On the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, in an area now called Tabgha, the modern-day Church of the Multiplication stands guard over one of the most well-known examples of early Christian art in the Holy Land: a fifth-century mosaic of loaves and fishes (Figure 17.1). This early Byzantine mosaic floor commemorates Jesus’s miraculous multiplication of his followers’ meager victuals in order to feed thousands of people, a wonder narrated in all four of the canonical gospels. The fifth-century foundation covers an even earlier church on the site, which was visited by the pilgrim Egeria in 383. She notes, “the stone on which the Lord placed the bread has now been made into an altar. People who go there take away small pieces of the stone to
bring them prosperity, and they are very effective.” Today’s pilgrims are not allowed such mementos, but the gift shop has plenty of other options. Hardly anyone leaves there without taking an image of that mosaic home in some form—on a postcard, a ceramic tile, or a coffee mug.

But there’s a problem with the mosaic, or so it seems. Astute readers of the Bible know that Jesus begins with five loaves of bread; the mosaic here shows only four. Would the mosaicist have made such a glaring error, here at the very pilgrimage site for this event? One might conjecture that the fifth loaf needs to be imagined within the picture, as if buried down in the basket, behind or under the other four. However, when we examine other examples of the multiplication in early Christian art, a scene relatively common among depictions of Jesus’s miracles, we do often see either five loaves or five baskets (Figures 17.2, 19.7). By comparison, this famous version at Tabgha seems unfulfilled, incomplete, in tension with its corresponding biblical narrative.

The resolution of the tension, the completion of the artistic program, and the fulfillment of the story only occur when one realizes the ritual context of the art. Early Christians consistently interpreted this miracle as foreshadowing the ritual meal called the eucharist or the Lord’s supper. Egeria herself described how that rock, near which the mosaic was laid, was used as an altar for consecrated bread, a loaf multiplied through its fracture and distribution to pilgrims. The artistic form thus evokes an expectation in its viewers; in order to represent its biblical text faithfully, the art requires them to enact the text ritually, to break bread physically and share it graciously. In other words, the fifth loaf is not hiding there in the imagined basket; it is really there on the altar above. The mosaic, in its ritual context, invites present viewers to experience the eucharist as an extension of the past miracle. In this particular space, art and ritual work together to collapse time and fulfill the image. When the ritual context is taken into account, the supposed problem of this mosaic dissolves.

Most scholarship on early Christian art treats the interaction between visual form and biblical text. How does one do visual exegesis of art that was usually influenced by textual or narrative traditions but was not bound by correspondence to them? To that vital question, this chapter
Early Christian art and ritual

adds a third dimension. How can we interpret early Christian art at the nexus of text, image, and ritual? After an introductory summary of how two leading scholars have theorized the ritual contexts of ancient images, this chapter builds upon the opening example from Tabgha to explore ritual participation in artistic programs. It next moves beyond two-dimensional art to consider types of ritual objects from the period, particularly the special case of pilgrimage artifacts.

Bible, art, ritual

To deepen comprehension of early Christian art by incorporating the ritual dimension, one must broaden the set of correspondences and associations beyond the biblical. While the Bible does allude to the primary rituals of initiation and eucharist, sometimes only noncanonical narratives or liturgical sources—such as hagiographies, homilies, baptismal catecheses, church orders, and pilgrimage evidence—can provide the details to color in the guidelines of our understanding. Accessing actual rituals through these sources presents a challenge, of course, since the rituals are not witnessed as such, but only as mediated through texts and images, thereby creating a hermeneutic circle for the historian. But an example such as the mosaic from Tabgha shows that the benefits of an approach sensitive to ritual sometimes compensate for this challenge.

