CONVERSION, SALVATION, TRANSFIGURATION AND TRIUMPH: THE MOSAIC PROGRAM OF TOMB M IN THE VATICAN NECROPOLIS

by

Carol Jean Mealer

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of

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in

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DEDICATION

For Erin, who has lived a beautiful life, inspiring love in those around her.

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VITA, CAROL JEAN MEALER

Carol Jean Mealer was born in Plainfield, New Jersey and is one of the nine children of Kevin Patrick and Regina Marie Walsh. She moved to Southern California when she was seven years old and grew up in Pasadena, California. At the age of fifteen, Carol studied art and architecture in Europe visiting Italy, Greece, (then) Yugoslavia, Austria, France and England. Her interest in this never waned as she pursued a business career for over thirty years. Those years included the jobs of Practice Manager at SW Montana Plastic Surgery (1990-2016) managing an accredited outpatient surgery, Project Manager at Walsh Medical Arts Center (1986-1990) overseeing the design, finance, leasing and construction of a 60,000-square foot medical office building, and Owner of Medical Arts Pharmacy (1990-1996) overseeing the building and development of a compounding pharmacy.

While living in Bozeman, Montana, Carol had the opportunity to study at Montana State University's School of Art. She achieved an undergraduate degree in Art History, with a Museum Studies minor, in 2019. She continued on to complete a Master of Arts in Art History in 2022. She maintained an average GPA of 3.95. Courses related to these degrees included 2-D Foundations, 3-D Foundations, American Indian Art and Symbols, Textiles, Film History, Toy Making and Puppets, Art of World Civilization, Medieval Art of Spain, High Renaissance Art and Mannerism, 19th Century Art, History of Decorative Arts, Survey of Ancient Art, Ancient Art of Mesoamerica, Roman/Etruscan/Greek Art (in Italy), Greek Art and Architecture, New York Field Study in Contemporary Art, Gender and Sexuality in Art, Museum Practices, Museum History, and Leisure and Luxury in Oplontis (a Roman maritime villa), Asian Art and Architecture, Medieval Art and Architecture, Pedagogy, Contemporary Art of the West, Public History, Italian for Research and Writing, Methods, and Roman Religion. Carol also joined the School of Art's Semester in Italy taking her throughout the mainland and to Sicily.

During this time, Carol founded Campania Travel Club and has taken four different groups on trips to Italy, mostly in the Lazio and Campania regions. She was also awarded the Yellowstone Theological Institute's Fellowship (2020-2021) which supported a two-month stay in Rome to study. Other awards and memberships include MSU Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society (2019), MSU Award for Excellence, School of Art (2018), Honor Society member, and Archaeological Institute of America member. Languages spoken include French (intermediate), Spanish (intermediate), and Italian (beginner). When MSU's School of Art hosted the exhibition *Leisure and Luxury in the Time of Nero: The Villas of Oplontis Near Pompeii,* Carol was named Community Liaison to the Exhibition for the Museum of the Rockies and wrote "Ancient Roman History Travels West to the Museum of the Rockies," published by the Montana Historian in 2016.

Carol's volunteer work includes Coordinator and Fundraiser for MSU School of Art's Semester in Italy (2018-2019), Board Member of the Bozeman Symphony Orchestra for 10 years, serving as its president for 4 years (2002-2012), Board Member, Dorland Mountain Arts Colony in California (1988-1994), Chair, American Cancer Society Courage Award Gala (1991). Carol enjoys traveling, symphonic music, opera, tennis, hiking, jogging and painting. She is widowed and has a son and daughter-in-law in Portland, Oregon. Her goal is to teach art history with an emphasis on early Christian art in the Roman Empire.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

Introduction to the Topography and setting of Tomb M: The Excavations 7

2. THE RELIGIOUS AND FUNERARY CUSTOMS OF THE ROMANS 13

Roman Religion 14
Roman Funerary Customs 16
The Rise of Christianity 23
Sol Invictus 26
Comparanda 29

3. TOMB M EXCAVATED 33

Sacred Space and Iconography 39
Comparanda 42

4. ROMAN WALL AND VAULT MOSAIC PRODUCTION 46

The History of Roman Wall and Vault Mosaics 51
The Economics of Mosaic Making 59
Gold *Tesserae* with Dye and With Foil 60
Comparanda 63

5. CONCLUSION 69

REFERENCES CITED 71

APPENDICES 77

APPENDIX A: Arch Room area 78
APPENDIX B: Mosaic v. Fresco 79

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. *Drawing of the circus of Nero.* Drawing: Pietro Santi Bartoli 1699 10

2. *The necropolis beneath St. Peter's.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro 11

3. *Isola Sacra Tomb 78* 18

4. *Limestone relief of Roman funerary procession with praefiae.* Photo: Amiternum.......20

5. *Banquet couches outside a tomb at Isola Sacra.* Photo: Regina Gee............................22

6. *Tomb of the Valerii.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro.................................31

7. *Isola Sacra street.* Photo: Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica.....................................32

8. *The Vatican necropolis street.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro.................34

9. *Tomb M with view towards north wall.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro .37

10. *Tomb M vault showing vines.* Photo: WikiCommons 38

11. *Colossus statue of Nero* 39

12. *The catacombs of St. Callixtus.* Photo: catacombesancalisto.it 44

13. *Early Christian sarcophagus in Sta. Maria Antigua.* Photo by author. 45

14. *Fragment of tombstone showing mosaicist* 49

15. *Vine detail of Tomb M mosaic.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro 50

16. *Alexander mosaic.* Photo by author..51

17. *Closeup of duck mosaic.* Photo by author 54

18. *Nymphaeum mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite.* Photo by author..............................66

19. *Tunisian mosaic of Dionysus riding in triumph.* Photo: WikiCommons.......................67

20. *Mosaic vault at Sta. Costanza.* Photos by author...

GLOSSARY

arcosolia	arched recesses used for inhumations.
Charon's Obol	term for the coin placed on the mouth of the deceased.
Chi-Rho	one of the earliest forms of Christogram.
chthonic	belonging to or inhabiting the underworld.
cinerarium	a place where the ashes of the cremated are kept.
cursus honorum	an epigraph of the deceased's achievements.
cubicula	a small room, typically a bedroom, in a Roman house.
dis manibus	found on Roman tombs it means "to the spirits of the dead."
divi filius	referring to the "son of a god."
Feralia	ancient Roman public festival celebrating the Manes. (Feb 21st).
giornata	refers to an artist's (frescoist/mosaicist) workday completions.
haruspicy	the study and divination by use of animal entrails.
ichthus	an image of a fish used as a symbol of Christianity.
in situ	situated in its original place.
lararium	a shrine to the guardian spirits in a Roman house.
lares	the guardian deities in ancient Roman religion.
liberti	slaves, in ancient Roman times, who had been freed.
manes	in ancient Roman times, the souls of dead ancestors.
olle cinerae	cremation ash urns.
opus musivium	mosaic decoration of walls.
opus quadratum	ancient Roman construction of square blocks of stone set parallel.
opus reticulatum	ancient Roman construction using pyramid-shaped tuff.
opus tessellatum	mosaic technique using *tesserae* larger than 4mm.
opus vermiculatum	mosaic technique emphasizing outline and shadow.
pantokrator	a depiction of Christ as ruler of all.
Parentalia	a 9-day Roman festival honoring family ancestors (Feb 13th).
penates	Roman household gods, worshipped with Vesta and the *lares*.
pozzetti per libagioni	Roman libation wells used to pour wine to the deceased.
prefiguration	a representation of something, used to suggest Christ's agony.
quadriga	a Roman chariot drawn by four horses abreast.
refrigeria	meaning "refreshment," a Roman graveside commemorative meal.
superstitio	improper Roman religious observance, excessive or illicit.
synopia	a monochrome preparatory drawing in mortar to guide *tesserae* design.
tablinum	room in a Roman house, back of the atrium, used to conduct business.
terminus ad quem	the point at which something ends or finishes.
terminus post quem	the earliest possible date for something.
tesserae	tiles, usually square, used in creating a mosaic.
thiosos	the retinue of the god Dionysus.
titulus	the plaque describing the owner and the deceased of a tomb.
triclinium	the dining room in a Roman house.
tropaion	meaning "trophy," a monument erected to commemorate a victory.

ABSTRACT

Within the second-and-third-century Roman tombs of the Vatican Necropolis, the monument with the modern name Tomb M (of the Julii*)* has become famous for its interior decorative program of wall and vault mosaics featuring some of the earliest known Christian imagery executed in the medium. The smallest of the 23 tombs excavated beneath St. Peter's basilica, this decorative program, combined with the tomb typology, date of construction and, perhaps above all, location offers a unique opportunity to examine the convergence of Roman funerary cult, with its emphasis on ancestor worship and the Christian cult, which in this context has strong soteriological and eschatological context. The sights, sounds, smells, flavors, and textures around Tomb M intuit its experience.

Tomb M was experienced as a Roman tomb and, subsequently, as a Roman Christian tomb. Its small size, approximately six feet by six feet, make it impossible to have a familial celebration of the dead within, celebrations which were part of the Roman calendar. This could only have occurred outside the tomb on the small street, where many celebrations were going on around. While many of the excavated tombs in the Vatican necropolis have mosaic pavements, Tomb M is the only one with wall and vault mosaics. Very little is written about the tomb being strictly Roman. Most scholars believe that the image of Jonah (which represents transfiguration) make the other three mosaic images - that of the fisherman (which represents conversion), the good shepherd (which represents salvation) and *Sol Invictus* (which represents triumph) - distinctly Christian. Mosaic wall and vault decoration is much more expensive than fresco wall and vault mosaic. Also, it takes much more time to create a mosaic. The choice of *tesserae*, made of glass with gold foil, is quite unusual for its time. (Gold *tesserae* backgrounds on mosaics didn't become popular until the Byzantine era in the fifth century). The owners of Tomb M, in deciding on its redecoration in the mid-third century CE, made extraordinary choices in theme, design, time and costs. The evidence suggests that they did so as a social comment as well as a religious statement.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Although it would be nearly two decades before he died, in the late 1930s Pope Pius XII declared he wished to be buried near the grave of the Apostle Peter in the Vatican necropolis. Within months of commencing work on the Vatican grotto in 1940 to accommodate that wish, and while Pius XII wrestled with more earthly complications during the outbreak of WWII, workmen dug into what appeared to be the traces of the top of a walled enclosure. Further excavations done during the decade of 1940-1950 led to the discovery of a row of tombs that dated to the middle of the second century CE. The excavators were dazzled by the gorgeous decorations found in all of the tombs. Twenty-three were excavated before further exploration was ceased due to the potential structural compromise to the existing piazza above. Within the second-and-third-century Roman tombs of the Vatican Necropolis, the monument with the modern name Tomb M (of the Julii) has become famous for its interior decorative program of wall and vault mosaics featuring some of the earliest known Christian imagery executed in the medium. The smallest of the 23 tombs excavated beneath St. Peter's basilica, this decorative program, combined with the tomb typology, date of construction and, perhaps above all, location offers a unique opportunity to examine the convergence of Roman funerary cult, with its emphasis on ancestor worship and the Christian cult, which in this context has strong soteriological and eschatological context.

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Sol Invictus (which represents triumph) - distinctly Christian. Mosaic wall and vault decoration is much more expensive than fresco wall and vault mosaic. The owners of Tomb M, in deciding on its redecoration in the mid-third century CE, made extraordinary choices in theme, design, time and costs. The evidence suggests that they did so as a social comment as well as a religious statement.

Tomb M (of the Julii*)* was originally dedicated to a child, the builders placed it to fit in a passageway between Tomb L and Tomb N, using their existing walls.[1] What Tomb M might lack in size was more than made up for by its impressive decorative qualities and its location near the Circus of Nero and St. Peter's tomb. Originally constructed in the mid- to late-second century CE, the tomb underwent a significant redecoration which included stunning, glowing gold-background wall and vault mosaics, making Tomb M exceptional. The other similarly constructed tombs in the Vatican necropolis are beautifully decorated also, but with brightly frescoed walls and black and white mosaic pavements. Of the surviving tombs, Tomb M is only one to have wall and vault mosaics. This type of mosaic is only later seen in churches of the Byzantine Style. Tomb M is also a unique funerary space not because of the iconography but because of the combination of subject matter clearly identified as a Christian program. It is the only one to survive in tombs from this period and is the only tomb in the Vatican necropolis with explicitly Christian themes. The iconography features the oldest known mosaic discovered with a Christian theme, including the earliest known mosaic depiction of *Christ-Helios,* the use of the

[1] Mielsch, Harald and Von Hessberg, Henner.*Die heidnische nekropole unter St. Peter in Rom.* Rome: Atti della Pontifica Accademia Romana di Archeologia. 1986. From the original excavations, this work from archaeologists Mielsch and Von Hessberg provided an alphabetical identification system for all of the tombs excavated.

Roman sun god iconography to show Christ in triumph over the world. This mosaic was set into the tomb of the Julii a full one-half century before Christological imagery regularly incorporated the visual language of the solar or cosmic ruler. Finally, in the Roman world, wall and vault mosaics were not uncommon. They were, however, found only in the *domus* as nymphaeum or other water features. This paper combines evidence from archaeological records and social art historical analysis to analyze Tomb M in light of its topography, patronage, and function as it relates to the ritual visitation.

Tomb M's experience of visiting has particular importance as it is framed by the tension of proximity to the burial site of St. Peter and the awe-inspiring impact of its transformative material. Particularly worthy of a closer look includes the consideration of archaeology, art history, theology and Roman history to describe Tomb M in relation to its location, who owned it, its use, and the underlying eschatology informing its decorative program.[2] [3] Phenomenological analysis includes the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of *refrigeria* in and around Tomb M. As the interior reveals, the space is small. Its decoration provides a powerful, intimate environment

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[2] As became commonly known in the Constantinian era, St. Peter, also known as Peter the Apostle, was the first pope and his papacy spanned over 30 years. He died as a Christian martyr in the hands of Emperor Nero, crucified upside down on the *spina* of the Circus of Gaius and Nero AD 64-68. It is believed that his remains, which his followers received, were interred on the Vatican hill. The site became a sacred pilgrimage site for Christians. The remains were put in a communal burial ground outside the *pomerian*, or city limits, and next to a row of chamber tombs. In and around the graffiti wall near the site were over twenty references to St. Peter, including the words "*Petr[os] en(i)I or "*Peter is here within."

