CHAPTER ONE

AN ICONOGRAPHY IN PROCESS

As is well known today, the oldest certain image of Dionysos, accompanied by his name in writing, is on a majestic *dinos* painted by Sophilos, most probably to be dated in the period between 580 and 570 BCE¹. Apart from this, studies on iconography tend to attribute it a pioneering role for two reasons. One is that the focus of scholarly attention after about 600 BCE tends to shift towards Attic pottery, which is much richer and consistent throughout its history than its contemporary productions in other centres. The other reason is that the theory, developed in the nineteenth century by students of philology and the history of ancient religions, according to which Dionysos was essentially a deity alien to the original Greek pantheon, where he would have been accepted at a late date to meet the requirements of the lower and rural classes, has influenced archaeologists considerably². Today, instead, it is not questioned that Dionysos, far from being a recent acquisition by the Greeks, is one of the oldest gods, since he is named on the tablets from Pylos and Chania in the second millennium BCE. It was not only Dionysos who belonged to the world of the Mycenaean palaces, clearly connoted in an aristocratic sense, and probably associated with wine even then³: wine also belonged there, with overtones not of commoners and countryside, but of prestige and power⁴.

For the moment, let us leave aside the vexed question of the cultural transformation that took place in Greece between the 2nd and

¹ London 1971.11–1.1; Beazley, Addenda 10 (40. 16bis); for a new interpretation of the image see Isler-Kerényi 1997b, 67–81 and pp. 69–75 below.

² A recent typical example is Carpenter 1986, 125: “Dionysian imagery is a sixth-century Attic invention”. Cf. also Peschel 1987, 15. Much more appropriate is the comment by Gasparri 1986, 499f. On the problem in general see the last chapter of this book.

³ Privitera 1968, 1027 and Privitera 1970, 43 with n. 56; Hallager/Vlasakis/Hallager 1992, 76ff. Similarly also Angiolillo 1997, 142.

⁴ Palmer 1995, 278: “Rather the palace administration reserved wine for special occasions such as festivals, or for people of high rank”.

1st millennia BCE and to what extent it involved the sphere of religious beliefs and ritual (and so also the character of Dionysos)⁵. From our point of view, concerning the history of images, we know of no definite representation of this god in Attic pottery before the image by Sophilos. However, the reason for this situation is to be sought, not in the history of religions but in the history of pottery. In fact, we know that the whole production of Athenian ceramic art had changed significantly a few years before the pottery painter Sophilos had started his career. The types of vase as well as the decorative formulae and the choice of subject matter had all changed. Where in the 7th century figurative decoration was found on large vessels with a monumental function, decorated in what is called the orientalisising style, in about 600 BCE or shortly afterward, it adorned new shapes that were introduced afresh, which were far easier to handle and often produced in series. The most important among these new shapes are the oinochoe (little jugs with a mouth often shaped like a trefoil), the dinos on a stand with its successor, the krater, and especially the kylix (drinking-cup): all types of vessel intended for drinking wine⁶. Thus, Dionysos belongs to the new repertoire, adapted to a new choice of shapes, but his absence from the previous phase does not necessarily mean that he was foreign to the mental world of the Athenians⁷.

In fact, it only needs a change of viewpoint to reach completely different hypotheses: especially by not restricting our attention to the figure of the god but instead also including characters who, as indicated by the successive development of Dionysian iconography, in some way belong to his ambit. Besides the pottery of Athens, we also have to consider contemporary ceramics from other centres.

An image of Dionysos from the 7th century BCE

Fig. 1–2 In the 7th century, the production of ceramics in Athens belonged, as did all its culture, to the wider panorama of Ionian pottery with

⁵ Burkert 1977, 88–98.

⁶ Isler-Kerényi 1993a, 3.

