

THE TRIUMPH OF DIONYSIS

Professor Sir John Boardman, University of Oxford

Dionysos was the Greek god of wine, Bacchus to the Romans. He was also a bit of a mystic involved with ritual initiations, and he occupies a major part of the picture stories of Greek art. In early Greece there was a story that he had conquered the whole world, his aim being to demonstrate the importance of wine, and that he met his greatest success in India. It is versions of his triumphal return to Greece that occupied many artists in the Greek and Roman periods and that is my subject today. His regular attendants are satyrs sporting horse tails and ears, and generally drinking and misbehaving, and the more serious woman maenads, who were rather wild and dangerous, handling snakes and tearing animals in pieces. It is a long story – virtually to the present day.

Processions in honour of Greek gods were common enough. Some for Dionysos were rather special and seem to have involved boats, an idea which may have been born, oddly enough, in Egypt [i]. Here is the front of a Greek vase of the mid-6th century BCE, a pleasant vineyard scene. The other side of the vase is less well preserved [ii] here are the fragments; but we can restore them into an intelligible scene like this [iii]. It shows a ship being carried by men.



[i]

[ii]

[iii]

Much is missing but there are satyrs in attendance and the scrap of a boar's head shows that this is a ship; so we may be quite sure that the ship carried an image of Dionysos. The interesting thing is that the vase was found in Egypt, just in a place, Karnak, where there were regular processions involving gods, images or priests being carried on boats [iv].



[iv]

The Greek historian Herodotus thought that some Dionysiac behaviour was inspired by Egypt and it looks as though, as often, he was right. In Athens the god was impersonated by a priest and with satyrs attending, and could be wheeled through the town on a ship for one of his festivals.

For the eastern and Indian connection there is Euripides' record of the god coming from Bactria and India. An Athenian vase [v] of about the same date, 400 BCE, has Dionysos dressed as a Persian and riding a Bactrian camel attended by dancing Persians and women.



[v]

But we shall be looking for something more specific, and as often in Greek mythology, it is a historical event which triggers an artistic response. It was increasingly common in Greek history that important leaders became assimilated to gods and heroes whose exploits were then used to mirror the mortal achievements.

In the 4th century BCE, Alexander, the not-so Great, I would say, was not a Greek, but he liked people to think he was, however badly he treated the Greeks. He resolved on an eastern expedition to destroy the great Persian Empire, the greatest and most liberal of all the ancient empires. He was successful, unfortunately, and it took him to the borders of India and into areas where Greeks, as prisoners of the Persians, had penetrated and settled over a hundred years earlier. He proceeded to kill them. Yet Alexander fancied himself as a Greek god or hero, Zeus or Hercules, but also as Dionysos. It was his triumphant return from India – though he died en route, in Babylon – that triggered stories and scenes of the god's triumphant return from India as a sort of memorial of Alexander's triumph in the same region.

One particular event recorded for us in some detail, demonstrates this. In the late 270s BCE the Macedonian/Egyptian king Ptolemy Philadelphos II mounted a massive procession in Alexandria to celebrate his family. It involved a cast of thousands in chariots and carts, colossal figures of gods and

heroes and of Alexander himself, but the dominant theme was Dionysiac and the god's image was carried reclining on the back of an elephant, while there were plenty of other wild animals, including lions in the procession. This was to be the model for many later regal processions and it contributed to the Roman conception and conduct of a military triumph and its processions, with spoils, prisoners, figures of gods. Pompey the Great, for instance, celebrating one of his eastern victories, included elephants and dressed himself in what was taken for Alexander's own cloak.

It is at about this time, the centuries around 1 BCE/CE that the subject attracted the attention of cameo engravers. Their work is important because they could carve very elaborate scenes on the small surfaces, which were very portable and could serve as models for artists far and wide [vi]. Here, is an important and influential one in the Renaissance Medici collection in Florence. You can see it better like this [vii].



[vi]



[vii]

We see Dionysos supported by a satyr in his chariot under a vine. Notice the little Cupid pushing the wheel, and another one on the chariot pole holding a horizontal torch. And they are pulled by two girls with butterfly wings, which identify Psyche, personification of the soul and Cupid's love, one turning to the other. Here is another [viii], a cameo of glass, the chariot, better seen here [ix], has turned into a flat cart, which we shall see often since it is a useful shape for such scenes.



