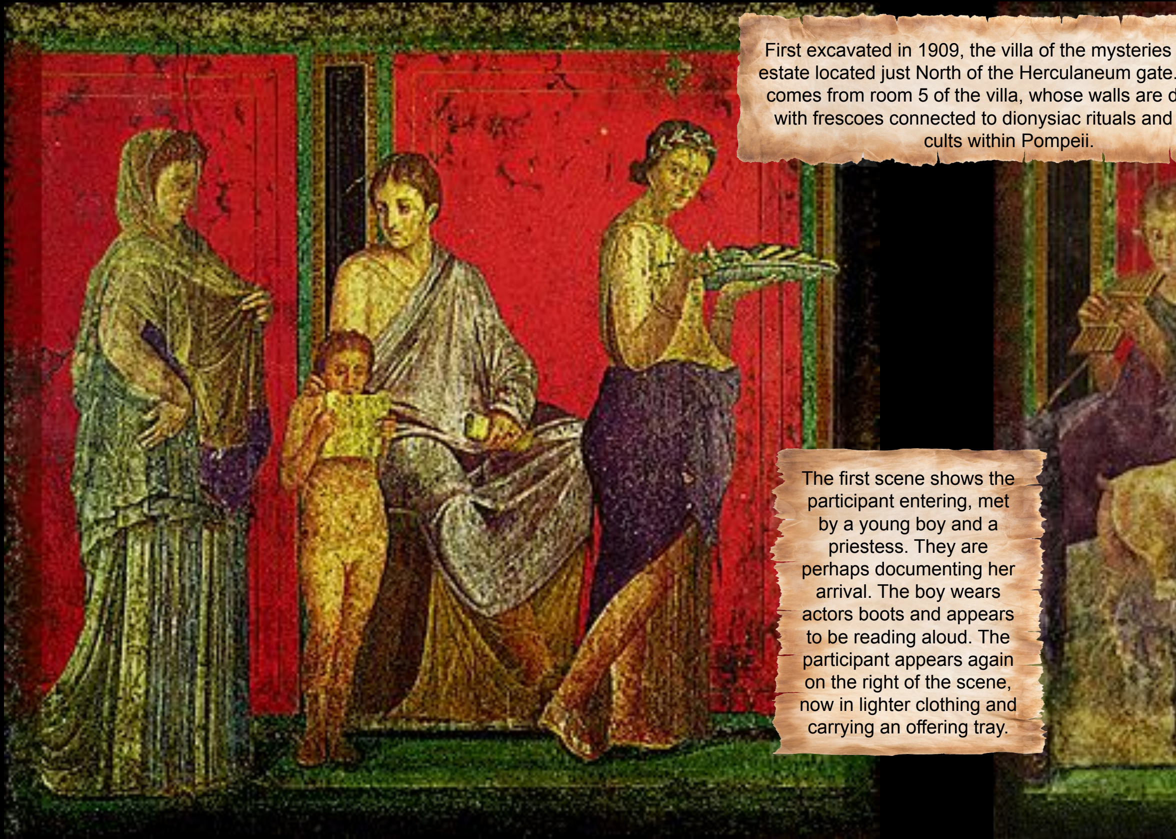
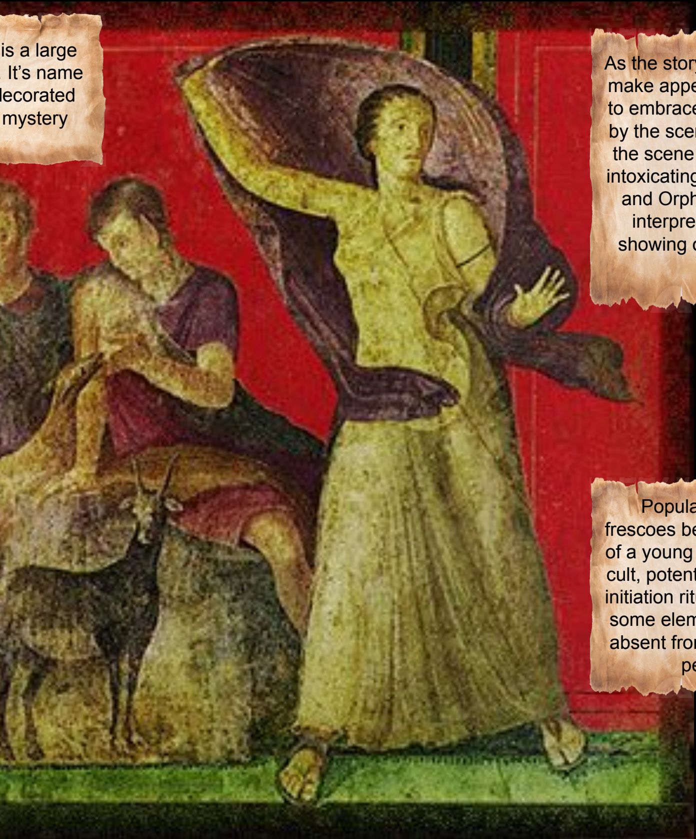


First excavated in 1909, the villa of the mysteries
estate located just North of the Herculaneum gate.
comes from room 5 of the villa, whose walls are d
with frescoes connected to dionysiac rituals and
cults within Pompeii.