[3] For the purposes of this paper there are two terms which require clarification. First, often scholars will discuss the pagan and Christian religions of Ancient Rome. During this time (Pre-Constantinian), Christianity was just another fringe cult, like the cult of Cybele or Mithras or Sol Invictus. The word pagan had no reason to exist. Therefore, unless quoting, the term pagan will not be used. Second, sometimes scholars will use the term mausoleum when discussing the Vatican necropolis. The structures were "momentum" and not mausolea. The term "tomb" will be used in describing the structures.

in which to celebrate ones' ancestors. As a re-decorated Roman tomb in the late third century CE, its design and use show a participation in the nascent Christian cult. The relationship between the emergence of martyr cults in Rome, specifically the Petrine cult, and the continuation of the Roman cult and Christian cult ancestor veneration are underlying themes to understanding these practices. Tomb M creates a unique position to explore eschatological, religious, and topographical elements in the choice of place of decoration.

Tomb M's location puts it in direct proximity to the Circus of Nero and to the burial site of St. Peter. The circus was the symbol of the solar cosmic cycle. It was also thought to be the site of the martyrdom of Peter. This links the histories of the circus, ancestor cult practices and martyr cult (which did not exist yet) through this imagery, already found in funerary art. The understanding of the circus as Roman sacred space presents a strong background to understand the funerary culture on Vatican hill. Cultic spaces were capable of material mediation of the religious experience and with, "Christians taking up pre-existing religious attitudes evidenced in minor objects would also likely share similar views regarding sacral status of cultic places as their social counterparts."[4]

Chapter Two will look at Tomb M as a Roman above-ground chamber or "house" tomb and as a Roman Christian funerary space and its use as such. We know that the religious life of ordinary Romans entailed ancestor worship and seasonal funerary rituals. While burials were necessarily restricted by law to be situated outside the city boundaries, Romans saw nothing

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[4] Hadley, James Thomas. "Early Christian Perceptions of Sacred Space." *Revue de la culture materielle.* 2014. 89-106.

wrong with burials near where survivors dwelt or sought amusement.[5] As individuals who were culturally Roman, Christians often continued the essential Roman funerary practices within their own funerary spaces. The historical memory of the persecutions by Nero at the circus was relegated to those historians but the cultural memory of the persecutions was very much a part of Christianity and really important to Tomb M, as it defines early Christian identity.[6] The owners used this to their own purposes. Chapter Two will explore how Tomb M was experienced in accordance with prevailing religious beliefs the third century CE.

Chapter Three will systematically describe the construction and décor of tomb M by moving from the outside in. As part of its overall impression and reception, the exterior of brick, with travertine jambs and sills, shows off the tomb owner's status to the other tomb owners, who are attempting to do the same. As the tomb is entered, a transfiguring vision engulfs the visitor in the design, materials and subject matter. About the subject matter, the description includes a wall to wall discussion of the imagery of the fisherman (conversion), the good shepherd (salvation), and Jonah (prefiguration). The vault is in a category of its own and must be described as such, in light of the non-Christian, incredibly popular *Sol Invictus.* Emperor Aurelian (270-275CE) made *Sol Invictus* the supreme deity of the Roman pantheon of gods and built a temple to the god. The

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[5] Guarducci, Margherita. *The Tomb of St. Peter.* Hawthorne Books. 1960. Chapter III.

[6] From the beginning of the Empire to the reign of Constantine, the persecution of Christians was sporadic. Most often, Christianity was tolerated. One of the biggest conflicts was the refusal to honor Rome's pantheon of gods. Romans believed that sacrificing to the gods brought them protection and prosperity. Christians, being monotheistic, refused to oblige, as did others. The most noted times of persecution were during the time of Nero (54-68CE) and the time of Diocletian (284-305CE), approximately 200 years before and 40 years after the redecoration of Tomb M. The triumph as the Christian martyr and the status of martyrdom as a part of persecution did not become a story for Christians about Christians until the fourth century.

vibrantly colored vine motif, that knits the composition together, shows a melding of all the images into one theme. The description of Tomb M includes the decoration, state of preservations, the socles, the pavement (now destroyed), and the mosaic program, along with dates and sources. The space gave visitors with ties to the deceased a temporal and experiential viewing experience.

Early Christian art was integral in establishing sacral perceptions within Christian space. In the catacombs the burials of the Christian dead, martyrs and biblical salvic images evoked a deep sense of the sacred. The syncretic means by which Christianity spread its message is seen in the four mosaic scenes within Tomb M. The early Christian art of Tomb M will be compared to contemporaneous works: the catacombs of St. Callixtus and a sarcophagus in Santa Maria Antigua, other funerary religious spaces in Rome.

Chapter Four looks at mosaics in the Roman world as a popular and permanent surface decoration category. Areas of study methods for exploring mosaics include material, technology, fabrication, cost, labor, along with value and prestige. Important evidence in the primary source of Diocletion to aid in this is used. Describing early Roman mosaics includes describing the social and religious purposes that inspired them. Mosaic making was a costly architectural embellishment and Tomb M's decorative program is a mosaic program not otherwise found in the Vatican necropolis. Tomb M's owner made extraordinary choices both in imagery and choice of medium, choices that were also distinguished by great expense. Focus on the most influential subcategory, which is wall and vault mosaics, is made as Roman's placed an emphasis on garden nymphaea with water features. These colorful garden settings created a private and luxurious paradise, delighting the senses. Context, phenomenology, the history of viewing plus study of

expense and value helps us understand the reference to paradise in Tomb M through the prestige and value of the gold background. Comparison of the experiential aspects of the use of mosaics is shown in nymphaea of the time, a North African mosaic and in a mausoleum in Rome of a somewhat later date.

Introduction to the Topography and Setting of Tomb M:
The Vatican Necropolis Excavations

When the Vatican necropolis was built, most burials were cremations. There were chamber tombs (*cella),* enclosure and chamber tombs and vault tombs. The majority of the tombs in the Vatican necropolis had *arcasolia* to allow for the *olle cinerare,* the funerary urns used after cremation. Death and ritual in the selection of individual elements of a tomb, and their position within the larger whole, gave a general context to the monument itself. Vitruvius stated that "tomb design tends to conform with local practices."[7] The tombs of the Vatican necropolis were once a part of an open-air Roman cemetery. Built originally as trans-Tiber tombs along the Via Cornelia, outside the city walls, it was "only in the second century AD, when space was no longer available in the vicinity of the bridge and along the Via Cornelia, that the tombs of the necropolis started to occupy the slopes of the hill, lining up north of the Circus."[8] [9] The name "Vatican" comes from the Latin *Vaticanus.* The Vatican area was partly a hill and partly a plain. The term is probably Etruscan, and the Christian church co-opted the name because of the

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[7] Ulrich, Roger B. and Quenemoen, Caroline K. "Funerary Cult and Architecture." *A Companion to Roman Architecture.* West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell. 2013. 267-279.
[8] Liverani, Paolo and Spinola, Giandomenico. *The Vatican Necropoles.* Milan: Editorale Jaca Book SpA. 2010. 42.
[9] At the time of the reign of Nero (AD 54-68), the south slope of the Vatican hill continued all the way down to the outer limit of the Circus. There were no tombs yet, only in the area east, closer to the *Pons Neronianus* or further south between the Circus and the Via Cornelia.

location of St. Peter's Basilica. The terrain was covered with permeable rocks and was by nature somewhat uninhabitable. Tacitus, speaking of the army of Emperor Vitellius which had been slaughtered there in 69CE, called the Vatican region unhealthy, or "*inamibus Vaticani locis.*"[10] Pliny the Elder stated that there were snakes there of such enormous size that they could swallow a baby whole.[11] Aggripina the Elder, wife of Emperor Germanicus, planted gardens there. The area ultimately became known as the *horti Neronis,* the gardens of Nero. The streets built were the Via Cornelia, the Via Aurelia and the Via Triumphalis. The most noteworthy structure built on the Vatican plain was the circus *Gai et Neronis.* It was built by Emperor Gaius (Caligula), who reigned between 37-41CE. It was later improved by Emperor Nero, who reigned between 54-68CE. Nero used it, often showing off his abilities as a charioteer. It is this same arena where, it is believed, the martyrdom of the Apostle Peter took place. The Egyptian obelisk that stood on the *spina* remained there until 1586 when Pope Sixtus V had it transferred to the plaza in front of St. Peter's Basilica by architect Domenico Fontana. He marked the original site with a stone inscribed "SITO DELL'OBELISCO VATICANO FINO ALL'ANNO MDLXXXVI." The site is still marked today. While there is no evidence that there was ongoing use of the circus after the time of Nero, archaeological investigation has found some remains of the circus, including the *carceres* and walls (in *opus quadratum* and *opus reticulatum).* Other elements of the circus are

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[10] Guarducci. *The Tomb.* 8.

[11] Pliny the Elder (23-79CE) was a Roman naturalist, writer and a friend of emperor Vespasian. He wrote the voluminous *Naturalis Historia*. He died in 79CE on the beach in Stabiae, attempting to rescue friends from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

not known perhaps because it consisted largely of wooden bleachers and garden works.[12] While there is no mention of the circus in the Middle Ages, walls excavated in 1776 and in 1847 are attributed to the circus. Many scholars believe that the circus was abandoned at the time of the redecoration of Tomb M. Regina Gee disagrees. She argues that "in the period from the reign of Claudius to that of Constantine, it is possible to track a break in the discourse of charismatic power associated with the circus and its surrounding area. There was a shift from the imperial affirmation of status to an ultimately victorious Christian construction of identity."[13] In fact, altars to the cult of Cybele (Magna Mater) were found in the area of the circus. The significance of the circus and the Vatican hill can be seen on the *titulus* of Tomb A in the Vatican Necropolis, which is still in place. It bears the inscription of a Popilius Heracla who had a specific request to be buried "IN VATIC. AD CIRCUM."[14] [15]

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[12] Castagnoli, Ferdinando. *Il Vaticano Nell' Antichitá Classica*. 6. Vol. 6. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1992. 57-64.

[13] Gee, Regina. "Cult and Circus in Vaticanum." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome.* Volume LVI/LVII. 2011/2012. 63-83.

[14] About 70 years following the redecoration of Tomb M, the rise in martyrium inspired Constantine the Great to construct circus basilicas above the relics of the martyrs. The construction and use of these church buildings sheds light on the connected performative aspects of circus and martyrium on the Vatican hill.

[15] The Constantinian age is the pivotal point at which Classical antiquity began to segue into the Christian world of the Middle Ages. In building the first churches, Constantine and other Christian benefactors adapted the traditional basilica to a new religious function. During the early Fourth Century, six basilicas were constructed outside the Aurelian walls on the major arteries leading to Rome. These were San Sabastiano on the Via Appia, SS. Marcellino e Pietro on the Via Labricana, the anonymous basilica on the Via Praenestina, San Marco (Pope St. Mark) on the Via Ardeatina, San Lorenzo on the Via Tiburtina, and Sant' Agnese on the Via Nomentana. They may range in date from the Constantinian period up to the late fourth century and even into the fifth century.[15] These structures were built in proximity to catacombs, cemeteries and mausolea, either on top or adjacent to them. What set these basilicas apart from other basilicas was their large, continuous apse that formed a U-Shape and their canted facades. In essence, they took the shape of the Roman circus. These unique shapes "all had a close connection to martyrs and all were shaped like a racetrack."[15] It appears that these basilicas were built to accommodate movement, perhaps processions, as a function within sacred space.

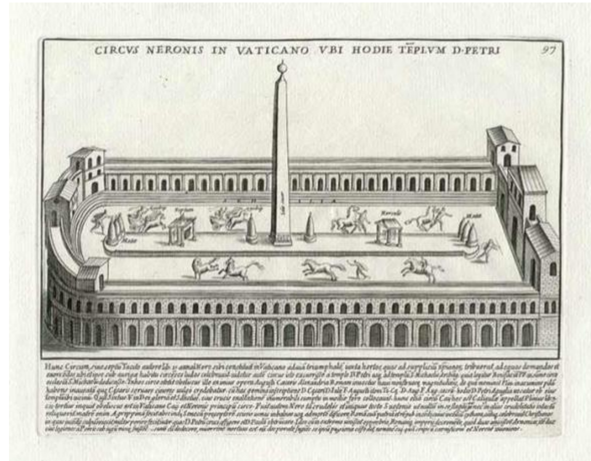

Figure 1. Drawing of *Circus of Nero.* (Pietro Santi Bartoli, 1699)

The necropolis was used until the fourth century when Emperor Constantine began construction of the first St. Peter's Basilica above the site widely claimed to be the apostle's grave on the Vatican hill. In order to make a level foundation to support the new basilica, the tombs roofs were removed and the tombs were backfilled with dirt. Constantine stipulated that the level of the pavement should be even with the level of the Trophy of Gaius.[16] This backfilling gives the Vatican necropolis a *terminus ad quem* of 322CE. In his writings, Pietro Zander describes this by saying that "the sun no longer bathed the tombs and alleyways."[17]

Tomb M was discovered during the Renaissance when a portico was built in front of the altar of Pope Sixtus I. At that time, workmen broke through the floor, discovering a tomb with walls of faux marble socles with upper parts and the vault decorated entirely in mosaic. Tibero

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[16] The excavations surrounding the papal altar revealed an open courtyard among the tombs. This became known as "Campo P." Although compromised by the Baroque bronze baldachin designed by Bernini, a plaster wall was found which had an aedicula. This structure became known as the Trophy of Gauis. Based on brick stamps, it is believed to date to about 160CE.
[17] Liverani. Chapter Five.

Alfarano reported that "a beautiful tomb was found…all in ancient mosaics with figures that looked like horses, one would think it belonged to a nobleman."[18] On that occasion, Alfarano considered the tomb "a thing of gentiles," due to the *titulus,* then *in situ.* This was Tomb M (of the Julii). The necropolis tombs then remained untouched for four centuries until the excavations that occurred during the years 1940-1950 beneath the basilica. Under the leadership of Monsignor Ludovic Kaas along with Professors Josi and Apolloni-Ghetti and the Jesuits Kirschbaum and Ferrua, the excavators deduced that the structures at the end of the street had been built in the middle of the second century. "There is no evidence for a precise, absolute dating of any of the mausolea; but on general grounds there can be no doubt that most, if not all, of them were built between about the year 125CE and the end of the second century.[19] In tomb N, in a *cinerarium,* was found a silver coin in a re-used tomb which establishes the existence of tombs in the Vatican necropolis prior to the time of Emperor Trajan (98-117 CE).

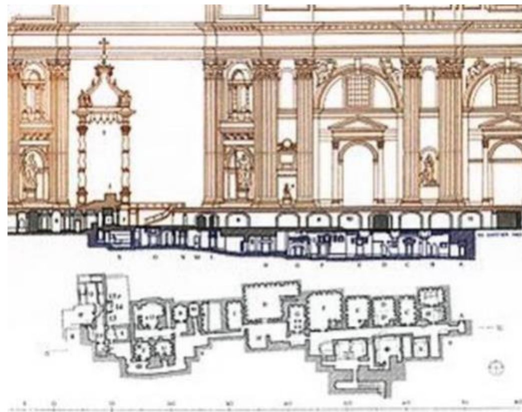

Figure 2. *Necropolis Beneath St. Peter's.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro

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[18] Liverani. 114.
[19] Toynbee, Jocelyn and Perkins, John Ward. *The Shrine of Saint Peter.* London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1956. 30.

