

Dionysus, God of Mythic Madness

by Laurel

Dionysus, god of wine, women, and song, or at least that's how many picture him. He was also vital to fertility and natural instinct. Called the 'twice-born', Dionysus was plucked from Semele's, his mother, womb when she was struck dead by Zeus's overwhelming brilliance. Zeus then stitched his son up in his thigh until the proper time for him to be born (in Greek medicine, gestation lasted until the 10th month). He spent his early childhood in the care of his aunt and uncle, Ino and King Athamas of Orchemenes and grew up with the nymphs of Nysa, whom Zeus later transformed into the constellation Hyades.

Madness and excessive violence were an integral part of Dionysian myth. Hera tricked Semele into discovering her lover's true nature, leading to her violent death by thunderbolt. Next Hera drove Ino and King Athamas mad because they took care of the boy. Then she drove Dionysus mad and he spent the next several years wandering outside of Greece, traveling as far as India. He eventually came to Phrygia where Cybele cured his insanity. He then returned to Greece, converting it bit by often bloody bit to his worship, continuing the trend of violence and madness while converting an oft times reluctant Greece to his worship. King Lycurgus of Thrace killed his son and then sawed off his own leg, thinking it a tree. The oracle at Delphi revealed that his death would appease the angry god. So his subjects had him pulled apart by horses. In Thebes, he drove King Penthus's mother Agave mad and then talked the king into spying on the women during the Bacchanalia. The women, lead by his mother, tore him apart, mistaking him for a wild animal. And in Argos, he drove the king's daughters into madness, whereupon they tore apart and devoured their infant children and then roamed the countryside lowing like cattle.

Wine wasn't indigenous to many of the lands Dionysus visited. He taught man to make wine. To those unfamiliar with the affects of too much wine, the experience can be frightening. In Athens, the humble Icarius learned the god's gift of making wine. He shared the drink with his neighbors who, upon becoming drunk, feared they'd been poisoned and killed him. Many rulers, including those mentioned above, wanted nothing to do with Bacchanal drunkenness in their lands and so forbid them, often with fatal results. There is a fine line between man and civilization and the realm of the animal and loss of civilization. Dionysian rites offered man, and more importantly women, a regulated outlet to lose some of that tight control and release pent-up steam and aggression, to experience instinct over intellect. Most of this followers were women and those of the lower classes in Greek society - the people who's lives were more regulated than the typical aristocratic male. Celebrating the civic Bacchanalia helped maintain civilization as the Greeks saw it.

In appearance, Dionysus was a beautiful, almost feminine man who wore the peplos of a woman. His male followers tended to do likewise. However, most of his followers were usually women, called Maenads, who wore fawnskins and carried the thyrsus, a staff wreathed in ivy or grapevine and topped with a fir cone. They wandered the countryside well into the night in religious frenzy, killing small animals and eating their flesh raw.

One of his greatest worship sites was at Delphi, where he shared the temple with Apollo. During the winter months when Apollo was away with the Hyperboreans, Dionysus reigned in Delphi. His tomb was in the main part of the temple. Apollo represented purity and civilization at its ideal, while Dionysus was representative of boundaries and the crossing of them, losing control of oneself, only to emerge having stronger, with greater knowledge of oneself for having stared into the abyss of madness.

For Further Reading:

Dixon-Kennedy, Mike. *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology*. ABC-CLIO: Santa Barbara, 1998.

Powell, Barry. *Classical Myth*. 2nd Ed. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1998.

Zaidman, Louise Bruit and Pauline Schmitt Pantel. *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*. Translated by Paul Cartledge. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, England, 1994.



Dionysus' children include Deianira, future wife of Herakles, and Priapus, the fertility god with the large phallus.

Theseus had abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos, where Dionysus found and married her. Upon her death, the marriage crown he'd given her was placed in the night sky in memorial as the constellation Corona Borealis, or Northern Crown.