

# THE MOUSE THAT MICHELANGELO FAILED TO CARVE

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## I

Whatever esoteric meanings may be attached to Michelangelo's *Four Times of Day* in the Medici Chapel, certain it is that their direct or overt purpose was to symbolize the destructive power of Time. This we learn from two unimpeachable sources: a few lines jotted down by Michelangelo himself, presumably in 1523; and a statement in his biography published in 1553 by his faithful disciple, Ascanio Condivi, and largely based on his own recollections.

The Michelangelo fragment reads—or, rather, begins—as follows: “Day and Night speak and say: with our swift course we have led Duke Giuliano to his death.”<sup>1</sup> Condivi gives the following description: “The statues are four in number, placed in a sacristy . . . the sarcophagi are placed before the side walls, and on the lids of each there recline two big figures, larger than life, to wit, a man and a woman; they signify Day and Night and, in conjunction, Time which devours all things.”<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the absence of the personal reference to Giuliano de' Medici, Condivi's statement

<sup>1</sup> K. Frey, *Die Dichtungen des Michelagnolo Buonarroto*, Berlin, 1897, XVII (reprinted, with the numbering unchanged, in A. Foratti, pref. and ed., *Michelangelo: Le Rime*, Milan, 1921, p. 22); for the presumable date, see Frey, “Studien zu Michelagnolo, II,” *Jahrbuch der Kgl. preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, XVII, 1896, pp. 5ff., and H. Thode, *Michelangelo; Kritische Untersuchungen über seine Werke*, Berlin, 1908, I, p. 501f.: “Il Di e la Notte parlano e dicono: Noi abbiamo col nostro veloce corso condotto alla morte il Duca Giuliano.” The text continues as follows: “It is just that he has taken his revenge as he has done, and this is his revenge: after we had killed him he, thus dead, deprived us of the light, and with his closed eyes he sealed ours so that they no longer shine upon the earth; what, then, would he have made of us had he lived”? This truly Mannerist play upon the idea that the eyes of a dead person have power just because they are closed (here employed in a spirit of almost servile adulation) recurs in no less than five of the fifty epitaphs on Cecchino Bracci (Frey, LXXIII, I, 11, 15, 32, 46) and cannot be used to prove the authenticity of the Edinburgh wax copy after the statue of Giuliano de' Medici which shows him with his head inclined and shadowed (A. E. Popp, *Die Medici-Kapelle Michelangelos*, Munich, 1922, p. 165, fig. 38). What the fragment does prove, as justly pointed out by C. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, Princeton, 1948, III (*The Medici Chapel*), p. 131, is that Michelangelo always intended the figures of Day and Night for the Tomb of Duke Giuliano (where they are placed today) and not for the Tomb of the Magnifici, which remained unexecuted.

<sup>2</sup> K. Frey, ed., *Le Vite di Michelangelo Buonarroto scritte da Giorgio Vasari e da Ascanio Condivi*, Berlin, 1887, p. 134f.: “Le statue son quattro, poste in una sagrestia . . . L'arche son poste avanti alle facciate laterali, sopra il coperchio delle quali giacciono due figuroni maggiori del naturale, cioè un uomo e una donna, significandosi per queste il Giorno e la Notte, e per ambidue il Tempo che consuma il tutto.” Cf. Thode, *op. cit.*, I, p. 502f.; De Tolnay, *op. cit.*, III, p. 135f.

parallels Michelangelo's own: in both cases only Day and Night are mentioned as the operative manifestations of all-destructive Time, while Dawn and Dusk (though alluded to in Condivi's "the figures are four in number") are not mentioned by name. But Condivi has more to tell. "And so that this his purpose might be better understood," he continues, "he added to the [figure of] Night, appearing in the guise of a woman of admirable beauty, the owl and other symbols concordant therewith, and likewise to the [figure of] Day its [appropriate] attributes. And in order to signify Time he planned to make a mouse, having left a bit of marble upon the work (which [plan] he subsequently did not carry out because he was prevented by circumstances), because this little animal ceaselessly gnaws and consumes just as time devours everything."<sup>3</sup>

Condivi, having no first-hand knowledge of the Medici Chapel (*fig. 1*), committed a slight inaccuracy in speaking of the "attributes" (*note*) of the figure of Day which has no attributes at all;<sup>4</sup> nor is he quite clear as to the exact location of the "bit of marble" which Michelangelo is said to have reserved for the mouse.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, just this absence of first-hand knowledge which lends credibility to what he tells us about the Master's intentions: had he visited the Medici Chapel he—or a guide—might have invented the mouse in order to account for the little "bits" of uncarved stone. As it is, we have a right to assume that he repeats what he was told by Michelangelo.

## II

The idea that human life is brought nearer to its close with every night and every day, combined with the thought that small rodents may be employed as symbols of all-consuming Time (and, therefore, all-consuming Death), brings to mind one of the best-known and most impressive attempts to describe "la condition humaine" in the guise of a parable. Told by Barlaam, the wise old sage, to Josaphat, the beautiful young prince, this parable—formerly attributed to John of Damascus<sup>6</sup>—compares the behavior of most human beings to that of a

<sup>3</sup> Condivi, *ibid.*: "E perchè tal suo proposito meglio fosse inteso, messe alla Notte, ch' è fatta in forma di donna di maravigliosa bellezza, la civetta ed altri segni a ciò accomodati; così al Giorno le sue note; e per la significazione del Tempo voleva fare un topo, avendo lasciato in sù l'opera un poco di marmo (il quale poi non fece, impedito), perciocchè tale animaluccio di continuo rode e consuma, non altrimenti chel tempo ogni cosa divora." The "impedito" would seem to refer to Michelangelo's final and rather hurried break with Florence in 1533–1534 (cf. De Tolnay, *op. cit.*, III, p. 13).

<sup>4</sup> That De Tolnay, *op. cit.*, III, p. 138, accuses Condivi of not mentioning the *Giorno* at all is the more difficult to understand as he reprints Condivi's text on p. 135 f.

<sup>5</sup> The text does not specify whether the mouse was to be attached to the figure of Night or to that of Day; but I personally strongly incline to favor the first alternative because the mouse is a nocturnal animal and because Condivi's "così al Giorno le sue note" gives the impression of an insertion which is not meant to interrupt the flow of a narrative mainly devoted to the more famous figure of Night. Nor is it clear whether the "in sù" means "in the upper area of" or merely "upon." In the first case the place of the mouse could have been only above the mask on which the *Notte* rests her left shoulder; in the second, it would be possible to think either of the uncarved pieces projecting beyond the right foot of the *Notte* or—should one decide to connect the mouse with the *Giorno*—of the uncarved pieces beneath the left hand and the right knee of the latter.

