Domestic Dionysus? Teleite in mosaics from Zeugma and the Late Roman Near East
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The study of Dionysiac imagery has never lacked matter for controversy, and the problems of interpretation appear especially vividly when that imagery is used as decoration in a domestic context. When scenes that may be taken to bear a reference to Dionysiac cult and initiation, supposedly performed in conditions of secrecy and seclusion, are found decorating the walls, floors, or ceiling of what appear to be rooms used for reception, open to a wide range of visitors, what role do allusions to initiation and the mysteries play in such a setting? They have been seen as professions of faith on the part of the patrons who commissioned them, and records of their personal commitment to the god and his cult, or as elements of fashionable décor emptied of 'real' religious significance.¹ Scholars have used the evidence of these representations as the foundation for reconstructions of the content and procedure of the ceremonies.² More recent critics have stressed the polysemy of such images, the possibility they offer of multiple readings, their ability to address different messages to different audiences, depending on the respective culture and levels of preparation.³

Discussion has long focused on the monuments of Rome and Pompeii from the Late Republic and Early Empire, and especially on such well-known and well-preserved complexes as the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii or the paintings and stuccoes of the Farnesina Villa in Rome.⁴ But modern scholarship has been no more unanimous in addressing the significance of the ubiquitous Dionysiac imagery on the domestic mosaics of the mid- and Late Empire. Only a few contain elements that have been taken to bear a direct reference to mysteries and initiation, directly comparable to the scenes of cult from the 1st c. B.C. and 1st c. A.D.: notably the mosaic from the Maison de Bacchus at Cucul (Djemila), which includes a scene of the unveiling of the ikhnai,⁵ and, more controversially, the mosaics from the Maison de la Procession dionysiaque at Thysdrus (El Djem).⁶ The great majority of Dionysiac mosaics are thoroughly ambivalent, susceptible to interpretations that could vary according to the inclinations of the observer; their keynotes are festivity, tryphe, wine, and a general Dionysiac atmosphere.⁷

The question of the significance of Dionysiac imagery in a domestic context and its relationship to cult is raised in a new and vivid form by a number of mosaics from the eastern provinces, dating from the 3rd and 4th c. and even later; many of these are recent discoveries. Among the most remarkable are the mosaics from the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris, excavated in the late 1980s, and dated to the late 2nd or early 3rd c. A.D.⁸ The mosaic of the large triclinium here...