

Dionysus and Kataragama: Parallel Mystery Cults

by Patrick Harrigan

**"Then only will you see it, when you cannot speak of it; for the knowledge of it is deep silence and suppression of all the senses."—
Hermes Trimegistus (*Lib. x.6*)**

**"This never happened but it always is."—
Saloustios (circa 360 CE)**

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Table of Contents:

- I. [God of Many Faces](#)
- II. [A Parallel Study: The Cult of Pattini](#)
- III. [Ptolemy's map of Taprobane](#)
- IV. [Dionysus and Shiva](#)
- V. [Gods of Feminine Power](#)
- VI. [Dionysus and Kataragama Skanda](#)
- VII. [Lord of the Underground Dream World](#)
- VIII. [Lords of Water, Life and Fertility](#)
- IX. [Gods of Play and Drama](#)
- X. [Lords of the Labyrinth](#)
- XI. [Gods of Abusive Epithets](#)
- XII. [References](#)

Introduction: A Many-faceted God



Dromena or mystery rite at Kataragama: A Kapurala shaman-priest (at right, shrouded under canvas) embodies the unseen god as he bears the tiny casket believed to contain the yantra, or rather the god himself, and prepares to mount Swami upon the tusker's back.

In the dry jungle of remote southeastern Sri Lanka lies Kataragama or *Katir-kamam*, the (place of) 'light and love-passion', a shrine complex of exceptional antiquity and sanctity that attracts many thousands of Buddhist, Hindu and even Muslim devotees year round, particularly during the fortnight-long Aesala festival in July-August, when a small casket believed to contain the secret of the god's birth—nay, the god himself—is taken out in solemn yet joyful torchlit procession nightly, escorted by his women-votaries and troupes of riotous dancers representing the animal, human, chthonic and heavenly spheres.



Nightly during the fortnight-long Esala festival, white-clad *kapurala* shaman-priests perform a complex, carefully choreographed ritual in which the Kataragama god stealthfully emerges from his Mahadevale residence, rides in grand torchlit procession upon a caprisoned elephant to visit his sweetheart, the jungle princess Valli, and returns without being seen despite thousands of devotees straining to see him. The Kataragama God, mounted on a tusker at right, begins His nightly procession at Kataragama. His simple, unimposing Mahadevale residence can be seen in the background.

An archaic spirit of paradox, fertility, rejuvenation and play, the Kataragama god also preserves an essential soteriological dimension as the Divine Psychopomp who guides his followers beyond the Portals of Death into an unconditional realm of freedom from the tyranny of the pairs of opposites (Sanskrit: *dvandva*).

A host of local indigenous, Sinhalese, Tamil and Islamic legends purport to explain the origin, character and exploits of the Kataragama god, whose reputation for sacred or mysterious power extends far beyond his immediate forest domain. Broadly speaking, scholars and cult-adherents alike identify him with the ever-popular Tamil hill god *Murukan* ('Tender One'), who arose before the dawn of



Sri Jñāna Pandita: Murugan as Expositor of Gnosis with His symbols the Vel or Spear of Wisdom = *axis mundi* and vehicle/totem the peacock = Phoenix. Behind Him dawns the rising sun symbolising the awakened mind (*bodhi*). Early 20th cent. painting by NS Balakrishnan, Madurai

Deities common to Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka who have always included a war-like 'Red God' (Tamil: *Ceyon*) identified with Murukan and *Kataragama Deviyo* respectively.¹ From what has been said here and from what follows, it is hardly surprising that informed Western observers should readily identify Skanda-Murukan with Dionysus or Bacchus, the ancient Eurasian god of paradox, fertility, drama, epiphany and the dissolution of boundaries. Alain Danielou draws attention to the close similarities between the two deities and concludes that the 'Indian Bacchus' of the Greeks was none other than Skanda.² Cultural anthropologist Aghananda Bharati earlier made the specific observation that Kataragama Skanda is a "Dionysian god".³

Fred W. Clothey, in his landmark study *The Many Faces of Murukan*, cautiously endorses the possibility of a common origin of the ecstatic cults of Dionysus and Murukan in the megalithic

history and has long been considered as the Dravidian counterpart or expression of the pan-Indian wargod *Skanda-Kumara*, 'son' of the great mountain-dwelling god Shiva. Skanda, tutelary god of warriors, kings, yogis and scholars and (as *Guha*, 'The Hidden') patron of all secret knowledge and covert activities, once quit his home on Mount Kailasa in the trans-Himalaya and, according to various traditions, made his way south in a series of exploits culminating at Kataragama with his secretive courtship and marriage to the indigenous Vedda maiden Valli, which is the theme and substance of the Aesala mystery rites. Local tradition insists that Skanda-Murukan has remained in Kataragama ever since, ruling unseen over his domain as **Kali Yuga Varada**, the boon-granting divinity *par excellence* of the Kali Yuga, the recurrent cosmic era of tumult and quarrel—our own present-day world.

Due to its isolation on the social and geographical margin of Sri Lankan society, Kataragama has long been insulated from the mainstream of religious change affecting Sri Lanka and South India. As **Heinz Bechert** has firmly established, this has enabled Kataragama to preserve archaic institutions attested in the ancient literature that have long since died out elsewhere in the subcontinent, such as the persistent tradition of the Four Guardian

culture of the Anatolian plateau and western Iran of ca. 1500 B.C.⁴ Apart from these, however, no study has ever probed beneath Kataragama's teeming surface to uncover supporting evidence to associate the surviving cult of Skanda-Murukan in Sri Lanka with the cult of Dionysus which flourished in Western Asia and the Mediterranean world from remote antiquity until the third century AD, when it was forcefully suppressed by Rome.

In this study, I propose to demonstrate, using structural and thematic analysis as well as historical evidence and my own field observations, how Kataragama actually embodies the survival into the twenty-first century of one of humanity's most archaic religious traditions long considered to be extinct—the initiatic mystery religion. Astonishing as this conclusion may appear to scholars, there are ample grounds for such an identification, which may be said to be inherent in the very structure of Kataragama itself. As such, Kataragama represents an extraordinary paradigm spanning both archaic and modern worldviews and over two thousand years of human history. How could such a remarkable phenomenon pass unnoticed by millions of pilgrim-observers and generations of scholars and what implications may follow for our understanding of ancient and modern cultures the world over? This study, although not exhaustive, presents an overview of the evidence and an outline of the reasoning behind this hypothesis.

A Parallel Study: The Cult of Pattini

In his penetrating study of the [goddess Pattini in Sri Lanka](#)—where her cult survives alongside that of Kataragama—anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere has observed a similar nexus of correspondences between the cult of Pattini and the mystery cults of popular mother-goddesses current in West Asia and the Mediterranean world from the earliest historical period until the sixth century AD. "Initially," he concedes, "I attributed the parallelism to similar sociocultural and psychological conditions . . . Yet, after fieldwork and historical research in Kerala in 1974, I was convinced that the Pattini cult diffused to Kerala (and other parts of South India) from West Asia."⁵

Commercial contact between West Asia and India, as Obeyesekere found, had been brisk until the sixth century





Dionysus or Bacchus. A classical bas-relief sculpture of Dionysus, the ever-youthful god of mystery, paradox, fertility, and midnight revelry, shown holding his characteristic thyrsus or fennel wand. From the Museo Archeologico Nazionale at Naples.

AD Strabo (AD 20) attests that upwards of 120 ships each year sailed to India from Myos Hormos on the Red Sea.⁶ And with the discovery in AD 45 by a Greek mariner, Hippolus, of the pattern of the monsoon winds, which enabled ships to leave Ocelis near Aden and reach the west coast of South India in forty days, trade increased dramatically.⁷ As Obeyesekere observes:

Statue of Dionysus, recovered from the bed of the Tiber River (Italy) during works on a pillar of the Garibaldi Bridge in 1885. The statue represents a naked Dionysus of a juvenile type, resting on the right leg, the left one being markedly flexed and resting on the forefoot, and the left arm holding a tyrsos, the traditional attribute of the god. Bronze, lost wax fusion, height 158 cm. Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo Alle Terme, (Rome). For full details, see footnote.

However, most of the foreign trade to Malabar and South India during this period was dominated by Alexandria, the great entrepot of trade in the Greco-Roman world (Woodcock 1966, p. 141) . . . Along with trade, the merchants brought their own religions . . . Syrians, Jews and Greeks—most of them from Alexandria and other parts of the Levant—were influential in Kerala trade during the first through sixth centuries at least, as I noted. Some of them must obviously have adopted the mother-goddess cults that spread from Anatolia, Lydia (Asia Minor), Phrygia, Egypt and Syria into the Greco-Roman world from about 500 B.C.⁸

Obeyesekere argues that "it would indeed be surprising if the Alexandrian and West Asian merchants did not bring with them the more popular religions of the time—the cults of the various mother goddesses and the dead god."⁹ He cites accepted facts from the later history of South India and Sri Lanka to support his hypothesis that the cult of Pattini—originally an ecstatic mystery cult of the mother-goddess of West Asia—migrated via Kerala to southern Sri Lanka by the twelfth century.¹⁰ At the same time, he cautiously concedes that the evidence for his hypothesis of the West Asian origin of the Pattini cult "must remain tentative and circumstantial."¹¹ This same proviso must apply to the present study as well.

