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Steven W. Thompson
Avondale College, steve.thompson@ozemail.com.au

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"Daimōn Drink": Ancient Greek and Roman Explanations for Drunkenness

Dr Steve Thompson

Emeritus Senior Research Fellow

Avondale College

What did ancient Greek and Roman wine drinkers believe was the mechanism, force, or process which caused their drunkenness? Three primary answers to this question emerge from the extensive ancient Greek and Roman literary references to wine and drinking. The first is that drunkenness is caused by some property resident in the drinker, the result of a bodily response to wine. This will be designated below as the "human cause." The second is that drunkenness is caused by a property resident in the wine itself. This will be designated below as the "wine cause." The third of these answers, the one most widely encountered, was that drunkenness was the work of the god of wine, known to Greeks as Dionysus and Bacchus. This will be designated as the "divine cause." The purpose of this paper is to describe and document these three explanations of drunkenness within the setting of Greco-Roman culture. Relevant original sources will be cited and translated.

Most persons in ancient Mediterranean cultures would have experienced, or at least witnessed, drunkenness. Wine was widely available in that world, and was apparently consumed on a regular basis by a large segment of

the population, according to current interpretation of surviving literary and material remains. A "sober" estimate by a recent researcher places per capita consumption of wine by occupants of the city of Rome at 100 litres per person per year.¹ A recent estimate for consumption in the Old Testament world is over three times this amount.² Neither estimate addresses the crucial question of whether these quantities were of diluted or undiluted wine. Greeks and Romans considered it civilised to dilute their wine, so this question needs addressing. Of course, not every Roman or every Israelite consumed wine, but many would have consumed it on a regular basis.

AMBIVALENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS DRUNKENNESS

Abundant ancient testimony to both the pleasures and pains of drunkenness survives in the literature from all epochs of ancient Greece and Rome.³ Pretty well the full range of both prosocial and antisocial behaviour attributed to drinking today was already observed by Greeks and Romans, and recorded in their literature.⁴ The Roman nobleman and naturalist Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) inserted into his extensive description of wine varieties available in his day a personal

acknowledgment of his ambivalent attitude towards the impact of wine drinking: “we are justified in saying that there is nothing else that is more useful for strengthening the body, and also nothing more detrimental to our pleasures (*voluptatibus perniciosius*) if moderation be lacking” (*Natural History* 14.6.58 Rackham translation).⁵ The Roman poet Horace (65-8 BC), although not necessarily addressing drunkenness, was familiar with ambivalent consequences of drunkenness and drew on it as a metaphor when he wrote “delightful is the danger, O Bacchus, of pursuing the god ...” (*Carmen* 3.25.19-20 Bennett translation).⁶ Marcus Cornelius Fronto (95-166 AD), in a letter to his former pupil the future Roman emperor Antoninus Pius, expressed his view that peoples and nations would have been better off had grapes, the main source of drunkenness in the ancient world, not been available: “It had surely been the benefit of many a race and nation had the vine been extirpated from the face of the earth.” (*On Eloquence*, 1 Haines translation).⁷ Fronto here drew on the well-known myth of the encounter between the wine god Dionysus and mythical primal human Lycurgus, the first person to personally encounter wine and drunkenness. After sobering up from the encounter, he set about removing all grape vines to prevent a repeat of his unwelcome discovery. His task brought him into an encounter with Dionysus, which turned into tragedy when Dionysus by divine power

blinded Lycurgus, then provoked him into an insane rampage during which he slaughtered his own family (see Homer, *Iliad* book 6.130-140). Shaun Hill and John Wilkins, commenting in general on recognition by ancient Greeks and Romans of the power of wine, comment: “The difficulties of dealing with alcohol are reflected in many forms.” They cite the urgings of poets to restraint, and the reciting of cautionary stories of drunken excess to heighten the sense of the risk of drunkenness.⁸

THE “HUMAN” CAUSE OF DRUNKENNESS

The human cause of drunkenness assumes a cause residing primarily within the person of the wine consumer. This account is familiar to modern readers because, like today’s typical scientific account of the process of intoxication, it employed the models of human anatomy, physiology and body chemistry available at the time to account for drunkenness. The most widely-attested of these ancient models drew on the complex interaction of three sets of variables operant within human bodies—hot and cold, wet and dry, and the porosity of bodies and their penetrability by particles of various sizes—to account for drunkenness, both as process and as state. In the words of the greatest medical authority of the Imperial Roman era, Galen (129-199 AD), “the bodies of all creatures are under the control of the opposing pairs of hot and cold, wet and dry.” Hot, he added, dominated these

variables as the main force governing the function of organisms (*On the Natural Faculties* 3.110-111 Brock translation).⁹ Galen gave credit for this view to Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor at the Lyceum in Athens.

