Developing a Dance Notation for the Study of Etruscan Dance Imagery in its Archaeological Context

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Research Report

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**Introduction**

Since his retirement from American Ballet Theater, Italian ballet *danseur* Roberto Bolle has continued to enthrall audiences with performances on stages in Italy that were once graced by those who were entertaining ancient Greek and Roman audiences. Set in the ruins of these monumental theatres and arenas, the grandeur of their architecture provides the shows with a spatial dimension, connecting audiences of today with those of antiquity. Set within a different backdrop for dance, one that predates the Greek and Roman structures, is a site in modern Tuscany, Italy, featuring the painted tombs of elite Etruscans. This site in Tarquinia, a UNESCO world heritage site since 2004, and ones from other former Etruscan regions, are too small and fragile for contemporary performances, and yet they offer a temporal dimension that can connect dancers and spectators of today with representations of their equivalents from the Etruscan past.

The spatial dimension of the Greek and Roman monumental architecture is well suited for the display of today’s conceptions of dance. However, it is the temporal dimension of the Etruscan tombs that provides a significant confirmation, namely, that large-scale displays of past conceptions of dance existed in the Italian peninsula over 2500 years ago. The Etruscan representations show that dance, although a transient form with ever new and revived expressions, has endured.

The dance models are paradoxically embedded in an eternal stillness, on the walls of tombs intended as the final resting places for elite Etruscans. The perpetual flow embodied in the funerary dance imagery creates its own continuity, by reflecting the flow of the nearby Tyrrhenian Sea. The sea stills bears echoes of the Greek name for these peoples, the *Tyrhennoi*[[1]](#footnote-1) and has shaped the lifestyles of generations of peoples living along its coastlines, in a timeless way. The images also poignantly situate the dance at a very specific point in time: the time of a people who called themselves not by the Greek nameor by the Roman appellation, *Tusci* or *Etrusci[[2]](#footnote-2)*, but rather, as the *Rasna* or *Rasenna*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As a former dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and a classicist, my first question has been whether the study of these ancient dance models can shed some light on this ancient people who had a unique non-Indo-European language that sharply contrasts with those of its neighbouring Latin, Greek and Celtic speakers, and a people whose more extensive primary source records either did not survive, or have not yet been discovered. As a dance teacher, my second question has been whether insights gained from the study of past can provide models to help us to foster better cultural stewardship in the modern world. To these ends, I conducted a preliminary study for feasibility in 2017, followed by a research project aimed at cataloguing and investigating the Etruscan dance models for an MA in subsequent years, under the supervision of Italian archaeologist Dr. Fabio Colivicchi. The former question is relevant because the search for truths about the cultural formation of various regions, and of the human past, for me, honours a responsibility to future generations to leave behind an understanding of the past that has integrity. An honest evaluation of cultural heritage provides a way of comprehending the confluences of cultures and peoples of the past, along with their impact on the human journey and its environment. For the former question, given that cultures can and have been conscripted for political purposes throughout the ages, another responsibility in dealing with cultural heritage is to support the current generation’s ongoing access to Smart Power, with its capacities for dialogues, debates, negotiations and mediations, rather than Soft Power, which is sometimes focused on propagandistic national or regional narratives that can omit or distort inconvenient truths, or Hard Power, which at times destroys any access to the past.[[4]](#footnote-4) The latter question about applicability is essential because one can never have enough tools in the box to help create cultural resilience, in a way that respects both diverse expressions and shared humanity.

The project began with the premise that for dancers of today to fill a theatrical space safely, we learn to translate elements of our non-verbal dance language proficiently into accurate and concise verbal constructs, in our communications with colleagues and artistic staff, in order to facilitate effective movement. A lack of clarity can impede problem solving and teamwork, as well as technical and artistic achievement, while a failure to communicate properly can also lead to accidents both on and off-stage. Similarly, for the scholar of today to bridge the temporal gap between our times and those of the Etruscan images, to better understand the ancient dance legacies embedded in a two-dimensional painting, it would seem the same verbal or symbolic acuity would be necessary. A further premise for the project has been that the models of the Etruscan past and the dancer of today are a continuity of the same species, allowing for a comparison of current practices with those suggested by the ancient representations. Both premises allow for a dancer’s perspectives to be included in academic study, just as a multi-disciplinary team of researchers is included in experimental archaeology, or specialists in ancient languages focus on primary sources. Dancers, as movement specialists, in a manner similar to the other experts, understand theoretical and practical issues impacting their field and as such, have distinctive perspectives that can contribute to the breadth of the study of antiquity and of ancient dance. While an analysis of these images may not tell us how Etruscans or those in Etruria danced, they indicate something about Etruscan conceptions of “dance”, ones that we may learn more about through investigation. Key findings from the project will be featured in a peer-reviewed article recently accepted for publication in 2023, while future goals include publication of the entire catalogue.

This research report for the *2023 World Congress on Dance Research* aims to share highlights about how a dance notation, tailoured specifically to match the Etruscan archaeological contexts, was developed, the relevance of this study, and how insights gained from the study were then applied to resolve issues impacting certain dance practices today. The report begins with a brief introduction to the Etruscans, to previous scholarship, and to observations about the Etruscan tomb dance models and their rich contextual data. This is followed by a summary of the methodology and its development, focusing on difficulties, resolutions and findings that show the capacities for using dance notations, to facilitate a better understanding the Etruscan elite mindset. The report then focuses on relevance and few insights gained from the study of these ancient models, that have been used in application in some dance practices today, with the aim of fostering improved cultural stewardship. It concludes with thoughts about future pathways.

The report aims to show that through enhancing our understanding of dance as represented in Etruscan funerary contexts, a dance expression particular to its time, and by seeking areas in which those knowledge gains can be impactful in application, specific to some dance expressions of today, the temporal dimensions of past and present can be re-connected, and together, these can confirm the enduring legacy of “dance” in the human journey.

