

The Significance of the Mix of Pagan and Christian Subject Matter in the via Latina Catacombs

The via Latina Catacombs in Rome contain wall paintings whose subject matter ranges widely between scriptural, non-scriptural, professional and personal portrayals and icons. As an index of cultural shift in pre-Constantinian Rome, the funerary art in the catacombs provides a way of understanding how pagan religious icons became appropriated and reloaded with Christian significations. Whereas the society above ground remained faithful to the second commandment's injunction against the production of graven images, the artwork on the walls below show a prolific and unfettered quoting of biblical metaphors cast amidst pagan forms that help to set the stage for shaping the new paradigm of Christian art.

In the arcosolium of cubiculum E birds dominate the front-facing panel. Their outlines fill out and gently taper downward, draping around the arch opening. The peacocks reveal luxuriously drawn tail feathers as they sit on either side of a large vase overflowing with flowers. For pagans, birds represented the human soul, which would rise toward the heavens at the end of its earthly tenure. Peacocks bestriding the vase would have signified comfort, sustenance and repose, which, in turn would point to how the deceased would be treated in this place going forward. Christians families burying their dead had up to that point a relatively restricted iconographic palette from which to draw their funerary art. In this new conception they would see in the peacocks a correlate to the dove of peace, the symbol of Christ. The destination the souls would fly to — heaven— made possible through resurrection. This two-sided interpretation becomes part of the fabric of the visual language of catacomb images. And it might not have meant necessarily that the artist was consciously working toward this goal. Instead, it is plausible that pagan and Roman icons were the defacto tools of the artist and the workshop to which he belonged. The patron started the process by ordering the funerary art. The patron would have likely supplied the ideas they wish to enshrine with their loved one. The

artist, however, finished the process using the aforementioned tools and further stylings and adaptations intended to personalize the tomb. It is that customized work that pulls us to our new understanding.

In an adjacent panel the veteran image of Winged Victory, which had graced graeco-roman art for centuries, provides yet another interpretive vehicle. In the painting, she stands erect, launching herself into the oncoming wind. Despite adversity she progresses and is victorious. Her success could have been the food brought in by a farmer. Or a battle won by a soldier. She is celebration of hard-won goals. This was a powerful sign for pagans whose message of success likewise resonated for Christians. The triumph, however, would have been of non-materialistic: it was all about the spirit over the flesh, the victory over death and decay with eternal life as the reward for living a Christian life.

The meaning of the pagan gorgon is revealed by its central placement at the apex of the chamber. Her birds-eye position suggests she will safeguard the inhabitants with her ferocity and power. For the pagan, she will watch over the deceased in the afterlife and make sure its repose is undisturbed. This is consistent with classical tradition placing gorgons in primary locations at temples and abodes. Her intense gaze was reputed to turn onlookers to stone. Gorgons were often portrayed with large, bulging eyes in order to cast off the evil eye and that is true in this case. Nevertheless, her power to strike fear is balanced by her ability to heal: blood from the right side of her head could bring the dead back to life. This double role of protector/healer might have found parallels with the figure of Jesus Christ. He too used his awesome power to accomplish miraculous deeds. In one case Christ reverses completely the decay of death when he raises Lazarus from the grave. Indeed, his most famous power play was to resurrect himself from the grave.

Reclining in the arched recess of the same arcosolium is the goddess Tellus. As another name for *terra* or earth, she was invoked for protection against earthquakes (indeed Romans could have walked by her temple, *Tellus, Aedes*, built to commemorate a 3rd century BCE battle during which time an earthquake occurred). For the pagan Roman this goddess also aided with fecundity: both in pregnancy and in agriculture,

which is probably why she is portrayed with flowers in the catacomb painting. Her hand is raised and waving while her other hand cradles a bouquet of flowers. As in pagan tradition she wears no dress, which accentuates her earthiness and selfless candor. She beckons. It is said that those who died without due honors would be received unto her bosom and protected. The *Tellus Mater* or Mother Earth persona for Romans evolves into a mother figure for Christians too, notably folding in the conception of Mary, the mother of Jesus and a spiritual mother in her own right. In Revelation she is referred to as the mother of all those Christians who keep God's commandments, which transforms her into a universal mother, thus allowing the patina of *Tellus Mater* to show through. Finally, for them it could have been comforting to know that she would also provide future generations of Christians to partake in this afterlife soon to be encountered.

One icon that crops up frequently in the via Latina catacombs are winged putti. The putto, from the latin *putus*, meaning boy or child, is a motif that represents the potential of profane love. Unlike infants, putti are singleminded in pursuit of their target. Beyond the notion of love comes the idea of union. Eros, the Greek god of love is considered a fundamental cause of unity whose energy presupposes the organization of the earth. Conquering chaos with order and harmony, he spring forths, according to myth, from nowhere. In the Greek myth Eros falls in love with Psyche after scratching himself with his own arrow. Through Cupid, the Roman god, desire is sated in the union with the object of desire. Thus he considered a driving force in the world. In yet more ancient versions of pagan polytheism putti represented the multifaceted nature of divinity: the specific powers described in terms of an extraordinary ability or genius. For pagans these *genii* pursue a directive from god to protect and serve, using their unique abilities in specific ways. The plentiful putti hover around the deceased in the catacombs. Surrounded as such the deceased was guaranteed a ready supply of all spiritual and material needs—indeed *genii* inhabited even the most banal of household objects.