The popular religions among Alexandrian and West Asian merchants of their day most assuredly included the cult of Dionysus or Bacchus as well. Oral traditions as well as archaeological evidence and the testimony of the *Mahavamsa* or Great Chronicle suggest that Kataragama had a long history as a center of cult activity even before the Christian era. It is also worth noting that both gods are

depicted as appearing from over the sea. According to Sinhalese legends, god Kataragama came to Lanka as a foreigner who arrived by a stone raft (Sinhala: *gal-poruwa*), landed on the island's southern coast and thence walked to Kataragama where he has remained ever since.¹² This suggests that a maritime origin or formative influence—possibly from Alexandria or West Asia via Kerala—cannot be ruled out. And yet, the cult's geographical fixedness in Kataragama is one of its most persistent traits and points to an indigenous origin in remote antiquity, quite likely among the Neolithic hunter-gatherer forbears of the island's Vedda forest-dwelling people.

Ptolemy's map of Taprobane

This brings us to a remarkable source of evidence which, combined with the preceding observations, it suggests that Alexandrian navigators of the early Christian era were very well acquainted with the ancient Kataragama shrine and fully recognized its close affinities to the surviving cult of Dionysus of their own Mediterranean cultural sphere. The precise nature of this contact and the extent of its impact upon either cultus must remain a matter for speculation and further historical research.

Claudius Ptolemaeus (2nd century AD), or Ptolemy of Alexandria as he is best known, was a Greco-Egyptian astronomer, mathematician and geographer whose influence upon all three disciplines endured for many centuries. Remembered to this day as the 'Father of Modern Geography', Ptolemy laid out a coordinate system of meridians of latitude and



Ptolemy's map of Taprobane.

longitude and employed it to chart the surface of the then-known world with such accuracy that his maps remained in use until the eighteenth century. Living in Alexandria when that city was the Roman Empire's foremost center of commerce and perhaps the world's leading center of scientific and esoteric or theological studies, Ptolemy would have been well acquainted with the major mystery schools of his day, including the cult of Dionysus and their practices if, indeed, Ptolemy was not an initiate himself.

As a resident of second-century Alexandria, Ptolemy was also well-positioned to encounter and de-brief his principal informants, the

adventurous and enterprising mariners of Alexandria who regularly ventured as far as the fabled island of Taprobane (*Lanka*) and beyond, navigating the high seas using newly-improved astrolabes and quadrants. For these navigators, the success or failure of a long and risky commercial voyage depended upon accurate and reliable geographic information. Returning fresh from lucrative voyages to obtain the island's rare spices, pearls, gems and silks of her great emporia or trade centers, they could accurately describe the location and character of coastal landmarks from first-hand experience as well as from current maritime lore.

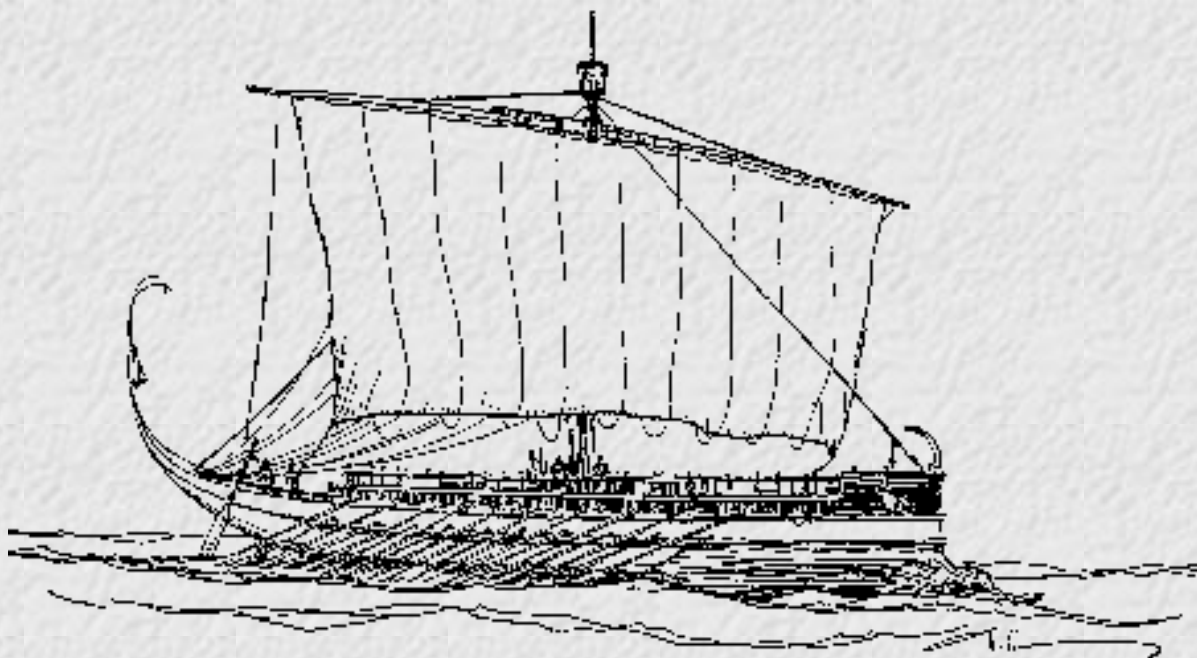
Indeed, Ptolemy provides at least three references to Dionysus in his catalog of island Lanka's coastal landmarks—all of them in the close vicinity of Kataragama, which was already an ancient cult center in Ptolemy's day. In most cases, he retains transcribed renderings of local names. But off the island's desolate southeastern coast, Ptolemy records that the waters were known to Alexandrian mariners as *Dionysi Mare* (Latin: 'The Sea of Dionysus'). Some versions of Ptolemy's Taprobane indicate a coastal landmark near Kataragama called *Dionysi Promontorium*—'The Promontory of Dionysus'. Thirdly, but not least, he attests that there was an important settlement near this coast which his mariner-informants called *Dionysi seu Bacchi Oppidum*—'The Town of Dionysus or Bacchus'.

This terse identification, based upon the supporting testimony of not one but many Alexandrian mariners who typically sojourned for weeks or months at a time in Taprobane, bears the stamp of authenticity. As informed observers, some of these mariners must have been *bacchantes* or initiates into the still-flourishing mystery cult of Bacchus, for whom the fundamental identification of



Detail of Ptolemy's Taprobane: Greek mariners reported the existence of a 'Town of Bacchus' (*Bacchi oppidum*) in the close vicinity of present-day Kataragama.

Dionysus with the local cult center or deity was self-evident. At the very least, there was a clear consensus among contemporary observers that here, far from Greece and Asia Minor, was an outpost-realm of god Dionysus extending even to the sea off Kataragama, a graveyard of wrecked trading vessels from ancient times.



Greek mariners of the early Christian era regularly ventured as far as the fabled island of Taprobane (Lanka) — and knew its coastal features well.

Moreover, this association of an ever-youthful Dionysian god with a promontory extending into a restless sea is not without precedent. In the very opening verse of his *Hymns to Dionysus* (I. 1-4), Homer evokes the god, saying "It is Dionysus, son of the most glorious Semele, that I speak and I shall tell how *he appeared on the shore of the untiring sea, on an outmost promontory with the aspect of a young man in his first adolescence*" (my italics).¹³ It is tempting to conclude that early Greco-Egyptian mariners, who were familiar both with the cult of Dionysus and with Homer's *Hymns to Dionysus*, had this opening verse in mind when they spoke of the Kataragama region. Evidently, Alexandrian mariners—and Ptolemy along with them—believed that here in exotic Taprobane was the original home of Dionysus described by Homer a thousand years earlier in the ninth century BC. This identification would have further reinforced the prevailing opinion of the time: that Lanka or Taprobane was the *Antipodes* (Greek: literally, 'where feet are opposite'), a fabulous, topsy-turvy island realm where anything was possible—the natural abode of gods like Dionysus. Remarkably, this simple attestation by one of classical antiquity's great scientists has attracted scant notice among scholars of the modern era. Apparently, what was once obvious to the ancients is no longer evident to modern observers. In the remainder of this study, I will argue that this is less due to changes in Kataragama than to changes in the fundamental assumptions of modern observers.

How did Alexandrian mariners come to identify the Kataragama god with their own Dionysus? In classical times, such identifications were accepted as natural. Caesar, for instance, assigned Roman names to non-Roman deities when he wrote of the Gaulish Celts: 'Of all the gods they worship Mercury (i.e. Hermes) most of all—After him they honour Apollo, Mars, Jupiter and Minerva.'¹⁴ By the same token, Tamils identify the Kataragama god with their Murukan and people of North Indian heritage, including the Sinhalese, identify him with Skanda-Kumara of Sanskritic mythology. And yet, as we shall see, such identifications are not based on outward similarities alone, but on deep-seated resemblances or resonances which traditional people ascribe not to a human origin by cunning 'myth-makers' but to divine intelligence operating in the super-human sphere and manifesting itself variously at different times and places.

Regarded from the diachronic perspective that prevails today, god Kataragama 'became' Murukan or Skanda-Kumara or he 'became identified' with them, but did not 'become' Dionysus because the identification did not endure among the local population. However, from the synchronic perspective common to traditional cultures, the Kataragama god already *is* Murukan *and* Skanda-Kumara *and* Dionysus from the very beginning, i.e. *in principio*. It is worth noting that this amalgamation—or rather, identification—of three 'distinct' gods is perfectly concordant with their characteristic association with the dissolution of boundaries.

