

# Dionysus, the God Within Sacrifice, Ecstasy, and Enthusiasm

## I. Introduction

### i. to Greek Religion gods

Greek religion was polytheistic and open-ended. That is, the Greeks worshipped many gods (polytheistic) and were open to the introduction of new, often foreign, non-Greek gods (open-ended). There were literally hundreds of divine beings. These included the so-called Olympian gods—the twelve gods and goddesses who inhabited the heights of Mt. Olympus in northern Greece, the Chthonic or "Earth" gods who were closely associated with death and fertility (Hades, Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus), groups of lesser divine beings (tree nymphs, river gods, ocean nymphs etc.), and many, many semi-divine heroes. Dionysus and Demeter belonged to both the Olympian and the Chthonic categories. The ancient Greeks conceived of all of these divine beings in anthropomorphic (human) form. Each of them had his or her own "sphere of interest", e.g. Apollo was associated with prophecy, law, particular kinds music and dance, and disease and healing.

### cult

Ancient Greek religion did not adhere to a single religious dogma. That is, there was no equivalent in the ancient Greek world of e.g. the Koran or the Bible. There were, to be sure, universal categories of religious worship (e.g. prayers and hymns, processions, offerings, festivals, blood sacrifice, banquets), but every community had its own particular ways of worshipping the members of its divine family. For example, the Olympian goddess Artemis was worshipped as the protecting deity of the political community in ancient Ephesus (located in Turkey), while in Athens she was worshipped as the patron goddess of girls at the time of puberty. We call the particular pattern of worship for a particular deity in a particular place a "cult", i.e. the cult of Artemis at Ephesus. We will be looking at the cults of Dionysus in general and in Athens in particular.

### sacrifice

The Latin phrase *do ut des* (I give in order that you may give) reveals an important aspect of ancient Greek religion. The relationship between worshipper and god was premised on the expectation that the gods would (or at least could) answer the prayers of those who gave them gifts. Thus, prayer (praise and request) and offering (gift) were fundamental forms of worship in the ancient world. The nature of the gift offered depended upon the request, the occasion of the request, and the particular deity to whom the appeal was made.

The fundamental gift to the gods among the ancient Greeks was blood sacrifice. The precise details of a blood sacrifice depended on the occasion, the location, and the god (that is, on the particular cult). But the basic pattern was the following:

1. preparation of the sacrificial community. This might include abstinence from certain foods or from sex, bathing, special clothing, etc.
2. preparation of the sacrificial animal. As a rule only domesticated animals were sacrificed—cattle, sheep, goats. The animals were selected according to sex, color, and age. They were bathed, their horns might be gilded, wreathes might be made to adorn their necks, etc.

3. on the appointed day the sacrificial community and the animals gathered at a designated place and formed a procession that included:

- priest(s) and/or priestess(es)
- a maiden carrying water jar
- a basket carrier with a basket bearing a knife under barley
- the sacrificial animal(s)
- remaining human participants

4. the procession made its way to the altar of the god. Altars were for the most part located in the open air. A fire had already been lighted on the altar.

5. participants formed a circle around the altar to delimit sacred space from profane

6. participants washed their hands

7. priest/priestess sprinkled water on the animal's head to test its acquiescence.

8. preliminary sacrifices

- priest/priestess scatters barley (agricultural offering)
- priest/priestess cuts hairs from the animal's brow and places them on the fire

9. knife is removed from under the barley and the priest/priestess cuts the animal's throat

- women scream (*ololyge*)
- animal's blood is made to flow over the altar

10. animal was carved and distributed according to a set pattern

- innards (*splanchna*) were roasted and consumed by the participants on the spot
- hide was given to the priest/priestess and sold for profit
- thigh bones were arranged on the altar and burned "for the gods"
- meat was divided up among the participants and taken home

The distribution of the sacrificial animal may be understood as a way to organize all animate life:

- gods eat the smoke from sacrifice (and recreate life from the bones)
- humans eat roasted meat
- animals eat uncooked meat

In other words, the modern sentiment "you are what you eat" had an important symbolic function in ancient Greek thought. To be human, for example, was to eat grain and cooked meat. Or again, the famous pomegranate seed that Persephone ate consigned her to the land of the dead (Hades) for part of the year because the pomegranate symbolized blood and death. She quite literally became what she ate, namely one of the "dead", by eating a food associated with the dead. A category of festival celebrated in honor of Dionysus had an

unusual blood sacrifice that required the human participants to eat uncooked meat. We will talk about the implications of this meal together.

#### ii. to Dionysus

As mentioned above, the god Dionysus belonged to both the Olympian and the Chthonic categories of divine being. His "spheres of interest" included fertility (agricultural and human), certain kinds of music and dance, and enthusiastic and ecstatic worship. In more general terms, it is useful to consider him as a god who "confounds opposites". For example, he was regarded both as a native born god and as a dangerous intruder, as a male deity but as somewhat effeminate, as a god who unleashes destructive behavior in humans but also as a god who inspires great creativity, and finally as both an Olympian god and as a Chthonic one.

