise him in his mighty heavens.
> 2 Praise him for his acts of power;
> praise him for his surpassing greatness.
> 3 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
> praise him with the harp and lyre,
> 4 praise him with timbrel and dancing,
> praise him with the strings and pipe,
> 5 praise him with the clash of cymbals,
> praise him with resounding cymbals.
> 6 Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.
> [Psalm 150: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5*]

Dance art in the Mesopotamian tradition

The development of art in ancient Mesopotamia has its own characteristics. Unlike ancient Egypt, for example, in ancient Mesopotamia there was a ruling people not of one nationality, but of different peoples. In Ancient Egypt, on the contrary, the same ethnic group was dominant for thousands of years.

However, a feature of the art of ancient Mesopotamia is that, judging from the analysis of monuments of plastic arts, the conquerors borrowed the stylistics of plastic arts and the culture of the conquered peoples, their predecessors. And in this way, a special Mesopotamian style was developed in sculptural relief, artistic ceramics and other types of art. Thus, in the historical course of time, the Sumerian pictorial culture passed into the Babylonian or Persian culture and other subsequent ones in the same territory, which we call ancient Mesopotamia. As we assume, something similar happened with ancient Mesopotamian performative arts, including choreography. Therefore, we consider the dance art of ancient civilizations in this territory from the specific perspective of the dance art of Mesopotamia.

At the same time, we understand that both in ancient Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian art, the style was continuously developing and nothing remained unchanged.

The dances of the peoples of Mesopotamia were noted as a peculiar feature. According to researchers, some choreographic compositions of dancers in ancient Mesopotamia were performed naked. [4] The author, however, refers to researchers of the art of Middle Eastern countries, who illustrate the number of images of naked dancers from Jordan with expressive movements that may belong to an oriental dance. We understand that the images cover a period of time even before the acceptance of Islam by these peoples. After all, it is unlikely that Islamic culture would promote images of naked dancers.

It is also noted that the naked dancers were in the closest position to the king compared to other spectators. The researcher S. Georgieva notes that such images show a clear desire of artists to imitate (unfortunately, it is not specified which one) older images that come from Iran, Mesopotamia.[5]

This is interestingly interconnected, because it is known that dances with female dancers existed in ancient Mesopotamia: for example, temple dances of girls and "men with women's breasts". [6] Dances in ancient Mesopotamia were also accompanied by loud folk festivities next to the music of harps and tambourines.[7]

People expressed their joy by dancing in the ancient Mezhirichchi, as can be understood from the epic of Gilgamesh. When Gilgamesh returned from a distant military campaign, the relatives of the warriors who returned alive expressed their joy through dance.[8]

Images of dancers from the Mesopotamian royal tomb A-Bar-Gi have been preserved. Inlaid images show fragments of what researchers believe to be illustrations of the Gilgamesh epic.[9] The dance movements depict the naked figure of the hero (Gilgamesh) and the half-man-half-scorpion dancer in front of a gazelle. In some compositions, human figures are depicted according to the Mesopotamian tradition (Fig. 1).

In the temples of Baal, the priests have also performed special dances in a circle around the deity, each turning around its axis on half-fingers, jumping and playing percussion instruments. Many dances of ancient Mesopotamia, as well as of ancient Egypt, have an astral character. However, there is no concrete data on the specifics and character of secular dances in ancient Mesopotamia, in contrast to Egyptian and ancient Jewish ones.

Finally, images of naked Coptic (Egyptian) dancers from the era of the Sassanid dynasty, dated by scientists to the V-VI centuries, have also

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[4] Siyana Georgieva, *The Complex Roots of the Figures Modellate in Stucco inside the Khirbat al-Mafjar - Some Observations***.** Anastasis, Iași, Volume XI, No.1/May, 2024, p. 108.
[5] *Ibidem,* pp. 106-108.
[6] Lohvyn Yurii, *About the deeds of Gilgamesh*,
https://www.ukrlib.com.ua/books/printitzip.php?tid=5883#google_vignette, p. 5.
[7] *Ibidem,* p. 7.
[8] *Ibidem,* p. 8.
[9] Albert Champdor, *Mesopotamian art,* Leipzig, 1964, p. 84.

been preserved.[10] A naked female figure is depicted dancing in the frame of an arch, which rested on columns with typical elements of Eastern and pre-Romanesque European architecture - lace ornament and flutes.



