

*The Thyrsos of Dionysos and the Palm Inflorescence of the Winged Figures of Assyrian Monuments.*

*By Dr. Charles S. Dolley.*

*(Read before the American Philosophical Society, February 17, 1893.)*

The generally accepted interpretation of the conical structure terminating the thyrsos, carried by Dionysos and his Thyasos, is that it represents the pine or fir cone.

Notwithstanding the number of authors, both ancient and modern, acquiescing in this interpretation, it seems to the writer entirely inconsistent with the present state of knowledge regarding the origin and spread of the Dionysos cult, and the significance of the Dionysiac mysteries. Brunck,<sup>1</sup> Welcker,<sup>2</sup> Smith<sup>3</sup> and others regard the fir tree and its cones (χωνοφόρος, χῶνος, Theoph.) as being dedicated to Dionysos in consequence of the use of the cones and of the turpentine and resin obtained from the fir trees (πεύκη, Theoph.) in making wines.

Buchholtz<sup>4</sup> comes to the same decision regarding the pine (πίτυς), basing his opinion upon the same line of reasoning, and the authority of Plutarch.<sup>5</sup>

The custom of flavoring wines with resinous substances was not confined to the ancients, but is prevalent in Italy and Greece to-day,<sup>6</sup> and a careful review of the list of wines mentioned by Homer and earlier Greek writers, and the statements of Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Pliny regarding turpentine and resins, goes to show that there is no sufficient foundation for the above conclusion. It will furthermore be shown in the following examination of the subject, that such associations as exist between the Dionysos cult and the pine or fir tree are based upon considerations having nothing to do with wine.

The epithet or surname Bacchus (βάχχος, Διόνυσος βάχχειος) does not occur until after the time of Herodotus (484 B. C.). According to Lenormant,<sup>7</sup> the "name is derived from the joyous cries with which the young god was accompanied, and it at first denoted the procession itself, or the song which was sung in it, before it was applied to the god." It seems possible that the term primarily referred to the thyrsos or rod carried by the god and each of his followers.

The drunken, riotous characteristics of the mysteries were probably

<sup>1</sup> *Griech. Anal.*, i, 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Griech. Götterleh.*, i, 424.

<sup>3</sup> *Dict. Greek and Roman Antiq.*, Article "Thyrsos."

<sup>4</sup> *Hom. Realien.*, i, 2, p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> *Symp. quæst.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> The modern Greek name χρασι ρήτσινάτο is applied to wines flavored with the resin of the Aleppo pine, *Pinus halepensis*, Mill. See Heldreich, *Die Nutzpflanzen Griechenlands*, pp. 14 and 41.

<sup>7</sup> "Eleusinian Mysteries," by Francoise Lenormant, *Contemp. Rev.*, Vol. xxxviii, p. 856



added to the original cult by the Phrygians and Phœnicians ;<sup>8</sup> moreover, Euripides lays the scene of the Bacchanals in Thebes, a Phœnician settlement. Creuzer<sup>9</sup> derives the word from the Phœnician and the Hebrew ככה (*bachah*). The religious ideas of the Phrygians were impressed directly upon the Greeks, but originally derived from the Syro-Phœnicians. With the Greeks the Dionysos cult had taken form and symbol long before the taste for artificially flavored wines arose, and, in fact, before wine became a common drink. The symbols came along with the cult, but having to a certain extent lost their original significance, so plain to the dwellers of Asia, the Greeks endeavored to account for them, as numerous writers have since, by giving them new and varied meanings. Thus the tall, slender fennel stalk, with a cluster of male date flowers fastened at the tip, as used by the Assyrian priests in the process of palmification, became the symbol of fructification in its widest sense. Carried in processions in honor of the deity of fruitfulness, it gave its name first to its bearers, and then to the god himself, and finally, when, far from its original home, the cult had lost its primitive purity, and its celebration had degenerated into the orgies of a frantic mob, the name (*βάζχος* = *rod*) came to signify the frenzy of intoxication.

