

**The Dualities of Sexuality  
and the Spiritual Quest  
in the Early Greco-Roman Period**

By

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INTRODUCTION

This paper's purpose is to explore the spiritual elements and beliefs exhibited in the sexual images of early Western art production. The main direction of this paper will explore images of the Greco-Roman period and will question how these early images set the framework and stage for subsequent art work. The connection between spirituality and sexuality is reflected differently in all cultures.

In Western art we see erotic or sexual images yet many times society denies the eroticism and focuses on the spiritual content. History has ignored, or at the very least - underplayed - the role of the forces of pure sexual energy and the basic human sexual drive in art history; and most certainly repressed the meaning of the sexual energy shown in art relating to the spiritual quest. The connection between spiritual meaning and sexuality has been a duality and paradox of not only art, but of human nature.

Donald Kalsched explored this paradox of human nature in his essay "The Limits of Desire and the Desire for Limits." Kalsched stated:

On the one hand, there is a desire for limitless expansion and discharge in pleasure. That's the human side. On the other side, there is pursuit of limits in order for transformation to occur. It's the god who is seeking limitation. It is the divine or transpersonal

part of desire that seeks limitation. At the same time, the human part is always seeking expansion, limitless expansion. These two things are a pair of opposites and they define the dialectic of desire as it moves through human development (1992, p. 93).

Each culture's social dialogue examines its art through its own social norms, mores, and personal points of reference. Therefore, the spiritual quest and erotic commentary often become so fused that the separation of the erotic element is negated and the academic focus remains on the spiritual allegory. Thus, we have art that is highly erotic and/or sexual in content but which is analyzed for its spirituality on a very superficial level. Minimal attention is placed on the role sexuality plays in spiritual growth. Art therefore becomes a socially accepted framework for the externalization of erotic feelings that are not fully explained or understood, and that otherwise would be suppressed. Edward Lucie-Smith (1991) stated in Sexuality in Western Art:

The spectator and the artist enter into a kind of tacit conspiracy; the story - which is usually a story-with-a-moral - makes the content acceptable. Guilt is kept at a distance thanks to the assumption that what is being shown, which might be offensive in isolation, is not being shown for its own sake (p. 196).

This paper will address art and myth that, on their own, could be considered erotic. Art work that is erotic in content must stir an emotion in the viewer. When this emotion is aroused the viewer is placed in the role of the voyeur. It must be understood that art placed in the category of "erotic art" has been traditionally placed there by men and

for men. In Western art history, there are very few female artists discussed and even less erotic art for woman. In fact erotic art for woman may not yet exist, or at the very least, it may be in the beginning stages. If there is not an adequate representation of gender, then one gender is left voiceless, so there would not yet be a language of expression for woman's visual erotic engery.

The early Greeks were very explicit in their portrayal of male sexuality. The love of "two young men for one another was considered nobler and more natural than that of the opposite sex" (Clark, 1956, p. 74). It wasn't until approximately the fourth century in Greece that the female nude sculpture is brought to life. Clark states that this scarcity is due to "both religious and social reasons" (p. 72).

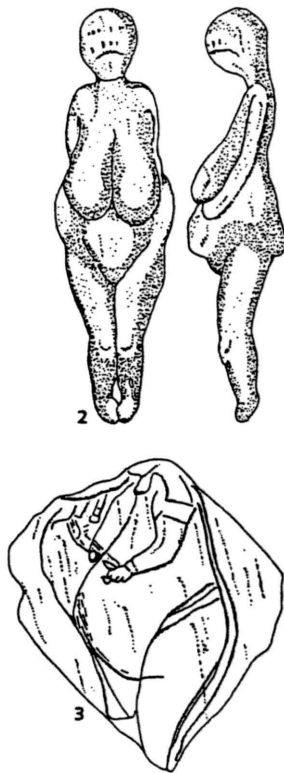
There appears to be an innate innocence in the early erotic art of the Greeks and Romans. This could be attributed to the lack of the Christianity which later destroys and suppresses pagan art and beliefs. Thorn (1990) wrote of this innocence:

The Greeks and Romans were innocent of obscenity in their eroticism, whether one looks at their mythologies or at their practices. It is within puritan societies - because of the concepts of sin and transgression and an inevitable hedonist backlash - that pornography flourishes (p. 107).

