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Ignorance and Search in the Villa of the Mysteries

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LEHMANN K., *Ignorance and search in the Villa of the Mysteries* : JRS LII 1962 62-68. | Le rapprochement entre la scène centrale de la fresque et une peinture murale retrouvée en 1933 à Hermoupolis dans une tombe datant de l'époque d'Hadrien permet de reconnaître dans le démon ailé armé d'une verge Ἄγνοια, qui refuse la révélation offerte par la femme agenouillée à sa droite. Elle symbolise le tourment de celle qui est encore dans l'ignorance et dont la tête repose sur les genoux de Μύησις, personnification de l'initiation. Quant aux personnages figurant à la droite de Dionysos, ils représentent la recherche de la vérité, symbolisée par l'image du masque reflété dans l'eau.

1021 (p. 68)
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1962

IGNORANCE AND SEARCH IN THE VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES

By KARL LEHMANN *

(Plates IX–XII)

During the fifty years that have elapsed since the great cycle of Dionysiac paintings was unearthed in the villa named after them at Pompeii, the search for their understanding has made reassuring progress. This search will never lead us out of ultimate ignorance about the deepest meaning which such visual imagery had within the context of an ancient mystery religion and we may resign ourselves to awareness of our own limitations in this respect. The best we can hope for is that we may learn to understand the surface meaning of images, whose full significance was only made clear to the initiated, to the degree to which, in antiquity, an uninitiated person could understand them. The last two published extensive discussions of this cycle of murals ¹ show clearly, however, that we are still far from having achieved even that degree of understanding. The impasse that has been reached can be overcome only by introducing new evidence and it is my hope that some progress can be made by doing so in the following pages.

But before turning to this new, or rather, previously overlooked evidence, I should like to acknowledge the basic merit of the recent analysis of the cycle by R. Herbig. His clear distinction of three subdivisions within it, each of which must be understood as a coherent unit before the question of the comprehensive meaning of the whole can be answered—if answered it ever can be—is of basic value. It is only the first and dominating unit of these three with which I concern myself here. This unit is in the nature of a great triptych that fills the centre of the rear wall and whose side wings flank that centre and, in the customary antique denial of the physical barriers of corners in a frieze composition, extend over the two adjacent sections of the lateral walls to create a loose balance conditioned by the architectural layout of the room, in which a broad window at the right reduces the wall space available for the right wing of the triptych (pls. IX, 1; X, 2, 3).²

In the centre of this unit, the dominating group of Dionysos reclining in the lap of Ariadne in drunkenness and love conjures the presence of the god who presides over his mysterious rites, in the same manner in which in the 'Hall of Aphrodite' in the Villa near Boscoreale that goddess appeared in familiar imagery in the centre of the rear wall.³ The two lateral wings, it is agreed, paraphrase essential features of these rites on an at least partly mythological level. They are still the most controversial sections of the whole cycle and it is to an understanding of them that the new evidence adduced here leads.

Only two of the seven ⁴ figures in the scene at the right are clearly and easily understood: the kneeling maiden who is engaged in lifting the cloth from the liknon to reveal the phallic symbol that is, here, still covered and not yet exposed to sight and, still further to the right, the dancing maenad (pl. X, 3), a familiar image of Bacchic revelry and the blissful state after initiation. We are still at a loss even to conjecture the meaning of the contrasting sombre woman behind her or of the figure behind the kneeling maiden. And most controversial of all remains the name and nature of the dark-winged female daimon (pl. X, 2) who threatens to castigate a half-naked girl who, kneeling, hides her face—enough is exposed to convey to the spectator that she has closed her eyes ⁵—in the lap of a seated woman who looks angrily at the scourging daimon.

* In the spring of 1960, Karl Lehmann wrote this article, the gist of which had been presented before the annual meeting of the College Art Association of America the previous January at a symposium on Religious Painting in Late Antiquity. He delayed its publication in the hope of receiving adequate photographs of the painting from Hermoupolis. Now, after his death, the photograph reproduced as pl. X, 1, has finally arrived, thanks to the kind assistance of N. B. Millet of the American Research Center in Egypt, Inc. Hence I submit this contribution to Roman painting in the form in which my husband left it, save for the two additions to the text inserted between square brackets (pp. 66, 67f.) that I have considered it proper to append.—Phyllis Williams Lehmann.

¹ Martin P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (*Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciae*, V), Lund, 1957, 66 ff., 128 ff.; Reinhard Herbig, *Neue Beobachtungen am Fries der Mysterien-Villa in Pompeji* (*Deutsche Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft*, 10), Baden-Baden, 1958, with a comprehensive bibliography, 70 ff.

² Herbig, o.c., 20 ff., 65 ff.

³ Phyllis Williams Lehmann, *Roman Wall Paintings from Boscoreale in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, 26 ff.

