INTRODUCTION

Early Christian art

Robin M. Jensen

Historians generally agree that first- and second-century Christians left behind few material artifacts that historians could recognize as specifically theirs. Adherents to this new faith evidently began to decorate their tombs, places of worship, and even small domestic objects with iconography that reflected their distinct religious identity only in the late second or early third century. Scholars have offered various explanations for this seemingly late emergence of Christian pictorial art. Some suggest that Christians did not possess the numbers, social status, or economic resources to commission objects that depicted scenes from their own sacred stories or reflected their particular beliefs about God, salvation, or the afterlife. Others, arguing for some degree of common culture as well as a more fluid set of religious identities in Late Antiquity, argue that Christian art may be a misnomer when historians too hastily try to distinguish among artifacts probably produced in common workshops for various religious groups. Thus, they see more continuity than discontinuity in the material record. Recently, one scholar even proposed that the supposed absence of Christian art in the first centuries is resolved by regarding Christian art as Jewish art.

An older, but still circulating, argument argues that Christians regarded the pictorial arts and divine images of their polytheistic neighbors as idols and, faithfully obedient to the prohibition of graven images in the Mosaic Law, avoided making or possessing any of their own. Historians have now largely repudiated this by demonstrating that while ancient Christians may have disapproved of images or statues of the Greco-Roman gods (and the honors bestowed upon them), they did not reject representational art as such. Moreover, the little surviving documentary evidence for critique of images takes aim primarily at practices rather than at objects, denouncing only idolatrous reverence for created things of nature or human craft, while presuming that Christians might properly make and own images. For example, Clement of Alexandria, one of the most severe critics of such misplaced veneration around the turn of the third century, nevertheless made concrete suggestions for what Christians should engrave on their signet rings:

And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus got engraved as a device; and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to delineate the faces of idols, we who are prohibited to cleave to them; nor a sword, nor a bow, following as we do, peace; nor drinking-cups, being temperate.
Clement’s suggestions of images deemed appropriate for Christian seals suggests that, in fact, Christians did wish to differentiate themselves from their non-Christian neighbors, to some extent through the images they chose to decorate items they used in their daily life. Consequently, scholars are able to classify certain motifs as Christian, whether or not they were made for or used exclusively by self-identified members of that group. Notably, many rings or gems have survived that display such designs (Figure 9.4). Hence, much early Christian art usually is demarcated by its subject matter—in other words that it bears what could be regarded as typically Christian symbols or biblical narrative scenes (both Old and New Testament). However, because other religious groups might have used similar iconographic conventions and Jews might also have chosen to represent certain biblical subjects, the setting or context of these objects can be decisive, as well as their overall composition and practical function. Consequently, historians have urged that clearly defined classifications can be dangerous. What looks like a Good Shepherd to one set of eyes could be regarded as a representation of Hermes as the ram bearer to another. An image of Sol Invictus, Apollo, or Orpheus could be adapted to a Christian iconographic purpose in order to relay the idea of Christ as bringer of light into the world or a tamer of souls, without necessarily verging on religious syncretism. This is especially vivid in a late third- or early fourth-century mosaic of Christ in the guise of the sun god found in the Vatican necropolis (Figure 6.1).

Corresponding to Christian apologists who elucidated the faith for their learned audiences by reference to accepted philosophical ideals or who drew upon the stories of the gods for the sake of comparison in words, artisans likewise used the pictorial vocabulary of their surrounding culture, especially when relaying an aspect of their Savior or tenet of faith that had resonance with pre-Christian myths. This is not a case of syncretism so much as the effective deployment of images for communicating meaning in visual rather than verbal language. Yet, the language is not necessarily precise, insofar as it could convey different messages to different viewers, depending on attitude, expectations, socialization, or experience. This may be its most characteristic and—depending on one’s point of view—its most valuable quality.

Moreover the materials, manufacturing techniques, and even style of works classified as Christian are often quite similar to those presumed to be Jewish or polytheist objects. Motifs like the personified four seasons evidently were inoffensive enough to be acceptable for a variety of religiously identified patrons (Figure 1.1). The fact that artisans were trained similarly, and that workshops followed prevailing fashions and used the same types of tools, meant they presumably catered to different kinds of clients, most likely customizing pre-made objects as needed. For this reason, many art historians choose to describe early Christian art as a sub-category of Roman art.

