Dionysus in India:
A Multifaceted Examination Across Past and Present Scholarship

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ekam sādviprā bahudhā vadanti

"Learned sages speak about the One in various ways."[1]

"Using Plato's terminology, one would have to say something like this about the tragic figures of the Hellenic stage: the one, truly real Dionysos manifests himself in a multiplicity of figures, in the mask of a fighting hero and, as it were, entangled in the net of the individual will."[2]

0.0 Head of Dionysus

http://id.lib.harvard.edu/images/olvwork419155/catalog

[1] Rig Veda, 1.164.46
[2] Nietzsche, 52

In this paper, I argue that the quest for identifying Dionysus' Indian counterpart is a challenging endeavor, one that can only bear fruit when we shift our focus towards understanding Dionysus as a divine force of nature, which manifests in various ways, aligning with the essence conveyed in the Rig Veda verse mentioned earlier. Drawing from Nietzsche's perspective, where he perceives the Dionysian as an inherent force of nature within humanity, it becomes a more plausible hypothesis to establish a connection between Dionysus and India through the lens of Indo-European comparative mythology and philology.

The reason behind this lies in the fact that many scholars have made assertions about Dionysus' relationship with India that are, at best, subjectively supported. In contrast, Indo-European comparative mythology and philology fields offer a more objective platform. They deal with a body of literature that remains unattested but provides room for an objectively plausible, albeit subjectively debatable, thesis regarding the connection between Dionysus and India. This journey will reveal itself as we traverse from early twentieth-century Germany to the rich tapestry of Indo-European cultures, encompassing Rome, Greece, Persia, Iran, and ultimately India.

Robert Cowan sheds light on the appropriation of the concept of Dionysus in India within the context of German National Socialism, highlighting how Nietzsche's ideas played a pivotal role. According to Cowan, the first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the transformation of Nietzsche in Germany, elevating him to the ultimate volkische hero.[3] Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysian essence permeated a community of

[3] —, 177

activists who enthusiastically celebrated the German Geist and the realm of occult mysticism.[4] Cowan goes on to point out that Alfred Bäumler, the official Nietzsche scholar during the Third Reich, had effectively Nazified Nietzsche, portraying him as a solitary Greek-Germanic warrior on a mission to reclaim the world by battling against the prevailing false values and beliefs of his era, all in pursuit of resurrecting the greatness of the Dionysian spirit.[5] This Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian was subsequently co-opted to launch a relentless assault against the Other in early twentieth-century Germany. In this context, the Other was personified as the plastic Apollonian, a deceptive entity that resembled an excellent life but fell short of truly embodying it. The plastic Apollonian was misled and deceived in its semblance of greatness.

Cowan's proposition centers on Nietzsche's perception of Apollo and Dionysus as elemental forces, akin to the description of forces manifesting from the One divinity in the Rig Veda verse mentioned earlier. According to Cowan, Nietzsche posited that Apollo and Dionysus emerged as natural forces devoid of the influence of human artistry.[6] This suggests that the artist within humans, or a group of individuals unable to craft their art, must balance the Apollonian and Dionysian to sustain what appears to be a controlled life force instead of unbridled natural forces. Modern individuals who maintain this balance often do so because they have become disconnected from the Dionysian. The dominance of Apollonian influences has compelled them to lead superficial lives. In such a scenario,

[4] —, 177
[5] —, 178
[6] —, 167

the intellectual life takes precedence over matters of the heart, despite recognizing that humans are not solely creatures of the mind.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche identified Apollo as emblematic of an "aesthetic Socratism,"[7] a concept that was a barrier to realizing the Dionysian. This faith in the power of intellectualism to regulate and subdue the potentially unsettling Dionysian forces led Nietzsche to assert that a Socratic man would run his course and eventually give way to the emergence of a tragic man. However, Nietzsche placed the responsibility on his readers to guide the Dionysian procession out of India and into Greece.[8] Modern humans must summon the courage to acknowledge that intellectualism inspired by Socratic ideals can tragically tighten the noose around their existence. The Indian, informed by the concept of the Dionysian, tragically understands this through Vedantic philosophy, while the Greek, enamored with Socratic intellectualism, is destined to be a victim of their own making.

Vedānta and the concept of the Dionysian are not mutually exclusive categories, as the Dionysian, within the context of Dionysus, mirrors the Vedic forces of nature that are inherently present in Vedānta—considered the study of the ultimate goal (anta) of the Vedas. In the words of Martha Nussbaum, Cowan presents the idea that the reader of The Birth of Tragedy must have already read Schopenhauer to grasp the dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian. However, Schopenhauer cautioned that the reader of The World as Will and Representation must have already perused the Upanishads.[9] It is worth

[7] —, 167
[8] —, 168
[9] —, 164

noting that the Upanishads are one of the three primary texts of the Vedānta tradition. However, Schopenhauer's interpretation of Vedānta and Buddhism is somewhat lacking. This is where Nietzsche's apprehension about the concept of the Apollonian and the Dionysian becomes relevant.

