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THE “ORPHIC” TABLETS DEPICTED IN A ROMAN CATACOMB (C. 250 AD?)

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Most commentators of the gnostico-Christian Viale Manzoni hypogeum pay virtually no heed to what they have called ‘the idyllic pastoral scene’, or just a ‘farm’ displayed in Chamber ‘C’¹ directly above the more outwardly impressive and often discussed ‘Odyssean’ picture to which it is generally assumed to be related (see Pl. VII).

The fresco in question shows what might be described as a well appointed house on each side of a large doorway. In the centre there is a clearly delineated fountain, beside which stands a woman, and to the right another spring provides water to ‘queuing up’ domestic animals. To the right of the central fountain stands an apparently white cypress tree. The evanescent state of the paintings, even in 1924 when O. Ferretti skillfully reproduced them in water-colour for Mgr G. Wilpert’s appraisal, makes it hard to be ultra precise, but the woman appears to be contemplating the animals moving in two opposite directions, drinking from the right-hand fountain and remaining virtually black in colour before and after their drink.

The most notable interpretation of the scene prior to my 1976 attempt is that of Ch. Picard² postulating that both this and the lower panel refer to the Circe episode of the Odyssey; one suspects that having made a case for the lower one featuring Ulysses, the ‘Monte Circeo scene’ as he calls it, up above, completes a set, with the woman above and the one below both representing the enchantress. This, however, would not apply if the more usual acceptance of the lower panel representing Ulysses and Penelope prevailed. The present paper offers a new assessment of the top painting, in which the female figure, far from being the simple ‘housemaid’ that Wilpert suggested, becomes in fact an instrument of initiation more in keeping with the deep spiritual values (notably in other female figures) discernable in this unique catacomb.

None of the judgments on the fresco in question takes account of the third element in this mural testimony: the *refrigerium* inscription by one Remius Celerinus for ‘A . . . Epaphroditus’ directly below the two paintings above mentioned.

RE MEVSCELERINVS
K IVNISREFRIGORVM
M OVMHONO
EPAIRO

Here must clearly lie a link of exegetic value regarding the portraying of flowing water in the top panel. It is also noteworthy that in a hypogeum having only three inscriptions (apart from a small caricature of a Christian theme without wording also in Chamber ‘C’) this one should refer to the pre-Christian and Christian theme of ἀνάψυξις, refreshment of souls, and perhaps more importantly that this is possibly

¹ I adopt J. Carcopino’s designation here (*De Pythagore aux Apôtres*, Paris 1956) as I did in my work *Glanures au Viale Manzoni*, Brisbane 1976.

² *Mém. Acad. Inscript. et Belles-Lettres*, 1945. There was also an interesting effort on the part of V. Daniel in *Revue Belge de Phil. et d’Histoire*, 1924, suggesting the grotto of the nymphs at Ithaca, implying the hope of a happy after-life. However, the reference to a Porphyry text seems debatable on the grounds of chronology.

the earliest use of *refrigerium* in a ‘semi-Christian’ catacomb yet discovered, perhaps implying some particular significance.³

In a monument of syncretism such as the Viale Manzoni hypogeum, a reminiscence of orphic tenets is even more feasible than one of Homeric epic. Such a possibility clearly lies behind the equation by E. Norden (albeit at the end of a footnote only) of the Thurii tablet IG XIV 641 dated 4–3 century BC and what he calls ‘the gnostic mysteries’⁴. This holds all the more interest for this paper in that one of the most recently discovered of the 17 known gold tablets was near Rome itself. The text is given by G. Pugliese Carratelli as follows:

ἔρχεται ἐκ καθαρῶν καθάρᾳ, | χθονίων βασίλεια
 Εὐκλεες Εὐβου|λεῦ τε, Διὸς τέκος ἀγλαά. ἔχω δὲ
 Μνημο|σύνης τόδε δῶρον ἀσίδιμον ἀνθρώποισιν·
 Καικιλία Σ(ε)κουνδεῖνα, νόμωι | ἴθι δῖα γεγῶσα.

