

Gymnasium Scenes in the Stuccoes of the Underground Basilica di Porta Maggiore

ANGELA TEJA

Premise

In the spring of 1917, subsidence under a section of railway leading over a viaduct to the Termini Station in Rome provided the opportunity for the Sovrintendenza alle Belle Arti (Government Office for Fine Arts) to make an important archaeological discovery. In fact the subsidence was not caused by the simple collapse of a layer of tufa owing to rain, but the caving in of part of the vault of an ancient Roman Basilica with three naves and a central apse. The building was of considerable size: about twelve metres long, with the five metre addition of an atrium, which was seven metres high and nine metres wide.

Despite initial controversy, the date of the monument was fixed in the middle of the 1st century AD, in the reign of the Emperor Claudius.¹ The Basilica is still little known today as it is closed to the public because of serious microclimatic problems which threaten to destroy the walls, entirely decorated with valuable stuccoes. An examination of this monument, however, offers students of physical exercise in ancient times valuable information, since its stuccoes feature several gymnasium scenes.

A Few Notes on the Basilica

The Basilica di Porta Maggiore comprises three naves in an age predating Christian basilica architecture. It is, however, not clear to whom it belonged or who frequented it because, as there are no signs of wear and tear, it would seem that the building was in use for only a few years, perhaps thirty if not less. The probable presence of cinerary urns, which subsequently disappeared, and the eschatological funeral content of most of the figures,² led to the hypothesis that it was a funeral monument.³ On

the other hand, several scholars⁴ have found more convincing the hypothesis formulated by Hulsen and Rostovzeff that it was a living space, a *nymphaeum* ('*aestivus specus*'), where people took fresh air in the afternoon or took part in nocturnal feasts.

The most suggestive and generally accepted interpretation has the Basilica as a meeting-place of a neo-Pythagorean sect⁵ which was closed after a few years owing to Claudius' persecution of Oriental sects and his ban on all religious meetings which, linked to spiritualism and divining, in some way threatened the Roman State.⁶

The Mystery of the Stuccoes

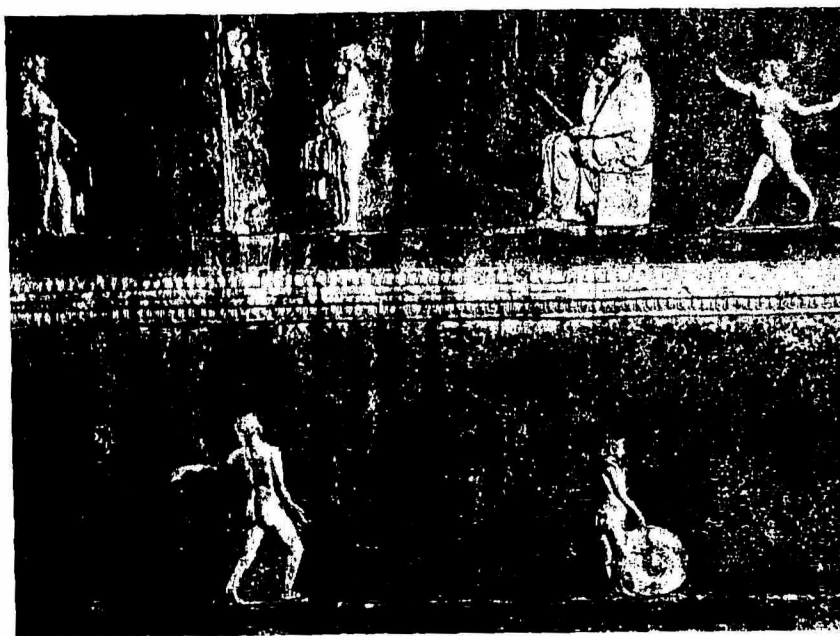
The most fascinating, mysterious aspect of the Basilica concerns the various interpretations which scholars have applied to the stuccoes, the work of fine artists probably influenced by the East and by Orphic-Dionysiac cults. The stuccoes were particularly widespread in the Roman world at that time and were associated with early Pythagoreanism.