Yet, while early Christian iconography often bears some similarities to non-Christian art of the same place and period, distinctions between them are not altogether absent. Early Christian wall paintings were executed in a sketchy, impressionistic style and were framed with colored borders similar to—although not usually as carefully executed as—those produced for contemporary Roman tombs and domestic interiors (Figures 2.4, 2.7, 2.9–11). Friezes carved on fourth-century stone coffins (sarcophagi) tend to display an almost random assortment of biblical characters, overlapping and often crowded onto a single panel rather than the more carefully composed reliefs of their non-Christian counterparts (Figures 3.3, 19.3, 19.7). Moreover, an evolution of motifs or narrative themes can be discerned. In general, Christian art proceeds from being primarily symbolic, to illustrating biblical narratives, to presenting certain dogmatic developments, and finally to embracing iconic, or portrait, types as it proceeds from domestic and funereal settings to monumental, ecclesial spaces. These distinctions in content or even style
do not presuppose the existence of workshops catering exclusively to Christian clients, but they do suggest an attention to particular religious identity. Based on stylistic analysis, it appears that a limited number of commercial workshops were the source of much early Christian art. These workshops most likely catered to private individuals and we have no evidence that either artisans or their clients were supervised by ecclesiastical officials or underwritten by church funds. Presumably patrons chose the décor of their burial places from among a stock repertoire of figures that artisans presented as samples. Many of the final programs included dedications to deceased spouses or reflections on the domestic life (and anticipated future reunion) of married Christians (Figures 20.1, 20.4, 20.10). The evidence for episcopal management of Christian cemeteries may have meant a certain degree of official oversight of their decoration, but it seems as likely that content and quality were entirely personal choices based on financial means and personal preferences. While surviving literary sources indicate scattered critique of certain types of pictorial subjects, no evidence supports the claim that church authorities actively regulated or censured the content or style of the iconography.

Most of the earliest extant examples of Christian visual art have come from funerary settings. They embellished the walls of the chambers of Christian catacombs (cubicula and arcosolia) and the fronts and sides of sarcophagi, as well as less pretentious illuminated epitaphs (Figure 1.2). These paintings and carvings survived largely because they were underground and so not as easily lost to neglect, deliberate destruction, renovation, or natural erosion. Even the gems, lamps, gold glasses, ceramic ware, or other small objects that add to the collection of artifacts were commonly found in burial contexts. In addition to that, the largest percentage of surviving evidence was found in the West, particularly in and around Rome. Unfortunately, very little that can be dated prior to the fifth or sixth century has been discovered in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. One outstanding, significant exception to both the funerary

*Figure 1.1* Seasons sarcophagus with menorah, fragment, last quarter of the third century. Origin unknown. Now in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Inv. no. 67611. Photo: Robin M. Jensen.
context and Western provenance of early Christian art is the Christian building discovered in Syria at the site of Dura-Europos, whose cycle of wall paintings has no exact parallel in either subject matter or style elsewhere. The fourth-century pavement from Hinton St Mary, with its presumed portrait of Christ (Figure 7.1) or the impressively detailed mosaic floor of a fourth-century basilica in Aquileia (Figure 1.3) are also important examples of early church decoration.

Early Christian symbols

The oldest surviving material evidence largely corroborates Clement of Alexandria’s list of appropriate iconography on Christian signet rings. Figures of doves, fish, boats, and anchors were popular signs, not only for inscribed gems but were also commonly found on early wall paintings, funerary epitaphs, sarcophagi, gilded drinking vessels and bowls, pottery lamps, and ceramic dishware (Figures 8.9, 17.3). Reminiscent of favorite Roman decorative motifs, early Christian tombs also displayed popular pastoral, harvesting, and maritime themes (Figure 6.2). Walls and vaults of burial chambers were adorned with painted garlands, vases of flowers, grapevines, bowls of fruit, brimming fountains, sheep and rams, doves, quail, and peacocks (Figure 1.4). Whether they had particular religious significance is difficult to know for certain but, like their appearance in Roman art, they may have been generic allusions to a safe passage to a blissful afterlife or a paradisical garden. Of course grapevines and vintaging scenes could have an eucharistic reference and shepherds with their sheep allude to the Christian flock, but such subjects might simply evoke the beauties of the earthly world and nature’s abundance. Whereas a dove could represent the Holy Spirit, it frequently appeared with an olive branch near the legend “in pace,” so it more likely symbolizes the hope for peaceful rest until the final resurrection.