Modern scholars—who are devotees by profession of Apollo—regard with disdain the secrecy and paradoxical, double-edged logic common to Dionysus and Kataragama and abhor what they regard as cult excesses. Charles Segal observes, "As Apollo imposes limits and reinforces boundaries, Dionysus, his opposite and complement, dissolves them."¹⁵ Undoubtedly, Kataragama and Dionysus "cannot be understood, only appreciated".¹⁶ Accordingly, an attempt may be made not to dissect the cults but to evaluate their bonds of commonality with a view to understand better their inner dynamics, if not the common source of their sacred power as well.

From its beginning, European indological scholarship has tended to focus on languages, texts and traditions of Indo-European origin while overlooking indigenous and Dravidian sources or downplaying their role in the evolution of Indian thought. As part of a general reappraisal of the history of Indian thought, the present study also aims to reapproximate the archaic worldview, alone from which archaic cults draw their soul-inspiring vision and vitality and outside of which they appear to the modern mind as mere 'belief systems' with no ontological basis in what we moderns fondly cherish as 'reality'. As Walter Otto observes in his landmark study *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, "It is the custom to speak only of religious concepts or religious belief. The more recent scholarship in religion is surprisingly indifferent to the ontological content of this belief. As a matter of fact, all of its methodology tacitly assumes that there could not be an essence which would justify the cults and the myths."¹⁷

As befits a multi-faceted god like Skanda-Murukan, this study considers his cult from multiple perspectives which often appear to be mutually incompatible and irreconcilable, especially where the modern, pragmatic-diachronic perspectives come up against—and clash with—the traditional, idealistic-synchronic point of view, laden as it may be with menacing paradoxes. Specifically, I maintain that no study of traditional initiatic (Skt: *parampariya*) knowledge (Skt: *vidya*) can dispense with that tradition's own approach to the acquisition of such knowledge, according to which the means and the end are inseparable. And I contend that it is precisely because of the modern reluctance or inability to recognize and comprehend the premises of archaic religions like Kataragama that modern observers including the vast majority of casual cult adherents have scarcely glimpsed more than the most superficial aspects of this archaic cult. As such, their understanding remains narrowly confined to the outlook of the modern era, which typically fails even to recognize, let alone appreciate, the implicit assumptions of archaic cults. This, in turn, partly explains why the very word 'cult' has overwhelmingly negative connotations to modern ears. So vast is the gulf that separates modern observers from the cult life of Dionysus or Kataragama that only a very tentative and imperfect attempt to bridge that gulf may be contemplated within the context of this study.

Dionysus and Shiva

For decades, indological scholarship has underrated this nexus implied between Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan while favoring a comparison of Dionysus with Skanda's mythological 'father' Shiva instead. In this context, I propose to examine the body of evidence that suggests a parallelism or historical link between the cults of Dionysus and Kataragama with a view to discover to what extent, if any, information concerning one cult may shed light upon the other. My frame of reference is the *Philosophia Perennis* (Augustine's "Wisdom uncreate, the same now as it ever was, and the same to be evermore," *Confessions* ix.10), by which I mean "the philosophy that assumes a transcendent unity behind all religions and sees them all as attempts, each valid for its time and place, to point the way to the true goal of human existence."¹⁸ From the outset, it should be noted that a remarkable pattern of correspondence does exist between Dionysus and Shiva. After all, both are identified with ecstatic possession, wine, mountains, wild animals, frenzied women, frenzied dancing, fertility and, especially, the coincidence of opposites. Structural evidence from literature and popular mythology has also been cited in support of this conclusion; the case in its favor as put forward by scholars is convincing and merits further study.¹⁹ Significantly, ancient Greek visitors to North India also made the same identification: as early as 300 BC, Megasthenes, ambassador of Seleucus I to Chandragupta Maurya, refers to the god in the mountains (Shiva) as Dionysus.²⁰

However, there are problems in identifying Dionysus with Shiva. Undoubtedly, their similarity is in part due to a family resemblance shared by Shiva the Father and his 'son' Skanda-Murukan, the *Sanat Kumara* or Perpetual Youth. This mythological relationship gained wide acceptance only in the late classical era; in earlier times, Skanda's parentage had been a matter of pure speculation. However, for the purpose of synchronic analysis, we accept this father-son relationship in myth at face value and take it as a starting point to re-examine the triangular relationship that obtains between Dionysus, the Indian god Shiva and his son Skanda-Murukan, the god of Kataragama.

Dionysus is recognized as the son of the high god Zeus and is sometimes depicted as sitting at Zeus' right side atop Mount Olympus. Already this should be enough of a clue that the Indian counterpart of Dionysus should be not the great god Shiva, aloof from humanity on Mount Kailasa, but Shiva's playful and precocious son Skanda who, in his familiar representation as *Somaskanda*, sits beside Shiva on Mount Kailasa. These common traits of Dionysus and Skanda, viz. their youthfulness, playfulness, and sonship, clearly distinguish them from the severe and dreadful father figures of Zeus and Shiva. Like Skanda-Murukan, Dionysus "is neither child nor man but, eternal adolescent, occupies a place somewhere between the two."²¹ As such, both represent "the spirit of ludic energy and the power of transformative play,"²² full of cunning, deception and strategies that are at once diabolical and divine. In this they reveal their common affinity to Hermes, the Greek god of cunning, theft and eloquence whose *caduceus* or herald's magical wand finds its counterpart in Skanda-Murukan's *vel* (Tamil: 'spear'), called his *Jñ•na Shakti* or 'power of gnosis'.

In Greek mythology, Dionysus is born from his father's thigh and delivered to twelve nymphs or

water-spirits, the Hyades, who become the child-god's wet-nurses. Later, out of gratitude for their service, they are exalted to the heavens where seven of them shine as the constellation Pleiades. Likewise Skanda, born directly from Shiva, descends to earth where he is found in a reedy marsh by six water spirits, the *Krittika* maidens, who serve as the god's wet-nurses and later are exalted to heaven as the *Krittika* constellation, which is none other than the Pleiades; hence Skanda is also *Karttikeya*, 'born of the Pleiades'. Just as Dionysus is *Purigenes*, 'the one born of fire', so likewise is Skanda called *Agribhu*. Skanda is *Sharadhajama*, 'born in a reedy marsh'; Dionysus is *Limnaios*, 'of the marsh'. Dionysus is *Dithyrambos*, 'twice-born', i.e. born first from fire and then from water. Likewise, Skanda is born first from the fiery element of his father's third eye and then born a second time in the watery element of *Saravana*, a reedy marsh. Danielou draws attention to this astonishing convergence of thematic elements and concludes that "Murugan, born in a reedy marsh and nourished by nymphs, is elsewhere called Dionysus."²³ So remarkably parallel are the thematic elements surrounding the complex birth-motif that it strains credibility to ascribe these similarities to sheer coincidence.

Yet, when we turn to Skanda's father Shiva, there is no birth-motif whatsoever, for while both Skanda and Dionysus are called 'twice-born', the god Shiva is not born at all: he is unborn, eternal and unchanging. It is not the father-gods Zeus or Shiva who are born on earth to sport among humanity, but their playful sons Dionysus and Skanda. Both are young gods of energy or power (associated with young stars—the *Pleiades*) having both creative and destructive aspects, whose creative energy manifests as an intellectual rather than procreative conception—and yet, they are associated with fertility nevertheless. In the pan-Indian conception, this energy or power (Skt: *shakti*) is feminine and this feminine energy is part and parcel of Skanda-Murukan's *svabhava* or inherent character.

Again, both Dionysus, who was contemptuously called 'the womanly one' and Skanda-Kumara, whose Tamil name Murukan means 'the tender one', are not purely masculine gods but possess equally strong feminine associations as well. Like Dionysus, Skanda is raised by female attendants or foster mothers, called 'mothers' or 'nurses.' To this day, women votaries at Kataragama (the twelve Alatti Ammas or Ladies of the Lamp) play an important role in his rituals; Alatti Ammas, for instance, must accompany the god in all his ritual processions, whether by day or by night. In contrast, Shiva is a masculine ithyphallic deity, surrounded by troops of ghouls. Significantly, both Dionysus and Skanda-



'Hermes and the Infant Dionysus' by Praxiteles, from the temple of Hera, Olympia, c. 330 B.C.

Murukan are very seldom if ever depicted as ithyphallic. While Shiva may be depicted as androgynous, the feminine aspect is far more prominent in Dionysus and Murukan.

Gods of Feminine Power

Skanda-Murukan's principal symbols—the *vel* and the *satkona yantra* (hexagram)—both serve as reminders of the god's close association with magical power and the feminine principle—*Shakti*. For instance, the ostensibly masculine *vel* symbol—Murukan's 'own self' as the tradition informs us—comes to the young god not from his father (as one might expect in patriarchal cultures) but from his 'mother' Uma, the personification of *Shakti* (as noted, a feminine word in Sanskrit that also means 'spear'). This, moreover, is a tacit reminder that the entire *Kaum•ra* (concerning the god *Kum•ra*) *parampar•* or "pupillary succession" is implicitly derived from India's indigenous *Sh•kta* heritage of mystical devotion to *Shakti*, the Indian conception of the Godhead as *Magna Mater*.

Of particular interest, however, is the god's longstanding association with the number six and the *shatkona yantra* or 'six-cornered magical diagram,' for the *shatkona yantra* (etched upon a metal plate) is precisely what is believed to be contained in the small casket that is taken out in procession at Kataragama. A full discussion of the subject of the 'calculus' of symbolic forms goes beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the god, whose Sanskrit name *Shanmukha* (Tamil: *•rumukam*) means 'having six faces,' is homologised to the *hexagram*, a figure composed of two intersecting equilateral triangles representing the Mother-principle and the Father-principle in balanced union and thus—*voila!* the *bambino* or Holy Child known to mythologies the world over.