Among scholars successfully incorporating the ritual dimension of early Christian art, Robin Jensen’s work stands out as the most fully developed, attending to the “ritual, visual, and theological dimensions” of artistic programs. She is well aware of the potential pitfalls of such interdisciplinarity, since art historians, liturgical scholars, and textually trained interpreters of religion often begin from different premises. While Jensen inveighs against treating biblical narratives as a kind of “lode of definitive, preferential, or even validating data,” she presses on with a rigorous interdisciplinarity that emphasizes the role of memory and imagination for interpreting both verbal and visual events. Because so much extant early Christian art can be associated with a ritual context (baptism, anointing, pilgrimage, burial, funerary meal, etc.), an “effective visual exegesis requires the viewer to make certain connections that were experienced in liturgical performances (sermons, prayers, catecheses, and so forth) or developed in written treatises and commentaries. After all, an image generally, or at least initially, will mean what one has been taught that it means.”

Moreover, the ritual context of early Christian art already influences our interpretation of it, even if we do not always acknowledge that fact. For instance, the simple image of Noah coming out of a box-like ark (which Jensen calls the “Jack-in-the-box” style) has been found almost exclusively in funerary settings, and thus our interpretation of Noah as the individual “Christian rescued from death” is corroborated by a ritual context. One could imagine, though, how the prevalent water imagery in the biblical narrative might engender different interpretations if the same Noah were to be found mainly in baptisteries (cf. 1 Pet 3:20) and the story’s dove associated with that of Jesus’s baptism (cf. patristic homilies). Or consider how the imagery of Jonah’s ocean adventure is also found mainly in funerary contexts, indicating its symbolism of Christian hope for salvation from the belly of death (Figure 17.3; see also Figure 3.2, Figures 5.1–4). If other parts of the Jonah story were found mainly depicted on pulpits or book covers instead, we might rather interpret their connection to his preaching to Nineveh as a prophetic call to Christian evangelism—a reminder to preach God’s word to those who had not yet heard it. Even the ubiquitous image of the shepherd with sheep depends for its meaning in part on ritual context: in a funerary context, it evokes the “good shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep and opens the gate to life (John 10), but in a baptismal context, the more operative association may be Psalm 23, the shepherd who leads beside the waters, refreshes the soul (baptism), and also prepares a meal for an anointed guest (anointing and eucharist).
Other art historians have also signaled ways forward in the interpretation of ritual spaces in antiquity. Jaś Elsner has encouraged a theorization of ancient visuality—ways of seeing—in specific ritualized moments from Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian materials. On the whole, he champions “a ritual-centered attitude to images in antiquity, which influenced both ways of seeing and ways of thinking about art.” What he calls ritual-centered visuality “may be defined in many ways—as the putting aside of normal identity and the acquisition of a temporary cult-generated identity, or as the surrendering of individuality to a more collective form of subjectivity constructed and controlled by the sacred site,” among other possibilities. Specific experiences conjured different modes of seeing, just as certain occasions call for one kind of rhetoric or another, one kind of dress or another. Thus religious participants’ collective form of subjectivity may be considered constructed in part by their visuality, whether one sees oneself as an indistinguishable member of a flock of sheep or as an indistinguishably costumed and adorned member of a procession. “In effect, ritual-centered visuality denies the appropriateness of . . . interpreting images through the rules and desires of everyday life. It constructs a ritual barrier to the identifications and objectifications of the screen of discourse and posits a sacred possibility for vision, which is by definition more significant since it opens the viewer to confronting his or her god.” Ritual processes, in other words, prepare viewers to enact visual exegesis in typological, allegorical, and other distinctly theological modes. The everyday rules of visuality for encountering an image of a shepherd, a fish, a dove, a mother and child, a procession, a man reclining under a vine, or a battle scene are temporarily suspended. The viewer draws instead from the narrative and symbolic worlds specifically appropriate for a ritual context—and for which he or she has been both consciously and subconsciously prepared.
By this turn to subjectivities in understanding the ritual viewing of ancient art, Elsner must employ an imaginative process alongside other forms of analysis. In a series of case studies, he focuses on the pattern of cultural constructs and social discourses that stand between the retina and the world, a screen through which the subjects of this inquiry (that is, Greek and Roman people) had no choice but to look and through which they acquired (at least in part) their sense of subjectivity. Just as that screen—what I am calling “visuality”—was itself made up of subjective investments while being limited by the material and ideological constraints of the ancient cultural context, so our examination of it must depend upon a certain amount of empathetic imagination as well as critical analysis.9

