

**Theatrical masks and the cult of Dionysus in Lipari**

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**1. Introduction**

The discovery of a large number of theatrical masks in the funerary equipment of the tombs of the 4th-3rd century BC, in the urban necropolis of Diana in Lipari, carried out by Luigi Bernabò Brea and Madelaine Cavalier during the intensive excavations conducted by them and then, case more unique than rare, promptly and comprehensively published, it was one of the main reasons of interest for the scholars of Aeolian antiquities and not only.

It's the richest quantity of miniaturist theatrical masks deposited in the funeral equipment that have ever been found in the classical world.

The studies dedicated to the theme of Bernabò Brea and Cavalier are a reference point for the study of ancient theater of the classical and Hellenistic age and its characters, but also for the knowledge of the late classical and Proto-Hellenic society of Lipari, of its religious beliefs and its aspirations for the beyond. The splendid display of the specimens at the Regional Museum of Lipari also shows all the visitors, not just the specialists, the enormous information potential that the masks can offer.

As part of this meeting concerning the theme of the mask, therefore, I believe it may be useful, for an audience of non-archaeologists, to synthesize some functional concepts to the full understanding of the phenomenon 'theatrical mask' and to the particular concentration of specimens found on Lipari, in a certain period.

The studies carried out by Luigi Bernabò Brea and Madelaine Cavalier, tutelary deities for the archeology of the Aeolian Islands from prehistory to the Middle Ages, make it possible to relate theatrical masks found with the cult of Dionysus and, above all, with the Dionysian mysteries;

to these was introduced a small circle of adepts, who promised the heavenly beatitudes after physical death.

Dionysus is the Greek god of the productive force of the earth and, in particular, of wine, one of the most important products, for the ancients as for the moderns. The god was very intensely revered both in the Greek and Roman worlds and is also called Bacchus, a name that was originally an epithet meaning "noisy", evidently referring to the wild parties that were celebrated in his honor, from which it derives the Italian word "*baccano*", used to express a chaotic and festive noise.

Dionysus, the only one of the gods of Olympus, is the son of a god - Zeus - and of a mortal - Semele -, the daughter of Cadmus, the king of Thebes. In the myth, the woman, loved by Zeus, aroused Hera's jealousy, similarly to what is known for the many other mortal lovers of the father of the gods. Hera, in revenge for the betrayal suffered, induced Semele to ask Zeus to appear before her in the same form with which he used to appear to his divine consort, as a god of lightning. Semele, however, could not resist and, surrounded by thunder and lightning, generated a premature child.

Zeus immediately intervened to save him and sewed the baby into a thigh to protect him until he was so mature to be born. Little Dionysus became so immortal. After birth, he was raised by a group of nymphs on Mount Nisa.

As an adult, also maddened by Hera, he undertook a series of wanderings through the most distant places in the world. From the Homeric hymn to Dionysus we know that he went first to Egypt, then to Syria and then crossed all of Asia, up to India. In his wanderings he taught the people the art of vine cultivation and at the same time he laid the foundations of civil life in those places. As Heracles, therefore, another hero son of Zeus and a mortal, plays the role of hero / civilizing god, who through his exploits reclaimed territories from monstrous and anomic beings and lays the foundations for organized civil life.

The right consumption of wine, in fact, in the mentality of the ancient Greeks, was synonymous with civilization. The Greeks, as is known, consumed wine at banquets and symposia, lying on their convivial beds; the sacred drink at Dionysus was served by attendants who drew from a large open vessel, the crater, in which the very strong wine of that time was mixed and diluted with water, and flavored with the addition of spices and other substances, such as honey or grated cheese. The attendants drank from the crater with ladles or pitchers and poured the wine into the drinking vessels, cups or kantharoi that they offered to the guests intent on discussing and listening to musical or poetic compositions, as we know from many literary descriptions or ancient iconographies (fig. 1).



