



Historically Speaking

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Dionysus, Dionysos, Bacchus



Greek to Roman to English spellings

The Greek gods were largely assimilated by the Romans or at least associated with their own gods. The spellings consequently vary depending on the source or the transliteration into English. The Latin alphabet has no 'k' so when the Greeks used 'c' as in *cosmos*, the Romans changed it to 'k' as in *kosmos*. Where the Greeks used 'ou' and 'ai' the Romans usually substituted 'u' and 'ae'. The Greeks ended names with 'os' but the Romans most often changed it to 'us'. This information is documented in Isaac Asimov's *Words from the Myths*, which is a fascinating explanation of words in our language coming from mythology.

The god of wine was Dionysos. You will see it spelled Dionysus showing the Roman influence (see sidebar). The Roman name for the god is Bacchus. He was actually the god of many things as were most of the major gods. Grape harvesting, wine making, orchards, fruit, vegetation, fertility, insanity, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, festivity and theater were all within the domain of this god. His thyrsus, a fennel-stem scepter, sometimes wound with ivy and dripping with honey, is both a wand bringing blessings and a weapon used to destroy those who oppose his cult and the freedoms he represents. Those who engage in his ecstatic worship are believed to become possessed and empowered by the god himself.

There are different accounts of his parentage, but my favorite, symbolically speaking has him being twice born. In this myth, Zeus impregnates a mortal named Semele. He swears to give her any request. She is driven to see him in his full glory, which he must grant, but that kills her. Zeus then takes the unborn child from Semele's womb and sews it into his own thigh. Dionysos is born then from the thigh of Zeus. This is an extension of his symbolic representation of the cycle of birth, death and resurrection. As the god of the vine, he symbolically dies when the grapes are picked from the vine, and is reborn in the spring when the grape vines come back to life with a new crop. Women, called the Bacchantes, go into a "religious fervor" (they get drunk) in the fall as the grapes are harvested and chase and tear apart small animals in the forest, such as their god is torn apart when the grapes are picked. Most accounts say he was born in Thrace, traveled abroad, and arrived in Greece as a foreigner. His attribute of "foreignness" as a god coming from outside the Greek world, may be inherent and essential to his cults, as he is a manifestation of the vine, and therefore grapes and the wine they produce.

Ouranian Publishing of Spokane
304 N. Adams Rd.
Spokane Valley, WA 99216-2062
(509) 710-7185