

The Roots of Early Christian Imagery in the Roman Empire: Archaeological and Artistic  
Evidence

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A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Art at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

2010

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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-67134-4  
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ISBN: 978-0-494-67134-4

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## ABSTRACT

### The Roots of Early Christian Imagery in the Roman Empire: Archaeological and Artistic Evidence

Melanie Perialis

The Roman Empire was one of the most powerful and longest-lasting empires of all times. It was home to a multitude of people from different social strata and ethnicities, as well as various linguistic and religious backgrounds. This diverse cultural community allowed different religions to arise, to be known, and also to flourish. One of these religions was Christianity. Christianity had to find a way to adapt itself to its environment and to attract converts to its new worldview. This created the need for an approach to make the Christian message more readily accessible. Therefore, Christians started using images to represent Christian themes that could be more easily understood by the Gentiles and the first Christian converts from Judaism. The way in which Christianity manages to spread its message in an efficient manner is through decorative images in the baptisteries, prayer halls, burial places and mausoleums. Therefore, an examination of images and artifacts, which are still extant, will be performed in order to find the root of Christian representations that influenced Christianity and its way of worship. The artifacts that will be examined will come from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century through to the late 5<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Dedication**

To my husband and my mother, who supported and encouraged me throughout my academic career; and to my father and Maria who cultivated and nurtured my love for archaeology and theology.

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## **Introduction**

The Roman Empire was one of the most powerful and longest-lasting empires of all times. The Roman Empire is the name given to both the imperial domain developed by the city-state of Rome and the corresponding phase of that civilization, which was characterized by an autocratic form of government. The latter phase is referred to as the Roman Empire and it succeeded the 500-year-old Roman Republic. The one who is usually credited with the beginning of this latter phase is Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar. At the time of Julius (100-44 BCE), Rome and the occupied cities were ruled by the Roman Republic. This republic's tranquility came under attack with two civil wars in 88 and 45 BCE then turned into a sort of dictatorship in 44 BCE when Julius took over.<sup>1</sup> His dreams of becoming the sole ruler of an empire that would rule the world came crashing down when he was assassinated that same year. The one who picked up the pieces after Julius's death was Octavian, who was later given the titles of "Augustus" "the one that rules by divine approval" and "Princeps" or first citizen,<sup>2</sup> a title he took instead of proclaiming himself emperor. This empire, which was the dream of Caesar and made reality by Octavian, conquered other lands and expanded throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Due to the great organization of the emperors this empire remained strong and fruitful.

Rome and her empire were home to a multitude of people from different social strata and ethnicities, as well as different linguistic and religious backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> This diverse cultural community allowed different religions to arise, to be known, and also to

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Vallée, *The Shaping of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 221.

flourish. One of these religions that came into being during the time of the Roman Empire was Christianity. What made Christianity so increasingly popular in the third and fourth centuries was the growing number of people who were rejecting polytheism,<sup>4</sup> and the amazing skill of the first Christians in the first and second century, to adopt and adapt pagan imagery and traditions to explain Christian thought. The numerous writings produced during the first four centuries are a testament to the great ability of the first Christians to write about their beliefs, ideals, and hopes. These writings were addressed to many audiences, including Jews and Gentiles. Unfortunately, a lay person would not customarily obtain and read copies of the manuscripts in circulation, due to their prohibitive costs, people's high level of illiteracy, or the language in which they were written (Greek, Latin, Coptic, and Hebrew). This created the need for a different approach to make the Christian message more readily available. Another reason for this need was the continuing persecution that Christians experienced. This persecution led Christians into hiding, in fear of their lives; they had to find a way to distinguish themselves from the pagans, without getting into trouble, all the while spreading the word of the Lord. Therefore, Christians started using images to represent Christian themes that could be more easily understood by the Gentiles and the first Christian converts from Judaism.

### **The Focus of the Thesis**

Representation of images was something very important for the early Christians and the multitude of early Christian images spread throughout the Roman Empire testifies

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 221.



to this. Later, the Christians of the Byzantine Empire turned the images into icons, which are still used and venerated by Orthodox Christians to this day. The use of images in worship was something prohibited in Judaism due to one of the Ten Commandments ascribed to Moses: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20: 4-5). But how were these images produced and why were they found useful to enhance Christian worship?

My thesis will examine some images and artifacts that are still extant and try to find the root of these Christian representations that influenced Christianity and its way of worship. Christianity derives from Judaism and was influenced by this great religion but there are others factors that influenced Christianity, such as the pagan traditions that were incorporated by the Gentile converts to Christianity. A major limitation that we face is that most of the earliest artistic representations and artifacts (from the first and second centuries) have not been preserved. This leaves me with no choice but to examine artifacts that come out of the late second century and later to cautiously extend my conclusion to an earlier era.

### **The State of the Question**

Early Christian imagery is a fascinating topic that has intrigued a number of scholars during the past century. Looking at these images does not imply that one tries only to uncover their date and meaning, but also where they come from, how they were influenced by non-Christian imagery and what they were used for. Fred Kleiner, the latest editor of the classic *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, concentrates on specific sights that

have revealed some of the extant early Christian art that remain for us today from the third and fourth century C.E. Kleiner looks at sites such as Dura-Europos and the catacombs and explains the images and the layout of these specific places. The author compares images and technique to pagan art and architecture, which gives an insight to the influencing forces on the first Christians.

Beckwith's *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* introduces detailed information on imagery found in the catacombs, on sarcophagi and wall paintings, which have been taken out of pagan tradition and applied to Christian themes. Christianity in the earliest periods, that is the first and second centuries, was a valuable contributor to philosophy and religious understanding. Art during this period, however, was taken from widespread traditional pagan form that made it easier for the Christians to spread the word and introduce Christianity to the pagans in a way that they were familiar with. Beckwith gives the reader information on the sarcophagus of Constantina, the daughter of the emperor Constantine, which shows the use of pagan images for a Christian burial (scrolls of vine with young cupids picking the grapes).

Frédéric Tristan, in his book *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes: Du Symbole À l'icône*, goes through the first traits of Christian and Jewish symbols, such as the thav, the menorah, the cross, the anchor and fish and others. These symbols are analyzed in detail and their origins are explored. Interestingly, Tristan finds that the traits of these symbols come out of a messianic basis that adapts to a Christian-pagan understanding. Yet the most interesting section is the third, entitled 'portraits et figures'. In this section there is a differentiation made between the anecdotal Jesus and the dogmatic function of Christ; this is examined by taking a look at frescoes, statues, and bass relief that represent

Jesus as the philosopher (found on sarcophagus 181)<sup>5</sup>, as Christ-Helios on the fresco from the necropolis under the church of St-Peter<sup>6</sup> and others. This book will help place these images and symbols in a cultural and political time frame, which in turn will facilitate the understanding of their origin and use.

The current thesis proposes to go beyond what these scholars have done. Instead of just looking at the archeological and artistic perspectives, it proposes to engage the biblical texts that undergird the artistic representations that will be considered. In doing so, I will take a more theological approach than the one taken by these scholars.

### **Methodology**

Art methodology is integral to this thesis in order to adequately examine and understand early Christian art. According to Adams, author of *The Methodology of Art: An Introduction*, ‘iconography is ... the way in which an artist ‘writes’ the image, as well as what the image itself ‘writes’ that is, the story it tells.’<sup>7</sup> Therefore, when examining an image one has to look at the technique the artist used and the overall meaning the image projects as a finished work. Erwin Panofsky, who worked at the Warburg Institute in London and was a pioneer of the iconographic method, distinguished three levels of reading a work of art iconographically.<sup>8</sup> He named the first level the ‘pre-iconographic’ the ‘primary, or natural, subject matter’. On this level the icon is taken at face value. The image of a man on the cross is identified as a man on the cross. On the second level, the level of convention and precedence, the image of a man on the cross is referred to as Christ’s crucifixion. In this level the text underlines the image. On the third level, the

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes* (Paris : Fayard, 2006), 380.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 383.

<sup>7</sup> Laurier Schneider Adam, *The Methodology of Art : An Introduction* (NY : IconEditions An Imprint of HarpersCollinsPublishers,) 36.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 36.

intrinsic meaning of the image is found. On this level several things are taken into account, the when and where the image was made, the prevailing cultural style or the particular style preference of the artists, the wishes of the patron, cultural themes, availability of contemporary texts and texts transmitted by past cultures.<sup>9</sup> The approach related to iconography is called iconology and refers to the study of a larger program to which the work belongs. According to Ernest Gombrich, another Warburg scholar, iconology involves the reconstruction of an entire program and therefore comprises more than a single text. This is contained in a context which includes a cultural and an artistic setting.<sup>10</sup> This methodological approach will allow me to examine the images in a systematic manner. Through this the icons will be looked at from a synthetic level of interpretation taking into consideration iconology through the cultural context and artistic setting.

In order to fully explain this iconographic approach an example needs to be provided. This example comes from the Old Testament and appears to have the most prominent biblical character, other than the Good Shepherd, to be represented in the catacombs. This is the life of Jonah. When looking at the life of Jonah, one sees a man being tossed overboard by other men, being eaten by a sea creature, and finally a man resting on the shore. This initial look falls in the first level of iconography which is called pre-iconographic, looking at the image as it is represented.

Once this has been done, the text that underlines the image needs to be identified. The textual reference to this image is Jonah 1-4. Through the story we are told that Jonah is chosen by God, he flees on a boat, is tossed overboard, is then eaten and spat out by a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 37.

sea monster, and is finally seen lying under a pergola (Jonah 4:5-11). This reading surveys the most literal features of the image. The third level opens up many different avenues of exploration and discussion. One has to keep in mind that this image is part of a larger program of images that detail the whole story and can be both identified in an iconological and iconographical study. Yet for this brief example only the image of Jonah under the pergola will be examined. What is interesting about this image is the origin of this sleeping figure and the reason why the figure of Jonah was represented naked. It comes from classical Greek mythology and the figure of Endymion, a beautiful young man that had been submersed into an everlasting sleep by the moon goddess Selene. He was represented in the same manner as Jonah. At first sight it appears that there is no differentiation between the representations of Endymion and Jonah; what is represented is a naked young man with the same stance (Roman artists represented a person asleep by showing them reclining on a couch with one hand behind their head). Yet, as Christians did when adopting images, they adapted the image to fit their needs. For this reason, unlike his Roman counterpart, Jonah is represented under a pergola. This imagery brings to mind the “climbing ground” found in the book of Jonah.<sup>11</sup> The story of Jonah is not just mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah in Mt. 12:38-42 and Church fathers such as Irenaeus and Justin Martyr offer a theological explanation to the story and in turn to the understanding of the images. Justin, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, uses the image of Jonah as a symbol of the resurrection while using three of the four scenes from the pectoral cycle.<sup>12</sup> Justin comes to the understanding of the story of Jonah as a pre-figuration of the crucifixion of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew. In the

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<sup>11</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 94.

<sup>12</sup> Ernest Cadman Colwell, “The Fourth Gospel and Early Christian Art,” *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr., 1935): 194.

Jewish tradition, the story of Jonah was not understood to be a pre-figuration of the Messiah, yet the original meaning must have been ambiguous to the evangelist who added several interpretations to the text. One of the interpretations is the reference to the three days Jonah spent inside the sea monster to points to the time Christ spent in the heart of the earth. This indicates that a synthetic level of interpretation needs to be performed in order to come to the intrinsic meaning of the image.

This brings us to the second method that is used in this thesis, typology. This is a method of biblical interpretation by which a person or event in the Old Testament corresponds to a person or event in the New Testament within a framework of salvation history.<sup>13</sup> Typology, along with allegory, is primarily a method of reading a passage/narrative that uses symbolic figures and actions suggesting hidden meaning behind the literal words of a text.<sup>14</sup> They were both used by ancient Christian writers and theologians such as Origen, Clement, Eusebius and others. Even though ancient writers used allegory and typology together, today many debates amongst scholars arise on whether or not allegory is an appropriate method to be used and if typology is a method within allegory. Nonetheless, for this thesis typology will be looked at on its own as a method of understanding early Christian images. Theodore of Mopsuestia, like other scholars, treated events in the Old Testament as *typoi* of events in the New Testament and explained that these events are *typoi* if they have some similarity with them, if they are constructive in their own time, and if they are inferior to the future realities of which they

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<sup>13</sup> Ninow, Friedbert, "Typology," Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, eds David Noel Freedman, Allen C Myers, Astrid B Beck (Grand Rapids: Wm.B Eerdmans Publishing co. 2000): 1341.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 43.

are *typoi*.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Jonah is a perfect *typos* of Christ. This *typos* is found in the interpretation favoring a parallel between the throwing of Jonah into the sea, the three days that Jonah spent in the sea monster and him being spat out on shore to Christ's crucifixion, death and resurrection on the third day.

This thesis consists of three chapters that cover places and artifacts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In order to better understand the origins of Christian imagery it is necessary to see what the Jewish communities of the Diaspora were doing in their synagogues. For this reason, the synagogue of Dura-Europos is the first place to be examined. Dura was a military and commercial outpost originally founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. on the west bank of the Euphrates River by Macedonian Greeks under the command of Alexander the Great; while in its final stages Dura became a Roman colony.<sup>16</sup> Dura was discovered in 1922 and revealed more than a dozen different cultic buildings, private homes, and shrines from polytheistic religions from the Mediterranean and the near east.<sup>17</sup> One of these private homes was converted into a synagogue; this is the focus of the first part of chapter one. Dura-Europos as a fortress was a cosmopolitan trading center and a place where religious syncretism flourished, for this reason it is not surprising to see that the style of the synagogue paintings were similar to those found in pagan temples and the Christian church at Dura.<sup>18</sup> Even though the Romans had control of the city for only one hundred years, the synagogue paintings appear to have been influenced by Roman art technique, such as some aspects of narrative devices, visual

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<sup>15</sup> Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: A Historical Introduction to Partistic Exegesis* (New York: T&T Clark,) 69.

<sup>16</sup> Marie-Henriette Gates, "Dura-Europos: A Fortress of Syro-Mesopotamian Art," *Biblical Archaeology* (Sep. 1984): 166-181.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 221.

<sup>18</sup> Fisher, "The Synagogue Paintings of Dura-Europos," 190.

sources, the elements and programmatic setting of the painting.<sup>19</sup> Like in all other cultures, borrowing was not uncommon; therefore, seeing Moses in the same stance as a Roman emperor is not unexpected. It is clear that a Diaspora Jew would be more inclined to associate with Greco-Roman art and culture since they lived in the heart of this great yet imposing culture. Similarly, the Christian baptistery or chapel at Dura unfolds the practices and beliefs of the early Christians using techniques similar to those used in the synagogue. Nonetheless, extensive wall decoration of this type found in the synagogue of Dura may offer an insight into why the first Christian communities thought that pictorial depictions were acceptable. Although there is no clear evidence linking the Dura images to the catacomb images of Rome, similarities in form may indicate a common ancestor in pagan art. Furthermore, the use of pictorial images in synagogues indicates that there was a prototype that was known to early Christians and used by them to represent their beliefs and understanding of their scripture and Jesus Christ.

The second chapter takes us from Syria to the Roman catacombs. The catacombs of Rome were used as burial sites from the second through the fifth century and hold a large number of images that can be called early Christian art. A visible evolution can be traced in the catacombs, offering information on what influenced the fociers, painters, and the patrons to depict certain images as they did. Like Dura, pagan art was at the root of that form of representation. The message, though, was Christian in its entirety, even when the depictions came out of the Old Testament. For example, Jonah is a clear prefiguration of Christ, even though he is represented in the form of the well-known Endymion. When the catacombs are examined, it becomes clear that early Christians did not feel the need

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<sup>19</sup> Warren G. Moon, "Nudity and Narrative : Observation on the Frescoes from the Dura Synagogue," Journal of the American Academy of Religion (Winter 1992): 589.

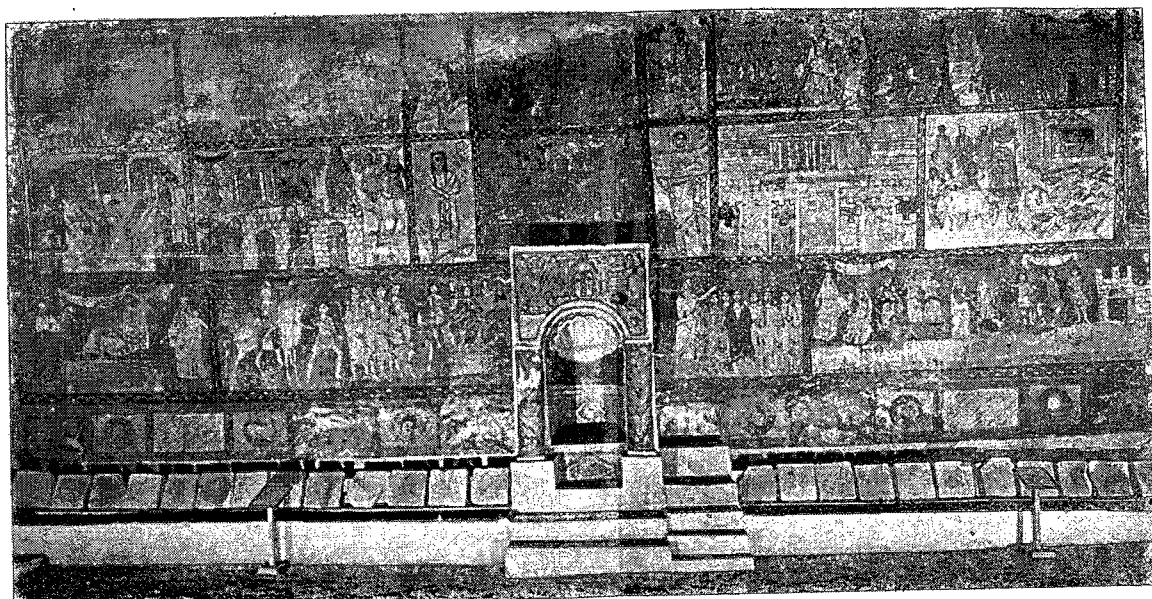


to separate their beliefs from paganism. Borrowing well-known images that fit their beliefs was acceptable and easy to do at a time when Christianity was under severe persecution and personal expression was minimized.

The third chapter examines funerary art in the open (e.g. in mausoleums), the industrial art, which includes rings and drinking vessels, and finally Constantinian artifacts, which are a development of the funerary art to imperial art that opened the way to Byzantine art. Even though Christian art developed out of paganism, it distinguished itself quite quickly through the moral teachings of Christianity. In 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century funeral art, pagan form became secondary to the intense meaning behind the image itself in the eyes of the Christian believer. A notable change comes in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially after the Edict of Tolerance of Milan (313 CE). This period brings to the surface more than ever Christian art and Christian belief. Hellenistic influence is still present in the art but Christian doctrine becomes more crystallized with the help of Constantine the Great and his use of the Christogram on his coins.

