Reprinted from
THE REVIEW OF RELIGION
November, 1937

THE MYSTERY FRESCOES IN THE MYSTERY VILLA OF POMPEII

By Margarete Bieber
Associate Professor of Archaeology, Columbia University

The ancient Mystery religions are rightly considered to be of the greatest interest to the Christian world, because from them many ideas of eternal value, such as that of purification, have been taken over and developed in the Christian religion. Sometimes these pre-Christian Christian ideas have been exaggerated, as in the writings of Rizzo and Macchioro,[1] who see pure Christian ideas in the frescoes of the Mystery Villa. Even Rostovtzeff, in a fascinating little book,[2] sees mysteries and their revelation everywhere, even in the innocent Hellenistic study of a beautiful cock on a tablet, with a still-life composed of fruits and a napkin, found in an underground summer dining room near a corridor where wine jars were stored.[3] On the other hand, some scholars are interested only in the artistic merits of the ancient religious representations, such as Pfuhl and Curtius in their important books on ancient painting.[4]

There are, of course, many pictures like the above-mentioned cock, which do not need any other than an artistic-aesthetic explanation. There are others which have no artistic value at all, but which elevate the reverent spectator by their deep religious feeling, as in the case with most of the paintings in the Roman catacombs. But in Greek art there are many works of the highest artistic merit which are imbued at the same time with deep religious feeling. "Why did the artist of the pediment sculptures of the Parthenon execute his figures all around with the same completeness, although no human eye could see the backs and upper parts of them from below?" an unbelieving student

1. G. G. Rizzo, "Dionysos Mystes," *Memorie Reale Academia di Napoli*, III, 1914, 39 ff. Pls. I-IV. V. Macchioro, *Zagreus, Studi sull'orfismo*, 1920; *Zagreus, studi intorno all'orfismo*, 1930; *From Orpheus to Paul*. New York, 1930. Cf. also D. Comparetti, *Le Nozze di Bacco ed Arianna*, 1921. M. Bieber, "Mysteriensaal der Villa Item," *Jahrbuch des deutschen archaeologischen Instituts*, XLIII, 1928, 298 ff. Pls. 5-9.

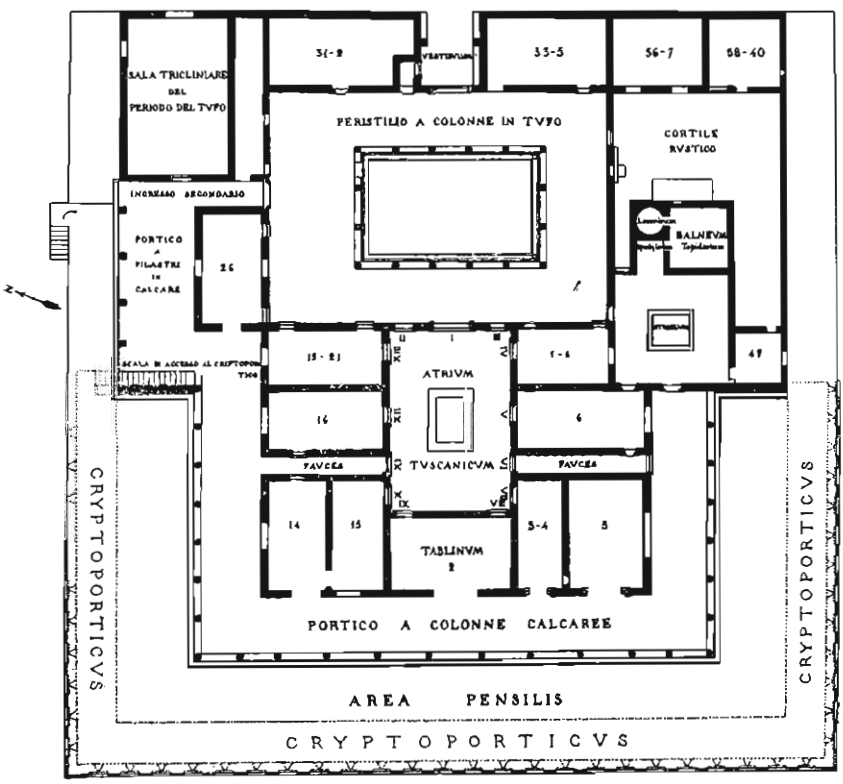
2. M. Rostovtzeff, *Mystic Italy*, 1927.

