



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

## The “Maddening Sting” of Dionysus

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

In his play *The Bacchae*, Euripides (ca. 480–406 BCE) describes the people of Thebes as overwhelmed suddenly by the “maddening sting” of Dionysus, after the worship of the god arrives in the city. What exactly did Euripides mean by this choice of words? If we examine this unusual god in more detail, we find that he was far more than just the jolly wine deity he became to posterity. In fact the mysterious presence of Dionysus could literally drive one to madness and death, and his worship was a dangerous, double-edged sword. Ancient authors indicate that worshipers who undertook the secret mysteries of Dionysus walked a fine line between order and chaos, conformity and deviance, and sanity and insanity.

Greek mythographers tell us that Zeus was the father of Dionysus but the androgynous, seductive character of this god is curious, if not alien. Scholars debate where the god originated, whether in Greece or Asia Minor, but others suggest the source of the god’s power and enlightenment was India. Origins aside, it was the worship of this new god that brought Greeks an experience like none they had previously encountered. We should note, however, that what initiates experienced depended on where they lived, just as religions are practiced differently today, contingent on location. In Classical Athens, for example, the spring “Dionysia” festival was a relatively tame affair, which included introduction of new plays and a boozy street celebration akin to a block-party. But in the rural celebrations of mid-winter, particularly in the forests of Macedonia, Thessaly, and Thrace, one could experience the secret rites of devotion known as the *orgia*. This entailed achieving what the Greeks called *entheos*, a mysterious merging of mortal and god, culminating in an ecstatic oneness in which the

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Anonymous (Italian)  
*Dionysiac Procession*, late 17<sup>th</sup> century  
Ink on paper  
Gift of Prof. and Mrs. Saul S. Weinberg in memory of Bernard Weinberg (73.272)



**Tetradrachm with Head of Dionysus** (*obverse*)  
Greek, Hellenistic, ca. 148–90/80 BCE  
From Thasos  
Silver  
Museum purchase and partial gift of Mrs. Mary Frances Osborne Davis and Mrs. Susan Ann Davis  
Aulgur in memory of John H. Townsend (69.164)



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suppliant was no longer himself or herself. How did one reach such a state? Initiates remained dutifully silent on the secret proceedings, but we can extrapolate some information from various sources. First, we must conclude that one had to be psychologically receptive to the experience, maintaining a particular openness of mind. Groups dressed in ritual dress gathered in forested countryside, where music and dance were undoubtedly part of the ritual. Scholars still debate whether wine was actually involved. There may have been role-playing, but details are slim. In any case, it seems there was a gradual building of group momentum as one gave in to music, dance, and ultimate possession by the god. Reports of initiates becoming imbued with superhuman strength are not uncommon, and frequently young trees were uprooted or their branches were stripped. As the collective energy grew, initiates also engaged in the tearing apart and consuming of young animals while the flesh and blood were still warm. As one author commented, “if you tear something to pieces and eat it warm and bleeding, you add its vital powers to your own.” It is thus clear that the god was thought to be present in the animal’s flesh and blood. Dionysus is therefore a potent, multidimensional life force in many things, from the blood pulsing in the young animal, to the sap flowing through a young tree, to the liquid potency in the grape. A few of the god’s many titles attest his multifaceted character: “Endendros” (he in the tree), “Karprios” (of the fruits), “Agrios” (wild or savage), and perhaps most telling is “Eleutherios” (the liberator). To be sure, what Dionysiac initiates experienced was a liberation from the self, or what modern lingo might term an “out-of-body experience.” The resulting state could be sublime and life-changing, provided one came through the possession. For others, authors report uncontrollable frenzies that led some over the edge of sanity, and sometimes to death. Tales of women killing their children are not just in *The Bacchae*, and one man is said to have cut off his own legs. We have no way to verify such stories, but the act of rampaging through forested countryside in a wine-fueled delirium seems treacherous enough. Frenzied dancing or “raging” was also common, and women are often shown engaged as such in the visual record.



**Black-Figure Neck Amphora with Dancing Maenad and Satyrs**

Greek, ca. 590–570 BCE

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

Gift of J. Lionberger Davis (67.60)

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**Black-Figure Kylix with Dancing Silenoi**

Greek, late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE

From Attica (Greece)

Pottery

William and Anna Weinberg Purchase Fund (66.11)



**Gem with Bust of Dionysus**

Roman, 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE–3<sup>rd</sup> century CE

Amethyst

Anonymous gift in honor of Saul and Gladys Weinberg (84.58)

The worship of Dionysus was extremely appealing to women who were undoubtedly lured by temporary emancipation from their cloistered lives. They could be known as *maenads* or *Bacchae*,\* and men could also become *Bacchoi*, but it remains unclear who received such labels. What is abundantly evident is that the cult remained extremely popular for centuries, and ancient records indicate that celebrations had to be occasionally curtailed because of over-zealous initiates bringing danger to themselves or others. There is no doubt that Dionysus was a god of liberating ecstasy, but precisely how one achieved it remains a mystery. The god's legacy in material culture is vast, along with the creatures of the woodlands such as centaurs, satyrs, and *silenoi* (old satyrs) who were his mythical followers. Their imagery is a persistent presence on wine vessels especially. The amethyst is linked to Dionysus, probably because of its purple color, and it was believed wearing amethyst prevented drunkenness. The word in Greek, *amethystos*, translates as “not drunk.” ■

\*Derived from “Bakchos,” a name given to Dionysus in Asia Minor, which Romans adapted to Bacchus. Romans also called him “Liber” just as the Greeks knew him as liberator.