

Two Sides of the Dice: Analyzing Two Domains of Dionysus in Greek Polytheism

The study of religion in ancient Greece is complicated by the fact that, unlike modern world religions with ancient roots, there is no “holy doctrine” to which scholars can refer. Although they shared a complex pantheon of gods, ancient Greek city-states were never a unified political empire; instead of a globalized dogma, religion was localized within each *polis*, whose inhabitants developed their own unique variations on “Greek” religious rituals and beliefs.¹ The multiplex natures of ancient Greek gods compounds the problem; it is a monumental task to study *all* aspects of *all* deities in the Greek world. As a result, scholarship often focuses solely on a single popular aspect or well-known cult of a god or goddess — such as Apollo Pythios of Delphi or Athena Parthenos of Athens, neglecting other facets of the gods’ cult and personality.² Greek religion,

¹ As Jon D. Mikalson states in *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 4, “In varying degrees Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Athens and the other city-states differed from one another in political, social, and economic structure, and it is only reasonable to assume that they also differed in some extent in their religion ... One should be wary of assuming that a religious belief or practice must have been current in all the city-states and among all Greek simply because it is attested for one city-state.”

² Apollo is generally remembered as the god of prophecy because of his oracle and cult in Delphi. However, Apollo is also the god who destroys the wicked. In the fifth-century BCE, tragic poet Aeschylus wrote of Apollo the destroyer through Cassandra: “Apollo, Apollo! God of the Ways, my destroyer! For you have destroyed me”. (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1080). “Apollon,” as Herbert Weir Smyth, translator of *Agamemnon* notes, derives from the Greek verb “apollumi” (ἀπόλλυμι), which means “utterly destroy” or “kill.” Aeschylus, *Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, Eumenides, Fragments*, Translated by Herbert Weir

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due to these complex and composite natures of the gods, can thus appear chaotic and unstructured to a modern individual, whose views on religion are most often shaped by a unified belief structure and a highly common characterization of a single unchangeable "God." However, the Greeks did not seem to suffer from cognitive dissonance and, as Henk Versnel notes, "managed to cope with the two (and more) religious realities ... by shifting from one to another and back, whenever the context or situation required ... [preventing] their religious imagery from blurring into chaos."³ Unlike modern monotheistic religions (e.g. Christianity, Islam), Greek religion, as an accumulation of diverse traditions, was heterogeneous and not bound to one set of core ideals or practices, which encouraged cognitive flexibility and supported regional differences.

In order to gain a better understanding of how the Greeks practiced their religion with such a complex pantheon, then scholars must go beyond the study of one aspect or cult of a god in one city-state or sanctuary in isolation, and instead adopt a comparative approach that considers how different groups viewed the same deity. As a case study, this paper focuses on the god Dionysus in two of his domains: the popularly known god of wine and the transcendental god of rebirth and afterlife, whose mysteries remain shrouded in secret. A study of the textual sources and representations of the god in Greek art, especially vase paintings throughout Athens and the southern

Smyth, Loeb Classical Library, No. 146 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930).

³ Henk Versnel, "Heis Dionysos! - One Dionysos? A Polytheistic Perspective." In *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*. Edited by Renate Schlesier (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG., 2011): 35.

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Italic settlements during the Classical period can thus reflect how different peoples are using the same god, and how they are using that god will demonstrate their attitudes on various aspects of life such as death.

To understand how the various domains of Dionysus inspired variant worships, we must begin with an analysis of his origins in the mythology. Dionysus was born, as noted by Hesiod in the *Theogony*, to a mortal woman, Semele, and the immortal god Zeus.⁴ However, before Dionysus could be born, Zeus' jealous wife Hera tricked Semele into asking Zeus to show her his divine form. This sight of the divine form resulted in Semele's death, ultimately causing Zeus to give birth to Dionysus himself by sewing the baby into his thigh. It is here that Dionysus first begins — mythologically, at least — to be considered twice born: once from Semele when Zeus removed him and once from Zeus himself. Although there are variations on this account, this version appears to be the traditional representation, as it is cited elsewhere in both Homer's *Iliad* 14.323 and Euripides' *The Bacchae* 90ff and 245ff.