⁴ Not eight as Herbig maintains: cf. the correction of this point by Phyllis Williams Lehmann, *Gnomon*, XXXIII, 1961, 80.

⁵ See, Herbig, o.c. (n. 1), fig. 8.

Ever since the discovery of this cycle, it has been recognized that the winged daimon is the same one who also occurs on terracotta reliefs and gems coupled with the figure of the kneeling girl revealing the phallos or another Bacchic symbol (pls. ix, 1, 2; x, 2, p. 64, fig. 2), a bearded mask. More recently, the occurrence of this same pair of figures in a mosaic from North Africa has become known (pl. ix, 3),⁶ where they occupy the main portion of one of five scenes, the other four representing a sacrifice to Dionysos, scenes of his childhood and his punishment of Lykourgos. The various meanings attached to the winged daimon have been discussed and listed by Herbig, who has not reduced the confusion by adding to them the symbolism of the scourge as an image of suffering womanhood.⁷

In the recent discussion of the meaning of this key figure, a monument that came to light in 1933 and which gives it a definite name seems to have escaped notice. As we shall see, this important monument in addition to identifying the daimon of the Villa of the Mysteries, of the terracotta reliefs, the gems and the North African mosaic also throws light on the corresponding wing of the painted triptych.

The mural painting illustrated here (pl. x, 1) was discovered in 1933 at Hermoupolis in Egypt in a tomb dated by the excavators in the Hadrianic age.⁸ The scene at the right represents Oedipus killing his father Laios—the name Οἰδίπους is inscribed over the former's head and Λαῖός appears on the ground beneath the latter—in the presence of a female figure who, like the daimon of the Villa of the Mysteries, makes her momentous epiphany on the stage by coming forward and raising both arms to her right while turning her face in the opposite direction. The figure, it is true, is fully draped and in this detail it is more closely related to the winged daimon of the terracotta reliefs and the mosaic (pl. ix, 2, 3) than to that of the Pompeian painting and the gems. It lacks the rod, which is absent in all the monuments with the exception of the Villa of the Mysteries, and it lacks the wings which are large in the latter, in the Campana reliefs and on the gems but are present in the mosaic only in a rudimentary remnant—if at all.⁹ Yet that this figure—closest to that of the African mosaic in location and date as well as in appearance—is derived from the same basic prototype as are the others is evident. That the artist who painted the tomb in Hermoupolis drew on a pictorial model in which this figure was included in a scene set in a sanctuary—presumably of Dionysos—can, in fact, still be seen. For while a high mountain, evidently the Kithairon,¹⁰ appears to the left of her, and, seated on its slope, Thebes (inscribed Θῆβαι) looking with horror on the parricide, next to the daimon herself there is a high pillar, a customary indication of a sanctuary and, in the background, between the right edge of the picture and the mountain, one sees a low uncrenellated wall, the enclosure of a sanctuary. Analogies to these elements of stage setting are not lacking, particularly in the Bacchic circle,¹¹ while they are obviously incorrect for the scene of Laios' murder at the crossroad of the wild Kithairon. The contamination here of two different pictorial sources, one of them showing the daimon in a sanctuary, probably combined with other figures of that realm as she appears in the mosaic, is evident.

In our context, the first important feature of the painting from Hermoupolis is the name inscribed over the head of the figure. She is Ἄγνοια (spelt ΑΓΝΥΑ), Ignorance, who seems here, with a magical gesture of her raised arms, to urge Oedipus on to commit parricide. Ignorance, indeed, as responsible for sin,¹² is a familiar personification in antique thought, at least from the Hellenistic age on. In 'The Girl Who Gets Her Hair Cut Short' of Menander, Ἄγνοια appears as the prologue who, in the light vein of a comedy of errors,

⁶ L. Leschi, *Monuments Piot*, 1935/6, 139 ff., pl. viii-ix. Further bibliography listed by Herbig, o.c. (n. 1), 75 ff.

⁷ *ibid.* 49 ff.

⁸ *Illust. Lond. News*, vol. 184, April 21, 1934, 598 f., fig. 6; S. Gabra, *Bulletin de l'association des amis des églises et de l'art Coptes* 1, 1935, 37 ff.; *idem*, *Rapport sur les fouilles d'Hermoupolis Ouest (Touna El-Gebel)*, Cairo, 1941, 98 f., pl. XLVI; S. Gabra-E. Drioton, *Peintures à fresques et scènes peintes à Hermoupolis-Ouest (Touna El-Gebel)*, Services des Antiquités de l'Égypte, Cairo, 1954, 10, pl. 15.

⁹ Leschi, l.c. (n. 6) recognizes the tip of a wing in a small remnant above the right shoulder. But it would be an awkward place for such a tip. Is it the

end of a strand of hair blown sidewise? Or the ends of a fillet? ⁷

¹⁰ Not Mt. Olympos, as Gabra called it, *Bulletin*, p. 40.