Indeed, drawing once more from Nussbaum's insights, Cowan illustrates that Nietzsche was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer at the tender age of twenty-six when he wrote The Birth of Tragedy, and the two categories of nature he introduced in the work—the Apollonian and the Dionysian—are, to a certain extent, mere Greek personifications of Representation and Will.[10] The Will represents the Upanishadic Brahman, while Representation corresponds to the Upanishadic concept of Maya. Brahman is the source of the natural forces, whereas Maya is the illusion that keeps us entwined with these forces as we navigate the world. Cowan argues that the depiction of Dionysus, in contrast to the Apollonian, aligns with the characterization of Dionysus found in Roman writings—as a wild conqueror who acquired transcendental wisdom from Brahmin priests.[11] Historically, this assertion may raise some concerns, but the connection between Vedānta and Dionysus is not beyond the realm of possibility.

Indeed, Renate Schlesier puts forward a compelling proposition regarding a potential connection between Dionysus and Germanic mythology, drawing on the god's association with the Vedic deity Soma. In her words, the comparison to Soma reinforced the elemental interpretation of Dionysos, with the sun and the moon[12] playing a significant

[10] —, 165
[11] —, 165
[12] —, 472

role. This interpretation suggests that Dionysus' image was once linked to the concept of sunlight flowing across the sky, giving rise to the notion of a divine drink within the Indo-European imagination.[13] An intoxicating beverage carried by sunlight possessed divine qualities that induced Dionysian experiences in those who consumed it. Similarly, Soma was an intoxicating drink imbibed by Vedic seers who ecstatically received the hymns of the Rig Veda. When Schlesier explores this imagery of Dionysus within the context of Germanic mythology, she cites Schwartz, who postulates that the birth of Dionysos from Zeus and Persephone symbolizes the birth of the sun-god from the union of the god of the sky with a sun-goddess, drawing an analogy to the union of 'Odhin' with 'Gunlöd.'

Consequently, this perspective shifts the focus away from the nineteenth-century symbolist theories that emphasized an Indian Dionysus,[14] redirecting it toward Dionysus's supposed Aryan connections through Indo-European Comparative Mythology.[15] This shift in perspective establishes a link between Greek Dionysus and Germanic mythology via the Aryan connection rooted in the Vedic period. This influence significantly impacted Nietzsche's interpretation of the Dionysian and Bäumler's efforts to integrate Nietzschean Dionysianism into the framework of German National Socialism.

Schlesier's research into nineteenth-century Indo-European comparative mythology scholarship reveals numerous connections between Dionysus and the ancient world. Citing Creuzer, Schlesier underscores that the worship of Dionysos can be traced back to Indian sun- and fire worship, and Dionysos was equated with the phallic Schiwa

[13] —, 472
[14] —, 471
[15] —, 472

Dewaincha. Priests transmitted the orgies of Schiwa from India to Greece via Egypt.[16] We have previously observed how the Rig Veda amalgamates natural forces like the sun and fire into manifestations of the One divinity.

The reference to the phallic Schiwa likely pertains to the classical veneration of Śiva, symbolically represented by the phallic lingam and often associated with orgiastic ideas similar to those later associated with Dionysian rituals. Schlesier further highlights that, according to her research, just as Dionysos could be identified with wine, Soma appeared in the Rig Veda as a god and an intoxicating drink. Moreover, both Dionysos and Śiva could be depicted in bull form. This provides valuable insights into the comparative mythology of the nineteenth century, drawing connections between Dionysus and Śiva. However, Schlesier prefers to relate Dionysus to a Platonic figure, showcasing her unique perspective.

Deferred from Nietzsche's perspective, Schlesier identifies Socrates as embodying a Dionysian ideal. In her words, Dionysian motifs emerge in numerous and profoundly significant contexts once one looks for Dionysus within Plato's works.[17] An illustrative instance can be found in the Symposium, where Alcibiades, Socrates' beloved, "behaves like a human manifestation of Dionysos,"[18] and when you engage with Socrates, your heart begins to beat more vigorously... he provokes and transforms everyone he encounters with the frenzy and ecstatic revelry of philosophy.[19] Schlesier ponders the reason behind Plato's choice to imbue the figure who, in the Western tradition, would

[16] —, 468
[17] —, 218
[18] —, 218
[19] —, 219

epitomize reason with such rich Dionysian symbolism.[20] For instance, she notes that in the Crito, as Socrates accepts his impending death, Plato abruptly employs the language of Bacchic ritual: "You know, my dear friend Crito: this is what I seem to be hearing, just as the corybants seem to be hearing flutes, and the sound of these arguments is buzzing in my ears."[21] Schlesier concludes that Plato positions Socrates at a peculiar and paradoxical crossroads between the Dionysian and rationality, casting him once more, as in the Symposium, as a corybant of reason.[22] The fact that Socrates later laments not dedicating more time to the study of music, which can be seen as a manifestation of the Dionysian, hints at the indictment that Socratic intellectualism curtails the Dionysian force—a concept in line with the later Nietzschean interpretation of Dionysus.