The tombs were somewhat preserved by the early fourth century backfilling (*la terra del reimpimento Constantiniano)* of the site to create a foundation for the original St. Peter's Basilica. The method of the site's destruction resulted in its preservation. Some of the tombs were simple in their construction but all were sumptuously decorated with frescoes, statuary and, one (other than in their pavements) was decorated with mosaics, Tomb M. Of the tombs and the area surrounding St. Peter's *tropaion*, most allowed for *cineraria.* Tombs F, H, M, R and the graffiti wall by the *tropaion* have Christian iconography. Tomb M is one of them. Tomb F, the first of the tombs discovered in 1939, has Christian symbolism in a woman drawing water from a well, two doves with an olive branch and the words "*dormit in pace."* The deceased is a young Christian woman, Emilia Gorgonia, who was eulogized by her husband. In Tomb H, a wall of stone tablets is inscribed with the *Chi-Rho* monogram in the upper right-hand corner, an unmistakably Christian symbol. This tomb, the largest of the Vatican Necropolis, has inhumations identified as Christian burials. Tomb R has a sarcophagus flanked with figures of Peter and Paul. The Graffiti Wall shows references to the Apostle Peter.[20] Tomb M was experienced as a Roman tomb and, subsequently, a Roman Christian tomb. Roman religious and funerary customs guided the design, decoration and use of the tombs in the Vatican Necropolis.

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[20] Thacker, Alan. *The Cult of Peter and the Development of Martyr Cult in Rome. The Origins of the Presentation of Peter and Paul as Martyrs.* The Early Reception and Appropriation of the Apostle Peter (60-800CE): The Anchors of the Fisherman. 2020. Chapter 13.

CHAPTER TWO

THE RELIGIOUS AND FUNERARY CUSTOMS OF THE ROMANS

Tomb M's location puts it in direct proximity to the Circus of Nero and to the burial site of St. Peter. The circus was the symbol of the solar cosmic cycle. It was also thought to be the site of the martyrdom of Peter. This links the histories of the circus, ancestor cult practices and martyr cult (which did not exist yet) through the imagery in Tomb M, already found in funerary art. The understanding of the circus as Roman sacred space presents a strong background to understand the funerary culture on Vatican hill. The small size of Tomb M is such that it did not allow for funerary celebrations within it. At best, it could accommodate one or two visitors at a time. Funerary dining occurred outside the tomb in the open air. The celebrants of the deceased in Tomb M would have certainly felt the otherworldly experience of sitting outside the tomb and dining close to the tomb of St. Peter and beneath the towering obelisk of the Circus of Nero. The cosmic and otherworldly significance of the circus, the martyr and the image of *Christ-Helios* in Tomb M become aligned not only in their close proximity to one another but in their close cosmic imagery (the charioteer Nero's triumph over the games, St. Peter's triumph over his martyrdom on the *spina* of the circus, and *Christ-Helios'* triumph over the cosmos, of which the Circus of Nero was symbolic reference).

In the time of the use of Tomb M, the Roman Empire was a collection of city states that included a number of ethnic groups who spoke a variety of languages. In this amalgam, people understood themselves to be Roman citizens. Through tax collecting, Roman society was a single economic system. The Roman social system supported ownership of slaves, which were considered to be chattel. While slaves had no civil rights, there was a path to citizenship for them

from the Republic (509-27BCE) to Empire (27 BCE – 476CE). They had the prospect of buying their freedom. Freedmen could not, however, hold office. Within the paternalistic Roman society, female status was inferior, but women were protected by law. The entire society was controlled by elite rulers and rhetoricians held the keys to power. To be successful, one had to be an orator – educated and able to speak well. Within this system, a reverence for the gods was essential as it was believed that the gods guided the nature of humans. Roman myths were borne out of these state and local traditions.

Roman Religion

Roman urban settings were not mere backdrops but "active participants in city life."[21] Sacred space almost always indicates ambiguous boundaries, a blur between the sacred and the profane, that makes up the religious experience of a group or society. Cicero wrote about the dramatic associative power of places. "Whether it is a natural instance of mere illusions, I can't say; but one's emotions are more strongly aroused by seeing the places that tradition records to have been the favorite resort of men of note in former days, than by hearing about their deeds or reading their writings."[22]

Rome remained a city characterized by the worship of ancient gods and religion was an integral part of the life of the state. Each city was unique in its religious traditions, using temples and shrines for public ceremonies. Temples had oracles attached to them, who were used as

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[21] Favro, Diane. "The City is a Living Thing: The Performative Role of an Urban Site in Ancient Rome, The Vallis Murcia. *The Art of Ancient Spectacle.* YEAR. 1999. 205-219.

[22] Cicero. *Fin.* 5. 2. Cicero (106-46BCE) was a lawyer and statesman. He is considered one of Rome's greatest orators. He was beheaded by Mark Antony following the death of Julius Caesar.

counselors. The Roman Empire drew on the Greek concept of the divine. Emperor Augustus cultivated this concept by building temples.[23] He himself became a deity, *divi filis.* Some gods in the east became fashionable in the west. Mithras from Turkey and Isis from Egypt are two examples. There were mystery cults that required initiations. The Dionysian room of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii is presumed to be showing just that in its fresco program. Salvation religions were few but became influential as models for the new Christian cult and its sacraments. The practice of Roman religion was more of a cultural obligation that a spiritual desire. In a Roman context, religion and politics cannot be separated since they are linked in ancient Roman thought. The center of Roman religion lay in ritual, not in belief**.** It was what people did that was important, not what they thought.[24]

There were two kinds of distinctions in Roman religion: public and private. Locally, there were traditional cults and religions specific to one's own family. Religion as practiced in the home was a personal affair. It was philosophical and its purpose was the seeking a life with the gods, leading towards a more virtuous life. In the *domus,* the life force of a family was its resident god. Usually set in the *atrium,* a *lararium*, or small altar, housed the *lares,* miniature expressions of the gods. A morning ceremony in the home, the *levee,* included a reverence to the *manes,* the familial gods and the *penates,* the house gods. Although Roman discourse is full of references to the *lares* and *penates*, little knowledge about the religion of the household has been

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[23] Emperor Augustus (27BCE-14CE), the first emperor of the Roman Empire, is quoted as saying, "I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble."
[24] Hackworth Petersen, Lauren. "Introduction: People, Places and Rituals in the Religions of Rome." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome, Volume 56/57.* University of Michigan Press. 2011/2012. 3-14.

passed down. That may be because it "was familiar and there was no need to explain what everybody knew…it is more natural to suppose that the name of the *penates* carried power for the very reason that it brought home and religion together."[25] Presumably the answer would differ from family to family, and from one person to another, but the question of what was usual is an important one and, yet again, it is not known.

Romans often sought amusement at the circus. The circus was an oval racetrack used for chariot races and other public events. It also played a distinct role in the religious life of the city. It was considered sacred space and informs the idea of the solar cosmic energy. The circus supports the transformation to Christ as ruler of the universe and light of the world, as seen in Tomb M. The significance is necessary to understanding the symbolic pairing of circus, martyrium, and understanding of the choice of location for Tomb M. Tertullian hesitantly acknowledged that the space of the circus was thoroughly religious and stated, "Take heed, O' Christian, how many unclean names have possessed the circus. [The circus] is an alien district to you, since so many devilish spirits have taken up residence in this space."[26] The circus itself, he believed, was the universe in small. The oval shape of the circus parallels the circuit of time with the twelve gates representing the twelve months of the zodiac and the four horses being read as the four seasons or the four elements.

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[25] Jenkyns, Richard. *God, Space and City in the Roman Imagination.* Oxford: Oford University Press. 2013. 198-210.
[26] Tertullian. *De Spectaculis*. 197-202 CE. Chapter 9. Tertullian (155-220CE) was an early Christian apologist who wrote an extensive body of work of Latin Christian literature and advanced the development of early doctrine.

Roman Funerary Customs

"This is a place without fear," says the mosaic from Tomb 43 at the necropolis of Isola Sacra. These words may well explain the emotional feelings of the owner who commissioned the tomb. Regardless of one's religious practices, the art and architecture of chamber tombs considered the ceremonial rites and festivals that were a part of Roman life. Roman funerary customs included the display of the corpse, the funeral and the public celebrations. The evocative aspect of the funerary art found in Roman chamber tombs is an underexplored topic. Unfortunately, current scholarship is fragmentary. Robert Ulrich observed that "no one source describes a 'typical' funeral or tomb, and we must synthesize the extant sources to create a picture of Roman funerary practices."[27] Cemeteries remain one of the few areas of Roman architecture where we can gain a sense of a local community and, particularly, of the desires of individuals to record themselves and their families. Grief and separation are the impetus for such art and architecture. Art gives the expression to the spirit understanding itself, or so the Hegelian view states.[28] It does not imitate nature but allows one to contemplate and enjoy images by using one's own innate inspiration. Its purpose is to assist the viewer in understanding their own truths. How Tomb M was used directly relates to Roman funerary practices.

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[27] Ulrich, Robert B. and Quenemoen, Caroline K. "Funerary Cult and Architecture." *A Companion to Roman Architecture.* West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell. 2013. 267-279.

[28] Hegel, in his *Phenonmenology of Spirit* (1807), wrote about art in terms of logic, the philosophy of nature, and the philosophy of the spirit. He weaves into these references an analysis of individual works of art. Perhaps aligned with Winkleman, debate still ensues on whether Hegel believed that Greek art was the apex of aesthetics.

Figure 3. *Isola Sacra Tomb 78.* Photo: Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica.

During the late first and second centuries CE, tombs had been crowded on the outskirts of the city. They looked like little houses with bricked facades, doors, windows and some with epigraphs. That was what the Vatican necropolis looked like. The tombs in the Vatican Necropolis were designed to be used throughout the year to celebrate the deceased. *Di Inferi*, or 'those who dwell within,' were honored during *Parentalia* and *Feralia*, days that celebrated the ancestors and the *manes*, respectively. These festivals occurred in February, the month devoted to purifications, propitiation and veneration of the dead. Food and wine were consumed during these festivals at the tomb site. It is only in the mystery religions, like the Dionysian cult and the Christian cult, that a promise of salvation was presumed. To others, there was the world of the living and the underworld, loosely defined amongst the Romans. Periodical visits from the deceased's family fulfilled a "need to physically maintain a communication channel with (the dead)."[29] Death and ritual in the selection of individual elements of a tomb, and their position within the larger whole, gave a general context of the monument itself. It is the tomb design that

[29] Liverani. 23-39.

tends to conform to local practices, and it is the living who decided what the dead need.[30] Most tombs in and around Rome were for freedmen and their families, including the tombs of the Vatican necropolis, which were dominated by freedmen and their families.

Slavery in Roman world was common, albeit quite different than our current understanding of the term. Slavery was very much a part of Roman society. The very rich might own hundreds of slaves. Slaves could earn their freedom and become Roman citizens of means. Some became *liberti* for meritorious service. Some purchased their freedom. Others were bequeathed this status. The reasons for the disproportionate number of these freedmen tombs, perhaps, is that they needed a way of showing the importance that they achieved in life by memorializing themselves in death.

Roman cemeteries were located outside the *pomerian*, as it was illegal to have burials within the city walls. Exceptions were allowed if you were an emperor. In ancient Roman times, love reverence of the deceased (*pietas)* was a fundamental aspect of the customs. Its practice was to ensure a positive disposition and to aid in the deceased's well-being. The body was cared for to allow for the need for reverence by washing and anointing the unhealthy remains, as the body was considered a pollutant.[31] A coin was placed in or on the mouth of the deceased, known as a *charon's obol.* Most funerals probably proceeded directly from the domus to the burial site. John

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[30] Urich, A. *A Companion...* 266.

[31] In the time of Augustus, the concern for hygienic disposition of the deceased became heightened. On the Esquiline hill, a "field of death" had formed where the bodies of slaves, beggars and criminals were thrown into *puticuli,* common burial pits. Domestic animals and beasts of burden were also thrown in. This harbored disease. The problem was suppressed by Augustus through his ordering of it to be buried under dirt. A new park was laid in its place.

Pearce suggests that we "cannot know exactly what happened away from the tombs, between the moment of death and the arrival at the burial site, but we can assume that local residents during the early centuries of the Roman era followed usual Greek practices for the period."[32] Votive offerings and other grave goods were taken to the tomb. Professional mourners (*praefiae)*, usually women, and musicians accompanied the family to the tomb. Most literary sources point to a customary two- or three-day interval between death and burial, although that length of time probably varied. The care and honoring of the deceased did not end with the funeral or with the formal period of mourning. Its cultivation was an on-going obligation. There were funerary festivals which marked the calendar. Inscriptions were often included and provided a *cursus honorum,* a description of the deceased's career. Often included was the inscription "D M," which stood for *dis manibus* or "for the ghost-gods."

Figure 4. *Limestone relief of Roman funerary procession with praefiae.* Photo: Amiternum.

[32] Pearce, John and Weekes, Jake. *Death as a Process: The archaeology of the Roman funeral.* Oxford: Oxbow Books. 2017. 54.

In Roman funerary tradition, a nine-day mourning period took place after the death of a family member. Cicero is quoted as saying, “a sow was sacrificed in the vicinity of the tomb – a ritual of great significance as it established the tomb as such.” It is likely that, in the case of cremation, offerings, such as meat, were deposited on top of the funeral pyre, a sacrifice made to the gods of the underworld. Ceres, a *chthonic* deity, was given the entrails (*exta)* and the deceased and family ate the balance at a *silicernium*, the traditional funerary banquet. Then the body was put on a pyre, burned and the ashes put into an urn. Ceres, it was believed, welcomed the body of the deceased. This was thought to transition the deceased to be among the spirits of the dead, the *Manes*. After the nine days, two offerings were made – a burnt offering to chthonic gods and a sacrifice of a ram to the *lares*, the protective gods of the family. Then, a *cena novemdialis* or *refrigeria*, the funerary banquet, signaled the ending of the mourning period and the bringing of the family back to the community.

