

Judging from the pure style of the composition, the relief dates back to the best times of classic art; but its most remarkable feature consists in the traces of the Bacchic cult, which like the Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries served during the last two or three centuries before the Christian era to satisfy man's aspiration for immortality. Dionysus, the liberty-bringing God, the twice born (so called because Semele bore him, and Zeus too), the eternally resurrected, is worshipped as the God of Nature, annually resurrected in spring, and typifies the conquest of mind over matter as it reveals itself in ecstatic states, both in intoxication and in the visions of prophets.

Dionysus is not himself pictured on the present bas-relief but is represented by his animals only, the steer and the ass. These two animals, which are unmistakable symbols of Dionysus worship, are standing right above the statue which is just being completed under the chisel of Prometheus. Mercury, the herald of the gods, brings down Psyche, the soul, a gift Zeus sends as his contribution to the formation of mankind, and the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis



DIONYSUS ON THE ASS.

Antique terra-cotta of Attica, ancient style.¹

and Atropos, are ready to take the destiny of the newly-created human beings into their hands. Clotho is the spinster that starts the thread, Lachesis receives and unravels it, while Atropos, the inevitable doom of every mortal, cuts it off.

The donkey is the animal on which Dionysus makes his triumphal entry. We reproduce the picture of an archaic terra cotta group (crude but very ancient) which shows the liberty-bringing god with a wine cup in his right hand and the thyrsus in his left,

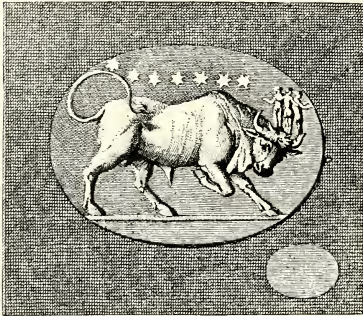
know how they should have spoken and voted when they descend the stairs of the town hall hence the term "staircase wit," or, as the Germans call it, *Treppenweisheit*.

¹ After Clarac, Pl. 675, 1600 A., cf. Baumeister, p. 433.

supported by Silenus or a satyr. There is a certain humor in the group, as the god is represented as being under the influence of his spirit-freeing drink.

The steer of Dionysus, which corresponds to the Egyptian Apis and to the primal bull of the Zoroastrian religion, represents the fertilising power of nature. He makes his appearance in spring, and decks the rejuvenated world with fresh verdure and flowers. Hence he is said to carry on his horns the three graces. The constellation Taurus to which the Pleiades belong was dedicated to him. We here reproduce a fine gem, one of the finest extant, on which the Dionysian steer carries on his horns the three graces and shows on his back the seven stars of the Pleiades.

Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele. Juno, jealous of her rival, induced her to request Zeus to show himself in his divinity, which led to her destruction. The God, on account of his promise could not help appearing to Semele, but he took pity on the child that was not yet born and when the mother in the presence of his heavenly thunderbolts died, he hid his little son in his own thigh until it grew strong enough to be handed over to the nymphs of the Nysene grotto for nursing. This scene in the infancy



THE DIONYSIAN STEER.¹ (Antique Cameo.)

of Dionysus is represented in a beautiful relief on an antique water-urn.

Our illustration represents the divine child as carried down by Mercury to a woman who represents all the nymphs of the Nysa grotto that took charge of the child. To the right we see three figures who are commonly supposed to be: first, Silenus, second, Mystis according to Welcker, and Telete according to Gerhard; and finally, Opora, or as Wieseler interprets it, Oinanthe; Silenus being the educator of Dionysus, Mystis the priestess of the Dionysian mysteries; Telete (i. e., initiation into the mystery) would practically mean the same and Opora or Oinanthe are representations,

¹ After Köhler *Ges. Schr.*, Vol. V., Plate 3, cf. Baumeister's *Denkmäler*, I., p. 377.

the former of the grape juice, the latter of the vine. While the group on the right hand is dignified and restful, the three corresponding figures on the left hand are full of Bacchantic enthusiasm. One Satyr plays the double flute and another moving in a graceful dancing step carries the thyrsus. Between them is a Bacchante beating the tympanum. The scene encircles a bell-shaped marble vase, and bears the inscription: "Salpion of Athens made it." The vessel, which belongs to the best times of the revival of the Attic school (compare Brunn, *Künstlergeschichte*, Vol. I, p. 599), served for a long time as a baptismal font in a church at Gaeta, and is now preserved in the museum of Naples.¹



MARBLE URN IN THE MUSEUM AT NAPLES.

The birth of Dionysus was celebrated in Greece with great rejoicings and formed an essential part in the Bacchic mysteries. The nativity of the God who was called the saviour, the rescuer and liberator, the bringer of joy, is frequently represented in Greek art and must have been celebrated all over Greece, especially in the rural districts. The cradle of the child is always a winnowing fan (called *vanus* in Latin and *liknon* (λίκνον) in Greek) which is sacred to the God, and his



THE NATIVITY OF DIONYSUS ON A MARBLE URN IN THE MUSEUM AT NAPLES.²

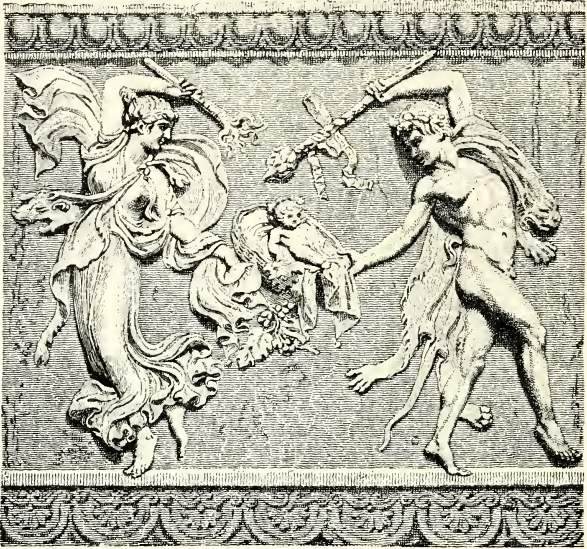
worshippers carried it, filled with sacred utensils or fruit, on their heads at his festivals. Liknites, i. e., "he who lay in the winnowing fan" is quite a common name for Dionysus.

The presence of the ox and the ass at the birth of Christ is not mentioned in the New Testament and may very well have originated under the influence of the Bacchic mysteries the recollection

¹ The illustration is reproduced from Baumeister, Vol. I., p. 438.

² After *Mus. Borb.*, I., 49, from Baumeister, Plate I., p. 448.

of which like those of the legends of Mithras, the story of the magi, the slaughter of the innocents, etc., was merged into the religious



LIKKNITES.

The Dionysus child in the liknos or winnowing basket. Antique relief in terra-cotta. British Museum. Reproduced from Baumeister, Plate XVIII. After Combe's *Terra-Cottas*.

notions of the Christians as to the circumstances that must attend the nativity of a saviour.