⁷ Similarly, but with a different explanation for the absence of images of Dionysos in the centuries prior to the orientalisising century, is the argument by Gasparri 1986, 496.

its many production centres. One of the most important examples, both for numerical consistency and for its avant-garde role in the history of figurative art, is the so-called Melian pottery, more probably produced in Paros and in any case oriented towards the important sanctuary of Delos⁸. Here also, as in Attica, besides common and standardised types of pot, large containers with a monumental function, conventionally called “Melian amphorae”, were made, although in fact they were more like kraters. Today, a dozen of these are known, either complete or as fragments. The importance of these kraters with a high foot lies in the fact that, within the overall orientalisising production in Greece, characterised by more generic and anonymous types of decoration, such as the animal frieze or the “Wappenbild”, they are some of the few to portray mythical events, often identifiable through the attributes that the characters are given. The mythological repertoire of these kraters comprises few images: the wedding or ceremonial cart drawn by winged horses; the duel between heroes; the Lady of the Lions; the anonymous female protome; the erotic abduction; and Hermes Psychopompos in front of a woman of the nuptial-matronly type. We find a venerable male deity, positioned and portrayed in the same way as Hermes, with a vessel like a kantharos in his hand: why not call him Dionysos⁹? In fact, this is how Dionysos was portrayed throughout the whole 6th century¹⁰. Therefore, Dionysos (with Apollo, Artemis, Hermes and Herakles) is one of the five gods and heroes who definitely feature on pottery already in the 7th century, a clear indication of his importance in the Cycladic culture of the time¹¹.

This representation of Dionysos in the final decades of the 7th century, rather than the one by Sophilos, may in fact claim to be the earliest occurrence of the god in figurative art, and is historically important for two reasons. In terms of iconography, it confirms the cultural connections also attested in other sources between Attica and the Cyclades in the 8th century, and it is the first of a series

⁸ Boardman 1998, 111f.

⁹ Melos, Archaeological Museum (formerly Athens, British School): LIMC III, Dionysos 708.

¹⁰ For a detailed iconographic analysis of this image cf. Isler-Kerényi 1990b.

¹¹ In this context note the temple attributed to Dionysos in Yria, Naxos, discovered in 1986, the first phases of which date back to the beginning of the 8th century BCE: Gruben 1996, 398ff.

of images of Dionysos facing a woman on medallions of Attic kylikes in the second quarter of the 6th century¹². This female is usually called Ariadne. However, it is equally likely that it could be the essentially anonymous, prototypical figure of the bride. Considering the funerary and commemorative function of these kraters, the matronly figure could certainly indicate two figures at the same time: a young bride who died prematurely and the companion of Dionysos, who was her mythological model.

Analysis of the decorative system of the Cycladic kraters has shown that, whereas the vase as a whole has a heroic connotation¹³, the function of the upper panel was specifically to evoke death in various ways: through the duel between heroes; the erotic abduction; the meeting with Hermes Psychopompos¹⁴. In fact, it is through death that a mortal becomes a hero. For the Cycladic painter to whom we owe the oldest image of Dionysos, the god goes into action, like Hermes, precisely in this sphere—the heroic sphere—intermediate between the divine and human levels, intermediate between life and death. The little that we know of 7th century iconography not only fails to justify reading Dionysos in either a plebeian or an exotic mode¹⁵, but also allows a glimpse of his position and his special role in relationships between mortals and Olympic deities.

Characters of the Dionysian circle before 600 BCE

As we said in the Introduction, it is typical of Greek pottery to portray Dionysos in contexts that do not match specific episodes from mythology but have a generic aura of myth. In other words, he is accompanied by male and female characters of unspecified and fluctuating identity, as we shall see. One of the most discussed and most controversial problems in Dionysian iconography is precisely how to understand when and to what extent these characters are to be considered as mythological and when, instead, as human. We will

¹² To be discussed on p. 44f.

¹³ A decorative formula that often occurs on these kraters, with a clearly heroic meaning, is in fact horses facing each other: Isler-Kerényi 1990b, 35–38.

