

PROCESSIONING WITH DEATH BEYOND THE MIDDLE AGES: INFLUENCES OF THE DANCES OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

We consider that the late medieval dance of death was based on secular practices that were well established in the popular tradition to accompany the dead in their journey to the afterlife. It would therefore not be an “edifying fiction”, as J.C. Schmitt put it, at least with regard to the ceremonial and the dance practices related to the farewell of the dead. When dealing with the characteristic choreographic form of the dance of death, it is necessary to think of very common figures in the history of dance: the circle and the row. The quintessential medieval dance, the “carola”, combined them both, with abundant iconographic samples throughout Europe. Thus, the “carola” would have functioned as the matrix form of the late medieval dances of death, the last echo of which seems to be hinted at in a dance that has survived for centuries in popular practice: the “contrapàs”. This is corroborated by its solemnity and circumspection¹.

KEYWORDS

Dance of Death, “Carola”, “Contrapàs”, Medieval Choreography, Pandemic.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Saltatio mortis, Carola, Contrapassus (Saltatio), Ars saltandi mediaevalis, Pandemia.

E fon aquesta pestilència de major força per ço com, per lo comunicar ensems los sans ab los malalts, se comanava no en altra manera sinó així com lo foc fa a les coses seques; e més avant encara havia tal força que no tan solament usar ab los malalts, ans encara lo parlar e la vista dava als sans infirmitat o ocasió de comuna mort; hoc encara lo tocar dels draps o qualsevulla altra cosa qui d'aquells malalts fos estada era ocasió de trespastar la malaltia²

Immersed in the pandemic of Covid-19, a highly contagious virus that has collapsed health systems around the world and paralysed the planet, it is worth observing how humanity reacted to the so-called “mother of all pandemics”, the Black Death. It also originated in the Far East, arrived in Europe in 1347 and took the lives of over a third of western population,³ with the consequent crisis.⁴ Then, almost like nowadays, “children stopped visiting their parents, and the parents their children”, as the chronicles of the time stated.⁵ The case is that, as Sophie Oosterwijk assures, “the dance macabre still has not died nearly six centuries after its first appearance on the scene.”⁶

1. Mystery and Rite of Death

Then, as now, each civilisation was defined “by the way death is experienced and represented.”⁷ Nowadays, at least in European society, one dies practically alone—an aspect aggravated by the epidemic—, a result of the individualism that compulsive consumerism has so eagerly cultivated. The deceased are isolated and death is distanced from the domestic setting, where it traditionally happened, and aseptic funerals parlours have been built where the traditional family rite has

1. Used abbreviations: ACA, Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó; ADPO, Departmental Archives of the Pyrenees-Orientales Perpignan.

2. Boccaccio, Joan. *Decameró. Versió catalana de 1429*. Barcelona: Els Nostres Classics, 1926: 36. Translation: “This pestilence was so powerful that it was transmitted to the healthy by contact with the sick, the way a fire close to dry or oily things will set them aflame. And the evil of the plague went even further: not only did talking to or being around the sick bring infection and a common death, but also touching the clothes of the sick or anything touched or used by them seemed to communicate this very disease to the person involved.”: Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*, trans. Mark Musa, Peter Bondanella. New York: New American Library, 1982: 88.

3. Pirenne, Henry. *Historia económica y social de la Edad Media*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975: 141. The chronicler Jean Froissart (1337-1405) states that “la tierce partie du monde mourut”, *apud* Corvisier, André, *Les danses macabres*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998: 14. Others talk of between a third and half of the population, see Benedictow, Ole Jørgen. *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004: 342-379.

4. Carpentier, Élisabeth. *Une ville devant la peste. Orvieto et la peste noire de 1348*. Brussels: De Boeck Université, 1993: 175.

5. Aberth, John. *The Black Death*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005: 165.

6. *Mixed Metaphors: The Danse Macabre in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Sophie Oosterwijk, Stefanie Knöll, eds. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2011: xxi.

7. Le Goff, Jacques. *Vivir y morir en la Edad Media*. Barcelona – Buenos Aires - Mexico: Paidós, 2003: 77-110.



become a coldness in line with the evasive attitude of contemporary man towards death. There is no familiarity with the coming of the Grim Reaper. The vision of death has disappeared from everyday life and has almost become an outrageous spectacle that must be hidden, as the “American way of Death” commands, a *Weltanschauung* or ‘conception of the world’ that is infantilising Western society to an alarming extent. Death and the dead are not to be seen, as if they had been erased from our mental map, which does not make us wiser but rather more foolish.⁸ Throughout history, humanity has wanted to overcome the idea of death or turn it into a problem that can be solved through speculation of a mythical, mystical or rational nature. However, the infantilised West no longer wants to overcome death: it limits itself to hiding it, to keeping it out of sight. This way, we have replaced the ancestral yearning for immortality with the immature fiction of amortality.⁹ We have lost sight of death, as if it tiptoed past the living: there are no longer vigils for the moribund, nor processions, nor those invitations to wakes with special tablecloths and mourning tableware.¹⁰ In recent decades death has been stripped off its characteristic ceremonies. When the bourgeois notion of progress, which supposedly has to lead humanity towards collective happiness (or idiotisation), is imposed, death is alienated, delegated to medical technology, banished from our references: it is the so-called “inverted death” or “outlawed death”.¹¹ Consequently, the traditional response to death, beared upon commonality, has become an individual and solitary affair. Capitalism has turned death into a lucrative business premised upon the relatives’ bad conscience for having renounced the ancestral warmth of domestic death. In this way, the booking of the funeral home is paid without second thoughts, as well as the costly coffins, cremations and other trifles. Spending a fortune to convert the ashes of the deceased into a blue diamond has become a wide-spread element of common sense.¹²

This was not always the case, nor is it now in other non-European cultures, where the ritual and collective sense remains one of the axes of existence.

8. “*No és pas savi sinó foll / qui memòria de la mort sovint de toll*”, states a sign on the impressive fresco in Morella that we shall see below. See Massip, Francesc & Kovács, Lenke, “Ein Spiegel inmitten eines Kreises: der Totentanz von Morella (Katalonien)”, Wunderlich, Uli, ed., *L’Art Macabre 1. Jahrbuch der Europäischen Totentanz-Vereinigung*. Düsseldorf: Association Danses Macabres d’Europe, 2000: 114-133.

