Η ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ

(He Epistole)

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The Temple Keepers

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THE NEOKOROI* are a group of Hellenic polytheists who feel called to a path of service and devotion to the gods. We support mysticism, hard polytheism, and tend to favor reconstructionism as an approach to developing Hellenismos, while also recognizing the importance of personal experience and local cultus. We are especially dedicated to fostering communities, festivals, and public shrines, and providing guidance and information on religious matters – all to ensure the strength and longevity of the worship of the Greek gods.

HE EPISTOLE (a "message" or "letter") is published four times a year. We offer articles, hymns, prayers, poetry, reviews, information, rituals, community notices, fiction, recipes, and anything else of interest to the Hellenic polytheist community. We welcome feedback, and submissions from guest writers. He Epistole is a free publication and can be found in many locations nationwide. If you would like the newsletter delivered to you directly, subscriptions cost $20 per year – contact us for more information. And please contact us if you would like to distribute copies in your area – in return you receive the issues in electronic format for free. Back issues can be downloaded in PDF form from the website for free.

To contact the editor, email: **info@neokoroi.org** - or visit the Neokoroi website: **www.neokoroi.org**. (We have even more articles online, as well as information on the gods, photos, links and more!) Our next issue will be coming out in December 2007. The deadline for submissions is November 20th.

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*The word *neokoros* is derived from the Greek words *naos* (temple) and *koreo* (to sweep) and originally meant "the one who sweeps the temple" or "the temple keeper". It was a humble position, but an important one, for it was the neokoros' responsibility to make sure that the temple was kept clean and free of any pollution, and also to tend to the daily service of the god in whose temple he or she served.

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Encountering the Gods

by Oinokhoe

> "Olympians adopt all manner of incognitos for their appearances before Homeric heroes, sometimes cloaking themselves in a fog, sometimes assuming the likeness of a mortal familiar to the character whom they visit, sometimes transforming themselves into the birds that descend effortlessly from their lofty perches."
>
> (Debora Tam Steiner, *Images in Mind*)

Over the years, I have heard Hellenic polytheists lament many times their distance from the gods. I have heard them remark that perhaps long ago the gods walked amongst us, but that now we must experience them on a purely spiritual level. And I have seen the same people dismiss what I would consider amazing encounters with comments about "coincidence" and "synchronicity" and perhaps "signs." But I wonder if perhaps we aren't missing something very powerful that is right in front of us.

When picturing the stories from mythology in our heads, I think many of us tend to see them with Hollywood-type glamour and special effects. There is Zeus, magically morphing into a shower of gold to rain upon Danae. Or Aphrodite, approaching Anchises as a mortal woman but with her beautiful robe practically glowing, revealing her true self. Or Apollon, leading his priests to Delphi in the form of a dolphin. These things belong to the realm of mythology, not our modern reality. If they ever did happen, they certainly don't happen now.

But what if we take a different view? What if the people who lived those stories experienced them in a much more natural and tangible way than we have imagined – perhaps not as ordinary events, but not supernatural either? What if, what we would see as an amazing but purely physical event – say, coming upon a deer in the woods, who then looks into your eyes for several moments before running away – they would have seen as meeting Artemis in the woods, looking right into her eyes.

Take the previous example of Apollon – instead of the god miraculously changing from an anthropomorphic physical form into that of a dolphin, and then leading the Cretan priests to land, what if a dolphin simply appeared at the side of their boat (as is not uncommon, the same thing happened to a friend of mine in the waters near Delphi), but they knew it to be Apollon and followed it because they were smart enough to follow a god? What if they didn't need to see the recognizable god actually change into the dolphin, to understand (through experience, through faith, through gut instinct) that the dolphin was nonetheless the god himself?

I mentioned that this happened to a friend – she was vacationing in Greece, took a boat ride to the bay near Delphi, and as she approached that sacred place, a dolphin appeared alongside the boat as if it were guiding her there. She certainly noted that this was a special occurrence, and that it might even be a "sign" (from the gods, or the universe, I'm not sure of her precise spiritual beliefs), but she never entertained the notion that it could be something even greater. And I doubt that many of us would – it seems hubristic or even crazy to believe that a god could be present in such a physical, *real* form, especially in order to communicate with us. But I think we might be missing out on something by dismissing the possibility.

> "Odysseus, one of the few heroes who succeeds in making his tutelary goddess reveal herself, knows that he stands as exception to the common rule: 'It is difficult for a mortal encountering you to recognize you, goddess,' he remarks to Athena, 'for you are able to liken yourself to everything.'"
>
> (Steiner)

I first had this idea many years ago while reading the beginning of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Firebrand*. She re-imagines the story of Leda and Zeus – instead of a swan, Zeus comes to Leda in the body of her husband. She sees Tyndareus walking to her as lightning sparks in the sky above, and she knows that she is looking at Zeus, that he has essentially possessed Tyndareus and is using that form to make contact with her. Through that physical incarnation (and yet, not some unbelievable manifestation out of thin air, but simply the temporary possession of an already physical form), he is even able to impregnate her. I believe that this type of experience is how many of the encounters between mortals and gods took place, how they appeared to the people involved, and how they can *still* happen today.

I know that many people believe that the gods send omens and signs, and I do too. I know that sometimes, when a hawk appears at a poignant moment, that hawk is a sign from Hermes, sending me a message. What I am suggesting here is that sometimes, the hawk might be Hermes himself in hawk form, come for some purpose for which a messenger wouldn't suffice. This might even seem like a subtle difference, but I think it is important. Because it opens up the possibility that the gods are indeed speaking to us, even coming to us, actually, immanently, right now. That it is not only mystics who have direct experiences with the gods, but perhaps merely only them who recognize those experiences as such. And also that we might be praying for our gods to appear before us, and then turning a blind eye to them when they do.

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Encountering the Gods *(continued from page three)*

So, if all this is true (and that is a matter of faith, and one that each person must decide for themselves), how do we take off the blinders? Well, for one thing, the next time you pray and receive something you see as a "sign," take a closer look. Test the experience (I once had a crow follow me for quite a ways, stopping and starting again when I did, after I asked it to show me if it was more than just a crow). Especially if the thing in question directly approaches you in some way, or is doing something totally out of the ordinary. If you pray to Hermes and encounter a homeless man just afterwards, it may be a sign. If that man tells you something he should not have known, appears to know you, and gives you pertinent advice, he may not be just a man (this happened to another friend of mine).

