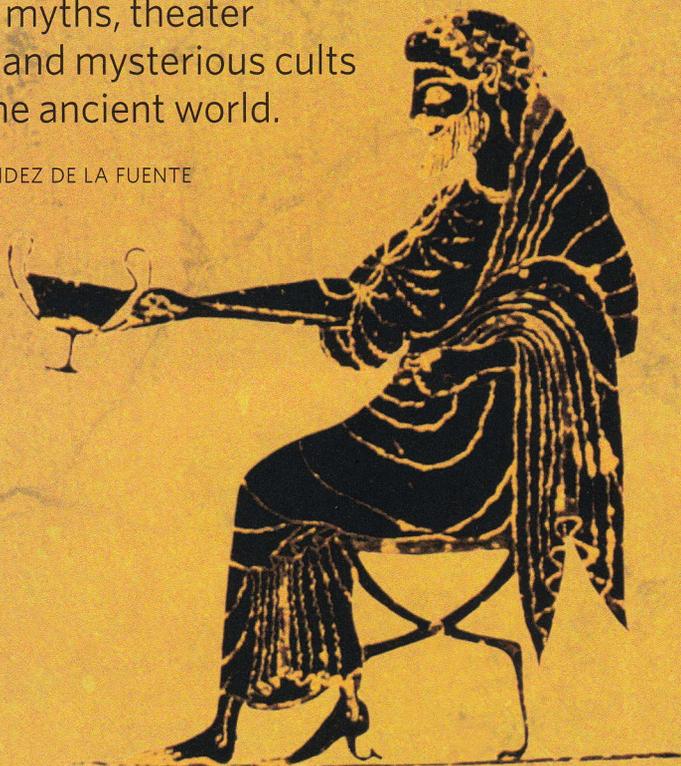


THE WILD GRECO-ROMAN GOD

DIONYSUS

Lord of wine and intoxication, the "twice-born" deity inspired dramatic myths, theater festivals, and mysterious cults all over the ancient world.

