
Gabriela Ingle
University of Edinburgh

A FOURTH CENTURY TOMB
OF THE FOLLOWERS OF MITHRAS
FROM THE CATACOMB OF SS. PETER
AND MARCELLINUS IN ROME

Abstract: Despite the popularity of the cult of Mithras in Rome in the 4th century AD, the archaeological record provides evidence for only two tombs associated with the followers of Mithras. The lack of Mithraic burials is most likely linked with the pro-Christian bias towards the funerary material found in the Roman catacombs, which had dominated the catacomb scholarship since their re-discovery in the late sixteenth century. However, following a recent development in the understanding of how the subterranean cemeteries were used in antiquity, it is possible to begin a re-evaluation of the available material. An *arcosolium* from the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus decorated with two separate dining scenes may shed new light on our knowledge about Mithraic burials in Rome. In the case of this particular tomb, the evidence suggests that the owner(s) of the *arcosolium* were most likely pagans, possibly followers of Mithras, who migrated to Rome from north of the Alps in the early 4th century AD.

Keywords: Roman Catacombs; Mithras; dining scenes

Introduction

The cult of Mithras was one of the most common ‘mystery religions’ of the Late Roman world and is well documented through archaeological material from across the empire (Griffith 1993; Sauer 2012). However, when one considers the burials of the followers of Mithras, the evidence

is minimal, and only two Mithraic graves have been identified in the city of Rome to date: the *arcosolium* of Caricus, a priest of Mithras, and the tomb of Aurelis Faustinianus and his brother Aurelius Castricius, also priests of Mithras. Both graves are located in the hypogeum of Vibia on the Via Appia Antica (Ferrua 1971). The association of the two burials with the followers of Mithras was based solely on the rare funerary inscriptions, while the identification of a neighbouring *arcosolium*, decorated with an image of nude Venus and scenes representing soldiers, as potentially belonging to a follower of Mithras on the assumption that soldiers were the largest group attracted to the cult (Ferrua 1971), may not be sufficient following recent scholarship (Clauss 1992). Nonetheless, bearing in mind that there could have been as many as 250 mithraea in the city of Rome active in the mid-4th century (Bjørnebye 2007, 59-66; Bjørnebye 2015, 201), which suggests a relatively large number of followers of the cult, it is surprising to see such minimal evidence for Mithraic tombs.

The majority of the fourth-century funerary material from the vicinity of the city of Rome comes from the catacombs – the subterranean cemeteries located in the suburbs alongside roads (Pergola and Barbini 1997), while most of the *sub divo* tombs, which must have once stood on the burial plots, ceased to exist during the expansion of the city (for the rare third-century examples see Borg 2013). Since the re-discovery of the Roman catacombs in the late sixteenth century the cemeteries have mostly been studied according to the religious affiliation of their users (Hirschfeld 2008), and, as most of them had been predominantly used by early Christians during the late fourth and early fifth centuries for burials, and in the fifth and sixth centuries as places of worship, they were pronounced ‘Christian’ (e.g. De Rossi 1864-1877; Wilpert 1903; Fiocchi Nicolai, Bisconti and Mazzoleni 1999; Fiocchi Nicolai 2019), with the exception of few Jewish examples (e.g. Leon 1960; Rutgers 1995). Moreover, certain scholars still maintain the idea of purely Christian origin and usage of the Roman catacombs (e.g. Fiocchi Nicolai 2018; 2019). However, it is now evident that the modern division of the catacombs does not reflect the actual usage of the cemeteries by ancient communities. First, as argued by Johnson (1997), both Christians and non-Christians could have been buried together and there was neither a reason, nor a law, that would prohibit religiously different burials at one cemetery. Second, research into literary evidence carried out by Rebillard (1993), supported by a scrupulous evaluation of archaeological material by Borg (2013), confirmed the lack of Christian authorities’ involvement in the early development of the catacombs. In fact, throughout

