

The Hypogeum of the Aurelii

A new interpretation as the collegiate tomb of
professional *scribae*

John W. Bradley



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Foreword

This book is based upon the author's PhD dissertation and looks at the frescoes in a single monument of the third century AD in Rome known as the hypogeum of the Aurelii. The images contained within these frescoes are varied and highly unusual in the canon of Roman art. As a consequence they have attracted a considerable amount of interest since their discovery. Many of the theories submitted to explain these images, however, do not provide a satisfactory or holistic explanation. Indeed, upon close examination what has been 'seen' by some scholars has proved not to exist and evidence put forward in support of their theories has at times been selective and anachronistic.

Recent restoration of the hypogeum of the Aurelii provides an opportunity to review the evidence and, as the centenary of the hypogeum's discovery approaches, it is now appropriate to posit a new and comprehensive interpretation of all the images in the monument. The process of unravelling the mystery of this tomb has required a multi-disciplinary approach exploring many aspects of Roman life other than the religious or funerary spheres that have been the main constituency of previous work. The interpretation put forward here serves, not only as an object lesson in the importance and utility of, 'going back to basics' i.e. seeing the varied iconography without preconception, and examining the evidence in the context of their known social status, i.e. they were freedmen, and the time in which they lived, the early third century AD. The result is a better understanding of the tomb's commissioners which shall inform future discussion on social organisation, including the role of women and children, the exercise of manumission, dining practice and linguistics in addition to funerary habits in the decades prior to the official recognition of Christianity less than a century later.

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Beyond Royal Holloway, I wish to acknowledge the unfailing assistance of staff at the Joint Libraries of the Roman and Hellenic Societies and the Warburg Institute in London. Further afield I thank the Prolepsis Associazione and Dr Lisa Maurice of Bar-Ilan University for allowing me to present some of my ideas at conferences in Bari and Tel-Aviv respectively, the comments and suggestions by participants clarified a number of points. Thanks are similarly due to Prof. Elżbieta Jastrzębowska whose ideas on the meaning of the 'manumission scene' closely matched my own: her comments and suggestions on my completed thesis were most welcome even (or perhaps especially) when we did not see eye to eye. My examiners, Dr William Wootton and Prof. Barbara Borg, likewise raised points that I had missed and made this work better than it would otherwise have been. Although during the production of thesis and book I examined nearly all the comparanda in person a number of institutions provided images for publication: a special thanks is due to those who provided such material at little or no cost i.e. the Museo Antonio Salinas, Palermo; Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali; Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – Rom; the American Numismatic Society and the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo – Parco Archeologico del Colosseo. Their generosity has ensured that this work is better illustrated than might otherwise have been the case. Thanks are due to Dr Ursula Rothe for suggestions on the subject of clothing and Prof. Paolo Liverani of the University of Florence for bringing certain modern publications to my notice. I wish to thank all those at the British School in Rome, especially Stefania Peterlini for her assistance in obtaining photographs and gaining access to various sites and exhibits. The library and community at the BSR provide a welcome harbour to put into after a long day's trail around the Eternal City.

Finally, I wish to extend a special thanks to Dr Eileen Rubery for her encouragement and a shared interest in the topic of late antique art. Without the assistance and suggestions of all these individuals and others unnamed this book and its author would have been much the poorer.

John Bradley
Brentford
June 2018

List of abbreviations

| | |
|------------------|---|
| AA | <i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i> . Berlin: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. |
| ASR | Robert, C. 1897-1919. <i>Die Antiken Sarkophag-Reliefs</i> . 3 vols. Berlin: G. Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung. |
| AE | <i>L'Année Epigraphique</i> . 1888- . Presses Universitaires de France. |
| BNP | Brill's Neu Pauly Cancik, H. and Schneider, H. 1996-2003. <i>Der Neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike</i> . Stuttgart: Metzler. |
| CDC 2000 | <i>2000 CDC Growth Charts for the United States: Methods and Development</i> . Vital and Health Statistics, Series 11, Number 246, May 2002. |
| CIL | Mommsen, T. 1863- . <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i> . Berlin: De Gruyter. |
| EDCS | Epigraphischen Datenbank Claus-Slaby. |
| EDR | Epigraphic Database Roma. |
| EEC | Di Bernardino A. (ed.) 1992. <i>Encyclopedia of the Early Church</i> (trans. A. Walford). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. |
| ICUR | De Rossi, G. B. (ed.) 1857-61. <i>Inscriptiones Christianae urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores</i> . Rome: Pontificio Istituto di antichità Cristiana. |
| IG | Kirschhoff, A. (ed.) 1873- . <i>Inscriptiones Atticae Anno Euclidis Vestiores</i> . Berlin: Geo. Reims. |
| ILCV | Diehl, E. (ed.) 1961-67. <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae veteres</i> . Berlin: Weidmann. |
| ILS | Dessau, H. (ed.) 1962. <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i> . Berlin: Weidmann. |
| LIMC | <i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (1981- 1999). Zurich and Munich: Artemis. |
| LTUR | Steinby, E. M. (ed.) 1993-2000. <i>Lexicon Topigraphicum Urbis Romae</i> . 6 vols. Rome: Quasar. |
| MNR | Museo Nazionale, Roma. |
| MNR Epigrafica | Friggeri, R., Granino Cecere, M. G. and Gregori, G. L. (eds) 2012. <i>Terme di Diocleziano, la collezione epigrafica</i> . Milan: Electa. |
| MNR Le Sculture | Giuliano A. (ed.) 1979-1995. <i>Museo Nazionale Romano, Le Sculture</i> . 12 vols. Rome: De Luca. |
| PCAS | Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra. |
| PIR ² | Groag, E., Stein, A. et al., (eds) 1933-2009. <i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani Saeculi I, II, III</i> . 2nd edition. Berlin: De Gruyter. |
| RIC | Mattingly et al. (eds) 1923-1981. <i>The Roman Imperial Coinage</i> . 9 vols. London: Spink. |
| RRC | Crawford, M. H. 1975. <i>Roman Republican Coinage</i> . 2 vols. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. |
| TV II | Bowman, A. K and Thomas, J. D. 1994. <i>The Vindolanda Writing Tablets</i> (Tabulae Vindolandenses II), London: British Museum Press. |

Ancient authors – editions used

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Aelian NA | Aelian. <i>On the Characteristics of Animals</i> . Translation A. F. Scholfield. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA. 3 vols. 1971. |
| Aesop Fab. | Babrius and Phaedrus. Translation B. E. Perry. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA. 1984. |
| Amm. Marc. | Ammianus Marcellinus. Translation J. C. Rolfe. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA. 3 vols. 1971. |
| App. BC | Appian. <i>Roman History</i> . Vol. 3-4. Translation H. White. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA. 4 vols. 1964. |
| App. Mithr. | Appian. <i>Roman History</i> . Vol. 2. Translation H. White. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA. 4 vols. 1964. |
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Terminologies, images and translations used

