

# Motherhood, Female Prophecy, and the Villa of the Mysteries Frieze

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[Slide 1] I must open today with a confession. The research process for this project so far has mirrored a pregnancy, to use a metaphor apt for this presentation. There was the initial flush of excitement and possibility at the germ of an idea. There was the increasing distress as the project grew in size and I realized I was woefully unprepared to deal with many aspects of it. There was the panic that set in as the inevitable due date approached. And now that the big day is here, I hope this metaphor ends and the birth is not a tortuous process eliciting screams of horror from all involved. As I proceed, I stress that this project is very much in its initial stages. I am aware that the bibliography on these subjects is vast, and many in this room certainly know more about the topic than I do. So I humbly present my theories for your examination, in the hope that you can point me towards relevant bibliographic references, share helpful critiques based on your more extensive knowledge, and kindly let me know that there is a German dissertation that already says everything I just said, only with a better catalog.

The Villa of the Mysteries needs no introduction, so I will not attempt to give it one. In 2002 Nancy De Grummond advanced the intriguing theory that the imagery of the Mysteries Frieze could be connected to iconography of prophecy on Etruscan mirrors. She hypothesized that prophecy could be associated in both media to the ritual of marriage. I would like to revisit her theories in light of another work that shares this prophetic iconography: the Borghese Meleager

sarcophagus in the Louvre. I specifically would like to expand on an idea that Dr. De Grummond mentioned in passing, that prophecy could also be connected to childbirth and motherhood. I argue that themes of motherhood, death, and female empowerment can further our understanding of the Mysteries Room Frieze.

[2] I will begin by a brief review of De Grummond's theory regarding prophetic imagery on the frieze. I will then turn to the Meleager Sarcophagus and explore how that item sheds light on prophetic iconography. Finally I will return to the Mystery Frieze to synthesize these lines of evidence.

Before I proceed, a brief note about methodology, which is to say, at this point my methodology is rather unrefined. As I must continue to stress, this project is very much in the state of "stuff Liz has noticed." In terms of approach, I have been inspired by research that examines the Mysteries Frieze within its local social and cultural contexts, as opposed to trying to read through it to Greek originals or religious practice. In particular, I am encouraged by work such as that of De Grummond and scholars of the Gazda school, who have looked to Italic rather than Greek precedents for the frieze. While these scholars have focused mainly on comparanda from Etruria, Campania, and Magna Graecia, particularly vase and wall painting, I will be drawing primarily from later Roman sculpture.

I am aware of the dangers of reading significance backwards in the archaeological record. I follow the accepted consensus, however, that the Mysteries Frieze drew on a wealthy corpus of pre-existing stock compositions. While these compositions were altered and adapted considerably for the immediate context, these compositions represented visual motifs that were somehow suggested by and considered appropriate for that context. By analyzing later examples, we can see other contexts that employed the same visual motifs. We can then look to see if the

same patterns identified in those contexts hold true for the Villa of the Mysteries. In other words, I think we can see how particular visual motifs were employed at different times and situations to create a fuller picture of the artistic tradition within which the producers and viewers of the Mysteries Frieze functioned.

This theorized artistic tradition gives me cover for mixing my media, employing sculpture to talk about painting. But there is particular relevance for using sculpture in the case of the Mysteries Frieze. As you know, Vitruvius refers to *megolographia signorum*, large pictures of sculptures. I do not believe the Mysteries Frieze reproduces actual sculptures, but I believe the figures were supposed to look like sculptures, perhaps within the general late Republican trend of mimicking public architectural space in painting. Sauron, furthermore, makes the interesting observation that the frieze is arranged much like temple sculpture, with figures processing towards a central cult statue on the back wall. There is sculpture in the air, in other words, in the Mysteries Frieze, and we should not be surprised if we find similar motifs in the two media.

I am also aware that much of what I am going to say today, in terms of particulars, has already been observed by numerous scholars. What I hope to contribute today is to bring together various existing threads of discourse and posit a shift in emphasis, rather than an erasure of previous interpretations. Sauron in particular has identified in the frieze numerous motifs pertaining to motherhood. His ultimate conclusion, however, was that only parts of the frieze commemorated a particular instance of childbirth, namely the birth of Dionysus by Semele, whereas I will be suggesting a broader interpretation. There is also an issue of terminology, what to call the god of wine and fertility who appears in Pompeii. I have chosen the term Dionysus as a place holder, because that is what I do in my Classical Mythology course and because “syncretic god of wine” sounded weird when repeated.

