

Old Iconography, New Meanings? The “Christianized” Roman Hunt Sarcophagus of Bera in San Sebastiano ad Catacumbas.

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Abstract

This article surveys the takeover of Roman Hunt Sarcophagi by Christians in Late Antiquity, with a special focus on the monument for Bera in San Sebastiano ad Catacumbas². It is typically argued that their selection of these monuments was motivated by the same “worldly” concerns as their pagan neighbours. This assumption will be challenged here by exploring the potential for resemanticization in a new Christian context, and – in the case of Bera in particular – the complex intersections of gender, virtue and religion in this period.

Keywords: Roman Sarcophagi; (Hunting) Iconography; Gender; Virtue; Early Christianity.

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² This is a heavily reworked and elaborated version of a text I had started for my doctoral dissertation, before deciding that the monument demanded consideration elsewhere; I would like to thank the Gerda Henkel Foundation for generously funding my work at that time.

Introduction

The shift from cremation to inhumation at Rome in the early 2nd century CE gave rise to a prolific sarcophagus industry, which also attracted Christians³. The iconography of their sarcophagi is characterized by both continuity and change. Sarcophagi with biblical themes appeared in the later 3rd century CE, but significantly increased in popularity after the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which granted to everyone – and expressly to the Christians – the freedom to practice their own religion⁴. On the other hand, their engagement with pre-existing iconographies by no means came to an end. They not only (re)used “pagan” sarcophagi, with or without alterations⁵, but also incorporated long-standing motifs into their creations and interpreted them in a particularly Christian way (e.g. Good Shepherd, Orante)⁶.

³ KOCH, G. **Frühchristliche Sarkophage**. Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000, p. 1-6. The first sarcophagus that was surely used by a Christian dates to ca. 270 CE.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For discussion, KOCH (2000), op. cit., 7-14; see also STUDER-KARLEN, M. **Verstorbenenendarstellungen auf frühchristlichen Sarkophagen**. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012, p. 59-170.

⁶ For discussion, KOCH (2000), op. cit., p. 15-28; see also STUDER-KARLEN, op. cit., p. 171-217.



Fig.1.

Roman Lion Hunt Sarcophagus for Bera.

Casket: 290-300 CE.

Portrait Head/Inscription: 315 CE. L. 2.09 m, H. 0.81 m.

Museo, San Sebastiano (Rome, Italy).

Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 79.1847, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/2262140>; Photographer: H. Schwanke.

One of the most striking types of “pagan” sarcophagi adopted by Christians is the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus⁷. The main hunter on horseback is typically furnished with a portrait of a male deceased⁸, but in exceptional cases, this position is usurped by a female deceased⁹. This paper will broadly explore the appeal of Roman Hunt Sarcophagi to Christians, with a special focus on the monument for Bera in San Sebastiano ad Catacumbas [fig.1]¹⁰. There is little doubt that these monuments were designed to signify the personal qualities and social standing of the deceased; as such, it is

⁷ For the Roman Hunt Sarcophagi, see ANDREAE, B. **Die Sarkophage mit Darstellungen aus dem Menschenleben II. Die römischen Jagdsarkophage**. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1980.

⁸ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

⁹ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 169-170 cat. 150; MIKOCKI. **Collection de la Princesse Radziwiłł. Les monuments antiques et antiquisants d'Arcadie et du Château de Nieborów**. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1995, p. 118-119 cat. 58.

¹⁰ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 169-170 cat. 150.

generally assumed that these purely secular connotations were simply transferred to Christians as well¹¹. This assumption will be challenged here by exploring the potential for resemanticization in a new Christian context, and – in the case of Bera in particular – the complex intersections of gender, virtue and religion in this period¹².

Description of the Sarcophagus of Bera

The Roman Hunt Sarcophagus located in San Sebastiano ad Catacumbas (Rome, Italy) [fig. 1] was discovered in a fragmentary state¹³. It was possible to piece back together the right side of the lid, large portions of the front side of the casket, as well as the left side of the casket; this revealed a monument measuring approximately 2.09 m in length and 0.81 m in height.

The tabula on the lid contains an irregularly engraved inscription: DEP(OSITIO) BERAЕ/ V KAL(ENDAS) MART(IAS)¹⁴. This indicates that the monument commemorated a female, named Bera. “In Christian thought, the burial was a *depositio*, a temporary placement of the person until the day of resurrection – this term appears in many Christian funerary inscriptions”¹⁵. As such, the mention of her date of burial (on the 5th day

¹¹ See below (“Hunting Imagery in Early Christian Contexts”).

¹² The search for theological content and dogmatic messages in early Christian visual culture has been largely abandoned; it is now approached as a pictorial language that developed gradually and within its broader pagan environment; for discussion, see ZIMMERMANN, N. “Catacombs and the Beginnings of Christian Tomb Decoration”. In: BORG, B.E (Ed.). **A Companion to Roman Art**. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2015, p. 452-470. p. 453-454. If the proposal to search for specifically Christian messages in Roman Hunt Sarcophagi seems like a step backwards, this is not the case: the visual culture will be considered in its own right, from the perspective of Christians who were immersed in a Roman visual language, but with the potential to perceive this in light of their own religious background.

¹³ For the sarcophagus, ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 169-170 cat. 150.

¹⁴ For the lid and its inscription, DEICHMANN, F.W. et al. **Repertorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage 1. Rom und Ostia**. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1967, p. 155 cat. 298.

¹⁵ CHILDERS, J.W. “Funerary Practices”. In: FERGUSON, E.; MCHUGH, M.P.; NORRIS, F.W. (Eds.). **Encyclopedia of Early Christianity: Second Edition**. London/New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 443-444. p. 443.

before the Kalends of March) identifies her as a member of the Christian community¹⁶.

The front side of the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus – produced between 290-300 CE¹⁷ – is divided into two scenes. To the left is the departure scene, featuring a headless male protagonist in hunting dress and holding a scroll. It was common to furnish him with individualized features, which match those of the main hunter in the next scene, but this cannot be confirmed here¹⁸.

The following scene features the hunt itself. The main hunter on horseback is placed in a prominent position, at the center of the relief, with all of the assistants focused on him; he valiantly charges towards a springing lion, closely followed by the goddess Virtus. He is dressed in a long-sleeved tunic, reaching to just above the knees, a cloak pinned on the right shoulder, short trousers and perhaps fur boots¹⁹. Unlike a lot of lion hunters, he does not hold up a spear in his right hand, but instead makes a triumphant, openhanded gesture²⁰.

¹⁶ This is generally accepted, e.g. ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 100; BIRK, S. **Depicting the Dead. Self-Representation and Commemoration on Roman Sarcophagi with Portraits**. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013, p. 291 cat. 511; DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., 155 cat. 298; SANDE, S. "The Female Hunter and other Examples of Change of Sex and Gender on Roman Sarcophagus Reliefs". *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, Rome, v. 22, p. 55-86, 2009, p. 61-62.

¹⁷ ANDREAE 1980, op. cit., p. 100.

¹⁸ For some examples, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 155 cat. 65; 157-158 cat. 75; 167 cat. 128; 167-168 cat. 131; 177 cat. 204; 177-178 cat. 206; 178 cat. 208.

¹⁹ The fur boots are not preserved, but this is the standard footwear here.

²⁰ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 99. For the significance of the openhanded gesture, see below ("Openhanded Gesture"). It is nevertheless clear that the lion has been struck in the flank.



Fig. 2a & 2b.

Detail of the Roman Lion Hunt Sarcophagus for Bera: Portrait Head of Bera (front and profile views).
Casket: 290-300 CE.

Portrait Head/Inscription: 315 CE.

Museo, San Sebastiano (Rome, Italy).

Photos: Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, Neg. Fitt69-42-02, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/155705> & Neg. Fitt69-42-01, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/155704>; Photographer: G. Fittschen-Badura

It is striking that the head of the hunter was furnished with female portrait features [figs. 2a & b], undoubtedly those of Bera herself²¹. She has a round and fleshy face with full cheeks, elongated eyes with large lids, a wide nose, a small mouth with pursed lips, and a rounded but protruding chin. The hair is parted at the middle and combed to the sides into undulating locks, which are tucked behind the ears and then seemingly folded upwards at the back²². It is difficult to judge her age²³: the

²¹ B. Andreae was the first to recognize that this is a female portrait, ANDREAE, *op. cit.*, p. 100. For further commentary on the portrait head, see BIRK, S. "Women or Man? Cross-Gendering and Individuality on Third Century Roman Sarcophagi". In: ELSNER, J.; HUSKINSON, J. (Eds.). **Life, Death and Representation. Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi**. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011. p. 229-260. p. 248; BIRK (2013), *op. cit.*, p. 137; VACCARO MELUCCO, A. "Sarcophagi romani di caccia al leone". **Studi miscellanei**, Rome, v. 11, 1963-1964, p. 35.

²² ANDREAE (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 100. There is no clear indication of plaits woven upwards from the neck, which were common in female portraiture of the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, see BERGMANN, M. **Studien zum römischen Porträt des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.**. Bonn: Rudolf Habelt Verlag, 1977, p. 180-200. However, the use of a boss intended for the addition of male features resulted in a rather flat and schematic rendering of the coiffure, so the strands of hair over the central part are probably stylized plaits.

physiognomy is not necessarily that of a girl, since these features are common in female portraiture at the time as a whole²⁴. The casket – measuring ca. 2.09 m in length – certainly permitted for the burial of a woman. The portrait head was carved from a boss with a wide flat chisel around 315 CE²⁵.

The left side of the casket is decorated with animals and trees; the right side is not preserved.

The lid of the sarcophagus is likewise divided into two scenes (one on each side of the tabula), but only the left one is still extant²⁶. This features a banquet. Men recline and dine on a sigma-shaped couch, with the boar's head and loaves of bread in front of them.

²³ This is in part due to the poor quality of the carving.

²⁴ BERGMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁵ VACCARO MELUCCO, *op. cit.*, p. 35; ANDREAE (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 100. This date is based on the similarities to the new reliefs on the Arch of Constantine.