the Greco-Roman world the arrangements of both funerals and commemorative rites was primarily the responsibility of the family of the deceased (Hope 2009, 65-69; Graham 2011). As explained by Scheid (2011, 541), the 'familial autonomy' during the funerals reflected the common perception of religious life where the father, or the oldest male family member, fulfilled the role of the 'family priest', leading all domestic ceremonies, including funerals, while the pontiffs and priests were not allowed to attend funerals unless the deceased was a member of their own family. On many occasions the responsibility for burial and commemoration fell to the members of the *collegium* with which the deceased had been associated (Perry 1999, 97-159). Therefore, it would be surprising to maintain that the early Christian communities organized themselves in a different way, and that the Christian authorities and priests played any role in the burials of their believers. That is, of course, apart from the burials of martyrs, whose graves were indeed of special importance to early Christian communities, and which became places of veneration and subsequent pilgrimage (e.g. Spera 1994; 2005).

In her research Borg also convincingly proves that some areas in the Roman catacombs were used by communities of mutual skills and professions (for instance, the *collegia* of cooks in the Catacomb of Pretextatus, see Borg 2013, 86-88), or of mutual origins and ethnicity (e.g. *Coemeterium Iordanorum* on the Via Salaria, see Borg 2013, 111-112). Therefore, in some areas the religious affiliation of the users was less important, which, combined with the fact that the early Christians did associate themselves with, and even belonged to, some professional guilds with not only Christian members (Rebillard 2012, 47-56), implies shared burials and very similar (if not the same) burial and commemorative practices among the Christians and their Jewish and pagan neighbours. Finally, several discoveries of smaller catacombs and hypogea decorated with both Christian and pagan representations provide evidence for the co-existence and collaboration of various religious communities in Rome (for example, the Catacomb on Via Latina/Via Dino Compagni discovered in 1955, see Ferrua 1960, Testini 1986).

For these reasons, it is safe to assume that at least some of the followers of Mithras who lived, and died, in Rome must have been buried in the Roman catacombs; yet, because of the lack of specific inscriptions or perhaps the neutral decoration of their graves, their burials have been either overlooked or even damaged by looters, explorers and researchers of the cemeteries; or were simply classified as Christian. One such grave is *arcosolium* 75 located in the western part of the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus

on the Via Labicana (modern Via Cassilina) in Rome, which will provide a case study for this article, which aims to identify the owner(s) of the tomb as (a) follower(s) of Mithras based on the re-evaluation of the remaining decoration of the tomb.

Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus

The catacomb is located on the third mile outside the Aurelian Wall on the east side of the city (Pl. 1-2). It is also known under the name of *ad* (or *inter*) *duas lauros* and was recorded as such in the sixth-century *Liber Pontificalis* with reference to the basilica dedicated by Constantine the Great to the martyrs Peter and Marcellinus (*Lib. Pont.* 34.26). Both its Latin name and the dedication of the land by the emperor suggest that the cemetery was established on imperial property (Guyon 1987, 8; Drijvers 1992, 30-33; Borg 2013, 80). Moreover, the area had been used for burials since republican times, and from the beginning of the 2nd century AD it was also designated as a cemetery for the *equites singulares augusti* (Guyon 1987, 11-32). After the Battle of Milvian Bridge in AD 312, during which the cavalry fought on Maxentius's side, Constantine not only demolished the famous *Castra Praetoria* and the New Fort on the Lateran Hill, using the land for the site of the Basilica of San Giovanni, but he also destroyed the horsemen's cemetery on Via Labicana and used their smashed tombstones as building material for laying the foundations of the Basilica of SS. Peter and Marcellinus (Guyon 1977; Guyon 1987a, 30-2; Speidel 1994, 156-7; Holloway 2012, 86-93; Cowan 2016, 87; the destruction of the fort in Zos.2.17.2). Those of the *equites singulares* who survived the battle were relocated to the northern frontiers (*Latin Panegyric* 12.21.2-3, ed. Nixon and Saylor Rogers 1994, 326), while several trusted officers of Constantine were stationed in Rome to keep a close watch on matters in the city (Le Bohec 2006, 68). The property of Maxentius, including his land and villa of *ad duas lauros*, was claimed by the victorious Constantine, and shortly afterwards became the property of Helena, Constantine's mother (Drijvers 1992, 31).

The Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus originated in the late 3rd century AD from the appropriation of abandoned water tunnels and cisterns, which must have been connected to an imperial villa located on the estate (Guyon 1987, 37-50; Borg 2013, 80). It is also evident that the first nuclei (the oldest galleries in regions Y, Z and X) developed as separate burial complexes, and were connected into a larger network of corridors during the course of the fourth century (Guyon 1987, 62-86 and 322-330).

The western part of the catacomb (regions A, Y and I) developed in the first half of the fourth century and is well known due to the presence of several dining scenes supplemented with inscriptions referring to *Agape*, *Irene* and *Sabine* (the latter only in *arcosolium* 75). These banquet scenes are unique in the city of Rome and have been vigorously debated, though only with regard to the connection between the inscriptions and the female figures that appear in the convivial images (e.g. Février 1977; Jastrzębowska 1979; Dückers 1992; Tulloch 2006; Zimmermann 2012). However, as I have argued elsewhere, apart from considering these dining scenes as affiliated with the Christian faith, due to their uniqueness in the city of Rome they should also be considered as evidence of a group of foreigners who relocated to Rome from north of the Alps: perhaps soldiers of Constantine I who settled in Rome after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, or members of the imperial court who arrived in the capital with Helena shortly afterwards, or possibly both (Ingle 2017a, 234-249). As the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus was located on imperial property, it was most certainly administered by members of the imperial household, and it would become a natural choice of burial site for both Constantine's and Helena's courtiers and officers who replaced the *equites singulares augusti*.

***Arcosolium* 75**

As mentioned above, the lunette of *arcosolium* 75 is decorated with a dining scene supplemented with the inscription *SABINA MISCE* ('Sabina, mix!') (Pl. 3: 1-2), which closely resembles the inscriptions of *Agape* and *Irene* found in seven neighbouring tombs. For this reason, the *arcosolium* has been commonly interpreted as Christian and not much attention has been paid to the rest of the tomb's decoration (e.g. Jastrzębowska 1979, 22; Dunbabin 2003, 178). However, the scene with *Sabina* is not unique because of its unusual inscription but because a) it is not supplemented by any image that could potentially reflect the Christian faith (i.e. a biblical or miracle scene or even an orant), b) the dining scene itself differs from the convivial representations found in the neighbouring *cubicula*, and c) an additional dining scene is represented on the wall above the *arcosolium*.

The banquet scene from the lunette of the *arcosolium* represents four men resting on a *stibadium* (a half-moon shaped elongated cushion, see Dunbabin 1991) with a three-legged table laden with food (a hare?) in front of them. A double basket with two bottles of wine and two wine jugs depicted next to the table emphasize the opulence of drink during the *convivium*. The men are served by a woman carrying a cup; her name, as indicated by

the inscription above, is Sabina, while an *authepsa* (a hot-water heater) shown behind her reflects the process of mixing wine with water during banquets (Fevrier 1977, 35), to which the second part of the inscription (*MISCE* – ‘mix!’) refers. In comparison, all of the other dining scenes in this part of the catacomb represent men resting on *stibadia* with, usually, two women seated on separate chairs or standing, one at each end of the couch, while inscriptions refer to *Agape* (‘Love’) and *Irene* (‘Peace’) clearly reflecting the Christian character of commemorative meals (*refrigeria*, see Jensen 2008; Hofmann 2011; Ingle 2017b), associated with charitable meals called *agapae* (Février 1977; Marrou 1979, 268-9; Dresken-Weiland, Angerstorfer and Merkt 2012). Sabina, on the other hand, is unlikely to be an allegory of any kind, and simply appears to be a servant.