Fig. 1. Relief images from the Mesopotamian royal tomb of A-Bar-Gi. Illustrations from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Fragment of the harp decoration. Inlay on a dark background.

Images of naked dancers have also been preserved as a decoration of Coptic textiles from the same era. The dancers are depicted surrounded by a braid of leaves and grapes. The composition is surrounded by depictions of teratological motifs reminiscent of future Romanesque stylized teratological and animalistic representations. Perhaps the character of the dance in the image is influenced by the Mesopotamian tradition, because just at that time the lands of Mesopotamia were also part of the state of the Persian Sassanid dynasty (Fig. 2).

[10] Siyana Georgieva, *The Complex Roots of the Figures Modellate in Stucco inside the Khirbat al-Mafjar - Some Observations*, Anastasis, Iași, Volume XI, No.1/May, 2024, p. 107.



Fig. 2. Dancers. Coptic art textile. The 5th century.

Another famous Coptic textile from the same period depicts a female dancer with her leg raised next to a clothed female figure (Fig. 3). The nature of the dance movements, perhaps like that of Mesopotamian dancers, is bouncy. Preserved textile products are characteristic features of the traditions of the Persian state. From these examples of Coptic textile products, we can see that at that time Egyptian art moved away from those stylistic planar conventions that were the canon in the art of Ancient Egypt.



Fig. 3 Dancers. Coptic art textile. Medallion. 4th-5th century.

Choreography of the country of Matsarim

The art of dancing was also respected by the ancient Egyptians. A frequent name of Egypt in the Bible is Matsraim [Genesis 10: 6] by the name of the ancestor of the Egyptians.

In contrast to ancient Mesopotamia, we have better information about the clothing of female dancers in Egypt. Throughout the entire period of Egyptian civilization, the costume of the dancers remained practically unchanged, gradually being enriched only with new forms and details. Only in the New Kingdom did a further class distinction in clothing take place, which could somewhat be reflected in the dancer's clothing.[11] There were primarily two types of dancers' clothing - a loincloth (shenti) and a less convenient kalaziris.

The tomb paintings in Beni-Hasan (Middle Kingdom, Egypt) are clearly drawn examples of images of sports competitions and dances. In more complex hands, as from: pirouette, pas de deux, Egyptian dancers were depicted almost exclusively in loincloths. But there are also sports and dance movements depicted in kalaziris. The silhouette of the picture clearly represents wrestlers and dancers. Thanks to these works, we have the opportunity to imagine the sports competitions and dance performances of the ancient Egyptians.

Paintings in Beni-Hasn are typical works of wall painting of Ancient Egypt with a specific rendering of human figures. The head was depicted in profile, the shoulder girdle in full face, the legs of a person on the same plane one after the other - in profile. Egyptian art was conventional without the depiction of planning and a three-quarter turn of the body on the plane of the composition of the entire work. That is, there is no depth of space here, and everything is depicted on one line. This suggests, like other art schools of the countries of the biblical East, a certain specificity and conventionality.

Paintings on the northern wall of the tomb from Beni-Hasan are a vivid example of depicting the scheme of several elements of sports and acrobatic dances. The silhouettes of the dancers in the kalaziris are so expressive that these elements can be reproduced even today (Figs. 4, 5, 6). Egyptian dancers are always depicted in clothes - either in a shente or in something similar to a kalaziris. In contrast to Mesopotamia, in Ancient Egypt we do not meet completely naked dancers. Although, in this case, we have the source data about the Mezhyrechya only from written references and images on consumer goods, and not from wall paintings, as in Egypt.

[11] *Essays on the history of foreign decorative and applied art* / head. Ed. Ya. P. Zapasko, Kyiv, 1995, pp. 66-67.