Fig. 1- Paestum, National Museum: the tomb of the diver

The immoderate consumption of the divine drink, on the other hand, is characteristic of the barbarians - for the Greeks the populations who did not speak Greek - and, in mythology, of semi-sweet beings, such as Polyphemus or the Centaurs; they are depicted as semi-human beings not yet civilized, who cannot resist and are overwhelmed by the power of the drink, which they consume excessively, pure.

Moderation and proper consumption of wine are therefore examples of civilization, while the immoderate and incorrect consumption of the sacred drink symbolizes incivility, barbarism and otherness.

Furthermore, the link between the Dionysian cult and the fertility of the earth is well exemplified by the myth of Lycurgus; during the return journey of Dionysus from Asia to Europe, the god was received in an inhospitable way by Lycurgus, the king of Thrace, who refused to recognize his divine nature and was punished for this. In madness, he killed his son Driante, mistaking him for a vine that he wanted to uproot and destroy.

Lycurgus recovered immediately afterwards and immediately realized what he had accomplished. His land, however, became sterile and, at the behest of the oracle, Thracian subjects had to kill and quarter him to regain the fertility of the fields.

When Dionysus returned to Greece, he moved to Thebes, city of Boeotia, home of his mother Semele, where he founded the cult that was later recognized. As we know from Euripides' famous tragedy "The Bacchae", he induced the Theban women to leave their homes and celebrate the ceremonies in his honor on Mount Citerone. Penteo, nephew of Cadmus and his successor on the throne of Thebes, opposed the introduction of the cult and, for this reason, he was severely punished. Made mad by the god, he was killed and torn apart by his mother and sisters who, in the grip of the bacchic ecstasy, took him for an enraged lion.

After Thebes he went to Argos. Here the population at first didn't want to recognize and attribute him a cult; but then, when the god had punished all the local women, making them mad, he was recognized and was venerated as a deity.

His last travel adventure was the maritime journey from Icaria to Naxos, Aegean islands. To make the journey, he used a Tirreni pirate ship (the Etruscans); the crew, did not reach the island of Naxos but diverted again to Asia, with the intention of selling him in the East as a slave. In this dramatic predicament, the god performed a great prodigy, testifying to his divine nature. He transformed the mast and the oars of the ship into snakes and himself into a lion; from the ship, then, the ivy appeared spontaneously and wrapped completely the boat; around the ship a sound of flutes spread.

The sailors, in the grip of madness, threw themselves into the sea and were transformed into dolphins, as shown by a famous cup of attic painter Exekias (fig. 2).



Fig. 2- Berlin, Antikensammlungen, nr. 2044, from Veio; Exekias: Dionysus cup

Through these stages, real tests, such as those faced by other semi-divine beings who had to affirm their immortality - like Heracles and his 12 labors -, Dionysus affirmed his divinity everywhere and his cult was recognized.

## 2. The cult of Dionysus

For a majority of ancient writers the cult of Dionysus originated in Thrace and then spread to the rest of Greece, starting from Boeotia and from Attica. Others, however, said he was from Phrygia, a region of Asia Minor in present-day Turkey.

It's very important to note the fact that Dionysus is mentioned in some tablets in Linear B, the writing used by the Mycenaeans; this means that it was already known in Greece at least from the 13th century BC

Nevertheless, Dionysus does not appear as one of the great gods of Olympus in the Homeric poems: he is remembered only twice in the Iliad and as many in the Odyssey. But it's only in Book VI of the Iliad that explicit reference is made to his cult, when, with a clear paradigmatic intent, Diomedes recalls the end of Lycurgus due to his opposition to the god.

The expansion of the cult of Dionysus in Greece, therefore, reflects the spread of vine cultivation techniques. But it's only with the archaic age (7th-6th century BC) that there is evidence of an increasingly widespread cult and ever longer, complex and unrestrained festivals, in which wine and music make the inhibitory brakes lose.

