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A Content Analysis Perspective on Altered States of Consciousness in Classical Antiquity¹

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Introduction

‘And with the Corybantes ye shall dance, says Sophocles’, according to Plutarch, should the reader be affected by the *ἐνθουσιασμός βακχείος*.² In this article, we will take a closer look at the phenomenon of maenadism – altered states of consciousness in the ancient world triggered by religious rituals – from the perspective of ancient Greek texts. To this end, we apply content analysis, a method used in the social sciences for coding unstructured text into key categories.

Our primary question could be phrased as: How exactly, and under which conditions, do altered states of consciousness manifest themselves in ancient Greece or Rome? What behaviour did ancient writers have in mind when they were talking about raving maenads, and which words did they use to describe them? Since classicists can only approach the phenomenon filtered through the reports (or depictions) of ancient writers or artists, we cannot, of course, ascertain whether what we might call ‘bacchic phenomena’ actually happened in reality, or whether they were the product of the mythogenic fantasies of – mostly male – symposiasts. Rather, we will try to clarify the cultic, or mythical, circumstances that were thought to be responsible for maenadic *thiasoi*, for the escape from society’s norms under certain mind-altering influences like drugs, music or peer dynamics.

From an ethnological point of view, the relevant question does not so much concern the degree of factual, physiological truth of the reports, but rather: How plausible did the stories appear to ancient recipients and redistributors? In other words, we will not

¹ This project was originally presented at the AMPAL Oxford 2012. We would like to thank the editors of Rosetta for the opportunity to expand the paper to a full-length article.

² Plu. Amatorius 16, transl. Plutarchus 1874.

be able to give reliable data on the impact of maenadic frenzy on child mortality rates in ancient Athens, or on physiological changes in the brains of dancing maenads, but we hope to find out whether ancient authors thought trance states to be possible, and which techniques were used to fall into trance, or ecstasy.

Methodologically, this paper introduces content analysis as a practical method to handle large amounts of unstructured text. Well established in the social sciences, content analysis summarises key topics in text material by identifying prevalent categories, coding the texts following these categories, which may then be quantified in terms of frequency and interrelations. Content analysis is especially useful to compare multiple sources from different authors, such as the texts on ancient trance investigated here. We aim to demonstrate the benefit of this method for anthropology, and provide hands-on advice for future applications.

Theoretical and methodological background

Previous research

The study of mind-altering rituals has long been an ‘entrancing’ topic for researchers in many fields, including anthropology, ethnology, psychology, psychiatry, religious studies and classical studies, to name but a few. Indispensable basic research into the dynamics of ritual and religion was undertaken by eminent scholars such as Burkert³ and Turner.⁴ Sfameni Gasparro analysed in detail the cult of Cybele and Attis, following its development from its Hittite origins to the Hellenised religion practised in Roman imperial times, and outlining the particular aspects of the cult ‘liable to arouse a state of sacred exaltation in the celebrants.’⁵ Recent work on cognitive effects of music and their therapeutic applications is collected in a volume edited by Aldridge and Fachner.⁶ From an archaeological point of view, Moraw⁷ described the socio-political background underlying depictions of maenads in attic vase-painting, as well as contextual elements visible in them, such as particular musical instruments, or indications of wilderness.

³ E.g. Burkert 1972.

⁴ E.g. Turner 1982.

⁵ Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 9.

⁶ Aldridge and Fachner 2006. Cf. in particular ch. 2: 15–37, for a detailed definition of various altered states of consciousness and their connection to particular stimuli, such as certain kinds of music.

⁷ Moraw 1998.

Dodds published an important study with a very similar thematic focus to the present paper,⁸ distinguishing various kinds of altered states and the reasons behind them that can be gleaned from ancient texts. He based his definitions primarily on Plato's description of the four inspired states,⁹ concentrating, as most scholars, on the testimony of a single author, or on individual descriptions of ancient rites - centring on these as representative for a general consensus in ancient societies. With this paper, we would like to take a broader perspective by providing statistical evidence on usage and meanings of terms in ancient texts from multiple authors describing a variety of rites and cults.

Definitions

Anthropological terminology

Research into altered states of consciousness suffers from the outset from a lack of a clear terminology, both in anthropology and neuroscience. This was already pointed out by ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget:¹⁰ He noted that there were no universal, scientifically precise definitions for the various extra-ordinary states of human consciousness, outlining them against each other. He therefore defined the working terms 'trance' and 'ecstasy' as two poles of a semantic spectrum, illustrated in table 1:¹¹

Ecstasy	Trance
Immobility	movement
Silence	noise
Solitude	in company
no crisis	crisis
sensory deprivation	sensory overstimulation
Recollection	amnesia
Hallucinations	no hallucinations

Table 1: Definitions of changed states (after Rouget 1985: 11)

Rouget further divides trance states into several subcategories, such as 'shamanic trance' and 'possession trance', defining them as follows:

⁸ Dodds 1966.

