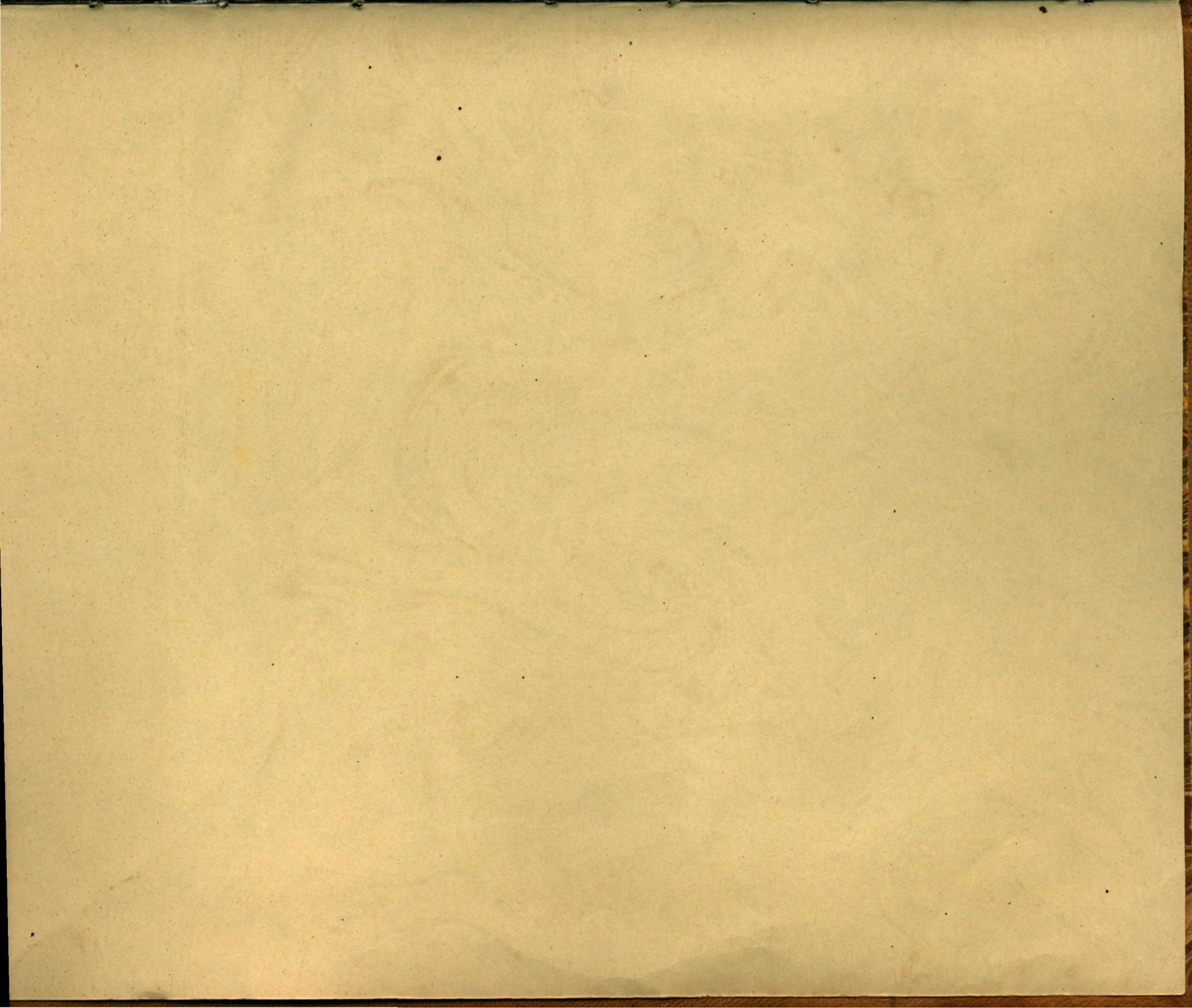


Vaults of Memory



Vaults of Memory

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Jewish and Christian Imagery
in the Catacombs of Rome

An Exhibition

Estelle Shohet Brettman

International Catacomb Society • Boston, Massachusetts • 1985

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Jewish catacomb, Vigna Randanini

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catacomb of Vigna Randanini

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1. Tapestry of Grapevine Tendrils Interwoven

Introduction

VAULTS OF MEMORY offers twentieth century viewers a record of the catacombs of Rome. Glimpses of the Jewish catacombs of Villa Torlonia and Vigna Randanini, as well as of Christian and pagan cemeteries, document the present condition of paintings still visible on the walls and ceilings of these underground burial places. Photographs of fresco and relief, vaulted ceiling and mosaic floor, ritual vessel and crude graffito present a visual essay of Jewish and early Christian images, symbols, and epigraphy more than fifteen hundred years old. Augmented by artefacts and impressions, the exhibition reflects the intersections of religious thinking of the various sects in ancient Rome. In funeral iconography, Graeco-Roman myths are mingled with Old Testament themes, both of which influenced early Christian expressions of hope for the deceased.

Jewish, Christian, and Graeco-Roman Symbols Interwoven in a Tapestry of Grapevine Tendrils

1. A vault painting from the decorated *cubiculum* in the upper catacomb of Villa Torlonia shows Jewish ritual objects: a menorah (seven-branched lampstand), a shofar (horn), and ethrogs (citrons), while the grapevines, dolphins, and tridents were derived by both Jews and Christians from Graeco-Roman iconography. Drawn from J. B. Frey C. S. Sp., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum* (Città del Vaticano, 1936. Reprint, New York, 1975), p. CXXVII.

Heracles Engaged in His Labors

2. After defeating the Nemean lion, here resembling an overgrown pussycat, Heracles does battle with that legendary force of evil, the many-headed Hydra. Wall painting. *Sala* (hall) N in the newly discovered pagan-Christian catacomb on the Via Latina.

Biblical Superman

3. The Old Testament hero Samson rends a lion. Life is virtually born from the jaws of death as bees busily make honey in the dead lion's mouth. Wall painting. *Vano* (room) L, the new catacomb of Via Latina.



3. Biblical Superman (Samson)

The Catacombs of Rome

Although various explanations have been offered for the word "catacomb," it may derive from the term *ad catacumbas*, the Latinized Greek *kata kumbas* meaning "down near the hollows" (perhaps the resting places or graves). On the other hand, the phrase may be a topographical reference to the site of the third century Christian cemetery under the present basilica of S. Sebastiano near the hollow in the Via Appia. This burial ground, a link in a network of cemeteries and tombs, lies south of the ancient city walls.

During the second half of the third century, the site became the center of Christian veneration of Peter and Paul, thus giving the basilica its earlier name, *basilica apostolorum*. The Christian underground cemetery located there was not the earliest cemetery of this kind; however, since it was one of the three catacombs still visited in the Middle Ages, the name "catacomb" came to be applied to all such subterranean networks — large or small, private (often known as *hypogea*) or communal — which had served ancient burial societies and various religious sects.

The catacombs served primarily for burials and commemorative services for the dead. There is no evidence to support the common, romantic notion that Christians habitually worshipped in the catacombs; nor is there any proof that they used them as hiding places during the periods of persecution. Even though most subterranean Christian burials had ceased by the mid-fifth century, the memory of the Christian catacombs was kept alive by the cults of the martyrs. Sanctuaries and eventually cemeterial basilicas became the centers for the veneration of sacred relics by pilgrims who often journeyed from afar.

The shrines of the martyrs were maintained and refurbished through the eighth century in spite of poverty and the incursions of the Goths and Longobards. Then the removal of relics to churches within the city walls escalated, and the catacombs faded into oblivion with the exception of a few galleries in the three cemeteries which continued to be visited

during the Middle Ages. Thereafter, little was known of their history until interest began anew in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Not until the nineteenth century was meticulous study of the catacombs resumed. Devotion to the Christian martyrs and the impression made by the catacombs are described in the words of Jerome, a noted Christian scholar of the late fourth century: "When I was a youth at Rome, studying liberal arts, it was my custom on Sundays . . . to visit the sepulchres of the apostles and martyrs. And often did I enter the crypts, dug in the depths of the earth, with their walls on either side lined with the bodies of the dead, where the darkness was such that it almost seemed as if the psalmist's words were fulfilled: 'Let them go down *quick* into hell' " (Ps. 55:15).

According to a number of twentieth century scholars, the main development of the Christian catacombs took place in the mid-third and fourth centuries. Entombment in Jewish catacombs appears to have flourished from at least the end of the second century to the fourth century, after which time *sub divo* (in the open air) burials were again the rule. Since in most instances there is no epigraphic evidence for dating, chronologies for the underground interments of the members of these Jewish and Christian communities remain under discussion.

