

Dionysus's Enigmatic Thyrsus

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Dionysus is often depicted in Greek carvings and vase paintings as holding a staff, or thyrsus (θύρσος), which serves as his attribute as well as his symbol in that it is used to identify his female followers, the Maenads (Figure 1). It has been defined as “a wand wreathed in ivy and vine leaves, with a pine cone at the top, carried by worshippers of Dionysus.”¹ This study argues that Dionysus's staff, which is sometimes referred to as fennel, varied in both written and visual form in antiquity, and that it became associated with a pinecone only in the 19th century. After its earliest appearance in the visual arts, depiction of the thyrsus assumed a different format in Etruria and in the Hellenistic and Roman eras.

Modern translators often define the thyrsus when no elaborate description is given in the early literature. For example, in his translation of Diodorus of Sicily (c. 80–21 BCE) in 1935, Charles Oldfather added a footnote to the passage that mentions a thyrsus, defining *thyrsi* as “wands wreathed in ivy and vine leaves with a pine-cone at the top.”² He seems to have overlooked Ferdinand-Gaudenz von Papen, who had argued in 1905 that the thyrsus was topped only with clustered ivy.³ Von Papen began his study with images of Greek black-figure vases and diagrammed how the ivy leaves gathered on the point of the god's staff were stylized into a clustered, regularly ordered image of pointed, heart-shaped leaves as if simulating a pinecone. He provided graphic flow sheets that demonstrate the chronological development in the stylization of the staff's point (Figure 2). As time went on, the original appearance of the ancient rod was lost, and visual artists were left to their own devices.

Nonetheless, in the art historical literature of the 20th century authors continued to describe the shaft as topped by a pinecone, even

1 Howatson and Chilvers, *Concise Oxford Companion*, 543. For more on the thyrsus, see Dodds, *Euripides' "Bacchae,"* 78–79, n. 113; 197, n. 1054.

2 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History, Vol. II*, 296, n. 1 (and echoed in subsequent sources, such as the *Concise Oxford Companion* six decades later). Dodds reported: “The thyrsus was formed by inserting a bunch of ivy leaves in the hollow tip of a fennel-rod”; Dodds, *Euripides' "Bacchae,"* 25, n. 25; 88, n. 176.

3 Von Papen, *Der Thyrsos*.

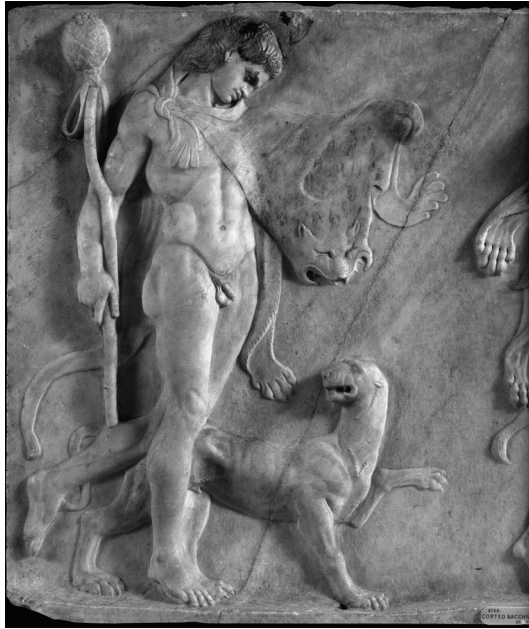


FIGURE 1. Anon., *Bacchus*, marble, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples (inv. 6726).

after E. R. Dodds corrected his English readers in 1944: “In later art the bunch of leaves is more and more stylized and simplified until it eventually looks like, and is mistaken for, a pine cone.”⁴ Catherine Kalke subsequently remarked, “The thyrsus is a fennel rod which, when it is adorned with leaves, becomes a symbol of Dionysus.”⁵ She noted that the ivy cluster was necessary for the staff to become a thyrsus, inferring that the ivy crown thus transforms a mundane rod into a liturgical device for the polymorphous demigod—one used by the Maenads as both weapon and provider of sustenance, and a sign of their fealty.⁶

In 2001, Hermann Schaubert declared unequivocally that no thyrsus could be identified with a pinecone at its peak.⁷ He reproduced the various schema of von Papen, and further noted that stylistic development of the thyrsus continued in later Greek art, with the emergence in

4 Dodds discusses the meaning of ivy for Dionysus, but without considering the allegorical trope of binding found in the later literature; Dodds, *Euripides’ “Bacchae,”* 74, n. 81.

5 Kalke, “Making of Thyrsus,” 409. Dodds cites von Papen for the transformation of an ordinary staff into a thyrsus; Dodds, *Euripides’ “Bacchae,”* 197, n. 1054.