A succinct statement of the human cause for drunkenness is found in a fragment of a comedy attributed to the Greek playwright Menander (342-292 BC): "it is not the quantity drunk, but the *physis* ("nature" in the sense of "character") of the drinker that causes drunkenness" (fragment Kock no. 627).¹⁰ The primary ancient literary source for the human cause of drunkenness is what can be loosely described as the largest collection of "university" lecture notes to survive from the ancient world, known collectively as *Physika Problemata*, "Physical Problems", and attributed by several ancient authorities to Aristotle (384-322 BC). There is widespread doubt he was directly responsible for them, and current scholarly opinion views the *Physical Problems* as the product of several generations of disputations conducted by lecturers and students in the Lyceum founded by Aristotle in Athens, an institution devoted to preserving its founder's methods of careful observation and deduction. They were probably compiled during the two centuries following Aristotle's death, and sometimes designated pseudo-Aristotelian. The 38 books of *Physical Problems* range widely across the fields of physics, biology, medicine and social and ethi-

cal issues, probably reflecting the main areas of curriculum at the Lyceum. Most of nearly 900 "paragraphs" open with a question probably designed to prompt a class or tutorial discussion: "Why ...?" It is followed immediately by a follow-on question: "Is it because ...?" Within these "paragraphs" the modern reader can expect to find a range of received assumptions about, inferences from, and statements of, the shared worldview of generations of lecturers in Aristotle's Lyceum. Book 3 of *Physical Problems* is titled "Concerning Wine Consumption and Drunkenness".¹¹ The topic resurfaces briefly in book 30 "Concerning Thought, Intelligence and Wisdom".¹² This source maintains a consistently human physiological explanation of drunkenness, although the physiology reflects ancient Greek anatomical understanding. It also probably reflects the views and approaches to the explanation of physical phenomena familiar to educated Greeks and Romans.

The core variable in organisms called on to explain drunkenness was the widely accepted hot-and-cold variable noted above, understood to be central to a range of life processes. The relation of body heat to drunkenness was stated in definite terms: "For drunkenness occurs when the heat is in the region about the head" (872b 30-31 Hett translation). This notion of a heated head is repeated in 873a2 and 874b11. Further on the reader encounters the declaration "both wine and life seem to belong by nature

to the hot ...” (874a38-874b1 Hett translation). Drunkenness became life threatening when the heat of wine “overcame” natural body heat (see 871b23-24, 875a18-21). Younger men were assumed to have higher body temperature, which cooled with age. For this reason they were considered more susceptible to drunkenness than older men.

The variable wet-dry was also assumed to have a causal relationship to drunkenness. In classical Greek physiology men were characterised as dry (872a6) unless they did inadequate physical exercise, which would render them more “wet” (872b18-19). Children and women, in contrast, were understood to be comparatively “wet”. The natural “wetness” of children was an inhibiting factor preventing them from developing a thirst for wine, even though they were by nature also “hot” (872a8-9). Presumably women likewise experienced reduced thirst for wine because of this crossover effect between the variables. The moisture provided by wine, which is “wet” (873a12) accounts for the accumulation of moisture in men when drinking (872b20; see also 871a24-25), contributing to their drunkenness. Wetness also caused the drinker’s inarticulate speech, since when drinking “the tongue is surrounded by a quantity of liquid” (875b26-28 Hett translation).