¹⁴ Isler-Kerényi 1990b, 41ff.

¹⁵ This is in perfect agreement with the image of the god transmitted either by contemporary literature or by the historical documentation of the Mycenaean tablets, cf. Privitera 1968.

return to this problem later. For the moment, it is important to remember that in the following phases there are two main categories of male characters represented together with Dionysos: satyrs and dancers. The satyrs are essentially hybrids of human and equine form, and therefore seem to belong more to mythology. The dancers, instead, appear as deformed and grotesque males and plausibly belong to ritual.

Both the satyr and the dancer may have precedents in Greek ceramic art before 600 BCE. The oldest example in terms of chronology can be dated towards the end of the 8th century. It is the *fragment of a large geometric vase* found in Miletus¹⁶, with a row of pot-bellied dancers. Unfortunately, since it is the only known example of the subject in the geometric figurative repertoire, and in the absence of an accurate description of it, all we can do is note its existence and propose the hypothesis that the dance of pot-bellied males, a recurrent motif in orientalising pottery¹⁷ of Corinth, may go back to the geometric repertoire. Fundamentally static images from the world of funerals, rituals and athletics dominate this repertoire, whereas figurations that could evoke mythological events, such as hunts and shipwrecks, remain rare¹⁸.

Fig. 3

Another example of a geometric dancer, but possibly as early as the 7th century, appears on a *fragment of a skyphos from Eretria*¹⁹, positioned in the right margin of the figured band next to a lyre of the same size as the dancer. Clearly, it is not a dance scene in the literal sense, but instead—matching the practical function of the container, for use in a symposium—has a twofold allusion: to music and to dance.

There are certainly not enough elements to ascribe these geometric dancers to the sphere of Dionysos, but the physical appearance of those that feature in the first example (they are pot-bellied and move with bowlegs) and the functional context of the second example do not exclude such a possibility. This is significant, since, as we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, there are no historical reasons to make the absence of Dionysos in Greek pottery in this period plausible.

¹⁶ IM 9/10, 1959/60, 58 pl. 60.2.

¹⁷ Here the term is used purely in the chronological sense, without implying the transfer of motifs from the ancient Near East to Greece.

¹⁸ Coldstream 1977, 352–356.

¹⁹ Isler-Kerényi 1993a, 3 n. 2.

Fig. 4–5

Nor is there a lack of characters that could belong to the world of Dionysos in Protoattic pottery in the first half of the 7th century. The figures that interest us appear in the region of the handles, in between the mythological figures represented on the main sides, of a *krater in fragments formerly in Berlin*²⁰. They represent different types, similar to the two variants of mythological males defined above. In the first of the images that interest us there are two characters, much alike, who appear to be dancing and simultaneously trying to hurl missiles at each other. From the way they move and from their gesture of touching their buttocks, they are similar to Corinthian and Attic pot-bellied dancers. The character on the opposite side of the vase, who is hairy and has one large round eye, is closer to the animal world and the wild, and so far closer to the satyr. He is also holding some round objects, possibly stones, instead of the ‘civilised’ weapons used by gods and heroes. These beings from the Protoattic period are evidently equated with primitive and wild mythological characters such as the Minotaur and the Centaurs.

Fig. 6

A *Protoattic amphora*²¹ that is chronologically close to the Cycladic krater just examined with the oldest known image of Dionysos—we are therefore in the final decades of the 7th century—belongs to a similar functional sphere. In the largest panel of the main side, it shows a hero attacking a centaur, while a quadriga with a charioteer and a female figure wait for him. In front of the horses, at the far right of the image and in line with the joint of the handle, there is a strange character, small, grotesque and bearded, with a leg that is out of proportion, in the act of dancing or running towards the protagonists of the scene. Although not forming part of a group, he also has the same characteristics as the Dionysian dancers, but could simply be a filler.

