

## NEW EVIDENCE FOR THE EARLIEST PORTRAIT OF JESUS REX MORGAN

Undaunted by the skepticism of "various experts", both before and after he published *The Holy Shroud and the Earliest Portraits of Christ* (Runciman Press, 1986. Reviewed in *Spectrum* # 21, Dec. 1986, pp. 23-24), Rex Morgan stood his ground. In Heaphy's album of paintings and notes, he had sensed something significant for sindonology: i.e., that some sections of some catacombs dated to the first century, therefore in those sections the representations of Jesus could have been "painted by persons who had either seen Christ ... or had his features described by eyewitnesses". Particularly intriguing was Heaphy's scary all-night experience, kept awake by "some biscuits and a cigar", in an unidentified chamber. Before his last candle flickered out, the young man had copied a medallion portrait of Christ that he estimated to be II<sup>nd</sup> century. Dobson attributed that part of the catacomb to the first century.

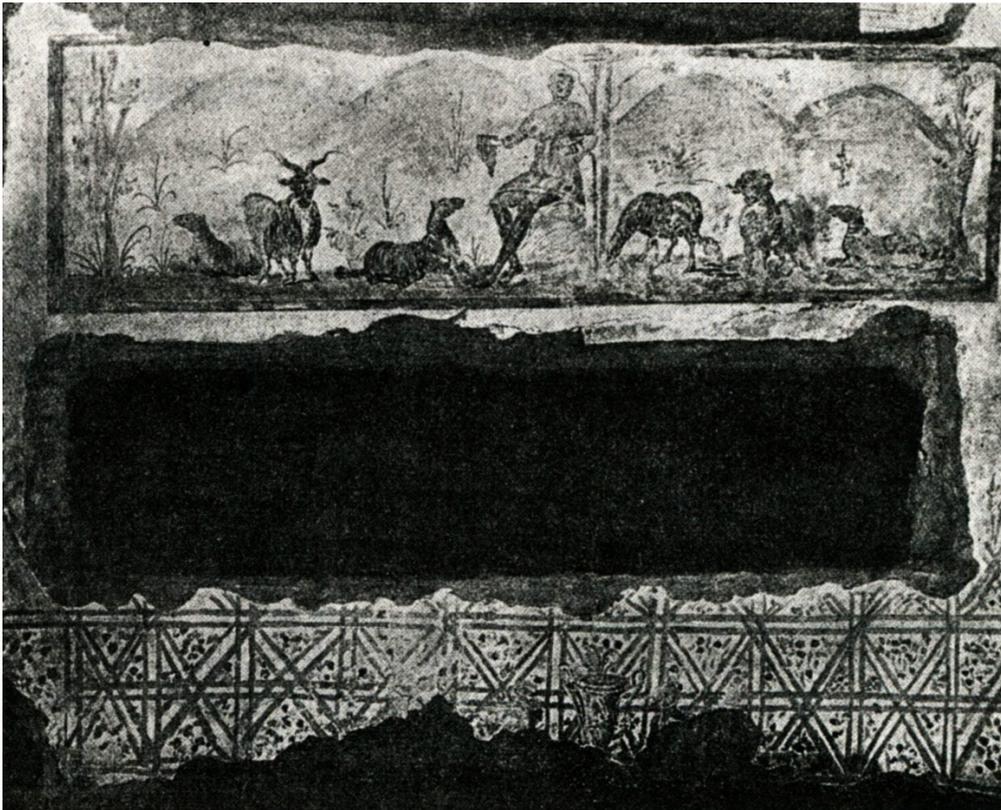
Meticulously, Morgan pored over the studies of Bosio, De Rossi, Bayliss, Dobson, recent archeologists, including the late Father Fasola.... New evidence, corroborating his studies, came providentially when he met Mrs. Sylvia Bogdanescu who, unbeknownst to him, had assiduously tracked the Heaphy trail and indeed, in 1979, had photographed the faded fresco that the artist had painted by candlelight: the one that could prove Rex Morgan right.

It is a three-quarters profile portrait of Christ, in a fresco medallion still faintly visible in the ceiling of a vault in the Orpheus Cubiculum\* of the Domitilla catacomb. The figure has long hair and a beard; a white mantle is clasped upon the right shoulder. Just as Heaphy had copied it.

The finding of the "secret chamber", twice lost, thrice misidentified, once sealed up, is in itself an exciting story. It was once recorded as being in the III<sup>rd</sup> century Callixtus catacomb; it lay in a connecting area between Callixtus and the first-century Domitilla. Heaphy believed he was in the catacomb of SS. Nereus and Achilleus. The original Domitilla entrance had long been lost from memory, but in 1865 the De Rossi brothers discovered the primitive entrance, and they put the date squarely in the time of Nero.

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\*The chamber is named "Orpheus" because of a fresco wherein Christ is represented as the poet of Greek myth who charmed the earth and even Hades, with his song. Pipes in hand, "Christ" lounges upon a tuft of earth as animals stand around. It is not for his music that Orpheus was a subject for an early Christian cemetery, but because he represented purification and life after death. In Domitilla there are two scenes of Christ as Orpheus: one is in a stairway, over a loculus; the other, "Orpheus-Good Shepherd" is a medallion on the ceiling of what Pierre du Bourguet, S.J. (*Early Christian Painting*, 1965) called an "Ancient chamber" in Domitilla.



The Orpheus fresco in Domitilla stairway, above a loculus.

The original entrance is lost again today, but from the scrutiny of ancient maps, Mrs. Bogdanescu thinks that it lies near the Via Ardeatina. Rex Morgan cannot be so Britishly matter-of-fact as to smother the excitement of this subterranean exploration.

If it be ascertained that this area is first century, then, Morgan argues, we have probably found a likeness of Christ painted from eye-witness memory or description.

In this paper, the main points that Rex Morgan set out to establish are: that there are catacombs below Rome containing paintings probably dating to the first century; that the portrait in the Orpheus Cubiculum could well be the work of an artist who had seen Christ or worked from a description by someone who had; that the features of the man in this profile "closely match those of the Man on the Shroud. ..."

To conclude, Mr. Morgan "challenges" the experts on the catacombs, art history, Shroud history, etc., to examine the evidence he has presented, new evidence that supports a first-century date for the Shroud.