The third variable impacting drunkenness, according to *Physical Problems*, was the porosity of bodies and their

penetrability by various sized particles. The widespread acceptance of this porosity and penetration variable among later Greeks and Romans with a scientific worldview is evident from passing reference to it by Galen (*On the Natural Faculties* 3.213-214). Diluting wine with water, a widely-practised Greek drinking custom, was believed to reduce particle size, allowing wine to penetrate further and bring about increased drunkenness, compared with undiluted wine (871a18-19; 872b7-9; 874a29-31). This explanation was assumed so confidently by the *Physical Problems* author that he inferred that a drinker could actually reduce drunkenness by drinking unfermented, or “sweet wine” following fermented diluted wine, because the more viscous sweet wine blocked the pores through which the more highly intoxicating diluted wine gained access (872b36-37).

THE “WINE CAUSE” OF DRUNKENNESS

Physical Problems also contains observations which reflect an awareness that drunkenness also resulted from a drinker’s response to something present in wine, but absent from grape juice. “Why do not men become drunkards by addiction to sweet wine ...?” (875b1-4 Hett translation). Here “sweet wine” translates Greek *glukus oinos* to designate fresh, unfermented grape juice. Clearly, Aristotelian schoolmen recognised in wine itself the power to temporarily induce what they deliberately described as extraor-

dinary human characteristics, different from those endowed by nature, which were permanent: "wine, on the one hand, causes the [temporary] excessive [behaviour], while nature [makes them] lasting however long a person lives" (953b18-19 my translation). The idea that a property of wine causes drunkenness predates Aristotle. It was already assumed by Plato (427 to 347 BC) and his circle, according to Harold Tarrant.¹³ The concept of drunkenness due to a natural property of wine was further developed in *Physical Problems* book 30, where changes in human temperament were explained. There wine was the subject of three active verbs, used somewhat synonymously, declaring that wine itself caused changes to human temperament. The verbs employed are "make" (*poieō*), "cause" (*apergazomai*), and "undergo change" (*metaballō*). The fourth verb in the passage, *paraskeuazō*, can be read to support the message of the previous three verbs if it is translated "produce," although this is not its usual meaning. The interchangeable employment of at least three of the verbs in this passage repeats and enforces the author's understanding that wine itself is the cause of changes to human behaviour which accompany drinking. Later in book 30 the wine property responsible for drunkenness is identified—air: "the power of wine is due to air" (953b26-27). As evidence, the author pointed to the froth that accompanies wine.

Roman versions of this "wine cause" of drunkenness clearly built on Greek

thought. Pliny the Elder was its chief Roman exponent, and will serve as its spokesperson here. Pliny devoted a lifetime to the study of natural phenomena, and part of his extensive writing on the topic is preserved in his 37 book *Natural History*, the longest surviving ancient Latin work, sometimes described as the first encyclopaedia.¹⁴ Modern interpreters agree that his commitment to the study of the natural world was accompanied by familiarity with the literature of Greek scientists, from which he drew in his *Natural History*. Pliny's dedication to field observation stayed with him through life, and contributed to his accidental death while investigating the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in August, 79 AD.

Pliny viewed *natura*, usually translated "nature," as that integration of principle and power which governed physical reality (*Natural History* 8.10), and which enabled humans to achieve their destiny (2.18). The sun was nature's ruler, and source of principle, and Pliny employed "soul" (*anima*) and "mind" (*mens*) to help explain the sun's role and relation to the world (2.13). In a nearby passage he went so far as to apply the term "divinity" (*numen*) to the sun, demonstrating that he was not atheistic (see also 2:21). For him, god was tightly bound up with, and identified with, physical reality: "when we say "God" (*deus*), we mean nature" (2.27). Pliny's theism, clearly under Stoic influence, was quite secularised or this-worldly.¹⁵

This becomes apparent from two of its features. First, it prevented him from believing in divine providence for individuals: “that that supreme being whate’er it be, pays heed to man’s affairs is a ridiculous notion” (2.20 Rackham translation). Pliny’s impersonal and uninvolved deity thus limited providence to running the universe with a steady, if impersonal, hand. Second, his restrained theism did not allow polytheism, at which he directed a scathing assessment, characterising it as “gods corresponding to men’s vices as well as to their virtues” (2.14).

