Dionysus Unmasked

"Even today everything is still there for a philologist to discover and excavate in this area! Above all the problem that a problem exists here—and that, for as long as we have no answer to the question, 'What is Dionysiac?', the Greeks will remain as utterly unknown and unimaginable as they have always been…"[1]

"Little agreement has been reached, except on one cardinal point. Virtually everybody who has an informed opinion on the subject seems to concede that a balanced and unified view of Dionysus and his place in history is not only difficult to achieve but is essentially incompatible with the complexity of the god and with his disparate manifestations…In short, Dionysus defies definition."[2]

"The primeval is that which is most alive—in fact, it alone is truly alive. It is not the subjective talent of the artist which gives the creations of Greek myth their incomparable vitality, quickening man's pulse as they have through the ages; but it is the appearance of the primeval world which these creations have been able to evoke."[3]

Few mysteries from the ancient world have proved as elusive and daunting as the original nature of Dionysus. A century and a half after Nietzsche first threw down the gauntlet the challenge remains: Who or what was Dionysus and what does this tell us about Greek religion and drama?

The pessimism prevailing in modern classical scholarship vis a vis the possibility of recovering the fundamental essence of Dionysus is palpable. The sense of despair evident in Albert Henrichs' quote above is echoed by virtually every top scholar in the field, most of whom have seemingly abandoned any hope of offering a unified portrait of the god. Witness the final sentence in Walter Burkert's magisterial *Greek Religion*: "Beneath this exterior the god and his activity remain mysterious and incomprehensible."[4] The mystery surrounding Dionysus, in turn, is inextricably related to another fundamental mystery: Whence derives the inspiration for the great gods of antiquity?

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[1] F. Nietzsche, "An Attempt at Self-Criticism," as reproduced in R. Geuss & R. Speirs eds., *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 6.
[2] A. Henrichs, "Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence," in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* (London, 1984), p. 209.
[3] W. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (Bloomington, 1965), p. 120.
[4] W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 167.

As in the Euripidean myth attached to his birth, Dionysus suddenly appears like a bolt out of the blue, with nary a hint of his point of origin or fundamental nature. The fact that his name appears already in the Linear B tablets from the middle of the second millennium BCE confirms that his cult is more archaic than previously believed. Mystery rites celebrating the god are attested throughout the Mediterranean region, yet the precise details of the mysteries themselves, like the god at their center, remain opaque at heart and the stuff of endless speculation.

The origins of Greek drama are equally obscure. Scholars are agreed that tragedy originated as part of a religious ritual performed in honor of Dionysus, and that circling dances, singing, and music featured prominently.[5] Indeed, it was these "choral dances" associated with the god that eventually became central to Greek drama.[6] It is evident that the god's mystery rites are alluded to in extant Greek tragedies, albeit in an allusive and figurative fashion.[7] Questions abound as to why tragedy was rooted in the worship of Dionysus: "Quite why all tragedy, indeed all drama, at Athens was performed under the sign of Dionysus is still found problematic."[8]

It is commonly agreed that the modern study of Dionysus begins with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1872. Certainly Nietzsche's book sparked renewed interest in the Greek god, particularly in the 20th century.

For Nietzsche, it was the sufferings of Dionysus himself that formed the religious context for Greek tragedy, acted out in the whirling chorus-dances and music attending the mad god's epiphany.[9] Early on in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the philologist cum Philosopher

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[5] H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus* (Leiden, 1990), p. 132.
[6] E. Csapo, *op. cit.*, p. 268. See also A. Henrichs, "Dionysus," in S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 2003), p. 481: "The choral dance is the most palpable link between Attic drama and Dionysiac ritual."
[7] R. Seaford, "Sophokles and the Mysteries," *Hermes* 122 (1994), p. 275.
[8] P. Cartledge, " 'Deep Plays': theatre as process in Greek civic life," in P. Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 8.
[9] R. Geuss, "Introduction," in R. Geuss & R. Speirs eds., *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1999), p. xi. See also P. Easterling, "A show for Dionysus," in P. Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 52.

opined that the Dionysian impulse was most familiar in the orgiastic celebrations that so often mark spring in cultures around the globe:

"Schopenhauer has described for us the enormous *horror* which seizes people when they suddenly become confused and lose faith in the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world because the principle of sufficient reason, in one or other of its modes, appears to sustain an exception. If we add to this horror the blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown of the *principium individuationis* occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the *Dionysiac*, which is best conveyed by the analogy of *intoxication*. These Dionysian stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting, awaken either under the influence of narcotic drink, of which all human beings and peoples who are close to the origin of things speak in their hymns, or at the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life. In the German Middle Ages, too, ever-growing throngs roamed from place to place, impelled by the same Dionysiac power, singing and dancing as they went; in these St. John's and St. Vitus' dancers we recognized the Bacchic choruses of the Greeks, with their pre-history in Asia Minor, extending to Babylon and the orgiastic Sacaea."[10]

More than a decade later, in an introduction added to a slightly revised edition of his one and only venture into Greek religion, Nietzsche speculated that the Dionysian rites were inspired by some hitherto unknown visual stimulus. There he wrote as follows: "Were there visions and hallucinations which conveyed themselves to entire communities, entire cultic assemblies?"[11] As we intend to argue in this essay, this is *exactly* what happened.

There is no denying Nietzsche's claim that the peculiar rites associated with Dionysus find remarkable parallels in the religious rituals familiar from the ancient Near East, especially those associated with the Great Mother and her variously named paramour

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[10] *Ibid.,* p. 17.
[11] *Ibid.,* p. 7.

(Dumuzi, Adonis, Attis, etc.).[12] It is in Cybele's cult that we find the general upending of normative culture marked by orgiastic rites of excess, prodigious bouts of drinking, transvestism, and frenzied dancing.[13] So, too, the rites associated with Cybele were renowned for the shrill, unsettling sounds of the tympanon and the aulos, instruments singled out by Euripides as characteristic of Dionysus's nocturnal rites.

Analogous rituals were also characteristic of the cults associated with the Sumerian Inanna, Akkadian Ishtar, Egyptian Isis, and other goddesses from the ancient Near East. Especially relevant is the sacred marriage rite centered around the Sumerian goddess Inanna, attested already late in the third millennium BCE: Here the local king, emulating Dumuzi, allegedly had sexual intercourse with Inanna (as the planet Venus) in an apparent effort to secure fertility for the land and apotheosis for himself.