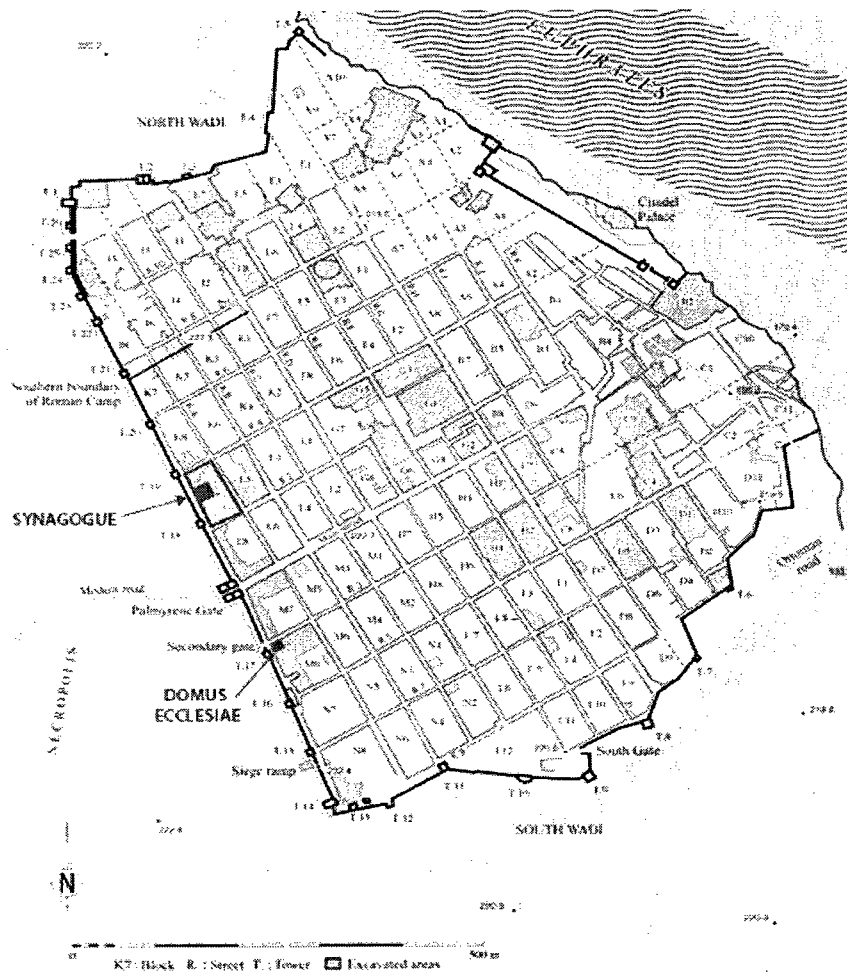
Therefore, the choice of subject in each chapter looks at the art of a particular century and place and compares it with its predecessors in order to understand the origin and meaning of the image. What can also be seen along with this analysis and unraveling of the development of the early Christian art is the popularity of images and symbols throughout the centuries.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Dura-Europos- Biblical Art of the Synagogue and Baptistery*

The West Wall, Synagogue of Dura-Europos, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

## The Synagogue of Dura Europos



Floor Plane of Dura-Europos Map 1

Dura-Europos (Map 1) was a military and commercial outpost originally founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. on the west bank of the Euphrates River by Macedonian Greeks under the command of Alexander the Great. Originally the city of Dura (a Semitic word that means “fortress”) was part of the Seleucid Kingdom. Later it came under the control

of the Parthian Empire and eventually became a Roman colony.<sup>20</sup> Dura was finally destroyed in 256 CE. by the Persian King Shapur I. Dura, which is also referred to as “Pompeii of the desert”, was discovered in 1922 and revealed more than a dozen different cult buildings, private homes, and shrines from polytheistic religions from the Mediterranean and the near east.<sup>21</sup> One of these private homes was converted into a synagogue, which involved two building phases. The first phase was the initial conversion of the private home into a place of worship. The second phase, which took place about seventy-five years after the completion of phase one, involved expanding and embellishing the earlier version. Phase two, which according to an inscription found on a ceiling beam was built by Archisynagogue Samuel in the year equivalent to 245 C.E.,<sup>22</sup> consisted of a suite for the congregation, a guest house for traveling merchants, a courtyard of the synagogue proper, and finally the sanctuary or House of Assembly. The House of Assembly consisted of mural paintings which covered all four walls of the building.<sup>23</sup> The west wall is the best preserved for it was reinforced from the inside with a ramp to protect the city from the Persian attack in 256 C.E. The South and North walls are half-preserved; both walls are cut diagonally following the shape of the ramp. Therefore, this ramp, which protected the building by filling it in with dirt, saved all the beautiful biblical and historical representations that adorned the Synagogue.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marie-Henriette Gates, “Dura-Europos: A Fortress of Syro-Mesopotamian Art,” Biblical Archaeology (Sep. 1984): 166-181.

<sup>21</sup> Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 221.

<sup>22</sup> James Fisher, “The Synagogue Paintings of Dura-Europos,” The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol 17 (April 1955):190.

<sup>23</sup> Gates, “Dura-Europos”, 172-3.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert L. Kessler and Kurt Weitzmann, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1990), 15.

The extraordinarily large number of frescoes found in the Synagogue took archaeologists by surprise. All four walls were covered from the benches all the way to the ceiling in Biblical narratives. This chamber, which was 13.75m long, 7.68m wide and 7m high, offered a wealth of information and insight into the study of ancient decorative art. All four walls were divided horizontally into five zones; the uppermost zone directly under the ceiling was destroyed. The three intermediate zones were well over a meter high; these are the zones that consisted of narrative compositions portraying incidents and persons who served to reveal the divine favor shown towards Israel in the past. Furthermore, these images of the prophets gave a sense of assurance of the culmination of that favor in the future. Finally, the fifth zone, the last at the bottom, was a continuing dado in imitation of marble incrustation work.<sup>25</sup> According to Kraeling, this use of dado and multiple zones was a technique common to all Dura paintings. Even Rostovtzeff, an art critic, found that the style of the Synagogue painting were similar to those found in pagan temples and the Christian Church at Dura.<sup>26</sup> This would not be surprising given that Dura-Europos as a fortress was a cosmopolitan trading center and a place where religious syncretism flourished. Even though the Romans had control of the city for one hundred years, the synagogue paintings appear to have been influenced by Roman art techniques, such as some aspects of narrative devices, visual sources, the elements and programmatic setting of the painting.<sup>27</sup>

The best-preserved images, as mentioned above, are on the west wall. In order to go into detail on the images I will designate the registries in the same manner as Kraeling

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<sup>25</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 66-67.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, "The Synagogue Paintings of Dura-Europos", 190.

<sup>27</sup> Warren G. Moon, "Nudity and Narrative : Observation on the Frescoes from the Dura Synagogue" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Winter 1992): 589

in “The Synagogue”. The three main horizontal registers will be designated as A, B, C respectively from top to bottom. The walls will be mentioned by their geographical positions and each panel will be designated with a number; for example WA3, west wall, register A, painting 3, which is the “Egyptians and the Exodus”. Only the four central panels depicting the prophets, also referred to as portrait panels, have been given Roman numerals, one to four. The two panels directly on top of the Torah shrine are mentioned only by the name assigned to them, because they are not a narrative scene or a static portrait of a prophet. For the purpose of this study it is impossible to go into extended detail on every wall painting, therefore a selection of the wall paintings will be analyzed.

***Moses and the burning bush***



FIGURE 1 “Moses and the burning bush” Wing panel I Dura-Europos mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The first image that will be examined is that of “Moses and the burning bush” Wing panel I (Figure 1). The Moses representation is found above and to the right of the Torah niche flanking the central panel; this is one of the four vertical scenes that

represent a prophet. This scene, which comes out of the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 3:1-6), is a representation of the theophany which occurred to commission Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and into the land of flowing milk and honey. The scene is much abbreviated due to the size of the panel that is filled with symbolism. Moses, who is represented in a frontal pose, has an expressionless face with heavily arched eyebrows. His eyes are wide open and his mouth, which is relatively small, is covered with a short dark pointed beard.<sup>28</sup> From his physical appearance Moses appears heroically youthful like most of the emperors in the Greco-Roman world. Warren G. Moon, in speaking of Moses' stance, writes that "reminiscent of Roman commemorative art Moses is depicted near the burning bush in an attitude of address that recalls the Roman *adlocutio*."<sup>29</sup> This statement is interesting particularly if one takes a look at the stance that the Roman emperors took in their commemorative art. Moses, not unlike the prophets found in the other wing panels, has his weight resting on the right foot leaving his left foot slightly behind, bent at the knees with the heel up and the toes to the ground. This stance can be found in free standing sculpture of Augustus of Prima porta (Figure 2).

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<sup>28</sup> Kracling, The Synagogue, 228, Kessler and Weitzmann, The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art, 34-35.

<sup>29</sup> Moon, "Nudity and Narrative", 590.



FIGURE 2 Augustus of Prima Porta, Prima Porta, ca. 20 B.C.E

The Augustus of Prima Porta is a statue that depicts the emperor as imperator. This was found at the villa of the empress Livia, the wife of Augustus, at Prima Porta and is dated to circa 20 BCE. The statue was discovered in 1863 in the garden of the villa where it was used as a decorative piece standing on the garden terrace against the wall.<sup>30</sup> This is thought to be a copy of a bronze original to commemorate one of the emperor's achievements. In the copy, which is 2.08 meters high and has traces of paint and gilding work, Augustus is depicted as commander and chief of Rome's army. He is wearing a cuirass, a military metal breastplate, which depicts a Parthian returning the Roman military standard. Augustus is portrayed as an eternal youth, which broke radically from the Republican realism and turned back to the classical Greek youthful depiction of a young virile man. Augustus in all his sculptures has a generic, expressionless face that

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<sup>30</sup> Donald Strong, *Roman Art* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 86.



copies characteristics from the statue of *Doryphoros* of Polykleitos.<sup>31</sup> The stance of Augustus and of Moses is the same; in both the weight-bearing leg is the right one and the free-standing is the left one which is bent at the knee. The right hand is lifted to indicate an address, or *adlocutio*, usually performed by an emperor when addressing his troops. The left hand of both Moses and Augustus is holding the himation, which is draped around and hangs towards the floor; unlike Moses, Augustus is holding in the same hand the Roman imperial staff. Moses, just like Augustus, is barefoot. Yet that similarity ends there, for Augustus has the bare feet of a god whereas Moses is on holy ground and therefore shows his respect by being barefoot.



FIGURE 3 Trajan's column, Rome, date ca. 113 C.E.

It is worth noting that on Trajan's column (figure 3) the emperor is found in the exact same stance as Moses. He stands facing to his right, with his right hand slightly raised and his left hand holding on to his himation. On the column, Trajan is seen addressing a general of his army and facing an animal sacrifice scene. In the same frame Trajan can be found with his back towards another Trajan figure, who is in the same

<sup>31</sup> Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* (Belmont, Ca: Thomson/ Wadsworth, 2007), 66-69.

*adlocutio* stance addressing his troops. Trajan's famous column, in Rome, is made out of marble and is 128 feet high. Coins indicate that this column was topped with the bronze statue of Trajan himself, now replaced with a statue of St. Peter. The shaft of the column is covered with a continuous relief that wind upwards and depicts Trajan's two successful campaigns against the Dacians, the first in 101 C.E and the second in 105-6 C.E.<sup>32</sup> Trajan, like Augustus, is depicted in military clothing including a cuirass. This differs from the figure of Moses who is dressed in a chiton with blue clavis and a himation that is draped over his left arm. Even so, Moses is very much in Greco-Roman stance and is draped with clothing that is reminiscent of the empire.

#### *Pharaoh and the Infancy of Moses*

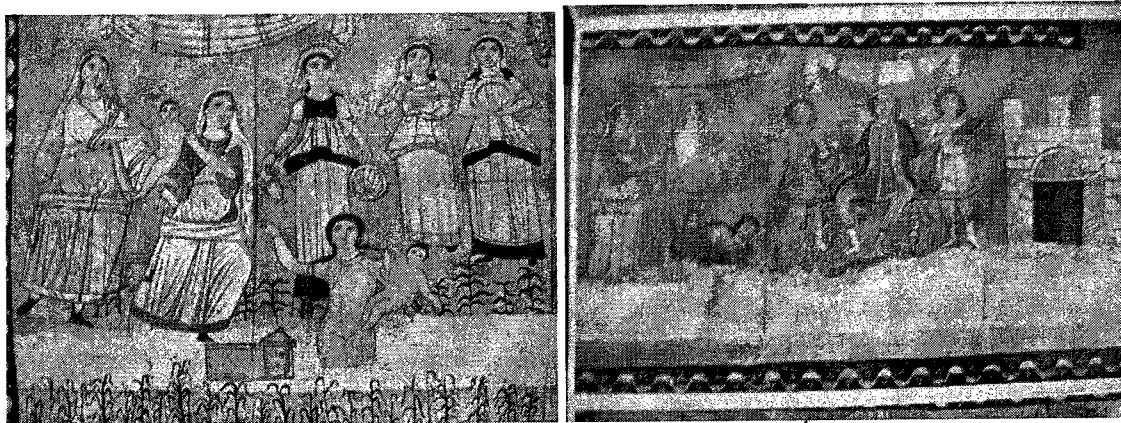


FIGURE 4 Pharaoh and the Infancy of Moses, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The second image, which is by far the largest panel of the west wall, is “Pharaoh and the Infancy of Moses” (Figure 4). This panel is found on the lower register of the west wall, WC4, and is in close proximity to the Torah niche. Unfortunately, due to water seeping through between the period of its composition and its burial, the panel suffered a general deterioration both to the painting surface and the lower part of the panel.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* 159.

<sup>33</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 169.

Nonetheless, the exposure of Moses by his mother can be found in this panel which comes from the book of Exodus chapters 1 and 2. The act of exposing a child is not something original to the Bible or to Moses for that matter. In Greek mythology, most of the heroes were exposed by their parents in fear that they would be killed, or so that the hero may retrieve the tools necessary to fulfill his/her mission in life. One Greek myth that features an exposed child is that of Jason the hero who was captain of the *Argo* on the quest to find the Golden Fleece. Jason was the son of Aeson and Alcimedede. Aeson was to become king of Iolcus, upon his father's death, but the throne was taken over by his half-brother Pelias. Alcimedede, fearing that Pelias would kill Jason, told Pelias that the child was born dead, then sent him to be raised by the wise Centaur Cheiron. He was raised and cared for till the day he was destined to come back and reclaim what was rightfully his, his father throne.<sup>34</sup> In the case of Moses, the exposure saved his life and gave him the tools necessary to stand up to the Pharaoh whom he had considered as a family member during his childhood.

Panel WC4 was meant to be read from right to left and consisted of several scenes compressed together to form the infancy story. Four scenes can be distinguished that take place presumably on the Nile River, which is depicted as a band running along the bottom edge of the panel. The panel begins with a crenellated walled city with an open gate. This may be meant as one of the treasure cities found in Ex. 1:11.<sup>35</sup> Immediately to the left of the city wall the Pharaoh is found seated on his throne flanked by two attendants. Pharaoh is represented in a similar manner, clothing and color of garments, with Ahasuerus and Mordecai in other panels. Yet the colors on the garments of Pharaoh

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<sup>34</sup> Jenny March, *Cassell's Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassell, 2001), 438-441.

<sup>35</sup> Herbert L. Kessler and Kurt Weitzmann, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, 26.

are reversed. The left hand of Pharaoh is holding a sword close to his side, whereas the right hand is extended in a gesture that can be understood either as acceptance, acclamation or instruction to those who are in front of him.<sup>36</sup>

The two attendants or courtiers that flank the Pharaoh wear the typical court costume of long-sleeved tunic, trousers and white boots. Even though their garments are the same the artist interchanged the colors of their garments by giving one pink pants a blue tunic and the other a pink tunic and blue pants. The attendant on the right of Pharaoh holds in his hand a diptych which he is writing on. The viewer is to understand this man as the Pharaoh's scribe. The attendant to the left of the Pharaoh has his right hand raised and his left hand around what appears to be a sword. Even though his identity has not been established he is referred to as the royal treasurer. Nonetheless, this image of the Pharaoh/king flanked by attendants is a standard design for the Synagogue artists. The image of the throne room appears to have been borrowed from the iconographic tradition of Roman Imperial art. The closest analogies can be found on the balustrade of the Roman forum which depicts a seated emperor receiving a female figure; the Arch of Galerius illustrates a seated *Augusti* (figure 5) and the Arch of Constantine which shows the submission of the German chieftain.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 157.

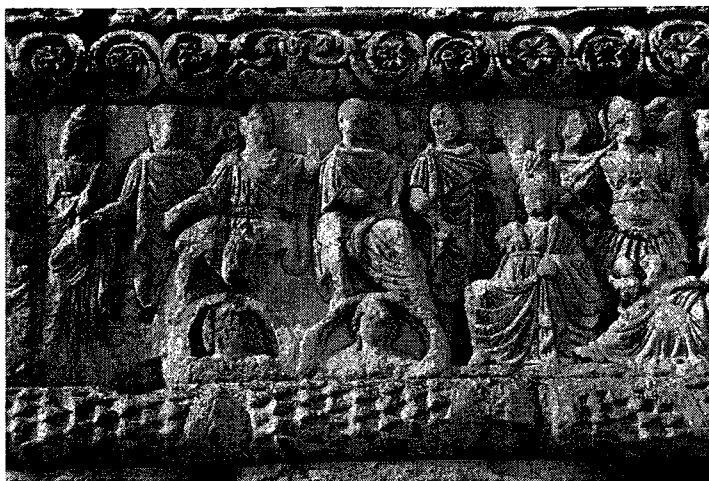


FIGURE 5 Arch of Galerius, Thessaloniki, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The scene that was just discussed is referred to as the audience scene. Therefore, immediately to the left of the throne the artist has placed two women in the proper standing position. Both women are seen in a frontal position with their right hand extended in front of them, probably in a gesture of acclamation. The clothing that they wear is similar to that of women in other panels, which consists of a chiton with long sleeves, a woman's himation fastened over the left shoulder with a broach, while the other end is draped over the head forming a veil.<sup>38</sup> The first woman is wearing a white undergarment and a yellow over-garment, whereas the second wears a reddish undergarment with a white over-garment. This scene has been clearly identified by Kraeling and others as the king receiving the midwives from Ex. 1:15-16.

Yet this scene has another element in it; there appears to be a separate scene altogether taking place at the bottom of the panel. This takes place at the feet of the two women where another woman is partially visible. This woman is bent down and appears to be placing something in the river; this is noted by her outstretched arms, yet the precise nature of her actions has been destroyed due to water damage that happened before the

<sup>38</sup> Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 139.

synagogue was filled in by the embankment. Even though this woman appears in similar clothing with the other two, she differs from the others in pose. What makes Kraeling think this is a separate scene is the lack of biblical reference to a third midwife. Therefore, Kraeling logically associates this woman with the mother of Moses placing her son in a basket in the river in order to save his life (Ex. 2:3).