[viii]

[ix]

On it Ariadne, Dionysos' consort, is seated with the god reclining on her lap. At the corner of the chariot sits a small Psyche playing the pan-pipes. In front is a Cupid holding a torch again, and overhead another with a long scarf. They are all pulled by another winged Psyche figure, a satyr, and perhaps a Pan whose head we see by a break at the edge of the stone. All the figures on these stones get repeated in various ways on other cameos.

Here [x] for instance, the couple are pulled by the two Psyches in the usual pose, one turning to the other, led by Cupid [xi].



[x]

[xi]

Here Eros leads the chariot bearing the couple, and it is drawn by lions. At about this time Mark Antony, after a fairly poor expedition to the east, declared himself a new Dionysos, and posed as such in Egypt. He was also said to have been the first man to manage to harness lions to a chariot – not a scene for antiquity but there is a fine late 19th century bronze group of him and the lions outside a building in Vienna [xii].



[xii]

Otherwise we have to wait a century or two for illustrations of the Dionysiac processions of his triumphant return from India, to the period when other Roman emperors tried to emulate Alexander's successes in the east. There is then a flood of representations of the Dionysiac procession which appear on sarcophagi, which echo the real processions of the day but which in themselves are a rich visual record of the way the classical world viewed its god of wine and his global successes. There is also here not a little hint of promise of immortality. Here are some examples.



[xiii]

[xiii] Dionysos and Ariadne take their ease on a cart drawn here by two musical centaurs, as often. The centaurs have a cupid on their back and there are satyrs leading the procession.



[xiv]

[xiv] Here a similar long cart carries Dionysos as a more senior figure than the last, and with Ariadne in his lap. The cart is pulled again by a centaur and there are satyrs, one with a wine skin behind

Dionysos, and a naked maenad and boy beyond. There is infinite variety of invention on these sarcophagi.



[xv]

[xv] One more. Here the god's cart is pulled by lions, and behind is a rather small elephant with two Indians perched on it. Two warriors behind the cart, recalling that this was a war of sorts.



[xvi]

And finally [xvi] a more relaxed couple, god and consort, on a low cart pulled by panthers, with a cupid driving it and another riding it.

Love, triumph in war, the value of wine and general festivity, are the keynotes for all these Dionysiac sarcophagi recording his eastern triumph.

These examples could easily be multiplied, not just from scenes on sarcophagi but on mosaics – it was a good subject – the success of wine – for a dining room floor, and on tapestries, but for my next example I am going to take you off to the east itself, to a site in north Afghanistan where intruders from the borders of China had settled and were about to found the great Kushan dynasty in north India. The site is called Tillya Tepe and has yielded a group of graves of about the mid-first century CE, well stocked with goldwork which reflects the taste of China, the central Asian steppes and of the Greeks who had, after Alexander, settled there with some success – the so-called Indo-Greek kingdoms. [xvii] This is a tiny gold relief, one of a pair set beside a woman's neck. We see, perhaps better in a drawing [xviii].



[xvii]

[xviii]

Dionysos and Ariadne seated on the back of a monster lion. Dionysos has a cup which is spilling into the drinking horn of a satyr crouching before him. But this is no ordinary wedding because at the top behind Ariadne there is a little Victory crowning her, so there is an element of triumph too. And by this time the artist, Greek or Greek-trained, had introduced some oddities – notice that the satyr does not grow a hairy pelt as he should, but he wears a hairy jacket. And Ariadne has under her Greek dress a thick sleeved garment which is exactly the type worn by the women of the Central Asian steppes. So this is a Dionysiac triumph with some peculiarly local features.

The woman wearing these plaques [xix] was not a Greek but maybe thought she would like to be, given the subject of this and other jewellery she was wearing, and the fact that she had a coin in her hand and another in her mouth, as might any Greek carrying the fee for Charon to ferry her over the river Styx to the underworld.



[xix]

There is another strange eastern echo too, a strange treatment of the right scene in the right place. This [xx] is a gilt silver cup which belonged to the Mirs of Badakshan in north Afghanistan and was perhaps some sort of heirloom. It had been made probably in Parthian Persia in around the first or second century CE. It clearly owes a lot to the scene we saw on the Medici cameo but completely misunderstood. Thus, we have the two women pulling the cart and in the same poses – [xxi] you see it better like this – but they have lost all attachment to it.



