ATHANOR XXXVIII

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

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Cosmic over or Athanor from Annibal Barlet, *Le Vray Cours de Physique*, Paris, 1653.

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Reexamining Syncretism in Late Antique Iconography of a Vault Mosaic

Sonia Dixon

Late Antiquity, third to seventh centuries, is a period recognized for the continuity and change of Roman culture despite a new religion and political instability.¹ This continuity allowed space for syncretism: an amalgamation of different art, religion, and culture in the Empire.² Jás Elsner explains that fourth-century Rome was a complex city juxtaposing “pagan polytheism and institutional Christianity.”³ Christian themes appropriating pagan iconographies demonstrate the visual syncretism of the period creating multivalent interpretations. In the following pages, I discuss the understanding of a vault mosaic featuring a charioteer or solar figure within the necropolis in Vatican City, Rome, Italy. Scholars generally agree that syncretism was part of Roman visual culture, however, I suggest it is not often taken into consideration when studying this mosaic. I argue for a more nuanced interpretation to better understand the iconography’s meaning.

For this paper, I use material culture from Rome and Constantinople that dates from the first to fourth centuries in order to contextualize the mosaic with other syncretic works of art and to demonstrate multiple readings of artworks. I begin with an examination of the decorative programs of the necropolis including the room with the vault mosaic. Next, I briefly investigate iconographies of the ascension to demonstrate a concern with the afterlife by different audiences. Then, I analyze visual evidence of continuity and change in meaning of imperial iconography on material culture during the reign of Constantine I (r. 306–337) to show more examples of syncretic art by a single patron. My methodological approach decenters Christianity—a point to which I will return—seeking a more accurate contextualization of Late Antique material culture.

The necropolis now lies underneath Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome (Figure 1). Originally, it was an open-air cemetery that ran parallel to the Via Cornelia and the Circus of Caligula, also known as the Circus of Nero.⁴ I first put the necropolis in context. In its original state, individual burial chambers were built from the first to early fourth centuries and included cre-

mation and inhumation burial practices.⁵ The site is a palimpsest layered with varied sacralities over time; the *Liber Pontificalis* claims that a temple dedicated to Apollo once stood in this location.⁶ Adjacent to it was the circus, a place identified with Christian persecution and associated with Saint Peter’s martyrdom.⁷ In the mid-fourth century, it is also where the Roman Emperor Constantine built Saint Peter’s Basilica to honor the apostle.⁸ The current state of Saint Peter’s originates from the sixteenth-century construction of the basilica and now sits on top of the necropolis.

My focus for this paper is the vault mosaic found in Tomb M, built in the second century (Figure 2).⁹ The room originally functioned for a pagan burial, evident by a niche, which once held a container with cremated ashes.¹⁰ Non-figural frescoes decorate the lower register of the room, while a mosaic decorative program with narrative scenes adorns the upper level of the three walls and the barrel vault.¹¹ The aniconic frescoes in the lower register were part of the room’s original second-century construction. According to scholars, this room was transformed in the third century from a pagan to a Christian tomb based on the iconographies of the upper walls.¹² Scholarship interprets the transformation as either a new family purchased the tomb and installed the mosaics, or the original family converted to Christianity, then added the decorative program.¹³ It is the only redecorated room in the necropolis. The mosaiced program visible today was added in the third century.¹⁴ The walls depict three of the most common Christian scenes in Late Antiquity: the Good Shepherd—now lost—on the west wall, the Fisherman on the north wall, and Jonah on the east

5 The site features burial pits, urns, and sarcophagi. Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Shrine of St. Peter*, 30; Liverani, Spinola, and Zander, *Vatican Necropolises*, 24.

6 I use the term palimpsest as discussed in Nadja Aksamija, Clark Maines, and Phillip B. Wagoner, eds., *Palimpsests: Buildings, Sites, Time*, vol. 4, *Architectural Crossroads* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); James T. Shotwell, ed., *The Book of the Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, trans. Louise Ropes Loomis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1916), 5.

7 Liverani, Spinola, and Zander, *Vatican Necropolises*, 18.

8 Liverani, Spinola, and Zander, *Vatican Necropolises*, 20.

9 Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Shrine of St. Peter*, 72.