**Background**

Between c. 520 BCE and the Hellenistic period, profound changes were occurring in Etruria, as Carthaginian, Greek, Celtic, Roman and Etruscan groups vied for territory and dominance in, what is today, central and northern Italy. During this same period, tombs were built into the landscape of Tarquinia, Italy and in four other former Etruscan regions. Over 50 of these funerary monuments of the Etruscan elite feature paintings that include images suggesting “dance”, most of which are *in situ* and offer a plethora of contextual information per scene and tomb. Given the Etruscan tomb dance images span a few centuries, are featured in five regions, are ubiquitous and are funerary, which may indicate mindset or beliefs related to why the images mattered, they provide sufficient relevant models for a robust investigation.

A research project was developed to catalogue the dance images, to help gain a better understanding of the Etruscan dance legacies and of elite thought at the height of their civilization. The first aim was to define needs and capacities specific to the Etruscan representations, in order to maximize the available data. This is important because, in contrast with more extensive Greek and Roman records, there are no extant primary source textual records about Etruscan dance that have survived or yet been found. The little that exists comes from the second-hand accounts by later Roman writers (e.g., Livy and Valerius, both writing just before and after the start of the Common Era) and by a more contemporary Greek one (Herodotus writing c. the 5th C BCE). To extrapolate information about patterns and anomalies in the dance images, a dance notation was developed to analyze each of the suggested 151 dance figures, by investigating the parts, the sum of the parts and the whole, and to include the contextual data. Many depictions are featured near banquet scenes, but other themes, such as wooded areas or seascapes, are also present. These scenes provide valuable contextual references that merited inclusion in the notation, to help understand relationships, mindset and reception of influences coming from other regions. While Stephan Steingräber notes that many paintings, workshops and influences in Tarquinia, and later Chiusi, came from Greek artists and conventions[[5]](#footnote-5), the acceptance, or reception, by the elite Etruscans of certain iconographies, for whom the tombs were intended, is a matter of their own agency.

**Previous Scholarship**

Previous scholarship[[6]](#footnote-6) on Etruscan dance at the time of my research project focused on specific elements of the dance, commentary about dance related to other aspects of study, chapters on dance; or studies noting degree of realism.[[7]](#footnote-7) Frederick Nearebout’s ground-breaking work on the study of ancient Greek dance closely aligns with a dancer’s priorities. The scholar emphasizes a need for objective approaches to the study of ancient dance, including a clear definition of “dance” for figural selection, and assessment of the “degree of realism” shown in each communication, allowing for some adjustments due to anatomical inaccuracies or fragmentary and damaged remains[[8]](#footnote-8). Inclusion of these aspects provided a foundation for the Etruscan study. Senta German[[9]](#footnote-9) developed a simplified stick figure key for the study of Minoan dance images, which although concise, easy to understand and objective, could not easily be adapted to the complex and broad range of movements and details shown in the Etruscan images. This is due to the intricate hand gestures and to the range of positions shown by female dancers, with higher skirt lengths than is typical of Minoan and ancient Greek models. Lillian Lawler[[10]](#footnote-10) selected a descriptive method for the study of ancient Greek dance; however, her method is at times subjective. For the Etruscan project, it became apparent that the needs included development of an objective and concise method, following German, but also, a descriptive model that allows for greater detail and expansiveness, following Lawler.

**Methodology**[[11]](#footnote-11)

In addition to elements from both German and Lawler’s approaches, a model selected as the basis for analysis of the Etruscan dance imagery was Benesh[[12]](#footnote-12), a dance notation developed by John and Joan Benesh in the 1940s CE to map the body and positioning from head-to-toe, while using the musical staff as the background for the alignment of each part. While not the only dance notation, each with its own strengths and limitations, it was selected because it suited the Etruscan models.[[13]](#footnote-13) Over forty years ago, Julia McGuinness Scott[[14]](#footnote-14) made a compelling case for the use of Benesh in diverse contexts, because it allows for objective evaluation of each facet of movement represented, in a logical manner. Because the symbols used in Benesh are not comprehensible to non-specialists, the notation for the Etruscan study was adapted and simplified to maintain the head-to-toe arrangement, but with simple descriptors to denote each component, for example the leg position, “shin lift back”, rather than “*arabesque*”. The aim has been to make the data readily accessible to other scholars with related research interests or different, but overlapping ones. These elements were then resituated back in their broader context when this was available e.g., a hand position with fingers pointing “Away” (from the figure) and in parenthesis “(Toward an adjacent bird)”. This system maintained the objectivity and concision of Benesh’s and German’s systems, but with the expansiveness of Lawler’s, to more fully verbalize the movement and its context. It eliminated the need for memorization of complex symbol systems or for referring back to a key repeatedly.

**Tailouring a Notation to Etruscan Archaeological Contexts and its Potentials**

**Foundations**[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the catalogue, tomb paintings were given a designation “A”, to allow for a later expansion of the catalogue to include dance models in other media, e.g., “B” for ceramics, and so forth. The tombs were then listed by geographic region, e.g., “1” for Tarquinia, which has the greatest number of tombs. Each entry began with these features, followed by the tomb name in Italian and English, the date, following Steingräber,[[16]](#footnote-16) from oldest to newest, general information including a tomb image when this was available, context for each wall and information about condition and copies. In the introduction, it was noted that images are not always anatomically accurate and that copies may also not be accurate. In all but one tomb, the entries started with the entry wall, left side wall, back wall and finally, the right side wall, with gables listed as “gable” with its wall respectively, and were described from the viewer’s perspective, inside the tomb facing a wall, looking from left to right (the way English text is read). Figures that were very damaged or fragmented, or that were questionably “dance” models were appended as “Listed figures”. “Dance” figures for the main catalogue were selected on the basis of positions and contexts suggesting dance and not indicating other functionality. Rational for figural selection was included when there were ambiguities. Next each figure was catalogued individually with a designated number, an image, and its location in the tomb. The general format after this was to include a general description (gender, suggested typology e.g., “castanet dancer” or “martial dancer”, age e.g., adult), attire, accoutrements or objects, and notes about degree of attire functionality for a dancer and degree of coverage of body parts created by attire and/or by the positions themselves. The advantage to these features was that they allowed for findings such as an absence of male figures displayed with full frontal nudity in profile positions or of female figures shown holding wine cups. After this, each figure was noted from the lower to upper portion, followed by additional information related to context or convention, and each entry concluded with a summary of the parts and the whole. Lastly, each tomb group was summarized, beginning with commentary on dance figural size per wall and tomb, and other shared or unique aspects shown by the models in this particular tomb. Tomb data came from Steingraber’s accounts[[17]](#footnote-17), unless otherwise noted. Caveats about possible errors in copies was discussed in the introduction and copies were generally used to cross-reference photographs of the paintings.[[18]](#footnote-18) Errors found in the copies were noted.