Dionysian characters in the animal frieze

The animal frieze, a decorative formula typical of the orientalising style and found in all the regional productions of pottery in the 7th century BCE and later, has long been considered purely ornamental and devoid of content. This hypothesis is not very convincing if one

²⁰ Berlin 31573 (A 32): CV 1 pls. 19–21.

²¹ New York 11.210.1: JHS 32, 1912, pl. 11f.

thinks of the prestige that images must have enjoyed in the ancient world, even when they were secondary in respect of the image-bearer. A hypothesis of this kind comes from a traditional way of reading the vase decoration that is basically inadequate. In the Introduction we have pointed out that this decoration does not wish to reproduce scenes from the real world but to evoke a world of the mind. Thus, there is no difference between the so-called 'scenes' and the open figurations of the animal frieze. The individual elements of the decoration can express a message even when they are simply in a line and not only when they are linked by the same action. It follows that the animals and vegetal motifs forming the frieze also wish to evoke something real, which the recipients of the vase assimilated immediately, whereas we are able to sketch the meaning only vaguely because to a large extent we lack the appropriate cultural parameters. A plausible hypothesis, for example, is that the animal frieze alludes to a sector of the cosmos opposed to the one controlled by man and his laws, the sector that to human eyes is seen as 'outside', the wild²². Among the deities of the classical pantheon, the first to dominate it would be Artemis, whom archaic art assimilates with the Mistress of the wild animals. It is a plausible hypothesis that not even Dionysos was foreign to this world, since his infancy, as already stated in the *Iliad*²³, occurred in the circle of the Nymphae, who are at home in the forest and wild nature. In fact, we lack sufficiently accurate data on the image of Dionysos during this period. However, it is worth noting that we find here the exact prototypes of both the Dionysian dancers and the satyr.

We have already noted the presence of a figure related to the satyr in Protoattic pottery in the first half of the 7th century. One figure which is more similar to the satyrs of the 6th century is depicted on a *pointed aryballos* from the Protocorinthian period found in Brindisi, Tor Pisana, which is dated at the latest to around 650 BCE²⁴. Besides the usual decoration for this type of pottery (rhombi in the geometric tradition, rosettes and interwoven ribbons typical of the orientalisising tradition), on the main band of the vase we find four pairs of figures in a row: two facing sphinxes (one with a beard!),

Fig. 7

²² Isler 1978.

²³ Privitera 1970, 53f. and 83.

²⁴ Brindisi 1669: Amyx 1988, 333, 659.

with a bird in the centre; duelling hoplites; a lion seizing a kind of ibex with his teeth; and lastly, a bearded, ithyphallic character, who with club in hand suddenly attacks a female figure. This character is distinguished from the satyr only because he lacks a tail. The woman is wearing a long garment and is looking behind her: she holds a wreath in one hand and the other she extends towards a hare. The four segments of this band certainly do not all belong to one and the same 'scene', even if they give the impression of being connected in some way on the intellectual level. The negative connotation that the four episodes have in common is obvious: it is always an antithesis, a confrontation. In fact, we are dominated by aggression whether on the battlefield or in wild nature, or in a transition zone between the human level and the mythical level of sphinxes. The image of the woman under attack places this episode in a world that is similar to the world of wild animals: but the wreath and the glance linking the two protagonists add an erotic colouring to the image that foreshadows the erotic aggressions of satyrs in the following century.

Fig. 8

Contemporary, or slightly more recent, is an image that can be considered the immediate forerunner to the Dionysian dancers of the 6th century. On a *tiny alabastron*²⁵ which, judging from the type of rosette inserted between the figures, must still belong to the Protocorinthian or to the Transitional style, and so at the latest dates to the decades around 630 BCE²⁶, we see four male characters arranged on the two sides of a wide vessel on a stand (which could be a krater although one of the handles is missing)²⁷. They are not pot-bellied, and in fact two of them are wearing a kind of belt. However, their position in the panel and their grotesque manner of moving is typical of pot-bellied dancers of Corinthian pottery from the 6th century. One of them is carrying a drinking-horn, a common attribute of later dancers in both Corinthian and Attic pottery as we will see. Instead, the second character from the right is carrying an object that is difficult to identify and could be a little jug. In any case, we get the impression that two characters are doing something with the

²⁵ Private collection. Exhibited for a time in Zurich, Archäologische Sammlung der Universität, L 88.