The second convivial scene represented on the wall above the lunette of the *arcosolium* is mostly destroyed but a figure of a diner, wearing a radiate crown and an *exomis*, and holding a cup in his right hand, is still visible (Pl. 3: 3) (Deckers, Seeliger and Mietke 1987, 337). As this figure resembles the seated shepherd depicted in *arcosolium* 30 in the catacomb of Domitilla, it has been viewed as such (Jastrzębowska 1979, 22); however, the representation rather suggests that the depicted figure is dining (Ferrua 1970; Nestori 1975, 61). Interestingly, the radiate crown that is clearly visible on the head of the represented figure has never been discussed, and it has been instead interpreted as ‘leaves’ (Deckers, Seeliger and Mietke 1987, 337) or ‘green brunches’ (Ferrua 1970). It is, however, evident that the pronounced ‘leaves’ are of very regular shape and are depicted on the very top of the man’s head, which makes them very different from representations of colorful circlets of flowers worn by diners, but only those celebrating eternal afterlife in the Elysian Fields (as, for instance, in the *arcosolium* of Vibia on the Via Appia Antica from the mid-4th century AD, see Ferrua 1971) in contrast to any other collective dining scenes found in the funerary context in the Roman World (see e.g. Jastrzębowska 1979; Ingle 2017a 154-197).

The composition of the painting suggests that only one other diner would have been depicted at the meal. The second half of the fresco most likely represents a *fossor* cutting a rock (Deckers, Seeliger and Mietke 1987, 337). The larger size of the grave-digger rules out his potential identification as a servant, and evidently points to the separation of the two scenes. This is especially intriguing, because representations of two diners, of whom one wears a radiate crown, are well-known from ancient art and depict Sol and Mithras dining (Griffith 2010, 63-77). One example of such a representation

can be found on the back of a late second – early third-century marble slab from Fiano Romano on the outskirts of Rome, now in the Louvre Museum (Vermaseren (1960), 238 = *CIMRM* 641; Merkelbach 1998, 319, Fig. 70), where Sol wearing a radiate crown and *chlamys* is holding a whip and resting on a bull's hide depicted as a *stibadium*, with Mithras on his left side represented wearing a Phrygian hat and holding a torch. The front of the slab is decorated with the common scene of tauroctony (Mithras slaying a bull).

The interpretation of the dining scene from above *arcosolium* 75 as representing Sol and Mithras, however controversial it may appear, is not impossible. The fact that painted images of Sol and Mithras dining are not known from Roman tombs and catacombs does not necessarily mean that they were never found there. Images of Sol and Mithras dining are known from provincial gravestones, of which an example is provided by the 2nd-century AD stela from Ladenburg now in the Lobdengau-Museum in Ladenburg, which portrays a nude Sol reclining on the hide of the slain bull and raising a drinking horn, and Mithras seated to his right and dressed in a cape; a small table standing on three bull's legs depicted in front of the diners provides an interesting detail relating to the tauroctony (Schwertheim 1974, 188, no. 144). Painted and sculpted representations of this kind have been discovered in non-funerary contexts all over the Empire, for instance in the famous Mithraeum of Dura Europos (Vermaseren 1960, 68 = *CIMRM* 49; Markelbach 1998, 274-278, Figs 15 and 16b), and in the City of Rome itself, as, for example, in the Mithraeum under the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome (Vermaseren 1960, 198 = *CIMRM* 483). The motif also appears on pottery, for instance on a third-century *terra sigillata* shallow bowl from Trier (Schwertheim 1974, 239, no. 206; Merkelbach 1998, 338, Fig. 93). Moreover, as discussed above, the number of known mithraea from Rome suggests that there must have been a relatively large number of Mithraic congregations living and eventually dying in Rome. The fact that the archaeological material provides evidence for only two graves of followers of Mithras indicates the poor preservation of such tombs. Moreover, the decoration of the Roman catacombs is mostly destroyed, and in several places the evidence indicates that the paintings were damaged intentionally, as with the 'cubiculum of the coopers' in the catacomb of Priscilla (Nestori 1975, 22, no. 5), where the faces of the coopers have been erased. It is, therefore, possible that the current scarcity of Mithraic tombs might also have been caused in late antiquity when the majority of the mithraea were intentionally destroyed by Christians (Sauer 2003, 131-142).