DAVID HERNÁNDEZ DE LA FUENTE



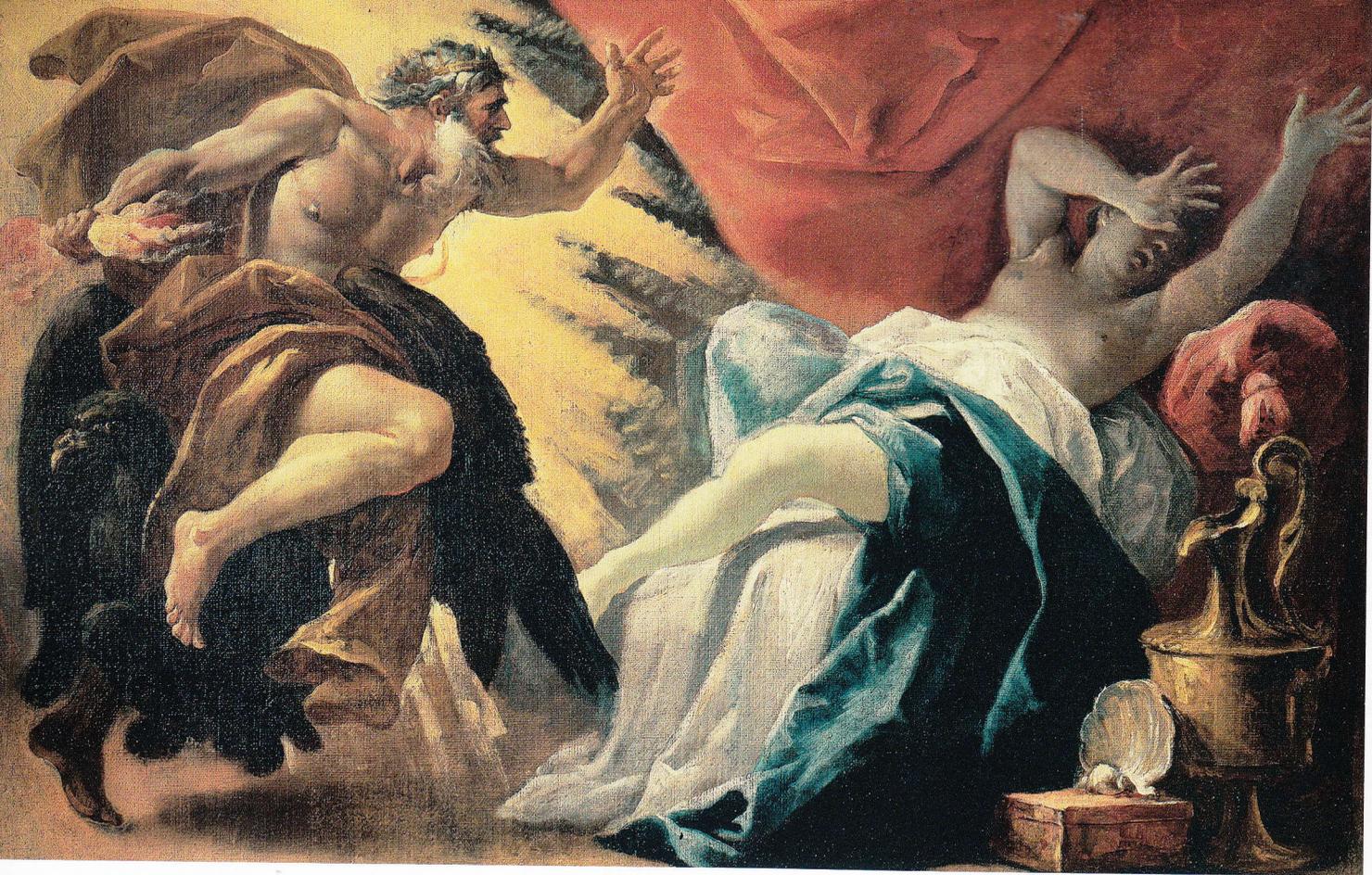
SHAPE-SHIFTER

A youthful Dionysus is crowned with grapes in a first-century A.D. marble statue. Naples Archaeological Museum

Opposite: The god is depicted as an older man on a sixth-century B.C. plate. British Museum

ACI/ALAMY; OPPOSITE: ACI





DEATH AT FIRST SIGHT

Pregnant with Dionysus, Semele perishes after demanding to see Zeus in all his glory. Oil painting by Luca Ferrari, 17th century. Castelvecchio Museum, Verona

SCALA, FLORENCE

Dionysus was so much more than just the master of the vine; he was also charged with fertility, fruitfulness, theater, ecstasy, and abandon. Whether called Dionysus (his Greek name) or Bacchus (his Roman one), he is perhaps the strangest of the gods in the vast classical pantheons. Though his pagan-like cults and mysteries may seem to have existed outside the usual Greco-Roman religious and philosophical spheres, archaeological evidence in the 20th century proved that he was a fully realized god.

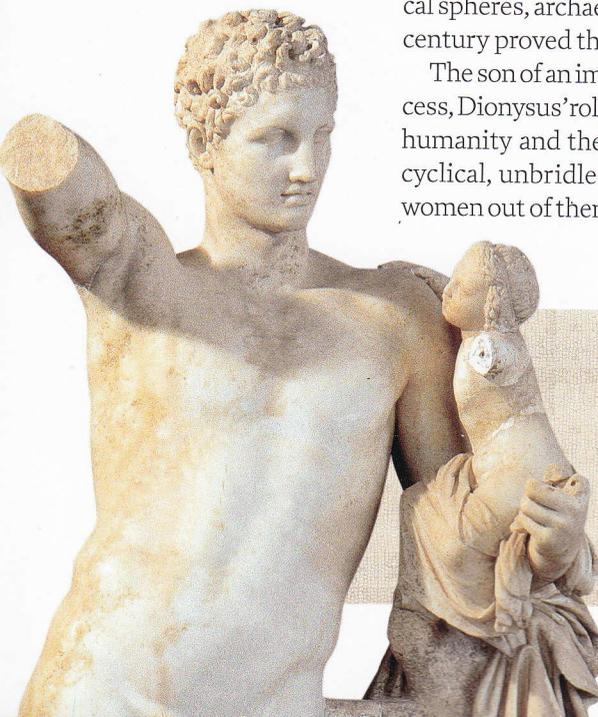
The son of an immortal god and a mortal princess, Dionysus' role forged a crucial link between humanity and the divine, serving as a force of cyclical, unbridled nature who drew men and women out of themselves through intoxication.

In that sense, Dionysus, a genial but wild and dangerously ravishing intermediary, represents one of the enduring mysteries and paradoxes of life.

