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# 2012 NAPS Presidential Address

## Fecit ad astra viam: *Daughters, Wives, and the Metrical Epitaphs of Late Ancient Rome*

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The following essay argues that the verse epitaphs of late ancient Rome offer unique perspectives on the social, religious, and intellectual milieu of Christianity in the late antique city. The allusive strategies and poetic metaphors of many of these texts index the otherwise largely undocumented social aspirations and religious ideals of middling segments of Roman society. More particularly, fourth- and fifth-century gender parity in funerary commemoration coupled with the disproportionate representation of young women in verse epitaphs reflects not only the nuclear family's emergence as society's paramount affective unit but also the premium placed by non-elite as well as elite families on the public display of filial and uxorial *pudicitia* and *castitas*. Although the representational strategies of male householders foregrounded traditional themes of female sexual modesty, nevertheless the *jeu d'esprit* and unguarded idiosyncrasies of these texts subtly project the subjectivity and social agency of commemorands as well as commemorators.

### THEODORA AND HER EPITAPH

Everything we know about Theodora Afrodite we owe to her tombstone.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has even riffled through the thousands of funerary inscriptions known from the cemeteries of fourth- and fifth-century Rome will find some of the information recorded on Theodora's commonplace (Fig. 1): a single name; an age at death—here twenty-one years, seven months, and

1. CLE 669 = ICUR 8.20799. The layout of the text given below replicates that on the stone (as at ICUR 8.20799); the extant portion of the stone (in bold typeface) is now immured at S. Agnese f.l.m. (Fig. 1). Abbreviations are as follows: lhm = M. lhm,

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Theodora qu(a)e vixit annos XXI M VII  
 D XXIII in pace est bisomu  
 Amplificam sequitur vitam dum casta Afrodite fecit ad astr  
 a viam Christi modo caudet in aula restitit haec mundo  
 semper caelestia quaerens optima servatrix legis fideique  
 magistra de<di>dit egregiam sanctis per secula mentem inde per eximios  
 paradisi  
 regnat odores tempore continuo vernant ubi gramina rivis  
 expectatque deum superas quo surcat ad auras hoc posuit corpus tumulo  
 mortalia linquens fundavitoue locum coniunx Evacrius instans  
 dep(osita) die . . .  
 Antonio et Syacrio cons(ulibu)s

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twenty-three days, at which point in her cosmic journey Theodora was laid to (temporary) rest in a tomb-for-two, a *bisomum*, in the suburban *coemeterium* of S. Agnese.<sup>2</sup> As often in Christian epitaphs, the subscription announces the day and year of burial, though in this case the former is no longer preserved: Theodora died sometime during the consular year of (Claudius) Antonius and (Afranius) Syagrius, by our reckoning 382 c.e., when Gratian was emperor in Milan and Damasus bishop of Rome.<sup>3</sup> The tombstones of late ancient Romans frequently recorded such information—notably age at and date of death—and for that reason the city’s Christian epitaphs have often been ransacked by historians and

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*Damasi Epigrammata* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1895); *CLE* = F. Buecheler, *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*, vols. 1–2 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1895–1897) and E. Lommatzsch, *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*, vol. 3: *Supplementum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1926), all three reprinted 1964; *ILCV* = E. Diehl, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, vols. 1–3 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1925–1931), second edition revised by J. Moreau (Berlin: Weidmann, 1961) with J. Moreau and H. I. Marrou, *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, vol. 4: *Supplementum* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1967); Ferrua = A. Ferrua, *Epigrammata Damasi* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1942); *ICUR* = *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae*, vols. 1 (1922) to 10 (1992), variously edited and published by the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology.

2. On the coemeterium begin with P. M. Barbini, “S. Agnetis basilica, coemeterium,” in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae: Suburbium*, ed. A. La Regina (Rome: Quasar, 2001), 1:33–36. On Theodora, as well as the cemetery, see also D. Trout, “‘Being Female’: Verse Commemoration at the *Coemeterium S. Agnetis* (Via Nomentana),” in *Being Christian in Late Antiquity: A Festschrift for Gillian Clark*, ed. C. Harrison, I. Sandwell, and C. Humfress (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

3. R. S. Bagnall, A. Cameron, S. R. Schwartz, and K. A. Worp, *Consuls of the Later Roman Empire* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), 298–99.

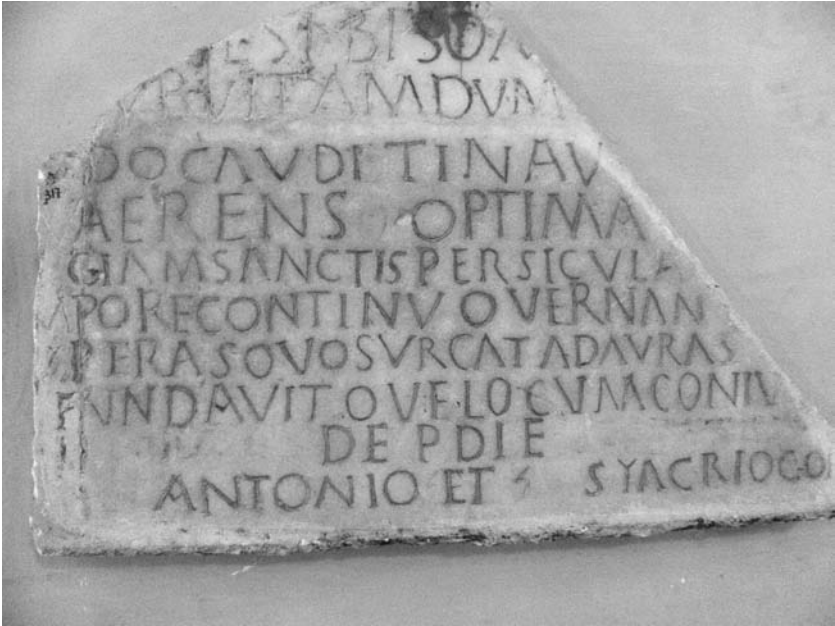


Figure 1. Preserved fragment of the epitaph of Theodora Afrodite (S. Agnese f.l.m.). Photo: Author.

demographers determined to pin down the median age of the commemorated dead or to plot out the high seasons of mortality in ancient Rome.

But Theodora's epitaph is also a special case. For the text that lies between her plaque's superscription and subscription was composed in dactylic hexameters, making it one of a small subset of Roman Christian epitaphs that honored the deceased in verse. Though numbering only some 350 and accounting for a mere one percent of late ancient Rome's surviving epitaphs, the city's *carmina epigraphica Christiana* stand out as splashes of color in an otherwise "swirling mass of grey and black and white."<sup>4</sup>

4. M. Jagger and K. Richards, "Salt of the Earth," *Beggars Banquet* (London/Decca, 1968): a propulsive paean (of sorts) to the "hard working people . . . the uncounted heads." Richards as quoted in *According to the Rolling Stones*, ed. D. Loewenstein and P. Dodd (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2003), 119, noted that "the working-class lyrics came from Mick." Perhaps not surprisingly their ambiguities required readjustment on at least two emotionally and politically charged occasions: by Jagger and Richards for "The Concert for New York City," 20 October 2001 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TW-sJqO5qDM>) and by Joan Baez on 11 November 2011 at Foley Square serenading the Occupy Movement (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBDmEA6DmUE0>).

Their literary textures encourage close reading; their poignant expressions of sorrow and joy provoke sympathy; they are plaintive and triumphal, brash and seductive—and above all they offer tantalizing glimpses of life stories seldom on display in the terser and more formulaic prose epitaphs of the age. Yet, as literary texts as well as documents of religious and social history, they remain understudied. Asking what Rome's *carmina epigraphica* can tell us about “daughters and wives” in the late ancient city, then, is merely one way of pushing these talkative texts into our own conversations about religion and identity in late antiquity. Moreover, if we entertain any hope at all of approaching late ancient Christianity as a “lived religion,” it is almost exclusively in the verses of these epitaphs that we will find pathways to the experience of Theodora and similar young women whose lives are otherwise undocumented.

