

# A Hidden *Telete*: Mythological Images as Symbols of Initiation in Roman Wall Paintings and Mosaics

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Initiation was one of the most substantial experiences undergone in Antiquity. The term *Les rites de passage* introduced by Arnold van Gennep, accommodates the multifaceted significance of initiation in the social structure. The two main aspects of initiation were defined as the social and that which belonged to the religious sphere; or, the profane and the sacred. Initiation or rites of passage in the social realm were intended to delineate the transition from childhood to adult status, while the sacred initiation was intended to promise eternal life and a merging with the divine. As van Gennep has indicated, however, acts of apprenticeship of any kind were enveloped in ceremonies, since no act was entirely free of the sacred. Sacred initiations were intended to remain secret in Antiquity, thus explicit depictions of sacred rituals are rare in ancient art. As this study will demonstrate, however, signifiers of such initiation can nonetheless be found in Roman wall paintings and mosaics depicting mythological protagonists. The point of departure here is that initiation is the main issue manifested metaphorically in the depictions under discussion, with the sacred initiation rather than the social mostly featuring in the visual images. The analysis is based on literary and philosophical sources, and focuses on four personalities: Narcissus, Endymion, and Achilles, who are represented in their mythological context on wall paintings from Pompeii, and Heracles, who is shown in Roman mosaics in a scene familiar as the "Drinking Contest between Heracles and Dionysus".

*Keywords:* initiation rites, mysteries, Platonism, Neo-platonism

## Introduction

Initiation was one of the most substantial experiences in Antiquity. The term *Les rites de passage*, introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1960), accommodates the multifaceted significance of initiation in the social structure. The two main aspects of initiation are the social, and the religious; in other words, the profane and the sacred. Initiation or rites of passage in the social realm marked the transition from childhood to maturity, while sacred initiation promised eternal life and a merging with the divine. However, as van Gennep indicates, acts of apprenticeship of any kind were enveloped in ceremonies, and since no act was entirely free of the sacred, every change in a person's life involved actions and reactions between the sacred and the profane. Accordingly, life came to be made up of a succession of stages with similar endings and beginnings, and for every event there were ceremonies that were aimed at enabling the individual to transition from one defined position to another (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 1, 3). This is reinforced by Victor Turner, who stresses that in apprenticeship one entered into a higher level of spirituality, engaging with magical and religious practices that merged humility with sacredness (Turner, 1969, pp. 95-97). In his discussion of tribal societies, Turner points

out that each social status is distinguished by certain sacred characteristics. These “sacred” characteristics and the change in social position are achieved through the rites of passage (Turner, 1969, pp. 95-97).

As this study will demonstrate, such signifiers of initiation can be found in wall paintings and mosaics depicting mythological protagonists. The point of departure here is that initiation, which was a dominant experience in Antiquity, is the main issue manifested in the depictions under discussion, with the sacred initiation rather than the social mostly featuring in the visual images.

Sacred initiation rites, known as the Mysteries, can be dated back to the 6th century BCE and were spread throughout the Greco-Roman world. Their aim was to promise eternal life after death, and their initiates were called *mystai*. During such mystery rites a secret was revealed to the *mystai* that promised proximity to the Divine and eternal bliss after death. The most famous of these mysteries were the Eleusinian mysteries held for Demeter. The Dionysian mysteries, to be discussed later, were also very common, as were the Orphic mysteries, and mysteries influenced by syncretism in Roman times, such as those held for Isis, Mithras, and Cybele (Bianchi, 1976; Meyer, 1987; Burkert, 1987; Bowden, 2010; Bremmer, 2014).<sup>1</sup> The aim of these rites of passage being similar, their portrayal was as well; hence I will refer to them all as “Mysteries”.

Explicit depictions of the Mysteries and other sacred rituals were actually rare in Greek and Roman art. Indeed, the Mysteries were intended to remain secret, for the divinities and the rituals were regarded as *semna*, “awesome”, and requiring great reverence (Turner, 1969, pp. 95-97), as expressed by Strabo: “The secrecy with which the sacred rites are concealed induces reverence for the divine, since it imitates the nature of the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses” (Jones, 1917-1932). As noted by Bremmer, it was the very holiness of the rites that forbade them to be performed or alluded to outside their proper ritual context. Bremmer also notes the lack of connection between rituals and their representations, and that myths often selected the more striking parts of a ritual, dramatizing and simplifying the issues at stake. Vase paintings, such as we have, never represented the afterlife, and indeed, representations of realistic rituals are rare in ancient art (Bremmer, 2014, 18-20). Nonetheless, the ancient world was full of sacred images, and ancient culture presented a ritual-centered visuality in which the religious experience is omnipresent (Elsner, 2007). Consequently, certain features of the sacred initiation are immanent in the iconography of the mythological images analyzed here. The discussion will focus on four personalities: three of whom—Narcissus, Endymion, and Achilles, are represented in their mythological context on wall paintings from Pompeii; and the fourth, Heracles, is shown in a scene familiar as the “Drinking Contest between Heracles and Dionysus”, represented mostly on mosaics from the 2nd-3rd centuries. This study is based on a Structuralist approach, under the assumption that the signs and symbols reflect wide but yet common cultural structures and contexts. Thus, the analysis employs both literary and philosophical sources. From an art-historical point of view, this study is post-Structuralist, conceiving a work of art as multifaceted, and the signs as revealing intrinsic meanings, as indicated by Alex Potts:

What a theory of the sign establishes first and foremost is that a sign points to a meaning outside itself and that this meaning is inferred by the viewer or reader on the basis of her or his previous experience of decoding signs. (Potts, 2003, 21)

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<sup>1</sup> On Greco-Roman Mysteries see: Ugo Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries* (Leiden 1976); Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries—A Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World* (San Francisco 1987); Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA. 1987); Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton 2010); Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World* (Berlin 2014).

Likewise: “Signs, as soon as they are interpreted as signs, generate other signs [...]” (Potts, 2003, p. 22). Accordingly, there is no one defined way of interpreting a work of art; on the contrary, there are many ways of locating an artwork within a structure (Carrier, n.d., p. 180; Bal & Bryson, 1991, p. 177).<sup>2</sup> This becomes particularly essential with respect to Antiquity, since the Classical myths were possessed of a rich, suggestive, and varied polysemy (Elsner, 2007, p. 133). The title “A Hidden Telete” thus relates to this polysemy in perceiving the protagonists under discussion as initiates, with the aspect of initiation in those figures sometimes being implicit and sometimes explicit.

Current attitudes to the study of art history that assign the interpretation of a work of art to the eye of the beholder actually have precedents in Antiquity (Barthes, 1993). As noted by Elsner, Callistratus draws attention to the fact that the image can never be visualized except in the subjective arena of the mind’s eye. Furthermore, he states: “The more successful the naturalism becomes, the greater the gap between the image on the canvas and the image imagined in the beholder/desirer’s mind” (Elsner, 2007, p. 142). A work of art, thus, is multilayered, and this assumption underlies this study, which seeks to interpret the images under discussion as signs of the viewer’s stratified worldview in Antiquity in reference to initiation. Many of the sources on which the research is based relate to Platonism and Neo-Platonism. Plotinus considered himself a commentator of Plato and was treated as such in Antiquity. He was mainly interested in Plato’s theory of Ideas, and thus Neo-Platonism is based on the Platonic concept according to which the soul aspires to release from the restrictions of the corporeal body and to return to its origin in the ideal divine world, to be discussed in length as follows.

### **Narcissus the *Epoptes***

The myth of Narcissus tells the story of a youth in love with himself who has rejected all his lovers and returns love to no-one. As punishment for his arrogance Artemis has condemned him to experience unfulfilled love forever. He wanders around filled with unrequited passion, and unclear purpose. One day, while seated near a spring, he gazes at his own reflection in the water. He feels such a yearning for this image that he falls in love with it and eventually dies from this longing, becoming the flower that still bears his name.<sup>3</sup>

Wall paintings in Pompeii usually represented Narcissus as seated on a rock and gazing at his reflection in a basin. I focus here on the image of Narcissus from the House of Lucretius Fronto (De Carolis, 2001, p. 56; Elsner, 2007),<sup>4</sup> while referring to other representations in accordance with the context. This depiction has already been interpreted as symbolizing the rites of passage in their secular sense, i.e. puberty rites (Fischer, 2010, pp. 141-158).

The depiction in the House of Lucretius Fronto (Figure 1) focuses on Narcissus’s image, seated on a rock in the heart of a desolate landscape. His body is only partly covered by a purple robe, exposing his nakedness, and particularly his genitals; he holds a spear and his head is adorned with a wreath. He gazes at his reflection in a basin of water. The composition is dominated by the naturalistic image of Narcissus, with some pale and

<sup>2</sup> David Carrier, “Art History,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 180. Compare also to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson’s words: “[...] the context can be augmented”; “Context can always be extended”. See: Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), 177.

<sup>3</sup> Ov. *Met.* 3.341-510; Callistratus, *Descriptions*, 5; Philostr. *Imag.* 1.23.

