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 Dionysiak?’, the Greeks will remain as utterly unknown and unimaginable as they have always been…”

“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.”

“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.”

The specter of Dionysus has long haunted scholars of Greek religion and culture, alternately mesmerizing them with the kaleidoscopic imagery attached to his cult and yet posing a fundamental mystery. How is it that the mad god of nocturnal jaunts and orgies so enthralled a culture renowned for its philosophical pursuits and emphasis upon the mean?

The pessimism prevailing in modern classical scholarship vis a vis the possibility of recovering the fundamental essence of the Greek god Dionysus is palpable. The sense of despair evident in Henrichs’ quote above is echoed by dozens of other top scholars in the field, all of whom have seemingly abandoned any hope of offering a unified portrait of the god. Hence the final sentence in Walter Burkert’s magisterial *Greek Religion* reads simply: “Beneath this exterior the god and his activity remain mysterious and incomprehensible.” In this sense the fundamental challenge issued by Nietzsche in 1872 looms yet today: “What is Dionysiak?”

---

3 W. Otto, *Dionysus* (Bloomington, 1965), p. 120.
In history as well as myth, 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 recognized. 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 tragedy are equally obscure. Scholars are agreed that tragedy originated as part of a religious ritual performed in honor of Dionysus. Circling dances, singing, and music featured prominently in Dionysian cult and, in fact, it was these “choral dances” associated with the god that eventually became so central to Greek drama. It seems certain that the god’s mystery rites are alluded to in extant Greek tragedies, albeit in an allusive and figurative fashion. Exactly why tragedy was rooted in the worship of Dionysus remains a puzzle to classical scholars: “Quite why all tragedy, indeed all drama, at Athens was performed under the sign of Dionysus is still found problematic.”

It is commonly agreed that the modern study of Dionysus begins with Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in 1972. Certainly Nietzsche’s book inspired renewed interest in the Greek god, particularly in the 20th century.

For Nietzsche, it was the sufferings of the god himself that formed the religious context for Greek tragedy, acted out in the whirling chorus-dances and music attending the god’s epiphany. Early on in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche hinted 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 Sacaia.”

More than a decade later, in an introduction added to a slightly revised edition of The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche speculated about the possibility 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?” 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 Queen of Heaven and her variously named paramour (Dumuzi, Adonis, Attis, etc.). This is certainly true with respect to 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 the planet Venus(Inanna) in an apparent effort to secure fertility for the land and apotheosis for himself. The ritual hieros gamos was attended by a strange

---

8 Ibid., p. 17.
9 Ibid., p. 7.
coterie of effeminate men, castrates, and transvestites, who danced in ecstasy to the discordant music produced by various pipe instruments and pounding drums. According to the Sumerian texts describing the sacred ritual, these so-called assinmu and kurgarru danced with swords and bespattered themselves with blood before the Great Goddess. Such rituals find a remarkable 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.”

What was reported of the Sumerian cult of Inanna was also characteristic of the cults associated with the Phrygian Cybele, Egyptian Isis, and other analogous goddesses from the ancient Near East. It is here, in the cult of the Great Mother, that we find the general upending of normative culture marked by orgiastic rites of excess, prodigious bouts of drinking, transvestism, and frenzied dancing. Thus, the orgiastic rites associated with Cybele were renowned for the shrill, unsettling sounds of the tympanon and the aulos, singled out by Euripides as characteristic of Dionysus’s nocturnal rites.

The sacred practices associated with these goddesses regularly feature 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 shrill sounds accompanying the procession is everywhere apparent. Apuleis describes the procession of Isis as follows:

---

13 Ion 533e.
“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.”

A prominent feature of the Egyptian procession saw Isis being paraded before her adoring throng while riding in a great ship. Here, too, Dionysus was wheeled around the countryside in a ship while in procession.

