THE DIPYLON OINOCHOĒ AND ANCIENT GREEK DANCE AESTHETICS*

ABSTRACT
This article asks what the graffito incised on the Dipylon oinochoē (IG I² 919, eighth century B.C.E.) reveals about the nature of the dance competition that it commemorates. Through a systematic analysis of the evaluative and descriptive meaning of the adjective ἀταλός and its cognates in early Greek epic, it is argued that a narrower definition compared to previous suggestions can be established. The word refers to the carefreeness that is specific to a child or young animal, and its uses typically imply a positive evaluation which is connected not only to the well-being that this carefreeness entails but also to the positive emotion of tenderness and the sentiment of care that it engenders in a perceiver. It is concluded that, when used to specify the criterion by which a dance contest will be adjudicated, the term refers to an aesthetic property that is repeatedly praised in archaic Greek texts in other words: that of dancing with the adorable but short-lived carefree abandon of a child.

Keywords: dance; aesthetics; ‘thick’ concepts; epigraphy; the Dipylon oinochoē; carefreeness; tenderness

The Dipylon oinochoē (National Archaeological Museum of Athens, inv. 192) was excavated under obscure circumstances in 1871 in the area of Plateia Eleutherias in Athens.1 This typical Late Geometric wine jug is ascribed to the workshop of the Dipylon Master and dated to c.740–730 B.C.E.2 Its fame is chiefly attributable to a graffito incised after firing in the dark band that runs along the shoulders of the vessel (IG I² 919 [excluded from IG I³] = CEG 432). A large part of the bulky literature on this object has been devoted to the final puzzling segment of the inscription,3 which might simply be nonsense.4 Leaving this aside here, the first forty-one letters can safely be read as follows:

ʰός νῦν ὅρχειστον πάντοτε ἀταλότατα παίζει τό τόδε

* I am most grateful to CQ’s two anonymous readers for helpful comments. This research was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond.


4 See the recent suggestion by N.M. Binek, ‘The Dipylon oinochoe graffito: text or decoration?’, Hesperia 86 (2017), 423–42.
The inscription indicates that the wine jug served as a trophy for the winner of a dance competition. It probably took place in the late eighth century in Athens, as one may infer from the place of excavation, the origin of the jug, and its Attic Greek inscription (as the contracted form ὁρχεστῶν, for instance, attests). What can this artefact reveal about the nature of the dancing that it commemorates? I will address this question in four steps. First, I will explain why the answer hinges primarily on our interpretation of a single word in the inscription, namely ἀταλόστατα; second, I will examine the meaning of ἀταλός in archaic epic; third, I will situate my interpretation of this word in the context of Greek dance aesthetics. In a final reflexion, I will briefly reconsider the evidential value of the material characteristics of the jug itself.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ΑΤΑΛΟΣ

The inscription is not merely a written commemoration of a foregone event but a recording, as it were, of an oral proclamation that preceded the dance contest. The thoroughly traditional and formulaic character of the language suggests that we are dealing with a snippet from a bardic song, and the deictic ‘now’ (νῦν) appears to mark a transition from some other activity and the forthcoming event. For these reasons, we have to imagine a festivity involving a variety of agonistic musico-athletic activities, perhaps similar to the idealized description of King Alcinous’ symposium in the Odyssey (8.250–380), or the succession of different forms of dancing and acrobatics in the third and final dancing scene depicted on the Shield of Achilles (II. 18.590–606). On such occasions we can easily imagine a bard at some point announcing that it is now time to make way for some new kind of performance. Does the recorded announcement specify what kind of dancing the audience and judge(s) should expect to see next?