²⁶ For the lid and its inscription, DEICHMANN et al., *op. cit.*, p. 155 cat. 298.

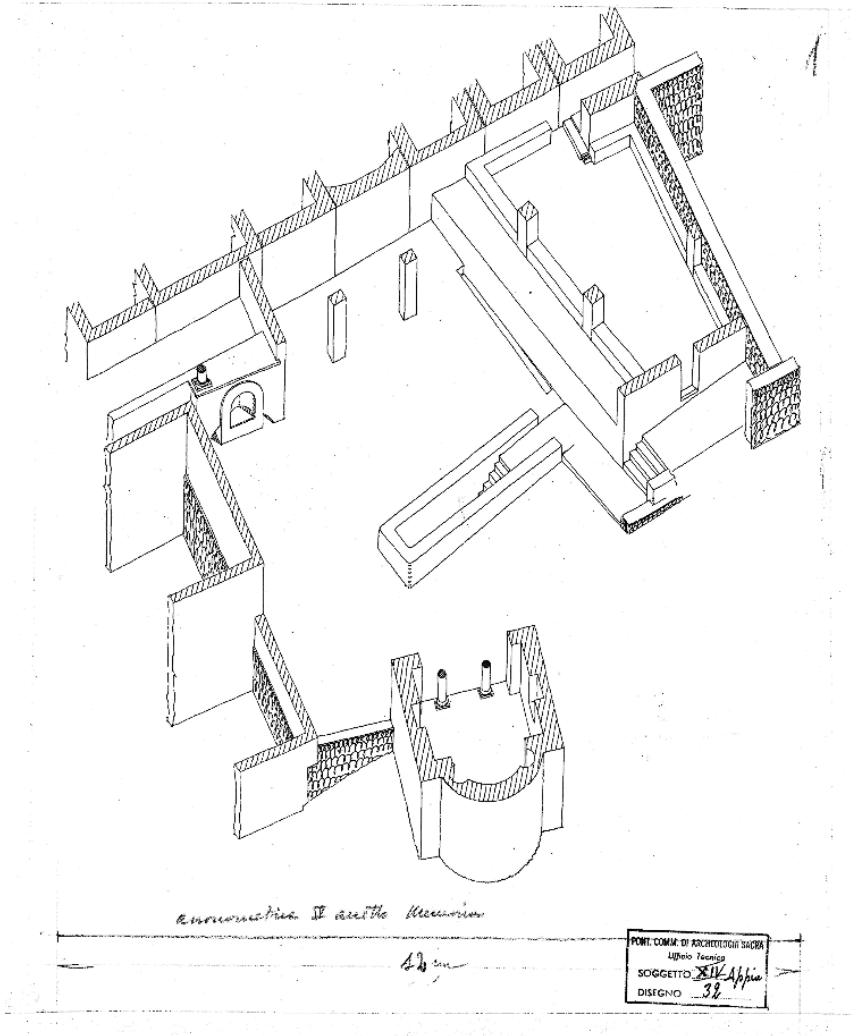


Fig. 3
Isometric Reconstruction of the Triclia and Mausoleum δ underneath the Basilica Apostolorum (S. Sebastiano).
© Archivio Fotografico PCAS.

The monument was discovered at the third mile of the Via Appia, beneath the ancient Basilica Apostolorum²⁷. It was placed in Mausoleum δ, consisting of a rectangular chamber with two columns *in antis* at the front and an apse at the back; it opened directly onto the so-called Triclia [fig. 3]. The mausoleum was built in the middle of the 3rd century CE at the earliest, and closed off with the construction of the Basilica Apostolorum in the early 4th century CE²⁸.

It is heavily debated whether this mausoleum was used for Christians in particular. On the one hand, the burial chamber was located next to the funerary cult of the apostles Peter and Paul, suggesting that it was intended for prominent Christians²⁹; on the other hand, it was probably built during the Tetrarchic Period, when Christian structures – which are not obvious here – were apparently falling out of use or perhaps even deliberately destroyed³⁰. While this question cannot be definitively resolved here, it is suffice to say that the sarcophagus under consideration was eventually (re-)used for a female member of the Christian community in the Constantinian Period, when this religion was officially permitted by the emperor.

²⁷ For the physical display context of the sarcophagus, see BORG, B.E **Crisis and Ambition. Tombs and Burial Customs in Third-Century CE Rome**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 55-56.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See KJÆRGAARD, J. "From Memoria Apostolorum to Basilica Apostolorum. On the Early Christian cult-centre on the Via Appia". **Analecta Romana Instituti Danici**, Copenhagen, 13, p. 59-76, 1984, *passim*.

³⁰ See KJÆRGAARD, op. cit., p. 67-68; BORG, op. cit., p. 55-56; BRANDENBURG, H. **Roms frühchristliche Basiliken des 4. Jahrhunderts**. Munich: Heyne, 1979, p. 87-88; SICHTERMANN, H. "Der Ganymed-Sarkophag von San Sebastiano". *Archäologischer Anzeiger*, Berlin, p. 462-470, 1977, p. 463. 465-466; of course, this does not take into account the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus for Bera.

The Female Deceased as a Male Hunter – An Unconventional Monument

There is nothing to suggest that Roman Hunt Sarcophagi were conceived of as unisex monuments. The role of the main hunter is as a rule assumed by males, only rarely by females³¹. The unfinished bosses could easily accommodate male portrait heads³², but not the fashionable hairstyles for females in this period³³. It is true that other types of funerary monuments with hunting iconography were developed to commemorate deceased females [fig. 6]³⁴, but there is no reason to believe that this was the case here as well.

This begs the question: how did Bera come to appear in the guise of a lion hunter?

It is necessary to consider the patrons of this monument, as well as the circumstances of its acquisition and use. In general, patrons selected funerary monuments either for themselves (and often their relatives), or else just for their deceased relatives: as such, the imagery is potentially prospective, in terms of anticipating death and potentially the afterlife; in the present, in terms of coping with loss; or retrospective, in terms of reflecting

³¹ The only parallel for portraying a female deceased in the guise of the main hunter is on the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus at Nieborów Palace (Poland), see MIKOCKI, *op. cit.*, p. 118-119 cat. 58. It is certainly possible that the monument commemorated a Christian, but there is no compelling evidence for this either.

³² See ANDREAE (1980), *op. cit.*, *passim*.

³³ Female portrait heads in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries CE have coiffures with heavy plaits, folded up over the central part, and usually forming a loop of hair on the neck, see BERGMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 180-200. In order to produce portrait heads for women on sarcophagi in this period, it was necessary to prepare helmet-shaped bosses. Since these are lacking on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi, females were clearly never a consideration here.

³⁴ Women are portrayed in the guise of mythical huntresses (e.g. Diana, Atalante), or else demythologized versions of them, see HOLLAENDER, S. **Portraits of Women as Goddesses and Heroines in Cross-Gendered Dress from the Roman Imperial Period**. PhD Thesis. University of Alberta, Prof. Dr. Steven Hijmans and Prof. Dr. Margriet Haagsma. Edmonton 2021, p. 301-401. The female deceased as a male hunter is quite different though, since the sex of the female deceased and her role model do not match.

on the lives of the deceased.³⁵ The production of sarcophagi also varies, depending on the relative influence of the quarries, the local workshops, and the consumer on the final product³⁶. There was the option to produce a monument by special commission, to choose a monument already in stock (with the potential for “customerization”), or to re-use an older monument.³⁷

It appears that this Roman Hunt Sarcophagus was originally purchased in the final decade of the 3rd century CE for the interment of a man³⁸. The production-to-stock model was economically viable in this case. As a general principle, “the more predictable the market and the more formulaic the decoration, the more feasible it was for a workshop with sufficient capital to produce a sarcophagus with blank portrait to stock”³⁹. The production of sarcophagi at Rome reached its zenith in the 3rd century CE⁴⁰ and this type was clearly in high demand, so the risk of not selling off these ready-made products was presumably low⁴¹. Moreover, imagery on sarcophagi was standardized due to the consumer desire for a universally

³⁵ R. Bielfeldt stresses that sarcophagi were also for the living, not (as repeatedly assumed) just for the dead, BIELFELDT, R. “Vivi fecerunt. Roman Sarcophagi for and by the Living”. In: HALLETT, C.H. (Ed.). **Flesheaters. An International Symposium on Roman Sarcophagi. Berkeley 18-19 September 2009**. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2019, p. 65-96. p. 68-75.

³⁶ According to an influential theory by J.B. Ward-Perkins, monuments were partially prefabricated in quarry workshops, exported to local sculpting workshops for completion, and then sold from a stock, e.g. WARD-PERKINS, J.B. “Nicomedia and the Marble Trade”. **Papers of the British School at Rome**, London/Cambridge, v. 48, p. 23-69, 1980, *passim*. The production-to-stock model was, however, not necessarily the norm: others argue that workshops often responded to individual orders, allowing for greater input on the part of the patron, e.g. RUSSELL, B. “The Roman Sarcophagus ‘Industry’. A Reconsideration”. In: ELSNER, J.; HUSKINSON, J. (Eds.). **Life, Death and Representation. Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi**. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011, p. 119-147. *passim*.

³⁷ For discussion, see e.g. HUSKINSON, J. **Roman Children’s Sarcophagi. Their Decoration and its Social Significance**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 79-80.

³⁸ The length of the casket – exceeding 2 m – as well as the representation of mature, bearded hunters, is fitting for the burial of an adult. See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*. Whether it was purchased by himself or by his relatives is not clear though.

³⁹ RUSSELL, op. cit., p. 138 (note that the quote has been rearranged).

⁴⁰ RUSSELL, op. cit., p. 138.

⁴¹ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 143-185.

recognizable visual code, with the capacity to produce certain evocations (e.g. social status, emotions, virtue) in their commemorative contexts⁴². The Roman Hunt Sarcophagi follow standard iconographic schemes (e.g. lion hunt, boar hunt, battue hunt) with little variation⁴³. Personalization was a secondary concern: these monuments had unfinished tabulae and bosses to carve out later⁴⁴. Based on this, it is highly likely that the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus in San Sebastiano – which is hardly unique in the corpus⁴⁵ – was originally purchased from a stock as well.