Like most naturalists, Pliny was attracted to unusual phenomena in his world. One translator characterised his *Natural History* as “coloured by his love of the marvellous ...”.¹⁶ His Stoic version of theism kept him from resorting to superstition in his account of the unusual. He vigorously expressed scepticism when dealing with reports attributing unusual phenomena or divine powers to the Magi, for example. He repudiated claims that Magi worked *prodigia* by divine power (37.157), and contrasted *prodigia* claimed by Magi with the results achieved by “scientific” medical practitioners (37.54). He could not resist adding brief scathing comments distancing himself from any belief in the possibility that Magi could access supernatural forces to foretell the future or perform miracles (37.54 and 37.156). On the other hand, Pliny’s intimate familiarity with nature required

him to acknowledge that strange and extraordinary “unnatural” happenings occurred, for which no satisfactory “natural” accounts were available. He referred to these by using the Latin noun *prodigia* (singular *prodigium*), a term whose field of meaning designates, at its centre, unexpected, inappropriate, or otherwise surprising attributes of natural things. Pliny employed *prodigium* about thirty times in his *Natural History*, mostly to describe phenomena which run counter to expectation, go against the natural order, or as portents pointing beyond themselves to major events in the natural or human realm. A typical *prodigium*, for Pliny, would be a prolonged eclipse of the moon or sun (2.98), a lightning strike out of a clear sky (2.137), or the rise and fall of the river Nile (5.59). A *prodigium* in the animal realm would be a talking ox or dog (8.153, 183), a reproducing mule (8.173) or auspicious animal behaviour such as a woodpecker landing on a man’s head (10.41). In the human realm he labelled the birth of quadruplets (7.34), and a 6 month-old speaking infant (11.270) *prodigia*. Along with others of his era he also viewed an unusual physical feature such as atypical height or a congenitally-absent or deformed body part a *prodigium*. Pliny’s secularised theism, again, kept him from identifying gods or divine intervention as sources of *prodigia*, however. Their source, declared Pliny, was “great nature” *natura magna*, which he

praised for its ingenuity and marvels (7.6). Further on, heaping additional praise on *natura*, he declared that the source of *prodigia* was nature's *potentia* ("power" 7.32). However, he clearly distinguished nature's *prodigia* from nature's normal course, which he designated "works of nature" *naturae opera* (7.179).

Like other products of *natura*, wine could exhibit *prodigia*, according to Pliny. In book 14, devoted to describing wine, he asserted the belief that "also in wine exist prodigia" (14.116). Examples of the *prodigia* he believed were produced by certain wines included aiding conception and causing abortion in women, inducing madness in men, and causing or preventing sleep (14.117). Importantly for our topic, Pliny explicitly declared wine's intoxicating power to be a product of *natura*, who "gave" wine to humans as a drink (14.137). Note here Pliny's personification of *natura*. Although wine consumption led to "unnatural" human behaviour, its cause was contained within the natural realm, bounded by Pliny's understanding of the scope of *natura*. Pliny acknowledged a range of "unnatural" human behaviours manifested by humans while drunk: "a thing that perverts men's minds and produces madness, having caused the commission of thousands of crimes ..." (14.137 Rackham translation). He also acknowledged that wine's power over drinkers sometimes prompted them to reveal their soul's secrets, to their

own hurt (14.141). He believed that regular drinking shortened human life, and wrote "the crowning reward of drunkenness [is] monstrous licentiousness and delight in iniquity" (14.142 Rackham translation). Pliny closed his sketch of wine's power by referring to the widespread societal damage done by habitually drunk rulers such as Mark Antony and Tiberius Caesar (14.146, 148). He also acknowledged in passing the addictiveness of wine: "the habit of drinking increases the appetite for it." Or, in the words of the Parthian ambassador whom Pliny quoted, "the more the Parthians drank the thirstier they became" (14.148 Rackham translation). This "wine-caused" explanation of drunkenness, attributing it to a property of wine, emerged in Greek natural philosophy circles, and was attractive especially to educated Romans, who distanced themselves from polytheism and superstition in their move towards a more consistently secularised model of existence.

