

Religion in the ancient Greek city



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which the Pythia sat to prophesy. We know too from Pausanias (x.19.4) that both Apollo and Dionysos were depicted on the Temple of Apollo in its fourth-century reconstruction, Apollo and the Muses at one corner of the pediment, Dionysos and the Thiades (female followers assimilated to Maenads) at the other.

DIONYSOS: GOD OF WILD POSSESSION (ENTHOUSIASMOS)

Dionysos was the 'twice-born'. His mother Semele had rashly desired to gaze on her lover Zeus in all his glory and was struck down by a thunderbolt. But his father rescued the embryo and sewed it into his own thigh, from which Dionysos was granted a second, divine birth. He was raised by Semele's sister Ino, who, in order to save him from the persecution of Hera which, according to some traditions, was driving him insane, disguised him as a girl. With his enemies in hot pursuit (notably Lykourgos king of Thrace, who drove him into the sea where he was rescued by Thetis), Dionysos fled through Greece and the Orient. But in the end the hunted god returned, and his arrival or rather return often formed the focus of local cults that represented him as the god from abroad.

Such myths are the source of a powerful tradition of interpretation, nineteenth-century in origin, which sees Dionysos as a non-Greek god, from either Thrace or the Orient, who imposed himself in Greece by main force. That, however, is to read in a crudely literal way myths whose concern was rather with the god's essential function. For the main function of Dionysos was to reveal to every individual what he or she had of the stranger within them, an interior alterity which the god's cults taught his devotees to discover by the circuitous route of the mask and the trance.

In contradistinction to Hermes, the god of transitions and divine cicerone who facilitated passage between contraries, Dionysos effaced boundaries, and by assuming and incarnating contrary characteristics in himself he threw all neatly defined categories into confusion. Thus his following of satyrs muddled up the categories of man and beast, while he himself confounded those of male and female by his feminine appearance and dress

(he wore the *peplos* rather than the *khitōn*). During the Anthesteria festival, an occasion when the dead mingled with the living, he was the only god whose temple was allowed to remain open, and he presided over the disguises and masquerades that accompanied this period of commingled unease and gaiety. During the October Oskhophoria festival the young boys who processed carrying bunches of grapes were disguised as girls. Likewise, male revellers participating in the *kōmoi* at the Great Dionysia wore female clothing. These festivals, moreover, all involved public gatherings and processions in which all the inhabitants of the city were mixed up together, including slaves and children (especially at the Khoës). Crucially, however, this Dionysiac jumbling of boundaries was conducted within the framework of the city and was indeed regulated by it.

Myth, as we have seen (chapter 12), laid the emphasis on the unleashing of Dionysiac madness. In the streets of the city, by contrast, the god's formal procession assumed a more orderly aspect, and Dionysiac orgies were reduced to institutionalized form. Epigraphic texts document the official existence of maenadic cult-groups (*thiasoi*) and show that initiation into Dionysiac mysteries was accomplished within a recognized civic framework. Such *thiasoi* proliferated in the course of the Hellenistic period, welcoming among their membership many of the people who ordinarily were somewhat neglected by the civic religion, above all women. For example, a cultic regulation from Miletos of the first half of the third century BCE (LSAM[59]: no. 48) lays down the procedure for the celebration of Dionysiac Mysteries and prescribes the rôle of the priestess. The old ritual of omophagy is recalled symbolically by the piece of raw flesh that the priestess has to place in a basket, the original wild chase through the mountains has been tamed into a formal procession, and the trance is made subject to precise rules.

Athenian vase-paintings of the fifth century present two different images of Dionysiac celebration within the city. On the one hand, there is the masculine *kōmos*, performed under the influence of wine and to the accompaniment of music (played on the *aulos* and *barbitōn* – a kind of stringed instrument) and dancing. On the other, there are the cavortings of the Maenads, Dionysos' particular devotees, who are shown crowned with ivy, brandishing

the *thursos* and the *kantharos* (a goblet with high-swung handles typical of Dionysiac worship), and processing, now in a serious and orderly fashion, now abandoned utterly to delirium and trance.

