

## *Re-conceptualizing the Cult of Sava Zeus*

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### **Abstract**

The Thracian-Phrygian cult of Sabazios is often identified with the cult of Dionysus and its mystic rituals. It appeared in ancient Greek art and literature in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. A general audience became familiar with content and meaning of the cult of Sabazios/Dionysus through Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae*. Both Dionysian and Saboi rituals were characterized by culmination of ecstatic trance which often included orgies, animal, and human sacrifice. There were few scholarly attempts that only partly explained connection of the two cults. The misunderstanding of the Sabazios cult, and the deity behind it, has been the result of faulty interpretation of non-Greek words coined into Greek notions. The article explores the meaning of the cult of Sabazios by drawing parallels between the expansion of the cult and the rise of Macedon during the Persian invasion of the Balkans. Additionally, it aims to illustrate and explain the mystery behind particular group of religious cults spread during that time, named Osiris-Dionysus.

Keywords: Sabazios, Dionysus, Macedon, Heraclids, Euripides

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## **Introduction**

In ancient Greece the Dionysian festivals were at the same time the most popular and the most alluring, yet unfamiliar and distant to both ordinary and intellectual audiences. The Thracian-Phrygian cult of Sabazios has been seen as similar or even identical with the cult of Dionysus (Dodds, 1940). Together with the cult of Demeter and Persephone they were simply referred to as mysteries by ancient writers, who left only few descriptions lacking any substantial explanation.

The Classical period of ancient Greece began around the time of the Persian invasion of the Balkans. Thereupon, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the cults of Sabazios and Dionysus appeared in ancient Greek art and literature. Macedon as Persian satrapy, and its most important ally in the Balkans, rose to become one of the most powerful Greek states. It is not exactly clear how the power and influence of Persia was reflected in ancient Greek religion and culture, since the traits of foreign elements had existed prior to the Persian invasion, often addressed to Egypt and Phoenicia. Additionally, there is another puzzle: Why was a Thracian-Phrygian rather than Zoroastrian cult, spread during the time of Persian presence in the Balkans? Perhaps the answer lies in its pre-Hellenic origin, and the Heraclid-Dorian lineage, shared only by Sparta and Macedon at that time. The re-establishment of the old, forgotten, or neglected religion and cult for the political purposes and conquests, reminds of a similar event that happened later, during the reign of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor.

The dynamism of Macedon-Sparta-Persia relation was very complex. It was drama which resembles the First World War 'clash of the cousins.' Was this relationship just a paradox of the kin and the foe, one of many fratricides that go a long way back into history and often repeats? The following analysis will try to explain the mysteries of Sabazios and Dionysus, and to shed light on the connection between Heraclids and Persian Achaemenids. The purpose of this article is to bring a new perspective on this topic using already existing evidences, which were either neglected or omitted in traditional interpretations.

## **Heraclid-Perseid Lineage**

The Macedonian Argead dynasty claimed its origin from the Temenids of Argos, the descendants of Heracles. The Temenids and the Persian Achaemenids were kin, with Achaemenids being the descendants of Perseus, Heracles's maternal grandfather. The Spartan and the old Lydian royal dynasties belonged to the line of Heraclids, as well. Even though Macedon participated in the Greco-Persian Greek war on the Persian side, according to Herodotus it had an amicable attitude towards Sparta. On the other hand, Sparta neither directly responded to the request of Ionian states against Persia (Olmstead, 1939, p. 306), nor chose to join Philip's League of Corinth.