⁹ Dodds 1966: 64.

¹⁰ Rouget 1990, English edition: Rouget 1985.

¹¹ It should be noted here that these definitions seem to go against standard English usage, because they were established in the French original version of Rouget (2nd ed. 1990), and retained in the English translation. For a more detailed discussion of this decision see Rouget 1985: 3–10.

The difference between the shamanic and possession trance thus seems to rest in three factors: the former is a journey made by a man to visit the spirits, the latter is a visit by a spirit (or divinity) to the world of men; in the former the trance subject gains control over the spirit embodied within him, in the latter the reverse is true; and lastly, the former is a voluntary trance whereas the latter is an involuntary one.¹²

It is not always possible to distinguish clearly between these phenomena, and a detailed discussion would be beyond the scope of this article. For the purposes of our research, we will therefore retain Rouget's 'possession trance'¹³ as the only relevant category in classifying altered states of consciousness in classical texts.

Relevant terms in ancient Greek

On the basis of these definitions, we delineated which aspects of the semantic field are referred to by ancient authors using the various terms available in the ancient Greek language (table 2).¹⁴ These terms served as starting points in the selection of the text corpus for the content analysis.

<i>βακχεύω</i>	celebrate the mysteries of Bacchus; speak or act like one frenzy-stricken; inspire with frenzy; initiate in the Bacchic mysteries
<i>Βάκχη</i>	Bacchante
<i>ἔκστασις</i>	displacement; standing aside; distraction of mind, from terror, astonishment, anger, etc.; entrancement, astonishment; trance, ecstasy; drunken excitement
<i>ἔνθεος</i>	full of the god, inspired, possessed; of divine frenzy, inspired by the god
<i>ἐνθουσιάζω</i>	to be inspired or possessed by a god, to be in ecstasy; inspire
<i>ἐνθουσιασμός</i>	inspiration, enthusiasm, frenzy
<i>θυιάς</i>	inspired, possessed woman; frantic, mad for love
<i>κατέχω</i>	hold fast; gain possession of, be master of; possess, occupy; seize; achieve, effect; master, understand; possess, of a god; control oneself; prevail; gain the upper hand
<i>μαϊνάς</i>	raving, frantic; mad woman, esp. Bacchante, Maenad; causing madness
<i>μαίνομαι</i>	rage, be furious, rage with anger; to be mad with wine; of Bacchic frenzy; to be inspired by, driven mad by; rage, riot

¹² Rouget 1985: 23.

¹³ Rouget 1985: 187.

¹⁴ Definitions (shortened) from: Liddell and Scott 1940.

<i>μανία</i>	madness; enthusiasm, inspired frenzy; passion
<i>ἄρρητα</i>	secret rites, secret worship; rites, sacrifices; mysteries

Table 2: Search terms

Content analysis

Content analysis is a systematic procedure to identify and interpret core topics from textual data. The raw textual data is scrutinised for similarities in phrasing and content, repeatedly occurring keywords, or overarching umbrella terms. These findings are integrated into a coding frame, a system consisting of a manageable number of non-overlapping categories, which reflect the main textual contents. Ideally, content analysis yields a simple yet meaningful system of categories that may describe and compare a corpus of unstructured texts.¹⁵

The process of developing and sharpening the system of categories can be driven either (i) inductively by adopting categories as they emerge from studying the text, or (ii) deductively by approaching the text with *a priori* assumptions on central categories.¹⁶ While the inductive strategy aims to (exhaustively) explore the range of occurring topics, the deductive strategy resembles the testing of hypotheses. However, usually content analysis is most powerful when these strategies are applied complementarily, not exclusively. In our analysis, we started deductively from definitions of trance and trance-related terms (see section 2.2) and extended these inductively during text analysis.

Usually, a system of categories is developed in an iterative process. In re-reading and re-analysing the corpus, preliminary categories are split up or merged until the derived categories cover all relevant aspects in the raw text. Various software tools are available to assist this process. We used the MaxQDA2007 software.¹⁷

¹⁵ Flick 2009.

¹⁶ Glaser 2005, Mayring 2010, Strauss and Corbin 1997.

¹⁷ Kuckartz 2007; see also <http://www.maxqda.com>.

Application of content analysis

Assembly of the corpus

The relevant terms (table 2) were utilised in a full text search in the Perseus database of ancient literature¹⁸ to compile a list of texts for analysis. This resulted in an extensive corpus of texts, which was then narrowed down to actual descriptions of changed states of consciousness (following our initial observations on ambiguous uses of the search terms: see section 3.2 below). This procedure yielded a list of texts, of which a broad sample was included in the content analysis (table 3). For this first introductory attempt at content analysis a wide variety of texts, in terms of epoch, genre, target audience and other factors were chosen to underline the possibilities for including diverse sources in the method. As this necessarily leads to a generalisation potentially undermining the findings, for more precise answers to more specific questions, a conscientious choice of source texts, taking into account the respective context, will be necessary (cf. also section 4 below).

