

## II. Biography of the god

One of the central characteristics of Dionysian iconography in South Italy is the reduced number of representations of the god's biographical events, in contrast to the large amount of Dionysian images that exist. The nature of Dionysus, his power, his sphere of action, and what he offers to his followers is developed with a great deal of intensity in other types of scenes that are not specifically mythological, i.e., which do not record, inspire, or recreate a mythological narrative. Only a small number of scenes do so when compared to the group of mythological representations from South Italy as a whole, and they are always related to the god's biography: his birth and infancy, his confrontation with the *teomachoi*, his participation in the Gigantomachy, the episode with pirates, and his encounter and subsequent union with Ariadne. One episode is missing from South Italian imagery: Dionysus' participation in the return of Hephaestus to Olympus. This episode is characteristic of his biography and enormously popular in archaic Attic imagery and, to a lesser extent, in classical imagery, but held no interest for the South Italian peoples and their clients<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. DIONYSUS' BIRTH AND INFANCY

The first episode in the god's mythological biography is, logically, his birth. This myth was already known by Homer (*Il.* 14.235) and Hesiod (*Theog.* 940-942). Semele, the mortal daughter of Cadmus and Harmony, sister to Agave, Autonoe, and Ino, united with Zeus, awakening the jealous vengeance of Hera, and gave birth to Dionysus. The tragedians included the myth in their works and emphasized the theme of punishing the mortal woman

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<sup>1</sup> We know only one Apulian instance of Hephaestus' return, an amphora by the Arpi Painter, where neither Dionysus nor any member of the Dioysiac parade is present: Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* II, 28/90, pl. 360; Todisco 2008, p. 23 and 40-43, tav. XXXVII.

who had dared to overstep the limits of her condition. Aeschylus<sup>2</sup> portrays Semele as a victim of Hera's deception: Hera, under the guise of the nursemaid Beroe, induces in Semele the desire to view Zeus in his divine form and to embrace him as his wife did. The consequence is death, struck by Zeus' thunderbolt, and the premature birth of his son, who Euripides<sup>3</sup> describes among the devastating flames that raze the house of Cadmus. Zeus gathers up the newborn and deposits him in his thigh to complete his gestation. After Dionysus' second birth, Zeus delivers him to the nymphs, or, according to other authors, orders him sent to Hermes, who takes him to Nysa, the fabulous place where nymphs and Silenoi care for and educate the boy god.

Three different episodes were thus linked to the miraculous first birth—the death of Dionysus' mother after being struck by Zeus' thunderbolt, the second gestation in his father's thigh, and the second birth of the child Dionysus and his delivery to the nymphs of Nysa to conceal him from Hera's vengeful hatred—. This last episode had a long tradition in Attic imagery, while the other two did not. In South Italy, despite the enormous popularity of Dionysian iconography, the narratives of the death of Semele, the birth of Dionysus from his father's thigh, and his delivery to the nymphs were hardly reflected on vases.

### 1.1. *The death of Semele*

The only preserved testimony of the representation of the death of Semele is an Apulian volute-krater by the Arpi Painter (Figure 1)<sup>4</sup>. On one of its faces, and in two different records, the painter has connected two of these episodes: the death of Semele and the child Dionysus with Hermes, nymphs, and Papposilenus; the meaning of this scene will be discussed below. In the upper frieze, Semele, who is naked and lying on her mantle, is supported by two women. Zeus' thunderbolt appears from a great, radiating nimbus cloud, a metaphor for the prodigious and deadly divine epiphany, to obliterate the woman who, in childbirth, will give birth prematurely to the child Dionysus. Three other women surround the central group, gesturing and fleeing either horrified or marveling at the events, anticipating the disaster that is about to occur. Two satyrs close the scene, reminding viewers merely by their presence that the child who is born will

<sup>2</sup> Herrero de Jáuregui, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> E. Bach. 1-10; Macías Otero 2020, pp. 135 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* II, 28/96, pl. 362; Todisco 2008, pp. 46-48.

be the Lord of the *thiasos*. Some<sup>5</sup> have established the identity of the female characters: the two older women who are supporting Semele could be her mother Harmony and the nursemaid Beroe, and the three younger women are her sisters Agave, Autonoe, and Ino. After the death of Semele, because they are related to the god, they will go on to be protagonists of events in which Dionysus plays a fundamental role.