¹¹ For example, in the famous painting of the Childhood of Dionysos in the Villa near the Villa Farnesina: J. Lessing-A. Mau, *Wand- und Deckenschmuck eines römischen Hauses aus der Zeit des Augustus*, Berlin, 1891, pl. viii, and often reproduced.

Gabra, *Rapport* 99 f. and *Peintures* 10, interpreted the precinct wall at Hermoupolis as theatrical décor and the high pillar as the 'stèle funéraire' of Laios!

¹² See, for example, for customary combinations of Ignorance and Sin, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Kittel, 1933, I, 117 ff.

figures as their source, saying: 'Lest thanks to me, Ἄγνοια, something chance against their will' (ll. 21 f.) and 't'was I that egged him on, though he's not such by nature' (ll. 44 f.). In the introduction to Lucian's treatise on *Slander*, Ignorance is blamed as the source of most human troubles and she appears as the 'tragic daimon' (ὑπὸ τῆς ἄγνοίας καθάπερ ὑπὸ τραγικοῦ τινος δαίμονος κεχορηγημένα) particularly in such tragedies as those of Oedipus (the Labdakidai). It is the same treatise that contains the description of Apelles' Calumny in which Agnoia was painted—we do not know with what gestures—next to the judge (§5). Multiple as such daimons may be ('Ignorances', Ἄγνοια, figure in the Pinax

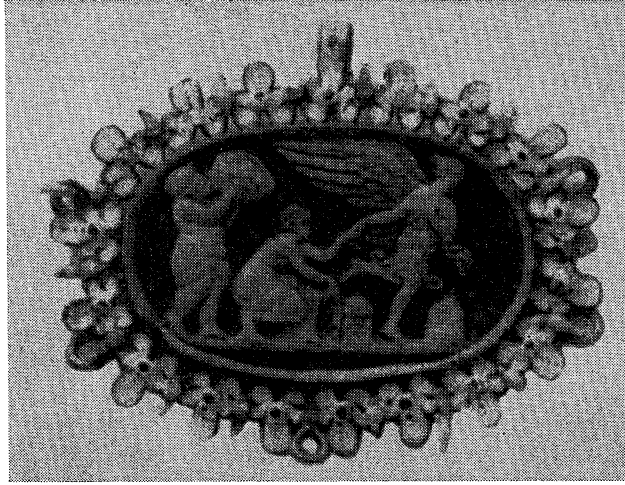


FIG. 2. PARIS, BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE: CAMEO IN SARDONYX. C. 2
E. Babelon, 'Catal. des camées antiques et modernes de la Bibliothèque Nationale' (1897), pl. VIII
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of Cebes, 23, 1), in this painting from Hermoupolis Oedipus clearly is driven on to commit sin by the daimon Ἄγνοια as, in general, one sins through ignorance.

The painter in Hermoupolis, as we have already seen, adapted his figure to give it this meaning from a prototype in which the personification appeared, apart from any action such as that of Oedipus, in a context of Bacchic rites. In the simplest version, that of the mosaic, we find her averting her face from the already revealed phallos and expressing her unwillingness to accept knowledge by the eloquent gesture of her arms and hands (pl. IX, 3). It is clear that, originally, this gesture was a phrase expressing the rejection of Knowledge by Ignorance and that, in the painting in Hermoupolis, it has been reinterpreted as one of magic command in the context of the action that takes place at her left instead of referring to an object shown to her at her right. On the cameo (fig. 2), on the other hand, while she averts her face and still makes the gesture of defence with her left arm, the meaning of the figure has been elaborated by her actually running away from the scene of revelation, while her right hand, extended downward, is seized by the kneeling maiden who has revealed the sacred symbol (in this instance, the mask, instead of the phallos). Her refusal to stay and to acquire knowledge is expressed in the same terms, in a slight modification of this version, on the Campana reliefs (pl. IX, 2), where the kneeling figure tries to hold her back by seizing the end of a scarf that Ἄγνοια holds in her right hand.

It is on the background of this process of constant modification of a basic type representing Ignorance that we must understand the daimon in the Villa of the Mysteries. That she, too, is Ἄγνοια there can be no doubt. Basically, in movement and gestures, she is the figure that appears in the mosaic and in the painting from Hermoupolis, although in costume and in her large wings she is more closely related to the images on the cameo and on the terracotta reliefs. The dark colour of her wings, symbols of obscurity contrasting with the light of truth, fits her well. The darkness in which Ignorance envelops man (σκότος) is, indeed, mentioned again in the opening sentences of Lucian's *Slander*.