Ancient Egyptian artworks depicting the frenzied dancers accompanying the Great Goddess in procession show the women with disheveled hair, shaking their heads wildly, and careening about. Such artworks find a precise functional parallel in the archaic Greek artworks depicting the maenads, where the frenzied dancers loose their hair while shaking their heads and whirling about.

In many of the ancient mystery rites a sacred marriage is either reenacted or hinted at. Carl Kerenyi, in his analysis of the sacred mysteries associated with the Kaberoi, emphasized the central function of the marriage: “This context [of the mysteries] was a marriage, mythologically represented and experienced, the primeval marriage of a divine bride and a divine bridegroom, of which human marriages are an imitation and copy.”

Granted that the religious rituals of Dionysus and the mystery cults associated with the Queen of Heaven share a set of unique thematic patterns in common, the question arises as to whether they were inspired by analogous experiences and commonly shared belief-systems? This line of thought, in turn, begs the following question: Is it possible to

---

16 W. Burkert, Greek Religion (Cambridge, 1985), p. 166: “The advent of Dionysos was celebrated from the sixth century onwards with a ship procession in which the ship was either carried by men or rolled on wheels.”
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, such peculiar belief-systems were inspired by ancient conceptions associated with the Queen of Heaven and her paramour (Dumuzi). To be specific: The sacred rituals and specific cultic practices associated with Inanna and Dumuzi trace to celestial determinants and are best understood as ritual reenactments of extraordinary astronomical events. If so, and given our reasoning above, it follows that a detailed study of Dionysus’s mythus and cult will also 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 overlooked by Classical scholars. Most famously, perhaps, Aristophanes describes Dionysus as the “light-bearing star in our nocturnal rite.” As we will document, Aristophanes’ testimony is not isolated in this regard.

If Dionysus’s epiphany is marked by the sudden appearance of a light-bringing star—*phosphoros aster*—it was also distinguished by the presence of an eerie entourage of fire-breathing stars. As evinced by Sophocles, the stars in question are explicitly compared to the dancing Thyiads:

“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!”

---

21 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.”
Notice the explicit reference to the fire-breathing stars, here conceptualized as rejoicing upon the god’s dramatic epiphany. How else, but as a description of some sort of celestial phenomenon, is it possible to understand these allusions to Dionysus as a “light-bringing star” and “chorus-leader of fire breathing stars”?\(^{23}\)

Additional testimony with regards to the stellar nature of the mad god and his retinue is provided by the recently discovered paean to Dionysus delivered 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[e]joiced] [at your] birth, Bacchian.”\(^{24}\) 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.”\(^{25}\)

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

“This could be rendered ‘show your starry self.’ 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 stars replicates in the skies the dance of the human worshippers; see, e.g. Eur. Ion 1074-9.\(^{26}\)

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 a star at heart and fire-like in appearance. Nor, for that matter, are we to understand

\(^{23}\) 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.”


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 central star 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 the chorus consisted of dancing stars does indeed represent a recurring theme in Greek cosmological tradition. The very word Xoreia suggests any circular motion and was commonly employed with respect to the stars. 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.” 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…” Plato’s Timaeus, likewise, describes the motion of the planets about the earth as a “choral dance” (χορεία). 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.” Hence the question: What astronomical panorama could have inspired the archaic Greek conception 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

---

27 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.”
30 Ion 1078-1080 as translated in G. Ferrari, op. cit., p. 4.
31 Timaeus 40c. Ibid., p. 265.
32 Ibid., p. 266.
explicitly described as a “circle” of stars. 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,’ \( p\ h r \ k b b m \) (1.10 I 4), since this phrase seems to parallel ‘sons of El,’ \( b n \ \ i l \) and ‘the circle of those of heaven,’ \( d r \ d t \ \ s m m \) (1.10 I 3, 5).”

The term translated as “circle” here is \( d r \), denoting “assembly” or “generation” as well as circle. 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.

