

BETWEEN MAGNA GRAECIA AND ROME:  
TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL APPROACH  
TO DANCE PERFORMANCE IN CULTS

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INTRODUCTION

Dance was a central element of Roman religion and dance performances were also typical of many Roman rituals, which were influenced by a range of cultural practices from regions across the Empire.<sup>1</sup> For Romans, the rituals accompanied by dance and music were part of daily life, and structured around the temporal experience of the year as well as of the spatial impression of the city thanks to the constant repetition of sounds, movements, gestures, and behaviour according to the festival calendar. However, aside from foreign cults, evidence of dance in traditional Roman cults is relatively sparse.<sup>2</sup> Ancient written sources claim that armed dances in particular had a long tradition dating back to the royal period. Thus, dance was considered by ancient sources as a traditional and noteworthy element of Roman ritual, even though the style changed over time with the introduction of new cults.<sup>3</sup>

Written and figurative sources securely account for two Roman cults which involved dancing. Indeed, dance was conspicuous in rituals devoted to the *Salii*, whose dance was a great public spectacle, and to the Arval Brethren.<sup>4</sup> However, the form of the latter remains in question because this dance would have likely been performed privately. The only indigenous Roman figures whose dances are well attested in the visual arts are the Lares, but in this case we lack the written sources to interpret their meaning.<sup>5</sup>

According to Friederike Fless and Katja Moede,<sup>6</sup> the potential for research to describe the specific qualities of dance in Roman religion is limited. Choreography – by which I mean a sequence of dance movements that is considered to be a distinct, bounded unit of performance<sup>7</sup> – cannot be reconstructed for different rituals: written sources simply do not contain that kind of information and detail, and the actual movement is almost completely lost to us. As Frederick Naerebout has noted, since we have no example of the actual dances, we cannot say to what extent the descriptions and

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<sup>1</sup> Fless and Moede 2007, 249-262.

<sup>2</sup> Shapiro *et alii* 2004, 342-343.

<sup>3</sup> Naerebout 2009, 143-158; Naerebout 2015a, 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Shapiro *et alii* 2004, 343. See also, Torelli 1990: 93-106; Torelli 1997: 227-255.

<sup>5</sup> Cruccas and Parodo 2015: 141-159.

<sup>6</sup> Fless and Moede 2007, 249.

<sup>7</sup> Naerebout 2017, 45.

images document real dances and, if they do, whether they do so in a more or less reliable way, i.e., whether they document observable reality in a manner we can relate to.<sup>8</sup>

Archaeological and ethnographic research shows that dance is prone to change, similarly to any other phenomenon in human society, since it is a dynamic element of ritual. This therefore implies that the common practice of combining evidence from sources ranging from the Bronze Age to Byzantium in a single picture of dance, or of individual dances, in ancient society, cannot be anything other than misleading. This is also true in the Roman Empire: according to Naerebout, the ‘multiculturalism’ of the Empire meant that, «rituals changed and were exchanged with the related dance, music, song and other nonverbal communication»,<sup>9</sup> thereby, enhancing the power of dance in religious practice and its multisensory and symbolic capacity according to different geographical and temporal locations and social organisation.<sup>10</sup>

However, if we direct our attention to archaeological evidence related to dance, it is possible to understand that this evidence is potentially quite informative about movement as realised in practice, because there are no sources on the meta-level of discourse on movement in the form of text. Considering that ancient dancing scenes on stone, pottery, or any other material, are archaeological objects that can tell us about dance practice and the context of its performance,<sup>11</sup> these artefacts and images in particular are the archaeological correlates of actual performance:<sup>12</sup> we can firstly examine the context of archaeological evidence of dance related to the sacred and/or funerary sphere, and secondly, performance spaces.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, even if the religious dimension of dance is not always accessible to us, by taking into account the contexts and spaces of dance performances some specific areas of study, such as the function of dance and the role of dancers in a ritual setting, can be examined. Indeed, the study of the context and the specific qualities of media (like images) could give us an insight into the importance and relevance of dance performances for rituals and ceremonies, as well as that of musicians and specialised musical instruments. In this respect, dance can no longer be considered as something unique that can be studied in isolation, but a specific manifestation of a general type of human behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, on the basis of archaeological evidence, it is possible to decipher which ritual dance sequences once appeared in a performative space and in a particular sacred sphere.

There were several locations where dancing regularly took place within sacred events, including boundary stones, springs, groves, and fields. Of course, shrines were the most familiar setting for dance performances, which took place in the sacred spaces

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<sup>8</sup> Naerebout 2015b, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Naerebout 2009, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Hanna 1987, 203; Soar and Aamodt 2014, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Hanna 1988, 281-306.

<sup>12</sup> Estienne 2015, 379-383.

<sup>13</sup> Hölscher 2018, 24-27. See also, Garfinkel 2014, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Naerebout 2019, 32.

around the altar or in front of the buildings, where the altar or the statue stood.<sup>15</sup> As Clemente Marconi has argued,<sup>16</sup> ritual activities took place in a special location, which was closer to the other world and distant from this world. Although dancers might perform ceremonial movements at any place, many chose to perform dances at the shrines or sacred spaces where the presence of the deity seemed especially close.<sup>17</sup> These performers often stood before the statues themselves or around them to make their dances visible to the deities: in both cases, the dance performance could be considered as an offering to the divinities.