Stuccoes decorate the walls and the vault of the Basilica, as well as the pillars which divide the three naves. The most important are those in the vault and the apse. In the latter is represented the dive of Sappho from the cliff of Leucades (the dive of the soul into the beyond?), while the figures in the vault are much more complex and are the ones of particular interest to historians of physical exercise in antiquity. The vault is divided into three sections, in the centre of which is a main panel with rape scenes (that of Ganymede and that of a Leucippe by a Dioscuro) which also symbolize the rape of the soul after death, its detachment from the body and ascension. Here we have the greatest corpus of religious figurative art ever found on Greek or Roman soil, compared by some (including Cumont, Carcopino and Bendinelli) to the Villa dei Misteri at Pompei.⁷

This paper focuses on certain panels in the vault, either side of the central panel, depicting the rape of Ganymede. In fact, whereas almost all the scenes – framed pictures (with many as 117 subjects) – refer to the mythological world dear to the Orphic-Dionysiac mysteries and therefore to the Pythagorean cult,⁸ the stuccoes in the central area show gymnasium scenes, next to the depiction of a wedding (also, perhaps, the symbol of the union of the soul and the body) and to a scene from scholastic life.

The latter represents a seated schoolmaster listening to two schoolboys opposite him holding writing materials, while a third, according to Bendinelli, seems to mock him from behind (Figure 1). Mingazzini gives another suggestive interpretation of the figure behind the teacher: according to him it is a boy who is about to do the 'wheel', *trochôn*

FIGURE 1



miméisthai, an exercise described by Xenophon (*Symp.* II, 22; VIII, 3). The scholastic scene would therefore represent the alternation of study with recreation, or rather, physical education alongside intellectual exercise.

But now let us analyse in more detail the gymnasium scenes which seem to confirm that the Basilica was a place of worship for the Neo-Pythagoreans. Some archaeologists, however, are not convinced of this⁹ since the collocation of scenes of scholastic and gymnasium life in a mystery context is not clear.¹⁰ Both Strong and Jolliffe have surmised that the four scenes are actually images of initiation, and this is borne out by the almost total nakedness of the figures.¹¹ It is, in short, a noviciate which, through school education and military gymnastic training, ends in marriage.¹²

Physical Education in the Pythagorean School

It is known that the practice of physical exercise was an integral part of Pythagorean theory which emphasized the health of the soul alongside that of the body. Iamblichus relates (*Pyth.* 96–100) how every morning the Pythagoreans walked in solitary, sacred places and then went to the temples or similar places to teach or learn from their Master:

After conversing together in this way, they took care of their bodies: most of them greased themselves and ran; others, though fewer, wrestled in gardens and woods; others exercised with dumbbells or moved their arms rhythmically, choosing the most suitable exercises to strengthen their bodies.

After a meal they engaged in the business of town politics. In the evening they walked again, but in groups of two or three, recalling the teaching they had received. After their walk they bathed and then went to the common refectories where, after sacrificing to the gods, they dined before sunset. As Di Donato has also observed, this account seems to describe life in a Greek gymnasium advanced at Croton by the Pythagoreans.¹³

In Pythagoras' *Golden Proverbs* we find: 'Think of your health and be moderate in drinking, eating and physical exercise.' So the Pythagorean School considered the need to join mental exercise with that of the body. Carcopino quotes a fragment of the *Antologia Palatina*, attributed to the epigrammist Socrates (XIV, I), in which Polycrates asks Pythagoras how many athletes he trains in his house with his wise diatribes.¹⁴

The Pythagoreans' interest in practising physical exercise could explain the juxtaposition of the gymnasium with those of a more explicitly mystic and cultural significance, even with a metaphorical valency. The hypothesis that the Basilica di Porta Maggiore was connected to the Pythagorean rite would thus be further strengthened.