## Chapter 1

Since Palaeolithic times the need for artistic expression through sexual images and nude figures has been recorded. The erotic content of the images is displayed in varying degrees. The cultures' need to use human sexuality in the spiritual quest is often evident in allegorical art. The sexuality of these early images speaks of very basic survival needs. Human survival was dependent upon food and procreation. Thus, fertility was always at issue, as was the basic instinctual sexual drive.

During Paleolithic times, the artist created images and objects that were to have a magical and powerful influence upon fertility. The female figurines show their pregnancy through the placement of their hand or hands on their stomach. The 'Venus' of Laussel, Aurignacian, is an example of the "fertility goddess" [Fig 1, p. 5]. Although the 'Venus' of Willendorf, [Fig 2, p. 5], 25,000 to 20,000 B.C., late Aurignacian, and the 'Venus' of Lespugue, Aurignacian, are the most famous of these figurines, they are believed not to be pregnant (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 141). With these 'Venuses' we see the emphasis on their breasts and buttocks; an exaggeration of these sexual characteristics. This exaggeration makes the figures appear obese. This "fatness" is considered an erotic element in many cultures. Even though the name 'Venus' placed on these objects is arbitrary, and they were subsequently named 'Venus', one still feels the power and worship they may have commanded.



'Venus of Laussel'  
Dordogne, S. France  
25,000-20,000 B.C.  
Fig. 1



'Venus' of Willendorf  
Late Aurignacian  
25,000-20,000 B.C.  
Fig. 2

Venus is a fertility goddess. She is the "Earth Mother" of prehistoric religion. The earth is considered feminine in all European languages and there is a mystical connection between the creative force of woman and the fertility of the Earth (Walker, 1983, p. 141). In late Rome, Venus was the "name for the Great Goddess in her sexual aspect derived from the eponymous mother of Venetian tribes of the Adriatic, after whom the city of Venice was also named" (p. 1043).

Venus' powers were not just limited to birth-giving, but also included death-giving. Patriarchial Christianity denounced the pagan worship of the Goddess Venus. They believed the temples were "dedicated to the foul devil who goes by the name of Venus - a school of wickedness for all the votaries of unchasteness. They believed the temples were schools of instruction in sexual techniques and sexual exercises like those of Tantrism"(p. 1043). Barbara G. Walker states:

Like Tantric yogis, educated Romans envisioned the moment of death as a culminating sexual union, a final act of the sacred marriage promised by the religion of Venus. Ovid, an initiate, said he wished to die while making love: "let me go in the act of coming to Venus; in more senses than one let my last dying be done." Centuries later in Shakespeare's time, "to die" was still a common metaphor for sexual orgasm (p 1043).

