

ICCI Newsletter

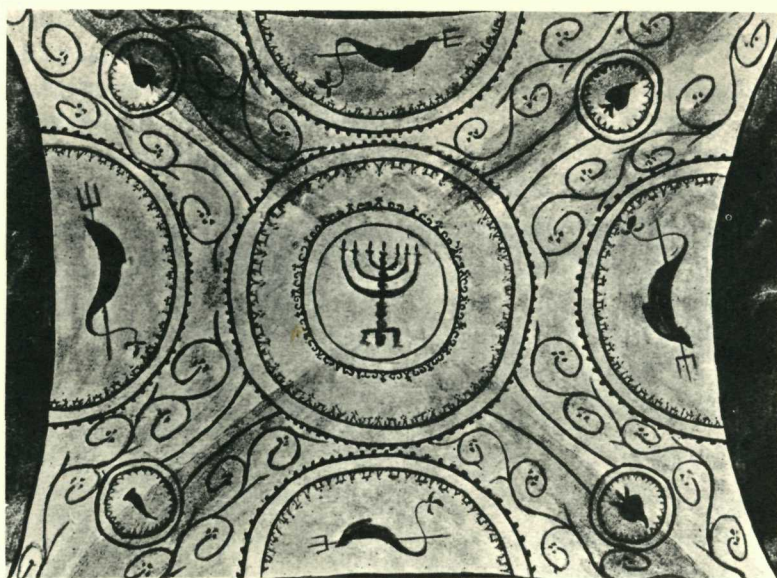
INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CATACOMBS IN ITALY

An Occasional Publication of the Committee

Autumn 1983

A Few Words about ICCI

The International Committee for the Preservation of Catacombs in Italy was organized to preserve and document the rare vestiges of history shared by the Jewish and early Christian religions at the time of the Roman Empire. It will be recalled that the earliest Christians were Jews; only later—owing largely to the influence of Paul—did pagans become Christians without first having adhered to the Jewish faith.



The painted ceiling of a *cubiculum* (funerary chamber) in the upper catacomb of the Jewish cemeteries under the Villa Torlonia, Rome. The seven-branched lampstand, the menorah, closely identified with the Jews since ancient times, takes pride of place in the center of the vault. Stylized grapevines, popular in pagan and Christian funerary art, enclose a shofar (horn) and ethrogs (citrons)—all Jewish ritual objects—as they sprout from the corners of a heavenly arbor. Four dolphins entwined around tridents, also symbols apparent in Christian and pagan cemeterial contexts, are framed in the interspersed painted lunettes.

The Greek language and pictorial symbols of the prevailing Hellenistic culture are frequently found in the catacombs as well as, less frequently, Latin epigraphy and, very rarely, Aramaic and Hebrew. Accordingly, the religious history of the first centuries of the present era is crucial to the understanding of developments in both the Christian and Jewish faiths. The Committee's activities are an organized program for the preservation and enhancement of knowledge about this period as it relates to both faiths and to pagan beliefs.



A rare fragmented bilingual marble epitaph from the collapsed Jewish catacomb of Monteverde, Rome, now in the Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums. "Isidora, daughter of the Archon of the Hebrews."

Here the Aramaic and Greek inscriptions each fill the lacunae in the other.

Isidora (the name means gift of Isis) was the daughter of an archon, a Greek term meaning ruler, here probably denoting an annually elected administrator of the secular affairs of the synagogue. The congregation of the Hebrews was most likely the oldest of the eleven or twelve synagogues known to have existed in Rome up to this time, and it is believed that its members were early émigrés from the Holy Land.

Our Collections

The Committee now possesses a remarkable collection of photographs of pictorial material and inscriptions from catacomb walls as well as related subject matter. The photographs were obtained with the special permission of the Vatican, and many of the items are unique to our collection. The slides are the backbone of the talks thus far given by Mrs. Brettman, and the photographs have constituted the material of exhibits. Many of the photographs have also been used in the preparation of publications.

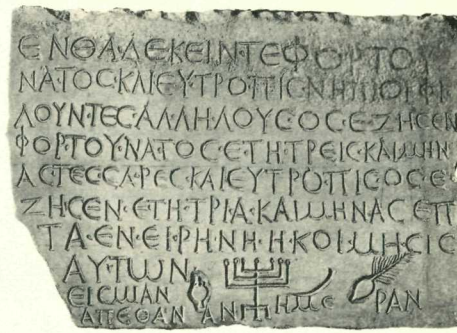


Greek epitaph on marble from the collapsed Jewish catacomb of Monteverde, Rome, now in the Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums. "Here lies Gaudentia, the priestess, aged twenty-four years. In peace her sleep."

Even though the role usually assigned to Gaudentia by historians is that of a member (wife or daughter) of a priestly family, the literal translation is that of priestess, *ierica*. This is not an improbable designation judging by the titles held by women in other Jewish congregations of the Roman Empire, such as mother of the synagogue, *mater synagogae*, and elder, *presbytera*.

