

## DIONYSUS AND THE FAWNSKIN

AMONG the accessories of Dionysiac cult, the thyrsus, ivy, and fawnskin are most frequently mentioned. It has often struck me as odd that the fawn should figure in such an ecstatic cult, even as a sacrificial animal, and it may be worth asking why it appears there. Henri Jeanmaire understands the *νεβρίς* as the skin of the animal offered in sacrifice, which, in practice, was more often the goat than the fawn,<sup>1</sup> and L. B. Lawler, in a study of the 'classical' figures of Maenads on Greek vases, found that only 90 out of 215 women were wearing the fawnskin,<sup>2</sup> an observation which led Jeanmaire to wonder if it were not an indication of rank in the Dionysiac hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> Dionysus himself was called both 'fawn-killing'<sup>4</sup> and 'fawn-like',<sup>5</sup> and so it is difficult to tell at once whether he is friend or foe of the animal.

Does this difficulty arise from his having 'borrowed' the deer or fawn from another cult altogether? The deer is most closely associated with Artemis, who was both its hunter and protectress,<sup>6</sup> and we often find that the deer or hind is a helpless victim, sometimes surrogate for a human being who is killed to propitiate a deity.<sup>7</sup> In Nonnos' *Dionysiaca*, the most complete omnium gatherum of Bacchic legend and practice, albeit a very late work, the fawnskin represents three different things: (i) the follower of Dionysus; (ii) the helpless victim; (iii) violated sexual innocence.<sup>8</sup> This, however, is a piece of literary technique, and if we are to discover why Maenads wore fawnskins, the answer is more likely to lie in the realm of magical *use* than of literary symbolism. Some primitive tribes wear the skins of animals they have killed in order to absorb the qualities of the animal. A fawn, however, is a timid creature. In Homer, the phrase 'dazed like fawns' carries a reproach of cowardice, and its flesh or skin would hardly be suitable magic for crazed, fierce women.<sup>9</sup> It is also a swift creature, of course. Among the Tarahumares of Mexico, foot runners tied deer hoofs to their backs to make them swift-footed,<sup>10</sup> and one wonders if the Thracians in Xerxes' army did not wear fawnskin shoes for much the same reason.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Dionysus* (Paris, 1951), 95-6. This difference between theory and practice may account for Aeschylus' calling the goatskin *νεβρίς* in metaphor (ἐκ μεταφορᾶς): Hesychius, s.v. *αἰγίλειον*.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Maenads', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, vi (1927), 84. Miss Lawler simply gives figures of the most frequent accessories on the vases. It is Jeanmaire who draws inferences from them.

<sup>3</sup> Op. cit. 170.

<sup>4</sup> Nonnos, *Dionysiaca*, 44. 198. See also C.V.A., Germany xxix. 1413<sup>1</sup> and cf. Nonnos 25. 224-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Anth. Graec.* 9. 524<sup>14</sup>. See also C.V.A., Germany xxii. 1077<sup>1-3</sup>. Ibid. 537<sup>1</sup> (detail 538<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>6</sup> (i) Callimachus, *Hymn* 3. 93; Pausanias 6. 22. 11. (ii) Ibid. 7. 18. 12. Nonnos 36. 55-6. Ibid. 20. 70-1. (iii) See Frazer on Pausanias 6. 22. 11. See also Pausanias 8. 37. 4. Strabo 8. 3. 12. (iv) See W. H. D. Rouse,

*Greek Votive Offerings* (Cambridge, 1902), 304-5. Cf. Bekker, *Anec. Graec.* i. 249. Athen. 14. 646 e. Strabo 14. 1. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Ovid, *Metam.* 12. 27-34. Nonnos 13. 115. Porphyry, *De Abstinencia* 2. 56. Nonnos 5. 287-551. Plutarch, *Moralia* (*Quaest. Graec.* 39) 300 c. Cf. Euripides, *Bacchae* 835.

<sup>8</sup> Nonnos 1. 34-6; 9. 126; 12. 353, etc. 11. 83-98, 232-3; 12. 179-80. 12. 351-4. 16. 25; *ibid.* 141; *ibid.* 99-100; *ibid.* 349; 42. 348; 48. 778; *ibid.* 864. 7. 341-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Iliad* 4. 243. Cf. *ibid.* 21. 29. Among the Dyaks, warriors may not eat deer-flesh for fear of becoming timid (Frazer, *Golden Bough*, viii. 144); cf. the reproach against Dionysus in Nonnos 26. 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Golden Bough*, i. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus 7. 75. For other magical uses see Pliny, *N.H.* 8. 119; Ovid, *Metam.* 7. 273 ff.; Pliny, *N.H.* 28. 98, 246-7. Cf. 30. 91.