The Gymnasium Scenes: The Apprenticeship and Military Training of Roman *Cives*

These are the longest pictures, in a prominent position, surrounded by numerous winged Victories, palms, and figures of Eros and Medusa.¹⁵

The right-hand scene, immediately below that of the school master, can be divided into two parts. In the left-hand part (Figure 2) there are three youths playing with a ball (I am inclined to think that even the youth on the left, who is dressed, is playing with the others who are naked perhaps because they are initiates). The game in question is probably *pila trigonalis*, owing to the compact equipment, held in one hand, and the position of the players. The lack of perspective makes it possible only to surmise the triangular direction of the shots.¹⁶ The fact that the artist placed this game alongside the first stages in the training of the Roman *cives* might mean that it was a form of exercise, a means of physical training and at the same time playful recreation.¹⁷

On the right-hand side of the same scene there are an instructor and three youths (one of whom naked) armed with a round shield and short

FIGURE 2

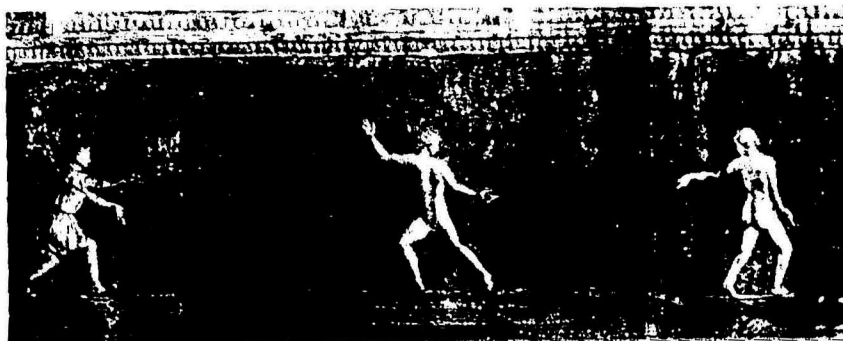
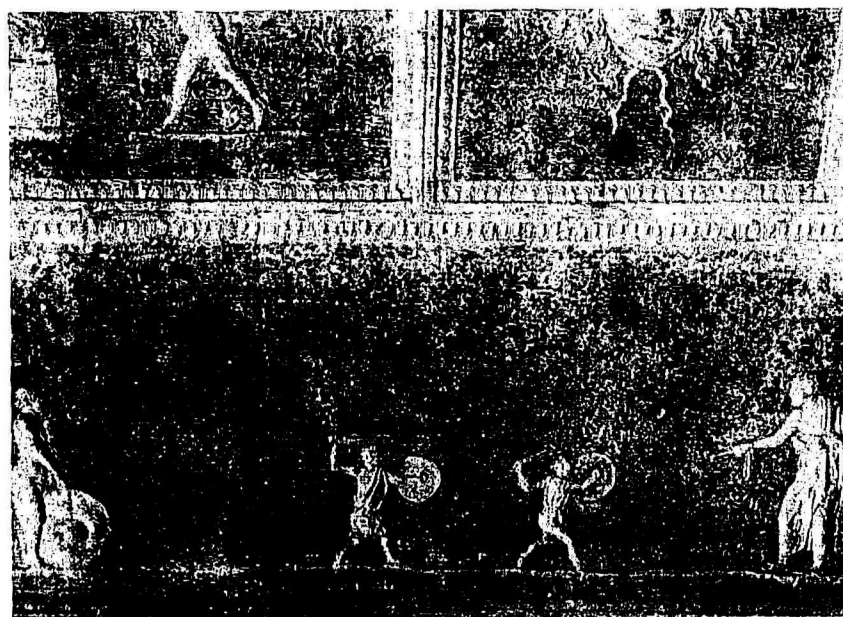


FIGURE 3



sword (Figure 3). It is likely that the instructor with the object he is holding (a short stick; an instrument of punishment; a rolled up parchment with two ties?) is controlling the rhythm of the exercise for the two (smaller) youths, while the third is standing still, leaning (it seems) on a round shield. In this first gymnasium scene, therefore, on the one side there is the ball game and on the other armed youths are being given a

