

Images in the Christian Catacombs

While touring the Christian catacombs “one comes into contact with the evocative traces of early Christianity and one can, so to speak, tangibly sense the faith that motivated those ancient Christian communities... Walking through the underground passages of the catacombs, one frequently glimpses many signs of the iconography of faith...”⁹ —(Pope John Paul II) Let us take a closer look at that iconography.

There are two categories of images painted on walls and ceilings and carved on sarcophagi in the Christian catacombs dating from the second through the fourth centuries. In one category, we find scenes depicting stories from scripture. That, of course, does not surprise us. However, in the second category, there are many images which are unrelated to specific bible stories. In fact, these images are shared, both in design and in meaning, with those decorating pagan burial chambers.

Non-narrative Images

The shared images —those images we find in both pagan and Christian funerary art— are sometimes referred to as non-narrative images¹⁰ because they appear most often as isolated images lacking an environment or background that would suggest a story line. Sometimes, however, they appear together in various combinations bringing out more clearly an intended Christian meaning. Such groupings present what is called a “program” or overall theme. We will discuss early Christian programs later in the chapter..

All of the shared non-narrative images were depicted in the same fashion whether appearing in a pagan or Christian context. In fact, it is interesting that in many instances it is difficult to tell a Christian burial chamber from a pagan one based solely on the images depicted on the walls and ceilings. Only traditional funerary images that contradicted Christian sensibilities were excluded from Christian use.

The image of the shepherd that we looked at earlier in this chapter is one example of a non-narrative image. There are variations in the depiction of the shepherd. He is usually shown as young, beardless and wearing a short tunic^[10] with boots and often carrying a purse, musical pipes or a bucket filled with ewe milk. In some cases he is shown standing among a few sheep, carrying one on his shoulders. Carrying a lamb/sheep is the most common image. At other times he is shown milking a ewe.

There are many such non-narrative images.

The orant (‘orans’ – one who prays) was a ubiquitous figure in ancient pagan Roman art in general, not just sepulchral art. It was always represented as a standing female figure, sometimes veiled, with arms outstretched and usu-

8 *Hermes (Mercury) as a shepherd*

As a crosser of boundaries, Hermes (“guide of the soul”), brought newly-dead souls to the underworld, Hades.

<www.uwm.edu/Course/mythology/0600/apollo.htm>



9 Funeral stele of an Egyptian woman.

The praying figure, with arms raised, has a very ancient origin.

<[www.templestudy.com/...](http://www.templestudy.com/)>



ally bent at the elbow.[9]

The image of a fish and fishing scenes fall into this non-narrative category as well. Fish along with nautical or maritime images, in general, were very popular decorations in Roman houses, public buildings, and on tomb monuments and sarcophagi.

Grape vines and sheaves of wheat as well as harvesting scenes graced many of the interior walls of buildings and are found in pagan and

Christian funerary art. Doves and peacocks were also popular.

Two very interesting shared non-narrative images are the *seated philosopher* image, and banquet scenes. Often a deceased individual was depicted in funerary art seated as a respected philosopher or teacher with his family or clients standing around him[10]. Sometimes he holds a

10 Rome, Vatican, Via Salaria Sarcophagus, mid-3rd century.

The seated figures are referred to as *seated philosopher* types. It is a type of reverential portrait used in both pagan and Christian funerary contexts. Here they depict the Christian patrons of the work.

<<http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/SarcPix/RomeOvalSarcophagus.jpg>>



scroll in his hands. In the banquet or meal scenes seven[15], three, or five people sit or recline on the far side of a table that is set with fish, bread, and wine. Sometimes servants stand in the foreground. The Christian meaning of this image is somewhat controversial and so we shall explore it shortly.

Shared meanings

As well as looking the same, these shared images between pagans and Christians also communicated the same concepts, sentiments, and interpretations. They not only looked the same, they meant the same thing. They required no translation or adjustment when used by Christians. This is not to say that the images did not, over time, undergo a Christian layering or focusing of meaning. Focusing a Christian meaning likely took many more years for some of these images than for others. Pagans and Christians, initially, held in common the basic sentiments expressed by these images. The shift to an understanding uniquely Christian was more than likely gradual, what some would refer to as a “transformative” or evolutionary process.

The shepherd and orant images are good examples to examine in this regard because they are so prevalent in the funerary art of both Christians and pagans. The shepherd image when used by the pagans personified

11 Orant Woman, Priscilla Catacomb, Rome, wall painting, ca. AD 200.

The orant (orans) represented the soul of the deceased in both pagan and Christian art. Sometimes the orant is thought to symbolize the church, praying, primarily because the church is referred to as female in text sources.

<www.kaleo.ws/kaleo/knowning_jesus_personally>



gentle protective care, and charity or philanthropy. It was also a symbol of the god Hermes who guided the deceased to the underworld and the afterlife.[8] With the exception of the specific reference to the god Hermes the image conjured the same basic feelings –sentiments of caring and guiding-- when used in a Christian environment. The Christian image of the *Good Shepherd*, on a primary level, communicates the same sentiments.

