

Aleksandra Nikoloska

Dionysus and the *bacchis* in Stobi

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229.112.14(497.713),,652”

email: nikoloska_aleksandra@yahoo.com

Bigger cities of cosmopolitan character were certainly the environment that attracted new religious trends and served as centers where the local population was directly introduced to the pertaining theology and symbolism of the popular religion of the time. Stobi is one of those cities where cultural influences flowed from many directions, interweaving within the autochthonous religiosity of the Paeonians. Positioned on two important roads - Via Axia and the so called Transversal Road (Heraclea - Stobi - Serdica), Stobi received influences mostly from the Hellenic world of the south and the neighboring Thracians, gradually adapting to the standards of the Romanization as early as the second century B.C. In one point of its long history, especially in the second and third century A.D., Stobi became an influential city itself, radiating the spiritual vogue of the Empire in the region.

Within the religious pluralism that existed in Stobi, one deity marked his presence more than the others – Dionysus. This ubiquitous god, together with members of his thiasos is abundantly attested in Stobi on a variety of monuments from different periods and unlike most of the cults in the city, this one enjoyed certain continuity. But, one should be cautious while attributing cultic functions to mythological imagery of antiquity. The existence of monuments with Dionysiac iconography not necessarily means that they were objects belonging to his cult and that their commissioners were initiates into his mysteries. These monuments ought to be viewed in the context of social relationships and historical circumstances. Nevertheless, the visual imagery of the monuments from Stobi carries a strong implication towards the local popularity of the myth of Dionysus and the Dionysiac lifestyle of the citizens of Stobi. It certainly suggest that this god was deeply rooted in the conscience and in the memory of the local population. Therefore, when speaking about the presence of Dionysus in Stobi, it will be perhaps more appropriate to include also the phenomenology of *the Bacchic* as a category which involves not only the religious practice of the Dionysiac cult, but also everything related to his world that left a mark in the visual imagery of the city. The following is an attempt to reconstruct the local cult or, at least, some of its elements in a chronological scale considering the monuments from Stobi that are already published and known to the academic public.



Fig. 1. Relief of the Dionysiac thiasos, first century A.D. (After Микулчи́к 2003, 61)

The enigma that swirls around Dionysus relates to the question of his origin. The long lasting opinion of Thrace being his birth land is in opposition with the fact that his name was already written on the Linear B tablets from Pylos.¹ However it may be, Dionysus is a very ancient and fascinatingly attractive deity, offering intoxicating ecstasy and frenzy to his followers in order for them to become one with the god, to become *βάκχοι* and reach the divine blissfulness both in this, as well as in the after-life. Dionysiac worship can be linked with the early history of Stobi. The autochthonous inhabitants of the city, the Paeonians, were familiar with the same religious concept that defined Dionysius. There has already been great discussion of the local god known as Dyalos whose image was depicted on Paeonian coinage.² On the other hand, there is no firm archaeological record that this god was celebrated in Stobi in the early ages. The Macedonians were even more famous for worshipping Dionysus.³ All of the Classical and later Hellenistic Macedonian cities have great testimonies of the Dionysiac cult. Aside the depictions of the god and his thiasos, motifs of Dionysiac iconography were liberally applied, both to luxurious objects as well as to the simple pottery that was in daily use. Alexander even identified himself with this god who also

1 Burkert 1985, 162.

2 Битракова 1987, 86; Проева 1996, 133

3 For the historical account of the worship of Dionysus among the Macedonians see Проева 1996, 133-4.

conquered the East. Later on, the Ptolemies in their cultic iconography demonstrated the same association between Dionysus and Alexander the Great, alluding to their links with the Macedonian royal house.⁴

One remarkable relief (Fig.1) offers us a glimpse of the Bacchic atmosphere that the citizens of the later Hellenistic city enjoyed. Although it is the work of a first-century artist, the iconography is typical for the attic art of the fourth century B.C.⁵ made in the archaisized style. Nymphs dance around Pan in front of the adorned mask raised up on a column, an effigy of Dionysus. Needless to say, masks were an inseparable element of the Dionysiac world, both in ritual and iconography. Many representations on the attic pottery from the Classical period helped while interpreting this mask-worship. During the ceremony the mask was fixed on a column and decorated in front of which food and wine was brought; Serving as a temporary improvisation of the temple statue.⁶ The portrayed scene on our relief is nothing but a representation of a nocturnal Dionysiac festival known from early times. This solemn encapturing of the celebrations takes us directly to the maenadism⁷ described by Diodorus Siculus (4.3) and portrayed in Euripides' *Bacchae* where Bacchic bands of women, once in every two years, honored the god with frantic dance, acting like maenads and allowing them freedom of forbidden behavior. We learn from Athenaeus that among the Macedonians these groups of women were called *Mimallones*, but also known as *Bassarai* and *Lydai* (Ath. *Deip.* 5.197c-203b),⁸ all names associated with maenads. Looking at the relief from Stobi, one can almost hear the dithyrambos, the cult hymn of Dionysus, being chanted through the words of a Homeric hymn:

*The nymphs followed as he led the way: their loud cry filled the vast forest.
Rejoice, Dionysos, god of the plentiful grape!*⁹

However, the ubiquity of this cult and the variations of worship are certainly causing us difficulties while attempting to interpreting the local cultic forms. In the Archaic and Classical period there is a true diversity of Dionysiac festivals, all of them dealing with the mystic aspect of wine-drinking and frantic rites.¹⁰ We are coming to the point when we can not illustrate the Dionysiac worship any further without placing it within the context of the mystery rituals.¹¹ Dionysus is a key deity bearer of the

4 Bowden 2010, 107.

5 Düll 1977, n° 208, Abb. 208 with bibliography; Битракова 1987, 121-2.

6 Burkert 1983, 235-7.

7 The eternal question of who were the maenads and what was the exact ritual behind their image seems to be followed by uncertainties of the answers. Were they historical or existed as a mere mythological imagination of the artists and poets? Versnel (1990, 135) presents the discussion first introduced by A. Rapp in the distant 1872 (*Die Mänade im griechischen Kultus, in der Kunst und Poesie, RM* 27 (1872) 1-22; 562-611).

8 See also Попева 1996, 133.

9 After Rayor 2004, 26. 9-11.

10 The Anthesteria, the Lenaia, the Agrionia and Katagogia or the Great Dionysia, but also festivals celebrated by smaller groups or cult associations, *orgia* (Burkert 1985, 163).

11 Mystery cults are of a secret, esoteric and initiating character, able to adapt within the flexible context of polytheism. They represent a separate aspect of a general cult of a specific deity, when through the experience of the sacred one can reach a change of consciences (R. Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions, their basic Ideas and Significance*, trans. J. E. Steely, Pittsburgh 1978, p. 111-169). This preliminary defining was accepted by other scholars involved in further examining of the matter. See F. Cumont, *Die orientalischen Religionen im Römischen Heidentum*, Leipzig - Berlin 1914; and U. Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries* (Iconography of Religions XVII, 3), Leiden 1976. Also see G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Soteriology and the Mystic Aspects in the Cult of Cybele and Attis*, Leiden 1985, who clearly distinguishes the mystic from the mystery aspect. Burkert (1987, 11) also adds that the initiation rituals are of voluntary, personal and secret character and that their primary goal is the alternation of consciences through the experience of sacredness.



Fig. 2. Statue of Dionysus – Liber, 119 A.D.
(After Соколовска 1987, Pl. 61, Fig. 3).

mystery aspect, widely present but without a center of his cult, owing to which we follow different local forms. The main distinction is the one between the Dionysian maenadism of mystic character and the esoteric - initiatory Dionysian mystery cult developed in the Hellenistic times, which is based on the archaic model, but has a new, organised form with the orphic adaptation of its mythology. The first was the already explained biannual collective ritual practise which had a temporary liberating effect for the initiates, while the orphic way of worshiping Dionysus involved greater devotion, asceticism and daily discipline in order to come closer to the life of the divine.¹²

In Roman times the Dionysiac festivals continued to change. According to Livy (*History* XXXIX. 8-14) the cult of Dionysus spread to Rome via Etruria and gained great popularity in the days of the Republic, notoriously followed by certain activities that were seen as a serious political threat to Rome. But soon after, the affair of the Bacchanalia broke and the cult underwent through a certain redefinition considering the organization of the worshipers. The scandal

of 186 B.C. which involved fraud and even murder resulted in drastic measures being ordered by the Roman senate. The Bacchic celebrations were not entirely prohibited, but were notably diminished.¹³ An altered form of the worship was gradually introduced to the devoted and it soon spread all over the Empire. Numerous epigraphical accounts found all over the Mediterranean world speak of *thiasoi* or cult associations again involved in ecstatic initiation rites as before.¹⁴ But now, Dionysus was celebrated more intimately, within a small group of fellow initiates who practiced the rites in secrecy.