6 Kalke, “Making of Thyrsus,” 409–10, 412, 419, 423. Kalke cited Dodds, who referred to the thyrsus as fennel, naming a Mr. Lucas as an authority but without indicating a specific source; Dodds, *Euripides’ “Bacchae,”* 78, n. 113.

7 Schaubert, “Der Thyrsos”; *Bei sorgfältigen Betrachtung ist jedoch kein Thyrsos zu finden, der sicher mit einem Pinienzapfen an der Spitze geschmückt ist.*

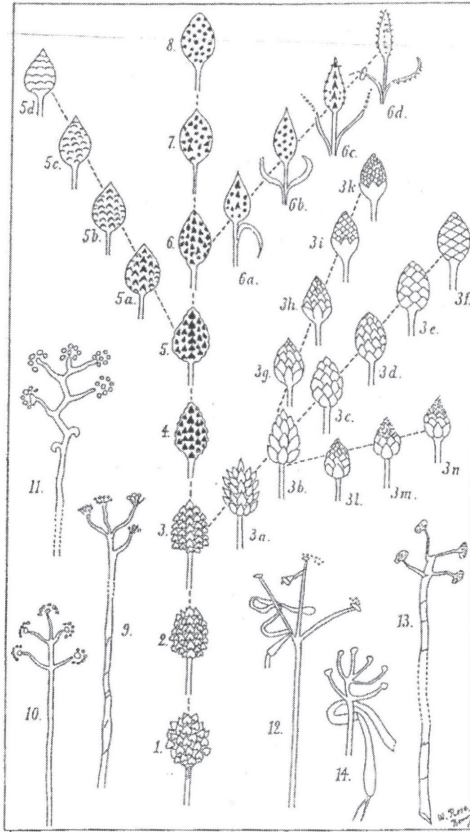


FIGURE 2. F.-G. von Papen, *Table, Stylistic development of ivy finials*, 1905.

some cases of an acanthus leaf motif for the finial. He also reasserted that the staff was the cane of the fennel plant, which received gradual acceptance in the scholarly literature.⁸ In a second article, Schauber referred to the undefined botany of the thyrsus, and reiterated that no thyrsus contained a pinecone, further noting that there was no direct connection of a pinecone with Dionysus: *Zwischen dem Pinienzapfen und Dionysius gibt es auch im griechischen Mythos keinen direkten Zusammenhang.*⁹

I hope to show that Schauber's identification of acanthus finials may be a mistaken view of stylized artichoke plants that have branches growing from the dominant stem with paired topmost leaves

8 Schauber, "Der Thyrsos," 44; *Die Pflanz Narthex war dem Dionysos heilig.*

9 Schauber, "Efeublätter," 85; *Es ist jedoch kein Tyrsos bekannt, der mit einem Pinienzapfen an der Spitze geschmückt ist.* Christians adopted pine imagery as symbolic of regeneration. A first-century colossal pinecone over 3.5 meters tall was placed in the Vatican grounds where it remains today; Bober and Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists*, 220, no. 187.

symmetrically placed, as on a *pelike* by the Kleophon Painter in Munich.¹⁰ As upright standard of the deity, the thyrsus changed form as it developed into the Hellenistic period, particularly from Etruscan art. Frequently stylized in vase paintings, its precise identity evaded description, as von Papen and Schaubert testified to its developing appearance. Jan Bremmer wrote, “Roman Maenads have to be looked at on their own terms, however closely they may resemble their Greek sisters,” and the same appears to be true of their thyrsi.¹¹ The ululations of joy and triumph for the Greek Maenads became howling laments for their Roman counterparts.

Diodorus of Sicily, in the first century BCE, became impatient with the omissions of the ancient writers, underscoring the need for interpretation. He complained that the myths did not give “a simple and consistent story,” disagreeing with some details and omitting others.¹² If written texts were susceptible to new experiences—or words could change meaning, be miscopied, or misunderstood—visual imagery could be misinterpreted as well, or become subject to reinterpretation or a fresh presentation. Furthermore, Greek geography may have been conducive to thriving fennel, whereas in Etruria, Sicily, and Carthage the more familiar artichoke abounded. In each case, the local plant offered a model at hand for the alien Dionysian device.

Thomas Carpenter reported, “The thyrsus does not appear in black-figure vases before the first half of the fifth century nor in literature before the second half.”¹³ The device received its most extensive characterization in Euripides’s play of 407 BCE, the *Bacchae*, with various descriptions of its use, including as a weapon. Dionysus’s frenzied Maenads use their staffs to rout men: “the wands the women threw inflicted wounds. And the men *ran*, routed by the women” (762–64).¹⁴ The effectiveness of the thyrsus as a weapon is underscored in the warning, “You will all be routed, shamefully defeated, when their wands of ivy turn back your shields of bronze” (798–99), clearly identifying the staffs as enchanted.

