PICTURING THE PASSION

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The word “Passion” (from the Greek pascho and its Latin derivative, the noun passio, related to the verb meaning “to suffer”) refers to the redemptive sufferings of Jesus and to the narrative of events leading up to and including his death, particularly as recorded in the four canonical gospels. These Greek texts, which had probably all appeared by the turn of the second century, laid out the “sufferings” of Jesus vividly and explicitly as a continuum, beginning with his agony and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and going through to his entombment (Mark 14.26–15.47, Matt 26.30–27.66, Luke 22.39–23.56, John 18.1–19.42). In the history of art, the term “Passion” has come to function as a label for images that illustrate some or all of these events.

The story of the Passion seems perfectly suited to illustration in view of the narrative structure of the gospel accounts, along with the broader theological significance attributed to the death of Jesus in the early church; and certainly this is the case from the eighth century on, when illustrated passion narratives came to form the bedrock of Christian visual culture. However, seeking the roots of this prominent pictorial tradition in early Christianity, it seems that the literary narratives did not furnish a blueprint for the visual narrative in the way that might be expected. Among early Christians, the priority was not to represent the historical events as described in the texts, but to interpret them, to express understandings of the death and resurrection of Jesus as they were evolving in the generations after the crucifixion. The following study considers the various attempts at pictorial expression of the Passion across the third to the fifth centuries, a highly innovative period of iconographic development fundamentally concerned with the representation of God’s power through Jesus’s victory on the cross.

Second and third centuries

The crucifixion (Matt 27.32–56, Mark 15.1–47, Luke 23.26–43, John 19.17–37) was central to early Christian discourse from the outset. Writers and preachers did not shrink from discussing the violence of the event; nonetheless its significance was fixed in its salvific import as a revelation of Jesus’s power, which was also God’s power. Just decades after Jesus died, the apostle Paul looked beyond the historical context of the crucifixion to interpret it as the final step in a divine plan for salvation (1 Cor 2.6–8); referring collectively to Jesus’s “sufferings,” he called attention to their redemptive significance (2 Cor 1.5). Highlighting the ramifications of the death for the broader future of the Church, the author of Acts noted that after his suffering Jesus appeared alive to the
disciples, speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3). The accounts of the disciples who saw, spoke with and touched the risen Jesus prior to his ascension were events that confirmed the resurrection; and for early Christians, they enabled the story of “suffering” to be interpreted as one of glory, framed by the entry into Jerusalem (Matt 21.1–11, Mark 11.1–11, Luke 19.28–39) and the ascension (Mark 16.19, Luke 24.50–51, Acts 1.1–11). This extended narrative enabled a path to glory to be set out more explicitly, a path that subsequent writers across the first, second and third centuries (including Ignatius of Antioch, Melito of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, and Origen of Alexandria) were eager to articulate as they developed a theology of the cross in Christian apologetics and literature. The saving power of the crucified Jesus thus became the central, though paradoxical, reality of Christianity. Expressions of curiosity about it are manifest visually at an early date in different parts of the Mediterranean in various ways, by ordinary believers, by elite Christians, as well as by those who were not followers of Jesus.

The earliest pictorial references to the power of the crucified Jesus appear in the visual culture of late Roman antiquity c. 200 CE, almost two centuries after the crucifixion in 36 CE. Images of crucifixion are entirely absent from the public art of imperial Rome, and while depictions of Jesus on his cross are extremely rare before the fifth century, a handful of surviving images collectively attest that a set of iconographic conventions for the depiction of the crucified figure of Jesus had been formulated by the early third century and was circulated widely across the Mediterranean basin. The figure was shown upright, tied to a T-shaped cross, the head represented in profile. Appearing in various media in the third and fourth centuries, these key iconographic details were widely accessible within late Roman visual culture, being known to ordinary Romans and producers of Christian imagery alike.

In the eastern Mediterranean, sometime in the late second or early third century, the maker of an amulet used the model for an explicit depiction of Jesus crucified naked, which is preserved at the center of a large bloodstone (Figure 18.1). The iconography is modestly but confidently carved: a bearded Jesus is tied to the cross beam of the T cross, his legs hanging apart. Inscribed around this design is a long invocation that begins: “Son, Father, Jesus Christ.” Close analysis of the invocational language has suggested that the inscription and the image functioned closely together for the wearer of the gemstone as means of seeking redemption: in word, and in detailed iconography, the object explicitly exults in the death of Jesus as the Son of God, the image of the crucifixion already an integral part of the celebration of the soteriological power of the cross for Christians.

Around the same time, the model was adopted in Rome for a satirical drawing, scratched onto a wall within the slave quarters of the Imperial palace on the Palatine Hill (Figure 18.2). In this case the Christian God is represented as a donkey-headed man, crucified and hailed by an onlooker; a Greek caption reads “Alexamenos worships his God.” The drawing may refer to the accusation that Christians worshipped a donkey-headed deity. It may also participate in contemporary humor wherein animal features were applied to a person in order to make fun of them. Graffiti practice was highly social and popular among all ages and classes as a means of direct communication in the Roman world. For this satirical image to succeed, for the joke to work, the concept of the crucified Jesus as a figure of power for Christians needed to be both widely understood and the picture recognizable to the viewer. While the drawing is rudimentary, the composition is complex and unlikely to have been imagined on the spur of the moment by this graffitist. The iconographic similarities with the amulet point to the likelihood that a basic formula for picturing a crucifixion existed and was used by different individuals for different purposes.