Map of Rome

4. The political and ecclesiastical divisions of the ancient city, catacombs, and *hypogea*, early parishes, and principal monuments, including pagan religious buildings situated in close proximity to the quarters in which the Jews and early Christians lived. The location of more than forty major Christian and seven Jewish catacombs is now known; the tombs of various sects lay close to one another. Of the seven documented Jewish catacombs, only three have survived to the present day: one under the Vigna Randanini and two under the Villa Torlonia.

Sepulchre and Sanctuary

5. Crypt of the Popes, an underground shrine in the S. Callisto catacomb, at the time of discovery (1854) by Giovanni Battista De Rossi.

Crypt of the Popes, Restored

6. Popes and African bishops were interred in this chamber in the communal burial ground of S. Callisto, the first to be documented as Church property.

Frontispiece from *Roma Sotterranea*

7. The arduous catacomb investigations of Antonio Bosio, the "Columbus of *Roma sotterranea*," were first published posthumously in Rome by Severano in 1634, though dated 1632. Engraving.

The Structure of the Catacombs

The catacombs encircling Rome consist of passages or galleries tunnelled through the relatively soft bedrock (tufa) of the region.

This type of inhumation burial, employed by Jews and Christians, was extremely practical in view of the increasing shortage of land around Rome and the rapid growth of the Jewish and Christian communities, especially the latter.

The Jewish colony in Rome, considered the most ancient continuing Jewish community of the Diaspora in Europe, may date from the last third of the second century B.C. Its catacombs, however, cannot be definitely dated prior to the second century of our era. As many of the early Christians of Rome came from the Jewish community, it was inevitable that they would be influenced by Jewish burial customs. Christians could draw upon the model of the burial of Jesus in a rock-cut sepulchre sealed with a stone. However, other prototypes of subterranean burial chambers had been common throughout the Mediterranean from prehistoric times.

For the initial passageways, catacomb diggers may have at times utilized the abandoned spacious galleries, *arenaria*. These sandpits were created by quarriers of the volcanic earth, *pozzolana*, which was used for mortar by Roman builders. *Hypogea* and water conduits which had been hewn from the granular tufa were often utilized. If the terrain per-

mitted, additional levels and corridors were excavated and floors lowered, as space for more burials was needed, until the catacomb included a vast, grid-like network of passageways.

The multi-levelled galleries of the Christian catacombs on occasion were dug as deeply as 20 to 22 meters into the soil. They are extensive and complex in contrast to the simpler galleries of the Jewish catacombs, and may have contained up to several thousand burials.

The most common type of grave was the *loculus* (a slot-like burial niche) which presented a special challenge to the expertise of the *fossor* (gravedigger). Carved in numerous tiers, these *loculi* could weaken the gallery walls if not properly planned. There were also burials in the floor. Affluent families had their own funerary chambers or *cubicula*, the walls of which could accommodate *loculi*, *arcosolia* (arched recesses over burials), and sarcophagi.

Generally the frescoes found in the catacombs appear in these chambers and in the *arcosolia*, which are more numerous in Christian and pagan than in Jewish catacombs.

A rare type of burial in the Roman catacombs is the *kokh*, a tunnel-like niche perpendicular to the catacomb gallery. The *kokh* possibly reflects the form of Near Eastern tombs which may have been introduced originally from Alexandria.

In these deep subterranean passages, illumination was provided in various ways. Surface apertures known as *lucernari* or *luminaria* admitted light as well as air.

Seventh and eighth century *Itineraries* written as guides for devout Christians have served as rich resources for modern investigators of the vast Christian reaches of *Roma sotterranea*. In the case of the pagan-Christian catacomb of the Via Latina there had been no documentation (no shrines sanctified this private cemetery); and so its discovery was a fortuitous surprise. The unearthing of this veritable gallery of paintings as recently as 1955 reminds us that Rome, indeed, lies over a buried city, a large part of which remains yet to be uncovered.



8. Cavernous City of the Dead

Catacombs: Galleries of Roman Painting in the Late Empire

The ornamentation of walls and ceilings within the catacombs reflected the variations and developments in the art of Rome in the late Empire — from a post-Pompeian compartmentalized style to an impressionistic *compendiaria* technique, from realism to illusionism and the classicizing, ennobling *stile bello*.

Cavernous City of the Dead

8. Tier upon tier of burial niches or *loculi* are visible in the Christian catacomb of Domitilla, named for the wealthy patroness who granted part of her estate to her dependents and members of various sects as a burial site.

Plan of Domitilla

9. Mainly confined to two levels because of the poor quality of the tufa and its situation over an

underground water channel, this catacomb, which extended for about 15 kilometers, was built around the basic nuclei of *hypogea*. So vast was this labyrinth of tombs that Bosio, one of its earliest investigators in 1593, lost his way. Plan of G. Palumbi (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, 1907).

An Early Third Century B.C. Home-Sepulchre

10. The Etruscan “Tomb of Reliefs” at Cerveteri provides the deceased with the necessities for life in the hereafter as well as many luxuries including elaborate *loculus*-like niches.

Multi-Levelled City of the Dead

11. Five levels of the Christian catacomb of S. Callisto are shown in cross-section. After a design by De Rossi in *Roma sotterranea cristiana descritta ed illustrata*, II (Roma, 1864-1877), Tav. 51 and 52.

A Fossor Then and Now

12. A modern gravedigger or *fossor* stands next to a view of his fourth century counterpart in the catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro. Wall painting.

Remains of an Elegant Cubiculum in the Villa Torlonia Catacombs

13. Several forms of burials — *loculi*, *arcosolia*, graves in the floor, and simulated strigilated sarcophagi — are apparent in the only decoratively painted chamber of the upper catacomb of these cemeteries. These catacombs were discovered as recently as 1919.

Space-Saving Burials

14. A wide gallery of the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini, discovered in 1857 and probably dating from the third to fourth century.

A Variety of Burials

15. In *cubiculum* II of the Randanini catacomb, *arcosolia*, *loculi*, and *kokhim* represent various burial modes used in the catacombs.

Plan of the Catacomb of Vigna Randanini

16. Only four of the thirty tomb chambers are decorated and only one contains representations of the Jewish cult symbols, the menorah and ethrog. After Jean-Baptiste Frey C. S. Sp., *Rivista di archeologia cristiana*, X (Città del Vaticano, 1933) at p. 50. Captions for the catacombs of Vigna Randanini and Via Latina refer to specific *cubicula* noted on the plans of these catacombs.

View of a Luminare

17. Cross-section of a gallery in the catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro. From a wood engraving. Northcote and Brownlow, *Roma Sotterranea* (London, 1879), Fig. 4.

Light in the Catacombs

18. Next to a *dipinto* of the seven-branched lampstand, a small niche to hold a lamp is cut into a wall. Gallery in the Vigna Randanini catacomb.

Plan of the New Catacomb of Via Latina

19. An excellent example of a small cemetery privately owned by a few affluent families. Dating from about 315 to 360 and housing approximately 325 tombs, this burial site includes pagan and Christian burials in close proximity. After a plan from Antonio Ferrua S. I., *Le Pitture della Nuova Catacomba di Via Latina* (Città del Vaticano, 1960), Tav. CXX.

Décor of a Roman Villa

20. A room from the early third century "Villa Piccola," now part of the catacomb of S. Sebastiano, illustrates the Graeco-Roman artistic styles and themes which influenced the ornamentation and motifs in the Jewish and Christian catacombs.

Vault Painting of the Cubiculum of the Good Shepherd

21. This prefiguration of Jesus derived from *Humanitas*, the Graeco-Roman motif for Philanthropy, is surrounded by such typical inhabitants of the celestial realms as doves and peacocks. Catacomb of Domitilla.

Surprising Revelations

22. As in the previous fresco, the central motif (here the crowning of a youth), painted on the vault of *cubiculum* I in the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini, is surrounded by symbolic flora and fauna. This cemetery lies close to pagan and Christian burial grounds, as well as to the "Villa Piccola."

Intersections

23. The Via Appia Pignatelli meets with the Via Appia above the sites of the catacombs of S. Sebastiano and Vigna Randanini, not far from the catacomb of Domitilla. Community Christian and Jewish catacombs, as well as private *hypogea* and *mausolea*, are clustered near the crossing of these two streets.

Remembrance of the Departed

At times favorite objects of the deceased such as toys, gold glass (nos. 92, 172, 176, 177), coins, and small sculptures were imbedded in the plaster not only as memory-evoking grave markers but also, perhaps, with the hope that the deceased would enjoy them in an idyllic afterlife.

In the Christian catacombs, the *loculi* were normally sealed by slabs of marble, tiles, or bricks which were incised or painted with the names of the deceased and religious symbols. The closures of the Jewish *loculi* usually consisted of plastered tufa pieces or, less frequently, bricks, tiles, or slabs of marble on which the epitaphs were painted, scratched, or engraved. Sometimes inscriptions were carved on marble slabs affixed near the closures.



