

Spectacula turpitudinum

Christian Schemata of the Dancing Body

Donatella Tronca

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer an analysis of the Christian intellectual perspective of choreutic gesture, putting forward the hypothesis that by regulating dancing, late antique bishops became spokesmen for an anthropology of gesture which on the one hand demonised all forms of performative dancing and on the other hand encouraged men to become perfect imitators of an angelic *choreia* in the Platonic framework. This *choreia* was supposed to guide the behavioural movement and schemata of men's bodies. However, it was more than just a characteristic of a presumed Ideal City; it also had to be realised in life on earth, the anticipatory mirror image of the heavenly city.

Contents

Choreia

Schema

Infamia

Harmonia



1 Bronze statuette of a veiled and masked dancer, h. 21 cm, Greek, 3rd-2nd century BCE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 1972.118.95 (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

[1] While presenting the moral dangers of dancing to Christians at the end of the fourth century, John Chrysostom (344/354–407) provides a vivid account of dance figures—as if describing a sculpture—to show that theatre-goers return home in a state of great impurity. This is the result of having seen dancers with features such as contorted bodies, rolling eyes, rotating hands and circles traced out by their feet.¹ *Spectaculum turpitudinum* is therefore the spectacle of the performing flesh.² Chrysostom focuses on the performers' ridiculous agitated voices, along with the tumult and clamour accompanying the recital, which are sometimes even taken into church. He does not advocate a ban on rejoicing, but recommends prohibiting meaningless voices, raised hands, foot-tapping and indecorous effeminate behaviour.³ He often compares female dancers to she-camels, saying that God did not give us feet to move in a disorderly way or dance like demons. Instead, as feet help Christians to walk righteously, they should imitate the movements of angels.⁴ Additionally, Basil of Caesarea (329–379) asks who would be more blessed on earth than those able to imitate the dancing of angels.⁵

[2] Over the following pages, I will present an analysis of the Christian intellectual perspective of choreutic gesture, putting forward the hypothesis that by regulating dancing, bishops in particular—who had an extremely active and influential role in late antique society—became spokesmen for an anthropology of gesture which on the one hand demonised all forms of performative dancing and on the other hand encouraged men to become perfect imitators of an angelic *choreia* in the Platonic framework. This *choreia* was supposed to guide the behavioural movement and schemata of people's bodies. However, it was more than just a characteristic of a presumed Ideal City; it also had to be realised in life on earth, the anticipatory mirror image of the heavenly city.

Choreia

[3] Considerations about dancing naturally refer to bodies in movement, but when we deal with non-contemporary history, we have to use still sources (written texts or images). For this reason, the distance between us and the bodies in our sources is not only temporal, but also perceptual and sensorial. It is therefore extremely important to focus on terminology when conducting this type of research by adopting a historical-semantic approach. When referring to choreutic gesture in this context, which we could define as 'angelic', Basil of Caesarea uses the Greek term *choreia*. So what exactly does it encompass?

[4] *Choreia* is generally translated in modern languages as 'dance', in particular 'choral dancing'. However, this translation does not really reflect the meaning that the term held in the ancient Greek world, which persisted even after the spread of Christianity.

¹ John Chrysostom, *In sanctum Barlaam martyrem* 4 (ed. *Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 50.682).

² Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* 1.32 (ed. Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, in *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina* [CCSL] 47.32).

³ John Chrysostom, *In illud, vidi Dominum, homilia* 1.3 (ed. PG 56.102).

⁴ John Chrysostom, *In Matthaicum homilia* 48.3 (ed. PG 58.491).

⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Epistola* 2 (ed. PG 32.225–226).

For example, processional movement also belongs to the lexicon of the concept of *choreia*. This is not only an intrinsic technicality related to the type of movement, but a lexical root which also connects choreutic gesture to the verb *choreo*, which is used to indicate moving forward, walking and even the flow of the Heraclitian river (*panta chorei*).⁶ The concept of *choreia* in this broad sense formed part of the reworked ancient imaginary acquired and spread by Christian intellectuals, whereby circular movement was easily associated with a reflection of the perfection of cosmic harmony. The presence of the apostolic *choros* in late antique baptisteries, such as the depiction in the ceiling mosaic in the Baptistery of Neon in Ravenna (Fig. 2), and the spatial and performative relations these figures established both with Christ in the centre and with believers, recently studied by Vladimir Ivanovici, allow baptism to be interpreted as the convert's official entry into the harmonic movement of the Christian *choreia*.⁷



2 The ceiling mosaic in the Baptistery of Neon, ca. 458 AD, Ravenna, Italy (photo: Vladimir Ivanovici)

The concept of *choreia* and this type of imagery therefore need to be seen as the expression of the amalgamation of numerous musically coordinated and harmonised actions.⁸ Furthermore, in ancient Greece the term *mousike* expressed more than the

⁶ Heraclitus, *Testimonia*, 6, in Plato, *Cratylus* 402A (ed. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 1, 6th ed., Berlin 1951). Nicoletta Isar's reflections on the link between gesture and the term *chora*, related to the verb *choreo*, are extremely interesting with her consideration of choro-graphy as the description of space (*chora*) delimited by dance schemata: cf. Nicoletta Isar, *XOPÓΣ. The Dance of Adam. The Making of Byzantine Chorography. The Anthropology of the Choir of Dance in Byzantium*, Leiden 2011, 97-100. See also Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch 2*, Heidelberg 1970, 1125-1126.