3. Rostovtzeff, *loc. cit.*, p. 62 ff. Fig. VIII. E. Rizzo, *La Pittura ellenistico-Romana* 10, Pl. XVI. Rizzo rightly calls these small pictures, 'xenia.'

4. E. Pfuhl, *Malerei und Zeichnung der Griechen*, II, 868 ff. L. Curtius, *Die Wandmalerei Pompejis*, 1929, 343 ff.

asked the other day. "Because they did not work for men but for the gods," was my answer. The temple on the Acropolis was dedicated to their highest and most venerated goddess, Athena, who had given them the victory over the Persians, and the artists worked for her praise and pleasure.

The frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries (also called Villa Item from the first discoverer of the site) are among those great treasures of art which give joy and instruction at the same time to the beholder. The frescoes are in the large room at the south-west corner of the



TAV. B - PIANTA RICOSTRUITA DELLA VILLA NELL'ETA CALCAREA E DEL TUFO

FIGURE 1

building, thus belonging to the oldest part of the Villa (Fig. 1). This part is dated 250-200 by Maiuri, who has published an excellent and georgeously illustrated volume on the Villa.[5] But the frescoes

5. A. Maiuri, *La Villa dei Misteri*, I, text. II, colored plates 1931.

were painted in the second Pompeian style, that is, not before Sulla had conquered Campania in 80 B.C., and not after the period of Augustus, when this style was replaced in Pompeii by the third, or ornate, style. Maiuri (p. 100) dates the frescoes in the Augustan period. I cannot follow this suggestion, because we know the style of the Augustan period in Rome from the house in the garden on the Farnesina, now in the Museo delle Terme,[6] and the house of Livia on the Palatine[7] to be already a forerunner of the fourth, or phantastic and intricate style of the Claudian, Neronic, and Flavian period. Here we have still the sober and grandiose style which to me seems characteristic of the period of Cæsar and Cicero and parallel to their writings. Therefore, I date the frescoes in the middle of the first century B.C.

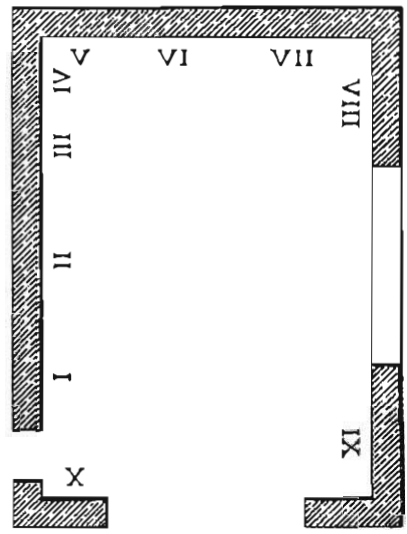


FIGURE 2

The question of date would not be so important if those scholars are right who believe that these frescoes are copied as a whole from an older picture, thus not representing the artistic and religious feeling of their own time, but that of a previous period. I suppose these scholars have not studied the frescoes in their place and have not taken into consideration the situation of the room (No. 5 in Maiuri, Tav. B., Figs. 1 and 2). It opens to the west with a large door, and to the south with a large window on the portico alongside the terrace above the subterranean passage. On the north it opens with a small door into a bedchamber with a double alcove. Thus it was open for visits and inspection from all sides, and probably formed a unit with the adjoining cubiculum, which may be described as a bridal chamber. The portico was later changed into a closed corridor, but the columns of the old

6. *Monumenti antichi dell'Instituto*, XII, *Supplemento*. Mau and Lessing, "Wand- und Deckenschmuck eines römischen Hauses ans der Zeit des Augustus." Pfuhl, *loc. cit.*, 880 ff. III, Figs. 719 f. Curtius, *loc. cit.*, p. 108 ff. Figs. 64-68.

7. *Mon. antichi dell'Instituto*, XI, Pls. 23-44. Pfuhl, *loc. cit.*, 870 ff. III, Figs. 708 and 728-731. Curtius, *loc. cit.*, 90 ff. Figs. 54-55, 62-63.

portico were left standing before the window in order to admit enough light for the study of the paintings. This fact shows that they were appreciated, not as reproductions of older-paintings, but as testimonials of a living art and of a living faith.

