

## **Veiled and Ascending: Portraying Women in their Religious Roles in the Early Christian Roman Catacombs**

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### **Abstract**

Early Christian portrayals of women involved in religious activities can be found in several Roman catacombs. These depictions of women span both the pre- and post-Constantinian church. The fresco Lunette of the Donna Velata, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century catacomb of Priscilla, is a relatively early example of how paleo-Christians represented women and their roles in early Christian ritual within the catacomb frescos. In this fresco, the titular figure is a veiled woman in an orant posture, engaged either in prayer or leading the others around her. The role of early Christian women within Christian ritual is one that shifts and is redefined as the church develops, moving from house churches to a more institutionalized entity. This redefinition of accepted roles for women is less easily traced within the frescos in comparison to contemporary texts, all of which are from a male perspective. This paper explores how early Christian women engaged in religious activities are marked and depicted within Roman catacomb art. These images, along with textual and scholarly work, offer a more nuanced understanding of the places held by women in the early Christian church in Rome, and how the roles of these women in Christian ritual may have changed in the pre- vs post-Constantinian church.

### **1. Introduction**

The early Christian catacombs in Rome contain a selection of frescos depicting ordinary women engaged in a multitude of activities. There is a wide variety of how these women are portrayed, as they are part of both domestic and religious scenes, and are shown alone and with others around them. The wearing of a veil in the context of these frescos functions as a marker of women engaging in some aspect of early Christian ritual, and has been seen in multiple catacombs. These images of women wearing the veil, in conjunction with textual evidence, provides a more nuanced understanding of the places held by women in the early Christian church in Rome. It also shows how the roles of these women in Christian ritual may have changed or evolved in the Paleo-Christian versus Post-Constantinian church.

The frescos discussed within this paper come from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE. This span of two hundred years includes parts of the Paleo-Christian and Post-Constantinian time periods. Paleo-Christian refers to the early Church prior to Constantine, while Post-Constantinian refers to the early Church after Constantine and his Edict of Tolerance, 311-312 CE. The majority of the frescos examined in this paper depict ordinary women, some of them, such as Veneranda at the Catacombs of Domitilla, have been identified while others remain unknown. Images that involve Mary or other Biblical figures have been excluded from this paper's analysis of the depictions of women in early Christian catacomb frescos, with the exception of a fresco of Thecla with Paul at Ephesus.

## 2. Cultural Context

### 2.1 Roman Catacombs

The early Christian catacombs in Rome are large underground burial spaces, comprised of “a complex of passageways, burial niches, and recessed chambers” cut into the ground and the “living rock.”<sup>1</sup> While these spaces were initially created prior to the beginnings of Christianity, the practice of burying the dead in the catacombs was adopted by Jewish and Christian communities in Rome.<sup>2</sup> The Christian catacombs in Rome have provided an important source of early Christian iconography, including sarcophagi and frescos on the catacomb walls.<sup>3</sup> The catacombs tend to date to the third and fourth centuries CE, and are a mix of Christian, Jewish, and Roman ‘Pagan’ burials.

### 2.2 Veiling

Within this paper, veiling refers to the act of draping cloth to cover or hide one’s hair in some fashion. The “veiling of adult women was a universal practice” within the Ancient Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Christian women and the use of veils is a topic much discussed by male authors contemporary to the Roman catacomb frescos. A common thread in their collective writings is how the use of the veil functions to protect the corporeal modesty of women within their communities. In Paul’s writings, the veil also serves as a sign of women “publicly” acknowledging “her subordination to men,” allowing her to “remain ‘private’ even in public.”<sup>5</sup> In *Corinthians*, Paul writes,

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man” (I Cor. 11: 4-7 NIV).