While maritime scenes were popular subjects for Roman funerary art, the fish and fishermen may have had specific Christian resonance. The fish by itself could symbolize Christ, especially when joined by an acrostic based on the letters of the Greek word ichthys (fish), which fill out
the title Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεου Υἱος Σώτηρ (Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior). Fish also could represent the followers of Christ, hooked by the anchor of faith (Figure 1.5). Because fish also appear frequently in New Testament narratives—the calling of the disciples from their nets to become fishers of men, the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish, or the miraculous catch of fish at the end of John’s Gospel—fishing scenes or platters of fish may refer to particular biblical stories.

Added to these relatively generic floral and bucolic themes were regularly recurring human figures: the praying figure (orant), the shepherd, and the seated reader. The orant was frequently (but not always) depicted as a standing female with outstretched arms, upturned eyes, a long tunic, and a veiled head (Figures 1.6, 1.7, 19.6). Her (or his) posture replicates the traditional ancient prayer stance and gestures. In some instances the figure appears to be a portrait of the deceased buried nearby, but could also personify the soul, or perhaps the virtue of piety (pietas). The shepherd, usually shown as a beardless youth, wears a short tunic and boots and carries a sheep over his shoulders and may be intended to represent the biblical “Good Shepherd”
Figure 1.4  Detail, vase with birds, from the Catacomb of Praetextatus. From Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 50.

Figure 1.5  Epitaph of Licinia Amias, Rome, late third century, found in the vicinity of the Vatican Necropolis. Now in the Museo Nazionale Romano-Terme di Diocleziano, Inv. number 67646. Photo: Robin M. Jensen.
(cf. Psalm 23; John 10.1–9). The shepherd is also among the rare examples of early statues in the round (Figures 5.5–6). In some instances, the shepherd appears more than once (Figure 3.2) and occasionally in an expanded pastoral setting where putti are shown milking or harvesting. Because the figure of a shepherd carrying a ram over his shoulders has an ancient pre-Christian precedent in a depiction of Hermes, the gods’ messenger and caretaking guide to the underworld, this motif could have conveyed different meanings to various viewers.

The shepherd and the orant frequently appear with a third figure: a seated reader garbed as a philosopher (Figure 1.7). Like the orant and the shepherd, this figure appeared in non-Christian funerary settings, often assumed to allude to the intellectual accomplishments of the deceased. So too, in Christian contexts, it might depict the deceased as a learned man or could have more generally alluded to Christian teaching as true philosophy. Together this trio may have been intended to personify piety, philanthropy, and love of wisdom—virtues that were not uniquely Christian—or perhaps the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (cf. 1 Corinthians 13.13).

Figure 1.6 Orant (portrait of the deceased woman) from Catacomb of the Giordani. From Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 174b.
An image that frequently turns up both in Christian catacomb paintings and on sarcophagus reliefs depicts five or seven diners sitting at a horseshoe-shaped table sharing a meal of bread, wine, and fish (Figure 19.6). Scholars have variously interpreted these as images of the Last Supper, the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fish, eucharists, or agape meals. Yet, as almost identical versions appear frequently in non-Christian contexts, the composition cannot depict exclusively Christian rituals or refer to any single biblical narrative. Most likely, the motif alludes to funeral meals shared by the deceased’s family and friends at the tomb, and perhaps represents the wish for a happy repast in the next world. In a Christian context, the scene could evoke the celestial banquet promised by Jesus at the Last Supper (cf. Mark 14.25 and parallels), and thus bear an eschatological significance. In some examples the diners are served by female figures who bear the names Irene (peace) and Agape (love/charity), probably a further indication of the meal’s meaning. In any case, like all of these early images, they could bear multiple connotations and mean different things to different viewers.

Biblical subjects

Throughout the third century biblical narrative scenes gradually joined the symbolic motifs described above. Initially, a select repertoire of characters and stories from the Hebrew Scriptures significantly outnumbered those from the New Testament. Among these early subjects were depictions of Adam and Eve (shown flanking the tree with the forbidden fruit), Noah in his ark, Abraham offering his son Isaac for sacrifice, Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, Daniel in...
the lions’ den, the three Hebrew Youths in the fiery furnace, Jonah being swallowed and then spit up by the sea creature, and Susanna with the elders. Though no two images are completely identical, the scenes are so similar as to be easily identified as standard types. For example, Adam and Eve stand to either side of the tree that bears the forbidden fruit. They usually are shown with their hands covering their genitals and with their eyes cast down. Noah is ordinarily portrayed as an *orant*, standing in a small boxlike ark, its lid rising behind him (Figure 19.5). Daniel, also an *orant*, is represented as a heroic nude flanked by two lions (Figure 1.8).

