

THE ORANTE AND THE GODDESS IN THE ROMAN CATACOMBS

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ABSTRACT

The Orante, or Orans, figure, a very common and important symbol in early Christian art, is difficult to interpret. Theories of what she meant to early Christians, especially Roman Christians who buried their dead in the catacombs, range from a representation of the soul of the deceased to a symbol of filial piety. In this article, I will attempt to show that the Orante figure originates with the prehistoric goddess, the all-encompassing Nature deity worshipped for millennia throughout the Mediterranean world. While many early Christians superimposed Christian meaning on her, it is likely that other Christians still viewed her in conjunction with the earlier Nature goddess of birth, life, death and rebirth, even as they worshipped God in male form.

Introduction

The Orante or Orans, generally a female figure with open eyes and upraised hands, is a pervasive symbol in early Christian art, perhaps “the most important symbol in early Christian art.”¹ Found frequently in the late second-century art in the Roman catacombs, as well as in sculpture, her head is almost always covered with a veil, and she wears a tunic. She exists both as a separate symbol and as the main figure in a number of Biblical scenes, but rarely in masculine form with male clothing. Instead, she frequently stands in for male figures in scenes of deliverance—she becomes Noah in the ark, Jonah in the boat and spewed out of the whale, Daniel between the lions, and the three young men in the fiery furnace. In one instance, she does represent a female figure—Susannah as she is saved by Daniel.²

¹ Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), 19. To my knowledge, the term Orante or Orans was never used by early Christians; this appears to be a term coined by modern-day scholars, meaning “the praying one.”

² Ibid.

It is the salvation/deliverance aspect that appears to be the most common in early Christian art.

Her exact meaning and usage, however, are debated, since there is no ancient literature to tell us exactly how her image was employed. Before considering the range of meanings she might have had, it is necessary to discuss the primary context of her image – the Roman catacombs.

Located in a rough circle approximately three miles from the city center, the catacombs date between the mid-second century and 400 CE.³ They derive their English name from the Greek *katakymbas* and Latin *catacumba*, neither of which has a clear meaning,⁴ contributing to the abiding intrigue and mystery of these underground burial sites.

Invading Goths ransacked the catacombs in the sixth century,⁵ and in 817 most of the bones interred there were removed to churches and chapels within Rome by order of Pope Pascal I. The catacombs were first excavated in the late 16th century. About 40 chambers are known.⁶

The catacombs preserve some of the earliest Christian, as well as Jewish and pagan, art related to death, resurrection and reunification of the deceased with the deity. This art is a rich repository of religious symbols, some of which originate in a much earlier time and can assist in the interpretation of the Orante. Below we shall consider several types of symbols: the gender and posture of the Orante herself; Nature symbols, including flora and fauna; anthropomorphic figures from the Graeco-Roman repertoire, such as deities and personifications of values; and Biblical scenes and figures.

Traditional Interpretations of the Orante

Ever since their modern discovery in the catacombs and on other artifacts such as sarcophagi, Orante figures have been studied and interpreted by early church historians,

³ Horst Moehring, "Catacombs," *The Encyclopedia Americana International Edition* (Danbury, CT: Grolier, 1997), Vol. 5, 812.

⁴ "Catacomb," *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1994), Vol. 2, 944. While legend has it that early Christians escaped persecution by hiding in the catacombs, this cannot be generally true, since the underground burials were well-known, accessible and too small for large gatherings.

⁵ Moehring, 812.

⁶ "Catacomb," *Britannica*, 944.

art historians and other scholars. However, among present-day scholars, there is no consensus on their meaning.

One common interpretation of the Orante is that she represents the “soul of the dead person – whether a man or a woman – rather than an actual dead woman”⁷ or “the immortal image of the dead, under the guise of a young girl.”⁸ The question becomes, why use a female figure to depict the soul? One explanation is that the word for soul in Greek, *psyche*, is feminine, and that the Orante is similar to other personifications of qualities and virtues; Nike, for instance, is a female personification of the quality Victory, and Tyche/Fortuna personifies Luck or Fortune. However, in Gnostic and other literature of the early Christian period, the human soul must become male to have eternal life.⁹ The Jewish God was male, and the Christian Trinity—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—was overwhelmingly male (at least in the orthodox literature of the time, most of which was written by the church fathers). Sophia, or Wisdom, represented a strand of Judeo-Christian thought and an example of a female personification,¹⁰ but it does not seem to be her attributes that are depicted in the catacombs.