Yet, no one reading this essay needs to be reminded how very difficult it is to recover “the experience of being female” from the sources left to us by late antiquity. Indeed, the challenges to retrieval thrown up by the lapidary texts considered below are hardly less stark than those issued, for example, by Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*: even in late ancient Rome's metrical epitaphs the “lady” too easily “vanishes.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to seek her “traces” in these poetic testimonials, not least among them the fact that so many of these texts draw us away from the aristocratic salons that patronized and consumed exegetical treatises or conversed through the finely wrought biographies of a Macrina or a Melania,<sup>6</sup> leading us on to less well charted social terrain. In verses like those composed for Theodora's tomb we might then hope to catch sight of Peter Brown's adventurous laity flying free of the clergy in an “unchurched” Christianity or encounter some of those “second church” Christians recently tracked down by Ramsey MacMullen in many of the same cemeteries that became home to these epigraphic monuments.<sup>7</sup> The metrical epitaphs of late ancient Rome, that is, invite us not only to walk the boundary between the literary and religious imaginations but also to look for the lives of women among the “faceless crowds” of Rome's busy

5. E. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the ‘Linguistic Turn,’” *Church History* 67 (1998): 1–31.

6. For one such conversation see the recent contribution of E. Muehlberger, “Salvage: Macrina and the Christian Project of Cultural Reclamation,” *Church History* 81 (2012): 173–97.

7. P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 49–50; R. MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 69–89.

streets and suburban shrines—measuring the difference Christianity made in that nearly invisible, yet complex and resilient “world beneath the rich” that was the heart (and future) of the fourth-century Roman church.<sup>8</sup> As tentative steps toward such ends, we can begin by briefly assessing the literary pretensions of Christian Rome’s metrical epitaphs and situating them within the broader commemorative patterns of the ancient city before grappling more directly with that ever pesky issue—constitution of the “female subject.”

### THEODORA, BASSA, AND THE PRETENSIONS OF FUNERARY POETRY

If the willful turn of Theodora’s epitaph to high prestige hexameters makes her tombstone atypical among the tens of thousands of Christian funerary inscriptions, her memorial nevertheless shares many features with the subset of metrical funerary monuments to which it belongs. Although it was once popular to lament the vacuity of verse inscriptions and blame their perceived shortcomings on pedestrian workshop manuals and the window-shopping of sub-literate patrons, recent scholarship more willingly acknowledges both the originality of many metrical epitaphs and their complicity with the reinvigorated strategies of Late Latin poetics.<sup>9</sup>

As it sits on the stone, and was presented above, Theodora’s epitaph disguises its genealogy. But its lines rearranged (and given a few orthographic adjustments) announce its pedigree: ten deft hexameters, adorned with a clever acrostic that sets out Theodora’s *signum*, Afrodite, as well as her claim to social respectability: *H(onest) F(emina)*:<sup>10</sup>

8. Faceless crowd: Jagger and Richards, “Salt of the Earth.” On the middling social profile of the fourth-century church see Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 31–52, quote 39.

9. For example, C. Hamdoune, *Vie, mort et poésie dans l’Afrique romaine d’après un choix de Carmina Latina Epigraphica* (Brussels: Édition Latomus, 2011), 9, on originality; D. Pikhaus, “La poésie épigraphique latine: Quelques points de vue nouveaux,” in *Hommages à Jozef Veremans*, ed. F. Decreus and C. Deroux (Brussels: Latomus, 1986), 228–37 and J. Meyers, “L’influence de la poésie classique dans les *Carmina epigraphica* funéraires d’Afrique du Nord,” in Hamdoune, *Vie, mort et poésie*, 307–10, for arguments that the empire’s *carmina epigraphica* show signs of their authors’ reading and not recourse to stonemasons’ manuals.

10. See Ferrua at *ICUR* 8.20799 for the expansion. On acrostics, G. Sanders, “L’au-delà et les acrostiches des *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*,” in *Lapides memores. Païens et chrétiens face à la mort: Le témoignage de l’épigraphie funéraire latine*, ed. A. Donati, D. Pikhaus, and M. van Uytanghe (Faenza: Fratelli Lega, 1991), 183–205. All translations are by the author.

A mplificam sequitur vitam dum casta Afrodite,  
 F ecit ad astrla viam; Christi modo gaudet in aula.  
 R estitit haec mundo | semper caelestia quaerens.  
 O ptima servatrix legis fideique | magistra  
 D e<di>dit egregiam sanctis per secula mentem.  
 I nde per eximios paradisi | regnat odores,  
 T empore continuo vernant ubi gramina rivis, |  
 E xpectatque deum superas quo surgat ad auras.  
 H oc posuit corpus tumulo | mortalia linquens,  
 F undavitque locum coniunx Evagrius instans.

During the time that chaste Aphrodite pursued a splendid life,  
 she paved a pathway to the stars; now she rejoices in the palace of Christ.  
 She stood firm against the world, ever seeking heavenly things.  
 An excellent guardian of the law and teacher of faith,  
 she surrendered her noble mind to the saints through the ages.  
 Thus she reigns amid the choice fragrances of paradise,  
 where the grasses ever bloom along the streams,  
 and she awaits god so that she may rise up to the lofty breezes.  
 Leaving her mortal remains behind, she set her body in this tomb,  
 and her husband, Evagrius, assiduously attending, secured the place.

The poem's dexterous hexameters and dense texture announced its aspirations to be read as *avant garde* verse. Our own approach must pass through recent reevaluations that have done so much to bolster appreciation of the digressive, ecphrastic, and allusive techniques of such premier poets of the age as Ausonius, Prudentius, and Paulinus of Nola. Like their verses, Theodora's epitaph delights in wordplay (*casta Afrodite*), alliteration (*superas quo surgat ad auras*), chiasmic arrangement (*servatrix legis fideique magistra*)—and especially *enargeia* and allusion. Theodora's husband Evagrius, as poet or patron, memorialized her in lines that blended classical images of astral apotheosis with the soothing fragrances and refreshing sights of the rural *locus amoenus*. The clausula *gramina rivis*, for example, has precedent in both Vergil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues*,<sup>11</sup> while the phrase *ad astra* reverberates throughout Augustan and early imperial verse. In this triumphal context many alert readers are likely to have recalled above all Apollo's luminous praise of Iulus in the *Aeneid*: "A blessing on your new *virtus*, young man, that's how you get to the stars!"

11. E.g., Ver. *Ecl.* 10.29–30: nec lacrimis crudelis Amor nec gramina rivis / . . . saturantur (part of Pan's rebuttal to Gallus's love sickness); *Geo.* 4.19: adsint et tenuis fugiens per gramina rivus (describing the ideal location for establishing bee hives).

(*sic itur ad astra*).<sup>12</sup> Theodora's electric *fecit ad astra viam*, however, is apparently all hers.