In the early years of the Peloponnesian War, Macedon sided with Sparta, who was later, during the Athenian expedition to Sicily, supported by Persia. At the time of Alexander's conquests of Persia, Sparta remained neutral. Herodotus noted that Sparta was an ally of Croesus whose ancestors removed Lydian Heraclids. Yet, why would Spartans as Heraclids make such an alliance? Croesus the king of Lydia, and its Mermnad dynasty were punished as an anticipated act of retribution on behalf of Heraclids, who were driven out of Lydia when Gyges killed Candaules (Wardman,

1961, p. 146). Persia perhaps acted ‘in a good cause,’ to take revenge for the Heraclids. However, the origin of Lydian Mermnad dynasty is unknown, hence it is not easy to establish, or understand the connection between the Spartans and Croesus. Dascylos, the father of Gyges, was the founder of Mermnad dynasty. The name Dascylos often appears in relation to Asia Minor. Alike Telephus, the son of Heracles, one of the Dascyloses was the ruler of Mysia. Therefore, the common origin of Mermnads and Heraclids should not be completely excluded.

Persia, a country without direct access to the Mediterranean Sea, engaged in naval invasion, simply it does not look plausible. Herodotus stated that the two most powerful naval fleets in the Persian navy were Phoenician and Ionian. Thus, the Sparta’s response could be in relation to the Ionian-Phoenician naval invasion under Persian banner. Heracles was Perseid, and it seems that the only remaining Perseids in Greece after his death were his descendants. If the story behind the Achaemenids’ origin is true, then there are no major differences between the first return of the Heraclids and the latter return of the Perseids. Both returned to claim what had belonged to them.

### **Lineage Hypothesis in the Context of Euripides’ Tragedies**

The tragedies of Euripides: *Heracleidae*, performed around 429 BC; *Heracles*, performed in 416 BC; and *Bacchae*, premiered posthumously in 405 BC, were written during the Peloponnesian War; all three carrying strong political connotations. In *Heracleidae*, Euripides describes the clash between Heraclids and Perseids. Eurystheus, the king of Argos, intended to eliminate all the children of Heracles. However, at the end, together with his sons, Eurystheus was killed, which ended the Greek branch of the Perseid bloodline (Spranger, 1925, p. 124). Correspondingly, some ancient writers emphasized animosity between Persia and Sparta. On the other hand, the position of Macedon and its relation to both Sparta and Persia was somehow unclear. Macedon was not directly hostile to Sparta, and at the same time it was a Persian satrapy. For Euripides, Eurystheus was an antihero, as were the Persians in the eyes of Herodotus. Yet, why would Euripides, who favoured Macedon, write an anti-Perseid tragedy?

### **Children of Heracles**

*Heracleidae* was written in the opening years of the Peloponnesian War. It propagated the glory of Heraclids, and their destiny to rule the Greek world. In *Heracleidae* the children of Heracles were prosecuted by Eurystheus, the king of Argos. They went to Athens searching for help from the son of Theseus, king Demophon. There is a ‘catch-22’ subliminal context in *Heracleidae*. Euripides played with the name Eurystheus that resembles Eurysthenes; the former was the grandson of Perseus and the ruler of Mycenae/Argos, and the latter, was the great grandson of Heracles and the founder of one of the Spartan royal dynasties.

The Theseus’ scions, descendants of Pandion, were kin to *Heracleidae*. Before the time of Cleisthenes and Solon, beside Sparta and Megara, Athens also had very strong Doric and pre-Dorian elements (Strassler, 2007, Book 5; Fisher, N., & van Wees, 2009 p. 158). During the Peloponnesian War, although dominated by Ionians, Athens still included a large portion of non-Ionian population. The subliminal political

context in *Heracleidae* plays with the old Athenian heritage and the new, imposed Ionian identity, which culminates at the end of the play in the glorious victory of Heraclids.

In the Peisander's poem Eurystheus, a Perseid, was humiliated by Heracles, and later, in *Heracleidae*, killed by his son Hyllus. In a similar way Persia was defeated by Greek coalition led and influenced by the Spartan Heraclids. Nevertheless, the glory of that victory also belonged to Athenians, yet along the Heraclid lines to its Dorian and pre-Dorian parts, which was the real target *Heracleidae* tried to reach. Purified through political catharsis of this magnificent play, Athenians could see that the war against Sparta was not their war, but the war imposed by a certain structure which at that time controlled and ruled Athens.