The great master who directed work in the Pompeian villa has preserved the connection



(1) POMPEII, VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES: TRIPTYCH FROM THE HALL OF THE MYSTERIES. (2) PARIS, LOUVRE: TERRACOTTA RELIEF (NO. 4042), c. 1. (3) DJEMILA, ALGERIA: DETAIL OF MOSAIC FROM THE BUILDING OF THE GREAT BATHS, NOW IN THE MUSEUM, c. 4th (see pp. 62 ff.)
(1) Photograph by Alinari. (2) From v. Rohden u. Winnefeld 'Architektonische römische Tonreliefs' (1911), pl. cxxiii. (3) From 'Monuments Piot,' xxxv (1935-6), pl. ix. Copyright reserved

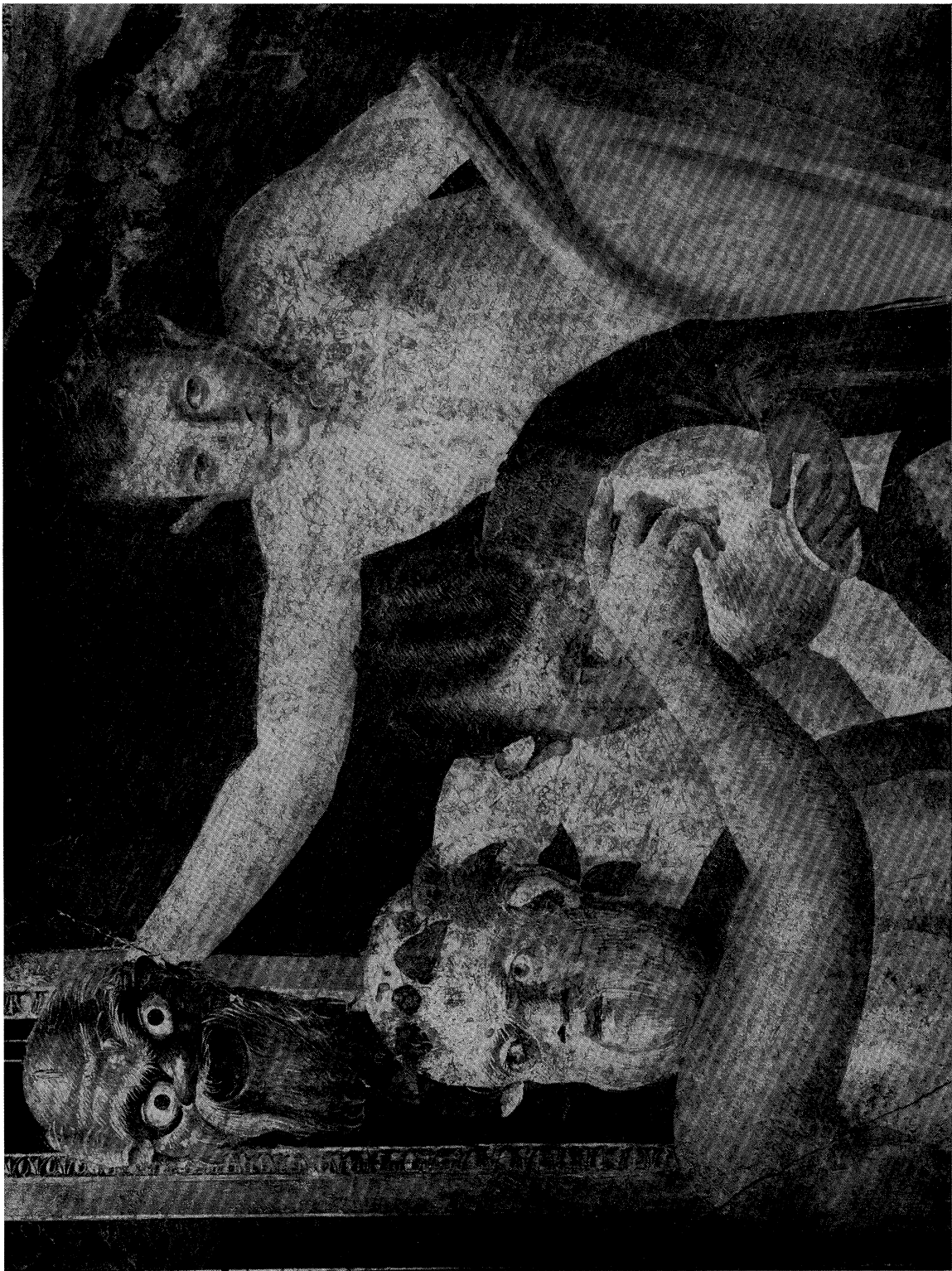


(1) CAIRO, EGYPTIAN MUSEUM : TOMB-PAINTING FROM HERMOUPOLIS, c. 16. (2, 3) POMPEII, VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES : DETAILS FROM THE BACK AND RIGHT WALLS OF HALL OF THE MYSTERIES (see pp. 62 ff.)
(1) By courtesy of American Research Center in Egypt, Inc. (2, 3) Photographs by Anderson. Copyright reserved



