The bacchants are silent – applying cognitive approaches to explore ritual maenadism

Tantalising similarities between Euripides’ *Bacchae* and the historical ritual of the *oreibasia –* a mountainside dance performed by women for Dionysos – have fascinated and polarised scholars for over a century. The question of whether participants could have experienced anything like the epiphanic visions found in the play has stimulated a debate encompassing arguments about hysteria, belief, and the interplay between cult and myth. Lacking first-hand or eye-witness accounts of the mysterious ritual, historians have struggled with reconciling the ecstatic ‘madwomen’ of myth with the prestige of the civic cult.

This has resulted in two extremes of interpretation of the experiences of ritual participants: at one end of the spectrum are bizarre reconstructions in which Greek matrons tear apart living animals and devour the still-warm meat, while, at the other end, performing an energetic dance results simply in tired women experiencing a slight endorphin rush. Neither account manages to satisfactorily deal with both the civic context and the artistic depictions, nor adequately explain the mechanisms by which changes in mental state might be effected.

Inspired by Jan Bremmer’s 1984 paper on the physiological effects of the *oreibasia*, I will revisit the ancient evidence with an interpretative framework drawn from cognitive sciences, looking at religious experience in the context of an embodied mind. Incorporating theories of agency detection and predictive processing, I will explore how we can use this approach to integrate artistic and historical narratives, and better understand the lived experience and religious identity of historical maenads.