Of course, sometimes a crow is just a crow. And yes, there is a danger here of losing touch with reality, seeing gods everywhere even when there are none, believing everything is directed at you. There are methods to counteract this – share your experience with a trusted friend and get their objective opinion; confirm or deny it through divination or look for a follow-up omen; consult a seer (we do have a few even now); review your dreams afterwards; keep a healthy dose of humor and skepticism within you at all times; etc. But I think it is still worth a deeper look, despite the risks. Because just consider the possibility that the gods are right in front of us, and we don't even recognize them! That the kinds of things that happen between gods and mortals in the myths could happen now, to us, if we open ourselves up to the experience!

Let's stop waiting for the gods to appear out of nowhere in a sparkly cloud and speak in a booming voice to us from on high. Instead, let's start looking for them in the real world around us, and listen for their voices in the songs of birds, the words of strangers, even the music on the radio.

Orphic Hymn to Demeter

translated by Harita Meenee
www.hmeenee.com

C

Ceres, universal mother, goddess
with many names, venerable Demeter,
nurturer of children, source of happiness.
Wealth-offering goddess, nourishing the corn, giver of all,
joyful in peace and in laborious work,
creating abundance in seeds and heaps of grain,
mistress of the threshing floor, with fresh fruit filled.
You dwell in Eleusinian holy vales,
delightful, lovely, nurturing all people,
you, the first who yoked the oxen to the plough
and offered mortals pleasant, happy lives.
Giver of growth, Bacchus's companion in feasts,
splendidly honored, bearer of the torch.
Pure, delighted with the summer sickles,
chthonic yet manifest, favorable to all;
mother of good offspring, children-loving,
venerable, maiden who nourishes boys.
Yoking your chariot with serpent reins
dancing around your throne in bacchic frenzy,
mother of one, goddess with many children,
reverenced by mortals, many are your forms,
filled with flowers and sacred leaves.
Come, oh blessed one, pure,
pregnant with summer fruit,
bringing desirable order and peace,
joyful riches, too, along with our queen, Health.

On Persephone

by Laura M. LaVoie

> Margaret Atwood referred to her as "Double Persephone":
>
> “The dancing girl's a withered crone;
> though her deceptive smile
> Lures life from the earth, rain from the sky,
> It hides a wicked sickle; while
> Those watching sense the red blood curled
> Waiting in the center of her eye;
>
> But the stranger from the hill
> Sees only the bright gleam
> Of a slim woman gathering asphodel,
> and lashes his black team.”

I have spent half a lifetime in the presence of Persephone and all of her aspects. That is why a conversation about mythology rocked me to the core and sent me on a spiral inward. I wanted to know if what I had felt - what was part of me to the very depths of my soul - was just plain wrong.

And I learned a few things. I suppose that would be the point. However, what I learned is that the Goddess does not chose her devotees lightly and that what I have always known and always felt is in fact the hand of the Goddess.

The conversation pretty much revolved around *when* Persephone descended into the underworld with her husband and when she ascended back to Olympos with her mother. The conversation involved a lot of talk about the Greek planting and season cycles - clearly different than the ones I had experienced in suburban Detroit growing up. Very different from the ones that I experience here in Atlanta, Georgia now.

Personal experience has always been the very cornerstone of my spiritual practice. I do not believe that the gods *exist* in the scholarly works from centuries ago. If our tradition is a living and breathing tradition then the Gods exist in the here and now. The ancient Greek texts and modern studies of the Greek texts provide us a map or a guidebook but they do not provide us with spiritual experiences. At least that is what I have come to find over the years.

So when I turned to the bookshelf to teach myself more, I was surprised. And the true epiphany came while reading *The Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* edited by Helene P. Foley. Frankly, when I started this book I expected it to be dry and boring. However, I found it to be quite the opposite - providing me with much insight.

I was reading Foley's commentary on her translation of the Hymn when I came across this bit regarding lines 401 through 403:

> "In the Hymn, Persephone's return does not explicitly cause the spring but precedes it." So I read more. "In the Hymn Demeter specifies that Persephone will return each year with the spring flowers but the season when the abduction took place is uncertain." (Foley, p.58)

Interestingly enough, in the aforementioned conversation I had been informed under no uncertain terms that the Hymn does not give us any contextual clues regarding the abduction or return. Well, maybe not on the abduction - but it appears to be quite specific about the return.

So I flipped back to the translation (Foley provides the English on the left page with the Greek on the right, as well, for the ability to cross-reference were someone to choose).

In the Hymn Demeter says to Persephone:

> "When the earth blooms in spring with all kinds
> of sweet flowers then from the misty dark you will
> rise again, a great marvel to gods and mortal men."

So there, right in front of me, were lines I had read a dozen times but it seemed as if they had always escaped me.

I grabbed my other book of *Homeric Hymns*, a translation that I love by Diane Rayor. I flipped to the same lines in her book:

> "When earth sprouts with every kind of fragrant
> flowers in spring, out of the misty darkness
> you will rise again, a great marvel for gods and mortal folk."

And the Loeb volume 57, translated by H.G. Evelyn-White, reads:

> “But when the earth shall bloom with the fragrant flowers of spring in
> every kind, then from the realm of darkness and gloom shalt come up
> once more to be a wonder for gods and mortal men.”