Achilles Tattius: Leucippe et Clitophon	Julian the Emperor: Contra Galilaeos, Orations
Aelian: De Natura Animalium	Longus: Daphnis et Chloe
Aeschylus: Agamemnon, Edonoi, Eumenides	Lucian: De sacrificiis, De saltatione, Dialogi deorum, Hesiod, Quomodo historia conscribenda sit, Timon
Anthologia Palatina	Parthenius: Narrationes Amatoriae
Apollodorus: Library	Pausanias: Description of Greece
Aretaeus: De causis et signis acutorum morborum	Philostratus the Athenian: Vita Apollonii
Aristophanes: Clouds, Frogs, Lysistrata, Thesmophoriazusae	Philostratos Minor: Imagines
Aristotle: Politics	Plato: Crito, Ion, Laws, Phaedrus, Philebus, Republic, Timaeus
Arrian: Anabasis, Indica	Plutarch: Amatorius, Animine an corporis affectiones sint peiores, Cleomenes, Crassus, De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute, De defectu oraculorum,
Chariton: De Chaerea et Callirhoe	De E apud Delphos, De Garrulitate, Pericles,
Diodorus Siculus: Bibliotheca Historica	Quaestiones Convivales, Quaestiones Graecae, Quaestiones Romanae, Romulus
Epictetus: Discourses	
Euripides: Bacchae, Cyclops, Helen, Heracles, Hippolytus, Ion, Iphigenia in	Polybius: Histories

¹⁸ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. The database was chosen for reasons of accessibility over the more comprehensive *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (cf. <http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>), which in a more extensive study would be the tool of choice to achieve a more complete picture of ancient Greek language usage. Texts used in the online edition from the Perseus database are marked '(Perseus)' in the bibliography.

Tauris, Orestes, Phoenissae, The Trojan Women	Sophocles: Antigone Strabo: Geography
Eusebius of Caesarea: Historia ecclesiastica	

Table 3: Analysed texts

Initial analysis

A preliminary look at the corpus already allowed some observations on the usage of the search terms: First, the word *μανία*, which Rouget equals with his use of ‘trance’,¹⁹ is in the majority of cases used for mental illnesses in a strictly medical sense, without cultic connotations.²⁰ Apart from actual medical texts on the treatment of the affliction, *μανία* is also used to denounce political opponents or their plans as idiotic.²¹ Homer, on the other hand, does not use the term at all.²² Also maenads, though etymologically related, are not necessarily associated with *μανία*. An interesting exception to this rule is Plato, who in his famous definition of the four types of inspired states, caused by Apollo, Dionysos, the Muses, and Aphrodite respectively, refers to them as *μανία*.²³

A similar observation can be made for *ένθουσιασμός*: The word describes an exceptional mental state like *μανία*, but with opposite emotional associations, referring to outstanding soldierly prowess or inspired political decision-making. The word in itself, literally indicating the presence of a spirit or god in the *ένθουσιαστής*, could therefore be translated as ‘possession’, or rather, considering the positive connotation, as ‘inspiration’. Nevertheless, it is not used primarily in the context of religious trance.

έκστασις, on the other hand, etymologically describes a state of shamanic trance, i.e. a person’s soul leaving the body and travelling to other planes of consciousness. The word appears in ancient texts mostly in a very special context: in Christian texts,

¹⁹ Rouget 1985: 188.

²⁰ e.g. Aret., SD 1,5: ‘... it appears to me that melancholy is the commencement and a part of mania. For in those who are mad, the understanding is turned sometimes to anger and sometimes to joy ...’ transl. Adams 1972.

²¹ cf. e.g. Dem. 8,28: ‘...and there are the laws, which direct us to impeach such offenders, but not, of course, to mount guard over ourselves, at such a cost and with so large a fleet; for that would be the height of madness.’ transl. Demosthenes 1930.

²² Concerning changed states in Homeric epics see also Dodds 1966: 67.

²³ Pl., Phdr. 244A; cf. also Plu. Amatorius 16. Rouget (1985: ch. 5, esp. 188–9) bases his equation of *manía* with trance on Plato’s usage of the word.

such as the New Testament,²⁴ or Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*. A notable exception is Plutarch,²⁵ who uses the term relatively often.²⁶

Another word mentioned by Rouget in connection with trance states is *κατέχω*.²⁷ In this case as well, a closer look enables us to differentiate more precisely: *κατέχω* is used only rarely to signify possession in a psychic sense; in the vast majority of cases it denotes a military notion of conquering, possessing a city or area.²⁸ Possession as a changed state of consciousness is restricted to phrases as 'κατεχομένος ἔκ του θεῶν',²⁹ or, more specifically, e.g., 'ἔκ Μουσῶν'³⁰.

Even the stem 'βακχ-' does not necessarily signify a cultic context. It is more often associated with scenes of symposia, where the presence of Bakchos Dionysos in the shape of the joy-bringing wine, enticing to song and dance, is alluded to, but this hardly ever leads to phenomena beyond everyday inebriation.