10 A pagan-style dedicatory inscription, now lost, also suggests a pagan owner. The inscription was found and copied in 1574; it is now lost. During this period, Christians only practiced inhumation, while pagans practiced both cremation and inhumation. Some scholarship does not recognize that pagans practiced inhumation, but there is evidence that they did. Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 72.

11 According to scholarship, the wall with the doorway does not feature a mosaic scene.

12 Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 29.

13 Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 72.

14 Scholars date the mosaic by the subject matter and the treatment of the tesserae. Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 72.

1 I use the dates established in Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity*, The Carl Newell Jackson Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

2 Jás Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 211–21.

3 Jás Elsner, “Inventing Christian Rome: The Role of Early Christian Art,” in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, eds. G. Woolf and C. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

4 Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (London: Patheon Books, 1957), 24; Margherita Guarducci, *The Tomb of St. Peter: The New Discoveries in the Sacred Grottoes of the Vatican*, (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960), 52; Pietro Zander, *The Necropolis under St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican* (Naples: De Rosa, 2009), 6–7; and Paolo Liverani, Giandomenico Spinola, and Pietro Zander, *The Vatican Necropolises. Rome’s City of the Dead* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 14.

wall (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁵ Although these scenes represent standard Christian iconography of salvific imagery, elements of all three were used before Christianity with a secular purpose or for a pagan cult.¹⁶

The most well-known image from this tomb is that of the charioteer on the vault measuring 78 x 64 3/16 inches (198 x 163 cm).¹⁷ A 1574 construction project damaged parts of the decoration, but the image remains clear; it features a figure wearing a tunic with a billowing cloak, holding an orb in their left hand (Figure 5).¹⁸ The figure rides in a chariot, apparent by the two horses and remaining wheel.¹⁹ The horses face left as the figure looks to the right.

Scholarship generally interprets the charioteer as Christian in two ways. First, scholars identify the figure as Christ.²⁰ Second, the mosaic scenes on the walls have a Christian reading and thus seemingly require a Christian interpretation of the figure—neglecting the iconographies' non-Christian origins.²¹ Most frequently, scholars identify the vault image as Christ as Helios—Christ with attributes of the Greek solar deity Helios or Sol.²² The non-Christian solar identification is accepted because Late Antiquity, especially the third century, is a period of religious syncretism, and as a result, has iconographical syncretism in art.²³

Even with this acknowledgement, the image is normally identified as Christian. This identification needs to be re-examined since the interpretation often prioritizes Christianity over multivalency. I suggest that the mosaic can only be properly

15 An undated photograph suggests the west wall's decoration is lost. Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 74.

16 Generally, scholarship does not accept that the Jonah scene has pagan origins, however, I suggest including the sea creature, *ketos*, connects the narrative scene to pagan imagery. The pagan imagery of the *ketos* represented "watery chaos," which can refer to Jonah's journey. Snyder suggests the presence of the *ketos* symbolizes Christians living among non-believers. See Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985).

17 Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 522, cat. 467.

18 Toynbee and Ward Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 72; Jonathan Bardill, *Constantine, Divine Emperor of the Christian Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 327; and Guarducci, *Tomb of St. Peter*, 60–61.

19 In the original design, four horses pulled the chariot. Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, 522.

20 Toynbee and Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 74.

21 For scholars who identify the vault image as Christ based on the subject-matter on the walls, see Guarducci, *Tomb of St. Peter*, 78; Toynbee and Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 74; and Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, 522. Not all scholars accept a clear Christian reading of the figure. Brubaker suggests the ceiling figure may represent Constantine. Leslie Brubaker, "God or Emperor? Imperial Legacies in Byzantine Christian Visual Culture," in *Imperial Lineages and Legacies in the Eastern Mediterranean: Recording the Imprint of Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Rule*, ed. Rhoads Murphey, vol. 18, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies (New York: Routledge, 2017), 84. See also Bardill, *Constantine*, 327. Eastmond states no details reveal that the figure is Christ, but he suggests the wall mosaics determine a Christian context. Anthony Eastmond, *The Glory of Byzantium and Early Christendom* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2013), 14.

