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VIRGA IN THE HANDS OF CHRIST, MOSES AND PETER: PAGAN HERITAGE OR CHRISTIAN NOVELTY?*

Keywords: Aurelii Hypogeum, miracles, slave liberation, *virga*

In one of the earliest Christian depictions in *Cubiculum A₃* of the Catacombs of Callixtus, dated to the

beginning of the 3rd c. (**Fig. 1**), where Moses is portrayed performing a miracle, he holds a rod or staff, commonly referred to as a *virga* with which he strikes a rock so that water comes out.¹ The scene corresponds literally to the Old Testament, according to which Moses was equipped

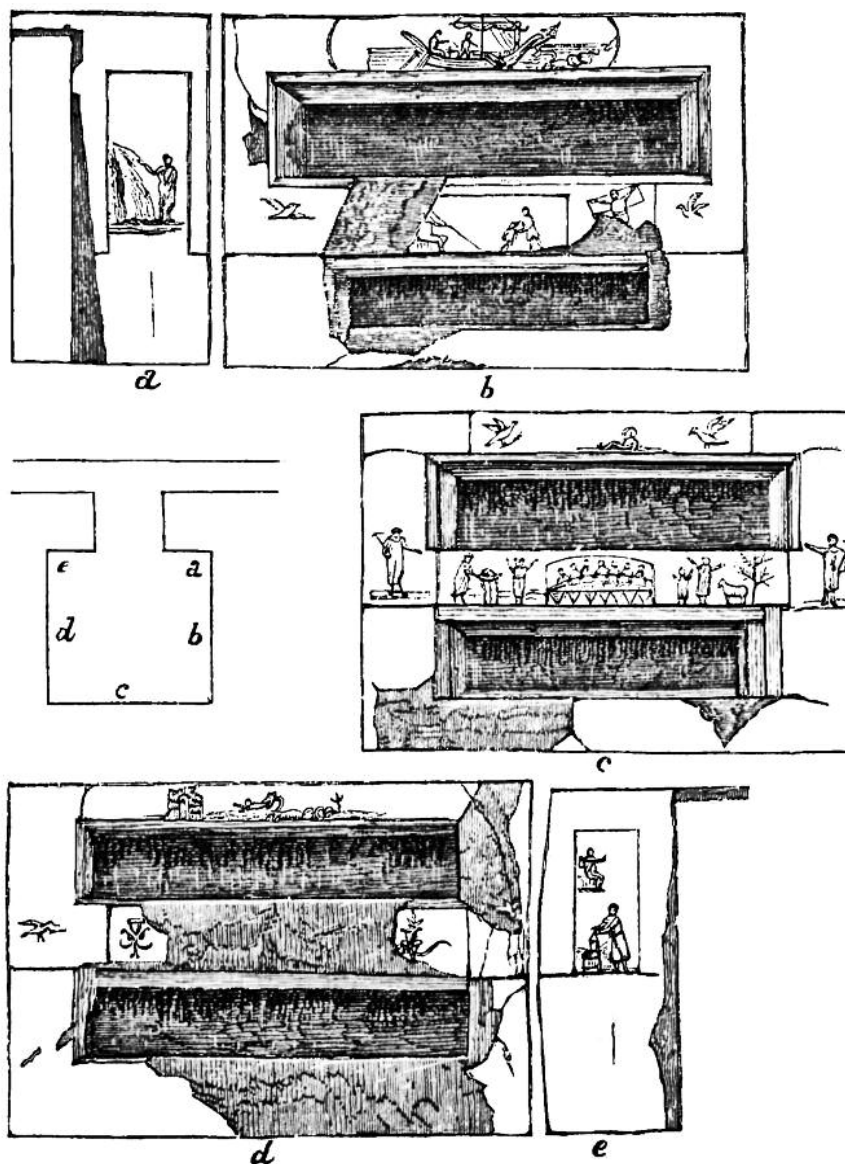


Fig. 1. Moses with the miraculous source (a), *Cubiculum A₃*, Area I, the Catacombs of Callixtus (F.X. KRAUS, *Roma Sotterranea. Die römischen Katakomben*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1879, fig. 52).

Ryc. 1. Mojżesz z cudownym źródłem (a), *cubiculum A₃*, Area I, Katakumby Kaliksta.

* The paper was presented at the Symposium in Kazimierz ("Sympozja Kazimierskie") organised by The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin on 28–30 September 2012 in

Kazimierz Dolny, Poland.

¹ F. BISCONTI, *Introduzione*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*, Città del Vaticano 2000, 40, fig. 32.



Fig. 2. Raising Lazarus from the dead, *Cubiculum A₆*, Area I, the Catacombs of Callixtus (Drawing E. Jastrzębowska).

Ryc. 2. Wskrzeszenie Łazarza, *cubiculum A₆*, Area I, Katakumby Kaliksta.

with a miraculous walking staff when he met God in the burning bush on Mountain Horeb (Ex 4, 2–5). Moses used the staff to do miracles: in front of Pharaoh (Ex 7, 10), when crossing the Red Sea (Ex 14, 16–27), and finally to make water come out of a rock in the desert (Ex 17, 5–6). It is commonly assumed in the literature that it is the image of Moses that provided inspiration for presenting others with similar rods in early Christian art:² Christ when performing miracles, especially when raising Lazarus from the dead (e.g., in *Cubiculum A₆* in the Catacombs of Callixtus, dated to the beginning of the 3rd c. (Fig. 2)³ and on a tomb relief in the Capitoline Museums dated to the end of the 3rd c.⁴); Ezekiel when reviving dry bones (at the front of a sarcophagus in the Vatican Museo Pio Cristiano, dated to the first quarter of the 4th c.),⁵ and St Peter when performing the water miracle (the front of the sarcophagus of Sabinus, in the same museum, dated to the same period (Fig. 3).⁶ The Bible does not mention any such miraculous instruments that these figures could use when performing

miracles. Both the Church Fathers and contemporary researchers are convinced that the *virga* in the hand of Christ, the new Moses, is symbolic of his spiritual power: his Godly power.⁷ The meaning of the symbol is deeply rooted in the Ancient tradition, in which a staff or rod was an attribute of power, as an ordinary *ferula* for lashing disobedient slaves or disciples or as a *vindicta* for distinguishing a state official and for liberating slaves as well as in the most mundane function as a *pedum* for controlling animals (Fig. 4).⁸ Besides, in

