

When is a Shepherd Not (Just) a Good Shepherd?

The Good Shepherd figure is familiar from Early Christian art, especially in funerary contexts (Koch 2000). It does, moreover, have a pagan antecedent that is common on Roman sarcophagi, although scholars debate its meaning. As Huskinson (2015) states “symbolic figures on these sarcophagi ... are hard to evaluate because their meanings are so contingent on context and viewer.” She attributes the increase of shepherds, Good Shepherds, philosophers, and other symbolic figures on strigillated sarcophagi in the 3rd and 4th centuries to the creation of an “alternative world of happiness” which included the ideals of self-fulfillment and spirituality as well as allusions to the world of nature and cosmology. She concludes that “figures suggest that human lives can be transformed through inspirational relationships or actions” citing Muses and philosophers.

This conclusion takes in a wide range of themes and figure types and seems to lack any basis in contemporary cultural context. I argue instead that the increase in the instance of shepherd images derives from a simpler impulse: the desire of the deceased (or those who selected, purchased, or commissioned their sarcophagi) to demonstrate appreciation for and connection to contemporary trends in elite culture. This argument has been made already to explain the contemporary rise in philosopher and muse images (Trimble 2002) with each understood as standing as surrogate for the male or female deceased respectively to reflect their valuing of elite culture. An analysis of the 55 strigillated sarcophagi with shepherd or pastoral imagery shows a strong correspondence of this category of images and other literary figures: philosophers, muses, theater masks, and portraits those holding scrolls, some reading and other rolled. These appear together on at least a quarter of the surviving examples. The overall theme seems clearly to be literary culture including the theater masks and the muses some of which are

iconographically certainly comedy and tragedy: Thalia and Melpomene. This is a celebration of an elite world of symbols of literature, not nature and cosmology as Huskinson argued. The greatest increase in the use of the Good Shepherd and shepherd figures occurs in the 4th century, the same period that sees a renaissance in the works of Vergil in all media of Roman art (Rees 2004). Visual parallels to both the shepherd figures and pastoral scenes are found in the Vergilius Romanus, the early 5th century illustrated manuscript of the works of Vergil (Cod. Vat. lat. 3867). The illustrations in the Vergilius Romanus section on the *Eclogues* shows the figures of the shepherds Menalcas and Mopsus, notably in *Eclogue* 5 in which they mourn their deceased companion, Daphnis, "Always your honor, name and praises will endure." I think we can conclude that at least some viewers were expected to recognize the shepherds on these sarcophagi as Menalcas and Mopsus. The increase in the appearance of the figures as pairs in the 4th century reinforces this conclusion. It is also significant that these characters who mourned Daphnis take the place on the sarcophagi previously occupied by mourning cupid figures, which were more common in the 3rd century, but overtaken in numbers by the shepherds in the 4th century. The paired figures of the shepherds flanking a central portrait of the deceased mourn him or her, convey the cultural status of the deceased, and imbue the deceased with the immortality that Menalcas and Mopsus did to Daphnis.

This interpretation might also provide a means for understanding the transition to and success of the Good Shepherd figure in Christian art. It builds on the pagan version, which conveyed the cultural values of the deceased, celebrated his or her life, and ensured the enduring reputation of the departed.

Bibliography

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