

# God of wine frescoes unearthed in Pompeii

**N**ear-lifesize frescoes showing the Roman god of wine and the mysteries of a Dionysian initiation rite have been revealed at Pompeii and hailed by experts as broadening our understanding of the ancient world (Philip Willan writes).

"These are important frescoes both in their size and content," said Gabriel Zuchtriegel, director of the Pompeii archaeological site. "They enable us to better understand what we already knew."

Alongside Alessandro Giuli, the

Italian culture minister, he unveiled a newly discovered lavish large-scale artwork, dating to the 1st

century BC, known as a megalography. It has been unearthed in a banqueting room in Insula 10 in the central part of Pompeii. The frieze covers three sides of the room and the fourth side opens on to a garden.

It depicts the procession of Dionysus, the Greek god of

wine known by the Romans as Bacchus, and bacchantes, Dionysus's followers, portrayed as dancers but also as ferocious hunters. One is depicted carrying a slaughtered goat on her shoulders, another holding a sword and the innards of an animal.

At the centre of the frieze is a woman holding a torch, indicating that she is an initiate, a mortal woman who, through a

nocturnal ritual, is about to be initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus, who has the power to die and be reborn and promises the same destiny to his followers.

The frieze can be dated to between 40 and 30 BC, meaning that at the time of the eruption of Vesuvius, which buried Pompeii beneath a thick layer of pumice and ash in AD79, it was already about 100 years old.

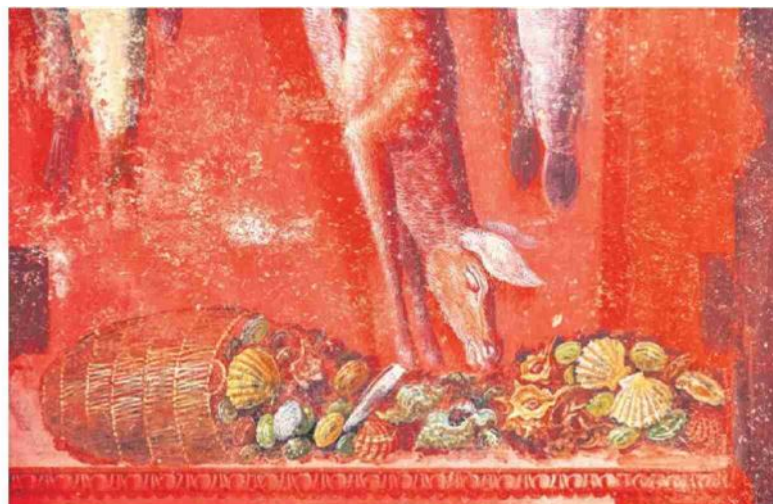
Zuchtriegel said that the frescoes complemented similar images found in Pompeii's Villa of the

Mysteries. They are the only two known depictions of the cult of Dionysus that have survived from the ancient world.

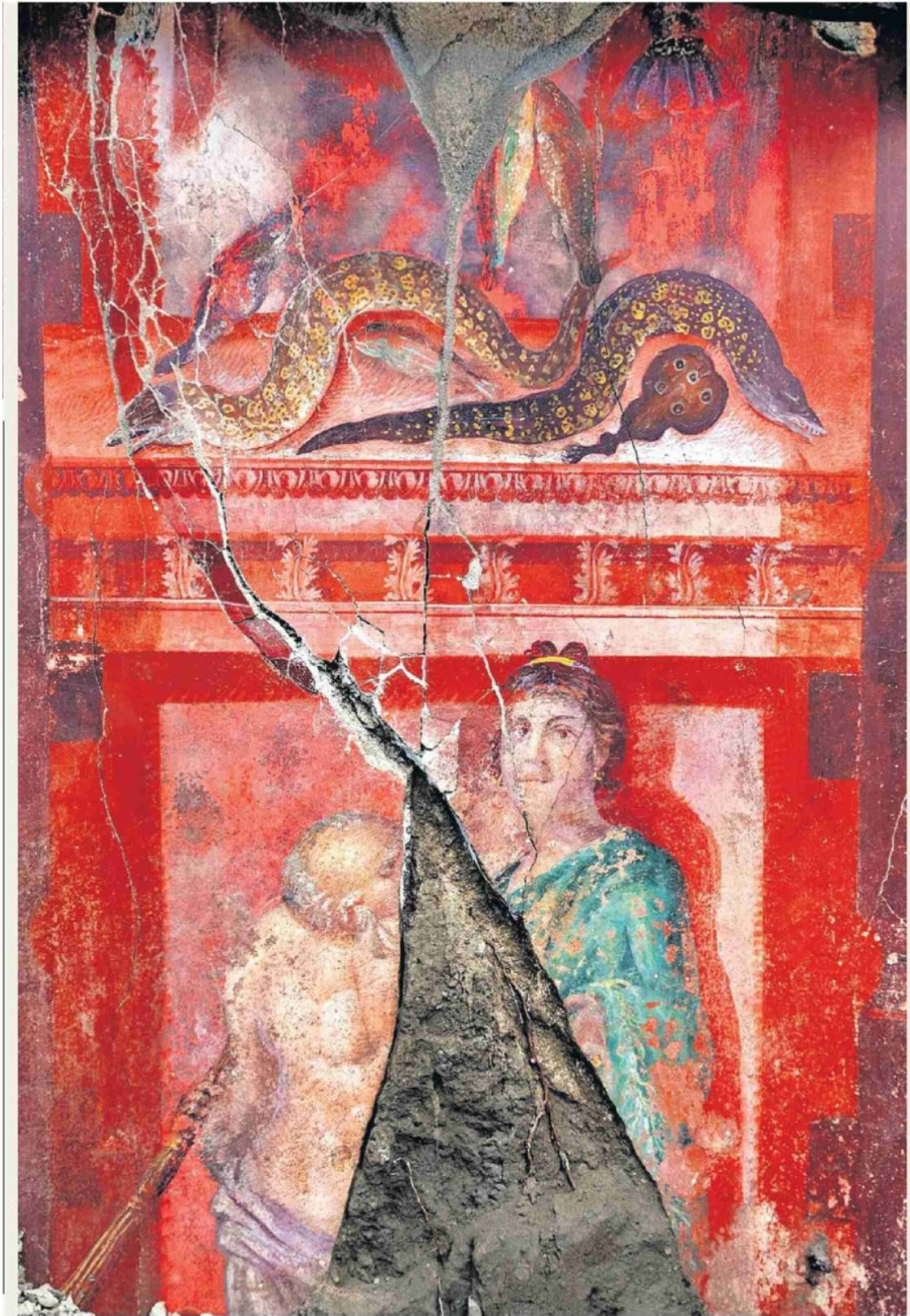
The partying bacchantes and huntresses contrast with the more staid portrayal of brides from the earlier discovery. "These are two extremes of the female experience in antiquity," Zuchtriegel said.

Sophie Hay, a British archaeologist working in Pompeii, drew attention to exquisitely rendered images of dead animals, fish, eels, squid and molluscs. She said there was still much to learn about the female figures who participated in the cult of Dionysus. "These were mystery cults, so what they did remains a mystery, even in the ancient written sources," she said.

The room is open for visitors from today. Bookings are by phone and parties of up to 15 people will be able to view the frescoes as work continues at the site.



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