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Early Mediaeval Wall-painting in the Roman Catacombs: Patronage and Function

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Mural paintings in the Roman catacombs have been traditionally studied in the context of Early Christian art, and with good reason, since the vast majority of catacomb paintings belong to that period, i.e. to the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries. In this paper I intend to examine the minority group: catacomb paintings of the 6th and later centuries – paintings which are distinct from their earlier counterparts in terms of subject matter – and I shall propose that the changes which take place in catacomb art can be interpreted in terms of a dramatic change in patronage and function.

Until the early 6th century, the function of the catacombs was funerary. They were, quite simply, places of burial; and as long as they continued to be used in that fashion their decorations were related to that function: scenes of salvation and promises of the afterlife, the victory over death, which constituted the Christian's reward. As time progressed, these became more elaborate, sometimes including portraits of the deceased. One of the very last examples is the mural marking the tomb of the widow Turtura, in the Catacomb of Commodilla, roughly dated to the decade 525-535 A.D., which depicts Turtura being presented to the enthroned Madonna and Child by her two guarantor saints, Felix and Adauctus, in whose crypt this burial is situated (Fig. 1).[1] Funerary art in the earliest centuries of the Christian faith was, as it remains today, a personal matter, depending on the wealth and taste of the family concerned. Thus in the 4th century, members of the imperial family of the emperor Constantine and rich patricians like Junius Bassus (d. 359) could afford lavish marble sarcophagi, while the average Christian of more modest means had to be content with a simple *loculus* shelf in a catacomb passage. In other words, patronage was individual as opposed to institutional.

Shortly after the burial of Turtura in the Catacomb of Commodilla, the suburban catacombs ceased to be used for their original purpose as places of burial. This shift from cemeteries outside the city to cemeteries within the perimeter of the Aurelian walls was complete by the second half of the 6th century,

FIGURE 1. Tomb of Turtura, Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome (Photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra).

1 The most recent study of this mural is by Eugenio Russo, 'L'affresco di Turtura nel cimitero di Commodilla, l'icona di S. Maria in Trastevere e le più antiche feste della Madonna a Roma,' *Bullettino dell' Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano,* LXXXVIII (1979), 35-85, esp. 35-49.

and while its exact causes have not yet been determined with any precision, it seems more than mere coincidence that this shift should correspond chronologically to the widespread disruption of traditional urban life occasioned by the Gothic wars.[2] Indeed, during the long sieges of the city, access to suburban cemeteries was cut off entirely.[3] When burials in the catacombs ceased, so too did individual or private patronage of catacomb art.

Knowledge of the catacombs did not, however, die out in the 6th century. They continued to be used, but now for a different purpose: as places of pilgrimage and veneration due to the relics of the early saints and martyrs which reposed there. This had been a secondary function of the catacombs since at least the 4th century,[4] but after the Gothic wars it became the only function served by the suburban cemeteries, and it is well attested to by the earliest of the mediaeval pilgrim guides which have survived: the *Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae* and the *De Locis Sanctis Martyrum*, both compiled in the first half of the 7th century.[5]

Corresponding to the change in function there was also a change in the nature of the artistic patronage. The church had for some time played a minor rôle in catacomb art – one thinks for example of the inscriptions placed at various martyrs' tombs in the time of pope Damasus – but beginning with the repairs to the cemeteries undertaken by pope Vigilius in the aftermath of the Ostrogothic destructions,[6] the church replaced individuals and families as the significant patron of subterranean art. In other words, as the catacombs changed from essentially private to overwhelmingly public sites, becoming major tourist attractions by the early 7th century, we find, as indeed we might expect, a corresponding shift from individual to institutional patronage. It is into this latter category that most of the 'mediaeval' catacomb paintings fall, and their subject matter clearly reflects this change in function. For the purposes of this paper it must suffice to examine a handful of individual examples in order to illustrate this point, rather than attempting to deal with the entire *corpus* of mediaeval catacomb painting.

Few catacombs establish the position more clearly than that of Ponziano, situated on the hill of Monteverde overlooking the via Portuense. This was an extensive cemetery, both above and below ground, noted for the large number of saints whose relics it contained, and in the early Middle Ages it became the site of a considerable complex of churches and shrines. It is thus described in the 7th-century guidebook, the *Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae*[7]:

Next you proceed to the north, and you discover the church of St. Candida, virgin and martyr, whose body lies there. You descend into a tomb chamber, and there you find a countless multitude of martyrs. The martyr Pumenius is there, and in another place the martyr Milix. The whole cavern is filled with the bones of martyrs. Then you come up to St. Anastasius pope and martyr, and elsewhere lies the martyr Polion. Next you enter the big church, where saints Abdon and Sennen repose. Then you leave and enter the place where St. Innocent pope and martyr lies.