[3] In her 2002 article “Mirrors, marriage, and mysteries,” De Grummond identifies 10 motifs that are associated with prophecy in Etruscan mirrors and that appear on the Mysteries Frieze:

1. the figure of Silenus
2. [4] the use of the lyre
3. the ritual stance of the left foot
4. [5] the gesture of reception of the prophecy, including signs of wind and an upthrown right hand
5. [6] divination using water
6. the speaking head
7. the presence of an assistant or medium
8. [7] divination using a mirror
9. the presence of a meditator/interpreter
10. [8] the tablets of prophecy

In discussing the significance of such imagery, De Grummond related it to mentions in various Roman authors of venerable prophetic rituals performed at marriages. De Grummond admitted she was puzzled as to the exact connection between 4<sup>th</sup> century Etruscan mirrors and 1<sup>st</sup> century Pompeii, but she pointed out that some Pompeiian family names may suggest Etruscan ancestry.

[9] I turn now to the Borghese Meleager sarcophagus in the Louvre. This sarcophagus is typically dated to the second half of the second century CE and, as part of the famed Borghese collection, presumably comes from Rome—ish. The front of the sarcophagus shows three scenes: Meleager’s mother Althea and the log, the death of Meleager in the center, and the battle of Meleager and his uncles on the right. It is the first scene that I will examine in detail.

[10] The scene of Althea and the log has been interpreted universally as Althea returning the log to the fire, thus dooming her son Meleager. There are several interesting points of

correspondence between this scene and De Grummond's prophetic motifs, however, that suggest that such a reading is too simple. The figure on the left is presumably one of the Moirai, or some more general representation of Fate. She lifts her left foot on a wheel of Fortune and poses with uplifted scroll and stylus in an act of writing.

[11] The central figure has been seen as a Fury, presumably because she has a torch and a Fury makes narrative sense. Such an identification, however, ignores four key points. First, while the iconography of the Furies is variable and can include torches, their primary attribute is snakes, mostly in their hair and also on their arms. They also tend to wear short chitons and tall boots, a point I will return to later. LIMC presents only a single example, other than this one here, where you may have a Fury with a long dress, a torch, and no snakes. [12] Second, there are numerous other goddesses that carry torches, most of them, such as Demeter, Persephone, and Artemis, associated with marriage and fertility. Most notably, Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, is called in Homer "the one who leads to light," and Pausanias muses on the symbolism of the torches held by statues of Eileithyia. In the Antonine period, in close chronology with the sarcophagus, a series of Roman coins appear featuring Eileithyia and a torch. Third, the sarcophagus figure does have what are clearly wings in her hair, suggesting speed, as for many goddesses associated with Hera. [13] Finally, the sarcophagus figure places her hand on Althea's shoulder. Ancient art preserves numerous examples of childbirth goddesses laying their hands on the laborer. Soranus records, albeit with skepticism, the common belief that laying hands on a laboring mother could reduce her labor pains. I submit, then, that the central figure on the Meleager Sarcophagus can be seen as a representation of a Roman goddess of childbirth, the kind that is often close companions to the Fates in both written and visual sources.

[14] An obvious counter argument would be that the figure is holding the torch in what appears to be a threatening manner. Pausanias, followed by modern scholars, speculated that the torch in Eileithyia's cult statues could represent the spirit of life, and indeed one of the statue's torches is upheld. The other points downwards, however, and I would point out that Pausanias, whatever his biographical details, had never gone through labor, and if he had, the symbolism of a torture instrument in the hands of the personification of childbirth would not have been nearly so perplexing for him.

[15] We may then turn to the figure of Althea. She presents two of the features identified by De Grummond as indicating the reception of prophecy, namely signs of wind and an upthrown hand. Her purpose with the log is ambiguous: she could be putting in it, but she could equally be pulling it out. Her weight on her back leg may suggest movement backwards away from the altar. Her facial expression of distress can be explained as concern for her endangered baby and fear in her encounter with the divine. Althea, in other words, could be seen as receiving the prophecy regarding Meleager, rather than fulfilling it.