In the traditions of Europe and West Asia, the hexagram is well known as the 'Seal of Solomon', which alludes to its widespread association with the conjunction of sacerdotal authority and temporal power. Moreover, the *yantra* in conjunction with the *vel* or spear corresponds to the archetypal warrior's *shield and spear* or, in another context, to the *axis mundi* and the *cakra* or *loka* or plane of existence through which the *axis mundi* or 'solar ray' passes as an axle around which a wheel turns.

The *yantra* is another product of India's indigenous, non-discursive schools of ritual magic and as such it is intended not for merely decorative purposes but for its magical efficacy. Its etymology offers a clue to the *yantra*'s function and *raison d'être*. Like the similar terms *mantra* and *tantra*, it consists of a verbal root *yam* ('to hold') plus the suffix *-tra* denoting instrumentality. Hence, *ya(m)-tra* or *yantra*, 'a device that holds,' i.e. a magical snare, trap, or container, especially one designed to



•latti P•ja, Kataragama Mah• D•v•le.

hold a spirit, *daimon*, or god. In this function, the *yantra* parallels the pervasive South Indian pattern of place-goddesses (e. g. Madurai *Meenakshi Amman* or *Valli Amman* of Kataragama) who first attract and then 'hold' wandering gods to those places as their husbands. In the context of Kataragama, the *yantra* in the holy of holies may be understood to 'hold' or 'contain' the god of six faces or directions, much as the Ark of the Covenant was understood to 'contain' the *Shekinah* or 'presence' of the Holy Spirit of god Jehovah.

Despite their feminine associations, both appear as archetypal heroes whose coming is characterised by strife and conquest. As the wargod Karttikeya, Skanda is *Mahasena*, the Supreme Commander 'who has a great army' of demons and angels alike;



The *Satkona yantra*, cut into black stone with the diagram of the Kataragama deity. Representation of flames along the centre. In the Museum für

Nirz (1954)



Detail of a mosaic depicting a riotous procession of gods and demigods surrounding Dionysus shown riding a chariot with thyrsus or fennel wand in hand.

his initial appearance is accompanied by such tumult that the devas at first mistake him for another super-demon. Dionysus, too, is described by Nonnus (*Dionysus* 24.151 ff.) as a warrior-chief whose troops advance to the sound of flutes, drums, pipes and crashing cymbals, astonishing the inhabitants of India. A sarcophagus from the early third Century AD (now in the Landgrafmuseum, Kassel) depicts the young Dionysus returning from his conquest of India surrounded by his army of devotees and riding upon an elephant. Skanda-

Murukan, too is *Gajarudhan*, he who rides astride the elephant as his *vahana* or vehicle in battle; to this

day, the Kataragama god is carried in procession upon an elephant and is accompanied by his 'army' of devotees.

Both gods are identified with the fringe of civilized society: with wilderness, 'crazy' or roguish behavior, sudden possession or intoxication and underground or otherwise vaguely subversive activities—in Sri Lanka, exclusive protagonists of religion look askance at Kataragama and its amoral reputation. Victor Turner and others would speak of Dionysus and Kataragama in terms of 'liminality', of being on the margin, in an in-between geographical or psychological space "where fluidity challenges stability, where fusion replaces boundary—here too normal relations and normal inhibitions are suspended in a quasi-magical interlude characterized by joyful play, imaginative exuberance and free energy."²⁴ This liminal quality of Kataragama also marks it as a place of transition or passage between psychological states or *lokas* ('worlds'), as we shall see. This liminality or meeting of worlds expresses itself as ecstatic possession (Skt: *arudha* literally, 'mounted' i.e., by a spirit), a common feature of the cults of both Dionysus and Murukan, readily visible in South India and Sri Lanka to this day. Dionysus is called *Gynaimanes*, 'he who maddens women': his madness affects women and they are his principal followers, called *Maenads* or 'raving' Bacchantes. In ancient Tamil poetry, too, Ceyon or Murukan is credited with creating love-frenzy in young women, as in the following lines from one of the oldest poems in the Tamil language, which could also well depict the cult of Dionysus:

"Here festivals are always held
Harmonious with the dances wild
Of frenzied maids by the Red-god stirred,
The flutes do pipe, the lyres do twang,
The drums roll loud and the tobors sound." -*Pattinapalai* 178-182

It is worth noting in this regard that adherents of cults of both Dionysus and Kataragama commonly engage in trance-practices that are nothing less than miraculous in the eyes of many. Euripides' *Bacchae* draws a picture of the marvelous circumstances under which fire does not burn the god-intoxicated celebrants and weapons do not wound them.²⁵ Even today in Kataragama, hundreds of celebrants may be seen walking over beds of live coals hot enough to melt aluminum, while others pierce themselves with pins, knives and skewers without a trace of injury—provided that they are in trance.

Finally, both Dionysus and Murukan are intimately associated with drama, mystery and ritual theater. Both Dionysus and Murukan are patron deities of bardic poetry, prophecy and dramatic performance and Murukan is closely identified with the genesis of Tamil, one of the world's great classical languages. In his play *Bacchae* (289 ff), the ancient Greek playwright Euripides says that Dionysus "is a prophet and the bacchic revel is filled with the spirit of prophecy."

Danielou proposes an explanation for the identification of Dionysus with both Shiva and Skanda. "In the Mediterranean world," he speculates, "Skanda appears as a new Dionysus and his legend is mingled with that of the old Dionysus."²⁶ Citing Diodorus, he distinguishes "Bacchos, son of Semele, who is Skanda, from an older Dionysus (Shiva), born of Zeus and Persephone" who is

credited with the invention of wine.²⁷ However, he offers no plausible chronology to support this hypothesis.

Clothey's version of this general hypothesis reconciles the best accepted conclusions concerning both cults and, as such, is more satisfactory. As he observes:

By the time of the *Cankam* literature . . . the Murukan cultus manifests certain aspects that have striking parallels in the Dionysian cult of the Middle East. The early Murukan is particularly similar to the agricultural Dionysos of a pre-Greek era . . . Murukan and Dionysos at a later period are 'Aryanized'; both become associated with warrior and celestial motifs and become the son of the presiding deity of the mountain at the center of the world.²⁸

However, he does not resolve the vexing issue of how Middle Eastern motifs may have entered the South Indian cultural milieu.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to explore the intriguing associations that both Dionysus and Skanda share with Alexander the Great and folk or literary traditions of an Alexander Romance, but careful analysis could reveal much about the migration of mythic patterns and cult ideologies across the ancient world. Interestingly, the historical world-conqueror Alexander was widely identified with Dionysus and, to a lesser extent, with Skanda-Murukan as well. For example, one of the oldest major pilgrimage centers of the hill-god Murukan, Tirupparankunram near Madurai, has at the top of the hill a Muslim *dargah* dedicated to *Sikandar*, whom local Muslims identify with Skanda-Murukan.²⁹ By a linguistic coincidence, both 'Alexander' and 'Skanda' transliterate into Arabic as *al-Sikandar*. N. Gopala Pillai has argued that the cult of Skanda is derived from the influence of Alexander on North India, but few scholars take his arguments seriously.³⁰ Clothey, however, concedes that "it may not be impossible that the name of Skanda was associated with Alexander, in a way still not precisely understood and that elements of Skanda's Northern iconography were derived or influenced by the impact of post-Alexandrian Hellenization."³¹

Dionysus and Kataragama Skanda

The issues are assuredly more complex than they initially appear, but these points taken together should be enough to turn our attention from Shiva and toward Skanda-Murukan in the search for affinities with Dionysus. So let us turn to the known structural and thematic parallels between the Dionysian mystery cult of the ancient Mediterranean world and the cult of Skanda-Murukan as it survives especially in Kataragama. Necessarily, I must confine my remarks here to a brief overview of relevant features, leaving unsaid many fascinating details.

The myths of Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan display other thematic parallels in their marvelous birth accounts. Skanda is born in the trans-Himalaya and migrates to South India and Sri Lanka where he is explicitly identified with the South—in Indian cosmography, the direction or realm of chaos and death, presided over by Yama, Judge of the Dead. The ancient Greeks used to look to the

Far East and the South as the birthplace of Dionysus and some accounts placed Nysa, his birthplace, in India.³² Skanda is born from his father Shiva seated upon the cosmic mountain Kailasa or Meru; by a linguistic pun, Dionysus is born from his father's thigh (Greek: *meros*). As Danielou observes, "It has been suggested that the fact that Shiva's sperm stayed on the snowy mountain Himavat, identified with Mount Meru, the axis of the world, is not extraneous to the legend of Dionysus' sojourn in the thigh (*meros*) of Jupiter."³³



Center of the universe in pan-indian lore, Mount Kailasa in western Tibet (above) is the cosmographical analog to the *sahasrara cakra* ('thousand-petaled lotus crown') in Kundalini Yoga and to heaven or *moksha* ('liberation') in soteriological terms.

On this point, one may say, there is agreement—both traditions point to, or suggest, a common mythological origin, even in a geographical sense.