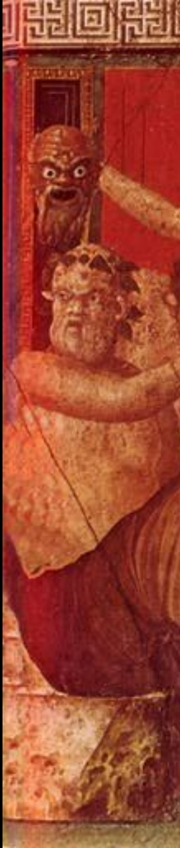
The first scene shows the participant entering, met by a young boy and a priestess. They are perhaps documenting her arrival. The boy wears actors boots and appears to be reading aloud. The participant appears again on the right of the scene, now in lighter clothing and carrying an offering tray.

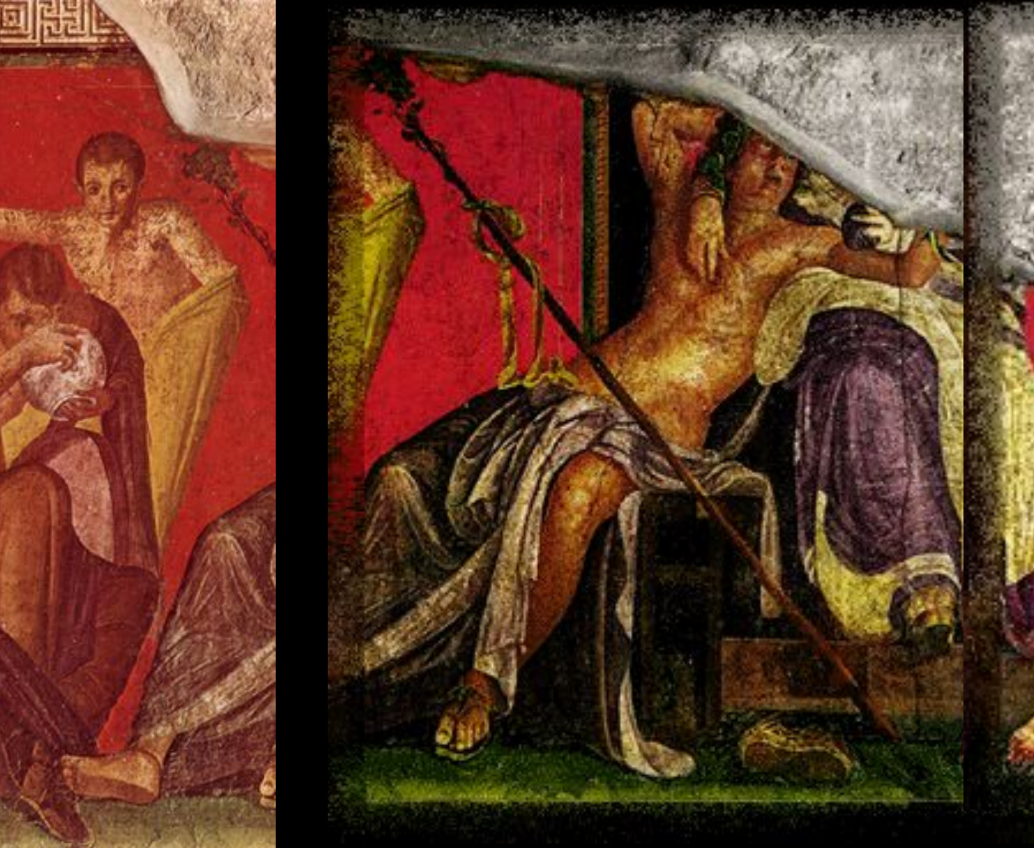


is a large
. It’s name
lecorated
mystery

As the story progresses, nymphs and satyrs make appearances, a call to the participant to embrace nature. She appears frightened by the scene to her right. The silver bowl in the scene is though to contain Kykeon, an intoxicating drink associated with Dionysian and Orphic mystery cults. An alternative interpretation is that of a scrying bowl showing one’s death, represented by the thearical mask.