COMBINATION OF "HUMAN CAUSE" AND "WINE CAUSE" EXPLANATIONS OF DRUNKENNESS

As becomes obvious in some of the passages cited above, there was not always a rigid either-or distinction between the "human cause" and the "wine cause" of drunkenness. Passages in *Physical Problems* book 3 seem to blend both accounts, and acknowledge that to Greeks and Romans with a "scientific" worldview,

drunkenness could be accounted for by properties present in wine interacting with physiological factors present within bodies. Heat was considered the key property at work in both wine and in bodies, contributing to drunkenness. Repeated assertions in *Physical Problems* that “wine is hot” occur, even within the section attributing drunkenness to human physiology.¹⁷ There is some evidence in the passages cited for both the “human cause” and the “wine cause” that the role attributed to “nature” expanded in subsequent generations of Greco-Roman thinkers. This was accompanied by a corresponding shrinking of the gap between the realm of plants and animals, and the human realm. Instead of three tiers of beings occupying the universe—animal, human, divine—there were only two—“natural” living beings, and the gods. This development facilitated the merging of these two accounts of drunkenness as a “natural” function. Once it was decided that drunkenness was part of “nature” it became unnecessary to determine whether the primary cause of drunkenness was in bodies, or in wine.

THE “DIVINE CAUSE” OF DRUNKENNESS

The third and most widely-expressed Greek and Roman account of drunkenness, designated here “divine cause,” assumed that divine, spiritual intervention was responsible for drunkenness. The expression “demon drink,” used widely during the temperance movement in the latter half of the nineteenth

century, is a surviving fragment of this belief—at least the “demon” part of the expression. The meaning of *daimōn* has undergone transformation during its long cultural and semantic journey from Greek to English. For the temperance campaigners, the expression evoked the “demonic” irresponsible and antisocial conduct of habitual drinkers who appeared to show little regard for relationships and responsibilities. But for ancient Greeks, a *daimōn* (plural *daimones*) was a god, or at least a spirit or spiritual intermediary between a god and humans. It could convey either good or ill into human affairs. The realm of *daimones* was divided between those who did humans good, and those who brought about human misfortune. In several respects Greek *daimones* corresponded to Judaeo-Christian good and evil angels. *Daimones* in popular thinking were credited with conveying supernatural powers and abilities to humans, resulting in increased physical or intellectual prowess for special occasions. They could also effect changes in human moods and temperaments, and their accompanying actions. It was in this setting that drunkenness was attributed to the work of a particular *daimōn* or, more specifically, the god of wine—god in a bottle. Working from within the consenting drinker, the god would take over the emotions, thoughts and actions of the drinker for a few hours.

The idea of a god as the source of wine’s power over its consumers

would have been familiar to everyone in the Greco-Roman world. Pliny's vigorous rejection of polytheism, which he considered to be evidence for human weakness (2.-14), meant that he also rejected the widespread notion that intoxication was the result of "taking in" the god of wine. But the very vigour of his assertion suggests the divine cause was frequently encountered in his day. It was the most commonly-encountered assumption about the cause of drunkenness. Language of the god within was widely employed to express drunken behaviour, whether constructive or destructive. When leading Roman poet Ovid (43 BC to 17 AD) wrote "He has a god in him ..." (*Metamorphoses* 3.611), he evoked a venerable and widely-employed figure of speech to account for a particular manifestation of human ability or behaviour. Whether or not Ovid personally believed that human accomplishments such as prophecy and prediction, poetic composition and reciting, and the unconventional conduct of drinkers were literally the workings of gods within does not alter the fact that his expression revealed a widely-held divine cause for unusual human behaviour. Well-known Greek authors such as the playwright Euripides (c. 485 to c. 406 BC) freely employed the Greek term *entheos* and related forms, indicating the wide circulation and availability of the idea of the god within to account for unusual human behaviour, including that of drunkenness.¹⁸ The term was also

