

Some Remarks on Titian and Bellini at Ferrara

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Some Remarks on TITIAN and BELLINI at Ferrara¹

The subject of this paper constitutes part of a larger study in preparation concerned with the question of thematic and formal relationships between the paintings executed by Titian, Giovanni Bellini and Dosso Dossi for the Camerino d'Alabastro, Duke Alfonso d'Este's study in the Castle of Ferrara.²

My discussion here will be limited to two particular problems: first the relationship between the *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (Fig. 1) by Titian and the *Feast of the Gods* (Fig. 2) by Giovanni Bellini. The view that Titian had planned and executed his *Andrians* as a competition panel to the work of the older master will be substantiated through the presentation of a considerable number of formal and thematic similarities which cannot be explained otherwise.

Further in the paper I shall discuss the reasons which motivated Titian to overpaint, at a later date, a large part of the background of the *Feast of the Gods* with a new landscape of his own.

The competitive character of the *Andrians* has already been mentioned by a number of scholars. As John Walker points out: "But above all, it seems to have been Titian's ambition to compete

with Bellini at Ferrara. Like Rasnar Brovic in Ibsen's *Master Builder*, he was the younger generation crying 'Make room, make room'."³

It is obvious that Titian seized a good opportunity to show his brilliance and thus enlarge his artistic "Lebensraum". Bellini was dead and he could not counter the younger artist's move with another work. On the other hand the older master had never been really at home with mythological subjects of this nature and it is very probable that he accepted to paint the *Feast of the Gods* without great enthusiasm.

The *Andrians*, probably painted around 1520, are thematically very near to the *Feast of the Gods* which was completed in 1514. This similarity of subject matter — which was not on hand in the case of the *Feast of Venus*, his first painting for the Camerino — gave Titian the long awaited opportunity for a direct confrontation with the Bellinian work.

A comparison between the two works, hanging for many decades side by side on the walls of Alfonso's study, shows clearly how close Titian followed up thematically the old master in order to prove his superiority in as many ways as possible.

Both paintings receive their light from the left and a stream runs across the forefront in both. While the light in Bellini's panel conforms to the rather static, peaceful character of the composition, in the *Andrians* it plays a dramatic role following up and intensifying the frenetic burst of energy which characterizes the work. When one looks at the cool transparent water of the creek and the almost bare ground behind it in the *Feast of the Gods*, one can barely compare it with the reddish glow of the wine stream in the *Andrians*, with its light reflections on the thick grass carpet covering

1. The completion of this study has been made possible through a travel grant of McGill University. A summary of the contents has been presented as a paper at the annual meeting of the UAAC in Toronto in February, 1975 (Session 4).

2. The major publications dealing specifically with the pictorial decoration of the Camerino d'Alabastro are the following:
E. Wind, *Bellini's Feast of the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948);
J. Walker, *Bellini and Titian at Ferrara* (London, 1956);
E. Battisti, "Mitologie per Alfonso d'Este," in *Rinascimento e Barocco* (Milan, 1960), 112-145;
Ch. Hope, "The Camerino d'Alabastro of Alfonso d'Este," in *The Burlington Magazine*, 113 (1971), 641-650 and 712-721.

3. J. Walker, *op. cit.*, 31.



FIGURE 1. Titian, *Bacchanal of the Andrians*. Madrid, Prado.

the foreground and on the surface of the heavy drinking cup. Here light and colour are applied in a masterly way to unite and articulate dramatically the different components of the composition. In Bellini's work colour is designed to underline the static, serene character of the painting.

In both works a sleeping half nude female figure, with white garments occupies the lower right hand corner. Titian painted the girl resting her lovely head on a bronze amphora in an attitude of total abandonment. She is loosely holding an empty cup in her left hand. In Bellini's work a wooden bucket and an empty cup lie beside the sleeping beauty. The sensuous character of Titian's nude, his superb treatment of the female body have been already

compared to the virginal appearance of the old master's halfnude.⁴

A retreating figure with a wine container is painted at the extreme left of both compositions. Here also the muscular tension of Titian's man, who is carrying a heavy bronze stamnos on his back — certainly full of wine — contrasts sharply with Bellini's satyr balancing a rather small ewer on his head.

The dancing bearded man in the centre of the *Andrians* seems to me to be a rough mirror image of Bellini's Pan. Again here the full volume of the

4. J. Walker, *op. cit.*, 71.

ecstatic dancer creates an antithesis to the less pronounced, flat figure of Pan.

The figure of the young man on the left side stretching out to draw wine from the flowing stream is conceived in a spirit quite alien to the serene obedience of the young boy drawing white wine from a barrel in a corresponding position in the *Feast of the Gods*.