The orant image in both a pagan and Christian context denoted the soul of the deceased in prayer. In *general* usage, funerary or otherwise, it symbolized pious familial devotion and intercessory prayer. The orant posture is, of course, common to the act of praying in many cultures throughout history. Even Roman coins utilized the image on the reverse side of the emperor's image to suggest the love and devotion of the emperor as he interceded with the gods in behalf of his 'family', the people of the empire.

Orant figures were always depicted as female in art and since a person's 'soul' in ancient literature was also referred to as female, the image in both pagan and Christian funerary contexts is interpreted as symbolic of the deceased's soul[11].

Christian layers of meaning

Of course, nearly all these non-narrative images eventually took on uniquely Christian meanings or 'layers' of meaning. Today, we ascribe the second through fourth century Christian meanings to these images mostly through discovery of parallel textural images from scripture and other contemporaneous literature such as the writings of the fathers of the church, sermons, liturgical texts, and hymns.¹¹ This does not mean that the pagan meaning was totally rejected or erased but that it was covered with a Christian layer that modified the under pagan layer.

12 Bread and Fish, Catacomb of St. Callixtus, Rome.

<http://www.jesuswalk.com/christian-symbols/images/fish_bread.jpg>



The fish

The fish image and fishing scenes, for example, have a wildly varied list of possible Christian meanings. There is a wealth of scriptural stories that the fish image may allude to, among them: the calling of the apostles to be "fishers of men,"¹² the miraculous catch of fish following the resurrection,¹³ Peter finding a coin in the mouth of a

fish,¹⁴ and other references. But, the fish as a symbol on its own or with other non-narrative images is more allusive. It could be referring to a nar-

13 Christian Banquet Scene, Sarcophagus fragment.
Vatican Inv. 31445

<www.rome101.com/Christian/Magician/>



rative such as the New Testament story of the multiplication of loaves and fish¹⁵ or, it could be a stand-alone symbol for Christ, himself. Third and fourth century writers noted that the Greek word for “fish” is a cryptogram on the Greek phrase “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” Therefore, the image of a fish, in some contexts, symbolizes Christ.

The association of the fish with the Eucharist is highly probable given the evidence of an inscription left by the second century Bishop Abercius of Hierapolis in Phrygia, and in a somewhat later epitaph of Pectorius of Autun. On his trip to Rome Abercius was ...*everywhere provided as my food a fish of exceeding great size*[13], and perfect, which a holy virgin drew with her hands from a fountain and this it [Faith] ever gives to its friends to eat, it having wine of great virtue, and giving it mingled with bread.¹⁶

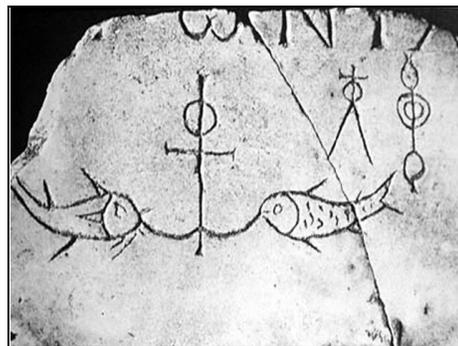
The bishop refers to the fish as the spiritual nourishment provided by the “Savior of the Saints.” He is, of course, describing the Eucharistic liturgy in veiled language, perhaps for security reasons.

Fish or fishing scenes on sarcophagi or on the frescoed walls of the catacombs may also be symbolic of the sacrament of Baptism. Grouped on the walls with fish symbols suggesting a possible Christian theme of Baptism, are images of scriptural texts often associated with the sacrament.¹⁷ Literary evidence, other than biblical citations, also points to a baptismal association. Early Christian writers often called to mind images of water, fish, and fishing when discussing Baptism. Converts were commonly referred to as swimming fish caught by Christ or, alternatively, caught by the apostles and their successors (“fishers of men”)[14]. Sometimes decorated with images of fish, baptismal fonts were at times called “fish ponds.”

14 Anchor and fish, tomb slab from Catacomb of Domitilla, 3rd century A.D.

Because it secures a vessel, the anchor was regarded in ancient times as a symbol of safety. In this instance the anchor symbolizes Christ who is the sure hope of Christians, represented here by fish.

<www.udel.edu/ArtHistory/news/209/images/2-01.jpg>



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Cyril of Jerusalem, instructing those about to be baptized, conjured the metaphor of fishing as well as Baptism’s imagery of death to rebirth in Christ: “*You are fish caught in the net of the church. Let yourself be taken alive: do not try to escape. It is Jesus who is playing you on his line, not to kill you, but by killing you, to make you alive.*”¹⁸

Banquet or meal scenes

The meal or banquet scenes are problematic. People are quick to see

in the image a representation of the *Last Supper* or the *Mass*. That the scenes had a Eucharistic layer of meaning is without doubt but that they literally represent the *Last Supper* or the Eucharistic liturgy is questionable. The meal scene is more likely a metaphor for an eschatological – heavenly-- banquet. The pagans utilized similar compositional scenes to illustrate the domestic comfort enjoyed by the deceased in his or her earthy life. It may have been suggestive of a hope for similar enjoyment in the afterlife. The *Mass*, of course, is understood, among other things, as a sacred banquet so it's easy to see the broad implications of the meal scene.

