

Varius dances

Halsberghe, in his *The cult of Sol Invictus*, a much quoted, though rather defective study, remarks of Varius that “he made the round of the altars, performing sacred dances as he went”.¹ This goes unannotated, as do three other instances where Halsberghe mentions the dancing and music-making women who habitually surround the emperor when he goes about his religious duties. Halsberghe approaches this as if Roman emperors, or at least some of them, are wont to perform sacred dances. In fact this is something completely out of the ordinary, and we are supposed to understand it as such: our sources seek to convince us that Varius was altogether an aberration, and one of the strategies employed to that end is to show us the emperor and his entourage performing various dances.

Our main source is Herodianus, who repeatedly mentions Varius dancing in a cultic context, when still in his native country and after he came to Rome.² The ecstatic nature of this dancing is underlined by the use of the word *bakcheuein*. Some passages in Herodianus seem to hint at the fact that the emperor also could be seen dancing in a non-cultic context, and this is stated rather more clearly by Cassius Dio and in the *Historia Augusta* – who in their turn do *not* stress the cultic dance.³ Thrown in are some stories of Varius favouring dancers and entrusting to them high offices of state.⁴ What can we make of this? Not too much, because these three authors

¹ Halsberghe 1972, 84.

² Herodianus 5.3.8: (ὁ Βασιανός) ἱερουργοῦντα δὴ τοῦτον, περὶ τε τοῖς βωμοῖς χορεύοντα νόμῳ βαρβάρων ὑπὸ τε αὐλοῖς καὶ σύριγγι παντοδαπῶν τε ὀργάνων ἤχῳ; 5.5.3: εὐθέως τε ἐξεβακχεύετο, τὴν τε ἱερωσύνην τοῦ ἐπιχωρίου θεοῦ,...; 5.5.9: περὶ δε τοὺς βωμοὺς ἐχόρευεν ὑπὸ παντοδαποῖς ἤχοις ὀργάνων, γύναιά τε ἐπιχώρια ἐχόρευε σὺν αὐτῷ, περιθέοντα τοῖς βωμοῖς κύμβαλα ἢ τύμπανα μετὰ χειρᾶς φέροντα; 5.6.1: πλὴν καίτοι χορεύειν αἰεὶ καὶ ἱερουργεῖν δοκῶν, πλείστους ἀπέκτεινε τῶν ἐνδόξων τε καὶ πλουσίων; 5.6.10: αὐτὸς δὲ ἐβλέπετο πολλάκις ἠνιοχῶν ἢ ὀρχοῦμενος; 5.7.4: ὡς δὲ Καῖσαρ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος ἀπεδείχθη, ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος αὐτὸν ἐβούλετο τὰ ἑαυτοῦ παιδεύειν ἐπιτηδεύματα, ὀρχεῖσθαι τε καὶ χορεύειν τῆς τε ἱερωσύνης κοινωνεῖν καὶ σχήμασι καὶ ἔργοις ὁμοίοις; 5.7.6: οὐκ ἐπιτρέποντες χορεύειν ἢ βακχεύεσθαι; 5.8.1: πάντων δὲ οὕτως τῶν πάλαι δοκούντων σεμνῶν ἐς ὕβριν καὶ παροινίαν ἐκβεβακχευμένων, οἱ τε ἄλλοι πάντες ἄνθρωποι καὶ μάλιστα οἱ στρατιῶται ἤχθοντο καὶ ἐδυσφόρου. ἐμυσάπτοντο δὲ αὐτὸν ὀρῶντες τὸ μὲν πρόσωπον καλλωπιζόμενον περιεργότερον ἢ κατὰ γυναῖκα σώφρονα, περιδεραιῶς δὲ χρυσίνοις ἐσθῆσι τε ἀπαλαῖς ἀνάδρωσ κοσμούμενον, ὀρχοῦμενόν τε οὕτως ὡς ὑπὸ πάντων ὀραῖσθαι.

³ *HA Vita Heliogabali* 32.8: Ipse cantavit, saltavit, ad tibias dixit, tuba cecinit, pandurizavit, organo modulatus est. One could see him singing, dancing, reciting to the flute, blowing the trumpet, and playing the pandura or the organ (after Turcan: “on le vit...”, because of the theatrical context of 32.7). For the organ, cf Suetonius on Nero, 41.4, 44.1. The *pandura*, a three-stringed instrument resembling a lute, seems an interesting choice, considering that the lute was associated with nudity, sexual activity, and acrobatics in Mesopotamian sources (see A.D. Kilmer 1995, 2604, on the lute and hand framedrum, as opposed to the regular instruments of the temple orchestra). But here issues of chronology should of course be taken into account: the lute appears on very decent Roman sarcophagi (examples in *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*). Cassius Dio 79.14: Now in trying anybody in court he really did have the appearance of a man, but everywhere else his actions and the quality of his voice showed the wantonness of youth. For instance, he used to dance not only in the orchestra but more or less also while walking, performing sacrifice, greeting friends or making speeches. 80.11.1 οὐδ’ ὅτι καινοπρεπέστατα αὐτὸν ἐμεγάλυνεν... 80.11.11: βαρβαρικὰς ᾠδὰς ἀπορρήτους θυσίας.

