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When the Jews played “football” at the Baths of Caracalla

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Caracalla Baths, Summer 2022

Photo: Brenda Lee Bohen

In the year of 212 CE, Caracalla expanded his edict, *Constitutio Antoniniana* granting citizenship to every potential taxpayer throughout the Roman empire. It seems that most of the Jews who were monotheists living in a polytheistic environment became fully fledged Roman citizens, says historian Samuele Rocca.

One of the world's largest and best persevered thermal spa complexes in ancient Rome, were entirely built by Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, known as the emperor Caracalla. This huge bathing complex, just walking distance from the Circus Maximus were begun in 212 under Septimius Severus (Lucius Severus, r. 193 to 211) inaugurated in 216 CE under Caracalla, and finally completed in 235 under Alexander Severus. Constructed with red bricks and marble, the baths were decorated with vast mosaics, niches in the walls contained sculptures, including free standing sculptures decorated the various rooms. The baths were places where Romans came to socialize, gossip and relax.

So how did the Jews in Rome assimilate during the reign of Caracalla when his baths were decorated with pagan mosaics and statues?

As a historic preservationist and an accredited tour guide in the eternal city who advocates for the scholarship and the history of the Jews of Rome, I am grateful to be in a position to interview a distinguished scholar of the Jewish history of Rome, Samuele Rocca.

The Talmud tells us that it is forbidden for a scholar to reside in a city which did not contain a public bath (Sanh. 17b)? So how did this apply to the city of Rome, can you elaborate?

Samuele Rocca: Indeed! There is an old song of Clara Jaione,

“Tutta la storia romana, vicina e lontana mi par di sognar, se fra i ruderi che son lì da millenni, la notte e il dì, io mi metto a fantasticare così. Alle Terme di Caracalla i romani giocavano a palla, dopo il bagno verso le tre tira tira a me, che la tiro a te, o con le mani o coi piè.”

All of Roman history, near and far, I seem to dream, if among the ruins that have been there for millennia, night and day, I start to fantasize like this. At the Baths of Caracalla the Romans played ball, so, after the bath around three o'clock, I throw the ball to you, and you to me, either with my hands or with my feet.

So, maybe let me ask the same question differently, did also the Jews living in Rome enjoy playing “ball” at Caracalla’s Bath?

First and foremost, Jews were bestowed by the Imperial law makers equal opportunities. Let's explain. First, after the death of Hadrian, who cruelly

repressed the Bar Kochba rebellion in Judaea, his successor Antoninus Pius repealed Hadrian's ban on circumcision, and restored most Jewish rights (*Digesta* 48.8.11). A generation later, Jews were admitted to the ranks of the decurionate by Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (*Digesta* 27.1.15.6).



The legal situation of the Jews living in Roman Italy further improved in the Severan period (193–235 CE), here considered. According to the third century jurist Ulpian, in his *Libri de Officio Proconsulis*, Septimius Severus and Caracalla confirmed the previous laws regulating the participation of Jews in public offices dated to the Antonine period (*Digesta* 50.2.3.3; *De Officio Proconsulis* 3). He, thus, stated that Septimius Severus and his son Antoninus, the emperor Caracalla, allowed the Jews to “enter offices,” imposing on them

the liturgies associated with these various positions on condition that the Jews would not violate the tenets of their religion.

The *Constitutio Antoniniana de Civitate*, enacted by Caracalla in 212 CE, granted Roman citizenship to all the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, with the exception of the so-called *peregrini dediticii*, populations conquered by Rome; after they surrendered unconditionally to the conquerors, they would have the status of subjects (*Digesta* 1.5.17; Ulpian, *Ad Edictum* 22; and the Papyrus Giessen 40.1, edited in 1910, with the Greek version of the edict). While Theodore Mommsen once argued that in the wake of the Jewish Wars, Jews were considered *dediticii*, and that as such they could not have enjoyed full citizenship, most scholars, such as Jean Juster, Alfredo M. Rabello, and Capucine Nemo-Pekelman, argue, on the contrary, that most of the Jews living in the Roman Empire, who previously had the status of *peregrini*, received Roman citizenship, something which improved their legal status and standing, an argument completely confirmed by epigraphy. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Severus Alexander reconfirmed the legal privileges of the Jews (SHA, *Severus Alexander* 22.4). Yet, Septimius Severus and successive third-century emperors maintained certain limitations on the Jewish population, including the continuation of the *fiscus Iudaicus*, the prohibition on conversion to Judaism, and the prohibition against Jews circumcising any slaves they might own.