employed by Plato (424 to 347 BC) in his dialogues.¹⁹

A good starting point for illustrating this view of a divine cause of drunkenness is Socrates (469-399 BC), model and inspiration for some of ancient Greece's best thought, and an influential Greek spokesperson. Socrates apparently wrote nothing himself, so we are dependent on his students, primarily Plato and Xenophon (430 to c. 355 BC), for his words and ideas. Since both had axes to grind, and were eager to recruit Socrates to help grind theirs, efforts to access the "real" Socrates must contend with the "Socratic problem" of deciding which of the differing accounts of his views by his disciples is more authentic. For our purpose it is sufficient to state that Plato and Xenophon agree that Socrates was a believer in at least certain gods although his unconventional theism clashed with that of his fellow Athenians. The view that Socrates was atheist did not receive support from either Plato or Xenophon. It was articulated somewhat tongue-in-cheek by the Greek playwright Aristophanes (c. 460 to c. 385 BC) through his influential comedy, *Clouds*.²⁰ Socrates' atheism has also been assumed because of the charge levelled against him by his fellow Athenians. In the words of Xenophon, they considered Socrates "guilty of rejecting the gods acknowledged by the state and of bringing in strange deities (*daimones*)."²¹ Xenophon went on to claim that Socrates acknowledged the

existence of his own personal guiding *daimōn* (1.2). On the strength of this testimony one can assume that Socrates was viewed by his most influential students as a believer in gods.

According to Xenophon, Socrates provided in a dialogue with Critobulus what may best be termed a theistic, or spiritual model of divine intervention in human affairs. Socrates stated that people who acted contrary to opportunity and intention were “prevented from doing these things by the masters ... and mistresses” (Greek *archontes* and *despoinai*). These masters and mistresses are not human, as the context makes clear, but are spiritual beings who manifest their presence and influence. Socrates went on to list typical human manifestations of their influence: idleness, moral cowardice, negligence, and what he termed “pretended pleasures” such as gambling, gluttony, lechery, reckless ambition, and drunkenness.²² In this passage Xenophon elaborated Socrates’ theism and model of divine intervention in human emotional and activity states, including drunkenness. The focus will now turn to the divine “master” most Greeks believed governed drunkenness.

DIONYSUS, GOD OF WINE

A range of Greek sources testify to the widespread acknowledgement of the god of the vine, wine, and drunkenness, Dionysus. Originally a foreign import into Greece, the influence of Dionysus seemed to increase during

the Greek era.²³ Plentiful literary references to Dionysus are found across the entire span of Greek literature, from the works of Homer and Hesiod in the eighth century BC to the rambling fifth century AD collection of material titled *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus. Dionysus is acknowledged as bringer of wine in line 614 of the epic poem *Works and Days* by Hesiod (flourished 700 BC). While Hesiod’s contemporary, Homer, did not specifically associate Dionysus with wine, he implied the connection when describing Dionysus as the “frenzied god” (*mainomenos theos*) in *Iliad* 6.132. This Greek term “frenzied” or “raging” (from the verb *mainomai*) was widely employed by later Greek authors to describe both the impact of drinking wine, and the emotional state achieved by worshippers of Dionysus. The Greek historian Herodotus (490 to 425 BC) employed the term to describe the “madness” or “frenzy” which overcame wine drinkers and worshippers of Dionysus when the god possessed them (*The Histories* 4.78-79). A connecting theme which runs through the entire range of Dionysian literary references, and extensive surviving decorated pottery, is his role as god of wine. Even Plato employed what must have become, to Greeks, a stock expression when he referred to wine as “gift of Dionysus” (*Laws* 672a).

Surviving visual representations of Dionysus on earthenware pottery of various kinds began about 600 BC, and continued through the classical Greek

era, especially on black figure and red-figure ceramic ware produced in Athens, where Dionysus was "one of the most common subjects."²⁴ Thomas Carpenter concluded in his study of Greek painted vases that:

The Dionysus who first appears in Greek art on an Attic black-figure dinos during the first quarter of the sixth century represents little more than his function as bringer-of-wine. There he is one of the lesser deities in a procession of gods and goddesses on their way to celebrate the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. Humbly dressed, he walks barefoot and carries a branch of a grapevine while the grander gods wearing elegant cloaks ride in four-horse chariots. Within three decades, however, Dionysus had become one of the most common subjects on Attic black-figure vases, and 'canonical' imagery had been developed to depict him.²⁵

Carpenter also noted "The god himself appears on more than 900 surviving fifth-century Attic vases, something over 3.5 per cent of the known total, which is more than any other god . . ."²⁶ Another authority on Dionysus, Albert Henrichs, declared: "Of all the Greek gods, Dionysus is the most visible."²⁷ If there is a "canonical" or ultimately authoritative Greek literary source for the nature and function of Dionysus, it is the famous tragic play titled *The Bacchae* by the Athenian playwright Euripides. From its first performance in 405 BC it gripped audiences and

readers, and to the present it expresses core ancient Greek thought about the presence and power of the god.