This faith was the Dionysiac Mystery religion in the peculiar shape it had taken in the Hellenistic period on Italian soil. Dionysos and Aphrodite are the chief gods of Pompeii; in almost every house the figures of these gods, their followers, or their influence are painted. Wine and love filled the life of many of the inhabitants of Pompeii. Dionysos is himself a great lover. His marriage with Ariadne, who had been abandoned by Theseus, was a symbol of the transition from sorrow to joy, from darkness to light. His mysteries were not as holy or as conservative as the Eleusinian mysteries. Demeter and Kore made their believers come to Eleusis, or to the few dependent sanctuaries of the Eleusinian cult at Athens and Alexandria, if they wanted to be initiated. Dionysos went through the world accompanied by his beloved wife, Ariadne. Everywhere men and women could become his followers. They fell into ecstasy by drinking his gift of the vine, and raved, made music, and danced in the guise of satyrs (Plate, III), and mænads (Plate, VIII). It seems that in Athens the maidens were introduced into the Dionysiac cult by the Basilinna, the priestess of Dionysos, who in the guise of Ariadne married the god. In the wedding month (Gamelion) the young brides were admitted to the sanctuary of the wine god in the Lenaion, thus named for the pressing of the grapes, which gave the precious gift of the god. After they had been purified and initiated they were ripe for marriage and love.

I think, therefore, that the ceremony represented in the 'Mystery room' is not an ordinary initiation, but the introduction of brides into the mystery of the wine god. His happy marriage is the prototype of all happy marriages. That is why he and Ariadne are represented in the center of the rear wall of the room (VI: Fig 2, and Plate) opposite the main entrance, and they are flooded with light from the large side window. The real center is taken by Ariadne seated on a high throne before a cult statue. We can reconstruct the upper part of the group, now destroyed, from a cameo at Vienna (Plate, *reverse*) and similar coins in Smyrna. This is probably a celebrated group, taken

over, as are other single figures, from older works of art. Ariadne is the principal personage because this is a woman's feast. Dionysos reclines drunken with wine and love in her lap. The wine is in the hands of his satyrs (Plate, V) of which three are represented to his right (left of the spectator). The oldest lets the youngest drink out of a deep bowl, while the middle one holds the other sacred symbol of the gods, the stylised mask, above the naturalistic head of the living old silenus. I do not believe that this is a scene of divination,[8] for the satyr bends his head much too deep into the bowl so that he could not see anything, and the mask cannot be reflected in the bowl, as the angle between the mask and the opening of the bowl is much too great. The bowl is held upward, the mask is to the left above the head of the old satyr facing the spectator. This type of handleless bowl is a drinking cup (σκυφος or κοτυλε) used in the ritual scenes of women celebrating the Dionysiac Lenaion festival.[9]

Music, which belongs to the Dionysiac, as to all ancient cults, is made by another old silenus who plays the cithara, throwing up his head in ecstasy (Plate, III). He is on the longest northen wall, separated from the corner and the rear wall by the idyllic group of a Pan and a Paniska (Plate, IV). The girl is suckling a small kid. The idea expressed by many scholars that this little goat is Dionysos himself is impossible, because the parents of the kid, a large goat in the background and a smaller she-goat in the foreground, are also present. Moreover, Dionysos is never himself a goat. The goat is his sacred animal, which is sacrificed to him. It is slaughtered because it is an enemy to the sacred grapes of the god, which it destroys by nibbling the young sprouts. The idea of the animals suckled by females is wide spread in the Dionysiac religion. We find it in the *Bacchae* of Euripides at the end of the fifth century B.C.

8. Mudie Cooke-Tillyard, *Journal of Roman Studies*, III, 1913, 167 ff.; Macchioro, *Zagreus*, 94 ff.; Jocelyn Toynbee, *JRS*, XIX, 1929, 74 ff. I agree with Miss Toynbee's excellent article in so far as she also sees prenuptial initiation rites. We disagree in so far as she believes that there is only one bride going through the different rites, while I see several brides in the different scenes, as their appearance, faces, hairdress, and clothes are considerably varied. I believe in the unity of the continuous ceremony, which is given for the initiation of a group of several brides; each bride is shown in a different situation completing the others.