Dionysus himself was involved in a sacred marriage ritual in the Anthesteria, the god's oldest festival at Athens. Here the mad god was united in marriage with the wife of the local king:

"The union of the Anthesteria festival meant that the God was married to the Basilinna on the day he came back from the underworld. The mythical reflection is Ariadne, who marries Theseus…and the annual marriage that the Athenians celebrated between Dionysos and the queen of the city provides the ritual example. Since the union was performed during a spring-and-flower festival, the ritual was meant to make the earth fertile and renew the fertility of the animals."[14]

In ancient Mesopotamia, the ritual *hieros gamos* was attended by a strange coterie of effeminate men, castrates, and transvestites, who danced "*entheoi*" to the discordant

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[12] H. S. Versnel, *Triumpus* (Leiden, 1990), p. 237 observes of Dionysus that: "There is no Greek god who so fully conforms to the type of Asiatic 'dying and rising' god as he does."

[13] G. Gasparro, *Soteriology and the Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis* (Leiden, 1985), pp. 9-12.

[14] E. Håland, *Greek Festivals, Modern and Ancient* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 118. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 239 observes: "Nowhere else does Greek literature speak so clearly of a sacred marriage ritual."

music produced by pounding drums and various pipe instruments.[15] According to Sumerian texts describing the sacred ritual, these so-called *assinnu* and *kurgarru* cavorted with swords and bespattered themselves with blood before the Great Goddess.[16] Such rituals find a striking analogue in the cult of Dionysus:

"Philostratos relates that in Athens there were 'effeminate dances' (by men) at this festival [Anthesteria], to the sound of the flute, accompanied by Orphic poetry, parodying the role of the Horai, Nymphs and Bacchants."[17]

The sacred practices associated with these goddesses regularly included ritual processions in which a god or goddess is brought from afar amidst much pomp and celebrated as if returned or somehow reborn. Here, too, an emphasis on the discordant sounds accompanying the procession is everywhere apparent. Apuleis described the procession of Isis as follows:

"Then followed a great crowd of the Goddess's Initiates, men and women of all classes…The Goddess's bright earthly stars, they carried rattles of brass, silver, and even gold, which kept up shrill and ceaseless tinkling."[18]

Egyptian artworks depicting the dancers accompanying the Great Goddess in procession show gyrating women with disheveled hair, shaking their heads wildly. Such scenes find a precise parallel in archaic Greek artworks depicting Dionysus's maenads, where the raving dancers loose their hair while shaking their heads and whirling about.[19] Hence Euripides' reference to "hair streaming wildly for the revelry of Bromios."[20]

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[15] P. Lapinkivi, *The Sumerian Sacred Marriage* (Helsinki, 2004), pp. 159-166.
[16] See lines 76-80 from "Iddin-Dagan A," in J. Black et al, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/) (Oxford, 1998). Hereafter *ETCSL*.
[17] M. Guia, "Redefining Dionysos in Athens from the Written Sources," in A. Bernabé et al eds., *Redefining Dionysos* (Berlin, 2013), p. 114.
[18] *Metamorphoses* XI, 10 as translated in R. Graves, *The Golden Ass* (London, 1950), p. 276.
[19] See plates 1-3 and 6 in W. Otto, *Dionysus* (Bloomington, 1965). According to R. Seaford, *Euripides Bacchae* (Warminster, 1996), p. 165: "The back-flung head and shaking of (long) hair by Dionysus and his worshippers is frequent in vase-painting

Granted that the religious rituals associated with Dionysus and the Great Mother share a set of specific thematic patterns in common, the question arises as to whether they are the product of diffusion from a common source or, rather, originally inspired by analogous experiences? This line of thought, in turn, begs the following question: Is it possible to identify the original historical stimulus behind such archaic and widespread ritual practices?

Inanna's identification with the planet Venus provides the all-important clue: As we have documented elsewhere, the peculiar cultic practices associated with the Queen of Heaven trace to celestial determinants and are best understood as ritual reenactments of extraordinary astronomical events.[21] The sacred marriage between Inanna and Dumuzi, for example, commemorates an extraordinary conjunction of Venus and Mars. If so, and given our reasoning above, it follows that a detailed study of Dionysus's mythus and cult will reveal unequivocal evidence of astronomical determinants.

In fact, there is a wealth of evidence that Dionysus and his strange retinue have a stellar origin, much of which has been downplayed by Classical scholars. Most famously, perhaps, Aristophanes describes Dionysus as the "light-bearing star in our nocturnal rite."[22] As we will discover, Aristophanes' testimony is not isolated in this regard.

If Dionysus's epiphany is marked by the sudden appearance of a light-bearing star—*phosphoros aster*—it was also distinguished by the presence of an eerie entourage of fire-breathing stars.[23] As evinced by Sophocles, the stars in question are explicitly compared to the dancing maenads (here named Thyiads):

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and literature." H. S. Versnel, *op. cit.*, p. 147: "Most pictures show the maenads in an ecstatic dance violently tossing their heads."

[20] Line 1364 from *Helen* as translated by E. P. Coleridge in W. Oates & E. O'Neill, *The Complete Greek Drama, Vol. 2* (New York, 1938).

[21] E. Cochrane, *On Fossil Gods and Forgotten Worlds* (Ames, 2012), pp. 71-123.

[22] *Frogs*, 342 as translated by Ian Johnston, *Aristophanes Frogs* (Arlington, 2008), p. 35. See also C. Kerenyi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton, 1976), p. 79.

[23] R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 32 notes that Dionysus "is unique among the gods in the extent to which he is accompanied by a cortege, his thiasos."

"O thou with whom the stars rejoice as they move, the stars whose breath is fire; O master of the voices of the night; son begotten of Zeus; appear, O king, with thine attendant Thyiads, who in night-long frenzy dance before thee, the giver of good gifts, Iacchus!"[24]

Notice the explicit reference to fire-breathing stars, here conceptualized as rejoicing upon the god's dramatic epiphany. How else, but as a description of some sort of celestial apparition, is it possible to understand these allusions to Dionysus as a "light-bearing star" and "chorus-leader of fire breathing stars"?[25]

Additional testimony with regards to the stellar nature of the mad god and his retinue is provided by the recently discovered paean to Dionysus inscribed at Delphi by Philodamus of Scarpheia (circa 340 BCE). In the opening lines of the hymn the entire universe is described as dancing and rejoicing at the birth of the divine child: "And all the [imm]ortals [d]anced, and all the mortals r[ejoiced] [at your] birth, Bacchian."[26] Dionysus, in turn, is implored to show his "starry self": "You yourself, your starry body displaying, with Delphian girls took your place on the folds of Parnassus."[27]

In her learned commentary on this paean, Pauline LeVen would interpret the stellar imagery as a projection of ritual practices onto the celestial landscape. Witness her summary statement:

"The 'starry self' of Dionysus could be interpreted as a reference to the torches of the maenads, dancing on Mount Parnassus, in a tame version of the description of Dionysian crazed possession. It can also be a reference to the traditional poetic idea that a chorus of

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[24] Lines 1146-1152 from *Antigone* as translated in W. Oates & E. O'Neill eds., *The Complete Greek Drama, Vol. 1* (New York, 1960), p. 454

[25] A. Bierl, *Time and Space in Ancient Myth, Religion and Culture* (Berlin, 2017), p. 126: "Dionysus is often notionally envisaged as a virtual divine *choregos* or *exarchos*."