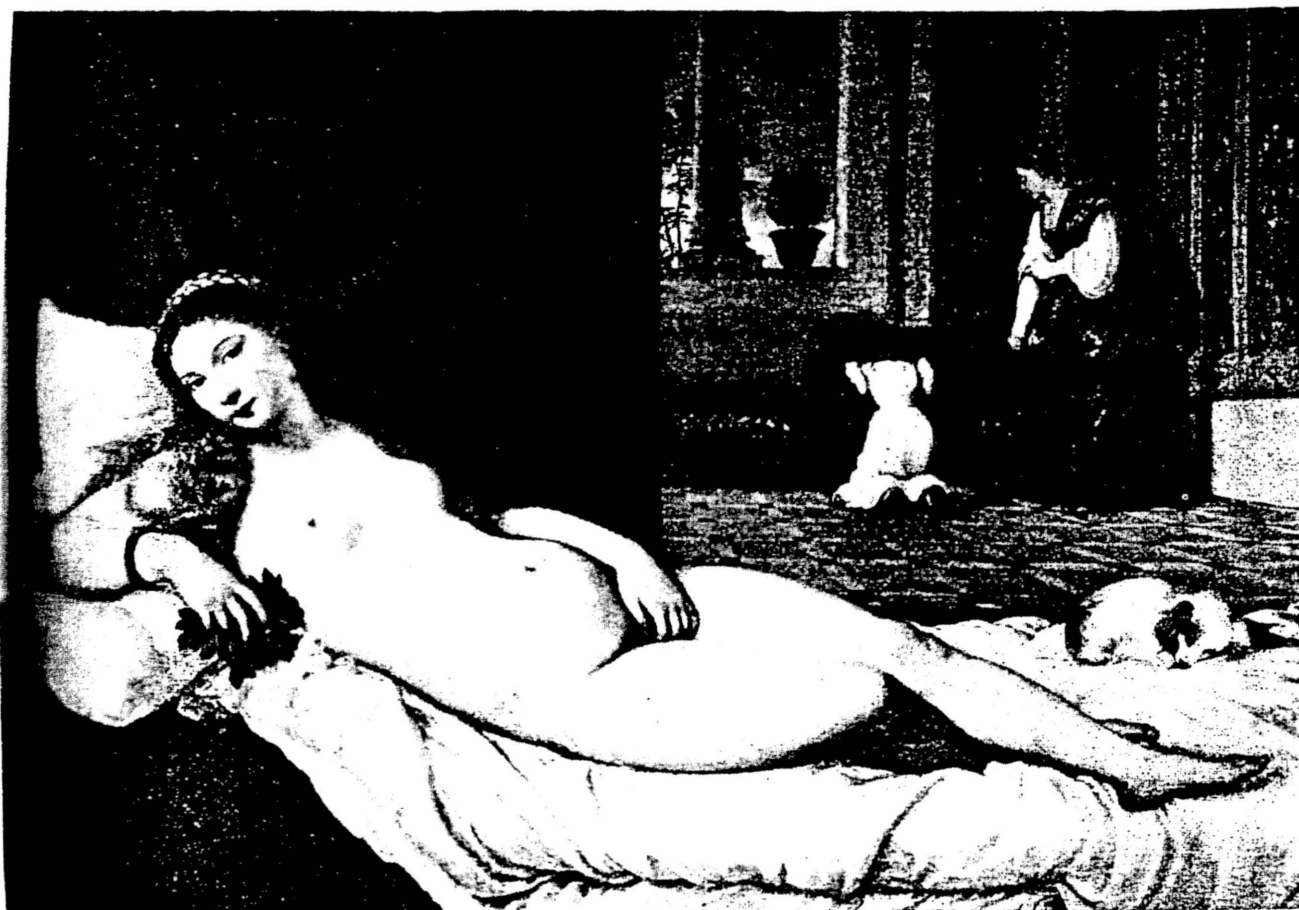
This understanding of Venus sheds a different light on later Venuses in Western art. She slowly transforms from an object of physical desires into a symbolic nude of spiritual excellence, i.e. the 'Venus Genetrix'. Then, taken out of the spiritual framework, Venus again becomes an erotic nude symbolising a very basic sexual desire: the ideal object of



Figure 3.  
Hellenistic  
'Venus Genetrix'



Figure 4.  
Titian,  
'Venus of Urbino'



man's desires as seen in later Western Art, i.e. Titian's 'Venus of Urbino' [Fig 4, p.7].

Kenneth Clark, author of The Nude, explains that one of the recurring aims of Western art was "to give these images a form by which Venus may cease to be vulgar and become celestial" (1990, p. 71), thus, the justification of the female nude.

'Venus Genetrix' [Fig 3, p.7] is perhaps the first female nude in which "the beauty that arouses physical passion was celebrated and given religious status" (p. 79). In this sculpture, light clinging drapery, *draperie mouillée*, delineates the form underneath; parts of the form are left to the imagination; and one breast is exposed as the drapery has slipped from her shoulder. The drapery enhances the beauty of her form and gives her a mystical/spiritual quality.

In the world of the early Greeks and Romans, art is full of erotic/sexual content associated with spiritual beliefs. The early Greeks "viewed human emotion, desires, and ideas as springing from the generative organ," the phallus (Thorn, 1990, p. 22). From the Greek "deification of the phallus" grew other myths and religions (p. 22). The Roman god Priapus, son of Aphrodite and Dionysus, [Fig. 6, p. 9], is represented with an erect and exaggerated penis and was often shown in the shape of a herm. Herms [Fig 5, p.9] are common in Greek and Roman art alike and usually are analogous to the "ithy-phallic pillars which were originally sacred to the Greek God Hermes" (Lucie-Smith, 1991, p. 16):

A "herm-et" was literally a little Hermes, with a divine spirit dwelling in the phallus.

