

INTRODUCTION: THE BONE GATHERERS

At a flashpoint in tensions during three tumultuous years of persecutions and pogroms from 249 to 251 CE, Rome's bishop, Cornelius, faced the fearsome Decius, the first emperor to launch a systematic and cruel hunt for Christians in Rome and abroad. Decius had already put to death Cornelius's predecessor, Fabian, in 250. The papal seat sat vacant for nearly a year as the Christian population of Rome roiled against the emperor and fractured under the force of external and internal pressures. Cornelius had been elected against his wishes, for 251 was a dangerous year to become the bishop of Rome. Decius himself had declared that he would rather vie with a claimant to the imperial throne than tolerate another bishop of Rome (Cyprian, *Epistle* 55.9).

Two years later, Cornelius was dragged outside the city to a Temple of Mars and ordered to throw a pinch of incense on an altar in honor of the emperor and the gods of Rome. Cornelius stood his ground and refused. The imperial response was swift: the bishop was summarily decapitated. His body lay in pieces, unmourned, until it was brought back to the city by a hero as unlikely as she is unknown—a “blessed” (*beata*) Roman Christian woman by the name of Lucina. Lucina brought the pope's body to her lands that adjoined the public Christian Catacombs of Callixtus, and she buried the pieces in her family crypt. She ordered his grave to be marked only with a simple marble slab and the Latin inscription “Cornelius, bishop and martyr.” The stone exists still, unearthed from Rome's soft soil in 1849.¹ Ancient sources record the date of Cornelius's burial: September 14, 253 CE.

Lucina was Rome's first bone gatherer of pious literature, a woman of substance and means who collected the bodies of the saints to give them a proper burial. It was this same Lucina who had earlier carried the body of a far more powerful saint than even the pope and martyr Cornelius to sanctuary on her lands. Before Cornelius's martyrdom, she was his friend, and she had exhorted him to exhume the bones of the city's patron saints Peter and Paul. They deserved, after all, far better than the relative ignominy of a temporary catacomb burial outside Rome's southernmost circuit. Lucina

wanted them to be glorified, brought closer to the sacred spots where the apostles had so long before forfeited their lives. Cornelius took Peter's bones to the Vatican Hill, where they still lie under the main altar of St. Peter's (*LP* 1. 66–67). But Lucina herself moved—so the story goes—the bones of Saint Paul. She piously “translated,” or carried the holy relics, to a peaceful spot along the long road that led to Rome's port city Ostia, the Via Ostiensis. There, she had them buried close to the place where, according to tradition, Paul had been beheaded, on a piece of property that belonged to her.² With that, Lucina was allied with the pope as his twin conservator of Rome's paired saints and as, in a real sense, the “owner” of Paul's relics. Cornelius had Peter's bones, but Lucina's prize—buried on her own property—was no less worthy of reverence. Lucina's ownership of Paul's bones, along with her ability to influence the bishop of Rome, would have made Lucina a powerful figure—arguably the most powerful of the lay Christians of Rome. At least, this is what we might be inclined to think.

If we look through the annals of the early Roman Catholic Church, through the letters and martyr acts and inventory lists and pilgrims' guides that provide our earliest accounts of the history of the church at Rome, more and more bone gatherers like Lucina appear, though none quite as spectacular and influential as she. They are always women. The young virgin Viatrix collects the bodies of her brothers Simplicius and Faustinus—flung off a bridge—from the shallows of the Tiber and buries them on the lands of the matron Generosa at the sixth milestone of the Portuan way.³ A matron named Hilaria gathers the bones of Daria, a vestal virgin converted to Christianity, after she is immured.⁴ The wealthy widow Cyriaca provides a burial space for the martyred saint Lawrence.⁵ Octavilla gathers up Saint Pancratius's body to bury in her own lands by the Via Aurelia.⁶ The devout matron Cecilia gathers the bodies of her martyred husband and her brother-in-law, Valerianus and Tiburtius, and takes them to her own land.⁷ Pope Damasus (366–384 CE) recounts how a noble lady, Lucilla, translated the sacred relics of the martyrs Peter and Marcellinus from relative ignominy on Rome's Via Ardeatina to a “more suitable place” off Via Labicana, Rome's cemetery known as *ad duas lauros*, “by the two laurel trees.”⁸ Church records and legends—for some *are* fictions—preserve scores of similar tales of women and bones and burials on women's lands.