There was a significant gap between the production of this sarcophagus (290-300 CE) and the carving of the portrait head (315 CE); moreover, the carelessly executed inscription is surely not the original one⁴⁶. This strongly suggests that the sarcophagus was reused for Bera⁴⁷. It follows that the monument was in all likelihood selected not by Bera herself, but by her relatives, and probably not under the most ideal circumstances⁴⁸. Regardless of her age, we should not attribute too much agency to the

⁴² RUSSELL, op. cit., p. 136.

⁴³ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 107.

⁴⁴ This strongly suggests that the monuments were in fact available on stock. There are, however, other explanations for unfinished portrait heads, ranging from practical to purposeful, see e.g. ANDREAE, B. "Bossierte Porträts auf römischen Sarkophagen. Ein ungelöstes Problem". In: ANDREAE, B. (Ed.). **Symposium über die Antiken Sarkophage. Pisa 5.-12. September 1982, Marburger Winckelmann-Programm 1984**. Marburg/Lahn: Verlag des Kunstgeschichtlichen Seminars, 1984. p. 109-128. *passim*; HUSKINSON, J. "'Unfinished Portrait Heads' on Later Roman Sarcophagi. Some New Perspectives". **Papers of the British School at Rome**, London/Cambridge, v. 66, p. 129-158, 1998, *passim*; RUSSELL, op. cit., p. 138-141.

⁴⁵ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

⁴⁶ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 100.

⁴⁷ Ibid. It was more common to reuse sarcophagi and to re-carve their portraits in the early Christian period, see PRUSAC, M. **From Face to Face. Carving of Roman Portraits and the Late-Antique Portrait Arts**. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011, p. 118-122.

⁴⁸ It is not possible to get into detail about it here, but it seems that the only other Roman Hunt Sarcophagus with a portrait of the female deceased as a lion hunter (see MIKOCKI, op. cit., p. 118-119 cat. 58) was a children's monument, which was purchased off the rack for the female deceased; the purchase of the sarcophagus on the occasion of her death was also more likely to involve compromises.

female deceased in the selection of this unconventional motif, but rather consider the motivations of her bereaved relatives⁴⁹.

Overall, it appears that the use of this Roman Hunt Sarcophagi for Bera was partially borne out of practicality: that is, simply using whatever was available, even an old monument. In any case, it should be stressed that this sarcophagus was evidently considered suitable for her⁵⁰. The fact that her portrait was even carved onto the main hunter, with a fully male body and dress, underlines this point all the more. The options might have simply been limited, but the result was evidently a praiseworthy form of commemoration among her social group.

Encoding Virtue

Virtus

The Hunt & Virtus⁵¹

It is generally agreed that Roman Hunt Sarcophagi, and especially their portraits of men as hunters, primarily evoke the *virtus* of the male deceased⁵², which is broadly defined as “manliness, manhood, i.e. the sum of all the corporeal and mental excellences of man, *strength, vigor, bravery, courage; aptness, capacity, worth, excellence, virtue, etc.*”⁵³.

⁴⁹ In contrast, S. Sande and S. Birk argue that the selection of such monuments was completely intentional, especially by attributing a high degree of agency to the female deceased, Birk (2011), op. cit., p. 249; Birk (2013), op. cit., p. 138, Sande 2009, op. cit., p. 61-63.

⁵⁰ As M. Prusac observes, the existence of cross-gendered portraits on sarcophagi indicates that – due to the suddenness of death especially – burial norms were rather flexible, and that various solutions were accepted for the commemoration of the deceased, PRUSAC, op. cit., p. 120-121. However, S. Sande rightly recognizes that the portrait heads of men cannot easily be placed on female bodies without further alterations; in contrast, the portrait heads of women can be placed on male bodies with relative ease, SANDE, op. cit., p. 55. 83-84.

⁵¹ Note that this section is a reworked excerpt from my doctoral dissertation, see HOLLAENDER, op. cit., p. 286-287.

⁵² ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 135-136 (he also interprets killing the lion as a sign of overcoming death, in the sense that it has no power over him). For further discussion on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi, as well as their connotations of *virtus*, BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 107-113; BORG, op. cit., p. 178-182; ZANKER, P.; EWALD, B.C. **Mit Mythen leben. Die Bilderwelt der römischen Sarkophage**. Munich: Hirmer, 2004, 225-227.

⁵³ LEWIS, C.T.; SHORT, C. **A Latin Dictionary**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879, p. 1997 (s.v. *virtus*). For discussion on the significance of *virtus*, see e.g. BALMACEDA, C. **Virtus Romana. Politics and**



Fig. 4

Roman Hippolytus Sarcophagus.

210-220 CE. L. 2.02 m, H. 0.62 m, D. 0.66 m.

Museo Gregoriano Profano, Musei Vaticani (Vatican City State), inv. 10400. Photo: Forschungsarchiv für Antike Plastik, Neg. FA-S5707-01, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/465891>; Photographer: G. Geng

Morality in the Roman Historians. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017, p. 14-47; EISENHUT, W. **Virtus romana. Ihre Stellung im römischen Wertsystem.** Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1973, *passim*; MCDONNELL, M.A. **Roman Manliness. Virtus and the Roman Republic.** Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 12-141; VAN HOUDT, T. et al. "Introduction. The Semantics and Pragmatics of Virtus". In: PAETOENS, G.; ROSKAM, G.; VAN HOUDT, T. (Eds.). **Virtus Imago. Studies on the Conceptualisation and Transformation of an Ancient Ideal.** Leuven/Dudley: Peeters, 2004, p. 1-26. *passim*.



Fig. 5

Roman Lion Hunt Sarcophagus.

ca. 235 CE. L. 2.19 m, H. 0.90 m, D. 0.18 m.

Musée du Louvre (Paris, France), inv. Ma 346.

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Hunting imagery signifying *virtus* served as a form of self-representation at Rome and its environs by the reign of Domitian at the latest⁵⁴. It was a popular theme on mythological sarcophagi (e.g. Adonis, Meleager, Hippolytus)⁵⁵. The image of Hippolytus hunting on horseback and accompanied by Virtus [fig. 4] was demythologized in Roman workshops between 220-230 CE⁵⁶. This gave rise to the Roman Hunt Sarcophagi: here, the central hunter is no longer portrayed nude and pursuing a boar, but dressed in contemporary attire and valiantly pursuing a lion [fig. 5]⁵⁷. It

⁵⁴ TUCK, S.L. "The Origins of Roman Imperial Hunting Imagery. Domitian and the Redefinition of *virtus* under the Principate". *Greece & Rome*, Oxford, v. 52, p. 221-245, 2005, *passim*.

⁵⁵ For the Adonis Sarcophagi, GRASSINGER, D. *Die mythologischen Sarkophage I. Achill, Adonis, Aeneas, Aktaion, Alkestis, Amazonen. (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs 12, 1)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1999, p. 70-90, 211-221 cat. 43-67. For the Meleager Sarcophagi, KOCH, G. *Die mythologischen Sarkophage VI. Meleager. (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs 12, 6)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1975, *passim*. For the Hippolytus Sarcophagi, ROBERT, C. *Einzelmithen II. Hippolytos-Meleagros. (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs 3, 2)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1904, p. 169-219 cat. 144-179.

⁵⁶ For the emergence of the Roman Hunt Sarcophagi, ANDREAE (1980), *op. cit.*, p. 17-32.

⁵⁷ See ANDREAE (1980), *op. cit.*, *passim*.

was the prerogative of the emperor and his inner circle to pursue this noble beast in Roman society⁵⁸; as such, the theme is ultimately taken over from imperial imagery, with the iconography naturally developing in the workshop⁵⁹.

The Roman Hunt Sarcophagi practically always include portraits of deceased males.⁶⁰ He is shown in the hunt scene as the main protagonist on horseback; if a departure scene is included as well, then he is shown once again as a military commander.

This trend towards demythologization and personalization resulted from shifting concerns in commemoration during the 3rd century CE.⁶¹ It is true that both heroic and “realistic” hunts refer to the *virtus* of the male deceased, but in a profoundly different manner. The mythical narrative of Hippolytus is pushed into the background on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi – including all of its potentially problematic connotations (e.g. inappropriate relationships, excessive passions) – in order to highlight the hunting theme in particular. Moreover, the direct identification through portraits and contemporary dress makes the relevance of the *virtus* theme to the male deceased unmistakable. The point of comparison is no longer a mythical hero, which focuses on his perfect, youthful body, with all of its sensual connotations, but rather the emperor, which emphasizes the maturity, gravity and at times the high status of the male deceased.

⁵⁸ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 135.

⁵⁹ It is true that the general format (i.e. the lion springing towards the main hunter) is a natural result of demythologization, ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 22-23. The influence of imperial imagery is nevertheless clear: there are, for instance, coins with the emperor hunting a lion on horseback with the legend *VIRTUS AVGVSTI*, VACCARO MELUCCO, op. cit., p. 45-48.

⁶⁰ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

⁶¹ BORG, op. cit., p. 178-182.

The portrait of Bera as a lion hunter on the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus should be understood in the same way: that is, as a marker of her *virtus*.⁶² It is notable that “their own biological sex seems to have been no hindrance to their use of this iconography”;⁶³ moreover, by drawing on well-established male models for *virtus*, the evocation is completely unambiguous.

Women & Virtus

It would seem inconceivable that *virtus* (i.e. “manliness”) is relevant to women at all. By the late Republican Period though, *virtus* encompassed a range of corporeal and mental qualities, allowing for its extension to the female sex⁶⁴. Contemporary women are rarely praised for physical acts of courage in literary and epigraphic sources; instead, they are praised for deeds requiring mental fortitude, enduring hardships, or for their “virtue” in general⁶⁵. In addition, they are only attributed *virtus* in exceptional cases and in a highly qualified way⁶⁶.