9. Frickenhaus, "Lenäenvasen," 72. *Berliner Winckelmannsprogramm*, 1912, 28 f. Figs. 11 B; 18 A, B; 19 A, B; 22 A; 28 A, Pl. 2, 13; 3, 16-17. Bieber, *Arch. Jahrb.* d. I. XLIII, 1928, 321 f. Fig. 14.

Next to the idyllic group at the corner between the long wall and the rear wall is a fleeing girl, who has come from the groups on the rear wall, for she looks back at them, and the old silenus who lets the young satyr drink turns to look after her (Plate, V). Here the liknon is unveiled, i.e., the sacred basket with the mysterious objects of the Dionysiac cult, outstanding among them the phallus, the symbol of fertility. The veil is lifted by a kneeling mænad. Behind her was probably an assistant mænad and one of the several brides who are initiated at the same time. The upper part is lost, but she seems to draw back in terror while the other bride is fleeing. The horror is not only injected by the huge symbol, but by the sinister winged figure, who lifts a rod to strike the back of a kneeling girl (VII: Fig. 2, and Plate). This girl is beyond the corner of the rear wall and the southern window wall (VIII: Fig. 2, and Plate). She hides her face in the lap of a matronly companion, who strokes her hair with one hand, but removes the dress from her back with the other hand, in order that the rod of the winged figure may reach it. Again we have a composition which reaches over the corner in a very clever manner. The striking figure is explained as Telete, Initiation, or more likely Aidos, Shame, who strikes the young girls when they are initiated into the mysteries of love and marriage. The flagellation of youths and virgins before they can be declared ripe and mature for independent private and public life is a custom found all over the world. The idea is that purification and fertility are necessary for brides, who are to become mothers of a family. This is best known from antiquity in the Roman cult of the Lupercalia, the cult of Faunus.[10] The priests sacrificed goats, cut straps from their hides, and with them beat the women to purify them and make them fit for the bearing of children. This happened in the month of February which is named from *februm*, cleansing or purification.

Before the women were admitted to the initiation they were given instruction and had to perform a sacrifice. These two scenes are represented on the southern wall next to the small door, leading to the bed-chamber (I-II: Fig. 2, and Plate). Out of this door a matron steps and joins the group of a bride to whom a boy is reading from a scroll. This is a boy acolyte, who had to have both parents living,

10. L. Deubner, "Lupercalia," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, XIII, 1910, p. 481 ff. Jocelyn Toynbee, *JRS*, XIX, 1929, 67 ff., especially 77 ff.

and who was used in mystical as well as wedding ceremonies. He reads to one bride the sacred laws, while a second carries a dish with cake, used in the cult of Dionysos as well as in weddings, to the group II in which a priestess prepares a sacrificial basket. She is seen from the back. With her left hand she lifts the veil from a basket held by an assistant, with her right hand she holds a laurel branch over a dish, while another assistant pours wine over it from a jug. She will probably put the purified sprig into the basket.

After the girls have gone through all the ceremonies, and the ritual flogging, they become mænads and dance in honor of the god. This is shown in the beautiful nude girl (Plate, VIII) seen from the back playing the castanets with hands lifted over her head, one of the most beautiful figures among the twenty-nine on the frieze.

After the completed initiation the bride is ripe for marriage. In a group (IX: Fig. 2, and Plate) to the right of the window, corresponding to the dancing mænad to the left of the window (VIII: Fig. 2, and Plate) she is decked and given an elaborate hairdress with the help of a handmaid and an Eros who holds the mirror. The Roman bride had a definite headdress of six braids (*sex crines*). We see here the hair divided into at least four parts and two more may be hidden. A second Eros looks on from behind the bride beyond the corner of the window-wall and the front wall. Again the action and the expression lead around the corner to show that the whole frieze is a unit. On the other side of the main entrance, between it and the little door leading to the cubiculum, is a matronly woman seated on a couch, resting her cheek on her right hand and displaying her left hand with a wedding ring (X: Fig. 2, and Plate). She is, no doubt, seated in the bridal chamber after the wedding has been performed.