<sup>6</sup> The Greek text is found in *Patrologia Graeca*, XCVI, cols. 859 ff., particularly cols. 976–978, and was critically edited by G. P. Woodward and H. Mattingly, ed. and tr., *St. John Damascene, Barlaam and Josaphat*, New York, 1914 (new edition, Cambridge [Mass.], 1953). A resumé of the literature up to 1952 is found in G. de Francovich, *Benedetto Antelami*, Milan and Rome, 1952, pp. 211 ff. To be added:

man who, pursued by a mad unicorn, climbs a tree where he believes himself to be safe. Looking down, he perceives two mice (in later versions often replaced by "rats" or simply by "little beasts"), one black, the other white, which continuously gnaw at the base of the tree and have gone far with their destructive work. Still farther down, he sees a horrid dragon, observing him with greedy eyes and opening its mouth in anticipation. Four asps lurking in the masonry beneath the tree intensify his fright.<sup>7</sup> Looking up, on the other hand, he realizes that the tree distills sweet honey (μέλι, in later versions mostly replaced by "fruits"). So he foolishly delights in the sweetness of the world (symbolized by the tree), forgetting death (symbolized by the unicorn), the "terrible maws of Hell" (symbolized by the dragon), and the instability of the elements (symbolized by the four asps). Oblivious of all this—and particularly of the two mice which stand for Day and Night, each of them bringing him nearer to death—he entirely abandons himself to the thoughtless enjoyment of life.

Though artistic representations of this engaging tale (*fig. 2*)<sup>8</sup> are more frequent in the Northern countries than in Italy, they are by no means absent from the Italian scene, the best-known example being Benedetto Antelami's south portal of the Baptistery at Parma;<sup>9</sup> even in Michelangelo's Florence the story was popular enough to be alluded to in a *Triumph of Time* attributed to Jacopo del Sellaio (d. 1493), where two little beasts, one white, one black, are seen gnawing, instead of the tree, the support of a sundial on top of which the figure of Father Time is perched.<sup>10</sup>

Yet we have reasons to doubt that the Barlaam and Josaphat story was uppermost in Michelangelo's mind when he conceived the mouse. From his point of view a medieval

J. Sonet, *Le roman de Barlaam et Josaphat*, Namur and Paris, 1949–1952 (with complete bibliography); *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, Stuttgart, IV, cols. 1504 ff., particularly 1533f. (s.v. "Einhorn"); F. Dölger, *Der griechische Barlaam-Roman; Ein Werk des h. Johannes von Damaskus*, Ettal, 1953; H. Peri (Pflaum), *Der Religionsdisput der Barlaam-Legende; Ein Motiv abendländischer Dichtung* (Acta Salmanticensia, Filosofia y Letras, XIV, 3), Salamanca, 1959 (ascribing the Greek version traditionally attributed to John of Damascus to Euthymos [tenth century]). Peri, who believes the parable to be of Hindu origin, distinguishes between two Latin versions (one of 1048, the other of the twelfth century), of which the later was the foundation of nine versions in Italian, eight in Old French (the most popular one edited by C. Appel, *Gui von Cambray, Balaham und Josaphas*, Halle, 1907), five in Spanish, and one in German verse (by Rudolf von Ems, ca. 1230). In addition, the parable—known in French as the "Dict de l'Unicorne" or the "Moralité des Besteletes"—is frequently retold outside its original context, for example in the *Golden Legend*, CLXXX (in Graesse's edition, p. 816) or in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum morale*, I, 1, 20, etc.

<sup>7</sup> In the later versions of the tale these asps tend to be omitted.

<sup>8</sup> Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 729 (Psalter of Yolande de Soissons, North French, probably written about 1275), fol. 354v. The miniature is apparently based upon the Gui de Cambray version since the two tree-gnawing animals are not characterized as either mice or rats, the asps are absent and the honey is replaced by fruit. In Germany the tale was elaborated into a complicated riddle the solution of which is "the year": the tree has twelve branches (months), each branch thirty nests (days), each nest twenty-four eggs (hours), and the birds cry sixty-two times, once for each minute; the tree is gnawed by a black and a white rat; and a cat, which here replaces the unicorn, symbolizes both Death and Time ("der todt oder die zeyt") which ultimately devour everything. Cf. E. Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, XVIII), Leipzig and Berlin, 1930, p. 92; further, W. Fränger, *Altdeutsches Bilderbuch, Hans Weiditz und Sebastian Brant*, Leipzig, 1930, pp. 100ff.

<sup>9</sup> De Francovich, *loc. cit.*, and figs. 255–257.

<sup>10</sup> Fiesole, Oratorio di S. Ansano. See P. Schubring, *Cassoni*, Berlin, 1915, pl. LXXXVI; E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, New York, 1939 and 1962, p. 80f., fig. 55.

morality—which, so far as I know, had never invaded the sphere of funerary sculpture in Italy—<sup>11</sup> would hardly have been a respectable source. And where this morality introduces the two little rodents as specific symbols of Day and Night and conveys the general concept of Time or Death by a huge monster, originally a unicorn,<sup>12</sup> Michelangelo expresses the ideas of Day and Night by over-life-sized human figures while making his little mouse the one and only representative of “all-devouring Time.” He must have had a classical source, or sources, in which the mouse appears as the destructive principle *per se*, and preferably within a funerary context.

### III

Looking about for sources of this kind, and turning first to texts, we are not surprised to find that the image of the mouse, like nearly all symbols, can carry many different meanings. The name of the small, cuddly and graceful animal was used as a term of endearment in Latin as it is in most modern languages, and on the modest memorial plaque of a girl named Ilara in the cemetery of Priscilla at Rome the name of the dead girl is followed by a tiny mouse apparently indicating an affectionate nickname (*signum*): “Ilara, quae et mus.”<sup>13</sup> White mice—though only white mice—were considered as favorable omens (for mice were considered *μαντικώτατοι τῶν ζώων*); there were those who derived the word “mysteries” from *μῦς*;<sup>14</sup> and tame mice were permitted to nest beneath the altar of Apollo Smintheus (or Sminthios).<sup>15</sup> The Egyptian Priest-King Sethos erected a statue to Hephaestus, which showed the god carrying a mouse and exhibited the inscription “Learn from me how to be pious and worshipful” (fig. 3), because Hephaestus had saved the Egyptians from an invading Assyrian army by sending innumerable mice who devoured the enemy’s bows and shield straps as well as all other leather equipment.<sup>16</sup> And a well-known fable tells us of the little mouse who, spared by a hungry lion, later on saved the latter’s life by gnawing through the net into which he had fallen.<sup>17</sup>

These favorable implications of the mouse are, however, only the positive aspect of its basically weird and harmful qualities: its swift and stealthy movement; its nocturnal and

<sup>11</sup> Even in the Northern countries only one instance of this kind, the tomb of Adelaïs de Champagne in St.-Jean at Joigny (Yonne), has come to light thus far (L. Pillion, “Un tombeau français du 13<sup>e</sup> siècle et l’apologue de Barlaam sur la vie humaine,” *Revue de l’art ancien et moderne*, XXVIII, 1910, pp. 321 ff.); and here the representation follows the Gui de Cambrai version, with the mice replaced by nondescript “besteteles.”