Therefore, the question becomes, what is it about the human soul that would compel an early Christian painter working in the catacombs (or his/her patron) to depict the soul of the deceased as a veiled female figure with upraised arms? Even if the femaleness can be accounted for, why would her arms not be folded in prayer, stretched out frontally, or held in a blessing posture, as are some Christ figures in early Christian art?

Another possible interpretation is that the Orante represents *pietas*, or filial piety: the Orante appears on imperial coins with the inscription *pietas*. Since the Orante image occurs in both funerary and ecclesiastical art, some scholars suggest that she referred to “the security of filial piety,” with the adopted family of the church providing believers with a sense of community

⁷ Jean Lassus, *The Early Christian and Byzantine World* (New York and Toronto: McGraw Hill, 1967), 13.

⁸ “Early Christian Art,” *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Art*, Vol. I (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 112.

⁹ *Gospel of Thomas* 51.19-26, as quoted in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) 49, 67.

¹⁰ Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, 48-69.

security or peace; this might explain depictions of the Orante in Biblical scenes of threat and impending death.¹¹

However, this does not explain the androgynous nature of the figure: “Since [the Orante] frequently represents male figures in early Christian art, the constant use of female clothing seriously affects our interpretation of pictorial art.”¹² Why did the Orante emerge as female to begin with, only to be so consistently used in scenes of men—of the emperor, of Noah, of Daniel? Also, why would a female figure be used to symbolize the protection of believers from danger, when contemporary theology was so intent on stressing male deities—Jesus, God—in that role?

A third possibility is that the Orante, when surrounded with flowers, represents the gardens of Paradise. If placed in the context of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, an early Christian document, and the visions of St. Perpetua, “both these pastoral and floral scenes may be seen as visions of the place of light and peace.”¹³ Again, though, why choose a female figure to represent paradise, rather than a Christ figure, shepherd or other masculine type? Several gardens in Biblical literature—the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Gethsemane—could have been depicted, yet the catacomb artists chose a female figure with upraised arms in a pastoral, Nature-oriented setting.

As we shall see, there are other explanations for the choice of this particular type in the catacombs at this particular time. To arrive at them, we will explore a far-distant time in the past, when, as some scholars believe, an all-powerful female deity ruled the human and natural world.

Origins: The Neolithic Goddess and Her Legacy

Investigating possible origins of the Orante figure reveals that a female figure with upraised arms was in the religious repertory of prehistoric peoples of Old Europe¹⁴ and the Mediterranean.

¹¹ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 20.

¹² *Idem*, 19.

¹³ Lassus, *Early Christian*, 13.

¹⁴ This is a term coined by Marija Gimbutas: “the collective identity and achievement of the different cultural groups of Neolithic-Chalcolithic southeastern Europe. The area it occupied extends from the Aegean and Adriatic, including the islands, as far north as Czechoslovakia, southern Poland and the western Ukraine. Between c. 7000 and c. 3500 BC, the inhabitants of this region developed a much more complex social organization than their western and northern neighbours...” From Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images* (Berkeley and Los Angeles:

What might this figure have represented, and could the same meaning have persisted into the Graeco-Roman era?

In recent years, excavations of sites dating to the Neolithic era (New Stone Age, approximately 7000-3500 BCE in this region) have yielded finds indicating that, unlike later societies, people revered a powerful female deity—in effect, a female manifestation of Nature or Earth and all its (her) attributes.¹⁵ Neolithic (and some Paleolithic) sites that have yielded significant finds include Çatal Hüyük in Turkey; sites on the Greek island of Crete, the height of whose culture is Bronze Age but owes a great debt to the Neolithic; Sitagroi, Greece, near the early Christian colony of Philippi; and a number of sites in Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary.

