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Religious Markers on the Graves: Co-produced Displays of Religious Affiliation in Late Antique Cemeteries

Seasons Sarcophagus with Menorah, Rome, late-3rd – mid-4th c. CE. Museo Nazionale Romano inv.n. 67611. Photo: Sean P. Burrus

From the 3rd century CE, new religious images emerged, arguably in line with the growing rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. One of the places where these new visual vocabularies could be used was in cemeteries, and in particular in the catacombs. These sites, shared by individuals from different religious backgrounds and supplied by the same workshops, were places of familial and individual expression, and, most importantly, were not administered by religious authorities, unlike what became the norm in the West during the Middle Ages. A strongly delimited canon of funerary imagery had not yet emerged, and there was thus in this early period more room for selection from a wider variety of cultural and religious motifs, making for an interesting laboratory wherein modern scholars can see how the selections of families of different faiths inter-related and sometimes co-produced.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the tomb has always been an important way to display the social status and family values of the deceased. It is, in fact, no coincidence that tombs in Antiquity were usually placed along the roads. They were supposed to be visible and to mirror the social order of the world of the living. From the simple graffiti or engraved drawing that adorned an epitaph to the family portrait on a stele or the late antique colorful frescoes and rich, elaborate reliefs on sarcophagi, tomb decoration was primarily an expression of the desire of the deceased to be remembered, and, most

importantly, how they wanted to be remembered. Among the various expressions of "identities at the grave" (profession, family virtues, social status, etc.), some refer to the domain of religion. In the case of Greek and Roman polytheism, it is a little more difficult to identify such expressions, since the concept of religion itself applies differently to these cults. But Jews and Christians had their own ways of displaying their religious backgrounds: the catacombs are full of scenes taken from biblical stories, but also of signs such as the fish, the anchor, and the dove (considered to be Christian) and various Christograms, and, for the Jewish visual tradition, menorahs, lulavs, shofars, Torah shrines.

The Jewish Seasons Sarcophagus from Rome

One of Rome's best-known Jewish sarcophagi is a fragment showing two Victories holding a *clipeus* in which a menorah is depicted. Given the fragmentary nature of the piece, it is impossible to recognize the entire scene. However, it is most probable that it was a Seasons sarcophagus, a popular thematic schema wherein the four seasons were represented with their attributes. Here, only the figure of Autumn, depicted with a basket of fruit under the right arm and holding a pair of wild fowl in the other hand, is visible. The sarcophagus is dated to a period between the late-3rd to mid-4th century CE.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this monument is that, with the exception of the menorah, it is entirely customary to the broader Greco-Roman context. The client a priori opted for this already-prepared model, and then, in the customizable *clipeus* section, where the portrait of the deceased or the deceased couple was typically depicted, they decided to have the seven-branched menorah engraved. In addition to shedding light on the inter-religious dynamics of late antique workshops, where individuals belonging to distinct religious groups could place orders, this is an illustrative example of co-production between Jewish and non-Jewish designs. The adaptation of a pre-existing non-Jewish form to a specific request to display a Jewish mark on a sarcophagus results in the creation of a new co-produced form that is both distinctly Jewish and not exclusively.

The value of crosses and menorahs in ancient funerary spaces

When speaking of religious markers that adorned late antique sepulture, one needs to think about the meaning of religious signs like crosses and menorahs. To borrow the title of a 2019 paper by historian Karen B. Stern, we may ask: "When is a menorah not just a menorah?", to which we might add "When is a cross not just a cross?" Without disputing whether these signs are fundamentally Jewish or Christian, it is worth asking about the absolute identity value (almost "political" for images such as the chi-rho and the cross) that research attributes to them, particularly when we want to discuss them in late antique funerary contexts. They may be more than just "monolithic and static symbols" of religious identity, to use the words of K. Stern.

Identifying a religion with a unique and exclusive symbol, as one can do with modern religions, doesn't quite fit the late antique funerary context. There, more nuance is necessary. A given image's purpose and message can differ significantly depending upon context: images on public monuments, in places of worship, or on tombs convey distinct meanings. Too often they have been taken by modern research to have been markers of particular space, physical and/or conceptual, that was the exclusive domain

of a particular religious identity: in this approach, a Christian image in the catacombs automatically renders these spaces as being for Christians only, just as Jewish inscriptions or a menorah would define a space as exclusively Jewish. But recent research has shown that this is not necessarily the case, and that late antique cemeteries such as the catacombs were shared and exhibited various markers of co-existence. This phenomenon persists to this day in multi-confessional cemeteries, such as the *Cimitero acattolico* in Rome, to stay within the same geographical context.

