

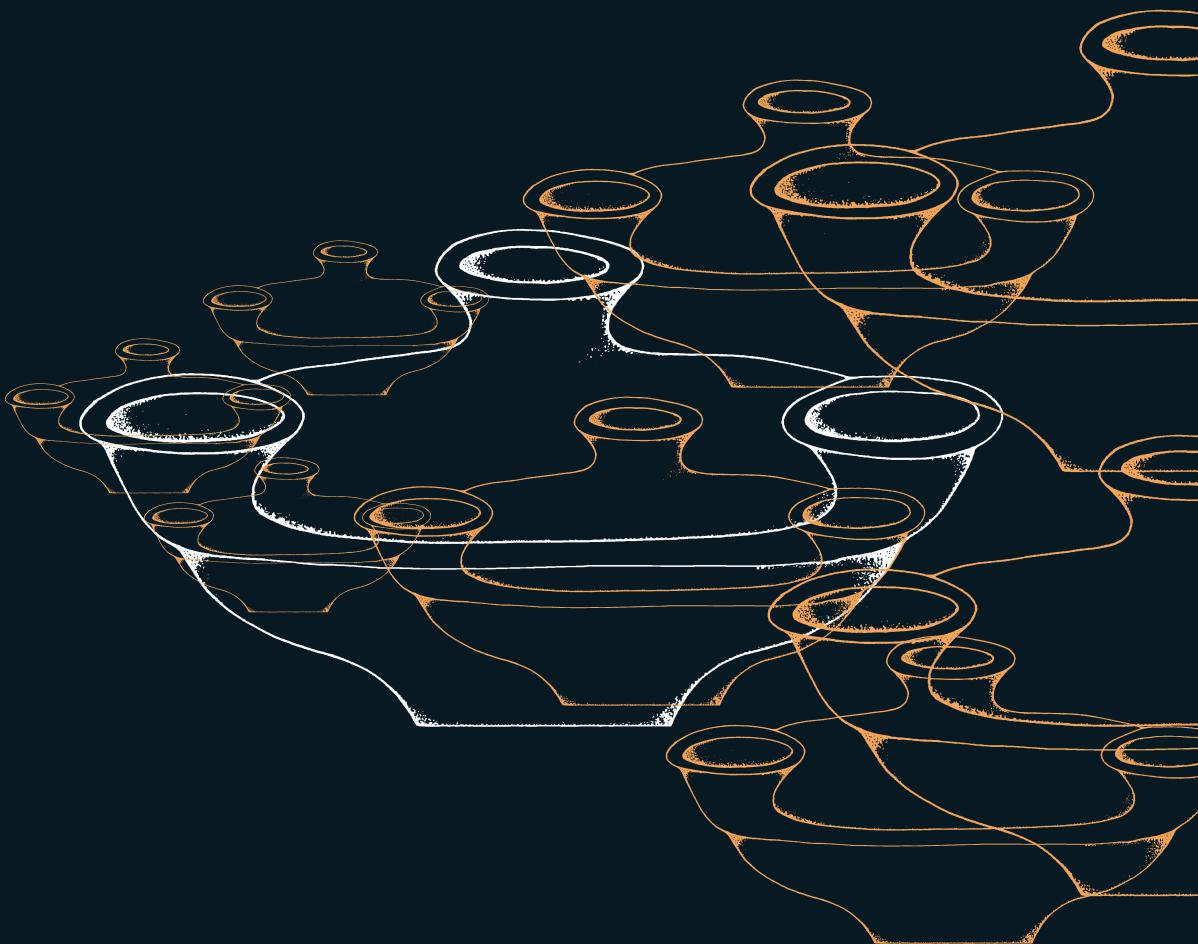
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Dionysus Briseus

Abstract: The theatrical guild in Roman Smyrna assigned the epithet *Briseus* to Dionysus: the reference was probably to the Brisei of Thrace, and honoring Thracian Dionysus, leader of the Bacchae, is consistent with the Smyrnaean actors styling themselves *mystai*.