It is, of course, evident that the image of Sol from above *arcosolium* 75 in the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus is not 'typical', as the Sun God is dressed in an *exomis* rather than a *chlamys*, which would be more common for his representations. However, as noticed by Hijmans (2009, 74), depictions of Sol nude or wearing a chiton are also common, so there was no one set way of depicting the Sun God. In addition, Sol wearing an *exomis* can be seen, for example, on a 4th-century AD mosaic in the House of Aion in Paphos (see Daszewski and Michaelides 1988, Fig. 48), or on a sculpted bust of Sol from Museum Carnuntinum in Bad Deutsch-Altenburg in Austria (see Hijmans 2009, Pl. 9.1), hence such a representation is not impossible.

At this point it is worth noting that the inscription above the dining scene from the lunette of this *arcosolium* (*SABINA MISCE*) reflects drinking toasts found on Trier black-slipped ware (Herrmann and van den Hock 2018), of which several pieces bore decorations and inscriptions referring to the Mithraic cult (Künzl 1997, 105-107). The presence of the drinking toasts on Rhenish black-slipped ware, and the fact that the majority of the vessels were found in a funerary context (Harris 1986, 107; Pirling and Siepen 2006, 79-100; Künzl 1997, 17), indicate that drinking wine (or wine mixed with water) must have played an important role in provincial mortuary and commemorative rites and beliefs. Therefore, considering that *arcosolium* 75 belongs to the part of the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus which was used by the imperial troops and personnel who arrived in Rome from Trier with Constantine and Helena, it is likely that at least some of the migrants were followers of Mithras, and so such decoration should not be surprising.

For these reasons, the dining scene with *Sabina* should be viewed as a decoration commissioned by a foreign client, possibly a member of the imperial court or of the military, who arrived in Rome from the Rhine region in the early 4th century AD. It is likely that the dining scene in *arcosolium* 75 portrays an event where a toast was raised to the dead, or, equally likely, an Elysian feast, or perhaps a Mithraic version of one, in which the departed are partaking. The latter interpretation is especially plausible as the ceiling of the *arcosolium* is decorated with a floral motif of numerous tangled red roses, which evokes settings for the Elysian feasts found in literary sources (e.g. Tib.I.3.58-66; Synesius *Hymn* 3: *To the Father and Son* 37) or other representations of Elysium from Roman tombs (e.g. in the early third-century Hypogeum of Octavii on the Via Triumphalis near Rome, see Blanc 1998, 107; Borg 2013, 65-68; or in the third century Hypogeum of Crispia Salvia in Sicily, see Giglio 1996, 10-13). Additionally,

the owner of the tomb was a pagan, most likely even a follower of Mithras, which can be deduced from the convivial image represented above the *arcosolium*. Further evidence is provided by the servant called Sabina, bringing diluted wine to the table. We have no way of knowing whether she was a real servant or perhaps an allegorical figure unknown to us, but her name was probably an intentional juxtaposition to the Christian representations found in the neighbouring chambers; otherwise, why not call her Agape or Irene, which was so common in other Christian tombs?

