

THE TRIUMPH OF DIONYSOS

Convivial processions, from antiquity to the present day

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Preface

The Greeks knew that their god Dionysos (Bacchus to the Romans) had conquered the whole world, to bring it the delights of wine, and that his greatest success had been in India. His victory procession back to Greece was a subject for artists and for real displays, which have provided models for triumphs, masques, civic and private celebrations, down to the present day. The model may be used to celebrate festivals for the gods, kings and emperors, successful athletes or sporting events, military victories, monumental entrance processions. The potential range of these and related celebrations is enormous, down to circus parades, the opening ceremonies for Olympic Games. For us the range will be more restricted, and often more serious, focusing on those involving wheeled vehicles of 'classical' type, and sometimes carrying images rather than 'real' gods, people or animals. The animals, especially the eastern, are important. The enthusiasm with which elements of the theme were accepted in the Renaissance may be exemplified by a famous ancient cameo in the Medici collection, an excerpt from the triumph [fig. 10], which Donatello adapted as a decorative marble roundel for the Farnese Palace in Florence [fig. 38], and the cameo reminds us of the sexual element – the acquisition of Ariadne by the god, which could be added to the general scenes of abandon in which a Pan or drunken old Silenos on a donkey was commonly also involved, as well as other heroes and divinities related to Dionysos either as drunkards or lovers.

Real chariots are the least important of the vehicles involved, since they can only hold one or two standing figures and are most appropriate for military triumphs. What was needed was transport which might accommodate several figures: commonly a low, flat four-wheeled cart, on which might be erected a tall platform for a throne, or a flatter chariot-type vehicle which could accommodate more than one figure if need be, even a boat on wheels, or what looks most like a Bath chair or a wheeled chaise-longue, like Donatello's, on

which a couple can comfortably recline. Wild animals played a very important part in Dionysos' Indian triumph, with satyrs and wild women (his maenads, handling snakes), and especially wine. In antiquity such a celebration served as a model for the celebration of Alexander the Great's triumphs in the east, as well as those of Roman emperors, since the assimilation of a victor to a god was a practice encouraged by most rulers. Renaissance artists adopted the theme enthusiastically, mainly the theme of the god acquiring Ariadne on his return to Greece, and it has lived on as long as there has been a classical tradition in western art. The most distinguished latest contribution is by Salvador Dalí [fig. 58], still dependent on the classical model, but we shall see that the procession itself and its classical elements have by no means been forgotten.

The account I give here has to be selective, but it concentrates on the classical renderings, their kin and succession, an art-historical exercise not unrelated to life. And it deals with Dionysos the easterner, not the northerner, who might be more relevant to many aspects of his cult, especially the mystic, but not to those aspects of his developing history which absorbed artists; nor whatever Mycenaean Greek figure bore his name on Linear B tablets; nor his many non-classical kin, like the Yoruba god Ogun and his phallic thyrsus;¹ nor the many parade vehicles of man's prehistory in which the sun disc or other symbols of the divine were carried in procession to entertain and reassure the populace; nor the very many religious or seasonal parades carrying icons or statues.² These are related only to the extent that long public parades are an ideal way to engage, entertain and even instruct the populace. I have not recorded my theme in a Dionysiac spirit, but the celebratory elements of it are exciting and inspirational, and if Dalí is the best that can be mustered for the modern artist's reactions to the ancient images, at least something of the spirit of the live processions can be glimpsed in the circus parades with which this account closes.³

¹ W. Soyinka, *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973) vi-vii.

² Well surveyed in Jennings, *Parades*.

³ For an all-period bibliography of the subject of triumph see R. Baldwin, 'A Bibliography of the Literature on Triumph' in B. Wisch and S. Munshower (eds.), *Triumphal Celebrations and the Rituals of Statecraft* (1990) 358-385.