⁷ Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany. Light and Ritual in North Adriatic Architecture (ca. 400-ca. 800)*, Berlin 2016 (= *Ekstasis: Religious Experience from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, 6), 86-90.

current connotation of the word music—it was always a combination of words, melody and choreutic gesture.⁹

[5] In his *Laws*, above all in books two and seven, Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE) outlines what Steven Lonsdale has defined as an "ancient anthropology of dance".¹⁰ Frederick Naerebout aptly reflects that it is somewhat anachronistic for Antiquity to consider Plato "an anthropologist *avant la lettre*".¹¹ However, the definition of an anthropology of Platonic dance is extremely fitting, especially in relation to the way that such deliberations were embraced by Christian intellectuals. Although it is important to place Plato's works in the historical cultural context in which they were produced, and although the philosopher was clearly unaware of how his theories would be received—making it difficult to perceive him as the creator of a systematic anthropological interpretation—, I feel that we can justifiably refer to the development of a Christian anthropology of choreutic gesture with Platonic origins in reference to Late Antiquity, which in turn influenced Christian thought in the Latin West and Greek East in the Middle Ages.

[6] Plato speaks authoritatively—and perhaps with a vaguely nostalgic tone, as an incurable conservative—about the political role of civic choruses and choreutic practices in Attica in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. In order to understand this concept of 'political role', we need to focus on the etymological root of the term, which is directly connected to the *polis*. Choreutic practices in ancient Greece were fundamental to the management of the *polis*: they were unifying performative practices of a mostly religious nature that created collective identities.¹² It is important to underline that I have only used the expression 'religious nature' for reasons of clarity, as this type of performance generally took place during festivities dedicated to one or more divinities. Here too, however, the civic role was always predominant; in a certain sense, the concepts of 'religious' and 'profane' interacted and overlapped. In order to understand the importance attributed to these practices in Plato—and more generally in Antiquity—, we need to think that the absence of just one of them would call the whole socio-political system into question. This consideration might also help us understand why many of these customs were still doggedly practised after the

⁸ For an analysis of the relationship between depictions of circular dances and the concept of harmony in the Middle Ages, see Francesc Massip Bonet, "L'harmonia de l'univers: la dansa en cercle a l'edat mitjana", in: *Dances imaginades, danses relatades. Paradigmes iconogràfics del ball des de l'Antiguitat clàssica fins a l'edat mitjana*, eds. Licia Buttà, Jesús Carruesco, Francesc Massip and Eva Subías, Tarragona 2014, 65-83.

⁹ Bruno Gentili, "Metro e ritmo nella dottrina degli antichi e nella prassi della 'performance'", in: *La musica in Grecia*, eds. Bruno Gentili and Roberto Pretagostini, Rome/Bari 1988, 5-14: 5.

¹⁰ Steven H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*, Baltimore 1993, 8.

¹¹ Frederick G. Naerebout, *Attractive Performances. Ancient Greek Dance: Three Preliminary Studies*, Amsterdam 1997, 96.

¹² With regard to this issue, see Claude Calame, "Morfologia e funzione della festa nell'antichità", in: *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli - AION (filol.)* 4-5 (1982-1983), 3-21; Pauline Schmitt-Pantel, "Collective Activities and the Political in the Greek City", in: *The Greek City. From Homer to Alexander*, eds. Oswyn Murray and Simon Price, Oxford 1990, 199-213.

progressive triumph of Christianity, and why there were attempts to eradicate them by Christian intellectuals, who sometimes labelled them as 'pagan'.

[7] For Plato, dance—*choreia*—was an instrument of *paideia*, which refers not only to scholastic and/or physical education, but to the entire way of life. According to his thinking, moral and civic virtues could be acquired by learning to dance in the right way, namely learning to execute the appropriate constitutive schemata for the relevant role in society. The whole civic system would be affected by the absence of this role, as it would also cast doubt on the roles of all the others. The inclusion of legislation about musical activity in the *Laws* shows the degree of power that Plato thought choral singing and dancing had as an agency of social control for the transmission and maintenance of the right feelings among citizens. The Greek term *nomos*, law, also indicates 'melody' and 'musical mode'—*nomoi* were called the first melodic repertoires because it was essential to remain within the established confines of intonation.¹³ In this way, just as *nomos* in the sense of law is at the basis of social order, it is by following the musical *nomos* that the collective *choreia* should guide the social body harmoniously. The term *choreia* therefore indicates the combined actions of singing and dancing; according to Plato, the link between the two derives from the rhythm and movement of the body. In choral and choreutic performances, just as in social life, voice and body must move in a harmonious way individually, collectively and in relation to their performance space.¹⁴ Only those who are trained to follow this harmony can live in the Platonic City. He who cannot dance is described as *achoreutos* and is excluded from the Ideal City, for he will not be able to socialise with other citizens or move in harmony with the rest of the civic *choreia*. The *choreia* therefore plays a fundamental civic role in Plato's work, to the point where failure to move one's body in harmony with others is seen as immoral and depraved.

[8] As Werner Jaeger's studies of early Christianity and Greek *paideia* clearly highlight, figures such as John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea had a complete classical education and were particularly steeped in Platonic culture. He stresses that Christian thinking was heavily influenced by the Greek language with its numerous concepts, categories of thought, inherited metaphors and subtle nuances.¹⁵ We therefore need to consider the eventuality that Basil attributed the same Platonic concept of *choreia* to his angels, who move harmoniously in heaven just like Plato's ideal citizens.

[9] However, the real-life city in Late Antiquity where John Chrysostom lived and worked was quite different from Plato's Ideal City. In the sermons he gave in Antioch and Constantinople, the bishop had to forcefully underline what should be done and what was wrong, especially to those who considered themselves Christians. Whether he did so consciously or not, he might have been conveying the same values that Plato wanted in his Ideal City. Indeed, Plato did not allow all forms of dancing in his

¹³ Roberto Pretagostini, "Μουσική: poesia e performance", in: *La 'parola' delle immagini e delle forme di scrittura. Modi e tecniche della comunicazione nel mondo antico*, ed. Ermanno A. Arslan, Messina 1998, 41-56: 45.