This passage from *Corinthians* not only focuses on the necessity of women’s modesty, but also begins to textually limit how women are able to interact with aspects of Christian ritual and the early Church. They are able to engage with it as prophets, so long as they remain veiled and submissive to men, publicly signalling that “they were not breaking with woman’s role as the culture’s symbol for shame.”<sup>6</sup>

Veiling for early Christian women is something that has been textually present since the beginning of the church, but as some of the contemporary scholarship shows, may not have always been practiced as part of women’s lived experiences on the ground. In her book, *When Women were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, Karen Torjesen argues that the early church was once a private and intimate space, such as a household, where women were able to occupy space in Christian ritual without having to cover their heads.<sup>7</sup> As the Church became more institutionalized after the Edict of Tolerance in 311-312 CE, the roles women were allowed to hold within Christian ritual appear to have become more constrained.

The shifting of the church from private to a more public space appears to have slowly started in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, and would have had an effect on the women in early Christian spaces. Torjesen writes that “nowhere is the trauma of this transition from household space to public space more poignant than in Tertullian’s passionate treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*.<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, says that as young women “wear your veils out on the streets [*in vicis*], so you should wear them in the church [*in ecclesia*], you wear them when you are among strangers [*extraneos*], then wear them among your brothers [*fratres*].”<sup>9</sup> Both Torjesen and Tertullian make the case that the church was once a private and intimate space, like a household, where women were able to occupy space without veiling. This matches Paul’s writing in *Corinthians*, as he and Tertullian argue that women should wear a veil, suggesting that they may not have been doing so in their Christian communities at some point during the Paleo-Christian time period.

### 3. Paleo-Christian Art

#### 3.1 Lunette of the Donna Velata



Fig. 1. Catacomb of Priscilla: Lunette of the Donna Velata. 220-240 CE.



Fig 2 & 3. Detail of lunette of the Donna Velata. 220-240 CE.

The *Lunette of the Donna Velata* (Fig. 1) is an early example of Paleo-Christian Roman catacomb frescos depicting women in Christian ritual. The fresco is a lunette<sup>10</sup> in the Catacomb of Priscilla, dated to 220-240 CE. The fresco is of three groups of figures in the same scene: to the left of the viewer is a small congregation of multiple genders and ages; to the right is a woman nursing her child (Fig. 3); and in the center, there is the titular figure, the *Donna Velata* or ‘veiled woman.’ This central woman (Fig. 2) is the primary focus of the image. She is painted slightly larger than the other figures, in addition to her placement at the center of the action. She is in an orant position, with her arms raised towards the heavens and her eyes cast upwards. The women to her left and right are not veiled, and are engaged in more private, domestic activities, while the veiled woman’s hair is covered with a white veil with stripes at the end of it as she prays.

There are a few ways that this particular scene has been and can be read. There is the potential that this lunette portrays three separate scenes that are not connected in any way to each other. It has been suggested that this small lunette represented “three scenes from the life of the deceased woman:”<sup>11</sup> the “deceased praying in paradise;” a depiction of “her marriage;” and her “life as a mother.”<sup>12</sup> Given the space the fresco occupies, as a lunette at the upper part of a wall within the catacombs, as well as the lack of ritual markers such as a “yellow veil,” this scenario seems unlikely at best.<sup>13</sup> Another interpretation is that the veiled individual is praying, while the others around her go about other, more profane aspects, of daily life. While she is not the only woman within this scene, she is the only one marked with the veil who appears to be actively taking part in religious activity, as indicated by the orant iconography. A slightly different reading places the veiled figure, who has been marked as the important figure within this piece based on her location, as leading a religious service, perhaps serving as a female deacon<sup>14</sup> or “ordained widow.”<sup>15</sup> This reading would point to the ability for women to participate in a larger role within Roman Christian ritual in leadership capacities during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE when this fresco was painted.

### 3.2 *Fractio Panis*



Fig. 4. Catacomb of Priscilla: *Fractio Panis*. 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE.