In addition to this “empathetic imagination,” he also gives credence to the precious few ancient testimonies about what it meant to see art. Coupling these testimonies with examples of the real presence of deities in statues and other figural objects, Elsner collapses the supposed dichotomy between the real and the imagined, the form and its instantiation, the god and its representation. “The represented is not just in the image,” he writes, “the represented is the image.”10

Elsner uses the first-person descriptions of art and ritual in authors such as Pausanias and Lucian as ways into the ritual-centeredness of Greco-Roman visuality. As a result, he questions the art historian’s usual focus on naturalism and aesthetics instead of iconicism and ritual: “Art history has tended to assume that classical art—the art of naturalism and ekphrasis—was much more like Renaissance art and art writing than it was like the arts of the Middle Ages.”11 However, ancient evidence about people’s experiences of statues, busts, and portraits indicates that the objects were highly charged with divine power and were encountered primarily through ritualized actions, e.g., at the culmination of pilgrimage, fasting, procession, or prayer.

Ritual participation in artistic programs

Early Christianity was a religion of conversion. In most cases, the life changes required of initiates were significant in terms of belief, ritual practice, and ethics. It is not surprising, then, that Christian leaders put considerable care into the design and execution of the artistic spaces that hosted the rites of initiation. We call these spaces “baptisteries” as a shorthand, since the immersion or affusion with water was usually central to the rites, and the fonts were often adorned with artistic programs. But we should not forget that many of the ancient baptisteries’ painted walls did not survive, so we do not often know how other rituals of initiation (anointing, exorcism, eucharist) might have been portrayed visually. In addition, some regions of eastern Christianity seem to have emphasized anointing more than baptism and do not often prefer the term “baptistery” for their ritual spaces, as evidenced by inscriptions.

The artistic programs of baptisteries have been extensively documented and analyzed by Robin Jensen.12 While there is no uniformity among extant baptisteries, nor can we discern clear chronological trends, they often include a cluster of popular visual motifs that relate to the ritual context. First, the shape of some fonts and the initiate’s direction of passage through them required an embodiment of beliefs about baptism. Jensen notes several fonts whose shapes suggest a woman’s vulva or womb, which “may have been specifically intended to emphasize the motif of rebirth from the womb of a spiritual mother.”13 Baptism as new birth was among the most widespread motifs in early Christianity, propagated in text, art, and ritual. Some baptisteries were also designed to move the initiate through a font from west to east, moving from darkness to
light, even as the nighttime rituals—frequently called by the term phōtismos (illumination) rather than baptism—were accompanied by the illumination of candles, tapers, or torches by neophytes.

Another way the baptismal setting connected to its ritual was through artistic representation of the ritual or its attendant objects. The two Ravenna baptisteries, for example, show the baptism of Christ by affusion, an anachronistic portrayal that likely bore more resemblance in form to the contemporaneous ritual than to the one practiced centuries earlier in the Jordan River. Some baptistery mosaics show ritual objects such as candles or tapers, analogous to how sacrificial temples from antiquity might represent in two dimensions the very objects that existed as part of the ritual in the room (e.g., the altar in the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, Dura-Europos). Even the common Christogram (the “chi-rho”) has a ritual function in baptistery art, since its cruciform lettering shows the sign of the cross by which initiates are sealed on the forehead. Beyond these ritual markers, baptisteries evoke many intersections of Bible, art, and ritual through natural symbols—fish, sheep, and deer drinking from running water—that draw from contemporaneous art, Biblical psalms, or Gospel narratives and also mimic some of the chief metaphors for initiatory rites.