Different authors have labelled various constituent parts of the structure in various ways that have tended to cloud rather than clarify descriptions. I shall attempt to avoid further complicating the process of cross-referencing between authors by maintaining the labelling of the constituent parts in accordance with the terminology used by the original excavator Goffredo Bendinelli in his final excavation report of 1922. Bendinelli's '*Cubiculo superiore*' will be referred to as the upper chamber, his '*Cubiculo inferiore A*' will be referred to as *cubiculum A*, '*Vestibolo con arcosoli*' as the vestibule and '*Cubiculo inferiore B*' will be referred to as *cubiculum B*.¹

Similarly, with the architectural form I shall use the term 'hypogeum' for the structure as a whole, a description adopted by Bendinelli in the original notice of the excavation and used by most commentators up to the present day.² The use of the term hypogeum in this instance is more a term of convenience rather than one of strict accuracy in contrast to *LTUR*'s description as '*Sepulcrum*'³ or Poe's '*Monumentum*'.⁴ Poe has highlighted that, strictly speaking, the term hypogeum ought to be reserved for a structure that is wholly subterranean, which the hypogeum of the Aurelii never was. Nevertheless I believe her reservation of the term hypogeum for those elements wholly below ground and the use of the term mausoleum for the structure as a whole introduces ambiguity when reading different sources and making consequent cross-references. I have used Poe's system of identifying different landings and stairways which make up the multiple levels within the hypogeum.

As with the use of the term 'hypogeum' the identification 'of the Aurelii' is one of convenience deriving from the mosaic floor inscription in *cubiculum A*. There is no evidence that other parts of the hypogeum were used by others of the same name yet their name is used for the hypogeum as a whole, a convention that I intend to continue, though, as shall become evident, that is not to advocate that the hypogeum was a familial tomb.

Today, despite the efforts of modern conservators, the frescoes have lost much of their colour since their discovery, particularly in the blue/green part of the spectrum. To mitigate this effect illustrations from a variety of sources are used. A number of post-restoration photographs from the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologica Sacra have been reproduced which provide the best record of the hypogeum in its present state. These are, in some cases, of a better quality than those in the comprehensive photographic record published in 2011 which, though not always ideal have nonetheless brought the monument to a wider audience.⁵ Given these limitations, the aquatints of C. Tabanelli, published in Josef Wilpert's 1924 monograph, remain an invaluable resource. Comparison of the near 100 year old aquatints and modern records confirms the accuracy of Tabanelli's work which provides an excellent record of the frescoes shortly after discovery. Unfortunately, the black and white photographs published in Bendinelli's report do not add to the pictorial record of this part of the hypogeum though in a few instances O. Ferretti's coloured plates included in Bendinelli's report complement Tabanelli/Wilpert's publication.

Translations of modern languages have been given where I have considered it useful to do so, such translations are my own. Ancient languages are from the Loeb edition referred to unless otherwise noted. I have not translated epigraphs due to the large number of epigraphs cited which would inevitably result in much repetition. Epigraphic evidence, however, has been quoted comprehensively in the footnotes using the guidelines set out by Hans Krummrey and Silvio Panciera in 1980 with the exception that editorial correction of error follows the convention of Epigraphic Database Claus-Slaby (e.g. f<e=f>cit for FFCIT).

¹ Bendinelli 1922: 112.

² *Inter alia* Bendinelli 1920; Jastrzębowska 2013.

³ *LTUR* vol. IV: 276-7 s.v. '*Sepulcrum: Aurelii*'.

⁴ Poe 2007: 4.

⁵ Colour rendition is, in a number of cases, inaccurate and the overall quality of some of the photographs, unfortunately, not as high as some of the unpublished photographs.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Object, aims and scope of study

In the autumn of 1919 the Società Trasporti Automobilistici arranged for the construction of an underground car park on the corner of the Viale Manzoni and Via Luzzatti in the Esquiline Hill district of Rome. During excavation workers broke into a hitherto undiscovered underground chamber decorated with a series of frescoes that quickly attracted scholarly attention. Initial notification of the discovery was made by Bendinelli in the *Notizie degli Scavi di Antichità* of 1920 with further notifications in English the same year by Thomas Ashby and Bendinelli himself the following year.¹ Excavation was briefly suspended at the end of 1920 and arrangements were made for the removal of an existing modern building whose removal allowed a complete excavation of the site.²

The chamber discovered was *cubiculum* A of the hypogeum of the Aurelii situated in Regio V of the city of Rome, approximately 750 m south-east of the Esquiline gate. It did not lie on one of the main arteries of Rome, but approximately 30 m south of the Via Labicana that leads to the Porta Maggiore where the Via Praenestina branches off.³ The hypogeum's construction and decoration can be securely dated to c. AD 220-240 on archaeological and stylistic grounds⁴ and the present study has found nothing within the corpus of wall painting in Rome that would suggest a different date. At some time during the third quarter of the third century a programme of expansion was begun.⁵ The expansion was, however, abortive, having stopped, before completion, upon the construction of the Aurelian Wall (c. AD 270). This expansion is now mostly demolished or made inaccessible during consolidation work. There was little in the way of decoration in the extended area, what there was is recorded in Bendinelli.⁶

In the third century AD, before the construction of the Aurelian Wall, the area between the Nymphaeum of Alexander Severus and the Porta Maggiore was a mixture of tombs and aristocratic *horti*.⁷ Some of the tombs were substantial and of considerable age such as the Sepulcrum Arruntii, and Statilii.⁸ The area was still being used for burials in the late second century as confirmed by the discovery of a fine marble sarcophagus⁹ found on the corner of the Via Giolitti and Via Porta Maggiore and into the third century as suggested by a grave dated by a coin of Otacilia Severa (wife of Philip the Arab r. 244-249).¹⁰ The hypogeum of the Aurelii forms part of this landscape and the frescoes form an important bridge between classical and late antique art; understanding them will provide new insights into Rome in the first half of the third century.

This book does not attempt to provide a history of the hypogeum beyond the execution of the original decorative scheme other than where later developments affected (always to the detriment) that scheme, but rather addresses a series of issues that require review/investigation to further our understanding of this important site:

- Do previous and existing theories of the frescoes' meaning stand scrutiny?
- Is the current reading of the mosaic inscription of *cubiculum* A sound?
- Can one interpret the frescoes individually and/or collectively?
- Were the frescoes commissioned by the same client/s and, if so, was the common factor that brought these people together religious or not?
- Having interpreted the frescoes in the context of Roman society in the third century AD how does this information shed light on the commissioners of the tomb?
- What are the broader implications of a more holistic interpretation of the frescoes?

In answering these questions this monograph presents a new interpretation of the images preserved in the

¹ Ashby 1920: 85; Bendinelli 1920: 123-41; Bendinelli 1921a: 169-72.