To sum up, the texts analysed in this study show that the Greek language, while markedly distinguishing between mental illness and God-inspired state, does not seem to know a specific term for a religious ritualised trance state: a state specific to a person under the direct influence of a god, or prerequisite for the attempt to contact a god. Considering that orgiastic rites, such as the ones for Dionysos or Cybele, did form an integral part of ancient culture(s), the use of content analysis to identify more semantic nuances in the description of such rites might lead to additional insights.

Detailed analysis

Generating the category list

To continue the investigation, we analysed the previously selected texts in detail, building and employing the dedicated category list (table 4), for occurrences of

²⁴ Luke 5,26; Mark 5,42; 16,8; Acts 3,10; 10,101; 11,5; 22,17.

²⁵ In his works, the context of the word ranges from the medical (e.g. Solon 8,1), to a "Bacchic" (e.g. Quest. conv. 1,5), to the discussion of a transcendental, platonic notion of deity (e.g. Quest. conv. 8,1). Further occurrences are: De E 21; De Primo 1; De Recta 1; Aem. 39,3; Quest. conv. 8,9.

²⁶ cf. also Rouget 1985: 7: 'One might have expected Plato to use [the term *ékstasis*] in the context of *mania*, but he never does. In fact the word did not figure in his vocabulary at all.'

²⁷ Rouget 1985: 190.

²⁸ Frequently e.g. by Arr.; D.C.; D.H.

²⁹ e.g. E. Ba. 1124; Parth. 4,1.

³⁰ e.g. Luc., Hist. Conscr. 8; cf. also Plu. Amatorius 16.

altered states of consciousness in a religious context on the one hand, and for music, dance, and other aspects associated with trance or possession on the other. Table 4 shows the final categories covering proper names ('Bakchos'), locations ('Arcadia', 'cave'), actions ('dance'), symptoms ('excitement') as well as situational characteristics ('night-time', 'secret'). Proper names and geographical locations are obvious categories, as they can be easily and unambiguously determined in the text. In contrast, broader categories like 'dance' often enable deeper insights but require a more thorough consideration of synonyms and context.

god/goddess/sacred	202	<i>bákch-</i>	148	Skythia	2
Aphrodite/Eros	18	<i>ékstasis</i>	8	Strymon	2
Apollo	36	<i>enthousiasmósl éntheos</i>	67	Syria	2
Ares	10	<i>epípnoia</i>	8	Thebes	36
Artemis	8	<i>katécho</i>	19	Thrakia	4
Athena	11	korybantes	16		
Demeter	6	<i>maníal máinomai</i>	145	<i>mousiké</i>	60
Bakchos/Dionysos	176	prophecy/Oracle	89	<i>áulos</i>	44
Erinyes	3	<i>theiázo</i>	13	<i>bárbiton</i>	1
Gaia	1			<i>bombýkes</i>	1
Hekate	2	Aeolia	1	<i>kerás</i>	5
Helios	8	Arabia	2	<i>kíthara</i>	12
Hera	12	Arcadia	1	<i>krótala</i>	5
Hermes	7	Argos	5	<i>kýmbala</i>	9
Iakchos	4	Asia	5	<i>lótos</i> (flute)	1
Kybele/ <i>Meter</i> /Rhea	21	Athens	4	<i>lýra</i>	6
Attis	9	Bactria	1	<i>rhótra</i>	2
<i>Galli</i>	2	Boeotia	1	<i>rhómbus</i>	1
Marsyas	1	Delos	3	<i>sálpinx</i>	1
muses	30	Delphi	25	<i>sýrinx</i>	4
nymphs	20	Dodona	1	<i>týmpanon</i>	19
Orpheus	9	Doria	7	dance	107
Pan	13	Dyme	1	shake hair/head	18
Pluto	3	Egypt	5	sing/scream	66
Poseidon	3	Elea	1	silence	3
Sarapis	1	Eleusis	1		
satyrs	8	Icaria	1	cave	9
Semele	14	India	23	fountain	17
Zeus	59	Kithairon	20	island	2
		Knidos	1	mountain	55

altered state	53	Kreta	2	sea	5
excitement	4	Leucadia	1	wilderness	20
heat	2	Lydia	14		
incense/Drugs	2	Mount Ida	4	day	9
ivy	35	Naxos	1	night	26
laurel	5	Nysa	12	secret	15
rolling eyes	3	Peloponnesos	1	public	4
sleep/dream/relaxation	36	Persia	1		
<i>theofórètes</i>	3	Phoenicia	2	<i>mystéria</i>	25
<i>thyrsos</i>	34	Phrygia	21	<i>órgia</i>	31
torches	7	Sikyon	1	<i>teleté</i>	30
wine	56				

Table 4: Categories and number of occurrences in the analysed texts

Connections between deities and trance

The analysed texts primarily point towards a connection between changed states and the cults of Dionysos, Bakchos, Iakchos etc. (chart 1a).³¹ This is due not only to Dionysos himself being venerated as the god of all sorts of shenanigans, but also to the fact that, in this very function, he was incorporated into other cults as the patron and personification of such practices.