What do we make of this pattern? In one important sense, the bone-gathering motif harkens back to the ends of the four New Testament gospels, where the sole narrative function of a group of women—differently constituted in each gospel—is to provide Jesus with a proper burial.⁹

The women come to anoint Jesus's body, to tidy up the areas in front of his grave, to make sure the tomb hadn't been violated, to grieve. They are resigned to the reality of death. They cannot hope for the Resurrection, because they are mired in the conviction of death's inevitability. Even the unnamed woman of the Gospel of Mark who comes to anoint Jesus's feet and head in preparation for his death has it wrong: she sees only the descent of the flesh into end, only body that must be prepared, not its possibilities for Resurrection. She is a symbol for faithful devotion, but not of hope and belief and full understanding.¹⁰

The gospel stories of Jesus's mourning women—and these early Roman Christian accounts of women bone gatherers—make inherent sense to us, because we assume that women are somehow more profoundly of the flesh and more directly connected to the cycles and rhythms of life. We see them as natural caretakers, the first to mourn, and the ones who mourn most deeply. In the vast range of Christian art, perhaps the only scene more moving than the sight of Jesus's mangled, lacerated body hanging from the cross is the *Pietà*, the limpness of Jesus's corpse spilling over the lap of his sorrowing mother. We perceive the connection between women and death as so natural that we scarcely stop to see what it might conceal. Why does Mary Magdalene go to Jesus's grave to grieve, but the male disciples to receive the revelation of the Resurrection? Why is it Lucina, of all people, who takes Paul's body tenderly to her own lands or sees to the decent burial of a flayed and decapitated pope? And why does the importance of the women bone gatherers end just there, with their having fulfilled their limited role in Christian stories as mourners and caretakers of the dead? Who, after all, tells us that women were assigned this role, and only this one? How was it that we come to remember—and in the case of Lucina, even forget—the early Christian women of Rome as mourning women?

If we move past the “naturalness” of a woman gathering the body of a dead saint to bury it and think instead on the meaning of this action in its historical context, we see something different. The phenomenon of Rome's bone gatherers reveals the importance of Roman Christian women as female patrons—*patronae*—of the church. Scholars of the ancient world have certainly recognized the importance of lay patronage in culture making.¹¹ Robin Lane Fox, a British historian of Rome, observes: “The motives and achievements of these donors were central to the civic culture within which Christians lived. It was they who financed the amenities of life and from them civic culture was delicately suspended.”¹² Lane Fox speaks here of the pagan *men* who established the civic infrastructure that enabled the social

networks and religious organizations of the city to flourish. But pagan women—barred from most other forms of public political and social engagement—could be equally generous in their civic beneficence. And following their example, female patrons of Christianity could also become powerful custodians and arbiters of meaning, of the holy.¹³ Just as Mary Magdalene's presence at Jesus's tomb made her the first witness to the Resurrection and thus (to some) the foremost of the apostles, so does Lucina's donation of her lands for burial—and her status as owner of Paul's bones—make her one of Christian Rome's first bearers of the holy.

Medieval historian Patrick Geary has challenged us to think of the bones of saints, apostles, and martyrs not just as sacred objects but as commodities in the economic world of late antique and medieval Europe. Bones are unique; they are simultaneously people and things.¹⁴ The roles and status of late ancient and medieval women in this trafficking and commodification of people as things have not received the attention they might. In a culture in which wealth was inherited and goods acquired by purchase, theft, or gift, wealthy women could be formidable allies to a pope—or equally formidable adversaries. This book, then, is partly about the vital—yet largely hidden—role of women as religious and economic agents, commodity brokers in the spiritual marketplace that was the newly Christian city of Rome.

