

# Women, Gender, and Society in Late Antiquity: A Study in Visual Culture



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*To T.B. and D*  
*Semper V*

# Abstract

This thesis uses visual culture to build a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of ordinary women in Late Antiquity and the impact of gender on their everyday lives. While much scholarship has examined women and gender in this period through literary sources, such texts provide almost exclusively elite male perspectives. In this thesis, I instead centre the representation of normal women in visual culture, from their donor portraits and funerary images to depictions on jewellery and graffiti. Analysis of this underexplored evidence allows me to undertake new evaluations of key themes such as education and family life, and to examine previously unrecognised aspects of women's experience. Throughout the thesis I integrate diverse textual sources into my analysis, from literary and legal texts to documentary papyri, inscriptions, and letters, where possible highlighting texts composed by women. By taking such an holistic approach I am able to demonstrate how attention to material and visual culture can corroborate, challenge, and complicate traditional textual histories.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, conclusion, and four main body chapters which examine the cultivation of beauty through the toilet, the popularity of depicting women as learned, the vicissitudes of female experience through the life course, and opportunities for women to engage with their communities as donors. Through these analyses I show that ordinary women were involved in late antique society to a far greater degree than is allowed for in texts, from changes in urban life and elite display to new forms of civic patronage. Christianity emerges repeatedly as a factor driving change in women's intellectual and public lives, as do transformations in governance and administration. At other times a marked continuity with earlier centuries is demonstrated where we would expect significant change, such as in the roles of widows and virgins. I also question several of the methods we use to

study ancient lives, in particular with regard to definitions of education and learnedness, arguing for greater flexibility in order to adequately study women and non-elite groups. My thesis also demonstrates the importance of women's homosocial relationships, both in informal social situations and the more formal segregation of the monastery.



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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Late Antiquity marks a period of transition, a period of cultural, religious, and political transformation defined by conquest, controversy, and change. The history of Late Antiquity as it is written by scholars is dominated by bishops, emperors, generals, philosophers, and administrators, in an attempt to reveal the important innovations that would transform the ancient world into the medieval. Yet the nature of ancient society means that this is primarily a history of a small number of high-flying men, punctuated by the occasional female cameo: an ambitious empress, a pious ascetic, or a scheming courtier. By focusing our attention on the perspectives of the elite men who dominate the textual corpus, we repeatedly write and rewrite the Late Antiquity of a privileged few as if they were the majority; sweeping overviews based on individual lives.

My thesis presents a new view of Late Antiquity, one not centred on the perspectives of great holy men or government officials, but on the lives of ordinary women. It does not attempt to explain sweeping economic or political changes, but rather to chart how the shifting sands of Late Antiquity impacted the lives of those normal women who do not generally appear in literary sources. In turn, evidence of the lives of these women can help us to understand the changes that shaped them, looking not from the lofty heights of power but from the opportunities and exigencies of the everyday. But where do we find these women? While there are many underexplored possibilities for this research, my thesis looks specifically to the representation of women in visual culture. This means depictions of ordinary women on everything from their donor portraits and home décor to personal property and tomb chambers.

I ask what these images can do both for our understanding of women's lives and ideals of gender, and what this new perspective can reveal about wider patterns of societal change.

## 1.1 Literature Review and Research Context

### 1.1.1 An introduction to the study of women and gender in antiquity

The roles of women in the ancient world is a subject that has fascinated scholars for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Until relatively recently, this fascination was primarily directed at women as dramatic props for the study of Great Men and their deeds: adulteresses, seductresses, murderers, or, more rarely, the model of submissive virtuous wives. The rise of 'second-wave' feminism in the 1960s and 1970s opened the door to more diverse and critical studies of ancient women, marked most famously by a special issue of the journal *Arethusa* in 1973 dedicated to feminist studies of women in antiquity, and the publication of Sarah Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* in 1975.<sup>2</sup> The 1980s and 1990s saw another shift, this time towards more nuanced research questions aimed at topics such as gender and sexuality, rather than the simple promotion of women as a subject worthy of serious study.<sup>3</sup> Gender began to be recognised as something far more complex than the fixed categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Rather, it represented part of a matrix of interacting factors including age, social status, sexuality, and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> The 1980s also saw the growth of gender in classical

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the attention paid to the role of imperial women in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1776-1789).

<sup>2</sup> Pomeroy 1975; Holmes 2012, p.5; Foxhall 2013, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Wallach Scott 1986; 2010; Foxhall 2013, p.11.

<sup>4</sup> Foxhall 2013, p.11. E.g. Gleason 1995.

archaeology, although much of this focused (and focuses still) on stereotypically ‘female’ subjects, such as domestic space and divisions of labour.<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1990s, the academic discourse around gender had become more flexible, and began to not only promote work on ancient men and masculinities but also respond to new theoretical perspectives.<sup>6</sup> The work of the philosopher Judith Butler, who questioned the idea that gender and biological sex are inherently linked, was particularly influential. She instead understood feminine or masculine behaviour as ‘performative’ acts whose repetition makes them seem natural or real.<sup>7</sup> The ‘discovery’ of Michel Foucault’s writings, meanwhile, revolutionised the study of sexuality, although his work has been criticised for its lack of attention to female experience.<sup>8</sup> By the early 2000s scholarship had come a long way from the pioneering, albeit now dated, work of the 1970s. Gender was used as a tool not only to study relations between women and men, but also to examine diverse dimensions of ancient culture, from warfare, childhood, and medicine, to politics, religion, and the family.

In contrast to some other sub-fields of archaeology, classical archaeology was slower to adopt new theoretical ideas of gender, yet the study of material culture has proved itself a fruitful avenue for analysis.<sup>9</sup> From innovative early works such as Natalie Kampen’s 1981 *Image and Status: Roman Working Women in Ostia*, visual and material culture has yielded important studies which often present aspects of ancient life in different ways than surviving texts. Given the rarity of texts authored by women and non-elite men, material and visual sources represent

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson 2006, pp.2-6 for an overview of early publications in gender archaeology and Gilchrist 1999, pp.1-17 on feminist theory within archaeology. See also Brown 1993; Spencer-Wood 2006; Allison 2015 on gender in classical archaeology.

<sup>6</sup> Foxhall 2013, pp.11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Butler 1999. For an effective use of Butler’s ideas in relation to Late Antiquity, see Wilkinson 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault 1985; 1986. See Foxhall 2013, pp.12-14 for a succinct and accessible introduction to Foucault’s impact on classical studies.

<sup>9</sup> Brown 1993.

a crucial tool for diversifying our understanding of the ancient world. They have been successfully used to shed new light on all manner of subjects, such as ancient sex work, the experience of enslaved people, and the intersection between gender and ethnicity on the borders of the empire.<sup>10</sup> Material culture is of course not without its own problems and biases, which will be discussed further below, but it is a vital piece of the puzzle if we are to understand the intricacies of ancient societies.

### 1.1.2 An introduction to the study of women and gender in Late Antiquity

The study of women and gender in Late Antiquity has taken a similar path to that described above for classical studies in general. The fourth to seventh centuries AD were just as well-stocked with powerful and enigmatic female characters as earlier periods, and such women have populated literary narratives from Jerome to Gibbon and beyond. An abundance of sources written ostensibly about or to women, such as the writings of Church Fathers like Jerome, Augustine, or Gregory of Nyssa, have provided ample material for the study first of women, and later of gender. The work of scholars like Elizabeth Clark, Gillian Clark, Kate Cooper, and Liz James during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s made women and gender a key area of research in the study of the late ancient world.<sup>11</sup> Gillian Clark's 1993 book, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Lifestyles*, remains a seminal work and the only general synthesis available on late antique women. The 1990s also saw the publication of important works on women and late antique law from Jöelle Beaucamp and Antti Arjava.<sup>12</sup> Since the latter part of the same decade, gender research has included men and masculinities, now a growing topic of study.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. Levin-Richardson 2019; Baird 2015; Trimble 2016; Carroll 2013.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Clark 1983; 1984; 1986; Clark 1993; 2011; Cooper 1996; 2007a; James ed. 1997; 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Beaucamp 1992; Arjava 1996.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. Kuefler 2001; Nathan 2015.

Elizabeth Clark's 1998 article, 'The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian', was a key text for the study of women and gender in late antique literary sources. In it she argues persuasively that the prominence of women in texts written by late antique Church Fathers is deceptive, and cannot offer us a direct connection to the voices and experiences of 'real' women. Gregory of Nyssa's biography of his sister Macrina, for example, appears to contain the words and thoughts of Macrina herself, but in reality these are put into her mouth by Gregory. It is his perspective we receive as readers, not hers.<sup>14</sup> This critique has rightly shaped the majority of modern studies, which no longer search for the voices or experiences of 'real' women in the writings of men, but rather how such texts construct ideas of gender, femininity, and masculinity. Unfortunately, this leaves us with a picture of gender in Late Antiquity that is almost entirely based on the perspectives of the elite men who authored the majority of surviving texts. In some ways, this is apposite: the perspectives of powerful men shaped everyday life through law-making and the preservation and promotion of patriarchal power systems. However, we must also be aware that what we are faced with are the literary creations of a privileged few. As such, they do not represent the diversity of opinion and experience that was present in society. If we are to move any closer to understanding this diversity, we must diversify our source material and modes of analysis.

While textual scholars branch out beyond the classic texts of the late antique canon in search of new perspectives,<sup>15</sup> visual and material culture has by comparison remained underexplored. Compared to both the preceding Roman imperial period, and the subsequent medieval and Byzantine periods, there has been very limited research into gender in late antique archaeology

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<sup>14</sup> Clark 1998.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Cooper 2007a.

or art. The bulk of the research undertaken has been concerned with the iconography of empresses and religious figures such as the Virgin Mary, both of which could be argued to represent extraordinary constructions of womanhood with little to connect them to the majority of women in late antique society.<sup>16</sup> The most comprehensive general study into women in late antique art remains Katherin Schade's 2003 book, *Frauen in der Spätantike: Status und Repräsentation, eine Untersuchung zur römischen und frühbyzantinischen Bildniskunst*, which focuses on sculptural and coin portraits of women.<sup>17</sup> Given the nature of these media, however, much of this material is also devoted to empresses. The book is impressive in its scope, but focuses on the chronological development of iconography, and as such is less concerned with contextual analysis and social history. More recently, Engy Hanna's book, *Women in Late Antique Egypt through Coptic Artefacts: A Social-Context, Art Historical Study of Women's Representations in Late Antiquity*, examined depictions of women from Egypt.<sup>18</sup> Hanna analyses an impressive range of media, however she categorises all of the women represented in her study as either "respectable well-off wives" or dancers. This is a somewhat heavy-handed distinction, in particular the characterisation of all non-dancers as "wives". The book provides a welcome contribution to the social history of women in late antique Egypt, but more for its collection and synthesis of different historical sources than for its analysis of visual or material evidence.

Some research has also been undertaken into sculptural portraits on sarcophagi (see Chapter 3), however the decline of sculptural production in the fourth century limits the usefulness of such studies. Investigations into archaeological material beyond visual culture have included

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<sup>16</sup> Empresses: e.g. McClanan 2002a and James 2001. Virgin Mary: e.g. Parlby 2010; Lidova 2016; 2017; Gines Taylor 2018.

<sup>17</sup> See also Schade 2016a and 2016b and on funerary sculpture Thomas 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Hanna 2019.

research into textiles and dress,<sup>19</sup> and inscriptions (see Chapter 3), and I have published some limited work on pilgrimage.<sup>20</sup> A small number of individual artefacts have also received sustained attention, most famously the Projecta Casket, whose historiography will be discussed in Chapter 2. Relationships between men and masculinity and material culture have received even less attention, with only a handful of publications to date.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.2 Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this thesis is to expand our understanding of women's lives and the ways in which they shaped and were shaped by ideals of gender. I tackle this aim by diversifying the evidence used to study this topic, focusing on depictions of women in late antique visual culture. I then contextualise this evidence using texts to show how attention to material sources can corroborate, challenge, and complicate traditional histories. This aim, however, is very broad and the visual and textual data wide-ranging. It is therefore necessary to focus the attention of my thesis on a series of more specific questions. In this thesis I explore three ways in which women interacted with society: as individuals, as members of family and kinship groups, and as members of their wider communities. As women rarely held official roles in the Church or state, this is the most natural way to structure my investigation of their experiences.

My study of women as individuals is split across Chapters Two and Three, each exploring a vital aspect of personal identity. Chapter Two examines the physical self through the cultivation of beauty. The Projecta Casket is perhaps the most famous depiction of a late antique woman, showing a wealthy lady at her toilet surrounded by attendants. Much has been

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<sup>19</sup> Explored fully in a chapter on dress removed from this thesis due to length limitations. Discussed further below.

<sup>20</sup> Stafford 2019a; 2019b.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Kampen et al. 2002; Harlow 2004; Kampen 2009, pp.123-138.



made of this object and the significance of the cultivation of beauty and sexual attractiveness in the construction of female identity. Yet the iconography of the casket sits within a broader visual context which is often ignored. What can a close analysis of depictions of the toilet tell us about its social significance? Was the cultivation of beauty a purely feminine practice or did it have wider appeal? Chapter Three addresses personal identity through the expression of intellectual cultivation. Representing women with books or scrolls was very popular in Late Antiquity, but does this indicate that women were any better educated than in previous centuries? In what sort of contexts do we find these intellectual women, and to what sort of knowledge do they lay claim? What was to be gained from representing oneself as intellectually sophisticated and were there any specific societal shifts that could explain it?

Chapter Four centres around the depiction of women in the context of the family and kinship groups. Here I take a life course approach to consider how the representation of women changed as they moved through the social roles of daughter, wife, mother, widow, or ascetic. What sort of family relationships were represented most frequently and what can this tell us about the perceived importance of those roles? For example, were widows as prominent in visual culture as they were in literary sources? How were women represented in relation to other family members: was their depiction often dependent on male relatives? Beyond the natal family, what happened when women became monastics? Were ascetic women depicted as individuals or as part of different, spiritual families, and what can that tell us about monastic life? Chapter Five concerns women's involvement in their communities as patrons. Women had had prominent roles as donors in earlier centuries and were commemorated with public statues. How were women celebrated as donors in Late Antiquity? What can their public representation tell us about the sort of roles they could play in their communities? What can the depiction of female patrons tell us about what made an ideal Christian patroness?

At this stage I would also like to note that an additional chapter was removed from this thesis due to limitations of length. This chapter addressed clothing and dress practices, aiming to outline the most common items of clothing in the late antique female wardrobe, how they were depicted in visual sources, and what relationships they had to surviving textiles and references to clothing in literary sources. This chapter examined in detail the practice of veiling and head-covering, which is given great weight both in early Christian textual sources and by modern scholars. I reference the findings of this chapter where necessary in the text and am happy to discuss its conclusions further.

### 1.3 Methods and Methodology

In this section I will provide an overview of the material collected for my thesis and the framework through which I analyse it. Following an overview of the scope of my data, I begin with a discussion of what is meant by the study of women versus the study of gender and how I use both in order to get the most out of my evidence. I then turn to an explanation of intersectionality and how this concept helps to contextualise the complexity of gender and nuance our understanding of it in ancient societies. While these two sections situate my theoretical approach to studying women and gender, the following sections deal with the use of evidence. I discuss why visual culture is such useful source material, the relationships between the visual and the material, and how I understand the connection between these representations and late antique society. Finally, I consider why it is necessary to include textual sources as a parallel stream of evidence and outline what sorts of texts I engage with.

### 1.3.1 Data

As noted briefly above, this thesis is concerned solely with depictions of ‘real’ women. This means that I have not included representations of allegories, mythological characters, or religious figures such as goddesses, saints, or women from the Bible. The decision behind this choice is twofold. Firstly, the project would simply not have been manageable if I had tried to collect and analyse all possible depictions of women; there are simply too many surviving from this period. Secondly, much like literary texts which talk about women, depictions of allegorical, mythological, or religious figures are often concerned more with theoretical conceptions of gender than about how real people lived and experienced it. A depiction of the Virgin Mary, for example, may be useful for thinking about feminine ideals such as motherhood or chastity, but it frames them around an exceptional, abstract model only loosely connected to actual women. I therefore chose to only collect depictions of ordinary women. I also chose to exclude representations of empresses, both because they have already been studied and because they too represent a category of woman far removed from the ordinary. When collecting depictions of real women, I excluded all ambiguous representations: for example, I excluded partially surviving depictions which made identification of sex difficult, figures who blurred the lines between the mythological and the real (such as dancers who might easily be maenads), and female busts or heads where the context made it unclear what or who was being represented.

To balance the relatively narrow focus on ordinary women, I maintain a broad scope in terms of geography, time period, and medium. For the purposes of this project, Late Antiquity stretches from the fourth to the seventh centuries AD, although there are a small number of representations that I have included which go beyond these dates. Where useful, I have also

extended discussion backwards or forwards in time in order to contextualise the development of a certain practice. Geographically, my material derives from the extent of the Roman empire in the fourth century, i.e., from Britain to Syria, and North Africa to the Balkans. Naturally, this means that some regions or centuries provide more evidence than others. This is discussed further in my section on limitations, however I believe that such a broad scope is useful as it allows me to draw comparisons across regions and time periods that have not been attempted before in scholarship. My data has all been gathered from museum and exhibition catalogues, excavation reports, studies of specific media, and my own visits to sites and collections.

The media included in this thesis are: gold-glass, ivory, jewellery, mosaic, painting, silver, textile, and miscellaneous other materials including other metals, manuscripts, ceramic, and bone. These materials represent contexts as diverse as domestic and public building decoration, bathing utensils, jewellery, commemorative memorabilia, funerary art, and graffiti. The intention is to access as many visual and social contexts as possible in order to produce an holistic picture of women's lives. Individual representations are gathered together in the accompanying catalogue to this thesis, which is organised according to medium. Here the reader will find basic data, images, a description of the depiction and its context, as well as relevant bibliography. Catalogue numbers are referred to throughout the text of the thesis<sup>22</sup> and detailed descriptions of representations are only provided where necessary, otherwise the reader is invited to refer to the relevant catalogue entry. I discuss items of sculpture within the text where necessary, particularly in Chapter 5, however I chose to exclude them as primary subjects of research and from the catalogue, as they have already been studied by Katherin Schade and others.<sup>23</sup> Coinage is not discussed as it does not concern non-imperial women. For

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. The Projecta Casket is S1, as it is the first catalogue entry for the medium of silver.

<sup>23</sup> I also excluded mummy portraits. While their production extends into the fourth century, there are not a great number relevant to this thesis and they have been extensively studied as an individual medium. See e.g. Walker 1997; Roberts 2008.

media where there are hundreds of examples of very similar pieces, such as gold glass or the so-called ‘marriage rings’, I have collected within my catalogue illustrative examples but have not attempted to gather them all. In cases like this this I indicate where the reader can access fuller dedicated catalogues.

### 1.3.2 Women or Gender?

In the preceding sections I have been rather cavalier in my use of the terms ‘women’ and ‘gender’. The study of women is different in many ways from the study of gender. Women’s history as a field is concerned with what women did in the past and how they lived their lives. Gender studies, on the other hand, examines how a specific culture at a specific time defined what it meant to be male or female; what was the expected ideal behaviour of a man or woman. The two fields are not always compatible. An example is Procopius’ discussion of Justinian and Theodora’s behaviour during the Nika Riots in 532. In Procopius’ tale, Justinian appears as a weak ruler who wants to give in to the mob and run away, only to be prevented from doing so by an heroic speech delivered by Theodora, which convinces him to stay and fight.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars have understood this as evidence that women, or at least Theodora, spoke up at council meetings and were listened too, that is to say, evidence of women’s political activity.<sup>25</sup> It has been convincingly demonstrated, however, that this was actually a literary ploy of Procopius.<sup>26</sup> Gender norms of the time considered rational, courageous behaviour to be indicative of

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<sup>24</sup> Procopius *Wars* 1.24.33-37 for Theodora’s speech.

<sup>25</sup> Procopius’ account seems to have been taken at face value well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Cameron 1985, p.69). In his recent biography of Theodora, David Potter still argues that whether or not Theodora actually spoke the words attributed to her by Procopius, she did intervene in this manner and prevented her husband from fleeing (2015, pp.151-155).

<sup>26</sup> See Cameron 1985, p.69 and Brubaker 2005, pp.429-430 on this specific episode, and Fisher 1978, Cameron 1985 esp. pp.67-83, and Brubaker 2004a more generally on Procopius’ careful manipulation of gender and use of rhetoric in his writings. Also mentioned in Neville 2019, pp.14-18, who goes argues that this scene inspired others in later literature with the opposite purpose: husbands shown resisting the opinions of their wives were painted as masculine and virtuous, the opposite of Justinian.

masculinity, and weak, impulsive behaviour typical of femininity. By inverting expected behaviour patterns within the husband and wife pair, Procopius demonstrated to the reader that Justinian was a terrible ruler, and Theodora a wicked and ambitious woman. The scene has no validity in the historical sense, but rather manipulates gender for dramatic effect and to express the opinions of the author. This tableaux therefore has little to offer to women's history, but much to interest gender studies.

In this thesis I will combine the approaches of women's history and gender studies. What women or men did in the past and how they lived their lives was intimately linked to what it meant in that time and place to be female or male. This was perhaps especially true for women as they faced greater legal and social restrictions than men. Such restrictions on what women could do were based on ideas about what was appropriate for their gender. What we continue to fail to understand about Late Antiquity is the true extent of both what women did and why they did it. We are developing an ever more intricate knowledge of ideals of gender as constructed within textual sources, but we have relatively little idea of what that meant 'on the ground'. This is where I believe material evidence can be of great usefulness. Work on pilgrimage has already shown that late antique ideals of gender and travel that we receive from literary sources do not necessarily concord with material evidence from pilgrimage sites.<sup>27</sup> Men were traditionally associated with the virtues needed to travel, such as mental and physical endurance. Ideal femininity, meanwhile, entailed domesticity and the avoidance of public spaces. Widespread archaeological evidence for women pilgrims, however, suggests that many women were on the road. This not only tells us more about what women 'did', but also that it was acceptable for them to do so. That is to say, that femininity was flexible and negotiable, and that in this context piety could be more important than domesticity. The material evidence

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<sup>27</sup> Stafford 2019a; 2019b.

has not ‘debunked’ domesticity as a desirable feminine trait, but has rather revealed that it was part of a more complex matrix of what was ideal and what was practical.

Material culture therefore represents an important opportunity to combine the benefits of women’s history and gender studies. Women’s history has been criticised for its tendency to take texts at face value (see Procopius’ Theodora above) and to focus study of sexual difference on women alone without problematising ‘woman’ as a concept.<sup>28</sup> Gender studies, meanwhile, has been at times criticised for detaching itself from the experiences of women in favour of theoretical conceptions of gender as constructed chiefly by men.<sup>29</sup> This thesis combines the approaches of both fields in order to mitigate these valid critiques of the individual disciplines. When analysing my sources, I am concerned with both the practical and the theoretical. What are women shown doing in visual culture and why was that an acceptable or desirable way to be depicted?

For example, when examining evidence for women’s involvement in their communities as patrons, we can ask practical questions like where and how many women were acting as donors, how big their benefactions were and with whom they were given. However we can also ask how the idea of a female donor was articulated visually: is she dressed in a particular manner? Does her representation stress civic virtues or gendered ones? How does the representation of women donors compare with male donors? We can then ask wider questions about how these patterns fit into society at large: what about the specific social and economic conditions of a place made it possible for women to act as patrons in the first place? Does the practice differ across regions? How did women’s patronage in Late Antiquity compare with the Roman

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<sup>28</sup> Wallach Scott 1986; 1988; 2010.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Stansell 1987; Hoff 1994.

period? From these approaches we can build a nuanced picture of women's patronage that can also expand our understanding of public giving in Late Antiquity more generally.

### 1.3.3 Intersectionality

The complexity of gender, as discussed above in relation to pilgrimage, often makes it difficult to work with. Not only is gender made up of a wide variety of elements specific to a certain time and place, but it also interacts with other facets of identity such as age, social status, wealth, and ethnicity. These factors have the potential to distort or alter the impact of gender on the lives of ordinary people. Although not late antique, a good example of this is the work of Steven Friesen on inscriptions relating to a first century AD woman called Junia Theodora.<sup>30</sup> Junia appears in an inscription from Corinth, in which she is praised by city officials from Lycia as a patroness who intervened politically to assist their citizens. The diplomatic activities of Junia were normally denied to women, who were considered to be too irrational and weak-willed to take part in governance. However, Friesen shows that Junia leveraged her position as a wealthy Roman citizen to exercise political agency which promoted imperial interests in Lycia. In this context, the restrictions of Junia's gender were offset by her money, status, and willingness to act as a conduit for colonial power. Junia is not simply an exceptional woman, she is rather an example of the interaction of different structural forces, some of which work against her and others which work in her favour. Friesen argues persuasively that in order to understand Junia and her situation, we must examine her through an intersectional lens.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Friesen 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Roland Betancourt's 2020 book, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, came out too late to be incorporated into this discussion, however it too demonstrates the importance of examining identity through an intersectional lens. See pp.1-17 for an overview of Betancourt's approaches to sexuality, gender, and race.



The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined in 1989 by Kimberlè Crenshaw in her article ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’.<sup>32</sup> Crenshaw argued that in order to effectively tackle the discrimination faced by people of colour, and the discrimination faced by women, we must acknowledge the ways in which they intersect. She writes: “Neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents.”<sup>33</sup> That is to say, in order to fight inequality, we must be aware of the ways in which different sources of inequality overlap, in this case for women of colour. Intersectionality has since expanded to include attention to factors such as sexuality, age, disability, and gender identity. While Crenshaw’s argument, and the use of the term in the modern world, is primarily directed at the struggle for social justice, it is useful for thinking about gender in the ancient world. While some ideals of gender may be presented in literary sources as uniform across all women and men, the ways in which gender intersected with other elements of identity made its impact variable. Junia Theodora experienced restrictions because of her gender, but also privileges based on her wealth, citizenship, and political allegiances. Her family status is unknown, so it is also possible that she was legally capable of acting independently without a male relative or guardian. Other women, who may have been younger, less wealthy, non-citizens, or enslaved, would necessarily experience gender in a very different way to Junia and women like her.

The example of Junia Theodora is especially pertinent given that much of the evidence of my thesis concerns women like her: wealthy and of a high social status. Some scholarship on women in the ancient world has contended that women suffered so greatly under the patriarchy

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<sup>32</sup> Crenshaw 1989.

<sup>33</sup> Crenshaw 1989, p.166.

as to be all but inaccessible. The back-cover blurb on one edited volume takes this to the extreme, stating that: “The ‘woman’ in antiquity in some senses never really existed. She was – and to some extent remains – always an illusion, a pleasurable but unsettling construct of the male imagination.”<sup>34</sup> While, as we have seen, this may indeed sometimes be the case when studying certain literary sources, it assumes that ‘woman’ was a single monolithic category, and that gender was the defining social factor for women themselves. As Cooper has pointed out, this “may be a false generality for a society to which class and estate were the dominant signifiers, and which expected its members to identify at once with multiple relational roles.”<sup>35</sup> Ascribing to all women an equally negative experience of patriarchy, and therefore denying all women agency on account of their gender, is too simplistic and prevents us from understanding how gender functioned in people’s lives. Rich women, for example, like Junia Theodora and many of the women represented in my thesis, experienced opportunities and allowances denied to the poor or enslaved. In some contexts, their social privileges could also exceed the gender-based privileges of men of lower status.

As this thesis is concerned with the study of both women’s lives and gender, it is therefore necessary to examine my sources through an intersectional lens. There was no one single experience of gender, rather it was informed by a package of unstable elements that varied by individuals and throughout the individual life course. My data cannot, of course, provide access to all possible constructions and experiences of gender, however by taking consideration of intersectionality I hope to reach a broader understanding of the spectrum that once existed. This conceptual framework influenced how I structured my research questions outlined above. In Chapters Two and Three on the self, it is wealth and status that come to the fore. Beauty and

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<sup>34</sup> Archer ed. 1994.

<sup>35</sup> Cooper 1996, p.113.

sexuality were closely tied to gender, yet they were also tied to status: wealthy free women received legal protections denied to women of the lower classes and slaves. Is this reflected in representations? Did wealthy women have opportunities for representation denied to others? Education was likewise a luxury reserved for the rich, but was erudition only prized in elite circles? What sorts of learned identities were appropriate for a woman? Chapter Four on women within the family takes greater account of age and marital status. The gendered expectations of unmarried girls and mature married or widowed women were very different: is this reflected in visual culture? Ascetic women in texts had the opportunity to transcend gender and achieve ideal masculine traits, but what do the visual representations of women monastics reveal about monastic life? Chapter Five returns to the theme of wealth and social power in examining the public image of women, most of whom were among the most wealthy and influential members of their communities. Did being female matter if you had enough money to build a church?

#### 1.3.4 Visualising Women

In his book, *Ways of Worldmaking*, the philosopher Nelson Goodman proposed that we “make” the world ourselves by constructing symbolic systems, such as literary discourses, paintings, or music.<sup>36</sup> Each system and each world-version generated is equally legitimate, as there is no neutral or essential world which exists behind these versions. While this may appear unhelpfully abstract in relation to our own experiences of the world we live in, it is useful for thinking about the ancient world. We cannot travel back to Late Antiquity and experience things for ourselves, what we have access to are some of the systems and world-versions

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<sup>36</sup> Goodman 1978. Ricoeur’s 1980 review of Goodman is particularly helpful to the non-philosopher in sorting through Goodman’s theses.

generated by people in the past. If we take a literary source, for example a letter of Jerome, we are presented with a representation of a world as he created it. Jerome did not simply provide a mirror or reflection of an external world, but rather he helped *make* his world through his writing. As scholars of the past, we study the versions produced by ancient people in order to make sense of the worlds that they created and the society of which they were part. We then use them to write history, our own versions of the past. From a philosophical standpoint, we may consider that all systems and all world-versions are equally valid and important for worldmaking. The problem with applying this to the study of the past and the writing of history, is that traditionally scholarship has centred the worlds of elite men (both past and present), and particularly those created through literary discourse.<sup>37</sup> This thesis does not seek to brand these versions as deceptive or false, but rather to highlight them for what they are: a tiny fraction of both the world-versions that once existed, and of those for which we have surviving evidence. This thesis privileges a different way of worldmaking as a source for understanding late antique society in general, and for writing about the worlds of women in particular: visual culture.

Visual culture was incredibly forceful in the worldmaking of Late Antiquity. The power of images is attested through both the choice of Christianity to develop its own visual language, and its violent destruction of offending images, such as those of pagan gods. Representations of people, whether mortal or divine, were especially potent. They quite literally inhabited the world alongside flesh and blood humans and served as conduits for the expression of visceral desires and fears.<sup>38</sup> Examining the ways in which the late antique world was peopled with

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<sup>37</sup> On the process of the creation of history, see Carr 2018 (first published 1961).

<sup>38</sup> Stewart 2003, pp.261-299 (Late Antiquity pp.290-298) on (negative) responses to statuary, with particular attention to memory and the practice of statue destruction or mutilation. One particularly evocative tale from Late Antiquity recounted by the fifth-century bishop Quodvultdeus, expresses the fears of pagan statuary held by some Christians (text and translation Picard 1986). A young girl had been at the baths when she saw a statue of nude Venus and imitated its pose. Through this action she unwittingly offered herself to the malevolent spirit dwelling within the statue, who rushed in through her mouth and possessed her. Eventually the girl was exorcised and the statue destroyed.

images of women is therefore one way of investigating how women themselves inhabited the late antique world. The sources that make up visual culture are complex and multifaceted, both physical things and abstract ideas, and this makes it difficult to analyse them effectively.<sup>39</sup> The rest of this section is devoted to laying out how I approach the analysis of depictions of women as sources of evidence and what makes them so useful for the study of women and gender.

In W J T Mitchell's book, *What Do Pictures Want?*, he defines pictures as the confluence of image, object, and medium. Image in this sense refers to a likeness, form or motif, object to the material support on which that image appears, and medium to the material practices that bring together the image and object.<sup>40</sup> I take a similar approach to my evidence, in that I consider not just iconography (Mitchell's 'image') but also object and medium. For example, the famous depiction of a wealthy woman at her toilet on the Projecta Casket should not be understood simply as an image of a woman doing her hair. If we are to get to the 'bigger picture', as it were, we need to consider more factors: 1) the image is located on a piece of bathing equipment, perhaps for carrying towels or linens; 2) this object is also replete with other images that require our attention; 3) this object is large, heavy, and made of silver. These considerations about the object which bears the image and the medium from which it was made reveal important contextual information. The function of the object is connected to the image: it is an item used during bathing and bears images of the toilet. This function, and the fact that other images on the casket also reference the female toilet, including a depiction of a female attendant carrying a representation of a similar object, indicate that it was probably used by a woman and her slaves. That the casket is made of silver tells us that this woman was socially privileged. That it is large and heavy indicates that using it would require the assistance of at

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<sup>39</sup> Mitchell 2005, p.xvii.

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell 2005, p.xiii. Later in the book Mitchell goes on to explain that medium refers not only to materials, but also the things that people do with them (p.204).

least one attendant to carry and manipulate it. Object and medium are as essential as the image itself. How differently would we interpret the images of the Projecta Casket if we found them on a ceramic drinking vessel, on the floor of a church, or engraved onto a piece of armour?

Behind these things and forms are people. The people who patronised the creation of representations, who conceived of the ideas behind them, who made them, and of course the people who looked at them, for whom they made up their visual world. Just as our study of a representation must take account of the image, the object, and the medium, so does our examination of it need to include multiple perspectives of creation and reception. The person who paid for the creation of a representation may not have also conceived of it conceptually, while the ideas behind its conceptual significance may have been beyond the skills of the craftsman who made it. In turn, any intended significance may have been lost on viewers, or have triggered different responses from different people. There is not one single ‘meaning’ to a representation, but many possible interpretations. When it comes to representations of people, in this case women, we are also faced with another person: the person depicted in the image. This person was not necessarily the same as whoever commissioned, conceptualised, crafted, or considered the image, but equally they may have been any combination of all four. The traditional temptation has been to place the greatest emphasis on the patron, often conflating financial and conceptual responsibility. This is limiting, however, as in most cases we can only take an educated guess at their identity, let alone if they did any more than bankroll somebody else’s invention. If we instead expand our aim to include all the interested parties in a representation, as detailed above, we reduce our need to guess the identity of the patron, and come closer to revealing the manifold potential of the image.

Representations of ordinary women are useful subjects of study for three reasons: firstly, the representations can often tell us something factual about the woman being depicted, for example that she was widowed, that she had donated a mosaic floor to a church, or that she was a dedicated virgin. This is the women's history side of things, adding to our knowledge of what women 'did'. Secondly, they can tell us about how the groups of people discussed above wanted to express a visualisation of that individual, for example emphasising attributes of beauty or piety. This perspective is more aligned with gender studies and how womanhood was conceived of within society. Thirdly, it is likely that women themselves also belonged to at least one of those four categories of commissioner, conceptualiser, maker, or viewer. This means that in some cases we are able to place real women alongside their visual counterparts. Returning briefly to the Project Casket, for example, we know little about who paid for it, conceptualised it, or made it, but the fact that it is part of a toilet set and is covered in depictions of women at their toilet suggests strongly that it was used by women for that function. The majority of studies into this object have viewed it from the perspective of an imagined male patron, framing it within a sexual and voyeuristic viewing context. Yet if we focus instead on a woman and her attendants as users and viewers, our perceptions of the images shift towards expressions of power and status.<sup>41</sup>

A limitation to studying representations of women, often cited in discussions of archaeology in general, is that men financed, conceptualised, and crafted the vast majority of material culture.<sup>42</sup> Lin Foxhall, for example, states in regard to using art and archaeology to study gender more generally in the ancient world: "As far as we know, virtually all of these works, ranging from temples and theatres to individual sculptures, wall paintings, decorated vases and

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<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 2, and more detailed discussion in Stafford, forthcoming.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Elsner 2018, p.12.

even engraved gems, were conceptualized and made by men.”<sup>43</sup> The first problem with this statement is its opening words, ‘as far as we know’. The second is that it takes little account of context. As we will see through the course of this thesis, depictions of women primarily derive from contexts in which we know women exercised significant agency. These include the decoration of domestic areas, the commemoration of family (both funerary and non-funerary), the celebration of their own activities as patrons, and items of personal adornment like jewellery.<sup>44</sup> Some media, such as textiles, are also connected directly to women’s production. While it remains something of a conjectural leap, I believe it would be facile to assume that women had no involvement in how they appeared in the decoration of their own home, or in how their donation was celebrated in the mosaic floor of the church which they paid for. While this will of course have varied by individual, it is an assumption that underlies this thesis, and which I believe is reasonably supported by contextual evidence, as will become clear in the chapters which follow.

### 1.3.5 Text and Image

As I have outlined above, I believe that focusing research into women and gender on textual sources, primarily ‘classic’ literary texts of the late antique canon and legal writings, has left us with an unrepresentative picture. Equally, turning exclusively to another source of evidence, such as visual culture, risks reproducing similar problems. For this reason, I endeavour to integrate textual sources of all kinds into my analysis, from literary and legal texts to documentary papyri, inscriptions, letters, and graffiti. While it is certainly true that a picture is

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<sup>43</sup> Foxhall 2013, p.19.

<sup>44</sup> See Talbot 2014, p.274: “I am convinced, however, that elite women also ordered their own clothing, linens, jewelry, and toilet articles, and perhaps even household furnishings such as furniture, ceramic vessels, and tableware...we should not forget women’s patronage of artisans who manufactured both deluxe and more ordinary personal items and furnishings for aristocratic and imperial households.”



worth a thousand words, many of the representations considered in my thesis either come with texts of their own, or are better understood through textual contextualisation. A basic example of this is inscriptions: many funerary portraits or depictions of donors come with explanatory inscriptions that provide additional information such as names, dates, and other data. These texts are an integral part of the representation as a whole, part of the ‘image’ of Mitchell’s tripartite definition, and therefore must be analysed alongside the figural image.

More abstractly, other textual sources not so directly connected to a representation can be equally useful. By understanding how visual culture sat in relation to different ways of worldmaking, we can better navigate the complex web of ideals, desires, fears, and realities which obscure our knowledge of the past. For example, many Church Fathers stressed in their writings the importance of women covering their heads as a sign of modesty and piety. This is often understood as a reflection of contemporary practice: men wrote about it and women did it. Yet might these sources better indicate the concern of the authors that at least some women were not living up to their expectations? Visual culture can help us examine how veiling and covering worked beyond the fears and ideals of Churchmen, and in turn also set those texts in a wider social context. If we are faced with numerous depictions of adult women shown unveiled, yet perfectly respectable, then we need to think more carefully about what these texts are doing, and adjust our assumptions about everyday dress practices.<sup>45</sup> From another point of view, texts can be helpful for understanding what images might be trying to achieve. The popularity of representing women as learned, for example, might appear obscure until we consider factors such as the literary output of late antique women themselves and the growing literary ideal of Christian education as a route to salvation.

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<sup>45</sup> This particular example was discussed in detail in the chapter removed from this thesis, however it is a matter that also appears in Chapter 5.

While it is difficult to extricate ourselves from the fact that the majority of textual sources that survive were written by men and therefore construct their perspectives, I have endeavoured to be as diverse as possible in my selection of sources. Where possible I have identified and utilised texts written by women (see in particular Chapter 3), and have included a variety of genres of writing. This has allowed me better access to women's perspectives, including their letters, poetry, wills, contracts, and business dealings. The use of these texts is intended to strengthen the amount of evidence used in this thesis that is directly tied to women themselves, and to further demonstrate the importance – and feasibility – of the diversification of source material.

## 1.4 Limitations

### 1.4.1 Limitations of data

A primary limitation of this thesis is the visual data available to study, which is variable across regions, centuries, and media. Some regions have been much better excavated and published, some centuries produce significantly more material, and some media survive better than others. Regions in which the empire had a strong hold and which continued to be under its control for longer, for example, tend to produce more surviving archaeological material than others. Places like Italy or the Near East remained relatively prosperous long after Britain or Germany had left the empire. They have produced more archaeology for both the Roman period and Late Antiquity, partly as a result of this prosperity, and partly as a result of sustained excavation and scholarship. A significant proportion of my evidence for wall-paintings, for example, comes from catacombs in Rome and central Italy. This is due to a combination of factors including

sustained prosperity into the sixth century, long-standing antiquarian interest in the area, the huge volume of catacombs and paintings, and their ability to be preserved underground. Unfortunately, wall-paintings in above-ground locations tend to be destroyed or significantly damaged as buildings decay or are robbed of their building material. This means my corpus has significantly more floor mosaics than any kind of wall-decoration. Ceiling decoration is almost completely absent as are perishable media such as wood.

It can sometimes be difficult to tell the difference between data ‘hot spots’ generated by this imbalance in survival and excavation, and real concentrated foci of evidence. I have tried to address this issue throughout the thesis where possible. Returning to floor mosaics, for example, a large proportion of known donor portraits of women come from sixth century floor mosaics in churches from the Near East (see Chapter 5). This is again due to a number of factors: the region was prosperous during this period and there was a building boom in the area focused on the construction and decoration of churches. Much of this building was paid for by local people, who chose to commemorate their donations with depictions of themselves. The area was also later abandoned and was not resettled, leading to extensive archaeological evidence awaiting excavation. So what is more significant, the penchant of local people for patronage and commemoration, or the extraordinary levels of preservation in the area? That is to say, were other people doing similar things in other places but the evidence doesn’t survive, or can we say that something special was happening here? While this is a significant problem, it is also where I believe the scope of my thesis becomes useful. As I am looking at all available material from across such an extensive geographic and chronological area, I can compare these patterns to a wider data set. I will elaborate on this further in Chapter 5, but it does appear that while patronage is found in other regions, something specific to the region and time period is happening in the Near East in the sixth century. Ultimately, there is little that can be done about

these limitations of data. The only thing we can do is contextualise what survives within our existing data pool, and acknowledge that in some cases this restricts the conclusions available to us.

#### 1.4.2 Limitations of conception

A project which examines women in visual culture will inevitably run up against the issue that the vast majority of material was produced by and for those with the resources to pay for it. While there are some examples in my corpus of representations for which issues of production are not a factor, such as graffiti, the vast majority were produced for people of relatively high wealth and status. Most depictions directly concern elite women themselves, while representations of lower status women, such as entertainers, were predominantly found in the context of elite decoration. For example, the famous mosaic depicting an all-female music group from Syria was part of the décor of a wealthy family's home.<sup>46</sup> It is unlikely that they themselves were musicians, but rather wanted to adorn their house with a representation of the kind of entertainment one could expect there. Throughout the thesis, I try to draw out as far as possible issues of variable status within my corpus of depictions. This is partly done through the fact that different types of representation were within financial reach of different groups of people. Items such as small gold-glasses bearing family portraits, for example, did not require the same resources as the large items of silver bathing equipment adorned with images of women at their toilet. Some contextual information from inscriptions can also inform us as to the relative status of an individual. This is explored in particular in relation to intellectual accomplishments in Chapter 3. I also attempt to draw out status differences through my consideration of the people who used and viewed these depictions. In Chapter 4, for example,

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<sup>46</sup> M14.

I consider how enslaved people may have engaged with their representation as part of elite households.

A further limitation to this thesis is its inability to consider nuanced questions of race and ethnicity. This was either not a factor for the kind of representations studied in this thesis, or, more likely, this thesis has failed to identify their relevance. It appears probable that the seeming racial homogeneity of my corpus is a comment on prevailing ethnic attitudes and prejudices in and of itself. We know from literary sources that skin-colour in Late Antiquity continued to be a site of prejudice and discrimination, with poetry in particular often deriding women with darker skin tones as ugly and constructing them as an uncivilised societal ‘other’.<sup>47</sup> With ideas of beauty and civilisation tied closely to whiteness, the homogeneity of representations of real women is perhaps unsurprising. That all the women in my corpus make a visual claim to white beauty standards further reinforces the evidence of literary sources. Other factors, such as differences in dress practices, which have been used to explore ethnic diversity in the Roman period, are more difficult to use as markers in Late Antiquity because there was such a shift in clothing and adornment more generally.<sup>48</sup> The investigation of race in Late Antiquity is a growing topic of research and moving forward it will be important to incorporate questions of gender alongside ethnicity.

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<sup>47</sup> Starks 2011, pp.249-253, primarily on the poetry of Luxorius, who wrote under Vandal rule in Carthage.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Carroll 2013. Dress as markers of ethnic difference has been more successfully explored in Late Antiquity for masculinity rather than femininity. For example, the impact of ‘barbarian’ dress on elite male self-representation (Harlow 2004).

## 1.5 Summary

The overarching goal of this thesis is to begin to build a more nuanced and balanced understanding of women's lives and constructions of gender in Late Antiquity. The field has progressed significantly in the last forty years, but is still centred around the writings of elite men, with all its attendant limitations. The challenge is therefore to find a way to study women and gender more effectively. One way to approach this challenge is to identify new data sets beyond the literary canon through which to study these phenomena. In particular, to identify evidence that is more diverse in its production and with a closer connection to women themselves. I have chosen the representation of women in visual culture because I believe it fulfils these parameters. While far from exhaustive, I hope that the scope of my research questions will provide a demonstration of the potential of the material evidence at our disposal and a catalyst for future research. By combining approaches from women's studies and gender studies and situating my understanding of gender in an intersectional context, I aim to write a new chapter in the history of Late Antiquity which places the lives of ordinary people, in all their complexity, at its centre.

## Chapter 2

### Bathing Beauties: Adornment as Public Spectacle

#### 2.1 Introduction

*The shell that bears Cytherea behind fish-tailed Triton  
compared with this one itself does not doubt to yield [its place].  
We ask that you bend down your queenly head for a bit,  
and, great patron, take this little gift,  
and with good will not reject your client Euodius,  
whom by making great will make you even greater.  
Thus to you, whose father is a king, and whose father-in-law  
and husband (are kings),  
may your son also reign alongside his father as well as  
afterwards.  
The happy waters, enclosed in this bright metal,  
cherish the still-brighter face of the lady.  
For when the queen deigns to touch her face hence,  
a radiance is emitted from her visage onto the silver.<sup>1</sup>*

This poem was commissioned from Sidonius Apollinaris (c.430-489) by his friend Euodius, who wanted to inscribe a verse dedication on a shell-shaped silver washbasin he was giving to the Visigothic Queen Ragnahilda. At first glance, the poem and the basin seem a predictable

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<sup>1</sup> Sidonius *Letters* 4.8.4-10, translation Leatherbury 2017, pp.39-40. See Leatherbury 2017 for a discussion of material contexts of late antique texts.

present for a woman of rank: the poem praises Ragnahilda's radiant beauty and wishes good fortune for her family; the basin is an addition to her toilet, an appropriately feminine tool for cultivating her appearance. Yet all is not quite what it seems. The poem puts more delicately what Sidonius states boldly in the text of the letter: "you plan to offer the basin, thus embellished, to Queen Ragnahilda, in the hope, no doubt, of securing beforehand an invincible support alike for your ambitions and for your actions."<sup>2</sup> The basin was no simple beauty accessory, but rather a calculated attempt to attract the favour and patronage of a powerful woman.

In this chapter, I will argue that bathing and the cultivation of beauty are rarely as simple as they seem. Impressive silver bathing vessels like Ragnahilda's basin are common in late antique silver hoards and are frequently decorated with images of women bathing and adorning themselves, the most famous being the Projecta Casket. This object and others like it have been firmly placed within a domestic world in which women obediently adorn themselves for the pleasure of their husbands.<sup>3</sup> But what if these images belong less to a framework of domestic seduction and more to a public context closer to Ragnahilda and Euodius? It is well known that in Late Antiquity there was a shift away from monumental, permanent forms of self-representation like statuary, and movement towards increasingly performative forms of display which led to the growing ceremonialisation of public events and daily life.<sup>4</sup> The desire of late antique elites to create opportunities to publicly flaunt their status ranged from organising games and spectacles to the construction of private audience chambers to receive clients.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sidonius *Letters* 4.8.5, translation adapted from Anderson 1936, p.93.

<sup>3</sup> Shelton (1981, pp.25-26) refers to furniture fittings from the Esquiline treasure as representing male public office, and the Projecta and Muse Caskets as "objects firmly in the private sector." (p.26); Wyke 1994, pp.143-144; Elsner 2003, p.31; Elsner 2018, p. 38. Swift 2018, p.128: "The practice of body care and the use of cosmetics and jewellery constituted the Roman woman as...primarily a bodily creature displaying herself for male eyes."

<sup>4</sup> Borg and Witschel 2001, pp.90-117; Borg 2007, pp.63-68.

<sup>5</sup> Borg and Witschel 2001, pp.93-104. A dramatic example of this fashion is the development of the *taurobolium* sacrifice into a sensational public event in the fourth century (McLynn 1996).



These ephemeral forms of self-representation were documented both in visual culture and in domestic architecture: mosaics, ivories, and other media record depictions of officials starting the games, while houses preserve richly decorated reception rooms and waiting areas, including wall-paintings showing processions of well-dressed slaves attending their masters.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, I will argue that in Late Antiquity bathing and the toilet likewise became a highly ceremonialised form of elite spectacle.<sup>7</sup> Depictions of women (and men) washing and adorning themselves ought not to be read simply as representations of passive sexuality, but as public statements of wealth, rank, and status.

I shall begin with a brief overview of bathing and toilet practices and their representation in visual culture during the Roman period. This will set the scene and show how the practice developed during Late Antiquity. I will then move to a close reading of the depictions of the toilet that survive to us from our period – both visual and textual – and a discussion of how they create a sense of spectacle that mirrored their real-life performance. I will then discuss in greater detail the ceremonialisation of late antique life and the place of the bathhouse within it, before closing the chapter with a consideration of the utility of these performances for women. One aspect of these images that will not be discussed in detail is the nudity incorporated into the depictions and associations with the goddess Venus, as I examine this in a forthcoming article in which I explore nudity in late antique art.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Borg and Witschel 2001, pp.93-104, 113-116; Dunbabin 2003a.

<sup>7</sup> See Bergmann and Kondoleon eds. 1999 on the “art of spectacle”, which extends the term beyond traditional spectacles to include events such as funerals (Bodel 1999) and banquets (D’Arms 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Stafford, forthcoming. This article includes a section dedicated to nudity in scenes of bathing. I argue that the ability to be represented nude is intimately connected to status, privilege, and the socio-legal structures that shielded wealthy women from sexual shame. I also contend that the eroticised male viewership frequently assumed for these images is misguided, as the social hierarchy did not permit lower-status men to view elite women as sexual objects.

## 2.2 Image and Rhetoric in Roman Antiquity

The act of bathing and adorning the body has a long history in the art of antiquity. Surviving depictions of women bathing or at their toilet date as far back as Archaic Greece, and are also found in Classical Greek and Etruscan art.<sup>9</sup> Evidence declines in the late Classical and Hellenistic periods and disappears almost completely during the Roman Republic, only to rise once more during the Imperial period.<sup>10</sup> The depiction of the toilet and bathing, although ancient, is inconsistent chronologically and covers a wide variety of media, contexts, and themes. In Greek culture many scenes of adornment were related to weddings, however this connection appears to have been lost relatively quickly. Despite this, the primacy of Classical Greek art has fostered a general understanding that depictions of women bathing or adorning themselves represent brides preparing for their weddings.<sup>11</sup> This is one aspect that leads such images to be tied to the domestic realm and will be discussed in greater detail below in relation to the Projecta Casket.

Scenes of bathing and adornment are relatively common in Roman imperial art, but imagery of bathing and imagery of adornment are kept separate. Women are shown in domestic spaces having their hair dressed by attendants, for example in a first-century AD wall-painting from Herculaneum, or are shown in the bathhouse in the act of washing, such as on a first-century AD lamp from Pozzuoli, which shows two naked women, one of whom is about to scrape her leg down with a strigil.<sup>12</sup> In the second and third centuries the iconography of the female toilet

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of adornment imagery from Archaic Greece through Late Antiquity, see Rose 2001, pp.15-76.

<sup>10</sup> Rose 2001, pp.52-58.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Rose 2001, who sees a direct link from Classical Greek iconography to Late Antiquity in terms of adornment scenes being related to weddings, however she admits that during the Hellenistic period there is no evidence this link was maintained (p.56).

<sup>12</sup> Wall-painting: D'Ambra 2007, p.5, Fig.1. A similar scene of a woman having her hair arranged is found on a first-century AD terracotta lamp (Rose 2001, p.69). Lamp: BM 1856, 1226.527, Bailey 1975, Q773; Whitmore 2013, Fig 3, p.24. Rose mentions that a worn relief sculpture from the bath at Sens shows six figures at their toilet.

grew in popularity in funerary art. This trend was particularly strong in Roman Gaul, where several grave reliefs survive depicting toilet scenes similar to earlier Greek ones.<sup>13</sup> A third-century monument from Gallia Belgica, for example, shows a seated woman having her hair arranged by a slave, while another slave holds out a mirror. Two more slaves stand in the background holding toilet items.<sup>14</sup> In other parts of the empire we find more indirect references to adornment: a second-century stele from Pisa dedicated by a mason to his wives and son represented tools of the mason's trade alongside various toilet items.<sup>15</sup> A funerary monument for a woman called Julia Maximilla, from Poitiers, meanwhile, included a motif of a mirror with a female face reflected in it.<sup>16</sup> While the act of looking in a mirror is usually associated with the toilet, the presence of the reflection of the woman may comment more on her death than on her cultivation during life.

A tantalising parallel, and perhaps precursor, to our late antique material, comes from a bathhouse attached to a *domus* under Piazza dei Cinquecento in Rome. In the Severan period older Antonine decoration was covered and the rooms received a new series of wall-paintings.<sup>17</sup> Elaborate scenes in the large apsidal hall apparently showed women dressing, undressing, and bathing.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, little of these paintings survive, as they were discovered in 1862 during railway construction works. Archaeologists made drawings of the space, which do show some nude women holding bathing items and some sitting at their toilet. However, they are

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She notes that they are all nude women, one fixing her hair, one arranging another's hair, and one pouring perfume or oil onto her body (Rose 2001, p.73). However the reliefs are indeed fragmentary and highly worn, and beyond that they once depicted women washing(?) it is difficult to discern much else, including whether the scene is meant to be 'real' or mythological (Esperandieu 1911, No.2856, 5-6, pp.57-58).

<sup>13</sup> Kampen 1981, p.92, cat nos.32-25; Rose 2001, pp.58-76. On the depiction of toilet items in Roman funerary art, see Shumka 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Kampen 1981, no.32; Wyke 1994, p.142; D'Ambra 2007, p.113, Fig.58.

<sup>15</sup> Wyke 1994, p.142; Shumka 2008, pp.179-180. It has been suggested that one or both women were involved in commercial hairdressing or perfume dealing (Wyke 1994, p.142).

<sup>16</sup> Musée Sainte-Croix, Poitiers, Inv. 2008.0.6.280.

<sup>17</sup> Barbera and Paris 1996, p.117 (public baths), p.119 (Severan re-furbishment).

<sup>18</sup> Barbera and Paris 1996, p.122.

impressionistic in style and clearly made under time pressure, and it is now impossible to confirm their accuracy.<sup>19</sup> Later excavations retrieved parts of the frescoes, some of which do show nude and clothed figures carrying objects, but most only preserve them from the hips down, and none concern a woman explicitly at her toilet.<sup>20</sup> Fragments of similar nude figures were also found in other rooms of the bath complex, but it is again difficult to interpret them when they are so badly damaged.<sup>21</sup> The decoration of the south wall of the *apodyterium* is better conserved: a central female figure is shown wearing a pair of briefs and a light diaphanous material over her head.<sup>22</sup> Barbara Borg has interpreted this house and its large baths as an example of the development of the *domus* into a space ever more directed towards display. She understands the bath with its luxurious decoration as a space for spectacle and ceremony just like apsidal reception rooms elsewhere in the complex.<sup>23</sup>

There was therefore certainly an interest in the depiction of bathing and adornment before Late Antiquity, yet in the Roman period the two themes were kept largely separate. Women are shown on grave stele in domestic contexts attending to their toilet, or they are shown nude at the baths, washing and drying themselves. In the art of Late Antiquity, however, we will find that the two themes become conflated: depictions of the toilet are purposefully situated within the bathhouse alongside images of bathing. It is possible that this was already present at the Piazza dei Cinquecento baths in the third century, indeed it is even probable given the documentation that survives. In Late Antiquity we will see the crystallisation of this iconography: our examples clearly take cues from earlier images, yet they all bear a distinctly

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<sup>19</sup> Barbera and Paris 1996, p.122, Fig 1; Mielsch 2001, p.109, Abb.126 (and in general pp.108-110).

<sup>20</sup> On display at Palazzo Massimo alle Terme in Rome. One panel seems to show a woman using a strigil on her leg, but since the arm of the figure is placed across the genitals, this cannot be confirmed (Barbera and Paris 1996, pp.128-129, Tav.1).

<sup>21</sup> Barbera and Paris 1996, pp.149-152, Figs 1-3 (corridor); pp.162-166, Figs 2, 5, Tav.1-2 (“La Sala Termale”). The paintings from the second group include what seems to be a servant carrying a casket (p.166, Tav.2), and is compared by the authors to the procession scene from Piazza Armerina.

<sup>22</sup> Barbera and Paris 1996, pp.158-161, Fig 1, Tav. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Borg 2007, p.66.

late antique formula. Before we move on to consider these representations in detail, I will briefly discuss attitudes towards bathing and adornment in the Roman period and how they may have impacted their depiction in visual culture.

Attitudes to the care of the body and physical appearance during both the Roman and late antique periods range from the ambivalent to the downright hostile. A certain level of *cultus* or grooming was necessary for the male citizen, as it defined him as sophisticated and urbane, in contrast to men who were brutish, unkempt, and by extension uncivilised.<sup>24</sup> Too much care for one's appearance, meanwhile, could lead to charges of effeminacy.<sup>25</sup> Women could not participate in this rhetoric of *cultus* as refinement and were instead praised for forgoing adornment. Attention to appearance was understood as artifice designed to mislead and seduce.<sup>26</sup> The excessive adornment and vanity of women was even used as a motif claimed to both reflect and cause the moral decline of the state.<sup>27</sup> Yet in reality, a matron's appearance was also expected to reflect the prosperity of her family: adornment thus trod a thin line between status and morality.<sup>28</sup> Our understanding of the gendered perception of bodily cultivation is largely based on early imperial literary sources, however this rhetoric continued into Late Antiquity: Church Fathers consistently complained about the vanity of women, and advised good Christians to dress plainly and forgo make-up and jewellery.<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps little wonder that images of adornment are often interpreted within a sexualised framework when contemporary texts viewed adorned women as sexually promiscuous or morally ambiguous. The popularity of such scenes, however, reveal that the commissioners of the images did not

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<sup>24</sup> Wyke 1994, p.135.

<sup>25</sup> Wyke 1994, p.137; D'Ambra 2007, p.112.

<sup>26</sup> Wyke 1994, pp.135-137; Olson 2008, pp.80-95.

<sup>27</sup> Wyke 1994, pp.140-141.

<sup>28</sup> See Olson 2008, pp.96-112 with further bibliography.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g. Wyke 1994, Richlin 1995, Olson 2008. On Christian attitudes see Upson-Saia 2011, esp. Chapters 2-3.

consider them to be negative or morally damaging. Regardless of the opinions of moralisers, many people invested a great deal of effort in their personal appearance.

In imperial sources bathhouses emerge as common sites for the cultivation of the body, as well as spaces for exercise, gossip, and display.<sup>30</sup> A certain level of pomp and ceremony was already associated with bathing, as is demonstrated in Petronius' *Satyricon* when the wealthy but vulgar freedman Trimalchio visits the baths:

*Anyway we entered the baths proper, and once we had begun to sweat, we moved on quickly to the cold water. Trimalchio, already doused with perfumed oil, was now being rubbed down, not with linen but with the softest woollen towels. Meanwhile his three physiotherapists were drinking Falernian wine ... He [Trimalchio] was then wrapped in a scarlet gown and placed in a litter. Four couriers decked out in medals preceded him, as did his little darling, who was conveyed in a handcart ... As Trimalchio was carried off, a musician holding tiny pipes played close to his head and accompanied him the whole way, as if he were whispering secrets in his ear.<sup>31</sup>*

Trimalchio is ridiculed for his provocative display of wealth, but the passage illustrates that the baths were a place to see and be seen. Despite having baths in his private residence, Trimalchio chose to travel to the public baths in order to impress people.<sup>32</sup>

While the nudity of bathers has led some people to suggest that the baths acted as a social leveller, there were numerous other ways in which the rich and powerful could mark

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<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Fagan 1999 Chapter 1 "A Visit to the Baths with Martial".

<sup>31</sup> Petronius *Satyricon* 28, trans. Schmeling 2020, p.113.

<sup>32</sup> *Satyricon* 72-73.

themselves out, such as jewellery, expensive utensils, and slaves.<sup>33</sup> Juvenal satirised a woman's visit to the baths by describing it as a military operation in which she "gives the order to move camp along with her perfume jars".<sup>34</sup> A whole army of slaves was apparently needed for the ablutions of a single rich woman. While the tone here is again one of mocking, both Trimalchio and this woman apparently represented recognisable caricatures that could be drawn upon to make an audience laugh. There was thus an established tradition in the Roman period that the baths were a locus for display, even if such displays were considered crass. What we will see developing in Late Antiquity is a heightened sense of ceremony and greater attention paid to each stage of travelling to the baths, bathing, dressing, and adorning oneself, and the expensive clothes, jewellery, slaves, and utensils that the wealthy used to curate these displays, both in text and image. From a relatively loose association between bathing, adornment, and elite display in the Roman period, in Late Antiquity this would become a more carefully defined and curated public event.

### 2.3 Depicting the Toilet in Late Antiquity<sup>35</sup>

The fourth-century Projecta Casket is famous for its portrayal of the 'private life' of a late antique woman (Figs 2.1-4).<sup>36</sup> On the lid is a clipeus held aloft by *erotes*, in which is depicted a woman and a man in bust form. An inscription identifies them as Secundus and Projecta and it has been suggested that the casket was a gift to the couple on the occasion of their wedding,

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<sup>33</sup> Fagan 1999, pp.215-217.

<sup>34</sup> Juvenal 6.419-420, trans. Braund 2004, p.275.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the following examples are a handful of other depictions that contain relevant iconography. A tomb painting from fourth-century Silistra (P8), shows slaves presenting a couple with clothing and toilet items. Since the process of the toilet is not depicted, however, I have not treated it here. It is possible that there is a toilet scene on the mosaic cupola from the villa at Centcelles (M63). However, since the mosaics are in such bad condition, they are not discussed here either.

<sup>36</sup> S1. Shelton argues for a date of c.330-370, whereas Cameron prefers a date in the 380s (Shelton 1981, pp.72-75; Cameron 1985; Shelton 1985).

although there is little evidence to support this interpretation.<sup>37</sup> The rear of the lid shows a woman processing with her slaves into a bath building, her attendants carrying silver objects necessary for bathing and her toilet. On the front and sides of the lid are scenes of a marine thiasos, culminating in Venus arranging her hair. The body of the casket meanwhile depicts slaves in procession attending their mistress who is also seated at her toilet directly below the goddess. The early fifth century Sevso Casket is a large silver perfume casket whose body is decorated with two scenes: a procession of women carrying toilet objects to a seated woman – much like Projecta – and a scene of bathing that features a woman undressing (Figs 2.5-7).<sup>38</sup> In this second scene the *domina* is shown about to remove her tunic over her head, exposing her genitals in the process. A slave helps her and two nude women stand nearby with their arms linked, posed like the Graces. The implication is that once the *domina* has removed her tunic she will join the women as the third Grace.<sup>39</sup> A late fourth century silver situla (bucket), now in Naples, shows a very similar scene: a woman raises her tunic to reveal her lower body, this time attended by a nude female slave (Figs 2.8-11).<sup>40</sup> No Graces are present here, but on the other side of the situla we see the seated *domina* attended by slaves who comb her hair, massage her leg, and bring her toilet objects. All the figures are completely naked, apart from the *domina* who wears a body-chain.

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<sup>37</sup> Inscription: “Secundus and Projecta, may you live in Christ.” The inscription was added after the casket was made, so it is possible that the couple depicted are not Secundus and Projecta. The identification of the casket as a wedding gift has some antiquity, the casket and other items from the Esquiline Treasure entered the collection of the British Museum as ‘Silver Toilet Service of a Roman Bride’ (Shelton 1981, p.27), however there is no solid evidence for this interpretation. The motif of a couple in a clipeus is common in all kinds of late antique contexts, including funerary art (see Chapters 3 and 4). The key publication for the Esquiline Treasure remains Shelton 1981, it was discovered in 1793 (Visconti 1827).

<sup>38</sup> S6. Mango and Bennett 1994, pp.444-473; Dági and Mráv 2019, pp.140-147. I am grateful to István N. Huszar for his assistance in translating the Hungarian text.

<sup>39</sup> Schade 2003, p.135.

<sup>40</sup> S3. Dresken-Weiland 1994. The Naples situla has been treated as a work of the first century BC, first century AD, and third century AD; however it is clear from the iconography and methods of decoration that it is late antique, Dresken-Weiland preferring the second half of the fourth century (p.43).



The visual context of these images is almost always understood to be a private, secluded area: a private house, or even a specific ‘women’s area’ inside. The view these objects provide into this secret zone is judged to add to the erotic appeal for the (male) viewer.<sup>41</sup> Yet the context of all these scenes can be demonstrated to be a bathhouse, throwing into question this voyeuristic reading. In 1962 Edmond Barbier first argued for the interpretation of the procession scene on the lid of the Projecta Casket as an elite woman on her way to the public baths.<sup>42</sup> He based his analysis on a close examination of the iconography of the procession and the building she is shown entering. The procession had been interpreted as a wedding procession, on the basis that the casket was a wedding present and that depictions of women bathing and adorning themselves must represent the bridal bath.<sup>43</sup> As noted above, the connection between representations of bathing and adornment and weddings is not well established in the Roman period, let alone the late antique, and we have little evidence for what the wedding rite in the fourth century actually consisted of.<sup>44</sup> Barbier’s interpretation seems secure given that the slaves in the procession on the Projecta Casket lid hold toilet utensils and that they enter a domed building highly reminiscent of bathhouse architecture.

To further support his reading of the scene, Barbier cited passages from the writings of Church Fathers who complained about the luxury, pomp, and pageantry of women at the baths and referred to the slaves and silver implements that they brought with them.<sup>45</sup> We will discuss

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<sup>41</sup> E.g. Schade 2003, pp.133-134, who describes the toilet scenes on the Projecta and Sevso caskets as taking place in a “women’s area” also Schade 2016b, p.226.

<sup>42</sup> Barbier 1962. This interpretation has been accepted by most scholars, e.g. Shelton (1981, p.28) and Elsner (2018, p.37).

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Schneider 1983, pp.5-38, esp. pp.17-27 who rejects Barbier’s interpretation and Rose 2001, pp.178-180.

<sup>44</sup> Martin-Kilcher understands the Projecta Casket (and other depictions of the toilet on silver) to refer to the bridal bath (2018, pp.268, 270). This reading is based on the Greek tradition, despite not being mentioned in any Roman sources, and the assumption that the inscription on the casket refers to the marriage of the couple. Martin-Kilcher’s theory that such silverware represents wedding gifts with wedding imagery is lacking in concrete evidence.

<sup>45</sup> Barbier 1962, pp.31-32. Tertullian *On the Veiling of Virgins*, Chapter 12; Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3.5; John Chrysostom *Homily 28 on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 13.

these literary sources further below. Logically, if the procession on the lid of the casket moves from an urban street into a bathhouse, the toilet scene on the body of the casket should take place inside. While the Sevso Casket and Naples situla do not show procession scenes, they too can be located inside bath buildings: on both objects fountains gushing with water are set into the walls, clearly indicating their location in a bathhouse rather than a *cubiculum*.<sup>46</sup> Similar lion-headed fountains survive from Naples.<sup>47</sup> The Naples situla also preserves a representation of a slave opening the door of a domed structure similar to that on the Projecta casket and evidently also depicting a bathhouse (Fig 2.10, cf. Fig 2.22).<sup>48</sup>

The bathhouse procession is also found in a mosaic from the fourth-century villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily. In the entrance vestibule to the bathhouse attached to the residence is a mosaic representing a woman on her way into the baths, attended by slaves carrying silver equipment (Figs 2.12-13).<sup>49</sup> In the centre is a richly dressed woman flanked by two young male slaves with long hair.<sup>50</sup> On either side of them is a female slave, one carrying a large box or casket containing a folded textile with dark clavi, assumedly an alternative tunic for her mistress, and the other a bag slung across her body and a silver box suspended from a chain. The slave at the front of the procession appears to be leading her mistress to a chair, in front of which is placed a large silver basin. Within the baths themselves a cycle of six mosaics in the *frigidarium* shows male figures at various stages of dress and undress after the bath (Figs 2.14-

<sup>46</sup> Noted for the Sevso Casket by Mango and Bennett 1994, p.471, and by Dresken-Weiland 1994, p.44 for the Naples situla. Bathhouses existed across a spectrum, from private, semi-private, to public. These differences will be discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>47</sup> An example of such a lion-headed fountain has been found walled into the Piazzale behind the forum baths at Ostia (G. Wheeler, pers. comm).

<sup>48</sup> Cf. figures shown entering bath-buildings from the fresco in the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs in the Roman Forum (mid-seventh century, see Gulowsen 2001, Fig 1, p.86), or at the bathhouse at Quasr 'Amra (Fig 2.22).

<sup>49</sup> M17. Gentili 1999, pp.29-33. In arguing against Barbier, Schneider claims that this mosaic does not have any "direct and exclusive connection to the bath", despite the fact that it is positioned at the entrance to the bathhouse (1983, p.18).

<sup>50</sup> Some consider these to be the woman's sons, however Dunbabin 2003a, p.460, has argued convincingly that they represent prestigious page-boy slaves, who were young, beautiful, and represented with long hair. The significance of their misidentification as family members is discussed in Chapter 4.

16).<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately only two are well-preserved: the first depicts a man wrapped in a towel which exposes his right shoulder and much of his chest. He sits on a folding chair draped with an animal skin while one slave approaches from behind to dry him and another offers him a clean tunic. In the other, the man is almost completely dressed, with one slave attending to his shoes and another offering him a bright blue cloak. In the surviving fragments of the other scenes we see male slaves holding bathing utensils and clothes. Evidence from the now lost *opus sectile* wall decoration indicates that similar scenes of the male toilet may have also adorned the walls.<sup>52</sup>

The combination of the *dominus* and the *domina* in the bathhouse is also found in the mosaics of a bath complex from Sidi Ghrib (c.30 km from Tunis), dated to the late fourth or early fifth century.<sup>53</sup> Two vestibules off the *frigidarium* – interpreted as changing areas – each depict the *domina* and *dominus* (Figs 2.17-18). The *domina* is shown seated on a large silver folding chair with a high back, fixing her hair or hair-covering.<sup>54</sup> Two slave women approach her from either side: one presents her with a silver tray, perhaps containing jewellery, and the other holds up a mirror in which we see her reflection. Around the scene are objects relevant to bathing and the toilet: sandals, a casket containing linens, a shell-shaped basin, a silver bucket, a casket hanging from a chain very similar to the Sevso Casket, a soft bag with a strap similar to that carried by the slave woman in the Piazza Armerina mosaic, and a ewer.

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<sup>51</sup> Carandini et al. 1982, pp.343-356 (with older bibliography) and Gentili 1999, pp.233-247. Note that Gentili erroneously identifies one figure as female.

<sup>52</sup> A surviving fragment is in the shape of the hair of a male figure, shown in a similar style to the mosaics. This suggests there was further decoration including male figures on the walls which no longer survives (Pensabene and Di Vita 2008, Cat. No.32, Tav. N,3).

<sup>53</sup> Ennabli 1986, pp. 42-44. The baths are assumed to belong to a villa, but this has not been excavated.

<sup>54</sup> M34.

The scene of the *dominus* shows him in the centre of the composition, framed with garlands and in a procession with two male figures. One carries a staff and gestures forwards, the other carries a bundle of sticks and a small metal bucket. While most scholars follow the interpretation of the excavators that the *dominus* is on his way out hunting, Katherine Dunbabin has suggested convincingly that he is in fact on his way into the baths.<sup>55</sup> All the other mosaics in the bathhouse are themed around water and bathing, so it would seem strange for this mosaic alone to be different. In addition, the orientation of the mosaic means the men process towards the *frigidarium*, that is, *into* the baths, which fits better with a bathhouse procession than a hunt scene. This identification is strengthened by a scene from the topographical border of the ‘Megalopsychia’ mosaic from mid fifth century Daphne. Among the scenes of life in the town is a depiction of a private bathhouse.<sup>56</sup> On either side of the doorway male servants stand, gesturing towards the interior of the building, one of them holding a large bundle under one arm and carrying a metal bucket. They both turn towards a man on a horse riding towards them, who is followed by a boy carrying a bucket and another bundle (Fig 2.19).<sup>57</sup> This scene is highly reminiscent of the Projecta Casket lid and there can be little doubt that it represents a man’s bathhouse procession. The presence of this motif in what is essentially a collection of genre scenes attests to its ubiquity in late antique urban life.

Imagery of the toilet in Late Antiquity was thus remarkably consistent in form, context, and medium: all but one of our examples are found on bathing silver or decorating bathhouses and all repeat specific motifs such as the procession, the seated figure attended by a parade of slaves, and even the woman removing her tunic. These examples also conflate adornment and the toilet with a trip to the baths through their setting in bathhouses, in contrast to earlier

<sup>55</sup> Ennabli 1986, pp.44-46; Ben Abed 2006, p.45; Dunbabin 1989, p.28, Note 155.

<sup>56</sup> Levi 1947, p.329. For genre scenes in this mosaic including women, see M2.

<sup>57</sup> Levi 1947, pp.328-329, Pl.LXXIX.a.

periods in which the toilet and bathing were kept separate. It is also notable that these scenes show a greater gender balance in which men are also shown engaging in their toilet and processing to the bathhouse, suggesting that this was a development across late antique society. The most common visual motif is the central figure flanked by slaves. This visual formulation of power is found across late antique art and is little different to that used for government officials or even the emperor. Not so much seated as enthroned, the implication of the composition is the supreme dominance of the central figure.<sup>58</sup> We can compare the toilet scene from the Projecta Casket, for example, with the contemporary Missorium of Theodosius I (Figs 2.20-21).<sup>59</sup> On the plate the emperor sits in the centre, framed by subordinate figures and a symmetrical architectural background featuring fluted Corinthian columns supporting a *fastigium*. On the Projecta Casket, Projecta is also seated in the centre, framed by her slaves and by an architectural background featuring fluted Corinthian columns supporting an arcade of alternating round and pointed arches.

The procession, meanwhile, is an entirely new iconographic feature incorporated into the depiction of bathing and the toilet. These processions, often featuring slaves carrying expensive silver equipment and rich clothing, add to the sense of pomp and ceremony which is created through the central motif of the enthroned *domina* or *dominus*. Processions were commonly associated with religious or civic events and thus their inclusion here creates a sense of narrative that elevates the toilet to a form of public spectacle that incorporated ceremonial elements.<sup>60</sup> Although the bathhouse had been used as a place to show off in the Roman period, in Late Antiquity it would become a key locus for display and this was documented in the

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<sup>58</sup> Elsner (2007, p.218) notes this in relation to the Projecta Casket.

<sup>59</sup> On the Missorium, see Almagro-Gorbea et al. eds. 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Dilia Angelova has suggested that processions made by elite women to the baths copied imperial processions, such as journeys made by Eudocia and Theodora (2015, pp.177-178). A direct connection, however, seems unlikely, since these were exceptional processions, a different order of magnitude from those of even the wealthiest private citizen.

crystallisation of a new mode of representation. Just as the representation of emperors and officials mimicked the kind of real pageantry enacted by them at public events, we can imagine that scenes like those we have considered were played out in living tableaux on the streets and at the baths.

## 2.4 Vanity and Envy: Critiques of the Toilet

As we might expect, the visual sources portray their subjects in a positive light: the women and men shown at their toilet are elegant, richly dressed, and emanate a sense of authority. Their processes of beautification are not just about physical appearance, but also about projecting wealth and power. Yet just as in the Roman period, literary sources take a more negative stance, framing wealthy bathers as greedy, vain, attention-seekers. Nevertheless, reading these texts largely corroborates the picture presented by the visual sources, both in terms of practical details and in the conception of the toilet as a carefully curated public performance. In this section I will consider the additional layer of detail that we can glean from the textual evidence and what it can tell us about the range of responses elicited from viewers.

Let us begin with the procession to the baths and the large numbers of slaves we see depicted in our scenes. John Chrysostom (c.349-407) complained about women and men who appeared in public with large groups of slaves. He protested that men did not bring their slaves to church to educate them in the Christian faith, but all of them dragged their slaves with them to the bathhouse.<sup>61</sup> He compared women with their slaves to sheep dealers with their stock and argued

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<sup>61</sup> Chrysostom *Homily 22 on St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians* 6:5-8: "Teach them [slaves] to be religious, and everything else will follow of necessity. But now, when any one is going to the theatre, or going off to the bath, he drags all his servants after him; but when he goes to church, not for a moment; nor does he compel them to attend and hear." (trans. Schaff ed. 1980, p.294).

that modest women with only a few attendants ought to garner more attention as their modest behaviour was truly extraordinary.<sup>62</sup> Chrysostom also went on to describe how a “great envy” was sparked among the crowds of spectators who pressed forward to catch a glimpse of a wealthy woman and her slaves on the street.<sup>63</sup> While for the churchman such displays were a disgrace for their excessive luxury and the envy they provoked, it seems clear that the movements of rich individuals were a form of street entertainment and a chance for the wealthy to assert their position in the social hierarchy.

In the early sixth century, Severus of Antioch (c.465-538) delivered a homily appealing to his congregation to donate silver to cover the *ciborium* in their church.<sup>64</sup> In order to demonstrate that they could easily afford it, he described how the wealthy among them dined on silver plates and the women went to the baths with weighty silver vessels, carried in opulent chairs pulled by mules also adorned with silver.<sup>65</sup> Slaves and silver were key parts of elite display and formed the backbone of the bathhouse spectacle. For a wealthy person to visit the baths a large number of slaves was not only desirable but necessary. Silver toilet implements were big and heavy: the Sevso Casket, for example, is 32 cm high and weighs over 2 kg without any contents.<sup>66</sup> Having an individual slave to carry each object made sure they were displayed to best effect while also being a practical necessity.

Once inside the baths the spectacle continued through the performance of bathing and the toilet process. Once again, the precious bathing vessels formed an important part of the display.

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<sup>62</sup> Chrysostom *Homily 28 on the Hebrews*, 10. Ammianus Marcellinus also described rich men and women who drag around “armies of slaves” (*History* 14.6.16-17, trans. Rolfe 1950, p.45).

<sup>63</sup> Chrysostom *Homily 28 on the Hebrews*, 10 (trans. Schaff ed. 1974, p.925). See Kellum 1999 on the street as a site for spectacle in the Roman period.

<sup>64</sup> Severus of Antioch, *Homily 100*.

<sup>65</sup> Discussed by Leader-Newby 2004, pp.70-71. For text and translation (French) of the homily, see Guidi ed. 1929, pp.230-248 (here p.247).

<sup>66</sup> Mango 2006, p.109.

Although a little earlier than our visual examples, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) complained about the “countless array of vessels made of gold or silver” used by women at the baths, while Tertullian (c.160-225) ranted about the unnecessary range of bathing equipment carried to the baths by virgins.<sup>67</sup> This conforms with our visual sources, which indicate that wealthy bathers would array themselves, their slaves, and their silverware in a sort of set-piece tableaux in which to be admired. A fifth-century silver hoard recently discovered in Germany preserves a silver folding chair much like the ones depicted in our toilet scenes. Silver statuettes that adorned the high-backed chair were shaped like female attendants carrying caskets, leading to the possibility that this was a chair owned by a wealthy woman and used during her toilet.<sup>68</sup> In this manner, wealthy bathers could set up their own ‘throne’ and hold court in the baths, recreating the sort of scenes we see in silver and mosaic. This kind of exhibitionist behaviour is criticised by Ammianus Marcellinus (c.330-400) in a scathing vignette of wealthy men at the baths:

*When such men, each attended by fifty servants, have entered the vaulted rooms of a bath, they shout in threatening tones: “Where on earth are our attendants?” ... Then when they come from the bath of Silvanus or from the healing waters of Mamaea, as any one of them emerges he has himself dried with the finest linens, opens the presses and carefully searches amongst garments shimmering with shifting light, of which he brings enough with him to clothe eleven men. At length, some are chosen and he puts them on; then he takes back his rings, which in order that the dampness may not injure them, he has handed to a servant, and after his fingers have been as good as measured to receive them, he departs.<sup>69</sup>*

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<sup>67</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3.5. (late second century, trans. Wood 1954, p.225); Tertullian *On the Veiling of the Virgins* 12.2 (early third century, see Dunn 2004, p.156).

<sup>68</sup> Himmelmann and Petrovsky 2018, pp.5-6.

<sup>69</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus *History* 28.9, 19, (trans. Rolfe 1950, pp.141, 149).



This passage is reminiscent of the mosaics from the baths at Piazza Armerina, although rather than a celebration of male cultivation and adornment, it critiques what is perceived of as a crass display of privilege. Similar complaints were levelled at women. Clement of Alexandria complained sarcastically that it was impossible for women to bathe without making a spectacle of themselves:

*With utter lack of taste they put their silver plates on display there, just to make an impression. Perhaps they are displaying their wealth with extravagant ostentation ... and show at the same time they cannot live with their husbands, or even sweat without being surrounded with their dishes.<sup>70</sup>*

He goes on to criticise mixed bathing practices, describing how both sexes strip naked before their slaves.<sup>71</sup> Yet it was not only the naked bodies that concerned Clement, but also the desire to turn a trip to the baths into a great event, to showcase one's wealth and status and not simply get clean. As we saw above, Tertullian complained about virgins who went to the baths, whom he thought also used the opportunity to make a public show:

*And then they seek beauty advice from the mirror and they torment their more fastidious face with washing, perhaps they even falsify it with some rouge, fling a mantle around themselves, cram [their foot into] an oddly-shaped shoe, bring more implements to the baths.<sup>72</sup>*

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<sup>70</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3.5 (trans. Wood 1954, p.225).

<sup>71</sup> Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3.5.

