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## THE GULIARIA OF PALAIOCHORI ON MOUNT PANGAION: TRACING THE VESTIGES OF A DIONYSIAN RITUAL

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### Abstract

This article examines the Gularia of Palaiochori on Mount Pangaion in Eastern Macedonia, Greece, a now-discontinued ritual performance remembered by local elders as an ancient custom and last publicly enacted in 1969. Drawing on folkloric documentation and archaeo-historical and anthropological interpretation, the study analyses the ritual's terminology, secrecy, initiation, bodily transformation, performative structure, and communal effects. During the performance, the Gularides, the male initiates of the Gularia, appeared on Clean Monday as nearly nude, soot-blackened, and unrecognizable figures wearing vegetal coverings, carrying agricultural implements, moving rhythmically through the village, shouting, teasing, disappearing, and reappearing unexpectedly. The article argues that the custom should not be reduced to Carnival entertainment, but understood as a ritual performance preserving pre-Christian symbolic elements associated with spring renewal, social cohesion, and Dionysian transformation. More specifically, it proposes that the Gularia preserve vestiges of a Dionysian ritual world, tenaciously transmitted through local cultural memory and, even when reconfigured across changing historical and religious conditions, still recognizable in the custom's secrecy, bodily transformation, ecstatic movement, vegetal symbolism, ritual laughter, and collective liberation.

**Keywords:** Eastern Macedonia; Mount Pangaion; Palaiochori; local tradition; Gularia; cultural memory; ritual performance; Dionysian ritual vestiges

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### Prologue: The *Gularia* as Ritual Performance

The present article considers the Gularia — Greek *Γκουλιάρια*, here rendered in simplified transliteration — a customary ritual performance, Greek *dromeno*, formerly enacted at the village of Palaiochori on Mount Pangaion, in the Kavala region of northern Greece. Performed at a particular point in the annual festive cycle, and remembered by the elders of the village as a relic of ancient times, the Gularia provided the occasion for a collaborative inquiry by Anagnostis P. Agelarakis and Aristeidis Chr. Mentizis.

The descriptive prologue that follows draws primarily on the local folkloric documentation of Mentizis, whose study recorded the terminology, remembered form, oral testimonies, and performative structure of the Gularia from within the

cultural memory of Palaiochori itself. This material was first presented in paired papers at the Second Conference of Local History of Pangaion, where Mentizis addressed the folkloric dimension of the custom and Agelarakis developed its archaeo-historical and archaeo-anthropological interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

In the local dialect of Mount Pangaion, the word *gouliari* means “naked”; accordingly, *Guliaría* denotes “the naked ones,” that is, the men who took part in the performance. Mentizis records that elderly villagers who had participated in its customary enactments did not assign to it a definite point of origin, but described it simply as “ancient.” Its public enactment ceased in 1969, under the broader political and ideological climate of the period, thereby closing a significant chapter in the local tradition of Pangaion. Many photographs of the performance were reportedly destroyed or hidden in order to avoid possible trouble, leaving oral testimony as the principal surviving source for the reconstruction of the custom.

According to the testimonies collected by Mentizis, the *Guliaría* were performed on the afternoon of Clean Monday<sup>2</sup>. In later times the custom appears to have been associated, through historical misunderstanding, with Carnival; yet its deeper structure was understood as connected with spring, the awakening of nature from winter dormancy, and the wider category of springtime *agermoi*, or ritualized processions intended to drive winter away. During the performance, young men of the village appeared naked or nearly naked, with grasses tied around their waists, their bodies blackened with soot and ash from household fireplaces. Carrying agricultural implements, they ran and danced among the assembled crowd, uttering inarticulate cries and teasing those who came into their path. They appeared suddenly from an unknown place and disappeared just as suddenly.

The performative space was the central square and the main road of Palaiochori, where villagers had gathered for the Clean Monday festivities. Participation in the custom was restricted to men. The participants used materials of vegetal origin: grasses and wild plants tied around the waist as a rudimentary covering and, in more recent years, pieces of hemp sackcloth, apparently introduced as a modest covering. Their faces and bodies were blackened with soot and ash so that they could not be recognized; later, some also tied a kerchief or piece of cloth over the face. No testimony records the sacrifice of an animal or the use of animal-derived materials, such as skins or wool, in this particular ritual performance.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristeidis Chr. Mentizis, “Ta ‘Guliaría’ tou Palaiochoriou Pangaïou I: Katagraphontas ti Laographiki Diastasi tou Thrylou,” in *Pangaio II: Proceedings of the Second Conference of Local History of Pangaion*, Municipality of Pangaion, 2021, 194–205; Anagnostis P. Agelarakis, “Ta ‘Guliaría’ tou Palaiochoriou Pangaïou II: Psachnontas sta Chnaria mias Apagorevmenis Dionysiakis Teletourgias,” in *Pangaio II: Proceedings of the Second Conference of Local History of Pangaion*, Municipality of Pangaion, 2021, 206–221.