From multidisciplinary interpretation of the material remains from these sites, a description of the Nature/Earth goddess can be attempted. Artifacts found by archaeologists in countless Neolithic sites—overwhelmingly female in form—bear symbols of a deity that link her with water, animals, plants, birth, life, death and regeneration—indeed, all of Life. This goddess was believed, through observation, to have dominion over not only the earth and all things on it, but also the skies and the planets (which were viewed as earth's ceiling, for all intents and purposes).¹⁶ Belief in the female origin of life and close attention to its manifestations in Nature allowed Neolithic peoples of Old Europe and elsewhere to cultivate crops, domesticate animals, and live in harmony with Nature and one another.

However, even when death and disaster struck, whether through storms, animal attacks, illness, or accident, the pre-historic mind still viewed the world from a gynocentric (female-

University of California Press, 1996. First ed.: London: Thames and Hudson, 1974, 1982. Originally published in the U.S. in 1974 by University of California Press under the title *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000-3500 BC*. New and updated edition in paperback, 1982), 17.

¹⁵ The question can be raised as to whether one speaks of one goddess or many. If one views earth and Nature as a single entity with many aspects, with that entity being in female form, then one can view the deity, equated with the earth and Nature, as one female entity with many aspects. This is not a philosophical discussion so much as it is based on the close observation of one's surroundings.

¹⁶ The deity "had dominion over" Nature and human beings by the mere fact that, for the most part, human beings could not control Nature. This may be a difficult concept for modern human beings to imagine, since we *can* control Nature to some extent: large-scale irrigation mimics rain, airplanes mimic birds, running water does not depend on a river running downstream, human beings can create fire without waiting for lightning to strike, and so on.

centered) perspective. Rather than attribute bad fortune to a separate “evil” being, as in later thought, misfortunes were seen to derive from the crone, witch, or hag manifestations of the same Nature goddess. While ugly, fearsome and dreaded, these attributes were not separate from the good side, to be defeated or annihilated, but rather to be accepted as part of the natural order and propitiated with ceremony, offerings and ritual.¹⁷

The goddess was thus viewed as all-powerful and involved in almost every aspect of life, not only in the large scale events—birth, death, childbearing, marriage—but also in more of life’s everyday activities. The goddess oversaw one’s everyday work, play, seasonal activity, relationships within the community, the creation of homes and clothes, and so on. In contrast to many strands of later androcentric, historic, war-defined religion the world over, the goddess belief and praxis system emphasized joy, creativity, beauty and harmony, both between human beings and between people and Nature.

The archaeological evidence demonstrates that the agricultural communities created by such goddess-worshippers experienced a large growth in population and developed a rich and sophisticated artistic expression. This culture—a true “civilization”—boasted towns with temples several stories high, four- or five-room houses, and professional ceramicists, weavers, and copper and gold workers. A network of trade routes facilitated the exchange of obsidian, shells, marble, and salt.¹⁸ Goddess cultures of prehistory were matrilineal and matrifocal but, significantly, not matriarchal; that is, descent was through the mother, the new husband lived with his wife’s family, but women did not dominate—social structure was egalitarian.¹⁹

Out of the excavations of Neolithic sites have come thousands of female figurines and symbols with stunning parallels with the Orante figure. Among these are various manifestations of

¹⁷ While it seems farfetched to draw these philosophical and theological conclusions from physical artifacts alone, given the absence of literature from this era, the archaeological evidence in its totality strongly supports these conclusions. Gimbutas and others present thousands of examples of female-centered figures and symbols in contexts of death, destruction, and misfortune, as well as the positive, life-affirming contexts, that demonstrate very clearly this aspect of the goddess as the other side of the same coin. See especially Gimbutas, *Goddesses and Gods*; idem, *The Language of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1989); and idem, *The Civilization of the Goddess*, ed. Joan Marler (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1991).

¹⁸ Gimbutas, *Civilization*, viii.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the Nature goddess—the hunt goddess, the snake goddess and the frog or toad.

The hunt goddess, who later became Artemis to the Greeks and Diana to the Romans, had a magic relation to animals. Her image, with upraised arms, is found throughout European folk tradition, art, alchemy and witchcraft. In Stone Age cave paintings, sacred women stood with upraised arms during the hunt, acting as receivers of cosmic energy.²⁰ To us accustomed to an image of “man as hunter,” this image may be counterintuitive, but the archaeological evidence and later Greek and Roman literature confirm the association between hunting and an ancient *female* deity.