¹⁴ Plato, *Laws* 2.664E-665A (ed. John Burnet, *Platonis opera*, vol. 5, Oxford 1907, repr. 1967).

¹⁵ Werner Jaeger, *Cristianesimo primitivo e paideia greca. Con una bibliografia degli scritti di W. Jaeger*, ed. Herbert Bloch, Florence 1966 [original ed. 1961], 5.

State: for example, the Bacchic dances of Nymphs and Satyrs were excluded.¹⁶ In practice, there was no place for frenetic dancing that made individuals lose their self-control, thereby interrupting the harmony of the civic *choreia*. This loss was always associated with the Dionysian realm, also in the figurative arts (Fig. 3), providing a contrast to the idea of maintaining control of the self, which became a vitally important concept throughout Christian culture.



3 Relief with a satyr and a maenad caught in an ecstatic dance, likely as part of a Dionysian ritual, terracotta plaque, h. 45.1 cm, w. 49.4 cm, d. 4.4 cm, Roman, Augustan or Julio-Claudian (27 BCE–68 CE). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acc. no. 12.232.8b (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

[10] In one of his homilies, Basil of Caesarea denounced certain drunken women who danced near the basilicas of martyrs on the night of Easter, thereby turning holy places into a stage for their indecency.¹⁷ The description of the women in question as inebriated is not a minor detail; the fact that they were dancing near a church might have made the offence only slightly more serious, because Christians were supposed to behave in a Christian way, namely with balance and discretion, at all times and in all places. However, it is even more important to note that when Christian authors wanted to attribute a negative definition to dance, they always did so by associating it with an adjective or a characteristic that made it worse, such as drunkenness in this case.

[11] Clement of Alexandria (150–215) had previously associated musical instruments with the development of passions related to drunkenness, lust, sensuality, violent aggression and pagan rites,¹⁸ the distinction between 'good music' and 'bad music'

¹⁶ Plato, *Laws* 7.815CD (ed. Burnet).

¹⁷ Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia* 14.1 *in ebriosos* (ed. PG 31.445).

¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.4 (ed. Henri-Irénée Marrou and Claude Mondésert, in: *Sources Chrétiennes* [Sch] CVIII, 1965). On Clement and music see Charles H. Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006), no. 3, 255-282.

and its power to influence states of mind reflects a long philosophical tradition of *harmoniai* dating back to Damon of Oa (fifth century BCE), bequeathed to us through Plato.¹⁹ Clement invited men to live their lives as an eternal liturgy, a holy *panegyris* celebrating the solemnity that the true Gnostic—therefore the perfect Christian—should honour every day and at every moment of his life in order to be part of the divine *choreia* and imitate the angels in everything.²⁰ Although good knowledge of *mousike* and harmony could have a positive effect on men's lives in conducting the eternal liturgy imitating the *choros* of angels, Clement felt that it was also necessary to provide the right indications so as not to suffer the negative influences of music, which could be extremely harmful. These were directly connected to the context of the symposium and the risk of losing self-awareness.²¹ It is important to underline that Clement was not providing simple rules of etiquette about how to behave decorously at banquets, but was describing norms of life, whereby he who did not comply was described in Platonic terms as *apaideutos*, standing outside the *choreia* with his ignorance of *mousike* and good schemata.

Schema

[12] At this point, with regard to proper behavioural norms, it is important to refer to the Greek concept of *schema*, analysed in depth by Maria Luisa Catoni in relation to Antiquity.²² The term *schema* refers to the way of speaking, walking, appearing in public and relating to space. In the life of a Greek citizen, the visual (as well as auditory) dimensions were fundamental, including not only the images that surrounded him but also the rites and performances in which he was involved and thus the very way in which he behaved in public in the city. This gestural lexicon covered various aspects of social life, and communication was guaranteed by knowledge of the relevant terms—the schemata.²³ Citizens were aware of the schemata of their gestures and the values that they conveyed. Therefore, schemata had political value in the ancient Greek world and anything that did not follow them potentially undermined the stability of the State. In Plato's political thinking, it was extremely important to maintain the traditional schemata as any innovation potentially led to the subversion of the State. Those who tried to alter and manipulate schemata were one of the most socially dangerous forces because they threatened the stability of the social rules. The

¹⁹ See Warren D. Anderson, *Ethos and Education in Greek Music. The Evidence of Poetry and Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA, 1966; Robert W. Wallace, "Damon di Oa ed i suoi successori: un'analisi delle fonti", in: *Harmonia Mundi. Musica e filosofia nell'antichità*, eds. Robert W. Wallace and Bonnie MacLachlan, Urbino 1991, 30-53: 30; Carnes Lord, "On Damon and Music Education", in: *Hermes: Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie* 106 (1978), 32-43.

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.7.49.3-5 (ed. Ludwig Früchtel and Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus Band 3: Stromata. Buch VII und VIII*, Berlin 1970 [= *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte* (GCS), vol. 17]).

²¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.40.1-2 (ed. Marrou and Mondésert).

²² Maria Luisa Catoni, *Schemata. Comunicazione non verbale nella Grecia antica*, Pisa 2005; I refer to the second edition: *La comunicazione non verbale nella Grecia antica. Gli schemata nella danza, nell'arte, nella vita*, Turin 2008.