⁶² BIRK (2011), op. cit., p. 248-249; BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 137-138; BORG, op. cit., p. 181; HUSKINSON, J. “Representing Women on Roman Sarcophagi.” In: MCCLANAN, A.L.; ENCAMACIÓN, K.R. (Eds.). **The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 11-31. p. 26-28; SANDE, op. cit., p. 61-63. It is possible that the equestrian motif also highlighted the social standing of their families, see e.g. GRASSINGER, op. cit., p. 98.

⁶³ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 138.

⁶⁴ MCDONNELL, op. cit., p. 161-165.

⁶⁵ For discussion, see HOLLAENDER, op. cit., p. 409-420.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*



Fig. 6

Roman Funerary Altar for Aelia Procula.

ca. 140 CE. L. 0.72 m, H. 0.85 m, D. 0.39 m.

Musée du Louvre (Paris, France), inv. Ma 1633.

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Women of all ages were praised for their *virtus* in portraiture as well. They are portrayed in the company of *Virtus*, the goddess of “manliness” herself⁶⁷; they are also portrayed in the guise of mythical role models of the same sex – including huntresses, such as *Diana* and *Atalante* – whose dress and actions strike a careful balance between their masculine virtues

⁶⁷ REINSBERG, C. *Die Sarkophage mit Darstellungen aus dem Menschenleben III. Vita romana. (Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs 1, 3)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 2006, p. 107-109, 213-214 cat. 213.

and traditional female roles [fig. 6]⁶⁸. It is certainly unusual that for Bera, the avatar for evoking *virtus* is completely male/masculine; there is seemingly no parallel for this. It ought to be pointed out though, that in the process of repurposing sarcophagi for members of the opposite sex, the portrait heads of females could be placed with relative ease on male bodies with masculine dress (e.g. togati, philosophers, learned men)⁶⁹. As such, this portrait type is completely unique, yet its production still fits into broader trends.

We could therefore easily stop there, by accepting – as many already have – that women could in fact be praised for *virtus* in their portraiture, and, in this exceptional case at least, with purely masculine visual codes. There is, however, yet another point of intersection worth exploring: namely, her “religious identity”. With the coming of Christianity, the expression of identity on Roman sarcophagi changed focus: “... the concept of social identity, understood as the aim of defining one’s self and place within society, was paramount in relation to pagan sarcophagi, whereas what could be termed ‘religious identity’, or a special focus on the individual in relation to religion, was increasingly significant for Christian sarcophagi.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ It has been recognized that portraits of women as mythical warrioresses and huntresses evoke *virtus*, or at least qualities related to *virtus* (e.g. strength, courage), e.g. BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 137; BORG, op. cit., p. 170. 173. 181; D’AMBRA, E. “Daughters as Diana. Mythological Models in Roman Portraiture”. In: Bell, S.; Hansen, I.L. (Eds.). **Role Models in the Roman World. Identity and Assimilation**. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008, p. 171-183. *passim*; FENDT, A. “Schön und stark wie eine Amazone. Zur Konstruktion eines antiken Identifikationsmodells. Amazonendarstellungen auf einem Achill-Penthesilea-Sarkophag als Bilder für Vorstellung von Weiblichkeit im 3. Jh. n. Chr.”. In: Socj, N. (Ed.). **Neue Fragen, neue Antworten. Antike Kunst als Thema der Gender Studies**. Berlin: Lit, 2005, p. 77-94. *passim*; HANSEN, I.L. “Gendered Identities and the Conformity of Male-Female Virtues on Roman Mythological Sarcophagi”. In: Lovén, L.L.; Strömberg, A. (Eds.). **Public Roles and Personal Status. Men and Women in Antiquity. Proceedings of the Third Nordic Symposium on Gender and Women’s History in Antiquity Copenhagen 3-5 October 2003**. Sävedalen: Paul Åströms, 2007, p. 107-121. *passim*. For a systematic exploration of the interplay between the attributions of *virtus* to contemporary women in Roman society and the visual codes in their portrait types, see HOLLAENDER, op. cit., 2021, p. 421-447.

⁶⁹ SANDE, op. cit., p. 55. 83-84.

⁷⁰ For discussion, see BIRK, S. “Using Images for Self-Representation on Roman Sarcophagi”. In: BIRK, S.; KRISTENSEN, T. M.; POULSEN, B. (Eds.). In: **Using Images in Late Antiquity**. Oxford/Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2014, p. 34-47. p. 42-44. (Quote from BIRK, S. “The Christian Muse. Continuity and Change in the Representations of Women on Late Roman Sarcophagi”. In: KOCH, G. (Ed.). **Akten des Symposiums Römische Sarkophage. Marburg, 2.-8. Juli 2006**. Marburg:

It is therefore worth exploring the possibility that this unique form of commemoration conveyed a specifically Christian message, at least within her community.

Early Christianity & Virtus Hunting Imagery in Early Christian Contexts

The biblical texts reveal an ambivalent attitude towards hunting. David hunted lions and bears to protect his father's livestock, which ultimately gave him the confidence to challenge Goliath⁷¹. When Samson was threatened by a lion, he was filled with the spirit of God and suddenly had the power to slay this beast with his bare hands⁷². As such, hunting was associated in the biblical texts not only with physical prowess and courage, but also godly power. On the other hand, early Christian authors viewed hunting in a predominantly negative way – connecting it with impiety, cruelty and “worldly” concerns – at times leading forth biblical examples (i.e. Nimrod, Esau) to support this notion⁷³.

The important point here though is not how hunting was perceived by Christians in reality, but in their visual culture. Hunting imagery was not particularly popular among Christians in the 3rd to 5th centuries CE, but never loses its special status and symbolic power⁷⁴. Most notably, the

Eigenverlag des Archäologischen Seminars der Philipps-Universität, 2016, p. 63-72. p. 63). She also connects this trend back to a decrease in the usage, variety and prominence of portraits on sarcophagi, as well as a diminishing concern for realism and individualism. None of this applies to the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus for Bera. However, the important point here is that portraits are not given up by Christians (at least not until 330 CE), but simply used in a different way: they are placed next to biblical themes (without being identified with their protagonists) and primarily concerned with the individual's spiritual qualities and religious affiliation.

⁷¹ 1 Samuel 17.34–36; 2 Samuel 23.20; GOLDBERG, E.J. **In the Manner of the Franks. Hunting, Kingship, and Masculinity in Early Medieval Europe**. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, p. 37.

⁷² Judges 14.6; see also Judges 15.4; GOLDBERG, op. cit., p. 203.

⁷³ GOLDBERG, op. cit., p. 203.

⁷⁴ For examples, see BRAVI, A. “The Art of Late Antiquity. A Contextual Approach”. In: BORG, B.E (Ed.). **A Companion to Roman Art**. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2015, p. 130-149. p. 138-139; GOLDBERG, op. cit., p. 15-17. 26-27. 42. See also fig. 11.

theme appears in funerary settings, including the mausoleum possibly of Constantine's son Constans I⁷⁵, catacomb paintings⁷⁶ and sarcophagi⁷⁷. It is also manifested through specifically biblical tales in these settings (e.g. Samson slaying the lion)⁷⁸. As such, the theme was clearly accepted by Christians, both among the imperial family and private persons.



Fig. 7

Roman Lion Hunt Sarcophagus.

290-300 CE. L. 2.10 m, H. 1.09 m, D. 0.63 m.

Catacombe del Cimitero maggiore, Regione delle Cattedre, Cubiculum K (Rome, Italy).

Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 78.106, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/2262077>; Photographer: C. Rossa

⁷⁵ BRAVI, op. cit., p. 141. (It is at least frequently identified as the tomb of Constans.)

⁷⁶ FIOCCHI NICOLAI, V. et al. **Roms Christliche Katakomben. Geschichte – Bilderwelt – Inschriften.** (2nd Edition). Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2000, p. 106-109.

⁷⁷ For examples of sarcophagi with hunting themes used by Christians (both at Rome and elsewhere), see DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 3-4. cat. 2, 6f. cat. 6, 86 cat. 126, 116-119 cat. 188, 214 cat. 513, 348 cat. 830, 415 cat. 992; ULBERT, T.; DRESKEN-WEILAND, J. **Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage 2. Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt.** Mainz: von Zabern, 1998, p. 70-71 cat. 185, 101 cat. 292, 249-250 cat. 519, 250-251 cat. 520, 259 cat. 549. 550, 293-295 cat. 642.

⁷⁸ BRATTON, S.P. **Environmental Values in Christian Art.** Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, p. 21.



Fig. 8

Roman Battue Hunt Sarcophagus.

370-380 CE. L. 2.08 m, H. 0.98 m, D. 0.55 m.

Centrale Montemartini, Musei Capitolini (Rome, Italy), inv. 837.

Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 2001.2253, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/2264234>; Photographer: K. Anger

Roman Hunt Sarcophagi were (re)used for Christian men with relative ease in the late 3rd and 4th centuries CE⁷⁹. In fact, this was one of the few types to survive production after the Constantinian Period⁸⁰. The lion hunt was displaced by the battue hunt in the third decade of the 4th century CE; the former clearly appealed to the Christians (also for later cases of re-use) [fig. 7], but the latter was eventually favoured, due to its capacity to signify *virtus* through valorous yet “down-to-earth” visual codes (e.g. boar/deer hunt) [fig. 8].⁸¹ Moreover, the fact that hunting imagery was included on the lids of

⁷⁹ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 153-154 cat. 59; 158-159 cat. 78; 164 cat. 112; 183 cat. 240. It is quite likely that others (especially later examples) belonged to Christians as well.

⁸⁰ BRANDENBURG, H. “Ende der antiken Sarkophagkunst in Rom. Pagane und christliche Sarkophage im 4. Jahrhundert”. In: KOCH, G. (Ed.). **Akten des Symposiums “Frühchristliche Sarkophage”**. Marburg, 30.6.-4.7.1999. Mainz. P. von Zabern, 2002, p. 19-39. p. 29.