This early preference for Hebrew Scripture subjects has caused some commentators to suggest the influence of Jewish visual art on these early Christian paintings, even to posit the existence of an illustrated Septuagint as a kind of missing link. In addition to the problem that no such model exists, surviving examples of Jewish art show little in common, either stylistically or in subject matter, with Christian catacomb paintings. Nevertheless, even if such models could be identified, it is more reasonable to conclude that the popularity of these stories reflects their prominent place in Christian exegesis, catechesis, prayer, and preaching. For example, scholars have suggested that prayers offered for the souls of the dead were given as assurance of God’s faithful deliverance from death and danger.

Figure 1.8 Ceiling fresco, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, late third or early fourth century. Center: Daniel and lions; surrounding: Noah in the ark and scenes from the Jonah cycle. From Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 104.
More generally, however, these images were not mere illustrations of favorite Bible stories. Christians maintained the importance of Hebrew Scriptures as part of their own story of salvation and saw these biblical characters as types that pointed to the future coming of Christ and the establishment of the church and its sacraments. In other words, they perceived prophetic meaning in these images and maintained continuity between Hebrew Scriptures and their New Testament narratives. For example, Abraham’s obedience to God’s command that he offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice was interpreted already in the New Testament as a sign of Abraham’s faith (Heb 11.8–11). Isaac—the innocent but willing victim—subsequently became a type of Christ (1.9).26 The story of Jonah, one of the most popular motifs for funerary art (and a rare sequential cycle), was edited down to depict only the episodes in which Jonah was tossed overboard, swallowed by a large fish, and then spit out onto dry land where he rested under a gourd vine (Figures 1.3, 1.8, 3.2, 11.2). According to the Gospels, Jesus refers to the “sign of Jonah” as a prediction of the Son of Man’s three days in the heart of the earth, just as Jonah was for three days in the belly of the fish (Matt 12.40; cf. Luke 11.29).27 Daniel was imprisoned in the lions’ den and presumed dead, only to be found the next morning alive in his ostensible tomb (Dan 6.19; Figure 11.14). Early Christian exegetes understood these stories as types of Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection, as well as indications of God’s deliverance of his faithful people from danger and death, or even allusions to Christian sacraments. The rescue of Noah from the flood prefigured Christian baptism (1 Pet 3.20), as did Moses’ striking of the rock from which a spring of water emerged to slake the wandering Israelites’ thirst.

These themes, which appeared on tomb walls as well as on small personal objects, also evidently found their way into worship spaces. The wall paintings found in the Christian building at Dura-Europos also demonstrate the linking of biblical narratives with baptismal interpretation. They include depictions of Jesus healing the paralytic (19.1), Jesus walking on the water, and possibly the Samaritan woman at the well. In this instance, the decoration of the space has an immediate resonance with the activities taking place within it and allows what one commentator has called a “ritual-centered visuality” that attends to the ways imagery, environment, and events interact in the expression of meaning and purpose.28

By the late third and early fourth centuries, New Testament Gospel scenes began to appear alongside these Hebrew Scripture narratives. One of the earliest was the portrayal of John the Baptist baptizing a small, nude Jesus (Figures 1.7, 19.2, 19.6). More scenes from Jesus’s ministry gradually appeared on tomb walls and sarcophagus reliefs, especially representations of Jesus healing the paralytic, the woman with the issue of blood, and the man born blind (Figure 19.5). Other popular compositions included the adoration of the magi, and Jesus raising Lazarus, meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, multiplying the loaves and fish, and changing water to wine (Figures 2.2–4, 19.3, 19.6, 19.8). Depictions of Jesus performing miracles such as raising Lazarus generally show him wielding a staff, a possible reference to the authority of Moses or the priestly-appointed power of Aaron (Figures 19.7, 19.10).29