While Dionysus and Dionysiac imagery are popular in Greek art, portrayals of his birth scene are more limited. Turning to vase painting, an Apulian red figure krater from southern Italy, dating to the Late Classical period, illustrates the infant Dionysus emerging from the thigh of Zeus.⁵ Similar to the Apulian krater, an Attic red figure lekythos, dating to the early Classical period, (c. 470-460 BCE) depicts that same scene in

⁴ Hesiod, "The Theogony of Hesiod." In *Sacred-Texts*. Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Apr. 2017: 940ff.

⁵ Catalogue number: Taranto 8264, from the National Archaeological Museum of Taranto. Image can also be found at: <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.13.html>.

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which Zeus is pulling Dionysus out of his thigh.⁶ Another is the Athenian red-figure krater by the Altamura painter ca. 475-425 BCE, which depicts Zeus with an infant Dionysus and also includes a kantharos and ivy leaves.⁷ While scenes of Dionysus's birth are not necessarily a common theme in Greek vase paintings, the vases do support the textual accounts of his birth, and they suggest a wide-spread acknowledgment of this version throughout the Mediterranean.

The Attic red-figure lekythos also displays the next chapter in Dionysus's "standard" mythology: Hermes takes him away to be raised by the Nysiades, a group of nymphs associated with Mt. Nysa.⁸ Fearing for the life of his child, Zeus sent Dionysus away from Olympus onto the earth, the scene being implied on the lekythos. Contrary to other gods in the Greek pantheon, Dionysus was not confined to the heavenly sphere, but actively interacted with humans in the mortal realm. As a direct result of Zeus sending him down to earth, Dionysus conducted many wanderings over the earth, teaching the people the art of viniculture and his status as a god. He travelled heavily

⁶ Beazley Archive Number: 206036. Catalogue number: Boston 95.39, from the Museum of Fine Art, Boston. Image can also be found at: <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.14.html>.

⁷ Classical Art Research Center. 207139, ATHENIAN, Ferrara, Museo Nazionale di Spina, Ferrara, Museo Nazionale di Spina, T381. Retrieved from <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=1&start=0>

⁸ This "next chapter" is also displayed in a Hellenistic/Roman sculpture "Hermes and Infant Dionysus" by Praxiteles found in the temple to Hera on Olympia, which can now be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Olympia. While the sculpture is later than the vase paintings discussed in this essay, the sculpture again demonstrates instances in which the art is supporting textual accounts as well as being an instance of a widely accepted interpretation throughout the Mediterranean.

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throughout Egypt and the Middle East before settling in Thebes.⁹ Encountering many people in his travels, Dionysus does what few gods and goddesses have done in mythology: establish direct interaction between god and mortal. It was these intimate interactions between himself and the mortals that formed the basis for his role as a transcendental deity and would allow him to become a more predominant figure in the intimate lives of the mortal Greeks. This aspect is unlike other deities, who tend to only appear physically to epic heroes or in theatrical meetings. Artistically, these intimate moments are further developed in Susanne Moraw's essay "Visual Differences: Dionysus in Ancient Art," in which she claims Dionysus "is imagined [in some of his artistic representations] as being 'really there,' as their companion."¹⁰ Specifically, she cites the Kleophrades painter's vases on Dionysus with his maenads as an instance of Dionysus appearing to his "ecstatic" followers.¹¹

Arguably, the most popular domain of Dionysus is his position as the god of wine. After being taken away from Olympus, Dionysus discovered the grapevine and shared his creations with those he encountered in his earthly wanderings, establishing himself as the god of the grapevine and wine. Aelian, a Greek rhetorician from the second and third centuries CE, notes in his *Historical Miscellany* that Dionysus was known as, "*Dionysos Phleon* (the luxuriant), *Protrygaios* (the first at the vintage), [and] *Staphylites* (the god of the grape)," among

⁹ For more on Dionysus's earthly wanderings, see Apollodorus, *The Library*, 3.5.1-3.

¹⁰ Susanne Moraw, "Visual Differences: Dionysos in Ancient Art." In *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*. Edited by Renate Schlesier (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG., 2011): 235.

¹¹ See Moraw, "Visual Differences," 235 n.11.