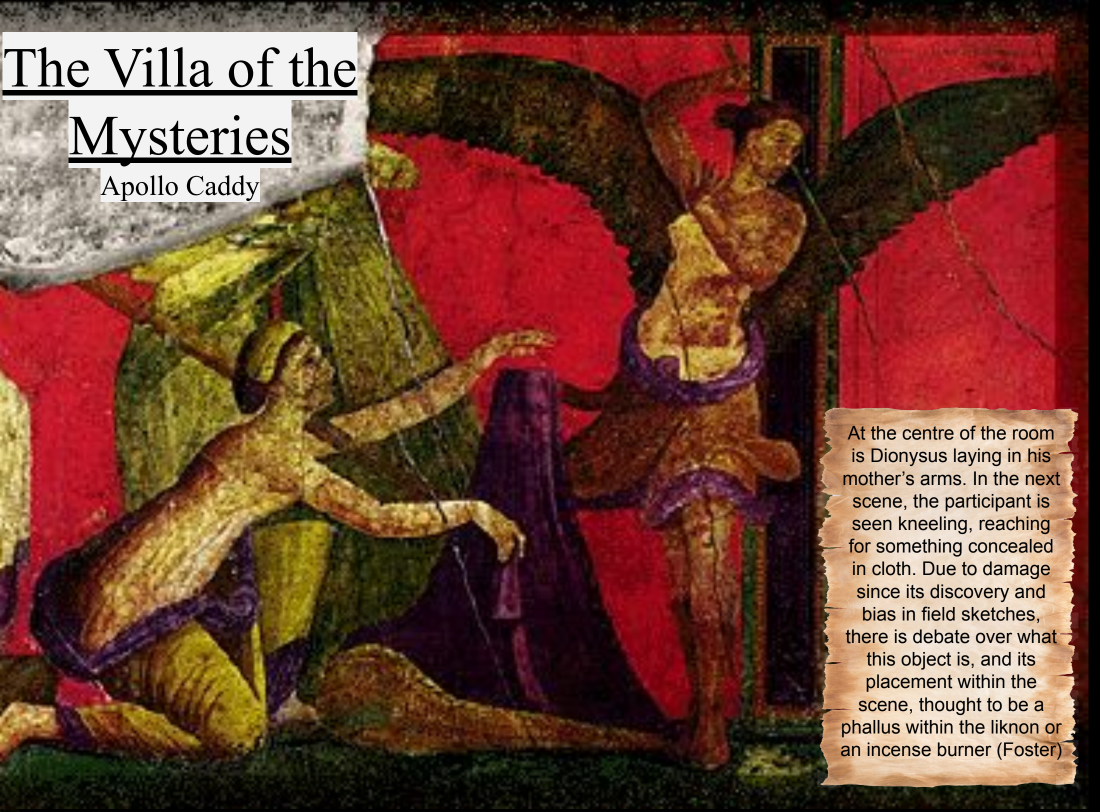
Popular interpretations of the villa’s frescoes believe them to depict the initiation of a young woman into a Dionysian mystery cult, potentially a dramatic retelling of a real initiation ritual, with many scholars believing some elements of said initiation ritual to be absent from the frescoes, as they were not permitted to be spoken of