The following section highlights some of the challenges, solutions and outcomes of developing the dance notation for the Etruscan images, tracking figures from the lower to upper portion, with additional contextual data, as available. The toe-to-head approach was used because the leg positions, often delineated by depiction of attire, another feature noted in the introduction, were often indicative of something suggesting “dance”, whereas a head position might be shared by many tomb figures of other types.

**The Lower Portion of a Dance Figure**

One aim was to designate a weightbearing leg indication as “Supporting” leg and a gesture or “Working” leg (in some cases the load is shown shared and is labelled as such) and a basic leg position label e.g., “Lunge Forward”. For example, in the Tomb of the Blue Demons c. the end of the 5th C BCE, a left side wall scene shows two dancers to the left of a figure representing a deceased male, depicted with a *biga* and horse, and one male dancer to the right of the these, in front of the horse. The solo male dancer is painted with a “lunge backwards” (weightbearing leg with a bent knee back and gesture leg extended forward). Although the solo figure is in a procession, with each figure’s feet oriented toward the back wall banquet, this figure’s balance on the weightbearing leg shifts the narrative backwards, creating a relationship with the deceased in the *biga*, directly behind him. Another aim has been to clarify directionality for the archaic convention, given many figures show their torsos facing the viewer inside the tomb, and the front of the hip bones facing sideways at a 45-degree angle from the torso, as well as a figure’s “face” in another direction altogether. Which way is the figure then “facing”? To answer this question, each figure was given a “Primary Orientation”, based on the direction of the front of the hips and lower abdomen. A “Divided Direction” was designated to indicate if the working leg, hands, arms, faces, clothing, etc. appear in different directions. In both cases, direction and context was also noted. A position such as a “Knee Lift Front” is then relative to the position of the hips and lower abdomen, which becomes the figure’s “Front”. In the classical art convention, in which figures show more rotated hip and leg positions, rather than parallel ones, one example was to notate an “L Shape” to indicate an approximate 90- degree angle rotation, in contrast with parallel leg positions, labelled as “Parallel”. Why does orientation matter? An example is the antechamber of Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing c. 510 BCE, in which the left side wall second *komos* dance figure from the left is shown with a Primary Orientation away from the back chamber, but with a Divided Direction showing the face, beard and sash ties and working leg and foot toward the back chamber. Because the sash ties are depicted in a way that suggests motion, a category tracking any indications for motion shown by attire was added, along with the orientations shown and context.

Another challenging feature involved tracking “Stance”, meaning whether it shows a “Natural” opposite hand to leg forward or not, whether the torso is in “Torque”, meaning between the upper and lower half or in “Profile” to the viewer, or between the two. The advantage to adding this feature was that it helped to show if there was any logic to the position. For example, the only martial dance figure in Tomb of the Bigas c. 490 BCE, is shown with the Unnatural Stance, but this position is rational for a figure holding a shield and spear, because it provides the counterbalance for spear or stick holding hand. Another advantage to this feature is that it showed that most dance positions in the tomb were opened out to the viewer, rather than in Profile and as such it, matches conventions used in some dance forms today. Tomb of the Bigas c. 490 BCE and Tomb of the Jugglers c. 520 BCE both indicate spectators watching events. Both models add to the validity of having dance positions opened out. This information might help us to better understand which dances are intended for “viewing”, in different time periods, and how to interpret this in contrast with models showing little indication of adjusting positions for “spectators”.

**The Lower and Upper Figural Representation**

Two challenging features to track involved the connection between the lower and upper body portions. One was related to indications of counterbalance and the other to degree of flexibility. The former helped to decern the degree of realism, despite the archaic convention in the movement representations and the latter helped to analyze when these representations changed, whether it was a dramatic shift or showed nuanced changes over a long period of time. These features also assisted with evaluation of gender and typology differentiations and shared conventions. Flexibility was difficult because few figures in the early tombs, which showed the most flexibility in the legs and gait, had imprecise anatomical proportions. The model selected was an approximation of “Flexibility” between the lower spine and the knees, based on whether a figure showed a 90-degree angle, more, or less. For some figures, it was unclear whether the legs were in parallel positions with one in front of the other, or parallel to each other side by side, but at an angle to the viewer. In these cases, the key focus was on Flexibility shown for the gait, and the issues with the parallel or front to back positions were discussed in the introduction and noted under “Leg” positioning.

Isolations, that is, movements in which one body part is not symmetrical with the opposite part or to the figure’s groundline, e.g., a shoulder raised, or a chin tilted extremely far up relative to the position of the rest of the spine were included, along with contextual information. The advantage to adding this feature was that only six models showed pure isolations, while the rest were either neutral or aligned with some contextual feature, e.g., a chin was lifted over a shield as is the case for the only martial dance figure visible in Tomb of the Bigas c. 490 BCE. His chin as well as shield, stick and primary orientation are all directed toward a musician. In broader context, this figure, one of the few shown in Profile, is also primarily toward a scene with a cult statue, just beyond the musician. The notation helps to show these relationships.

