The enigmatic divinity Dionysos (Bacchus in Roman mythology) is well known throughout Asia Minor. The distinctive headdress of fruit and vine leaves is visible in sculpture, a hallmark of the god’s association with the vintage and symbol of his fertility. Not one for the faint hearted: Dionysos commands fear and respect. In his retinue may be found mainads – mostly women devotees with a reputation for wild partying; animals – especially felines; silenoi – aged and effeminate tutors of the young god; satyrs - half human, half beast; musicians and dancers. Companions of the god would bear the wooden thyrso, a symbol of devotion and a sacred implement used in ritual and procession.
DIONYSOS IN KOLOSSAI

More than just the wine…

Revellers in procession - mainad with kymbala, dancer and feline beast; satyr with instruments, and Dionysos himself, reclining in a chariot, thyrsos in hand.

From a frieze found in the theatre at Hierapolis. Image taken from Denizli Müze. Source: author

In mythology Dionysos is represented in many places and in many guises. He is born either of Persephone and Zeus, an ill fated deity torn asunder by the jealous Titans and reborn again from his own ashes; or he is born of the mortal Semele and Zeus, again ill fated, destined to death by thunderbolt, born again from his father’s thigh.

Dionysos is energetic, driven by insatiable desires to love and to wound. He is a wanderer in the realm of mortals, lover of disguises, tempter, game player and destroyer. He is the agent of mania – madness, and the master of wine. He is associated with the sea, with epidemia – visitation, with raw flesh and intense religious ritual. Mountains and caves are favourite places for worship: natural places in which devotees celebrated the god and re-enacted his stories.

Dionysos in Asia Minor is witnessed in public festivals, inscriptions, temples, coins and literature. Images of gods populate city and countryside, are present in theatre, in cult, are ingrained within civic processes, and deeply imbued within the consciousness of a people. Inevitably Dionysos would have inhabited Kolossai on the Lykos. Kolossai was a significant city in size and reputation until at least the middle of the second century. The likelihood of a cult to Dionysos in the city is high – Kolossai is no different in this respect to other cities – just as Kolossai would have supported multiple cults to other gods. Evidence of Dionysos in coin and inscription has been attributed to Kolossai.
DIONYSOS IN KOLOSSAI
More than just the wine...

Numismatic evidence of Dionysos in Kolossai - the god is half naked on the reverse of the coin, with a cantharum in one hand and a thyrsos in the other. A feline lies at his feet. On the obverse the head of Agrippina the elder is depicted with the writing ΚΟΛΟϹϹΗΝΩΝ – ‘of the Kolossians’. Source: Von Aulock 454

Kolossai on the Lykos. View looking across to the acropolis

True, Kolossai is unexcavated to date and the ground beneath the inquisitive feet that wander the site today is keeping secrets. Why Dionysos in Kolossai? Let’s start with the mountain – site of cultic activities, related even in name to dionysian myth: Mount Kadmos. Kadmos, father of Semele in Euripides’ Bakkhai, founder of Thebes and grandfather of Pentheus, the unfortunate Theban king who would attempt to penetrate the gathering of female mainads and be discovered, then torn apart by his own mother in a rage induced by Dionysos.
Mount Kadmos - the realm of gods. This massive mountain looms over the town of Khonai - modern Honaz, a short distance from the site of ancient Kolossai. Here echoes the sound of the thyrsos thumping the ground... *ite Bakchai*

Source: author

Mount Kadmos looms skyward, two kilometres from the centre of ancient Kolossai, the second largest peak in the Taurus Mountains. Imagine the mainads gathering to honour Dionysos in ritual, albeit modified and tamer than that described by Euripides. Imagine the sound of tambourine and kymbala, the thumping of the thyrsi - *ite Bakchai, ite Bakchai* – go Bakchants, go Bakchants; *eis oros, eis oros* – to the mountain, to the mountain. The atmosphere is rich, organic, enduring. Caves and grottoes discovered in the precinct could well have been sacred spaces, with devotees in them at festival time, celebrating the rituals, invoking Dionysos.

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More than wine and vine is Dionysos, more than ill reputed orgy making. Come and experience Dionysos in Kolossai. Tread the vine, taste the blood, feel the *energia* surge…

ΔΙΟΝΥΣΟΣ

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