<sup>72</sup> Tertullian *On the Veiling of the Virgins*, Chapter 12.2, (trans. Dunn 2004, p.156).

Tertullian's complaint appears to be that they were not acting like proper virgins, but were aping the practices of wealthy matrons. Cyprian (c.200-c.258) echoed Tertullian's concerns when he too complained that virgins "transform the bath into a public show", equating it to theatre.<sup>73</sup> While we should not necessarily take this criticism at face value, it is clear that it played into wider stereotypes about the vanity and pride on display at the baths. This trope went beyond simple feminine vanity: the crux is the way in which vanity was mediated through a visible public spectacle, something considered by these churchmen to be deeply immodest.

John Chrysostom also used the motif of the wealthy woman primped and adorned on her way to the baths as a rhetorical tool. In complaining about women who wore jewellery to church, he compared their appearance to women getting dressed up to go to the marketplace or the baths. While it was apparently "no wonder" that women should adorn themselves to go to those places, he considered going to church so bejewelled to be ridiculous.<sup>74</sup> This passage also highlights the intensely performative nature of these trips. By complaining that women got dressed up to go to the baths, Chrysostom identifies that this was not primarily an exercise in getting clean, but a calculated performance. Wealthy bathers arrived already well groomed, only to undress, bathe, and redress again for the benefit of viewers who could admire their clothes, jewels, silver, and slaves and by extension their elevated social position.

The relevance of elaborate bathing ceremonies to contemporary conceptions of status and identity is highlighted by the way in which they could be appropriated and subverted. An encomium written on the virtues of the wealthy widow Olympias, a favourite of John

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<sup>73</sup> Cyprian *On the Dress of Virgins* 19, (trans. A. E. Keenan, in Deferrari ed. 1958, p.48).

<sup>74</sup> John Chrysostom *Homily 28 on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 13 (trans. Schaff ed. 1974, p.927). A similar sentiment is repeated in *Homily 10 on Colossians* 3:18-25, where he groups together the theatre, pageants, and the baths as places one could see elaborately adorned women. See also *Homily 2 on 1 Timothy* 1:5-7 on the attention paid to spiritually righteous men in the baths, assembly, or other public places.

Chrysostom, describes how she bathed infrequently and wore a tunic as she could not bear even to see herself naked.<sup>75</sup> In addition to hailing Olympias as a paragon of virtue, this is clearly a veiled criticism of the practices of other women. While it may be complete fiction, we ought to consider that if Olympias did visit the baths and bathe completely covered, contrary to contemporary customs, that this represented a performance as calculated as those of wealthy women and men. Extreme modesty, just like extreme luxury, would have been visually striking and attention seeking.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, it relied on the ubiquity of ostentatious bathing ceremonies for its efficacy.<sup>77</sup>

The act of bathing and performing the toilet was therefore a potent tool in the hands of the elite. While the baths had always been a place to show off, in Late Antiquity both the visual and the literary evidence document its increasing importance as a site for everyday spectacle. Churchmen railed about the luxury and vanity associated with parades of slaves and piles of silver vessels, satirists mocked wealthy bathers, and the wealthy themselves chose to adorn their homes and their bathing utensils with images of themselves washing and getting dressed. In the following section, I will consider in greater detail the cultural context that framed this practice, and the place of the bathhouse in the growing formality and ceremonialisation of late antique life.

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<sup>75</sup> *Dialogue on the Life of John Chrysostom* 17.

<sup>76</sup> See Wilkinson 2015 on the intentional performance of modesty by women in Late Antiquity, primarily related to dress and speech.

<sup>77</sup> Chrysostom repeatedly describes how simply-dressed ‘modest’ women with few attendants ought to be lauded over those who parade about in fine clothes surrounded by slaves (e.g. *Homily 28 on Hebrews* 10, 13). His imagined praise is spiritual, however in reality the performance of asceticism could be a powerful social tool.

## 2.5 Bathing Ceremonies and Late Antique Culture

Late Antiquity has long been understood as a period of heightened theatricality and formality.<sup>78</sup> The late antique city channelled its inhabitants along processional routes that provided the backdrop for the elaborate displays of emperors, officials, and religious representatives, all of whom made public spectacle a part of their manifestation of power as never before.<sup>79</sup> By the fourth century, the archetypal late antique city, Constantinople, became a site for the constant renegotiation of authority between emperors and other important figures, played out in the construction and alteration of monuments, churches, and processional routes.<sup>80</sup> In domestic architecture, private audience halls were moved from the centre of the *domus* to next to the street and were defined by large apsidal spaces which often featured a raised or separated area which literally elevated the owner above their visitors. There is also evidence that moving audience halls near to the entrances of houses encouraged queues of people waiting on the street, adding to the prestige of the owner and the visual spectacle.<sup>81</sup> According to Damascius, Bishop Cyril was so overcome with jealousy on seeing the queues outside the philosopher Hypatia's house, that this prompted his desire to see her dead.<sup>82</sup> In his poem the *Eucharisticus*, Paulinus of Pella (377-c.461) reflected on how his life had previously been centred on his luxurious house, "when the pageantry of my rank flourished no less in its setting of deferential crowds and throngs of supporting clients."<sup>83</sup> This new arrangement afforded more privacy to

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<sup>78</sup> See for example, MacMullen 1964; MacCormack 1981; Bauer 2001; Dey 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Dey 2015, pp.21-64 on the development of the late antique city and its use as a ceremonial backdrop.

<sup>80</sup> Bauer claims ceremonial routes in Constantinople defined its urban structure (2001, p.44). Bauer in general for how emperors made their presence felt in the city, and the importance of processions in imperial, ecclesiastical, and spontaneous contexts. For ecclesiastical processions, see Baldovin 1987, and on the transformation of circus processions in Rome, see Curran 2000, pp.252-258; Latham 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Özgenel 2007, pp.263-267. Clients queuing to see their patrons are mentioned in the Roman period as a sign of status, but the formulation of the architecture to facilitate this appears late antique.

<sup>82</sup> Özgenel 2007, p.265; Haas 1997, pp.311-312; Damascius fr. 104. Cameron notes that the term used for the crowds of officials (ἄρχοντες) denoted in this period imperial officials rather than local magistrates, and that therefore the group mentioned was likely the new governor and his entourage (Cameron 2016a, p.200).

<sup>83</sup> *Eucharisticus* 437 (trans Evelyn-White 1921, p.339).

the rest of the house and created a hierarchy of access in which ‘public’ and ‘private’ were increasingly defined by means of architecture.<sup>84</sup>

Dining also became a more ceremonial occasion: the traditional *triclinium* couches were replaced with the more rigidly hierarchical *stibadium*, and greater emphasis was placed on the space in front of the diners as an area for entertainment and to display the wealth and generosity of the host.<sup>85</sup> The decoration of domestic spaces also saw the emergence of a new visual language of status and rank which placed more emphasis on the everyday life of members of the elite. In the late third and fourth centuries, for example, the depiction of rows of waiting servants proliferated in domestic and funerary art.<sup>86</sup> Land-owners also increasingly portrayed themselves in the luxury of their villas, waited on by their slaves.<sup>87</sup> Increasingly disempowered from running the empire, it has been argued that wealth and luxury allowed the rich influence and honour in public life and therefore priority in art was given to rank and ceremony.<sup>88</sup> Yet it is clear that there was also a more general drift towards ceremony, formality, and the creation of visual spectacles of power that permeated society more deeply.<sup>89</sup> People living in late antique cities or even rural villas witnessed or were involved in ceremonial on a frequent basis, mediated through the city-scape or domestic space. Alongside civic ceremonies such as the imperial *adventus*, the transfer of holy relics also became increasingly common. Churches

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<sup>84</sup> Ellis 1991, p.123.

<sup>85</sup> Ellis 1997; Stephenson 2016 on “dining as spectacle”. On the *stibadium* in particular see pp.63-64, 67. Özgenel 2007, pp.269-270 on ceremonial dining.

<sup>86</sup> Dunbabin 2003a, pp.462-464.

<sup>87</sup> Warland 1994, p.176. See also Barnes 2011; Scott 2004 on elite ‘exhibitionism’ in villas.

<sup>88</sup> Warland 1994 *passim*, esp. p.177.

<sup>89</sup> The ‘formalisation’ of late antique houses and its connection to societal change has been critiqued, most prominently by Kim Bowes (2010). Bowes rightly questions the link between the construction of reception rooms and the decline of local government (*contra* Ellis 1988), and is correct that there was probably a greater variety to domestic architecture than is currently allowed for. However, wider evidence including visual culture and literary sources indicate that Late Antiquity did see increasing ceremonialisation and formality, and it is difficult to believe this was entirely separate from the construction of elaborate reception and entertainment spaces in some elite homes (e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus *History* 14.6.12-18). Bowes’ argument that houses largely continued to serve as the loci for social competition is not incompatible with growing social formality, even if this formality was indeed more “rhetorical” than reflecting real power shifts.

proliferated as foci for ritual and procession from the fourth century, while evidence for spontaneous processions in times of disaster testify to how embedded such displays were in the public consciousness.<sup>90</sup> In literary discourse panegyric continued to develop, in which ceremonies became common *topoi*.<sup>91</sup> The culture of exaggeration, hyperbole, and theatricality ran so deep that it has been identified in both the compositions of court poets and the private letters of provincial monks. It is this self-consciousness concerning status and hyper-awareness of hierarchy that we see elsewhere expressed so clearly in art and architecture.<sup>92</sup>

In a world in which the lives of the wealthy and powerful were played out with such theatricality both in art and in life, it is unsurprising that bathing and adornment developed ceremonial features. Movement between one's home and the bathhouse represented an obvious opportunity to turn routine travel into a procession, and the use of clothes, jewellery, slaves, and silver made for a natural spectacle. There is also evidence that bathhouses in this period were increasingly used as spaces for official meetings and the reception of clients. Recent research on bathing practices in late antique North Africa indicate that at the turn of the fourth century a new type of bath complex appeared: large baths located in private houses that could be accessed both from inside the dwelling and from the street.<sup>93</sup> These "semi-private, semi-public" baths have been identified by Sadi Maréchal as a means for local elites to entice clients through the provision of infrastructure in their neighbourhoods. With more clients, patrons

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<sup>90</sup> On the *adventus* see MacCormack 1981; Bauer 2001, pp.41-44, 48-50; Dey 2015, pp.59-62. On churches and liturgies see Baldovin 1987; Bauer 2001, pp.50-59, and pp.52-55 on spontaneous processions. Salzman 2013 on stationary liturgy in Rome from the fifth century, and the addition of papal processions from the sixth century. Salzman situates such services as part of the 'strategies of visibility' used by bishops to assert their power (p.1).

<sup>91</sup> MacCormack 1981, p.8. Nixon and Rodgers, however, remind us that panegyric *per se* should not necessarily be associated with Late Antiquity, it is more accident of survival that so many are preserved from the third and fourth centuries (1994, p.3).

<sup>92</sup> MacMullen 1964, p.436.

<sup>93</sup> Maréchal 2016. See also Uytterhoeven and Martens 2008 on the proliferation of private bathhouses, particularly in Asia Minor. Unfortunately, Maréchal's monograph on late antique bathing came out too late to be considered in this thesis (Maréchal 2020).

could expect greater political support.<sup>94</sup> Taking this argument further, it is also possible that bathhouses were not only used to attract clients, but also as a kind of secondary audience space in which patrons and clients could interact. Clients could approach a potential patron in this more relaxed setting and patrons could perform their toilet for the benefit of a crowd of eager onlookers. If a wealthy man or woman was known to bathe regularly at a certain hour at a certain bathhouse, it might function like an informal *salutatio*.<sup>95</sup> There may even have been specific spaces where wealthy bathers gathered.<sup>96</sup> By depicting themselves in the process of their toilet inside their bathhouses, the owners of the villas at Sidi Ghrib and Piazza Armerina made sure that their presence was felt there permanently. It is interesting that at both the villas we find the *dominus* and the *domina*: the baths may have been an area in which it was acceptable for women to appear as patrons and interact with clients, given that it was a less official space than the traditional audience chamber. The gendered aspect of this practice will be discussed further below.

This reading of the archaeology is supported by literary sources which record meetings and speeches that supposedly took place inside bathhouses. In a passage from the fourth-century *Historia Augusta*, for example, the emperor Valerian “had taken his seat in the public baths at Byzantium, in the presence of the army and in the presence of the officials of the Palace” when he made a speech thanking Aurelian for defeating the Goths and awarded him the consulship.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Maréchal 2016, pp.128-130. Helena’s Sessorian Palace complex also included public baths (Angelova 2015, p.137). Elite competition for clients is also suggested by the fact that cities frequently boasted several houses endowed with rich reception areas (Bowes 2010, p.64).

<sup>95</sup> Roman authors tell us that bathing typically took place in the afternoon. Some individuals were known to bathe at specific times, e.g. Pliny’s friend Spurrinna bathed at the ninth hour in winter and eighth in summer (*Letter* 3.1.8; Thatcher 1956, Note 40). I am grateful to Panayiotis Panayides for this reference.

<sup>96</sup> The papyrus P.Flor.3.384 (a fifth-century bathhouse lease contract), mentions a *matronikion*. *Matroniciae* are described by John Lydus in the sixth century as spaces in bathhouses where modest *matronae* would gather to bathe away from “the majority of women” (Meyer 1992, pp.55-56; Lydus *De Mensibus* 4, February 29, trans. Hooker 2017, p.80). While John thinks the women are concerned for their modesty, this would also function to concentrate the wealthy in a predictable place where they would be easily located.

<sup>97</sup> *Historia Augusta* Aurelian 13-15. Trans. Magie 1932, p.217.

While we need not believe this actually happened, it is interesting that the baths were considered an appropriate space in which to set such a meeting. In the Near East, a number of fifth and sixth century complexes have been excavated that include baths in close proximity to audience halls, such as in Bostra, Apamea, Caesarea, and Antioch.<sup>98</sup> For a number of these complexes, it is unclear whether they represent public meeting places equipped with baths or rich private villas in which baths were placed near reception rooms.<sup>99</sup> Inscriptions from the bath-gymnasium complex in Sardis, meanwhile, indicate that council meetings took place in the Marble Court during the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>100</sup>

This pattern would continue in this region into the Islamic period: the famous Ummayyad bathhouse complex at Quasyr ‘Amra, for example, preserves some fine eight-century frescoes of bathing women that would not look out of place in a late antique context.<sup>101</sup> The complex itself is composed of a small bathing suite attached to a large audience chamber, complete with an apse from which the owner could receive visitors. By this period bathhouses were well established as spaces for official events. The ninth-century Greek chronicler Theophanes, for example, described the emperor Philippicus’ (711-713) decision to hold a public reception in the baths of Zeuxippus in Constantinople.<sup>102</sup> The strongest evidence, however, comes from the Muslim world. A fragment by the Abbasid historian al-Madā’inī, preserved in the *Kitāb al-aghānī*, describes how a courtier fallen from favour tried to work himself back into the good graces of the heir to the caliphate, al-Walīd b. Yazīd (743-744).<sup>103</sup> Banned from court, the man was advised to approach al-Walīd when he visited the baths as there was less security. The

<sup>98</sup> Piraud-Fournet 2014. Also Uytterhoeven and Martens 2008 on private bathhouses in Asia Minor.

<sup>99</sup> E.g. at Daphne and Caesarea (Piraud-Fournet 2014, pp.690, 694-696).

<sup>100</sup> Four graffiti incised into dividing bands of the *opus sectile* floor mention the *topos* (place) of the *boulé* and the *gerousia* (Yegül 1986, pp.49, 51, Fig.124).

<sup>101</sup> On this site in general, see Fowden 2004.

<sup>102</sup> Fowden 2004, pp.53-54; Theophanes *Chronographia* 383.

<sup>103</sup> Considered to be the patron of Quasyr ‘Amra by its rediscoverer, Alois Musil, and supported by Fowden. See Fowden 2004, p.20, and Chapter 5 “The Princely Patron”.



crown prince had his throne set up in the baths and received petitioners, only to be surprised by the presence of the disgraced courtier.<sup>104</sup> In the apse of the south wall of the reception hall at Quasir ‘Amra is a fresco depicting the patron of the complex, himself enthroned on a high-backed chair.<sup>105</sup> The combination of audience halls and bathhouses was an architectural pattern seen throughout Umayyad Jordan and one they took with them to Muslim Spain.<sup>106</sup> For the Umayyads it is well-known that “the bath formed a part of the norms established by ceremonial protocol” and that the new Islamic elites quickly recognised the importance of bathhouses as spaces for political meetings and receptions.<sup>107</sup> In an arrangement also found elsewhere, in the Umayyad bath on the citadel of Amman the apodyterium itself was used as an audience hall.<sup>108</sup> This is the same space in which we find the mosaics from Sidi Ghrib and Piazza Armerina showing the owners enthroned on their folding chairs.

The proximity of bathhouses to reception rooms, the tales of high ranking individuals holding receptions in bathhouses, and the explicit use of baths as audience chambers in the post-antique period suggests that the late antique iconography of the bather ‘enthroned’ in a manner similar to contemporary officials was not accidental. The majority of these archaeological and textual sources post-date our visual evidence, and it may be that as bathhouse ceremonies developed organically in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, they gradually became incorporated into more official contexts. By the seventh and eighth centuries this was adopted wholesale by the

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<sup>104</sup> Fowden 2004, p.54; Al-Madā’inī in Işf. 4.307–310.

<sup>105</sup> Fowden 2004, pp.115-127, Figs 36-37. Fowden compares the iconography of the patron with that of late Roman imperial and consular figures, Sassanian art, and a striking fifth-century mosaic of an enthroned Adam from Syria. See Chapter 3 “O God, Bless the Amīr”. On the identity of the patron, see Chapter 5.

<sup>106</sup> Almagro 1992, pp.355-356; Arce 2015, pp.142-159.

<sup>107</sup> Almagro 1992, p.356; Arce 2015, p.165. Ignacio Arce also states that “We must not forget either the representative character of the bath in the Umayyad protocol. It is well known that certain areas of the Umayyad baths were used for representative purposes...in addition to their hygienic and religious/ritual functions.” (2015, p.137).

<sup>108</sup> Arce 2015, pp.137-138, 166, Figs 1, 23. The *apodyterium* was 10.95 m long and 5.90 m wide with a platform 60 cm above floor level at the south end, which was reached by climbing one or two narrow steps. A half dome probably covered this raised platform and along the long sides of the room were benches covered with plaster.

new Muslim rulers of the region, who needed a tactic to win over both the settled Christian populations and the rural pastoralist communities. This diplomatic exercise required “an adequate theatre to be performed: friendly and playful but impressive and dazzling at the same time. Places where pleasure and political business, enjoyment and clientele commitment can be played and performed simultaneously, as two sides of the same card, as two faces of the same game.”<sup>109</sup> This was the beauty of the bathhouse: it could move seamlessly between seemingly innocent leisure and carefully crafted spectacle.

## 2.6 Authority and Agency: Women’s Bathhouse Displays

The evidence presented above strongly suggests that from the late third to the eighth centuries, the use of bathhouses as social spaces was changing. Baths gradually gained more of a ceremonial and formal character until eventually they were merged architecturally with audience halls. I contend that our late antique visual evidence marks an early stage in this evolution in which the elite staged their own spectacles in bathhouses and documented them in those spaces or on their bathing utensils. The function of these spectacles was not only to assert one’s status in the social hierarchy but also to receive and entertain clients. From the point of view of a potential client – as in the story of the disgraced courtier – the baths offered an alternative setting in which to approach a wealthy individual. One notable aspect of the depiction of the late antique toilet, however, is the presence of both men and women. In general, depictions of the male toilet have been misattributed or ignored, with the female toilet receiving the lion’s share of the attention.<sup>110</sup> I believe this has created the most significant stumbling

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<sup>109</sup> Arce 2015, p.160.

<sup>110</sup> Despite the fame of Piazza Armerina, for example, the male toilet scenes have been interpreted as women (Gentili 1999, pp. 233-247), the *mutatio vestis* (Carandini et al 1982, p.343), or simply ignored.

block in the recognition of the toilet as a form of public ceremony: women are widely assumed to have wielded little authority and therefore no need to display it like men. In the words of Whitmore, “a woman’s procession to the baths with slaves or servants would have been a different social activity than a procession of a patron and his clients.”<sup>111</sup> She suggests that while Roman men may have chosen to frequent baths further from their homes because of the importance of the procession, women and the poor might have gone to local baths, “shorter on time and not requiring that level of display”.<sup>112</sup> The public appearance of a well-dressed woman is thus commonly understood to passively publicise the riches and achievements of male relatives, and the depiction of her toilet a private process of beautification.<sup>113</sup> By contrast, I have argued that both women and men engaged in the creation of bathhouse spectacles designed to express their power and prestige. We must therefore consider in more detail the opportunities women had to access social authority and therefore the relevance of their bathhouse activities.

Some women had significant access to influence and prestige, as a result of personal or familial wealth, access to high-ranking male relations, and more rarely their own holding of civic offices. Estimates of how much wealth and property were concentrated in the hands of women in Late Antiquity vary between one sixth and almost one half, probably with variation between rural and urban communities.<sup>114</sup> Even allowing for flexibility, this still meant that large

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<sup>111</sup> Whitmore 2013, pp.56-57, note 180.

<sup>112</sup> Whitmore 2013, pp. 49-50. Laurence (2007, pp.163-166) posits the idea of bathing processions during the high empire (in reference to Pompeii) but would limit this to wealthy men.

<sup>113</sup> Wyke 1994; D’Ambra 2007, p.112. There are two notable exceptions: Angelova considers that processions to the baths were spectacles that created opportunities to affirm social status, however she is mostly concerned with imperial processions (2015, p.177). Dunbabin describes toilet scenes as a “ceremonial occasion”, but is focused on the depictions of servants (2003a, p.459). See Olson 2008, pp.111-112 for a nuanced discussion of the intersection of ‘beauty culture’ with patriarchy.

<sup>114</sup> Cooper 2007a, p.113. Bagnall (1993, pp.130-133) suggests between one sixth and one quarter of land in Egypt, and Arjava (1996, p.71) suggests anything between 30% and 45% is possible and that anything under 25% is unlikely. Arjava notes, however, that this was largely the case for the upper classes and accepts Bagnall’s estimates for rural communities.

amounts of wealth were controlled by women. Wealth and personal connections had long meant access to authority: one need only to think of the sycophantic attention paid to Ummidia Quadratilla recorded by Pliny the Younger, who commented contentedly that panderers only received a tiny bequest in her will.<sup>115</sup> The appearance of prominent women in the baths must have attracted similar attention to that paid to Quadratilla in the theatre. In the so-called Baths of Scholastica in Ephesus, a seated statue was erected to the local notable Scholastica in recognition of her patronage of refurbishments at the end of the fourth century.<sup>116</sup> While we cannot know for sure if Scholastica visited the baths after the erection of her statue, its presence would have certainly augmented the impression made by such a visit. The choice to patronise these baths may indicate that she was a regular sight in flesh as well as a permanent one in marble. A remarkable papyrus from Oxyrhynchus dated to AD 553 records a receipt issued to one Flavia Gabrielia for a payment she made to the water-supplier of the public baths.<sup>117</sup> When the receipt was made out Gabrielia held all the principal civic offices in Oxyrhynchus at the same time: *logistes*, *prohedros*, and father of the city. While she may not have carried out public business in her own right, it was her wealth and property which bore the responsibility for any shortfalls for which those offices were liable.<sup>118</sup> Gabrielia was one of the most important and influential people in the city and certainly a woman with whom it would be worth cultivating a patron-client relationship.<sup>119</sup> When Oxyrhynchites bathed, they bathed in water provided by Gabrielia.

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<sup>115</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Letter* 24.

<sup>116</sup> LSA-741 (base LSA-742); PLRE II, 982 Scholastica; IvE 453; Miltner 1956-1958, pp.16-27; Yegül 1992, pp.288-291, Figs. 371-372; Auinger 2011, Fig 1 (showing location on map of late antique Ephesus), p.70; Strocka 1985. The statue was found *in situ* in front of a niche in the east wall of the apsidal hall of the baths.

<sup>117</sup> P.Oxy. XXXVI 2780; Rowlandson 1998, pp.204-205.

<sup>118</sup> Rowlandson 1998, pp.204-205.

<sup>119</sup> There is papyrological evidence for other women in Egypt holding similar roles: a woman called Theodote is attested as a *bouleutes* (councillor) in a sixth or seventh century papyrus (Sijpesteijn 1987), while Flavia Theophania and her daughters held the title of fathers of the city (AD 584, CPR X 127), and a Patricia held the title *pagarch* (official in charge of tax collection) but deputised the official responsibilities to a man (c. AD 553, P.Lond.V 1660).

While I have chosen the examples of Scholastica and Gabrielaia, there were scores of other locally influential women across the empire. Flavia Christodote, another resident of Oxyrhynchus and near contemporary of Gabrielaia, is recorded in a legal text chasing payment of sixty-one pounds of gold owed to her by her brother.<sup>120</sup> This is a fantastic sum, indicating that she was a multimillionaire.<sup>121</sup> In Aphrodito in the year 525/526, 34 women paid 10.9% of the taxes and just seven owned 11.9% of the land.<sup>122</sup> In a population of a few thousand such a group would have been known by sight and wielded significant influence.<sup>123</sup> In this vein, it is key to view the practice of patronage in its local context: while a woman like Flavia Gabrielaia might not have merited notice in Constantinople, she would have been immediately recognisable in Oxyrhynchus.<sup>124</sup> Scholarship has a tendency to focus either on the ‘elites’ or ‘non-elites’ in ancient societies, often forgetting that for many people social status was relative. For individuals living in smaller provincial communities, the power wielded by local notables could have a greater impact on their lives than that of aristocrats or emperors in far-away cities.<sup>125</sup> In the fifth century, Salvian of Marseille complained about the power held by such figures over their small districts, demonstrating that even in minor cities and towns the wealthy sought and exercised what power they could attain.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> PSI I.76, AD 572 or 573. Rowlandson 1998, pp.205-206.

<sup>121</sup> Rowlandson 1998, pp.205-206. See Ruffini 2008, pp.70-75 on female elite networks in Oxyrhynchus.

<sup>122</sup> Bagnall 2008, p.185; Ruffini 2018, p.153.

<sup>123</sup> Ruffini 2018, p.153.

<sup>124</sup> See Ruffini 2018 on local networks of patronage in provincial contexts.

<sup>125</sup> Apart from in extraordinary circumstances. Peter Brown discusses the late antique imperial system’s “perpetual battle with distance” in reference to the impact of centralising power in one place. In one example, he cites a case in which a group of villagers from the Euphrates waited for eight months in Antioch to receive a ruling from the prefect (1992, pp.9-11). While it was apparently worth the wait, it is apparent that all business could not have been conducted in this way for the provincial residents far from administrative centres.

<sup>126</sup> “What cities are there, and even towns and villages, where there are not as many tyrants as there are decurions? Yet, perhaps they glory in this designation, because it seems to be powerful and honoured.” (*On the government of God* 5.4, translation Mathisen 2003, p.43). See also Mathisen 2003, Vol 1 pp.42-56 on what he terms “The Aristocratic Fringe”.

While the average late antique patron was a man, there were clearly plenty of wealthy and important women that could have represented desirable benefactors, worth the effort of approaching in the bathhouse. As the general workings of women's patronage will be considered later, the remainder of this chapter will be concerned with how women's bathhouse displays may have also contributed to the structuring of female social hierarchies. While men's social networks were dominated by other men, women also found themselves frequently involved in homosocial relationships. An interesting feature of women's patronage in the Roman period, for example, is that women were more frequently included among the recipients of a benefaction when the donor or the honorand was female herself.<sup>127</sup> High-ranking female citizens also organized themselves into groups which were involved in public events such as processions or religious ceremonies and set up statues to other prominent women, while assemblies of *matronae* debated important issues and seem to have issued rulings about women's matters.<sup>128</sup> Even in the late fourth century, Jerome complained to Marcella about the "daily meetings of the matrons' senate" in Rome.<sup>129</sup>

In the mid fifth century, a woman called Paulina commemorated her refurbishment of a public pavement in Seleucia with an epigram that described her as the "patrician mistress of women", a title that has been described as the late antique equivalent of "First Lady".<sup>130</sup> The dedication, steeped in Homeric allusions, not only referenced Paulina's cultivation, but placed her at the top of an explicitly gendered hierarchy. At the more humble end of the social scale, evidence from Jeme in Egypt shows that women typically turned to female money-lenders for financial assistance, and men to male ones.<sup>131</sup> Women therefore occupied important roles in stabilising

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<sup>127</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, p.210, note 102, Table 3.6.

<sup>128</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.205-216; 214-217

<sup>129</sup> Jerome *Letter* 43.3, trans. Wright 1933, p.177; Hemelrijk 2015b, p.217.

<sup>130</sup> Sahin 1991, pp.155-162.

<sup>131</sup> Wilfong 2002a, pp.132-133.

the social position of other women of the same status and commonly acted as benefactors for women of lower orders.<sup>132</sup> These homosocial relationships are unsurprising in a world in which male-female relations beyond the family were viewed with suspicion.

The bathhouse is attested in Roman and late antique sources as an important site for female homosociality, that is to say, for the formation and enactment of social relationships between women.<sup>133</sup> Homosociality has primarily been studied in both the ancient and modern worlds in relation to men, in particular how men use male homosocial relationships to maintain dominant gender hierarchies.<sup>134</sup> The tendency to study women's social status as it related to their male relatives has obscured the significant social investment women made in one another: ancient societies were sex-segregated to a high degree, meaning that women spent most of their time in the company of other women.<sup>135</sup> While bathhouses were not always segregated,<sup>136</sup> they were clearly a place where women congregated, creating a homosocial space that offered myriad opportunities for women to engage with each other. Nudity, for example, offered a fertile opportunity for gossip: in Chariton's novel *Callirhoe*, the naked body of the heroine not only inspires admiration of her beauty but also reveals when she is pregnant.<sup>137</sup> John Chrysostom, meanwhile, describes how violent mistresses were exposed and shamed when their female slaves were forced to reveal their bruised bodies at the bathhouse.<sup>138</sup> This reminds us of the

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<sup>132</sup> A statue base from AD 338 honouring a local Italian patron called Helvidia Burrenia Modesta recorded explicitly that it was set up by "citizens of both sexes of the city", indicating she had a significant number of female clients (LSA-1635, trans. U. Gehn).

<sup>133</sup> Rabinowitz 2002, p.2; Hammarén and Johansson 2014, p.1.

<sup>134</sup> Hammarén and Johansson 2014, pp.1-2, e.g. Willis 1977 on young working-class men. Important exceptions are Brooten 1996 and Rabinowitz and Auanger eds. 2002. For Late Antiquity, see Wilfong 2002b, in that volume.

<sup>135</sup> Rabinowitz 2002, p.2.

<sup>136</sup> The extent to which bathing was segregated or mixed probably varied across time and place and was dependent on personal preference (see Ward 1992, pp.142-146 and Whitmore 2013, pp. 29-35 on attitudes to different types of bathing, Schoolman 2017 and DeForest 2019 on baths and bathing culture in Late Antiquity including Christian attitudes). Double baths attest to the separation of the sexes, while a rare inscription from Roman Lusitania records temporal separation: women in the morning, men in the afternoon (Sommer 1996).

<sup>137</sup> Chariton *Callirhoe* 2.2.1-4, 2.8.5-6. See also Chrysostom *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy 2:11-15* in which he complains that women talk too much in church, gossiping like they do in the baths or the marketplace.

<sup>138</sup> John Chrysostom *Homily 15 on Ephesians 4.31*.

highly-idealised nature of our toilet scenes and the sharp reality of the power dynamics encoded within the visual scheme.<sup>139</sup>

Chrysostom also protested that women used the baths as a site to practice apotropaic magic, using mud or clay to mark children's foreheads to keep away the Evil Eye.<sup>140</sup> A lead tablet from Hermopolis Magna dating to the third or fourth century shows that the baths were also a space where magic met the female erotic gaze. It records a love spell in which a woman called Sophia tried to attract a woman called Gorgonia by attempting to conjure a corpse-demon in the form of a female bath attendant who will arouse Gorgonia with longing.<sup>141</sup> Homoerotic desire is also attested in a tale recorded by Socrates Scholasticus, in which Valentinian I's wife Severa was supposedly so struck by the naked beauty of a fellow bather, that her description of her sparked Valentinian's desire to marry the girl.<sup>142</sup> Small finds from bathhouses also attest to leisure activities practiced by women there. At what has been interpreted as the "women's baths" at Augusta Raurica, for example, a bone die and nine gaming pieces provide evidence for gaming or gambling.<sup>143</sup> We should therefore understand bathhouses as places where women not only interacted with men, but also socialised with each other, gossiped, gamed, and gambled, and engaged in (or desired) homoerotic relationships.

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<sup>139</sup> See also Rose 2008.

<sup>140</sup> John Chrysostom *Homily 12 on 1 Corinthians*, 13.

<sup>141</sup> *Suppl. Mag.* I no. 42.1-25; Rowlandson 1998, pp.361-362; Brooten 1996, pp.81-90. Brooten considers that the proximity between bathers and attendants probably made the spell more efficacious (p.89). For more spells containing bath imagery see Brooten 1996, p.89, note 37, and on magic in Roman and late antique bathhouses, see Alfayé 2016.

<sup>142</sup> Socrates Scholasticus *Historia Ecclesiastica* 4.31. The baths as a "queer space" for male homoerotic activity has been explored (Egers 2007), but a study of queer female space has not been addressed.

<sup>143</sup> These are called the "women's baths" because of a high concentration of hairpins and glass beads found in the pools and the drains, however there is no concrete evidence they were gender-segregated. The baths were constructed in mid-first century AD, and destroyed in the fourth (Whitmore 2013, p.83; 183; 201). On gaming pieces at the baths, Whitmore 2013, p.185. See table 5 and pp.229-230 on small finds associated with gaming and gambling in general.



While these interactions seem to represent minor everyday exchanges, attempts to assert power over another individual appear frequently, whether emotionally, sexually, or physically. Seemingly innocent or trivial interactions constantly worked to construct and maintain relationships and hierarchies. The combination of female socialising and adornment is in fact directly criticized by churchmen as a method used by women to assert their status over others. Shortly after Chrysostom complained about women who bejewelled themselves for church like they did for the baths, he stated that such women claim they only did so to please their husbands.<sup>144</sup> His response to these women was sharp:

*It is not your husband you wish to please, but the multitude of poor women; or rather not to please them, but to make them pine [with envy], to give them pain, and make their poverty greater... For that it is not your husband whom you wish to please, and for this reason you deck yourself out, you make plain to all by what you yourself do. For as soon as you have passed over the threshold of your chamber, you immediately put off all, both the robes and the golden ornaments, and the pearls; and at home of all places you do not wear them.<sup>145</sup>*

Chrysostom thought women dressed not for men, but to excite the envy of other women. While his primary concern is the sinfulness of the act, it is noteworthy in the context of bathing and adornment as a form of public display. The procession to the baths and the performance inside were designed to provoke a reaction of awe from onlookers and reinforce the social order, just as Chrysostom's envious crowds pressed forward to catch a glimpse of a rich woman on the

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<sup>144</sup> It is interesting to note that women were apparently aware that their behaviour might attract censure, and were ready to justify their actions through reference to wifely duty and the preservation of marital *concordia*.

<sup>145</sup> John Chrysostom *Homily 28 on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 14 (trans. adapted from Schaff ed. 1974, pp.927-928). The idea of the woman who dresses up when she is out of the house but never cares for her appearance when she is inside is also found in Juvenal's sixth satire e.g. 457-465. Tertullian also comments that women at the baths use their adornment as a "snare" to "dazzle the indiscriminating" (*Paedagogus* 3.5, trans. Wood 1954, p.225).

street. Jealousy was the desired effect, as well as an awareness of the social chasm that separated the viewer and the viewed. What Chrysostom interprets as vanity and jealousy could equally be understood as a calculated claim to status within female social hierarchies, both ‘vertical’ hierarchies between women of differing social status and ‘horizontal’ hierarchies between women of similar rank jockeying for position.<sup>146</sup>

Chrysostom may then have been unwittingly picking up on female homosocial activity: displays of status made by women for female viewers. Scholarship consistently denies women both agency in displaying personal authority and wealth, and the agency of being active viewers, particularly viewers of other women’s bodies.<sup>147</sup> Yet it is recognised that in modern Western society women are pervasive viewers of other women, both consuming their images in popular culture and viewing them in a variety of social situations.<sup>148</sup> Female spectatorship has been shown to be an active and complex process in which women can engage in escapism, self-comparison, and self-identification.<sup>149</sup> We must therefore consider that the highly-curated bathing spectacles of late antique women may have been most effective when viewed by other women, and at least partly designed with that audience in mind. Women shared similar opportunities for social advancement (mediated through status) and could perhaps more easily understand the intricacies of such spectacles. A woman might have a better idea of the cost of a slave skilled in hairdressing or a better grasp of the latest women’s fashions. On a physical level, Callirhoe’s pregnancy reminds us of a form of display unconnected to clothes, slaves or jewels. In a culture that prized female fertility and understood women to be biologically

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<sup>146</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.214-217 discusses social distance between Roman women of different social orders and competition between women of similar status.

<sup>147</sup> Olson 2008, pp.111-112. Man as viewer and woman as viewed was most famously espoused by John Berger (1972, p.47). This “way of seeing” is reproduced by scholars like Elsner and Schade (see above). Laura Mulvey’s influential article on visual pleasure also assumed that the viewer of a female subject was necessarily male (1975).

<sup>148</sup> Frost 1999, p.129.

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, Stacey 1994 on female spectatorship of female Hollywood stars in the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s.

responsible for conception, the public display of a pregnant body could assert a different kind of social prestige. Chrysostom's criticism ultimately reveals that while men had access to a range of 'traditional' public spaces, women routinely exercised their authority in alternative locations such as churches, bathhouses, and marketplaces, spaces frequently populated by other women. The importance of women's relationships with each other is a theme we will return to several times in this thesis and represents an important area of further research for the study of women in antiquity.

### 2.7 Conclusions

The choice of late antique women and men to represent bathing and toilet ceremonies in visual culture testifies to the importance of such displays for elite conceptions of the self. The cultivation of beauty was not just about keeping clean and attractive, it also contributed to the display of power and its assertion over others. Although using the baths as an area for public pageantry was not new in Late Antiquity, the language used to define such spectacles created there shifted in this period. In textual and visual evidence increased emphasis was placed on the number of slaves, the number and material of bathing utensils, and the complicated process of performing one's toilet for the benefit of viewers. These features align well with wider trends towards ephemeral forms of self-representation and promotion such as games-giving, the growing importance of processions, and the increasing emphasis placed on the social hierarchy. While the popularity of these visual motifs appears to fade in the fifth century, archaeological and textual sources suggest that in the following centuries bathhouses in the East gradually merged with audience halls and became part of official ceremonial architecture.

Elaborate public toilet ceremonies situated women squarely within late antique spectacle culture as both performers and viewers. It allowed them space to flex their social muscles and contribute to the construction and maintenance of their identity and position within the social hierarchy. It is important to remember, however, that this was only possible because the performance of such spectacles conformed to contemporary gender norms and wider cultural practice. Women had long been associated with bodily cultivation and their presence in the bathhouse represented no challenge to gendered divisions of public space. Only the use of processions may have represented a more novel incursion into the male-dominated cityscape. Access to public displays of authority was also limited to those at the top of their local social hierarchies. Such women could leverage their wealth and status over their gender, but did not challenge the wider patriarchal system. Despite this, we ought to recognise these spectacles as the legitimate exercise of social agency. Beyond these elite women, it is also important to remember those who made up the audience for these displays. The responses of those women were essential in creating the reciprocal relationship required for the construction and maintenance of social power. Whether as watcher or watched, female involvement in this phenomenon constituted a significant engagement in contemporary culture and helped to shape the way power was expressed in late antique art and life.

## Chapter 3

### More than a Muse? Learned Women, Education, and Literary Culture

#### 3.1 Introduction

The motif of a woman holding a scroll or other attributes of learning was ubiquitous in late antique visual culture. On sarcophagi, for example, it was the single most popular mode of self-representation for women.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon was part of a larger trend, which saw a boom in individuals celebrating their intellectual cultivation during the third and fourth centuries. Women and men were shown in the guise of Muses and philosophers, as well as simply holding scrolls, books, musical instruments, or with their hand posed across their chest in the speaking gesture. The fact that this trend extended to women has at times led to tension in scholarship when it comes to interpreting its significance. The popularity of the learned man has been attributed to the way in which the reorganisation of the imperial administration under Diocletian opened positions of power to educated men of non-senatorial classes.<sup>2</sup> In more general terms, it might also be linked to the growing acceptance of Greek-style learning from the first century AD, which developed into the Second Sophistic and the prestige of classical education in Late Antiquity.<sup>3</sup> But why was the learned woman so widespread alongside the learned man, when women had no official role in the imperial administration, limited access to philosophical and literary circles, and restricted opportunities for education?

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<sup>1</sup> Birk 2013, pp.73-94. In Birk's corpus, 160/382 sarcophagi with portraits of women show them as learned figures (p.77).

<sup>2</sup> Zanker 1995, pp.281-282; Hansen 2008, pp.275-276.

<sup>3</sup> Brown 1992, pp.35-70; Hemelrijk 1999, pp.92-95. The literature on the Second Sophistic is vast. For a collection that explores its varied contours, see Borg ed. 2004. On the difficulties of the term *paideia* in light of its historiography, see Elsner 2013. I avoid the term *paideia* as it is conceptually tied to elite identity and I will argue for broader engagements in intellectual culture.

This question has caused discomfort for some scholars, who while conceding that certain elite women were highly educated and that intellectual virtues could be relevant to men and women, have emphasised visual patterns that show female intellect subordinated to male.<sup>4</sup> In the context of sarcophagi, for example, Paul Zanker argues that the depiction of women as Muses to their husband's philosopher showed them in supportive intellectual roles reflecting marital *concordia*.<sup>5</sup> In relation to gold-glass, Daniel Howells noted that being shown holding a scroll was the single most popular attribute for individuals, but also commented that "men and women are rarely shown as equals regarding symbols of intellect", the man always assuming the position of prominence.<sup>6</sup>

Minimising the significance of learned women as simply playing complementary or secondary roles in relation to learned men does not, however, answer the question of why it was such a hugely popular and effective form of self-representation in Late Antiquity. Aside from a growing societal interest in learning and education, what developments can we identify which might explain why being shown as learned was so desirable for women in particular? Imagery of learned women stretched well beyond sarcophagi and gold-glass, and remained popular from the third and fourth centuries all the way to the end of our period, indicating the emergence of

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<sup>4</sup> Birk, for example, is generally positive about the representation of learned women, but notes that for married couples, only the man is shown with a scroll "demonstrating his superior position in comparison with the woman" (2013, p.76). The exception to this pattern is Huskinson (1999), who identifies women's intellectual motifs on sarcophagi as indicating progressive ideas about women's intellectual identities and a new focus on the development of virtues through study and prayer.

<sup>5</sup> Zanker 1995, pp.271, 275. A similar position is taken by Hansen 2008, but she attributes greater agency to the woman as a sort of advisor to her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Howells 2015, pp.119, 125 and e.g. his discussion of Cat No.39. This discomfort is also reflected in the ways some scholars have interpreted the scrolls held by women. Rose (2001, p.187) for example, understands it as a representation of the marriage contract, despite widespread acceptance that this meaning was lost by this period (see Huskinson 1999, p.199). Walde (1997, pp.245-246) sees the scroll held by the woman in the famous Metropolitan Museum bust as linked to the legal freedom from tutelage. This seems very unlikely, since it is debatable what real impact guardianship laws had on women even when they were in force (Arjava 1996, pp.112-123; Evans Grubbs 2002, pp.37-46).

more complex developments in gendered intellectual ideals than is currently recognised. In this chapter, I will situate the visual representation of learned women within the cultural context of female education, literary production, and the development of the ideal of the Christian female intellectual, in order to show how late antique society came to increasingly recognise and reward learned women. Access to education and literary circles was certainly a gendered experience, but this does not mean that women were entirely excluded. In fact, opportunities presented by religious and political change opened new doors for female visibility in the world of intellectual cultivation. The relationships between these trends and the popularity of intellectual motifs demonstrate that we need not have any anxiety about the depiction of women as learned. There is ample evidence that women conceived of themselves as intellectually cultivated and nurtured such identities successfully within society.

### 3.2 Approaches to Gender and Education in Late Antiquity

The intersection between gender and education is a field that has not been greatly explored for Late Antiquity.<sup>7</sup> There is no shortage of studies into education in general, however these rarely mention girls or women since they focus on the traditional tripartite system of education which was largely limited to males.<sup>8</sup> This lack of scholarship undoubtedly contributes to a sense of unease about learned women in visual culture. Female education has been better studied for the Roman imperial period, primarily through Emily Hemelrijk's *Matrona Docta: Educated Women of the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna*.<sup>9</sup> Hemelrijk characterises female

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<sup>7</sup> Peterson 1994; see Alberici and Harlow 2007 on female transition to adulthood with references to education.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. Cribiore 2007 and 2009. Female pupils are mentioned briefly in Stefaniw 2018, pp.170-171. Even in studies of education in antiquity in general, women are commonly overlooked. Marrou's landmark work, for example, only makes very cursory reference to women and girls, see e.g. 1977, pp.34, 103, 117, 206, 232.

<sup>9</sup> Hemelrijk 1999. See also Hemelrijk 2015a (with some refinement of her earlier arguments) and González Gutiérrez 2018, in particular for epigraphic and archaeological sources. Cribiore 2001, pp.74-101 for women's

education as haphazard in comparison to that available for boys, interrupted by marriage and limited by conceptions of women's intellectual and moral capacity for learning. She ties opportunities for intellectual cultivation largely to the roles of wife and mother: women needed some literacy and numeracy to administer property, perform as a hostess, and help in the early stages of education for their (male) children.<sup>10</sup> Hemelrijk identifies just one female writer of Latin poetry with surviving work: Sulpicia, and notes that women were almost completely absent from prose genres apart from letter-writing. This too, however, was restricted by social convention primarily to family members.<sup>11</sup> A rather bleak picture thus emerges of women's intellectual lives, which perhaps goes some way to explaining the neglect of this topic for Late Antiquity.

This approach has been recently challenged by the work of Crystal Dean, whose 2012 PhD thesis *Roman Women Authors: Authorship, Agency, and Authority* argues that trying to fit women to the traditional tripartite education system is doomed to fail. Dean advocates for an approach that looks for ways in which women could access education rather than the limits imposed upon them.<sup>12</sup> She identifies three primary ways in which girls could continue their education after marriage and the interruption of 'official' teaching. The first was under the direction of their husband. In the cases of first marriages husbands were often significantly older than their wives and were encouraged to take an active role in their new bride's education in order to cultivate marital harmony.<sup>13</sup> The second method was through private tuition. The *Enchiridion Harmonicon*, for example, is a letter written to a female student by the philosopher

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education in the Hellenistic and Roman Egypt and Wolicki 2015 on the education of women in Ancient Greece (with further references).

<sup>10</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Hemelrijk 1999 pp.146-184 (poetry); pp.185-209 (prose).

<sup>12</sup> Dean 2012, p.135.

<sup>13</sup> Dean 2012, pp.134-138. Pliny the Younger, for example, encouraged Calpurnia to study literature (see, e.g. Pliny *Letter* 4.19).



Nichomachus of Gerasa (c.60-120) explaining the Pythagorean theory of harmonics. The content of the letter makes clear that the relationship of teacher and student was long established and that Nichomachus expected her to understand sophisticated arithmetical and geometrical theories as well as complex written Greek.<sup>14</sup> The third was through the involvement of mothers in the education of their children, both in the sense of choosing teachers and observing lessons, and as active participants in teaching. Quintillian advocated for learned women on the grounds that they could contribute to the cultivation of their children.<sup>15</sup> For wealthy women, learning did not have to stop at marriage and nor did it need to be limited to basic literacy and numeracy. Dean suggests that wealth, not marital status, was in fact the primary factor in determining if a woman received a strong education.<sup>16</sup> This pattern continued into Late Antiquity, the evidence for which we will consider in detail later.

Dean's arguments about education were ultimately secondary to the main purpose of her thesis, which was to examine surviving women's writing from the Roman period. She opens by noting that what survives comes almost exclusively from Late Antiquity, perhaps explaining the paucity of sources provided by Hemelrijk, whose study ends with Julia Domna.<sup>17</sup> Dean analyses three major literary works in-depth, all written in Latin in the third and fourth centuries: Perpetua's *Passio*, Proba's Virgilian *Cento*, and Egeria's *Itinerarium*, and asks why these texts survived. She argues that women were no better educated in Late Antiquity, nor that there were necessarily more active women writers. Rather, she sees greater opportunities for the acceptance and preservation of women's literature in this early Christian setting. The key factors she identifies are the following: 1) all three texts represent an early work within a newly

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<sup>14</sup> Dean 2012, pp.138-141, with further references.

<sup>15</sup> Dean 2012, pp.147-150, (Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* 1.1.6; Seneca, *Cons. Helv.* 15.1)

<sup>16</sup> Dean 2012, pp.142-143. She does, however, note that there were occasionally conservative wealthy families that were opposed to educating women.

<sup>17</sup> Dean 2012, p.2. She also identifies nearly 50 individual female authors active between the first century AD and the fifth century, indicating that the picture is not perhaps as bleak as we would believe (pp.33-34).

developing Christian genre, combining or appropriating existing genres, breaking with convention, and opening up possibilities for female authorship; 2) they all play with authorial gender in a way that makes the voice of the author more ambiguous, using a mix of male and female “voices” to imbue their texts with authority; 3) all of them employ intense emotion as a “textual voice”, a tactic which Dean considers successfully placed them within a recognisable tradition of the female voice, aligning themselves with the expectations of their audience.<sup>18</sup> Dean’s careful treatment of these texts demonstrates that female visibility in the literary world was at a high in Late Antiquity, with growing opportunities for women writers across a range of genres.

Is it just a coincidence that the phenomenon Dean observed was happening at the same time that the visual depiction of the learned woman was becoming increasingly popular? Ultimately it is very difficult to draw a direct connection between the two, but Dean’s work provides a rich backdrop for the consideration of such images. In this chapter, I will follow her lead in looking for opportunities for female education and involvement in literary culture, and in the sections that follow I will build on her work to show that the evidence she presents is just the tip of the iceberg. In particular, I will present evidence from epigraphic sources that are often neglected in literary studies, to show that Perpetua, Proba, and Egeria were far from unique.

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<sup>18</sup> 1 – Perpetua’s *Passio* mixes a diary with a memoir, *vita*, *exemplum*, and *passio*, Proba’s *Cento* was an early example of the form, allowing her to appropriate epic poetry in the *Aeneid*, while Egeria’s *Itinerarium* was a transitional genre of *peregrinatio* that would become popular in the Middle Ages (Dean 2012, pp.90-109); 2) Perpetua’s *Passio* combines multiple voices (at least one of them male), Proba harnesses the voice of Virgil, and Egeria often turns to Scripture or the words of a male guide to relate information. This was aided by the fact that developing Christianised genres did not yet have a tradition of either masculine or feminine voice (Dean 2012, pp.109-115). Restriction to “feminine” poetic genres like epigram and elegy is one of the key factors identified by Hemelrijk as limiting women’s poetic output and literary profile (1999, Chapter 5, esp. pp.173-174); 3) Perpetua discusses her feelings during incarceration, Proba her feelings and desires at the beginning and end of the poem, and Egeria makes continual reference to her feelings at holy places and events (Dean 2012, pp. 118-122).

### 3.3 The Visual Evidence

Before continuing to discuss images of learned women within their cultural context, it is worth briefly noting the extent of the evidence available to us, as not all of it can be closely analysed in the following sections. As noted above, attributes of learning were very common on sarcophagi and gold-glass.<sup>19</sup> On gold-glasses we find scrolls and writing tablets or diptychs both in the hands of individuals and used in the background (Fig 3.1).<sup>20</sup> The majority of these glasses can be dated to the fourth century.<sup>21</sup> Such attributes also appear in funerary painting, such as the fourth-century tomb portrait of Aelia Arisuth, who is shown holding a scroll in both hands (Fig 3.2).<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, the late fourth or early fifth century family group of Primenius, Severa, and their son from the catacombs of Saint Sebastian in Rome are shown with a small scroll-box to Severa's left.<sup>23</sup> Even on the Projecta Casket, discussed in Chapter 2, we find that the tondo on the lid shows the woman holding a scroll and the man posed with his right hand in the speaking gesture (Fig 2.4).<sup>24</sup> The Muse Casket from the same treasure represents eight Muses around the body of the casket, and a ninth woman weaving rose garlands on the top of the lid, shown with a contemporary hairstyle.<sup>25</sup> She may represent the owner of the casket as the ninth Muse.<sup>26</sup> The fourth-century 'empress' pepper pot depicts a woman similar to that on the Projecta Casket, she too is richly dressed and holds a scroll in both hands (Fig 3.3).<sup>27</sup> A beautiful gold brooch dated to the early fifth century from Ténès in

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<sup>19</sup> For sarcophagi see Zanker 1995; Huskinson 1999; Hansen 2008; Studer-Karlen 2012, esp. pp.83-106; Birk 2013. See also Ennaifer 2006 on representations of intellectual life on North African mosaics.

<sup>20</sup> Howells 2015, p.119. See, for example, GG1; GG7; GG9; GG13; GG15; GG18; GG2, among others.

<sup>21</sup> Howells 2015, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> P7.

<sup>23</sup> P34.

<sup>24</sup> S1.

<sup>25</sup> S2.

<sup>26</sup> Shelton 1981, pp.75-77; Elsner 2019a, p.70.

<sup>27</sup> S7.

North Africa, meanwhile, was decorated with a bust image of a woman in repoussé technique, holding her hand in the speaking gesture across her chest.<sup>28</sup>

It is difficult to determine the frequency of learned women in free-standing portrait sculpture, since so few statue bodies survive. However, the famous marble portrait bust of a woman holding a scroll from the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not unique (Fig 3.4).<sup>29</sup> The statuette of an empress from the Bibliothèque Nationale, for example, shows her holding a codex or diptych against her left side.<sup>30</sup> Steelyard weights in the shape of female busts, normally identified as empresses, often show them with their right hand in the speaking pose and the left holding a scroll.<sup>31</sup> Other statuary examples include women in the guise of Muses.<sup>32</sup> Depictions of learned women on mosaics are rare compared to other media, however a tomb mosaic from the Urban Basilica Cemetery at Tabarka in North Africa apparently depicted a woman called Victoria with a scroll in her left hand and her right posed in the speaking gesture.<sup>33</sup> Scenes of domestic education such as spinning or wool-working are not common: a mosaic of a pastoral scene with a woman spinning, also from Tabarka, is the only example I am aware of that represents a real woman.<sup>34</sup> Other scenes of women spinning are commonly – and probably correctly – interpreted as the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> J14.

<sup>29</sup> LSA-8, c.AD 400. Schade 2003, pp.208-210, No. I 49.

<sup>30</sup> LSA-568. Schade 2003, pp.204-206, No. I 46.

<sup>31</sup> Hundreds of steelyard weights of this type survive, identified iconographically as dating broadly to the fifth–seventh centuries. Few have any provenance. For catalogues of steelyard weights, see Meriçboyu and Atasoy 1983 and Kraken 1994. See also Chapter 2 of McClanan 2002a on the relationship of the iconography to empresses. See Sharvit 2013 for a rare example with a provenance.

<sup>32</sup> LSA-2303; LSA-202.

<sup>33</sup> M43. Unfortunately I have not been able to see an image of the mosaic. For catalogues in which she is described, see Gauckler 1910, No.942; Alexander 1958, No. 288, Downs 2007, JMD No.13, and pp.163-165; Powell 2019, p.40, Cat no. W04, p.153.

<sup>34</sup> M37.

<sup>35</sup> Gines Taylor 2018.

### 3.4 Images in Context

#### 3.4.1 Women and the education of children

The cultivation of an educated woman began when she was a child: her early years were a formative period in which to lay the ground-work to create a cultivated and virtuous woman. A key player in this development was her mother, as women were traditionally tasked with the work of bringing up children. As we shall see, the cultivation of the ideal learned girl was circular: a well-educated girl would make a chaste and modest wife, who would in turn provide a good role model and teacher for her own daughters. The ideal of mother as teacher is common in late antique literary sources, and probably reflects a practical reality in which girls (and boys) would have received some tutelage under their parents at home. Several noted intellectuals received their education from their philosopher fathers: Aelia Eudocia from Leontius, Hypatia from Theon of Alexandria, and Asclepigenia from Plutarch of Athens.<sup>36</sup> Macrina studied under her mother, while Augustine recounted in his *Confessions* the prominent role Monica played in his education, including paying for his study of rhetoric.<sup>37</sup>

In his poems that praise Serena and her daughter Maria, Claudian made it clear that for girls an education was not just about erudition, but also the cultivation of good moral character. Serena's study of classical texts such as Homer and Virgil helped her to identify virtuous female role models, and made her well equipped to take on the role of teacher for her daughter.<sup>38</sup> Claudian praised Maria's naivete on the eve of her wedding, so engrossed in her

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<sup>36</sup> Dean 2012, pp.151-2. Asclepigenia became the teacher of Proclus.

<sup>37</sup> Dean 2012, pp.153-4. *Life of Macrina* 3.3-5; *Confessions* 2.3.8.

<sup>38</sup> Claudian, *In Praise of Serena*, 146-159. In another poem, *The Shell*, Claudian describes Serena as *docta* (Shorter Poems, XLV [LV], 3).

lessons that she was unaware of her impending nuptials. Her education was inextricably linked to her mother's virtuous moral example, which she had cultivated from reading about famous literary heroines:

*But Maria, with no thoughts of wedlock or knowing that the torches were being got ready, was listening with rapt attention to the discourse of her saintly mother, drinking in that mother's nature and learning to follow the example of old-world chastity; nor does she cease under that mother's guidance to unroll the writers of Rome and Greece, all that old Homer sang, or Thracian Orpheus, or that Sappho set to music with Lesbian quill; (even so Latona taught Diana; so gentle Mnemosyne in her cave gave instruction to meek Thalia)...*<sup>39</sup>

The discipline of intellectual life was considered an advantageous tool for keeping young women focused on virtue. The girl who was reading with her mother did not have the time to develop undesirable habits or socialise with the wrong people.

This same idea of a connection between the well-disciplined mind and the well-disciplined soul was expounded at length by Jerome in his guidance to Laeta, a Roman matron who asked for assistance on how to bring up her daughter Paula as a dedicated virgin.<sup>40</sup> Jerome stressed the importance of beginning a religious education as early as possible, in order to mould the girl while she was still impressionable.<sup>41</sup> He gave detailed advice about tools for reading and writing, including the instruction that Laeta herself should help Paula to write on a wax tablet by physically guiding her hand.<sup>42</sup> The implication is that Laeta should be a guiding hand for

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<sup>39</sup> Claudian, *Epithalamium of Honorius and Maria*, 228-237. Trans. Platnauer 1922, p.259.

<sup>40</sup> Letter 107.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 107.4.

<sup>42</sup> Letter 107.4.

Paula both physically and spiritually. Paula's skills in reading should be then put to work in memorising Scripture in Greek and Latin, with both reading and prayer forming the cornerstones of her daily activities.<sup>43</sup> In this way she would grow up to be a virtuous virgin: education was intertwined with discipline to cultivate her intellect and Christian identity. Education was thus not only a sign of wealth and leisure, but also of virtue and control.<sup>44</sup> While we may view this policing of girls' intellectual activities as a method of patriarchal regulation, the advice of literary texts represents an ideal, not a reality. It is instructive that when Jerome advised Laeta that Paula should not read apocryphal writings, he qualified this by saying that if she read them anyway, he hoped she would do so with a critical eye.<sup>45</sup> He thus appears to tacitly accept that the need to study Scripture opened doors to literacy which could not be easily controlled.

Papyrological evidence indicates that these idealised mother-daughter educational relationships were not mere literary fantasy. Private letters from Roman Egypt reveal women's involvement in the educational development of their children and younger siblings. In one example the mother-in-law of a woman called Aline wrote to reassure her that her little daughter was "persevering at her studies."<sup>46</sup> In another letter a woman called Apollonous informed her brother that the children were well and attending the lessons of a female teacher, a tantalising reference to occasions where women put their cultivation to professional use.<sup>47</sup> When parents were absent, other family members could step in: a letter from Apollonia and

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<sup>43</sup> *Letter* 107.9. Jerome details the texts she should read and in what order, beginning with the Psalter and culminating with the Song of Songs, Cyprian, Athanasius and Hilary, and omitting apocryphal writings altogether (107.12).

<sup>44</sup> In a letter to his wife, Sidonius Apollinaris assures her that their daughter Roscia is treated with a strictness that "trains the mind" (*Letter* 5.16.5, trans. Anderson 1965, p.227).

<sup>45</sup> *Letter* 107.12. See Luijendijk 2011 on a late-antique shroud inscribed with words from the Gospel of Thomas, a clear piece of evidence for Christians reading a text deemed apocryphal. Unfortunately, the piece has no certain context, and we cannot know who was buried in it.

<sup>46</sup> Eudaimonis to Aline, AD 117: *P.Brem.* 63 (Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 41).

<sup>47</sup> *P.Mich.* 8.464, AD 99 (Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 240).

Eunous(?) to their younger sisters instructed them to maintain the family shrine and devote their attention to learning.<sup>48</sup> Oversight of education was an important part of familial duty and mothers, grandmothers, and older sisters could all be key figures in the education of family members, even if they were not members of the senatorial elite.

Representations of family-oriented education derive predominantly from gold-glass, a medium in which the depiction of family groups was common.<sup>49</sup> A glass of unknown origin now in Pesaro depicts a relationship similar to that of the mother-daughter groups considered above. It shows a woman seated on a bench with her hands on the shoulders of a child standing in front of her, identified by Ferrari and Morey as a young girl, who holds her right hand in the speaking gesture across her chest (Fig 3.5).<sup>50</sup> The implication is that the woman is the child's mother, seated behind her and offering support at an early stage of her intellectual development. The child's speaking pose is reminiscent of Jerome's suggestion that after memorising passages of Scripture, Paula should report verbally to her mother on what she had learned. It is not only mothers and daughters we see engaged in this way, but also whole families. The gold-glass of Pompeianus and Theodora shows the parents standing behind their daughter and son (Fig 3.6).<sup>51</sup> Theodora is shown with her right hand in the speaking pose and her left on her son's shoulder, who imitates her pose and also holds an unfurled scroll. Pompeianus holds no attributes of learning, placing his right hand Theodora's shoulder and his left on his daughter's, perhaps emphasising his supporting role. The daughter is shown holding a scroll in her left hand and reaching out for her brother's scroll with her right. The message is clear: educated parents prize the cultivation of their offspring (both male and female), and together form an exemplary family unit. There seems a particular emphasis on the education of the children,

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<sup>48</sup> *P.Athen.* 60, first century AD (Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 266).

<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> GG20. Ferrari and Morey 1959, No.289, p.50.

<sup>51</sup> GG9.



indicating the parents' commitment to raising them as the next generation of cultivated individuals.

### 3.4.2 Women and Literary Culture

Literary sources paint a compelling picture of the educated wife as an essential support for her husband and family. In addition to Jerome and Claudian, Augustine considered that the ideal bride should be “literary, or at least, easily teachable by her husband”, while Sidonius Apollinaris advised his nephew that marriage could be an opportunity for husband and wife to work together towards literary pursuits.<sup>52</sup> These texts, however, present us with an ideal ‘type’ rather than a real woman. In this section, I will analyse the depiction of learned adult women against the backdrop of both ideals constructed by literary sources and the literary outputs of women in the form of poetry. This will expand Dean’s picture of the literary landscape of late antique women and our ability to understand the significance of the representation of learned women in visual culture. I will focus on poetry for two reasons: the first is that prose writing is considered later in this chapter and the second is that poetry (in particular Latin) has been better studied than other genres and collected in anthologies.<sup>53</sup> While this does not represent all of women’s literary production that survives,<sup>54</sup> it is the most accessible and perhaps reflects most accurately the interaction of ordinary women with literary culture. By this I mean that much of the poetry here considered was not written by famous literary figures, nor preserved through a manuscript tradition that favoured male authors.

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<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *Soliloquiae* 1.10 (17) (trans Stevenson 2005, p.62); Stevenson 2005, p.62; Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters* 2.10.5-6.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Churchill et al. 2002; Plant 2004; Stevenson 2005.

<sup>54</sup> See Cameron 2016a on the works of Hypatia, for example.

### 3.4.2.1 *Approaching women's writing*

One reason why Hemelrijk identified Sulpicia as the lone female poet of the Roman period is due to her standards of definition. For Hemelrijk, being a poet entailed a level of professional status and publication through traditional frameworks of literary patronage, which she admits were largely inaccessible for women.<sup>55</sup> Poetry which survives in epigraphic form is derided, such as that of Terentia and Julia Balbilla on the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Colossus of Memnon. She refers to Terentia, for example, as a “literary dilettante, for whom there is no place in the history of Roman literature.”<sup>56</sup> This approach obscures female involvement in literary culture: defining women's poetry by male standards of production and publication is as problematic as defining their education through the male tripartite system. It is more useful to widen our conception of what constitutes legitimate literary production, as while some women could work through official channels, many used different ways of being heard. Whether these women considered themselves poets in an official sense, they took part in literary culture as the producers of verse and often chose to make that involvement public through inscriptions. To this end, this section will treat both texts transmitted in literary and epigraphic form as legitimate poetic production and their authors as genuine poetic practitioners. This allows us to construct a more inclusive picture of what it meant to be a learned woman and the significance of being so represented.

In relation to epigraphic poetry we must address the question of whether the dedicator of the inscription also composed the verse. It is often difficult to know if a person brought their own composition to the workshop, if they used verses they had read or remembered from elsewhere,

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<sup>55</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, pp.147-153 about access to literary circles.

<sup>56</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, p.172.

or if they chose from common formulations or hired a poet to compose something for them.<sup>57</sup> It has been shown categorically that some verse funerary inscriptions dedicated by women in the Roman period, for example, were not their own compositions.<sup>58</sup> Others are so generic that they have raised suspicions, or betrayed the illiteracy of the patrons.<sup>59</sup> We should therefore be critical in our reading of women's (and men's) epigraphic poetry, but not entirely dismissive. It should be clear by now that wealthier women, those with the financial means to dedicate inscriptions, could have had opportunities to become literate and even literary.<sup>60</sup> As we shall see, having raised this matter there is little to worry about when it comes to the poetry considered here. Most of the examples we shall examine are either highly specific to individual circumstance or reference within the poem the author as poetess. In light of this, I have chosen to take these women at their word and treat their poetry as in all probability reflecting their own compositions. Where doubts have been raised by scholars I have noted it within the text or footnotes.

#### 3.4.2.2 *Women's poetry in Late Antiquity*

Women's poetry was popular in Late Antiquity, both in literary and epigraphic form. A significant number of female poets from the imperial period are only known to us from late antique sources. Cornificia is mentioned by Jerome for her epigrams, while the only lines of Sulpicia II's work to survive are given by a fourth-century scholiast of Juvenal.<sup>61</sup> Sulpicia II is also mentioned by both Sidonius Apollinaris and Ausonius, who includes her in a list of

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<sup>57</sup> See Stevenson 2005, pp.49-58 on epigraphy as a source for women's Latin poetry in the second and third centuries AD.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Courtney 1995, no.199, pp.186-187, 398-399 (third century).

<sup>59</sup> Stevenson 2005, pp.53-54.

<sup>60</sup> Stevenson 2005, p.53.

<sup>61</sup> Jerome *Chronicle* 41 BC; *Schol. Ad Juv.* 6.537; Hemelrijk 1999, pp.149, 161.

eminent literary figures.<sup>62</sup> A fifth-century political satire about the expulsion of philosophers from Rome during the reign of Domitian was erroneously attributed to her as well, testifying to her enduring popularity.<sup>63</sup> A very early lyric poem by Melinno (c.150 BC) also survives from the work of Stobaeus in the fifth century.<sup>64</sup> Late antique readers had access to several popular women poets from the imperial period, classics of Greek poetry like Sappho, and contemporary poetic practitioners.

In terms of literary production, we are able to identify a rich tradition of women's poetry, perhaps linked to a revival in poetry production in general in Late Antiquity.<sup>65</sup> The most famous poets of the period are Proba (famous for her *Cento*, but author also of a lost military epic), and the Empress Aelia Eudocia, who wrote an Homeric *Cento*, an epic poem on the martyrdom of Saint Cyprian, a hexameter poem inscribed at the baths at Hammat Gader, and a significant number of works that are no longer extant.<sup>66</sup> Ausonius recorded that his wife Sabina also wrote poetry, and preserved one poem written in her voice in his *Epigrammata*.<sup>67</sup> The content of the poem suggests that she embroidered her verses or perhaps worked them into tapestry. Whether this is meant literally or figuratively, it shows how composition could fit neatly alongside traditional feminine pastimes. A sixth-century satirical poem has been attributed to a noblewoman called Eucheria (named within the text), who scorns a potential suitor, and a woman called Theosebeia is credited in the Greek Anthology with composing a funerary poem

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<sup>62</sup> Ausonius *Cento Nuptialis* 141-142, Sidonius *Poems* 9 (To Felix) 261-262; Hemelrijk 1999, p.163.

<sup>63</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, p.163, with further references to the *Conquestio Sulpiciae de statu rei publicae et temporibus Domitiani*.

<sup>64</sup> Dean 2012, pp.46-47.

<sup>65</sup> Even figures famous for other literary products chose to express themselves in verse. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, wrote more than 300 poems over some 18,000 lines (Cameron 2016b, p.168).

<sup>66</sup> Most scholars accept Eudocia's authorship (e.g. Usher 1998; Sowers forthcoming) but some question it (e.g. Schembra 2007). For an overview of the debate and manuscript tradition see Gronow 2016, pp.9-10. Non-extant works: poem on the military victories of her husband over the Persians, verse paraphrase of the Octateuch, paraphrase of the books of the prophets Zacharia and Daniel, and an encomium in praise of Antioch delivered there in AD 438.

<sup>67</sup> Stevenson 2005, p.64. Ausonius *Epigrammata* 55.

for a man called Ablabius.<sup>68</sup> This is the limit of surviving women's poetic production from the manuscript tradition as far as I am aware, however if we add surviving epigraphic poetry we increase our corpus considerably.

Much of the surviving epigraphic poetry by women is funerary in nature.<sup>69</sup> Two women called Serena and Constantia both wrote verse epitaphs for their husbands (Nymphius and Anastasius) in which they lamented the loss of their spouse and extolled their virtues.<sup>70</sup> Constantia described herself as a "sad wedded wife", and her grief is more the subject of the poem than her deceased husband. While we as readers learn relatively little of consequence about Anastasius, the picture of Constantia is clearer: her poem constructs her as an ideal wife mourning her husband, and places her act of composition at the fore. She opens the poem with the line: "Constantia, his sad wedded wife, is writing verses for Anastasius".<sup>71</sup> Taurina, a nun, composed an acrostic poem on the death of her four aunts, Licinia, Leontia, Empelia, and Flavia, glorifying their virginity and the rewards they were receiving in heaven.<sup>72</sup> Taurina does not identify herself until the last line: the final words of the poem are "Taurina sacrata", Taurina the nun.<sup>73</sup> The implication is that her virtuous life will also entitle her to similar glory in the afterlife. Marcella (probably also a nun), wrote verses on the death of her brother Hesychius, Bishop of Vienne.<sup>74</sup> She both praised her brother as Taurina did her aunts, and bitterly lamented

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<sup>68</sup> Eucheria: Mathisen 2003, pp.38-40; Plant 2004, pp.210-212; Stevenson 2005, pp.75-76. Theosebeia: Greek Anthology 7.559. Probably dated between the third and sixth centuries (Plant 2004, p.169).

<sup>69</sup> See also Stevenson 2005, p.60 unknown woman on her husband; p.61 possible poem by Martha for her brother Pope Damasus.

<sup>70</sup> Serena's poem has been dated to the mid fourth to mid fifth century, and Constantia's to AD 355. Serena: Mathisen 2003, pp.44-46; Stevenson 2005, pp.558-559. Mathisen is not certain that Serena wrote the poem herself, however she is included in Stevenson's anthology. Constantia: Stevenson 2005, pp.60-61; Dean 2012, pp. 50-51.

<sup>71</sup> *Tristis Anastasio Constantia carmina scribit coniunx*. Text and translation Stevenson 2005, p.60.

<sup>72</sup> Fourth century. Stevenson 2005, pp.79-80; Dean 2012, p.51. Originally epigraphic, the poem survives in a copy made in 1603 (Stevenson 2005, p.79).

<sup>73</sup> *Hunc posuit neptes titulum Taurina sacrata*: "The nun Taurina, their niece, set up this inscription" (text and translation Stevenson 2005, pp.79-80).

<sup>74</sup> Sixth century. Stevenson 2005, pp.81-82.

her own loss like Constantia did her husband. It has been argued that Fabia Aconia Paulina, wife of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, was the author of at least some of the verses found on his famous funerary monument, and that the epigraphic text was based on a funerary oration given by her.<sup>75</sup> Another Roman matron, Anicia Faltonia Proba (granddaughter of the Proba who likely authored the *Cento*) should also be given at least some editorial credit for the verse epitaphs commemorating herself and her husband, and for similar involvement in editing and disseminating her grandmother's poetry.<sup>76</sup>

Other surviving examples of women's poetry are dedicatory in nature or have no clear purpose beyond the intellectual pleasures of verse. When Constantine's daughter Constantina erected a church to Saint Agnes in Rome, she dedicated it with an acrostic poem in her own voice that spelled out CONSTANTINA DEO.<sup>77</sup> A poem was also famously composed for Anicia Juliana's dedication of the church of Saint Polyeuctos in Constantinople, and while her authorship is certainly questionable, we should perhaps ascribe to her some kind of editorial control.<sup>78</sup> The co-production of literary works by couples alluded to by Sidonius is found in a poem inscribed near a spring in Croatia near modern Zivogostje, which was composed by a husband and wife team: Licinianus and Pelagia. The poem opens with Licinianus' words, and closes with those of Pelagia, extolling the joys of the water and addressing the nymph living there.<sup>79</sup> There appears to be no specific purpose for the poem other than to express the refined taste of the couple and their harmonious relationship.

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<sup>75</sup> CIL VI 1779, Kahlos 1994, pp.16-19. Lambrechts 1955, pp.9-14, (not seen) cited in Kahlos.

<sup>76</sup> Trout considers that editorial or authorial responsibility for the verse epitaphs commemorating Anicia Faltonia Proba and her husband Probus should be given to the couple, who had documented literary interests. Ausonius wrote in verse to Probus, and Avienus dedicated a work to him, while Anicia is probably responsible for the popularity of her grandmother's *cento* in the 390s (Trout 2001, esp. pp.166-167).

<sup>77</sup> Stevenson 2005, pp.62-63; Trout 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Fowden 1994, p.275; Connor 1999, pp.515-516 (for Juliana as author). Tissoni 2000, pp.22-23; Whitby 2006 (against).

<sup>79</sup> Stevenson 2005, pp.73-75 (fifth century).

An unwillingness to incorporate epigraphic poetry into our consideration of women's literary production thus alienates a significant number of women writing verse in Late Antiquity.<sup>80</sup> It also obscures the public nature of women's poetic voices, both in epigraphic form, and especially in the case of funerary poetry, in public oral performance.<sup>81</sup> One of the difficulties with working with these texts, however, is that they have received relatively little scholarly attention. Where they have been studied, analysis has revealed not only the complicated constructions and textual allusions which betray the education of the author, but also a sense of the identity of the author as poet. In his analysis of Constantina's dedicatory poem, Denis Trout has identified numerous religious and secular allusions, as well as the complex technical construction of the text.<sup>82</sup> Constantina's references to Ovid's *Tristia* 3.7, in which he urges the poetess Perilla to persist in composing poetry, indicate Constantina's own self-awareness as a poet and evidence that not all epigraphic poets considered themselves to be merely privileged amateurs.<sup>83</sup> Constantina's poem does not directly narrate Agnes' life, but rather alludes to it through comparisons with Polyxena in Virgil and Ovid. The use of Polyxena and Perilla as proxies for Agnes and Constantina create a cocktail of references to earlier Latin literature that Trout believes allowed learned readers to understand the two Christian women through a classical framework.<sup>84</sup> Poetry allowed Constantina to assert both her religious and intellectual identity in public, and to align herself with another female poet, if only through Ovid. Constantina harnessed Perilla, Polyxena, and Agnes to construct a public literary identity for

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<sup>80</sup> Verse inscriptions have only recently been taken seriously as a poetic medium, recognised for their originality and "complicity with the reinvigorated strategies of Late Latin poetics" (Trout 2013, p.5).

<sup>81</sup> Agosti 2010, pp.165-6. Agosti considers that reading epigraphic poetry aloud, with its elevated and complicated allusions, could have contributed to the diffusion and persistence of *paideia*, creating a "form a library within reach of all", in which aspects could be explained by more educated participants (2010, pp.175-9). See also Cameron 2016b, pp.166-167 on the performance of the dedicatory inscription of St Polyeuctos, and p.178 in reference to panegyrics.

<sup>82</sup> Trout 2015, pp.267-268.

<sup>83</sup> Trout 2015, pp.271-274.

<sup>84</sup> Trout 2015, p.274.

herself that positioned her simultaneously as an educated Christian woman well versed in classical culture, and as a poetess embedded in a tradition stretching back some 400 years.

The bulk of surviving epigraphic poetry is funerary in nature, or related to the dedication of religious spaces. This seems unlikely to be coincidental, as it taps into two pre-existing features of ideal femininity. The first, is that by ostensibly praising family members, women could situate their poetry within ideals of conjugal and familial love, respect, and devotion. Secondly, women's visibility in public had traditionally been tied to religious participation, helping create the impression of idyllic family life so important for wealthy and politically active families and to express their orthodox religious credentials.<sup>85</sup> We should also consider the trend in Late Antiquity (particularly in the East) for elevated verse commemorations in statue, church, and funerary dedications.<sup>86</sup> This may have provided fertile ground for women's compositions to be preserved epigraphically in the first place and perhaps explains their prevalence in our source material. Our examples therefore represent a similar phenomenon to that observed by Dean: women's literary production took advantage of expectations placed on women by society and was preserved in circumstances specific to the period.

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<sup>85</sup> Dean 2012, pp.229-234 (on traditional roles in religion). E.g. Helena's actions as a pious religious agent, her contrast with Fausta, Constantia's conversion to Christianity after the death of Licinius, Aelia Flaccilla's high profile charity work, the networks of non-imperial women involved in the patronage of churches, and the consecration of girls to virginity (2012, pp.234-42). See pp.62-73 on the dating of Proba's *Cento* for the potential political implications of the text.

<sup>86</sup> Robert 1948 pp.35-114 on inscriptions for provincial governors; Roueché 1997; Smith 1999, pp.174-175; Agosti 2010, p.164; Ward-Perkins 2016, pp.31-32; Gehn 2016, pp.193-195. See Trout 2015, pp.276-278 on public verse inscriptions in Rome composed by key imperial and ecclesiastic figures. He identifies this trend in dedicatory poetry continuing into the sixth century.



## 3.4.2.3 Reading Women

There were therefore certainly opportunities in Late Antiquity for women to not only receive an education, but to exercise it in public. Moreover, this formed an acceptable part of the construction of ideal femininity, connected with familial piety and religious charity. Depictions of learned women are frequently found on expensive high-status items and it seems likely that these were owned or commissioned by the sort of women who would have had access to education and the leisure to devote to literary pursuits. It is difficult to get anything more from a simple representation of a woman holding a scroll and it seems likely that such a common motif could hold different meanings for different women in different circumstances. Two surviving depictions, however, show women not just holding attributes of education, but actively reading aloud in the company of other women: a mid to late fourth century mosaic from a necropolis south of Antioch and a sixth-century ivory pyxis, probably from Egypt.<sup>87</sup> The mosaic depicts an all-female funerary banquet featuring three diners and three attendants (Fig 3.7). The diner seated to the left of the sigma-shaped dining table is sometimes identified as the deceased, the mosaic her funerary banquet.<sup>88</sup> It is also possible that the scene represents more generally a group of women who formed a funerary *collegium*.<sup>89</sup> Given this is a funerary banquet, we may consider that the woman is reading a funerary oration in honour of the

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<sup>87</sup> M3; I9.

<sup>88</sup> Kondoleon 2000, p.121; Becker and Kondoleon 2005, pp.198-199. For original identification as a funerary banquet, see Levi 1947, pp.297-300. This iconographic formulation is reminiscent of the Totenmahl reliefs, but I am unaware of examples in which the seated woman reads from a scroll. See Dunbabin 2003, pp.114-120 on the depiction of women in earlier funerary art concerned with feasting and drinking, and pp.103-110 on the Totenmahl relief tradition. In sarcophagi the depiction of a funerary banquet does sometimes include a seated woman playing a musical instrument (Dunbabin 2003, p.120, Fig. 68). The arrangement is also reminiscent of catacomb paintings showing diners reclining and a woman seated on a separate chair, however again I am unaware of instances in which she is reading (Dunbabin 2003, p.178 and Chapter 6). A fresco of an all-female banquet is also known from Pompeii (Roberts ed. 2020, Fig.147).

<sup>89</sup> Kondoleon 2000, pp.121-122; Becker and Kondoleon 2005, pp.200-201. Evidence for all female funerary *collegia* is scant, but survives (Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.181-225 on female *collegia* and other organisations; see also Lefkowitz and Fant 2016, No.209, perhaps also No.210; No.206 refers to a donation made by a women's club).

deceased.<sup>90</sup> Most of our evidence for such oratory is related to public funerals of important individuals, but there is also limited evidence for the practice in private settings.<sup>91</sup> The only funerary *laudationes* to survive in substantial quantities from the Roman period all concern women.<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, there is little evidence for how private funerary orations functioned.<sup>93</sup> The epitaph of Aelia Secundula from Mauretania Sitifensis, however, offers us a rare window into women's funerary commemorations. Dedicated by a certain Statulenia Julia in 299, the poem records how mourners set up a funerary banquet and stayed up late reminiscing about Secundula and telling stories.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps our mosaic was the site of similar commemorative banquets at which women could give orations as well as receiving them. If the interpretation of the mosaic as an all-female funerary *collegium* is correct, the women may have composed and performed orations for each other as part of communal celebrations of remembrance. A relief from the famous Haterii tomb (c.100) shows the funeral of a woman attended by a mixed group of mourners, including a seated woman playing the flute and a kneeling woman leading a dirge.<sup>95</sup> While earlier than our mosaic, it too indicates that women could play leading roles in funerary rites.