² For a description of the events around the discovery of the hypogeum and the history of its acquisition and stewardship by the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, see Giuliani 2011: 31-50.

³ Bendinelli 1922: 299.

⁴ Bendinelli 1922: 510 believed the likely date to be AD 200-220 based on brick stamps found in the vicinity. Wirth 1934: 86 suggested a date of AD 240 while Himmelmann 1975: 9 thought a slightly earlier date of AD 220 as did Jastrzębowska 1981: 37-8. The latter considered the Villa Piccola beneath S. Sebastiano to be c. AD 240 and given the similarities between that and the hypogeum of the Aurelii (see especially Chapter 6) the author believes that the hypogeum of the Aurelii is likely to date to the same time or slightly earlier.

⁵ Bendinelli 1922: 415, 424, figs 56 and 60.

⁶ Bendinelli 1922: 412-20, figs 57-9.

⁷ The *horti Pallantini* and *Liciniani* covered most of this area with the pavilion of Minerva Medica (built c. AD 300) approximately 350 m to the north. For a brief description of this area in the imperial era prior to the construction of the Aurelian walls see Coates-Stephens 2004: 75-7.

⁸ Brizio 1876. The frescoes are now preserved in the MNR Palazzo Massimo.

⁹ Depicting the death of Creusa, MNR Terme, 75248. Musso in MNR *Le Sculture* 1/8*, VI, 8: 279-83.

¹⁰ Coates-Stephens 2004: 77.

hypogeum of the Aurelii. I shall demonstrate that previous theories have placed too much emphasis on a supposed religious inspiration for the work and have not paid sufficient attention to the tradition of freedman commemoration. By looking at the frescoes in a religious rather than a *libertus* context, erroneous conclusions have been drawn. Rather than a familial or religious community, the tomb was constructed by a *collegium*. Such a conclusion has been suggested before,¹¹ however, I shall argue that the basis of such a *collegium* was as a group of bureaucrats or scribes linked to one another by virtue of their profession rather than religious affiliation. Furthermore, the enigmatic nature of the decoration of the hypogeum is a direct consequence of the avoidance of specific cultic symbolism arising, in all probability, through a desire to avoid religious offence. In the course of the investigation the position of women and children in such a profession has been brought to light. The prominence of women in *collegia* has been questioned recently.¹² The prevalence of women in all *cubicula*, but especially *cubicula* A and B, however, demonstrates that women could play a greater role in organisations that did not require physical strength than has been previously suspected. An identification of the child's grave, not with the *virgo* Aurelia Prima but with one of the male dedicatees opens up insight into the role of children in professional *collegia*.

I do not expect everything in this book to remain unchallenged; some of the images contained within the hypogeum of the Aurelii are unique in the corpus of ancient Roman art and so will, perhaps, ever elude a definitive understanding. Such difficulties, of course, ought not to prohibit the attempt. Nevertheless, I trust that the readings of individual scenes is coherent with the tomb as a whole.

Chapter outline

Previous scholarship, where such work has surveyed the whole tomb, has suffered from the undue influence of the 'Adam and Eve' image of the upper chamber and the 'shepherd' in *cubiculum* A. In large part this is due to the former being the first image a visitor encounters upon entering the hypogeum and the latter was the first image brought to light on the hypogeum's discovery.

Difficulties in this approach arise from the upper chamber's fragmentary state. The 'Adam and Eve' image has informed discussion of the more complete paintings of *cubicula* A and B resulting in a great deal of conjecture to make the well-preserved paintings fit an ideology based upon the most ruined. This study, in contrast, discusses 'Adam and Eve' only after the near intact

paintings of the lower *cubicula* have been discussed and a scenario proposed that not only conforms with what we know of contemporary Roman funerary practice, but is also consistent with interpretations put for the whole monument. Similarly, the 'shepherd', which gained such interest in early scholarship, is given no precedence over other, more prominent decorative details in *cubiculum* A. The 'shepherd' is an interesting image, but not significant to the overall interpretation of the paintings.

Further difficulties have arisen when individual images or single rooms have been discussed with little (or no) reference to other areas of the hypogeum. Scholars have not investigated in any depth the similarities that occur between *cubicula*. This study pays far more attention to these similarities which aid interpretation and confirms that the three surviving chambers were all commissioned by the same clientele and carried out contemporaneously or near contemporaneously. In order to facilitate this approach after the detailed description of the lower *cubicula* discussion and interpretation shall proceed on a thematic, rather than room-by-room basis. After the interpretation of the lower *cubicula* attention will turn to the upper chamber's fragmentary decoration. With this in mind this monograph will proceed as follows:

- Chapter 1. An introduction which includes methodology and a summary of previous scholarship.
- Chapter 2. An architectural description of the tomb and its immediate vicinity.
- Chapter 3. An examination of the mosaic floor inscription in *cubiculum* A.
- Chapter 4. The floor inscription explicitly confirms the Aurelii's freedman status, therefore I briefly discuss funerary art among *liberti* from the first century BC to the beginning of the third century AD.
- Chapter 5. A comprehensive description of the decorative motifs and schemes of the lower *cubicula*.
- Chapter 6. An examination of the differing motifs that are depicted in the red-green linear areas of the lower *cubicula*.
- Chapter 7. A discussion of the central medallion in *cubiculum* B and its interpretation as a scene of manumission.
- Chapter 8. An examination of the recurrence of groups of eleven and twelve figures in the lower *cubicula* i.e. the two Processions and banqueting scene in *cubiculum* A and the *arcosolium* decoration in *cubiculum* B.

Attention will then concentrate on the remaining large-scale scenes in *cubiculum* A.

¹¹ Giovagnoli 2011: 231; Poe 2007: 108-123.

¹² Hemelrijk 2015.

- Chapter 9. The so-called ‘Homeric Scene’ and the role of women with an excursus on portraiture in Roman funerary art.
- Chapter 10. An examination of children in Roman art and how an understanding of ancient attitudes towards children informs the ‘shepherd’, ‘*adventus*’ and donkey scenes.
- Chapter 11. An analysis of the rear wall of *cubiculum* A and the sidewalls of the upper chamber and how they illustrate the professional lives of the Aurelii.
- Chapter 12 will look at the rear wall of the upper chamber – the so-called ‘Adam and Eve’ and ‘Creator’ images. A new interpretation will be given drawing on the work of Nikolaus Himmelmann and Helga Kaiser-Minn that not only reconciles the difficulties of their findings, but also tackles the perceived inconsistencies between this and contemporary funerary art.
- Chapter 13. Conclusions and discussion of the wider implications.