The *Historia Augusta* is a late Roman collection of biographies, in Latin, of the Roman Emperors of the period 117 to 284 C.E., albeit not much reliable, refers more than once to the relationship between the Severan rulers and Jews as well as their attitude to Judaism. Thus, the *Life of Septimius Severus* mentions the conquest of Palestine in the aftermath of the defeat of Pescennius Niger, an unknown “Jewish triumph” of Caracalla, which still puzzles the historians, and the fact that while Severus conferred numerous legal rights to the Jews, yet he forbade conversion to Judaism under heavy penalties (*SHA, Septimius Severus* 14: 6, 16: 7, 17: 1.). The *Life of Caracalla* refers to the positive and friendly attitude of the future emperor, still heir to the throne to a playmate, who was a proselyte to Judaism (*SHA, Antoninus Caracalla* 1: 6). The *Life of Antoninus Heliogabalus* refers twice to Jews. The first time it mentions that Heliogabalus wished that the religious rites of the Jews should be performed in his palace on

the Palatine, while the second time, it mentions a joke of the emperor on Jewish dietary laws (*SHA, Antoninus Heliogabalus* 3: 4-5, 28: 1-4). Thus, Heliogabalus declared that the religions of the Jews and of the Samaritans and the rites of the Christians ought to be transferred to the Palatine palace together with Elagabalus, the Grand Mother, the Fire of Vesta, the Palladium, and the Shield of the Salii. Here in the eyes of Heliogabalus, Oriental religions, Roman tradition, Judaism and Christianity deserve their rightful place in the Palatine Imperial palace.



However, it is the *Life of Alexander Severus*, the paradigm of the good emperor in the eyes of the authors, which exemplify the positive attitude of the Severan emperors towards Judaism. No matter if some of the anecdotes are spurious; still, it reflects the much more favorable ambiance of the Severan

period towards the Jews. Yet, Miriam Pucci Ben Ze'ev rightly argues that this positive attitude towards Judaism and Jews attributed to emperors such as Alexander Severus in fact probably mirrors the positive attitude towards Judaism of the fourth century Pagan aristocracy, although That does not mean of course that in this case the historical narrative of the *Historia Augusta* cannot be accepted as face value. Thus, Alexander Severus was so favorably disposed towards the Jews that the mob of Antioch and Alexandria called him “*archisynagogus*”. Moreover, Alexander Severus kept in his Lararium, not only the portraits of his ancestors, but also the statues of the most positive deified emperors, but also the statues of Apollonius and those of Jesus, Abraham, and Orpheus. It seems that the young Emperor liked to announce his future plans publicly, and when he wished to appoint any man governor of a province same, he declared that he was following the Jews and the Christians, who always announced the names of those who they ordained as priests. Furthermore, Alexander Severus often said as the sternest rebuke, “Do you desire this to be done to your land which you are doing to another's?” a sentence probably heard by a Jew or a Christian. Moreover, he followed the well-known rule “What you do not wish that a man should do to you, do not do to him”, attributed to the Jewish Sage Hillel the Elder was carved on a monumental inscription on the walls of the Imperial Palace and on other public buildings (*SHA, Alexander Severus*, 22: 4; 28: 7, 29: 2, 45: 6-7, 51: 6-8).



In the same period, the Roman Senator of Greek origin, Dio Cassius Cocceianus refers to the Jews more than once in his monumental *Roman History*. Judaism and Jews are introduced by the Roman historian, while relating Pompey's Siege of Jerusalem. The Roman senator turned historian is very sympathetic to Judaism and the Jews, and the information he provides is probably quite accurate. Cassius Dio narrates that the Jews are "distinguished from the rest of mankind in practically every detail of life". Menachem Stern as well as Peter Schäfer rightly argues that in this passage the notion of Jewish separateness lacks any negative connotations. In the eyes of Cassius Dio, the Jewish God, the Jewish Temple, which once stood at Jerusalem, and the Shabbath are the most peculiar characteristics of Judaism. Cassius Dio argues that the Jews do not worship the traditional gods, but a "peculiar Divinity, who is characterized by its aniconism. The Jews "do not make any statue of their God, but they believe that their God is "unnamable and invisible". In the eyes of

