

# Early Christian Images: Roman forms and emerging iconographies

L. Sweet / Materiality and the Religious Impulse / Fall 2008

## TIMELINE!

### Structuring Ideas/Concepts:

- Christian adaptation of media and imagery from existing, contemporary Roman and Jewish forms or traditions
- Images as prompting memory, recording tradition of faith rather than decoration or “Art” in the modern sense.
- Links between visual imagery and textual sources; the visual as a ‘stand-in’ for the verbal.
- Status of image makers and image ‘patrons’

### Advent of Christianity and Christian Imagery

*Fresco with Veneranda and Petronilla, Tomb of Veneranda, C. Domitilla, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> ce.*

Christianity developed out of Judaism and availed itself of Judaic theology.

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible draws heavily from the Hebrew Bible.

### Prohibited Images?

Early Christian imagery did not appear much before 200 ce (3<sup>rd</sup> ce), when it seems to have appeared quite suddenly.

Q: If there were no images in the first 200 years of Christianity, why not?

- (1) Judaism prohibited the pictorial representation of God (Second of the Ten Commandments) in which ‘idols’ were defined as man-made objects which contain no divine essence and which are therefore inappropriate to represent the divine.
- (2) Other possible reasons for the proscription of images of God, Jesus, and God’s creation: to create such images was to challenge God’s role as the primary creator of the earth and its inhabitants.
- (3) Another possible reason or the late emergence of imagery in the Christian faith is the possibility that being a ‘religion of the book’ – a verbal/textual tradition: the Gospel or “good news” was essentially a verbal matter.

Indeed even the earliest images often include descriptions suggesting the power of the word for early Christians. As in Veneranda and Petronilla the mixed use of text and image

**Graphē sioposa** was the term describing visual culture in early Christianity: the scripture in visual form. Art was an idiom of communication that worked like language.

Such images may suggest a gradual transition from text-based expressions of Christian faith to pictorial expressions.

Another hypothesis for the apparent late emergence of Christian imagery may have been due to early Christians strong desire to distinguish the Old Law from the New Law (Judaism from Christianity), the creation of images was one powerful way to develop a Christian religious identity and for the emerging faith to distance itself Judaism.

## **Antecedents of Christian Imagery: artistic media**

### Artistic Syncretism

In opposition to our notion of “Art” as *original* or *new*, early Christian material culture drew on existing image-making technologies and images used by the Classical Greek world and later by the Roman Empire. These included: (1) bronze, (2) stone carving and (3) fresco or wall painting.

*Aulus Metellus, bronze, late 1<sup>st</sup> bce, Italy*

*Statuette of St. Paul, bronze approx. 3.75 inches high, found in Christian cemetery, Sardinia, 4th ce*

*Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles (Roman copy of Greek sculpture) marble*

*Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Rome, 359 marble*

*Roman wall painting (Rites of the Cult of Bacchus), Pompeii, 50 bce*

*Reconstructed bedroom, Roman wall painting, 1<sup>st</sup> ce, Pompeii*

*Adam and Eve, C. SS. Peter and Marcellinus, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce*

## **Catacombs: Structure and Function**

Catacombs were a common burial structure, older than Christianity.

Catacombs were hewn out of tufa, a volcanic rock that hardens in contact with air. The catacomb could be dug easily because the tufa was soft, but as they passage-ways were dug and developed contact with the air hardened the tufa making the catacombs strong resilient.

The first levels were dug just below the surface of the earth, later levels were dug more deeply and so on.

*diagram of Catacombs of Callixtus, (Bourget, pg 218)*

*aerial diagram of the catacombs beneath Domitilla, Rome (Spiro Kostos)*

*arcosolium (painting in arcuated ceiling)*

*loculi (burial niche, C. SS. Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, 3-4<sup>th</sup> ce*

loculi held 2 – 3 bodies that were sealed with rocks or marble slabs....

***Epitaph of Asellus, marble, C. of Hippolytus, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

This epitaph says : “to the well-deserving Asellus, who lived six years, eight months, and twenty-seven days”

The images portray Ss. Peter and Paul, intercessories on behalf of the boy’s soul.

The *Chi Ro* or *labarum*, is the symbol for the first two Greek letters of the word "Christ" — *Chi* (χ) and *Rho* (ρ).

***Chamber tombs, Thessalonika, Greece, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

Wealthy families could afford to build a cubiculum or mausoleum room off the hallways that might include crypts and sarcophagi.

***Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Rome, 359 marble***

This sarcophagus was carved for Junius Bassus, Roman prefect. He clandestinely practiced Christianity (because he was a Roman officer), and was baptized on his deathbed. His sarcophagus was found beneath St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> ce.