[26] Lines 8-9 as translated in E. Bowie, "Time and Place, Narrative and Speech in Philicus, Philodamus, and Limenius," in A. Faulkner & O. Hodkinson eds., *Hymnic Narrative and the Narratology of Greek Hymns* (Leiden, 2015), p. 101.

[27] Lines 21-23 as translated in E. Bowie, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

stars replicates in the skies the dance of the human worshippers; see, e.g. Eur. *Ion* 1074-9.[28]

It is our view that LeVen has the true situation exactly backwards: It is not the maenads' torches that are being likened to a star, rather Dionysus himself, presumably because he was manifest as a star and fire-like in appearance. Nor, for that matter, are we to understand the circling dances of the god's worshippers as being projected onto the stars, rather the very opposite: It was the extraordinary spectacle presented by "fire-breathing stars" circling around a stellar god in the skies overhead that was reenacted in the ritual practice of dancing around Dionysus (see below).

LeVen is right about one thing: The idea that choral dances were somehow related to circling stars does indeed represent a recurring theme in Greek cosmological tradition.[29] The very word *Xoreia* suggests any circular motion and was commonly employed with respect to the stars.[30] Thus it is that Euripides, in a description of Achilles' shield, alludes to "the heavenly choruses of stars, Pleiades, Hyades, bringing defeat to the eyes of Hector."[31] The same poet elsewhere celebrates the "bright choir of beauteous dames" among Zeus's circle: "When Zeus's star-eyed sky has begun its choral dance…"[32] Plato's *Timaeus*, likewise, describes the motion of the planets about the earth as a "choral dance" (*χορεία*).[33] As Eric Csapo has documented in great detail, such traditions long predate Plato himself: "The idea that the stars perform a circular dance, and a cultic dance around an altar, is, as we have seen, much older."[34] Hence the million-dollar question:

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[28] P. LeVen, "Philodamus of Scarpheia," in D. Sider ed., *Hellenistic Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 2017), p. 480.
[29] G. Ferrari, *Alcman and the Cosmos of Sparta* (Chicago, 2008), p. 3: "The idea that the constellations in the night sky are dancing choruses of maidens is commonplace in Greek thought and literary imagery." See also E. Csapo, "Star Choruses: Eleusis, Orphism, and New Musical Imagery and Dance," in M. Revermann & P. Wilson, *Performance, Iconography, Reception* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 262-290.
[30] H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1996), p. 1998.
[31] Lines 464-469 of Electra as translated in D. Kovacs, *Euripides III* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 201.
[32] *Ion* 1078-1080 as translated in G. Ferrari, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
[33] *Timaeus* 40c. Ibid., p. 265.
[34] E. Csapo, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

What astronomical panorama could have inspired the archaic Greek tradition of a chorus of circling stars?

In order to reconstruct the natural-historical (i.e., astronomical) background for the circle of stars attending Dionysus's glorious epiphany, it is instructive to compare the Greek testimony with sacred traditions from the ancient Near East, where astronomical observations had a long history and from whence the Greeks derived much of their own astronomical information. In ancient Ugaritic tradition, for example, one reads of a band of stars which encircled the Creator-god (El) in the northern circumpolar sky. Alternately known as a Divine Assembly of gods or as the "sons of El," the heavenly host is explicitly described as a "circle" of stars.[35] Mark Smith has analyzed such traditions in a number of recent publications:

"El's assembly seems to be denoted further by the 'assembly of the stars,' *pḫr kbbm* (1.10 I 4), since this phrase seems to parallel 'sons of El,' *bn ʾil* and 'the circle of those of heaven,' *dr dt šmm* (1.10 I 3, 5)."[36]

The term translated as "circle" here is *dr*, denoting "assembly" or "generation" as well as circle.[37] The obvious inference to be drawn from this terminology is that a band of stars or satellites was perceived as circling around the star El.[38]

These archaic Canaanite traditions left an indelible mark on the Old Testament—witness the recurring phrase "the Lord of hosts"—although the monotheistic bias of the Hebrew scribes typically discouraged any explicit mention of an "assembly of gods."[39] Vestigial references to an assemblage of stars remain nevertheless. A representative example of

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[35] E. Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Chico, 1980), pp. 111-280.
[36] M. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Oxford, 2001), p. 35.
[37] G. del Olmo Lete & J. Sanmartin, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (Leiden, 2015), p. 277.
[38] M. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 43: "In the case of the 'circle of El' (*dr ʾil*) and 'circle of the sons of El' (*dr bn ʾil*), there is apparently not much, if any, real difference in the referents of these two expressions: both refer to a group centered around El."
[39] On the Lord of hosts as a divine assembly, see M. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

this idea occurs within the famous passage in Job which describes the remarkable circumstances prevailing at Creation:

"Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have insight. Who fixed its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched the measuring cord across it? Into what were its bases sunk, or who set its capstone, when the stars of the morning rejoiced together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"[40]

In the passage before us the "morning stars" (*kwkby bqr*) are clearly set in apposition to the "sons of God," the latter phrase being *bene elohim*—i.e., the very same phrase that appeared in Ugaritic texts as *bn ʾil* in conjunction with an "assembly" or circle of stars in heaven. This correspondence between the Canaanite and Biblical traditions has long been recognized, needless to say. Matthias Albani offered a recent summary of the evidence:

"According to Job 38:7 the 'morning stars' (*kwkby bqr*) belong to the divine council of God…In Job 38:7 the *kwkby bqr* are also called 'sons of God' who represent the heavenly council of the Most High (cp. Deut 32:8 LXX; Ps 29:1; 82; 89:7). This corresponds to the Ugaritic notion of the 'assembly of the sons of El' (*pḫr bn ilm*) which is also designated as 'assembly of the stars' (*pḫr kkbm*—KTU 1.10 I 3f)—just as in Mesopotamia where the term *puḫrum* is the *terminus technicus* for the pantheon (*puḫur ilani*—cp. *Enuma eliš* V 1f.)."[41]

To return to the famous passage in *Job*: The "rejoicing" of the stars attending Creation warrants our attention. This tradition finds an echo in Sophocles' account of Dionysus's epiphany, quoted above: "O thou with whom the stars rejoice as they move, the stars whose breath is fire; O master of the voices of the night; son begotten of Zeus; appear, O king, with thine attendant Thyiads, who in night-long frenzy dance before thee, the giver of good gifts, Iacchus!" So, too, Philodamus's paean to Dionysus emphasizes the fact