As a signal for their revels to begin, the Maenads whirl their staffs (724) and some wind “the stalks of their tattered wands with tendrils

10 This may be similar to the stylized iris known as the French *fleur-de-lis*. For the Kleophon Painter’s *Pelike*, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich, see Isler-Kerényi, *Dionysos in Classical Athens*, 97, fig. 50; and other examples in Carpenter, *Fifth-Century Athens*.

11 Bremmer, “Roman Maenads,” 25.

12 Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Vol. IV, 44, 6.

13 Carpenter, *Fifth-Century Athens*, 110. Carpenter notes that “Oltos is probably the first red-figure painter to show it, in a work from about 510”; Carpenter, *Archaic Greek Art*, 63.

14 Quoted passages are from Euripides, *Bacchae*. Carpenter asserts that the first appearance of the word *thyrsus* appears in the *Bacchae*; Carpenter, *Archaic Greek Art*, 64.

of fresh ivy" (1054–55). When the god Dionysus surrenders his thyrsus to Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, and disguises Pentheus as a woman so he can witness the Maenads' rites undetected, Pentheus asks, "But to be a real Bacchante, should I hold the wand in my right hand? Or this way?" Dionysus replies, "In your right hand. And raise it as you raise your right foot" (941–44).¹⁵ In the end, the Maenads discover Pentheus and dismember him. His mother, as one of the mob of frenzied women picking up his head, impales it "on her wand" (1140).

Euripides gave the thyrsus its most extensive mention in his *Bacchae* and taught nine things about the device:

- It is a wand.
- It is a weapon.
- It is enchanted.
- It is entwined with ivy leaves (1055).
- It is contrived (to the degree of embellishment with ivy).
- It is wielded by the Maenad followers of Dionysus.
- The object embedded on the staff was the head of Pentheus (by his ecstatic mother, Agave, 1140–41).
- It is a signifier of Dionysus (1387).
- There is no mention of a pinecone.

Indeed, Euripides distinguished thyrsi from evergreen branches when he related that some Maenads attacked Pentheus with "javelins of fir, while the others hurled their wands" (1097–98).

Euripides also reveals something of the Maenads' secret rites, namely, that they whirled their staffs for the revels to begin (724), they chanted (1057), and they danced raising their thyrsi (941–44), using their wands as truncheons as they attacked animals and people, and then dismembered their victims (1126–35). For the possessed women, their thyrsi signified the mystical presence of their changeling deity.¹⁶

Euripides's play tells us that the blind Teiresias uses his thyrsus as a cane, and that flames float from Dionysus's "trailing wand" (146). It narrates a Maenad striking her wand against a rock to provide water, and tells of another who "drove her *fennel* (*vápθnξ*) in the ground to

¹⁵ Dodds states that there is no rule on how to hold the thyrsus; Dodds, *Euripides' "Bacchae,"* 184, n. 943.

¹⁶ For more on the Maenads, see Hedreen, "Silens, Nymphs, and Maenads"; and Dodds, "Maenadism." Bremmer enumerated many of the characteristics of Maenads; Bremmer, "Roman Maenads," 24. Catullus (*Oreibasia*, 62:23) was the first Roman author to mention the term *Maenades*. See also McNally, "Early Greek Art." See Dodds, *Euripides' "Bacchae,"* 72, n. 67 for some of the several names of Dionysus.

produce a spring of wine” (704–706, italics added).¹⁷ Pure honey spurts from other wands as Euripides concludes his fanciful account of “these wonders” (712). So the wands are magical devices. While only reeds, they nonetheless turn back bronze shields and triumph over the lances of male warriors (733, 762–63, 797–99)—yet no mention is made of pinecones. With Pentheus killed by his own mother for violating the secrecy of the Dionysiac rites, the nature of the thyrsus seems to have been one of the secrets that the Maenads preserved. In any case, it is hardly possible to impale a pinecone on a staff without bursting it, although anything might be possible in the charmed world of Euripides’s *Bacchae*.

Homer (*Iliad*, 6:132–37) and Plato (*Phaedo*, 69c–d) gave the thyrsus but passing mention (for Homer, *thysthla* [θύσθλα]). Later sources cited the object without definition, such as the Egyptian Nonnus of Panopolis (c. 390) who wrote about Dionysus and, after him, Macrobius (c. 415). Presumably, the device was a commonplace in need of no definition. If description was incomplete in classical literature, interpretation was not. Eusebius (c. 260–340; *Preparation*, 53d) borrowed from Diodorus Siculus (c. 80–21 BCE) as he reported that when men drank they became rowdy and beat each other with sticks, often fatally, so that Bacchus (Dionysus) substituted light reeds for their wooden staffs. This typifies the rational approach to myth in the Hellenistic culture in stressing a functional aspect for the thyrsus.

