



Mystery Cults and Magic

Pompeii: The life, death and rediscovery of a Roman town
(HPAH5078/HPAH6078)

What is a mystery cult?

- Modern usage vs. ancient meaning.

Modern connotations:

- Charismatic leader.
- Mildly or severely dangerous.
 - e.g., Heaven's Gate, Mason family, etc.
- Involved in nefarious rites, including murder and orgies.
- Fraudulent.
- Progressive hierarchy and stages.
- Isolation of members; closed off.
- End of the world.

How many of these connotations do you think are applicable to the ancient world?

Parallels from the ancient world:

- Charismatic leader (Alexander of Abonoteichus).
- Were believed to be nefarious, including accusations of murder and orgies, as with the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BC.
- Claims of fraud (Alexander of Abonoteichus and the Glycon cult).
- Can progress up the hierarchy: many cults.

Distinctive features:

- Often more about a good afterlife rather than the end of the world.
- Non-exclusive (notable exceptions, monotheism).

• Can you guess which cult were and were not present at Pompeii?

- Cult of Demeter and Kore at Eleusis ✗
- Cult of Isis (and Serapis/Osiris) ✓
- Cult of Mithras ✗
- Orphic cult / Orphism ?
- Cybele and Attis [Magna Mater] ✓
- Bacchic rites ✓



Bronze hand, in gesture of benediction
[in connection with a shrine in house
II.1.12 [cult to Sabazius?]]

- Suspicion, toleration or integration.
 - e.g., *Senatus consultum de bacchanalibus*.
- Several (“foreign”) mystery cults in Pompeii.
 - Challenges of determining “popularity”.

Villa of the Mysteries and Bacchic rites?

- Villa of the Mysteries
 - The “mystery frieze” (megalographia)
 - Mid-1st century BC?
 - Narrative (sequence)?
 - Scenes overlapping.
 - Cult of Dionysus of female only cult?
 - Fresco hinting rather than revealing?
- Thematic grouping:
 1. Women reading and preparing a meal
 2. Dionysus in the mortal realm
 3. Adoring of a bride