<sup>12</sup> For a German poem in which the unicorn has been replaced by a cat, see above, note 8.

<sup>13</sup> For the use of *mus* as a term of endearment, see Martial *Epigrammata* XI. 29, 3: “Nam cum me murem, cum me tua lumina dicis” (“For when you call me ‘mouse’ or ‘apple of my eye’”). For the memorial plaque of Ilara, see J. Wilpert, “La Croce sui monumenti delle catacombe,” *Nuovo bollettino di archeologia cristiana*, VIII, 1902, pp. 5 ff., particularly p. 13 and fig. 9 (illustrated also in Cabrol and Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne*, 1907, I, 2, fig. 561).

<sup>14</sup> Aelian *Variae historiae* I. 11, cited, e.g., in Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopaedie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, XIV, 2, col. 2406 (s.v. “Maus”); cf. also J. Blochwitz, *Kulturgeschichtliche Studien* . . . , Leipzig, 1882, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Aelian *De natura animalium* XII. 5; cf. Pauly-Wissowa, *op. cit.*, II, col. 68 f. (s.v. “Apollo”).

<sup>16</sup> Herodotus *Historiae* II. 141. Our fig. 3, showing how an Italian artist of ca. 1570 reconstructed the image of Hephaestus (Vulcan) from this description, comes from V. Cartari, *Le Imagini de i Dei de gli Antichi*, Venice, 1571, p. 393; the Herodotus text is translated *ibidem*, p. 389.

<sup>17</sup> Babrius, *Fabulae Aesopaeae*, 107 (O. Crusius, ed., Leipzig, 1897, p. 97 f.).

subterranean way of life; and, above all, its illimited power of destruction. Mice were kept not only in the Temple of Apollo Smintheus but also in that of Nephtys, the Egyptian goddess of Night.<sup>18</sup> Athena hated them because they, greedy and fond of darkness, damaged the garlands in her temples and broke the lamps, lapping up the oil.<sup>19</sup> And Scopas' cult image of the same Apollo Smintheus who tolerated mice beneath his altar, showed him with a mouse at his feet.<sup>20</sup>

This motif, we are told, was meant to glorify the subdual of the mice's "conspiracy" against the crops of the region or, according to another version, to commemorate the founding of the town of Hamaxitus by Cretan refugees who, like the foes of Sethos, found their weapons ruined by mice but saw therein the fulfillment of a Delphic Oracle which had enjoined them to found their new city "where 'the earth-born' (οἱ γηγενεῖς) would make war against them."<sup>21</sup> But we have a right to assume that the Scopasian image was also intended to illustrate the triumph of light over darkness and to allude to the mysterious connection which was felt to exist between the appearance of mice or rats and the outbreak of a plague which only Apollo was able to send as well as to heal—the very connection which is hinted at in the Biblical description of the Plague at Ashdod: "And the villages and fields in the midst of that country boiled over, and there came forth mice, and there arose the confusion of multitudinous death in the City."<sup>22</sup> In short, the same power by which the tiny animals delivered King Sethos from his enemies, encouraged the Cretan refugees to settle down at Hamaxitus and saved the lion in the fable is thought of as purely destructive and ill-boding in most other classical sources: "religious fears" were aroused when mice had nibbled at a golden wreath at Antium in 203 B.C.;<sup>23</sup> and the Marsian War of 91 B.C. was held to have been announced by the fact that mice

<sup>18</sup> Blochwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>19</sup> Pseudo-Homer, *Batrachomyomachia*, line 179f., quoted in R. H. Howland, *The Athenian Agora . . .*, IV (*Greek Lamps and Their Survivals*), Princeton, 1958, p. 79, n. 73: . . . ἐπεὶ κακὰ πολλὰ μ' ἔοργαν Στέμματα βλάπτοντες καὶ λύχνους εἴνεκ' ἑλαίου.

<sup>20</sup> Strabo *Geographica* XIII. 1, 48 (literally repeated in Eustathius, *Schol. in Iliad.*): καὶ τὸ σύμβολον τὸ τῆν ἐτυμότητᾳ τοῦ ὀνόματος ὠδῶνον, ὃ μῦς, ὑποκεῖται τῷ ποδὶ τοῦ ἑοάνου (viz., the foot of Scopas' cult image in the Temple of Apollo Smintheus at Chryse). See also J. A. Overbeck, *Die antiken Schriftquellen zur Geschichte der bildenden Künste bei den Griechen*, Leipzig, 1868, Nos. 1168, 1169; further, L. Lacroix, *Les reproductions de statues sur les monnaies grecques; La statuaire archaïque et classique*, Liège, 1949, pp. 76ff.; W. Wroth, *British Museum, Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Troas, Aeolis, and Lesbos*, London, 1894, pl. III, 6. Blochwitz, *op. cit.*, p. 154 (his statement repeated in Bächtold-Stäubli, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, VI, 1934-35, col. 43f.), avers that the mouse is also found "at the feet of pious servants of the Church" in medieval funerary monuments. He gives, however, no reference and I have been unable to find a monument of the kind described. The Christian successor to Apollo Smintheus is St. Gertrude of Nivelles.

<sup>21</sup> Aelian *De natura animalium* XII. 5; Strabo, *op. cit.*, XIII. 1, 48. The Middle Ages still believed that mice were born from the damp soil and connected the word *mus* with both *humus* and *humor*; see, e.g., T. H. White, *The Book of Beasts . . .*, New York, 1954, p. 91; or Johannes Balbus (d. 1298), *Catholicon*, s.v. "Mus": "Mus idem est quod terra . . . Alii dicunt mures quia ex humore terrae nascantur . . . Mures et ranas e terra gignari [should read *gigni*] videmus."

