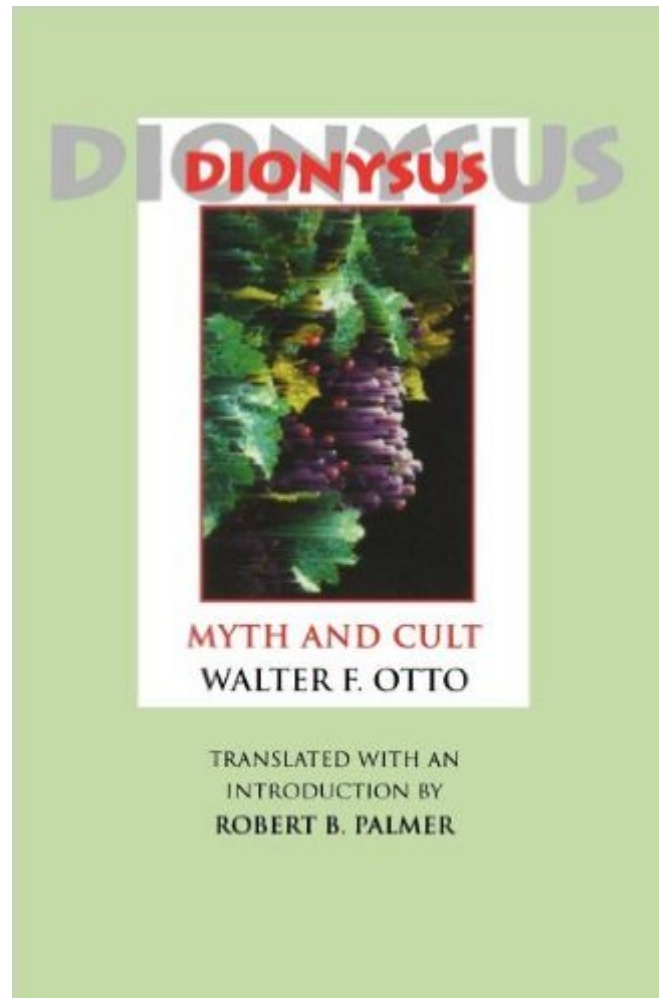


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Dionysus: Myth And Cult



Synopsis

"This study of Dionysus... is also a new theogony of Early Greece." •Publishers Weekly
"An original analysis... of the spiritual significance of the Greek myth and cult of Dionysus." •Theology Digest

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Water F. Otto's *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* is a difficult but extremely rewarding study not only of the god Dionysus but of myth and cult as well. The book is divided into two parts. The first looks at the meaning of myth and cult and their relationship, the second attempts to arrive at the essential characteristic of Dionysus. By no means should you skip the first part. In it Otto lays the groundwork for his penetrating analysis of the god. It is a scintillatingly brilliant and illuminatingly original exposition of the meaning and origins of myth and cult. Anyone interested in Greek religion or for that matter liturgy alone, should read it. Although written over forty years ago it will still challenge and startle. Otto is gifted with a poetic depth of perception and gnomic expressiveness worthy almost of Heraclitus. For example at one point he states: "The more alive this life becomes, the nearer death draws, until the supreme moment-the enchanted moment when something new is created-when death and life meet in an embrace of mad ecstasy." Otto holds that "The true visage of every true god is the visage of a world." In the second part he sets about discovering the form or visage of Dionysus. This he brilliantly lays out in chapters dealing with every aspect of the god. Chapters include: *The Vine*, *The Somber Madness*, *Dionysus and the Element of Moisture*, *Dionysus and the Women*, and *Dionysus and Apollo*. I will not attempt to recount his conclusions. Get the book and read them in Otto's lapidary language. Don't be put off from reading this book if

you don't know Greek. While there are a fair number of untransliterated words, you can understand the meaning of the sentences from the context. However, be aware that this is not "lite" reading but a serious study that requires and will repay thought. The book itself is a handsome, sturdy paperback with glued signatures.

This book is written in two parts. The first is an essay about the use of Cult practices as a source for the substance and interpretation of myth. The second (and longest) describes the myths themselves. I have only read the second part. Otto's description and interpretation of the myths surrounding Dionysus is poetic and, at times borders on the sublime. His impact is emotional as well as intellectual, and I came away feeling that I knew the God of whom he writes. This must say something for both the passion of the author for his subject and the skill and sympathy of the translator. The book is well (exhaustively ?) documented. Only one thing was irksome. Reference is constantly made to words from the original Greek using greek characters with no transposition into english characters (for a non-classically trained person such as myself). While the commentary surrounding these texts usually explains their meaning and impact, I have had to learn the Greek alphabet and buy a classical greek dictionary (Langenscheidt) to verify and fully understand the commentary. Even so, the book is otherwise beautifully accessible for a lay person such as myself.

The first part of the book is essentially a long essay on the way myth and cult interact. It is important to note that this is a philological book and it can appear pedantic. The thesis in the first section is still crucial to pre-Christian religious studies today, but some of the polemics against other thinkers within it are quite dated. The second part of the book covers the historical development of both the Dionysus myth and cult. Otto unravels several popular and scholarly misreadings of the Dionysus myth. You may want a Attic/Koine Greek lexicon and alphabet guide near you if you feel so inclined, but most untranslated words can be figured by context with few exceptions. I will also note that this is an excellent translation from the German; Robert B. Palmer's introduction is very helpful in contextualized this work in the history of Philology and religious studies.

Walter F. Otto's literary tribute to Dionysos is a masterpiece of mythic spirit and proportions. Plunging into the paradoxical realm of the god, he explores the divine drama of the deity and his various roles as conqueror, deliverer, Lord of Souls, God of Wine and vegetative nature, his special relationship with the Feminine, the maenad priestesses of his cult and his consort, Ariadne. He presents a work of love and immediacy that is clearly born of an intimate connection with this

complex god and his cult. Irresistibly readable.

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