²³ Catoni, *La comunicazione*, 5.

term *schema* indicates clothes, accessories, gestures and manners, embodying the values that one wants to communicate. It also has a bearing on the arts, painting and sculpture, as well as on *mousike*, namely music and dance. For this reason, it can be seen as a sort of corporeal iconicity in the broadest sense of the concept. The subversion of schemata falls into the category of *aschemosyne*, a term that indicates turpitude, lack of form, ugliness and deformity, the opposite of *euschemosyne*, namely decorum and dignity. A disorderly choreutic performance is duly defined as *aschemon* (indecent, shameful and depraved). We should underline that these terms did not have an abstract meaning but instead indicated concrete bodily attitudes and always referred to physical appearance. This aspect is confirmed by the fact that the term *aschemon* is also present in medical literature to indicate something deformed.²⁴

[13] This analysis of the concept of *schema* helps us to understand why, for example, John Chrysostom in one of his homilies invited the people of Antioch to avoid public *aschemosyne* during festivities.²⁵ As it seems reasonable to assume that the terms used by Christian authors had not lost the concrete nature that characterised them in Antiquity, I think that he was referring to specific bodily gestures to be avoided so as not to interrupt the gestural harmony that he wanted people to comply with. The celestial dancing mentioned by Basil of Caesarea is also concrete and represented the type of harmonic movement that had to be imitated.

[14] The *schemata kala*—good bodily attitudes—are the schemata of *euschemosyne*, which all citizens needed to learn in order to maintain self-control. Frenetic gestures were not allowed in Plato's Ideal City or in the *civitas christiana* as they were a symptom of loss of self-constraint. While Plato suggested identifying judges that could evaluate and approve the right schemata to follow and divulge to young citizens, late antique Christian citizens would, at least in theory, have their own pedagogical judges: bishops.

[15] The schemata that included singing and dancing—*mousike*—never had a neutral ethical connotation. This point is stressed by Plato, and it is considered by Christian intellectuals when defining the behavioural models that Christians should follow, addressing choreutic gesture and music, and dealing with questions, also at a legislative level through various conciliar norms, such as how to behave during celebrations, which seem far removed from intellectual interest.²⁶ These were not only questions of the danger of lasciviousness or contact with pagan cults: the matter was

²⁴ See, for example, the passages of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* quoted by Catoni, *La comunicazione*, 112-116.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilia in martyres* 1-3 (ed. PG 50.664).

²⁶ E.g. Canons 39 (De Christianis celebrantibus festa gentilium) and 53 (Ut in Christianorum non saltetur nuptiis) of the Council of Laodicea in the fourth century: *Concilium Laodicenum sub Silvestro, Canones concilii Laodiceni. Ex interpretatione Dionysii Exigui* (ed. Mansi 2.581, 571-574); Canon 23 (Ut in sanctorum natalitiis ballimatiae prohibeantur) of the Council of Toledo in 589: *Concilium Toletanum III sub Pelagio II* (ed. Mansi 9.999); Canon 35 (Sacerdotes admoneant populum, ut in diebus festis non vacent conviviis malis et iocis turpibus, sed orationibus) of the Council of Rome in 826 (ed. Albert Werminghoff, in: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* [MGH], *Concilia*, II, Hannover 1906, 581-582).

much more serious in their eyes and far more meaningful to the life of a Christian because their references were the Platonic schemata models.

[16] According to Plato, *euschemosyne* always had to be pursued in life just as in art because a lack of decorum, harmony and rhythm in the figurative and performative arts would lead to the same defects arising in life.²⁷ Furthermore, the Platonic insight into what should be considered 'good schemata' is also extremely interesting for the subsequent polemic developed by Christian intellectuals against theatrical performances because of the intrinsic ambiguity that they perceived in the professions of actor and dancer and indeed in theatre-goers, an issue well scrutinised by Carla Bino and Leonardo Lugaresi.²⁸ In short, Plato stresses the importance of the content of 'good schemata' as well as the technical aspect (*techne*); the cultivated citizen should not only be able to sing and dance appropriately but also perform 'good songs and good dances' that imitate virtues rather than vices.²⁹ It is clear that Plato poses this problem because not doing so would legitimise a separation of *techne* and ethics, meaning that a dancer, who we can now define as a citizen to all intents and purposes because in a certain sense the two figures overlap, might execute a *schema* that represents evil in an impeccable manner. It is therefore necessary to identify good schemata to civilise citizens who should then imitate them, an undertaking only befitting philosophers as authorities on what is good.

[17] It is impossible to know whether Plato ever thought or hoped that someone would attempt to apply this legislation at a future date or that intellectuals would try to civilise citizens to this end through direct contact.³⁰ Nevertheless, it is plausible to think that it was this model of choreutic nurture that late antique bishops attempted to convey to the Christian citizen/dancer, perhaps unknowingly or not deliberately but nevertheless effectively. In a certain sense, they then became the philosophers who tried to nurture citizens to execute the right schemata by claiming to know good and using the full authority pertaining to their role. This is why Platonic texts were all included in what Gaëlle Jeanmart defines as the "bibliothèque intérieure",³¹ namely inherited knowledge and awareness that cannot be quantified or measured by manuscripts, fragments and citations, but form an integral part of the historical and cultural heritage of the context in which late antique bishops operated.

²⁷ Plato, *Respublica* 3.401BD (ed. Simon Roelof Slings, *Platonis Rempublicam*, Oxford 2003).

²⁸ Carla Bino, *Il dramma e l'immagine. Teorie cristiane della rappresentazione (II-XI sec.)*, Florence 2015; Leonardo Lugaresi, *Il teatro di Dio. Il problema degli spettacoli nel cristianesimo antico (II-IV secolo)*, Brescia 2008.

²⁹ Plato, *Laws* 2.654C (ed. Burnet); Catoni, *La comunicazione*, 272-274.