22. Surprising Revelations

Catacombs: Archives of History

The epigraphy from the Roman catacombs has yielded the single largest corpus of information found to date concerning the daily life of the Jews and early Christians of ancient Rome. These inscriptions impart precious revelations of the civic, religious, and socio-economic life of these communities.

The dominance of Greek epigraphy in the Jewish catacombs of Torlonia (greater than 90%), Monteverde (more than 75%), and in the other Jewish catacombs reflects the fact that Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean at this time. The remaining epitaphs in the Jewish catacombs were in Latin, the principal tongue for the Christians by the mid-fourth century. One Aramaic inscription, one Aramaic-Greek epitaph (no. 47), and several stones with phrases in Hebrew or Semitic characters were found in the Monteverde catacomb. Since all of the well-documented Semitic epigraphy apparently came from the Monteverde burial grounds, perhaps this catacomb was the final resting place for those Roman Jews most conscious of their roots; whereas the Jews buried in the Randanini catacomb may have included the most Romanized, considering the greater number of Latin epitaphs and Graeco-Roman symbols.

Although Greek was preferred in epigraphy, Latin names outnumbered Semitic and Greek names in the Judeo-Roman onomasticon. These facts might indicate the degree to which the Jews of ancient Rome had become integrated into the life of the Roman Empire. While many Jews bore Latinized or Hellenized Semitic names such as Gelasi(o)s and Hilaros for Isaac, Zosimos for Chayim, Theodotos for Jonathan, Iustus for Zadok, Donatus for Nathan, Aster for Esther, Irene for Shelomith, Regina for Malcah, only about 15% of their names were of direct Semitic origin. There appears to have been a greater use of Semitic names in the Monteverde catacomb. The inscriptions from the Monteverde catacomb cited hereafter were incised on marble, and are located in the Musei Vaticani, Collezione Epigrafica Giudaica, unless otherwise indicated.

A Rare Instance of the Use of the Mother Tongue

24. This possible translation of a Hebrew-Aramaic inscription from the Monteverde catacomb has been widely discussed: "Annia, son-in-law of Bar-Col-bruah (or Calabria?)."

Strange Bedfellows

25. In the epitaph "Here lies Faustina," there is an infrequent instance of the use of Hebrew (the word *shalom*) in the catacombs of Rome, and a curious juxtaposition of Jewish and Dionysiac imagery: the traditional lulav, menorah, and shofar in the company of theatrical masks. Possibly from the Monteverde catacomb. Museo Nazionale Romano.

The Earliest Documented Jewish Epitaphs from Ancient Rome

26. The following inscriptions, now lost, one in Greek and one in Latin, were fortunately recorded by Philippe de Winghe and Claude Menestrier in the late sixteenth century, although the first Jewish catacomb, Monteverde, was not discovered until 1602: "Here lies Zosimos Life [Archon] of the Synagogue of the Agrippesians. In peace his sleep. Here lies . . . Archon (?), [aged] . . . years." The term "life archon" was probably an honorary title. The Synagogue of the Agrippesians might have been situated in the Transtiberine region and most likely was named after Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa.

"(Beturia) Veturia Paulina F (?) settled in her eternal home, who lived 86 years, 6 months, a proselyte of 16 years, named Sara, Mother of the Synagogues of Campus and (Bolumnius) Volumnius. In peace her sleep." A convert to Judaism at the age of seventy, Veturia Paulina was honored with the revered position of Mother of the Synagogue in two congregations — an office, like that of its masculine counterpart, Father of the Synagogue (nos. 44, 49 and 50), conferred on the most highly respected individuals of the community and perhaps associated with charitable duties.

Archival Autographs

27. Vivid reminders of the Flemish Philippe de

Winghe and the Maltese Antonio Bosio, explorers and chroniclers of the catacombs in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, are recorded on the face of an *arcosolium* in the Christian catacomb of Priscilla.

A Sixteenth Century View of the Paintings in the Catacombs

28. Documented by early catacomb investigator Alonso Chacón and interpreted by his illustrator, this watercolor serves as a precious record of a now much-damaged fresco from the catacomb of Domitilla. Figures of Moses and perhaps Micah flank a tondo encircling a bust of Jesus. In the lunette below, Orpheus, an antecedent to the Good Shepherd, is depicted charming birds and beasts with his music.

The Same Idyllic Scene Today

29. This recent view of the fresco shows the variations in the copy and the subsequent destruction of much of the fresco.

Startling Discoveries

30. In his massive work, *Roma Sotterranea*, Bosio documented his discovery of the Jewish cemetery of Monteverde. For the earliest methodical explorer of the catacombs, the presence of the word "synagogue" in Greek and the repeated appearance of the "candelabrum with seven lamps" identified this surprising find as a Jewish catacomb, unheard of in his time.

The Location of the Principal Residential Quarters of the Jews in Seventeenth Century Rome

31. A section of the line drawing from Giambattista Falda's *La Pianta di Roma del 1676* (Città del Vaticano) shows the quarters near the Tiber which Bosio frequented. The largest communities of Jews had moved from the right bank of the Tiber to the left bank, mainly in the region around the Piazza Giudea, later to become the Ghetto; others were located near the Porta Nomentana.

By the sixteenth century, there were eleven synagogues on the left bank, coincidentally the same number documented epigraphically in ancient Rome. Like a number of their later counterparts, the synagogue of the Tripolitans as well as that of the Hebrews (representing the early émigrés from Palestine) and probably those of the Elaeans and the

Secenians derived their names from the places of origin of their members. The names of these ancient congregations were the Agrippesians, the Augustesians, the Calcaresians, the Campesians, the Elaeans, the Hebrews, the Secenians, the Siburesians, the Tripolitans, the Vernacians, and the Volumnesians. The communities of the Campesians, the Siburesians, and possibly the Calcaresians, took their names from the Augustan quarters in which they were situated. The teeming Transtiberine region might have housed a number of the early synagogues such as those of the Hebrews, the Augustesians, the Agrippesians, the Tripolitans and the Vernacians.

Photographs of a Lost Treasure

Four views of the now-collapsed, no longer existent catacomb of Monteverde from Nikolaus Müller's "Il Cimitero degli antichi Ebrei posto sulla Via Portuense," *Dissertazione della Pontificia Accademia Romana d'Archeologia* Ser. II, v. 12 (published posthumously in 1915), Tav. XI, XII.

32. A menorah painted in red above a tier of *loculi*, reminiscent of Bosio's illustration.

33. Two examples of tombs: an open tomb in the floor and a *loculus* with epitaph painted on the lime of the closure.

34. The doorway of a destroyed *cubiculum* which opened off a collapsed gallery perforated with *loculi*.

35. An epitaph painted on the closure of a destroyed *loculus*: "Here lies Simon. In [peace] his sleep."

Remains of an Archive

36. In 1919 this short, sheared-off section of a gallery was the last vestige of the Monteverde catacomb. Over the centuries continuous quarrying weakened the burial site until it finally slid into a declivity in the hill.

The Site of the Monteverde Catacomb Today

37. This cemetery was located near the ancient Via Portuensis (Via Portuense today) about one and one-quarter miles outside the present Porta Portese.

Map of the Mediterranean World

38. The places of origin of the Jews of Rome and the sites for major Jewish settlements at the time of the Roman Empire.

Documents in Stone

The following inscriptions were either retrieved from, or might be presumed to have originated in, the lost Jewish catacomb of Monteverde. These inscriptions, probably dating from the second century to the fourth century, represent a remarkable archive on the Jews of ancient Rome — from the language and names they preferred to their origins, congregational affairs, personalities, vocations, and family and community life.

Greek Influence in the Holy Land

39. “Here lies Makedonis, the Hebrew, a Caesarean of Palestine, son of Alexander. The memory of the righteous is for a blessing. In peace your sleep.”

An Opisthograph

40. On this example of the not uncommon practice of “recycling” tombstones, one side of the stone is the epitaph “Ionios, also named Acone, of Sephoris.”

41. On the other side of this epitaph, the inscription reads: “Here lies Irene, a virgin (or young girl).”

Father and Sons

42. “Alypi(o)s of Tiberias and his sons, Iustus and Alypi(o)s, Hebrews, lie here with their father.” Museo Nazionale Romano.

An Émigré from Asia Minor

43. “Here lies Ammias, a Jewess from Laodicea, who lived 85 years. Peace.” Palazzo dei Conservatori.

A Venerable Patriarch

44. “Here lies Pancharios, Father of the Synagogue of Elaea, aged 110 years, lover of his people, lover of the Commandments. He lived a good life. In peace his sleep.”

An Esteemed Octagenarian

45. “Here lies Symmachos, Gerousiarch, a Tripolitan, aged 80 years. In peace his sleep.” The title of *gerousiarch* described the important office of president of the governing body (Council of Elders) of the congregation.