Dionysus' association with wine embodies this paradox. Wine is a delicious beverage with medicinal properties, but it also intoxicates. It brings liberation and ecstasy, yet, like any initiatory experience, it also introduced the risks of losing hold of identity and control.

Births and Deaths

Many of the myths centered on Dionysus come from different sources. One of the most popular, the *Bibliotheca*, is a first- or second-century A.D. compendium of myths that draws on earlier sources, such as the *Homeric Hymns* from the



GOD OF WINE AND THEATER

13th century B.C.

The name Dionysus appears on clay tablets in Pylos, Greece, written in Mycenaean Linear B script.

ca 7th-6th century B.C.

Three of the *Homeric Hymns* are dedicated to Dionysus, who is described as "ivy-crowned" and the "god of abundant clusters."

THE INFANT DIONYSUS AND HERMES. FOURTH-CENTURY B.C. STATUE BY PRAXITELES FROM THE TEMPLE OF HERA AT OLYMPIA
ALBUM/DEA PICTURE LIBRARY



TEENAGED DREAM

In this oil painting from 1595, Caravaggio depicted Bacchus (the Roman name for Dionysus) as a callow adolescent, his head crowned with grape leaves and a glass of wine in hand. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

SCALA, FLORENCE

ca 6th century B.C.

Athens begins holding an annual spring festival, the Great Dionysia, celebrating theater and dedicated to the god of wine.

ca 405 B.C.

The Athenian playwright Euripides' greatest tragedy, *The Bacchae*, premieres at the Great Dionysia and wins first prize at the festival.

ca 4th century B.C.

Located on the south slope of the Acropolis, the Theater of Dionysus is transformed into an amphitheater that could seat as many as 17,000.

ca 2nd century B.C.

Called Bacchanalia, Roman festivals in honor of Bacchus (Dionysus' Roman name) become so popular the Senate tries to curtail them.

DIONYSUS (CENTER) IS FLANKED BY APOLLO, GOD OF ARCHERY (LEFT), AND APHRODITE, GODDESS OF LOVE (RIGHT FOREGROUND). FRESCO FROM POMPEII. NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, NAPLES

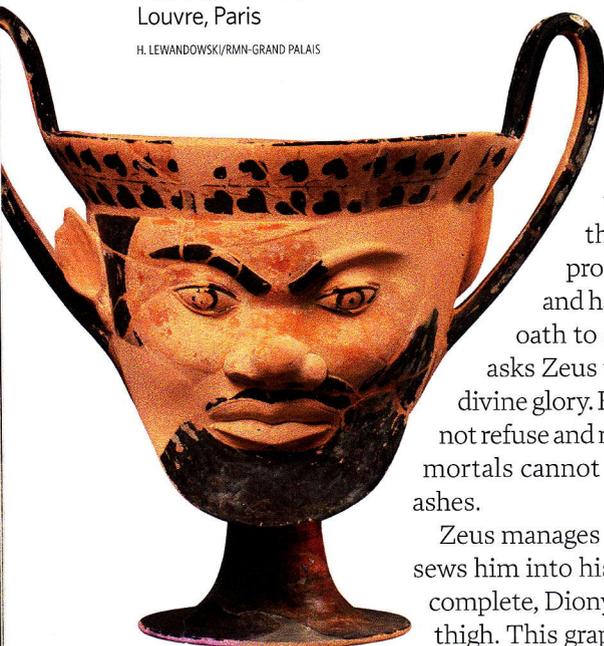
DAGLI ORTI/AURIMAGES



FRIEND AND MENTOR

A loyal friend, tutor, and servant to Dionysus, Silenus was nearly always present in the deity's entourage. His likeness appears on both sides of this *kantharos* (below). 540 B.C. Louvre, Paris

H. LEWANDOWSKI/RMN-GRAND PALAIS



seventh to sixth centuries B.C. as well as earlier Greek plays and poems. These texts supply a standard story of Dionysus' birth: Like many of Zeus's children, Dionysus was not the son of Zeus's wife and queen, Hera, but the product of an extramarital affair. In the *Bibliotheca*, Zeus falls in love with a mortal princess Semele, and the two conceive a child. When Hera discovers the relationship, her jealousy drives her to try to destroy Semele and her unborn son.