However, Schlesier is not the sole proponent of linking Dionysus to historical figures, extending beyond mythological contexts. Larson's research highlights the existence of four distinct versions of Dionysus in the ancient world: "the revered patron of the theater and the arts," "the effeminate yet fierce and phallic deity of the bloodthirsty Maenads," "the mystical god within the temples of Demeter," and "the divine savior who sacrificed himself for humanity, with his body and blood symbolically consumed in the eucharist of the celibate Orphic-Pythagoreans.[23] In essence, Larson draws parallels between Dionysus and the figure of Christ. Much like the Rig Veda verse mentioned earlier, Larson posits that all these variations stem from a singular divinity, the Egyptian god Osiris.[24] He underscores

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[20] —, 220
[21] —, 220
[22] —, 221
[23] Larson, 37
[24] —, 38

that the differences observed among these versions arose from the god's migration from one region to another. While we will not delve into Larson's assertion that Christ is the ultimate manifestation of this One divinity, what stands out in his perspective is the association between Dionysus' purported expedition to India and a similar journey undertaken by an Egyptian king, Sesostris. Larson suggests that Sesostris' life story closely mirrors that attributed to Osiris, leading to the incorporation of much of his history into the Osiris-Dionysus myth.[25] Like Dionysus, Sesostris was believed to have commanded an army that traversed various regions of Asia.

Larson's linkage of the Dionysian with Christ is rooted in the figure of Osiris. In his words, the Greeks made an immense contribution to Christianity, as the less-educated among them eventually embraced Osiris under the name of Dionysus, who became the universal savior god and the archetype for Christ.[26] This is intriguing because, while the educated might confine themselves to the study of Socratic Intellectualism and the Aristotelian response to it, the general population worshipped Dionysus, thereby drawing closer to a subjective experience of reality that facilitated their acceptance of Christ as their Savior. It is essential to remember that Dionysus was often depicted as a deity accessible to all, not limited to the elite echelons of society, who were compelled to acknowledge him and incorporate him into the Greek pantheon.

This becomes even more intriguing when Dahlquist draws connections between Dionysus and a non-Aryan deity, possibly one later integrated into the Vedic pantheon.

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[25] —, 28
[26] —, 34

Indeed, Larson argues that the Dionysian mysteries could not have originated in Greece alone, given that the initiation rituals were open to all, in contrast to the closely guarded secret rites of Byblus, Cyprus, Thrace, Samothrace, and Eleusis.[27] Schlesier adds another layer to this perspective by suggesting that the earliest depictions of Jesus' first baptism unmistakably reflect what was then ancient Dionysian symbolism.[28] While it might be premature to assert that such a metaphor makes Dionysus a precursor to Christ, this implicit connection eventually takes shape, primarily through the writings of Nonnos of Panopolis.[29] The concept of Dionysus and the Dionysian is gradually finding its place in the history of religions, potentially evolving from a force of nature to a human, perhaps even an immortal figure, to validate contemporary believers' worship practices.

However, the appropriation of Dionysus and the concept of the Dionysian extended beyond historical or mythological figures. McEvilley highlights the intriguing connection between Dionysus, India, and the introduction of reincarnation and body-soul dualism in Greece. According to McEvilley, the doctrine of reincarnation suddenly seemed to surface in Greece, lacking discernible developmental stages and appearing as a fully articulated belief rather than a rudimentary concept.[30] McEvilley challenges the hypothesis that reincarnation in Greece might have originated from Thrace, as this explanation fails to account for the central issue: the extensive and exact parallels between Greek and Indian versions of reincarnation.[31] [32] McEvilley points to Herodotus, who noted that the Egyptians

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[27] —, 37
[28] Schlesier, 5
[29] —, 163
[30] —, 118
[31] —, 120
[32] —, 120

claimed that Demeter and Dionysus were the first to introduce the doctrine of the soul's immortality, asserting that after death, the soul transmigrates into another living being at the moment of its birth.[33] Having extensively explored the relationship between Greek and Indian philosophies, McEvilley concludes that the Greek tripartite doctrine of reincarnation (purification and the release of the soul) originated in India and subsequently diffused into Greece through Persia.[34] In other words, regions like Egypt and Persia played pivotal roles in disseminating Indian ideas to Greece. Notably, during the time of Cyrus[i] in the Persian courts, Greeks and Indians shared the same social circles, providing a potential conduit for exchanging ideas between these cultures.

Nonetheless, the connection between Dionysus and Śiva has solidified into a scholarly consensus that is challenging to overturn. Germana, citing Görres, underscores that the phallic cult associated with the Śiva lingam had spread throughout the ancient world and formed the core of the religious symbolism that animated ancient myths.[35] Once again, the phallic element linked it with the orgiastic aspects of the Dionysian. While Semitic religions often held a conservative stance toward matters of sexuality, the ancient world, from Egypt and Persia to India, displayed a more open attitude toward such facets of the Dionysian. Germana highlights that Görres went so far as to locate it at the core of Greek cult worship, linking the Greek veneration of Dionysus with Śiva, whom he termed the 'Indian Dionysus.'[36] Furthermore, according to Germana, Creuzer directly contributed to this orientalizing of Greek deities by tracing the origins of the Greek cult of Dionysus back

[33] —, 126
[34] —, 126
[35] Germana, 156
[36] —, 156

to India, citing the belief, frequently referenced by the Greeks themselves, that Dionysus had come to Greece from India.[37] However, it is worth noting that Śiva's history within classical Indic religion remains somewhat obscure.