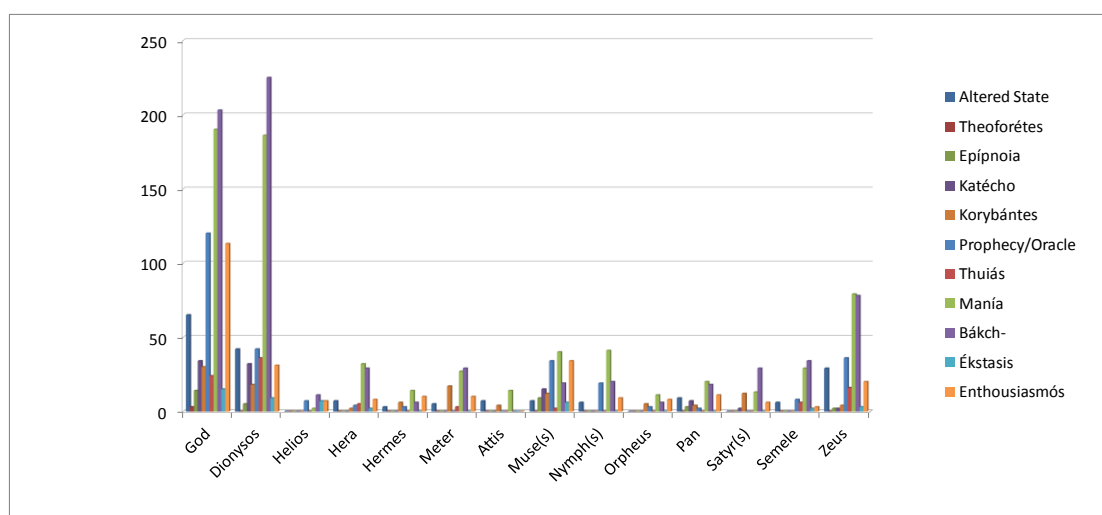


Chart 1a: Connections between deities and trance, absolute numbers.

³¹ Equating Dionysos with Iakchos and other patrons of 'bacchic phenomena' is of course a gross simplification; for a more detailed study, see e.g. Kerényi 1994: 60–63. But cf. also Mylonas 1961: 318, who differentiates strictly between Iakchos and Dionysos. For further references see also Simon 1990: 612. A detailed look at varying associations to the different theonyms would be another promising application of the method presented in this article.

Apart from generic terms (*θεός*, sacred ...) ³² Zeus and Semele are also represented frequently. They appear above all in their role as parents of Dionysos, like Hera, who is often mentioned in connection with the myth of Dionysos as well. These occasions are dominated by the use of the terms *βάκχ-* and *μανία/μαίνομαι*. This is a marked difference to the context of nymphs and muses, where *μανία* is used noticeably more often than *βάκχ-*; the opposite is true in the context of satyrs, hinting at a subtly different usage of the terms in relation to gender. Furthermore, muses are associated more often than other gods to *ένθουσιασμός*; Cybele, as was to be expected, to *Κορύβαντες*.

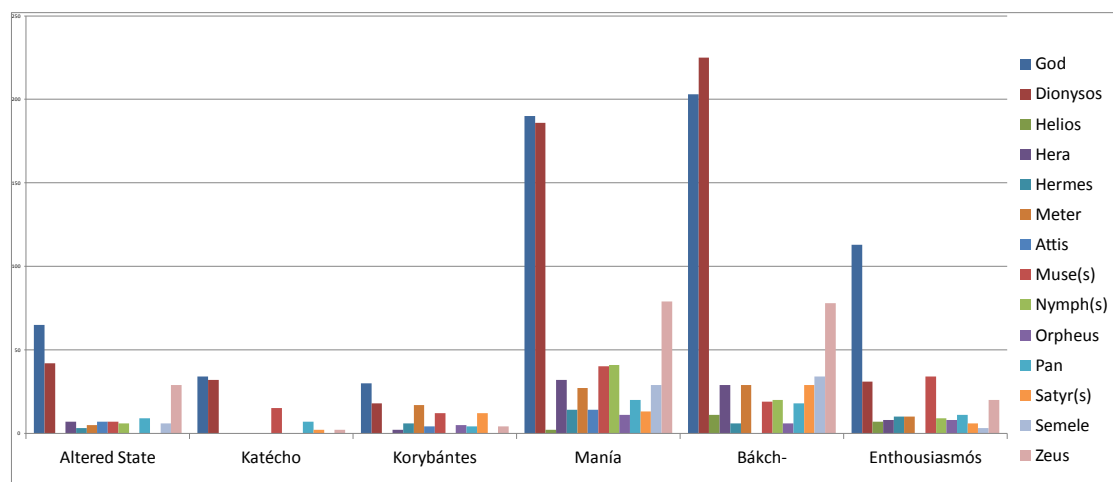


Chart 1b: Connections between deities and trance, absolute numbers (switched axes, selected terms).