The archaeological evidence of dance performances, along with all the images related to cults, including reliefs, may have contributed to achieving the goal of ritual performances using dance, music, sacred verbal formulas, and the offerings of material gifts to the gods to induce a sense of the numinous in the participants. As a time when appropriate individuals acted during sacred events, choral and musical performances could be considered a favourite language of communication with the gods and an offering to the deities completed in the framework of the ritual ceremony: dance and sonic events in a sacred context contributed to the enactment of rituals.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Catherine Bell has highlighted,<sup>19</sup> in addition to gestures of touching, sacrifices, prayers, and specific clothing and postures, songs and chants, dances and music are all important aspects of rituals<sup>20</sup> and indispensable to the rhythm and the frame of a ceremony. Moreover, dance in this context may also be termed performative in the sense that they were dramatic performances, involving dancers, an audience, a set-apart space and time, and conventional movements.<sup>21</sup>

In this dramatic sense, if sound and music, in all Roman rituals, formed an acoustic background (the form of which was widely heard and engraved in the memory of every worshipper), dance, effectively disrupting the ideal of solemn walking, could only be observed by actual spectators: sound and ritualised movements, together with the burning or distribution of scents, the illumination and decoration of the routes or the sacred space, and the decoration of participants, may have given shape to the ritual setting. On sacred occasions, the performers of ritualised movements were usually either priests or priestesses, although women or children might have been specially selected to perform a dance. In another characteristic shared with dramatic performances, dance, often accompanied by music or sounds, was performed by professional dancers and musicians. Moreover, as Karin Schlapbach puts it,<sup>22</sup> dance spectacles typically involve dancing and singing, which opens up new avenues in creating and defining cultural knowledge. Choral performances would have seemed

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<sup>15</sup> Shapiro *et alii* 2004, 342.

<sup>16</sup> Marconi 2007, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Shapiro *et alii* 2004, 339.

<sup>18</sup> Connelly 2011, 320. See also, Bellia 2020, 75-79.

<sup>19</sup> Bell 1997, 159-164.

<sup>20</sup> Fless and Moede 2007, 259-262.

<sup>21</sup> Sklar 2007, 38-42.

<sup>22</sup> Schlapbach 2018, 19-21.

even more dramatic in their use of multiple instruments and in the frequent addition of accompanying movement. On certain occasions, the chorus walked in a solemn manner in a ritual procession reminiscent of Greek cult practices and the closely related dramatic performances.<sup>23</sup>

Despite all facets of this performative aspect of the ritual being not suitable for visual representations of dancers and dancing, we have a lot of interesting archaeological evidence belonging to the Roman period that ought to be analysed. However, it is necessary to take into consideration that local repertoires changed and were extended as time progressed. In this paper we will focus on performances related to a choral dance which seems related to female divinities in the Cisalpine area in North Italy. As we will see, this dance, which was performed by female dancers holding and alternating their intertwined arms, appear associated with the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, deities of fertility, birth, and death, of which we lack the written sources to shed light on their worship (Fig. 1).<sup>24</sup> We only have information about festivals performed for the celebration of the renewal and the awakening of nature honouring these goddesses, who kept special watch over all aspects of women's lives.<sup>25</sup> The reliefs, which generally represent them in groups of three bearing attributes of sovereignty and fertility are clearly modelled on the Classical figurations of mother goddesses.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 1. Map showing the distribution of dedications to the *Matres* and *Matronae* (with and without epithets) and the spread of their cult in North Italy.

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<sup>23</sup> Gianvittorio 2017, 104-113.

<sup>24</sup> Bauchhens and Neumann 1987, *passim*; Bauchhess 1997, 808-816; Mekaches 2005, 108-110.

<sup>25</sup> Torelli 1984, 31-50; Brelich 2015, 224.

<sup>26</sup> Terracotta groups of female dancers and instruments players were discovered in sacred places and sanctuaries in Magna Graecia and in Sicily. Bellia 2014, 13-46.

Images depicting groups of intertwined female dancers in a ritual setting seem to have figurative parallels with the groups of dancers represented in Magna Graecia since the VII c. B.C. until the III c. B.C.; the latter was a period of completion of the Romanisation process in South Italy, which, according to Strabo,<sup>27</sup> ended in the Augustan Age during the I c. B.C. If, on the one hand, it is true that the majority of the several small places of cult in the cities of South Italy disappeared, but not necessarily (as has generally been thought) around 273-272 B.C. (as deduced from the Latin colony of Paestum: the conquest of Taranto, emblematic date of the “end” of Magna Graecia),<sup>28</sup> on the other, some of the sacred places continue to be attended in the II c. B.C., and even until the time of the Empire: the cult continued, spreading throughout the Roman world, but at the cost of change. Thus, we can almost never exclude the possibility that behind a god of a Roman pantheon an indigenous god lurks: this god would have been assimilated by the process of the so-called *interpretatio Romana*<sup>29</sup> into a Roman one with some similar characteristics. But it is also impossible to exclude the possibility that the Roman deity was accepted by the local people,<sup>30</sup> who may have imitated the beliefs of Romans.

#### DANCE DEPICTIONS ON ROMAN RELIEFS IN THE CISALPINE AREA

Despite the fact that literary sources referring to the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae* are entirely non-existent, epigraphs, reliefs and terracotta figurines found in Spain, France, Great Britain, Germany, and particularly in North Italy, can be considered archaeological evidence documenting its spread between I and V c. A.D. However, the cult can be traced back to the II millennium B.C., and some discoveries dating to the III c. B.C. have been attributed to these goddesses. Moreover, the representation of deities appears in images of ornithomorphic triads as early as the VI-V c. B.C.

According to Noémie Beck,<sup>31</sup> Romans translated a pre-existing cult into an image in a cultural context in which the representation of anthropomorphic divinities was still unknown. Thanks to Etruscan-Italic influences, the anthropomorphic figures of the goddesses seem time to appear for the first in North Italy, while the first actual human representation of the *Matres* and *Matronae* appeared during the Roman occupation. Moreover, it is worth noting that hundreds of inscribed votive reliefs with the representation of a group of female figures began to appear in the Cisalpine area only after the Roman conquest.

Epigraphic and figurative sources from North Italy allow us to decipher a cult devoted to three deities. Moreover, judging by dedications to the *Matres* and *Matronae*, the cult was popular among the legion, and soldiers of various ranks participated in their

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<sup>27</sup> *Geographia*, VI, 1, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Pedley 1990, 55-58. See also, de Cazanove 2007, 53-56.

<sup>29</sup> Rüpke 2014, 472-473. See also, Derks 1998, 94-118.

<sup>30</sup> Lolos 2009, 264-266.