Foley then continues to point out contextual clues from the mythologies. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has Proserpina picking

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On Persephone *(continued from page five)*

flowers in the spring. And the Orphic Hymn does specifically place the marriage of Persephone and Hades in the fall:

> "In spring you rejoice in the meadow breezes
> and you show your holy figure in shoots and green fruits.
> You were made a kidnapper's bride in the fall,
> and you alone are life and death to toiling mortals,
> O Persephone, for you always nourish all and kill them, too."
>
> (translation by A. Athanassakis)

The commentary continues to say:

> "Later sources, sometime said to be Stoic-influenced, interpret earlier myth as indicating that Persephone is associated with the planted seed and thus absent while it is in the ground (contrary to later interpretation, but it is not clear that these sources use Persephone's appearance and disappearances explicitly to explain the seasons). In Greece the grain continues to grow after being sown in the fall, if slowly, throughout the winter season; growth then quickens in the spring. The winter is thus a time of less flood but slow growth. Cornford and Nilsson associated the descent of Persephone with the storing of the seed in the underground *pithoi* (jars) after the harvest. Her absence then coincided with the dry months of summer (one-third of the year), and she returned in time for the fall plowing (and the fertile two-thirds of the year). Lack of growth coincides in this case with abundance, because the proceeds of the spring harvest are ready at hand. This version corresponds better with the actual growing season in Greece; yet the Hymn, by linking Persephone's return to the spring flowers, appears to deny it."

She goes on to footnote (regarding Cornford and Nilsson) that some scholars reject their view but others, including Burkert, are still "sympathetic" to it.

Is Foley the only one who has a correct interpretation? Certainly not. Who can know - it is all conjecture. These are ancient texts and their authors' intentions died with them. The texts remain a map but not the bible - the Gods are the source.

Then Carl Kerenyi throws a new monkey wrench into the whole deal. In the book *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, he suggests that Persephone never really leaves the underworld at all.

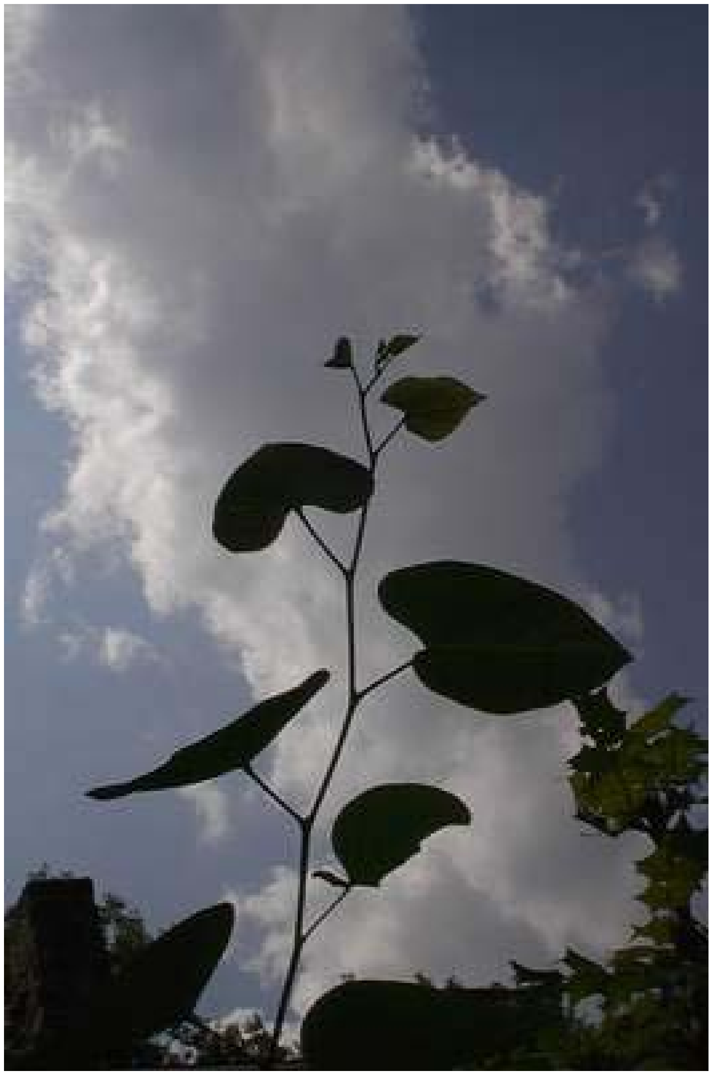
> "In the cult of the Queen of the Dead, to whom the dying repair at all seasons, the underworld can scarcely have remained without a queen for two thirds or - according to a later version - half the year. Could the travelers to the underworld - Orpheus, Herakles, Theseus, and Peirithoos - have found the queen's throne empty?.....Thus her person seems always to have admitted of a duplication." (Kerenyi, p. 148-149)

And now we are back to Atwood's "Double Persephone". Perhaps the intuitive and poetic author Margaret Atwood understood Persephone in a way that Kerenyi, Foley and the author of the Hymn could not. The real Persephone is ALL of the Persephones. The real Persephone is the one who reveals herself to her devotees as she chooses, and to each one differently. Does it really matter *when* she descends and returns? And maybe there is, as is suggested, a duality to Persephone that really splits the Queen of the Dead from the Kore eternally. But ultimately, if this is a living and breathing tradition the *real* Persephone is the one who has revealed herself to me and to others in whatever way she feels appropriate for the individual.

I have hesitated sharing all of this with the community. I don't believe that the modern Hellenic tradition should be about proving each other more right or more wrong. It really should be about the Gods and about our individual experiences with the gods than about what Hesiod, Homer or anyone else *said* about the Gods. Once again, those are guideposts not gospels. There are so many contradictions even in the ancient world that the modern Hellene's mind would easily explode trying to reconcile it all to create one cohesive interpretation.

My relationship with Persephone has evolved quite a bit since the first time I learned of her existence. And I suspect that it will continue to evolve for the rest of my life. That is how it should be, I believe. I practice a devotional tradition above all. May all the reading and research I do provide a deeper understanding of the Goddess and my relationship with her.

y



"Beanstalk, seen from below" ~ numinous photography by Autolykos

Library of the Ancients: Nonnos

by Sannion

Nonnos is one of the most interesting authors included in the Library of the Ancients. Homer stands at the head of the line, being the first great poet of ancient Greece, who all subsequent authors must be compared to – and Nonnos, almost eleven hundred years later, stands at the end of the line, the last flowering of the epic tradition. Nonnos is an enigma. His fame rests on two substantial works – the *Dionysiaka* and the *Paraphrasis*. Beyond the fact that he authored these two works, precious little is known about this great man's life.

