

In the company of *Dionysos*

This Boeotian cup shows the wine god Dionysos at a **symposium** [Symposium 21]. Gods were thought to enjoy their wine like humans! But Dionysos knew there had to be limits:

“For sensible men I prepare only three **kraters**: one for health (which they drink first), the second for love and pleasure, and the third for sleep. After the third one is drained, wise men go home. The fourth krater is not mine any more: it belongs to bad behaviour...”

From a comedy by Euboulos, late 5th century BC



The pictures on the cup suggest that Dionysos knew more about bad behaviour than he admitted. His followers, the **satyrs** (male figures with animal horns and tails), who are commonly shown on Athenian pots, are responsible for most of the drinking and sex in Greek art [Symposium 17, 28, 30, 71 – 72].

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The satyrs act like some men but don't look like real men because of their animal parts. The **maenads**, Dionysos' female companions, however, look like real women but act differently. Written sources tell us that maenads were, in fact, real women who became filled with Dionysos' spirit when they worshipped him [**Citizenship 8**]. This spirit changed their behaviour: they sang and danced freely in the mountains but they got carried away and even ripped wild animals to pieces. After all, maenad means 'crazy woman'. Satyrs and maenads are called mythical characters because they are shown with Dionysos who, like all Greek gods, was a character in myth [**Myth and religion 4**]. But there are few mythic tales about them. Some Athenian writers used satyrs to fill the chorus of comedies called satyr plays. For example, in Euripides' *Cyclops*, a chorus of satyrs served wine to the ogre Polyphemos. Athenian artists and writers used satyrs instead of humans when they pictured the things that the Dionysos loved, especially wine and women.

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