Funerary images (whether they feature religious or non-religious subjects) mayexpress mourning, concern for protection, hope for an Afterlife, social status, familial affiliation, and many other ideas.. Christian and Jewish imagery on sepultures could therefore have been used as markers to distinguish a Jewish grave from a nearby Christian or pagan one, and vice-versa but it seems unlikely that they were used mostly and uniquely so,in a competitive desire to claim space against other religious groups, as research that views late antique religious interactions as a linear transformation is sometimes inclined to reduce them to it.

Religious signs can also have a meaning that goes beyond religious identity. Fish, anchors and doves were used as marks of Christians from early on, as Clement of Alexandria reminds us as early as the 2nd century CE (*Pedagogus* 3, 11, 59). But those images were not exclusively Christian, as Goodenough's research on the fish image has shown. In fact, even the late antique Christian sign *par excellence*, the chi-rho, can, depending on context, be read in other ways than as a statement of Christian affiliation. In the political context of the 4th century, for example, the chi-rho could just as easily be a sign of social status. It could, in some cases, have been a way to show belonging to the highly Christianized elite of the time, rather than an indication of "personal belief" (a notion that actually didn't really exist in the late antique world, still governed by orthopraxy, or at least it didn't carry the same weight as it does today).

What makes these images interesting to analyze in funerary contexts is precisely the fact that these late antique signs are not fixed and immutable emblems used as static statements of religious affiliation that excludes other identities. They appear in shared spaces, are produced by shared workshops — as seen with the Seasons sarcophagus — and bear witness to shared practices and shared perceptions of the grave. In the midst of these entangled funerary contexts we can observe various cases of Pagan-Jewish-Christian co-production. Here we will focus on Jewish-Christian co-productions, but it is important to note that the Roman(-Pagan) aspect of these productions underlays most examples from this period.

A Co-Produced Schema of Religious Display

The Aster funerary epitaph (*CIJ* I 306 = *JIWE* 91) was discovered in the catacombs of Monteverde near the *Via portuense,* south-west of the city of Rome, and dates probably to the second half of the 3rd century CE. In style, it aligns with other Jewish epitaphs found in Rome. Such epitaphs were usually inscribed in Greek, as is the case here. Images of menorahs or a short formula in Hebrew characters such as "peace" or "peace upon Israel" could be engraved alongside the inscription. The very short text of this epitaph (*astêr*), could refer to the name Esther, or could mean "star", and may be read as an indication of hope for life after death. The rest of the epitaph's decoration features a menorah flanked by birds, a motif very common on funerary inscriptions in the catacombs of Rome. This motif is commonly regarded as Christian and is often depicted alongside Noah in his ark or accompanied by a chrism (see *ICVR* IV, 12295; *ICVR* VIII, 20769). As a Christian motif, it can be read as the dove of peace or a representation of

the Holy Spirit as it appears in baptism scenes in the Gospels.

Funerary epitaph from the catacombs of Monteverde (Via Portuense), second half of the 3rd c. CE. Vatican Museums inv. n.30825. Photo: Genevra Kornbluth

But this motif is not solely a Christian one. While Jewish inscriptions usually depict other subjects, including menorahs, ivy leaves, and ritual objects, a figcaption number of the Roman ones feature birds or animals (see for examples *JIWE* II 17; 41; 246; 253; 254; 306; 332; 351; 451). This sub-category can be considered to be co-produced as a result of the specific entangled context of the catacombs in Rome, since both Jewish and Christian epitaphs in Rome bear the motif of the bird, as do inscriptions that brook no indication of belonging to a specific religious group (see MV.6578; MV.6026; MV.6039). From this example, co-production seems quite common in ancient iconography. Late antique imagery is indeed characterized by a dynamic between the creation of new iconographic languages (for Jews and Christians) and the use of the wider Greco-Roman visual vocabulary. The borrowing of “classical” forms, when reconfigured for the benefit of Jewish or Christian ideas, results in what we might call co-productions.

Co-production, however, can also go beyond the simple use of a shared motif. A new iconographic composition (scheme)was created by the mix between the catacomb’s decorative tradition (the framing pair of birds) and the increasing appeal to display religious signs such as menorahs and chrisms on graves. This is evidenced by a later Christian epitaph found in the catacombs of S. Commodilla that uses the schema of the bird framing a religious sign in the same way as seen on the Aster epitaph. This gravestone closed the burial place of a child named Siddi (or Siddinus), who died at the age of five months. In the 5th century, birds were still utilized on funerary inscriptions and are found here in the same composition, with the exception that the birds frame a chrism with an Alpha and an Omega instead of a menorah.