These archaic Canaanite traditions left an indelible mark on the Old Testament—witness the familiar phrase “the Lord of hosts”—although the monotheistic bias of the Hebrew scribes typically discouraged any explicit mention of an “assembly of gods.” Vestigial references to an assemblage of stars remain nevertheless. A representative example of this idea occurs within the famous passage in Job which references the remarkable circumstances prevailing at Creation:

“Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”

In the passage before us the “morning stars” (\( k w k b y \ b q r \)) are clearly set in apposition to the “sons of God,” the latter phrase being \( b e n e \ e l o h i m \)—i.e., the very same phrase that

---

36 M. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 43: “In the case of the ‘circle of El’ (\( d r \ i l \)) and ‘circle of the sons of El’ (\( d r \ b n \ i l \)), there is apparently not much, if any, real difference in the referents of these two expressions: both refer to a group centered around El.”
37 On the Lord of hosts as a divine assembly, see M. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
38 *Job* 38:4-7.
appeared in Ugaritic texts as \textit{bn il} 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’ (\textit{kwkby bqr}) belong to the divine council of God…In Job 38:7 the \textit{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’ (\textit{phr bn ilm}) which is also designated as ‘assembly of the stars’ (\textit{phr kkbm}—KTU 1.10 I 3f)—just as in Mesopotamia where the term \textit{pu\textae rum} is the \textit{terminus technicus} for the pantheon (\textit{pu\textae ur ilani}—cp. Enuma eli\textae V 1f.).”\textsuperscript{39}

As noted by Albani, the term \textit{pu\textae rum} represented the \textit{terminus technicus} for the Mesopotamian pantheon. So, too, the cognate term \textit{phr} came to denote the celestial assembly not only in ancient Ugaritic lore but in various cultures throughout the Near East, including Egypt, where \textit{phr(t)} denotes “to go around,” “circulate,” “circuit,” and “circle.”

To return to the famous passage in \textit{Job}: The “joyfulness” 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 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.”\textsuperscript{40}

Here, too, there is a wealth of evidence that the universal rejoicing associated with divine epiphany is a central theme in ancient cosmogonic myth. Egyptian hymns celebrating the sun’s prototypical appearance, for example, report that it was marked by the appearance of a Divine Assembly in the sky and by outbursts of universal rejoicing. The following passage is representative in this regard (here the Divine Assembly is designated by the term Ennead [ḥnmm]: “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.” 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.”

Another term for the Divine Assembly in early Egyptian texts was ḫnmmt, 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.” 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 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.”

Granted the obvious parallels presented by disparate traditions of a Divine Assembly from ancient 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 ancient artworks can help clarify the details.

---

42 Ibid., p. 39.
43 CT 4:122.
44 CVI 1:393.
regarding the appearance of the ancient sky. Images of the sun and other celestial bodies are commonplace on ancient cylinder seals, stelae, and kudurru, after all, and therefore it would appear sensible—and methodologically sound—to simply allow the archaic artworks to illuminate the mythological traditions. Figure one presents three different Mesopotamian cylinder seals from the Old Babylonian period (circa 1700 BCE) purportedly depicting the sun.\footnote{Adapted from L. Werr, \textit{Studies in the Chronology and Regional Style of Old Babylonian Cylinder Seals} (Malibu, 1988), figure 26.}

![Figure one](image)

The first thing that stands out about the respective images in question is that none of them resemble 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 open to question, 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 retinue begin to unravel like Ariadne’s clew.

Dionysus himself is to be identified with the four-rayed or quatrefoil star set in the midst of the circle of stars. The star in question resembles nothing so much as a four-petaled flower, the latter forming a conspicuous element in logograms denoting the ancient sun-god.46 The fact that Dionysus himself was 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.47 The god’s oldest festival at Athens, the Anthesteria, denotes “flowering,” presumably that of the god himself and/or the verdant greenery associated with his epiphany.48 It was at this spring festival that a sacred marriage involving Dionysus and the wife of the local king was reenacted amidst much secrecy, thereby recalling the hieros gamos associated with Inanna/Venus, which, as we have seen, was believed to renew fertility throughout the world:

“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

46 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.”
47 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 Phyle, in Attica, of the altar of Dionysos Ἀνθέος associated with the worship of the Isemian nympha, and Ge or the Great Goddess.”
performed during a spring-and-flower festival, the ritual was meant to make the earth fertile and renew the fertility of the animals.”