This tablet is in the British Museum (*Catalogue of Jewellery*, Oxford 1911, p. 380 no. 3154), and is probably not much earlier than the 3rd century AD catacomb, i.e. 4 to 5 centuries later than all the other *lamellae aureae* (from Magna Graecia, Crete and Thessaly). My contention is that the mural in question, independently of the one directly beneath it, is a direct representation of orphic ritual elements – guides to entering the underworld for pure souls – as handed down to us by these tablets (though not only the Roman one).⁵

Much has been written on these ‘amulets’⁶. I confine myself to stressing two particular elements of similarity, using Ferretti’s watercolour reproduction of what is now a fast vanishing fresco:

1. The feminine element

One sole being, a female, is the picture’s centrepiece. I do not think she is the Sophia of Chamber ‘B’. Dressed in a white garment, still unsullied by time, she stands near the left of the two sources or wells of water⁷ which I take to be that of Memory (from which she may be drawing water to be drunk by the elect (gnostic *pneumatics*?) and that of Oblivion, to be avoided by them. She may be Persephone (as in Thurii texts IG XIV 641–2) but more likely to be the goddess Mnemosyne as purveyor of a gift (δῶρον) in the form of a password (‘Be thou godlike’) for the *mystes* about to enter the underworld reigned over by the gods duly invoked⁸. Here, as χθονίων βασίλεια she holds sway, receiving the elect’s vow of purity (ἔρχεται ἐκ καθαρῶν καθάρᾳ, formula taken up from Thurii by the Roman tablet). Finally she will confer divine – and legal – status on the godlike soul (νόμωι ἴθι δῖα γεγῶσα).

The candidate for these supreme honours, in the Roman tablet, was also a woman, by name Caecilia Secundina.

³ Credit must go a) to F. Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, 1905–1963, for his consciousness of a link (p. 247 note) between the refreshment tenet of the early Church and ‘orphic tablets’ and b) to N. Maurice Denis-Boulet, *Rome souterraine*, Paris 1965, for holding the Viale Manzoni text as the earliest we possess to date on this theme (p. 150). NB in Carcopino, *op. cit.* the reconstruction epigraphically of *refrigerium* here by my former mentor Paul Fabre (p. 96). One also notes with interest that as long ago as in 1903, J. A. Stewart returned to the orphic tablets as a source of *refrigerium* (*Classical Review* 17, p. 117) ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ . . .

⁴ *Agnostos Theos*, Leipzig/Berlin 1923, p. 193.

⁵ The Thurii texts are grouped with that of Rome by G. Pugliese Carratelli, *Parola del Passato*, XXIX, 1974. However, one needs to have all the texts in mind (e.g. with O. Kern, *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, Berlin 1922), particularly having regard to two notable divergencies in them (positioning of the 2 wells as of the shining/white cypress). Something of the gist, but without the emphasis of this paper, appears in my *Glanures*, *op. cit.*, p. 54, and black-white illustration opposite p. 56.

⁶ In *ZPE*, in particular 17, 1975; 23, 1976; 25, 1977; in *Epigraphica* 35, Firenze 1974, 1–2.

⁷ Not mentioned in the Roman tablet, but e.g. Hipponion places Lethe on right whereas Petelia places Memory on the right . . .

⁸ Texts given here in Greek from the Roman tablet.

2. The importance of colour, especially white:

Mgr Wilpert claimed⁹ that Ferretti’s work failed to do justice to the background contrasts and thought that the shining white elements (woman, fountain of Memory and adjoining house or palace) were too obscured under dark woodlands. Be this as it may, the most notable feature (and one I failed to take into account in my 1976 appraisal of the fresco) must be the whiteness of the cypress near the life-giving fountain. One critic suggested that the tree had ‘dried up’¹⁰. Whilst there is no reference to this phenomenon in the Roman tablet, there has been ample debate on its significance. It appears to play some sort of indicative, not to say initiatic role, illuminating the way to Hades. But whereas the divergency displayed in its positioning in the various texts makes one disinclined to be dogmatic about it, it is clear that to the Roman artist of the Viale Manzoni hypogeum who placed it next to the fountain of Memory, it played a vital part. Its colour still shines out, to this day.

One hardly needs to add that the white sections of the painting are in sharp contrast with the extreme blackness of the animals (gnostic *psychikoi* or *sarkikoi*, v. *supra*).

