

# Fashion or Function? Costume, Colour, and Cultic Codes. Clothes in the Great Dionysiac Fresco in Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii

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## Introduction

### *The Great Dionysiac Fresco*

The great fresco in a *triclinium* in Villa of the Mysteries was painted around the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, according to Maiuri, the villa's main excavator (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> More precisely, it was painted between 60–40 BC according to Barbet.<sup>2</sup> Gazda<sup>3</sup> concludes that the majority of researchers now seem to have most confidence in Maiuris' and Barbets' datings, namely that the Fresco was painted sometime between 60–40 BC. The fresco is a megalography, according to the criteria by Vitruvius<sup>4</sup>; and painted in Style II, phase 1b, according to Beyen.<sup>5</sup> The fresco covers all four walls of the dining-room, and



Fig. 1: The triclinium of the Great Fresco in Villa of the Mysteries.

is a contingent cycle, although broken up by a large window on the southern wall, the large entrance to the room on the western wall, and a small door-opening in the north-western corner.

The villa the fresco is located in is commonly called “Villa of the Mysteries”, and the fresco is likewise commonly called “the Dionysiac Fresco”. However, both these names rest on the interpretation that the fresco has a Dionysiac content, and perhaps shows Dionysiac mystery-cult ceremonies, such as initiations. However, these interpretations have been highly disputed in almost 100 years since the fresco was discovered and uncovered.

#### *Cultic Motifs in the Fresco?*

The fresco has been given numerous interpretations. All recognize the Dionysiac elements, but their implications have been variously interpreted. The most salient interpretations are that the fresco shows Dionysiac initiations and mystery-rites.

And indeed, the Dionysiac content of the fresco is obvious, both with regard to persons and objects: Dionysos himself resides in the central part of the fresco, two Silenoi and four satyrs are easily identifiable, and a maenad (although she is somewhat different from most depicted maenads). Further, the presence of two *thyrsoi*, a *liknon*, a torch, and a shrouded *phallos* also indicate a Dionysiac content. These elements have been taken to support the hypothesis that the fresco shows cultic activities, primarily Dionysiac initiation and mystery-rites. Some of the main classes of interpretations are: Dionysiac initiation and mystery-rites,<sup>6</sup> hieros gamos,<sup>7</sup> religious education in these connections,<sup>8</sup> scenes of divination,<sup>9</sup> bridal preparation and prenuptial initiation.<sup>10</sup> Many interpretations are mixtures of these themes.

These interpretations have been mainly based on data from the persons in the fresco, their behaviours, certain objects in the fresco, and compositional characteristics of the fresco, and the frescos’ references to Dionysos, his mythology and rites. However, Dionysiac motifs were among the most popular motifs in art at the time when the fresco was painted, both locally in Pompeii and generally in Campania, so one cannot conclude with certainty that cultic activities were painted in this fresco on the basis of the motifs alone. The data regarding the identity of the persons, their behaviours and objects are definitely relevant; however, the Fresco contains other classes of data that are still poorly explored and interpreted. One of them is the textiles, particularly the clothes.

#### *Characteristics of Cultic Costumes*

Various kinds of “priests”, from shamans to popes, as well as their assistants and attendants, wear costumes that are particular for their role, status and ceremonial service in the cult. Cultic costumes have certain properties.<sup>11</sup> Cultic clothes usually contrast the contemporary “fashion”: Their style is often old-fashioned or foreign, or both. When they are old-fashioned, it is related to the age of the religion; when foreign, it is related

to the origin of the religion. Cultic costumes also have cultic codes: symbolic colours, patterns, ornaments and accessories; and they tend to be uniform and standardized. If it is so that the fresco’s content is cultic, and shows people engaged in cultic activities, one should expect to see the person dressed in cultic clothes. – So, the question is: Are there any indications that this fresco contains persons dressed in cultic costumes? And if so, or not, what consequences can that have for the interpretation of the fresco? – In this analysis, I will first analyze the clothes worn by the persons in the fresco with regard to the following criteria for cultic costumes: age, origin, uniformity and particularly colours. Secondly, I will try to connect this information to the persons’ behaviours and possible roles.

*Data: Costumes, Colours and Colour-combinations*

Garments in the fresco are presented in Table 1. Of the 29 human or divine persons, 27 can be data-registered. On 2 the paint is destroyed and the colours unclear. Of the remaining 27 figures, 2 are completely naked, leaving 25 figures that are dressed or semi-naked. (The Chi-square-analysis is based on these 25 persons.)