Flutes, although not mentioned in the corresponding passages of Ovid's *Fasti* and Philostratos' *Eicones* — the literary sources of the paintings — are musical instruments displayed in both works. Titian seems to follow the example of the *Feast of the Gods* in this detail as well.

In Bellini's panel Apollo receives a cup of wine offered to him by Ceres, while in the centre of Titian's composition a reclining young woman has her wine container refilled by a young man with a magnificent nude body. Apart from the reversal of the sexes we have here a clear demonstration of Titian's ability to create intricate figural compositions as opposed to Bellini's rather static "inventions".

The introduction at the right side of the *Bacchanal* of the little boy with his uncovered tiny genitals, in a position roughly similar to that of Priap with his well covered generous genitals, was possibly intended as a humorous note by Titian.



FIGURE 2. Giovanni Bellini, *Feast of the Gods*. Washington, National Gallery (Widener Collection).

Priap supports himself with his left arm on the trunk of a tree while approaching Vesta. In the *Andrians* a young man is holding the trunk of a tree with his right arm looking longingly at the sleeping nude.

In Bellini's work a nymph is carrying a wine jar on her head. In a roughly corresponding place in his canvas, Titian introduces the glorious figure of the dancing man balancing a glass pitcher in his right hand.

One empty silver cup lies on the ground in front of Mercury. Two drinking cups are painted by Titian in a similar position in the foreground of the *Andrians*.

Finally both paintings contain seventeen figures in the foreground.

It is possible that further investigation could uncover more formal and thematic correspondences than the thirteen discussed in this paper.

I would like at this point to draw the attention of the reader to the relationship which possibly exists between the strongly competitive character of Titian's *Bacchanal* and its date of creation. The painting generally has been placed chronologically between the *Feast of Venus* and the *Bacchus and Ariadne*.

Some years ago the idea was put forth that the *Bacchanal* was the last work Titian created for the Duke's Camerino.⁵ Arguments on both sides, based mainly on the rather scanty and controversial documentary evidence, have not proven conclusive in my opinion.

On the other hand if Titian painted the *Andrians* as his last work for the Duke, many years after the death of Bellini, and at a time when he was responsible for the final arrangement of the Camerino paintings, it would be logical to assume that he was more inclined to produce a work harmonizing with the others already there, like his *Bacchus and Ariadne*, rather than create a highly competitive composition like the *Andrians*.

So it seems more probable that the *Andrians* were created at an earlier date, when the master was not responsible for the overall aesthetic and iconographic concept of the Camerino and enjoyed more freedom in the elaboration of his composition.

In summary I think that it is clear that in his *Bacchanal of the Andrians* Titian tried to demonstrate his artistic excellence by competing with Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* not only in general

terms but in several thematic and formal details as well. It is as if the arising young Venetian Cinquecento is challenging the late Quattrocento with the confidence and exuberance of youth.

Unfortunately it is very difficult today to draw any conclusions about the comparative qualities of the two masterpieces, since some years later the *Feast of the Gods* underwent substantial alterations, ironically enough by the hand of Titian. These alterations considerably modified its initial character. It is as if Titian himself wanted to change the relationship between the two panels from a status of competition to one of "peaceful coexistence". This later "harmonizing" of the two works explains in part the fact that the strongly competitive character of the *Andrians* has not been systematically investigated before.

In his fundamental study on the pictorial decoration of the Camerino John Walker devotes a whole chapter to the significance of the changes Titian introduced in the canvas of Bellini.⁶ He suggests that the main reason for the massive intervention was a wish to modernize the already old-fashioned style of Bellini and at the same time demonstrate his artistic superiority. Finally, the author finds that for the most part the results of the alterations have been aesthetically successful.

I have strong reservations about this last view. I find that by introducing a different style, Titian created a dichotomy between landscape and figures to the detriment of the aesthetic unity of the work. The master must have been well aware of this fact. Is it possible that considerations of a different nature led to the extensive intervention?

One baffling question connected with the *Feast of the Gods* is the result of the discovery, through the help of X rays, that the picture has had three backgrounds.⁷ First, the original one, painted by Bellini with tall slender trees extending across the canvas, similar to his *Orpheus* also in Washington. Then, another landscape, with heavy shrubbery in the middle distance and a hilly landscape behind it has been painted over the first one, covering approximately two thirds of the length of the background. The right side of the composition has been left in its original form. The creator of the second background has not yet been identified, though the names of Dosso Dossi and Titian have been suggested.⁸ The third and last background with the magnificent mountainous landscape has

5. C. Gould, *The Studio of Alfonso d'Este and Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne* (London, 1969); Ch. Hope, *op. cit.*

6. J. Walker, *op. cit.*, 63ff.

7. J. Walker, *op. cit.*, 48ff.

8. E. Battisti, *op. cit.*, 119 and J. Walker, *op. cit.*, 48ff.

been attributed to Titian on stylistic and documentary evidence.