The final section, which occupies only one fifth of the panel, consisted of the Pharaoh's daughter bathing in the Nile. This scene has been divided into two sections: the lower one depicts the Pharaoh's daughter bathing in the Nile, while the upper one depicts the princess' attendants on the shore and two women who are the final figures of the panel. The three attendants are in a frontal pose and placed in a row. These women are dressed in ornate court costumes, which consist of a short veil that reaches the shoulders, a sleeveless bodice and a long skirt with a wide border at the bottom. The women differ from each other only in arm position. Each one holds the princess' toilet accessories.<sup>39</sup> It appears that these women are only placed in the scene to qualify the naked princess found in the water.

The princess is seen in the Nile, in full frontal pose, up to her thighs in water. She is holding baby Moses in her left arm, while the ark is seen to her right. She gestures with her extended right arm to the two women who are found at the left of the panel. Both the infant and the princess are entirely nude. Yet to show the status of this woman as a princess she is represented as wearing earrings, two necklaces, two pairs of armbands and one pair of bracelets.<sup>40</sup> What is quite striking in this section is the naked body of the princess. Nudity was something that deviated from the Jewish tradition and seems odd in

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<sup>39</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 174.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

such close proximity to the Torah niche. Many scholars, such as Moon who mentions the Jerusalem Talmud as an example, suggest that the nudity found at Dura was there for didactic reasons. Yet the naked body seems odd in such a prominent position. This artistic vocabulary brings to mind the goddess Aphrodite, who emerged out of the water nude; the images of Aphrodite can be found on plaster plaques that were excavated in houses at Dura. The princess has many similarities to the Aphrodite represented at Dura and would have certainly been a scandalous one for a Jewish community. Nonetheless, rabbinic passages mention that the princess suffered from leprosy and was bathing in the Nile when she found the Ark. Once she touched the Ark she was cured which led to her conversion to Judaism.<sup>41</sup> If this was a well-known rabbinic text, the community would have viewed this image as the pagan princess which would not excuse the nudity but would serve as a lesson.

This image of the princess is in stark contrast to the images of Miriam and Jochebed who are part of the fourth and final scene of this panel. In this section Miriam is shown holding baby Moses and handing him over to her mother, as mentioned in Exodus 2:7-10. Interestingly, the two women in this final section are identical with the two midwives mentioned earlier. The only thing that changes is the body stance. Miriam stands with her left foot in the water; with her left hand she is holding Moses while her right shoulder supports him. This representation indicates the action of passing the child backwards to Jochebed. Miriam's face, as well as Jochebed's, is turned towards the princess. The similarities in dress and color of the clothing in this panel between the midwives and Miriam and Jochebed may have several interpretations: 1) it could have been done unintentionally, 2) the artist may have wanted to distinguish the Jewish women

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<sup>41</sup> Moon, "Nudity and Narrative," 596.

from the pagan women, and finally 3) as mentioned by Kraeling, may have been taken from the Targum of Jonathan, in which Shiphrah and Puah are identified respectively with Jochebed and Miriam.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, these two women must have appeared heavenly, dressed according to Jewish tradition, in comparison to the Aphrodite-like pagan princess naked in the water.

*Elijah Revives the Widow's Son*

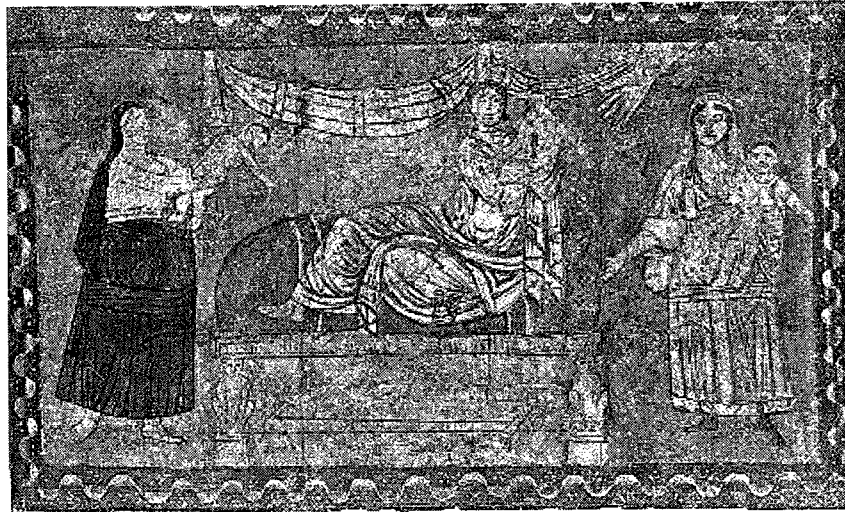


FIGURE 6: Elijah Revives the Widow's Son

The final panel that will be discussed is also found on the west wall in close proximity to the Torah niche and contains nudity. This is the panel named “Elijah Revives the Widow's Son” and is referred to as panel WC I (figure 6). This panel is meant to be read from left to right and begins with a woman in somber clothing holding a nude limp baby in her outstretched arms. The woman's face is in profile, which could suggest her confident reliance upon the prophet to whom she is giving her child. She is draped in a dark brown garment that is tied around her waist and draped over her head. Her feet and her upper body are bare, exposing her breast. This exposure of the upper

<sup>42</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 178.



body and the dark garments shows the mourning rituals of the ancient Orient.<sup>43</sup> Once again, a woman not of Jewish heritage but from Sidon, is demonstrating some form of nudity. This panel is in close proximity to that of “Moses and the Pharaoh’s Daughter,” and additionally has the same color background. Therefore, since the widow in the Elijah panel converted to Judaism, a parallel can be seen with Pharaoh’s daughter.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, this could lead to the conclusion that nudity was reserved for the unbelievers and that modesty should be reserved for the upright Israelites.

Most of the panel is taken up by the central figure who is reclining on a couch. The couch has a yellow frame and a thick rounded mattress and bolster in green. Elijah reclines on the couch with his left leg bent at the knee under the right leg which is extended comfortably. He is dressed in a grayish-white chiton, a pink clavi and a himation with decorative pink lines. Elijah is full frontal and holds the child with his right hand while it rests on his left shoulder. The child is erect and faces front, which signifies that the child is now alive. According to the biblical passage the widow’s son is brought back to life by God (1 Kings 17:22); so how was the artist able to incorporate God into the panel without being blasphemous? Like in other images found at Dura that artist incorporated the Hand of God in order to indicate the presence of God in an event.

Therefore, on the right side of the panel, left of Elijah extending towards the child, the artist has depicted a hand. This is not the first time that this hand has found its way into the synagogue panels. This can also be found in the Sacrifice of Isaac, the Exodus and the Crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and the Burning Bush and finally Ezekiel the Destruction and Restoration of National Life. In all these panels the hand, which

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Moon, “Nudity and Narrative,” 604.

usually is referred to as the Hand of God, is used to signify divine intervention. The hand color is a flesh tone that appears to be much lighter than that of the human figures found in the panel. The hand has a stocky forearm and all the fingers are widely spread.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the position of the hand indicates the recipient of the divine intervention, namely, the child. This Hand of God has its roots in the Hebrew Bible where it is mentioned numerous times. For example Deuteronomy 7:19 states, “the mighty hand and outstretched arm with which Yahweh your God brought you out” and Exodus 3:20, “he will not let you go until I have stretched out my arm and struck Egypt with all the wonders I intend to work there.”

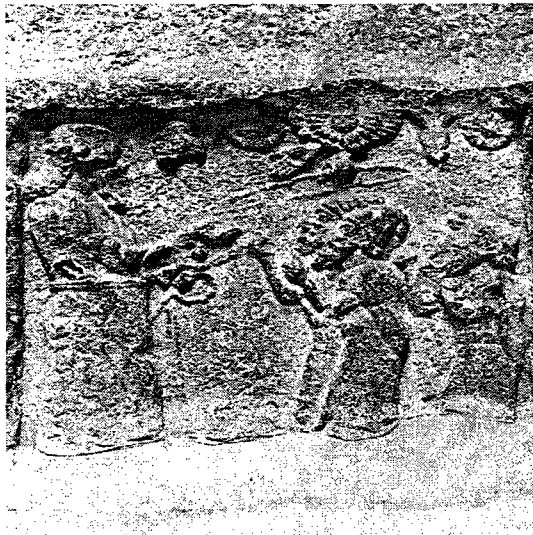


FIGURE 7: The Broken Obelisk of Assur-bel-kala from Nineveh. London, British Museum.

Nevertheless, one can find other sources that may have influenced the Jewish community with the visual representation of the Hand of God. The hand, which also appears to be the representation of a deity or deities, can be found in ancient Near East art as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE. A good example is found on an unfinished obelisk from Nineveh. On this, the ‘obelisk’ of Tiglathpileser I, a winged sun disk is found with two

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<sup>45</sup> Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, 145.

hands emerging from it. The left hand is outstretched with an open-palm blessing and the right hand drawing a bow symbolizing victory. Along with this the obelisk contains the victorious king and the captive men that are paying homage to him.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, these hand images can be found in second-third century Durene and Palmyrean art. A good example of this appears in a house at Dura: a hand holding a thunderbolt represented on gypsum that is believed by archaeologist to be the hand of Hadad protecting the house from evil.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it can be speculated that the image of the Hand of God may have been borrowed from pagan sources. Nonetheless, the synagogue of Dura contains the earliest emergence of this image in Jewish art. In the Christian catacombs, this image only appears from the fourth century on.<sup>48</sup>

The panel ends with the image of the widow holding her son in her arms. She is dressed in bright colored clothing and fully covered, indicating that she has abandoned her mourning. The child is also dressed in a shirtsleeve pink tunic and has its left arm outstretched and his right arm bent at the elbow. The facial expression of the child is a happy one just like its mother. One cannot help but feel relief for the widow and her son.

Looking at the images found at the synagogue of Dura-Europos, it is clear that the artist used biblical themes in order to tell the story of the Jews. Yet the manner and style of art is quite foreign since images were forbidden in Judaism. Like in all other cultures, borrowing was not uncommon; therefore, seeing Moses in the same stance as a Roman emperor is not unexpected. It is clear that a Jew of the Diaspora would be more inclined to associate with Greco-Roman art and culture since they lived in the heart of this great

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<sup>46</sup> Andre Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria* Trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons, (New York: Golden Press, 1961), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora*, 145.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

yet imposing culture. Similarly, the Christian Baptistery, or chapel, at Dura unfolds the practices and beliefs of the early Christians. Furthermore, it exposes how these Christians viewed Jesus, and how they represented the gospels stories through their murals. The big question still remains whether this synagogue is the precursor to Byzantine art. However, in order to come to the answer we must first finish our examination of the Baptistery of Dura, the catacombs, and finally funeral and Constantinian art.

### **The Baptistery at Dura-Europos**

The Baptistery was uncovered during the fifth campaign of 1931-32. According to Clark Hopkins, one of the archaeologists, on January 17, 1931 they uncovered by the Great Gate what appeared to be a wall with plaster. As the excavation continued, the vaulted canopy, or niche, was uncovered on the west wall, which was decorated with rosettes and stars. When the whole Baptistery was uncovered, eight murals, one inscription and one graffito were revealed. These are the murals of David and Goliath, the healing of the paralytic man, a woman at the well, the three Marys going to the tomb, Jesus walking on water and Jesus the Good Shepherd. The inscription reads, "The Christ Jesus is yours, remember Proclus."<sup>49</sup> Like the synagogue paintings, these survived due to the ramp that filled in the building in order to protect the city from the Persians.

On the north wall, which was quite damaged, are represented the miracles of Christ. This was divided into two panels, which was done by dividing the wall horizontally into registers with decorative borders. These dividing borders consist of three elements, which were placed in between four light reddish-brown lines. The elements found in the first and third section are formed by continuous brush strokes.

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<sup>49</sup> Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1979), 89-91.

These brush strokes produced what appears to be the letter *tau* “T” and the backwards letter *gamma* “⌋”. These were placed in such a way as to represent a cornice, yet this is not carried out throughout the room at the same level. The top of the cornice is outlined with a solid black band, while the bottom is outlined with a reddish band that is followed by a thin white band that is defined at its lower end by a black strip. This final line not only defines the cornice but acts as the border of the pictorial composition.<sup>50</sup>

### *The Resurrection Sequence*

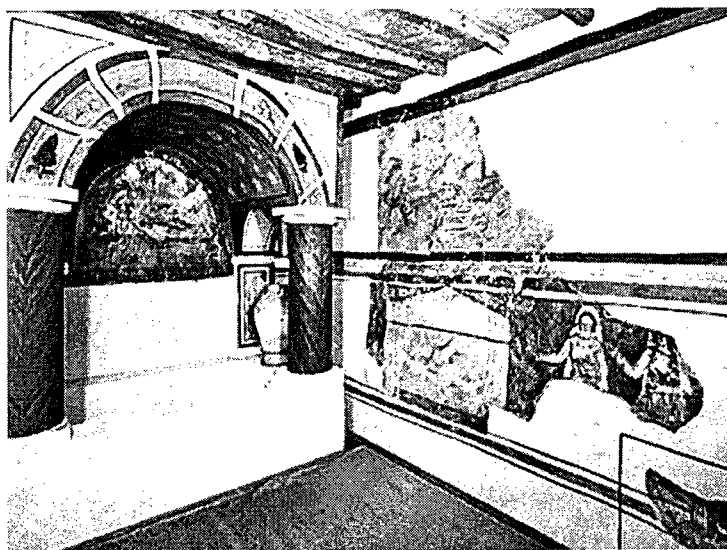


FIGURE 8 The Resurrection Sequence, Dura-Europos, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

As mentioned earlier, eight murals were uncovered, yet the one that brought up a lot of questions was the longest mural which started on the East wall and ended at the north wall. This mural is referred to by two names: “The Three Marys going to the Tomb” (Hopkins) and “The Resurrection Sequence” (Kraeling) (Figure 8). For the purposes of this work the mural will be referred to as the Resurrection Sequence. This is

<sup>50</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building* ed. C. Bradford Welles. (New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1967), 46.

found on the lower section of the East wall. This mural, as mentioned earlier, is the longest mural covering over 5 meters in length and consists of three pictorial elements that span consecutively from the right to the left.<sup>51</sup>

The East wall unfortunately was not fully covered from the embankment and therefore was mostly destroyed. What was covered by the embankment was not more than one meter high off the floor level. Once the area was cleared out, what was uncovered was the white plinth that ran throughout the room and the elaborate set of colored bands that finished off the lower end of the mural. Through examination of the border, it can be said that this mural was devoted to a single composition that continued uninterrupted on the adjacent portions of the North and South wall. Kraeling also suggests that the image even led to the doorway leading from the Baptistery to the south courtyard. The background was decorated with a reddish-brown color that was lightened with pink; this appears to be a consistent background color for most of the murals found. What is visible in this section is a heavy brown base line that is traced along the whole wall.

The most important element in this section of the Resurrection Sequence is the remains of five persons, whose feet and ends of their garments are visible. These five figures are symmetrically distributed in a row across the length of the wall. From the positioning of the feet, it is understood that the figures are frontally positioned.<sup>52</sup> Kraeling mentions through calculations of the width of separation of the feet and the garment, that the figures in this section were the same in proportion with one another and with the three women that are found on the North wall, who will be discussed later. He also mentions

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 73.

that the figures are homogeneous and analogous which the equal proportions of the five figures suggest.<sup>53</sup>

All five figures have the right foot shown in profile facing the left; the left foot is seen in profile with the toes pointed downwards. This stance can be seen in the Dura synagogue and in the painting found in the Temple of Bel. Nonetheless, this posture does not necessarily imply actual motion; it does on the other hand indicate that these figures came or are coming from the right and will be involved in something on the left. Since the artist did not outline the toes to show that the figures are bare foot and did not represent soles to indicate they have sandals on, it can be understood that the figures are wearing soft high boots that are typically shown in a white color. What is interesting, which Kraeling points out, is that these boots are usually associated with two types of dress at Dura. The first is trousers with a short tunic belted at the waist with long sleeves, which is worn by men and is Iranian in origin. The second is a long chiton worn by women, which typically covers the whole leg. This happens to be the type of dress found on these figures, which allows Kraeling to state that in fact the five figures on the East wall are women.<sup>54</sup> The garment has a heavy outline in a brown color, yet the chiton itself like the boot has no indication of color, which suggests that they were left white indicating the natural color of the plaster. The only thing that can be distinguished on the garment are lines that run down suggesting fold lines; the garment is full and gathered in the front.<sup>55</sup> Since the actual bodies and heads of these figures were not uncovered, it is hard to know or even speculate on what their action or intention was, yet the only thing that is certain is that all five women are heading toward the north wall and its gate.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 74.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The second element of the sequence, which as mentioned earlier is the continuation of the East wall, can be found on the eastern side of the North wall. What is apparent in this section is what appears to be some doors. Since this section of the wall was quite fragmentary, the lines and spacing had to be carefully calculated in order to come out with the full picture. An image of doors in Dura imagery is not unusual. In the synagogue there are two instances of doors: the first door is shut, while the second set of doors are open. Yet the doors appear to lay outside the line of the jambs.<sup>56</sup> In the Baptistry, the doors come at an angle meeting on the ground line, which may indicate, though not mentioned by Kraeling as in the process of being opened or closing after it had been opened.

— The third and final element of this panel preserves the most intriguing part of the whole representation. This representation begins on the left of the door, or gate and shows three women in a usual processional manner. Immediately to the left of the women a tomb or sarcophagus can be found, which takes up most of the left side of the panel. The sarcophagus takes up 1.4 meters. The tomb consisted of a square base with a pointed triangular roof. The artist used a beige color to indicate that it was made of some kind of rock. On either end of the roof one star is seen, which consists of a central disc that is shown by three concentric circles. The outer circles are done in yellow and the inner ones in white. The rays, which are also in yellow, are also outlines in brown.<sup>57</sup> Even though the actual base of the sarcophagus is not decorated, the roof has a light brown vine design, which spread in an irregular design from the center of the roof.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>57</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 77-78.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 77.



On the right of the tomb, all the women are represented in a frontal pose with their feet seen in profile. The women are dressed in a long sleeved flowing garment, their hair is covered with a long veil, yet some of the hair is visible, which allowed archaeologist to compare the hairdo that of the Alexander Severum period (ca. 200).<sup>59</sup> The women, who are seen walking towards the tomb, are rigidly frontal in pose and hold torches in their outstretched right hands. Their left arms are folded close to the body, along the waist, and hold what appears to be incense or ointment bowls. Even though there is a slight slant in the right arm holding the torch of the second woman, all three women have the same repetitious pattern. The women are clothed with a long-sleeved, white belted chiton along with a long white belt. Despite extensive damage and fading to this panel some decoration on the garment is still visible. The garments appear to have a wide opening at the neck, embroidered or decorated cuffs, and the belt has the distinct marking of the loops whose knots are outlined while the ends hang down. This type of garment, represented in this panel, is more often seen as an undergarment or overgarment that is normally unbelted. This particular dress with the belt can be found in funeral busts of women from Palmyra. Furthermore, this type of dress can also be seen in the synagogue panels.<sup>60</sup>

The formation of the procession is quite similar to that of the procession of martyrs from the church of St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. The basilica is dated to 568 CE and contains extraordinary mosaics. The mosaic at hand consist of four men walking one behind the other, their left hand folded close to their waist holding a bowl, while their right arm is covered with a cloth supporting the bowls. The similarity in the two

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<sup>59</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 114-115.

