

Domestic Dionysus? Telete in mosaics from Zeugma and the Late Roman Near East

Katherine M. D. Dunbabin

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 rôle 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 Cuicul (Djemila), which includes a scene of the unveiling of the *fiknon*,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

1 For an overview of the question, see Wyler 2004; Geyer 1977 (with review by G. Zimmer, *Gnomon* 52 [1980] 659-66). For an example of interpretation in the mystical sense, see Horn 1972; Merkelbach 1988.

2 Nilsson 1957; Matz 1964; Turcan 2003, especially 135-41; and *infra* nn. 34-37.

3 Wyler 2004; cf. Paillet 1995, 185-91.

4 Villa dei Misteri: Sauron 1998; Veyne 1998; Paillet 2000; and the articles in Gazda 2000. Farnesina Villa: Bragantini and de Vos 1982, 91-92, 138-39, 191, 193-94, pls. 27, 73-74, 78-79, 100-1, 112-13, 119-20; Wyler 2005.

5 Blanchard 1980; Dunbabin 1978, 179-80; Geyer 1977, 142-53; the date is probably the second half of the 2nd or beginning of the 3rd c.

6 Foucher 1963, 113-29 and 146-54; Dunbabin 1978, 175-76; Geyer 1977, 113-14 and 117-24; probably mid-2nd c. Both the Djemila and El Djem mosaics are accepted by Turcan (2003, 125-26 and 151-53) in his corpus of documents illustrating initiatory ritual, the latter with some reservations.

7 See Geyer 1977, 109-12 and 158-60; Dunbabin 1978, 185-87; Turcan 2003, xxiii, quoting J. Bayet for "un dionysisme d'atmosphère". For Dionysiac motifs on mosaics of Greek houses of the 4th and 3rd c. B.C., see Guimier-Sorbets 2004; for Dionysos on mosaics and in other media in late antiquity, see Parrish 1995 and 2004.

8 Talgam and Weiss 2004; date: *ibid.* 27-29; the house was destroyed, apparently by an earthquake, in the mid-4th c. I am very grateful to Z. Weiss for his readiness to provide photographs of the mosaics and to discuss the issues that they raise.