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<sup>90</sup> Levi (1947, pp.300-303) connects funerary banquets with reading prayers, scripture, and singing psalms.

<sup>91</sup> Flower 1996, p.131, and pp.128-158 on funerary orations in general. Lucian *On Funerals* 13-16 imagines a scenario in which a grieving parent delivers an embarrassingly dramatic speech about their son.

<sup>92</sup> The *laudatio Turiae* (late first century BC, delivered by her husband); *laudatio Murdiae*, (late first century BC or early first century AD, delivered by her son); *laudatio Matidiae* (delivered for Matidia the Elder by Hadrian). All survive in epigraphic form – LT: CIL 6.1527, 31670, 37053 = ILS 8393; LMr: CIL 6.10230 = ILS 8394; LMr: CIL 14.3579). See Lindsay 2004; Hemelrijk 2004a, with further references. Public funerary orations for prominent women became common from the late Republic onwards, see Mustakallio 2005, esp. pp.187-188, although she gives no evidence for women giving funerary speeches.

<sup>93</sup> Private funerary eulogies are not explicitly mentioned in literary sources, but their presence can be inferred from the LT and LMr (Lindsay 2004, p.88). The text of the *laudatio Murdiae* states that it was to be delivered in front of friends and family (Flower 1996, pp.131-2; Lindsay 2004, p.88). The granting of public funerals to women (often including a *laudatio*) is also recorded in inscriptions. Hemelrijk (2015b, Table 6.1) has collected some 58 examples from the imperial period. On public funerals for women in general, see pp.320-329.

<sup>94</sup> Jensen 2008, pp.125-126. CIL 8.20.277.

<sup>95</sup> Kleiner 1992, pp.196-199; Bodel 1999, pp.267-270, Fig.2.

The pyxis features another all-female banquet and a Nilotic scene, leading to the suggestion that it represents a feast in honour of Isis (Fig 3.8).<sup>96</sup> Five diners are arranged on the *stibadium*, the central woman placing her hand on a large fowl in a dish on the table in front of her.<sup>97</sup> The woman seated at the far left of the couch holds her right hand in a speaking pose, and in her left hand she holds a book or tablet. Reading aloud was a common entertainment at dinner parties, particularly small intimate gatherings, but these performances were normally given by professional slaves or freed-persons rather than guests.<sup>98</sup> To avoid the taint of *infamia*, upper-class poets would hold an official *recitatio* for their work instead.<sup>99</sup> While guests and hosts were therefore unlikely to provide official entertainment, they certainly did take part in more informal exchanges “between learned persons” over the dinner-table.<sup>100</sup> Since the woman in question reclines on the couch, it appears she is intended as a guest rather than a performer, and thus is perhaps engaged in just this kind of learned spectacle. A letter of Sidonius Apollinaris describes how such informal displays could form part of a banquet. He tells his friend Montius how he was invited to dine by the emperor Majorian, who then asked him during the meal to spontaneously compose and perform some lines of satirical verse.<sup>101</sup>

The nature of the speech given by our woman is unclear, perhaps she recites a text in honour of Isis, or simply engages in the kind of learned exchange expected at such dinners?<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Strzykowski 1902, p.47; Carra 2000, pp.472-473.

<sup>97</sup> In general, the iconography of diners in late antiquity is highly consistent. E.g. the repetition of the figure facing away from the viewer on the far right of the scene: in both the Sevso Plate (S5) and the mosaic of the Small Hunt at Piazza Armerina he is shown feeding a dog, on the Cesena plate he is in a similar position but leans back in towards the other diners, while the woman on the pyxis directs her attention to a performer.

<sup>98</sup> Professional readers, *lectores*, could be hired to entertain at dinner parties (Starr 1991, pp.341-342). The practice is satirised in Petronius’ *Satyricon* when a slave delivers lines from the *Aeneid* mixed with Atellan farces (68.4-5). See also Parker 2009, pp.199-200, and on reading as dinner entertainment pp.203-204. The mention of poetry being read aloud is occasional, see Parker 2009, pp.204-205, with extensive references.

<sup>99</sup> Parker 2009, p.205.

<sup>100</sup> Parker 2009, p.205. Cicero praised such practice, while Martial considered it rude for hosts to force guests to endure their verses (p.205, notes 72-73).

<sup>101</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letter* 1.11.11-17 (c.AD 461-467); Dunbabin 2003b, pp.192-193.

<sup>102</sup> Several hymns to Isis survive, see e.g. Rowlandson 1998, pp.51-54, No.25, *P.Oxy.* 11.1380 (second century AD). Thomas identifies the female figure not as Isis but a personification of the Earth, and that this may actually

Whatever she is saying, she is clearly important: while the woman at the centre of the diners dominates the composition, the speaking woman is seated at the ‘right-horn’, the traditional position of honour. This is the place taken by Majorian in Sidonius’ letter and that taken by Christ in a sixth-century mosaic depicting the Last Supper at Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (Fig 3.9).<sup>103</sup> A prominent role in conversation was frequently attached to this position: it is Majorian who leads the conversation with the other diners, addressing them in order of importance, while Christ holds his hand in the speaking gesture and addresses his disciples.

In both examples, the mosaic and the pyxis, women are shown speaking in the company of other women. This reminds us that a woman’s peers were likely an important group through which to develop learning and find an audience for literary productions. This is also noted by Dean, who recognises the importance of the Christian study circle in Perpetua’s *passio* (which included several women) and Egeria’s membership of an all-female religious group in which Bible study was clearly the norm.<sup>104</sup> All-female spaces could have given women access to responsibilities normally assigned to men, while in other contexts women must simply have been the best equipped to perform a specific task, regardless of gender.<sup>105</sup>

### 3.4.3 Learned Christian Women

For women there was a clear link between Christian identity and intellectual cultivation: Paula’s education focused on religious reading, while Constantina, Taurina, and Marcella all

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reference a funerary banquet (Thomas 2000, pp.64-65). If this reading is correct then the speech given by the woman may be another *laudatio*.

<sup>103</sup> Dunbabin 2003b, pp.198-201, Fig.120.

<sup>104</sup> Dean 2012, pp.169-181.

<sup>105</sup> In a document from 620, for example, testators disinherited their son in favour of their daughter and granddaughter, leaving the two women responsible for the testators’ funerals. Apparently, their son had stolen from them, while their daughter and granddaughter had cared for them when they were sick (Luijendijk 2011, p.407, citing Krause 1983, p.87).

composed poetry that was strongly influenced by their identity as Christian women, as did Perpetua, Proba, Egeria, and others. Dean argues that there was nothing inherently special about Christianity that allowed women access to education, but that emerging Christian systems provided the means to preserve women's writing and afforded novel opportunities for female involvement in certain literary genres.<sup>106</sup> In this section I will build on Dean's findings by demonstrating that Christianity also created new opportunities for women's involvement in letter-writing and learned epistolary relationships, female patronage of prominent Christian authors, and the development of the ideal of the woman reader. The emergence of women's ascetic communities also created another all-female space in which women could develop and share their intellectual ideas. The connection between female authority and the cultivation of specifically Christian erudition has significant bearing on how we understand images of women shown as learned in religious contexts.

The use of learned motifs to express religious learning is illustrated well by the tomb painting from the *arcosolium* of Veneranda in the catacombs of Domitilla in Rome (Fig 3.10). It dates from the second half of the fourth century, and show the deceased woman (Veneranda) in the centre of the composition in the *orans* position, with Saint Petronilla standing behind her.<sup>107</sup> Most of the far left-side of the painting no longer survives, but roses indicate a paradisiacal setting. On the far right is a large open scroll box filled with scrolls and an open book or codex with black lines on the pages to indicate text. The presence of the saint and the paradisiacal setting indicates that these scrolls are not a generic sign of learning, but represent Veneranda's spiritual erudition and cultivation. The two women gaze at each-other as Saint Petronilla gestures towards the open scroll box with her left hand and Veneranda turns towards the

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<sup>106</sup> I do not intend to enter debates on the impact of Christianity on general literacy rates, this is beyond the scope of the thesis. See Blumell 2012 on Christian literacy at Oxyrhynchus, esp. pp.163-236. See also Harris 1991, pp.285-322 on literacy in Late Antiquity, and Johnson and Parker eds. 2009 on literacies across the ancient world.

<sup>107</sup> p31.

paradise she is entering. Her assent, guided by the saint, is directly connected to her status as a learned woman. Veneranda is the adult product of the education championed by Jerome for little Paula: a woman who is spiritually cultivated will know how to live a virtuous life and through this find her way to Paradise.

An even more direct appropriation of attributes of learning is found in the later *arcosolia* of Cerula and Bitalia, from the catacombs of Saint Januarius in Naples (Figs 3.11-14).<sup>108</sup> They both date to the late fifth or early sixth centuries, and show the deceased women in bust form and in the *orans* pose. Above the women's heads we find the Chi-Rho and Alpha and Omega, and on either side of their heads are depicted open books, apparently surrounded by flames. On the pages of the books are written the names of the four evangelists, indicating that they represent the New Testament gospels. The tomb of Cerula is better quality than that of Bitalia and is dated slightly earlier. It is located at the end of a gallery on the first floor of the catacombs, and takes up much of the end wall, an impressive sight for anyone visiting.<sup>109</sup> The area below the *arcosolium* was painted to mimic marble, and to the viewer's left we see the figure of Saint Paul. Peter probably once occupied the right, but this side is almost entirely lost.<sup>110</sup> At the top was painted a red *tabula ansata*, but there is no surviving inscription.

The unusual motif of the flaming Gospel books has spawned suggestions that the women held specific positions in the Church, ranging from deaconess to catechist, and even bishop.<sup>111</sup> The evidence for such an identification, however, is weak.<sup>112</sup> The motif may have been chosen for

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<sup>108</sup> P22; P23.

<sup>109</sup> Braconi 2015-2016, p.131. Bitalia's *arcosolium* is located along the same corridor, but tucked away and angled to make it difficult to see properly.

<sup>110</sup> Braconi 2015-2016, pp.132-133.

<sup>111</sup> See Braconi 2015-2016, pp.136-137 on previous arguments about the position of the women. He rejects their identification with any official position in the church.

<sup>112</sup> Their identification as bishops is based on the argument that when bishops were ordained a gospel book was held over their head, so that the "tongues of fire" of the Holy Spirit would descend onto them. Kateusz 2019,

Cerula's tomb and later copied for Bitalia's or they may not be flames at all.<sup>113</sup> The idea that the books indicate that the women shared the same important position within the church hierarchy is difficult to reconcile with the fact that Cerula's monument is orders of magnitude larger, more imposing, and better quality than Bitalia's. Braconi has argued that the gospels demonstrate the wish of the women to express their Christian faith and their ability to read Biblical texts on their own.<sup>114</sup> I would take this further: the learnedness of these women is not just linked to their faith, but one is directly mediated through the other. While we cannot know if they held any official role within the church, it is likely that Cerula and Bitalia derived a considerable part of their social status and authority from their learned knowledge of religious texts, and that this in turn informed how they wished to be remembered.

Veneranda, Cerula, and Bitalia are all shown as having a direct relationship not just with religion, but religion as it was recorded and transmitted in books and scrolls. That their connection with texts has tempted scholars to assign the latter two official positions within the Church reflects the idea that involvement in the production, transmission, and reception of sacred texts was intimately linked to religious and social authority. The iconographic epitome of this was the depiction of Christ as a philosopher-teacher, giving the law to Peter and Paul, holding scrolls or books, making the speaking gesture, and addressing his disciples.<sup>115</sup> Zanker has interpreted the depiction of Jesus as a philosopher as illustrative of just how completely the "cult of learning" had become imbedded in popular culture.<sup>116</sup> Peter, Paul, and other holy

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pp.158-161 suggests that their representation may have represented active resistance to Pope Gelasius' letter complaining that women in southern Italy were ministering and performing official roles in the Church.

<sup>113</sup> The mosaic representations of the *Ecclesiae* from the church of Santa Sabina in Rome also hold books from which emanate reddish-orange strands. In these cases they look less like flames and more like markers. On the women see Schlatter 1995.

<sup>114</sup> Braconi 2015-2016, p.137.

<sup>115</sup> Zanker 1995, pp.289-307; Jensen 2000, pp.44-46; Jensen 2020.

<sup>116</sup> Zanker 1995, p.296.

figures are also frequently shown in the guise of learned men in a similar fashion.<sup>117</sup> Nor was it only men that were invested with such symbols of religious authority: in gold-glass Saint Agnes is often shown with scrolls, and in the seventh-century apse mosaic from her church on the Via Nomentana in Rome she is depicted holding a scroll, flanked by the popes Symmachus and Honorius.<sup>118</sup> There is no specific tradition that Agnes was particularly learned, rather these attributes derive from her status as a pious and powerful holy figure. Her spiritual authority is invested and represented in scrolls that we assume represent holy texts.<sup>119</sup> In a more extreme example, Prudentius' account of Saint Eulalia's martyrdom described how the virgin defied her torturers by claiming that as they cut into her body they wrote the name of Christ upon her: her body became a sacred text through the act of martyrdom.<sup>120</sup> The books and scrolls used by our women can therefore be situated within a cultural discourse in which they conveyed authority. This naturally leads to the question of what sorts of relationships ordinary women could have with religious texts and what kind of authority they could derive from them.

Late Antiquity was a golden age for the production and preservation of letter collections, a phenomenon that has been linked to the growth of both the Imperial and Church administrations.<sup>121</sup> Roman women's involvement in letter-writing had been limited primarily to their families,<sup>122</sup> but in Late Antiquity churchmen represented a new group with whom women could develop socially acceptable epistolary relationships. Jerome and Augustine, for

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<sup>117</sup> Jensen 2020, pp.75-76. Biblical figures shown in the garb of a philosopher include Daniel, Job, Moses, and John the Baptist (Jensen 2000, p.45). On Saint Laurence see Grig 2004, p.136.

<sup>118</sup> Gold-glass: see, e.g. gold-glass still *in situ* in the Catacomb of Panfilo showing Agnes *orans* with scrolls above her hands (Howells 2015, Plate 11). Mosaic: see Trout 2019.

<sup>119</sup> Ambrose discusses Agnes in *On Virginité* (2.5-9), but stresses only her fortitude at such a young age. Huskinson notes a similar phenomenon in the iconography of Susanna, where scrolls indicate she is "empowered" by religious learning (1999, p.205). In Asterius of Amasea *Ekphrasis on the Martyrdom of Saint Euphemia* (3.2), he describes the virgin at her trial as being shown in the guise of a philosopher, wearing "a dark tunic and cloak, the sign of philosophy" (translation Castelli 2000, p.467).

<sup>120</sup> Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 3.131-140. See also Frese and O'Brien O'Keefe 1997, pp.ix-x.

<sup>121</sup> Sogno, Storin and Watts 2017, pp.6-7. On letter-writing and letter collections in Late Antiquity see Sogno, Storin, and Watts eds. 2017.

<sup>122</sup> Hemelrijk 1999, pp.189-190.



example, both maintained correspondence with large numbers of aristocratic women for whom they represented spiritual advisors.<sup>123</sup> Some scholars have questioned the level of education attained by these women, however most accept that there was a relatively large number of wealthy educated women who could involve themselves in complex theological discussion.<sup>124</sup> While men like Jerome preserved and published their correspondence for their own ends, it is clear that the opportunity to become a ‘woman of letters’ greatly increased in Late Antiquity.<sup>125</sup> Relationships between women and theologians also extended to the patronage and dissemination of the latter’s work.<sup>126</sup> Jerome dedicated a huge number of his works to women, and advised friends that they could obtain copies of his books from Marcella and Fabiola.<sup>127</sup> The theologian Origen was patronised by a wealthy virgin called Juliana: Palladius wrote that he found a note in Origen’s hand inside an old book of verses that read “I [Origen] found this book among the things of Juliana the virgin in Caesarea when I was hidden by her. She used to say that she had it from Symmachus himself, the translator of the Jews.”<sup>128</sup>

It is through letter-writing that we can build the clearest picture of such patron-client relationships. ‘Men of letters’ frequently wrote to people they did not know well in search of

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<sup>123</sup> Augustine: Conybeare 2005; Tilley 2005; Kamimura 2019. Jerome: Cain 2009; Moretti 2014; Cain 2017; Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.35-37 and p.47 on letters to women by John Chrysostom, Severus of Antioch, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Informal study circles around Jerome and Augustine: Dean 2012, pp.172-173.

<sup>124</sup> E.g. Vessey 1993; and the “dialogue” on Augustine’s correspondence with women in Conybeare 2005 and Vessey 2005. Vessey (2005, pp.82-83) notes that elite people may have had little occasion to actually write or read a letter, as they had educated slaves to do that for them. Literacy was more about engagement with intellectual culture. Moretti argues that the multilingualism of women in the correspondence of Jerome (several of them are said to be proficient in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) is more than just a literary *topos* as language skills were common among the elite, and should be taken seriously as the tools necessary to study Scripture and appreciate the work of Jerome himself (Moretti 2014).

<sup>125</sup> On Jerome constructing a literary self-portrait through his letters, see Moretti 2014, p.283. On letter collections as literary genre see Sogno, Storin, and Watts 2017.

<sup>126</sup> This is dealt with in detail in Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.33-37.

<sup>127</sup> Haines-Eitzen records the following works as among those dedicated to Paula, Eustochium and/or Marcella: Vulgate translations of the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the Twelve Minor Prophets; translations from the Septuagint of Job, Psalms, Books of Solomon; and commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians, Philemon, Titus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Haggai. He also prefaced his commentary on Zephaniah (addressed to Paula and Eustochium) by saying that there have been numerous virtuous women throughout history who “demand complete books” (2011, p.35). Books to be borrowed from Marcella (*Letter* 47, 49) and from Fabiola (*Letter* 126.2) (Haines-Eitzen 2011, p.33).

<sup>128</sup> Haines-Eitzen 2011, p.34; *Lausiac History* 64, a similar story appears in Eusebius *HE* 6.17.

patronage; epistolary communication did not always indicate a close personal relationship.<sup>129</sup> Letters written by churchmen to women are commonly analysed for their theological content alone, however Anne Kurdock has convincingly argued that these men were often seeking patronage from aristocratic and influential women.<sup>130</sup> Her analysis of letters written to the virgin Demetrias by Jerome, Augustine, and Pelagius have revealed clear intentions beyond merely giving advice. Kurdock has shown that when we situate Demetrias in the context of the powerful *gens Anicia*, her mother Anicia Juliana, and her grandmother Anicia Faltonia Proba, the power dynamic between writer and recipient shifts dramatically.<sup>131</sup> Each man had an agenda in writing to Demetrias: Pelagius hoped to garner support for his doctrines, Jerome was worried about his finances and his reputation, and both Augustine and Jerome were concerned about Pelagius. Each was also careful to declare that they had been invited to write to Demetrias, so as to deflect the charge of flattery. Their rivalry comes to the fore as they jostle for position, each hoping to benefit from what Kurdock calls “a powerful concentration of female agency”.<sup>132</sup>

The women meanwhile gained prestige from their relationships with prominent thinkers, while commissioning texts to celebrate Demetrias’ virginity also advertised the religious importance of the family. Demetrias’ dedication took place in 413, in the wake of her family’s flight from Rome to North Africa. There is rich evidence for the Anicii erecting statues in Rome in the years leading up to the sack, but now far from the city, the women chose to exercise their patronage and express their status in new ways. What had been traditionally achieved through public monuments could now be attained through text. Elite women therefore played an

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<sup>129</sup> Clark 1992, pp.16-17.

<sup>130</sup> Kurdock 2007, p.191. Cain argues that one of Jerome’s letter collections was specifically compiled to insinuate himself into Marcella’s aristocratic circle (2017).

<sup>131</sup> Kurdock 2007.

<sup>132</sup> Kurdock 2007, p.213.

important role in the production and dissemination of religious literature, a process that was stimulated by the formation of study circles and epistolary relationships.

The volume of texts written to or for women also opens the question of women as readers. In a letter describing the library of a friend's villa, Sidonius states that the books were so arranged "that the manuscripts near the ladies' seats were of a devotional type", while near the chairs of the men were works "distinguished by the grandeur of Latin eloquence".<sup>133</sup> The women's dedicated spaces in the library implies that they were expected to spend a significant amount of time there, and that religious texts were particularly appropriate. Kim Haines-Eitzen has shown that although there was occasionally ambivalence towards books as part ascetic practice, we can identify the emergence of the ideal of the woman reader, in which intensive periods of reading became a form of bodily discipline.<sup>134</sup> Jerome advised Eustochium to read until the point of exhaustion, while Gregory of Nyssa in his *Life of Macrina* emphasised her childhood spent reading the Psalms.<sup>135</sup> Melania the Elder supposedly consumed huge amounts of literature, including three million lines of Origen and two and a half million lines of other religious writers, re-reading many works and studying them closely. Palladius stated that "thanks to those books – by good hopes she transformed herself into a spiritual bird and so made the journey to Christ."<sup>136</sup> Gerontius described Melania the Younger's "overwhelming" love of learning, how she not only read the Old and New Testaments multiple times a year, but also copied and distributed them.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris *Letter* 2.9.4, AD 461-467. Trans. Anderson 1936, p.453.

<sup>134</sup> Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.39-52. Book were luxury objects and therefore possession of them could be argued to be at odds with ascetic practice (p.41).

<sup>135</sup> Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp. 46, 48; Jerome *Letter* 22.17 "Read often and learn all you can. Let sleep steal upon you with a book in your hand, and let the sacred page catch your drooping head." (trans. Wright 1933, p.87); Gregory of Nyssa *Life of Macrina*, 3.

<sup>136</sup> Peterson 1994, p.30; Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.48-49; Palladius *Lausiaca History* 55.3, trans. Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.48-49.

<sup>137</sup> Haines-Eitzen 2011, pp.49-50; Gerontius *Life of Melania* 26.

In the centuries that followed, the prodigious consumption of texts by young would-be saints would become a hagiographical trope.<sup>138</sup> Long periods of reading were also connected to fasting: in Ambrose's treaty on virginity written to Marcellina, he praised her long periods of fasting during which she was constantly reading.<sup>139</sup> The ascetic woman reader used books to free herself from worldly distractions, disciplining both her body and soul. While the reading habits of these women are extreme and need not be understood entirely literally, feminine piety and rigorous religious practice were evidently closely connected to texts.

Surviving texts written by women also indicate that they could derive substantial interpersonal authority from roles within ascetic communities and intimate knowledge of religious texts. A letter from c.400 which survives in the Codex Sangallensis 190 (c.800) was written from one learned virgin to another, perhaps in Spain, and was part of a larger body of epistolary exchange which unfortunately does not survive.<sup>140</sup> Near the beginning, the writer eloquently protests her inability to match the religious erudition of the recipient:

*Indeed, how can I answer you, or, whence can I grasp the words to speak? For in the discourse of your letter you have embraced in such a manner the total body of Scripture that you have left nothing for me to say.*<sup>141</sup>

She continues that the very heart of her addressee is bound by the Testament, and that inside it she has amassed an "entire library of books". The letter proceeds to discuss virginity, in

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<sup>138</sup> Davies 2013, pp.158-159.

<sup>139</sup> Haines-Eitzen 2011, p.49; *On Virginity* 3.4.15.

<sup>140</sup> Mathisen 2003, pp.160-164, with translation. See also Morin 1928 for the original publication and suggestions about authorship, and Burrus and Keefer 2000 for comments on Morin's arguments and an English translation of another letter found alongside it. This was also probably written by a woman, who addresses her correspondent as "a woman trained in priestly doctrine" (trans. Burrus and Keefer 2000, p.333).

<sup>141</sup> Mathisen 2003, p.161.

particular in relation to the author's conception of virginity as a creative process in which one could seek learning and achieve a closer relationship to religious knowledge. The passage is worth quoting in full:

*I certainly know why the prophet said, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive in her womb and bear a son." You can freely proclaim, "I have conceived in my womb, Lord, and I have given birth to the spirit of your salvation that you have made over the earth." You have given birth to the word of God, you have delivered His discourse, thus you are in labour with the knowledge of God for us, so that you are always magnified and pregnant in yourself. Let them know, those who doubt, how a virgin can conceive and how she can give birth. And let them read your writings, because here is the undefiled fecundity of the virgin birth.<sup>142</sup>*

The writings of this learned virgin gained authority from her religious status, her special relationship with God, and no doubt also from her intimate knowledge of Scripture. The writer of the letter bemoaned that her own virginity was not equally enriched by knowledge, despite the fact that her letter is replete with erudite scriptural references.<sup>143</sup> The letter makes clear not only that these women were learned in religious matters and carried on an epistolary relationship on theology, but that also the addressee composed theological writings that were read and appreciated by other women. At the end of the letter the writer implores her correspondent to help her develop her religious knowledge that she will be impressed the next time she comes to visit her, thus providing us a tantalising glimpse of women's study circles.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Mathisen 2003, p.162.

<sup>143</sup> Mathisen identifies references to both canonical and apocryphal writings (2003, pp.160-164).

<sup>144</sup> Mathisen 2003, p.164.

The manuscript in which this letter was found also contains a fragment of Baudonivia's *Life of Radegund*, written around the turn of the seventh century.<sup>145</sup> The sixth-century Frankish Queen Radegund had founded a convent in Poitiers in which Baudonivia was a nun.<sup>146</sup> Radegund herself composed poetry, of which three epistolary poems survive: one written to her cousin, one to her nephew, and one to the emperor Justin and the empress Sophia, who had sent her relics of the True Cross.<sup>147</sup> When Radegund set up her monastery she also corresponded with Caesaria of Arles, requesting that the abbess send her the Rule that Caesarius of Arles had earlier written for her predecessor, his sister (also called Caesaria).<sup>148</sup> The intertwined lives of these learned religious women illustrate how authority was mediated through the composition and dissemination of texts, and reveal the potential for women to lead vibrant intellectual lives with minimal involvement from men. Nor was letter-writing limited to virgins and abbesses: official diplomatic letters of imperial and royal women from east and west attest to their role in court politics. While Julia Hillner has shown that these letters – and those of men with which they were sent – were probably drafted by officials trained for the task, the fact that they were ‘signed by’ or attributed to these women demonstrates a new visibility for imperial/royal women and their importance for court rhetoric.<sup>149</sup>

While there is no indication that Veneranda, Cerula, or Bitalia were dedicated virgins, the learned female monastic is present in visual culture. A wall-painting from a chapel at the

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<sup>145</sup> Burrus and Keefer 2000, p.330. Another life of Radegund was written before this by her friend and confessor Venantius Fortunatus.

<sup>146</sup> McNamara 1992, p.61. (Chapter 4 on Radegund, including English translations of the lives of Radegund by both Fortunatus and Baudonivia).

<sup>147</sup> Justinian and Sophia: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/916.html>; Amalfred: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/947.html>; Artachis: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/917.html>. These poems have been attributed to Fortunatus, but since we know she wrote poetry (Radegund and Fortunatus exchanged poems, but only his survive from that relationship), and she inscribes her names in these, her authorship is likely (against her authorship see Hillner 2019). Another letter attributed to her is addressed to a group of bishops, declaring her intention to assist some women establish a monastery: <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/914.html> (all accessed 12/12/2020).

<sup>148</sup> <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/letter/915.html>

<sup>149</sup> Hillner 2019.

monastery of Bawit in Egypt dating from the sixth to eighth centuries, depicts a woman called Ama Rachel among a series of monastic and religious figures (Fig 3.15).<sup>150</sup> She is shown holding a jewel-encrusted book, surely a representation of a holy text. A painted architectural relief sculpture from a similar period found at the women's monastic community at Atriye, part of the White Monastery Federation, depicts an unidentified female monastic alongside eight monks (Fig 3.16).<sup>151</sup> She alone of the surviving figures is shown holding a book, her other hand held in a gesture either of speaking or benediction. Both of these examples come from the sites of double monasteries and therefore probably represent figures of authority within the women's communities.<sup>152</sup> The attribute of the book, a religious text, was considered appropriate to express the authority of these women over their sisters and justify their place in the monastic hierarchy alongside men. In the case of Ama Rachel her book also goes beyond being a mere symbol, as in the adjacent room a small cupboard was found containing fragments of papyrus.<sup>153</sup> If this was used to store important texts it seems likely access would have been controlled by figures like Ama Rachel herself. The emergence of monastic communities in Late Antiquity provided a new homosocial environment in which women could develop Christian intellectual identities, engage in literary culture, and use learning to assert their status both within and beyond the monastery walls. In the following centuries, women's monasteries would remain a bastion of women's intellectualism and literature.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> P4.

<sup>151</sup> Misc9.

<sup>152</sup> I believe the complex at Bawit containing the Ama Rachel fresco relates directly to the female community there, as she is identified as "mother of the monastery", and there is a large amount of graffiti written by women and mentioning women's names. Maspero and Drioton (1931, p.VI) considered this complex to be a convent but this has not been accepted by all (e.g. Rapp 2011, p.41).

<sup>153</sup> Unfortunately the cupboard had already been looted by the time it was excavated, but also contained the remains of a bronze utensil and a slice of molten silver (Maspero and Drioton 1931, p.XIV, see Plate LV).

<sup>154</sup> See e.g. Vollendorf 2005, pp.431-437 on Spanish convents. Stevenson's anthology is also brimming with monastics.

It is thus easy to see the attraction for women of being memorialised as learned in Scripture. Religious education was conceived of as a route to salvation, perhaps best summed up by Melania the Elder's "journey to Christ" through her books and Veneranda's progress to Paradise through her scrolls. Religious erudition also brought women authority, and this authority could be exercised particularly effectively within all-female communities. Just as the anonymous virgin used her letter to claim an intellectual identity and its attendant prestige for herself and her recipient, so too do the funerary portraits of our women. Cerula's tomb constructs her as a social powerhouse: it covers a whole wall with high-quality paintings, larger than all the other tombs in the area. Shown in the company of Peter and Paul and with the gospels literally at her fingertips, Cerula stakes her claim to religious authority. Bitalia's tomb is smaller and poorer quality, but connected to Cerula's through its position and mimicry of her iconography. Perhaps the women knew each other, and, as in the letter, one sought the other as a teacher or role model. Even if they never met, the memory of a woman like Cerula may have been sufficient to encourage her emulation by future generations.

#### 3.4.4 'Non-Elite' Women

In the previous sections we have primarily considered evidence for the intellectual cultivation of elite women. Literary sources in particular are dominated by senatorial matrons, abbesses, and royal and imperial figures. The archaeological and epigraphic sources, however, have revealed diversity beyond the aristocracy. While Cerula, for example, was clearly wealthy, in reality we know little about her social status, and while Bitalia was certainly not poor, she was not on the same socio-economic level as Cerula. Gold-glass could probably be purchased by



people of middling social status, while large silver items were only within reach of the rich.<sup>155</sup> Looking at the epigraphic material, we know that women like Constantina and Fabia Aconia Paulina emanated from the highest social ranks, but little is known to us about Constantia, Serena, or Taurina. While these women were wealthy enough to be educated and commission an inscription, it seems unlikely that they reached the dizzying heights of the senatorial aristocracy or imperial family. In this section, I consider the involvement specifically of ‘non-elite’ women in literary culture, women who lacked the considerable economic and social privileges of many of those discussed thus far. The issue of status is important because it raises questions about the use of attributes of learning on objects that were relatively less expensive – like gold-glass – and therefore available beyond the elite. There is a tendency in scholarship to understand these people as staking a claim to basic literacy rather than learnedness.<sup>156</sup> Literacy is in turn seen as an indication of wealth, and scrolls and books therefore become symbols of economic power rather than intellectual cultivation. This approach not only oversimplifies literacy as a concept, but also fails to consider why such attributes were so popular if they functioned merely as accessories like jewellery or fine clothes.

The equation of attributes of learning with literacy and money rather than intellectual cultivation hits women the hardest as they are considered least likely to receive an education. In general, women had lower levels of literacy than men: in poorer families educational opportunities were offered first to boys, who could use them to earn money and improve the family’s prospects. It is widely assumed that for women, education and involvement in literary circles was a route only open to the rich, the families with enough money to educate not just

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<sup>155</sup> The debate on gold-glass is ongoing. Howells argues that no great level of technical skill was required to make them and that therefore they may not represent high-status objects (2015, pp.51-52). Susan Walker, however, asserts that while not as expensive as silver or ivory, gold-glass was still costly, perhaps only within reach of senior servants of the imperial family (Walker ed. 2017, pp.84-86).

<sup>156</sup> Howells 2015, pp.117, 119, 128.

sons but daughters as well. Women of poorer, but still affluent families, might only gain the sort of basic competencies described by Hemelrijk. The number of women with a truly high level of intellectual cultivation is thus commonly taken to be more or less those we hear about in the literary sources, the *crème-de-la-crème* of the social elite. While the women on gold-glasses might be literate, within this framework they are denied any claim to being learned. This section will examine the methodological difficulties of understanding attributes of learning in this way and ask if women of lower social status could have conceived of themselves as intellectually cultivated. I will argue that our way of thinking about status, education, and learning is flawed: definitions of literacy and illiteracy were more fluid than we allow for, and being knowledgeable was not necessarily tied to gaining that knowledge through the same means as the wealthy. If we view intellectual cultivation as a relative quality, instead of comparing everyone to the aristocratic and imperial elites, we need not deny ordinary women the claims to learnedness that they so clearly desired.

A key concern here is the relationship between literacy, education, and intellectual cultivation: what was the difference between a person that was literate, and one that was learned? In the ancient world there was no clean binary divide even between ‘illiterate’ and ‘literate’.<sup>157</sup> The curious case of *P.Oxy* 33.2673 (AD 304) illustrates this well. The *lector* of a church near Oxyrhynchus did not sign this letter himself, but employed an illiteracy formula that declared someone else had signed for him.<sup>158</sup> How a man with an official position as a *lector* was unable to sign his name has caused significant confusion: scholars have argued he knew Coptic but not Greek, that he feigned illiteracy for the benefit of the authorities, that he could read but not write, or that he had only minimal reading skills and functioned as a *lector* in a limited capacity

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<sup>157</sup> See, e.g., the discussion in Harris 1991, pp.3-7, in particular p. 5 on ‘semi-literates’; Hanson 1991 on illiteracy.

<sup>158</sup> Blumell 2012, pp.184-186.

through memorisation.<sup>159</sup> Whatever the truth, the ability to use texts was more complicated than simply being wealthy enough to read and write. This is related to the fact that education was highly dependent on individual circumstance, both for boys and girls. In his study of Christian literacy at Oxyrhynchus, Blumell shows that even for boys, the tripartite system of education was not as well-structured as is often implied: there was no fixed curriculum, no fixed ages at which one took part, and no requirement to complete all three stages.<sup>160</sup> Even individuals that had access to the traditional ‘official’ modes of education could achieve wildly different levels of literacy. A significant amount of religious education also took place outside of the classroom entirely and had little relation to the ability to read for oneself. People learned from their parents, received oral instruction as catechumens and at church services, and were exposed to monasteries that held libraries of religious texts. The laity could be scripturally literate whether or not they actually had the ability to read or write.<sup>161</sup> The same was true of non-Christian culture: one did not have to have read Homer or Virgil in order to understand classical mythology when one could be exposed to it through oral performance and public art.<sup>162</sup>

If the concept of literacy was fluid, by extension the idea of learnedness was probably more complicated than we currently recognize. Knowledge, literacy, education, and intellectual cultivation were relative achievements, and not necessarily tied directly to the ability to read or write. The fact that few women (or men, for that matter) ascended to the intellectual heights of the women famous in our literary sources is in many ways irrelevant for our consideration of this material. It is unlikely that women of the middling ranks of late antique society

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<sup>159</sup> Blumell 2012, pp.185-186 for a summary of these arguments.

<sup>160</sup> Blumell 2012, pp.187-188.

<sup>161</sup> Blumell 2012, pp.197-207, esp. p.204.

<sup>162</sup> Agosti 2010, pp.175-178 on oral performance of epigraphic verse as a tool to perpetuate *paideia*. See also Rousselle 2001 on images and education in the second and third centuries, and Prescendi 2010 on the transmission of religious knowledge through stories and religious practice.

compared their intellectual capabilities to the Melanias or Probas of their world, and thus it seems unfair that we ought to do so. If we are to move forward, we should investigate how such women may have conceived of their own intellectual cultivation, and what opportunities they had to exercise it. There was clearly an attraction for women of middle or upper-middle social status to see themselves depicted as learned in ways that emulated elite women. The iconography of the learned woman is remarkably consistent across media: the well-dressed woman holding a scroll looks almost identical on gold-glasses as she does on the Projecta Casket, the Hoxne Pepper Pot, or the marble bust portrait in the Metropolitan Museum. The shape of the Projecta Casket is similar to that of another of the same period made from wood and bone, its panels cut in intaglio and filled with red and black wax.<sup>163</sup> The casket only survives in panels, but of the three that we have, two of them show a woman holding a scroll. A similar fragmentary panel, perhaps from another similar casket, depicts a comparable scene, and another may show a woman reaching into a scroll box.<sup>164</sup> We cannot know anything about the women who owned these caskets, but their more modest materials suggests that they were less expensive than their silver counterparts, and therefore perhaps belonged to women of less financial means.

One woman we can know more about is Bassilla, a mime actress whose funerary stela was set up in Aquileia in the third century (Fig 3.17).<sup>165</sup> Bassilla is shown in bust form above the inscription, with her right arm wrapped in a *himation* and held across her chest in the speaking pose. The stele was dedicated by a fellow mime actor called Heraclides on behalf of the wider community. In the inscription he lauds Bassilla as a talented and well-known performer and “the tenth Muse”.<sup>166</sup> Bassilla was proud of her profession and the intention of the portrait and

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<sup>163</sup> Misc1.

<sup>164</sup> Misc2; Misc3.

<sup>165</sup> See Webb 2002, appendix for text and translation.

<sup>166</sup> Webb 2002, appendix; Prauscello 2004.

inscription was to hail her as an intellectually cultivated woman, in which her erudition was directly linked to her status as a performer. This might appear surprising since mimes were known for their risqué themes, with surviving scripts indicating that female actors were commonly involved in scenes of adultery.<sup>167</sup> The status of female performers in society was unstable: while some could earn considerable amounts of money, or even become empress in the famous case of Theodora, many were socially vulnerable.<sup>168</sup> Sources of work could be unsteady and most performers were of a low social status.<sup>169</sup> Churchmen often described female performers as little better than sex workers, disapproving of theatrical entertainment that commonly employed mythological or sexual themes.<sup>170</sup> Saint Pelagia was also mime actress, but her status as a performer blurs in sources with that of a prostitute.<sup>171</sup>

Other evidence, including Bassilla's stele, makes clear that the views of churchmen were heavily partisan. Performers were often highly trained and could be valuable members of their communities. Funerary inscriptions from the imperial period describe actresses with terms such as *docta* and *erodita*, while a law of 380 from the Theodosian Code decreed that any man guilty of abducting a female performer and thus preventing her from fulfilling her public duties would be fined the substantial sum of five pounds of gold.<sup>172</sup> Acting was also made an obligatory profession in the fourth century, which forced the children of actors to become actors themselves. This testifies to the need for people to fulfil these vital roles, a restriction that was also placed on professions like bakers.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Rutschowskaya 2000, p.241; Webb 2002, pp.288-289 on *P.Oxy.* 413 (first or second century AD), which preserved a partial script for an adultery mime, and another plot with a prominent female role.

<sup>168</sup> Webb 2008, pp.4-7; Procopius *Secret History* 9.20-22 on Theodora's scandalous performances as Leda.

<sup>169</sup> Webb 2002, pp.293-294; Webb 2008, pp.47-49.

<sup>170</sup> Webb 2002, pp.296-299; Webb 2008, pp. 49-55.

<sup>171</sup> Webb 2002, pp.287-289; Mazzo Karras 1990, pp.13-15.

<sup>172</sup> Webb 2002, p.292; Webb 2008, p.55; Theodosian Code 15.7.5.

<sup>173</sup> Webb 2008, pp.46-47. An inscription from Rome references a *Sociae Mimae*, or an organised community of female performers, but the inscription is undated (Webb 2002, p.291).

The social status of women like Bassilla was therefore precarious: it is highly unlikely she belonged to an affluent family or received much formal education, yet she trained as a performer and received support and respect from her community. Her community considered that their profession conferred upon them status and that in large part this derived from their cultivated skill and erudition. Heraclides describes himself as “skilled in speaking”, while Bassilla is a Muse shown in the speaking pose. This attests to the importance of oral performance for those with limited access to traditional education. The newly popular visual attributes of learning were considered entirely applicable to Bassilla, despite her social background. Nor were Bassilla and Heraclides unique in their claims: the sarcophagus one M. Sempronius Nicocrates – a self-proclaimed poet and lyre-player turned pimp – is covered with imagery of Muses and philosophers.<sup>174</sup> The example of Bassilla demonstrates that professional opportunities allowed some non-elite women to conceive of themselves as cultivated and be conceived of as such by others. Yet Bassilla’s stele is exceptional in the contextual evidence it provides alongside her image. The rest of this section will examine more wide-ranging evidence for the involvement of non-elite women in literary culture, so we can better assess if women of middling and lower social status could credibly stake a claim to intellectual cultivation. The nature of the evidence means much of this centres around texts, however Bassilla’s example reminds us that not all learning needed to be derived from reading and writing.

Just as senatorial women developed epistolary relationships with famous churchmen, so we find in the papyrological record that ordinary women engaged in similar practices. In their collection of women’s letters from Egypt, Bagnall and Cribiore record more than fifteen letters

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<sup>174</sup> Late third to early fourth century, British Museum 1805,0703.152. Hansen 2008, p.279.

written by women to clergy or holy men.<sup>175</sup> Many of these concern requests, for example a nun called Maria asked the anchorite Apa Kyriakos to remember her in his prayers, while a widow called Leuchis appealed to Apa John to intercede for her to remove Goths that were billeted on her house.<sup>176</sup> In one heart-breaking letter, a woman called Esther asked a holy man for help as all her children had died. She apparently thought she might be doing something “unfitting”, and requested that the holy man send her a rule to live by so that she need not grieve more children.<sup>177</sup> While humbler in nature, the letter is not dissimilar to those requests made to Jerome or Augustine on how to live as a good Christian virgin or widow. Another fragmentary letter also attests to an extended epistolary exchange, as the surviving part records a woman’s joy at receiving a previous letter from an unknown holy man.<sup>178</sup> The verbs she uses to describe her delight are rare, the only other place they appear is in the *magnificat* in Luke 1:46-47, suggesting that the writer was making a learned scriptural allusion.<sup>179</sup> The quality of the hand that wrote the letter is also exceptional to the level of appearing professional, and if the female sender were also the writer, might suggest the presence of a Christian female scribe.<sup>180</sup>

Women and girls are known to have been involved in book production and copying. Haines-Eitzen has traced the evidence for them working as calligraphers and scribes from the famous statement by Eusebius that Ambrose provided Origen with shorthand writers, copyists, and “girls trained in beautiful writing”.<sup>181</sup> She argues persuasively that this statement, combined with a Roman tradition of women scribes, mentions of Melania the Younger as a copyist, and claims that Abbess Caesaria of Arles trained her virgins to “beautifully copy out the holy

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<sup>175</sup> Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, letters 78-92, plus others scattered in other places through the corpus.

<sup>176</sup> Maria: *O.Brit.Mus.Copt.* add. 23, Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 79 (sixth – eighth century); Leuchis: *P.Herm.* 17, Letter 86 (c. AD 380).

<sup>177</sup> *O.Mon.Epiph.* 194, Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 125 (sixth – eighth century).

<sup>178</sup> *P.Oxy.* 12.1592, Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, Letter 90 (third or fourth century).

<sup>179</sup> Blumell 2012, p.222.

<sup>180</sup> Blumell 2012, p.182. See also notes of Bagnall and Cribiore 2006.

<sup>181</sup> Haines-Eitzen 1998; Eusebius *HE* 6.23.

books”, lends credibility to the suggestion that some of our earliest Christian manuscripts may have been made by women.<sup>182</sup> Recent archaeological evidence from a later period supports this conclusion: traces of lapis lazuli pigment found preserved in the dental calculus of an eleventh or twelfth century German nun led to the suggestion that she was involved in the production of illuminated manuscripts. The pigment would have been introduced to her mouth through repeatedly licking her brush to create a fine point.<sup>183</sup> In a fascinating but heavily damaged letter from the archive of an Egyptian monastery, some monks wrote to a woman about a book they had ordered, apparently wanting it to be sent quickly. Unfortunately, the context of the letter gives no more information about how the woman was involved in the book’s production or sale.<sup>184</sup>

Women as consumers of texts are also attested. One fourth-century letter preserves a glimpse of women lending each other books:

*To my dearest lady sister in the Lord, greeting. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the little Genesis. Farewell from us in God.*<sup>185</sup>

Lending and borrowing among friends was likely common, since books were expensive objects. Another text informs us of the case of a virgin who was accused of stealing Christian books rather than borrowing them.<sup>186</sup> Roger Bagnall has argued that a woman from

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<sup>182</sup> Haines Eitzen 1998, p.645; *Life of Caesarius* 1.58, trans. Klingshirn 1994, p.39 (again here it refers to the younger Caesaria, successor to Caesarius’ sister of the same name).

<sup>183</sup> Radini et al. 2019.

<sup>184</sup> Wilfong 2002a, p.112. *O.Mon.Epiph.* 388.

<sup>185</sup> *P.Oxy.* 63.4365. Trans. Rowlandson 1998, p.78. Blumell considers that the Ezra refers to one of the pseudepigraphical books published in his name, rather than the book of Ezra that appears in the Bible. The “little Genesis” might be a miniature codex or the Book of Jubilees, which was referred to as such by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 39.6.1) (Blumell 2012, pp.169-170).

<sup>186</sup> *P.Lips* 43, Rowlandson 1998, pp.77-78. The arbitration on the case concludes that if the heirs cannot produce any witnesses that saw Thaesis commit the crime, then she will receive half the goods within the house of Besarion as long as she swears an oath that she has not stolen the books.



Oxyrhynchus called Aurelia Ptolemais was the owner of a collection of literary papyri that included fragments of the *Iliad*, the “History of Sikyon”, and the *Kestoi* of Julius Africanus.<sup>187</sup> Contextual information about the family records that Aurelia Ptolemais’ dowry had consisted of four talents and a female slave, indicating that her family was well-off, but by no means part of the aristocracy.<sup>188</sup> Women of relatively modest backgrounds could therefore still have significant access to literary worlds as correspondents of holy men, or as producers or owners of texts.

The practice of dedicating elevated verse funerary inscriptions was also engaged in by non-elites, despite the assumption that only a small number of people could understand them. Trout has argued that in Late Antiquity reading and writing poetry was not just a pastime for the wealthy, but a method of “action and public posturing” across the social spectrum.<sup>189</sup> The relatively modest funerary epigram of a woman called Theodora Afrodite from the cemetery of Saint Agnes in Rome, for example, and that from a sarcophagus for a woman called Bassa, were both ambitious acrostic poems.<sup>190</sup> Trout’s careful analysis reveals both texts to be competent metrical constructions. Bassa’s epigram makes allusions to earlier literature such as Statius and Virgil, and even lifts a phrase almost entirely from Pope Damasus’ elegy for the martyrs Felicissimus and Agapitus. The combination of Christian and classical texts attests to the literary culture and poetic sensibilities of people living at an almost certainly sub-elite level.<sup>191</sup> Theodora’s epigram describes how her exemplary manner of living “paved a pathway

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<sup>187</sup> Bagnall 1992 (Late third century).

<sup>188</sup> Bagnall 1992, pp.138-139. If Bagnall is correct, then she was also able to lease out land, probably flax land, for a good rent. Bagnall’s arguments for identification are persuasive, however if he were incorrect this would only mean there were two women living in Oxyrhynchus in the late third century with the same name who separately owned literary papyri.

<sup>189</sup> Trout 2013, p.11, and Trout 2014.

<sup>190</sup> Trout 2013, pp.5-11.

<sup>191</sup> Trout 2013, pp.10-11. While Trout acknowledges that such commissions necessitated some financial means, evidence from sarcophagi shows that the majority of patrons came from a diverse group of backgrounds below senatorial level, from clergy to civic and military functionaries and artisans (Trout 2014, p.218). From a corpus of 310 Christian sarcophagi in Rome, only 46 were linked to senators (Dresken-Weiland 2004).

to the stars” to join Christ. She is also proclaimed “an excellent guardian of the law and teacher of the faith” and apparently “surrendered her noble mind to the saints through the ages.”<sup>192</sup> Theodora was learned in her religion, a fact supported by what Trout calls “dexterous hexameters” and a dense poetic structure that uses complicated techniques and literary allusions.<sup>193</sup> This epigram was erected by Theodora’s husband and thus we must be sensitive to the possibility that it may reflect only his desires for her representation. However, in light of the evidence above there is little reason to believe that non-elite women like Theodora were any less engaged and enamored with literary culture than their wealthier sisters.<sup>194</sup> Kate Cooper has suggested that for the senatorial classes, depicting oneself with books or scrolls signaled involvement in a cultured lifestyle that established “moral title” to wealth.<sup>195</sup> This facet of learnedness may have been aspirational for non-elites, who could have used intellectual cultivation in a similar way, to defend their claims to their place in society and advocate for a move upwards. While the notion of *paideia* has been understood to express and enforce social distance,<sup>196</sup> it is possible that learnedness was used as a tool by people of middling social status to align themselves more closely to the elite.

The commemorations of Theodora Afrodite and Bassilla are quite similar: both women were of non-elite status and it is unlikely that either had access to the traditional mechanisms of elite male education, less the wealth and social prestige that marked out famous learned women from literary sources. Yet in their own ways, they were cultivated individuals. Bassilla was portrayed as a skilled artist and speaker, while Theodora was hailed as a guardian of law and teacher of faith. The men who set up these relatively modest monuments clearly thought it

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<sup>192</sup> Trout 2013, p.6.

<sup>193</sup> Trout 2013, pp.5-7.

<sup>194</sup> Trout 2013, p.24.

<sup>195</sup> Cooper 2007a, pp.59-60.

<sup>196</sup> Brown 1992, p.39 on *paideia* and social distance.

appropriate to commemorate them with visual and textual motifs that testified to their learned status, and there is no reason to think that this opinion would not have been shared by the women themselves. They may have even been involved in designing the monument before their deaths.<sup>197</sup> Far from blindly copying the motifs of the rich, women from varying social backgrounds and levels of education sincerely engaged with the popular ‘cult of learning’ and used it in their self-representation. We should therefore not be dismissive of the use of attributes of learning in contexts that indicate sub-elite ownership.

### 3.5 Conclusions

Representing women as learned was one of the single most popular ways of depicting women in Late Antiquity. While some scholarship has questioned the legitimacy or sincerity of the use of learned motifs, this chapter has demonstrated that they need to be taken seriously as claims to intellectual virtues. I do not contend that every woman depicted holding a scroll or with her hand in the speaking pose received a high level of education or had literary ambitions. Rather, I argue that they indicate a desire to participate in a broader ‘cult of learning’ that had much wider implications. In a broad sense, intellectual virtues were valuable attributes for daughters, mothers, and wives, as they expressed a sense of self-control and moral discipline. The intellectual climate of Late Antiquity also meant that women who desired to take this further had greater opportunities to engage with literary culture: new literary genres were emerging that had yet to be defined by gendered authorship, and Christian holy men represented a new category of socially acceptable epistolary correspondent. Nor were these opportunities limited

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<sup>197</sup> There is evidence from wills that it was common practice for those with money and foresight to leave detailed instructions for their funerary monument, including the inscription (Carroll 2006, pp.40-44; Hope 2007, pp.63-70).

to elite women: intellectual virtues were prized by professionals and women of middling status who had little access to traditional education. They remind us that more flexible understandings of what it meant to be a learned person are necessary in order to better comprehend the diverse intellectual landscape of our period.

It is the emergence of Christianity that perhaps represents the greatest change for women's intellectual opportunities moving through Late Antiquity and into the Middle Ages. This was not because the new religion valued women's education particularly highly or considered women more capable intellectually. Rather, the rise of Christianity saw literature and education tied to religion as never before. Christianity was rooted in textual culture in a way that paganism was not and systems of education became steadily more attached to religious themes and institutions.<sup>198</sup> Religion had always been a sphere of life that was relatively open to women and piety a highly desirable feminine trait. The social acceptability of women's engagement in religious education as a route to morality and ultimately salvation opened the doors to women of a range of backgrounds who might have otherwise been denied an education. With religious education – in whatever form it took – came opportunities to claim the moral and intellectual authority it supplied. More specifically, the emergence of all-female communities in the form of monasteries created new spaces in which women could explore their intellectual identities and use them to form internal hierarchies. While representations of learned women were varied in context during the fourth century, by the sixth century such depictions are solely concerned with demonstrating an unequivocally Christian erudition. Cerula, Bitalia, and Ama Rachel are all explicit in the relationship between learning and religious authority. What had in the third and fourth centuries indicated participation in a broad-based 'cult of learning' was by the sixth century confined to Christian scripture.

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<sup>198</sup> See Larsen and Rubenson eds. 2018 on monasteries and education.

## Chapter 4

### Daughters, Wives, Mothers, Widows, and Ascetics

#### 4.1 Introduction

Sometime in the sixth century, someone in the short-lived late antique city of Justiniana Prima drew a crude image of a family on a brick (Fig 4.1).<sup>1</sup> Although now fragmentary, the core of the image remains clear: a couple flank their small child, all three in the *orans* pose. What is fascinating about this graffito-portrait is that it looks strikingly similar to family depictions from elsewhere in the late antique world. The depiction of the nuclear family grouped together in just this manner is found from gold-glass to wall-paintings. In the previous two chapters, we examined the expression of personal qualities: beauty and intellectual refinement. Yet through these analyses we also met the multitude of other actors involved in the negotiation of these facets of individual identity, from the slaves who attended their mistress or master at the baths to the parents who taught their children. This highlights the fact that individual identity was often dependent upon, and subordinated to, life stage and relationships with others. Whoever incised the graffito from Justiniana Prima chose not to depict themselves as an individual, but as part of a family group.

Scholars frequently comment on the prominence of familial relationships in ancient women's identities. It is commonplace to remark that women were primarily identified as somebody's

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<sup>1</sup> Misc10. Identified with the modern site of Caričin Grad, the city was founded by Justinian and probably abandoned in the early seventh century. On the site see Kondić and Popović 1977; Duval and Popović eds 1984; Bavant, Kondić and Spieser eds. 1990; Snively 2001; Ivanišević 2017.

daughter, wife or mother, and by implication that their identity was not their own, but instead invested in the status of a man.<sup>2</sup> Relational identity is often not understood as ‘real’ identity, but a consolation prize for people without access to more concrete identifiers linked to profession or position. While most women’s personal feelings about marriage or childbearing were indeed subordinated to the desires of family and community, in order to understand the complexities of womanhood we must appreciate the enormous impact of life stages and relational identities. The status of ‘woman’ was not monolithic or static: the experience and expectations of a young girl, a new wife, or a widow were very different. Social and familial roles were connected to specific patterns of social expectation, restriction, and opportunity, not just to a father, husband, or son. This chapter will take a life course approach to examine what visual sources can tell us about women’s lives as they moved through biological stages and social roles within the family and household.<sup>3</sup> Following discussion of what we might call the ‘traditional’ female life course, I will also consider the option of dedicating oneself to virginity and the renunciation of conventional family life.<sup>4</sup>

## 4.2 The Life Course Approach

The study of the life course derives from the field of sociology, where it represents research into human lives from birth to death.<sup>5</sup> This entails examining not only discrete episodes such

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. repeated in Davies 2012 at pp.205-206, 209, 210, 211, 212.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the structure of the Roman family, see Rawson 1986. This is the introduction to the first volume from what would become a series of conferences on the Roman family. A string of edited volumes have issued from these conferences, providing valuable and continuing research on the Roman family. Recently this has grown to encompass Late Antiquity (Laes et. al. eds., 2015).

<sup>4</sup> I will use the term ‘family’ to refer to those related by marriage or blood, and the term ‘household’ to encompass all those living under the authority of the head(s) of that household, including slaves but excluding clients. For a discussion of the Latin terms *familia* and *domus* and their relation to English terminology, see Nathan 2000, pp.6-8.

<sup>5</sup> Mayer 2009, p.414.

as marriage, but the changes that take place in people's lives over a long stretch of time and across diverse social domains. Personal characteristics and individual actions are analysed alongside societal and institutional structures and historical context, in order to understand the life course in an holistic manner.<sup>6</sup> Human lives are not viewed as individual but in the "collective contexts" of couples, families, age cohorts etc.<sup>7</sup> This approach recognises the importance of movement through and between stages of life as a way of understanding individual experience and societal attitudes to different life stages. The data available to modern sociologists are of course far beyond an archaeologist's wildest dreams. However, the intention to study changes in human lives is useful for thinking about a complex category such as gender in an intersectional manner. Its utility has already been recognised by scholars of the ancient and medieval worlds. Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence's book *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach*, charts how age impacted behaviour and expectations within the Roman family, highlighting the diversity of potential life courses and outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, meanwhile, in *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course*, develops a fine-grained analysis of the rhythms of human life stretching from foetal life to life beyond death.<sup>9</sup> Both these studies reveal the shifting sands of experience for individuals over time, whether measured chronologically, biologically, or culturally.<sup>10</sup>

For all women in Late Antiquity, movement through different stages of life represented one of the greatest structuring factors of their existence. The transition from a young child to an adolescent signalled the need for greater control and guidance as a girl entered puberty. At her

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<sup>6</sup> Mayer 2009, p.414.

<sup>7</sup> Mayer 2009, p.414.

<sup>8</sup> Harlow and Laurence 2002. See also Alberici and Harlow 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Gilchrist 2012. See also Davies 2013 on the life course in Byzantine hagiography.

<sup>10</sup> Gilchrist is particularly explicit in her identification of different measures of time – natural and cosmic time, individual biological 'body clocks', historical time, cultural and social time, generational time, and institutional calendars (2012, p.13).

wedding she left her natal home for that of her husband and began running their household, and if she gave birth to children she became a mother. Yet marriages did not always last. Divorce meant leaving her children and returning to her parents' home, perhaps then entering another marriage and beginning the process again. As women typically married younger than men, usually in their mid to late teens, widowhood was also relatively common. A widow might remain unmarried or enter into another union. Roles as a daughter, wife, household manager, and mother thus ebbed and flowed over time, changing course, ending and (re)starting within different family groups. As well as changes in domestic environment and responsibility, independence and authority fluctuated across the life course. Unmarried girls might be strictly supervised, but once wed even a teenager entered her new home as the mistress of the house. If she bore children and grandchildren she could expect to see her influence over the family grow, perhaps ending her life as a venerable matriarch.<sup>11</sup> This in turn might be disrupted by divorce or widowhood, events which could leave a woman financially unstable and vulnerable, perhaps forcing her to enter into another marriage against her better judgement. A wealthy single woman, however, could afford to be more selective, or might choose not to remarry and remain independent. Fortunes rose and fell on a constellation of factors such as age, status, wealth, fertility, and the unpredictability of death.

By analysing the lives of women from the perspective of the life course, we are able to better appreciate the great variety of experiences and roles a woman could embody during her lifetime, and society's shifting attitudes to womanhood. Early theorising about 'rites of passage' such as marriage or childbirth understood these as events during which the body as a passive object was acted on by society and moved from one social category to another.<sup>12</sup> More

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<sup>11</sup> Gilchrist 2012, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Van Gennep 1960. The work of Turner developed Van Gennep's ideas of the ritual process of rites of passage, beginning to explore the experiential aspect of the liminal phase, but ultimately maintaining the idea of the body as a passive object (Turner 1967; 1969; Mitchell 2006, p.387).



recent understandings of ritual, however, see rites of passage not as mere transition, but as facilitating the individual's transformation in becoming part of a new social group. The orientation of the individual to society shifts forever: rather than being passively assigned a new social label, a new state of personhood is achieved.<sup>13</sup> Beyond the social labels of daughter, wife, mother, widow, or ascetic, this chapter seeks to better understand these 'states of personhood' and situate them within the shifting landscape of late antique society.

### 4.3 Childhood

In recent decades there has been a boom in the study of children and childhood in the ancient world, as scholars moved away from Philippe Ariès' famous idea that childhood is a distinctly modern notion.<sup>14</sup> The study of girlhood, however, remains in its infancy.<sup>15</sup> This is in part because scholarship has often defined female childhood as a single life stage that ended early: girls transitioned from childhood to adulthood at marriage and early marriage meant that girlhood was curtailed and simplified. This has been complicated by recent work, however, which has demonstrated discrete developmental stages before marriage.<sup>16</sup> It is this diversity we will explore in the following discussion. Evidence for the representation of girls – and children in general<sup>17</sup> – is relatively restricted and in view of this limitation I will examine three case

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<sup>13</sup> Bloch 1992; Mitchell 2006, pp.387-390; Gilchrist 2012, p.9.

<sup>14</sup> Ariès 1960. See, for example, Rawson 2003; Mustakallio et al. eds. 2005; Papaconstantinou ed. 2009; Evans Grubbs ed. 2013; Laes et al. eds. 2015; Vuolanto 2015; Laes and Vuolanto eds., 2016; Vuolanto 2016a; Vuolanto 2016b; Carroll 2018. For a fascinating thought experiment exploring a child's experience of Constantinople, see Aasgaard 2015.

<sup>15</sup> On Roman girlhood see Caldwell 2015.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Alberici and Harlow 2007 on adolescence; Caldwell 2015 on the development of femininity during girlhood.

<sup>17</sup> Rawson describes children as "highly visible" in Roman art, but with considerable chronological variation, peaking in the second century AD (1997, p.206). Huskinson has studied this trend in greater detail, demonstrating that a peak in the second century was followed by a plateau and a "fairly steep decline with the development of early Christian art" (2005, p.97). Behling has studied children in late antique art extensively (2011; 2014; 2016), but most of this research focuses on boys and children in religious contexts such as the infant Christ. On children in Byzantine art, see Hennessy 2008; Hennessy 2013.

studies which offer snap-shots into particular stages of girlhood: infancy, childhood more broadly, and adolescence. These examples do not offer us a complete picture, but they shed light on formative life stages and the diversity of experience that girls could expect before marriage.

#### 4.3.1 Burying girls: funerary mosaics of North Africa

At some point between the mid-fourth and mid-fifth centuries, three infant girls were laid to rest in a subterranean burial chamber at Leptiminus on the North African coast (Fig 4.2).<sup>18</sup> Florentia died at just three months old and Elia Theodora at fourteen months, Agapia's age at death is unknown.<sup>19</sup> All three were commemorated with sensitively rendered mosaic portrait panels laid over their tombs, one next to the other.<sup>20</sup> They are each divided into three parts: an inscription, a depiction of the seated child holding a bird and grapes, and a section depicting flowers, birds, or other animals. Despite these similarities, each girl is individualised: Florentia has short blonde hair, Elia Theodora longer blonde hair curling over her ears, and Agapia cropped dark hair. Each also wears a different colour tunic, sits on different textiles, and has different background embellishments ranging from trees to garlands. As probably the oldest, Elia Theodora has longer hair and is shown as more physically active than the other two, her contrapposto pose giving the impression of movement. Florentia and Elia Theodora wear necklaces which mark them as female, but only Agapia's name gives away her gender.

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<sup>18</sup> M52; M53; M54. Ben Lazreg 2002; Ben Lazreg et al. 2006. Children are particularly well represented in this complex, in seven of the seventeen tombs so far exposed. Four are identified by inscription, the other three anepigraphic marble panels are judged to be children from their small size (Ben Lazreg 2006, p.367).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Lazreg et al. 2006, p.367. The term *innocens* in her inscription and her close-cropped hair informs us that Agapia was also an infant.

<sup>20</sup> On mosaic portrait panels from late antique North Africa see Powell 2019.

What is immediately noticeable about these girls is their androgynous appearance, with short hair and tunics that reveal their lower legs. While Florentia and Elia Theodora wear necklaces or tunics with embellished collars that might be intended to signal their femininity, nothing about Agapia's presentation marks her as female. A depiction of another infant girl from the Urban Basilica cemetery in Tabarka depicts Crescentia in a similar fashion, with cropped dark hair and an embellished tunic.<sup>21</sup> These girls are not shown as miniature adults, but are intentionally rendered as infants, their youth especially marked by their short hair. This is particularly noticeable when compared to the only adult female portrait from the burial chamber: Pelagia wears an intricate braided hairstyle covered at the back by a delicate veil.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the girls' androgenous appearance indicates that as very young children they occupied a liminal space in which expectations of gender and gendered representation were not yet fully formed. Despite their young age, Florentia, Elia Theodora, and Agapia were valued members of their community, their memorials laid together with others and united by a uniform visual style.<sup>23</sup> Their representation as infants, however, indicates that their identity within that community was defined primarily by age rather than gender. Had they lived, this would soon have changed: a mosaic portrait of the four-year-old Rogata in the Christian cemetery at Sfax shows little to distinguish her from an adult woman (Fig 4.3).<sup>24</sup> The boundary between infant and girl had been crossed.

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<sup>21</sup> M39.

<sup>22</sup> M55. Ben Lazreg et al. 2006, pp.366-367. The tombs of men from the complex are dominated with images of the Good Shepherd, including the only funerary mosaic for a male child (p.366).

<sup>23</sup> Ben Lazreg et al. 2006, p.365.

<sup>24</sup> M59.

### 4.3.2 Educating Maria

A set of mid sixth-century mosaics from the church of Saint Demetrios in Thessaloniki offer us a window into the development of the spiritual identity of a girl called Maria, from infancy to the cusp of adulthood.<sup>25</sup> The panels depicting Maria's childhood were among those arranged along the north inner aisle of the church (Figs 4.4-6).<sup>26</sup> Her story is divided into four scenes which chart her growth from babe-in-arms to adolescent. In the first scene, we see Maria as a baby, held between Saint Demetrios and her mother.<sup>27</sup> Christ appears in a roundel at the top right of the scene, stretching his hand down to the saint, who represents the intercessor between girl and God. In the second scene Maria, now an infant, is carried by her mother who is introduced to the Virgin by an angel. Maria wears a red and gold cloak and has a mark on her forehead. On the Virgin's other side is a male figure, assumed to be Maria's father, who appears with his hands covered, gesturing towards the Virgin, who indicates a space that perhaps once contained an image of Christ.<sup>28</sup>

The third scene is damaged, but the composition is dominated by Saint Demetrios, who stands *orant* in the centre, approached by three figures. On the left is Maria and her mother: Maria is now old enough to stand and both she and her mother carry candles to offer to the saint. On the right approaches another figure, probably female, perhaps another member of the family. Unfortunately, a significant part of the fourth scene is lost, however we see Maria as an older child leading a group of three women and a man towards Saint Demetrios. She is richly dressed

<sup>25</sup> M15. Unfortunately destroyed during a fire in 1917, the mosaics are recorded in a series of watercolours.

<sup>26</sup> On the north aisle were four mosaic panels, the third of which tells Maria's story. The first represented a scene of thanks to two male saints, the second a couple approaching the Virgin and Christ, and the fourth Saint Demetrios supplicated by three male figures (Bakirtzes 2012, pp.149-157, and pp.131-179 on the church in general).

<sup>27</sup> This is the only example I am aware of in which a child is shown as a baby, bar representations of breastfeeding mothers from genre scenes, see e.g. T3, M9.

<sup>28</sup> Hennessy 2003, p.159. It was replaced by a later inscription recording renovations.

in a tunic embellished with gold, and with a green and red mantle drawn over her head. The girl offers two doves to the saint, encouraged by a woman who stands behind her and places her hand on her shoulder, presumably her mother. An inscription under the scene reads: “And you my master Saint Demetrios help us your servants and your servant Maria, whom you gave to us.”<sup>29</sup>

These mosaics thank Saint Demetrios and the Virgin for the child Maria, who may have been conceived as the result of a fertility miracle,<sup>30</sup> perhaps even explicitly depicted in the first scene. They chart Maria’s developing relationship with these holy figures as she grows, guided by her family and in particular her mother. As Maria ages, her development is indicated by her size, the complexity of her dress, and her growing independence in interacting with Saint Demetrios.<sup>31</sup> Cecily Hennessy has compared Maria’s story to the *Life of Saint Stephen*, in which the saint’s mother prays for a child and then regularly takes her son to pray at the site of her miracle to build his faith and connection with the holy.<sup>32</sup> Maria is also set apart from a young age, perhaps even from birth, to have a special relationship with the patron saint of the church. Much has been made of what happens to Maria in the final scene. It has been suggested that the flowery meadow in the background indicates that she died and entered Paradise, that the beardless figure accompanying her is her husband and that she is celebrating her wedding, or that the doves represent her virginity and that she is dedicating herself as a bride of Christ.<sup>33</sup> There is insufficient evidence to decide in favour of any of these theories, and it may simply

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<sup>29</sup> Bakirtzes 2012, p.156.

<sup>30</sup> Cormack 1969, p.31; Hennessy 2003, p.160.

<sup>31</sup> The meaning of the mark on her forehead is unclear. It may indicate her baptism or be a mark of miraculous intercession (Hennessy 2003, p.159; Brubaker 2004b, pp.74-75; Bakirtzes 2012, p.134).

<sup>32</sup> Hennessy 2003, pp.160-161.

<sup>33</sup> Death: Grabar 1978, p.72; Bakirtzes 2012, p.156. Bride: Behling 2014, p.383; Virgin: Connor 2004, p.104.

be that in the final scene Maria is shown at the age she was when the mosaics were commissioned. This would then not be a complete story, but rather a “to be continued”.<sup>34</sup>

It is noteworthy that Maria’s family decided to commemorate her at different stages of childhood development, reminiscent of Roman children’s sarcophagi showing miniature ‘life histories’ cut short.<sup>35</sup> This kind of narrative progression is rare,<sup>36</sup> however the church of Saint Demetrios is unusual for its concentration of images of children shown supplicating holy figures. Two other mosaics depict boys alongside Saint Demetrios and (perhaps) Saint Bacchus.<sup>37</sup> Maria’s narrative creates a quasi-hagiographical story in which she is marked out by the favour and protection of the saints. Maria acts as a kind of intercessor between her family – and perhaps the wider congregation – and Saint Demetrios, while her family are marked out as capable of raising a daughter of such piety. Maria’s story, just like the funerary mosaics above, demonstrate that it was never too early to be incorporated into the church community. Infant baptism and confirmation were common by the sixth century and it was therefore possible for young children to have access to church spaces and be present during services.<sup>38</sup> Hennessy even suggests that images of devout children like Maria may have been intended to teach other children about the importance of piety.<sup>39</sup>

The panel also emphasises the importance of the women in Maria’s family for her spiritual development: her mother is the primary figure while her father is notable for his detachment or

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<sup>34</sup> Brubaker (2004b, pp.74-75) breaks from other commentators in suggesting that the panel represents four different girls, however the clear narrative and chronological progression makes this less likely.

<sup>35</sup> Huskinson 2005, pp.95-97; Carroll 2018, pp.132-139, 218-219.

<sup>36</sup> While not displaying narrative progression, the Samagher Casket (I6) also uses multiple scenes to express the piety of a family with children (see Chapter 5).

<sup>37</sup> Boy presented to Demetrius: Dated to before the fire of c.620 (Hennessy 2003, pp.163-164, Fig.11.5; Bakirtzes 2012, pp.144-146, Figs 21-22). Boys with Saint Bacchus(?): After the fire (Hennessy 2003, pp.164-166, Fig.11.6; Bakirtzes 2012, pp.158-161, Figs 36-39).

<sup>38</sup> Hennessy 2003, p.166.

<sup>39</sup> Hennessy 2003, p.166.

even absence.<sup>40</sup> This likely relates to the reality of raising girls: we have seen that mothers had a special role in educating their children, in particular daughters. This was amplified in religious contexts, as girls would not only read religious texts on the laps of their mothers, but would accompany them to church, a space that may have been gender-segregated.<sup>41</sup> The transmission of religious knowledge from mother to daughter was therefore key to the perpetuation of orthodox religious practice from one generation to the next.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4.3.3 Negotiating adolescence at Piazza Armerina

A rare depiction of female adolescence is found in the fourth century villa at Piazza Armerina in Sicily. Famously known as the ‘Bikini Girls’ mosaic, it is located in a small room separated from the main peristyle court by an antechamber, and depicts a group of young women engaged in a pentathlon (Fig 4.7).<sup>43</sup> Following its discovery in the mid-twentieth century, the scene was interpreted as a beauty contest, a sexually-charged aquatic mime, a troupe of dancing girls, or a pure artistic fantasy.<sup>44</sup> These perspectives were based on the fact that the girls wear breastbands and loin cloths, hardly – it was thought – appropriate attire for respectable women. Following Hugh Lee’s 1984 article interpreting the mosaic as a pentathlon, it is now widely accepted that the mosaic represents a serious depiction of girls competing at athletics.<sup>45</sup> This

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<sup>40</sup> Hennessy 2003, p.159. Mother-child relationships are particularly prominent in hagiographical narratives (Hennessy 2003, pp.160-161).

<sup>41</sup> The identification of women’s spaces in churches is a thorny issue. There probably were specific areas for women in some churches, whether in galleries or side aisles, but this practice was far from regulated (see Taft 1998). Jerome advised Laeta not to let Paula out in public without her, specifying in particular that she should not visit a church or martyr shrine without her mother (*Letter* 107.9). This is repeated in his advice to Demetrias (*Letter* 130.19).

<sup>42</sup> Prescendi 2010, esp. pp.76-77. In his *Reply to Symmachus*, Prudentius describes how pagan children were indoctrinated into their faith by watching their mothers and nurses (*Reply to Symmachus* 197-244).

<sup>43</sup> M19.

<sup>44</sup> Lewd dancing girls: Balsdon 1962, p.274; Aquatic mime: Pace 1955, pp.77-85; Water ballet: Bieber 1961, p.237; Performers: Dunbabin 1978, p.209. For a full discussion of early responses to the mosaic, see Lee 1984, note 1.

<sup>45</sup> Gentili (1956, pp.43-44) had considered them to be engaged in exercises following a bath, however it was Lee who first pursued the idea that they were athletes in detail (Lee 1984).

argument was strengthened in 2008, when Isabella Baldini showed that motifs from the mosaic were repeated in wall-paintings depicting much younger nude children.<sup>46</sup> The combination of serious ‘real’ scenes enacted by adults and parody versions in which children or *erotes* take over the roles is found throughout the villa, confirming the intention of this mosaic as a serious depiction of athletes. The subject-matter also fits well within the wider visual repertoire of the *domus*: in the baths we find depictions of chariot racing and athletics, and elsewhere musical competition.<sup>47</sup>

The owners of the villa evidently had a strong interest in games and competitions, and some have suggested they were involved in financing games in Rome and elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> It is possible that these female athletes also commemorated a real event. During the imperial period there were athletics events at which the daughters of the elite could compete, which may have persisted into the fourth century.<sup>49</sup> While there is no secure evidence that girls still competed in athletics beyond the third century, such silence is relatively unsurprising given that there is less surviving evidence for competitions and competitors in general during Late Antiquity, and the evidence for female competitors had always been sparse. We do know that there were athletics events held in Sicily in the fourth century, as a verse inscription from Catania honours an *agonothetes*.<sup>50</sup>

While we may then imagine that the mosaic recalls the patronage of games at which girls competed, the image encourages more questions about the figures portrayed. As noted, the

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<sup>46</sup> P18. Baldini Lippolis 2008, esp. pp.351-352.

<sup>47</sup> Chariot racing and athletics: Gentili 1999, pp.220-232, 250-254; Musicians: M23.

<sup>48</sup> Remijsen 2015, pp.140-141.

<sup>49</sup> Mantas 1995, pp.125-144; Baldini Lippolis 2008, p.352; Kyle 2014, pp.270-272; Scanlon 2014, pp.117-119; Schade 2014, pp.337-338; Remijsen 2015, pp.102-103, 141.

<sup>50</sup> Remijsen 2015, p.140, IG XIV 502. Women continued to be involved in the administration of late antique games: a verse epitaph from Paros (c.300) honours a local *gymnasiarch* called Aurelia Leite and her efforts to rebuild the gymnasium (Mantas 1995, p.142, IG XII 5, 929).



girls' lack of clothing prompted suggestions that the nature of the mosaic was purely sexual. If we accept that they are in fact elite girls competing at athletics, we must ask what was to be gained from depicting them in this manner.<sup>51</sup> In the previous chapter, we explored how schooling was used to discipline girls both intellectually and morally. Physical education was the other side of this coin: contemporary medical texts advised the strict regulation of diet and promotion of exercise for the healthy physical development of girls. Control of the body was especially important for reproductive health, but also helped to control mental impulses and encourage moral behaviour.<sup>52</sup> The girls in the mosaic display their toned bodies not only as members of a social class that could afford to indulge in athletics, but also as girls in peak physical and mental condition for their future roles as chaste wives and fertile mothers. The seemingly unusual choice to depict them in breastbands and loincloths merely reflects the minimal clothing used for athletics. It is thus key to remember that these are adolescent girls, not adult women. Throughout antiquity, games had been limited to unmarried girls: once married, female sexual urges could be controlled by husbands and it was no longer deemed acceptable for them to display their bodies. The girls at Piazza Armerina therefore represent a highly specific moment in the lives of elite young women. Caught between childhood and adulthood, they occupy a discrete social niche informed by ideals of gender, age, and social status.

These three examples cannot give us a full picture of what life was like for girls in Late Antiquity, but they highlight that childhood was a complex and sometimes difficult time. The

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<sup>51</sup> Involvement in childhood athletics was reserved for the elite, both boys and girls (Baldini Lippolis 2008, p.352).

<sup>52</sup> Alberici and Harlow 2007, pp.193-203; Schade 2014, pp.337-338; Caldwell 2015, pp.79-104. See, e.g., Rufus of Ephesus on controlling girls' diets in general (cited in Oribasius. *Orib. Coll. Med.* 4: *Lib. Inc.* 18.10) and on food triggering sexual desire (18.2), and Soranus on exercise to promote the onset of menarche (*Gyn.* 1.5.25). A limited amount of exercise was thought to produce the heat needed to counteract the excessive moisture that caused sexual desire. Rufus prescribes walking, running, "rolling in the dust" (wrestling?), playing ball games, dancing and singing (Caldwell 2015, p.90; Rufus cited in Oribasius *Coll. Med. Lib. Inc.* 18.11-15).

girls from Leptiminus died before gender even became a decisive factor in their identity and representation. It is hard to pin down when this transition would have taken place, but as babies and infants, girls would not have been aware that they were any different from their brothers. The mosaic portrait of the four-year-old Rogata shown almost as an adult woman indicates this transition happened early, however a mosaic from Piazza Armerina showing boys and girls playing ball games together still depicts the girls in short tunics like their male companions. It is only their longer hair that indicates their gender.<sup>53</sup> This may highlight the liminal nature of childhood: playing at home girls could just be children, but in more formal or sombre situations girls like Maria and Rogata embodied what was expected of them as adults. As girls approached puberty, female biology became a threat that needed to be controlled. This may not have always involved participation in sporting events, but it was a valid concern: failure to control the naturally unstable state of girls could ruin their prospects and the reputation of their families. From relatively androgynous beginnings, as girls grew the burdens of gendered expectations weighed heavier and heavier. This probably peaked in the mid to late teens, just before marriage, when the stakes were highest. Once safely married and settled as a new wife, everything changed once again.

#### 4.4 Marriage, Motherhood, and the Family: Depicting the *Domus Felix*

##### 4.4.1 Family structures and the impact of Christianity

The pressures of high mortality meant that late antique society was “mobilized for fertility”: marriage was near universal and girls married young.<sup>54</sup> In some ways, the social expectations

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<sup>53</sup> M18.

<sup>54</sup> Harper 2012, p.670.

placed on wives and mothers were similar to unmarried women, social respectability was tied to sexual morality and domestic responsibilities loomed large. Yet growing older and getting married also expanded opportunities for action both within and beyond the family. Since the late Republic women married *sine manu*, meaning that they remained technically part of their father's family and under his *patria potestas*, rather than that of their husband. This ensured that property returned to agnatic kin in case of marriage breakdown. It also meant that when a woman's father died she became legally independent, which was significant because the high mortality rates driving early marriage also meant that few adults had living fathers.<sup>55</sup> Partible inheritance meant daughters inherited property, and the practical of dotal marriage ensured they took at least part of this into marriage. A woman's property then remained legally separate from that of her husband and in the case of divorce or death reverted to her family.<sup>56</sup> This legal framework meant that married women of means could expect a relatively high degree of independence and the authority that came with property and wealth. If a woman had children, this might also increase her social capital, binding her more closely to her husband's relatives as a productive member of the family capable of producing heirs.<sup>57</sup> Influence over sons that might one day hold prominent offices offered women yet another avenue for the exercise of authority.

So how did marriage and family relations change – if at all – in Late Antiquity? The primary issue that has plagued scholars is the role of Christianity: how did Christian ideology impact people's lives? This is a difficult subject because the written evidence is dominated by minority Christian perspectives. For example, surviving literature grossly overstates the importance of asceticism.<sup>58</sup> Most scholars now stress continuities between the Greco-Roman and Christian

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<sup>55</sup> Arjava 1996, pp.41-42, also noting that legal emancipation was common as well; Harper 2012, p.672.

<sup>56</sup> Arjava 1996, pp.177-178; Harper 2012, p.672

<sup>57</sup> On abortion, contraception, and the control of fertility, see McClanan 2002b; Mistry 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Jacobs and Krawiec 2003.

family and downplay the influence of ideology.<sup>59</sup> Before moving on to the visual evidence, I will briefly outline the primary trends in the development of the family in Late Antiquity.

