

by peasants at rural festivals and by the Salii, priests of Mars who performed a ceremonial dance in full armour every March.

The Greek style of dancing, which was much more graceful and lively, arrived in Rome in the second century BC, but - unlike saltatio - was considered suitable only for women and children. (The old Christmas song about "ten lords a-leaping, nine ladies dancing" reminds us of this traditional gender-role distinction.) Even with this limitation, the new dance craze was a shocking sight for Romans of the older generation. Scipio Aemilianus (famed for his destruction of Carthage in 146 BC) visited a dancing school at Rome, where he was scandalized to see boys and girls of noble birth actually taking lessons with ballet dancers.

Roman dancing, like Greek, involved not only moving your body but singing to music, and even accompanying yourself on the castanets, lyre or tambourine. Dancing was thus a form of entertainment in which you could show off your skill in several musical activities at once. Naturally Scipio considered such immoderate displays to be indecent and unfit even for a slave. Female dancers were also adept at swirling their brightly coloured garments, sometimes exposing tempting glimpses of flesh. Most famous were the dancing girls from Cadiz, who performed a brisk dance with castanets, perhaps a cross between a flamenco and a belly dance. The poet Martial claims that they gyrate so wildly and wiggle their hips so seductively that even Hippolytus (a mythological character famed for his chastity) would be aroused.

Despite the growing popularity of Greek dancing, it remained a disreputable activity for serious men. Cicero declared that no man would dance unless he was either insane or drunk. Lucius Afranius, one of the consuls of 60 BC, came under criticism because he was said to be a good dancer. The emperors Caligula and Nero were fond of dancing and performed publicly, much to the disgust of self-respecting senators. Still there were some impudent men who were not ashamed to display their skill in this art. In Horace's well-known "Encounter with a Bore" (Satire 1.9), the bore brags (implausibly) that he's the slickest dancer in town. Likewise Ovid, advising men on how to pick up women at parties, tells them to impress the ladies with their talents: "If you have a voice, sing; if you have nimble arms, dance."

Roman dancers performed either as individuals, or in a chorus with others of their own sex. So what about touch-dancing? The geographer Strabo, in the first century AD, records that in Bastetania (south-eastern Spain) "women dance promiscuously with men, holding their hands". Obviously, a custom fit only for barbarians!

Veni, Vidi, Saltavi: Dancing at Rome

by L.A. Curchin

If you somehow can't picture Cicero doing the Lambada, the fault probably lies not with your imagination but with Republican gravitas, the dignified seriousness which prevented noble Romans from engaging in any frivolous activity. However, the early Romans did have a sort of dance, called saltatio ("leaping"), which involved hopping about and stamping the ground with your feet in triple time (tripudium). This was a masculine activity, practised