Greek art and less often in Roman art, a staff was held by messengers and heralds as a sign of being a god's or a monarch's missionary. In the Roman representational art of the Imperial era, a staff symbolised power – *virga virtutis*, and was presented as a simple or decorative sceptre in the hands of judges, procurators, consuls and emperors.⁹

In Christian iconography, however, the *virga* has been treated as a supernatural instrument. Apart from the miracles mentioned above, Christ uses it to raise a boy from Naim (e.g., the front of a sarcophagus in the Catacombs of St Sebastian, the first third of the 4th c.).¹⁰ Jesus holds a *virga* also on reliefs depicting the transformation of water into wine at the Wedding at Cana (e.g., the aforementioned sarcophagus of Sabinus). Though less frequently, he is also depicted with a staff in the scenes of the miraculous multiplication of bread, as on the front of the aforementioned sarcophagus in the St Sebastian catacombs or on a fresco in the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter (Fig. 5).¹¹ St Peter can also be portrayed with a *virga* in other scenes from

² Cf. first of all: M. DULAËY, *Le symbole de la baguette dans l'art paléochrétien*, "Revue des études augustiniennes" 19, 1973, 3–38 and U. UTRO, *Virga*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *Temi...*, 300–301.

³ Cf. J. PARTYKA, *La résurrection de Lazare dans les monuments funéraires des nécropoles chrétiennes à Rome*, Varsovie 1993, 115–116, No. 18, pl. 28.

⁴ F.W. DEICHMANN, G. BOVINI, H. BRANDENBURG, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage. Erster Band. Rom und Ostia*, Wiesbaden 1967, 339–340, No. 811, pl. 130; D. HNATIO-JĘDRZEJCZAK, *Scena wskrzeszenia Łazarza na sarkofagach z Rzymu, Italii i Galii (III–V wiek)*, Warszawa 2011 (MA thesis, Institute of Archaeology, University of Warsaw), 65.

⁵ F.W. DEICHMANN, G. BOVINI, H. BRANDENBURG, *Repertorium...*, 5, No. 5, pl. 1; cf. M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 6.

⁶ F.W. DEICHMANN, G. BOVINI, H. BRANDENBURG, *Repertorium...*,

6–7, No. 6, pl. 2; see also: G. KOCH, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, München 2000, 186–188.

⁷ M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 16–19; U. UTRO, *Virga...*, 301; patristic sources – see: M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 16–19.

⁸ E. CUQ, *Vindicta*, (in:) Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, vol. 5, Paris 1919, 1200–1221; F.J.M. DE WAELE, *The Magic Staff or Rod in Graeco-Italian Antiquity*, Gent 1927, 51–54, 127–132; M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 13.

⁹ See first of all: F.J.M. DE WAELE, *The Magic Staff...*; M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 14–15.

¹⁰ F.W. DEICHMANN, G. BOVINI, H. BRANDENBURG, *Repertorium...*, 111–112, No. 176, pl. 43; cf. G. KOCH, *Frühchristliche...*, 166–167.

¹¹ J. WILPERT, *Roma Sotterranea, Le pitture delle catacombe romane*, Roma 1903, pl. 45:1; M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 5.



Fig. 3. The sarcophagus of Sabinus, The Vatican, Museo Pio Cristiano (Photo courtesy Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, neg. No. 57991).

Ryc. 3. Sarkofag Sabinusa, Watykan, Museo Pio Cristiano.

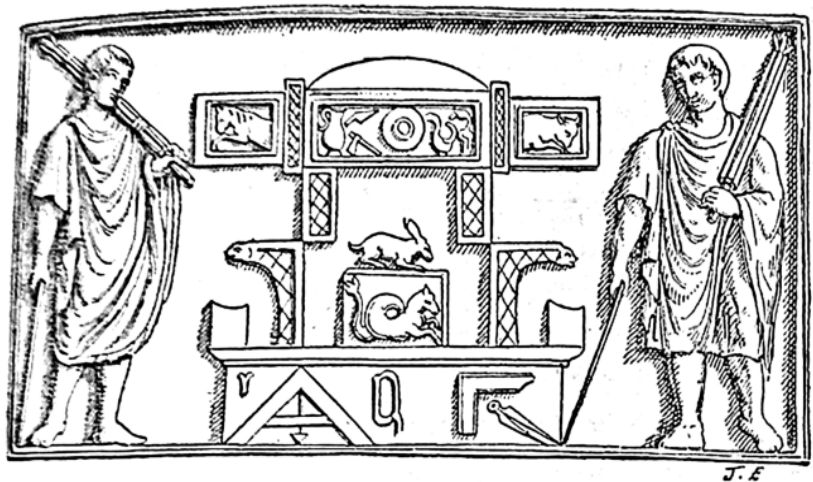


Fig. 4. Roman relief with lictors holding *fasces* and *vindictae* (E. CUQ, *Vindicta...*, fig. 7506).

Ryc. 4. Relief rzymski z liktorami trzymającymi *fasces* i *vindictae*.



Fig. 5. Christ multiplying bread, the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, 4th c. (Drawing E. Jastrzębowska, based on H.A. STÜTZER, *Die Kunst der römischen Katakomben*, Köln 1983, fig. 25).

Ryc. 5. Chrystus rozmnażający chleb, katakumby Marcelina i Piotra, IV w.