POMPEII, VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES : DETAIL FROM THE RIGHT WALL OF THE HALL OF THE MYSTERIES
(see pp. 62 f., 65)

Photograph by Alinari. Copyright reserved



POMPEII, VILLA OF THE MYSTERIES : DETAIL FROM THE BACK WALL OF THE HALL OF THE MYSTERIES (see pp. 66 ff.)
Photograph by Anderson. Copyright reserved

between Ignorance and the scene of revelation at her right, the averting of her face to her left and the defensive gesture of her left arm. But, beyond that, he has filled the figure with added meaning by giving her a wand in her raised right hand with which she threatens to scourge the exposed bare back of the maiden across the corner of the room. The position of her two arms resembles that of Ἀγνοία in the painting at Hermoupolis more than that of the comparable figure on any of the other monuments and links the two paintings even more closely: in both the daimon is involved in an action, here, that of causing pain, there, that of driving on to murder. The sensitive and imaginative painter has imbued the traditional

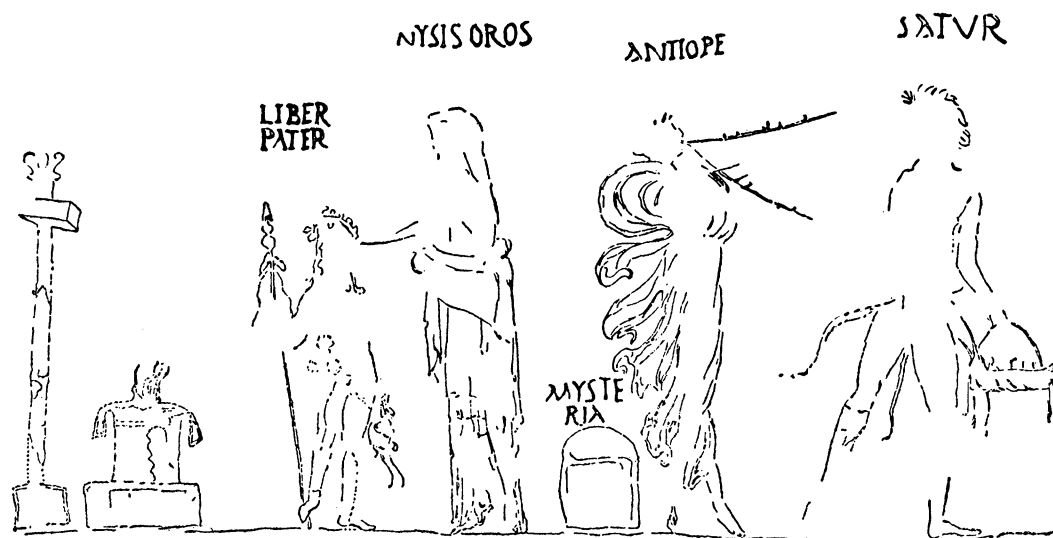


FIG. 3. OSTIA, ISOLA SACRA: STUCCO DECORATION OF TOMBA N, 150 M. FROM S. IPPOLITO. C. $\frac{1}{8}$
 'Notizie degli Scavi' 1928, 158, fig. 19. Copyright reserved

figure of Ἀγνοία with new life by more than the often praised dynamism that pervades its sudden appearance. For while the averted face and left hand of the daimon retain the original meaning of refusal to accept the revelation offered by the kneeling maiden, the former is turned in concentration towards the object of the scourging wand and the latter seems to be thrown upwards in a dynamic movement natural in the action of attack.

If the daimon is Ignorance, the scene is neither an allusion to ritual flagellation¹³ nor is it a symbol of purification or punishment or an allegory of the suffering that is a part of the fate of women as previous interpreters have assumed. It is, as it were, an artistic figure of speech stating that the kneeling girl who hides her face in the lap of the seated woman is 'tormented' by her lack of knowledge (pl. xi).¹⁴ Who, then, is she and who is the seated woman who looks angrily at Ἀγνοία and lifts her hand over the maiden's mantle as if to cover her up (pl. x, 3)?

The answer is offered, in this case, by the African mosaic (pl. ix, 3). The scene in this mosaic shows, in fact, not only the kneeling girl revealing the phallos to the left of Ἀγνοία but a seated woman to the right. She cannot, of course, merely be a figure chosen at random, as the editor of the monument thought. In the context of the picture her meaning is clear, because she holds in her lap the mystic chest containing the *mysteria*, as it is inscribed on

¹³ A remarkable case has been made for this theory by Jocelyn Toynbee, 'The Villa Igem and a Bride's Ordeal,' *JRS* xix (1929), 77 ff. But the evidence submitted here forces us to abandon it.