In Boiotia (during the Agrionia festival at Khaironeia), at Sparta (where two female cult-societies, the Leukippides and the Dionysiades, participated in the Dionysia festival), at Alea in Arkadia, at Elis and elsewhere, the cults of Dionysos were distinguished by chases, flagellations, ecstatic dancing, sacrifices and *orgia* (secret ceremonies) in which women were the principal participants. It was the women, too, who occupied centre stage during the Theoinia and Iobakkheia celebrations at the Anthes-teria festival at Athens. Chief among them was the Basilinna, wife of the Basileus or 'King' Arkhon. She and her entourage of fourteen priestesses performed the secret rites that included a sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) with Dionysos himself, a public function of the utmost importance.

Within this civic context of Dionysiac worship the use of trance should be viewed as ritualized social behaviour aimed at bringing about a change of state and status in the worshipper, enabling him or her to become 'other' and thereby assume a form of alterity defined by precise civic norms and values. The two dimensions of this experience, the collective and the personal, cannot be separated out: the trance was collective, in that it unfolded as a group phenomenon within the membership of the cult-society, and yet at the same time it affected individually each member of the group, who found himself or herself brought face to face with the god. It is wrong therefore to interpret the phenomenon (with Rohde 1925[254]) as a state of internal crisis within which each individual was impermeably insulated, or to see Dionysiac worship as a stage on the road to the discovery of an immortal inner life and as an essentially mystical experience.

The Lydian women who accompany Dionysos on his return to Thebes at the opening of Euripides' *Bacchae* and form his *thiasos* graphically illustrate this condition of 'madness':

DIONYSOS

I, Dionysos, am back in this land of Thebes.
I was born here, of Semele, daughter of Kadmos,
blasted from her womb by a bolt of blazing thunder.

I am here, a god in the shape of a man,
walking by the banks of Ismenos, the waters of Dirke.
Look out there, near the houses! That home in ruins,
still smoking, smouldering still with unquenchable flame,
is my mother's monument, her thunder-dug grave,
undying evidence of spiteful Hera's rage.
I praise Kadmos, who turned his daughter's grave into consecrated
ground,
a living temple that I shrouded with clustering vine.

I left behind the gold-abounding lands of Lydia
and Phrygia, Persia's sun-beaten plains and Baktria's giant walls,
crossing the winter-scorched earth of the Medes
and the length of happy Arabia, in short,
all Asia down to its shimmering seashores
where Greeks and barbarians freely mingle
in teeming, shapely-towered cities.
In Greece this is the first of its cities I visit.
I danced my way throughout the East,
spreading my rituals far and wide – a god
made manifest to men.

Of all Greek cities, Thebes is the one I chose
to rouse into a new awareness,
dressing Greek bodies in fawnskins,
planting the thyrsus in Greek hands,
my ivied spear. My mother's sisters
were there ever more unsisterly sisters? –
gossiped that this Dionysos was no child of Zeus,
that Semele had slept with some man and
then – on Kadmos' cunning advice –
attributed her sinful conception to Zeus.
No wonder Zeus struck her dead, they would prattle,
taking a lover and brazenly lying!

Well! These sisters, all three,
I've stung into a frenzy and steered them
from their homes into the mountains,
where I left them raving. Complete of course
with orgiastic trappings. What is more,
all the women of Thebes, but all,
I've sent stampeding out of doors. They're up there now,
milling with Kadmos' daughters under the fresh-smelling pines
or high upon the rocks. This city must learn,
even against its will, how much it costs

to scorn to be initiated in my Bacchic mysteries.
So shall I vindicate my virgin mother
and reveal myself to mortals as a god,
the son of Zeus.

Now Kadmos has conferred the powers of his throne
and its honours on the son of another daughter, Pentheus.
This god-fighting upstart snubs me; banishes my name
from public libations and private prayer.
He'll soon find out, and every Theban with him,
whose birthright is divine and whose is not.
Once that score is settled, I'll move on
to reveal myself in other lands. But should this city,
in blind anger, take up arms to drive my Bacchae from the hills,
I'll give them war, leading my women's army.
I have disguised myself as a mortal,
adopting the ways and features of a man.

You, women of Tmolos, Lydia's towering mountain,
my band of initiates, you,
whom I unplucked from your primitive lands
to be my travel-companions and my assistants,
raise up your native Phrygian drums
that pulse to rhythms that are Mother Rhea's and mine.
Surround the royal home of Pentheus with your beat
and turn the city out to see. Meanwhile,
I'll make my way to those Kithairon slopes
that seethe with Theban Bacchae
and join their dance.