<sup>31</sup> Beck 2009, 35-38. See also, Miedico 2016, 205.

cult.<sup>32</sup> Their denomination in *Matres* or *Matronae* was common in this area, while the peculiar aspect of their cult was related not only to fertility and the worship of water, but also to birth, death, and re-birth. While some cultic places and many sanctuaries devoted to these deities have been found beyond the Alps in Northern Europe, no structure has been identified in the Cisalpine area. However, the isolated discovery of single altars found at springs and grottoes, and at crossroads and commercial routes allow us to speculate on a relationship between the *Matres* and *Matronae* not only with Nymphs, but also with Juno, Mercury or the Lares.

Research on epigraphic and iconographic sources related to the cult of the *Matres* and *Matrones* in the Cisalpine area has revealed that most of the dedications come from the area around Milan, Como, Varese, Novara and Vercelli. As in the case of Milan, where the cult of the *Matronis Dervonnis* – a term probably of Celtic origin designating oak -,<sup>33</sup> was worshipped, the theonym was frequently accompanied by cultual epithets (*epiclesis*) that drew explicit limits to the deity's field of action. While their generic name *Matres* and *Matronae* seems to be Latin, their epithets are exclusively of Celtic or Germanic origin. It is noteworthy that the same epithet can be associated with both the terms *Matres* and *Matronae* in the inscriptions, which clearly proves that these two forms are interchangeable and equivalent in meaning.<sup>34</sup> In this geographical area in North Italy, this resulted in a peculiar iconography on Roman votive artefacts with Latin inscriptions as well as rituals that combine elements of both local and Roman religious traditions.<sup>35</sup>

According to Gambari,<sup>36</sup> the most ancient image related to the three goddesses may appear on a relief dating to the III-II c. B.C. On this relief, found on the Masso Falchero in Tuberghengo of Viù di Lanzo (Ninin Mills) near Turin, three anthropomorphic figures with raised arms are depicted, perhaps recalling a dancing group (Fig. 2a-b): this image could prove the pre-Roman origin of the *Matres* and *Matrones* cult in this area. It is interesting to note that for the two following centuries, there is no archaeological evidence of *Matres* and *Matrones* representations in the Cisalpine area, at least until the Julio-Claudian era in the I c. A.D.

Though we cannot assume that images are completely precise representations, we can nevertheless analyse ritual actions and dancing performances and glean some information from these depictions.

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<sup>32</sup> Phang 2001, 187. See also, Tagliamonte 1994, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Landucci Gattinoni 1986, 33-35; Soldati Forcella and Antico Gallina 1979-1980, 216-217; Guerrino Viglienghi 1976, 147-153.

<sup>34</sup> Derks 1998, 120; Beck 2009, 47-48.

<sup>35</sup> Haensch 2007, 180-185. Van Andringa 2007, 83-95; Moede 2007, 164-170. See also, Hölscher 2018, 35-40.

<sup>36</sup> Gambari 2007, 39-45.



Fig. 2a-b. Anthropomorphic figures with raised arms. Image related to the *Matres* and *Matronae* on the relief discovered on the Masso Falchero in Tuberghengo of Viù di Lanzo (Ninin Mills) near Turin (Italy). III-II c. B.C. From Gambari 2007, 39-40.

In 1982, Gemma Sena Chiesa completed her study on the altars dedicated to the worship of the *Matres* and *Matrones* in the Cisalpine area.<sup>37</sup> Firstly, her research took into consideration the so-called *Ara delle Matrone*, dating to I c. A.D. and found in Angera in April 1909, currently kept at the Museum of Varese (Fig. 3).<sup>38</sup> Carved in a Candoglia relief, on the front side of the fragmented marble block are three women in an intertwined dance. They hold hands, alternating their intertwined arms, and moving to the right. The three figures wear long dresses with hair gathered in a simple bun on the neck. In front of them on the right, there is a fourth male figure: he could be the lead dancer of the group. The dance seems to be being performed in a sacred space around an oak tree, at the foot of which an amphora is placed. On the top right, the ends of a ribbon seem to belong to a festoon, similar to the leaf festoon carved on one side of the altar. On the other side, a fragmentary epigraphic dedication to the *Matrones* is carved.

<sup>37</sup> Sena Chiesa 1982, 116-125; Tocchetti Pollini 1983, 171-174.

<sup>38</sup> Varese, Musei Civici, inv. 5001. Guzzo, Moscati, Sartori 1994, 262-263, n. 758; Sartori 2009, 368, nr. ANG10.06.

It also seems there is a carving of a bovine horn and a human head, the probable remnants of a sacrifice scene.<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 3.

Varese, Musei Civici, inv. 5001. Relief with three women in a intertwined dance and a man depicted on the so-called *Ara delle Matrone* discovered in Angera (Italy). The three figures wearing long dress. On the right a fourth male figure: he could be the dancer leader of the group. I or II c. A.D. From Sartori 2009, 368, nr. ANG10.06. Fragmentary epigraphic dedication: *VÓTO [SOLVTO] MA [TRONIS] SEX(tus) S [----] DIO [-----]*

Surrounded by a dancing female group, the lead dancer, perhaps representing a priest or a sacrificer, seems to move around the actual altar where the actual ceremony could start with the offering of wine. It cannot be ruled out that this recalled sacrificial rite was accompanied by the sound of musical instruments:<sup>40</sup> this sound was most likely created by a *tibia*, the most frequently played instrument in all Roman sacrificial ceremonies, or it may have been a lyre.<sup>41</sup>

An intertwined dance is also depicted on the altar from Pallanza in the same geographical area, dedicated to the Caligula Emperor from *Narcissus*. Moreover, an epigraphic dedication to the *Matrones* has also been carved into the altar.<sup>42</sup> The depiction on this relief, dating to the I c. A.D., is very similar to the *Ara delle Matrone* scene: three women are dancing and moving to the right, similarly dressed (Fig. 4a). They are holding hands and performing a dance in a sacred space surrounded by a

<sup>39</sup> Miedico 2016, 211-212.

<sup>40</sup> Hickson Hahn 2007, 237-245.

