Ancient Egypt has left a rich and varied textual legacy. Nevertheless, evidence on dance per se from literary sources is rare, since the ancient Egyptians saw no need to describe in words something that was so familiar to them. There are a number of terms that were used for the verb “to dance,” the most common being *ib3*. Other terms that describe specific dances or movements are known but unfortunately these often occur simply as “labels” to scenes or in contexts where they say little or nothing of the nature of the dance in question. From casual references in literature or administrative documents it is, however, possible to learn something about dance and dancers in ancient Egypt, their lives and the attitudes of the ancient Egyptians towards performers.

The “Scorpion” mace head, depicting dancers performing at a royal ceremony. Three dancers (there may have originally been more) are shown with braided hair. They have one leg raised and would seem to be clapping their hands as they perform. These dancers accompany a scene of the king (named “Scorpion”) ritually breaking soil and were therefore performing in a ceremonial context.

*Drawing by Richard Parkinson after Marion Cox.*
In the popular culture, dance was something people took for granted and rarely described. This is, of course, not unique to Egypt in antiquity—references to dance in Egypt from the Byzantine period to the eighteenth century CE are scarce but this does not mean that dance had ceased to exist. It was only when European travelers started to visit Egypt and the Near East and to record the dance that they saw performed in private salons, at parties or in the context of weddings or street festivals, that Egyptian or other “oriental” dances were described in any detail.

There are many obstacles to attempting to understand the purpose of dance and the contexts in which it took place in ancient Egypt and especially in attempting to reconstruct any of the movements involved. The same is true of any historical period for which one has to rely on textual and decorative evidence, but is especially so for ancient Egypt where the conventions for depicting the human form were so stylized and, essentially, static, that any accurate representation of movement was difficult, if not impossible.

Virtually all representations of dancers from ancient Egypt are two dimensional. They come from the walls of temples or...
Scene from the tomb of Intef at Dra Abu'l Naga. This tomb scene shows women wearing calf-length dresses, bracelets and anklets, and with white fillets tied around their long flowing hair, dancing in pairs with a wide range of movements, some more elegantly depicted than others. After Petrie (1909: frontispiece). Reproduced courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London.

tombs or from depictions on ostraca and papyrus, and they were governed by the artistic conventions of ancient Egypt, which required that the human form be depicted in accordance with a strict canon that left little room for flexibility or for the artist to use his imagination and skill to try and show three-dimensional movement with any degree of accuracy. There is also the additional problem that the dance scenes that have been preserved from ancient Egypt were not intended to inform viewers about dance, its nature and context, but were carved or painted on the walls of tombs or temples for purposes that are not always obvious or even

Banquet scene from the tomb of Nebamun. Two girls are shown dancing accompanied by a group of female musicians. The two dancers are depicted with much more freedom than was possible for earlier artists and their bodies are almost entwined as they dance and snap their fingers to the beat of the music. Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum.
A funeral dance scene from the tomb of Niunetjer at Giza. Three of the dancers hold a throw-stick in their left hands while shaking sistra. (The sistrum is a musical instrument with small metal disks threaded horizontally to form a kind of rattle.) Throw-sticks were used by the Egyptians in hunting, to bring down birds, and their occurrence in dance scenes may indicate origins in a ritual “hunting-dance.” After Junker (1951: Abb. 44).

intelligible to modern eyes—for example, to demonstrate devotion to a cult, to facilitate entry to the next world or to show activities that, hopefully, would occur in perpetuity once the deceased had attained his eternal goal. Most of the scenes were never intended to be seen by more than a handful of cult devotees, whether of a god or a deceased individual.

With these praisos in mind, however, it is possible to survey what is known of dance in ancient Egypt, even if a full understanding of its nature and its context must remain tantalisingly unattainable. It should also be borne in mind that the ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for over three thousand years and, while it is deservedly regarded as having been a very “conservative” culture, there must have been changes and developments in dance during that time.
The earliest depictions of dance in Egypt are found in rock-art and on predynastic vessels and are described in Garfinkel's contribution to this issue. Egypt became a unified kingdom about 3100 BCE and the political and military stability that followed unification led to the flourishing of the distinctive pharaonic civilization and the establishment of the artistic conventions to which all representations of dance in ancient Egypt had to conform. The "Scorpion" mace head showing an Upper Egyptian king of the period just before unification provides an early representation of dancers in accordance with dynastic Egyptian artistic conventions. On the mace head the dancers are shown taking part in a royal ceremony and the vast majority of depictions of dancers from ancient Egypt also come from ceremonial religious or funerary scenes.

