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*Training of the chorus in ancient Greece*

The intent of this *essai* is to provide a larger social context for the rehearsal processes of ancient Greek theatre. This historical account will mainly focus on the relationship between the embodied knowledge of ancient Attic primary education, the movements of the actor in a tragic chorus, and ancient Greek military manoeuvring. The emphasis will be on the physical elements of the connection, though it is worth flagging up that a similar musical embodiment also existed. I begin by giving a brief outline of what learning consisted of in Athens, theories of what chorus training was like for dramatic performance, and then evidence of how these trainings were believed to have a social function, that of military learning and success. This is part of my larger project which examines ancient Greek theatre as a space of learning in Attica.

Primary Athenian education was not state-funded and thereby started anywhere between five and seven years of age, depending on what a boy's parents could afford. Attic education was roughly divided into three categories: gymnastics, music, and grammar.[1](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#fn0001) Gymnastic education included running, wrestling, various jumping, and throwing the javelin and discus. Extant sources show an understanding that there was a relationship between the gymnastic activities learned and being better suited for the military training they would receive as *ephebes* – the age class of young men whose beards had just started to grow—and subsequently their actions in battle. Less time was devoted to music school, which taught singing and lyre at first, but eventually reading, writing, and counting. Reading evolved into memorising epic poems and was combined with song and lyre to learn lyric poetry. It has been widely noted that ‘the education provided was cultural, not technical, directed towards character training and citizenship’ (Beck 1964, p. 72). While the physical, musical, and literary skills learned may be applied to practical tasks, the primary aim was to cultivate an understanding of and appreciation for Athenian citizens' lifestyle. Primary education consisting of physical and musical training struck me as directly linked to the danced and sung tragic choruses, which are almost a culmination of their primary, cultural studies.

The best extant visual source of Athenian drama, the Pronomos Vase, depicts actors and chorus members holding their masks at the end of a satyr play, which followed three tragedies. There are three actors on the vase, who have unique masks and costumes, like the one on the top row holding a club and labelled ‘*herakles*’. These men are depicted with beards, as was the common device for portraying adult males in art at that time. The chorus members have no facial hair and adult bodies, the way in which *ephebes* were artistically depicted. It is interesting to note that instead of being labelled with character names, the chorus members are labelled with their own names (in this case Athenian ones). It is likely that this is done to emphasise that the chorus is made up of Athenians – they are citizen performers – whereas the actors, who may be foreigners, are symbols of their mythic roles. It is of course not possible to state that all dramatic choruses were made up of *ephebes*, but it certainly would make sense that these young men had the time and ability to train for choral performances and this vase shows that it happened at least on this occasion.

There are not many specifics as to how the choruses were trained by the *didaskalos* – a word which connotes playwright, teacher, chorus-trainer, explainer, and learner.[2](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#fn0002) The *didaskalos* would teach the words, the music, the dances, and the movements to the chorus members and the actors. Being a member of a tragic chorus was seen as a luxury, probably due to the pay, relief from military duties, and social cachet. However, because the financing of a chorus was costly and the competition fierce, the training process was rigorous and not without sacrifices on the part of the performers. Chorus men were expected to adhere to a very strict diet, as food was understood to have a powerful effect on the voice. The majority of the training would happen in the early morning before any food was consumed, so the effects on the voices were minimised. One can assume a level of fatigue would result from such intense training done without sustenance. As it came closer to the time of tragic competition the chorus members fasted to protect their voices. Sexual abstinence was also required for good vocal quality.

When the productions would tour the dozen *deme* (subdivisions of Attica) theatres, locals, most likely resident *ephebes*, would be trained for the choruses of the plays. The actors rehearsed and learned their lines separately from the chorus men, who were trained by a chorus leader upon arrival in the *deme*. The nature of rehearsing and performing the choral roles of tragedy throughout Attica thus greatly expanded the number of young men who would have an experience in training for, as well as singing and dancing in, a chorus. It is likely that these choruses were somewhat simplified from that of performance in the main Theatre of Dionysus, due to condensed training time. It is also likely that the singing/dancing chosen was steeped in a wider cultural repertoire for ease of learning.

It can be assumed that the training resembled rehearsing the movements and music that would later be performed; however, there is scant evidence of this as well. Lillian B. Lawler in *The Dance of the Ancient Greek Theatre* describes a general framework for the choreography of the chorus, which she states was then left to the freedom of the *didaskalos* for alteration in order to best suit the tragedy at play: ‘the chorus, with its flute-player, came in from the right of the audience, usually in a rank-and-file alignment of three by five persons […] this formal marching entry was customarily accompanied by singing or chanting, and was often in the anapaestic or “marching” meter’ (Lawler 1964, p. 26). Some of the movements that have been textually described by the ancients include the *parabēnai ta tettara*, where the front and back rows would exchange places; the *xiphismos* or sword thrust, possibly used to recount a battle; and the *kybistēsis*, which consisted of rhythmic tumbling. Written as a bit of a throw-away fact, but quite germane to this *essai*, [Lawler](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#cit0006) (1964, p. 27) states, ‘it is interesting to note that the technical terms for the various positions in the chorus were the same as those used in military tactics’. Indeed, it is very interesting.