[16] This interpretation has several features to recommend it. Within the scene, it would make more sense for the Moira to be proclaiming the prophecy rather than re-reading it, since she is in the act of writing, although blind adherence to a standard figure type should not be ruled out. More importantly, the most common narrative setting for the Moirai in art is the birth scene. [17] They appear in Greek, Roman, and Etruscan pieces, in painting, sculpture, and mirrors; they attend the births of gods, such as Athena and Fulgens Dionysus, of heroes such as Achilles, and of mere humans. Finally, prophecies tend to take place at the birth of an individual, not at the death. Prophesizing that someone is going to die as they are doing it is really just observing.

[18] Now, I am not arguing that the Borghese scene was meant to illustrate Althea's saving the log to the exclusion of her burning it. Anyone recalling the birth of Meleager would be reminded necessarily of his death. Instead I see this scene as purposefully ambiguous, a direct illustration of Meleager's birth and Althea's reception of the prophecy, but an illustration composed in a way that shades into that prophecy's fulfillment. In a way it functions like those optical illusions, where you can see either a duck or a rabbit, depending on your focus.

Let us accept my hypothesis that this sarcophagus illustrates Meleager's birth. How does this influence our understanding of the Mysteries Frieze? On a basic level, it further confirms De Grummond's theory by providing an example of this imagery in an unambiguous prophetic context, a securely identifiable illustration, of a well-known myth, involving a critical prophecy.

[19] It also somewhat eases the question of continuity between Etruscan mirrors and Pompeian painting. If two points are coincidence and three points make a line, then this sarcophagus is the third point. It demonstrates that there was in the artistic ether a traditional iconography for illustrating prophetic encounters with the gods, and that this iconography was robust enough to be in circulation as late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. How this iconography circulated, I have no precise idea.

On a more complex level, the Meleager sarcophagus invites us to re-examine the Mysteries Frieze with a focus on motherhood, specifically the connections among motherhood, child bearing, prophecy, and death. Before I continue I would like to stress again that I am not arguing that motherhood was the ONLY theme in the Mysteries Frieze. But I do think it helps illuminate several puzzling aspects of the frieze.

[20] I will turn first to the famous scene where a winged spirit prepares to strike the exposed back of a cowering woman. [21] The outfit of the spirit consists of a short skirt wrapped low

around her hips, some high boots, and a thin gauze covering on her upper torso. [22] On the one hand this outfit is reminiscent of numerous depictions of the Furies, and of the winged Etruscan demon of death, Vanth. [23] The robes of these latter spirits, however, tend to be more structured, with high belts and crossed straps held by a baldric between the breasts. [24] Women with their breasts freely bared, not surprisingly, do appear in numerous birth scenes and may represent wet nurses. [25] Figures in such scenes also often have robes wrapped loosely around their hips.

[26] The primary distinctive sartorial feature for scenes of birth or childbearing, however, is a particular type of head wrap. As others before me have noted, this same type of head wrap appears on the woman cradling the cowering woman. Turning to the cowering woman herself, her bent, crouching, half-kneeling position is a common position for laboring outside of modern hospitals. [27] Birthing scenes in Roman art frequently feature women holding each other, an unusual motif in other contexts. [28] Finally the handling of the woman's torso is unusual, with a strange bulge in the lower half. This may be an attempt to represent her swollen womb. One might object that she is not obviously pregnant, but I would argue that she is not obviously not pregnant either, and there is little precedent for the representation of pregnant women in Classical art. [29] All of this lends support to the theory, advanced most prominently by Sauron, that the whipping demon represents the pains of labor.

[30] The winged figure is closely associated compositionally with the woman to the immediate left, who kneels in profile and does something with a something in a *liknos*, or winnowing basket. I will say generally that I don't have a clear idea what is happening here, and I have a sneaking suspicion that neither did the painter. [31] This woman also wears a head wrap similar to those of midwives or nurses, as well as robes wrapped around the hips, this time over a thin



tunic. If the item under the basket is a phallus, a phallus is an obvious fertility symbol and also necessary for childbearing. If Polinger Foster is on to something with her arguments that the represented action is the burning of incense, Roman midwives use artificial smells to comfort and revive laboring women. [32] The *liknos*, furthermore, is famously the cradle of the infant Dionysus. [33] Polinger Foster has argued that the *liknos* lies in front of the erect object, and that this bulge here is cloth in the basket. This cloth could be a reference to the baby god's swaddling cloth. In other words, there is nothing in the group that precludes a theme of child bearing for the other images, and if you want to shoehorn it in to maternal themes, and I do, you can.