<sup>41</sup> Vendries 2004, 406-410; Fless and Moede 2015, 257-259. See also, Scheid 2007, 263.

<sup>42</sup> Pallanza, Church of St. Stephen. Moreno 2001, 128-129, fig. 125; Garman 2008, 39-42, fig. 1.



vegetable wreath ending with ribbons, perhaps an oaken wreath: this was an emblem recalling the numinous character of the grove and spring, and the chthonic quality of the sacrificial gifts linked to spring cult of female divinities.<sup>43</sup> The dancing scene continues on the left side of the altar, where a woman who seems to be following the group is depicted; on the right side, a fifth woman appears who seems to lead the dancing group (Fig. 4b). On the fourth side, under the inscription, a scene of sacrifice is represented (Fig. 4c).<sup>44</sup> Dancers depicted in scenes of this type suggest that ritualised movements and sounds played a significant role in all stages of the ritual, including the moment of sacrifice itself.



Fig. 4a-c. Pallanza, Church of St. Stephen. Intertwined dance depicted on the altar, dedicated to the Caligula Emperor from Narcissus. The female dancers are represented in a sacred space surrounding by a vegetable wreath ending with ribbons. I c. A.D.  
From Moreno 2001, 128-129, fig. 125.

<sup>43</sup> De Cezanove 2015, 186-188.

<sup>44</sup> Miedico 2016, 212.

Two other reliefs with representations of an intertwined dance performed by five female figures have been discovered in Avignana in the *Statio ad Fines* area (near Turin), on the way to the *Matronae Vertex* at the crossroads of ancient paths. As with the previous examples, a dedication to the *Matronae* is carved (Fig. 5).<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 5. Turin, Museum of antiquity. Inv. ST 548. Relief with the representation of an intertwined dance performed by five female figures. From Avignana (Italy). I c. A.D.

Epigraphic dedication: *MATRONIS / TI(berius) IVLIVS PRISCI L(ibertus) / ACESTES*  
From Moreno 2001, p. 128, fig. 128.

There are many other examples depicted on altars, one of which, found at Sommariva del Bosco, near Cuneo, is depicted with a group of three intertwined female dancers, a female divinity, possibly Minerva, and a worshipper.<sup>46</sup> It is worth noting that the intertwined dance is depicted not only on carved reliefs, but also on fragmented pottery found in the same area (Fig. 6).<sup>47</sup>

As with the altars, the recurrent figurative element on the scenes depicted is the representation of a group of figures holding hands and performing an intertwined dance

<sup>45</sup> Turin, Museum of antiquity. Inv. ST 548. Guzzo, Moscati, Sartori 1994, 262, n. 757.

<sup>46</sup> Miedico 2016, 212-213.

<sup>47</sup> Moreno 2001, 127, fig. 124.

moving in a sacred space, often around an oak tree, which is also an ancient symbol of fertility linked to the Celtic sacred sphere as a medium between the human and divine worlds.<sup>48</sup> This depiction could be recalling an actual dancing procession making its way toward the altar of the divinities to be honoured. For the participants, the continuous sequence of this dance within a ceremony had to be structured into a discernible unit so that they could identify this ritual action and adapt their behaviour accordingly.<sup>49</sup> It is worth noting that dance is an important indicator, since movement in a ritual space can introduce a new moment of the ritual.



Fig. 6.  
Intertwined female figures on fragmented pottery.  
From Vercelli (Italy). I c. A.D. From Moreno 2001, p. 127, fig. 124.

However, for modern observers, it is very difficult to enter the cultural and symbolic dimension of these ancient dance imageries completely. Indeed, images shape what seems to be only a snapshot of a moment, marking unequivocally the main protagonists and items, even if this does not say anything about the temporal features and sequence of ritual events. For this reason, some clear questions do emerge. Taking into account the carved inscriptions and dedications, there is no doubt that the chorus on these reliefs are linked to the religious sphere of the *Matres* and *Matronae*:<sup>50</sup> therefore, what is the ritual function and the meaning of the choral intertwined dance in their worship? The

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<sup>48</sup> Spagnolo Garzoli 1996, 89-112.

<sup>49</sup> Burkert 2003, 223-225.

<sup>50</sup> Beck 2006, 54-57.

second issue concerns the roles of the dancers: are they divinities, or simply female worshippers dancing an intertwined dance as an integral part of a religious festival performed in a sacred space? In addition to this, there is a third issue related to the practicalities of dance performance: are these figures representing actual dancers in a sacred setting during a particular festive occasion? And if so, are they situated in a public or private space? In order to answer some of these questions, it will be necessary to take into consideration other representations of intertwined dances to investigate both the relationship between the sequences of dance movements and ritual performance, why these particular dance representations were chosen for the worship of these female deities, and why these ceremonial movements were depicted around their altars.

The best comparisons can be made in South Italy, where groups of female intertwined dancers are depicted on and/or carved into various media: given the archaeological context of their discovery, these representations not only seem related to the female and wedding spheres, but also to the dualism of life and death, and to the sacred and funerary ideology widespread throughout Magna Graecia.<sup>51</sup>

#### INTERTWINED DANCING GROUPS IN MAGNA GRAECIA

As we have seen, like most choral dancing, intertwined dance was linked to the rituals and performed in a sacred space. So, this dance can be defined as a group of choral dancers characterised by moving in unison in a dancescape, sometimes led by a lead dancer. To reference Naerebout,<sup>52</sup> we can consider dancescape as a sacred space or a ritual space – a spatial and performative continuum between the performance and the audience –,<sup>53</sup> where bodily movements took place, but also where other senses, especially hearing and sight, were involved. Indeed, dance is a human bodily movement, intentional, rhythmical and patterned, with some sound as a cue, usually performed communally with any number of active and passive participants.<sup>54</sup> Whichever way we seek to understand the function and meaning of dance in a sacred context, it should be clear that it is an indispensable part of the formation of a member of society. However, the complexity of the related rituals makes their reproduction in imagery quite difficult and it is almost impossible to produce a narrative within a single image.

