

She who dances with raised arms...

Ariadne's Wonder

(C) Birgit WEHNERT

Live music and dance in the village square somewhere in Southern Crete at the edge of the Messara Plain.

I sit in front of my favorite tavern and sometimes join the line of dancers, in the simple *Siganos* or the *Syrtos Kritis*, the Cretan *Syrtos*. Back to my table the exceptionally friendly waitress with the beautiful name Ariadne serves my dish and a carafe of *Krassí* (local wine). Young, tall and vibrant she glides smoothly with loaded trays between the rows of tables. In her limited free time, she plays basketball and considers studying sports after graduating from highschool.

The music - firmly in the hand of the men - intensifies: the fast, artistic *Maleviziotis*¹ is beginning, danced mainly by the young folks. Lightning fast, small and delicate are the steps, the entire village square starts buzzing with energy. Ariadne has quickly removed her apron and joins the line of dancers. A young man steps to the front and, supported by the dancer on his left, he begins to improvise breathtaking acrobatic jumps, known as 'figurés', while the dance group is moving almost in place. He receives the full attention and applause of the co-dancers and spectators.

As soon as he has stepped back into the line, a second dancer takes his place with new variations and leaps.

These 'figurés' of the young men strike me as relics of Minoan bull-leaping, the game with life and death, part of a complex cultic event as many as 4000 years ago, invoking the epiphany of Divine Power, which appeared in female form.²

The powerful dance acrobatics are captivating the attention of everyone present for what is about to come: Ariadne steps to the forefront of the dancers, wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt, like most of the young people. She feels called to lead, 'has Meraki' as the Cretans say. Now she is breaking away from the line, dancing alone in front, her arms raised wide like wings, her steps high on her toes, so small, quick and delicate, her feet barely seem to touch the ground anymore. Highly concentrated and yet oblivious to herself, she is moving back and forth in a trance-like state, carried by the rapid steady rhythm of the *laouto* and *lyra*, her gaze lowered sideways, she is turning around her own axis, spinning and, in the act of spinning, with her whole body and soul she becomes mediatrix between heaven and earth.

Everything seems to hold its breath, the dancers are spellbound on their knees, clapping along with those around them. Time stands still for a Divine Moment, in which everyone present may partake – in a wonder that can happen only when someone dances with *Meraki*.

The music fades away. Ariadne, who has rejoined the line, picks up her apron and returns to her work – as if nothing had happened.

Untranslatable is the term *Meraki* (from Turkish *merak* 'labor of love', 'wonder' etc.), which, in Greek, means to do something with yearning, with complete dedication, full of care and skill, with all one's heart, connected to one's own soul, in perfect truthfulness - whether it's brewing a cup of coffee, painting a picture or dancing.

Each time the music plays in the village square and the dance is about to begin, I wait for Ariadne to step in front of the dancers again. She knows that I am waiting for this, but she won't do it just because I want it. It only works when she feels called, with *Meraki*.



Golden signet ring from Isopata , Late Minoan Bronze Age, 3400 years, height 2.1 cm

The following year, a wonder appears in form of a little girl whom Ariadne brings into the world. With pride, Zoí (meaning 'life!') is presented to me. Even as an infant, she wears a little skirt in which she somehow resembles the divine girl-apparition that seems to be floating in the upper left corner of the ritual dance scene on the Minoan goldring from Isopata. Zoí's tiered skirt was crocheted by Ariadne's mother - from a ball of red! woolen thread.

The father, a young Cretan of small stature, watches over 'his' family's steps in the old patriarchal manner. No longer do I see Ariadne dancing in the village square, nor does she serve in the tavern anymore. In addition to her duties as a young mother and well-guarded wife, she works part-time as a chambermaid in the neighboring tourist village – there is no more mention of her study plans.

I would love to see the day when she will lead the dance again, upright, confident and powerful, even if it won't be the fast *Maleviziotis* anymore. One day (if I live long enough), I may see Ariadne's daughter do the small delicate steps of the *Maleviziotis*, having learned from her

mother to follow her yearning and to dance with Meraki. Then the wonder can happen again. And perhaps then one of Zoí's girlfriends will be sitting in the row of musicians, playing the lyre with Meraki – just like in Minoan times.