⁸¹ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 127-130. To summarize, B. Andrae argues that the lion hunt iconography was not really appealing to the Christians, and therefore resulted in its abandonment. It is important to note, however, that the theme was still used by Christians, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit.,

caskets with biblical themes from Roman workshops⁸² indicates its continued, albeit subordinate relevance.



Fig. 9
Lid of the Sarcophagus for Aurelia Heliodora.
Early 4th century CE. Catacombe di Domitilla (Rome, Italy).
Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 64.1731, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/2261580>

Quite interestingly, sarcophagi with hunting iconography produced in Roman workshops were dedicated not just to Christian men, but also to Christian women. The portrayal of Bera in the guise of a hunter is basically unique⁸³, but the hunting iconography was evidently appropriate for

p. 158-159 cat. 78, 183 cat. 240). He also argues that the battue hunt iconography was not specifically Christian, but developed within their broader social strata and was readily accepted by them. Just as the image of Hippolytus hunting a boar on horseback had been demythologized to produce the lion hunter, the images of mythical heroes hunting boars on foot (e.g. Meleager) and deer with their bare hands (e.g. Hercules) were taken as models for the battue hunt; at the same time, the theme was less grandiose and pretentious in general.

⁸² For some examples, DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 3-4 cat. 2, 6-7 cat. 6, 86 cat. 126, 116-119 cat. 188, 214 cat. 513, 348 cat. 840, 415 cat. 992. These date to the first quarter of the 4th century CE (and perhaps later too).

⁸³ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 169-170 cat. 150. It is not possible to say whether the female portrayed on the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus Nieborów Palace (Poland) (see MIKOCKI, op. cit., p. 118-119 cat. 58) was Christian.

Christian women in general. Indeed, another Roman Hunt Sarcophagus was used for the burial of a woman, but without a portrait identification⁸⁴; moreover, a few lids with hunting scenes were intended or even used for female burials [fig. 9]⁸⁵.

It is typically argued that the use of Roman Hunt Sarcophagi by Christians was motivated by the same “worldly” concerns as their pagan neighbours (i.e. status and *virtus*)⁸⁶. In other words, “they chose to construct their *post-mortem* identity through a motif that traditionally symbolized status in society and not in heaven, in contrast to the iconography of more explicitly Christian sarcophagi that exclusively showed scenes of the miracles...”⁸⁷.

While this hypothesis certainly has its merits, it fails to take into consideration the possibility for Roman iconography to convey specifically Christian messages. “Originally, Christianity was non-iconographical and the traditional Roman iconographic language was ‘adopted’ because it was the one the newly converted Christians already understood”⁸⁸. This also holds true for Roman sarcophagi: they often latched onto pre-existing motifs and “baptized” them (e.g. Good Shepherd, Orante)⁸⁹, so perhaps

⁸⁴ See ANDREAE (1980), p. 100, 143 cat. 3.

⁸⁵ For examples of lids with hunting themes surely intended or eventually used for female burials, DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 6-7 cat. 6, 214 cat. 513, 415 cat. 992. Note that other lids with hunting themes were surely intended for or eventually used for the both male and female burials, see DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 86 cat. 126, 116-119 cat. 188.

⁸⁶ BRANDENBURG (2002), op. cit., p. 29-31; see also BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 111-113. It has also been suggested that sarcophagi for Christians with biblical themes on the casket, but hunting themes on the lid express social status and *otium*, BEJAOUÏ, F. “Le sarcophage de Lemta” In: Koch, G. (Ed.), **Akten des Symposiums "Frühchristliche Sarkophage"**. Marburg, 30.6.-4.7.1999. Mainz: von Zabern, 2002, p. 13-18. p. 17; FIOCCHI NICOLAI et al., op. cit., p. 108. For a similar interpretation of hunting imagery in the catacombs (which is, however, also seen as a pleasurable pastime in the afterlife), FIOCCHI NICOLAI et al., op. cit., p. 106-109. In contrast, S. Bratton suggests that the image of a lion killing its prey was resemanticized on a sarcophagus for a Christian woman: as she states, this motif normally refers to the strength of a male deceased, identified with the lion, but in this case, it refers to the fortitude and sacrifice of the female deceased, identified with its prey (possibly a sheep), BRATTON, op. cit., p. 23; there is little support offered for this interpretation, but in general, it is worth looking for specifically Christian interpretations.

⁸⁷ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 113.

⁸⁸ BIRK (2016), op. cit., p. 64.

⁸⁹ For discussion on the adoption of pagan motifs on Roman sarcophagi for Christians, see BIRK (2016), op. cit., *passim*; KOCH (2000), op. cit., p. 7-28; STUDER-KARLEN, op. cit., p. 63-170.

similar attempts were made with the hunter as well. In particular, I would like to suggest that the *virtus* motif was understood not just as a sign of personal virtue, but also in terms of Christian ideals⁹⁰.

Virtus in Early Christian Contexts

The concept of *virtus* was embraced by early Christian authors, but refocused to suit the new religious framework. On the one hand, *virtus* could refer to the power of God; on the other hand, it "... could also stand for both the interior quality of moral excellence and its external manifestation in pious deeds, such as monastic self-discipline, charitable acts and wonder working."⁹¹ These two meanings were intricately connected, considering that divine power was seen to work through the faithful. For the Romans, the cultivation of *virtus* was primarily aimed at perfecting individual character for the good of society, and therefore self-aggrandizing and social.⁹² For Christians though, *virtus* was granted to the worthy – living by divine law – by the grace of God and ultimately for the glory of God; it was a solitary and humble pursuit, which promised heavenly salvation⁹³.

The roots of this development were clearly laid out by the Constantinian Period⁹⁴. *Virtus* refers to almighty godly power, and *virtutes* to miracles, performed by Jesus and the Apostles, in the works of Tertullian and Minucius Felix⁹⁵. *Virtus* also refers to Christian virtue – as a physical and

⁹⁰ This is not to claim that hunting imagery did not continue to symbolize social status and prestige, as seen in the domestic context as well (e.g. mosaics, silverware, etc.), see e.g. BRAVI, op. cit., p. 138-139.

⁹¹ CAIN, A. Jerome's Epitaph on Paula. A Commentary on the Epitaphium Sanctae Paulae. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 105-106.

⁹² HEFFERNAN, T.J. Sacred Biography. Saints and Their Biographers In the Middle Ages. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 150-157.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jesus was the progenitor of Christian *virtus*, with the Apostles as his faithful imitators, REIS, D.M. "Spec(tac)ular Sights. Mirroring in/of Acts". In: DUPERTIUS, Rubén R., PENNER, T. (Eds.). **Engaging Early Christian History. Reading Acts in the Second Century**. Durham/Bristol: Acumen, 2013, p. 59-100. p. 67. 73.

⁹⁵ For sources and discussion, see EISENHUT (1973), op. cit., p. 195-207.

moral quality – which is heavily bound up with masculinity, yet consciously subverts the hegemonic ideal in Roman society⁹⁶. This is best exemplified by the concept of the *miles Christi* (“soldier of Christ”)⁹⁷. While Roman manliness was frequently connected to military prowess, for early Christian writers, the supreme virtue was *patientia*, in the sense of suffering with (stoic) endurance⁹⁸. The martyrs in the Roman arena offered the main models for Christian *virtus*: indeed, “the martyr, like the gladiator, received honor because of his or her display of manliness... [(i.e. *virtus*, especially in terms of actively and hence “manfully” approaching death)], a virtue that placed the Christian – regardless of his or her sex – in a masculine body”⁹⁹. They are often described by authors like Tertullian and Minucius Felix in terms akin to Roman soldiers, but recast as “soldiers of Christ”, engaging in pacifistic, spiritual warfare, which promised eternal salvation¹⁰⁰. This ideal was extended to Christians as a whole – by authors like Cyprian, Commodian and Hippolytus of Rome – by presenting their mere preparedness for self-sacrifice, as well as their daily internal struggles, as part of the cosmic battle between good and evil¹⁰¹. Christians should exhibit “virtue” (e.g. morality, modesty, good deeds)¹⁰², as well as overcome their weaknesses – coded as effeminate – by accepting hardship and resisting lust and luxury¹⁰³. The notion that the *miles Christi* should “fight” not with

⁹⁶ M. Kuefler offers a compelling overview of this phenomenon, see KUEFLER, M. **The Manly Eunuch. Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity**. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

⁹⁷ KUEFLER (2001), op. cit., p. 105-124.

⁹⁸ KUEFLER (2001), op. cit., p. 109-111.

⁹⁹ COBB, L.S. **Dying to Be Men. Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts**. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 33-34.

¹⁰⁰ KUEFLER (2001), op. cit., p. 111-117.

¹⁰¹ KUEFLER (2001), op. cit., p. 117-124.

¹⁰² EISENHUT (1973), op. cit., p. 200. 203f.

¹⁰³ KUEFLER (2001), op. cit., p. 105-124.

weapons, but with prayer, humility, and abstinence, would become firmly established in discourses on monastic exemplarity in Late Antiquity¹⁰⁴.

In summary, early Christians viewed *virtus* and even a *vita militaris* as praiseworthy ideals, but not in terms of traditional combat in the Roman army: they redefined these “manly” struggles in terms of patiently suffering, overcoming sin, and finding eternal salvation.



Fig. 10

Roman Battue Hunt Sarcophagus.

ca. 320 CE. L. 2.22 m, H. 0.79 m, D. 0.85 m. Concattedrale di Osimo (Osimo, Italy).

Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 75.998, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/5321471>; Photographer: C. Rossa

¹⁰⁴ SMITH, K.A. “Spiritual Warriors in Citadels of Faith. Martial Rhetoric and Monastic Masculinity in the Long Twelfth Century”. In: THIBODEAUX, J.D. (Ed.). **Negotiating Clerical Identities Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages**. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 86-112. p. 89-92. This theme was clearly worked out by Origen and was firmly established by the time of Jerome.

