

Marice ROSE

Late Antique Images of Slaves in Domestic and Funerary Contexts

Several well-known late antique monuments include depictions of slaves attending their owners. The monuments, including mosaics at Piazza Armerina, objects from the Sevso and Esquiline treasures, paintings in the catacomb of Petrus and Marcellinus, and grave reliefs from Neumagen, are both pagan and Christian, both domestic and funerary. Images of slaves from all contexts do not reveal slavery as the dehumanizing and abusive institution it is, but instead show a peaceable, paternal relationship between owners and slaves. The imagery is shown to reflect domestic hierarchy and to regulate slaves' behavior, as it emphasizes the slaves' dependence on their owners, their removal from their own extended family and society, and their acceptance of their labor. This paper examines the images in relation to the historical realities of domestic slaves and as visual constructions of ideal elite households. The conception of an ideal household, as expressed visually, was not significantly different whether the members were pagan or Christian. In showing slavery to be an integral part of the social structure, the visual evidence is consistent with the writings of such third- and fourth-century Church Fathers as Tertullian and Basil of Caesaria, who used Biblical passages to advocate that slave ownership was consistent with the mores of a Christian household.