As for the snake goddess, a classic example comes from Minoan art. The great goddess of Crete, bare-breasted, wears a flounced skirt and dances ecstatically with upraised arms, holding magic snakes in her hands.²¹ For many pre-industrial, Nature-centered peoples, even today, snakes symbolized both immortality and the image of spontaneous life energy, and the goddess' bare breasts in the Minoan image connote the nourishing lifestream of the Mother.²² In the catacombs and other early Christian art, the powerful female deity's upraised arms may still have represented this same energy, life, regeneration and immortality, even though in orthodox Judeo-Christian thought the snake had evil and misogynist characteristics.

The goddess in a birth-giving position—legs spread widely apart and arms upraised—is a very common image from the Neolithic sites, appearing on pottery of various kinds from Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bohemia and elsewhere in Old Europe. In some examples, the goddess resembles a frog or toad, animals closely connected to both birth and death. The frog-woman image may be as old as the Upper Paleolithic (the millennia preceding the Neolithic), appearing as stand-alone figurines or carved or painted on pottery. The animal is depicted frequently in prehistoric sites along with the human vulva and the sign of the uterus, so the frog shape is not necessarily representative of the birth-giving posture but rather an anthropomorphized animal connected by its symbolism to regeneration or life after death.²³

²⁰ Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 84.

²¹ *Idem*, 212-14.

²² *Idem*, 213.

²³ Gimbutas, *Language*, 251-55.

This survey suggests that the Orante in a death/burial setting is a direct descendant of the prehistoric Nature goddess and many of her attributes. It remains to be seen how she ties in with other symbols of the catacombs and what meaning she may still have had for early Christians.

Religious Symbols in the Catacombs

In the catacombs, space shared by pagans, Jews and Christians, are depicted Graeco-Roman goddesses, plants, flowers, trees, birds, animals, food and fish. As images representative of other values or qualities, these symbols all have roots in prehistory. While such images may be merely decorative, they may also have deep meaning, especially in a specific context. Since the primary function of the catacombs was to provide a permanent resting place for the deceased, it is highly likely that many of the symbols chosen for the paintings held meaning related to death, resurrection and the afterlife.

First, as has been noted by art historians, catacomb art generally conveys peacefulness, plenitude, and deliverance from danger. There is remarkably little sense of human sinfulness, death (even the death of Jesus on the cross), fear or the awesomeness of God. Death appears as an almost welcome release from the perils and hardships of life, not as a dark, foreboding place to be dreaded.

Since this positive emphasis is so different from much of early Christian theology as expressed in mainstream literature of the time (written mostly by men), we must ask why there is a discrepancy. Might the ethos of the catacombs be due to earlier, pre-Christian (and even pre-Jewish) conceptions of death and the afterlife? The underground burials were sacred ground, with apparently little or no theological conflict occurring between the many groups using them. This space was also “ground” itself — mother earth, Nature, a locus of life-sustaining and life-enhancing vegetation.

The connection between Nature and peacefulness is well illustrated in the Jewish catacomb of Vigna Randanini. The wall paintings in this catacomb have “a festive air... There is nothing solemn about the graceful, mythological figures, leaping dolphins

and sea horses, flying birds, palm trees full of dates, and garlands of flowers.”²⁴

Furthermore, one of the vault frescoes of Vigna Randanini depicts a Winged Victory (the Greek goddess Nike) crowning a naked youth in the center of a round design; Nike holds a palm leaf in her right hand. The central picture is surrounded by symbolic flora and fauna: a peacock with its feathers spread sits on a column, while two birds stand on either side of a pedestal with a basket of flowers and fruit on top.²⁵ The decoration of the vault also includes curved and straight lines in a design that gives a swirling, watery feeling.