But the line that expresses anticipation of Theodora's corporeal ascension—*Expectatque deum superas quo surcat ad auras* (and she awaits god so that she may rise up to the lofty breezes)—has a particularly intriguing and telling set of associations. Something similar to the second hemistich had appeared twenty-five years earlier inscribed on the base of the towering Egyptian obelisk that in the mid-350s the emperor Constantius II had installed on the *spina* of the Circus Maximus: that enormous monolith, the base's metrical inscription proclaimed, had long lain prostrate on the ground “because none could believe that a monument (*opus*) of such great mass could rise into the upper breezes (*superas consugere in auras*).”<sup>13</sup> But both Constantius's imperial boast and Theodora's Christian hope rested on firm Virgilian foundations. Twice Vergil had used similar phrasing: once in the *Georgics* (4.486) to describe Orpheus's bungled attempt to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld—“and Eurydice regained was nearing the upper air (*superas veniebat ad auras*)”;<sup>14</sup> and again in book six of the *Aeneid*, where it appears as part of the Sibyl's cautionary advice to Aeneas—“but to recall one's steps and pass out to the upper air (*superasque evadere ad auras*), this is the task, this the toil.”<sup>15</sup> Constantius had defied public opinion and raised his gigantic obelisk, with a self-satisfied nod, it seems, to his epic-size *opus* and *labor*. The difficulty of returning from the realm of the dead, which was of course Vergil's point at *Aeneid* 6.128–29, was another matter entirely. Theodora's confident vision of her *bodily* resurrection—*superas quo surgat ad auras*—was, therefore, at once an embrace of Vergil's language and a rejection of his Sibyl's pessimism. Any contemporary reader sensitive to Theodora's inter-texts—and capable of generating “meaning” from the web of associations her epitaph

12. *Aen.* 9.641: *macte nova virtute, puer, sic itur ad astra.*

13. The history of the obelisk is recorded by Ammianus at 16.10.17; 17.4.1; and 17.4.12ff. See further C. D'Onofrio, *Gli obelischi di Roma* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1967), 160–72; J.-C. Grenier, “Obeliscus Constantii: Circus Maximus,” in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*, ed. E. M. Steinby (Rome: Quasar, 1996), 3:356–57.

14. *Geo.* 4.486: *redditaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras.* A preposition followed by *auras* ends a substantial number of Vergilian lines; see H. H. Warwick, *A Vergil Concordance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 97.

15. *Aen.* 6.128–29: *sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est.* Further comparanda at R. P. Hoogma, *Der Einfluss Vergils auf die Carmina Latina Epigraphica* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1959), 279 and J.-M. Lassère, *Manuel d'épigraphie romaine*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Picard, 2011), 2:534.



evoked—must have appreciated the bravura with which she trumped both Orpheus and the Sibyl. In any case, it is here crucial to recognize that such ways of reading and writing, even if we have often failed to notice them in the verses inscribed on late Roman tombs, were fully consonant with the spirit of the age.<sup>16</sup>

Roughly contemporary with the epitaph of Theodora, and equally enticing, is the memorial of another wife who died young—not quite twenty-three—and whom, like Theodora, we know only through the poem that preserves an image of her life.<sup>17</sup> Bassa's twenty hexameters (arranged in two columns) occupy half of the front of her sculpted sarcophagus, where they stand in for the standard scenes that would otherwise have made her monument just another representative of the Bethesda type.<sup>18</sup> There are thirteen other surviving Bethesda sarcophagi; all display the same sequence of images from left to right. They begin with Christ healing a group of blind men and continue, to the right, with a second small group scene in which Christ touches the head of a kneeling woman. In the central section Christ has turned to face a prominent column on whose other side, in the central panel, is depicted the healing of the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda. The figural imagery of Bassa's sarcophagus, however, never arrived there: by design (and not retro-fitting) her epitaph overwrote the type's eponymous central scene as well as the two scenes that typically followed it (reading to the right)—Zacchaeus perched in the sycamore tree and Christ's final entry into Jerusalem to the waving of palm fronds.

Such blatant manipulation of a standard sarcophagus type must have prodded viewers towards especially careful reading of the verbal text inscribed in a space where the type's figural images regularly told their New Testament tale. In her commemorative verses, readers discovered a Bassa hardly less bold than the patron and workshop that commissioned and carved her unique memorial. The poem's acrostic, again an index of ambition, announced the names of both commemorand and commemorator: *Bassae suae Gaudentius* (Gaudentius to his Bassa). The epitaph's

16. For a recent and concise treatment of the allusive, figural, and visual ploys of late Latin poetry see M. Malamud, *The Origin of Sin: An English translation of the Hamartigenia* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 56–65.

17. ICUR 5.14076, whose subscription reads *dep(osita) pr(idie) kal(endas) . . . / quae vix(it) ann(os) XXII m(enses) VII*.

18. I draw here on D. Trout, "Borrowed Verse and Broken Narrative: Agency, Identity, and the (Bethesda) Sarcophagus of Bassa," in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. J. Elsner and J. Huskinson (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 337–58, with images and full bibliography.

first column recounted Bassa's dis-corporation and vividly portrayed her at home amid "star-bearing heaven" and "the stars of the sky":

B assa caret membris vivens per saecula Xpo  
 A eterias secuta domos ac regna piorum  
 S olvere corporeos meruit pulcerrima nodos;  
 S telliger accepit polus hanc et sidera caeli  
 A etatisq(ue) citae properans transcendere cursus  
 E xuvias posuit fragiles corpusq(ue) s[epu]lcro;  
 S edula iudicio credens venerabilis al[t]i  
 V enturumq(ue) deum puro [cum] corde secuta  
 A mplificae sumpsit [sibi gau]dia premia lucis  
 E ximium [. . . . . umq]ue [de]corem.

Bassa is free of her limbs, living through the ages in Christ.  
 Pursuing an ethereal home and the kingdoms of the pious,  
 most beautiful, she deserved to loose the knots of the flesh.  
 Star-bearing heaven and the stars of the sky have received her  
 and hastening to move through the course of swift passing life, 5  
 she has placed her fragile husk and body in the tomb.  
 Worthy of respect, steadfastly trusting in the judgment of the high God,  
 and attending with pure heart the God who will come,  
 she has taken to herself the pleasures (and) rewards of the boundless light  
 distinguished . . . . . and beautiful. 10

In the second column, with an alluring bit of ventriloquism, Bassa consoled the husband she (temporarily) left behind, forecasting (perhaps in muted erotic undertones) their eventual reunion.

G audenti tuam consortem suspice laetus  
 A eria nunc sede nitens qu[ae] . . .  
 V i potiore valens expromit ta[llia ve]rbis:  
 D ul[c]is in aeternum mihi met iun[tissi]me coniux  
 E x[c]ute iam lacrimas, placuit bona [r]egia caeli;  
 N ec lugere decet terras quia casta reliqu[i];  
 T angere sinceras didici praestantior a[u]ras;  
 I n laqueis mortis poteram rema[nere su]perstes;  
 V ita satis melior nostros hi[c] . . . . . ]actus;  
 S ospes eris fateor v[enies et ad o]scula Bassae.<sup>19</sup>

Gaudentius, happily look up at your wife,  
 who shining brightly now in her lofty abode . . .  
 prevailing with renewed strength, utters such things in words:  
 "Sweet husband, most closely bound to me forever,  
 drive off your tears, the noble court of heaven is pleasant, 5

19. Following Ferrua's neat suggestion (*ICUR* 5.14076) for filling the lacuna.

and it is not fitting to weep because I, a virtuous woman, have abandoned earth;

More pre-eminent I have learned how to take hold of the pure upper air;  
in the snares of death I was able to remain alive;

A much better life . . .

You will be saved, I confess, and will come to Bassa's kisses.

Bassa's sarcophagus has significant implications for our appreciation of sub-elite social agency in late ancient Rome but can also contribute a further element to our sense of the aspirations of these metrical epitaphs. The piece delights in figures, tropes, and thoughtful word arrangement—and it echoes with phrases drawn from earlier poets. Bassa's third line—*stelliger accepit polus hanc et sidera caeli*—conflates Statius and Vergil: in his *Thebaid* (12.565) the former had glossed the heavens with *stelligeri iubar omne poli* (“all the splendor of the star-bearing pole”); while *sidera caeli* appears three times in Vergil's works, as, for example, early in the *Aeneid* (1.259) where it denotes the apotheosis of Aeneas: *feres ad sidera caeli*.<sup>20</sup> But other voices would have been audible in Bassa's epitaph as well: *regia caeli*, too, had Vergilian roots, serving, for example (*Aen.* 7.210), to represent the divinized hero Dardanus enthroned “in the golden palace of starry heaven (*aurea nunc solio stellantis regia caeli*).” But much more recently, Damasus had deployed the same *regia caeli* in five different epigrams to describe the heavenly halls enjoyed by the Roman martyrs.<sup>21</sup> Most telling, however, is Bassa's *aeterias secuta domos ac regna piorum* (“pursuing an ethereal home and the kingdoms of the pious”), which has been lifted nearly wholesale (but hardly surreptitiously) from a Damasan *elogium* for the martyrs Felicissimus and Agapitus that the bishop had installed in the very same catacomb that housed Bassa's tomb, where it was inscribed in elegant Filocalian script on a large marble tablet: *aetherias petiere domos regnaque piorum* (“they sought out an ethereal home and the kingdoms of the pious”).<sup>22</sup> In short, in Bassa's epitaph the crisscrossing of Vergilian and Damasan phrases and the evocation of classical and Christian intertexts encouraged sophisticated reading while also claiming for Bassa the same celestial immortality that other poets had offered Rome's legendary founders as well as its Christian martyrs.

