

The ‘Written Death’ in Late Roman Collective Funerary Settlements. Some Case Studies from Rome (3rd–4th Century CE)

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In order to achieve the aims of the panel “*New research on collective burial spaces in Rome from the late Republic to the late Roman time*”, the consideration of the epigraphic documents related to the Christian catacombs of Rome – the main collective burial areas of the late Antiquity – could be actually very useful.

I present here some notes based on the data resulting from a research started more than ten years ago in the largest Roman catacomb: the cemetery of Domitilla along the via Ardeatina.¹ The data of the about 2000 records in the third volume of the corpus of the *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae nova series* related to the almost 5000 epigraphs pertaining to the entire catacomb² are available since 2008 in the on-line database of the inscriptions by Christians of Rome, the *Epigraphic Database Bari* (EDB).³

The very exceptional situation we have about the epigraphic documents from the catacombs of Rome – where the inscriptions, in large majority, still exist in their own original contexts – allow us to consider, in addition to the texts, also other features of the “written monuments”, as for example their materials or execution techniques.

Some years ago I proposed a detailed analysis of the archaeological features of the inscriptions from Domitilla catacomb, by relating them to their positioning into the two main levels of the underground cemetery.⁴ This quantitative approach to the data reported from the past ICVR edition into the EDB allows to consider this Christian catacomb no more as a monolithic and uniform community cemetery – as we are used to think; rather, as a collective burial area where it is possible to recognise, inside the common frame (managed as a whole by the ecclesiastical hierarchy), different ‘neighbourhoods’ of the subterranean spaces, where we can recognise different social levels and different patrons.⁵

Even if very precious, the ICVR edition – as other past epigraphic corpora – has a very serious gap: with only very few exceptions, it displays no photos or drawings of the inscriptions. So, about the Domitilla epigraphs we had no data about their lettering, their palaeography, their actual graphic features. A systematic survey of all accessible places of the catacomb started in 2009, in order to photograph every inscribed fragment still existing there; the aim was to have a complete and actual view of all the inscriptions and to achieve a really complete analysis of the epigraphic dossier of the cemetery.⁶

During the survey, I photographed all the epigraphic finds still existing in the cemetery – including also some inscriptions not included in the past ICVR edition by



Fig. 1: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla, general plan with the considered regions highlighted.

Angelo Silvagni and Antonio Ferrua. The association of the new photos with the EDB records has led in some cases to the amendment of the reading proposals as reported in the ICVR;⁷ to the ascertainment of the disappearance of some pieces (also of someone of those registered seen still as *in situ* in 1956), and also to the discovery of unknown inscriptions.⁸

But the really new outcome of the photographic survey is the effective chance to consider the inscriptions not according only to their texts, but also to their physical appearance, their lettering, their graphic and technical features.

We are used to think that the inscriptions of the Christians in the catacombs are ugly and badly realised: this is actually true for the most part of the cases, but it is *not always* true. Again, we are also used to think that the inscriptions in the catacombs were



Fig. 2: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla, region M (*Flavi Aurelii*).

roughly realised by the same diggers who excavated the galleries, as improvised and non-professional stonecutters. Right: but it is *not always* true.

The photographic systematic survey, here for the first time applied to an entire catacomb, has demonstrated that on the contrary there are also inscriptions from Christian underground cemeteries that very probably were made by teams of professional stonecutters, still operating in organised workshops.

I propose some examples pertaining to a single zone, the region *M* in the second level of the cemetery (so-called of the *Flavi Aurelii*: see the general plan of the catacomb in fig. 1) in use from the end of 2nd century AD – as a private independent funerary settlement until 4th, when it is completely included in the large Christian catacomb.

It is possible to identify there, in some inscriptions, a recurring outline in the images of the anchor, defined by strongly curved endings;⁹ in this same region, some images of birds show similarities, as in two inscriptions still closing the tombs in the same gallery *M4*,¹⁰ pertaining to the 3rd-century phase of the hypogaeum.

Even more convincing are the similarities among another kind of images of birds, simpler and rougher than the previous ones (see some examples in fig. 2): they are all realised in the same way, with necks defined by two collars, bodies with no plumage, bipartite tails and lightly incised paws.