In the Christian view, these same *genii* become transformed into cherubim. In the Christian hierarchy of angels, cherubim were second to seraphim in the first sphere around God. They would guard the

tree of life and the throne of god. Our modern sense of *guardian angel* comes from this conception of their role in an individual's life. Agricultural and domestic affairs fell under the purview of putti as well. Some aided in the harvesting of grapes and wheat. Some represented the four seasons. In regard to the wine harvest they symbolized the notion of feasting and commemoration, expressions of love and ecstatic joy.

A putto greets the viewer entering cubiculum N of the via Latina catacombs. And through the next six panels there appears to be a straight forward sampling of pagan iconography. That is true and yet there is something else is going on beneath the surface of the pagan assignation of meaning. The chamber has two arcosolia, each with three panels. The central lunette of the left arcosolium depicts Admetus on his deathbed. Onlookers lament as Alcestis his wife declares her readiness to die in his place. She reasons it is better not to be widowed herself and to leave her children fatherless. But the actual wife who commissioned this funerary art won't really die in her husband's place. She does, however, want to leave that impression. She also wants us to know that she was very much loyal and faithful to her husband when he was alive and that the powerful feelings will continue on despite death's punctuation. Buttressing this idea in the adjacent panel is the portrait of Hercules and Minerva. The painting shows the couple side by side, staring into each other's eyes, forearms interlaced. He holds his club with his left hand. She wears a helmet and holds a spear in a confident stance. They look loving and resolute, he for his well-known labors and her in her role as wise counselor of warriors. Indeed, Aesop reports that Minerva gives Hercules wise and dependable council about avoiding hardship, thus adding to the intrinsic value of the relationship. Their *dextrarum iunctio* or sacred handclasp is a central feature of the panel for it signified fidelity in marriage, but also presents the allusion of the bond between the deceased and his wife. Romans would have recognized these virtues. Christians would have overlaid upon this the demonstration of the ancient Israelite covenant between a married couple as being the strongest union on this earth. Indeed it represents a crucial sacrament in the life of a Christian for the marriage union sets up a healing of concupiscence, that inherent character trait brought about by way of original sin that seeks cupid or

lust, which in the this sense refers to evil. As continence is accomplished through conjugal acts, marriage becomes therefore a remedy—*remedium concupiscentiae*—leading toward redemption.

The third panel of the arcosolium shows Hercules raising the hand of a vanquished foe. The triumph is not over a mortal enemy, but rather over death itself. Hercules holds his club high in victory, his quiver and bow, no longer needed, stowed on the ground to the right. The image here suggests to the pagan that Hercules could bring Alcestis back from death to be reunited with her husband. Her worthiness has been vetted in the earlier panels. She has been loyal to the man in life and gone as far as to volunteer to receive his punishment. To the Christian the parallel with Jesus' willingness to die so that others would be saved is apparent. Also that Alcestis would die for Admetus' mistake underscores her own courage to face death—as she is really headed for a resurrection she has nothing to fear from death.

These images contain pictorial elements derived from the predominant pagan culture. Christian artists working at this time lacked such tools for fear of violating the injunction against creating graven images. Through time and necessity Christians began to drop this adherence and in the depths of the catacombs they might have been able to speed up the process. Fourth century artists indeed were getting orders from Christian clients who sought to express their religious sentiments in burial adornment. In borrowing pagan icons the artists were able to expand and amplify certain ideas and turn them to their own use. Berg suggest these tableaux themselves are the nexus of meaning for Christian ideas. She hypothesizes that the patron's wife, in these examples, would have ordered their production while the painter executed as per style conventions of the time and place. Further, the resemblance of these frescos with the overtly biblical works in adjacent chambers reasonably links them together as the product of the same workshop and even the same artist.

This premise seems to be borne out in the final two lunettes of the arcosolia where Hercules battles two different serpents. First there is the direct allusion to the serpent of Genesis, bringer of the forbidden fruit

from the Tree of Knowledge. It is interesting here to see how Hercules, a thoroughly pagan personage, facilitates this biblical image. It also shows his durability as a cultural icon. He has transcended the penitent pagan strongman to represent an ethical warrior fighting against evil. As such Christians were willing to envision him sharing the burial chamber with biblical characters, washing them in the grace of his powerful and enviable attributes.

The art made in the catacombs was underground but that in no way suggests that it didn't enjoy a vibrant connection with the artistic styles and cultural traditions. Indeed, it seems to have been a part of a wave of innovation, a mixing pot of sorts, blending pagan idiom with Christian theology. In the *arcosolia* mentioned here we've seen how one couple's conjugal space could have housed two separate religious traditions, or at least be tolerant of both. We've seen also how peacocks, gorgons, putti and images of Winged Victory are drawn using the Roman vernacular only to be understood in the new Christian dialect. Like language, the traditional meanings color the foundational interpretation of the work while the newer meaning bubbles forth on the surface. The two meanings work with each other. At this point historically, it seems as though the complete shedding of pagan meaning isn't possible. In conclusion, the significance of the mix of pagan and Christian art in the catacombs portrays a world in transition, coming to grips with new influences, while the older voices still ring strongly.

References

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