But let us return to our bone gatherer Lucina. If we seek to learn more about her, we immediately meet with some puzzling elements to her story. She appears in ecclesiastical records again and again. In a fifth- or early-sixth-century martyr text called the *Passio Sebastiani*, she fishes up the body of its hero, Saint Sebastian, a soldier from the first cohort of Praetorian guards, from the sewer into which it had been thrown.¹⁵ In this account, Saint Sebastian himself appears to her in a vision and spurs her on, begging to be buried *ad catacumbas, iuxta vestigia apostolorum*: in the catacombs, next to the remains of the apostles Peter and Paul.¹⁶ The year, we learn, is 290 CE, under the long persecution of Rome's next-to-last pagan emperor, Diocletian. But here, a problem of logic emerges: by that time—according to our accounts concerning Lucina's burial of Pope Cornelius in 253 CE—Lucina had *already* moved Paul's body to the Via Ostiensis.¹⁷ But there is no mention of this event in the *Passio Sebastiani*. As far as its author was concerned, in 290 CE the bones of the apostles still resided in the catacombs off the Via Appia. And in another martyr account, the *Passio Processi et Martiniani*, it is Lucina, again, who transfers the bones of Processus and

Martinianus to her land.¹⁸ But Processus and Martinianus were the legendary jailers of Peter and Paul at Rome's Mamertine prison, and the setting for this *passio* is the late first century, the age of Jesus's own eyewitnesses and apostles. In the final reckoning, Lucina appears in no fewer than eleven ancient sources. Each time, she appears as a bone gatherer. But the sources disagree on whose bones she collected and when precisely she lived. Apparently, she was alive, gathering bones, in the first century, and still alive, gathering bones, two hundred years later.

Perhaps, then, Lucina never existed. At least one historian of late ancient Christianity, Kate Cooper, dismisses her as a "pious fiction."¹⁹ If this is the case, what of her sister bone gatherers, the women whose acts of generosity and piety laid the physical foundations for Rome's cult of the saints, the women patrons of Christianity who donated their time and their lands? Some of these certainly existed. In the town of Velletri, not far from Rome, archaeologists have unearthed a dedicatory stone dating to the fourth century stating that a woman named Faltonia Hilaritas had founded a Christian cemetery there.²⁰ The inscription, at the very least, should make us wonder if women bone gatherers were merely literary inventions. Unfortunately, archaeological evidence itself is generally opaque; in the absence of supporting literary or epigraphical sources, we cannot tell from excavating a cemetery who, definitively, founded it. Faltonia Hilaritas left us a dedicatory inscription—but it is the only one.

On the other hand, many of the bone gatherers have very suspect histories. For example, the wealthy bone-gathering matron Lucilla, who moved the bones of the saints Peter and Marcellinus, seems to be but a variation on Lucina. Kate Cooper calls her, in fact, Lucina's literary twin or *Doppelgänger*.²¹ And as for Lucina's legend—that she moved Paul's bones in the 240s CE to her own lands on the Via Ostiensis—we know from earlier sources that by the year 200 CE Paul's bones were venerated at a small shrine called a *tropaion* on that road.²² Perhaps Lucina lived much earlier than the 240s and had moved Paul's bones to her land sometime before ecclesiastical historians noted the *tropaion* in 200 CE. Or perhaps—just perhaps—she never existed at all.

The question of whether Lucina ever really existed is of vital importance to understanding the nature of early Roman Christianity generally and the role of women in Roman Christianity specifically. It is not a question easily answered; nor can we be sure either way, given the state of the evidence. If we look for evidence for women's activities as influential patrons of the early Roman church, no source preserves this better than visual

and archaeological sources. This book tells the story—or really, the stories—of these lost and forgotten women. It takes seriously the possibility that fictive characters like Lucina might conceal real women such as Faltonia Hilaritas who inspired these narrative re-creations. And it looks to a set of sources different from those that scholars conventionally read (or write about) to illuminate and amplify their lives: the visual, archaeological, and epigraphical sources that preserve vital evidence for women’s history, activities, piety, and influence in early Christian Rome. The relevance of these sources for reconstructing ancient women’s lives is only just beginning to be recognized. In 1985, the scholar Margaret Miles was the first to emphasize their significance:

If we were, for the moment, to put all of our historical literary texts back on the shelf, to shelve even our knowledge of them, and to reconstruct a history of Christianity on the evidence of visual texts alone, we would see immediately that from the earliest Christian images there is a continuous depiction of women and the development of subjects and themes based on the experience of women.²³

Miles is absolutely correct, though perhaps not daring enough. If we were to “shelve” our knowledge of literary sources and turn only to the neglected visual evidence, we would still have only a partial, imperfect picture of ancient history. To round out that picture, we must dare to read all extant sources together, remembering all the while that they were in some sort of meaningful—though often implicit—dialogue with one another. But that is not all I have done here; I have often pushed beyond or through the sources to bring to bear the full weight of my knowledge of the ancient world, and to explore largely unknown territory concerning what the lives of individual women were like. There are no fictions in this book, but the reader will come across something akin to feminist midrash—that is to say, like some Jewish feminist theologians, I want to sing stories of these lost women’s lives. I want to write these women back to life. This process involves not just listening and looking intently, but engaging the imagination, reconstructing, drawing connections, making assumptions, looking again, walking and rewalking through a space, actively wondering and pondering, holding these women’s bones in my hands, and sitting in front of their images for many, many hours.

I have endeavored to make this book *experiential*—that is to say, I am primarily interested in what late ancient Roman women experienced in their lives and how they thought about themselves. To do this is not merely to

pore through documents and to look at pictures; it's also about, I believe, experiencing and re-creating for readers what late ancient Rome was like and what ancient women likely saw, thought, felt, and lived in the city's dark, private spaces. Each chapter of this book, then, highlights not just one or two "lost" women, but also a specific place. These places can be seen—indeed, experienced—today, and I have spent much time in them all. I hope readers of this book will go to Rome and will stand in front of Veneranda's image or Turtura's fresco or the Velata's grave to ponder these women and their places deeply, whereas they might before just have passed by, unseeing.

Although nearly two millennia separates us from the lost women of ancient Rome, I remain convinced that their lives can become more vibrant to us if we pay attention to the experience of seeing what they left behind for us to see. For this reason, I have delved into theoretical work on the history of response and have been most engaged by scholars (especially art historians) who are less concerned with ancient brush or building techniques than they are with the question of viewer-centered responses to art.²⁴ Those who commissioned a catacomb painting, I assume, were less concerned with artistic technique than they were with conveying information. We can work backward from the catacomb painting to try to figure out what that information was. There are plenty of clues to help us: we can compare similar paintings; we can understand that painting in relation to the space that houses it, or consider the painting in its fullest social and cultural context. After that work has been done, we can try to bring in an understanding of our own responses to a painting in a space. What do we see, and why? What colors the way we see, and how is that likely to be like or unlike what an ancient viewer saw, or what an ancient *patrona* of art and architecture intended?

In telling the story of these lost and forgotten women, this book grapples with the problem of powerful women for the early Christian church in Rome. It explores why—as the church grew in power and influence—women came to be most valued within specific, narrowly defined social roles and why, for the most part, real women came not only to be marginalized but to be rendered virtually invisible. There is no simple tale here of the oppression of women. There is a tale to be told, but it is one of the church's creation and manipulation of collective memory and of subtly shifting perceptions of women and femaleness in the process of Christianization. It is about the process of recollection and remembrance and the role of seeing in

the construction of institutional memory. I am interested in instances in which real women were sometimes “made male” in ecclesiastical and scholarly perception—like the women of some catacomb banquet paintings who are later repainted as unambiguously male figures, as I discuss in chapter 4. Not uncommonly, we find that women were simply obliterated through the process of male-centered remembering, made absent in the face of overwhelming evidence for their active presence in a variety of early Christian roles. By the time that Lucina and her bone-gathering sisters appear on ecclesiastical imaginative horizons during the fifth and sixth centuries, they are no longer anything but mere literary refractions of real, influential women who once marshaled their considerable resources into a church that gave them no other avenues for their active agency in shaping the notions of “tradition” that would come to form the backbone of Catholicism.

