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Fall 2020

# The Institute of Archaeology & Siegfried H. Horn Museum Newsletter Volume 41.4

Robert D. Bates

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## The Institute of ARCHAEOLOGY Siegfried H. Horn Museum



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INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
HORN ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
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NEWSLETTER

Paul J. Ray, Jr.	Editor
Constance E. Gane	Assoc. Editor
Randall W. Younker	Assoc. Editor
Robert D. Bates	Assoc. Editor
Benraimel Velázquez	Asst. Editor

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## Women in the Early Christian Church

Andrews University and the Institute of Archaeology has been involved in numerous excavations over the last 50 years. Most projects have been centered in Transjordan as part of the Madaba Plains Project. However, in recent years Randall Younker, Director of the Institute of Archaeology, has been working on a new excavation site of San Miceli near the town of Salemi, on the island of Sicily. The project centers around a small Christian village with a church and its burials. This church dates to the early Byzantine period and may have been part of the formation of the Christian church on the island. The excavation has discovered a number of important finds including a collapsed building, a mosaic and several interesting graves. Dr. Younker shared the results of these discoveries and the significance of the graves in a lecture entitled Archaeology, Women and the Early Christian Church.

In 1893, the original excavations at San Miceli discovered approximately 58 graves in and around the church, including a woman buried inside the church. Although it is not unusual for people to be buried inside a Christian church, this woman, found in Grave 54, was buried in a prominent place by the altar in the front of the church, next to a priest. Her grave's goods included her gold diadem, gold necklace and rings, and a gold medallion of the Roman emperor Gratian (AD 367-383), who was known for his focus on the Trinity. These grave deposits suggest that she was a very wealthy woman with a deep Christian faith. While it is uncertain exactly who this early-Christian woman was, it is clear that the prominence of her burial place, inside the church, and the contents of her grave, shows that she was a woman of high status in the community with considerable wealth who perhaps served as the central patron of the church itself. This grave, along with others found in the churchyard, reveal a complex relationship between the high-status women

(cont'd on p. 2)



Sixth Century Fresco of Cerula, a Female Bishop, Catacombs of San Gennaro, southern Italy.

in the community, and the organization and leadership of the early Christian church. Dr. Younker believes that the woman buried in Grave 54 may have been the wealthy patron responsible for building the Christian church at San Miceli and who possibly donated the land for that purpose.

Women played an important role in the development of the early Christian Church. Population studies from the period show that as Christianity grew in the Roman empire, women made up the majority of Christian membership. It appears that women were attracted to the Christian church because it was more accepting of females than Roman society, in general, and provided more opportunities for religious participation and leadership. In general, Roman society did not value female life in the same way that it valued male life. A male child was welcomed into the family, while a female child represented a financial liability. The *patria familia*, or male head of the household, had the power of life and death over each member of the family, and decided whether a child should live or die. When a female child was born it was often rejected, and left at the city gate or killed outright, and then disposed of in the sewer or cast into the river. In Delphi, a survey of 600 tombstones of the Roman city showed that only six families raised more than one daughter; the others were discarded. However, things were different in the newly-emerging Christian religion. Christianity offered an alternative to these grisly Roman practices because it valued all human life, including women. It rejected infanticide, exposure, or other means of killing unwanted babies. It treated women with a level of respect not practiced within the general population, which allowed women to rise to levels of leadership within the church community not open to them in society at large. As a result, women made up over 60% of the Christian church in the early centuries of its development, and financially supported its ministry.

Wealthy women patrons used their influence and connections to spread the

Christian message throughout the Roman world. They opened their homes as house churches for early Christian meetings, donating their property to the church to continue the work. In Rome, 33% of the earliest churches were donated by women. These house churches became the fore-runners of official ecclesiastical structures, and later basilicas were often built on the original sites. Although women were excluded from leadership in public life, their role as leaders in the church continued to grow throughout early Christian times. The public world was considered the world of men, but the private world, especially within their own homes and by extension the houses where early Christians met, was the world of women. Since they were often educated and the principal patron of the church, they could control the finances, organize the meetings and officiate the services.

Evidence showing the leadership roles of women in the early Christian church has been found on tombstones, sarcophagi, artwork, and early documents of the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. Wealthy Romans created elaborate and often exquisitely decorated tombs, including large sarcophagi, and beautifully painted wall frescos. Upper-class people depicted themselves wearing togas, while holding a scroll in one hand, with a basket of scrolls at their feet, and being surrounded by sages or philosophers. Christian women decorated their tombs with similar images. In some tombs important Christian women are seen, depicted with the same scroll motif surrounded by four of the apostles or other biblical figures, showing that their principal role in life had been a teacher of the gospels. Women are also shown wearing clerical garb, reading from biblical scrolls, being consulted by the apostles, and in one example Peter and Paul putting their arm around the women, indicating their roles as priests or presbyterēs. Two 5th century frescos appear to show women bishops receiving ordination directly from the four gospels, depicted over their heads, indicating they were divinely ordained women.