³⁰ There are some considerations about Plato's political systematisation and its potential implementation in Paul Veyne, "Critique d'une systématisation: les Lois de Platon et la réalité", in: *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 37 (1982), 883-908.

³¹ In this specific case, she was referring to Boethius (480-524), but I think that the concept can be extended to all intellectuals in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Gaëlle Jeanmart, "Boèce ou les silences de la philosophie", in: *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs. Actes du Colloque International de la Fondation Singer-Polignac (Paris, 8-12 Juin 1999)*, ed. Alain Galonnier, Leuven 2003, 113-129: 125.

[18] In her section on schemata and dancing, Maria Luisa Catoni explains the theory behind her research, namely that dance-related schemata play a crucial role in visually establishing the bodily attitudes to express certain values.³² By following this approach I would like to demonstrate that the same schemata and values were also transmitted after the spread of Christianity and, in a certain sense, also substantiated the new faith, although they were structured differently and featured different means of communication such as preaching. Schemata no longer only concerned the citizens of a *polis*, but the citizens of a much larger state. A good Christian was also defined through his bodily attitudes: all those that did not adopt the schemata variously recommended by late antique bishops were *achoreutoi* in the strictly Platonic sense of the term and were excluded from the *choreia*, which had by now become Christian. It could be said that the bishops were creating a form of iconicity of the Christian living body, where subversive behaviour, defined as *aschemon*, called into question the very values of societies.

[19] Aside from that, the link with Christian philosophy also derives from the fact that the term *schema* could also mean disguise and therefore deceit. It was used in ancient sources to express the problematic relationship between appearance and reality that characterises the mimetic arts; as is known, this also became a cornerstone of the Christian intellectual polemic against performances.

[20] While the citizens of the Greek *polis* were perfectly nurtured to understand the constituent gestures and attitudes of the language of schemata, also through the theatre, which had paedeutical value, Christian intellectuals attempted to transmit to the faithful the schemata that they deemed acceptable and which stemmed directly from their Greek and Platonic equivalents. In this way, all Christians would ideally communicate using the same gestural language cleansed of everything that fell into the realm of *aschemosyne* and which could contain the much-feared and potentially deceitful ambiguity that typified the thespian language. Each constituent component of an ancient city had a *schema*, which could not be modified without undermining the order of the city, with the result that appearance was placed above being.³³ This is the same danger that Christian bishops systematically warned citizens of the *societas christiana* about when (in different contexts to those in ancient Greece that were, however, also influenced by Roman thought) they pointed out all of the inherent contradictions and dangers of contamination in theatre-going. For them, the theatre was the ultimate place of appearing and never of being, and was thus, even if only for this reason, to be avoided at all costs.

[21] Carla Bino's studies have shown that Christian philosophical teaching completely redefined the elements of performance, placing man at the very centre of the dramatic action of which God is the only spectator, making him the leading actor on the world stage. This precluded other forms of performance, at least in theoretical terms, as man is himself the spectacle and in this way can no longer ever pretend to be what he is not. He must always perform his role in the world under the judging eyes of God.³⁴

³² Catoni, *La comunicazione*, 125.

³³ Catoni, *La comunicazione*, 238.

[22] The depth of the Platonic meaning of the concept of *schema* is clearly highlighted in book four of the *Republic*, which discusses the individual components of the State, stressing that everyone must have a precise role and wear his social *habitus*.³⁵ I use the latter term as I feel that the use of the Latin—and then also Christian—concept of *habitus* is highly appropriate to translate the Greek *schema*, which is also often rendered in Latin by the term *figura*. As the meaning in this sense is more technical, referring for example to the figurative arts,³⁶ the term *habitus* might be preferable to grasp its broad sense, which also includes the way of dressing, directly connected to behaviour and societal role. Furthermore, in this sartorial meaning, *schema* later came to specifically indicate the monastic habit.³⁷ Indeed, monks were the ideal inhabitants (also deriving from the verb *habito*)—or the perfect icons—of the Christian cosmos. With regard to *habito*, Giorgio Agamben notes that the term *habitatio* seems to indicate a virtue and a spiritual condition in ancient rules rather than a simple fact.³⁸ 'Inhabiting the coenobium' does not only mean living together in the same place, but precise communal participation in shared *habitus*, namely schemata. Monks were able to wear the *schema*/habit in the sense that, at least in theory, they knew how to behave and adopt bodily attitudes in line with the Platonic dictates acquired and spread by Christian intellectuals.

Infamia

[23] As far as I can discern, late antique and medieval Christianity's stance on dancing was shaped by the confluence of the views of the practice held in the Greek and the

³⁴ Bino, *Il dramma e l'immagine*, 2-8; see also the analysis of the Latin concept of *turpitudine* on pp. 21-23. See also Carla Bino, "'To See and to Be Seen'. Gaze, Desire and Body in the Christian 'Dramatic'", in: *Comunicazioni sociali* 2 (2016), 203-216.

³⁵ Plato, *Resp.* 4.420E-421A (ed. Slings). On matters regarding the *habitus* also in the Roman context, especially in relation to oratory and the danger of contamination from acting, see the reflections by Anthony Corbeill, *Nature Embodied. Gesture in Ancient Rome*, Princeton/Oxford 2004, 109-115; this study applies the consideration about the social habitus made by Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge 1990, trans. Ricard Nice [orig. ed. 1980], 52-79.

³⁶ On Latin translations of *schema*, see Maria Silvana Celentano, Pierre Chiron and Marie-Pierre Noël, eds., *Skhèma/Figura. Formes et figures chez les Anciens. Rhétorique, philosophie, littérature*, Paris 2004, in particular the contributions by Michel Casevitz, "Du schéma au schématisation", 15-29 and Carlos Lévy, "Les lumières de la rhétorique. Les significations rhétorique, politique et philosophique des figures dans l'*Orator*", 229-241; see also, especially in relation to late medieval Latin sources, the essay by Danièle Jacquart, "Du contour à la forme: la notion de figure en divers contextes (XIIIe-XIVe s.)", in: *Statue. Rituali, scienza e magia dall'Antichità al Rinascimento*, ed. Luigi Canetti, Florence 2017, 335-363.