But to revert to our objections to the plea that the pine cone was sacred to Dionysos because employed in flavoring wines, we find that the resinous taste was not by any means imparted to wines by means of the products of cone-bearing trees alone ; on the contrary, Theophrastus<sup>10</sup> in his chapter on resins<sup>11</sup> refers to the relative values of the different varieties of gum resins, and places, far in advance of all others in public esteem, that produced by the terebinth (the turpentine tree of the Bible, *Pistachia terebinthus* L., or *τέρμινθος* of Theoph.), a tree common in the Greek islands and in Palestine, Egypt and North Africa, and belonging to an order of plants totally distinct from the conifers. The modern product of this tree is known in commerce as Chian turpentine, and comes mostly from the island of Chios, which excelled in the quality and quantity of this product in the time of Dioscorides and ancient Rome. The specific name had been changed, at the time of Dioscorides, from *τέρμινθος* to *τερέβινθος*, and that writer refers to it as *ἐλατον μάστιχον*. According to Pliny<sup>12</sup> the terebinth was used in wine making, by boiling the new wood with the must. The same writer<sup>13</sup> quotes Plautus as stating that the wines most highly esteemed among the ancients were those perfumed with myrrh, a product of two distinct plants, neither of them conifers. On the other hand, while the pitchy flavor was, without doubt, frequently produced by the resin of cone-bearing trees, such wines were not specially popular, nor were they considered wholesome, judging from the follow-

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard., *Mythol.*, 1, 495.

<sup>9</sup> *Symbolik d. Mythol.*, III, 125.

<sup>10</sup> ix, 2, 7 and 3, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Koch, *Blume und Sträucher des alten Griechenlands*, pp. 26 and 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Nat. Hist.*, xiv, 19.

<sup>13</sup> xiv, 15.



ing statement : "The most wholesome wine of all is that to which no ingredient has been added when in a state of must ; indeed, it is still better if the vessels even in which it is kept have never been pitched." . . . .

"New wines seasoned with resin are good for no one, being productive of vertigo and headache ; hence it is that the name of *crapula* has been given equally to new resined wines and to the surfeit and headache which they produce." <sup>14</sup> In the making of "crapula," *Στροβιλίτης οἶνος*, <sup>15</sup> pine cones (*Στρόβιλος*) were certainly employed, being steeped in the must, but it seems hardly probable that a custom not altogether prevalent, and producing a product regarded as unwholesome, should have given rise to the most common and characteristic Dionysiac symbol. Moreover, the resinous flavor was frequently produced in the wines by smoking either the grapes or the wine itself in wine lofts—*apothecas* <sup>16</sup>—in the smithies or the chimneys. The Libanian grape produced a wine having a natural odor of frankincense, and which was preferred in making libations to the gods. <sup>17</sup> Rhætian and Allobrogian grapes had naturally a strong flavor of pitch. <sup>18</sup> At the time of Homer, Dionysos was unknown as the god of wine. According to Herodotus <sup>19</sup> not only was the name of Dionysos, but also the various extraordinary rites accompanying his worship, introduced into Greece by Melampus.

Euripides in many places clearly points to a well-understood Eastern origin of the cult, thus :

"DION. And I have left the golden Lydian shores,  
The Phrygian and the Persian sun-seared plains,  
And Bactria's walls ; the Medes' wild wintry land  
Have passed, and Araby the Blest ; and all  
Of Asia, that along the salt sea coast  
Lifts up her high-towered cities, where the Greeks,  
With the Barbarians mingled, dwell in peace.  
And everywhere my sacred choirs, mine Orgies  
Have founded, by mankind confessed a God  
Now first in an Hellenic town I stand."

Or again :

"But ye, who Tmolus, Lydia's strength, have left  
My Thyasus of women, whom I have led  
From lands barbarian, mine associates here,  
And fellow-pilgrims ; lift ye up your drums,  
Familiar in your native Phrygian cities."

Melampus is supposed to have received his knowledge of the cult from Cadmus, who, with the Phœnicians accompanying him to Bœotia, brought these rites either directly from Egypt or from Tyre.

General tradition points to the introduction of the Dionysiac mysteries

<sup>14</sup> Pliny, xxiii, c. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Dios., 5, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Pliny, xiv, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 3.

<sup>19</sup> *ib.*, 49.



into Greece from India—compare the Assyrian title of the sun god *Diannisu*, “judge of men” (Fox Talbot),—by way of Parthia and Thrace, and this seems to be confirmed by Strabo’s<sup>20</sup> assertion that all Greek music was of Thracian origin. The choragic monuments of Athens show the intimate relation of music and the worship of Dionysos. The worshipers of the god in Thrace were in fact known as Orpheans, and with them the thyrsos-tip represented no longer a date-palm inflorescence, and not yet a pine cone, but the heart of Dionysos-Zagreus, torn from the young god by the Titans.<sup>21</sup>

As to the thyrsos, its primitive use in the Dionysiac processions was that of a wand or stave, to be tossed by the hands or feet of the dancers ; thus :

“ PENTHEUS. The Thyrsus—in my right hand shall I hold it?  
Or thus, am I more like a Bacchanal?  
DIONYSOS. In thy right hand, and with thy right foot raise it.”