⁴ *HA Vita Heliogabali* 12.1: As prefect of the Pretorians he installed a dancer who had performed in Rome (probably Publius Valerius Comazon Eutyichianus (?), a freedman = PIR 3, 355, no.42. This was not a mere dancer (the whole story is nonsense, invented on the basis of the name Comazon): Publius Valerius Comazon aided in the overthrow of Macrinus, later he received the consular insignia and in 220 was Elagabalus’ colleague in the consulship. He was prefect of the city on three different occasions. Cf. Cassius Dio 79 (80?), 14.21: Theocritus was of servile origin and had been brought up in the orchestra; [he was the man who had taught Antoninus dancing and had been a favorite of

provide all the information we have. We have no independent evidence, such as inscriptions or iconography, to confirm anything said by the emperor's biographers about the place of the dance in the cult of Elagabal or about the emperor's involvement in the same. Neither do we have any information on other, non-cultic events at which Varius might have publicly performed – and it would be very surprising if we had. Considering the nature of the imperial biographies, we should admit that there is at present no evidence that allows us to say anything definite about the musical and saltatory aspects of Varius' reign. That said, we can, and should, probe into this interesting issue of the dancing emperor and see whether we can come up with some useful hypotheses. Here we face a common set of questions: first, what is the purpose of the references to the dance found in the sources, whatever their veracity, and secondly, what background in fact do these references have, if any, whatever their purpose?

As to the first question, the answer has, implicitly, been given above: in the Roman context dancing, at least those kinds of dancing that are perceived as professional and/or as foreign, can always be used to brand some person or group as lacking in common discipline and decency. If Varius' reputation is to be blackened, he should be shown indulging in un-Roman behaviour. Thus the literary sources do not mention the cooptation of Varius into the collegium of the *Fratres Arvales*. Without asking whether the emperor's biographers were aware of this fact, we can be certain that it would have been kept from us: it fits in with the saltatory imagery but it is not un-Roman.⁵ Whether an emperor ever performed with the *Arvales* or not, this would be acceptable in principle, while an emperor dancing in public as a common performer is to be held in contempt. So much for the dancing of Varius in a non-cultic context. If the dancing takes place in a 'foreign' cultic context and is of an ecstatic nature, the Roman inference is that the dancers are orientals, the orient being the source of particularly offensive dance traditions. By his cultic dances Varius is characterized as an oriental. In his dress and other behaviour he is a clear example of the *mos regius*, and shows himself to be an oriental despot. The dancing as described in the sources strengthens this image.⁶ Dance is a recurrent ingredient of 'orientalism' through the ages, down to Hollywood productions.

As to the second question, it is not at all unlikely that this image of Varius dancing around the altars of Elagabal, whatever its propaganda value, has a basis in fact. Herodianus, our main source for this aspect, hails from Emesa and must know what he is talking about. More importantly, if we put together the (rather sparse) information on dancing in Syrian cults, we are left with the impression that cultic dancing was nothing out of the ordinary, and that Varius in his

Soterus, and through the influence thus acquired he had been introduced to the theatre at Rome. But, as he was disliked there, he was driven out of Rome and went to Lugdunum, where he delighted the people, who were rather provincial. And, from a slave and dancer, he came to be an army leader and prefect.] He advanced to such power in the household of Antoninus that both the prefects were as nothing compared to him.

⁵ Scheid, nos 100-104; the cooptation is in 100b (Henzen 206), lines 21-25. Pietrzykowski wants to play this down, and remarks (1815): "Dies waren nur wenige Gesten in Richtung der römischen Tradition". But this seems unwarranted: cf. the coinage with the emperor sacrificing according to the *ritus romanus, togatus* and *capite velato*.