The *Fractio Panis* (Fig. 4), from another section of the Catacombs of Priscilla, the Cappella Greca,<sup>16</sup> is a depiction of women engaged in early Christian ritual. While once thought to be an example of 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE catacomb art,<sup>17</sup> it has been identified as coming from the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE.<sup>18</sup> This fresco has remained a somewhat controversial image, primarily because there are differing academic opinions on the number of women engaged in the Eucharistic meal<sup>19</sup> depicted within the image.<sup>20</sup> It depicts a scene with seven figures against a red background seated at a table with food. These figures sit “upright on the same *pulvinum*,” rather than in “a reclining position” like Roman men on “*klinae*.<sup>21</sup> The individual to the left of the central figure is widely accepted as a woman, marked by her veil and her hair style, which is somewhat visible as the veil only covers part of her hair (Fig. 4).<sup>22</sup> The gender of the other figures is more “ambiguous” and

difficult to discern.<sup>23</sup> The feminist scholar Dorothy Irvin argues that all the figures within the scene are women, saying that it is “beyond cavil that most of the figures are female. One wears a veil, and they are all characterized by upswept hair, slender neck with sloping shoulders, and a hint of earrings.”<sup>24</sup> Other academics, such as Josef Wilpert,<sup>25</sup> who was a member of the team which discovered the small fresco in the late nineteenth century, have had what Irvin considers petty objections to the idea that the majority of the figures could be women.<sup>26</sup> The more traditional interpretation of this scene is that the veiled figure is the only woman within the scene, and that the others are all men.<sup>27</sup> Nicola Denzey, in her book *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, makes the argument that most of the figures are women, with the “possible exception of the figure on the far left, which is too faded to be seen distinctly.”<sup>28</sup>

Settling the argument of how many women exist within this particular fresco is not the purpose of this paper, however. Regardless of whether there is one woman in this fresco, or the scene is composed entirely of women, this image clearly depicts women’s involvement in the early Christian Eucharistic meal ritual in some fashion.

#### 4. Constantine and Post-Constantinian Art

##### 4.1 *Veneranda and the Martyr Petronella*



Fig. 5. Catacomb of Domitilla: Veneranda and the Martyr Petronella. 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

The Catacombs of Domitilla contain a small fresco, placed in a way that invites intimacy with the viewer. This fresco depicts Veneranda, a Roman Christian woman from the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE<sup>29</sup> with the martyr Petronella (Fig. 5). The two women stand next to each other, Veneranda in an orant position, with her eyes cast up towards heaven, while Petronella is to her left and slightly smaller. The two figures differ in their veiling and dress, marking their positions. Veneranda is veiled and clothed in a “resplendent saffron dalmatic with dark purple or deep red stripes (clavi) on the sleeves.”<sup>30</sup> The martyred Petronella, in contrast, stands unveiled and wearing the “the more formal and archaic stola and palla.”<sup>31</sup> Veiling for Veneranda marks her corporeal modesty and her prayer, as she is being portrayed as a pious Roman matron, who is still tied in some ways to the earthly realm, even in the intimate setting the fresco creates. In comparison, Petronella is unveiled and looks directly at Veneranda, whom she is leading up to heaven. Denzey makes the argument that this may be because Petronella “is already in heaven where no earthly sign of modesty is

necessary,”<sup>32</sup> therefore freeing her from the expectations placed on early Christian women to maintain a sense of modesty and protect their sexuality. Instead, her hair is neatly pinned back, but exposed.

It is important to note here that Veneranda, unlike the women from the *Lunette of the Donna Velata* and the *Fractio Panis*, has been identified as a specific woman who was buried within the catacombs. Her name, along with the name of the martyred Petronella, has been neatly written above her head as part of her fresco. The exact year of her death is unknown -- there is an inscription of the date, January 7, but no year.<sup>33</sup> The fresco itself has been dated to 356 CE<sup>34</sup> based on the dates of other images near the fresco. She has been buried without other family members, which Denzey has interpreted as a “dislocation from early family” that she considers “hardly unusual for a fourth-century Christian woman.”<sup>35</sup> There is both the alienation from family, perhaps based on her Christianity or because of her desire to be buried near the saints instead of with a husband, and also a connection with her brothers and sisters in Christ, as she stands next to the martyr Petronella in this fresco. As such, this fresco appears to likely be a funerary image, intended to show how pious the matron Veneranda was in life, rather than an example of her specific role within her Christian community.