[34] Continuing to the left, the central figure of Dionysus lounging on his companion can also make sense within an overarching theme of motherhood. I realize that the identification of the companion is controversial, and I have no definitive evidence here, only observations. The first is that in the corpus of images of a lounging Dionysus, there are few examples where the woman is unambiguously labeled as Ariadne. [35] There are, on the other hand, Etruscan mirrors where the female embracing an upturned Dionysus is clearly labeled as Semele. The Mysteries Frieze version of the Dionysus and companion motif includes two details that deviate from other versions of the type and which therefore warrant explanation. [36] The first is the item the companion holds in her hand. [37] I have no idea what it is, but it does remind me of another thing-in-hand-shoved-in-youth's-face that I find confusing, found in all places on the Borghese Meleager sarcophagus. [38] The second is Dionysus' shoe. His right shoe lies sole out in front of his companion's seat, while his bare foot is extended to the foreground. Close parallels are not forthcoming. A stock composition, seen on Neo-attic Reliefs, features a satyr doing something with Dionysus's shoe, perhaps taking it off to enter a dwelling, or putting it back on to indicate his drunken state. [39] On the other hand, a Dionysus childhood sarcophagus in the Capitoline

presents a scene where a satyr adjusts one of the god's boots, while a nymph combs his hair. As a mother of two small children who has had to put her daughters' shoes in a cabinet and literally lock it so the shoes don't get lost, I am willing to believe that losing and retrieving shoes was some sort of symbol of the bonds between caretakers and children.

[40] I would like to revisit in the present context the hypothetical identification of the female companion here as Semele. Semele's story, like that of Althea, closely interweaves childbirth and death. For both mothers, their childbearing was the ultimate cause of their demise. Semele is probably the happiest of stories where mothers die in childbirth or because of their children, in that in some traditions she is rescued by Dionysus and taken to Mt. Olympus. Her story becomes one of not only death, but also rebirth through childbearing. A grown Dionysus cradled on his mother's lap would be an inspirational image for a human woman, a path to glory through motherhood and suffering, even if actual resurrection could not be expected.

Dionysus is a particularly interesting god in regards to childbirth. He is the only god with a human mother. [41] Scenes of his birth and childhood are enormously popular compared to those of other divine figures. Unlike the birth of Athena, scenes of his birth are often rendered in vivid and naturalistic details. [42] The Sebasteion at Aphrodisias devotes at least three reliefs to Dionysus' childhood, [43] including this one that features the head wrap, one figure with an exposed breast, and another bare to the hips. All of this would make him unusually fitting for a theme of motherhood.

[44] If, on the other hand, we interpret the companion as Aphrodite, there are still possible connections to motherhood. The union of Aphrodite and Dionysus produced numerous children, including Priapus and the Graces. Notably, both may be alluded to in the adjacent scenes: [45] Priapus in the reminiscent phallus and the Graces in the dancing woman with her back to the

viewer. There is also of course the prospect of multivalence, with the companion alluding both to Dionysus' mother and various consorts, including Aphrodite and Persephone, another fertility goddess.

[46] To return to the Running Woman. De Grummond saw her as reacting to a prophecy, proclaimed by the Silenus head and read out or interpreted by the faun gazing into the bowl of water. De Grummond believed this prophecy was related to marriage, but it could also be related to childbirth. [47] Many of the Etruscan mirrors that De Grummond identifies as illustrating prophecy deal with childbirth or include similar imagery. [48] Some of the mirrors depict the birth of Fulfens, the Etruscan god of the vine. [49] This Mysteries Frieze scene can reasonably be read, then, as a woman receiving from the Dionysiac retinue a prophecy regarding childbirth.

[50] I move on to the highly unusual group of two fauns and a goat, which is enclosed by the running woman and a prophesizing Silenus. The woodland spirit nursing a goat would integrate the theme of motherhood within the wild pastoral facet of the Dionysiac world. [51] The nursing is not incidental, but rather forms the center of the composition, [52] not only for the fauns, but for the larger flanking figures as well. [53] The combination of goat and lactation would also recall another divine childhood, that of Zeus, who was fed by a magical goat on the island of Crete, where he had been safeguarded by his mother from the violence of his father Kronos. Once again themes of potential suffering, childhood, divinity, and motherhood meet.