Considering that the concept of *virtus* was embraced but revised by early Christians, it is conceivable that the portraits of Christian men on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi – as a popular and longstanding visual code for *virtus*¹⁰⁵ – were viewed in a particularly Christian light as well¹⁰⁶. This hypothesis is especially supported by the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus in the Concattedrale di Osimo, which was specially commissioned for a Christian around 320 CE [fig. 10].¹⁰⁷ The casket features a battue hunt. The male deceased is identified with the main hunter on horseback, driving deer into a net, as well as another hunter to the left side, striking a boar on foot. The lid is decorated with biblical themes: 1) Adoration of the Magi, 2) Spring Miracle of Moses, 3) Noah's Ark, and 4) Jonah and the Whale. It is conceivable that the juxtaposition of this traditional *virtus* motif with Christian tales of piety, miracle working, as well as salvation and resurrection was intended to have a transformative effect, where the virtue of “manliness” was understood within this overarching religious framework¹⁰⁸. The impression of individual glorification remains, but perhaps this was fit into the increasing interest in “religious identity” on these monuments; moreover, the *virtus* theme was potentially opened up for eschatological readings, as the pathway to salvation¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁵ ZANKER, P.; EWALD, B.C., op. cit., p. 225.

¹⁰⁶ It is conceivable that Christians initially latched onto hunting iconography to convey *virtus*, but that more genuinely biblical themes developed as well (e.g. perhaps Daniel in the lion's den or the three youths in the fiery furnace were perceived in terms of not only courage, but also putting their trust in God).

¹⁰⁷ For the sarcophagus, ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 153-154 cat. 59. G. Koch argues that it was specially commissioned, KOCH (2000), op. cit., p. 14; the unique mixture of hunting and biblical themes supports this.

¹⁰⁸ For these themes in early Christian art and their significance, see ZIMMERMANN, N. “Catacomb Painting and the Rise of Christian Iconography in Funerary Art”. In: Jensen, R.M.; Ellison, M.D. (Eds.). **The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art**. London: Routledge, 2018, p. 21-38. p. 26. 30.

¹⁰⁹ B. Andrae had already interpreted the image of the hunter killing the lion on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi as a sign of overcoming death, but in the sense that it has no power over him because his *virtus* ensures his immortal glory, ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 135-136. It is true that imagery on pagan sarcophagi was not necessarily viewed in an eschatological manner, due to the lack of a widespread or unitary belief in the afterlife, see BORG, op. cit., p. 160; for the Christians, however, the imagery might have been open to salvific interpretations.

Bera: Hunter, Woman, Christian

The portrait of Bera as a hunter was surely perceived as a sign of her *virtus*, but – if the hypothesis just presented is correct – how might this have been understood in terms of her identity as a female member of the Christian community? Are there any exceptional features in the iconography that fit well into their conception of a pious female? And how can this be reconciled with any remaining “pagan” symbols in her surroundings?

Bera as a “Man”¹¹⁰

Early Christian authors were generous in ascribing *virtus* to the female sex, perhaps even more so than others before them¹¹¹. Moreover, it is often the case that when they “...asserted that an early Christian woman progressed to a higher spiritual or moral state, they simultaneously claimed that she transcended her gender and that she became male”¹¹². A prominent example of this is Perpetua, a young woman who wished to get baptized and was consequently arrested in 203 CE¹¹³. She allegedly recorded her visions leading up to her martyrdom. In the final one, she defeats the “Devil” in a brutal combat in the arena; quite significantly, she had been

¹¹⁰ Note that this section is a reworked excerpt from my doctoral dissertation, see HOLLAENDER, op. cit., p. 33-35.

¹¹¹ Sande states that *virtus* was more often attributed to Christian women than to the women that came before them, SANDE 2009, op. cit., p. 62. Since she offers no corresponding analysis though, this requires more research.

¹¹² UPSON-SAIA. **Early Christian Dress. Gender, Virtue, and Authority**. New York/London: Routledge, 2011, 12-13. 104-107. Women attributed *virtus* in Roman society were typically seen to surpass the expectations of their sex, allowing them to earn the status of “honorary men”, HEMELRIJK, E. **Matrona Docta. Educated Women in the Roman Elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna**. London/New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 89-92; as such, treating exceptionally spiritual and moral Christian women as “men” fits well into this earlier trend.

¹¹³ For a brief biography of Perpetua, see GOLD, B.K. “Remarking Perpetua. A Female Martyr Reconstructed”. In: MASTERSON, M.; RABINOWITZ, N.S.; ROBSON, J. (Eds.). **Sex in Antiquity. Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World**. London/New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 482-499. p. 484-485.

disrobed and transformed into a male (*masculus*) just beforehand, to signify her “manly” strength (*virtus*) and hence her spiritual superiority¹¹⁴.

Moreover, early Christian women are seen to eschew feminine dress and adornment.¹¹⁵ This might merely involve the rejection of jewelry and cosmetics, as markers of vanity and luxury.¹¹⁶ Some, however, chose to entirely obscure their sex.¹¹⁷ Already in the 1st century CE, Paul the Apostle allegedly inspired Thecla to become an ascetic by renouncing the usual life course for women (i.e. marriage, motherhood) and then cutting off her hair, donning masculine dress, and accompanying him on his journey to preach the word of God.¹¹⁸ A series of devout women followed in her footsteps. For instance, Eugenia disguised herself as a man in order to serve God, but was martyred at Rome in the 3rd century CE¹¹⁹. Bishop Helenus of Heliopolis tells her, “You are rightfully called a man, since, although you are a woman, you act manfully.”¹²⁰

These “unnatural practices” were normally not endorsed by Christian authorities, as seen by their repeated censure and prohibition in the 3rd to 5th centuries CE.¹²¹ The issue was that cross-dressing in real life threatened

¹¹⁴ Passio sanctorum Perpetuae et Felicitatis 10; note that she is attributed *virtus* just beforehand (9). For discussion on her masculinization, GOLD, op. cit., p. 485-489.

¹¹⁵ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 14. 33-58. 104-107.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Acts of Paul, 2.25, 2.40 (note that the text dates to the end of the 2nd century CE at the latest). For discussion on Thecla (especially as a cross-dresser), KUNST, C. “Wenn Frauen Bärte haben. Geschlechtertransgressionen in Rom”. In: HARTMANN, E.; HARTMANN, U.; PIETZNER, K. (Eds.). **Geschlechterdefinitionen und Geschlechtergrenzen in der Antike**. Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2007, p. 247-161. p. 256-259.

¹¹⁹ Acts of Saint Eugenia (note that the text dates to the final quarter of the 3rd century CE at the latest). For discussion on Eugenia, UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 93-95. 99-100.

¹²⁰ For the quote by Bishop Helenus of Heliopolis, see VORAGINE, J.A.; GRAESSE, T. **Legenda aurea. Vulgo historia lombardica dicta**. Osnabrück: Zeller, 1965, p. 603 (mentioned in UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 101).

¹²¹ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 14. 59-83. 104-107.

to flatten gender distinctions, thereby calling into question the exclusivity of certain rights and privileges to men.¹²² Nevertheless, the cross-dressing female saint was hardly problematic in hagiographies (e.g. Thecla, Eugenia)¹²³, also extending into the 4th to 7th centuries CE.¹²⁴ The authors of these narratives stress that they are in fact female¹²⁵ and only disguise themselves as men in extenuating circumstances, to flee problems in the secular world and under the counsel of a male ecclesiastical or monastic superior.¹²⁶ The significance of their cross-dressing potentially operates on a number of levels. It is not only a practical disguise, allowing them to move freely and independently, but also an outward expression of their rejection of female beauty and sexuality, in favour of “manly” spiritual progress¹²⁷: “the men’s clothing worn by the cross-dressing saints worked as the transferential object that brought with it notions of superior masculine characteristics; male clothing became the metaphor, code and signifier of (male) virtue”¹²⁸.

In summary, cross-dressing was not broadly endorsed for women in early Christian communities; it nevertheless carried positive connotations for

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ See the previous paragraph.

¹²⁴ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 84-103.

¹²⁵ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 84-103. 104-107.

¹²⁶ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 84-103.

¹²⁷ For the semantic possibilities (for Thecla in particular), KUNST, op. cit., 2007, p. 257-258. It is generally held that cross-dressing female ascetics are ambiguous, but more strongly aligned with the masculine, e.g. TOMMASI, C.O. “Cross-dressing as Discourse and Symbol in Late Antique Religion and Literature”. In: CAMPANILE, D.; CARLÀ-UHINK, F.; FACELLA, M. (Eds.). **TransAntiquity. Cross-Dressing and Transgender Dynamics in the Ancient World**. London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 120-133. p. 125-129; VIDÉN, G. “The Twofold View of Women. Gender Construction in Early Christianity”. In: Lóven, L.L.; Strömberg, A. (Eds.). **Aspects of Women in Antiquity. Proceedings of the First Nordic Symposium on Women’s Lives in Antiquity, Göteborg 12 - 15 June 1997**. Jonsered: P. Åströms Förlag, 1998, p. 142-153. p. 145-150.

¹²⁸ UPSON-SAIA, op. cit., p. 101.

female ascetics in the imagination, with no need to bridge the gap between reality and symbolism¹²⁹.

It is conceivable that the image of Bera, dressed like a man while “virtuously” pursuing a lion, was viewed in a similar way: regardless of the threat posed by cross-dressing in everyday life, the same motif had an overwhelmingly positive symbolism for the female sex in a Christian context – as a sign of progressing to a higher spiritual and moral state – with no apparent paradox. Her essential sexual difference from “real” men is evident (e.g. the feminine name, the fashionable female hairstyle), but this is kept to a minimum here. There is, of course, no way of fully reconstructing the motivations of patrons, who also could not completely control the reception of any image. It nevertheless seems reasonable – given the unique handling of the iconography, its incorporation into this funerary context, and especially the religious background of its patrons and viewers – that this special symbolism was intended and would have readily come to the minds of many members of her community.