Figure 1. Apulian volute-krater by the Arpi Painter.  
Tampa Museum of Art 87.36.

This scene differs greatly from its preceding Attic scene, a hydria from the Semele Painter, dated 390 to BC<sup>6</sup>, the only known example of this theme. In that scene, the action seems to take place, not in the Palace of Cadmo, but in the open air, in the heart of nature. Semele is lying on a bed, in the manner of Ariadne in Naxos, her eyes closed, asleep or already dead. Around the bed sprout branches that ascend and form a type of grotto. At the top of the scene, Zeus is depicted in all his deadly majesty: his lightning bolt has left his hands and hovers over Semele. Next to him are Aphrodite, two Erotes and a woman with bridal gifts. Below, at the foot of the bed is Hermes, who already holds the child Dionysus in his arm; behind him is Hera. Next to Semele is Iris and behind her, a nymph. The dramatic tension, evoking that of a theatrical representation, reaches its peak at this moment.

In the Apulian volute-krater by the Arpi Painter, below and in the center of the lower register (Figure 1), the child Dionysus is naked and seated under flowering branches, bunches of grapes, and vine leaves, which form

<sup>5</sup> Todisco 2008, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> ARV2 1343; CVA I, pl. 48-50; Kossatz-Deissmann 1994, p. 720, n. 6.

a type of bower. At his feet, and only under his feet, sprout flowers, rosettes, and calyxes of flowers. Branches and flowers delineate a space that is the place of divine epiphany, which in this case is marked by a floral hierophany. The presence of the god has magically transformed nature, has aroused its fruitfulness and has brought forth the sweet fruit of the vine, its flowers and plants suffused with seductive perfume. These miraculously-generated herbal elements contain a space that can be imagined, in this mythical context, as a grotto. Dionysus extends his arm to shake hands with Hermes. Behind the child-god, a woman, one of the nymphs, also extends her arm to embrace him, while behind her, the old Papposilenus mimics her action. At the other end of the scene, three nymphs contemplate the central action or converse among themselves.

The issue is that we cannot be sure what specific moment this scene represents. Some<sup>7</sup> have described it as the moment the child Dionysus is delivered by Hermes to the care of the nymphs of Nysa, after his second birth. But the iconographic details pose some problems that make it difficult to accept this interpretation. Normally, in both the Attic and the South Italian tradition, to be addressed shortly, the scene of the delivery depicts the child Dionysus stretching his arms towards one of the nymphs while still in the arms of Hermes, thus emphasizing the decisive role entrusted by Zeus to the messenger god and Zeus' intermediary. Here, in the krater by the Arpi Painter, the child is seated in a well-delineated space by himself, a type of grotto made of vegetation. This could be the moment when Hermes leaves the child in one of the grottos, or simply in the meadow of Nysa, while the nymphs and Papposilenus, his tutor, arrive to take care of the child. This would be a marked deviation from the iconographic tradition. Kossatz-Deissmann<sup>8</sup> proposed a different, enormously suggestive meaning: the central scene does not represent the delivery of the child Dionysus to Nysa, but another moment. After the death of Semele, the palace of Cadmus in flames, the premature birth of the god provokes a marvelous action: Euripides recounts that

his back was covered immediately by enveloping ivy, coiled, crowning him with its green branches, enshadowed (Eur. *Phoen.* 650-656).

<sup>7</sup> Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* II, p. 926, n. 96; Todisco 2008, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, pp. 203-210.

Philostratus also describes this event:

Among the different peaks that form the flames, there is apparent, in the shade, a cave for Dionysus, more beautiful than those which Dionysus has in Assyria or Lydia, its surroundings filled with green shoots of the vine, sprouts of ivy and beautiful clusters of grapes, with his staff of fennel from the generosity of the earth, some of which seemed to grow forth from the flames (Philostr. *Imag.* I, 14).