<sup>4</sup> Narcissus, wall-painting, *cubiculum* i, north wall, House of Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii V.4.a, between 62-79 AD. See: Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (Zurich 1981-2009), VI, 2, Figure 1; Ernesto De Carolis, *Gods and Heroes in Pompeii*, trans. Lory-Ann Touchette (Los Angeles 2001), 56; Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, Figure 6.1.

shallow shadows of mountains featuring in the background. The artist has focused here on the image of Narcissus and emphasized him through the strong oblique composition, while purposely omitting a more detailed depiction of nature. Narcissus's facial expression is introspective and his gaze is dreamy and contemplative. His image recalls in its appearance the character of the *ephebe*, who is the archetype of the Classical Greek youth, evoking the definition of a "soft youth" referred to by the *Diadomenos* (Stewart, 1990, p. 162; Robertson, 1981, p. 114). Narcissus's contemplative mood recalls that of the disengagement and sense of aloofness and divinized youthfulness, identified by Pollitt as Olympianism, and characteristic of the figures in the procession on the Parthenon frieze (Pollitt, 1972, p. 89). The classical thoughtful expression, typical of images such as the Blond Boy, the Youth from Beneventum, and the Doryphoros, was intended to express *aidos*—modesty, as against *hubris*; and *dianoia*—the "reflexive thought" or contemplation of the rational and moderate youth and his discretion in the process of becoming an adult (Stewart, 1990).<sup>5</sup> The solitude characterizing Narcissus is well connected to the social practices of puberty rites. The process of initiation was marked by a period of seclusion and isolation that the young initiate had to undergo, and which signified his way to maturity; while the initiate's return to society symbolized his rebirth as a man and his new status as an accepted adult, celebrated through a change in his physical appearance, manifested in a new costume and his joining the *andreion* (Willets, 1955; 1962; Koehl, 1986; Van Gennep, 1960). The Spartan initiation discipline included concealment (*krypteia*), which was the custom of secluding Lacedemonian youth in the mountains, where they had to live for a year in isolation (Eliade, 1965, p. 109). Vidal-Naquet noted that the practice of the *krypteia* at Sparta contained elements such as nakedness and temporal separation (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, 113-114; Dodd, 2003, p. 75). The spear that Narcissus holds characterizes him as a hunter (Elsner, 2000, p. 92); while the nudity, with the strong emphasis on the exposure of the genitals, is related to his erotic appeal, to homoeroticism. Narcissus himself was a figure of erotic desire, like a desirable *eromenos*, and thus a subject of pursuit in an erotic hunting game (Elsner, 2000, p. 92; 1996, 248-261; 2007, p. 133, 147; Valladares, 2011, p. 384; Platt, 2002).<sup>6</sup> Hunting was symbolized as the social game in which the *eromenos* is the metaphoric hunted and the *erastes* is the hunter and thus the transition from childhood to adulthood (Schnapp, 1989, pp. 71-72). These references indicate Narcissus's image, as has been suggested, as pertaining here to initiation in its social sense, i.e., puberty rites (Fischer, 2010). Narcissus's image was thus perceived as liminal; that is, at an intermediate state, between youth and adolescence, as Ovid (1933) puts it: "When he might seem either a boy or a man" (Elsner, 2007, p. 93; Fischer, 2010, pp. 142-143). As a hunter Narcissus belongs to the realm of Artemis/Diana, and as hunted, to the realm of Aphrodite and Eros/Amor. His liminality, being on the threshold of puberty, is in equivalence with the liminality of Artemis as a marginal goddess between the wild and the civilized, and as the patron of the young on the threshold of adulthood (Vernant, 1991, p. 209). Under the protection of Artemis the young cross the threshold in order to integrate into the community as adults; and thus, as associated with the realm of Artemis, hunting is connected with initiation rites. This transition requires that the young must renounce themselves and "die" in order to be reborn (Vernant, 199, pp. 209-210). Narcissus,

<sup>5</sup> Compare: the "Blond Boy" from the Akropolis, ca. 490-480 BCE; The "Critias Boy" from the Akropolis, ca. 490-480 BC, in Stewart, *Greek Sculpture*, 14, 133-135, 145, Figs. 219, 221-222.

<sup>6</sup> Elsner, "Caught in the Ocular", 92; Jas Elsner, "Naturalism and the Erotics of the Gaze," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, ed. N. Boymel Kampen (Cambridge 1996), 248-261; Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 133, 147; Hérica N. Valladares, "Fallax Imago: Ovid's Narcissus and the seduction of mimesis in Roman wall painting," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 27 (2011), 384. Among recent studies on Pompeian paintings of Narcissus: Verity Platt, "Viewing, Desiring, Believing: Confronting the Divine in a Pompeian House," *Art History* 25 (2002), 87-112.



however, is unable to escape from this liminal state. He, like Hippolytus, refuses to “grow up” and forgoes the world of the solitary hunt, and thereby becomes an adult in the commonwealth. Narcissus’s pose too was conceived as vulnerable and feminine, as an expression of his transgression and his refusal to transition to maturity (Fischer, 2010, pp. 148-149).

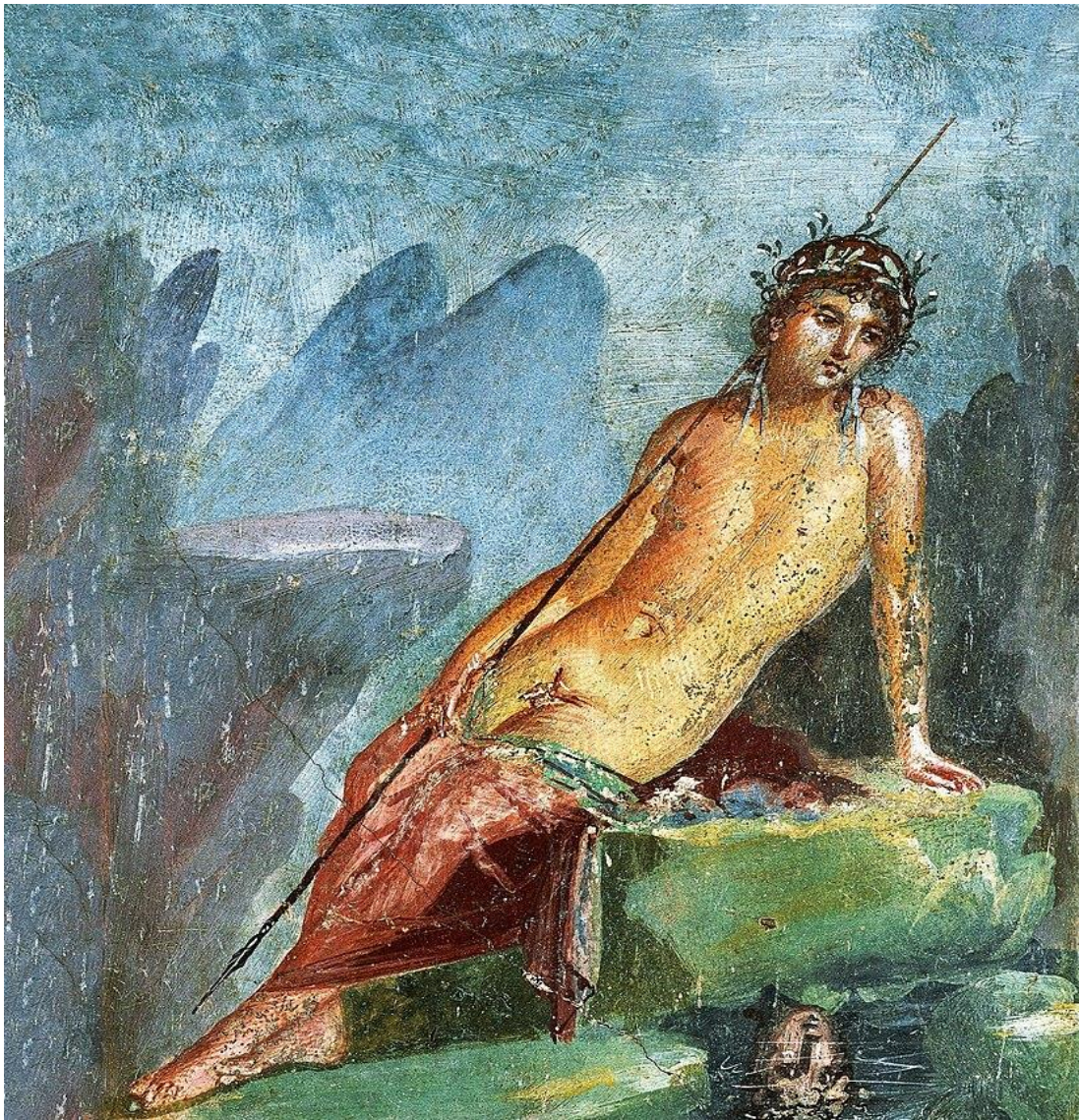


Figure 1. Narcissus, wall-painting, cubiculum i, north wall, House of Lucretius Fronto, Pompeii V.4.a, between 62-79 AD. Public Domain.

Such interpretation relies on a common judgmental perception that conceives Narcissus’s self-love as egocentric. This didactic notion derives from the accepted moral outlook intended in Antiquity to clarify the distinction between good and bad, in order to impose restrictions on human conduct and avoid deviations that could endanger human morality (Bryant, 1996). The question arises as to whether Narcissus’s self-interest is indeed simply negative, and indeed whether it should be perceived as such. Here too, as noted before in reference to ancient myths, Elsner’s words seem very appropriate: “In Antiquity, the myth of Narcissus—perhaps like all the classic myths—was possessed of a rich, suggestive, and varied polysemy” (Elsner, 2007, p. 133).