These stylized images of birds appear in some epitaphs pertaining to a higher floor of the region *M* that, because of topographical and archaeological reasons, is datable not before the end of 3rd century and the beginnings of 4th century:¹¹ so, they are later than the early lowest galleries of the same region *M*. A marble slab still *in situ* to close a *loculus* in the cubiculum *M1* – surely excavated in the first phase of the hypogaeum – displays both



Fig. 3: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla, region M (*Flavi Aurelii*).

the types of bird images;¹² the displacement in the right half of the slab of the rougher image shows that it was added later, evidently because of the reuse of the grave.¹³

But the most significant evidence of the real existence of a defined stonecutters' team (or also an organised workshop, actually) operating in the region of the *Flavi Aurelii* is a group of eleven inscriptions¹⁴ that systematically show the same lettering model recurring in all of them (examples in figs. 2. 3). The letters "F" and "E" have the horizontal strokes extending beyond the point of contact with the left vertical line; the letter "A" has the crosspiece in an about semicircular shape, often overstepping the right and left strokes. The letter "A" is also defined at the top by a 'hooking' ending; we could see it, identical, also on the left in the letter "N", whose angle width at the top on the left is always the same of the letter "A" (fig. 2): these same features are evident also in the Greek epitaph of Εὐγηνία Νήα,¹⁵ probably realised by the same stonecutters' team (fig. 3). Most of these inscriptions are generically pertaining to the galleries M5 and M6, but the epitaph of *Severina* (fig. 3) is still in its original position, closing a loculus at the end of the staircases that join the two levels of the region M.¹⁶

So, we could be sure that a stonecutters' workshop realised all these inscriptions for some of the users of the region of the *Flavi Aurelii*, between the end of 3rd century and the beginnings of 4th century. Just in these decades, the hypogaeum – originally created as a private funerary settlement – seems to be in use by an organised group of Christian patrons; maybe the same patrons in the same decades realise – not too far from the *Flavi Aurelii* – another subterranean burial area, known as the "regione dello scalone del 1897" (regions H-I, see fig. 1).¹⁷

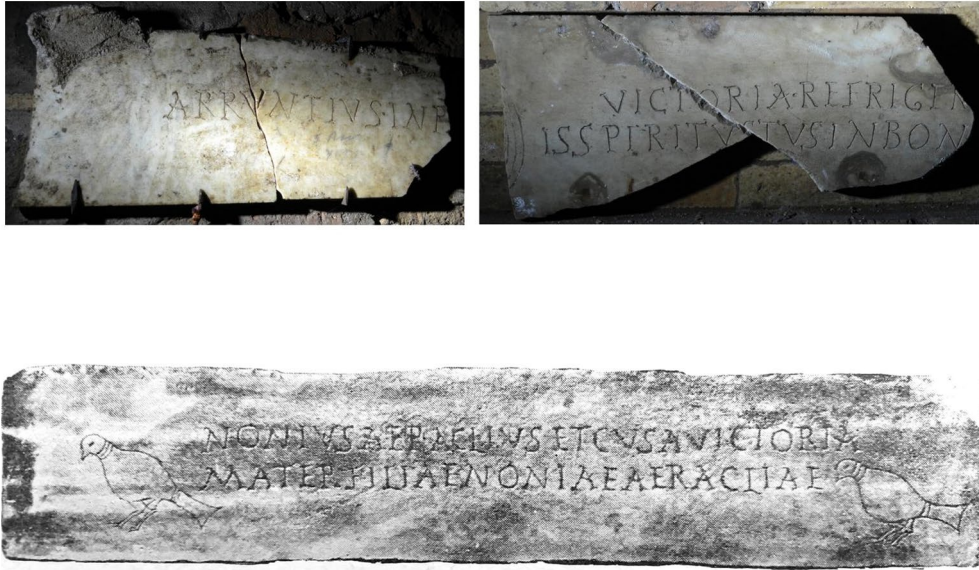


Fig. 4: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla. Some examples of very similar inscriptions from other regions in the second level.

It is remarkable that in this same zone of the cemetery there are more than twenty inscriptions produced very probably by the same stonecutters' workshop operating at the same time in the region of the *Flavi Aurelii*.¹⁸ But this is not the only case (fig. 4): the survey identified other about twenty inscriptions of the same kind also in the region "of the Good-Shepherd" (today identified as region *D*) as like to its first expansion (region *E*) in order to connect it to the other community burial areas (as the region *F*), during the merging process of the originally private and independent *hypogaea* existing in the *praedium Domitillae* into the largest Christian community catacomb in Rome suburb.¹⁹