As part of the decoration of the venerated sites, and perhaps as an aid to assist pilgrims in their identification, we find in Ponziano depictions of a number of those named in this passage: Abdon and Sennen, Pumenius, Milix and Polion. The last is shown carrying his martyr's crown, flanked by his 'guarantors,' saints Peter and Marcellinus, who hold scrolls.[8] What is perhaps significant here is that the painting is not in a *cubiculum*, nor on the existing side wall of a passage, but rather on an inserted wall which blocks off the catacomb passage at this point, thus establishing and defining the space to be visited. Further evidence of the veneration of the spot is provided by the numerous graffiti recording visits both ancient and modern. It is difficult to fix a date for this mural, and as well for the contemporary painting on the adjoining wall, which depicts Milix and Pumenius, but clearly they belong to this second phase. The cemetery was no longer being used for burial and access to other sections was restricted in order to emphasize the relics of martyrs such as Polion, whose remains were being visited by the city's pilgrims. One might postulate a *terminus ante quem* of 817, in which year the relics were removed by pope Paschal I and translated to the church of S. Prassede, and the mural should probably be ascribed to the 7th century.

We find a similar situation in the Catacomb of Calepodio on the Aurelia *antica*, where the grave of the important 3rd-century pope, Callixtus, was isolated for pilgrims by the construction of walls, turning a section of underground passage into a small chapel, complete with apse wall and staircases for ascent and descent. Again the evidence of the painted plaster reveals that this process of isolation

2 See J. Osborne, 'Death and Burial in sixth-century Rome,' *Classical Views*, XXVIII (1984), 291-299.

3 For example: Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, VI, iii, 19.

4 St. Jerome, for example, describes how, as a youth, he participated in memorial services at the tombs of martyrs. See J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 24.

5 For both texts and a discussion of the date of their composition, see R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, *Codice Topografico della Città di Roma* (Rome: Tipografia del Senato, 1942), II, 67-131.

6 See A. Ferrua, 'I lavori del papa Vigilio nelle catacombe,' *Civiltà Cattolica*, CXVIII (1967), 142-148.

7 Valentini-Zucchetti, *Codice Topografico*, II, 91-92: 'Deinde discendis ad aquilonem, et invenies ecclesiam Sanctae Candidae virginis et martiris, cuius corpus ibi quiescit. Discendis in antrum et invenies ibi innumerabilem multitudinem martyrum: Pumenius martir ibi quiescit, et Milix martir in altero loco, et omnis illa spelunca inpleta est ossibus martyrum. Tunc ascendis et pervenies ad Sanctum Anastasium papam et martirem, et in alio Polion martir quiescit. Deinde intrabis in ecclesiam magnam: ibi sancti martires Abdo et Sennes quiescunt. Deinde exeas et intrabis ubi sanctus Innocentius papa et martir quiescit.'

8 See R. Farioli, *Pitture di Epoca Tarda nelle Catacombe Romane* (Ravenna: Edizioni Dante, 1963), fig. 5.

serves as a *terminus post quem* for the decorations, which were published by the excavator, Prof. Aldo Nestori, in 1971.[9] These decorations are unusual among catacomb murals in that they depict *inter alia* a narrative cycle of the passion of Callixtus. The usual situation, as one finds for example in the Catacomb of Ponziano, is the depiction of standing figures, not engaged in any particular action, and the Catacomb of Calepodio, with its narrative of Callixtus, is unique among the Roman catacombs in this regard. This manner of decoration suggests a date not earlier than the 8th century, when such non-Biblical hagiographic cycles first appear in the decoration of Roman churches (there are earlier precedents in the eastern Mediterranean, but not in Rome), and it is consequently tempting to identify this underground chapel with the enigmatic 'basilicam sancti Calisti pontificis et martyris' which the *Liber Pontificalis* records as having been painted at the order of pope Gregory III (731-741).[10] Indeed that compilation of papal biographies which we know as the *Liber Pontificalis* is our principal attestation to the official involvement of the church as an institution in the upkeep and repair of the cemeteries in the centuries after the Gothic wars, and while references in this text to painting are few, we do find a considerable amount of information concerning structural repairs and the provision of access staircases.