Disguised as a mortal, Hera plants a seed of doubt in the young woman's mind that her lover isn't a god and then gives her a way to obtain proof. Semele follows Hera's plan and has Zeus swear an unbreakable oath to grant her any wish; then she asks Zeus to appear before her in all his divine glory. Because of his oath, Zeus cannot refuse and reveals his divinity, a sight that mortals cannot withstand. Semele burns to ashes.

Zeus manages to save their unborn son and sews him into his own leg. When gestation is complete, Dionysus bursts forth from Zeus's thigh. This graphic and gruesome episode is

not an unprecedented one in Greek mythology: Athena, goddess of wisdom and warfare, was born similarly, emerging fully formed from Zeus's head. Dionysus thus became known as the "twice-born god."

After his extraordinary (re)birth, Zeus entrusts the infant Dionysus to the messenger god, Hermes. The baby is shielded from Hera and cared for and raised by nymphs. Hera's jealous rage does not end with Semele's death. She aims to punish Semele's son, too, and decides to drive Dionysus mad. Stricken, the young god wanders aimlessly through the lands east of Greece, winding up first in Phrygia, a kingdom in the west-central part of Anatolia (modern Turkey). There, the mother goddess Cybele—whose own cult was associated with, and apparently resembled, Dionysus' retinue—purifies him, perhaps recognizing a kindred spirit.

Wanderings and Wine

Cured of his madness, Dionysus continues to travel, and he is not alone. In many of the tales surrounding him, he is accompanied by an entourage who worship Dionysus in a state of drunken revelry, holding lavish festal orgia (rites) in his honor. Among them are nymphs called maenads—also known as the Bacchae, or *bacchantes*, who form the crux of his traveling retinue (the *thiasus*).

Pan, the hirsute fertility god associated with shepherds, often took part, along with satyrs and sileni—wild creatures that were part man, part beast. The *thiasus* comprised animals such as big cats (leopards, tigers, lynx) and snakes as well. The group brings the gift of wine wherever it goes.

Dionysus' odyssey takes him from Greece across Turkey and into Asia. Some modern scholars theorize that ancient Greeks believed that anywhere grapevines could be found and wine was cultivated, Dionysus had once visited. When Dionysus reaches India, on a chariot pulled by panthers, he conquers the land with wine and dance rather than weapons and war.

Dionysus encounters different peoples and not all welcome him. Those who reject his teachings are swiftly and brutally punished. In Thrace (parts of modern Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey), he encounters King Lycurgus, who refuses to recognize his status as a god and imprisons his followers. To demonstrate

HEROIC HOMECOMING

Dionysus returns to Greece from India. He is represented here as a child holding bunches of grapes. Around him, maenads, satyrs, and the drunk Silenus venerate this god who has given humanity the precious gift of wine. Oil painting by Pietro da Cortona, ca 1625. Capitoline Museums, Rome

SCALA, FLORENCE





PARTY PEOPLE. IN AN ATTIC RED-FIGURE KRATER FROM 370 B.C., DIONYSUS IS SHOWN MOUNTED ON A LEOPARD, PRESIDING OVER A PROCESSION OF FAITHFUL MAENADS AND SATYRS. LOUVRE, PARIS

H. LEWANDOWSKI/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

FOOTLOOSE AND FANCY FEET

Maenads like this one (below) danced frenetically as part of Dionysus' entourage. Roman copy of a Greek original, first century A.D.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM



his power, Dionysus drives the king insane. Lycurgus kills his own son after mistaking him for a grapevine. Recovering his senses, the king is horrified, but Dionysus is not satisfied. He demands that the king be put to death or no fruit will grow in the kingdom. On hearing that, the king's people seize Lycurgus and feed him to man-eating horses to appease the god.

A similar incident occurs in Thebes, the native city of Dionysus' mother, the princess Semele. The story is the basis of Euripides' dramatic masterpiece of the late fifth century B.C., *The Bacchae*. The god's cousin King Pentheus opposes the Dionysian cult and provokes the god's anger. Pentheus spies on a group of Theban women practicing their bacchanalian rites on a mountainside. The frenzied women—which included Pentheus's own mother, Agave—mistake him for a wild animal, and tear him apart with their bare hands in their intoxication.