In the beginning of the war, exactly around 430 BC the time of *Heracleidae* premiere, Macedon sided with Sparta. *Heracleidae* was a tale of triumph and glory of the old days, of the ancient heroes and their descendants, at that time forgotten and denied in Athens. And that was the true essence of the tragic in *Heracleidae*.

### **Madness of Heracles**

*Herakles* was performed during the second stage of the Peloponnesian War when Macedon hesitated between siding again with Sparta and allying with Athens. The strife between Macedon and Sparta, as the aftermath of the Battle of Lyncestis in 423 BC, had serious impact on the further Macedonian engagement in the Peloponnesian War. Macedon was torn between allying with kin Sparta and preserving its own security. Miscalculating the threat from Athens, being indecisive to ally with Sparta again, and perhaps the lack of true support from Sparta, resulted in the 417 BC Athenian naval blockade of Chalcidice. Around that time 417 - 415 BC the Athenians gained advantage, seemingly as a result of friction in the Heraclids' lines.

*Herakles* was premiered in 416 BC, one year before Athens launched the expedition to Sicily. The play itself is dark and heavy. Heracles was in the Underworld accomplishing his final labour while the kingdom and the lives of his beloved ones were in danger. Returning back home to save his family, he ended up losing his mind and killing his own children. The tragedy reflects disappointment in the lost time and meaningless efforts of the twelve labours, where all the glory from doing unattainable was annulated by the most essential thing man must do; and that is, to protect his family, and his land.

During the opening years of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides' *Heracleidae* glorified the heroic lineage and union of Heraclids. By 421 BC and the Peace of Nicias, the illusion of the glory left only the bitterness and disappointment, since the Sparta-Macedon alliance collapsed as a result of the strife among Heraclids. The devastating feeling of broken expectations was intense to the degree where, allegorically speaking, dead Heracles would come back from the Underworld and kill his Heraclids himself – and it is exactly what happened in the Euripides' play. The tragic in *Herakles* is the unfortunate death of the children of Heracles. Yet, at the same time a contextual essence of this tragedy was in fact the failure and degradation of the Heraclids in the real life.

## Bacchanals

*Bacchae*, is one of the most important written references for the cult of Dionysus. It was written in Macedon, during the reign of king Archelaus I, and premiered in Athens in 405 BC, one year after Euripides' death. At that time Macedon was already established as Athenian ally, yet this did not change the fact that Macedon entered into alliance with Athens indecisively, mostly due to its weak and overexposed geopolitical position. In the year of the premiere of the play the Athenians were almost defeated in the war.

The king of Thebes Pentheus and his mother were punished by Dionysus for spreading lies and disbeliefs in his divine origin. The king was accidentally killed, dismembered, and devoured during Dionysian rites, by the followers of the cult, including his mother. The stories of *Heracleidae* and *Bacchae* are related. In *Heracleidae*, Euripides propagates advance of the Heraclid leadership, through Macedon-Sparta alliance; and in *Bacchae*, a catharsis thought destruction of disbelievers. Nevertheless, there are two very important questions which implicitly allude the answers: Why was the play written in Macedon at the closing of the war in 406 BC, when Athens was still powerful, yet suffered a defeat against Spartan navy led by Lysander (who was a Heraclid), in the battle of Notium? Why was it premiered in Athens in 405 BC, the year of the battle of Aegospotami, when Lysander led navy delivered the final blow to Athenians? Considering above described circumstances, the play was, perhaps, an attempt to propagate and politically justify Archelaus' possible break away from the alliance, and to awake Dorian and pre-Dorian population in Athens by emphasising the psychological moment of destruction of the 'disbelievers.' In that sense the purification which *Bacchae* intended to bring was created through repentance and forgiveness over the wrong political decisions, and the hope that unity founded on old values and glory of Dorian Heraclids was still achievable.