After Christianity was recognized by Constantine, on his deathbed, the Christian movement began to expand exponentially. House churches in larger cities like Rome were no longer sufficient to hold the growing church membership. Larger, basilica-like structures, were introduced to accommodate the masses and Christian worship moved from private homes to larger public buildings, calling for priests to become increasingly more public figures, which challenged the role of women in church leadership. The roles of priests and bishops became a very lucrative career and increasing numbers of men turned to the church to avoid military service and taxes, leaving women with fewer opportunities in these larger contexts. However, a conflict began to arise between the leaders of the largest Christian communities, centered in regional capitals, over who should have central authority for establishing churches and assigning priests and bishops.

Unlike in urban settings, rural churches continued to be based on the house church model. Churches were often organized by wealthy women in the community, and they ordained their own priests and bishops based on a person's personal calling, regardless of gender. Women could ordain priests, baptize new believers, give religious instruction, and hear confession. Priests and bishops, both male and female, had families that often worked together to minister to a congregation, passing on their role as presbyterate to their children, along with the responsibilities of managing the church. Members of the patrician class often donated large sums of money and land to support the church, which was then controlled by the local priest or bishop, exempt from taxes. Nobles, kings, and wealthy landowners appointed their own priests and bishops to oversee these properties, and to keep their wealth within the community. Urban churches, however, coveted these land holdings and feared that allowing rural churches to continue to appoint their own leadership might introduce religious heresy, and present a challenge to their authority.

During the 4th-5th centuries, the Bishop of Rome began to introduce restrictions on the ordination of priests and bishops, seeking to centralize his authority throughout the Christian world. One of the primary restrictions was aimed at preventing women from having leadership roles in the church. The male-dominated clergy considered women to be unfit to function as priests. Many declared that sex was sinful and that women were the root of all evil, distracting men from carrying out their responsibilities to the church. By the mid-5th century, the Bishop of Rome began to assert the primacy of the See of Rome over the entire Christian world. In 495 AD, Gelasius I sought to remove women from the priesthood and other leadership roles.

Soon, separate communities were created for men and women serving the church; effectively preventing priests and bishops from passing their leadership roles and church property to their families. Women were no longer allowed to hear confession, baptize new believers, or function as priests, even within their own gender-restricted community. Priests, who had until the 6th-7th century been married, were restricted from interacting with women, and forced to live apart from their wives. Celibacy became a sign of religious piety, giving priests authority over ordinary people, including nobles and kings. It also gave them the spiritual power to turn the eucharist bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, changing it from a symbol, celebrated

equally by all, to a sacrament that could only be administered by the male clergy.

Despite continued efforts to suppress women in church leadership roles, many continued to function as ordained priests and bishops. Historical documents and archaeological evidence from tomb fresco paintings show that outside of the larger urban centers, many smaller rural communities, continued to ordain women as priests and bishops. They flourished in areas where these communities had a long history of women as priests and bishops serving as respected church leaders. This situation continued until the Bishop of Rome achieved absolute primacy over the Christian church, and ended the practice in the late 12th century. (Robert D. Bates)



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# RANDOM SURVEY

## *New Discovery in Aswan:*

In 2016, archaeologists working at Qubbet Al-Hawa, a cemetery in Aswan, discovered the 133 m causeway of Sarenput I, the nomarch (or governor) of the First Nome, during the reign of Sesostris I (1971-1928 BC), in the Middle Kingdom Dynasty 12. The causeway led from the Nile River to his tomb (no. 36). More recently, a 2.0 m high buttress wall, part of the architectural support for the first upper terrace tombs, including those of the Old Kingdom Elephantine governors Harkhuf and Heqaib, have been found.

## *Ziklag Found:*

Although a number of sites have been proposed over the years, the site of biblical Ziklag has now been located at the site of Khirbet a-Ra'i, between Kiryat Gat and Lachish. It has evidence of the Philistines, including stone structures, bowls, and lamps from the 12-11 centuries BC.

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FAX: 269-471-3619

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## *Ancient Cuneiform Documents:*

Among the 23,000 tablets dating to ca. 1900-1850 BC, found at Kaniš, in Turkey, are contracts and court rulings. At this time, the Assyrians had established a trade network between Aššur, on the Tigris River, and their colony at Kaniš. Merchants made trips on donkey back between the sites. The Assyrians devised various investments, and wrote their own letters, instead of dictating them to scribes. The letters also bear witness to women, acknowledging their role in commerce and innovation. They looked after the business, at Kaniš, while the men traveled.

## *Greek Aqueduct Found:*

Archaeologists have recently found an aqueduct and numerous Hellenistic and Roman-period artifacts in Piraeus, the port of Athens. The aqueduct, which probably brought water from Athens, was built during the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian, and abandoned after the Goths invaded Greece in the third century. Besides Greek ceramics and statuary, numerous wooden objects such as appliances and furniture have been found in nearby houses.

## *Assyrian Reliefs Found:*

Archaeologist in northern Iraq have recently found ten carved stone reliefs that decorated a canal system. The 8th century BC panels display a procession of Assyrian gods, including Ashur riding on a dragon. Other figures include Ishtar, Shamash, and Nabu.

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