²⁶ Dehl-von Kaenel 1995, 42.

²⁷ For a preliminary interpretation of the piece cf. Isler-Kerényi 1988, 272f.

large vessel, positioned on the vase in the centre of the composition²⁸. The crossed arms of the one carrying the horn are unusual, but in fact similar to the crossed legs of dancers in similar figurations in Laconian and Boeotian pottery: it emphasises the grotesque and paradoxical nature of the action.

The most interesting character of the four is the one to the left of the large vase in the middle: he is facing forward with bent legs, in a position that would be overtly obscene if the style of the decoration were not so concise. This is not an isolated element in the representations of pot-bellied dancers. On vases with red figures it remains a typical feature of satyrs, for example; so there is no doubt that it belongs to the Dionysian world. Like the stones in the hands of the strange, more or less contemporary Protoattic characters that we have just considered, this position, which is contrary to the norms of decent behaviour, could mean that we are now in an “inverted” world, in a world that is the antithesis of the normal.

Slightly more recent is another Corinthian image of Dionysian dancers, considered the oldest occurrence of this iconographical type, found on a *fragmentary dinos from Athens* belonging to the phase between the Transitional and the Corinthian styles²⁹. It is particularly important because, as it was found at the Attic site of Vari, well-known for supplying the greatest number of Protoattic vases of the 7th century, it is material evidence for the penetration of Corinthian imagery into Attic craftwork. Apart from the early date and the place where it was found, the figuration also stands out because the formula of the Dionysian dancers, arranged on the vase in a prominent position, now has a canonical formulation: groups of two or three pot-bellied dancers are arranged on the sides of a large vessel forming the pivot of the composition. A youthful person is approaching with what appears to be a wine-skin on his shoulder. Accordingly, this confirms the association of the dancers with wine that we had already noted on the alabastron in the transitional style. We can therefore accept that this association is present even when the vessel is missing from executions of the same subject that are sketchier or more hastily drawn.

Fig. 9

²⁸ In the description by Seeberg 1971, 39 nr. 207, the krater is instead the goal of a “procession” of four figures.

²⁹ Athens, from Vari: Callipolitis-Feytmans 1970, 93–97; Amyx 1988, 60.

A characteristic feature of the pot-bellied dancers is their portrayal as a group: that is, the action of an individual is part of a collective performance, here rendered not as an ordered dance but as moving together around a large vessel. This vessel can only contain wine, as indicated both by the wine-skin and by the drinking-horn. As we have seen, the presence of wine and the association with Dionysos, already present in Hesiodus³⁰, are also documented in the pottery of the Cyclades in the final decades of the 7th century, and, as we shall see, in Athenian vase painting after about 580 BCE. Later, they spread throughout Greece and into the areas where the Greeks spread—including Etruscan cities. Viewed in this way, to remove the grotesque dancers from the sphere of Dionysos seems to be forcing matters³¹. Instead, it seems far more plausible that, in the second half of the 7th century BCE, Dionysos, the god of wine, was known not only in Boeotia (Hesiodus's homeland) and in the Cyclades, but also in Corinth.

Conclusion

In evaluating these first traces of the Dionysian world in Corinthian pottery, we can make two observations: first, the two motifs of the "proto-satyr" and the dancers appear in one of the oldest phases of figurative decoration, to which they belong quite naturally. Therefore, it is not possible to state that these subjects are secondary to others. Nor can one deduce that their absence from previous phases is anything special, as it is motivated principally by the actual style: unlike Attic and Argive styles, the Corinthian geometric style does not use the human figure at all.