Naturalism in painting and naturalism in ekphrasis are deceptive, misleading, and subversive: “The ekphrasists’ Narcissus becomes a myth of the fallibilities of the gaze and of the subject as viewer” (Elsner, 2007, p. 148). In his discussion on Narcissus, Elsner focuses on the question of how much of viewing is in the beholder’s eye and how much the beholder imposes onto the autonomy of the viewed, given that the key theme of Narcissus’s image is the act of viewing, and states—“the desire is not in the image itself but in its beholder” (Elsner, 2007, p. 136, 138, 142). Perceiving a visual image in Roman times would thus seem to have been multifaceted, while mythology would seem to have been conceived not only from a moral point of view but also as representing symbols of nature and its divine power, and the sublime. Hence, the myth of Icarus, for instance, didactically signifying human hubris, was also conceived as symbolizing the cyclicity of the luminaries, since Icarus was worshiped as a heavenly god whose ascension and fall signified the daily orbit of the sun and the cyclicity of nature (Kilinsky, 2002, pp. 19-24).

Similarly, the image of Narcissus might be conceived from another perspective and a non-judgmental approach, and thus in the context of presenting symbols of sacred initiation.

Narcissus’s contemplative mood suggests that intense and serious expressions are reflected on the faces of the initiates and priestesses in the Mysteries, since these were occasions for contemplation and consideration (Bremmer, 2014, p. 105; Turcan, 2003, p. 138; Bowden, 2010, p. 44). All the depictions of Narcissus focus on his seclusion and isolation and the reflective mode in which he is immersed. Initiates such as Livy’s Aebutius and Apuleius’s Lucius underwent seclusion and abstinence before their initiation.<sup>7</sup>

Elsner notes the isolated appearance of Narcissus on the wall of the Casa dell’Ara Masima as a framed panel-painting, where the only image of him appears in an alcove (Elsner, 2000, p. 99). A very salient equivalent to Narcissus’s reflective mode is the solemn expression of the women participants in the ritual depicted in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Another feature in the image of Narcissus is that of the purple cloth draped around his thighs. This too suggests another motif connected with initiation, since at the end of the initiation the initiates received a purple fillet which they would bind below the abdomen. Odysseus, who was initiated, was saved from the storm at sea thanks to the initiate’s veil he tied below his abdomen. Bremmer notes that, over time, the story of Odysseus had evidently become associated with the Mysteries and that the purple fillet would have served as a kind of talisman: “With their fillets around their hips the initiated will have left the sanctuary in a happy mood” (Bremmer, 2014, p. 28, 29).

The wreath around Narcissus’s head recalls those worn by the initiates during the ritual, as can be seen on Greek vases (Durand Schnapp, 1989, pp. 53-70).<sup>8</sup> The initiates of Artemis wore garlands of stalks of wheat; the initiates of Dionysus wore garlands of ivy (Vernant, 1991, p. 212); and at the Eleusinian Mystery processions, branches of myrtle were held together by rings (Bremmer, 2014, p. 6).

The water that reflects Narcissus’s image, and which is a very prominent motif in the myth, is also a salient feature of initiation rites. Purification was one of the main acts during initiation, and was carried out with water brought from a fountain or a sacred spring. The ritual bathing was meant to consecrate the initiates and imbue them with the illusion of a sublime experience: at Eleusis, a brook that bordered on the sanctuary supplied the water; the Korybantic Mysteries consisted of ritual washing; in the Kabeiroi rituals the purifications were held with water from the sea (Bremmer, 2014, p. 40, 44, 51, 83, 94) immersion in the sea

<sup>7</sup> Livy, 39.9; Apul. *Golden Ass*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in Procession, depicted on a large krater in Ferrara, and other depictions of initiation rites.

was part of initiation rites in cults such as that of Demeter at Eleusis, and was also part of Aphrodite's worship (Havelock, 1995, pp. 23-25; Eliade, 1965, p. 131; Ovid, 1998); initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries were required to go down to the sea (Bowden, 2010, p. 33); and the initiation that the protagonist in Apuleius's "Golden Ass" underwent was held at the beach (Apuleius, 1994). Presumably, the initiation was preceded by a bath, given the omnipresence of baths in the Mysteries and the mention of a "holy bath" in an inscription from a Dionysian sanctuary in Halicarnassus (Bremmer, 2014, p. 104). The secluded location in the wilderness of the scene suggests the initiate's seclusion prior to the sacred activity held behind closed doors (Bowden, 2010, p. 30), since the Mysteries were held in nature and occasionally in open-air sites constructed like a grotto (Bremmer, 2014, p. 103; Bowden, 2010, p. 122; Euripides, 1960, pp. 32-38). Elsner notes that Narcissus's setting is a sacred one with allusions to Bacchic rites (Elsner, 2007, p. 144); and Valladares notes that the scene in Ovid takes place in a sylvan setting (Valladares, 2011, p. 381). Nature is indeed a common dominant feature in both Narcissus's myth and the Mysteries. Narcissus's metamorphoses, as told by most of the sources, consisted in being reborn as a flower. After this rebirth he is blessed with love and a widespread beauty in a cycle that reflects the periodicity that governs the universe. In the Narcissus myth told by Ovid there are two allusions to a process of *catharsis* by Narcissus: the first is embedded in the blind seer Tiresias's answer to the nymph Liriope's question—whether her son will reach old age. The answer is: "If he but fails to recognize himself..." This answer references the climax of the initiation rites, to be discussed below. The other allusion appears at the end of the myth, with Narcissus's metamorphosis into a small yellow flower with shiny white petals (Ovid, 1993). Calistratus's story too ends, like that of Ovid, with the blooming of a spring flower in the meadow, and focuses on the process of metamorphosis;<sup>9</sup> while Philostratus's focus on the story emphasizes the need to change one's position in order to attain maturity.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the sacred initiations, after the seclusion and the purification, the *mystes*, who is "he who closes the eyes" was considered as reborn, and became *epoptes*—"he who sees" (Bowden, 2010, p. 44). In the initiation Mystery, at this very moment a miracle was believed to happen: a ear of wheat sprouted and matured with supernatural suddenness in the Mysteries of Demeter, while a vine grew within a few hours in the Dionysian cult. Death and rebirth were thus the main features of the initiation, suggesting transcendence over the human condition (Bremmer, 2014, p. 15; Eliade, 1965, p. 111). This is significantly manifested in the initiation mysteries of Isis, which included a "voluntary death" (*ad instar voluntariae mortis*) and the initiate "approached the realm of death" to obtain his "spiritual birthday" (*natalem sacrum*). The sacred mystical death was followed by a new sacred spiritual birth: the initiate attained another mode of being and became one with the gods and eternity (Eliade, 1965, pp. 112-113). Similarly, Narcissus wished to be merged with the beautiful reflection he had seen in the pool, and his merging generated his metamorphosis and his rebirth as a flower.

A very prominent equivalence in the philosophical realm is the yearning to merge with the divine, described poetically in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Before the soul was incarnated in a corporeal body she dwelt amongst the divinities and witnessed their sublime beauty. When the soul then entered the physical world and was incarnated, she forgot those glorious sights. However, whenever she finds beauty in another being she feels a dim memory of the sights that she had once seen, and this fills her with great emotion and a passionate love for that being. This love stems from the longing for divine beauty and the wish to merge with it (Hadot, 2002, p.

<sup>9</sup> Calistratus, *Descriptions*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Philostr. *Imag.* 1.23.



47).<sup>11</sup> *Eros* was considered a mediator between the corporeal and the divine and the embodiment of the yearning for eternity.<sup>12</sup> The longing to return to the divine realm, which is the origin of the soul, is described by Plotinus (as also by Plato in *Phaedo* 67e). Accordingly, in order to merge with the sublime beauty, the soul has first to be purified and become incorporeal by cultivating “internal sight”. Corporeal beauty is only a reflection of the sublime beauty, and only the soul that has become beautiful herself is able to discern the sublime good and beauty.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, *Eros* is portrayed in some Pompeiian wall paintings as a mediator between Narcissus and Echo, pouring water into the pool.<sup>14</sup> From a Platonic and Neoplatonic viewpoint *Eros* is the mediator between Narcissus and the sublime with which he is yearning to merge. *Eros* is very active in these depictions, and in the painting from the house of Fabius Rufus he is engaged with preparing the sacred bath for the purification. Narcissus himself appears, as in the house of Lucretius Fronto, with all the characteristics of a *mystes* delineated above: the contemplative mood, the water pool for immersion, the purple cloth, and the wreath. Consecration and the illusion of merging with the divine were, apparently, highly desired in Antiquity; and the Mysteries, which were varied—Eleusinian, Samothracian, Orphic-Bacchic, and Korybantes (Bowden, 2010; Bremmer, 2014),<sup>15</sup> promised at least an illusion of such merging. Narcissus’s image appears to be a kind of archetype of the Mystery as a general and dominant imbued concept.

### Endymion the *Entheos*

The myth of Endymion tells the story of a lovely youth with whom Selene the goddess of the moon has fallen in love. He was granted eternal sleep by Zeus, thus remaining deathless and ageless.<sup>16</sup> The wall painting from Herculaneum (Figure 2) portrays Endymion asleep in a desolate landscape (McNally, 1985).<sup>17</sup> His appearance resembles that of Narcissus—a naked, delicate, and passive youth with a cloak wrapped around his thighs and a spear in his hand. The goddess Selene, with a halo around her head, adorned and embellished in a Venus-like form, approaches him gently on tiptoe, with *Eros* grasping her hand and leading her towards the sleeping youth. The atmosphere is dreamlike and soft, as of a twilight zone. The composition is oblique, with a hidden line stretching between Selene and Endymion. This composition conveys the meaning imbued within this portrayal—that of the human yearning to merge with the divine.