Moreover, this heritage of punning, word play and *double-entendre*, too, persists both in Dionysian ritual drama and in the cult of Skanda-Murukan even today. For instance, one of Skanda's ancient epithets, *Shaktidhara* (Skt. literally, 'he who holds *shakti*') plays upon the multiple meanings of the grammatically feminine word *shakti*, such that the epithet may mean 'he who holds the spear', 'he who holds his goddess-consort', or 'he who wields mystic power'. All three interpretations are perfectly applicable to the god; they also, incidentally, illustrate the god's common affinity to women, magical power and the spear-symbol. When allegorical tales abound with such ambiguous references, the informed listener or connoisseur apprehends a rich universe full of multiple levels of meaning or exegesis, which serve as a virtual stairway of ascent to higher and higher levels of understanding. This finds its material counterpart in the multiple curtains that hang between the worshipper and the *sanctum sanctorum* of the god at Kataragama.

Lord of the Underground Dream World

Again, both deities are protean figures who transform themselves into myriad forms. Both appear first as hunter-gods: Dionysus as *Zagreus*, 'The Great Hunter' and Kataragama Deviyo as a Paleolithic hunter-ancestor of the Veddas. Dionysus undergoes numerous transformations in his battle with the Titans. So likewise does Murukan in his battle with the super-titan *Surapadma* (Tamil: *Curapatuman*). Otto observes that "In Nonnus, the Indian Deriades complains of the impossibility of conquering him—Dionysus—because the 'many-faced one' was now a lion, a bull, a boar, a bear, a panther, a snake and now a tree, fire, water."³⁴

Like Skanda-Murukan, Dionysus is reckoned to be both king and prophet, patron of hunters, bards and *antis* or itinerant magical performers. Dionysus appears incognito on earth as one of his own bacchantes in Euripides' *Bacchae*; again in *The Frogs* of Aristophanes he journeys into the underworld, also in disguise. In like fashion, Sinhala oral tradition likens the Kataragama god to a king who routinely inspects his kingdom disguised as a beggar, a pilgrim, or a *swami* to ascertain the conditions of the realm and the attitudes of his subjects—a recurrent theme in Indian literature and folklore. As gods who journey in disguise through a lower world, they also share chthonic associations; nocturnal processions by torch light are conducted in their honor and their presence is felt with great immediacy—even nowadays at Kataragama. Both are suprasensual guides to deliverance, psychopomps who guide, paradoxically, by leading astray. As such, Dionysus is also *Lusios* ('The Liberator') while Skanda is *Guha*, 'The Mysterious'.



"I behold Teiresias the Seer in dappled fawn-skins arrayed, and likewise, moving me to laughter, my mother's father flourishing the wand of Baccheus!" (from Euripides' *The Bacchae*)

Kataragama's reputation for mystery and sanctity is well deserved; living traditions current among the majority Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims all testify to the shrine's mysterious power. An example from Islamic lore of Tamil Nadu will suffice, but many others could be added. A Tamil text, the *Kanzul Karamat*, tells how the sixteenth-century Muslim saint Kuthub Shaul Hameed of Nagur was mysteriously transported to the bank of the Menik Ganga in Kataragama and thence conducted underground to a subterranean palace where the mystic robe of Kuthub-ul-Akhtab was conferred upon him by *al-Khadir*³⁵, 'The Green Man' of Islamic lore who appears in the Holy Quran (Surah 18 verses 57-83) as the teacher of Moses and who is none other than Kataragama-Skanda according to local Sufi interpretation.

Not surprisingly, this underground Kataragama has been variously attested by contemporary resident experts as well, not only as a standard theme of [Kataragama's storytelling tradition](#), but also as a recurrent subject of visions and dreams.

For instance, it is well-known in Kataragama that no ritual innovation or architectural renovation may be undertaken unless and until the god himself so commands his servants in a dream; untimely death or misfortune is the certain consequence of disregarding this tradition. Moreover, even today some advanced practitioners are known to engage in yogic or lucid dreaming, a practice whereby the dreamer may consciously explore Kataragama in the dream state.

Reports from yogic dreamers who have explored the subtle dream world of Kataragama tend to

support and even elaborate upon longstanding tradition. One experienced adept described to this researcher the Kataragama god's *Mahadevale* as he beheld saw it in a lucid dream: as a pagoda of seven stories—a ground floor, three upper stories and three subterranean stories, in contrast to the simple, single-storied Kataragama shrine of diurnal consciousness.

Mount Kailasa
81° 10" E. long.



The Kataragama god's Mahadevale residence (right).

Evidently, in the dream world the god's *sanctum* has an added dimension—the vertical, corresponding to the solar ray or the *axis mundi*—encompassing the chthonic and heavenly planes which the god (and, presumably, the accomplished yogic dreamer) may freely visit as a "mover-at-will" (Skt. *kamacarin*). This, too, is structurally related to kundalini yoga practices that postulate a virtual ladder of psychic centers or *cakras* within the human frame which practitioners pass through or experience in ascending and descending order. In the tradition of Kataragama, however, distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer' lose their familiar hard-and-fast quality, as does the distinction between dreaming and waking consciousness. Here the microcosmic psychic centers are routinely homologized to macrocosmic centers of sacred geography. Thus, Skanda's heavenly abode corresponds to Mount Kailasa in Tibet, while Kataragama itself is equated to the *mul•dh•ra cakra* of Kundalini Yoga—the center where the *stambha* or *axis mundi* touches the earth and, as such, the subtle gateway through which one may be 'transported' to heavenly and chthonic spheres.

Neither Dionysus nor Skanda-Murukan dwells in a celestial heaven, but rather in shadowy underworlds (which include, from the divine perspective, life here on earth) the realm of the dead and the source of life. Both are gods who have known the lofty heights—the Himalaya of their own divine origin and nature—but who nevertheless prefer the life-sustaining valley (homologized to Mother Earth, the



Mt. Kailasa in western Tibet and Kataragama in the far south of Sri Lanka form a near-perfect analog to the *axis mundi* or *susumna nadi* of yogic lore. See also "Kailasa to Kataragama: Sacred Geography in the cult of Skanda-Murukan".

him changed for life, as they readily testify. This conviction that the god is *present and real* has long characterised the mystery rites of Kataragama and is still a feature of the Kataragama festival even in the late 20th century; Dionysus, too, was "thought and felt to be present with overwhelming certainty."³⁶

As spirits of antithesis and paradox, both Murukan and Dionysus are characterized by the juxtaposition of pandemonium and silence, another coincidence of opposites. Not only in myth, but also in cultic practice, their epiphanies are celebrated with colorful noisy processions and frenzied dancing by torchlight—and yet, during the procession at Kataragama, ritual participants do not utter a single word. In the cult of Dionysus, too, melancholy silence was the sign of women possessed by the god. Indeed, Kataragama's ritual performances are all conducted in strict silence and no initiate will verbally disclose anything about his or her oral-performative tradition (Skt: *parampara*) except to reiterate its prehistoric origins. This, of course, is perfectly concordant with the cult's central injunction *cumma iru!* (Tamil: 'Be still!') enjoining both contemplative silence and secrecy upon cult initiates. Incidentally, the utility of discursive research methodologies is also severely restricted when so much of what the researcher intends to study is shrouded in silence and secrecy. As such, the traditional approach to acquiring specialized knowledge becomes truly indispensable.

Both deities are gods of epiphany who repeatedly 'come' or manifest themselves. Otto calls Dionysus "the god who comes, the god of epiphany, whose appearance is far more urgent, far more compelling than that of any other god. He had disappeared and now he will suddenly be here again."³⁷ That is, both gods appear mysteriously from the watery or chthonic depths in disguise to shatter the conventional social order and to fill with terror and wonder the hearts of those who behold them before incomprehensibly disappearing again. Until the twentieth century, the Kataragama god was regarded with such dread by Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike that only those who received a direct summons would dare to visit the remote shrine. Robert Knox, who spent eighteen years as a captive in the Kandyan kingdom of the seventeenth century, testifies that "The Name and Power of this God striketh such terror into the Chingulayes, that those who otherwise are Enemies of this King and have served both Portuguese and Dutch against him, yet would never assist either to make Invasions this way."³⁸ Public perceptions have changed since Knox's time, but the fact remains that millions consider the Kataragama god to be the most down-to-earth and powerful of the island's guardian spirits. To this day, the god's devotees invoke him, repeatedly urging him to 'come'.

This 'coming' of Dionysus or Skanda-Murukan is, properly speaking, a return or re-awakening of an age-old experience. For instance, when Murukan first appears to [Valli](#) in a Neolithic setting, his cult

is already well established; Valli is already the god's ardent devotee even before he comes in person to woo her and she becomes his beloved only later when at last she sees through his disguise. Like the god himself, the cult of Kataragama



At that moment, Murugan invoked the help of his brother Vin•yaka who appeared behind Valli in the shape of a frightening elephant. The terror-stricken girl rushed into the arms of the Saiva ascetic for protection. Painting from [Tiruttani Devasthanam](#).

has passed through many cycles; the locality itself has risen from jungle into urban center and returned back into jungle repeatedly in recorded history. And so it is with Dionysus: according to Otto, "The Greeks themselves considered their principal cults of Dionysus to be age-old . . . in Delphi the worship of Dionysus could be considered older than that of Apollo . . . Homeric epic is intimately acquainted with his cult and his myths and it speaks of him in the same manner in which it speaks of the deities who have been worshipped since time immemorial."³⁹

Lords of Water, Life and Fertility

Yet another common motif which classicists and indologists have long recognized about these two gods is that both are associated with the watery element and its connection with fertility and with life itself. That is, both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan are closely associated with fruit, blood, semen (the Sanskrit verbal root *skand* refers primarily to the spurting of semen; hence *Skanda* means 'Spurt of Semen' or, by extension, 'The Leaper or Attacker'⁴⁰), the sap of fresh vegetation and with an elixir of immortality, whether wine or *soma*. As infants, both are nursed by females of the watery element. In Kataragama's Islamic lore and in the Alexander Romance as well, for instance, the mysterious figure al-Khidr is Alexander's accomplice or cook who discovers unsought what

Alexander sought in vain—the *ma'ul hayat* or 'Water of Life' that bestows heavenly knowledge and life everlasting to those who taste it. His epithet *al-Khadir*, 'The Green Man', also points to his chthonic association with plant growth, sap and the underground fountain of life which, local Islamic tradition maintains, he discovered in *Khadir-gama* (i.e. Kataragama), the 'home of *al-Khadir*.' Like god Murukan of South India, the Kataragama god is looked upon as a fertility god who brings or withholds rain—as god-king of a hydraulic civilization, he "divides the waters" and ensures that each community gets its share of life in the form of water. Both functions—fertility and the regulation of life-giving water—are ritually enacted in the colorful *diya kaepeema* or 'water-cutting ceremony' that is the climax of the Esala festival.