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[40] Job 38:4-7 as translated in D. Clines, *Job 38-42* (Nashville, 2011), p. 1048.
[41] M. Albani, "The Downfall of Helel, the Son of Dawn," in C. Auffarth & L. Stuckenbruck eds., *The Fall of the Angels* (Leiden, 2004), p. 75.

that the god's birth was greeted by universal rejoicing: "And all the [imm]ortals [d]anced, and all the mortals r[ejoiced] [at your] birth, Bacchian."[42]

The universal rejoicing associated with divine epiphany, in turn, is a central theme in ancient cosmogonic myth.[43] Egyptian hymns celebrating the sun's prototypical appearance at the time of Beginning, for example, report that it was accompanied by outbursts of rejoicing. The following passage is representative in this regard (here the Divine Assembly is designated by the term Ennead [*psḏt]*): "The Ennead in your retinue The sun apes are in praise when you rise And appear as Re-Harakhty The Ennead of the gods rejoice."[44] In his summary of the general themes of the Egyptian solar hymns, Stewart emphasized the importance of this idea:

"The sun-god's triumphant emergence into the upper world is celebrated joyfully by his crew, the gods, mankind, and all living creatures, sometimes typified by apes, whose chattering heralds the sunrise. Of all the themes this universal acclamation greatly predominates in the hymns."[45]

Another term for the Divine Assembly in early Egyptian texts was *ḥnmmt*, conventionally translated as "sun-folk." The original reference, without question, was to an assemblage of stars encircling the ancient sun-god. Thus a Coffin Text quotes one god as boasting that he appears with the "sun-folk about me, about me, like Re when he was born."[46] Notice the specific reference to the gathering of the Divine Assembly about Re at the time he "was born." Equally significant is the fact that the sun-folk are

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[42] Lines 8-9 as translated in E. Bowie, "Time and Place, Narrative and Speech in Philicus, Philodamus, and Limenius," in A. Faulkner & O. Hodkinson eds., *Hymnic Narrative and the Narratology of Greek Hymns* (Leiden, 2015), p. 101.
[43] D. Clines, *Job 38-42* (Nashville, 2011), pp. 1100-1101 observes: "The theme of rejoicing, often specifically with music, at creation, is known from many cultures."
[44] H. Stewart, "Traditional Egyptian Sun Hymns of the New Kingdom," *Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology* 6 (1967), p. 48.
[45] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[46] *CT* 4:122.

remembered as "rejoicing" before the sun: "The gods shall come to you at the stairway of your throne, the multitudinous sun-folk who are in the god's castle shall rejoice at you."[47]

Granted the obvious parallels presented by disparate traditions of a Divine Assembly from Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, we are emboldened to dig deeper into the ancient testimony to see if we can discover a possible celestial prototype for such widespread conceptions. It is here that the world's vast corpus of artworks can help clarify the details regarding the appearance of the ancient sky. Images of the sun and other celestial bodies are commonplace on cylinder seals, stelae, and kudurru, after all, and therefore it would appear sensible—and methodologically sound— to simply allow the artworks to illuminate the mythological traditions. Figure one presents three different Mesopotamian cylinder seals from the Old Babylonian period (circa 2000-1600 BCE) purportedly depicting the sun.[48]

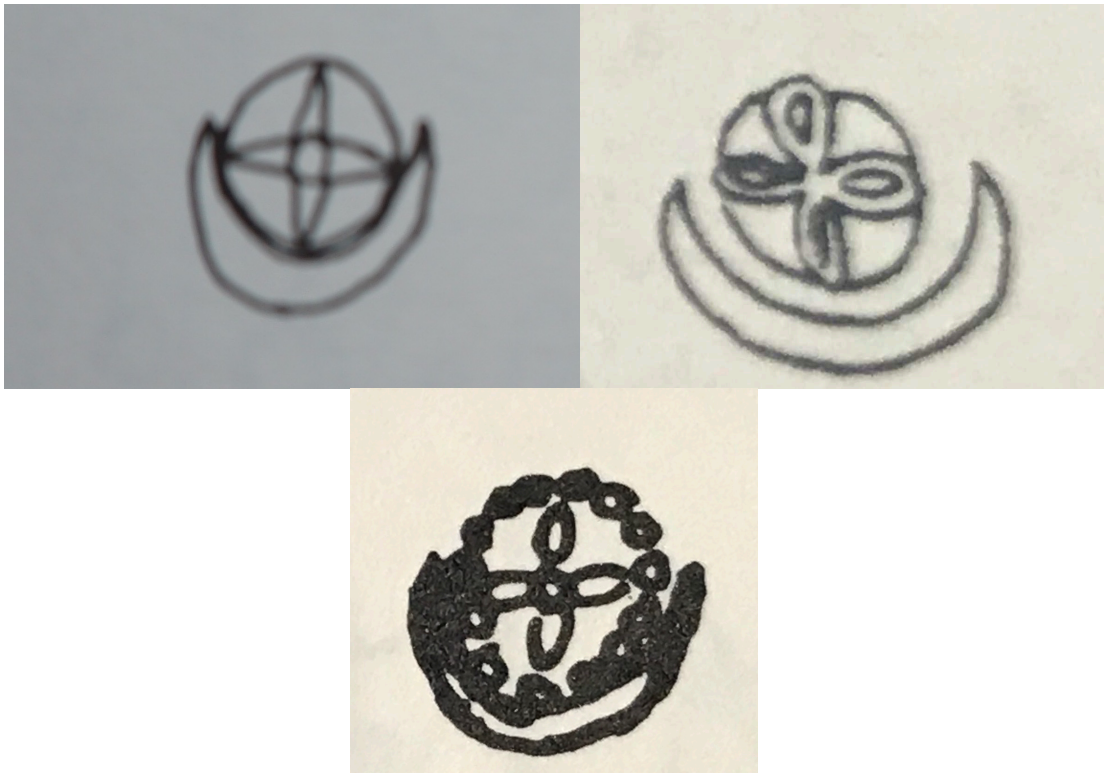

Figure one

[47] *CT* VI:393.

[48] Adapted from L. Werr, *Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals* (Malibu, 1988), figure 26.

The first thing that stands out about the respective images in question is that none of them resembles the present sun. That alone is highly significant. The second thing that strikes the eye is that each of the images shows the so-called "sun" set alongside a crescent, an astronomical impossibility in the present sky. This is but one of numerous clues from the pictorial record that suggests that the conventional view of the solar system's recent history is in need of revision, to put it mildly.