9. Alzamora, Sebastià. “La amortalitat”. *Avui* (2001): 17.

10. In the Empordà, the meal celebrating the day of the burial was called “dinar magre” (lean lunch), and that of the day of the funeral, “honres grasses” (fat honours). See Grau, Dolors. “Tombes i ritus de mort a Girona”. *Revista d’Etnografia de Catalunya*, 19 (2001): 112-119.

11. Serrano Martín, Eliseo, ed. *Muerte, religiosidad y cultura popular (siglos XIII-XVIII)*. Saragossa: Institución Fernando el Católico, 1994: 8.

12. There is a company in Barcelona (Algordanza Ibérica) that offers the possibility of converting the ashes of any body into a bluish diamond of approximately one quilate, depending on the percentage of carbon in the ash, through a process of graphitisation at very high temperatures. The cost varies between €3,700 and €15,000, depending on the size of the future diamond self-presence. Draw up chairs...



Death, as a foundational concern of Humanity, as a universal and irrefutable event, generated from the beginning a whole set of ritual ceremonies to conjure and assume it, to prepare the members of the community for its reception and perpetuate in the collective memory the formulae necessary to accompany the deceased on their final journey.

A good part of the people of Ancient Rome, who joined the ceremonies around the dead, wished to attract the sympathies of the defunct spirits, imitating them and dressing in the closest possible way to what they believed they did. So, they wore long white tunics and covered their faces with masks, also white... Nowadays, the burial at the end of Carnival, the troupes dressed in white with floury faces or death masks, seems like a distant echo of those Roman festivities of worshipping the dead.¹³ Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church deployed a campaign of Christianisation by positioning itself against deep-rooted popular beliefs about death, both ancestor worship and the funeral ceremonies,¹⁴ and attempting to redirect these towards its directives, with more or less success. We already know the attitude of the Christian creed to traditional rites, performing arts and popular festivities, a veritable battle without quarter in which the hegemonic dimension of the catechesis and Catholic theology were in open conflict with the recipients which were obligated, willing or by force, to accept it.¹⁵ A task of obliteration that would culminate with the Counter-Reformation.

2. Towards the origins of the Dance of Death

The ancestral rites around the dead, that could include balls nocturnal dances in the cemeteries, typical of Germanic and Scandinavian folklore,¹⁶ must have influenced more than we imagine on the concretion of the Dance of Death, a literary, choreographic and spectacular genre that probably arose as the havoc caused by the Black Death spread. For over a century, each generation experienced a deadly epidemic. It is not surprising then that in this context of collective psychosis, existential fear, terrible paroxysms and crisis of the imaginary, the theme of the dance of death took form and spiritual guides like the *ars moriendi* that appeared to help people to a good death.¹⁷ The fact is that the macabre iconography began to prosper and the art of death was profoundly transformed. Desolation appeared, as did the worms, the rotting flesh, the nakedness of the corpse, with a morbid

13. Amades, Joan. *Costumari Català*. Barcelona: Salvat, 1950-1956: II, 23.

14. Van Gennep, Arnold. *Les rites de passage*. Paris: Éditions Picard, 1981: 209-236.

15. Giordano, Ortonzo. *Religiosità popolare nell'Alto Medioevo*. Bari: Adriatica editrice, 1979.

16. Infantes, Víctor. *Las danzas de la muerte. Génesis y desarrollo de un género medieval (siglos XIII-XVII)*. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 1997: 39, 46.

17. Tenenti, Alberto ed. *Humana Fragilitas. I temi della morte in Europa tra Duecento e Settecento*. Clusone: Ferrari editrice, 2000: 113.



complacency unknown in the Christian tradition.¹⁸ The late-medieval spirit took pleasure in the truculent taste for depicting the dead in process of decomposition, and at the same time was obsessed with the preservation of the incorrupt body.¹⁹ In fact, the Dance Macabre apparently has little of Christian about it and would appear to us like a controlled concession by the Church to the people's urgent need to ward off death.²⁰ Because if the dance of death (of the skeletons) is a fantasy of popular imagination, with expressive folkloric remnants, the macabre dance has an element of democratic satire that highlights the equality of all the mortals in the face of death,²¹ whatever their class, rank or position, a golden opportunity to make up for the profound inequalities of the stratified society and to apply an edifying corrective to the most powerful.

The theme was widely spread through the sermons of the preaching friars (particularly the mendicant orders: Franciscans and Dominicans), who attempted to edify the people —and comfort them before death— with the relativisation of the worldly things and preparation for the inevitable. It is known they were often accompanied by macabre dances to illustrate their homilies.²²

Although Schmitt considers that the dance macabre, "is not a real social practice, but an edifying theme of the preaching and religious iconography from the late Middle Ages",²³ we believe that in the background there was a practical protective ritual that prefigures the birth of the genre and then evolved in parallel to the macabre plastic samples, while it has left expressive traces in certain surviving traditions, like the dance in a circle around the coffin in Norra Dellen (Sweden) which was still performed in the 1840s,²⁴ or, at a similar time, the *caracolu*, a funeral dance that Corsican women did around the deceased²⁵ or, over a century

18. Massip, Francesc; Kovács, Lenke. *El baile: conjuro ante la muerte. Presencia de lo macabro en la danza y la fiesta popular*. Ciudad Real: Consejo Internacional de Organizaciones de Festivales de Folklore y de las Artes Tradicionales - Instituto Nacional de Las Artes Escénicas y la Música, 2004: 28.

19. Huizinga, Johan. *El otoño de la Edad Media*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1979: 197-202.

20. The circulation of the Hispanic text of the dance of death among the Sephardic Jews that we shall see below shows that the genre was loaded with very universal impulses, partly of oriental origin. See Massip, Francesc. "Huellas de Oriente en las representaciones macabras de la Europa medieval: el caso catalán". *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios Medievales y Renacentistas*, 19 (2011): 137-161.

21. Marle, Raimond van. *Iconographie de l'art profane au Moyen Âge et la Renaissance*. New York: Hacker Arts Books, 1971: 363.