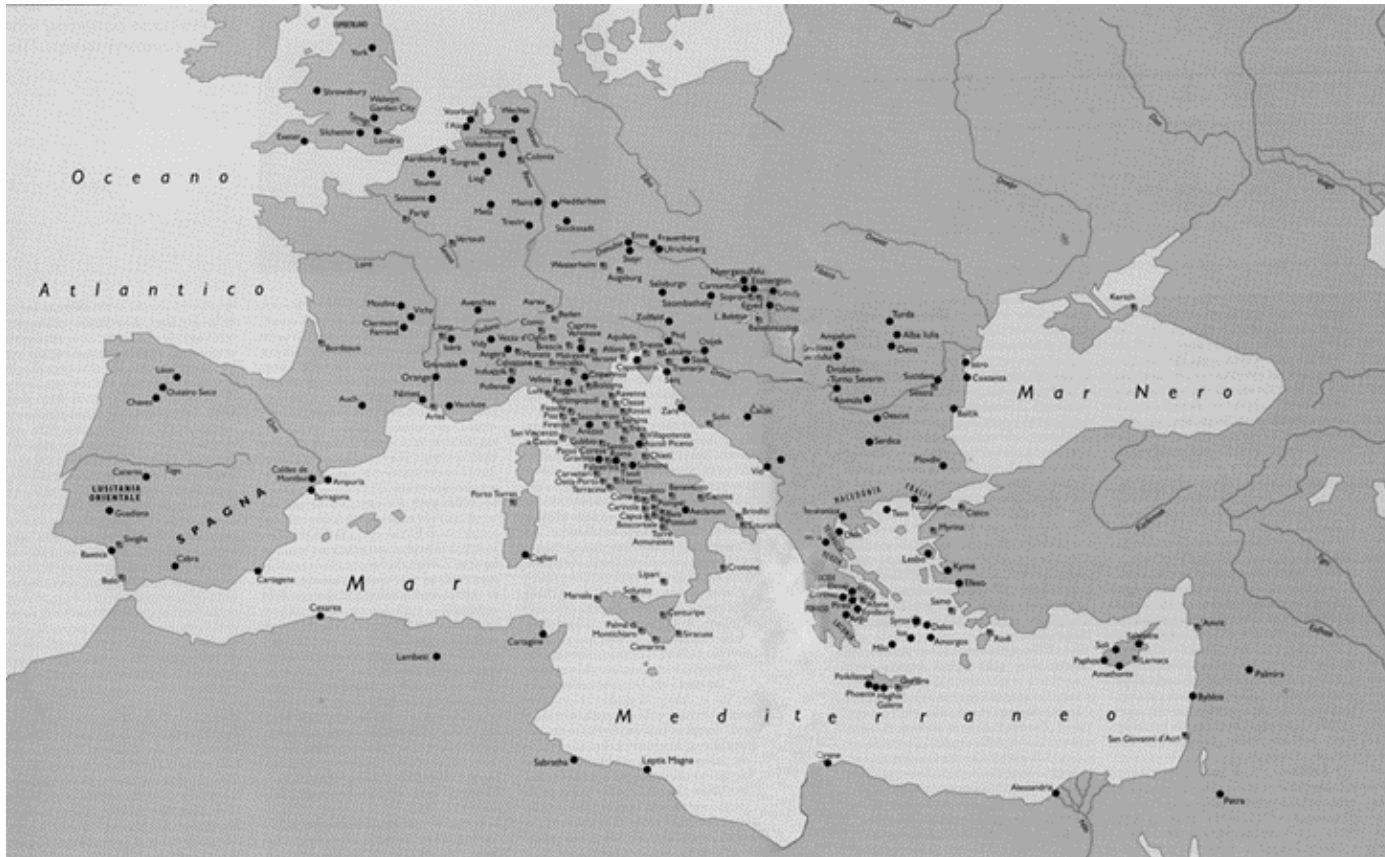




Cult of Isis



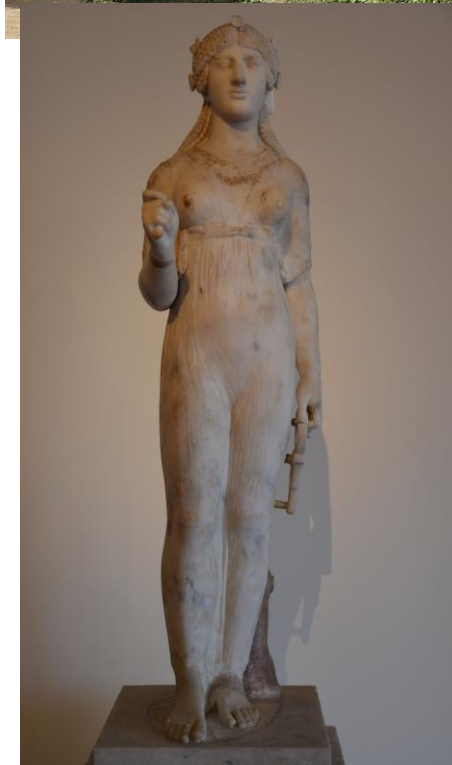
Isis in the Roman Empire



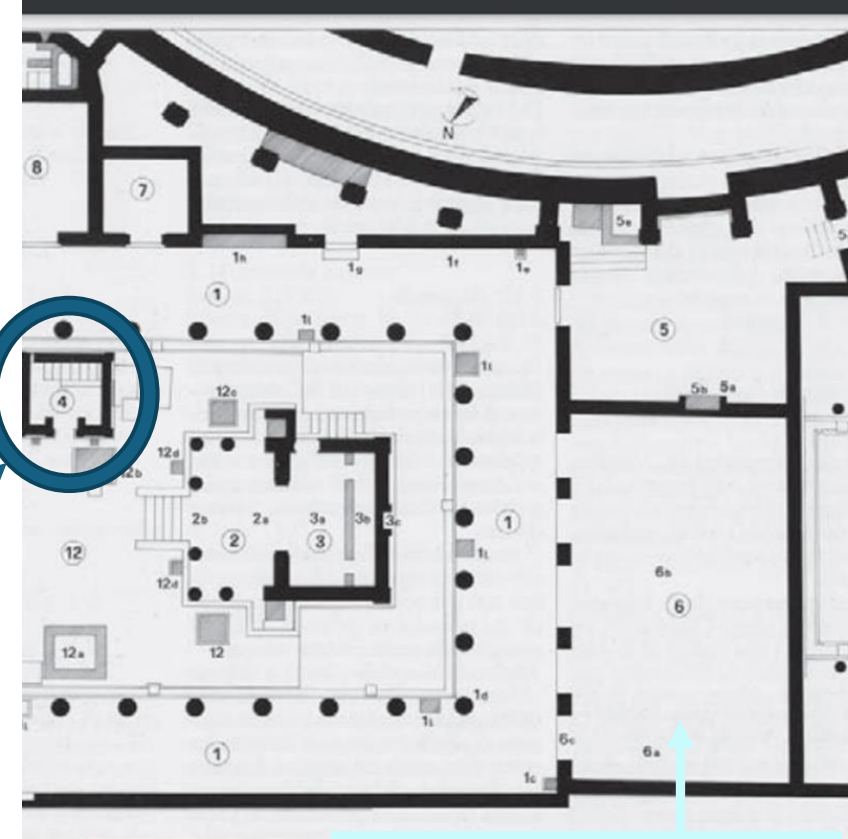
- Syncretic amalgamations (fertility and resurrection).
 - *interpretatio Graeca*.
- Increasing spread of worship of Isis, Serapis (Osiris) and Harpocrates during the Hellenistic period.
- Resistance and expulsion from Rome.
 - Officially restored in Late Julio-Claudian period.
 - Rebuilding of temple (after AD 80) by Domitian.

Isis at Pompeii (1)

- Possibly dating back as early as 100 BC?
 - Rebuilt after AD 62/63 by Numerius Popidius Celsinus (C/I 10.846).
- Initially excavated in 18th century:
 - Various murals removed.
 - A mixture of Isis related cultic and “profane” images.
 - Stucco relief on Nilometer of cultic utensils (e.g., sistrum and hydria).
 - Panels flanking the door: Isis figures standing on tiny consoles.



Marble statue of Isis from the NE corner of the portico; Archaeological Museum of Naples



Ekklesiasterion: a room used for solemn reunions, possibly also for religious banquets

Isis at Pompeii (2)

- A Nilometer – a specifically “Egyptian” feature.
 - Use for measuring the Nile’s water level.
- Mars and Venus, Andromeda and Perseus on Stucco relief
 - other walls depict Erotes.
- Porticos surround temple a fairly “Roman” feature.

Graeco-Roman scenery and mythological details

Temple of Isis at Pompeii, Ekklesiasterion, south wall with Isis and Io on 18th-century coloured engraving (after *Alla ricerca di Iside* pl. XVI).