Three words in the inscription refer to the performers or the anticipated spectacle: ἀταλόστατα, ὁρχεστῶν and παίζει. Despite many attempts to argue otherwise, the last two words appear to offer no specific information, since we find them used rather neutrally in reference to different varieties of dancing. Calvert Watkins argued that both ὁρχηστής ‘dancer’ and ὀρχης ‘testicle’ derive from the root *h₁erǵh- ‘mount’ and hypothesized that the semantics of ὁρχέομαι developed from denoting sex to erotic dancing to simply dancing. He placed the Dipylon inscription at an intermediate stage in this evolution, suggesting that ὁρχηστής in this context refers specifically to a

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5 C. Watkins, ‘Syntax and metrics in the Dipylon vase inscription’, in A. Morpurgo Davies and W. Meid (edd.), Studies in Greek, Italic, and Indo-European Linguistics Offered to Leonard R. Palmer on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday (Innsbruck, 1976), 431–44, at 431–8, demonstrating not only that ‘every word and every morpheme … is placed according to the canons of epic formulaic and metrical practice’ but also that we find similar relative sentences that serve to announce competitions in Hittite and Vedic texts. Cf. P. Friedländer and H.B. Hoffleit, Epigrammata: Greek Inscriptions in Verse from the Beginning to the Persian Wars (Los Angeles, 1948), 55.


‘lascivious dancer’. Watkins is not alone in suggesting that we have to envision the same kind of entertainment that we might suppose the dancers repeatedly mentioned in the famous homoerotic Thera inscriptions offered. However, this etymology is controversial, and in early Greek hexameter poetry the verb ὁρχέομαι and its cognates have no such clear connotations. In similar fashion, it has been argued that παίζει does not refer to dancing at all but rather to the sexual activity of a young beloved. More often it has been argued that the verb needs to be translated ‘sport’ and that it refers to particularly ‘playful’ or ‘dynamic’ dancing. However, just as with ὁρχηστής, the parallels in early Greek epic do not allow us to limit its meaning to any one particular mode of dancing. παίζει is used about the exuberant acrobatic performance of young men accompanied by music at the aforementioned banquet in the Odyssey (8.261) but also, for instance, about a wedding dance in which adult men and women participate (Od. 23.146–7). Naturally, these observations cannot rule out that the dancing commemorated on the Dipylon oinochoē was indeed playful and/or erotically suggestive, but invoking the use of ὁρχηστῶν and παίζει is not sufficient to substantiate such a claim.

2. THE MEANING OF ΑΤΑΛΟΣ

We must focus our attention on the word ἀταλότατα. Without explicitly reflecting on the matter, many scholars have translated the inscription as a claim that the prize belongs to the dancer who performs ‘most gracefully’ or ‘most elegantly’. By their very nature,

10 Refuted by R. Beekes, Etymological Dictionary of Greek (Leiden and Boston, 2010), 1115–16; D.G. Miller, Ancient Greek Dialects and Early Authors: Introduction to the Dialect Mixture in Homer, with Notes on Lyric and Herodotus (Boston and Berlin, 2014), 142.
12 J. Chadwick, Lexigraphica Graeca: Contributions to the Lexicography of Ancient Greek (Oxford, 1996), 220, where it concludes that the text is a funerary inscription for a dead younger lover.
13 See K. Robb, ‘The Dipylon prize graffito’, Coranto 7 (1971), 11–19, at 13–14, arguing that it was a consolation prize to an energetic but unsuccessful young dancer; C. Gallavotti, ‘I due incunaboli di Atene e Pitecusa ed altre epigrafi arcaiche’, RAL 31 (1977), 207–38, at 210: ‘che spicca i passi più gagliardi’; Havelock (n. 6), 192–3, arguing that ‘grace’ or ‘beauty’ may have been the desired quality in the preceding contest, but that this was a lighter event; Powell (n. 7), 75 n. 30; A. Henrichs, Warum soll ich denn tanzen? Dionysisches im Chor der griechischen Tragödie (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1996), 32–4.
14 LfgrE s.v. παίζει; Hommel (n. 7), 203–4; Naerebout (n. 11), 280; S.E. Kidd, Play and Aesthetics in Ancient Greece (Cambridge, 2019), 7–9. See also R. Wachter, Non-Attic Greek Vase Inscriptions (Oxford, 2001), 50 with the objections raised by Beekes (n. 10), 1143 and Miller (n. 10), 142.
aesthetic evaluative terms are notoriously hard to define; however, ‘elegance’ and ‘grace’ usually connote maturity and refinement. For example, two recent, free-association, questionnaire studies conducted in Frankfurt found that their participants associated *Eleganz* with impressions of lightness, fluency, exquisiteness and artful simplicity; when applied to people, it was primarily linked to adults in their third to sixth decades of life. They also found that their participants’ understanding of *Anmut* (‘grace’) was very close to *Eleganz*, but it was regarded as less sober, rigorous, tasteful and expensive.16 The adjective ἀταλλός, on the other hand, is typically applied to young animals or children in the Greek sources. Other suggestions thus include ‘most dynamically’,17 ‘most softly’, ‘daintily’ or ‘delicately’,18 or ‘most sweetly’.19 Is it possible to arrive at a more precise definition of the quality that the word refers to? Leaving aside the difficult question of etymology,20 the standard definitions ‘kindlich, zart’ (LgfrE), ‘tender, delicate’ (LSJ) or ‘tender, delicate, youthful’ (F. Montanari’s *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* [Leiden, 2015]) are difficult to accept when we consider what the less ambiguous denominative verbs ἀτάλλω and ἀτιτάλλω reveal about their adjectival base. In Homer and Hesiod, ἀτάλλω denotes the frolicking of animals and children;21 in later authors, it can also denote the act of providing care, shelter or nourishment.22 The verb ἀτιτάλλω is also used about caring for an animal or someone else’s child by giving them nourishment or keeping them content with play and affection.23 P.J. Barber has observed that denominative *-iē/o-* verbs based in G.K. Giannakis (ed.), *Brill Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics*, 3 vols. (Leiden and Boston, 2014) 1.499–501, at 500: ‘dances most elegantly’.