Funerary Dances
Chronologically, the next series of dance depictions comes from tomb-scenes of the Old Kingdom where dancers and singers are shown performing during the funeral procession or at the entrance to the tomb. In this period, these entertainers seem to have been groups of, presumably, professional musicians and dancers who were attached to temples, funerary estates and important tombs or cemeteries. The collective name for such a group during the Old and Middle Kingdoms was the hnr and they would perform at important festivals as well as funerals. Initially all the members of the hnr seem to have been female, with women labeled in tomb scenes with titles such as "overseer of the hnr" or "inspector of the hnr" showing a high degree of organization and professionalism within the group. One Fifth Dynasty lady, Neferesres, had the titles "overseer of the hnr of the king" and "overseer of the dancers of the king." The female dominance of the hnr seems to have ended towards the close of the Old Kingdom when male performers start to be depicted and male officials are named (Nord 1981: 29–38). Usually the dancers depicted in these scenes are female, though there are also men and occasionally a dwarf, as in a sistrum but no throw-stick, and are followed by a female dwarf, who also plays a sistrum. Another three dancers face in the opposite direction and have neither throw-sticks nor sistra. The entire group may be an attempt to represent (in so far as it was possible for the Egyptian artist within the prevailing conventions) seven women dancing around the dwarf in their midst (Anderson 1995: 2563).

Similar scenes, though the details vary, are found in many Old Kingdom tombs. The dancers are often shown in rows (though this, of course, may simply reflect Egyptian artistic conventions) and their dance would appear to have been very stylized with a limited number of movements. Many of the movements depicted are "acrobatic" in nature, as in the scene from the tomb of Kagemni. Here the dancers are accompanied by women clapping (and probably singing) as in so many other funerary paintings of dancers. In these Old Kingdom tomb scenes, male dancers wear what might be regarded as "everyday" clothes with a short kilt. Female dancers, however, at a time when most women were depicted with long ankle-length dresses, usually also wore short skirts, probably to free their legs for the dance. Occasionally they are depicted as if naked, or with just a belt around their hips. Male dancers have short hair and often so do female dancers, though some wore their hair long and tied back with a disk at the end of the "pony-tail" to weigh it down and make the hair's movement more dramatic. There are tomb scenes which show couples dancing together, often holding hands, but these are always two men or two women—men and women never dance together.

One of the most uninhibited depictions of dance to have survived from ancient Egypt features pair-dancers (see p. 113). The scene originally came from the tomb of Intef (Second Intermediate period, ca. 1795–1550 BCE) at Dra Abu'l Naga on the west bank at Luxor but is now preserved in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The relaxation of rigid state control that always occurred during an "Intermediate period" (when centralized government broke down in Egypt) has allowed the...
artist of this scene the freedom to depict the dancers’ evident enjoyment of their performance.

In the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2135–1985 BCE) funerary dances, as depicted in, for example, the tombs at Beni Hasan, Meir and Deir el-Gebrawi, also often included movements that would seem to our eyes to be more “acrobatic” than representative of “dance” but we should not assume that the ancient Egyptians made the same distinction between “dancers” and “acrobats” that we do. One interesting scene in the Twelfth Dynasty tomb of Antefiker and his wife Senet at Thebes shows three women clapping while two groups of dancers move towards each other, in front of the clapping women. Both groups, each made up of two dancers, are female but, unlike the clapping women who wear long shifts, they are simply dressed in short kilts and floral collars. The dancers approaching from the right have short hair while the pair coming towards them from the left both have long pony-tails with the weighted disk at the end.

Perhaps the most important of the funerary dances was that of the Muu dancers, with their distinctive headresses, as shown in the tomb of Antefiker at Thebes. These headresses were made of woven papyrus stalks and recalled dwellers in the marshy Nile Delta where the cities of Sais, Pe and Dep were located. After Norman de Garis Davies (1920: pl. 22).