FIGURE 4

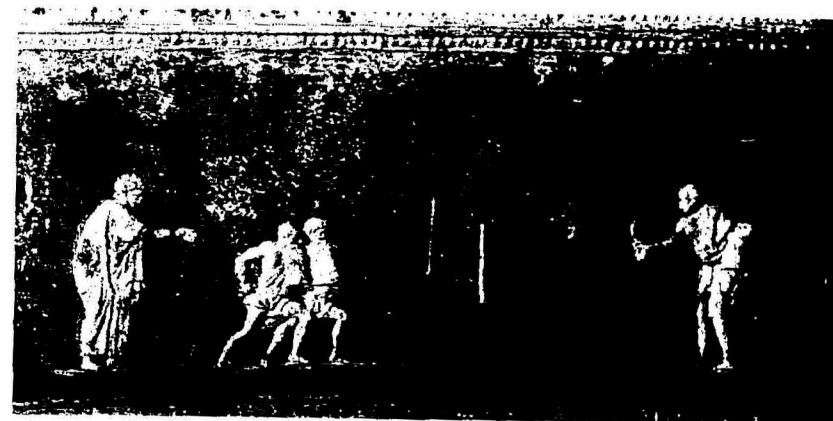


FIGURE 5

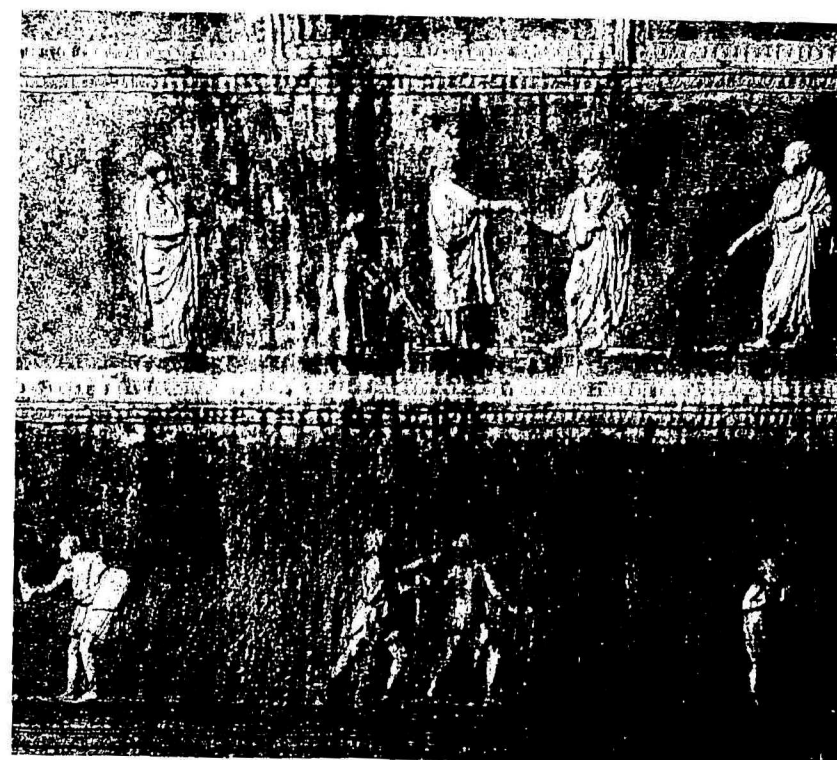
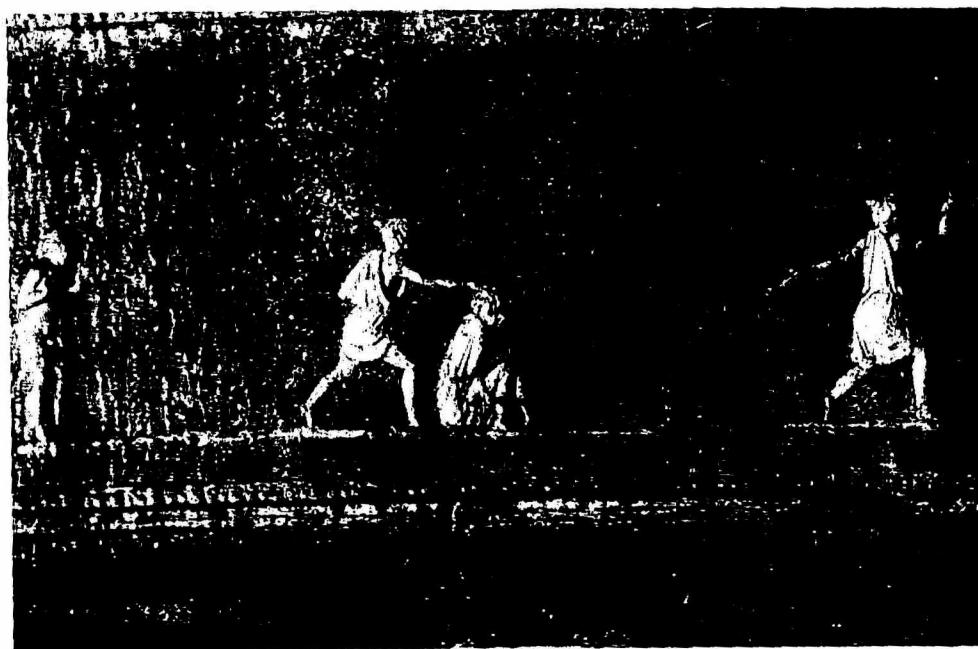


