

Women Bodies and Images in Funerary Landscapes of the Late Antique Oecumene: An Analysis of Women Representation Between Idealized Pagan Antecedents and Concrete Female Power Within Christian Communities

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Abstract : The sarcophagus of Adelfia represents an iconographic unicum compared to female representations on sarcophagi. From the time of its discovery in 1872 until recent studies, the figurative program of the sarcophagus' lid has been the subject of extensive debate. Critics have been divided between those who have interpreted the scene as the life of Mary, those who have interpreted it as a depiction of Adelfia, those who saw it as a traditional representation of Moses and Christ, and those who read a particular philosophical doctrine depicting Sophia dei. Indeed, next to the female orans, Maries on the throne and female servants of Christ, the distinctiveness of the sarcophagus becomes evident and a unique scene stands out on the lid: a procession of nine women culminating with a frontal woman on the throne. Using an iconographic analysis that questions 1.the traces of the typologies of christian women found in sarcophagi and 2.the pagan models used by the artisans of Christianity, this paper aims to investigate an interpretation of the scene based on the discoveries of meaning and semantic shifts that can be understood once the model used for this iconography is found, whilst conducting a comparative analysis that underlines the importance of understanding the reasons behind this commission. Searching for the commissioner's will needs to be an interdisciplinary quest: from iconographical analysis to epigraphical and archaeological data. Considering, that several recent studies have emphasized the important female presence in the catacomb of St.Giovanni (perhaps a burial dedicated exclusively to female monastic cults?), where the sarcophagus was found, the local development of the cult of St. Lucia, and the fact that Adelfia is referred to as clarissima femina in her inscription, the present paper will try to make a transition between art and social context. Thus, this paper aims to understand whether this iconography can be an ulterior source, next to the epigraphical ones, to reconstruct the concrete role of Adelfia in local women's communities. In summary, by tracing different forms of continuity between pagan and christian practices, this paper aims to understand what the relationship between actual hierarchical power, funerary self-representations and the inherited semantics of images could tell us about the life and death of late antique Christian women.

Keywords : early Christian art, female bodies, iconography, female communities, sarcophagi

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