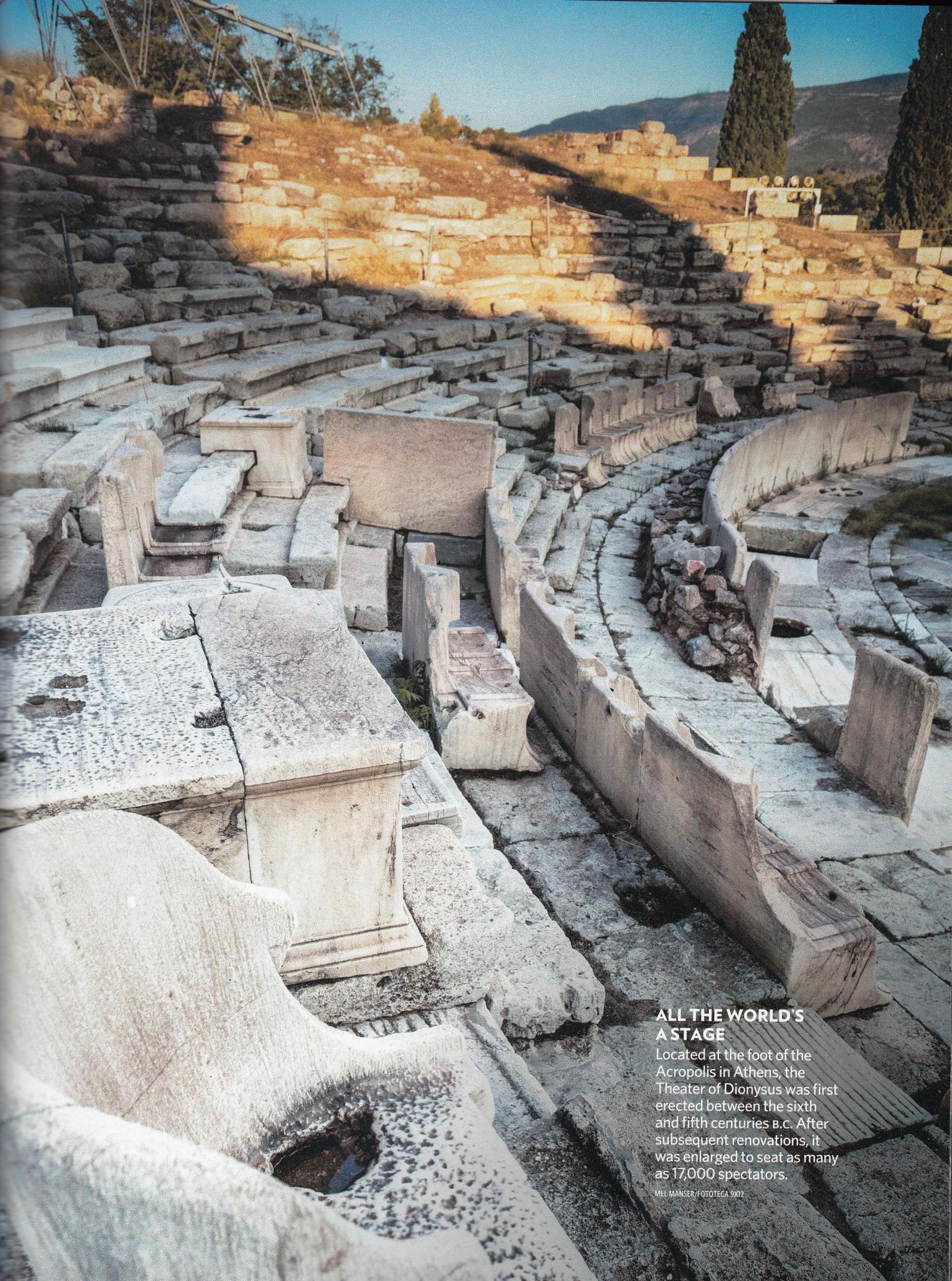
Dionysus was not always cruel. When a band of Tyrrhenian pirates kidnapped the god off the west coast

of what is now Italy, Dionysus responds by having grapevines sprout all over the ship. Realizing they were in the presence of a god, the terrified pirates threw themselves into the sea. Rather than let them drown, Dionysus transformed the sailors into dolphins.

Performance and Mysteries

Worship of Dionysus was not uniform in the classic world. Some of it was public and organized, while other rituals were mysterious and carried out in secret. Many Greeks showed their reverence for Dionysus through festivals; in Rome, where he was called Bacchus, these became the Bacchanalia—wild rituals celebrated at night in forests and mountains. The maenads would enter a delirious state of ecstasy, then—inspired by the personification of Dionysus in the form of a priest—dance wildly before setting out on a hunt.