Architectural and artistic context

Because of its position within the Aurelian wall the hypogeum of the Aurelii never developed into a full-scale catacomb. That it would have done so had it been placed a few hundred metres further along the via Labicana is clear from the incomplete, and comparatively unordered, extensions that were being undertaken when the new city wall put an end to further development. Had the wall not been built there is little doubt that the hypogeum of the Aurelii would have become subsumed into a broader catacomb system in the same manner as the hypogeum of the Flavii became incorporated into the catacomb of Domitilla and the area of Lucina incorporated several individual hypogea into the catacomb system that became part of S. Callisto.¹³

Not only did the city wall’s construction limit the monument’s physical development it also arrested its artistic development. Pre-Christian decoration was generally adapted or simply covered over when a burial site passed into Christian use: as in the case of the hypogeum of Ampliatus.¹⁴ The artistic style of the hypogeum of the Aurelii however is, outside of the megalographic scenes, firmly in the tradition of Roman wall painting which arose during the late Antonine period out of the earlier Fourth style of painting that was itself first seen in the mid-first century AD.¹⁵ The

architectural forms seen in the Fourth style became progressively more slender as horizontal and vertical columns were replaced by patterns of red and green (occasionally blue) lines. In addition to the horizontal and vertical divisions, the fields and panels formed as a consequence were embellished with curved swags of vegetation.

In those areas of the hypogeum of the Aurelii which use the red-green lines (*cubiculum* B, vestibule and *cubiculum* A vault) the closest comparanda are:

- (1) The so-called Villa Piccola beneath S. Sebastiano and
- (2) The *cubiculum* of the Good Shepherd in the catacomb of Domitilla.

The first, near the third milestone of the Via Appia, is dated to c. AD 240.¹⁶ The term ‘villa’, however, is a misnomer as the building is not domestic, but closely associated with adjacent tombs though not used as a burial place itself.¹⁷ The decoration displays what Joyce describes as a ‘*horror vacui*’.¹⁸ Each of the principal panels, at its centre, has detailed human, animal or vegetal motifs. Around these panels the space between panels and the broader fields created by other red lines are filled with short green lines that are sometimes connected to, sometimes separate from the red line framework.

The second comparandum, in the wholly funerary context of the catacomb of Domitilla, is dated a little earlier to AD 200-240.¹⁹ Here, as in the Villa Piccola, a primary framework of red lines provides panels, some of which are filled by ‘floating’ figures and others by secondary green lines. The use of green lines as secondary to the primary divisions formed by red lines will inform the interpretation of the so-called ‘Homeric Scene’ in *cubiculum* A in Chapter 9.

Thus the hypogeum of the Aurelii decoration in the vestibule and *cubiculum* B is, by virtue of its similarities in the basic layout of its decorative scheme, contemporary to the *cubiculum* of the Good Shepherd and the Villa Piccola i.e. dateable to the first half of the third century. This is compatible with the archaeological evidence discovered by Bendinelli who found a number of tile stamps (in the fill of the hypogeum) the latest of which was dated to the reign of Septimius Severus (r. 193-211 AD) and an adjacent burial also dated to the Severan era.²⁰

¹³ For the early development of the catacomb of Domitilla see Reekmans 1964; for the area of Lucina in the catacomb of S. Callisto see Pergola 1979. For the early development of catacombs, see Brandenburg 1984; Fiocchi Nicolai *et al.* 2009: 13-36 and most recently Borg 2013: 59-121.

¹⁴ Giuliani 2007; Testini 1978.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the emergence and evolution of red-

green linear style see: Joyce 1981 chapter 1 especially 40-6; Mielsch 2001: 107-21.

¹⁶ Fiocchi Nicolai *et al.* 2009: 90, fig. 99; Jastrzębowska 1981: 36-9.

¹⁷ Jastrzębowska 1981: 100, abb. 1.

¹⁸ Joyce 1981: 44.

¹⁹ Fiocchi Nicolai *et al.* 2009: 22-3, 91-2, figs 17, 100-1; Pergola 1979: 332-4.

²⁰ Bendinelli 1922: 300 and 432.

The hypogeum of the Aurelii stands on the threshold of two significant changes in ancient Roman burial practice: (1) the requirement for greater levels of organisation than had previously been the case²¹ and (2) the advent of Christianity which, while adapting and modifying certain pre-existing motifs, nonetheless profoundly changed the iconography of Roman tombs.

Methodology

Much of the scholarship on the hypogeum of the Aurelii has been based upon a conviction that the paintings represented some form of Christian belief. Consequently, discussion has revolved around material that post-dates the paintings. This study has sought to address this difficulty by drawing upon material that is, wherever possible, contemporary or pre-dates the hypogeum. Where later material, especially Christian material, is used it is done so with caution given the changes (and continuities) that occurred in artistic representation in the century and a half after the hypogeum's construction brought about by the triumph of Christianity. Where commentators have avoided perceived Christian connections interpretation has been based on elite representation. This is mistaken as the one secure fact that we do know about the Aurelii is that they were not members of the social elite, but *liberti* and I therefore, as mentioned above, discuss the tradition of freedman commemoration before turning to the hypogeum of the Aurelii itself.

Extensive use is made of epigraphic evidence and material that relates to pre-Christian commemorative funerary practice. Epigraphic research has been greatly enhanced in recent years by the construction of on-line epigraphic databases. The two most commonly referred to are the Epigraphic Database Clauss-Slaby (EDCS) and the Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR). They both have their strengths and weaknesses. The former is more comprehensive, but the latter possesses more detailed information e.g. the current whereabouts of a particular inscription and more extensive bibliography. Such tools allow rapid searches for comparanda and finding further information. Yet useful though they are they are less useful when investigating 'unknown unknowns'. For that the impressive scholarship of previous generations has not been made redundant. The author carried out an exhaustive search through the many fascicules of *CIL VI* which threw up many useful leads that may otherwise have gone undiscovered.

Early Christian and Homeric texts used in support of previous theories have been re-read in context to test whether they may be relied upon to throw light on the meaning of the paintings and ultimately those depicted

within them. In many instances the alleged 'proof' is revealed to be less than convincing.

It has been the author's intention to address all the images within the hypogeum's three *cubicula* and vestibule. Some scholarship has concentrated on individual images without taking the wider context, architectural and artistic, into consideration. Not all these results have been satisfactory with some contributions repeating errors that could have been avoided with a closer consideration of the overall decorative schema of the tomb. This study seeks to provide an interpretation which avoids internal contradictions in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the commissioners of the monument and their place in Roman society.

Summary of previous scholarship

Since the discovery of the hypogeum of the Aurelii there have been numerous attempts at interpretation. This brief description follows the five 'schools' of opinion on the meaning of the frescoes and the belief systems of those who commissioned them. They are:

- Orthodox Christian.²²
- Gnostics and heretics.
- Non-Christian or pagan beliefs.
- Syncretic art.
- Non-religious interpretations.