This scene joins the events taking place in the upper frieze. After the premature birth of Dionysus and death of Semele, Hermes, commissioned by Zeus, collects the not-yet-fully-gestated child, who is safe from the flames that devour the palace, protected by the vegetation that he himself has brought forth, to take him to Olympus, for his subsequent birth from the thigh of Zeus. The nymphs and Papposilenus may simply be foreshadowing Dionysus' future stay in Nysa. Kossatz-Deissmann interprets this image as the background of a theatrical representation – *Semele* by Aeschylus or *Hydrophorai* by Sophocles – or, I might add, any allusion by the tragedians (especially Euripides) to the wondrous birth of Dionysus among the flames that the lightning bolt has unleashed. The multiplication of female figures could allude to or inspire the chorus of some of these tragedies, the chorus of water carriers, for example. In any case, whatever the moment represented in this scene is, the images from this krater are exceptional, and constitute the only documented South Italian example of the representation of the death of Semele and the subsequent events connected to her death and Dionysus' infancy.

The differences with the Attic scene are evident. On the hydria there are persons who are not depicted on the South Italian krater – Zeus, Aphrodite, and Eros, who, through their presence, sanction Zeus' love for the mortal woman, Iris. This presence is bewildering, as it is unprecedented in texts or images of this episode. Also present are Hera and, most importantly, Hermes, Dionysus' savior, who will take him to his father, and who in the Apulian krater appears in the lower scene. However, there are some points of contact that could suggest a single source of inspiration for the two images. The cave that is created by the branches above Semele's bed, branches which are brought forth by the immediate birth of the god, could allude to the epiphanic action described by Euripides, or to the cave made of foliage generated to protect the god from destruction. And while the scene is described as taking place in the middle of nature, it could take

place in the Cadmus Palace, as in the lower scene of the Apulian krater. The presence of Hermes in this episode –unrelated to the delivery of the child to the nymphs of Nysa after his second birth, although alluded to in the figure of the nymph, is also quite revealing–. The krater by the Arpi Painter appears to depict in two scenes what the Attic hydria represents –the death of Semele and the rescue of the child-god by Hermes to facilitate his second gestation–.

Another debatable question is the existence of possible Orphic connotations in the Apulian image. Todisco<sup>9</sup> maintains that Dionysus is represented here as the Zagreus god of the Orphics who dies torn apart by Titans –the immediacy of this event is shown by the ball held by one of the nymphs–, is reborn, and saves his followers and his mother Semele from eternal darkness. Semele, whose complete nakedness was shared simultaneously by the force of Eros and the maternal burden of Gaia, was assimilated with Thyone, whose death and subsequent *anabasis* from Hades by her son raised hopes of rebirth and salvation. If it is indeed the Orphic Zagreus, his mother would be Persephone<sup>10</sup>; after his first birth he would have been torn apart by Titans, his heart saved and, according to the Orphic version of the *Rhapsodies* or its sources<sup>11</sup>, swallowed by Semele, who would gestate him again until he was struck by Zeus' lightning rod, and afterwards the pregnancy would be culminated in his father's thigh. If this were the case, Dionysus would already have been torn apart by Titans, which is alluded to, according to Todisco, by the ball in the hands of the nymphs<sup>12</sup>. However, if the Painter followed another Orphic tradition, this scene would represent the first birth, Zagreus as the son of Semele, who was then torn apart by the Titans after his second birth from the thigh of Zeus and returned to life –his third birth– from the

<sup>9</sup> Todisco 2008, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> An Attic pelike of the 4th century shows Persephone handing to Hermes the newborn Dionysus Zagreus: ARV2, 1476, 1; Simon 1966, pp. 82-83, pl. 18-19. However, cf. Kossatz-Deismann 1990b, p. 207 who proposes other Reading of this base: Gea or Kore would be receiving the infant from Hermes.

<sup>11</sup> Bernabé 1998, pp. 29-40, p. 32 ff; Bernabé, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> The ball, or perhaps wool roll, may not allude to the toy with which the Titans distracted Dionysus, but to the female status as *nymphé*: it is an element always associated to women in South-Italian iconography, as a symbol of their work and of the trousseau that is part of their dowry, or of the games of women in initiatory pre-nuptial rituals.

union of the dismembered remains<sup>13</sup>. It is difficult to determine whether the image represents the Orphic Zagreus or the Dionysus of the myth and the Dionysian religion in general; however, the funerary function of the vase imposes the incorporation of an eschatological (and, logically, redemptive) reading of the scene depicting the death of Semele and the miraculous power of the child-god, whether specifically Orphic or more broadly Dionysian.