A Major Officer of the Congregation

46. “Here lies Proclus, Archon of the Synagogue of the Tripolitans. Let him sleep in peace.”

The numerous annually elected officials who bore the title of archon probably carried on much of the secular business of the synagogue. They were possibly members of the executive committee of the congregation or even of an overall communal council, if such a body existed.

A Rare Bilingual Epitaph in Aramaic and Greek

47. “Esidora (Isidora), daughter of the Archon of the Hebrews.”

A Puzzling Title

48. “Here lies Gelasi(o)s, Exarchon of the Hebrews. In peace his sleep.” “*Exarchon*” may refer to a former archon.

Three Sisters

The tombstone with the epitaph of two daughters of Gadias was found in Portus, the ancient port of Imperial Rome, while the third daughter’s tombstone was discovered in Rome itself. They read respectively:

49. “Here lies (sic) two daughters of the Father of the Hebrews, Gadias. Cara in peace.”
“Here lies Sarra with her son.”

50. “Here lies Salo, daughter of Gadias, Father of the Synagogue of the Hebrews. She lived 41 years. In peace her sleep.” Museo Nazionale Romano.

The Ancient Synagogue of Ostia Antica

51. During the repair of the highway to the Da Vinci airport in 1961, the remains of a fourth century synagogue on the site of a first century synagogue were unearthed, thus making the existence of an ancient Jewish cemetery near Portus a possibility.

The Advocate

52. “Here lies Caelius, Prostates of the Agrippesians.” Caelius was probably the legal representative of the Agrippesians. Museo Nazionale Romano.

Synagogue of the Augustesians: Two Dignitaries

53. “Here lies Annius, the Gerousiarch of the Synagogue of the Augustesians. Let him sleep in peace.” This synagogue most likely took its name

from the Roman ruler who, like his great-uncle Julius Caesar, was favorably disposed toward the Jews.

54. "Here lies [. . .]ia Marcella, Mother of the Synagogue of the Augustesians. May [. . .] be remembered (?). In peace her sleep." Palazzo dei Conservatori.

A Second Term for Pomponius

55. "Here lies Pomponius, twice Archon of the Calcaresian Synagogue. He lived 60 years. In peace his sleep." Museo Nazionale Romano

A Much-Loved Archon

56. "Here lies Nicodemus, the Archon of the Siburesians, and loved by all, aged 30 years, 42 days. Take courage Ablabis, the younger; no one is immortal." Museo Nazionale di Napoli.

The Secretary of the Congregation

57. "Donatus, grammateus of the Vernacians." The *grammateus* or scribe was charged with the secretarial duties of the Roman congregation. The name of this synagogue indicates that its founders were born in Rome.

A Leader of His Congregation

58. And most eminent: "Here lies Poly[. . .]nius, Archisynagogos of the Vernacians, aged 53 years. In peace his sleep." In his capacity as the president of his community, this prestigious official directed the ritual and the services.

Youthful Aspirations

59. "Here lies Siculus Sabinus, Mellarchon of the Volumnesians, aged 2 years, 10 months." The title of *mellarchon* (archon-designate), bestowed upon such a young child, was honorary, perhaps out of respect or gratitude to a notable family in the community.

A Life Archon of the Volumnesians

60. "Here lies Flavius Sabinus, Life [Archon] of the Synagogue of the Volumnesians. In peace their (sic) sleep." Museo Nazionale Romano.

Presbyters in Rome

The title presbyter was shared by both Jewish and Christian congregations. The presbyter's main function was attested to by Paul's reasons for leaving Titus in Crete: "to set in order the things that are



64. Gaudentia

wanting, and ordain elders [presbyters] in every city" (Titus 1:5).

61. "The grave of the Presbyter Basil of the titulus of Sabina."

62. "[M]etro[d?]oros [presb?]yteros (Elder) [lies here?]." Museo Nazionale Romano.

Sara: Elder or Elderly

63. "Here lies Sara Oura, presbytes." The title "presbytes" (probably *presbytis*) means either elder or elderly woman.

A Jewish Priestess?

64. "Here lies Gaudentia, the priestess, [aged] 24 years. In peace her sleep." Even though the role usually assigned to Gaudentia by historians is that of a member (wife or daughter) of a priestly family, the literal translation of *hierisa* is that of priestess.

Priests

As for the office of priest, the esteem bestowed upon the descendants of the family of Aaron continued as a tradition just as it does today. In Rome their main activity was to deliver benedictions; however, the inscription that immediately follows indicates that the office did not exclude the performance of other duties. All five of the inscriptions referring to priests in the catacombs of Rome were found in the Monteverde catacomb.

65. "Here lie Ioudas and Ioses, archons and priests and brothers."

66. "Here lies Ioudas, the priest."

A Man of Achievements

67. "Eternal home. Here lies Eupsychos twice Archon, Archon of All Honor, and Phrontistes. In peace his sleep. [Aged] 55 years." This highly honored, pious believer in eternity apparently was the overseer and business manager of the congregational properties in his capacity as *phrontistes*. Museo Nazionale Romano.

A Patron's Tribute

68. "Felicitas, a proselyte of 6 years, named Peregrina, who lived 47 years. Her patron, to the well deserved [deceased]."

A Moving Epitaph

69. On an opisthograph bearing a pagan inscription, the second side describes young friendship and tragic coincidence: "Here lie Fortunatus and Eutropis, children who loved each other. Fortunatus lived 3 years and 4 months, and Eutropis who lived 3 years and 7 months. In peace their sleep. They died on the same day."

A Poetic Lament for a "Most Sweet Child"

70. "Would that I who reared you, Iustus my child, were able to place you in a golden coffin. Now, Lord, [grant] in thy righteous judgment that Iustus, an incomparable child, may sleep in peace. Here I lie, Iustus, aged 4 years, 8 months, sweet to my foster father. Theodotos, the foster father to his most sweet child."

Catacombs: Archives of Imagery

Rites and Rituals

Funerary practices in the Roman world conformed to tradition. Among the important rituals in the pagan world were the oblations and *refrigeria*, meals eaten at the grave at the time of burial and other occasions. Vessels found in burials of the Mediterranean indicate that this custom had antecedents in pre-Roman, Greek, and Near Eastern cultures. Such traditions served to perpetuate the memory of the deceased, and to renew the spirit after death. For the Christians, death marked the entry of the soul into life everlasting. Hence the representations of the comforting *refrigerium* or *agape* in the catacombs might have prefigured heavenly banquets for the blessed in the hereafter. Peter and Paul were commemorated with such *refrigeria* or memorial repasts observed in the *trichia* in the catacomb of S. Sebastiano.

As in more ancient periods, wine, fish, and bread were offered ritually by pagans, Jews, and Christians alike and were shared in such festal meals as the *agape*, a love feast at which the deceased was believed to be present; the *cena pura*, the holy meal before the Jewish Sabbath; the Passover feast; and the Eucharist. The sacrament of the Eucharist was established in the Last Supper, which had origins in the Passover feast (John 6:4-13) commemorating the deliverance of the Israelites (Exodus 13:6-8). From ancient times communal banquets, including the sharing of bread, established a bond among the participants and with divine beings.

Liquids such as blood, wine, and water also had special meanings in ritual observances. Regenerating or revitalizing substances were sacrificial blood, blood spilled in combat over a grave, or its look-alike surrogate, red wine. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, wine with bread symbolized the blood and body of Jesus, who — like ancient Near Eastern vegetation and shepherd gods — was offered for salvation. The Eucharist recalls the ancient Semitic rite of “first fruits.”

Expiation, salvation, and rebirth were attained through the miraculous properties of water. In the ancient world pure water was believed to be endowed with restorative qualities. This life-giving element, along with sacramental oil and unguent, was essential in such ceremonies as the purification of the pharaohs, the lustration of eastern Mediterranean monarchs, and in ancient cleansing rituals such as those practiced in burial rites and baptism. In New Testament iconography, the nurturing waters of baptism fed, renewed, and purified souls symbolized by fish; thus, by analogy, Jesus made his disciples “fishers of men.”

Entrance to the Catacomb of Vigna Randanini

71. The second door on the far left side of the vestibule led to a small well room encircled by a bench, perhaps utilized for purification of the deceased and/or repasts; the other doorway led into the catacomb proper, which also connects to the well room. Apparently the catacomb was used for underground burials by the Jews of Rome from the third to fourth century; regions above had served as pagan burial grounds.

Entrance to the Catacomb of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina

72. A vaulted room to the right, surrounded by the remains of a bench, served for funerary banquets; the room on the left provided water for cult practices. These chambers were added at about the turn of the fourth century, when the second century entrance by way of a luxurious *hypogeum* had been linked to the rapidly growing network of burials. After a watercolor by G. Mariani, 1865.