<sup>22</sup> I Reges 5.6: "Et ebullierunt villae et agri in medio regionis, et nati sunt mures, et facta est confusio mortis magnae in civitate." This sentence of the Vulgate is absent from I Samuel 5.6 in the Protestant versions though these retain the references to the "golden mice" which the Philistines had to offer for atonement (I Samuel 6.4; 11. 18). For representations of the Plague of Ashdod, see O. Neustetter, "Mice in Plague Pictures," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, IV, 1941, pp. 105ff.; for the fact that a connection between mice and plague was also sensed in classical antiquity, see Pauly-Wissowa, *op. cit.*, II, col. 68f. and XIV, 2, col. 2463.

<sup>23</sup> Livy *Historiae ab Urbe condita* XXX. 2, 10, referred to in Pauly-Wissowa, *op. cit.*, XIV, 2, col. 2406.

had gnawed up the shields kept at Lanuvium—a superstition delightfully ridiculed in Cicero's *De divinatione*.<sup>24</sup>

Small wonder, then, that that *fons et origo* of Renaissance emblematics, Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* (probably compiled in the fourth century A.D.), defines the mouse as the symbol of "destruction" or "annihilation" and sums up its characteristics as follows: "To denote destruction, they [the Egyptians] draw a mouse, since it devours all things, defiles them and makes them useless";<sup>25</sup> small wonder, too, that the two best-known compendia of Cinquecento symbolism, Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (first edition, Venice, 1556) and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (first edition, Rome, 1593) list it as either the symbol or an attribute of "Damage."<sup>26</sup>

#### IV

In art the interpretations of the mouse are, if anything, even more various than in the literary sources; but here, too, the sinister aspect of the little rodent prevails.

Apart from tiny works of sculpture-in-the-round, which seem to be pure genre,<sup>27</sup> and such facetious scenes as a weighing contest between a mouse and an elephant,<sup>28</sup> we find the mouse either as a special, uniquely determined attribute—as in Archelaus of Priene's *Apotheosis of*

<sup>24</sup> Cicero *De divinatione* II. 27, 59 (cf. also, *ibid.*, I. 41, 99), referred to in Pauly-Wissowa, *ibid.* "As if it mattered," says Cicero, "whether mice, which gnaw something day and night (*diem noctem aliquid rodentes*), devour shields or sieves! Following this line of thought, I should have been afraid for the Roman republic when mice in my house gnawed up, the other day, Plato's *Republic*; or if they had gnawed Epicure's *On Pleasure*, I should have thought that the price of grain would go up in the market."

<sup>25</sup> Horapollo *Hieroglyphica* I, 50. G. Boas, *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo* (Bollingen Series, XXIII), New York, 1950, p. 80, is not quite right in translating the ambiguous Greek word used in the original text ( $\delta\phi\alpha\nu\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\varsigma$ ) as "disappearance" instead of "destruction" or "annihilation." Such Renaissance translators as Caelius Rhodiginus, Willibald Pirckheimer and Pierio Valeriano correctly render it as *interitus*. See K. Giehlow, "Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance," *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, XXXII, 1915, pp. 166, 201: "Interitum autem ostendentes, murem depingunt, quoniam omnia corrodendo defedat et annihilat."

<sup>26</sup> Pierio Valeriano *Hieroglyphica* XIII. 31, s.v. "Detrimentum" (in the Lyons edition of 1626 and the Frankfurt edition of 1678, p. 133); Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, s.v. "Danno" (in the Roman edition of 1613, I, p. 164). Both Pierio Valeriano and (quoting him) Ripa cite the Cicero passage quoted in note 24, and Pierio Valeriano adds to Cicero's facetious references to Plato's *Republic* and Epicure's *On Pleasure* a delightfully tragi-comical experience of his own. When he had settled in Rome, he tells us, mice ruined first a Horace which he greatly cherished and then applied themselves, with equally disastrous results, to a Pindar. This portent, he concludes, should have shown him at once that Rome at the time was not a place "favorable to the Muses and the more agreeable studies"; but it was only after twenty years of misery that he had come to understand the message of the mice and was freed from Rome through the liberality of his disciple, Ippolito Cardinal de'Medici.

<sup>27</sup> S. Reinach, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine*, Paris, 1913, IV, pp. 545-548.

<sup>28</sup> H. B. Walters, *Catalogue of the Greek and Roman Lamps in the British Museum*, London, 1914, p. 90, Nos. 595 and 596, with further references: a stork is holding the loop of a pair of scales with a mouse in the left pan, and an elephant, which is weighed down by the mouse, in the right one. Walters compares this iconography to that of another specimen where a man is weighing an ant against an elephant; but it may also allude to the widespread opinion that the elephant hates and fears the mouse (see, e.g., Pliny *Nat. hist.* VIII. 10, 29, or Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 26)—perhaps because the mouse was credited with the ability to penetrate into the elephant's brain via the latter's proboscis and thus to kill him. Professor W. S. Heckscher calls my attention to a passage in John Donne's *The Progress of the Soule*, stanza 39f., where this process is described in gruesome detail (E. J. Hayward, *John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, London, 1936, p. 267f.).

*Homer* in the British Museum, where a mouse, paired with a frog, appears at the feet of the hero in order to designate him as the author of the *Batrachomyomachia*—or as a symbol of destructiveness. By implication, this is true even of the mouse connected with Apollo Smintheus;<sup>29</sup> explicitly, it applies to countless other representations ranging from the humorous to the macabre.

Mice appear in renderings of the Plague of Ashdod from thirteenth-century Bibles (*fig. 4*) to Poussin and beyond.<sup>30</sup> A rapacious mouse is threatened and cursed by a twelfth-century scribe named Hildebertus (*fig. 5*).<sup>31</sup> In an anonymous Dutch *vanitas* still-life of 1538 a mouse devouring a cheese complements the well-known symbolism of the snuffed-out candle.<sup>32</sup> And from the seventeenth century at the latest we find a constant association between the mouse and the Death's head (*fig. 6*).<sup>33</sup>

This specifically sepulchral connotation of the mouse, well-established in classical antiquity though dormant for many centuries, was stressed, exactly one-hundred years ago, by the great J. J. Bachofen: "Therefore [viz., because Apollo embodies the ideas of light as well as darkness, which for Bachofen represented, respectively, the paternal and maternal principle] Apollo in his capacity of Smintheus appears in Asia Minor, particularly in Troadic Lycia, so intimately linked to the mouse, the animal of tellurian darkness and the tomb, which on a sepulchral lamp at Nîmes is represented gnawing at the burning wick, the symbol of the flame of life."<sup>34</sup>

Thanks to the kindness of Dr. Henri Stern and Professor Fernand Benoit, I was able to obtain a photograph of the Nîmes lamp (*fig. 7*), and there can hardly be any doubt as to the correctness of Bachofen's interpretation, especially since the body of the lamp, containing the light-and life-giving oil, is guarded by a lion's head, a symbol of solar vitality, contrasting with the sinister mouse. In point of fact sepulchral lamps adorned with mice enjoyed consider-

<sup>29</sup> See above, note 20.