A third example of the new function of an underground cemetery being reflected in its painted decoration may be found in the Catacomb of S. Callisto on the via Appia (Fig. 2). The site in question is once again the grave of a 3rd-century pontiff, Cornelius, and the tomb is flanked by murals: that to the left depicting saints Sixtus and Optatus, that to the right depicting Cornelius himself, and Cyprian, a contemporary bishop of Carthage who shares the same commemoration day. (It should perhaps be mentioned that it was Giovanni De Rossi's discovery of this tomb in 1852 which prompted the systematic exploration and study of Rome's catacombs over the last 130 years.[11]) The site itself is well-documented in early sources; for example, it is included in all the 7th- and 8th-century guidebooks for pilgrims to Rome, and the *Liber Pontificalis* credits pope Leo III (795-816) with its restoration.[12]

The problem of dating is a vexing problem indeed with dates proposed thus far ranging from the 6th to the 9th century.[13] Previous attempts at determining their chronology have relied either on stylistic comparisons, or on attempts to link the Biblical texts (from the book of Psalms) which are written in the borders of each mural to the historical circumstances of various pontiffs. Neither has produced convincing results. I propose a third approach, an approach for which a plea was recently made by Per Jonas Nordhagen: palaeography.[14] It seems clear that, as is the case with carved inscriptions, some painted letter forms are more popular in one period than in another, and on occasion a certain form can be seen
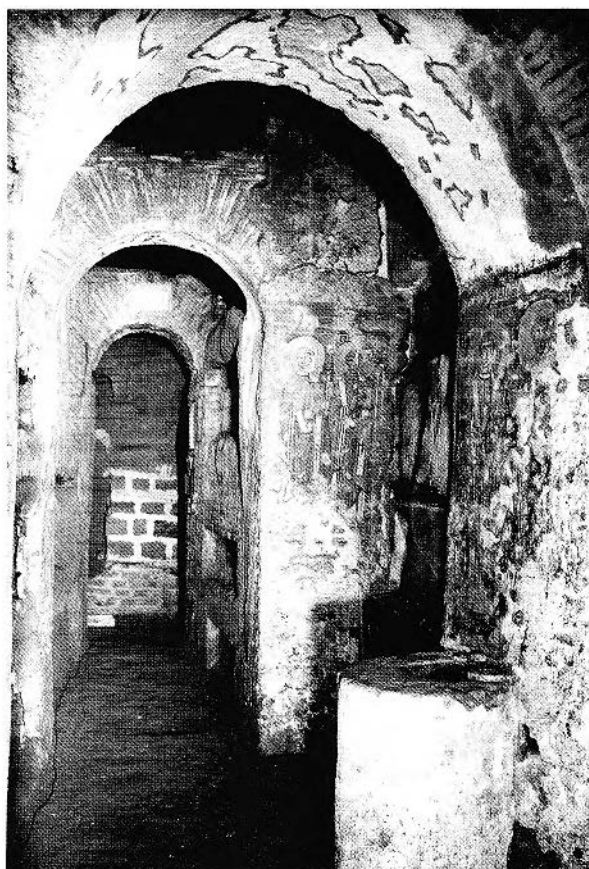

FIGURE 2. Tomb of Pope Cornelius, Catacomb of S. Callisto, Rome (Photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra).

as being particularly characteristic of a certain age. This approach can be used to advantage in examining the tomb of pope Cornelius.

The two lengthy Biblical quotations provide a plentiful supply of letter forms on which to base such a study. I shall confine my remarks to two: the B, in which the two curved loops do not meet in the centre, and the combination of T + U, in which the U is indicated by a diagonal line rising to the right from the base of the T. A survey of other early mediaeval inscriptions reveals that while parallels for this curious B are infrequent, some do indeed exist, and with only a few exceptions they are all concentrated

9 A. Nestori, 'La catacomba di Calepodio al III miglio dell' Aurelia vetus e i sepolcri dei papi Callisto I e Giulio I,' *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, XLVII (1971), 169-278.
10 *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne (Paris 1955), I, 419.
11 G.B. De Rossi, *La Roma Sotterranea Cristiana* (Rome: Salviucci 1864), I, 274-305.
12 *Liber Pontificalis*, II, 2: 'Itemque renovavit ... cimiterium beati Xysti atque Cornelii, via Appia.'
13 For a survey of the literature, see Louis Reekmans, *La Tombe du pape Corneille et sa région cémétériale* (Vatican City, 1964), 174-184.
14 P.J. Nordhagen, 'The use of palaeography in the dating of early medieval frescoes,' *Jahrbuch der Osterreichischen Byzantinistik*, XXXII. 4 (1983), 168-173.