Another visualisation of the same data (chart 1b) emphasises different details, such as the fact that *κατέχω*, in the sense of psychic possession, is almost exclusively related to the spheres of Dionysos and the muses, *μανία* and *βάκχ-* rather to Dionysos, while *ένθουσιασμός* is associated more with the muses. Meter/Cybele is connected with *μανία* and *βάκχ-* about as often as Hera, Semele, nymphs, satyrs or muses; with *Κορύβαντες* as often as muses and satyrs, while other figures are mentioned less often in this context. It is interesting to note here that the mentions of Dionysos equal those of Cybele; considering his general dominance in absolute numbers in the texts, this is a markedly low percentage.

³² In many cases the words included in this category could have been attributed to specific deities from their context, this was avoided to prevent overinterpretation. It should be noted though that the terms *ὁ θεός/ἡ θεά* in the analysed texts were apparently not used in the specific meaning connected to the Eleusinian mysteries.

Connections between music and trance

An important question this study set out to answer is how *μουσική*, i.e. dance and song, and single musical instruments, were used to trigger changed states of consciousness. Connections between these terms and the semantic field ‘trance’ are shown in charts 2a and 2b. Chart 2a visualises absolute frequencies of relations between changed states and various methods of bringing them about. Here, dance is revealed as the most important factor, especially taking into account the aspect of ‘shaking of head or hair’, which can be regarded as a specific form of rhythmic bodily motion, or dance. Song is mentioned frequently as well, as is the word *μουσική* itself. Apart from these musical factors, other (potential) influences are mentioned (not pictured in the graph), mainly wine, ivy, and *thyrsos*, but psychoactive substances are not mentioned in connection with trance states. The semantic fields ‘sleep’ and ‘relaxation’, on the other hand, are present, a result which is clarified in chart 2b, showing the relative frequencies of the terms. Here the highest correspondence can be found between sleep and prophecy. This kind of divine influence on the subject’s mental state is apparently compatible with sleeping and dreaming, as opposed to *μανία*, which was primarily connected to dance, song and *aulos* music.

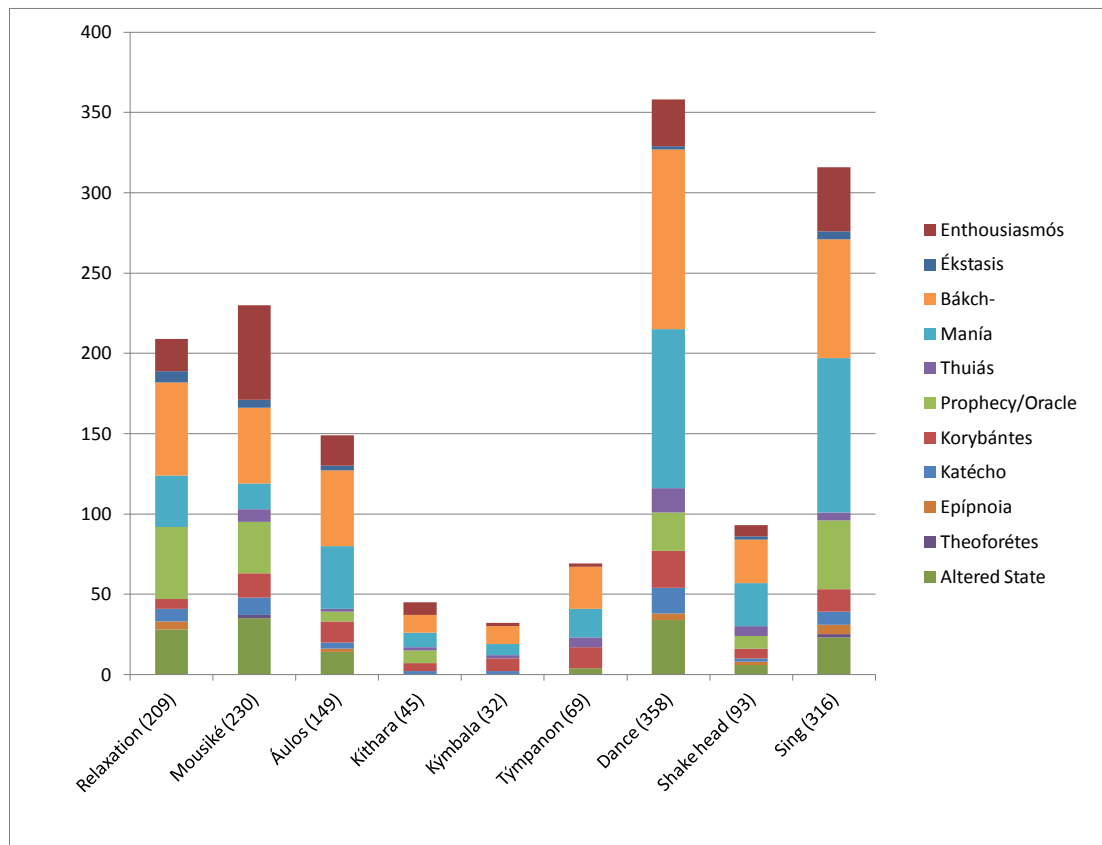


Chart 2a: Connections between music and trance, absolute figures.