Such forthright complicity with the literary spirit of an age that valued communion with anterior (and contemporary) texts suggests that aspirations for public recognition—as much as grief and hope—motivated the

20. See also *Geo.* 2.1 and 4.58.

21. Damasus at Ferrua 11.11, 16.3, 25.2, 39.4, and 47.3.

22. Damasus at Ferrua 25.5.

poets or patrons of funerary verse. As investments of cultural as well as financial capital, that is, the memorials of Theodora and Bassa suggest that “authorship” served more than just Rome’s senatorial elite as a form of self-presentation and social agency.<sup>23</sup> Reading and writing poetry were not simply the dilettantish pastimes of the city’s superrich, for inscribed verse was a medium of action and public posturing across a social spectrum that, in addition to including such eminent senators as Junius Bassus and Petronius Probus,<sup>24</sup> embraced Christians of middling means, representatives of sub-elite ranks whose poetic sensibilities (and life stories) would be unknown without the preservation of these epitaphs. It is in this border zone between literary and social history, where the ghosts still flicker, that we must pursue the daughters and wives of this paper’s subtitle.

### COMMEMORATIVE CHOICES

Bassa and Theodora both died young and were commemorated in verse by surviving husbands. In that respect, it seems, both women were “typical” in a way that has significant consequences for our understanding of the social and religious history of Christian Rome. How so? We can begin to frame an answer with data from the cemeteries of Praetextatus and S. Agnese. At the former where Bassa was interred, seven metrical epitaphs are well enough preserved to allow conclusions about the sex and age of the commemorands: five commemorate males, while only the fifteen-year-old [Quinti]lla joins Bassa.<sup>25</sup> At S. Agnese, however, where Theodora was buried, the sample is larger and the ratio reversed. Here, along the Via Nomentana, fourteen legible *carmina* commemorate fifteen individuals, since one stone (*ICUR* 8.20819) memorialized a brother and sister together. In this sample, female commemorands outnumber males two to one.<sup>26</sup> Before pursuing those leads, however, some background facts and figures.

23. For a place to start see W. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

24. A. Cameron, “The Funeral of Junius Bassus,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 139 (2002), 288–92; D. Trout, “The Verse Epitaph(s) of Petronius Probus: Competitive Commemoration in Late-Fourth-Century Rome,” *New England Classical Journal* 28 (2001): 157–76.

25. Male commemorands: *ICUR* 5.13954, 14036, 14201, 14472, 14969. Female commemorands: *ICUR* 5.14076 (Bassa), 14759 ([Quinti]lla).

26. The fifteen individuals commemorated in the fourteen epitaphs break down as follows: four certain males and one likely; eight certain females and two likely. The ratio, therefore, is five males to ten females; for the texts see Trout, “Being Female,” Appendix.

How many *carmina epigraphica* survive from the Roman world? How do they fit into the larger Latin epigraphic dossier? And what are some of the “gendered features” of both the general dossier and its metrical sub-set? The verse epitaphs of Theodora and Bassa belong to a body of metrical Latin inscriptions that numbers more than 4100 texts spread out over nearly a millennium—from the third century B.C.E. to the seventh century C.E.<sup>27</sup> Many are fragmentary and there is at this time no single modern critical edition of the entire *corpus*—an obstacle that makes both quantitative and qualitative study of the *carmina* challenging.<sup>28</sup> This body of more than 4100 inscriptions is, however, a very small sub-set of the rather more than 250,000 known Latin inscriptions of all kinds. The relative rarity of verse epitaphs, less than two percent of the total, should reflect both their greater cost and the stiffer demands they made of patrons as well as stonecutters—but that is not the only (or even primary) factor informing the choice to commemorate in verse—as the patterns of geographic distribution, for example, suggest.

Rome, home to Bassa and Theodora and some 1200 Latin metrical inscriptions, accounts for more than a quarter of the extant Latin *carmina epigraphica*. Add Italy and the peninsula’s claim rises to sixty percent of the total, with the provinces of Roman Africa coming in a distant second: roughly 600 texts and fifteen percent of the total.<sup>29</sup> The old heartland of the empire, that is, dominated well into later antiquity—and Christians there became eager epigraphic versifiers. Of Rome’s nearly 1200 metrical inscriptions some 425 (thirty-six percent) can be designated “Christian.”<sup>30</sup> But as the city and the cemeteries of late ancient Rome preserve a total of more than 31,000 Christian Latin inscriptions, the vast majority of which are epitaphs, these 425 metrical texts represent merely 1.4% of the city’s

27. W. Schetter, “Poésie épigraphique,” in *Nouvelle histoire de la littérature latin 5: Restauration et renouveau 284–374*, ed. R. Herzog (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), 259, put the figure at 4135. P. Cugusi, “‘Doppioni’ e ‘ritornelli’ epigrafici,” *Bollettino di Studi Latini* 33 (2003), 449, suggested 4500. All numbers here and below should be considered approximate as well as conservative.

28. On the pressing need: P. Cugusi, “Per una nuova edizione dei *carmina latina epigraphica*: Qualche osservazione metodologica,” *Epigraphica* 65 (2003): 197–213.

29. D. Pikhaus, “La poésie épigraphique latine,” 229: 60% Italy and 40% the remaining provinces (with North Africa first among them at 600 texts and 15% of the total); Schetter, “Poésie épigraphique,” 259, counts about 1165 from Rome, 1020 from the rest of Italy, and 520 from North Africa.

30. C. Carletti, “‘Un mondo nuovo’: Epigrafia funeraria dei cristiani a Roma in età postcostantiniana,” *Vetera Christianorum* 35 (1998): 61, estimates the number of Christian metrical epitaphs to be about 350. At least another seventy-five non-funerary inscriptions can be added to these.

Christian inscriptions.<sup>31</sup> Even these 31,000 inscriptions, however—the elephant’s tail in respect to the city’s mortality rate over three centuries—clearly index cultural not demographic phenomena—by, for example, severely underrepresenting infant mortality. One obvious conclusion follows: it is unwise, for this and other reasons that have to do with the nature of the epigraphic habit,<sup>32</sup> to generalize about late Roman social or demographic norms solely on the basis of 425 verse inscriptions.

And yet, the choice to memorialize in verse rather than prose—to expend resources on a “deluxe” epitaph—signals an act of social will worth acknowledging in “qualitative” terms. Once so acknowledged other questions follow. Do metrical epitaphs memorialize certain kinds of individuals more often than others, say men more often than women or the young more frequently than the aged? Do late ancient patterns conform to or diverge from earlier imperial ones? The answers to such questions (still tentative here) matter because they offer an index of the perceived social value of commemorating some individuals (and not others). Epigraphic commemoration, that is, is a product of choice and habit—and one of the most significant habits being formed in the fourth century tended, it seems, towards gender parity in epitaphic commemoration.