The story of the martyr Petronella that Veneranda might have been familiar with is Petronella as “the virgin daughter of Saint Peter,”<sup>36</sup> who was kept partially paralyzed by her father so that she would remain a virgin and “save both her and the men around her from falling into the sins of the flesh,”<sup>37</sup> as seen in the stories that survive in the *Acts of Peter*. Later narratives speak of Petronella’s death, providing her with her martyr status. She dies while fasting and praying, rather than allow herself to be taken by force by a soldier.<sup>38</sup> Denzey does not consider Petronella’s narrative to be strictly a “martyrology,”<sup>39</sup> arguing that it is the “heroic death of a young woman who chooses chastity over marriage, even at the cost of her life.”<sup>40</sup> However, while her death is not what a contemporary idea of a martyr looks like, she and her story are associated with a “lesson that the late ancient Roman church rehearsed over and over again,”<sup>41</sup> that the way for women to absolutely get into heaven was to “fight to the death”<sup>42</sup> for their virginity. Given this narrative of Petronella and her ‘martyrdom,’ this fresco is tinged with this idea of the importance of virginity and modesty for early Christian women. Petronella may also be understood as a model for Veneranda’s ministry, as some early Christian women “modeled their ministry on their early Christian foremothers,”<sup>43</sup> and explains the inclusion of the scrolls in a capsula within the fresco.<sup>44</sup> This fresco marks not only the wealth of Veneranda, but her piety as a Roman Christian matron.

#### 4.2 Woman in Orant Position



Fig. 6. Catacomb of Callisto: Woman in orant. 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

In the Catacomb of Callisto, there is a fresco of a woman standing in an orant position (Fig. 6), from the 4th c. CE. She stands alone against a background of flowers and birds, with her arms raised and her eyes cast upwards in prayer.

There is some ambiguity as to whether she is veiled or not. The areas around her shoulders appear to either be damaged, and she is unveiled, or they are the remnants of a veil. Her hair is neatly coiffed, but as has been seen in the *Fractio Panis* from the 3rd c. CE Catacombs of Priscilla, there were some veiling styles which allowed the front of the hair to be seen. There also is some red paint around her hair near her shoulders, which would suggest veiling at some point, although it was not preserved. The figure is engaged in prayer by herself, rather than engaging in other aspects of early Christian ritual with others, as seen in the depictions of women during the paleo-Christian period previously examined within this paper. The figure standing alone in prayer suggests that this image may depict a private moment or a depiction of an individual's piety, rather than a role in a larger early Christian ritual context.