The reasons behind these repeated overpaintings are not clear. The first alteration, substituting a great part of the Bellinian screen of trees through a hilly landscape, could well have been undertaken in an effort to harmonize this part of the background of the *Feast of the Gods* with the right side of the *Andrians*, the painting hanging on the left side of the Bellinian work.

At this point the fundamental question arises why Titian decided at a later date to overpaint the

hilly landscape with a mountain, which does not harmonize as well with the background of the neighbouring *Andrians* as the second version did.

It is interesting to note in this respect that although Titian modified substantially the landscape in the left and in the middle of the composition he made only minor additions on the right side. These additions, resulting in an increase in the extent and density of the foliage, help to create harmony between the landscape of the *Feast of the Gods* and the landscape of Titian's *Feast of Venus* (Fig. 3), the painting originally hanging on the right of the Bellinian canvas.

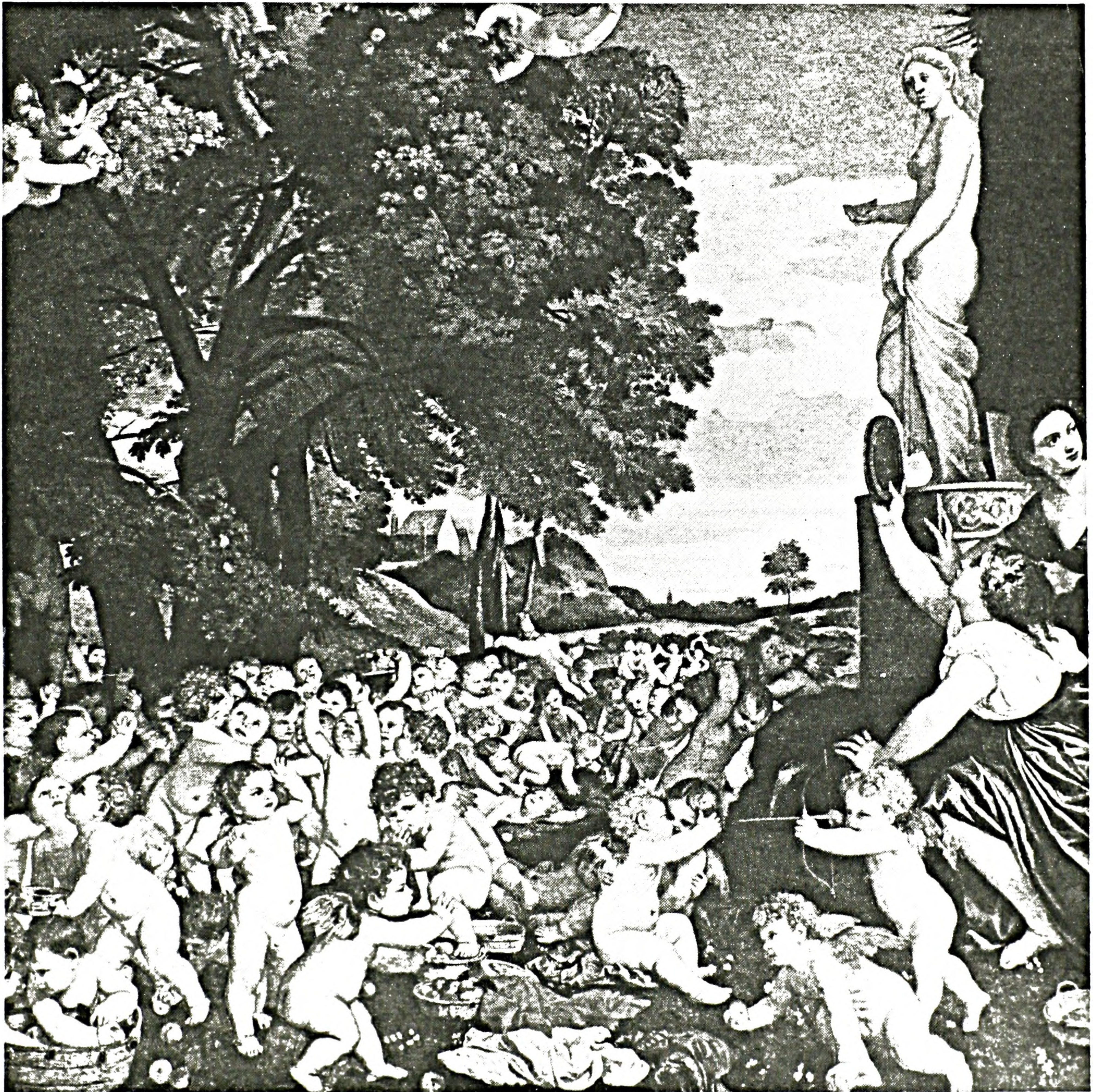


FIGURE 3. Titian, *Feast of Venus*. Madrid, Prado.

