

Representations of Gender Liminality in the Cults of Dionysos and Cybele

Mythological narratives of ancient cultures are replete with characters whose gender and sexual identity exist between normative definitions of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, the transgression of the male/female gender binary was only acknowledged in the divine realm or through the intervention of deities.

Dionysos/Bacchus and Cybele/Magna Mater Idaea stand out as two of the most 'liminal' deities in the Graeco-Roman pantheon. They are often interconnected not only in mythological narratives but also in rituals and processions. Textual evidence consistently highlights how both these gods, and particularly their followers, defy norms related to gender. However, when examining material sources, representations of gender liminality become tricky to assess.

This paper aims to investigate the iconographic representations of priests and devotees of Dionysos' and Cybele's cults, specifically looking for traits that (may) indicate a similar transgression of gender boundaries as recounted in literary evidence. Special attention will be given to a number of exemplifying representations produced under the Roman Empire, such as the famous portraits of Cybele's *galloi* (Vermaseren, *CCCA* 1, 504; 3, 249, 447 and 466) and some representations of satyrs and maenads (e.g. bronze of dancing satyr from Villa of the Papyri, in Herculaneum; Roman copy of a Greek relief of a dancing maenad).

In this paper, I will demonstrate that, although gender liminality is clearly acknowledged as a trait in literary references concerning Cybele's and Dionysos' attendants, its representation in material evidence is not equally straightforward. While ambiguous gender traits are more readily discernible in portraits of the gods or semi-divine creatures, such as Attis and the satyrs, representations of human cultic actors typically conform to physical sexual standards. To identify instances of defiance against gender norms in material culture, one must necessarily examine it through the lens of Roman narrative.

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