<sup>2</sup> Clean Monday, also known as Pure Monday, marks the first day of Great Lent in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition.

The *Guliaria* carried agricultural tools, especially *dikrania*, or two-pronged forks. These were not specially made ritual objects, but ordinary implements used in the agricultural life of the village. The number of participants was not fixed. In practice, the participants were usually groups of younger men bound by friendship, a circumstance that helped preserve the strict secrecy surrounding the preparation and identity of those involved.

Preparation began early on the day of the performance, or even on the preceding evening, and took place secretly in the houses of group members. No one outside the group knew beforehand where the meeting would occur, and the house changed from year to year. A domestic space was necessary because ash and soot had to be collected from fireplaces, wood ovens, or, later, stoves. The consumption of alcohol was also considered necessary, so that the participants would enter a state of cheerfulness; this consisted almost exclusively of locally produced *tsipouro*<sup>3</sup> or wine, since extensive vineyards existed in Palaiochori until the mid-twentieth century.

There was no fixed time of day for the appearance of the *Guliarides*, since surprise was essential to the custom's enactment. Neither the precise moment nor the point of emergence was known to the public gathered for the custom. The performers appeared suddenly, ran and danced in an unusual, primordial manner among the crowd, shouted, teased spectators — especially women — and then withdrew, only to reemerge again from another, unexpected point. No one attempted to stop or seize them in order to discover their identities. The recollections of older villagers suggest that the *Guliaria* were treated with a certain respect: any attempts at recognition were limited to distant observation, never to capture or forced unveiling.

After the performance, the *Guliaria* returned to the secret place where they had prepared. There they quickly washed off the soot and ash and dressed again, so that they could rejoin the gathering in the square without their absence being noticed and without their identity as participants being revealed. The communal feast then followed, in keeping with local practice whenever the villagers gathered for the enactment of the custom.

### Toward an Archaeo-Historical Interpretation of the *Guliaria*

In the face of the rapid, often unpredictable, and at times even unrestrained transformations of the twenty-first century—and given the precarious condition of human existence and cosmic consciousness—is it still possible to trace and identify, with some transparency as to its source, the identity of a custom whose characteristic features and beliefs appear unmistakably to preserve primordial roots?

The custom in question is the *Guliaria* of Palaiochori, preserved through its long-standing performance almost down to our own day. It survived through time under the constraints of cultural, religious, and sovereign oppression imposed by invaders

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<sup>3</sup> *Tsipouro* is a traditional Greek distilled spirit, usually produced from grape pomace — the skins, seeds, and stems remaining after grapes have been pressed for wine.

and conquerors who set foot upon the land, only to be prohibited as pagan by a decree of zealots as late as the sixth decade of the twentieth century. That act, myopic in the opinion of the present writer, first rendered inactive and then set in motion the dismantling of a living tessera in the wonderfully multidimensional mosaic of the customs of this region—until then an inseparable component of the distinctive tradition and social identity of the people of Palaiochori.<sup>4</sup>

And if, fortunately, the cultural memory of the people of Palaiochori transmitted into the fertile repository of their collective intellectual inheritance the elements and versions of the unwritten tradition of the *Guljaria*, which binding rules of the custom's form, beliefs, and ritual symbolism — as embodied in the ritual performance itself — may still be discerned with sufficient clarity to permit a comparative evaluation of competing explanatory hypotheses? Such hypotheses might appear to claim either a partial connection with, or even the original source of, the custom, namely the *Saturnalia* or *Kronia*, the *Lupercalia* or *Lykaia*, or, more compellingly, the *Dionysia*.