### *Gender Parity in the Late Ancient Epigraphic Corpus*

The legible Christian metrical epitaphs from the Roman cemeteries of Praetextatus and S. Agnese mentioned earlier give us a ratio of ten male commemorands to twelve female commemorands. If we add to these the six males and three females honored by metrical epitaphs at the cemetery of S. Callisto on the Via Appia,<sup>33</sup> for example, the totals poise at sixteen males and fifteen females, a rough balance that persists as we add data from the city’s other cemeteries. Across the Mediterranean, in Roman North Africa, gender parity appears as a feature of late ancient metrical commemoration as well. The inventory of North African *carmina epigraphica*

31. C. Carletti, *Epigrafia dei cristiani in occidente dal III al VII secolo: Ideologia e prassi* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2008), 49, reckons the number of Christian Inscriptions at Rome to be 35,000 (of which 94% are funerary). Approximately 3800 of the 35,000, however, are Greek.

32. Still fundamental is R. MacMullen, “The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire,” *AJP* 103 (1982): 233–46. For applications see E. A. Meyer, “Explaining the Epigraphic Pattern in the Roman Empire: the Evidence of Epitaphs,” *JRS* 80 (1990): 74–96; G. Woolf, “Monumental Writing and the Expansion of Roman Society in the Early Roman Empire,” *JRS* 86 (1996): 22–39.

33. Male commemorands: *ICUR* 4.10129, 10228, 10888, 11102, 11328, and 11435. Female commemorands: *ICUR* 4.10183 (Severa, on whom see further below), 11225, and 11444.

published by Dorothy Pikhhaus in 1994 includes seventy-eight epitaphs that she identified as Christian: twenty-eight of these commemorated males, twenty-six commemorated females, and twenty-seven are too poorly preserved to allow secure assignment.<sup>34</sup> Is this relative parity reflected in the late ancient epitaphic habit overall (that is, in prose as well as metrical epitaphs)? In fact, two thorough studies of the Roman evidence point to gender balance in that extensive *corpus*. The data subsets of Henric Nordberg's pioneering 1963 "bio-metrical" study of some 11,000 Latin Christian inscriptions from Rome consistently display near gender equality, with only a very slight edge to male commemorands.<sup>35</sup> The same picture emerges from a different Roman data set compiled more recently by Brent Shaw for the purpose of assessing seasonal mortality patterns: in a group of 3,733 Christian inscriptions from the city of Rome that recorded both the date of death and the gender of the deceased the proportion of males to females was fifty-one to forty-nine percent.<sup>36</sup>

In short, a variety of subsets of Rome's more than 31,000 Christian epitaphs consistently reveal "near equality of gender." Crucially, as Shaw noted, this is a commemorative pattern "peculiar to Christians" and one that "sets them apart from earlier non-Christian populations of the city."<sup>37</sup> In short, the sum of Rome's Christian metrical epitaphs, as Shaw stressed elsewhere, like the city's Christian epitaphs generally, do not favor the epigraphic memorialization of males as did early imperial Rome's epigraphic habits—and as remained the case in some less urbanized regions or less Christianized provinces where the preference for male commemoration actually grew more pronounced in late antiquity.<sup>38</sup> In short, the near gender parity in funerary commemoration manifest in late ancient Rome is synchronically as well as diachronically distinct and therefore worth pondering as a difference Christianity made.

34. D. Pikhhaus, *Répertoire des inscriptions latines versifiées de l'Afrique romaine (Ier–VIe siècles)* (Brussels: Epigraphica Bruxellensia, 1994).

35. H. Nordberg, "Biometrical Notes," *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae* 2.2 (1963): 1–76, especially Tables 1, 2, and 8.

36. B. Shaw, "Seasons of Death: Aspects of Mortality in Imperial Rome," *JRS* 86 (1996): 100–138, especially 107.

37. Shaw, "Seasons of Death," 107.

38. B. Shaw, "The Cultural Meaning of Death: Age and Gender in the Roman Family," in *The Family in Italy From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. D. Kertzer and R. Saller (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 66–90, especially 80–84 with Table 4.5 (*Urban/Rome*).

*Achieving Gender Parity*

To put it differently, had Theodora and Bassa died earlier or elsewhere, simply because they were women it would have been less likely that they would have been memorialized in verse or prose. But a further shift in commemorative practices in late-fourth-century Rome also played in their favor. In 1981, Jos Janssens observed offhand that in Christian Rome far more epitaphs were dedicated by husbands to wives than by wives to husbands.<sup>39</sup> Ten years later the data presented by Brent Shaw in an article on “The Cultural Meaning of Death” quantified Janssens’ observation: Shaw’s data revealed that the overall gender parity achieved in Rome’s Christian epitaphs came about because of a radical reversal in the epigraphic commemoration of young women in their teens and twenties, who progressed from being “decidedly not preferred” in the early imperial period to becoming the “favored gender” in these two deciles in Christian Rome.<sup>40</sup> After age forty-one the male preference re-emerged and continued thereafter though still less markedly than in earlier centuries. Not all women, in other words, dramatically increased their chances of being epigraphically commemorated in late ancient Rome; pre-nuptial but nearly marriageable daughters and young wives, like Bassa and Theodora, apparently enjoyed an extra edge.

The much smaller data sets of metrical texts seem to fit this pattern. For example, Hervé Belloc’s recent assessment of sixty-one metrical epitaphs from Gaul, non-Christian as well as Christian, found that fourteen were dedicated to children younger than fifteen years of age. Of the eleven individuals in this group whose sex could be determined eight were boys and only three were girls. In his next age group (15–40), however, Belloc found that young women dramatically outnumbered men twelve to four.<sup>41</sup> If we return to Rome—to S. Agnese and Praetextatus and their dossiers of metrical epitaphs—the commemorative trend highlighted by Shaw is evident there as well. At S. Agnese, as noted, female memoranda outnumber males two to one, at least eight to four. With one exception (a *puer* named Remus), the males are adults commemorated as professionals (two priests and a high-ranking imperial official).<sup>42</sup> The females are both

39. J. Janssens, *Vita e morte del cristiano negli epitaffi di Roma anteriori al sec. VII* (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1981), 127.

40. Shaw, “Cultural Meaning of Death,” 82–83 and table 4.5 (*Christians/Rome*).

41. M. Hervé Belloc, *Les carmina Latina epigraphica des Gaules: édition, traduction, étude littéraire* (Doctoral Thesis, Université de Caen, 2006), 2:16–17. The chronological span, however, reaches from the second to the sixth century.

42. In addition to the *magister peditum* and consul Merobaudes (*ICUR* 8.21048; *PLRE* 1, “Merobaudes 2”), solely styled *orator* in the subscription to his lacunose



young, when age can be determined, and commemorated as daughters and wives by parents and husbands. Four are teenage daughters (Urbica, Arcontia, Evodia, and one anonymous) while Theodora is joined by three other women memorialized by husbands.<sup>43</sup> At Praetextatus the gender ratio, as noted earlier, is reversed but even so the age and status distribution is similar. The fragmentary texts of Praetextatus are less forthcoming but the crude hexameters of Superbus' epitaph (*ICUR* 5.13954) identify his father as his commemorator. Four other commemorands can be identified as male but age at death is unclear.<sup>44</sup> The only companion piece to the verse epitaph of the twenty-two-year-old Bassa is that of the previously mentioned fifteen-year-old [Quinti]lla (*ICUR* 8.14759), set up by her mother.

On the one hand, such evidence may seem simply to confirm our suspicions: domestic and familial roles long dominated the public representation of girls and women at Rome while the remembrance of men traditionally foregrounded their public and professional identities.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, what these particular texts (and others like them) reveal when considered in aggregate and within the context of ancient Rome's full epigraphic dossier are the changing patterns of commemoration over time, particularly the increased popularity in Christian late antiquity of celebrating in prose and in verse the lives of marriageable or married young women. The relentless mortality regime of ancient Rome cannot account for this phenomenon; and, once again, we are reminded that epigraphic commemoration is a gauge of social valuation.