The key differences between classical and early Christian ideas about marriage and the family were that Christianity opposed divorce and promoted the indissolubility of marriage, and endorsed sexual fidelity for both partners.<sup>60</sup> In the classical system, divorce was freely available, although not encouraged, and it was expected that men would have extensive extra-marital sexual relations.<sup>61</sup> Both systems, however, consisted of monogamous unions created for the production of legitimate children, promoted the supremacy of husband over wife, and valued marital harmony and conjugal affection.<sup>62</sup> Divorce provides a good case study for thinking about the relationship between Christian ideology and social and legal change.<sup>63</sup> It did become harder over the course of the fourth to sixth centuries to obtain a divorce, especially for women, but this was not necessarily the direct result of Christianity. Laws were enacted in a piecemeal fashion and frequently overturned by subsequent regimes. Constantine famously brought in laws restricting access to divorce for example, but these were overturned by the Emperor Julian.<sup>64</sup> During the fifth century, divorce laws shifted back and forth until Justinian brought in the most radical change yet, outlawing even consensual divorce by both parties. Yet this was also repealed just 24 years later by Justin II.<sup>65</sup>

It has been argued by Kyle Harper that the regulation of divorce was in fact much more closely connected to property than to religious ideology. Free access to divorce was connected to the

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<sup>59</sup> For an excellent overview see Harper 2012. A number of major works have taken this stance, see e.g. Shaw 1987; Evans Grubbs 1995; Beaucamp 1992; Arjava 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Stolte 1999; Harper 2012. For a detailed exploration of the differences between Roman and Christian sexual morality, see Harper 2013, esp. pp.1-133.

<sup>61</sup> On Roman divorce, see Gardner 1986, pp.81-95.

<sup>62</sup> Harper 2012, pp.670, 680.

<sup>63</sup> For an overview see Arjava 1996, pp.177-192.

<sup>64</sup> Evans Grubbs 1995, pp.228-242; Arjava 1996, pp.178-180; Harper 2012, p.676.

<sup>65</sup> Stolte 1999, p.84; Harper 2012, pp.676-677. Justinian Novel 134,11 pr., Justin II Novel 140.

agnatic system in which marriage involved little transfer of property. In Late Antiquity, however, betrothal became more formalised, with the exchange of payments and additional gifts made to the bride. This led to increasing awareness of conjugal property and greater complications when marriages broke down.<sup>66</sup> Laws introduced in the fourth and fifth centuries had effectively only penalised people who could not come to a settlement, rather than removing the ability to divorce altogether. Harper argues this was therefore not a process of Christianisation so much as a shift towards principles of property ownership centred on the nuclear family.<sup>67</sup>

The matter of sexual fidelity was equally nebulous. The exasperation with which churchmen tried to convince the male members of their congregation to remain faithful is indicative that the practice was resisted by many.<sup>68</sup> Christian writers like Ausonius and Paulinus of Pella were happy to discuss their sexual relations with enslaved women with apparently little anxiety for their eternal souls.<sup>69</sup> The general picture of late antique family life is therefore one of relative continuity with the high empire. Some Christian ideals represented radical changes to the social order, but were necessarily subordinated to practicality and deeply ingrained social practice. Other perceived changes were the result of slow but sustained movement from the earlier years of the empire, such as the growing importance of nuclear inheritance over agnatic.<sup>70</sup> The true dominance of Church would not take hold until the High Middle Ages.<sup>71</sup> We should also remember that the majority of our sources represent family life from an urban perspective.

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<sup>66</sup> Harper 2012, pp.674-675, 678-679. A similar sentiment is expressed by Arjava in relation to remarriage legislation following widowhood (1996, pp.176-177)

<sup>67</sup> Harper 2012, p.679.

<sup>68</sup> Harper 2012, pp.682-683. On sex outside of marriage see Arjava 1996, pp.193-229.

<sup>69</sup> Arjava 1996, p.31; Harper 2012, p.683; Laes and Vuolanto 2016, pp.272-274. See also Shaw 1987, p.45 on Augustine's repeated use of concubinage and the assertion that during these relationships he engaged in forms of contraceptive intercourse that he later went on to condemn in his sermons.

<sup>70</sup> Harper 2012, p.674.

<sup>71</sup> Although Arjava (1996, p.191) and Stolte (1999, p.81) note that the Church took over secular legal jurisdiction much earlier in the west than the east. On the family in the west, see Southon et al 2013.

Rural living could be very different, with lower infant mortality and larger family groups. Matters also worked differently for low-income families without substantial property and members of immigrant groups.<sup>72</sup> Our perspective is therefore skewed, as so often, towards a particular type of family life that was certainly not universal.

#### 4.4.2 Marriage

Marriage represented a significant moment in the lives of both women and men, as the conjugal unit formed the basis for family life.<sup>73</sup> Depictions of couples are perhaps the most common family unit in visual culture, however this is in part because they dominate on objects that survive in relatively large numbers, such as gold-glass and sarcophagi.<sup>74</sup> Much of the late antique iconography of marriage represented continuity with the Roman period. The motif of a couple – with or without children – in a tondo or shell, and the famous *dextrarum iunctio* pose in which the couple grasped each other's right hand, dated back well into the second and third centuries.<sup>75</sup> The same is true for the figure of the *pronuba*, the married woman in whose presence the couple were bound together through the *dextrarum iunctio*.<sup>76</sup> This visual language continued to be used by pagans and Christians alike. On gold-glass we find couples in the company of Eros and Hercules, while others dispense with the *pronuba* or include Christ as *pronubus*.<sup>77</sup> Some glasses incorporate religious inscriptions, such as one in which the couple is framed by the inscription 'May you live in God' (Fig 4.8).<sup>78</sup> A crown is placed between them

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<sup>72</sup> Harper 2012, pp.686-687. Southon et al. 2013, p.110 also notes that scholarship focuses on elite 'Romanised' families at the expense of immigrant groups. Unfortunately, the same is largely true of this work.

<sup>73</sup> Caesarius of Arles placed conjugal love at the top of the hierarchy of familial affection, followed by love for children (*Serm.* 21.2; Laes and Vuolanto 2016, pp.263-264).

<sup>74</sup> Howells 2015; Ellison 2017; Ellison 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Ellison 2018, pp.332-333 on the tondo form. On the *dextrarum iunctio* and the marriage ceremony, see Kantorowicz 1960, pp.4-6. On physical contact in general in funerary art see Mander 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Kantorowicz 1960, p.4.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. GG2 (Hercules); GG3 (Eros); GG4 (Jesus).

<sup>78</sup> GG6.

which may be connected to real crowns used during the marriage ceremony, a reference to spiritual rewards in the next life.<sup>79</sup> Couples are also common images on jewellery, the corpus of ‘marriage rings’ being the most well-known example of this phenomenon. Stretching in date from the fourth to seventh centuries, they are termed as such because of depictions of couples on the bezel (Figs 4.9-10). The earliest examples show facing profile portraits, moving to paired frontal busts, and variations on the *dextrarum iunctio* pose by the sixth century, often inscribed with wishes for concord, harmony, health, and the grace of God.<sup>80</sup> Variation in band size indicates that they were worn by both women and men.<sup>81</sup> Similar imagery is also found on small silver boxes, perhaps used to hold rings themselves, and on decorative belts sometimes referred to as ‘marriage belts’ (Figs 4.11-12).<sup>82</sup>

The appearance of Christian elements in marriage iconography has been understood to reflect the emergence of a specifically Christian ideology of marriage in which a harmonious union was a gift from God.<sup>83</sup> Christ *pronubus* in particular has been identified as representing the idea that marriages were formed by God and therefore indissoluble, and the growing role of the Church in marriage ceremonies from the fourth century.<sup>84</sup> Mark Ellison presents the most extreme form of this argument. He understands the inclusion of Christian motifs in depictions from third and fourth century Rome as conscious contributions to contemporary debates about the role of marriage and its relevance to spiritual life. Ellison argues that the inclusion of Christian elements promoted marriage as a worthy alternative to asceticism, placing them in direct conversation with contemporary texts that praised the ascetic life and viewed marriage

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<sup>79</sup> On crowns see Ellison 2018, pp.337-338.

<sup>80</sup> Vikan 1990.

<sup>81</sup> Vikan 1990, p.151.

<sup>82</sup> S10; S11; J1. On marriage belts in particular see Kantorowicz 1960, and on the identification of the boxes as ring boxes Vikan 1990, p.150 (against their identification as reliquaries).

<sup>83</sup> Kantorowicz 1960, p.11; Vikan 1990, esp. p.163; Ellison 2018, p.336.

<sup>84</sup> Ellison 2018, p.336.

as a consolation prize.<sup>85</sup> Such readings of the iconography, however, take too little account of striking continuities with representations of pagan marriage. Roman marriage iconography and wishes for a harmonious relationship were for the most part entirely acceptable and needed minimal adjustment to be relevant to Christians.<sup>86</sup> While the Christian ideology of marriage was certainly distinct from that of paganism, it seems reductive to read this directly into the iconography. Ellison's argument in particular also leans too heavily on literary sources which are inherently biased in their ideas about marriage. Surviving texts often overplay the importance of asceticism because they were themselves preserved primarily by monastics.<sup>87</sup> Tracts celebrating married life certainly existed, such as those analysed by Kate Cooper in *The Fall of the Roman Household*, but they are not as well known or well studied.<sup>88</sup> While Ellison's argument is compelling, there is no convincing evidence that normal people felt threatened by asceticism. The visual evidence could equally well be understood to bear the opposite meaning: people chose to depict themselves as pious married Christians because they saw no contradiction in their choice and were content to celebrate their union.

It is also notable that marriage iconography appears to have been used in magical contexts. Gary Vikan and Alicia Walker have both argued that 'marriage rings' were not necessarily used in marriage or betrothal ceremonies, but instead had amuletic functions. Vikan understands the rings wishing the couple health, as well as belts and necklaces with similar iconography, as designed to promote reproductive well-being.<sup>89</sup> A compelling example is an

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<sup>85</sup> Ellison 2017.

<sup>86</sup> It is also notable that while Christ (and sometimes Mary) replace the *pronuba* figure, there are no depictions of priests or church officials officiating. The control of the Church over the marriage ceremony was ambiguous during this period and the development of explicitly Christian marriage ritual slow and irregular. On this see Harper 2012, p.684.

<sup>87</sup> See Jacobs and Krawiec 2003, and Krawiec 2003 on the "problem of asceticism" for understanding early Christian families and a detailed discussion of how the notion of family could work together alongside asceticism to extend salvation across all members.

<sup>88</sup> Cooper 2007a, in particular the household manual *Ad Gregoriam in palatio*.

<sup>89</sup> Vikan 1984, p.83; Vikan 1990, pp.154-156.



early fifth century necklace or body chain from Rome with two pendants, one a gold disk with portraits of a couple being crowned by Christ, the other a much earlier Greco-Egyptian hematite amulet depicting Abrasax, a snake-legged solar deity with the head of a rooster (Figs 4.13-14). Vikan argues that since hematite was associated with blood disorders, that this object could have been used to guard against miscarriage and other uterine problems.<sup>90</sup> Walker prefers to see such objects as connected to a more general protection of the marital union, in particular with regard to protecting the wearer against hostile love magic.<sup>91</sup> Beyond wearing amuletic devices on the body, Vikan has also suggested that a hoard of earthen “pilgrim tokens” featuring paired frontal portraits also depict married couples, and not Peter and Paul or Constantine and Helena.<sup>92</sup> He proposes that while marriage jewellery was to be worn, earthen ‘marriage tokens’ could be consumed or rubbed on the body.<sup>93</sup> If he is correct, this evidences interest in magical images of marriage beyond those who could afford expensive jewellery. Understanding these objects as amulets appealing to a range of supernatural forces suggests a broader conceptualisation of what made a harmonious marriage, in which the Christian God was one factor among many. This suggests we need to read these images less as documents of Christian marriage ideology and more as examples of the variety of ways in which Christian people engaged with ideas about marriage and negotiated married life.

Finally, the diversity of Christian marriage ideals is also illustrated by the iconography deployed on a late fourth century gilded copper belt tab (Figs 4.15-16).<sup>94</sup> On one side a bride and groom in the *dextrarum iunctio* pose flank a Christogram, while on the other Bellerophon fights the Chimera. Images of Bellerophon could represent a visual allegory of Christ, however

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<sup>90</sup> J12. Vikan 1990, p.156.

<sup>91</sup> Walker 2002.

<sup>92</sup> Vikan 1990, p.156, Fig.20.

<sup>93</sup> Vikan 1990, p.156. Vikan compares them to Symeon *eulogia* tokens that were powdered and rubbed on the body or taken with water.

<sup>94</sup> J11.

he also carried more specific relevance for marriage: Bellerophon's defeat of the Chimera won him the hand of a princess.<sup>95</sup> In sixth-century *epithalamia* he appears several times as the prototype for the ideal groom.<sup>96</sup> This object was part of a man's belt, and as such represents wishes for marital harmony and conjugal virtue; by wearing such a belt a man could declare himself to be an ideal husband, the head of an harmonious household. While Christian blessing was important, pagan mythological figures still offered desirable reference points for the ideal couple that Christianity could not yet provide.<sup>97</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Happy families

The presence of family groups in both state and private art during the Roman and late antique periods was irregular. It has been convincingly demonstrated that the prevalence of imperial wives and children was connected to their importance for dynastic politics.<sup>98</sup> This explains the downturn in family imagery during the third century and its prominence under the Julio-Claudians and during the Antonine, Severan, and Constantinian periods. The uneven distribution in private art is more complicated. The representation of children in funerary art, for example, peaked in the second century and declined into the fourth century.<sup>99</sup> This does not mean that children ceased to be commemorated, but that different visual strategies were preferred over images of children.<sup>100</sup> Trends in the depiction of the family in late antique visual

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<sup>95</sup> Kalavrezou 2003, p.231.

<sup>96</sup> Bellerophon was a favourite of Dioscorus of Aphroditto, appearing in a number of his works (H2, H5, H21, H23, H24, H32), see MacCoull 1989, esp. p.83. In his *epithalamium* for Patricia and Paul, for example, Dioscorus describes Paul as "like Bellerophon, a desired bridegroom" (H24, trans MacCoull 1989, p.82).

<sup>97</sup> See also T2, a fifth century funerary tapestry depicting a couple in which the husband is shown in the guise of Dionysus. Muth 2001 argues convincingly that late antique householders also used mythological imagery, particularly mythological couples, in their domestic self-representation. See Fig 16, p.103 for a fourth century mosaic representation of the marriage of Bellerophon and Philonoe.

<sup>98</sup> Kampen 2007, pp.124-125.

<sup>99</sup> Huskinson 2005, pp.95-97. Note also significant regional variation, e.g. children were common in funerary art in the Danube region, but rarer in Palmyra (Carroll 2018, p.229; Krag and Raja 2017).

<sup>100</sup> Huskinson notes, for example, that interest in narrative scenes on sarcophagi declined while popular imagery such as lion hunts or philosophers and Muses tended to exclude children (2005, esp. pp.99-100).

culture have been surveyed by Natalie Kampen, with particular reference to sarcophagi, tomb paintings, and gold-glass from the catacombs of Italy.<sup>101</sup> She notes that families were not commonly depicted on sarcophagi, which instead demonstrate a strong preference for images of couples like those discussed in the previous section.<sup>102</sup> Tomb paintings show a similar trend: there is a relative lack of interest in family depictions from the Roman catacombs when compared with religious imagery.<sup>103</sup> The only substantial corpus of familial imagery is found on gold-glass, and as with sarcophagi, depictions of families are vastly outnumbered by those of couples: Kampen estimates that of the 600 or so known examples, no more than three or four percent concern family groups.<sup>104</sup>

It remains unclear why depictions of family groups declined in Late Antiquity. It has been suggested that the citizenship edict of 212 meant there was no longer a need to broadcast citizen status and identity, understood to be a driving factor in the depiction of families on ‘freedmen’ tombs, yet this explanation seems unsatisfactory given the localised nature of those reliefs.<sup>105</sup> The rise of the Christian community has also been put forward: being represented as part of the wider family of believers may have become more important than biological family, which could explain the preference for biblical and paradisiacal imagery in the catacombs.<sup>106</sup> This idea has also been connected to burial practices in North Africa, where figurative and epigraphic panels tend to commemorate individuals and provide little or no information about family or household.<sup>107</sup> However, these burials are primarily from the fifth century and therefore post-date the rise of Christianity by some time. For now, there is no convincing

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<sup>101</sup> Kampen 2007; Kampen 2009, pp.123-138. See also Brubaker 2013 on the family in Byzantine art.

<sup>102</sup> Kampen 2007, pp.127-129.

<sup>103</sup> Kampen 2007, p.130.

<sup>104</sup> Kampen 2009, pp.130-131.

<sup>105</sup> Morris 1992, p.168; Kampen 2009, pp.127-128.

<sup>106</sup> Kampen 2009, p.129.

<sup>107</sup> Yasin 2005, pp.441-446.

explanation for what exactly caused the decline in depictions of family groups in Late Antiquity.

Given the surveys already undertaken by Kampen, I will focus here on a subset of family images that has not received much attention: depictions of mothers and daughters. We have already met two of these: the gold-glass depicting a mother overseeing her daughter's speaking practice and the mosaics of Maria and her mother from Thessaloniki.<sup>108</sup> Mother-daughter pairs occur with relative frequency in my corpus: we will examine nine potential examples in this section beyond the two mentioned above, while there is only one mother-son pair and no father-daughter pairs.<sup>109</sup> I will primarily discuss mosaics and wall-paintings from funerary contexts, before moving briefly to donor portraits, which will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The catacombs of San Gennaro in Naples represent a 'hotspot' for family funerary imagery during the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>110</sup> We have already discussed the individual tombs of Cerula and Bitalia, but we also find two family groups and two mother-daughter groups. The *arcosolium* of Nonnosa shows the infant flanked by her parents Ilaritas and Theotecnus (Fig 4.17), while a clipeus held by *erotes* depicts a large family group of parents with four children.<sup>111</sup> The best preserved of the two mother-daughter groups is the *arcosolium* of Nicatiola and Cominia (Fig 4.18).<sup>112</sup> Cominia stands in the *orans* pose dressed in white, as does her daughter Nicatiola, who is shown as a tiny version of her mother. Between them is the

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<sup>108</sup> GG20; M15.

<sup>109</sup> Mother son: GG23.

<sup>110</sup> Religious subjects also survive, such as Christ teaching the apostles, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and the martyrdom of St Stephen (Fasola 1975, pp.68-72).

<sup>111</sup> P20. The large family group is described by Fasola (1975, p.68) but is not illustrated or referenced elsewhere and is therefore not catalogued. He also notes an *arcosolium* decorated with a group of standing people "who occupy the entire lunette" (1975, p.68) but their identity is unclear, as is their relationship to one another.

<sup>112</sup> P21.

patron saint of the catacombs, also shown as *orans*, flanked by burning candles.<sup>113</sup> The inscriptions indicate that both Nicatiola and Cominia were buried in the tomb, but the circumstances are unclear and there is no indication of who commissioned their grave. Since Nicatiola is identified as *infans*, it is possible that they both died at or shortly after her birth.<sup>114</sup> Mother and child are connected by their almost identical clothing and by the intercession of Saint Januarius, who is dressed in a similar fashion but with the addition of a gold mantle. Nicatiola directs her gaze towards the two adults and it is almost as though the saint takes the place of a father figure.

A similar approach is taken in a recently restored *arcosolium* fresco from the catacombs of Thecla in Rome (Fig 4.19).<sup>115</sup> Here a richly dressed woman and her small daughter are flanked by holy men, perhaps Peter and Paul, who each place a hand on the shoulder of the woman. Like Cominia and Nicatiola, the mother and daughter receive the intercession of the saints through a kind of paternalistic interaction. A heavily damaged fresco covering a *loculus* tomb at San Gennaro depicts two women, Rufina and her daughter (Fig 4.20).<sup>116</sup> Unfortunately only one of the portraits is well preserved, depicting her in a similar fashion to Cominia. We do not know which woman she represents, but the surviving parts of the other portrait indicate the two women were shown in a similar manner. What is curious about this panel is that it does not concern a woman and a child: Rufina and her daughter died at the ages of 55 and 37. Rufina's daughter was an adult old enough to have children and even grandchildren of her own, yet she is commemorated alongside her mother.

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<sup>113</sup> The presence of the patron saint of the catacombs has somewhat overwhelmed any attention paid to the two women. On the figure of Saint Januarius see Calvino 1972; Fasola 1975, p.102.

<sup>114</sup> Legally, *infans* ended at six years old, but in practice the designation seems to end at weaning (Shaw 1987, p.40). The three family members shown on the *arcosolium* of Nonnosa died and were buried at different times, and Fasola has hypothesised that as each member passed away a new fresco was completed until all three were reunited (1975, caption to Tav.Va).

<sup>115</sup> P33.

<sup>116</sup> P24.

The majority of mosaic funerary commemorations from late antique North Africa remember individuals, much like the girls from Leptiminus.<sup>117</sup> From figured funerary mosaics I am aware of only five exceptions.<sup>118</sup> The first is the famous mosaic panel from Tabarka featuring Victoria Elias and a seated male scribe whose name and relationship to Victoria is unknown.<sup>119</sup> The second is the tomb of Naucelius and Nepotianus (also at Tabarka), who were commemorated with a panel depicting a single male *orant* figure, despite the inscription naming two individuals.<sup>120</sup> The original burial appears to be of a man and a child, a rare father-son pairing. At the necropolis of Henchir-Thina, two adjacent panels commemorated a husband and wife, both shown reclining at their funerary banquet.<sup>121</sup> The inscription indicates that this was a pagan burial and the tomb is of uncertain date, meaning it does not derive from the same cultural context as Victoria, Naucelius, and Nepotianus.<sup>122</sup>

The other two examples concern the double commemoration of two women: Felicitas and Victoria, and Romanilla and Emerita. The tomb mosaic of Felicitas and Victoria was found in the Urban Basilica Cemetery Enclosure at Tabarka and dates to the mid fifth century (Fig 4.21).<sup>123</sup> A single *orant* female figure is depicted on the panel, but the inscription tells us it commemorated two women. No indication is given of the relationship between Felicitas and Victoria, but their shared tomb strongly suggests they were related. Romanilla and Emerita were commemorated on a huge mosaic panel also depicting a single female *orant* at Khirbet

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<sup>117</sup> Yasin 2005, p.446.

<sup>118</sup> In addition to these five, there is a husband and wife pair commemorated in a similar style on a mosaic panel showing a single male figure, but this comes from Monte Cillas in Spain (Powell 2019, M28). See Patout Burns and Jensen 2014, pp.425-426 for inscriptional markers commemorating multiple people, these too, however, are rare.

<sup>119</sup> M38.

<sup>120</sup> Powell 2019, M14.

<sup>121</sup> M60.

<sup>122</sup> Dated to the third – fourth century, all others fifth century.

<sup>123</sup> M46.

Guidra in Algeria (Fig 4.22).<sup>124</sup> While the panel was laid in a single phase, the inscription informs us that Emerita died at the age of 70 in 444, while Romanilla died in 467 aged 41. A direct mother-daughter relationship here is unlikely: Romanilla would have been born in 426 when Emerita was 52. It seems more probable that they were grandmother and granddaughter, perhaps commemorated by a still-living mother.

It is curious that we know of three single-sex joint commemorations but no certain husband-wife pairs or family groups. It is possible that this simply reflects practical considerations. The majority of mosaic panels – as has been said – depict and commemorate individuals, most commonly as *orant* figures. Our single-sex pairs do not deviate from this rule in that each uses a depiction of a single *orant*; it is only the inscription that informs us there are two people buried there. It may be that it was deemed acceptable to commemorate two people with a panel depicting an *orant* of the correct gender, and a more economical choice if a parent and child were commemorated together. On the other hand, Romanilla and Emerita were commemorated together at least 23 years after Emerita died, suggesting a more conscious desire for them to be brought together.

Beyond funerary images there are also four donor portraits which may depict mothers and daughters. A woman called Elizabeth patronised a chapel dedicated to Saint Menas in the small Egyptian town of Jeme sometime in the sixth to eighth centuries, having herself and her daughter shown in the *orans* position at the end of frescoes narrating the life of the saint.<sup>125</sup> A similar *orant* pair is found in an early Christian complex from Rome dating to the late fifth or early sixth century, which shows an older woman and younger woman on either side of

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<sup>124</sup> M61.

<sup>125</sup> P3.

Christ.<sup>126</sup> While there is no explanatory inscription, the depiction of their relative ages suggests an identification of mother and daughter. Another chapel of similar date from Jerusalem depicts Georgia and Theodosia as the donors of the mosaic floor.<sup>127</sup> Georgia holds a dove, an attribute common to children and also held by the infants from Leptiminius, indicating that despite her adult appearance she may be Theodosia's child. Finally, two older women are shown as donors on the mosaic floor of a church in Israel from the sixth century.<sup>128</sup> In this pairing it is the younger-looking woman who is the larger and more dominant figure, which is not what we might expect from a mother-daughter group. The relationship between these women is therefore uncertain.

These examples of mother-daughter pairs illustrate the enduring bonds between women and the complexities of motherhood. Some demonstrate what we could understand as traditional mother-child relationships, such as Nicatiola and Cominia. Nicatiola died at an age when she was still heavily dependent on her mother and when Cominia's role was probably primarily defined as a maternal caregiver.<sup>129</sup> Rufina's daughter, however, was an adult, as were Romanilla and Emerita. These cases attest to the complexities of growing up and growing old: while we might expect a normative scenario in which marriage made a girl's husband the most important connection in her life, things were not always so simple. Women commemorated alongside female kin challenge us to imagine alternate circumstances beyond the ideal nuclear family. Donor portraits, meanwhile, emphasise the sort of relationship we have already witnessed with Maria and her mother. Mothers were held responsible for the education of their daughters and were perceived as role models. In including their daughters in public benefactions, mothers taught them about what was expected of them as wealthy citizens and

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<sup>126</sup> P25.

<sup>127</sup> M12.

<sup>128</sup> M8.

<sup>129</sup> On mother-infant burial markers in the Roman period, see Carroll 2014.



extended their maternal qualities outward towards the community at large. Authority based on motherhood was a well-established concept and a time-honoured method for women to assert themselves in a way that was socially acceptable. The prevalence of mother-daughter pairs rather than mother-son pairs indicates the extent of homosocial experience even within the family, something we will return to at the end of this chapter.

#### 4.4.4 The *domina* and the *domus*

Life as a wife and mother was not solely focused on producing and raising children. On her marriage a woman became the mistress of her household, with responsibilities for maintaining the prosperity of the *domus*. The *domus* represented the “central arena” for political, economic, and social negotiations, and was the primary venue of production and exchange in the late antique economy.<sup>130</sup> Running a home meant organising finances, property and estates, children, relatives, dependents, and slaves. For elite women this also involved curating the public-facing image of her family, important for the political career of her husband.<sup>131</sup> The social importance of wealthy *dominae* is highlighted in Cooper’s analysis of late antique conduct literature, in particular *Ad Gregoriam in Palatio*.<sup>132</sup> This tract was written for a married senatorial woman of the western court by an anonymous cleric, probably during the reign of Theoderic the Great in the early sixth century.<sup>133</sup> Key to being a good Christian *domina* was the stewardship of everything and everyone under her authority, the text emphasising her obligations towards dependents and situating her as a moral example for her children and slaves.<sup>134</sup> Nor were the responsibilities of the *domina* just a matter for her family, as the vast estates of the aristocracy

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<sup>130</sup> Cooper 2007a, pp.96-97.

<sup>131</sup> Cooper 1996, pp.1-19; Wilkinson 2015, pp.58-85.

<sup>132</sup> Cooper 2007a.

<sup>133</sup> Cooper 2007a, pp.44-45.

<sup>134</sup> Cooper 2007a, pp.47, 115-133. This draws on older Roman ideas about the ethical responsibilities of masters for their slaves.

meant that the acts of noblewomen could be a matter of public concern.<sup>135</sup> With such power in her hands, the elite *domina* was encouraged to develop a maternal attitude to all in her household. As *materfamilias* it was her responsibility to guide those under her authority, with the additional expectation that she would one day face the judgement of God for her actions.<sup>136</sup> The *domina* therefore found herself on the front lines of a complex battle to maintain a well-functioning home that was received positively by society and by God. In late antique visual culture the representation of the *dominus* and *domina* as masters of the *domus* became a popular decorative trope. This section will examine the representation of women in the hierarchy of the *domus*.

The ideal of the conjugal pair at the head of their estate is best encapsulated in the so-called Dominus Julius mosaic, from a late fourth century villa in Carthage (Fig 4.23).<sup>137</sup> The centre of the panel is dominated by the villa itself, framed with scenes of the couple attended by slaves and dependents. The upper register is centred on the *domina*, shown in the guise of Venus *genetrix* reclining on a bench. She is approached from both sides by figures who offer her livestock and produce. The central register sees the villa flanked by a servant leading the *dominus* on his horse, and a bare-chested man with dogs and a net for hunting. The bottom register includes both husband and wife in separate scenes: on the left the *domina* leans on a column in the attitude of a Muse as she is offered a basket of roses and a necklace. On the right, the *dominus* is seated on a chair and receives a scroll. The mosaic as a whole depicts the couple's prudent management of a prosperous estate: the different animals and crops refer to bountiful agricultural production, while the well-dressed *rustici* who offer up these goods

<sup>135</sup> Cooper 2007a, p.124. Wealthy heiresses could even raise armies for their husbands.

<sup>136</sup> Cooper 2007a, p.125. On the gendered terms *paterfamilias* and *materfamilias*, see Saller 1999.

<sup>137</sup> M29.

represent thriving dependents who are loyal to their masters.<sup>138</sup> The *domina* embodies the virtues of Venus and Muse, the fertile and beautiful human counterpoint to the abundance of the estate, capable of providing a guiding hand through her intellectual cultivation. The *dominus*, meanwhile, appears as the hunter who exerts his will over animals and nature, and as the diligent and beneficent administrator who oversees his holdings.<sup>139</sup> The mosaic therefore represents a microcosm of good management based on the virtuous and harmonious couple as the core of the *domus*. A similar idea is found on a gold-glass from Rome, which shows in the upper register a couple with a son and daughter being offered produce by small dependent figures, and in the lower register the *dominus* overseeing his business.<sup>140</sup> This is the only example in which a couple's children are included in scenes related to the management of the family estate, perhaps because gold-glass as a medium often included depictions of children. On the whole, children were not considered important in this genre of representation.

The dome mosaic from the villa at Centcelles in Spain demonstrates how secular and religious ideas could be brought together.<sup>141</sup> The decoration of the dome is split into three registers: in the lowest register are scenes of the villa and the hunt, the middle register biblical scenes and the Good Shepherd, and in the inner register scenes of the *domina* and *dominus*.<sup>142</sup> The scenes of the couple are unfortunately rather fragmentary, but again balance both figures in expressing their authority and importance: the *dominus* is shown holding a scroll in one scene and with a jug in another (perhaps at his toilet?) while the *domina* is shown seated in a *cathedra* holding a mappa, and perhaps receiving jewellery.<sup>143</sup> Much like the Dominus Julius mosaic, the

<sup>138</sup> Dossey 2010, pp.83-84 on the clothing of dependents and 'rustics', and p.93 on their clothing as a sign of status for their masters.

<sup>139</sup> Warland (2002, p.33) sees the husband and wife in the classic combination of philosopher and Muse, discussed in relation to sarcophagi in Chapter 3.

<sup>140</sup> GG21.

<sup>141</sup> M63.

<sup>142</sup> For the programme of the dome see Warland 2002, summary in Fig 7.

<sup>143</sup> Another tantalising possibility for both *dominus* and *domina* shown at their toilet as part of elite self-representation, however the condition of the images is far too fragmentary to be certain.

programme of the dome deals with life at the villa under the management of the couple, yet with a clear link between Christian faith and aristocratic dominion. Biblical scenes are sandwiched between images of the estate and the couple, inextricably bound to their authority and providing it with additional visual reference points. The *domina* and *dominus* shepherd their flock like the Good Shepherd does the Christian faithful.<sup>144</sup>

Rarely, the *domina* also makes her way into the political sphere. The famous ‘Stilicho diptych’ shows a couple with their young son (Fig 4.24).<sup>145</sup> Traditionally understood to commemorate an office awarded to Stilicho’s son Eucherius, the woman is therefore identified as Serena, the niece of the emperor Theodosius I. A justification for this identification is indeed the presence of a woman at all, as women are normally absent from such diptychs, which were circulated among the elite to commemorate office-holding.<sup>146</sup> If the couple is Serena and Stilicho, the presence of Serena may be explained by the idea that her aristocratic rank and connections worked to validate the position of half-Vandal Stilicho and their son.<sup>147</sup> The need for such a specific justification, however, is partially challenged by the evidence from a set of lesser-known fourth-century silver consular spoons from Aquileia, which celebrated an official called Eusebius.<sup>148</sup> One of the spoons shows Eusebius seated in a large chair holding a scroll, to his left a woman leaning on a column in a similar fashion to the Dominus Julius mosaic, most likely his wife (Fig 4.25). To the left of the woman is a smaller male figure, perhaps their son or a member of Eucherius’ entourage, and to the far right another unidentified male figure. Wives therefore did have a place in public political imagery, if only rarely, and perhaps only if they possessed significant personal authority. The presence of such political wives may have

<sup>144</sup> For more examples of husband and wife shown together on their estate, see S5; M36.

<sup>145</sup> I4.

<sup>146</sup> On consular diptychs see Delbrück 1929; Volbach 1976; Cameron 1998; 2013.

<sup>147</sup> Hughes 2010, pp.14-28 on Serena’s marriage to Stilicho. Shelton notes that Serena is the only woman shown on such a diptych who is not a personification, Tyche, or reigning empress (1982, p.133).

<sup>148</sup> S4.

also been related to the importance and visibility of imperial women during the Constantinian and Theodosian periods,<sup>149</sup> and illustrates that the perceived good standing of a man's family was still crucial to his success.

As we saw briefly in Chapter 2, Late Antiquity saw the increasing popularity of depicting slaves in visual culture, typically shown serving their master or mistress. This ranges from slaves in toilet scenes shown directly assisting their owners, to processions of slaves carrying objects used as decorative motifs in domestic and funerary wall-paintings.<sup>150</sup> While enslaved people had no agency in terms of their own representation, their images were harnessed to make important points about the families they served. In a fourth century tomb in Silistra in Bulgaria, wall-paintings depict a couple attended by eight slaves (Fig 4.26).<sup>151</sup> On the far wall opposite the entrance the *domina* and *dominus* stand under scenes of peacocks and roses. They are flanked by slaves, one holding a jug and patera, the other a large piece of cloth. On each long side of the chamber are three slaves, each carrying silverware associated with the toilet or items of clothing including the belt, trousers, and cloak of the *dominus*. Dunbabin considers that female slaves carry feminine toilet items and the male slaves garments related to office-holding, thus balancing the virtues of the wife and husband.<sup>152</sup> While this is attractively neat, it is not wholly satisfying: if the associations of the objects are explicitly gendered, why not place all the slaves carrying toilet objects on the side closest to the woman and those carrying clothes on that of the husband? In addition, while five of the slaves are easily gendered by their hair and dress (four male and one female) the other three are somewhat ambiguous and may

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<sup>149</sup> McClanan 2002a, pp.13-28.

<sup>150</sup> Dunbabin 2003a. For a domestic context see P13; P14; P15; P16; P17 at Piazza Armerina and for funerary examples, see P8; P9; P10; P11.

<sup>151</sup> p8.

<sup>152</sup> Dunbabin 2003a, pp.461-462.

not be female as Dunbabin suggests.<sup>153</sup> I contend there is no need for gendered distinctions here: the elaborate clothing, textiles, and bathing silver demonstrate the status of the couple and make reference to the importance of bathing and dressing as discussed in Chapter 2. The clothing items that reference the husband's official positions add an additional level of embellishment that elevate their household.

The fourth-century 'tomb of Eustorgius' from Thessaloniki is somewhat more difficult to understand.<sup>154</sup> On the western wall are four figures: a couple identified as Flavios and his wife Aurelia Eustorgia and two male children (Fig 4.27).<sup>155</sup> The elder child holds a beaker and both touch a jug placed on a table between them. Scholars have been divided as to whether these children represent slaves, or the sons of Flavios and Aurelia.<sup>156</sup> Recently, both Dunbabin and Claudia-Maria Behling have convincingly argued that the boys are slaves, as they do not interact with the couple and appear to be about to serve them from the jug.<sup>157</sup> On the north wall together with a scene of birds and flowers we find another contentious figure, an adult woman also carrying a jug and a beaker, wearing a long tunic and with her hair covered by a kerchief. An inscription identifies her as Aurelia Prokla, "mother of all" (Fig 4.28).<sup>158</sup> Is she too a slave, or a member of the family? If she is a family member why is she so far from the couple, yet if she is a slave why was she important enough to be identified with an inscription? This matter remains unresolved: Dunbabin considers that on balance she is probably a slave, while Behling argues she was probably a family member who had died and been buried elsewhere, shown

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<sup>153</sup> While they all wear long tunics, perhaps indicating they are female, they all have long loose hair, more similar to the 'page-boy' type we see elsewhere. Only one slave has her hair dressed properly in a common late antique female style.

<sup>154</sup> p9.

<sup>155</sup> The tomb draws its common name from a different reading of the inscription made by Stylianos Pelekanidis (1969, p.231), on the inscription see Behling 2015, p.214.

<sup>156</sup> On the historiography of this issue see Behling 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Dunbabin 2003a, p.454; Behling 2015, p.216.

<sup>158</sup> Behling 2015, p.214.

waiting to escort her descendants to Paradise.<sup>159</sup> I suggest that the kerchief Prokla wears is an iconographic staple in the representation of nurses.<sup>160</sup> The identifier “mother of all” may suggest she was a beloved nurse; the affection with which free family members remembered and commemorated servile nurses was so common that it became a social and literary trope.<sup>161</sup> This hypothesis explains how Prokla slides so ambiguously between the status of family member and slave, reflecting the lived experience of enslaved women who served as caregivers.

It is noteworthy that there is so much difficulty in telling the difference between slaves and members of the family. In addition to the boys in the ‘tomb of Eustorgius’ we have also seen that the slaves accompanying the *domina* to the baths at Piazza Armerina are frequently identified as her sons. This ambiguity was probably intentional: wealthy people showed their slaves and dependents as well dressed and taken care of because it reflected well on them as slave-owners. The ideal *domina* was expected to take care of her slaves as she took care of her own children, or face the judgement of God.<sup>162</sup> It is at times like this that we are made acutely aware of the ways in which slaves were used in the visual culture of the elite. Legally slaves had no family and took the name of their former owner if they were freed. While some slaves formed family bonds and had children, technically these marriages were invalid.<sup>163</sup> The brutal reality was that slave families were highly vulnerable, members could be sold at any time, new mothers could be made to nurse free children at the expense of their own, and sexual abuse could introduce unwanted pregnancies.<sup>164</sup> It was therefore impossible for enslaved people to

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<sup>159</sup> Dunbabin 2003a, p.454; Behling 2015, p.217.

<sup>160</sup> Carroll 2018, pp.120, 134.

<sup>161</sup> Sparreboom 2014, pp.149-153. E.g. Odysseus and Eurycleia.

<sup>162</sup> See Garnsey 1997 on obedience and the metaphorical link between children, slaves, and Christians.

<sup>163</sup> See Brooten 2015 on early Christian enslaved families.

<sup>164</sup> Several of Ausonius’ poems describe his relationships with enslaved women, one of whom was probably little more than a girl (Ausonius, *Bissula*). In another he casually describes how his ideal mistress should take his beatings (*Epigram* 89).

live up to the social ideals of a parent or spouse.<sup>165</sup> If Prokla does represent an enslaved nurse, she may have faced just these realities: loved and valued by free members of the household, it is nonetheless likely that they profited from her labour at the expense of any biological children she may have had. In the art of the elite the real families of enslaved people are erased; slaves become an extension of their masters' family. Well dressed and cared for, they are shown happy and content, a mirage designed to further glorify the paternal and maternal virtues of their owners. There may also be a more sinister purpose: research on experiences of modern slavery has suggested that separation from family is used as a tool to "inculcate a slave mentality".<sup>166</sup> In this sense, the erasure of slave families and promotion of them as extensions of their owners' families might represent a tool for the control of enslaved peoples, visually reinforcing the notion that their only valid ties were to their owners.<sup>167</sup>

The impression of all these examples is a preoccupation with representing a domestic idyll in which the conjugal couple live and work in harmony. It is noteworthy that this is understood as the result of the efforts of both partners: women play as important a role in the iconography of the *domus felix* as men. This reinforces the conceptual importance of the conjugal pair in contemporary family ideology and the idea that it took a virtuous husband and a virtuous wife to build and maintain an effective home. The crucial importance of the couple for sustaining a successful household also lends increased emphasis to the anxieties expressed through marriage jewellery. Marital concord was key not only to a happy home, but to one that functioned effectively at an economic and social level. Amuletic rings and necklaces may well have functioned to improve reproductive health and fend off malicious love magic, but they

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<sup>165</sup> Brooten 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Brooten 2015, pp.111-113, recounting the experiences of the Sudanese anti-slavery activist Mende Nazer, who was sold into slavery as a child in 1993.

<sup>167</sup> A similar argument is made by Rose (2008) in relation to idyllic depictions of women with their enslaved attendants. We ought not to understand slaves as mere passive viewers of images but must consider that they actively engaged with the depictions of themselves around them. On this see also Stafford, forthcoming.



could also tend to hopes for economic prosperity, political advancement, and prudent management of slaves and finances, all of which paved the way to Paradise.

#### 4.4.5 The merry widows of Late Antiquity?

High mortality rates and early age at marriage for girls meant that women would commonly outlive their spouses, however harmonious their marriage.<sup>168</sup> Single again, a widow needed to decide whether or not to remarry. Many of the most well-known women from Late Antiquity were widows who refused remarriage, such as Melania the Elder, widowed at only 22, or Macrina, who defined herself as a ‘virgin widow’ after her fiancé died before their wedding.<sup>169</sup> Wealthy widows with independence and money dominate the literary landscape of the period, appearing as quasi-celebrities who were acclaimed for donating their vast fortunes to the poor or to the Church.<sup>170</sup> Much has been made of the opportunities for widows to take on important roles in the early Church and the legal changes that afforded them greater freedoms.<sup>171</sup> Official roles for widows were in decline by the fourth century and I will therefore not discuss them here, but the legal situation deserves closer attention.<sup>172</sup> In 320 Constantine ended the penalties against unmarried and childless people that had been instituted under Augustus, rendering such individuals free to receive inheritances.<sup>173</sup> In parallel, there were some new laws that might be understood to discourage remarriage.<sup>174</sup> At some point in Late Antiquity the requirement for lifelong guardianship for women was removed entirely and the rights of the *ius liberorum* were

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<sup>168</sup> Pudsey 2012, p.157.

<sup>169</sup> Kuefler 2015, p.28; Methuen 1997, p.285.

<sup>170</sup> Kuefler 2015, p.28.

<sup>171</sup> On “enrolled widows” see Eisen 2000, pp.142-157. On legal status see Arjava 1996, pp.167-177; Kuefler 2015. On widows in the early Church in general, see Bremmer 1995. Bremmer considers that “Never was the position of the widow so high in the western world as in this short transitional period between antiquity and the Middle Ages.” (p.50).

<sup>172</sup> Methuen 1997, p.297.

<sup>173</sup> Kuefler 2015, p.31.

<sup>174</sup> Kuefler 2015, p.32.

extended to all women.<sup>175</sup> A woman who remarried, however, could not act as guardian for the children of her first marriage.<sup>176</sup> Dowries, meanwhile, increased as a proportion of family wealth and their value was boosted by betrothal gifts from the groom.<sup>177</sup> Taken together, this meant that on the death of her husband, a woman could find herself in possession of substantial wealth and with the legal ability to dispose of it, an ability strengthened if she did not remarry. In theory this wealth needed to be preserved for her children, but she could benefit from it within her own lifetime and if she was childless it was hers to do with as she pleased.<sup>178</sup> All this has led Mathew Kuefler to declare such women the “Merry Widows of Late Roman Antiquity.”<sup>179</sup>

The apparent freedoms afforded to wealthy widows is highlighted by the disdain in which they were held by certain Church Fathers. In his advice to the widow Furia, Jerome counsels her not to constantly “claim a widow’s liberty” by appearing frequently in public attended by a crowd of eunuchs, thus implying it was common practice for widows to flaunt their riches and independent status.<sup>180</sup> In addition to financial privileges, widowhood also held moral cache: widowhood was understood as a virtuous moral state if the woman remained chaste. For some extreme thinkers, it was essential: only one marriage was acceptable and all others could be considered bigamous.<sup>181</sup> Jerome described widowhood as an escape that ought to be welcomed. In his advice to Furia he describes remarriage as like a dog returning to its own vomit: why

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<sup>175</sup> Guardianship was probably abolished sometime in the early fourth century, but it is doubtful how far tutelage actually impacted women even before this period (Arjava 1996, pp.112-123). See also Kuefler 2015, pp.33-34.

<sup>176</sup> Arjava 1996, p.174. The law was introduced in 390.

<sup>177</sup> Kuefler 2015, pp.37-38.

<sup>178</sup> Arjava 1996, pp.174-175; Kuefler 2015, pp.38-39.

<sup>179</sup> Kuefler 2015.

<sup>180</sup> Jerome *Letter* 54.13, trans. Wright 1933, p.251.

<sup>181</sup> See Harper 2012 p.680 on the indissolubility of marriage, but with the caveat that there was a diversity of opinions within the Church about justifications for remarriage. As Arjava notes, the majority of religious writers did not condemn remarriage for widows outright, and a short-lived law of Majorian in 458 (NMaj 6.5, repealed five years later, NSev 1) even tried to force widows under the age of 40 to remarry (1996, pp.169-171).

seek something foul which you had already successfully purged from your body?<sup>182</sup> The picture that thus dominates our understanding of widowhood is the chaste aristocratic widow who chooses a life devoted to God. Her vast wealth leaves her financially comfortable and able to make substantial benefactions. But just how accurate is this view? Were all widows really so merry?

There is only one depiction of a woman in my corpus who can be identified with certainty as a widow: Turtura. Turtura's tomb painting is located in the catacombs of Commodilla in Rome and probably dates to either the beginning of the sixth century or the mid-late seventh century (Fig 4.29).<sup>183</sup> It is found on the wall of the crypt in which were also buried the chief martyrs of the catacomb: SS Felix and Adauctus. The Virgin sits on a throne with Christ in her lap, flanked by Felix and Adauctus, the latter of whom introduces Turtura to Mary. Below the figural scene is an extensive painted inscription that informs us that she lost her beloved husband Obas at the age of 24 and never remarried. As a widow she acted as both mother and father for her only son, the dedicator of the tomb painting, and died at the age of 60.<sup>184</sup> Turtura is dressed sombrely, the traditional appearance of a woman in mourning, perhaps marking her as an *univira* who never stopped mourning her husband.<sup>185</sup> More generally, it speaks to her modesty and the solemnity of the occasion. Turtura is presented as a pious woman set apart from others by her position next to the saints, not only in the painting but also in the space of the catacomb itself. This accords with the picture of widowhood we are presented with in the literary sources: socially privileged and of special sanctity.

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<sup>182</sup> Jerome *Letter* 54.4.

<sup>183</sup> P35. Compelling arguments are made for both, see Osborne 1985, p.300; Karambinis 2009, p.143.

<sup>184</sup> For a full transcription of the inscription, see Wilpert 1904, pp.166-167.

<sup>185</sup> Olson 2004-2005, pp.96, 100-108, 129. Some women apparently never gave up their mourning dress, such as Octavia on the death of Marcellus (2004-2005, pp.96-97). There were no specific garments associated with mourning: Olson argues that a fringed shawl or head-covering sometimes associated with widows had ritual rather than mourning connotations (pp.117-123) On clothing and mourning more generally in the Roman period, see Hope 2019, and on the "materiality of mourning" Newby and Toulson eds. 2019.

Yet if Turtura's state was so desirable, why are there not more women identified as widows in visual culture?<sup>186</sup> Perhaps there were simply not that many women who remained widows? Or perhaps the status of widows was not valued as highly as we have believed? We must of course remember that in general the representation of the family and its members was focused around the ideal of the nuclear family, in particular the conjugal pair. It is difficult to identify family members beyond this core unit and even children are sometimes confused with slaves. There is little evidence of multiple marriages or blended families: the impression is always one of unity and harmony, even in death. It is of course possible that some of the women shown individually or in family groups were widows, but if so they chose not to emphasise this as part of their identity. Ilaritas, for example, in the *arcosolium* of Nonnosa discussed above, is shown in similar dark clothes to Turtura. We do not know, however, if she outlived her husband and is thus shown in mourning clothes, or if she is simply shown as a very modest and pious woman. For whatever reason, widowhood was apparently of little interest when it came to self-representation.

I believe the keys to understanding this seeming paradox are issues of social status and how we define widowhood. While it is true that demographic pressures meant many women would face widowhood in their lives, there was a difference between experiencing the death of a husband and choosing to live as a holy widow. I would therefore like to draw a distinction between the socio-legal label of 'widow' and the intentional choice of widowhood as a lifestyle with a view towards its religious ramifications. Simply *being* a widow was not the same as *acting* like a widow. Jerome advised Eustochium to avoid women who were widows "by

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<sup>186</sup> There are a number of inscriptions that record the deceased as a *vidua* or *χήρα*, however even these are not common. For inscriptions from Rome from the second century onwards, see Eisen 2000, pp.144-147. On a mosaic inscription for a widow called Matrona from Bennafta in North Africa, see Patout Burns and Jensen 2014, p.431, Note 209, Fig.119.

necessity” rather than choice, contrasting the ‘bad’ widows who enjoyed the freedoms afforded them after the death of their spouse, with the ‘good’ widows who saw it as an opportunity to live a chaste and spiritual life.<sup>187</sup> It is also possible that a woman needed to be widowed relatively early in life in order to reap the social rewards of holy widowhood. Turtura, Melania, and Macrina were all widowed in their twenties, still well in their childbearing years. An inscription commemorating a widow called Regina from Rome states that she was also widowed at 20 and lived 60 years as a widow.<sup>188</sup> Dedicating oneself to chaste widowhood for these women represented a sacrifice of any future children and a potentially long period of modest and sober living. Women who were widowed later in life, or following more than one marriage, may not have been viewed as so exceptional and therefore had more limited access to the status of holy widow.

Dedicating oneself to holy widowhood would not have been an easy life for women without substantial wealth. Jerome criticised young widows who complained about the hardships of living without a husband, claiming such women only wanted to remarry so they could have sex.<sup>189</sup> Yet for women of moderate means, widowhood could present serious difficulties. A heart-breaking papyrus from 554, for example, records a widowed mother who adopted her nine-year-old daughter out to a couple because she could no longer afford to raise her.<sup>190</sup> Widows’ legal petitions frequently protest their mistreatment, thus revealing them to be at least perceived of as vulnerable members of society.<sup>191</sup> Some of these widows owned substantial

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<sup>187</sup> *Letter* 22.16. See Wilkinson 2015 on the performative nature of modesty, in particular with regard to virgins. It was not enough to declare oneself a virgin, one had to act like one as well.

<sup>188</sup> Fourth – fifth century. Eisen 2000, pp.145-146. Blesilla, who died following Jerome’s strict ascetic regime, was widowed after just seven months of marriage (*Letter* 22.15).

<sup>189</sup> *Letter* 54.15.

<sup>190</sup> P.Oxy. XVI 1895, Rowlandson 1998, pp.298-299.

<sup>191</sup> E.g. P.Oxy. I 71 col.2 lines 1-16 (BL 1 314) (AD 303), Rowlandson 1998, pp.239-240: a widow complains about the conduct of her business managers; P.Herm 17 (c. AD 380), Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, p.204: a widow protests against Goths billeted on her house; SB Kopt. 1.295 (c. AD 630), Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, pp.242-243: a widow petitions the local bishop to intercede with the authorities to keep her from losing her house due to unpaid taxes. It should of course be noted that in some cases (especially P.Oxy. I 71) the women making these

property, often the target of those people they complained about, indicating that vulnerability was not just a concern of the poor.<sup>192</sup> No matter how pious she may have been, it may not have been a prudent decision for a woman to remain unmarried if it meant sliding into poverty or exposing herself to potential manipulation.

Evidence from Egyptian census records from the imperial period also illuminate another fact little considered in this context: a significant minority of women remained unmarried following divorce or widowhood for practical reasons, well beyond the rise of Christian ideology.<sup>193</sup> Second-century census records indicate, for example, that widows in their late thirties onwards tended not to remarry.<sup>194</sup> April Pudsey notes that widowers remarried more frequently than widows, and that they also tended to marry young women. There was therefore a lack of older, suitable husbands for older single women, which created a relatively large population of single adult women, a well-attested demographic pattern in other pre-modern Mediterranean populations.<sup>195</sup> In this context widowhood was enforced rather than chosen. Such pre-existing diversity in remarriage and a relatively substantial number of single older women may have contributed to the ambiguous status of older widows. This supports the argument that youth and intentionality were key to reaping the social rewards of pious and chaste widowhood.

In summary, it appears that while widowhood was a fact of life for many women in Late Antiquity, the respected, high-status position of holy widow was only accessible to a few. In order to qualify, a woman needed the requisite wealth to support herself and publicise her virtue

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petitions understood that they could gain sympathy by playing on their 'natural weakness' as women and vulnerability as widows.

<sup>192</sup> Widows often appear frequently in North African documents from the 490s selling off their land, presumably to support themselves (Arjava 1996, p.172). John Chrysostom describes a young widow as an unfortified city vulnerable to attack (*Letter to a Young Widow* 2).

<sup>193</sup> Arjava 1996, p.167; Pudsey 2012.

<sup>194</sup> Arjava 1996, p.167.

<sup>195</sup> Pudsey 2012, pp.158, 174.

by giving it away others. The rejection of material wealth, and by extension its possession in the first place, have already been identified as common prerequisites for sainthood. In order to be holy, poverty needed to be voluntary.<sup>196</sup> In addition, a woman probably needed to be widowed young, and to intentionally and publicly dedicate herself to the lifestyle of a holy widow. In this sense, widowhood was not so much a marital status as a cultivated performance, a conscious choice to enact a specific identity. Much like asceticism, the impact of holy widowhood has been significantly overstated. It is therefore not surprising that we do not meet more of these women in the visual sources, they must have been celebrities indeed.

#### 4.5 Brides of Christ: Beyond the Family?

Beyond marriage and childrearing, there yet remained another lifestyle open to young women and men: dedication to virginity. In theory, asceticism represented complete alienation from the family, in that its core obligations of celibacy, poverty, and obedience were all connected to the renunciation of family life. Celibacy rejected marriage and children, poverty rejected inheritance and property, and obedience to religious superiors replaced obedience to a parent or spouse.<sup>197</sup> Yet ascetic practice was still framed around familial language, perhaps most famously in the case of virgins as ‘brides of Christ’.<sup>198</sup> Asceticism and monasticism had its origins in the household, either through the progressive ‘conversion’ of biological family members or through groups of male and female ascetics living together.<sup>199</sup> In this early period asceticism was highly flexible and often based around cohabiting monastics in urban areas.<sup>200</sup> In the fourth century it became progressively institutionalised with the acceptance of

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<sup>196</sup> Patlagean 1983, p.103; Davies 2013, p.155.

<sup>197</sup> Talbot 1990, p.119.

<sup>198</sup> Talbot 1990, p.119.

<sup>199</sup> Elm 1994, see e.g. pp.374-378.

<sup>200</sup> Elm 1994, p.376.

Christianity and eventually regulated into patterns of what we now understand as traditional gender-segregated monasticism, located at some distance from lay society.<sup>201</sup> Even within these segregated monastic communities, family structures remained prominent: monastics simply exchanged their biological family for a spiritual one, placing themselves as children under the pseudo-parental care of the mother/father superior.<sup>202</sup> The monastery as an institution then took over many of the functions of the family in terms of economic and social care.<sup>203</sup>

These spiritual families could find themselves at odds with biological families when related monastics entered the same community. It was common to enter the same institution as an older relative and some families all joined together. Such biological ties could lead to disagreements concerning favouritism and monastic leaders showed great interest in trying to control such relationships within their spiritual families.<sup>204</sup> The idea(l) of the monastic spiritual family was to promote harmony – like the secular family – but with the specific goal of attaining salvation for its members.<sup>205</sup> This did not, however, preclude the monastic family from utilising the same asymmetric hierarchies as the earthly family. Rebecca Krawiec has shown how Shenoute, the head of the White Monastery Federation in Egypt, cultivated patriarchal structures in order to enforce male authority.<sup>206</sup> Shenoute casts female monastics both as mother-figures with a duty of care to others, and as children who owe their obedience to him as the *paterfamilias*, thereby manipulating family structures to impose discipline and maintain authority.<sup>207</sup> Female ascetics

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<sup>201</sup> Elm has linked this to doctrinal changes concerning the body following the council of Nicaea. The incarnation of Christ increased the importance of the body in ascetic practice – it was no longer the goal to transcend the body but to transform it. When such significance is placed on the body its external attributes (such as gender) come to the fore. Societal constraints on gender thus came to bear on ascetic practice more forcefully (1994, pp.378-380).

<sup>202</sup> Talbot 1990, pp.120-121.

<sup>203</sup> Talbot 1990, p.121; Krawiec 2002, p.135.

<sup>204</sup> Talbot 1990, pp.121-123; Krawiec 2002, esp. pp.161-174; Pudsey 2015. On monasticism and family strategies, in particular child donation, see Vuolanto 2005.

<sup>205</sup> Krawiec 2002, p.134.

<sup>206</sup> Krawiec 2002, pp.133-141.

<sup>207</sup> Krawiec 2002, pp.137-138, 141. Shenoute uses the gender-neutral term “brethren” to justify the women’s corporal punishment. The language of childhood is used in reference to monastics of both sexes in order to justify the place of such punishment in the monastery in the first place.



were therefore not alienated from ideas of the family; such hierarchies organised society at large and it was indeed the very ‘naturalness’ of the family that made it so desirable and effective in configuring monastic life.<sup>208</sup> In the rest of this section we will consider if and how this was articulated through the representation of ascetic women.

In his treatise *On the Dress of Virgins* Cyprian declared: “A virgin ought not only to be so, but also to be perceived and believed to be so: no one on seeing a virgin should be in any doubt as to whether she is one.”<sup>209</sup> His treatise only gives vague indications of what a virgin might look like, preferring to emphasise what *not* to wear.<sup>210</sup> For Cyprian it is simply an issue of modesty: to be a virgin one must not only be continent, but modest in the way one acts and dresses.<sup>211</sup> The internal state of virtue will therefore radiate outwards, leaving the onlooker with no doubt as to the virginal state of the woman in question. Jerome presents us with a similar situation: in his letters to Eustochium, Laeta, and Demetrias on living the virginal life, he is also frustratingly vague when it comes to physical self-representation. Virgins ought to dress modestly but neatly, as he considers appearing too shabby as also being attention-seeking.<sup>212</sup> Yet clothing was clearly integral to this lifestyle: when Demetrias devoted herself to virginity, for example, Jerome described how she exchanged her fine clothes for a coarse tunic and cloak, thus marking her transition to her new life.<sup>213</sup> This *mutatio vestis* could entail receiving new clothing on entering a monastery or the veiling ceremony conducted by a bishop.<sup>214</sup> However, we still have little idea of what this clothing actually entailed beyond that it should be simple

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<sup>208</sup> Krawiec 2002, pp.134-135.

<sup>209</sup> Cyprian, *On the Dress of Virgins* 5, trans. Wallis 1886.

<sup>210</sup> Essentially, virgins should not dress like married women, however he also gives no indication of what this really entails.

<sup>211</sup> Cyprian *On the Dress of Virgins* 5.

<sup>212</sup> *Letter* 22.13, 27, 29; *Letter* 107.5, 10; *Letter* 130.5, 18.

<sup>213</sup> *Letter* 130.5.

<sup>214</sup> Krawiec 2002, p.24. This could also be the progressive adoption of ascetic dress, as in the case of Melania the Younger (Krawiec 2009, pp.137-139). I do not include the famous ‘investiture of a virgin’ fresco here (P32) as there is no conclusive evidence that this is what it depicts.

and modest.<sup>215</sup> This creates problems for identifying ascetic women in the visual record: how can we tell a modest laywoman from a dedicated virgin?

There are currently no securely identified depictions of ordinary ascetic women before the sixth century. Funerary epitaphs do survive for such women, but they do not include depictions. One example from Tabarka commemorates two ascetics on the same panel: Privata and Victoria, *consecratae virginitatis*.<sup>216</sup> The inscription describes their spiritual victories in detail, but leaves no space for an image. A tantalizing mosaic from the same chapel commemorates a woman called Pompeia Maxima as *dei famula* – handmaid of God (Fig 4.30).<sup>217</sup> This language is much more ambiguous: was Pompeia also a dedicated virgin, or an especially pious laywoman? Her portrait is damaged but shows her wearing a dark tunic and white mantle draped over her head, with little to differentiate her from other women's funerary commemorations. If she was an ascetic, it does not seem to be marked iconographically. It is not until the end of our period that we find certain depictions of ascetic women, all from monastic contexts. We have already met two of these in Chapter 3: the architectural fragment depicting an unknown monastic woman from the White Monastery Federation and the wall-painting of Ama Rachel from Bawit.<sup>218</sup> The unknown monastic from the White Monastery wears a dark tunic and mantle covering her head, while watercolour reconstructions of the monks' clothing elsewhere on the fresco indicate that Ama Rachel's clothes were muted tones of white, cream, or grey, her nimbus and book bright orange, red, and blue. Once again, there is nothing specific to mark these women as ascetics.

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<sup>215</sup> Jerome advises Laeta that Paula's clothing should be warm, homemade, and cover her body (*Letter* 107.10). Krawiec (2009, p.133) also notes that female monastic clothing is marked as drab and cheap. A North African council mandated in 475 that women taking the veil should be consecrated wearing sombre vestments (Coon 1997, p.38). Studies of Egyptian textiles with inscriptions indicating (male) monastic ownership are indeed simple with relatively little ornamentation in comparison to other textiles (Rooijakkers 2017).

<sup>216</sup> Patout Burns and Jensen 2014, Fig.144.

<sup>217</sup> M40, Downs 2007, pp.215-219.

<sup>218</sup> Misc9; P4.

We find more monastics on a silver votive cross dated to the sixth to seventh centuries.<sup>219</sup> Inscriptions tell us that it was commissioned by a nun called Theodote for the monastery of Apa Shenoute – the White Monastery Federation – assumedly her monastic community (Figs 4.31-32).<sup>220</sup> It also mentions two other figures: Ama Mannou “the archimandrite”, presumably the head of the women’s community, and Ama Matermoute, interpreted as her second in command.<sup>221</sup> The cross also bears depictions of a number of monastics, most probably Ama Mannou, Apa Shenoute, and Theodote herself. On the recto, alongside the dedicatory inscription we find a woman in the *orans* pose holding two candles positioned below the crucified Christ. This seems the most likely candidate for Theodote, shown in the act of making an offering. On the verso are three angels, Apa Shenoute (identified by an inscription) and the bust of a woman holding what appears to be a baton. While it has been suggested she is the Virgin, I would argue she more probably represents Ama Mannou as she is directly below her name.<sup>222</sup> Under the bust is the inscription naming Ama Matermoute, however it would seem unlikely to depict the second in command and not the abbess herself. While the baton may indicate a symbol of authority, perhaps linked to corporal punishment as discussed above, both Theodote and Mannou are shown in the similar plain standard dress of tunic and mantle.

The only indicators that these women are ascetics are their accompanying inscriptions and presence in monastic settings. In light of this, we might consider that it was more important that the women all look like *each other*, even if this meant sharing some facets of their appearance with laywomen. A rite of passage upon entering the White Monastery involved the

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<sup>219</sup> S13.

<sup>220</sup> MacCoull 1996, p.13.

<sup>221</sup> Entitled *deutarios*. On this title see Coquin et al 1989, p.79; MacCoull 1996, pp13-14.

<sup>222</sup> One of the authors among Coquin et al posits the figure as the Virgin Mary, but admits that this reading is simplistic (Coquin et al. 1989, p.78). MacCoull (1996, pp.13, 16) considers Ama Mannou to be the correct identification.

would-be monastic exchanging their clothes for new ones produced by the monastery and held as common property.<sup>223</sup> There was nothing innately special about the clothes they received beyond the fact that they represented a transition, an integration into the community. By putting on this new ‘uniform’, the same as worn by everyone else in the monastery, the identity of the initiate could be regulated and controlled.<sup>224</sup> Any inadvertent similarities with lay clothing were not as important as the intentional sameness within the community. Figures of authority such as Mannou and Rachel might take additional attributes such as books or staffs to mark their status, but their clothing was necessarily the same as their fellow sisters. Perhaps there are therefore many other ascetic women in this corpus, but we are simply unable to recognise them outside of these community contexts.

Anxieties about the ambiguity of female monastic dress would be a recurring issue for centuries. Even monastic rules written for the purpose of proscribing the boundaries of female monastic life wrestled with these issues. The Rule written by Caesarius of Arles for his sister Caesaria’s community, for example, stipulated that only nuns who had lived for a full year at the convent could wear the monastic habit, but was not explicit about what this entailed.<sup>225</sup> It only states that clothing ought not to be conspicuous, neither too dark nor bright in colour, but undyed or milky-white. Restrictions were placed on embroidery and purple dyes.<sup>226</sup> When Caesarius reissued his revised Rule (the *Recapitulatio*) 22 years later in 534, he added that clothing should not be trimmed with purple or with beaver fur.<sup>227</sup> Apparently the nuns were taking advantage of the ambiguity in what exactly their appearance ought to entail. This would continue to be an issue well into the Renaissance and beyond, as ascetic women used their

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<sup>223</sup> Krawiec 2002, p.24.

<sup>224</sup> Krawiec 2009, p.131.

<sup>225</sup> Tilley 2018, p.85; *Regula Virginum* 3-4.

<sup>226</sup> Tilley 2018, p.86; *Regula Virginum* 44-45.

<sup>227</sup> Tilley 2018, p.86. *Recapitulatio* 55.

clothing as a means to push boundaries, assert individuality, and express status over their sisters.<sup>228</sup>

Returning to the question of family, none of these examples conforms exactly with the iconography considered in the sections previously. In some ways, however, they do relate to the ways in which family ideology was manipulated in monastic settings. Theodote chose to commemorate her monastic superiors Mannou, Shenoute, and Matermoute in place of parental figures, while the frieze and fresco both depict extended monastic families dominated by men, no doubt reflecting real patriarchal hierarchies. For Ama Rachel, the parade of holy figures made up of monastics, saints, and angels gives the sense of a semi-mythological or imagined spiritual family for living monastics to look towards. While this may have been the ideal, graffiti from the complex are replete with references to women's relationships with each other, often formulated through mother-daughter bonds.<sup>229</sup> We do not know if these represent biological connections or monastic ones, but clearly women monastics had a range of choices when it came to locating themselves within familial narratives. These graffiti also reveal a certain disconnect from the institutional ideal of the monastic family dominated by remote male authority figures as we see in the wall-painting. They show the concerns of women monastics for those around them, reflecting more immediate bonds with those whom they lived alongside, or left upon entering the monastery. In this way they encapsulate the tension between the ideal spiritual family and the realities of communal life.

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<sup>228</sup> See, for example, the complaints about the sort of aristocratic clothing (or even carnival dress) worn by nuns in Venetian convents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Laven 2002, pp.5, 101, 137-138).

<sup>229</sup> Maspero and Drioton 1931, e.g. "Oh God, watch over me, Marihêou, the daughter of Anne(?) ... the mother of the monastery ... of Apa Apollô ... Amen, so it be. Jesus Christ..." (No.504), see also Nos 492, 508. The dominance of women's names and several mentions of "mothers" of the monastery suggests this complex was the women's section. All names attested are female bar one, referencing "My brother Joseph, son of Ama Theodote" (No.488).

## 4.6 Conclusions

This journey through the female life course has shown that women's relational identities within the family and the household were dynamic and fragile, requiring constant (re)negotiation in relation to their age and socio-legal status. For girls, gendered expectations started young and loomed larger as they approached puberty and marriage. Increasing levels of supervision were necessary at this dangerous juncture, at which point control of body and mind were crucial. Late antique women were most visible in their roles as adults, in particular as wives and *dominae*. The widespread desire to represent elite lifestyles in visual culture no doubt contributed to this trend, but it may also reflect the increasing focus legal changes placed on the nuclear family, cementing the conjugal pair as the basic family unit and the anchor of the household. The roles of widow and virgin which are so highly valued in the literary sources are far less prominent. This lack of visibility is almost certainly partly due to our inability to recognise such women, yet the clear imbalance also highlights the different perspective offered by visual evidence. Surviving literary sources that form the basis for modern scholarship are dominated by ascetic men, while visual and material evidence is primarily the product of people whose lives continued to follow patterns of secular family life. It is thus hardly surprising that these sources are dominated by wives and mothers. Far from offering a backlash against ascetic sensibilities, these depictions attest to the easy continuity of family life in contemporary culture and women as key players in its realisation.

This chapter has also highlighted the importance of women's relationships with other women within family groups. Mother-daughter relationships are prominent in the visual evidence in a way that mother-son or father-daughter relationships are not. This perhaps reflects a nexus of gendered social expectations. Firstly, girls' lives were tied more tightly to their homes and

families than boys' were, while expectations of sexual morality required greater parental oversight and control. The responsibility for bringing up children, in particular girls, was traditionally the obligation of women, and motherhood was a defining factor of womanhood to a much greater degree than fatherhood was for men.<sup>230</sup> The mother-daughter relationship was therefore particularly important for defining what it meant to be successful as both a girl and an adult woman.<sup>231</sup> On a personal level, the practical realities of these ideals meant that mothers and daughters probably spent a lot of time together, and in some cases developed bonds that persisted long into adulthood. Given the relatively high male mortality rate and good chances of widowhood, developing strong relationships with female family members could have been key to thriving when male support systems were gone. In Pudsey's study of Egyptian census records, for example, 18% of households which included divorced or widowed women were all-female households in which women lived with daughters or sisters.<sup>232</sup> For ascetic women, the game was both the same and different: male authority figures were influential but the everyday reality of single-sex community life placed the most emphasis on their fellow sisters. Enforced segregation could even work to their advantage: the women of the White Monastery may have been under the rule of a man, but they constantly tested his reach and sought to renegotiate their own roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Sidonius Apollinaris apparently travelled with his daughter Roscia without his wife Papianilla, but mentions that she was cared for by her grandmother and aunts (*Letter* 5.16.5). While fathers were expected to marry off their daughters, they were otherwise entirely in the charge of their mothers (Vuolanto 2016b, p.48). On father-son relationships see Shaw 1987, pp.19-27; Vuolanto 2016b, pp.43-45, 49, 51-52.

<sup>231</sup> John Chrysostom on mothers as role models for daughters: *Homily 9 on 1 Timothy*, *Homily 10 on Colossians*, *On Virginity* 73; Vuolanto 2016b, p.48; see also Chapter 3.

<sup>232</sup> Pudsey 2012, pp.165-166, Table 9.3. The majority of single women lived with adult kin, usually sons/daughters or siblings (pp.159-161).

<sup>233</sup> Krawiec (2002, pp.31-50, 73-91) describes how evidence of disciplinary crises involving the women's community emphasise their physical separation and their ability to use this to create and maintain their own internal power structures. See also Wilfong 2002b on women monastics' sexual relationships with each other at the White Monastery.

## Chapter 5

### Pray for the Patron: Women and Patronage in a Changing World

#### 5.1 Introduction

*The wife of Namatius built the church of Saint Stephen in the suburb outside the walls of Clermont-Ferrand. She wanted it to be decorated with coloured frescoes. She used to hold in her lap a book from which she would read stories of events which happened long ago, and tell the workmen what she wanted painted on the walls. One day as she was sitting in the church and reading these stories, there came a poor man to pray. He saw her in her black dress, a woman already far advanced in age. He thought that she was one of the needy, so he produced a piece of bread, put it in her lap and went on his way. She did not scorn the gift of this poor man, who had not understood who she was. She took it, and thanked him, and put it on one side. She ate it instead of her other food and each day she received a blessing from it until it was all eaten up.<sup>1</sup>*

In this episode from Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*, we are confronted with two very different kinds of late antique patronage. The wife of Bishop Namatius of Clermont (446-462) represents 'traditional' civic patronage: she constructs a building and decorates it with frescoed images. Yet as she instructs the workmen, a poor man enters the church, and mistaking her for a needy widow, offers her a piece of bread. She eats the bread and receives blessings. The

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* II.17, Thorpe 1974, pp.131-132.



actions of the old man underscore the woman's virtues: her simple dress marks her as humble, as does her willingness to accept the offered food. However his gift of bread also represents an act of Christian charity. The gifts of the rich woman and the poor man are thus placed in opposition to each other, with the old man's humble piece of bread coming out on top. While the woman's church might be sumptuously decorated, it is the bread that produces miracles. In a vignette reminiscent of the Biblical tale of the widow's mite, true generosity is not measured in absolute worth, but is relative to each individual's ability to give.

The patterns of gift-giving and their motivations outlined in this passage tell us much about how benefaction and its commemoration changed in Late Antiquity. In earlier periods, wealthy individuals and families engaged in the practice of *euergetism*, fulfilling public offices and liturgies, constructing or restoring buildings, giving games and feasts, and making distributions of money. In return, they might be honoured by the local council with an invitation to a public meal, a seat in the theatre, an honorific inscription, gold crown, proclamation, state funeral, or the erection of an honorific statue.<sup>2</sup> Benefactors demonstrated the civic virtues of generosity and responsibility, which in turn crafted their identities as model elite citizens. These identities were publicly recognised through civic rewards which imparted prestige on the honorand and their family, increased their visibility within the community, and perpetuated their memory.<sup>3</sup> The involvement of wealthy people in civic life was thus a key part of maintaining both elite identities and the functioning of the community. The difference between this system and that illustrated by Gregory is stark: a wealthy Roman who built a temple would certainly not have been honoured with a crust of bread and a blessing imparted by a pauper. In Gregory's text we are invited instead to consider a gift as a conduit for divine blessings and heavenly rewards

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<sup>2</sup> Fejfer 2008, p.49. For an overview of civic patronage in the Roman world, see Nicols 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Fejfer 2008, p.48.

rather than earthly acclaim. Under the old system of *euergetism*, wealthy Roman women found relatively high levels of public visibility through engagement in civic munificence. What happened to these women as giving transformed in Late Antiquity? This chapter examines what visual evidence can tell us about how women's patronage developed and what constituted the ideal Christian patroness.

## 5.2 Women and Civic Life in the Roman Period

The involvement of women in *euergetism* during the imperial period has received a significant amount of scholarly attention.<sup>4</sup> While women's access to public roles and offices was more limited than men's, opportunities to serve as priestesses were relatively widely available and temples in general benefited from the lion's share of women's benefactions.<sup>5</sup> Both status and location were important factors for female patrons: women appear later and in fewer numbers than their male colleagues, were confined to more densely urbanised and prosperous 'Romanised' areas, and tended to be of a higher social status.<sup>6</sup> Involvement in patronage in the West, for example, was highest in Italy, North Africa, southern and eastern Spain, and Narbonese Gaul, followed by other areas of Spain and Gaul, the Balkans, and the northwest

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<sup>4</sup> On women's patronage in the Hellenistic and Roman East, see Van Bremen 1996. On the Late Republican and early Augustan periods, see Cooley 2013. For Livia in particular as a potential role model for female patrons, see Longfellow 2014/2015. Van Bremen takes a pessimistic view of women's patronage, arguing that wealthy women were essentially taxed by their communities (1996, *passim*, esp. pp.55-56). This perspective was critiqued in Pomeroy's 1998 review of Van Bremen, on the grounds that she takes too little account of literary, papyrological and material sources. More recently, the extensive work of Emily Hemelrijk on women's patronage in the West has emphasised its diversity and the ways in which women leveraged their social position where they could (Hemelrijk 2004b; 2013; 2014; 2015b).

<sup>5</sup> At least in the west. Hemelrijk (2013, p.73) with temples at 56%, followed by baths, aqueducts, roads, arches, theatres and amphitheatres. This preference for the religious sphere followed general patterns of civic building, rather than women's preferences. Women's benefactions tended not to be overtly political: they did not finance embassies to Rome, build *curiae*, or relieve grain shortages, and only rarely did they fund city walls or fortifications (Hemelrijk 2013, pp.73-74; Hemelrijk 2015b, p.342).

<sup>6</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, p.342. We should note, however, that there is less data available for more rural areas.

provinces.<sup>7</sup> Local patterns also persisted within these regions: civic priestesses and women awarded the title of ‘patroness’ of a city or *collegia* were predominantly found in Italy and North Africa. So-called mothers of *collegia*, meanwhile, were most common in Italy and the Balkan and Danube regions.<sup>8</sup>

The city of Rome itself was dominated by the Senate and imperial family, and therefore saw very little patronage by ordinary women, even elites.<sup>9</sup> Female authority may have been more acceptable outside the capital, where communities needed to be more flexible in their attitude to patronage and less hostile to female power.<sup>10</sup> In terms of social position, city patronesses were almost exclusively of the very highest status, whereas male city patrons could hail from a wider range of backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> In general, women’s opportunities for civic involvement required greater negotiation and accommodation than men’s, but they offered access to similar forms of recognition and acclaim. Publicly prominent women were celebrated for their munificence with public statue honours filtered through the gendered virtues of beauty, modesty, and fertility.<sup>12</sup> The image of the good citizen could have a female face and civic generosity was added to the list of desirable traits for wealthy women.

It is difficult to judge what proportion of patronage was performed by women, and this too probably also varied regionally. It has been estimated, however, that in the West around a tenth

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<sup>7</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.18, 342. Percentage of inscriptions attesting women’s civic roles: Italy 46%; Africa Proconsularis and Numidia 25%; southern and eastern Spain 13%; Gallia Narbonensis 5%; the Mauretania 3%; Balkan and Danube regions 3%; Hispania Lusitania 2%. The remaining regions of Germania Superior, Gallia Lugdunensis and Aquitania, Britannia, Gallia Belgica, and Germania Inferior preserve together just 21 inscriptions.

<sup>8</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, p.341. The co-optation of women as patrons of cities has been particularly well studied, revealing the practice as largely confined to central Italy and North Africa from the late second to early fourth centuries (Nicols 1989; Hemelrijk 2004b).

<sup>9</sup> Boatwright 2011; Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.339-340.

<sup>10</sup> Hemelrijk 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, p.342.

<sup>12</sup> Hemelrijk 2013.

of patrons sought by *collegiae* were women, while in third-century North Africa women made up about one in eight city patrons.<sup>13</sup> The erection of an honorific statue was the most prestigious way in which to be commemorated for both sexes, and it is predicted that around 10% of honorific statues in municipal towns were presented to women.<sup>14</sup> Set up on an inscribed base in a public place, statue monuments marked significant features of the urban landscape.<sup>15</sup> The erection of honorific statues for women also followed regional and local patterns. In the west, where the practice has been best studied, statues are found most commonly in Italy, followed by North Africa.<sup>16</sup> In the cities of Italy, women's statuary tends to be found in theatres, sanctuaries, and family building projects, however in North Africa we find a higher concentration in *fora*.<sup>17</sup>

The Roman period thus provides rich evidence for women's involvement in civic life and their visual representation in the form of honorific statuary. This statuary advertised both the individual woman honoured and a package of feminine virtues associated with ideal citizenship. So what happened in Late Antiquity, when the imperial administration rose to prominence over local councils, *euergetism* slumped, economies went into decline, urban landscapes began to change, and portrait statuary gradually ceased to be produced? What was the fate of women's patronage and its commemoration?

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<sup>13</sup> MacMullen 1980, pp.211; Nicols 1989, p.127.

<sup>14</sup> MacMullen 1980, pp.211; Fejfer 2008, p.331. On the erection of honorific statuary see Fejfer 2008, pp.16-70.

<sup>15</sup> Fejfer 2008, p.18.

<sup>16</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.285-286.

<sup>17</sup> Hemelrijk 2015b, pp.287-289; Murer 2017. Murer notes that in second-century North Africa women connected to the imperial family could outcompete local men for prime locations in the *forum*, but that their increased presence in these spaces did not indicate increased political or civic importance. Rather, the space itself was becoming less connected to the political functions and more honorific statues of local notables in general were being set up there (pp.90-134). Boatwright (2011) makes a similar argument for the increasing images of women in the *Forum Romanum* in the second and third centuries. On public monuments for women in North Africa, see also Witschel 2013.

### 5.3 Civic Engagement and the Statue Habit in Late Antiquity

In Late Antiquity, the practice of *euergetism* underwent fundamental changes and new forms of giving emerged. Along with these developments went a general decline in the statue habit and changes in who received the honorific statues that were still erected. The decline of *euergetism* and the statue habit profoundly impacted opportunities for civic engagement and the creation of prestigious public images. Yet just as in previous centuries, these patterns varied regionally, as well as along the lines of wealth and status. After we have discussed what we can learn from the decline in honorific statuary we will move on to a form of commemoration that was on the rise: the donor portrait.

In Late Antiquity, traditional civic munificence was in decline: wealthy citizens were less and less interested in financing major buildings and spectacles like theatres, bathhouses, and games, which had been so prominent during the High Empire.<sup>18</sup> This was partly because such projects were becoming less desirable and partly because the local administrative system into which elites had been organised was changing. Soaring inflation during the third century and administrative reorganisation under Diocletian and Constantine meant that local elites faced financial pressures and increasingly heavy administrative burdens.<sup>19</sup> Large numbers of wealthy men who in previous centuries would have taken up roles in their local council and engaged in competitive *euergetism* with their peers now sought to avoid these duties. This could be achieved through entering the imperial administration, the army, the clergy, or the senatorial class.<sup>20</sup> The number of people seeking to avoid serving on councils is demonstrated by the extensive attempts of imperial legislation to force them to do so, measures which seem to have

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<sup>18</sup> Whittow 1990, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Whittow 1990, pp.7-8; Liebeschuetz 1992, pp.6-8; Liebeschuetz 2001, p.3.

<sup>20</sup> Jones 1964, pp.737-763; Liebeschuetz 2001, pp.104-136.

been largely ineffective.<sup>21</sup> While local councils in some form continued to exist in a few places into the early medieval period, by the sixth century their importance for civic administration was greatly reduced.<sup>22</sup>

In tandem with the decline in local councils went the rise of bishops as leading figures.<sup>23</sup> Civic administration was therefore taken over by the loose cooperation of bishops, the clergy, some lay officials, and important members of leading families.<sup>24</sup> Instead of patronising amphitheatres or stadia, this new group of leaders built monasteries, hospitals, and particularly churches.<sup>25</sup> The overall picture is therefore one of relative continuity: bishops tended to come from the same kind of social background as the local landowning elites, meaning that power still went hand in hand with social status, while building projects continued under a new form.<sup>26</sup> One important change, however, which we will discuss further below, was that these transformations meant opportunities for patronage were extended to a wider section of society. Many churches were decorated and furnished with funds from multiple donors who each contributed a limited sum towards part of the mosaic carpet or a piece of liturgical silver.<sup>27</sup> Prosperous laypeople of more limited means could engage in civic benefaction as never before.