Chapter I

THE DIONYSIAC PROCESSION IN EARLY GREECE

We start soberly, to make a better acquaintance with our god as a serious actor in Greek religion as well as for his processional career. In the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford are fragments of a Greek black-figure clay vase found at Karnak in Egypt. One side depicts a big vine and vintage scene. The other side [fig. 1] can be restored as showing a large sailless boat (revealed by the scrap showing its boar's-head prow) being carried on the shoulders of men and attended by figures of satyrs – the animal-eared, tailed, phallos-waving attendants of Dionysos, one of them playing pipes. There can be little doubt that on the missing part of the boat (the majority) there was a figure of the god Dionysos himself, such as appears on later Attic scenes with the boat and satyrs [fig. 2]. There are much later references to a procession for Dionysos in which his priest steers a trireme boat carried to the agora of Smyrna,¹ and Smyrna or another East Greek city seems certainly the home of the artist who painted the Oxford vase soon after the middle of the sixth century BC. But there are no wheels here and we have to turn to Athens at the end of the century where we find on vases the Attic equivalent, also attested by texts, in which a figure of the god – most probably the priest dressed as the god – travels through the streets of Athens in a boat on wheels, attended by mock satyrs and music [fig. 2]. Attica too gives us more information about rustic Dionysiac processions, the *Dionysia in agrois*, involving the carriage of a massive phallos, which we see also on an Athenian vase, supported by a monster satyr.

¹ Philostratos, *Vit.soph.* i, 25.1.

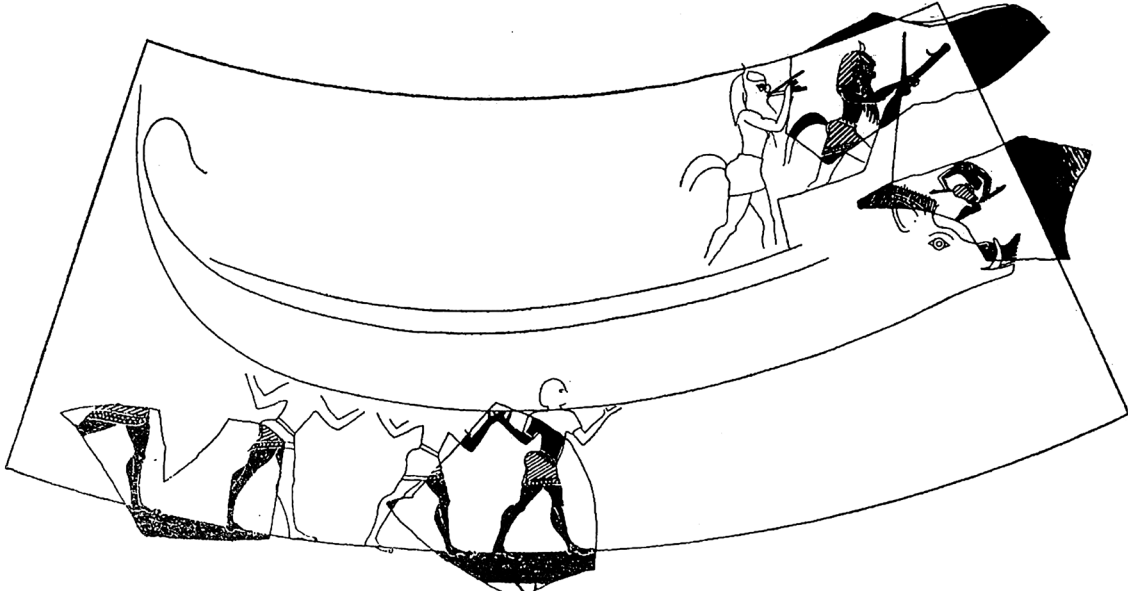


Figure 1: East Greek black figure vase from Karnak, Egypt. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1924.264.



Figure 2: Attic black figure vase. London, British Museum B79.

The point of using a boat to celebrate the essentially agricultural and vinous, landlubber god Dionysos remains to be explained.² At any rate Dionysos was very addicted to wagons of some sort apart from those just mentioned; he would have appeared in the procession to any place where a Dionysiac theatrical production was to be staged, while on the stage itself there was on occasion the *ekkyklema*, a platform that could be wheeled out during or at the end of a play to display figures, even corpses, relevant to the action.³

Most of this is relatively early and in many ways very informal, but clearly such processions were a normal part of the religious life of Greek cities and villages, and especially in honour of Dionysos. Certainly there were other processions for deities at their sanctuaries. One of the more conspicuous was that in Athens for their goddess Athena. In the classical period the quadrennial Panathenaea festival featured a ship on wheels, carrying as its sail the peplos robe which was to be dedicated to the goddess on the Acropolis. The Spartans too were said to carry models of the rafts on which their Dorian ancestors entered the Peloponnese from the north, in their Karneia festival.⁴ But we must return to Dionysos and our starting point in the vase found in Egypt.