Many of the symbols found here not only evoke Nature but are reminiscent of the prehistoric goddess, as presented especially by Gimbutas. Nike is a female deity or personification; she, like many female deities in the Graeco-Roman pantheon, are direct descendants of the prehistoric goddess.²⁶ The palm leaf has very early goddess resonance,²⁷ as do birds, flowers and fruit, geometric designs, and water. The peacock, sacred to Juno/Hera, Queen of Heaven, is also significant: the eyed feathers of peacock’s tail represented the goddess’ starry heavens or her all-seeing awareness. On Roman coins, Juno’s peacock meant apotheosis for women.²⁸

However, the peacock could also be a bad-luck sign in Christianity, precisely because of its goddess association.²⁹ Since it is unlikely that anyone, Jewish or Christian, would have surrounded their deceased relative/s with symbols that might negatively impact his or her afterlife journey, it is quite likely that the artist, the deceased and the deceased’s kin took comfort from these symbols—and therefore revered the goddess with which they were associated, whether they called her Nike, Juno, or Hera or had no name for her at all.

²⁴ Letizia Pitigliani, “A Rare Look at the Jewish Catacombs of Rome,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (May/June 1980) 43

²⁵ Estelle Shohet Brettman, *Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome* (Boston, MA: International Catacomb Society, 1985) 12-13; Pitigliani, “Rare Look,” 43.

²⁶ See, e.g., Gimbutas, *Civilization*, 226, 235.

²⁷ Sjöö and Mor, *Great Cosmic Mother*, 163-64.

²⁸ Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman’s Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 405-06.

²⁹ Walker, *Dictionary*, 406.

Symbols such as the tree, the vine, wine, fish and bread are found frequently in the catacombs. The tree, like the palm, represents for Christians either a sign of victory (the presentation of a palm to the winners of the games) or a sign of life — or both. Of course, in many contexts victory could mean victory over death, which parallels the promise of eternal life. Church historian Graydon Snyder asserts that the tree appears “most frequently in the context of the Good Shepherd,” which may derive from Orpheus with the tree symbolizing “satisfactory existence.”³⁰ However, far back in time the tree represented life in the sense of Nature, life-giving fruit, shade, and shelter; these too were all under the dominion of the great goddess.³¹

Doves and other birds also figure prominently in catacomb art. Whether under the guise of Aphrodite or Astarte, the dove represented for pagans of the Graeco-Roman era the great goddess,³² while for Christians it was often equated with John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit.³³ Therefore, the frequency of the dove’s appearance in the catacombs cannot be purely coincidental. In several instances (e.g., the catacomb of Priscilla, several times in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini, and in the catacomb of SS. Marcellino e Pietro), the dove is presented with an olive branch or roses.³⁴ For people of the Neolithic era, both the olive branch and the dove symbolized the peace of the goddess.³⁵

Elsewhere in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini, four doves, depicted with a spray of roses, may signify the four seasons,³⁶ which were also under the domain of the goddess in the prehistoric mindset. Another examples of doves is from the catacomb of Priscilla: a figure of the Good Shepherd stands amid his flock of sheep flanked by doves who sit on two trees.³⁷

The roses too were significant, appearing in graveside funerary rituals and symbolizing immortality, rebirth and hope from very early times.³⁸ A hen and roses appear on a wall painting

³⁰ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 21.

³¹ See, e.g., Sjöö and Mor, *Great Cosmic Mother*, 163-64; Gimbutas, *Language*, 319.

³² Gimbutas, *Language*, 195.

³³ Walker, *Dictionary*, 399.

³⁴ Brettman, *Vaults*, 22-23.

³⁵ Barbara, *Dictionary*, 399-400.

³⁶ Brettman, *Vaults*, 23.

³⁷ *Idem*, 31.

³⁸ *Idem*, 20, 23.

in cubiculum I in the Vigna Randanini catacomb.³⁹ Ducks and hens, fish, baskets of food, and roses are depicted together in the Vigna Randanini and SS. Marcellino e Pietro catacombs,⁴⁰ bringing together themes of fertility, water, nourishment and immortality—all linked to the prehistoric goddess.

Fortuna/Tyche, symbol of Nature's profusion, is another goddess descendant appearing in a vault painting in the Vigna Randanini catacomb.⁴¹ She holds a cornucopia in her left hand and pours a libation with her right.⁴² As both giver of plenty and taker of life, she was very much at home in the catacombs.