The fact that Dionysus’s epiphany is 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 (φάος megiston). 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. 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). So, too, the Orphic cosmogonic traditions attached to Phanes/Dionysus, who is said to have suddenly appeared at the time of Creation in a flood of intense light (*phanes* itself derives from φῶς, “light”), testify to this archaic theme. How else, but as a reminiscence of Dionysus’s stellar form, is it possible to understand these recurring traditions? 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, in fact.

---


50 Themistocles XV:1. See also *Progress in virtue* 81 E.

51 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 al eds., *Light and Darkness in Ancient Greek Myth and Religion* (New York, 2010), p. 239.

It is our claim, in fact, that the awe-inspiring epiphany of Dionysus is impossible to understand apart from this sudden explosion of stellar light. Indeed, a wealth of evidence confirms that the idea of a sudden explosion of light is inherent in the ancient Greek concept of a divine epiphany. The etymology of the term makes this deduction somewhat obvious:

“The Greek verb φαίνω ‘to show, to make visible, bring to light, make known’…derives from the root *pha (Indo-European *bʰeh₂-/PIE root *bʰh₂-) ‘to shine’, ‘to radiate’, ‘to 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.”


In addition to a nova-like explosion of light, Dionysus’s epiphany is also accompanied by lightning, thunder, earthquake and other terrifying meteorological phenomena. Euripides begins his Bacchae with an account of the god’s conception by a fiery thunderbolt implanted in Semele, thereby setting the stage for the uncanny meteorological effects to follow. Lightning and thunder signal the god’s manifestation throughout the play. The epithet Bromios, “roarer,” is employed by Euripides and the other dramatists to
commemorate the rumbling thunder and lightning associated with Dionysus’s birth.\textsuperscript{55} In 1082-3, lightning is coincident with the god’s speaking. In his commentary on the Bacchae, Richard Seaford emphasizes this point in great detail:

“The Epiphany of Dionysos is manifest in the voice of the god…Thunder and lightning are involved…Various passages combine to suggest that Dionysos’s thiasos created (in the imagination) thunderbolt and earthquake by the use of drums, rhomboi (‘bull-roarers’), dance, etc…\textit{Helen} 1362-3 ‘The whirling circular earthquake-in-the-aither (\graphic{\text{\textepsilon\nu\sigma\iota\varsigma\ a\imath\theta\epsilon\rho\iota\alpha}) of the rhombos’ is in a list of the accouterments of the Dionysiac thiasos.’\textsuperscript{56}

Hitherto overlooked by all scholars of Dionysus’s cult, however, is the decisive fact that the very same meteorological phenomena accompany the prototypical appearance of the sun in the earliest Sumerian and Egyptian hymns. 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.”\textsuperscript{57} 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.”\textsuperscript{58}

Now I ask: Does this sound like a realistic description of the modern experience of sunrise? In what sense is the Sun’s appearance ever accompanied by the shaking of heaven and earth or prodigious thundering? Far from referencing the familiar sunrise, the Sumerian hymns describing Utu’s awe-inspiring appearance encode a cultural memory of almost unimaginable natural catastrophe and serve to underscore the fact that ancient descriptions of divine epiphany typically reference extraordinary astronomical events. In this sense the Sumerian hymns describing Utu form a perfect

\textsuperscript{58} Line 28 from “A hymn to Utu (Utu B),” \textit{ETCSL}.
complement to the testimony of the Mesopotamian cylinder seals, which likewise describe a wholly foreign “sun.”