## 5. Paul and Thecla

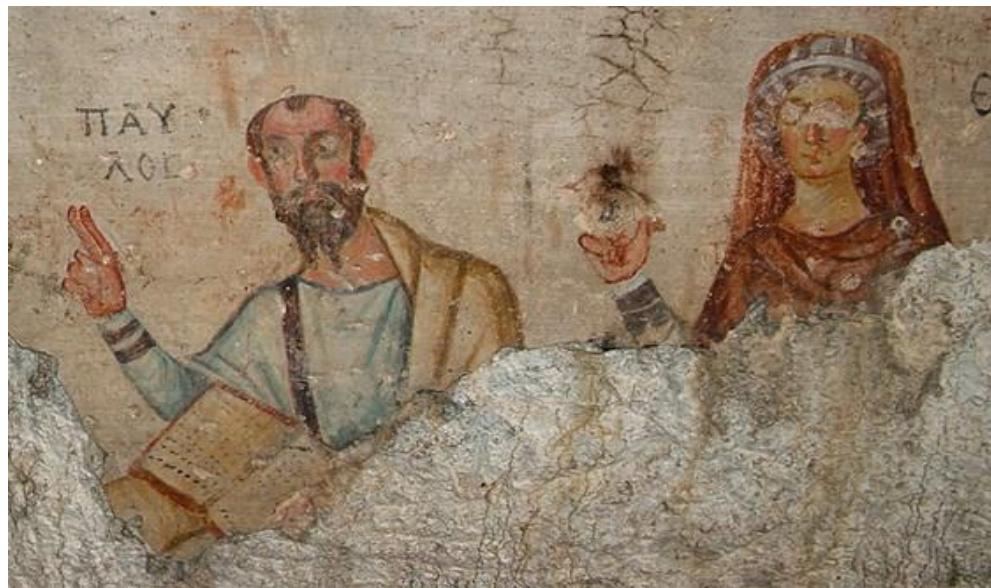


Fig. 7. Ephesus: Paul and Thecla. 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

Stepping away from the Roman catacombs for a moment, there is a fresco of Paul and Thecla in a cave at Ephesus which dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Fig. 7). This fresco depicts both Paul and Thecla standing, with one arm outstretched with their hands in a gesture of authority.<sup>45,46</sup> At some point after the creation of the fresco, Thecla's eyes and hand were scratched in an attempt to silence her voice from the record. Thecla is veiled in red cloth, marking her as taking part in some form of early Christian ritual or teaching.

Thecla is unique among the depictions of women examined within this paper, as she is not only portrayed in the fresco art outside of the Roman catacombs, but she is also portrayed in the Acts of Paul and Thecla, an apocryphal story. She was an aristocratic virgin woman about to get married who heard, from her window, the teachings of Paul of "sermons concerning God, concerning charity, concerning faith in Christ, and concerning prayer."<sup>47</sup> Thecla followed Paul, abandoning her family and intended husband in order to do so. Eventually, Thecla became a missionary in her own right, and taught the gospel. Thecla has been included in this paper on the ways in which ordinary women are portrayed in the catacombs and marked by the veil because she is an example of a woman marked by the veil engaged in teaching.

## 6. Contemporary Male Authors

### 6.1 Biblical Authors

There are several Biblical sources which discuss the roles of women within the early Church. These texts come from a male perspective, and seek to, intentionally or not, minimize the authority of women within the church. The Biblical texts codify how women, not just within the Christian communities in Rome, are able to access information, and the kinds of presence they can have in Christian ritual. Within 1 Timothy 2:11-15(NIV), it is written that:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

This selection from Timothy touches on a few aspects of women within the church. First, it lays out an expectation which is reaffirmed in other parts of the Bible, that women will be silent in the church. Men are allowed to have voices and control, while women are being placed below them. A ‘good’ Christian woman is one who is quiet and submissive. This excerpt also forbids women from teaching or taking any role that would place her above men. It speaks to the idea that, like Thecla, ordinary women are actively engaged in Christian practice as the teachers and other positions of power and knowledge. If there was not this kind of engagement, there would be no need to write against it. There is then the piece about how women are the origins of sin, and that this inheritance is why women are unfit for positions of power within the church. It also lays out the path for women to be saved, which is different than how men can expect to reach salvation.

Corinthians is another source of Biblical understandings of how women should behave within the church and their relationship with Christian ritual practice. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NIV) states: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

Earlier in Corinthians, as seen previously in this paper, 1 Corinthians 11:5-10 (NIV) contains Paul’s discussion of the necessity of veiling for women within Christian ritual.

“But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.”