Sacrifice of Isaac	Arrest of Peter	Enthroned <b>beardless Christ as youthful philosopher</b> , with Peter and Paul, his feet on the mantle of heaven, held by Coelus (minor Roman god)	Arrest of <b>beardless, youthful</b> Jesus	Pilate washes his hands
The patience of Job.	Adam and Eve	Beardless Jesus’ Entry into Jerusalem	Daniel in the Lion’s Den	Arrest of Paul

***Crypt of the Virgin, C. Marcellinus and Peter, frescoes, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

***View of the arcosolium – arched ceiling in niche, Crypt of the Virgin, C. Marcellinus and Peter, frescoes, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

***View of domed ceiling, Crypt of the Virgin, C. Marcellinus and Peter, frescoes, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

These views indicate what a fully-painted crypt looked like. This crypt also employs numerous images that were among the most common found in early Christian art:

**Catacomb Paintings**

***AGAIN Crypt of the Virgin, C. Marcellinus and Peter, frescoes, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

Christian catacomb wall paintings are the most prevalent images from the first centuries of Christianity that remain today

these survived better than other forms of art (metal can be melted down; stone used for fill or for other kinds of pagan decoration, or destroyed).

And thus will be the focus of our survey of early Christian imagery.

the earliest Christian imagery focused on **function**:

to relate stories,  
to prompt memories of oral or written tradition,  
to confirm/bolster Christians' faith,

early Christian images did **not serve as self expression or decoration** nor did they address ideas about **originality**, or **beauty**.

### Image makers / Image viewers

Catacomb painters were not formally trained artists, but grave diggers. While some were possibly artists of merit, most of the image makers were generally modest workmen fashioning simple representations needed by the Christian community.

Thus image making was largely left to ordinary individuals -- not elite or highly trained artists.

Neither were the viewers/users of the imagery elite, wealthy or aristocratic patrons.

We shall see later in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, that clergy develop a strong desire to dictate and control Christian image-making. (Charles-Murray, Matthews)

### Visual Language and Iconography

Q: How were images selected for portrayal?

Images that referred to scriptures were used.

Selected pagan/Roman images were **chosen for their usefulness** in the context of the new Christian faith, **and their ambiguity** was a strong component of their effectiveness:

Ambiguity permitted Christians to use Roman images to communicate Christian ideas while also avoiding the threat of persecution.

**Ambiguity** also meant that images could convey several ideas at once, and thus their imaginative reach could extend beyond the obvious association of the image.

The value of a sign/image/symbol is in its brevity or ambiguity – the more schematic, the more it prompts the viewer to “build on the image” presented.

An Example: Fish were a common decorative motif in Greco-roman imagery, but put to use by Christians, images of fish could become much more.

### ***Fish and Loaves, C. Domatilla, Rome, 3<sup>d</sup> ce***

Here is an ambiguous, benign image. Fish commonly appeared in pagan, Roman decorative arts. It seems innocuous. It is ambiguous. It is brief.

WHAT WE DON'T SEE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART—

**Crucifixions:** One image that is very common to us, but virtually nonexistent in the first 300 years of Christianity is the image of a crucified Christ.

In the ancient world, execution by crucifixion came with particular shame and humiliation and the notion that Christians followed a deity executed in this manner came with considerable stigma.

It was also distinctive imagery that might call attention to Christians in hostile regions.

Thus the crucifixion was probably rejected in favor of other more ambiguous imagery until the legalization of Christianity by Constantine and even later during the Byzantine era.

It is also possible that the nature of the faith focused on other aspects of the faith – resurrection, healing, community, prayer, rather than crucifixion and suffering, since that increasingly became the focus of the religion toward the middle ages.

### ***Parody of crucifixion, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce, Imperial Palace, Palatine Hill, Rome***

This image was scratched into a plaster wall on the Imperial Palace around 3<sup>rd</sup> ce. It is one of the rare references to a crucifixion found during this period. Most scholars agree this was an anti-Christian parody / graffito castigating and their Lord.

### Loaves and Fishes

#### ***Fish and Loaves, C. Domatilla, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce***

#### ***Bread and fish painted on niche wall, fresco, C. Callixtus, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce***

fish carrying white round objects was interpreted with more complexity to those familiar with this sign:

- The Greek word for “fish” (ICHTHUS) gives the initial letters of the acrostic Iesus CHristos, THEou Uios, Soter (Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior)
- The fish could prompt the memory of apostles and Christians’ charged to become “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19)
- The faithful were often referred to symbolically as *pisciculi* – “little fish”
- “Fishing” could signify the spiritual awakening or rebirth that comes with conversion.

#### ***Epitaph with fish and anchor, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce, marble***

The anchor references Hebrews 6:19 “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf...”

#### ***Multiplication of loaves and fishes, fresco, C. Callixtus, 4<sup>th</sup> ce.***

- the miracle of the multiplication of bread and loaves by Jesus
- the bread = a symbol for the spiritual food of the Eucharist.