in one monument: the Theodotus chapel in S. Maria Antiqua, which, by good fortune, is securely dated to the reign of pope Zacharias (741-752).[15] Vincenzo Federici, who made a study of the inscriptions in S. Maria Antiqua, considered this form of B to be a peculiar characteristic of the Theodotus chapel, where it occurs frequently in the titles identifying the passion scenes of saints Quiricus and Julitta.[16] The link is confirmed by the particular form of the combination of T and U, which to my knowledge occurs elsewhere only in this same chapel. There are similar parallels for the letters A and G, and indeed for the entire alphabet. This approach would, therefore, appear to provide the first solid evidence for a date – in this case in the second quarter of the 8th century – and this is perfectly acceptable in light of the function of the mural and of the documented interest in the catacombs being taken by pontiffs of this period, notably Gregory III (731-741).[17]

This second phase of catacomb use ended with the massive translations of relics from the suburban cemeteries to churches within the walls of the city, a phenomenon which seems to have been initiated in the middle of the 8th century by pope Paul I, in the aftermath of a Lombard siege, and which reached its peak in the first half of the 9th century during the reign of Paschal I (817-824). With the relics removed, public interest waned, although it was not extinguished entirely until almost the end of the Middle Ages; and the church spent its money elsewhere.

There is however still one final phase of catacomb painting which remains to be mentioned. Once again it is characterized by an abrupt change in subject matter, reflecting a change in function, and most likely a change in patronage as well. There are very few catacomb murals which post-date the mid-9th century, but in that late period must be placed the depiction of Christ in S. Callisto,[18] two treatments of the same theme in Ponziano,[19] the painted apse in the Catacomb of S. Ermete (published as 8th century, but clearly 12th, as has recently been convincingly argued by Øystein Hjort[20]), and the Deesis mural in the Catacomb of San Senatore at Albano Laziale.[21] In these examples the hagiographical emphasis is clearly no longer present. Instead we find decorations of a more general religious nature, paralleling church decorations in their emphasis on Christ and Mary. I venture to suggest, although the evidence is not overwhelming, that the patronage was now principally monastic. Our historical sources point to a direct correspondence between those suburban sites which survive beyond the 9th century and those where monasteries had been established. Some of these extramural institutions were sufficiently large and influential to prevent the removal of their relics: for example S. Paolo fuori le mura, S. Lorenzo, and even St. Peter's itself, which we should remember was outside the walls until they were extended by Leo IV, ca. 850. Others lost their relics, but still continued to function as monasteries; perhaps the prime example of this latter category is S. Sebastiano, where a monastery was founded in the mid-9th century by Nicholas I, after the relics of this saint had already been translated.[22] A parallel situation may be found at the catacomb of S. Gennaro at Naples. The most telling indication of monastic patronage may be seen in the mural at S. Ermete, where special prominence is given to St. Benedict.

In summary, the picture which I have attempted to paint for you is one of continued use of *Roma sotterranea* from early Christianity through the Middle Ages. There is, however, no continuity in function or in patronage. While the catacombs continued to be used, it is clear that this was done for different purposes at different times and that the nature of the decorations, and the nature of their patrons, varied accordingly.

15 For a discussion of the dating, see J. Osborne, 'The portrait of pope Leo IV in San Clemente, Rome: a re-examination of the so-called square nimbus in medieval art,' *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XLVII (1979), 58-65.
16 See W. de Grüneisen et al., *Sainte Marie Antique* (Rome: M. Bretschneider, 1911), 418.
17 Farioli, 37, claims that the site was restored in the time of Gregory III, but this is based on a misinterpretation of a passage in the *Liber Pontificalis*. There is no documentary evidence for any restoration at this time.
18 Farioli, fig. 17.

19 Farioli, fig. 10. To my knowledge there is no published photograph of the second bust of Christ in Ponziano.
20 Øystein Hjort, 'The first portrait of St. Benedict? Another look at the frescoes of Sant' Ermete in Rome and the development of a 12th-century facial type,' *Hafnia*, VIII (1981), 72-82.
21 See J. Osborne, 'Notes on early medieval wall paintings in Lazio: the Catacomb of San Senatore at Albano,' *Medieval Lazio* (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1982), 287-292.
22 See B. Pesci, 'Il culto di S. Sebastiano a Roma nell' antichità e nel medioevo,' *Antonianum*, XX (1945), 177-200.