

GATHERINGS IN THE UNDERGROUND BASILICA AT PORTA MAGGIORE: Ancient Viewers of Stucco Decoration and the Depiction of Sappho's Leap

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Introduction

The underground hall near the Porta Maggiore in Rome is the earliest example of an arched and barrel vaulted basilica. It is composed of a central nave with a semicircular apse and two aisles. The complex was built in two phases during the early Imperial era: The basilica hall (12 m x 9 m), divided into three naves and covered by barrel vaults, was built in the Augustan era. During the second phase of construction, in the mid-first century AD, a long barrel vaulted corridor and an atrium with a domed vault were added as an entrance to the basilica hall. The hall was excavated underground using an innovative construction technique: the forms of the wall structure and all pillars were dug into the soft volcanic tufa creating trenches for the concrete. Once the concrete was poured and hardened the tufa surrounding the walls was dug out.

The basilica was located in or near the *Horti Tauriani*, a luxurious garden villa belonging to the *gens Statilia* (Frontin. *Aq* 19, 20, 62; *CIL* XV, 7542). The first prominent member of the family was T. Statilius Taurus, a successful *novus homo*. He commanded Octavian's fleet at the Battle of Actium and was elected consul twice (37 BC and 26 BC). He was also the builder of the first Roman stone amphitheatre, dedicated in 29 BC. A *columbarium* for the slaves and freedmen of the *Statilii* located only 200 meters from the Underground Basilica.

Abandonment of the Underground Basilica Following an Accusation of Sorcery

Two heirs of T. Statilius Taurus, both named as T. Statilius Taurus, each held the office of consul – the elder in AD 11, and the younger in AD 44. Tacitus recounts how Agrippina the Younger, the wife of Emperor Claudius, accused the younger T. Statilius Taurus of practising magic, leading to his suicide in 53 AD (Tac. *Ann.* 12, 59). Early excavations in 1917 revealed that the Basilica had been filled with rubble around AD 50, thus corroborating Tacitus' account. As a result, Jérôme Carcopino suggested in his monograph in 1927 that the basilica was abandoned and filled in response to Agrippina's accusations. He proposed that the hall had been used for rituals associated with a Neo-Pythagorean group linked to T. Statilius Taurus, consul in AD 44. Some scholars assume that the hall was intended for Orphic and Dionysiac rites, while others argue that it served as a lower section of a funerary monument dedicated to the *gens Statilia*. The opulence of the *Horti Tauriani* may have been the motive behind the charge of sorcery, which allowed Agrippina to seize the estate and incorporate it into imperial buildings.



Fig. 1. The central nave of the Underground Basilica ends to the apse, which features the scene of Sappho's leap.



Fig. 2. At the top right Sappho leaps from the Leucadian cliff on the ceiling of the apse. A maritime figure waits for her in the sea with open arms. On the left, Apollo observes the leap from the upper part of the apse, while a seated figure and a Triton are depicted beneath the god.

Stucco Decoration and the Scene of Sappho's Leap to the Afterlife

The walls and ceilings of the basilica hall were adorned during the early Augustan era with white stucco reliefs depicting winged female figures, mythological scenes, everyday life, and ritual offerings. In contrast, the vestibule hall features polychrome wall and ceiling decoration, painted in the mid-first century AD. The vestibule is illuminated with natural light by an opening whose shape mirrors the ground plan of the basilica hall.

The apse features a hemispherical vault decorated with a white stucco scene depicting a woman leaping into the sea, where a marine figure, covered with shells, awaits her with open arms. Most scholars agree that this scene represents the myth 'Sappho's leap off the Leucadian cliff', symbolising death and the afterlife. According to Sappho, she would live forever through her poetry. The figure of Sappho calmly leaps into the sea, even though the myth portrays her suicide. Some scholars argue that this scene alludes to metempsychosis, the transmigration of the soul, a central theme in Pythagorean philosophy.

The story of "Sappho's leap off the Leucadian Cliff" derives from Greek comic writers, such as Menander (c. 342-290 BC). In Menander's comedy, Sappho leaps from the Leucadian Cliff in the precinct of Apollo. In the apse the figure of Apollo is depicted in the upper zone to observe Sappho's leap. Roman poet Catullus followed the example of the Sappho's love poetry in the mid-first century BC, and the Augustan poet Ovid described Sappho's tragic leap, prompted by her sorrowful love for the beautiful Phaon.

Aims of the Research Project

The project investigates the diverse meanings that the Romans might have attached to Sappho's poetry as well as stories and images about her life, death, and afterlife. It also compares decorative styles and motifs of the basilica with contemporary Roman decor, from the Villa della Farnesina to the Domus Aurea.

In the *Columbarium* of the *Statilii* were buried stonemasons, blacksmiths, and stucco decorators, as well as members of an association of Greek singers. The cult of Theos Tauros was dedicated to Statilius Taurus at Thespieae in Boeotia, starting from the early Augustan period, and several names in the *columbarium* suggest a Boeotian origin. The close relationship between the *gens Statilia* and Boeotia may help to explain why they chose to depict the most famous Greek female poet in the apse of their monumental *hypogeum*.

In summary, the project focuses on the decoration of the Underground Basilica to determine whether the *gens Statilia* intended to advocate their large household, including the *collegium domesticum* etc., or whether its members preferred to emphasise a Greek mystery cult within their enigmatic underground monument. The study explores both possibilities, considering that one of these functions does not necessarily exclude the other.

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