Paul has no direct objections in this excerpt about women engaging in Christian ritual, as long as they remain veiled while doing so. For Paul, the veil functions as a way to publicly acknowledge women’s “subordination to men,” allowing her to “remain ‘private’ even in public” as a way of mitigating the social disruption that the women might cause.<sup>48</sup>

### 6.2 Extra-Biblical Authors

The textual silencing of women continues among the contemporary Extra-Biblical male authors. While many of the texts discussed in this section come from the Greek, and are not specifically from Rome, they provide examples of the general view of women during the Paleo-Christian and Post-Constantinian time period. Origen of Alexandria, writing in Greek during the early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE, provides commentary on 1 Corinthians which typifies the “Fathers’ view of women and teaching.”<sup>49</sup> He writes that “it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” [1 Cor 14:35], whatever she says, even if she says something excellent or holy, because it comes from the mouth of a woman.<sup>50</sup> The subject matter of a woman’s speech in his communities is irrelevant, what matters is that she is a woman and therefore unable to access this part of Christian ritual. The reasons why women are unable to teach within the Church is something which John Chrysostom, along with other male authors, writes about. In his *Discourse 4 on Genesis 1*, Chrysostom says that women have condemned themselves to a “state of subordination” because they did not “use [their] authority well.”<sup>51</sup>

Women have been doomed by the actions of Eve and, in the eyes of the male voices writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE, proven themselves unable to handle authority.

There are a few texts which do talk about the necessity of women having roles in the church, such as Epiphanius' *Panarion*, 3.6. He writes that:

"There is an order of deaconesses in the church. But this is not allowed for the practice of priesthood or and liturgical function, but for the sake of female modesty, at either the time of baptism or the examination of some condition or trouble, and when a woman's body must be bared, so that she will be seen not by the male priests but by the assisting female who is appointed by the priest for the occasion, to take care of the woman who is in need of it when her body is uncovered."<sup>52</sup>

While women here are textually allowed to access the role of deaconess, it is not for the sake of liturgical function, but instead to protect the modesty and virginity of other women. The author, Epiphanius, goes on in the next set of lines to talk about how "God does not allow women 'to speak,'"<sup>53</sup> furthering his point that women taking on the role of deaconess should not allow them any kind of power within the church. The function of these women is to "administer mysteries already celebrated," and the "ordinance of the church" requires "no more than deaconesses," instead of functioning as leaders in the church.<sup>54</sup>

The necessity of deaconesses in the early Church is also discussed as part of the *Didascalia apostolorum*, a Church Order which purports to be "the Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and holy Disciples of our Redeemer," but it appears to have been written during the early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE.<sup>55</sup> The *Didascalia apostolorum* was meant to provide guidance to communities, and covers a variety of subjects, such as "penance, liturgical worship, behaviour during persecution, widows and deaconesses, the settlement of disputes and the administration of offerings."<sup>56</sup> It discusses the need for deaconesses within the community, saying: "And when a woman who is being baptized has come up from the water, let the deaconess receive her, and teach and instruct her how the seal of baptism ought to be (kept) unbroken in purity and holiness. For this reason we say that the ministry of a woman deacon is especially needed and important. For our Lord and Savior was ministered to by women." The *Didascalia apostolorum* makes it clear, however, that women's role as deaconesses does not provide them with much power within the church hierarchy or in ritual. While women are able to help with the baptism of other women, this is to keep the modesty and chastity of women safe, as "that a woman should baptize, or that one should be baptized by a woman" is not being recommended by this text, because "it is a transgression of the commandment, a great danger to the woman who baptizes and to him who is baptized."<sup>57</sup> The focus on this sentence is on women baptizing men, but that idea of women not having the authority to baptize carries over to the baptism of women. Deaconesses are able to help in the baptism process, but only as a way of serving under male deacons.

The discussion of deaconesses and their role in the early Church also takes place in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which were compiled near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

"Ordain also a deaconess, for the service to women, because it sometimes happens that a male deacon cannot be sent to the houses of certain women because of the unbelievers. You shall therefore send a woman deacon, because of the suspicions of evil-minded people. Actually we need a woman as deacon for many services. In the first place, in the baptizing of women, the deacon shall anoint only their foreheads with the holy oil; following this the deaconess shall anoint them; for it is not necessary that the women be observed by men."<sup>58</sup>

As in Epiphanius' *Panarion* and the *Didascalia apostolorum*, there is a focus on the ways having deaconesses function to protect the modesty of women within the communities. Deaconesses should be ordained because they provide a link to the Church for women who are unable to be seen by deacons, which also serves to uphold a positive public image of Christianity during the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE when this piece was written and the position of deaconess has been well established since the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE.