Orthodox Christian

An interpretation of the monument, as one erected by orthodox Christians, was first proposed by Bendinelli who undertook the excavation.²³ This interpretation was prompted by various individual scenes considered Christian and that influenced the exegesis of the whole monument's decorative scheme.

The first part of the monument to be excavated was *cubiculum A* where, on the left hand wall close to the entrance, in the Upper Register of decoration, the image of a long-haired and bearded, yet youthful, figure was found. The figure, sitting on a hillside reading a scroll and surrounded by various animals brought to Bendinelli's mind images of Christ,²⁴ in particular, at the suggestion of Orazio Marucchi,²⁵ the concept of Christ as Good Shepherd mentioned by the early

²² Strictly speaking the terms 'orthodox' and 'orthodoxy' when applied to Christian belief are anachronistic in the pre-Nicene period, however, for ease of reference they are used here to denote belief that would in due course become orthodox. Similarly the term 'heretic' is used here anachronistically for those beliefs that subsequently would not become part of orthodox faith.

²³ Bendinelli 1922: 476.

²⁴ Bendinelli 1922: 344-5.

²⁵ Bendinelli 1922: 440; Marucchi 1921: 45.

²¹ Borg 2013: 119.

third-century epitaph of Abercius.²⁶ A lack of settled Christian iconography at the time of the monument's construction was thought to be the reason that the figure was not the clean-shaven image of Christ more common in Christian iconography of the fourth and fifth centuries.²⁷

Excavation progressed to the upper chamber where two fragmentary scenes were found on the rear wall. The first, on the left, of two figures, a snake and a tree was read by Bendinelli as part of a scene of the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall from Grace.²⁸ Bendinelli thought the second scene, on the right, resembled early images of God creating mankind:²⁹ a Creation scene that formed a pendant to that of the Fall from Grace. To complement these images from the Old Testament the seated figures on the sidewalls were interpreted as prophets or apostles reading scripture.³⁰

In the vestibule to the third chamber, *cubiculum* B, a figure dressed in tunic and *pallium* was found apparently pointing to a green Latin cross (Figure 1).³¹ This was not interpreted by Bendinelli, but was made much of by Wilpert and the Gnostic 'school', as discussed further below.

Within *cubiculum* A the Large Procession of eleven palliate figures initially led Bendinelli to construe these as the twelve apostles, one having been lost when the portal (leading to the incomplete hypogeum extension) was cut into the rear wall.³² However, by the time of his monograph in 1922 further investigation had revealed that the doorway had destroyed a pre-existing *arcosolium*, rather than a twelfth figure, and there had only ever been eleven figures:³³ a point emphasised by Thomas Ashby.³⁴

This misunderstanding of the number of figures in the Large Procession (despite Bendinelli's retraction in his definitive monograph) coloured the opinion



Figure 1: Figure pointing to a Latin cross.
Wilpert 1924: tav. Xa.

of many subsequent commentators. Mary Swindler³⁵ followed the opinions of, 'alcuni studiosi' in 1929 and, despite drawing attention to Paul Styger's warning³⁶ against reading symbolism into places where it does not exist, described the Large Procession as apostles yet accepted that there had only ever been eleven. Despite the uncanonical number Ernest Nash,³⁷ in 1962, also described them as apostles and repeated the canard that one had been destroyed by the construction of the door to the tomb's extension. Wladimiro Dorigo,³⁸ in 1971, rejected the idea of the figures being historical on the grounds of the, 'most reliable philological evidence' which, unfortunately, he did not quote. More recently, this apostolic reading has been repeated by Filippo Coarelli³⁹ and Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis.⁴⁰

The Christian interpretation coloured the reading of other frescoes in the same *cubiculum* such as the 'adventus' scene above the Large Procession. This has been read as an *adventus* based upon contemporary imperial iconography that in turn influenced the entry into either the earthly Jerusalem by Christ⁴¹ or the celestial city by the deceased.⁴² the former informed by the image of a donkey within the city, the latter by the urban imagery on the rear wall and their supposed similarities with descriptions in the Book of

²⁶ Considered to be the earliest Christian inscription dated c. 216. Mitchell 2008: 303.

²⁷ Bendinelli 1922: 441, fn 2.

²⁸ Bendinelli 1922: 436-7.

²⁹ Bendinelli 1922: 437-8.

³⁰ Bendinelli 1922: 434 why Bendinelli should state that, 'oggi visibili in numero di cinque' is unclear as there are only four with no suggestion (or space) for a fifth figure.

³¹ Bendinelli 1922: 320 and 434. Wilpert 1924: tav. Xa.

³² Bendinelli 1920: 131.

³³ Bendinelli 1922: 320, 322-3 discusses the possibility of a twelfth figure to the right of the *arcosolium* below the 'Homeric' scene but rejects the idea on the grounds that there would be insufficient space and the loss of all trace of such a twelfth figure when all the others are well preserved is highly unlikely. Bendinelli 1922: 434 records, without reference to his original opinion, and with a hint of disapproval that, 'nonchè la serie di undici figure virili, che già da alcuni studiosi furono senza molte esitazioni identificate con gli Apostoli.' ['as well as the series of eleven male figures, that some scholars have, without much hesitation identified as apostles.']

³⁴ Ashby 1923-4: 107.

³⁵ Swindler 1929: 401-2.

³⁶ Styger 1927: 11.

³⁷ Nash 1962: 317.

³⁸ Dorigo 1971: 105.

³⁹ Coarelli 2007: 200.

⁴⁰ Petsalis-Diomidis 2007: 278.

⁴¹ Swindler 1929: 402. Kantorowicz 1944: 215.

⁴² Borda 1958: 317; Colli 1983: 123, 147; Grabar 1966: 108, fig. 106.

Revelations.⁴³ Thus to the proponents of an orthodox Christian interpretation the decorative scheme of *cubiculum* A presented a, 'coherent' programme: Good Shepherd, welcome to heavenly Jerusalem after death and divine judgement.⁴⁴

Although Bendinelli posited a Christian interpretation of the monument he recognised that many elements of the decoration remained unexplained and acknowledged that there were colleagues who considered this, '*scabrosa e controversa materia*'⁴⁵ was due to the monument's possible use by heretics. The enigmatic nature of the paintings was evidence, according to Ashby,⁴⁶ of attempts to 'camouflage' the Christian graves from hostile pagans though this particular idea did not find favour with scholars other than Rodolfo Lanciani.⁴⁷

Gnostics and Heretics

In 1924 Wilpert, an ordained priest who had already produced a *magnum opus* of catacomb wall paintings in 1903, issued an influential publication that contained the finest colour reproductions of the frescoes by C. Tabanelli. Wilpert's attempt to interpret the tomb's decoration highlighted the perceived incongruities and led him to a comprehensive, and enduring, interpretation based upon Gnostic belief.