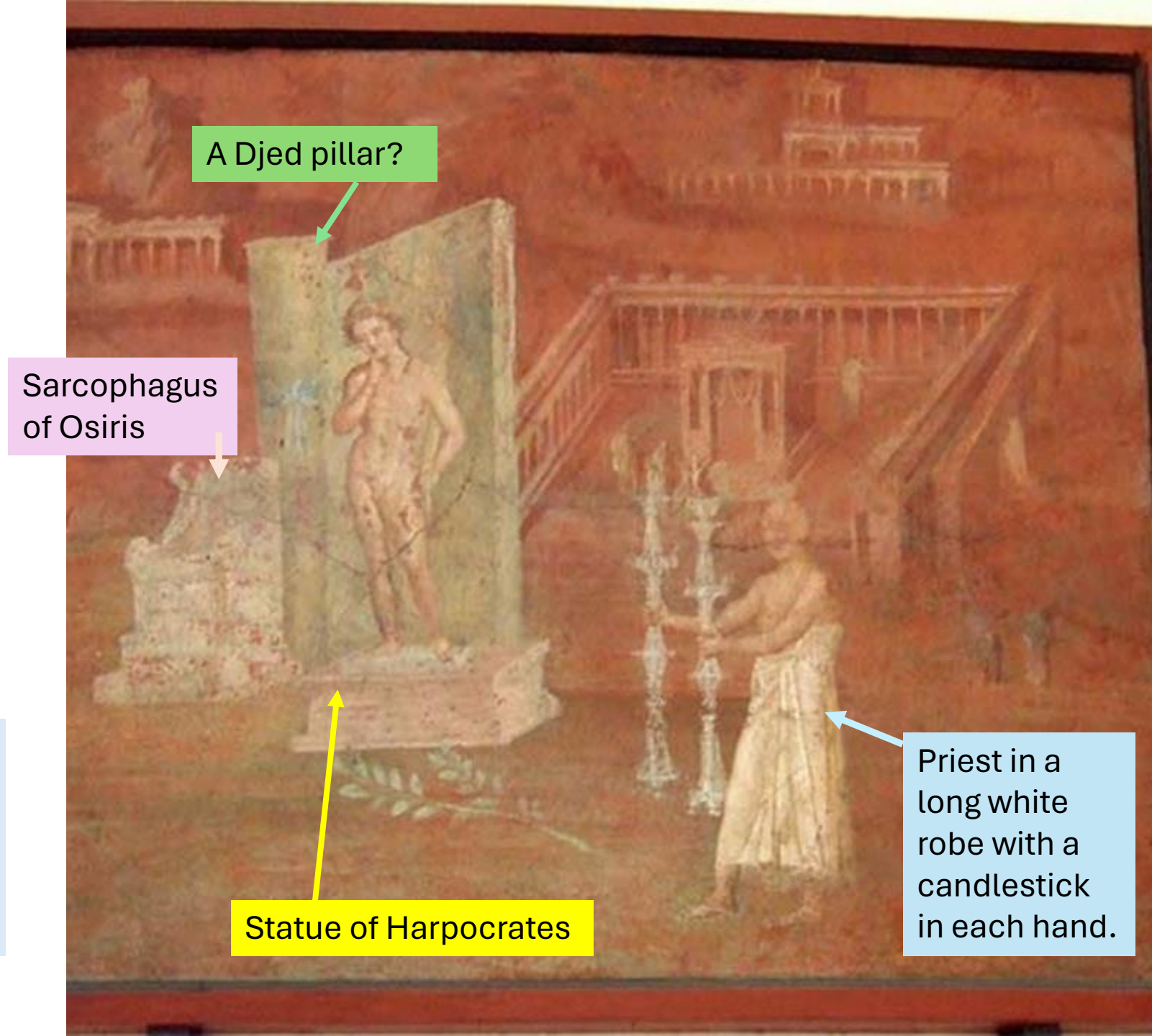


Isis will receive Io in Canopus, where the latter will give birth to Epaphos (Apis), a king of Egypt.

- **Are Graeco-Roman scenes directly relevant or allegorical?**
- **Imagery of Perseus and Andromeda:**
 - Kepheus (father of Andromeda) seeks answers from Temple of Ammon at Siwa.
 - Connections with the defeat of Seth/Typhon?
 - Amorous connection – bounties of Egypt [more allegorical]?

Painting from a niche in the east wall (Temple of Isis)

**Can you see any
elements that would
tie into the cult of Isis?**



A Djed pillar?

Sarcophagus
of Osiris

Statue of Harpocrates

Priest in a
long white
robe with a
candlestick
in each hand.

Fresco from Herculaneum: can you see what is happening?

Priests with a
sistra (both sides)

High priest
with sacred
water jar

Sphinx (both sides)