At this point I would direct the reader's attention to the third image: This particular image, which has analogues around the globe, depicts an assemblage of satellites or lesser stars encircling a central star. Occam's razor rears its head at this point: If it be granted that the Old Babylonian cylinder seal in question offers a relatively faithful depiction of the prehistoric sky, it stands to reason that the circle of satellites would be conceptualized as an "assembly" of "stars" or "attendants" circling about the central "sun." Yet once grant this possibility and the many mysteries surrounding Dionysus and his stellar retinue begin to unravel like Ariadne's clew.

As the chorus leader set in the middle of a circle of stars, Dionysus himself is to be identified with the four-rayed or quatrefoil star. The star in question resembles nothing so much as a four-petaled flower, the latter forming a conspicuous element in logograms denoting the primal sun.[49] The fact that Dionysus himself was commonly invoked as a flower or flower-like form—witness his epithets *Anthios* and *Antheus*—has long baffled scholars but finds a perfectly coherent explanation here.[50] The name of the Dionysian spring festival Anthesteria commemorates this "flowering," presumably that of the god himself and/or the verdant landscape associated with his epiphany.[51]

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[49] Of the Mayan hieroglyphic logogram for sun, *kinh*, M. Leon-Portilla, *Time and Reality in the Thought of the Maya* (Norman, 1998), p. 18 writes: "The most common [glyph signifying kin] is the one simulating a flower with four petals."

[50] On the epithet, see L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States Vol. V* (Oxford, 2005), p. 119: "He was occasionally supposed to appear, like Adonis, his Oriental compeer, in the flowers of spring, and we hear at Phlye, in Attica, of the altar of Dionysos Ἀηθίος associated with the worship of the Ismenian nymphs, and Ge or the Great Goddess."

[51] During the festival Dionysus was invoked as Fair-Flowering, Dithyrambos, and the Stormer. On the "flowering" of the god, see C. Kerényi, "The Mysteries of the

The Greek traditions that Dionysus's epiphany was marked by the sudden appearance of an extraordinary light is in perfect agreement with the astronomical interpretation developed here. Thus in a climatic scene from Euripides' *Bacchae* the chorus of bacchants compares the god's epiphany to the greatest light (φ*áos megiston*).[52] Plutarch, likewise, alludes to the great light (*μέγα* φῶς) that formed the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries in specific connection with the shouting throng in the Bacchic procession.[53] The same idea seems to be reflected on an ancient vase-painting in which the newborn Dionysus is invoked by the name *Diosphos*, the latter evidently denoting the "light of Zeus" (see figure two).[54] How else, but as a reminiscence of Dionysus's stellar form, is it possible to understand these recurring traditions?[55] Far from being a metaphor, Aristophanes' likening of the god to a "light-bringing star"— *φωσφόρος ἀστήρ*—is best understood as a literal statement of fact, as an archaic epithet describing the god as spectacularly luminous celestial body—as a veritable Superstar.

Figure two

A wealth of evidence confirms that the idea of a sudden profusion of blinding light is inherent in the ancient Greek concept of a divine epiphany. The etymology of the term makes this deduction somewhat self-evident:

"The Greek verb *φαίνω* 'to show, to make visible, bring to light, make known'…derives from the root **φα* (Indo-European **b^heh_2*-/PIE root **b^hh_2*-) 'to shine', 'to radiate', 'to

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Kabeiroi," in J. Campbell ed., *The Mysteries* (Princeton, 1955), p. 35. On the ritual celebrations in general, see W. Burkert, *Homo Necans* (Berkeley, 1983), pp. 213-247.

[52] Line 608.

[53] *Themistocles* XV:1. See also *Progress in virtue* 81 E.

[54] Adapted from figure 17:1 in D. Paleothodoros, "Light and Darkness in Dionysiac Rituals as Illustrated on Attic Vase Paintings of the 5th Century BCE," in M. Christopoulos et el eds., *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion* (New York, 2010), p. 239.

[55] B. Zimmermann, "Phanes," in H. Cancik & H. Schneider eds., *Brill's New Pauly*, *Vol. 10* (Leiden, 2007), pp. 914-915. See also the insightful discussion in W. Wili, "The Orphic Mysteries and the Greek Spirit," in J. Campbell ed., *The Mysteries* (Princeton, 1955), p. 71.

startle', 'to sparkle', 'to glow'…Light, then, is not only a conspicuous *semeion* of divine presence as mentioned above; it is inextricably intertwined with divine epiphany; it lies at the very heart of the notion."[56]

It is relevant to note that it is this very word (*φὰνη)* that is used to describe the rising of stars in heaven or the first light at daybreak (the same word was also employed to describe the onset of spring).[57] In his *Bacchica*, Eumolpus used the same word to describe Dionysus as a star: ἀστροφαῆ.[58] So, too, the root is evident in the name of the Orphic god Phanes—explicitly identified with Dionysus—who was said to have suddenly appeared at the time of Creation in a flood of intense light.[59] How else, but as a reminiscence of Dionysus's stellar epiphany, is it possible to understand these recurring traditions associating the god with a sudden outburst of light?

Early Greek artworks seem to reference this sudden explosion of supernatural light associated with Dionysus's epiphany. A common theme on 6th-century vases shows satyrs shielding their faces in the so-called *skopeuma*-gesture, as if attempting to protect their eyes from a blinding light (see figure three).[60] According to Cornelia Isler-Kerényi, the gesture evidently alluded to the joyful circumstances attending the god's epiphany:

"A recurring element is the gesture of greeting which the satyr, or one of the satyrs welcomes Dionysos while dancing. This gesture was called *skopeuma* when the satyr had his arm upraised and his hand at his forehead, thus trying to protect his eyes from something blinding him. The gesture expresses the joyous surprise of the satyr, and the sudden and unexpected apparition of the object of the greeting, the god: his epiphany."[61]

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[56] G. Petridou, *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (Oxford, 2015), p. 3.
[57] See H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1996), p. 1912.
[58] E. Csapo, *op. cit.*, p. 269.
[59] See the insightful discussion in W. Wili, "The Orphic Mysteries and the Greek Spirit," in J. Campbell ed., *The Mysteries* (Princeton, 1955), p. 71. A. Bernabé, "The Gods in Later Orphism," in J. Bremmer ed., *The Gods of Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh, 2010), p. 434 notes that Phanes was originally an epithet of Dionysus.
[60] Adapted from figure 18 in C. Isler-Kerényi, *Civilizing Violence: Satyrs on 6th-Century Greek Vases* (Fribourg, 2004), p. 36.
[61] C. Isler-Kerenyi, *op. cit.,* p. 36.