The upper chamber's rear wall fresco⁴⁸ was interpreted according to Gnostic philosophy as it had developed in the second century AD and known (in Wilpert's time) exclusively through writings later approved for their orthodoxy:⁴⁹ primarily Irenaeus (late 2nd century), Hippolytus (first half 3rd century) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215). According to these early Christian writers Gnostics believed that Man had been created by an emanation of the Pleroma or Divine Spirit known as the Demiurge Ialdabaoth.⁵⁰ This less than perfect Being was identified by Wilpert as the figure on the right side of the rear wall. The serpent on the left side of the wall associated the monument with a sect known as the Ophite Naassenes as they held serpents in great esteem: the serpent was the means by which *gnosis* was received (Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1, 30.7).⁵¹

In *cubiculum* A the '*adventus*' scene was associated with the arrival of the second-century Epiphanes, son of

the Gnostic prophet Carpocrates, into Same on the island of Cephalonia.⁵² This '*adventus*' was explained by Wilpert as symbolising a form of apotheosis in the Carpocratian belief system.⁵³ However, Epiphanes is known only⁵⁴ from the writings of Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* III, 2, 5-9) who does not mention such an incident. Wilpert was another of Bendinelli's, '*alcuni studiosi*' who interpreted the 'Large Procession' as the apostles without commenting on the fact that there were only eleven.⁵⁵ The central medallion on the ceiling of *cubiculum* B was construed, by Wilpert,⁵⁶ as a Gnostic divine triad: the central figure of Sophia, the first woman with the first and second man from whom Christ is descended. The four figures with wands (*virgae*) set around the medallion were representations of the Gnostic Christ alternating with peacocks, symbols of consecration.⁵⁷ Other images of figures with *virgae* were construed as symbolic of magic related to the followers of the early Gnostic divines Menander and Simon Magus⁵⁸ (Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.23.1-5). The depiction of women called to Wilpert's mind⁵⁹ the imparting of Gnostic wisdom through the agency of Mariamne (Hipp. *Philosoph.* 5.7 and 10.5, not 10.7 as Wilpert's footnote). Despite the somewhat complex arguments put forward by Wilpert, in the years immediately following the idea that the builders of the monument were a sect of Gnostics was generally accepted as a means of reconciling the various non-orthodox elements of the paintings.

As briefly noted above one 'proof' of a Christian origin for the hypogeum of the Aurelii was a Latin cross on the right hand wall of the vestibule that Wilpert claimed to have been the first to recognise.⁶⁰ He first associates the cross with the Gnostic aeon *Oros* in accordance with Valentinian theology then states that that is not the purpose of the cross in this instance, but that it is a symbol that the monument was exclusively used by Christians. In Wilpert's words a '*trait d'union*' between

⁵² Wilpert 1924: 36-9.

⁵³ Wilpert 1924: 39-42.

⁵⁴ EEC: 145, A. Monaci Castagno 1992, s.v. 'Carpocrates'.

⁵⁵ Wilpert 1924: 26. Wilpert 1924: 24 also identifies the twelve male figures in the *arcosolium* in *cubiculum* B's rear wall to be apostles.

⁵⁶ Wilpert 1924: 19-20.

⁵⁷ Wilpert 1924: 20.

⁵⁸ EEC: 553, A. Monaci Castagno 1992, s.v. 'Menander'; 780, E. Peretto 1992, s.v. 'Simon Magus - Simonians'; Wilpert 1924: 18.

⁵⁹ Wilpert 1924: 10, fn 40.

⁶⁰ Wilpert 1924: 2, '... mostrava niente meno che una croce della forma così detta latina, dipinta in color verde e un po' sbiadita, perciò rimasta da tutti inosservata. Quando fui sicuro del fatto mio, dissi: 'Qui c'è la croce!' La scoperta della croce destò presso i miei compagni il più vivo interesse. 'Questo è forte!', esclamò il dott. Bendinelli, avvicinandosi alla pittura.' ['It displayed nothing less than a cross of the so-called Latin type, painted in green and a little abraded, for which reason it had remained unobserved by everyone. When I was sure of my facts I said, 'It is a cross!' The discovery of the cross awoke a lively interest in my companions. 'This is amazing', exclaimed dott. Bendinelli, approaching the picture.'] The incident is not recorded by Bendinelli in his description of this part of the hypogeum Bendinelli 1922: 380.

⁴³ Colli 1983: 123, 147.

⁴⁴ Coarelli 2007: 201.

⁴⁵ Bendinelli 1922: 435.

⁴⁶ Ashby 1922-3: 100.

⁴⁷ Lanciani 1922: 54.

⁴⁸ Wilpert 1924: 8-17

⁴⁹ The Nag Hammadi discoveries in Egypt, 1945 subsequently opened up further fields of study on Gnosticism outside the scope of this work. For a review of Gnostic studies post-Nag Hammadi see Filoramo 1990.

⁵⁰ Wilpert 1924: 9-10.

⁵¹ Doresse 1960: 92; Wilpert 1924: 10.

the two subterranean *cubicula*, though precisely how this was meant to be understood remained unclear.

Michael Rostovtzeff⁶¹ followed Wilpert's Gnostic interpretation stating that the frescoes, 'certainly reflect the sacred books of one of the Gnostic sects' and re-iterated the theory that the 'Adam and Eve' images in the upper chamber were key to the Christian, if heretical, philosophy of the Aurelii. Attempts to understand the meaning of the paintings concentrated on what particular form of Gnostic or heretical Christianity was being exhibited. Carlo Cecchelli, in 1928⁶² and in 1944⁶³ in his review of supposedly heretical monuments in Rome, noted the absence of any cross in Christian iconography prior to the fourth century yet nevertheless used its presence in the hypogeum of the Aurelii in support of a heretical Christian, in this case Montanist,⁶⁴ interpretation; a view supported by Paulo Mingazzini⁶⁵ who listed nine reasons - none of which are very different to views considered orthodox.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the idea was repeated by Maurizio Borda who saw allusions to the biblical Book of the Revelations in the *forum* and *hortus conclusus* scenes painted on the rear wall of *cubiculum* A.⁶⁷

The Valentinians⁶⁸ mentioned by Wilpert were first suggested by Marucchi⁶⁹ and Felice Grossi Gondi⁷⁰ in 1921. Their ideas arose by considering the *arcosolia* decoration in *cubiculum* B and the banqueting scene in *cubiculum* A. As each of these images contained twelve figures and, as the number twelve was said to be important to the Valentinian sect (Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.1.2 and 1.18.4), known to have been in Rome,⁷¹ then this was considered proof for a Valentinian connection. This idea had developed earlier in 1903-4 when Marucchi⁷² had discussed another image showing twelve diners in a recently discovered tomb called Cava della Rossa on the Via Latina near the Villa Lazzaroni.