Dionysus, of course, is well known in Greek mythology for his association with water, plant sap, sperm and another elixir of knowledge—wine. Plutarch tells us that, according to Greek belief,

Dionysus was the lord of all moist nature.⁴¹ Varro (August. *De civ.* D.7.21) declares that "the sovereignty of Dionysus was not only to be recognized in the juice of fruits whose crowning glory was wine but also in the sperms of living creatures."⁴² Since prehistoric times, the worship of Murukan, too, has included fruit, honey, the fermented juice of paddy and coconut and the blood of sacrificial rams.⁴³ In the widely-circulating legend of *Palani* in Tamil Nadu, the popular shrine's name is interpreted in the expression *palam nee*—'you are the fruit', i.e. you (Murukan) are the *ñ•nappalam* or 'fruit of gnosis'—that father Shiva says to placate his precocious and impulsive son Murukan.

The association of blood and fertility finds expression in the importance of the color red in both cults. Blood or vermilion powder and Murukan as *Ceyon* 'the Red', mutually symbolize each other and evoke his close connection to *shakti*, the feminine principle. Blood-red color simultaneously symbolizes both life and death, as well as both classical genres of ancient Tamil poetry: *akam* ('love-matter') and *puram* (mainly war), over which Murukan presides as the patron of Tamil language, poetry and drama. Likewise, images of Dionysus were commonly colored with vermilion and his Maenads in their frenzy were known to rip apart and devour the raw flesh of male goats and even men unwary enough to intrude upon their torchlit revels upon the mountains—the god himself was *omestes*, 'eater of raw flesh.'⁴⁴

Again, both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan have strong associations with certain species of plants. Dionysus is *Dendrites*, 'He who dwells in trees' and is the patron of orchards and vineyards. Similarly, Skanda was equated with *Vishakha* or *Bhadrashakha*, the 'God of the Auspicious Bough,' recalling an early association with tree-worship which persists to the present day. Alexander Dubianski has lately given a lucid account of the association of Valli and Murukan with specific flora and fauna of the *Kurincittinai* or mountainous landscape in *Cankam* poetry. He notes that from the *Cankam* Age (and probably far earlier), Murukan has been associated with the *katampu* (*Anthocephalus cadamba*) and *venkai* (*Pterocarpus bilobus*) trees, both of which have strong fertility associations in Tamil culture. The *venkai*, for instance, produces fragrant, golden-red flowers during the season considered most auspicious for weddings and its bark yields a reddish sap when cut. Murukan is said to have transformed himself into a *venkai* tree while wooing Valli. Indeed, the Tamil word *valli* means a creeper (*Convolvus batatas*) and the motif of the creeper entwined around a tree evokes to the Indian mind the image of a woman embracing her lover.⁴⁵

In Kataragama specifically, the god has strong arboreal associations and may have originally been a tree-spirit or *yaksa* from pre-Buddhistic times. In the beginning, we are told, the god came by foot to Kataragama, planted his *vel* in the ground under a shady tree, sat down and remained there. Hence, the tree was his original 'temple' and even today the exterior of his *sanctum sanctorum* retains relief-images of trees, lotus blossoms and elephants only. Indeed, the *vel* symbol, which tradition says is equivalent to the god himself, is itself an image of the *axis mundi* or the *arbor vitae*, the 'Tree of Life' or *kalpavriksha*, the 'wish-granting tree' of pan-Indian tradition; its spearhead, for instance, is in the shape of a *venkai* leaf and is frequently compared to a leaf in Cankam literature. As Coomaraswamy rightly observes, "All these are forms of the Axis of the Universe, thought of as a Tree by which the very existence of the cosmos is maintained."⁴⁶ With the advent of Buddhism as the state religion, however, the Kataragama god's tree became the pipal or 'bo-tree' (*Ficus religiosa*) that now offers its shade to the god's *Mahadevale* and, in return, receives ritual offerings of water from the Alatti Ammas and the *kapurala*-priests every Saturday when the god—at least until recently—also received a ritual offering of venison, the hunter-god's favorite food.



Kapurala-shaman possessed by tree-spirit, Sri Lanka

Gods of Play and Drama

It is no coincidence that the word 'play' refers equally to sportive behavior and to dramatic performance. This is as true in Indian languages as it is in European: Murukan's 'divine play' (Tamil: *vilaiyatal*; Sanskrit: *leela*) is also the word used to describe his pranks, sports and dalliances, especially with Valli, the vivacious and even cheeky jungle heroine who is Murukan's devotee and sweetheart. Together with Valli and his 'older' rival brother, the elephant-headed Ganapati, the ever-youthful god of Kataragama is widely regarded in Sri Lanka to be still sporting to this day, **dispensing justice** along with boons to those who respect him.

In the eyes of connoisseurs, this 'play' goes on year-round in the form of divine pranks, tricks and games like hide-and-seek which, we are told, Murukan and Valli love to play with each other and with their devotees. But it is especially during the Aesala festival which, as Paul Wirz already observed in the 1950's, "consists of a dramatic staging of the legendary traditions of Skanda,"⁴⁷ that

the god's 'play' also manifests as *dromena*, or "numinous performances" as Obeyesekere calls them,⁴⁸ that are conducted as *ritual pantomime* in keeping with the festival's theme and content of mystery, secrecy and dangerous power. As part of its powerful magic, the annual mystery rites are felt to portend the peace and fertility—or misfortune—of the entire realm or kingdom and so great care is taken to ensure its successful performance. It is also a spellbinding spectacle to behold and attracts many thousands of devout pilgrims and casual spectators alike, a fact that has given it commercial significance in contemporary Sri Lanka as well.

In ancient Greece this close relation between drama and mythology was epitomized by the mask, which stood both for the god Dionysus himself and for a process whereby those who participated realized a glimpse of the wild paradoxes that were related as myths and enacted as mystery rites or *dromena*, literally 'things performed'. Such mystery traditions were commonplace in the ancient world and some are known to have endured for thousands of years. Gnostic Christianity was a relatively late example of initiatic mysteries and even today the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches retain ritual elements recalling an origin in mystery religions, such as the transubstantiation of the sacraments into Christ's own body and blood.

For ancient Greeks, the mask or *persona* was a symbol of unity in duality. The wearer was both himself and someone else at the same time, or temporarily became the *persona* (Greek: 'sound through' i.e. speak through the mask) in the *dramatis personae* or characters of the ritual drama. The mask 'held together' the two identities.⁴⁹ As such, it also represented the possibility of a passage or gateway between different realms or worlds of experience. As we have seen, this passage into a dangerous, shadowy underworld realm of chaos and death is a key theme in both cults; as Godwin notes, it is characteristic of mystery gods that they descend to an underworld to redeem those souls incarcerated there.⁵⁰ Except for some masked dancers who explicitly represent *yakku* or other-worldly spirits, masks are not in evidence at Kataragama. Nor are there any lines to be spoken, or even a single utterance by ritual performers, although enthralled spectators may sing and many are heard to cry *Haro-Hara!* ('Hallelujah').⁵¹ And yet, the dramatic or numinous character of the ritual performance is readily evident; the presence of the principal divine characters is keenly felt though they are seldom to be seen, as secrecy and disguise are integral motifs of the ritual drama both in



***Dromena* or mystery rite at Kataragama: A Kapurala shaman-priest (at right, shrouded under canvas) embodies the unseen god as he bears the tiny casket believed to contain the *yantra*, or rather the god himself, and prepares to mount *Swami* upon the tusker's back.**

theme and content.

In the cult of Murukan, the mask-symbol may be said to find its counterpart in the youthful god's ever-present *vel*, or spear. The spear, too, unites hunter and prey, life and death, in a sacrifice that enables life—the world—to continue. The *vel* motif reappears as the god-king's scepter, the magician's wand, or the ascetic's staff. But its persistent representation as a spear clearly points to its Paleolithic origin in the dawn of human consciousness. It seems that in early times Murukan was represented by abstract symbols like the *v•l* or *yantra* alone, which perhaps explains why there are no anthropomorphic images or temples dedicated to the god prior to the bhakti age.⁵² This aniconic tradition, too, survives to this day in Kataragama where the god's Tamil devotees worship him as *kantali*, which Ponnambulam Arunachalam interprets as "reality transcending all categories without attachment, without form, standing alone as the Self."⁵³

Kataragama's indomitable spirit of paradox, antithesis and intercourse between worlds is evident even in the usual etymology: Kataragama is *Katir-k•mam*, where *katir* (Skt: 'luster'), connoting the *Logos* or Unitary Principle, meets *k•mam* (Skt: 'lust'), denoting *Eros*, the driving force of duality, birth and everyday embodied existence. As the story tells us, *Katirk•mam* is the place where Skanda-Murukan—as the *Logos*—manifestly expresses his yearning for the joys of earthly existence, personified in the vivacious heroine *Valli*, who may have been an agricultural goddess of fertility if she was not a flesh-and-blood maiden of the Neolithic era. Dionysus, too, is closely associated with love-fulfillment and Anacreon's song to the god begins with the words "O Lord, whose playfellows are the mighty *Eros* and the dark-eyed nymphs and violet *Aphrodite*!"⁵⁴

The coincidence and harmonious reconciliation of opposites is another recurrent theme in the myths of Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan.

