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Pyrrhic Contests in Greek world from the 5th BC to the 2nd century. BC

Accompanied by the *aulos* (music instrument with reeds and more often two unequal pipes) and by the song *pyrrhichistikon*, the pyrrhic is the most famous of ancient war dances in Ancient Greece. The name comes from *pur*, which means fire¹. The pyrrhic is practiced with a shield and a spear, sometimes a helmet, a cuirass and greaves, i.e. the equipment of the Athenian hoplite. The shield is almost always round and occasionally fitted with an apron. In some cases, there is an other shield much lighter and half moon shaped, the *pelta*. The dancers' helmets are Corinthian (hiding the cheeks), or attic (the face is visible) ; some helmets are garnished with plume. Costume is enough free : dancer is often naked or wears *chitoniskos*. Originated in Crete, the pyrrhic reproduces movements of defence and attack :

« it represents modes of eluding all kinds of blows and shots by swervings and duckings and side-leaps upward or crouching ; and also the opposite kinds of motion, which lead to active postures of offence, when it strives to represent the movements involved in shootings with bows or darts and blows of every description»²

Plato distinguishes the gestures of defence and the gestures of attack. He explains the former by quoting four movements : horizontal jump (ἔκνευσις), vertical jump (ἐκπήδησις ἐν ὕψει), walking backwards (ὑπείξις) and knelling (ταπεινώσις). But he defines more blurred the latter. Separately, Plato's text is not enough to reconstruct the pyrrhic. In return, if we confront it with the iconography of the potteries and the low reliefs, which offer pyrrhic images, this text makes sense

At the Vth century B-C., painters and sometimes also sculptors depicted pyrrhichists and showed well the mimetic character of the dance³. So they underscore the defensive shape of movements with an accurate detail : the weight of the pyrrhichists' bodies is carried backwards, with an important torsion of head and chest, while for offensives attitudes, there is no torsion and the weight of the body is forward. All these pictures depicted and explicit Plato's purpose⁴. We see that the gestures of attacks, so blurred define by Plato, are less

¹ It is an indo-european word, with inanimate gender as says Chantraine P., *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1965, p. 956-957 ; But ancient authors give very various origins, cf. Delavaud-Roux M.-H., *Les danses armées en Grèce antique*, 1993, p. 53.

² Plato, *Laws*, VII, 815a, transl. R. G. Bury, The Loeb classical Library, 1926.

³ Poursat J.-C., "Les représentations de danse armée dans la céramique attique", *BCH*, 1968, p. 550-615

⁴ Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 75-105.

various than gestures of defence : these are walks and jumps. In addition, the study of the iconography shows movements that Plato neglected to quote : these are all the transitional movements, which are located in an intermediate between attack and defence. The most part of the iconographical representations evoke one or two pyrrhichists (maybe the soloists' performances) but some of them depict pyrrhic choirs, e.g. at the IVth century BC. The low relief from Acropolis, called « Artabos' basis »⁵. On this basis is sculpted a choregos walking behind two groups of pyrrhichists who have the right leg crossed front the left one, the chest in torsion, the left arm wearing the shield and the right arm doing the gesture to hold a spear. On the kantharos of Vatican (G 58, around 500 B. C.), four groups of pyrrhichists manoeuvre, all the dancers turned in the same direction. The chorus can also break up into two parts who dance parallel (the Artabos' basis) or who confront each other.

Since the archaic period, this dance was considered by Greeks as an excellent exercise to prepare fight. It helped to memorize the movements which were practiced in hoplitic phalanx. Greek defined battle as the Ares' dance. We have an example with Tyrtaeus at the VIIth century BC :

"Come, children of Sparta, weapons for the Ares' dance"

As far as that goes, according to Socrates, the best dancers in the choirs are also the best fighters in the war (Athenaeus, XIV, 628 e-f.). At last, Lucian (*On the dance*, 14) tells us that in Thessaly, the best soldiers were called *proorchestères* and citizens erected statues to men who « danced well the battle ». This idea explains why since the classical period, there are pyrrhic contests in a lot of Greek cities. These contests were studied by par Ceccarelli. As the case maybe, they affected different age groups : adult men, epebes, and children.