Egypt will figure not a little in our narrative. At Karnak, the major royal and religious site, there was an annual festival (Opet) in which the boat of the sun god was carried in procession [cf. Fig. 3]. The presence of the Greek vase there can be no coincidence. The Greek who took it there, no doubt to dedicate, had seen the parallel with the local festival and may have especially ordered it at home, or at least chosen it as an appropriate special gift. It might even have been made in north Egypt where, it seems, Greek potter-painters were active in this period. But then the question arises whether the correspondence in

² A full account of the Karnak fragments and associations discussed in the following paragraphs, appears in my article 'A Greek Vase from Egypt', in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 78 (1958) 4-12: the Karnak vase (Oxford 1924.264) – figs. 1-2, pl.1; the Attic ship on wheels (London B79)– fig. 3; the satyr and phallos (Florence 3897)– fig. 4. Further on Dionysos ship-cars, C. Auffarth, *Der drohende Untergang* (Berlin, 1991) 213-29; R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2005) 302-3; *ThesCRA* V, 293 (the doubts about reconstruction are quite misplaced). The Egypt connection and the Karnak vase seem to be regularly omitted in recent discussions by historians of religion.

³ On which see now J.D. Eis, *The Scene Wagon and the Ship of State* (New York, 2011).

⁴ J. Boardman, *The Archaeology of Nostalgia* (2002) 85, and for other mythical ships. From the 1930s' excavations at the sanctuary of Apollo Phanaios in Chios there are unpublished (in Chios Museum) archaic fragments of clay models which vaguely resemble ship foreparts with roundels (wheels?) attached, and might be associated with ship processions of some sort.

practice was accidental. The fifth-century historian Herodotus (2. 48-9), who knew Egypt well, thought that the Dionysiac processions in Greece was derived from Egypt, including the carriage of cubit-high jointed images borne by women, with pipers, and that it was introduced in remote antiquity by Melampus ('black foot' – an African?), a seer who could talk to animals. Later, the historian Diodorus derived the Dionysiac phallos procession from Egypt too.⁵ Another East-Greek-style vase found in Karnak, and of about the same date as the ship vase, has a satyr leading a large ram, a creature annually sacrificed there to Amun (= Greek Zeus), and so was perhaps also a deliberate choice for dedication.⁶

As for the ship on wheels, the Egyptian goddess Isis' ship is so depicted on a third-century AD painting in Ostia.⁷

We shall return to the Egyptian connection but should also consider other Greek processions of the archaic and classical periods, especially for any features which might relate to the later Dionysiac practices. Archaic depictions of chariot processions involving gods are plentiful in vase painting with a few on other monuments. The gods ride and are often accompanied on foot by other deities. Mortal rustic, marital and other processions are commonly on foot, accompanied by music and often dancing. Dionysiac ones generally seem to be given a mythological setting and describe the Return of Hephaistos to Olympus, whence the god had been thrown for binding Hera to her throne, and the god is often depicted lame from the fall. He is accompanied by Dionysos, another 'lame' god, with his full rout of satyrs and maenads, music and dancing, but for transport nothing more than an ass.

This is the sort of mythical processional occasion which could easily, through art, have provided a model for real rustic celebrations of the god and wine.

The use of a chariot, however, is most relevant. The chariot was not a weapon of war for Greeks of this period, but it was used for racing in the Games (themselves very religious occasions) and ceremonially, being especially associated with heroes and a major feature in the Homeric epic poems about the war at Troy. Most of the gods were at times represented in chariots, often attended by other gods. There may, however, on occasion

⁵ Herodotus 2, 48-9; Diodorus 1.22.7.

⁶ *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 78 (1958) pl. 2b.