“Balance” and the degree to which a figure is shown on or off balance (slight, moderate, extreme), along with contextual data, were also noted. An example is from Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing c. 510. Three figures are shown with cross-lateral positions, meaning natural stance with opposite arm to leg forward and two figures with supporting foot on the ball and working foot in an aerial position show the centre of their weight over the supporting foot, in a hypothetically balanced position, even though the positions still follow archaic conventions of the hips shown in a sideways direction, while the waist to upper torso faces the viewer in the tomb. This suggests the artists were exploring how to show a greater degree of realism in art, early on in the period of Etruscan tomb paintings. Another example is that a figure depicted off balance was noted with context in the direction of the off-balance position. An example of this is from Tomb of the Inscriptions c. 520 BCE, in which two back wall right side *komos* dance figures are depicted with off balance positions Primarily Oriented toward the central false door, although the dancer closest to the door is shown with his face in the opposite direction, meaning a Divided Direction, toward a musician and another *komos* dance figure. Again, this highlights the merit of utilizing every aspect of dance movement indications, to provide information about how to interpret the images, to better understand the Etruscan mindset and the productions of painters working in Etruria at the time.

**The Upper Figure**

The upper half of the body was noted with neck/chin alignments, shoulder positions, rib cage alignment, spinal position, arm positions, wrist directions, and hand, finger and thumb positions, gestures and directions. Each was noted with contextual information when available. The arm and hand positions themselves were easy to extrapolate, for example, an “O” shape for arms in a donut-hole position. The challenge was dealing with all the various directional cues given by fingers, thumbs, palms, hands as a whole, and accoutrements or objects shown as “held” by the figure (or in the case of shields, in which the hand is not visible, assumed to be held by the figure). Each was tracked by Right and Left separately and then designated a composite arm shape, when both arms showed, but separate hand shapes per hand. One question was how to learn whether a figure is shown “holding” an object with the figure’s right or left hand, rather than the viewer’s perception of right and left. For this notation, the convention that on stage, dancers have a personal right and left, in addition to the shared “stage right and stage left” was used, giving each Etruscan dance figure a personal right-and-left hand designation, to facilitate the answer to what hand holds are suggested. This feature was clearly detailed in the introduction and key, along with the rational, to mitigate any confusion. The results showed that for each martial dance figure, the shield is always shown in a figure’s personal left hand, while the stick or spear is in the figure’s right. This feature aimed to follow Nearebout’s suggestion to consider evaluation of degree of realism in representations.

Notations of the many hand, finger and thumb and gesture positions and directions, while a time- consuming task, produced telling results. Recalling the previously mentioned solo male dance figure in the side wall procession, from Tomb of the Blue Demons c. the end of the 5th C BCE, his gesture with the index and little fingers of the left hand lifted, a gesture noted by Sybille Haynes[[19]](#footnote-19) as an apotropaic one still used in Italy at the time of her research, showed an alignment with the deceased male figure’s eyes and face. The same gesture is visible on a back wall right side female castanet dancer from the Tomb of the Lionesses c. 520 BCE, over a century before. Her thumb points toward a duck face decoration on a ladle that is adjacent to a musician fully oriented toward a large central *volute krater* wreathed in ivy, which Haynes[[20]](#footnote-20) suggests alludes to their god of wine Fufluns (the Greek Dionysos). As the data from various notations accumulated, it suggested that these artists were creating well thought out and highly detailed paintings for the tomb owners, it showed that both male and female dancers the Etruscan funerary contexts could share certain gestures and that certain gestures endured in the iconography despite the passage of time. These findings inspired a search for more ways to provide a thorough investigation of the many intricacies.

**Additional Features**

The notation was then expanded to include more contextual data and conventions such as:

* “Configurations” (e.g., “Alternating Primary Orientations”)
* “Relationships” between dance pairs or trios and dancers with musicians (e.g., a pair showing “Mirroring positions”)
* “Flanking” objects (commonly saplings in the Etruscan tomb contexts)
* “Adjacent” (figures and relationships between figures within a scene or scene opposite),
* “Frame” (whether a figure’s position fits within its allotted space and degree)
* “Space” (around the figure and degree)
* “Overlap” (with other objects and figures, and if so what and whether it is in the foreground or background)
* “Size” of the figures in a scene and tomb
* “Dance Conventions” (a practice in flamenco taught by *bailaora* Esmeralda Enrique[[21]](#footnote-21), in which it is common for complex gross motor movements to go with simpler fine motor ones or vice versa, to allow the dancer and audience to have a less divided focus)
* “Practices” (e.g., practices found in dance forms today)
* Dancer’s “Line”, (an aesthetic used to create a certain look, e.g. ballet dancers use these create the sense of endless extension, while flamenco dancers use these to emulate the matador’s iconic shapes)
* visual “Art Conventions”

Tracking the Configurations allowed one to see not only patterns, but how this aligned with gender or type representations. It also allowed one to track when configurations changed and how so. For example, by c. 490 BCE in Tarquinia, alternating patterns by primary orientation are no longer visible and alternating patterns by gender begin and continue. “Flanking” objects were tracked separately to “Adjacent” figures, so that once it was confirmed that an object was flanking a figure, it was then assumed, when the notation for adjacent figures was added. This allowed for less repetition of flanking objects, while expanding the notation to examine what figures are in what relation to others. In the case of “Flanking” objects and adjacent figures, in the Tomb of the Dead Man c. 510 BCE, a male *komos* dancer is shown directly next to the *prothesis* scene, adjacent to a female attendant, a female figure and deceased. The dancer is Primarily Oriented toward the deceased, while a same wall mourner is separated from the entire scene, including from the dancer, by a sapling. The question is then, how realistic would it be to have a dancer in a *prothesis* scene. An example from dance practices today is found in the *Danza Velatori*, which is still extant today and which is illustrated in a sketch by Gustav Dore in Alicante, Spain c. 1867 CE, showing castanet dancers around the bed of a deceased child. While this dance is not a continuity of the Etruscan forms and it does not confirm that such dances existed in Etruria, the fact that such practices do exist in dance indicates that this Etruscan image cannot be entirely dismissed as a creation of the artist’s imagination either. Another feature is that majority of dance figures in the tombs are flanked by or adjacent to small saplings. This is a significant number of images connecting or intertwining the Etruscan dance closely with the natural world.