the Roman senator, the belief in one God, aniconic and nameless, is the most peculiar feature of Judaism. It is difficult to ignore the “respectful tone of the whole passage”. To the Jewish God, Cassius Dio associates the Jewish Temple, now destroyed. Cassius Dio then discuss the Shabbath, which in his own day, was probably the most peculiar characteristic of Judaism. He states that the Jews hold holy the Shabbath. Referring to it as the Day of Saturn. In a successive passage, Cassius Dio explains the custom of referring the days to the seven planets. He characterizes the Shabbath as a day in which the Jews “among many other most peculiar observances, they undertake no serious occupation.” Cassius Dio also refers to conversion to Judaism. He relates that in his own days the name Jews, which are presented as a people, or *ethnos*, not just a religion, refers not only those who were born Jews, but to converts as well. Dio refers to the converts to Judaism as “the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their (Jewish) customs.” Peter Schäfer well argues that Cassius Dio is aware that anyone coming from a different people can become part of the Jewish people, accepting the Jewish Law. Cassius Dio ends his description of Judaism in his *Roman History*, relating that the Jews, as well as converts to Judaism, in his own days “although often repressed they had increased to a great extent, and had won the right of “freedom in its observances”. Thus, it is clear that in this moving passage Cassius Dio is aware that under the last Antonines and the Severans, Judaism and Jews had finally won the “right of “freedom in

its observances” (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* XXXVII, 15: 2-17-4; XLIX, 22: 3-23: 1).

John G. Gager persuasively argues that by the third century the books dealing with religion, astrology, magic, and alchemy started to mirror an interesting “dialogue” between Jews and their gentile surroundings. Censorinus, who lived in the third century, refers to Jews with deep respect in his erudite book *De Die Natali*, a miscellanea that includes astronomy, astrology, and religious rites. In this framework, it is clear that the perception of Judaism and Jews does not mirror the opinion of a few intellectuals, but it reflects that of wider sections of the population, those who believed in popular religions.



We can try to estimate the number of Jews who lived in the city of Rome at this time. The general population of Rome passed from 1,000,000 under Trajan to no more than 650,000 in consequence of the Antonine plague. Indeed,

we must not underestimate the effects of the Antonine plague, which reduced the population of the city by a third. Possibly the successive Severan period brought a rise in the population which reached 750,000. Besides, in the middle of the third century a second pandemic, whose nature is unknown, further weakened the Roman Empire, striking for no less than fifteen years well into the second half of the third century. What, then, was the demographic trend of the Jewish population of Rome during the third century, and how can the general data regarding the surrounding population help us in establishing how many Jews lived in Rome in this period? If we follow the general assumption that Jews were 10 percent of the total population of the Roman Empire, and that by the early second century foreigners were 50 percent of the total population of the city of Rome, we shall arrive at a range of numbers. Thus, after the plague of 160-170 C.E., in Rome, of a total population of 650,000, there were 32,500 Jews, who represented 10 percent of the foreign population of Rome, which amounted to 325,000. Yet archaeological data sharply contradicts this data. According to Leonard Rutgers, following a study of the evidence from the Villa Torlonia Catacombs, it is possible to consider that the size of the Jewish community in Rome in the third and fourth centuries CE was an average of 2000 persons. Such data is much closer to the real number of Jews living in Rome, yet it is probably still too small. Therefore, if we accept Josephus's statement that in Augustan Rome the Jewish population reached 8,000 individuals (Josephus, *AJ* XVII, 300), then, a ratio of 1 percent compared to the

total population of the city, which numbered 800.000, this ratio can be accepted for the third century as well. Thus, while at the end of the second century CE, as consequence of the plague, we arrive at 6600 individuals, possibly by the end of the Severan period, in 235 CE, at least 7500, maybe 15.000, Jews lived in Rome.

A careful study of the location of the location of the Jewish catacombs shows that the Jewish settlement in Rome widened considerably under the Severans. Although Jews continued to dwell mainly in the *Transtiberinum*, *Regio XIV*, as in the Augustan period, as recorded by Philo (Philo, *Leg.* 152, 158), it seems that in the late Antonine - Severan period Jews settled in *Regio I*, along the Via Appia, and probably in the late third century and early fourth century in *Regio VI*, along the Via Nomentana. This assumption is based on the fact that the Jewish catacombs were located near the greatest concentrations of Jews living in the urban area. Jews probably wanted to bury their death as soon as possible and as near as possible to their dwellings. Thus, even if the catacombs were located outside the city walls or *pomerium*, as it was forbidden to bury inside the city, their location still stood as close as possible to the Jewish areas of settlement located inside the *pomerium*, and later the Aurelian walls.