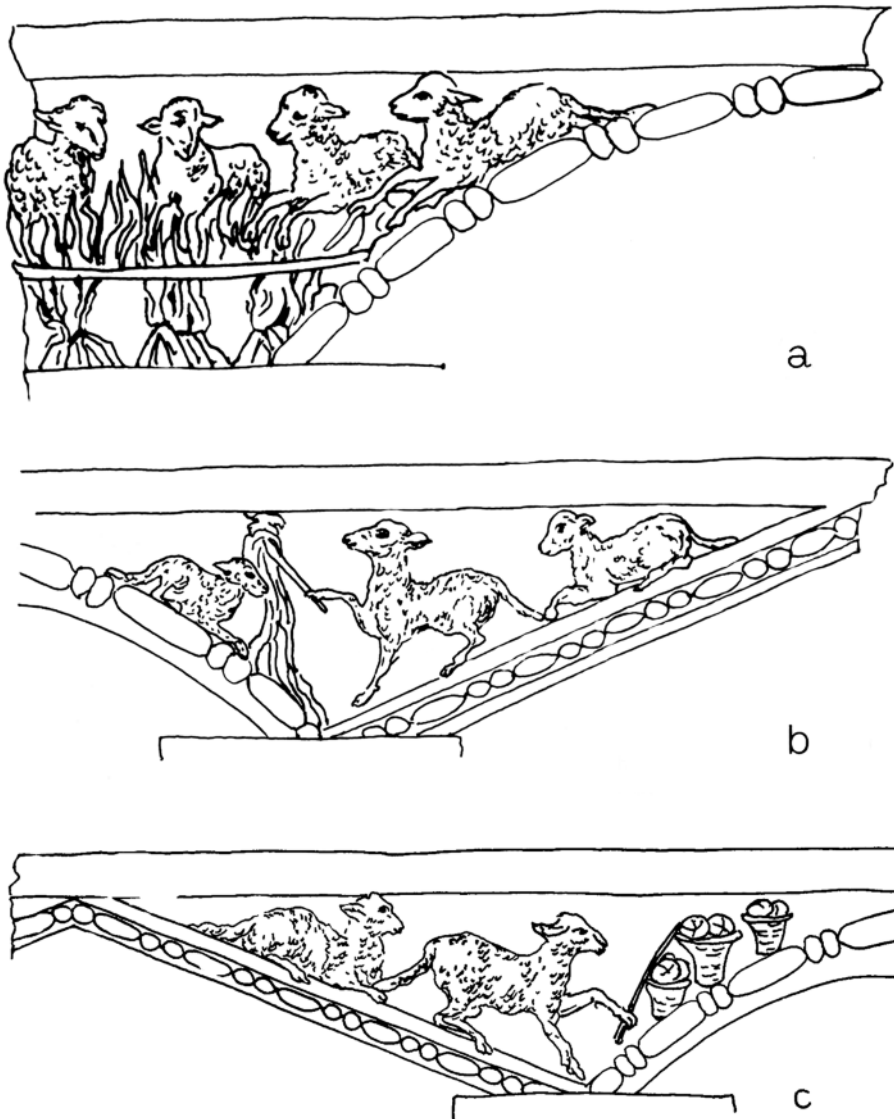


Fig. 6. Relief details from the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, AD 359 (E. STRUTHERS MALBON, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, Princeton 1990, fig. 17). a – Three Youths in the fiery furnace; b – Moses with the miraculous source; c – multiplication of the loaves.

Ryc. 6. Detale reliefu z sarkofagu Juniusa Bassusa z 359 r. a – Trzej Młodzieńcy w piecu ognistym; b – Mojżesz z cudownym źródłem; c – Rozmnożenie Chleba.

the cycle, as those on the Vatican Dogmatic Sarcophagus dated to the second quarter of the 4th c.¹² It is not necessary to mention here all the existing depictions of miracles performed by Christ and other Biblical heroes using the *virga*, suffice it to say that a comprehensive list was published forty years ago by Martine Dulaey, with some items being unfortunately wrongly dated.¹³ The majority of catacomb scenes recorded by Dulaey picture acts of raising from the dead. Instances of using a staff to help the living get out of oppression are in turn more frequent in decora-

tions on bottoms of bowls or drinking cups, so-called gold-glass, originating from the Roman catacombs and dated to the 4th c., such as the gold-glasses used in a bottom of a large Roman bowl in the British Museum in London.¹⁴ An interesting case, although overlooked by Dulaey, are symbolic depictions of scenes from the Old and New Testament on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus from 359, with Biblical figures portrayed as lambs holding the *virga* (Fig. 6). Presented in this way are an angel by a fiery furnace with three Jews, Moses striking the rock as well

¹² F.W. DEICHMANN, G. BOVINI, H. BRANDENBURG, *Repertorium...*, 39–41, No. 43, pl. 14; M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 6; see also G. KOCH, *Frühchristliche...*, 175–177, 184–185.

¹³ M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 3–7, 19–38.

¹⁴ D. BUCKTON (ed.), *Byzantium. Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture*, London 1994, 32–33, No. 9:c; cf. M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 26–27.

Fig. 7. Figure with a *virga* on a fragment of a gold plated glass bowl, Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum (Drawing E. Jastrzębowska, based on K.-P. GOETHERT, cat. no. I.11.54, (in:) A. Demandt, J. Engemann (eds.), *Imperator Caesar Flavius Constantinus. Konstantin der Große. Ausstellungskatalog*, Mainz am Rhein 2007).

Ryc. 7. Postać z *virgą* na fragmencie czarki szklanej ze złotą dekoracją, Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum.



as Christ multiplying loaves and raising Lazarus from the dead.¹⁵ Besides, single figures with the *virga* are also attested,¹⁶ typically on gold-glass, such as a fragment of a large bowl from the British Museum,¹⁷ and on another small gold-glass from the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn (Fig. 7), and less frequently on catacomb paintings, such as a fresco in the 5th c. Catacombs of St Januarius in Naples.¹⁸

As far as the origin of this motif is concerned, it seems that my reinterpretation of the paintings from the Hypogeum of the Aurelii in Rome can shed some light on the role of the *virga* and on the significance of the figures holding it.¹⁹ There is no doubt that there is a controversy to be explained, considering the number of existing hypotheses on the subject: for Raffaele Garrucci (1812–1885) the origin of the *virga* motif goes back to Jesus in the scene of the Wedding at Cana,²⁰ for Hans Achelis (1856–1937) –

to Jesus in the scene of rising Lazarus,²¹ and for Joseph Wilpert (1857–1944) the *virga* is a magic wand (*virga thaumaturgica*) or a symbol of power (*virga virtutis*).²² According to Alexander Hermann, the depiction of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead with a staff originates from the Egyptian opening of the mouth ritual.²³ Taking into account the varied hypotheses of the pagan origin of the *virga*, Martine Dulaey sees in its Christian version a symbol of God's spiritual and liberating power, which manifests itself through a specific act of intervention in the life of a human.²⁴ Jan Partyka describes this meaning more precisely with reference to the scene of raising Lazarus, stating that in that scene Christ reveals his power to liberate a human from sin, and consequently from death.²⁵ Umberto Utro is not in the least concerned with the origin of the motif, which he considers to be no more than an instrument of power, *virga virtutis*, present already in paganism.²⁶

¹⁵ E. STRUTHERS MALBON, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, Princeton 1990, 72–75, figs. 17–24.