## 7. Conclusion

There are multiple frescos of women within the early Roman Christian catacombs. The use of the veil marks some of them as being engaged in some aspect of early Christian ritual. These veiled women, along with the textual evidence available from Biblical and Extra-Biblical sources, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the places held by women in the early Christian church in Rome. It also provides an understanding of how the roles for women within the church shifted and evolved in Rome between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

The textual evidence provides male understandings of the roles women should hold within the church. There is a focus in their writings, both Biblical and Extra-Biblical, on the ideas that women should be silent, veiled, and not engaged in teaching or Christian ritual. Within 1 Timothy 2:11-15(NIV), it is said that women should “learn in quietness and full submission,” as she is not permitted to “teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” In I Corinthians 11: 4-7 (NIV), Paul discusses the necessity of veiling for women engaged in prayer or prophesying. This pattern of textually silencing or limiting women continues in the writings of Tertullian, who chastises unveiled Christian women in the context of the church buildings. Extra-Biblical writings continue this thread, with Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, the *Didascalia apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. These texts discuss how women should be able to interact with the church, allowing for deaconesses only to protect women’s modesty, and reserving power in the church for men.

While the textual evidence points to the silencing of women, the frescos present a view of how the church existed on the ground. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE frescos the *Lunette of the Donna Velata* and the *Fractio Panis*, women appear in these catacomb paintings veiled and engaged in aspects of early Christian ritual and leadership. These images present an alternative to the male narrative within the available texts. In the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE, there appears to be a shift in how women are depicted in the frescos. As the church becomes more institutionalized after 311-312 CE and the Edicts of Tolerance, the roles accessible to women in Rome appear to change. In the catacombs, there are fewer large ritual pieces, such as the *Fractio Panis*, and more images of women engaged in prayer by themselves or, like the fresco of *Veneranda*, funerary pieces intended on showing the piety of the subject.

It is important to note that access to early Christian Roman catacomb frescos is restricted by the Catholic church. The church has control over the images and which ones are available and able to be reproduced. While the visual evidence examined in this paper is limited because of this, what is available supports the theory that there was a shift in how early Christian women were able to engage in Christian ritual towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE and into the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE. The textual evidence has always attempted to control early Christian women, pointing to the fact that women would have been engaged in the activities men, such as Paul and Tertullian, were writing against. In the frescos, which provide a better understanding of the church on the ground, there is a distinctive shift between the ways women are portrayed in the 3rd c. CE and how they are portrayed in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Women in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE are depicted as having agency and engaged in ritual in positions of leadership, while the women of the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE are more submissive and silenced.

## 8. Notes

1. Timothy Darvill. “Catacombs,” in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology, 2 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. Ibid.
3. Jonathan Reed, *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 145-146.
4. April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matters* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 53.
5. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFranciso, 1995), 41-42.
6. Ibid, 145.
7. Ibid, 165.
8. Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFranciso, 1995), 165.
9. Ibid.
10. A half-moon shaped space, often part of the upper section of a wall.
11. Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 133.
12. Ibid, 134.
13. Ibid.
14. Dorothy Irvin, “The Archaeology of Women’s Traditional Ministries in the Church 60-1500 AD,” in *Calendar 2005* (St. Paul, MN: Self-published, 2005), cited in Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 134.

15. Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 133.

16. Madeleine Emanuel, "The Utility of the Fractio Panis as Evidence in the Case for Women's Ordination." Order No. 1554524, The Claremont Graduate University, 2014. <http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/docview/1528526408?accountid=8388>.

17. Dorothy Irvin, "The ministry of women in the early church: the archaeological evidence." *Duke Divinity School Review* 45, no. 2 (1980 1980): 83. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2017).

18. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 91.