22. Du Cange [Charles Du Fresne]. *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis, conditum a Carolo du Fresne, domino Du Cange*, 10 vols. Niort: L. Favre, 1883-1887: v, col. 161a. See also Mâle, Émile. *L'art religieux de la fin du Moyen Age en France*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1922: 361-362.

23. Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *Los ritmos del cuerpo y del mundo en la Edad Media*, Salamanca: SEMYR, 2016: 79.

24. Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *Los ritmos del cuerpo y del mundo en la Edad Media*, Salamanca: Seminario de Estudios Medievales y Renacentistas, 2016: 79.

25. Fée, Antoine-Laurent-Apollinaire. *Voceri, Chants populaires de la Corse, précédés d'une excursion faite dans cette île en 1845*. Paris: Victor Lerou, 1850: 60. Other dances around the deceased, in these cases children, are performed in the *velorios de angelito* of the Canary Islands (like the funeral vigil on La Gomera), Chile (Trapero, Maximiano. *Religiosidad popular en verso. Últimas manifestaciones o manifestaciones perdidas en España e Hispanoamérica*. Mexico: Frente de Afirmación Hispanista, 2011: 379-84, 389-406) or the Valencia region (*dansa dels albats o dels mortixols*) (García Latorre, Pilar. *El velatori del albaet*. Valencia: Anubar editores, 1978: 5-6).



later, the slow dance that the women of Martano (Lecce) did in a circle with white handkerchiefs held by the ends, danced around the body, moving rhythmically as they did little jumps. This appears in the film *Stendali (suonano ancora)* (1959) by Cecilia Mangini, a documentary about funeral rituals in Puglia, last testimony of a funeral lamentation in Greek (*griko*), of high ethnographic value endorsed by the studies by Ernesto Martino.²⁶ The Jewish ceremony of the *hacafot haniftar* should also be remembered. This consists of encircling the deceased seven times during the burial in the cemetery, “coming and going as if they were dancing”, as a way to keep dangerous spirits at bay.²⁷ In other cultures, formally similar rituals are observed in which the deceased, in the centre, is surrounded by a dance with men



ILLUSTRATION 1. FUNERAL DANCE FROM THE CONGO, ENGRAVING FROM THE CAVAZZI DA MONTECUCCULO, *ISTORICA DESCRIZIONE DEI TRE REGNI CONGO, MATAMBA ED ANGOLA* OF FEDERICO AGNELLI. BNF GALICA VUE 19: [PL. IN REG. P. 103: DANSE FUNÉRAIRE AU CONGO.] [COTE: RÉSERVE DT 350.5 C 37]. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

26. Martino, Ernesto de. *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico. Dal lamento funebre pagano al pianto de Maria*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000: 261.

27. Manrique, David Maximiliano. “The Personification of the Angel of Death in a Castilian Version of the Dance of Death”. *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study in Jewish Mystical Texts*, 44 (2019): 117-157 (especially 123-124). I do not know if it is based on an archaic ritual from Galician culture (and it seems to be), but at the beginning of the film *El bosque del lobo* (1970) by Pedro Olea Retolaza, there is a funeral where



holding hands, while they sing funeral chants or *mbembo* “accompanied by the drums, the wrought iron bells and ivory trumpets”, and the women “weep and sing the mourning songs”²⁸ (see illustration 1).

3. The circle and the mirror: the dance of Morella

Ever since I visited the Franciscan convent of Morella with the historian Mn. Manuel Milian Boix (1908-1989), I was stunned by the remains of some parietal frescos, then in a deplorable state, which were accompanied by a monumental score. It was the famous macabre dance of Morella: an estamental circle around a reclining corpse, like a tormenting mirror of the living (see illustration 2). Years later, I received a grant from the CIOFF (International Council of Organizations of Folklore Festivals and Folk Arts) and the INAEM (Ministry of Education and Culture) to do research into this kind of iconographic, choreographic and musical performance that had proliferated in 15th-century Europe with expressive continuities during the following centuries and some surviving folklore.

In the research, and guided by a magnificent study by Fritz Saxl (1942),²⁹ I went to the Biblioteca Casanatense behind the church of Sant’Ignazio in Rome—with that lavish *trompe-l’oeil* on the flat ceiling that seems to project into a deep celestial vault. There, I was able to analyse the manuscript Cod. Cas. 1404 and establish the illustration on sheet 5 as the model for the composition of the fresco in Morella (see illustration 3). This manuscript had a close relative with an almost identical illustration in London’s Wellcome Library (Apocalypse Ms. 49, fol. 31) (see illustration 4). Both manuscripts are of German origin and date from the first third of the 15th century and also include the same score: *Ad mortem festinamus*, which had already appeared in 1399 in the Llibre Vermell de Montserrat and that corresponds to the monumental score from Morella, only in the Franciscan convent with a text in Catalan *contrafactum* of the Latin piece. All these findings were shared with the musicologist Maricarme Gómez Muntané who, when publishing the result of the research, agreed to do a prologue highlighting this *prometedor hallazgo de Massip y Kovács*.³⁰ The medievalist would take full advantage of these findings in the reissue of her study into the Llibre Vermell de Montserrat. Whilst the first edition

the deceased is surrounded by the men of the village (somewhere deep in Ourense province—filmed in Santa Baia de Bolo, Celanova, Verín and Tui) who move round the coffin, in a kind of dance step while they grunt (“rum, rum, rum”). When they finish, they say that the evil spirits have gone: <https://fb.watch/dkOU2Qo5a0/>.

28. “accompagnati dai tamburi, dalle campane di ferro battuto e dalle trombe d’avorio”, “piangono e cantano le canzone di lamento”: Cavazzi da Montecuccolo, Giovanni Antonio, *Istorica descrizione dei tre Regni Congo, Matamba ed Angola situati nell’Etiopia inferiore occidentale* compilata dal P... e nel presente stile ridotta dal Fortunato Alamandini. ecc. Bologna: Giacomo Monti, 1687: 127-128.

29. Saxl, Fritz. “Spiritual Encyclopaedia of the later Middle Ages”. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtland Institutes*, 5 (1942): 82-142.

30. “promising find by Massip and Kovács.” Massip, Francesc; Kovács, Lenke. *El baile...*: 15.