• The pyrrhic in Sparta

As says Pseudo-Plutarch, the pyrrhic was exported from Crete to Laconia, around the end of the VIIth BC, by a cretan musician, Thaletas of Gortyn with songs and *aulos* melodies he composed (Ps. Plutarch, *De Musica*, 9 et 28; scholia Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, II, 127). This story is not unlikely because we know that very close links united Cretan and Spartan communities. According to Lacedemonians, Lycurgus imported his constitution from Crete, Herodotus, I, 65 and Strabo, X, 4, 19). The pyrrhic plays a not second fiddle in Spartan education, which gave little importance to intellectual training but much to gymnastics, music and dance. Children learned the pyrrhic, since they were five

⁵ Athens, Acropolis Museum 1338, 366-365 BC. cf. Casson, *Catalogue of the Acropolis Museum* II, p. 240 n° 1338 and IG II2 3025 ; Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 103 ; Ceccarelli P., *La pirrica nell'antichità greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, p. 37 and p. 244

old years (Athenaeus, XIV, 63d), before they were removed from their parents and submitted to community life. They did not stop practicing this dance every day to prepare themselves to the war. The pyrrhic was also important in some lacedemonian feasts. It was performed during the Gymnopaedia and Dioscuri' feast (Athenaeus, XIV, 631e), and according to Ceccarelli also at the Hyakinthia and at the Karneia⁶. Contests for Dioscuri are certified by the Greek inscriptions but not before the IInd. c. AD.⁷.

• Pyrrhic contests in Athens

In Athens, education is given at school and privileges intellectual. There are regular lessons to learn how read and write, to work literature and mathematics, to play music but not to perform the pyrrhic. The pyrrhic is practiced, as *hoplitodromos* or other sports. People train also for the contests which take place during the feasts, for example at the Panathenaia and at the Great Panathenaia⁸ : the contest was with different teams. There were prizes for each age group : children, ephebes and adult men. Between proclamation of the victory and the moment where the prizes were given, took place the victors' honorary circuit⁹ : one pyrrhichist, probably the chief's choir, was worn triumphantly by his companions, as we can see on the fragment of a basis (Athens National Museum 3854) offered by a victor¹⁰. But we do not know what was the unrolling of the competition. According to P. Ceccarelli, some images are located in the context of these contests : e.g. the Artabos' basis¹¹, the Xenocles' basis¹² ; the black figured the pelike by the Beldam painter¹³, the lecythos by the Athena painter¹⁴. Several pictures are connected with the palaestra but for other iconographical representations nothing can help us to identify a context¹⁵.

⁶ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 105-106.

⁷ *IG V*, 1, 599 et 602 respectively from the end of IInd c. / beginning of IIIrd c. AD. and the beginning of IIIrd c. BC., <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, p. 103 et n. 60.

⁸ Lysias, *Défense d'un anonyme*, XXI, 1 et 4; Isaeus, V, 36

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Poursat, J.-C., "Une base signée du Musée national d'Athènes : pyrrhichistes victorieux", *BCH*, 91, 1967, 102-110.

¹¹ See *supra* n. 5 and Ceccarelli P., *La pirrica nell'antichità greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, p. 37.

¹² Xenokles' basis, Athens, acropolis Museum 6465 and *IG II²* 3026 ; Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 104 ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 34 et p. 36

¹³ Black-figured pelike Gela 124B, Painter of Beldam, around 490-480 BC. ; Poursat J.-C., "Les représentations de danse armée dans la céramique attique", *BCH*, 1968, 16, p. 573 ; Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, 5, p. 76 ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, n° 16.

¹⁴ White group Lecythos, Basilea private coll., Painter of Athéna, 485 BC. ; *Paralipomena*, 261 ; MuMAuktion 34, 1967, pl. 41, n. 141 ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, n° 66

¹⁵ Delavaud-Roux, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

Other contests took place in Attica, outside the *astu* of Athens. A decree from the middle of the IVth c. BC, from the Halai Araphenides deme, gives honour to the demote Philomena's because he was the choregos of the pyrrhichists and he accomplished some other liturgies of his deme¹⁶. The honours must be proclaimed during the Tauropolia¹⁷. P. Ceccarelli thinks that this competition took place during the Tauropolia¹⁸. On the other hand, an inscription of the Athmonon deme, from 325/324 BC, evokes contests for Artemis Amarysia, whose worship is attested by Pausanias¹⁹ : according to P. Ceccarelli, the pyrrhic was maybe included²⁰.