Distinctly Greek clothes, a *chiton* and a *peplos*, are worn by 2 persons (fig. 2). 7 other persons can also be regarded as “Greek” since they are Silenoi (2), satyrs (4) and Dionysos himself, but their clothes do not have any distinct Greek features. Of these, 3 satyrs

PERSONS	white tunic	purple border	yellow palla purple border	white shawl purple border	light purple	purple tunica/stola	purple palla	Greek garment	fur
P 1 Woman standing/walking		X		X				X	
P 2 Boy reading									
P 3 Woman seated next to reading boy	X	X (?)			X				
P 4 Woman carrying object	X						X		
P 5 Woman bending, holding object	X	X	X						
P 6 Woman sitting, seen from behind	X	X		X					
P 7 Woman pouring liquid from a jar	palla					X			
P 8 Man with lyre (Silenos)					X			(X)	
P 9 Boy with syrinx (satyr)						X		(X)	X
P 10 Boy or girl with fawn / (satyr)						X		(X)	X
P 11 Woman running							X	X	
P 12 Man sitting, holding bowl (Silenos)							X brownish	(X)	
P 13 Man bending over bowl (a satyr?)								(X)	X
P 14 Man standing, holding mask (satyr?)			yellow only					(X)	
P 15 Man reclining in woman’s lap (Dionysos)					X			(X)	
P 16 Woman sitting, holding P15	X	X		X		X			
P 17 Woman kneeling, arms towards object	X	X	X						
P 18 Woman standing behind P17	-	?	-	-	?		-		
P 19 Woman standing close to P18	-	-	yellow only ?	-	-		-		
P 20 Woman winged, holding whip		X	X						
P 21 Woman kneeling over a woman’s lap						X	(?)		
P 22 Woman sitting with P21’s head in her lap	X						X		
P 23 Woman standing, holding thyrsos						X			
P 24 Woman dancing		X ?	yellow only ?						
P 25 Boy winged, holding mirror (an eros)							X belt&cloth		
P 26 Woman looking at mirror	X	X (?)			X				
P 27 Woman sitting, doing her hair	X	X	X (light)						
P 28 Boy winged, holding a bow (an eros)									
P 29 Woman sitting	X	X	X						

Table 1: Types of clothes worn by the persons in the fresco, and their colours.





Fig. 2: The two distinctly Greek garments.

wear fur (fig. 3), 2 of them wear fur over a purple tunica (or *chitoniskos*, the Greek parallel to *tunica*). 10 persons wear white *tunicae*, and 6 wear purple *tunicae* (tab. 1). A *tunica* was primarily an undergarment. 3 wear a purple *palla* and 1 a purple belt; 8 persons, possibly 12, have a purple border (*clavus*) on their clothes (tab. 1).

There are two kinds of white, one very bright (on shawls), and one more off-white (mostly on *tunicae*). So, there are only 2 chromatic colours on the clothes: purple, (in dark and light variants) and yellow. 4 persons are dressed in light purple (fig. 4, lower part). 4 persons are mainly dressed in deep purple (fig. 4, right part). There are 3 colour-combinations in the garments: Purple and white clothes in combination (white *tunica* and purple *palla*) are worn by 4 persons (fig. 4, upper part); purple borders on yellow garments (*pallae*) are worn by 5 persons (fig. 5, upper part); and purple borders on white shawls are worn by 3 persons (fig. 5, lower part). In addition, there are two cloths that may also be yellow with a purple border (fig. 6). The dancing woman wears one of them, the other lays folded over a woman's lap, and might also be a garment. However, since the data from these two are unclear, they are not included in the further analysis.