However, as Dahlquist recounts, it is essential to refrain from associating Dionysus with any Aryan deity in India and instead consider connections to divinities linked to non-Aryan Dravidian traditions. In his own words, Dionysus finds resonance with the non-Hindu Dravidian religion, as exemplified by the beliefs of the Kotas of South India and the Oraons, among others, in the Chota Nagpur-Orissa region.[38] Dahlquist does acknowledge that while employing a statistical approach to find the Indian counterpart of Dionysus, he encountered particular challenges in establishing direct links between Megasthenes' descriptions of Heracles and Dionysus in India and the beliefs prevalent among Dravidian-speaking communities.[39]

In essence, Dahlquist's methodology involved attempting to match the characteristics described by Megasthenes with various Indic deities, using statistical analysis to determine the closest match. Ultimately, Dahlquist concludes that Dionysus corresponds to the non-Aryan deity Kittung, revered in the Munda tradition—an indigenous hill tribe of India.[40] In his words, the traits ascribed to Dionysos in Megasthenes' accounts are also ascribed to Kittung and other gods/cultural heroes of the Mundas. Dahlquist identified twenty-five specific traits described by Megasthenes that closely align with Kittung, leading him to conclude that Megasthenes was describing a religion and a non-Aryan people whom

[37] —163
[38] —, 283
[39] —, 279
[40] —, 282

Hinduism's tenets had not influenced. The Mundas of the Chota Nagpur and Orissa regions have preserved these people, their religion, and their culture.[41]

Dahlquist refrained from linking Dionysus to Śiva or Krishna primarily due to the lower degree of correspondence. He explained that scholars often associated Heracles with Krishna, which led to the assumption that "Dionysos must then be Śiva,"[42] a method he considered unsatisfactory and unconvincing.[43] Dahlquist argued that none of Megasthenes' descriptions of Dionysus could objectively be equated with Śiva, primarily because Śiva's asceticism, meditation, and the worship of the linga are essential aspects of Śiva's character. However, they are notably absent in Megasthenes' accounts of Dionysos.[44] Regarding Krishna, Dahlquist did identify seven direct correspondences between Krishna and Dionysus, but he ultimately concluded that the core body of material related to Dionysos does not align with Krishna. This conclusion stemmed from the fact that everything essential in the description of Dionysus has no counterpart in the narrative of Krishna and vice versa.[45]

Other scholars have raised critiques of Dahlquist's statistical methods. According to Kuiper, while intriguing, correctly identifying Herakles and Dionysos would, in practical terms, amount to successfully interpreting a few passages in specific Greek and Latin texts.[46] Furthermore, Kuiper suggests that Dahlquist's unwavering conviction in the accuracy of his new identification, Dionysos = Kittung, led him to persistently construct

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[41] —, 283
[42] —, 185
[43] —, 185
[44] —, 189
[45] —, 183-184
[46] Kuiper, 142

additional theories to defend his thesis despite indications to the contrary.[47] De Casparis adds that there is no evidence to suggest that the ancient Indians were interested in the religions of the primitive tribes. Our knowledge of the Mundas is relatively recent, and there is no basis to assume that Munda myths date back to the time of Megasthenes.[48]

De Casparis concludes that, although Dahlquist's study raises intriguing points, his endeavor to validate Megasthenes as a reliable authority on ancient India remains unconvincing.[49] Dahlquist's inability to establish a connection between Dionysus and either Śiva or Krishna highlights how scientific methods, such as statistics, may fall short of providing absolute truths in the realm of humanities. This indirectly ties into Nietzsche's critique of the Socratic human attempting, yet failing, to comprehend the Dionysian. Nietzsche views Dionysus as a force of nature, not a quantifiable piece of data to be manipulated.

Otto and Dodds, in their respective works, provide valuable insights into the pre-Greek origins of Dionysus. Otto, for instance, challenges the prevailing view that designated Greece as the third seat of the Dionysiac movement.[50] He, quoting Wilamovitz, suggests that Dionysus arrived in Greece during the early eighth century BCE, when the society in which Homer composed his poetry initially resisted acknowledging Dionysus until it had no choice but to yield to a grassroots movement.[51] Otto goes on to speculate that the widespread veneration of Dionysus might predate even the worship of Apollo at Delphi,[52]

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[47] —, 142
[48] De Casparis, 281
[49] —, 281
[50] Otto, 53
[51] —, 53
[52] —, 53

positing that Dionysus was as essential to the Archaic Age as Apollo.[53] Apollo represented security, whereas Dionysus offered freedom.[54] Dodds underscores this point by linking Dionysus's irrationality to being fundamentally a god of joy; his joys were accessible to all, including enslaved people and freemen excluded from the old gentile cults.[55] Hence, Dionysus and the concept of the Dionysian were perceived as universally applicable to every individual, existing before becoming institutionalized into specific cults or religions.