Minoan dancers with 'Lyra' player Roussolakko / Palaikastro 3300 years

About Meraki, Cretan dances with 'figurés' and women with raised arms.

Cretans smile at people who lead and 'make' 'figurés' to present something special or to appear impressive. However, with full respect they speak of a person who dances in truth, '*she has Meraki*,'³ and that is always beautiful, no matter how imperfect it may be. Such a person offers herself as a medium to the Great Power. Nevertheless, the 'figurés' require great skill. They are a unique feature of Cretan dances such as the *Syrtos Kritis* and the *Maleviziotis/Kastrinos Pidichtos*, and we may therefore assume that they contain ancient relics of Minoan dance rituals. However, Cretan people care less about such interpretations. They simply dance and let things take their course.

Unlike the male-oriented combative *Pentozalis*, the swift *Maleviziotis*, with its 'figurés', is especially loved by women and girls. It is danced not only at the Glentis (village festivals) and weddings, but also, and above all, at the great baptism festivals that celebrate young life. Like queens or young goddesses, they dance their solos there, and sometimes the entire chorus kneels down and claps to honor a dancer, affirming her expression, her skill, and her becoming-one with the Great Power, allowing themselves to be taken by it for a moment.

The *Maleviziotis* should definitely not be interpreted as a war dance, as it sometimes is. Instead, it contains elements of female initiation rites and sacred acts from matriarchal times.

I often hear Greek dance teachers say that in the 'figurés', men display strength and skill, while women exhibit grace and beauty. That is certainly *also* true, but it overlooks the powerful and significant role of women in what was originally a ritual dance context, which can still be felt today.

Women with raised arms are ubiquitous in Cretan iconography from Minoan times to the present day (Nicola Cucuzza, Laura Shannon and others also refer to this posture): snake goddesses, bird-dancers with outstretched wings, votive figures, crowned women bestowing blessings – in Minoan art, in contemporary folk art, in textiles and in depictions of the All Saint/Panagia/Gods Mother: all of them invoking feminine divine power, generating, embodying, and distributing blessings. This all-besouling power is regarded as life-renewing, manifesting itself in natural phenomena, in mountains, caves, stones, animals, birds, trees and plants, and - as a central medium - in dance: cyclical life that encompasses birth, death and regeneration.⁴

Such representations often have been found in connection with Minoan burials. The round, circles, spirals, movement and dynamics played a central role in art, daily life and spirituality of the Minoans.

(On this topic, see also Birgit Wehnert: *Europa tanzt – Kreta, Wiege unserer Tanzkultur*, 2011)



Dancing vegetation goddess with raised arms
Phaistos 3800 years



Bird dancer, Minoan seal from Zakros
3500 years



contemporary Cretan weaving/ritual cloth:
Power flows from raised arms/hands of a woman
between sun/mountain mother goddesses guarding
young life and seeds

A new old dance circle

Therefore, I am filled with great joy at the discovery of a third (and, aged about 3,800 years, so far the oldest) Minoan circle-dance-sculpture: five women, magically belted, dancing with raised arms. They were excavated in the late 1980s at a burial complex near the Minoan temple-palace of Agia Triada. Since May 2023 they are finally now accessible to the public at the newly opened archaeological museum of the Messara (which is definitely worth a visit)

There, this delicate restored and completed clay model is now turning in a circle (really!), bridging nearly four millennia, not only to the traditional Cretan dances, but also to our more recent sacred and ritual dances, where we dance with raised arms towards the center and back, calling for life and blessings.

Birgit Wehnert, Jun 2024

1 Maleviziotis, also known as Kastrinos Pidichtos, is one of the five main dances of Crete.

2 As on other pieces, it is depicted on the Minoan ring from Isopata. The Minoan culture of Crete flourished from 3100 to 1100 years before our era (Bronze Age).

3 Thanks to the musician, lyra-player and dance teacher Stefan Petersilge, who introduced me among other things to the concept of Meraki.

4 Much suggests that the well-known ancient Greek vegetation myth of the grain goddess Demeter and her daughter Kore Persephone, who returns from the underworld in spring, has its origins in Minoan culture and religion.



Women's dance ritual, Agia Triada, 3800 years old

Height approx. 15 cm, photo May 2023

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