Stobi offered some indications for the existence of a local association practising a form of the Roman Dionysian mysteries. The mystery substrate can be predominantly found in the iconographical symbolism that became universally standardized with the spread of the Roman religious trends. But, a votive inscription is a true treasury that directly exposes us to the spiritual impulses and practices of local individuals.¹⁵ We are fortunate to have such an inscription from Stobi, which gives us a few details

¹² Turcan 1996, 295-300.

¹³ For more details see Turcan 1996, 300-306.

¹⁴ Bowden 2010, 110-111.

¹⁵ Burkert 1987, 12ff.



Fig. 3. Pilaster–capital with a representation of a tragic mask. (After Микулчић 2003, 73)

about the organization of the initiates. A certain Titus is mentioned, an archimist from the first century,¹⁶ initiated in the Bacchic mysteries. This alone shows the existence of a religious community connected to the cult of Dionysus, as well as the hierarchy within its frames. The inscription is part of a wider group of monuments collected and interpreted by Helmut Waldman, found mostly in Thrace and Asia Minor, but also in several Macedonian cities such as Philippi and Thessalonica. Most of them came from Thrace, the legendary homeland of the cult. They all speak of mystery communities from Roman imperial times that gravitated mainly around Dionysus, but also around the Kabiri, Cybele, Isis and Serapes. The center of spreading of this later form of mystery communities is in fact Asia Minor, more precisely Kyzikos and Nikomedeia.¹⁷

As the Dionysiac ritual had many forms, so did the god himself. A statue of Dionysos-Liber (fig. 2) was dedicated in Stobi by a certain L. Dexius Longinus, former praetorian, in the year of 119.¹⁸ Here the god is presented young and beardless, resting on a column wrapped with vine, wearing his typical nebris and accompanied by a panther. While observing the way it was made, it is clear that this statue is a product of a local workshop. Liber, on the other hand, is an ancient italic deity of fertility, completely melted into the dominant character of the newcomer Dionysus. Besides the obvious aspect of vicissitude defining both these deities, the actual connection is to be found in the ritual of libation to Liber before the annual vintage.¹⁹ This particular image belonged to the public sphere of Stobi and enriched the Bacchic visual impression of the city streets. However, it is by all means possible that this statue also served

16 Βακεῖον πρεσβύτερον πρέπον Τίτῳ ἀρχιμύστῃ (Düll 1977, n° 105 with bibliography). L. Robert offered a different reading of the inscription: Βακεῖον πρεσβύτερον Πρέποντι τῷ ἀρχιμύστῃ. See Wiseman 1973, 155, n.21 for bibliography.

17 Waldman 1978.

18 Düll 1977, 78, n° 106, Ab. 26; Соколовска 1987, Но. 154, Т. 61, Сл. 3 with bibliography.

19 Milićević 1990, 104.

a cultic function. In the Roman world it is often that dedicated images were turned into cultic objects. In that case their statue-bases served as altars where offerings to the gods were placed and where incense was burned.²⁰ If it was so, than the statue from Stobi illuminates another aspect of the local cult in the second century – its public form. Public rites were a bit more organized and regulated by a consensus, unlike the private ones which had more freedom of form.²¹

Certainly, the interest for *the Bacchic* in the public sphere as a performative artistic concept rises in the second century with the construction of the theater in the city, which in this period reached its highest point of urban living.²² It is common knowledge that many of the plays all over the Empire were infusing the Bacchic spirit and were performed in honor of the god. The theaters were mostly decorated with motifs of the Dionysiac iconography (fig. 3). But the interest in theatrical plays didn't last long and in the third century they were replaced due to the immense popularity of the gladiator games.

It is necessary to view also the impact that Dionysus left on the other artistic heritage of Stobi, not necessarily related to the cult. It is the phenomenology of *the Bacchic* in general that offers us the insight into several more aspects during our investigation of the presence of the god in Stobi. The earliest that we recognize motifs belonging to the Dionysiac iconography is on the pottery made locally in the first half of the first century B.C., found in a destruction fill deposit. This is the same pottery used all over Macedonia in that particular period with a repertoire that included satyrs, maenads, and floral motifs, mostly vine and ivy.²³ Here we also include the sepulchral figurines depicting Dionysus riding a lion from the first century A.D., found in the south-west necropolis of the city.²⁴ In this context, a sculptural fragment from Stobi (fig. 4) needs to be mentioned as well.²⁵ It is a resting column wrapped with vine and grapes, a part of a round sculpture, most probably with similar dimensions as the one dedicated by L. Dexius Longinus. It is not the finest of works, but nonetheless speaks in the name of all unfound or destroyed images of Dionysus