72A. Chamber with the well which furnished water for the *refrigeria*.

A Boy with His Best Friends

73. On a sarcophagus lid presumably from the catacomb of Monteverde, a child, grasping a bunch of grapes in his left hand, reclines at a heavenly banquet. Accompanied by two doves holding grapes in their beaks, he strokes his pet dog.

A Rousing Funerary Banquet

74. Revelers hold forth at a lively *agape* under a rose bower. Roses symbolized immortality and re-birth for the ancient Greeks and later the Romans. Painted lunette. Catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

Fish and Basket Brimming with Eucharistic Loaves and Wine

75. For Christians, the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, is an acronym for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Here the fish is accompanied by the symbols of Christian Holy Communion. Wall painting. Catacomb of S. Callisto.

Abraham's "First Fruit"

76. Abraham's long knife is stayed by the hand of the Lord (now no longer visible) as he prepares to offer the sacrifice of a ram, surrogate for his first-born son Isaac. Wall painting. *Cubiculum C*, new catacomb of Via Latina.

"Ram in a Thicket"

77. This gold and silver caprid prefigures the biblical description of Abraham's sacrificial ram. From the graves of Ur in Mesopotamia, the ram here is a metaphor for virility and renewal as embodied in the Near Eastern "dying and rising" god of vegetation, Tammuz, associated with the cycle of the seasons. Probably a stand for an offering bowl. London, British Museum.

Sheep with Caduceus

78. Many interpretations are possible for the sheep, here ruminating in a sparse landscape: perhaps a sacrificial animal of Greek or Roman rituals such as the Roman *suovetaurilia*; the Paschal lamb of Passover, an instrument of deliverance for the "children of Israel;" and in Christian contexts, the "Lamb of God," representing Jesus. Wall painting. *Cubiculum I*, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.



74. A Rousing Funerary Banquet



80. The Crossing of the Red Sea

Clay Pots

79. From the 1973-1974 excavations of the Jewish catacombs under the Villa Torlonia,¹ these vessels of varying sizes may have been used as water receptacles for a ritual cleansing of the deceased or as food containers for the departed and those who commemorated the death.

The Crossing of the Red Sea

80. Under a symbolic star, Moses performs his miracle while the Egyptians flee in disorder. Lunette painting. *Cubiculum O*, new catacomb of Via Latina.

Baptism

81. A symbolic fisherman presides over a baptism. Wall painting. Catacomb of S. Callisto.

¹Fasola B., Umberto M., "Le Due Catacombe Ebraiche di Villa Torlonia," *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* (1976) p. 60. During the period when the Jewish catacombs of Villa Torlonia and Vigna Randanini were under Vatican jurisdiction, they were protected from further damage through the concern of the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra and its Segretario, Prof. Dr. Umberto M. Fasola.

Fishers of Men

82. On a fourth century marble relief, possibly from a sarcophagus lid, Jesus expounds to Luke, Mark, and John as they row across the waters of Galilee. Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Cristiano.

Fish Grouping with Messianic Implications

83. Four fish flank a central object, possibly a short column, which supports an apparently dead fish. Perhaps the lifeless fish represents the leviathan, food for the blessed in the messianic age to come. Pillars had ritual connotations as far back as the Bronze Age. Vault painting. *Cubiculum II*, Vigna Randanini catacomb.

Aqueous Soulmates

84. Impressionistically rendered ducks are pictured on each side of a stump-like object in a semicircular marshy setting framed with delicate sprays of roses. They are separated from the vignettes of fish by bounteous baskets. Vault painting. *Cubiculum II*, Vigna Randanini catacomb.

85. Ducks appear in a similar habitat in a wall painting in the catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

Manna from Heaven

"Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, and had rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the corn of heaven. Man did eat angel's food" (Psalms 78:23-25). From time immemorial humankind has been concerned with the sustenance of both material and spiritual needs. The assurance of nature's abundance was sought by supplication and votive offerings to the divinities.

Fruits of the harvest were offered by various ancient peoples at New Year festivals in celebration of the Lord's granting another productive growing season. The first fruits of seven species (Hebrew, *bik-kurim*) — wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey — were offered to the Lord by the ancient Israelites in gratitude for the "land of milk and honey" during the period from the festival of Shavouat (the celebration of the Giving of the Torah) until Sukkot (The Feast of the Tabernacles), a harvest festival.

As early as the sixth millennium B.C., nature's munificence was personified in images of fat-hipped fertility goddesses which had been placed in wheat-bins. These idols later developed into the more seductive Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Minoan, Canaanite, Greek, and Roman goddesses associated with the creatures and fruit of the earth: snakes, doves, fish, wheat, pomegranates, and flowers, which could in themselves signify the powers of the deities to provide a bountiful present and a blissful hereafter.

During the Exodus from Egypt the Lord fed the starving Israelites manna that he might make the Israelites "know that man does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

The Fauna of the Catacombs

In addition to ascribing symbolic meaning to flora, ancient writers on natural history attributed particular qualities and traits of behavior to birds and animals. Certain birds and animals became symbols

for the vices and virtues with which they were endowed. Their well-known attributes served in art as a shorthand for abstract ideas. Thus, in the imagery of the catacombs, a few familiar motifs could express complex theological ideas; and the humblest worshipper, even though illiterate, could be reminded of scriptural teachings about God's grace toward man and man's duty to God, of sin, redemption, and man's hope for eternal life in the abode of the blest.

The Dove

For the pagans, the dove was an attribute of Aphrodite; in the Old Testament, Noah's dove signified God's covenant with mankind; in the New Testament, John the Baptist likened the dove to the Spirit, the Holy Ghost, descending upon Jesus at his baptism.

God's Covenant for Earth's Renewal

86. Noah as an orant emerges from the ark-sarcophagus to welcome the dove bearing an olive spray. Wall painting. Catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

Dove with an Olive Branch

87. Pendentive painting from the catacomb of Priscilla.

Manna of the Holy Spirit

88. A dove embodying the Spirit of God descends upon a baptismal scene. Wall painting. Catacomb of S. Callisto.

Fluttering Dove

89. Detail from an offering scene on the outer coffin of Djehuty-Nekht, El Bersheh, Egypt. Painted cedar, Dynasty XII. In Egyptian thought the soul often took on the form of a bird with a human head. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

"Ioudas aged 7 months lies here"

90. The doves on a marble epitaph from Monteverde are perhaps allusions to the transformed state of the pure and innocent deceased infant.

"Aster"

91. The name Aster, a Hellenized form of Esther meaning star, is inscribed above the seven-branched lampstand which could light the path of the deceased to a paradise populated by doves. Tombstone from the Monteverde catacomb.

The Quest for Spiritual Sustenance

92. Two doves alight on the open doors of a Torah shrine delineated on a fragment of a gold glass cup inscribed with the remains of the legend, "sweet soul." Perhaps from Ostia. Biblioteca Vaticana.

Doves Enjoying Celestial Roses

93. On a vault painting from *cubiculum* I in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini, the curtains of Paradise are opened to reveal two symbols of hope, the dove and the rose.

Doves Perch on a Garland of Roses

94. Painting framing an *arcosolium*. *Cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

The Dedication of a Loving Husband

95. The two doves suggest conjugal fidelity, reminders of a verse from the *Song of Solomon* (6:9): "My dove, my undefiled is but one." The marble inscription from the catacomb of Priscilla reads: "Senti-
us Mercurius [made] this for himself and his beloved well-deserving wife Cesorina, [rest] in peace."

Doves, Symbols of Seasons

96. A dove and a spray of roses. The four doves painted in the pendentives may signify the four seasons. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.



93. Doves Enjoying Celestial Roses

Cycles of Birth and Death

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted" (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2). Ancient peoples were deeply aware of natural phenomena and their parallels in the stages of birth, maturation, decline and death in their own life cycles.

Olive Picking

97. Winter is depicted in a vault painting from the catacomb of Pretestato.

Signs of Spring

98. In a detail of the vault painting from the catacomb of Pretestato, a mother bird feeds her chirping young.

99. A fledgling tries its wings. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* II, Vigna Randanini catacomb.

Genius of the Four Seasons

100. The seasons are translated anthropomorphically into four winged putti or cupids with such attributes as crooks, a mirror, and draperies. One of four painted pendentives. *Cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Head of Summer

101. Roses and wheat bedeck a head in a floral roundel. Vault painting. Catacomb of Priscilla.

The Harvest

102. Wheat is harvested in a metaphor for summer. Vault painting. Catacomb of Pretestato.

Barnyard Scenes

Hen among Roses

103. The hen, symbol of fertility, daintily picks her way through roses, feminine attribute of fruitfulness. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

A Doughty Dependable Mate

104. Separated from his helpmate only by an *arcosolium*, the cock approaches a column base festooned with wreaths and fillets. To the ancients, the

union of cock and hen symbolized the generation of new life because of the procreative powers of the cock. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* I, Vigna Randanini catacomb.