Whether the above-detailed interpretation of this Viale Manzoni catacomb painting, linked with the *refrigerium* inscription, has, if justified, any bearing on the scene depicted on the panel directly below it, is a further conundrum.¹¹

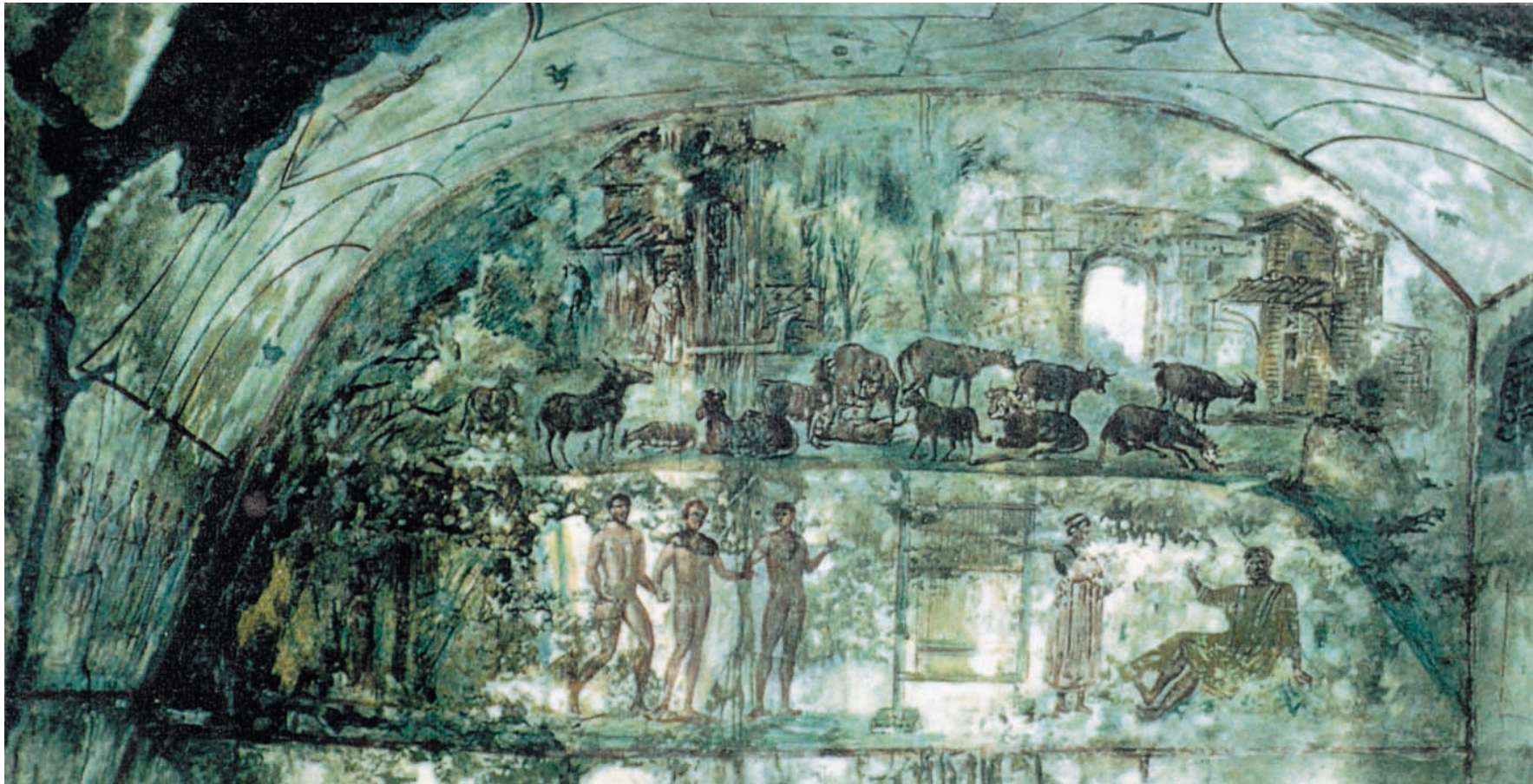
Brisbane, Australia

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⁹ *Atti della Pontif. Accad. di Arch.* III, 1924.

¹⁰ G. Germain, *La genèse de l’Odyssée*, Paris 1954, p. 367. But he is referring to the Petelia text which places the cypress near the water not to be drunk by the elect.

¹¹ One briefly glimpses the orphic mysteries, like a palimpsest for this lower panel, in R. Turcan’s *Ulysse et les prétendus prétendants*, in *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 21–22, 1978–79, p. 169.



Fresco in the Viale Manzoni Hypogeum