Another two female deities appear in the catacomb of the Via Latina. In cubiculum O, a wall painting shows Demeter as a fashionable Roman matron. "With her right hand she sprinkles grain from a sheaf; in her left she bears aloft the flaming torch of life."⁴³ In cubiculum E the goddess appears again: "a voluptuous pagan earth goddess clutches to her bosom a serpent, symbol of earth's fecundity. The scene has been associated with the myth of the fertility goddess Persephone."⁴⁴ This scene, like many others, reinforces the link between life and death and recalls that people saw the earth as both womb and tomb. The "flaming torch of life" symbolizes the hope that the way to the other world is illuminated for the deceased by the deity, and the serpent/snake, as we saw above, is the return to earth and new life (via the annual spring shedding of its skin) and life energy.⁴⁵

Significantly, the Via Latina catacomb was a private pagan-Christian catacomb.⁴⁶ This suggests that the families who buried their kin here did not find it contradictory to honor ancient deities, including goddesses or female personifications, along with the Christian god. Perhaps they felt that the goddess better represented fertility and the earth than did Jesus, a male.

The fish is a very complex symbol, carrying several meanings for early Christians but hearkening back much earlier. There appear to be two early Christian uses of the fish symbol, one nautical representing life in an alien environment and the other

³⁹ Idem, 24.

⁴⁰ Idem, 21.

⁴¹ Idem, 9.

⁴² Idem, 24.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sjöö and Mor, *Great Cosmic Mother*, 59.

⁴⁶ Brettman, *Vaults*, 10.

in conjunction with the communal meal: Jesus the Christ is “eaten” in the eucharistic meal. Snyder proposes that the nautical fish “developed *de novo* [and] referred to the alien nature of the environment. When that alienation disappeared, the nautical fish became a Christological symbol with baptismal implications. . . . At the same time a meal with fish . . . became the primary kinship or fellowship meal of the early Church.”⁴⁷

Even the church father Tertullian in his work *de baptismo* appears to connect early, goddess-related symbols to Christian theology: “But we little fish, according to our *ichthun* Jesus Christ, are born in the water, nor are we saved in any other manner than by remaining in the water.”⁴⁸ Tertullian and other early Christian leaders argue that the goddess, one of whose domains was water, the environment of the fish, has been replaced by Jesus the Christ; the goddess’ life-giving waters, essential to all living things, have been replaced by the more esoteric and symbolic waters of baptism, possible only through conversion to the Christian faith. Tertullian’s reference to being saved by water obviously refers to Christian baptism, yet it undoubtedly hearkens back to salvation and life as originating in the waters of the human female and, by extension, the all-powerful Nature goddess who provides the life-giving waters of streams, rivers, lakes and oceans.

A similar transformation has taken place with regard to the fish as a major component of the meal. Fish as a source of food would again, in the Nature-centered, pre-industrial mindset, be a gift from the deity, especially the female deity who rules over all plants and animals. In the Christian context, the deity becomes male; the communal meal is given to devotees by the grace of a male god in the form of Jesus the Christ.

Finally, the overall pastoral setting of much of catacomb art is a compelling illustration of a link between the Orante and the ancient goddess. In a painting in an arcosolium in the Coemeterium Maius in Rome, the Orante figure “stands in surroundings suggesting an earthly Paradise [green trees and grass], flanked by two shepherds, one of them milking one of the flock, the other bringing a stray to the fold, under the watchful eyes of a dog.” The graves are carved directly under this painting.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 25.

⁴⁸ Idem, 24-25.

⁴⁹ Lassus, *Early Christian*, 20.

Several symbols in this painting are suggestive. Milk was a sacred liquid associated with the goddess, a female fluid and vital source of sustenance, without which humans and animals would perish. The dog, often accompanying a goddess such as Hekate, appeared in prehistoric images and later folklore as a harbinger of death, overseer of cyclical time, guardian of life and crucial to the awakening of slumbering vegetation.⁵⁰ The lush surroundings in which this figure is placed further suggest the goddess who oversees all of Nature and causes trees, plants and grass to grow, to the benefit of all.

Conclusion

We can now begin to draw some conclusions about the meaning of the Orante in the catacombs. First, many, if not most, of the symbols used in catacomb art were not purely decorative. Much of it held great meaning for the patron, the deceased, the loved ones, and the community at large. This meaning of course derived from contemporary religious and philosophical belief. Most Romans of this era had at least a rudimentary understanding of mythology and ritual practice, and gods and goddesses were an integral part of their everyday lives.