“Frame” helped show whether a figure’s position was defined by the frame or whether the position was a shortened one by choice. For example, in Tomb of the Little Flowers c. the 2nd quarter of the mid 5th C BCE, the arms of a right side wall central male dancer are very bent at the elbows, shortening the arm positions, although there is ample space around the dancer for a more expansive position. “Size” assessments presented difficulties, in that, some same scene figures had very bent knees while others had straight legs. Rather than trying to measure each to a straightened position, (which did not work given for some images it was difficult to ascertain the end of the spine and start of the legs), each was noted as shown, relative to the other figures nearby and in the scene. Because the tomb dance figures share ground lines, this was sufficient to indicate whether gender or type was portrayed with differentiations or not. This feature, along with “Frame” and available wall “Space” helped to confirm that females were generally represented as shorter than male dancers in the same tomb scenes. “Overlap” notations provided insight into what was protected visually in the dance imagery and whether certain figures were “upstaging” others.

A good example of dance “Practices” was expressed in Tomb of the Painted Vases c. 500 BCE, in which the castanet dancers are shown in positions that model strategies used by castanet players today, perhaps because although the instruments are different, the same conventions are needed to focus on fine motor sounding, while using gross motor function to display dance movements. “Art Conventions” were also tracked, for example a back chamber *komos* figure in Tomb of the Casuccini Hill, c. 470 BCE from Chiusi, is represented with a sash showing no attachment to the figure, and was a pure Art Convention. Some tombs showed both “Dance” and “Art conventions, which can be shared ones. In closing, “Alignments” with other iconography and the context was tracked, because of the abundance of contextual data available in the tombs. Although alignments could be interpreted as lines used by the painters to simplify their work, given the amount of evidence showing so many details seemingly carefully thought out and ultimately approved by the elite Etruscans for funerary purposes, the data from the notations strongly indicate that functionality alone, from the artists perspectives, cannot be assumed.

**Summary**

In sum, the notation allowed for both general and nuanced tracking of the dance figures, to help ascertain continuities and changes over time, although it may be that other models have not been found or were destroyed. The examples provided here show the capacities for what can be discovered about the Etruscan elite mindset related to funerary representations, for example the importance of the relationships between dancers and other tomb iconographies and the exacting detail involved in dance conceptions to create those relationships. It also helped us to better understand the Etruscan dance language, in that, no dance figure is ever shown falling or tripping, in contrast with the accident in the chariot race shown in Tomb of the Casuccini Hill from Chiusi, c. the 1st quarter of the 5th C BCE. In the same tomb, one martial dance figure is the only figure shown with both feet in an aerial position, suggesting something unique, although it is possible other models like this were lost or destroyed. In Tomb 994 c. 2nd quarter of the 5th C BCE, one female dancer is shown with her eyes, chin and hand shape aligned toward an inscription with a female’s name. The notations confirm that female figures can feature innovative positions, for example a Tomb of the Triclinium dancer on the far right of the right side wall, painted with the lower body in a new classical style and the upper body more reflective of older archaic conventions. While it may seem that this was a revolutionary style now emerging, as Steingräber[[22]](#footnote-22) comments about new art influences coming into Etruria at this time, it is important to remember that even in 510 BCE, as mentioned previously, Tomb of the Hunting and Fishing was already showing experimentation with figures in cross lateral positions, with the upper body in torque toward the viewer and the working leg in opposition. This doesn’t mean that the classical style was not new to Etruria, but it does show that there may have been a longer trajectory for acceptance and reception of this aesthetic. In essence, a dance notation has the capacity to be developed and adapted for Etruscan archaeological purposes and can help to provide a different perspective to enhance analysis and interpretation.

**Supplementary to the Notation**

Appended at the end of the catalogue was a chart in Excel, using simple English abbreviations, close to the original position names, to make it easy to guess what the meaning is e.g., “exc off” in the “balance” column and row means, “extremely off” balance. A short key was also provided with the chart. While the chart was not as elaborative as the detail in provided the catalogue, it offered a quick summary and was provided to assist with analysis of patterns for scholars with similar or related research interests.

**Conclusion of the Notation Process and Results**

The aims of the research project had been to explore the Etruscan dance imagery found in the tombs, to help gain insight into the Etruscan elite practices, and to learn something about ancient dance conceptions in Etruria over an extended period. Further aims, had been to develop a way of studying the Etruscan archaeological record of human figures, in a way that is objective, concise and comprehensible. A final goal had been to reframe the questions one asks, as it became clear that new categories for notation were required to enhance understanding and to accurately communicate about what the images are showing. One aim has been to create ways of verbally expressing what the images show, to better engage in dialogues and debate about this ancient peoples, their practices and their connection with other ancient peoples in nearby regions, such as Greece and Rome. While this dance notation is by no means perfect, it offers a new avenue for the study of Etruscan dance and it has the capacity to be expanded.

**The Relevance of Developing Dance Notations for the Study of Ancient Etruscan Dance**

Why does it matter to develop a range of dance notations for archaeological contexts and to tailor ones to the needs of specific projects? One answer to the former is that it allows for diverse perspectives to contribute to dialogues and debates. A second is that dance notations in archaeological contexts have the capacity to open new research avenues in related interest areas and to address the distinctive needs of dance images coming from diverse peoples and regions, such as the Etruscans. A third is that dance images appear at a time when Etruria was undergoing profound changes in their society. Given the Etruscan language is non-Indo-European, there are still questions about how dance could have facilitated cultural diplomacy locally among a group that was connected by language and religion, but not by a fully cohesive political unity, and whether dance facilitated cultural diplomacy throughout the broader Mediterranean cultural milieu. The capacities for dance, when there are linguistic barriers, has not been sufficiently studied. Insights from ancient models may have potentials to serve as models for future trajectories in the role of cultural diplomacy and dance in different societies and in the interconnected global society.