20 Besides the previous inconclusive debate succinctly surveyed by Bernhard Mader in LgfrE s.v. ἀταλλός, see also F.R. Adrados, *Diccionario Griego-Español* (Madrid, 1991), 3.580: ἄς+telh2- ‘to bear’; E.J. Furnée, *Die wichtigsten konsonantischen Erscheinungen des Vorgriechischen* (The Hague, 1972), 88 n. 478 and 262: a Pre-Greek *Lallwort* (support from Beekes [n. 10], 161); however, as Furnée points out, the gloss mentioned in this context (Hsch. α 1432 Latte–Cunningham: ἀξολαίνεια καὶ ἀσαλλία) might be a corruption of *αταλλία* in Od. 11.39.


on adjectives with a theme argument (for example ποικιλος ‘variegated’) have a factitive relation to the adjective (ποικιλλω ‘to variegate’), whereas verbs formed in the same way from adjectives with an agent or experiencer argument (for example κότιλως ‘persuasive’) have a predicative relation to their base (κοτιλλω ‘to persuade’). If we suppose that ἀτάλλω follows this pattern, it cannot have been formed from an adjective carrying the theme meaning ‘tender, delicate, youthful’, since the resulting verb would have been factitive: ‘to make someone tender, delicate, youthful’. ἀταλός must have had the experiencer meaning ‘carefree, untroubled’ or the agent meaning ‘playful’ in order to produce ἀτάλλω ‘to frolic’. The fact that ἀτάλλω can also mean ‘to take care of’ should probably not be explained as deriving from ἀταλος carrying the otherwise unattested agent meaning ‘caring’, since it is unlikely that the semantics of the base adjective was realized in two different ways in the denominative verb. It is much more plausible that this is the result of later confusion of ἀτάλλω with ἀττάλλω. The latter verb was originally formed by reduplication from the former in order to make ἀτάλλω ‘to be carefree’ factitive: ‘to make someone carefree’, that is, to sustain that creature’s carefree existence and take care of it (*ἀτατάλλω with analogical -τ- or ἀ-τ-τάλλω if it was analysed as a compound ἀ-τάλλω). We might compare the formation to τι-θη-νη ‘nurse’ and γαλο-θη-νός ‘milk sucking’ from θη-σθαι ‘to suck’. The verb ἀττάλλω gained currency (sixteen occurrences in Homer and Hesiod) and in turn eventually influenced the much rarer ἀτάλλω (only two occurrences in Homer and Hesiod, both in the sense ‘frolic’).

Let us consider the extent to which the interpretation ‘carefree’ fits attestations of the word ἀταλός down through the Classical era.  

