



Drunken Secret Masters: The Cults of Dionysos

"[T]he individual, as the modern world knows him, began in that age to emerge for the first time from the old solidarity of the family, and found the unfamiliar burden of individual responsibility hard to bear. Dionysus could lift it from him. For Dionysus was the Master of Magical Illusions, who could make a vine grow out of a ship's plank, and in general enable his votaries to see the world as the world is not."

- - E. R. Dobbs, *The Greeks and the Irrational*

Groups of people, discomfited by the changing world around them, seek collective ecstasy rather than individual existence. Communing "with nature" using drugs, chanting, weird music, and heavy exercise, they enter ecstatic trances, see things their conventional neighbors ignore as delusion, and sometimes run off into the hills or wait on mountains for unknown alien entities. Rumors of child abuse, sexual orgies, and conspiracy to overthrow the government run wild. It's the story of a myriad of cults from today's headlines, and it's a story as old as the hills. The hills of Thrace, north of Greece, specifically, where this cult first sprang up and into history - - and if his cult wrote the script for all its successors, that's only appropriate for Dionysos, god of the masquerade.

"Unarmed they [the Maenads] swooped down upon the herds of cattle grazing there on the green of the meadow. And then you could have seen a single woman with bare hands tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright, in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces."

- - Euripides, *The Bacchae*

The cult of Dionysos reaches back at least into the Archaic Greek world of the 9th century B.C., contemporaneous with Homer, who mentions his ecstatic followers, the Maenads. It may go as far back as Mykenaeen times; inscriptions to "Diwonosos" can be found on the island of Keos dating back to 1400 B.C. (The delightfully exciteable archaeo-anthropologist Marija Gimbutas takes the cult back to 4500 B.C. in the Balkans alone, based on bull-masked phallic figurines from Yugoslavia.) By the reign of Peisistratos of Athens in the mid-6th century B.C., the *tragodoi* ("goat-singers") who alternately sang hymns to Dionysos and represented his horned fertility aspect had specific duties in city ritual - - which the foundation of Greek, and therefore Western, theater. The official Athenian dramatic contests were held during the three Dionysia - - festivals of Dionysos. Which, if we let it, would lead us either back to Yule - - the Lesser Dionysia - - or forward to the Lenaea on Beltane (February 1); between the two is Dionysos' official second birthday, January 6. A selected group of Athenian women of good birth met the women of the oracular city of Delphi on the slopes of Mount Parnassus every two years during the Lenaea

to dance the Dionysian ritual dance, the *oreibasia*, in the bitter cold. (The image of witches dancing with their horned god on the Brocken, or of any number of nights on bald mountains, should be coming to mind now.) This practice, at least, lasted well into the 2nd century A.D.; existing cults of Dionysos can be definitely located as late as the early 6th century.

Dionysian cults melded with Pythagorean mysticism; eventually Dionysos (conflated by now with Osiris) got his own official mystery cult, complete with ritual journeys to the underworld, passwords, and initiatory secrets - - and more drugged wine. The aim of these mysteries was, basically, to fully combine the rational soul and the irrational material world. Plutarch attests that one of the great truths of the Dionysiac mysteries was that the soul could be freed from the body both in the ecstatic rituals (astral projection?) and by death (making ghosts?). The post-Pythagorean mystagogues saw him as a metaphor for philosophical awakening and for "rational intuition."

"How do you know what Dionysus is? . . . What do you think it was we saw? A cartoon? A drawing from the side of a vase? . . . What if you'd never seen the sea before? What if the only thing you'd ever seen was a child's picture - - blue crayon, choppy waves? Would you know the real sea if you only knew the picture? Would you be able to recognize the real thing even if you saw it? You don't know what Dionysus looks like. We're talking about God here. God is serious business."
- - Henry Winter, in *The Secret History*, by Donna Tartt

Which is quite a departure from the god of madness, of drunkenness, of the sheer irrational exuberance of wine and "all the flowing liquids" in the polite tones of Plutarch. He's the "twice-born" god, killed by Titans and resurrected by Zeus, or killed in his mother's womb and rescued by Zeus; distracted by a bull-roarer as a baby, and named the "roaring god," Bacchus. Creator of dolphins, rider of tigers, he wields the sacred fennel stalk that brought fire to mankind, but wraps it in ivy. He journeyed all over Greece, driving men and women mad, watching them kill and eat their children, forcing the Greeks to add him, an unlucky thirteenth god, to Olympus rather than feel his anger. He is named Sabazius and Zagreus and Lenaeos. With so many names, he becomes almost a nameless god: even his 'true name,' Dionysos, simply means "god of Nysa," and nobody knows where Nysa is, although Alexander the Great (himself perhaps channeling the god of wine) thought his discovery of a city in India called Nysa significant. And indeed, intriguing parallels exist between Dionysos and the "nameless god of Kataragama," in Sri Lanka, often considered an aspect of Skanda-Murukan, a son of Shiva and a tutelary god of warriors, kings, yogis, and scholars.