<sup>30</sup> See Neustetter, *op. cit.* Our *fig. 4*, showing the picture Bible of Shah Abbas the Great (Pierpont Morgan Library, ms 638, fol. 21v.), corresponds to Neustetter's *fig. 2*. For Poussin's famous picture in the Louvre, see the literature in *Musée du Louvre, Exposition Nicolas Poussin, Mai-Juillet, 1960*, p. 62f., No. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Prague, Cathedral Chapter Library, ms A XXI (St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, datable 1136-37), fol. 133; see A. Goldschmidt, *Die frühmittelalterlichen Bronzetüren*, II (*Die Bronzetüren von Nowgorod und Gnesen*), Marburg, 1932, *fig. 3c*. The imprecation reads: "Pessime mus, saepius me provoca[sti] ad iram; ut deus te perdat" ("Most wicked mouse, often hast thou provoked me to anger; may God destroy thee").

<sup>32</sup> Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo; see I. Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, London, n.d. [1956], p. 15f., *fig. 14*.

<sup>33</sup> Guercino, "Et in Arcadia Ego," Rome, Galleria Corsini, for which see E. Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego; Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1955, p. 307, *fig. 90*, with reference to a passage from C. J. Weber's *Demokritos oder hinterlassene Papiere eines lachenden Philosophen*: "Ein gar herrliches 'Memento mori' ist . . . ein hübscher gebleichter Menschenschädel auf der Toilette. So ein leerer Hirnkasten . . . müsste Wunder tun, wenn die Macht der Gewohnheit nicht noch stärker wäre . . . Man würde zuletzt das Dasein des Totenschädels ganz vergessen, wenn nicht schon zu Zeiten eine Maus ihn wieder lebendig gemacht . . . hätte."

<sup>34</sup> J. J. Bachofen, *Das Lykische Volk*, Freiburg i. B., 1862, p. 73: "Darum tritt er [Apollo] in Vorderasien, besonders in dem Troischen Lykien, mit der Maus, dem Thiere des tellurischen Dunkels und des Grabes, das auf einer Sepulcralampe zu Nîmes den brennenden Docht, das Symbol der Lebensflamme, benagend dargestellt ist, als Smintheus in so engen Verein." The passage was called to my attention by Professor Ludwig Edelstein.

able popularity, and of the ten examples which have accidentally come to my knowledge—three of them contrasting the motif of the mouse with that of the lion's head—at least seven show the mouse turned toward, and in close proximity to, the wick hole; one of them (*fig. 8*) is even comparable to Jean Paul's *Wirtshaus zum Wirtshaus* (an inn whose sign depicts the inn itself) in that the relief on its slightly concave upper surface shows a lamp of the Nîmes type in profile.<sup>35</sup>

It might be argued that lamps, even though used for funerary purposes, do not necessarily exhibit a specifically sepulchral iconography. But only a few years ago the specifically sepulchral implications of the mouse in classical art were confirmed by its repeated appearance in the pictorial decoration of Etruscan tombs. And this brings us back to our point of departure: the mouse projected but not carried out by Michelangelo.

## V

In 1897, when he published his fundamental edition of Michelangelo's poems, Karl Frey made known, in a weak tracing, one of four profiles (*figs. 9 and 11*) sketched on the back of an envelope addressed to "Dnō Michelagnolo de Bonarotis in Firenze" and therefore sent and received between 1517–18 and 1534 (when Michelangelo left Florence forever): the profile of a bearded man, turned to the left, his head covered, as with a helmet, with a wolf's mask.<sup>36</sup> And in the same year a great archaeologist, Eugen Petersen, identified the model of this sketch as the Etruscan Orcus or Hades (AITA, EITA), known to us from the Tomba dei Velii ai Sette Cammini at Orvieto-Volsinii (*fig. 10*) and the Tomba dell'Orco at Corneto-Tarquinia (*fig. 12*).<sup>37</sup>

While two or three art historians were skeptical of either the authenticity of the drawing, its Etruscan derivation or both,<sup>38</sup> no archaeologist has ever questioned Petersen's hypothesis; and, the dust of the battle having settled,<sup>39</sup> the following may be stated with some degree of

<sup>35</sup> Jerusalem, Museum Haaretz, No. 67461; a photograph was kindly placed at my disposal by Dr. P. P. Kahane, and the subject of the relief was identified by Miss Erika Simon. Whether the little animal approaching the nozzle of a lamp in the collection of Mrs. Miriam Schaar Schlessinger in New York, also brought to my attention by Dr. Kahane, is a mouse or a lizard is difficult to decide. The other instances alluded to in the text are: a) a lid of a lamp found in the Agora at Athens (Howland, *op. cit.*, p. 82, No. 364); b) two further instances, referred to *ibidem*, in the Benachi Collection at Alexandria; c) four lamps in the British Museum (Walters, *op. cit.*, p. 2, No. 6, fig. 3; p. 10, No. 49, pl. V; p. 12, No. 62; p. 17, No. 103). In Walters No. 49 (a "double lamp" with two nozzles and two mice) and No. 62 we find the same combination of the mouse motif with a lion's head as in the Nîmes specimen.

<sup>36</sup> K. Frey, *Die Dichtungen . . .*, p. 385. For the poem (p. 384, No. C) written on the obverse of the envelope, see below, note 40.

<sup>37</sup> E. Petersen, "Eine antike Vorlage Michelangelos," *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst*, New Series, IX, 1897/98, p. 294 f.