¹⁶ M. DULAHEY, *Le symbole...*, 29–31.

¹⁷ O.M. DALTON, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum*, London 1901, pl. 30.

¹⁸ F. BISCONTI, *Introduzione...*, pl. 61:a.

¹⁹ E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Darstellungen der manumissione vindicta im Hypogäum der Aurelier in Rom*, "Boreas" 35, 2012, 53–64.

²⁰ R. GARRUCCI, *Vetri ornati di figure in oro trovati nei cimiteri dei*

cristiani primitivi di Roma, Roma 1858, 65.

²¹ H. ACHELIS, *Die Katakomben von Neapel*, Leipzig 1936, 58; cf. M. DULAHEY, *Le symbole...*, 30.

²² J. WILPERT, *Roma Sotterranea...*, 41.

²³ A. HERMANN, *Ägyptologische Marginalien zur spätantiken Ikonographie*, "Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum" 5, 1962, 63–67; cf. J. PARTYKA, *La résurrection...*, 48.

²⁴ M. DULAHEY, *Le symbole...*, 23, 33.

²⁵ J. PARTYKA, *La résurrection...*, 48–49.

²⁶ U. UTRO, *Virga...*, 300.

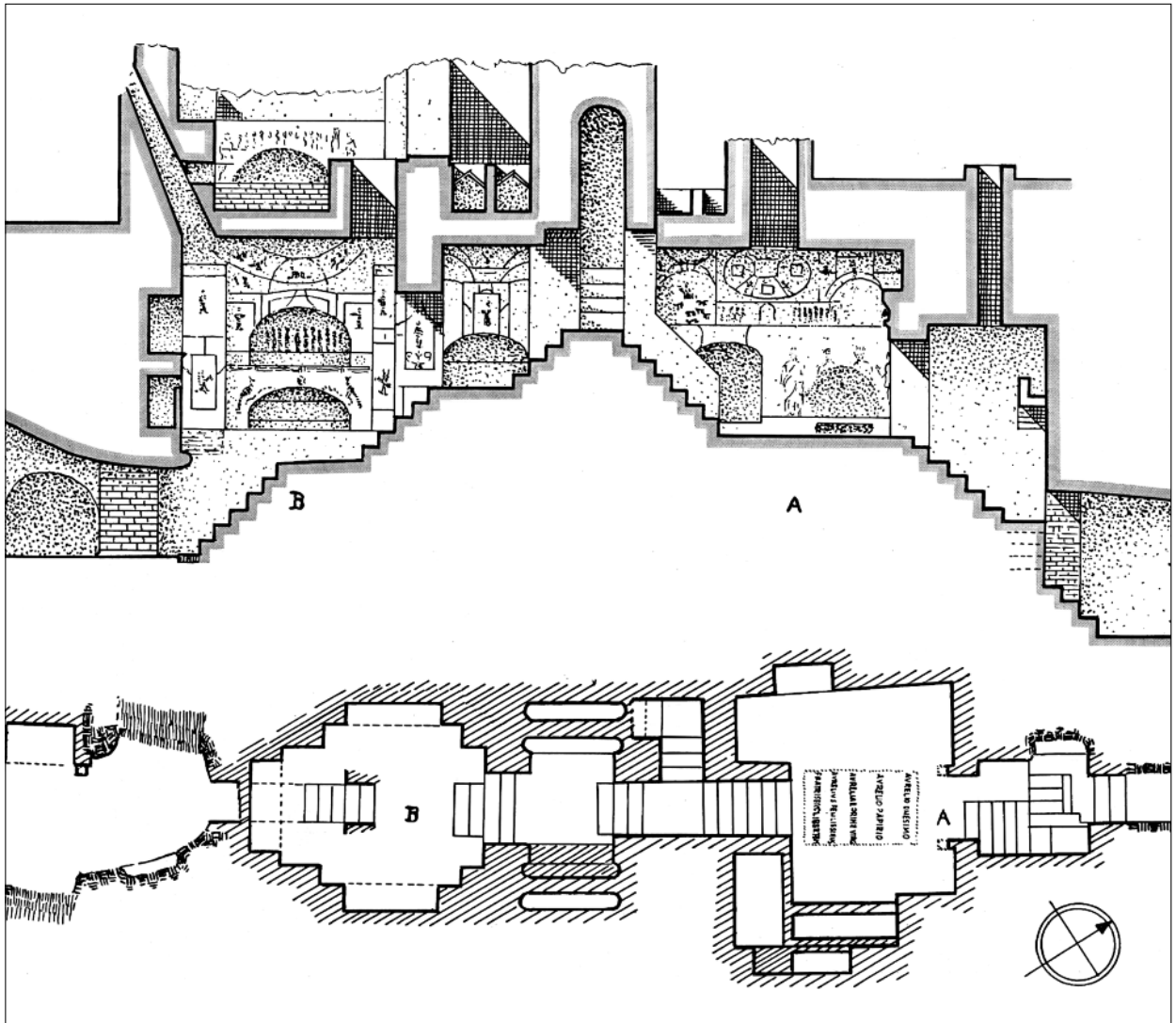


Fig. 8. Cross-section and diagram of the Hypogeum of the Aurelii, AD 220–230 (E. NASH, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie des antiken Rom*, Tübingen 1962, fig. 1075).

Ryc. 8. Przekrój i plan Hypogeum Aureliuszy, 220–230 r.

There are many figures with the *virga* in the relatively well preserved frescos in the Hypogeum of the Aurelii in Rome (Fig. 8), unanimously dated to 220–230.²⁷ Researchers however disagree as to the religious identity

of the owners of the tomb: were they pagans, Gnostics, crypto-Christians, orthodox Christians, or heretics?²⁸ The polemics on these issues as well as the interpretation of the most disputed scenes in the overground part of the tomb

²⁷ See F.M. TOMMASI, *Materiale ceramico e laterizio proveniente dall'ipogeo degli Aureli*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli in viale Manzoni, restauri, tutela, valorizzazione e aggiornamenti interpretativi*, Città del Vaticano 2011, 71–80.