... Greeks called Hermes the Psychopomp, Conductor

Greek Herm,  
c. 500-475 B.C.  
Fig. 5



Priapus  
Graeco-Roman  
Fig. 6



Satyr,  
575-550 B.C.  
Fig. 7



Phallic altar of Dionysus, Delos. Fig 8

of Souls, the same title everywhere given to the Lord of Death in his union with the Lady of Life. Hermes had greater power over rebirth and reincarnation than the heavenly father Zeus. It was Hermes who transferred Dionysus from the womb of the Moon-goddess to Zeus's "thigh" (penis) so he could be born from a male; apparently Zeus couldn't accomplish this miracle for himself (Walker pp. 395 and 397).

Hermes was bisexual which has been interpreted as self-love. He is therefore associated with masturbation, which "some claimed would lead to comprehension of the God, just as sexual intercourse led to comprehension of the Goddess" (p. 397).

The cult of Dionysus [Fig 8, p.10] was a rich source of spiritual and erotic imagery in the Greek world. Dionysus was the god of wine and appears with satyrs [Fig 7, p. 9] on cups, vases and coins. He is also known as the God of Ecstasy:

Obviously linked to the Dionysiac scenes on vases are those where no religious allusion seems to be intended, and which show erotic scenes of the greatest frankness; for example, heterosexual or homosexual encounters often adorn the center medallion or border of a cup. These subjects serve as a reminder of the fact that the Greeks of the archaic and early classical periods seem to have had little feeling of guilt about any form of sexual activity. The release of orgy was as much to be celebrated as the dignity of the gods (Lucie-Smith, 1991, p. 21).

Dionysus is known as the god of paradox. Not only is he the god who gave man wine, but he is also known as the "raving god whose presence makes man mad and incites him to savagery and even to lust for blood" (Otto, 1987, p. 49). He is also known as the "one of two wombs; the female mother life, and the male initiation rite" (Campbell, "From Darkness to Light; the Mystery Religions of Ancient Greece").

Joseph Campbell explains the message of the dark Dionysian mystery rites as the:

...realization in a properly prepared way of the dynamic of inexhaustible nature which pours its energy into the field of time and with which we are to be in harmony with both its destructive and its productive aspects. This is the experience of the life power in its full career. (V. I, Tape III).

As with Venus, Dionysus had two roles. He was the god of the most blessed ecstasy and enraptured love; but he was also the persecuted god. He was always surrounded by women. These women, his priestesses, were called maenads. They were named after the holy mountain of Maenalus. They were also called the "mad women" and the "wild women" because they were possessed by the spirit of Dionysus and they would tear apart their sacrificial victims during their orgies (Otto, p. 135; Walker, p. 564). Campbell states that the metaphorical meaning of this dismemberment is "eternity is in love with the forms of time; but, in order to come into those forms it must be dismembered" (1990). On vases of this time it is usually the satyrs [Fig. 9, p.14] who are shown in sexually explicit scenes:

...the high nobility of his (Dionysus) spirit is revealed that much more in all representations of him, and the impression they give is emphasized even more by the way in which his actions are contrasted with those of the satyrs, of whose naked lust the god seems to take no notice (Otto, p. 179).

The maenads [Fig. 10, p. 14] are shown less explicitly. Maenads are shown with clinging drapery, which creates movement around their bodies thus emphasizing the feeling of the ecstatic dances they are performing. The possessed stare on their faces characterizes

their "stateliness and haughty aloofness" (p. 178). Kenneth Clark (1990) explored the physical movement the artist created:

At an early stage in Greek art painters, and perhaps sculptors, had discovered poses and movements that expressed something more than physical abandonment, which were, in fact, images of spiritual liberation or ascension, achieved through the thiasos or processional dance; and the thiasos, whether of bacchantes or Nereids, became the favorite motive of sacophagi: for it showed that death is only the passage of the soul through some less rigid element in which the body is remembered for its joy of sensuous participation rather than for its weight and dignity ( p. 273).