Résumé : Les technites de la Smyrne romaine qualifiaient Dionysos de *Briseus*: l'épiclèse faisait probablement référence aux Brisei de Thrace, et l'hommage rendu au Dionysos thrace, patron des bacchants, entre en résonance avec le fait que les acteurs de Smyrne se mettaient en scène eux-mêmes comme des mystes.

In Roman Smyrna, the local branch of the theatrical guild, the Technitai of Dionysus, honored their god with a special epithet.¹ In most cities the Actors' god was simply Dionysus without title, οἱ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνῖται. At Smyrna he was Dionysus Βρισεύς: thus in Aelius Aristides (*Or.* 41.5 K.), and in seven inscriptions Βρεισέύς with the grapheme for long iota that was common in Imperial times (e.g. *I.Smyrna* 600: συνόδῳ τῶν περὶ τὸν Βρεισέα Διόνυσον; 652: ἡ ιερὰ σύνοδο[ζ] τῶν Βρεισέων). Two inscriptions give Βρησέύς (758, 759). The word is not on record earlier than the Roman Empire. How to account for it?

The lexicographers assert two ways. The fullest version extant is in the *Etymologicum Magnum* (213 Gaisford):

Βρισαῖος, οὗτως ὁ Διόνυσος· καὶ εἰ μὲν διὰ τοῦ ι, παρὰ τὸ βρίζειν² ἐστίν, ὁ δρμητικός· εἰ δὲ διὰ τοῦ η, ἀπὸ ἄκρας Λεσβιακῆς Βρήσης, ἣς μέμνηται Ἀνδροτίων· ὅτι τὸ ιερὸν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν τῇ Βρίσῃ φησίν ίδρυσθαι ὑπὸ Μάκαρος.

Brisaīos, so Dionysus is called. And if with iota, it is from *brīz̄ein* ['to come forcefully']: 'the impulsive one'. But if with eta, from the Lesbian cape Bresa, which Androton mentions: for he says the sanctuary of the god at Brisa was founded by Macar.³

Thus a lexicographer in his readings had found two spellings, Βρισαῖος and Βρησαῖος.⁴ He distinguished them and offered two unconnected explanations. His

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1. PETZI, on *I.Smyrna* 729, lists the testimonia.
 2. Read βρίθειν: cf. Hesych., s.v. βρῖσαι · βραδῦναι. δρμῆσαι. καὶ Νύμφαι, apparently reflecting the same source.
 3. Jacoby (on Androton, *FGrH* 324 F 56) commented that this last element may not come from Androton (emending e.g. φαστν).
 4. Cf. Hesych., s.v. Βρησαῖος · ὁ Διόνυσος.

explanations are for us a caution: the meaning of the epithet was unknown and the object of guesswork.

The first explanation has found no support among scholars. The second, by contrast, is grounded in reality. For we have reliable evidence for Lesbos' cult of Dionysus on cape Bresa: a dedication Μεγάριτος Αἰσχί[να] Διονύσῳ Βοησαγέῳ[η];⁵ in Imperial times a Mytilenaean doctor Βοῆσος Βοήσω, with his many priesthoods (not including Dionysus).⁶ A distinguished man of Assos, four miles north of Lesbos, was the son of a Βοησίνλης.⁷ In the authors, we have Steph. Byz., s.v. Βοῖσα· ἄκρα Λέσβου, ἐν ᾧ ἔρχονται Διόνυσος Βοισαῖος. The cape is deduced to be the promontory Ag. Fokas on the south coast: the dedication to Dionysus Βοησαγένης was found there, and the modern town Vrisa is nearby.⁸

This Lesbian connection has long been approved.⁹ Most fully, M. Hasluck argued that the Smyrnaeans' cult of Dionysus was brought from Aeolian Lesbos either by some putative original founders of Smyrna, or else later.¹⁰ But we should wonder why a cult with a geographic epithet would have been carried over from Lesbos to Smyrna, to be attested only in Roman times. More important, nothing suggests that this was or had been a cult of the city of Smyrna, somehow inherited from Lesbos — on extant testimony, it belonged only to the Technitai, and at a late date. What special connection had they with a Lesbian cult or toponym in the form of its offshoot in Smyrna?