Thus, the close connection between the Monteverde catacombs and the *Transtiberinum*, *Regio XIV*, is quite obvious. The connection between the Vigna Randanini catacombs and the neighboring *Regio I* is obvious as well. According to Juvenal, Jews possibly resided in this area from the beginning of the second

century C.E. Moreover, the area encapsulated by *Regio* I mainly developed in the Severan period, which is the same period to which the Vigna Randanini catacombs are dated. Less obvious is the connection between the Villa Torlonia Catacombs and *Regio* VI. However, the mention of the synagogue of the Siburenses in some inscriptions coming from the Villa Torlonia catacombs points clearly to this area. Moreover, *Regio* VI was an area in which foreigners and Christians could be found during Late Antiquity.



Even in Late Antiquity, the *Transtiberinum* continued to expand. Septimius Severus erected in the area the *Thermae Septimanae*, and his son Geta established a palace with huge suburban gardens. The Aurelian Wall protected this area as well. The main Jewish cemetery in the area is the Catacombs of Monteverde, located on the *Via Portuense*. If some of the brick

stamps indicate the first century, most scholars nonetheless agree that the complex began not before the end of the second century CE and continued in use throughout the fourth century CE. Yet the presence of some sarcophagi points to the third century as the main period of use. Moreover, the rareness of the *gentilicium* Aurelius on the sepulchral epitaphs can indicate that many persons were buried there before the full effect of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was felt. Some of the synagogues whose names are found on the sepulchral inscriptions coming from the area date still from the Augustan period, including the Synagogues of the Agrippesians, Augustesians, Hebrews, Herodians, and Volumnesians. However, by the third century there are other synagogues located in the area, like the synagogue of the Calcaresians, the synagogue of the Tripolitans, and the synagogue of the Vernaculensians. Arnaldo Momigliano argues, probably quite rightly, for the existence of another synagogue whose existence is not corroborated by the epigraphic data, the synagogue of Severus, probably founded by Jews coming from Arca in Lebanon, the birthplace of the emperor Alexander Severus. The existence of this synagogue is attested in the Middle Ages as late as the twelfth century.

In this period, Jews are also found in *Regio* I, the southernmost area of Rome, from where the huge Via Appia enters in the city. The main monumental buildings, which stood in the area, were the huge thermal baths, the Caracalla Baths. Commodus was the first to erect a huge thermal structure. Septimius Severus did as well, although the main bath building was of course the huge

Thermae of Caracalla. The main religious building was a temple dedicated to Mars. Yet the presence of a Mithraeum and the Chapel of Isis Athenodoria indicates that the Jews were not the only Easterners living in the area. Two catacombs, the catacomb of Vigna Randanini and the catacomb of Vigna Cimarra, indicate a Jewish presence in the area. Jews probably settled there before the late second century. Juvenal mentions Jewish beggars in the area of Porta Capena at the beginning of the second century CE (Juvenal, *Satires* III, 10-18). It is probable that these beggars did not live far away. The area included in *Regio* I was on the main rebuilt in the late Antonine and Severan periods. Thus, the dating of the most important building phase of the neighborhood is another clue to the Jewish presence in the area. This area, rebuilt by emperors quite sympathetic to the needs of the Jewish communities as well as to Easterners, would probably have had pushed Jews to live there. It is possible that some of the well-to-do Jews lived in this area. This possibility comes out from an analysis of the catacomb of Vigna Randanini. According to David Noy, this catacomb would have been probably the best available, because of the low density of burials, the width and lightening of the galleries, and the elegance of the entrance area, framed with bricks. The catacomb was erected not before the second century and remained in use till the fourth century. Two beautifully decorated rooms, Hypogea I-II (also called cubicula 13-14), are dated by Leonard Rutgers to the early third century, to 220-250 CE. The sarcophagi can be dated to the end of the third century. The catacomb of Vigna Cimarra is a

small hypogeum, which Rutgers dates to the third century. The two synagogues, whose members were on the main buried in the catacomb of Vigna Randanini, are the synagogue of the Eleans and the synagogue of the Campesians. In the Catacombs of Vigna Randanini, many of the buried Jews bear, as a consequence of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, the name Aurelius, which was still widespread in Late Antiquity. No fewer than twelve individuals bear the name Aurelius.