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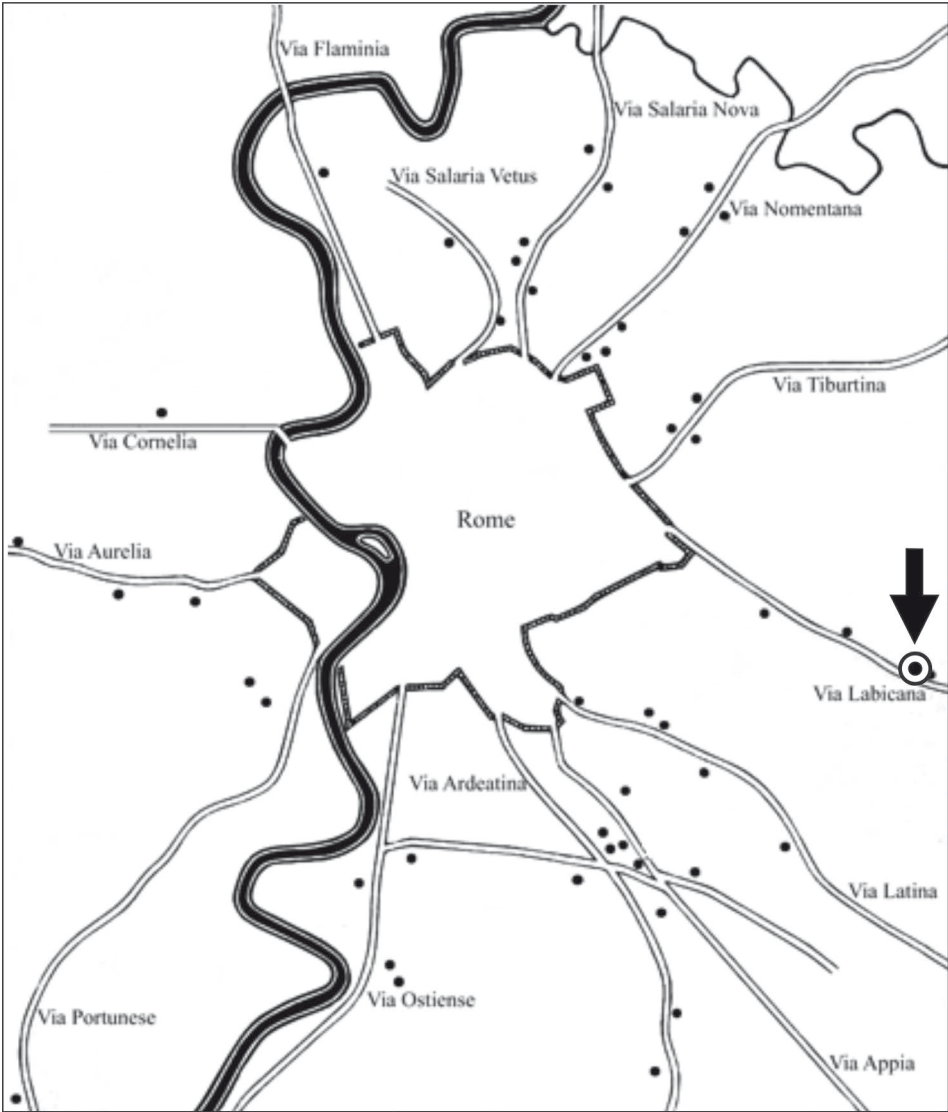
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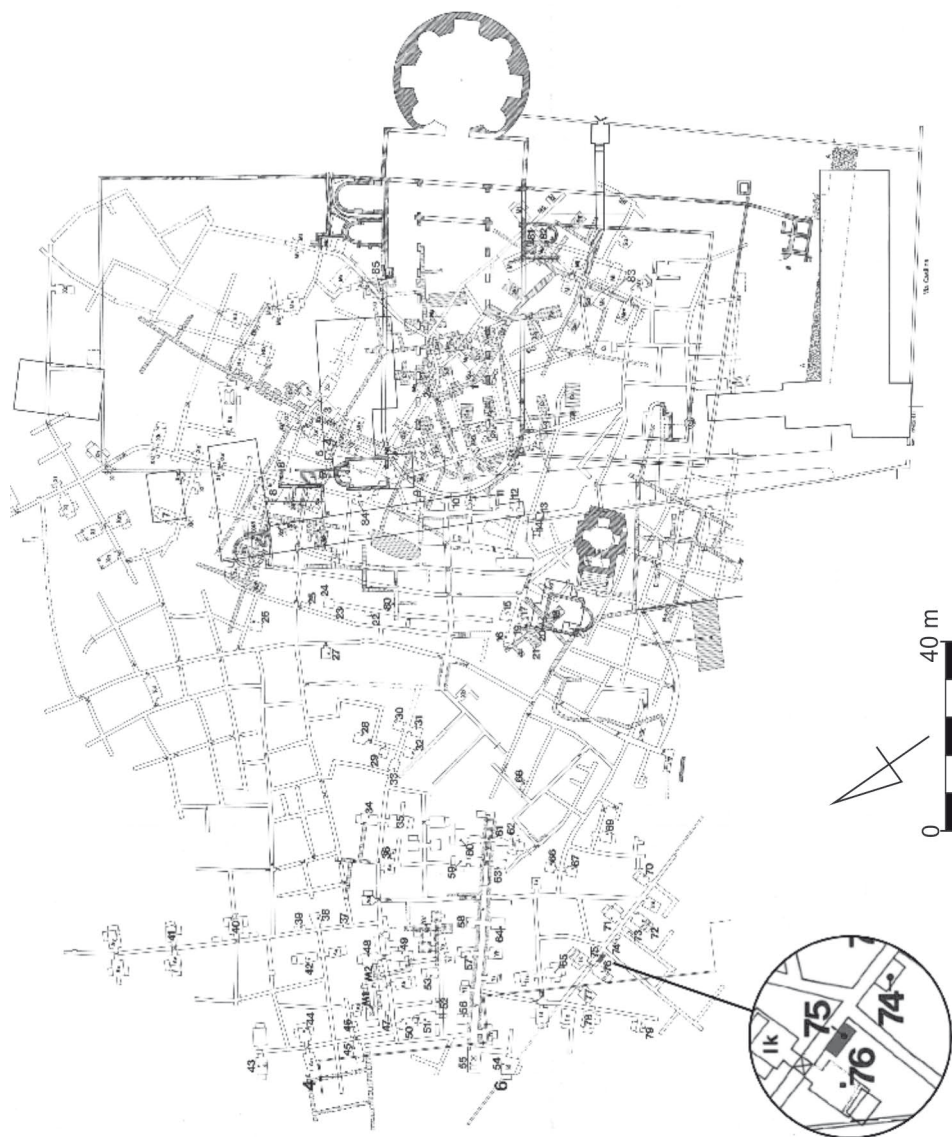
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Gabriela Ingle
The University of Edinburgh
g.e.ingle@ed.ac.uk