<sup>60</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 78-79.

processions lies in their styles, according to Hopkins. The Dura procession is not part of the manuscript style but holds close to a tradition from a later period. Even though Hopkins does not make the connection, I would like to speculate that the images from the Baptistery of Dura may be a precursor to the later art that flourished during the Byzantine period.<sup>61</sup>

Analyzing the artifact did not prove to be as difficult for the archaeologist as was finding from which biblical passage this panel derived from. In the Synagogue panels the images all derived from the Old Testament and did not prove hard to read. Yet this panel proved a mystery wanting to keep its biblical origin a secret. In order to understand the panels origin the Gospels need studying and analyzing. Upon closer consideration of the texts, only Mark 16:1-8 seems to be a match with the panel on the North wall. The only thing that appears to be out of place are the torches that the women hold, which indicate that it is still dark out; the other is the stars that appear on top of the tomb, which bring to mind the birth of Jesus.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint him. And very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen.<sup>62</sup>

John 20:1-18 mentions one woman going to the tomb: “It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb.”<sup>63</sup> Whereas, Matthew 28:1-10 mentions two women, “After the Sabbath, and towards dawn on the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary went to visit the sepulcher.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 114-115.

<sup>62</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Mk. 16:1-2.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, Jn 20:1-2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, Mt. 28:1.

Then there is Luke 24:1-2 who mentions three women followed by “other women” going to the tomb,

on the first day of the week, at the first sign of dawn, they went to the tomb with the spices they had prepared...[10] the women were Mary Magdala, Joanna, and Mary, mother of James. And the other women with them also told the apostles.<sup>65</sup>

This seems more consistent with the overall panel spanning from the East to the North wall. Yet when the texts are examined closer, it becomes obvious that this panel is a *mélange* of all four Gospels. John mentions that it was dark out, Mark and Luke mentions that the women brought spices and finally Luke mentions the other women who followed the three main characters.

During the initial excavation in 1931, archaeologists had been unsuccessful in their search to find the appropriate biblical passage that this mural belong to. Yet the answer came out of the sand on March 5, 1933 when a parchment fragment became known.<sup>66</sup> After closer examination from several scholars, including Carl Kraeling at Yale, the fragment was identified as a part of the Diatessaron. This fragment consisted of fourteen fragmentary lines made up of words and phrases from all four Gospels.<sup>67</sup> The fragment states:

[And the mother of the son] of Zebedee, and Salome, and the wives of those who followed Him from Galilee, to see Him crucified. It was the day of preparation and the Sabbath grew light. While it was still twilight in the day of preparation, there came a man, a councilor, a hyparch from Arimathea; a good man and just who was a disciple of Jesus; but secretly, for fear of the Jews and he looked forward to the kingdom of God and he was not in agreement with the [Jewish] council<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, Lk. 24:1, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 107.

<sup>67</sup> Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, 108.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, it can be concluded that since this fragment was found in the vicinity of the Baptistery, the images, which appear to be a *mélange* of all four Gospels, was the source for the panel found on the East and North walls. This is somehow not surprising, since Tatian's Diatesseron was the standard Gospel text in the Syrian Middle East until about CE. 400, when it was replaced by the four separated Gospels.<sup>69</sup>

### *The Good Shepherd*



FIGURE 9 The Good Shepherd, Dura-Europos, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The West wall, like in the Synagogue (houses the Torah niche), is the focal point of the Baptistery. This is the wall that houses the basin or baptismal font. The Basin of this font along with the plinths and abaci were left white, the color of the plaster. The columns were painted with dark green and black lines that represented veins. This technique was also used in the Synagogue in order to make the columns look like marble. On top of the columns sits a rectangle that is seen decorated with a grape and leaf motif. The grapes and leaves may seem out of place, yet this is a motif, including the fruit

<sup>69</sup> "Diatessaron." Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2010. Web 28 Feb. 2010 <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9030296>.

garland, that can be found in the Synagogue adorning the Torah niche.<sup>70</sup> The vault of the canopy is painted in a dark blue with whitish yellow stars as decoration (star-studded sky).<sup>71</sup> Yet the focus of attention, is found set behind the font itself. In this section, the artist chose the most familiar theme of early Christianity to be represented. This is the allegory of the Good Shepherd and his flock (figure 9) found in John 10:11-16.

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and runs away and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; he runs away because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep. And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd.<sup>72</sup>

This panel is rectangular with a curved top that meets with the vault. All around the panel there is a reddish brown band of 0.08 m wide, which is outlined by a black line. This creates a border of 1.40 meters wide on the base and 1.08 meters high from the base to the top. The artist however did not depict the figures directly on the border. He places the ground line higher leaving a blank space, which was later used to depict the image of Adam and Eve. This area was ideal for a single figure composition, yet the artist opted for a scene with numerous characters that entailed greatly reduced proportions.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 44-45.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>72</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jn. 10:11-16.

<sup>73</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 50-51



FIGURE 10 Hermes Kriophoros, Athens, c.570-560 BCE

This panel has two main elements. First, on the left the Good Shepherd is found represented as a “kriophoros” or “moschophoros” (figure 11), holding a big ram on his shoulders. Second, on the right his large flock is seen moving in front of him. The figure of the Good Shepherd is 0.40 m high outlined in a light brown color and represented in a frontal three quarter pose. This pose is represented by having the left foot of the figure, in profile and the right foot positioned frontally with the toes pointed downwards. This stance, which through the positioning of the feet shows the left foot as the weight bearing foot and the right as free standing, indicates that motion is taking place toward the left. The clothing, a short chiton also known as *exomis*, which is represented on the Good Shepherd, hangs from the left shoulder sweeping across to the right hip. This exposes the right breast and arm and the legs. The chiton was represented in a yellow color with brown fold lines and outline.<sup>74</sup> The stance of the Good Shepherd is not only found at the

<sup>74</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 51-52.

Baptistery; it can also be seen in the Dura Synagogue in panel WB1 “Moses Smites the Rock”, in panel II “Abraham Receives the Message” and last but not least, in pagan art such as the column of Trajan, the scene where Trajan is addressing his troops.

The second element of this panel, as mentioned earlier, is the large flock found grazing in front of the Good Shepherd. Best preserved of the flock are the black outlines of the heads, horns and backs of the rams found grazing on the top of the flock and the outline of the hooves and legs of the animals at the bottom of the flock. What is found in the middle of the two is quite faded and hard to distinguish. For this reason, it cannot be said for certain whether this flock only consisted of rams. Nonetheless, the sketch from the tracing by Pearson indicates that there are twelve rams grazing, in addition to the one on the Shepherd’s shoulder making the total thirteen.<sup>75</sup>

Even though the composition of the Good Shepherd and the rams is quite straightforward, a word needs to be said about the probability of the flock being all rams. Where does the image of the Good Shepherd carrying a ram come from? Kraeling points out that Klauser, who compiled statistics on sarcophagi depicting animals carried by Good Shepherds, identified 184 Good Shepherds in total: 49 carried rams, 57 ewe, 27 indistinguishable animals and the rest were too fragmentary.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, the sex of the animal seems to be of little importance. Furthermore, if one takes into consideration the widespread use of the pagan kriophoros, it would be natural to see the Good Shepherd carrying a ram. Nonetheless, the most important aspect of this representation lies in the meaning of the whole image. In order to get to the meaning of the image, the biblical text that explains this image needs to be examined. Therefore, if one states that the image of

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Carl H. Kraeling, *The Excavation at Dura-Europos Final Report VIII: Part II The Christian Building*, 54.

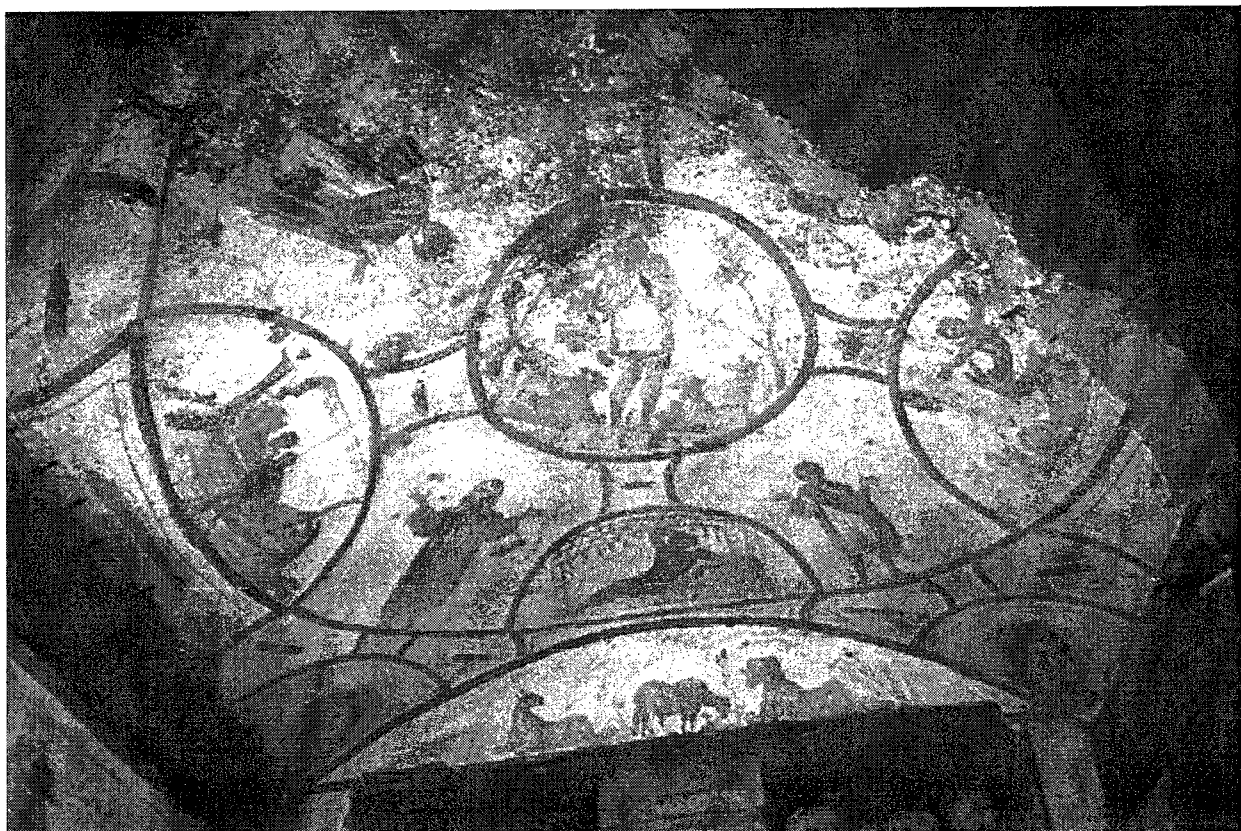
the Good Shepherd comes from the parable of the lost sheep, Matthew 18:12-13, the Shepherd should have on his shoulders a lamb. Yet, if it is taken from Genesis 22:13, the sacrifice of Isaac, it can be argued that Christ is the sacrificial ram. Subsequently, does it make sense to have Christ the Good Shepherd represented as both the Shepherd and the sacrificial ram? Some would state that this is “nonsense”.<sup>77</sup> Yet the duality is quite intriguing. It appears that Jesus the Good Shepherd is tending to his flock but if the image is further analyzed, one can see Christ as the sacrifice.

Dura-Europos offered a great deal of knowledge on 3<sup>rd</sup> century Jewish and Christian life in the Diaspora. Extensive wall decoration of this type had not been found in a synagogue until Dura, which may offer an insight into why the first Christian communities did think that pictorial depictions were acceptable. There is no clear evidence to link the Dura images to the catacomb images of Rome, yet similarities in form may indicate pagan imagery as a common ancestor. The Baptistery of Dura, even though small in size, sums up the Christian faith. The believer walks in and follows the path that the woman had taken to go to see Jesus in the tomb; yet at the end there is no longer death but a new beginning with the baptistery basin and the Good Shepherd tending to his sheep. Since this is the core of the Christian faith, that through the resurrection of Jesus humans are saved, the catacombs of Rome should have a similar feel for salvation. Therefore, in order to uncover the mystery of the catacombs, a study must be done to determine not only the theology but also the evolution that took place in the catacombs and its Christian art.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 53-54.



**CHAPTER TWO*****The Catacombs of Rome: Typological Representations of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Art***

The Good Shepherd, Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

## **The Catacombs of Rome**

One can of course speculate as to when Christian art came about, yet archaeological evidence and scholarly debates cannot pinpoint the birth of Christian art. The crystallization of ideas and dogma passed through a preliminary stage to come to the present form in the Christian churches of today. Nonetheless, in order to come to an understanding of the stages of development, a study needs to be performed in the catacombs of Rome, a place that was constructed by Christians and developed over the centuries as Christianity came to complete its corresponding body of beliefs and rituals. Therefore, the catacombs will be examined in this chapter in order to unearth the influences of existing art standards and practices onto this new form of art referred to as early Christian art.

The catacombs of Rome were used as burial sites from the second through to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. From the late 5<sup>th</sup> century, until the ninth century the sites were no longer used as burial places; instead they were now filled with pilgrims who wanted to visit the graves of the early Christian martyrs. Due to the pilgrimages in the catacombs, the burial practices in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century changed; they started burying the dead in close proximity to the church. Later, the saints and martyrs whose remains were in the catacombs were moved to new and existing churches that bore their names. Consequently, from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards the catacombs were forgotten. Fortunately, they were re-discovered in 1578 by workers in the Vigna vineyard. This find came at an ideal time. Fighting between the Protestant and the Catholic Church was on the rise due to the Reformation and subsequent Counter-Reformation. The catacomb discovery allowed all to know that the use of icons was not a new addition that the church instated. Icons were used by the

first Christians to represent their belief system. Similarly, the discovery allowed the Catholic Church to show that the veneration of the Virgin was something that was introduced by the first Christians.<sup>78</sup>

The re-discovery of these burials is quite fascinating, yet what they are and how they were used is of the greater interest. The catacombs are underground cemeteries that were carved out of the volcanic rock tuff that is found in the area. This rock, which can be found throughout Italy, is a rock that is quite easy to carve yet is solid enough to be used in most Roman constructions once it comes into contact with the air and it hardens. These underground burial tunnels were made up of intricate subterranean galleries that had one of three types of burial forms. The most standard and found throughout the catacombs is the *loculi*. These are simple wall graves, rectangular in shape, that are cut out on both sides of the wall. The *acrosolia* are once again carved into the wall but are surmounted by a semicircular arch. Finally, the *sarcophagus* is a rectangular box made out of stone where the body is placed the actual word means flesh eater. The *acrosolia* and the *sarcophagi* are usually found in burial chambers called *cubicula*, which are highly decorated.<sup>79</sup>

When one is trying to study the catacombs one has to keep in mind that they were constructed over a long period of time. The construction, according to Rutgers, went through four phases. The first phase began when underground burials commenced in the second century. The second phase is when the real catacombs were constructed in the third century. The third phase is when the catacombs were expanded and developed into underground communal cemeteries, and finally, the fourth phase, took place when burial

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<sup>78</sup> L.V. Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome: In Search of the Roots of Christianity in the Catacombs of the Eternal City* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 9-13.

<sup>79</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 42-44.

stopped and pilgrimage began.<sup>80</sup> These phases changed and developed the catacombs and burials; therefore, one has to keep in mind that there is a chance that what was there in the beginning of the second century may have changed by the end of the fifth.

Nonetheless, the catacombs, which offer a wealth of images, were well preserved because there was no real climatic change in these underground burials. After close examination of the content of the catacombs, archaeologists realized that not only did the building go through phases but so did the paintings. These three phases are as follows: phase one corresponds to the beginning of Christian art in the second and third centuries. Phase two, the Old Testament phase, which took place in the third century, and finally, phase three, the New Testament phase, which took place in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>81</sup> Keeping these phases in mind, images that come out of the catacombs along with sarcophagi will be examined to establish the origin of the forms, symbols, and images found.

Christian iconography, in the form existing today in the Orthodox or even Catholic Church, was not born overnight. It took centuries and a lot of modification to come up with the beautiful art symbols use in their worship and venerated today. Not surprisingly, when Christianity appeared there was no Christian art. Christians had to find a way to express themselves artistically. One option was to incorporate existing objects that were currently available to them or to develop an iconography appropriate to them. As it will be shown, later Christians used both of these options to their advantage; they

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 82-84.

used popular themes from pagan art that suited their beliefs and transformed them in a way to speak to them.<sup>82</sup>

An evolution is apparent in the images that follow. The evolution is found in three stages: first, symbolic images derived from messianic roots and are adapted to pagan-Christian understanding. Second, anecdotal images, which allow the painter and sculptor to extract out of the images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just depict biblical images. Third and final are portraits and figures, which incorporate all the relevant questions on the incarnation of Christ, the church and the empire. According to Tristan it is this last stage that covers the adventures of iconography in the first six centuries.<sup>83</sup> Having said this, the first images to be considered correspond to what Tristan calls symbolic images. Nonetheless, before considering the images themselves, some historical background on why these images were accepted and used by early Christians will be presented, starting with Clement of Alexandria and the symbol of the fish.

## **SYMBOLIC IMAGES**

### ***The Fish.***

Clement of Alexandria (ca.150- 220) was born to a pagan family and later converted to Christianity. Little is known about his life, yet starting at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, his writings began influencing Christianity considerably. One of the ways that Clement was influential when it came to the milieu of representational art can be seen in his work entitled *Paedagogus*. This work, composed of three books, has as its basis

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<sup>82</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 85.

<sup>83</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole a L'icône : II-VI Siècle* ( Paris: Fayard, 1996), 19.

Christian ethics and uses Jesus as the teacher/educator.<sup>84</sup> In *Paed.* 3.59.2 line 8 Clement mentions five images that are acceptable for Christians to wear on their rings. These images are the dove, fish, ship, lyre, ship's anchor and finally, if one is a fisherman, he may use an apostle drawing children out of the water.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, it can be understood that these images are accepted by Clement to have Christian significance. The popularity which Clement enjoyed during his lifetime and afterwards, explains why the symbols he proposed became predominant in the first Christian communities of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. A good example of a Christian ring from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century can be found in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, Paris. This late 3<sup>rd</sup>-century ring consists of an engraved gem, with the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ and one fish. This can be clearly understood of as a Christian ring not only because of the fish (its significance and meaning will be discussed later), but also because of the Greek word, which translates as "fish", and was used as an acrostic composed of the first letters of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, these images went beyond the use on rings to be placed on gravestones, the catacomb walls, glass bowls, oil lamps, and ornaments.

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<sup>84</sup> "Clement of Alexandria" in D. Wyrka, ed., *Dictionary of Early Christian Literature* (New York: The Crossroad, 2000), 130-132.

