

Carrying Dionysos: The God and the Hellenistic Kings

The young effeminate Dionysos who celebrated a triumph over his eastern conquests frequently appears in Hellenistic art. Plutarch claims that the Dionysiac cult permeated Macedonian society long before the birth of Alexander the Great, thus it is no surprise that Alexander and his successors were equated with Dionysos (Plut. *Alexander* 2.5). At least six Hellenistic rulers in the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires assumed the name “Dionysos” in addition to many other titles. The Ptolemies linked Dionysos with the Egyptian god, Harpokrates, the young incarnation of the falcon god Horus, who was often equated with Pharaoh and even associated with rebirth, a typical characteristic of Dionysos (Ridgway 2006). Ptolemy IV Philadelphos even clothed himself in the dress of Dionysos in a religious procession, an act that displays the close connection between the god and the new line of “Pharaohs,” the Ptolemies (Rice 1983). The images of Dionysos carried and paraded within the procession exemplify the forms of Dionysos depicted in the Hellenistic period. I will assess Dionysos’ link to Hellenistic rulers through an analysis of artistic depictions of the god being carried. Other deities of the Greek pantheon are carried, but none to the extent of Dionysos. He is carried by humans on stage, on ships in his processions, on the backs of exotic animals, and in the arms of other divinities. Many ritual practices involved carrying images of the god from one location to another, which may relate to his mythical journey from the east back to Greece. A combined analysis of the nature of the “carrying” rituals, the god’s mythical journey, and the processions of Hellenistic rulers will illuminate a new relationship between Dionysos and Hellenistic rulers, as well as explain the multiplicity of images depicting Dionysos being carried as a result of royal court art associated with the kings in this period.

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