²⁸ See first of all: G. BENDINELLI, *Il monumento sepolcrale degli Aureli al viale Manzoni in Roma*, "Monumenti Antichi" 28, 1922, 289–520; J. WILPERT, *Le pitture dell'ipogeo di Aurelio Felicissimo presso Viale Manzoni in Roma*, "Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Memorie" III/1, 2, 1924, 1–42; P. MINGAZZINI, *Sul carattere eretico del sepolcro degli Aureli*, "Atti

della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia, Rendiconti" 19, 1942–1943, 355–369; C. CECHELLI, *Monumenti cristiano-eretici*, Roma 1944, 3–119; J. CARCOPINO, *De Pythagore aux Apôtres, étude sur la conversion du monde romain*, Paris 1956, 85–156; N. HIMMELMANN, *Das Hypogäum der Aurelier am Viale Manzoni. Ikonographische Beobachtungen*, Akademie der Wissenschaften un der Literatur in Mainz, Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse 7, Mainz – Wiesbaden 1975, 7–26; F. BISCONTI, *L'ipogeo degli Aureli in Viale Manzoni: un esempio di sincretismo privato*, "Augustinianum" 25, 1985, 889–903; F. BISCONTI (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*

will not be dealt with in this paper, since they are not in any way germane to the discussion of the *virga*. The underground part of the tomb consists of two chambers: the bigger northern one and the smaller southern one. All the walls and vaults of staircases and chambers are covered with paintings. On the floor of the bigger chamber is a mosaic inscription with the names of the tomb owners: *Aurelio Onesimo Aurelio Papirio Aureliae Prim(a)e virg(ini) Aurelius Felicissimus fratri(bu)s et collibert(ibus) b(ene) m(erentibus) f(ecit)*.²⁹ It cannot be concluded whether the brothers mentioned in the inscription are genuine relatives or members of the same funerary collegium, or else fellow freedmen liberated at the same time. It cannot likewise be established whether the tomb belonged to pagans or Christians.

The content of the frescos in the hypogeum chambers will not be discussed in detail, as this would surpass the scope of the present paper.³⁰ All that is relevant to our considerations is that there is no Christian representation of any kind on the frescos. Of greater interest to us are the scenes depicting the *virga*. In the bigger chamber, at the upper part of the walls, the scenes in a horizontal row present a coherent sequence.³¹ It starts on the western wall with the image of a shepherd-philosopher and a rider welcomed by the crowd of city inhabitants and goes through the northern wall with the picture of a villa and garden, to the eastern wall depicting twelve men and a woman at the banquet as well as a mythological scene with Ulysses and the witch Circe.³²

On the wall opposite the entrance, directly over the mosaic tomb inscription, there is a large painting of a *villa urbana*. The most interesting part of the vast house, pictured together with a neighbouring garden, is the large court surrounded by porticos, where among the standing

crowd we can see a man dressed in white, holding a long straight staff/rod (**Fig. 9**). The man points the staff towards a woman in front of him, accompanied by two or three men, clearly standing apart from the crowd. In the villa garden we can also see three men and a woman standing.³³ The same villa is also depicted as part of the city on the neighbouring wall of the chamber. The sketchy representation shows the city from above and from a side, and the villa with the portico-surrounded court can be seen on a river, towards the right edge of the painting. The same court shown in a close-up discloses what was hidden in the picture of the whole city: the garden at the back of the villa, with the crowd gathered in the court. The presence of the man with the staff in the centre is of great significance for interpreting this scene. Although the object in question is almost not visible today, it can be seen very clearly on old photographs and watercolour copies (**Figs. 9, 10**) of the scene. It is surprising that the researchers analysing the paintings in the Hypogeum of the Aurelii so far have typically identified the object – depicted at several places – mainly as an attribute of Ancient magicians (*virga magica*), even though, as Nikolaus Himmelmann rightly noted forty years ago, iconography lacks any analogous depictions of this kind.³⁴ It is thus much more plausible to associate the *virga* or *festuca* in the hand of the man standing in the middle of the crowd with an indispensable attribute of state functionaries, used by them in the ceremony of releasing slaves – *manumissio vindicta*.³⁵ Freeing a slave *per vindictam* was a legal act which could be performed in a private house as long as a state official was present. The slave owner/patron could perform this act only through the third party, who offered freedom to the candidate, by touching him with a *virga* and proclaiming the formula *addictio* by the silent presence of the patron.³⁶

²⁹ A. FERRUA, G.B. DE ROSSI, *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae Septimo Saeculo Antiquiores*, vol. VI: *Coemeteria in Viis Latina, Labicana et Praenestina*, Roma 1975, 15931; cf. recently: L. DE MARIA, *L'iscrizione musiva dell'ipogeo degli Aureli in viale Manzoni: restauri e nuove riflessioni*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 223–228; M. GIOVAGNOLI, *L'apparato epigrafico dell'ipogeo degli Aureli*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 229.

³⁰ See: A. PERGOLA, *Il quadrante delle interpretazioni*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 81–124.

³¹ G.L. GRASSIGLI, *L'ipogeo degli Aureli: tra trascendenza e identità pagana*, (in:) I. Colpo, I. Favaretto, F. Ghedini (eds.), *Iconografia 2001. Studi sull'immagine (Atti del Convegno – Padova, 30 maggio – 1 giugno 2001)*, Roma 2002, 414–415; M. BRACONI, *Il cavaliere, il retore, la villa. Le architetture degli Aureli tra simbolo, rito e autorappresentazione*, (in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 135–164.

³² F. BISCONTI, *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 897; G.L. GRASSIGLI, *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 414–415; A. LATINI, *Quadro omerico*,

(in:) F. Bisconti (ed.), *L'ipogeo degli Aureli...*, 173–192.

³³ A. PERGOLA, *Il quadrante...*, 95–98, 120–123.

³⁴ N. HIMMELMANN, *Das Hypogäum der Aurelier...*, 18–19; cf. also M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 13–16.