Figure three

In addition to a nova-like explosion of light, Dionysus's epiphany is also accompanied by a wide range of terrifying meteorological phenomena, including lightning, thunder, and earthquake. The opening lines of *Bacchae* recount the god's incendiary conception and birth, the result of Zeus's coupling with Semele in the form of a thunderbolt. It was Dionysus's birth by fiery thunderbolt, according to Plato, that formed the central theme of the early dithyramb.[62] The oft-cited epithet *Bromios* is alleged to commemorate the "roaring" and thunderous sounds attendant upon Dionysus's birth.[63] According to Pindar, it was the thunderbolt's roar (*βρόμω* κε*ραυν*οῦ) which killed Semele: "Long-haired Semele died amid the roar of thunder."[64]

It is important to underscore the cataclysmic nature of Dionysus's epiphany. The sky-borne disaster that resulted in Dionysus's conception serves as a recurring theme in the *Bacchae* while setting the stage for the uncanny meteorological effects to follow. Central to the drama is the idea that the entire world reels with the epiphany of *Bromios*: "Immediately the whole land will dance whenever Bromios leads the thiasoi to the mountain."[65] Later in the same hymn the bacchanals call on *Bromios* with the result that "the whole mountain and the wild animals joined the bacchanal, and nothing remained unmoved in running."[66] The same idea is attested in Sophocles's *Antigone*, wherein the god is invoked as follows: "And may Bacchus be our leader, whose dancing shakes the land of Thebes."[67] The epithet *ἐλελίχθων*—the shaker of earth—commemorates this aspect of the god's persona.

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[62] Laws 700 b. R. Seaford, *Cosmology and the Polis* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 97 observes that Dionysus's birth by thunderbolt likely formed "*the* typical theme."
[63] Diodorus 4.4.1-2: "from the thunder which attended his birth." See also M. Reguero, "The Names of Dionysos: Meaning and Suggested Interpretation," in A. Bernabé et al eds., *Redefining Dionysos* (Berlin, 2013), p. 351.
[64] *Olympian* 2, 27 as translated in A. Verity, *The Complete Odes* (Oxford, 2007), p. 8.
[65] Lines 114-115 as translated in R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[66] Lines 725-726.
[67] *Antigone* 153. See H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1996), p. 531: "Dionysus is called *ὁ θήβας ἐλελίχθων* because the ground shook beneath the feet of his dancing bands."

Hitherto overlooked by all scholars of Dionysus's cult, however, is the decisive fact that the very same meteorological phenomena accompany the prototypical epiphany of the sun in early Sumerian and Egyptian literature. Of the numerous texts that could be cited in this regard, the following Sumerian hymn is representative: "As my king [Utu, the sun-god] comes forth, the heavens tremble before him and the earth shakes before him."[68] A subsequent passage from the same hymn likens the appearance of the sun-god to a great storm thundering over a mountain: "The lord, the son of Ningal…thunders over the mountains like a storm."[69]

Now I ask: Does this sound like a realistic description of the modern experience of sunrise? In what sense is the Sun's appearance accompanied by prodigious thundering and the shaking of heaven and earth? Far from referencing the familiar sunrise, the Sumerian hymns describing Utu's awe-inspiring epiphany reflect cosmogonic myth and encode a cultural memory of almost unimaginable natural catastrophe. In this sense the Sumerian hymns celebrating Utu form a perfect complement to the testimony of the Mesopotamian cylinder seals, which likewise describe a wholly foreign "sun."

Granted that we have succeeded in pulling back the veil and revealing a bit of the historical context behind the extraordinary and terrifying natural phenomena attending Dionysus's epiphany, it remains to clarify some of the rich symbolism pertaining to the chorus of circling stars. Euripides describes Dionysus as serenaded by a raucous menagerie, the latter represented as dancing around the god.

"Where then on Nysa, nurse of beasts, are you leading thiasoi with your thyrsus, Dionysos, or on the Corycian peaks?…He will come to dance together with the bacchanals, and crossing the swift-flowing Axios he will lead the whirling maenads."[70]

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[68] Lines 13-14 from "A hymn to Utu (Utu B)," in J. Black et al, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/) (Oxford, 1998). Hereafter *ETCSL*.
[69] Line 28 from "A hymn to Utu (Utu B)," *ETCSL*.
[70] Lines 566-570 as translated in R. Seaford, *Euripides Bacchae* (London, 1996), p. 97.

Far from being unique to Dionysus's epiphany, circling dancers also attend the births of other great gods as well. Indeed, the mythological pattern is so archaic and widespread that it is best understood as constituting an archetypal thematic pattern in the ancients' conception of divine epiphany itself.

Perhaps the most famous example of this motif finds the Kouretes performing a warriors' dance and clashing their weapons as they danced around the Cretan Zeus at the time of his birth.[71] Euripides alludes to the Kouretes in an antistrophe from the *Bacchae,* where they are identified with the Korybantes:

"O chamber of the Koúretês, O sacred reaches of island Crete! —Where, in the cave of the birth of Zeus, Triple-crested Korybantës devised for me the circle of stretched hide! In the frenzy of the dance they joined this beat with the sweet calling breath of Phrygian pipes, they gave the drum, pounding for the Bakkhic cries of ecstasy, to Mother Rhea. From her, the Mother Goddess, ecstatic satyrs took it to the festivals where every other year our Dionysos rejoices when everyone is dancing."[72]

It will be noted that Euripides explicitly associates the Kouretes with the cult of the Great Mother goddess, the Phrygian Kybele, here identified with Rhea.[73] This view was commonplace in ancient times and confirms the close connection between the Kouretes and analogous dancing warriors in the service of the Queen of Heaven, as rightly emphasized by Radcliffe Edmonds in a recent study: "All of these types, as Strabo tells us, are terrifying figures who dance ecstatically with weapons to the accompaniment of the flutes and cymbals in the train of the mother goddess."[74]

A very similar vision is evident in the so-called *Dictaean Hymn to Kouros*, likely inscribed in the 3rd century AD but commonly held to preserve very archaic traditions.

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[71] S. Scullion, "Dionysos and Katharsis in 'Antigone'," *Classical Antiquity* 17 (1998), p. 112 notes that the Korybantes belong to the "same conceptual and cultic realm" as the Thyiads.
[72] Lines 149-165 as translated in R. Gibbons, *Bakkhai* (Oxford, 2001), p. 49.
[73] R. Seaford, *op. cit.,* p. 163.
[74] R. Edmonds, *Redefining Ancient Orphism* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 186. See also S. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 13-40.