Wilamowitz,¹¹ by contrast, urged that the Cean nymphs called Brisai¹² disproved the Lesbian source of the epithet at Smyrna: rather this was a wide-spread name, in origin Boeotian,¹³ and leading finally to Homeric Briseis, 'the girl from Brisa' on Lesbos. He proposed no meaning for the word or reason for its use at Smyrna.

The spelling variants are admittedly dubious evidence, with *t/ει/η* sounding the same; the authors show every possible combination. But the inscriptions give for Lesbos Βοησ- without exception. Those at Smyrna have usually Βοεισ-; the two instances of Βοησ- are known only from early copies (*I.Smyrna* 758 and 759,

5. *IG XII.2* 478, late Hellenistic or Roman.

6. *IG XII.2* 484 [SAMAMA, *Les médecins*, no. 119].

7. *I.Assos* 8, late Hellenistic.

8. BOUTAN (1856), p. 303–306; confirmed when the dedication was discovered, POTTIER – HAUVEILLE-BESNAULT (1880), p. 445. Cf. NEWTON (1865), p. 13; KOLDEWEY (1890), p. 63–64; BÜRCHNER (1897), col. 855 (who however denies the relevance of modern Vrisa).

9. Already in 1828 DINDORF on Aristides *Or.* 4 (= 41.5 K.); POTTIER – HAUVEILLE-BESNAULT (1880), p. 446 (publishing the dedication); KERN (1903), col. 1027.

10. HASLUCK (1912/3) p. 89–94.

11. WILAMOWITZ (1884) p. 409–412.

12. Heraclides Lembus, *Excerpt. Polit.*, 27.

13. On the basis of a Theban named Βοεσάδας: *IG VII* 2556 (6th/5th B.C.?).

the stones lost; Petzl reproduces the drawings, in which eta is clear — but EI and H are easily confused). I suggest that Lesbian Βρησ- and Smyrnaean Βρ(ε)ισ- are distinct and not connected. We can suspect instead that the Artists of Roman Smyrna selected for their god an epithet that was literary and recherché, rather than a civic cult title of foreign origin.

Two authors offer material independent of the lexicographers. Aelius Aristeides, a man of Smyrna, describes types of Dionysus: “as with men, he is both beardless and *Briseus*”, ὡς ἐν ἄρρεσιν ἀγένειός τε καὶ Βρισεύς.¹⁴ These then were visual opposites: *Briseus* was a bearded Dionysus. In turn, Macrobius cites two epithets for a bearded Dionysus: “with bearded appearance, and as an old man, as Greeks call him sometimes *Bassareus*, sometimes *Briseus*”, *barbata specie, senili quoque, uti Graeci eius quem Bassarēa, item quem Briseā appellant* (1.18.9). He cites the two epithets for their common element, the beard; but *Bassareus* also signals a region, Thrace.

Bassareus identifies Dionysus as leader of the raving Thracian bacchantes, for the βάσσαροι was their distinctive garment: Photius, *Lex.*, s.v. Βάσσαραι · χιτῶνες, οὓς ἐφόρουν αἱ Θράκαι Βάκχαι, καλούμεναι οὕτως ἀπὸ τοῦ Βασσαρέως Διονύσου.¹⁵ Horace invokes the leader of the Sithonian/Thracian Bacchae as *candide Bassareu*.¹⁶ Thrace was the scene of the dismemberment of Orpheus; the authors make clear the raging character of the Thracian maenads, and from an early date. Anacreon, with enough wine, will turn violent and raving: “I will again be a *bassareus*”, ὡς δὲν τυβριστιῶς τὸν δῆντε βασσαρήσω.¹⁷

Thus *Bassareus* points to the Thracian version of Dionysus, and this suggests an approach to *Briseus*. Just as Horace’s Sithones were one Thracian tribe, another was the Brisei. These are the *Briseorum latronum* in a career inscription of the first century (*AE* 1956, 124.16) and the *Brisas* in Pliny.¹⁸ This, I would urge, is the origin of the Artists’ name for their god: it was a learned way of specifying the Thracian Dionysus, leader of the ecstatic maenad chorus. *Briseus* was a synecdoche for ‘Thracian’, like Horace’s *Sithonii* — a bookish affectation. We may even guess that the Actors derived the epithet *Briseus* from a tragedy now lost to us.