ILLUSTRATION 2. DANCE AROUND THE BODY. FRESCO IN THE SALA DE PROFUNDIS IN THE CONVENT OF SANT FRANCESC IN MORELLA (C. 1470). PHOTO: RAÛL SANCHIS. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

published 1990 did not include any of these details, the new extended 2017 edition incorporated them, profitably, as if they were of her own.³¹

The iconographic typology of the three images attached below (manuscripts from Rome and London and the fresco in Morella) corresponds to the circular dance, form per excellence of the sacred dance of all time and particularly of Christian dance, as shown in the *Llibre Vermell de Montserrat*, a collection of ten dances, one of which annotated with the rubric *ad trepidium rotundum* and three others *a ball redon*.³² The macabre theme dance has no rubric, but the appearance of the same score in the above-mentioned 15th-century manuscripts and on the fresco in Morella, which are accompanied by a choreographed form in a circle, lead us to suppose that it would be the same in Montserrat. This is how Catherine Ingrassia and Christophe Deslignes have been reconstructed at the head of the *Morescarole*

31. Gómez Muntané, Maricarmen. *El Llibre Vermell de Montserrat. Cantos y danzas*. Sant Cugat del Vallès: Los Libros de la Frontera, 1990; Gómez Muntané, Maricarmen. *El Llibre Vermell. Cantos y danzas de fines del Medioevo*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017: 83-94.

32. “in a round dance” Massip, Francesc. “L’harmonia de l’univers, la dansa en cercle a l’Edat Mitjana”, *Dancing Images and Tales. Iconography of Dance from Classical to Middle Age*, Licia Buttà, Jesús Carruesco, Francesc Massip eds. Tarragona: Institut Català d’Arqueologia Clàssica, 2014: 65-83.





ILLUSTRATION 3. ENCIRCLING THE DECEASED, MANUSCRIPT COD. CAS. 1404, SHEET 5. BIBLIOTECA CASANATENSE, ROME. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.



ILLUSTRATION 4. ENCIRCLING THE DECEASED, APOCALYPSE MS. 49, FOL. 31. WELCOMELIBRARY, LONDON. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

group in their second DVD of the Morescarole group have “reconstructed” it on their second DVD of *La Danse Médiévale*.³³

4. The Carola, liturgical dance

In fact, it corresponds to one of the best known dances in medieval times: The Carola,³⁴ Latin diminutive of the Greek word χορεία (*chorea* in Latin), *dansa* being a word of uncertain origin, probably Andalusian, in consonance with the popularity and diffusion of the dancers and musicians from Al-Andalus who were called to

33. Ingrassia, Catherine; Deslignes, Christophe; Terrasa, Xavier, *La Danse Médiévale*, 2 vols. Beauchamp: le lOcal, 2009-2010: II, 63.

34. Mullally Robert, *The Carole: A Study of a Medieval Dance*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011.



bring solace to the Occitan courts in the Troubadours' Golden Age.³⁵ The *carola* would be the necessary step, if not the conclusive one, of the majority of documented ecclesiastical dances that would culminate closing its processional wanderings in a circle inside the church and, particularly, around the relics of the patron saint.

It would be the way to pronounce the famous *Canczon de santa Fe* (1054-1076) in dance. This was a text in Occitan verse to be sung and danced, in an ambulatory and majestic movement, by the faithful and the clergy around the imposing statue-reliquary of the saint of Concas (Occitania) circulating along the aisle—probably born in that temple of pilgrimage—called the *girola*. It is no coincidence that in Limosin the word *carola* designated the ambulatory, a popular name that indicated one of its most solemn and festive functions as the scenario for the sacred dances that were usually performed around the holy vestiges. The double chain of dancers in the *Canczon* was led by the *praecentor* who sang the verses, while the rest sang the chorus, in a nocturnal ceremony performed in this space surrounding the presbytery. Each of its almost six-hundred octosyllabic verses meant eight steps forward (one for each syllable), the last emphasised with a small jump, and every time the rhyme changed, the direction of the processional march changed, whose ideal place was in the wide ambulatory.³⁶ It is a typology that can be linked to the liturgical *conductus* that was performed in processions that supposed a rhythmic and solemn walk inside the church, the atrium and the adjacent cloisters.

So, if these were the characteristic choreographic forms in medieval churches, it should not surprise us that the dance macabre, perhaps born—or grown—inside the church as a homiletic illustration,³⁷ adopted a similar typology: a *conductus* or ambulatory dance very adequate for doing around the naves and ambulatories of the churches, and that could culminate closing the row in a harmonious circle.

In this way, the first macabre Hispanic text written to be performed in dance, the *Dança General de la Muerte*, seems to come from the Castilian translation (*trasladación*) perhaps of a lost Catalan or Aragonese original,³⁸ picked up by a

35. As Joan Corominas suspected, the word would come from Arabic. (Corominas, Joan. *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico*. Madrid: Gredos, 1997: *ad vocem*); Federico Corriente qualifies that it would be from *tanç* 'burla' or the Andalusian verbs *tanjár* and *attanjár* that are interpreted as 'dance' (Corriente, Federico. *Diccionario de arabismos y voces afines en iberorromance*. Madrid: Gredos, 2003: *ad vocem*).

36. Massip, Francesc. "La dansa i el teatre en els camins de pelegrinació", *El Camí de Sant Jaume i Catalunya*, Maria Teresa Ferrer, Pere Verdés, eds. Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2007: 477-484 (481-482 for reference).

37. That could be deduced not only from the first documents that cite a "Machabaeorum chora, vulgo Dance Macabre" (Du Cange, *Glossarium, ad vocem*) done in the church of Saint-Jean in Besançon (1453), but also from the iconography with the presence of a preacher who usually presided from the throne over a good part of the dances macabre in line preserved in Europe.