The depiction of Endymion’s eternal sleep as portrayed in the wall painting from Herculaneum seems too to contain signs of initiation. First, the environment in which the event occurs appears isolated, mysterious, and mostly unfamiliar, as typical of an initiation, in conformity with the secrecy of cults. Each of the three figures in the wall painting is connected with initiation. Endymion, as an initiate and like Narcissus, wears a purple cloth draped around his thighs. He is totally passive, even dormant, and out of doors, a significant sign of initiation (McNally, 1985, p. 153).

<sup>11</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 251; *Pl. Symp.* 203a.

<sup>12</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 252; *Pl. Symp.* 204-208; Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.5.

<sup>13</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.8, 1.6.9.

<sup>14</sup> Narcissus from the House of Fabius Rufus, Pompeii, wall painting, mid-1st century AD; Narcissus, Pompeii, wall painting, mid-1st century AD, in Museo Archeologico, Napoli, LIMC VI. 2, Figure 48.

<sup>15</sup> For the specific aim of every kind of Mystery cult see: Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*; Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries*.

<sup>16</sup> Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.7.5-6; Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4. 54-60.

<sup>17</sup> Selene, *Eros* and Endymion, wall-painting from Herculaneum mid-1st century AD, Naples, Museo Nazionale, Inv. 9246. LIMC III. 2, Figure 19; Sheila McNally, “Ariadne and Others: Images of Sleep in Greek and Early Roman Art.” *Classical Antiquity* 4 (1985): Fig. 29. The myth of Endymion is told by Apollodorus. See: Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.7.5-6.





Figure 2. Selene, Eros and Endymion, wall-painting from Herculaneum mid-1st century AD, Naples, Museo Nazionale, Inv. 9246. Public Domain.

Helen Askitopoulou indicates that sleep was practiced as part of the ritual in the sanctuaries of the god Asclepius (Askitopoulou, 2015, p. 70, 72).<sup>18</sup> After their preparation with purifying baths and sacrifices to the god, the initiates would spend the night in the god's precinct or temple, and they "slept" or "were in a strange state between sleep and waking", waiting for the revelation of the god (Askitopoulou, 2015, p. 70). Sleep was considered a state that alters the ordinary boundaries of thought and consciousness, isolates and connects with nature and the divine (McNally, 1985, p. 153). As a state of altered consciousness, dreaming was considered by Plato as the activity of a Muse, which is the practice of philosophers. Philosophy, thus, offers a gradual process for the liberation of the soul from its corporeal limits.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Paus. 2.10.2.

<sup>19</sup> Pl. *Phd.* 61, 63-68.

In mythology, Hypnos and Thanatos are brothers and their realm is the Underworld, as told by Homer and Hesiod.<sup>20</sup> Sleep was considered a semblance of a temporary death and as a way of reaching a separate kind of immortality (Askitopoulou, 2015, p. 70).<sup>21</sup> Sheila McNally notes that no ancient artist depicted the journey to the next world, since this was clearly secret (McNally, 1985, p. 169). Instead, the representation of a myth could be used as a metaphor for this journey. In her analysis of a *thiasos* scene on a bronze crater, McNally raises the possibility that the vase refers to initiation and salvation, showing sleep both as an outcome of ritual and as death (McNally, 1985, p. 168). Endymion's eternal sleep was conceived as an idiosyncratic way of defeating death, human aging, and decay (Askitopoulou, 2015, p. 71).

Plutarch, who had been initiated into the Dionysiac Mysteries, speaks of the initiate as wandering astray in the darkness before entering into some wonderful light, where meadows greet the sanctified (McNally, 1985, p. 186; Bowden, 2010, p. 40).<sup>22</sup> The great light that is revealed to the initiate is manifested in the image of Selene, who is shining and stepping lightly towards Endymion. Her lower body is enveloped in a veil while her upper body is bare, in the manner of Aphrodite, and her head is adorned with a crown and a halo. Selene's appearance suggests a manifestation of the beauty of the Platonic sublime *ideas* that dwell in heaven. The soul, which originated in the *ideas*, constantly yearns to return to its origin.<sup>23</sup> The divine light that attracts the soul is referred to by Plotinus, the 3rd century-CE Neoplatonist, who explicitly expresses the notion of the sublime in Antiquity:

When anyone, therefore, sees this light, then truly he is also moved to the Forms, and longs for the light which plays upon them and delights in it, just as with the bodies here below our desire is not for the underlying material things but for the beauty imaged upon them. For each is what it is by itself; but it becomes desirable when the Good colors it, giving a kind of grace to them and passionate love to the desires. Then the soul, receiving into itself an outflow from thence, is moved and dances wildly and is all stung with longing and becomes love. Before this it is not moved even towards Intellect, for all its beauty; the beauty of Intellect is inactive till it catches a light from the Good, and the soul by itself "falls flat on its back" and is completely inactive and, though Intellect is present, is unenthusiastic about it. But when a kind of warmth from thence comes upon it, it gains strength and wakes and is truly winged; and though it is moved with passion for that which lies close by it, yet all the same it rises higher, to something greater which it seems to remember. And as long as there is anything higher than that which is present to it, it naturally goes on upwards, lifted by the giver of its love.<sup>24</sup>

The return of the soul to the divine realm and its merging with the divine is conditional upon its purification from corporeality.<sup>25</sup> Purification and merging with the divine are attained by means of the mysterious ecstasy.<sup>26</sup>

Eros, who hovers between Endymion and the goddess, is the mediator that connects between the soul and the divine, as defined by McNally: "In Greco-Roman art, wings generally mark figures who mediate between gods and human beings, figures who bring change, sometimes conveying decisions and messages, sometimes assisting passage into the next world" (McNally, 1985, p. 185).

<sup>20</sup> Hom. *Il.* 14.231, 16.672; Hes. *Theog.* 211.

<sup>21</sup> Askitopoulou refers to Plutarch. See: Plut. *Mor. De anima* frg. 178.

<sup>22</sup> Plut. *Mor. Consolatio ad uxorem* frg. 611E; Plut. *Mor. De anima* frg. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 251; Pl. *Phd.* 72-77; Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6, 8; Iambl. *Vita Pythagorae* 18. 2; Iambl. *Myst.* x. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.7, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.5, 6; 6.7, 34-35; 6.9, 7.

Eros, as defined by Plotinus, is: “[...] to be the ‘guardian of beautiful boys’ and mover of the souls towards the beauty of the higher world [...]”.<sup>27</sup>

### **Achilles the *Mystes***

The myth of Achilles at Skyros tells the story of Achilles being hidden at the court of King Lycomedes, disguised as a girl. Achilles’s secret is then revealed by Odysseus’s trumpets, which trigger the disguised hero into revealing his true identity.<sup>28</sup> The meaning of the word “hidden” becomes very concrete in light of the myth.

The release of Achilles from the *gynaeceum* at Skyros is portrayed as a very dramatic event in two wall paintings from Pompeii: one from the House of the Dioscuri (Figure 3), and the other from Domus Uboni (De Carolis, 2001, p. 73; Lessing & Varone, 1996, p. 146; Ling, 1991).<sup>29</sup> Both depictions are portrayed as noisy events characterized by a turbulent and dynamic composition aimed at expressing the dramatic moment of the metamorphosis of Achilles from a disguised maiden to a boy. In both portrayals Achilles’s pale skin is accentuated against the tanned skin of his captors, as a strong dichotomy between the state of immaturity and that of maturity. The hero is also wrapped in soft feminine clothing in contrast to the masculine attire of his captors. Both depictions show a nude girl in juxtaposition to Achilles, indicating his liminal state. This liminality is also accentuated in both portrayals by the chiasmic composition based on strong hidden oblique lines that merge in the image of Achilles.

Several features of certain acts have been noted as connected with initiation: the use of deception, refusal of normal sexuality, lack of any normal political role in a community, and the use of the bow and hunting (Dodd, 2003, p. 74). At least some of these features seem to be manifested in Achilles’s images in Pompeii. As noted by Jeniffer F. Trimble, the House of the Dioscuri had a social meaning in Antiquity, for elite Roman houses were designed to display their owner’s social status. Likewise, in their composition, placement, and visual interaction, the paintings in the House of the Dioscuri might have contributed to articulating and defining the social rituals that took place within the house. Trimble also notes that Odysseus’s staff points to the emblem on the shield at the center of the painting. This has been badly preserved but one can still discern the boy Achilles with the centaur Chiron who had tutored him in the arts of hunting and war (Trimble, 2002, p. 226, 228, 233). Chiron, thus, has initiated Achilles, and Trimble’s contention seems to support the perception of the depiction under discussion as a metaphor of initiation.

<sup>27</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 3.5.2; Plotinus actually refers to Plato: *Pl. Phdr.* 265c 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.8.

<sup>29</sup> Achilles on Skyros, wall-painting, House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii, third quarter of the first century AD, in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Inv. 9110. Public Domain, see: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Achille\\_a\\_Sciro2.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Achille_a_Sciro2.JPG) published on 13 November 2010; Achilles on Skyros, wall-painting, Domus Uboni, Pompeii, second quarter of the first century AD, in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Inv. 116085.





Figure 3. Achilles at Skyros, House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii, third quarter of the first century AD, in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (inv. Nr. 9110). Public Domain.