Openhanded Gesture

Another feature that seemingly appealed to Christian patrons, and perhaps even took on specifically Christian connotations, is Bera’s openhanded gesture.

In the 3rd century CE, the main hunter on Roman Battle and Hunt Sarcophagi started to appear without weapons, yet throwing his empty right hand up in the air anyway¹³⁰. It has been convincingly demonstrated that this gesture signals the triumph of the deceased, perhaps even over death,

¹²⁹ In contrast, cross-dressing was viewed negatively for men, DOERFLER, M.E. “Coming Apart at the Seams. Cross-Dressing, Masculinity, and the Social Body in Late Antiquity”. In: UPSON-SAIA, Kristi, DANIEL-HUGHES, C.; BATTEN, A.J. (Eds.). **Dressing Judeans and Christians in Antiquity**. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, p. 37-51. p. 37-47. The female cross-dresser still found approval in the Middle Ages, see HOTCHKISS, V.R. **Clothes Make the Man. Female Cross-Dressing in Medieval Europe**. New York: Garland, 1996, *passim*.

¹³⁰ See ANDREAE, B. **Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den römischen Schlachtsarkophagen**. Berlin: Gebr. Mann 1956, *passim*; ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

as well as “the renunciation of all force but that of inherent *virtus*”¹³¹. Of course, this proposed symbolism is relevant to pagans and Christians alike, but there is good reason to believe that it was particularly appealing to the latter.



Fig. 11

Nummus minted at Rome, featuring the bust of Constantine on the obverse (IMP CONSTANTINVS P F AVG), and Constantine hunting a lion on horseback on the reverse (LIBER-A-TOR ORBIS). 312-313 CE.

British Museum (London, England), inv. B.2142.

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First of all, Constantine the Great was the first emperor to be portrayed on horseback with the openhanded gesture, on a series of coins minted at Rome in 312-313, with the legend LIBERATOR ORBIS [fig. 11]; afterwards, this iconographic scheme was widely embraced in Byzantine art, including the colossal bronze equestrian statue of Theodosius in the church of Hagia Sophia¹³². The acceptance of Christianity by Constantine in 313 CE instigated the incorporation of imperial motifs into Christian iconography¹³³,

¹³¹ For discussion, see LEWIS, S. “The Iconography of Coptic Horseman in Byzantine Egypt”. **Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt**, Princeton, 10, p. 27-63, 1973, p. 47 also footnote 103.

¹³² LEWIS, op. cit., p. 48 footnote 108.

¹³³ ZIMMERMANN, op. cit., p. 452. 462-464.

which might have greatly increased the appeal of the openhanded gesture to this group as well¹³⁴.



Fig. 12
Christian Tub-Sarcophagus.
Early 4th century CE. L. 2.18 m, H. 0.59 m, D. 0.64 m.
Chiesa di Santa Maria Antiqua (Rome, Italy).
Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 1542, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/5585252>

Secondly, the visual culture of the Christians in the funerary context is characterized by a general shift away from violent themes, towards peaceful and idyllic ones. For instance, the Good Shepherd is widely attested in paintings of the Christian catacombs, whereas hunting scenes only appear in isolated cases;¹³⁵ a similar development is attested on sarcophagi as well [fig. 12]¹³⁶. It is important to emphasize that Christians never abandon hunting imagery¹³⁷, yet their preference for tranquil and

¹³⁴ The openhanded gesture is attested on other Roman Hunt Sarcophagi for Christians, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 143 cat. 3, 153-154 cat. 59, 164 cat. 112.

¹³⁵ FIOCCHI NICOLAI et al., op. cit., p. 106-109. 120.

¹³⁶ In latching onto pre-existing iconographies, the Christians tended to prefer idyllic and peaceful themes on sarcophagi, e.g. shepherds, fishermen, feasting, see KOCH (2000), op. cit., p. 15-28.

¹³⁷ See above ("Hunting Imagery in Early Christian Contexts")

bucolic imagery “greatly reduces the prominence of violent animal death as an indicator of human valour”¹³⁸. It is conceivable that the image of the disarmed hunter satisfied two needs for commemoration: the desire to convey innate *virtus*, while downplaying the direct confrontation with beasts.

In summary, Bera’s openhanded gesture is not particularly Christian, but seems to have fit well into these ideals: she is shown as a “man” who conquers without brute force, and hence by sheer virtue¹³⁹. Was this merely a way of expressing the perfectly individual, innate *virtus* of Bera, or – to return to the line of reasoning presented above – was this a sign of God’s power working through her, which promises salvation if not in this life, then the next?

Virtus: Goddess or Personification?

This brings us to the next issue, namely, the image of the Roman goddess Virtus following Bera, which is the only truly “pagan” vestige in the imagery. It would initially seem difficult to square her presence away with a Christian interpretation, but this is not the case.

Virtus was the recipient of cult at Rome by the end of the 3rd century BCE¹⁴⁰. On the one hand, the goddess is one and the same with the quality *virtus*.¹⁴¹ On the other hand, she is the divine patroness of a certain,

¹³⁸ BRATTON, op. cit., p. 22.

¹³⁹ The lion has already been struck in the flank with a spear, which is typically the case, whether the main hunter is armed or not, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

¹⁴⁰ For the divine nature of Virtus, as well as the worship of the goddess in the Roman world, EISENHUT, W. “Virtus als göttliche Gestalt”. In: **Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft. Neue Bearbeitung. Suppl. XIV**. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlerscher, 1974, p. 896-910. *passim*; MCDONNELL, op. cit., p. 206-240; MILHOUS, M.S. **Honos and Virtus in Roman Art**. PhD Thesis. Boston University, Prof. KLEINER, F.S.. Boston 1992, p. 1-17. For the images of Virtus, see GANSCHOW, T. “Virtus”. In: **Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae VIII**. Zurich/Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1997, p. 273-281, *passim*.

¹⁴¹ For instance, Varro states that “it is the divinity Virtus who gives courage [*virtus*],” which functioned like a physical or spiritual possession, Varro ant. rer. div. frg. 189 (CARDAUNS, B. **M. Terentius Varro**.

distinguished man, and therefore the source of his *virtus*; this patron-protégé relationship is clearly expressed in the imagery, by leading his chariot, by following him on his campaigns, or by crowning him with a wreath.¹⁴²

There was, however, no need for Christians to perceive her in this way. The importance of *virtus* among this religious group never waned, even if the status of this quality as a freestanding and independent divinity was denied – instead, *virtus* was seen to emanate from God, while taking on a new spiritual significance and dimension. The comments of St. Augustine of Hippo, writing about a century later, strongly support this notion:

“They have also made Virtus, or Virtue, a goddess; and if she were really a goddess she would deserve preference over many others. As it is, since she is not a goddess, but the gift of God, let her be sought and won from him by whom alone she can be granted...”¹⁴³

The rejection of the pantheon of gods did not necessarily entail a rejection of their images, if their signifying power could be accommodated to the new religious framework. As the veneration of quality gods like Virtus came to an end with the progressive Christianization of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity, it was possible to transform them into personifications: that is, visual devices for representing abstract concepts in anthropomorphic form¹⁴⁴.

Antiquitates rerum divinarum I. Die Fragmente. Mainz/Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976) = Aug. civ. 4, 24 (translation and discussion in MCDONNELL, op. cit., p. 211).

¹⁴² See GANSCHOW, op. cit., *passim*.

¹⁴³ Aug. civ. 4, 20. (Translation in: AUGUSTINE. **City of God, Volume II. Books 4-7.** Green, W.M. (Transl.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 71).

¹⁴⁴ The early Christian emperors repressed the worship of gods with mythical associations, but tolerated the worship of quality gods that were compatible with their conception of God; all kinds of sacrifices for both were banned from 341 CE, and then their temples were closed from 346 CE, MILHOUS, op. cit., p. 17.

In summary, Bera is joined by Virtus, which – from a Christian perspective at least – is not a goddess, but a mere personification. This visual device simply points to the *virtus* of the female deceased, considering that this quality ultimately comes from God¹⁴⁵.

Eruditio

As a rule, Roman Hunt Sarcophagi with two scenes feature the (male) deceased both departing for and participating in the hunt [fig. 5]¹⁴⁶. It is not possible to verify this here, due to the fragmentary state of the relief, but it is probable that this was the case.

Both the dress and the accessories of the departing (portrait) figure deviate from the norm¹⁴⁷. He is typically portrayed as a high-ranking military officer¹⁴⁸, but in this case, this outfit is traded in for contemporary hunting clothing and a scroll¹⁴⁹. This served to highlight the multifaceted virtues of the male deceased: he is celebrated for both his *virtus* (as a hunter) and his *eruditio* (as a learned man)¹⁵⁰. It has even been suggested that the hunting theme here is “... an allegory not only of physical power, but also of psychic strength, here symbolized through learnedness”¹⁵¹. Whether or not this is the case, the complementary nature of *virtus* and *eruditio* is evident in this

¹⁴⁵ It is worth pointing out though that Virtus is progressively absent on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi in the course of the 4th century CE; B. Andrae attributes this to a desire for less grandiose themes, as well as the reduced persuasiveness of Virtus on these monuments, ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 127-130. Perhaps it is also due to the image of Virtus being more redundant than ever in a Christian context.

¹⁴⁶ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

¹⁴⁷ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 110.

¹⁴⁸ See ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., *passim*.

¹⁴⁹ There is only one other example of a departing figure holding a scroll on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi (now unfortunately headless); for the sarcophagus, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 162 cat. 101.

¹⁵⁰ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 91-92. 110.

¹⁵¹ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 110.

period,¹⁵² since hunting iconography is frequently combined with visual codes for learnedness on other sarcophagi as well¹⁵³.