Here the Kouretes dance around the baby Kouros, who himself is but a thinly veiled allusion to the Cretan Zeus, the latter commonly understood as an Adonis-like figure:

"O most mighty, Thou, Kouros, son of Kronos,…sing it standing around your well-walled altar, o most mighty etc. (str. 2) for here it was that the Kouretes took Thee, immortal child, from Rhea, and hid Thee, dancing with their shields around you, o most mighty etc. (str. 3)…"[75]

In the hymn in question Zeus is depicted as an agent of fertility. In one passage, Zeus was urged to "leap" (*θόρε*) in order to promote fertility: "O [lord, spring up in the wine-j]ars and spring in the fleecy [flocks, and in the crop]s of the fields spring up…"[76] Jan Bremer discussed this motif in his commentary on the *Hymn*:

"The conclusion is justified that this *θόρε* is an indication of a very early stage of Greek, if not pre-hellenic, religious sentiment. This god, who is supposed to leap, to mount as a bull does, is evidently not the father of gods and men, the cloud-gatherer and Olympic supergod, but a young god who—probably in connexion with (subordination to?) a Mother-goddess—has absolute power (*παγκρατής*) over vegetation, fertility and the 'brightness and splendour' that accompany them."[77]

The fertility and prosperity which accompanies the "springing up" of the child-god recalls the fertility that ensued upon the successful completion of the *hieros gamos* in Mesopotamia. In both cases the specter of the Great Mother—the planet Venus as the Queen of Heaven—is omnipresent.

Analogous traditions survive from ancient Roman tradition, where the birth of Mars was greeted by armed warriors dancing about him while clanging their shields. The warrior-band in question was known by the name *Salii*, from *salire* "to dance."[78] Significantly,

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[75] J. Bremer, "Greek Hymns," in H. S. Versnel, *Faith, Hope, and Worship* (Leiden, 1981), p. 206.
[76] Lines 57-59 as translated in M. West, "The Dictaean Hymn to the Kouros," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 85 (1965), p. 150.
[77] J. Bremer, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
[78] *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 2003), p. 1348.

the Greek historian Dionysius Halicarnassus described the Salii's dance as a *kourêtismos.*[79]

In a Roman ritual celebrating Mars's birth and the dawning of a New Year/Spring, the Salii capered about the city in an effort to promote fertility. A brief summary of the Roman traditions reveals striking parallels with the cult of the Cretan Zeus:

"Mars's power over vegetation is further indicated by the fact that the early Romans began the year with the month of March, which took its name from the god and marked the return of spring and plant life. The Salii (leaping priests) performed their leaping dance through the streets of Rome during this month, beating spears upon shields and singing an archaic hymn. The growth of crops was supposed to be encouraged through the sympathetic magic of their leaping, and their hymn commemorated the passing of the old year's spirit of vegetation (Veturius Mamurius=Old Mars), and the return of the New Year."[80]

The archaic hymn sung by the Salii during their procession throughout Rome was the *Carmen Arvale*, or *carmen Saliare*. This is the oldest example of the Latin language still extant and its meaning was already obscure to Roman worshippers of the late republican period.[81] Interestingly, a recurring refrain from the hymn urges the raging (*fere*) war-god Mars to "leap" over the threshold (*limen*).

The prominent role of the leaping Mars in stimulating the verdant greenery associated with Spring while attended by his leaping *Salii* naturally reminds us of the Kouretes dancing about Zeus and ushering in the "brightness and splendor" associated with Spring greenery. In addition to being intimately associated with the verdant greening of Spring, Dionysus himself was also renowned as a leaper. Together with his bacchants, the god was described as leaping (*pedan*) during the Spring festival Anthesteria—the latter, as we have seen, featuring a *hieros gamos* and believed to promote fertility.[82] So, too, the

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[79] 2,71 as cited in H. S. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek & Roman Religion* (Leiden, 1994), p. 297.
[80] G. Forsythe, *A Critical History of Early Rom*e (2006), p. 127.
[81] A. Johnston, *The Sons of Remus* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 250.
[82] R. Seaford, *Dionysos* (London, 2006), p. 25.

Bacchae describes the revels of the mad god as follows: "You will see him even on the Delphic rocks leaping with pine-torches over the twin-peaked plateau, brandishing and shaking the bacchic branch, and great throughout Greece."[83]

How is it possible to understand these strange reports of circling weapon dances attending the births of Zeus and Mars? For Martin West there can be no doubt: Citing James Frazer, he would refer them to—what else?—the projection of archaic ritual practices involving fertility magic: "The mythical armed dance of the Kouretes is without doubt the projection of an annual dance intended to promote fertility and growth."[84] But this "solution" is no solution at all, as it merely substitutes one mystery with another: namely, how to explain the traditional association between armed dances, leaping, and the promotion of fertility?

Archetypal images of ancient myth, such as the armed dances of the Kouretes, Korybantes, and Salii do not originate out of thin air. Rather, they typically reference memorable natural events—in this case the awe-inspiring sights and sounds of fiery satellites circling and dancing in conjunction with the prototypical appearance of the sun (figure one). If so, it stands to reason that the Kouretes' dance has some reference to the extraordinary natural events that attended the prototypical sunrise and the outburst of fertility universally associated with that event.[85]

Here we would draw attention to a remarkable parallel in the cosmogonic traditions preserved from the New World: According to the Aztec informants of the Spanish Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, a band of warriors celebrated the "dawning" of the sun by dancing and banging their weapons together:

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[83] Lines 306-309 as translated in R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 85.
[84] M. West, *op. cit.,* p. 156.
[85] E. Cochrane, op. cit., pp.

"'When the sun burst forth and rose, then they [the band of warriors] shouted and cried out to it and struck their shields together' helping thus the sun to rise, and they skirmished and accompanied the sun to its zenith."[86]

The warriors' shouting and clanging of shields at sunrise can't help but recall the discordant din associated with the armed Kouretes as they danced around the newborn Zeus, banging their shields. And as Jane Harrison noted over a century ago, such belief-systems are not confined to the ancient Greeks and Aztecs: "The custom of greeting the rising sun with dances and the clash of instruments is world-wide."[87]

In addition to the striking parallels with the Greek traditions surrounding the Kouretes, Korybantes, and Salii, the terrible din and shouting associated with the warrior's dance and the banging of shields finds a close functional analogy in customs associated with solar eclipses. From time immemorial eclipses were perceived as ominous in nature and greeted with collective hysteria, as terrestrial skywatchers fretted that the world was about to come to an end.[88] In order to stave off this greatest of natural disasters, human beings the world over engaged in frenzied shouting and the banging of shields and other percussive instruments. Sahagún himself provides eyewitness testimony to this particular belief-system among the Aztecs in the sixteenth century:

"Then [upon an eclipse of the sun] there were a tumult and disorder. All were disquieted, unnerved, frightened. There was weeping. The common folk raised a cry, lifting their voices, making a great din, calling out, shrieking. There was shouting everywhere. People of light complexion were slain [as sacrifices]; captives were killed. All offered

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[86] M. Graulich, "Afterlife in Ancient Mexican Thought," in T. Barthel et al eds., *Circumpacifica* (New York, 1990), p. 167 translating *Florentine Codex: Book 3* (Sante Fe, 1978), p. 49.