In the post-war period Jerome Carcopino in 1956⁷³ and Marcel Chicoteau in 1976⁷⁴ took up the purely Gnostic reading. Carcopino's contribution was the second part of a three-part discussion on the evidence of Pythagorean philosophy in the city of Rome and its evolution during the imperial period. The hypogeum of the Aurelii was dealt with in five chapters in arguments that Jocelyn Toynbee described as more satisfying than previous theories, but at times, 'not a little weak'.⁷⁵ Chicoteau's concise and influential study under the title: '*Glanures au Viale Manzoni*' explained all the paintings in the hypogeum of the Aurelii in purely Gnostic terms. As with Carcopino the work received mixed reviews primarily due to the lack of attention to the physical evidence⁷⁶ and Chicoteau made no attempt to see the monument in the context of other earlier or contemporary tombs.

Despite criticisms of both Carcopino and Chicoteau and the rise of alternative theories the Gnostic 'school' continued to attract supporters. In 1960 Jean Doresse⁷⁷ considered the *mandorla* formed by the red/green curved lines in the vestibule and *cubiculum* B evidence of the Naassenes' veneration for the almond (Hipp. *Philosoph.* 5.9) while James Stevenson,⁷⁸ also drew on Hippolytus (Hipp. *Philosoph.* 7.1), to connect the so-called 'Homeric Scene' in *cubiculum* A with Naassene sect yet suggested another sect, the Monarchians,⁷⁹ as the commissioners of the monument. Contra these ideas Paul Corby Finney's 1980 work on Gnostic art saw no connection between the hypogeum of the Aurelii's decoration and Gnosticism.⁸⁰ The Gnostic theories of Wilpert, Carcopino and Chicoteau were repeated by William Frend⁸¹ and Alastair Logan⁸² in 1996 and 2006 respectively. The prevalence of the Gnostic interpretation is exemplified by the hypogeum of the Aurelii's use as an exemplar of Gnostic symbolism in the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Early Church.⁸³

Non-Christian or pagan beliefs

For more than half a century there was little dispute about the fundamental exegesis of the paintings of the hypogeum of the Aurelii - they were Christian. Arguments there were about what particular form (orthodox, heretical, Gnostic) which varied in influence or complexity, but no radical reappraisal of the

⁶¹ Rostovtzeff 1927: 150.

⁶² Cecchelli 1928: 59-60.

⁶³ Cecchelli 1944: 86-7.

⁶⁴ Followers of a mid-second-century prophet, Montanus, from Phrygia they were orthodox in many of their views and attracted the support of Tertullian at the beginning of the third century AD. See *EEC*: 570-1, B. Aland 1992, s.v. 'Montanus - Montanism'.

⁶⁵ Mingazzini 1942/3: 365-6. Although taking a Montanist reading Mingazzini nonetheless considered the '*adventus*' scene to represent a real life event.

⁶⁶ E.g. no. 8: the Montanists held the apostles in high regard hence the apostles of the Large Procession.

⁶⁷ Borda 1958: 318-19.

⁶⁸ A Gnostic sect that arrived in Rome from Egypt c. 140. See *EEC*: 860-1, C. Gianotto 1992, s.v. 'Valentinus the Gnostic'.

⁶⁹ Marucchi 1921: 47.

⁷⁰ Grossi-Gondi 1921: 126-34.

⁷¹ On the subject of Valentinians in Rome see Guarducci 1973.

⁷² Marucchi 1903: 284 citing Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* 1.13 (the author could not find any reference to dining groups of twelve in Marucchi's cited passage)

⁷³ Carcopino 1956: 85-221.

⁷⁴ Chicoteau 1976.

⁷⁵ Toynbee 1957: 265.

⁷⁶ Poe 2007: 96, fn 3; Wild 1980: 296.

⁷⁷ Doresse 1960: 92.

⁷⁸ Stevenson 1978:114.

⁷⁹ *EEC*: 566, M. Simonetti, 1992, s.v. Monarchians.

⁸⁰ Finney 1980: 442-7.

⁸¹ Frend 1996: 210.

⁸² Logan 2006: 92-115.

⁸³ *EEC*: 612, C. Gianotto 1992, s.v. Ophites-Naassenes.

paintings was forthcoming until the publication of Himmelmann's article in 1975.

Himmelmann fundamentally undermined the twin pillars upon which the Christian/Gnostic interpretation had been based: (1) the 'Adam and Eve/Creator' paintings of the upper chamber and (2) the figure pointing to the Latin cross in the vestibule.⁸⁴ The first criticism was that the so-called Adam and Eve iconography was simply inconsistent with Christian representation of the story of Genesis i.e. the tree and serpent were to one side of the two figures and not between them. Furthermore, the lack of shame features argued against the Christian story of creation. In place of the story of Genesis Himmelmann thought the image was more redolent of Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides.⁸⁵ An alternative reading for the right side of the upper chamber's rear wall, Prometheus creating the first humans, was considered, but rejected by Himmelmann because the hypogeum of the Aurelii portrait was inconsistent with known images of Prometheus.⁸⁶ Himmelmann argued that the 'creator' figure was the deceased in the apparel of a philosopher; a habit that would become increasingly popular in the later third and early fourth centuries.⁸⁷ The presence of figures wearing tunic and *pallium* elsewhere in the monument led Himmelmann to conclude that the whole inspiration and meaning of the tomb's decoration was philosophical.⁸⁸ These figures were comparable to sarcophagi philosopher images popular in the late third/early fourth centuries and recalled, 'philosophischen' *Wundertäter*' such as Apollonius of Tyana (a philosopher who lived in the late first/early second century AD).⁸⁹

Himmelmann further demonstrated that the second pillar of a Christian/Gnostic interpretation, the Latin cross whose discovery had so excited Wilpert was, in fact, an accident of preservation.⁹⁰ The 'cross' was no more than the remnants of a garland and had no iconographic significance:⁹¹ an analysis subsequently accepted by those most closely associated with the recent restorations and able to examine the fresco in minute detail.⁹²

Kaiser-Minn,⁹³ in her 1981 study of Creation myth as depicted in third and fourth-century art, also rejected the Christian reading, but included the hypogeum

of the Aurelii's Creation Scene in her corpus of Promethean imagery. The image of Prometheus and the palliate figures on the adjacent walls had, she argued, parallels with the Promethean sarcophagus found at Trinquetaille, Arles that has the Promethean creation on the long face of the sarcophagus but images of philosophers on each of the two short sides.⁹⁴ Iconographic inconsistencies, such as the Prometheus figure's short hair and clean-shaven appearance, Kaiser-Minn explained as idiosyncrasies of the Severan era.⁹⁵ Jastrzębowska, in a recent article, noted the lack of Christian iconography and has defended Himmelmann's interpretation of the 'Creator' scene as one of philosophic representation rather than that of Christian or Promethean creation.⁹⁶