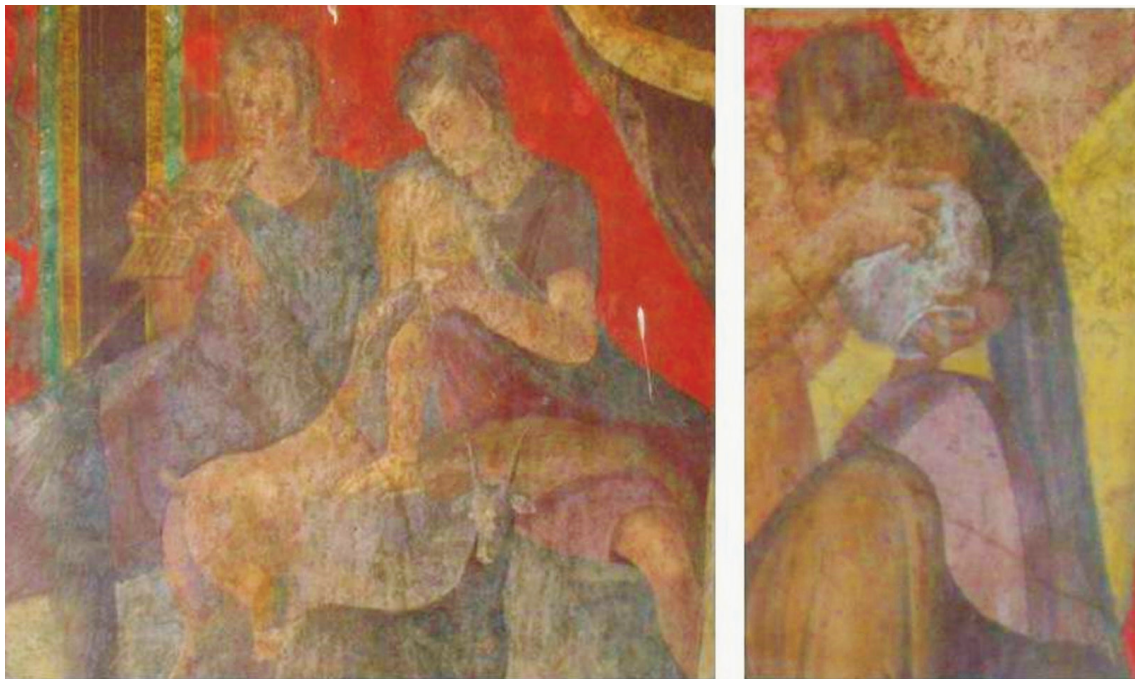


Fig. 3: Three persons wearing fur.

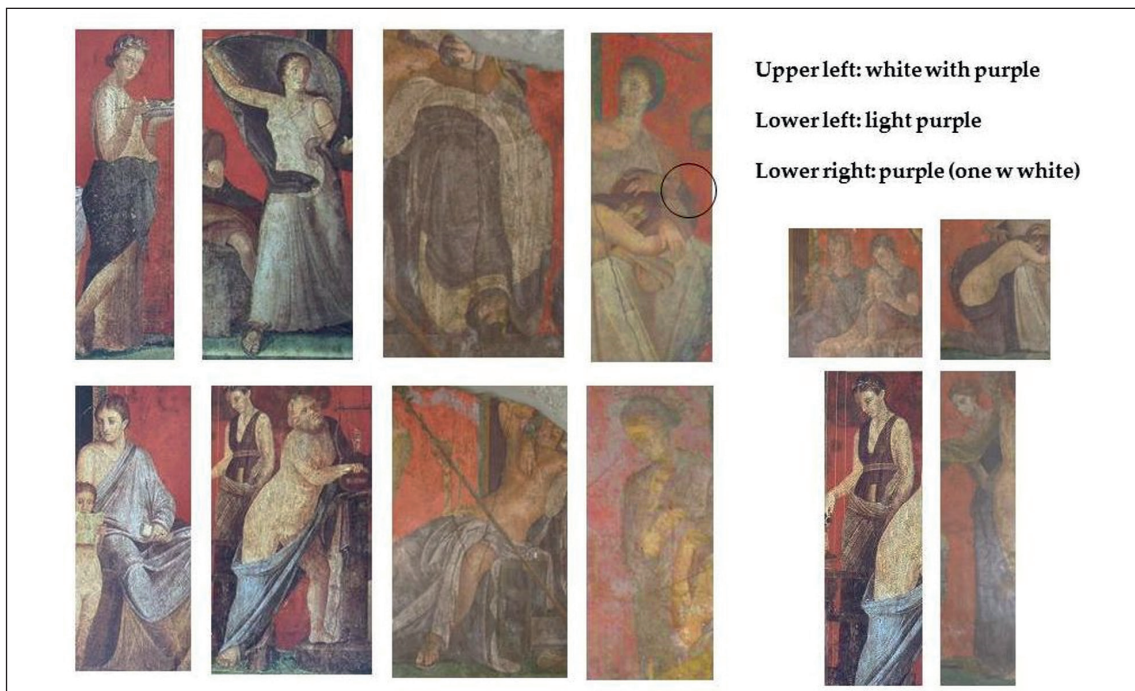


Fig. 4: Characteristic colours and colour-combinations in the clothes in the fresco: Light purple (lower part of fig. 4), mainly deep purple (right part), deep purple and white (upper part).