As civic benefaction transformed, a new type of munificence was on the rise that would eventually take over as the primary form of community giving: Christian charity. In contrast to *euergetism*, the intended beneficiaries of charity were not the citizenry of a city or town, but the poor.<sup>28</sup> The ostensible reason for providing such relief was not to gain earthly prestige, but

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<sup>21</sup> Jones 1964, pp.737-757; Laniado 2002, pp.3-26.

<sup>22</sup> Whittow 1990, pp.10-12.

<sup>23</sup> Liebeschuetz 1992, pp.14, 18-19, 35-36; Liebeschuetz 2001, pp.137-168.

<sup>24</sup> Whittow 1990, pp.21-29. On the patronage activities of bishops' wives in sixth-century Gaul see Brennan 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Whittow 1990, p.29.

<sup>26</sup> Whittow 1990, p.29; Laniado 2002, esp. p.253.

<sup>27</sup> See Jacobs 2020, pp.40-43 on the cost of such donations and the status of patrons.

<sup>28</sup> It is wrong to say that pagans offered no support to those in need, rather they lacked an ideology of charity or almsgiving present in Judaism and Christianity. See Finn 2006, pp.110-113; Brown 2012, pp.59-61.

to achieve salvation and rewards in the next life.<sup>29</sup> This represented a form of reciprocal giving in which the wealthy gave to the poor and in return the poor would provide efficacious prayers for the soul of the giver. The poor thus represented Christ-like figures that would intervene on behalf of a benefactor.<sup>30</sup> This intervention was both personal and direct: the *Apostolic Constitutions* stipulated that the bishop should tell the needy the name of their benefactor, so they could pray for them by name.<sup>31</sup> Paulinus of Nola, praising the alms distributed by his friend Pammachius on the death of his wife Paulina, remarked that “the voices of the poor are readily directed to the ear of God.”<sup>32</sup>

The growth of charity represented increased focus on alms-giving, church construction, and giving to church institutions. This fundamentally changed who was eligible to act as a donor: each person gave what they could afford, making even the most humble offering worthy of receiving heavenly rewards. Rewards were based on good intentions and the relative value of the gift, rather than on absolute value.<sup>33</sup> In reality, of course, matters were not so simple. Charitable giving still had the potential to offer similar honour and prestige as traditional *euergetism*. It has been noted that while Christian charity redefined the poor as active subjects in a reciprocal exchange, it also redefined the character of donors. Loving the destitute and compassion for the poor became important virtues signalling justice and generosity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Finn 2006, pp.176-220 on the meanings attributed to almsgiving; Canetti 2014, p.339.

<sup>30</sup> Finn 2006, pp.176-220, especially p.180 on almsgiving as a form of gift exchange and pp.182-188 on the identification of the poor with Christ; Canetti 2014, p.339.

<sup>31</sup> AC 3.4.2-3; Finn 2006, p.180.

<sup>32</sup> Paulinus of Nola *Letter* 13 to Pammachius, 14. Translation Walsh 1967, pp.130-131. Paulinus talks of how the alms are in turn “poured over” Paulina by Christ, refreshing her soul as earthly food is transformed into “heavenly nourishment”.

<sup>33</sup> Canetti 2014, p.340. Canetti describes Christian charity as grounded in a “divine economy” that worked with “salvific capital” counted by a “divine banker”. See Finn 2006, pp.90-115 on almsgiving by monks and laypeople, emphasising that all Christians were called to charity, thus differentiating the practice from traditional *euergetism*.

<sup>34</sup> Finn 2006, pp.188-190.

Providing alms for the needy and giving to the church justified the possession of wealth by the rich.<sup>35</sup> Generosity became a mark of good leadership, a kind of patronage over the destitute.<sup>36</sup>

The decline of traditional modes of civic munificence went hand in hand with the decline of the honorific statuary that had celebrated it. While the statue habit was relatively healthy in the fourth century, it was greatly reduced by the fifth century, and in the sixth had all but disappeared outside of Constantinople.<sup>37</sup> Patterns of commemoration also changed: statues to members of the imperial family and imperial office holders increased as a proportion of the total, while statues to civic notables, cultural figures, and athletes all decreased.<sup>38</sup> Of the c.1350 statue inscriptions where the status of the honorand is known, well over half (nearly 800) are for emperors or other imperial figures, and nearly 380 for imperial office holders.<sup>39</sup> Only around 130 are for (male) civic notables, less than 10% of the total.<sup>40</sup> Once again regional patterns are prevalent. Places that had a strong tradition of erecting honorific statuary held onto the practice for longer, such as Italy, North Africa, Greece, and Asia. In areas where it had never really caught on, the decline was steeper, such as in Britain, Gaul, Egypt, and the Roman Near East.<sup>41</sup> The lack of late antique statuary from the prosperous Near East highlights the fact that these patterns were largely driven by cultural preferences rather than money or resources.<sup>42</sup>

What about statuary erected to women? It will come as no surprise given the vertiginous drop for local notables that statues dedicated to women also suffered.<sup>43</sup> Of the c.1350 statue

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<sup>35</sup> Finn 2006, p.214; Cooper 2007b, pp.168-169.

<sup>36</sup> Finn 2006, pp.203-205. Lack of perceived generosity could be used as a tool for criticism, especially for bishops (pp.208-213).

<sup>37</sup> Smith 2016, p.3, Fig. 1.2.

<sup>38</sup> Smith 2016, pp.4-5, Fig. 1.3. On governors as benefactors, see Slootjes 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Ward-Perkins 2016, p.39.

<sup>40</sup> Ward-Perkins 2016, p.39.

<sup>41</sup> Smith 2016, p.5.

<sup>42</sup> Ward-Perkins 2016, p.37.

<sup>43</sup> Smith 2016, pp.4-5, Fig. 1.3.



inscriptions mentioned above, only 42 honour non-imperial women, just over 3% of the total.<sup>44</sup> In absolute terms this is a significant drop from the imperial period, during which an estimated 10% of honorific statues in municipal towns commemorated women.<sup>45</sup> These numbers must be viewed, however, in the context of the wider patterns outlined above. In Bert Smith's analysis of statue honorands, women are defined as a separate category from local notables.<sup>46</sup> While it is laudable that women are identified as an analytical category, this is surely an artificial distinction, as women were honoured as notable citizens, just ones that happened to be female. If we combine the numbers for women and local notables, a somewhat surprising picture emerges. From the new combined total of c.172 inscriptions, almost 25% represent women. That is to say, around 1 in 4 statuary erections to notable citizens were awarded to women.

We can refine this picture further. At Rome we find the highest number of statues dedicated to other people *by* women: 10 of 15 (67%), and almost half of the 42 inscriptions for female honorands (20 of 42, 48%). Of the c.270 inscribed bases surviving from Rome where the status of the honorand is known, 7.4% thus represent honours for women. If we remove honours for imperial figures (126 bases), women make up 14% of the honours for non-imperial people.<sup>47</sup> These relatively high numbers are in accordance with remains of statuary itself: of the c.170 surviving statuary items from Rome, non-imperial women represent a substantial 23%.<sup>48</sup> This is in comparison to non-imperial men at 30%, emperors and their family at 34%, and cultural

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<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately relatively little statistical data on statuary for women is presented by the *Last Statues of Antiquity* monograph (Smith and Ward-Perkins eds. 2016), the analysis of which is largely qualitative (see Schade 2016a in the volume). Women appear in Smith's graph of honorands (Smith 2016, Fig.1.3), but the scale on the graph makes it impossible to identify specific numbers. The following analysis is based on my calculations derived from the online database.

<sup>45</sup> Fejfer 2008, p.331.

<sup>46</sup> Smith 2016, Fig. 1.3.

<sup>47</sup> In Rome we cannot effectively separate imperial office holders from local notables, as the typical career of an ambitious Roman aristocrat involved the imperial court and administration (Machado and Lenaghan 2016, p.122).

<sup>48</sup> Machado and Lenaghan 2016, p.132.

figures at around 10%.<sup>49</sup> The ratio of statuary for women to inscribed bases is 39:20, the reverse of the normal proportion, indicating that much of the surviving statuary derives from busts set up in private contexts without inscriptions.<sup>50</sup> In their analysis of the material from Rome, Carlos Machado and Julia Lenaghan note that sculpted portraits of late antique women appear here in higher numbers than anywhere else.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond Rome, female honorific statuary conforms to the regional patterns noted above, clustering in regions with a strong tradition of the statue habit. Seven bases originate from elsewhere in Italy, eight from North Africa, four from Asia Minor, two from Greece and one from Spain. There is no reliable evidence for honorific statuary erected to non-imperial women in Constantinople. This represents a clear break with patterns observed for previous centuries, when there was little evidence for female patronage or representation in Rome due to the pre-eminence of imperial figures. This only began to change in the second and third centuries as the function and organisation of the forum transformed following major fires.<sup>52</sup> The prominence of female statuary in Rome during the fourth and early fifth centuries may be therefore attributable to the growth in representation in the preceding two centuries, the preservation of the statue habit in Italy, and the conservatism of the Roman aristocracy. The flourishing of other imperial capitals and the founding of Constantinople may have also opened up more space for patronage and representation for women beyond the imperial family.

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<sup>49</sup> Machado and Lenaghan 2016, p.132. It will be noted that the percentages given by the authors add up to 97%. The missing 3% may represent fragmentary remains where the subject is indiscernible, however the percentage for women is accurate given the number of statuary items cited (39).

<sup>50</sup> Machado and Lenaghan 2016, p.132. I have adjusted Machado and Lenaghan's numbers from 39:19 to 39:20. I believe the difference here is because I count an inscription on the foot of a statue erected to a "wise mother-in-law" (LSA-409). I assume they do not because the inscription is on the statue rather than a base, indicating that it was erected inside a private house. Despite this, a dedicatory inscription was still deemed important, and private houses very often retained the character of public spaces. They themselves note that there was a growing vogue for erecting statues, including those to imperial office-holders, in domestic spaces (p.125).

<sup>51</sup> Machado and Lenaghan 2016, p.132.

<sup>52</sup> Boatwright 2011.

The evidence presented above indicates that while statue dedications to women dropped in absolute numbers, they may have actually risen as a proportion of local notables that were honoured. As statue honours shifted towards emperors and imperial officials, private citizens suffered by comparison. Many men who in previous centuries might have been honoured as prominent citizens may have looked to the imperial service to find advancement instead of engaging in traditional patterns of patronage. Less wealthy men may have sought to avoid the financial burdens of positions on local councils and therefore could also disappear from the pool of prominent locals to honour. The people impacted the most by these changes were not the very richest donors, but the middling sorts who were local players in provincial areas. Ambitious women, by contrast, could not join the imperial service and remained more closely tied to traditional opportunities for prestige. Women had always needed to be richer and of a higher status in order to engage in civic life and were thus better represented in the very wealthiest classes of donor. It is therefore possible that changes in the practice of civic munificence buffered women to a certain extent, leading to a proportional increase in women honoured as local notables in the fourth and fifth centuries as less wealthy men dropped out or joined the imperial administration. This idea is most clearly demonstrated where there was a high concentration of very wealthy women from the most prominent aristocratic families: Rome.

Yet while these patterns in the erection of honorific statuary are interesting, they relate to a practice in decline. Forms of giving and the commemoration of such gifts were changing. In order to understand women's involvement in patronage during Late Antiquity it is necessary to turn away from honorific statuary and look towards an emerging form of visual commemoration, the donor portrait.

## 5.4 From Honorific Statuary to Donor Portraits

The decline in honorific statuary in Late Antiquity heralded the rise of another mode of commemoration that would become prominent in the following centuries: the donor portrait.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to honorific statuary, which could represent the result of a long-term relationship between a benefactor and their clients,<sup>54</sup> donor portraits were a more direct form of commemoration driven by the donor themselves. For example, while in earlier times there was often a significant temporal discrepancy between a major benefaction and its commemoration,<sup>55</sup> donor portraits appear to have been incorporated into the benefaction itself by the person who paid for it. Little work has been done on the emergence of donor portraits in Late Antiquity as a distinct form of commemoration.<sup>56</sup> This may be partly due to the restrictions that the nature of donor portraits place on research. Honorific statuary was typically combined with a dedicatory inscription giving information about the donor, the awarding body, and the nature of their benefactions. Such inscriptions are much less common with donor portraits; sometimes even the name of the donor is missing. This creates problems not only for studying patronage, but also for identifying such portraits in the first place.<sup>57</sup> Most often we rely on visual clues such as pose, location, and interaction – or lack of interaction – with other figures. For example, in the small town of Jeme in Egypt, a woman labelled as Elizabeth is depicted with her daughter at the end of a cycle of frescoes detailing the life of Saint Menas.<sup>58</sup> Since no characters are known with those names and they do not appear to take part in the action of the scenes, we interpret them as donors.

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<sup>53</sup> On donor portraits in later Byzantine art, see Franses 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Nicols 2014, p.314.

<sup>55</sup> Nicols 2014, p.314

<sup>56</sup> Other forms of portraiture have been studied, e.g. Marsengill 2013, primarily concerning icons.

<sup>57</sup> On the differences between donor portraits and genre scenes see Habas 2008, pp.85-87. For interpretative problems associated with Byzantine donor portraits see Safran 2014.

<sup>58</sup> p3.

The novelty of donor portraits as a form of commemoration in Late Antiquity also means that evidence for them is disparate and diverse. This is true not just for women's donor portraits, but also for those of men. This chapter will therefore take a regional approach, examining three key areas of the empire for which we have evidence for women's patronage: Italy, the Near East, and Egypt. Before moving on, however, I will first outline some methodological issues relating to donor portraits with reference to the dedicatory miniature of Anicia Juliana from the Vienna Dioscorides, and the Samagher Casket. These examples will show that while donor portraits are complex and often difficult to handle, they also have the potential to reveal much about how late antique people thought about gift-giving, generosity, and its commemoration.

The miniature portrait of Anicia Juliana from the Vienna Dioscorides represents a cautionary tale. At first glance it looks like a donor portrait: Juliana is seated in the centre of the image holding a scroll in one hand and scattering coins in the other, a pose remarkably similar to a donor portrait from Israel that will be discussed below (Fig 5.1).<sup>59</sup> She is flanked by personifications of magnanimity and prudence, while 'gratitude of the arts' kneels at her feet and a putto labelled 'love of building' offers her a book. Since the miniature is dated to the sixth century, long after the decline of honorific statuary, we may be forgiven for considering this image a donor portrait. Yet text running around the image clearly states that the manuscript was a gift from the grateful people of the *Honoratae* region, for whom Juliana had built a church. This is therefore an honorific image, albeit in a new form. Without this inscription, however, the context of the image's creation would be lost, and we might mistakenly consider it a donor portrait. So how can we be sure that donor portraits in this chapter were not honorific

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<sup>59</sup> Misc13; M8. The *sparsio* gesture is connected to depictions of emperors, consuls, and personifications of generosity (Kiilerich 2001, pp.176-177). See for example the 'Megalopsychia' mosaic (M2).

images? When we lack explanatory inscriptions this can be difficult, however the overall tone of the image can offer valuable clues. Juliana's miniature flatters her to an extraordinary degree, casting her as an intellectual and even imperial figure.<sup>60</sup> Donor portraits, by contrast, tend to cast the donor in simpler and less elevated settings. Even in the most extravagant examples, donors are commonly shown praying or supplicating holy figures. Apparently a certain level of modesty was required when commissioning one's own image. The same is broadly true of donor inscriptions. While dedicatory inscriptions from statuary routinely praised the honouree and honourer, donor inscriptions are generally less effusive in their acclamation.

There is also a greater diversity found in donor portraits than there had been for honorific statuary, which established a repertory of poses and costume types that conveyed a fixed set of virtues and attributes. The wider conceptual scope of our images suggests they were tailored to the desires of donors rather than representing a practice in which the recipient commissioned the portrait from a range of available options. Paolo Liverani has noted that in antiquity portraits painted on wooden panels were considered the most faithful to a person's actual appearance, and suggests that the rise of two-dimensional portraiture in Late Antiquity was connected to an increased desire to represent individuals as they were known to their community, rather than through the fixed set of attributes provided by statuary.<sup>61</sup> It is also notable that many donor portraits survive from regions that never developed a strong statue habit, meaning there is no reason to expect its continuation in other forms. While not a perfect framework, I believe we can reasonably say that when it comes to non-imperial people, honorific portraits like that of Juliana were rare. As a figure very close to the imperial house,

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<sup>60</sup> See Küllerich 2001, esp. pp.173-180 on the imperial connotations of the image.

<sup>61</sup> Liverani 2016, esp. pp.325-329.

Juliana was in many ways exceptional and it is perhaps unsurprising that her representation has more in common with imperial modes of commemoration than those of ordinary people. Her position and connection to Constantinople, the last bastion of honorific statuary, likely make her an outlier and not a cause for concern.

Another difference between honorific images and donor portraits is in viewership and display. The unashamed purpose of an honorific statue was to be seen by passersby, its inscription read, and the relationship between the benefactor and their client(s) thus publicised. While this is also broadly true for the majority of donor portraits, the ostensible goal of Christian benefaction was to receive rewards in heaven, not on earth. This is illustrated by the occasional practice of removing individual names from donor inscriptions and replacing them with anonymised formulae such as “whose names God knows”.<sup>62</sup> The implication is that the name of the benefactor is not important, since God already knows of their generosity. The Samagher Casket offers an example of donor portraits that may have functioned in a similar anonymised manner, something not possible for honorific statuary. The Samagher or Pola Casket is a wooden reliquary casket decorated with ivory panels that was deposited under the altar of the basilica of Saint Hermagoras in Samagher, modern Croatia (Figs 5.2-5).<sup>63</sup> Alongside religious scenes, such as Christ giving the law to Peter, three of the panels depict groups of people, either worshippers or pilgrims, in a series of architectural settings identified as churches. One panel in particular has been widely considered to represent the fourth-century shrine in St Peter’s basilica.<sup>64</sup> The people in these scenes have been suggested to represent members of a wealthy family visiting important Roman churches.<sup>65</sup> However, there is no inscription to indicate that

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<sup>62</sup> E.g. Hamarneh 1996, p.74. Anonymous donors were also included in formulae that included an individual’s family members, e.g. *cum suis* (Vuolanto 2002, pp.249, 259-260, 267).

<sup>63</sup> 16.

<sup>64</sup> See Noga-Banai 2019, pp.228-231 for a detailed description of the casket and the various locations scholars have tried to identify.

<sup>65</sup> Noga-Banai 2019, p.230.

they were also responsible for its creation. How can we know that they do not simply represent generic worshippers? Are these donor portraits? And if they are donor portraits, why go to the trouble of having such images made only for them to be hidden?

If we compare the Samagher Casket to other reliquaries, it becomes clear that ‘invisible’ commemoration could be effective and desirable. A silver reliquary from the cathedral at Grado dated to around 500, for example, is inscribed with the names Laurence, John, and Nicephorus.<sup>66</sup> These men were content to memorialise their donation in an inscription that would be hidden forever once deposited below the altar. It did not matter that it could not be seen, either because they considered that it could still be seen by God, the most important of viewers, and/or because alternative forms of commemoration at the time of deposition were deemed sufficient. Clues within the basilica may also have reminded worshippers of hidden relics: in a letter to his friend Sulpicius Severus, Paulinus of Nola wrote that under the altar of a basilica he built on his estate he placed a slab of purple marble marking the spot where he interred a reliquary.<sup>67</sup> In reference to another church, he described how relics buried under the altar were marked with a verse inscription.<sup>68</sup> Just because something was hidden, did not mean it was forgotten. Given the specificity and originality of the scenes depicted on the Samagher Casket, it would seem reasonable to assume that whomever commissioned it saw themselves and their family in the pious images of the worshippers. Elsner has argued that the decorative programme as a whole represents a careful and theologically involved design that plays with ideas of visibility and invisibility through such motifs as doors, screens, and curtains.<sup>69</sup> It is thus conceivable that the patron(s) of such an object might consider the invisibility of their portraits as something special, side by side with holy relics for eternity.

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<sup>66</sup> Noga-Banai 2008, pp.95-120; Noga-Banai 2019, pp.224-225.

<sup>67</sup> Elsner 2019b, p.83; Paulinus *Letter* 32.17.

<sup>68</sup> Paulinus *Letter* 32.10-11.

<sup>69</sup> Elsner 2019b.



While we cannot be certain, I consider that the Samagher Casket represents something similar to the mosaics of Maria and her family from Thessaloniki discussed in Chapter 4: a representation of the piety of a family group that stakes its claim to inter-generational status and patronage. While Maria's family decided on an image visible to all, such visibility was not a prerequisite for efficacy. God's omniscience ensured the family's intentions were received in heaven, while on earth the benefaction could be remembered through oral transmission. Future members of the family could recount how their ancestors sat in the most holy place of the church, a form of embodied practice in which object, place, and memory become intertwined.<sup>70</sup> Even if originally the people were intended to represent generic figures, the knowledge of their presence might trigger new narratives of memory in which they represented portraits of past family members.<sup>71</sup> Such verbal transmission may not last down the centuries, but could be just as efficacious a way of preserving prestige and memory.

### 5.5. Italy: Keeping it in the Family

The two examples of women's donor portraits that survive from Italy bookend our period, with one from the fourth century and one from the late fifth or early sixth. Both show the importance of family for patronage, however the rarity of lay donor portraits also highlights the sporadic development of the practice and the growing dominance of ecclesiastical and imperial figures by the sixth century. While women's visibility in honorific statuary in Rome during the fourth and fifth centuries fared relatively well, this trend did not translate into donor portraits. To

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<sup>70</sup> See Van Dyke and Alcock 2003 on social memory in the construction of individual and community identities, esp. p.4 on embodied memory versus 'inscribed' practices, and pp.5-6 on memory and place.

<sup>71</sup> Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, p.3 on the creation and manipulation of social memory as a fluid process.

begin, however, we must travel beyond Rome, to the southern hall of the early fourth century episcopal complex at Aquileia, where the mosaic pavement preserves fourteen portrait busts – nine women and five men.<sup>72</sup> The pavement is divided into ten panels: the panel decorating the presbytery depicts a seascape with scenes of Jonah and bears the dedicatory inscription of the Bishop Theodore. The rest of the carpet is divided into nine panels organised in three rows of three. These panels have geometric patterns decorated with motifs of animals and plants, the Good Shepherd, a Victory, and figures bringing offerings.<sup>73</sup> Three of these panels also bear portrait busts: in the north-west corner we find four female busts (Figs 5.6-9), in the adjacent panel four male and one female (Figs 5.10-14), and in the central panel four women and a man (Figs 5.15-19).<sup>74</sup>

Many scholars accept that these portrait busts represent donors who contributed funds to the construction or decoration of the church, however the absence of inscriptions has led others to be sceptical.<sup>75</sup> Hugh Brandenburg, for example, argues that they represent generic images similar to allegorical figures or personifications, as they are too early to represent donors because donor inscriptions are unknown in church mosaic pavements before the fifth century.<sup>76</sup> While this would surely not preclude the commemoration of donors by other means, there are examples of fourth century mosaic inscriptions from nearby areas, such as the fourth century phase of the basilica at Poreč.<sup>77</sup> We may also disregard the idea that the busts represent allegories since they bear none of the attributes that habitually appear in such depictions. The

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<sup>72</sup> Dated to the second decade of the fourth century. Menis 1976, p.78; Humphries 2000, p.76. Bertacchi (1998, pp.98) argues that the mosaics in this hall were laid in two separate phases based on stylistic differences, but there is no strong evidence for this.

<sup>73</sup> For genre scenes see M24.

<sup>74</sup> M25. Menis 1976, pp.78-81.

<sup>75</sup> In favour of their status as donor portraits see e.g. Menis 1976, p.78, Caillet 2003, p.21; Novello 2012, p.236.

<sup>76</sup> Brandenburg 2006, pp.38-41. It has also been claimed that these busts represent members of the Emperor Constantine's family, but this has been widely discredited (Kähler 1962; for an overview of the 'German interpretation' of the complex, see Lehman 2006, pp.68-77).

<sup>77</sup> Buzov 2011, pp.179-180.

lack of inscriptions is unfortunate, but it has been noted that there are barely any inscriptions in the Aquileia complex at all. Beyond two dedicatory inscriptions for Bishop Theodore, there are only two further donor inscriptions, both in the northern hall and of a later date.<sup>78</sup> We may therefore imagine that for a brief period in the early fourth century, the local elite preferred to commemorate themselves through donor portraits but that this did not catch on.<sup>79</sup>

The simplest and most widely accepted understanding of the busts is that they represent portraits of wealthy local benefactors. Their organisation into small groups across three separate panels also supports this reading, as do their individualised dress and portrait features. It may be that each group represents a distinct family unit, or related individuals within a larger kinship group. It has been suggested, for example, that the panel with four female busts represents a mother and her three daughters,<sup>80</sup> however I find it difficult to identify one figure that is represented as older than any of the others. While individualisation of the figures is clearly attempted through differences in dress, hairstyle, and facial features, their placement in individual tondi removes the cues of body positioning and relative size which normally provide clues to age and family role. Given the prevalence of families in contemporary donor inscriptions – discussion further below – I believe we can identify general familial connections, but there is frustratingly little else we can do with these images.

We already mentioned briefly in Chapter 4 the presence of donor portraits from a chapel in Rome that may represent a mother and daughter. The frescoes were unearthed in a series of

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<sup>78</sup> Caillet 2006. Compared to others this number is very small: Saint Eufemia in Grado, for example, preserves some fifty donor inscriptions, while the three phases of the basilica at Poreč preserve some twenty-four (Vuolanto 2002, p.250; Buzov 2011, pp.179-181).

<sup>79</sup> Novello 2012, p.236. Menis (1976, pp.73-74) further notes that the period from the middle of the third century to the middle of the fourth is the richest in terms of the production of mosaic pavements in Aquileia, and for the production of mosaic portrait busts.

<sup>80</sup> Menis 1976, pp.78-79. Menis also sees the panel with four men and a woman as a mother with four sons (pp.79-80).

rooms during excavations under the Ospedale di S. Angelo near the Lateran basilica, but unfortunately the publication of the space makes it difficult to understand the wider organisation and function of the complex.<sup>81</sup> While religious and biblical frescoes clearly characterise it as Christian, the space has been interpreted as both a chapel and a private area for catechesis.<sup>82</sup> Beyond a Christian function of some kind, however, it is impossible to truly identify its purpose.

Rooms A and B are decorated with frescoes from the late fourth century, while room C contains two large frescoes dating to the late fifth or early sixth centuries. It is these latter frescoes that concern us here. The first shows Christ towering over two female figures whom he crowns with laurel wreaths (Fig 5.20).<sup>83</sup> The woman on the viewer's left appears the older of the two, shown wearing a white tight-fitting head covering with a matching loose veil over the top. The woman on the right is depicted slightly smaller, unveiled, and wearing a long-sleeved white tunic under an elaborate gold tunic, similar to that worn by the procession of female saints from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo.<sup>84</sup> While their identification as mother and daughter is not confirmed in an inscription, their relative ages suggests this kind of relationship.<sup>85</sup> The other fresco depicts the saints Crescentia, Modesto, and Vito. Beat Brenk notes that this depiction is a very early attestation of their cult; they do not appear in literary sources until c.600.<sup>86</sup> Perhaps these women were early proponents of these saints and wanted to honour them with frescoes. The close similarity in style certainly indicates that the two panels were completed at the same time.

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<sup>81</sup> P25. Scrinari 1995, pp.227-241.

<sup>82</sup> Scrinari continuously describes the area as chapels (1995, pp.215-241), however Brenk argues strongly that it is a private space used for Christian instruction (2003, pp.121-128).

<sup>83</sup> Scrinari originally identified the pair as Valentinian III and Licinia Eudoxia, but it is clear, as also noted by Brenk, that both figures are female (Scrinari 1995, p.238; Brenk 2003, p.127).

<sup>84</sup> Poeschke 2010, Plate 51. See also GG6.

<sup>85</sup> Brenk 2003, p.127.

<sup>86</sup> Brenk 2003, pp.127-128.

This may have been a private chapel in which the interests of the family in the Sicilian saints were celebrated, or a public space in which their cult was promoted by private donors.

Both of these examples represent what appear to be anomalous points in the development of donor portrait commemoration. The Aquileia portraits pre-date all other known donor portraits from Italy by about a century, while the women from the Lateran chapel represent the only donor portraits of laypeople known from this region and period. All other donor portraits concern church officials or imperial figures, such as Justinian, Theodora, and the bishops Ecclesius and Maximian at the basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna.<sup>87</sup> The layperson who financed this church, a banker called Julianus, was not commemorated through an image, but through inscriptions both inside the church and on a silver reliquary.<sup>88</sup> At Sant'Apollinare in Classe the same pattern occurs: Julianus is commemorated in inscriptions but the local bishops are depicted in portraits.<sup>89</sup> At Poreč, lay donors were commemorated in mosaic inscriptions, but Bishop Euphrasius had himself depicted in an image in the apse.<sup>90</sup> While donor portraits had a brief flourishing in early fourth century Aquileia, it was not until the sixth century that they really took off in the great basilicas of Italy and Dalmatia, seized primarily by powerful church figures rather than lay donors, who used them to affirm their authority through positioning themselves alongside saints and emperors.<sup>91</sup> The women from Rome are also exceptional because with the decline in honorific statuary, evidence of ordinary women patrons once again largely disappears from centres like Rome and Ravenna, which were dominated by the Pope and imperial figures.<sup>92</sup> The limited surviving evidence relates to high-ranking women

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<sup>87</sup> Caillet 2003, pp.24-26.

<sup>88</sup> Caillet 2003, pp.24-26.

<sup>89</sup> Caillet 2003, pp.27-28.

<sup>90</sup> Caillet 2003, pp.22-24. On the mosaics from the basilica see Terry and Maguire 2007. On the apse mosaic with the donors, pp.109-113, pp.140-142.

<sup>91</sup> Caillet 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Vuolanto 2002, p.266. On female imperial patronage see e.g. Brubaker 1997; McClanan 2002a, pp.93-106; Cooper 2004; Angelova 2015, pp.161-182;

who made significant donations, such as Demetrias' construction of the church of Saint Stephen, or the construction of Saint Lawrence-in-Damaso by Attica, wife of the praetorian prefect of Gaul.<sup>93</sup> The Lateran chapel may therefore represent the rare survival of a private or minor community space in which more modest donations were possible.

When situated alongside donor inscriptions rather than portraits, however, our images do not seem so strange. Inscriptions from Italy and the surrounding regions, in particular Croatia, have been intensively collected and studied, allowing us to contextualise the limited visual evidence.<sup>94</sup> Ville Vuolanto in particular has conducted an analysis of male and female *euergetism* based on the inscriptions collected in Jean Pierre Caillet's *L'Éuergetisme monumental chrétien en Italie et à ses marges*, and provided focused analyses of the donors from the Basilica del Monastero at Aquileia (early fifth century) and Saint Eufemia at Grado (late sixth century).<sup>95</sup> Vuolanto concludes that compared to donations made in Italy during the imperial period, the late antique material shows many more donations made by couples, more references to family and kin, and a much higher number of women, around a third of the identifiable names.<sup>96</sup> He argues that it is the shift away from individual *euergetism* and towards a more family-centred practice which gives more visibility to the women of the community.<sup>97</sup> However, he also notes that the proportion of women making benefactions on their own does not increase, at only 4% of the total donations.<sup>98</sup> Chronologically speaking, a greater number of women appear as donors in inscriptions from the fourth to the mid-fifth century; by the late

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<sup>93</sup> Kurdock 2007, pp.223-224; Mathisen 2003, p.181.

<sup>94</sup> Toynbee 1976; Caillet 1993; Vuolanto 2002; Buzov 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Caillet 1993; Vuolanto 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Vuolanto 2002, pp.265, 267, 269.

<sup>97</sup> Vuolanto 2002, p.269.

<sup>98</sup> Vuolanto 2002, p.269.

fifth to sixth century there is a decrease in donations made by couples and an increase in those made by a single person, usually a man.<sup>99</sup>

This picture accords particularly well with the portraits from Aquileia, which appear to be clustered in small family groups in which women play a noticeably visible role, in the case of the portraits even outnumbering men. The identification of parent-child donations among the inscriptions is less common, however when it does occur it is almost invariably a mother and child rather than a father, with Vuolanto identifying one father-son donation, but five mother-son donations, one mother-daughter, and one grandmother-granddaughter.<sup>100</sup> I should note that the greater number of mother-son donations in Vuolanto's inscriptions is the opposite of the pattern I identified for the visual evidence in Chapter 4. The reason for this contradiction is unclear, but may be due to differences in the nature of the evidence.

While women beyond the very highest echelons of the aristocracy apparently once again had little chance of being involved in patronage in major cities like Rome, the preponderance of churches in need of funds in provincial areas and the growing focus on family-based giving meant there were plenty of opportunities elsewhere in the region. In some places women even represented the majority of lay donors, as may have been the case in the episcopal complex at Aquileia. In the Basilica of Euphrasius at Poreč, for example, women donors are common in all three phases of the structure, and in the sixth century, aside from Euphrasius himself and a deacon, all other known donors were women: Fausta, Claudia, Honoria, Basilia and "their

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<sup>99</sup> Vuolanto 2002, pp.261-262.

<sup>100</sup> Vuolanto 2002, p.259.

kin”.<sup>101</sup> The growing ‘democratisation’ of giving outside the capital opened the doors for a greater variety of women to engage in patronage and employ new methods of commemoration.

## 5.6 The Near East: The Rise of the Rural Patroness

In Late Antiquity the Near East was affluent, well-governed, and stable, which provided excellent conditions for widespread civic patronage. The region saw the expansion of agricultural and industrial economies, as well as increased regional trade, pilgrimage travel, and religious endowments at sites like Jerusalem and Mount Nebo.<sup>102</sup> Rural areas also experienced a boom, both in terms of the foundation of new settlements and the expansion of existing ones. Indeed, while building had been focused on towns and cities during the fourth and fifth centuries, during the sixth and seventh centuries it was mostly concentrated in villages.<sup>103</sup> Peaks in building occurred under Justin I and Justinian and then again under Maurice, Phocas, and Heraclius.<sup>104</sup> While it was once thought that the region had declined precipitously following the Persian and Islamic invasions, it is now understood that there was remarkable continuity through the seventh and well into the eighth century, with abandonment in some cases pushed into the ninth.<sup>105</sup> The church of St Stephen at Umm al-Rasas, for example, was refurbished in 718 and again in 756.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> In the fourth-century phase there are 15 individuals across nine inscriptions, eight of which were women, mostly probably in husband-wife pairs (Buzov 2011, pp.179-180). In the fifth century there are eleven men and seven women, and in the sixth all the lay patrons are women (Buzov 2011, pp.180-182).

<sup>102</sup> Walmsley 1996.

<sup>103</sup> Di Segni 1999, pp.164-165; Walmsley 2007, pp.336-337.

<sup>104</sup> Di Segni 1999, p.164.

<sup>105</sup> Walmsley 2005; Walmsley 2007; Hamarneh 2013.

<sup>106</sup> Walmsley 2005, p.517.



The hallmark of this prosperous period was the construction of churches in both towns and villages. The wealthy town of Gerasa, for example, saw the construction of ten churches across the fifth and sixth centuries, with five of them dedicated between the years 526-533 alone, while the village of Khirbet el-Mukkhayat on Mount Nebo saw the construction of four.<sup>107</sup> These newly built churches were lavishly decorated with elaborate mosaics depicting animals, plants, hunting, agriculture, and often included donor commemorations in the form of inscriptions and portraits.<sup>108</sup> As public spaces, churches became the primary communal space for display and the principal location for patronage.<sup>109</sup> Sixth century church floor mosaics from the provinces of Arabia and the three Palestines provide us with the largest concentration of female donor portraits anywhere in the late antique world.

The driving forces behind the boom in church construction from the fifth to seventh centuries were local people and the clergy. During this period the control of the civic administration declined in favour of church officials, and by the sixth century many villages and towns looked to bishops for leadership.<sup>110</sup> The construction of churches represented the patronage of local bishops in conjunction with wealthy citizens, whether through direct involvement on the part of the bishop or through more general oversight of civic projects.<sup>111</sup> While the figure of the bishop was omnipresent, patterns of patronage varied across the region and according to the size of the community. For example, at Gerasa local notables were involved in civic patronage on a substantial scale, whereas in larger centres like Bosra and Caesarea there was greater participation from provincial governors and even the emperor.<sup>112</sup> Like Italy, the vast majority

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<sup>107</sup> Gerasa: Biebel 1938, p.297; Kennedy 2000, p.201. Khirbet el-Mukkhayat: Saller and Bagatti 1949.

<sup>108</sup> For an overview of the mosaics of the region see Talgam 2014, pp.77-378.

<sup>109</sup> Eckersley 2016, p.203.

<sup>110</sup> Liebeschuetz 1992, pp.14, 18-19, 35-36; Walmsley 1996, p.129; Liebeschuetz 2001, pp.137-168; Hamarneh 2013, pp.61-62; Jacobs 2020, pp.39-40.

<sup>111</sup> Hamarneh 2013, p.62; Jacobs 2020, p.39. See also Hamarneh 1996, esp. pp.66-72 for the involvement of bishops and clerics in church patronage.

<sup>112</sup> De Segni 1995, p.312.

of surviving evidence for benefactions is in the form of mosaic inscriptions. Donor portraits are rarer, often found clustered together in a single church or across multiple churches in the same settlement. For example, in Gerasa we find the donor portraits of Georgia and her husband Theodore, John, and Calloeonistus at the church of SS Cosmas and Damian, Elias, Maria, and Soreg at their eponymous chapel, and Konstantinos and two further portraits that are almost completely destroyed at the Church of the Bishop Isaiah.<sup>113</sup> This works out to just under a quarter of all surviving donor portraits from the region.<sup>114</sup> Nevertheless, portraits offer us a rich source of evidence for the self-presentation of benefactors and crucial insights into women's patronage in rural areas, a phenomenon that is largely undocumented during earlier periods.

The largest concentration of women's donor portraits is found in Gerasa. We find Georgia and her husband Theodore, the local *paramonarius* or sacristan, in the church of SS Cosmas and Damian (Figs 5.21-22), and Maria and Soreg with a man called Elias in their eponymous chapel (Figs 5.23-25).<sup>115</sup> Both groups were located in prominent areas: Georgia and Theodore were positioned directly below the chancel screen and flanking the church's dedicatory inscription, and Maria and Soreg were depicted in the presbytery itself. Georgia's portrait would have been unmissable for visitors, while the unusual and extremely prestigious location of Maria and Soreg may have made them less visible, but would surely have been highly desirable. Just as with the Samagher Casket, oral transmission could have conveyed their presence in the holiest space of the church. Inscriptions only tell us these women's names and unfortunately we know little else about the nature of their benefactions. Their prominent positions within the space of

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<sup>113</sup> Biebel 1938, pp.331-332; Piccirillo 1993, p.296. For the Church of Bishop Isaiah see Baumann 1999, Figs 41 and 43. The name Konstantinos survives above an image of a person almost completely destroyed but for a bow. In the others fragments of letters are preserved and in both cases the person seems to have been holding an object hanging from a chain. For an overview of mosaic donor portraits from the region see Hamarneh 1998.

<sup>114</sup> This calculation does not include the donor portraits that were intentionally removed from the churches of Khirbet Umm al-Rasas. These will be discussed further below.

<sup>115</sup> M6; M7.

the churches, however, indicate that these were important people who probably made substantial donations.

Not all women's donor portraits were located in such prestigious locations. A mosaic depicting two women, one identified as the 'Lady Syltous', was located in an intercolumnar space on the north side of the basilica in the village of Kissufim in Israel (Fig 5.26).<sup>116</sup> As mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, it is possible that the two women in this donor portrait represent a mother-daughter pair or another combination of female relations. Some consider the older woman to be another donor named Kalliora, while others see her as a personification or symbol of the local church.<sup>117</sup> Her more mature appearance would argue against her identification as a personification, and while we cannot be certain, the simplest conclusion is that she is another donor. It is possible she represents an attendant, but again her age would be unusual; generic attendants are typically shown as youthful. My interpretation of the scene is that it represents two donors whose relationship to each other remains obscure. In another intercolumnar space in the church was a donor portrait for a man called Orbikon, shown wearing a short tunic and leading a camel, perhaps representing a prosperous camel merchant.<sup>118</sup> Lady Syltous, by contrast, is shown wearing sumptuous clothes and scattering coins in the *sparsio* gesture we saw from the Anicia Juliana miniature, while her companion holds a fowl on a large dish. Many have seen Lady Syltous as an aristocrat, her *sparsio* gesture perhaps indicating pretensions to align herself with an imperial and consular milieu.<sup>119</sup> Yet the relatively small size of her mosaic

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<sup>116</sup> M8.

<sup>117</sup> Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, pp. 275-276; Cohen 1993, pp.279-280; Talgam 2014, p.237.

<sup>118</sup> Baumann 1999, Fig 38. There is possibly another donor portrait. In the left aisle is a panel showing a man spearing a wild cat and the inscription "The Deed of Alexander". It is not agreed what this refers to, whether to the mosaicist, to Alexander the Great, or, less likely, to a potential donor (Cohen 1977, p.255; Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, pp.274-275; Cohen 1993, pp.280-281).

<sup>119</sup> Britt (2008, pp.126-127) compares this image with that of empress steel-yard weights and consular diptychs, concluding that Lady Syltous represents "a hybridization of two categories of objects that enjoyed wide circulation throughout the eastern Mediterranean." Such a direct reference to imperial and consular iconography seems unlikely.

and its position alongside a possible camel merchant suggests an affluent but significantly less elevated background.<sup>120</sup>

The depiction of the women scattering coins and offering food is reminiscent of the writings of Church Fathers who described how donors gave gifts of money or food as alms to the poor at the doors of their homes or the entrances to churches.<sup>121</sup> The sort of people who were involved in church construction and decoration were probably also engaged in other charitable activities. These women may have wanted to be depicted in the pious act of alms-giving, which was itself both an act of charity and an opportunity to display wealth and status. Giving alms directly with one's own hands, as may be shown on the mosaic, was also perceived of as being more pious than giving through the church; the act of service augmented the alms offered.<sup>122</sup> The performative nature of alms-giving is illustrated in Jerome's famous tale of a Roman matron handing out alms at St Peter's. When an elderly woman tried to re-join the queue to receive another coin, the matron supposedly punched her in the face for her insolence.<sup>123</sup> Alms-giving as spectacle was not universally understood as negative, however. Paulinus of Nola referred to St Peter's – the site of the funeral banquet of his friend's wife discussed above – as "Christ's theatre", where both the poor and God were the spectators. He compared Paulina's funeral to traditional spectacles, stating of his friend: "Your spectacles you exhibit for the Church; you are not a candidate in the arena seeking vainglory, but rather eternal praise."<sup>124</sup> Alms-giving also offered another way in which more humble people could participate in the culture of gift-giving and charity. Given the relatively modest size of the Syltous and Kalliora's

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<sup>120</sup> Jacobs 2020, pp.40-43. Baumann rejects the notion that men shown leading camels were really camel-drivers by trade, preferring the interpretation that the camel-driver represented a status symbol for a rich individual or a more generic allegorical representation of gift-giving (Baumann 1999, pp.227-231).

<sup>121</sup> Finn 2006, pp.99-114.

<sup>122</sup> Finn 2006, pp.107-108, see John Chrysostom on encouraging people to give directly to the poor (*Homily on 1 Timothy* 14.3).

<sup>123</sup> *Letter* 22.32; Finn 2006, pp.102-103, 206.

<sup>124</sup> *Letter* 13.16, translation Walsh 1967, p.132.

mosaic panel and its unremarkable position, perhaps they primarily engaged in patronage through alms-giving and branched out to contribute to the pavement of their local church.

While we question the identity of the older woman in this mosaic, there can be little doubt that it commemorates a benefaction by at least one of the women. In the case of Georgia and Theodosia, however, a potential mother-daughter pair mentioned briefly in Chapter 4, it is unclear whether we are faced with donor portraits or funerary images. Their depictions are found in the mosaic carpet of the well-known Orpheus chapel near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem (Figs 5.27-28), which is frequently identified as a funerary space despite lacking evidence for any burials.<sup>125</sup> The bulk of the carpet is taken up with a depiction of Orpheus, below which are five rectangular panels, one of which contains our portraits, and under this naked hunters fighting big cats. From its original discovery the room was identified as a tomb chamber and has also been understood as a funerary chapel, and in this context the images of Theodosia and Georgia would represent deceased women buried there.<sup>126</sup> As no burials were actually discovered, however, the funerary nature of the space is doubtful, and the association of Theodosia and Georgia is more likely to be one of patronage.<sup>127</sup> If this is the case, then their central positioning means they are probably to be recognised as the benefactors of the entire floor and maybe the chapel as a whole. Their clothing is sumptuous and brightly coloured and their potential benefaction sizable; perhaps they are the sort of women that Lady Syltous wanted to be taken for.

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<sup>125</sup> M12.

<sup>126</sup> Bagatti 1952, pp.145-146; Olszewski 2011, p.656.

<sup>127</sup> Elsner 2009, esp. p.37. Mucznik and Ovadiah (1981, p.160) also doubt that the space is a Christian funerary chapel, but argue that Theodosia and Georgia represent personifications. There is no compelling evidence for this interpretation.

Among the donor portraits there are – broadly speaking – two styles of representation. Both Georgia (from Gerasa) and Soreg are shown unveiled and wearing a mantle that is fastened in the centre of their chest with a *fibula*. This is also the case for an unidentified female donor represented in the mosaic carpet of the Chapel of the Priest John in the village of Khirbet el-Mukkhayat (Fig 5.29).<sup>128</sup> These three women are highly unusual for the sixth century in being shown with their heads uncovered. While covering the hair had become gradually more popular during the fourth and fifth centuries, the vast majority of women by the sixth century were represented veiled in some manner. We might especially expect women to be shown veiled in church contexts even if they were not in their everyday lives. This throws into question the commonly stated assertion that veiling was a social prerogative for women by this period, in particular one that marked the transition to marriage.<sup>129</sup> While both Soreg and the unidentified woman from Khirbet el-Mukkhayat appear to be depicted as adults, we can be certain that Georgia was a married adult woman as she is shown alongside her husband.

By contrast, the style of dress worn by Maria, Syltous, and Kalliora appears more conservative. The juxtaposition of Maria and Soreg is particularly striking: Maria is shown in a long yellowish tunic over which she wears a large red mantle draped over her shoulders, chest, and head. A single row of white and black tesserae around her face indicate that she is also wearing a tight-fitting white and black striped cap under her mantle, a combination that became increasingly popular in this period.<sup>130</sup> The combination of this relatively conservative style of dress and the fact that she holds a cross may tempt us to identify Maria as a consecrated virgin

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<sup>128</sup> M5.

<sup>129</sup> The initial chapter on dress that was removed from this thesis included a significant discussion on veiling and head-covering in Late Antiquity. The primary conclusions of this section were that veiling was a highly situational practice used primarily in sombre religious contexts during the fourth and fifth centuries, only becoming truly widespread during the sixth century.

<sup>130</sup> The chapter on dress also discusses the practicality of a tight-fitting cover underneath a loose veil for preventing slippage and accidentally revealing the hair, a technique still used today in Muslim veiling.

or monastic, however she may be just a pious laywoman who chose to be represented in this manner. That is not to say that I am suggesting that her veiled appearance marks her as more pious than Soreg or Georgia, but that her individual understanding of piety may have been tied to dress practices that were far from obligatory within the society of sixth-century Gerasa. Syltous and Kalliora are dressed in a similar style, their heads covered both by tight-fitting head-coverings and by mantles worn draped over their chests and heads.<sup>131</sup> They appear to make no claim to special religious status and thus we should probably assume that neither does Maria.

Theodosia and Georgia from Jerusalem sit somewhere between these two styles. They are shown wearing sumptuously decorated clothes including what is probably meant to represent a mantle or loose-veil covering their hair, shown in the mosaic framing their heads. They do not wear tight-fitting coverings underneath, but rather jewelled diadems; they are veiled, but in the most extravagant manner possible. The diversity of these styles indicates that there were a variety of options for the self-presentation of female donors in this region. Piety – the universal claim of these women in their patronage of religious spaces – does not appear to be invested in any particular mode of dress, nor any gesture or attribute. Georgia at Gerasa is shown in the *orans* pose in what we might consider a predictable display of piety, while Soreg holds a palm leaf and Maria a cross. Syltous and Kalliora make direct reference to their generosity to the Church, perhaps in the context of alms-giving as well as their mosaic donation, and the unidentified woman from Khirbet el-Mukkhayat is shown with a nimbus. What unites these women is the desire to make themselves visible as pious citizens who cared about their communities and gave back generously. The key message is affluence and piety, the latter justifying the former. Traditional ‘feminine’ attributes are almost completely absent:

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<sup>131</sup> These are decorated head-coverings, not diadems as is commonly stated (E.g. Cohen 1977, pp.255-256).

only Theodosia is shown holding a flower and therefore making a claim to beauty.<sup>132</sup> This is a remarkable departure from honorific portrait statuary and one that we see mirrored in the other regions under study in this chapter.

As noted above, donor portraits were far outnumbered by inscriptions, however it is useful to contextualise our female donors among donor portraits in general from the region. I have identified sixteen donor portraits from the Near East that include men and six that include women, with some overlap, as in the case of Georgia and Theodore.<sup>133</sup> We are therefore left with a total of 21 portraits representing 26 individuals, with women appearing in 29% of surviving donor portraits and representing 31% of the individuals depicted. This is a strong ratio, but with an admittedly small sample size. Part of the reason for this relatively healthy proportion of donor portraits may be because they were almost exclusively a lay phenomenon: bishops and clergy were not typically depicted in donor portraits, in contrast to the pattern noted for Italy during the same period. It is possible, however, that the clergy appeared in wall decoration that does not survive.<sup>134</sup> In contrast to Aquileia, there were also significant differences in the Near East in how male and female donors were represented. Many men are shown engaging in activities such as hunting, carrying baskets, or leading animals.<sup>135</sup> Women, on the other hand, are shown in more formal poses and never in the sort of genre-style scenes

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. e.g. I4; P8. See also Baumann 1999, pp.210-212.

<sup>133</sup> I have only included donor portraits that can be identified as such by inscriptions or other compelling evidence. For the purposes of counting, I have grouped together individuals shown clearly affiliated, such as Lady Syltous and Kalliora, or Georgia and Theodore, counting them as one portrait. Figures depicted individually in the scrolls or medallions of the same mosaic carpet, but without obvious affiliation, I have counted separately, e.g. Elias, Maria, and Soreg, or John and Calloeonistus.

<sup>134</sup> In the church of SS Peter and Paul at Gerasa, for example, an inscription from the pavement honouring a bishop Anastasius strongly indicates that there was once a depiction of him on the wall above the text (Welles 1938, p.485, No.330; Agosti 2010, p.170, SGO 21/23/06).

<sup>135</sup> Baumann thinks hunt scenes represent the donor's *virtus* and leisured lifestyle, and figures carrying baskets as donors making offerings to the church (1999, pp.218; 251-258). He thinks representing oneself as peasant could situate the donor as a humble servant of God with stewardship over the land (1999, pp.218-224). Ine Jacobs, however, argues that donors represented leading animals could relate to their professions and therefore reveal their relatively modest socio-economic status (2020, pp.40-43).



often used for men, in which a name was appended to a genre-figure on a larger carpet.<sup>136</sup> Having one's name added to an existing figure may have been a cheaper option for donors, in which case women's portraits – which all appear to be unique – may indicate that women donors were once again on average wealthier than their male counterparts.

In Baumann's study of late antique donors in the Near East he does not undertake a gendered analysis of the inscriptions he collects, however we can identify some broad patterns from the raw data. Although a very crude measure, Baumann lists a little over a page of women's names attested in inscriptions, but around nine pages of men's names, indicating a much wider gap in gendered representation than for donor portraits.<sup>137</sup> Yet it is clear from Baumann's tabulation of professional and clerical nomenclature that a large proportion of these men must have been members of the clergy.<sup>138</sup> It therefore remains unclear how laywomen donors related to laymen. A complete analysis of the inscriptions from the region is not within the scope of this thesis, however I will undertake a micro-analysis of the prosperous village of Khirbet el-Mukkhayat on the southern spur of Mount Nebo, in order to show how relationships between donors functioned at this well-attested site.<sup>139</sup> Once we strip back the clergy and officials to look just at ordinary laypeople, we see that in this village prominent kinship groups dominated patronage and that this opened the doors for women donors.

Three churches have been excavated at Khirbet el-Mukkhayat: St George, SS Lot and Procopius and the chapel of the Priest John, all built within a thirty-year period between AD

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<sup>136</sup> There are women in genre scenes, but they are never labelled to mark them as donors as they are for men (e.g. M5; M9).

<sup>137</sup> Baumann 1999, pp.344-355. This measure must remain crude as there are some omissions in Baumann's tabulation, for example Kalliora is included but Lady Syltous is not.

<sup>138</sup> Baumann 1999, pp.356-360.

<sup>139</sup> Piccirillo 1993, p.164.

535 - 565.<sup>140</sup> Of the over thirty persons mentioned in inscriptions from these churches seven or eight belong to the clergy: two bishops, an archdeacon, three or four priests, and a monk.<sup>141</sup> Of the laity present there are many names which are repeated. Given the proximity of the churches and the clusters in which names appear, some are likely to represent the same people. Taking this into account, we find seventeen laymen: one a consul, three artists and their two friends, and eleven men who patronised the churches.<sup>142</sup> The remaining nine individuals were women.<sup>143</sup>

As Saller and Bagatti note, if we remove most of the clergy, the consul, and the artists, the remaining people fall into two broad family groups: the family of Cometissa and the family of Ammonius.<sup>144</sup> The family of Cometissa is the largest, appearing in all three churches and comprising some thirteen people who appear together across four inscriptions: Cometissa, Stephen, Elias, Sergius, Porphyria, Procopius, Anastasia, Rabatha, Anastasius, John, Rome, Maria, and Julian the monk (Fig 5.30). Cometissa was the matriarch of the clan, the mother of Stephen and Elias. Stephen was the father of Sergius, Sergius the father of Procopius, and Porphyria Procopius' mother. This core group is presented alongside other clusters: a mother-daughter and father-son pair, and three individuals whose connections to the others are unknown. That they appear together in the same inscriptions, however, suggests there was

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<sup>140</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, p.32. The chapel of the Priest John is annexed to an earlier church which will not be considered here as it has no surviving mosaic inscriptions. Saller and Bagatti note that inscriptions on the chancel posts of this church references individuals called Closis and Amos (1949, pp.180-182).

<sup>141</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, p.203.

<sup>142</sup> The consul was named only to date the inscription. Male lay patrons: Stephen, Elias, Sergius, Procopius, Anastasius, John, Ammonius, John, Sargus, Cassiseus, John. Since John was such a common name I have counted them separately, however it is possible that at least some of the attestations refer to the same person.

<sup>143</sup> Female patrons: Cometissa, Porphyria, Anastasia, Rabatha, Rome, Maria, Epiphania, Mica Callinice, Maria Callinice. We should also note that some inscriptions reference anonymous additional donors, of whom "the Lord knows their names" (Saller and Bagatti 1949, p.184).

<sup>144</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, p.203. See also Ruffini 2011 on the importance of local families of the village of Nessana in the Negev.

some kind of connection between them that is now obscure. How individuals are clustered together across the four inscriptions is summarised in Figure 5.31.

The family of Ammonius is formed of two core groups mentioned across five inscriptions. The first core group is made up of Ammonius and his wife Epiphania, and their children John and Sargus. The second is Saolas, his father Cassiseus, and Saolas' daughters Mica Callinice and Maria Callinice (Fig 5.32).<sup>145</sup> All but one of the inscriptions referencing Ammonius' clan are found in the church of St George; Epiphania appears alone in an additional inscription in SS Lot and Procopius. Given her appearance in St George and the relative infrequency of the name (in comparison to John or Maria) I have assumed this is the same woman, but it is possible that it is another individual. Saolas also appears in another inscription alongside a certain John. Since this name is very common I have treated him as a separate individual. It is of course possible that this John and the son of Ammonius and Epiphania were one and the same. How individuals are clustered across the five inscriptions is summarized in Figure 5.33.

A striking feature of the inscriptions from the churches of Khirbet el-Mukkhayat is the relative parity in numbers between laymen and women. Donor portraits offer us a similar picture: John son of Ammonius is depicted as an orant in a populated vine scroll on the mosaic carpet of St George, and two portraits, one of a man and the other of a woman, are found in the chapel of the Priest John.<sup>146</sup> We discussed the bust of the unidentified woman briefly above in relation to veiling; her portrait was located in a square panel in the border of the mosaic carpet of the chapel. The portrait bust of the man was also found in one of these panels, shown bearded and tonsured. Unfortunately, much of the carpet is lost and it seems probable that to complete the

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<sup>145</sup> In one of the three inscriptions that include the name Saolas, he is identified as an archdeacon. Given that this is a relatively unusual name, it is likely that all three refer to the same man (Saller and Bagatti 1949, pp.159-160).

<sup>146</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, p.75, 98-99, 114, 166-167, Plate 29.1; pp.54-55, 98-99, Plate 10.3. The portrait bust of the woman had not been discovered at the time of Saller and Bagatti's publication, hidden by a later wall.

symmetry there would have originally been other busts around the border. The man has been associated with a priest called John after whom the chapel was named and who is mentioned in an inscription from the east of the nave.<sup>147</sup> The woman is associated with another of the inscriptions from the church, which names the donors Sergius son of Stephen, Procopius son of Porphyria, Rome, Maria, and Julian the monk.<sup>148</sup> The other individuals may have been represented in the hypothesised donor portraits now lost.<sup>149</sup>

Several of the women of Khirbet el-Mukkhayat appear to have been prominent members of the community in their own right. Stephen and Elias are defined by their relationship to their mother, Cometissa, not their father. Cometissa was perhaps a widow, the matriarch of the family and well known enough to command independent recognition. Porphyria, Rome, and Maria appear not only together with a larger group in the chapel of the Priest John, but also alone in the church of SS Lot and Procopius. Assuming there to be only one Epiphania, she too appears in an inscription alone, in addition to one alongside her husband and sons. The inscription from SS Lot and Procopius appears to be a personal appeal: the inscription cites a passage from the Psalms and requests mercy for the “lowly” Epiphania.<sup>150</sup> These women made benefactions on their own or in the company of other women as well as alongside men. This suggests their status was not inherently tied to male relations, but was more closely connected to wealth and the position of their families within the wider community. This seems to be reflected in the donor portraits as well. The only woman whose connection to a man we know for certain is Georgia from Gerasa, all the others are represented either with other women or their relationships are unknown.

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<sup>147</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, pp.54-55, 98-99, Plate 10.3.

<sup>148</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, pp.176-177.

<sup>149</sup> Britt 2008, pp.122-123. Britt suggests that the man might represent Julian the Monk.

<sup>150</sup> Saller and Bagatti 1949, pp.199-200.

While the volume of women attested at Khirbet el-Mukkhayat is exceptional, it is not unique. Another cluster of six women is attested in the churches of Gerasa, three of whom were commemorated with portraits.<sup>151</sup> Other smaller clusters were scattered across the region, for example a Georgia and two instances of Mary are recorded in the monastery of Lady Mary in Beisan, and four women are attested across three churches at Khirbet Umm al-Rasas.<sup>152</sup> The prosperous towns and villages of the region were apparently fertile sites for women's patronage. Female members of prominent families frequently acted as benefactors on their own or as part of larger groups. The decline of local councils – of which women could not be part – in favour of looser forms of local administration dominated by prominent families and the clergy seem to have benefitted wealthy women. Despite being excluded from positions of authority in the Church or the surviving parts of the secular administration, women apparently had little trouble asserting their position through wealth and family networks.

In some places, such as Khirbet el-Mukkhayat, prominent women made up almost half of all surviving lay donors. This is a significant increase compared to estimates from earlier periods that women typically made up between a tenth and a third of patrons. This new prominence, however, was based on the flexibility of changing forms of administration, rather than the conscious inclusion of women into hierarchies. It may therefore have been highly dependent on the attitudes of specific families and communities. Although much later than our examples, the eighth century church of St Stephen at Umm al-Rasas contained at least eleven donor portraits later damaged by iconoclasts, all of whom seem to have been men.<sup>153</sup> It is possible

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<sup>151</sup> Georgia at SS Cosmas and Damian; Eulampia at the church of Bishop Isaias; Ioulia at the chapel at the Hadrianic Arch; Maria at the chapel at the Cathedral; and Maria and Soreg from the chapel of Elias, Maria, and Soreg (Baumann 1999, pp.344-345).

<sup>152</sup> Baumann 1999, pp.344-345. Khirbet Umm al-Rasas: Sophia at the church of the Bishop Sergios; Mary and Goumela at the church of St Stephen; and Talitha at the church of the Lions.

<sup>153</sup> Piccirillo 1993, p.238.

that the presence of a military garrison at the site boosted the number of male patrons, or that by the eighth century the pendulum had begun to swing once again away from female patrons.

## 5.7 Egypt: Into the Monastery

Three donor portraits of women survive from Egypt, in the form of a silver cross, a textile wall-hanging and a wall-painting. While this may seem like a lot, evidence for civic patronage in this region is rare. This is not a quirk of Late Antiquity: evidence for *euergetism* in Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman periods is also slight.<sup>154</sup> While papyri inform us about everyday income and expenditure, we lack the inscriptions that form the backbone of evidence for *euergetism* elsewhere. Peter Van Minnen considers the evidence may simply not have survived long periods of sustained urban occupation, but also notes that systems of urbanisation and government in Egypt had long been different from other regions and that this may have impacted the prevalence of civic giving.<sup>155</sup> While the large numbers of surviving church floor mosaics detailing benefactors and their gifts have triggered investigations into late antique patronage in Italy and the Near East, no such evidence nor studies exist for Egypt. This makes it more difficult to contextualise the donor portraits considered below. When we do hear about networks of patronage in papyri, it is most often through requests for legal or monetary assistance, rather than plans to build a new church.<sup>156</sup> There certainly were churches, monasteries, and other such structures built across Egypt, but we are not nearly so well informed about who was funding them. Given this lack of background material, I shall first

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<sup>154</sup> Van Minnen 2000.

<sup>155</sup> Van Minnen 2000, pp.443-445.

<sup>156</sup> See Ruffini 2018, pp.164-180.

discuss our donor portraits, and afterwards contextualise them as far as possible with evidence from other sources.

The first of the donor portraits we will consider concerns Elizabeth and her daughter at Jeme, who we mentioned briefly in the previous chapter. Their images were located in a chapel dedicated to Saint Menas in the former temple of Rameses III, decorated with scenes from the life of the saint and depictions of other holy figures (Figs 5.34-35).<sup>157</sup> At the far right end of the scenes related to Menas we find two female figures in the *orans* position, clad in red, and isolated from the action of the tableaux. These figures are labelled by the inscription “Elizabeth and her daughter...”, most likely the donors of the chapel or this cycle of paintings.<sup>158</sup> Saint Menas was a famous Egyptian martyr with a large and successful pilgrimage site far to the north near Alexandria. He was known for his ability to heal sterility and one of the souvenirs pilgrims could purchase were figurines of pregnant women and women holding children, indicating that female pilgrims visited the saint for help with their reproductive health.<sup>159</sup> Menas’ pilgrimage site itself is depicted in the paintings, and it is conceivable that the depiction of Elizabeth and her daughter may commemorate a successful appeal to the saint for a child.

Elizabeth was evidently a prosperous woman of the town, but her exact social status and the extent of her benefaction remains unknown. On the opposite wall of the chapel are further frescoes, which may include the images of other donors. While most of the figures depicted are clearly saints, the appearance of a woman and a female child do not conform to this pattern and appear more similar to Elizabeth and her daughter from the other side of the chapel.<sup>160</sup> It

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<sup>157</sup> P3. On the Saint Menas paintings see Wilber 1940.

<sup>158</sup> Followed by some illegible words, perhaps beginning with the letter ‘M’. Wilfong (2002a, p.97 and note 3) suggests this may indicate her name was Mary.

<sup>159</sup> Stafford 2019a, Stafford 2019b.

<sup>160</sup> See figures in P3.

is therefore possible that much like in the churches of the Near East, multiple donors were needed to contribute funds for the decoration of religious spaces. The extensive documentary evidence preserved from Jeme does record an affluent woman called Elizabeth, but as noted by Wilfong, the name is too common to be connected to our donor with any certainty.<sup>161</sup> This Elizabeth can, however, give us a general idea of what a prosperous Jemean woman looked like. We know both she and her husband inherited houses from their parents: her husband's house was in another town and was sold for 57 solidi, while hers was a four-storey Jemean townhouse that was co-owned with her niece Abigaia. Elizabeth also owned plots of unworked land in the town and the countryside, various household furnishings, and equipment from some kind of workshop. Elizabeth, Abigaia, and Abigaia's husband all appear to have had limited literacy skills, requiring legal documents to be read to them or signed by others.<sup>162</sup> This situation is probably similar to many of the donors we find in Egypt and the Near East: thriving inhabitants of villages and towns with modest property and some financial flexibility.

Our other donor portraits originate from monastic contexts. A fifth or sixth century wall-hanging now in the Benaki Museum in Athens preserves what is probably a textile donation made by a woman called Hethyme to a monastery in (Fig 5.36).<sup>163</sup> A rare survival, the hanging provides a tantalising glimpse into a form of dedication that we know relatively little about. The linen hanging depicts a female and male figure in the *orans* position framed by a multi-coloured arch supported by columns with composite capitals. The man is bearded and has a multi-coloured halo, while the woman wears a reddish-orange tunic with green clavi and a large purple mantle draped around her shoulders and over her head. An inscription above the heads of the figures reads: "Hethyme (the daughter of) Kyriakos (and) Apa Makare." The

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<sup>161</sup> Wilfong 2002a, p.98, Note 5.

<sup>162</sup> Wilfong 2002a, pp.47-68. The status of Elizabeth's husband remains unclear.

<sup>163</sup> T1. Delivorrias 1980, p.33 records that the textile comes from a monastery, but I am not aware of a published archaeological context. Dimensions: H: 129 cm, W: 89 cm (with fringe); H: 105 cm, W: 86 cm (without fringe).



woman should therefore represent Hethyme, the donor of the hanging, and Apa Macarius, possibly Saint Macarius of Egypt. We know very little else about either Hethyme or the hanging. Given the traditional associations between women and textile production, was the hanging considered a particularly appropriate donation for a woman? Could Hethyme have made the hanging herself? It is a frustrating prospect that women donors may have been particularly well represented through a medium that rarely survives.<sup>164</sup> Such hangings may have been common features of religious spaces: a comparable wall-hanging, although only surviving in fragments, is found in the Abbeig-Stiftung and has been carbon-14 dated to AD 333-545.<sup>165</sup> Said to be from Akhmim, one of the fragments depicts a family group of two women, a man, and a child, all standing in the *orans* pose. Unfortunately the inscription survives only in scattered letters and the fragmentary nature of the hanging makes it difficult to interpret. However the prayer posture of the family may indicate it was commissioned for a religious space, perhaps a church or monastery.

The silver cross of the nun Theodote – which also bears her donor portrait on the recto – has already been mentioned in relation to monastic families in Chapter 4 (Figs 5.37-38).<sup>166</sup> This was a substantial benefaction and one that was evidently long in use, as it was repaired in antiquity.<sup>167</sup> At around 30 cm x 25 cm it is by no means the largest cross known, but it is almost double the size of two other crosses from the same period.<sup>168</sup> These crosses were also made of bronze, making Theodote's silver donation even more impressive. Silver figural crosses are

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<sup>164</sup> Herl (2014, p.254) also notes that women's dedication of perishable items may skew our understanding of their activity as patrons.

<sup>165</sup> T4.

<sup>166</sup> S13.

<sup>167</sup> Coquin et al 1989, p.74.

<sup>168</sup> Cotsonis 1994, Cat Nos 8, 9. No 9 was dedicated by a woman called Leontia for the forgiveness of her sins. Unfortunately Theodote's cross is lost and data on its weight and silver content unavailable.

extremely rare for this period, with only one other example known.<sup>169</sup> While we may be surprised that a monastic possessed the personal wealth to dedicate such an object, papyrological sources attest that some women retained substantial property.<sup>170</sup> A lease contract from the year AD 400, for example, records two nuns (possibly sisters) leasing part of their property to a Jewish man called Aurelius Jose.<sup>171</sup> A sixth century document, meanwhile, records a nun initiating legal proceedings against her mother in order to gain possession of money she thinks she is due following her mother's divorce.<sup>172</sup>

The function of the cross has been debated. While Coquin et al argued that it was not intended for use as a processional cross as there is no surviving tang to affix it to a pole,<sup>173</sup> the rich decoration on both sides surely suggests it was designed to be admired in the round.<sup>174</sup> Numerous depictions show processional crosses held in the hand rather than attached to poles and in any case tangs are known to be fragile and easily lost, so it is entirely possible that the cross originally had one.<sup>175</sup> Literary sources attest to processional crosses used for processions in monastic contexts, both for important feast days and in connection with the veneration of the dead.<sup>176</sup> They are also attested during the celebration of the liturgy or the eucharist.<sup>177</sup> Theodote's cross may have therefore been intended for use during commemorations of the monastery's famous founder, Apa Shenoute, who is depicted on the verso. Another option may be that it was intended for use during the celebration of the eucharist, as the image of the

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<sup>169</sup> Cotsonis 1994 p.57 states that the silver cross from Antioch in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York is the only example known, he is not aware of Theodote's cross. The Met cross is significantly larger than Theodote's but it is also less highly decorated and in a fragmentary condition (Acc. No. 50.5.3).

<sup>170</sup> Entrants to the White Monastery were required to cede all their property to the monastery (Elm 1994, p.301). Clearly this did not function in practice since Theodote was able to finance the cross.

<sup>171</sup> P.Oxy. XLIV 3203, Rowlandson 1998, p.79.

<sup>172</sup> P.Lond V 1731.1-20, Rowlandson 1998, pp.79-80.

<sup>173</sup> Coquin et al. 1989, pp.73-74.

<sup>174</sup> MacCoull 1996, pp.16-17.

<sup>175</sup> Cotsonis 1994, p.24, Figs 10, 11. See for example the Justinian panel from San Vitale, which shows Archbishop Maximianus holding a jewelled cross in his hand. On the delicacy of the tang, see MacCoull 1996, p17.

<sup>176</sup> Cotsonis 1994, pp.14-24, esp. pp.20-24.

<sup>177</sup> Cotsonis 1994, pp.24-26.

Crucifixion and the body of Christ is an unusual iconographic choice and therefore may have been selected specifically for this purpose.<sup>178</sup> Such a function would be particularly meaningful in a donation from a nun, as it would insert the agency of a female monastic into a rite dominated by men.

The size of Theodote's cross and the complex figural decoration suggests it was intended to be used and viewed in the context of a modest gathering, perfect for the limited size of the monastery. Its unique and complex iconographical programme, meanwhile, shows that this was an intensely personal commission. The inclusion of Theodote's portrait alongside so many holy figures, directly below the feet of the crucified Christ, attests to her devotion and her wish to associate herself with the figures she hoped would intercede on her behalf.<sup>179</sup> The inclusion of so many monastic figures on the other side of the cross indicates Theodote's devotion to the monastery and perhaps an ambition to one day hold similar roles to Ama Mannou and Ama Matermoute.

Theodote and Hethyme were not the only women making donations to monasteries. One of the largest crosses known from this period, the so-called Moses Cross, was offered by a woman called Theodora to the chapel of Forty Martyrs in Saint Catherine's monastery at Mount Sinai.<sup>180</sup> Ama Mannou, the abbess named on Theodote's cross, is also attested in a manuscript colophon from a fragmentary MS of the sermons of Shenoute.<sup>181</sup> She is remembered as the commissioner of the text "in the twenty-second year of her reign", alongside a fellow monastic, her spiritual sister Theodora.<sup>182</sup> There was apparently a rich culture of benefaction among the

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<sup>178</sup> Cotsonis 1994, pp.42-44.

<sup>179</sup> On the association between crosses and supplication or intercession, see Cotsonis 1994, pp.14-5, 46-7.

<sup>180</sup> Weitzmann and Ševčenko 1963.

<sup>181</sup> MacCoull 1996, pp.15-16. MacCoull notes that earlier dating of the MS to the tenth century are not based in any evidence and that there is no reason it should not date from the sixth – eighth centuries.

<sup>182</sup> MacCoull 1996, p.16.

nuns of the White Monastery, who engaged in a diverse range of patronage activities to enrich their community and promote their own status.

In some ways, the evidence from Egypt is similar to that from Italy and the Near East: all the benefactions made concerned gifts to churches or religious institutions. There is more heterogeneity, however, with three different media represented. Apparently there was no standard route to commemorating one's patronage, unlike in the village churches of Jordan and Israel. This may however largely be an issue of preservation: the churches of the Near East could once have been rich with textile hangings and wall-paintings donated by unknown benefactors.<sup>183</sup> Yet it does seem that the practice of patronage and its commemoration functioned differently in Egypt. Donor portraits of men are incredibly rare: I am only aware of one painted donor portrait from the Red Monastery.<sup>184</sup> This does not mean men did not act as donors, but that donor portraits were not a common form of commemoration.

Evidence from papyri can help us complicate this picture. The papyrus archive from sixth-century Aphrodito paints a complex picture of patronage and clientship that stretched all the way to Constantinople. This patronage, however, was primarily extended in the form of legal assistance, loans, and favours, rather than civic construction projects.<sup>185</sup> Patrons did not act of their own accord, but responded to requests for help.<sup>186</sup> Evidence for patronage is often found through rather circuitous routes, such as the flattering attentions of a would-be client. Dioskoros, for example, the protagonist of much of the Aphrodito papyri, addresses one of his poems to Patrikia, an elite woman originally from the town, on the occasion of her marriage.

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<sup>183</sup> For example, fragmentary painted inscriptions are known from the plaster surface of pilasters from the church of SS Cosmas and Damian (Welles 1938, p.483). For translation see Cult of Saints E02377, translation Pawel Nowakowski (<http://csla.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E02377> [accessed 08/12/2020]).

<sup>184</sup> Bolman 2016, pp.21-25, for perhaps another example, see also pp.24-25.

<sup>185</sup> Ruffini 2018, esp. Chapter 10.

<sup>186</sup> Ruffini 2018, p.173.

Patrikia is known from other sources as the local pagarch, the official in charge of tax collection.<sup>187</sup> Giovanni Ruffini asserts that Dioskoros had no real interest in her wedding *per se*, but that Patrikia interested him because she was a powerful woman and a potential patron.<sup>188</sup> In another case, a woman called Maria, possibly in the wine business or the owner of an estate, recorded her gifts of wine to various people within the community. In one year she gave away 532 jugs of wine with a combined worth of six and a third gold pieces.<sup>189</sup> The context for these gifts, however, remains entirely obscure. There were plenty of affluent women and men in Aphrodito, from pagarchs to wine merchants, but we know very little about how they used their money to support their community.

In and around Jeme, it was common for women and men to make benefactions in the form of money or land.<sup>190</sup> Offerings in the memory of one's parents were common, made in the form of payments to churches or monasteries for furnishings or to fund commemorative services.<sup>191</sup> Acts of patronage like these afforded few opportunities for the creation of donor portraits even if they were desired; commemoration could be achieved through intangible means rather than inscriptions or images.<sup>192</sup> Such forms of giving opened up patronage to even those of the most modest means. Terry Wilfong's detailed analysis of documents from the area show that even small benefactions were taken very seriously. In an event reminiscent of the poor man's crust of bread from the introduction, when Tsyros donated one tremis to the monastery of Apa Psate, her benefaction was still duly documented.<sup>193</sup> Acts of patronage recorded as death-bed requests were also relatively common. One by a certain Anna from 735 records her "little memorial" to

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<sup>187</sup> Ruffini 2018, pp.161-162.

<sup>188</sup> Ruffini 2018, p.163.

<sup>189</sup> Ruffini 2018, p.149.

<sup>190</sup> Wilfong 2002a, pp.98-99.

<sup>191</sup> Wilfong 2002a, p.98.

<sup>192</sup> See e.g. a seventh century Egyptian diptych listing the names of people to be read aloud during the liturgy (Fluck et al. 2015, No.100 p.94; Toth 2016, p.8).

<sup>193</sup> Wilfong 2002a, p.99; *P.KRU* 54. A tremis was worth a third of a solidus (Wilfong 2002a, p.55).

the monastery of Paul, in which she describes herself as a “wretched woman awaiting her hour of death”. She hopes that God may look favourably on her and that her gift may support the poor-relief practiced by the monastery.<sup>194</sup> While Anna’s narrative of her decline is fascinating, we learn precious little about what her “little memorial” actually involved.<sup>195</sup>

The evidence from Egypt therefore provides us with a glimpse of the rich patchwork of patronage practices that developed during Late Antiquity. From silver crosses to single coins, such diversity opened the doors for a much wider cross-section of society to act as benefactors. Monasteries and monastics represent particularly prominent sources for both donations and donors. Monastic archaeology in Egypt is very well developed compared to other regions and it may be that similar patterns were also true for other areas.<sup>196</sup> The role of monastics in late antique patronage is certainly a fruitful area for further study.

## 5.8 Conclusions

While evidence for women’s patronage – and patronage practices in general – is diverse and often disjointed for Late Antiquity, some broad patterns can be identified and trends suggested to explain them. Aside from Italy, it is notable that evidence for donor portraits clusters in regions that did not have a strong tradition of *euergetism* or the erection of honorific statuary. This suggests we are not seeing a simple shift from honorific statuary to donor portraits, but a different way of thinking about giving and its commemoration. While donor portraits may have drawn inspiration from older modes of representation, they were not merely used to fill a gap

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<sup>194</sup> *P.KRU* 106.57-77, trans Wilfong 2002a, pp.85-86.

<sup>195</sup> See also women who ‘donated’ their children to Egyptian monasteries (Wilfong 2002a, pp.103-104; Römer 2014).

<sup>196</sup> Women’s involvement in monastic patronage and the patronage of female monastics was certainly prominent in later centuries (see e.g. Constantinou 2014).

when statuary production began to dwindle. They represent something new, a system of giving and commemoration that was more tightly controlled by patrons themselves.

In previous centuries, evidence for civic patronage in general and women's patronage in particular was concentrated in the most heavily Romanised and urbanised areas of the empire, bar Rome itself. In Late Antiquity material evidence for non-imperial female patrons is still thin for major cities like Rome and Constantinople, however it is also weak for urban centres in general. This contrasts sharply with the evidence from textual sources, which emphasise aristocratic women patrons, in particular widows and virgins.<sup>197</sup> Apart from Aquileia, the strongest material evidence comes from minor provincial towns and villages. This may partly be due to accidents of preservation, however it may also reflect a real trend in which women patrons thrived in smaller provincial settlements. The preponderance of women patrons in these communities may be explained by changes in administration and civic hierarchy and their impact on towns and villages. Whereas in earlier centuries communities had been governed by civic officials, such roles had largely been dissolved, moved to larger cities, or replaced by members of the Church hierarchy. With those officials gone, the drivers of patronage became the clergy and rich local families. While women could not form part of the first group, they could be extremely active in the second. With civic status for laypeople now more closely tied to wealth and personal connections than civic office, rich women had greater freedom to engage with their communities and faced less competition from men who outranked them by virtue of office. In women's monasteries in particular they were free to assert their authority through patronage with little interference from men.

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<sup>197</sup> Clark 1990, pp.260-261.

While our data set is not as robust as for the earlier empire, the numbers do suggest that women donors increased as a proportion of benefactors in general. I suggest this is due to a confluence of factors including changing systems of governance and the increasing importance of the family. It may also be the case that in regions that had little tradition of *euergetism* – and where our evidence is strongest – there were fewer barriers to women acting as Christian benefactors because there was less expectation that it should be a male prerogative. The increasing diversity of patronage into both tangible and intangible forms also gave a greater cross-section of society the chance to engage in patronage. This favoured women and people of more humble backgrounds and is a trend we see particularly strongly in rural areas. It is possible that similar forms of patronage were practiced by people in rural communities during the Roman period, but that these have been overlooked in favour of statues and inscriptions which are easier to trace. More work on Roman rural patronage would be necessary before we can say for certain that something completely new was happening in Late Antiquity.

During the imperial period honorific statuary commemorating women patrons had articulated a constellation of virtues such as beauty, generosity, fertility, and piety, through a combination of posture, clothing, and attributes. While there are scattered references to these virtues in our donor portraits, piety emerges as the dominant quality asserted by these women. They are shown in the attitude of prayer, supplicating saints, receiving blessings from Christ, and distributing money to the needy. In one sense this is unsurprising given that all our donor portraits come from religious contexts. Yet women's patronage in the imperial period had been focused predominantly on temples and the commemoration of benefactors still maintained a more holistic attitude to what made an ideal patroness and citizen. In Late Antiquity, by contrast, Christian piety which drove generosity became the primary civic virtue claimed by both female and male benefactors alike. This is probably in part due to changes in the rationale



behind giving: the shift from *euergetism* to charity and the promise of rewards in the next life. Yet it may also be connected to the growing significance of Christianity in all aspects of society. We have already seen in Chapter 3 how a certain kind of Christian intellectualism offered women novel opportunities for the exercise of authority. It is possible that the fervent expression of piety opened doors to public visibility and civic involvement otherwise denied them. The extension of patronage to ever wider sections of society through charity also expanded the relevance of virtues like civic responsibility and generosity to women outside the ‘elite’. From provincial nuns to village notables and beyond, giving – and being seen to give – became a key facet of ideal womanhood as never before.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

While interest in women's history and gender studies has grown over recent decades, the place of women within broader histories of the late antique world remains ambiguous. By this I mean that while specialist studies have proliferated,<sup>1</sup> attention to women and gender does not often penetrate historical overviews. If attention to these themes is paid at all, it is often confined to a specific chapter on 'women', thus acknowledging their relevance but tacitly considering women's history or gender issues as tangential to broader historical considerations, such as political, religious, or economic developments.<sup>2</sup> The result of singling women out with their own chapters – despite often being done with the best of intentions – is to imply that the rest of the book does not concern them.

