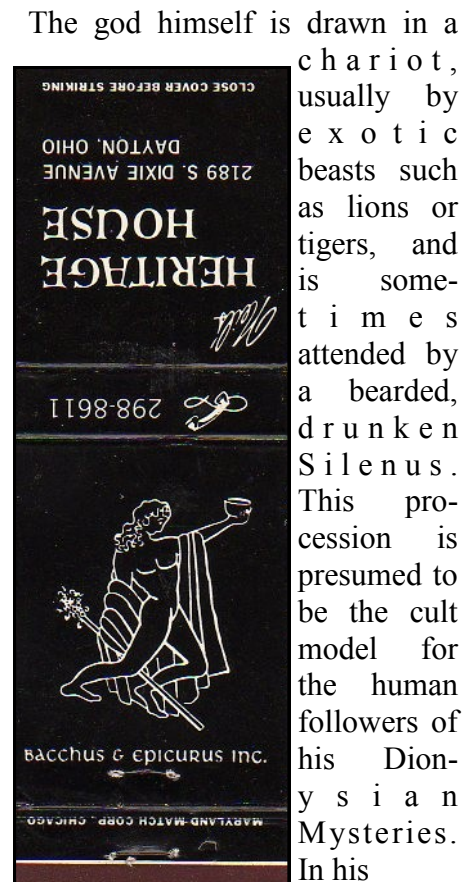


Myths & Tales:

Bacchus! Now, *here's* a god! God of the grape harvest, winemaking and wine, of ritual madness and ecstasy in Greek mythology. To the Greeks, he was Dionysus. His name in Linear B tablets shows he was worshipped from c. 1500—1100 BC by Mycenaean Greeks (those are the ones who conquered Troy). Other traces of a Dionysian-type cult have been found in ancient Minoan Crete. His origins are uncertain, and his cults took many forms; some are described by ancient sources as Thracian, others as Greek.

In some cults, he arrives from the east, as an Asiatic foreigner; and in others, from Ethiopia in the South. He is a god of epiphany, "the god that comes", and his "foreignness" as an arriving outsider-god may be inherent and essential to his cults. He is a major, popular figure of Greek mythology and religion, and is included in some lists of the twelve Olympians. His festivals were the driving force behind the development of Greek theater.

The earliest cult images of Dionysus show a mature male, bearded and robed. He holds a fennel staff, tipped with a pine-cone and known as a thyrsus. Later images show him as a beardless, sensuous, naked or half-naked youth: the literature describes him as womanly or "man-womanish". In its fully developed form, his central cult imagery shows his triumphant, disorderly arrival or return, as if from some place beyond the borders of the known and civilized. His procession (thiasus) is made up of wild female followers (maenads) and bearded satyrs. Some are armed with the thyrsus; some dance or play music.



The god himself is drawn in a chariot, usually by exotic beasts such as lions or tigers, and is sometimes attended by a bearded, drunken Silenus. This procession is presumed to be the cult model for the human followers of his Dionysian Mysteries. In his

Bacchus

Thracian mysteries, he wears the bassaris, or fox-skin, symbolizing a new life. Dionysus is represented by city religions as the protector of those who do not belong to conventional society and thus symbolizes everything which is chaotic, dangerous and unexpected, everything which escapes human reason and which can only be attributed to the unforeseeable action of the gods.

He was also known as Bacchus, the name adopted by the Romans, and the frenzy he induces, bakkheia. His thyrsus is sometimes wound with ivy and dripping with honey. It is a beneficent wand but also a weapon, and can be used to destroy those who oppose his cult and the freedoms he represents. He is also the Liberator, whose wine, music and ecstatic dance frees his followers from self-conscious fear and care, and subverts the oppressive restraints of the powerful. Those who partake in his mysteries are possessed and empowered by the god himself. His cult is also a "cult of the souls"; his maenads feed the dead through blood-offerings, and he acts as a divine communicant between the living and the dead.

In Greek mythology, he is presented as a son of Zeus and the mortal Semele, thus semi-divine or heroic: and as son of Zeus and Persephone or Demeter, thus both fully divine, and possibly identical with Iacchus of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Some scholars believe that Dionysus is a syncretism of a local Greek nature deity and a more powerful god from Thrace or Phrygia such as Sabazios or Zalmoxis. *[but, of course, I'm sure you already knew that!]*

When Dionysus grew up, he discovered the culture of the vine and the mode of extracting its precious juice; but Hera struck him with madness, and drove him forth a wanderer through various parts of the earth. In Phrygia, the goddess Cybele, better known to the Greeks as Rhea, cured him and taught him her religious rites, and he set out on a progress through Asia teaching the people the cultivation of the vine. The most famous part of his wanderings is his expedition to India, which is said to have lasted several years. Returning in triumph, he undertook to introduce his worship into Greece, but was opposed by some princes who dreaded its introduction on account of the disorders and madness it brought with it.

Dionysus was exceptionally attractive. One of the Homeric hymns recounts how, while disguised as a mortal sitting beside the seashore, a few sailors spotted him, believing he was a prince. They attempted to kidnap him and sail him far away to sell for ransom or into slavery. They tried to bind him with ropes, but no type of rope could hold him. Dionysus turned into a fierce lion and unleashed a bear onboard, killing those he came into contact with. Those who jumped off the ship were mercifully turned into dolphins. The only survivor was the helmsman, Acoetes, who recognized the god and tried to stop his sailors from the start. filled the vessel with ivy and the sound of flutes so that the sailors went mad and, leaping into the sea, were turned into dolphins.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus>]