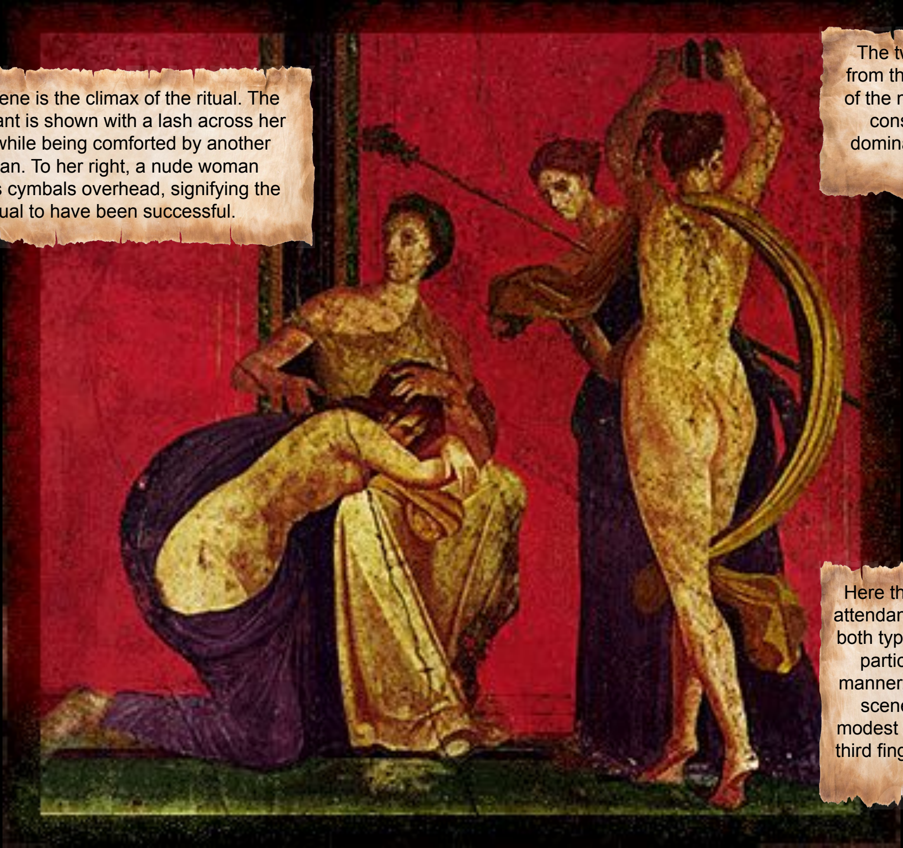


The Villa of the Mysteries

Apollo Caddy



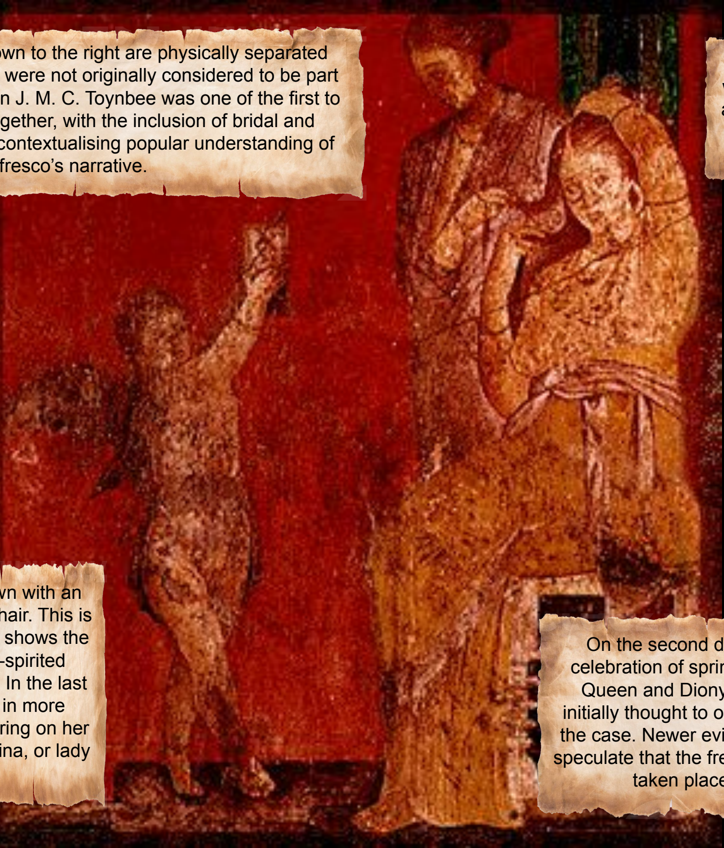
At the centre of the room is Dionysus laying in his mother’s arms. In the next scene, the participant is seen kneeling, reaching for something concealed in cloth. Due to damage since its discovery and bias in field sketches, there is debate over what this object is, and its placement within the scene, thought to be a phallus within the liknon or an incense burner (Foster)



This scene is the climax of the ritual. The participant is shown with a lash across her back while being comforted by another woman. To her right, a nude woman clashes cymbals overhead, signifying the ritual to have been successful.

The two latter scenes sho
from the others in situ, and
of the narrative. Art historia
consider the frescoes to
domina imagery shown rec
the

Here the participant is show
attendant assisting with her
both typical of marriage and
participant in a more free
manner, with her hair loose.
scene (far right), she sits
modest clothing, showing a
third finger, posed as a domi
of the house



own to the right are physically separated were not originally considered to be part n J. M. C. Toynbee was one of the first to gether, with the inclusion of bridal and contextualising popular understanding of fresco's narrative.

vn with an hair. This is shows the -spirited In the last in more ring on her ina, or lady

The idea of marriage to Dionysus was not a new one, and marriage is a common association with the god, appearing in Dionysiac cults and rituals throughout Ancient Rome.

On the second day of the Anthesteria festival (a three day celebration of spring and new wine), a sacred marriage of the Queen and Dionysus takes place. This particular ritual was initially thought to only take place in Athens, although this is not the case. Newer evidence from Hamilton has lead academics to speculate that the frescoes depict this occasion, which may have taken place within the villa itself (V. Hernshaw)

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