In this final chapter, I do not intend to summarise the conclusions of the previous chapters; I believe these stand on their own merits. What I would like to do instead, is to address the issue presented above by exploring what I see as two key themes which emerge from my thesis as a whole. These themes may at first glance appear contradictory: I contend that women were both an integral part of the late antique world, both in those domains traditionally considered relevant to women such as the family, and those considered 'male', i.e. everything else. Yet at

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<sup>1</sup> Some excellent examples include Kuefler 2001 on masculinity, Wilkinson 2015 on women and modesty, and Wilfong 2002a for a micro-study of women and gender in the town of Jeme.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the almost 800 pages of *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Bowerstock ed. 2001), a "comprehensive guide to the world of late antiquity", women appear rarely, primarily confined to their own entry in the dictionary (pp.749-751). Gender does not appear at all in Averil Cameron's classic *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity* (1993), the subheading 'women' receives a little over three pages (pp.148-151). In Jill Harries more recent overview, *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363*, imperial women get their own chapter (2012, pp.255-273), while in A. D. Lee's 2013 follow-up, *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565*, gender is discussed briefly in relation to eunuchs and the empress Theodora, while the index redirects a search for women to a handful of individuals such as Anicia Juliana and Olympias.

the same time they stood apart from it, often occupying homosocial spaces in which women turned to each other to build relationships and exercise agency. Women were both a fundamental component of the late antique world, and the creators and maintainers of a world of women. In this chapter, I will explore both these worlds that women inhabited and how greater attention to them might allow us to move towards a more nuanced understanding of life in Late Antiquity. I believe this will ultimately bring us closer to the wider aims of this thesis as outlined in the introduction: to expand our understanding of women's lives and the ways in which they shaped, and were shaped by, ideals of gender.

## 6.1 Women in the Late Antique World

The first theme which emerged from my thesis was that women were involved at a fundamental level in the development of myriad aspects of late antique society, from changes in urban life and elite display to new literary genres and forms of civic patronage. While women maintained key roles in family life, their presence was felt well beyond the home and beyond the standard labels of daughter, wife, or mother. In this sense, the continued 'othering' of women in mainstream scholarship is unwarranted. Writing on the late antique economy, for example, whether concerned with the importance of the great estates or the rise of provincial villages, could take account of the importance of women in both these realms. Christian ideology made aristocratic *dominae* the moral lynch-pins of their households, while legal developments made wealthy women more financially independent than ever. The decline of local councils and the rise of charitable giving, meanwhile, opened the doors to women of even humble means to engage with their communities as never before. Women's roles as property owners, household managers, and civic benefactors situate them squarely within shifting discourses of wealth and

its distribution. There is therefore plenty of scope to incorporate women into more sweeping thematic studies and pay closer attention to the role that gender might play in aspects of late antique culture normally considered in what is understood to be a gender-neutral – i.e. male – framework.

Material evidence offers us perspectives on how women were integrated into late antique culture that are often different from literary sources. Texts place significant emphasis, for example, on widows and virgins, figures that are conspicuous in their rarity in the visual evidence. This represents an illustrative example of the bias in literary sources towards concepts of ideal elite womanhood rather than *lived* womanhood. Even though visual culture also preserves a filtered reality, the absence of widows in particular strongly suggests that the literary ideal of widowhood was simply not accessible for the vast majority of women. It seems that virgins too were less noticeable than we have been led to believe. While writers like Cyprian and Jerome thought modesty a clear enough indicator of virginity, it was probably only well-known aristocratic women who gave up their jewels and silks for plain, simple clothes that were recognisable as such on sight. ‘Normal’ virgins probably looked much like everybody else, distinguishable by their decision to marry a heavenly husband rather than any quirk of dress. Even the mother superior of a monastery apparently looked little different from any other respectable matron.

Ultimately, both the perspectives of texts and material culture are necessary in order to arrive at an increasingly nuanced understanding of women’s lives and the workings of gendered ideals. However, I believe that an over-reliance on literary sources often hampers our ability to see how women fit into the late antique world. The emphasis which texts place on certain gendered ideals or stereotypes, as seen above with relation to widowhood, frequently creates a

binary framework from which it is difficult to extricate ourselves. Chapter 2, for example, demonstrated how reading images of the toilet through a textual lens that understood bodily cultivation as inherently feminine, prevented us from recognising the importance of the male toilet and the development of the toilet in general as a new facet of late antique ceremony with significant consequences for urban life. In this case, our insistence on reading these images through a particular gendered framework made it all but impossible to see beyond a single predetermined ideal.

In Chapter 3, by contrast, we saw this pattern reversed. Trying to understand women through a framework designed for men – this time in the context of education – was bound to fail. Indeed, the traditional tripartite system of education was probably too rigid a structure to be relevant to any but the very wealthiest men in late antique society. Here we see the importance of an intersectional understanding that takes into account the impact not just of gender but also of status: looking beyond literary sources can be important for better understanding men as well as women. While it may be tempting to do so, letting texts take the leading role in understanding material culture is a dangerous game. Texts can be invaluable in helping us to analyse material sources, but we must let our evidence speak for itself and take as holistic an approach as possible to the texts that we do use. I believe that my thesis has shown that when we allow sources like visual culture to take centre stage, we not only arrive at a more nuanced body of evidence, but we are also better equipped to consider the rhetoric and biases of texts.

Ultimately, centring depictions of women from Late Antiquity has revealed greater involvement of ordinary women in contemporary culture than is allowed for in texts. However, a word of caution is necessary, lest it appear that this period was some sort of golden age for women. In almost every chapter of this thesis, we have seen that changes in women's

engagement with society was connected to moments of transition in which social practice was shifting. In Chapter 2 this was manifested in changes in elite display and urban life, in Chapter 3 the emergence and popularity of new literary genres and Christian reliance on holy texts, and in Chapter 5 the rise and fall of forms of civic administration. Chapter 4, by contrast, revealed the relative consistency of women's roles within the family, challenging the importance of changes thought to be key for women, such as the prominence of the Christian widow. As noted in the introduction, Late Antiquity marks a period of cultural, religious, and political transformation. I believe that the nature of these changes provided sufficient flexibility to offer women novel opportunities which we see in the visual evidence and elsewhere, but that this flexibility did not represent meaningful improvements in the status of women in relation to men. Even if some women did experience tangible improvements in their situation in Late Antiquity, the status of women fragmented into numerous successor states. The continued study of women and gender in a plurality of late antique worlds, from the nascent Islamic communities of east to the Visigoths, Lombards, or Merovingians in the west will doubtless generate a rich mosaic of experiences and practices that will keep scholars busy for generations to come.

## 6.2 A World of Women

The second theme which emerged from my thesis was the key role which women played in each other's lives. In Chapter 2, I posited that women's bathhouse ceremonies may have been most effective when viewed by other women. Baths represented a key homosocial space for women and men, both as places where hierarchies were established and maintained, and as potential spaces for homoerotic desire. In Chapter 3, all-female groups emerged as important sources for the development and reception of women's intellectual activities. Women speakers

appear in visual evidence as part of single-sex groups and mothers are routinely represented as responsible for their daughters' mental and spiritual education. Women's monasteries, meanwhile, appeared for the first time in Chapter 3 as a locus for the development of women's writing, and intellectual growth through mentorship and study. In Chapter 4, we explored the prominence of mother-daughter and other female family relationships both in funerary art and in donor portraits, a theme which returned in Chapter 5. Once again, in Chapters 4 and 5 monastic settings were seen to offer a true 'world of women', in which female authority figures and homosocial relationships came to the fore. Male hierarchies, meanwhile, occupied a more distant ideal and often struggled to assert their dominance.

As discussed briefly in Chapter 2, the late antique world – and indeed the ancient world in general – functioned with a relatively high level of sex-segregation.<sup>3</sup> The importance of sexual fidelity for women's reputations and by extension the reputations of their families meant that unrelated women and men did not typically socialise together.<sup>4</sup> This was of course partially mediated through social status: men frequently had sexual relationships with women of lower status, whether sex workers or slaves.<sup>5</sup> These women were perceived to lack sexual honour and to be sexually available as they were not embedded in networks of inheritance and family reputation like 'respectable' women. Women may have had male clients or retainers of a lower social status, but male-female friendships were not the norm. It was not just a matter of being faithful, but of having a reputation for fidelity and modesty. The ideal woman made public appearances infrequently and was accompanied by appropriate chaperones. She dressed

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<sup>3</sup> Rabinowitz 2002, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson 2015, p.59. Harper 2013, pp.37-52 on the two sexual "pathways" a woman could take in life: chastity, personified by the virgin or the matron, and promiscuity, personified by the prostitute.

<sup>5</sup> As we saw in Chapter 4, although Christianity promoted sexual fidelity for both partners, a double standard persisted. As segregation practices were primarily tied to women's reputations rather than men's, men risked less by engaging socially with women and their interactions with lower status women probably made their worlds far more integrated than those of women seeking to preserve their modesty.

modestly and did not fraternise with men from outside her household.<sup>6</sup> Modesty and domesticity were not passive states but complicated enterprises that required careful negotiation.<sup>7</sup> As Jerome declared in a letter to a widow called Salvina: “A woman’s reputation for sexual modesty is a fragile thing, like a precious flower that breaks in the soft breeze and is ruined by the light wind.”<sup>8</sup> Keeping women in the company of other women reduced anxieties surrounding male-female relationships and helped to preserve women’s sexual modesty and by extension their families’ reputations. Women were therefore brought together in numerous social settings throughout the life course. The kind of segregation that I describe is relatively flexible and informal, however with the rise of monasticism in Late Antiquity more strictly segregated spaces also emerged.

Research into modern societies with high levels of sex-segregation has shown that such conditions facilitate the creation of female hierarchies and social practices. While segregated to a higher degree than the ancient world, given that segregation is enforced and controlled by the state, research by Amélie Le Renard into women’s homosociality in Saudi Arabia has demonstrated that segregation has created a “society” of young urban women formed through homosocial gatherings.<sup>9</sup> Homosocial spaces from shopping malls to women’s websites function as sites for the development of hegemonic femininities and as spaces where women can access education and employment.<sup>10</sup> Le Renard also argues that segregation provides opportunities for women to become preachers and religious leaders in all-female spaces.<sup>11</sup> While it is the Saudi state’s policy of segregation – and therefore the creation of women-only spaces – that has generated the necessary conditions for women’s leadership, it does not

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<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson 2015, pp.58-85.

<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson 2015, p.84.

<sup>8</sup> *Letter 79.8*, translation Harper 2013, p.41.

<sup>9</sup> Le Renard 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Le Renard 2014; Le Renard 2012, pp.107, 110-111. On hegemonic femininity see Paechter 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Le Renard 2012.



determine how female initiatives and practices emerge or who leads them.<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, of course, that female homosocial activities and women's leadership often remain reliant on the approval of male authorities, from family members to institutions. Women-only spaces offer flexibility and opportunity unimaginable in a world of men, but do not typically contest the dominance of male authority.<sup>13</sup>

Forms of sex-segregation practiced in the late antique world encouraged the development of women-only spaces which also offered opportunities otherwise unavailable to women.<sup>14</sup> This is seen most starkly in the context of the monasteries, which would become bastions of female education and authority in the coming centuries. The letter shared between two monastics discussed in Chapter 3, for example, in which the concept of virginity was explored as a generative practice, hints at the ways in which women might engage with ideas of theology and gender when given the time, education, and audience to do so.

Within this framework, devoting individual chapters of books to 'women' may not seem quite so strange, if one considers that women's everyday lives were frequently structured around interactions with other women. Yet I believe if we are to do so, the attention must be paid explicitly to homosocial or homoerotic activities, with the goal of better understanding how unequal societies created, negotiated, and manipulated single-sex spaces. As research on Saudi Arabia has shown, while segregated spaces are commonly the result of oppression, they can be desirable for women for the opportunities they provide within an unbalanced system that is nonetheless widely accepted. Study of such spaces helps us better understand the nuances of gender and realities of women's lives from the perspectives of marginalised groups. The

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<sup>12</sup> Le Renard 2012, pp.105-106.

<sup>13</sup> Le Renard 2012, pp.105-106, 110, 118-119, 124; Le Renard 2014, pp.159-160.

<sup>14</sup> See Stafford 2019a, esp. pp.279-280; Stafford 2019b on the provision of sex-segregated spaces at early Christian pilgrimage sites as spaces that could facilitate women's travel.

examination of women-only spaces and the practices they generate therefore has the potential to reveal more about the everyday lives of late antique women and how homosocial interaction contributed to the construction of gendered norms. Investigating female homosocial spaces in the late antique world is of course a difficult endeavour since the lion's share of the surviving evidence was created by and for men.<sup>15</sup> However, the same is also broadly true of modern societies like Saudi Arabia. I hope that this thesis has shown how attention to a diverse range of sources, in particular material and visual culture, may help ease these difficulties.

Throughout this thesis, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that while Late Antiquity may have been a man's world, there is much we can do to identify how women moved through such a society. We must remember that while wealthy, high status, adult men sat squarely at the top of the social pyramid, the lower levels were messier. Status, rank, money, age, marital status, gender, and location – among a constellation of other factors – came together to determine identities and opportunities that were constantly shifting. It is in this seeming chaos that we can find the nuance and diversity we seek. As Caroline Walker Bynum wrote in her article *Why Paradox?*: “We must stub our toes over bits of the past that strew our path where we least expect them and accept that these bits will be as incompatible yet simultaneous as life and death.”<sup>16</sup> It is moments of strangeness, paradoxes, that make human experience what it is, and make writing history such a bizarre and often difficult undertaking. I hope the reader has stubbed their toes once or twice during this thesis, and that as a result the paradoxes and complexities of life as a woman in Late Antiquity have been brought into slightly better focus.

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<sup>15</sup> However see Broton 1996; Rabinowitz and Auanger eds 2002; Wilfong 2002b for excellent examples of the potential success of such projects.

<sup>16</sup> Walker Bynum 2012, p.435.

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## Figures

### Chapter 2

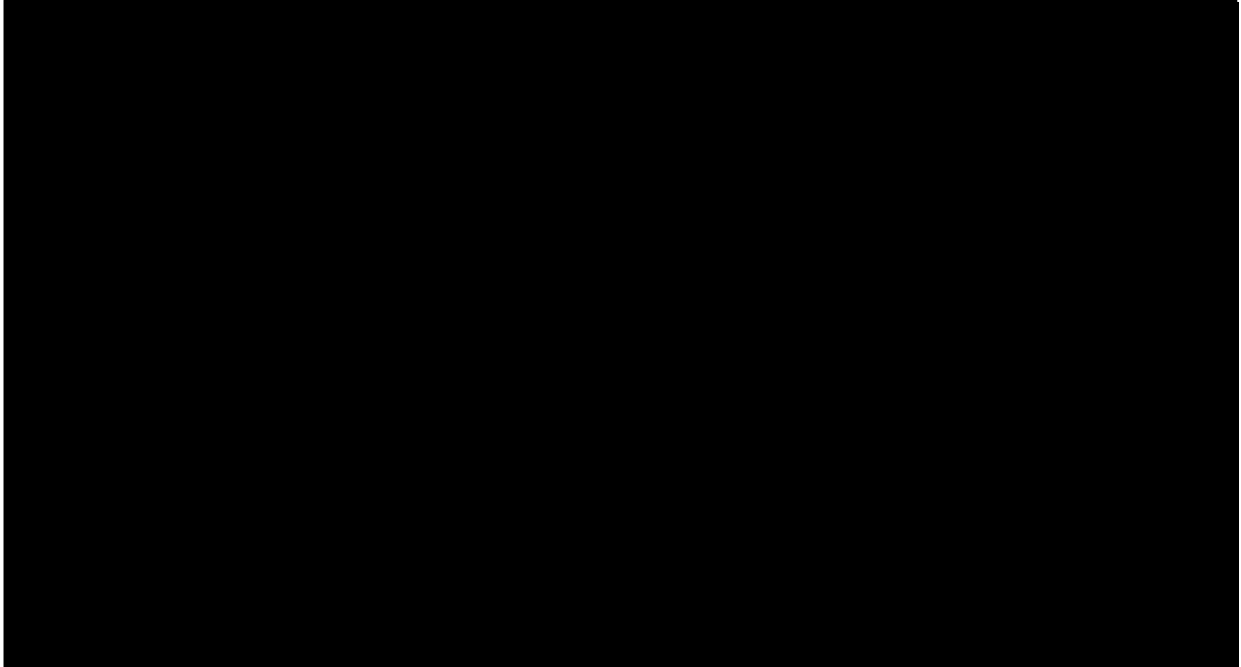


Figure 2.1: Frontal view of the Projecta Casket, showing a woman seated at her toilet below Venus at hers (© British Museum).



Figure 2.2: View of the lid of the Projecta Casket, showing Venus at her toilet (© British Museum).

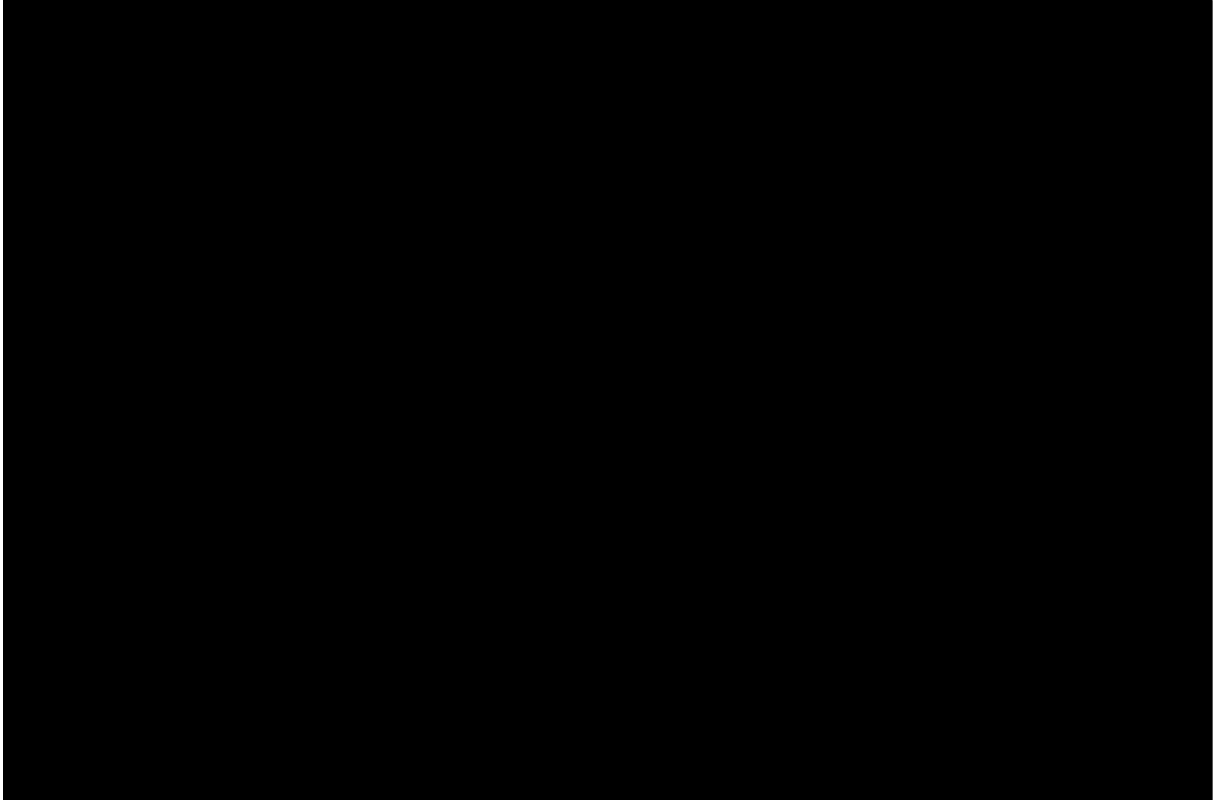


Figure 2.3: View of the back of the lid of the Projecta Casket, showing a woman processing into a bathhouse with her slaves ( © British Museum).

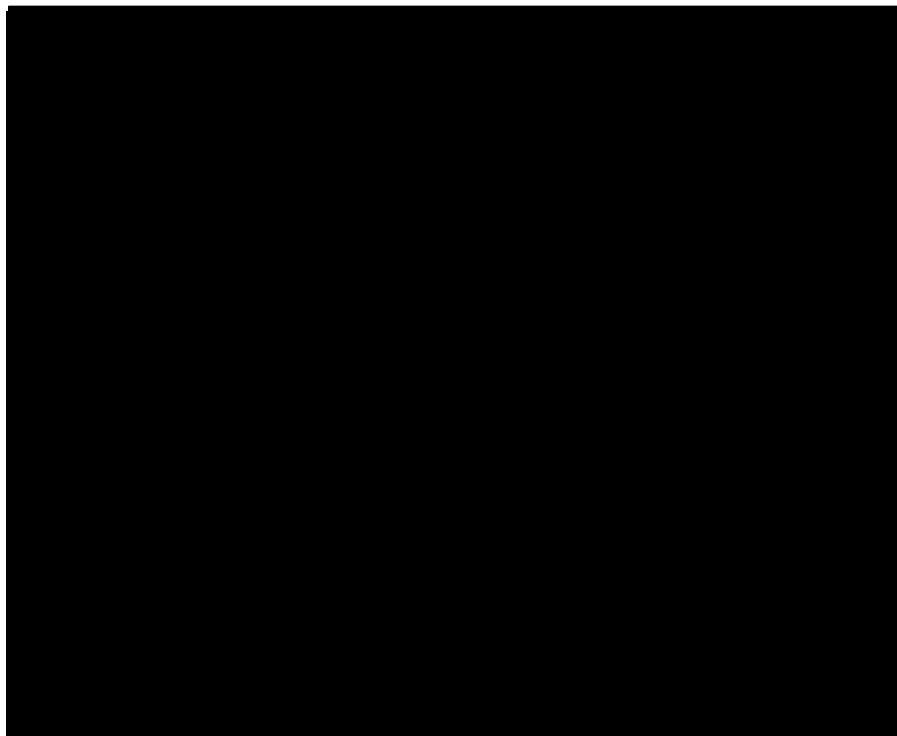


Figure 2.4: View of the top of the lid of the Projecta Casket, showing the clipeus with portraits of a couple ( © British Museum).

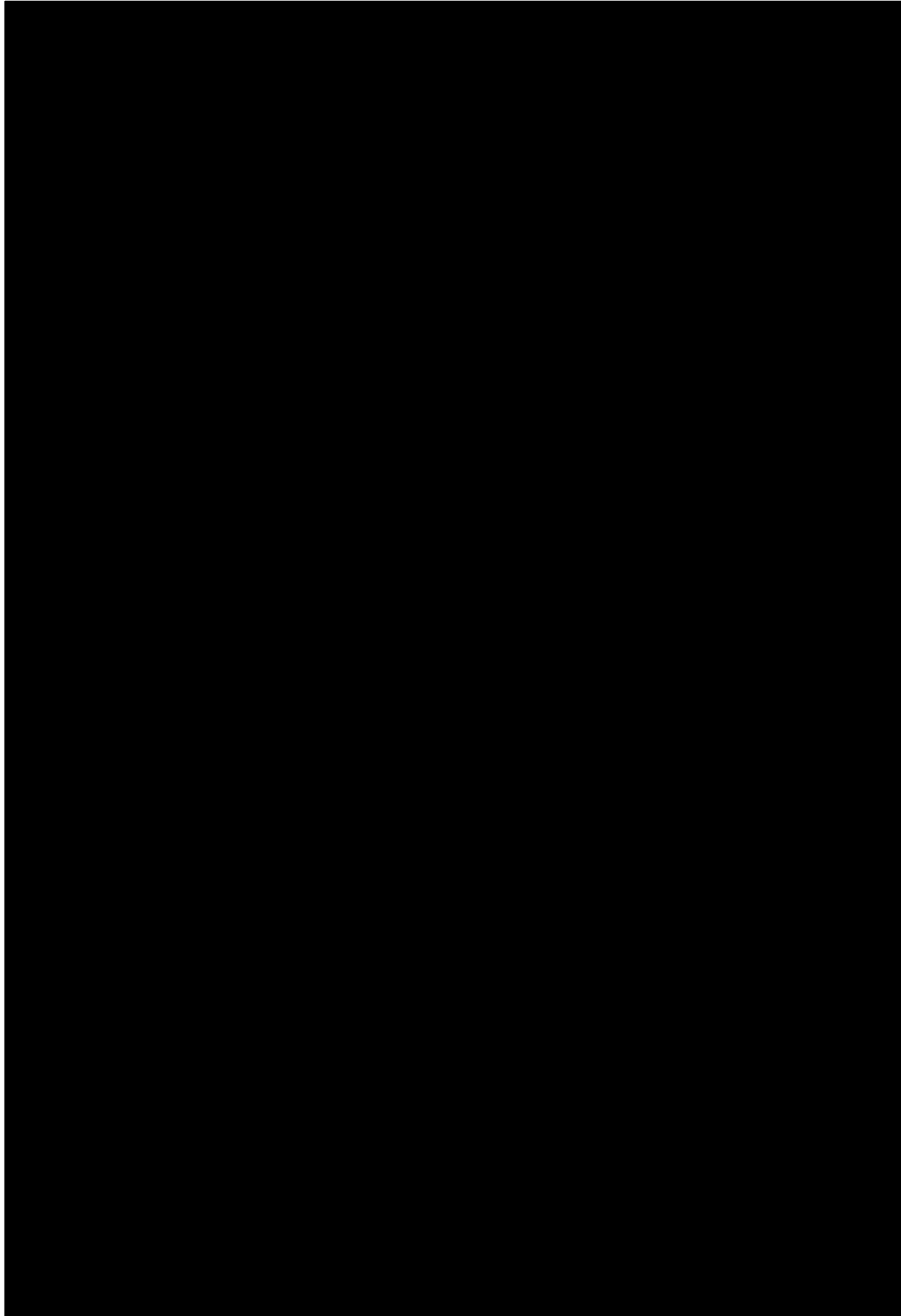


Figure 2.5: View of the Sevso Casket showing a woman removing her tunic and two nude Graces ( © Hungarian National Museum).

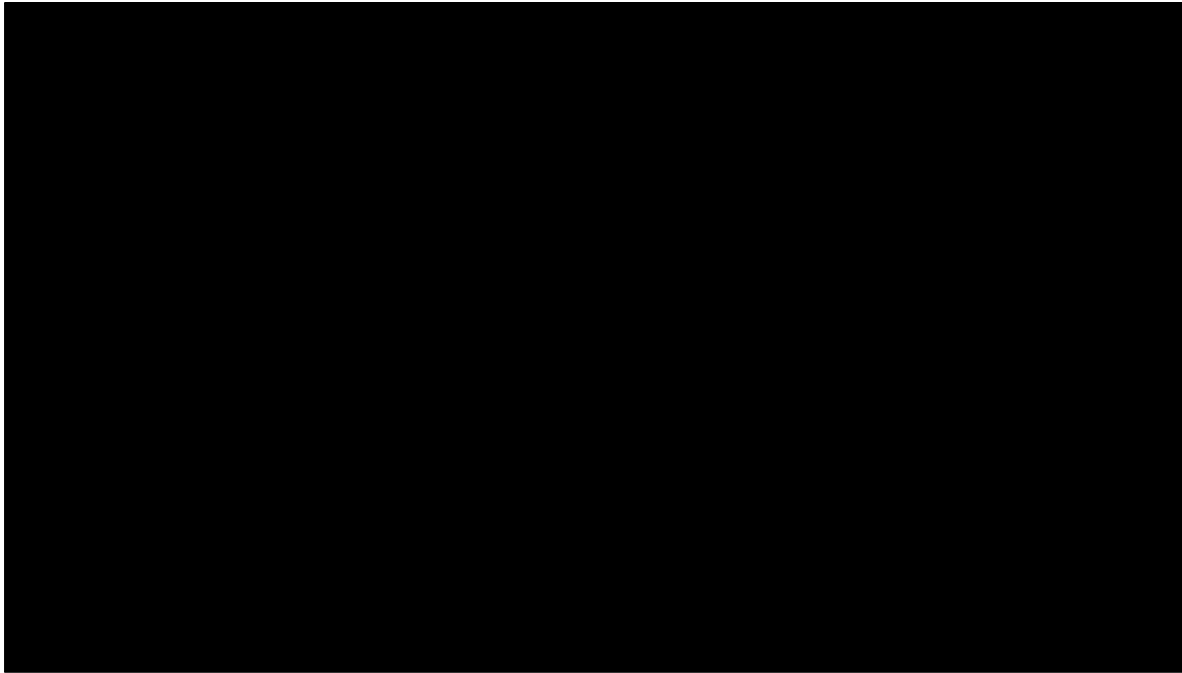


Figure 2.6: View of the Sevso Casket showing a woman seated at her toilet, attended by slaves ( © Hungarian National Museum).

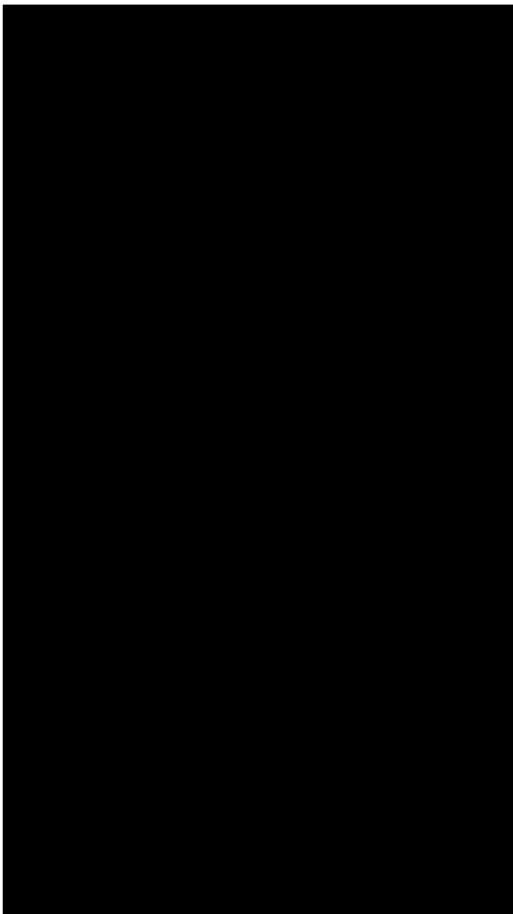


Figure 2.7: Detail of the Sevso Casket scene of a woman at her toilet (Dági and Mráv 2019, Figure p.142).

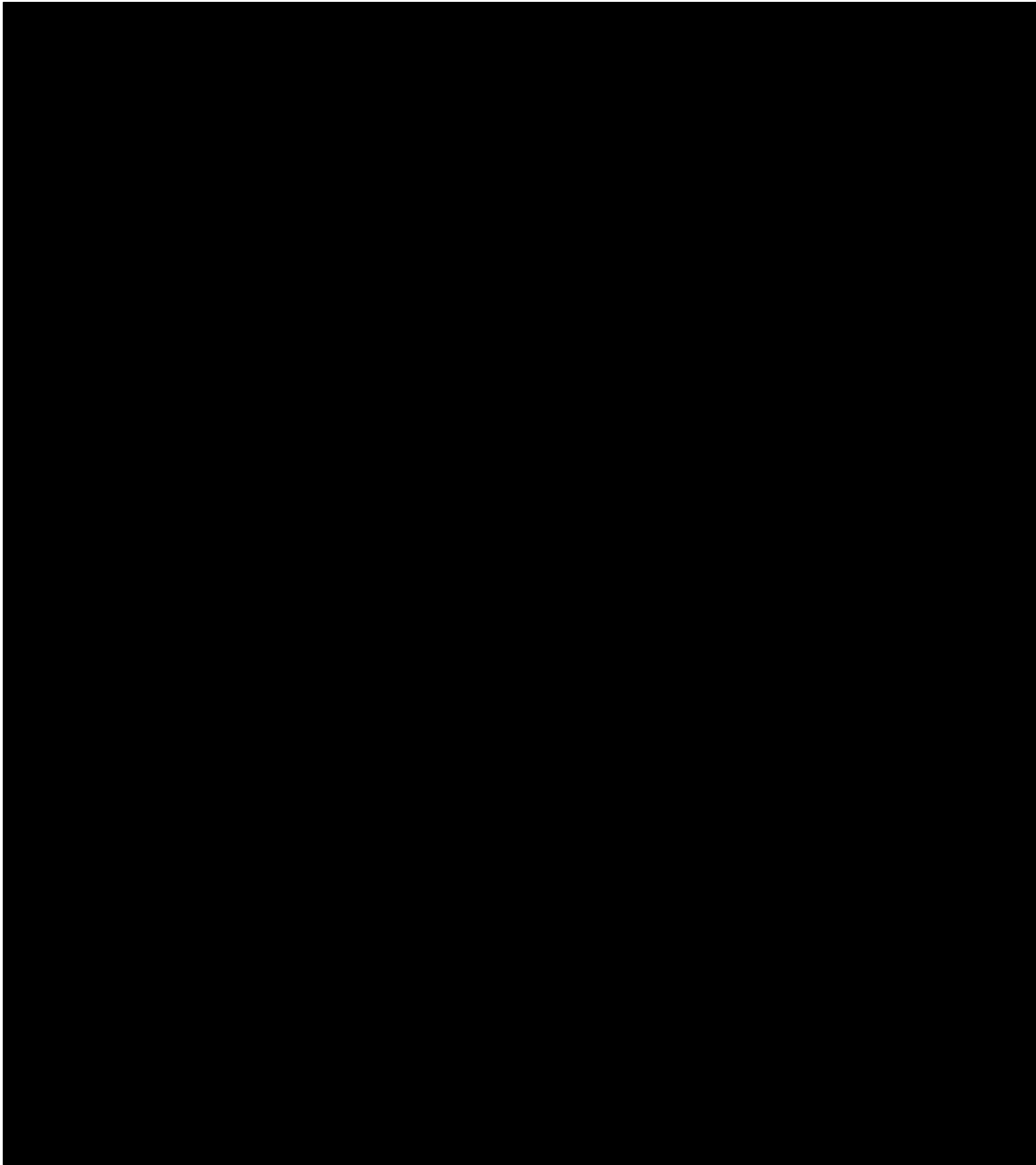


Figure 2.8: View of the Naples situla showing a naked woman at her toilet, attended by slaves (photo by author).

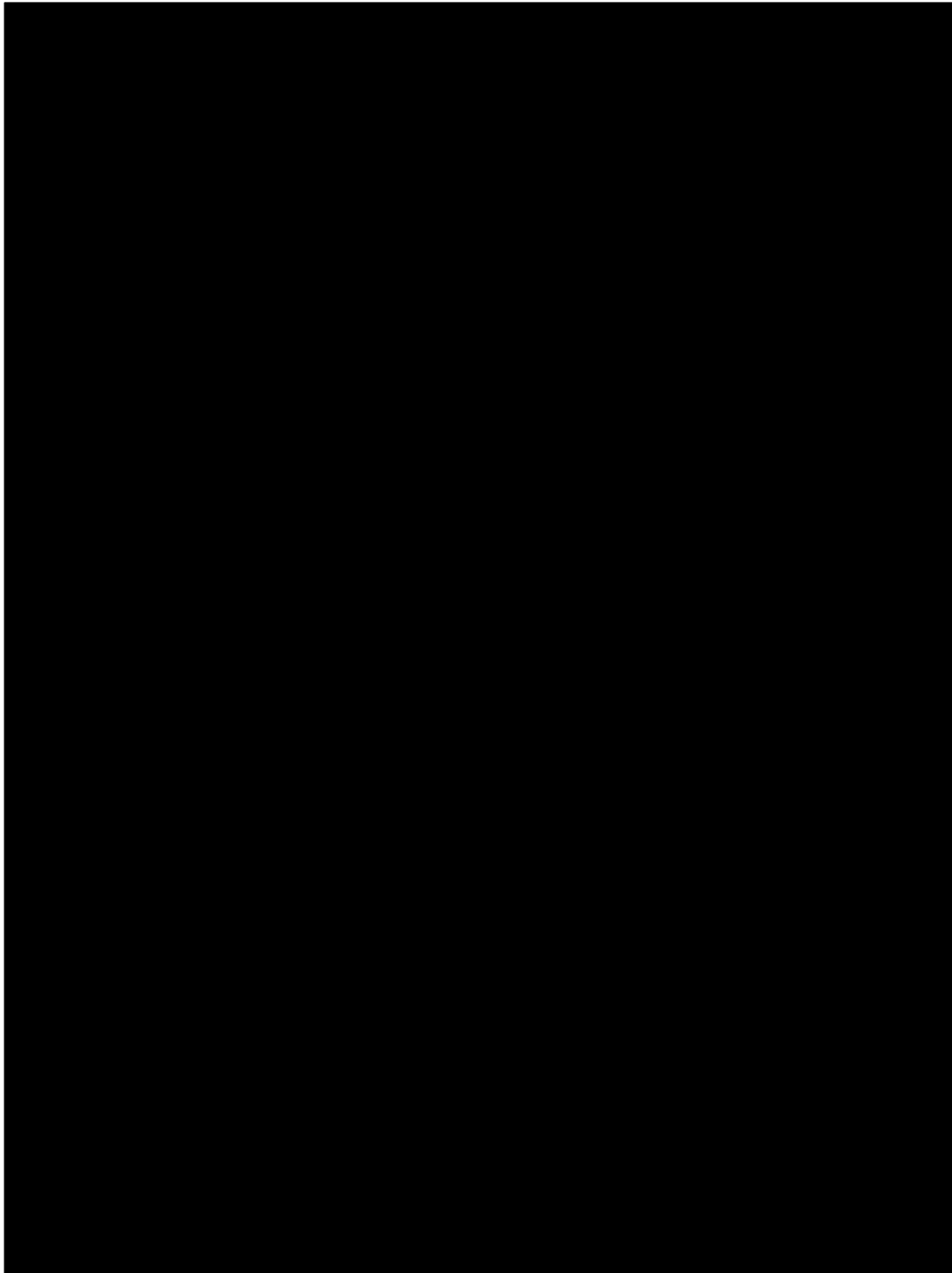


Figure 2.9: View of the Naples situla showing a woman taking off her tunic, assisted by a nude slave (photo by author).

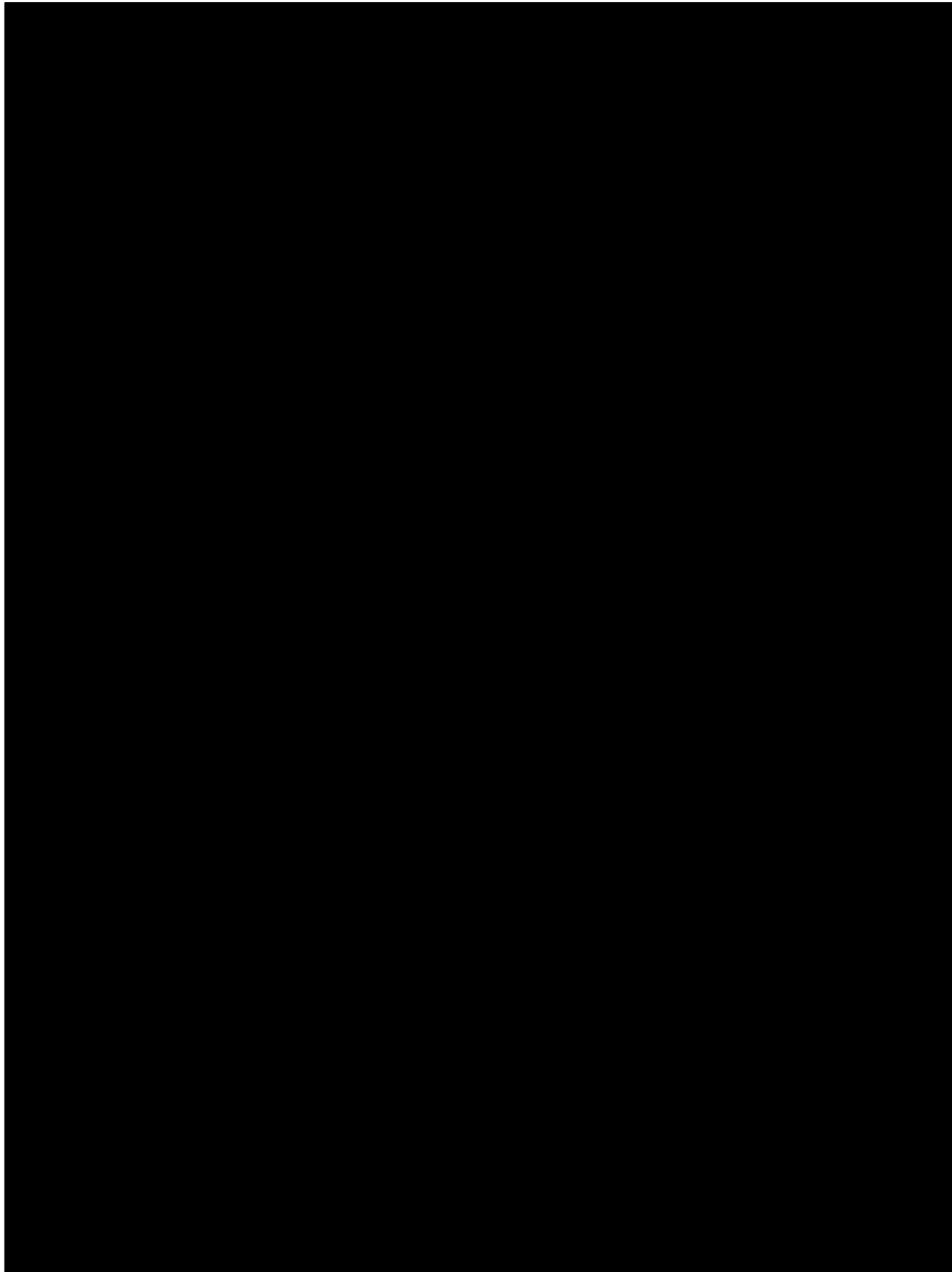


Figure 2.10: View of the Naples situla showing an nude attendant opening a door, and a domed bath building (photo by author).

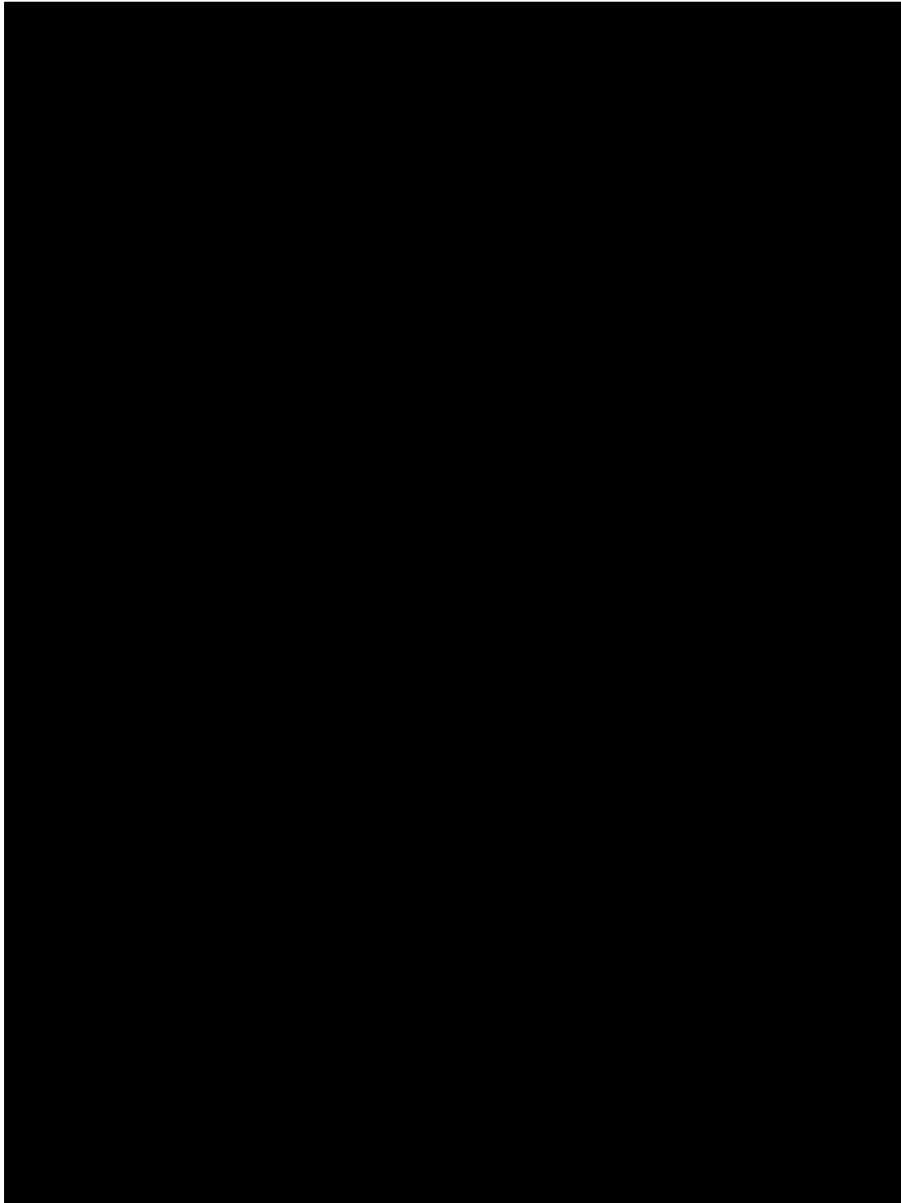


Figure 2.11: View of the Naples situla showing a lion-headed fountain spewing water into a large tank or basin (photo by author).



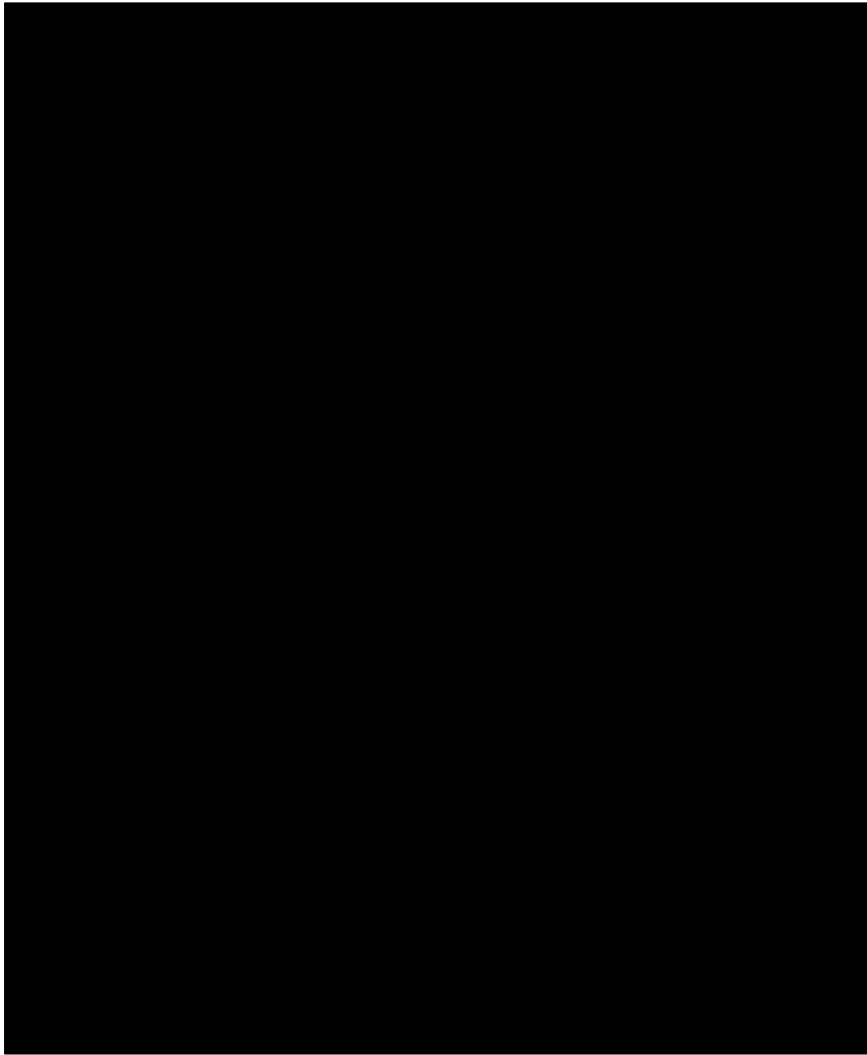


Figure 2.12: Mosaic of a woman processing to the baths with her attendants, from the entrance vestibule of the baths at Piazza Armerina (photo by author).

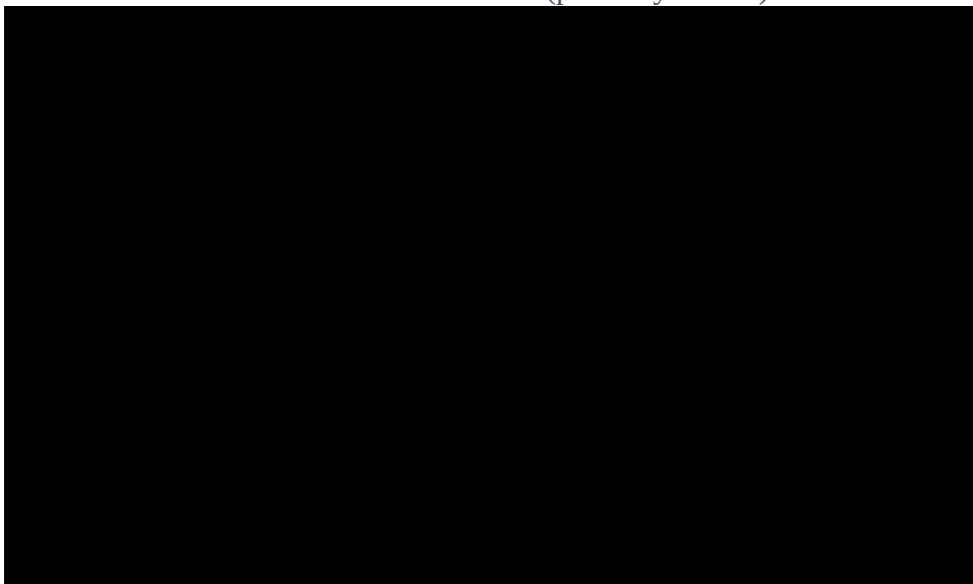


Figure 2.13: Detail of the woman processing to the baths (Gentili 1999, Fig 1, p.29).

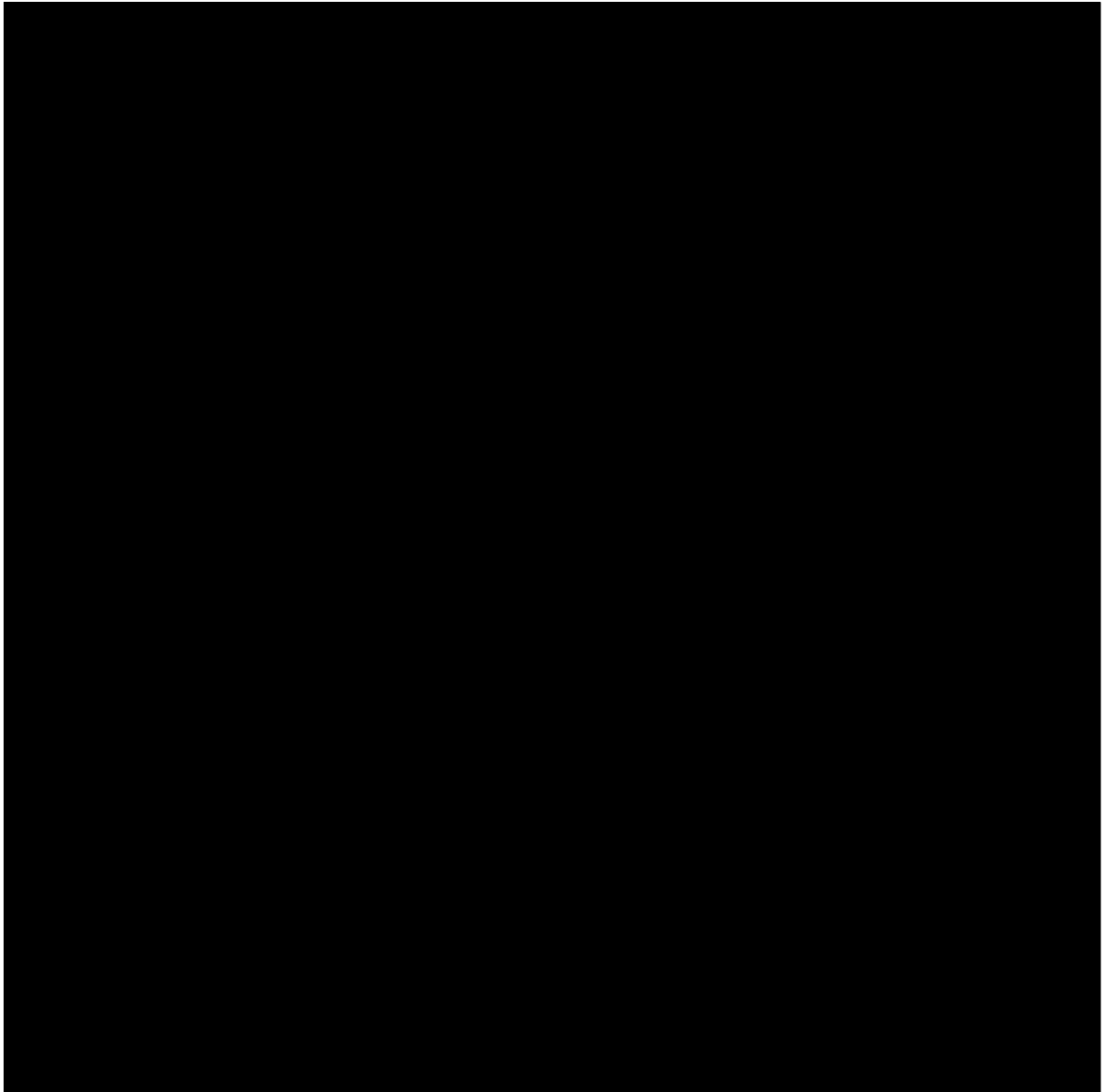


Figure 2.14: Plan of the *frigidarium* of the baths at Piazza Armerina, showing the placement of the apsidal mosaics of men at their toilet (Gentili 1999, Fig 1, p.234).

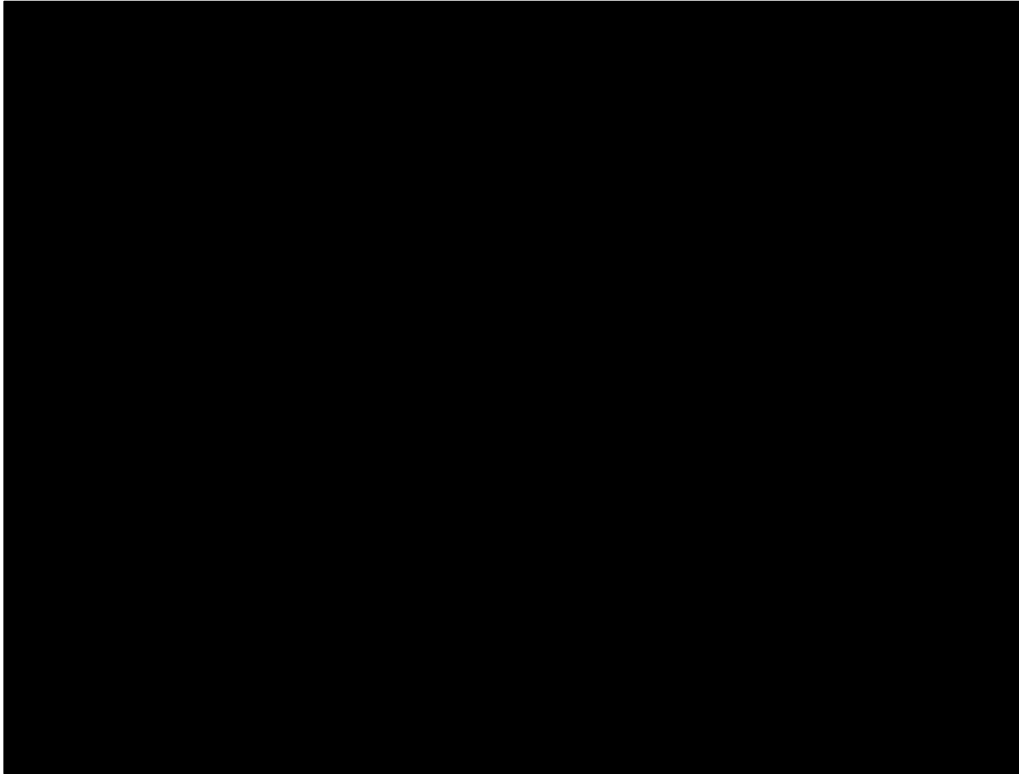


Figure 2.15: Mosaic from the *frigidarium* of the baths at Piazza Armerina, showing a man in a towel being dried off by his slaves (Gentili 1999, Fig 2, p.240).

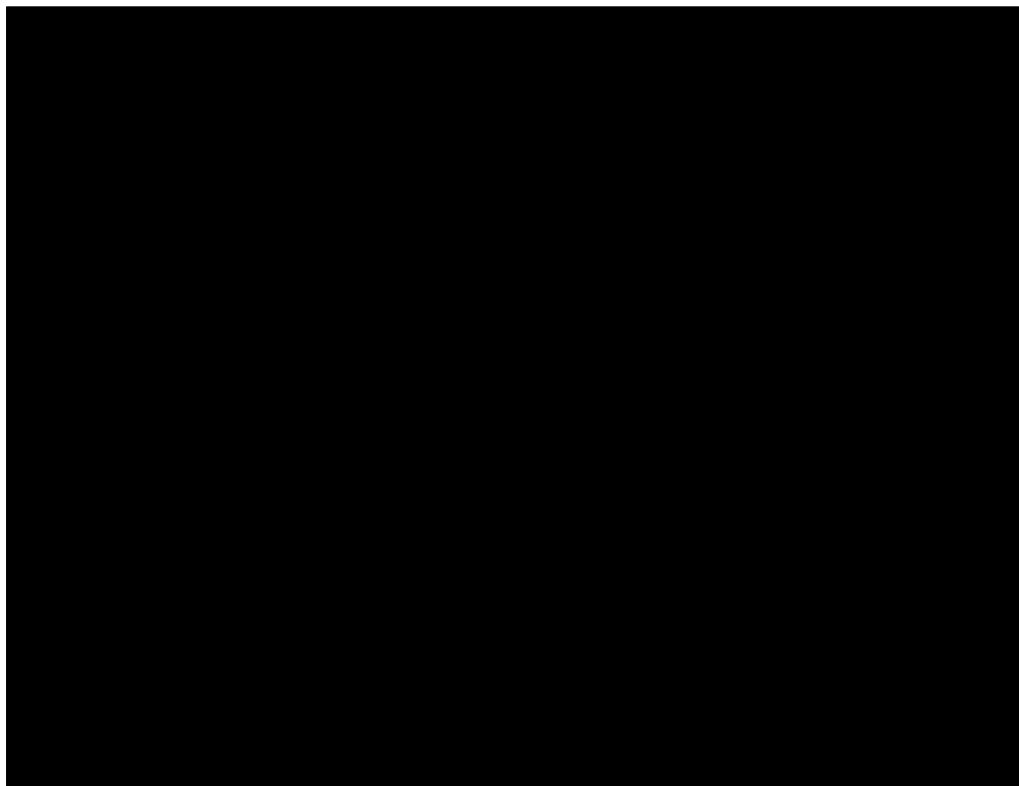


Figure 2.16: Mosaic from the *frigidarium* of the baths at Piazza Armerina, showing a man putting the finishing touches to his outfit (Gentili 1999, Fig 7, p.245).

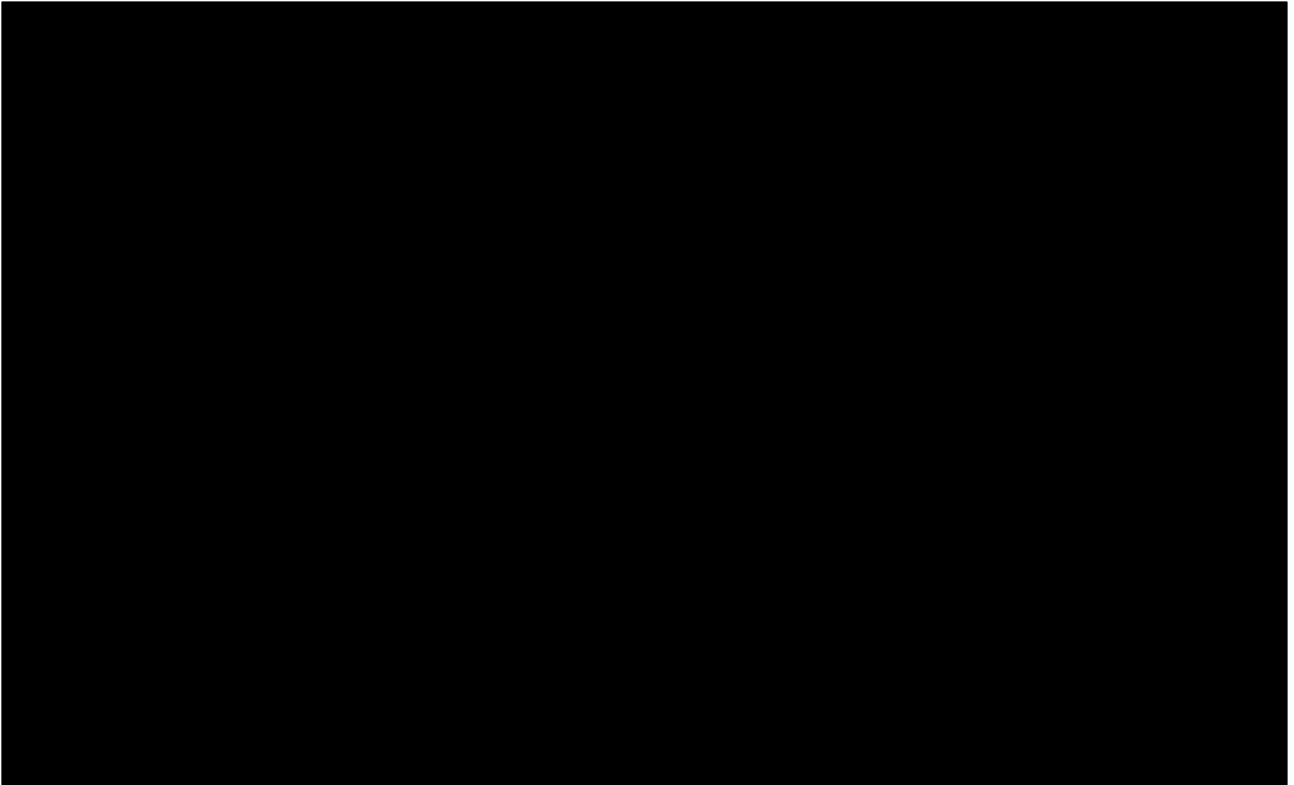


Figure 2.17: Mosaic from the bathhouse at Sidi Ghrib, showing the *domina* at her toilet attended by two slaves (Ghalia 2006, Fig 21a).

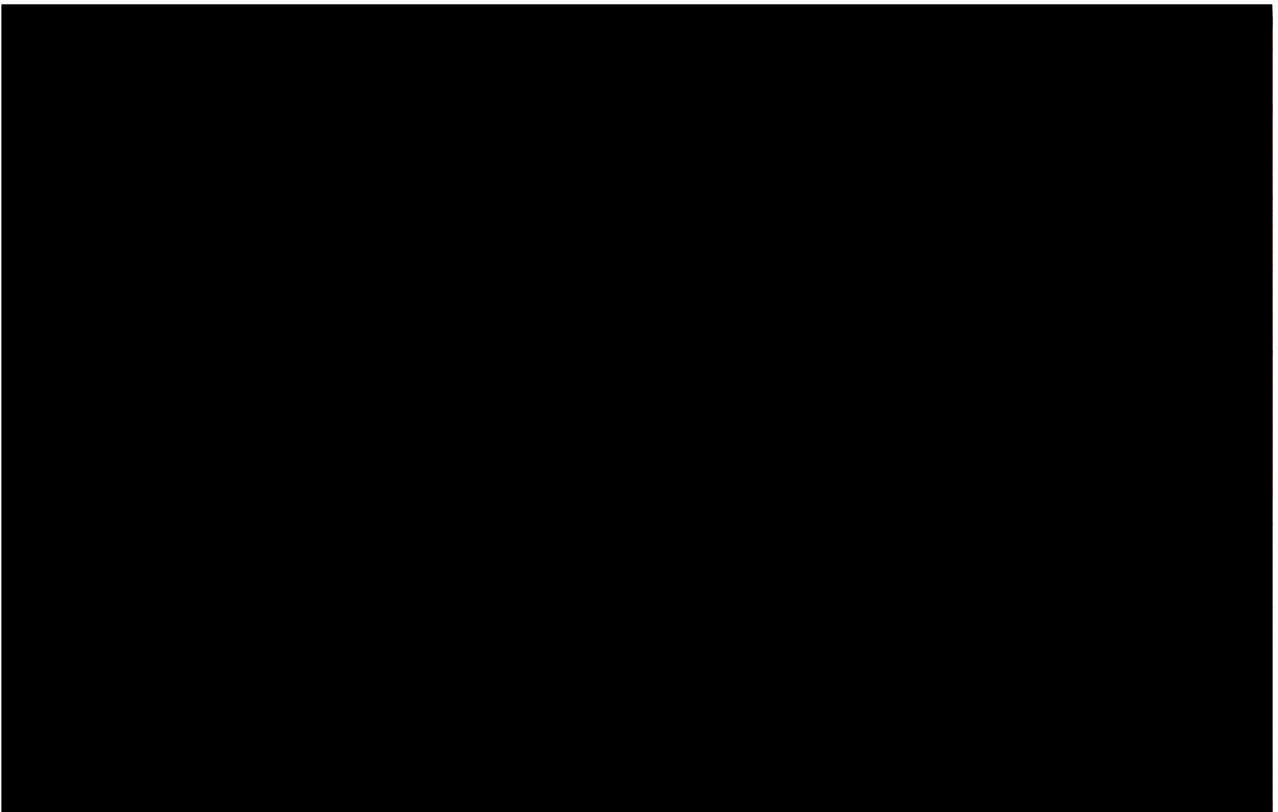


Figure 2.18: Mosaic from the bathhouse at Sidi Ghrib, showing the dominus processing with his attendants (Ennabli 1986, Plate XIV).



Figure 2.19: Male toilet procession from the topographic border of the Megalopsychia mosaic at Daphne (Levi 1947, Pl.LXXIX.a).

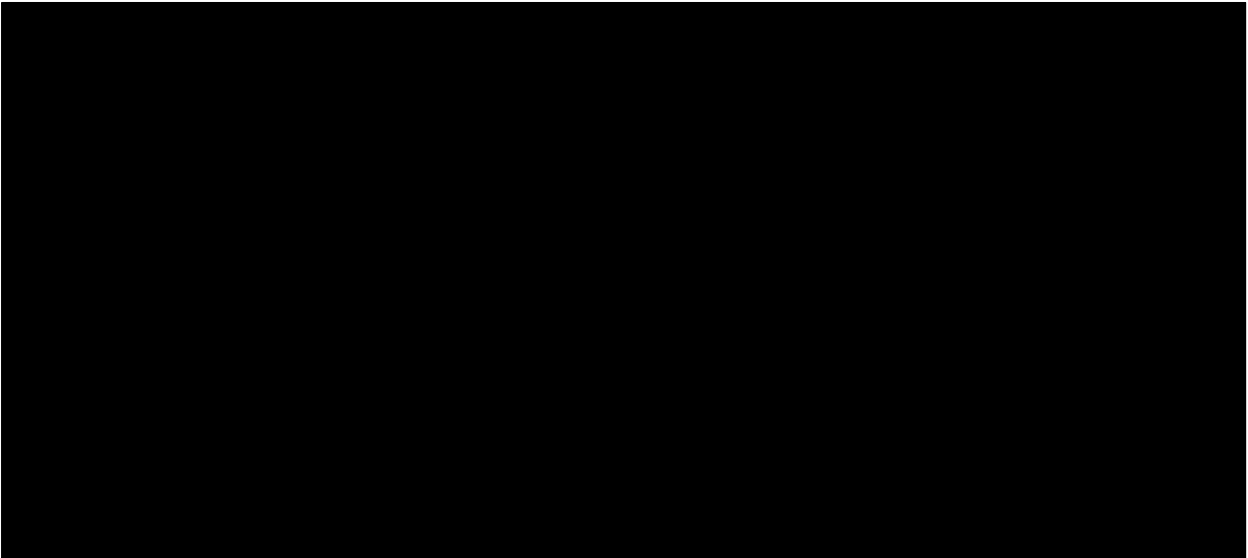


Figure 2.20: Detail of the Projecta Casket, showing the *domina* framed by symmetrical architecture and slaves (© British Museum).

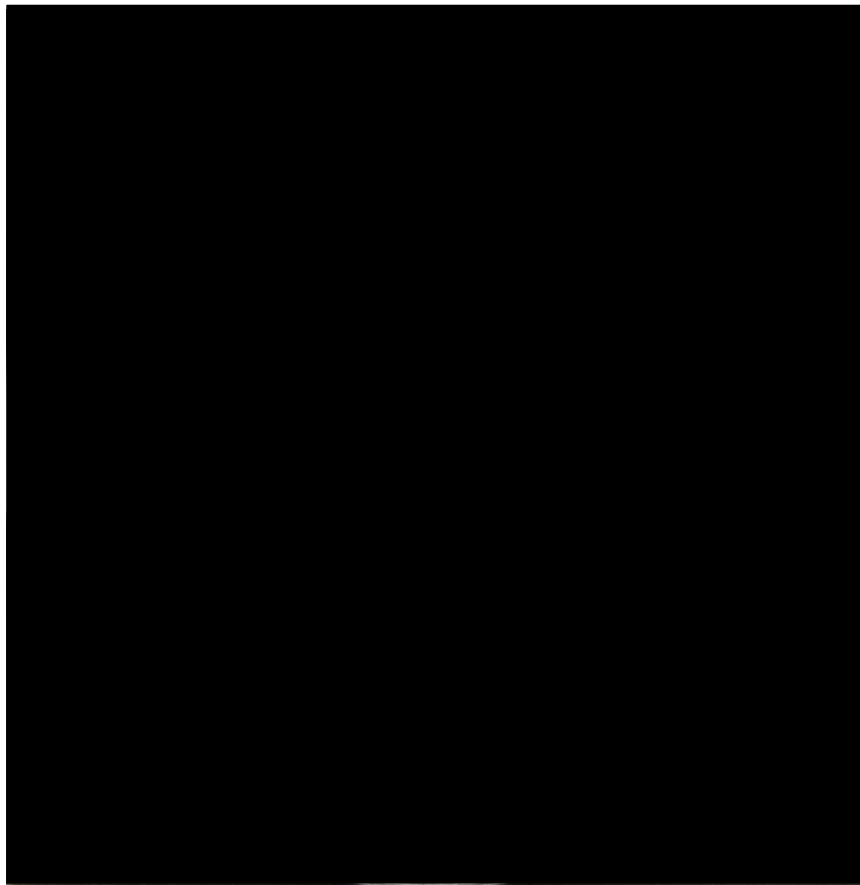


Figure 2.21: Missorium of Theodosius, showing the emperor framed in a similar manner to Projecta (Almagro-Gorbea et al. eds. 2000, Lámina I).

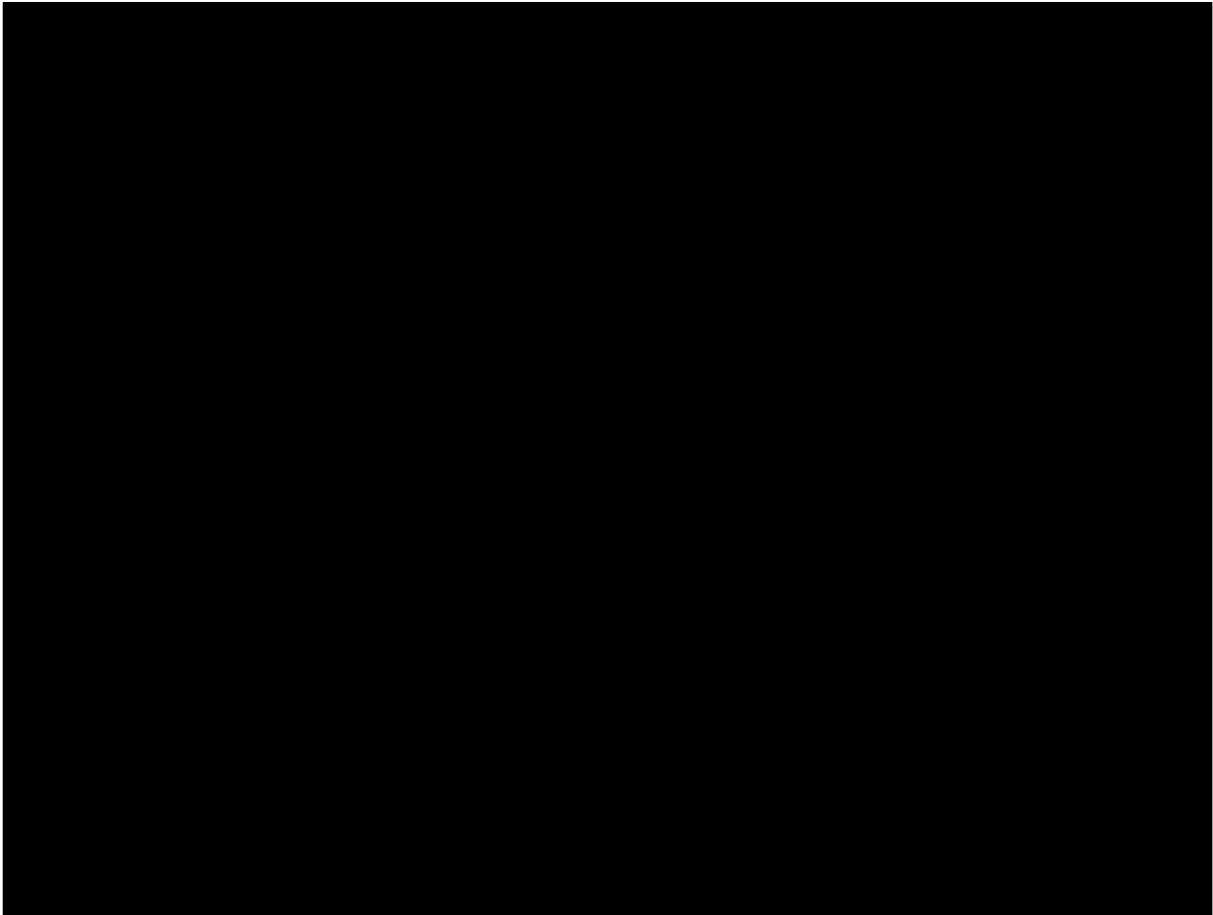


Figure 2.22: Wall-painting from the baths at Quasyr 'Amra, showing women bathing. Note in particular the similarity between the woman on the far right opening the door and holding the bucket, and the woman performing the same action on the Naples situla (photo Bea Leal).

## Chapter 3

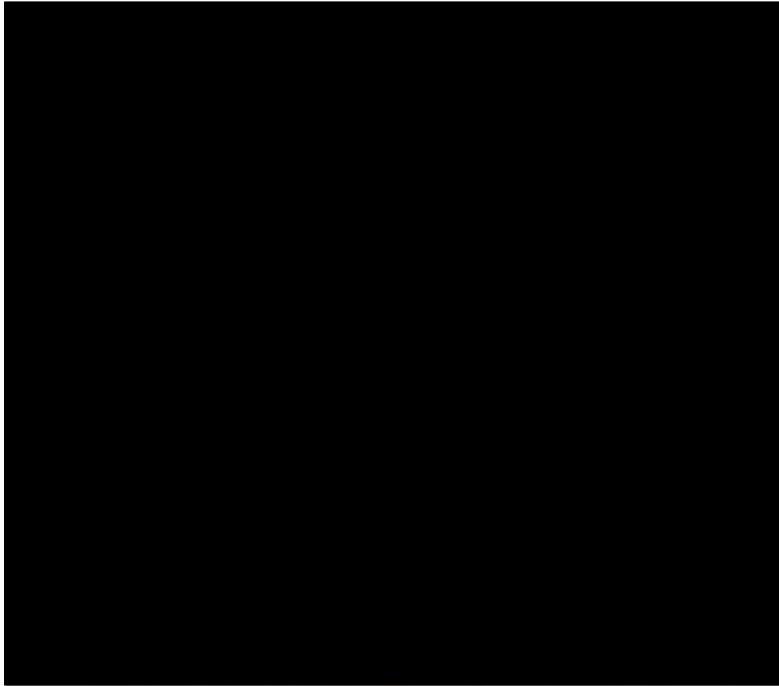


Figure 3.1: Drawing of a gold-glass showing a girl holding a scroll and with other attributes of learning in the background (Garrucci 1872-1880, Plate 200.5).

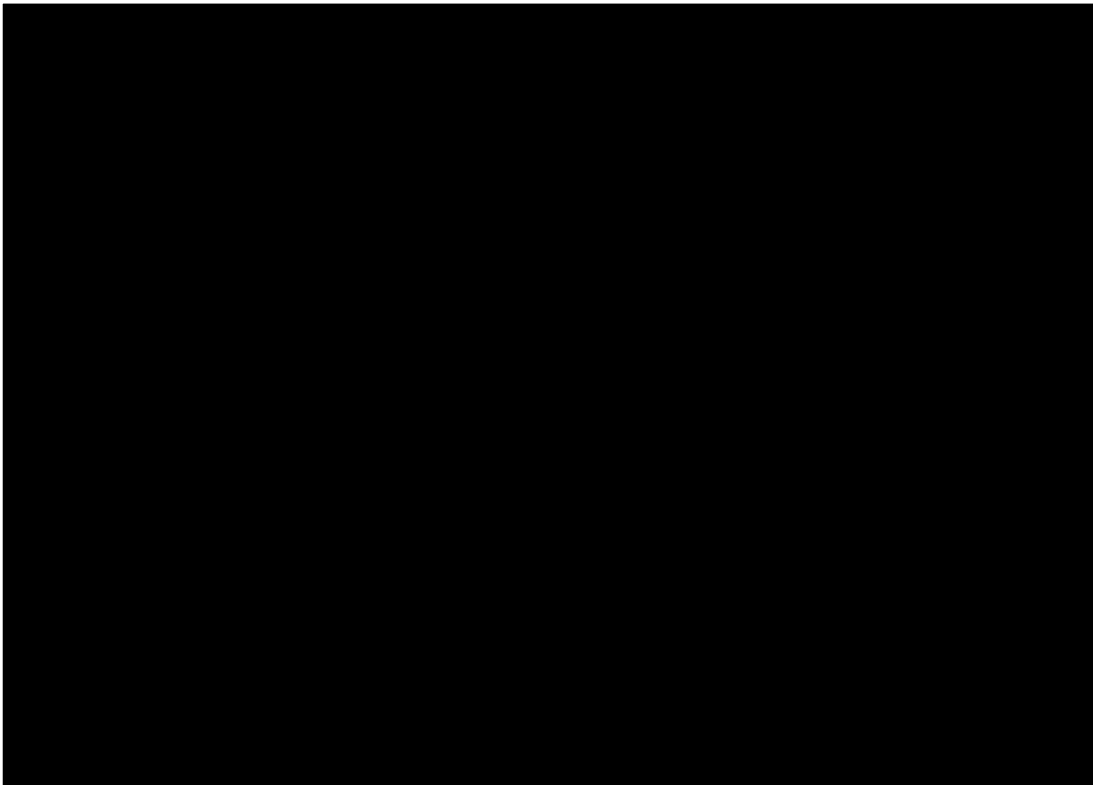


Figure 3.2: Tomb paintings of Aelia Arisuth, shown in the central tondo holding a scroll (Image from <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=cimrm113> [accessed 19/11/20]).





Figure 3.3: Hoxne pepper pot in the form of a woman holding a scroll ( © British Museum).



Figure 3.4: Marble bust of a woman holding a scroll (Metropolitan Museum of Art, image in public domain).

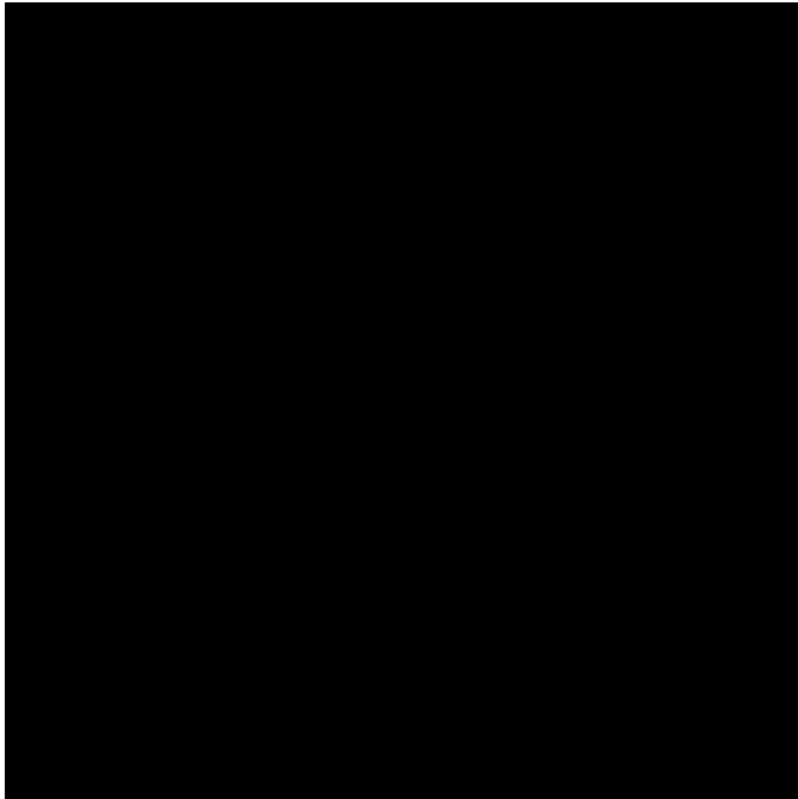


Figure 3.5: Gold-glass depicting a mother seated behind her daughter, whose right hand is positioned in the speaking pose across her chest (Ferrari and Morey 1959, No.289).