1. In the famous meeting of Hector and Andromache in the Iliad (6.400–1), Astyanax is called ἀταλάφρων, a regressive formation from the formulaic ἀταλά φρόνεων, perhaps influenced by ταλάφρων (ll. 13.300). The phrase is immediately followed up by ‘just a child’ (νηπιάν οὔτως) and ‘beloved, like a beautiful star’ (Ἐκτορίδην ἀγαπητὸν ἀλίγκιον ἀστέρι καλώ). Hector ‘smiles in silence’ (μειδόρισαν ... σιωμη) when he looks upon him. We are supposed to apprehend Astyanax’s life as something precious and adorable, and hence as ‘grievable’, but we are also encouraged to perceive these qualities in the light of the child’s impending destruction: we know that his parents’ worst fears (ll. 6.447–9, 24.725–45) about the boy’s future will inevitably be realized. When Andromache later laments her husband’s death, she contrasts the child’s future


27 I exclude Hes. fr. 85, which is too fragmentary.

28 This explanation should be contrasted with the suggestion that ἀταλός resulted from an erroneous analysis of this verse by M. Leumann, ‘ἀταλός’, Glotta 15 (1972), 153–5 and Homersiche Wörter (Bessel, 1950), 139–41, rejected by e.g. P. Chantraire, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque (Paris, 1968), 132 and LfgrE s.v. ἀταλός.

misery with the previous carefree existence as an infant that we are witnessing here (Il. 22.500–5):

Ἀστυάναξ, ὃς πρὶν μὲν ἐοῦ ἐπὶ γούνασι πατρὸς μυελὸν οἰον ἐδεσκε καὶ οἰον πίονα δημόν.

αιτῶρ δὲ ὑπὸς ἐλοι, παῦσατο τε νηπιαγεύων,

εὐδέσκε’ ἐν λέκτροσιν ἐν ἀγκαλίδεσσι τιθήνης

εὐνή ἐν μιαληκήθαλέον ἐμπιθάμισεν κηρι.

νῦν δ’ ἔν πολλὰ πάθησι φίλον ἀπὸ πατρὸς ἀμαρτών

Astyanax, who in days before, on the knees of his father, used to eat only the marrow or the fat flesh of sheep.

And when sleep caught him and he was done with his childish games, he would go to sleep in a bed, in the arms of his nurse, in a soft bed, with his heart given all its fill of abundance.

Now, with his dear father gone, he has much to suffer.

For the moment the child is nurtured, amused, cared for and protected, blissfully oblivious of the dangers he is facing.31 An interpretation of ἀταλαί φρονέων as ‘carefree in his mind’ would certainly fit the context.

2. In the harvest scene depicted on the Shield of Achilles (Il. 18.568–72), the phrase ἀταλαί φρονέωντες is applied to young adults carrying grapes and—in the same or in the next image—dancing around a child singing a dirge ‘with a delicate voice’, beating the ground and following the rhythm with shouts and capering. Here too the context emphasizes freedom from cares: we should recall that the scene belongs to the peaceful images on the Shield that contrast with the city at war (Il. 18.509–40), the lion attacking cattle (Il. 18.579–86) and, of course, the theme of the Iliad in general. Just like the joy of the king in the preceding harvest scene (Il. 18.557), the description of the children as ἀταλαί φρονέωντες could mean that they are ‘carefree in their minds’, neglecting their mortality and the painful realities that human life can involve.

3. In Aeneas’ account of his lineage in the Iliad (20.223), King Erichthonius’ mares take delight in their foals, which are described as ἀταλαί (ὕπποι … θήλεια, πολυοιστά ἀγαλλόμεναι ἀταλῆσοι); next we are told that the North Wind desired and covered the mothers. The interpretation that the foals are ‘carefree’, skipping around their mothers in playful glee, is at least possible. Note that the quality is presented as something pleasing to the mothers of the foals and that impending rape adds an element of danger.

4. In the Nekyia (Od. 11.39–40), the spirits from Erebus that flock around Odysseus include ‘brides, and young unmarried men, and much-enduring (πολύτλητοι) elders, | virgins, ἀταλαί, with hearts new to sorrow’ (γεσπενθέα θυμόν ἐχονσαι). The pairing of παρθενικα ἀταλαί with πολύτλητοι γέροντες suggests that both kinds of death and afterlife are piteous in their own way: old men arrive in Hades after long lives filled with hardship, whereas virgins come to this grim place ‘carefree’, their hearts forever unaccustomed to the grief they must now eternally sustain.

5. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (24), Hecate is still a child, ἀταλατρὸν of Zeus, when she hears the screams of Persephone being abducted. There appears to be a contrast between her previous carefree life and the sudden calamity that she witnesses.

6. In Hesiod’s Theogony (989), Phaethon is still a child, ἀταλατρὸν, when he is abducted by Aphrodite. There appears to be a contrast between his previous carefree spirit and his abduction.

7. In a Pindaric ode (Nem. 7.90–2) the poet hopes: ‘If a god supports this [sc. the value of benevolent neighbours], in you, Subducer of Giants [Heracles], Sogenes might wish to live with good fortune in the well-built sacred street of his ancestors, fostering, to his father’s benefit, an ἀταλατρὸν spirit’ (ei δ’ αὐτό καὶ θεὸς ἀνέχοι, | ἐν τίν κ’ ἐθέλοι, Γίγαντας ὃς ἐδάμασσας, εὐτυχὸς | νοεῖν πατρὶ Σωγένης ἀταλάς ἀμφέσθων | θυμόν προγόνων ἑυκτήμων ζαθέαν ζύγουαν). Sogenes should pray to his neighbour Heracles to grant him a continued life free from cares in his home. Note also that this state of carelessness is explicitly something pleasing to his father.32

8. Euripides (El. 699) describes Atreus’ golden lamb as ἀταλατρὸν when it is lured away from its mother by Pan, provided that we accept Page’s emendation (ἀταλάν [–ός MSS] ὑπὸ μοτέρος … ὀρνα). Otherwise, it refers to the mother. In either case there could be a contrast between previous carelessness and impending doom or loss.33

Among the Hellenistic attestations we find one potential counterexample that needs to be addressed. Erinna (3 G.–P. = Anth. Pal. 6.352) praises a lifelike portrait of a maiden and declares that the hands of the painter must have been ἀταλατροί. It seems unlikely that the point is that the hands were capable of ‘carefree’ or ‘insouciant’ artistry, but rather that they were particularly suitable for the task of depicting a virgin: they were ‘soft’ or ‘delicate’ (implicitly commenting on the poet’s own literary ‘fineness’).34 However, this departure might be explained by the learned analysis of ἀταλατρὸν as formed from ἀπαλός ‘soft’, first attested in Chrysippus (fragment missing in von Arnim, but see Etymologicum Gudianum 224.17–18 de Stefani: ὁ δὲ Χρύσιππος ὡς ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀπαλοῦ γέγονε κατὰ τροπὴν τοῦ -πι- εἰς -πι-) and Apollodorus of Athens (Apollonius, Homeric Lexicon 47.1–2).35 The competing ancient etymology, ἀ- + *τλόω ‘not enduring’ (first attested in Philoxenus, fr. 183 Theodoridis, but suggested already by example 4 and perhaps by attestation 1 above), is more compatible with the interpretation advanced here.

The recurring emphasis on carelessness in the face of death or violence can also be seen in certain instances of ἀταλάψω. Hesiod uses the verb in relation to the protracted childhood of members of the silver race before their short, brutal adult lives as warriors:

32 It is not necessary (pace LSJ s.v. ἀταλατρὸς) to interpret this as a special use of ἀταλατρὸς with the dative, ‘subject, amenable to somebody’. I am suggesting that the point is not necessarily filial piety (pace C. Carey, A Commentary on Five Odes of Pindar [Salem, 1981], 174) but being delightfully carefree.


35 In later texts the word is clearly used as an equivalent of ἀπαλός in Oppian, Cynegeticus 2.163 (the jaws of a bison are ἀταλάτρα) and Greg. Naz. in Migne, PG 37.975.4 (about musical notes).
'A child would be nurtured for a hundred years at the side of his cherished mother, leading a carefree existence (\(\text{ταλός}\)) in his own house, a great baby' (\(\text{ἄλλας ἔκοπτόν μὲν παῖς ἔσσεα παρά μητρί κεδήν | ἐτρέφετ' ἀτάλλον μέγα νήπιος ὃ ἐνὶ οίκῳ, Ἡσ. Ὀπ. 130–1). A similar use is found in Sophocles’ Ajax, where the hero addresses his son Euryssaces, clearly commenting on Hector and Astyanax in attestation 1 above. The father claims to be envious of his son who cannot perceive the present calamity, ‘because the happiest life is lived while one understands nothing, before one learns delight or pain’ (554–5). Thus he advises the child: ‘nourish (βόσκου) your young soul on gentle breezes in your carefreeness (\(\text{ταλός}\)), a delight to your mother here’ (558–9).36