Specific to Italy’s UNESCO site in Tarquinia, these images form part of the Italian, Mediterranean and global dance heritage, while also containing a profound communication related to a person’s intended final resting place on earth. Each tomb and dance image, transcends the temporal dimension and connects people of today with one iteration of dance, in the very long human practice of engagement with dance. It is important to try to understand if nothing else, that dance has endured. The study of dance may help us to understand what it means to different groups and why it endures or why certain dance forms disappear over time. Insights might help with better preservation of at-risk dance cultures today. Considerations of relevance, led to ideas about actual applications, based on insights gained from the study.

**Application based on Insights from the Ancient Etruscan Dance Representations**

This final section of the research project focuses on application, based on insights from the tomb dance images. The aim is to share four examples, to show the potentials for using insights gained from study of ancient dance models, to, when applicable and respectful, work toward better stewardship of dance cultures in their unique local and global contexts today.

The first insight related to the previously mentioned preservation of at-risk dance cultures today. The lack of Etruscan primary source materials shows the importance of having firsthand accounts by authentic interpreters of intangible cultures, and shows the problems with imbalances created when outsiders accounts may be meager, biased or show limited understanding. As a person who grew up with samba as the local culture in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, and now, as a teacher of ballet, a mainstream global culture and flamenco, a UNESCO heritage one, I recently observed the following. During the Black Lives Matter protests, the social media popularity of a young ballet aspirant from Africa resulted in a full scholarship to the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School in New York[[23]](#footnote-23). While this was a generous and important contribution to creating access for talented students, something much needed in the ballet, the trajectory even today is still often focused one way, on the ballet and mainstream cultures, particularly in the media and funding. There is also a need for diversifying focus on and funding of the many dance forms that exist globally, so that children see that these forms are equally valued and respected and offer their own unique talents and perspectives that can be shared with humanity, while protected locally.

In application, as I was completing the Etruscan project, I took additional non-mandatory courses on post-colonial perspectives in archaeology and on ancient graffiti, including study of ancient Greek dance graffiti, to better understand the context for how cultures can be or become marginalized or promoted. More recently, I took professional development courses (2022) to better understand the strengths and limits of UNESCO’s work, and plan to continue academic studies with a focus on UNESCO’s capacities, because it fosters awareness and initiatives for dance cultures outside of mainstream and particularly at-risk cultures. Through ongoing professional development, the aim as I teach ballet and flamenco, is to work toward offering balanced approaches for students coming into these cultures, to help student gain appreciation for the many dance cultures that exist globally.

A second example of application is related to sustainability. When I did the preliminary Etruscan dance study, in 2017, for feasibility of the project, it became apparent that Etruscan attire was very basic: it was in theory easy to maintain and to refit to other dancers, it showed good functionality and it highlighted the importance of flexibility e.g., the versatile mantles that could be arranged to create different expressions through the lines and drape of the fabric. At the time, I was allowed to provide my own costuming for my classes at a school I was teaching in. I realized that since my childhood, many sustainable practices that were standard at the time were no longer utilized, and that much of the dance attire was ultimately ending up in landfill. I started to focus on creating sustainable models for my classes and after moving to a new school in 2019, all the costuming for the school that a colleague and I work toward facilitating, aims at supporting sustainable practices in as much as possible. For my part, this involved taking courses in construction with a tutu-maker from the Royal Ballet in UK, with a flamenco dress-maker from Granada, Spain and in belly-dance costuming (two of the three online). These courses helped with me to develop flexible models that could be re-used for multiple dance forms (e.g., a false waist on a mermaid skirt that can be taken off to refit belly dancers or vice versa to fit other dance forms more suited to a natural waist), without appropriation. Another aim was to work toward zero waste in how patterns are cut from the fabrics and to better understand how scraps can be utilized and stored. The courses also helped to understand which textiles and designs hold up well to the rigours of dance needs, can be re-altered easily and be cleaned well with eco-friendly products, and which fabrics alternatives are less toxic in production. The courses helped frame both needs and what questions to ask on an ongoing basis.

The first tutus I purchased when I started teaching ballet in 2012, made by Rosetti in the UK, came at a time when the EU had banned fabrics made with formaldehyde, sometimes used for tutu skirt fabric to make it stiffer. These tutus have since been re-used by many dancers in recreational to elite schools where I have taught, and are still in mint condition after multiple alterations and cleanings, because of the engineering Rosetti used to work with less stiff fabric options available at the time. While working on the Etruscan project, which showed greater linkage between nature and dance, I re-prioritized in as much possible, aims for sustainability and respect for life on earth. The Etruscan models confirmed for me, the importance of making “time” to focus on sustainable practices, as being equally important to the time focused on dance.

A third example is related to cultural diplomacy. Livy (7.2.4) suggests the Etruscan dancers were sent to Rome during a plague, to offer their performances in appeasement to the divine. The Etruscan dancers were sent into a dangerous situation, to try to help resolve it. Inspired by the idea that cultures can bridge with others during difficult times to help improve things, just as much as cultures can cause divides that create strife, I searched for research guided courses in cultural diplomacy and found the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. It was one of the first entities to focus on research-based studies specific to cultural diplomacy, and was founded in Berlin/USA, at the end of the Cold War. At the time of my application, it was also affiliated with UNESCO. In the course (which I completed mid-pandemic), I learned that the Institute’s philosophy[[24]](#footnote-24) is one in which cultural diplomacy aims are to secure the cultural bridge, through projects that foster respect for diversity, shared humanity and joint problem solving, with forethought to developing long-term trust and mutuality. This contrasts with one way trajectories from “us to you”.