The story of the Twelfth Dynasty official Sinuhe offers a good description of an Egyptian funeral involving the Muu dancers:

A funeral procession will be made for you on the day of burial, with a gold coffin, a mask of lapis lazuli, heaven above you, you being placed in the portable shrine, with oxen pulling you, and singers going before you. The dance of the Muu will be performed at the entrance to your tomb and the offering list shall be recited for you. (Sinuhe, lines 194–195)

There were also dancers who would seem to have been permanently attached to the headquarters of the embalmers. A demotic story of the Ptolemaic period lists “dancers, who frequent the embalming rooms” among those to be summoned for a royal funeral (Spiegelberg, quoted by Lexova 1935: 67–68).

Dancers also played a major role in the funerary rituals of the most important of the sacred bulls of Egypt. The Apis and Mnevis bulls were accorded royal and divine honors during their lives and were given elaborate burials in special cemeteries on their deaths. Their funerals must have rivaled those of members of the royal family and would have been processional in nature with dancers employed along the route. The dwarf Djeho, who lived during the Thirtieth Dynasty, describes himself on his sarcophagus (Egyptian Museum, Cairo CG 29307) thus:

I am the dwarf who danced in Kem on the day of the burial of the Apis-Osiris ... and who danced in Shenqeh on the day of the eternal festival of the Osiris-Mnevis ... (Spiegelberg 1929: 76–83; see also Dasen 1993: 150–55 and pl. 26, 2).

The presence of ritual dancers at a funeral, whether for a king, a sacred bull or a private individual, seems to have been very important to the ancient Egyptians. The dancers helped the mourners to bid farewell to the deceased and also celebrated his passing into the next world.

Dances of the Gods

Certain gods and goddesses were particularly associated with dance in ancient Egypt. The goddess, Hathor, for example, was, with her son Ihy, associated with music and dance and dancers were often described as having been performing in her honor. Sometimes dancers are shown carrying musical instruments (sistrum and clappers) or objects (such as mirrors or menat-collars) that were sacred to Hathor. Another Egyptian god, the popular Bes, was often shown dancing and playing musical instruments. This association with Bes may account for the popularity of dwarves in Egyptian dance scenes. Dwarves, as we have seen, were frequently shown dancing at the funerals of individuals, and they were involved in temple dances.

Temple Dances

An early textual reference to a “divine” dance in dynastic Egypt comes from the well-known letter written by the six-year old king Pepi II (ca. 2087 BCE) to his official Harkhuf who had
led an expedition into what is now Sudan to bring back to the court at Memphis a dwarf, in this case possibly a pygmy, for the “dances of the gods.” Harkhuf’s success in acquiring the “dwarf” earned him a personal letter of thanks from the excited young king which Harkhuf proudly had carved on his tomb walls:

You have said in this letter of yours that you have brought a dwarf for the dances of the god ... come north to the palace immediately ... bring this dwarf with you ... alive prosperous and healthy for the dances of the god, to distract the heart and gladden the heart of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt ... My Majesty wishes to see this dwarf more than the produce of the mining region or of Punt.

We don’t know exactly what the “dances of the gods” were, but presumably they took place in a religious context, probably within a temple precinct. Most Egyptian temples seem to have had dancers and musicians on their staff. A papyrus from the Twelfth Dynasty temple of Senwosret II at Lahun describes in tabular form the occasions on which dances were performed with the name and nationalities of the singers and dancers/acrobats concerned. From this we learn that the temple employed Asiatic and Nubian performers, in addition to Egyptians. These dancers were paid to perform at religious feasts to mark the end of the old year, the New Year, the coming of the annual inundation, the full and new moon and the feasts of specific gods (Griffith 1898: 59–62).