Translators and lexicographers sometimes use the word ‘innocent’ to translate \(\text{ἀταλός}\).37 ‘Innocent’ is a so-called ‘thick’ concept, that is, a concept that expresses a union of fact and value.38 More specifically, ‘innocent’ often represents a ‘thick’ ethical concept, denoting the positive quality of being free from moral wrong or evil (OED s.v. ‘innocent’ 1). However, the word can also be used in a morally neutral sense to represent a ‘thick’ affective concept, about the ‘unsuspecting nature of a child or one ignorant of the world; … hence, artless, naïve, ingenuous’ (OED s.v. 3). This is probably as close as we can get if we need to use one single English adjective to render \(\text{ἀταλός}\), which lacks obvious connotations of guiltlessness, except from in some instances where Christian authors use it.39 The descriptive dimension of the ‘thick’ concept \(\text{ἀταλός}\) involves a blissful freedom from cares that is specific to a pampered and protected child; its evaluative dimension is grounded in a capacity to elicit positive attachment motions, such as tenderness in response to immaturity, dependence and need.40 The Kindchenschema—certain physical juvenile features such as large eyes, bulging craniums and retracting chins—is universally sufficient to elicit such responses.41 But immaturity can also be manifested by clothes, actions, gaits, language mistakes, naïve ideas, and so on, which we might call ‘sweet’, ‘cute’, ‘adorable’, and so on. To be \(\text{ἀταλός}\) is thus to be sweetly carefree precisely because one needs a caregiver.

We should also try to explain why there is a touch of doom in so many of the examples mentioned above. The pathos of these scenes can be compared to that evoked by the recurring motifs of ‘youth and beauty brought low’ and ‘pathetic ignorance’ in connection to the death of minor characters in the Iliad.42 Much like the word νήπιος, \(\text{ἀταλός}\) tends to be used by epic poets in order to emphasize a poignant joining of tenderness with compassion and a pathos of transience. The carefree existence of

36 For this punctuation and interpretation, see P.J. Finglass, Sophocles Ajax (Cambridge, 2011), 300; cf. schol. rec. Soph. Aj. 559. For this and further examples of the blissful ignorance of children, Pratt (n. 31), 232–3.

37 See Adrados (n. 20), s.v. \(\text{ἀταλός}\); F. Montanari (ed.), The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek (Leiden, 2015), s.v. \(\text{ἀταλός}\).

38 See B. Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Abingdon, 2006) on ‘thick’ concepts.

39 Clem. Al. Paed. 1.5.19.4, where \(\text{ἀταλός}\) and its cognates are used about Christians as opposed to the ‘crooked’ and ‘hard-hearted’ pagans; Anth. Pal. 1.119.10, the introduction to Eudocia’s Homeric Cento (about the children killed by Herodes).


infants is blissful and sweet; however, unlike the everlasting carefree existence of the 
gods (Il. 24.526), it is by definition ephemeral.

3. HOW TO DANCE ΑΤΑΛΩΤΑΤΑ

Like Eris’ mythical apple pledged ‘to the most beautiful’ (κοιλίστη), the singer who 
announced our dancing competition in eighth-century Athens specified the criterion 
by which the judges were to assess the competing performers in this context: the quality 
of dancing ἀταλῶτατα. The only example besides the Dipylon oinochoē where the word
 ἀταλός is used in connection to dancing is the harvest scene on Achilles’ Shield 
(Il. 18.568–72). Admittedly, the adjective is not used to modify the dancing itself in 
this context, but the phrase ἀτάλα φρονέοντες denotes the sweetly carefree spirit of 
boys and girls as they carry grapes in baskets before proceeding to dancing; yet it is 
not unreasonable to think that the whole image is a manifestation of the quality under 
consideration. The children beat the ground in unison and follow the music, ‘capering 
on their feet’ (ποσί σκαίροντες), a verb otherwise used about the frolicking of calves 
when their mothers return from pasture (Od. 10.410–14) or about the joyful dancing 
of maidens (ἐὐψρον θημώ παιζουσαι σκαίρουσι, Hymn. Hom. 30.15). The dance 
appears to be executed in a manner that suggests exultation and immaturity.