Here are the solid facts that we possess: He grew up in Panopolis and probably studied in Alexandria. Panopolis was the ancient Egyptian Khemmis or Akhmin, and in addition to being a center of the worship of Min or Pan (the two were syncreticized as early as the sixth century BCE as we see from the second book of Herodotos' *History*) it was also sacred to Dionysos. We know that mysteries were performed for the god there. We know that its cult of Dionysos had surprising vitality, as Christian authors remark that the rites are still being carried out in the region well into the fifth-sixth century.

Panopolis was also famed for its weaving and tapestries, lovely examples of which have come down to us intact. Guess what was a prominent theme in them? Dionysos, scenes from his mythology – and later, once they have

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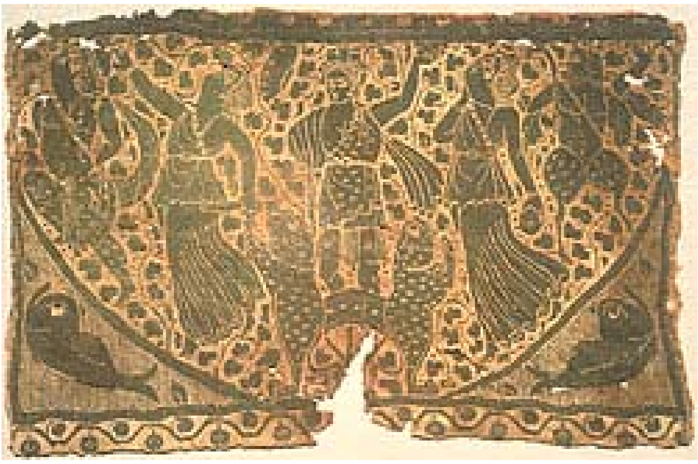
Library of the Ancients *(continued from page five)*

become ostensibly Christian, we find grapes, ivy, panthers, lions, and wine still prominent:



Considering that, it's not surprising that Nonnos would compose a work on the god who was so popular in his home region.

Nonnos was a respected scholar and teacher. He had a small group of students and writers who gathered around him, and one of the things that they did was revive ancient forms of poetry, most prominently the hexameter. As early as the time of Kallimakhos and Apollonios it had already begun to fall into decline. Poets tended to favor simpler poetic forms such as Bucolic and Iambic verse, with themes centered on domestic things like love, shepherds in the wild, and the origins of obscure words and customs. Apollonios wrote his epic about the Argonauts to prove that it could still be done. And in the centuries between him and Nonnos there were a few more major epics composed, but not many and they tended to lack the vitality of earlier pieces, being the work of dusty antiquarians. Nonnos and his circle attempted single-handedly to revive this ancient poetic form - and Nonnos' work was the shining example of it.

His *Dionysiaka* is huge, comprising almost double the length of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. His *Paraphrasis* is also quite large. One of the striking features of the *Dionysiaka* is that he sought out to collect every single obscure myth or legend told about the god, and weave them into a single narrative. His story also encompasses a vision of the world as an epiphany of the forces of self-generation, of nature as a divine force continually recreating itself through endless transformations. Although the spirit of Dionysos courses through every word of the epic, he doesn't actually introduce the god until about halfway through. Then, once he details the god's birth, youth, and early career he sets the stage for his masterpiece by relating the account of the god's conquest of India, which allows him to tell all of the other stories through complex and lengthy anecdotal narratives.

This theme, the conquest of India, was very important after the career of Alexander the Great, who was said to model his exploits after those of his divine ancestor Dionysos. The Ptolemies also made use of the myth, claiming descent from the god, and at times asserting that they embodied his vital essence. (Hence the several Ptolemies and Marcus Antonius' adoption of the title 'Neos Dionysos'.) The Ptolemaiea festival, which celebrated the foundation of their dynasty, had a strong Dionysian element to it: the first Ptolemy, by conquering Egypt, establishing his kingdom, making inroads into Seleukid territory to regain the sacred statues of the Egyptian gods which had been carried off by the Persians, reviving old cults that had fallen into decline and establishing centers of culture and learning, and presiding over an era of peace, prosperity, harmony, enlightenment and civilization were depicted as acting out the myth of Dionysos in the mortal realm, which is why the god has such a prominent place in the Pompe of Ptolemy II as described by Athenaeus:

www.geocities.com/neos_alexandria/dionysos_texts.html

Now, some of the myths that Nonnos recounts are obscure, and do not come down to us in any other author; though they are represented in works of art, and thus we know that they were current at the time, and may have been treated by poets whose work has been lost to us. (For instance, there was another Dionysian epic written around the 3rd century CE which also dealt with the Indian conquest and even preserves Nonnos' name for the evil Indian king that Dionysos fights, a feature attested nowhere else. This, at least, proves that Nonnos isn't completely making it up. Sadly, however, only a handful of lines of this earlier epic survive: a rather gruesome scene where Dionysos' forces have captured an Indian spy, dressed him up in a deer carcass, and sent the fellow back to his king, whom Dionysos is going to compel to butcher and eat!)

The legends that Nonnos tells that do have cognates in other poets aren't always consistent with their versions, though again that doesn't mean he's making it up. The Greeks and Romans saw myth as a fluid thing, and there was an almost infinite elasticity to it, with many places having profound local variations on a tale. Nonnos can be trusted as an important source of information - but no poet or writer, not even Homer or Plutarch - should be perceived as the infallible gospel truth. If you strip myth of its complexity and fluidity and turn it into something more along the lines of a nightly newscast, you lose its timeless value, making it mean one thing and one thing only, whereas myth must be allowed to supply many levels of interpretation - however contradictory - simultaneously.