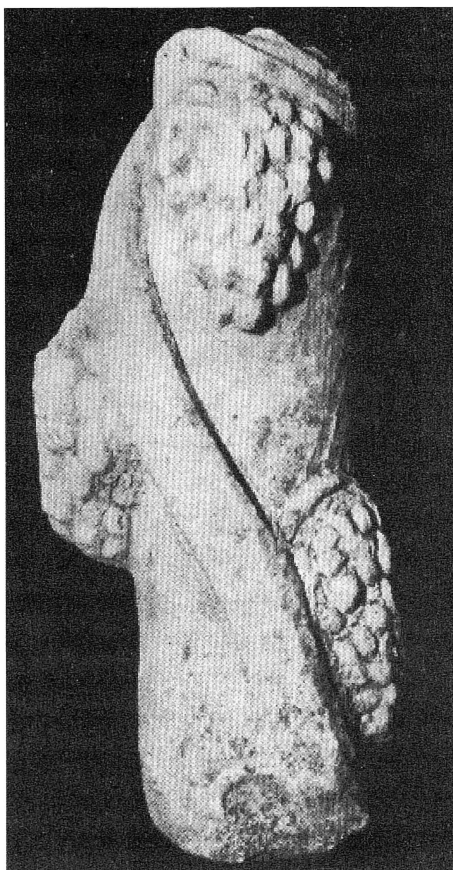


Fig. 4. Fragment of a Dionysus statue. (After Соколовска 1987, 168, Таб. 66, Сл. 6)

20 Stewart 2003, 190; the author refers to the Roman term *signum cum basi* which often meant a statue with an altar rather than the literally translation.

21 Stewart 2003, 206.

22 Микулчиќ 2003, 70-81.

23 Anderson-Stojanović 1992, 34-35.

24 Петрушевска 2007, 21-26.

25 Соколовска 1987, Но. 168, Таб. 66, Сл. 6.



Fig. 5. Head of a Satyr. (After Соколовска 1987, 164, Таб. 66, Сл.3)

and his companions that once made the visual imagery of Stobi. And there must have been quite a few more because this fragment also speaks of a local workshop, productive most probably in the second century.

But the true luxuries of the Bacchic visual landscape of Stobi are the bronze satyrs from the so called *House of Parthenius* (figs. 6, 7).²⁶ It will be without false praising if we are to say that these sculptures are truly remarkable works of art and, most likely, imports from Alexandria. However, they were part of a domestic setting and not belonging to the cultic environment. Their delightful playfulness contributed to the daily Bacchic imagery of the high-class community who could

have allowed themselves such masterworks and enjoyed them in privacy. The satyrs were found together with the marble heads of Serapes and Artemis and the statuettes of Venus, Apollo and Lar.²⁷ We know also of another head of a satyr from Stobi (fig. 5), made in white marble but, unfortunately, greatly damaged. It is a well done Roman copy of a Scopas work, judged by the soft modeling of certain details.²⁸

Finally, we will hold our attention on a relief from the middle of the third century, now in the Museum of Belgrade (fig. 6).²⁹ On it there is an inscription³⁰ which tells us about a connection between Dionysus and a local deity. We see Dionysus in the iconographical motif *Lykeios* enriched with the depiction of Pan, one female figure and a smaller figure of an adorant. This relief in the study of Pochmarski is placed within the group of monuments from Mesia, Dacia, and Thrace, the last one being the center from where these monuments were spreading.³¹ The Bacchic thiasos is by default composed of mystery figures, but here we also have some attributes of mystery character that can be beneficial while interpreting the cult in Stobi. The torch

26 Битракова 1987, 129; Соколовска 1987, Но. 160, 161 Таб. 64, 65.

27 Соколовска 1987, 31; Микулчић 2003, 172.

28 Соколовска 1987, Но. 164, Таб. 66, Сл.3.

29 Düll 1977, n° 107, Ab. 31 with bibliography.

30 ΔΕΜΟΝΕΣ ΑΝΤΑΝΟΙ.