[xx]

[xxi]

The Cupids, one with a horizontal torch, the other with a wreath have here been linked together. The cart no longer looks like a cart but a platform, but the wheel below it has the expected Cupid pushing it. Behind skips a satyr in a familiar late Hellenistic-cum-Roman pose and there is a vine overhead

and a little figure seated at the corner of the platform-cum-chariot. But the reclining figure is no longer Dionysos, though he holds a cup, but a Hercules, in a form which he adopts in the east when he represents the Persian god Verethagna – look at the same figure here [xxii] cut in the rock face at Behistun in Persia. So we have a fine reinterpretation of the Dionysos triumph and in the right part of the world but with a changed leading man. This is not the end of it either, because a century or two later the scene is revived in Sasanian Persia [xxiii], for a goddess this time, but with all the usual mistakes and the Cupids obviously don't know what they are meant to be doing with the wheel, below what looks more like a carpet.



[xxii]

[xxiii]

We make something of a leap now, to the Renaissance when artists were discovering again the subjects and figures of classical antiquity and copying them, often accurately but without always understanding what they were copying.

So this [xxiv] is a fine shell cameo at the center of which we see Dionysos sprawling on a cart like the Roman ones, with a cup and being served by satyrs. But the cart is pulled by oxen and there is a lion below with many drinking, dancing and music-making satyrs all around, and a temple in the background. This carries all the essence of the ancient triumphs in a multiplied form.



[xxiv]

The same scheme was also used in real life for victory processions and for ceremonial entrances to towns or palaces. In one, the god is replaced by two princes, but they are pulled by centaurs, as in antiquity, driven by cupids, and with a little cupid pushing at the wheel with others providing a musical accompaniment.



[xxv]

[xxv] This is not as abrupt a change of subject as it may at first sight seem. You remember the Medici cameo. It was studied by contemporary (that is to the Medici) artists, notably Donatello. He designed the roundels which decorate a courtyard in the palace in Florence, and the designs in the roundels were taken from gems in the Medici collection. So [xxvi] here we have, below, the Medici Roman cameo we already saw, and above, Donatello's version for the palace courtyard, with all the usual figures of women and cupids, but the sexes of those on the chariot are changed to make them allegorical figures.



[xxvi]

Now for a change of subject, not as abrupt as it may seem and in a way more local to our venue, scenes of David slaying Goliath, as on this Renaissance gilt plate in New York [xxvii]. The giant is decapitated. The head is important – [xxviii] here is an early single figure study of David with the head.



[xxvii]

[xxviii]

And here [xxix] Donatello's famous version with David as a heroic classical nude in an Easter bonnet. A little diversion now for more of David which will not prove totally irrelevant. Here he is at Hyde Park Corner in London [xxx] celebrating the machine-gun corps in the Great War [xxxi].



[xxix]

[xxx]

[xxxi]

But back to Donatello. We have seen the artist's treatment of the Dionysiac procession already in the roundels. Now look closely at his Goliath's head [xxxii], and especially at his helmet [xxxiii].



[xxxii]

[xxxiii]

Here again is the Dionysiac cart, the high version which was favoured also in Rome for carrying the victorious generals in triumphs, but the figure on the throne here is gaunt and naked, no doubt meant for some crude Philistine god or king. But he is still served by cupids who pull the cart and present him with wine, while one still pushes at the wheel, one of the most engaging and long-lived images from antiquity for such scenes.

So much for antiquity and the Renaissance, whose painters also devoted some attention to the subject, but dwelling rather on Dionysus/Bacchus picking up Ariadne on his return to Greece – as in Titian's famous painting. The story goes on even to the present day. An 18th century neo-classical cameo [xxxiv] recalls even in detail the Roman scenes and especially the Medici cameo.



[xxxiv]

The engraver Natter made a special version, of which we have only his pencil sketch, around the mid 18th century. He made a very elaborate group [xxxv] with the couple as usual in the chariot which is being pulled by lions led by Cupid. A rather wild maenad follows on behind and another holds aloft

a basket of fruit.[xxxvi] And in the nineteenth century the silversmith Storr used the subject as it appeared on cameos to decorate metal vessels, quite true to his models.