The third area where Jews resided is the *Regio VI*, which included the Quirinalis and Viminalis areas. All along the Via Nomentana is located the Villa Torlonia catacomb. *Regio VI*, located on the eastern part of the *urbs*, was dominated by the *Castra Praetoria*, or the praetorian guards' barracks. The huge Temple of Serapis, as well as two mithraea, were located in the area. Thus, the Jews were not the only Orientals living there. The Catacombs of Villa Torlonia

consists of two separate catacombs, the Upper Catacomb, and the Lower Catacomb, which had independent entrances. The Upper Catacomb's entrance is dated by Leonard Rutgers to the end of the second century. The Lower Catacomb dates from the beginning of the third century, no earlier than the reign of Septimius Severus. The inscriptions found in the catacombs mention two synagogues, the synagogue of the Seceni and the synagogue of the Siburensians, which were probably located in the area. The name Siburensians suggests of course the word Subura. Yet Subura is never spelled with 'I', but always with 'u' in all the other inscriptions. However, the area of the Subura is quite near to *Regio VI*. Besides, as the area of the Subura by now was dominated by public monuments, it is possible that the community shifted from its original area but conserved its original name in the new location.

And yet, to better understand the relationship between Jews and their Gentiles neighbors, pagans and Christians, it is necessary to give a look at the wall paintings of the Hypogea I and II from Vigna Randanini and to a few sarcophagi. According to Leonard Rutgers, these two hypogea were excavated slightly earlier than the successive Vigna Randanini Catacombs, which later integrated these two hypogea. Both rooms are also known as the Cubicle of the Winged Horse. The entrance to the hypogeum Painted Room I and Painted Room II is through the Via Appia from the east. The main decorative element of Painted Room I is a round medallion depicting a winged Nike crowning a nude male youth. Four semicircular panels contain two pairs of birds facing each

other over a central basket of fruit; between each of the two panels there is a depiction of a peacock set on a pedestal. Each corner of the ceiling is decorated with a dove with open wings, holding maybe a twig between his claws; these are joined by a garland decoration. A central *arcosolium* is in the south and north walls flanked by panels depicts animals such as a winged horse, Pegasus on the eastern wall, a cock and a hen on the southern wall, a lamb, a bird, and peacocks on the northern wall.

The general plan of the vaulted ceiling's decoration in Painted Room II resembles that of Painted Room I. Here, the central, circular medallion contains an image of Fortuna in a square frame. Surrounding this medallion are four oval panels (on each opposite side of the square). Each pair contain the image of a vase and other decorative motifs, such as garlands; these four oval panels are alternated with four semicircular panels, each containing animals, the first pair birds, while the second pair fishes, both pairs flanking an object. An outer decorative band consists in alternated panels depicting sea creatures such as dolphins and sea horses and a simple geometric decoration. Each spandrel is decorated with a Cupid.



The two hypogea followed the artistic trend of Roman Italy of the period, which is characterized by a linear style and which can be found in non-Jewish hypogea as well as domestic spaces such as the excavated insulae of Ostia. A number of scholars hesitate to attribute the decoration of Painted Rooms I and II to Jews, an exception being Erwin Goodenough, who believed the owners were part of a mystical, Hellenised and non-normative brand of Judaism. Leonard V. Rutgers, in contrast, believes that the Rooms were eventually used by Jews but is uncertain whether the decoration goes back to an earlier, non-Jewish owner. Paul Finney, although he believes that these hypogea were commissioned and used by Jews, notes that “Judaism is conspicuous for its absence” in the decorative scheme; Finney also refutes Goodenough’s attribution of the hypogea to a non-normative Judaism. However, comparison with the

sarcophagi used by members of the Jewish elite of Rome reinforces the possibility that the frescoes of the two hypogea were made for Jews and that these reflect Jewish tastes of the time. Indeed, sarcophagi found inside these rooms were characterized by the use of pagan iconography, although inscriptions attest that the owners belonged to members of the Jewish elite. The similarity in the iconography supports the claim that Painted Rooms I and II were made for and used by prominent Jewish families in Severan Rome.

These rooms are earlier than the other burials in the catacombs and probably provided a catalyst for less wealthy members of the community, who were buried in the complex. Such an arrangement for the development of burial grounds mirrors the social hierarchy of the living: members of the elite initially create a burial ground using hypogea separated from those for the surrounding, less wealthy members of the community. This hierarchy reflects the patron-client organization of the Roman world. Just as Jewish patrons led in life by maintaining relationships with local Jewish clients, so they also lead in death.



Some of the surviving sarcophagi are well preserved, but most are fragmentary. The decoration on these sarcophagi, like the decoration of the Painted Rooms, illuminate the attitude of the Roman Jewish elite of the third century toward the outside world.