• Other Pyrrhic contests in the Greek mainland and in Crete

Three inscriptions reveal a pyrrhic contest for the ephebes at Eretria, for Artemis Amarysia, since 315-305 BC. The first is a contract between the city of Eretria and a stranger called Chairephontes for the drainage of swampy land. The text says that pyrrhichists pay a fine to Artemis Amarysia in case of transgression²¹. The second inscription dated the end of IInd c. or the beginning of Ist c. BC is a decree for Theopomp, who gave 40.000 drachmas. It speaks about the proclamation of honours for the benefactors of the city, during the Dionysia, the day of procession, and during the pyrrhic competition, which takes place at the Artemisia²². The third inscription is a decree for Hipposthenes and his son Aischylos : it gives the same information that the previous inscription²³. The pyrrhichists who competed were ephebes²⁴ and institution of ephebia in Eretria cannot be dated before 315-305 BC²⁵. The goddess, which received honours in these contests, was of warlike nature²⁶ and was originated in

¹⁶ SEG XXXIV, 103 ; Ceccarelli P., *op. cit.*, p. 83 ; Knoepfler D., "Sur les traces de l'Artémision d'Amarnthos près d'Érétrie", *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 2, 1988. p. 382-421, cf. p. 387 n. 21, thinks the inscription is dated from 350-300 BC.

¹⁷ Knoepfler, *op. cit.*, p. 387 n. 21.

¹⁸ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Pausanias, I, 31, 4-5

²⁰ IG II², 1203 ; <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

²¹ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 91-92 ; Chankowski A. S., "Date et circonstances de l'institution de l'éphébie à Érétrie", *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, 19, 2, 1993. p. 17-44 ; Knoepfler, *op. cit.*, p. 387 and n. 22.

²² IG XII, 9, 236, lines 44-46 <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 93 ; Knoepfler D., *op. cit.*, p. 386-387.

²³ IG XII, 9, 237, lines 21-23 <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, *Op. cit.*, p. 93 ; Knoepfler, *op. cit.*, p. 386 n. 17

²⁴ and also ephebes in their second year, according to Dareste R., Haussoullier B., Reinach Th., *recueil des inscriptions juridiques grecques*, 1891, p. 153-157, particularly 156-157, n° 3 ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁵ Chankowski, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁶ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

Amarynthos, an Eretria deme located at 60 *stadia* from the city²⁷. She played a role that went beyond that of a simple local goddess²⁸.

There are also contests for Artemis Sôteira in the area of Megara, but not before the 1st c. BC.²⁹.

In Crete, the tradition of the pyrrhic is still more ancient than in Sparta, with the Cretan Homeric Merion, which was a very good dancer³⁰. On the other hand, there is also an other armed dance, the Curetes' dance, but which according to Ceccarelli, has been identified to the pyrrhic since the 4th c. BC³¹. For Ceccarelli, we must understand in the same context the inscription of Palaiokastro, which contains a hymn sung by the Cretan Couroi³². In an other inscription from Itanos³³, where is written a hymn to Zeus Dictaios, i.e. the god who was worshiped in the Dictaios Mountain But in the present state of our knowledge, there is no Cretan epigraphic evidence of pyrrhic contest.

Pyrrhic contests in the Greek cities of Minor Asia

Competitions are developing since the end of the 3rd c. BC. In Cos, two inscriptions of the end of the 3rd c. or the beginning of the 2nd c. give the victors' lists for the Dionysia and probably come from the theatre³⁴. We know also two inscriptions with similar lists for the Dionysia of Teos, dated from the same period³⁵. In the contests of these two cities, The pyrrhic is connected with the dithyramb³⁶. In Rhodes six inscriptions dated from 2nd to 1st c. BC. honours various men who financed the pyrrhic choruses³⁷. Two inscriptions from

²⁷ Chankowski, *op. cit.*, p. 29

²⁸ Knoepfler, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

²⁹ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 95-97.

³⁰ *Iliade*, XVI, 617-619 and Ceccarelli' s commentary, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³¹ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³² *IC III*, 2, 2 = *SEG XXVIII*, 1978, 751 from 3rd c. AD but the hymn dated 3rd c. BC., <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 111 et n. 100. We think that the movements of this war dance are very different from the pyrrhic, and the aim of this dance, before the war is connected with fertility and growth.

³³ *IC III*, 4, 8 = *SEG XIII*, 464 dated 3rd c. BC., <http://epigraphy.packhum.org> ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 111 ; Lonsdale S. H., *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, Baltimore and Londres, The John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 165.