¹⁴ For ἄγνοια as a technical term for the lack of knowledge of things divine see, for example, Plutarch, *Moralia* 164, E, 167 A. For the figure of speech which uses 'torment' as it is used today referring to states of mind, see, for example: 'In . . . caecae suspicionis tormento' (Cicero, *Fam.* 6, 7, 4); μάστιγι Πειθοῦς (the lash of Eloquence as here 'the lash of Ignorance,' Pindar, *Pyth.* iv, 390); the θεῖα μῶστις which drives on the mad Io (Aeschylus, *Prom.* 682);

Ἡδοναί (as here Ἀγνοία) drive on the young to excesses in the manner in which, on the stage, the Eumenides use the whip (Stobaeus, *Flor.* 3, p. 447); Rizzo, *Memorie della Reale Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti di Napoli* III, 1914, 86, approached a correct understanding more closely than any later interpreter: 'Credo cioè, che sia rappresentata una misteriosa personificazione di una potenza avversa al fine supremo dei Misteri dionisiaci, invidia della beatitudine eterna agognata dai mortali.' And on p. 87, 'un daimon . . . il quale si oppone a che si compia il mistico rito . . .'

the most eloquent document of the Bacchic mysteries preserved apart from the Villa of the Mysteries—the stucco decoration of a tomb in Ostia (fig. 3).¹⁵ The figure, doubtlessly, is a personification of Initiation, Μῆσις herself. Like Ἀγνοία the isolated personification of the mosaic has been made active in the painting: Μῆσις receives in her lap a girl who, tormented by her lack of knowledge, has fled to her. While the girl, like a frightened child, hides her face in the lap of the seated woman, the artist has made it clear that she is a *mysta* by showing enough of her face to let us see that she has closed eyes (pl. xi)—as μύεσθαι originally means ‘closing one’s eyes’. In the actual μῆσις, as numerous monuments illustrate, this exclusion of sight during the initial rites was insured by covering the head of the neophyte with a skin or cloth and one may see an allusion to this impending action in the right hand of Μῆσις raised hesitantly over the maiden’s mantle as if to cover her up and withdraw her from further exposure to the torments of Ignorance.

Finally, there is the fact that, unlike the customary representation found on the terracotta reliefs, the gems and the mosaic, here the sacred symbol has not yet been revealed and exposed to sight. The kneeling maiden at the left is just beginning to lift the cloth that covers the phallos. We are still in the preliminaries.

Whoever the enigmatic and secondary background figures may be, the right wing of the triptych paraphrases the escape from tormenting Ignorance of the uninitiated via initiation into the Bacchic mysteries, in which knowledge will be revealed through the impending vision of meaningful symbols and this knowledge will lead the initiate to the blissful existence paraphrased by the dancing ‘maenad’ at the right (pl. x, 3).

[On 10th June, 1960, my husband and I had occasion to examine the figures in this room with particular care. I find among the notes that he took on that day and conceivably may have intended to incorporate in this manuscript the following reflections: Like the neophyte, the figure behind the dancer is clothed completely in purple (they are unique, in this respect, in the cycle) and holds a great thyrsos. She has, as it were, seized the bakchos but is not yet in ecstasy. The four figures are then Myesis with a μυουμένη who passes through the first stage, the torture of ignorance, next a *mysta* who already holds the βάκχος and, finally, a τελεία in ἔκστασις.—P. W. L.]

Where everything is so clearly stated, we should expect an analogous description of the road that leads to blissful existence in the left wing of the triptych. Here, the crucial and much discussed problem—analogue to that of the daimon at the right—is the interpretation of the scene between Dionysos and the corner: a Silenus holds a vessel (λεκάνη) over which a satyr bends and into which he looks while a young Pan holds up a fierce mask of an old Silenus and the seated Silenus looks angrily across the corner at a frightened maiden who runs away from this scene (pls. ix, xii).¹⁶

The mask is clearly shown here as an element of revelation, more or less equivalent to the phallos which will shortly be revealed in the other wing of the triptych. This equivalence is borne out by the fact that on the cameo in the Bibliothèque Nationale (fig. 2), it is a bearded mask of a Silenus from which the covering cloth has been lifted by the kneeling maiden while, on the corresponding monuments, it is the phallos. As on the cameo, Ἀγνοία runs away, refusing to see the revealed mask, so here the frightened girl trying to shield herself from the sight of the sacred symbol expresses unwillingness to face the revealed truth and she, too, makes a defensive gesture with her left hand emphasizing her refusal to accept knowledge. She is, as it were, a human servant of Ignorance in contrast with the maiden on the opposite wall who, tormented by that daimon, seeks the truth through initiation. And the seated Silenus who holds the bowl for the young satyr, the ubiquitous teacher on monuments related to Bacchic initiation, looks irately at the girl who prefers to remain ignorant in analogy to the angry stare with which, in the other wing,

¹⁵ *Notizie degli scavi*, 1928, 158, fig. 19. Most surprisingly, this key monument remains completely unmentioned in Nilsson’s book.