Another noteworthy aspect of chart 2b is the relation of *μανία* and *βακχ-* on the one hand, and *ένθουσιασμός* on the other. While *ένθουσιασμός* was used less frequently in absolute numbers, it was used more often in instances in which the other two terms were less prevalent, especially in connection with *μουσική* and the *kithara*. *Kymbala* and *tympana* on the other hand were connected to *βακχεύω* and *Κορύβαντες*.

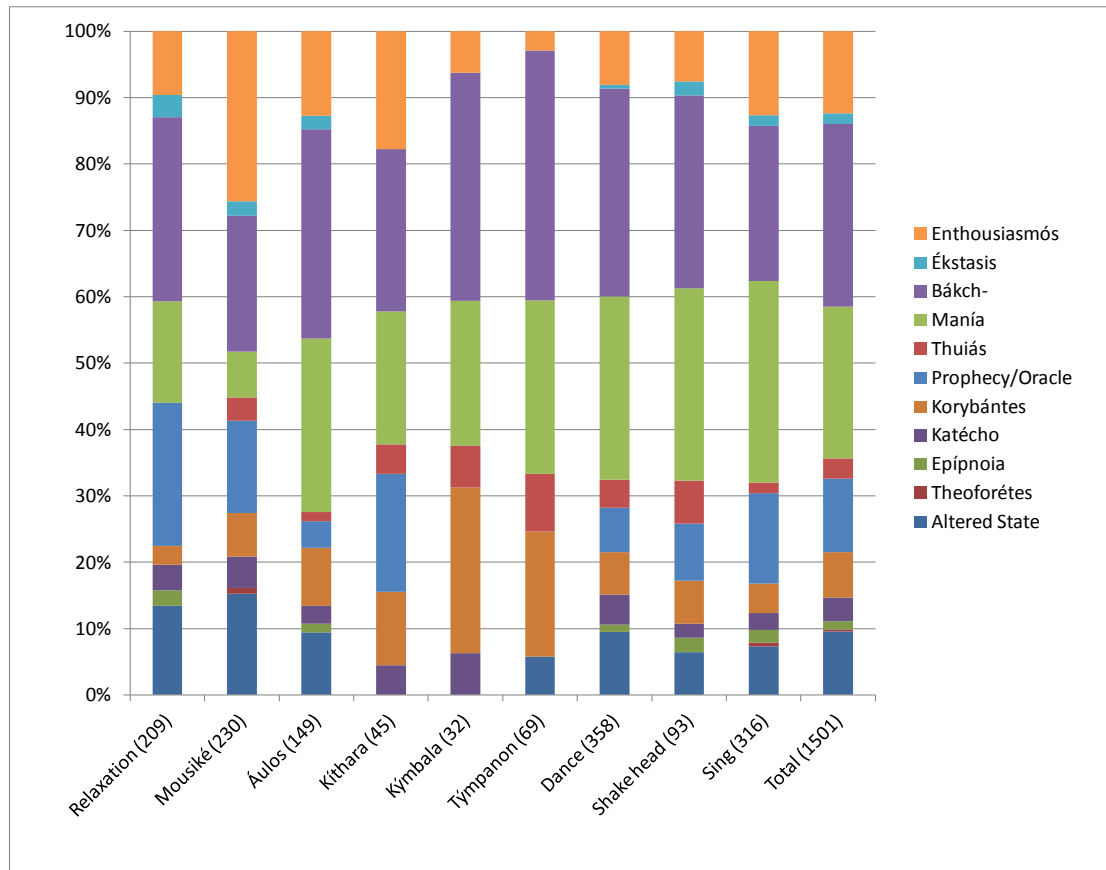


Chart 2b: Connections between music and trance, relative frequencies.

Ambience of trance

Besides music, other factors influencing consciousness can be visualised.

Chart 3 shows several tendencies: Firstly, 'secret' activities are clearly dominant over 'public' ones. Secondly, orgiastic rites are mentioned in connection with the night twice as frequently as with the day. Nevertheless, they were obviously possible during daytime as well, as illustrated by over 50 relevant entries. The most important ingredient for a successful maenadic frenzy, however, seems to have been a rural

setting, removed from urban civilisation, in wilderness – mountains and springs are mentioned especially often.