The Greek Dionysus, like the Sumerian sun-god Utu, was a notorious earthshaker—witness the epithet (ἐλελίχθων). Most telling, perhaps, is the following line from *Antigone* in which the chorus sings: “And may Bacchus be our leader, whose dancing shakes the land of Thebes.”⁵⁹ Evident in this and similar passages of Sophocles and other Greek poets is the conviction that the whole universe reels with Dionysus’s epiphany. Such imagery has little to do with metaphor, poetic license, or hyperbole. On the contrary, Sophocles’ imagery is best understood as accurately reflecting the ancients’ experience of the prototypical appearance of the sun during the extraordinary natural events remembered as Creation. As is evident from the earliest Sumerian and Egyptian accounts of sunrise, the prototypical epiphany was tumultuous in nature, being accompanied by terrifying sights and sounds including earthquake, thunder, and prodigious bouts of lightning.

It will be remembered here that, according to Aristophanes, Dionysus led the procession in the form of a bright star.⁶⁰ Dionysus’s epiphany, moreover, was marked by a procession of satellites, or attendants. So, too, a common feature of Greek festivals celebrating Dionysus was a ritual procession of dancing figures, the latter known as *thiasos*, a term of pre-Greek origin. In the Dionysia, for example, a torchlight procession of worshippers brought a statue of the god from Eleutherai to Athens amidst much pomp and revelry. As Richard Seaford has pointed out, the procession in question marked the epiphany of the god: “The processional epiphany of Dionysos tended to celebrate the mythical first arrival of the god.”⁶¹

---

⁶⁰ A. Bierl, “The Bacchic-Chor(a)ic Chronotype,” in A. Bierl et al eds., *Time and Space in Ancient Myth, Religion and Culture* (Berlin, 2017), p. 126: “The choral god is called to appear as chorus leader of the actual chorus as well as the chorus of the initiates’ procession in Eleusis and the maenadic-mystic chorus of Delphi projected simultaneously onto the chorus of stars.”
The raucous processions traditionally associated with Dionysus were a favorite theme in ancient Greek artworks. Cornelia Isler-Kerényi emphasized this point in her discussion of Dionysian themes: “One characteristic of Dionysos that marks him off from the other deities of the Greek pantheon is that he is almost always moving around with a procession of male and female followers.”62

It is our claim that ancient traditions of a divine “procession” are immediately clarified by reference to the band of satellites that circled about the prototypical “star”/“sun” (figure one). Inherent in the concept of procession is a train of attendants heralding the god’s epiphany—in the case of Dionysus, the god’s retinue of Thyiads, explicitly likened to a chorus of stars. How better to emulate this celestial panorama than for worshippers to parade about at night performing circular dances while brandishing torches? Sophocles’ description of Dionysus’s epiphany captures the essence of the imagery: “Thou has been seen where torch-flames glare through smoke, above the crests of the twin peaks, where move the Corycian nymphs, thy votaries, hard by Castalia’s stream.”63

Also inherent in the concept of procession is the notion of movement—a “going forward” or circling of the train in question. The fundamental essence of the phenomenon in question is epitomized by the semantic field associated with the Egyptian word *phr*, specifically employed to describe the Divine Assembly’s motion with respect to the prototypical sun. According to Christopher Eyre: “The primary vision is that of stars circling the sky.”64 Yet the very same term was commonly employed to describe ritual processions featuring the sun-god or pharaoh (the latter viewed as an incarnation of the former).65

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

---

63 *Antigone* 1126-1130.
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.”

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 common 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. 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 Korybantês 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.”

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. This idea 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

---

68 R. Seaford, op. cit., p. 163.
us, are terrifying figures who dance ecstatically with weapons to the accompaniment of the flutes and cymbals in the train of the mother goddess.”

Much the same idea 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. Here the Kouretes dance about the baby Kouros, who himself is but a thinly veiled allusion to the Cretan Zeus, the latter commonly understood as an Adonis-like god:

“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)…”

In the same hymn, 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…” Jan Bremmer 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 (παγκρατίης) over vegetation, fertility and the ‘brightness and splendour’ that accompany them.”

Analogous traditions survive from ancient Roman tradition, where the birth of the war-god 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.”