A reaction to the Euripides' play and its political aims can be seen in Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*. In *Frogs* Aristophanes mocks Dionysus, Heracles and Euripides. At the end of the play Aristophanes allegorically buries Euripides and his importance. The comedy was premiered in Athens in the same year as *Bacchae*. Nevertheless, the hope and the vision of Euripides were far from being buried, soon to be resurrected in the new 'Heraclid Word' established by one of the descendants of Heracles, Alexander the Great.

The Peloponnesian War is understood as hegemonic war between the two most powerful city-states in ancient Greece, and never as a clash along cultural, social, ethnical and religious lines. Aristophanes put in the same basket, the Olympian god Dionysus, the demigod Heracles, and Euripides, one of the greatest ancient writers. All three were related to the non-Ionian, world. Dionysus, 'the god from Nysa,' was the only Greek god who was named after the place where he was raised, located in the non-Hellenic world. Heraclids were kings of Sparta, Macedon, and Lydia. They were Dorians, as were Megarians. Euripides was born in Salamis, once a Megarian island. The Dorian invasion was referred to as 'the return of the Heraclids,' which occurred less than a century after the Trojan War. In the years after the Dorian invasion, Ionians were evicted from Peloponnese and Attica, remaining only in Athens and the colonized coastal city-states of Asia Minor. Thus, who were Dorians; where were

Heraclids those 60 years prior to the invasion; why did they fight against Achaeans in Troy, and latter against Ionians during the Greco-Persian and Peloponnesian wars; did the Greeks grecized foreign gods, in the same way the Romans romanized Greek gods? There are many unanswered questions, even never raised. The following chapter will try to answer some of them, or at least provide awareness of the missing parts of the great puzzle, forenamed the cradle of Western civilization.

### **Pre-Hellenic Cult**

The spread of Dionysian/Saboi and Eleusinian mysteries to a certain extent reflects the influence of the non-Greek world to whom Macedon and the city-states in Asia Minor, as part of Greek frontiers, were continuously exposed. According to Herodotus, Phrygians were the most ancient people (Herodotus, 1910, Book 2), a belief accepted by Egyptians, as well. They were called Brigians as long as they dwelt in Europe. Originally Brigians lived in Pelagonia, in the neighbourhood of Macedon. They changed their name to Phrygians after moving to Asia Minor (Borza, 1990, p. 65; Herodotus, 1910, Book 7). Therefore, it is quite feasible to argue that the Thracian-Phrygian deities and religious cults had influenced Macedon even before the Persian invasion.

There are not many evidences proving the existence of the cult of Sabazios/Dionysus in Greece prior to the Persian invasion. The ancient origin of the cult of Dionysus was often falsely related to the early spread of the cult of wine all around the ancient world. During the pre-Classical period the two cults were similar, if not identical. The cult of Dionysus, or at least the rites of the Rural Dionysia, was anchored in the Thracian-Phrygian cultural heritage (Kraemer, 1979), which is probably the reason why in ancient Greece its real meaning was never clearly recognized. It was incomprehensible for the writers of that time, as it is for us today. The Sabazoi/Dionysian cult was a mystery, yet it was annually performed. The only valid assumption is that the cult was foreign, a part of non-Greek cultural heritage, remembered and performed only in its external form. In ancient Greece, the cult of Dionysus was fully established only during and after the Persian invasion. The latter Hellenistic form of the cult was reduced to the theatrical performances of tragedies and comedies during the City Dionysia. In some regions of Greece, the Rural Dionysia still included the mystic rites of pre-Hellenic heritage with bizarre activities of maenads and other participants such as *sparagmos*, *omophagia*, *carrying phalloi*, *orgia*, etc. (Dodds, 1940). The spread of the cult probably reached its peak during the reign of Alexander the Great (Brunt, 1965, p. 214), and its final stage coincided with the Celtic invasion of Greece in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

### **Missing linguistic link**

In the Ancient Greek language consonants  $\varphi$ ,  $\theta$ ,  $\chi$  (b, d, g) were often altered into  $\beta$ ,  $\delta$ ,  $\gamma$  (p, t, k) (Lane, 1980; Babiniotis, 1992). Macedonian dialect, on the other hand, used the old forms with unchanged consonants.