³⁷ See, for example, Evagrius Ponticus, *Practicus, prologus* (ed. Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, in SCh CLXXI, 1971); Serapion of Thmuis, *Epistola ad monachos* 8 (ed. PG 40.933B). Cf. Johannes Schneider, *σχῆμα, μετασχηματίζω*, in: *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, founded by Gerhard Kittel, continued by Gerhard Friedrich, Brescia 1965-1992 [orig. ed. 1933-1979], XIII, 417-430: 419.

³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer*, IV.1: *Altissima povertà. Regole monastiche e forme di vita*, Vicenza 2011, 24.

Roman traditions, especially in the early imperial period.³⁹ As Diego Lanza underlined, there was a somewhat ambiguous idea of the profession of actor and dancer in Rome that differed considerably from the Greek concept.⁴⁰ Although the Romans were keen theatre-goers, actors and dancers were included in the category of *infames* in Roman law; *infamia* entailed the loss of political rights and the restriction of civil rights. Valerio Neri observed that *infamia* was an ethical and social stigma expressing the disapproval of the dominant part of the civic body.⁴¹ For actors, the marginal status of *infames* in the Roman world was due to the act of *prodire in scaenam* or performing on stage. We know that this feature remained intact in the reasoning of most Christian authors. For example, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) praises the ancient Roman constitution for having assigned the lowest social ranking to actors and distinguishing them from respectable people.⁴² His thinking features the same form of contamination that is often found in the Christian polemic against performances and dancing; sometimes he even refers to the *pestilentia saltatorum* (the pestilence of dancers).⁴³

[24] When Christians accused pagans of idolatry for celebrating feasts in honour of demons, they also accused them of the fact that these celebrations were ridiculous and the figure of the dancer/actor was held up as non-human and ferine because of the ambiguity of the mask worn and his characteristic depraved gesturing, almost as if possessed. (Fig. 4)

³⁹ With regard to conceptual differences that seem to emerge from sources in the republican and imperial eras, also in relation to specific types of performance, an extremely useful, if slightly dated work is Tenney Frank, "The Status of Actors at Rome", in: *Classical Philology* 26 (1931), 11-20.

⁴⁰ Diego Lanza, "Lo spettacolo" and "L'attore", in: *Introduzione alle culture antiche*, vol. 1: *Oralità, scrittura, spettacolo*, ed. Mario Vegetti, Turin 1992, 107-139.

⁴¹ Valerio Neri, *I marginali nell'Occidente tardoantico. Poveri, 'infames' e criminali nella nascente società cristiana*, Bari 1998, 197. See also Christophe Hugoniot, "De l'infamie à la contrainte. Évolution de la condition sociale des comédiens sous l'Empire romain", in: *Le statut de l'acteur dans l'Antiquité grecque et romaine*, ed. Christophe Hugoniot, Frédéric Hurlet and Sílvia Milanezi, Tours 2004, 213-240.

⁴² Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 313A (ed. Germain Morin, in: *Miscellanea Agostiniana* I, Rome 1930, 68).

⁴³ Augustine of Hippo, *Ser.* 311.5 (ed. PL 38.1415).



4 Pantomime dancer holding masks, ivory, Trier, 5th century CE. Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, inv. no. TC 2497 (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, photo: Ingrid Geske)

[25] As Alessandro Saggiaro highlighted, the circus was condemned by Christian apologists because it was a place where self-awareness could be lost, a place of *mania* and *furor*, while the theatre was a place of perdition.⁴⁴ Leonardo Lugaresi stressed that Christianity introduced the responsibility of the gaze to supplement the shame that any Roman citizen felt when making a spectacle of himself.⁴⁵ For a Christian, theoretically speaking, he who watches a theatrical performance is no less deplorable—we could even say *infamis*—than the performer. It was also feared that such places and events would generate a cohesiveness that might somehow limit the forms of control that bishops tried to implement in late antique cities, and that insurrection could even occur in theatres and circuses.⁴⁶ It is important to stress that this form of control was widespread and aimed to regulate behaviour. From Chrysostom's homilies we know that he assigned a fundamental role to laymen, instructing them and inviting them to inform the bishop of the behaviour of any Christians who had lost their faith, as well as avoiding contact with believers who persisted in attending the theatre and circus.⁴⁷ The fact that the church hierarchy and councils in Late Antiquity and the Early

⁴⁴ Alessandro Saggiaro, *Dalla 'pompa diaboli' allo 'spirituale theatrum'*. *Cultura classica e cristianesimo nella polemica dei Padri della Chiesa contro gli spettacoli. Il terzo secolo*, Palermo 1996 (= *MYΘΟΣ. Rivista di storia delle religioni*, 8), 115-119. See also Ruth Webb, *Demons and Dancers. Performance in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, MA/London 2008.

⁴⁵ Lugaresi, *Il teatro di Dio*, 406-411.

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Mt. 37.6* (ed. PG 57.426-427). On the socio-cultural aspect of performance space, see Paul Veyne, *Il pane e il circo. Sociologia storica e pluralismo politico*, Bologna 1984 [orig. ed. 1976], esp. 460-462; 619-623.

⁴⁷ On this see Ottorino Pasquato, *I laici in Giovanni Crisostomo. Tra Chiesa, famiglia e città*, Roma 1998, 55-58.