---

Significantly, the Greek historian Dionysius Halicarnassus described the Salii’s dance as a *kourêtismos*.\(^73\)

In an archaic Roman ritual celebrating the birth of Mars and the dawning of a New Year/Spring, a special band of priests named 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.”\(^74\)

The archaic hymn sung by the Salii during their spirited dances 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 listeners of late republican period.\(^75\)

Interestingly, a recurring refrain from the hymn urges the raging (*ferē*) war-god Mars to “leap” over the threshold (*limen)*.

The prominent role of the leaping Mars in stimulating the verdant greening 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. Yet Dionysus himself was also renowned as a leaper. Together with his bacchants, the god was described as leaping (*pedan*) during the Spring festival Anthesteria.\(^76\) The *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.”

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.” 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 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.

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:

“‘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.”

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.”

Greek tradition preserved several references that support the claim that the warrior’s dance memorialized the prototypical sunrise. Certainly it is relevant to note that Strabo claimed that the Korybantes were the children of Helios. According to Nonnus, the Korybantes (=Kouretes) danced their dance at dawn—in our view, a reference to the prototypical dawn:

“Allready [at dawn] the helmeted bands of desert-haunting Corybants were beating on their shields in the Cnossian dance, and leaping with rhythmic steps, and the oxhides thudded under the blows of the iron as they whirl’d them about in rivalry, while the double pipe made music, and quickened the dancers with its rollicking tune in time to the bounding steps.”

To return to the Aztec tradition cited above: 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 the age-old 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. In order to stave off this greatest of natural disasters, human beings the world over

---

81 Geography 202.
82 _Dionysiaca_ iii 61ff.
83 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.
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 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!’”

Analogous belief-systems and ritual practices prevailed around the globe, as I have documented elsewhere. 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.”

It is against this backdrop of eclipse superstitions 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, to dispel the forces

84 B. Sahagún, Florentine Codex: Book 7 (Sante Fe, 1953), p. 2.
85 On Fossil Gods and Forgotten Worlds (Ames, 2010), pp. 231-244.
of darkness and aid the sun’s rising, thereby restoring order and fertility to the world. Hence the likely esoteric significance of the otherwise peculiar report attached to the Kouretes: “When they dance wearing their armour, all the flowers bloom.”

If, as we have argued here, Dionysus and his thiasos find their historical and celestial prototype in the ancient sun-god attended by his satellites, it stands to reason that the god’s “disappearance”—Euripides attributes it to his imprisonment in Pentheus’s palace—represents 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.” Dionysus’s much-heralded epiphany, likewise, commemorates the extraordinary spectacle presented by the nova-like outburst of the “light-bringing” star’s emergence from its prison of darkness. It is this occasion that is greeted with universal rejoicing, not only in ancient Egypt but around the globe. Hence Euripides’ impassioned words: “Celebrate in song Dionysos to the deep-booming drums, exalting with joyful cries the god of joyful cries.”

**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.” Nothing could be further from the truth or more misguided: The ancient Greek conception of Dionysus is empirically based and encodes memories of a lightning-hurling, thundering star, albeit interpreted through a mythical lens. The Greek vision of Dionysus accompanied by his thiasos memorializes catastrophic natural events, in which an extraordinarily brilliant star appeared in conjunction with a band of stellar satellites, the latter of which appeared to circle about the sun.

---

90 Lines 155-159 as translated in R. Seaford, p. 77.
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 induced by planetary catastrophes of an almost unimaginable nature, were seemingly “imprinted” on the human psyche and not easily 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 unifying 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 nearsightedness 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; the chorus as stellar in nature; Dionysus’s epiphany as a great light; the central role of lightning, thunder, and earthquake in the god’s epiphany; 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 magisterial commentary on the *Bacchae*, observed that the central figures of Greek tragedy had star power.92 Truer words were never spoken. Yet for one

---

reason or another, this eminent scholar never suspected that the star power in question references a very real star.