Epitaph of Siddi, from the catacombs of S. Commodilla, Rome, 431 CE. Vatican Museums inv. n. 32032. ICUR II, 6081 Photo: Vatican Catalogue Online

Analysis of the iconographic culture specific to the inscriptions of the Roman catacombs reveals a notable co-production between Jews and Christians in the epitaphs adorning their tombs. While certain Jewish inscriptions present uniquely Jewish iconographic elements, others draw on a common iconographic repertoire also used by pagans and Christians. In addition to the use of analogous iconographic motifs, we observe a deeper level of co-production in the creation and utilization of a shared schema: the religious sign flanked by the two birds.

The co-production behind the graffities in the catacombs of Venosa in Naples

The Jewish catacombs of Venosa (Basilicata) constitute a significant historical testimony to the Jewish presence in southern Italy. The funerary complex was occupied between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, having been dug into the Maddalena hill outside the city. It has yielded a number of important findings, including frescoes and graffiti with traditional Jewish signs, as well as inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Some of these epigraphs are bilingual or even trilingual. Subsequent to the catacombs of Rome, this is the location where the most ancient Jewish inscriptions in Europe have been discovered. These serve to illustrate the integration of the Jewish community into the local population of Venosa, as well as the multicultural and multilingual nature of their lived environments.

Menorah graffiti from the Jewish Catacombs of Venosa, near Naples. Photo: Creative Commons (Wikimedia)

A lesser-known aspect of these catacombs, usually referred to as the "Jewish catacombs of Venosa," is the discovery of Christian signs amidst the Jewish inscriptions, frescoes, and graffiti. More than twenty crosses and one chrism have been uncovered at various points in the galleries. As this type of engraving is challenging to date, it is difficult to ascertain whether the crosses were engraved during the Jewish occupation of the necropolis or at a later point in time. However, from the perspective of the modern visitor, we are dealing with yet another form of co-production: the co-existence of these religious signs on-site. We can't reconstruct exactly the borrowing, encounters, or influences that created this shared use of crosses and menorahs, but their co-existence today in this mortuary space makes the catacombs of Venosa a site of co-production.

The discovery of Christian and Jewish graffiti at the same location, whether contemporaneous or not, provides evidence for the use of the site by both Jews and Christians and their same desire to mark graves with religious signs. Who knows whether the crosses would have been carved if it weren't for the menorahs (already) being there? Moreover, the mere act of adding a cross to a menorah could be considered as an act of co-production, facilitated by the same practice and the co-existence on site. Just as with the inscriptions we discussed earlier, we can also see here two levels of co-production. First, crosses and menorahs form together a co-produced dynamic of decoration, which can be seen in the (a-chronical) shared and probably mutually stimulated practice of marking graves with religious signs. Secondly, these lead to the co-produced situation we see today, where both religious markers co-exist in the same place.

Conclusion

At a time when (mainly Christian) writers were developing new discourses on religion and attempting to instrumentalize and politicize specific signs (e.g., the chrism that appeared to Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge), funerary imagery seemed to evolve in the margins of these debates, thus providing us with various cases of co-existence and co-production through the use of a shared religious imagery that hadn't yet fully been instrumentalized by religious authorities. As shared religious sites,

catacombs were places of encounter, and these encounters provoked reactions, to which we referred when speaking of “mutual stimulation” within co-production dynamics.

Indeed, it can be reasonably assumed that the menorah’s emergence as a prominent motif for Judaism in the 3rd century, coinciding with the development of early Christian iconography, reflects a mutual influence between the two religions. In her analysis of the development and significance of menorahs in ancient synagogues, Rachel Hachlili suggests that “The expansion of Christianity, with its inherent challenge to the established Jewish religion, may have been the cause of the increasing ceremonial content in synagogue ritual and art.” [Hachlili 2018, p. 18] While the motif of the menorah undergoes different developments in the particular contexts of Late Antique Diaspora cemeteries, it seems reasonable to suggest that the appearance of menorahs in catacombs alongside early Christian signs is the result of similar dynamics.

As illustrated by the examples presented here, this phenomenon manifests at various levels of complexity, through time and space. The shared desire to personalize one’s grave with an element referencing one’s religion gave rise to various forms of co-production, as both Jews and Christians have employed similar means to achieve this: the display of religious markers on graves, and the creation of new iconographic compositions that included them. In the end, this mutually influenced development of religious markers in Late Antiquity sheds light on the multifaceted and intricate nature of co-production.

Further reading

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