

# IN SEARCH OF DIONYSOS

## REASSESSING A DIONYSIAN CONTEXT IN EARLY ROME

av

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## **Abstract**

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In the present study the possibility of an early appearance of the god Dionysos and his sphere in archaic Rome, in the decades around 500 BC, will be examined. In early scholarship, rooted in the 19th century, the phenomenon of Dionysian ecstatic rites, cults, and satyr-plays in Roman society was denied. According to that view and the subsequent tradition in religious studies, such cultic activities were not present in Rome. Furthermore, due to Christian presuppositions, religion could scarcely be connected with sexual activities and bawdy behaviour, and as this is one fundamental quality in Dionysian cultic activities, it was reason enough for neglect and rejection of the thought of Dionysian cult as religion proper, on the whole. These preconceptions have long prevailed and formed the foundation for research in Roman religious studies. Scholars in various disciplines now challenge these ideas. The theoretical framework in this multidisciplinary study focuses on an intercontextual methodology and will have the approach of a case study. The starting point is thus to make a reassessment of the evidence at hand. The importance of the iconographic material is brought forward, beside the literary and epigraphic sources. Finds from the Greek and Etruscan areas supply a comparative perspective since Rome hardly can be seen as an isolated entity. It is suggested that ideas and values travelled rather freely in the area. Parallel Dionysian phenomena are known in the cultural spheres influencing Rome. Dionysos' visual manifestations are in focus as well as Dionysos' possible revelation in early Rome and plausible relation to the god Liber. Moreover, the diverse aspects of the satyrs as part of the Dionysian sphere are treated and an attempt is made to explain the satyr in a religious context. Liminality is a central feature when satyrs are concerned, and their function as a symbol of inversion of order is considered. Arguments are given for a strong connection between ritual and performance, thus indicating a cultic origin of performances in Rome, and for an early appearance of Dionysos and his thiasos.

**Key words:** Dionysos, Dionysus, Roman religion, Archaic Rome, paradigm shift, satyrs, liminality, iconography, ritual, cult, performance, Fuflluns, Liber, Bacchus, oral tradition, antefix, small finds, intercontextual.