Indeed, the very coherence or internal consistency between the myth, local ritual practices and underlying metaphysical principles is in itself further structural evidence of Kataragama's antiquity and continuing soteriological function. Alternatively, one may interpret this extraordinary structural cohesiveness in synchronic literary terms, as a *homology of form and content*, exhibited throughout the artistic traditions of both Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan. Indeed, it would not be too much to assert that this homology of form and content, or Unity of Theory and Action, is evident in the cyclic structure of the traditions, as both homologize a body of mythic events with the ritual calendar. At the same time, both draw upon the motif of eternal return, of ends being identical with beginnings.



Spirit of life and fertility: Valli Amma

Just as Kataragama Deviyo makes a promise or solemn vow (*bara*) to remain or reappear at a later time, so likewise his followers undertake solemn oaths in a ritual practice that can only be concluded before the deity, i.e. by returning to Kataragama.⁵⁵ Similarly, the *diya kaepiima* (Tamil: *t•rttam*) or 'water-cutting ceremony' at the conclusion of the great festival of Kataragama, ritually enacts the end of one annual cycle and the beginning of a new cycle.

Another expression of this homology of form and structure is intimately associated with the very nature of mystery itself. The Latin *mysterium* and Greek *mūsterios* are derived from a verbal root *mus* 'to close (the eyes or lips)' and one who was initiated into the ancient mysteries was called *mustes*, meaning 'one vowed to silence.'⁵⁶ Thus, strictly speaking, silence and secrecy are integral components of any genuine mystery tradition—as the Taoist dictum puts it: 'Those who know don't speak and those who speak don't know'. Having made this confession, I can only point out that the same rule applies to the mystery cult of Kataragama—its central injunction *cumm• iru!* (Tamil: 'Be still!') enjoins both contemplative silence and secrecy and is said to the essence of instruction imparted by Skanda-Murukan himself. And indeed, silence and secrecy characterize both the theme and content of the *dromena* or numinous performances associated with the cults of Kataragama-Skanda and Dionysus. As such, the hierophany or mystery drama of *Katir-kamam*, like that of Dionysus, may be understood as the "plenitude of divine configurations"⁵⁷ permeating the story, the principles that govern it, its enactment and even the stage upon which it is enacted, which is Kataragama's sacred geographical setting together with its shrines and hypothesized underworld.

The fact that the *dromena* of Dionysus or Kataragama have never been remotely understood or, in the case of Kataragama, scarcely recognized as such at all, fits perfectly with the underlying patterns common to both. I say 'underlying', for both mysteries are characterized by motifs of disguise, guile and trickery—all elements common to life in the wild and survival in a perilous underworld or, for that matter, in today's urban jungles. It is noteworthy in this regard that Skanda-Murukan has long been reckoned as the **presiding spirit of the Kali Yuga** and all its tumult, including such activities as children's games, hunting, erotic sports, dramatic performance, politics and warfare. All these have a place in the myths of both gods who are spirits of paradox, duplicity and inexpressible unity within duality. One should recall that Skanda's epithet *Guha* means not only 'the Mysterious One' but also 'the Concealed One'. That is, he is not merely quiescent, but constantly engaged in playful unseen activities.

Lords of the Labyrinth

Persistent oral traditions preserved in Kataragama speak of the locality as being riddled with hidden passageways leading to other places of sacred power (such as Adam's Peak and Mount Kailasa) or even to other *lokas* or worlds. Many local stories tell of gods, goddesses, demons, *siddhas* and other supernatural beings passing in and out of our world through such gateways. Others tell of unwitting humans who stumble through such entrances: there they behold incredible wonders and marvelous wealth, but when they attempt to bring things back, either they cannot return or their treasures vanish.

For years, I dismissed as pure fantasy such stories claiming that beneath Kataragama there exists a 'sunken kingdom', an 'underground university', or vast subterranean chambers full of priceless gems guarded by *n•gas* or dragon-spirits. However, after years of focusing on the literal or surface (*pratyaksa*) meaning, I am now convinced that these stories are allegories deep with metaphysical or parabolical (*paroksa*)

meanings or applications.⁵⁸ These narratives were—and still are—recited for the enjoyment and wonder of all listeners but specifically intended to serve as conscious exegetical exercises, attracting and enticing spiritually-qualified aspirants at the same time that they screen out those who are unsuited to proceed further. As such, they implicitly direct the aspirant to *search beneath the surface* meaning to progressively deeper realms of allegory, imagination and eternal archetypes. Other bardic traditions the world over, notably that of the Celts, have also made extensive use of this theme of subterranean or otherworldly adventure. Furthermore, it suggests the survival of a cult of the earth-goddess, of divinity abiding in the earth-mother *Gaea*, recalling and invoking the maternal rhythm of basic life processes and feminine creativity—as Euripides (fr. 488) once said, "The myth is not my own, I had it from my mother." A matrilineal line of transmission further suggests an origin in antiquity prior to the Sanskritisation of Sri Lankan society by early patriarchal Sinhalese immigrants.

The fact that no one, outside of the tradition's custodians themselves (who are vowed to secrecy anyway), has ever drawn attention to these peculiar features of Kataragama fits perfectly with the complex maze of interwoven themes, motifs, practices and outward circumstances that characterize Kataragama and, as a profound intellectual edifice, serves the purpose of a *labyrinth*, the penetration of which was—and remains—one of the heroic tasks of initiates of metaphysical traditions the world over. For the most part, like Dionysus, the god of Kataragama maintains a low profile in legend and his cult's custodians or connoisseurs follow suit. Most, it seems, have been *•ndis*, *swamis* and other itinerant performers who revel in life regardless of outward exigencies. They may be said to express what they know, or know of, less through the medium of words than through embodying a tradition whose central injunction *cumm• iru!* enjoins utter simplicity and profound silence as well as secrecy.

Moreover, one should also bear in mind that the myths or stories of Kataragama and Dionysus concern an unknown (and perhaps unknowable) principle or agent acting in an unseen and unrecognized way with an invisible power or efficacy, called *shakti*, upon the visible realm of multiplicity and manifestation—our own world. The central theme concerns a passage through the Gates of Death into an inconceivable realm lying beyond. As such, it is a soteriological theme of



Journey to the Sacred Center: Labyrinth motif of a 20th Century straw mat woven in Anuradhapura district, Sri Lanka. Sacred animals (deer and elephant) guard the approach to Kataragama.

liberation, salvation or deliverance from the tyranny of *Cur* (old Tamil: literally, Angst or fear) the terrific protean demon that Murukan subdues and then accepts as his servant. Dionysus, too, was known by the highly significant epithet *Lusios*, "the Liberator."⁵⁹

In like fashion, we are reminded that the epithet *Bacchos*, of obscure etymology, was applied both to the god Dionysus and to his celebrants. Similarly, the common honorific epithet *swami*, (Skt: 'one who is (lord of) himself', i.e. a free man), originally referred exclusively to the deity Skanda and to his hierophants, as did the Tamil epithet *velan* (literally, spearman or lancer). Even today, not only is the god of Kataragama still called *Sw•mi*, but the celebrants, hierophants or adepts of his cult are also called *sw•mis* and *sw•mi-ammas*, many of whom still bear the *vêl*-emblem (as well as personal names) that implicitly homologises them to the deity. Thus, the pervasive theme of instantaneous (Skt: *sa-krit*) transition or simultaneity between worlds or levels expresses itself as a homology of roles, divine and human, ideal and actual.

While an individual *sw•mi*'s actual apprehension ('realisation' in modern Indian vernacular) of the cult's metaphysical subtleties may vary, most aspirants must persevere for years or decades before being regarded as a *sw•mi* or expert. As such, it is not orthodoxy, 'correct belief,' that matters in Kataragama as much as *orthopraxis*, 'correct practice.' Highly esteemed Kataragama swamis tend to be child-like, guileless and friendly, but they are not overly talkative and proselytise still less. As such, they stand in stark contrast to the typically modern 'sw•mis' of the Vivekananda model with their diverse social and political agendas, which are singularly absent from the Kataragama model of contemplative mysticism.

Students of ritual have noticed the points of similarity between ritual and play. As Frits Staal observes, in play as in ritual activity, "the rules count, but not the result" and yet "the two kinds of activity, ritual and ordinary, can be juxtaposed without conflict or contradiction."⁶⁰ Or, in Segal's words, "Dionysiac play, like its artistic equivalent, is jealous of practical application; it insists on the spirit of play for its own sake."⁶¹ This persistent absence of expediency shown in the core tradition is a characteristic feature which, as Otto observes, "makes cult practice so alien and strange to the modern mind."⁶² Kataragama's cloak of secrecy, too, is partly woven of our own reluctance to understand, i.e. our modern prejudices and notions.