### 2.1 Festivals in honor of Dionysus

From ancient literary sources, we are informed about the main feasts celebrated in honor of the god, called Dionisic; originating in Attica, they also spread to other regions of the Greek world. We know the Small Dionysias or rural Dionysias, the Lenee and the Great Dionysias, the main Athenian festival after the Panathenaea.

The Small Dionysias were celebrated in the various demi of Attica on days 8-11 of the month of Posideon (corresponding to December-January). The festivities were very sumptuous, characterized by unbridled joy. Aristophanes' comedy "Gli Acarnesi" contains an accurate description of the procession. As part of these festivals, the core that will lead to the birth of comedy develops.

In the following month, Gamelione (January-February), again between 8 and 11, the Lenee were held in Athens, the continuation of rural Dionysias in the city. They took place in the area south of the Acropolis, near the sanctuary of Dionysus, where the homonymous theater once stood. During the festivities, there were wagon parades, exchanges of invectives and dramatic competitions.

Up to around 440 only comedies were represented, then also tragedies subsidized by the State. In the month of Elafebolione (March-April), in the days between 8 and 13 or 16, the Great

Dionysias were held, the most important, established by the tyrant Pisistratus around the middle of the sixth century BC. as opposed to the Panathenaic festivals.

The parties in honor of Dionysus, in fact, were popular while the Panathenaea were dear to the aristocracy.

The Great Dionysias were dedicated to Dionysus Eleuterio, from the beotic place from which the cult originates, the city of Eleutere. The theme of the celebrations consists of theatrical performances. The party was very complex: after a series of sacrifices and initial rites, the presentation of the actors and the authors of the performances took place. The following day the simulacrum of the god was transported from the temple to the Leneo.

It was a procession by torchlight and recalled the arrival of the god from Eleutere to Athens. The procession was accompanied by wild songs and dances. The simulacrum of the god was then placed on the altar, built in the orchestra of the theater on the slopes of the Acropolis, near the sanctuary, so that it could attend all the shows: dance competitions, music, and poetry. After a lavish banquet, they continued with dramatic agonizing.

In the fifth century, there were three tragic poets and three comedians. It is therefore evident the connection between the dramatic agons, the origin of the theater and the cult of Dionysus; a connection that for us modern exegetes becomes clearly perceptible since the last decades of the 6th century BC.

## **2.2 The iconography of Dionysus and the Dionysian cortege**

A vast series of figured vases, above all attics with black and red figures, from the archaic and classical era but also from Italiot and Siceliot production, as well as reliefs and works of sculpture, give us back the iconography of the god.

There are two main types in which he was portrayed: the youthful, beardless, and the more usual, adult and bearded one. In this second case, the god is generally depicted elegantly dressed in a chiton and cloak, panther skin or leopard on the shoulders and is richly garlanded, often holding the thyrsus, the zither or the kantharos, a particular potorio vase, which holds in hand, and is surrounded by ivy branches.

In the ceramography of the sixth and fifth centuries BC there are innumerable images of the god and his entourage of Maenads and Satyrs (fig. 3) which appear above all on drinking vessels (cups, glasses) but also on large vessels for transporting and preparing wine (amphorae, craters, deinoes).