If the theatrical guild in Smyrna portrayed their god under this version of his myths, and could even call themselves *Briseis* (*I.Smyrna* 652), that will help

14. *Or.*, 41.5 K.; v.l. Βρισσεύς.

15. Cf. *Etym. Magn.*, s.v. Βάσσαρίδες · αἱ βάκχαι.

16. *Carm.* 1.18.9–11; on the synecdoche in *monet Sithoniis non levis Eubius*, Porphyry explained: *Sithonii Thrae sunt, qui per uinulentiam invitati etiam inlicitos concubitus audent* (p. 27 HOLDER).

17. *PMG* 356, from Ath. 427a: “†violently† turn into a drunken madman”, OLSON in the Loeb edition. Cf. *Hymn. Orph.* 45: ἔλθε, μάκαρ Διόνυσε, πυρίσπορε, ταυρομέτωπε, | Βάσσαρε καὶ Βάκχεū. In an epigram, a retired Bacchante had been a member of the Βάσσαρικοῦ θιάσοιο (*Anth. Gr.* 6.165; PAGE, FGE p. 47). At Artemidorus 2.37, δὲ χορὸς δὲ περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον, οὗτον Βάκχοι καὶ Βάκχαι καὶ Βάσσαραι καὶ Σάτυροι καὶ Πάνες.

18. *HN* 4.18 (v.l. *Bryssai*). On the text see PFLAUM (1960), p. 489.

explain another usage that is unique to the Artists of Smyrna: they liked to describe themselves as initiates. They were ἡ οἰρὰ σύνοδος τῶν περὶ τὸν Βρεισέα Διόνυσον τεχνειτῶν καὶ μυστῶν (639), οἱ τοῦ μεγάλου πρὸ πόλεως Βρεισέως Διονύσου μύσται (622), μυστῶν πρὸ πόλεως Βρεισέων (729). A performer who was son of a performer was πατρομύστης (731, 732).¹⁹ Theater professionals elsewhere made no such claim. This too was an affectation, and consistent with honoring the Thracian Dionysus: the Actors were his raging Bacchoi (cf. 639, a prominent benefactor honored by the guild as βάχχον τοῦ θεοῦ).

By Roman times it was normal that maenads included men as well as women.²⁰ The Technitai of Smyrna would be distinctive in being male only — but (again) there is in their pose as *mystai* a large admixture of metaphor. In antiquity as now, ‘initiation’ could be used to describe a wide range of inductions and introductions.²¹ The Technitai had every right to call themselves a *thiasos* and a *choros*, terms rich in their implication of special membership. But though we might call this guild’s language of initiation an affectation (not ‘real’ mysteries, if that is meaningful),²² we need not deny the possibility that induction to the theatrical guild involved both ritual and the revelation of some insider knowledge. The metaphor of initiation would be appropriate.

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19. So TOD (1915), p. 1.

20. HENRICHES (1984), p. 70. On gender roles in Dionysiac cult, see JACCOTTET (2003), p. 64–100; FARAOONE (2013), p. 120–143; and in Dionysiac imagery, ISLER-KÉRENYI (1991), p. 293–307.

21. Cf. e.g. to philosophy: see NOCK (1952), p. 185–190 [repr. NOCK (1972), p. 797–802].

22. They “seem to have been an association of actors which posed as a mystery association”, NILSSON (1957) p. 47–48, cited by PETZL on *I.Smyrna* 639. For the range and metaphorical use of “mystai/mysteries”, see RIEDWEG (1987); PIRENNE-DELFORGE – SCARPI (2006), p. 159–162; BELAYCHE (2013), p. 39; BORGEAUD (2013), p. 137–144; JACCOTTET (2016), p. 88–90.

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