Additional Old Testament subjects appeared in the fourth century, including some still unique depictions of stories from the Joseph cycle found in the Via Latina catacomb. Besides these stories, this catacomb, which also had wall paintings depicting pagan gods, contained representations of Abraham entertaining his three angelic guests and of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea—representations that also began to be carved on sarcophagus reliefs. Other previously unknown images that appeared on sarcophagi included depictions of the Trinity creating Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel presenting their sacrifices to God, Elijah’s ascent to heaven, Jesus entering Jerusalem mounted on a donkey (Figure 19.4), and Jesus (in the guise of Ezekiel) raising the dead.
The book of Acts inspired an image of Peter’s arrest, which was frequently juxtaposed with an image of the saint striking a rock to baptize his Roman jailers, an image that has a surviving textual parallel in a later apocryphal source, the *Acts of Peter*. Clearly based on an earlier representation of Moses striking the rock, this iconographic transformation indicates the important role of Peter as a “new Moses” or the rock on which Jesus would found his church (cf. Matthew 16.18). At the same time, allusions to Peter’s denial are also evident in the appearance of a rooster, often near his feet (Figure 19.3). During this period of innovation in iconography, compositions often became more complex, and the quality of technique, workmanship, and materials improved. One famous example, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, shows extraordinary skill and sophistication, combining biblical narrative scenes like the fall of Adam and Eve, Abraham’s offering of Isaac, Daniel, and Jesus entering Jerusalem, with an early depiction of the Jesus before Pilate, the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, and the ascended and enthroned Christ giving the law to these same two—Rome’s traditional founding apostles (Figure 18.5).

Given its ubiquity in later Christian art, depictions of Christ’s crucifixion are notably absent from Christian art prior to the early fifth century, and then still rare until the sixth century and later. A small group of early gems engraved with crucifixion images has been hypothetically dated as early as the late third or early fourth century, but beyond those are only two fifth-century examples, one a small panel of the carved wooden doors of Rome’s basilica of Santa Sabina (dated to ca. 420) that depicts Christ between the two thieves, and the other one of the sides of a small ivory box or reliquary casket that shows Christ with the Virgin and Beloved Disciple (Figures 18.9–10). None of these examples shows Christ as suffering, but rather as open-eyed and alive upon his cross.30

**Dogmatic and imperial motifs**

By the mid-fourth century, the biblical narrative scenes of Old Testament characters and Jesus’ miracles were joined by more dogmatically oriented and imperially influenced subjects. Some of this evolution may reflect the contemporary debates over the nature of the Trinity or the person and work of Christ, but the increasing prosperity and security of the Church during the fourth century must have contributed as well. Images of Jesus as a teacher surrounded by his apostles show up in catacomb paintings (Figure 2.8), sarcophagus reliefs (Figure 20.10), and even later fourth-century mosaic programs (Figure 1.9). Portraits of Christ, the apostles, and other saints also began to appear with more regularity, often as devotional images without specific narrative contexts (Figures 8.11–12, 12.10).31 Their tombs became sites for pilgrimage, their physical remains became objects of veneration, often inserted into elaborately decorated containers made from precious metals or studded with gems (Figures 10.1, 10.6, 10.9).32

Many of these new types of compositions began to appear soon after Emperor Constantine I’s rise to power, the so-called Peace of the Church, and the imperial patronage of the Christian faith, which included the construction of major basilicas and shrines in Rome, Palestine, and Constantinople. While lay clients were probably the primary clients of workshops that produced funerary art, the development of new motifs seem to reflect the rising prestige of the Christian religion following the emperor’s conversion to the faith. At the same time, iconographic themes and artistic styles from the imperial court influenced the decoration of the new church buildings, which displayed lavish mosaic decoration on walls and apses, as well as carved capitals, and embellished liturgical objects made from precious metals and ivory, much of this construction underwritten by the imperial family (Figures 13.3–4).33
For example, among the many gifts that Constantine donated to his first Roman basilica—now known as Saint John Lateran but originally called simply the Constantinian Basilica—was a hammered silver *fastigium* (a pediment supported by columns) that displayed a life-size seated image of Christ accompanied by silver statues of the twelve apostles and four spear-carrying angels. In addition to these impressive (and heavy) silver figures, the pediment supported gold and silver lamps and wreaths. The emperor furnished that basilica’s baptistery with a statue of a lamb in solid gold, almost life-sized silver representations of Christ and John the Baptist, and seven silver stags. Other objects of gold and silver, from candle stands to altars, exhibit an appreciation for fine craft, a love of luxury, and a desire to give precious donations to the church, sometimes inscribed as personal memorial gifts (Figures 15.3–4). By the end of the fourth century luxury objects of ivory and silver began to be made for private individuals, and these often showed a combination of Christian and mythological motifs—an indication that the ancient gods and their stories had not been completely eclipsed as subjects for visual art (Figure 15.6).

