

## Memorial

For thus was the thread spun which the *Moirai* gave her.<sup>1</sup>



Death has always been the great constant and commonplace event throughout time. During late antiquity, it was not unusual to expect the early death of family members or friends, and to be well acquainted with the ritual and material culture associated with commemorating the dead. Art and artifacts associated with burials are disproportionately represented in the material record because, through burial, they passed out of use and were preserved. In many cases, arid climates and sanctity for the realm of the dead contributed to their survival. Even though the memorial artifacts presented here represent only a tiny fraction of actual burials, they make up the most substantial category of ancient objects associated with any single facet of ordinary life.<sup>2</sup> This final chapter will analyze the iconography of the spinning Annunciate on objects further associated with death and burial. Specifically, this chapter provides a close reading of the Annunciation image by revisiting the Priscilla catacomb Annunciation as well as the iconographic and contextual narrative of the Annunciation on the Pignatta Sarcophagus preserved in Ravenna, Italy, and several Phrygian tombstones with spinning iconography.

As both artifact and icon, the spindle and distaff demonstrate the most ordinary piety at odds with more elite and codified representations within the funerary context. They demonstrate that where some saw death as the end of human life, others memorialised it as an eternal extension to the quotidian nature of life.<sup>3</sup> Choosing the spindle and distaff in association with memorial objects and images had at least two implications: first, its association with Mary spinning could remind those left behind of life eternal through the salvific

1 Epitaph from *EG* 113, 4 (Attica). Cited in Lattimore, *Themes*, 159.

2 Richard Saller, "Introduction," in Laurie Brink and Deborah A. Green, *Commemorating the Dead* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 1.

3 Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies*, 165.

Incarnation. Second, the spindle and distaff were sure and familiar markers of a capable life lived, no matter how ordinary it had been. In combining the two we find that the domestic task was elevated through its association with Mary. Of course there were many other personal associations that viewers and patrons of this iconography could have extrapolated, but these present the two most basic, consistent, and rather obvious suggestions. Patrons and viewers who saw Annunciation images in the catacombs, especially the image in Cubiculum P of the Catacomb of Priscilla, were presented with an image classically derived in both composition and symbolic detail, but now, for the first time, placed within a Christian narrative context.

Apart from the Annunciation scene discussed previously, other significant images of Mary are found elsewhere in the Catacombs of Priscilla. Located above an arcosolium approximately 30 meters from Cubiculum P is the earliest extant image of the Virgin and Child with the prophet Balaam foretelling the star that would mark the birth of a king:

I shall see Him, but not now: I shall behold Him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth, and Edom shall be a possession. Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly. Out of Jacob shall come He that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Balaam's reluctant yet divinely inspired prophecy revealed that a unique star, associated with Israel, would accompany a future sceptre or king who would eventually rule the world. Additionally, a third depiction of the Virgin and Child receiving three magi adorns an arch inside the Greek Chapel. The Greek Chapel is near the ancient cryptoportico or underground portico, a very large rectangular area with masonry walls, groin vaults, and a stairway that led outdoors onto the estate grounds of a suburban Roman villa in what is today the Villa Ada park on the Via Salaria. The chapel has been positively identified as a site for Christian worship, and specifically as a site where pious Christian women gathered on sacred occasions for overnight funerary vigils amidst the potent realm of the deceased and the vapours of holy sanctity.<sup>5</sup> These three images of the Virgin, situated within close proximity of each other, demonstrate a popular taste for images of Mary celebrated in her role as a mother and idealized matron.

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4 Num. 24:17–19.

5 Denzey, *Bone Gatherers*, 89–124.