³⁵ F.J.M. DE WAELE, *The Magic Staff...*, 128–129; M. DULAËY, *Le symbole...*, 15; J. PARTYKA, *La résurrection...*, 48.

³⁶ See first of all: Ch. LÉCRIVAIN, s. v. *Libertus, Libertinus*, (in:) Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, vol. 3/2, Paris 1904, 1201–1204; Ch. LÉCRIVAIN, s. v. *Manumissio*, *ibid.*, 1585; H. LECLERCQ, *Manuel d'archéologie chrétienne*, vol. 1, Paris 1907, 504–576; W.W. BUCKLAND, *The Roman Law of Slavery: The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian*, Cambridge 1908, 437–597; S. TONDO, *Aspetti simbolici e magici nella struttura giuridica della manumissio vindicta*, Milano 1967; J.A. HARRILL, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, Tübingen 1995, 53–56, 158–178; J.A. GLANCY, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, Oxford 2002, 94–96.



Fig. 9. Court of the villa, with the crowd and the functionary with a *virga*, the Hypogeum of the Aurelii, *Cubiculum A* (G. BENDINELLI, *Il monumento...*, pl. 11).

Ryc. 9. Dziedziniec willi z tłumem i urzędnikiem z *virga*, Hypogeum Aureliuszy, *cubiculum A*.

All this could perhaps shed new light on the word *colliberti* included in the mosaic *titulus Aurelii* on the floor of the chamber. It can only be regretted that today's rich knowledge on the form, conditions and ceremony of

manumissio vindicta is based on written sources and studies and not on iconographic representations,³⁷ with the 1st c. fragment of a marble relief from the Museum in Mariemont, Belgium being a sole exception.³⁸

³⁷ J.A. GLANCY, *Slavery...*, 18–30.

³⁸ Ch. LÉCRIVAIN, *Manumissio...*, 1585, fig. 4827; E. CUQ, *Une scène d'affranchissement par la vindicte au premier siècle de notre ère*, "Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres" 59, 1915, 537–551, fig. 1; E. CUQ, s. v. *Vindicta*, (in:) Ch. Daremberg, E. Saglio (eds.), *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, vol. 5, Paris 1919, 909, fig. 7504; F.J.M. DE WAELE, *The Magic Staff...*, 127–132; H. LÉVY-BRUHL, *Le bas-relief No 26 du Musée de Mariemont*, "Revue Archéologique" 32,

1930, 217–222, fig 1; J. KOLENDO, *Éléments pour une enquête sur l'iconographie des esclaves dans l'art hellénistique et romain*, (in:) M. Capozza (ed.), *Schiavitù, manomissione e classi dipendenti nel mondo antico*, Roma 1979, 163–164, fig. 2; for the bibliography see: E. PACK, *Manumissio in circo? Zum sog. Freilassungsrelief in Mariemont*, (in:) W. Eck, H. Galsterer, H. Wolff (eds.), *Studien zur antiken Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift Friedrich Vittinghoff*, Köln – Wien 1980, 190, n. 7. For more details see: E. JASTRZĘBOWSKA, *Darstellungen...*, 58, pl. 20, fig. 6.

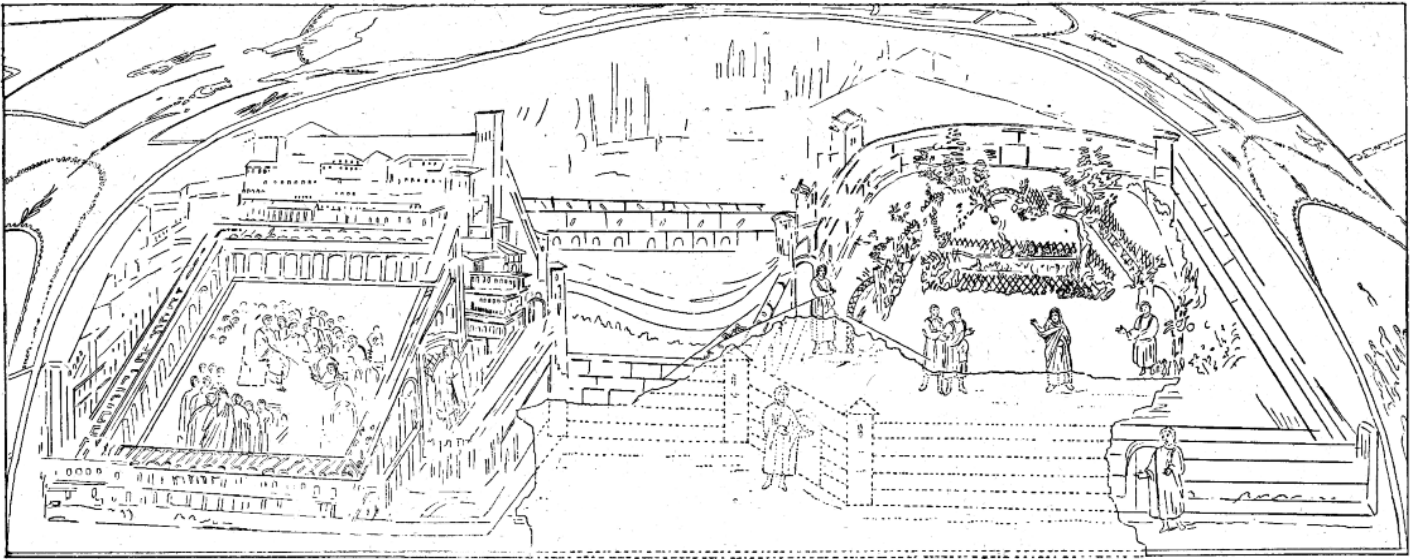


Fig. 10. Villa with the court and garden, the Hypogeum of the Aurelii, *Cubiculum A* (J. WILPERT, *Roma Sotterranea...*, 40, fig. 9).
 Ryc. 10. Willa z dziedzińcem i ogrodem, Hypogeum Aureliuszy, *cubiculum A*.

It is therefore likely that the main figure in the court of the villa depicted in the Hypogeum of the Aurelii is a Roman functionary and the three or four major figures standing in front of him are the most prominent persons buried in the hypogeum, also portrayed as figures in the garden (Fig. 10) and mentioned in the mosaic inscription: Aurelius Onesimus, Aurelius Papius and Aurelia Prima.³⁹ The group may also include Aurelius Felicissimus, the founder of the tomb and the patron of the collegium of the Aurelii. The other people in the crowd at the city gates and in the court would then be brothers and fellow freedmen (*fratres et colliberti*), referred to in the same tomb inscription.