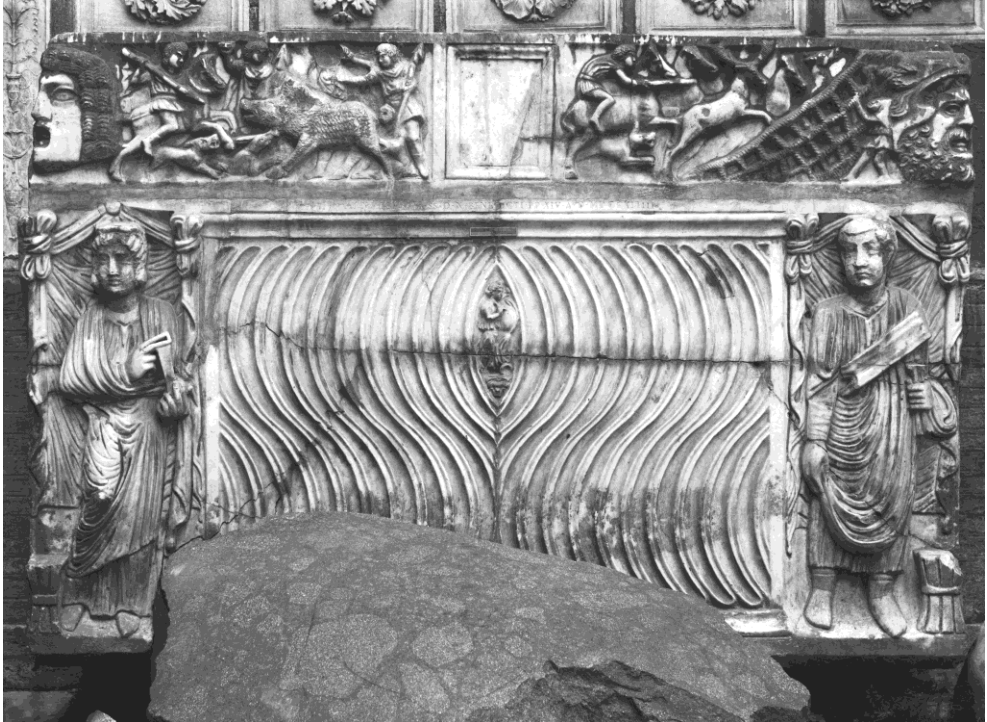


Fig. 13
Strigillated Sarcophagus [i.e. Casket].
Early 4th century CE. L. 2.17 m, H. 1.41 m.
Cortile, Musei Capitolini (Rome, Italy), inv. 9. P
foto: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 269, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/920478>

¹⁵² Since the concept of *virtus* was resemanticized to include a wide variety of corporeal and mental qualities (see above, “Women & *Virtus*”), it is not outside of the realm of possibility that the significance of the hunting imagery could have also extended to learnedness. Even if this had been the case, the patrons could only ensure that learnedness would come to the minds of the viewers by including a scroll.

¹⁵³ The exact same “learned hunter” features on another Roman Hunt Sarcophagus (for a child), see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 162 cat. 101. Moreover, learned men and women feature in visual fields directly juxtaposed with hunting scenes in a variety of ways on Roman sarcophagi as a whole, see ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 148 cat. 30, 158-159 cat. 78, 163 cat. 105, 183 cat. 240; DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 6-7 cat. 6; WOLF. *Die Nekropole In Vaticano ad circum*. Rome: 1977, p. 89 cat. S9.



Fig. 14

Christian Sarcophagus.

Second quarter of the 4th century CE. L. 2.23 m, H. 0.72 m.

Museo Pio Cristiano, Musei Vaticani (Vatican City State), inv. MV.31556.3.1.

Photo: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 32.703R, <arachne.dainst.org/entity/1057312>; Photographer: Repro Vasari.

The presence of this “learned hunter” probably increased the appeal of the monument for Bera, as both a female and a Christian. Through this imagery, her “manly” *virtus* is nicely balanced by her learnedness, which is particularly relevant to the commemoration of women in this period. Indeed, portraits of women as learned women (e.g. in the guise of Muses, holding scrolls, playing instruments) became practically ubiquitous on Roman sarcophagi in the course of the 3rd century CE [fig. 13]¹⁵⁴. Moreover,

¹⁵⁴ For the portraits of men and women as learned figures on Roman sarcophagi, see EWALD, B.C. **Der Philosoph als Leitbild. Ikonographische Untersuchungen an römischen Sarkophagreliefs.** Mainz: von Zabern, 1999, *passim*. For discussion on their gendered representation, HUSKINSON, J. “Women and Learning. Gender and Identity in Scenes of Intellectual Life on Late Roman Sarcophagi”. In: MILES,

portraits of women as orants – the embodiment of piety and faith – appear on sarcophagi for Christians by the end of the 3rd century CE [fig. 12]¹⁵⁵. Quite notably, the orant frequently merges the iconography of learned women with praying women (i.e. in the guise of Pietas, attending sacrifices)¹⁵⁶: she stands in a central position with a scroll (or codex) and preaches [fig. 14]¹⁵⁷, suggesting that “she embodies intellectuality and literary knowledge, now related to Christian literary texts instead of the pagan philosophical ideology and traditional education...”¹⁵⁸.

The fact that the learned woman was a beloved role model for Christian women is notable. Just as the image of Bera as a “virtuous” hunter seemingly resonated with a Christian viewership, so too is it conceivable that the image of her holding a scroll was specifically interpreted as a sign of her pious engagement with religious texts.

Blissful Visions

The Roman Hunt Sarcophagus in San Sebastiano also features a banquet scene on the lid [fig. 1]. It is clear that the feast occurs after the hunt, since the boar’s head is situated in front of the sigma-shaped couch. The connection between hunting and dining was first established on mythological sarcophagi depicting the life and death of Meleager¹⁵⁹. It entered its way onto “realistic” sarcophagi around 270 CE¹⁶⁰, and was

R. (Ed.). **Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity**. London/New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 190-213. *passim*.

¹⁵⁵ For a few examples, see DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 4-5 cat. 4, 6-7 cat. 6, 7-8 cat. 7.

¹⁵⁶ BIRK (2016), op. cit., p. 66-68.

¹⁵⁷ For a few examples, see DEICHMANN et al., op. cit., p. 12-13 cat. 13, 13-14 cat. 14, 22-23 cat. 25.

¹⁵⁸ BIRK (2013), op. cit., p. 90-91.

¹⁵⁹ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 102-103. For further discussion on the banquet after the Kalydonian Boar Hunt, on sarcophagi featuring the life and death of Meleager, KOCH (1975), op. cit., p. 48-50 cat. 127-142.

¹⁶⁰ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 102-103, 181 cat. 232.

thereafter virtually programmatic on Roman Hunt Sarcophagi: indeed, more than a third of the caskets with extant lids feature a banqueting scene, usually on a sigma-shaped couch¹⁶¹.

It seems most likely that the image of the banquet was introduced into the funerary context as an “allegory of peaceful happiness”, as a reminder to enjoy life’s pleasures¹⁶²; moreover, the viewers could easily relate to it due to the regular feasts for the dead¹⁶³. Banqueting scenes continued to appear on sarcophagi with Christian themes¹⁶⁴. This indicates that this blissful theme was still relevant to Christians, and perhaps even resemanticized in the process (e.g. symbol of the Eucharist¹⁶⁵, heavenly banquet with an eschatological significance)¹⁶⁶.

Conclusions

This article has explored the potential for Roman Hunt Sarcophagi to appeal to Christians, especially the monument for Bera in San Sebastiano ad Catacumbas. This sarcophagus was surely intended for a Roman man and merely reused for Bera; in any case, it is hardly a negligible point that the patrons not only accepted it for a female burial, but also took the effort to carve her portrait head onto a completely male hunter, without further alterations. The image of Bera pursuing the lion evidently resonated with her social group.

It is generally agreed that Roman Hunt Sarcophagi expressed personal qualities (i.e. *virtus*) and social standing. Their takeover by Christians was

¹⁶¹ ANDREAE (1980), op. cit., p. 102-103.

¹⁶² HIMMELMANN, N. **Typologische Untersuchungen an römischen Sarkophagreliefs des 3. Und 4. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.** Mainz: von Zabern, 1973, p. 28. (Original text: “Allegorie friedlichen Glücks”).

¹⁶³ ZANKER; EWALD, op. cit., p. 354.

¹⁶⁴ KOCH (2000), op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁶⁵ WILPERT, J. **Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse im Dienste der christlichen Archäologie. Rückblick auf eine fünfundvierzigjährige wissenschaftliche Tätigkeit in Rom.** Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1930, p. 35-36.

¹⁶⁶ HIMMELMANN, op. cit., p. 25-26.

presumably motivated by “worldly” concerns as well¹⁶⁷. However, this does not take into account the capacity of pre-existing iconography to take on new meanings among this religious group.

The views on hunting in biblical texts were mixed and in early Christian treatises predominantly negative, but in visual culture, there is a clear “rehabilitation” of this theme. I have proposed that the Roman Hunt Sarcophagus for Bera was perceived in a specifically Christian way. The portrait of Bera as a lion hunter, accompanied by Virtus, is seemingly a celebration of her *virtus* as a Christian woman. Following this hypothesis, her overt masculinization symbolizes her spiritual and moral progress. She does not triumph with physical force, but by sheer virtue and ultimately the grace of God, which promises salvation in the next life. If she had in fact been shown as a “learned hunter”, then this was potentially viewed in terms of pious study. Perhaps the banquet scene also expressed peaceful communion or a blissful afterlife.

The “Christianization” proposed here is not a tangible process – it does not leave its traces in the marble, but happens solely in the imagination. Nothing in the iconography really changed to provoke this viewing, just the background of its patrons and intended viewers; the standard commemorative codes were simply reinterpreted in terms of their “religious identity”. This is actually not such a major leap as one might expect: the hunting iconography still stands for *virtus*, but a specifically Christian “virtue”; the scroll still stands for *eruditio*, but a pious learnedness; and the banquet scene is still an allegory for peaceful happiness, but potentially extending into the next life as well. Even though this monument was reused for Bera, the patrons seemingly found a creative way to infuse old iconographies with new meanings, which fit well into their broader views on gender, virtue and religion.

¹⁶⁷ See above (“Hunting Imagery in Early Christian Contexts”).