In other zones of the second level (regions *A*, *B*, *Q*, *R*, and *T*: see fig. 1) we have only sporadic examples of these particular kind of inscriptions,²⁰ but all the spots where the survey identified samples of the activity of this specific stonecutters' workshop are all datable to the same period: between the end of 3rd century and the first decades of 4th century. For example, it is not by chance that all the three finds attested in the region *T* are all pertaining to places pertaining to its very first phase.²¹

About forty inscriptions displaying the same specific features of our stonecutters' team are also in the first level of the catacomb (some examples in fig. 5). But it is relevant that the very most part of them (exactly thirty, some still *in situ*) come from a specific zone only: the region *A* with its first expansion towards east, the region *D* (see fig. 1).²² These inscriptions could be a very reliable clue to resolve the issue about the dating of this so important and large zone: consequently, it could be assigned between the last decades of 3rd century and the beginnings of 4th century.²³

So, in total we count from different areas of the cemetery a little more than one hundred inscriptions,²⁴ produced very probably by the same stonecutters' workshop.



Fig. 5: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla. Some examples of very similar inscriptions from other regions in the first level.

The presence of the same kind of inscriptions in different and not contiguous zones of the catacomb of Domitilla (from the *Flavi Aurelii* region *M* to the region *A* in the first level; from the ‘Good Shepherd’ galleries to the region of the ‘scalone del 1897’ – or in the third level too, in the region *Q*²⁵), is not a simple coincidence in my opinion.

I already remarked that, because of different reasons, all the regions in which these inscriptions were found, are unanimously considered as datable at the end of 3rd century or – maybe better – to the first decades of 4th century. As we know, just this period is a very important phase of the history of the Christian cemeteries in Rome, more and more enlarged and systematically organised by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The occurrence of the same kind of inscriptions in different, separate and previously private zones of the cemetery is a reliable clue of their transformation process into the large community cemetery we today know as the ‘Domitilla catacomb’.

Rather than usual outcomes of requests by single patrons to a single workshop operating along the *via Ardeatina*, these so similar inscriptions could be considered also as a reliable clue of a centralised management of a new ‘community’ burial settlements, ruled by the members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Maybe, the responsables of the new, largest, collective burial areas, could have relied on some specific teams of craftsmen (from the diggers to the stonecutters, from the



Fig. 6: Some examples of the presence of same stone-cutters in different cemeteries.

architects to the painters) in order to guarantee 'standard services' to the members of the community, proposing – and not imposing – them to the *fratres*.

In addition, probably the same workshops operated for more than one collective and community cemetery: a very clear example are the well-known 'ostrian' inscriptions, pertaining to the catacomb of St. Agnes and to the near *coemeterium Maius*, along via Nomentana.²⁶ But we could recall other cases closest to the Domitilla catacomb. There are samples of strong similarities between the earliest inscriptions from the catacombs of Domitilla and Praetextatus: for example, the three slabs with an identical stylised image of a bird picking a bunch of grapes (fig. 6).²⁷ I propose also to compare an epitaph found in the cubiculum *Lc* in the first level of Domitilla' cemetery with an inscription found in the catacomb of Praetextatus²⁸: both of them show a lightly inclined anchor and a bird outlined just in the same way (fig. 7).

Among the 'standard services' previewed by the management of the community cemeteries, there is surely the chance to request epitaphs for the deceased.

Evidently this choice was not mandatory, as demonstrated by the fact that only few tombs in the catacombs have inscriptions. In the case of the underground cemetery of Domitilla (fig. 8), comparing the total amount of the inscriptions with the quantity of the graves,²⁹ the general percentage of the 'written tombs' is about 13%, but with a remarkable difference between the two main underground levels. In the first one – for the most part datable between the middle and the second half of 4th century – the percentage is about 10% (exactly 10,4%); in the second level, where there are regions



Fig. 7: Some examples of the presence of same stone-cutters in different cemeteries.

datable in pre-Constantinian age, the percentage of the “written death” is higher, about 14% (exactly 14,3%).

The percentage of tombs provided with inscriptions in the second level of the Domitilla catacomb is exactly the same (14,5%) registered also in an important sample of the Imperial Roman collective funerary settlements, the ‘columbarium III’ in the Vigna Codini on the via Appia, in use during 1st and 2nd centuries. There, the previewed tombs are about 1200 and the inscriptions pertaining to the columbarium are exactly 167 (still existing: 109).³⁰

The equivalence of the percentage about the “written death” between the late antique catacomb of Domitilla and the third columbarium of Vigna Codini is very interesting, first of all because we are used to think to a much greater use of inscriptions in Imperial age in respect to the Late Antiquity.