⁷ *ThesCRA* VII 234, pl. 31.1. I do not think the Late Dynastic model of a Mediterranean-type ship on wheels found in Gurob (Nile delta) can be easily accommodated in the Dionysos-Egypt story: S. Wachsmann, *Gurob ship-cart model and its Mediterranean context* (Texas, 2012), especially ch. 2, but it might be borne in mind.

be a mortal association also in the divine chariot scenes. When the tyrant Peisistratos marched to take over Athens in about 560 BC he came in a chariot (not, as we have seen, a war chariot so much as a parade chariot) in the company of a woman who had been dressed up as the city goddess Athena. There is good if indirect evidence even in the earlier archaic period that prominent mortals could be assimilated to gods or heroes in popular ideology and art if not religion. In Athens Herakles, then Theseus, were the prominent heroes, and closely associated with politicians of the day. It was soon to become a very common practice, especially in the Hellenistic period, starting with Alexander ‘the Great’ who could be assimilated to a Zeus, Herakles or Dionysos. Athena’s own procession at the Panathenaea festival in Athens has been noted already for its inclusion of a ship on wheels, but most of it passed through Athens on foot or on horseback, the Acropolis being inaccessible to chariots. The carriage of gods’ statues on chariots was probably commonplace – thus, there is record for that of Dionysos being so treated on early third-century BC Delos,⁸ and this was a feature of the spring Dionysia festival in Attica. Even eighth-century BC Greece may have had a statue-in-chariot tradition, in Crete, with a nature goddess, shown on a vase.⁹

Egypt requires special attention not only for this early period but also for developments in the post-Alexander, Hellenistic (Ptolemaic) period from the late fourth century BC on. Processions were an important part of rituals both for the gods and for the dead. Boats figure prominently, both because of the simple presence of the Nile and for its special function at Karnak as being the divider between the lands of the living and the dead (on the west bank). Images of the dead, of kings and of gods, were carried on boats on various occasions, often accommodated in individual shrines. The boat itself is normally carried on the shoulders of men [fig. 3], as on the Oxford vase, but could also be moved on sledges and pulled by oxen. Wheeled vehicles, normal in the Greek world, were less important in a land dominated by its river and relatively roadless, and Egyptian war chariots were fast and flimsy. For our purposes it is the Egyptian practice that must have been the most influential, but the notion of carrying statues of divinities, either for ritual or between cities, was known too in early Mesopotamia and is virtually universal.

A god’s statue in its way signified the independence and power of a city, so that its theft was a matter of some concern. Whence the significance of the ‘Palladion’ statue of Athena at Troy which, once stolen by the Greeks,

⁸ *Inscriptiones Graecae* XI.2, 158A.70, 161A.90-1; T. Homolle, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 14 (1890) 503-4.

⁹ *ThesCR A* II.5, 482, no. 583 (fig). *Ibid.*, 477-488 on the carriage of cult statues (C. Lochin).



Figure 3: Relief at Karnak, Egypt.

spelled the downfall of the city. Later and elsewhere there are the great Krishna processions of divine statues on chariots, and the Juggernaut, and much more.

For the early period we have seen that a Greece-Egypt parallel can be found. Whether it is significant or not is another matter. A boat is a less obvious vehicle for Dionysos, a rustic god, than for the gods and divine kings along the Nile. The Athenian Exekias' famous cup of about 530 BC shows the god alone on a ship, its mast growing a vine, and dolphins around [fig. 4].¹⁰ One explanation is that he is bringing the gift of the vine and wine from Naxos to Athens. He was said also to have sailed west where he was attacked by Tyrrhenian (Etruscan) pirates whom he turned into dolphins. The story appears in the Hesiodic Hymn to Dionysos, of uncertain date, but possibly archaic, 6th-century. The subject appears quite explicitly on the Lysicrates Monument in Athens in the 4th century BC, without any ships.¹¹ Whether such stories are enough to justify a Dionysiac ship procession, in Athens and East Greece, is not clear; otherwise we might have to judge that observation

¹⁰ J. Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases* (1974, 1991) fig. 104 (Munich 2044).

¹¹ J. Boardman, *Greek Sculpture; the Late Classical Period* (1995) fig. 16.



Figure 4: Attic black figure vase. Munich 2044.

of what were taken to be Dionysiac practices in Egypt suggested that for the image of the Greek god too a ship could be appropriate and serve as a carriage. We would expect to see it first in East Greece (and we do, on the Karnak vase which is of East Greek parentage) but Athens' later adoption of the motif and with a wheeled ship is at least odd, and the connotation there seems more rustic (a spring festival) than maritime.¹² Maybe the maritime associations of Dionysos have older roots, and we need to look again at Egypt.

¹² LIMC III, Dionysos nos. 788-90, 792, 827-9. For the Exekias vase and full discussion of the subject see now E.A. Mackay, *Tradition and Originality: A Study of Exekias* (Oxford, BAR 2092, 2010) 221-241.