Fig. 5: Characteristic colours and colour-combinations in the clothes in the fresco: Purple borders on yellow fabrics (upper part of fig. 5), purple borders on white shawls (lower part).

In order to test whether the colour-combinations in the clothes could be arbitrary or not, a Chi-square test (2-tailed) was done with  $N = 25$ , 6 possible (theoretical) combinations of: purple, yellow, white, and clear white, and with 5 degrees of freedom (6 theoretical possibilities minus 1), and I used a two-tailed test. The result was: Chi-square: 12.50 with P-value  $< .03$ . This means that there is less than 3% chance that the repetitive colour-combinations in the clothes in the fresco were arbitrary, and 97% likely that they were intended.





Fig. 6: Other possible garments with yellow and purple colour-combinations.

### Discussion

Are there any indications of cultic costumes in the fresco? Are the criteria for cultic costumes, old age, foreign origin, uniformity, and particular symbolic colours, fulfilled?

There are two distinctly Greek garments in the fresco, a *chiton* and a *peplos*. Motifs from Greek mythology were common in paintings in Roman (Pompeian, Campanian) contexts, but one could say that the Greek clothes in this fresco are “foreign” in the sense that the persons wearing them are without any clear thematic reference to Greek mythology. This type of *chiton* was old-fashioned even in Greece when the fresco was painted. So, there are two distinctly foreign costumes and one of them is also old-fash-

ioned. The Greek connection is obvious if the fresco is Dionysiac. Dionysianism was most probably Thracian and Greek in origin, and was a very ancient cult, with antecedents as early as in Minoan Crete.<sup>12</sup> So these two costumes fit the two first criteria for cultic costumes: they are foreign and old-fashioned.

Cultic costumes have semantic, symbolic features. Colours are one of them. The colours convey symbolic information. The question is: Do the colours and the colour-combinations on the clothes in the fresco convey any symbolic significance?

The result from the Chi-square test is very significant: The colour-combinations were deliberately chosen. Further, the restricted range of colours in the garments, white (in two hues), purple (in two hues) and yellow, also seems deliberately chosen. The clothes in Roman paintings are usually quite colourful and varied. Here, the two only chromatic colours are purple and yellow. It is significant that both have particular connections to Dionysos. Dionysos was the god of wine (among other things). Purple is the colour of wine, and may thus symbolize Dionysos. Yellow is also particular to Dionysos, as he is described as wearing saffron yellow by Aeschylus<sup>13</sup> and Aristophanes.<sup>14</sup> In addition, yellow and purple were among the most exotic and expensive colours one could have on textiles. Genuine saffron yellow (*crocum*) was extracted from the stamens of crocus or lotus flowers,<sup>15</sup> and genuine purpur (*purpurea*) was made from murex snails from the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup> Clothes in these colours (but not their cheaper imitations) were exclusive. – So, the purple and yellow colours are symbolic in two ways. The light purple clothes, the clothes in dark purple, the dark purple clothes in combination with white, and the dark purple border on yellow *pallae* or on white shawls, are so repeatedly found throughout the fresco, that I will say that they show clothes that are uniform and standardized. So, also in that respect, and supported by the statistically significant Chi-square result, they meet the criteria of cultic costumes.

A tentative suggestion regarding cultic roles, primarily on the basis of the colours on the garments, could be the following: Light purple costumes might refer to roles as teachers. That colour is worn by a woman who supervises a little boy who is reading, by Silenos who was Dionysos' teacher, by Dionysos who brought culture and taught people how to make wine, and by a woman who takes divinations from a mirror and instructs them to the woman who is doing her hair. All these four have some role of being a teacher or an instructor.

The white shawls with purple borders are apparently worn by very prominent women with particular positions in the fresco: by the woman who "starts" the fresco-cycle and wears the foreign and old-fashioned *chiton*, by a woman frequently defined as a priestess since she is the major person in some behaviour involving, at least, two other women, and by Dionysos' female partner. It is also significant that the woman called "a priestess" sits on a piece of furniture that is covered by a cloth which is yellow with a purple border (fig. 7), just like the *pallae* of 5 other women (fig. 5, upper part).

The yellow garment (*palla*) with a purple border (*clavus*) seems to be worn by persons who perform particularly important activities, and thus have important roles. One





Fig. 7: Other paintings with persons wearing yellow garments with a purple border.