⁶ The image of the oriental monarch: Xenophon, *Cyropaideia* 1.3.2: eyeliner, rouge, wig, purple tunic, necklaces and bracelets. Cf. Apuleius 8.28: dancers who go out "facie caenosa pigmento delita et oculis obunctis graphica". How much is of this is pure Black Legend, how much actual oriental religion misunderstood or misrepresented, or even orientalism propagated by the orientals themselves, is difficult to make out. As Pietrzykowski says: sacrifice of children is a charge levelled against every unwanted religion. Child sacrifice and cultic prostitution are, as far as Baal is concerned, unproven assumptions, maybe part of a polemic of Yahwists against supporters of Baal (W. Hermann in *DDDB* p.138). It is all neatly summarized by F. Millar.

priestly role, as the sacerdos amplissimus Dei Invicti Solis Elagabali (ilāh ha ḡabal), was performing dances that were an integral part of the cult of his god.⁷ We should, in fact, not have expected anything else: dancing and religion are everywhere intertwined – even if modern scholarship tends to overlook its importance.⁸

Let us first list the evidence we have. As far as inscriptional evidence goes, we have the dedications to Baal Marqod (< *rqd*⁹): three Greek (Balmarkodes) and fifteen Latin (Balmarcod) inscriptions, found at Der al-Qal'a (Der el Gal'a), Beit Mery, to the northeast of Beyrouth.¹⁰ Next, there is Heliodorus, 3rd c. AD, and Syrian himself, quoting Kalasaris on 'Phoenician sailors' from Tyre performing in the 'Assyrian' manner for Melqart: "I left them there at their piping and dancing, in which they frisked about at a tripping time provided by the pipes in an Assyrian measure, now jumping up lightly, now doing kneebends low to the ground, spinning their bodies round and round like possessed persons" (*Aithiopika* 4.17.1).¹¹ This text is often associated with *1 Kings* 18.21-26 and 19.18, the description of the Baal priests (*y^efash^u* < *psh*).¹² It is, however, impossible to postulate certain dance traditions linking the one and the other, as is often done: there is the time span, the issue of local variations, and the commonality of knee bends, plié, in fact and as schema.¹³ It is interesting, though, that *LXX* uses *oklazein* in the passage on the Baal priests, which is the word used by Heliodorus (*epoklazontes*): the Greek *okla-* is supposed to be applicable to dances in the Syrian area.¹⁴

⁷ Cf. Krumeich on iconography of Varius as Syrian priest (especially the carrying of a twig or branch).

⁸ The exception: R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*; see his pp 20ff with many references.

⁹ See Kilmer on *raqādu* = to skip, to dance; *raqqidu* = a (cult) dancer; *riqittu*, *riqdu* = the dance; *gāšu* = to whirl; *gūštu* = whirling dance; *sāru* = dance in a circle; *huppū* = acrobat, acrobatic dancer. Ras Shamra: *mrqdm* = dancers (I Danel 189).

¹⁰ See OGIS 2, 589 (IGRR 3, 1081): B'1 mrqd (*koiranos komon*, κοίρανε κόμων: LBW 3 (1855) 8.9/EpGr 835) = Jupiter (cf Juno CIL III, 6669). Cf. CIG III, 4536, CIL III, 6668, CIL VI,403 (Rome), CIL III, 7680 (Dacia), CIL III,15. I quote PAO 1 (1888) 95:

[Κυ]ρίω γε[iv]
ναίω Βαλ-
μαρκῶδι
τῶ καὶ Μη-
γριν; κατὰ
κέλευσ[iv]
θεοῦ Ἀ-
ρεμθη-
νοῦ, Μά-
ξιμος,
εὐχαριστ-
ῶν ἀνε-
θηκα.

The temple of Marcod is a 1st-c. AD Roman temple on a substantial podium; but Teixidor, *BES* 1972, no.53, speaks of a rustic chapel. Full annotation: B. Servais-Soyez 1986, 352.

¹¹ C. Bonnet 1988, 67-68.

¹² See De Vaux. Seger links the texts to the imagery of a Mitannian seal of about 1500-1200 BC from Tel Halif and a terracotta from Tel Dan. He is very careful, not to say hesitant – but the point of departure is the unchanging nature of dance traditions. Cf next note 000. Teixidor, 5,8 refers to the Wenamon papyrus (ca. 1100 BC) on frenzy in Byblos (*ANET* p.26).

¹³ Cf. Garfinkel, Naerebout 1997.

¹⁴ *Oklasma* is a dance with squatting postures, already in the classical period (if the identification of certain imagery with the *oklasma* is correct) associated with the East (cf. Naerebout 1997, 223).

