

Recalling But a Little: A Late Antique Woman's Life from her Epitaph

A monument placed for the dead reveals the nature of the grief of the person left behind, and in epitaphs on sarcophagi of Late Antique Roman Italy, young women are among the most frequently commemorated. A fluted sarcophagus from Umbria, dedicated to a young wife, Pontia, by her grieving husband, holds within it several questions about her life and the social and artistic implications of images within her sarcophagus and epitaph (ICI 41= CIL 11 4631, CLE 1846, ILCV 4812). The sculptural imagery, literary allusions, and poetic language together suggest an understanding of Pontia's time period, religious affiliation, and biography. I will argue that Pontia's epitaph represents a look into the non-senatorial class female role of the late 4th century (c. 359 AD), as well as a glimpse into the use of literature, literacy, and reception of golden-age literature and imagery in a Late Antique and Christian Rome.

While Pontia's epitaph is not found in the *Carmina Latina Epigraphica* and has not been studied before, the texts that will be compared to hers have been found in both the *CLE* and the *ICUR*, allowing for a more comprehensive study of both the material culture and the literary aspects. This proposed paper is indebted to the work presented by MacMullen (1982) in which he explains the ebb and flow of the distinctly Roman impetus to remember loved ones on stone. This paper will focus on comparison with two other epitaphs in particular, namely the epitaphs of Bassa (ICUR 5.14076) and Theodora Afrodite (ICUR 8.20799 = CLE 699), from the same time period as Pontia's (Trout 2011, 2013, 2014). There are several similarities that can be drawn, one of which is the astral imagery used in all three epitaphs. Pontia is described with *sidereis aspirans uultibus olim*, and thus is aspiring towards the stars. In Bassa's epitaph, she is described as *aeterias secuta domos ac regna piorum/... stelliger accepit polus hanc et sidera caeli*. Just like Pontia, Bassa is striving to reach the heavens and the saints (*piorum*). Bassa's husband,

Gaudentius, however, takes it one step further and states that heaven and the stars have already received her into their fold. Similarly, in Theodora Aphrodite's epitaph set up by her husband, Evagrius, she is said to have *fecit ad astra viam*. While Pontia's husband does not suggest that Pontia is in heaven already, as these two husbands clearly do, he does use this common star-image to describe Pontia's aim towards heaven. In this way, Pontia is not alone in her character striving to come into the fold of the saints. This is just one example of the literary analysis that will be done in order to develop an idea of religious values and womanly virtues that made up the identity of the non-senatorial Roman class.

Within this paper, my questions foreground issues of literary sensibility, biographical representation, social values, and religious or spiritual tenants. The issue of individual and collective identity, as developed in how one is chosen to be remembered, will aid in this discussion. I argue that this in-depth analysis of Pontia's epitaph and sarcophagus will enhance appreciation of a range of issues relevant to late Roman society and literature.

Bibliography

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