Good Shepherd with Domestic Fowl and Animals

105. Vault painting. Catacomb of Priscilla.

The Denial of Peter

106. The crowing of the cock — signal of Peter's betrayal of Jesus — could also augur the "dawn of a new day." Lunette painting. Catacomb of Commodilla.

Putti at Work

107. ". . . for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). Putti framed in roses and wheat are shown performing the traditional labor of the land. Vault painting. *Sala* N, new catacomb of Via Latina.

A Duo of Divine Bountiful Ladies

108. Fortuna or Tyche, a Graeco-Roman personification of nature's profusion, holds a cornucopia in her left hand and pours a libation with her right. Vault painting. *Cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

109. In another embodiment of nature's abundance, Demeter (the Roman goddess of the earth, Ceres) is depicted as a fashionable Roman matron. With her right hand she sprinkles grain from a sheaf; in her left she bears aloft the flaming torch of life. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* O, new catacomb of Via Latina.

"The Death of Cleopatra"

110. Reclining amidst a lush field of roses and wheat, a voluptuous pagan earth goddess clutches to her bosom a serpent, symbol of earth's fecundity. The scene has been associated with the myth of the fertility goddess Persephone. Lunette painting. *Cubiculum* E, new catacomb of Via Latina.

Pomegranate

111. An image of the fruit is sketchily rendered but strikingly silhouetted in a vault painting in the decorated *cubiculum* of the catacombs of Villa Torlonia.

Cross on Mosaic Floor

112. Below the motif of an encircled cross, stylized

pomegranates flank two geometrized fish (all themes associated with the fecundity of nature). Three chevrons in the center represent Golgotha. Fifth century church. Shavey Zion, Israel.

Nature's Guarantees of Perpetuity

113. A cock pheasant struts among the pomegranates near a stump. Like the quail, this bird was "manna" from the Lord for the famished Israelites in the desert after their departure from Egypt. Wall painting. *Cubiculum I*, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

The Fruits of Paradise

114. An exotic parrot looks on while a quail,

which often symbolizes the human soul, pecks at a cluster of grapes. Bountiful fruits such as pomegranates and grapes overflow the elegant Roman glass vessel in this *arcosolium* painting. Such images (also no. 93) were influenced by Hellenistic mosaics. Mausoleum of M. Clodius Hermes encompassed by the catacomb of S. Sebastiano.

Golden Pomegranate

115. Representations of pomegranates have been found in funerary contexts as early as the third millennium B.C. in the royal burials at Ur. This gold Mycenaean granulated pomegranate pendant of the fourteenth century B.C. was discovered in a burial in Cyprus. London, British Museum.



110. The Death of Cleopatra



114. The Fruits of Paradise

The Vine

The plant most frequently seen in art and alluded to in writing was the grapevine, brought to the Greek and Roman world by Dionysos, a god associated with resurrection and eternal life. From Homeric times wine was poured on the remains of heroes and royalty, and grapevines were part of the funerary ritual. As the garden where the vine grew, the vineyard signified the "house of Israel" for the Jews and the Church for early Christians.

A Laboring Putto

116. On a sarcophagus lid from the catacombs of Villa Torlonia, a putto harvests grapes.

Vintage Scenes Mosaic

117. Doves and industrious amorini-like youths pursue their business within a heavenly bower of vine tendrils in the mid-fourth century ambulatory of the mausoleum of Sta. Costanza.

Tasting the Fruits of His Efforts

118. Seated in a vineyard amid gamboling satyrs, Dionysos sips the divine ambrosia from his *kantaros*. Attic black-figure amphora. About 450 B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Antioch Chalice

119. In a similar setting, Jesus assumes the role of

philosopher-teacher, enthroned apparently among the apostles, with whom he is engaged in discourse under the shade of their vine. Silver gilt eucharistic cup of the first half of the sixth century. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"Iulianus, a Hebrew"

120. The four vine leaves punctuating the inscription perhaps imply the wish for a blissful afterlife. Catacomb of Monteverde.

Dionysos Crosses the Sea with Cavoring Marine Companions

121. This vignette of Dionysos's transformation of pirates into dolphins combines two major symbols of salvation, the vine and the dolphin. Interior of Greek *kylix* (drinking cup) from Vulci (Etruria). Third quarter of the sixth century B.C. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen.

Marine Transports

The ancients believed that ships and creatures of the sea (dolphins, hippocamps, hippogriffs) carried the deceased across perilous waters to the Elysian fields. The dolphin, part of Poseidon's retinue and often associated with the marine Venus who was born of the seafoam, became a favored symbol of salvation. In early Christian iconographic art, the story of Jonah and the "great fish" was one of the most popular Old Testament allegories of deliverance and redemption.

A Dolphin Skimming over a Sea of Chalcedony

122. From the period of the Middle Bronze Age (the second millennium B.C.), the swift, intelligent dolphin was represented figuratively. Greek intaglio, mottled jasper scaraboid with streaks of chalcedony. Second half of the fifth century B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Augustus as Neptune

123. His chariot drawn by hippocamps, Augustus as Neptune calms the stormy seas with his trident, as a triton rises from the sea before him and a dolphin follows. The victory of Augustus at the battle

of Actium in 31 B.C. may have been allegorized on this milky sard intaglio from Tunis. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Dolphin Wound around a Trident

124. The dolphin with tail entwined around a trident is a recurrent Graeco-Roman image in both Jewish and Christian catacombs, as well as in pagan contexts. The trident frequently symbolized the power of the elements. Vault painting in the decorated *cubiculum* from the catacombs of Villa Torlonia.

Two Emblems of the Sea

125. In Christian imagery, the trident evolved into the anchor and the cross; the dolphin became a metaphor for Jesus, carrying souls to heaven. Wall painting. Catacomb of S. Sebastiano.

Anchor in Transition

126. A fragmentary epitaph from the catacomb of Domitilla shows fish bearing in their mouths a cross-like anchor, reminiscent of the Egyptian *ankh* or *crux ansata*.

Dolphin Bearing a Cross

127. Fourth to fifth century limestone from the Coptic cemetery at Armant, Egypt. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Marine Games

128. Half horse, half sea creature, the hippocamp frolics with other-ocean-going psychopomps (bearers of souls), dolphins. Vault painting in *cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Jonah and the "Whale"

129. Jonah is tossed from the canopied bark to the impatient monster of the sea. Vault painting. Catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

The Waiting Ship

130. Graffito of a ship with oars from the Villa Torlonia catacombs.

Safe Harbor

131. The ship of the 65-year old Firmia Victoria approaches the haven of salvation guided by the beacon of a four-story lighthouse. Third century epitaph originally from the *Coemeterium Iordanorum ad S. Alexandrum* (Giordani catacomb). Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Cristiano.



124. Dolphin Wound Around a Trident

Celestial Transports

From ancient times, chariots drawn by horses, fanciful Pegasus-like equines, or griffins (part lion, part eagle) served as psychopomps for their divine or heroic passengers. Another representation of the eagle, this time as the surrogate of the Greek god Zeus, is depicted in its entirety as the abductor of Gany- mede, symbolizing the soul in the funerary art of the time. In another type of abduction, the inscription of the Christian Severa describes how the Lord seizes the “inviolable soul” of the maiden; and in a Jewish inscription, Regina rises to the “eternal home.”

Soaring Pegasus

132. In a wall painting from *cubiculum* I in the Vigna Randanini catacomb, the fabulous winged horse connotes ascension and apotheosis.

Pegasus Romps in a Heavenly Setting

133. Surrounded by the traditional vine leaves, funerary fillets, and rosettes, Pegasus prances over flowers, including the lotus, the Egyptian emblem of constant renewal. Apulian *oinochoe* (wine jug). Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

The Return of Light

134. Greeted by his twin sister Artemis, a lyre- playing Apollo returns to Delos in a chariot drawn by winged horses. Terra-cotta krater, c. 640 B.C., possibly from Melos. Athens, National Museum.

Mosaic of Christ as Helios

135. In a chariot drawn by four rearing white steeds, Jesus ascends to a celestial vine arbor. This mosaic decorates the vault of the pagan-Christian mausoleum M in the mixed burial grounds of the Vatican necropolis.

Ascension of Elijah

136. Elisha prepares to receive the mantle of succession tossed by Elijah, who drives off in a chariot drawn by four soaring horses. Lunette painting. *Cubiculum B*, new catacomb of Via Latina.

The Abduction of Ganymede to Olympus

137. A majestic Zeus carries off Ganymede, who clutches a cock, a love gift. Terra-cotta group, about 475-470 B.C. Olympia, Museum.