<sup>85</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*. (Trans. Simon P. Wood. Washington: The Catholic University Press, 1954), 246.

<sup>86</sup> Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 196.

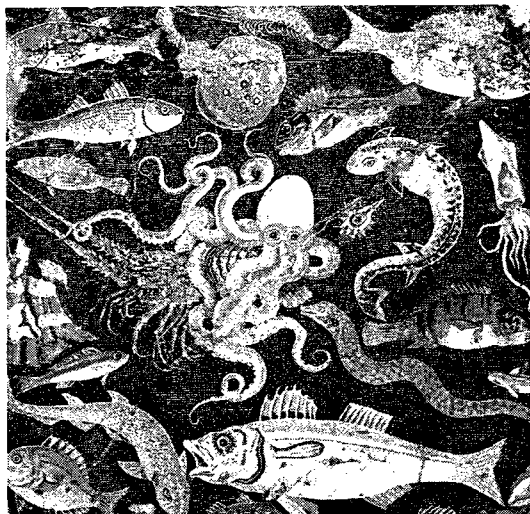


FIGURE 11 Fish mosaic, from House of Faun, Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> century.

The fish, one of the images mentioned by Clement, can be seen on the wall of the catacomb of Callixtus in Rome. This image consists of a fish with a basket of five loaves of bread placed on it. This image is mirrored on either side making it two fishes being represented. One can claim, like in a pagan context, that this is just a representation of food with no Christian or theological significance. It is true that in a pagan milieu fish were represented in fresco that evoked associations to the sea and seafood. A good example of this is a mosaic from the first century BCE in Pompeii represented, presumably, on one of the walls of the House of Faun (Figure 11). In this mosaic, however, different kinds of fish, an octopus, squid and other sea animals are represented. It is easy to look at this image and imagine that this alludes to the seafood that the people of Pompeii dined on. Yet this does not necessarily have to be true for a Christian viewer. A Christian, going back to the image in the catacomb of Callixtus (figure 12), may not see in this just a fish; for that Christian it may be a symbol of her belief such as Christ and the apostles as fishers of men, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and finally

the Eucharist.<sup>87</sup> Yet the question can be raised, Why did early Christian painters and church fathers consider the fish as an acceptable image for Christian usage? Where did this image come from? Moreover, why was it associated with Christ and the Eucharist?



FIGURE 12 Catacomb of Callixtus, Fresco with the symbol of bread and fish. Early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century.

The answers to these questions can essentially be found in the Bible and more specifically in the Gospel writers. Mk 6:39-45, Mt. 14:15-22, Lk. 9:10-18 and finally Jn. 6:5-16 refer to the miracle of the loaves where two fish and five loaves of bread are divided to feed 5000 people. At first glance, these readings do not appear to have any correlation with a Eucharistic meal, but, upon close examination, the Gospel writers employ terms that were used to describe the Last Supper, which is the quintessential Eucharistic meal. The following main five actions are common in meals: 1) the people or community sits down, 2) one person (head of the table, priest, or teacher) takes the food (bread, fish, wine), 3) blesses the food or gives thanks, 4) breaks and 5) distributes to the people or community.<sup>88</sup> These similarities between a Eucharistic meal and the miracle of the loaves offers an indication of why early Christians saw and represented the bread and

<sup>87</sup> Jas Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christian* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>88</sup> Richard H. Hiers, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3 no 1 (Spr 1976): 31.



fish as part of the Eucharist, which at the same time offered them hope of resurrection and life to come in the messianic age. Nevertheless, what does the fish have to do with the Messiah?

In order to understand the correlation between the fish and the Messiah, it is important to look back at the Jewish tradition. In Jewish apocalyptic circles the fish was found as the main dish in messianic banquets. This stems from the thought that Behemoth and Leviathan were fish, which would be food for those who would live in the messianic age.<sup>89</sup> This is clearly stated in 2 Baruch 29:

And it shall come to pass when all is revealed... that the Messiah shall then begin to be revealed. And Behemoth shall be revealed from his place, and Leviathan shall ascend from the sea, those two great monsters which I created on the fifth day of creation, and shall have kept until that time; and then shall be food for all that are left.

From this and other passages, fish can be seen as something present at the Messianic banquet and the messianic age. Therefore, since this image offered hope of life in the messianic age for the Jews, it is understandable that the early Christians took this to refer to their apocalyptic food, a Eucharistic meal: Jesus distributing “eschatological food sealing the recipient in, the life to come of the coming Kingdom of God.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, it is easy to understand why the early church fathers, such as Clement, chose the fish to be one of the images that can be represented by Christians.

Nonetheless, a correlation can be found in pagan thought that may have also influenced Christians in associating the fish with Christ the savior and protector. For the ancient Greeks and Romans the *poisson par excellence* was the dolphin. Pliny spoke highly of this amazing creature, which was a remarkable diver who would take on its

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<sup>89</sup>Hiers, “The Bread and Fish Eucharist In the Gospels and Early Christian Art,” 38.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid, 27.

back castaways and bring them to safety. There was a story of the poet-musician Arion, at the time that mentions that he was thrown in the water by his fellow sailors and was saved by dolphins. The story goes that the dolphins came and fought against whales that were coming to eat Arion. It is easy to see how the dolphins can be associated with Christ. This story can be seen on numerous pagan sarcophagi with an image of a trident or an anchor, which was the symbol of hope and stability for the Greco-Romans.<sup>91</sup>

The symbolic images though could go so far in expressing the belief, intentions and aspirations of the early Christian. Furthermore, during the time of persecution ambiguity and symbolism was the norm, since the expression of the Christian belief was condemned but in time of peace Christian expression flourished. This, therefore, bring us to the second part of Tristan's evolution, the anecdotal images, which allows the painter and sculptor to extract out of images spiritual and ecclesiastical messages and not just stagnant depictions of biblical images.

### **ANECDOTAL IMAGES**

Once in the catacombs the viewer is not only struck by the beauty and mystery that is found there, but also by the vast amount of Old Testament stories represented on the walls of the cubicula. Eusebius, the fourth century bishop of Caesaria in his work *The Proof of the Gospel*, defended Christian use of Jewish scriptures. He states that those Holy Books belong to the Christians and that when they are read properly they offer certain proof that is fulfilled in the Gospels. One example that Eusebius gives, and is found represented in the catacombs, is the account of Abraham's three visitors at Mamre

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<sup>91</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole a L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 91.

(Genesis 18:1-8). Yet how does the vision at Mamre fulfill the Gospels? Using a typological interpretation, which sees Old Testament characters and events as prefigurations of New Testament characters and events, both Eusebius and Justin Martyr would assert that it can be seen in the text and in visual representations that Abraham saw the pre-Incarnate Christ, an event that foreshadows Jesus. As Justin Martyr writes: “At this point I asked, ‘do you not see, my friends, that one of the three, who is both God and Lord, and ministers to Him who is in Heaven, is Lord of the two angels?’”<sup>92</sup>

### *The Vision at Mamre*



FIGURE 13 Fresco of the Vision at Mamre, Cubiculum B, Via Latina Catacomb, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> Century.

The vision at Mamre can be seen in Cubiculum B in the Via Latina catacomb. Not surprisingly, this cubiculum is full of Old Testament scenes such as Rahab saving the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:15), Samson slaying the lion (Judges 14:5-9), Noah in his ark, Jacobs Ladder (Genesis 28:10-13) and many more. The vision at Mamre appears to be a new scene in funerary art, in cubiculum B the panel is 38 x 37 inches and is bordered by a

<sup>92</sup> Justine Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (Trans. Thomas B. Falls. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 237.

5-inch band of stylized flowers. In this, Abraham is depicted as an old man with long hair and beard. He is wearing a simple tunic with one hand raised in front of him towards the three visitors. Abraham sits on a rock out in the open, which is inferred from the background trees, and greenery; Abraham's tent is not found in this image.

The three men are represented higher up as if on a ledge or floating. The three men, who are referred to as angels by most scholars, are represented as normal men. They are young-looking beardless men with brown hair. All three are dressed in long tunic, mantle, and sandals that are outlined and black.<sup>93</sup> Just like Abraham, the three men have their right arm extended in a gesture that suggests speech or even blessing and their stance is very similar to the one mentioned in the previous chapter as the Roman *adlocutio*. Out of the three men the one in the middle is depicted smaller than the rest. Robin M. Jensen suggests that this figure is not represented in a way to appear more important than the others, which is the case in other representations of the visit at Mamre.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the middle figures seem to be distinct from the other two, and that could suggest that the three divine persons are represented as the Trinity, while the middle figure symbolizes the Pre-Incarnate Son of God, which may have been the intention of the artist. It is likely that when commenting on the representation of the three men at Mamre, Irenaeus was reflecting some opinion that the artist may have known. In his work *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 44, Irenaeus states:

And again Moses says that the Son of God drew near to exchange speech with Abraham: and God appeared to him at the oak of Mamre at midday, and lifting up his eyes, he saw, and behold, three men were standing over him; and he prostrated himself to the ground and said; Lord, if I have truly found favor before thee; and all the rest of his speech is with the Lord, and the Lord speaks

<sup>93</sup> Antonio Ferrua. *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*. Trans. Iain Inglis, (Scotland: Geddes and Grossett, 1991), 70.

<sup>94</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "Early Christian Images and Exegesis." *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*. (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 66.

to him. Two, then of the three, were angels, but one the Son of God; and with Him Abraham also spoke pleading for the men of Sodom, that they might not perish, if at least ten just men were found there.<sup>95</sup>

### *The Life of Jonah*



FIGURE 14: The Life of Jonah, Via Latina, Rome 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The next image to be analyzed is once again an Old Testament scene that appears to have the most prominent biblical character, other than the Good Shepherd, to be represented in the catacombs. This is the life of Jonah. According to Goodenough, in the Via Latina alone Jonah is represented twice thrown into the mouth of the monster, three times being vomited by the sea monster, three times sleeping under the arbor and finally two times “aroused” or angry, as Ferrua would suggest. On the left and right wall on top of the arcosolium in cubiculum A the image of Jonah can be seen. On the left-hand wall Jonah is represented being cast into the sea as mentioned in the book of Jonah: “he replied ‘take me and throw me into the sea, and then it will calm down for you.... And taking hold of Jonah they threw him into the sea; and the sea stopped raging’”<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Trans. Joseph P. Smith. New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 76.

<sup>96</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 1:12-16.

The image is damaged and faded and for this reason the sails of the ship, the upper bodies of the three sailors and finally the head of the sea monster has been lost. This is found in a panel 30 x 19 ½ inches and is bordered by what appears to be thick reddish brown bands. On the opposite is Jonah disgorged by the sea monster as mentioned in Jonah 2:11. In this 27 ½ x 21 ½ inch panel, Jonah is projected from the monster's mouth with both his arms outstretched in front of him, while his head is lifted backwards. The colors of this panel, like the one mentioned above, is green for the monster and red for everything else. The background is the color of the plaster, and there is no indication of water or ground line.<sup>97</sup> The sea monster that swallows and spits out Jonah is not original to Christianity. Maritime themes enjoyed great popularity in the Roman world in the first two centuries of the Common Era. Even though it is assumed, in the representation of Jonah, to be the sea monster from the Bible, the monster takes on the form of a dragon that was quite popular in Roman representation.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the explicit representation of a monster and not an actual big fish, according to Tristan, is done so that there will be no confusion between the monster that swallowed Jonah, which represents death, with the dolphin and most importantly with the symbol of IXΘΥΣ.<sup>99</sup>

On the right-hand wall, immediately to the right of Jonah being spit out, Jonah is represented as angry and to the right of this image Jonah is represented lying under the pergola (Jonah 4:5-11)\*. In the first image he is represented sitting on a rock holding his chin with his right arm, in the second image he is reclining on what appears to be a rocky

<sup>97</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 63.

<sup>98</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 93-94.

<sup>99</sup> Tristan, *Les Premières Images Chrétiennes Du Symbole a L'icône : II-VI Siècle*, 186

\* The cycle of Jonah can also be seen in cubiculum C and cubiculum M.

outcrop that has a greenish color with a red outline.<sup>100</sup> Jonah has his right leg bent at the knee while his left leg is straight out in a relaxed position. He has his left arm bent at the elbow, propping up his upper body, while his right arm is bent behind his head. His face is in a frontal pose, while his body is in a three-quarter position as he is seen semi-reclining on the “couch.” The pergola is also represented in a green color with vines hanging from it, yet the leaves have been discolored and damaged, and, therefore, are not all visible. What is interesting about this last image is the origin of this sleeping figure.



FIGURE 15: Endymion Sarcophagus, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

In classical Greek mythology Endymion, a beautiful young man that had been submersed into an everlasting sleep by the moon goddess Selene, was represented in the same manner as Jonah. At first sight it appears that there is no differentiation between the representations of Endymion and Jonah. What is represented is a naked young man with the same stance (Roman artists represented a person asleep by showing them reclining on a couch with one hand behind their head). Yet, as Christians did when adopting images, they adapted the image that fit their needs. For this reason, unlike his Roman counterpart,

<sup>100</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 65.

Jonah is represented under a pergola. This imagery brings to mind the “climbing ground” found in the book of Jonah.<sup>101</sup>

Yahweh God then ordained that the castor-oil plant should grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head and sooth his ill humor; Jonah was delighted with the castor oil plant.<sup>102</sup>

The question that should be asked is “Why Endymion? Why not just make up a new image?” As mentioned earlier when Christianity appeared, Christian art did not exist, yet what did exist was Greco-Roman art and workshops that dominated the market. Therefore, it would be natural for Christian converts, most of whom were formerly pagan, to seek out something familiar and commonly available. Nonetheless, adopting images and adapting them to make them have Christian significance can be seen as an evolutionary process through which early Christians found their identity.<sup>103</sup>

The story of Jonah is not just mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus mentions the sign of Jonah in Mt. 12: 38-42

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees spoke up. ‘Master,’ they said, ‘we should like to see a sign from you.’ He replied, ‘it is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign! The only sign it will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah remained in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights...’<sup>104</sup>

and figures such as Irenaeus, and Justine Martyr offer a theological explanation to the story and in turn to the understanding of the images. Justine, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*,

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<sup>101</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 94.

<sup>102</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Jonah 4: 6-8.

<sup>103</sup> Rutgers, *Subterranean Rome*, 103-105.

<sup>104</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Matt. 12: 38-42.



uses the image of Jonah as a symbol of the resurrection while using three of the four scenes from the pictorial cycle.<sup>105</sup> Justin states:

And these Memoirs also testify to the fact of his resurrection from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion, for it is therein recorded that in answer to the contentious Jews who said to Him, "Show us a sign," He replied, "An evil and adulterous generation demands a sign, and no sign shall be given in but the sign of Jonah." Though these words are mysterious, His listener could understand that He would arise from the dead on the third day after the crucifixion.<sup>106</sup>

It is clear that Justin came to an understanding of the story of Jonah as a pre-figuration of the crucifixion of Christ from the Gospel of Matthew. In the Jewish tradition, the story of Jonah was not understood to be a pre-figuration of the Messiah, yet the original meaning must have been ambiguous to the evangelists, who added several interpretations to the text. One of the interpretations is the reference to the three days Jonah spent inside the sea monster to indicate the time Christ spent in the heart of the earth. It is interesting to note however that the *Di Rossi* version of the *Midrash of Jonah* mentions that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath who was resurrected by the prophet Elijah, the immediate forerunner to the Messiah according to Jewish tradition. Jonah, in the Midrash, is thought to have been physically taken up to heaven, like Elijah, and his task in the messianic age is to bind and bring Leviathan to the righteous in Paradise to be feasted on. Therefore, the Jewish Midrashic images of a messianic Jonah must have been quite strong in the mind of Matthew in order to make such an association. Nonetheless, no matter what the origin, the interpretation of Jonah being spat out of the sea monster as

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<sup>105</sup> Ernest Cadman Colwell, "The Fourth Gospel and Early Christian Art," *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Apr. 1935): 194.

<sup>106</sup> Saint Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho." *The Fathers of the Church: Writings of the Saint Justin Martyr* ed. Ludwig Schopp, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 314.

the resurrection of Christ becomes the most popular artistic interpretation in early Christian art<sup>107</sup>.

### *Sacrifice of Isaac*



FIGURE 16: The Sacrifice of Isaac, Via Latina, Cubiculum F, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

On the left-hand wall, of room L in cubiculum F, the sacrifice of Isaac is represented.

It happened some time later that God put Abraham to the test. ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ he called. ‘Here I am,’ he replied. God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, your beloved son Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, where you are to offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.’ Early next morning Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him his two servants and his son Isaac. He chopped wood for the burnt offering and started on his journey... Abraham built an altar there, and arranged the wood. Then he bound his son and put him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of God called to him...then looking up, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the bush. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Bezalel Narkiss. “The Sign of Jonah.” *Gesta* Vol. 18, No. 1 (1979): 64.

<sup>108</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Genesis 22: 1-13.

Unfortunately, the image itself has been quite badly damaged by looters who tried to remove it in 1954.<sup>109</sup> Abraham, in this image, is dressed with a short tunic and a mantle. He is bearded and holds a long sword in his right arm while in his left he presumably holds his son Isaac, who appears to be leaning next to him in a short tunic and sandals. To their left is an altar with burning wood; behind this a ram is visible among small bushes. On the top of the frame, the hand of God is visible coming out of red clouds, representing the divine voice stopping Abraham from killing his son. The same image can also be seen in cubiculum C with minor differences. While the altar appears to be burning, Abraham holds the sword while Isaac is kneeling with his hands tied behind his back; the ram is to the left of the altar. Yet the hand of God in this representation comes out of blue clouds (the hand is not visible in the image for it has been damaged); below the figures of Abraham and Isaac is a servant dressed in a short tunic holding on to a loaded donkey.<sup>110</sup>

This scene is probably the most common representation, other than the Good Shepherd, in catacomb art, oil lamps and sarcophagi. In the book of Genesis, the importance lays in the obedience that Abraham shows to God, yet this does not explain why this image was represented in funerary art.<sup>111</sup> The Letter to the Hebrews, however, offers an explanation to why this story would be represented in a funerary milieu:

It was by faith that Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He offered to sacrifice his only son even though he had yet to receive what had been promised, and he had been told: Isaac is the one through whom your name will be carried on. He was confident that God had the power even to raise the dead; and so, figuratively speaking, he was given back Isaac from the dead.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ferrua, *The Unknown Catacomb: A Unique Discovery of Early Christian Art*, 127.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>111</sup> J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscover Monuments of Early Christianity* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 68.

<sup>112</sup> *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Hebrews 11: 17-20.

Therefore, it can be understood that this image brought to mind for the ancient viewer a comfort in deliverance and resurrection of the dead. This idea of sacrifice can also be seen in the letter of Paulinus of Nola to Melania the Elder, who left her son in the care of a tutor, a form of sacrifice for a mother to leave her child, in order to follow God's call. Paulinus, however, goes one-step further and compares the ram that replaced Isaac with the lamb that signifies Christ.