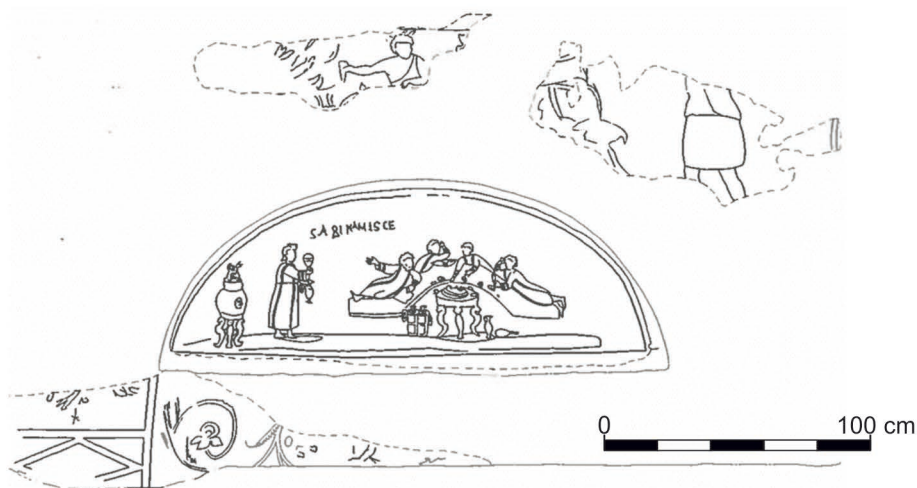
Pl. 1 – Map of Rome



Pl. 2 – Plan of the Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus on the Via Labicana. After Deckers, Seeliger, Mietke 1987



1



2



3

Pl. 3: 1 – Dining scene with inscription *SABINA MISCE* in *arcosolium* 75, the catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus, c. 320-360 AD. Adapted from: Giuliani 2015, 45, Fig. 23

Pl. 3: 2 – Drawing of the decoration of *arcosolium* 75 and the wall above it, the catacomb of Ss. Pietro e Marcellino. After: Deckers, Seeliger, Mietke 1987

Pl. 3: 3 – The remains of the dining scene located above *arcosolium* 75. Adapted from: Ferrua 1970, 36, Fig. 23