Achilles's seclusion in the *gynaeceum* in itself suggests a reflection of the Spartan initiation discipline of concealment, the *krypteia*, mentioned in connection to Narcissus, the custom of secluding Lacedemonian youth in the mountains, where they had to live for one year in isolation (Elsner, 1996; 2000; 2007; Valladares, 2011; Platt, 2002; Schnapp, 1989). By entering the *gynaeceum*, Odysseus delivers Achilles anew, restoring him

to his original manly identity, and thus initiating him. This encounter between the bearded Odysseus and the pale and smooth-faced Achilles metaphorically reflects the normative initiation practices that were accepted in Antiquity: the relationship between the beloved (*eromenos*) and the lover (*erastes*) (Bryant, 1996, pp. 107-108; Hubbard, 1990; Hubbard, 2003).<sup>30</sup> Achilles's soft and feminine appearance is crucial to the interpretation of those scenes as a manifestation of social initiation in relation to puberty rites, as well as of the sacred initiation.

Achilles appears in both depictions in the guise of a girl, his body enfolded in a transparent and delicate fabric. This appearance emphasizes the hero's crucial gender transition and restored identity, from feminine to masculine, and from youth to manhood, and evokes practices of transvestitism that symbolized the moment of becoming a man (Loraux, 1990, p. 34). These practices were associated with puberty rites such as the *Oschophoria* festival, during which boys were dressed as girls. The *Oschophoria* was connected to the myth of the return of Theseus from Crete after killing the Minotaur, which can be understood metaphorically as symbolising a rite of puberty (Vidal-Naquet, 1986; Molholt, 2001). The first event of the festival was a procession (*parapompe*) from Athens to the shrine of Athena Skiras at Phaleron. The names Skiras, Skiros, and Skiron were generally given to outlying frontier areas, and this alludes to liminality, which is dominant in the Achilles at Skyros myth. The procession to the shrine of Athena Skira was composed of boys (*paides*) led by two boys disguised as girls carrying the vine shoots with grape clusters (*oschoi*) (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, p. 115). Transvestitism was also part of Theseus's journey to Crete, according to Plutarch, who recounts that among the seven maidens whom Theseus took with him there were two boys disguised as girls (Perrin, 2018). The reversals in Achilles's dramatic scene can be deciphered in relation to Vidal-Naquet's approach (Dodd, 2003, p. 72). Thus, Achilles is not a girl, but he is not yet an *ephebe*, he is in a liminal state. Vidal-Naquet notes that in archaic Greek society dressing up as a woman, as in the procession at the *Oschophoria*, was a means of dramatizing the fact that a young man had reached the age of virility, and refers to the myth of Achilles at Skyros, who is disguised as a girl but unable to control himself at the sight of a weapon (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, p. 116). He further emphasizes that it is actually not the kind of disguise that is important but, rather, the oppositions or contrasts that it underscores. Those oppositions were mostly between a boy and a girl, and between naked and armed (Vidal-Naquet, 1986, pp. 116-117), and thus connected with a process of initiation. Oppositions are manifested in both depictions from Pompeii by the chiasmic composition, which is of the Classical type known as the "strife motive" (Robertson, 1981, p. 83, 95; Boardman, 1985).<sup>31</sup> This serves to express the dramatic and intense moment of the transition, which is dynamic, swift, and even violent, almost that of abduction. The composition offers an iconographical motif imbued with features of both the secular-social initiation and the sacred.

The violent aspect is manifested particularly in the way by which Achilles is grasped forcefully by Odysseus and Diomedes and dragged out of the *gynaecium*. Eliade notes that certain moments in the story of Achilles can be interpreted as initiation ordeals: he was brought up by the centaurs, that is, he was initiated in

<sup>30</sup> Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure*, pp. 107-108. On Homoeroticism in Antiquity see: Thomas K. Hubbard, ed., *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York 1990); Hubbard, Thomas K., ed., *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Robertson, *A Shorter History of Greek Art*, 83, 95. The most remarkable works featuring the "strife motif" composition are: the struggle between Heracles and the Cretan Bull in Olympia, and on the west gable of the Parthenon, with the description of the struggle between Athena and Poseidon for the land of Attica, see: John Boardman, *Greek Sculpture: the Classical Period* (London 1985), Figs. 23.4, 77.



the wild by masters of animal disguise; and he passed through fire and water, which are classic initiation ordeals (Eliade, 1965, p. 109). Violence, asceticism, and mortification were occasionally part of transition rites, such as the old Spartan cult of Artemis Orthia that was famous for its ritual flagellation (*diamastigosis*) at the altar (Bonnechere, 1993, pp. 11-22; Bowden, 2010, p. 16, 45; Elsner, 2007, p. 18, 32).<sup>32</sup> Philostratus attests to the altar of the goddess being awash with blood;<sup>33</sup> and Cicero noted that during the Roman period the ritual became a blood spectacle.<sup>34</sup> This leads us to the other aspect of initiation, which is no less apparent in those depictions: that of the sacred. Violence as part of a ritual is dominant in the monumental frescoes in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, where a woman initiate is shown stretched out across the knees of a maenad, while a demonic figure with outstretched wings lashes her with a whip. This lashing may symbolize the path of purification towards sanctification and a merging with the divinity, as well as the suffering in pursuit of fertility embodied in ritual flagellation during the Lupercalia, an ancient purification rite for the city of Rome (Gazda, 2000; Fierz-David, 1988; Henderson, 1996; Ling, 1991; Maiuri, 1953; Clarke, 2003).<sup>35</sup> A very particular iconographic equivalent between the fresco of the Villa of the Mysteries and that of Achilles from the Dioscuri House is that of the image of the excited maiden in the background of the wall painting, whose body is enveloped in a large flowing veil, and particularly reminiscent of the panicking woman, who is an initiate in the Dionysian rite undergoing *katabasis* in the Villa of the Mysteries, in front of the unveiling of the mystic content of the *liknon*. Unveiling was a symbolic practice in initiation rites, performed by tearing or laying aside clothing as a sign of change (Turner, 1969, p. 108). Another, related, idea was that of the body as a garment for the soul, as allegorized by Plotinus.<sup>36</sup>

The sacred rituals were comprised of a series of acts of purification that the initiates underwent in order to achieve an illusion of merging with the divine and a promise of eternal life after death. The mystical unification with the divine is expressed by Plotinus as the most desired wish and the supreme goal of the initiates in Antiquity. The origin of the soul is the divinity, “the One” (*to Hen*), for whom the soul permanently yearns but is unable to reach except upon entering a temporary state of trance.<sup>37</sup> A mortal is able to experience the divine only at moments of ecstasy and through a mysterious contact. Socrates determined that insanity, when gifted by the gods, is not a bad thing at all:

But in reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. [...] mania, when it comes by gift of the gods, is a noble thing [...] madness has entered in and by oracular power has found a way of release for those in need, taking refuge in prayers and the service of the gods, and so, by purifications and sacred rites, he who has this madness is made safe for the present and the after time, and for him who is rightly possessed of madness a release from present ills is found.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Paus. III 16, 9-10;.

<sup>33</sup> Philostr. V A. VI, 20, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Cic. *Tusculan Disputations*, II.34.

<sup>35</sup> On the Villa of the Mysteries see: Elaine K. Gazda, ed., *The Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii: ancient ritual, modern muse* (Ann Arbor 2000); Linda Fierz-David, *Women's Dionysian Initiation: The Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii* (Dallas 1988); John Henderson, “Footnote: Representations in the Villa of the Mysteries,” in *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, ed. Jas Elsner (Cambridge, MA 1996), 235-276; Roger Ling, *Roman painting* (Cambridge, MA 1991), 101-104; Amadeo Maiuri, *Roman painting* (Geneva 1953), 50-63; John R. Clarke, *Roman sex, 100 B.C.-250 A.D.* (New York 2003), 47-56; on the Lupercalia see: Ov. *Fast.* 2.381-452.

<sup>36</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.6.7.

<sup>37</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.11, 5.8. 11; Jas Elsner, 1995, 91-97.

<sup>38</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 244-245.

According to Plotinus, it is only through an ecstatic experience that the soul can become one with the god: “[...] then he hastens inward and has everything, and leaves perception behind in his fear of being different, and is one in that higher world; and if he wants to see by being different, he puts himself outside.”<sup>39</sup>

Participation in the Mysteries and becoming *mystai* was possible only for those who had undergone a purification rite and as a result had become initiates—*teletes* (Bianchi, 1976; Meyer, 1987; Burkert, 1987; Cole, 2003; Bowden, 2010).<sup>40</sup>

A scene of sacred initiation can be seen on Roman sarcophagi from Naples and from Baltimore (Figure 4) (Varone, 2000, p. 94; Kerenyi, 1996),<sup>41</sup> where a *mystes* is being led and supported during a Dionysian mystery rite. Visually speaking, Achilles’s passivity and soft appearance previously interpreted as symbolizing the image of a youthful initiate in a puberty rite can now be perceived as equivalent to the image of the passive initiate, or the *mystes* in the Dionysian mysteries, in relation to the intense and mighty power that imposes the transition upon them. The visual equivalence is supported by the mythical, for, just as the initiates in the Dionysian mysteries believed they would attain eternal life after death, Achilles himself attained immortality, manifested in his *kleos*; while the act of his immersion in fire by his mother Thetis symbolizes purification and the ordeal that initiates underwent (Dacosta, 1991, p. 116). In addition, the previously noted feminine aspect of Achilles related to disguising boys as girls during puberty rites, coincides with Platonic texts that conceive the human soul that yearns for its unification with the divine as feminine.<sup>42</sup> Perceiving the feminine aspect of Achilles in relation to the sacred aspect of the scene thus becomes possible.

