

In throughout history.
while dance is
normally



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In today's modern society dance is capable of being used in any type of situation imaginable even if it goes against typical social norms. The same can be said for other cultures throughout history. While dance is normally looked at being used in times of joy and celebration, a look into the ancient Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Medieval mourning rituals shows how dance can also be used in times of death and sorrow. In order to look at these ancient cultures and their use of dance, it is first necessary to dive into its origins.

Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy give a great description of one of the main theories that most anthropologists believe to be as the origin for all theatrical activities, including dance. They start by pointing out that since there is very little remaining documentation from which historians can pull from, the precise origin is purely speculation.

Even so, the most popular belief of anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries describe theatrical activities as emerging from myth and ritual. They continue to illustrate that since ancient societies had little understanding of the natural world they became aware of the forces around them that appeared to influence their well-being. For the people in these societies it was easy to attribute positive and negative effects of these forces and try to influence them so favorable results would follow. By using their perceived connection between the two they would repeat, refine, and formalize their actions until they were fixed rituals.

1 Rituals can be described as a series of symbolic acts that are focused towards fulfilling a particular objective. Often being associated with

religion, rituals are actually a common part of everybody's daily lives. 2 From simple chores to elaborate performances, the use of rituals has been a part of human culture since even before the first documented societies. There are many different types of rituals for all occasions. One interesting type of ritual is called an "ending" ritual. Renee Beck and Sydney Barbara Metrick describe "ending" rituals as being one that focuses on something being terminated. This can be as simple as finishing school all the way to the loss of someone close.

"The rituals of wakes and funerals are very important in helping to cope with such a loss". 3 One of the main components of ancient rituals is the use of symbolic actions which were used to portray various things that related to the purpose of the ritual. These actions are often described as being mimetic in nature and even though it would be nothing like the dancing we have today, according to the Oxford English Dictionary definition: dance is a series of steps and movements matching the speed and rhythm of a piece of music, they can be described as the earliest forms of dancing. 4 HistoryWorld supports that in their History of Dance saying that, "Like cave painting, the first purpose of dance was probably for ritual – to appease a nature spirit or accompany a rite of passage". 5 This gave the people of ancient societies an outlet from which they could release the deep emotions that came with losing someone close to them. It is also noted in The Encyclopedia of Death and Dying that, "Dance, like other forms of art, has treated the subject of death continually throughout history and ... funeral processions were an important example of organized movement to music, expressive of grief," 6 showing that the use of dance was important enough to these ancient cultures that

they would incorporate it into their mourning rituals in order to express themselves. Even if these ancient cultures weren't aware of their feelings enough to recognize the benefits that dancing was providing to themselves, it was kept alive because it worked and did help people mourn.

One of the earliest examples of this dancing can be found in Egypt where, "women were known to dance to express the grief of the mourners".⁷ Gayle Kassing states that dance was the chief means of expression in Egyptian religious services, which would emphasize life after death. For their funerals, one person would wear a mask and dress in the deceased's clothing to lead death processions and reenact events from the dead person's life.

During the procession, professional dancers were hired to perform mimetic dances alongside the mourners from the deceased's house to the tomb.⁸ There were three kinds of funeral dances in Egypt; they included ritual dances, postures and gestures, and secular dances. Ritual dances were performed by men and women who would move with their hands above their heads and people who attended funerals with them would provide rhythmic clapping as accompaniment. The postures and gestures would express grief and were incorporated into movement and executed in a rhythmic pattern. This type of funerary dance started with families and friends showing their natural expressions and then moved to hiring professionals that would perform during the funeral instead.

Lastly, secular dances were meant to provide entertainment for the deceased person. Higher ranking noblemen would get the men and women who danced for them during their life perform the dances he liked best before

his tomb. 9 The Egyptians, being the first society to document their use of dancing in pairs and also have it documented that they would also adapt their dancing to be used in funerary rituals again shows how important the practice of mourning the dead was. Another example of Egyptian funerary rituals is the use of a song called Maneros. Named after the only son of the first Egyptian king's untimely death, Maneros was a dirge invented in his honor and became the first and only melody in existence at the time. 10 This gives us one of the first examples of the combined use of dance and music and it was used specifically for mourning in ancient Egypt. In Greece, funeral processions similar to those of Egypt took place. These processions included the family and friends to the tomb as well as hired mourners that performed professional dances in which they executed symbolic gestures and movements such as twisting their hands, beating their chests or thighs, scratching their faces, and tearing their clothing.

These processions were led by a priest, instead of the masked person that would imitate the deceased's life events, who could be male or female in order to facilitate communication between humans and the gods. The number of mourners participating in the dance would be directly related to the show of strength for the deceased. Accompanied by a flute, mourners would speak to the dead or chant laments or dirges. 11 During this time period though, not everyone was exactly in favor of the processions that would take place for the dead. Plato believed that regular citizens should keep their funerary services discreet and that death was a private family concern.