FIGURE 6



training exercise. We are reminded of the words of Vegetius when he writes that military training is best started at puberty because 'the things learned by young boys are more firmly imprinted in the mind' (*De re mil.* I, 4; 5;8).

Here we are probably dealing with an apprenticeship scene, a phase in the training of the Roman citizen before actual military service. This confirms the thesis that physical exercise in Rome was military in character. In fact the stucco artist, having to represent Romans taking exercise, would have thought of their military training.

The other gymnasium scene, the one to the left of the vault, under the *dextrarum iunctio*, can be divided into three parts: on the left an instructor watching two armed youths running towards a third who is facing them with a sword and dagger (Figure 4); in the centre two youths (Figure 5, bottom); and on the right four other youths who are playing, in the manner described below (Figure 6).

The features of the youths training in arms are more adult, indicating their progress towards maturity, as a woman is fulfilled in marriage.¹⁸ In the left-hand scene (Figure 4) we are still in the gymnasium, during a fencing exercise 'on the pole', training skills which were very important

for Roman soldiers.¹⁹ Fencing instructors were highly regarded in the Roman army and were given double rations. As Vegetius writes (*De re mil.* II,23), 'in war, training in arms is more useful than strength, because it is this eduction which distinguishes the man from the soldier'. In the background, there are two poles stuck in the ground, which have been interpreted by most scholars as the targets around which the two armed men had to turn, or as elements which marked out the field of action. But it seems much more logical to interpret the two poles as training equipment for the soldiers.

In support of this interpretation we may refer to other iconographic testimonies. For example, in a marble stylobate preserved in the Galleria Doria in Rome, to the right of a gladiator can be seen a pole which is more or less the same size as that described by Vegetius, with a helmet on top of it.²⁰ In a marble stele, now in the Lapidario in the Sforza Castle, Milan, on the right a pole with a helmet on it may be distinguished, at the foot of which a dog is crouching.²¹ Another marble stele from Ravenna, in the deposit at the Centro Operativo of the Soprintendenza Archeologica of the Emilia Romagna Region, shows a pole with a helmet.²²

Boys' Games

We now go on to the interpretation of the two boys' games shown in the centre and on the right of the same panel (Figure 5). The two boys in the centre, one naked and the other with a short tunic, seem to have finished a race. They have perhaps played at imitating respectively the rider and the horse, because the dressed boy has thongs (the bridles?) which he holds around the neck of the other. Or the first has simply caught up with and 'captured' the second.²³

The interpretation which Mingazzini gives to the last game seems convincing (Figure 6): he sees the visual representation of the *moschinda*, leaping the 'calf' – we would say 'leapfrogging': a child crouches on the ground and the others jump over him resting their hands on his head, while someone beats the rhythm or starts the game with a 'rattle'.²⁴ In leapfrog played nowadays a rhyme is sometimes chanted to give rhythm to the action.

Conclusions

In the gymnasium scenes of the stuccoes of the Basilica di Porta Maggiore, we believe that we can recognize the symbol of the struggle of souls with death.²⁵ The Basilica in this case becomes a gymnasium and there are also numerous athletic vases present, singly or with headbands or crowns

of victory on the tables for the winners.²⁶ The scenes thus have an initiatory value, borne out also by the presence of many naked youths, together with others dressed. Lastly, the ball game might symbolize the soul which lightly frees and detaches itself from the body.²⁷

In any case the educational progression described in the stuccoes (teacher, instructor, gymnasium, military service, marriage) could signify the path of man towards maturity. Life, that is, is seen as a struggle in which man, if honest, must engage against everyone; a concept which was quite widespread among ancient thinkers. In this path gymnastic training is an important step and in Rome it signified first and foremost training for war. Coming of age for the Roman citizen coincided with his entry into the army in the service of the state. After recruitment, the apprenticeship was followed by actual military training.