Along with objects of ivory, silver, and gold, were probably less costly and certainly less enduring textiles that included items of clothing as well as sanctuary curtains and altar cloths, mainly made from wool, linen, and silk. Because of their fragility, they mostly survive in fragments and come predominately from dry climates such as Egypt. These woven objects displayed colorful images of biblical characters, saints, and crosses, as well as less animals, flowers, and geometric patterns. One of the most impressive examples is a tapestry icon of the Virgin and Child now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 14.8). Along with these personal objects are small souvenirs, purchased by pilgrims to the holy sites, especially in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. Often clay or pewter ampullae that were designed to contain blessed oil or perhaps consecrated soil, they were stamped with the figures of saints or biblical scenes to remind travelers of the places they visited along their journeys (Figures 10.8, 11.15).
Many of these compositions represented Jesus as the new lawgiver, assuming the role of Moses, conveying a scroll to the holy apostles, Peter and Paul (Figures 4.6, 18.5, 20.10). He also appears as the enthroned heavenly sovereign (Figure 6.5). Scholars often have described this change of emphasis—from Jesus as healer or miracle worker to Jesus as enthroned king—as the adaption of imperial iconography. However, now depicted as thickly bearded rather than youthful, seated on a jeweled throne rather than a folding curule chair, and garbed in resplendent gold and purple robes rather than simple tunic and pallium, Christ appears more like a cosmic king of kings than a rival for the earthly emperor. Even as the references to the passion began to make their appearance in visual art, the cross was first displayed without the body, as a symbol of his overcoming death. As it is surmounted by a wreath and christogram, an image modeled after the emperor’s own emblem of military conquest, it bears allusions to imperial triumph while being adapted to convey the assurance of divine victory (Figure 18.6).

The emperor’s example inspired a church building boom across the Roman world. As elite and wealthy Romans joined the faith, they often redirected their wealth from sponsoring civic projects to generously endowing ecclesiastical foundations. These structures were adorned with magnificent mosaics on floors and walls, and furnished with elegantly crafted objects. The official function of these structures meant that their design and decoration were most likely supervised by church officials rather than lay or even imperial sponsors, some of whom would have underwritten the projects from their own funds.

The application of colored small tesserae to church walls and vaults was a technical innovation during this period. The image placed in the apse replaced the cult statue (or imperial portrait) that would have been there in pre-Christian basilicas and became a focus for the liturgy (Figure 6.4). One of the oldest surviving examples, in Rome’s church of Santa Pudenziana, depicts Christ enthroned among his apostles and before the cityscape of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21.2). A gemmed cross rises from the site of Golgotha and in the sky above are the four living creatures described in the Book of Revelation (Rev 4.6–8). Two female figures, probably personifications of the churches of the Jews and the Gentiles, offer crowns to Peter and Paul (Figure 6.5).

Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries the decorative programs of churches became more and more elaborate and iconographically innovative. The mosaics that decorated the church of Santa Maria Maggiore (built by Sixtus III, c. 435) depicted a cycle of subjects from Genesis and Exodus in the nave (Figure 6.7), as well as previously unknown scenes from Christ’s nativity narratives, including the magi before Herod and the massacre of the innocents on the triumphal arch (Figure 1.10). By contrast, the original arch program for San Paolo Fuori le Mura, created about the same time, displayed another scene from the Book of Revelation. On the uppermost register a bust of Christ adorned with the radiate nimbus of the sun god hovered among the four beasts of Paradise and above the twenty-four elders of Revelation bearing crowns to cast before him (cf. Revelation 4.1–11). The mosaics of Ravenna are among the most magnificent of all. Their stunning pictorial compositions are often surrounded by geometric and floral designs and exemplify the ways that liturgy is illuminated by the decoration of its environment (Figures 21.5–10). Furthermore, as the Ravenna mosaics represent the transitions from Roman to Gothic to early Byzantine culture and theology, they provide an unsurpassed and extremely precious visual archive.