In Hellenic culture, Dionysus embodied a symbol of communal cohesion and reconciliation, closely connected with the theater. Every March, the city of Athens would hold a festival known as the Great Dionysia (also called the City Dionysia). Dating as early as the sixth century B.C., this dramatic festival lasted as many as six days. On the first day, a procession would open



**ALL THE WORLD'S
A STAGE**

Located at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens, the Theater of Dionysus was first erected between the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. After subsequent renovations, it was enlarged to seat as many as 17,000 spectators.

MEL MANSER/FOTOTECA 9X12



TWO THEATRICAL MASKS—ONE TRAGIC, ONE COMIC—ADORN THIS MARBLE RELIEF FROM THE SECOND CENTURY A.D. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON
BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

DELIRIUM OF THE BACCHAE

The chorus of Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, written around 405 B.C., evokes the Dionysian mystery rites:

"Blessed is he who, being fortunate and knowing the rites of the gods, keeps his life pure and has his soul initiated into the Bacchic revels, dancing in inspired frenzy over the mountains with holy purifications, and who, revering the mysteries of great mother Kybele, brandishing the thyrsos, garlanded with ivy, serves Dionysus."

Euripides describes the ecstasy that Dionysus unleashes among his retinue:

"Go, Bacchae, go, Bacchae . . . sing of Dionysus, beneath the heavy beat of drums, celebrating in delight the god of delight with Phrygian shouts and cries, when the sweet-sounding sacred pipe sounds a sacred playful tune suited to the wanderers, to the mountain, to the mountain!" And the Bacchant, rejoicing like a foal with its grazing mother, rouses her swift foot in a gamboling dance.

FLIPPER FLOP

The legend of Dionysus turning Tyrrhenian pirates into dolphins is depicted on a *kylix*, a shallow drinking cup, from 530 B.C. (below) State Collection of Antiquities, Munich

SCALA, FLORENCE

the festival as a statue of Dionysus was borne to his theater. After the day's performances, a bull would be sacrificed and a feast held.

In the days that followed, ancient Greece's playwrights would present their works—tragedies, comedies, and satyric drama—and compete for top honors. (According to tradition, tragedy was originally related to songs from the Dionysian feast of the *tragos*, goat, and *oidos*, song). Actors who gave the best performances would also be awarded prizes. Those taking first place would be given wreaths of ivy, in a nod to the patron god of wine.

Dionysus was also worshipped through a series of secret rituals known today as the Dionysian Mysteries. These are thought to have evolved from an unknown cult that spread throughout the Mediterranean region alongside the dissemination of wine (though it's possible that mead was the original sacrament).

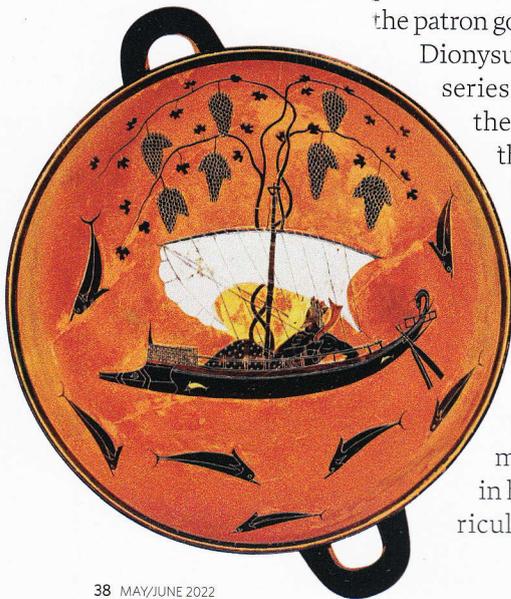
As the patron of the Dionysian Mysteries—secret rites to which only initiates were admitted, such as those performed in honor of Demeter, goddess of agriculture, and later, of Isis (original-

ly from Egypt) and Mithras (originally from Iran)—Dionysus was a disruptive deity, entering civilization and throwing out the established order. When he arrived, liberation and transgression had their turn.

Outsider or Olympian?