These are the reasons why these gymnasium scenes may be interpreted as the visual expression of an aspect of Pythagorean doctrine (fulfilment of the individual through the care and exercise of the physical body), pictured however as part of the Roman reality whose gymnastic expression *par excellence* was that of military training. In the period in which the Basilica was built, that is in the first half of the first century AD, there was a revival of the customs imposed by Augustus. The *Collegia iuvenum* had restored great splendour to the gymnastic and military exercise of Roman youths. The stuccoes of the Basilica exalt physical exercise, confirming the importance of its place in Roman educational policy.

ISEF Rome, Italy

NOTES

1. Concerning the dating of the Basilica, Carcopino (*Rev. Arch.* 1923/11, 1-23) is inclined to place it in the period of the Emperor Claudius, who introduced the cult of Attis in Rome, which appears several times in the stuccoes of the Basilica.
2. This thesis is upheld by Bendinelli and by Coarelli (*Roma, Guida Archeologica*, Bari, 1985), p. 231.
3. After the first reports on the excavations by E. Gatti and F. Fornari ('Brevi notizie relative alla scoperta di un monumento sotterraneo presso Porta Maggiore', in *Notizie degli scavi*, 1918, pp. 30-52) and by R. Lanciani (in *Bullettino Comunale* 1918, pp. 69ff.), numerous scholars have concerned themselves with the Basilica di Porta Maggiore, including: F. Cumont, 'La Basilique souterraine de la Porte Majeure,' in *Revue Archéologique*, vols. VII-VIII (1918), p. 52 ff.; Ch. Hulsen, in *Berl. Phil. Wochenschr.* (1919), p. 259 ff.; H.M.R. Leopold, 'De onderoördische basilica te Rome,' in *Meded. Nederl. Inst Rome*, I (1921), pp. 68 ff.; J. Carcopino, *La Basilique pythagoricienne de la Porte Majeure* (Paris, 1943); G. Bendinelli, 'Il monumento sotterraneo di Porta Maggiore,' in *Monumenti Antichi dei Lincei XXXI* (1927), pp. 601-859; G. Lugli, *Rivista di Archeologia* (1921), p. 209.
4. P. Mingazzini, 'Sul preteso carattere religioso della c. d. basilica sotterranea di Porta Maggiore,' in *Festschrift E.v. Mercklin* (Waldsassen, 1964), pp. 90 ff.
5. According to Carcopino (op. cit. 1943) there is no doubt that it is a neo-Pythagorean

basilica. To support his thesis he mentions the location of the building (outside the pomerium, in a solitary place, in the shade of the woods and with vast gardens) and its orientation (east-west, with the apse to the east, because the first duty of the Pythagorean was the dawn worship of the divinity (Iamblichus, 256), and the atrium facing west with the best light at sunset, when the mystery rites were performed). Carcopino also lists other plausible reasons; white, the symbol of the radiation of good, the prevalent colour in the stuccoes and in the floor mosaics, the lustral water, abundantly present in amphoras in the stuccoes, the numerous representations of Apollo and other divinities dear to the Pythagoreans, and then the fact that it was an underground basilica in memory of Pythagoras and his cave.