We don't know when Nonnos became a Christian and a Bishop, since so little of his life has come down to us. It's suspected that that his other great work, the *Paraphrasis* (or translation of the Gospel of John) was written after he became a Bishop. But here's the clincher: from internal evidence, such as the relatively simpler style and occasional errors that are present in the one but not the other, it seems likely that the *Paraphrasis* was written **before** the *Dionysiaka*. Now, this is controversial, and some scholars maintain that he wrote the *Dionysiaka* in his youth, then converted - and some have even speculated (though this seems unlikely) that he wrote the *Paraphrasis*, but then later apostatized from Christianity and wrote the *Dionysiaka* in his old age! These theories arise from the seeming unlikelihood that a Christian author would compose such a large and favorable work for a pagan divinity, the seeming antithesis of Jesus, while maintaining his orthodox beliefs. There are, however, a number of examples of Christians from that period who had an entirely favorable view of pagan culture, art, philosophy, and religion, who didn't feel that one needed to give these up to embrace a belief in Christ, and consequently wrote poetry in honor of pagan divinities or texts extolling Platonic philosophy while still maintaining their Christian faith.

But the fact is, we will never really know. We also don't know how much Nonnos actually believed in the Dionysos he wrote about. While there is definitely this beautiful undercurrent of Dionysian epiphany and revelation through nature that runs through the whole epic, the actual character of Dionysos is quite different. Nonnos' Dionysos isn't very likeable: he's vain, cruel, petty (though that needn't imply a lack of faith, since I definitely believe in the god, but recognize that he has some less than positive character traits), and time and time again triumphs against insurmountable odds, killing a host of transparent cardboard cut-out villains. The battle scenes - while beautifully rendered, with lots of attention to detail and some truly remarkable poetic phrases - get tiresome to read, because there's no real dramatic tension. He's a hero - but one who is never in danger of losing. His Dionysos is pretty much the ancient equivalent of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone, though not nearly as charming.

That said, the *Dionysiaka* is still a great work, the last flowering of the Classical epic tradition. It provides us with a multitude of obscure or lost stories; there are some amazingly beautiful scenes; and if you go beneath the surface and see the stuff on creation, nature, and epiphany as a revelation of the god - it is a very powerful work indeed.

Unfortunately, the *Dionysiaka* has only been translated into English in a very poor, almost unreadable paraphrase by W. H. D. Rouse. I really can't stand it - for one thing, it's actually in prose, when it's supposed to be poetry, and a lot of its beauty and innovation is lost in translation. If you're curious to read it, you can find it online here:

http://www.theoi.com/Text/NonnusDionysiaca1.html

Go to the section on Dionysos at theoi.com and you'll also find ample quotations from other books.

Here are some interesting articles on the *Dionysiaka*:

http://www.nonnus.adelaide.edu.au/

A valuable translation of Nonnos' *Paraphrasis* can be found here, as well as some fascinating background information:

http://nonnos.iscool.net/

A truly wonderful, if speculative, tale has been told about Nonnos' conversion. In it, Nonnos is about to be confirmed as Bishop when the god Apollon comes before him and makes him choose between Poetry and Acceptability. I won't give away the ending, but I adore this story which captures the spirit of the times better than anything else I've seen:

http://www.horrormasters.com/Text/a2641.pdf

As you can tell, Nonnos is pretty dear to my heart. I've gone through periods of intensely disliking his work, but in the end, he devoted the single largest poetic work in history to my god, and that mediates against any possible short-comings he might otherwise have had.

"For now your time has passed you by,
and the fruit, what there was of it, is plucked,
but perhaps the shoot, for it is fine,
will bear abundant clusters of grapes,
but I fear the harvesters will pluck
from such a vine unripe grapes."

- Alkaios

Ashes for Hekate

by Amanda Blake

Pieces of a life
Ashes of a home
On the breeze
Soot floats away
Tiny curls of nothing
Easily crushed underfoot
Penelope's at the loom
Shredding apart the burial shroud
Under cover of nights gloom
What some would call destruction
Is really an act of creation
As she faithfully awaits Odysseus

As life never springs from a void
Creation must come from destruction
Life come from death
Change is invariably born in moments of pain
Most fear change, and treat Death with disdain

Hekate,
Fearsome Goddess,
Let me never be one to cower in my home
As your hounds bay across the night
Let me forsake the fear that binds my heart
And ride out to meet you at the crossroads
And embrace whatever comes
Lady of Ghosts
Let me meet death
With a smile on my lips
And a song in my heart