19. Some of the controversy surrounding this image, other than the question of what gender the figures in the fresco are, stems from a scholarly disagreement on what kind of meal is being portrayed. Some interpret the meal as a funerary banquet (see Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 125-126.), while others see it as an example of a Eucharistic meal. There is some uncertainty about what a 3rd c. CE Eucharistic meal might have looked like, but for the purpose of this paper, this fresco has been taken as a Eucharistic scene, given the fresco itself and the poses of the figures, along with the work of Denzey and Irvin. See: Denzey, Nicola. *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 95-99 and Irvin, Dorothy. "The ministry of women in the early church: the archaeological evidence." *Duke Divinity School Review* 45, no. 2 (1980 1980): 81-83. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2017).

20. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 96-99.

21. Ibid, 98.

22. Ibid, 96.

23. Ibid.

24. Dorothy Irvin, "The ministry of women in the early church: the archaeological evidence." *Duke Divinity School Review* 45, no. 2 (1980 1980): 81-83. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2017).

25. There are some suspicions that the fresco itself was tampered with by Wilpert, and that it had originally survived in a better condition than it appears in today. See: Denzey, Nicola. *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007. 95.

26. Madeleine Emanuel, "The Utility of the Fractio Panis as Evidence in the Case for Women's Ordination." Order No. 1554524, The Claremont Graduate University, 2014.

27. Kraus Rudolf, "The "Fractio Panis," *Orate Fratres* 6, no. 7 (May 14, 1932): 295-296, cited in Emanuel, Madeleine. "The Utility of the Fractio Panis as Evidence in the Case for Women's Ordination." Order No. 1554524, The Claremont Graduate University, 2014.

28. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 98.

29. Ibid, 126-127.

30. Ibid, 128.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 149.

34. Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gathers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 126.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid, 129.

37. Ibid, 130.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 157.

44. Ibid, 148.

45. Jonathan Reed. *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 149.

46. There is an interpretation of the fresco which reads it as a representation of Thecla at the window listening to Paul preach as her mother complains to Paul, see: Christine Schenk, CSJ. *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*. (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2017), 64. This interpretation is based on translations of the Greek on the walls beside the figures, but it does not account for Paul and the female figure using the same hand gesture, which is associated with authority and teaching, nor the use of veiling, see: Jonathan Reed. *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), 149.

47. "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," *PBS.org*. Last modified April 1998.  
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/thecla.html>

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50. Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on I Corinthians*, trans. R. P. Lawson, in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 29.

51. Chrysostom, John. *Discourse 4 on Genesis 1*. trans. Elizabeth A. Clark, in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 30.

52. Epiphanius, *Panarion 79.2,3-4,1*. trans. Carolyn Osiek, in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 68.

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54. Ibid.

55. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, "Didascalia Apostolorum," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3 rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

56. Ibid.

57. R. Hugh Connolly, trans. *Didascalia apostolorum*. in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 65.

58. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Apostolic Constitutions*. in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 64.

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Fig. 1. *Lunette of the Donna Velata*. 220-240 CE. Fresco on rock-cut tufa interior. SCALA, Italy. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 2. Detail of *lunette of the Donna Velata*. 220-240 CE. Fresco on rock-cut tufa interior. University of California, San Diego. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 3. Detail of *lunette of the Donna Velata*. 220-240 CE. Fresco on rock-cut tufa interior. University of California, San Diego. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 4. *Fractio Panis*. 4th c. CE. Mural. University of California, San Diego. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 5. *Veneranda and the Martyr Petronilla*. 4th c. CE. Mural. University of California, San Diego. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 6. *Catacomb of Callisto: det.: Orants*. 4th c. CE. Mural. University of California, San Diego. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed October 25. 2017).

Fig. 7. *Paul and Thecla*, 4th c. CE. Fresco. Reed, Jonathan. *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament: What Archaeology Reveals about the First Christians*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007. 148. Image from <https://www.the-exponent.com/women-of-the-bible-series-the-acts-of-paul-and-thecla/>

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