#### iii. to the Homeric Hymns

A collection of thirty-three hymns (poems sung in honor of the gods) has come down to us under the name "Homeric Hymns". These poems were composed by different Greek poets from different centuries. Most of the Hymns are anonymous (we do not know the names of the poets who composed them). However, they are most certainly NOT the work of a poet named Homer. Some of the Hymns may be as early as the 7th century B.C. (the 600's B.C.). Each of the hymns honors a single god or goddess. They were perhaps composed for recitation, perhaps competitive recitation, during religious festivals. They are a rich source of Greek myth. You will read the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus*.

#### iv. to Greek tragedy

Greek tragic poetry was a uniquely Athenian phenomenon. Like the *Homeric Hymns* tragic poetry seems to have developed in a religious context. In the 5th century B.C. the people of Athens began to hold dramatic competitions during a festival in honor of Dionysus. Greek myths provided the stories for the plays. Every year, Athenian playwrights would be chosen by a special committee to compose three tragedies (a trilogy) each. In some cases all three tragedies dealt with the same myth, in others they seem not to have. The trilogies were performed in competition. The tragedies of three playwrights survive: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. A tragedy is not merely a play with an unhappy ending. Rather, tragedies investigate how individuals grapple with conflicting forces often beyond their control. The tragedy which you will read, *The Bacchae* by Euripides, was performed posthumously sometime around 407 B.C. We do not know the names of the other two tragedies that Euripides composed along with it.

## II. Readings

Barry Powell, "'Myths of Fertility: Dionysus," in *Classical Myth*, pp. 254-287 (Prentice Hall, 2004).

Susan C. Shelmerdine (ed. & trans.), "The Homeric Hymn to Dionysus," in *The Homeric Hymns* (Focus Publishing, 1995).

Paul Woodruff (ed. & trans.), *Euripides Bacchae* (Hackett Publishing 1998).

## III. Study Questions

1. As you work your way through the assigned readings look out for the following themes:

- madness

- opposition
- arrival/intrusion
- destruction and creation

2. The birth myths of Dionysus (see Powell, pp. 256-257). As noted above, Dionysus was numbered among the Olympian gods. The fundamental characteristic distinguishing the Olympian gods from other categories of divine beings and from humankind was their immortality—they are born but they do not die. The birth myths of Dionysus, however, reveal a pattern of birth, death, and rebirth. Dionysus was also numbered among the Chthonic gods. Rituals associated with these gods emphasized fertility. Furthermore, where the Olympian gods were remote and jealous of their status, worship of the Chthonic gods offered the prospect of union with the divine.

2.a. In light of this special function of the Chthonic gods (i.e. union with the divine) what might be the message of Dionysus, a god who is born, dies, and is reborn?

2.b. Cf. Dionysiac ritual (Powell, pp. 280-286) with the stories of the birth of Dionysus.

3. The *Homeric Hymn to Dionysus* presents a theme common to many myths involving the god Dionysus—the failure of mortals to recognize his divinity. The narrative structure of myths that emphasize (or foreground) this theme may be summarized as follows:

Dionysus travels to a new city where he attempts to establish a cult (see definition above) in his honor. The local inhabitants fail to recognize his divinity. In punishment, Dionysus drives the local inhabitants mad. In their madness, they destroy one of their own in what might be called an inverted sacrifice.

Scholars refer to this type of myth as a "Resistance Myth" (Powell, pp. 261-262). The myth that provides the narrative for *The Bacchae*, is a resistance myth

4. Although Powell (pp. 282-286) seems to reject the view that tragedy developed out of a cult to Dionysus, the fact remains that tragedy and comedy were performed during festivals in honor of the god—namely the Lenaia festival (comedy) and the City Dionysia (tragedy). Furthermore, the satyr plays which rounded off each poet's trilogy of tragedies were largely Dionysiac in their character. Satyrs were companions of Dionysus and the satyr plays were ribald. Even the name tragedy (*tragoidos*, 'goat song') is 'goaty' and so potentially Dionysiac insofar as the goat was closely identified with Dionysus. More than any other surviving tragedy, *The Bacchae* concerns itself with a god.

4.a. As you read *The Bacchae*, compare the fate of the characters who fail to recognize the divinity of Dionysus and reject the god with the fate of those who accept Dionysus and worship him freely.

5. Compare the second half of *The Bacchae* (from line 433) with the pattern of Greek blood sacrifice described above. Try to find sections from the second half of the tragedy that correlate with the various steps in a Greek sacrifice. If you are able to do this, do you think Euripides intended for you to do so? And if so, what do you think Euripides' point was in doing so?