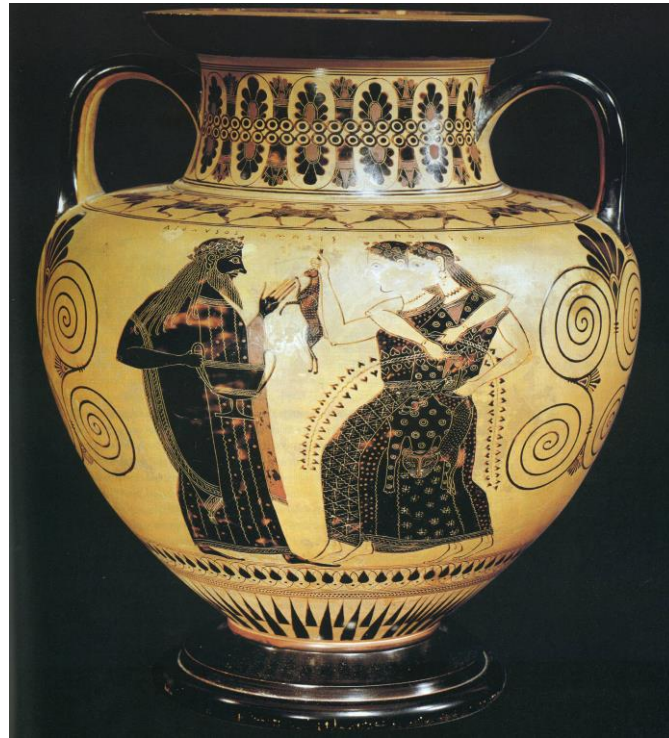


Fig. 3- Paris, Cabinet des Médailles, nr. 222, from Vulci; Amasis Painter: Dionysus and Maenads

Soon, alongside, appear the Bacchantes or Maenads, the women dedicated to his cult, depicted while dancing. Often they are accompanied by the thyrsus, a wooden stick wrapped in ivy branches and vine leaves, in the shape of a pinecone, to which woolen bandages were knotted (fig. 4).



Fig. 4- Munich, Antikensammlungen, nr. 2645, from Vulci; Brygos painter: cup interior with Maenad

The Maenads are accompanied by Satyrs and Sileni, personifications of fertility. They are mythical beings, perhaps sons of Hermes, with human features, but endowed with animalistic attributes: pointed ears, two small horns on the forehead and a pony or goat's tail. The elderly Satyrs have these accentuated features. The Satyrs prefer wine and sexual pleasures and are accompanied by attributes such as the goatskin, the kantharos, the bunches of grapes, the thyrsus. In the Dionysian processions are depicted intent on playing musical instruments, dancing or sleeping won by the intoxication of wine.

#### **2.4 The cult of Dionysus and the theater**

The cult of Dionysus and the feasts in his honor are linked to the theatrical performances that were staged in Athens and in the demi of Attica. The oldest representation of which we have memory is that of 535/3, with the victory of Thespis in the Great Dionysia, established then by Pisistrato.

The first dramatic agony of which we have memory is, instead, of 499-6 (70th Olympiad), when a source reports the news of the collapse of the wooden scaffolding that supported the seats for the spectators.

The first buildings for shows, in fact, were made with wooden caves supported by precarious scaffolding, as seen in a famous crater fragment of the Athenian painter Sophilos found near the city of Farsalus, in Thessaly, dating back to around 580 BC, with spectators who attend the chariot race in honor of Patroclus, called by Achilles to celebrate his friend's death.

The great Greek theater, therefore, with its educational and paradigmatic contents, organized at the expense of the State, by special magistrates, was born and developed in the religious sphere and is closely connected to the festivals in honor of Dionysus.

The first known built Greek theater, in fact, is that of Athens, located right next to the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleutereo, on the southern slopes of the Acropolis. From the 4th century BC theaters are then built in the main cities of Greece and the Hellenized world and, with them, the use of dramatic representations is also spread, always maintaining a strong relationship with the Dionysian cult.

#### **2.5 Theatrical masks**

It is very important to define the importance of the use that the actors made of the masks. Attested since the Archaic period, at first the masks had a predominantly ritual and religious significance, having been found mainly in the sanctuary. Then, over time and with the codification of dramatic representations, the masks took on a more technical meaning: the use, in fact, in addition to helping the identification of the characters even from afar, amplified the



sound of the voice that was so perceptible to all spectators, even if placed in the other rows of the cavea.