Ascent

138. The Zeus-Ganymede theme in a pendentive painting, catacomb of S. Sebastiano.

Detail of Ascent

138A. Here the eagle spirits the deceased away to the celestial regions.

"And the Lord Seized Her Inviolable Soul"

139. The epitaph in Latin reads: "By the order of his Pope Marcellino, this Deacon Severus, grateful has constructed for himself and his (family) a tranquil sojourn in peace, in which to keep, for a long time the beloved limbs in the slumber of peace for the Creator and Judge. The maiden Severa, a delight to parents and to family, surrendered her spirit on the 8th day of the *Kalends* [January 24]: upon her the Lord bestowed from birth extraordinary



136. Ascension of Elijah

wisdom and skill. Her body, resting in peace, is buried here until it rises again and the Lord who seized from her hallowed life's breath her pure, chaste and at all times inviolable soul, restores again her spiritual glory. She lived nine years, eleven months and fifteen days; thus she departed from this life." Catacomb of S. Callisto.

"She Will Rise to the Eternal Life"

140. This Latin inscription in poetic meter comes from the Jewish catacomb of Monteverde: "Here lies Regina covered by such a tomb which her husband set up as fitting to his love. After twice ten years she spent with him one year, four months and eight days more. She will live again, return to the light again, for she can hope that she will rise to the eternal life promised, as is pledged to the worthy and the pious, in that she has deserved to possess an abode in the hallowed land. This your piety has assured you, this your chaste life, this your love for your family, this your observance of the Law, your devotion to your wedlock, the glory of which was dear to you. For all these deeds your hope of the future is secure. In this your sorrowing husband seeks his comfort."

The Peacock as Celestial Transport

In Roman art the peacock was shown in scenes of apotheosis, bearing the imperial ladies to heaven; for Christians the splendid bird denoted immortality. The spread plumage of the peacock's tail, with many "eyes" on the feathers, evoked the vault of heaven.

Apotheosis of an Imperial Lady

141. On the obverse of an aureus struck during the reign of Domitian, A.D. 90, a peacock is surrounded by the legend DIVI TITI FILIA (daughter of the deified Titus). London, British Museum.

Peacock on an Orb

142. Perched on an orb, the insignia of the Roman Empire, the magnificent bird and the surrounding design have been despoiled by twentieth century graffiti. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Peacock in Display

143. Vault painting of a peacock, also from *cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Peacock amidst Roses

144. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Peacock with Lavish Plumage

145. An elegant peacock turns away from the tree he dwarfs. Vault painting, catacomb of Priscilla.

Paradise Gained

The name "Paradise" comes from the Greek *Paradeisos*, a word adapted from the Persian by Xenophon to describe the luxurious parks of the Persian kings. The Classical image of a lush garden filled with plants and animals frequently represented heaven in the art of the Jewish and Christian catacombs.

The Flora and Fauna of Paradise

146. A microcosmic view of the creatures and vegetal life of Paradise is represented in this mosaic floor. Sixth century Synagogue at Hammam Lif, Tunisia. Colored drawing from the *Révue archéologique*, Ser. III, Vol. III (1884), plates VII/VIII.

Three Views of Paradise

147. Here the animal/plant life of heaven surrounds the victorious. Vault painting. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

148. Similar residents of the Garden of Eden encircle the Good Shepherd. Vault painting. Catacomb of Priscilla.

149. A caring deity and a bountiful nature are rendered in impressionistic fashion in this vault painting from *cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Heavenly Pastures

Celestial pastures in funerary art served as symbols of the kingdom of heaven. Prefigured by Orpheus of pagan mythology, David signified the Judaic shepherd and Jesus the Christian shepherd in catacomb renderings of Paradise.

The Vanished Pastoral Scene

150. On the vandalized rear wall in the Vigna Randanini catacomb, vestiges of an arboreal scene suggest Orpheus, tamer of beasts, a theme common to Christian catacombs. This 1881 view of *cubiculum* II in the Vigna Randanini catacomb was from a work by Théophile Roller, *Les Catacombes de Rome*, I, plate IV, b. (See no. 15 for a recent view of the same.)

Lyrical Landscape

151. In a possible allusion to Orpheus, a shepherd tends his flock in an idyllic scene; his musical instrument, a *syrix*, is suspended from the bough of a tree. Painted wall. *Cubiculum* F, new catacomb of Via Latina.

David the Intrepid

152. In his defeat of Goliath with only sling and stone, David, the young shepherd, embodied the righteous hero doing battle against a wicked and powerful foe. In Christian iconography this picture of David was easily recognized as an analogue for the triumph of Jesus over the forces of evil. Vault painting. Catacomb of Domitilla.

The Good Shepherd

153. A dominant symbol of the Christian catacombs, the Good Shepherd is shown in short tunic and thigh-high leggings amid his flock and flanked by the age-old sacred symbols of doves atop two trees. Vault painting. Catacomb of Priscilla.

The Pastoral Aspect of the Sheep

154. In a wall painting from *cubiculum* I in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini, the sheep may represent a departed soul; the caduceus of Hermes, supported by a symbolic pillar, signals the arrival of its "shepherd."

Reader in Pastoral Setting

155. From the pagan-Christian *hypogeum* of the Aurelii, an image of Jesus as teacher with his flock. Wall painting.

Scrolls, Saints, and Scholars

The importance of the Law for ancient Jewry and early Christianity is attested to repeatedly in the art and epigraphy of the catacombs. Scrolls represented the Law for both Jews and Christians, and signified the wisdom of philosophers and scholars for the pagan Graeco-Roman world. Observing Jews living in the wisdom of the Torah and faithful Christians living in Christ looked forward to sharing the joys of the afterlife with the Lord in the company of righteous followers and students who would perpetuate his teachings.

A Covenant with God and Its Promise

156. Ezra (or possibly Moses) looks up from his reading of an imposing Torah scroll. Wall painting, Dura-Europos Synagogue (244-245).

Torah Scroll

157. The knob (the *umbilicus* of the rod) and the *titulus* (the tab for identification) are both in evidence. Vault painting of the decorated *cubiculum* in the Villa Torlonia catacombs.

A Teacher of the Law

158. "Here lies Eusebius, the teacher, learned in the law, with his wife. Peace." Tombstone from the Monteverde catacomb.

The Law and Deliverance

159. Atop Mt. Sinai veiled in clouds, Moses receives the Law from the hand of God; below, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Lunette painting. *Cubiculum* O, new catacomb of Via Latina.

159A. Detail of above.

Traditio Legis

160. In majestic imperial stance near his flock, a nimbed Jesus presents Peter with the scroll of the Law, representing the Church, as Paul looks on. Restored mosaic, ambulatory of Sta. Costanza, about the first half of the fourth century.

Jesus Instructs the Apostles Peter and Paul

161. Jesus is enthroned between two of his apostles; all three hold scrolls. Lunette painting. *Sala I*, new catacomb of Via Latina.

Jesus the Teacher Enthroned among the Apostles

162. Lunette painting, catacomb of Domitilla.

A Sixteenth Century View of the Same Subject

163. Chacón's illustrator created his own version of the Domitilla fresco above by adding the quintessential Christian symbols, the Good Shepherd and an orant.

Physician-Saint

164. Saint Luke is depicted in a seventh century fresco with a pouch for surgical instruments suspended from his left hand and a scroll held in his right hand. Pillar in basilica of SS. Felice e Adauto, catacomb of Commodilla.

Lesson in Anatomy

165. In this earliest visual record of a lesson in anatomy, the teaching doctor, surrounded by his "disciples," may represent the deceased practicing his profession, or it may be a symbolic scene. Lunette painting. *Sala I* in the new catacomb of Via Latina.

The Seven Sages

166. Amid Athenian landmarks, six sages look on as a seventh points to a globe on a bench. Mosaic. Villa Albani, Rome.

A Surgeon's Legacy

167. A wordless tombstone carved only with medical instruments reveals the profession of the deceased. From the catacomb of Pretestato. Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Cristiano.

A Woman's Career in Ancient Rome

168. "Marciana . . . in peace." The tools of her calling suggest that Marciana was a midwife (*obstetrix*). Tombstone. Catacomb of Domitilla.

Birth of a Baby

169. A midwife assists in the delivery of a child. Terra-cotta relief from a tomb in Isola Sacra, the ancient cemetery of the Imperial port of Rome. Ostia, Museo Ostiense.

A Physician in His Study

170. Scrolls and the tools of his trade are depicted on cabinet shelves carved on the front of a sarcophagus of a Greek physician who practiced in Portus, near Ostia. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



159. The Law and Deliverance



165. Lesson in Anatomy

Cosmic Symbols

Seven was a mystical number among the ancients. The menorah, a sacred object as early as the time of Moses, had seven branches, as did many representations of the Tree of Life. Images of the menorah, the Torah shrine, and perhaps also the Temple, were depicted frequently in catacomb frescoes and artefacts. Because the seven-branched lampstand continued to signify deliverance for early Christians, the image of the menorah has been found on occasion among Christian motifs.