Robin Jensen writes that “physical remains have the advantage that, even if fragmentary or no longer *in situ*, they are firsthand witnesses to religious rites. They are mediators of divine presence, as objects of veneration, as possessing and wielding supernatural powers.”[33] Family gatherings at the gravesites, with *refrigeria*, are known. Dining with the dead was a “denial of the corpse and affirmation of the ancestral spirit in need of actual and symbolic sustenance, and this act of propriation and provision formed the second element in the transformations, the creation of memory.” [34]

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[33] Jensen, Robin. “Visuality.” *Ancient Mediterranean Religions.* Cambridge University Press. 2013. 209-243.
[34] Gee, Regina. “From Corpse to Ancestor: The Role of Tombside Dining in the Transformation of the Body in Ancient Rome. *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome.* 2006. 59-68.

Figure 5. Banquet couches outside a tomb at Isola Sacra. Photo: Regina Gee

To celebrate at the Vatican necropolis was a powerful sensory stimulus. On a funerary holiday, walking to one's family tomb would expose one to the sights of the many beautifully decorated spaces filled with families celebrating. Smells would be experienced as small ovens were found in the excavations of these tombs. These ovens were used to warm food and to warm the surrounding space. The burning of wood and the warming of food would send aromas well beyond the oven and one's own familial tomb celebration. Libations were freely consumed. Drunkenness was not unheard of. The noise of animated conversations most certainly permeated the street. This served to augment the religious intent of the experience. Cultic spaces were capable of material mediation of the religious experience and with "Christians taking up pre-existing religious attitudes evidence in minor objects would also likely share similar views regarding sacral status of cultic places and their social counterparts."[35]

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[35] Hadley. 89-104.

The Rise of Christianity

The Roman civilization had an open policy allowing for many new cultures and cults to assimilate. This led to a need and desire for order. This is seen most clearly in the "rise of Christianity in the Late Antique Period and to the fate of paganism that Christianity was supposed to have replaced."[36] Christianity was a salvic cult where salvation was dependent on conversion. In the mid-third century, when Tomb M was known to have been redecorated, the pantheon of Roman gods was still growing. From the period before 312CE, archaeology still has not provided an accepted example of a Christian church or house of worship. Nor is there any evidence of the parish churches that gradually replaced them. There was a relationship between martyr's tombs, a burial ground for the faithful, and the celebration of funeral banquets developed both in honor of the martyr and of ordinary Roman Christians. During the late first and early second centuries CE, inhumations replaced cremations as the "disappearance of the older rite is certainly related to the success of Christianity, respecting the human body as a host for the Holy Spirit."[37] There were shifts in burial practices and attitudes towards the afterlife. Christianity was on the rise in Rome during the mid-third century CE. One of the last known cremations in the Vatican Necropolis that can be dated is in Tomb T and dates to 317-318CE, shortly after the Edict of Toleration in 311CE, which allowed Christians to practice their own religion. The decorations of Tomb M indicate either the tomb's owners shifted in theological orientation towards Christianity in the redecoration or that new Christian owners purchased the

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[36]Brown, Peter. "Late Antiquity: Anomaly and Order Between a Pagan and A Christian World." *Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD.* New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation. 2011. 21-25.
[37] Liverani. 23-39.

older tomb. There is a niche in the north wall that contained cremations and that was patched over when it was repurposed as a Christian tomb. During the excavations, the tomb only contained inhumations.

Tomb M is known for its eschatological and religious significance. Its decorative program is widely regarded as Christian in theme. Few scholars support the concept that the tomb is strictly Roman and that the image of the sun god is just that: *Sol Invictus.* Through the syncretic nature of early Christian art, iconographic influences from other Roman religions is easily made, although little scholarship supports the re-decoration as non-Christian. One such critic of the Christian interpretation of Tomb M is Dr. Steven Ernst Hyjams. He wrote:

> "It is time reenter the mausoleum with Roman eyes, if possible, avoiding premature and possibly anachronistic assumptions about the nature and identity of the figures in the mosaic. If we look again at the mausoleum as a whole, without labeling the figures, a different, quite obvious, and very Roman pattern reveals itself. To begin with, the vine and the lack of borders emphasize the interconnectedness of the scenes. Clearly the images combine to form a single theme, and it is quickly apparent which. On the East wall, with its ship and the sea-monster, we have the ocean. On the West wall, opposite the sea, we have the sheep-bearer signifying land. On the North wall the angler occupies the area of transition from sea to land. The vault, with Sol, represents the sky and light, while darkness and the underworld are below, represented by the lower parts of the mausoleum and the tombs therein. In short, the imagery defines mausoleum M as a "cosmos", or at least as a "world", and endows it with a basic visual rhythm for which there are many parallels in Roman art."[38]

During the time of its redecoration, many contradictory strains of practice in the cult of Christianity existed. Early Christianity appeared to deny the pantheon of Roman gods and was, therefore, *superstitio.* Initially, Christianity drew its traditional base of support from the

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[38] Hijams, Steven Ernst. *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome.* Netherland Organization for Scientific Research. 1960. 570.

powerless, who had little interest in the well-being of the Roman state. Neoplatonism accommodated the ascetic within Rome's traditional Graeco-Roman cults. Christians saw these practices as ungodly and a cause of political and economic crisis.[39] They, in turn, refused to sacrifice to the Roman pantheon. Emperor Decius, who reigned from 249-251CE, decreed that all subjects of Empire must actively make an effort to benefit the state through sacrifice to the ancestral gods. To not do so could bring penalty. The Jews were exempt as they did not actively attempt conversions the way that the Christians did. The fulfillment of sacrificial obligation by citizens would define citizens and their gods as Roman. This Roman identity of processions, sacrifices, and games was integral to the social community.

> "Nella citta antica […] il Cittadino e legato alle sue divinita non da un rapporto di semplice "fede", da una fede che doveva comunque esistere, ma da un rapporto piu complesso. Era un rapporto che collegava il singolo alla comunita attraverso appunto la partecipazione globalmente condivisa ai riti, al gioni di festa, ai bianchetti che seguivano gradiosi sacrifici."[40]

The Christian theologian Origen (185-254CE) had written to the predecessor of Emperor Decius (244-249CE), about the theological disparities. Emperor Valerian singled out Christianity as a particularly self-interested and subversive foreign cult and outlawed their gatherings. He felt that Christianity was a threat to the Empire. He directed particular focus on Christians in his

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[39] Neoplatonism developed as a school of thought from the third to the fifth century CE in the Roman Empire. It is rooted in the philosophy of Plato (428-347BCE) but more religious and sought to meld thought (ideal) and reality (form). It seeks to locate the one God in the finite world and in human experience.

[40] Fraschetti, A. "Principi cristiani, temple e sacrifice nel Codice Teodosiano e in alter testimonianze parallele." Saggioro. 2005. 124. Translation: "In the ancient city […] the citizen is linked to his deities not by a relationship of simple "faith," by a faith that had to exist anyway, but by a more complex relationship. It was a relationship that connected the individual to the community through precisely the globally shared participation in the rites, in the feast days, in the whitewashes that followed graceful sacrifices."

ruling of 258CE.[41] In the next forty years, the Christian church grew stronger, and its teachings gained a higher social and intellectual reception. The Christian churches, however, still lacked unity in their teachings. Tomb M's redecorated vault has the image of *Christ-Helios,* a syncretic adaptation of *Sol Invictus.*

Sol Invictus

The cult of *Sol Invictus* was popular in Rome at the time of the redecoration of Tomb M. Emperor Gallienus (Publius Licinius Egnatius Gallienus), who ruled with his father Valerian from 253-260CE and then alone from 260-268CE, needed a power-grabbing tool after the Crisis of the Third Century.[42] This was at a time when a chaotic social structure coincided with an economy in flux. The popularity of the cult of *Sol Invictus*, it is believed, dates to his reign. A god, upon which power could be based, was needed to revitalize civic pride. A distinguishing

[41] Beard, Mary and Price, Simon. *Religions of Rome, Volume I: A History.* Cambridge University Press. 1998. 291-292. Christian apologetics started with Paul the Apostle in the New Testament and is a branch of Christian theology that defends, or explains, Christianity to those opposed or unaware. Christian apologists took Valerian's disgraceful capture and death as a divine judgement.

[42] The Crisis of the Third Century was one of the most dangerous periods in the history of the Roman Empire. The Empire was being unraveled by internal strife and enemies were vying at the borders for control. During the Severan dynasty, the army was doubled in size with higher pay. Paying for this was the beginning of an economic crisis. The role of the military increased ten-fold while the senate's power was diminished. The territories of the Empire were under constant threat and defending them kept focus away from Rome. In 232 CE, the last Severan Emperor, Alexander Severas, had to fight against the Sassanid Empire. While the territories were preserved, casualties were high and the military became insubordinate, particularly towards their emperor. In 235 CE, Alexander Severas was murdered by his own men. This began the Crisis of the Third Century. The army became the ultimate ruler. Over the next fifty years, more than thirty soldiers were sworn in as emperor. Foreign enemies continued to encroach. Emperor Valerian had to fight in the east to prevent a Sassanid invasion. Gallienus oversaw the west. Valerian was captured in battle and died while imprisoned. Gallienus claimed the throne, continued to fight invaders but also had local rebellions. These rebellions led to the fracturing of the Empire. In 268 CE, after a major defeat, Gallienus was assassinated. When Aurelian became emperor, he was under pressure at all the Empire's borders. In 272 CE, he had to retake Palmyra to solve a grain crisis. He defeated the Empire and then defeated the Gallic Empire in the north. The death of Aurelian in 275 CE, began a new phase of the crisis. It was during the reign of Emperor Diocletian that the Crisis of the Third Century ended.

feature of Roman religion was its propensity to adopt new gods and goddesses. With this flexibility, new deities mirrored changes in the socio-political events of the time. The origins of the cult of *Sol Invictus* are a topic of much debate among scholars. In one view, it is one of two versions. First, *Sol Indigis* was an early Roman god whose cult was already in decline by the first century CE. It is believed to have originated from old Syrian traditions and was named after the sun god *Elagabalus*. Others believe *Sol Invictus* originated in Palmyra. A non-scholarly view states that the cult of the sun god was in continuous use from the Republic to Empire. During the reign of Emperor Aurelian (270-275CE), *Sol Invictus* was given the status as supreme deity, ruling over both Rome and the pantheon of gods. Aurelian made Sunday the day of the sun god and its celebration day December 25th. Called *dia natalis Solis Invictus*, Aurelian's choice of date was not seen as a coincidence to the Christian day of celebrating the birth of Christ. Some scholars believe that his choice in selecting that date was to combat the rise in Christianity, as he was a polytheist. On December 25, 274CE, Aurelian opened a new temple dedicated to *Sol Invictus* on the Quirinal hill, the fourth such temple built in Rome. Aurelian is credited with saving the Roman Empire from collapsing. He defended the empire from foreign invaders and built the giant walls of Rome that still bear his name. He defeated the Goths, reorganized Dacia, took back the Palmyrian empire and defeated the Gallic empire.

While the god *Sol Invictus* was head of the Roman pantheon, he seems not to have been particularly associated with Apollo/Helios. Helios, to the Greeks and the Romans, meant "sun." Apollo, in classical Greek and Roman mythology and religion, was the god of, among many things, the sun and light. The gods most important cult sites were in Delos and Delphi. Early

Christians shared an interest with non-Christians in the story of Orpheus.[43] In the third century CE, the emergence of Neo-Platonism and the triumph of the cult of *Sol Invictus* all show a change in the relationship between man and the Divine and between men and other men.[44] Following the Crisis of the Third century, it was Emperor Aurelian, who appealed for harmony among his soldiers, *concordia militum,* and stabilized the Empire and its borders, successfully established the official form of a unitary cult to *Sol Invictus*. Christians at this time were beginning to establish the concept of martyrium.

Martyrium, or the worship of one who sacrificed his or her life for a religious cause, was not a new Roman concept. *Agon,* from which is derived the word "agony," is an ancient Greek term for a conflict, struggle or contest. This could be a contest in athletics, in chariot or horse racing or in music or literature at public festivals. *Agonalia,* or *agonia,* was an obscure archaic religious observance celebrated in ancient Rome several times per year in honor of various divinities. This *agon* is that which is celebrated in martyrium. When Tomb M was undergoing its Christian redecoration in the mid third century CE, persecutions of Christian were not common. The Fire of '64 was two centuries prior and the next organized suppressions were decades in the future when a report of ominous *haruspicy* during Emperor Diocletian's reign ushered in a series of edicts against Christianity. The first, in 303CE, ordered the destruction of church buildings and Christian texts, forbade services to be held, degraded officials who were Christians, re-

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[43] Murray, Sister Charles. *Rebirth and Afterlife: A study of the transmutation of some pagan imagery in early Christian funerary art.* Oxford: BAR International Series 100. 1981. Chapter II. Regular mention of this in Christian literary tradition is seen from the second century apologists onward.

[44] Matthew, Gervase. "The Character of the Gallienic Renaissance." *The Journal of Roman Studies, Volume 33.* Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies. 1943. 65-73.

enslaved imperial freedmen, who were Christians, and reduced the legal rights of all Christians. The second edict threatened Christian priests with imprisonment and the third offered them freedom if they performed sacrifice. In some places the edicts were strictly enforced. Some Christians resisted and were imprisoned or martyred. Diocletian's successor, Emperor Galerius (305-311CE), maintained an anti-Christian policy until his last year, when he asked Christians to pray for him.

The Petrine and Pauline cults in Rome were founded on their martyrdom. In his *Church History,* Eusebius (c. 325CE) confirmed the tradition of the deaths of Peter and Paul in Rome under Nero, between 64-68CE. He quoted Gaius, a Roman presbyter under Pope Zephyrinus (c. 199-217CE) as saying that he could "show you the trophies of the Apostles. For whether you go to the Vatican, or along the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who founded the Church of Rome."[45] The apostle Peter was crucified upside down on the *spina* of the Circus of Nero. His body was placed in an unmarked, communal grave. To think that early Christians paid little attention to the Apostle is less strange when one considers that the cult of martyrs had not yet been established. The Trophy of Gaius, a monument marker at the site of St. Peter's burial, was placed at the site c.160CE. This information was passed on by the historian, Eusebius of Caesarea.[46] Monuments like the shrine have been found elsewhere, for example at Ostia.[47]

[45] O'Callaghan, Roger. "Vatican excavations and the tomb of Saint Peter." *The Biblical Archaeologist.* 1953. 69-87
[46] Bosso, Michele. *Guide to the Vatican Necropolis.* Fabbrica di S. Pietro in Vaticano. 1986. *81.*
[47]O'Callaghan, Roger. "Vatican…" 79.

<u>Comparanda</u>

Tomb M is a Roman chamber tomb within a necropolis. These house tombs were very common beyond Rome's city limits. The Vatican necropolis and Isola Sacra both have chamber tombs dated from the first through the fourth centuries CE and give archaeological hints about how Roman chamber tombs functioned. In the Vatican Necropolis, the Tomb of the Valerii is the biggest and most luxurious tomb excavated beneath St. Peter's Basilica. It was constructed in the latter half of the second century by a freed slave of the Valerii family. The tomb was excavated in 1943 and restored between 1954 and 1955. Like most of its surrounding tombs, the Tomb of the Valerii was preceded by an open-air courtyard with an entrance that "*rivolto a mezzogiorno in direzione della valle del circo.*"[48] The inscription carved on the marble slab above the entryway states that Caius Valerius Herma built the tomb for himself and for his wife, Flavia Olympius, for their two sons and for their freedmen and their descendants. Inside, a well is seen to ensure the supply of water necessary the maintenance of the tomb during the *refrigeria.* On the western wall are six niches for cinerary urns. The walls are composed of rows of yellow bricks. The tomb is a square plan with a staircase. The floor had a mosaic pavement and libation wells, *pozzetti per libagioni.* On the side walls are four large *arcosoli* that have white backgrounds, *fondi bianchi,* with figures of birds among cut flowers of red and purple. On the front of the burial rooms for inhumations, figures of white swans support two ends of a garland hanging at the center of each *arcosolio*.

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[48] Soprintendenza. "Mausoleo H, dei *Valeri*. *Roma Sacra: Guida alle Chiese della Citta Eterna, Itinerario 25.* 2002. 38-46.

Figure 6. *Tomb of the Valerii.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro

It has been said that, to get a real idea of what ancient Rome was like in the period of the Empire's greatest expansion, one should see Ostia, not Pompei or Herculaneum.[49] There are few Roman cemeteries that are so well preserved, and that provide a strong sense of the varied repertoires of funerary behavior, than Isola Sacra in Ostia. It has been described as "*il sepolcreto, anche nel suo insieme, ha un aspetto singolarissimo e tale che non trova parallelo nel mondo romano."*[50] Tomb 29 at Isola Sacra tells a story of a woman, Verria Zosime. It appears that she had two husbands, although not at the same time. The tomb was remodeled, transforming it from a single-room chamber tomb to a two-level, multi-chamber tomb. Begun around 160CE, Tomb 29's design aligned with the surrounding necropolis tombs. The entrance was enhanced by a travertine cornice, sills and jambs. There was a *titulus*, a marble slab, with an inscription placed about the entrance door. The inscription identified Verria Zosime as the 'commissioner' of the tomb, which was rare as tombs were commissioned mostly by men. The inscription further

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[49] Basso, Michele. Guide. Preface.

[50] Calza, Guido. *La Necropoli del Porto di Roman nell'Isola Sacra.* R. Instituto di Archeologia e Stooria dell'Arte. 1940. 43. Translation: "the burial ground, even as a whole, has a most singular aspect and such that it finds no parallel in the Roman world."

acknowledges that Verrius Eccharistus was the first husband of Verria Zosime and *benemerens* of such a memorial.

Figure 7. *Isola Sacra street.* Photo: Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica.

The inside of Tomb 29 was elaborately decorated. Its niches were painted with stars and flowers. There are three *arcosolia*, one on each wall, and three *formae* in the floor, which was covered with a polychromatic figural mosaic. Yellow brick trefoil Corinthian capitals and a surrounding red brick cornice are found. On the second level was the *solarium,* a terrace used for sunbathing. This indicates that the deceased sought to encourage friends and family to perform rituals within the tomb space, supported by a mosaic floor depicting two *amphorae* for wine. The occupants were freed slaves, as explained on a plaque on the exterior. Another exterior plaque shows workers using oversized tools in a field, thought to represent a blacksmith's shop. All this supports the Roman funerary custom of wanting to be in constant communication with any passerby, detailing the lives of the deceased within and creating a liminal ambiguity between the living and the dead.

CHAPTER THREE

TOMB M EXCAVATED

Conversion, Salvation, Transfiguration and Triumph of the iconographical depictions in the mosaic program of Tomb M in the form of the fisherman, the good shepherd, Jonah and thewhale, and *Christ-Helios.* Tomb M is small to only accommodate one or two visitors at a time. It was built between Tomb L and Tomb N, to fit in a passageway that ran between the two, using their existing walls. A *terminus post quem* can be linked to the construction of the contiguous tombs, perhaps the third quarter of the second century CE.[51] When a slab from a makeshift tomb was moved by the excavators, a circular hole in the ground was discovered. Workman lowered a lamp into the hole and Tomb M was revealed, half filled with earth, chalk and bones. One of the workmen was lowered into the tomb and saw a wall with the image of Jonah as he was cast into the sea. To the team, there was no denying that this was a Christian burial site.

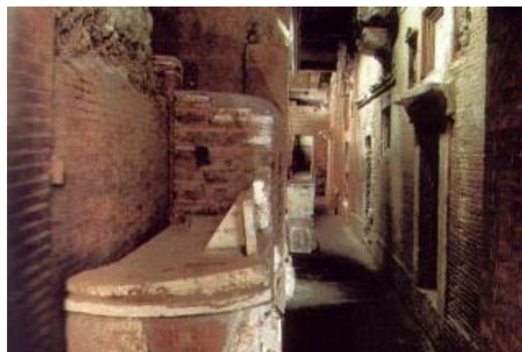

Figure 8. *The Vatican necropolis street.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro

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[51] Kirschbaum, Englebert. *The Tombs of St Peter & St Paul.* New York: St. Martin's Press. 1957. 38.

The *titulus,* now lost, tells of the original purpose of the tomb. In 1574, Tiberio Alfarano described that workmen preparing the site for a front entrance near the high altar of the tomb of St. Sixtus I in the Vatican discovered a small porch, supported by narrow columns and a tomb with antique mosaics depicting horses. It was believed then to be a non-Christian tomb. In an undisturbed state, the tomb was filled up again. Unfortunately, the entrance was walled up by the foundations for the columns.[52] There is mention of a marble slab by the windows of the tomb noting the inscription:

D.M.
JULIO TARPEIANO
VIXIT ANN. I MES
VIIII DIEBUS XXVII
JULIA PALATINA ET
MAXIMUS PARENTES
FEC.LIB.LIBER T. POS-
TERISQUE EORUM
H.M.H.N.S. (Hoc monumentum heredem non sequitur)

The inscription noted that Tomb M was dedicated to Iulius Tarpeianus, a young boy who died before the age of two. It was dedicated by his parents, Iulia Palatina and Maximus. "*Poiche il bambino porta il nome della madre e il padre non ha gentilizio, Palaatina doveva essere una liberta che conviveva con un servo*."[53] Tomb M is substantially smaller than its contiguous tombs L and N. It is somewhat higher on the slope of Vatican hill and its entrance door is slightly back towards the North. Since existing walls were used on the sides, only the backwall and the façade needed to be constructed. It was on the façade that the marble slab with inscription, now lost,

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[52] Kirschbaum, *The Tombs.* 34-42.
[53] Liverani. *The Vatican Necropoles Editoriale.* 114. Translation: "Since the child bears the mother's name and the father has no gentility, Palatina must have been a freedwoman cohabitating with a servant."

was placed. The slab was dated prior to the redecoration of the tomb to Christian motifs. On either side of the slab, narrow windows allowed light to enter the tomb. The floor was made of brick, but only one section of the floor, which reaches from the entrance to the rear wall, is preserved. Beneath the floor, alongside the walls to the right and left, are two inhumations. Other than being extremely small (198cm x 163cm), Tomb M is similar in its construction to the other tombs excavated in the Vatican Necropolis. The redecoration is what sets Tomb M apart.

After passing through a narrow and short bricked corridor to the tomb, one enters the very small, vaulted chamber of Tomb M. The internal surface of the façade has a thick layer of plaster. This wall does not have traces of design. It consisted of simple red bands, with only a small part on the South-east corner still visible. The lower portions of the other three walls are frescoed in a pattern of rectangles, diamond shapes and circles in black, red, yellow painted against a white background. These Fourth Style Roman wall paintings create the socles in the tomb.[54] Roman wall painting is common amongst the tombs in the Vatican necropolis.[55] The geometrical pattern in isolation could just be mimicking masonry however the question is raised as to when this socle was painted. The date of the original building of Tomb M was at a time when the Fourth Style was in vogue. If it is a part of the redecoration, then it was be viewed in terms of the entire wall and vault motifs, regardless of medium.

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[54] In the Flavian age (69-96CE), frescoists started again to paint imitation marble mainly for socles or podiums of lararia.

[55] Since the nineteenth century work of archaeologist August Mau, Roman wall painting has been put into four categories: First Stye (Masonry Style), Second Style (Illusionism), Third Style (Ornate Style) and the Fourth Style, which has elements of the first three styles. New innovations were not seen after the Fourth Style, preserved so well in Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79CE.

Figure 9. *Tomb M view towards north wall.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro

Only visible on the back wall, a narrow molding encircled the tomb at a height of 97cm. Above this, and on the vault, the surfaces were entirely covered in mosaic. Enveloped in scrolling vines on a brilliant yellow background, the images on the walls and vault are in various states of preservation. Many of the *tesserae* in the tomb decorations have fallen off; but the s*ynopia*, the underlying tracing of the design, remains. The three wall mosaics are difficult to discern as most of the tesserae have been lost. It is the *synopia* that allows images to be revealed. The north wall of the tomb depicts a mosaic of a fisherman with a fishing line. The east wall of the tomb depicts two men in a boat with another falling into the water and a sea creature approaching. The sea creature is about to swallow the man, whose legs are in the fish's mouth. The ship is under full sail and the right hands of the men on board are raised in the air. Only a narrow strip of the original mosaic has survived. It is in the top corner and the balance of the scene is depicted in the *synopia.* Most of the plaster has fallen off the west wall of Tomb M. It is possible, however, to make out the image of the Good Shepherd, flanked by two sheep. It appears that the shepherd is carrying a sheep on his back.

Better preserved, with only small parts damaged or missing, the extant tesserae and *synopia* show the vault, which features an octagonal panel depicting *Helios* riding a *quadriga*, a four-horsed chariot, and holding a blue globe in his left hand. The right hand of the figure is missing, but it is possible that it was "raised in an act of benediction."[56] Only two horses are visible. The others demolished when the large hole was made in 1574 to access the tomb. The figure is dressed in a tunic with a cloak floating behind him. Radiating from the figures head are rays extending in all directions. The lower rays make the shape of a T-cross, a design unique for its time. Usually referred to as *Christ-Helios*, the image is an appropriation of Apollo/Sol as the charioteer.

Figure 10. *Tomb M vault showing vines.* Photo: WikiCommons

The size of Tomb M is such that only a few visitors could enter at a time. While this precludes the possibility of a *refrigeria* within[57], the intimacy of size and the vitreous gold

[56] Beckwith, John. *Early Christian and Byzantine Art.* New Haven; Yale University Press. 19.
[57] Outside Tomb M, across the narrow street, is an open area that would have provided ample space for these celebrations.

tesserae blanketing the ceiling and three walls create a liminal space of illumination. This background is draped with green vines throughout. The overall vines would have given the occupants of the room the impression of being under a tree. This mosaic representation is of the traditional *Helios*, the sun god traveling across the sky. As discussed previously, the emperor and sun were the two polestars around which the circus racetrack orbited, and the circus had cultural prestige and cosmological systems. The cycles of life envisioned through circus imagery extended to the birth of Rome and had long been associated with solar rites.[58] The imagery was not static but morphed during the centuries of Roman imperial rule, as did Roman religion. *Quadrigas* were projections of Sol's power. Chariots drawn by horses were vessels of the moon. In many respects, the circus was "a giant sundial around which chariots raced like heavenly bodies."[59] The emperors of the third and fourth centuries aligned themselves with the cult of *Sol Invictus*. Sol/Apollo was seen as the "divine patron of the Circus and its games."[60] Stemming from that tradition, it is assumed the space in the tomb was sacred, performative, symbolic and religious. It had mythological, ritual, social and architectural purpose.

Figure 11. *Colossus statue of Nero.*

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[58] Bergman, Bettina Ann. "Pictoral Narratives of the Roman Circus." *Les Spectacles du Cirque et leur Reception.* 379.
[59] Bergmann, Bettina. Introduction: The Art of Ancient Spectacle." *The Art of Ancient Spectacle.* 2000. 9-35.
[60] Ames, Cody Scott. "Rome's seat of passion: An assessment of the archaeology and history of the Circus Maximus." Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. London/New York. 2016. 1-14.

Sacred Space and Iconography

Understanding sacred space, Roman funerary customs and martyrium lends to understanding the experiential aspects of Tomb M and how it was used. The rituals associated with Greco-Roman religious traditions generally took place outdoors as, for example, the cella of the temple was the site of the cult's statue and sacrifices. Worshipers stood beyond the peristyle. This changed with the advent of Christianity, which required participants to "enter and remain inside the church to take part in rites. Because of this, walls and ceilings of church interiors became essential spaces for the display of figural images."[61] This practice did not manifest itself until the fourth century CE and therefore displays the avant-garde vision of the owners of Tomb M. With the emergence of Christianity, the notion of death acquired a different meaning. Death did not mark the end of life but "constituted the transition from earthly to heavenly life."[62] The veneration of the burial site of St. Peter on the Vatican Hill attests to the strength of martyr worship.[63] The highest status among the Christian dead was obtained by having died for the faith with an emphasis on the sites of suffering as opposed to the physical tombs of the martyrs. Damasus, in his famous epigraphic poem *Hic habitasse,* asserted that it was on account of their

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[61] Jensen, Robin M. and Ellison, Mark D. *The Routeledge Handbook of Early Christian Art.* London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group. 2018. 86-103.
[62] Touratsoblou, Ioannis P. "The Transition from Paganism to Christianity: The Numismatic Evidence." *Transition to Christianity: Art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th Century AD.* New York: Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation. 2011. 41-43.
[63] Antonio Ferrua, one of the archaeologists on the excavations at the Catacomb of Saint Sebastian, postulates that in 258CE, after the Valerian prohibitions of Christians assembling in 'so-called cemeteries,' the remains of St. Peter and St. Paul were translated to the "*Catacumbas*, thus giving rise to the *Memoria* on the Appian Way." This is supported by both the *Depositio Martyrum* and *Hieronymian Martyrology.*

blood (martyrdom) that Peter and Paul reached the heavenly realm, and it was that same blood (shed, of course, in Rome) that gave the city the right to claim them as their own.[64]

The fisherman and the shepherd found on the north and west walls were representations of the earth and the sea. This is a common representation of Jesus. With his line cast, two fish are swimming beneath the fisherman. One fish is moving towards the hook while the other fish is moving away. This scene might be describing free will, the human trait that motivated Jesus to become incarnate and save mankind. He was the "fisher of men" (Mark 1:17). Perhaps this comment had an important role in the adoption of the *Ichthys* as a symbol of Christianity. It is the image of the sea creature on the east wall that lends support to Tomb M being distinctively and purposefully designed as a Christian funerary space and by association provides the charioteer the interpretation of *Christ-Helios*.