The walls and vaults of the other, smaller chamber of the hypogeum are decorated with paintings presenting individual figures of philosophers and also a few figures of women with a scroll or a *virga* pointing to what was alleged to be a cross. This hypothesis was however undermined by Himmelman, and the “cross” thought of as the key evidence testifying to the Christian character of the frescos turned out to be a fragment of a hanging garland.⁴⁰ The most important image of the smaller chamber is however a figural composition on the central medaillon of the vault

(Fig. 11). There are three standing figures, with a man on the right holding a rod (*virga*) over the centrally placed female figure having her head wrapped in a mantle (*palla*), and the other man at her other side standing with a scroll in his right hand. Both of these men look like typical philosophers, with beards, wearing white tunics and mantles (*pallia*) but the face of the woman is not visible. The scene has usually been conferred with a deep symbolic-religious sense, related to some kind of initiation rite either of pagan or Gnostic character.⁴¹ However, a new interpretation of the scene can be proposed in connection with the previously discussed court scene depicted in the bigger tomb chamber. From this perspective it is likely that the scene on the medaillon shows a moment of liberating the woman whose name was mentioned in the mosaic inscription, or some other important person buried in the Hypogeum of the Aurelii. This representation can be understood both literally, as an event that occurred in the life of the woman, and metaphorically, as liberation from the earthly slavery to the real freedom in the afterlife. Due to the lack of inscriptions and analogous iconographic representations from the same period as the frescos discussed here, the interpretation proposed above must remain a hypothesis. As has been mentioned above, there are more

³⁹ Similarly M. BRACONI, *Il cavaliere...*, 151.

⁴⁰ N. HIMMELMANN, *Das Hypogäum der Aurelier...*, 24; A. PERGOLA, *Il quadrante...*, 109–110.

⁴¹ Cf. A. PERGOLA, *Il quadrante...*, 110–112, 124.

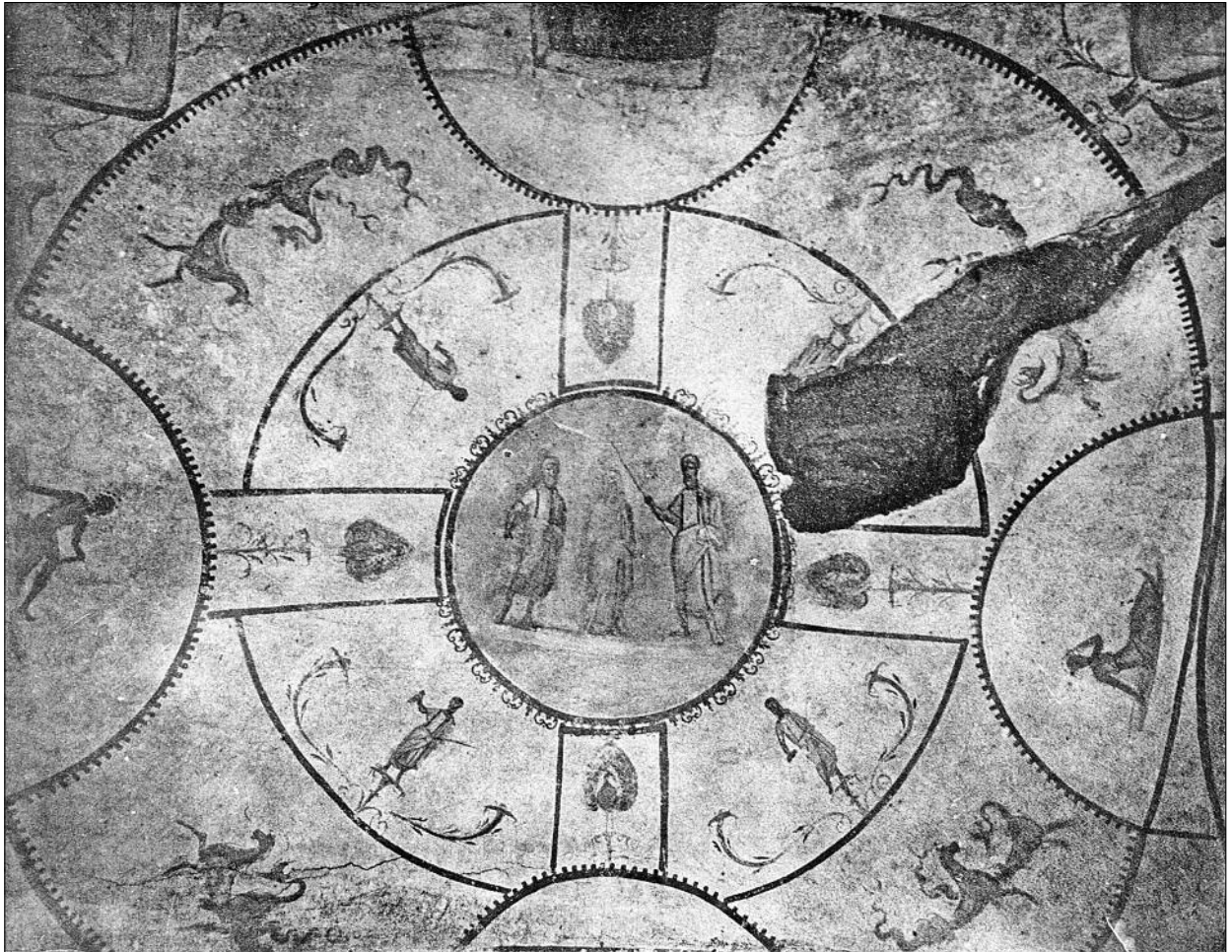


Fig. 11. Three figures in the central medaillon on the vault, *Cubiculum* B, the Hypogeum of the Aurelii (G. BENDINELLI, *Il monumento...*, pl. 14).