"[T]his god who is the most delightful of all the gods is at the same time the most frightful. No single Greek god even approaches Dionysus in the horror of his epithets, which bear witness to a savagery that is absolutely without mercy. In fact, one must evoke the memory of the monstrous horror of eternal darkness to find anything at all comparable. He is called the 'render of men,' 'the eater of raw flesh,' 'who delights in the sword and bloodshed.' Correspondingly we hear not only of human sacrifice in his cult but also of the ghastly ritual in which a man is torn to pieces."

- - Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*

In its best-known form, the cult used strong (unwatered) wine, ritual dancing (similar to that of the Sufi dervishes), and (possibly) drugs like amanita mushrooms or belladonna to create a sense of "divine madness" in its worshippers. At the height of

their enthusiasm (literally, "god-within-ness") and ecstasy (again, literally, "out of body" experience), the cultists would fall on an animal (or, many classical sources explicitly insist, a human - - J.G. Frazer, of course, is all over it as a sacred-king sacrifice ritual in *The Golden Bough*) and tear it to pieces with hands and teeth, in a fugue state known as *omophagia*. (Giving a nice happy medium between blood-drinking vampires and animalistic werewolves - - Dionysos was a shapeshifting god, too.) They make a fine "wandering hazard" for a good, bloody, **GURPS Greece** game. These wild women, the Maenads, killed Orpheus (either after he refused worship, refused to take part in the ecstasy, or gave himself up as a ritual sacrifice); their cry "I?" gives us not only pages of Lovecraftian dialogue but Dionysos' epithet *Iacchus*, "the roarer," which became *Bacchus*.

These are not necessarily the kinds of activities that you need to have bruited about. This helped drive the Dionysian cults into the form of the mysteries mentioned above. (It's perhaps useful to note here that one of Skanda-Murukan's avatars is *Guha*, "the Hidden," patron of all secret knowledge and covert activities.) And when you're a secret blood cult, it's only a matter of time before the law steps in.

"But never was there in the state an evil of so great a magnitude, or one that extended to so many persons or so many acts of wickedness. Whatever deeds of villainy have, during late years, been committed through lust; whatever, through fraud; whatever, through violence; they have all, be assured, proceeded from that [Bacchanalian] association alone. They have not yet perpetrated all the crimes for which they combined. The impious assembly at present confines itself to outrages on private citizens; because it has not yet acquired force sufficient to crush the commonwealth; but the evil increases and spreads daily; it is already too great for the private ranks of life to contain it, and aims its views at the body of the state."
- - Spurius Postumius Albinus, speech to the Roman Senate (186 B.C.)

And that's just what the Roman law did, in 186 B.C., when acting on a tip from a disgruntled cult member, the Senate outlawed the Bacchanalian cults and executed hundreds of them for crimes of forgery, murder, blackmail, and rape. The Senate found at least 7,000 Bacchantes in Rome, although the real ringleaders seem to have gotten off. (Livy claims the cult's founders were two plebeians and three out-of-towners.) As cults will, the cult of Dionysos went further underground; the *Piso* family crypts denote their devotion to the Horned God of Nysa with detailed carvings. And the *Pisos* eventually became the Antonine Roman Emperors. (David Icke claims that they were Reptoids who wrote the Bible and made up, well, everything.) Which is as good a place as any to mention the Dionysian Architects, who apparently belong to that "rational" Dionysian tradition I mentioned earlier. (Unless they're part of the evil Hawksmoor "dark ley" tradition of ritual murder temples.) According to the usual Freemason suspects, the Dionysian cult built the Temple of Solomon and passed their sacred geometric lore on to the Templars, from whence we join the rest of the Conspiracy, already in progress. (Tim Powers has a nice riff on the Dionysos myth as the true meaning of the *Prieur?de Sion* conspiracy in his novel *Earthquake Weather*.) Intriguingly, Aldous Huxley, one of the pioneers of LSD (drug-fueled visions, anyone?) also wrote about the Dionysian mysteries, and has long been fingered by anti-British conspiratologists as one of the evil geniuses who introduced rock music (ritual dancing, heavy drumbeats) to America. A **GURPS Illuminati** or **Cyberpunk** party who dismisses such rumors as laughable might stumble into a rave and find themselves waking up in an alley covered with human blood. I? I? Dionysos fhtagn!

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