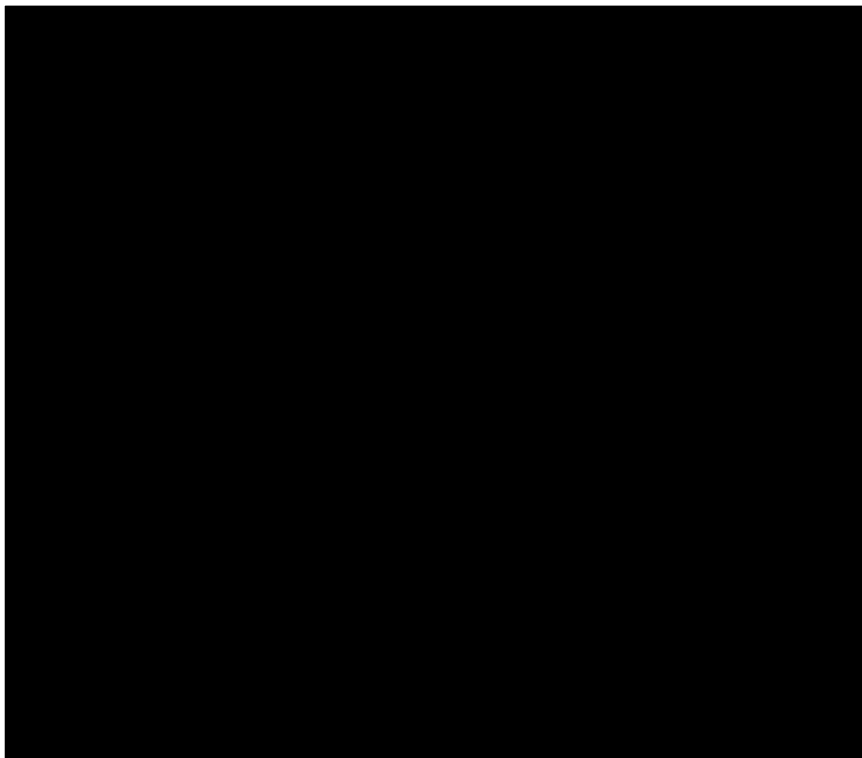


Figure 3.6: Drawing of a gold-glass showing a family with the attributes of learning (Garrucci 1872-1880, Plate 198.4).

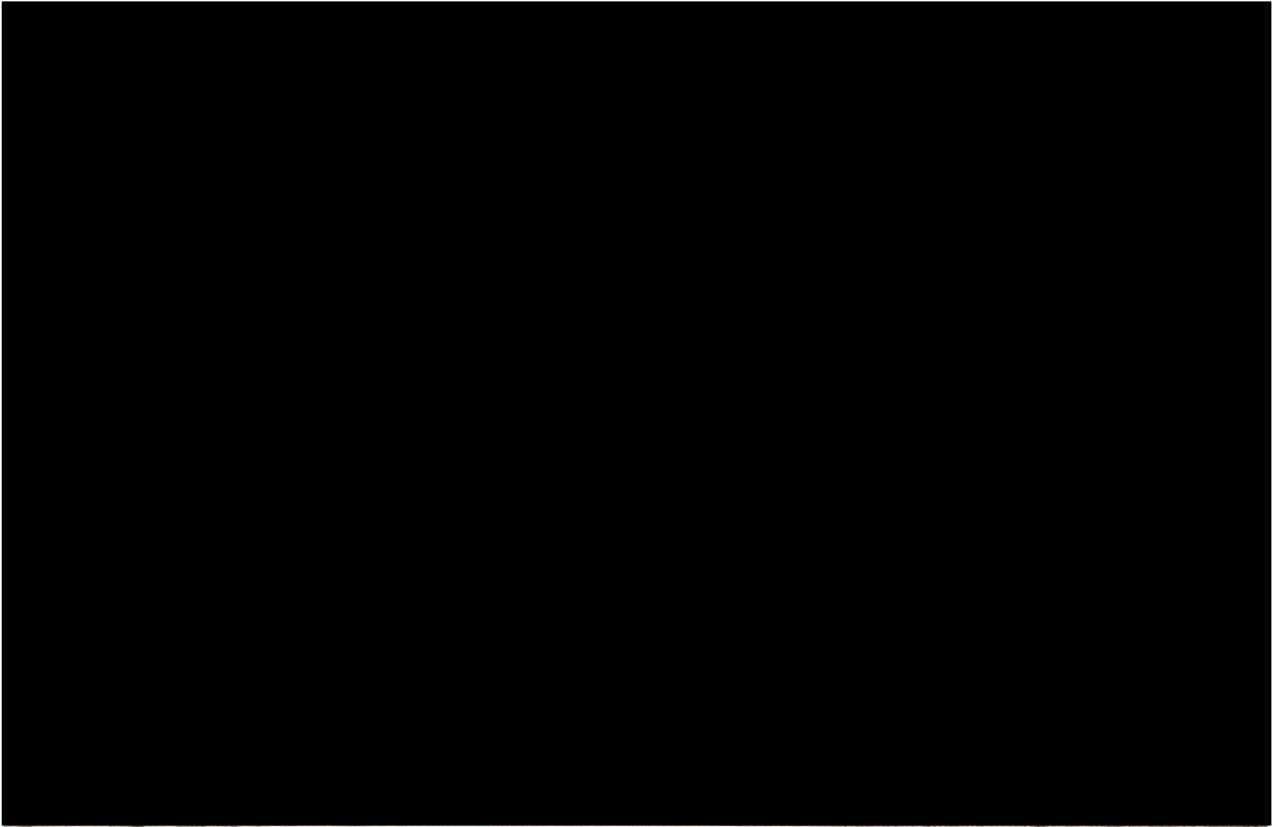


Figure 3.7: Mosaic of an all-female banquet (Kondoleon 2000, No.9, p.121).

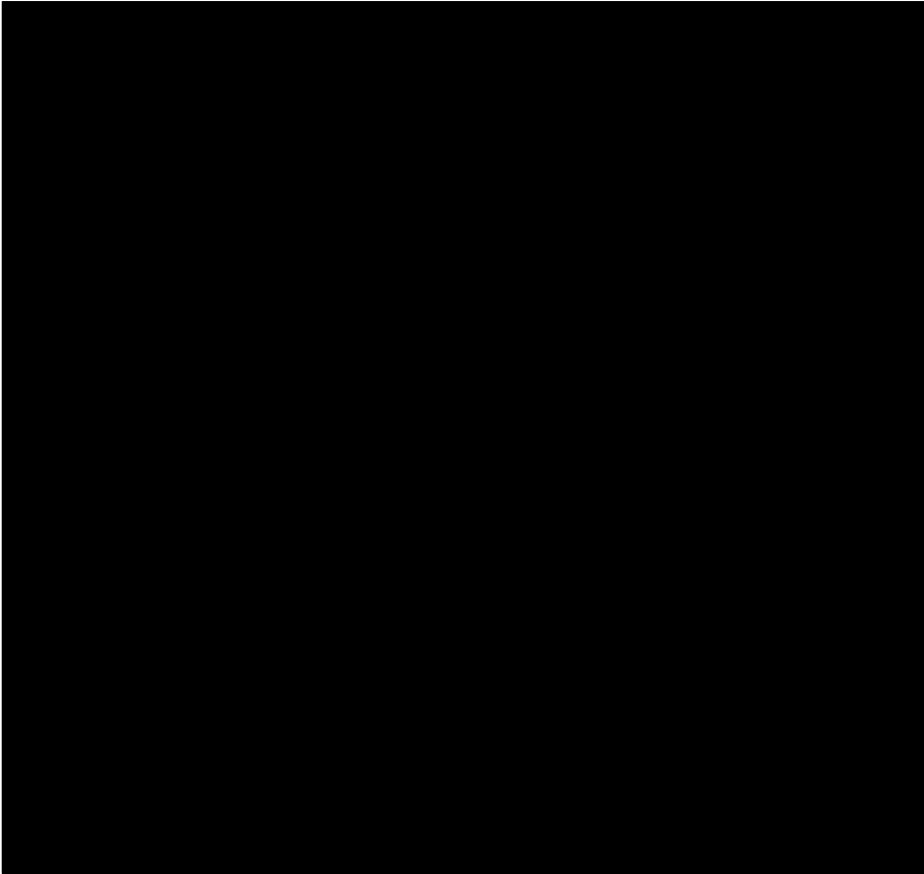


Figure 3.8: Ivory pyxis with a scene of an all-female banquet (Carra 2000, Fig.83).



Figure 3.9: Mosaic from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, showing Christ seated in the position of honour at the Last Supper, hand posed in the speaking gesture (Image: Wikimedia Commons).

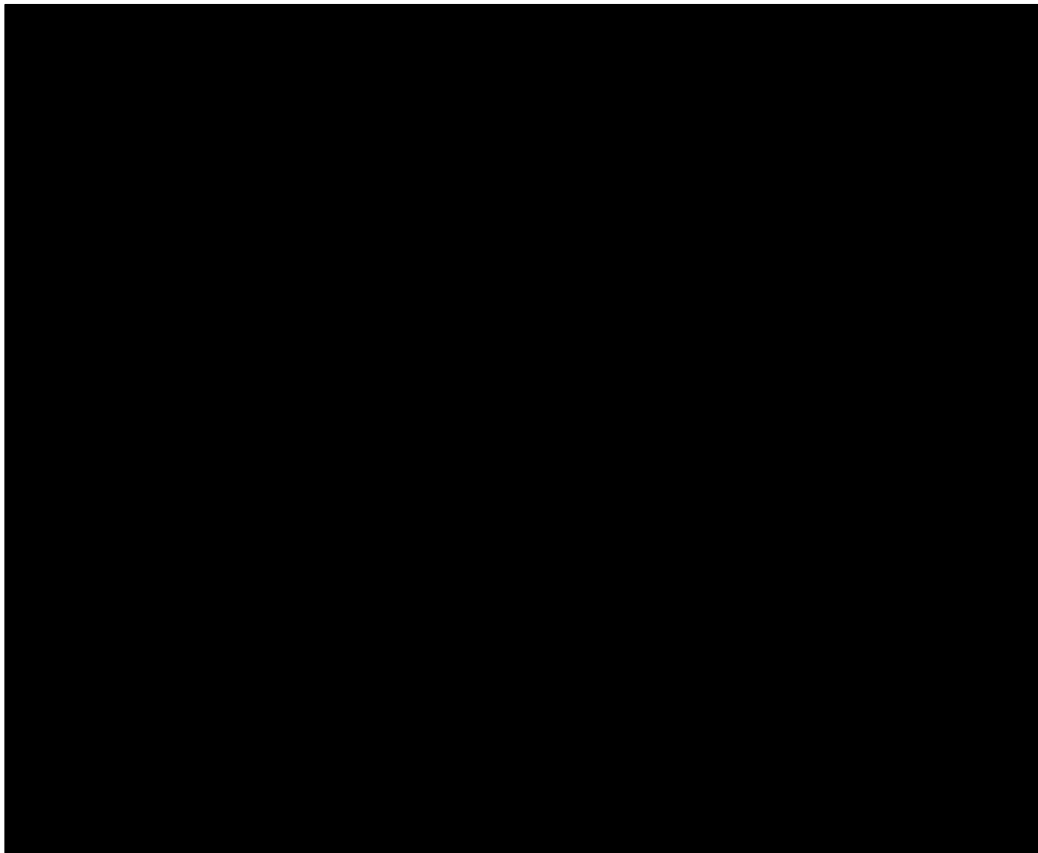


Figure 3.10: *Arcosolium* of Veneranda, Rome (Pennesi 2006, p.164, Fig 1).

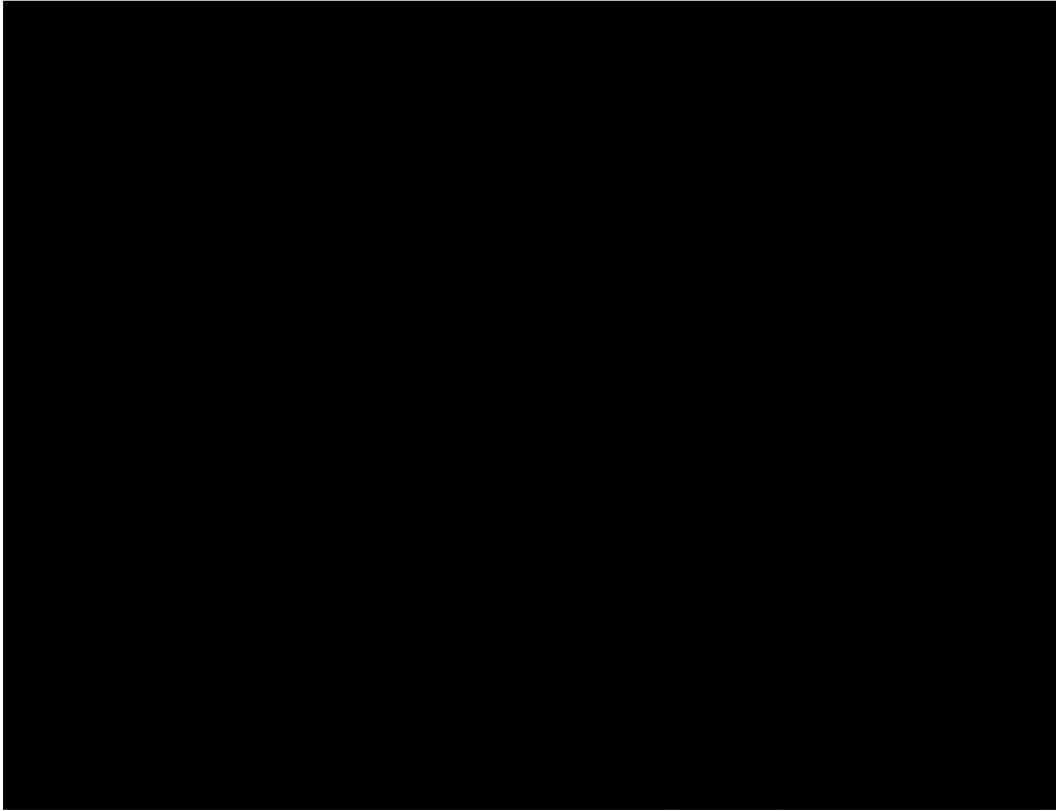


Figure 3.11: Tomb of Cerula, Naples (Braconi 2015-2016, Fig 1).

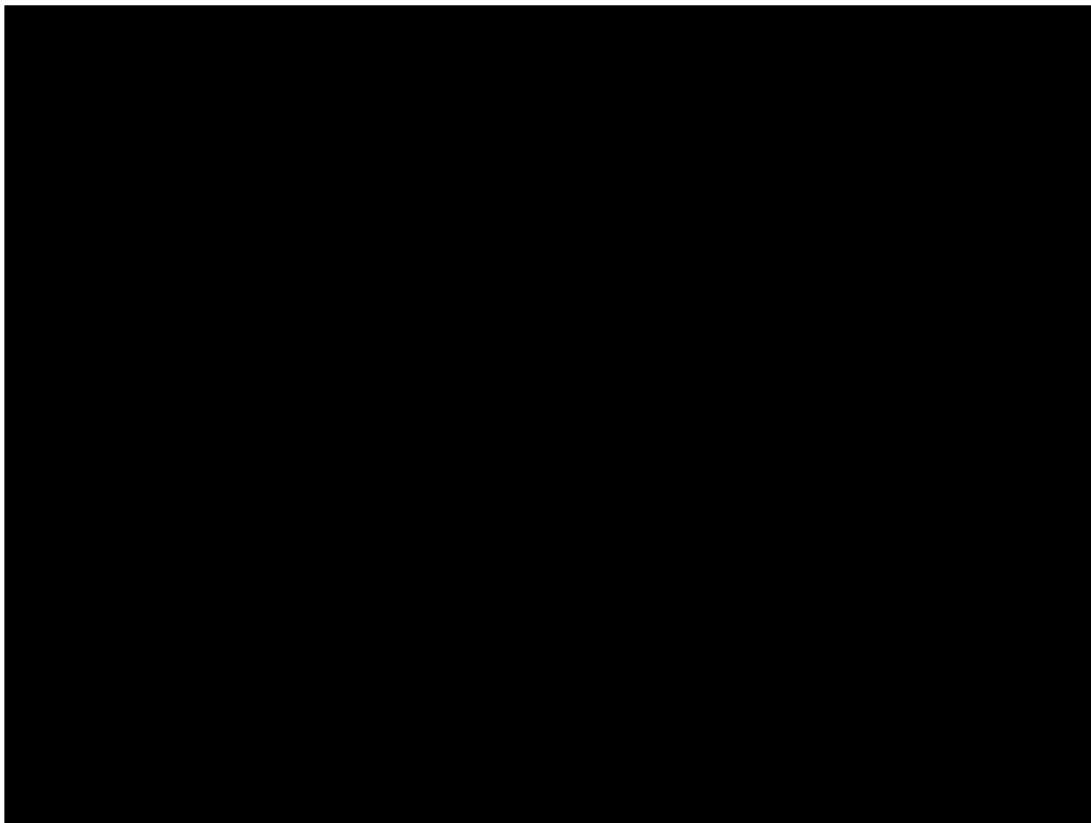


Figure 3.12: Detail of the *arcosolium* of Cerula's tomb, Naples (photo by author).

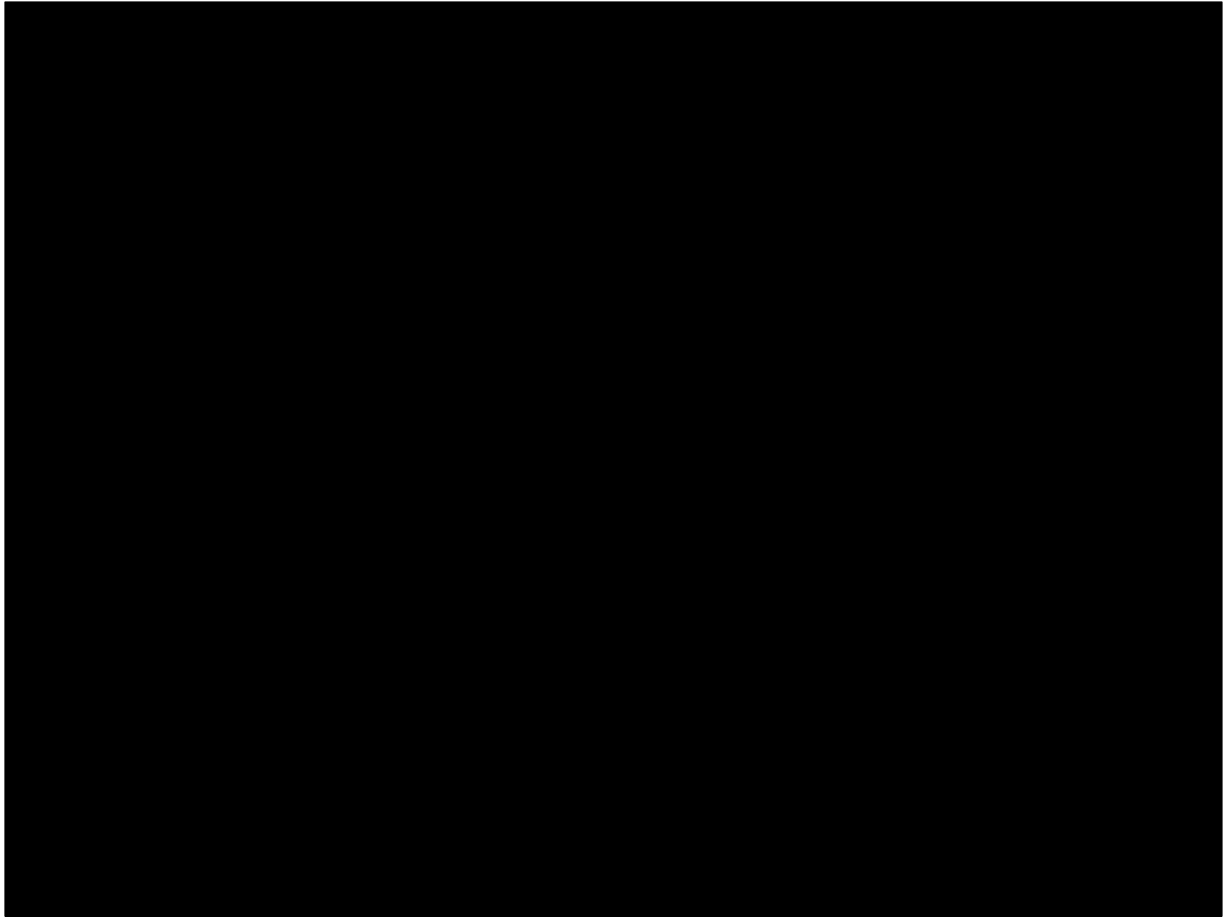


Figure 3.13: View of the catacomb gallery showing the relative positions of Cerula and Bitalia's tombs. Cerula's large tomb can be seen at the end of the gallery (left), while Bitalia's *arcosolium* is in shadow on the right (photo by author).

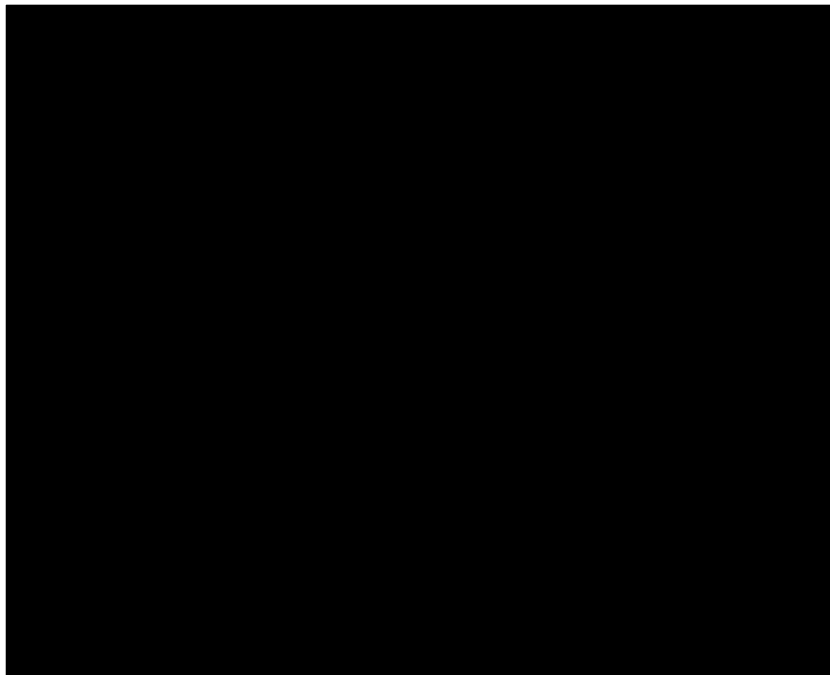


Figure 3.14: *Arcosolium* of Bitalia, Naples (photo by author).

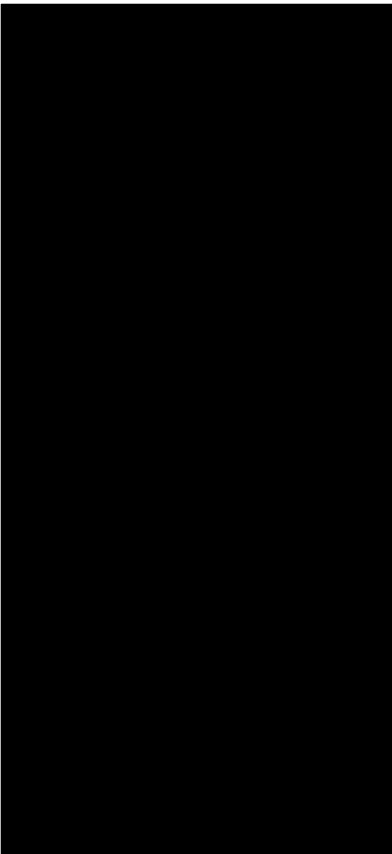


Figure 3.15: Detail of wall-painting of Ama Rachel at Bawit (after Maspero and Drioton 1931, Pl.XLIX).

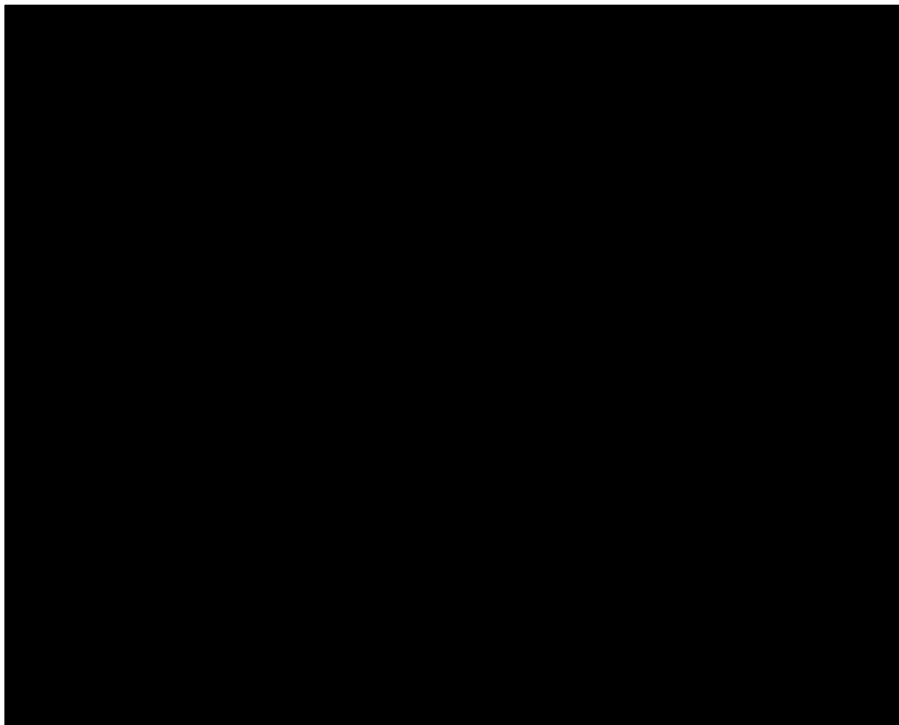


Figure 3.16: Architectural fragment depicting a woman monastic holding a book, Atripe (Bolman 2016, Fig.3.8)





Figure 3.17: Tomb stele of the mime actress Bassilla (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia, photo Museid Italia, Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0).

## Chapter 4

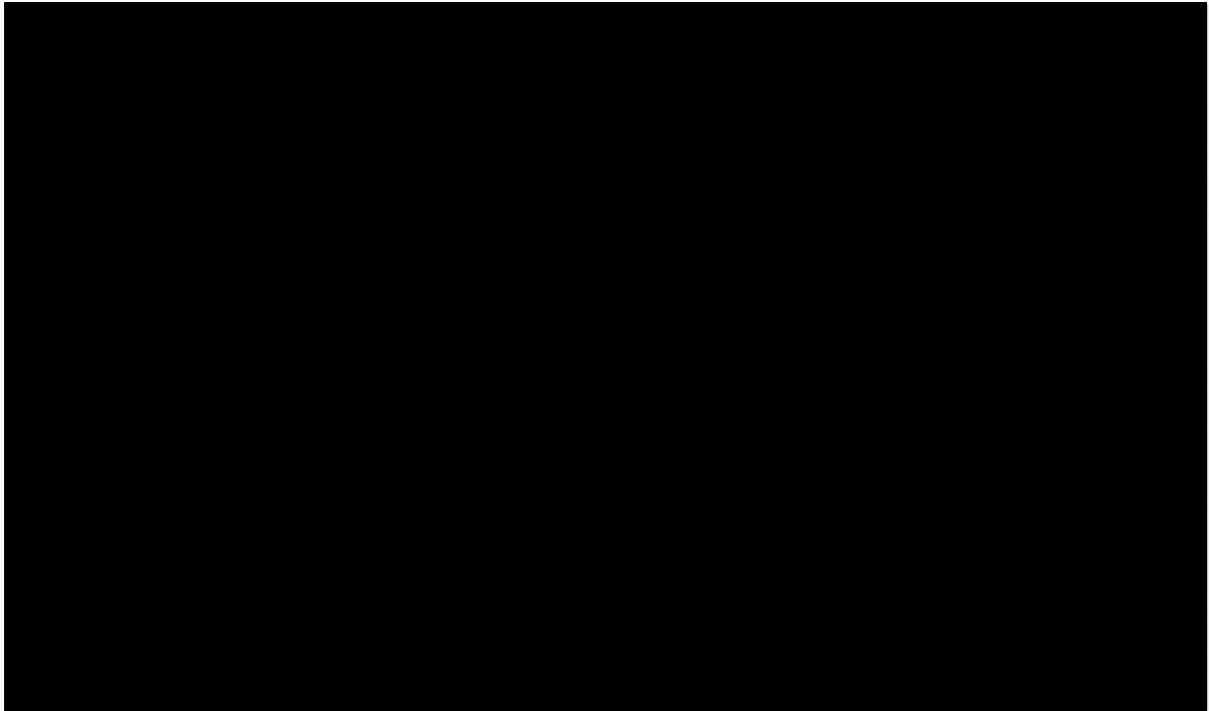


Figure 4.1: Brick fragment from Justiniana Prima with a graffito of a family (Behling 2015, Fig.4).

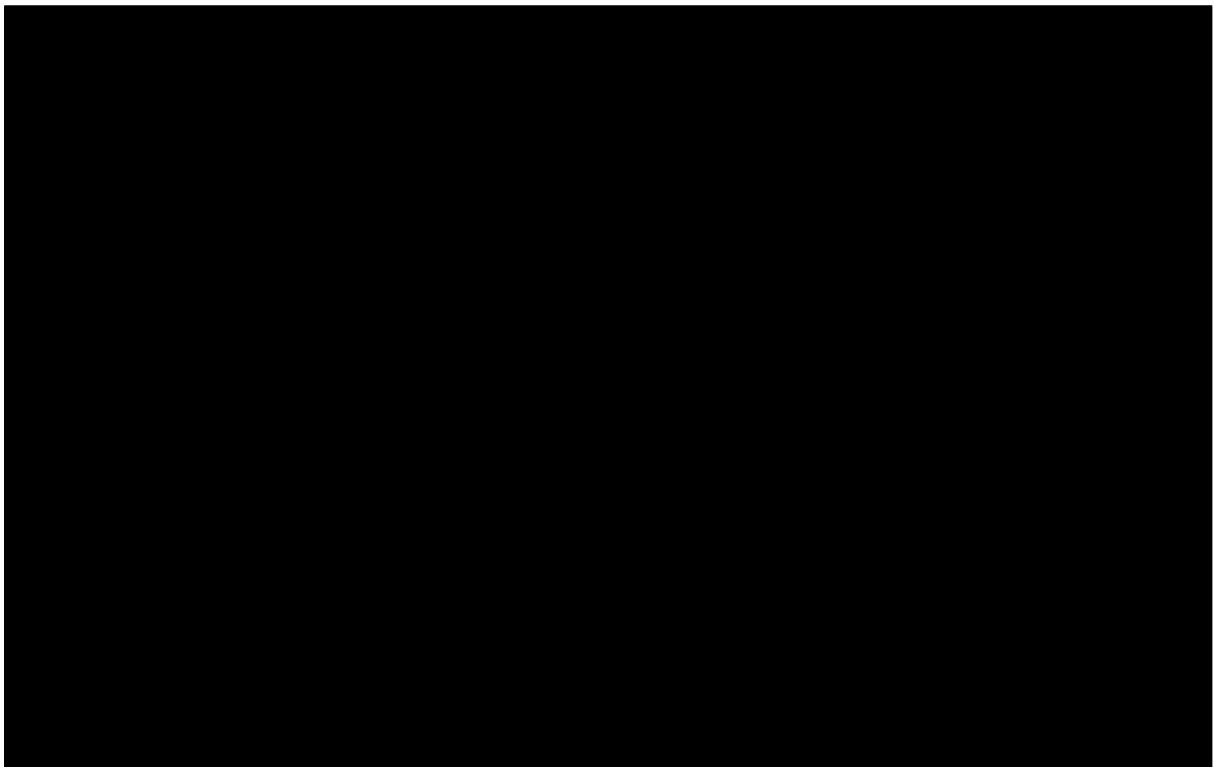


Figure 4.2: The tombs portraits of Florentia, Elia Theodora, and Agapia, Leptiminus (Dumbarton Oaks Grant Project Report, Fig.5, accessed at: <https://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/project-grants/stevens-2006-2007> [28/11/2020]).

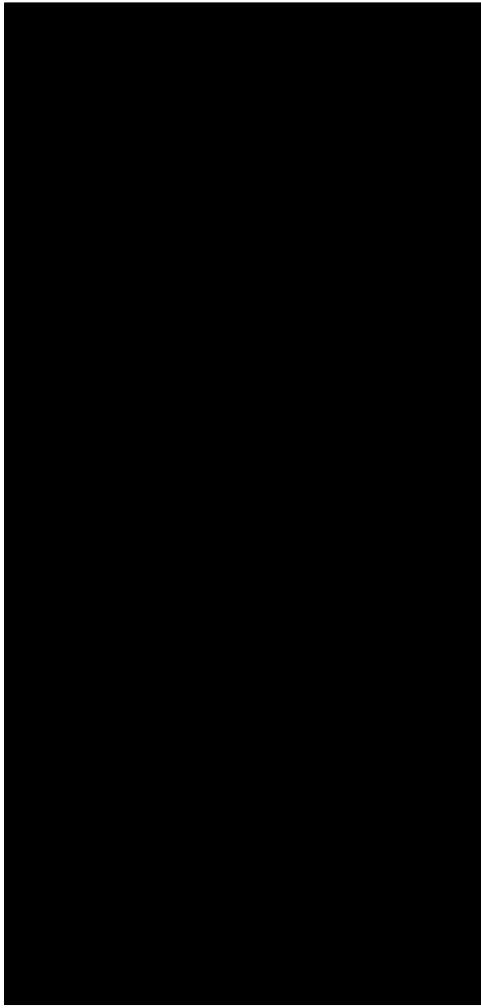
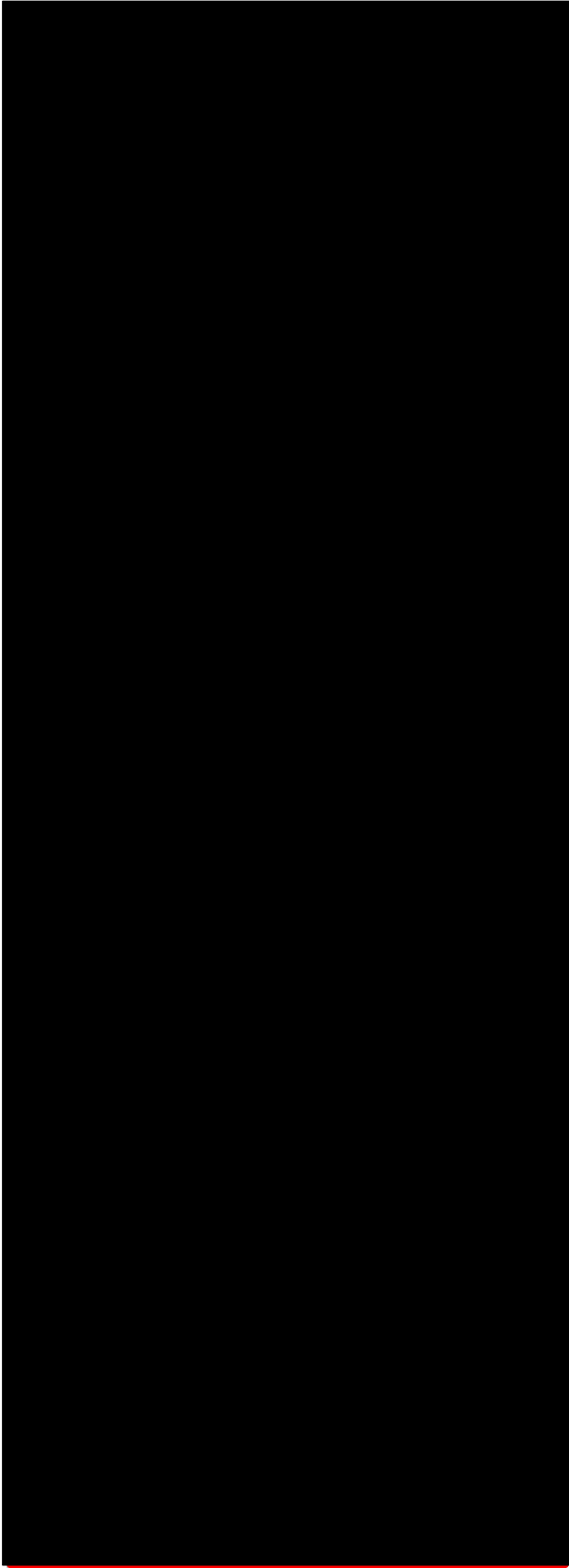
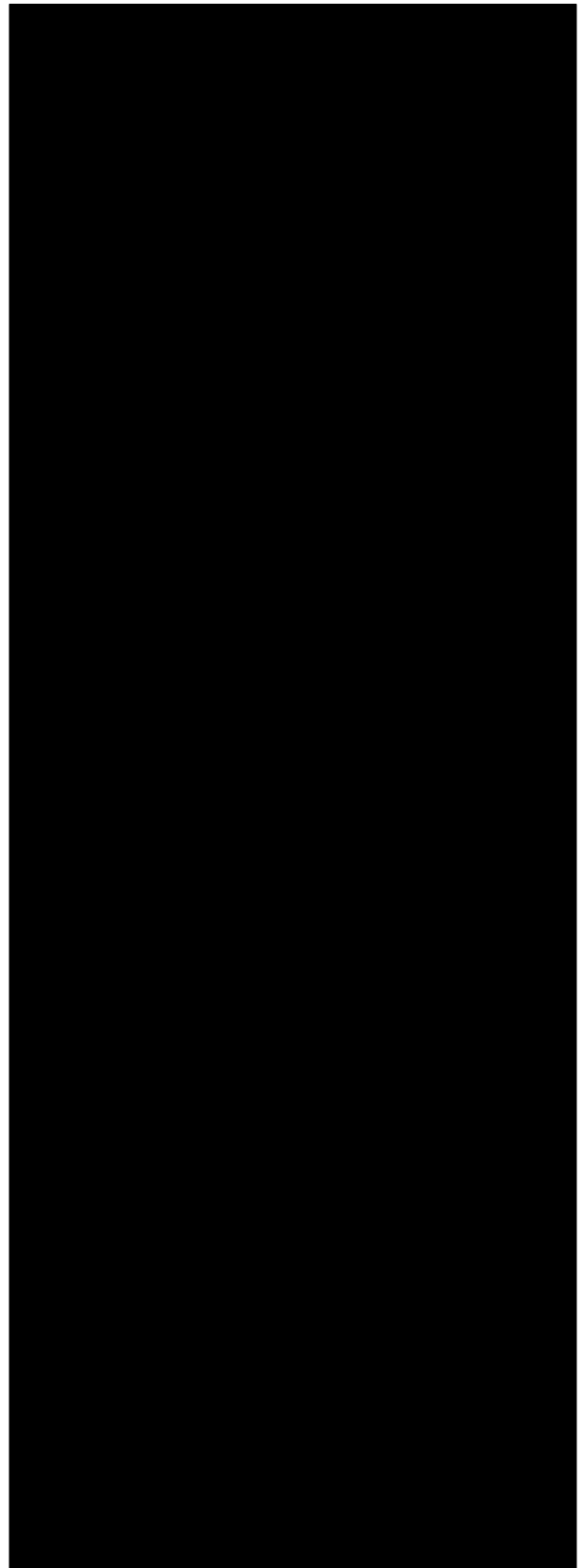


Figure 4.3: Tomb portrait of Rogata, Sfax (Powell 2019, C19, p.188).



Figures 4.4 and 4.5: Water colours made of now lost mosaic panels depicting Maria and her family at Thessaloniki – Figure 4 shows scene 1 (far right side), Figure 5 shows scenes 2 and 3 (adapted from Bakirtzes 2012, p.150, Fig 27, p.154, Fig 30).

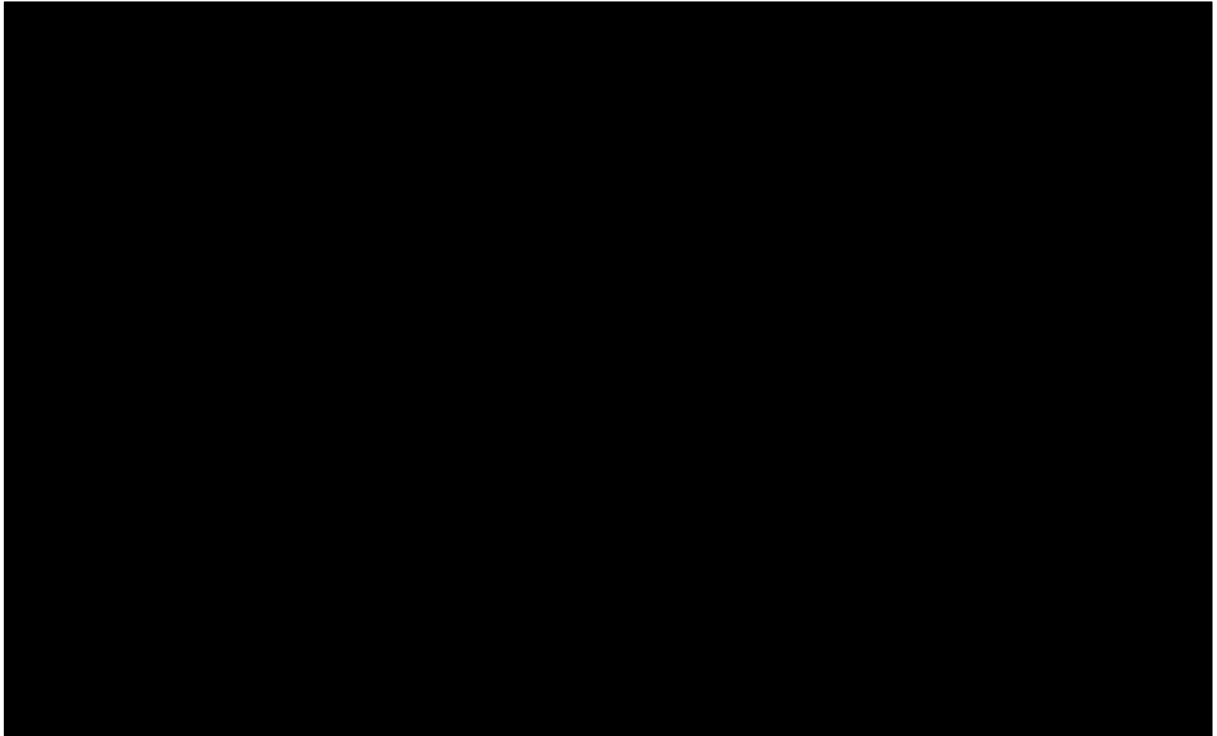


Figure 4.6: Water colour of final scene in concerning Maria and her family at Thessaloniki (Bakirtzes 2012, after p.149, Fig 26).

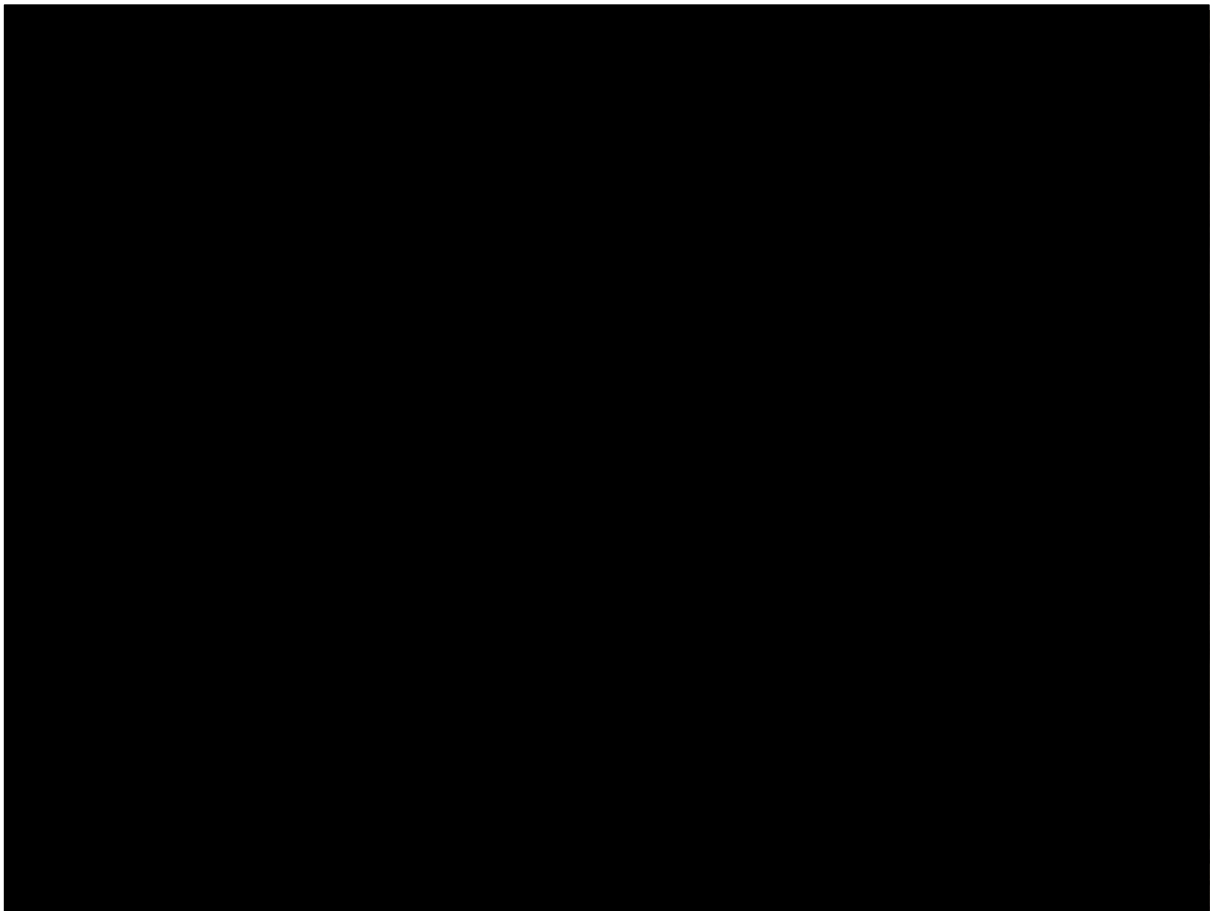


Figure 4.7: Mosaic depicting girls competing at athletics, Piazza Armerina (photo by author).



Figure 4.8: Gold glass depicting a couple in the *dextrarum iunctio* pose (Metropolitan Museum of Art, image in the public domain).

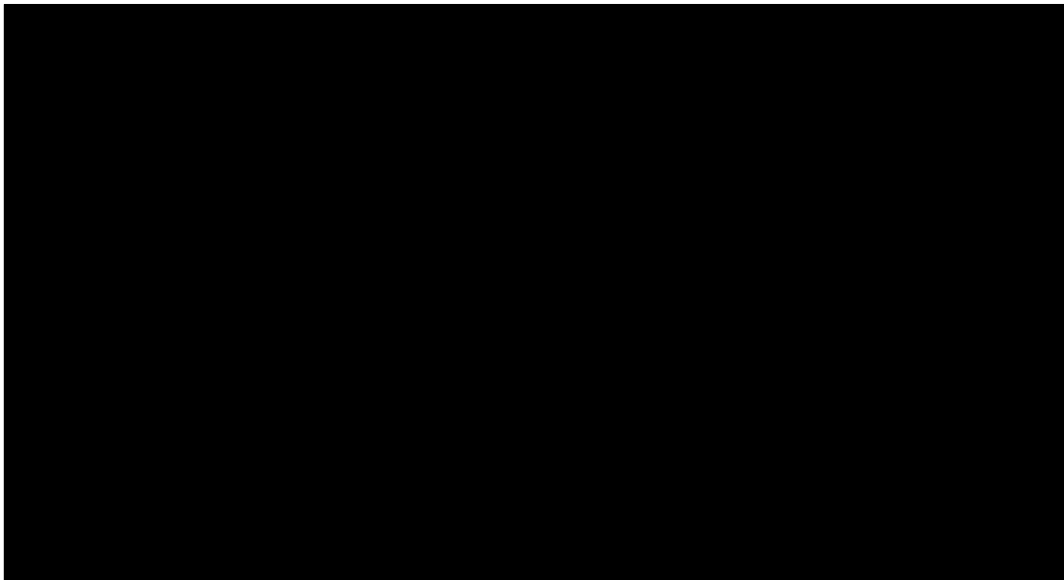


Figure 4.9: 'Marriage ring' with facing busts of couple (Ross 2005, plate XXXIX).

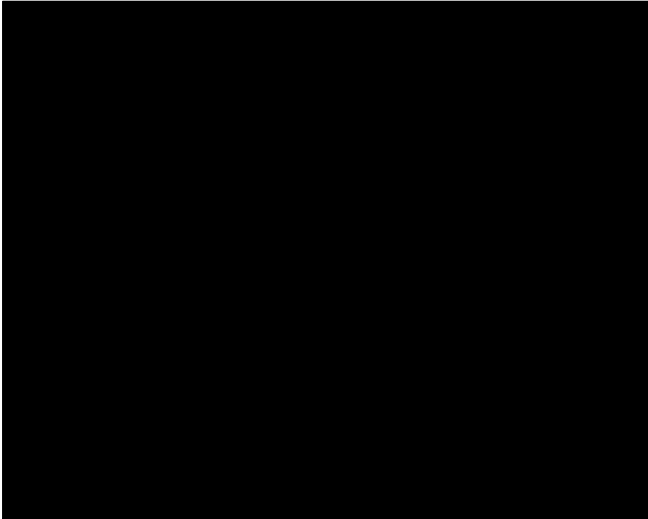


Figure 4.10: 'Marriage ring' depicting a standing couple flanking Christ (Bank 1977, plate 100).



Figure 4.11: Lid of box showing paired portraits of a couple (Buschhausen 1971, B Tafel 8).

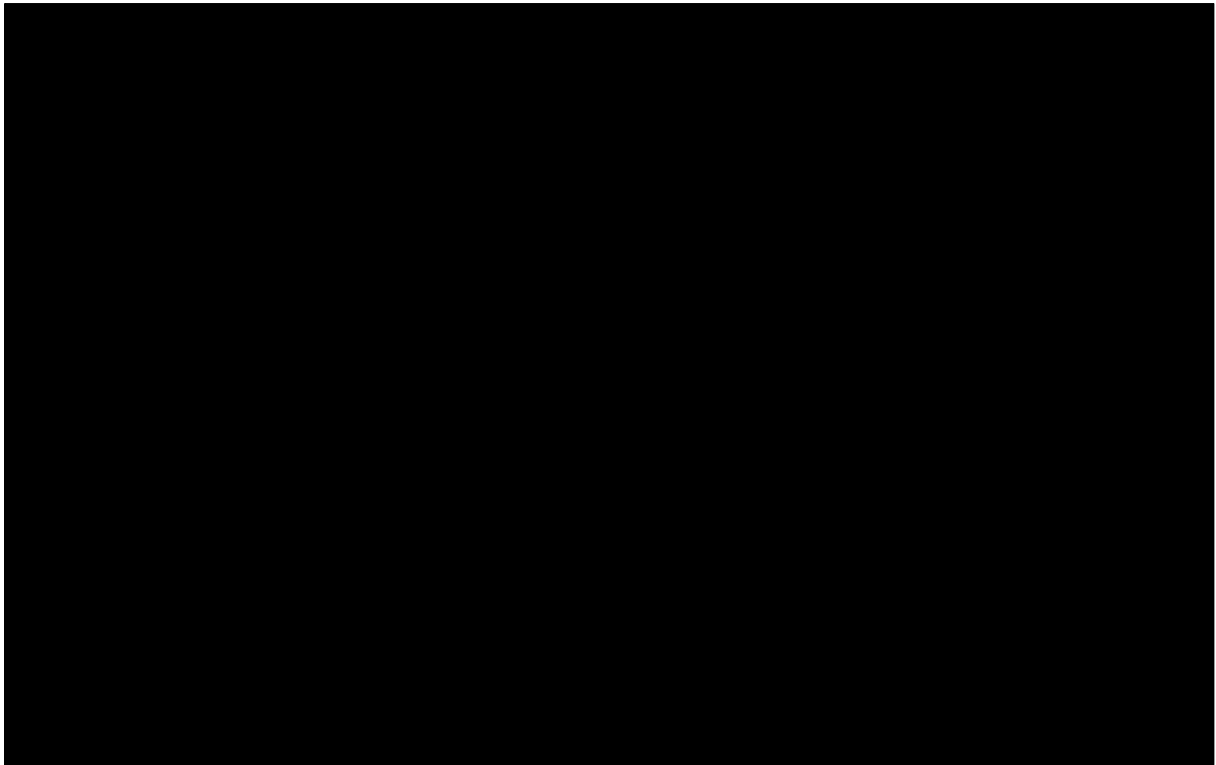


Figure 4.12: Large medallions from a 'marriage belt' depicting a married couple with Christ (Ross 2005, colour plate A).



Figure 4.13: Necklace with medallion and amulet (Metropolitan Museum of Art, image in the Public Domain).





Figure 4.14: Detail of the medallion showing a couple crowned by Christ (Metropolitan Museum of Art, image in the Public Domain).



Figures 4.15 and 4.16: Gilded copper belt tab with marriage scene and Bellerophon (Metropolitan Museum of Art, images in the Public Domain).

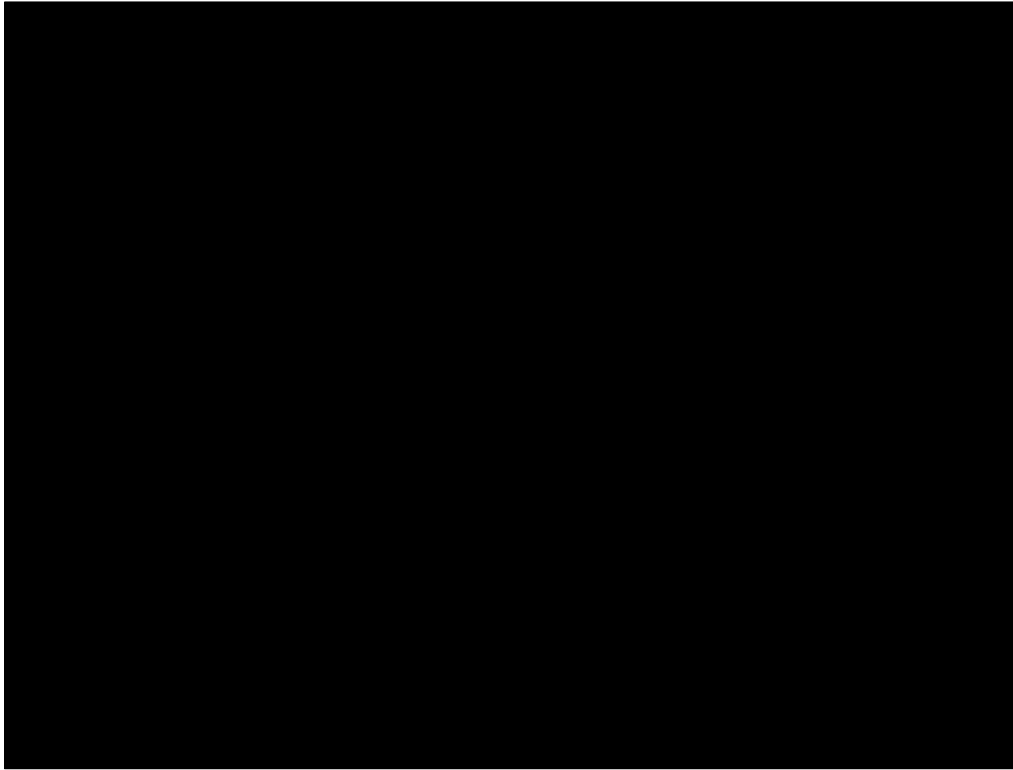


Figure 4.17: *Arcosolium* of Nonnosa, Naples (photo by author).

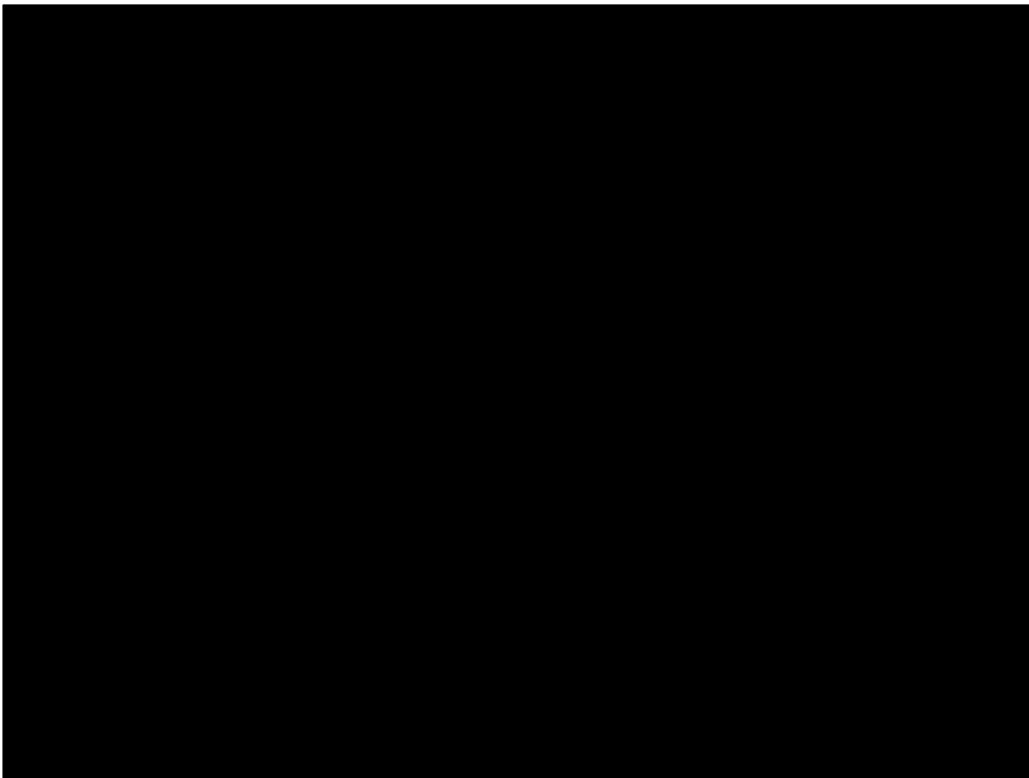


Figure 4.18: *Arcosolium* of Cominia and Nicatiola, Naples (photo by author).

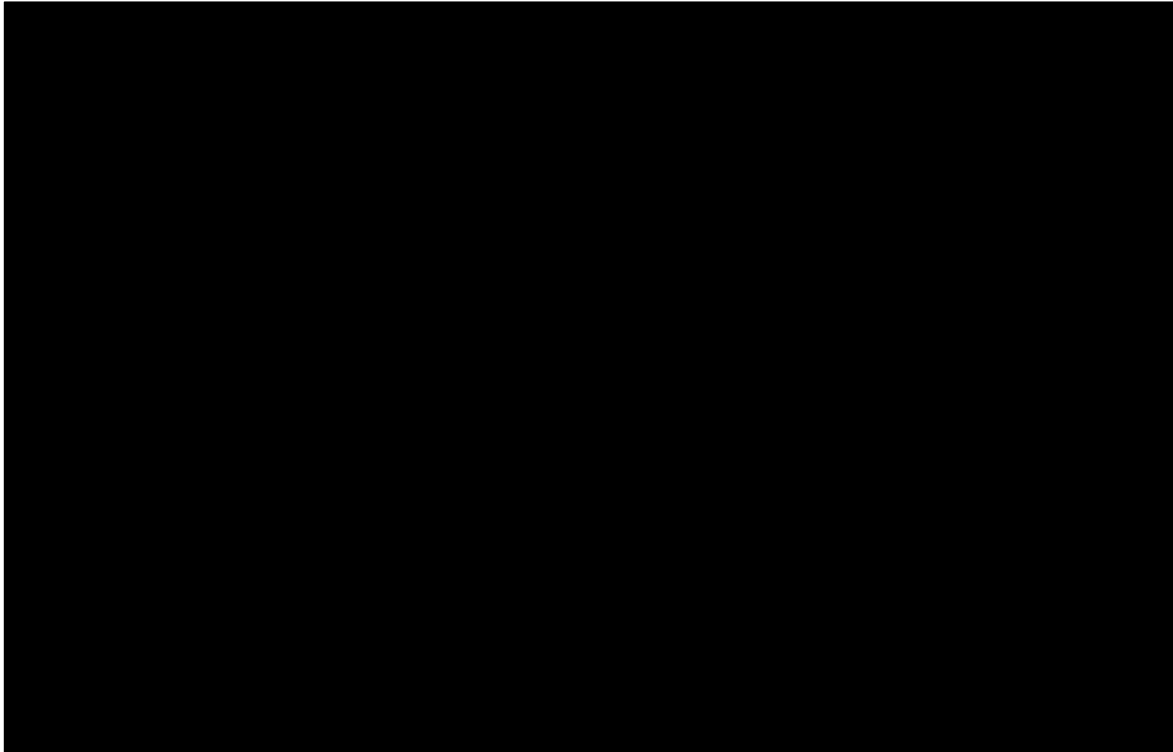


Figure 4.19: *Arcosolium* depicting a woman and her daughter flanked by holy men, Rome (Mazzei 2010, Tav.39).

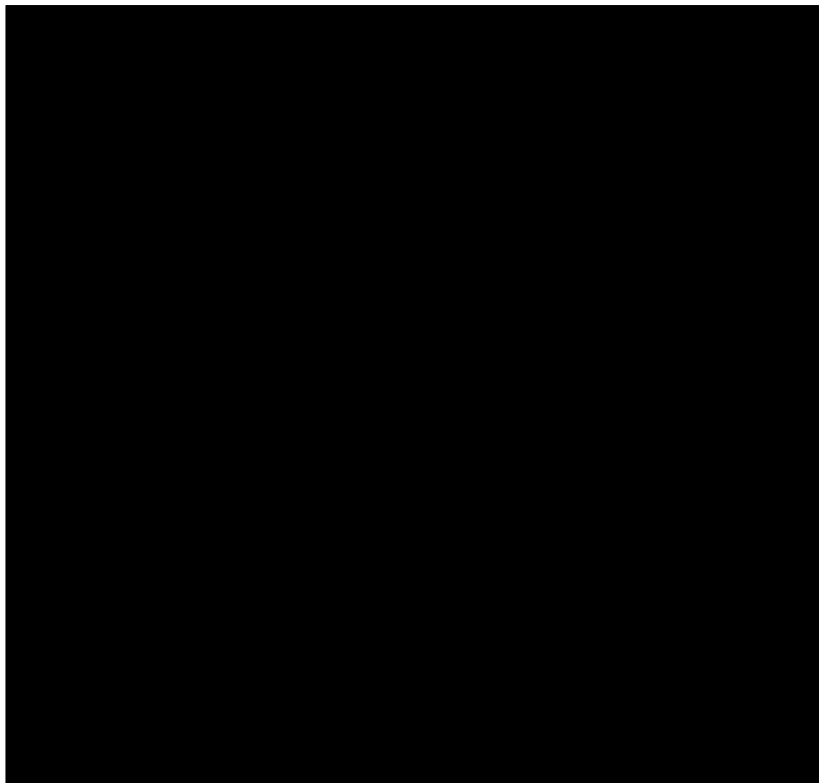


Figure 4.20: Tomb painting of Rufina and her daughter, Naples (Achelis 1936, Taf 30).

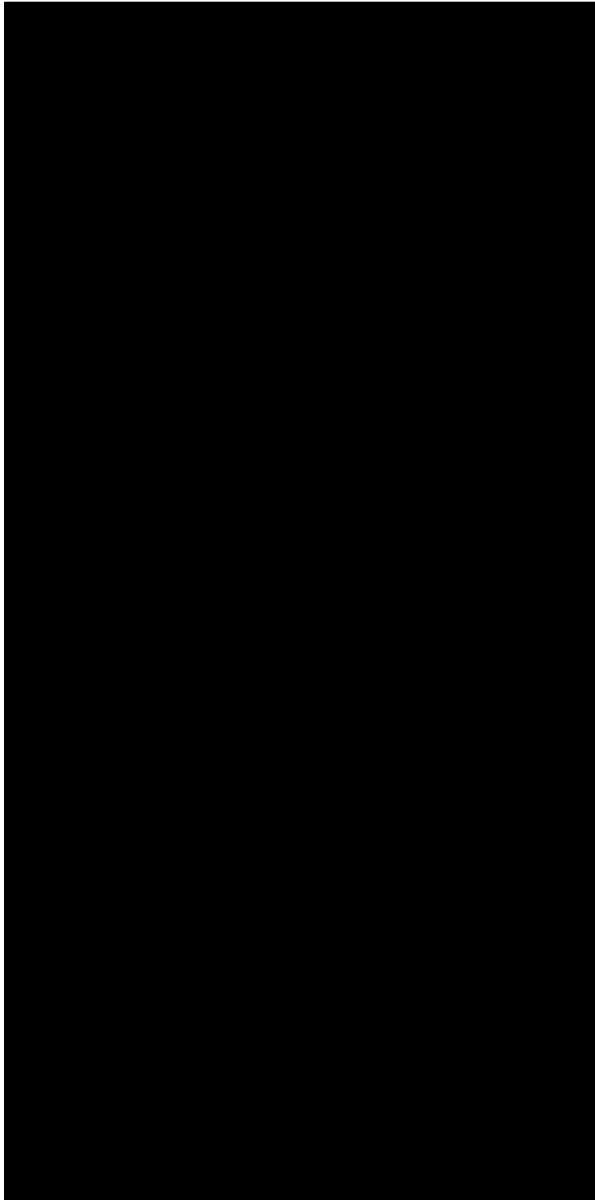


Figure 4.21: Funerary mosaic of Felicitas and Victoria, Tabarka (Powell 2019, W09, p.158).

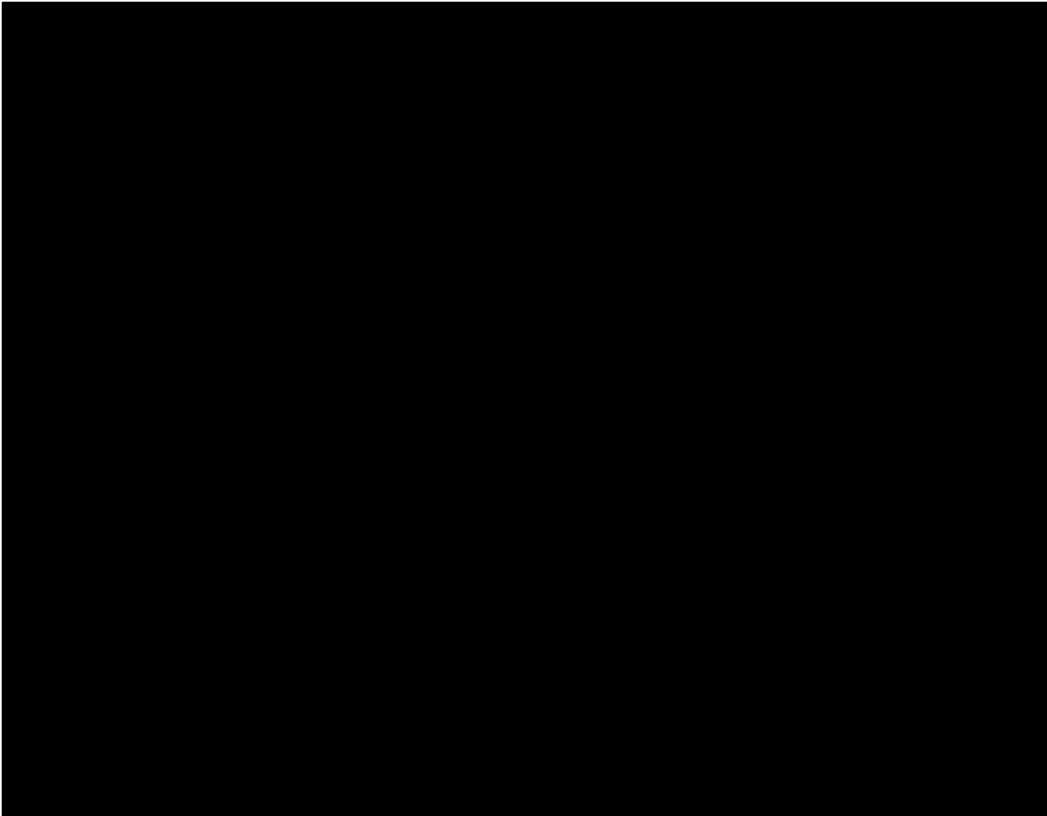


Figure 4.22: Funerary mosaic of Romanilla and Emerita, Khirbet Guidra (after Brochin 1888, Pl.XIII).



Figure 4.23: Dominus Julius mosaic, Carthage (Ghalia 2006, Fig.20a).

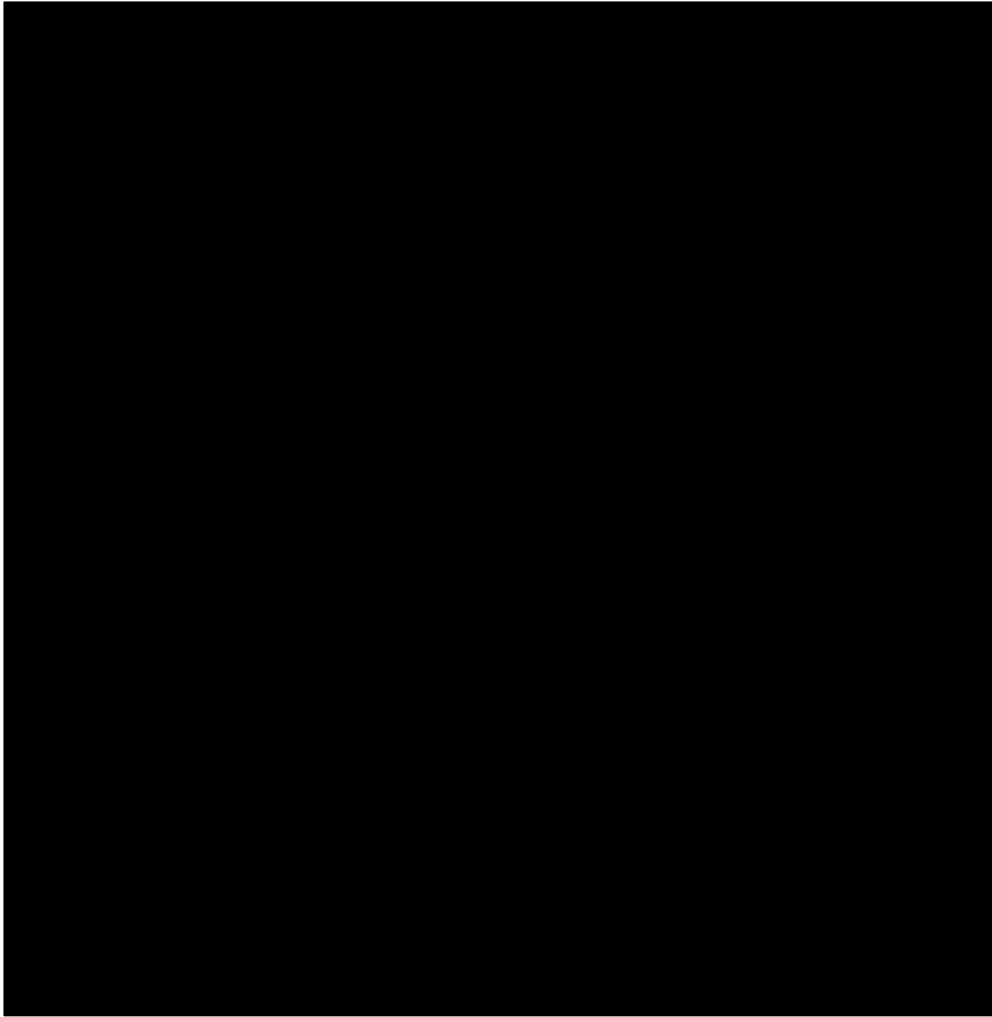


Figure 4.24: 'Stilicho diptych' (Getty Images).

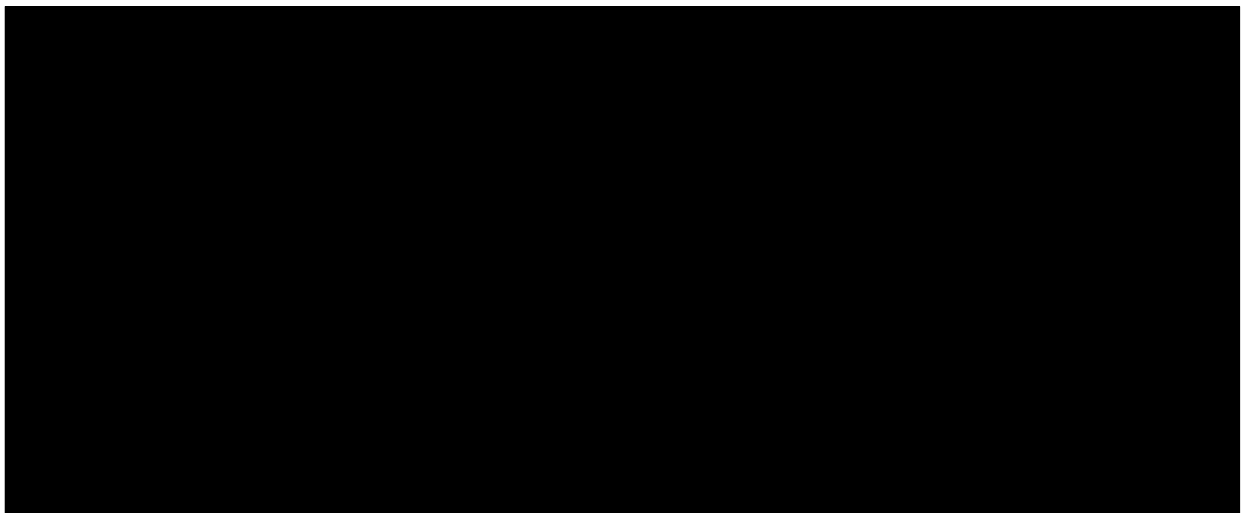


Figure 4.25: Silver consular spoons of Eusebius, the first showing his wife and possibly son (after Cameron 2015, Figs 3a-b, after Garrucci 1880, Tav. 462, 4-5).

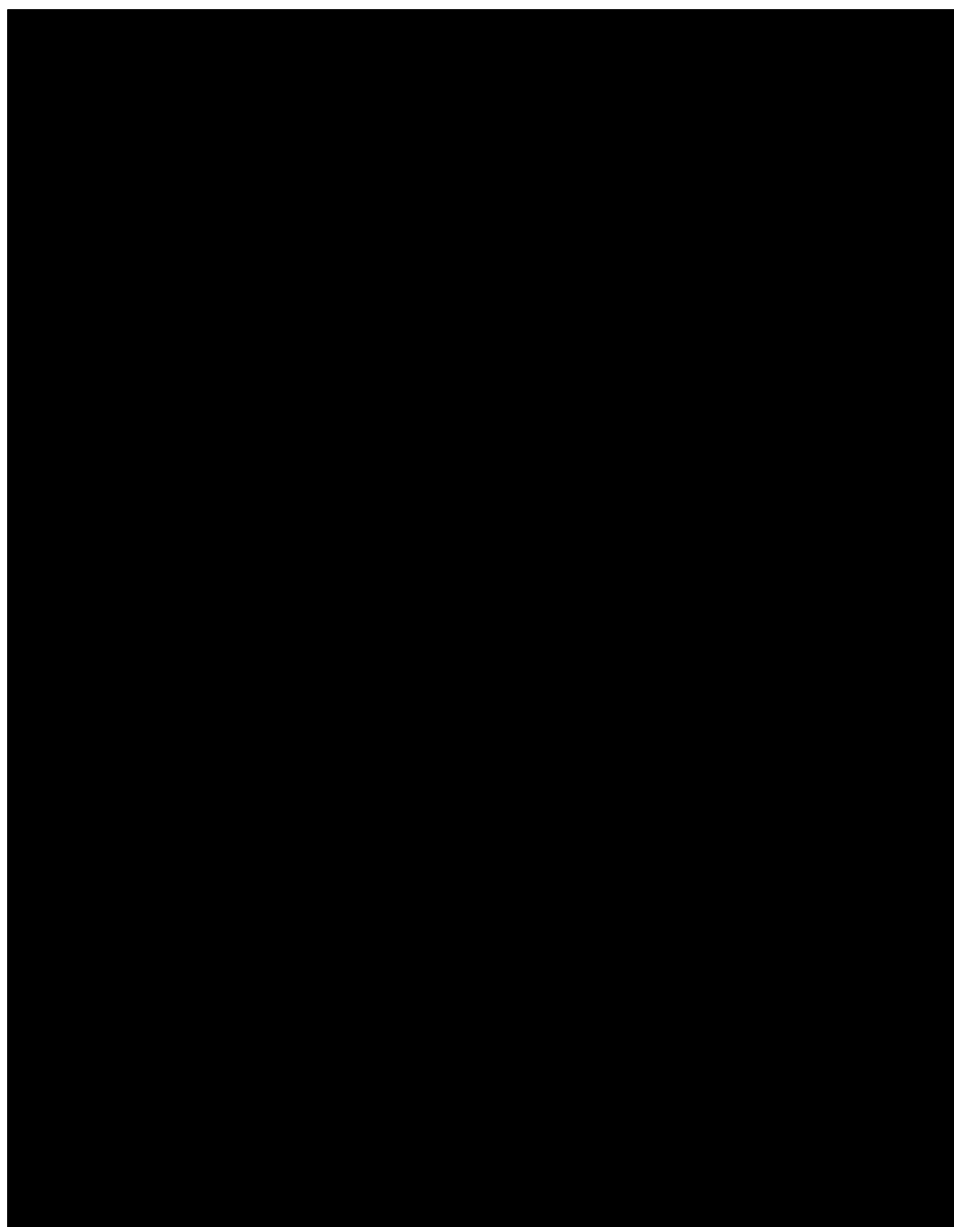


Figure 4.26: Plan of the fresco decoration of a tomb of a couple at Silistra (Atanasov 2009, Fig.6).

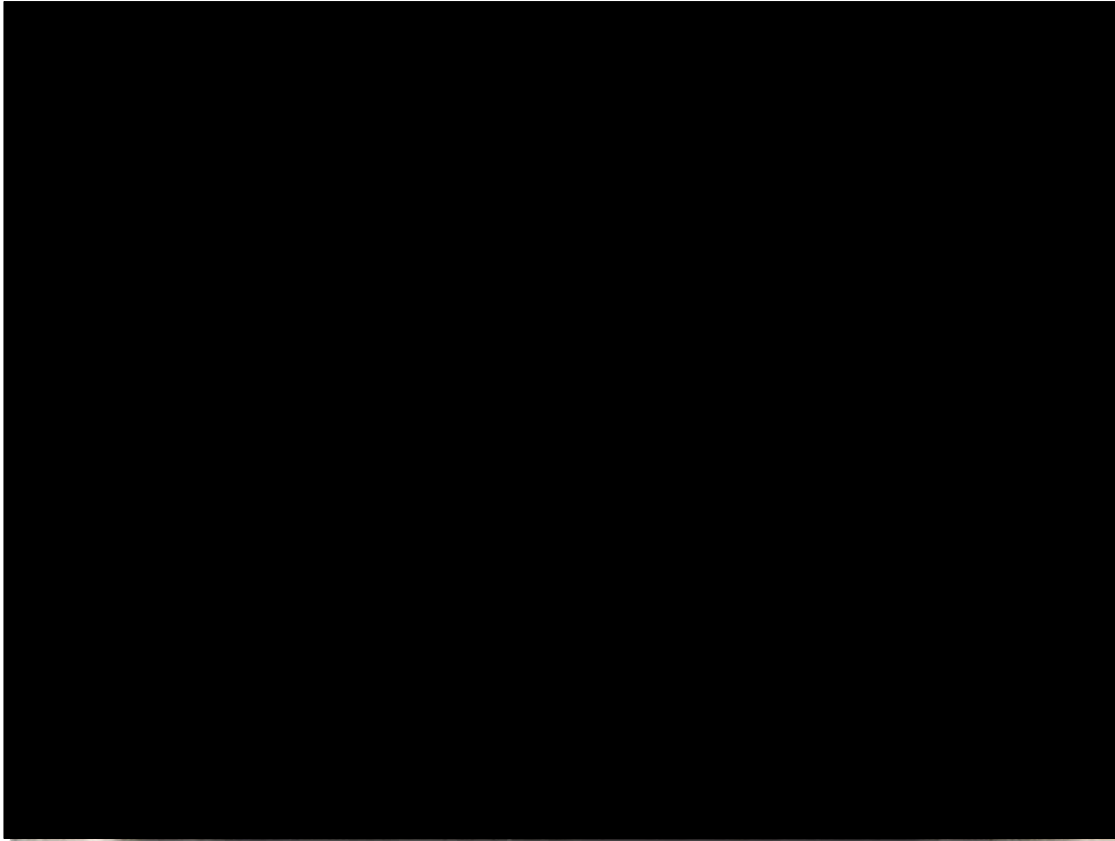


Figure 4.27: The western wall of the ‘tomb of Eustorgius’, showing the couple with two male slaves, Thessaloniki (Behling 2015, Fig 3).