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other epithets, linking him closely with wine.¹² Representations of Dionysus in this domain are abundant in Greek art, and this iconography can be found on Attic vase paintings of the late Archaic and Classical period, traded around the Mediterranean. For instance, a Late Archaic red-figure vase depicts Dionysus with a wreath of ivy on his head, holding a kantharos, a vessel used for drinking often associated with Dionysus in vase paintings.¹³ Similarly, a classical Attic red-figure krater depicts Dionysus wearing the ivy and holding a kantharos.¹⁴ Although many preserved vases are of Attic origin, the iconography of the kantharos is not limited to Athens. One instance can be found in a fourth-century BCE Lucanian red-figure krater from a Greek settlement in southern Italy, which has the image of the kantharos displayed with Dionysus.¹⁵ This krater is but one example of the many vases found throughout Italy with this theme of Dionysus and wine presented on it, many of them being Attic imports. In importing such Attic portrayals of Dionysus, it can only be inferred then that these people also perceived Dionysus as the god of wine and drinking in a similar way.

The tradition of the symposium is another theme of drinking that can be further attributed to Dionysus, which dominated in Athens and spread throughout the Mediterranean.

¹² Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*. Translated by N.G. Wilson. Loeb Classical Library, No. 486 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997): 3.41

¹³ Beazley Archive Number: 204911. Catalogue Number: Boston 13.67, from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Image can also be found at: <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.6.html>.

¹⁴ Beazley Archive Number: 213539. Catalogue Number: Harvard 1960.343, from Harvard Art Museum, Cambridge. Image can also be seen at <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.4.html>.

¹⁵ Catalogue Number: Toledo 1981.110, from the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo. Image can also be seen at <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.10.html>.

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Beginning as a social institution restricted to the elites, the symposium was a cultural mechanism for discussion and debate on a various number of topics: political views, alliances, social standings, cultural views, etc. In the symposium, men from Athens would come together and drink while listening to beautiful music and enjoying the presence of prostitutes while discussing such topics.¹⁶ There is a great emphasis on drinking in this space, as shown in the Attic art. In this period, the potter Exekias began to produce Attic black-figure kylixes, which are often associated with the symposium.¹⁷ Otherwise described as eye-cups, Exekias decorated his kylix (figure 1) with two large eyes upon its front. Thus, the artist is giving an impression that even though the drinker is behind the rim of the kylix, he is still attentive to what lies in front of him. At the bottom of this kylix, an image of Dionysus floating in a boat in the sea awaits the drinker, warning him against drinking further. Although not depicted in every kylix, Dionysus or other iconographic symbols such as the maenads, the maidens of Dionysus, and satyrs can also be found on many kylixes.¹⁸ It then becomes clear why the domain of wine and associated realms are more remembered in Athens: because much of Dionysus's iconography was preserved from these kylixes in Athens. As Osborne notes, more is known

¹⁶ For more on the symposium, see Robin Osborne, "Intoxication and Sociality: The Symposium in the Ancient Greek World," *Past and Present* 222 (2014): 38. *Oxford Academic Journals*. Web. 1 May 2017.

¹⁷ Figure 1.

¹⁸ See the fifth-century BCE red-figure vases: 209719, ATHENIAN, Frankfurt, Stadel Institute, STV6: 211388, ATHENIAN, Leipzig, Antikenmuseum d. Universitat Leipzig, T3589, and 211537, ATHENIAN, Laon, Musee Archeologique Municipal, 37.1056. All of these vases can be found in the Beazley archive on the Classical Art Research Center's website: <http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/index.htm>. Furthermore it should be noted that the later two vases listed are attributed to provinian fabrics, but with Athenian fabrics, furthering the point that this aspect of Dionysus is wide-reaching across the Mediterranean.

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“about how the ancient Greeks ... conceived of their drinking parties (symposia) than we know about almost any other aspect of their lives.”¹⁹ As the symposium spread throughout the Mediterranean, these interpretations are therefore transported as well. As discussed above, imported Attic art may also transfer to other settlements sharing the similar view of Dionysus. Therefore, this portrayal may be considered the dominant attribute of Dionysus. However, just because it is the most dominant does not mean that all of the Mediterranean viewed Dionysus in this manner.