CHORUS

Out of the heart of Asia
down from the sacred heights of Tmolos
have I come running. For the god Bromios
fatigue is sweet to the limbs,
and effortless effort the trek,
greeting the Bacchanals' god with shouts of joy.

Who is there in the street? Who?
Who is lurking in the house? Stand still,
stand back and purify your lips,
while I chant a prayer immemorial,
in customary praise of Dionysos.

Oh, happy is he who, blessed by his knowledge
of the gods' rites, discovers purity.

Who opens his heart to togetherness.
Who joins in the mountain-dancing
and sacred cleansing rituals. He,
who sanctifies the orgies of Kybele,
the mother of fertility,
waving the thyrsus high,
crowning his head with ivy,
in honour of Dionysos.
Go, Bacchae, go, go, go. Bring
Bromios the godly son of a god – our Dionysos –
down from the Phrygian hills
out into the spacious streets of Greece, Bromios.

Him, whom his mother carried
to premature and painful birth
when in a crash of thunder
she was death-struck by a fiery bolt.
But quicker than death,
Zeus son of Kronos swept him up and plunged him
into a makeshift womb –
secure from Hera's eyes –
in the thick of his thigh,
fastened with clasps of gold.
As time ripened into fate,
he delivered a bull-horned god
and crowned him with a crown of serpents.
Thus was invented the custom
for thyrsus-carrying Maenads
to twine snakes in their hair.

Oh Thebes, Semele's nurse,
crest your walls with ivy.
Burst into greenness, burst
into a blaze of bryony,
take up the Bacchanalian bear
with branches of oak and of pine,
cover your flesh with fawnskin
fringed with silver-white fleece
and lifting the fennel-wand
touch god
in a fit of sanctified frenzy.
Then all at once, the whole land will dance!
Bromios will lead the dancing throngs to the mountain,

the mountain, which is home to that mob of women,
who rebelled against shuttle and loom
answering the urge of Dionysos.

Oh holy heights of Crete
cradling the caves of the Kouretes
where Zeus was born.
There, the triple-crested Korybantes
traced in vibrant drumskin
the circle of my joy.
They married its percussive strength
to the wailing sweetness of Phrygian flutes,
then put it into Rhea's hands
to draw the earth-beat out
and make it throb in Bacchic song.
In time, the frenzied Satyrs
from the mother-goddess stole the drum
and struck up dances for the feasts,
held every second year,
to honour and give joy to Dionysos.

How sweet to the body, when
breaking loose from the mountain revels
one collapses to the ground in a fawnskin
after hunting the goat.
How sweet the kill –
the fresh-smelling blood –
the sacramental relishing
of raw flesh . . .
To the mountains of Phrygia, Lydia,
how the mind races back!
And Bromios is our chorus-leader, *evoi!*

Your ground flows with milk,
flows with wine, flows with nectar from bees.
Like smoke from a Syrian incense,
Bakkhos arises with his torch of pine.
He runs, he dances in a whirl of flame,
he rouses the faithful
crazing their limbs with his roar,
while he races the wind,
his soft hair streaming behind.
And his call resounds like thunder:
'Go, my Bacchae, go!

Let Tmolos with its golden streams
reverberate with songs of Dionysos,
and the vibrant crash of drums.
Sing out in joy
with loud Phrygian cries,
while the holy sweet-throated flute
climbs the holy scale and the scaling Maenads climb
up the mountain, the mountain.'
It is then that a girl like me
knows happiness. When she is free,
like a filly playfully prancing
around its mother,
in fields without fences.

(Euripides, *Bacchae* 1–167, trans. M. Cacoyannis, modified)

The madness of these celebrants is controlled and socialized madness (*mania*), as opposed to the uncontrolled frenzy (*lussa*) which later in the play grips those who refuse to recognize the god – Agaue and her women of Thebes, and (see above quotation) Pentheus. The same opposition, between ritualized madness and murderously bestial raving, can also be found in other myths of Dionysos and his epiphanies.

