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 BCE\(^1\). 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 considerably\(^2\). 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 then\(^3\): wine also belonged there, with overtones not of commoners and countryside, but of prestige and power\(^4\).

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

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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.


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

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1st millennia BCE and to what extent it involved the sphere of religious beliefs and ritual (and so also the character of Dionysos). 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 orientalising 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 klyix (drinking-cup): all types of vessel intended for drinking wine. 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 Athenians.

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

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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 orientalising century, is the argument by Gasparri 1986, 496.