<sup>38</sup> See Thode, *op. cit.*, II, p. 338 f.; III (1913), p. 81, No. 199; De Tolnay (who first published the sheet from a photograph and in its entirety whereas the "Etruscan" head had already been published from a photograph by E. Heimeran, *Michelangelo und das Porträt*, Diss. Erlangen, 1925, p. 93 f., fig. 8), "Die Handzeichnungen Michelangelos im Archivio Buonarroti," *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, New Series, V, 1928, pp. 377 ff., particularly p. 474 f., No. 60, fig. 79; *idem*, *op. cit.*, II (*The Sistine Ceiling*), Princeton, 1945, p. 200 f., No. 40, fig. 233; L. Goldscheider, *Michelangelo Drawings*, London, 1951, p. 93 f., fig. 8.

<sup>39</sup> This writer agrees with the very reasonable review of the problem in L. Dussler, *Die Zeichnungen des Michelangelo*, Berlin, 1959, p. 151, No. 251, with ample bibliography to which, however, a few items may be added: O. Cederlöf, "Fladdermusen," *Symbolister*, I (Tidskrift för Konstvetenskap, Malmö, XXX, 1957),



confidence. First, if—as is generally admitted—one or more of the sea shells in the drawing is genuine and belongs to the period of the Medici Chapel (probably the latter half of the 'twenties) the same must be true of the other sketches, including the "Etruscan Hades"; they are all executed with the same pen and the same ink, and these were also used for the indubitably authentic words and "pen try-outs" in the upper left-hand corner.<sup>40</sup> Second, for purely iconographical reasons the derivation of the head from an Etruscan Hades is "hard to deny"<sup>41</sup> and, therefore, presupposes Michelangelo's acquaintance, either direct or indirect, with Etruscan tomb painting. Third, while the head in the drawing agrees with that in the tomb at Corneto-Tarquiniā (*fig. 12*) in that it is turned to the left, it agrees with that in the tomb at Orvieto-Volsinii (*fig. 10*) in such specific details as the comparatively small eyes of the wolf's mask and, above all, the "wind-swept" appearance of its hair. We may perhaps infer that Michelangelo worked from an original different from both and no longer available to us.

Be that as it may, Michelangelo would seem to have had access to, and taken an interest in, the decoration of Etruscan tombs. An Etruscan tomb near Florence, still in existence, exhibits visitors' graffiti dating as early as 1495 and 1507; other Etruscan tombs were robbed from as early as ca. 1400; and numerous Etruscan wall paintings were recorded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries though they have now disappeared.<sup>42</sup>

The gable of the very entrance wall of a tomb of ca. 525–520 B.C.—the Tomba delle Olimpiadi in Corneto-Tarquiniā—shows, with the grizzly obfuscation of the borderline between life and death so characteristic of Etruscan art, the reclining figure of a nude man (painted red) attended by no less than three mice painted a bluish gray: one nestling in the small of his back and apparently nuzzling (or nibbling at) him while he looks round towards it; one near his left shoulder; and a third playing about in the vicinity of the arm on which he

pp. 89 ff., particularly p. 110; G. Q. Giglioli, *L'Arte etrusca*, Milan, 1935, Notes to pls. CCXLV (Orvieto-Volsinii) and CCXLVIII (Corneto-Tarquiniā); M. Pallottino, *Etruscan Painting*, Lausanne, 1952, p. 112 (ill. p. 111); P. J. Rijs, *An Introduction to Etruscan Art*, Copenhagen, 1953, pp. 77, 85; P. Ducati, *Storia dell'arte etrusca*, Florence, 1927, I, pp. 414 ff. For the fact that the head-covering of the Etruscan Hades is the mask of a wolf and neither that of a dog nor (as claimed by de Tolnay, "Die Handzeichnungen . . .") of a bear, see *idem*, "Esegesi di alcune urne etrusche," *Rendiconti della R. Accademia dei Lincei* (Classe di Scienze Morali), Series 5, XIX, 1910, p. 161 ff.; *idem*, "Osservazioni di demonologia etrusca," *ibid.*, XXIV, 1915, pp. 515 ff., particularly pp. 540 ff.

<sup>40</sup> For the sea shells see De Tolnay's convincing comparison with those on the feet of the sarcophagus of Lorenzo de' Medici (*op. cit.*, III, figs. 186, 188). It should also be noted that the back of another envelope addressed to Michelangelo by the same person and in the same manner (Frey, *Die Dichtungen . . .*, *loc. cit.*, and p. 342) was used for notes referring to marble blocks destined for either the Medici Chapel or even the facade of San Lorenzo (which would date them as early as about 1519–20). That the obverse of the envelope whose back shows the sketches here under discussion was used for a poem lamenting the death of Vittoria Colonna on February 25, 1547 (rather, as assumed by de Tolnay, that of Michelangelo's brother Buonarroto in 1528) and thus postdating the sketches by about twenty years is not without parallel (see, e.g., the drawing Dussler, *op. cit.*, p. 60, No. 46, fig. 66); cases like these can be accounted for by Michelangelo's proverbial parsimony, especially in relation to paper.

<sup>41</sup> Dussler, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>42</sup> See F. Weege, *Die etruskische Malerei*, Halle, 1921, pp. 72 ff. Cf. also R. Bartoccini, C. M. Lericci and M. Moratti, *Tarquiniā; La Tomba delle Olimpiadi*, Milan, 1959, p. 15, stressing the fact that, unless special precautions are taken, the very opening of a closed tomb, producing as it does a sudden contact with the atmosphere, may cause "non soltanto la disintegrazione degli eventuali resti umani esistenti, ma anche di arredi, e l'alterazione delle decorazioni dipinte."

supports himself (*fig. 13*).<sup>43</sup> And in a tomb not as yet published and provisionally nicknamed "La Tomba del Topolino" the little "Mickey-Mouse," here unconnected with any human figure, stands guard near the left-hand doorpost of the front wall—a "Grabmaus" *tout court* and *par excellence*.<sup>44</sup>

\* \* \*

Michelangelo's mouse, had it ever been realized, would thus have had a most distinguished and diversified ancestry; but just for this reason it is difficult to say precisely which of the elements of the tradition was present in the artist's mind when he decided to embellish the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici with a mouse. That he was familiar with the Barlaam and Josaphat story is more than probable, and that he, like every cultured artist of his time, knew Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* is a virtual certainty (it may be noted that Condivi's description of the mouse's destructive character reads almost like a free translation of the Horapollo passage quoted above).<sup>45</sup> But it may well be that literary reminiscences like these would not have caused Michelangelo to include a mouse in the program of Giuliano's Tomb had he not met the little animal in an actual image, and this in an Etruscan tomb—a place not only hallowed by its classic, even specifically "Tuscan," associations but also analogous in purpose to the Medici Chapel. If this hypothesis were admitted the case of the mouse which Michelangelo had planned to immortalize by his chisel would have paralleled that of the wolf-helmeted Hades whom he recorded with his pen.