Our position in this paper is that Macedonian, an Ancient Greek dialect, existed in an oral form (quite early the Attic dialect became the official language of the macedonic state for socio-political reasons), so it did not

suffer any effect from a conservative written tradition (Babiniotis, 1992, p. 38).

*Sabazios*, is comprised of two words: *saba* and *zios*, unfortunately both mistranslated. The Ancient Greek alphabet did not have letter *v*. *Saba* in *Sabazios* is a grecized form in which  $\beta$  is replacing non-existing *v* (Johnson, 1968, p. 543). The word *saba* was derived from the Sanskrit word *sava*, meaning: sacrifice, instigator, commander, progeny, the Moon, the Sun. Thus, in Ancient Greek, *sava* was written as *saba* (Lane, 1980). In the name of the cult, the words *sava* and *zios* combined, have one of the following meanings:

The cult of *the sacrificed god* – Dionysus Zagreus, the horned god (Nonnos, 1940, p. 225; Hard, 2004, p. 35).

The cult of *the god to whom we sacrifice* – mentioned in *Alcmeonis* as Zagreus, highest of all the gods (Foster, 2017, p. 165). The night ranging Zagreus from *Cretans*, performing his feasts of raw flesh (Spanoudakis, 2014, p. 222).

The cult of *the progeny of God (the son of God)* – Zagreus in *Sisyphus*, identified as the son of Hades (Aeschylus, fragment 124). *Sabazios*, the god on horseback, the son of the mare goddess Kubileya.

The cult of *the Moon-god* – the son of the Phrygian self-castrated god Attis; or, the son of the Indo-Aryan self-castrated god Rudra (Kramrisch, 1992).

### ***Dionysian dilemma***

Before the time of Alexander the Great, the ancient world had witnessed the conquests of Dionysus-Father *Bacchus*, and Heracles-Hercules (Brunt, 1965, p. 209). The former was placed among Olympians, and recognized as God by Greeks and all other people he subdued. The latter conquered the entire known world, including Europe. Alexander tried to achieve both the extension of the conquests of Heracles, and the divine status of Dionysus.

In Greek mythology there were two Dionysus. The first Dionysus was *Dionysus Zagreus*, worshiped in the non-Hellenic Balkan and Asia Minor as *Sabazios*. The second Dionysus is the biggest pre-Heraclian conqueror, the youngest Olympian god. In the world which he had conquered the word *bhaga/baga/baha* echoed the highest concept of God – the life, the Plato's idea of the good. Behind the Persia-Macedon alliance there was a long history which connects Balkan, Asia Minor, Persia, and India. The spread of the *Sabazios* cult during the Persian invasion of Balkans revoked the memories of the great conquests and the importance of the starting point, the location of their initial spread. Soon after entering India, Alexander was told by the locals to be the third descendant of Jupiter who had visited their country, and while Father *Bacchus* and *Hercules* were known to them merely by tradition, him they saw present before their eyes (M'Crindle, 1893, p. 191).

The god *Pan* in Asia Minor was often associated with the mother goddess *Cybele*.

“*Pan* was worshipped jointly with *Meter* in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., when the poet *Pindar* established a shrine to the two divinities in *Boiotia*” (Roller, 1994, p. 252).

This could be a reference to Sabazios who was sometimes depicted together with Cybele and Attis (Zahn, 1929, p. 139). Persephone gave birth to the horned god Zagreus. Cybele's consort was the self-castrated 'shepherd god' Attis, and, perhaps, Sabazios was her son. Many scholars identify Sabazios with the Phrygian Moon-god Men. Attis is the father, with the sun's rays above his head, and Sabazios/Men, with the crescent moon emerging from his shoulders, is the son. Interestingly enough, in Akkadian, the Moon and the Moon-god was called *sin*, which in contemporary Slavic languages is the word for son.