I am convinced that here lies the explanation of the second intervention. It is well known that the *Feast of the Gods* was inspired by two passages in Ovid's *Fasti* (I, 391ff and VI, 319ff). The story of Priap's unsuccessful amorous adventure is basically the same in both texts with some minor differences. One of these differences is of paramount importance within the framework of the present study. Here are the relevant parts of both passages in English translation:⁹

"A young ass, too, is slain in honour of the stiff guardian of the country-side: the cause is shameful, but beseems the god. A feast of ivy-berried Bacchus, thou wast wont to hold, O Greece, a feast which the third winter brought about at the appointed time. Thither came, too, the gods who wait upon Lyaeus and all the jocund crew, Pans and young amorous Satyrs, and goddesses that haunt rivers and lonely wilds. Thither, too, came old Silenus on an ass with hollow back, and the Crimson One who by his lewd image scares the timid birds. They lit upon a dingle meet for joyous wassails, and there they laid them down on grassy beds. Liber bestowed the wine: each had brought his garland: a stream supplied water in plenty to dilute the wine." (Ovid's *Fasti*, I, 391-404.)

"Shall I pass over or relate thy disgrace, rubicund Priapus? It is a short story, but a very

merry one. Cybele, whose brow is crowned with a coronet of towers, invited the eternal gods to her feast. She invited also the satyrs and those rural divinities, the nymphs. Silenus came, though nobody had asked him. It is unlawful, and it would be tedious, to narrate the banquet of the gods: the livelong night was passed in deep potations. Some roamed at haphazard in the vales of shady Ida; some lay and stretched their limbs at ease on the soft grass; some played; some slept; some, arm linked in arm, thrice beat with rapid foot the verdant ground." (Ovid's *Fasti*, VI, 319-330.)

The crucial difference between the two texts — in relation to the present study — is the following: In the first passage Bacchus is the host and the locality of the feast remains anonymous, somewhere in Greece. This passage served as the main source of inspiration to Bellini. In the second of Ovid's texts the hostess is the goddess Cybele, prominently placed in the painting, and the locality is Mount Ida and surrounding vales. Mount Ida was well known in antiquity as a place of veneration to Cybele.¹⁰ More importantly, it is located on Crete, an island which together with Naxos is very closely linked to the story of Theseus, Ariadne and Bacchus.¹¹

In my opinion, Titian intended through his last intervention to emphasize that the locality of the *Feast of the Gods* was the island of Crete.¹² In that way the subject matter of Bellini's painting could be linked iconographically to the story of *Bacchus and Ariadne* — Titian's last painting for the Camerino — and also very probably to the *Bacchanal of the Andrians*.¹³

In the larger study in preparation, which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I intend to show how the competitive character of the *Andrians* and the fact that iconographic considerations motivated the intervention of Titian in the Bellinian masterpiece can be used to throw new light on some of the fundamental problems related to the pictorial decoration of the Camerino d'Alabastro.

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9. Translation by Sir James George Frazer, The Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1931).

10. Luciani, *Dialogi Deorum*, 12.

11. The building on the top of the mountain seems to me to resemble to ruins of a sanctuary, probably an allusion to the holy character of a mountain dedicated to the veneration of Cybele. (Comp. Strabo, 575, 589, 619.)

12. Further support to this view comes also through some of the minor alterations by Titian in the work of Bellini. On the slopes of the mountain he painted two satyrs, one holding an amphora and accompanied by a dog. One may argue that these figures have been added as a counterpart to a similar figure in the middle distance of the *Andrians*. On the other hand the satyrs could well have been placed there to illustrate Ovid's phrase: "some roamed at haphazard in the vales of shady Ida." (*Fasti*, VI, 327.)

13. It is indeed extraordinary how closely some parts of the description of the feast of the gods in Ovid fit the iconography of the *Bacchanal of the Andrians*: "Some roamed at haphazard in the vales of shady Ida; some lay and stretched their limbs at ease on the soft grass; some played; some slept; some, arm linked in arm, thrice beat with rapid foot the verdant ground." (*Fasti*, VI, 327-330.)