Syncretic art

Following Himmelmann's article there was a line of thought that saw the frescoes as the product of an artistic syncretism: the proto-Christian builders of the tomb drawing upon classical art and culture to produce an eclectic series of pictures that fitted neither the classical nor later Christian canon. Bisconti's 1985 article was the first to suggest that the decoration represented a, '*sincretismo privato*';⁹⁷ a synthesis of multiple philosophical and artistic trends that were developing during the third century. In this idea Bisconti cited such places as the hypogea of Via Dino Compagni (Via Latina), Via Livenza etc. as examples of the mixture of Christian and pagan imagery. Bisconti returned to the subject on many occasions⁹⁸ warning that convoluted theories risked losing sight of the context in which the hypogeum of the Aurelii frescoes were created.⁹⁹ Recently Bisconti considers a more overtly Christian inspiration especially for the rear wall of the upper chamber and the 'Creation Scene' with parallels being drawn with the fourth-century 'Dogmatic' sarcophagus.¹⁰⁰ Alison Crystal Poe, in her unpublished 2007 PhD dissertation, believed that no interpretation of the religious meaning of the upper chamber paintings was possible due to their fragmentary condition.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless she argued that the builders of the monument were, 'favourably disposed' towards Christianity.¹⁰² Poe saw significant Christian iconographic influence in the urban landscapes depicted in *cubiculum* A¹⁰³ despite

⁸⁴ Himmelmann 1975: 10-11.

⁸⁵ Himmelmann 1975: 12.

⁸⁶ Himmelmann 1975: 13.

⁸⁷ Himmelmann 1975: 14-16.

⁸⁸ A theory taken up most recently in Urbano 2016.

⁸⁹ Himmelmann 1975: 18.

⁹⁰ Himmelmann 1975: 24.

⁹¹ A similar 'cross' hanging from an extant garland may be seen in the entrance (north) wall of *cubiculum* B in Bisconti 2011a: tav. 57.

⁹² Bisconti 1985: 892; Bisconti 2004b: 37; Pergola 2011: 110.

⁹³ Kaiser-Minn 1981: 86-9.

⁹⁴ Baratte and Metzger 1985: 117.

⁹⁵ Kaiser-Minn 1981: 88.

⁹⁶ Jastrzębowska 2014b: 138.

⁹⁷ Bisconti 1985: 898.

⁹⁸ Bisconti 1989: 1314-17; 1994: 62-6; 1996: 4-11; 2004b: 13-38; 2006: 85-8; 2010: 25-52.

⁹⁹ Bisconti 1994: 63.

¹⁰⁰ Bisconti 2004b: 35-6. Dogmatic sarcophagus, dated to the first half of the fourth century: Vat. Mus. Pio Cristiano, 31427 (ex. 104) see Bovini and Brandenburg 1967: 41, no. 43. Bisconti 2011b: 44-5.

¹⁰¹ Poe 2007: 185.

¹⁰² Poe 2007: 195.

¹⁰³ Poe 2007: 193-5.

the observation, 'In surviving Christian art, heaven is pictured as a city, but only beginning in the late fourth or early fifth century'¹⁰⁴ and, 'Perhaps, finally, the Aurelii simply absorbed the *general* view of the afterlife as a city from Christian belief.'¹⁰⁵ A conclusion in marked contrast to the research published by Klauser in the 1950s and 1960s¹⁰⁶ and Schumacher¹⁰⁷ that proves that Christian art arose out of the influence of pre-existing pagan art not vice versa. Unlike Bisconti,¹⁰⁸ who considered the monument to be the property of a particular family, Poe saw the eclectic decoration as evidence of a Christian presence, and that the Aurelii were members of a domestic *collegium*, some of whom were Christians.¹⁰⁹

Non-religious interpretations

The non-Christian reading of Himmelmann and Kaiser-Minn of the upper chamber was not immediately taken up by scholars, but in the 21st-century two scholars returned to the secular possibilities of the lower *cubicula*. Gian Luca Grassigli proposed the first at a convention in 2001.¹¹⁰ He stated that it was a mistake to view the series of frescoes in *cubiculum A* in terms of religious affiliation, but rather that it ought to be seen within the context of other Roman funerary art: in particular the representation of *otium* among the élite which extended to their funerary decoration. This theory was an extension of his ideas of the *dominus in villam successus*, the reign of villa life and the habit of autorepresentation in Late Antiquity discussed in an article of 2000¹¹¹ and finally articulated in his book printed in 2011.¹¹² The fundamental decorative motif was the display of the status of the *dominus* exalted in a

style descending from the ideals portrayed in the first-century tomb of C. Vestorius Priscus in Pompeii and leading to the depictions of Trebius Iustus in fourth-century Rome.¹¹³ Grassigli placed the *cubiculum A* series of shepherd, 'adventus', forum, *hortus conclusus* and banquet all as portraying an idealised everyday life.¹¹⁴

The second secular interpretation, and most recent publication on the hypogeum, was by Elżbieta Jastrzębowska whose article primarily focussed on the central medallion of the vault in *cubiculum B*.¹¹⁵ She drew attention to the status of the occupants as *liberti* and concluded that the medallion scene represented the act of manumission carried out on one of the deceased and that consequently images such as the 'adventus' ought to be seen in the same light without recourse to spiritual symbolism.

After nearly a hundred years of speculation and research there is no generally accepted explanation, comprehensive or otherwise, of the frescoes of the hypogeum of the Aurelii. The initial Gnostic ideas of Wilpert, despite criticism by Himmelmann, Finney, Bisconti and Grassigli, continue to be repeated viz. Logan. Bisconti's earlier views of some form of syncretism have evolved in the light of recent restoration towards a more orthodox Christian explanation repeated by Coarelli. Very little work has been done on the frescoes of *cubiculum B* (*pace* Jastrzębowska) and no one has explained why the figures of the Large Procession are barefoot. The identity of the Aurelii themselves remains enigmatic: Grassigli¹¹⁶ sees them as a family of freedmen whereas Poe¹¹⁷ and Giovagnoli¹¹⁸ consider them members of a type of *collegium*.

¹⁰⁴ Poe 2007: 191.

¹⁰⁵ Poe 2007: 194.

¹⁰⁶ In a series of articles published in *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* between 1958 and 1967. See especially 1958, 1960 and 1967 on the iconography of the Good Shepherd.

¹⁰⁷ Schumacher 1978: 495-505.

¹⁰⁸ Bisconti 1985: 898.

¹⁰⁹ Poe 2007: 117-20, 195.

¹¹⁰ Grassigli 2002: 405-18.

¹¹¹ Grassigli 2000: 199-226.

¹¹² Grassigli 2011: 75-84.

¹¹³ Grassigli 2011: 83.

¹¹⁴ Grassigli 2011: 77.

¹¹⁵ Jastrzębowska 2013: 53-64.

¹¹⁶ Grassigli 2011: 82.

¹¹⁷ Poe 2007: 108-23.

¹¹⁸ Giovagnoli 2011: 231.