This book is not a sweeping history of the Roman Catholic Church, nor even of women in the history of Catholicism. Instead, I focus on only a handful of “case studies” of forgotten women, most of whom lived within the same span of around a hundred years (ca. 250–350 CE), all within the city of Rome. I have imposed these chronological and geographical limits on the mass of historical sources that remain from a period that historians call “late antiquity” (or, more recently, “late ancient Christianity”)—that is, the late third to the eighth centuries—because such narrow focus makes this book feasible; otherwise, it would be a far bigger task than I might hope to complete in a single, readable volume. It also zeroes in on a century when Catholicism began to take shape in earnest. The conversion of the emperor Constantine in 312 CE initiated a new era for the church. But recently, scholars have acknowledged that a good part of the shaping of a newly Christian Rome had to do with the efforts of the city’s people and their own competing visions of Rome as a new City of God.²⁵ The fourth century, then, witnessed the success of the papacy over rival factions of Christians in the city—a victory that came, in no small part, from its strenuous efforts to create and manipulate Christian historical memory. *Catholic* self-identity—and *Catholic* concepts of “tradition”—began to stand for *Christian* self-identity and tradition as a whole. It is also a century in which the roles of women in the church begin to coalesce into forms different from those previously seen. It is the age that witnesses the rise of the virgin and the martyr, the age in which powerful Christian widows are limited and censured, and the age immediately prior to the rise of women’s monasticism, the first proponents of which were drawn—almost implausibly—from a tight circle of Roman aristocratic families. Those women—the ascetic aristocratic

women of late-fourth-century Rome—have been much discussed.²⁶ Their immediate predecessors, however, have not. It is to these women that I turn my attention.

To find the lost women of third- and fourth-century Rome, one must look in unexpected places. As I've noted, historians traditionally turn first to textual sources. This inclination reflects our training as historians and our own comfort with reconstructing history from text. But the written sources for women during this time period have been read and reread countless times in the past few decades; they get us only so far. There are remarkably few of them, and the evidence they yield is invariably from the upper classes. To find nonelite women, we need to look elsewhere. The best place to look, as it happens, is at archaeological sites, which in this case are the burial places of Rome: the catacombs. This is because death provided the only opportunity for hundreds of thousands of otherwise unknown Roman women or their loved ones to leave some sort of physical record of their existence. This record may be a grave or the body itself; it may be an epitaph or a portrait. Most of the material remains we have from the late Roman period are, in one way or another, products of commemorating the dead. To cite a figure from only one type of evidence, fully 75 percent of the hundred thousand or so inscriptions left by the Romans, chiseled into stone or marble, are tombstones. Properly used, they represent an untapped gold mine of information about ancient women. Remarkably, no single book exists that examines women's lives in early Christianity based on the material and physical evidence that women left behind, whether it be a tomb, an epitaph, or a funerary image. This book moves in the direction of filling that lack.

It must be said, however, that visual, archaeological, and epigraphical evidence from Rome's Christian catacombs rarely preserve authentic women's voices. What this type of evidence *does* provide is some limited but fascinating evidence for what women were doing, how people (men and women) wanted to preserve women in memory (and which aspects of their identity were important to preserve for memory), and what was important for people outside the most powerful circles of Rome's ecclesiastical and aristocratic elite to remember and show about themselves and the women in their families. It is important to remember that these sources, too, are refracted through lenses of both class and gender; they represent male obsessions with commemoration and status at least as much as they do women's own lives and self-representation. Despite all this, however, they do often show women's activities differently—and in different proportion—to what

we find in the church's official textual record. The reason for this is partly one of scale—catacomb art and inscriptions were simply too prolific for the church to expend much energy on. Second, commemorative art, tombs, or inscriptions for ordinary women were not public statements issued by the church that might be read by outsiders. In that sense, they were not “official” documents crafted to shape public response. Thus this book reads together some of those official textual sources from the period with this visual and archaeological evidence to find, highlight, and ponder the women of the third and fourth centuries. It aims to interrogate our evidence anew—not just with suspicion, but with more knowledge of alternative visions and voices.