Most of the rituals of Egyptian state religion took place within the temple itself, to which only the priests and the king were allowed entry, so the temple singers and dancers would have performed only for the eyes of the priests and the gods whom they served. However ordinary Egyptians were able to watch dances for the gods on the occasion of public religious festivals, which often took the form of processions. It was standard practice at Egyptian cult temples for the divine image to be brought out of its shrine and carried out of the temple at the time of important feasts. Usually placed in a sacred barque and carried on the shoulders of the priests, the divine image would process around the god’s local area, or be taken to visit other gods in neighboring towns. The procession accompanying the sacred barque included dancers/acrobats as in the important festivals at Thebes (modern Luxor) in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BCE). In addition to the “Festival of Opet” there was the “Festival of the Valley” when Amun-Re’s image crossed the river Nile to visit the royal mortuary temples of the west bank. Scenes of both festivals, depicted in tombs and temples, show dancers/acrobats accompanying the procession.

The occasions on which dancers, musicians and singers performed within an Egyptian temple would, presumably, have been very formal and, one imagines, somewhat sedate in nature. The entertainers would have been called upon to praise the god or goddess at particular festivals throughout the year and their performances would have been witnessed by only a small select group of priests and temple officials. However, when the divine image was taken out of the temple at the time of more public feasts, then the entertainers, including dancers and acrobats, who performed as part of the god’s procession would have been seen by the large crowds who gathered to watch what must have been one of the most impressive occasions in the local calendar. Dancing on such occasions, in the open air, might well have been less inhibited than it normally was inside the peaceful sanctity of the temple.

**Dance in Everyday Life**

Although most of the depictions of dance which have survived from ancient Egypt relate to funerary or religious rituals, there is sufficient evidence to show that dance was not confined to ritual contexts and played a very real, and important, role in the life of ordinary Egyptians. Ancient Egypt had no theatrical tradition, with the possible exception of mythological...
plays performed at religious feasts, and any public entertainment as such must have been limited in scope at a time when most people probably rarely strayed far from their home town or village. Entertainment on festive occasions would have been to a large extent “homemade” and provided either by members of the celebrant’s family or by hiring professional performers.

In addition to scenes of funerary and temple cult dances, the Egyptians also showed dance as it occurred in secular situations, particularly in the New Kingdom, essentially at private entertainments, and it is from these depictions, less rigid in style and convention than those in formal religious or funerary scenes, that we can learn most of the context of dance in the lives of ordinary people in ancient Egypt, and can attempt to reconstruct the situations in which dance occurred and the nature of the dance itself. It must, however, always be borne in mind that even these “domestic” scenes served a funerary purpose since most of them are found on the decorated walls of tombs and depict an idealised view of the next world—a world in which good living and entertainment was to be anticipated.

Dance in a domestic context is shown in scenes from the Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom. Its absence from later tomb decoration is a reflection of the different nature of funerary decoration after the New Kingdom, when the “daily life” scenes that previously had been regarded as essential, were replaced by more religious themes.

Dancers in tomb scenes at private banquets are often shown with accompanying musicians clapping hands or playing instruments. The most elaborate of these scenes is that from the tomb of Nebamun at Thebes, now in the British Museum. Both dancers shown are virtually naked wearing only a narrow belt around their hips, and jewelry. In the register above the dancers and musicians is their audience, who would, of course have been on the same level as the dancers—Egyptian artistic convention could not show them all in one register, as this would have obscured parts of or whole figures. Dancers in these New Kingdom tomb scenes are usually women and the musicians are also often women, though men can be found playing to accompany female dancers. The Egyptians seem not to have had any form of musical notation so we cannot know what ancient Egyptian music sounded like, any more than we can reconstruct dance movements with any degree of accuracy, but percussive instruments certainly played a major role. In the earlier periods, most dancers were accompanied only by percussive instruments or by clapping. The introduction in the New Kingdom of a greater variety of stringed instruments, such as the lute and the lyre, would have increased the range of music available and may in turn have influenced the movements of dancers.