The diffusion of the use of theatrical masks in a not specifically theatrical context, but miniaturized and inserted in the funerary outfits, is captured in Athens from the end of the fifth century BC and then develops in the fourth century BC also elsewhere. This diffusion is a clear reference to the Dionysian sphere in which the world of theater is included. Dionysus, in fact, ensures the joys of otherworldly initiates to his mysteries and the mask, present in the funerary outfit, constitutes a clear and unambiguous reference to the world of Dionysus, within whose festivals theatrical performances are held, as we have seen. From this moment on, in fact, the mask is added to the attributes of the god, as we know from many iconographic evidence consisting of vases, paintings, mosaics (fig. 5).



Fig. 5- Pronomo Painter: detail of the crater with satirical drama representation: actors with masks

Precisely because of the close semantic connection between the cult of Dionysus, wine and heavenly beatitudes, Dionysian themes on funerary vases are very frequent, not only in figurative Attic productions, but also in Apulian, bells and Siceliot ones.

From the end of the fifth century BC, moreover, following this same trend, also the theatrical scenes, the figurative compositions directly inspired by the preparation of the great tragedies, the depictions of actors and the theatrical masks themselves become themes that lead directly back to Dionysus and his cult. Precisely for this reason, they are frequently reproduced on funerary vessels.

### 3. The cult of Dionysus in Lipari

Judging by the archaeological documentation provided by the necropolis of the Diana district, the cult of Dionysus on Lipari is highly developed, especially from the 4th century BC.

Despite the absence of explicit literary sources and concrete epigraphic or archaeological documentation, this is confirmed by the hundreds of theatrical terracottas and by the innumerable Dionysian and theatrical iconographies present on the vessels of the necropolis.

In the context of the rich necropolis of the classical and Hellenistic period in the contrada Diana, from the 4th century BC the shape of the crater takes on particular importance. The crater, as already seen at the beginning (fig. 1), is the vase in which the wine is mixed with water, which dominates the center of the symposium. The frequency of Dionysian scenes and theatrical representations on the craters therefore constitutes a double reference to Dionysus (fig. 6).



Fig.6- Lipari: crater of the painter of Adrasto from tomb 1155 with theatrical scene

The consumption of wine and theater are themes that, for initiates into the Dionysian mystery cults, lead in the same direction: the allusion to the heavenly beatitudes promised to the adepts of the god of wine and theater.

As mentioned, large vases, especially craters, with Dionysian themes are used in Lipari from the 4th century BC, especially as cinerary tombs, a secondary ritual within the necropolis; therefore, they seem to be connected to a minority nucleus of incinerators, compared to the majority of the dead who use the burial rite.

The Dionysian aspects are also linked to the extraordinary presence of theatrical terracottas in funerary objects from the 4th century BC (fig. 7).



Fig. 7-Review of Greek theater masks

To justify their widespread presence in Lipari, greater than in any other center of the ancient world, including Athens, had thought of the existence on the island of companies of actors and had even sought a theater. Thanks to the studies of Luigi Bernabò Brea and Madelaine Cavalier, on the other hand, the masks are further evidence of the funerary cult at Dionysus, evidently particularly felt on the island.

With the last decades of the 4th century BC the production of large funerary craters is finished with the depiction of Dionysian and theatrical themes. The great mythological scenes and those of the Dionysian cortege disappear and other forms are affirmed with more genre decorations, which however continue to refer to the Dionysian sphere.

In these vases, especially those painted by the so-called Painter of Lipari, an innovative master who uses a polychromatic technique, active in the first half of the III century. a.C., especially wedding scenes appear where the bride is often depicted sitting, more rarely standing; friends, handmaids, Eroti bring her gifts or help her (fig. 8).



Fig. 8- Lipari: Painter from Lipari: lekane from tomb 232

The vases of the Painter of Lipari are intended only for funerary purposes; they are luxury objects that had to appear in funeral ceremonies and accompany the deceased in the afterlife. They are closely linked to the religious feeling of the community or of a part of it. As a result, the vascular forms and themes depicted also seem to conform to particular religious beliefs.