Middle Ages (and beyond) frequently spoke out in this way against dancing and *cantica turpia* (depraved singing) shows the level of importance attributed to controlling these phenomena.⁴⁸

Harmonia

[26] According to ancient and medieval Christian intellectual thought, men's bodies had to contribute to the formation of universal harmony with their gestures. This universal harmony in Christian thought was directly linked to the harmony of the Platonic cosmos. In Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy, the universal harmony of the macrocosm is supported by musical proportions that are reflected in the human microcosm, which acts as a mirror of the universe. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus (203/205-270) mentions the soul using the body as a musical instrument⁴⁹ and, while recalling Plato, makes a comparison with dancers in a chorus, in the sense that singing together is not enough in itself: individual members also need to sing their parts well.⁵⁰

[27] This Pythagorean and Platonic concept was adopted by Clement of Alexandria (150-215) in his *Paedagogus*, presenting the metaphor of the incarnate musical body by comparing the instruments mentioned in Psalm 150 to parts of the body. He invites the faithful to praise God on the lyre, explaining that the lyre means the mouth struck by the Spirit as if it were a plectrum, or praise God on the chords and organ, referring to the human body whose nerves are the strings which bestow harmonious tension.⁵¹ In the eternal liturgy that must be celebrated throughout life, men have to modulate their body parts—tongue, mouth, nerves—so that they become instruments that always sing and play praise to God. Christ—the Logos and the New Song—enchants the hearts of men and creates harmony from the dissonance in the universe.⁵²

[28] It is essential to reiterate the concrete nature of these images. When Clement of Alexandria mentioned these human musical instruments, he was referring to actual bodies in movement that acted, interacted and were expected to produce harmony, with all the inherent musicality of this term. My hypothesis is that Christian authors used musical analogies to describe men's bodies in a way that was perfectly in keeping with and functional to the achievement of this harmony. These human bodies

⁴⁸ On this see for example Mario Resta, "'Saltationes sceleratissimorum'. La musica e la danza nei canoni conciliari e nelle epistole pontificie", in: *Synesis* 7 (2015), 110-123.

⁴⁹ Plotinus, *Enneades* 1.1.3 (ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer, *Plotini opera*, 3 vols., Leiden 1951-1973).

⁵⁰ Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.6.2 (ed. Henry and Schwyzer); Plato, *Resp.* 4.441DE (ed. Slings).

⁵¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.4.41.4-5 (ed. Marrou and Mondésert).

⁵² Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 1.5.1 (ed. Claude Mondésert, in *SCh* II, 2nd ed. 1949). On this see Luca Arcari, "Il 'canto nuovo' di Cristo tra Orfeo e Davide (Clem., prot. 1, 2-5; Eus., I.C. 14, 5)", in: *Amicorum munera. Studi in onore di Antonio V. Nazzaro*, ed. Gennaro Luongo, Naples 2016, 41-88; Thomas Halton, "Clement's Lyre: A Broken String, a New Song", in: *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3/4 (1983), 177-199; Eleanor Irwin, "The Songs of Orpheus and the New Song of Christ", in: *Orpheus. The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. John Warden, Toronto/Buffalo/London 1982, 51-62.

as musical instruments and iconic living bodies must dance and play the harmonious music directed by the New Song, namely the Logos incarnate.

[29] The analogy between the human body and musical instruments is present in various forms in the work of both Greek and Latin Christian authors. Besides Clement, it can also be found in Origen (184–253), Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339), Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), Hilary of Poitiers (310–368), Ambrose of Milan (339–397), Augustine of Hippo and Cassiodorus (485–585). These sources have been well scrutinised by Laurence Wuidar, who addresses the issue with a mainly hermeneutic form of exegesis.⁵³ There is, however, the further crucial aspect that Christian intellectuals, above all bishops, played an active role in society. As a result, they also expressed the philosophical principle using a different language for a different audience in contexts where they had direct contact with the faithful.

[30] It seems plausible to suggest that while on the one hand, in practical terms, there is direct intervention through the regulation of dancing, on the other hand, in theoretical terms, there is the philosophical development of the harmony of the Christian cosmos, consisting of a chorus of perfect dancers who use their gestures to achieve this consonance on the world's stage—the only possible form of order, the incarnation and further actualisation of the Pythagorean and Platonic macrocosm in the human musical microcosm. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the human body was given to the soul as an instrument; when the inner man touches the strings of this instrument, all of his limbs and senses exalt the law of God.⁵⁴ In his treatise on the Psalms, Gregory of Nyssa revisits the Pythagorean and Platonic theory of universal harmony and man as a microcosm, also focusing on otherworldly dancing and the eschatological value of music. He stresses that when all forms of creation unite to form one dance (*chorostasia*), the pleasant sound from men's bodily symphony will join what was previously sundered.⁵⁵ Bodies are to be used as instruments to praise God and all limbs are called on to carry out this function.

[31] Although this cosmology was contemplated by both Eastern and Western Christian intellectuals, I believe that Byzantium offers a privileged standpoint from which to observe the implementation of this philosophical framework of universal harmony, above all in its court ceremonies. In some respects, every limb of the body of the court was also employed and had to follow certain schemata to participate in the glorification of the imperial figure. The tenth-century *Liber de caerimoniis aulae byzantinae* by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (905–959) provides written codification of these ceremonies (to find something similar in the West, we have to wait until the fifteenth-century Italian courts).⁵⁶ Constantine saw imperial ceremonies as a reflection

⁵³ Laurence Wuidar, *L'uomo musicale nell'antico cristianesimo. Storia di una metafora tra Oriente e Occidente*, Brussels/Rome 2016.

⁵⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ps.* 2.65.1-2 (ed. PG 23.648-649).