Ryc. 11. Trzy postacie w centralnym medalionie na sklepieniu, *cubiculum* B, Hypogeum Aureliuszy.

smaller individual figures of philosophers holding *virgae* in raised or lowered hands, on the walls and vaults of the chamber (Fig. 12). Such an abundance of figures of this kind is rather unique and is not attested anywhere else. They cannot be magicians, since magicians are not represented in this way in the iconography of the period. Naturally, they cannot refer to Christ himself either, since in such a number and in this iconographic context this would be out of the question. If the scenes presented in the Hypogeum of the Aurelii are indeed the scenes of *manumissio vindicta*, in which the *virga* plays an important role as an attribute of giving and receiving freedom both in the literal and metaphorical sense, then the frequent depiction of this attribute in the hands of figures painted on the walls

of the *collegium collibertorum Aureliorum* tomb is no longer a mystery.

Perhaps then, when analysing the provenance of the *virga* in the hands of Christ and other Biblical heroes performing miracles, i.e., in the images of salvation and liberation from misfortunes and death placed on Christian tombs, it would also be advisable to abandon the idea that the *virga* originates from a magic wand. The theory tying its origin to the traditional Roman instrument for liberating from slavery, i.e., the *virga* used in the *manumissio vindicta* ritual is much better founded, and in fact was somewhat shyly, as one of many hypotheses, suggested by Dulaey and Partyka.⁴² It can be hypothesised that deriving the provenance of the *virga* in the hand Christ from the

⁴² M. DULAHEY, *Le symbole...*, 37–38; J. PARTYKA, *La résurrection...*, 48.

Fig. 12. Philosopher with a *virga* on the wall, *Cubiculum B*, the Hypogeum of the Aurelii (J. WILPERT, *Roma Sotterranea...*, pl. 8).

Ryc. 12. Filozof z *virga* na ścianie *cubiculum B*, Hypogeum Aureliuszy.



instrument liberating from death, illness, poverty and all evil could also be confirmed by early Christian writings. This, however, remains to be examined in another study, preferably by a knowledgeable patrologist.

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**VIRGA W RĘKACH CHRYSTUSA, MOJŻESZA I PIOTRA: POGAŃSKIE DZIEDZICTWO
CZY CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKA NOWOŚĆ?**

W ikonografii wczesnochrześcijańskiej Chrystus praktycznie tylko w czterech scenach, odnoszących się do Jego cudownych działań, trzyma w ręku witekę/laskę (*virga*) – przeważnie nazywaną magiczną różdżką: przy wskrzeszeniu Łazarza (Ryc. 2) i chłopca w Naim oraz w cudzie w Kanie Galilejskiej (Ryc. 3) i przy rozmnożeniu chleba (Ryc. 5). W III w. sceny te (ograniczone tylko do wskrzeszenia Łazarza) były dość rzadkie, zarówno w malarstwie katakumbowym, gdzie *virga* miała formę długiej wtki (Ryc. 2), jak i wśród reliefów sarkofagowych, gdzie atrybut był grubą laską (Ryc. 3). Powszechnie sądzono, że Jezus dzierży ten atrybut cudownego działania w ślad za Mojżeszem, który według Księgi Wyjścia otrzymał laskę od Boga, aby czynić nią cuda (Wj 4, 2–5; 7, 10; 14, 16; 17, 5–6). Mojżesz rzeczywiście posługuje się taką laską w najstarszych znanych przedstawieniach swojego cudu ze źródłem wody (Ryc. 1). Później, w IV w., także Piotr w scenie swojego cudu ze źródłem trzyma podobną cudowną laskę (Ryc. 3), choć nie wspomina się jej w odnośnym tekście apokryficznym; dlatego też przedstawienia tego cudu Piotra wyprowadzane są bezpośrednio z analogicznej sceny Mojżeszowej. W scenach wskrzeszenia *virga* towarzyszy nie tylko Jezusowi, ale też Ezechielowi ze Starego Testamentu. Mimo że w Nowym Testamencie brak jakiegokolwiek wzmianki o lasce w ręku Chrystusa w opisach wspomnianych cudów, to przedmiot ten jest właśnie obecny w najstarszych zachowanych przedstawieniach tych cudów.

Artykuł niniejszy podważa powszechnie przyjmowaną proweniencję przedstawienia *virga* w rękach postaci biblijnych od różdżki magów, gdyż nie mają jej ani magowie, których wyobrażeń w sztuce rzymskiej w ogóle brak, ani żadni filozofowie, bardzo często występujący w sztuce

późnego antyku. Proponuję zatem inną genezę dla *virga* w ręku Chrystusa, wywodząc ją od *virga* = *festuca*, niezbędnego „instrumentu” używanego w Rzymie antycznym podczas wyzwolania niewolników: *manumissio vindicta*. Postuluję tę propozycję w oparciu o moją nową interpretację dwóch scen z malarskiej dekoracji Hypogeum Aureliuszy na viale Manzoni w Rzymie, z lat 220–230 (Ryc. 9–11), grobowca pogańskiego *collegium funeratitium* wyzwolenców nazwanych w zachowanej inskrypcji *Aurelii*. W scenach tych, zarówno z tłumnym zgromadzeniem na dziedzińcu willi, jak w małej grupie trzech stojących osób, główny bohater w typie filozofa trzymający *virga* powinien być interpretowany jako rzymski urzędnik dokonujący *manumissione vindicta*. Scenę wyzwolenia w obu tych przypadkach można zresztą rozumieć zarówno dosłownie, jako obraz z życia zmarłych Aureliuszy, jak i w przenośni, jako ich uwolnienie po śmierci z trosk ziemskich i przejście do życia wiecznego, co było w III w. ideą popularną na równi wśród pogan, jak i chrześcijan.

Ponadto w Hypogeum Aureliuszy pojedyncze postacie filozofów z *virga* w ręku pojawiają się jeszcze kilkakrotnie wśród malowanych wizerunków figuralnych na ścianach tego grobowca (Ryc. 12) i są bardzo podobne do postaci Jezusa z *virga* w scenach Jego cudów. Zatem może należałoby rozumieć ten atrybut Chrystusowy przede wszystkim jako pochodną tradycyjnego instrumentu służącego do wyzwolania niewolników. Byłby on wówczas w kontekście chrześcijańskim instrumentem wyzwalającym i zbawczym, w tym przede wszystkim uwalniającym od życia ziemskiego i wprowadzającym do nowego życia wiecznego.