Fig. 4. Paintings with sports and acrobatic scenes from Beni Hassan, Ancient Egypt, Middle Kingdom.

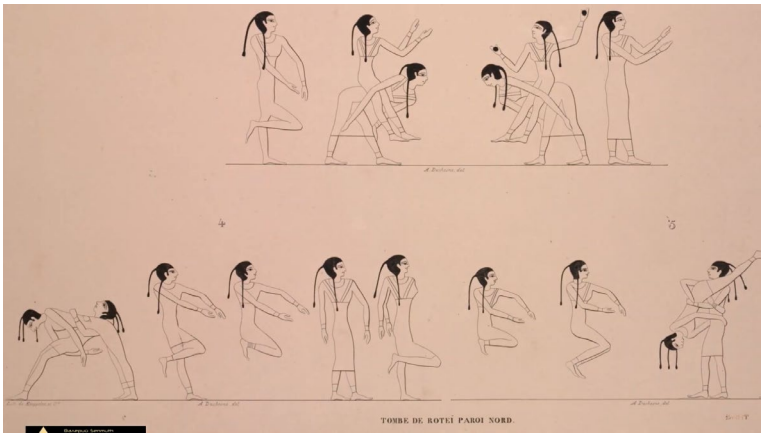


Fig. 5. Drawing of paintings with sports and acrobatic dances from the tomb, Beni-Hasan. Ancient Egypt, Middle Kingdom.

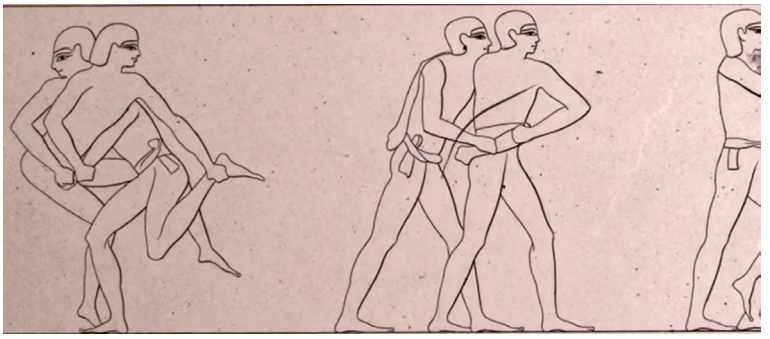


Fig. 6. Drawing from tomb paintings. Beni Hassan. Ancient Egypt. Middle Kingdom.

Another classic example of the spread of sports dances in Ancient Egypt is the famous dancer from the Italian Museum of Egyptian Art in Turin (Italy). It is painted on an ostracon - a ceramic surface (Fig. 7). The dancer is depicted bent backwards in the body. She is dressed in a shenti bandage, which in most cases symbolizes male figures. Finely drawn characteristic excessively elongated forearms and shoulders, fingers and toes, the direction of the hair clearly emphasize the dynamism of the composition, its closure and plasticity and at the same time the femininity of the model. The colour brevity gives this work of art concision and the ability to focus the viewer's attention on the dancer's skills. Such works of art show the high level of ancient Egyptian artists and dancers.



Fig. 7. Dancer from Turin. Ostracon.

In ancient Egypt there were different types of dance: star, astral, moving and other dances. As far as can be understood from the analysis of ancient Egyptian wall paintings, couple dances were performed only by representatives of the same sex between themselves - that is, either two girls or two boys danced. The combination of two different sexes in one pair was not allowed in the dance.[12]

Obviously, this Eastern culture of the lack of close contact in dance between partners of different sexes was also reflected in early Christian

[12] Tetiana Medvid, *History of choreographic art from the origins to the era of Enlightenment: a teaching aid for students of the direction of training (specialty) "Choreography" of higher educational institutions,* Kherson : MPP «Yzdatelstvo «IT», 2015, p. 36.

culture. It is not for nothing that the first epistle of Saint Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians says:

> As for what I was told, it would be good for a man not to touch a woman. But to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let each husband give his wife the love she needs, and so does the husband's wife." [1 Corinthians, 7: 1-3], Don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that He lives in you, that you have from God, and you are not your own? [1 Corinthians, 6: 19].