Judging from images related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matrones*, the intertwined dance was characterised by female dancers arranged in single file, however, it cannot be ruled out that this dance could also have been performed in multiple files or circular formation.<sup>55</sup> However, intertwined dancing was different from the type of dances that were very widespread in the ancient Mediterranean world, which involved groups of

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<sup>51</sup> Wonder 2014, 517-520.

<sup>52</sup> Naerebout 2017, 39.

<sup>53</sup> Schlapbach, 18

<sup>54</sup> Naerebout 1997, 155-165; Naerebout 2019, 32.

<sup>55</sup> Naerebout 2017, 50.

dancers arranged in a circle or rows of female and male dancers moving towards each other (Fig. 7).<sup>56</sup>



Fig. 7.

Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Row of female and male dancers depicted on a *perriranthron*. VI c. B.C. From Lippolis 1997, p. 535, tav. XXIX,1.

The intertwined dance was characterised by the interlocking of the figures' hands, which were firmly bound to each other; each female dancer grasped the hand of the previous or next figure. This formed a chain which is led at both ends with the possibility to reverse the direction of dance motion. This dance, which is still performed in traditional dances,<sup>57</sup> provides a leader group leading a row and reproducing a sort of labyrinthine winding path.

The first example (Fig. 8a-c) of this interweaving dance performed by women only is depicted on an Etruscan vase from Vulci dating to VI c. B.C., known as “Polledrara *hydria*”.<sup>58</sup> Many scholars have linked the intertwined dance depicted on this vase with the Theseic dance, not only because the first female dancer is holding the thread in her left hand, but also due to the presence of a female figure, perhaps Ariadne, behind the hero killing the Minotaur.<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that on the Etruscan vase discovered in the Tomb of Isis, the interweaving dance is performed only by female figures. This is an exceptional example of intertwined dance related to the Theseic mythical episode: all the choral dances represented in other scenes associated with this event always involve both boys and girls dancing together. One example is the depiction of an interweaving

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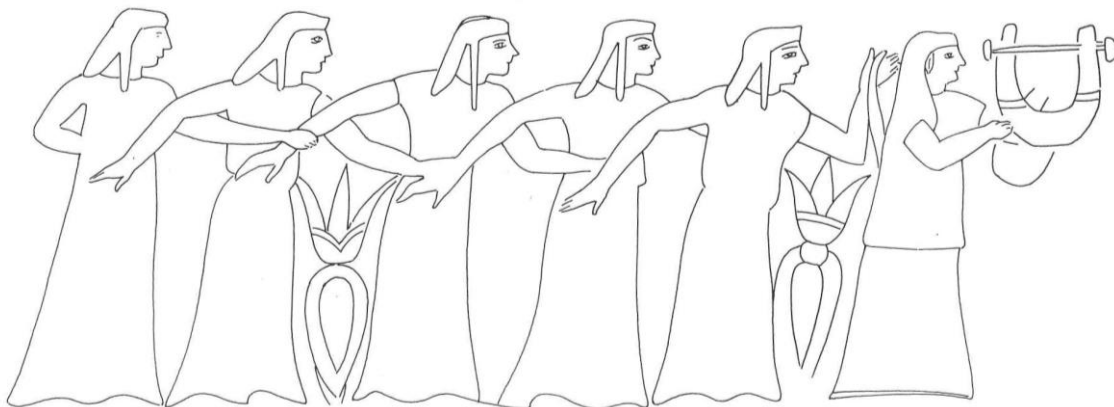
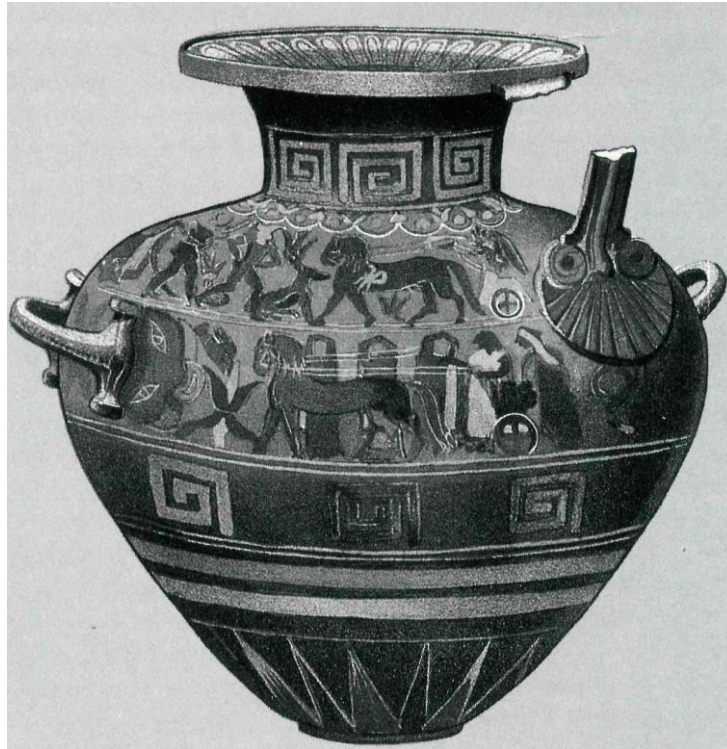
<sup>56</sup> Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Lippolis 1997, 535, tav. XXIX,1.

<sup>57</sup> Buttitta 2008, 159-160; Gould and Tahmasebian 2019, 64-68.

<sup>58</sup> London, British Museum, H 228. Todisco 1996, 126, tavv. LX-LXI.2:  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1850-0227-50](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1850-0227-50)

<sup>59</sup> Todisco 1999, 444 (previous bibliography note 38). See also, Gadaleta 2002, 137.

dance on a clay triad group dating to VII-VI c. B.C., where one male and two female dancing figures are represented (Fig. 9).<sup>60</sup>



<sup>60</sup> Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Lippolis 1995, 87, tav. XXX,3.

Fig. 8a-c.

London, British Museum, H 228. Interweaving dance depicted on the «Polledrara Hydria» from Vulci (Italy). VI c. B.C. From Todisco 1996, 126, tavv. LX-LXI.2.