Later authors felt the need to allegorize the importance of ivy. Nonnus stressed it as a metaphor for restraint: “that the onslaught of war should be held in check, as it were, by the bondage of forbearance, for ivy has the natural capacity to bind and hold in check” (*Dionysiaca*, 6:169–75). Macrobius queried of Dionysus, that “when he holds a thyrsus, could it be anything but a disguised spear,” adding only that its tip is covered with an ivy wreath (*Saturnalia*, I, 19:2). Claudian (d. c. 404) reported that the shaft is a reed to hold the god of wine steady, and a substitute for more deadly weapons to keep his followers from harm when they begin to fight, echoing Diodorus Siculus and Eusebius.¹⁸ There was ample opportunity in these descriptions to cite a pinecone if one was part of the device.

As ancient sources were revived in the early modern era, Boccaccio told of Bacchus discovering the walking stick or *baculus*, “which men weighed down by wine could use.”¹⁹ In 1551, the mythographer Natale Conti defined the thyrsus as “a spear that was sometimes decked out

¹⁷ For the magical and beneficial properties of the thyrsus, see Dodds, *Euripides’ “Bacchae,”* 155, n. 704.

¹⁸ Cited in Mulryan, *Vincenzo Cartari’s Images*, 336.

¹⁹ Boccaccio, *Genealogy*, IV:25, 707.

very nicely with the foliage of the vine or the ivy plant.”²⁰ Five years later, Vincenzo Cartari referred to the thyrsus as a reed, “which Bacchus employed to keep himself standing on his feet,” parroting Boccaccio.²¹ Cartari turned to Macrobius to define the thyrsus as “a staff crowned by a sharp spear-head and decked out with ivy,” and further allegorized it by noting that it taught men to bind their anger with the thongs of patience like ivy that encircles and binds. Here he seems to refer to Nonnus. So the thyrsus oscillates between a staff and a weapon, each on occasion with ivy embellishment. Conti stressed the importance of the evergreen when he reported that the ancients who sacrificed to Bacchus used to carry branches from the fir tree because they formed the plants for his wreaths. Conti also referred to the Maenads’ enchanted wands, which they used to beat the earth and rocks for milk and honey when they were thirsty or hungry. These descriptions now define the Maenads’ existence in mountainous areas away from human habitation, although Euripides’s Maenads are repressed city dwellers.

Modern mythologies, such as Edith Hamilton’s in 1940, apparently unaware of von Pappen’s study, cited the Maenads’ “pine-cone tipped wands,” and Dionysus’s “queer, pine-tipped stick.”²² Robert Graves either followed her lead or confirmed her characterization in citing, “Maenads whose weapons were the ivy-twined staff topped with a pine-cone, called a *thyrsus*.”²³ Eva Keuls wrote, “The thyrsus, a *fennel* stalk topped by a pine cone.”²⁴ Michael Grant, on the other hand, made no mention of a pinecone in his comments on the wand.²⁵

The association of a pinecone with the thyrsus seems to have its origins instead in 19th-century classical literature. The etymology of the word *thyrsus* is uncertain.²⁶ The visual imagery adds a further complication as artists stylized the finial of the object, as von Pappen had warned. The pinecone, however, is neither mentioned in antiquity in the context of the thyrsus, nor cited in Renaissance mythological manuals. Furthermore, some authors stress the ubiquity of ivy, extolling the importance of the evergreen for the deity, although visual artists sometimes substitute ribbons to embellish the wand.

That the seed pod finial for the thyrsus as depicted in most vase paintings and relief carvings is not a pinecone thus seems clear, having

20 Mulryan and Brown, *Natale Conti’s ‘Mythologiae,’* I:400.

21 Mulryan, *Vincenzo Cartari’s Images*, 336.

22 Hamilton, *Mythology*, 56, 58.

23 Graves, *Greek Myths*, I:104.

24 Keuls, *Reign of Phallus*, 360. For fennel, see Stuart, *Encyclopedia of Herbs*, 80.

25 Grant, *Myths of Greeks*, 241–51.

26 Concik and Schonbeider, *Der Neue Pauly*, 12/1, col. 526. The prefix *thyr-* is applied to several plants.



FIGURE 3. Anon., *Turkey Millet*, from Leonard Fuchius, *De Historia Stirpium*, no. 771.

misleadingly originated from the stylized cluster of ivy leaves as von Papeen demonstrated. So far the thyrsus has been identified as a staff embellished with ivy clustered at its head without mention of the origin of the shaft.