22 Some scholarship uses the solar deity Apollo, rather than Helios.

23 Bardill, *Constantine*, 327.

viewed in the context of the period, and that to do this, we must decenter Christianity from the discussion of Late Antique art. Deemphasizing Christianity—without removing it from the narrative—allows agency to paganism or other religions that persisted during Late Antiquity. This approach, as argued by seminal scholar of Late Antiquity Peter Brown, results in a more accurate contextualization of the period and its art.²⁴

Brown describes the Late Antique period as a "shaken kaleidoscope."²⁵ Roman culture persisted, but the new religion of Christianity shifted the political and religious climate.²⁶ Scholars often emphasize Late Antiquity as a period of change and continuity. I argue the third to seventh centuries shifted more than they changed. I suggest this distinction recognizes the slow Christianization within the Empire. For instance, evidence demonstrates that paganism continued into at least the sixth century.²⁷ In Late Antiquity, traditional Roman and Christian cults were both polytheistic and monotheistic; not all Christians only practiced Christianity. Some Christians incorporated existing religions into Christianity, which contributed to syncretic art. In 2018, Javier Martínez Jiménez, Isaac Sastre de Diego, and Carlos Tejerizo García convincingly argue that Christianization was a slow 200-year process beginning in the third century with the establishment of the tetrarchy.²⁸ The shift must remain in the forefront of scholarship for this period. I suggest the state of the problem arises when scholarship over-privileges a single Christian meaning.

Another tomb in the necropolis provides evidence of the coexistence of multiple religions in the Roman Empire. Tomb Z dates to the second century and is known as the Tomb of the Egyptians.²⁹ It features a fresco of the Egyptian goddess Hathor and sun god Horus and a sarcophagus with Dionysus.³⁰ In the third century, a Christian woman was buried in this space, as is evident by her dedicatory slab showing a palm leaf and dove.³¹ I suggest the insertion of a Christian tomb in a space with existing pagan iconographies is not unusual for the period. This addition shows individuals were more concerned

24 Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (November 1971): 80–101; Brown, *Late Antiquity*.

25 Peter Brown, "Art and Society," in *Age of Spirituality*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 22.

26 For further discussion on this topic, see Brown, "Art and Society"; Brown, "Holy Man"; and Jaś Elsner, "Late Antique Art: The Problem of the Concept and the Cumulative Aesthetic," in *Approaching Late Antiquity: The Transformation from Early to Late Empire*, eds. Simon Swain and Mark Edward, repr., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

27 Bowersock provides evidence of the continuation of paganism within the Roman Empire. G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Jerome Lectures 18 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

28 The tetrarchy was a government system established by Diocletian in 293 that comprised of two *caesars* and two *augusti*. Javier Martínez Jiménez, Isaac Sastre de Diego, and Carlos Tejerizo García, "The Settings of Late Roman Hispania," in *The Iberian Peninsula between 300 and 850: An Archaeological Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 47–66.

29 Zander, *Necropolis*, 36.

30 Zander, *Necropolis*, 36–38.

31 The palm and dove are standard Christian iconographies. Zander, *Necropolis*, 38.

with their personal faith and afterlife than their proximity to what contemporary scholars separate as opposing religions. There is no evidence of altering or concealing the original fresco when the Christian was buried here.

The Ascension

An iconography that directly relates to the afterlife is that of the ascension. This iconography is not reserved for one religion or group of people. For this paper I identify two types: one for the imperial and the other for the non-imperial. Imperial ascension guarantees that an emperor becomes a god, preserving their legacy. Non-imperial ascension provides salvation for an individual in their afterlife. Generally, the visual expression of an ascension is represented by two distinct iconographies. The first example is found on the marble base of the Column of Antoninus Pius (Figure 6). The monument was dedicated in 161 and rests in Campus Martius. One side of the base depicts the emperor and his wife Faustina with a *genius*, as eagles flank the couple. The scene of the ascension in this example is in the form of an apotheosis. An apotheosis is an imperial funerary ceremonial when Roman emperors become gods.³²

The second example of an ascension iconography is found in Tomb B of Fannia Redempta at the necropolis (Figure 7). The room dates to the second century and includes a poorly preserved depiction of a charioteer in a *quadriga* in the central medallion of the cross vault.³³ Four smaller medallions depict busts of the seasons.³⁴ The iconography of Tomb B is similar to that of Tomb M, which was mosaiced in the following century. Unlike Tomb M, scholars only recognize Tomb B's ceiling decoration as non-Christian; however, the vault mosaic in Tomb M appears as an ascension.³⁵

Iconographies of the ascension are syncretic. I suggest the understanding of syncretic images depends on the media, the context of the image, and the interpretation by the viewer. Placement on a tomb's vault in the same necropolis, such as Tomb B or M, does not require a single interpretation.