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<sup>43</sup> Bartoccini, Lerici and Moratti, *op. cit.*, p. 51, illustrated p. 91, fig. 18. The tomb, though rediscovered only a few years ago, was entered and robbed not only in classical times but also at some later date (Bartoccini, etc., p. 49). I am deeply indebted to Signor Lerici for having placed at my disposal the photograph here reproduced.

<sup>44</sup> Corneto-Tarquini, Tomb No. 494. This tomb was kindly brought to my attention by Signor Lerici *in literis*. He also provided me with a photograph obtained with the aid of a photographic drill before the tomb was opened and entered; but this photograph is unfortunately not clear enough for reproduction.

<sup>45</sup> Compare the texts adduced in notes 3 and 25; cf. also the closely related passage from Cicero's *De divinatione*, adduced in note 24.

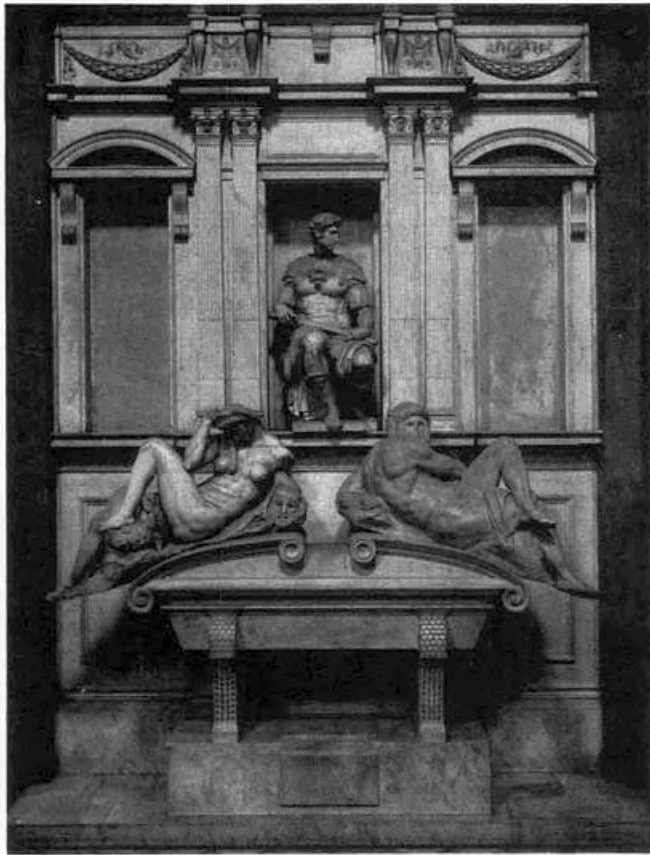


Fig. 1. Michelangelo, Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici.  
Florence, San Lorenzo. (Photo: Alinari.)



Fig. 2. The Parable of Barlaam and Josaphat.  
New York, Morgan Library, MS 729, fol. 354v.  
(Photo: Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library.)



Fig. 3. Bolognino Zaltieri, the Hephaestus statue of King Sethos of Egypt. Engraving from Vincenzo Cartari, *Le Imagini de i Dei de gli Antichi*, Venice, 1571, p. 393.

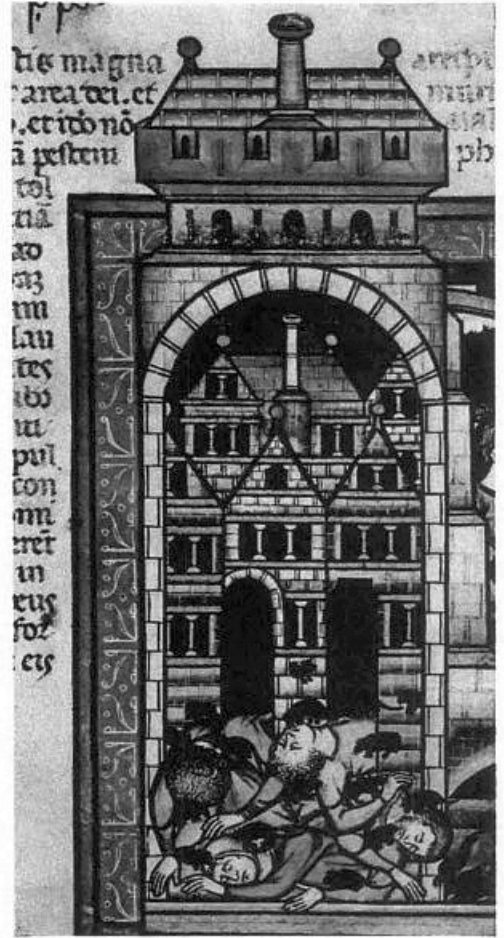


Fig. 4. The Plague of Ashdod. New York, Morgan Library, MS 638, fol. 21v. (Photo: Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library.)



Fig. 5. Hildebertus cursing a mouse. Prague, Cathedral Chapter, MS A. XXI, fol. 133. (Photo: Státní Památková Správa, Prague.)



Fig. 6. Skull and mouse, detail from Giovanni Francesco Guercino's "Et in Arcadia Ego." Rome, Galleria Corsini.

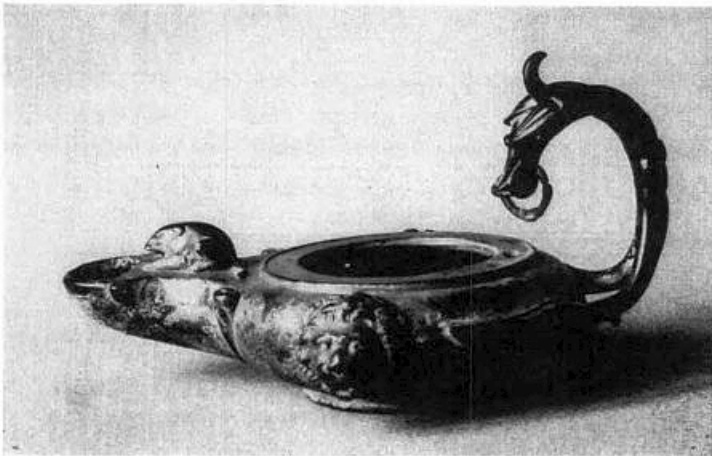


Fig. 7. Roman bronze lamp showing a mouse threatening the wick.  
Formerly Nîmes, Collection Séguier.  
(Photo: Courtesy of Professor Fernand Benoit.)



