

The cult of Dionysus has been a hot issue for no less than 150 years, or to be more exact, from the moment in which Nietzsche proposed his passionate eulogy of this – up to that moment – marginalized figure of Greek pantheon. Since then, the bizarre rituals in honour of Dionysus, as described by poets and represented in art, have fascinated generations of scholars, influenced general perception of the ancient culture and inspired contemporary artists. In spite of what some dull academics of previous generations might have claimed, classical Greece was not only a country of rationalism, order and harmony. On the contrary, it seemed to have originated from appalling, yet fascinating “primitivism”. More strikingly, it has been argued that Greeks had never forgotten or even fully rejected this murky and savage side of their patrimony. Thus, still in the seventies of the twentieth century, texts such as Euripides’ *Bacchae* were read by scholars as a reflection of an extremely archaic kind of sacrificial ritual in which an animal, sometimes substituted by a human being, was torn apart by worshippers and eaten raw. Given that the boundaries between a victim, a worshipper and divinity seemed to have been often blurred, the cult of Dionysus was thought to offer a particularly interesting case-study of “primitive” thought, whose survivals and offshoots could be traced in various aspects of Greek culture, as well as of human mind in general. In both cases, the quest for their presence in contemporary culture seemed to be justified.

Such a vision, which has still not been completely abandoned on the peripheries of the mainstream research (thus, it still pervades publications for general audience and still influences artists), has undergone severe criticism, especially from the nineties onward. It has been observed that its theoretical premises are no longer acceptable from the point of view of contemporary cultural anthropology. Moreover, this traditional interpretation is based on a very shallow reading of the sources, which gives little justice to the distinction between “history”, “myth” and “fiction”, between the “real” and “constructed” or “perceived”. Thus, it has been established that the savage side of Dionysus represents a product of fantasy rather than a reflection of reality of any (pre-)historic period or place. As a consequence, little attention has been recently paid to what is conceived of as “unreal” ritual practice.

In face of the recent development in the field of study of Greek religion and especially that of animal sacrifice, whose understanding has radically changed (perhaps accidentally) in the same period in which our interpretation of Dionysian rituals shifted, the data on Dionysian blood-rituals once again need reappraisal. This certainly does not mean that the (justly) abandoned interpretative models shall be revived. Instead a thorough analysis of all available sources shall be conducted in order to provide a so-called “thick description” of the phenomenon. Thus, within my project, the literary and inscriptional data will be confronted with artistic representations and with archaeological evidence. The overarching goal of this procedure is not to provide a simple and single explanation of the studied material. It is rather intended to serve as a means against trivializing interpretations, even if they are sometimes fascinating.