³⁴ ED 52 et E234 Segre M., *Iscrizioni de Cos*, I-2, Roma, 1993 ; Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 121 ; Ceccarelli P., « Le dityrambe et la pyrrhique. À propos de la nouvelle liste de vainqueurs aux Dionysies de Cos (Segre, ED 234) », *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 108, 1995, p. 287-305.

³⁵ CIG 3089 et CIG 3090 ; Ceccarelli P., *La pirrica nell' antichità greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, p. 134-135.

³⁶ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 124-125 et 134-135

³⁷ Blinkeberg Ch., *Lindos Fouilles et recherches 1902-1914 II Inscriptions*, Berlin / Copenhagen, 1941, 131 d, l. 2-3, 1st c. BC (to Aristeidas) ; Iacopi G., *Clara Rhodos. Studi e materiali*, vol II, Rhodi Bergamo, 1932, n° 18, 189-190, 1st c. av. BC. (to Pasiphon) ; *SEG* 39, 1989, 759, 1st c. BC (to Eupolemos) ; Iacopi G., *op. cit.*, p. 193-194, n° 21, 2nd c. BC. (to

Colophon, from the last quarter of the IInd c. BC., evokes the proclamation of honours for Polemaios and Menippos during the pyrrhic contests at the *Dionysia* and the *Claria*³⁸. We also know an inscription from Xantos, from Ist c. BC, two epigraphic documents from Aphrodisias from 180-190 AD, an inscription from Tripoli in Lydia dated from imperial period³⁹. This last text is concerning a pyrrhichist professional dancer.

Besides these epigraphic testimonies, P. Ceccarelli thinks that Callimach' allusions to the Curetes' dance at the IIIrd c. BC and various literary sources from Vth c. BC would refer to the existence of a pyrrhic choir in Ephesos⁴⁰. At last, in Clazomenes and in Troad, some pyrrhic sculptures on two sarcophagi attest the interest in this dance outside⁴¹

The pyrrhic contests are very important in the life of the Greek cities, even if our textual sources concern only some of these cities⁴². The age group, which is the most enlisted by these competitions, is the ephebes, and it is normal because at the end of this period, a young man must use well the adult weapons and demonstrate it in front of its civic community. The pyrrhic competitions were offering the opportunity of this type of performance. Sometimes, e.g. in Athens, other group ages can be mobilized : adult men and children. When it is the case, we think that the pyrrhic has an educational function in citizen's life, at any age (except old people because they do not fight at the war since they are 60 years old).

Aristomenes) ; Pugliese Carratelli G., "Supplemento epigrafico rodio", *Annuario della scuola archeologica di Atene*, p. 30-32, 1952-54, n° 18 (to Dionysios) ; Maiuri A., *Nuova silloge*, n° 18, 80 av. J.-C. (to Polykles). See also Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 125-128 and Ceccarelli P., « Le dityrambe et la pyrrhique ». À propos de la nouvelle liste de vainqueurs aux Dionysies de Cos (Segre, ED 234) », *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 108, 1995, p. 287-305, cf. p. 298 n. 45.

³⁸ *SEG* 39, 1989, 1243 (col. V l. 36) et 1244 (col. III l. 28) ; J. and L. Robert, *Claros I. Décrets hellénistiques*, Paris 1989 ; Ceccarelli P., *La pirrica nell'antichità greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, p. 132-134

³⁹ Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 128-131.

⁴⁰ Callimaque, *Hymne à Zeus*, 237-247 ; Aristophane, *Nuées*, 599-600 ; Diogen. Ath. TrGF I 45F1 ; Dion. Per. 839-845 ; See P. Ceccarelli, *La pirrica nell'antichità greco romana. Studi sulla danza armata*, Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1998, p. 135-136

⁴¹ sarcophage from Clazomenes, London, British Museum 96.6-15.1, end VIth c. or beginning of Vth c. BC, *CVA Great Britain / British Museum* 8 II Dq and Ceccarelli' s commentary, *op. cit.*, p. 136-137 ; sarcophage from Gümüşçai (near Biga and the north of Hissarlik) end VIth c. BC, cf. Sevinç N. "A new sarcophagus of Polyxena from the salvage excavations at Gümüşçai, *İStudia Troica*, 6, p. 251-264, and Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 138-139.

⁴² We did not include here the Etruria, the Lucania, the Campania and the coasts of the Adriatic sea, whose testimonies about pyrrhic are only iconographics. On this last point, see Ceccarelli, *op. cit.*, p. 141-147.