In the absence of further instances in which the word ἀταλός is used about dancing, 
we must ask whether the ‘thick’ concept that it represents—sweet carefreeness—is 
expressed by other means in contexts where dance performances are applauded for 
manifesting this aesthetic property. Such examples can indeed be found. In the old-new 
Sappho (58b V., extended by the new papyrus) the poet addresses a group of ‘children’ 
in a musical context and reflects on the process of aging:

My body, which used to be … old age has now | … and my hair has turned from black [into 
bright white]. | My heart has been made heavy, my knees do not carry, | those which once were 
nimble to dance like [the knees of] fawns.

The poet is no longer soft, her colour no longer vibrant, and her mental organ (θύμος) 
has grown heavy. This weight hinders her from dancing with the same kind of appeal 
that the girls she is addressing can achieve: with knees like those of a baby deer.44 The 
common property of the comparatum and the comparandum is not merely speed 
or agility—a grown-up deer would have served that purpose—but clearly also a naïve 
and joyous spirit, still not checked by the psychological ‘weight’ of old age. Note 
also that the value of this charming naïveté is amplified by a poignant emphasis on 
its ephemeral nature: I am old, all mortals grow old, young Tithonus was abducted 
from this world by a goddess because of his youthful beauty, but he too grew old in 
a most pitiable way. In this respect too, the fawn-dancer simile is reminiscent of scenes 
where epic poets use the word ἀταλός.

In the Late Archaic era, we find bounding fawns depicted together with dancing and *aulos*-playing girls on a *kratériskos* from the Acropolis (510–500 B.C.E.). In the Classical period, fawn-dancer and deer-dancer similes are well attested. In his ode for an Aeginetan’s pankration victory in Nemea 485 or 483 B.C.E., Bacchylides (Nem. 13.86–92) conjures up the image of another artist singing Aegina’s praise: ‘some high and proud girl sings in praise of your [might], often leaping lightly on her feet, as a carefree fawn towards the flowery [banks], with her illustrious near-dwelling [companions]’ (τὸ γε σῶν [κράτος ύμα]νει | καὶ τις υψαυχής κόρα … | πόθεσα ταρφεώς | ἡμέ νεβρός ἄπεν[θής] | ἀνθεμένεις ἑπὶ’ ὀθόνος | κοῦφα σὺν ἀγελάδοις | θρόω<υ>σκοου’ ἀγαλετα[ῖς ἥτωφροι]ς.) The imagined young female performer singing Aegina’s praise is compared to a fawn, and again not only because of her agility but explicitly because of her freedom from sorrows (the fawn is ἄπενθής), a quality unavailable to a more mature artist. A slightly darker emphasis on the precarious nature of this vulnerable charm is found in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, where the chorus expresses their longing to dance, to move their feet and toss their heads towards the sky like a fawn as it rejoices after escaping the hunter. The triumphant joy of the prey animal—a triumph of escape rather than conquest—is emphatically impermanent, involving a neglect of the danger one has evaded and a joy unchecked by dismal awareness of one’s fragility or by the anxiety about similar dangers in the future.

The fawn-dancer simile and the way in which it combines sweetness and precariousness may suggest that this quality in a dance had an erotic appeal. Archilochus at 255

is it not the case that the young among us are capable of participating in choral performance, while those of us who are elders think the proper way to conduct ourselves is as their audience, taking pleasure in their dancing and revelry, now that we are abandoned by our own lightness, which we long for and cling to and therefore arrange competitions for those who are most able to excite us to juvenescence through memory?