A likely plant that might be considered for the thyrsus is sorghum or Turkish millet (Figure 3, *holcus sorghum*).²⁷ Joseph Manca has suggested that the background grain in a late 15th-century engraving of *Jason and the Golden Fleece* was a field of sorghum.²⁸ Sorghum is a coarse grain that was used as an emergency crop in antiquity when enemies burned agricultural fields. It was an ideal siege crop because it grew quickly, with a well-developed root system requiring little water, and grew best in red clay soil. Because it is a rough grain, it is associated with the barbaric Other—with the wild tribes beyond the Greek city states. Sorghum grows to a height of four feet. Its stalk has a swollen flower cluster or panicle, which can be erect or feathery, or can form dense seed clusters. While the sorghum stalk and panicle are integral, the clustered head of the plant lacks the solidity of many of the depicted finials that are misread as pinecones. Nor does sorghum

²⁷ The illustration is from the herbal of Fuchius, *De Historia Stirpium*, no. 771, as reproduced in Halton, *Plant and Floral Ornament*, 477.

²⁸ Manca, "Passion and Primitivism."

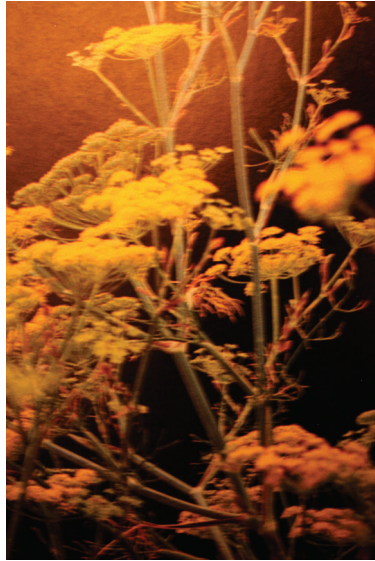


FIGURE 4. *Foeniculum vulgare*.

replicate the pointed, heart-shaped leaves that von Papen identified with the ivy of the thyrsi in the early painted Greek vases.

On the other hand, *Foeniculum vulgare*, or fennel, grows from four to seven feet and has a hollow stem that is rigid when mature.²⁹ It differs from the *ferula communis* L., or Florence fennel, which has a bulb and is grown as a vegetable. It has stout stems that become hard and woody and are segmented like bamboo (Figure 4). Its main stalk has secondary stems that flower with yellow umbels throughout its length. Fennel pith can burn while the stem remains intact. Many early Greek vase paintings depict thyrsi as segmented staffs while others show uniform stalks.

Several writers refer to thyrsi as fennel wands, as noted.³⁰ The Modern Greek name for fennel is phonetic, φέυελ, and also μάράθωψ (*Foeniculum vulgare*). The word translated as “fennel” in ancient sources is νάρθηξ, or narthex, and is perhaps an archaic form; Hesiod used it (*Theogony*, 567). The Modern Greek words for fennel do not appear in the original Greek in any case, as noted, suggesting perhaps that E. R. Dodds’s Mr. Lucas translated a more generic name for a grain or vegetable as “fennel.” There is some explanation for this. Prometheus is said to have kindled fire hidden in a “fennel” stalk, and in Euripides’s *Bacchae* (146) it is noted of Dionysus that flames “float out of his

²⁹ McVicar, *New Book of Herbs*, 163.

³⁰ Dodds comments on the union of ivy and fennel to form the thyrsus; Dodds, *Euripides’ “Bacchae,”* 64, n. 25; 88, n. 176.



FIGURE 5. Anon., *Maenad*, c. 430 BCE, marble, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (35.11.3).

trailing wand,” which might allude to Prometheus’s fennel stalk. Also in the *Bacchae*, it is reported that another of the Maenads “drove her fennel into the ground” (105).

Florentine fennel is a sizeable herb, but a bud would be impaled with difficulty on its shaft if such a composite is what is meant by “fennel stalk.” The wand would be a composite deliberately crafted by the Maenads in anticipation of their frenzied rites. Euripides indicated that the device is an assemblage, but only to the degree that ivy is wound about the shaft. The one item he mentioned as impaled on the stick was the head of Pentheus. Although pinecones the size of a human head are known in forests in California and Eastern Europe, it would be difficult to impale one on a staff without bursting it, or crumpling the thin reed of fennel, which in any case seems moot after von Papen’s study.

A striking carving from c. 430 BCE in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 5) presents an equivocal statement concerning the thyrsus. It depicts a dancing Maenad in undulating, calligraphic drapery holding a flowering wand in her right hand. Her thyrsus is taller than she is and has a thick stalk. The shaft is uniform and not segmented, appearing more as an artichoke cane shorn of its leaves and integral with the head. The bulb is clustered with ivy and berries but

also appears to be flowering at the top. Schauber considered the stalk to be fennel.³¹ If adorned with ivy, it is also decorated with a ribbon tied in a bow. Schauber's diagrams show painted Greek vases alternating ivy leaves with berries.³²

It appears that the Greek thyrsus developed into an artichoke (κίναρα) plant (*Cynara scolymus*) with the Etruscans. First, because it looks like an artichoke in many representations in Etrurian, Hellenistic, and Roman art, an observation confirmed by consultation with a number of botanical authorities.³³ Stem and bulb are an integral unit, and the scales or bracts of the latter conform with von Papen's characterization of the finial's pointed, heart-shaped leaves. The artichoke appears in Etruscan art by mid-fourth century BCE, as for example the kylix, *Satyr with Thyrsus* (350–340 BCE) in the Villa Giulia, Rome (no. 33) and also the amphora, *Dionysus Supported by a Satyr* (330–320 BCE; no. 36). The head-high thyrsi in both rest on the ground and are decorated with ribbons.