Like Melania, father Abraham got back his one son whom he had offered to God, because when the demand was made he readily offered the child. The Lord is content with the perfect sacrifice of heartfelt love, so the angel's hand intervened to stay the father's right arm as it was poised for the blow. The angel snatched up the victim and in its place set a hastily furnished sheep, so that God should not lose his sacrifice, nor the father his son. There was this further reason, that the mystery to be fulfilled in Christ and rehearsed by Isaac (so far as the image of God could rehearse it) could be given shape through the ram. For the lamb which was to be later sacrificed in Egypt to typify the Savior was thus already anticipated by the beast of its own species-the ram which replaced Isaac as victim to prefigure Christ. So the ram was found by Abraham since the highest sacrament was not his due, but it was killed for Him for whom the fulfillment of the sacrament was being preserved.<sup>113</sup>

Hence, it is understood that the sacrifice of Isaac was understood and represented as the iconographic paradigm of Christ's crucifixion. Nonetheless, if this image is a prefiguration of Christ, where are the similarities? Robin M. Jensen, in her article, points out the similarities between Isaac and Christ: 1) Abraham was offering his beloved and only son, as God the Father did with Christ, his Son, 2) both sons were miraculously conceived, 3) it took three days to get to the place of sacrifice or place of resurrection, Christ resurrected in three days, 4) both sons carried the wood for their sacrifice, Isaac the wood to burn on the altar and Christ his cross to Golgotha.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> St. Paulinus of Nola, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola* (Trans. P.G. Walsh. Westminster: The Newman Press, 1967), 111-112.

<sup>114</sup> Robin, M. Jensen. "Isaac as a Christological Symbol in Early Christian Art." The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies 5 no 2 (Winter 1993): 8.

The Letter to the Hebrews points to the representation of the sacrifice as the obedience of Abraham to God, yet Paulinus clearly maintains that Isaac is a prototype to Christ's sacrifice. The problem here lies in the dates, Paulinus wrote his letters in the late fourth and early fifth century. So, this may give credence to Jensen's statement that before 313 CE it cannot be said with certainty that the sacrifice of Isaac was seen as something more than a symbol of deliverance and resurrection since all the literature that talks about the prototype comes from the fourth century onwards. Even though the original theological significance may be different in the second to the third centuries, the pictorial origins cannot be disputed. The only problem with this is that according to our analysis the answer comes from the written word and not from the image itself. Nonetheless, as Jensen suggests, "homilies and liturgies were the most important source from which early Christian imagery derives meaning from".<sup>115</sup> Therefore, it is possible as Kessler suggests that artistic interpretation influenced the written word. This may be the reason why in early representations of the sacrifice of Isaac, Isaac is not represented as bound on the altar.



FIGURE 17: Child Like Isaac and Abraham as Orants, Catacomb of Callixtus, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

<sup>115</sup> Robin M. Jensen. "The Offering of Isaac in Jewish And Christian Tradition." *Biblical Interpretation 2*, (1994), 105.

A good example found in the Catacomb of Callixtus, which dates to the first half of the third century CE where a child like Isaac and Abraham are shown like orants, while a ram proudly stands to the left of Abraham along with an olive tree and the fire wood in the back-ground.



FIGURE 18: Sacrifice of a Child Isaac, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, late 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

Similarly, in a later third century representation, Isaac is show as a child carrying the wood while Abraham is pointing to the fire on the altar. On the other hand, in the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus and Cubiculum F in the Via Latina, Abraham holds a knife in his right hand and the childlike Isaac has his hands bound.<sup>116</sup> What is interesting to note is that, in the Jewish tradition and in the representations of the Sacrifice the Akedah, Isaac is represented and understood as an adult between the ages of 26-36, old enough to get married and carry the heavy burden of the wood of the ultimate sacrifice.

<sup>116</sup> Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 157-159.

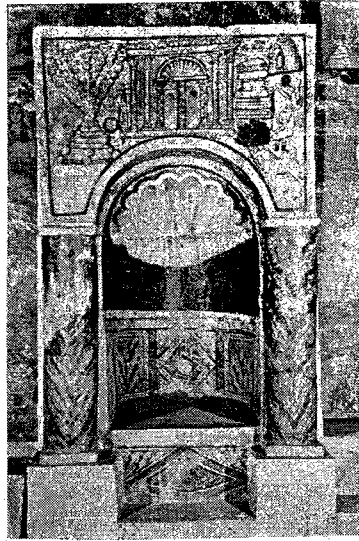


FIGURE 19: Torah niche, Dura Europos, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

In stark contrast to the Sacrifice of Isaac, is the image found on the Torah niche at Dura, where Isaac is clearly represented as a child that appears unbound lying on the altar. Could we conclude from this that the Christian view of Isaac as a child comes from the exegesis that the Dura artist made to the biblical story? In any case, one has to keep in mind that the Dura representation of the Akedah is the closest of all representation to the actual biblical story.<sup>117</sup>

Catacomb construction started, in its first phase, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, yet the earliest remaining images come out of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. Interestingly, a visible evolution can be traced in the catacombs, offering information on what influenced the fociers, painters, and the patrons to depict certain images as they did. Like Dura, the form of representation was rooted in pagan art. The message, though, was Christian in its entirety, even when the depictions came out of the Old Testament. Jonah is a clear prefiguration of Christ, even though he is represented in the form of the well-known Endymion. The symbol of the fish may have just been a marine representation for the

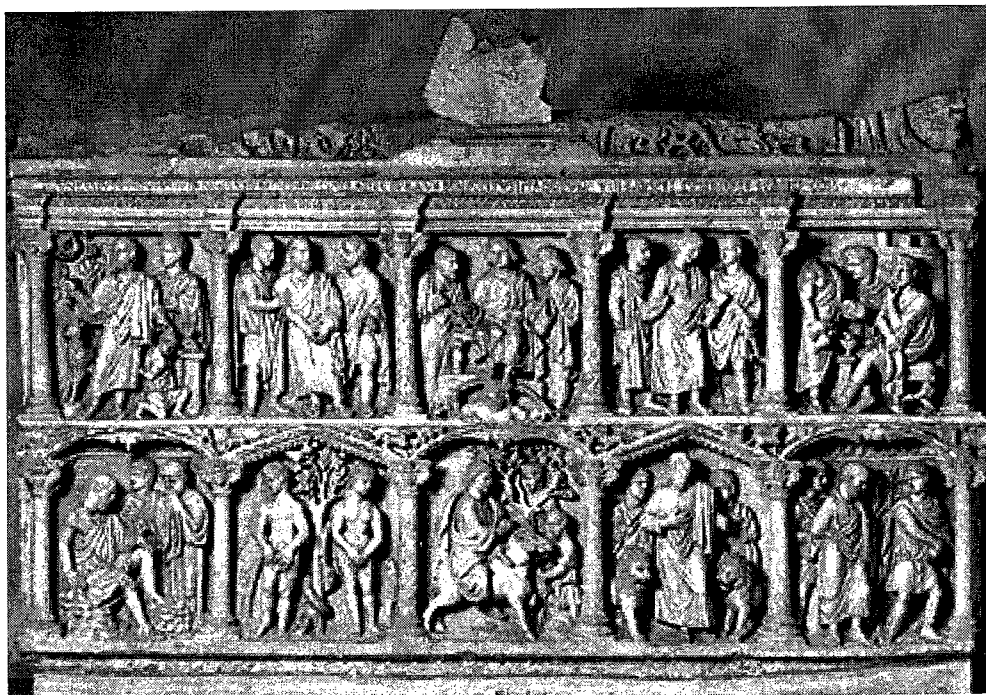
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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 166-167.

pagans, yet for the Jewish community it was the main dish of the Messianic banquet; and finally for the Christians the symbol of Christ. Nonetheless, the extent of Christian images is not enclosed in the catacombs. Other forms of art come about in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries that need to be looked at such as the sarcophagi.



## CHAPTER THREE

*Funeral Art and Other Forms of Early Christian Art*

Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican, 359 CE.

In the late republic and in the time of the Julio-Claudian era, the standard method of burial was cremation. On the outskirts of Rome three columbaria (first century CE) or “pigeon houses” were found that consisted of niches, which were rectangular or rounded, with urns containing the ashes of the cremated dead. Usually, depending on the status of the deceased, a bust would be carved and placed in front of the urn.<sup>118</sup> In the time of Trajan (97-117 CE), however, inhumation and the use of carved sarcophagi started becoming popular. Under Hadrian (117-138 CE) this new form of burial became widespread all over the Roman Empire. “Sarcophagus” literally translates to “flesh eater”; this is usually carved out of stone in a rectangular form and is usually decorated on all four sides or just three, depending on where the sarcophagus was placed, that is, free standing or against a wall or niche of a tomb. Decorative carvings were also placed on the lid. The top part would either be finished off with the deceased person’s image reclining on a cline or it would finish in a pyramid shape. Scenes that were represented on these pagan sarcophagi incorporated moments of the life of the deceased including: marriage scene, sacrifice, warfare, public office, mythological scenes, war scenes and lastly scenes that have to do with death and the afterlife.<sup>119</sup> Sarcophagi were the canvas where Christian funerary art and pagan art mingled easily together. The themes that overlapped and were ready to be borrowed were the motifs of paradise and eternal life.

In this chapter, I will be looking at the following sarcophagi; the sarcophagus of Santa Maria Antiqua, the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus and the sarcophagus of Constanina. I will attempt to show that while the funerary art found on these sarcophagi is directly borrowed from pagan art, the message coming across is Christian. This will be

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<sup>118</sup> Nancy H. Ramage, Andrew Ramage, *Roman Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 2001), 228.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

achieved by analyzing the images found on these Christian sarcophagi and comparing them to similar pagan images found on pagan sarcophagi. Similarly, I will also look at glass vessels that were used by Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to note the leap that took place in art; from funerary to everyday life. Finally, an examination of what will be called Constantinian art will be undertaken in order to trace the change from funerary to imperial art, which led the way to what is known today as Byzantine art.

## Sarcophagi

### *Santa Maria Antiqua*



FIGURE 20: Sarcophagus Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

The sarcophagus at Santa Maria Antiqua is one of the earliest to be found in Rome. This is believed to be a late third-century (ca.270 CE) sarcophagus made out of marble. The sarcophagus is of the early vase form, oval in shape with rounded edges. Jonah is found in the front of this sarcophagus taking up a third of the sarcophagus starting on the left-hand side. To his right a standing ornate female figure is found, while to her right is a seated philosopher reading from an open scroll. Following this scene is

the Good Shepherd and the baptism of Jesus.<sup>120</sup> On the extreme right and back of the sarcophagus one can see two fishermen, next to that is Neptune with his trident pouring a deluge of water from a vase causing the storm, and finally, to connect with the front-left image, Jonah's ship with furled sails battling the storm.<sup>121</sup>

When looking at this sarcophagus the detail on the figures and scenes jumps out and amazes the viewer. The faces are well carved and the draping intricate. Yet, on closer inspection it is curious to see that the faces of the orant and the seated philosopher have not been finished. An explanation for this could be that Roman workshops produced sarcophagi beforehand and then added the portrait in after the client paid. In this case it appears that after the burial the features were hastily added in with paint. Interestingly, this underscores the universal appeal of the themes chosen.<sup>122</sup>

Starting with the left of the sarcophagus, Jonah is found reclining under the vines. The sea monster and part of the boat are visible, which continue around to the back of the sarcophagus, indicating in a small space the four scenes in the life of Jonah. Jonah is positioned in such a way on this sarcophagus, that he can be directly compared to the Endymion sarcophagus found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 15). The story of Endymion is found on some seventy Roman sarcophagi, including the one found in the Metropolitan museum, indicating the popularity of this image.

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<sup>120</sup> Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's art through the ages: the western perspective* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 226.

<sup>121</sup> Marion Lawrence, "Three Pagan Themes in Christian Art." *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky* (New York: University Press, 1961), 325.

<sup>122</sup> Kleiner, *Gardner's art through the ages : the western perspective* 225.



FIGURE 21: Bust of Empress Julia Domna, Indiana University Art Museum, ca. 201 – 210.

On the Endymion sarcophagus, Arria, the deceased, is represented on the lid in a portrait bust with a distinctive coiffure that closely resembles that of Julia Domna (the wife of emperor Septimius Severus) dating the sarcophagus to the early third century (c. 200).<sup>123</sup> On the front façade between two apotropaic lions, Selene can be seen descending from her chariot and going toward Endymion. Endymion is found in a semi-recumbent position with his right arm raised behind his head as if he is resting his head on his hand. His left arm is bent and placed under the left side of his body. Endymions' right leg is bent upward, while his left leg lies bent beneath the right. He has long curly hair, a youthful, peaceful face, and is represented naked. On the opposite side of this a shepherd can be seen seated on rocks tending his flock, three of which appear on top of the head of the shepherd. According to Theocritus, Endymion was a shepherd and not a hunter; therefore, having him represented as such is not out of place.<sup>124</sup> It is worth noting that Jonah is represented in the same exact way: he is in the same semi-recumbent position

<sup>123</sup> Lawrence. "Three Pagan Themes in Christian Art." 324.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

with his right arm behind the head, with his legs, hair and facial expression is in the same style as well. Two small differences are found, the head of Jonah faces upward, whereas Endymion faces downward in profile and Jonahs' left arm is stretched out instead of bent under the left side of the body. Nonetheless, the representation of Endymion in this manner can be found on other pagan sarcophagi.

As mentioned earlier Endymion is represented as a shepherd, on the Endymion sarcophagus, which can explain why on the Santa Maria Antiqua sarcophagus Jonah is shown to have two rams and a goat on top of his canapé. Jonah was not a shepherd but a seafarer and city dweller. So, it is legitimate to ask the question “Why represent the animals?” On the front façade of the sarcophagus the image of the Good Shepherd can be found, but he is so far from the “lost sheep” that they do not appear to be part of the same scene. Furthermore, in the scene of the Good Shepherd he is holding a ram on his shoulder and by his left leg, between the Good Shepherd and the baptism scene, a sheep is visible.

*Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*

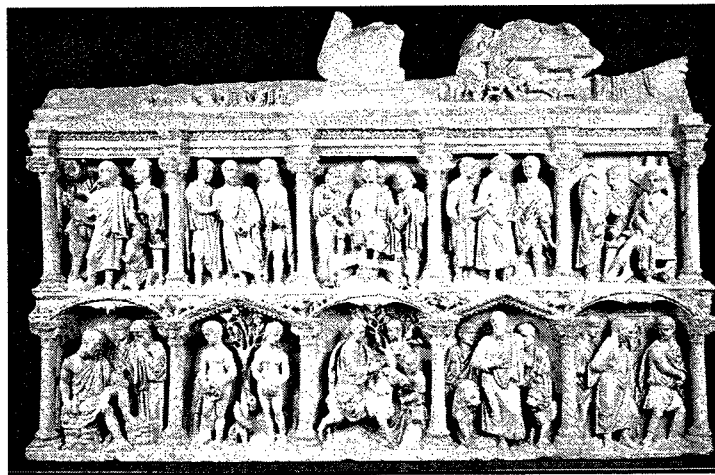


FIGURE 22: The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Rome, 359 CE.

The most important early Christian sarcophagus is that of Junius Bassus. The importance of this sarcophagus comes from an inscription placed on the lid, indicating Junius Bassus as Prefect of the city of Rome and a former council member. In the same inscription the date of his death is indicated, making it a great marker and reference point for sarcophagi that come before and after.

Junius Bassu, *vir clarissimus* [of senatorial rank],  
 Who lived 42 years, 2 months,  
 In his own prefect of the city,  
 Newly baptized, went to God,  
 The 8<sup>th</sup> day from the Kalends of September,  
 Eusibius and Hypolitus, consuls [August 25, 359]<sup>125</sup>

The date indicates that the sarcophagus was carved after the Edict of Milan, which declared tolerance towards Christianity. Therefore, public Christian imagery was just being established and for this reason the sarcophagus contains many Roman elements. Both Old and New Testament images can be found on it. The images on the ten intercolumniations of the façade from left to right are as follows: top row- The near-sacrifice of Isaac, the arrest of Peter, Christ enthroned between Peter and Paul, Christ's arrest, Christ brought before Pilate. Bottom row- Job on the dunghill, Adam and Eve, the entry into Jerusalem, Daniel in the lion's den, and Saint Paul being led to his martyrdom.<sup>126</sup> The spandrel scenes, that is, the sections between the two rows of carvings on the façade, consist of biblical scenes symbolically enacted by lambs. These scenes are the following: the three youths, striking the rock, Christ and the loaves, the baptism of Christ, receiving the law, the rising of Lazarus. The ends on the sarcophagus depict allegorical or symbolic putti in a grape harvest scene. The lid, of which only fragments

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<sup>125</sup> Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>126</sup> Ramage, *Roman Art*, 330.

remain, consists of two scenes; like the two ends these scenes are somewhat less deeply carved and polished, in comparison with the front of the sarcophagus. All this intricate decoration and planning, along with the quality of the white marble indicates an expensive piece of work.<sup>127</sup>

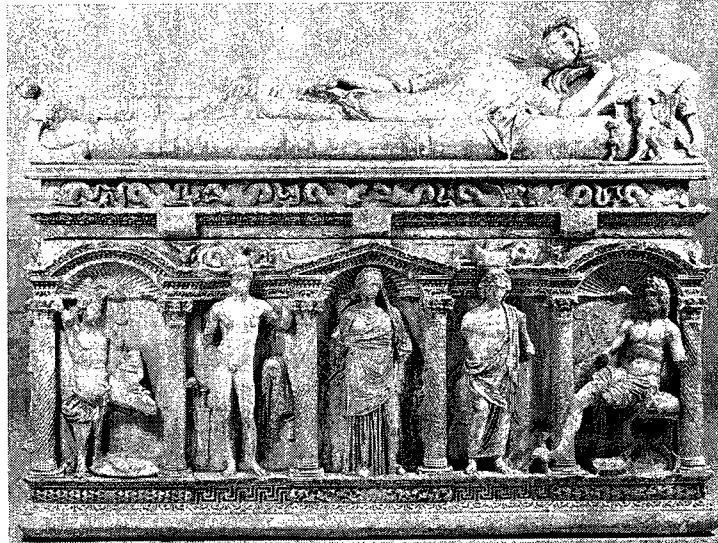


FIGURE 23: Asiatic sarcophagus, from Rapolla, Italy, ca. 165–170 CE.

In considering the images that are represented, this sarcophagus can be thought of, at least theologically, as Christian. Yet, architecturally and artistically the sarcophagus is in the form of an Asiatic-style pagan sarcophagus. The Asiatic style (Figure 23), which takes its name from where it was produced in Asia Minor, was a type of sarcophagus that was carved on all four sides. The back façade was usually less carefully finished than the other façades. These usually lined the roads in the cemeteries, or were placed in the center of a mausoleum in order to be visible from all four sides. Even though, this style was produced and quite common in Asia Minor, it was shipped throughout the empire. The distinctive decorative motif that is found on the Asiatic sarcophagus is the series of

<sup>127</sup> Malbon, *The Iconography of The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 7.



columns that frame and divide the different scenes depicted.<sup>128</sup> On the sarcophagus of Junius, the columns are Corinthian style, ornately carved with scrolls or spiral fluting. The clothing worn by the figures is the Roman toga. Furthermore, the way in which some of the images are portrayed, makes one think of the classical prototypes.