The fact that preliminary searches in historical archives, together with ethnographic efforts to investigate the possible survival or later revival of related ritual performances elsewhere in the Greek world, pointed to the uniqueness of the custom within the cultural heritage environment of Palaiochori on Mount Pangaion, was considered to present a particularly compelling research challenge. It called for an interdisciplinary approach, based principally on a process of retrospective archaeo-anthropological investigation, in order to set forth a reasoned account, with propositions and interpretations, of a custom that withstood the complexity of diachronic conditions through the binding force of tradition and the collective intergenerational behaviour of the Palaiochorians. It also called for an inquiry, insofar as possible, into the social causes, correlations, and compensatory benefits that gave the custom the resistance and endurance necessary for its preservation amid the challenges and difficulties of the passing centuries.

## Evidence, Observations and Propositions

Apart from the regrettably few archival materials that have survived, valuable data for the present study concerning the performance of the custom were gathered *in situ*, in collaboration with—and with the precious contribution of—the Palaiochorian colleague Dr. Aristeidis Mentizis.<sup>5</sup> The conceptual framework for the gathering of information was designed on the basis of related methodologies of ethnography and social anthropology, implemented through systematic direct contact and sustained interpersonal communication,<sup>6</sup> in order to collect and cross-check information deriving from diachronic oral tradition, narrative accounts, and descriptive experiences. These were obtained primarily from age-groups of local men who, after

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<sup>4</sup> On the cessation of the public performance of the *Guljaria* in 1969 and the local memory of its prohibition as “pagan,” see Mentizis 2021, 198–199.

<sup>5</sup> For the local folkloric documentation of the *Guljaria*, see Mentizis 2021, 194–205

<sup>6</sup> That is, not merely through brief or transient interview-based approaches.

being initiated and admitted as new members, had in due course replaced older members and had experienced, as participants, not only the internal proceedings but also the totality of the *Guljaria* custom. Secondly, information was gathered from members of other age-groups within the local community who had taken part as participating witnesses during the performance of the custom.

The exclusive group initiated into the *Guljaria* consisted of adult men over the age of eighteen. Throughout the year they acted in absolute secrecy in connection with the organization, planning, and performance of the custom, which took place on Clean Monday in the public spaces of Palaiochori, filled festively with local residents and visitors. Given these features — secrecy, initiation, regulated preparation, bodily transformation, sudden public appearance, repeated disappearance and reappearance, and the patterned interaction with the assembled community — the *Guljaria* may be approached not merely as a local custom, but as a ritual performance.

It follows that during the public performance of the ritual—with the element of the unexpected and their sudden, almost nude appearance in the main plaza of the village; their successive disappearance from and reappearance in public space; their startling and provocative effect upon the participant-spectators; their concealment through disguise and non-recognizability by means of an improvised mask and the smearing of the body with ash and soot;<sup>7</sup> their brandishing of two-pronged forks or pitchforks;<sup>8</sup> their passage not in an ordinary walking gait but in a quick, dance-like kinetic rhythm; and their cries, unintelligible voices, and satirical disposition as they moved among the crowd—they produced a condition of heightened energy, excitation and activity.

This condition accelerated, swept along, gladdened, encouraged, and vitalized the dynamic of the assembled body of spectators. At first, it stirred a feeling of disorienting disorder and a release of primordial instincts; this was followed by intense emotions of enthusiasm, good humour, and merriment among the gathered crowd. The crowd did not remain inert, merely as spectators, but was ardently transformed into participating and mutually contributing followers of the ritual. The spectators not only allowed the *Guljaria* to pass freely among them, welcoming their satire, obscenities, mockery, and comic excesses with the laughter that followed; they also vigorously cheered, applauded, and, more generally, supported the performance through body language, intellectually and psychologically. They had accepted the introduction and presentation of the ritual, as well as its elementary

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<sup>7</sup> The deciphering of the black colour is proposed to be allegorical, representing the older chthonic existence of Dionysos Zagreus, while at the same time marking its diametrical opposition to the white powder with which the Titans deceptively smeared their round faces in order to distract the young Zagreus and then tear him apart with an iron implement or implements. Cf. Nonnos, *Dionysiaka*, V:1, VI:155–174, Loeb Classical Library, 224–226.

<sup>8</sup> Necessary accessories of symbolic character in the costume of the *Guljaria* performance, but also of practical use in preventing insistent spectators from coming too close.

surface principles, while the uninitiated yet not indifferent spectators<sup>9</sup> attempted—each man and woman in his or her own way, perhaps drawing upon memories from previous years or observing the event for the first time—to interpret whatever underlying meanings of the symbolism they were able to perceive, recognizing that what they witnessed was the continued enactment of an ancient custom.