Outside of wine and drinking, Dionysus held many domains associated with the various Greek cities and colonies. In the Athens, Sparta and the Spartan colony of Taras, modern city of Taranto in southern Italy, Dionysian festivals were performed to Dionysus as the god of choral song, in which competitions of playwriting in tragedy and comedy would take place to entertain the god, documented by Plato in the fourth century BCE.²⁰ Naxos in Sicily minted drachmas of Dionysus as their patron god; moreover, this depiction upon coins relates Dionysus to his divine role as a god of commerce.²¹ However, another domain of Dionysus which is demonstrated throughout the Mediterranean in text, art, and cult worship is Dionysus as the god of rebirth and afterlife.

Mythologically, accounts attributed to the domain of afterlife and rebirth are prominent in ancient texts. Diodorus, a first century BCE Greek historian, notes that “Dionysos was

¹⁹ Osborne, “Intoxication and Sociality,” 38.

²⁰ Plato. *Laws, Books 1-6*. Translated by R. G. Bury. Loeb Classical Library, No. 187 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926): 637b.

²¹ Figures 2 and 3.

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named twice-born (*dimetor*) by the ancients ... having been born once from the earth and again from the vine."²² Diodorus alludes to Dionysus's birth as a demigod and his rebirth as a god from his discovery of the grapevine. Also remember the previous discussion about Dionysus being twice born: once from Semele and once from Zeus. In addition, Oppian, a third century CE poet, continues the domain as piece of his power, saying the child Dionysus would place dead rams on the ground and "neatly put their limbs together, and immediately they were alive and browsed on the green pasture."²³ One of the most well-known instances of Dionysus's interaction with the Underworld comes from the fifth century BCE playwright Aristophanes, in which a scene from *The Frogs* depicts Dionysus journeying to the Underworld in order to rescue Euripides to bring him back to life, essentially "rebirthing" him.

Parallel to this portrayal of Dionysus as twice-born in mythology, Marie-Claire Beaulieu attributes Dionysus' close encounters with death to Dionysus' divine character being associated with mortality.²⁴ These close encounters with death attest to how Dionysus rose to become represented as the god of the afterlife and the god of rebirth as he is seemingly in the middle of worlds, both the living and dead. Nevertheless, scholars cannot rely solely upon ancient texts. Dionysus'

²² Diodorus. *Library of History, Volume II: Books 2.35-4.58*. Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Loeb Classical Library, No. 303 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1935): 3.62.5.

²³ Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus. *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus*. Translated by A.W. Mair. Loeb Classical Library, No. 219. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928: 4.230.

²⁴ Marie-Claire Beaulieu, "Dionysus and the Sea," In *The Sea in the Greek Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016): 168, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17xx5hc.10.

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representations in art allow for further understanding of Dionysus's role throughout the Mediterranean.

The variety of iconographic images associated with Dionysus as the god of afterlife and rebirth includes association with the sea. Of course, this association should not surprise as the sea was an important piece of ancient Greek culture both economically and spiritually. While the shipping routes were needed for trade and transportation, there is also a sense of the sea as a place of death. Literally, there was great fear of shipwrecks that made many seek divine intervention before sailing. As Odysseus would attest from his journey in the *Odyssey*, it is better to have a sea god on your side when sailing than not. Symbolically, the sea represented "the voyage of the dead to the afterlife."²⁵ In mythology, for example, Charon leads the dead into the afterlife on a boat as they cross the river Styx. These attributes of the sea are then mixed within iconographic imagery upon Greek art to distinguish Dionysus in his divine role as god over the afterlife. A sixth century BCE Etruscan kalpis, used to carry water, depicts one mythic scene in which Dionysus turns pirates who deny his divinity into dolphins.²⁶ These pirates were fleeing for their lives as they jumped overboard; their transformations from man to dolphin are therefore portrayed as their transition from their theoretical death as humans into their rebirth as a dolphin. Therefore, dolphins themselves can be attributed to Dionysian iconography. Depictions of dolphins continue to be seen in Archaic vase paintings associated with

²⁵ Beaulieu, "Dionysus and the Sea", 168.

²⁶ Scene of transformation found on an Etruscan Black Figure case attributed to the Micali Painter. Catalogue Number: Toledo 1982.134, from the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo. Image can also be seen at <https://www.theoi.com/Gallery/K12.15.html>.