This notion gains further support from an inscription described by Philostratus, which Dalby examines in his quest to trace Bacchus's sources in India. According to Dalby, the earliest Greek historian, Herodotos, had heard that Bacchus was born in the southeastern regions of the world, possibly beyond Arabia, perhaps even in India, specifically in the land of cinnamon.[56] Dalby explains that Bacchus's annual or triennial festival was celebrated every three years, reflecting the three years it took Bacchus to return from his Indian expedition.[57] It is worth noting that Bacchus was credited as the first to introduce ancient Indian spices like cinnamon and frankincense to the West, which subsequently found use in numerous temples across Greece and Rome.[58] This suggests a foreign origin for Bacchus rooted in India. What is particularly noteworthy is Philostratus's account, where he mentions that Bacchus dedicated a discus made of Indian silver at Apollo's renowned shrine in Delphi, located in the heart of Greece. The discus bore a simple inscription: *Dionysos, son of Semele and Zeus, from India, for Delphic Apollo*. This

[53] Dodds, 76
[54] —, 76
[55] —, 76
[56] Dalby, 35
[57] —, 78
[58] —, 78

account is significant not only because it depicts a Greek god offering a foreign item to Apollo within the esteemed institution of the Delphic shrine but also because it explicitly states that Bacchus, born of Zeus and Semele, essentially Dionysus, had a direct connection to India, affirming his purported origin from this land.

O'Brien's insights provide intriguing clues regarding Dionysus's identification with various figures within and beyond Greece, strengthening the connection between Dionysus and Śiva. He suggests that Priapus, a god known for his prominent genitalia,[59] might have been linked to an earlier Greek version of Dionysus.[60] As we have seen, Śiva's association with the phallic lingam symbol, revered for its generative power[61] like a force of nature, shares similarities with this concept. O'Brien also highlights an Egyptian cult associated with the fertility of bulls belonging to the Egyptian god Osiris,[62] often equated with Dionysus. Śiva, in addition to his phallic symbolism, is known for riding a sacred bull.[ii] In essence, O'Brien's research showcases how Dionysus, or the concept of the Dionysian, spread widely across the ancient Mediterranean, linking him to India through Egypt. Benaissa further strengthens this connection by citing ancient sources that link Dionysus to India through Egypt. For instance, he mentions Hecataeus of Abdera's assertion that Osiris, traditionally equated with the Greek Dionysus, was depicted as a mortal cultural hero who earned divine honors for his contributions to humanity. After civilizing Egypt, Osiris embarked on a journey with his army and founded cities in India, including Nysa, to commemorate his conquest. These accounts underscore the historical

[59] —, 62
[60] —, 62
[61] Kimmel, 107
[62] O'Brien, 224

ties between Dionysus and India, mediated through Egypt, demonstrating the widespread influence of Dionysus or the Dionysian idea across ancient cultures.[63]

Benaissa also sheds light on Alexander's expedition to India and its connection to Dionysus. According to Benaissa, certain ancient writers dismissed the notion of Dionysus' expedition to India as a fabrication by Alexander's flatterers. They pointed to the remarkable absence of accounts or evidence of Dionysus' alleged journey between the Aegean and India.[64] Benaissa posits that the association of Dionysus with India, whether established before or after Alexander's expedition, served as a means to provide Alexander's troops with familiar points of reference in an unfamiliar and foreign environment.[65] He also suggests that Dionysus' reputation as a wandering outsider with solid ties to the East and the non-Greek world facilitated the creation of the legend.[66]

Hence, it was reasonable to assume that Alexander and his troops would seek to discover traces of the god in India.[67] Benaissa emphasizes that Dionysus held particular significance for the Macedonian leader, as Alexander viewed the conquering Dionysus as his divine predecessor. Alexander not only aimed to emulate but even surpass Dionysus in his Indian conquest—a theory that some have accepted as historical while others have dismissed as retrospective.[68] In essence, Benaissa's research does not definitively establish whether Dionysus' purported expedition to India was rooted in Alexander's desire to

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[64] —, 39
[65] —, 33
[66] —, 33
[67] —, 34
[68] —, 34

emulate the god or was based on a genuine Dionysian journey to India, possibly involving a cultural hero who later became deified.

The notion of a presumed Dionysian expedition to India gained traction after Alexander's conquests in the region. While there is limited secure evidence of the legend of Dionysus' Indian campaign before this period,[69] the association of Dionysus with India gained prominence due to Alexander's visit in 327 BCE to a city between the Cophen[iii] and Indus rivers. The Greeks called this city Nysa,[70] coincidentally sharing its name with Dionysus' mythological birthplace. Benaissa highlights that when Alexander's troops encountered ivy growing in this Indian region, they were astounded and interpreted these signs as evidence of Dionysus' previous expedition to India. Essentially, Alexander and his soldiers sought to identify traces of Dionysus in India to validate Alexander's expedition and his aspiration to emulate the god. This endeavor gave rise to various sources in ancient times that made diverse and sometimes contradictory connections between Dionysus and India. Some scholars regarded these sources thoughtfully, while others dismissed them as products of ancient imagination and myth-making.