Fig. 9.

Taranto, National Archaeological Museum. Interweaving dance on a clay triad group, where male and female dancers are depicted. From the Satyrion Sanctuary near Taranto. VII-VI c. B.C. From Lippolis 1995, 87, tav. XXX,3.

These figurines discovered in Satyrion near Taranto in a sanctuary associated with a spring - most likely devoted to the Satyria Nymph -, could be considered as evidence that the intertwined dances of Theseic myth and *gheranos* were performed in Magna Graecia as early as the Archaic Age. Despite the aspects of *gheranos* dance having already been extensively discussed,<sup>61</sup> it is useful to recall the symbolic meaning of this dance related to the labyrinth and its reference not only to prenuptial rites of passage and changing of status,<sup>62</sup> but also to the cycle of life and death and to the hope of life after death symbolised by the changing of the dance direction, a particularity of the intertwined dance.<sup>63</sup>

Luigi Todisco<sup>64</sup> and other scholars have highlighted, the most interesting example of intertwined dance comes from Magna Graecia (Fig. 10). On the images depicted in a bi-dimensional space of the four walls' surface inside the "Dancers' Tomb" of Ruvo in Apulia, which are dated to V c. B.C. and preserved at the National Archaeological

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<sup>61</sup> On the *gheranos* dance, see Lawler 1942, 112-130; Delavaud-Roux 1994, 78-79; Moreno 2001, 120-129; Gadaleta 2002, 144; Mancini 2004-2005, 158-160. Written sources related to *gheranos* are collected in Todisco 1996, 128-130 and in Todisco 1999, 445-447. Philostratus the Younger (*Imagines*, X, 18) quotes a depiction with the representation of a intertwining dance.

<sup>62</sup> Buttitta 2008, 161-163.

<sup>63</sup> An intertwined dance is depicted on an attic *lebes gamikos* attributed to the Syrikos Painter (470-450 a.C.). Museum of Mykonos, inv. 970. Todisco 1999, 444; Gadaleta 2002, 142-143, figg. 63-67.

<sup>64</sup> See also, Todisco 1996, 435-465; Todisco 1999, 123-132; Gadaleta 2002, 135-156.

Museum of Naples, a group of female choral dancers, accompanied by a lyra player, is performing an intertwined dance: they are ready to change the direction of movement, ideally around the dead.<sup>65</sup>



Fig. 10. Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Invv. 9352-9357. Particular of the “Dancers’ Tomb” of Ruvo in Apulia. V c. B.C. From Todisco 1996, 127-126, tavv. LIII-LIX.

Moreover, an intertwined dance performed by four female dancers in a sacred space - with the representation of two *boukrania* (skulls) at the sides, typical iconographical markers of a sacred space - is also depicted on the neck of an Apulian volute krater dating to the IV c. B.C. (Fig. 11):<sup>66</sup> this vase, attributed to the De Schultess painter, is preserved at the White and Levy Collection in New York.<sup>67</sup> On the krater, which is perhaps from the surrounding area of Taranto, the symbolic meaning of the intertwined dance scene has been connected to the relationship between birth and death as a ritual of passage by Todisco<sup>68</sup> and Paolo Moreno:<sup>69</sup> this in turn can be compared with youth initiation and prenuptial rites.<sup>70</sup>

Another example of a group of female dancers performing an intertwining dance accompanied by an *aulos* player is also depicted on an Apulian *Thymiaterion*, a vase used for burning incense during rituals and wedding ceremonies (Fig. 12).<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting that in a tomb belonging to a little girl from *Herakleia*, a Greek *polis* founded by Taranto, an unpublished terracotta group with the representation of three female intertwined dancers has been discovered. Along with this choral group (dating to the end of IV c. B.C.), other objects related to the female sphere and nuptial rites belonging

<sup>65</sup> Naples, National Archaeological Museum. Invv. 9352-9357. Todisco 1996, 127-126, tavv. LIII-LIX; Gadaleta 2002, 8-13, figg. 1-6.

<sup>66</sup> New York, Shelby White and Leon Levy Collection. Inv. 381. Todisco 1996, 127-128; Todisco 1999, 444, fig. 14; Gadaleta 2002, 146-147, figg. 69-71.

<sup>67</sup> Trendall and Cambitoglou 1991, 133-135, n. 78.

<sup>68</sup> Todisco 1996, 127-128; Todisco 1999, 444-445.

<sup>69</sup> Moreno 2001, 126-128.

<sup>70</sup> Lonsdale 1993, 72-73.

<sup>71</sup> Beverly Hills, Antiquities trade. Todisco and Sisto 1998, 603, fig. 30; Todisco 1999, 447, fig. 15; Gadaleta 2002, 150, fig. 72.



to the same grave have been found, and are preserved at the National Museum of Siritide-Policoro, situated on the Gulf of Taranto (Fig. 13).<sup>72</sup>

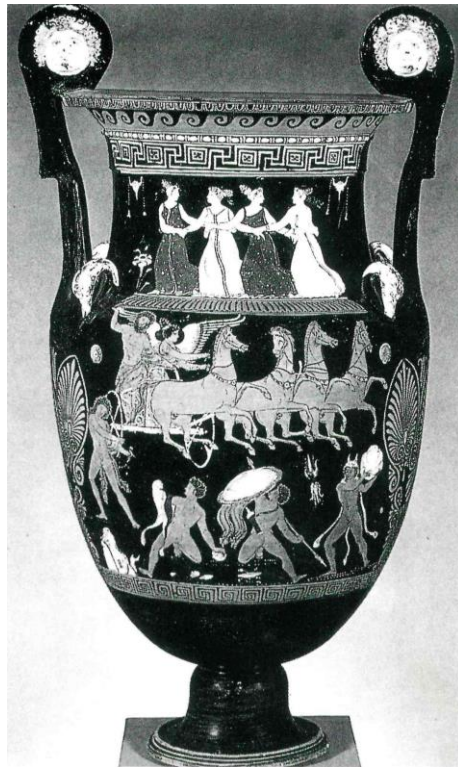


Fig. 11. New York, Shelby White and Leon Levy Collection. Inv. 381. Intertwined dance performed by four female dancers in a sacred space depicted on the neck of an Apulian volute krater (from Taranto?) IV c. B.C. From Todisco 1999, 444, fig. 14.