A Torah ark and menorah decorate the right side of the stone.

A unique feature of this collection is a group of polymer castings made from impressions of important inscriptions in marble in the stores of the Vatican Museums. They reflect the occupations, origins, civic and family life as well as the hope for the afterlife of the Jews who lived in Rome in the third and fourth centuries.



Marble opisthograph (inscribed on both sides) from the collapsed Jewish Catacomb of Monteverde, Rome, now in the Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican Museums. The stone bears on one side a pagan inscription ("recycling" of tombstones was not an uncommon practice) and on the other the following text in Greek: "Here lie Fortunatus and Eutropis, children who loved each other. Fortunatus lived three years and four months, and Eutropis lived three years and seven months. In peace their sleep. They died on the same day."

Reading from left to right, the cult symbols inscribed on the lower part of the stone are a ritual vessel, a menorah, a shofar and a lulav (a palm branch.)

Allen Swartz, Vice-President of Tra-Con, has experimented with the cast-making process and has developed it to a fine stage of authentic reproduction. These castings, remarkably resembling marble, are very light and durable. They will be shown at our next exhibit. When finances permit, this collection will be enlarged.

Materials used in the construction of the polymer castings have been donated by Tra-Con and General Electric Silicon Division. In addition to them and other donors who have supported our work, we are pleased to announce that a grant was awarded by the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation to ICCI in 1981. Our photographic collection has been greatly augmented through the cooperation of individuals and institutions who have supplied photographs at minimal cost as well as publication privileges. An unexpected bonus

has been the outright gifts of photographic material from museums in East Germany, Egypt, and the U.S.S.R. as well as from scholars in France, Israel, Italy and the U.S.A.

Lectures and Exhibits

In 1979 Estelle Brettman gave illustrated talks on Judaism and Christianity in the Roman Catacombs before such groups as the Members of the Harvard Semitic Museum; the New England Women's Association, Hebrew College, Brookline; and the Combined Adult Education Program of four Newton, Massachusetts synagogues. In 1980 she addressed Radcliffe alumnae at their annual dinner and a Peace Mission group in the Vatican Museums in Rome at the request of Msgr. Mejia, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Relations with the Jews, and an architect of Vatican Council II. He described her talk as "a milestone on the road to ecumenism."

The Committee's first formal exhibition opened at the Boston Public Library on December 11, 1979 and was extended until February 11, 1980 by popular request. The event served as an illuminating record of religious history to Boston viewers. Liam M. Kelly, Assistant Director of the Boston Public Library, called it "one of the most successful programs we have had in the Library in terms of public interest, enthusiasm and reception."

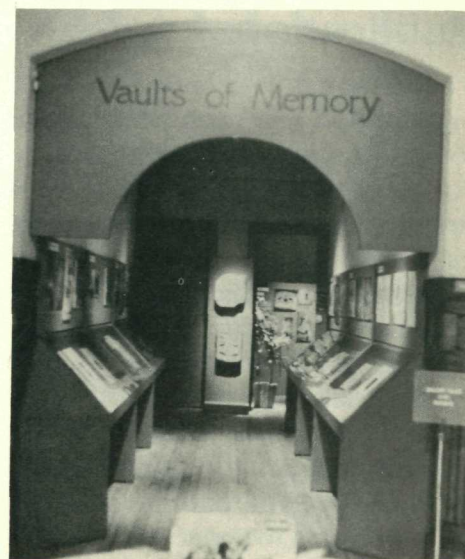
The program consisted of an exhibition organized by Estelle Brettman, Florence Wolsky, Professor Cornelius C. Vermeule III, and Richard Zonghi. The title of the show was *Judaism and Christianity in the Catacombs of Rome*, also the title of Mrs. Brettman's lecture, delivered in

the Library's Rabb Lecture Hall on January 6. The exhibit was enhanced by artifacts from the collections of the Department of Classical Art of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Semitic Museum at Harvard University. The exhibition and lecture were offered at the Library on the occasion of the centennial meetings in Boston of the Archaeological Institute of America.

The event received much favorable attention from such diverse publications as the *Boston Globe*, the *Jewish Advocate*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the Boston Archdiocese newspaper the *Pilot*. The article in the *Pilot* detailed the help given by Giuseppe Cardinal Caprio of the Papal administrative staff and Father Umberto Fasola, currently Rector of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archeology.

In 1981, from September 25

through December 15, the Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archaeology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, was the site of an impressive display of our materials in a show titled *Vaults of Memory: Jewish and Christian Imagery in the Catacombs of Rome*. The evening before the opening of the show Estelle Brettman gave an illustrated lecture in the auditorium of the Museum. Professor Elaine Gazda, Associate Director of the Kelsey Museum, and her staff organized the installation. Earlier, in anticipation of the showing at Kelsey, Professor Gazda had stated, "We at the Kelsey Museum feel certain that *Vaults of Memory* will be among the most significant and broadly appealing exhibitions that the Museum has ever presented." The Kelsey showing was augmented by pertinent objects from the Museum's own excellent collections.