The duality of Dionysus is carried a step further, when Apollo, the Greek God of Light and Truth, is studied. Apollo is also known as the Lord of Life; he is in opposition to Dionysus. Philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche looked at the irrationalism of the Apollonian and Dionysiac opposition in his first book, The Birth of Tragedy. He felt that Apollo represented a fantasy of dreams, and that Dionysus represented the barbaric intoxication, the Lord of the Underworld. He believed both states are natural to man. The conflict is the integration of the two opposing states. Nietzsche stated:

...the origins of art and of all human creativity are to be found in the dual aspects of human nature which he calls dream and song (p. 496).

Creative energy is found within the conflict of the rational (Apollonian) and the passionate (Dionysiac). Human love is derived from the conflict between unconditional love (spiritual) and the uncontrollable lust (physical). Thus, the spiritual quest in the physical state is the result of the harmony between the mental and the passionate states of man.



Dionysus,  
Cup by the Brygos  
Painter.  
Fig. 9.

Fig. 10.  
Greco-Roman,  
Three Maenads.





In scenes from a frieze from the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii, mid-first century B.C., [Fig. 11-12, p. ], an initiation into mystery religion is portrayed. This may be the ritual passage into the religion of Dionysus.

In one panel, the artist shows "how naked girls were hit with a switch as an initiation rite" (Croix & Tansey, 1986, P. 204). There are maenads with flowing draperies that further associate Dionysus with this event:

In the portion shown here a winged half naked female whips a young woman who cowers in the lap of another woman, perhaps her mother.  
...We may have an example here of a Roman version of Greek megalography, or painting of large scale figures (Ramage & Ramage, 1991, p. 61 and 63).

In another panel, a winged naked female holds a whip above her head, while another young woman sits in front of a covered object. She appears ready to uncover this object. Its shape and form resembles that of the phallus, which not only makes a connection to Dionysus, but also to the Roman god Priapus. There is evidence of a connection to the Goddess Vesta.

Priestesses and goddesses were very much a part of ancient societies. The mysteries, power, and dualities associated with Venus, the Earth Mother, have already been discussed. At the time of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, A.D. 79, Pompeii was under the patronage of the Goddess Venus. Pompeii "thrived as a center of opulence and good taste" (Thorn, p. 57). In Pompeii, sexuality had been refined to an art.

The round Temple of Vesta (Aedes rotunda Vestae) stands out from among the square and rectangular buildings in Rome.

It appears to be an anomaly. Rome and Roman cities were set up on a grid plan and their Temples had "to be square as to face the four cardinal regions of the sky" (Goodrich, 1989, p. 274). The symbolism of this rare round temple is clear. Rollo May (1991) stated that "the symbolism for Apollonianism is the circle" and that the Apollonian "stands for the cultures reason, harmony, balance, and justice" (p. 218). The Roman Goddess Vesta mirrors the dualities of sexuality and the spiritual quest as shown in the cult of Dionysus. Only, at least on the surface, she is shown in the Apollonian light.

The Goddess Vesta was the same as the Greek's Goddess Hestia, "first of all divinities to be invoked" (Walker, 1988, p. 226). Vesta and Hestia date to the Great Mother Goddesses, for they were the guardians of the hearth. The hearth is associated with the home, man's center of the world. The Vestal Virgins tended to Rome's hearth, to the altar of the state. According to Barbara G. Walker:

Vesta or Hestia was left over from the matriarchal age, when the hearth of the clan mother was the first fire altar, and her housewifely functions of fire-keeping, food preparation, and creating the sacred center of clan life were considered the holiest of human activities (p. 226).

Six young girls, between the ages of six to ten, were chosen to be Vestals. These girls came from noble or aristocratic families. They served Rome until they were about thirty, then they were dismissed. They were chosen by the High-priest alone. The Vestal Virgins attended Rome's perpetual fire in the Temple of Vesta. This fire was the "mystic heart of the empire" (Walker, 1988). It was only allowed to be extinguished once a year, and then the Vestals had to start the fire by rubbing two

pieces of oak together. According to some sources, the Vestal, on assuming her vow, "was symbolically married, through the Pontifex, the phallic deity of the Palladium" (Mascetti, 1990, p. 194). She was buried alive if she broke this vow of chastity. Her behavior was watched and controlled. Goodrich stated:

for an minor offense, the High-priest had the Vestal stripped naked. Then he whipped her, usually behind a curtain, and in a dark place (p. 275).