The first scene that will be examined is that of Christ enthroned. This scene is found in the middle of the top row (front façade). Jesus has a prominent position, sitting on an eagle-headed couch placed on a platform. Jesus is in a frontal position with His head slightly turned to the left. In one hand he holds a scroll, while His right hand, which was carved free standing, has been lost. In this He may have been holding a key. The two apostles, presumably Peter and Paul, have a frontal body with their heads turned to look at Jesus. The enthroned Christ can be compared artistically to that of Constantine himself represented on his arch in Rome.

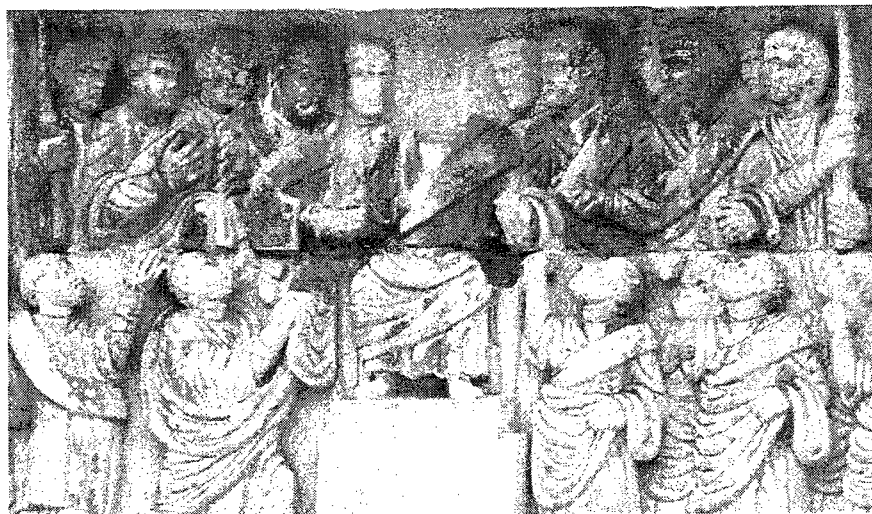


FIGURE 24: detail of the north frieze of the Arch of Constantine, Rome, 312–315 CE

The *donation* (Figure 24), which was carved in a very abstract and formal fashion, was one of two official acts performed by an emperor and carried out in the Roman Forum; Constantine is found sitting, in the center of the panel, on a throne place on a platform.

<sup>128</sup> Ramage, *Roman Art*, 231.

His ministers surround him in two rows, frontally in pose while their heads are turned toward Constantine.<sup>129</sup> The most notable and surprising element found in the Jesus scene, on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, is that of the allegorical representation of the heavens under the feet of Jesus in front of the platform. This personification is represented as an older man with curly hair and beard. Only his upper body is visible. His arms are raised and hold on to a piece of material that flows upwards like an umbrella over the man's head. The same figure can be found on the breastplate of the sculpture of Augustus of Prima Porta (1<sup>st</sup> century AD)(Figure 2). The figure, which here is referred to as the god of the sky, is found on the top part of the breastplate close to the neck holding a canopy between his two raised arms. He is also seen only from the chest up, he has a long curly beard and hair.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, this can be found on the Arch of Galerius in Salonika, which depicts two emperors enthroned as universal sovereigns.<sup>131</sup> Interestingly, this one image of Christ enthroned brings the viewer full circle from the beginning of the Roman Empire to the end.

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<sup>129</sup> Ramage, *Roman Art*, 316.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 107-108.

<sup>131</sup> Andre Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art* (France: Thames and Hudson,1966), 43. (image 110)



FIGURE 25: Christ Enthroned, detail sarcophagus Museo Latarna, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

This representation of the sky god can be found on other Christian sarcophagi (Figure 25). A good example is that of a Roman sarcophagus found in the Museo Latarna, depicting Christ enthroned in the middle with the personification of the sky god under his feet, while Old and New Testament scenes unfolding on either side. This sarcophagus bears many similarities to that of Junius Bassus. It has ornate Corinthian style columns dividing the scenes, it depicts Jesus in the center, while sides of the sarcophagus are also carved, yet in low relief.<sup>132</sup> This is important to note because it shows that there was demand by Christians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century for these types of sarcophagus that incorporated Christian theology onto pagan form.

<sup>132</sup> Andre Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art* (France: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 251-252

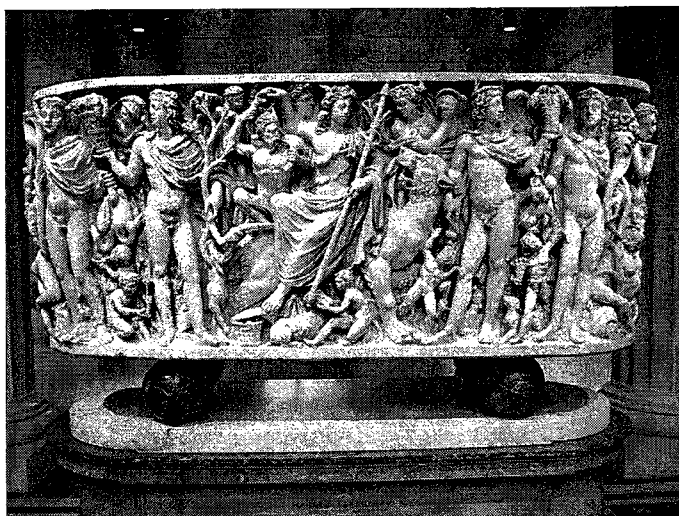


FIGURE 26: Badminton Sarcophagus, Metropolitan Museum of Arts of New York, 260-270 AD.

On the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, vegetation is visible in the background of certain scenes. The vegetation can be compared, in carving and form, to Season sarcophagi. A good example is the Badminton Sarcophagus (Figure 26), presently in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts of New York, which has as subject matter the triumphant Dionysius with the four seasons represented as naked youths. The numerous figures found on the sarcophagus hold in their hands trees and vines to indicate the event is taking place outside in the countryside.<sup>133</sup> One of the scenes that must be noted is that of the entry into Jerusalem, which is depicted as the central image on the second row of the front façade. In this, Christ is seen entering into the city on what appears to be a donkey. In comparison with the animal and the two other figures, Christ is big in size indicating He is the most important figure. The two other figures signify the crowd that ushered Jesus into the city; the lack of space limited the number of people that could be represented. One of the figures is seen in front of the animal, whereas the other appears to be in the tree with only his head and one hand visible. According to Malbon, the image of

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 282.

the entry into Jerusalem, is representative of the passion of Christ and the prefiguration of His eternal triumph in heaven. Yet this scene can be compared to another scene found in the pagan world found on the triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius (Figure 27).



FIGURE 27: Arch of Marcus Aurilius detail, Tripoli, 167 A.D.

In this the emperor is shown on horseback surrounded by soldiers and prisoners seeking *clementia*.<sup>134</sup> None of this seems to have any similarity with the image of Jesus; the animal in one is a horse, while in the other is a donkey, yet the victorious trot depicted on the legs of the emperor's horse can be seen on the legs of Christ's donkey. Nonetheless, the main similarity lies with the tree that is found in both these scenes. Malbon quotes from George Altrop who states:

In place of the olive tree in the background there stands the oak tree; the Romans associated a particular significance with the oak leaves and the oak wreath, for the oak tree was conferred *ad civis servatos*. Therefore

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 249.

there is less of an allusion to the coming passion than to the youthfully triumphant Christ, riding ahead into the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>135</sup>

Therefore, both Marcus Aurelius and Christ are understood as triumphant, in a Roman context, when represented with the oak tree, which moreover, in the case of Christ being paired with the image of Christ enthroned, shows His eternal reign as the king of heaven. The representation of oak trees as a representation of triumph can also be found on the arch of Trajan. In this scene the emperor stands on an elevated rocky area, in an *adlocutio* stance, while his soldiers show him the decapitated heads of the “barbarians” that they had just apprehended and killed. In the background a big oak tree can be seen taking up most of the background. It is very easy to understand the victorious nature of this scene and the importance the oak tree played in the Roman world.

### *The Sarcophagus of Constantina*



FIGURE 28: Sarcophagus of Constantina, Vatican, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>135</sup> Malbon, *The Iconography of The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 54.

In contrast to the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus is that of Constantina, the daughter of Constantine the Great. Her sarcophagus was found in Rome in the Mausoleum of Constantina, also known as Santa Constanza. The Mausoleum was constructed in two stages, starting before the death of Constantina in 337 and completed after her death, some time before the death of her brother Constantius II in 361. The sarcophagus was made out of porphyry and is remarkable for its size (7ft. 5ins. in height)\* and for its imperial religious reticence.<sup>136</sup> It is clear that Constantina did not go the same direction as Junius Bassus, even though they lived and died around the same time. Constantina's sarcophagus is covered with putti picking grapes from grape vines framed by massive cylindrical acanthus-scrolls. Other putti press grapes into vats or hold garlands. At the bottom of the sarcophagus two peacocks are visible on both ends, while a lamb can be seen in the middle.

The images found on this sarcophagus bring to mind the cult of Dionysius. In most, if not all representation of Dionysius, he is surrounded by grapevines and grapes (sometimes placed on his head as a wreath), with putti holding grapes or baskets of grapes, animals such as sheep, along with half naked maenads, satyrs and others. Even so, a lamb and two peacocks are present on the sarcophagus that may be Christian in character.

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\* In comparison to the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus which measures 3ft. 10 ½ ins in height.

<sup>136</sup> John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (England: Penguin Books, 1979), 28.

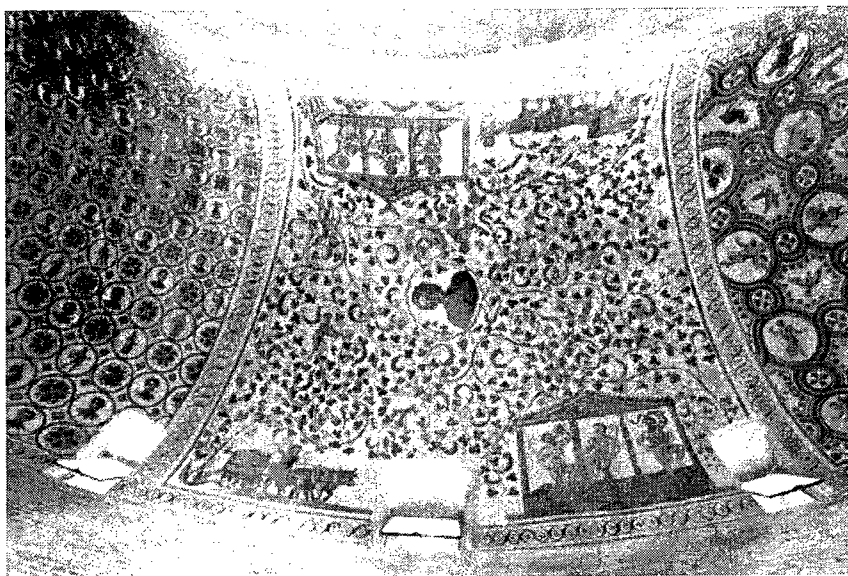


FIGURE 29: Scenes of grape harvesting with a bust of a woman, probably Constantina or Helena, Mausoleum of Constantina, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The mausoleum itself also had harvest scene mosaics. The ambulatory is covered with mosaics showing putti harvesting and vintage scenes along with scattered birds, branches, fruit, and mythological figures (Figure 29). This is followed by bands decorated with libation cups and branches.<sup>137</sup> Included in these mosaics are two portrait heads that are thought to be those of Constantina and her husband Gallus. In the lateral apses there are some Christian representations of Christ seated on a globe delivering the Law to Moses and Christ delivering the Law to Peter and Paul. These are seventh-century restorations of fifth-century work, almost a century after the death of Constantina. Despite this, it is all the Dionysiac motifs that earned this building the name ‘Temple of Bacchus’ during the Renaissance.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Pierre Du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art* trans. Thomas Burton. (London : A Forms and Colors Series Book, 1972), 160.

<sup>138</sup> Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, 30.



## Rings and Drinking Vessels

As mentioned in the previous chapter, seal rings were quite popular in the Christian community. For this reason Clement felt the need to comment on what images were acceptable to be represented on these. Christians in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries put on their rings images from the Old and New Testament that most represented them. We once again find images that were popular in the catacombs and on sarcophagi.

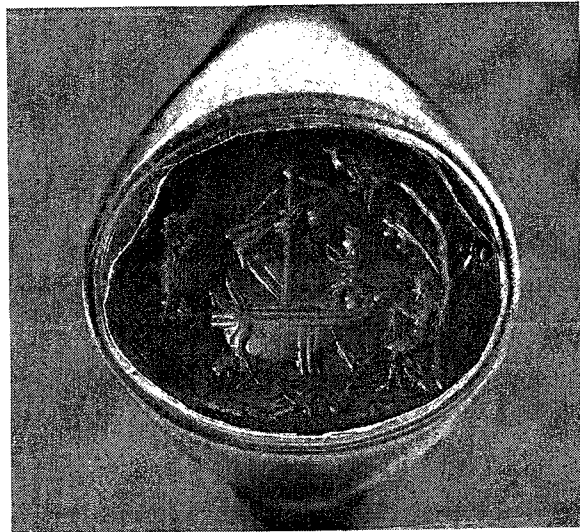


FIGURE 30: Engraved Gem with the Story of Jonah, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Late 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

A very good example is an Engraved Gem with the Story of Jonah. This late 3<sup>rd</sup> to early 4<sup>th</sup> century Asia Minor ring, presently in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, has several episodes of the life of Jonah on it (Figure 30). In the center of the ring a boat is observed with Jonah diving off it into the sea. On the bottom right the sea monster is visible waiting for Jonah. On the left, Jonah is represented standing with his hands raised in front of him. This may be Jonah warning the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). He then appears sitting under a tree

with a bird sitting on the top, this comes from Jonah 4:5.<sup>139</sup> Finger rings with such representation further indicate the popularity of the story of Jonah and the significance of it to the Christian community.



FIGURE 31: Engraved gem with the story of Adam and Eve, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

A second engraved gem, from Asia Minor that dates from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, has another popular theme from the catacombs and sarcophagi. This one is the story of Adam and Eve (Figure 31). This is engraved in a style that can be dated to the Constantinian period. A tree is visible in the center of the ring dividing the stone in two. On the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge the serpent is visibly entwined. On the right, Eve can be seen with her hand outstretched toward the mouth of the serpent. Adam is positioned on the left of the tree. The composition is quite simplified, yet the message of salvation to come is evident. These rings were used as personal seals representing the message the faithful Christian wished to represent.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 188.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

### *The Industrial Arts*

It is interesting to see that Christians did not limit themselves solely to funerary art. As Christianity became increasingly popular, so did Christian art. The industrial arts, as Walter Lowrie characterized them, properly belong to pagan archaeology, for Christianity did not do much in furthering the progress of industry in the Roman Empire since the Church was more occupied with *Civitas Dei*.<sup>141</sup> Nevertheless, Christianity took over almost exclusively one specific aspect of the industrial arts, the art of decorating glass vessels. This can be stated because of the vast number of drinking vessels decorated with Christian motifs found in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The *fond* of the cup was primarily decorated. The figures were designed on gold leaf and then applied and engraved onto the glass. In some instances color was added to enhance the image, while a thin glaze added at the end to preserve the design.<sup>142</sup>

This art form seems to have come into fashion in Christian circles around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and lost its appeal after the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The themes used on these cups are the Good Shepherd, Jonah, the Sacrifice of Isaac, along with some themes that became vastly popular after the peace of the church such as Adam and Eve, and Daniel and the Dragon.<sup>143</sup> Since these cups were commissioned by the proprietor, it was not unusual to have family portraits included along with Christian images or symbols. Often these cups, which indicated the owner's name, were used as stamps in the catacombs indicating where they were buried and preserving the cherished design the owner looked at every time he drank.

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<sup>141</sup> Walter Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 214.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

Interestingly, along with the name of the owner, the inscription *PIE ZESES* is seen on several of the cups. *Pie Zeses* though written in Latin letters is Greek for drink, live. This may be an indication that these cups were primarily used at wedding feast and funeral banquets.<sup>144</sup>



FIGURE 32: Gold Glass Medallion with Shepherd, Corning Museum of Glass, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

A good example of a cup medallion with the above inscription can be found in the Corning Museum of Glass. This 4<sup>th</sup> century Gold Glass Medallion with Shepherd (figure 32), has what appears to be the Christian representation of the Good Shepherd on it. Like in the catacombs, a young shepherd with a short tunic stands under a tree. He holds a syrinx while two goats stand on his left, while one lies at his feet. No sheep can be found on the shepherd's shoulders which may reflect more of a pagan composition. This may be considered a Christian representation, however, because of the moral exhortation that is made by the words *dignitas amicorum*. In addition, this inscription is found on other

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid, 215.

Christian cups that derive from one single workshop in Rome.<sup>145</sup> Another example, with the above inscription that is undoubtedly Christian in nature, is a gold glass medallion with a toast to a married couple with early Christian themes around it.<sup>146</sup> The medallion has a small circle in the middle with the portraits of a man and a woman in it. Around their heads, in the same circle, the words *PIE ZESES* can be clearly seen. This is enclosed in a larger circle that contains Old and New Testament scenes. Some of the images seen on this are the Sacrifice of Isaac, Adam and Eve, the Rising of Lazarus, what appears to be the Healing of the Paralytic, and finally Moses striking the Rock.



FIGURE 33: Glass Medallion with the Multiplication of Loaves, Vatican Museum, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

A couple of gold glass medallions found in the Vatican Museum indicate two popular images from the New Testament found on cups. The first is a Gold Glass Medallion with the Multiplication of Loaves (Figure 33). This late 4<sup>th</sup> century cup has a square in the center bordered by four book scrolls; these may

<sup>145</sup> Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art*, 193.

<sup>146</sup> Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, Plate 150b.

be a representation of the four gospels. Inside the square a beardless Jesus wearing a himation can be seen along with what appears to be a disciple represented beardless and in the same dress. According to Spier, Jesus holds in his right hand a wand which he points at seven baskets of bread while the disciple looks on.<sup>147</sup> Yet upon closer examination it is more likely that the figure on the left is Jesus. This conclusion was reached after looking at the positioning of the fingers on his right hand. The hand gesture signals blessing with the two figures, the pointer and the middle finger, extended while the thumb and the other two fingers are closed. The second figure on the right that is mentioned as holding a wand appears more as if he is pointing.