Within the description of military tactics there is similarly a connection between music and choreography of battle. Xenophon gives a very choreographic account:

The orders had been to keep their spears on the right shoulder until a signal should be given with the trumpet; then lowering them for the attack to follow on slowly, nobody to break into a run [… then once again] the trumpet sounded, and they struck up the paean [a song of triumph or thanks] and after that raised a battle-cry, and at the same moment couched their spears. (VI.V25–28)

Not only does this passage demonstrate the movements of arms based on the calls of a trumpet or battle-cries, but it also suggests the striking up of a paean ode in the midst of battle. Homer, the great educator of the Greeks, mentions the benefits of being a dancer on the battlefield as the angered Aeneas of the *Iliad* calls out, ‘Meriones, though you are a dancer my spear might have stopped you now and for all time, if only I could have hit you’ (XVI.616–618), and Homeric Hector, when describing how good at battle he is, includes dancing on the floor of Ares, amongst his abilities to kill men in battle, manoeuvre his shield, and horsemanship (VII.237–241). Athenaeus' Socrates concurs with this notion, stating, ‘“whoso honour the gods best with dances are the best in war.” For the art of dancing was virtually like armed manoeuvres, and a display, not merely of discipline in general, but also of care taken for the body’ (XIV.628f). The examples abound.

The armed *Pyrrhic* dance specifically emphasises the bridge between education, military training, performance, competition, and warfare. The performers of the *Pyrrhic* were nude and early artistic examples show them holding shields of various sizes, while later art depicts the dancer manipulating a cloak to imitate a shield. Sometimes spears and swords are used; sometimes arms are pantomimed, which could lead to the demonstration of multiple weapons in the same dance. It was performed individually or in large *Pyrrhic* choruses, publicly or for private audiences. Some evidence depicts the dance at the major athletic competition, the *Panathenaia*, others at the wrestling school or gymnasium. The competitions in *Pyrrhic* dance were held in the categories of children, *ephebes*, and adults. Although a dance, the *Pyrrhic* was used as a preparatory drill for war as late as the third century BCE. This form of performance, practised in schools and performed in festivals, was understood to benefit young men in battle. Similar to tragic choral performance, the competitive and public nature of the *Pyrrhic* also contributed to cultural learning.

The Pyrrhic is an example of the bleed between performance and military movements, and a similar embodied learning is happening in tragic choral training and performance. For example, movement in tragic choruses was similar to the training of armed foot-soldiers (*hoplites*) due to the movements within a mask and helmet, respectively. Masks and helmets both covered the entire head and exposed only the eyes, ears, and part of the mouth. In *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy*, [David Wiles](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#cit0007) (2007, p. 57) emphasises the physical difficulties of manoeuvring with either of these heavy objects affixed to your head, limiting your hearing, lines of sight, and air circulation. He states, ‘it is clear that dancing in a tragedy would have helped young men function in a phalanx. Masks would have helped them adjust to sensory deprivation in extreme conditions and find intuitive or kinaesthetic means of sensing the collective rhythm of a group’ (Wiles [2007](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#cit0007), pp. 58–59). The *phalanx* itself – the formation of holding shields and spears for optimal offensive/defensive manoeuvring – was spaced about arms-length apart (as perhaps with dance formations), not at all as interconnected as it appears in popular films such as *Troy* or *300*. This embodied knowledge was part of the tragic choral experience not only for the young citizen performer, but also for the citizen audience members, who could recall when they practised movement at school, rehearsed dance for performance at festivals, and trained for and served in the military. It goes without saying that military service at the time was deeply connected with one's citizenship and thereby one's cultural experience.

This brief provocation began by discussing how institutional education was understood to be cultural, informing a young Athenian's understanding of citizenship and also preparing him for military service. In looking at the training of tragic choruses and its interconnections with military preparation and duty, it becomes apparent that training for choral performance built upon the aforementioned foundations and functions of institutional education. The fasting involved would likely prepare them for meagre rations whilst in battle, the dancing in masks would prefigure the manoeuvring in helmets, and the rhythms of choral formation would instil embodied instincts related to movements within the *phalanx*. In the preparation for tragic choral competition, a young Athenian was training for much more than a performance in the theatre; he was preparing for performance in the *polis* and performance on the battlefield as well.

**Notes**

1. For more details on ancient Greek education, please consult Boyd ([1961](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#cit0003)), Joyal *et al.* ([2009](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/4T2gITR7R7C6MQNBp8wN/full#cit0005)), and Beck (1964).

2. The best outline of training is in Peter Wilson's *The Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia: *The Chorus, the City and the Stage* (2000, pp. 81–86).

**References**

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* **9.** Xenophon, 1932. Anabasis. trans. C.L. Brown, ed. E. Capps, T.E. Page, and W.H.D. RouseLondon: William Heinemann.