Constantine I

Multivalency in Late Antiquity is further evident in art commissioned by Constantine I. I focus on Constantine to further demonstrate the extent of Late Antique syncretism and the issues with overprivileging Christian narratives. I turn now to the emperor and begin with a brief biography. Constantine

first ruled as a member of the tetrarchy in 306.³⁶ In 312, he became the sole emperor of the western Roman Empire.³⁷ Soon after he issued the Edict of Milan in 313.³⁸ The edict did not, as often represented, make Christianity the state religion, but rather made this newer religion legal and the persecution of its followers illegal.³⁹ Then in 324, Constantine became the sole Roman Emperor.⁴⁰ Today, he is best known as the first Christian emperor, but the account of his conversion was written after his death by the bishop Eusebius, who wished to improve his own standing in the new church.⁴¹ In short, we have no evidence of Constantine's personal religion. Coins issued by Constantine are frequently cited in scholarship as evidence of the emperor's support of Christianity within the empire, however, the coins also reflect the religious syncretism of the period.

Constantine had a silver medallion minted in 313 in present day Pavia, Italy, and issued it in 315 to celebrate his *decennalia* (Figure 8).⁴² The obverse features the bust of Constantine with a horse, shield, and scepter. His helmet bears the Chi-Rho, a monogram of two superimposed Greek letters, which begin the word Christ.⁴³ The obverse inscription reads, "Emperor Constantine Pious and Fortunate Augustus."⁴⁴ The reverse shows a depiction of an imperial ceremony, possibly that of the victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome on October 28, 312.⁴⁵ The reverse inscription translates to, "conservation of the state."⁴⁶ If analyzed alone, this medallion seems to support Constantine as a Christian ruler, however, further examination of art commissioned by Constantine shows otherwise.

In 313, Constantine had a gold *solidus* minted (Figure 9). The obverse features two profile busts. In the foreground is a depiction of Constantine in military garb. In front of him rests a shield with an image of a charioteer in a *quadriga*. The figure behind the emperor is the deity Sol, who bears a

36 Noel Lenski, "The Reign of Constantine," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 61–62.

37 Lenski, "Reign of Constantine," 68–70.

38 Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 48.2–12.

39 Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 48.2–12.

40 Raymond Van Dam, *The Roman Revolution of Constantine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 81–87.

41 For a closer examination of Eusebius, see Jan Willem Drijvers, "Eusebius' 'Vita Constantini' and the Construction of the Image of Maxentius," in *From Rome to Constantinople: Studies in Honour of Averil Cameron*, eds. Hagit Amirav and R. B. ter Haar Romeny, *Late Antique History and Religion* (Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 11–27.

42 Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, 66.

43 In Greek, "Χριστός."

44 IMP[ERATOR] CONSTANTINVS P[IVS] F[ELIX] AVG[VSTVS].

45 It is standard for Roman imperial coins to feature a military scene on the reverse. For more on the battle see: Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall, *Clarendon Ancient History Series* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.5–6; and Raymond Van Dam, *Remembering Constantine at the Milvian Bridge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

46 SALVS REI PVBLICAE.

32 A more detailed description of "apotheosis" can be found in the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium. See "Apotheosis," *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, eds. Alexander Kazhdan and Anthony Cutler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

33 Fannia Redempta refers to the woman buried in the space known through an epitaph dedicated to her husband Aurelius Hermes. Zander refers to the central image as "a sun chariot." Zander, *Necropolis*, 49.

34 Zander, *Necropolis*, 50.

35 They suggest later owners covered the solar figure with a decorated disc, possibly to conceal pagan imagery. Toynbee and Perkins, *Vatican Excavations*, 44.

radiate crown. The obverse inscription reads, “Unconquered Constantine, Maximus Augustus,” a title given to him by the Senate in 312.⁴⁷ This coin commemorates Constantine’s arrival in Milan and his declaration of the Edict of Milan.

Three elements on the obverse of this *solidus* reference salvation. First, the deity Sol insures and provides military salvation for Roman emperors and is a continuation of a Roman imperial tradition. Second, Sol’s full epithet is Sol Invictus, meaning unconquered or invincible. I suggest the word Invictus in this case applies to both Sol and Constantine. Third, the depiction of the ascension on the shield emphasizes the salvific meaning. The inscription on the reverse reads, “the auspicious entry of our Augusti.”⁴⁸ The plural form of *augustus* alludes to the tetrarchy that remained established at the time of mint. The coin was minted in 313, but not issued until 315, a year after the dissolution of the tetrarchy. The reverse features a typical *adventus*, the ceremonial entrance of the emperor into a city. The emperor on horseback is preceded by the personification of victory and followed by that of virtue.

Constantine’s silver medallion and gold *solidus* were minted in the same location and in the same year. The medallion features a Christogram, while the *solidus* features Sol. According to the general perception and presentation in scholarship, the two objects feature iconography from two separate religions: Roman paganism and Christianity. Constantine was aware of the growing aristocratic class adopting the newer religion. This group had great influence in the empire so it was necessary for Constantine to appease them. At the same time, the Senate remained largely pagan.⁴⁹

On May 11, 330, Constantine officially moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey).⁵⁰ He continued the imperial tradition of erecting imperial monuments such as the porphyry column in the new capital’s forum.⁵¹ As with the other objects linked to Constantine, this column visually expresses Roman imperial rule and divinity. According to descriptions, the column originally supported a bronze statue of a figure wearing a seven-point radiate crown holding a spear and possibly an orb.⁵² Reconstructions of the statue vary in composition, but all feature the radiate crown. Scholars contest the identification of this figure as representing either Constantine or a solar deity. I suggest that the radiate crown provides one clear meaning—this is a salvific figure. I propose that Constantine may have intended a conflated interpretation of the figure, like that seen on his *solidus* with Sol Invictus.

The iconography of a figure with a radiate crown begins long before Constantine came to power. This particular crown

is an attribute of a solar deity and of Roman emperors.⁵³ Tiberius minted a bronze coin for the first Roman emperor Augustus (r. 27 BCE–14 CE) in the year 15 (Figure 10).⁵⁴ It features a profile bust of Caesar Augustus wearing a radiate crown. The obverse inscription reads, “divine Augustus.”⁵⁵ The coin was minted after his death, as is evident by the word *divus*, an honorific title the senate granted to Roman emperors, that refers to his divinity in the afterlife.

Following this tradition, a gold *solidus* was issued in 337 and minted in Constantinople (Figure 11). The sons of Constantine struck the coin after his death in the same year. The commemorative coin features a profile bust of a veiled Constantine, indicating that he is dead. The inscription reads, “deified Constantine father of the emperors.”⁵⁶ Constantine was granted the same honorific title *divus*. He does not wear a radiate crown on the coin, but the tradition of using the term divine continues. On the reverse we see the familiar iconography of a charioteer and *quadriga* flying upwards. Constantine ascends and extends an arm to, what appears to be, a hand protruding from the sky. I suggest this coin demonstrates syncretic art in Late Antiquity. The hand could be interpreted in a variety of ways. One may interpret the iconography of the posthumous coin as Christian, but it is posthumous and, as with Eusebius’s work on the emperor’s life, we are dealing with identity placed on Constantine after his death. Although scholarship often refers to Constantine as the first Christian emperor, his posthumous coin does not support this. His last coin depicts a standard imperial Roman iconography of an apotheosis. Scholarship also points to the building of Old Saint Peter’s Basilica, the Holy Sepulcher, and the Chi-Rho monogram on his medallion as evidence of his Christian identity, while neglecting to mention the pagan temples he also erected.⁵⁷ I suggest that the situation in the fourth century was more complex. Constantine had to balance his role as emperor with a religiously fluid empire that included pagans and monotheistic and polytheistic Christians. Furthermore, iconography in the mid-third and fourth centuries had a slippery slope of interpretation. Constantine commissioned multivalent works, such as his coin with Sol or the porphyry column in Constantinople, with syncretic figures who bear a radiate crown.⁵⁸ It is unclear if the emperor, or a solar deity, is depicted. The image may also depict a conflation of the two. I suggest this is not

53 Elsner states that Constantine followed Augustus’s use of iconography of the radiate crown, which demonstrates Augustus’s affiliation to Apollo. Ja Elsner, “Perspectives in Art,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine*, ed. Noel Emmanuel Lenski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 264. Augustus’s affiliation to solar divinity does not rest on the coin alone. Augustus erected an obelisk, from Heliopolis, Egypt, to coordinate with the solar calendar in 10 BCE. Bardill, *Constantine*, 42.