Fig. 8. Roman clay lamp, its decoration showing  
a lamp similar to that reproduced in Fig. 7.  
Jerusalem, Museum Haaretz.  
(Photo: Courtesy of Museum Haaretz.)

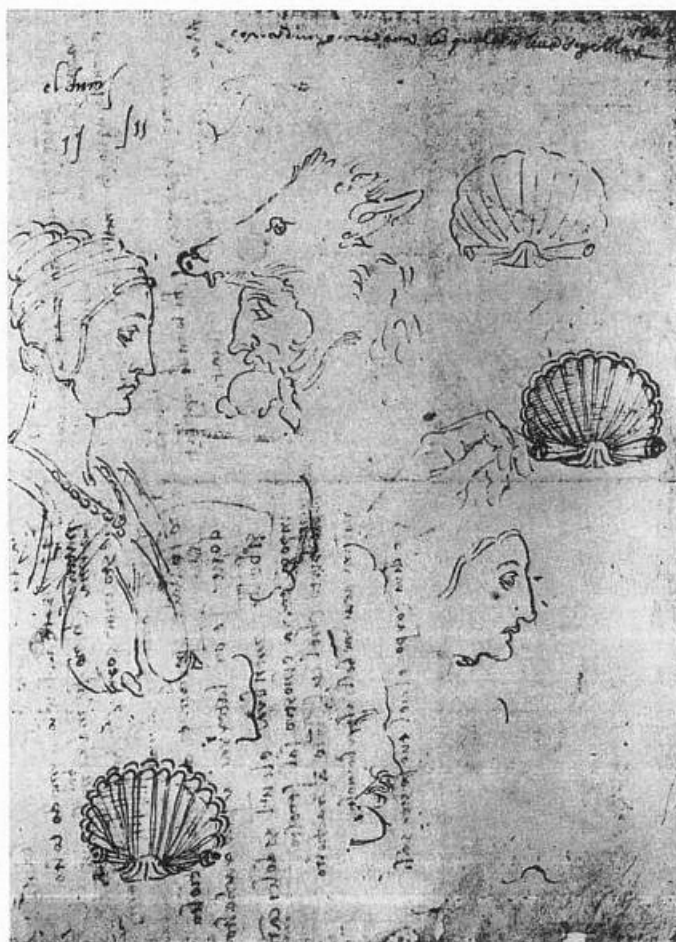


Fig. 9. Michelangelo, Drawing Th. 199. Florence, Archivio Buonarroti,  
Cod. XIII, fol. 40v (after C. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, II, Princeton, 1945, fig. 233).



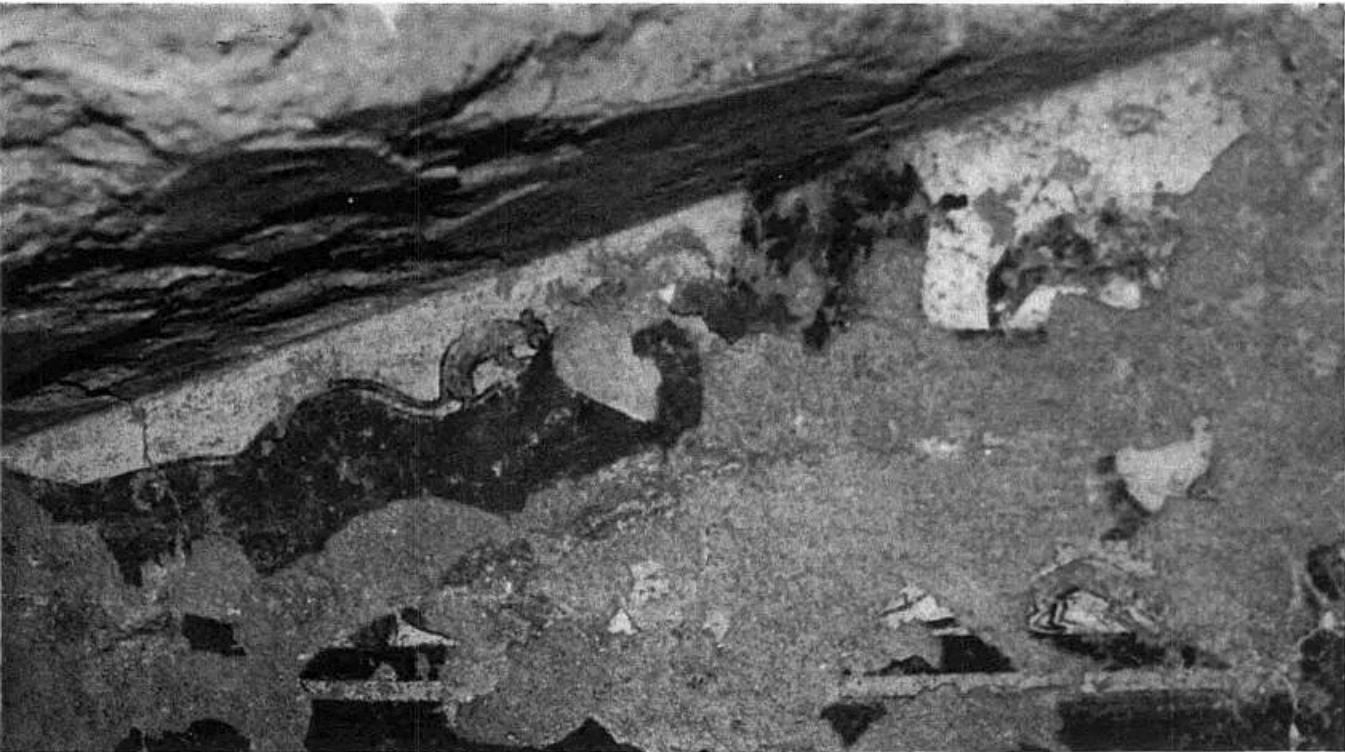
*Fig. 10.* Etruscan Hades, detail from a mural in the Tomba dei Velii at Orvieto-Volsinii. (Photo: Soprintendenza Antichità Firenze.)



*Fig. 11.* Michelangelo, Etruscan Hades, detail from Fig. 9.



*Fig. 12.* Etruscan Hades, detail from a mural in the Tomba dell'Orco at Corneto-Tarquinia. (Photo: Allerocca.)



*Fig. 13.* Reclining figure with three mice, detail from a mural in the Tomba delle Olimpiadi at Corneto-Tarquinia. (Photo: Courtesy of Fondazione Ing. C. M. Levici.)