Dancing for the Gods

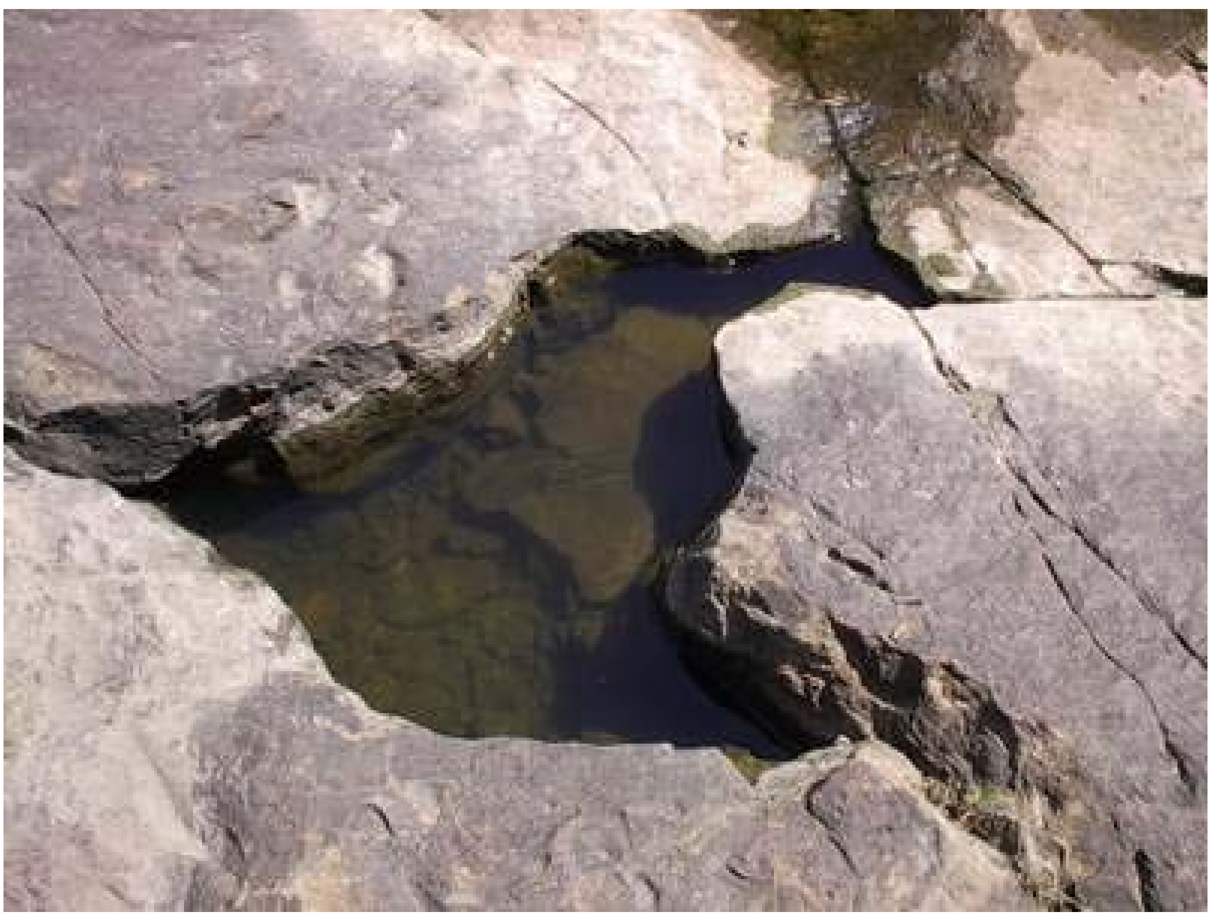
by Gabriel Aly

A little over a year ago, I was reading the book "Pride of Carthage," by David Anthony Durham (a great novel), and there was a quote that put me in a rather thoughtful mood. As one of the young daughters of the Barca family was lamenting over the recent disasters that befell her nation (Carthage losing the second Punic War, the loss of her brothers Hasdrubal, Mago, and Hanno, being forced to marry Syphax of Western Numidia instead of her love, the Massylian prince Massinisa), her sister told her, among other things like it: "We are the gods' puppets, ever dancing for their amusement. We have no choice but to always try and please them." After reading this, I was forced to ask myself a question: was my faith, even *all* faith, motivated only by fear of the divine? Just to – as said elsewhere in the book – avert the wrath of the gods elsewhere?

Some of the ancient peoples might have believed this, but I don't agree with this borderline blasphemous claim. I'm willing to bet that if you do have a religion, there are at least a few things, no matter how small you might think these things are, that your divine beings have done for you. Sure, you had to devote time and other resources to them, but didn't they give back to you? It's the equivalent to any earthly ruler; a true leader gives back to their subjects. The same is true with the gods. If you love them, and prove you do, they love you back. Your giving to them shouldn't be fueled by fear, as they can see through shallow attempts like that. It should be fueled by realizing that they are kind, generous beings who will help you a lot if you're only willing to give a little bit back to them, and acting towards yourself and others in a manner you know is truly good. The gods do have wrath, but never have I experienced it come unjustified from them. To attack them specifically or go back on an oath or a responsibility will result in negative consequences, but even if you're not religious, it's only common sense that these things are bad. And no one, much less the gods themselves, are forcing you to pray to them.

A few of us before converting not only had no religion whatsoever, but were flat-out atheists. Before I felt the calling of the gods, I was a devout atheist, which is one of the reasons my friends still don't take my new beliefs seriously. Back then, I didn't consider being judged by a divine force. When you're in that mindset, there's little more to fear than the regular cause and effect. Was I punished by the gods for doing so? No. I did not deliberately offend them, and if I ever did accidentally, I didn't look back on it and smile cruelly in defiance of them. They aren't bullies, angered by ignoring them, and unlike some other divine beings they don't want to punish you for following others. Unless all the translations of the *Iliad* I've seen were interpreted by inferior authors, I don't remember Homer quoting Zeus: "and he who does not believe in me, I shall smote(th?) him." Despite the earlier mentioned Carthaginian noble woman's belief, the gods don't demand action from you if you haven't claimed you would and didn't, or mock them. And why should they? I think it would be safe to state my belief that if something else makes you happier, they would not mind if you stopped worshipping them, as long as you respect and appreciate all help they provide. It's much more holier to drop something you don't believe in than to be a pretender to that thing.

So yes, maybe I am always dancing for the gods, but willingly, and with a smile on my face the whole time.



"Untitled" ~ numinous photography by Autolykos

Getting to Know Dionysos Through Study and Reflection

by Sannion

There are a number of different and important ways to get to know a god such as Dionysos. There is the most obvious and effective route, which is through worship, meditation/visualization, and direct personal encounters with the god. And then there are the more passive, internalized forms such as study, reflection, and discussion. Although there are things you can learn about the god only through direct experience, some people feel that you need to know who the god is before you can begin interacting with him. (Though I'll point out that Dionysos is a complex, contradictory god who defies easy classification; as soon as you think you've got him pinned down he'll do something to completely shake you up and challenge your understanding of him, and often yourself as well. I've been working to understand the god for over a decade now, and I'm no closer than when I first started out!)

To understand who Dionysos is, it's important to understand who Dionysos was, and the ancients expressed that through two distinct but complimentary ways: mythology and ritual. Mythology is literally stories told about the gods, and Dionysos has some of the most beautiful, powerful, dramatic, and at times frightening myths of any of the gods.

We should never forget, however, that myths are stories. Stories are not simply a recitation of bare facts; they are creations of the imagination which convey higher truths than any nightly news story (which pride themselves on providing just the bare facts) possibly could. They tell us who we are, where we came from, the proper way to act, who the gods are, how they act in our lives and in the world. A fact is one thing, and one thing only; a myth can speak to us on many levels and reveal the complex and multifaceted nature of reality. To ask of a myth 'did this happen' is to misunderstand its nature; a better question is, 'what does it mean if this happened?' Therefore when you are studying mythology, don't be surprised if you come across a number of different and mutually contradictory accounts of the same incident, as one frequently does when they are reading the myths surrounding Dionysos, especially those regarding his origins, of which there are at least four or five distinct varieties.