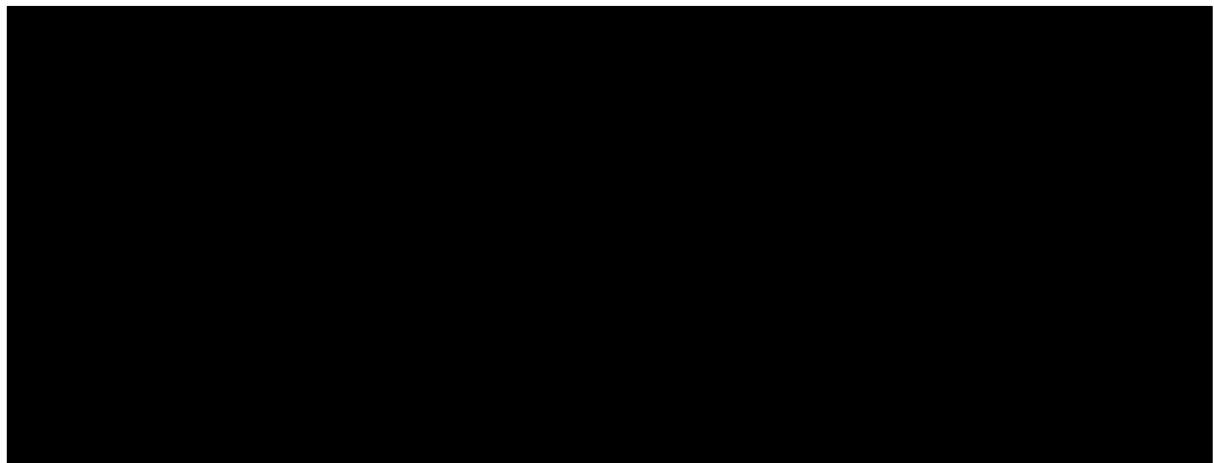


Figure 4.28: Drawing of the northern wall of the tomb, showing Aurelia Prokla (Behling 2015, Fig 2).



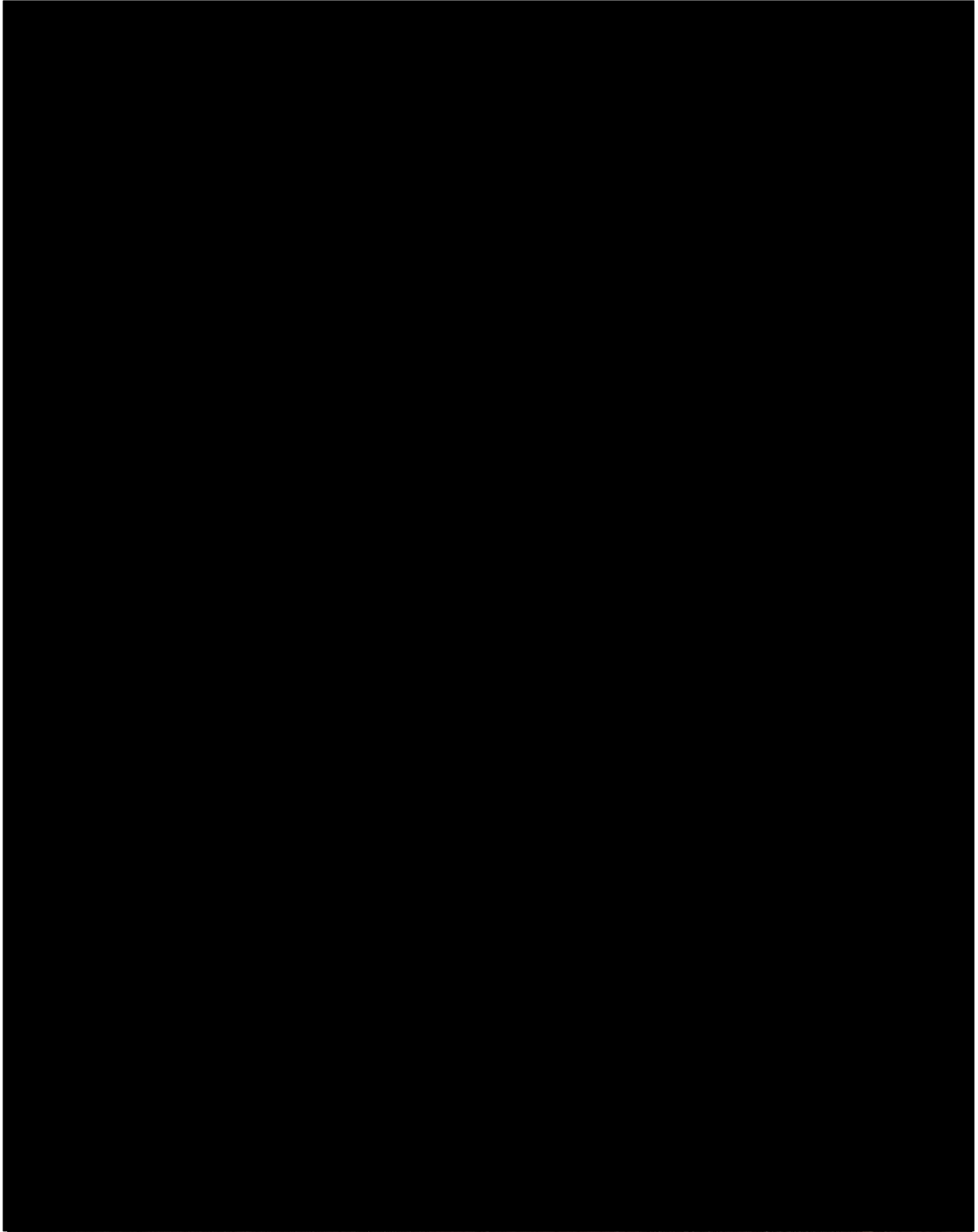


Figure 4.29: The tomb painting of Turtura, Rome (Deckers et al 1994, Farbtafel 8).

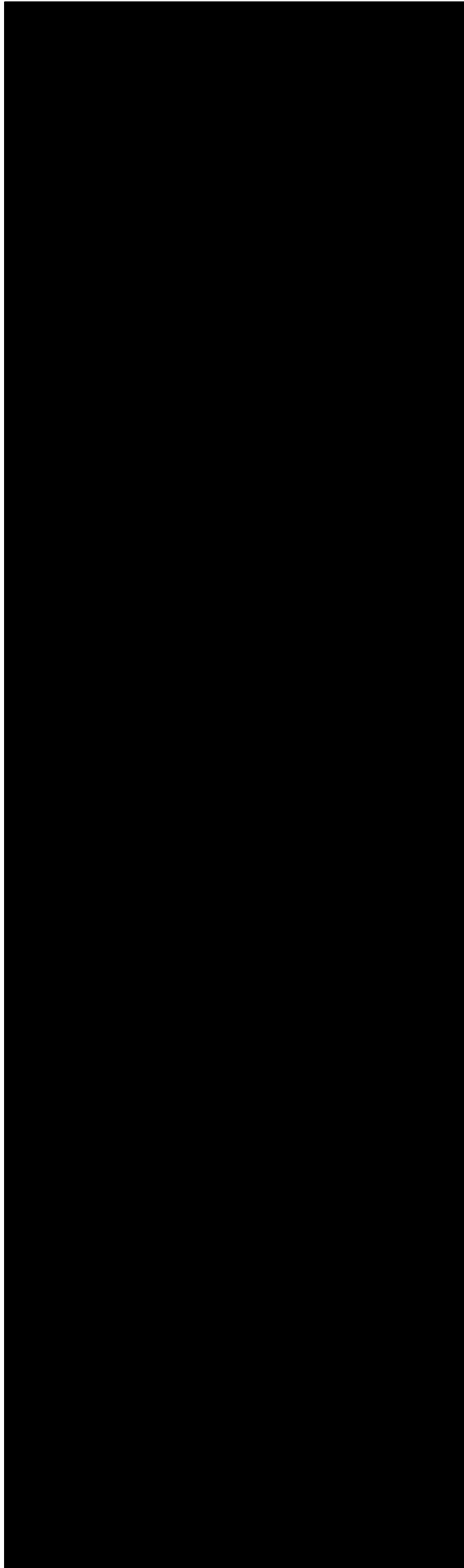


Figure 4.30: Funerary mosaic of Pompeia Maxima, *dei famula* (Burns and Jensen 2014, Fig.142).

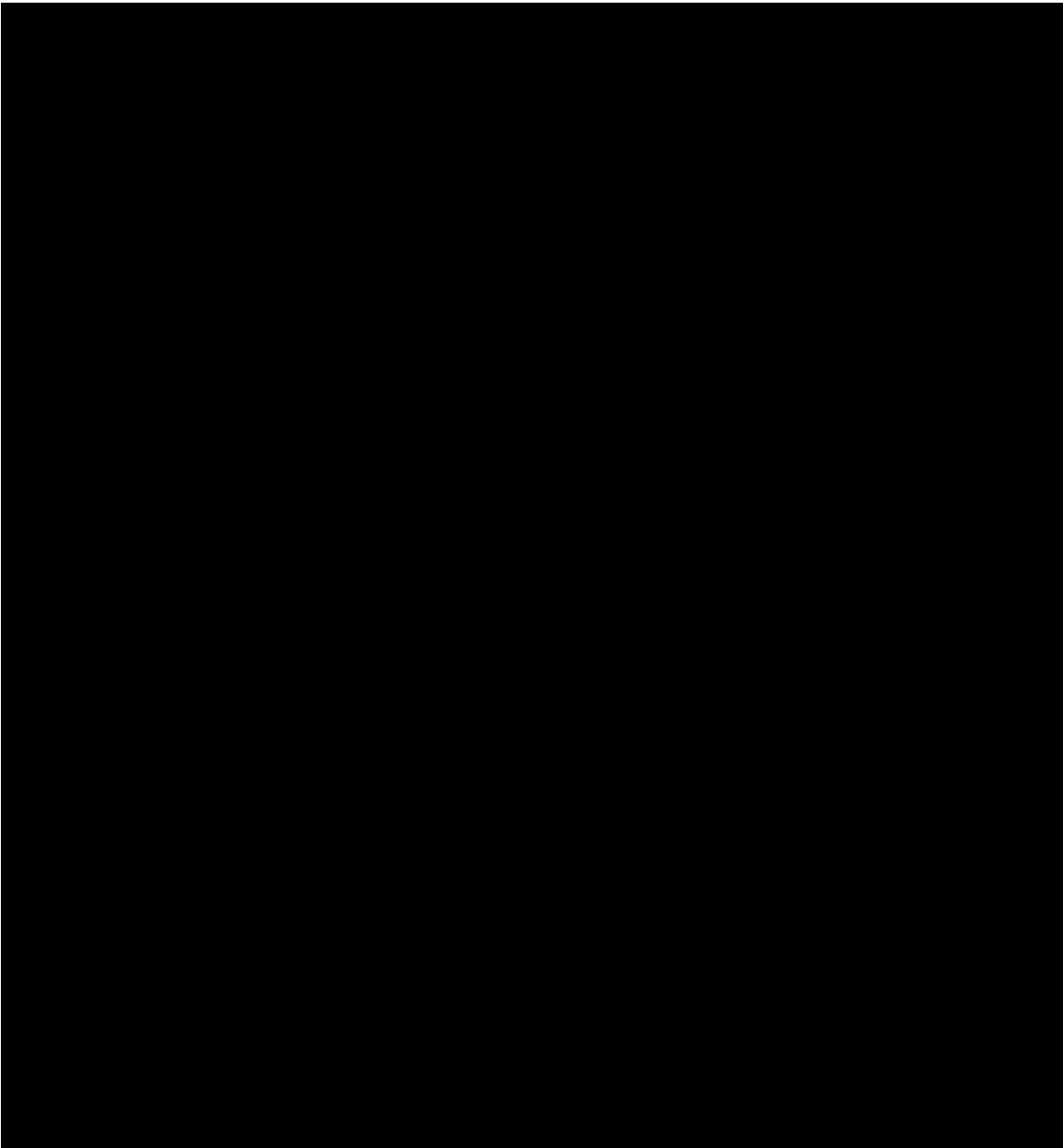


Figure 4.31: Line drawing of the recto of the votive cross of Theodote (Coquin et al. 1989, line drawing of Plate VIII).

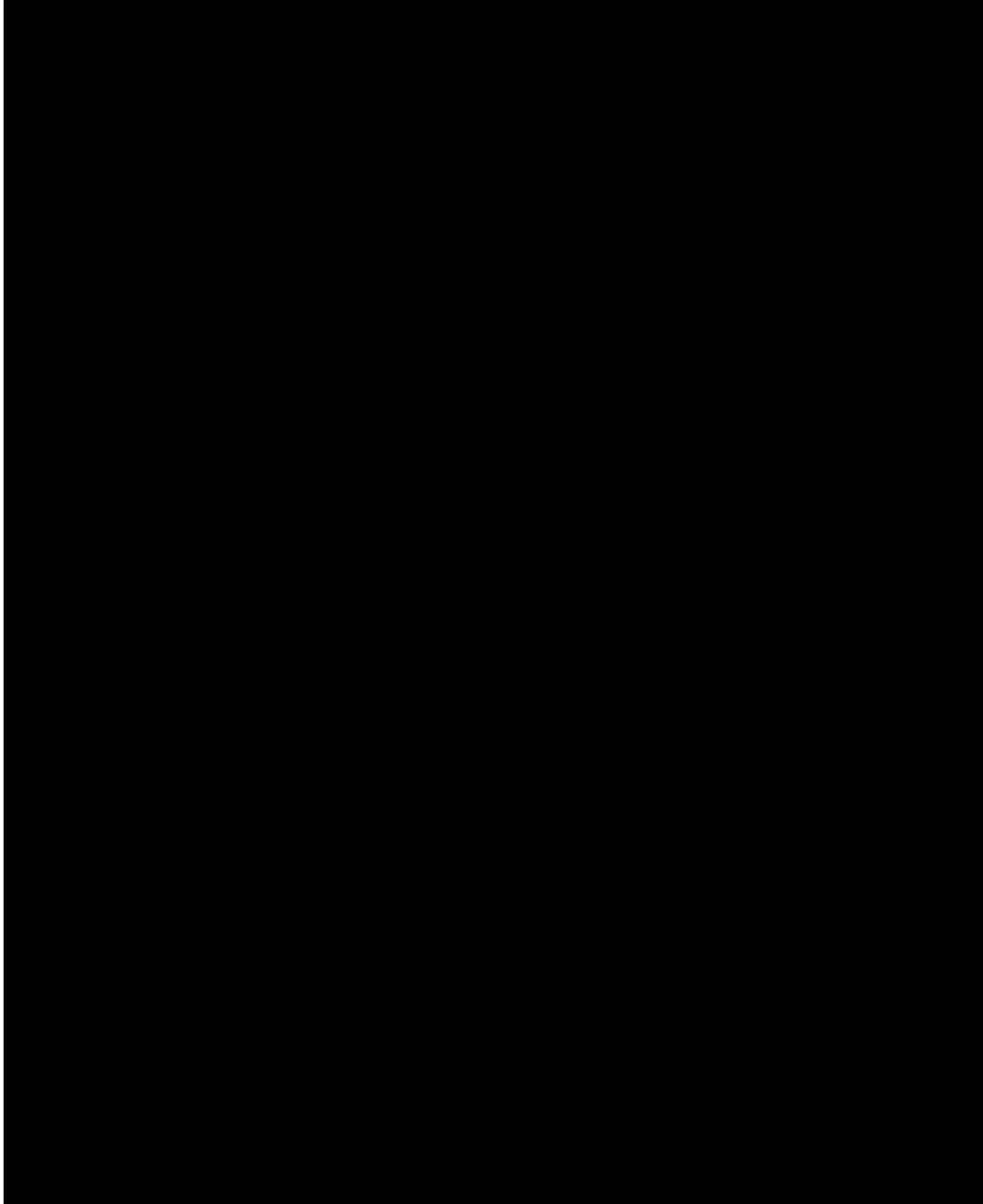


Figure 4.32: Line drawing of the verso of the votive cross of Theodote (Coquin et al. 1989, line drawing of Plate IX).

## Chapter 5



Figure 5.1: The dedicatory miniature of Anicia Juliana, from the Vienna Dioscorides manuscript (image in public domain).

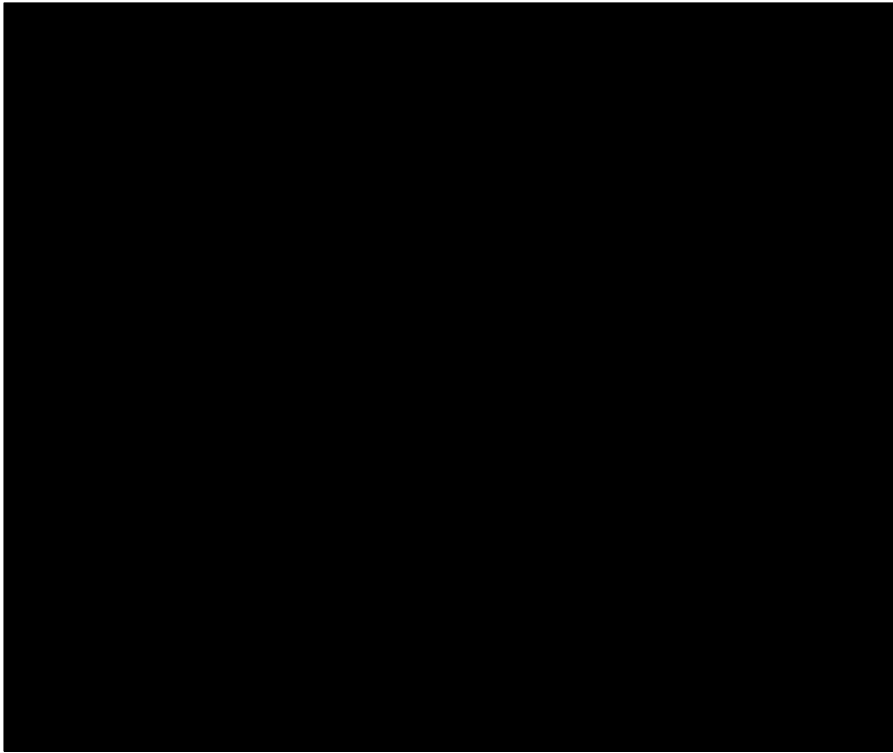


Figure 5.2: Front panel of the Samagher Casket showing the Adoration of the Empty Throne by the Apostles (<http://vcg.isti.cnr.it/capsella/>: Samagher Casket Digitization Project).

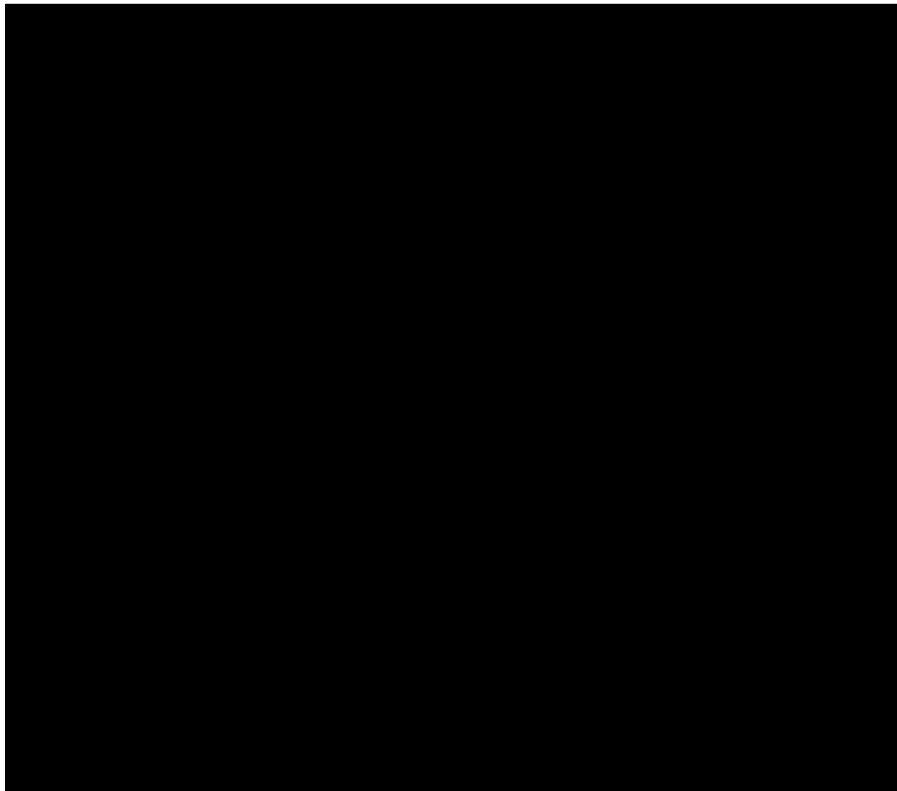


Figure 5.3: Back panel of the Samagher Casket showing figures flanking a baldachin with fluted columns (<http://vcg.isti.cnr.it/capsella/>: Samagher Casket Digitization Project).

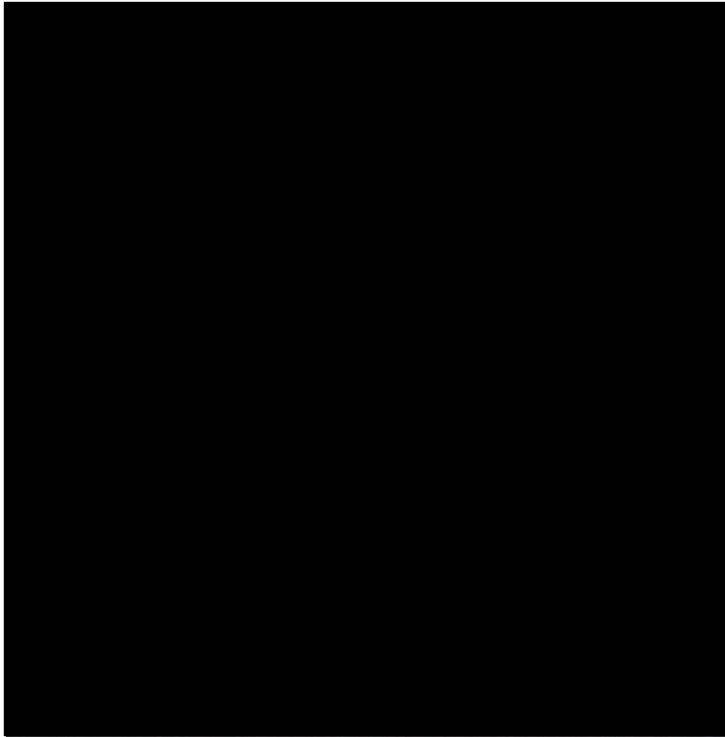


Figure 5.4: Right side panel of the Samagher Casket, showing damaged figures flanking central gesturing woman (<http://vcg.isti.cnr.it/capsella/>: Samagher Casket Digitization Project).

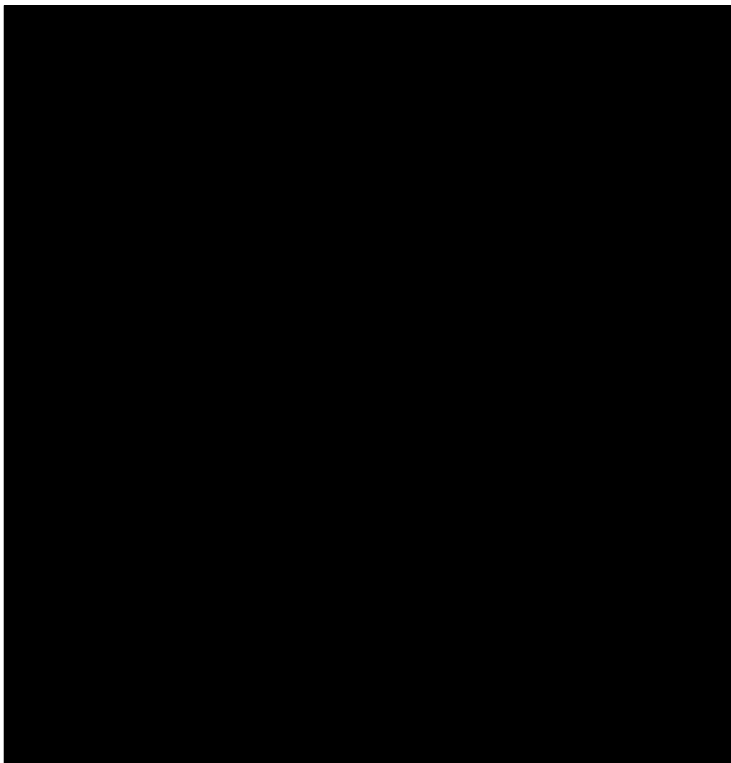
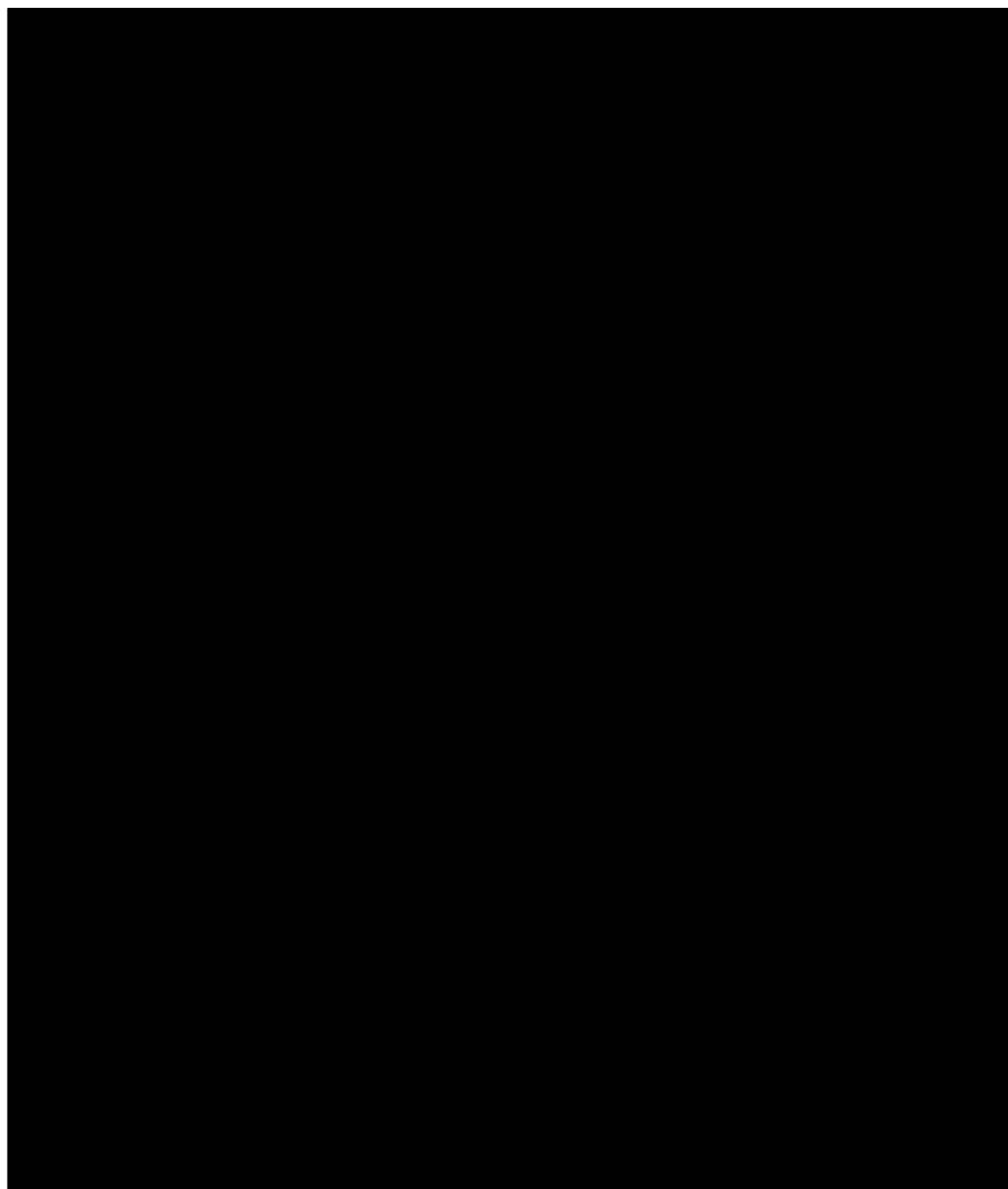
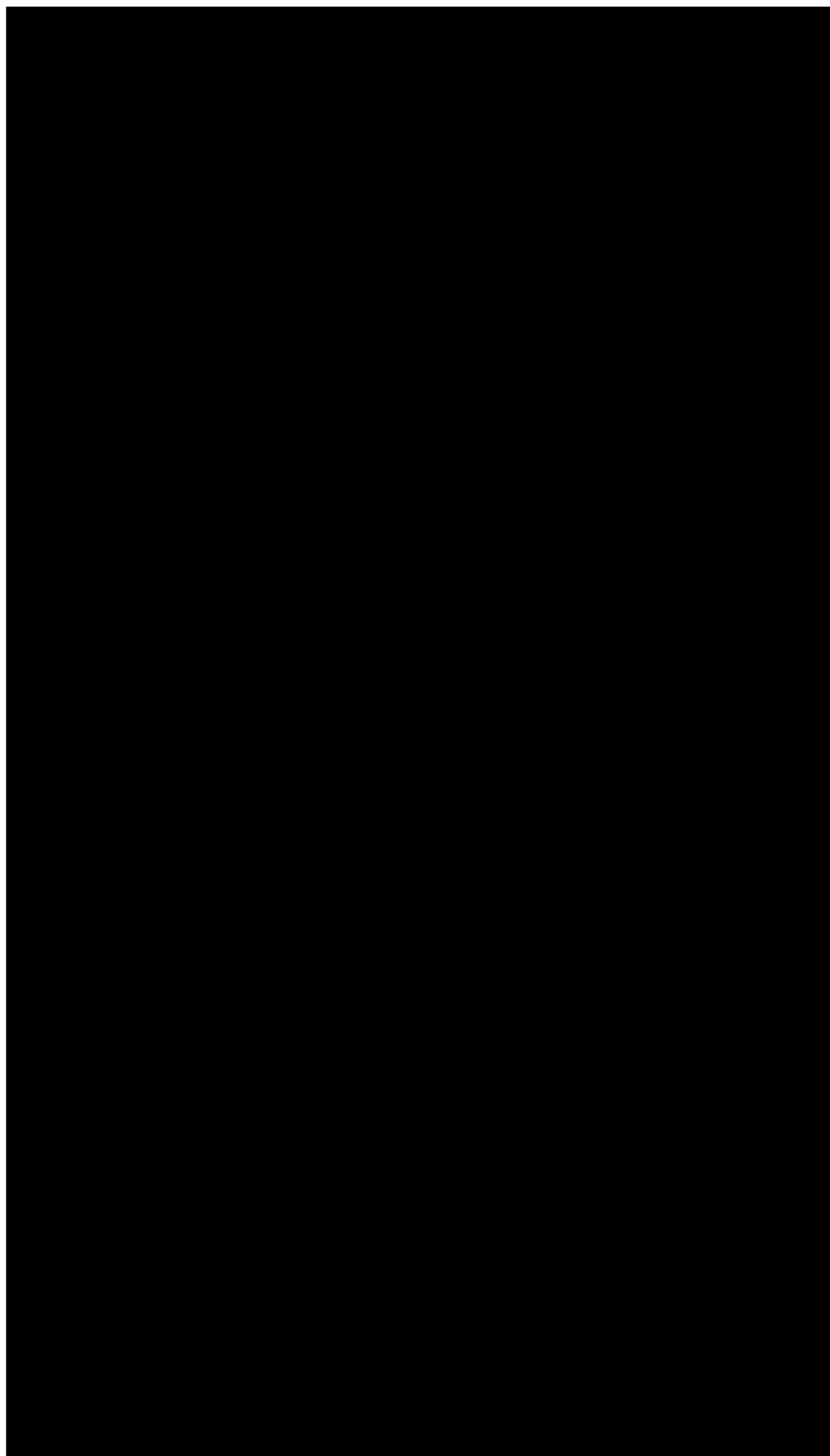


Figure 5.5: Left side panel of the Samagher Casket, showing figures flanking a man, woman, and child entering a shrine (<http://vcg.isti.cnr.it/capsella/>: Samagher Casket Digitization Project).

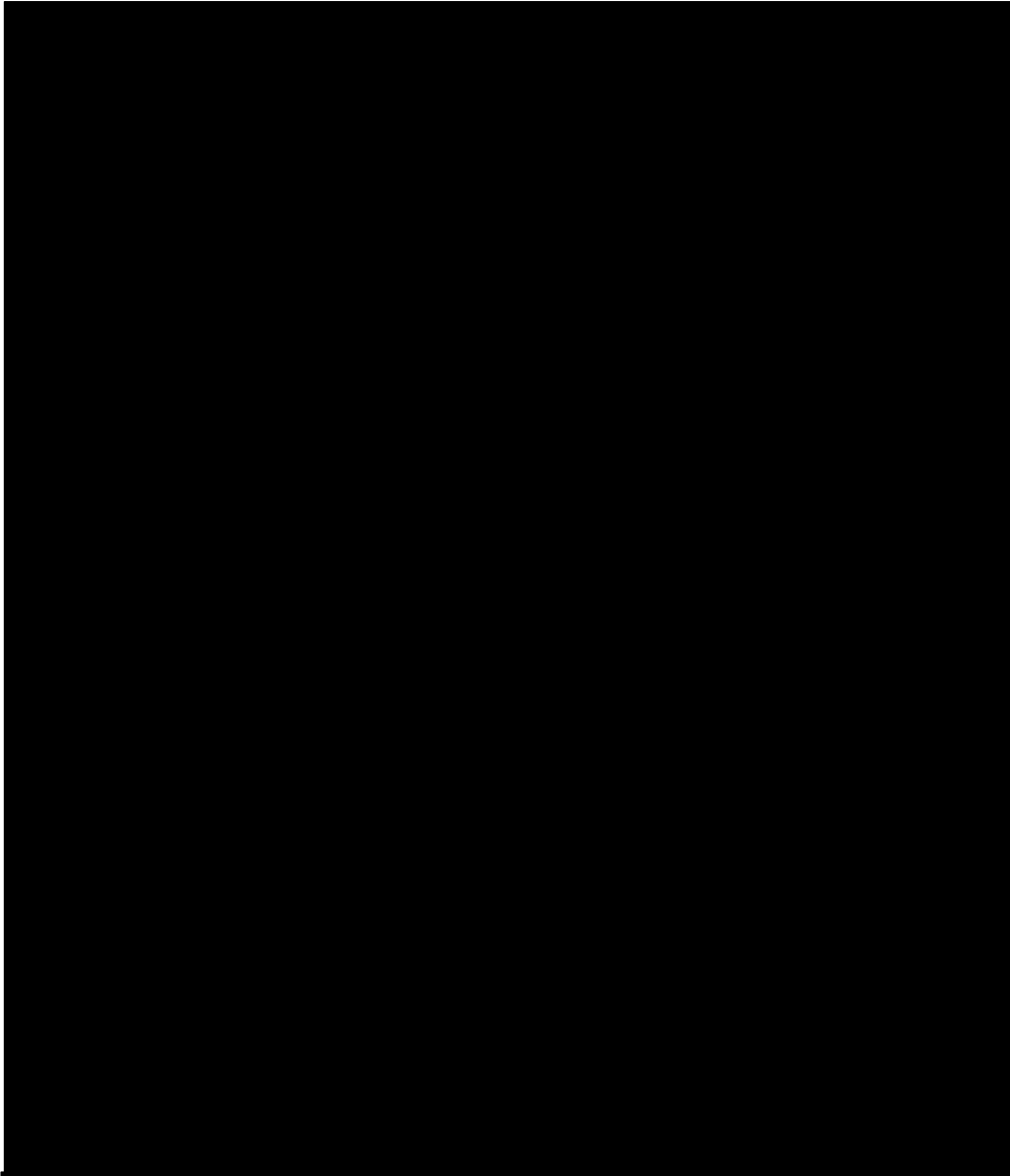


Figures 5.6-9: Portrait busts of four female donors, Aquileia (Kähler 1962, Figs 13, 14 (colour), 18, 19 (black and white)).

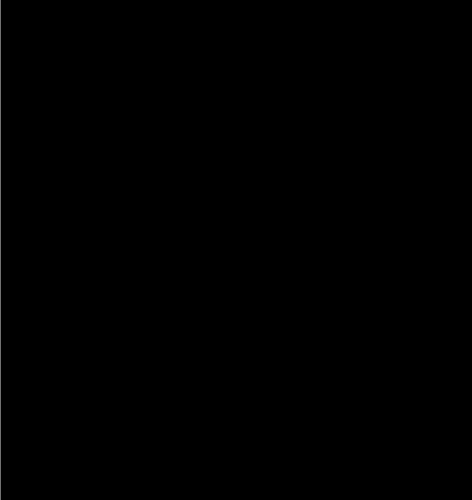




Figures 5.10-14: Portrait busts of one female and four male donors (Kähler 1962, Figs 2-6).



Figures 5.15-19: Portrait busts of four female donors and one male donor (Kähler 1962, Figs 7-10 (female busts), Fig 1 (male bust)).



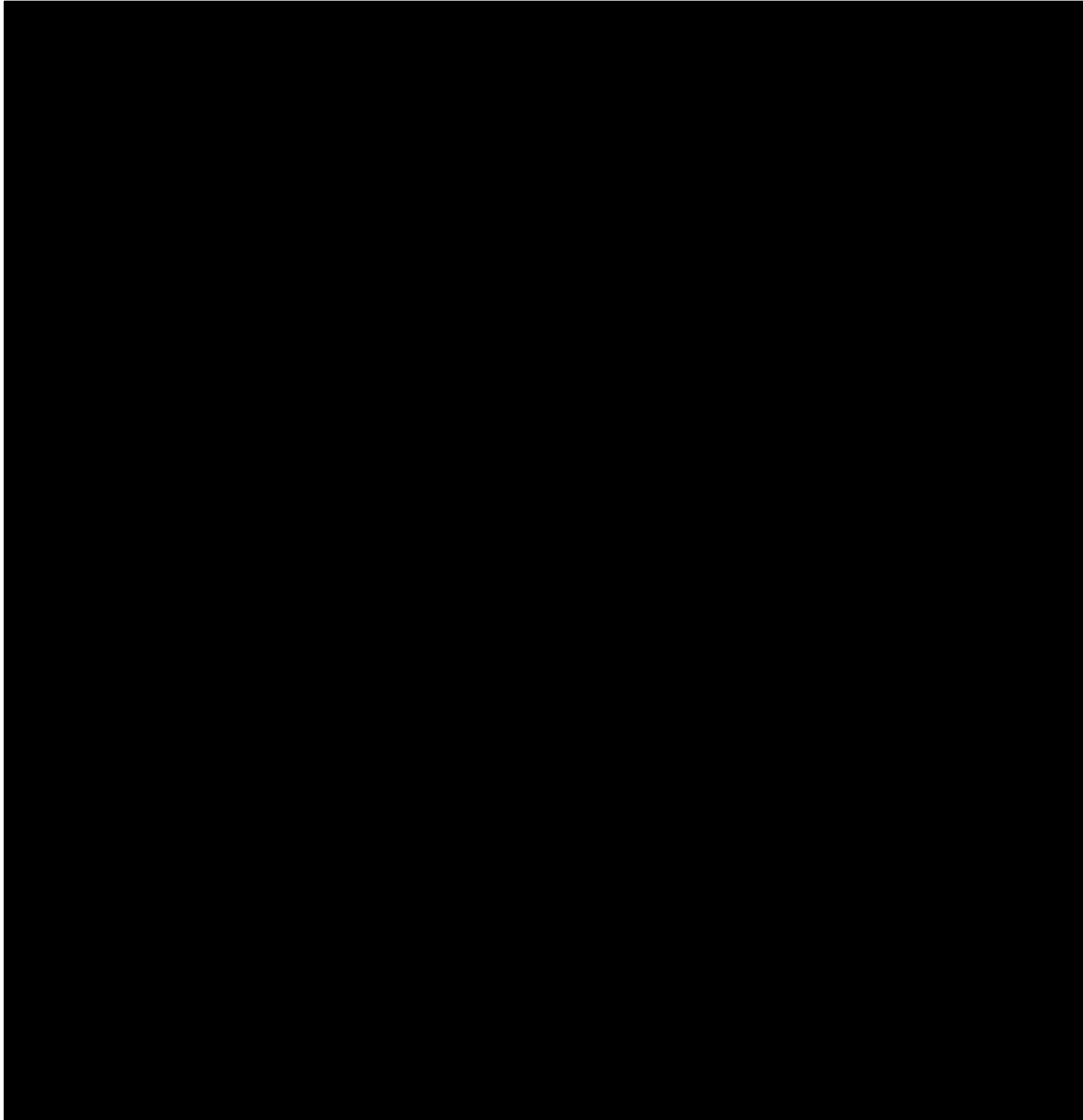


Figure 5.20: Two women donors being crowned by Christ, Rome (Scrinari 1995, Fig. 264).

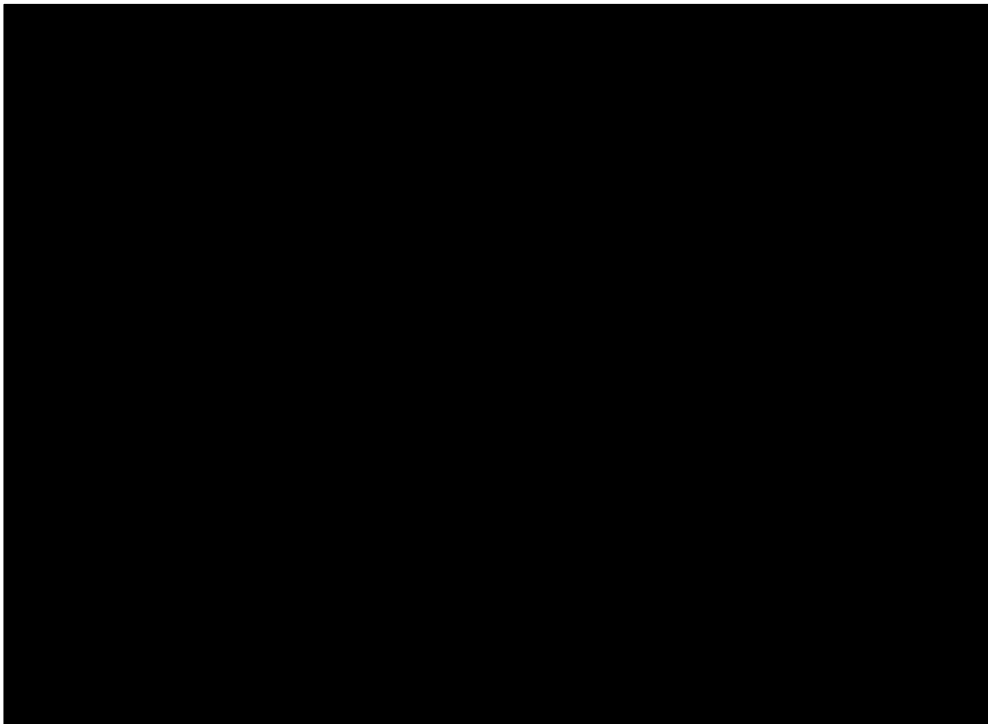


Figure 5.21: Donor portrait of Georgia at Gerasa (Piccirillo 1993, Fig 509).

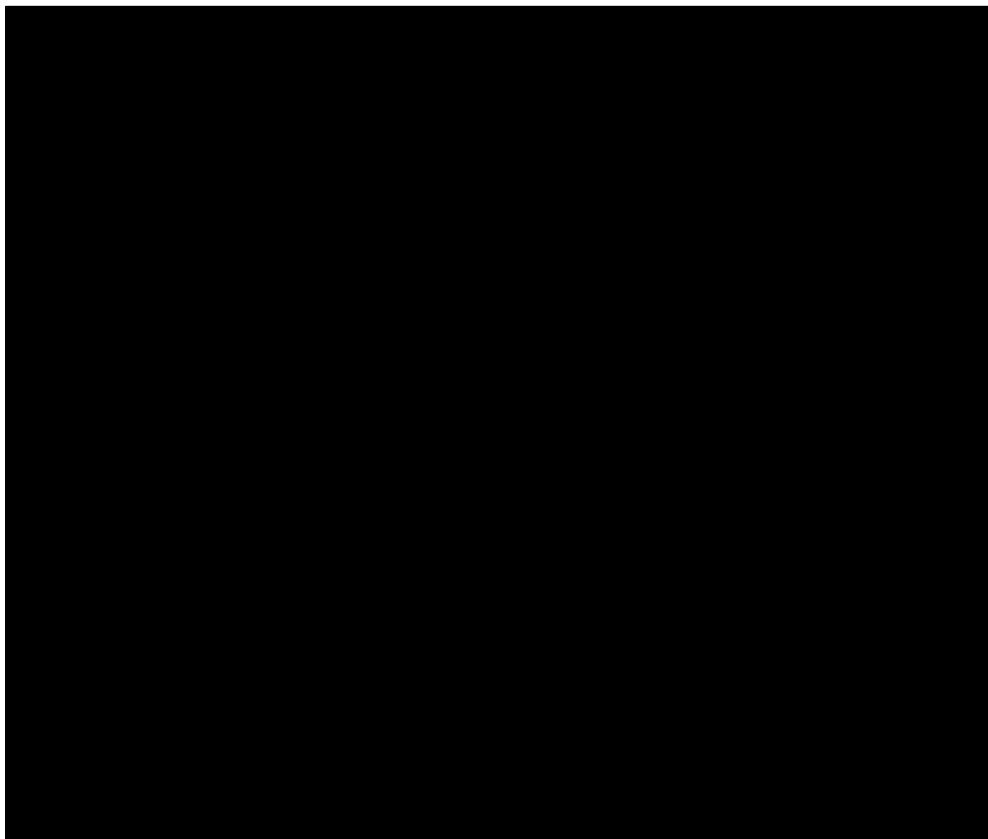


Figure 5.22: Donor portrait of Theodore, Georgia's husband (Piccirillo 1993, Fig 507).

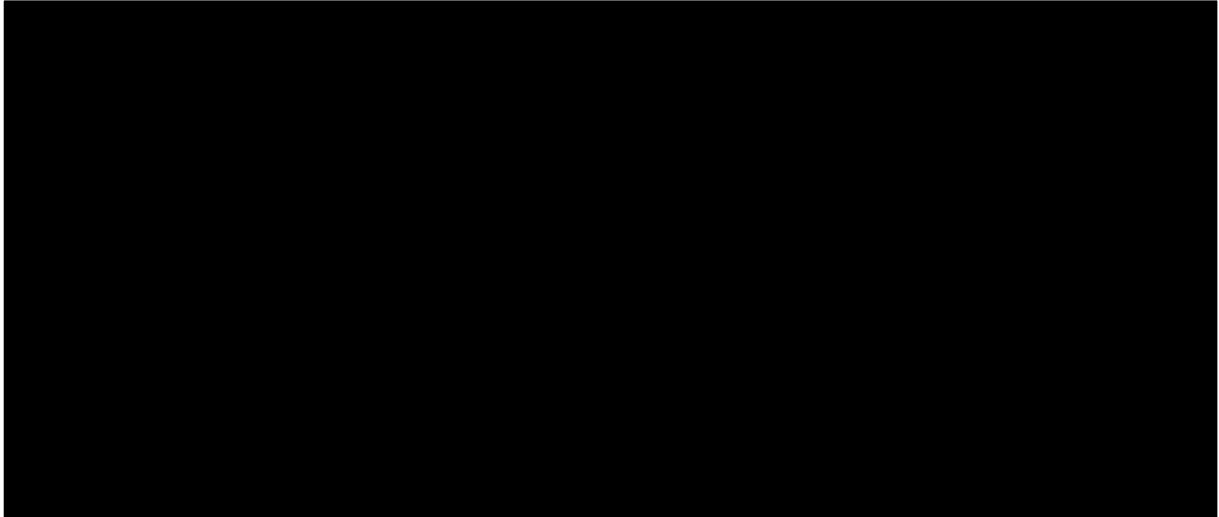
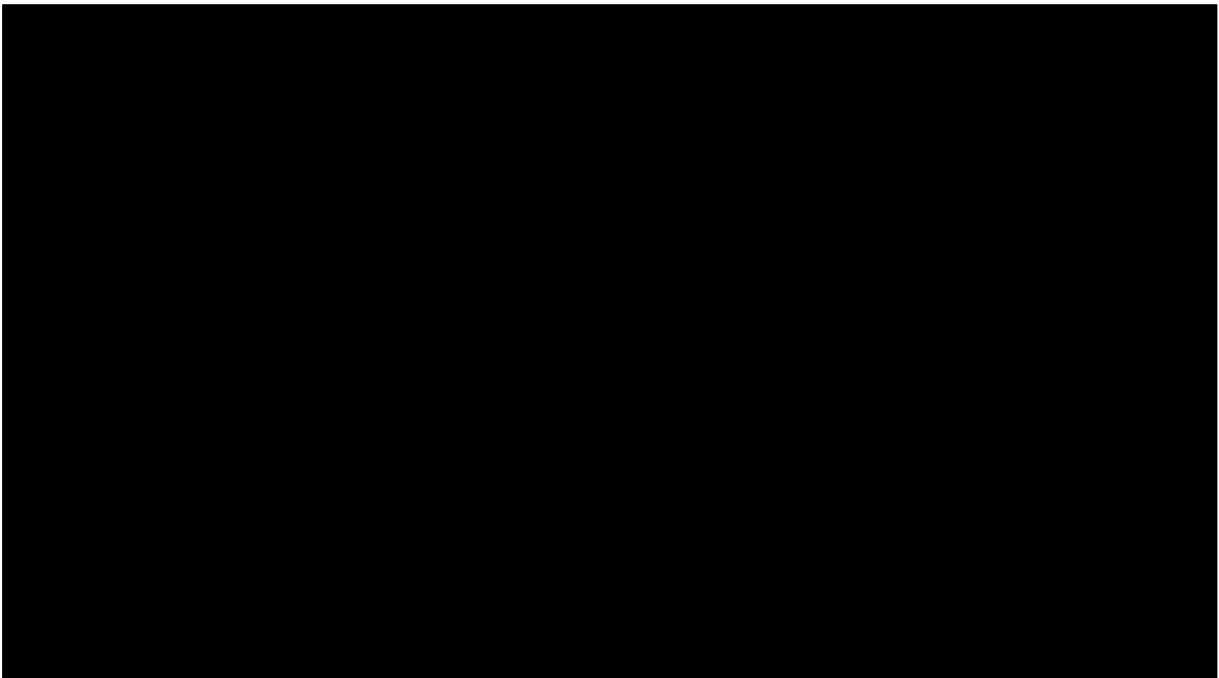


Figure 5.23: Photograph of the mosaic panel containing the donor portraits of Elias, Maria, and Soreg at Gerasa (Piccirillo 1993, Fig 572).



Figures 5.24-25: Donor portraits of Soreg (left) and Maria (right) at Gerasa (Piccirillo 1993, Figs 515, 569).

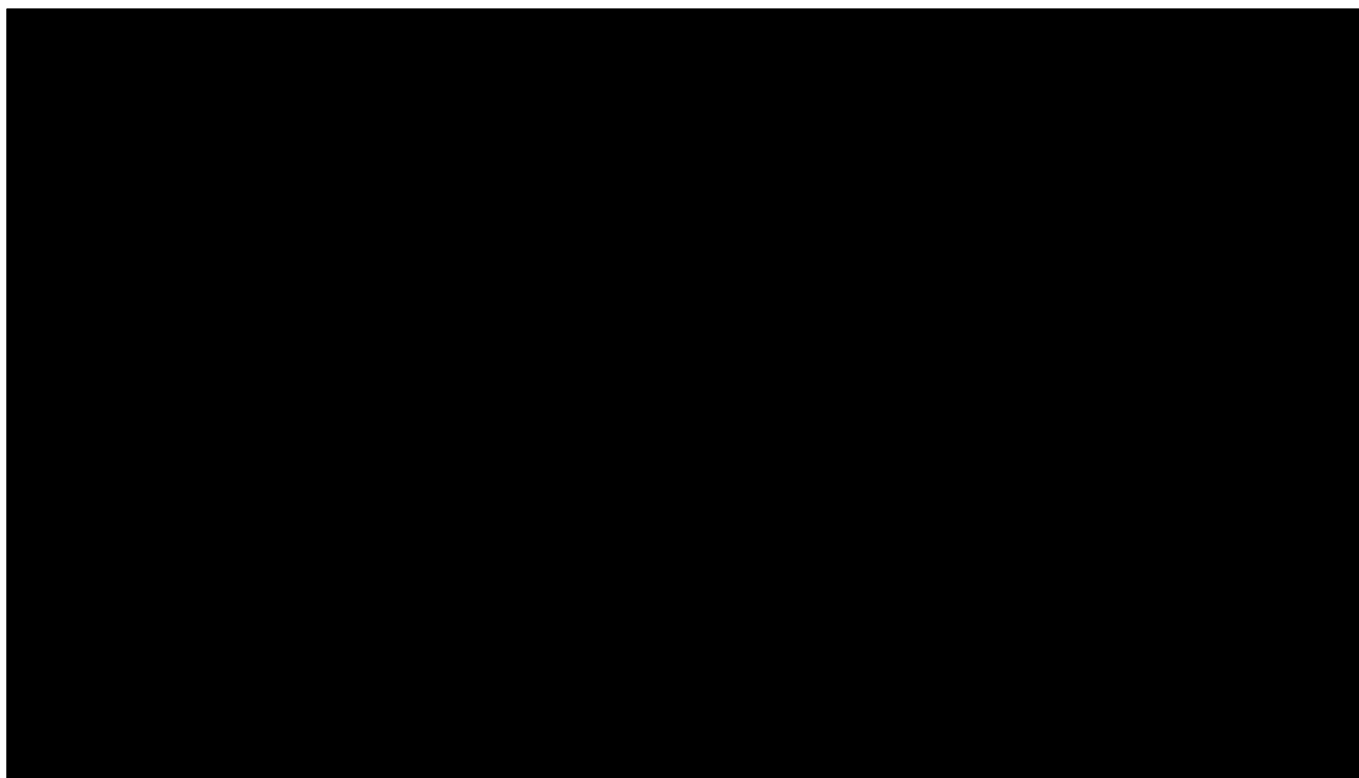
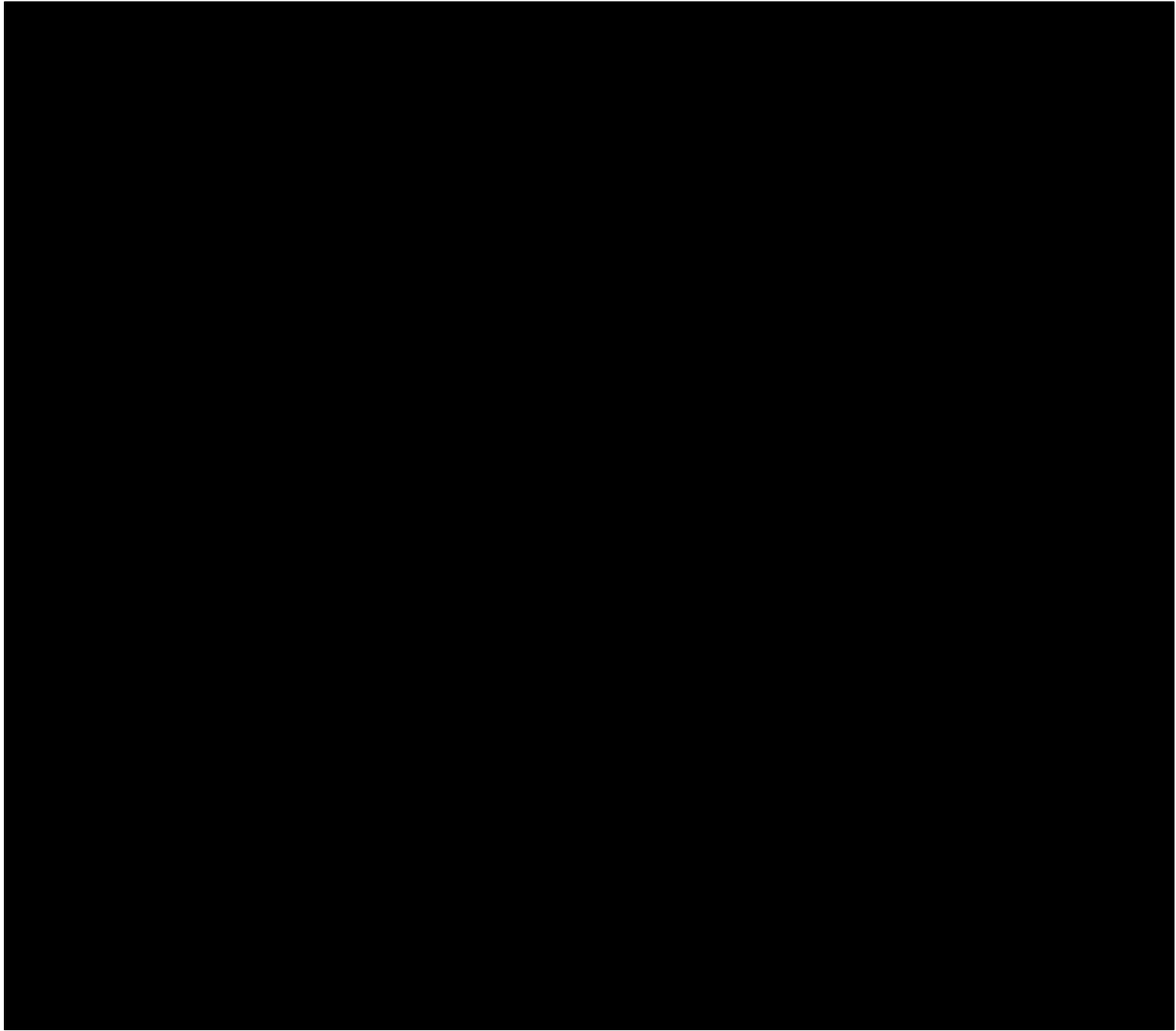


Figure 5.26: Donor portrait of Lady Syltous and Kalliora, Kissufim (Israeli et al. 2000, pp.86-87).



Figures 5.27-28: Drawing of the complete mosaic floor of the chamber and detail of the portraits of Theodosia and Georgia, Jerusalem (Elsner 2009, p.36; p.41).

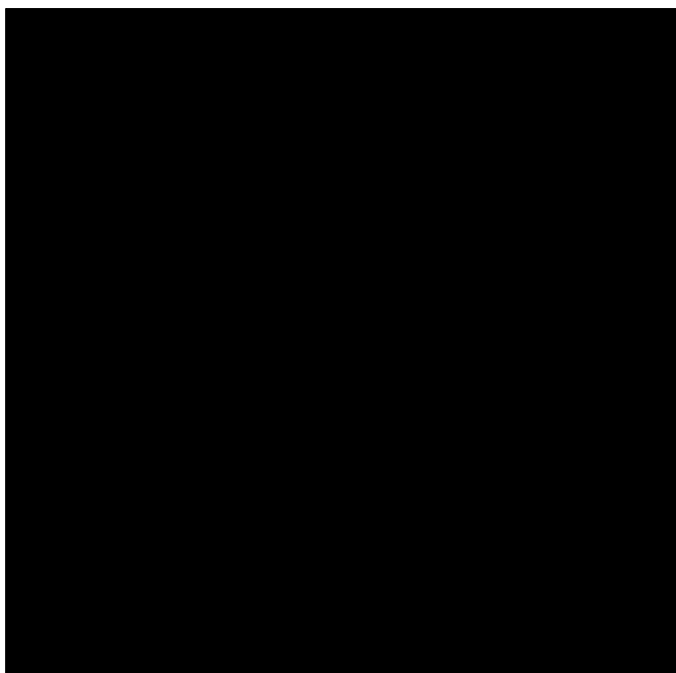


Figure 5.29: Donor portrait of an unidentified woman from the Chapel of the Priest John in Khirbet el-Mukkayat (Piccirillo 1993, Fig 217).

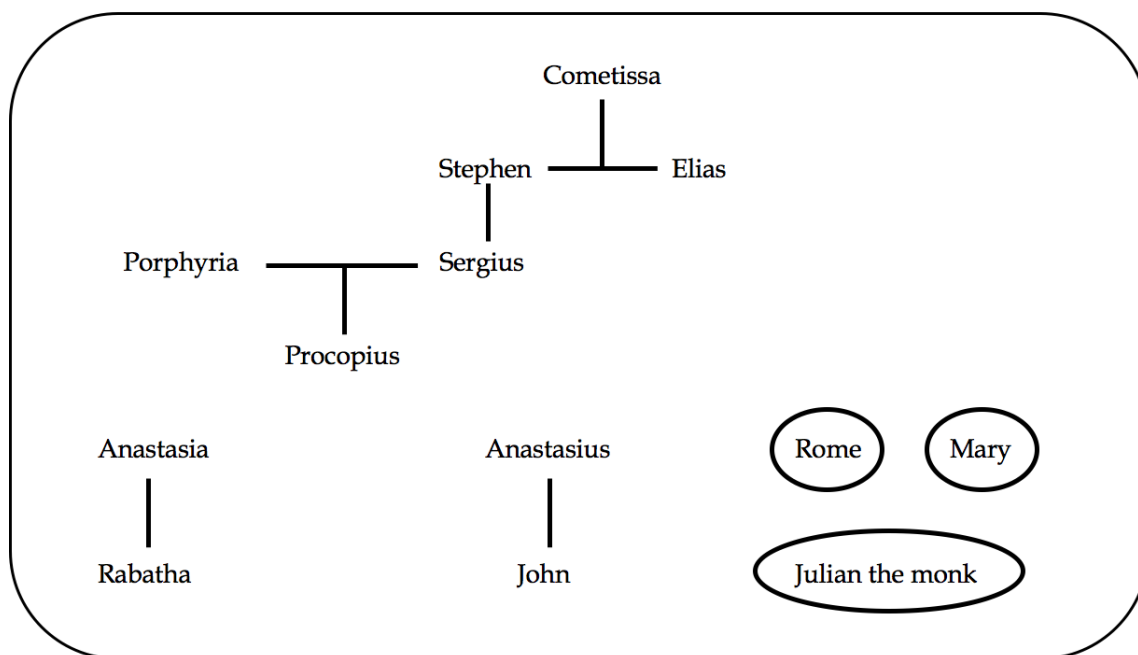


Figure 5.30: Family relationships surrounding Cometissa (by author).

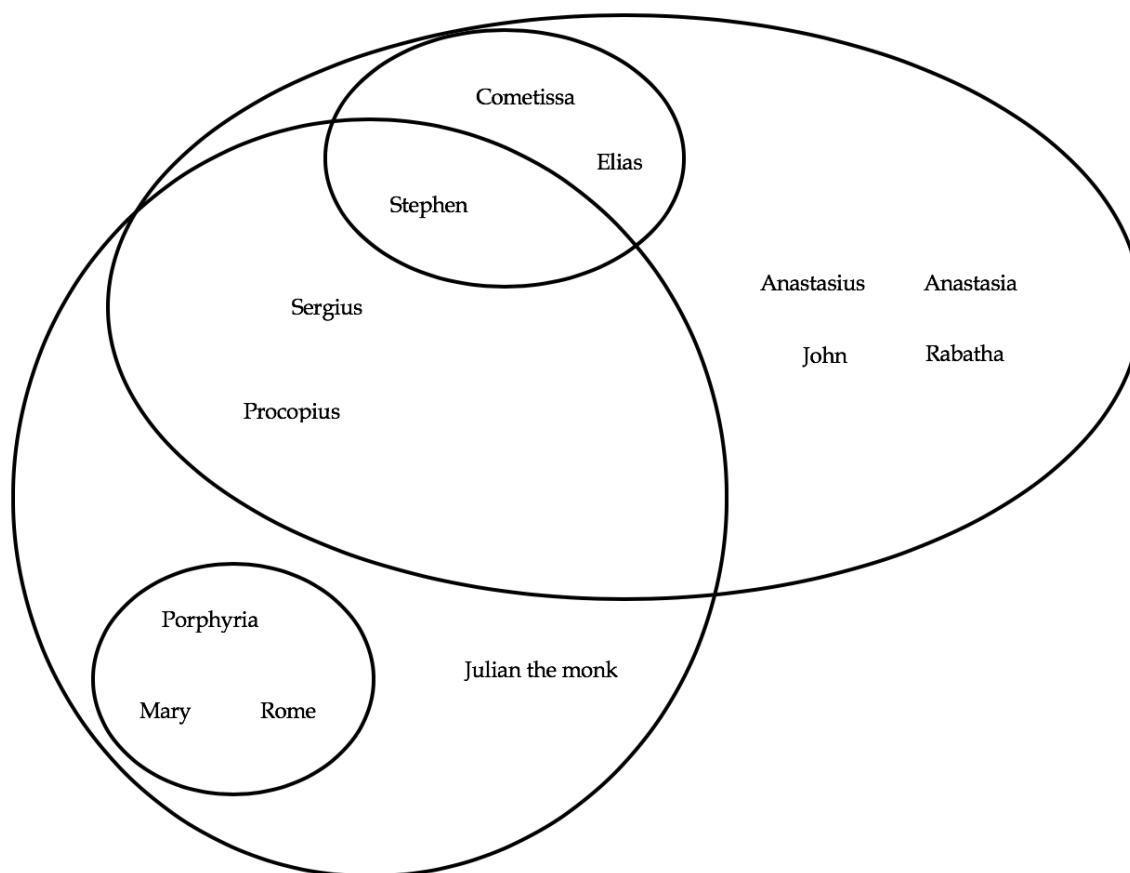


Figure 5.31: Summary of how individuals in Cometissa's family are connected through inscriptions (by author).



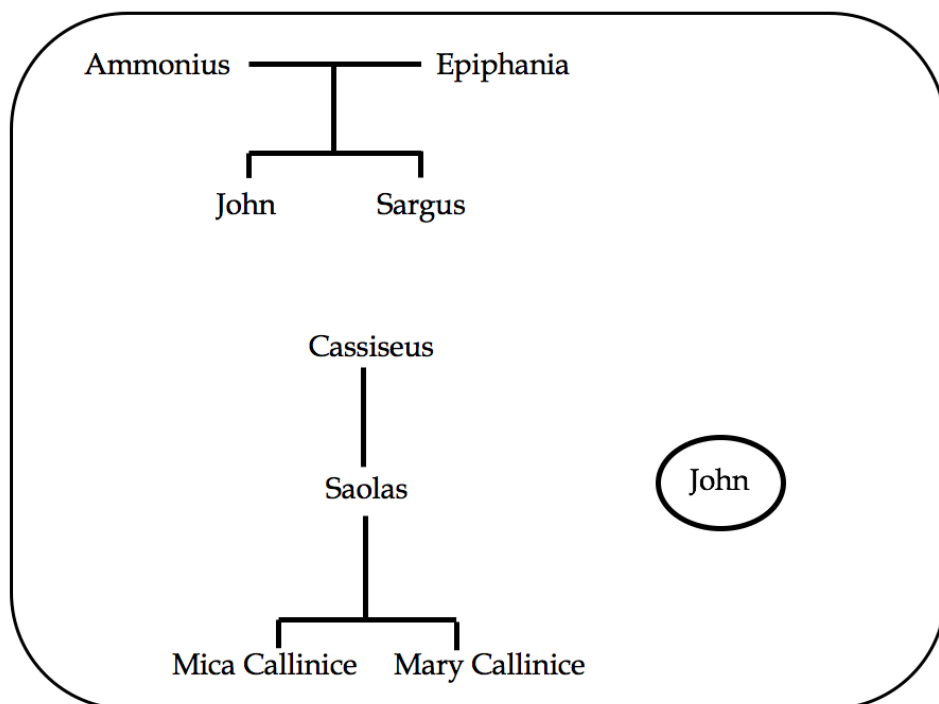


Figure 5.32: Family relationships surrounding Ammonius (by author).

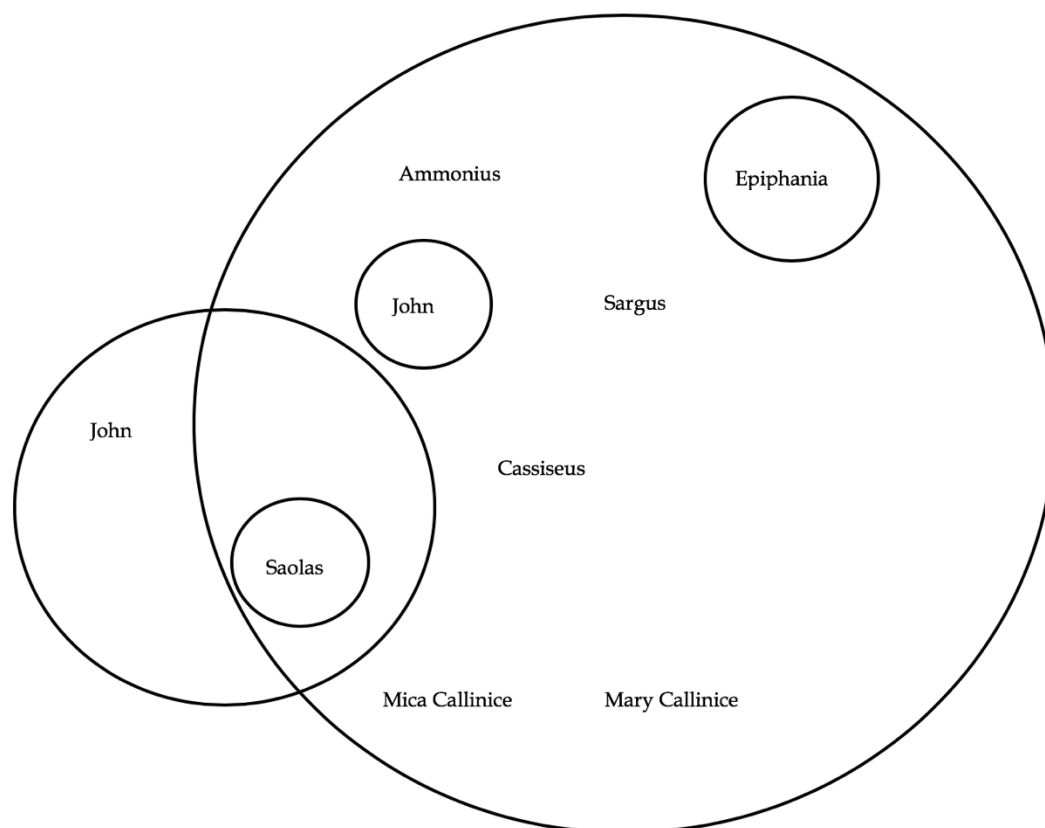


Figure 5.33: Summary of how individuals in Ammonius' family are connected through inscriptions (by author).

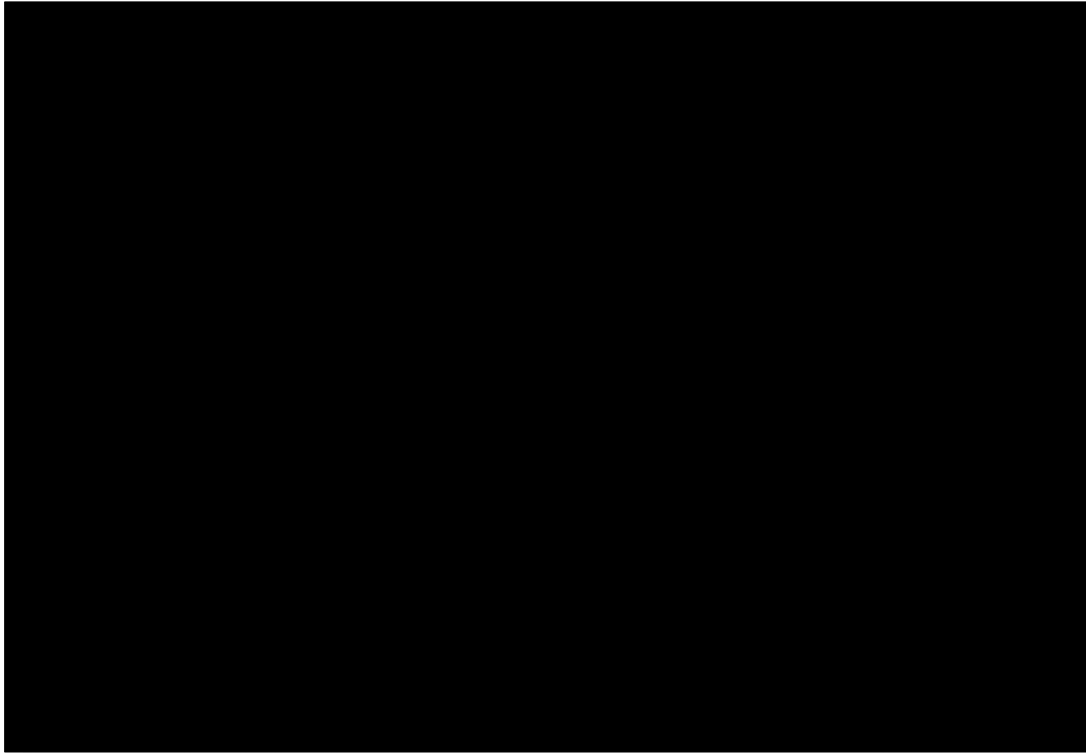


Figure 5.34: Restoration drawing of the frescoes from the church representing the life of Saint Menas, Jeme. Elizabeth and her daughter at the bottom right (Wilber 1940, Fig 1).

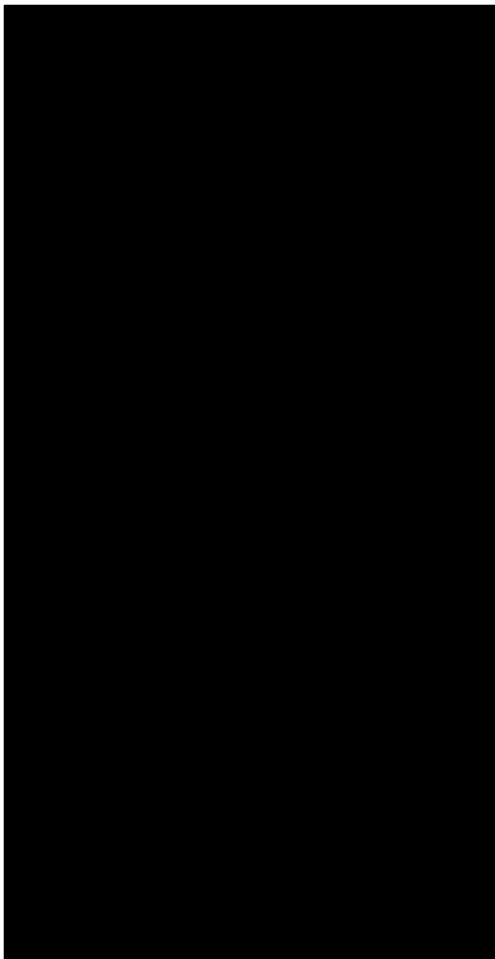


Figure 5.35: Copy of the surviving parts of the fresco showing Elizabeth and her daughter, Jeme (after Edgerton 1937, Plate 98).



Figure 5.36: Wall-hanging of Hethyme, Antinoopolis (public image, Princeton Index of Medieval Art).

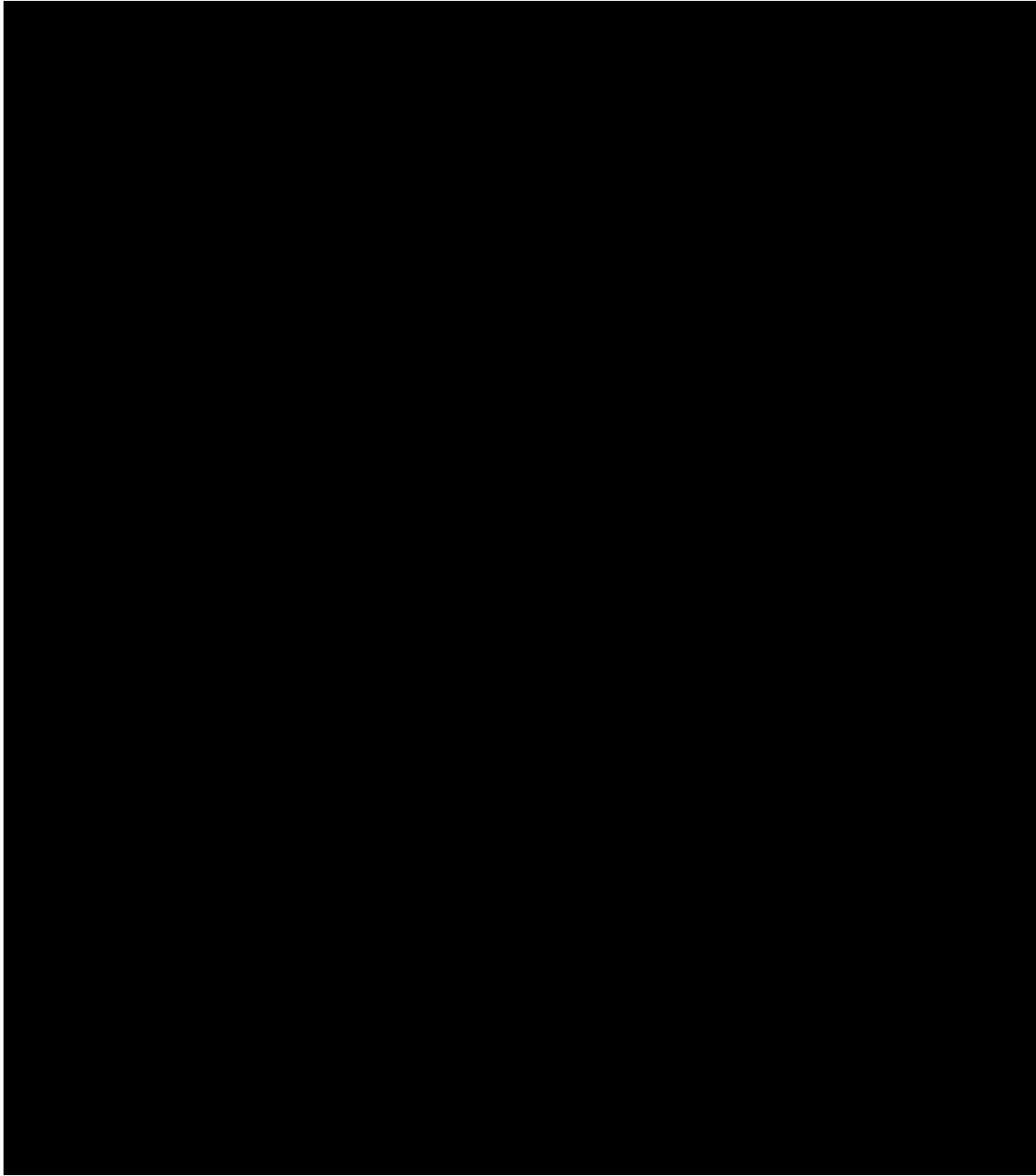


Figure 5.37: Line drawing of the recto of the votive cross of Theodote (Coquin et al. 1989, line drawing of Plate VIII).

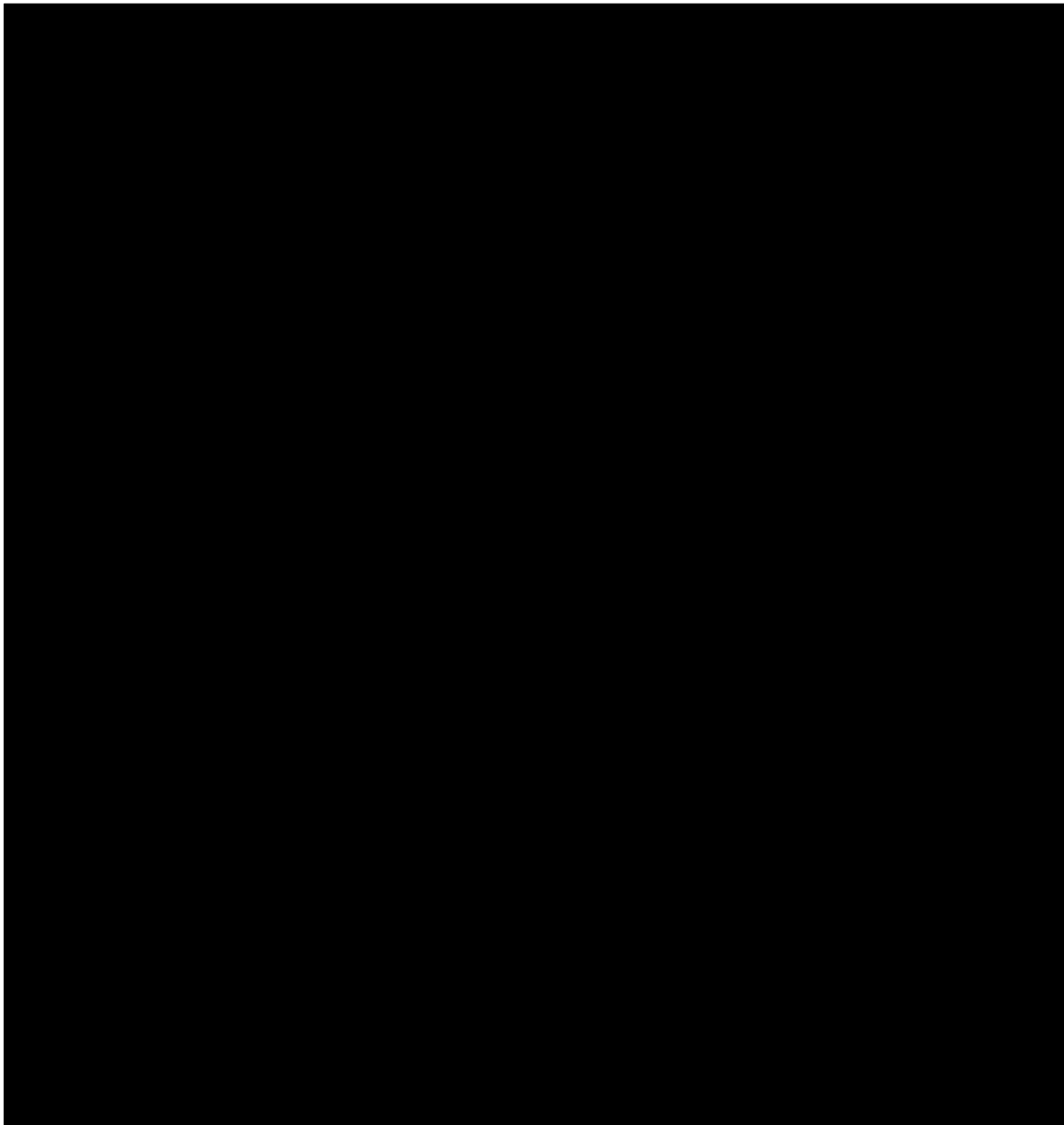


Figure 5.38: Line drawing of the verso of the votive cross of Theodote (Coquin et al. 1989, line drawing of Plate IX).