38. According to Francisco Rico ("Pedro de Veragüe y fra Anselm Turmeda". *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 3/50 (1973): 224-236), this would be a translation by Pedro de Veragüe of a Catalan original perhaps from the pen of Anselm Turmeda. On the other hand, rabbi Aça who appeared in the *Dança* studying the Talmud has been identified with Yshaq ben Siset Perfet, called Ribas, born in Barcelona in 1326 and a teacher in the Talmudic school. After the brutal pogrom that decimated the Jewish community,



Jewish copyist from the Crown of Aragon in a recently published manuscript in *aljamiat* Hebrew,³⁹ the primitive version of which could date back to the early 15th century.⁴⁰ The text presents Death calling each mortal to the dance, whom he invites to *andar en mi dança que tengo ordenada* (xiii, xxiii, xxvii, xxxii). This seems to point out to a choreographic movement of wandering, actually leading the Pope to be its “guiador” (xi), that is, the head dancer, in accordance with his rank within the hierarchy. Thus, we can think about the different characters who are linked by giving each other their hand (xlv) in this *su dança a fuerça* (xiv) which the Grim Reaper imposes, forming a line like a *tresca* or *farandola* which grows as the living who are reluctant to join are included. At one point, Death calls for the incorporation *a la dança cortés* (the courtly dance) (xix): we think that at the time of the quintessential court dance it was the *baxa dança* that is also mentioned (xviii), a slow, solemn and majestic curial typology, danced in pairs who move as if dragging their feet, with an elegant rhythmic slide and a rhythmic punctual lowering of the body; a typology that appears referenced for the first time around 1325 and that became the fashionable dance during the 15th century.⁴¹ One should also add to this typology the dance of *Lo Bar de Lop*, a painting from the late 15th century where five pairs of lay people describe the so called *Baixa dansa* (Low dance), that seems to want to close into a circle, while death rehearses them, and that is accompanied by a poetic text of 33

he exiled himself in Algiers in 1391, where he died in 1408 (Solà-Solé, Josep M. “El rabí y el alfaquí en la Dança General de la Muerte”. *Romance Philology*, 18/3 (1965): 272-283). There are clues that point to the author of the *Dança* having been an inhabitant of the Catalan-Aragonese Crown, who would have written it, probably in Catalan or Aragonese, at the end of the 14th century. See Infantes, Víctor. *Las Danzas...: 226-239*.

39. This was reported by Morrás, María-Michelle Hamilton. “Un nuevo testimonio de la “danza de la muerte”: hacia la versión primitiva”, *Actas del VIII Congreso de la AHLM (Santander 1999)*, Margarita Freixas-Silvia Irisoeds, ed. Santander: Asociación Hispánica de Cultura Medieval, 2000: 1341-1352. This is the Ms. 2666 in the Biblioteca Palatina de Parma, fols. 199-206, miscellaneous volume with philosophical work and literature sapiential written in the mid 15th century in *solitreo*; integral edition, with Hebrew text and transliteration side by side, in Manrique, David M., *Dize la muerte, estudio y edición de la copia cuatrocentista de la Danza de la muerte aljamiada (Ms Parma 2666)*, Barcelona: Tirocinio 2019: 115-174.

40. Ms. b.IV.21 in the Library of the Monasterio del Escorial. There is a reelaboration and extension published in Seville in 1520 (both versions published together by De Icaza, Francisco A.; De los Ríos, Amador, eds. *La Danza de la Muerte*. Madrid: Clásicos El Árbol, 1981); moreover, as well as the above-mentioned version in aljama hebraica, a fragment (*probatio calami*) has been found in Segovia Cathedral (Ms. 336) that the author would have memorised for some “dramatic representation or game”, indicator of an effective scenic circulation of the piece, as insinuated by its discoverer: Gómez Moreno, Ángel. *El teatro medieval castellano en su marco románico*. Madrid: Taurus, 1991: 102.

41. Massip, Francesc. “Aureli Company i la Dansa”, *Aureli Capmany*, Magí Sunyer, ed. Tarragona: Universitat Rovira i Virgili, 2019: 23-50 (37 for reference).



Alexandrine verses.⁴² Saugnieux⁴³ calls it the *Danse des vivants* and relates it to the Triumph of Death.⁴⁴

5. Conductus and contrapàs

The chain of dancers in the *Dança General de la Muerte* recalls the *contrapàs*, with which it shares a processional or ambulatory choreography, a ‘walking’, rhythmic and ceremonial dance. The *contrapàs* (counterpoint) is a traditional dance (*la dansa més antiga i característica de totes les catalanes*),⁴⁵ that dates back to medieval times, as its name is mentioned in one of the sermons of Vicent Ferrer who quoted it to blaspheme it, because he attributed it to the biblical Salome, the one who sinned by dancing it and which is why the monk says that God punished her:

Davant la casa de prop havia una lacuna de aygua molt pregona, e hun dia va's gelar axí fort que les gens hi anaven damunt e les bèsties. E ella [Salomè] dix a les donzelles: 'anem a ballar allí'. E anaren-hi. E quan fo llà, volgué fer lo contrapàs que havia fet davant lo rey [Herodes], e en la girada que donà, trenquà lo gel e entrasse'n. ¡Ahaa!... E l'ànima [reté] a cent milia dyables.⁴⁶

However, perhaps this dance was only reprehensible for the exalted Dominican, because, in fact, it seems to be a derivation of the very noble *baixa* (low) dance that appeared among the soirees in the lively Valencian court, Renaissance style, of Germana de Foix and the Duke of Calabria where festivities abounded in which *l'alta i baxa* were danced, but also the *contrapàs*, one of the dances proposed to be danced by ladies and gentlemen in the staging of the farce *La Vesita* by Joan Ferrandis d'Herédia, performed in that court in 1524 and 1541.⁴⁷ It also formed

42. Massip, Francesc; Kovács, Lenke. *El baile...*: 67.

43. Saugnieux, Joel. *Les danses macabres de France et d'Espagne et leur prolongements littéraires*. Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1972: 309.

44. A new interpretation in Massip, Francesc. “La dansa macabra en l'àmbit catalano-provençal”, *Els Països Catalans i la Provença: mirades creuades*, Estrella Massip, Marina Navàs, Francesc Niubo, eds. Canet del Rosselló: Association Française des Catalanistes - Centre Aixois d'Études Romanes, Trabucaire Edicions, 2022: 269-283.

45. “the oldest and most characteristic of all the Catalan ones.” Text by Julita Farnés (written in 1909), reproduced by Mas Garcia, Carles. *Aproximació a la tècnica coreogràfica del contrapàs*. Barcelona: Institut del Teatre, 1988: 283.