In summary, the Achilles at Skyros scene portrayed in the House of the Dioscuri and the House of Domus Ubioni can primarily be interpreted as symbolizing the social practices of puberty rites, manifested by features such as the feminine disguise of the hero and the intense act of dragging him out of the *gynaecium*. However, employing a different reading of the same features suggests rather that it is the sacred initiation that is encapsulated in this scene: the intense and violent act of dragging the hero is equated to the violence entailed in sacred rituals; there is an iconographical equivalence with images of initiates or *mystai* on Roman sarcophagi; the excited maiden in the background constitutes an iconographical image equivalent to the panicking initiate in the Villa of the Mysteries; the unveiling of the *liknon* is equated to the unveiling of Achilles, and the body as a garment of the soul by Plotinus; and the hero’s soft and feminine appearance are in equivalence to the Platonic soft and feminine soul. All these equivalences offer grounds for perceiving the scene of Achilles at Skyros as a metaphor of sacred initiation.

<sup>39</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.8.11. See also: Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.9.4, 6.7.34-35, 6.9.9-11.

<sup>40</sup> On the Dionysian Mysteries, see: Bianchi, *The Greek Mysteries*, 3-7, 13-15; Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries*, 63-65; Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 12, 18-24; Susan G. Cole, “Landscapes of Dionysus and Elysian Fields,” in *Greek Mysteries—The Archeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, ed. Michael B. Cosmopoulos (London 2003), 93-194, 197-199, 205; Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 105-136.

<sup>41</sup> Bacchanal scene, The Sarcophagus from Naples, Second half of 2nd century A.D., marble. Farnese Collection, Archeological Museum, Naples, Inv. 27710. See: Antonio Varone, *Eroticism in Pompeii* (Rome 2000), 94; *Bacchanal scene*, The Sarcophagus from Baltimore, 2nd century A.D., marble. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. See: Kerenyi, Karl, *Dionysus, Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* {Princeton 1996 (1976)}, Fig. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 251.



Figure 4. Bacchanal scene, a Roman sarcophagus, 2nd century A.D., marble, in Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

### Heracles the *Telete*

Heracles appears in a Dionysian context in mosaics throughout the Roman world. A very prominent scene is that known as the “Drinking Contest between Dionysus and Heracles”. This scene appears in the mosaics from the Atrium House; the House of the Drinking Contest in Antioch (Figure 5); and the mosaic from the Dionysian villa at Sepphoris (Talgam & Weiss, 2004).<sup>43</sup> There is no known source telling of a drinking contest between Dionysus and Heracles, except for Nonnus’s recounting of a visit by the god in the Temple of Heracles in Tyre. The two protagonists are described as enjoying a banquet with nectar and ambrosia, with no mention of a contest or rivalry.<sup>44</sup>

Heracles is shown inebriated in mosaics that represent the Dionysiac procession, such as that from Sheikh Zouede and that from Lyon (to be discussed later); and he also features in the Dionysian *thiasos* in mosaics such as those from Sousse and from Torre de Palma (Ovadia, De Silva, & Mucznik, 1991; Lancha, 1990; 2002; Dunbabin, 1971; 1978; Blanchard-Lemee, 1996; Lopez, 1999; Lancha, 2002).<sup>45</sup> The accepted commentary to date has interpreted the drunkenness of Heracles in those mosaics negatively as a sign of human frailty and lack of restraint, seeing the hero as degraded by inebriation, as set against the divine nature and superiority of the god by means of his reason (*sophrosyne*) and self-control (*enkrateia*). Thus, Heracles’s intoxication was conceived as a contrast to Dionysus’s divine nature with the character of the “fallen” human hero (Talgam, 2014; Talgam & Weiss, 2004; Ovadia & Turnheim, 1997; Ovadia, n.d.; Foucher, 2000; Kondoleon, 2000; Dunbabin, 2003);<sup>46</sup> and the banquet as a presentation of the right and wrong uses of wine, as appropriate in a *triclinium* (Dunbabin, 2008, p. 197). However, the choice of Dionysus for demonstrating the concept of *sophrosyne* would seem strange. If the intention was to represent the concept of moderation, Apollo would have

<sup>43</sup> Dionysus and Herakles, a mosaic from the Atrium House, Antioch, 2nd century AD, in Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. See: <https://worchester.emuseum.com/objects/16119/drinking-contest-of-herakles-and-dionysos>; Dionysus and Herakles, a mosaic pavement from the House of the Drinking Contest from Antioch, early 3rd century A.D., in Princeton University Art Museum. See: <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/29551>; the mosaic from the Dionysian villa at Sepphoris, See: Rina Talgam and Zeev Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysus at Sepphoris* (Jerusalem 2004), CL. I, B. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dionysus\\_Mosaic\\_depicting\\_scenes\\_from\\_the\\_life\\_of\\_Dionysus,\\_Sepphoris,\\_Israel\\_\(15630884375\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dionysus_Mosaic_depicting_scenes_from_the_life_of_Dionysus,_Sepphoris,_Israel_(15630884375).jpg)

<sup>44</sup> Nonnus, *Dion.* trans. William Henry Denham Rouse, vol. VI, pp. 298-580, XL.

<sup>45</sup> The floors from Spain: Guadalupe Monteagudo Lopez, “The Triumph of Dionysus in Two Mosaics in Spain”, *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 4 (1999), 35-60; and the floor from Torre de Palma: Janine Lancha, *La Mosaïque des Muses Torre de Palma* (Conimbriga, PT 2002), 31-37.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Dunbabin deciphered those scenes as a reflection of social customs of the time. See: Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman banquet: images of conviviality* (Cambridge 2003), 8.

been much more suitable than Dionysus for this purpose. It should be noted that a drinking contest between the god and the hero is not told in any written source. Rather, as mentioned before, the poem *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus recounts a visit by the god in the Temple of Heracles in Tyre. Dionysus requests the hero's friendship and greets him with pleasant words and with esteem, such as: "*Lord of fire, prince of the universe*" and *astrochiton*, and Heracles hosts him graciously. They enjoy a banquet with nectar and ambrosia, riddles and parables. The god even presents the hero with a golden drinking goblet.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 5. Dionysus and Heracles, a mosaic pavement from the House of the Drinking Contest from Antioch, early 3rd century A.D., in Princeton University Art Museum Gift of the Committee for the Excavation of Antioch to Princeton University. Public Domain.

<sup>47</sup> Nonnus, *Dion.* trans. William Henry Denham Rouse, vol. VI, pp. 298-580, XL.



The contention put forth by Dunbabin, namely that the scenes of Heracles and Dionysus cannot be perceived in a religious context since they are found in rooms used for reception, i.e. in a domestic context and thus emptied of religious significance (Dunbabin, 2008, p. 193), cannot be applied since the gods in Antiquity were considered omnipresent, and were not portrayed necessarily in a religious context. Actually, religion in Antiquity never had a strict division between the sacred and the profane. Religion was completely embedded in public and private life, so that no sphere of life lacked a religious aspect, and religion was strongly tied up with social and political conditions (Bremmer, 1994; Warrior, 2006; Elsner, 2007). Indeed, the very fact that the personalities portrayed in the mosaic belong to the divine realm is religious by itself. Besides, it would seem unlikely that the host wished to introduce his guests to the right and wrong uses of wine in order to educate them to moderation, since the Roman ambiance was totally different, as reflected in phrases such as *Vomunt ut edant, edunt ut vomant* (Seneca, *Consulatio ad Helviam* 10.3), and as attested by Petronius's *Satyricon* (Carcopino, 1956; Kiefer, 1941).<sup>48</sup> In view of the famous legendary host Trimalchio's tremendous fear of death and his proclivity for pleasures (Arrowsmith, 1966), it is more likely that the owner of the house at Sepphoris wished to portray the opportunities to gain immortality after life to his guests and to encourage the pleasure of drinking wine rather than to educate them to moderation in the triclinium.

Even the assumption that the owner of the villa was a pagan devotee of the god, or a Jew belonging to Sepphoris's urban aristocracy, as suggested,<sup>49</sup> does not contradict a multifaceted observation. This multifaceted observation might be all the more relevant in light of the secrecy of the Mysteries.

Hence, the argument presented here is that the appearance of Heracles in a Dionysian context represents him as an initiate in the Dionysian Mysteries as part of his *Apotheosis* after his corporeal life (Freyne, 2004, pp. 61-62).<sup>50</sup> Support for this claim lies in both iconographical and textual sources, with the previous interpretations of the Narcissus, Endymion, and Achilles scenes serving to strengthen this argument. As in the case of Narcissus, the approach here is a positive rather than a negative one regarding the hero, from the premise that mythological protagonists were not necessarily judged negatively in Antiquity (Kilinsky, 2002); but, rather, that their representations could also indirectly embody the secrecy of the Mysteries. This might be connected to Levi-Strauss's contention, according to which, that which seems to be different to western culture and thus uncomprehensible, is perceived as savage, barbaric, and unrestrained (Levi-Strauss, 2006, p. 38). Levi-Strauss criticizes the inclination to discard what seems to be foreign and to judge ancient civilizations from a contemporary point of view that adopts only what is associated with its own values and perceptions (Levi-Strauss, 2006).