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Dionysus: a sixth century Corinthian kylix depicting the men transforming into dolphins admits a potential party scene.²⁷ In abstract, this idea of a realm in-between life and death may also be depicted within the symposium: specifically, the Exekias Eye-Cup.²⁸ Upon this kylix, Dionysus is resting on a boat, surrounded by dolphins. Understanding the role dolphins played in realm of Dionysus as the god of the afterlife, one can then infer this state of in-between as a parallel to the state of drunkenness. Identical to Dionysus transforming the pirates into dolphins, the wine transformed the men at the symposium.²⁹ While the mythological scenes and these artistic pieces establish Dionysus's domain of rebirth and afterlife, the importance of this domain is reflected within the southern Italic Greek colonies through the various cults and religious practices associated with the god.

In one religious practice concerning death, Dionysus is insinuated as the god of the afterlife in funerary vases. In the southern Italic Greek Apulian region, these vases showed Dionysus reclining as if in a symposium (perhaps to symbolize elite status) or dancing in a procession; however, "unlike the Attic vases ... intended mostly for daily use, the Apulian vases ... were exclusively made for, and found in, tombs."³⁰ In addition, Thomas H. Carpenter, in his "Dionysos and the Blessed on Apulian Red-Figured Vases," notes that these vases were made in Apulian schools and not imported from other colonies based

²⁷ The scene can be found on a Corinthian Black-Figure vase. Beazley Archive Number: 575051. Catalogue Number L62/MNC 674, from the Musee du Louvre, Paris.

²⁸ Figure 1.

²⁹ Beaulieu, "Dionysus and the Sea," 173.

³⁰ Moraw, "Visual Differences," 243.

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upon the vastly different iconographic symbolism.³¹ This distinction is important because Attic vases were often exported across the Mediterranean, thus depicting Attic views upon the vases and not representing that region's beliefs. The Apulian vases however were made by the Apulians and therefore reflected their view of the god.

Golden tablets from the Pelinna in Thessaly from the fourth and third centuries BCE, similarly, reflect funerary rites associated with Dionysus.³² According to Susan Guettel Cole, in her chapter "Voices from beyond the Grave: Dionysus and the Dead," there are two groups of these tablets: those which mention Persephone and are concerned with purifications and those describing the underworld.³³ Furthermore, because the tablets invoke the "Bacchic god," Cole concludes that the tablets were meant to be buried with dead initiates of the deity and "meant as a reminder of an initiation that promised protection after death."³⁴ As Charles Segal notes, these "texts from Thessaly make us aware again how much the figure of Dionysus ... aids in the crossing of...the greatest of all divisions, the barrier of life and death."³⁵ Lucas Murrey, in his *Holderlin's Dionysiac Poetry*, describes an inscription upon a golden leaf from Pelinna in Thessaly: "'Tell Persephone that Bakchois himself freed you

³¹ Thomas H. Carpenter, "Dionysos and the Blessed on Apulian Red-Figure Vases," In *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*, Edited by Renate Schlesier (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2011): 253.

³² These are a few of the tablets found in Thessaly; however, there are others from south Italy as well.

³³ Susan Guettel Cole, "Voices from Beyond the Grave: Dionysus and the Dead," In *Masks of Dionysus*, Edited by Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993): 276.

³⁴ Cole, "Voices from Beyond the Grave," 277.

³⁵ Charles Segal, "Dionysus and the Gold Tablets from Pelinna," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 31, no. 4 (1990): 418.

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... below the earth there await you the same rituals as other blessed ones."³⁶ These texts from Thessaly are a key piece in documenting religious practices involving Dionysus as the god of afterlife. As members of the cult, these individuals were promised protections in the afterlife, and these texts serve to remind the god of this promise.

Likewise, a bronze mirror dating to the sixth century BCE, was found in Olbia in a grave and appears to catalogue the initiation of Demonassa and Lenaios.³⁷ Finally, also found in Olbia, there are three bone tablets associated with Dionysian afterlife. One bone tablet is inscribed: "life, death, life, truth ... Dio[nysoi], Orphikoi'."³⁸ Here, Cole takes a slight notice of the order of the phrase "life, death, life" and insinuates that the order is "perhaps significant." In looking back at the mythological stories of Dionysian rebirth, it can only be concluded that the phrase is indeed significant in that it demonstrates how followers of this Dionysus took on his mythology as their belief system.