Also in Vigna Codini III, some inscriptions seem made by the same stonecutters’ teams, but – as in the early phases of the community cemetery of Domitilla – this does not mean absolute uniformity. There are epigraphs surely created by different hands (some of them appear fastly made in the *columbarium* itself), but also no epigraph at all, although they were more or less systematically planned: we can deduce it by considering the framed spaces left blank on the long marble slabs expressly prepared to receive the epitaphs.

Also in an imperial age *columbarium*, as like into the earliest Christian community catacombs between 3rd century and the beginnings of 4th century, the users of a collective funerary settlement keep the chance to request different levels of burial services, according to their different wishes and resources.

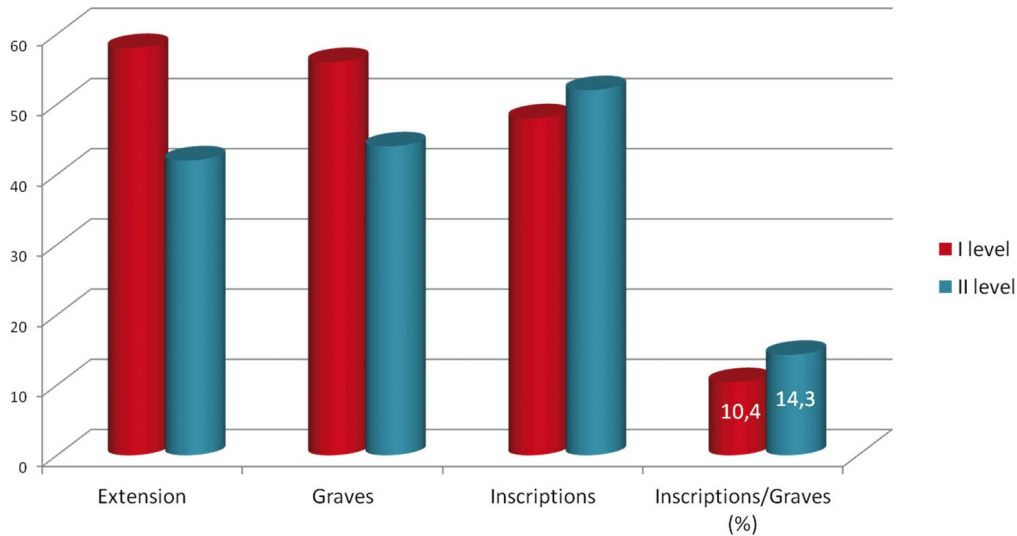


Fig. 8: Rome, catacomb of Domitilla. Comparison between the amount of the tombs and of the epitaphs pertaining to the underground cemetery (percentage values).

This habit, still adopted in the earliest first phases of the Christian community cemeteries, changes within the 4th century, when we note a general trend in the Roman catacombs. The more and more lowest percentage of 'written tombs' corresponds to a very fast declining of the quality of the inscriptions. Starting from the 4th century, into the catacombs it is very hard to identify epigraphs made by organised workshops, chosen – as previously – by a centralised and organised management. On the contrary, the inscriptions appear more and more made by improvised and non-professional individual craftsmen that, from the middle decades of 4th century onwards, become actually the only real managers of the Christian community funerary settlements, instead of the hierarchy – as in the previous decades.

Notes

¹ At its very beginnings, the research was of course based on the edition of the inscriptions published in the 3rd volume of the corpus of the Christian inscriptions from ancient Rome, the *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae nova series*: the volume was published more than sixty years ago, exactly in 1956: Cf. *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores, nova series* (= ICVR), III, edd. A. Silvagni – A. Ferrua, in ciuitate Vaticana 1956, 4–315. 328–404.

² Including the *inscriptiones quae in coem. Callisti repertae traduntur* (cfr. ICVR, III, 8716–9338): “probabilius nobis Domitillae vindicari posse viderentur” (these are the words by A. Silvagni and A. Ferrua in ICVR, III, pp. 328 f.).

³ Cf. <www.edb.uniba.it> (EDB). Since 2013 EDB is one of the main partners of the *Europeana network of Ancient Greek and Latin Epigraphy* [EAGLE: see <www.eagle-network.eu> (20.08.2020)].

⁴I presented some results at 13th International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy, held in Oxford in 2007 (Felle 2007) and, more extensively, in 15th International Congress of Christian Archaeology, held in 2008 in Toledo (Felle 2013).

⁵Cf. Felle 2013, 1643.