### THE VIA AD ASTRA, THE VITA AMPLIFICA, AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

What, then, might a cultural historian make of these proclivities of epigraphic commemorators? Some scholars have seen the fourth-century pitch of Rome's epigraphic dossier towards gender parity (and its newfound propensity for the commemoration of children and wives) as evidence for the unprecedented role now being played by the nuclear family in western

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epitaph, are the two presbyters Celerinus (*PCBE* 2.1, "Celerinus 1") and Augustus (*PCBE* 2.1, "Augustus 1"). Remus shared his epitaph (8.20819) with his sister Arcontia; he was, it seems, about eighteen years old. See further Trout, "Being Female."

43. Daughters: Urbica (*ICUR* 8.20811), Arcontia (20819), Evodia (21015 and Figure 2 below), an anonymous (21513). Wives: Theodora (20799), Tecla (21306), and two anonymous (21049 and 21516).

44. Male commemorands: *ICUR* 5.14036, 14201, 14472, and 14969.

45. So, for example, G. Nathan, *The Family in Late Antiquity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 18–20.

Roman society.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the nuclear family's emergence as the dominant "affective and living unit" in the century or so after Constantine has itself been viewed not only as a social and emotional response to "Christian ideology,"<sup>47</sup> but also as fallout from various political and economic (as well as religious) realignments that encouraged aristocratic males in particular to turn more of their energies inward.<sup>48</sup> The revitalized funerary poetry of this age provides another perspective upon these crucial cultural shifts. Brief consideration of the Christianity that lurks in this poetry, of the models that influenced its composition, and of the value epitaphic verse possessed for the living suggests just how deeply-seated were the forces reshaping family life in the city where Bassa and Theodora lived and died.

Thirty years ago Jos Janssens published a prescient study of the "life and death of the Christian" as portrayed in the funerary inscriptions of late ancient Rome. Two of Janssens's instincts are relevant here. The first, surely correct, was to advise readers of epitaphs that patristic literature was not the key giving access to the spiritual dimensions of these brief and generic texts. Epitaphs, Janssens cautioned, were not theological tracts but pointed and occasional expressions of a living faith that privileged the purifying rite of baptism while clutching to the promise of eternal life in god.<sup>49</sup> To be sure, there is little theology of any stripe in Rome's funerary inscriptions (verse or prose), indeed, little that even qualifies as scriptural citation, as a recent study by Antonio Felle has made abundantly clear: amid the more than 35,000 Greek and Latin inscriptions of Christian Rome, Felle could single out only twenty-seven containing a "direct Biblical citation." Of these twenty-seven only nine are epitaphs.<sup>50</sup> But, then, as Janssens understood (and others have concluded), scriptural reading and

46. Building, in part, on the data and arguments in B. Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy and Family Life in the Later Roman Empire," *Historia* 33 (1984): 457–97, especially 484–85, and "The Family in Late Antiquity: The Experience of Augustine," *Past & Present* 115 (1987): 3–51.

47. E.g., Shaw, "Latin Funerary Epigraphy," especially 472–81; first quote at 485.

48. For some sense of the possibilities see M. R. Salzman, "Symmachus and his Father: Patriarchy and Patrimony in the Late Roman Senatorial Elite," in *Le trasformazioni delle élites in età tardoantica*, ed. R. L. Testa (Rome: Bretschneider, 2006), 357–75; K. Cooper, "Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman *Domus*," *Past and Present* 197 (2007): 3–33; and K. Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

49. Janssens, *Vita e morte*, 8 and 32–36.

50. A. E. Felle, *Biblia Epigraphica: La sacra scrittura nella documentazione epigraphica dell'orbis christianus antiquus (III–VIII secolo)* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2006). From Rome are numbers 645–71, with the nine epitaphs at 657–65; quote at 383.

rumination had rather little to do with the vitality of lived religion (and the “second church”) in this age.

But Janssen’s sympathy had limits and his other instinct now seems blinkered, for he clearly felt uncomfortable with the handful of metrical epitaphs that peppered his dossier. Those texts, he felt, were dangerously alloyed with the residue of the pagan past. He contrasted the uncomplicated faith he recognized in Rome’s thousands of prose inscriptions with the exotic imagery of the city’s poetic monuments, whose visions of astral immortality and celestial *loca amoena*, he suspected, camouflaged whatever true Christian sentiments their subjects may have harbored.<sup>51</sup> Our inclination thirty years on will be, I suspect, to accept this poetry as “Christian” and then ask what it says about the Christianity of those who saw classicizing verse and metaphor as media compatible with their spiritual and religious convictions.

Certainly, at first glance, most metrical epitaphs do reveal imaginative realms barely perceptible in most prose inscriptions. In part the medium itself is explanation: poetry, which had once staged the apotheosis of heroes and emperors, naturally encouraged the picturesque portrayal of the Christian soul’s celestial refreshment. The very prominence in metrical epitaphs of images of the astral afterlife is vivid measure of the gravitational pull still exercised by a starry realm once reserved for demi-gods and heroes but more recently made available to the martyrs and such ambitious faithful as Theodora and Bassa.<sup>52</sup> So the consular and aggressively Christian Petronius Probus lived on to possess the stars—*vivit et astra tenet*—while the priest Celerinus rejoiced in the same astral zone: *qui gaudet in astris*.<sup>53</sup> Clearly gender was no handicap: we have witnessed Theodora’s Vergilian *fecit ad astra viam* and Bassa’s Statian *stelliger polus*. We can add here the young Evodia’s consolation to her grieving parents expressed on the recently reunited fragments of her epitaph: *ne pectora tundite vestra*—don’t beat your breasts, father and mother, *nam regna celestia tango* (Fig. 2).<sup>54</sup>

51. Janssens, *Vita e morte*, 9, suspecting that some metrical epitaphs were actually composed by pagans for Christian clients.

52. Janssens, *Vita e morte*, 318; D. Trout, “Damasus and the Invention of Early Christian Rome,” in *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. D. Martin and P. Cox Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 304–5.

53. Probus: *CIL* 6.1, p. 389 = *CIL* 6.8.3, pp. 4752–53. Celerinus: *CLE* 668 = *ICUR* 8.20798.

54. Evodia: *CLE* 2018 = *ICUR* 8.21015 with P. Colafrancesco, “Un caso fortunato: dall’integrazione alla ricomposizione di *CE* 2018,” *Invigilata lucernis* 29 (2007): 77–83 on the restoration of the text now immured at S. Agnese (Fig. 2). See also Carletti, *Epigrafia dei cristiani*, no. 120.



Figure 2. Restored epitaph of Evodia (S. Agnese f.l.m). Photo: Author.

Or the confidence of the parents of the four-year-old Theodota, who found consolation in the fact that “such souls straightway seek out the stars (*quod tales animae protinus astra petunt*)—an expression (it turns out) reminiscent of the Ovidian clausula by way of which Romulus achieved his apotheosis in that poet’s *Fasti*: *astra petebat*.”<sup>55</sup> Or the certainty of Herculia, the twenty-two-year-old wife of Asellus, who “sought out the kingdom of heaven (*caelorum regna*), along the highway of the saints,” though in faulty hexameters.<sup>56</sup> Here were brightly charged images of what eternal life in god might be like.

Furthermore, verse also permitted bolder sketching of the lines linking merit to these starry rewards.<sup>57</sup> Theodora purchased her stairway to heaven with the coinage of a life splendidly lived: *amplificiam sequitur vitam*. The adjective is exquisite;<sup>58</sup> the combination unique but justified by what followed: resisting the world, keeping the law, living faithfully, attending the saints. Bassa, a virtuous woman (*casta*), left earth behind to lay hold of the pure upper air. Elsewhere, shorthand seems to have sufficed: the spirit of the seventy-five-year-old Eleuteria, her son avowed, had joined the saints *pro meritis et opera tanta* and she was “for her deeds (*pro factis*) summoned on high.”<sup>59</sup> A certain Barbara (about whom, more below), *puella* and *uxor*, “devoted to the lord,” ever served the tombs of the saints—if that is how we should understand *monimenenta piorum*.<sup>60</sup> And if so, then, Barbara (like Theodora) rested in proximity to the special tombs that may have anchored the rituals of her life in the flesh. Still, in all these respects—in voicing the claim that lives well-lived merited eternal and heavenly reward—metrical epitaphs differ more in medium and mode of expression than in underlying sentiment from the thousands of prose epitaphs with their myriad variations on *requiescit in pace*, *aeterna requies*, and *pro meritis*.