Gods of Abusive Epithets

Millions of Sri Lankans visit Kataragama, most with a practical purpose in mind, usually to request a boon or to give thanks for one received. Ironically, however, cult initiates themselves frequently address the god—privately and not so privately—with abusive epithets. As noted, both Skanda-Murukan and Dionysus are widely reckoned to be earthy and even roguish gods. In as ancient a canonical text as the Atharva Veda, a section called the *Skanday•ga* is also known as the *Dh•rtakalpa*, or 'Rogue Ordinance'.⁶³ This association of the solar hero Skanda with cunning and fraud has long puzzled scholars. He is repeatedly called *dh•rta*, meaning 'rogue'. Why?

In brief, the reputation of both Dionysus and Skanda—and particularly Kataragama-Skanda—for

roguishness is a natural consequence of their paradoxical, playful and picaresque character. Both gods are perfectly at home in a shadowy underworld replete with word play, trickery and thinly disguised sexuality. Both are amoral, mischievous characters who employ crafty stratagems—divine *picaros*, as it were. Both are masters of duplicity and mime or natural theatrics. All this suggests the tension, paradox, or contradiction felt between the Logos, *katir* and Eros, *k•ma*. At the same time, this duplicity is the principle of duality outside of which there can be no Eros, the experience of aesthetic rapture.

Not only in myth and legends, but also in practice, the god of Kataragama is a god of *oaths and abusive epithets*. His closest friends address him intimately—with insults; even Valli mocks the god when he appears to her in disguise. Dionysus, too, was called 'womanly', 'mad', 'lecherous': Lycurgus, King of the Edones, however unknowing, insults and expels Dionysus (*Apollodorus*, iii, v, 1-3). There is, after all, at least a kernel of truth in most of the allegations and, given the hidden or clandestine character of the gods, no one can say for certain what improprieties they have *not* committed in the course of their long careers. That Kataragama Deviyo is a philanderer, thief, rascal and friend of criminals and politicians is well known throughout all of Sri Lanka, if not in India as well. Indeed, his very notoriety serves to underline his down-to-earth immediacy and accessibility to devotees of every stratum of society.

[Arunakirinatar](#), the brilliant and prolific fifteenth-century composer of ambrosial Tamil poetry celebrating Murukan (who earlier had been a rogue and profligate himself), is mindful of this tradition of 'abusive praise' (Skt: *nind•stuti*) when he exclaims:

The bridegroom of Valli with tresses adorned with garlands
is ready to foster even those who curse and abuse—in threefold
Tamil!⁶⁴

This same grassroots tradition of abuse, slander, or reproach (Tamil: *ecal*) directed at Skanda-Murukan and/or his shakti-consorts finds expression in the still-flourishing and popular genre of *Vallikkum Teyvayanaikkum ecal* in which the god's rival consorts hurl abuse at each other.

Indeed, both gods in legend and Skanda's initiates in practice to this day follow a pattern of guile and deceit whereby they encourage humanity at large to misinterpret them, their motives and their behavior by confusing such conventional distinctions as high/low, good/bad, divine/worldly, etc. "As above, so below" goes the ancient hermetic dictum or principle; so likewise gods of alchemical transformation generally appear as socially-despicable characters, divine culprits who disseminate lofty metaphysical wisdom in the form of inscrutable behavior and low or uncouth speech. For instance, the very quintessence of wisdom is said to be expressed in the terse utterance *cumm• iru*, which in common parlance means 'shut up!' Unrecognized for what they truly represent, the gods *and* their followers are free to go about their inscrutable business, whatever it may be. These subtle cloaks of disguise, woven out of the mistaken perceptions of the world at large, have also played a role in other ancient Indian cults such as that of the *Pas'upatas*.⁶⁵

This beguiling practice of inverse adoration is not without parallel elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world even up to modern times. Says Dionysius the Areopagite, "Divine things

should be honoured by the true negations and by comparisons with the lowest things, which are diverse from their proper resemblance."⁶⁶ Rosalie Colie observes that these "rhyphological" images of low and sordid things "become by Dionysius' argument appropriate to attempt comprehension of the divine essence. Against this background, several things become clear, among them, the curious habit of devotional poets' using 'low things' in immediate juxtaposition to the highest, such as Herbert's likeness of Christ to a bag, of God to a coconut and Donne's of the flea's triple life to the Trinity."⁶⁷

Rather than to abuse—or praise—the god too much, I should point out that this beguiling practice of *nind•stuti* is not only attestedly very ancient, but it, too, survives to this day among the traditional folk of Sri Lanka. Some, especially village elders, are said to be extremely adept at it. Modern education, however, has taken its toll on this local tradition, while radio and television threaten to eradicate it altogether. It is a bardic tradition of *double entendre*, of ambiguous reference and risqué connotations. Truly, little is known or understood about this practice, but it is safe to conclude that it is closely related to the god's own association with roguery, the swearing of oaths, and magical word-play.

This use of language having double meanings—especially with sexual innuendoes—again points to cultures and times where 'Mother Wit' alone could prevail over brawn, where women both goaded and restrained their men through subtlety and where justice or Dharma was regarded as being virtually a cosmic force. Combined with the recurrent motif of periodic return, it suggests an origin in matriarchal culture prior to the imposed structure of a civilizing patriarchy, often associated with Aryan invasions. Above all, it was—and remains—a tradition of basic human values and needs.

To suggest, as this hypothesis does, that a millennia-old mystery cult has survived unrecognized until the dawn of the 21st century may sound like an extravagant claim to many. But when one looks at the cult of Kataragama-Skanda as that cult views itself, this conclusion is not so startling. The cult of Kataragama is a religion in the strict Durkheimian sense: it has a body of doctrine and myth, a set of associated rituals, a priesthood and other ritual specialists and "a moral community" of believers.⁶⁸ As such, it deserves to be studied on its own terms, as it sees itself and not merely as an adjunct or product of the society that has developed around it. When one considers the body of evidence from all available sources, including first-hand experience—as I have attempted—one arrives at a picture of Kataragama that is very different from the descriptions offered by social scientists—and remarkably similar to the mystery cult of Dionysus as its contemporaries described it. In short, there is much more to Kataragama than social research to date has made it out to be. Beneath Kataragama's surface, beneath layer under layer of secrecy and subterfuge, an initiatic mystery tradition survives to this day, waiting for intrepid souls to penetrate its ancient mystery.

Not surprisingly, this study raises more questions about the cults of Kataragama and Dionysus than it answers. Did one cult inspire or exert influence upon the other? Or do they share a common origin lost in antiquity, as Clothey suggests, as two branches of the same west Asiatic mystery tradition? Without postulating a Cosmic Intelligence or Jungian universal mind, can one maintain that they arose independently? Most especially, what *is* the underlying mystery of Kataragama and what can modern humanity learn from it? The in-depth study of Kataragama and the cult of Skanda-Murukan has really just begun. As a riotous affirmation of life in this world and in other worlds as

well, it stands without equal as a survival of times in remote antiquity prior to the imposition of patriarchal values upon older cultures. When feminine or matriarchal values were the norm of society, the rhythmic biological cycle of the *Magna Mater* was seen everywhere together with her Son the archetypal cultural hero.

As down-to-earth gods of paradox, fertility and ecstatic terror, Dionysus and Skanda-Murukan have baffled and inspired rural and urban, educated and unlettered, rich and poor devotees alike since millennia. Undoubtedly, this is among the reasons why Skanda-Murukan remains so popular in modern Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu and even appears to be making a comeback once again after centuries of relative obscurity.

Through ritual, symbolic gesture and allusive language, the mystery of Kataragama—so remarkably akin to that of Dionysus—has endured through the centuries to become antiquity's gift to modern humanity. But does modern man still possess the intuitive faculties needed to apprehend what Kataragama represents? Kataragama, it is said, embodies the *mysterium magnum*. If so, then it may represent the ultimate frontier and the gateway to humanity's understanding of itself, which is, after all, the *real* mystery.

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"Statue of Dionysus, recovered from the bed of the Tiber during works on a pillar of the Garibaldi bridge (1885). During the years 1984-1985, has been submitted to a process of restoration for better conservation. Bronze, lost wax fusion, height 158 cm, inventory 1060. The statue represents a naked Dionysus of a juvenile type, resting on the right leg, the left one being markedly flexed and resting on the forefoot. The head is slightly turned to the right inducing a light beginning movement of the back and the left arm holding a tyrsos, the traditional attribute of the god. The long hairstyle is parted in the middle and disposed in two undulating locks first maintained by a decorated head-ribbon, then falling laterally on the back. The disposition of the body still hints to a polyclitian influence, but the accentuated movement of the head and the sinuous line of the flanks denotes a good knowledge of the praxitelian opus.

The general scheme of the figure refers to a famous statuarian model which is the Dionysus of the Woburn Abbey type created during the middle of the 4th century BCE, from which

there are more than twenty known instances or variants, a style that shows for the first time a naked Dionysus of a youthful appearance and which will enjoy a tremendous popularity in the later Hellenistic and Roman ages. A noteworthy difference is in the position of the left, raised arm, which can be observed also on an exemplary of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek at Copenhagen and the statue of the Horti Lamiani in the Capitoline Museums.

P. Zanker thinks that the statue from the Tiber is derived from the well-known athlete of Stephanos, a classicist creation of the Roman first century BC, to which would have been added an abundant crop of undulating hairs. The work seems to be a creation of the imperial age and a reflect of the then predominating classicist taste. The insertion of the inlaid pupil and the thick upper lid allow a dating to the Hadrian-Antonine epoch."

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