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The point of the counterexample is understandable within the larger context. The Athenian Stranger goes on to observe that ‘all young creatures have a fiery nature’ (Leg. 2.664e), that they are unable to sit still or keep quiet but scream and leap about as though they were ‘mad’ and dancing in playful glee. Among all the animals, only human beings have received the gift of rhythm and harmony from the gods, and it is through the long process of musical education that their voices and movement will eventually attain order (Leg. 2.672c–d). However, there are certain qualities—such as playful revelry (παιδιά τε και ἑορτάσει), lightness (τό ἐλαφρόν) and juvenescence (νεότης)—that can only be enjoyed if perceived in performers who are in fact closer to this natural starting point of music and gymnastics, which we share with all animals; in performers who have less art and skill but more simplicity and youth. Plato suggests that we take vicarious pleasure—not the highest kind of pleasure but a worthwhile pleasure none the less—in displays of sheer youth because we have all had and lost this quality. It is a nostalgic but also a revivifying experience.

It is natural to ask at the end of this section to what extent texts from the early sixth to the late fourth centuries which lack the lexeme ἀταλός can shed light on the dance contest commemorated by our late eighth-century inscription. My answer is that I invoke them merely to illustrate what this ‘thick’ affective concept could plausibly mean when uniquely employed to denote an aesthetic ideal within the realm of dancing in a Greek archaic context. In epic, ἀταλός denotes the sweet carefreeness of children. Extending it to a dance performance suggests a capacity to move one’s body in a manner expressive of naïve rejoicing and lacking in mature composure. The winner of this competition, we might suppose, had to dance in a way more spontaneous than restrained, more agile than firm and solemn. This was not the aim of all choral performances. It must be contrasted with the well-trained ‘flashing feet’ (μαρμαρύγας ποδῶν) and the display of dazzling acrobatics on Scheria (Od. 8.263–5, 8.370–84). It must also be contrasted with the stately ‘blameless’ adult wedding dance (ἀμυμονὸς ὥρχημοιο) on Ithaca (Od. 23.145). It was a less wonderous and less dignified, more adorable kind of performance. I have also suggested that the appropriate affective response to such a display of childish carefreeness might have had a bittersweet tone. In epic, ἀταλός is almost always used in situations charged with dark forebodings. Of course, there is no reason to think that a dance performance perceived as ἀταλός had any such connotations of doom. However, the frequent use of the short-lived joy of a prey animal, the fawn, as an image of the dancer moving with the carefree abandon of a child in later Archaic and Classical sources might offer some clue about the particular aesthetic value ascribed to this kind of performance, namely that it resided partly in its power to elicit not only tenderness but also poignant reflections and emotions in response to the fragility and impermanence of that carefreeness. However, this is admittedly not hinted at in the verse inscribed on the jug.

4. THE TROPHY

So far, we have considered the words of the inscription as a fragment of living oral poetry in its original function as an announcement, as a piece of preparatory dance criticism that articulated the main criterion of judgement and perhaps invited the audience to identify and savour the sweet carefreeness embodied by the performance. The jug itself was probably not produced for this specific occasion, but it was still regarded as an appropriate trophy for the winner of the contest. Lillian Lawler called attention to the
depiction of a bird and grazing deer in the panel on its neck,49 which is not uncommon but found on a series of similar oinochoai from the Dipylon Master’s workshop.50 Lawler conjectured that an object with this motif was chosen since it called to mind both the ‘lightness of the dancer’ and the ‘komos in which the contest took place’, arguing that this event was the Athenian spring festival for Artemis Elaphbolos (Deer-shooter), which might have involved stag processions.51 It has also been argued that the slightly undulating series of thin, spidery letters running around the vessel were engraved with the particular dance movements in mind.52 Although I feel less confident both to pin down the exact festival53 and to find choreographic clues in the layout and shapes of the inscribed letters, it is conceivable that this popular small vessel with its round body and slender neck, decorated with a single vulnerable prey animal, was seen as a suitable prize for this particular contest. In the end, the boy who won the heart of the judges with his adorable capering on that day probably died young, since the jug is in good condition, and was buried with this keepsake of the impermanence of all childish delights.

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51 Lawler (n. 49), 52.
52 J. Carruesco, ‘Choral performance and geometric patterns in epic poetry and iconographic representations’, in V. Cazzato and A. Lardinois (edd.), The Look of Lyric: Greek Song and the Visual (Leiden and Boston, 2016), 69–107, at 84–6; Steiner (n. 18), 189.
53 Many have since suggested that a private symposium is a more likely venue: e.g. Robb (n. 9), 38 n. 16, citing private conversation with E. Havelock.