⁶Cf. Felle – Zimmermann 2014. Between 2006 and 2011, the staff of the Domitilla-Projekt leaded by Norbert Zimmermann (DAI – Abt. Rom) was then operating in the galleries to build a complete laser-scanning 3-D model of the entire catacomb. So, the idea of a strong collaboration between the two projects was absolutely natural: today one can appreciate a concrete interaction between the EDB and the Domitilla-Projekt. Starting from EDB or Domitilla Project web-pages it is possible to reach interactive maps of the single regions of the different levels of the catacomb: a dedicated layer on the now updated plans displays the position of the inscriptions still in their original places (in situ) by single markers. These markers directly point to the corresponding records in EDB, permitting an easy and quick access to their detailed description, with data related to the bibliography, transcription of the text, images and so on.

⁷A good example is the sure complete re-reading of the fragmentary ICVR, III 7693 (EDB 23287), based on the draft inscription scratched on the marble slab itself, never seen until the photographic survey. Here the edition by Ferrua (ICVR, III 7693): *Marcellina qu[ae vixi]t / an(nos) VII dies XX[I dormit in] pace*; but the original text, as reported in the scratched draft, was a bit different: *Marcellina que vixit / an(nos) VII d(ies) XXVIII te cum pace* (EDB 23287). The slab is in the first level of the catacomb, precisely in the gallery A5. Cf. Felle 2017, 191 f.

⁸An example in Felle 2017, 192–194.

⁹See exempli gratia the epitaph of *Decim---* (ICVR, III 6645; EDB 22568), as like the still in situ ICVR, III 7314 (EDB 23383) and 7315 (EDB 23384). Inspired to this same design is the anchor in the epigraph of *Pulberius* (ICVR, III 6875; EDB 23091) as like as the one in ICVR, III 7230 (EDB 23805), where we can see also a monogram. Also the idea of the monograms is recurring in the same region, but everyone of them is realised differently: cf. ICVR, III 7060 (EDB 22121) in the gallery *M4*, 7061 (EDB 22122) and 7229 (EDB 23804) in the cubiculum *Mb*; ICVR, III 7230 (EDB 23805) in the cubiculum *Mi*. But we see monograms also in other regions of the catacomb.

¹⁰ICVR, III 7328a (EDB18540); ICVR, III 7060 (EDB 22121).

¹¹ICVR, III 6572, 6857, 6909d (respectively: EDB 18564; EDB 23062; EDB 18164), are all pertaining to the gallery *M5*; ICVR, III 6804 (EDB 22873) was found in gallery *M6*.

¹²ICVR, III 7195 (EDB 23766). The slab shows in its middle the name of the deceased – in genitive case – Ε{ν}ξουπερα<ν>τία: under the name, in the centre, there is a bird outlined as in the previous examples before reminded: see ICVR, III 7328a (EDB 18540); ICVR, III 7060 (EDB 22121).

¹³Also the slab displaying the epitaph of *Pankratius* and *Isidora* (ICVR, III 6764; EDB 22820), still in situ in the gallery *M1*, very probably is another case of re-use. The first epitaph consists of the only image of the bird (as it is the epigraph still in situ in the gallery *M04* [ICVR, III 7328a; EDB 18540]), well centred on the slab, differently from the later dedication to *Isidora* by *Pankratius*, that foremost it was realised considering an already existing break of the marble. The lettering in this last text is similar to the writing of other documents as like the epitaphs of *Q(uintus) Domitius Peregrinus* [ICVR, III 6654; EDB 20698] and *Balerius Bales* (ICVR, III 6961; EDB 23159): both of them were found in the gallery *M2*.

¹⁴ ICVR, III 6505 (EDB 22063), 6572 (EDB 18564), 6612 (EDB 22524), 6670 (EDB 22589), 6692 (EDB 20747), 6804 (EDB 22873), 6857 (EDB 23062), 6909d (EDB 18164), 6917 (EDB 23104), 7028b (EDB 23246), 7245 (EDB 23379). Four out of these epigraphs display the same simplified kind of bird images we reminded before: ICVR, III 6572 (EDB 18564), 6804 (EDB 22873), 6857 (EDB 23062), 6909d (EDB 18164).

¹⁵ ICVR, III 7245 (EDB 23379)

¹⁶ ICVR, III 6917 (EDB 23104).

¹⁷ Only this early region of the Domitilla catacomb shows the same excavation schemas we see in other early Christian community funerary settlements in Rome suburb: for example, in the not far catacombs of Callixtus and of Praetextatus, along the via Appia.