A relief carving in Naples depicts Dionysus holding a thyrsus in his right hand, accompanied by a panther (see Figure 1). Here the wand is clearly indicated, as are von Papen's pointed, heart-shaped leaves, with the artichoke bulb on the verge of opening, signifying Dionysus, in W. Arrowsmith's words, as "the force that through the green fuse drives the flowers." This illustrates another of Dionysus's several appellations, namely, "the blossom bringer."³⁴ In the *Borghese Vase* (first century BCE) in the Louvre (Figure 6), a dancing Dionysus also holds an artichoke-thyrsus in his right hand, with a second carried in the mouth of a panther. A third example in the Campo Santo in Pisa of a neo-Attic, Bacchic relief has a bacchante hold the device over his right shoulder (Figure 7). The staffs appear to be three to four feet in length, are now decorated with fillets instead of ivy, and are of substantial thickness.³⁵ Columella (first century CE), in his *De re rustica*, reports artichoke

31 Schauber, "Der Thyrsos," 40.

32 Modern ivies lack berries, but one of the oldest known ivies, *Hedera helix f. poetam*, has orange-colored fruits, or seed heads, and is taken to be Pliny's "red berried ivy"; Rose, *Gardener's Guide*, 108–109.

33 I am indebted to the following botanists for their expertise: Gary Esmone and Larry Giblock, Cleveland Botanical Garden; Renee Boronka, Cleveland Museum of Natural History; and Anton Reznicek, University of Michigan. For the artichoke as a thistle bulb in bloom, see Taylor, *Taylor's Guide*, 121; see also: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artichoke>; and American Horticultural Society, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gardening*, 74.

34 Euripides, *Bacchae*, IV:537; and Dodds, *Euripides' "Bacchae,"* x.

35 Kalke's claim that ivy was the defining component of the thyrsus might apply just to its Greek origins. Euripides wrote that only "some Maenads wound their stalks" (*Bacchae*, 1054–1055, italics added) with ivy tendrils, although he might have been referring only to those wands that had become tattered.



FIGURE 6. Anon., *Borghese Vase*, first century BCE, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



FIGURE 7. Anon., *Bacchic Thiasos*, neo-Attic krater, marble, Campo Santo, Pisa.

cultivation in Italy and further states "*pinea vertice pungit*": "its head apex pierces" (Figure 8).³⁶

Euripides states of the Maenads that only "[s]ome wound the stalks of their tattered wands with tendrils of fresh ivy" (1054–55, italics added), implying that this was necessary only when the wands became "tattered," reinforcing the idea of ivy as binding. In the Naples relief and the *Borghese Vase* the bulbs are integral parts of the stalk and are not attached by cloth ribbons. That ribbons decorate the thyrsi instead of ivy indicates that the evergreen initially identified with the wand was no longer essential to it, yet the cloth fillet replacing the plant seems necessary to retain the binding symbolism associated with the device by the rational Hellenistic authors.

An artichoke grows to an average height of 4.5 to 6.5 feet. Twenty to 32 inches of pointed leaves embellish the upper stalk with an edible bud of three to six inches in diameter at the top (Figure 9B). It blossoms in a bright floral display of large, purple flower heads. The vegetable is native to the Mediterranean; it was cultivated by the Romans and improved as a food crop by the Arabs. If left uncultivated, the thistle can bolt and cover fields (Figure 10). It could serve as an emergency food when enemies burned cultivated crops. If Euripides's wand was an artichoke, one can then imagine his fictional Maenads rampaging through the fields tearing out the ready-made stalks of this "noble weed" for their wands. Wielding their thyrsi, they would identify themselves as from the lands beyond, as marauders, followers of a rebarbative race, which in Euripides's *Bacchae* they certainly were.

The thyrsi in many Greek vase paintings are often taller than the figures carrying them, appearing to be five or six feet in height, a size appropriate to artichoke stalks.³⁷ An Athenian red-figure skyphos in the Toledo Museum of Art (450–400 BCE) shows Dionysus with a tall wand (Figure 11). Calyx kraters in the Vatican and in Madrid offer other examples of staffs extending to Dionysus's head.³⁸ Some thyrsi are ambiguous in vase paintings due to the use of stylized images, as noted, such as the Athenian red-figure column krater in Ferrara (500–450 BCE), attributed to Syriskos (Figure 12).³⁹

36 Sonnante, Pignone, and Hammer, "Domestication of Artichoke," 1095–96. Artichokes may have been present in Greece but uncultivated. They were known in Sicily and cultivated in Italy. Pliny (23–79 CE) mentions them.