At first glance these mysteries, and the orgiastic rites that surrounded Dionysus, seem to run counter to the harmonious and ordered view of classical Greek religion. For this reason, many scholars, especially of the German tradition, for a long time did not believe that Dionysus could be truly Hellenic. They considered him to be a foreign god, perhaps Thracian or Phrygian, and discounted the possibility that the myths around his death and resurrection could be Greek. Positivist scholars of the 19th century argued that Dionysus was an imported rather than a Greek god, and that the maenads existed only in myth and literature.

These preconceptions changed over the course of the 20th century. In 1953, thanks to the decipherment of Linear B script—the writing system used by the Mycenaean civilization, which predates the Greek alphabet by several centuries—researchers learned that Dionysus was indeed known in Greece as far back as the





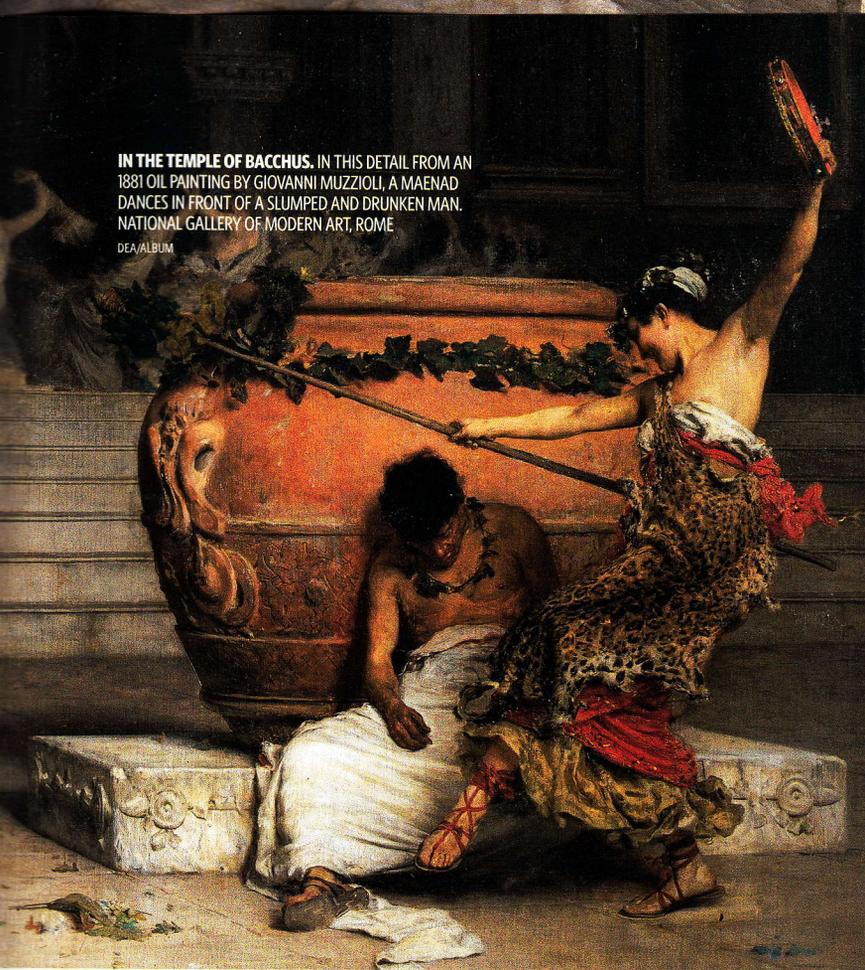
GRUESOME FINISH

The graphic death of the mythical King Pentheus of Thebes is depicted in this fresco from the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. In *The Bacchae*, Euripides recounts how Pentheus was dismembered by a group of maenads—including his own mother, Agave—while the women were in the throes of an ecstatic Dionysian frenzy.

SCALA, FLORENCE

IN THE TEMPLE OF BACCHUS. IN THIS DETAIL FROM AN 1881 OIL PAINTING BY GIOVANNI MUZZIOLI, A MAENAD DANCES IN FRONT OF A SLUMPED AND DRUNKEN MAN. NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART, ROME

DEA/ALBUM



DIVINE MOTHER

The Greco-Roman mother of the gods, known as Cybele from about the fifth century B.C. onward, welcomed and cured Dionysus of madness. Metropolitan Museum, New York

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, SCALA, FLORENCE

13th century B.C. Ancient Mycenaean tablets found in the palace of Pylos, in the Peloponnese region of southern Greece, mention his name and prove that Dionysus was not a god adopted from abroad, but a profoundly Greek divinity.