### 1.2. *Dionysus' birth from the thigh of Zeus*

The second birth of Dionysus, after his gestation in Zeus' thigh of, is the theme of a volute krater from Taranto<sup>14</sup>, from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. It is the work of an Apulian painter who is named precisely for the scene that decorates this vase: The Painter of the Birth of Dionysus. The center of the scene is occupied by the seated figure of Zeus, from whose thigh the child Dionysus emerges. Dionysus is crowned with ivy and his hands extend towards a goddess holding a scepter, called by Trendall Hera Eileithyia<sup>15</sup>. The importance of the central group is emphasized by inscriptions that identify Zeus and Dionysus. Grouped together at a slightly higher level are Eros and Aphrodite, Pan, Apollo, and Artemis, and at a lower level there are three women (who, according to Trendall, are the Moirae<sup>16</sup>), Hermes, and a satyr, who seems to be leaning backwards with a gesture of astonishment.

This theme, rarely depicted in Attic vases<sup>17</sup>, is unique in South Italian iconography, as it is only known in this vase and a second one that is now lost. The choice made by the Apulian painter reinforces the impression that there is a very close connection with contemporary Attic painters, especially with the Kadmos Painter, a connection that is perceived in other stylistic and iconographic details used by this painter<sup>18</sup>. The arrangement used by the painter to depict the scene of the birth of Dionysus –Zeus,

<sup>13</sup> This is the so-called Egyptian-influenced version: cf. Bernabé 1998, pp. 36-38.

<sup>14</sup> Trendall 1934, pp. 175-179; Trendall 1974, p. 53, n. 166, pl. 31; Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* 1, 2/6; Gasparri 1986, p. 478, n. 667.

<sup>15</sup> Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* 1, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Trendall and Cambitoglou, *RVAp* 1, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> The theme is represented for the first time in an Attic lekythos dated between 460 and 450 BC: ARV2, 533, 58; Gasparri, 1986, p. 478, n. 666. See also the fragment in Bonn (note 38). Cf. Díez Platas 2013, and chapter 3.3.2.

<sup>18</sup> Mugione 2005, pp. 175-186, p. 176.

seated, from whose leg the figure of a child arises in mid-torso, crowned with ivy, who extends his arms towards a female figure – is very similar to the one represented in a fragment of the Attic Krater by the Dinos Painter of Athens, preserved in Bonn<sup>19</sup>. The Painter of the Birth of Dionysus' production includes a selection of themes and arrangements that share many similarities with those produced by the workshop of the Kadmos Painter, and which appear to have appealed to an elite clientele in Taranto, Ruvo, and the Adriatic Etruria<sup>20</sup>.

The Painter of the Birth of Dionysus depicts the birth of the god with a grandiose composition which includes several Olympic gods who are closely linked with Dionysus, such as Apollo, Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan, along with members of his future *thiasos*. This scene draws attention to the identity of the central female figure, who has an active and seemingly protective role. If she is Hera, as identified by Trendall, and not Eileithyia, come to pick up the newborn, as proposed by Gasparri<sup>21</sup>, her intentions are unknown. It is more logical to identify the figure as Eileithyia, the goddess who protects childbirth and acts as midwife and protector of newborns, although in images from the classical period she no longer held the importance she occupied during the Archaic period. In the Attic vases her presence is only noted in the birth of Dionysus in the Bonn fragment<sup>22</sup>. In South Italian vases her presence is doubtful. In the Taranto krater, the goddess carries a scepter, which is typical of Zeus' wife and not of a goddess who is a midwife, even though that is her role in this scene<sup>23</sup>.

The three female figures located in the lower area of the scene, together with Hermes, could be the nymphs of Nysa (although this contradicts Trendall's identification). This group of figures could be awaiting the delivery of the child, or might simply be an allusion to later events during Dionysus' childhood in Nysa. The image would therefore fuse two places, Olympus and Nysa, and two mythological time periods.

<sup>19</sup> ARV2, 796, 3. Trendall 1934, p. 176, fig. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Mugione 2005, p. 177.

<sup>21</sup> Gasparri, 1986, p. 478, n. 667.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. note 38

<sup>23</sup> Olmos, 1986, p. 692, n. 72, who also identifies her as Hera.





Figure 2. Amphora from Naples (now lost). Cf. R. Olmos «Eileithya», *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. III, p. 692, pl. 71.