Christian borrowings tend to show Christ as Orpheus or Apollo/Helios. Christian iconography neither provided idols for worship nor represented the divine essence. Englebert Kirschbaum concluded that Tomb M was the one "purely" Christian tomb in the Vatican Necropolis and that it contains the oldest mosaic discovered with a Christian theme and it contained a picture that was particularly important to early Christian iconography, *Christ-Helios.* This could be seen as the triumph of Christ as *pantokrator,* or divine ruler. There is liturgical writing that, metaphorically, links Christ with the rising sun, evidencing the continuity of symbols in the Roman culture which could communicate aspects of the Christian faith. Another

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[64] Thacker, Alan. *The Cult of Peter and the Development of Martyr Cult in Rome. The Origins of the Presentation of Peter and Paul as Martyrs.* 2020. Chapter 13.

metaphor found in the New Testament is when Jesus speaks of himself as the "true vine" (John 15:1-17). "The vine is Christ and its branches represent the apostles and by extension the church."[65] Christian reinterpretation regarding the depictions of grape vines were often "regarded as Eucharistic metaphors."[66] In early Christian art, other resurrection themes include the dolphin, the phoenix and the peacock, all taken directly from other Roman religious images.

Coupled with the iconography on the walls, we see the artistic program within Tomb M develop as a part of a larger understanding of human nature, the interpretation becomes plastic and the sun god takes on a new personification. Clearly, the family tomb shows a conversion to Christianity, or the purchase by a new owner. Other than Tomb M, four of the excavated tombs also have Christian themes as does the graffiti wall. Other similarities are: Tomb I, which shows a *quadriga* in its mosaic pavement; Tomb O, which has a wall mosaic on its façade and Tomb B, which has a frescoed vault with the allegory of the "Sun Chariot" surrounded by the seasons, underscoring the uniqueness of Tomb M.

The graves of the martyrs and their places of martyrdom became the objects of a solemn cult and site of pilgrimages. Burial near a martyr became desirable. The martyrs and their "visual or tangible evocations were to become the focus of cult." Every saint was a conduit to eternal life and "a guarantee, through Christian theology and exegesis, of the salvation made possible" by this.[67] The significance is necessary to the understanding of the symbolic pairing of circus and

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[65] Jensen, Robin Margaret. *Understanding Early Christian Art.* Oxford:Routledge. 2000. 61.
[66] Couzin, Robert. "Syncretism and Segregation in Early Christian Art." *Studies in Iconography: 38.* Michigan: Western Michigan University. 2017.
[67] Elsner, Jas. "Inventing Christian Rome: the role of early Christian art." *Rome The Cosmopolis,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003. 71-99.

martyr. The site, design and redecoration of Tomb M creates a moment of specialness. Nero as charioteer in his circus, conquering the world, and Peter, given the Christian status of martyr and conquering persecution, foreshadows the owners of Tomb M using *Sol Invictus* conquering the sun and *Christ-Helios* conquering the world and saving mankind.

Comparanda

The mosaic program of Tomb M is believed to be some of the earliest Christian art. It is also the earliest known depiction of Christ in a mosaic. Other contemporaneous examples in Rome are the catacombs of St. Callixtus and a sarcophagus in Santa Maria Antigua, located in the Roman Forum. Catacombs and sarcophagi are the earliest examples of early Christian art found. This art was integral in establishing sacral perceptions within Christian space.

In the catacombs, biblical images evoking salvation provided a deep sense of the sacred. At the time of the redecoration of Tomb M, the catacombs of St. Callixtus were acquired by the church of Rome and administered by it. Pope Zephyrinus (199-217CE) appointed deacon Callixtus as custodian and administrator of the catacomb. Christian cemeteries and catacombs were ordinarily protected by Roman law, as was the necropolis. The law established that every sepulcher was a "sacred space." In the first three centuries CE, the Christians had no basilicas nor churches in the city. Sacraments took place in their few places of worship, generally in private houses. Meetings for funerals and devotional services for martyrs in catacombs were frequent. Christian symbols found near the entrance show the fish, the *Ichthus* or the *Chi-Rho*, the anchor, and the dove with an olive branch, among many others. One of the distinctive features of Pre-Constantinian Christianity is its aniconism, particularly not depicting God or Christ. Christian apologists "seldom condemned images specifically on the basis of biblical

injunctions."[68] This was more a rejection of the polytheistic cult objects seen in Rome than an adherence to the second Commandment. The prophet Jonah appears in the Cubiculum of the Sacraments in the catacombs that dates from the first half of the third century CE. Jonah was a very important biblical figure to early Christians since the story of Jonah inside the whale for three days mirrors and preconfigured the three-day crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Christ in Jerusalem.[69] In the Cubiculum of the Sheep, in the center of the *arcosolium,* there is an image of the Good Shepherd. One of the crypts was originally used for assemblies, the mass and for the rites of *refrigeria*. The room was decorated in third century CE frescoes of birds, garlands, flowers and geometrical motifs. Two *arcosolia* were discovered on the side walls. Its use can certainly be seen as aligning with the function and use of Tomb M.

Figure 12. *The Catacombs of St. Callixtus.* Photo: Catacombesancallisto.it

In the Roman Forum, a sarcophagus was discovered that dated to the third century CE that was opulent as well as being Christian in theme. Structurally, sarcophagi of this time were chiefly produced in workshops in Rome, northern Italy and Gaul and were modeled on their non-Christian precursors. Identifying the use of this imagery in Christian sarcophagi funerary art is

[68] Jensen, Robin. "Aniconism in the first centuries of Christianity." *Religion, Volume 47.* 2017. 408-424.
[69] Baruffa, Antonio. *The Catacombs of St. Callixtus.* Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 2000. 83.

complicated due the uncertainty of their original placement, usually “unknown, unreliable, or incomplete.”[70] The most common form has a “continuous frieze of symbolic figures or of biblical scenes or one composed of a group showing Christ with the Apostles on either side of Him.”[71] In the church of Santa Maria Antigua, one of the oldest churches in Rome, a sarcophagus was found buried beneath its structure exhibiting early Christian art that was borrowed from the non-Christian art of the time. On the left side of the sarcophagus are scenes from the Jonah story including a ship with two figures on rolling waves. Jonah is seen lying on the shore after being expelled from the belly of the sea creature. He has a tree above him and there are three sheep around him. This is a strong example of syncretic nature of early Christian art.

Figure 13. *Early Christian sarcophagus in Sta. Maria Antigua.* Photo by author.

Endymion was a favorite motif for Roman sarcophagi. The mythical young boy, cursed with eternal youth and perpetual sleep, was visited nightly by Selene, who bore him 40 children. Endymion represented eternal repose and fruitfulness. When the mythical figure was re-invented

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[70] Couzin. “Syncretism.”
[71] Toynbee, Jocelyn. *Death and Burial in the Roman World.* New York: Cornell University Press. 1971. 274.

to tell the Christian story of Jonah, the interpretation showed Jonah in repose under the vine. He was "scarcely happy; after he preached the imminent destruction of Nineveh."[72] Here Jonah is not resting but sulking. The image of the Good Shepherd is also found on the sarcophagus. This is a figure dates back to ancient Greek art. On the right is a scene of baptism. The figure being baptized looks down on a sheep. There is a dove in a tree nearby. Towards the back are two figures with fishing nets.

Thus, in analyzing the mosaics in Tomb M, known to be among the oldest mosaics discovered in Rome with a Christian theme, and comparing the images found in the tomb with other examples of early Christian iconography, we see the intent in the mosaic design of Tomb M as early Christian art, but also the cultural overlap of beliefs about life and death in Rome during that early Christian era.

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[72] Matthews, Thomas F. *The Clash of the Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1993. 23-53.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROMAN WALL AND VAULT MOSAIC PRODUCTION

The Christian iconography, the elaborate *tesserae* and function as a funerary space are all qualities that distinguishes the mosaic program of Tomb M from other mosaics of the late third century CE, all designed to create a sense of paradise on earth. As the only excavated tomb in the Vatican Necropolis with wall and vault mosaics, the choice of this time consuming and costly art medium is quite rare in early Christian art. It was a desire to achieve a more painterly appearance in mosaics that led to the invention of the use of *tesserae*, in the third century BCE.[73] Two of the most important centers for the production of *tesserae* were Alexandria, Egypt and Pergamum in Asia Minor. Many of the mosaics emulated existing paintings and an attempt to recreate the modulation of color and light is seen. Pliny the Elder writes that a pavement attributed to a mosaicist whose name was Sosus was found in Pergamum, which confirms the status of mosaic pictures in the Hellenistic period.[74]

The Crisis of the Third Century had an influence on the artistic realm through a break from the Hellenistic tradition and a shift reflecting the spiritual changes of the time. Christianity,

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[73] As with many other aspects of Roman culture, mosaics were adapted from those found in ancient Greece, where the mosaic art form developed as a durable and quite lavish way of decorating. The first patterns and figural representations in mosaic appeared around the late Fifth and early Fourth Centuries BCE in Greece. Before the middle of the Fourth Century BCE, pebble mosaics were the standard. The earliest mosaics were made with river pebbles, dating back to the fourth century BCE. In Pella, the pebble mosaic became more refined. A pebble mosaic workshop in Pella explored new ideas and, for the first time, mosaicists looked to sculpture and painting for designs and moved away from geometric patterns. Later, this was enhanced with other materials. Pottery shards and lead strips were incorporated. Also, faience and glass added shades of blue and green, colors rarely found in natural materials.[73] In the Third Century BCE, pebbles intentionally were replaced by cut materials. There is evidence that Pella mosaics moved towards panel and wall painting. One subject represented was Dionysus riding a leopard, a quintessential iconographic representation of the wine god.
[74] Pliny the Elder. *Naturalis Historia.* 36. 184.

Neoplatonism and Orphism brought the idea that “the image must transcend reality and take its inspiration from the supernatural.”[75] Images were less molded and were flattened in space. Figures were frontal, usually on ambiguous space, bringing them closer to the viewer and heightening the other-worldly experience. Less is known about wall and vault mosaics however “fragments suggest that they generally followed the schemes of wall and vault decorations in other media, notably painting.[76] The production of mosaics became increasingly refined and, by the late Roman period, a division of labor was defined. A large project could involve many specialties: the *pavimentarius,* who prepared the ground, the *pictor,* who drew the design, the *tessellarius,* who laid the larger background of the mosaic, and the *musivarius,* who created the figural elements. In smaller projects, a worker would have taken on more than one job. Certainly, Roman wall and vault mosaicists, and their patrons, went to great lengths and expense to create something that could be achieved much quicker and much less expensively through painting. The patrons of Roman mosaics often had to live with the works for some time, and through them they expressed certain ideas that were important to them. On a tombstone from Ostia, a rare relief of a mosaic workshop is found. It depicts two craftsmen splitting *tesserae* with a double-edged hammer, while *tesserae* already cut are in a basket to the right. In the background is seen the master of the shop showing two workers where to unload some marble slabs.

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[75] Pappadarlo. 68.
[76] Ling. 18.

Figure 14. Fragment of tombstone depicting mosaicist. Ostia Antiquarium

History shows that Roman Christianity used mosaics capable of transforming space for other-worldly experiences. This is certainly the case in the mosaic program of Tomb M and the position of viewing the vault must be considered when discerning the experiential aspects of the tomb. The visitor must have felt as if the vines were a blanketing arbor through which they contemplate the rising *Christ-Helios.* By the early third century CE, funeral banquets had grown with the Christian community. These banquets culminated with the celebration of the mass. "Christ as cosmic charioteer blurs religious boundaries: he is the sun god of the circus (*Sol)*, whose temple commands the games; he is the *Sol Oriens*, the Risen Sun of the East, who carries salvation with him as he travels his daily route to the West; he is the wine god Bacchus with the standard grape foliage."[77] The designers of the vault mosaic clearly had this in mind.

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[77] Coon, Lynda. "Racetrack to Salvation: The Circus, the Basilica and the Martyr." *Gesta.* Spring 2020. 26.

Figure 15. *Tomb M vault detailing Christ-Helios.* Photo: Ufficio Scavi Fabbrica di San Pietro

Many Roman families grew rich from trade in the eastern Mediterranean, increasing the influence of Greek art in Roman Italy. In the first century CE, black and white mosaics came into style in Rome. However, there were regional trends and mosaics not only differentiated between one room and another, but also differentiated space within a room. In antiquity, the use of mosaics for decoration was strictly to decorate architectural surfaces. Often, pavement mosaics enhanced the frescoed walls of the rooms. Roman mosaics were anonymous, and the mosaicist rarely aspired to be known for the prestige of their work. The Romans then took this art form and gradually refined it with the use of *tesserae* to form intricate and colorful designs. Having a mosaic in one's home was a symbol of Roman wealth and status. Themes that reflected that status and included mythological stories (which represented knowledge) and wild animals (which represented sponsorship of public games). Roman mosaics had both religious and social purposes. They provided a glimpse into who the Romans were, what they valued, what they looked at, where they walked and whom they aspired to be.

Roman mosaics can be divided into two categories: *opus tessellatum,* or pavement decorations and *opus museum* or *opus musivum,* or wall or vault decoration. There was a

difference in prestige between the two as wall or vault mosaics were the least common and, therefore, more prestigious. As I noted earlier, Tomb M contained both kinds of mosaics, while the other tombs on the site contained only the less rare *opus tesselatum.* An excellent example of the art form in a Roman home is found in the House of the Faun at Pompeii, a large, private Roman residence in which a number of mosaics were found. Most spectacular is the Alexander mosaic (c. 100BCE), based on a painting from the late fourth century BCE. The mosaic is 2.7m high and 5.12m long and depicts the end of the battle between Alexander the Great and Darius, the Persian king. This mosaic mimics the illusionistic painting with overlapping figures, foreshortening and *chiaroscura*. The *tesserae* are about two millimeters squared. It is estimated that there are, more or less, 1-1/2 million *tesserae* and that it took five mosaicists about five years to complete the pavement. It is important to note here that mosaics found *in situ* allow for much more in-depth interpretations. For example, a floor mosaic removed to a museum most likely is viewed on the wall. This ignores the original, intended point of view.

Figure 16. *Alexander mosaic.* Photo by author.

The Mithridatic Wars, in the first century BCE, and ensuing civil wars of the late Republic, caused an economic downturn that affected the mosaic industry. Subsequently, the Romanization of conquered territories, including in the Roman northwest, brought a

gradual spread of mosaic making. Mosaic making returned slowly and, in the third century CE, the illusionistic mosaic became of interest again. A general trend of mosaics in the eastern Empire was the use of personifications in representations of the four seasons, the months of the year as well as geographic personifications, such as rivers. These images did not necessarily appear in isolation but, especially from the third century CE onward, as allegorical scenes.