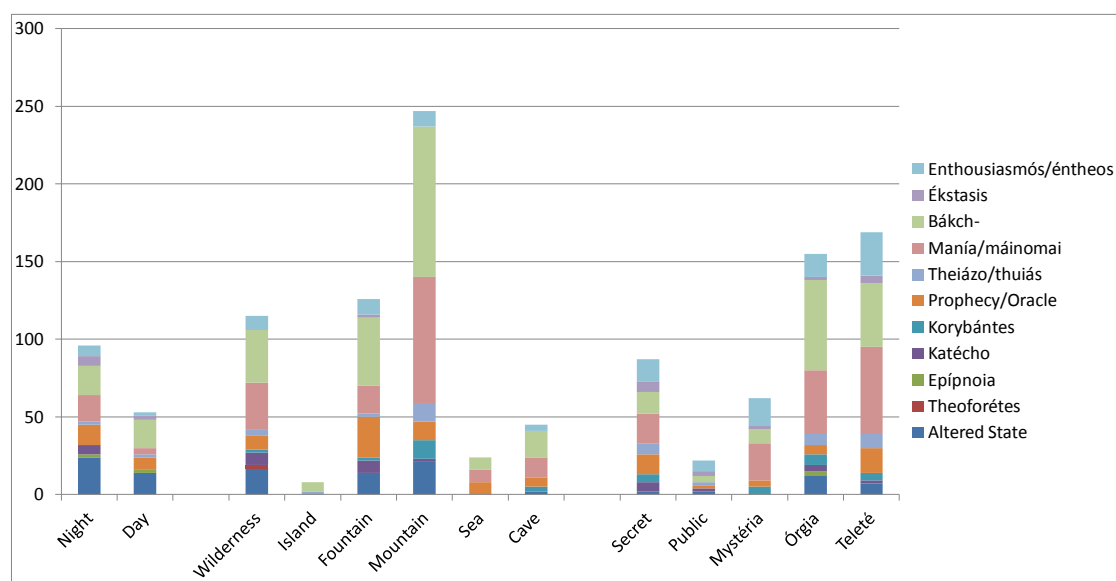


Chart 3: Ambience of trance

Conclusions

The activities surrounding trance states in ancient cults have long fascinated researchers. Applying content analysis to a corpus of ancient Greek texts has yielded a number of results that can help to clear up semantic nuances of trance-related terms. The presented statistics underline implicit associations in the Greek language between changed states and gods, above all Dionysos, on the one hand, and music, dance, and wilderness on the other.

Once the coding of the corpus by category is complete, any possible semantic correlation can be visualised. A promising course for further investigation is the relationship between variations in cultic trance states, their respective patron gods, and specific landscapes, such as ‘Phrygia’, both as an actual toponym and as a chiffré for an otherworldly place removed from everyday reality, as appears to have been present in the Greek-Roman collective unconscious, via associations with Cybele and other ‘Eastern’ deities.³³

³³ For an overview, with further literature, of the migration and evolution of the cult of Cybele during the 1st millennium BC cf. Sfameni Gasparro 1985: 1–5.

The results presented thus far were not necessarily unexpected – nevertheless, while expanding on details in our knowledge of ancient trance states, the congruence of the findings with what was previously assumed or postulated underlines the validity of the approach in principle.

From a methodological perspective, content analysis has been shown to be well suited for discovering underlying concepts in unstructured, diverse text material. It is paramount that the system of categories goes beyond simple word counts of keyword frequencies and makes the categories accessible to a description of their contexts and relations (e.g., A leads to B; C does not occur if D is present). The consistent and uniform coding frame allows comparative analyses between authors, cultures, historical epoch, etc.; the category scheme may even be transferred and extended to similar sources from related text corpora.

However, as our first methodological *caveat*, structuring text by means of categories implies the risk of taking content out of context. The term ‘cave’ is meaningless by itself, unless framed by ‘secret’ rituals of a ‘Dionysian’ cult. Thus, to facilitate the interpretation of results from content analysis, the system of categories shall refer to underlying concepts connected to previous studies, and shall be open to alternative interpretations. The strength of content analysis lies in discovering overarching similarities between a large number of diverse texts. As such, content analysis shall complement rather than substitute conventional approaches of critical text analysis, which allow for a much deeper understanding of the socio-historical connotations in a single text source.

The categorical structure derived from content analysis allows quantification as much as it demands meaningful interpretation. This points to a second methodological *caveat*: the achieved system of categories is highly dependent on the coder’s views. A different person with different interests or different background knowledge might come up with entirely different categories. Therefore, good practice in content analysis calls to approach objectivity by inter-subjectivity between at least two coders. Both coders work independently with the textual data and develop separate coding schemes. Their results are then compared; conflicting views are resolved by both coders agreeing on a common interpretation.

In view of this, the results presented in this paper are far from beyond improvement. Nevertheless, we do hope that they illustrate the potential of content analysis in the study of ancient texts, and might inspire further research in this field.

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