Although there are countless handbooks on Greek mythology (many of which devote at least a single chapter to Dionysos, and often more) I would advise against these. To begin with, they tend to lump the accounts together, ignoring or watering down their contradictions, and in the process often lose the important elements in the story. Secondly, they are often poorly written, providing little more than a skeleton account, lacking the charm, poetry, and power of the originals. Thirdly, many of these handbooks are full of errors and can give you a wrong impression about the myths. Case in point, Robert Graves frequently pulled myths out of his own head and tried to pawn them off on the ancients. When he bothered to cite sources for some of his neo-myths (which he often didn't do, simply stating 'the ancients said …') those works often do not support his assertions, and sometimes were made up whole-cloth along with his myths. And sometimes an author can accurately cite a source but twist its meaning so much that it ends up saying something completely different from what the original author intended. (Barbara Walker is especially guilty of this sort of revisionism.) Therefore I think it's far better to go to the sources yourself and draw your own conclusions about the material.

The most important sources for ancient Dionysian mythology are:

Euripides' *Bacchae*
Nonnos' *Dionysiaca*
The Homeric Hymns
The Orphic Hymns
Hesiod's *Theogony*
Apollodorus' *Library*
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
Plutarch's *Moralia* (Especially 'On Isis and Osiris', 'Table Talks', the 'Pythian Dialogues', and the 'Greek and Roman Questions' though there are numerous references spread throughout almost all of his works.)
Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*
Pausanias' *Guide to Greece*

There are, of course, many other valuable sources which could be added to this list (especially many of the poets, and some of the Christian apologists who provide important details only touched upon by other authors, albeit with their own hostile spin) but this should be more than sufficient to provide a working knowledge of Dionysos' mythology. All of these should be readily available in popular English translations (Loeb, Penguin, and Everyman being the most easily obtainable) especially Euripides, whose play on the confrontation between Dionysos and Pentheus has been a perennial favorite with translators, scholars, and audiences down through the ages, and thus has produced an over-abundance of versions. Try a couple out and see which flows best for you.

If you don't feel like spending a fortune to build up your own personal library, or spending hours searching through the dusty shelves of your public library, you can always look to the internet, where many, if not most of these volumes can be found. Some excellent resources for ancient Greek literature are:

http://ww.perseus.tufts.edu/
http://www.users.drew.edu/~jlenz/authors.html
http://www.fordham.edu/HALSALL/ANCIENT/asbook07.html

And a very handy collection of Dionysian quotations can be found on Aaron Atsma's theoi.com website.

Moving beyond mythology, we next turn to ancient cult practice and the history of his worship, which reveals a great deal about how Dionysos was conceived and how men and women related to him through ritual.

Writing about Dionysos has become sort of a cottage industry among academics and historians of religion, and consequently one may find there to be too many volumes to possibly wade through. Especially when many of them treat obscure aspects of his cult and history, arguing about things only an author of a doctoral thesis could possibly care about. It seems every couple years someone comes out with a revolutionary theory that challenges everything we know about Dionysos and how he was worshipped – only to have their theories dissected, debated, and often discarded by their contemporaries. While it can be exciting and enlightening to keep abreast of these developments, in the end I often think they are much ado about nothing, and consider it best not to leap onto every new fad that passes through academia, preferring instead to wait and see if it receives general acceptance in the scholarly community and has some genuine relevance to my understanding of the god and my attempts to create a valid form of worship rooted in the ancient ethos before I accept them.

What follows, then, is a list of titles which I think are especially relevant for an understanding of Dionysos' historical and cultic background. This list should by no means be considered an exhaustive bibliography, nor do I think it necessary to have read every single one of them. Many cover the same ground as their predecessors, providing only minimal new insight. And yet all of them have some value – or else I wouldn't have recommended them!

The two most important volumes to get are Carl Kerenyi's *Dionysos: Archetype of Indestructible Life* and Walter Otto's *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*. I cannot recommend these books highly enough! In addition to providing an overview of what's known about the god's history, mythology, and cultus these two provide poetic and profound insight into his very nature and treat him, not just as an interesting antique specimen, but as a living, breathing, powerful divinity. Otto in particular is my favorite, and practically serves as my Bible. I go back each year and read this book cover to cover, and it never fails that I find some new piece of the puzzle, some glimpse of Dionysos that I'd failed to apprehend previously. Although every page surges with his spirit, I find Otto's chapters 'Pandemonium and Silence', 'The Somber Madness', and 'Dionysus and the Women' to be truly prophetic. Similarly, Kerenyi's treatment of the Dionysian cult in Southern Italy deserves special attention since there is so much that is beautiful, powerful, and profound packed densely into those handful of pages that it's easy to miss out on it. I know that I did the first couple times I read him.

Other important works include:

Thomas Carpenter and Christopher Faraone's *Masks of Dionysus*
Marcel Detienne's *Dionysos at Large* and *Dionysos Slain*
Xavier Riu's *Dionysism and Comedy*
Andrew Dalby's *Bacchus: A Biography*
Arthur Evans' *The God of Ecstasy: Sex Roles and the Madness of Dionysos*
Jane Ellen Harrison's *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*
Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

Now, the last two are not without their problems. Much of Harrison's conclusions have been discarded by subsequent scholars (especially those which rely heavily on Fraser's 'dying and resurrecting god' model) and at times she's a little overzealous to find connections where they do not actually exist. But her work is seminally important in the history of ancient Greek scholarship (she was one of the first women in the field and subsequently inspired many individuals including the Dionysian poet James Douglas Morrison) and aside from that, her work is an interesting Dionysian document in its own right. Originally she had intended it just to be study on Keres or the spirits of the dead, and about half-way through found that it had taken on a life of its own, becoming a treatise on Dionysian worship, a fact she bewilderingly confessed to one of her colleagues in a personal letter quoted in the introduction to the present edition.