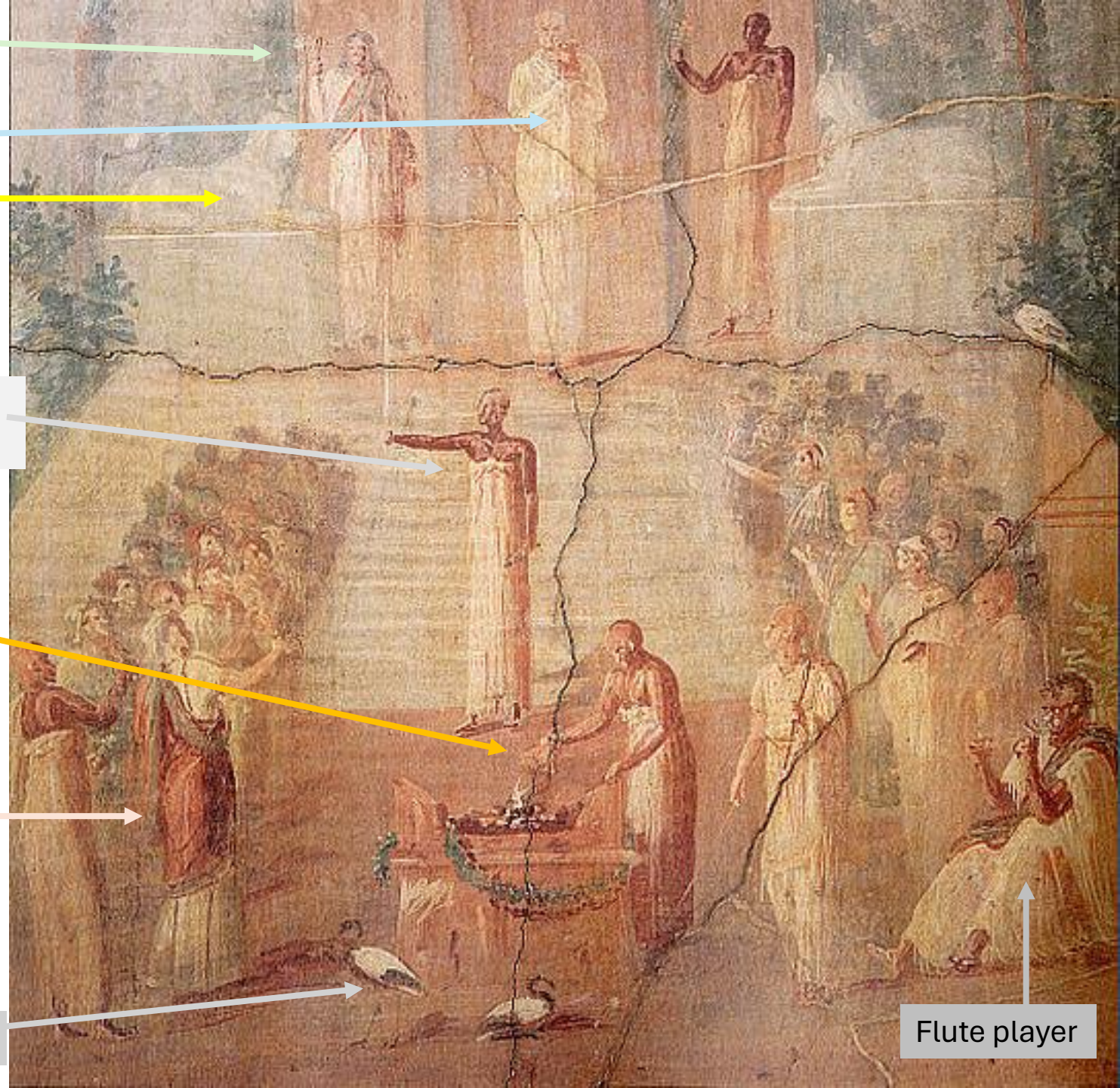
Priest directing
worshippers

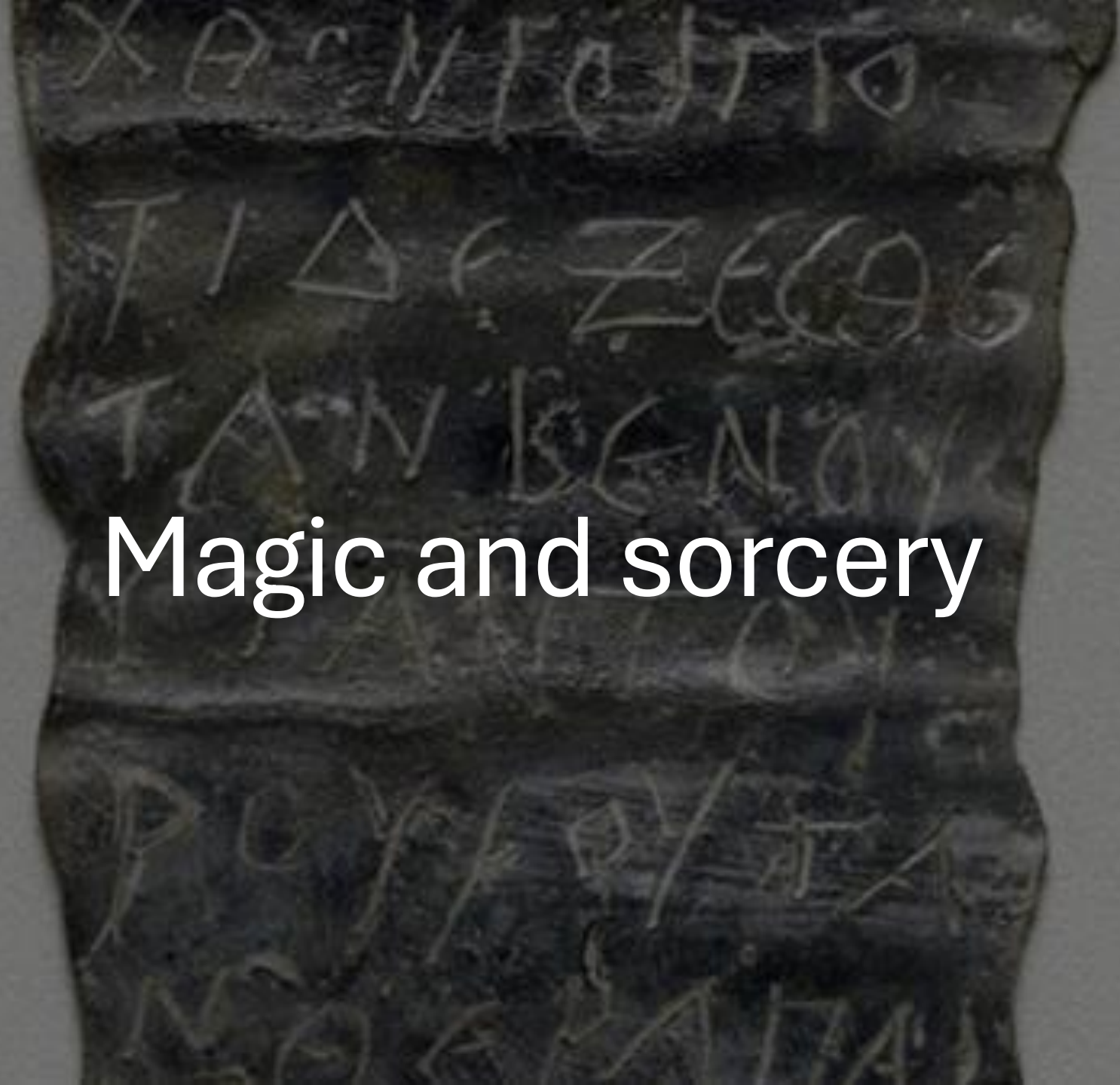
Priest fans
the sacred
flame

Dancing
and/or
singing

Ibises

Flute player



A vertical strip of a palm-leaf manuscript, showing several lines of handwritten text in an ancient script. The script consists of stylized characters, some of which are geometric shapes like triangles and circles. The leaf is dark and has a rough, irregular edge. The text is written in a light-colored ink or pigment.

Magic and sorcery

The acceptable and unacceptable

- *religio* (positive meaning) and *superstitio* (negative).
 - Seneca *De Clementia* 2.5.1.
- Magic distinct from religion?
 - A mixture of the religious, astrological, medicinal and symbolic.
- *Lex Cornelia de sicariis and veneficis* (81 BC).
 - Outlawing sorcery (among other things).



So-called sorceress kit from House of the Garden (V.3)?

Should we
interpret
these
women as
witches?



Fear of witches

- Fearful figures, often engaged in necromancy.
- Numerous tropes in Latin literature:
 - e.g., Horace *Satires*, Lucan *Pharsalia*, Apuleius *Metamorphoses*, among others.

Mosaic (signed by Dioskourides of Samos), from the Villa of Cicero, outside the Herculaneum Gate (Now in the Archaeological Museum of Naples).