Stoneman points out that Alexander and his troops hastily drew connections between Dionysus and India. For instance, when they discovered ivy in Nysa, Stoneman asserts that the Macedonians and Greeks failed to grasp that the growth of such plants was primarily determined by altitude, not a divine sign of the god's presence in the region.[71] Nonetheless, they interpreted it as a clear indication of the god's proximity. Driven by

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[69] Benaissa, 31-32
[70] —, 32
[71] —, 93

their determination to identify Dionysus in India, Alexander and his soldiers identified Nysa's location on a nearby mountain and bestowed Mount Meru upon it. This choice stemmed from the mythological account of the infant Dionysos being hidden in the thigh (Greek mēros) of his father Zeus.[72] Additionally, they perceived that the Indian people, who often wore distinctive attire and played drums and cymbals, were adherents of Dionysus.[73] They even likened festivals like Holi to a joyful celebration that Dionysus would have cherished.[74] This illustrates how Alexander and his troops eagerly embraced cultural or natural elements aligned with their preconceived notions of Dionysus' presence in India.

Stoneman underscores that part of the propaganda employed by Macedonian kings like Alexander involved indirect associations with gods such as Dionysus to establish their Hellenistic origins. For Alexander, he viewed the exceptional accomplishments of the hero-god Dionysus as a fitting model for his aspirations.[75] Alexander did not assert that Dionysus was inherently linked to the Macedonian dynasty, but through this association, he effectively elevated Dionysus to the position of the principal deity presiding over his reign.[76] Furthermore, Stoneman points out that Alexander was likely aware of a play by Euripides, where it was suggested that Dionysus had conquered the entirety of Asia, including India.[77] This play serves as a testament to the subjective nature of historical sources, as Dionysus and the concept of the Dionysian circulated throughout the ancient

[72] —, 93
[73] —, 94
[74] —, 94
[75] Stoneman, 83
[76] —, 91
[77] —, 93

world. However, Alexander's identification with Dionysus became a significant aspect of his legacy. Subsequently, later authors seized upon this connection to recount Dionysus's purported expedition to India and speculate that India might have been the origin of the Greek god himself.

Stoneman's perspective leans towards linking Dionysus to Vedic India, particularly the Vedic god Indra,[iv] rather than Classical India. He posits that some argue that Dionysus could be considered a manifestation of Indra, characterized as the first king, a culture hero of the Aryans, a warrior leader, and a provider of agriculture.[78] Stoneman finds it noteworthy that while the Greek name for Indra is Indos, some scholars argue against equating Dionysus with Indra. For instance, they interpret Diodorus' Greek statement, "καί φασι τὸν μὲν αρχαιότατον Ινδὸν εἰναι," to mean that "the most ancient [sc. Dionysus] was an Indian,"[79] rather than implying that Dionysus was Indra. Moreover, Stoneman highlights an intriguing parallel: the supposed Aryan invasion of India led by Indra against the indigenous Dasas resembles Megasthenes' description of Dionysus' arrival in India.[80] This connection underscores the complex interplay between myth, history, and culture in interpreting the origins and travels of gods like Dionysus.

Stoneman challenges the consensus that Dionysus' Indian counterpart is Śiva, expressing doubts primarily because of the uncertainty surrounding Śiva's existence in the form known today at the time of Alexander's conquests.[81] He prefers to establish a connection between Dionysus and Vedic India rather than Classical India. Stoneman

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[79] —, 190
[80] —, 191-192
[81] —, 95

emphasizes that Śiva is not mentioned in the Vedas or Pānini, and the identification of the Indus Valley seals as depicting Śiva remains a topic of debate among scholars.[82] Stoneman posits the possibility of linking Dionysus to another Vedic god, Rudra, who shares several characteristics with Śiva and Dionysus, including being a storm god, having the bull as a sacred animal, and using intoxicants.[83] In conclusion, Stoneman asserts that Alexander's expedition was driven by the desire to find evidence of Dionysus in India.[84] He maintains that the sources relating Dionysus to India following Alexander's expedition should be regarded with skepticism, as they lack objective confirmation. This underscores the complex and subjective nature of interpreting historical and mythological connections.

The connection between Dionysus and Vedic India introduces philological methods into this discussion. Vasunia highlights that Sir William Jones authored an essay comparing the gods of Greece, India, and Italy. In this essay, he proposed correspondences between various deities, such as Janus and Ganesha, Saturn and Manu or Satyavrata, Jupiter and Indra, Hermes and Narada, Ceres and Lakshmi, Dionysus and Rama, and Apollo and Krishna.[85] Specifically, Sir William Jones suggested that Bacchus, with his ithyphallic images, measures, and ceremonies, could be linked to Siva, one of whose names is Vágís or Bágís.[86] However, a more accurate comparison between Nonnus' Dionysiaca and Valmiki's Ramayana might reveal that Dionysus' counterpart in India was Rāma.[87] According to Jones, Rāma could be seen as the Dionysus of the Greeks, referred

[82] —, 95
[83] —, 95
[84] —, 98
[85] Zajko & Hoyle, 184
[86] Jones, 26
[87] —, 31

to as Bromius, without them fully comprehending the connection.[88] In essence, Sir William Jones attempted to relate the Latin name Bromius to Rāma by examining linguistic and philological similarities among Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin.[89] This linguistic interpretation opens up intriguing considerations about the potential relationship between Dionysus and Vedic India.