¹⁶ Several critics (already Rizzo, l.c. (n. 14) 71; and recently Nilsson, o.c. (n. 1) 75, and Herbig, o.c. (n. 1) 29) relate the maiden’s flight to her witnessing with terror the scene of flagellation across the room. But in a frieze, which carefully leads the composition around the corner, such a relationship cutting across the actual physical space in which the spectator stands

is unthinkable. It is further admitted that the Silenus across the corner looks angrily at her, as Herbig says, because of the noise she makes. How is that expressed? Certainly not by her slightly opened lips. Her eyes look upward to her left in the direction of the mask and not across the room. Nilsson, after illogically denying that the mask could frighten her, later, on p. 97, interprets the scene on the sarcophagus from Carthage (fig. 24) in exactly this sense.

Μῦθις looks at Ἄγνοις. He holds the λεκάνη for the young initiate who corresponds in meaning to the kneeling girl seeking initiation in the scene at the right.

It has long been recognized that this scene in which a mask is held up behind a figure looking into a bowl means that he sees a reflection of that mask in the liquid, presumably wine, contained in the bowl and it has been suggested and widely accepted that this scene represents a version of the mirror-oracle (κατοπτρομαντεία).¹⁷

Undoubtedly what happens here is related to that realm of folklore magic.¹⁸ But I doubt whether the precise meaning of this scene is that the satyr has a vision of his future state as an old Silenus through seeing the reflection of the mask in the bowl. Nothing is known about such practice in the Bacchic or any other mystery rites and the mirror by which the child Dionysos is distracted before his dismemberment has no possible relationship to what goes on here. The mask from which the girl at the left runs away, like Ἄγνοις on the cameo—and *she* cannot be expected to be afraid that even in the future she might look like an old Silenus—is the symbol of Bacchic revelation, like the phallos, as we have already seen, although we do not know what truth was revealed to the μύσται by its exhibition. Here it is, as yet, only dimly seen by the neophyte in a reflection. The scene, in fact, with its different symbols and figures, corresponds in meaning to the progress from the state of complete ignorance towards that of blissful knowledge in the opposite wing of the triptych.

Again, the painting in the tomb at Hermoupolis (pl. x, 1) helps us to grasp the meaning of this scene more precisely. In this painting, the incident of Oedipus driven by Ignorance to murder his father is balanced, at the other end of the frieze, by his solving the riddle of the Sphinx—both names are inscribed (Οἰδίπους, Σφίγξ). It follows a well-known iconographic type in which Oedipus stands in front of the monster who, in one version of the story, originated from the blood of his murdered father¹⁹ and solves the riddle of 'what is man'. Pointing to his forehead,²⁰ he makes the sign of self-recognition. The scene takes place in front of an isolated gate, not the city gate of Thebes but, like similar gates on Roman sarcophagi and in funeral paintings, the gate to the other world or to Elysium. The self-recognition of man is here clearly meant as a symbol of salvation and such must be its meaning on Roman sarcophagi, too. Oedipus, in fact, is the hero who symbolizes man's search for the truth about himself through trial and error, a search that leads him to sin on the road, but ultimately makes him a god-like hero after death.

Plutarch, in a remarkable passage, says: 'It was, in fact, curiosity which involved Oedipus in the greatest calamities. Searching for his identity (ζητῶν γὰρ ἑαυτὸν) . . . he met Laios, killed him and took, in addition to the kingship, his own mother to wife; thus seeming to be blessed (μακάριος), he again began to search for his identity (πάλιν ἑαυτὸν ἐζητεῖ).'²¹ If the search for self-recognition, the ζητεῖν interrupted by disasters caused by Ignorance is the theme of this painting, we find in the centre, between the two episodes of Oedipus' life, another paraphrase of Search. It is the well-known figure of Narcissus, although not recognized as such by the excavator. In the type familiar from many antique representations, he sits looking down into the spring in which he sees the reflection of his own face. We cannot see clearly what the relationship of Narcissus to Oedipus may be, beyond the fact that both are Boeotian figures, though it should be pointed out that at Kolonos, near the tomb of Oedipus, 'each day clustered narcissus, the flower of the . . . crown of the great goddesses' blossoms'²² and that the connection of the narcissus flower with Demeter and Persephone, and of Oedipus with their religious realm in general²³ may have led to the combination of these figures in this tomb which was next to another containing a mural painting of the rape of Proserpina.²⁴

What matters to us here is that in the painting at Hermoupolis Narcissus has become a personification of Search, as the name Ζήτημα inscribed over his head shows. He, thus, is the opposite of the other personification in this painting, Ignorance. And he personifies Search because he looks at the dim reflection of a face in the liquid of the spring.