It is important to note that Heracles was considered in Antiquity as divine. Furthermore, Dionysus himself was depicted intoxicated in representations such those in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii and the House of Dionysus at Antioch (Maiuri, 1953; Levi, 1971).<sup>51</sup> As for the status of Heracles, he was a highly venerated

<sup>48</sup> On promiscuity in ancient Rome see: Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (Harmondsworth, UK 1956); Otto Kiefer, *Sexual Life in Ancient Rome* (London 1941).

<sup>49</sup> Talgam and Weiss disagree about this issue. See: Talgam and Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysus at Sepphoris*, 128-131.

<sup>50</sup> This view was discerned also by Sean Freyne, who examines the historical context of the Dionysian mosaic at Sepphoris. See: Sen Freyne, "Dionysos and Herakles in Galilee: The Sepphoris mosaic in context", in *Religion and Society in Roman Palestine: Old Questions, New Approaches*, ed. Douglas R. Edwards (New York; London 2004), 61-62.

<sup>51</sup> Dionysus, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, early-mid first century AD, See: Maiuri, *Roman Painting*, 50-63; Dionysus inebriated, House of Dionysus at Antioch, 4th century AD, in Antakya Museum, Antakya, Turkey, see: Doro Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Rome 1971), pl. VIIb.



divinity in late Roman times, next only to Dionysus, and was conceived as godlike by the ancient authors (Holt, 1989; Nock, 1944; Bowersock, 1990). Pindar called him *heros theos* (Pindar, 1997), and Diodorus considered him as both human and godlike (Elsner, 2007, p. 39).<sup>52</sup> Jean-Louis Durand and Alain Schnapp's somewhat joking comment is relevant here: "It is imperative to get rid of Heracles; he must be divinized" (Durand & Schnapp, 1989, p. 58).

The Dionysian *thiasos* and ritual objects such as garlands, the *liknon*, tripods, baskets of grapes, and sacrificial animals, symbolizing the liberation of the soul and the happiness caused by the Dionysian Mysteries, fill the mosaic from Sepphoris around the main emblem, showing Heracles and Dionysus banqueting (Talgam, 2014; Talgam & Weiss, 2004; Nilsson, 1975; Kerenyi, 1996; Otto, 1965).<sup>53</sup> My contention is that Heracles's drinking is not inferior to that of Dionysus, and is connected with the overall theme of the Dionysian Mysteries presented in this mosaic, since, as Elsner puts it: "It is important that the vision of the god be seen as a culmination of a ritual process" (Elsner, 2007, p. 23). A highly crucial support for perceiving Heracles as a Dionysian devotee is offered by the inscription *telete*, meaning "initiation", in the mosaic from Sheikh Zouede (Ovadia, 1991).<sup>54</sup> True, some scholars do not consider this inscription as an indication of initiation and Dionysian Mysteries. Talgam has contended that this term acquired a more general and neutral meaning, or that it continued to exist alongside the iconography of initiation. However, she concludes that this does not imply that the cultic interest remained (Talgam, 2014). Dunbabin contends that the inscriptions are mostly concerned with administrative matters, and it is not their purpose to inform the reader about the liturgy of the cult or its practices. She suggests that this inscription indicates a general characteristic of Dionysiac revelry and that the specifically cultic element is obscured (Dunbabin, 2008). Nonetheless, the very use of this word is meaningful; and, moreover, it is located in prominent proximity to the overall situation that seems to represent the initiation of Heracles into the Dionysian Mysteries. The apprehension of the meaning of the inscription *telete* thus naturally seems to derive from its wide context, and should not be detached from it. Consequently, this inscription, alongside the presence of the Dionysian retinue during a *thiasos*, alludes to the hero being initiated during a Dionysian cultic ecstasy, or a *pandemonium*, and encountering the god face to face, as indeed appears in the panel (Bowden, 2010; Otto, 1965). The atmosphere of *oreibasia* created by the Dionysian retinue around Heracles was intended to free the mind in order to achieve the main goal of the initiation: the illusion of merging with the divinity—*enthousiasmos*. Bremmer notes that: "As the prestige of the Mysteries grew, more mythological heroes were said to have been initiated, and in due time all of the Argonauts, including Heracles, Jason, Kadmos, Orpheus and the Dioskouroi, became Samothracian initiates". Bremmer notes too that Heracles had crowned himself with twigs of white poplar after his victory over Cerberus, as a Bacchic initiate (Bremmer, 2014); while Nicole Loraux states that the Dionysian banquet with Heracles depicted on Attic pottery represents his transition to immortality (Loraux, 1990, p. 38). In a volute krater from Bari, the upper panel depicts Heracles in a chariot driven by Athena and Nike, while the lower panel depicts him at a banquet with

<sup>52</sup> Diod. Sic. IV 38.4-39.1.

<sup>53</sup> See analysis in: Talgam, *Mosaics of Faith*, 27-36; Talgam and Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysus at Sepphoris*, 57-85, 125-126. On the mystery symbols, such as the *liknon*, *cista mystica*, *arcane*, *situlae*, *thyrsus*, see: Martin Persson Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic and Roman Age* (New York 1975), 21-22, 36-38; Karl Kerenyi, *Dionysus, Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton 1996), 123, 180, 368-369, 375-377; Walter Friedrich Otto, *Dionysus Myth and Cult* (Bloomington, IN 1965), 96, 157; Eur. *Bacc.*

<sup>54</sup> A Dionysian procession with Heracles, a mosaic from Sheikh Zouede, 4th-5th Century, AD, in Ismailia Museum. See: Ovadia, "The Mosaic Pavements of Sheikh Zouede in Northern Sinai".

Dionysus and a maenad, with another maenad and satyr dancing at the side.<sup>55</sup> In a *pelike* by the Kadmos Painter, the Apotheosis of Heracles depicted on the upper part is accompanied by a depiction of Heracles's pyre being set alight by satyrs and maenads on the lower part.<sup>56</sup> In all of the mentioned mosaics Heracles appears intoxicated, seemingly to imbue him with a sense of liberation and exultation (Rösler, 1995). This exultation is intended to free the hero from the burden of his corporeal life, leading him to *catharsis* and to the divine realm, enabling him to become *entheos*—one with the god (Lonsdale, 1993).<sup>57</sup> I refer here too even to a very odd image that appears underneath Dionysus in the Sepphoris mosaic, seemingly a corpse that is being removed by another standing figure. In accordance with Homer, who tells that the *eidolon* of Heracles remained in Hades with the heroes, while his spirit ascended to Olympus to dwell in eternal and pleasant life with the gods, perhaps it is the corporeal body of Heracles that is being removed.<sup>58</sup>

As for Heracles's exultation, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates declares that madness is a gift when it is given by the gods:

And we made four divisions of the divine madness, ascribing them to four gods, saying that prophecy was inspired by Apollo, the mystic madness by Dionysus, the poetic by the Muses, and the madness of love, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros...<sup>59</sup>

Madness is considered as a *pharmakon* by Plato also in the *Laws* (Plato, 1963; Lonsdale, 2001). This madness is temporary and positive in nature, and purifies the soul through *catharsis*. Plotinus points out that wine is a medium for exultation:

[...] but those drunken with this wine, filled with the nectar, all their soul penetrated by this beauty, cannot remain mere gazers: no longer is there a spectator outside gazing on an outside spectacle; the clear-eyed hold the vision within themselves, though, for the most part, they have no idea that it is within but look towards it as to something beyond them and see it as an object of vision caught by a direction of the will.<sup>60</sup>

Wine can thus contribute to entering the state of ecstasy necessary to abandon consciousness in order to merge with the one (*to hen*).

These images of Heracles in the mosaics might thus be compared to the images of the initiates on Roman sarcophagi mentioned before in comparison to Achilles at Skyros. A very similar image of Heracles being led is seen on one of the panels from Sepphoris, which has been interpreted as the rape of Auge (Talgam & Weiss, 2004, pp. 54-57).<sup>61</sup> In light of the above, however, this panel shows Heracles rather as an initiate in the Dionysian Mysteries.

<sup>55</sup> The Apotheosis of Herakles, a Volute Krater from Bari, mid 5th century AD, in the Royal Museum, Brussels, 1018, LIMC V. 2, Figure 2927.

<sup>56</sup> The Apotheosis of Herakles, a Pelike from Vulci, by the Kadmos Painter, mid 5th century AD, in Munich, LIMC V. 2, Figure 2916. See: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Attic\\_red-figure\\_pelike\\_depicting\\_Heracles\\_brought\\_to\\_Olympus\\_by\\_Athena\\_ca.\\_410\\_BC\\_attributed\\_to\\_the\\_Kadmos\\_Painter,\\_Staatliche\\_Antikensammlungen,\\_Munich\\_\(8958356382\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Attic_red-figure_pelike_depicting_Heracles_brought_to_Olympus_by_Athena_ca._410_BC_attributed_to_the_Kadmos_Painter,_Staatliche_Antikensammlungen,_Munich_(8958356382).jpg)

<sup>57</sup> Eur. *Bacch.* 298-301; Steven H. Lonsdale, *Dance and Ritual in Greek Religion* (Baltimore 1993), 79.

<sup>58</sup> Hom. *Od.* 11.601-603. I note this with caution, however, since there is no solid evidence for such a reading; hence it must remain merely a possibility.

<sup>59</sup> Pl. *Phdr.* 264-265. See also: Joseph M. Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics* (Albany 1996).