[54] The ceremony being performed by the woman with her back to the viewer notably combines a wide, low bowl being filled with water, and reams of loose unsewn cloth. [55] Both elements show up in birthing scenes, where the cloth is used to wrap the newborn and [56] the water for the ceremonial and absolutely necessary first bath. The fact that she is seated on an elevated chair, its back covered with cloth, may also be significant. [57] Soranus recommends that

birthing stools be enclosed on all sides except the front, where the midwife does her work. Such chairs often had high backs, but not always, [58] especially when a servant could serve the same purpose. The woman with her back turned to us is rendered as heavier than either of her companions, and her unusual pose may not only hide the front of the birthing stool but also her swollen womb. What we may be seeing here, in sum, is the ceremonial preparation of the birthing kit.

[59] Moving to the left, the woman reading to the boy can easily be seen as a maternal moment, a mother participating actively in the education of her child. [60] Her right hand seems to hold a writing instrument, suggesting that she may be composing what her child is reading. The boy is shown in a rather asexual way, suggesting a child still clearly in the maternal, as opposed to masculine, world. [61] Her left hand holds another scroll in such a way as to call attention to her womb. The drapery in this region is rendered rather oddly, falling forward as opposed to hugging the lines of her body. It may be another discrete reference to pregnancy. One can even see the scene as a mother instructing one child in the prophecy concerning his fate, while holding the prophecy of the growing child in her womb. This mother re-enters the process of childbearing secure in the knowledge that she has already provided a living male, who has past the dangerous period of infancy.

Both of the women on either side of the reading woman are shown almost in full profile, the only examples of the frieze. Both also seem to have swollen bellies. [62] The odd position of the veiled woman, both in her bent right arm and her adjustment of her fabric, like the gesture of a bride but not quite, both call attention to and conceal her womb area. [63] The three vertical stripes of her dress emphasize that her girth is extended past where it normally would fall. [64]

Similar emphasis is obtained through the heavy drapery around the belly of the woman on the right.

[65] Turning to the bride in her separate corner, De Grummond has already pointed out that the mirror is not aligned in such a way as to reflect the bride, but may represent a prophecy, read by the hairdresser who gazes at it. I would like to suggest that this prophecy is of a daughter, shown fully grown, who will continue the cycle of marriage and birth upon which the bride embarks.

[66] At this point my gathering of comparanda has followed a methodology I call “seeing stuff randomly in museums.” But even that has proven fruitful, as I will show by several examples. My first example is a sarcophagus in the Palazzo dei Conservatori that is decorated with scenes of Dionysus’ childhood. [67] Moving right to left, as the narrative does, we see three female figures apparently observing the scene to the left. One of them crouches with her hand elevated to pluck what appears to be fruit from a tray or shallow basket. [68] Next Nysa and presumably another nymph wash the baby god. Nysa wears her hair in a midwife’s cap and there is clear emphasis on fabric and flowing water. Behind Nysa another woman claps symbols. [69] The next scene involves a group of satyrs and fauns: the satyr seems to be raising a whip to strike a contorted faun, while the other faun holds a dish and raises his voice in prophecy. [70] In the final scene, Nysa and a Satyr play the roles of proud parents while baby Dionysus stands, fully frontal, wearing nothing but high boots. A satyr is adjusting one of these for him, while a nymph combs his hair. [71] This sarcophagus shares numerous elements with the Mysteries Frieze, all within the context of Dionysiac childhood.

[72] The parallels are not so close in my second example, but still worth noting. [71] Another decorative relief in the Palazzo dei Conservatori shows a woman, nude to the waist and with her hair in a wrap, gazing at a disembodied Silenus head, presumably a mask. Barely visible under a

tree is a goddess figure holding two torches, perhaps a goddess of childbirth. In the lower register nude youths await their initiation. One possible way to interpret this relief is to see a mother receiving or reliving the prophecy concerning her children below.

[74] Finally, and I am not sure yet what to do with this information, I would like to point out numerous points of correspondence between the Mysteries Frieze and the Niobe Sarcophagus in the Munich Glyptothek. [75] One figure rushes to the left, her arm up-thrown and cloak blown back, in terror at the appearance of the god of prophecy, Apollo. [76] An old servant, looking very much like a Silenus with his wild animal pelt and shepherd's crook, comforts a small male child, awkwardly positioned somewhat frontally. Several women in their suffering adopt the pose of dancing Maenads, their backs to the viewer. [77] A vengeful Artemis appears in a short chiton with a bare breast and a belted quiver. [78] And finally, Niobe herself holds her cloak upward, while her suffering daughter lies across her lap, her bare back exposed. [79] Normally I would discount this as a coincidence of stock types. But the Niobe and daughter pose is relatively uncommon, [80] and we have here again a myth with themes of motherhood, suffering, and prophecy interwoven.