A similar consideration is also valid for Attic geometric pottery. As we have seen, the repertoire of the geometric style is limited to a certain number of subjects that have an explicit connection with the function of the actual vases, i.e. chiefly for celebrations and burials. Typical Attic geometric vases, even with figured decoration, are not intended for the symposium or other occasions linked in some

³⁰ Privitera 1970, 93.

³¹ For example, cf. Carpenter 1986, 86: "... this does not necessarily imply ... that komos scenes are Dionysian in origin ...".

way with Dionysos: the absence of Dionysian motifs is not at all surprising and does not mean that in Attica, in the corresponding historical period, the concept of Dionysos was missing. The first mythological images on Attic painted pottery—for example, Perseus, Herakles or other characters from the heroic world—entered the repertoire during the Protoattic period. At exactly the same time, the first figures that could belong to the Dionysian world appeared. Again it must be admitted that the absence of Dionysos and the characters belonging to his circle in figurative art is determined not by their non-existence in the local—cultic or mythic—ambience (because then the same conclusions would have to be drawn about Zeus, Athena, et cetera) but from a choice of repertoire conditioned by artistic style and the function of the image-bearers.

Thus, the iconographic situation of the centuries prior to about 600 BCE does not in any way prove that Dionysos and his circle did not belong to the mental world of the Greeks. The evidence makes it more likely that at that time the position of Dionysos in the Greek pantheon was by no means subordinate or secondary, but similar to other deities whose presence in this period has not been disputed, in spite of the meagre iconographic evidence or even of its absence. The idea that Dionysos did not originally belong to that pantheon and was inserted into it against the will of the representatives of constituted order is solely due to the dominating influence exerted by the Euripidean and generally tragic image of Dionysos on 19th century classicists³².

It cannot be said that Dionysos and the characters of his circle are absent from the art of the first centuries of historical Greece. It is also true that, as for all the other characters of mythology and religion, in the 7th century BCE there was a period of experiment and trial, before his image was fixed in 'canonical' forms, to ensure its immediate acceptance. Those forms were developed gradually and, based on the few occurrences that have reached us, it remains difficult to establish the exact moment and the cultural milieu in which they were consolidated. However, we can state that, at the latest, the figure of Dionysos appears in its canonical form in the closing decades of the 7th century in a Cycladic milieu at the same

³² Cf. Introduction and Chapter 7.

time as the first Dionysian dancers, and that it was preceded by the figure of the proto-satyr, already documented in Corinth in 650 BCE.

Finally, it is important to note that, among the Dionysian subjects present in the oldest phases of figured pottery, at least Dionysos himself and the dancers are explicitly connected with wine. In addition, the dancers, like the proto-satyrs, are attributed to the wild sphere of the cosmos, the antithesis of the civilised world. Thus, wine is closely linked with the division of the cosmos into two parts, which is clearly felt to be fundamental: 'inside' and 'outside'; culture and nature. In fact, in these first images wine has opposite values that, however, paradoxically, do not seem to be mutually exclusive: in the krater it is a symbol of civic life; in the drinking-horn it is a symbol of a primitive phase; in the wine-skin, used for transporting wine, it is a symbol of the transition from 'outside' to 'inside'.

The primacy for the most varied imagery belongs to Corinth, even if the figure of the god is missing, although his presence is certain in the Cyclades. However, we must remember that a figuration of Dionysos similar to the one on the Cycladic krater would fit badly into the decorative system of the animal frieze, whereas the dancers and satyrs belong there naturally. In Attica, as early as the 7th century, there was also a search for figurative formulae suitable for characters belonging not to the world of heroes and mythology but to the liminal world between civilisation and wild nature. After 600 BCE, the various figurative experiences of neighbouring workshops would converge on Athens to form a consistent and structured tradition of Dionysian imagery.