¹⁸ ICVR, III 6539; 6563; 6585; 6608; 6641; 6731; 6749d; 6757; 6758; 6778; 6779a; 6826; 6835; 6946; 6970; 6973a; 7028c; 7056c; 7158; 7318c; 7332m; 7332g; 7333a.

¹⁹ ICVR, III 6545cd; 6559; 6597; 6686; 6701c; 6772; 6812c; 6871; 6915; 6916g; 6922cd; 6924; 6951; 6981; 6984; 6996; 7019b; 7123b; 7157b; 7552; in addition to these ones, two fragments unpublished in ICVR.

²⁰ Region A: ICVR, III 6628, 7156d; Region B: ICVR, III 6756, 6943; Region Q: ICVR III 6791, 6807 and one unpublished; Region R: ICVR, III 6530; Region T: ICVR, III 6593, 6962 and the unpublished text on the backside of ICVR, III 8394b (see the following footnote).

²¹ More precisely, in the gallery *T1* (ICVR, III 6962 [EDB 23160] of Varronia) as like as in the cubicula *Tc* and *Tn* (see respectively ICVR, III 6595, and the other side – still unpublished – of ICVR, III 8394b [EDB 25609]).

²² First level, Region A: ICVR, III 7249, 7389, 7441, 7470, 7476, 7500, 7503, 7505, 7526, 7556, 7637a, 7648, 7651, 7694, 7750, 7793, 7798, 7839, 7842, 7874b, 7918e and seven inscriptions unpublished in the corpus; first level, Region D: ICVR, III 7590, 7641, 7667, 7797a, 7895c.

²³ It is also interesting that this same Region A has the highest number of Greek inscriptions in the first level of the cemetery (Felle 2015, p. 1640). About the issue, see Pergola 1975, 70–72. 90.

²⁴ Exactly 108: forty-two related to the first level and sixty-six to the second one.

²⁵ See ICVR III, 6807 (EDB 22876), found in the gallery *Q4*.

²⁶ Cf. Carletti 2018.

²⁷ ICVR, III 7196 (EDB 23767) from *M12*, 2nd level; ICVR, III 8114c (EDB 25364) from cubiculum *Ae*, 1st level; ICVR, V 14984 (EDB 805), *incertae originis* from the catacomb of Praetextatus.

²⁸ Respectively, ICVR, III 7223 (EDB 23797) and ICVR, V 14845 (EDB 1066).

²⁹ Calculated by dr. Verena Fugger (ÖAW) in the frame of the Domitilla-Projekt leded by Norbert Zimmermann. All my thanks to both of them.

³⁰ I thank for this data dr. arch. Silke Haps (tombs) and to dr. Antonello Vilella (inscriptions), both involved in the team of the DAI (Abt. Rom) for studying the columbarium Vigna Codini III (project leded by Thomas Fröhlich and Norbert Zimmermann).

Image Credits

Photos of the inscriptions reprised from EDB (by courtesy of the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology).

Fig. 1: by courtesy of Norbert Zimmermann, Domitilla-Projekt; with the considered regions highlighted by the author. – Fig. 2: ICVR, III 6572 and 6804 (second line). – Fig. 3: ICVR, III 6505 (on the left); ICVR, III 7245 and

6917 (on the right). – Fig. 4: In the first line: ICVR, III 6531 (from gallery *I*); ICVR, III 6981 (from vestibule of cubiculum *Dc*). In the second line: ICVR, III 7721 (from cubiculum *Ea*). – Fig. 5: ICVR, III 7590 (from gallery *D*, first level); ICVR, III 7441 (from gallery *A*, first level). In the second line: ICVR, III 7798 (from gallery *A2*, first level). – Fig. 6: In the first line: ICVR, III 7196 (catacomb of Domitilla, second level, gallery *M12*); ICVR, V 14984 (catacomb of Praetextatus, *incertae originis*: from O. Marucchi, I monumenti del Museo cristiano Pio-Lateranense (Milano 1910), tab. LXII n. 12). In the second line: ICVR, III 8114c (catacomb of Domitilla, first level, cubiculum *Ae*). – Fig. 7: In the first line: ICVR, III 7223 (catacomb of Domitilla, second level, cubiculum *Lc*); in the second line: ICVR, V 14845 (catacomb of Praetextatus, *incertae originis*). – Fig. 8: Data: Domitilla-Projekt and EDB; graph by A.E. Felle.

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