From these considerations it seems to be apparent that the frieze was designed for the special room, and that the Dionysiac Mysteries are represented in the form in which they were performed at Rome in the first century B.C. They have now a mild form without the tortures, wild orgies, and riots that made the Roman senators in 186 B.C. forbid the nocturnal gatherings of the religious associations. We are in the period of Cæsar, and probably in the house of a rich Roman educated in the Greek spirit and the Greek religion. We are in the important historical moment when Greek civilization passed over into the Roman and when Greek ideas, Greek art, Greek religion, and Greek

philosophy, were taken over by the Roman people to be developed into a practical form capable of conquering the whole spiritual world.

There is a second monument of the same period and of a similar character. It is unfortunately not left in place, but has been partly destroyed and the rest divided between the Museums of Naples and New York: the frescoes from a large room from a Villa in Boscoreale.[11] In both cases, on the rear wall opposite the entrance, there were gods, and on both long sides, mortals. In Boscoreale, on the rear wall, Aphrodite was in the center. Dionysos and Ariadne were to the left, the three Graces on the right side. Again we see a combination of the gods of Love, and Wine, in this case combined with the representation of female grace. On each of the long sides there was in the center a couple, a man and a woman, the woman with the marriage ring, the man with weapons. One of the men (in the Metropolitan Museum) is nude like a Hero. He has probably fallen in the same war from which the other man has returned. But he was a victor before he died, for he has brought home his shield. One of his daughters takes it into the inside of the house, moving toward a small door and looking back with a pathetic expression. Another member of the family, probably an older daughter, plays the cithara, turned toward the gods. Behind her chair is a little girl, who resembles her, and is probably her daughter or little sister. At the side of the couple on the other wall was an old man coming out of a sham door, as the matron in the Villa of the Mysteries comes out of the door by the cubiculum. The figure on the other side of the second couple is lost. It was probably an old woman to match the old man.

Here we have in my opinion a portrait of some noble family. Near the corner between the entrance and the left side wall was the oldest member of the family. In the center of both walls were the two sons with their wives, and on the right side-wall the youngest members were beside them. The arrangement is thus similar in spirit to the one in the Villa of the Mysteries: the story begins with the oldest generation of the family at the left side from the entrance, the doors are taken into account, and the rear wall opposite to the main entrance is dedicated to the gods.