### Sacrifice of Isaac

***Sacrifice of Isaac, fresco, V. Latina Catacomb, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***  
***Sacrifice of Isaac, engraved bowl, found at Podgoritza (?) 4<sup>th</sup> c.***

A very common theme in early Christian visual culture, the scriptural basis for this image was argued by Christians using the Hebrew bible (Old testament) saw the text not only as a record of Abraham's obedience but also as suggesting by metaphor other Christian beliefs and narratives:

- Obedient and faithful Abraham passes God's test / he is a model for Christians
- For Jews, Abraham's "sacrifice" sealed God's pact with the Israelites forever
- Christians saw Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as analogous to God the Father sacrificing his only son Jesus in the crucifixion
- Christians also believed that *if* Abraham obeyed God knowing He could raise Isaac from the dead, then resurrection is implied – Jesus' resurrection; and the resurrection of the faithful. (Jensen)

Jews-converted-to-Christianity, this image would resonate from the Hebrew Bible. Now, in the context of Christianity, it has even richer resonance.

This is another image that seems to suspend a moment of a narrative, yet placed in its scriptural, textual context, the image suggests many more ideas.

## Resurrection Images

### Jonah

***Fresco with Jonah in the mouth of the whale, C. Priscilla, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> c.***

***Jonah, fresco, C. Callixtus, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce***

***Jonah being thrown off the boat, fresco, C. Priscilla, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> c***

***Jonah in the mouth of the whale, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce, marble, Asia Minor***

***Jonah thrown from the boat and Orant frescoes, C. Priscilla***

- Jonah's story is also an Old Testament text.
- It, like the sacrifice of Isaac would resonate for recent converts from the faith of the Israelites.
- Among Christians, Jonah's tale of being swallowed by a whale (death) and being thrown up again (resurrection) prefigured Christ's resurrection.

### Lazarus

***Jesus raising Lazarus, Epitaph of Datus, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce Rome***

"Given by his parents for their well-beloved son, Datus, who lived 20 years, in peace".

***Christ raising Lazarus (with loculi) Via Latina, Rome***

***Christ raising Lazarus, Cubiculum C, Via Latina, Rome***

***Lazarus raised from the dead***

A New Testament/Gospel narrative in which Jesus raises a man, dead and buried for three days, from the tomb.

This miracle was viewed as prefiguring Jesus' own resurrection.

### Shepherd Imagery

Perhaps the most prevalent example of syncretic imagery, the Good Shepherd could also be Hermes the Shepherd of the Roman pantheon, or Orpheus among the animals.

These are images depicting Christ, but here, as in the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Christ is depicted beardless, as a youth, with short hair – in keeping with more Roman depictions of men and gods.

*The Good Shepherd, fresco, C. of Callixtus, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce*

*Good Shepherd, C. Domatilla, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> ce*

*Good Shepherd, ivory, approx. 6 inches height, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce*

*Good Shepherd, Orants and Story of Jonah, View of domed ceiling, Crypt of the Virgin, C.*

*Marcellinus and Peter, frescoes, 4<sup>th</sup> ce*

*Christ/Orpheus with Animals, C. Domatilla, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce*

*Pyx, Christ/Orpheus, carved ivory, 4<sup>th</sup> ce*

The image of a shepherd was very common in Greek and Roman, often in the persons of Hermes and Orpheus, so this image would have been adapted from existing imagery AND be relatively safe.

The image of Christ as a “good shepherd” is a common theme, appearing well over 100 times among the Roman in the catacombs.

draws from the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul.”

Images in the catacombs were designed to bring hope – especially in an era of intense persecution of Christians. Thus images of comfort and support as well as tested faith and resurrection/redemption were common.

### Orant / Orans

*Orant figure, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce, Rome*

*Three Hebrews in Furnace, C. Priscilla, Rome, 3<sup>rd</sup> ce (orant gesture)*

The Orant gesture, arms up-lifted, was common to pagan, Jewish and early Christian practices – so this image is an excellent example of the ways early Christian images developed syncretically, assimilating visual traditions from a variety of sources.

It is another “safe” commonplace image in the Roman era.

The eyes and vision were particularly significant as the eyes formed a link or conduit between ideas/vision and the soul to the body.

Vision is frequently used in patristic texts as an analogy for the interaction with God through prayer and worship.

Eusebius links these notions of the eyes, and prayer in reference to Christian portraiture – eyes “looking upward in a manner reaching out to God in prayer.” (Charles-Murray)

Such ideas were much in vogue in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries and are clearly reflected in the *orant* images.

***Teacher and pupils/Orans (Donna Velata)/mother and child, C. Priscilla, Rome, 4<sup>th</sup> ce***

This orant image also draws upon common visual imagery from the Greco-Roman tradition – the philosopher/teacher with students, the praying figure and the mother and child were all common imagery in the roman visual vernacular.

### **Bibliography**

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### Terms

*graphè sioposa*

arcosolium

loculi

Chi Rho (or labarum)

orant/orans



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### IV. Catacomb Paintings: Prevailing Early Christian Images

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