Among the sarcophagi which can be dated to the third century, three groups can be distinguished. The first group are the sarcophagi that were used as sarcophagi in the third century, whether their current state of preservation is intact or fragmentary; the second group consists of fragments of sarcophagi found in the catacombs that were probably used to decorate the catacombs. According to Erwin Goodenough these fragments were used as plaques to cover the loculi and their decorated sides were placed against a wall, where the imagery could not be seen. The third group consists in sarcophagus fragments found in the Jewish catacombs that probably originated in the non-Jewish

necropolis and found their way in the Jewish catacombs in a later period. It is quite difficult to differentiate between the second and third categories, especially as it is quite possible that third-century fragments created for Jewish burials were reused as loculi covers at a later date.

Most of third century sarcophagi have simple strigil decorations, such as the sarcophagus of the *gerousiarch* Julianus, the *archon* Jonathan, Julia Eirene Arista, and the *gerousiarch* Silicius and his wife Sophronia. Other strigil sarcophagi, found in the Villa Torlonia Catacombs, are also decorated with pagan imagery, such as the griffin on the sarcophagus of Caelia (D)omnina, wife of Julianus, the *archon* of the Siburesians, or a strigil sarcophagus framed with reliefs of Dionysus together with a panther, satyr, and dancing maenad and whose sides are decorated with griffins. The Sarcophagus of Artemidora, intended for a child, was decorated with reliefs depicting playing Erotes, or

Cupids.



Sarcophagus fragments used to decorate the loculi have been found scattered across the Jewish catacombs. The Muse Urania sarcophagus coming from the Vigna Randanini Catacombs, impressive despite its fragmentary state, depicts two female figures, one of whom (on the right) has been identified as the Urania, the muse of astronomy.

Leonard Rutgers emphasizes that all these sarcophagi were produced in Roman workshops. It is clear that the Jewish owners commissioned these sarcophagi in a workshop that also produced objects for gentiles and that the Jewish buyers did not seek to give a specifically Jewish character to them.

Thus, as in contemporary Galilee, pagan imagery was the dominant element in the frescoes found in the funerary *hypogea* as well as on the reliefs

which decorated the sarcophagi that were found in the Jewish catacombs or nearby in Rome as well. On the other hand, the use of Jewish symbols, as the menorah, the shofar and the ethrog is rare, although few examples were carved or scratched on funerary slabs. Probably, Roman Jews adopted pagan iconography because they felt sure of themselves vis-a-vis the surrounding world. Jews were by now an integral part of the surrounding world. This attitude of the Roman state towards the Jews would have been reciprocated by the attitude of the Jews towards the Roman state. Good examples of this trend is that it is in this period that the Jews of Rome began to use the Latin language in their epitaphs, adopted Roman names, and the wealthier of them made use of the *duo nomina* and *tria nomina*. Hence, this trend belies not just acculturation, but also a certain symbiosis with the surrounding pagan world. Therefore, there is no motivation whatsoever why this process of acculturation should not be mirrored in the material culture of the Jews of Rome.

However, it is still important to emphasize that for the Jews of Rome, the choice of pagan iconography is lacking any religious connotations. Thus, the choice of pagan figurative elements is just an indication that the owner of the hypogea or of the sarcophagi during his earthly life felt quite integrated in the wide Roman world. Personally, I'm quite sceptic in seeing in all these decorations, a hidden Jewish symbolism, as Goodenough proposed, this time expressed through Pagan iconography. On the contrary, Pagan imagery was adopted because, on one hand, it mirrored the cultural choice of the surrounding

world, and, on the other hand, its Pagan meaning was not so gripping, as these images answered more to a general “universal” fashion, widespread in the Roman Empire than to a specific religious dimension. A clear example of the neutral meaning of these images is the fact that Dionysiac motives, so important in this period, was carefully eluded and shunned. Therefore, the adoption of Pagan iconography not only fulfilled a primary "neutral" decorative function, but it also expressed the level of cultural acculturation of the Jews in third century Rome.

Photo Gallery

Catacombs of Vigna Randanini, Hypogeum I
Photo: Samuele Rocca



Catacombs of Vigna Randanini, Hypogeum II
Photo: Samuele Rocca



Sarcophagus of the *gerousiarch* Silicius and of his wife Sophronia
Photo: Samuele Rocca

Caracalla Baths, Summer 2022
Photos: Brenda Lee Bohen