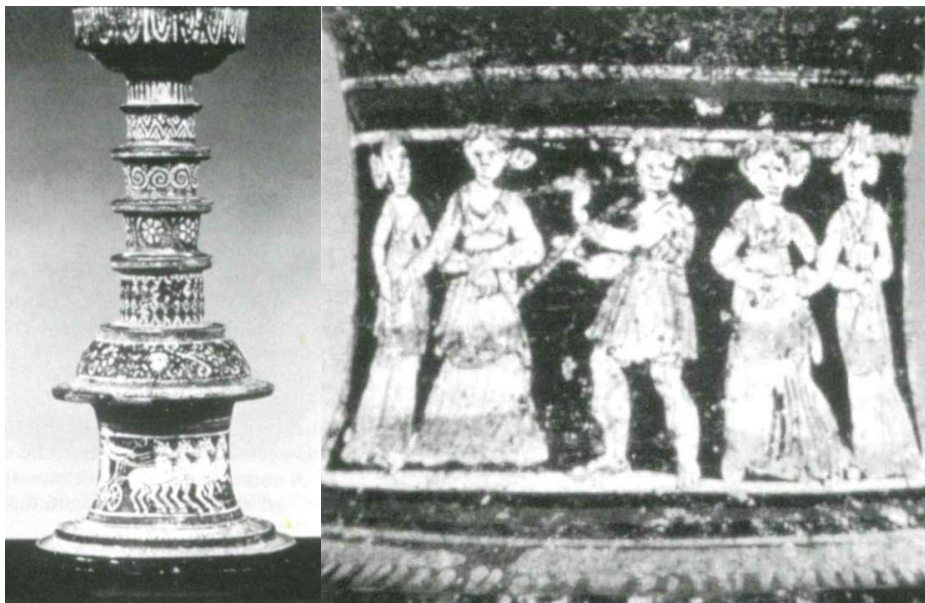


Fig. 12. Beverly Hills, Antiquities trade. An intertwining dance accompanied by an *aulos* player depicted on an Apulian *Thymiaterion*, IV c. B.C. From Todisco 1999, 447, fig. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Policoro (MT), National Archaeological Museum of Siritide. Inv. 216374. Unpublished.



Fig. 13. Policoro (MT), National Archaeological Museum of Siritide. Inv. 216374.  
Terracotta group with the representation of three female intertwined. End of IV c. B.C.

As Mario Torelli notes,<sup>73</sup> the symbolic meaning of this particular dance appears linked with an ideal symmetry between two transitions: marriage and death. Thus, the depictions of the intertwined dance seem to be related to these important phases of life, and appear to explain the presence of images of intertwined dancing groups in Magna Graecia, where this dance could be recalling performances related to the female sphere and to rites of passage for changing status.

On the basis of the set of evidence and the context of their discovery, it should be considered that the intertwined dance and its particular movement, which allows the dancers to change the direction of movement symbolically, signifies a change (of status, of life, of human condition): this symbolic meaning could likely explain its depiction on various media in different geographical areas and periods, and its association with cults and rituals related to the divinities, who were patronesses of fertility for both humans and nature.

Archaeological evidence found in Magna Graecia and in the Cisalpine area highlights the way intertwined dance was closely allied with ceremonies involving rites of passage and initiation, and nuptial rites, linking intertwined dance with the cycle of death and rebirth. What remains to be understood is how these rituals were connected with events and marital unions promoted by Romans in an area on the border of Celtic and German regions at a moment in which the Empire needed to establish and reinforce alliances in this area.<sup>74</sup>

#### A DANCING FESTIVAL IN THE CISALPINE AREA?

Religious ritual was a favourite subject for Roman sculptors and painters; we possess countless images of sacred events, but only a few that explicitly show a worshiper in the act of dancing. This is not surprising given both the difficulties of depicting movements and by contrast the visually more interesting scenes of ceremonies. Regarding the

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<sup>73</sup> Torelli 1992, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Beck 2009, 17-20.

portrayals of intertwined dances related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matronae*, we have not distinguished between human and non-human dancers, but it is possible to consider them as reflective of human dance in honour of these divinities and their retinue. Therefore, the images present us at least with an idea of which dance was appropriate for which context.

As Naerebout has highlighted,<sup>75</sup> images were intended to portray “dance” but not any particular event. For this reason, the depictions (as written sources) do not allow us to reconstruct actual performance since we lack the music and their song texts. Moreover, not only must we be aware that these performances cannot be seen or heard, we must also consider that a dance and a particular movement are never fixed but are constantly evolving, and even if a dance can be localised and pinned down in time, every performance is unique and can never be repeated in exactly the same way. For this reason, images can be questioned on the basis of the function and social role of dance as marking an occasion as other than ordinary, mobilising an audience, and communicating messages about the community and about social relations.<sup>76</sup>

As Beck has argued,<sup>77</sup> archaeological evidence related to the worship of *Matres* and *Matronae* has been most notably discovered in places connected with springs and water sources in the Cisalpine area, where the ritual use of grottoes dates back to prehistory.<sup>78</sup> There is evidence for a proliferation of the use of caves for celebration related to the female and nuptial sphere:<sup>79</sup> the presence of springs and water sources, their closed entrances, and their liminality, made grottoes particularly attractive as locations for the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, which have often been identified with Nymphs, and, as Torelli notes,<sup>80</sup> are connected with the rites of passage of women and some seasonal festive occasions, perhaps similarly to the *Matronalia*, a festival of nature’s renewal as well as New Year’s celebration celebrated in Rome since the Archaic period in honour to Juno Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, but also Roman mothers and wives.<sup>81</sup>

Protecting women and embodying fertility were also functions of the *Matres* and *Matronae*, which would explain why they were compared and assimilated to the Junones in four inscriptions from Cisalpine area.<sup>82</sup> These various instances show that the term *Junones* was believed to be identical to the term *Matronae*: it may even have completely replaced it in some areas after the Roman invasion, such as in large parts of North Italy.