In this manner, the infusion of the ecstatic conduct and frenzied yet synchronized movement of the *Guljaria*—provocatively dissolving the structures of everyday legitimate and permissible social norms, joyfully penetrating the crowd and forcefully stimulating it through a happily electrified form of osmotic diffusion—drew the people along as willing devotees of a collective performance. It brought forth a different, irresistibly contagious, liberated behaviour as an effect of the ritual process.<sup>10</sup>

The state of personal bodily and psychological excitation among the participants, transformed through the effusiveness of a ritual in which no one was excluded or set apart but all were incorporated through voluntary and unanimous group participation within the broader performative context of the ritual, with converging expressions of common joy and merriment, is proposed to have strengthened social bonds. It shattered, even if only ephemerally, and averted any antisocial tendencies, ill-humour, or existing confrontations between persons and/or groups. It also provided those present as participants with the capacity to understand the shared ground of the sensibilities and emotions of others, through the catalytic action of a social education in sympathy and concord — acting as a great healer and liberator, during the state of enthusiasm, from the shouldered burdens of life’s responsibilities, anxiety, fear, and the pressures of everyday trivialities at both individual and collective levels.

With regard to the long-standing relationships and interdependencies of the closed and secret circle of the initiated *Guljarides*, their dynamic required strong bonds of friendship, solidarity, trust, and unity of spirit. These were fundamental components in the code of their devotion, interconnectedness, and fellowship<sup>11</sup> in the serious task and responsibility of preserving the tradition and ritual dimensions of the custom entrusted to them by their forefathers.

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<sup>9</sup> From conversations with the elders of Palaiochori, especially those initiated into the secret circle of the *Guljaria*, it emerged that a large portion of the visiting public attending the Clean Monday festivities considered the performance of the *Guljaria* to be part of Carnival.

<sup>10</sup> The manifestation of enthusiasm expressed among the participants, whose character and intensity an ancient observer would perhaps have compared to the onset of a mild form of *menos* — that is, inspired force or ritualized frenzy — among ancient devotees.

<sup>11</sup> This resembled a shared kin-related psychology, not only because of the intense experience of connection and identity fusion among the *Guljarides* brought about by their initiation into the group, the secrecy of “belonging,” the annual preparations and enactment of the custom, and the reservoir of memory concerning their achievements and deeds of valor before, during, and after its performance, but also through the collective sense of moral satisfaction and pleasure as a reward for safeguarding the custom and preserving intergenerational respect for, and memory of, the ancestors.

Beyond whatever particular benefits may be discerned at the level of the individual — benefits that, cumulatively, assumed the form of qualitative social and cultural value — the act of the ritual offered significant communal and cultural benefit, guided by collective enjoyment and well-being, as well as by the strengthening of the bonds of the social whole. In its effectiveness, it surpassed the proportional relationship between the expendable material and immaterial elements of individual or group economic cost required for the maintenance, organization, and performance of the custom; in this respect, it stood diametrically opposed to customs that, from the perspective of cost-benefit analysis, may be understood as cases in which costs exceed benefits.

And while an approach drawn from economic theory is consistent with the diachronic continuity of the custom, its functionality — when examined through an analysis of its structural significance within the dynamics of social life — allows further explanatory aspects of the ritual to be recovered. Thus the ritual did not only provide the participants with a sense of joy, assimilation, and “belonging” to a cohesive social whole, one that had insisted with regulative resistance, especially during long periods of sovereign oppression, on safeguarding its common cultural roots and identity from extinction.<sup>12</sup> It also preserved inner teachings which, as part of the framework of an ancient ideological system, may not have been fully consciously known or initiatically assented to by the majority of the people of Palaiochori, perhaps already from as early as the Palaeochristian period.<sup>13</sup> Yet indirectly, though clearly, these teachings implied exhortations toward the liberation of human intellectual wisdom from the myopia of everyday commonplaces, while also encouraging psychic elevation and spiritual transformation through the allegory of the ritual performances enacted by the *Guliaría*.

What, then, could have been the primordial roots which, bound to these beliefs, impelled fundamental and almost radically subversive forms of behaviour, as well as the awakening of human cosmic consciousness — roots that may be discerned as concealed within the surviving allegories and symbolisms of the *Guliaría* ritual, and

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that cross-referenced information from the *Guliaría* initiates revealed memories entrusted to them by earlier generations of *Guliarides*, namely that during the later phase of Ottoman rule, the Ottomans avoided participating in, or even appearing in public space during the performance of the *Guliaría*, fearing superstitiously that some harm might befall them.