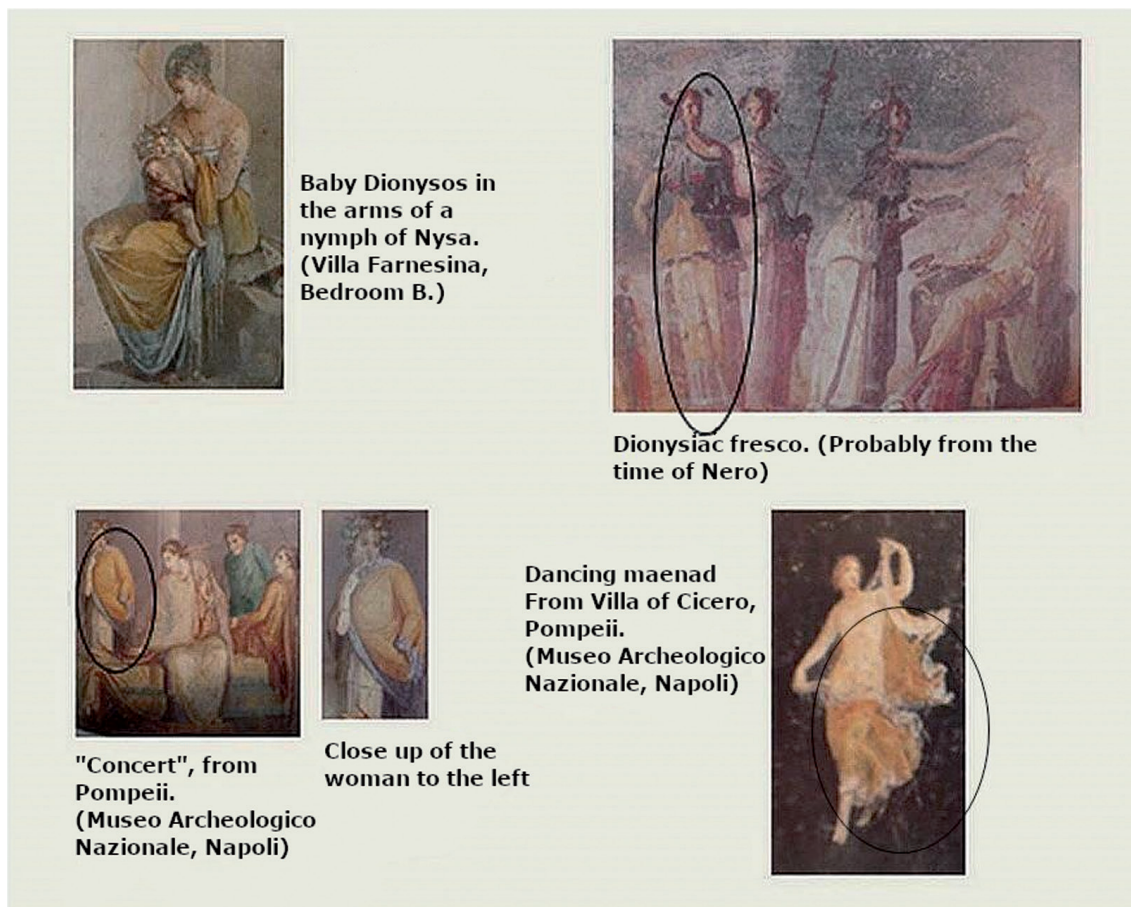


Fig. 8: A piece of furniture covered by a cloth, which is yellow with a purple border.

assists the woman who sits on the above mentioned yellow-and-purple cloth, one is surrounded by or handle typical Dionysiac objects (torch, shrouded *phallos*, and *liknon*), one swings a whip, one is being dressed in the manner of a bride (but in the wrong colours), and finally, one sits somewhat solemnly, alone, and fully shrouded in a yellow *palla* with a purple border. She looks back towards, and “ends” the fresco-cycle. – These costumes are convincingly cultic. There is also comparative evidence to connect the yellow garment with a purple border to Dionysos. Other paintings show women dressed in such garments, several of them in clear connection to Dionysos (fig. 8). One is the nymph Nisa (Nysa) holding baby Dionysos in her arms, one is a ceremonial scene where women puts a wreath on Dionysos’ head, and one is a dancing maenad (bacchant). The last picture in fig. 8 is not necessarily Dionysiac, it is called “The concert” (in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Napoli). But the woman wearing the yellow-and-purple *palla* in this painting has a wreath on her head, and music was in many ways associated with both Dionysos and Orpheus. They were closely linked in Orphic-Dionysiac mystery cults, so there might be a link also here.