Whether or not the Vestal Virgins remained chaste on the physical level is still questionable. According to Walker, they were not virgins in the physical sense. She stated:

Their marriage to the phallic deity of the Palladium was physically consummated in Vesta's temple, under conditions of great secrecy. The ceremony was performed by a priest called the Pontifex Maximus, 'great maker of the pons,' which meant a bridge, a path, or a way...One might suppose that his 'way' was something like the Way of eastern sex-sacraments; that is he built the 'bridge' between Father Heaven and Mother Earth (Vesta) (p.1046).

In ancient times it was also common for gods to come down from the sky and impregnate women. Rhea Silva, one of the first Vestals, was impregnated in just this way. Mars, the god of war, enjoyed his desire while she was sleeping and because of "his divinity he was able to depart unseen and unknown" (Goodrich, p. 265). Rhea became the mother of the well known twins, Romulus and Remus. Her fate was inevitable; she was executed. Goodrich tells of a Vestal's horrible and antagonizing death:

Inside the Colline Gate stretched an earthwork alongside the city wall, what the Romans called an agger. Under this wall was a small chamber with steps going down to it. Inside this chamber were placed a couch with its coverings, a lighted lamp, a piece of bread, and three bowls, one of water, one of milk and one of oil. In other words, nobody could say that a Vestal who was sentenced to death had died of hunger.

That would have been unsuitable for a lady of such high birth and so consecrated to such a sacred, public office (p. 276).

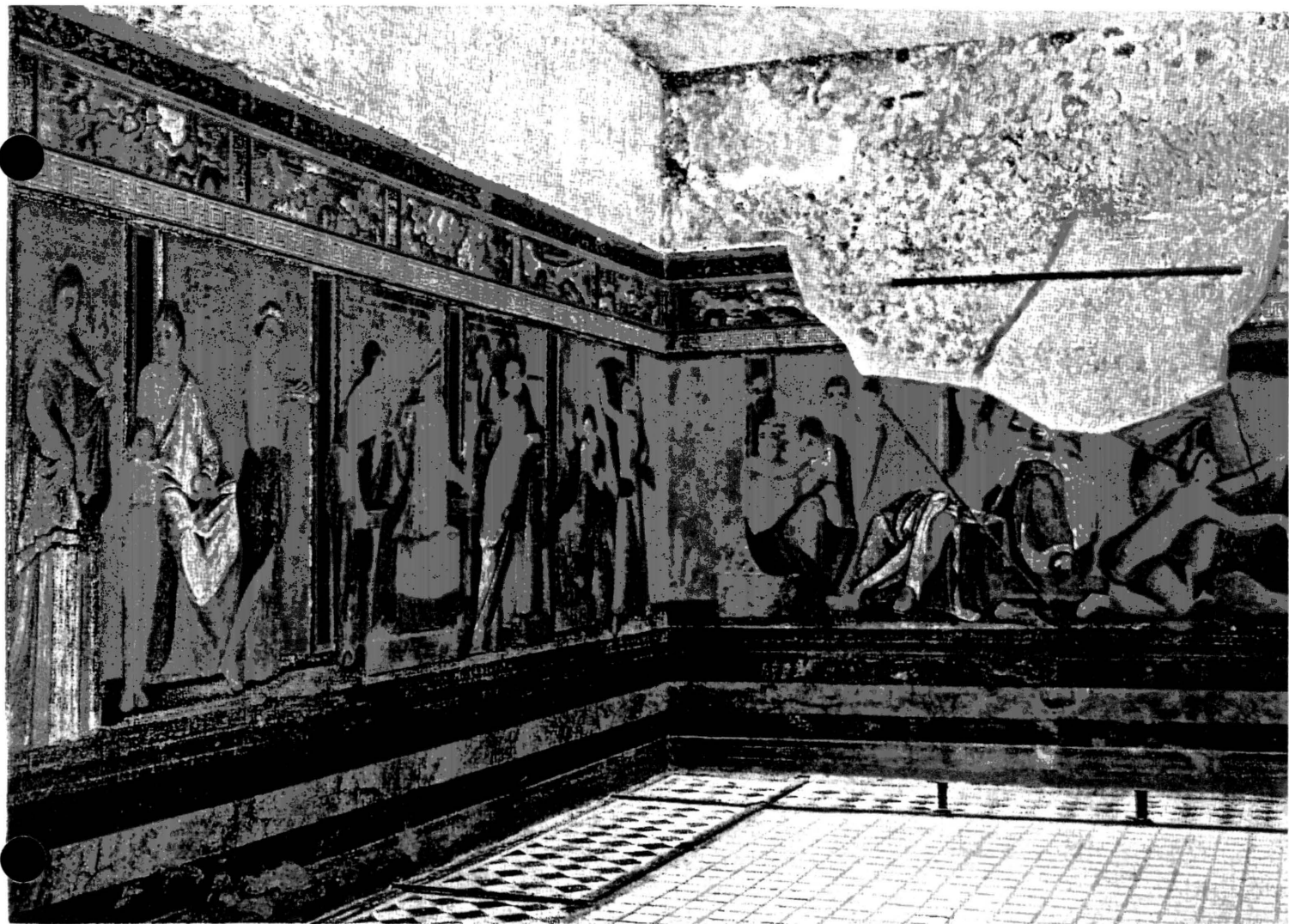
Again, the Apollonian and the Dionysian conflict is seen in the spiritual quest of the Vestal Virgins, on both cultural and human levels. Humans' need for "limits in order for transformation" is represented by the Vestals. A fire burned at the center of these young virgins' boundaries; a perpetual fire. This combination can only set a stage for an emotional scene ending with all the intensity of a Greek tragedy.