Of course, we might expect just such idealized pronouncements of religious devotion to have prevailed in Christian funerary verse, but a young woman’s claims upon the stars might be no less forcefully expressed in the language of sexual decorum. Prose epitaphs tirelessly praise wifely

55. *ICUR* 1.1001 = *CLE* 1401 = *Ihm* 107. Ovid, *Fasti* 2.496: rex patriis astra petebat equis.

56. *ICUR* 1.396 = *CLE* 2193.4 (commatica; voluit, qui fecit, hexametros): sanctorum itinere perge(n)s caelorum regna petivit.

57. Recognized by Janssens, *Vita e morte*, 309.

58. C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879) knew only one use (by Fronto); A. Blaise, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954) adds Pacianus, *ep.* 3.4.

59. Eleuteria: *ICUR* 1.1426.

60. Barbara: *ICUR* 4.11225: h(a)ec semper serbat monimenta piorum.

deportment in familiar idioms of fidelity and modesty, but now the venerable conceits of *fides*, *pudicitia*, and *castitas* could also justify a woman's designation as a *sancta et religiosa uxor*, as they did a certain Septimia.<sup>61</sup> But here, too, the gap between prose and verse commemoration narrows. In North Africa, as Jean-Marie Lassère has recently noted, the traditional constellation of uxorial virtues admirably served Christian poets well into the centuries of late antiquity.<sup>62</sup> So, too, as we have already glimpsed, at Rome: like Bassa, Theodora Afrodite had been (playfully perhaps) *casta*—as was an anonymous *fidelis coniunx* at S. Agnese.<sup>63</sup> Urbica's parents celebrated her as *semper pudica*, while *pudor*, *probitas* and untrammelled fidelity endeared Florentina to her husband.<sup>64</sup> Examples are so easily multiplied that such language must express still deeply embedded and widely accepted values and standards. Of course, the tenacity of ideals as old as Ennius should not surprise; it is rather their setting in flashy epitaphic poetry that might catch our eye. By the later fourth century to announce these virtues in funerary verse was to leverage them forcefully toward the advantage of the living—for by then poetry on stone, particularly that dedicated to chaste girls and young women, had acquired a noble lineage.

What are probably the two earliest Christian verse epitaphs known at Rome, both dating to the late third or early fourth centuries, were dedicated to females: the young Severa, *casta, pudica* and nine years old; and Agape, aged twenty-seven, *Christi fidelis*, and commemorated, it seems, by her parents.<sup>65</sup> These two “private” epitaphs, however, are followed by a flurry of imperial and episcopal *carmina epigraphica*: notable among them (for our purposes) are the empress Constantina's dedicatory inscription at S. Agnese and three pieces Damasus composed to commemorate young women.<sup>66</sup> The features of the verse commemorative landscape just

61. Septimia Afrodite, thirty-six years of age, on her prose epitaph at *ICUR* 1.2398. See also Janssens, *Vita e morte*, 123.

62. J.-M. Lassère, “Éléments de biographie dans les *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*,” in Hamdoune, *Vie, mort et poésie*, 326–27.

63. *ICUR* 8.21516.

64. Urbica: *ICUR* 8.20811 = *CLE* 1753a (though a restoration). Florentina: *ICUR* 7.18806 = *CLE* 1429 (questioning her Christianity) = *ILCV* 417.

65. Severa: *ICUR* 4.10183; discussion and presentation at P. Carletti Colafrancesco, “Note metriche su alcuni epigrammi cristiani di Roma datati,” *Rendiconti delle sedute dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei: scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* 31 (1976): 273–79; Carletti, *Epigrafia dei cristiani*, no. 35. Agape: *ICUR* 9.25962; with Carletti Colafrancesco, “Note metriche,” 258–61; Felle, *Biblia Epigraphica*, 566, no. A878; Carletti, *Epigrafia dei cristiani*, no. 36.

66. On Constantina's epigram (*ICUR* 8.20752) see D. Trout, “Vergil and Ovid at the Tomb of Agnes: Constantina, Epigraphy, and the Genesis of Christian Poetry,” in *Brill Studies in Greek and Roman Epigraphy*, ed. John Bodel and Nora Dimitrova

discussed—sexual modesty, holy service, and celestial reward—were set out for all to see on these texts. At her new basilica dedicated to Agnes, in fourteen hexameters Constantina advertised her euergetism as well as her devotion, claimed intimacy with the divine *numen*, and anticipated her heavenly ascension, like Christ, *ad caelum*. A generation later, in a splendid Filocalian *elogium* (Fig. 3) installed near Agnes's *memoria*, Damasus, celebrated (line 9) the virgin martyr as the *sanctum decus pudoris*—the holy glory of modesty.<sup>67</sup> Elsewhere his praise swept in less “legendary” figures: at the tomb of his maiden sister, Irene, *sanctus pudor* itself sanctioned the virgin's merit.<sup>68</sup> And (lest *pudicitia* be monopolized by *virgines*) his hexameters honored the sixteen-year-old bride Proiecta as *pulcra decore suo* and *solo contenta pudore* and cast her untimely death as but the bright manifestation of her desire to ascend to the ethereal light of heaven.<sup>69</sup> Henceforth to inscribe verse in honor of virtuous young women would be to follow the lead (and the language) of the first imperial family in some time to devote significant resources to the ancient capital and to emulate a pope whose swagger had decidedly advanced the invention of Christian Rome. And that is a point worth pausing over, for such heady endorsements of *form* as well as *content* surely meant that by the later fourth century commemorating young women in classicizing poetry was as much a gesture of social as of religious significance—saying as much about the aspirations of commemorators as the real lives of commemorands.

So we return to the beginning: are we, for all our effort to chart the currents swirling around these tombs, any closer to the “experience of being female” in late ancient Rome? Perhaps not: indeed, if the epitaphs of Theodora, Bassa, and the rest (like those of Irene and Proiecta) should, in the absence of information to the contrary, be read as the compositions or commissions of male commemorators, then, first and foremost they might seem to inscribe the literary aspirations and self-interest of Roman men—men for whom careful household management had long been a source of “moral authority and social power” and for whom the modesty of their wives and daughters, it has been observed, was “of use . . . only if it was