[87] J. Harrison, *op. cit.*, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion and Themis* (New York, 1962), p. 201.

[88] J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology, Vol. 2* (Gloucester, 1976), p. 706: "One of the most terrific phenomena to heathens was an *eclipse* of the sun or moon, which they associated with a destruction of all things and the end of the world." The following report from the Amazonian region not only recalls Sahagún's report, it is representative of analogous traditions that recur around the globe: "[Upon a solar eclipse] it is then feared that the epoch of chaos will return and monsters and demons will come from the jungle and rivers to attack people." See G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos* (Chicago, 1971), p. 72.

their blood…And in all the temples there was the singing of fitting chants; there was an uproar; there were war cries. It was thus said: 'If the eclipse of the sun is complete, it will be dark forever! The demons of darkness will come down; they will eat men!'"[89]

Analogous belief-systems and ritual practices prevailed around the globe, as I have documented elsewhere.[90] The observations of Claude Lévi-Strauss are representative in this regard:

"If one were to ask an ethnologist *ex abrupto* in what circumstances unrestricted noise is prescribed by custom, it is very likely that he would immediately quote two instances: the traditional charivari of Europe, and the din with which a considerable number of so-called primitive (and also civilized) societies salute, or used to salute, eclipses of the sun…As for the din that is made at the time of an eclipse, its ostensible purpose is to frighten away the animal or monster that is about to devour the heavenly body. The custom has been recorded the world over: in China, Burma, India, and Malaysia; in Africa, especially in Dahomey and the neighboring territories; in America, from Canada to Peru by way of Mexico. It was also known among the Greeks and Romans, since Livy and Tacitus refer to it; and it seems to have lasted until fairly recent times."[91]

It is against this backdrop of customs attending solar eclipses that we would understand the peculiar behavior ascribed to the Kouretes and other attendants upon the great god. The Kouretes banged on their shields and raised a great din for the very same reason that the ancient Aztecs imagined their warriors to be banging their shields—namely, because such discordant sounds accompanied the prototypical sunrise, as a result of which they were believed to play an apotropaic role in the dispelling of darkness at the time of Creation and again at any analogous untimely "eclipse" of the sun.

Archaic eclipse-traditions are also evident in the manifold Greek traditions describing Dionysus as hidden or disappeared for prolonged periods of time.[92] Thus, in *The*

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[89] B. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: Book 7* (Sante Fe, 1953), p. 2.
[90] *On Fossil Gods and Forgotten Worlds* (Ames, 2010), pp. 231-244.
[91] C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 286-287.
[92] W. Otto, *op. cit.*, p. 14 observes that "The motif of being hidden is typical for Dionysus." H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus* (Leiden, 1970), p. 238 remarked: "The

Bacchae, the god is described as "hidden in a dark prison"—specifically, in Pentheus's palace, likely a historicized account of the star's period of "hiding" or occultation. As Seaford describes the scene, "Most strikingly *Bacchae* 576-641 projects the mystic transition, from despair and fear to joy, caused by the reappearance of the deity, who is identified with light."[93] Dionysus's awe-inspiring epiphany, in our view, commemorates the primal sun's reemergence from its prison of darkness, whereupon it erupted in a nova-like explosion of light. It is this occasion that is greeted with universal rejoicing, not only in ancient Egypt but around the globe. Hence Euripides' impassioned plea: "Celebrate in song Dionysos to the deep-booming drums, exalting with joyful cries the god of joyful cries."[94]

Conclusion

In his recent authoritative summary of Dionysus's religion, Albert Henrichs observes that a consensus has emerged among modern scholars that the mad god is to be understood "inevitably as a construct of the Greek imagination."[95] Nothing could be further from the truth or more misguided: The ancient Greek conception of Dionysus is firmly grounded in natural history and encodes memories of an awe-inspiring lightning-hurling, thundering star, albeit interpreted through a mythopoeic lens. The Greek vision of Dionysus accompanied by his *thiasos* memorializes catastrophic natural events, in which a preternaturally brilliant star appeared in conjunction with a band of stellar satellites, the latter of which appeared to circle about the star-god. Indeed, the mere fact that analogous mythological traditions—cultural memories in a very real sense—are to be found around the globe confirms that imagination had precious little to do with their origin. Such collective memories, having been inspired by planetary catastrophes of an almost unimaginable nature, were seemingly "imprinted" on the human psyche and not easily

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disappearance of the god stood for his death." See also E. Cochrane, "The Hidden God," unpublished manuscript.

[93] R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

[94] Lines 155-159 as translated in R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

[95] A. Henrichs, "Dionysus," in S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 2003), p. 480.

forgotten. Although long since banished from consciousness, such memories continue to reverberate in Euripides' *Bacchae* and in other great works of art.

In the past century or so, the dominant trend in Classical scholarship is to eschew unified theories of Greek religion in favor of piecemeal, incremental hypotheses allegedly accounting for this or that aspect of a god's cult. Rarely, if ever, is a theory put forward that purports to explain the vast majority of a god's characteristics by reference to a singular set of determinants. This is due in no small part to the disrepute associated with the so-called solar school of the 19th century, reflected in the publications of Wilhelm Roscher and others of his generation. The historical reconstruction advanced here harks back to the naturalistic theories of Roscher et al and stands in marked contrast to the ever-increasing specialization and narrowing of scope apparent in modern scholarship. It is our claim that it is possible to explain virtually every aspect of Dionysus's religion by reference to the extraordinary natural events attending the prototypical sunrise during Creation. Included here are the imagery attached to Dionysus as light-bringing star; Dionysus's epiphany as a great light; the central role of lightning, thunder, and earthquake in the god's epiphany; the chorus as stellar in nature; the procession as a circling of stars; the universal rejoicing at his epiphany; Dionysus as flower; the shouting and leaping of the armed dancers; the sacred marriage; the connection with verdant greenery and fertility, etc. Indeed, I know of no major element or feature of the god's cult that does not receive immediate clarification by reference to the historical reconstruction offered here.

Richard Seaford, in his authoritative commentary on the *Bacchae*, observed that the central figures of Greek tragedy had star power.[96] Truer words were never spoken. Yet for one reason or another, this eminent scholar never suspected that the star power in question was that of a celestial body.

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[96] R. Seaford, *op. cit.*, p. 6.