Perhaps the most prevalent artistic form that invited ritual participation was that of the procession, which was among the most ubiquitous forms of religious activity and religious visualization in antiquity. Around the Mediterranean region, the sheer number and variety of ancient, processional cultic activities encouraged a ritual-centered, processional visuality on the part of viewers. Art historian Thomas Mathews highlights depictions of processions from Greek and Roman antiquity, including the early third-century “Aventine Mithraeum” in Rome and fourth-century processions to temples of Apollo and Diana in Carthage or Bacchus/Dionysus in Spain. Processions cover Christian sarcophagi and adorn Christian arcosolia in the catacombs. The Christian procession’s primary mode—“convergence,” according to Mathews—would hit its peak in the mosaics of fifth- and sixth-century Christianity, as in those of the two grand basilicas of Ravenna. The wall mosaics of the Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo line the nave and feature, for example, a procession of virgin martyrs and the three magi on one side (Figure 17.4). Processional activity culminated in these basilica-style churches, but Christians

![Figure 17.4](https://tango7174.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mosaic_with_procession_of_virgin_martyrs_and_Magi,_north_nave_wall,_Basilica_of_Sant%27_Apollinare_Nuovo,_Ravenna.jpg)
also celebrated “stational liturgies” that used various parts of cities, especially Jerusalem, Rome, and Constantinople. The processional art that captured the spirit of these liturgies encouraged, in the words of Annabel Jane Wharton, a “haptic” mode of engagement with the images on the walls. Processional art was meant to be not only viewed with one’s eyes, but experienced by one’s body in motion—a precursor of the most common stational liturgy of later centuries, the “stations of the cross.”

The Dura-Europos house-church, the lone excavated site of Christian initiation from before the fourth century, had several features that suggest an exchange between artistic form and ritual practice. The southern wall of its baptistery had a painting of David and Goliath underneath a wall niche likely used for oil of anointing. While anointing was common in antiquity overall, it held a particular significance for early Christian rituals in Syria. The prebaptismal anointing of initiates was understood as a mimesis of the anointing of priests and kings in the Bible (Psalm 2). Just as the anointed David was a model for Jesus Christ (“anointed”), so was Christ the model for Christians. The anointed initiate was to gaze on the power of the anointed David and be empowered for battles with temptation and evil (1 Sam 16–17). The oil that sat over the head of David on the wall’s art thus became the oil that anointed the head of each initiate in the ritual.

The painting of the shepherd and flock over the baptismal font also engages with the ritual movement in its location. The shepherd here carries a sheep aloft on his shoulders, while a flock of other sheep grazes or drinks water on the right side of the painting. The image is reminiscent of Psalm 23, a popular catechetical text across early Christianity, or parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7). When placed directly above a font, the image offers a striking interdependence between text, art, and ritual movement: the shepherd descends from above to lift a newly-branded sheep from the pit of the font and add it to the number of the flock already congregated nearby. While it is not definitively clear whether the painted sheep are only grazing or are also drinking water, the combination of the two seems more likely. If so, an art-ritual transitive exchange occurs also between the depicted water of the painting and the physical water of the font. The “refreshment” or “restoration” of the “soul,” which Psalm 23 portrays as the result of the shepherd’s care, offered a biblical backdrop for the ritualized encounter with the art.

