

Women Slaves and the Bacchic Murals in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii

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The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii has held a special place in the scholarly and popular imagination ever since the excavations of 1909-10 that uncovered the room containing the now famous murals of women performing rituals in the presence of the god Bacchus and members of his mythical entourage. These powerful images have given rise to numerous speculations, all of them highlighting the perspective of the elite members of the household and their social peers. Scholarly studies have proposed various interpretations—cultic, nuptial, mythological and prophetic, social, and theatrical. They also focus on the principal figures: the so-called “Domina,” “Bride” and other figures thought to represent the “Initiate.”

In contrast, this paper considers meanings that the murals may have held for non-elite viewers—in particular, the female slaves and freed slaves of the household. It proposes that those household slaves identified with the women on the walls through the lens of their own experiences as slaves in both domestic and cultic contexts. Focusing on those women who play various supporting roles in the visual drama depicted on the walls, this paper contends that a number of “jobs” portrayed in the murals in cultic form correspond to jobs that female slaves of the household performed in their daily lives in the villa. Merely recognizing the work that the non-elite women on the walls perform would have allowed slaves and former slaves as viewers to identify with their depicted counterparts.

Beyond seeing such correspondences, slaves and freed slaves might have found personal meaning in the murals. A remarkable 2nd century inscription in the Metropolitan Museum of Art lists nearly 400 names, (many of them servile in origin,) and cultic titles of members of a Bacchic thiasos, probably that of a large Roman gens. The names and titles are carved on a base that once held a statue of Pompeia Agrippinilla who was likely a priestess of Bacchus. A number of cultic titles correspond to jobs performed by the women in the Villa of the Mysteries, suggesting the possibility that the villa’s female slaves could have been members of a household thiasos led by their owner, the domina. Although the *Senatus consultus de bacchinalibus* of 186 BCE imposed severe restrictions on the celebration of the bacchanalia, the worship of Bacchus remained widespread in Campania. The temple at Sant’Abbondio outside of Pompeii, the numerous depictions of Bacchus in Pompeian lararia, and an inscription that identifies a Campanian priestess of Bacchus attest to the strength of the cult and the role of women in it. Along with Agrippinilla’s thiasos in Rome, this evidence suggests that the Domina of the Villa of the Mysteries was a priestess of Bacchus with her own thiasos, which would certainly have cast her household slaves and freed slaves in cultic roles. The example of Livia’s leadership of the cult of Bona Dea in Rome, which included members of her female staff, lends further credence to this possibility. Recognizing slaves as active participants in such cultic activities opens the possibility of deriving new meanings from these extraordinary murals in their Campanian context.

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Figure 1. Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii