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Review of Nicola Denzey, The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007)

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The catacombs of ancient Rome were liminal spaces, places where the boundaries between the living and the dead collapsed during family burials and ritual commemorations. During Christian late antiquity, these places, and the bones they purported to hold, were deployed in efforts to telescope a remembered Christian past with a desired Christian present. *The Bone Gatherers* brings to life these ancient tombs, the women who patronized them, and the religious topography of Rome, which increasingly depended on the tombs, the female bones they contained, and the stories of their bone gatherers for the city's religious and political identity.

The book examines the ways female patrons of the Christian catacombs (the "bone gatherers" of the title) exerted religious, political, social, and cultural influence on their city and on their faith tradition. In Denzey's account, the "bone gatherer" functioned almost as an unofficial church office. She documents the women who collected the bodies and bones of the Christian dead and then constructed tombs, commissioned art, and funded churches. Their influence, however, was incidentally and deliberately effaced over time. Weaving together insights from archaeology, art history, gender studies, classics, and religious history, Denzey (hereafter D.) has produced an interdisciplinary and unique monograph, analyzing specific catacombs, the lives of women who commissioned them and buried their loved ones inside, as well as the mythic and historical women interred within. D. also uses the subterranean chambers as prisms through which she scrutinizes the intersection of religion and gender in Roman society. Each chapter spirals out to the crowded streets of the city above -- the world of the living women of Rome. In doing so, the book provides (despite caveats to the contrary) a survey of daily life in terms of gender dynamics and lived religion in Christian Rome from 250 to 350 CE. The book is illustrated with thirteen black-and-white photographs and one map. (While I wished for more images, I understand the financial limitations of humanities publishing today. A list of illustrations would have been useful and feasible, however.) Each chapter is consistently up-to-date on the latest research in early Christian studies as well as women and gender studies of the period.

D. establishes the parameters and methodology of her work in the Introduction. She claims to present not a "sweeping history" of early Christian women or the burgeoning church in Rome but a series of "'case studies' of forgotten women" who lived from 250-350 CE (xviii). *The Bone Gatherers* is unabashedly feminist in the classic sense, in that it seeks to tell "the story of these lost and forgotten women" (xvii). D. uses "visual, archaeological, and epigraphical sources" (xvi) in conversation with literary, legal, and other historical sources to reconstruct women's lives and self-representations. She also interrogates gender and power relations expressed in the evidence and in previous scholarship.

Chapter One, "Death Takes a Bride" opens with the the 19th-century discovery of a sarcophagus belonging to one Crepereia Tryphaena. Within it remained the body of the young bride buried in her wedding attire. D. uses the corpse, its adornments, and the sarcophagus as a window into wedding rituals and female mortality in Rome. D. reconstructs the likely life events of the dead Tryphaena by placing her within a context illuminated by demographic data on marriage, childbirth, and disease. The emotional and psychological impact of Tryphaena's passing is weighed through a reading of literary sources, such as Cicero's correspondence with friends upon the demise of his daughter Tullia and Pliny the Younger's letter to Marcellinus about the death of the thirteen year-old Marcella. Methodologically, this chapter is typical of most of the others in the book, in that it moves back and forth between the material objects that center the study, broader historical context about issues that relate to these objects, and the history of modern scholarship on the objects themselves.

Chapter Two, "Proba and the Piglet," turns to the Via Latina hypogeum, specifically Cubiculum O, which contains both pagan and Christian artistic motifs. Contrary to other contemporary scholarship, D. argues that the tomb's unnamed patron was a pagan woman (not a Christian man), who commissioned the tomb for her Christian daughter. D. provides the patron with a pseudonym ("Proba") and supports her interpretation through a detailed reading of the imagery in the cubiculum. In doing so, D. explores mother/daughter relationships, the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity by pagan women, devotion to Ceres, the cult of Demeter, comparable Christian iconography in other catacomb tombs, and funerary rituals of sacrifice.

Chapter Three, "Waiting in the Afterlife," examines "Proba's" tomb in neighboring Cubiculum N and the Priscilla Catacombs' famed Cubiculum of the Velata (home to the fresco of a veiled Christian woman with hands raised in prayer). These women provide the opportunity for D. to discuss Roman marriage, views of the afterlife, women in church offices, and women's involvement in rhetoric and education. As in the previous chapter, D. challenges some standard readings of the art. She argues that the woman in the Velata fresco (likely the woman for whom the tomb was created) is depicted neither at her marriage, nor her baptism, nor her sanctification as a church virgin. Rather, depicted with a scroll and in the *orans* position, she commemorates her status and identity as an educated and pious Christian rather than a particular life-event. D. impresses upon her readers, "the catacombs came to represent women's sacred space" (82). The Velata's tomb is not merely the resting place for a famed fresco; it is one piece in a network of feminine religious imagery commissioned by women who wished to be remembered as devout, learned, and civically engaged. "Proba's" parallel pagan artistic programme draws on but alters the traditional iconography of the drama of *Alcestis*; it too represents a culturally educated woman's manipulation of literature in an expression of self-identity.

Chapter 4, "Praying with Prisca," sifts through the traditions about the person(s) after whom the Catacombs of Priscilla are named (Prisca is a nickname for Priscilla). In one thread of the narrative, the legendary woman transforms from a church leader mentioned by Paul (remembered for her authority in life) to a martyr (remembered for her death). D. finds links between the shifting legends about the founder or founding corpse and the scholarly anxiety over the identities of the people in the famous painting there known as the *Fractio Panis*. Both reflect a resistance to acknowledging female leadership in the early Church. The *Fractio Panis* depicts seven people at a table breaking bread. D. reviews the controversies over whether the figures are

male, female, or both, and whether they depict a funerary feast, the Eucharist, a simple meal, or some combination thereof. (D. herself concludes that the people are likely all women.) After examining some of the other images in the same chamber, D. suggests that the room may have been a martyrium, built to honor and house the bones of an early female leader. D. resists labeling her a priest, deacon, or other church office-holder.

Chapter Five, "Petronella Goes to Paradise," explores the gendered dimensions of the cult of the saints through an examination of a painting of a Roman matron, Veneranda, with her patron saint Petronella. D. traces the evolution of Petronella's identity as the apostle Peter's daughter, a virgin martyr, and finally (in modern scholarship) one of a number of wealthy women engaged in Christian patronage of Roman churches, relics, and other institutions. Veneranda's choice of Petronella -- a saint whose name was not contained on the male-dominated "official sanctioned list of martyrs" -- is evidence that "memory traditions of 'unrecognized martyrs' such as Petronella still lay in the hands of women" (146).

The final two chapters, entitled "The Silent Virgin and the Pale Child" and "Damasus, Ear Tickler," document the ways in which the agency of women as bone gatherers, patrons, and teachers was effaced from Roman topography and memory. They were replaced with women venerated for their death (especially as virgin martyrs) or with male saints. Chapter Six establishes the ways in which Christian officials "discovered" or relocated from the catacombs saints' bones to populate their above-ground basilicas with relics. Thus the remains of venerated holy women were moved from sacred space that had been founded, patronized, and inhabited by women into a space controlled by male church officials. Simultaneously, the authorized narratives of holy women narrowed, until, "By the middle of the fourth century, the only action that might confer status on a woman was her rejection of a sexual existence," preferably through death (174). This despite the fact that married Christian women continued to inhabit both city and tombs. In Chapter Seven, the erasure of the female bone gatherers and other politically and socially influential Christian matrons is completed by Damasus, in his bloody and contentious campaign to become the sole bishop of Rome. In promoting male saints over female ones, Damasus embarked on a "masculinized reformulation" (179) of Christian memory and devotion. He also strived to ensure that the piety of the average Christian woman and the veneration of female saints took place through "complex rituals of access" controlled by the church (201).

The Epilogue turns to the Catacombs of Commodilla and a sixth-century lay patron named Turturra, who commissioned the art in an underground sanctuary. Her money and influence allowed her body to be buried near the bones of martyrs and her image to be viewed by later Christians amidst a depiction of the Holy Family. For D., Turturra's powerful self-image and simultaneous near-anonymity in Christian history represent the endpoint of the gendered transformation of subterranean and urban sacred space.

While D. draws upon scholarship on the specific tombs under discussion, archaeologists and art historians may wish the book engaged more deeply with research on the catacombs in general. Surely some will disagree with D.'s interpretations of the artistic programs, interpretations which often cut against the grain of earlier work. But the book, as the title and subtitle suggest, is more about networks among the living than objects below the earth.

D. excels in providing the social, historical, religious, and cultural context for understanding the material culture at the kernel of the book. She masterfully uses material culture to shed light on world of women otherwise often viewed "through a glass darkly" when using only literary sources. D. produces a richer account of women in Rome because of it. Much of the book provides an inspiring model for other scholars. At times, however, D.'s efforts to overcome the obstacles imposed by the paucity of sources by, and even about, women are frustrating. D's goal is "to make this book *experiential*," (author's emphasis) which involves "experiencing and re-creating for readers what late ancient Rome was like and what ancient women likely saw, thought, felt, and lived" (xvi-xvii). Thus, D. often creatively imagines her subjects acting in the world. Chapter 2 opens with an account of "Proba" entering the catacombs with a piglet for sacrifice. D. describes Proba's steps, thoughts, and challenges in building and sanctifying her family's tomb. It turns out, however, that the tomb's patron may not have been a woman, and the episode of Proba's "problem" with her pig (25) is historically inspired invention. Asserting that "there are no fictions in this book," D. describes this technique as "engaging the imagination" through "something akin to feminist midrash" -- academically and scholarly inspired recreations (xvi). I admire D.'s refusal to capitulate in the face of the quandary of how to reconstruct ancient women's history. D. explicitly chooses to reimagine as fully as possible Roman women's lived experiences, and she repudiates the notion that she must limit herself to examining only the gendered discourses of the worlds of men. Her methodology resists binary classification; she chooses to conduct both social history and a deconstruction of gender ideologies. D.'s strategy, however, is frustrating, for even a knowledgeable reader must thread carefully here between the well-documented and the skillfully-imagined. The less-informed reader (such as an undergraduate or beginning graduate student) may need an experienced guide.

The book attempts to speak both to a specialized audience and to an educated but non-academic audience. The needs and expectations of the two groups are at times in tension, and the book's efforts to reach them results in obstacles for both readerships. D.'s prose ranges from a mesmerizing academic style to an overly familiar one. I was impressed with the scope and accuracy of the book's historical context, its illumination of the material culture of death, and its recreation of the daily lives of Roman women, but I found the informal writing jarring and distracting. On the other hand, I also wondered if the lay reader would be overwhelmed with the scholarly data directed toward the academic audience. In some chapters I found myself hunting for D.'s individual contributions to the field. At times her original insights are clear, but at others they are overwhelmed by historical and historiographical contextualization. This situation is exacerbated by the method of documentation. In a nod to her lay readers, D. is sparing with endnotes; thus, those sections of the book which contain original contributions often look and feel like the sections providing historical context (sections which are accurate and exhaustive but are more of a broad assessment of the field). D. has done a tremendous service, but some of her fresh contributions are partially hidden.

Any book that seeks to bridge traditional divides is risky. *The Bone Gatherers* joins material culture with document-based history, feminism with academic inquiry, and a scholarly audience with a lay one. The criticisms raised in this review are the consequences of these risks, but they are also consequences worth risking. They do not undermine the work; they are issues to consider while reading it. For D. has provided us with a book sorely needed and genuinely welcomed.

This study will prove valuable to those interested in Imperial Rome, religion and material culture, Christianity, and gender studies. It may appeal to an educated general audience. Because of its substantial historical framing in each chapter, it could be used in an advanced undergraduate class on early Christianity, Roman history, or women's history.