The procession of women along the baptistery’s eastern and northern walls offers a third way in which art and ritual interact to produce meaning for the Christian initiates of Dura. Processional art is also known from the other excavated sites there: the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, the synagogue’s “Purim panel,” and the side walls of the Mithraeum, which show a hunt that converges on the central tauroctony, Mithras’s slaying of the bull. Here in the baptistery, the procession begins on the eastern wall, where all that remain are five pairs of feet. On the northern wall is a partially preserved painting of a door, followed by a broken part of the wall (which probably showed two more female figures), until the procession resumes with portions of three female figures approaching a large structure (Figure 17.5). The women are dressed in white, veiled, and each carries two items: a torch in the right hand and a vessel in the left. The scene has often been interpreted as a representation of the women going to the empty tomb of Jesus to anoint his corpse. According to this interpretation, the vessel in the left hand carries the anointing unguents, and the structure they approach is a sarcophagus. Other scholars argue for an entirely different identification: the scene may better represent marriage rituals, such as we find in textual or artistic depictions of ancient weddings and Jesus’s own parable of the wise and foolish virgins (also called the parable of the ten virgins; Matt 25:1–13). These female figures may be the virgin bridesmaids, in torch-lit procession, approaching a bridal chamber of a wedding night.
This second interpretation accords better with eastern textual traditions about rites of initiation. Sources such as the *Acts of Thomas*, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nazianzus each emphasize the motif of marriage in Christian initiation. The opening of Cyril’s catecheses for those about to be “illuminated,” for example, describes how candidates “have carried the torches of a wedding procession” and the “door” has been “left open” for them to enter the “wedding feast” of their baptism. This is likely how initiates entered Dura’s baptistery too, each carrying a light for the night of “illumination.” If they entered the room from the courtyard, as most scholars presume, the very first image they would have seen, directly ahead of them on the northern wall, bears noting: through the real open door, what they saw was another open door—the one painted on the wall, the door that separates exclusion from inclusion and death from life in the imagined world of the artistic program. From the first instant, art and ritual are fused across the threshold: the processional artistic program draws them forward into ritual action and demarcates the boundary of initiation. Whether the painted door is open or closed thus does not determine the image’s correspondence to a text (or not), but rather its primary function is to influence the ritual experience of the viewer.

This mode of interpreting the art emphasizes the ritual experience and the processional visuaity constructed for the participant: the female figures on the wall are “self-reflective embodiments of the initiates.” Rites of initiation frequently attempt to deemphasize individuality and draw participants into an undifferentiated communal experience, as a member of a flock or a procession. This type of visuaity might even have temporarily muted one’s own sense of gender identity, enabling a man to imagine himself as a virgin bride, just as the opposite wall enabled a woman to imagine herself as David, an unexpectedly mighty warrior. And while the effect of contemporary ritual theory on such interpretations is evident, we may note that just a few years after the discovery of the baptistery, ritual-centered interpretations of its art had already been offered. The Byzantinist Henri Grégoire argued that the processing women at Dura-Europos were not primarily painted as illustrations of a text: “Above all, the procession symbolizes the

Figure 17.5  Fresco, procession of women, Dura-Europos baptistery. Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection.
illumination of baptism.” The writing from ancient texts will aid our understanding, but so too will attempts to read the “riting” on the walls.

In addition to these ideas of ritual participation in artistic programs, through which the viewer completes a kind of transitive exchange between art and ritual, there are also occasional examples from early Christianity when an artistic program is left incomplete—to be completed by a ritual action or ritual celebration of an imagined action. The example of the four-loaved basket at Tabgha was described at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to this, one of the much less heralded (and, unfortunately, poorly preserved) examples of processing virgins from the Roman catacombs implies the same mode of interaction.

In the late 1800s, Joseph Wilpert had identified two catacomb paintings as representations of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The first of these paintings (not pictured) shows a complete rendering of the narrative’s characters: five women with lit torches held upright and five others with torches, apparently extinguished, held downwards. Coming from different sides of the painting, the two groups approach Christ, who stands in front of an archway at the center and greets the wise group. This painting conveys the parable’s common allegorical interpretation, in which the foolish virgins lack the oil and thus the light (perseverance, good works, etc.) required for entry to the wedding (heaven). Christ was figured himself as both bridegroom and doorway (just as he is both good shepherd and sheep gate in John 10:1–18). Here the art performs and invites a visual exegesis of the biblical narrative, but it does not necessarily invite further participation by the viewer.