<sup>60</sup> Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.8.10.

<sup>61</sup> A panel from the Sepphoris Mosaic, see: Talgam and Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysus at Sepphoris*, 54-57.

In the mosaic from Vienne too,<sup>62</sup> Heracles seems to be an initiate, his head adorned with a wreath, and accompanied by satyrs and maenads while Dionysus watches from above. This representation is very similar to a depiction of Heracles supported by satyrs on a Roman sarcophagus (Figure 6), in which the hero appears as a *mystes*.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 6. Sarcophagus with triumph of Dionysos about A.D. 215-225 Marble, from the island of Proconnesus in the Sea of Marmara near Istanbul. William Francis Warden Fund; Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

<sup>62</sup> Mosaic of “the Drunkenness of Hercules”, “House of the Atrium”, Vienne, mid 3rd Century, Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-romaine, Lyon, LIMC V. 2, Figure 3262.

<sup>63</sup> Sarcophagus with triumph of Dionysos, about A.D. 215-225, Marble, from the island of Proconnesus in the Sea of Marmara, near Istanbul. William Francis Warden Fund; Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, LIMC V. 2, Figure 3265.

To cite Turner again, the practice of conferring intentional inferiority upon the designated chief of a tribal society during his liminal status as an apprentice prior to his coronation ceremony was a mechanism aimed at preparing him for his exalted role. Turner indicates that sacredness is inherent in the submissiveness of the apprentice (Turner, 1969, pp. 96-102). This approach can be applied to Heracles as an initiate of Dionysus and an apprentice in the Dionysian mysteries.

Another comparison is to be found in an earlier representation of Heracles as a Dionysian initiate, depicted on a Sicilian *olpe*.<sup>64</sup> It is very clear from the images of the maenads carrying *thyrsi*, of the lyre held by one of them, and the maenad pouring a libation, that the situation is that of a Dionysian initiation, and that the hero is in the midst of a sacred ritual. The naturalistic style of drawing also contributes to the sense of intense atmosphere of this sacred occurrence. In one of the panels surrounding the main emblem of the Sepphoris mosaic, Heracles is seen wearing a purple cloth draped around his thighs, as a *mistes* (Talgam & Weiss, 2004).<sup>65</sup> Eros, who drives the carriage in the mosaic from Sheikh Zouede, hovers between Dionysus and Heracles in the mosaic from the Atrium House at Antioch, in which reveling maenad accompanies the sacred event. As in the painting of Endymion, Eros again appears to be the Platonic mediator that connects between the soul and the divine, and draws the soul towards the exalted divine realm.

### Summary and Conclusions

The two main aspects of initiation—the sacred, which belongs to the religious sphere, and the profane, which belongs to the social sphere—were the starting point for this study. The argument presented here has been that various images that signify initiation can be found in wall paintings and mosaics depicting mythological protagonists. Presumably, because the Mysteries were intended to remain secret in Antiquity due to the apprehension of the divinities and of the rituals as *semna* (“awesome”), explicit depictions of the Mysteries and sacred rituals are rare. Consequently, certain mythological images could also be perceived as symbolic in the context of initiation. A common denominator for all the mythological characters discussed is that all of them undergo metamorphosis, which is a prominent signifier of initiation.

The images of Narcissus from Pompeii, and especially in the House of Lucretius Fronto, had already been interpreted as symbolizing rites of passage in their secular sense, i.e. as puberty rites. Narcissus’s image recalls in its appearance the character of the *ephebe*, with characteristics such as seclusion, nakedness, hunting as a social game, and liminality, which indeed connect this scene with puberty rites. From another perspective certain features of this Narcissus depiction might be deciphered as symbols of sacred initiation. The seclusion could be compared to the mood characteristic of the initiates. The purple cloth draped around Narcissus’s thighs also offers a motif connected with initiation, since the initiates received a purple fillet as a symbol of their completion of the rite and as a kind of talisman. Another feature is the wreath on his head, recalling the wreaths that were worn by the initiates in Mystery cults, such as those of Artemis and Dionysus.

Water, which is a prominent feature in Narcissus’s myth and representations, is also an important motif, since water and ritual bathing in fountains or sacred springs were connected with acts of purification during the ritual. The very metamorphosis that Narcissus underwent and that led to his rebirth could be conceived as

<sup>64</sup> *Olpe. Scene of the Intoxicated Herakles*. Clay. 31,7 cm. Inv. no. GR-7007 (B-2079). The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. LIMC V. 2, Figure 3227.

<sup>65</sup> A panel from the Sepphoris Mosaic, see: Talgam and Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysus at Sepphoris*, Color Plate II, B.

symbolizing purification or the *catharsis* that formed the climax of the initiation. Narcissus can also be seen as an embodiment of the *epoptes*—"he who sees", in connection to the myth as told by Ovid, Kalistratus, and Philostratus. Thus, a sacred mystical symbolic death was followed by a sacred spiritual birth, and the initiate attained another mode of being and became one with the gods and eternity. This is anchored in Platonic dialogues such as *Phaedrus*, in which *Eros* is conceived as a mediator between the corporeal and the divine. The purification of the soul required in order to merge with the sublime is anchored in Plotinus's *Enneads*. Indeed, *Eros* is portrayed in some Pompeiian wall paintings as a mediator between Narcissus and Echo. Narcissus's image thus appears to constitute a kind of archetype of the various Mystery cults.

The depiction of Endymion's sleep is embedded with symbols of sacred initiation, such as the isolated and mysterious location, and the purple cloth draped around his thighs. The most prominent feature of sacred initiation, however, is the sleep that was practiced as part of certain rituals and was considered as a state that alters the ordinary boundaries of thought and consciousness, isolates and connects with nature and the divine, as a temporary semblance of death, and as a way of reaching a separate kind of immortality. The initiate, according to Plutarch, wanders in darkness before entering into the light. The divine light attracts the soul who yearns for it, as poetically described by Plotinus and manifested in the depiction of the shining image of Selene. *Eros* hovers between Endymion and the goddess and functions as a mediator connecting the soul and the divine.

The release of Achilles from the *gynaecium* at Skyros suggests initiation in its social context. The elements of initiation and puberty rites referenced in this scene can be found in the act of seclusion as itself a reflection of the custom of isolation prior to initiation; in the encounter between Odysseus and Achilles as a metaphor for the practice of pederasty in connection with puberty rites; and in Achilles's disguise as a girl as a reflection of the practice of transvestitism that was associated with puberty rites. The chiasmic composition characterizing the Achilles at Skyros scene is imbued with features of both the secular-social initiation and the sacred. The violence aspect of this representation suggests the puberty rites that involved violent acts such as flagellation. Violence and asceticism were sometimes also part of sacred rituals, as told in the ancient sources and featuring in the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. The image of the excited maiden in the Dioscuri House can be compared to the panicked initiate in the Villa of the Mysteries. Another common characteristic in scenes of initiation is the practice of unveiling, as in the Achilles scene, performed in sacred rituals as a sign of change, and supported by Plotinus's metaphor of seeing the body as a garment for the soul. The mystical unification with the divine or "the One" (*Hen*) was the most desired wish and the supreme goal of the initiates in Antiquity. A mortal is able to experience the divine only in moments of ecstasy and through a mysterious contact by participating as a *mystes* and consequently becoming a *telete*. Achilles's passivity and the way in which he is led by Odysseus offer a visual equivalence to images of the *mystes* led and supported in the course of a Dionysian mystery rite depicted on Roman sarcophagi. Just as the *mystes* was believed to attain eternal life after death, Achilles too attained immortality, manifested in his *kleos*.

The appearance of Heracles in the scene known as the "Drinking Contest between Dionysus and Heracles" in Roman mosaics seems to represent the hero as an initiate in the Dionysian Mysteries as part of his *Apotheosis* after his corporeal life. This argument is supported by the many symbols of the Dionysian initiation that appear in mosaics such as those at Sepphoris and Sheikh Zouede, and particularly the word *telete* inscribed in the latter mosaic. The domestic context of the rooms in which the mosaics were situated does not seem to contradict the religious significance of the scenes, since the religious experience in antiquity was considered as omnipresent, and because of the sacred nature of the mysteries.



Heracles would appear to be a participant in the Dionysian *thiasos*, and his appearance is compared here to images of *mystai* on Roman sarcophagi, as well as to images of the hero himself as a *mystes* on Roman sarcophagi and on Attic vase paintings. Heracles's exultation seems to free the hero from the burden of his corporeal life, leading him to *catharsis* and to the divine realm where he will become *entheos*—one with the god. This is expressed by both Plato and Plotinus, who considered wine as *pharmakon* and as a medium for exultation.

In light of the multiplicity of images connected with initiation, as discussed above, an overall observation would seem to suggest that consecration and an illusion of merging with the divine were, apparently, highly desired in Antiquity. This is reflected in the sacred initiation rites, which were intended to enable the initiate to achieve this state of exultation, and it is this that would appear to be the main message enfolded within the scenes discussed here. This message, however, is not necessarily an explicit one, but is immanent in the ancient viewer's knowledge and experience of a ritual-centered visuality, as Elsner notes, and also:

In the reciprocal gaze of divine confrontation, there is a form of visuality in which the image does not just *look back* at the viewer, but in which the viewer has specifically made the journey *in order* that the image should look back. (Elsner, 2007, p. 23, 25)

Indeed, the power of the images analyzed here derives from their stratified language and their hidden meanings, making the Mystery itself immanent in the images.

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