Dance art in biblical descriptions

A special place was reserved for the dances of the Jewish people. We have almost the most significant information about the dancing art of the Jewish people from the pages of the Bible. They are, however, typical of the general characteristics of the dance art of the peoples of the Middle East, especially when the musical accompaniment is under consideration:

> It is worth noting that the Jewish religion, from which other Abrahamic currents - Christianity and Islam - originated, also had its own ritual songs and dances, which were performed during religious ceremonies accompanied by ancient musical instruments common to the peoples of the Middle East.[13]

From the information about male Jewish dances described in the Bible, we read about David's dance before the Lord's ark: “And David danced before the Lord with all his might. And David was girded with a linen ephod” [Samuel 6: 14]. So, the nature of the dance is not mentioned, but the ephod is mentioned - a part of the high priest's clothing in the form of a specific apron.

Similarly, the Bible indicates the attitude of women (or of a certain part of them) to men's dance.

> And it came to pass, when the ark of the Lord's covenant came as far as the city of David, that Melchola, Saul's daughter, looked through the window. And she saw King David dancing and playing, and she despised him in her heart [1 Chronicles 15:29].

Therefore, Melchola despised both David's dance and, apparently, the ark, in front of which David danced in special religious clothing - the ephod. However, she was punished for such disdain after David addressed her, who disapproved of this act of hers: “And Melhoda, Saul's daughter - because of this, she had no child until the day of her death” [2 Samuel 6: 23].

So, not all high-ranking women spoke favourably of men's dances. After all, the vast majority of Jewish dances described in the Bible are

[13] Anatolii Bohorod, *Problems of ritual dance in the Christian religion. Abrahamic religions in Ukraine: history, ethnocultural interactions, interfaith relations. Proceedings of the scientific conference,* Halych, 25 travnia 2013 roku, 2013, p. 229.

women's dances. David performs his dance during the ritual worship before the face of God, the ark of His covenant.

After all, as the researchers note, with the establishment of Christianity and the acceptance of more and more people into the Christian community, the movements that were described in the Bible, including David's dance, began to be considered acceptable for Christians. These movements were simplified so that those present could repeat them.[14] That is, despite insufficient tolerance, the Christian cult sought to adapt to the remnants of previous eras.

According to the researchers, the early Christian cult has finally recognized the solo dance:

> The hymn in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas ... is one of the examples that highlight the recognition of the solo dance by early Christians. The movements of the dancer's hands are described as an image of the dance of the 32 principles, indirectly connecting these figures with the traditional "dance of the cosmos". This, in any case, refers to the idea expressed in the Middle Eastern tradition that the various combinations and permutations of the basic elements (here the dance of the 32 bases) make up the ongoing process that is the universe. Woman is an aspect of the manifestation of God, the presence of God in the world. The figure of a woman is used as the main image, which embodies many favourite motifs of mystical Middle Eastern ideas: God is the Light, the King, the last Truth. She - His daughter - radiates His divine presence with beauty, song, dance.[15]

Thus, it becomes clear why so much attention was paid to women's dance in Eastern cultures.

However, unlike the religious rites of the biblical peoples of the East, in Christianity, the art of dance has never become a used element of worship. As the researcher of dance art A. Bohorod notes:

> The study of biblical dance traditions is a necessary condition for an objective clarification of the main problem: why in the "daughter" religions of Judaism - Christianity and Islam - neither dance nor musical instruments have the slightest positive meaning and are even called "tricks of the devil", "weapons of the devil", "demonic scandals", "Hellenic demonization", "satanic temptation".[16]

Dances among the eastern peoples of biblical times were widely used not only in religious worship, but also in secular celebrations. The parable of the prodigal son is well known. The father, who forgave the prodigal son,

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[14] Viktoriia Volchukova, *Problems of development and the role of ritual dance in early Christian culture: Author's abstract. dis... cand. in art history: 17.00.01* / V.M. Volchukova; Khark. derzh. akad. Kultury, Kharkiv, 2002, pp. 5-6.