⁵⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *In inscriptiones Psalmorum*, 1.9 (ed. Jacobus McDonough, *Gregorii Nysseni opera*, vol. 5, Leiden 1962).

⁵⁶ On the ways in which the *Liber de caerimoniis* might have been influenced by older texts describing sixth-century court ceremonies, see Michael Featherstone, "De Cerimoniis: The Revival of Antiquity in the Great Palace and the 'Macedonian Renaissance'", in: *The Byzantine*

of the harmony of the cosmos, because imperial power could achieve the harmonious movement that the demiurge (*demiourgos*) had donated to the universe if it moved in accordance with the right rhythm and order.⁵⁷ This harmony was also expressed in buildings, signs, images and music, and, as Antonio Carile underlined, the keywords of consensus were *cosmos*, *taxis* and *harmonia*.⁵⁸ This hierarchy did not allow for any subjective individuality, as everyone had to dance in unison and harmony like the Platonic *choreia*, always remembering that God was the spectator. He who danced outside the chorus became like the Platonic *achoreutos*, incapable of socialising, and always risked falling into heresy in the broadest meaning of the word: not only in a strictly religious sense but also (and above all) in political, ethical and social terms. In the rituals of the Eastern Roman court, fundamental importance was given to compliance with etiquette and what semiotics defines as proxemics, namely ideologically determined space. Order and social control were implemented through the cultural use of space and spatial relations, and as Mary Douglas put it: "the more value people set on social constraints, the more the value they set on symbols of bodily control".⁵⁹

[32] We have to imagine this concept of harmony as something musically conducted, taking account of the fact that in modern languages the term has lost much of the concrete nature and the gestural component that characterised it in Antiquity.⁶⁰ If we strive to think in these terms, it will not seem too abstract to compare the bodies of men to musical instruments. This harmony needed to shape life, the eternal liturgy of Christians, who were actors/dancers on the world's stage under the gaze of God, spectator and supreme judge. In this branch of Christian philosophical thinking, an offshoot of Pythagorean and Platonic thought, human bodies were seen as musical microcosms and living icons that had to move harmoniously through space following the musical rhythm conducted by the Logos/New Song.

[33] It is therefore not mere rhetoric to define dance in the broadest possible sense of the term—including the concepts of *schema* and *choreia*—as a metaphor of life, social life and political life (life in a *polis*). Dancing defines the relationship that the body establishes with space and the way in which it interacts with other bodies within the

Court: Source of Power and Culture. Papers from the Second International Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Symposium (Istanbul 21-23.6.2010), eds. Ayla Ödekan, Engin Akyürek, and Nevra Necipoğlu, Istanbul 2013, 139-144.

⁵⁷ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De caerimoniis* 1.2 (ed. Albert Vogt, *Le livre des cérémonies*, vol. I, Paris 1935, 3).

⁵⁸ Antonio Carile, "La prossemica del potere: spazi e distanze nei cerimoniali di corte", in: *Uomo e spazio nell'alto medioevo*, 2 vols., Spoleto 2003 (= *Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, 50), vol. 1, 589-653; id., "Le cerimonie musicali alla corte bizantina", in: *Da Bisanzio a San Marco. Musica e liturgia*, ed. Giulio Cattin, Bologna 1997, 43-60; id., "Εὐταξία: l'ordine divino nel cosmo e nell'impero", in: *Spazio e centralizzazione del potere*, ed. Maria Pia Baccari, Rome 1998, 131-136.

⁵⁹ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols. Explorations in Cosmology. With a New Introduction*, London/New York 1996 [first ed. 1970], XXXV.

⁶⁰ To this end, there are still some fundamental historical-semantic suggestions in Leo Spitzer, *L'armonia del mondo. Storia semantica di un'idea*, Bologna 1967 [orig. ed. 1963].

same shared space. The model of harmony that Plato defined for his Ideal State influenced the boundaries that the great Christian preachers attempted to establish as new schemata for religious discipline and social control. Just like the Platonic City, the Christian cosmos did not allow gestures that interrupted this harmony and were categorised as *aschemosyne*. The importance of schemata in Christian culture, with all the associated bodily concreteness and choreutic gesture of the concept, is clearly explained in a passage of the *Paedagogus*. In reference to beauty par excellence—which is symmetry of limbs and parts, the state that human bodies return to when they are resurrected—Clement of Alexandria describes true beauty as the *schema* given by God.⁶¹

About the Author

Donatella Tronca, PhD, is a researcher in the History of Christianity and Latin Palaeography. She is currently affiliated to the Department of Cultures and Civilization at the University of Verona, where she is working on a project concerning the manuscripts of the Cathedral Library. In addition, she coordinates the activities of Eurythmia – International Research Network on the Cultural History of Dance at the Department of Cultural Heritage at the University of Bologna. Her research interests include late antique and medieval Christian texts, which she approaches from a historical and anthropological perspective, as well as from a material angle involving the history of manuscripts and libraries.

E-mail: [donatella.tronca\[at\]univr.it](mailto:donatella.tronca[at]univr.it)

Special Issue Editors

Michele Bacci and Vladimir Ivanovici, eds., From Living to Visual Images. Paradigms of Corporeal Iconicity in Late Antiquity, in: RIHA Journal 0222-0229.

Copy Editor

Susanne Kubersky-Piredda, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome

Recommended Citation

Donatella Tronca, *Spectacula turpitudinum. Christian Schemata of the Dancing Body*, RIHA Journal 0227, 30 September 2019, URL: <https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2019/0222-0229-special-issue-paradigms-of-corporeal-iconicity/0227-tronca>, URN: [see metadata].

License

The text of this article is provided under the terms of the [Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

⁶¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.11.64.2 (ed. Marrou and Mondésert).