A possible reference to this festival in the scenes depicting female dances in the Cisalpine area could mean that women had their own particular religious roles, supporting the notion that the women played a role in the spread of the *Matres* and

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<sup>75</sup> Naerebout 2019, 35.

<sup>76</sup> Naerebout 2019, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Beck 2009, 334-344.

<sup>78</sup> David 2014, 180-181.

<sup>79</sup> Larson 2001, 211-225; Buttitta 2013, 247-290.

<sup>80</sup> Torelli 1984, 67.

<sup>81</sup> Estienne 2011, 245-246; Brelich 2015, 224.

<sup>82</sup> Epigraphic sources are collected in Beck 2009, 84.

*Matronae* cult.<sup>83</sup> It is worth considering that in this cult *elite* women, both local and Roman, had the chance to lead religious rituals and celebrations, as various forms of archaeological evidence seems to point to. Like the *Matronalia*, *Matres* and *Matronae* worship allowed women to have a presence, specifically one that brought the Romans and local populations together.

This cult could serve as an example of a mixed culture that emerged in the Cisalpine area.<sup>84</sup> Romans' legal reforms made marriages much more viable, which helped to create social interactions and blood ties between Romans and local populations:<sup>85</sup> particularly those who married local women, Romans were exposed to the *Matronae* and gravitated towards the cult both to get closer to the locals and to win over the deities for protection.<sup>86</sup>

The Roman presence – formed from soldiers and Italic immigrants –<sup>87</sup> and in this geographic area in North Italy did indeed use coercive imperialistic power, but the participation across socio-cultural exchanges between both groups, which created the mixed ritual and iconography, suggests an active relationship in religious behaviour.<sup>88</sup> The opportunities related to the cult as well as the family ties created by marriages between Romans and locals fostered this religious community. The *Matres* and *Matronae* cult in the Cisalpine area provides an example of Romans and locals forming communities together in the frontiers. In this case, a common religious worship brought the groups together in a social organisation.<sup>89</sup>

Within this context, dance performances could function as a means of social control, helping to establish and maintain new social groupings.<sup>90</sup> The study of dance performances and their ritual contexts related to the Roman votive artefacts found in the Cisalpine area may help us to understand how social relations could be marked, shaped, and introduced by bodily and ritualised movement in special festivals and ritual acts.

## CONCLUSION

Depictions of intertwined dances performed by groups of worshippers are not simply dedications and material objects but dynamic and expressive products of human behaviour in cult. Taking into account the communicative nature of dance, which carries a great deal of significance beyond that represented by everyday movement, these objects may have been conceived as souvenirs of rituals that involved not only dancers (and, obviously, singers and musicians who formed an acoustic background, the form of which was widely heard and engraved in the memory of each participant), but also

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<sup>83</sup> Lomas 2014, 485-487.

<sup>84</sup> Arslan 1994, 66.

<sup>85</sup> Torelli 1988, 53-74.

<sup>86</sup> Rothe 2014, 506-507.

<sup>87</sup> Sartori 1994, 120.

<sup>88</sup> Rüpke 2014, 475-479.

<sup>89</sup> Sartori 1994, 121. See also, Lee-Stecum 2014, 464-467.

<sup>90</sup> Slofstra 1983, 71-81.

priests, priestesses, or cult personnel in special events who were all relevant for the community. Thus, it is necessary to consider the representations of intertwined dancers and their relationship with the religious sphere on a case-by-case basis, while keeping in mind the different uses of the same representations for different sacred occasions, and, where possible, the differing archaeological contexts in which these depictions were found.

Images might themselves “participate” in these ceremonies, most likely related to rituals of social transformation. These sacred occasions were privileged moments for the consecration of these images to the divinities that ensured these passages. The worshippers might incorporate their offering into the ritual as a tool for illustrating proper behaviour during the sacred events.<sup>91</sup>

Dance, alongside music and sound as inseparable components in the sacred sphere, strengthens the power of performances,<sup>92</sup> which relies in great part on the effect of the heightened multisensory experience.<sup>93</sup> dancing activities performed at sacred settings were intended to maximise the effects of the ceremony, and reinforce the solidarity engendered by these practices. Active participation in processing, in listening, and viewing, created a *communitas* of shared experience.<sup>94</sup> The desire to retain a tangible memento of a dance performance in a sacred setting could have led worshippers to offer particular dedications that depicted dancing performances: this may have contributed to evoking the experience of cult by recalling bodily movements and sounds in a sacred setting.<sup>95</sup> Keeping this perspective in mind, the dance scenes on Roman votive artefacts and the inscribed epigraphic dedications could be associated not only with a specific idea of ritual and dance performances in the local cult of *Matres* and *Matronae* in the Cisalpine area, but also to an explicit preservation of their memory.<sup>96</sup>

The link between sacred events and dancing performances during their celebrations would be the key to understanding the symbolic meanings and the production of depictions of intertwined dancers on altars and images, which are spread across a broad geographical space and a wide chronological spectrum in the ancient world, particularly between Magna Graecia and Rome.

To quote Eric Csapo,<sup>97</sup> «the cycle of death and rebirth is a link that bridges beginnings and ends, aether and underworld, and so steps, as ritual does, outside of time and space to unite time and space».

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<sup>91</sup> Chaniotis 2009, 3-4.

<sup>92</sup> Bell 1997, 159-164.

<sup>93</sup> Betts 2017, 26-28.

<sup>94</sup> Buttà 2014, 7-8.

<sup>95</sup> Bellia 2018, 94-95.

<sup>96</sup> Spickermann 2015, 412-414.

<sup>97</sup> Csapo 2017, 149.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

JAAR = Journal of the American Academy of Religion  
 LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*  
 MEFRA = Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Antiquité  
 RAComo = Rivista Archeologica dell'Antica Provincia e Diocesi di Como  
 SE = Studi Etruschi  
 ThesCRA = *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*

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