As to ecstasy, we need not be in doubt that ecstatic dances were part and parcel of religious life in the area: these are quite well documented.¹⁵ As to these ancient sources describing ecstatic dancing, we should not forget that the context of such descriptions is not the temple dance – which does not mean that dances in the temple could not be ecstatic; but the information about the travelling groups of Galloi cannot be transferred to temple dances without further evidence. Often comparative material is brought in, such as dervishes, the Ssabii and the Aïssaouas, or *zar*. But the techniques for provoking ecstasy that we find there, are widespread, so there is no need to presuppose any direct links between the ancient and the modern or early modern accounts – besides, there is no adequate documentation. Also, links are usually forged backwards in time: especially Egypt and ancient Israel are documented and discussed, but there is more.¹⁶ But again, the gaps in time are rather too large for the parallels to be of any real use. We have to be tough on ourselves: we know very little about the cultic dances in Syria in the Roman period. They are there, they can be of an ecstatic nature, we have a vague notion of what these dances, especially the ecstatic ones, were like, to the extent that possibilities are fairly limited. That is about it. Even with an extremely well-documented dance tradition, that of the archaic and classical Greek world, laid down in numerous texts, also epigraphical ones, and images, we have to admit that in the end we can only say things about the importance of the dance in actual practice and in thought, its functions, some of the consequences of its omnipresence, but almost nothing about the dance itself. You can be sorry about that, because you would like to be able to truly visualize this ancient art (as you would like to be able to hear the music), you can also be indifferent: personally, I am much more interested in ‘the uses of the dance’ in a given society than in the actual choreography of individual dances – which we would never be able to appreciate on their terms anyhow. It would provide a contemporary aesthetic experience, not the reconstruction of an ancient one. As a historian my priorities lie elsewhere.

Putting the two questions together: Varius is likely to have taken part in cultic dances – whether he also performed in public in any non-cultic dancing cannot be established, but I deem it unlikely and a mere *topos*. The cultic dancing is both *topos* and reality. It need not be doubted that dancing formed part of the cult of the god Elagabal, although we cannot say whether any of the descriptions offered by Roman authors bear any relationship to the actual on-goings. The emperor’s dancing – as part of the propagation of Elagabal’s cult – did not go down well with the elite in Rome, where cultic dancing was not unknown, but of a different character compared to

¹⁵ Lucianus, Luc. Sive Asin. 37: ἐπὶ δὲ εἰς κώμην τινὰ εἰσελθοίμεν, ἐγὼ μὲν ὁ θεοφόρητος ἰστάμην, ὁ δὲ αὐλητῆς ἐφύσα ὄμιλος ἔνθεον, οἱ δὲ τὰς μίτρας ἀπορρίψαντες τὴν κεφαλὴν κάτωθεν ἐκ τοῦ ἀγένης εἰλίσσοντες τοῖς ξίφεσιν ἐτεμοντο; De Dea Syria 50: Γάλλοι οἱ ἱεροὶ ἄνθρωποι τελέουσι τὰ ὄργια... ἐπαυλέουσι τύμπανα παταγέουσιν ἄλλοι δὲ αἰείδουσιν ἔνθεα καὶ ἱερὰ ἄσματα; 51: μανίη; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 8.28: evantes exsiliunt incitante tibiae cantu lymphaticum tripudium; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.23.13 (on Baalbek 5th c AD): Huius templi religio etiam divinatione praepollet, quae ad Apollinis potestatem refertur, qui nidem atque sol est. Vehitur enim simulachrum dei Heliopolitani ferculo, uti vehuntur in pompa ludorum Circensium deorum simulachra: et sebeunt plerumque provinciae proceres, raso capite, longi temporis castimonia puri, ferunturque divino spiritu, non suo arbitrario sed quo deus propellit vehentes: ut videmus apud Antium promoveri simulachra Fortunarum ad danda responsa. See also L. Robert 1964, on the fire walking and ecstatic dancing at Kastabala (NB: p.81: “A Catabala...le culte d’Élagabal, dieu de l’empereur Élagabal, fut introduit solennellement; il set à croire que ce fut comme parèdre et seigneur de la déesse Pérasia”).

¹⁶ See *Les danses sacrées* (= Sources Orientales 6); Kilmer; Sendrey; *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66.3 (September 2003) = special issue ‘Dance in the ancient world’; Garfinkel.

the Greek and non-Greek Eastern half of the empire.¹⁷ So it entered into the hotchpotch of allegations, with and without a basis in real life, intended to ruin the emperor's reputation. Obviously, we do not find any attempt to understand what it was all about. Nor have many attempts been undertaken since. If we look at it from the perspective of the Roman empire, there was nothing out of the ordinary in Varius' dancing; if we look at it from the perspective of Rome, it was very much out of place.

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¹⁷ Cf C.R. Whittaker in Loeb ed of Herodianus, vol 2 (1970) 41 n.4: 'Elagabalus' real fault lay in making no concession to Roman tradition when introducing the local Syrian cult'. I think it might be safer to say: 'not enough concessions'.

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