[xxxv]

[xxxvi]

Now things get a bit fanciful. Probably the most spectacular 20th century display inspired clearly by the general atmosphere and content of a Dionysiac-cum-circus processions, is Balanchine's choreography in 1942, for a dance by 50 elephants and 50 ballerinas in Ringling's circus, for which Stravinsky composed "Circus Polka", in a spirit of satire on military marches. But the 20th century had not forgotten the real thing, and for not quite my last picture [xxxvii], but not my last remark, we have Dali's splendid version with grotesque satyrs and spindly-leg elephants to draw the cart.



[xxxvii]

I now intend to be somewhat speculative. I have a strong suspicion that the spirit and much of the detail of modern circus parades are not only in the tradition of the old Alexandrian parades for Dionysos but inspired by them. The modern circus and its parades through towns, which are at least

or more important than the performance under the big top, were invented in Britain in the late 18th century. The procession always included wild animals, normally elephants and lions. It was attended by clowns, who match the ancient satyrs, and by women snake-charmers who are the ancient maenads, well known as snake-handlers. They regularly included tableaux of historical figure and events carried on what they called chariots, a number of which were sold to America in the 19th century, where the circus parades have flourished to the present day, through Barnum and Bailey, then the Ringling Brothers, getting more and more watered down today by more correct attitudes to animals, but notable for their length and the time – measured in hours, which they spend going through towns – just like the procession in ancient Alexandria. Here, for example [xxxviii] is the 1890 Mardi Gras carnival procession in New Orleans, where we see wild-animal and winged-horse chariots, fat Silenos riding on his donkey, and piping Pans.



[xxxviii]

To give a little flavour of the circus parades I shall end by reading you an account written by the nephew of the greatest of the modern Dionysoses, John Ringling. The occasion was a circus parade in Boston just a very few weeks before his death in 1936. His nephew describes the procession and scene in some detail –

"the three-mile-long line of tableau wagons, cages, band wagons, elephants, horses, clowns, and steam music-calliopes snarled up traffic for hours; only the spectacular driving of Jake Posey at the reins of the forty-horse hitch of the band wagon averted a massacre when the brakes failed on the seven-ton vehicle with its iron-shod wheels. The horses began to run down Beacon Hill in Boston like a cavalry charge toward the crowd massed at the end. I saw the eight horses with nodding plumes of the band wagon round the corner. Then the full blast of sound hit us, the gay, raucous blare of brass playing circus music. It got louder and behind the tootling musicians. I could see red-and-gold howdahs rolling and pitching on the stately gray backs of the elephants. There went the ferocious, man-eating hyenas, the dusty brown bear, and the glowering bald eagle; elk, lions, monkeys, a deer; Aunt Louise wrapped in a boa constrictor; and, very proudly, Babylon and Fannie, those first ponderous pachyderms. A multi-team hitch of horses that filled the whole thoroughfare from curb to curb, pulling a crimson-and-gold wagon as long as a railroad car with thirty musicians playing for dear life. A herd of forty elephants in gorgeous trappings with gorgeous girls on their backs. Another stream of horses drew the Bell Wagon, its carillon chiming sweetly after the noise of the band. Clowns cavorted along, cage after cage of sleek, pacing jungle beasts were followed by the open dens with tamer creatures – Louise, the hippo, and Katy, bowing her long reticulate head. Then,

blasting us with its cacophony until the buildings seemed to rock, came the biggest steam calliope of them all.

Uncle John was sitting motionless in his chair and tears were streaming like miniature cascades from his eyes. He pushed himself out of his chair with enormous difficulty, and clung to my shoulder. 'Time to go home, Buddy,' he said."

And time for me to end my tribute to Dionysoses old and new.

***But there is more from the 20th Century, a poem,
not a picture, which I came across only the other day.***

***A poem by James Elroy Flecker, who gave us the Golden Road to Sanmarkand. He called it The
Ballad of Hampstead Heath.***

Here are four verses:

*From Heaven's Gate to Hampstead Heath
Young Bacchus and his crew
Came tumbling down, and o'er the town
Their bursting trumpets blew.*

*From London houses, huts and flats,
Came busmen, snobs and Earls,
And ugly men in bowler hats
With charming little girls.*

*Far in a rosy mist withdrawn
The God and all his crew,
Silenus pulled by nymphs, a fawn,
A satyr drenched in dew.*

*And one spoke out into the night
Before they left forever,
'Rejoice, rejoice!' and his great voice
Rolled like a splendid river.*