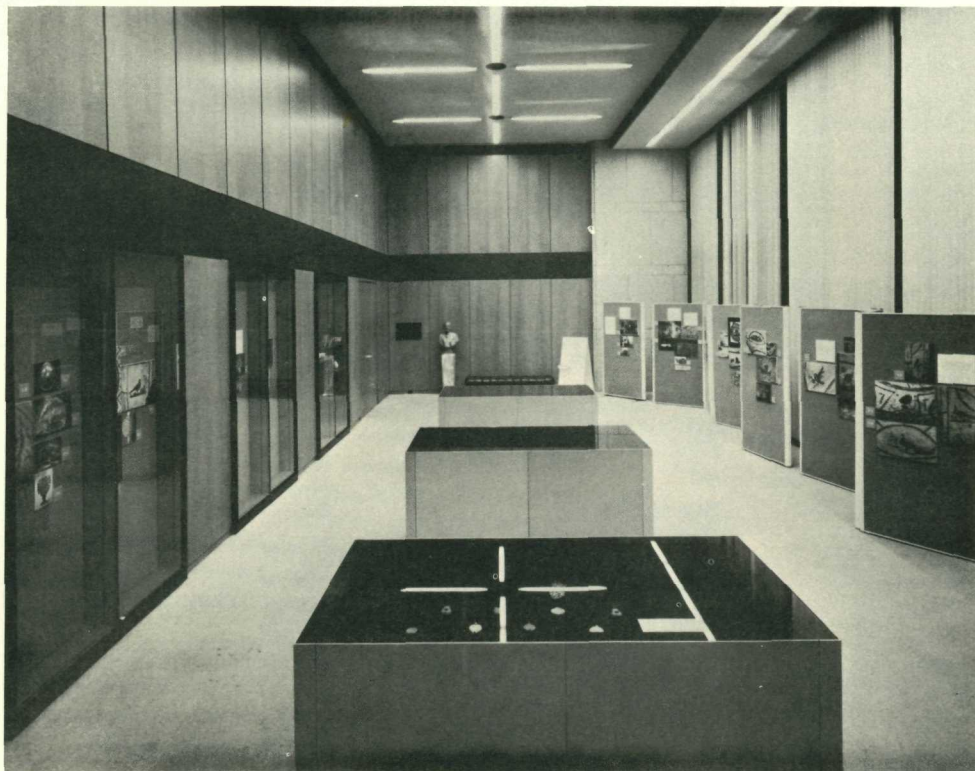
The entrance to the *Vaults of Memory* exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archaeology, the University of Michigan.

Future Exhibits

An important aftermath to the successful exhibition and lecture at the Kelsey Museum were the requests for similar events. They were received from institutions in this country and as far away as Rome, England, Germany, and Israel. The main hindrance to meeting these requests is financial. In the face of such expressed interest, many possibilities are being studied. At the moment two exhibit/lectures are scheduled:

Autumn 1983 for the Countway Associates, at their meeting in the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School (temporarily scheduled).

April 12, 1984, at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. The Academy has graciously offered to extend an invitation to those persons who are interested in attending. If you wish to be included in the list of guests, please let us know promptly. Replies should be addressed to: Sarah Sheldon, Secretary-Clerk, International Committee for the Preservation of Catacombs in Italy, 61 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02108. At the appropriate time you will hear directly from the Academy.



View of the exhibition in the Boston Room of the Boston Public Library.

Publications

Young though it is, our organization will soon become a source of scholarly publications. For some time now Estelle Brettman has been working on the manuscript of a profusely illustrated book that may well become a significant resource in the area and period of our interest. Selecting the best illustrations and developing the scholarly commentary to go with them has been an enormous task, but the end is in sight. Requests for this book have already been received from institutions and individuals here and abroad as a result of the Kelsey exhibition and the notice which appeared in issues of *Archaeology*.

The brochure prepared for the

exhibit and lecture at the Kelsey Museum in Michigan combined brief commentary and selected illustrations to define the purpose of the occasion. Copies of this brochure are still available.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way . . .

It seems that the International Committee for the Preservation of the Catacombs in Italy now has been officially recognized by the post office in Rome. It all started following a request to Cairo for photographic material. In answer to the request, the Director of the Cairo Museum sent two important photos with the sole address:

Estelle S. Brettman
International Committee for the Preservation of Catacombs in Italy

Instead of ending up in the Tiber River—the rumored place for “dead” letters—the packet of photos was forwarded by a keen official of the Italian postal system who took pains to label the packet “NON PIEGARE (contiene fotografie)”—DO NOT FOLD, photos. But more than that, with great perspicacity, the official forwarded the packet to Rome! Once there, it was saved by another postal sleuth who tracked down the addressee’s exact number and street.

New respect is surely due the Italian mail system for this happily resolved James Bond-ian caper.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CATACOMBS IN ITALY

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