For this purpose the light stalks of the giant fennel, the *Náρδης* of the ancients, *Ferula communis* L.,<sup>22</sup> a native of the regions about the Mediterranean, were admirably adapted, their structure being of so fragile a character as to obviate any danger being done by such blows as might be given by the rioters, as has been pointed out by Feé.<sup>23</sup> The same plant, and probably for similar reasons, was associated with Silenus, the companion of Dionysos :

“ Venit et agresti capitis Silvanus honore  
Florentis *ferulas* et grandia lilia quassans.”  
Virg. *Ecl.*, x, 25.

(Sylvanus also came with the rustic honor of his head  
Shaking the flowering fennels and the large lilies.)

The custom of twining garlands about the thyrsos was but an imitation of nature. Pierre Loti, in his charming descriptions of Morocco, refers more than once to these gigantic fennels, spreading over the country in every direction, a “forest of yellow verdure,” . . . . “the flower-clad stalks of which are like yellow trees, and which are *festooned* by the great white blossoms of the bind weed, such as we see in our gardens.” This very bind weed, *Convolvulus scæpium* L.,<sup>24</sup> was used in decorating the bacchantes and their staves, together with the ivy, there being a great resemblance between the leaves of the two plants.

From the above and many similar considerations, we are led to believe that the early worship of Dionysos was free from the frenzied debauchery of later days, and that the god’s peculiar relations to wine were the result

<sup>20</sup> x, pp. 469–471.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. De Gubernatis, *Mythologie des Plantes*, ii, p. 290.

<sup>22</sup> Dierbach, *Flora Mythologica*, p. 67 ; Heldreich, *l. c.*, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Feé, *Flore de Virgile*, p. lvi.

<sup>24</sup> J. Murr, *Die Pflanzenwelt in der Griechischen Mythologie*, p. 235 ; Euripides, *Bacchinalis*, 702.



of corrupting influences affecting the cult during its westward spread. According to Pindar,<sup>25</sup> Plutarch<sup>26</sup> and Appolonius,<sup>27</sup> instead of the wild and wanton Thyasos depicted by Euripides, who, "at the appointed hour, shoot their wild thyrsi in the bacchic dance," Dionysos was in the earliest times accompanied by the Graces, and near the grove of Pelops, at Olympia,<sup>28</sup> shared an altar in common with them. In fact, while tracing back the cult through Parthia and the East, we pass from the home of the grape to lands where wine was the product of the date, and if the cone-like structure tipping the thyrsos finally came to symbolize the bacchic and wine-loving attributes of Dionysos, it was through a substitution of the grape for the date, a combining of the Eastern symbol of fertilization with the garlanded rod of the dancers, and a failure to comprehend the significance of the cone-like thyrsos tip, which in reality originally represented the date inflorescence found in the hands of gods, priests and winged figures on Eastern monuments.<sup>29</sup>

That the Greeks and Latins were for a long time at a loss properly to account for this cone-like tip, being in no position to understand the import which the male date-palm inflorescence and the process of palmification held in lands further to the East, where dates formed the staple article of food, is shown by the substitution of various plants for the cone. The shaping of ivy and vine leaves into conical form, or "entwining with leafy greens the blades of javelins,"<sup>30</sup> shows as little comprehension of the real significance of the thyrsos on the part of the Greeks, as well as the corruption into which the cult had fallen, as does the story of the death of Orpheus the poet-guardian of the bacchic mysteries, at the hands of the frantic throng of Ciconian matrons beside Hebrus' stream.

Without going into the question of the identity of Dionysos and Osiris,<sup>31</sup> or of Dionysos and the Priapus of Lampsacus, there can be no question that the basis of Dionysos worship was the belief in his universal quickening or procreative powers. The similarity of Osiris and Dionysos worship, the association of Dionysos with Demeter and the various symbols of his worship—phallus, serpent, bull, goat, fauns, satyrs, and the seasons of the year devoted to his festivals—all go to confirm the conclusion that the original cult rested entirely upon the personification or deification of the active propagative or creative powers of living nature. It is a significant fact that the Greeks held and still hold that pulverized date seeds have the property of provoking and facilitating parturition.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ol.*, xiii, 5-10, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Quaest.*, Gr., 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Rhod.*, iv, 424.

<sup>28</sup> *Pausanias*, v, xiv, or Taylor's transl., ii, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Edw. B. Tylor, "The Winged Figures of the Assyrian and Other Ancient Monuments," *Proc. Soc. of Biblical Archaeology*, Vol. xii, pp. 383-393.