46. “In front of the house nearby there was a very deep water gap, and one day it froze so hard that people and beasts went on. And she [Salome] said to the maidens, ‘Let’s dance there.’ And they went there. And when she was there, she wanted to do the same “contrapàs” that she had done in front to the king [Herod], and when she turned, the ice broke and she fell down. Ahaa!... And the soul [was given] to a hundred thousand devils”. Chabàs, Roc. “Estudios sobre los sermones valencianos de san Vicent Ferrer. vi. Invectivas contra las mujeres”, *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, 4 (1903): 291-295.

47. Massip, Francesc ed. *Comedia de Corte. “La vesita” de Juan Fernández de Heredia, poeta y caballero valenciano*. Salamanca: Sociedad Española de Historiografía Lingüística - Seminario de Estudios Medievales y



part of the sequence of dances done in the festive evenings of the Acadèmia dels Nocturns which were held between 1591-1594 in the mansion belonging to de Bernat Guillem Català de Valeriola in the Plaça de Nules in the city of Valencia.⁴⁸

In the popular or urban context, the *contrapàs* is documented in 1482 as the dance of the guild of orchard workers of Tarragona, who danced it in the Corpus Christi procession,⁴⁹ and which Cervantes cites in *La ilustre fregona*.⁵⁰ The traditional nature of the dance is also reflected in the saying *en la casa del joglar, tothom balla el contrapàs*.⁵¹

In the macabre context, the *contrapàs* is mentioned as the dance calling the general accounting (*Mestre Racional*) to death in the *Ball de la Mort* by Pere Miquel Carbonell (Barcelona 1434-1517),⁵² composed in 1497 and dedicated to the courtiers in the royal palace in Barcelona, among whom there was the author as an archivist to King Ferdinand the Catholic.⁵³

The first scholar who dedicated a monographic study to it, Aureli Capmany (1922), and who still saw it danced as a popular tradition, appreciated its *accentuat arcaisme i el caràcter greu i mesurat d'aquesta dansa excepcional*, as well as the religious

Renacentistas, 2020: 117 (vv. 809-810).

48. Sanchis Francés, Raül. *La dansa metafòrica en la festa valenciana*. Tarragona: Universitat Rovira i Virgili (PhD Dissertation), 2019: 352-354.

49. In the procession of Corpus Christi in 1482, the guild of orchard workers performed *un graciós entramés balant lo contrapàs vastits tots de l'urea de que se hag[ue] molt plaer per tots los qui veren* ("a graceful 'entramés' dancing the "contrapàs", all of them wearing liveries, being a pleasure to look at them"). See Bertran, Jordi. "Les representacions del turc en el cicle de Corpus, de santa Tecla i d'entrades espectacularitzades a Tarragona", *La dansa dels altres. Identitat i alteritat en la festa popular*, Raül Sanchis, Francesc Massip eds. Catarroja-Barcelona: Afers, 2017: 199-212 (especially 203). In the 15th century, the popular music of the *Contrapàs* was adopted by the Remenses de Verntallat and to its sound, they paraded before the walls of towns and cities which tended to refused them entry, labelling them bandits, because they considered it a musical invitation to revolt.

50. "Con mudanzas y meneos | den principio al *Contrapàs*" (With moves and shakes start the "Contrapàs"). As an Andalusian youth did not understand the word, he clarified that the "*contrapàs es un baile extranjero*" (the *contrapàs* is a foreign dance) (Cervantes, *Obras Completas*, ed. Angel Valbuena Prat. Madrid: Aguilar, 1949: 933). On-line edition: <http://cervantes.tamu.edu/english/ctxt/cec/disk5/IFWORD.html>.

51. "in the minstrel's house, everyone dances the *contrapàs*." Farnés, Sebastià. *Paremiologia Catalana Comparada*, Jaume Vidal Alcover, Magí Sunyer, Josep Lluís Savall, eds. 8 vols. Barcelona: Columna [1992-1999], 1993: II, 770-2. In Latin, it was said: "Sunt tibicinibus plenae tibicinis aedes". In Castilian they said: "En casa del gaitero todo son danzantes"; "en la casa del tamborilero, todos saben danzar la pavana"; "en casa el tamborilero, el mozo baila el primero" or "siempre engendra un bailador el padre tamborilero", etc. In a manuscript from Roussillon in 1862, the *Tragèdia de la degollació de Sant Joan Baptista en set actes, corregida y augmentada en 1862*, there is a mention of the *contrapàs* by Graciós: "Si algú massa me enfada / y me posa la mosca al nas / li jugaré un contrepàs / qu-anirà a l'endimoniada" (if someone gets mad at me too much / and bothers me / I'll give a "contrapàs" / that will seem a devil): ADPO 217Jp29/9, fol. 3v. It must refer to a *contrapàs* danced very, or excessively, boisterously.

52. "ballar ab mi no us sia greu / moveu los peus, ara sou meu, / ab *contrapàs*" (don't worry about dancing with me / move your feet, now you are mine, / with "*contrapàs*"). (ACA, vv. 76-78, *Manuscripts Miscel·lània*, 26, fol. CIV).

53. Massip, Francesc; Morrás Ruiz-Falcón, María. "El *ball de la mort* de Carbonell: una dansa macabra cortesana", *Memento mori. Il genere macabro in Europa dal Medioevo ad oggi*, Marco Piccat, Laura Ramello, eds. Alessandria: Ed. Dell'Orso, 2014: 447-460.



spirit and the aspect of sacred ceremony that it offered due to its unitonal cadence, the reverence and gravity of its performance and the ritual air of its movements.⁵⁴ A ceremonial appearance corroborated by the lyrics that accompanied it: the story of Christ's suffering and woes during the Passion, as well as music that in the plainchant style, in other words, the Gregorian monody in major mode, as sung in the *Passio*.⁵⁵ In the epoch of greatest prestige, the payment for the young men hired to do the harvest included them being taught the lyrics, tune and steps of the *contrapàs*.⁵⁶ Otherwise, the popular dance not only attracted the locals but also the ecclesiastic authorities,⁵⁷ and was performed in front of the church and even in the presbytery.⁵⁸

The movements consisted in a heavy swaying by one line or the rest of the dancers guided by two skilled leaders.⁵⁹ The dancers, holding hands, come and go in an evolution of lateral movement both to the left and right, but advancing more in one direction than the other and tracing a semicircle.