I cannot believe that either of the frescoes is copied as a whole from

11. Barnabei, *La Villa Pompeiana de Fannio Sinistore presso Boscoreale.* A. Sambon, *Les Fresques de Boscoreale.*

I

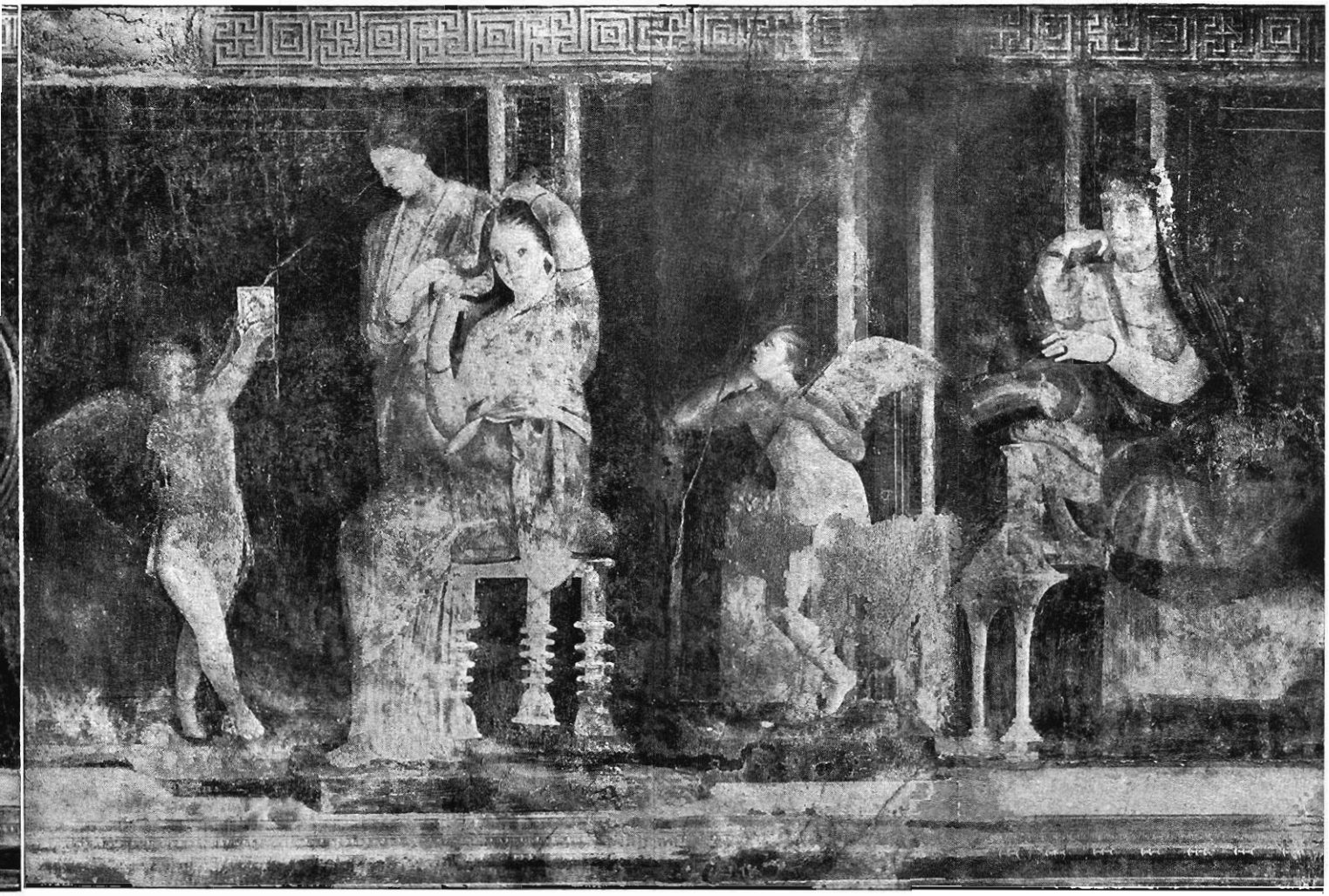
II

III

VIII

VII

VI



IX

X

older pictures. They not only fit the room, but are also in the spirit of their own period, the austere greatness of the late Roman Republic, i.e., the period when the Roman Empire of the ancient political Universe and the Christian Empire of the spiritual Universe were prepared. The people who have gathered to venerate the gods in Boscoreale, and the brides who are initiated into the Dionysiac Mysteries, are not Macedonian rulers, as has been said by Studniczka,[12] and as many others have believed, and they are not Greek followers of Dionysos of the classical period, as Macchioro,[13] and again many others, have believed. They are Italians of the first century B.C., painted by a late Hellenistic artist like Timomachos, who was a favorite of Cæsar and who had painted a "Noble Family,"[14] the best title which could be given to the frescoes from Boscoreale also. The group in the center of the Mystery Villa may be called Liber and Libera, the liberators, the name which in Italy was given to Dionysos and Ariadne.

ILLUSTRATIONS

FIG. 1. Plan of the Villa. From A. Maiuri, *La Villa dei Misteri*, I text Tav. B. opposite p. 38.

FIG. 2. Plan of the "Mystery Room." From Maiuri, Fig. 45 on page 125.

Plate, *verso*. Cameo at Vienna. From Maiuri, I, Fig. 58, page 151.

Courtesy of Libreria dello Stato, Rome

Plate, *recto*. Frieze of the "Mystery Room." From V. Macchioro, *From Orpheus to Paul*.

Courtesy of Henry Holt & Co.

12. Studniczka, *Jahrbuch d. deutschen archaeol. Instituts*, XXXVIII/IX, 1923/1924, 64 ff. Cf. Curtius *loc. cit.*, 114 ff. Figs. 77 and 79 and p. 279 ff. W. Tarn, *Cambridge Ancient History*, VII, 1928, p. 87.

13. Macchioro, *Zagreus*, 132. Cf. also M. Cooke, *JRS*, III, 1913, 157 ff. Pls. 8-14. Cf. on the other hand M. Bieber, *Arch. Jahrb. loc. cit.*, 306 ff. and Maiuri, *loc. cit.*, 166 f.

14. Cf. Pliny, XXXV, 136, "cognatio nobilium, palliati quos dicturos pinxit, alterum stantem, alterum sedentem."