Dionysus was imported into Rome from Greece largely within the beliefs and rituals of people in Greek territories incorporated due to Roman territorial expansion, and by the flood of immigrants to the city of Rome itself during the latter part of the Roman Republican era. He soon became widely acknowledged there in spite of the suspicion of Roman leaders due to his "foreignness." Matter-of-fact references to his cult as an established feature of Roman life occur in the plays of Plautus before 180 BC. The historian Livy's detailed and vivid account of the expulsion of worshippers of Bacchus from Rome during the so-called Bacchanalian affair of 186 BC (*Books from the Foundation of the City* 39, 3, 6) gives the impression the movement was a major threat to public order.²⁸ The response of the authorities to dislodge his organised worship from the city seemed to have only limited success.²⁹

The cult of Dionysus appealed to Romans as it had earlier to Greeks, drawing devotees from differing social classes. Dionysus and what he represented was important enough to Roman generals Marius and Pompey, contemporaries of Julius Caesar, to have themselves deified as Dionysus.³⁰ Arthur Nock commented on the increasing popularity of Dionysus during the first century BC³¹. Erich

Gruen also declared the prominence of Dionysus among Romans, citing as evidence the Augustan poets.³² His cult was widespread at the time Christianity emerged, according to Richard Seaford.³³ Roman representation of the god reached a high point in the extensive “Villa of the Mysteries” wall mural of Pompeii.

WHAT DIONYSUS OFFERED

Dionysus presided over a wide range of human activities and beliefs, but his core function was related to wine and drinking. “For the Greeks, at any rate for the Athenians of the classic period, Dionysus was in the first place the god of wine.”³⁴ In his recent assessment of Dionysus, Richard Seaford argued that the god appealed because of his power to bridge the gaps between the three spheres of the world—nature, humanity, and divinity. Humanity emerges from nature and aspires to divinity. Dionysus, by transcending these fundamental divisions, may *transform the identity* (italics original) of an individual into animal and god. And it is by his presence that he liberates the individual from the circumstances of this life. Dionysus presided over noisy, earthy and tipsy celebrations of fertility and life itself. Not everyone was pleased with Dionysus and his influence. Dionysus contrasted sharply with “the relatively remote and austere god of Christianity.”³⁵

In spite of upper class Greek and Roman concern about the god’s spontaneity, Dionysus and his followers

came to dominate mass culture. Cultivated Greek and Roman establishment voices could protest and refer to their high culture’s more disciplined and conventional approach, but they spoke only for a small minority.³⁶ The reality of spiritual and theological devotion to Dionysus has been vigorously championed by E R Dodds. His influential definition of the Greek verb *bakchuein*, derived from Dionysus’ alternative name Bacchus, and sometimes translated “inspire with frenzy, be frenzied” continues to be cited. “*Bakchuein* is not to have a good time, but to share in a particular religious rite and (or) have a particular religious experience—the experience of communion with a god which transformed a human being into a *Bakchos* or a *Bakchē*.”

OPPOSING SIDES OF DIONYSUS

The complex nature of Dionysus, bringer of both joy and grief, is the subject of considerable recent scholarship.³⁸ These contrasting manifestations of Dionysus are elsewhere named: “The ambivalence in Dionysus’ nature between ecstatic joy and terrible cruelty.”³⁹ The popularity of the massacre theme in Greek painted pottery dramatically symbolises the rawness of the standoff between wine and some of its human consumers. All references to Dionysus in both Greek and Latin literature gave him the upper hand over humans, whether devotees or victims. This is most chillingly unfolded in Euripides’ great tragic play *The Bacchae*, which forces on its audi-

ences in the grimmest possible manner the over-riding threat to human decency when Dionysus took over the life. The god presided unflinchingly over the beheading and dismemberment of Pentheus by his own mother who, deluded by divine possession, thought she was doing her family and city a favour by killing what appeared to her a beast of prey.