Wilpert’s second example, which he photographed in Coemeterium Maius along the Via Nomentana (Figure 17.6, from the room now called Maius 19), shows a different and seemingly incomplete rendition of the parable in a lunette of an arcosolium. On the right side one sees five virgins processing with torches, in the middle an orant figure, and on the left a group of just four figures seated at a table. (Wilpert did not make a watercolor of this lunette, and so we rely on his autoptic observation and the single photograph, since the painting is no longer available for viewing.) The question is, why depict only four figures at the banquet? Wilpert

![Figure 17.6](image-url)
Michael Peppard

emphasizes that this peculiarity was not caused by a lack of space but was quite intentional. He argues that the deceased person buried in that very arcosolium should be regarded “as one of the wise virgins; she was to have completed the number, and thus [Christ] had designated a seat at the meal for her.” The incomplete picture is thus completed by the transposition of the corpse; the faith in this particular body’s resurrection was inscribed into the very painting by a conspicuous absence at the table. Instead of Christ pictured at the center, this artist shows the deceased in between the five and the four as an orant, probably to symbolize her liminal status between death and resurrection. Her place is being held, and she prays that she might be worthy of entry to take her seat.

At the same time, when her friends and relatives gathered at her tomb to commemorate her death—to celebrate a refrigerium and by that graveside meal invoke the hope for her eternal life—the nexus of meaning for this painting was triangulated from Bible–art to Bible–art–ritual. Some extant tabletops from Late Antiquity which may have been designed for graveside meals, were themselves adorned with figural imagery. One well-preserved example with circular lobes around the perimeter, presumably for cups of commemorative wine, shows four sheep converging in procession on a central Christogram (Figure 17.7). According to abundant early sources, a deceased Christian is compared with a sheep marked with the “seal” of membership in the flock of the good shepherd. A separate table base shows part of the Jonah cycle—very popular in early Christian art—to encourage the hope of resurrection from the belly of death for the deceased soul being celebrated at the meal (Figure 17.3). Returning now to the catacomb example, we can better imagine how, through the rituals of prayer and the refrigerium, the visitors to these graves joined with the body before them in order to move the orant on the wall one step closer to her banquet. The incomplete picture of the incomplete narrative was intended as such because the rituals performed in this space helped to complete it.

Figure 17.7 Marble tabletop. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1947 (47.100.50).
Art and ritual objects

Ritualized actions were undertaken by Christians daily (prayer), weekly (eucharist), or seasonally (processions, holy days), and many of these were accompanied by symbolic or figural art. In the home, Christians adorned oil lamps with biblical scenes or images of saints and connected the light of the flame with the light of salvation. They chose particularly religious scenes for use on their personal signet rings. Some used biblical amulets, such as a hematite intaglio with Christ healing the woman with the flow of blood (Figure 17.8), in order to ward off disease or unwelcome bodily fluctuations. Eucharistic liturgies featured items such as processional crosses, statuettes of doves suspended over the altar, and narrative or figural scenes on patens, ladles, chalices, strainers, candleholders, fans, and book covers, to name only the most common examples. Consecrated eucharist could be carried from a church to the homes of the sick or elderly in a pyxis, usually a cylindrical container with scenes carved around it that may call to mind the eucharist. A clear instance of such art-ritual congruence appears on a pyxis that shows the multiplication of the loaves and fishes—a story of the distribution of salvific food retold on the very vessel that carried such nourishment to the infirm (Figure 17.9).

The ritual of pilgrimage was rarer and thus worthy of unique memorialization. Pilgrims to the Holy Land or other sacred sites marked their experiences with ritual objects, many of which have been well preserved. Through decades of leadership, Byzantinist Gary Vikan has curated interpretation of the genre of early Christian pilgrimage art from the fourth to the seventh century, from the refounding of Jerusalem by Constantine to its conquest by Muslims. Following on the heels of Constantine’s mother Helena’s alleged discovery of the “true cross,” a sense of Christian holiness

Figure 17.8 Amulet carved in intaglio (incised). Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.491).
radiated outward from Golgotha and permeated Judea and Galilee. Soon ascetics from all over were emigrating to set up hermitages and monasteries in this holiest of lands. Growing flocks of pilgrims were not far behind. The most famous of these are known through their travel diaries passed down through history: the “Bordeaux pilgrim,” the “Piacenza pilgrim,” “Peter the Deacon,” and the preeminent example, “Egeria,” who offers detailed accounts of Holy Week in Jerusalem. Most do not give reason for their journeys, but they were likely drawn by the allure of religious blessing from both holy places and holy people. “For the early Byzantine pilgrim, the word *eulogia* (Latin, *benedictio*) held special meaning, referring to the blessing received by contact with a holy person, holy place, or holy object, sometimes realized through the reenactment of the event that had initially sanctified the *locus sanctus* [holy site].”