There is, for example, the story of the Minyades, royal princesses of Orkhomenos in Boiotia where Dionysos was raised. They refused Dionysos' appeal, and preferred to remain in the palace weaving, whereas the other women abandoned their usual tasks and spread out over the surrounding countryside up into the mountains, assuming the guise of Maenads (wearing fawnskins, crowned with ivy, and carrying *thursoi*, tambourines and *auloi*). Back in the palace, tendrils of ivy and vine miraculously brought their weaving to a halt, and the princesses, belatedly converted and gripped now by a murderous frenzy, tore one of their own children to pieces and devoured him. But when they wanted to join forces with the other Maenads, the latter drove the Minyades away in horror. Madness and death, in other words, are well within the purview of Dionysos, but only as the price that has to be paid by anyone who has either failed to look the god squarely in the face in order to discover himself or herself through the mask's empty gaze, or deliberately ignored or repudiated him.

The figure of Dionysos was represented in a variety of cultic media. Among these the mask, as depicted on the so-called Lenaia series of Attic vase-paintings, was particularly significant. Here the mask is shown supported either on a stake fixed in the ground or on a sort of truncated column; it is accompanied by an article of draped clothing in the style of the female *peplos* adorned by a fawnskin and fastened by a belt – in other words, Maenads' dress. Dionysos, who is both absent and present in the empty garment, thus offers to those who can recognize him an image both of the Other and of that which makes other.

The means whereby Dionysos gave expression to his power over the vine are yet another instance of the dangerous attraction he exerted for people who did not know how to put his peculiar gifts to beneficial use. God of luxuriant vegetation and moistness in general, he was also the god who introduced the grapevine to Attica. But before the inhabitants of the region had learned how to use wine properly, employing ritual to turn the beverage into an instrument of sociability, a series of disasters occurred. Ikaros joined with some shepherds in drinking the neat wine that Dionysos had given them, but in their drunken stupor the shepherds killed him; his daughter Erigone hanged herself in despair, and the daughters of Attica went mad in consequence.

So in a sense Dionysos stands for the profitable use of madness. Just as Apollo could at the same time both inflict ill and cure it, so Dionysos was the god who both maddened and knew how to cure madness. Dionysiac rituals, which covered the spectrum of transgressive forms of behaviour from omophagy, through the controlled imbibing of wine, to falling into a trance, offered to each individual the chance to experience, in a context that was simultaneously collective and individual, 'the Other' within himself or herself. This was an experiential apprenticeship that could take a person to the limits of madness, unless it were regulated by this 'double god' (as Euripides calls him), at once man and woman.

It becomes comprehensible, then, that the theatre was another of Dionysos' spheres of influence, since in that setting a member of the audience could be or see himself as 'other' for the duration of a dramatic performance. It was also by means of the theatre that Dionysos was able to establish himself at the very heart of

the city under the gaze of all. So far from being content to be recognized only by marginal sects, Dionysos claimed his rightful place as a god on a par with the other divinities of the civic community.

Let us return, finally, to Delphi. In his encounter there with Apollo, Dionysos, the god of enthusiastic possession, found himself side by side with the god of articulate speech, Apollo the 'sonorous', in the sanctuary where the Greeks located the very navel of the earth. It was as if the two modes of communication with the sacred that they represented, the one based on the transmission of clear speech, the other on a bewitching look, had found in Delphi just the place to put down their roots.

THE PANTHEON IN OPERATION: THE CITY OF MANTINEIA (fig. 11)

Every Greek city (and there were more than a thousand in all) honoured a number of gods and heroes with sanctuaries and cults, establishing a hierarchy among them and telling locally adapted versions of their myths. As the pantheon varied from city to city, so the mythology varied accordingly. Nor was the establishment of a city's particular combination of sanctuaries and cults something that was set in stone from its foundation to the end of antiquity. A city's pantheon had its history, in other words, sometimes difficult to reconstruct and even more so to interpret. In the hope of making a contribution towards a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of Greek polytheism, we have thought it useful to select a single city's pantheon as a case-study. Our choice of Mantineia is of course somewhat arbitrary. However, in respect of its size, its by no means first-rank historical importance, and the documentation available, Mantineia does seem to us to be representative of a larger number of cities than the exceptionally complex case of Athens.

Mantineia is located in the Peloponnese, in the northeast of the region of Arkadia and on the border with the Argolis. Its civic territory, measuring some thirteen kilometres from north to south and between four and seven kilometres from east to west, was bounded by those of Alea, Orkhomenos, Megalopolis