54 Bardill, *Constantine*, 47.

55 DIVVS AVGVSTVS PATER.

56 DIVVS CONSTANTINVS AVG[VSTVS] PATER AVGG[VSTORVM].

57 Bassett argues that Constantine consciously continued a civic tradition when building his new capital rather than the new religion. Bassett, *Urban Image*, 34–36; Elsner, “Perspectives in Art,” 255.

58 Elsner argues that his commissioned works demonstrate Constantine’s strategy of following tradition while providing innovation. Elsner, “Perspectives in Art,” 255.

47 INVICTVS CONSTANTIVS MAX[IMVS] AVG[VSTVS]. Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.11.

48 FELIX ADVENTVS AVGG[VSTORVM] NN[OSTRORVM].

49 Van Dam, *Roman Revolution*, 39.

50 Sarah Bassett, *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

51 Only the column and base survive, both in very poor condition.

52 Bassett, *Urban Image*, 71.

limited to works relating to an emperor.

Conclusion

Returning to the necropolis, the figure in the vault mosaic found in Tomb M should be viewed through the same lens. The scenes on the tomb's lower walls cannot unequivocally determine the identification of the vault mosaic as Christian. I argue for a reading that is more encompassing—one that removes an emphasis on Christianity and allows space for multiple readings. I suggest that the ceiling image provides a visible concern for the afterlife and desire for salvation, whether through Christ, or Helios, or Sol, or a divine emperor; this depends on the viewer. A viewer could also interpret the figure as more than one person at the same time, a similar approach to the solar figure used by Constantine on different media.

Interpretation of syncretic art during Late Antiquity is multifactorial. The interpretation depends on who enters the space and when. As I have discussed, religion was not as confined as we recognize today. This is especially true in the third century when Tomb M's decorative program was erected. The reading of the image could also shift over time as Christianity did not bring immediate changes the Roman Empire. The syncretic identity of the figure in the vault provides multiple readings of salvation for the faithful, which reflects its historical context as it was erected during a time of shifts and instability.

Florida State University

Figure 1. (left) Layered plan of the Vatican Hill. Photo credit: Maxwell School of Syracuse University.

Figure 2. (right) Ceiling mosaic of Tomb M, 3rd century, tesserae, 78 x 64 3/16 inches (198 x 163 cm). Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 3. The wall on the left, the west wall, appears heavily damaged. *The Fisherman* on the north wall, Vatican Necropolis. After Zander, *The Necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican*.

Figure 4. *Jonah* on the east wall. Vatican Necropolis. After Zander, *The Necropolis under St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican*.

Figure 5. This photograph shows the 1574 damage and the lost tesserae with the underdrawing. Photo credit: Wikimedia.

Figure 6. (facing page, above) Base of the *Column of Antoninus Pius*, ca. 161-180 CE, marble, height: 97.25 in (247.02 cm). Image source: Charles S. Rhyne from Reed College Digital Collections.

Figure 7. (facing page, below) *Tomb B*, Fannia Redempta, Vatican Necropolis. After Gee, "Cult and Circus In Vaticanum."

Figure 8. Medallion (electrotype) of Constantine I, minted in 313 CE, issued 315 CE, bronze, diameter 24 millimeters. British Museum, 2012,4159.1.

Figure 9. Coin of Constantine I, minted in 313 CE, gold, diameter 4 cm. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Cabinet de médailles (RIC, VII, 111).

Figure 10. *Coin of Augustus*, minted in Rome ca. 15 CE, copper alloy, diameter 27 millimeters. British Museum, R.6413.

Figure 11. *Solidus of Constantine I*, minted in 337 CE, gold, weight 4.42 grams. British Museum, 1986,0610.1.