Many people are interested today in what ancient women's lives were like and what opportunities women had. Some scholars have offered an attractive, even inspiring image of how these ancient women were our sisters in emancipation, paving the way for the historical and political struggles of women today.²⁷ These scholars are not necessarily wrong. Women's roles in the early church were in marked decline from the first to the fourth centuries. It is indeed possible to massage the ancient sources to show women in the roles of leaders, priests, men's equals, but only if we ignore evidence from the third and fourth centuries. Lest this book disappoint those seeking powerful Christian women priests, I answer that the “lost women” in this book, although they did not exercise the sort of power that we use to define terms like “successful” or “independent” or “leader,” nevertheless actively participated in forms of power and authority. They were women with agency—rallying their sometimes substantial financial resources to participate actively in the dominant discourses of religion. Furthermore, they left records of this participation: monuments, inscriptions, and images of themselves.

I've elected to start our visits to Rome's lost fourth-century women not with a Christian but with a young pagan freedwoman (that is, a member of something like the “middle class”) who lived in the third century. I'm interested not so much in what she believed, but in things more visceral—in what her death tells us about the way that Romans thought about important things, from marriage and women's bodies to how to carry on when people we love die. Chapter 2 delves into the mind and heart of an anonymous freedwoman of the mid-fourth century who kept to her ancestral rites in a Christian Empire even as she buried her Christian daughter. The example of the woman I have named “Proba” alerts us to the challenges that women

faced to exercise religious agency in a patriarchal social structure (particularly nonelite women, whose options were more limited than were those of their elite sisters)—and the considerable ingenuity with which nonelite women carved a small but sure place for themselves within the late Roman world. In chapter 3, I look at the same woman's own grave and compare her distinctive use of visual rhetoric with that of her contemporary and social equal, a Christian woman buried at the Catacombs of Priscilla. I see both these women—however different their religious convictions and daily lives—as simultaneously engaged in genuine efforts to portray themselves as learned and active participants in the culture of fourth-century Rome. Their poignancy, for me, lies in the degree to which their efforts were in vain.

Chapter 4 explores one of the jewels of early Christian art and architecture, the Greek Chapel in the Catacombs of Priscilla. Its famous image of a meal scene has been one of the most controversial in early Christian art, if only because different factions of scholars and viewers have invested so much in their debate over whether its participants were women. I use the meal scene painting to speculate on what seems to me clearly an example of women's sacred space. Chapter 5 visits the grave of Veneranda, a fourth-century Christian woman who venerated Saint Petronella, the legendary daughter of Saint Peter. Chapter 6 investigates two more spaces: the church of the matron martyr Saint Cecilia in Rome's Trastevere district and the church of the virginal child martyr Saint Agnes, far beyond the city's walls to the northwest. Both chapters contrast what late ancient Christian women *did* with how they came to be remembered. The final chapter, 7, reads the pontificate of the highly controversial pope Damasus (366–384 CE) as a triumph not just of Catholic unification and clarification of vision and purpose, but a concerted effort of an all-male institution to deliberately masculinize Christian Rome—to the detriment of Rome's female patrons and sponsors.

To understand what the women featured in this book might mean for us today, and to learn what we can from them, we need to take women such as the pagan "Proba" (chapters 2 and 3) or her Christian contemporary Veneranda (chapter 5) on their own terms, and to seek to understand them in their full historical context. This is to listen attentively to what they have to say, to elevate them from historical obscurity, and to avoid distorting them into our own models of idealized womanhood. We're left with a complicated, lively world—full of equally complicated and lively women.