Benveniste offers a concise linguistic interpretation establishing a connection between Dionysus and ancient Persia, particularly Iran, through Armenia. According to him, *Spandaramet* is the equivalent of Dionysus.[90] He explains that *spanta* is an Indo-European term meaning sacred in its Avestan form. This term is integral to the name of the Avestan Immortal Saints, referred to as *amasa-spanta*. Benveniste elaborates that the Immortal Saints presided over human life's material and moral aspects and were associated with various elements, including water, earth, plants, and metals.[91] Additionally, he notes that *amet* is part of the name of a local Earth deity called Aramati, which evolved into *Spandarmat* in Middle Iranian. Therefore, Benveniste contends that the Armenian adaptation of *Spandarmat* into *Spandaramet* reflects its connection with Dionysus. He suggests that this transformation occurred because Spandaramet, initially an ancient Earth deity, assumed the role of Dionysus as a god of fertility in Armenian tradition.[92]

Skjaervo delves deeper into the intricate relationship between Dionysus and India through the lens of Iran. He postulates that *Armaiti* is the daughter and wife of Ahura

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[88] —, 31
[89] —, 33
[90] Benveniste, 447
[91] —, 447
[92] —, 449

Mazda, the principal deity in Zoroastrianism.[93] Drawing a connection between *Armaiti* and the *aramet* component in *Spandaramet*, which serves as the Armenian equivalent of Dionysus, Skjaervo suggests that, according to his interpretation of Zoroastrianism, the precursor to Dionysus in Indo-European tradition could be linked to a female deity: "the genius of the Earth."[94] Skjaervo buttresses this proposition by pointing out that in Old Avestan texts, *Armaiti* unmistakably represents the Earth deity. He highlights that she plays a pivotal role as the counterpart to the celestial Order and draws a parallel between *Armaiti* and the Old Indic divine couple of Heaven and Earth, as featured in the Rig Veda.

Furthermore, Skjaervo intriguingly notes that the name *Armaiti* likely conveys the concept of humility, symbolizing the Earth's humble status as both the daughter and spouse of Ahura Mazda. He connects this notion of humility to the Latin word *humilis*, meaning humble, which derives from *humus*, signifying Earth. In essence, Skjaervo's exploration suggests that the origin of Dionysus in Indo-European tradition may be intimately tied to the concept of a female Earth deity, with significant implications for understanding the deity's role and symbolism.[95]

Skjaervo delves deeper into the word *God's* etymology and its potential relation to Dionysus within the context of Indo-European languages. He observes that proto-Indo-Europeans engaged in sacrifices to celestial deities, represented by the term **deiwo*.[96] This term parallels Old Indic *deva* and Latin *deus*. Moreover, Skjaervo points out that **deiwo* is also connected to another Indo-European word, **dyew*, signifying the bright sky, which

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[93] Skjaervo, 16-17
[94] —, 17
[95] —, 18
[96] —, 11

likely served as a deity revered as a supreme god among various Indo-European communities. This connection is exemplified by terms such as Old Indic *dyau* for heaven, Latin Juppiter derived from the vocative **dyeu-pater* ("O father heaven"), and Greek Zeus stemming from **dyêus*.[97] Skjaervo presents an intriguing, albeit debatable, notion that the *Dio* in "Dionysus" may be linked to the Greek variation of God, perhaps in the genitive case, implying of/belonging to God. This interpretation could suggest that Dionysus is a deity associated with God, mirroring the role of Armait as the daughter and wife of the Zoroastrian God.

The connection between Dionysus and Indo-European deities aligns Dionysus with gods found in the Rig Veda. Skjaervo highlights that the Rigvedic religion encompasses a pantheon of gods, including devas and asuras.[98] The Rigvedic devas were reinterpreted as malevolent forces in the transition to Zoroastrianism. Following Skjaervo's interpretation, Dionysus can be seen as related to an Indo-European female deity who might have been reimagined as evil in the context of religious evolution. This transformation occurred as the deity shifted from a divine figure in the Rig Veda to an evil force within Zoroastrianism. Consequently, one could interpret the orgiastic and intoxicating rituals associated with Dionysus as having been regarded as evil when the Dionysian concept was integrated into Zoroastrianism. This antecedent and influential religious tradition shaped the Semitic religions of the Middle East.