Nietzsche's work, which explores the creative impulse through the medium of ancient Greek tragedy, is fascinating and highly poetic (especially the passage on Dionysian epiphany which reads like a prose hymn to the god) and has had great influence in philosophical and artistic circles ever since. His theory about tragedy's origins, however, are generally no longer accepted by academia, and many have argued that he makes too much of the polarity between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, although these are important concepts that passed into the philosophical vernacular. Despite these caveats, Nietzsche deserves a place in Dionysian literature because of the degree to which he identified with the god, going so far as to sign his letters 'Dionysos Zagreus' in his declining years in a sanitarium where he suffered from insanity and other complications from syphilis which he had contracted in his youth.

While not specifically Dionysos-related, there are several sourcebooks which contain important information on Dionysos' cult in antiquity, being collections of literary, epigraphical, and monumental evidence. The best of these are:

(continued on page fourteen)

Getting to Know Dionysos… *(continued from page thirteen)*

Marvin W. Meyer's *The Ancient Mysteries*
David G. Rice's *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion*
Frederick C. Grant's *Hellenistic Religions*
Ross Shepard Kraemer's *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*

There are a couple other books that I would recommend, but with the caveat that these are fictional, and thus do not necessarily portray a proper historical conception of the god. Needless to say, however, they have a power and provide a unique insight which the other sources might miss. Noteworthy portrayals of Dionysos in fiction include:

Percival Everett's *Frenzy*
Donna Tart's *The Secret History*
Betley Little's *Dominion*
Frank Palescandolo's *Phallos Dionysos*

In addition to these excellent works on Dionysos, another valuable resource for gaining a better understanding of the god is to speak with those who already know and worship him. We are lucky to live in an age of widespread and instant communication, since chances are there isn't going to be a large Dionysian community directly where you live. There are a small handful of online groups devoted to discussions about the god, of which the best are:

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ThiasosLusios/
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cultofdionysos/
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dionysos-l/

Members of these groups have produced some truly excellent websites, among which my favorites are:

http://www.wildivine.org
http://www.hermeticfellowship.org/Dionysion/
http://home.earthlink.net/~delia5/pagan/dio/index.htm
http://www.baubo5.com/dionysos.html

Most of these sites contain contact information, or their authors can be found on the lists already mentioned. Feel free to ask these people questions. All of them are pleasant, intelligent, and deeply devoted individuals who would be most eager to help you out and answer whatever questions you might have, no matter how simple or silly they might seem to you. Chances are we've heard the questions a dozen times already – or asked them ourselves when we were first starting out. In fact, this sort of exegetical work is part of my devotion to the god. I consider it a solemn duty to help guide his followers into a deeper understanding of him. It's why I write all of the essays I do and why I maintain a presence online. And I suspect I am not alone in this.

Additionally, community plays an important role in Dionysian worship. He is a god of the throng, and is always depicted surrounded by companions, both mortal and divine. His ecstasy is contagious, spreading among a mass of people, who serve to enhance and infect each other, building to ever greater states of bliss and connection together. Many of the things that come out during contacts with Dionysos can be difficult and painful, and it is good to have others to turn to to help you deal with this, and to put those strange experiences into context. While it's certainly possible to worship the god on your own – and indeed the most intense moments of contact will be experienced as individual communion no matter if they take place amid a group of revelers – it doesn't hurt to have that support group in place, and for many of us the only community of fellow-worshippers we have is to be found online.

But one must never forget that Dionysos is a personal god, and the journey you are taking with him is an individual one. While it is important to know what others have said about him, and how others experience him, the most important thing is how you, personally, relate to him. You aren't going to find that in any book or website, or in any way other than communing directly with the god. As the philosopher Aristotle so wisely observed, "It isn't learning that makes an initiate, but experience and entering into a proper state of mind." (Fragment preserved in Synesius' Dio 10)

As you are undertaking this course of Dionysian study, it is important to be actively engaged with the material, or in other words, figure out what all of the stuff you've read means to you. One of the most useful tools you will ever have in your spiritual life is the journal. In fact it would probably be a good idea to keep several of these, one for jotting down notes and reflections on the things you read, and a second, more personal one in which you record the rituals you've done, any dreams or strange experiences you've had, random occurrences in your life, goals you'd like to accomplish, and important thoughts you have during the course of things. Don't think you're going to be able to keep all of this fresh in your head. Even the most important events become cloudy in our memories over time, and pass away from us altogether if we're not careful. A journal is a great way to keep these, and also to record our personal growth and how our understanding of things change over time. Dionysos is a very fluid god, and he has an abundance of manifestations which he reveals to us gradually. Some symbols can appear to us long before the light of their true meaning dawns for us. Having a record of this can be one of the most helpful things you'll ever have.

So, while you're taking in all of this information, jot down notes for yourself. Then later on go back over these and sort out what they mean for you. Reflect on his myths and the various levels of interpretation that they afford. Map out all of his epithets and associations and figure out which ones go with which. Try to follow the threads of his cults and associations as they develop over time and across wide geographical distribution. Figure out which of the conclusions in the books you've read are just the speculations of the assorted authors and which are supported by actual historical fact. Personalize all of this by figuring out what this random information means to you, what it says about the god and how he might conceivably act in your life based on that. See if any patterns emerge about a consistent Dionysian ethos. Are there certain behaviors which seem to find favor with the god and others which might incur his displeasure? Are there certain activities that recur which you should begin implementing into your life?

Don't think that this is a process which you can complete in a single sitting. This is the kind of work that takes a lifetime to find completion, and which will constantly undergo transformation over that period. I am always revising my understanding of things based on new information I uncover or new insight on how assorted things fit together. But believe me, this can be one of the most rewarding aspects of one's relationship with the god.

Invocation

by Diotima

What will invoke a god?

Will incense bring him in our midst
    Will chanting bring her down?

Will the god be there for us
    If we dance the circle round?

Must the words be correct
    The cadence be just so

Do we tempt them from the heights
    To join us here below?

Is it not – perhaps – as strange as it may sound

Do we have it not – perhaps – an improper way around?

Perhaps our rites
    Our incense fine
    Our circles danced at night

Bring not the gods
    Down to us
But draw *us* into sight

They let us see
    What we should have known
    Without our righteous rites

The divine is here
    If we could but see

    The rituals give us sight.

"Aphrodite" ~ by Harita Meenee