In the second-century CE, Greek traveler and travel-guide author Pausanias, also documented much of Greek cult worship in his travels throughout the Greek regions. In the Argolis region, south of Attica, Pausanias notes the presence of the Alkyonian Lake near Amymone. According to mythological sources, Dionysus entered the underworld through this lake to resurrect his mother. In celebration of his accomplishments, nocturnal rites were performed along the banks annually in

³⁶ Lucas Murrey, *Holderlin's Dionysiac Poetry: The Terrifying-Exciting Mysteries* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2015): 53.

³⁷ Cole, "Voices from Beyond the Grave," 277.

³⁸ Cole, "Voices from Beyond the Grave," 277.

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honor of Dionysus.³⁹ In the Argolis town of Troizenos, there are altars dedicated to the gods of the underworld within the Temple of Artemis. Although not explicitly stated to be an altar of Dionysus, "it is here that they say Semele was brought out of Hades by Dionysos."⁴⁰ Elis, in southern Greece, holds a sanctuary dedicated to Dionysos Leukyanites, named for the nearby river Leukyanias.⁴¹ Although not specified to what worship occurred in the sanctuary, the Leukyanias River flowed from the town of Elis into the Ionian Sea. As the sea has symbolic meaning associated with Dionysus, perhaps it is plausible to suggest that a form of worship to Dionysus as the god of the afterlife or rebirth took place within the sanctuary. Another instance lies in the town of Methymna in Lesbos, in which fishermen one day caught a wooden face in their traps and when they asked a Pythian priestess of it, she told them the face belonged to Dionysus; thus, the Methymnans worshiped the mask with prayers and sacrifice.⁴² Although not explicit in worshipping of Dionysus as the god of the afterlife or rebirth, perhaps the symbolism of the face being found in the sea could allude to a potential cult worship of such a domain, as the symbolism of Dionysus and the sea are closely related. It may be a larger jump to make such a claim, but the lack of other interpretations leaves the subject open for debate.

³⁹ Pausanias. *Description of Greece, Volume I: Books 1-2*. Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Loeb Classical Library, No. 93 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918): 2.37.5.

⁴⁰ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2.31.2.

⁴¹ Pausanias. *Description of Greece, Volume III: Books 6-8.22*. Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Loeb Classical Library, No. 272. Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press, 1933): 6.21.5.

⁴² Pausanias. *Description of Greece, Volume IV: Books 8.22-10*. Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Loeb Classical Library, No. 297. Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Press, 1935): 10.19.3.

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Although much of the discussion above focusses on practices involving smaller settlements, it should be noted that the Athenians did appear to acknowledge, or at least have some knowledge of, Dionysus as a god of rebirth and afterlife. However, this acknowledgement does not appear to be positive. As noted by Mikalson, an "orator at the state funeral of the Athenian soldiers who died in 338 [BCE] at Chaeronea thought, in fact, that it was improper even to mention the name of Dionysus on such an occasion."⁴³ According to Mikalson, for the Athenians, the gods took a backseat role to matters of actual death. Instead, their gods take form for practices that involve the living, such as the symposium and the Dionysia: "Clearly what mattered to the average Athenian was [their] life, and in the fourth century [Athenians] took little interest in the bleak and uncertain prospect of the afterlife."⁴⁴

Furthermore, the association of death and Dionysus, as presented in the plays of the Dionysia, were not necessarily reminiscent of Athenian views either. Take the *Bacchae*, for instance: while written by an Athenian for Athenians, the tale of Bacchus in this manner is based on Theban mythology, not Athenian.⁴⁵ This Theban Dionysus can also be found in Sophocles's *Antigone*, written again by an Attic playwright for the Athenians, in the Dionysian ode.⁴⁶ Modern opinions on the

⁴³ Jon D. Mikalson, "The Afterlife". In *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983): 50.

⁴⁴ Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion*, 82.

⁴⁵ A. Henrichs, "Between City and Country: Cultic Dimensions of Dionysus in Athens and Attica," In *Cabinet of the Muses: essays on classical and comparative literature in honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, Edited by Mark Griffith and Donald J. Mastronarde (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990): 257.