#### CONCLUSION

The creative ones have always known that the act of creation has to be set into motion by something which man does not have in his power. The greater their creative power was, the surer their belief in an Existence which has reality and the majesty of the one who sets all into motion (Otto, p. 24 and 25).

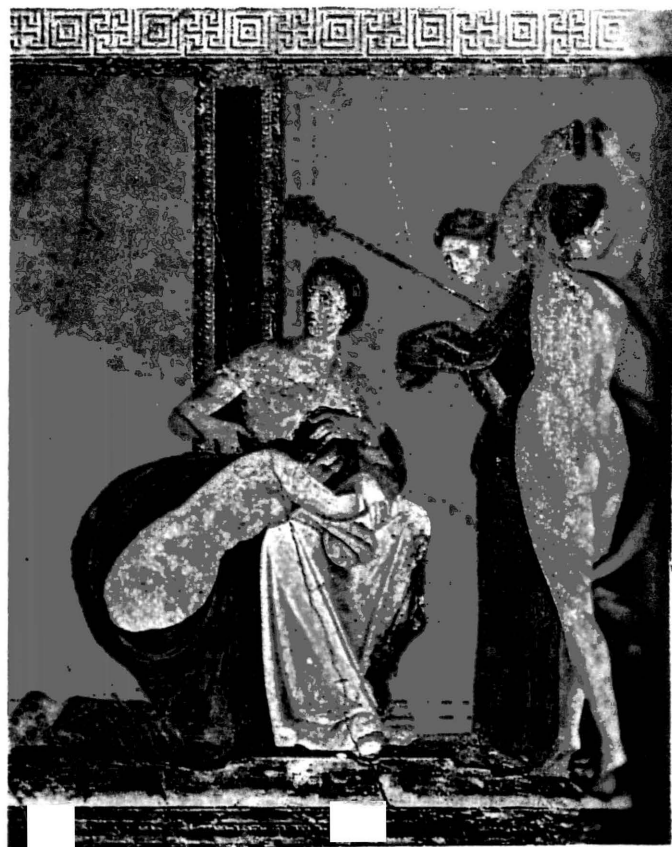
The early Greeks and Romans explored through their myths, beliefs, and art a need for balance and harmony in the opposing aspects of nature. They understood the dualities of humans and the elements of nature; acknowledging the need to believe in something larger than their own mortality, something eternal and all powerful, something known, something pure. They explored the passions of the soul; the passions that often entice one off the path, "the way"; the passions that lead to a unity with nature, to be limitless, to explore without boundaries their human potential. These passions often lead to the darker unknown. Graciously, the Greeks and Romans have passed down their stories of their personal spiritual quests.

I find these quests not too different from ours.



Top, Villa of Mysteries, mid-first C. B.C.  
Fig. 11 and 12.

Bottom, Detail



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