The divine account for drunkenness therefore assumed an explicitly theistic worldview within which the act of drinking wine served as an invitation for the powerful spirit of Dionysus to enter and take over the life of the drinker for a time. Transformed attitudes and actions during the time of this divine takeover were attributed to the wine god within. As god of wine and drunkenness, Dionysus was both powerful and unpredictable—just like human conduct while under the influence. While Dionysus was welcomed for his soothing influence, his destructive power caused concern, and was the frequent focus of Greek and Roman authors.

CONCLUSION

Ancient Greeks and Romans did not agree among themselves on the cause of drunkenness. Some explained it as a response of a physical property within the drinker, while others traced its cause to a physical property of wine. Both these were minority views which reach us mostly in the literary remains of educated Greeks who were under the influence of Greek natural science,

and of Romans under the added influence of Stoicism. These "naturalistic" accounts of drunkenness stopped short of accounting fully for drunkenness because they did not explain individual variations of behaviour from one drinker to another in identical or similar circumstances. The cause of drunkenness most widely supported by ancient sources was that it resulted from taking in the god of wine, surrendering to his control. The advantage of this explanation, held by the great majority of people, was that it made available an additional source of will and control, another master external to the drinker, which could be called upon to account for the common, shared behaviour of drunkenness, as well as for individual variation. Physical accounts for drunkenness were too reductionist and secularised to convince the highly spiritual worldview shared by most of the people living in classical Greece and Rome. For them, accounting for drunkenness without appealing to its spiritual cause would have been as unthinkable as accounting for any other significant phenomenon without recourse to its spiritual dimension.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the major gains and losses resulting from an account of reality which allows for the working of spiritual forces?
2. What are the major gains and losses resulting from an account of reality which acknowledges only the

presence of material and physical forces?

3. Which of the three ancient accounts for drunkenness—something in the drinker; something in the drink; something in the spirit(ual) realm—seems to account best for drunkenness?

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- 12 — — —, *Problems II*, trans. W. S. Hett, 23 vols., vol. 16, Aristotle in 23 Volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 154-81.
- 13 “When they were confronted by natural power of any kind, the Greeks desired to harness it . . .” Tarrant, “Platonist Ponderings,” 17.
- 14 The elder Pliny’s lifetime of intense devotion to observing natural phenomena, and in reading what earlier authors had written about them, has been recorded by his nephew, Pliny the Younger, in book 3, epistle 5 of his surviving letters.
- 15 Pliny’s indebtedness to Stoicism has been thoroughly canvassed by Mary Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
- 16 Pliny, *Pliny, Natural History* (Rackham Translation), ix.
- 17 See *Physical Problems* 871a1, 871a6, 871b22, 872a22, 873b12, 874b23, 874b36.
- 18 Examples include *Hippolytus* 141; *Electra* 1032; *Trojan Women* 366.

- 19 Examples include *Ion* 533-534; *Phaedrus* 244, 255; *Symposium* 179-180; *Timaeus* 71-72.
- 20 Jeffry Henderson discusses this in the introduction to his translation of the plays of Aristophanes. See Aristophanes, "Clouds, Wasps, Peace," in *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.
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- 26 *Ibid.*, 1.
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- 30 This has been noted by A D Nock, "Notes on Ruler-Cult I-IV," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 48 (1928): 30. For the deification of the Roman general Pompey (106-48 BC) under the Latin equivalent title *Liber Pater* see Pliny, *Pliny, Natural History (Rackham Translation)*, Book 33, para. 150.
- 31 Nock, "Ruler Cult," 30.
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- 33 Seaford, *Dionysos*, 4.

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- 36 This is suggested by Jean-Charles Sournia, *A History of Alcoholism*, trans Nick Hindley and Gareth Stanton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 6.
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- 38 For an account of the development of the complexity of Dionysus, see Albert Henrichs, "Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 88 (1984).
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