<sup>13</sup> Compare with the destruction and priestly holocaust of the Eleusinian Mysteries in 395 CE by Alaric. See Eunapius, *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists*, §§475–476.

which appeared to be plainly pre-Christian,<sup>14</sup> since, for example, cross-symbols and priestly blessings or invocations were absent?<sup>15</sup>

And yet the date on which the custom was enacted had been incorporated immediately after the close of *Apokries* — the period of abstention from meat-eating — and at the beginning of one of the oldest Christian traditions, the fast of Great Lent<sup>16</sup>, identified calendrically with Clean Monday: the bodily and spiritual purification of the Christian faithful in anticipation of the greatest feast of Orthodoxy, Easter. Was it accidental, coincidental, or selective that the ritual of the antiquity-oriented *Guljaria* fell upon the date marking the beginning of the greatest Christian fast, as a devout sign of bodily and spiritual preparation and reverence for the approaching triumphal resurrection from the dead, and the liberation from Hades?

If this was not an accidental or coincidental occurrence, but rather a selective incorporation of part of an ancient religious tradition into the festive order and calendar now dominated by Christianity, what might the relevant reasons have been? It is proposed that the ancient religious tradition of the ritual possessed the deepest bonds with the indigenous cultural and cultic roots of Mount Pangaion and of the Palaiochorians. Consequently, from the perspective of functional structural analysis, its abolition was not immediately possible and/or desirable—at least for a significant part of the collective consciousness of the Palaiochorians—especially insofar as, among the laity, it could over the course of the centuries have come to be characterized as a popular, entertaining-traditional observance rather than as a provocatively anti-Christian religious performance.

Indeed, through an inductive evaluation, one might advance the argument that theological criteria for assessing the elements of allegory and symbolism in the ritual, according to the perception and spirit of the times, projected an older basis of approach, if not of conceptual convergence, with the message of the Christian feast. Retrospectively considered, this would have formed a network of interdependence and interconnection in the transmission between older and newer beliefs, so that the ritual's complete disappearance was not required. Such a process would have

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<sup>14</sup> With regard to certain general distinctions in the categorization of ancient customs and rituals, there appears to be no correlation with any pre-Christian custom characterized by rituals of distress, or with others that included divinatory or interventionist processes of purification and expiation through bodily bloodletting, the induction of vomiting, the spitting of saliva to expel miasma, or the removal of pollution, crime, and psychic burden through the sacrifice of a scapegoat animal. Nor did the ritual performance of the *Guljaria* imply the soothing of human anxiety through the appeasement of ancestral spirits, through superstition in the face of unverified phenomena of nature, or through obligations toward polytheistic powers.

<sup>15</sup> Washing and sprinkling of the body as a process of cleansing and purification from enacted or psychic injustices and transgressions, confession for forgiveness, or prayer for release and redemption from violations, wrongs, and sins are not mentioned here as examples of Christian ritual symbolism, because these also formed part of the conceptual and ritual system of ancient Greek religion.

<sup>16</sup> Established in the fourth century CE.

permitted a non-exclusionary approach and, through syncretism, the transmission and preservation of this particular ancient tradition and the tracing of its theological aspects.

In that case, of course, the proposed argument would stand in extreme opposition to the vigorous and, in fact, continuing Christian high ecclesiastical effort to abolish ancient religious customs and beliefs, as is evident from the acts of the Sixth Ecumenical Council in the seventh century, with its vivid description and strict prohibition of continuing Dionysian cultic customs and behaviours, prescribing deposition for participating or sympathetic clerics and excommunication for the laity.<sup>17</sup> Yet despite the threat of severe prohibitions, and despite the danger of deposition and excommunication — which could easily have brought serious, if not devastating, consequences, at least in the social, political, and economic sphere for those who failed to conform — it appears that the primordial Dionysian cult, subversive of the established order, could not be expelled from the cultural consciousness of the people of Palaiochori.<sup>18</sup>

What, then, could have been the relationship between the *Guljaria* and the Dionysian cult? The absence alone of any required animal sacrifice and bloodshed of slaughtered animals, of the consequent blood-marking of the head, and of the subsequent “purification through milk,”<sup>19</sup> excludes the *Guljaria* from the required actions of the ritual procedure of the Roman Lupercalia.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the use only of vegetal consumables and non-animal materials among the *Guljaria*<sup>21</sup> approached

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<sup>17</sup> See Canon 62 (of the Quinisext Council) associated with the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Trullo (691/692 CE).

