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Reading *Orantes*: Gesture and Commemoration in Early Christian Funerary Art

The frontal pose and outstretched arms of the orant figure are familiar elements in the visual language of early Christian funerary art. Yet, despite numerous iconographical studies, there has been no consensus as to the figure's meaning: an indication of the piety of the deceased, a representation of the soul in paradise, the Church personified, or a symbol of Christian bliss. Each of these solutions attempts to crack the code, to translate the "image sign" of the orant into an identifiable person, concept or quality. However, in early Christian art, numerous figures adopted the *orans* gesture deceased individuals, Biblical characters, saints and others unidentified. Conceivably, the fact that no single interpretation convincingly fits the corpus of represented *orantes* could indicate that the correct key has not yet been found. I would suggest, however that this interpretive confusion is perhaps more indicative of an inherent problem in the formulation of the question. Whereas iconographical methodologies have assumed that the image of an orant worked as a visual symbol for something or someone in particular, my approach is more functional. I suggest separating the pose from the depicted individual, and reexamining the gesture within the architectural and ritual contexts in which it was both practiced and represented. By resituating *orantes* figures within their religious and funerary contexts, this paper seeks to demonstrate their more complex functions both as commemorative monuments of the deceased and as performative models for the living.

Augustine's theories on vision and memory and his instructions laid out in the *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* provide one avenue from which to approach the interpretation of *orantes* figures in early Christian funerary art. His clearly articulated position on the role of memory and prayer in assisting the soul of the departed builds on notions of Christian prayer expressed by earlier Christian writers such as Tertullian and Origen. From these authors we learn that the physical attitude of prayer was both symbolically loaded and influenced by the appropriate setting and example. Augustine further emphasized that the prayers of the living were required as part of the obsequies due to the departed, and implied that the position and appearance of the tomb could influence the frequency with which the deceased was remembered. These sentiments encourage us to examine the effect the orant imagery had, or was meant to have, on the visitors to the grave. The question thus shifts from what the *orantes* symbolize to the more fundamental issue of why prayer was depicted. I argue that the images of *orantes* were more than symbols; their frequency in funerary art not only reflects an attempt to represent the Christian dead as pious individuals, but also expresses a gesture of communication with the living viewers which expected a reciprocal motion of memory and prayer for the departed in return.