

Circle Dance: The Deep History

Some fifteen years ago, towards the end of a long illness, my therapist, Sylvia Hollingworth — now, sadly, no longer with us — invited me to try circle dance. Once I had begun to overcome the two-left feet syndrome, I was astonished by the spiritual impact. In fact, I had what I can only describe as a spiritual experience during the Vivaldi/Friendship dance — an overwhelming sensation of beauty.

Now, I am, to trade, an engineer/scientist — a down-to-earth "nuts and bolts" man — and my curiosity was fully aroused. Where on earth does this stuff come from? And, of course, other than very short term recent history, and mere speculation, no-one could tell me.

I first discovered Jesus' invitation to the disciples to dance around him — The Hymn of Jesus — in the New Testament Apocrypha: Acts of St John; and later I then found the earlier poem by Sappho of women dancing.

More recently, I casually Googled "prehistoric dancing" and was amazed to get a hit on a book: "Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture" by Prof. Yosef Garfinkel, Department of Biblical Archeology, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and published by the University of Texas, 2003.

On first opening the book, I was stunned to see images of women dancing in V, or W, hand-holds depicted on sherds dating from as much as ten millennia before the present (BP).

The book is divided into two parts: The Dance Analysis and The Data. The latter is a compilation of nearly 400 images from archaeological artefacts. These show that the depictions of dance were, at first, literal portraits, and then later became severely stylised over the six millennia that they appear. Subsequently, dance images were replaced with depictions relating to the emergence of organised authority.

In The Dance Analysis section the author's view is that, at that time, coinciding as it does with the earliest beginnings of agriculture, small communities created internal cohesion, and the very necessary synchronism with the seasons, through the ritual of circle dance. These rituals were recorded on pottery. In his analysis the author draws in data from ethnology and from the etymology of Middle Eastern languages.

Of course, one absolutely has to have music to accompany dance, and here too the archaeological evidence is strong and exists in the form of surviving wind instruments. The records are dispersed in the literature, but the most striking is the article in Nature, 460, pp737-740, 6 August 2009, "New flutes document the earliest musical tradition in southwestern Germany", authors N.J. Conard, M. Malina, S.C. Munzel. This article describes the discovery of the fragments of a total of 8 flutes, variously made from mammoth ivory, swan bones, and a wing-bone from a griffon vulture, all dating to not later than 35,000 years BP.

Elsewhere, there is a fragment, found in Slovenia, of a supposed flute made from a bear thigh-bone and dating to 43,000 years BP. Some critics contend that the finger-holes are but carnivore tooth perforations but the holes are nicely circular - they look to have been very neatly drilled - and a flautist, Jelle Aterna, showed that it was a part of a flute by very competently playing a replica

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In addition, there are 22 flutes from the French Pyrenees dating from 20,000 to 35,000 years BP, and finally there is a single flute from Austria dating to 19,000 years BP.

And then I encountered the following in an article, in the journal *New Scientist*, by Prof. Robin Dunbar, who leads the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at Oxford University.

“Over the past two million years, there seems to have been increasing pressure to evolve ever-larger social groups. Based on the social brain hypothesis, I have calculated that our social group size should be around 150. This has come to be known as “Dunbar’s number” and turns out to be both a common community size in human social organisations and the typical size of personal social networks. But how could humans and their immediate ancestors have sustained groups that greatly exceed the number that can be bonded by grooming?”

“It seems we have exploited three additional behaviours that are very good at triggering the release of endorphins but can be done in groups, allowing several individuals to be “groomed” at the same time. First came laughter, which we share with the great apes. Essentially a form of chorusing, laughter typically involves a group of three people, making it more efficient than grooming as a bonding mechanism. Next, perhaps 500,000 years ago, we added singing and dancing, which increased the grooming group still further. Finally, language gave greater control over both laughter – through jokes – and song and dance.”

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22229700-400-friendship-do-animals-have-friends-too/>

These ideas are much expanded in Prof. Dunbar's book: *Human Evolution*, Pelican, 2014, — which includes an extensive academic bibliography. Importantly, he shows the endorphin (feel good factor) release effect, outlined in the *New Scientist* article, to be confirmed through ingenious experiments on cooperating people. In particular, he shows the enhanced bonding effect of synchronised communal activity from, for example, drumming, or singing, or dancing.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all my dancing friends for this fascinating and very rewarding journey of discovery. I have no doubt that we have been dancing in a circle since we emerged as anatomically modern humans 200,000 years ago; thus superseding the very much older dancing of our archaic human predecessors.

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