Indeed, the precision of the relationship between the vases with the decorations of the Painter of Lipari and the environment of the initiates to the Dionysian mysteries, an eschatological cult widespread in the Hellenistic Lipari, since the beginning of the fourth century BC, has been noted since seen, as elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The themes depicted, the characters, the postures, the objects, have a precise symbolic meaning and allusive for the adepts to the mysteries, on which we do not know much, precisely because they are reserved for initiates only, who could not disclose them outside.

The Dionysian religion was particularly widespread in Magna Graecia and Sicily in the late classical and Hellenistic period (4th-3rd century BC) and from here it also penetrated Rome, where it was strongly opposed by the senatorial power and drastically repressed with the famous *senatusconsultum de Bacchanalibus* of 186 BC

The Dionysian element, therefore, has been present in Lipari since the 4th century BC, as we have seen: the large craters with Dionysian scenes, Satyrs and Maenads, the great vases with theatrical scenes and then the hundreds of theatrical masks found in the grave goods are the clear proof.

The eschatological meaning of the Dionysian cult, with the promise of the heavenly beatitudes, is closely connected symbolically to wine. In fact, through the vinification of grapes, an activity which Dionysus supervises, we get the passage from a good thing (grapes) to an even better one (wine). In the same way, through death, the righteous man passes from a situation of enjoyment (life) to an even better one (the beatitudes of the Elysian Fields promised to the adepts).

What the Dionysian cult shares with the transition between life and death is a long-lasting concept: the transition to an otherworldly dimension better, attested by the funerary objects of the archaic age up to the early Christian sarcophagi, in some of which is still present iconography of grape crushing for its transformation into wine. Christian eschatology, therefore, is ideally connected to the Dionysian mystery cults.

Therefore starting from the IV century BC the Dionysian religion had assumed a special role in Lipari, and not only, especially for otherworldly beliefs. Judging from the themes depicted on the vases we can say that, at the time of the Lipari Painter - first half of the 3rd century BC -, the deceased, after death, is not simply received in the Dionysian thiasos, on the permanent feast of Satyrs and Maenads, as was the case previously; death itself is conceived as a union with divinity, as a sort of mystical marriage. This is why the vases of the Lipari Painter almost all depict scenes of young women preparing for weddings, wearing make-up, washing and dressing assisted by friends, raising the wedding cake decorated with eggs, sacrificing to Aphrodite, receiving gifts from Nikai and Eroti.

The shapes of the vases on which these scenes are depicted are those typical of marriage: the lekane is the vase in which gifts were offered to the bride; in the pyx the objects of the toilet are preserved; the lebetes contains the perfumed water for the bridal bath; the smaller jars contain perfumes and oils.

It is never a question of evoking a royal wedding ceremony; in fact, the male figures are absent, both the husband and the relatives; instead, they are symbolic weddings, weddings with the

divinity. This explains the fact that the same themes and the same ceramic shapes are also present in definitely masculine funerary objects, such as those characterized, for example, by bronze strigils, objects used by athletes for body care before and after competitions.

The presence of theatrical masks in the grave goods, therefore, is inscribed in a context in which it is possible to outline the presence on the island of a large community of adepts to the Dionysian mysteries, at least between the early fourth century BC and 252 BC, the year of the destruction of the city during the first Punic war.

A community of adepts that has left unequivocal evidence of its beliefs in the burials of the urban necropolis, of which the theatrical masks constitute an element of notable antiquarian and cultural interest, as well as a precious testimony on the characters of the tragedy and the ancient comedy of the classical era and proto-Hellenistic.

It remains to explore the terrain of a possible connection between the masks chosen to accompany the deceased in the afterlife, the characters, the themes and the human types that it represents, in connection with the real or ideal characteristics of the deceased. An archeology of the psyche still to be investigated.

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