37 Fennel stems are shorter than artichoke stalks, uneven, and more fragile, as indicated by Schaubert, "Der Thyrsos," 43, figures 9–11.

38 Reproduced in Isler-Kerényi, Isler-Kerényi, *Dionysos in Classical Athens*, 109, figure 59; 208, figure 109. See also 50, figure 24; 133, figure 73; and 186, figure 99.

39 Here the stylized finial compares more favorably with a magnolia tree seed pod (Figure 9C). That magnolias were not known in ancient Europe indicates how misleading the stylizations can be.



FIGURE 8. Makron, *Maenad and Satyr*, cup (detail). Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich.



FIGURE 9. From left: A. Pinecone; B. Artichoke; C. Magnolia seed pod.



FIGURE 10. Field of artichokes, Monterey, California.



FIGURE 11. Kleophon Painter, attr., *Skyphos*, 450–400 BCE, Toledo Museum of Art.

A fennel plant pulled from the earth would have one or more thin, flexible reeds that lacked pointed, heart-shaped leaves. It seems complicated that Euripides's Maenads would extract the fennel plant, tear off the secondary stems, and entwine ivy, but it could have been part of preparatory rituals, which in any case were fictive. Yet, many of the Greek black-figure vases show just such segmented stalks (Figure 13). Nonetheless, the artichoke stalk is thicker, taller, and firmer than a fennel reed and has its bulb on top firmly attached. Outside the suspended credibility of the Greek theater, a fennel reed could hardly serve as Claudian's or Boccaccio's walking stick to support the unsteady weight of inebriates. Even Ovid, in his account of the mad Ciconian women attacking Orpheus (whom he calls Maenads), puzzles that they "threw their wands, wreathed with green leaves, / Not meant for such a purpose" (*Metamorphoses* 11:28–29). Some thyrsi in vase paintings have a bifurcated branch like the artichoke, which can also have multiple heads.⁴⁰ The thistle offers a bright floral display of bold foliage and large purple heads with protrusions strewn between leaves occasionally.

It would appear that classicists in the 19th century first confused the artichoke with the pinecone. A painting in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris by the French neo-classical painter, Emile Lévy (1825–1890),

⁴⁰ The examples illustrated by Schaubert, "Der Thyrsos," 42, figures 7–8, may be stylized artichokes. If acanthus leaves, they indicate how freely visual artists interpreted the appearance of the staff. That both these examples are decorated with cloth fillets instead of ivy indicates how unimportant ivy embellishment had become in many instances. See Figures 1–3, 8, and 9 in this essay.



FIGURE 12. Syriskos, attr., *Athenian red figure column krater*, 500–450 BCE, Ferrara.

Death of Orpheus (1866; Figure 14), depicts Maenads attacking Orpheus.⁴¹ One holds his left arm as she wields her thyrsus, which at first glance looks like a cat tail or bulrush (*typha latifolia*), but which my botanist sources confirm is a pinecone (Figure 9A). Thus, the wand becomes associated with the pinecone in visual art by the mid-1800s. The thyrsus may have developed over time to become a ceremonial device, symbol of authority, or badge of office, perhaps emerging as the Roman standard.

The relief carving *Bacchus Visiting the Poet Icarus* in the British Museum (100 BCE; Figure 15) is a Roman copy of a Greek painting or relief.⁴² An acolyte supports the bearded, pot-bellied Dionysus, while behind them a bacchante carries a tall thyrsus—which, in a version in Naples, Museo Nazionale, is on the verge of blossoming. Clearly, this is an artichoke and not clustered ivy or a pinecone, as the thistle begins to flower, an appropriate accompaniment for a shape-shifting deity, the “blossom bringer.”

Pliny claims that Dionysus, in the form of his Roman counterpart Father Liber (Bacchus), invented the triumph (*Natural History* 7:191). In the third century BCE, the procession in Alexandria of Ptolemy Philadelphus included a float with a tableau of Dionysus’s return from the

41 Lévy had studied in Paris with François-Edouard Picot (1786–1868). He won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1854, was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor 13 years later, and won first class and gold medals at the Salons in 1878 and 1889, completing the typical resumé for a late-19th-century French Salon painter.

42 Bober and Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists*, 122–24, no. 90. The scene is repeated in a marble neo-Attic krater, Campo Santo, Pisa (see Figure 7). A Renaissance copy of the Bacchic relief indicates some lack of clarity about the thyrsus, where the wand has been turned into a staff with a fanciful finial. In his drawn copy of the relief carving, the artist Falconetto gives the satyr a torch of Hymen, god of weddings, as he reads the scene as a wedding march. See Bober and Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists*, 124, no. 91.