Paulinus of Nola, an aristocratic early-fifth-century bishop who built churches on his ancestral lands between Rome and Naples, described the apse mosaics he commissioned. For his church at Nola, Paulinus evidently commissioned a representation of the Holy Trinity. A poem that he composed describes the iconography as depicting Christ in the form of a lamb standing on a rock from which four rivers flowed, the Father as a voice thundering from above (almost certainly depicted as a hand from heaven), and a dove for the Holy Spirit. The image also included a cross within a wreath, which was itself surrounded by a circle of twelve doves
to represent the apostles. The central image was a cross within a wreath. The other, at Fundi, depicted the final judgment. Christ was depicted as a lamb beneath a bloody cross. Above him hovered the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and the hand of God descended to offer a crown. The Christ-lamb was busy separating sheep from goats, with the assistance of the Good Shepherd, who herded off the goats and welcomed the lambs into a bucolic paradise.42

Around this same time, the shift from a book roll to a codex allowed the production of illustrated Bibles, which provided a different context for scripture-based images. The oldest surviving example of these, the Quedlinburg Itala, dates to the early fifth century and consists of five leaves from the books of Samuel and Kings. The style of these manuscript illuminations starkly contrasts with that of the catacomb paintings. Richly detailed and finely painted, some made from purple-dyed parchment, a complete manuscript may have had dozens of illustrations, many presented in sequenced cycles (Figures 16.1, 16.5–6, 18.11).43

**Conclusion**

Although scholars disagree on the reasons for the seeming absence of Christian art prior to the early third century, it is clear that no later than that, those who became adherents to the new religion were beginning to decorate their homes, bodies, tombs, and places of worship with iconography that reflected their religious identity and can still be identified as distinctively Christian insofar as they depicted biblical narratives or referred to central dogmatic or theological ideas. Although much of the surviving remains were found in burial contexts, they include objects like lamps, rings, or gold glasses that would have been made for domestic use or personal adornment. Eventually, these private or personal objects were joined by monumental works of art, liturgical furnishings of precious materials, and illuminated sacred books that were commissioned by members of the imperial family or other elite individuals and almost certainly
approved by church authorities. Although one cannot know how any object was used or much less perceived by ancient owners or viewers, it can be assumed that they were intended to express both individual and communal identity and religious commitments, while also stimulating devotion, prompting prayer, and enhancing corporate worship.

Notes


7 See the chapter by Jeffrey Spier in this volume.


9 See, for example, Justin Martyr 1 Apol. 21ff.

10 See the chapter by Jutta Dresken-Weiland in this volume.

11 For example, see Jaš Elsner’s introduction to *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–14.


13 See the chapter by Mark D. Ellison in this volume.


15 See the chapters by Norbert Zimmerman, Jutta Dresken-Weiland, and Gutram Koch in this volume.

16 See the chapter by Michael Peppard in this volume.

17 See the chapters by Susan Walker and John J. Herrmann, Jr. and Anniewies van den Hoek in this volume.


19 On this acrostic see Tertullian *On Baptism* 1; *Sibylline Oracles* 8.217–250; and Optatus of Milevis *Against Parmenian* 3.2.1.

20 See the chapter by Heidi J. Hornik in this volume.


23 See the chapter by Norbert Zimmerman in this volume.


29 See the chapter by Lee M. Jefferson in this volume.

30 See the chapter by Felicity Harley-McGowan in this volume.

31 See the chapter by Katherine Marsengill in this volume.

32 See the chapter by Erik Thunø in this volume.

33 See the chapters by Niamh Bhalla and Ruth Leader-Newby in this volume.

34 Liber Pontificalis 34. 9–13.

35 See the chapter by Jennifer L. Ball in this volume.


39 See the chapters by Sean Leatherbury and Rina Talgam in this volume.


41 See the chapter by Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis in this volume.

42 Paulinus of Nola Epistle 32.10, 17.

43 See the chapter by Dorothy Verkerk in this volume.

Further reading

Selected, broad, and English-language introductions to the study of early Christian art or scholarly studies on the general subject of the emergence of Christian art and its relationship to Greco-Roman art and iconography include the following general works, some of them edited collections of essays by important scholars. More focused studies on different media or thematic questions are included at the ends of the rest of the chapters in this volume.