Nevertheless, none of this helps; so we are forced to consult the *Etymologicum Magnum*,<sup>1</sup> where in the words ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐλαύνειν τοὺς ὄφεις we may find what may be a reasonable answer to our question. This is a reference to a very old superstition. 'Deer are called *elaphoi*,' says Plutarch, 'not from their swiftness but from their power of attracting snakes',<sup>2</sup> a piece of behaviour which Oppian describes in detail:

All the race of Snakes and Deer wage always bitter feud with one another, and everywhere in the mountain glens the Deer seeks out the bold serpent. But when he sees the snaky trail woven with long coils, greatly exulting he draws nigh to the lair and puts his nostrils to the hole, with violent breath drawing the deadly reptile to battle. And the compelling blast hales him, very loth to fight, from the depth of his lair. For straightway the venomous beast beholds his foe and raises high in the air his baleful neck and bares his white teeth, bristling sharp, and snaps his jaws, blowing and hissing fast. And immediately in his turn the Deer, like one who smiles, rends with his mouth the vainly struggling foe, and, while he writhes about on his knees and neck, devours him amain. And on the ground are shed many remains, quivering and writhing in death.<sup>3</sup>

To this information Turbervile, in his *Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1576), adds the following information, derived from Isidore:<sup>4</sup>

Afterwards he goethe to drinke, and so the venyme spreadeth through all the veynes of his body, and when he feeleth the venyme worke, he runneth to chafe and beate him selfe, immediately he beginneth to voyde and purge himselfe, in such sort that nothing remayneth in his belly, comming forth by all the conduites and pores that nature hath made in him. And by this mean he renueth his force, and healeth him selfe, casting his haire (ch. 16).

What reliance may we put upon such information? Obviously the tradition has grown from some direct observation of behaviour, and the most likely seems to be the deer's behaviour in early summer when he is attacked by the Nostril Fly, one of the Cephemyia. This enters the nose of the deer and lays its eggs in the nasal passages, where they develop into large, white 'maggots' which may make breathing very difficult. In the spring, deer are much disturbed by the nostril fly and will bury their noses in the ground, snort, and then run off, shaking their heads in an effort to escape the discomfort.<sup>5</sup> This is common knowledge to anyone who has watched or hunted deer, and it seems to me an adequate explanation of the deer's behaviour. If the observation took place in a region where snakes were common, the origins of the traditional feud become all too clear.

Now in the early days, at least, of the Bacchic cult, snakes were a common adjunct of worship or frenzy. Euripides describes the Maenads:

νεβρίδας τ' ἀνεστείλανθ' ὄσαισιν ἀμμάτων  
σύνδεσμι' ἐλέλυτο, καὶ καταστίκτους δορὰς  
ὄφεσι κατεζώσαντο λιχμῶσιν γέννν. . . (Bacchae 696-8)

<sup>1</sup> S.v. ἔλαφος, 326.

<sup>2</sup> *Moralia* (*De sollertia animalium* 24) 976 d.

<sup>3</sup> *Cynegetica* 2. 233-50. Translation by A. W. Mair (Loeb edn.), who also gives further references. Cf. Lucretius 6. 765-6.

<sup>4</sup> Isidore, *Etym.* 12. 1. 18 = Migne, *P.L.* lxxxii, col. 427.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Dr. R. V. Short to whom I owe this explanation of the deer's behaviour and the description of it.

νύψαντο δ' αἶμα, σταγόνα δ' ἐκ παρηίδων  
γλώσση δράκοντες ἐξεφαίδρυνον χροός.

(Ibid. 767–8)<sup>1</sup>

If the women were to handle venomous creatures during their frenzy, they might wish for some kind of magical protection against their deadly bite, and what more natural than the skin of the snake's deadliest enemy, the deer? As we remarked before, primitive people often wear skins in an effort to absorb certain qualities of the animal, to 'become' in some part that animal, and to benefit from its special powers. The Maenads did not want swiftness, or timidity; nor were they thinking of the magical 'medicine' inherent in various parts of the deer family. But they did want immunity from snake bites and herein, I am sure, lies the answer to their wearing the fawnskin. No doubt only certain women handled snakes and only upon certain occasions—hence the relative infrequency with which the garment is depicted on vases.

Queens' College, Cambridge

P. G. MAXWELL-STUART

<sup>1</sup> This may not have been confined to the early days of the cult. Cf. Clement of Alexandria: 'The Bacchanals hold their orgies in honour of the frenzied Dionysus . . . crowned with snakes etc.' (*Cohortatio ad*

*Gentes* II, Migne, *P.G.* 8, col. 72). Cf. the Hellenistic pageant described by Athen. 5. 198 e. The snakes here, however, may not have been real. See also *C.V.A.*, Germany xii. 577<sup>1</sup> and 578–81, which show details.