31 Pochmarski 1990, 119-20.



Figs. 6, 7. Bronze satyrs. (After Соколовска 1987, Таб.64, Сл. 1; Таб. 65, Сл. 1)

held by the female figure is a symbol alluding to the *katabasis*, or the symbolic ritual descend into the Underground, during which the initiates are introduced to the sphere of death and rebirth. The second attribute of the female figure also reveals the mystery dimension of this monument. According to Pochmarski, she holds a *cista mysica*, an object exclusively used during the mystery rituals, where the secret *hiera* was held and revealed only to the initiates, a symbol of the commemorative ritual. It is rather difficult to recognize precise mystery aspects of the cult in the provinces in the late Roman times. Their language is above all composed out of symbols and allegories, mostly seen on votive monuments such as the latest mentioned from Stobi. But, maybe we can rely on the contemporary testimony of Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticos* 2,15,3) and on the later one of Firmicus Maternus (*De errore profanorum religionum* 18, 1) who reveal the content of the *cista mystica*. It is the musical instruments that infuse the holy madness and which are the symbols of revelation exposed during initiation.

Several conclusions can be drawn out of this historical and iconographical survey of everything related to Dionysus in Stobi. First, let us place the cult within



Fig. 8. Relief of Dionysus with his thiasos, 3rd century.

(After Битракова Грозданова 1999, 178, Fig. 5).

the chronological frame, possible to reconstruct owing to the existing material. The local Paeonian worship of Dyalos, an autochthonous god with Dionysiac features, prepared the ground on which the cult further developed. It is in the Hellenistic times that we first see the god in the city coming with the influential wave from the south, carrying ritual forms recognized through the iconographical heritage. Later on, with the Romanization, new ways of organizing the worshipers were known. There is an epigraphical testimony telling us that such an organization existed in Stobi and practiced initiation rituals which set the hierarchy within the group. This cultic form spread from Asia Minor and was typical for the eastern provinces. In the second century the cult alternated again when Dionysus entered also the public domain. This was the time when the cult gain its greatest popularity having in mind the position of the theater in the everyday life of the citizens. Even a local production of sculpture connected to the cult can be related to this period. However, not all of the material with Dionysiac iconography from Stobi belongs to the cultic sphere. There has been a local workshop producing pottery with Dionysiac motifs in the first century B.C. Also, some of the figures of the thiasos of Dyonisus were part of the domestic life of the wealthy citizens in Roman times, such as the famous bronze satyrs. The mystery

aspects of the Dionysiac cult in Stobi were not lost during time and can be seen in the iconography of the later third century, again showing close relations to the eastern provinces. Dionysus was now closely related to a local god, which is, unfortunately still enigmatic. Certainly, the material that is yet to be unearthed or has been found but awaits its academic presentation will, hopefully, supplement this study and allow us a better perception of the local celebrations of Dionysus and on the visual mark that this god left in Stobi.

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Резиме:**Дионис и Дионисиското во Стоби**

Благодарение на постоечкиот материјал кој не врзува за Дионис и неговиот тиас, возможно е да се разгледа локалниот развој на овој култ во Стоби, толку длабоко вкоренет во античкиот приказ, а сепак нам толкувачите толку енигматичен. Стоби е секако еден од поважните центри на култот на Дионис на овие простори, со широк хронолошки дијапазон на почитувањето на ова божество и богатство на археолошки сведоштва. Самата положба на градот и неговиот космополитски карактер се доволни услови врз кои култот на Дионис ќе се основа, а неговото почитување ќе се стекне со особена популарност и долготрајност. Култот го следиме почнувајќи уште од раната историја на градот, преку традицијата и верувањата на Пајонците, па сè до доцната антика, виден низ призмата на римските религиски трендови. Сликата за почитувањето на Дионис во Стоби добива уште попрецизна гравура со можноста за согледување на мистерискиот аспект на овој култ како и на локалната организација на иницираните верници. Дионис е клучен бог носител на мистерискиот аспект и нашироко присутен, сепак без центар на неговиот култ врз основа на што и следиме различни локални варијанти. Се разграничува, пред сè, дионисискиот менадизам со оргијастичко-ентузијастички карактер од оној, езотеричко-иницијацискиот мистериски култ на Дионис кој се развива во хеленистичко време. Понатаму, со романизацијата, култот следи извесни промени во однос на организацијата на верниците. Се јавуваат помали групи кои повторно го слават богот со иницијациски ритуали, но сега со понагласен приватен карактер. Во времето на вториот век животот во градот го досегнува својот највисок развој, а пак култот на Дионис својата најголема популарност кога богот влегува сè повеќе во јавниот живот на граѓаните. Завршните заклучоци се движат во правец на објаснување на влијанијата кои делуваат врз развојот на култот во Стоби. Освен оние од јужните хеленски простори кои ја обликуваат раната форма на култот, ги согледуваме и влијанијата од Мала Азија и Тракија, особено присутни во источните провинции на римското царство.

Александра Николоска