In Canada, our situation in ballet is that it is one of the many cultures that have been grafted to this once colonial region. Therefore, is a culture that struggles to develop a strong root system, in contrast with regions where ballet’s cultural formation consolidated current practices. In a newer country, we have advantages in that there is less burden that can come with traditional cultures, but also, disadvantages in that our primary teaching methodologies have been either British marketed or Russian ones, creating a strong polarization in a culture that is commonly shared in the circles of children and teens, the vulnerable sector. On the one hand, the limited methodologies allow for cultural bridges to form with these regions. On the other, neither British (extreme restraint) nor Russian styles (extreme cantilena) are salient to many of the diverse cultural identities in our pluralistic society. As a teacher who trained in the Russian classical method in America with one of the Fokines and in the Vaganova method with a former Kirov soloist, who worked with many defectors during the Cold War years in my time at the National (Mr. Baryshnikov, Mr. Nureyev, Ms. Makarova and Ms. Popa among others), but who also apprenticed at the Royal Ballet in the United Kingdom, I can appreciate the benefit of finding balance, when cultural bridges become highly politicized.

In the search for such balance during this period post-Brexit, with a war waging in Eastern Europe, I applied to UNESCO CID to become a member. It allowed me, as it has many teachers and researchers, to participate in a non-political and non-nationalistic organization and to continue to connect with colleagues globally, with shared purpose in our nurturance of dance, which has endured in the human journey, despite wars, plagues and other calamities. For me, CID is one of the more secure cultural bridges available at this time, because it allows us to be human, and to establish mutuality in human relations through our love and dedication to dance, in a world in which many people are being dehumanized. A cultural bridge requires many supports, and many perspectives, to span across such vast global horizons. Membership has allowed for the neutrality to keep scholarship open and for our understanding of dance to keep improving through collaborative and collective effort. UNESCO CID well matches the aims of the ICD’s related to cultural diplomacy, in that it allows for joint problem solving, mutuality, and trust-building on a professional level, in a world where this can no longer be taken for granted. Some criticize membership, because it is neutral. For me, being pro-dance is not neutral, but rather, it focuses on a long-term vision that allows specialists to improve understanding of the field, so that in time, we can hope to use the jointly acquired knowledge to improve our world, with respect for both local contexts and global connectivity. Rather than neutrality, it is about maintaining the cultural bridge, so that one exists, given this is one of the few that has survived into 2023. Even ballet, which has been largely neutral for many years, is now markedly political and polarized again. UNESCO CID provides the opportunity, if nothing else, to maintain the bridge, with the hope that someday soon, we can find peace on both sides of the bridge, despite the distance.

A final example came from the process of extrapolating the Etruscan dance dialect suggested by tomb images. I realized that in ballet today and not just in Canada, but in many regions in which ballet traditions were not historically rooted, we have very few outreach-based teaching dialects (as noted previously). In essence, it is like we are creating a ballet environment in which children are being culturally socialized along old Cold War divides. In practice, we see either extreme restraint (British style) or extreme cantilena (Russian style), and no central style that creates an easier access physiologically for students to any style. It is uncertain whether the Ukrainians and other regions of the former Soviet Union, who shared the Vaganova method, and the rest of us will want to distance from Vaganova method (or others from post-Brexit British marketed ones) with time or willmaintain these, because they are good methods. Likely we will see a little of both options, preservation of older ways and creation of new pathways.

In thinking about how dialects in dance develop, and recalling that Vaganova herself blended French and Italian influences to create something new a century ago, when there was a need for a new iteration in ballet in her region, I reached out to a well-respected elite school in Europe to ask if we can start dialogues, among regions outside of UK and Russia. The aim is to explore the potentials for developing more choreographic schools, which have the flexibility to develop new methods, based on scientific and artistic knowledge of today. My hope is that we can find ways to create a better middle ground, offering more outreach alternatives and creating cultural resilience in ballet, rather than greater polarization, particularly in the lives of children in regions like my own multicultural region. While in preliminary exploratory stages, the dialogues about teaching methodology and creation of breadth are in progress.

This section on application offers some of the potentials that were explored, based on insights from the study of Etruscan dance models. Their world was no less challenging than our own and their survival no more guaranteed. In fact, their culture, language and autonomy did not survive. A study of the record that remains of their existence, including that of their dance, might offer pathways to help us to become better stewards of culture in our time. The observation of their practices has certainly helped me to reframe how I think about dance, to question trends and to act, with respect not just for the past, or today, but for the future. The study of Etruscan dance, consideration of antiquity and of dance today, with implications for the future, facilitated a respect for the temporal dimension of dance, its past, present and future.

**Future Pathways and Conclusion**

The next steps specifically in the study are to complete cataloguing the entire Etruscan dance corpus for my PhD. The aims are to better understand the role of dance in Etruscan society, its relationship with Greek and Roman influences, and to more fully develop this method of dance notation for archaeological study. This includes expanding to encompass other models such as three-dimensional ones (statues, friezes, etc.), models with little or no context and models with very different immediate contexts e.g., ceramics from Etruria or found in Etruria, with varying information about provenance. One particular area of interest is to do more in depth studies of the confluence of Greek artists coming into Etruria and of local Etruscan artists and patrons, which were included in the preliminary study. Another area of interest is to better understand the dynamics of Roman reception of Etruscan dance, given many Etruscan tombs with dance images indicate Dionysian iconographies and yet, the Roman reception of Bacchic practices contrasts sharply at times with Etruscan reception.

Generally, long-term aims are to contribute another perspective to the development of dance notations for the study of antiquity and archaeology, to facilitate better collaboration between researchers working in material cultural heritage and practitioners who are intangible heritage specialists, and to further develop the specialization of dance experts coming into academia. Dance was the muse left out of the liberal arts education and in this post-colonial period, when we are re-evaluating the role of intangible practices and re-balancing their inclusion in tandem with more well-established and documented material cultural heritage practices, it is an auspicious time to bring the perspectives of dancers, whose work is no less defined by objective study of technique (sciences) and by the need for query and wonderment (the arts), into the academic disciplines. An auspicious time, means a reconnection with that temporal dimension of dance. It is what the Etruscan remind us to consider. One final goal is related to the exploration of cultural memory, including how it is understood and shared with the public. This aims to facilitate the ongoing interest and engagement with the public at the UNESCO site in Tarquinia, now joined with the site in Cerveteri (ancient Etruscan Caere, which also left evidence of dance representations). Tarquinia is a beautiful site and I highly recommend that dance scholars make the time to see the ancient dance paintings in person, to fully appreciate the landscape and the scale of their relevance in their local and in the world’s ancient dance heritage.