<sup>30</sup> Ovid, *Metam.*, xi, 27, 28; iii, 667.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, 2d ed., 1887, pp. 321-323.

<sup>32</sup> *Grisard et Vanden Berghe, Les Palmiers Utile et leurs Allies*, Paris, 1889, p. 146.



In early art we find Dionysos frequently represented in association with the palm tree, or its conventionalization, the palmette.<sup>33</sup>

At a later date, we find associated with the god some thirty odd plants, chief among which are the ivy, the silver-leaved poplar, the grapevine, the myrtle, the fig, the bind weed, etc.

Most of these plants, from the damp, shady character of their habitat, or from their productiveness, were held to be symbolic of the dews or moisture so essential to vegetation.

The aphrodisiac and stimulating qualities of wine naturally led to the placing of the vine among the plants symbolic of the quickening, rejuvenating god. Certain plants evidently refer to the soft, florid skin of the god, and to his general effeminate character.

In all the symbols of Dionysos, we find some obvious motive, except in the case of the fir or pine cone, and we cannot admit any force to the argument of Murr, Boetticher and others, that the association of the pine with the god may be traced to the Corinthian myth of Pentheus, hiding among the branches of a pine tree from the frenzy of his mother Agave and the furious bacchantes :

“PEN. Well said : against a woman who would fight?  
I'll hide myself upon some shady pine.”<sup>34</sup>

It is curious that Milman, in translating this passage, calls the tree an ash, by what authority I cannot even surmise. In Paley's text the word *ἐλάτης* is used to indicate the tree, *i. e.*, the silver fir, *Pinus picea* (distinguished by Theophr. as *ἐλ. ἄρορην* and *ἐλ. θήλεια*, probably *Pinus abies* and *P. picea*,<sup>35</sup> but oddly enough this word was also used to refer to the young bud of the palm.

Neither can any inference regarding the origin of the thyrsos tip be drawn from the use of pine wood in the making of statues of the god, since Pausanias<sup>36</sup> describes the head found by the Methymnean fishermen, and declared by the Pythian deity to be a representation of Bacchus, as being made of olive wood. No one would, however, care to argue that the olive should, on this account, be considered a Dionysiac symbol. It is much more probable that the association of the pine with Bacchus was based upon the gathering of the throngs upon the pine-clad hills :

“DION. There's not a woman of old Cadmus' race,  
But I have maddened from her quiet house ;  
Unseemly mingled with the sons of Thebes,  
On the roofless rocks, 'neath the pale pines they sit.”

<sup>33</sup> I do not agree with Goodyear in the belief that the palmette is derived from the lotus or any other motive than the palm.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. translation, by James Thorold Rogers, of Euripides' *Bacchanals*.

<sup>35</sup> See Daubeny, *Trees of Ancients*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> x, c. 19 ; Taylor's translation, Vol. iii, p. 152.



Or the customary use of pine torches in the Orgies :

“CHOR. The while the frantic Bacchanal,  
The beaoning pine torch on her wand,  
Whirls around with rapid hand.”

Or :

“TIR. As him shall we behold on Delphi's crags,  
Leaping, with his pine torches lighting up  
The rifts of the twin-headed rock ; and shouting  
And shaking all around his Bacchic wand  
Great through all Hellas.”

It was, as Dyer points out,<sup>37</sup> not at all uncommon for the priests of the temples “to combine and maintain with equal hand the various cults of various divinities centred there.” There was an early brotherhood of this kind established between Dionysos and Apollo, accompanied at times by an exchange of attributes and symbols, as is done by Æschylus when he sings :

“Apollo, ivy-god and prophet bacchanal.”<sup>38</sup>

Or by the words of Euripides :<sup>39</sup>

“Lord Bacchus, lover of the laurel tree.”

We see the blending of the Apollo and Dionysos cult in the appellations *Dionysos melpomenos*<sup>40</sup> and *Apollo Dionysodotos*. In the frequent transfer of insignia of one god to another, the tripod, originally a bacchic symbol, is permanently turned over to Apollo—*χορηγικοὶ τρίποδες ἐκ Διονύσου*, “dedicated to a god by victorious choruses”<sup>41</sup>—although given as a prize at the festivals of Dionysos in the Attic dithyrambic contests<sup>42</sup> and we find it associated with the vine on the shields of warriors, pictured on certain Greek vases.<sup>43</sup> Again Bacchus was worshiped in the shape of Apollo's bull,<sup>44</sup> as at Elis, *ἄξιτε ταῦρε*,<sup>45</sup> or in turn lends his crown of ivy to Poseidon.<sup>46</sup>

Apollo as the god of light, Dionysos as the earth god, combine the attributes of light, heat and moisture, the essentials of all organic life. We can, therefore, understand the close relation of their cults, and explain the presence of a date palm tree alongside the oracle of Apollo.