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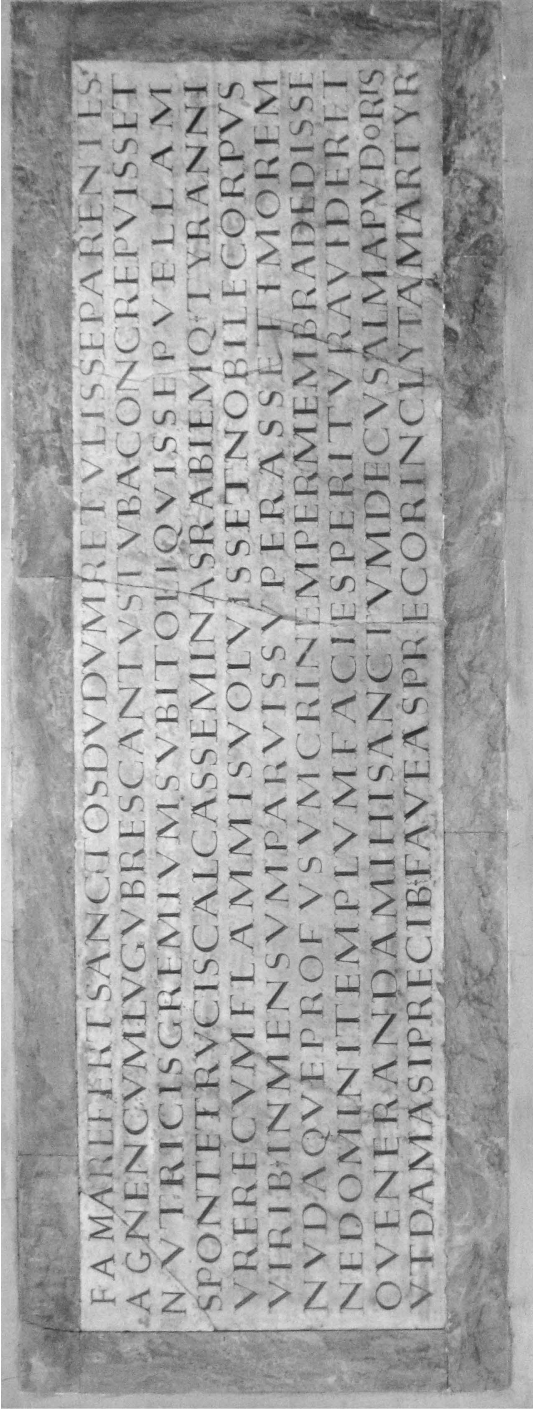
(Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). On Damasus see also Ma del Mar Agudo Romeo, “Tres epitafios femeninos en la obra damasiana,” in *Homenatge a Josep Alsina*, ed. E. Artigas (Tarragona: Diputació de Tarragona, 1992), 247–53.

67. Damasus on Agnes: Ferrua 37 = *ICUR* 8.20753. 9: O veneranda mihi sanctum decus alma pudoris.

68. Damasus on Irene: Ferrua 11 = *ICUR* 4.12417. 3–4: voverat haec sese Christo cum vita maneret / virginis ut meritum sanctus pudor ipse probaret.

69. Damasus on Proiecta: Ferrua 51 = *CLE* 670. 4: pulcra decore suo solo contenta pudore and 8: aetheriam cupiens caeli conscendere lucem.





FAMAREFERTSANCITOSDVDMIRETVLISSEPARENTIES  
AGNENCVMIVGBRESCANTVSTVBACONINGREPVISSET  
NAVTRICISGREMIUMSVBITOTIQUVISSEIPVELLAM  
SPONTETRVCISCALCASSEMINASRABIEMQTYRANNI  
VRERECVMFLAMMISVOLVISSETNOBILECORPVS  
VIRIBINMENSVMPARVISSVPERASSETIMOREM  
NVDAQVEPROFVSVMCRINEMPERMEMBRADEDISSE  
NEDOMINITEMPLVMFACIESPERITVRAVIDERET  
OVENERANDAMIHISANCITVMDECVSALMAPVDORIS  
VTDAMASIPRECIBFAVEASPRECORINCIVTAMARTYR

Figure 3. Damasus. *Elogium* for Agnes (S. Agnese f.l.m.). Photo: Author.



widely acknowledged.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, as if to second such observations, on a tombstone in the cemetery of S. Callisto, a certain Probilianus publicized (in prose) the verdict of his neighbors: for a full eight years while he was out of town (*annis numero octo absentia*), he boasted, they all knew that his wife had kept close watch over her chastity (*suam castitatem*).<sup>71</sup> No less than the sixth-century men of wealth and taste discussed by Kate Cooper, fourth-century husbands like Probilianus found it advantageous to invite scrutiny of their households, validating their claims to respect by exposing the sexual integrity within their walls.<sup>72</sup>

And yet, in the ideals and images of Rome’s metrical epitaphs surely lurk traces of “biographies” not qualitatively unlike those that scholars have extracted from the “social logic” and literary “constructions” of the better known “lives” of some of the age’s better known women.<sup>73</sup> Although the late antique preference for memorializing young females may reveal strategies of representation that set a high premium on sentimental paternalism, that need not mean that Bassa and Theodora did not embrace the values and visions inscribed on their memorials. The cultural logic of history rather tells us that, for the most part, they would have. Nor would male authorship, if it could be proven, demonstrate that these wives and daughters were any less enamored of the high-culture cachet of classicizing hexameters than, say, the empress Constantina—or the noble Proba.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, we might read these funerary poems as implicit testimony to the literary interests of the deceased. Certainly, if Rome’s metrical epitaphs truly open windows onto “lived,” or “second-church” Christianity in late ancient Rome, then their verses are an invitation to think further about the differences Christianity made—or didn’t—for women living outside the real-estate hungry mansions of the Esquiline, Caelian, and Aventine hills.<sup>75</sup>

70. K. Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antique Italy: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 35–62, quote 45; K. Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), quote 13. For a similar suspicion regarding epitaphs of the early empire see W. Riess, “*Rari exempli femina: Female Virtues on Roman Funerary Inscriptions*,” in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. S. L. James and S. Dillon (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 491–501.

71. *ICUR* 4.10953 = *ILCV* 2157.

72. K. Cooper, “Closely Watched Households.”

73. Clark, “The Lady Vanishes,” 31.

74. E. Clark and D. Hatch, *The Golden Bough, The Oaken Cross: The Vergilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).

75. C. Machado, “Aristocratic Houses and the Making of Late Antique Rome,” in *Two Romes: Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Grig and G. Kelly (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 136–58.

And bearing that in mind, we might close with this final image from the borderlands. We met Barbara above, celebrated by her husband as a *puella* “devoted to the lord . . . ever serving the monuments of the saints.” In her epitaph’s second line she is further styled *grata* and *decens*—pleasing and proper. But all this good Roman humility is cast into curious light by her memorial’s opening line: *Penthesilea fuit respondens nomine formae*, which we might understand as “she was, in keeping with her name, a Penthesilea.”<sup>76</sup> Penthesilea, of course, was the Amazon (that is *barbarian*) queen who fought on behalf of Priam at Troy. But those first two words of Barbara’s epitaph (*Penthesilea fuit*) also verbally recall the Amazon heroine’s flamboyant entrance onto the stage early in the *Aeneid*, when a wandering Aeneas spied her amid scenes of the Trojan War carved on Juno’s Carthaginian temple: *ducit Amazonidum lunatis agmina peltis / Penthesilea furens mediisque in milibus ardet* (“she leads the crescent-shielded ranks of Amazons, Penthesilea raging, and blazes amid her thousands”).<sup>77</sup> Read on and we find that Vergil’s raging Penthesilea was both a *virgo* and a bare-breasted *bellatrix* who “dared to mix it up with men.”<sup>78</sup> *Penthesilea fuit*? No wonder Janssens hesitated before the Christianity of these memorials. But it is in just such unexpected, delightfully idiosyncratic moments, as in the willfulness of Theodora’s *fecit ad astra viam* or the promise of Basa’s “kisses,” that the “real lives” behind these texts may come closest to breaking the surface and we can momentarily glimpse a Christianity that will, perhaps, seem most at home in our alternative histories of this age.

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76. *ICUR* 4.11225: *Penthesilea fuit respondens nomine formae / Barbara grata decens domino devota puella*. Ferrua (at *ICUR* 4.11225) suspected Barbara was only called Penthesilea in the poem “ad exprimendam virtutem qualis fuit barbarae illius heroidis.” Penthesilea’s traditional *virtutes*, however, are (as below) primarily those of the battlefield.

77. Ver. *Aen.* 1.490–91. See also *Aen.* 11.659–63, with *Penthesilea refert* initiating line 662.

78. Ver. *Aen.* 1.492–93: *aurea subnectens exsertae cingula mammae, / bellatrix, audetque viris concurrere virgo*. For similar martial images of Penthesilea see Ovid, *Her.* 21.117–20; *Ars am.* 3.1–2; and *Rem. am.* 675–76. In the fourth century Ausonius (*Praecatio* 1.15) would refer obliquely to Penthesilea as the “Thracian warrior-maid”: *Thressa virago*; see R. P. H. Green, *The Works of Ausonius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 533.