Mourning should occur in the deceased's home and then go straight to the burial and only before daybreak. Only higher-ranking officials and priests could have a funeral procession outdoors and dirges were not allowed, instead, they would sing antiphonally hymns. 12 Similar to Maneros, in ancient Egypt, invocation and lament for things like dying crops were the bases of folk songs in ancient Greece. One song called the Linus song was used at the time of harvests and is noted as being of a common type in Egypt among other places. Aristophanes of Byzantium, the third-century Alexandrian editor, said that the Linus song is sung not only in times of mourning but also in the "happy dance", as in Euripides. Referencing a passage in Euripides' Heracles where the chorus joins the ainos¹³ with the dance of prosperity praising the labors of dead Heracles, combining eulogy with lamentation. 14 Hugh Thomas also states a line from Heracles where the chorus says, "Alas! What groans or wails, what funeral dirge, or dance of death am I to raise?" mentioning a practice known as 'the dance of death'.

Thomas points out that this line is significant because it is the only literary evidence that depicts the role of dancing within a funerary context in ancient Greece. 15 Despite this, it is noted that there are two groups of Athenian funerary pots that appear to show figures dancing in a funerary context during the laying out of the body, prothesis, and the funeral procession, ekphora, as well as other funerary rituals that are believed to occur after burial. 16 The post burial rituals that are indicated through these pots are generally believed to conclude after 30 days with the tria kostia or "the ritual which concluded mourning held approximately one month after decease".

However, there are three other rituals that are known to have taken place within the 30 days, they are perideipnon, ta trita, and ta enata. The perideipnon consisted of a feast where the "bereaved wore garlands and delivered eulogies on behalf of the dead" and took place in the home of the deceased just after burial. The ta trita was the third day ritual which marked the beginning of the mourning period. The only indication of what ta trita involved comes from Cicero's *On the Laws* where he states, "when they had cast the earth over the dead, scattered the seeds of vegetables over the spot" in order to sow the earth with the fruits of its bounty. Lastly, the ta enata was the ninth day ritual and it is suggested that "food, libations, and other offerings were placed on the new tomb".¹⁷ During the Medieval Ages, death became personified as a skeletal figure that led people from all levels of society in a round dance to the grave.

¹⁸ Painted images of this were created out of the anxiety produced by the bubonic plague. ¹⁹ Death became a major theme in all medieval arts and appeared in sculptures such as gargoyles on churches. Medieval churches housed tombs and graves in their yard making there the scene for the dance of death to take place.

The Dance of Death would be performed in order to ward off death while symbolizing oblivion and death. Medieval beliefs centered on the idea that all people were equal when they met death, so they needed to make the most of their lives. Depictions of the Dance of Death include the belief that the dead danced and would sing and dance around as an effort to revisit the joys of living. They believed that the dead would dance in these churchyards to draw the living into the dance, and those then would die within the year. Other

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versions included a mimetic form of the dance that would be more like a march instead of having the liveliness that people did when they were alive.

2010 Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *The History of Theatre*, 10th Ed, Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

, 2008, 1. 2 Renee Beck and Sydney Barbara Metrick, *The Art of Ritual*, Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2009, 5. 3 Beck and Metrick, 27.

4 Editors of Oxford English Dictionary, Dance | Definition of Dance in English by Oxford Dictionaries, Accessed November 27, 2017, en. oxforddictionaries.com/definition/dance. 5 Editors of History World, History of Dance, History World, Accessed August 30, 2017, <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ab82>. 6 Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, s. v.

“Dance”. 7 Editors of History World. 8 Gayle Kassing, *History of Dance: An Interactive Arts Approach*, Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics, 2007, 45. 9 *ibid*, 45. 10 Steven H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 81. 11 Kassing, 55.

12 Lonsdale, 82. 13 An ancient dirge similar to that of the Linus song. 14 Lonsdale, 83. 15 Hugh Thomas, “The Dance of Death: Dancing in Athenian Funerary Rituals,” *Bar International Series* 2622(2014): 59-66, 1.

16 Department of Greek and Roman Art. “Death, Burial, and the Afterlife in Ancient Greece.” The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Accessed December 19, 2017.

17 Department of Greek and Roman Art. “Death, Burial, and the Afterlife in Ancient Greece.” The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Accessed December 19, 2017.

18 Department of Greek and Roman Art. “Death, Burial, and the Afterlife in Ancient Greece.” The Met’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. Accessed December 19, 2017.

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18Kassing, 74. 19Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, s. v.

“Dance”. 20Kassing, 74.