6. Since the necropolis of the *gens Statilia* is situated very near to the Basilica, Fornari argues that its founder could be Statilius Taurus, a devotee of magic practices, who was persecuted by Claudius in 52, when a Senate Consultation was pronounced against the 'mathematicians', that is the Magi, Neo-Pythagoreans, astrologers (Tac. *Ann.* XII, 52).
7. E. Strong and N. Jolliffe, op. cit., p. 66.
8. As far as the symbology of the Orphic-Dionysian and Pythagorean cult is concerned, apart from the rape of the Leucippe, there are reproductions of Agave's dance, Hermes and Aecestis, the processions of Maenads and Bacchantes, and Apollo the favourite god of the Pythagoreans, who is often represented, etc.
9. F. Coarelli (op. cit. p. 231) doubts that it is a place of neo-Pythagorean worship since he dates the Basilica to the period of Tiberius and not to that of Claudius, the true persecutor of the Neo-Pythagoreans.
10. R. Paribeni ('Culti e religioni in Roma imperiale,' in *Atene e Roma*, 1920, p. 174) argues that the master stuccoist was given complete freedom to fill the space as he thought fit. In reality Paribeni does not seem to understand the connection between tables, palms and crowns, gifts to offer the winners of races. His interpretation seems too simplistic for a monument of this workmanship. Aurigemma (*La Basilica sotterranea neopitagorica di Porta Maggiore in Roma*, Rome 1961) also thinks that many images have no links with Pythagorean theories but derive 'inexplicably' from everyday life.
11. E. Strong and N. Jolliffe, op. cit. p. 65. The authors speak of a true 'map of the adventures of the spirit in the search for divinity'.
12. Even if one is reluctant to interpret this last scene as a '*dextrarum junctio*' but as a '*depositio barbae*' (Mingazzini, op. cit., pp. 90-105), we are still dealing with an initiation rite.
13. M. Di Donato and A. Teja, *Agonistica e gimnastica nella Grecia antica* (Rome, 1989), p. 151. According to Di Donato's thesis, it is possible to see an early organization of the life of the Greek gymnasium in the sixth century BC, in Croton in fact.
14. J. Carcopino, op. cit., p. 255.
15. On the use of winged Victories in numerous funeral vases in southern Italy and in tomb paintings in Paestum, see M. Leopold, 'La basilique souterraine de la Porte Majeure', in *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire XXXIX* (1921-22), pp. 165-92. Death is in fact often pictured as a winner returning from an athletics contest, as it receives a crown, a diadem or a bowl full of water from Victory. The palms must have had the same meaning of the success of the soul over the death of the body.
16. It is known that the game of 'trigonal ball' was based on rapid throws with both hands. Cf. M. Di Donato, *Il gioco con la palla nell'antichità classica* (Trapani 1965), pp. 16-17.
17. Silius Italicus, in his history of the war between Rome and Carthage, also states that the Romans played ball in the camp, awaiting the clash with Hannibal (*De bel. pun.*, 8).
18. J. Carcopino, op. cit., p. 119.
19. The 'pole' training was used to learn the techniques of duels. It consisted of feigning a fight with the enemy using a round shield and a wooden club, weighing twice as much as the sword, with which all the fencing strokes were tried out against a pole which stood six feet from the ground. This type of training helped to increase the agility of the legs and the strengthening of the whole body. Cf. A. Teja, *L'esercizio fisico nell'antica Roma* (Rome, 1988), p. 180.
20. Cf. P. Pensabene in AA. VV., *Antichità di Vialla Doria Pamphili*, (Roma 1977), p. 137

tab. CVI, figg. 167 a-b. The gladiators also used 'pole' training.

21. P. Sabbatini Tumolesi, *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell'Occidente Romano. I Roma* (Roma, 1988), p. 67, n. 50.
22. In the inscription *primus* and *secundus palus* are mentioned. According to Robert (*Gladiateurs*, Paris, 1940, pp. 26-31), the term was later used to indicate the room where the gladiators trained according to the level of training reached. The lowest was the 'fourth pole'. In the scene in the Basilica di Porta Maggiore the two poles would therefore also symbolize the fencing room.
23. It is a game still commonly played by children all over the world.
24. P. Mingazzini, 'Tre giochi infantili antichi', in *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia* 32 (1959-60), 81-92.
25. Carcopino (op. cit., 1943) also takes up this hypothesis.
26. A Pompei relief, in the house of the Labyrinth, also reproduces some *ierai trapezài*. Cf. F. Bastet, B.A. Besh, 35 (1960), p. 10 fig. 11.
27. This symbol is also present in other tomb frescoes. For example, in the c.d. Purfina tomb (first century AD), now in the Roman Museo delle Terme.