Dionysus Zagreus was described as the horned god. In one of the tales of Achaemenid origin, Achaemenes is said to be the son of Aegeus, 'the goat man.' According to the foundation myth the first capital of Macedon was also named *aegae*, after the goat. Further, Aegeas the legendary king of Athens was the son of Pandion, and the 6<sup>th</sup> pre-diluvial ruler of Athens. During his reign the cults of Dionysus and Demeter arrived to Attica. Thus, was he the first Dionysus Zagreus, the horned god (the pan-dion), the son and Demeter, i.e. Cybele, his mother? Persephone and Demeter represent different aspect of the same divinity – the young princess, and the old queen. Persephone, who was sometimes called girl, or maiden, is young Demeter. The Greek goddess Demeter was known as the mare-goddess, and Sabazios as the god on horseback. The original name of the goddess Cybele was *Kubileya*, which incredibly resembles Slavic word for mare – *kobila*. Demeter's son Arion, was a horse begotten by Poseidon. In the name of Dionysus Zagreus, *zagre* means pit for the capture of wild animals. Often, Sabazios was portrayed as the master of animals holding griffins (Hinks, 1938). Aegeus the goat man, the Pan-Dion, the horned god Zagreus, most likely all of them refer to the same historical figure, the first Dionysus.

## Conclusion

The cult of Sabazios/Dionysus was one of the most important cults in the ancient Balkans and Asia Minor. Sabazios, referred to as the Thracian-Phrygian deity, most probably originated in Thrace, or further north to the Danube. The cult was spread to the rest of Greece as a consequence of the Persian invasion of the Balkans, and the rise of Macedon. The linguistic analysis of this study shows, that the Greek translations of non-Greek words were either incomplete, replacing original phonetic sounds with inadequate Greek letters, or incorrect, creating completely new words after their grecization. The grecization was a process of assimilation of non-Greek elements (gods, heroes, cult, etc.) into Greek cultural and historical heritage. Heracles was a real historical figure, the conqueror who subdued the East and the West, yet none of this was known to the Greeks. He existed only in the myths and legends, as demigod who performed the twelve labours. Therefore, tools for better linguistic analysis of the grecized words are Sanskrit itself, and some older Indo-Aryan languages, such as Gaelic and Slavic.

During the Peloponnesian War, some people saw Macedon-Sparta alliance as a new return of the Heraclids. Euripides propagated it through his tragedies dedicated to Heracles and Dionysus. Athens, one of the oldest Greek states, was at that time under the political and economic control of Ionians, with the majority of its population still belonging to the non-Ionian group. The aims of Sparta in the Peloponnesian Wars were accomplished and completed by Alexander the Great. His Balkan campaigns resulted in surprisingly easy victories and treaties. In the course of his conquest of the



East, Sparta remained neutral, due to the failure of previous Macedon-Sparta alliance, or perhaps, the Spartans believed that they should lead a new Dorian invasion - the return of the Heraclid Aryans.

The Persia-Macedon alliance was not solely based on the Heraclid-Perseid lineage. The true link was the Indo-Aryan connection preserved in the old customs, religious cults, and the residue of the ancient languages. Macedon was ruled by Heraclids, and at the same time it was within the Thracian religious and cultural domain. Illyria, Thrace, and Macedon were regions located on the doorstep of Europe. There were many worlds, crossing over their territories. The Balkans was always torn between the myth and reality, between the need to survive and the will to power, between the things it was and the claims how it should be. Not much has changed. The sway of political decisions and the system of alliances of the ancient Macedon reflected the sway of the old glory. The Balkans – a tragedy of torn, dismembered region for the sake of Greece, or Europe; a catharsis that still brings purification through wrath and fire. The cult of Sabazios, the sacrificed god, ever-present motif of that land.

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