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[97] —, 11
[98] —, 10

Furthermore, if the precursor to the Zoroastrian deity can be traced back to Old Indic beliefs and if this Old Indic deity was originally divine before being reinterpreted as malevolent in Zoroastrianism, one might consider a speculative yet compelling connection between Dionysus and the Vedic deity associated with Earth and fertility. It is worth noting that Skjaervo's assertion that "the Rigvedic religion is a polytheistic religion"[99] is subject to debate. While the Rigveda mentions numerous deities, it also encapsulates the concept of a singular divinity manifesting in multiple forms, as expressed by the verse एकं॒ सद्विप्रा॑ बहु॒धा व॑दन्ति (*ekam sādviprā bahudhā vadanti*: "Learned sages speak about the One in various ways.")[100] In alignment with Skjaervo's approach and the overarching theme of this essay, which posits Dionysus as a force of nature, it is conceivable to view Dionysus as one of the manifestations of the singular divinity described in the Rig Veda. According to Brereton and Jamison, the Vedic divine pair representing Earth and fertility consists of *Dyaus and Prithivī*, symbolizing 'Heaven and Earth.' This perspective invites us to explore Dionysus as a manifestation of the broader divine principles associated with fertility and nature found in Vedic traditions.[101v]

Interestingly, Brereton and Jamison draw parallels between stories of sexual violation involving the Vedic divine pair and similar narratives in which Dionysus is portrayed. They highlight a less benevolent aspect of the heavenly father figure in Vedic mythology, where he is depicted as committing a disturbing act - the rape of his daughter.[102] This

[99] —, 10
[100] Rig Veda, 1.164.46
[101] Brereton & Jamison, 63
[102] —, 96

theme of divine transgression is not unique to Vedic mythology but can also be found in Dionysian myths, where various incidents involve the rape of women, often driven by external influences or neglect of Dionysus's worship. In some Dionysian stories, external factors compel Dionysus to commit acts such as the rape of women, as seen in instances involving characters like Aura[vi] and Nicaea.[vii]

Moreover, there are accounts of individuals neglecting the worship of Dionysus, resulting in them being driven to commit such heinous acts against their daughters, as exemplified in the stories of Aruntius[viii] and Kyanippos.[ix] While Dionysus may be closely related to Prithivī as the female deity of fertility, Brereton and Jamison clarify that the divine pair of Heaven and Earth is sometimes called mothers alone and father and mother. This duality may be influenced by the gender fluidity inherent in the term for heaven, *dyaús*, which can grammatically be both masculine and feminine.[103] This notion of gender fluidity is reminiscent of Dionysus, especially when interpreted through particular perspectives, such as those in Euripides' Bacchae.[x]

I could continue to delve into various scholarly and non-scholarly claims regarding the connection between Dionysus and India. However, as previously stated in the introduction of this paper, this endeavor quickly becomes futile unless one is willing to embark on a journey into the past and propose connections that, due to the inherently subjective nature of Dionysus and the Dionysian, can, at best, be asserted as objectively plausible. Throughout this exploration, I have demonstrated that Indo-European comparative mythology and philology offer a plausible thesis: that Dionysus represents a

[103] —, 96

force of nature—one of the myriad manifestations stemming from a Rigvedic concept of divinity. This thesis aligns with Nietzsche's notion of the Dionysian, echoing the multifaceted and enigmatic nature of this deity.

As my research has revealed, scholars from diverse fields have explored Dionysus's potential links to India, yet none have definitively established this connection. While I may not be entirely content with the conclusion, I would like to believe that a classicist, philologist, and philosopher like Nietzsche would be receptive to this subjective but plausible Dionysian thesis: that, as the Rigveda verse suggests, the One manifests itself in manifold ways, and Dionysus is but one of these manifestations—a divine force coursing through the cultures of Indo-European peoples, including Germany, Greece, Rome, Persia, Iran, and India.

एकꣳ सद्विप्रा॑ बहुधा व॑दन्ति

ekam sādviprā bahudhā vadanti[104]

Endnotes

[i] The Persian version of the Sanskrit कुरु (Kuru), the main clan of family described in the Sanskrit epic, The Mahābhārata

[ii] See image 0.2.

[iii] In Classical Sanskrit, the Cophen river is known as the Kābul river (काबुल). In Vedic times, it was known as the Kubhā (कुभा). There was a Κάβουρα settlement in Afghanistan crossed by Alexander. See Majumdar, *The Vedic Age*, 247.

[iv] See image 0.4.

[v] As a side note, according to Brereton and Jamison, the Vedic twin gods Aśvins… "have an alternative and apparently older name: Nāsatya (*nā̆satya*), which has an Avestan counterpart, though it refers to a single being and is the name of a demon, and they appear to have even deeper roots in prehistory, corresponding to the Greek Dioskouroi (likewise a secondary designation, literally "Zeus's boys")." Page 66.

[vi] http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg2045.tlg001.perseus-grc1:48 Nonnus, *Dionysiaca,* 48. 240 ff (trans. Rouse) (Greek epic C5th A.D.)

[vii] http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg2045.tlg001.perseus-grc1:48 Nonnus, *Dionysiaca,* 48. 567 ff (trans. Rouse) (Greek epic C5th A.D.)

[viii] http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg085.perseus-eng1:19 Plutarch, *Moralia,* Section 19

[ix] http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg085.perseus-eng1:19 Plutarch, *Moralia,* Section 19

[x] See Segal, Charles in Bibliography

[104] Rig Veda, 1.164.46

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