The second vase that narrates the birth of Dionysus is an amphora from Naples (Figure 2), now lost, of which a schematic drawing remains<sup>24</sup>. The scene is made up of two planes; in the upper center is Zeus, seated on his throne. From his thigh arises the child Dionysus, who extends his arms, in his characteristic appearance, towards a woman. Here, the goddess has no scepter, but a cloth rolled around her arm, which seems very suitable for the midwife who is going to pick up the child. The problem is in the naming of this figure, as it could be Eileithya or one of the nymphs of Nysa<sup>25</sup>. What is truly unique in the image from the Naples vase is the group of figures that attends the birth, which both seems and does not seem to take place on Olympus. In the lower plane, on what appears to be a rocky landscape, three women are represented. Two of them hold thyrsus in their hands, one rests on a *tympanum*, and the third raises a torch. They are, evidently, maenads. Behind Zeus' throne, and from what can be perceived in the drawing, a naked young man and a woman resting her arm on his

<sup>24</sup> Lenormant ap. Witte and Lenormant 1880, pp. 72-73; Trendall 1934, p. 176, n. 3, rated by the author as South-Italian; Olmos, 1986, p. 692, n. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Olmos 1986, p. 692, n. 71, acknowledges the same doubt.

shoulder contemplate the scene. Both appear to carry thyrsus, and therefore they are identified as members of the *thiasos*. But who is the young man? He cannot be a god, such as Apollo, for example, who is never represented with a thyrsus or with short hair; he must be a mortal, possibly a Bacchos, a *mystes*, who, already a part of the Dionysian *thiasos*, is present at the birth of the god. Temporal or spatial logic is not sought in these images. The message or doctrine that is transmitted and the ambiguities of the image that facilitate their meaning is the miraculous birth of the god, a birth that enabled the final liberation of mankind, his or her access to an otherworldly life, both beatific and eternal.

### 1.3. *The god's delivery to the nymphs of Nysa*

The representation of Dionysus' childhood as imagery dissociated from that of his second birth was more widely accepted in the iconography of South Italy, although this imagery never reached the frequency or popularity of the other scenes from the divine biography, or undoubtedly that of the representation of the *thiasos* or «the Dionysian».

South Italian imagery follows the Attic tradition very closely. In Athens<sup>26</sup>, the first representations of Dionysus' childhood appeared shortly before the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. At times, it is Zeus himself who gives his son to the nymphs, although by 460 BC, Hermes appears as the intermediary, taking Dionysus to the nymphs or the Silenoi<sup>27</sup>. Soon a new motif appeared: Hermes makes a stop on his way and contemplates, with his head bowed low, the child who has been entrusted to his care, or plays with him, a scene of intimacy that in the 4<sup>th</sup> century would be represented in the Olympian Group by Praxiteles.

This is the attitude of Hermes, absorbed in the contemplation of the child-god, in a fragment of the Apulian krater (Figure 3), attributed to the Black Fury Group<sup>28</sup>, dated between 390 and 380 BC. The fragment shows the moment of the delivery: Hermes, on the left and in profile, supporting his left leg on the head of a satyr, holds in one hand the caduceus and in his other hand, the child. The child is seated on Hermes' arm, but turns his body and extends his arms towards another figure. He is naked to the waist and wears a white conical cap, used as a child's cap in other Apulian rep-

<sup>26</sup> Gasparri 1986, pp. 505-506.

<sup>27</sup> Concerning the emergence of this theme in Attic iconography a close relation to theater has been proposed: Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, Tf. 34. 1

representations, and in his hand he holds a branch, perhaps of ivy. Both his hands are open to grab onto the person who receives him, a nymph of Nysa. The action takes place in the middle of nature, possibly in a sacred enclosure, which in other images is marked with an altar.



Figure 3 Apulian krater attributed to the Black Fury Group.  
(Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, Tf. 34. 1.).

This is the landscape represented on the proto-Sicilian amphora of Palermo by the Painter of Locri<sup>29</sup>. Hermes, with the child in his arms, heads towards a woman, who is clearly meant to depict a maenad, because she holds in her hands a thyrsus and a panther while extending her arms to receive the god. Behind Hermes are a maenad and a satyr. An altar, situated between the first maenad and Hermes, synthesizes the sanctuary space, a place in the middle of nature, consecrated by the divine presence. A small fragment from a Sicilian skyphos by the Lentini-Manfria Group<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Reinach 1889, Monum IX, p. 122, pl. x; Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, Tf. 35, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Kossatz-Deissmann 1990b, Tf. 34, 2.