To conclude. I realize that there is no smoking gun here, and that everything I have described can be interpreted in a myriad different, even directly oppositional ways. But let us follow my logic regarding the Mysteries Frieze through. [81] What we would have is a frieze where the Domina, as De Grummond and others have suggested, gazes on a vision of a ritual undertaken, with prophetic tablets in hand. But the vision here is the journey of motherhood. A woman enters into the full bloom of pregnancy. She continues her duties and joys as a mother to her existing child. She bears thanks offerings to the gods that culminate in the ceremonial preparation of the

birthing equipment. [82] She enters into the realm of Dionysus, a world friendly to mothers, and receives the startling prophecy of her child's fate. [83] She bears the even more terrifying prospect of labor, followed by a celebration of a happy delivery and the freeing of her body by the god of overcoming bounds. This is, in other words, what I imagine I will look and feel like when I finally lose the baby weight. [84] A new bride sees her prophesized daughter and the cycle continues.

What would be the significance of shifting or overlying the focus to motherhood, rather than marriage? And I must reiterate once again that the two concepts cannot be separated in the Roman world, and I am suggesting a shift in emphasis, rather than a total sea change. On a basic level, seeing motherhood as a dominant theme could open wider the relevance of the life event being celebrated. Marriage, after all, was supposed to be a one-time event. Childbirth in contrast was frequent and ongoing, an ever renewed cycle. Indeed, without reliance on dependable birth control, childbearing was a constant feature of female life, possibly happening every year or so, with pregnancies in between. Seeing the Mysteries Room as celebrating motherhood would be to see it as celebrating a dominant and persistent concern of female life.

[85] To move to a more literal concern, childbirth would be a repetitive event that needed to occur somewhere. Roman advising texts on childbirth stress the need for a calm, positive environment for the delivering mother. A spacious room in a private part of the villa, with wide openings to refreshing sea air, surrounded by images of divine sanction of the triumph through the pain of childbirth—I will just say that that would be much nicer than any labor and delivery room I've been in. If there were multiple women in a household, or if women returned to their maternal family for pregnancies, a room used for birthing could get frequent use. I have no evidence yet to support this, but I would not be surprised if elite Roman women, like women in

numerous cultures and time periods, engaged in a practice of confinement, where they would retreat to special secluded living quarters, often in the country, to await the birth during the last few months of pregnancy. This practice was not only social, to conceal the not so pleasant last months, but also logistical, since pregnant women need rest and easy access to midwives for the delivery, especially when premodern estimates of gestation had a two-month standard deviation.

Brenda has argued that access patterns to Room 5 suggest that events that took part there were pre-planned, occasional, and required some sort of staging support, which took place in the adjoining Room 4. A birthing and/or confinement suite would fit these requirements. I will also mention that Roman women seem to have labored in different positions according to stage, eventually moving to the birthing chair when the pushing arrived. For the earliest of these stages the woman was supposed to lie on a hard bed, perhaps like the benches in Room 4.

I will not go on record here and argue that the Mysteries Room was necessarily a room used exclusively for childbearing. But if you wanted to use it for that purpose, it would have some advantages. Childbearing was ultimately a life event where the stakes were terribly high, literally life and death for the woman and child. [86] In the myths of Meleager and Niobe, life, death, and motherhood were all entwined. Women could give life and it could be taken away. But it was also an empowering moment, where a woman could bring forth new life through suffering and the risk of death. If women were the recipients of prophecies regarding birth, then this was a chance for women to be directly engaged with the will of the gods. A birth, furthermore, was a communal moment, when women came together to literally surround and support their most vulnerable members.

[87] Unlike marriage, childbirth was a ritual that primarily involved women, almost to the exclusion of men. Doctors and treatise writers could be men, but texts and the epigraphic record



make clear that professional midwives were almost always women. Some of these women wrote their own treatises. If the Mysteries Frieze celebrates motherhood and childbearing, sometimes in somewhat graphic and emphatic terms, then this would be a rare instance where considerable time, talent, and treasure has been devoted to a particularly woman's issue. Taken in light of the significant record of powerful women in Pompeii, it is not unthinkable that this should be the case. We should maybe consider that at least in this instance birth could be presented not as something shameful to take place in the shadows, but as a triumph of womanhood that put them in touch with the gods.