[It was the author's hope that good photographs of this painting would allow him to

¹⁷ For the bibliography, see Herbig, o.c. (n. 1).

¹⁸ For the ancient testimonia, see: P-W, s.v. 'Hydromanteia' (Boehm); Κατοπτρομαντεία (Ganschietz); Λεκανομαντεία (Ganschyniec).

¹⁹ P-W, Suppl. vii, col. 769 f.

²⁰ Carl Robert, *Oedipus*, Berlin, 1915, 508 f.

²¹ *Moralia* 522, B-C.

²² Sophokles, *Oed. Col.* 681 ff.

²³ Robert, o.c. (n. 20) 1 ff., 44.

²⁴ Gabra, *Bulletin*, l.c. (n. 8).

resolve certain seeming discrepancies between the small-scale black and white photographs of it previously published (above, p. 63, n. 8) and the obviously crude colour plate in Gabra-Drioton, *Peintures*, pl. 15. Most important of these inconsistencies, hence the only one that need be mentioned here, is the presence in the latter of what appears to be a face or skull on a fragment not visible either in the black and white photograph made before the painting was detached from its mural background and transported to Cairo (cf. Gabra, *ibid.*, p. 11) or in the photograph reproduced here (pl. x, 1) taken after it was installed in the Musée Égyptien. Whether this fragment restored, in the colour plate, to the large triangular gap in the preserved painting is a face (i.e., Narcissus' reflection) or a skull is not clear nor does the colour of the background behind this object clarify its interpretation by being itself unequivocally intelligible, for, again, discrepancies between the photographs in more than one area of the painting seem to imply that it was overpainted or touched up after its transport to Cairo. Decision and interpretation are further complicated by the fact that a second face appears to be applied to or visible against a spot toward the bottom of the shaft of the pedestal on which the Sphinx sits. If this object really is a face, then these 'faces' must be skulls, since obviously the last-mentioned one cannot be a reflection and skulls would be entirely understandable in the context of the Sphinx. And if they are skulls, then, as my husband speculated in his notes on this problem, Narcissus (Ζήτημα) contemplates not his own reflection but the symbol of death, searching to understand its meaning and the meaning of man.

Whatever the objective facts about this much-damaged portion of the painting may be and however they should be interpreted, the essential point in the argument presented above, the identification of Ζήτημα as Narcissus stands, as the iconographic type of the figure in itself attests. I append this lengthy note to point out the existence of this problem not only because my husband was aware of it but also because these 'faces', which surely require some kind of explanation, have not been mentioned in the previously published reports.—P. W. L.]

The story of Narcissus, too, is rooted in the general lore of mirror-prophecy as the scene of the vision of a demonic image in a λεκάνη in the Villa of the Mysteries is rooted in the special branch of that mirror magic, called λεκανομαντεία, in which a liquid of some kind reflects an image in a bowl.²⁵ But as Eitrem has pointed out, in the Neoplatonic speculation of late antiquity, the story of Narcissus became an allegory of the search for truth that fails in its ultimate goal and his death in the spring was thus interpreted as the fatal involvement in the passing stream of material nature of those who fail to reach complete knowledge of ultimate truth in the realm of ideas. The painting at Hermoupolis in which Narcissus is interpreted as a personification of Search stands on the road towards such lofty speculation and, as Neoplatonism often borrowed from and elaborated on ideas prepared in ancient mystery cults, it is from the imagery of such a cult that the painter must have borrowed his figure of Narcissus, Search, as, demonstrably, he borrowed that of Ignorance from a Bacchic context.

In the Villa of the Mysteries, evidently, the vision of the mirrored image also paraphrases the search for truth, here for the truth that will be seen and understood when the sacred symbols of the god are clearly revealed and their meaning is made clear to the initiate by the hierophant. The left wing of the triptych, thus, has as its main theme the search for truth which will be found in the initiation, as the right wing shows the escape from the torment of ignorance that is possible via initiation. The spectator is transported into the realm of detachment from average experience preliminary to the initiation, in which he will see and learn the truth about the message of this god. But all that is seen in these paintings remains in a suspense of expectation and preparation for what is to come. This is true in the quiet sections, where the bride adorns herself and the woman waits seated on the bed, as it is in the scenes of hesitant entry, of the reading of a sacred book, of the preparing of lustral rites on the left wall. In the two wings of the major triptych, in a penumbra between myth and allegory, desire for the great experience of the mysteries is conjured with only hints about the blessed existence of maenads, Pans, Silens and Satyrs. Only in the centre is the divine couple present, self-contained and unnoticed by those who surround it: the cause and the goal of the search for revelation and the escape from ignorance.

²⁵ Above, p. 67, n. 18; Eitrem, P-W, s.v. Narkissos, col. 1728 f.