FIGURE 13. Kleophrades painter, *Dancing Maenad*, Attic red-figure amphora (detail). Staatlichemuseum, Munich, no. 2344.



FIGURE 14. Emile Lévy, *Death of Orpheus*, 1866, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



FIGURE 15. Anon., *Visit of Bacchus to Poet Icarus*, Roman copy of Greek neo-Attic source, c. 100 BCE, British Museum, London.

East.⁴³ Roman sarcophagi soon featured Bacchic triumphs, such as that in the Villa Medici, Rome, from c. 150 CE, where elephants pull the god's chariot. Mary Beard observed, "the thyrsus in the *general's* hands."⁴⁴ Pliny reported that Pompey wished to have his first triumphal chariot drawn by elephants instead of horses, suggesting a Bacchic triumph (*Natural History* 8:4).

Mantegna revived the Roman/Bacchic triumph in the Renaissance with his series of tempera paintings from 1486, which are preserved today in Hampton Court. Roman standards fill the sky above the horizon line in these canvases in his interpretation of the *Triumph of Caesar*.⁴⁵ And as late as 1729, G. B. Tiepolo depicted the *Triumph of Marius* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) with Roman banners and standards silhouetted against the sky.

Annibale Carracci, in his fresco of the *Triumph of Bacchus* for the Farnese Gallery (1595), depicted the god seated in a chariot holding in his right hand a rod entwined with ivy, which contains all the information given by Euripides.⁴⁶ Even Ovid says only that Dionysus "was waving / A wand with ivy tendrils" (*Metamorphoses* 3:367–68). This would seem to be an example of the rare dilemma noted by Leo Steinberg: "There are moments even in a worldly culture like ours, where

43 By the first century BCE, the god's return from India had been restated in Roman triumphal terms. Varro claimed that *triumphus* derived from the Dionysiac *thriombos*; Beard, *Roman Triumph*, 316.

44 Beard, *Roman Triumph*, 317.

45 Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 424, no. 78, pls. 110, 117.

46 Webster described the thyrsus in a floor mosaic of Dionysus riding a panther (House of the Masks, Delos, c. 150 BCE) as "a fennel stalk with a head of ivy leaves;" Webster, *Art of Greece*, 63, pl. 48; see also 157.

images start from no preformed program to become primary traits," thus requiring a glut of visual imagery to be understood.⁴⁷ As identified with a god of transformation, Dionysus's wand appears to have had different functions. As a ritual device, its liturgy is confined to weaponry, securing sustenance, and later supporting inebriated followers, with depictions on vase paintings showing similar limited functions. If there were other ceremonial uses, Euripides's fictional Maenads successfully preserved their secrets. The chief purpose of the thyrsus seems to serve as Dionysus's symbol, identifying him as the polyvalent demi-god whether in the guise of a child, woman, or old man. Euripides exploited the thyrsus as a marker and upright standard of the authority of folk belief and conforming tradition, which he paraded in his Dionysian drama as a signpost of popular custom in its most severe tyranny.⁴⁸

Author's Note

Often overlooked in the scholarly literature is the mode of protection the gods assigned to their female devotees. For example, after the beautiful Medusa is raped by Poseidon in the temple of Minerva, the goddess gives her snakes for hair, and a look that petrifies. This is interpreted as punishment of Medusa because her attack violated the temple precinct of the goddess. But Medusa was victim and not aggressor, and the serpents were a form of protection, a guarantee that Medusa would never fear another attack, and also a form of outrage on the part of Minerva that her temple was not protection enough. Serpents had positive attributes in much of ancient literature, associated with health and prudence. For example, Euripides has Zeus crown Dionysus with serpents, "the writhing crown of the Maenads," in his *Bacchae* (101–104).

When Ovid recounted Actaeon's accidental stumble onto Diana's bath, and the goddess transformed him into a stag to be attacked by his own dogs, Ovid complained that Actaeon was an innocent victim: "What crime is there in error?" (*Metamorphoses* III:145). But the writer seemed blind to Medusa's innocence, and modern authors as well, from Sigmund Freud to Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous. For Euripides, his Dionysus had female followers protected with thyrsi that routed men and turned back their shields of bronze.

47 Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ*, 108.

48 Euripides seems skeptical of Greek religion, and his *Bacchae* gives a fantasy account of Dionysus's arrival as a deity in Greece. His writing after Athens was ravaged by plague, and humbled by its failed Sicilian expedition and defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, may account in part for his cynicism. He retired to the court of Archelaus of Macedon in 408 BCE where he died two years later. His son, Euripides the Younger, then produced the play in Athens, winning the prize denied Euripides during his lifetime.

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