In conclusion, the aim of this research report has been to share the rational for developing a dance notation for the Etruscan tomb dance imagery, to explain how the primary aims for objectivity, concision and comprehensibility were addressed, and to show the results and benefits of using a form of dance notation in an archaeological context. A further goal has been to provide considerations of relevance and also examples of how insight gained from the ancient Etruscan models can help to foster cultural stewardship in some dance practices of today. Stewardship of dance, necessitates awareness of the temporal dimension. Improving practices in how we verbally describe, think about, discuss, dialogue and record information about past dance legacies visible in the archaeological record, is part of nurturing that temporal dimension of dance, by connecting the past in a very clear and accurate way, with people of today, and with forethought about future needs. The temporal dimension encompasses two distinctive points in time, such as the time of the Etruscans, who were planning the dance paintings for their tombs, and the time of our own dance practices, inspired by our current needs and aspirations. A study of the temporal dimension of dance highlights the capacities of dance to transcend its own time and to influence the present and future. A study of the temporal dimension of dance also verifies that dance, through the long durée, has endured.

About the Author

She danced professional with the National Ballet of Canada (*corps de ballet* 1986-1992), performing with such luminaries as R. Nureyev, M. Baryshnikov, N. Makarova and K. Kain, and on world stages including the Metropolitan Opera House and Kennedy Centre, USA, ROH Covent Garden, UK, and the National Arts Centre, Canada. Career highlights included performing at the Calgary Olympic Arts Festival and with the Canadian Opera Company. She trained primarily with I. Fokine, whose family were from St. Petersburg’s Imperial Ballet, now Mariinsky tradition. (Fokine’s uncle was the choreographer M. Fokine, her godmother, the ballerina A. Pavlova, and her mother, the soloist A. Fedorova, who trained dancers of the Latvian National Ballet and also the founder of the National Ballet of Cuba.) In the upper years, she studied with L. Gulyaeva (a former Kirov soloist who trained with N. Baltacheva, the assistant of A. Vaganova, founder of the Russian method) and apprenticed with the Royal Ballet, UK. She now teaches ballet holistically in Canada, contributing to the conservation of the choreographic schools of Fokine and Vaganova. In 2019, she studied Vaganova teaching methodology with E. Schchelkanova (a former American Ballet Theater and Kirov artist and a student of L. Safronova, one of A. Vaganova’s final students) and was certified by I. Kolpakova (A. Vaganova’s last surviving student). For Vaganova *pas de deux* methodology she trained with Y. Fadeyev and A. Boytsov (former Kirov and Mariinsky *danseurs*). She also is certified by dance physio-therapist Lisa Howell in dance medicine practices for teachers and, as a member of the College of Early Childhood Educators, takes ongoing courses in current child-development practices. Raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, she learned samba with step-family members, the older generation of whom were *Baianas*, the repositories of the oldest forms of samba and she was introduced in Brazil to Iberian forms. After retiring from the National, she studied flamenco and Spanish classical for over a decade with Esmeralda Enrique, supplemented by studies with Antonio Granjero, Isabel Bayón and Ramón Martínez, after which she taught for the Academy of Spanish Dance. She now has over 20 years teaching experience in these forms. Her aim in dance is to help children to develop authentic expression, with respect for diverse perspectives and shared humanity.

In 2014 she returned to studies at Queen’s University in Canada. Her goal is to foster better collaboration between material and intangible cultural heritage professionals and practitioners, in the shared stewardship of past legacies. Through the generosity of a national grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and a Queen’s MacLoughlin-Bracken Fellowship, she completed an MA in Classics at Queen’s University, researching the Etruscan dance legacies.

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1. Strabo 5.2.5, found in Haynes: 2000, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Haynes: 2000, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Dionysios of Halicarnassos *Rom. Arch*. 1.30.3-4, found in Haynes: 2000, 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nye 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Steingräber: 2006, 129, 139, 183, 158, with previous bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The following account of previous scholarship is a summary of that featured in Morgan, upcoming 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See e.g., Camporeale 1987; Spivey 1988; De Puma 1988; Swetnam-Burland 2000-2001 and Cantoni 2005, with previous bibliography. Also see Jazwa 2020 on Etruscan boxing-dance. For dance related to other studies see e.g., Bonfante 1975; Brown 2017. For dance and “realism” e.g., see Jannot 1984; Da Vela 2006; Gouy 2012; Morgan upcoming 2023. For chapters on dance see e.g., Cherici 2017; Spitzlay 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Naerebout 1997: 112-23, 219-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. German 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Lawler 1967 and 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The following account of methodology is a summary of that featured in Morgan, upcoming 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. McGuiness-Scott 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In the 1980s when I apprenticed at the Royal Ballet in the United Kingdom, through the Upper School, Benesh notation was a mandatory course for its students. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. McGuinness Scott 1982. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The following account of the data base is a summary of that featured in Morgan, upcoming 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Steingräber 2006: 308-311, with previous bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Steingräber 1986 and 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The accessible tombs were visited by the researcher in 2017, to also allow for direct observation of the dance representations. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Haynes 2000: 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Haynes 2000: 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Esmeralda Enrique: 2009, private lesson. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Steingräber: 2006, 129, 139, 183, 158, with previous bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. # “Nigerian ballet dancer Anthony Mmesoma Madu gets scholarship following viral video.” August 20, 2021. BBC Africa. Filmed and edited by Grace Ekpu. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-53850666.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Mark Donfried 2021. Institute for Cultural Diplomacy. Lecture 1 part 1. Global Governance and Cultural Diplomacy, with previous bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)