<sup>18</sup> In the opinion of the present writer, it remains to be demonstrated whether the level of classical education, discernment, and prudent, rather conciliatory management exercised by the local Christian clergy toward its flock led it to overlook — perhaps even disdainfully — the performance of Dionysian practices deeply rooted in popular consciousness.

<sup>19</sup> Blood markings with the blood of goats, made by the sacrificing priests of Lupercus upon the participating men, honored ancestral circumstances of Romulus and Remus and sought blessing for the shepherds, as well as expiation and purification — in February, the month whose very etymological meaning indicates the performance of purificatory rites, the particular day being called *Februata* — from the acts of *Homo Necans*. Compare Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, Romulus XXI.3–7*, Loeb Classical Library, 156–161, and Caesar, Book LXI.1–2, Loeb Classical Library, 584. Also noted is the sacrifice of a dog by the Luperci: Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, Romulus XXI.5*, Loeb Classical Library, 158, and the related comparison with the Greek practice of *periskylakismoi* in purificatory rites, *ibid.*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> The corresponding Greek customs were those of the *Lykaia* of Arcadia and Lykaian Pan; see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives, Romulus XXI.3–4* and note 4, Loeb Classical Library, 157.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the two-pronged forks, ash, and improvised mask made from vegetal materials, even the most elementary garment covering the lower part of the trunk, between the abdominal and inguinal regions, was composed of and enriched with dry grasses and ears of grain, evoking dried wheat as part of the symbolism of the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the god Dionysos held a highly significant and interwoven role. In the more recent years of the *Guljaria* performance, this rudimentary garment had even been enriched with pieces of hemp sackcloth.

rather than departed from the relevant beliefs and principles of the Christian tradition.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the ritual of *Guliaria*—including the full range of its components, from the closed and secret circle of its initiates to the public performance of the ritual—stood in diametric opposition to descriptions of the events, rumours, conduct, and behaviour of human beings toward one another, and toward their gods, during the Saturnalia, the festival of the New Year. By contrast, the ritual drinking of wine and its distillate by the *Guliarides*, especially during their secret preparation before their emergence to perform the ritual in public space, constituted a participation in the communion of the fermented juice of the grapevine,<sup>23</sup> in the teaching and symbolism of transubstantiation with the god Dionysos. Dionysos, the reborn son—after his slaying by the Titans<sup>24</sup>—of his father and supreme god Zeus, and thus born from the father imperishable and immortal,<sup>25</sup> stood against savagery, bloodshed, and injustice. He appeared as an advocate of justice, of respect, and of the protection of the weak and persecuted, and as the god of joy and merriment through the liberation and elevation of the human psychic world above whatever earthly defects of its Titanic nature,<sup>26</sup> inclinations, and passions.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Catullus, *Carmen* 14; Livy, *History of Rome*, 22.1.19/20; Lucian, *Saturnalia*, 1, 13; Martial, *Epigrams*, 14; Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 2.17.24; Seneca, *Epistles*, 18.3.

<sup>23</sup> One of the principal symbols and allegories of the Dionysian cult, which Christianity also embraced and adopted. See the related parable in the Gospel according to John, 15:1: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.”

<sup>24</sup> See Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, XIII:§§5–6, with reference to Onomacritus concerning the sufferings and dismemberment of Dionysos by the Titans; see also references to the Titans in Hesiod, *Theogony* 207, and Homer, *Iliad* 14:279—that is, concerning Dionysos Zagreus and therefore the rebirth, or theogony, of the principal deity of the Orphics—and Nonnos of Panopolis, *Dionysiaka*, Book VI. See also Hesiod, *Theogony* 940, and Homer, *Iliad* 14:325, for the version of the myth concerning the birth of Dionysos from Semele—the enthusiastic Dionysos, and not the older (cf. Nonnos, *Dionysiaka* V:III, Book 39:71–73, Loeb Classical Library, p. 128), chthonic Dionysos Zagreus from Persephone [see references to the name Persephone in Homer, *Iliad* I(9):457, *Odyssey* K(10):491, and Hesiod, *Theogony* 768, 774, and 913], and chthonic Zeus [cf. Callimachus, *Etymologicum Magnum: Callimachi Aetia*, Fragment 43.117 Pfeiffer / Fragment 43b.34 Harder: “...that Zeus mingled with Persephone, from whom came chthonic Dionysos”; cf. Nonnos, *Dionysiaka* V:I, Book 5:563–571].