Although in earlier periods dancers were usually shown wearing skirts or dresses, by the New Kingdom they are more scantily dressed, often with just a scarf or band around their hips, though sometimes with what would seem to be a diaphanous robe on top—their bodies are clearly visible through the transparent cloth. Their hair, or a wig, is usually long and loose and the dancer’s head could be topped by the cone of scented beeswax, which the Egyptians liked to have melt over their heads during entertainment. Dancers are also usually bejeweled, with heavy floral collars, bracelets, anklets and long dangling earrings. Their eyes are always heavily outlined with kohl. The impression is certainly given that these are professional performers, dressed for their part. Nubians (from the very south of Egypt or from what is now northern Sudan) were often shown dancing with other Egyptian dancers or musicians, the difference in skin tones being accurately depicted. These Nubians probably performed a different, perhaps more African, dance which may have seemed more exotic to Egyptian

Musicians and a Nubian dancer as shown in the tomb of Djeserkaresoneb. The little dancer, who seems totally absorbed by her performance, is naked apart from her jewelry and floral collar. 

*Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.*
eyes. A famous scene (now destroyed) from the tomb of Djeserkaresoneb at Thebes shows a small Nubian girl dancing with a group of female Egyptian musicians. The scene was a copy of one in the nearby tomb of Amenhotep-Siese (Davies 1923: pl. V), illustrating the way in which Egyptian artists often worked from “patterns” with little freedom of choice as to subject matter and style. Interestingly the copy in the tomb of Djeserkaresoneb is more skillfully executed than the original.

Dancers would also have performed out of doors (as indeed they frequently do in modern Egypt) where there was more space. A less-rigid outdoor scene is shown in the Theban tomb of Huy (reign of Tutankhamun) where a group of women is shown dancing to welcome Huy home from his travels.

Performing out of doors could however lead to problems. In the narrow streets of an Egyptian village, spectators (again as can be seen today) would have crowded into any vantage point, often watching from the windows of upper stories or roof-tops. This led to a tragedy at the village of Senepta, near Oxyrhynchus, when an eight-year old slave leaning out from a roof to watch the “castanet dancers” who were performing at a nearby house, fell to his death (P. Oxy 475; 182 CE).

Itinerant performers are found in many cultures and are known to have existed in ancient Egypt. A story about the divine births of the kings of the Fifth Dynasty describes how some goddesses and a god disguised themselves as a group of traveling musicians and dancers. They carried with them clappers and sistra. Although the group did not actually perform in the story, they did assist at the birth of the triplets who would become the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty and were rewarded by the grateful father with a bag of grain, which they asked to be kept safely for them until they returned from their travels. Since there was no currency in ancient Egypt, itinerant performers, like everyone else in the country, would have been paid “in kind.” Even by the Graeco-Roman period, after money had been introduced into Egypt, payments to dancers were still made partly in kind.

Can we say anything of the social status of professional entertainers, including dancers, in ancient Egypt? Today, professional dancers, though they may be admired for their skills, are not accorded high status in Egyptian village society.

They travel around, often in the company of men to whom they are not related and may stay away from home at night—behavior on which society frowns. The fact that performers in ancient tomb-scenes are sometimes identified in the accompanying texts as members of the tomb-owner’s family might suggest that to be a musician or a dancer was socially acceptable, but in such cases, these are unlikely to be professional performers. They are relations of the deceased dancing for him in private in both his

The Depiction of Dancers in Tomb Scenes

Dancers were often depicted, according to Egyptian artistic conventions, in one register while their audience was shown in other registers. The audience could be made up both of men and women, but they were seated and grouped separately, with the exception of prominent married couples. This should, of course, as with the celebrated scene from the tomb of Nebamun (page 113), be interpreted as a scene of dancers and musicians in the midst of a party, probably surrounded on at least three sides by the diners.

Dancers welcoming Huy home. Scene in the tomb of Huy at Thebes. At this time, at the end of the Amarna Period, artistic conventions were more relaxed and the artist took advantage of this to try and give more of an impression of the movements of the dancers. After Nina de Garis Davies (1926: p. XV).
Professional Dancers of Ancient Egypt

The best evidence for the lifestyle of professional dancers comes from late in ancient Egyptian history. A papyrus found at the Graeco-Roman city of Arsinoe describes how a “castanet dancer” (krotalistria) named Isidora was engaged by a woman called Artemisia to perform in her village, together with another dancer:

To Isidora, castanet dancer, from Artemisia of the village of Philadelphia. I request that you, assisted by another castanet dancer—total two—undertake to perform at the festival at my house for six days beginning with the 24th of the month of Payni according to the old calendar, you (two) to receive as pay 36 drachmas for each day, and we to furnish you in addition 4 arabas of barley and 24 pairs of bread loaves, and on condition further that, if garments or gold ornaments are brought down, we will guard these safely, and that we will furnish you with two donkeys when you come down to us and a like number when you go back to the city. (Westerman 1924: 134–44)

A similar papyrus, written some thirty years earlier also describes the engagement of entertainers (this time called orchestriad) from Arsinoe to perform in the city of Bacchias, interestingly for the same rate of pay (36 drachmas a day) as that offered to Isidora a generation later. It should be noted, however, that this daily rate seems generous compared with the daily average rate (less than 3 drachmas) that laborers received at the time. The higher rate of pay for dancers and singers probably reflected the part-time and uncertain nature of their employment.

Has Ancient Egyptian Dance Survived into Modern Times?

Egypt, as noted above, is a very “conservative” country and many similarities with ancient activities can still be seen in Egypt, even today. Dancing, with or without engaging professional entertainers, was certainly important as a means of celebration in ancient Egypt as it is in modern Egypt. Only a drum is needed or, if no instrument is available, a flat surface, for someone to mark the beat and people will start dancing. Can we make any attempt to interpret the movements and steps of ancient Egyptian dance, and if so, can they be compared with those that can be seen today? In 1935 Irena Lexova, the daughter of a Czech Egyptologist, attempted this exercise and her interesting little book on the subject has recently been reprinted. She makes an important point that must always be borne in mind when trying to assess Egyptian dancing scenes in that the draughtsmen must often have selected for portrayal those movements and steps that were the simplest to draw or the most easily represented in accordance with the conventions of Egyptian art. As in the case of the Theban tombs of Amenhotep Si-
ese and Djeserkaresoneb, they also would have worked from “patterns” of typical scenes so that there was a limit to the spontaneity possible for the Egyptian artist. Lexova had little admiration for or sympathy with the dances of “modern” (1930s) Egypt as witnessed by her and her father, and dismissed any similarity between the dances she had reconstructed from ancient depictions and what she described as the ‘angular movements in bending of limbs, witnessing to jerky movements” and “those tasteless movements and postures” of dance as practiced in Egypt in the twentieth century. Certainly in its most obvious and commercial form, usually known as “belly-dancing,” dance in Egypt today can seem far-removed from the graceful lines of New Kingdom dancers.

Could anything have survived in Egypt today of the dance depicted on the walls of ancient temples and tombs? This is really impossible to say, though some of the ancient dancers have similarities to performers of “modern” Egyptian or oriental dancing (raqs sharqi). The emphasis on hip-movements, as shown by the many depictions in antiquity of dancers with scarves or belts around their hips, for example, is one of the essential similarities between ancient and modern Egyptian dancing. However the relationship between the hieroglyphic script and accompanying scenes must always be borne in mind. Figures in Egyptian wall scenes often served as a kind of pictographic determinative to the accompanying text. The intention of the artist would, therefore, have been to show a figure that was recognizably “dancing” rather than to depict accurately specific movements as made by genuine performers. Thus dancers were shown in distinctive “dancing” poses, with their arms raised and often with one leg bent, or one foot resting on its toes as if the dancer was about to move. The actual steps and movements of ancient dance in Egypt might have been quite different from those depicted in tomb or temple scenes.

Since the time of the pharaohs, Egypt has been subject to a great deal of outside influence and modern raqs sharqi has developed over several centuries. In its present form, it reflects the merging of the ancient traditions with those of the Arab world, introduced after the coming of Islam to Egypt (641 CE). In recent centuries dance in Egypt, and throughout the near east, has also been influenced by contact with “western” music and movement.

Ancient Egyptian art was possibly the least effective medium for showing the spontaneity of dance and the enjoyment of its participants. Dance just for the pleasure of it was hardly ever depicted, but ancient Egypt would have been a strange and unusual country if dancing for pleasure had not existed and despite the conventions of Egyptian art, this love of dancing does sometimes show through. Even the Egyptian artist, governed by his formal conventions and rigid grids, could not totally obscure the spirit of the dance.

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