The most common composition deployed in representations of the meal scene shows seven persons seated at a semi-circular table, all on the

far side[15]. The number seven is usually symbolic of completeness in biblical numerology and so to some people, in fact, may be suggestive of the complete roster of twelve apostles at the *Last Supper*. However, it may also be symbolic of all who are called to the mystical supper including, of course, the deceased whose tomb it is. The table usually holds loaves of bread (five or seven loaves or baskets,

sometimes more) and containers of wine –and plates of fish. The presence of the fish –and seven baskets of bread-- invites various interpretations, especially among those who find problems in identifying the meal image with the Eucharist or with the narrative of the *Last Supper*.

The presence of images of fish on the tables has led to various interpretations of the meal scenes. Some see them as references to the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, others, perhaps the post-resurrection meal of grilled fish shared by Christ with seven of his apostles.¹⁹ Others see a depiction of an agape meal, due to the often animated poses of some figures.

We saw, in the inscription by Bishop Abercius looked at previously, a metaphorical interpretation of the fish as Christ. A late appearing Jewish feast included the eating of a rather large fish at a special meal in anticipation of a future messianic banquet.²⁰ Possibly, then, the images of plates of fish in the meal scenes of the catacombs provide a messianic layer of meaning but point more to a future sacred banquet than to the *Last Supper* narrative or a Eucharistic liturgy as conducted in the first few centuries..

Some hold that the meal scenes may be nothing more than a representation of the traditional funerary meal²¹ held at the gravesite by family and friends at the time of burial and on the traditional ninth day after of a person's death. This was a common practice in antiquity and there was certainly nothing about it Christians would have found offensive. It was

15 Banquet or Meal Scene.

<http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/images/webber/Agape_feast_07.jpg>



common for the food at such meals to be shared with the deceased by way of basins and tables to hold food, or pipes to conduct libations into the grave. Archeological evidence reveals that fish was sometimes one of the foods offered to the deceased. It is reasonable to assume that Christians would have continued the tradition as a simple pious act of familial devotion. It is not likely the stone or marble tables found at some graves were altars used for Eucharistic liturgies.

It is likely the meal scenes had many shades of meaning -- surely including a Eucharistic one—but, given the funerary context, it more likely symbolized a hoped-for celestial banquet.

16 Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, detail, 359, Grottoes of Saint Peter, Vatican City.

The seated philosopher image is thought to perhaps be a prototype of the later type of “Christ Teaching” or, in this instance, handing the law to Peter and Paul.

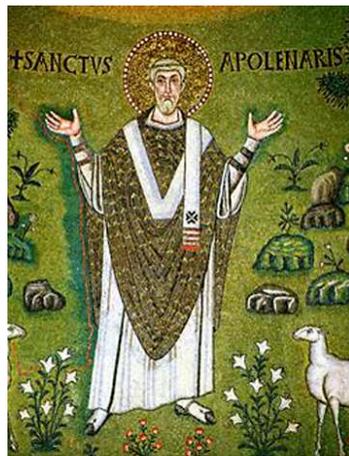


Shepherd, vine, wheat, seated philosopher, and orant

The shepherd image, of course, became the *Good Shepherd* in Christian iconography. Hermes, as a shepherd, guided the souls to Hades while the Good Shepherd was the Christian’s sure guide to salvation. On the walls and ceilings in the catacombs and carved on the sides of sarcophagi he is pictured shepherding the faithful into paradise.

17 Saint Apollinare, detail from the apse mosaic of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe, ca. 549.

The orant pose is used by clergy while leading the faithful in prayer. Later on it became the pose used to depict the saints in heaven interceding in behalf of the faithful still on earth.



The grape vine, and sheaves of wheat, became symbols of the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ. Harvesting scenes became metaphors for the last judgment and the ultimate salvation of the just.

The seated philosopher image does not appear to have taken on much of a Christian layer of meaning although some historians would argue that it became the prototype for the subsequent image of Christ teaching his apostles[16]. The orant, too, does not undergo much “Christianization.” It becomes the standard posed used in depicting saints in intercessory prayer[17]. It is also the posture assumed by the priest when leading prayers at Mass.

The next section will examine the origins of narrative or textual images in Christian art.

⁹ Istituto Salesiano S. Callisto - Roma, *The Pope’s Speeches Concerning the Catacombs*,

16 July 2007, December 2, 2008 19:32

<<http://www.catacombe.roma.it/en/discorso.html>>

¹⁰ Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, (New York, Routledge

2006) p 32

¹¹Jensen 1 - 7

¹²Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17

¹³John 21:1

¹⁴Matthew 17:27

¹⁵Matthew 14:15 - 21, Mark 6:35 - 44 and 8:1 - 8, and parallels

¹⁶Henri Leclercq, *Inscription of Abercius*, (The Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 1, New York: Robert Appleton Company 1907) 22 Dec. 2008, Nov. 24 2008 19:33
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01040a.htm>>

¹⁷Jensen 48

¹⁸Jensen 50

¹⁹John 21:9 - 13

²⁰Jensen 57

²¹The *refrigerium*