The dance measured accurately the distance travelled and what was left so the dance would end in the same place where it had commenced. In the past, the *contrapàs* was the dance per excellence in the Catalan lands and presided over all festivities. Its complexity required two or three good *contrapàs* dancers to lead it: the head cap, the end or tail, and the middleman placed respectively at the front, back and centre of the line which allowed them to *treure el contrapàs* with the

54. "accentuated archaism and the serious and measured nature of this exceptional dance". As explained someone who witnessed it still well alive in the Catalan areas north of the Pyrenees, it is a sacred rite: *ens creuríem transportats al mig d'una cerimònia religiosa: Sense crits, tothom és atent i com recollit* ("we would think we were transported in the middle of a religious ceremony: Without noise, everyone is attentive and like concentrated").: D'Avalri, Jean. *Le coq Catalan*, 41 (1920).

55. Capmany, Aureli, *El ball popular a Catalunya. El contrapàs*, Barcelona: Políglota, 1922: 12-13.

56. Capmany, Aureli, *El ball popular a Catalunya...: 9*. As Albert Manyach stated: *El contrepas era el ball popular per excel·lència i presidia a totes les festes; hi ha uns cinquanta anys no s'hauria pogut pensar un ball català que no comportés el contrepas. No era rar de sentir-ne tocar cinc o sis dins la mateixa diada de festa* ("The *contrapàs* was the popular dance par excellence and presided over all celebrations; Fifty years ago, it would have been impossible to think of a Catalan dance that did not include the counterpoint. It was not uncommon to hear five or six of them played in the same festive day"): Albert Manyach, "Le contrepas", *Courrier de Céret* (30 October 1921): <https://blocs.mesvilaweb.cat/oriollluissual/el-contrapas-a-catalunya-nord-2/>.

57. Capmany, Aureli. *La dansa a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Barcino [1930-1953], 1953: II, 22. Otherwise, Capmany considered that "dins la història de la dansa popular el contrapàs constitueix un document d'importància cabdal, tant per la seva condició de joia arqueològica, com pel seu interès coreogràfic i musical i pel caràcter de la lletra que acompanya el ball" (In the history of folk dance, the "contrapàs" is an important document, both for its status as an archaeological meaningful remain, and for its choreographic and musical interest and the character of the lyrics that accompany the dance). Capmany, Aureli. *La dansa a Catalunya...: II*, 11.

58. In Prats de Molló, the *contrapàs* could not start before *el senyor rector, a la sortida de l'ofici, anés a plaçar-se sobre el primer graó de les "costes e creus" per presidir el contrapàs* (the priest, after the mass, would place himself on the first step of the "coasts and crosses" to preside the "contrapàs"). According to Leopold Colomer, an old dancer who in 1979 relearned the dance that had been lost since 1945 and collaborated, with other old people who still remembered it (Omer Fité, Miquel Dunyach and Joan Resplandy), when the dance was retaken. Lluís-Gual, Oriol. "El contrapàs a la Catalunya nord", *Caramella*, 25 (2011): 87-90.

59. Capmany, Aureli. *El ball popular...: 10-11 and 13*.





ILLUSTRATION 5. CONTRAPÀS LLARG, CONTRAPASSAIRES OF OLOT (c. 1908). PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.



ILLUSTRATION 6. CONTRAPÀS LLARG IN THE PARC GÜELL IN BARCELONA, CONTRAPASSAIRES BANYOLES (1908). PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

necessary precision, to conclude exactly on the point where they had started, that is, in front of the musicians.⁶⁰ The venue had to be, of course, the square, and

60. Pujol, Francesc; Amades, Joan. *Diccionari de la dansa*. Barcelona: Cançoner Popular de Catalunya, Fundació Concepció Rabell i Cibils, 1936: I, 162-191.



one of the fundamental skills of the *contrapàs* dancer was to have the concept of *repartiment* (distribution) of the space or *proporcionalitat del moviment en l'espai on es balla*, aspects that already appeared in the 15th-century treatises on dance.⁶¹ When the music slowed, the head and tail came together and the line formed a circle, called the *roda* or *rodada* and that was used to rest.⁶² The difficulty of performing it is due to its *estructura coreogràfica cadencial irregular i continuada*, which required prior learning that had to allow to 'repartir' (share) the *contrapàs*, which demanded skill at combining movement, space and sound. Despite its high choreographic value, its laborious irregular nature meant a progressive simplification or oblivion in modern times.⁶³ However, the tradition is kept alive in Prats de Molló (Vallespir) where it is danced in the square and occasionally inside the church.⁶⁴

The first diagrams or graphics of the *contrapàs* date from the 18th century.⁶⁵ According to Carles Mas, these were part of the tradition of Catalan choreographic notation that arose in the 15th century, as shown in the manuscript from Cervera which describes a series of low dances and *ballets*, annotated and drew with an original symbolic procedure that constitute the first choreographic notation known in the West, created around the Catalan dance masters of the 15th-century,⁶⁶ a system which reappears in the manuscript of the Hospital from the end of the 16th century which also combines the literary description of the dances with the indication of the choreographic steps through signs, and among which the *Contrapàs* also appears.⁶⁷ The editions of the maps of the *contrapàs* are headed by vignettes where a group of three dancers appears (perhaps those responsible for leading out the *contrapàs*: the head, the tail and the middleman) and two groups of musicians: 5 aerophones (trumpet or cornet, bagpipes or *sac de gemecs*, *flabiol*, *gralla* and *fagot*), a chordophone (*rabequet* or violin), apart from the tambourine of the *flabiol* player.

It is difficult to link names of dances from the past with those in the present, and it is complicated to trace earlier iconographic similarities to surviving traditional dances. However, let us look at the frieze of the Dresden Dance Macabre by Christoph Walter (1534-1536), nowadays in the Dreikönigskirche.

61. "proportionality of movement in the space where it is danced". Mas i Garcia, Carles. *Aproximació a la tècnica coreogràfica...*: 20.

62. Mas Corretgé, R. *Dansàneu. Els balls populars del Pallars*. Tarragona: El Mèdol, 1992: I, 91.

63. "irregular and continued rhythmic choreographic structure", Mas i Garcia, Carles. *Aproximació a la tècnica coreogràfica...*: 19-23.