Representations of the cross also appear in the catacombs. The cross not only symbolized the four cardinal points of the universe from which came the life-giving winds and rains, but was talismanic for many peoples. The *crux gammata*, or swastika, was adopted by eastern religions and depicted in pagan, Jewish, and Christian cemeteries; the *crux commissa*, shaped like the Greek letter *tau*, was pictured in Old Testament scenes of deliverance; the *crux ansata*, the Egyptian *ankh*, continued to be the sign for life in Coptic art. By the fourth century, the cross-like anchor and the trident, the Latin and Greek crosses, and the Christogram were all standard emblems of Christianity. In addition, the cross was a metaphor for the tree, which was related to the dying and saving God who was resurrected with the budding of its spring leaves.

Thus, both cosmic symbols — the menorah and the cross — had origins in the Tree of Life and signified the presence of a Lord who offered redemption and immortality.

Cosmic Illumination: The Lampstand and the Book

171. A now fragmentary inscription for Salutia. From the Monteverde catacomb.

Torah Shrine

172. Apparently the bottom of a drinking vessel used as a tomb marker, probably in the Monteverde catacomb, a gold glass bears several ritual symbols: six Torah scrolls in a shrine guarded by lions of Judah, flaming menorahs, shofars, a lulav, an amphora, and an ethrog. In the Greek inscription ANASTASI refers to resurrection and PIE ZESES is analogous to the Hebrew toast to life, *le Hayim*. Biblioteca Vaticana.



172. Torah Shrine

173. A tombstone from the Monteverde catacomb reads: "Here lies Hilaros, Archon from the Synagogue of the Volumnesians, who lived 35 years. In peace his sleep. His memory (for a blessing?)." The Torah shrine here with scrolls may have represented the deceased's concept of the "eternal home" (see nos. 26, 67, 140). Museo Nazionale Romano.

Celestial Torah Shrine

174. Rosette-studded curtains are drawn back to reveal a Torah shrine (desecrated by a slash) flanked by blazing menorahs and the traditional cult symbols. A star shines above, while clouds partially obscure the sun on the left and the moon on the right. Painted lunette. *Arcosolium* in the Villa Torlonia catacombs.

174A. Detail of above.

Chalice with Cross

175. Curtains open to reveal a cross within a gabled shrine in starry heavens. Two angels draw near with books (?). Glass chalice. Syro-Palestinian, sixth century. Washington, Dumbarton Oaks.



174A. Detail of Celestial Torah Shrine

A Holy Precinct

176. A chromolithograph reproduction of a gold glass fragment made by De Rossi in 1884. The Greek inscription, if complete, would probably have read, "House of Peace. Take blessing with all of your family." The notable Christian archaeologist interpreted the structure as the First Temple, surrounded by the appropriate ritual objects. Biblioteca Vaticana.

The Actual Gold Glass

177. The glass itself — a rare example of Jewish gold glass — was discovered about 1882 in the Christian catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro, near the Jewish cemetery of Via Labicana.

Fragmented Graffito of a Menorah

178. An example of a Jewish symbol observed by the author in the Christian catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

Treelike Menorah

179. A crude graffito, observed by the author in a Hellenistic through Byzantine cemetery dating from the second to first century B.C., recalls the probable origins of the menorah in the Tree of Life. Palazzolo Acreide, Sicily.

The Menorah

180. Preeminent as a Jewish symbol, especially in Roman times, the menorah could have been modelled after ancient Canaanite seven-spouted lamps. Vault painting in the decorated *cubiculum* of the Torlonia catacombs.

Fragment with Cult Symbols

181. On the vestige of a tombstone from Portus, a menorah is flanked by the traditional ritual objects — a possible lulav, an ethrog, and an amphora. It reads, "Here lies . . ." From Portus.

Ritual Symbols Frame the Epitaph of a Grandmother and Grandson

182. "Here lies Primitiva with her grandson Euphronon (Euphrainon). In peace their sleep." From the Monteverde catacomb.

A Thematic Blend

183. On this fragment of a marble sarcophagus, the menorah is enclosed in a roundel which is supported by two winged Victories. This was adopted

from Roman design in which the medallion usually contained portraits of the deceased. From the Vigna Randanini catacomb. Museo Nazionale Romano.

Child's Sarcophagus with Christogram

184. The customary portrait of the deceased is replaced here with the monogram of Christ encircled by a wreath held by two angels. Late fourth to early fifth century sarcophagus from Sarigüzel. Istanbul Museum.

Mother and Child

185. A pair of Constantinian monograms, later known as Christograms, flank a mother with a child. The scene has been variously interpreted as the deceased with her child or as the Madonna and Child. Lunette painting in an early fourth century chapel. Cimitero Maggiore or Maius.

Victory and Coronation

Like the victorious contestants in the stadium, Jesus and all martyrs who had conquered the trials of life were rewarded with palms or crowns or wreaths.

Date Palm

186. A palm tree, heavy with clusters of dates, symbolizes the fertility of the earth and suggests the Tree of Life. Given its significance as a symbol of victory in the ancient world, the palm tree in a funerary context meant victory over death. Decorated corner. *Cubiculum* III in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

A Crown for the Victorious

187. A winged Victory crowns a nude youth with a laurel wreath. Vault painting. *Cubiculum* I, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Aureus of Vespasian, Mint of Rome

188. Holding a palm in her left hand, Victory is about to crown Vespasian (A.D. 69-79). Reverse.

Mosaic from the Baptistry of St. John, Naples

189. The hand of God crowns with a jewelled laurel wreath the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ. Second half of the fourth century.



190. Cock with Symbols of Victory

Cock with Symbols of Victory

190. Standing near the familiar columella bedecked with wreaths and fillets, a valorous cock is depicted as victorious in waging the battles of life. Wall painting. *Cubiculum* II, catacomb of Vigna Randanini.

Fighting Cocks

191. Above a swag of laurel leaves and a festoon laden with many fruits, a proud cock struts with a wreath of victory in his talons. Sarcophagus. Ostia, Museo Ostiense.

Shared Symbols

Early Christians borrowed themes of the miracles of the Old Testament, and both Jews and Christians adapted motifs from earlier religions and myths to invoke salvation and immortality.

Ecumenical Wheel

192. A medley of Old and New Testament themes decorates a vault. Catacomb of Domitilla.

“Inhabited” Vegetal Interlace

193. An assemblage of ritual symbols — shofar-like horn, palm tree, lemons, birds perched on a bowl, libation pitcher, plus other familiar motifs — all pertinent to the religious iconographies of the mid-fourth century. Vault mosaic, ambulatory of Sta. Costanza.

Immortal Sacred Symbols

194. Some two and one half millennia earlier than the mosaic above, cult objects — a ritual vessel, palm branches, and a horn — were carved on this green jasper Minoan gem. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Holy Light upon the Name of the Deceased

195. On an elegantly carved marble from the Vigna Randanini catacomb, a menorah illumines the *tabula ansata* above. This frame enclosed a now-faded epitaph. The familiar cult objects — ethrog (citron), shofar, vessel, lulav (palm) — surround the sacred lampstand. New York, Jewish Museum.



196. A Devastating Contrast

The Catacombs Today and Tomorrow: The Need for Preservation and Study

The Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini demonstrates the kinds of damage which historical monuments have suffered over the centuries. Vandalism has ranged from tomb robberies and the desecration of burials to the casual collection of souvenirs, and gouging and scratching of graffiti (nos. 29, 103, 142, 144, 174) on ancient structures and artefacts. Environmental and human factors, such as seepage of water from vineyards or farmlands above, pollutants in the atmosphere, and the presence of unlimited numbers of tourists have taken a serious toll.

Children's Cubiculum, Catacomb of Vigna Randanini

196. The contrast between these painted walls pierced by children's *loculi* and the ceiling ravaged by water seepage is striking. Surely knowledge and history suffer in the face of such losses, and one can only speculate as to the major insights into our past that figured on the now mute and devastated tufa vault stretching above the young Jews of ancient Rome who were entombed here.

Deteriorated Vault

197. Another example of the ravages of nature in Children's *cubiculum* III, Vigna Randanini catacomb.

Epilogue

A Flippant Approach to the Inevitable

198. "Friends, I await you here: Leo my name and Leontius my surname." From the Monteverde catacomb. Musei Vaticani.

A Warm Welcome Awaits

199. A decorated *cubiculum*, catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro.

Common Concerns

The parallels in the funerary art of the Roman Empire suggest that artistic expression for ritual purposes draws upon the language of its period and then adapts the vocabulary to its own needs and precepts. However, the basic symbols have persisted in one form or another through the ages, as have man's primary concerns.

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