⁴⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of the ode, see Henrichs "Between Country and City," 265-270. Furthermore, although the purpose of

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ode is divided: Sir Richard Jebb's "optimistic characterization of the god, whose Victorian innocence is transformed into a divine virtue ... 'invoking the healing presence of the bright and joyous god who protects Thebes'."⁴⁷ George Steiner, on the other hand, interpreted Dionysus as "'myriad-named' [πολυώνυμος] In the lost choral ode of the play, the sixth Dionysus (as in the *Bacchae*) has the potential and attributes of both life and death."⁴⁸ In both the *Bacchae* and the second interpretation by Steiner, Dionysus seems to be a god holding power over life and death, but these views are Theban themes being presented to the Athenians, and not necessarily characteristic of Athenian views on Dionysus's role in death. Likewise, while the plot of Aristophanes fifth-century BCE play, the *Frogs*, could attribute Dionysus as the god of rebirth, in which he is responsible for going to Hades and wanting to bring Euripides back to life (literally rebirthing him). However, the play seems more directed at Dionysus as the god of choral songs and the Dionysia, as the only reason Dionysus goes to Hades to revive Euripides is so that the poet can produce better work than the "current" poets. Likewise, throughout the play, there is a much greater emphasis on the quality of plays rather than the actual rebirth of a poet.

This attitude on death by the Athenians demonstrates a potential reason as to why the domain of wine of the symposium and chorus song of the Dionysia were the domains on which the Athenians focused. These are attributes of life, not death. As for the smaller settlements, which did not live in such

Antigone may not be to comment on Dionysus, the ode itself is also telling of Theban views on Dionysus.

⁴⁷ Henrichs, "Between City and Country," 267.

⁴⁸ Henrichs, "Between City and Country," 268.

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lavishness, death and the afterlife may present a greater fear and therefore be a higher priority in their religious representations and practices. Therefore, rather than focusing on Dionysus as a god of wine and ecstasy, these settlements looked to his other domain as god of afterlife and rebirth to fulfill a niche in their belief system.

Nevertheless, this domain of Dionysus as a god of afterlife and rebirth is difficult to study and comprehend in its entirety. One reason lies within the economic situations surrounding the some of the smaller, private cults. Marietta Horster, in "Cults of Dionysos: Economic Aspects," divides polytheistic cults into two categories: the public cults organized by a city or polis, which are financed by the polis, and individual cults that are administered by the cult worshippers.⁴⁹ Therefore, economically prosperous cities like Athens could build large structures that withstood the test of time. On the other hand, individual cult worshipping in lesser economically prosperous states, such as the Italic Greek colonies and smaller Greek colonies, were not able to build grand temples that would last thousands of years. Instead, smaller works such as the vases and iconography, along with textual evidence, prevailed. The second being the nature of these cults as mystery cults. There is much scholars do not know about these cults because of their private practices. However, lack of preserved evidence to this Dionysus does not mean that his cult was less important than his most dominant attribute as the god of wine. As Versnel stated, the Greeks were able to shift their views of the gods for whatever the situation required of that god. In Athens, he was

⁴⁹ Marietta Horster, "Cult of Dionysos: Economic Aspects," In *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*. Edited by Renate Schlesier (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG., 2011): 63.

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the god of wine, and in some colonies, he was the god of afterlife and rebirth. Despite one being better preserved and therefore better known by modern scholars, both domains of Dionysus were important in Greek views on the deity. He is not only the god of wine but also a god of rebirth and afterlife, and these are only a few of his domains within Greek polytheism. Perhaps, once more scholarship is dedicated to the subject of the gods and comparing their representations in various domains and epithets throughout the Mediterranean, more information will result about ancient Greek society and how the Greeks practiced such a chaotic religion.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Exekias Kylix (Eye-Cup) ca. 540-530 BCE. Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File: Exekias Dionysos Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2044 n2.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Exekias Dionysos Staatliche Antikensammlungen 2044 n2.jpg&oldid=118950989](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Exekias_Dionysos_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen_2044_n2.jpg&oldid=118950989).



Figure 2: Coin from Naxos, ca. 460 BCE. Kahn_054. With permission of wildwinds.com. http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/sicily/naxos/Kahn_054.jpg

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Figure 3: Drachmas from Naxos, ca. 420-403 BCE. Kahn_145.
WildWinds. With Permission of wildwinds.com, ex Roma Numismatics.
<http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/sicily/naxos/i.html>

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