<sup>25</sup> See Herodotus, *Histories* II.146, and the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos* 1.7–8.

<sup>26</sup> Especially concerning the primordial sin — “ancient grief” (*παλαιού πένθεος*) — that burdened the souls of human beings, bringing about repeated transmigration of souls until the longed-for release through the virtuous life, see Plato, *Meno* 81b, with reference to Pindar, *Threnoi* 133; and concerning the Titanic crime against Dionysos, see S. R. Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, Cambridge, 1964, 278.

<sup>27</sup> Fundamental elements of the ancient cult, aspects of which appear to have paralleled or converged with Christian thought and practice, had components interwoven with pre-Socratic philosophical views of the ancient Greek world of the Pythagoreans and Empedocles, and, of course, with the post-Socratic Platonic and Aristotelian traditions.

Subsequently, under the protection of a transformed personality,<sup>28</sup> reflecting the god Dionysos after his rebirth, the initiates of the *Guliaria* penetrated the public space in a rapid, ritual-dance rhythm. As hierophants<sup>29</sup> of the Dionysian cult, under the influence of sacred madness after wine-drinking and their transubstantiation with the god, they cried out ritual cries (*iaches*, ἰαχέξ), invoking the divine presence of *Iacchos-Bacchos*.<sup>30</sup> Arriving unexpectedly in dithyrambic fashion, acting perhaps more as a chorus of celebrants in the Rural Dionysia than as members of a procession or as *Komasts*<sup>31</sup> within the milieu of a pre-theatrical environment — as an

<sup>28</sup> The blackening of the body, beyond its function as disguise, is proposed perhaps also to have offered the additional benefit of protection from supernatural powers, indeed from those of the underworld, if we consider a parallel with the painting of exterior doors black during the great and ancient annual festival of the Athenians in honor of the god Dionysos, the *Anthesteria* (Thucydides, *History*, II.4), and specifically during the first day, the *Pithoigia*. Cf. W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley, 1983, p. 219 and note 13 on Photius; J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 39–40. It is also proposed that it could symbolize the primordial materials of anthropogony from the amalgam of the components of the dismembered Zagreus and the ashes of the Titan perpetrators (cf. Euphorion of Chalkis, *Hellenistic Collection: Poetic Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library, 2009, §14, 226–228, and a reference that would resemble a related description from the burnt remains, §137, p. 375, as a scholion on the *Theriaka* of Nicander of Colophon) after their destruction by Zeus' thunderbolt. In this case, the deciphering of the symbolism of this action is proposed to approach the allegory of external bodily transubstantiation with the god, in addition to internal transubstantiation through the drinking of the fermented juice of the grape (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 614; Euripides, *Bacchae* 284–285; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 3.62.7). In this way, the ancient religious smearing of the body with ashes, especially with regard to the face, if transmitted into Christianity — and as emblematically preserved through the cross-shaped marking on the forehead of some faithful, especially in Catholicism on Ash Wednesday, signaling the beginning of the great fast of Lent — would have been intentionally considered, rather than innocently misinterpreted, as an impermissible allegory through the disfigurement of the face before God, against which the Evangelist Matthew counseled and urged in the first century CE (*Gospel according to Matthew* 6:16).

<sup>29</sup> Given the internal hierarchy of the group and the leadership of the most experienced of the *Guliarides*, they may be said to have observed, even if without conscious reference to it, the Pythagorean maxim “Not all things are to be spoken to all” (Οὐ πάντα τοῖς πᾶσι ῥητά), with respect to the ineffable matters of the *Guliaria*; see, for example, Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VIII.9–10. And if, in the haze of millennia and through the sediment of intergenerational memory, rudimentary initiation became limited to members of the *Guliarides*' own closed circle, they nevertheless preserved the memory of a ritual traced to ancient times — as did the uninitiated Palaiochorians, without necessarily possessing knowledge of its concealed meanings. They did not disdain or reject it, but consciously preserved, through time, the *Guliarides* and their ritual performances as a precious part of local cultural heritage.

<sup>30</sup> Symbolizing the *Bacchoi*, with two-pronged forks instead of *thyrsoi* — and probably not the knife-bearing Bessoï of the Dionysian oracle of Pangaion — as faithful companions of the god and as his impending punishers in response to the neglect, mockery, violation, and insult of his divine mission and sacred authority.