Second, the context of the catacombs—underground burials in “mother earth”—reflect the prehistoric goddess’ oversight of both the earth and human death, the “womb-tomb” connection. The art of the catacombs illustrates people’s belief that the deceased did not just go to a dark, foreboding place for eternity but was rather reunited with a beneficent deity in a paradise-like setting of peacefulness and abundance.

Third, the posture of the Orante in early Christian art reflects that of earlier, very powerful female deities from the prehistoric period. The hunt goddess, snake goddess and anthropomorphized frog provide intriguing models that may have been available to the artists of the catacombs. These ancient figures represented energy, life and regeneration in female form; the Orante appears to have done the same for the Christians, Jews and pagans using the catacombs.

Fourth, the natural imagery used in so much of the catacomb art, which was also used elsewhere by Jewish and Christian artists, is striking in its resonance with prehistoric goddess symbols. As we have seen, flora and fauna chosen in many

⁵⁰ Gimbutas, *Language*, 197.

catacomb paintings had clear goddess associations millennia earlier. Romans in the early Christian era remained an agricultural, pre-industrial people, so those using the catacombs to inter their loved ones would have seen many of these plants, animals and birds in their daily lives. This is not to say that early Jews and Christians did not take comfort in other symbols, such as the shepherd, menorah, Biblical figures, and the like, but rather that images from the natural world still evoked feelings of comfort that may have been linked to an all-powerful female deity.

Now we can begin to answer the question as to why a female religious figure was used in conjunction with security and peace and the theory that the Orante represents *pietas*. Could it be that *pietas* originally developed as female because of the role the goddess had played in providing for her people? The characters of the Hebrew and Christian faiths who need rescuing—Noah, Susannah, Daniel—are depicted in the guise of the Orante, according to Snyder, because she symbolizes the rescue of threatened Christians by membership in a community of faith, a community protected by a loving god. That this meaning is depicted by an ancient figure of a female with upraised arms which, cross-culturally, represents the powerful, all-embracing love and energy of a female deity must be taken seriously in these Judeo-Christian contexts.

A fifth link between the catacombs and the prehistoric goddess is the sometimes surprising appearance of Graeco-Roman goddesses and female personifications in catacomb art. As noted above, Nike, Tyche, Demeter and Hera/Juno all make appearances in the Roman catacombs, in contexts of peacefulness, repose and abundance. Female deities of this era, even though depicted in literature as more-or-less distinct beings with their own mythologies and personalities (like male deities of the same era), were descended from the prehistoric Nature goddess. Many of them, including Demeter, had dominion over the underworld; others, such as Artemis and Athena, were called upon as city protector deities throughout the Mediterranean area. For Jews and Christians to accept these deities' images in their final resting places strongly suggests that Jews and Christians still looked to a powerful female deity for solace, protection and deliverance.

Finally, we noted above that some scholars connect the Orante with “the place of light and peace.” Light can also be linked to the prehistoric goddess – through her command of the sun, stars and moon.

The above analysis does not mean that Christians or Jews who used the catacombs as burial places necessarily consciously and ritualistically worshipped the same goddess revered in Neolithic times. What it does show is that *rituals* to the goddess that originated in the Neolithic era most likely continued, as did some remnant of a *belief* in this very ancient deity and her power. To entertain this possibility means that we can no longer do “business as usual” in interpreting early Christian symbols and images, including the Orante. We cannot automatically maintain that Christians and Jews in the second through fourth centuries had completely transformed ancient symbols into their own terms, discarding their earlier meaning. Neither can we say that a symbol that appears to be Christian or Jewish had only one meaning for all people who used it.

Early Christians had a choice of symbols to stand forever over the graves of their loved ones. They could easily have chosen the male gender and any number of different hand and body postures to represent peace, solace, deliverance, abundance and everlasting life (which they did in other times and places). Rather, they chose a veiled woman with open eyes and upraised arms. The Orante, like other female personifications and deities of the Graeco-Roman era, is a direct descendant of the prehistoric Nature goddess in both form and function, and her image was depicted because of her beneficent power in the lives of her people.