Yet, what roles and functions the clothes in the fresco might signify are very hypothetical. The Dionysiac mystery-cults were secret. Only the initiated fully knew their symbols, rites and roles. Still, some information has come down to us: Some are negative and critical, such as the “*Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus*” from Roma 186 BC<sup>17</sup> and religious texts by Clement of Alexandria<sup>18</sup> and Firmicus Maternus.<sup>19</sup> Others are positive, and written by Dionysiac cult-members themselves, such as the “Rule of the Iobacchoi” from Athens (178 AD),<sup>20</sup> and the Torre Nova inscription from outside Roma (160–170 AD).<sup>21</sup> The Torre Nova inscription mentions a list of functions and roles. Among others: priests, priestesses and a hierophant (dealing with initiation), people who should carry various sacred objects such as: torch, *cistae*, *liknon*, *phallos*, flames, and even a god-bearer; but also more mundane roles such as: neatherds (shepherds), a financial administrator, and an instructor of adolescent members. Although the inscription is somewhat vague regarding the status of these various roles, it is reasonable to expect that there were hierarchical differences in status. The teacher-role I suggested above matches with the “instructor of adolescent members” in the Torre Nova inscription. The satyrs wearing fur in the fresco could represent the *Apo katazoseos* (“those who girded themselves with the skin of a newly sacrificed animal”). That the Fresco contains a torch, a *liknon* and a *phallos*, makes the existence of “bearers” of these objects, or at least “handlers” of them, likely; and they may be present in the fresco. The Torre Nova inscription explicitly states that such objects were carried, – possibly in processions. – But a word of caution: all these suggestions regarding possible roles indicated in the fresco, are only tentative suggestions. They are not conclusive.

Actually, whether the fresco shows real people involved in cultic behaviours, divine mythological beings, or both, is still disputable. The fact that theatrical processions, costume-wearing and role-play were common in Dionysiac cultic activities,<sup>22</sup> makes the fresco ambiguous. For instance, the satyrs in the fresco could simply be satyrs, or could be human persons dressed up as satyrs. The same holds for the other divine beings in the fresco. – And, finally, most importantly, one must acknowledge that such intricate and subtle ambiguity was indeed very typical and characteristic of Roman painting.

### Conclusion

The fresco contains two definite foreign costumes, and one of them is old-fashioned. The colour combinations in the clothes in the fresco were not arbitrary, but deliberately chosen. The number of chromatic colours was only 2, purple and yellow, which were both very expensive dyes, and had clear symbolic connections to Dionysos. In general, the limited number of colours used and their similar arrangements and combinations indicate that the clothes were uniform, standardized costumes. The final conclusion is therefore, that the clothes worn by the persons in the fresco in Villa of the mysteries in Pompeii fulfil the criteria for cultic costumes. They are cultic costumes with particular



symbolic colours and colour-combinations. They convey symbolic, cultic codes that refer to various cultic roles and offices within a Dionysiac cultic society, a *thiasos*. With regard to the general interpretation of the fresco, I will conclude that: The fresco either shows or refers to Dionysiac cultic activities, and the fresco does indeed deserve its name: The Dionysiac Fresco.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maiuri 1964, 100.

<sup>2</sup> Barbet 1985, 37–40.

<sup>3</sup> Gazda 2000, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Vit. 7, 5, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Beyen 1938.

<sup>6</sup> Kerényi 1948, 1976; Herbig 1958; Maiuri 1967; Seaford 1991; Sauron 1998, and others.

<sup>7</sup> Comparetti 1921; Bieber 1928; Toynbee 1929; Nilsson 1957; Isler-Kerényi 2009, and others.

<sup>8</sup> Turcan 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Mudie Cook 1913; Macchioro 1920; Kerenyi 1948; Matz 1963; Gallistl 1995; De Grummond 2002, and others.

<sup>10</sup> Houtzager 1963; Zuntz 1963; Brendel 1966; Eitrem 1968; Little 1972; Veyne 1998; Kirk 2000; Mielsch 2001, and others.

<sup>11</sup> Lindstrøm forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Kerényi 1976; Adams 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See Sommerstein 2015.

<sup>14</sup> See Dover 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Bradley 2009, 184.

<sup>16</sup> Bradley 2009, 200–202.

<sup>17</sup> Grant 1957.

<sup>18</sup> Smith 1973.

<sup>19</sup> Turcan 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Tod 1974.

<sup>21</sup> De Grummond 2000, 77–82.

<sup>22</sup> Håland 2012.

### Image Credits

Table 1 and figs. 1–8: by author.

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