<sup>31</sup> The noisy and more frenzied festive revelries of the *Komasts* did not require initiation or internal hierarchy, and their “performance” did not call for preliminary rehearsal. For references to the *Komos*, see Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 100–104 and 987–990; Demosthenes, *Against Meidias* 10; Hesiod, *Shield* 281–283; and Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 5.20–22, for Arcesilas of Cyrene.

observer of old might perhaps have discerned through the haze of the millennia — they appeared among the crowd from a secret place, departing and returning from unknown directions through the streets of the open plaza.

Through their repeated presence and absence during the ritual, they hinted at the allegory of the dual gates of the upper and lower worlds, the danger of passage between the world above and the world below,<sup>32</sup> and the protection of knowledge and final release offered to the initiated, projecting at the same time the power of rebirth, fertility, and divine wisdom.

And while Lycurgus, king of the Edonians, attempted brutally but unsuccessfully to expel, by goading with ox-goads,<sup>33</sup> the god Dionysos and his retinue from the region of Pangaion (820 BCE), the *Guliarides*<sup>34</sup> of Palaiochori, through their narration into our own day, perpetuate<sup>35</sup> the enchantingly revealed and unextinguished Dionysian transformative power of ancient ancestral conceptions and cult: the power of bloodless purification, of enthusiasm through the drinking of wine, of rebirth and longed-for apotheosis. They permit us to touch tangible ancient religious traditions interwoven with the unequivocally subversive — and hopeful for the human condition and its beliefs — syncretism of *Iacchos-Bacchos* of the Eleusinian rites, of Dionysos

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<sup>32</sup> Recalling the two gates of passage in the process of initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries.

<sup>33</sup> See Homer, *Iliad* 6.129–140. It was not, however, the only time that Dionysos was offensively challenged, even in the city of the daughter of Cadmus, the princess Semele.

<sup>34</sup> While in the vocabulary of the Palaiochorians of Pangaion the term *Ta Guliaria* means “The Naked Ones,” if one were to examine even the slightest possibility that the etymological origin of the term derived from a root and related sound similar to the word in colloquial Italian, *giullari*, translated as “actors, chatterers, jesters, mimes,” one would turn to the Latin root of the word, *iocularis*, meaning “a little joke” or “those who jest,” which later became the French *joglar*, encompassing those performers who appeared before an audience of spectators. In this hypothetical case, it is proposed that the derogatory renaming of the ancient ritual could have occurred during the sovereign administration of the region by a Latin-speaking power, one alien to the ancient beliefs of the ritual, yet nevertheless attributing to the *Guliaria* the character of a rather peaceful and entertaining performance which, judged in the long term, functioned adaptively in favor of its preservation.

<sup>35</sup> Despite the reduction in the number of initiates over time, the *Guliaria*, as a mystery ritual, nevertheless remained preserved through intergenerational respect for tradition among the members of the closed circle of its central core, with the elders serving as mystagogues and the new members as initiates. These new members possessed the courage to defy the danger of severe sanctions and to perpetuate — certainly with the direct and indirect support of their fellow villagers — one of the unique mystery festivals of Dionysos deriving from ancient religion and surviving down to our own day. Especially since the annual performance of the ritual of the *Guliaria* gave the Palaiochorians perhaps the unique opportunity in their festive calendar, under the protection of the ritual form, appearing over the centuries as a secular celebration, to declare publicly and subversively — through shouting and through the language of the body, as individuals and as components of their collective consciousness — their criticism, opposition, and perhaps even anger against the constraints, forces, and whatever binding and oppressive parameters of each established order were imposed upon their personal human existence and more generally upon their sociopolitical framework.

Eleuthereus, and of Orphic beliefs,<sup>36</sup> which inexhaustibly drew whispers and echoes from ancient roots deep in the slopes and recesses of sacred Mount Pangaion, and indeed with particular significance and gravity down to our own day at the very centre of Palaiochori.



Figure 1 - The Gularides during the Gularia ritual performance at Palaiochori, Mount Pangaion. Historical photograph from the period before the prohibition of the ritual performance in 1969, showing barefoot participants, nude except for face-coverings and vegetal waist-coverings, carrying agricultural implements and bundles of hay or dry grasses. Reproduced in Mentizis 2021, fig. 1.

<sup>36</sup> See Herodotus, *Histories* II.43 and II.123. Cf. W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley, 1983, 225 and notes 43–45.

