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Quote: Sophie Lespinasse-Milan, *Danced spiritual life of Teresa of Avila and current witnesses*, Historical Insights: Catherine Ingrassia, online seminar n°12, Dance and Spirituality/Christianity, International Council of Dance, 22/11/2025.

"Danced Spiritual Life of Teresa of Avila and Current Witnesses" Historical Insights: Catherine Ingrassia, art historian and archaeo-choreographer

The dances that Teresa may have practiced (00'10")

At the beginning of the 16th century, the most common dances in Europe, and particularly in Spain, were the basse danse, which is the dance most frequently mentioned in the sources we have from that period. We have several treatises that discuss basse danse, the most recent dating from around 1530. It was the most widely used dance, I would say, for performances, for the Court, for balls.

[Videos - Reenactment of the dance La Grolo, music by The Magdalena, early 16th century – The Tourdion]

The tourdion is a short piece of music that typically follows a basse danse. It is quite fast-paced, a very lively dance. It is very popular with young people. As the basse danse is somewhat of an ancestor of the pavane, the tourdion is the ancestor of the galliard.

As another type of dance, we also have Italian ballets, which were used in virtually every court throughout Europe.

[Image]

Then we also have more spectacular dances like the Moresque.

In Spain, it often takes the form of a battle between Moors and Christians.

[Image]

Court dances and folk dances (01'30")

Folk dance is ultimately poorly documented, except in certain archives or literary texts where it is briefly mentioned. Otherwise, it is very rare to find sources that discuss folk dances. We therefore primarily have information on bourgeois dances for the 16th century, or on dances performed by the nobility. So, determining whether nobles and the bourgeoisie danced like the common people is difficult.

However, it is certain that there has always been an exchange, throughout history, between folk dances and courtly dances. There has always been this kind of interaction between the two, whereby a person of high rank might slum it a little by dancing folk dances, and the common people would also dance the more refined dances of courtly life.

Tambourine and castanets (02'27")

We've had tambourine dancers for a very long time, even in Egypt.



In any case, for the Middle Ages, we have images of tambourine dancers from the 5th to the 15th centuries.

In Spain, more precisely, during the Gothic or pre-Gothic period, we have numerous depictions of these dancers holding a tambourine, either square or round, which they spin and strike while dancing.

[Image]

As for castanets, I don't actually have any images of castanets from before the 15th century. However, it's certain that people danced with rattles.

Rattles are two small pieces of wood or horn that are placed on either side of the index finger.

[Image]

This is probably the ancestor of these famous castanets. We also often find these images in Spain, in Romanesque art, and we often see Salome depicted dancing with rattles.

A possible influence of the Roma (03'45")

It is often said that the Roma influenced Spanish dances, including the future flamenco (since in the 16th century, the term "flamenco" wasn't yet in use).

It is certain that the Roma, throughout the Middle Ages, had the right to travel throughout Europe, since the Papal Bull allowed them to seek asylum wherever they stopped. Thus, they traveled as far as India and to more remote countries in Northern and Eastern Europe.

They managed to bring back gestural codes, and it is likely that the hand gestures seen throughout the Middle Ages sometimes even resemble the poses we see today in flamenco dancers. So these dances with the hands, the fingers, which we also see in India, in Syria, all along these routes, or the Silk Road, which the gypsies traveled – and we speak of "Gypsies", at that time we did not yet speak of "Gypsies", that is a more current term – they spread these gestural codes and they spread a little bit everywhere.

A possible Jewish dance tradition? (05'10")

It is certain that Jews had a presence in dance. Indeed, one of the great Italian dance masters, Guglielmo Ebreo ["ebreo," Jewish], was Jewish and a very well-known dance master in the 15th century. However, it is difficult to know for certain whether there was truly a Jewish dance tradition in the 15th or 16th centuries.

The Church and dance in the time of Teresa? (05'40")

The relationship between the Church and dance throughout the Middle Ages was complex, sometimes even paradoxical. The Reformation led to the abandonment of certain dance traditions within the Church. Among them was the tradition of "La Pilota," a dance whose origins can be traced back to a trial in which some canons refused to



perform a dance in the church. This trial also revealed that similar dance traditions were abandoned in other places, whether by canons or in abbeys by monks and nuns, because they were no longer considered acceptable by the Church. They deemed them too pagan, unsuitable for this new religion, which was expected to be more serious and spiritual than its predecessors.

[Vidéo – Reconstrucción de La Pilota, siglo XV]

Credits (07'05")

Catherine Ingrassia holds a doctorate in Art History and is an archaeo-choreographer specializing in the reconstruction of 15th- and 16th-century dances.

She is also a costume designer.

"La Magdalena/Grolo" is taken from volume 3 of Medieval Dance.

The booklet is available on the website:

www.ladansemedievale.fr

Also available on the same website, the para-liturgical dance "La Pilota" was notably performed at Easter in France, by the canons of Auxerre Cathedral.

Video capture: Kristina Lamaud-Brun

Interview prepared with S. Lespinasse-Milan and N. Guillemé,

conducted by: Sylvie Lavagne

Work carried out by Sophie Lespinasse-Milan.

Opening (07'17")

The first references to the dance "Los Seises" date back to the early 16th century. Dependent on a Jesuit college since 1985, it continues to be danced in Seville Cathedral during Corpus Christi.

[Image]

On November 22, 1588, Thoinot Arbeau, a canon of Langres in France, obtained the royal privilege to publish his treatise on dance, Orchesographie, "by which all people can easily learn and practice the honest exercise of dances."

[Image]

Final image (07'35")

"Danced Spiritual Life of Avila & Current Witnesses"



International Dance Council, official partner of UNESCO
Dance and Spirituality Program, Dance and Christianity Group
Seminar n°12 of November 22nd, 2025
"Danced Spiritual Life of Teresa of Avila and Current Witnesses"
Historical Insights: Catherine Ingrassia
By Sophie Lespinasse-Milan (07'35")



Presented for the first time on November 22, 2025,
during seminar no. 12 of the Dance and Christianity group.

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