64. Dancing the *contrapàs* in 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBJV-zUphx4>, and 2008: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q33qk51Jko0>.

65. The first manuscript map found of the *contrapàs* was from La Selva de Mar in 1797, according to Capmany, Aureli. *La dansa a Catalunya...*: II, 39.

66. Nocilli, Cecília. *El manuscrito de Cervera. Música y danza palaciega catalana del siglo XV*. Barcelona: Amalgama, 2013.

67. Remember that in 1592 the important Confraria de Mestres de Dansa (Guild of Dance Masters) was founded. This was always linked to the Santa Creu Hospital, which had a monopoly of theatrical performance in Barcelona until 1833. See Mas i Garcia, Carles, "L'expansió de la dansa d'escola", *Dansa i música. Barcelona 1700*, Albert Garcia Espuche, ed. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2009: 229-299 (especially 236-239).



The line is headed and closed by a skeleton, while in the centre, there is a third dead person, as if they were the conductors of the *contrapàs*: *capdancer* before the Pope (and all the clergy who followed him), *mitjaner* holding the Emperor (followed by all the laity) and the tail closing the line. The line of *contrapàs* could eventually close into a circle (in the pauses or *rodes* and in the final *rodada*), as the *Dança General* seems to culminate in what one of its characters calls *dança medrosa*—dreadful dance— (xxviii) and that another rejects *andar en ella* (xxxii), but that Death ends up threatening all humanity *a entrar en mi dança sin excusación* (LXXVIII), and the mortals end up assuming that *la muerte con dança muy dura nos meta en su corro* (LXXIX).

Thus the *Dança General de la Muerte* would be a lineal dance like the *contrapàs*, of ambulatory movement and spirit tending towards circularity and that would culminate with this such expressive end *en corro*, not to mention the spiral chaining of the stanzas, a structure *basada en un patró d'intercalació successiva entre els personatges que formen un diagrama circular*.⁶⁸ And, as explained elsewhere, the circle or ring is a symbolic form of perfection and eternity.⁶⁹

To recapitulate, I have attempted to show that the late-medieval dance macabre, despite being a re-dimensioned argument in the Christian context with exemplary purposes for the homiletics and ecclesiastic iconographic programmes, was based on secular practices well established in popular tradition to accompany the deceased on their journey to the afterlife. So, far from the *fiction édifiante* that Schmitt would like,⁷⁰ at least regarding the ceremonial and dancing act of sending off the dead. Despite the difficulty of elucidating the characteristic choreographic forms of the

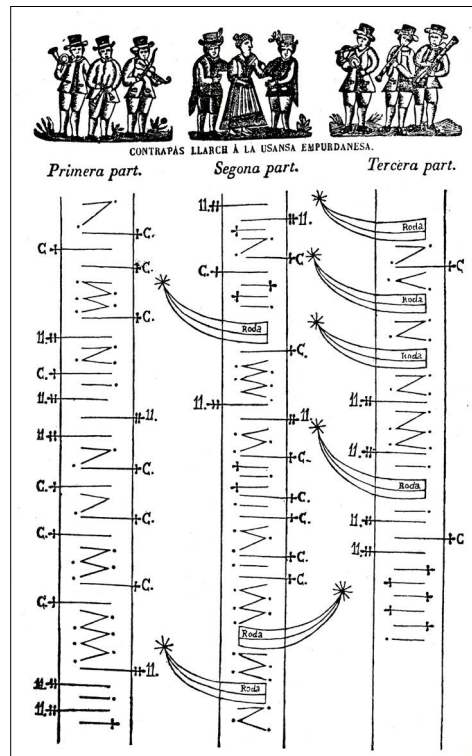


ILLUSTRATION 7. MAP OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF STEPS FOR THE “CONTRAPÀS LLARG A LA USANSA EMPURDANESA” (PRINTED IN THE 18TH CENTURY).

PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

68. “based on a pattern of successive intercalation between the characters that form a circular diagram”. Manrique, David M. *Dize la muerte...: 59*.

69. Massip, Francesc. “L’harmonia de l’univers...”: 65.

70. Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *Les rythmes au Moyen Age*. Paris: Gallimard, 2016: 615.





ILLUSTRATION 8. DANCE MACABRA, CREATED BETWEEN 1534 AND 1536 BY CHRISTOPH WALTER, ORIGINALLY PLACED ON THE OLD GEORGTOR GATE OF DRESDEN CASTLE, NOWADAYS IN THE DREIKÖNIGSKIRCHE, DRESDEN. PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY FRANCESC MASSIP.

macabre dances, they undoubtedly included the two most common figures in the history of dance: the circle and the line, with abundant iconographic examples all over Europe. We know that the quintessential medieval dance, the *carola*, combined both figures in its evolutions, and would have a particular development in churches in a liturgical route around the naves and ambulatory that enabled a combination of the processional *conductus*, the open chain and its annular closing throughout its development and/or its culmination or closure. It is plausible that the late-medieval macabre dances adopted these well-documented choreographic forms both inside the church and outside in the street. Thus, we could say that the *carola* had functioned as a matrix form of the macabre late-medieval dances. On the other hand, a dance like the *contrapàs*, which has survived for centuries in popular practice, would be the last evidence of those macabre dances that had lasted until well into the modern age. Its solemnity and circumspection seem to endorse this, especially in the samples pronounced on Good Friday to recall the Passion of Christ, although the only dance of death that has subsisted in that context, the one in Verges, had adopted a cross configuration during the Baroque, adjusted to the purpose of accompanying the dramatic procession of the *Via Crucis*.⁷¹

If the macabre dance spread in the especially crude context of the Black Death pandemic and was, at the same time, an edifying act and another display of collective responses to funeral mourning and the rituals around death, always very visible and communal, nowadays, in another feral pandemic of planetary proportions, our society continues to avert its gaze, unable to face death with a ceremony with the creative potential of those expressive dances, of which the atavistic *contrapàs*, precursor of the modern short *sardana*, is a popular echo.

71. Massip, Francesc; Kovács, Lenke. "Una comparsa macabra a la llum del barroc: La Dansa de la Mort de Verges". *Revista d'Igualada*, 5 (2000): 16-25.