[15] *Ibidem,* pp. 6-7.

[16] Anatolii Bohorod, *Problems of ritual dance in the Christian religion. Abrahamic religions in Ukraine: history, ethnocultural interactions, interfaith relations. Proceedings of the scientific conference,* Halych, 25 travnia 2013 roku, 2013, p. 229.

arranged a banquet in his honour: "And his eldest son was in the field. And as he walked and approached the house, he heard music and dancing" [Luke 15: 25]. Apparently, as we assume, it is about hired musicians who were invited for the celebration. Unfortunately, the characteristic features of movements, dance figures, as well as the performer (hosts, holiday guests or hired dancers) are not described.

It is well known that the erotic dance is of great importance to Eastern peoples. It is classically described in the Bible in the dance of Solomia, the daughter of Herodias: "And as it was Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter danced among the guests, and she pleased Herod. Therefore, under oath, he promised to give her whatever she asked" [Matthew 14: 6, 7]. In reality, it is unknown how the daughter of Herodias danced in front of Herod. We only know the impact of this erotic dance - at her request they brought the freshly beheaded head of John the Baptist [Matthew, 14: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. Note that, as you can understand, in contrast to ancient Mesopotamian dances, here is described an erotic dance performed in the midst of guests, and not only in front of the king himself. This dance, like the dance of the Jews in front of the body, shows the peculiarities of the dance in the biblical Jews as a collective dance, or one that is performed by a soloist.

The image of Solomia shows the dynamics of power, when the biblical ruler had to fulfill his promise in order not to lose his authority before his subjects. Thus, young Solomiya was woven into such an intriguing story. In consequence, on the pages of the Bible we see the great importance of the erotic dance in the life of the Jewish biblical people.

Conclusion

Thus, we can draw certain conclusions in the study of the peculiarities of the art of dance among the biblical peoples of the East. Dance was one of the features of the culture of these peoples. It accompanied them all the time, satisfying certain spiritual needs.

With a certain probability, we assume that these peoples did not have dances with two partners of different sexes in one pair. Dances could be groups with dancers of different sexes (like the Jewish dance around the Golden Body), groups with a same-sex group of dancers - most often women (Mesopotamian, Jewish and other dances), and a group of men, but with a specific appearance – (the epic of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia, for instance). Single - solo dances are also most often represented by women (the dance of Solomia, daughter of Herodiadina and others), less often or in isolated cases – men (the dance of David in front of the ark of the Lord's covenant, the dance of Baal in ancient Mesopotamia - the priest dances with bouncing movements around the altar of the deity). However, as we can understand

from the biblical text, male solo dances were condemned among the ancient Jews, as Melchola, Saul's daughter, did.

Many dances of the peoples of the East were performed in a circle, (the dance of Baal, the dance of the Jews around the golden body, the Egyptian dances of the zodiac, planets and others) which to one degree or another influenced the ritual dances of early Christianity:

> the main form of the early Christian ritual dance, of course, was the form of a circle, which, first of all, symbolized the sacred dance of life and the divine beginning of all living things.[17]

This is not surprising, because the first communities and traditions of early Christianity were formed in the territories of the Middle East (Egypt, Mesopotamia and neighbouring territories).

In the perspective of further research, it is worth setting the task of a more detailed study of the dance art of the biblical peoples of the East, in particular, the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Egypt, etc.

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Fig. 6. Drawing from tomb paintings. Beni Hassan. Ancient Egypt. Middle Kingdom, Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WHRMywR9cg_, accessed at 04 01 2025.

Fig. 7. Dancer from Turin. Ostracon, source: https://uk.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Female_topless_egyption_dancer_on_ancient_ostrakon.jpg, accessed at 22 02 2025.

[17] Viktoriia Volchukova, *Problems of development and the role of ritual dance in early Christian culture: Author's abstract. dis... cand. in art history: 17.00.01*/V.M. Volchukova; Khark. derzh. akad. Kultury, Kharkiv, 2002, p. 9.

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