Evidence of the maenads' existence has been found as well, in Greek inscriptions from various time periods. Apparently there really were groups of women who would reach such a state of delirium, under the influence of Dionysus' priestly incarnation, that they were prepared to rip apart live animals and eat their raw flesh.

Divine Influence

Dionysus was thus a fully Greek god, whose



popularity has spanned different time periods and guises; he is depicted as both a beautifully effeminate, long-haired youth and a corpulent, bearded mature man. The Greek Dionysus and the Roman Bacchus are functionally the same god, but there are a few key differences. Dionysus—a noble, youthful figure in myth and classical literature—is usually listed alongside the 12 Olympian gods. Bacchus, on the other hand, is often seen as a portly older man who, according to the Roman poet Ovid, could be vengeful, using his staff as both a magic wand and a weapon against those who dared oppose his cult and its ideals of freedom.

Surveying different belief systems in the ancient world, it is easy to spot Dionysus' influence in other traditions. The term "Osiris-Dionysus" is used by some historians of religion to refer to a group of gods worshipped around the Mediterranean in the centuries prior to the emergence of Christianity. These gods shared a number of characteristics, including being male, having divine fathers and mortal virgin mothers, and being reborn as gods.

The Egyptian god Osiris, for instance, was equated with Dionysus by the Greek historian Herodotus during the fifth century B.C. By late antiquity, some gnostic and Neoplatonist philosophers had expanded the syncretic equation to include Aion, Adonis, and other gods of the mystery religions. Scholars also note links between the life-giving wine of the Dionysian cult and the centrality of wine in the Christian Eucharist, as well as parallels between the Greek god and Christ himself. The sixth-century B.C. classical cult known as Orphism centered on the belief that Dionysus was torn to pieces and then resurrected. Twentieth-century thinkers such as James Frazer saw Dionysus and Christ in the context of an eastern Mediterranean tradition of dying-and-rising gods, whose sacrifice and resurrection redeemed their people.

Clearly Dionysus continues to cast a long shadow. Given the prevalence and power of wine and early ecstasy, it is no mystery why. ■

HISTORIAN DAVID HERNÁNDEZ DE LA FUENTE IS A SPECIALIST IN CLASSICAL HISTORY, AND ITS LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.

Learn more

The Library of Greek Mythology
Apollodorus (translator Robin Hard), Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

DRAMATIC TRIBUTE

Pergamon, an ancient city in Asia Minor that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, built a massive theater with a capacity for 10,000 spectators. The seating is set into the hillside and faces a temple dedicated to Dionysus, god of the theater.

J. LANGE/GETTY IMAGES



SLEEPING BEAUTY

A Roman sarcophagus from the third century A.D. depicts Dionysus discovering the sleeping mortal princess Ariadne. The pair fell in love, married, and had children, including Oenopian (the personification of wine), Staphylus (associated with grapes), and Thoas.



This magnificent composition depicts a well-known episode from classical mythology. After helping the Athenian prince Theseus kill the monstrous Minotaur, Ariadne, daughter of King Minos of Crete, flees with him. Theseus cruelly abandons her on the island of Naxos, and she is devastated by his abandonment. **1** Ariadne falls asleep and is discovered by **2** Dionysus, who arrives on Naxos accompanied by his retinue. He immediately falls in love with her, and they marry. The decoration of the sarcophagus shows a **3** band of satyrs playing instruments and **4** maenads dancing wildly.

PHOTOS: H. LEWANDOWSKI/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

5 Centaurs appear as well, including **6** a mother holding her little son in her arms. The episode is a fitting scene for a sarcophagus like this one, from the third century A.D.: There is a parallel between a deceased person's hope for salvation after death and the immortality that Dionysus grants Ariadne. Near the top of the facade is **7** a human figure whose features are unfinished. It may have meant to be the deceased, whose features may also have supplied the likeness for the unfinished Ariadne. Likewise, **8** a central blank space at the top was possibly intended for an inscription.



ODDS AND ENDS

The lavish decoration on the sarcophagus, which was discovered in 1805 near Bordeaux, France, continues past the ornate facade to the ends of the tomb. The horned god Pan can be seen playing his flute (left) at one end, while a satyr is seen tending to a child and goat on the other (right). The sarcophagus dates to around A.D. 220-240 and is housed today in the Louvre, Paris.