<sup>37</sup> *Studies of the Gods in Greece*, Macmillan, 1891, pp. 29-36.

<sup>38</sup> *Æschylus Tr.*, 394 ; cf. Macrobius, *Saturn*, 18, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Macrobius, *Saturn*, 18, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Pausanias, i, 2, 3, 4 ; xxxi, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Gerhard, *Auserlesene Griechische Vasenbilder*, etc., i, p. 115 ; cf. Muller, *Der tripode delphico*, p. ii ; *Amalthea*, i, s. 127.

<sup>42</sup> Athen, ii, 37, *νίκητῆρον ἐν Διονύσῳ*, “the festival of victory.”

<sup>43</sup> Gerhard, *l. c.*, Tab. xxxi.

<sup>44</sup> Gerhard, *l. c.*, p. 114, Tab. xxxii.

<sup>45</sup> Plut. *Quæst. Gr.*, 36 ; *Historia Numorum*, pp. 33, 66 ; Creuzer *Symbol*, iii, 87-95.

<sup>46</sup> Gerhard, Tab. x ; Paus., vii, 20, 1 ; iii, 24, 6.



The date palm, like the Dionysiac cult, was unknown to the early Greeks, to which Victor Hehn<sup>47</sup> refers as follows: "The *Iliad* never mentions the palm, which was as foreign on the Anatolian coast as in Greece proper; but in the oldest and most beautiful part of the *Odyssey*, the palm at Delos is described in words that express the admiration excited in the Greeks of the Epic period by a figure so novel and strange in the vegetable world. Ulysses has approached Nausicaa on the strand, and flatteringly beseeches her assistance:

" 'Never, I never viewed till this blest hour  
Such finished grace! I gaze and I adore!  
Thus seems the palm with stately honors crowned  
By Phœbus' altars; thus onlooks the ground;  
The pride of Delos. (By the Delian coast  
I voyaged, leader of a warrior host;  
But ah, how changed; from thence my sorrow flows;  
Oh fatal voyage, sum of all my woes.)  
Raptured I stood, for earth ne'er knew to bear  
A plant so stately, or a nymph so fair.'

The far-traveled Ulysses had nowhere else on earth seen a tree like this, to the slender form of which he compares the figure of the royal maiden, just as Solomon does in his song, 'This thy stature is like to a palm tree,' and as the daughters of kings in the Old Testament bear the name of *Tamar*, the date palm. The palm tree, the pride of Delos, is also mentioned in Homer's hymn to the Delian Apollo; at its foot, clasping its stem with her arms, Leto was said to have given birth to her glorious son. The fame of the Delian palm grew with the increasing fame of the island, both as a resort of Apollo's pilgrims and as an emporium, especially as its fame had been echoed in the *Odyssey*. In later times, palm leaves were used at the four great festivals as symbols of victory. They were sometimes worn as wreaths on the head, sometimes carried in the hand. . . . In the middle of the seventh century B. C., the tyrant Kypselus, ruler of semi-Oriental Corinth, dedicated a bronze palm tree to the temple at Delphi, where there were no living palms. . . . The Athenians also erected a bronze palm tree at Delphi in honor of their double victory on the Eurymedon, and another at Delos through Nikias. Palms are found figured on the coins of Ephesus, of Hierapytna and Priansus in Crete, of Karystos in Eubœa, and on painted vases."<sup>48</sup>

From the evidence before us, I am convinced that the conical flower cluster of the palm, as conventionalized in sculpture, and as the thyrsus tip, was mistaken by the later Greeks for the pine cone, and that they and subsequent writers have been ignorant of the peculiar relations of the date palm to the primitive Dionysiac cult.

<sup>47</sup> *Wanderings of Plants and Animals from their First Home*, by Victor Hehn, London, 1885, p. 204.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Imhoff Bloomer and Otto Keller, *Thier- und Pflanzenbilder auf Münzen und Gemmen des Klassischen Altertums*, Pl. I, Fig. 8; II, 13; X, 2-4.





Dolley, Charles S . 1893. "The Thyrsos of Dionysos and the Palm Inflorescence of the Winged Figures of Assyrian Monuments." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for promoting useful knowledge* 31(140), 109–116.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/86396>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/212277>

**Holding Institution**

University of Toronto - Gerstein Science Information Centre

**Sponsored by**

University of Toronto

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: Not provided. Contact Holding Institution to verify copyright status.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.