FIGURE 34: Raising of Lazarus gold medallion, Vatican Museum, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

This comes from comparing the positioning of the fingers of Jesus in this image, to that of the hand of Jesus in the Raising of Lazarus gold medallion. What is quite interesting about these two medallions is that Jesus is beardless, like the images of Jesus in the catacombs from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The draping and kind of garment are also similar. Indicating that in the 4<sup>th</sup> century even after the

<sup>147</sup> Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 222-223.

peace images did not change dramatically. What changed was how and where they were used.

Even though Christian art developed out of paganism, it distinguished itself quite quickly through the moral teachings of Christianity. It is evident in 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century funeral art, that pagan form became secondary to the intense meaning behind the image itself in the eyes of the Christian believer. A notable change came in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially after the Edict of Tolerance. This period brings to the surface more than ever Christian art and Christian belief. Hellenistic influence is still present in the art, but Christian doctrine becomes more crystallized. The next section will look at the beginning of Byzantine art, for this reason the art will be named Constantinian art.

### **Constantinian Art**

The Roman Empire in the late 3<sup>rd</sup>-century saw a number of emperors, most of which were not elected by the senate; more specifically between 235, during the reign of the last Severans and the beginning of the reign of Diocletian in 284, more that 25 men gave themselves the title of emperor. The distress of the empire can be seen in the art that comes from the pagan arts.<sup>148</sup> Most of the art is polemic and gives the dynamic that comes with the reign of soldier emperors. Yet from 284 to 312 C.E., during the rule of the Tetrarchs, monumental art becomes popular once more along with a joint reign between the

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<sup>148</sup> Nancy H. Ramage, Andrew Ramage, *Roman Art* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 2001), 284.

four rulers. The first Tetrarchs were Gaius Valerianus Aurelianus *Diocletianus*, better known as Diocletian and Marcus Aurelius Valerius *Maximianus*. The two junior members that were invited to co-rule were Gaius *Galerius* Valerius Maximianus and Gaius Flavius Constantius who is better known as *Constantius Chlorus* the father of Constantine the Great.<sup>149</sup> The Tetrarchy was beneficial to the empire as a whole, yet was quite detrimental to Christianity. The reign of Diocletian brought on the Great Persecution which targeted the heads of the Christian communities, churches, and brought the cancelation of any legal rights Christians had been given by previous Emperors. This persecution, which took place from 303 to 313 C.E., tried to bring a pagan revival and suppress the monotheistic beliefs of the Christians; it did not, however, dampen the spirits of the Christian community. The apostates would come back to the rebuilt Church thanks to one man named Caesar Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus Augustus or better known as Constantine the Great the first Christian Emperor.

### *Imperial coins*

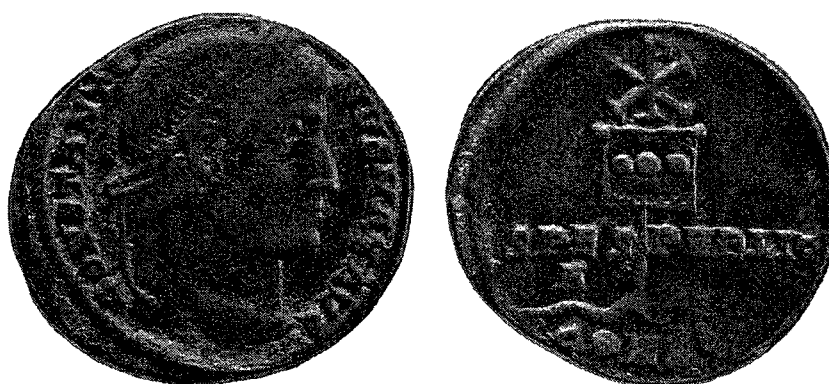


FIGURE 35: Coin of Constantine the Great, British Museum, c. 327.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 298.



Constantine the Great became emperor in 305 and like his father was co-ruler of the empire. He ruled alongside Gaius *Galerius* Valerius Maximianus (reign 305-311 CE), and Valerius Licinianus *Licinius* (reign 308-324 CE). The Great Persecution came to an end when Galerius signed the decree of tolerance in 311, which opened the door for Constantine and Licinius in 313 to declare religious freedom, restoring to the Christians all that had been taken away by Diocletian.<sup>150</sup> Interestingly, at the beginning of his reign, Constantine emphasized his special closeness to the supreme deity appearing in the form of the Sun god, Sol. He was not the only one to subscribe to this monotheistic concept in the third century. Intellectuals and Constantine's own army gave their allegiance as well.<sup>151</sup> It was the event of 312 that fashioned the future of Christianity making Christ the replacement of the Sol Invictus as *Christus Victor*. Just before Constantine entered into battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, in 312, he had the famous vision of the cross. This is how Eusebius himself describes the event,

About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, 'By this conquer'. Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the whole company of soldiers which was then accompanying him on a campaign he was conducting somewhere, and witnessed the miracle. He was, he said, wondering to himself what the manifestation might mean; then, while he meditated, and thought long and hard, night overtook him. Thereupon, as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy. (Eusebius 28:2-29)<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Gerard Vallee, *The Shaping of Christianity: The History and Literature of its Formative Centuries (100-800)* (New York: Paulist Press 1999), 108.

<sup>151</sup> Johannes G. Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art* ed. Jeffrey Spier. (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 87.

<sup>152</sup> Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine* trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (New York: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81.

Soon after this event and the legalization of Christianity, Constantine made, as Christ told him in his dream, copies of the *chi-rho* and put it on his army's *labarum* and on his own helmet, as mentioned by Eusebius. Even so, Constantine seldom placed Christian imagery on his coins. This can be noted in the numerous examples of coins and medallions depicting the sun god Sol. The popularity of the image of Sol came after Constantine had a vision in 310 in a Gaulish temple of Sol in the form of Apollo appearing to him in a blinding light. In this vision Sol prophesized to the co-emperor that he would be the sole ruler of the empire. This motif of Sol was popular until 325.<sup>153</sup> In 315, however, he distributed silver medallions to selected members of his officers that allude to his close ties with Christ. On this medallion the bust of Constantine is visible wearing a helmet ornamented with a small disk bearing the monogram on it. This is the earliest evidence of the veneration of Christ by Constantine himself. However, there was no allusion to Christ on the widely circulated bronze coins for about another decade. These continued to depict Sol as the emperor's companion and protector.<sup>154</sup>

Rare but very good examples of Constantine's use of the monogram can be seen on two coins found in Constantinople that date to ca.326-327 CE. The first coin is presently in the Trustees of the British Museum, Department of Coins and Medals in London (Figure 35). On the one side the head of Constantine is visible wearing a laurel wreath. Around it is inscribed CONSTANTINVS MAX(imus) AUG(ustus).<sup>155</sup> On the other side a military standard is depicted with three medallions on it, which represented Constantine and his two sons. On the top of the standard the *chi-rho* monogram of Christ

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<sup>153</sup> Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 88.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

<sup>155</sup> Jeffrey Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), 198.

is clearly visible. Across this the words SPES PVBLIC can be seen which translate to “the public hope” and below that the word CONS is visible translating to Constantinople.<sup>156</sup> What is interesting about this coin is that this image can be seen in Eusebius’ account of what Constantine instructed his goldsmiths to make.

It was constructed to the following design. A tall pole with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme to a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fashioned. On it the letters, intimating by its first characters the name ‘Christ’, formed the monogram of the Saviour’s title, rho being intersected in the middle by chi. These letters the Emperor also used to wear upon his helmet in later times. From the transverse bar, an imperial tapestry covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together, which glittered with shafts of light, and interwoven with much gold, producing an impression of indescribable beauty on those who saw it. This banner then, attached to the bar, was given equal dimensions of length and breadth, but the upright pole, which extended upwards a long way from its lower end, below the trophy of the cross and near the top of the tapestry delineated, carried the golden head-and-shoulders portrait of the God beloved Emperor, and likewise of his sons. (Eusebius 31).<sup>157</sup>

This image appears to have been a copy from a larger scale image that was represented above the entrance of the imperial palace in Constantinople. Similar to the coin, a serpent is seen, yet Constantine and his two sons are piercing the serpent with the standard. Eusebius viewed this as the defeat of the opponents of Christianity; Constantine may have viewed the serpent as Licinius his co-emperor whom he defied in 324 CE and killed in 325 CE. In any event, the Monogram is placed in a prominent position indicating that Constantine associated his victory with the Christian God.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 81-82.

<sup>158</sup> Spier, *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian art*, 198.



FIGURE 36: Medallion coin, National Museum of Belgrade, c. 326-27

The second is a medallion coin, found in the National Museum of Belgrade (Figure 36), with the representation of an idealized portrait of the emperor on one side. On the other a standing commander is visible holding a standard with a banner, hanging from the cross-arm, depicting the monogram.<sup>159</sup>

Others in the fourth century took Constantine's lead and placed the monogram on their coins. Whether this was done to win over the Christian population or to associate themselves with Constantine is not certain, however, the image finds itself clearly imprinted on imperial artifacts. Two good examples come from Gaul which have the busts of Magnetius, self-proclaimed emperor in 350, and his brother Decentius. On the reverse the *chi-rho* monogram, is visible, flanked by an A and Ω. Around the symbol is inscribed "the health of our emperor and Caesar".<sup>160</sup> It is clear to see from archaeological evidence that Constantine used the christogram on coinage in the context of military iconography. This can be seen in the limited number of christograms represented on coins

<sup>159</sup> Deckers. "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 90-91.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

before 325, and even more interestingly Christ does not appear in human form on any bronze coins, unlike Sol. Christ only appears symbolically as the christogram and later the triumphant cross. Mosaics on the other hand depict Christ in human form and furthermore, take Christ from the good shepherd to an emperor-like figure.

### **Mosaics**

The image of the Pantocrator is quite popular in church apses or in the central cupola. Yet whether this specific image was used in churches at the time of Constantine is impossible to know. What is known, though, is that churches/meeting halls were decorated with images. Two good examples of this are the Baptistery of Dura-Europos, and a decision by a regional church council in Elvira Spain in 306 forbidding the placement of pictures representing objects of faith and worship in the churches.<sup>161</sup> In any case, the earliest example of Christ as Pantocrator does not come from a church or a pilgrimage site, but from the imperial mausoleum of Constantine's daughters Constantina and Helena. In the circular mausoleum two apses are found. One consists of Christ as Pantocrator, and the other Christ flanked between Peter and Paul.

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<sup>161</sup> Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 94.

*Santa Costanza apses*

FIGURE 37: Christ the Pantocrator, Mausoleum of Santa Costanza 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Among the generic pagan images in the mausoleum are found two very interesting mosaics. In one of the apses Christ the Pantocrator is seen. The event takes place outside; this is indicated by the trees that are around Christ and Peter. Christ is seen seated on a transparent blue spear, which symbolizes the cosmos. This can be compared to a coin from the reign of Alexander Severus, 222-235 CE. On this coin the emperor is depicted seated on a star-studded spear, not unlike the one Christ is seated on, symbolizing the cosmos indicating that the emperor is representing himself as godlike. Christ is dressed in the traditional tunic, cloak and sandals of a philosopher; yet, the colors are no longer white but gold or purple with gold stripes. This is interesting because these colors are the ones worn by the emperors. In this mosaic, Christ has a bearded face and has a nimbus that surrounds his head. Peter stands to the right of Christ and has his hands outstretched to receive the key.<sup>162</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art." *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 95-96.



FIGURE 38: Christ is flanked by Peter and Paul, Mausoleum of Santa Constanza.

In the second apse Christ is flanked by Peter and Paul. Behind both apostles, buildings are visible representing their respective congregations. In front of each apostle two sheep are also visible. Christ is seen standing between the two with his right hand raised while with his left he hands over to Peter a scroll. His tunic and cloak are sun-like gold and he appears to be coming out of a fiery cloud above the mount of paradise. In both mosaics it appears as if we are witnessing a ceremony at the court of the emperors. This is indicated by the manner that the figures are placed. Peter approaches Christ in the way an official would approach the emperor when receiving an appointment. The stance is suppliant while receiving his earthly office with his hand draped.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Deckers, "Constantine the Great and Early Christian Art," *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, 95-96.



FIGURE 39: Santa Pudenziana, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Similarly, Christ in Santa Pudenziana is no longer represented as a youthful teacher and miracle worker, nor the suffering mature man, but the Lord of the world who has entered into the majesty of His Father. In this apse mosaic the elevated throne of Christ is the focal point. This is decorated with gold and colored jewels along with a red pillow that cover the arms of the throne. Christ is seen seated as a great philosopher, teaching the apostles who sit around Him as if in the Roman senate.<sup>164</sup> On either side of Christ, Peter and Paul can be seen with female personifications of the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* and *Ecclesia ex Gentilibus* standing behind them and crowning them with gold wreaths. Even though the space is limited in the arch, the artist included in the background the mount of Golgotha which has the triumphal cross on it. This cross, which

<sup>164</sup> Heinrich Neumayer, *Byzantine Mosaics* tran. By Margaret Shenfield (London: Methuen & Co LTD, 1964), B22.



is gold and decorated with gems, is surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists along with Jerusalem and its Christian churches.<sup>165</sup>

The change in early Christian art is quite evident in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The transition from catacomb to imperial art can be seen in the use of Christian imagery, such as the cross, on coins and the use of the triumphal Christ, represented as the Pantocrator or the philosopher teacher, in Christian buildings. Classical form is not completely absent in Constantinian art, yet the move from pagan art to what we now know as Byzantine art is apparent.

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<sup>165</sup> André Grabar, *Byzantium: From the Death of Theodosius to the Rise of Islam* Trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons. (France: Thames and Hudson, 1966), 135.

## CONCLUSION

Rome and her empire were home to a multitude of people from different social strata and ethnicities, as well as different linguistic and religious backgrounds.<sup>166</sup> This diverse cultural community allowed different religions to arise, to be known, and also to flourish. Christianity, a religion that flourished in the Roman Empire, had to assert and identify itself in relation to the surrounding world. A separation started to be seen between Judaism and Christianity as early as the 1st century CE, yet a strong bond started forming between Christianity and Hellenistic culture, especially moral philosophy. Therefore, on a theological level a shift is visible in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century, which also influenced Christianity artistically. As seen in this thesis this shift is quite visible in the artifacts and places examined.

Dura-Europos offered a great deal of knowledge on 3<sup>rd</sup> century Jewish and Christian life outside of Jerusalem. Extensive wall decoration found in the synagogue of Dura shows that artistic freedom in representing biblical images in prayer halls was not a novel idea of the Christians. Jewish communities of the Diaspora incorporated into their way of teaching and prayer human representation of biblical characters and events that incorporated pagan mannerisms. Moses and the burning bush found on the west wall of the Dura synagogue is an excellent example of an artistic representation that brought together Jewish belief and pagan art. The young Moses stands barefoot, like a Roman god, by the burning bush in an *adlocutio* stance, much in the same manner as Augustus himself. Pagan influence is quite visible; however, the biblical and theological meaning behind the pagan form is also very clear.

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<sup>166</sup> Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 221.

The Baptistery of Dura, even though small in size, sums up the Christian faith in the city of Dura. The believer walks in and follows the path that the woman had taken to go to see Jesus in the tomb; yet at the end there is no longer death but a new beginning with the baptistery basin and the Good Shepherd tending to his sheep. This image of the Good Shepherd is explicitly Christian in its theology and in the message that it spreads. Even so, this cosmopolitan trading center left its mark on the images in the baptistery. It is not surprising to see that there is a similarity between the Good shepherd and Hermes kriophoros.

Christian images were not only restricted to Asia Minor. Rome offers a wealth of images that gives great insight into the theological belief of the early Christians. The catacombs, the underground tunnels where these early Christian images are found, were constructed in its first phase, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, yet the earliest remaining images come out of the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. A visible evolution can be traced in the catacombs, offering information on what influenced the fencers, painters, and the patrons to depict certain images as they did. Like Dura, the form of representation was rooted in pagan art. The message, however, was Christian in its entirety, even when the depictions came out of the Old Testament. As indicated the similarities between Endymion and Jonah are evident, therefore, if a pagan were to look at the image, a correlation would be formed between the two figures. On the other hand, a Christian would see Jonah a man who resurrected after three days as a prefiguration of Jesus Christ. As for the symbol of the fish, pagans may have just seen it as a representation of marine life, yet for the Jewish community it was the main dish of the Messianic banquet. As for the Christians this

symbol came to represent Christ and is seen in the New Testament in miracles that he performed.

Even though Christian art developed out of pagan art, it distinguished itself from the latter quite quickly through the moral teachings of Christianity. It is evident in the evolution that is visible in 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century funeral art, that pagan form became secondary to the intense meaning behind the image itself. As Christian belief and understanding of their own religion and Christ becomes more solidified, images of Christ start appearing through New Testament events. This becomes more evident in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially after the Edict of Tolerance. This period brings to the surface more than ever Christian art and Christian belief. Hellenistic influence, however, is still present in the art, but it takes on Christian characteristics as Christianity comes out of hiding and into the accepting eye of the empire. Constantinian art, the predecessor to Byzantine art, indicates this evolution very clearly. We see Christian art move from funerary art to imperial art and onto artifacts that were used in every day life. This notable change can be seen on Christian drinking cups and Christian seal rings that depict well known images such as Adam and Eve and the life of Jonah.

Yet the major change is visible on the coins that Emperor Constantine minted. He shows his affiliation to Christ, even though these coins are rare, by using the christogram. Additionally, by building churches and by allowing the image of Christ to be represented in all His glory Christian standards of representation are established. As seen, the mausoleum of his daughters is a good example of the use of the triumphal Christ, represented as the Pantocrator or the philosopher teacher. Classical form is not

completely absent in Constantinian art, yet the move from pagan art to what we now know as Byzantine art is apparent.

This study of early Christian art has brought to the surface a very interesting practice. Jesus, in early Christian art, is often represented through other biblical figures, such as Jonah and Isaac who are viewed as prototypes. Yet the crucifixion and resurrection are virtually absent, even though these fundamental events have been intrinsic to Christian belief throughout the past two millennia and are represented quite prominently in the Eastern Orthodox Church's iconography. These events are at the core of Christian doctrine and are the most important events by which Jesus Christ secured salvation for humanity. It is only during the reign of Justinian in the 6th century, that the representation of the cross becomes more prominent. A change is noticeable in the way Jesus is represented, when the image of the classical youthful Christ is no longer used, but the suffering Christ on the cross becomes an increasingly accepted image in Byzantine art, found more often in written manuscripts and liturgical books. Only later in the 8th century there existed and have been preserved large-scale representations of the suffering Christ in Byzantine iconography.

Therefore, an interesting undertaking would be to examine the reasons why there is a late representation of this important Christian event, and why Christians in the 8th century felt more the need to represent Christ on the cross, when early Christians were content in the representation of the cross alone. This could be done by studying the circumstances that may have prevented the early church from representing the suffering Christ and how these circumstances changed after the iconoclastic period. In addition, an examination needs to be performed on the development of the image of Christ and the

cross from the time of Justinian up to the height of Byzantine iconography in the 14th century. The main focus should be on how the church and the fathers of Christianity influenced the development in the doctrine of the crucifixion, along with a look at socio-political events that may have influenced this shift.

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