

**Eugene VANCE**

**How do Bury Your Early Christian Mother? The Case of Monica**

The death and burial of Monica at Ostia in *Confessions IX* raise crucial questions in a Roman perspective. Should Monica really be buried apart from her homeland and away from the joint tomb with Patricius awaiting her in Hippo? What is the place of grief in the Christian faith, and how as a Christian should Augustine commemorate his parents in view of the tenacious mores of Roman religion and society?

Previously, Monica had proposed to her family a theme by which she wanted to be commemorated: that of a heroic maritime voyage of return to her dead husband's side, evoking an epic fidelity to her still-pagan husband during her peaceful marriage to him since the age of 12. The maritime *navigatio* was important to Roman funerary iconography as well as to Christian pilgrimage imagery, but Monica's previous concept of an epic *navigatio* to her spousal tomb was less Christian than Roman.

Augustine and his friends are stunned that at the threshold of death, Monica is now indifferent to repatriation and burial beside Patricius. They see Monica's change of heart as an offense to the Roman obligations either to repatriate the body of a defunct relative or to consign it to a permanent burial *in situ*. Their view is tenacious. In *De obitu Theodosii* (394 C.E.), Ambrose lauds the struggle of the emperor's son and successor Honorarius to repatriate and bury his father in distant Constantinople an undertaking over land and sea that took almost two years to complete. By contrast, Monica tells her sons that she wishes her body to be buried just anywhere (*ponite hoc corpus ubicumque*), and that she also wishes instead to be commemorated anywhere and any time even by *us*, the readers of these *Confessions* at the Eucharistic table. Such indeed is Augustine's plea at the end of Bk. IX, which marks the end of the narrative portion of the *Confessions*, itself a commemorative act indeed, a sarcophagus of words which commemorates, by the way, both of his parents, putting both them and himself to rest.

As he highlights Monica's burial as a Christian challenge to Roman customs, he provides the spiritual basis for her change of heart. Monica expresses her entire confidence in bodily resurrection an article of faith that the Romans had yearned to discredit by defiling the bodies of the martyrs of Lyon. He also implies that Monica's wish to be commemorated at the Eucharistic table vindicates Ambrose's forbidding even her Christianized practice of the *refrigerium* on holy feast days after she came to Milan. The Eucharistic feast has now superseded the *refrigerium*.

Writing about 20 years later in *De Cura Gerenda Pro Mortuis*, an older bishop shields Christian burial and commemoration from Roman habits of mind, allowing for the fullness of grief, yet underplaying the appeal of burial *ad sanctos* that still vexed Paulinus of Nola. He evokes one last time his desolation at having been abandoned by Monica in dying, yet rejoices that Christ himself has now taken up his wardship.