Mosaic making arrived late to Roman Africa. The first known examples of pavements in *opus vermiculatum* date to the late first century CE. These mosaicists are known for rejecting the popular black and white style in Italy, as seen in Ostia, and adopting a polychrome approach. This may be due in part to the fact that more colorful geological resources were available in that area. During the Crisis of the Third Century in Italy, Africa remained mostly neutral and economically flourished through oil and grain production. The production of mosaics for local residences made these northern African areas boast the largest proportion of domestic mosaics than in other parts of the Roman Empire. The social desirability of mosaic pavements became the essence of the urban lifestyle. When there was a slowdown in production in Italy, mosaicists would often travel from place to place to find work. This allowed for more sharing of patterns and styles.

The History of Roman Wall and Vault Mosaics

The preservation of Tomb M's wall and vault mosaics is unique in that wall and vault mosaics are rarely preserved due to their vulnerability of being upright. The earliest Roman wall mosaics survive only in a limited number of places in Italy. There are about forty preserved, with the greatest number located in sites around Vesuvius and Rome. This concentration led scholars to believe that wall mosaics were particular to the garden adornments in the houses and villas

around the areas of Rome and the Campania region. The recent excavations in Cremona of a wall mosaic have helped demonstrate a wider distribution of wall mosaics. Wall and vault mosaics were frequently found in buildings of high social status, such as palaces, and eventually Christian basilicas.

The earliest wall and vault mosaics, dating to the end of the second century BCE, mixed natural and artificial elements. Choices of materials were partly due to stylish considerations of the time but also due to cost and availability. Vitreous materials, such as faience and Egyptian blue, are used from the Hellenistic period to the early Imperial era, when it was completely replaced by glass. Faience is evidenced only in floor mosaics, while Egyptian blue is a material exclusive of wall mosaics.[78] Glass was expensive, and its dissemination was limited. By the end of the first century CE, glass began to be used in wall mosaics. A gradual expansion of the use of glass developed on the Italian peninsula, from the second century BCE to the first century CE. Faience and Egyptian blue and sealing-wax red glass are found in mosaics from this era. Polishing mosaics was common, often partly removing the vitreous layer.

The use of tiny *tesserae,* in *opus vermiculatum,* created a pictorial effect[79] dates to the late third century BCE, when artists used these small *tesserae* of different colored materials to create a scene. When viewed from a distance, optical blending gave it the effect of a painting, similar to *Pointillism*'s use of daubs of color. This *opus vermiculatum* soon became the norm.

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[78] Boschetti, Cristina *et al*." Glass Mosaic Tesserae: Two interdisciplinary research projects." *Annales du 18e Comgress de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre.* 2009. 145-50.
[79] Boschetti, Cristina. "Glass in Mosaic Tesserae: Two Interdisciplinary Research Projects." *Annales du 18th Congres de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire de Verre.* 2012. 145.

The earliest *tesserae* were cut from glass canes. Later, cubes were cut from flattened cakes of glass.

Figure 17. *Closeup of duck mosaic.* Photo by author.

The Bay of Naples, an area of extensive cultural contact with the Levant and Egypt, became known for glassmaking. Pliny the Elder (Gaius Plinius Secundus) wrote the thirty-seven-volume *Naturalis Historia*, which has survived in its entirety. Among these works, Pliny the Elder writes about the arts in Books 33-36. He states that *lithostrota,* Latin for "inlaid with stones," was introduced in the time of Sulla (138 – 78 BCE). He further mentions that, since the time of Sulla, "mosaics have left the ground for vaults, and they are now made of glass."[80] Vitruvius (Marcus Vitruvius Pollio) was a Roman architect in the first century BCE. He authored the 10-volume *De Architectura*. He mentions glass production activity just outside of Pozzuoli.[81] A Vestorius of Pozzuoli, a friend of the orator Cicero, was famous for producing "Egyptian blue," a baked mixture of silica, malachite, calcium carbonate and sodium carbonate. Residue of

[80] Pliny. 189.
[81] Vitr. 11. 1-2.

Egyptian blue was found in the same area in excavated crucibles.[82] The widespread use of glass did not occur suddenly. During the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE), illusionism became an aspect of mosaic making. The dissolving of light and dark *tesserae* took the place of distinct color variation. This approach is thought to mimic the "Fourth Style of wall painting at Pompeii and seems to persist into the reign of Hadrian (117-138 CE)."[83] Soft transitions from light to dark, creating shadows, and foreshortenings give the mosaics pictorial qualities.

Colors that were not easily obtained in nature were then created in glass. To date, the manufacture of the colored glass has been seldom studied but it is known that it was expensive and more difficult to obtain than colored stone. Italy lacks any archaeological evidence attesting to the existence of Roman primary glass production.[84] Colored glass *tesserae* were relatively difficult to acquire and, therefore, were expensive. The trade of raw glass at the time is well documented including the discovery of seventy kilos of raw glass at Pompeii.

The focus of most glass research in antiquity has been on vessels and the development of glass-blowing techniques. The problem of the provenance of Roman glass in Italy can only be answered by using innovative analytical techniques, such as isolating radiographic isotopes of Strontium and Neodymium.[85] This could help determine where the history of wall mosaic techniques and the history of glassmaking connect. Prior to studies done in 2008, the use of

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[82] Pappalardo, Umberto and Ciardiello, Rosaria. *Greek and Roman Mosaics.* New York: Abbeville Press. 2012. 197.
[83] Pappalardo. 66.
[84] Boschetti, Cristina *et al.* 139-144.
[85] Boschetti, Cristina *et al.* 139-144.

faience and glass in Roman *vermiculata* mosaics was almost unknown and the use of archaeometric methods seeks to investigate the raw material provenance of these glass *tesserae*.

Mosaic designs, with regional differences, were derived from pattern books, especially figural compositions. None of these pattern books survives, but an Egyptian papyrus from the third century BCE states that there was a "pattern being sent from Alexandria to serve as a guide to a mosaicist laying a pavement in Philadelphia in the Fayum."[86] There is hardly a known pair of like pavements in all of antiquity, although similarities are found. This is probably due to the fact that room size, shape and use were not constant. Patterns were modified to fit the space, by either adding patterns or deleting them. The owners of Tomb M not only looked at pattern books but made deliberate modifications to the designs available at the time. Tomb M is decorated in *opus vermiculatum.* This term is documented in a verse of a Latin poet quoted by Pliny the Elder, "*Arte pavimenti atque emblemate vermiculato.*"[87] It is this technique, and the use of glass *tesserae*, that allowed for the iridescent and illuminating experience for those who visited Tomb M.

The dramatic impact, and costs, of creating wall and vault mosaics made them a symbol of Roman social status. The origin of mosaics for walls and vaults was distinguished from the making of floor mosaics. It was not until the late first century CE that a common approach to wall and vault mosaics was in place. The development of the technique of wall and vault mosaics

[86] Ling, Roger. *Ancient Mosaics.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1998. 13.
[87] Pliny. *Natural History, 36.* 185.

can be linked to the history of glass.[88] Wall mosaics are categorized into three phases: First, with a mixed technique; second, with an intermediate technique, and third, mosaic with *tesserae*.[89] The Roman architect Vitruvius, writing in about 30-20 BCE, recommended the preparation for mosaics (albeit for pavements). He wrote that an initial layer, *statumen,* of fine pebble be laid out then a layer of mortar, *rudus,* be applied and, finally, a layer of mortar with terracotta, *nucleus,* be applied. This was the foundation upon which the *tesserae* were embedded. Prepping for wall mosaics was different. These mosaics were produced in various stages starting with preparing the "ground" with a few layers of lime plaster. Once dried, the *synopia* was traced on plaster. Examples of these drawings can be found where the surfaces have been damaged and the *tesserae* have fallen off, as is the case with Tomb M. These drawings in mortar are sometimes quite elaborate, facilitating the mosaicist's choice of *tesserae* colors. Sometimes the plaster ground was painted to better emphasize the *tesserae* colors. Both approaches required a *giornata,* defined by the mosaicists to complete their day's work before the mortar dried. Multiple workers would then work on the mosaic simultaneously, using scaffolding if needed. The *tesserae* were set into their foundation. Glass *tesserae* were often set at angles to increase their reflective capabilities.[90] Mosaicists often did their work *in situ* rather than prefabricating sections before installing them. Often, they were regional workers and, sometimes, traveled further. This explains why similarities are found in different times and different places. An exception would

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[88] Boschetti, Cristina *etal.* "The Earliest Wall Mosaics and the Origin of Roman Glass in Italy: Archaeological Considerations for an Archaeometric Study." *Annales du 18th Congres de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire de Verre.* 2012. 142.
[89] Sear, Frank. "The Earliest Wall Mosaics in Italy." *Papers of the British School at Rome, v43.* 1975. 83-100.
[90] Jensen. *The Routeledge Handbook.* 99.

be the *emblemata,* which was popular in the eastern Empire. These were square or round mosaic images, usually figural, that became the center of a pavement around which geometrical patterns were installed to fill the desired space. It was not until the Roman period that compositions with figures occupied the entire surface of a mosaic. *Tesserae* were set with a ruler or level to ensure accuracy. Final stages included rubbing the mosaic, smoothing it, and burnishing the surface so that it could be smooth. This was not done on wall mosaics as the *tesserae* were positioned at angles to provide more reflection from the uneven surface.

Knowledge of vitreous mosaic *tesserae* materials is important in the understanding of the history of mosaic making and techniques, although published information about the materials is scarce. The vitreous materials used in early Roman *opus vermiculatum* mosaics in Italy originated in Egypt and Greece during the Hellenistic period dating back to the second and first centuries BCE, in the Roman Republican period. Because of the time required in producing *opus vermiculatum* mosaics, they were usually made in workshops on a slab to enable the piece to be transported. However, more extravagant works were created *in situ.* Data is lacking about the provenance of the many *opus vermiculatum* mosaics in Italy in regard to the technical aspects as well as archaeological studies of the form. It is only recently that a keener interest in these mosaics has surfaced, including studies of the production of *tesserae*. A recent research project looked at the use of vitreous materials in 83 Italian mosaics mostly from Pompeii and Latium. A portable optical microscope was used at the sites, which generated data about the surface materials microstructure. Then, electron microscopes were used in the research lab to further examine the material. Faience *tesserae* in a variety of green and blue shades were detected in all

but one of the mosaics studied. [91, 92] These Faience *tesserae* were similar to *tesserae* found in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean region. The study defined two types of *tesserae* categories: First, were light green colored *tesserae*, opaque and with a few pores; second, the study noted turquoise, green or blue *tesserae*, richer in pores and stones. Lead and copper were detected to obtain this particular green shade. In the turquoise color, cobalt was also discovered. In both, there is no evidence of a vitrified layer on the surface, so the samples have been classified as "glassy faience, a non-glazed faience variant."[93] At around 40 CE, glass *tesserae* became the predominant material of wall mosaics.[94] By around 60 CE, Egyptian blue was no longer used.

In wall or vault mosaics, the *tesserae* were placed in mortar. To obtain a greater variant of color shades, studies have shown that the mosaicists used paint on the interstitial mortar and, in some cases, finished the mosaic surface with brush strokes. In a study of the mosaic *emblemata* from St. Susannna, a yellow painted layer was found that was identified as ochre and cinnabar red. Egyptian blue was found in a sample of light blue. This is an important but mostly unknown aspect to the *opus vermiculatum* mosaic technique.[95]

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[91] Boschetti, Cristina *etal.* "Early evidences of vitreous materials in Roman mosaics in Italy: An archaeological and archaeometric integrated study." *Journal of Cultural Heritage."* Elsevier Masson SAS. 2008. e21-e26.
[92] Faience is a sintered-quartz ceramic material from ancient Egypt. The sintering process covered the material with a vitreous coating, creating luminating hues, usually in transparent green or blue. In ancient Egypt, objects created with faience were considered magical, imbued with the powers of the sun.
[93] Boschetti. 22.
[94] Boschetti, Cristina *etal.* "Virtreous Materials in Early Mosaics in Italy: Faience, Egyptian Blue and Glass." *Journal of Glass Studies.* 2011. 59-91.
[95] Boschetti, Cristina *etal.* "Raman characterization of painted mortar in Republican Roman Mosaics." *Journal of Raman Spectroscopy.* John Wiley & Sons. 2008. 1085-1090.

<u>The Economics of Mosaic Making</u>

By the end of the first century BCE, illusionistic picture mosaic technique had reached its apex. The outlay of time and money to create these works was exorbitant. The making of wall and vault mosaics was not only a more difficult form of the art, but it was also more expensive. Little has been written about how mosaics were put on walls regarding the logistics and the costs. *Opus vermiculatum* was expensive to use and time consuming to create. There is still little known about the names, identities or businesses of the mosaicists. The mosaicists that worked on wall and vault mosaic were paid more than those who worked on the pavement mosaics. A wall or vault mosaicist, a *musearius,* was paid wages that were twenty percent higher than those paid to a floor mosaicist, a *tessellarius.*[96] In reviewing the Edict of Diocletian on Maximum Prices, the determining the cost of creating a mosaic is fragmented at best. The cost of a mosaicist was 50 *denarius communis* per day. The cost of a frescoist was 75-150 *denarius communis* per day (depending on whether they were painting the background or the figural elements). A mosaic takes much more time to complete than a fresco. Also, the supplies for mosaics are much more expensive and more difficult to acquire. Mosaicists were regarded as second-ranked craftsmen and were compensated in an unfavorable way in relation to other visual artists. We can surmise that putting of a wall mosaic in place was a major financial investment. The making of *tesserae* involved first making the glass. Wall mosaics required millions of *tesserae*. In Late Antiquity, "glass was made as a raw material in huge, industrial quantities."[97] This manufacturing occurred

[96] Ling. 7.
[97] James, Liz. "Late Antique Wall Mosaics and the Numbers Game." *Late Antique Mosaics: Current Research and Conservation Strategies across the Mediterranean.* Wien: Universitat Wien. 2022. 39-46.

mostly in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt and, perhaps, in Italy. Tank furnaces used in glass making also have been found in Israel and the Levant. These furnaces were generally located near sand, the essential substance needed for glass making. The glass then needed to be exported throughout the Empire. The raw glass also needed to be colored and cut. The next stage was sorting the *tesserae* into an assortment of colors, applying the plaster and tracing the *synopia.* Other related costs included the expense of making the scaffolding and hiring, housing and feeding the mosaicists. To underscore the unique choices that the owners of Tomb M made in the redecoration, the choice of the mosaic program rather than choosing fresco painting was much more expensive in not only time but the costs, including using gold foil tesserae throughout.[98]