On their way to the culminating experience of reverence for the cross in Jerusalem, pilgrims visited a number of holy sites, and their mementos from this journey feature a *locus sanctus* cycle ranging from four to twelve scenes. The events commemorated by the locations were inscribed on metal flasks, terra cotta tokens, armbands, censers, reliquaries, and more.

Pilgrims used all their senses and “sometimes sought blessing through mimesis—action imitative of the sacred heroes and events along his or her route.” A typical example would be the tradition of throwing stones at the tomb of Goliath. But in addition to throwing something at the tomb of an archetypal enemy, they could also gather something from the tomb of their Lord, once they finally arrived there. As the Piacenza pilgrim notes, dirt was brought into Jesus’s tomb from outside, so that “those who enter it bear away a blessing with them when they depart.”

Pilgrims brought back iconography of and reverence for the cross and empty tomb, which were featured prominently in the ritual encounter orchestrated by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Several pilgrimage *ampullae* feature these scenes with an upper register that commemorates the cross and a lower register that portrays the empty tomb (Figure 17.10). The scene at the tomb perfectly demonstrates how, as is often the case in early Christian art, the image’s correspondence to a biblical text was not as meaningful as its reminiscence of a ritual—in this case, the pilgrimage to the contemporaneous holy site of the Anastasis in Jerusalem. When the two registers are viewed together, the overall visual effect suggests that the women at the tomb are venerating not only the empty tomb, but also the cross that dominates the scene. Considering how uncommon crucifixion imagery was before the fourth century, it seems probable that the popularity of the cross itself was the greatest artistic legacy of the increase in religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

*Figure 17.9* Ivory pyxis with the miracle of Christ’s multiplication of the loaves. Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.34a, b).
Early Christian art and ritual

The Sancta Sanctorum Blessings Box (Figure 10.7), a rare example of a pilgrim’s collection combined with early Christian painting from the Holy Land, captures well the interface of art and ritual on the pilgrim’s path—and serves as a fitting conclusion to this essay. The box is packed with rocks, earth, and wood from various sites, and some of the mementos’ labels are still legible. A piece here from the Mount of Olives, a piece there from the tomb of Jesus. The underside of the lid has five painted scenes from the locus sanctus cycle: nativity, baptism, crucifixion, women at the tomb, and ascension. As with the ampulla, the depiction of the empty tomb

shows an architectural ensemble modeled on the tomb aedicula itself and the Anastasis rotunda as they existed at the time of the painting. . . . In the eyes of the pilgrim, the tomb aedicula was not a building but a large contact relic, on a par with the True Cross, both sanctified and empowered by having been touched by the body of Christ. In emphasizing the real, historical structure of the tomb at the expense of the biblical narrative, the painter of the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary lid was sharpening the focus of this documentation to show less the ultimate, biblical origin of sanctification and more the proximate, relic origin.³²

Concerning the art’s correspondence to the story of the empty tomb, the required “text” is not only the Bible, but also the pilgrim’s ritual encounter. Just as in the case of the Tabgha mosaic or the Dura-Europos baptistery, this artifact demonstrates the benefits of artistic interpretations open to not only the relevance of ritual, but even its centrality.
Notes

7 Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 25.
8 Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 25.
9 Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, xvii.
10 Elsner, *Roman Eyes*, 45.
22 *Proc. V. 1, 3–4.
23 Wharton, *Refiguring the Post Classical City*, 60.
26 Wilpert, *Die gotzgeweihnten Jungfrunen*, 69, trans. mine.

Further reading