Gold *Tesserae* with Dye and with Foil

By the second half of the First Century CE, gold glass *tesserae* were used for the first time but "a more frequent use is in evidence starting from the end of the Second Century CE."[99] The earliest known use can be found in the decoration of niches in the gardens of Lucillus in Rome.[100] It was not until the latter fourth and fifth centuries CE that glass and gold and silver *tesserae* became more common. By the second half of the first century CE, gold glass *tesserae* were used for the first time.[101] The main period of use of gold *tesserae* in mosaics is in the Byzantine period, which occurred after the time period of this paper's focus. Use of these colors during the period demonstrates a great amount of money spent on mosaic decoration. Tomb M,

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[98] The Edict of Diocletian on Maximum Prices was enacted by Emperor Diocletian in 301 CE. This was written to combat inflation by setting maximum prices on products, slaves and services.
[99] Boschetti. 145.
[100] Boschetti. "Vitreous Material" 81.
[101] Bartoli *et al.* 2009.

which is dominated by the color yellow, is an example. At that time, there were two ways to create this glass color: by the use of pigment or the use of gold foil. Tomb M has gold *tesserae* covered in a "*sottile foglia d'oro protetta da una cartellina vitrea, anch'essa trasparente*."[102] Either technique begins with the use of Roman colorless glass, which has been studied. During the Roman era, it is believed that this transparent glass was melted from a batch consisting of natron, a sodium carbonate mineral, and a naturally occurring silica-lime sand in which quartz and calcium were present. However, Roman yellow glass, and the pigments used, is more complex and published analytical data for this time period (between the first and seventh centuries CE) is fragmented. Chemical and mineralogical analysis of 10 yellow-hued *sectilia* of the second century CE from the Gorga Collection provide new insights into the nature of yellow glass pigment used in Roman glassmaking. The samples come from the imperial villa of Lucius Verus (161-169CE) on the Via Cassia in Rome. This provided an opportunity to provide more data on glassmaking technology and the Roman use of yellow pigments. The Gorga Collection analysis showed that both tin and antimony, which were available to Roman glassmakers, were simultaneously used in creating yellow pigments. The yellow *sectilia* were prepared in glass sheets (cast, pressed and drawn at the corners) from which pieces were cut and shaped. They were mixed with lead oxide which, depending on their proportions, created a considerable variety of yellow hues. The analysis showed a fourfold classification of these hues: (A) lemon yellow, (B) cold yellow and light green, (C) medium yellow, and (D) warm orange yellow.

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[102] Zander, Pietro. *La Necropoli di San Pietro: Arte e fede nei sotteranei della Basilica Vaticana.* Fabbrica di San Pietro in Vaticano. 2014. 299. Translation: "thin gold leaf protected by a glassy covering, also transparent."

Classifications of those found in Tomb M would fall into category C or D. Following Freestone's classification, this composition is rather typical of the Roman period.[103] This yellow-hued glass would not be achieved again until the Renaissance.[104]

The technique used by Roman glass manufacturers is not found in the archaeological evidence. The process was described in Renaissance and Nineteenth Century Venetian texts. In both cases, the gold glass cakes were composed of three layers: At the base there was a thick glass layer. Metallic foil was placed in the middle. The top layer, *cartellina,* consisted of a thin layer of glass applied to protect the gold foil. Finally, the cake was put in a furnace that was kept below the melting point of the glass, but at a temperature that allowed the cake to be pressed and flattened.

In the vault of Tomb M, it has been possible to verify the use of polychrome *tesserae* made of a transparent vitreous paste in Tomb M, which at times are covered by thin gold foil protected by a transparent glass. There are at least two different tonal gradations present in the chalky stone and white-grey mosaic *tesserae* belonging to the figures of *Christ-Helios* and the *quadriga*. The other parts of the mosaic are mainly made up of vitreous-based pastes allowing for shading (four gradations of yellow, five of green, three of blue, two of red, etc.). The *tesserae* used in the backgrounds are bigger and more regular in size (a maximum of 5mm x 7mm)

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[103]Freestone, T.C. "The Provenance of Ancient Glass through Compositional Analysis. *Materials Research Society Symposium Proceedings x852.* 2005. 1-14.
[104] Verita, Marco *etal.* "Colors of Roman Glass: An Investigation of the Yellow Sectilia in the Gorga Collection. *Journal of Glass Studies Volume 55.* 2013. 39-52

compared to those smaller and irregular tiles used for the figurative parts (a minimum of 3mm x 3mm). All are about 10mm in thickness.

There is not enough evidence to precisely define the difference in economics of the choices made by the owners of Tomb M in the redecoration in the third century CE. The mosaic redecoration of Tomb M cost was certainly much more expensive in time and materials than had the owners chosen Roman wall fresco painting. Clearly, another extraordinary decision by the owners. (APPENDICES A&B)

Comparanda

Wall and vault mosaics have no known Hellenistic predecessor. The earliest wall mosaics, dating from the second century BCE to the first century CE, consisted of a mixture of various materials that created uneven surfaces that were evocative of a natural grotto. The sacred grotto of nymphs might have been the inspiration.[105] These often-featured water sources and became popular as a feature in the Roman *domus.* With regards to Tomb M, trying to find a comparable Roman wall and vault experience is difficult. None is known in a funerary environment. A similar, ethereal experience can be found in nymphaeum. The Romans sought the love of nature found in the Hellenistic world and this extended into the garden. Nymphaeum, or monuments consecrated to nymphs, became a popular feature beginning in the later part of the First Century BCE. These artificial grottoes often featured a fountain, and cheerful non-figural ornamentation was preferred. The decoration of the nymphaeum of Neptune and Amphitrite, from the late second century BCE, in Herculaneum is unusual in that it is "quite rare to find

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[105] Lavagne. 1988. 256-320.

serious mythological themes represented in a nymphaeum."[106] The early wall mosaics in these works were created by mixing shells, pumice, Egyptian blue *tesserae* and other elements.[107] Glass came into favor because it was waterproof, but also because glass could create an environment with extremely brilliant colors. Sky blue and sea green were typically used as background colors. Increased us of these *tesserae* are found in a series of *nymphaeum* preserved in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Behind the *tablinum* in the House of Neptune and Amphitrite at Herculaneum there is a courtyard with an intricately decorated *nymphaeum* in mosaic. The house, encased in ash by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79CE, is well preserved and was "probably built in the late second century BCE."[108] The courtyard with the nymphaeum is an open-air *triclinium*. A basin with a fountain with a reservoir was hidden by the nymphaeum. The mosaic of the nymphaeum has a blue background and features vegetal motifs and hounds, stags and peacocks. There are three niches, and a statue may have been placed in one. A theatrical mask representing tragedy, comedy and satire sits atop the cornice. Scenes of dogs hunting deer adorn one niche while another shows the deities for whom the house is named. Positioned to be visible from the street, this is an intricately designed mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite. According to the myth, Neptune fell in love with Amphitrite, one of the Nereids. After shying away from Neptune's advances, Amphitrite hid in the ocean by the Pillars of Hercules, but dolphins returned her to Neptune. She ultimately bore him three children, one being Triton.

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[106] Pappalardo, Umberto and Ciardiello, Rosaria. *Greek and Roman Mosaics.* London: Abbeville Press. 2012. 199.
[107] Boschetti. "The earliest wall mosaics."
[108] Pappalardo. 205.

Figure 18. *Nymphaeum mosaic of Neptune and Amphitrite.* Photo by author.

During the early Empire, Northern Africa was known for its polychrome figure mosaics with rare unique inventions of design. One popular motif of mosaics from this area was the free-growing vegetal decorations where vines spread throughout the picture plane. While representing fertility and fruitfulness, this is a representation of the fertility god Dionysus. All-over vegetation of this type had been seen in second century CE mosaics in Italy, however they were on a white background. The African mosaics were polychrome compared to Italian mosaics of the time, which were simpler. The vegetal theme shows a deliberate disorder in its rendering. The theme of Dionysus, as well as that of Venus, was the most common of the mythological scenes. Another popular concept demonstrated in mosaics was the charioteer and the circus. The African inclination for subjects taken from the real world have given these mosaics the term "African Style." It is important to mention the mosaics at the villa at Piazza Armerina, which were most likely works of an African mosaicist in the fourth century CE. Scholars widely accept that the hunt scene there, as well as some other mosaics in the villa, were "carried out by craftsmen from

the Carthage area."[109] The mosaics found in Sousse, El DJem and Cherchell show striking similarities to the figural and vegetal elements of the mosaic program in Tomb M.

Figure 19. *Tunisian mosaic of Dionysus riding in triumph.* Photo: WikiCommons

The vault mosaic of Tomb M, *Christ-Helios* riding the chariot surrounded by grapevines, can be compared to early North African mosaics of the triumph of Dionysus. This *Christ-Helios* scene acquired exceptional popularity in the Roman Empire. During the time of Alexander the Great, the theme of Dionysus' victory in India became a symbol of triumph. The Dionysiac religion favored this representation of the god. This scene aligned well with traditional Roman sensibilities regarding iconography and religious significance of the triumphal procession. On the North African mosaics, the image of Dionysus and his *thiosos* occurred most frequently, with the triumph being most prominent. These examples are quite similar as to indicate procedures followed by mosaicists of form, detail, or composition "are to be attributed to the use of the same

[109] Ling. 96.

model or the practice of the same workshop, and not to direct imitation of one mosaic by another."[110]

One of the finest examples of early Christian art and architecture in Rome, the stunning fourth century CE mausoleum of Santa Costanza, offers a vivid insight into the Eternal City's gradual transition from early Roman Imperial antiquity to Christian monotheism. While this dates to almost a century after Tomb M was redecorated, there exists no comparable funerary examples in the period between the making of the two mosaic programs. The mausoleum was built for Constantina, the daughter of Constantine the Great. Although mostly lost, it was once elaborately decorated, recorded in some drawings dated to the Renaissance. Originally, the cupola, vaults and niches were covered with mosaic. The mosaic decorations combine mythic, secular and Christian imagery. There is a river scene, a marine scene, doves, peacocks and creeping vines. There are Dionysian panthers as well as Christian images from the Old and New Testament. Dionysiac themes were frequently used in early Christian art to symbolize the transfiguration Christ and the Eucharistic wine consumed at mass. The free-figure compositions "find their closest parallels in the pavements of North Africa."[111]

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[110] Dunbabin, Katherin. "The Triumph of Dionysis on Mosaics in No. Africa." *Papers of the British School in Rome, v.39*. 1971. 52-65.
[111] Ling. 96.

Figures 20. *Mosaic vault at Santa Costanza.* Photos by author.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Tomb M in the Vatican necropolis has become quite famous for its decorative program depicting some of the earliest known Christian mosaic imagery. The smallest of the 23 tombs excavated beneath St. Peter's basilica, Tomb M represents many aspects of Roman religion and culture in the mid-third century CE. Using Roman religious and eschatological beliefs, the parallels of Nero and his circus with martyred Peter the Apostle, the rise of Christianity and its syncretic iconography, experiential aspects, mosaic production and its overall uniqueness, the beginnings of a more detailed description of Tomb M, in terms of its use, begins to take form. Imagining the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch and emotive aspects of *refrigeria* at Tomb M, with the close proximity to the Circus of Nero and the tomb of St. Peter, brings this sacred space to life.

To date, most of the descriptions of the tomb are a small part of a larger story, usually the stories of the discoveries and excavations of all the excavated tombs in the Vatican Necropolis. Tomb M was experienced as a Roman tomb and, subsequently, as a Roman Christian tomb. Its small size makes it impossible to have had a familial celebration the dead within, celebrations which were part of the Roman calendar. While many of the excavated tombs in the Vatican necropolis have mosaic pavements, Tomb M is the only one with wall and vault mosaics. Very little is written about the tomb being strictly Roman. Most scholars believe that the image of Jonah makes the other three mosaic images (that of the fisherman, the good shepherd and *Sol Invictus*) distinctly Christian, creating a cohesive and emblematic reference to conversion, salvation, transfiguration and triumph. The owners of Tomb M, in deciding on its redecoration in

the mid-third century, made extraordinary choices. Tomb M's mosaic program tells an in-depth story of Roman religion, funerary customs, the Christian cult in the third century and the complexities of mosaic making.

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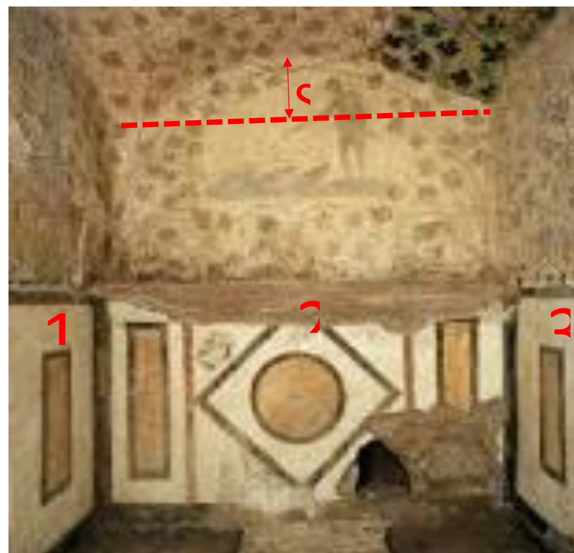
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Arch Room Area

Surface Area Calculator Tool				Color Code		
				Inputs		
Surface Area of a room with arched ceiling				Calculated		
Room Dimensions		**Wall 1**	**Wall 2**	**Wall 3**	**Wall 4**	**Ceiling**
Length	***198***	198	198	198		198
Width	***163***		163			
Wall H	***97***	97		97		
Center H	***183***					
Arch S	30					
Arch R	436					
Arch Area	6554		6554			
Arch Angle deg	22					
Area		19,206	38,828	19,206	-	32,993
Total Area	110,234					



APPENDIX B: Time

Assumptions:

1. Scholars believe that the Alexander mosaic took 5 mosaicists 5 years to complete.
2. The Alexander mosaic is 2.7m x 5.12m. With its *tesserae* measuring 2sqmm, It is estimated to contain 1,310,720 *tesserae.*
3. The Alexander mosaic uses *chiaroscuro* and shading (requiring optical blending to visualize the scene), foreshortening, and modeling of figures. The mosaic program of Tomb M uses the popular flattening of decorative elements and figures, showing them in frontal view, by not using extensive variants of color in the *tesserae.* This would make the mosaic production go quicker.

	Alexander Mosaic	Tomb M
Size	262,144sqcm	110,200sqcm
	2,621,440sqmm	1,102,000sqmm
Tesserae Size	2sqmm	9sqmmNumber of
Tesserae	1,310,710	122,444
Tesserae/Worker/Year	52,429	52,429
	5 Workers/5 years	3 workers/9.5 months