Another drawing of a crucified figure, this time scratched in plaster on a wall of a Roman taberna in Pozzuoli (ancient Puteoli) perhaps only decades before, confirms this in deploying the same constituent elements: a T cross, the body rigidly upright and frontal, head in profile, arms stretched out beneath the cross-beam, and ties rather than nails attaching the body. That the iconography was
Figure 18.1  Bloodstone amulet engraved with the Crucifixion, Christian invocation, and magical words. London, The British Museum. Photo: Jeffrey Spier.

Figure 18.2  Roman graffito parodying the Crucifixion, late second–early third century. Scratched in plaster on an internal wall of the Paedagogium, a building that formed part of the Imperial Palace complex on the Palatine Hill, Rome, and possibly used as a training school for slaves and freedmen in the Imperial household. Rome, Museo Palatino. Photo: © The British School at Rome Photographic Archive, John Henry Parker Collection, jhp-0107.
reasonably well known, came to be understood as a way of depicting Jesus, and persisted in later art, is attested on a fourth-century Christian gemstone probably manufactured in a Syrian workshop for wearing in a finger ring (Figure 18.3). In that context, an invocation of Jesus’s name again accompanies the image—though Jesus is now flanked by the twelve apostles in a composition designed to emphasise his authority. The Palatine graffito has been used to support the argument that because Christian worship of a crucified messiah was open to misinterpretation or ridicule (as Paul attests, 1 Cor 1.23) Christians avoided depicting Jesus’s cross or Passion. Yet Paul further noted that to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ crucified is also “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” This is clearly understood by the amulet maker (perhaps a Christian) who deploys the image to invoke the soteriological power of the cross, by the slave who publicly parodies that image, and by fourth-century Christians who were wearing the image in public on finger rings.

The power of Jesus on the cross was expressed symbolically and celebrated in other ways by Christians. In several early Gospel manuscripts, scribes make visual reference to the crucifixion by inserting the *staurogram* (a literary monogram comprising the Greek letters tau-rho) into the middle of the noun “cross” and the verb “crucify” (Figure 18.4). Often such ligatures functioned simply as abbreviations. In these papyrological contexts however, it also functions as a sacred image either of the cross or the crucified Jesus himself, having the appearance of a miniature crucifix. The deliberate and prominent placement constitutes another striking pictorial acknowledgement of the crucified Jesus, and highlights the salvific importance of the death. Paleographic and codicological analyses agree that these papyri are probably similar in date; whether produced c. 200 or as late as c. 325, they constitute vital evidence for experimentation by elite, literate Christians with visual mechanisms by which to express the significance of the crucified Jesus.

In light of this material, it is curious that in other aspects of Christian visual culture as it was emerging c. 200, there is no surviving evidence to suggest an interest in representing the crucifixion and other episodes from the Passion narrative. Yet at this period, with attention fixed on paradigmatic representations of Jesus, as teacher or healer for instance, there was little interest in portraying Jesus in historical settings. In the loose cycles of text-based images that were emerging at this time, episodes from Hebrew scripture were used to express the broad

![Figure 18.3](https://www.example.com/figure18.3.jpg)  
concept of salvation begun in the Old Testament and completed in the New. Stories about deliverance from death were recalled joyfully, and these provided a framework for understanding and celebrating divine power that offered no place for stories about suffering, death or mourning. Instead, the resuscitated bodies of Jonah (disgorged from the mouth of the ketos after three days in its belly, Jonah 1.17–2.10) and Lazarus (raised after four days in the grave, still in his burial wrappings, John 11.17) were popular across all media—examples of death being “swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15.54). The resuscitated body of Jesus was not. It had not been described in the Gospels; and art, like those texts, instead focused on testimony to Jesus’s resurrection—the empty tomb indicating his resuscitation and his appearances to the women and the disciples confirming it. An early version of what became a strong pictorial interest in the tomb may be the painting datable to c. 240 ce on the walls of the baptistery-room in the Christian Building at Dura-Europos depicting women holding lamps and bowls and approaching a tomb-like structure. Although the identification is not certain, it has long been considered as an early depiction of the women coming to the tomb (Mark 16.1–2, the other narratives being Matt 28.1, Luke 24.1, John 20.1), serving to articulate the promise of resurrection given in baptism and underscoring the idea of that sacrament as a rebirth. The iconography has parity with later representations of that subject on sixth-century ivory pyxides where liturgy is likely to have influenced the composition, and later Syrian manuscript illumination.

It is apparent that as part of this broad focus on divine victory over death, events related to the Passion were inserted into soteriologically focused pictorial cycles in funerary contexts as early as the first half of the third century. A fresco in the “Crypt of the Passion” (Catacomb of Praetextatus, Rome) depicting a man wearing a wreath and being hailed by two bystanders, one
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of whom extends a foliate branch, may be an early depiction of Jesus’s crowning with thorns (Matt 27.27–30, Mark 15.16–19, John 19.2–3). Iconographically it seems to anticipate later versions of that scene, with the crown of thorns, rather than being a cruel act of humiliation, depicted as a Roman victory wreath to express the idea that Jesus will transform suffering into triumph. Nonetheless, a firm identification remains difficult.

Fourth century

A growing interest in the varied interpretations of the death and resurrection of Jesus is apparent in private and public art following the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine and the subsequent legitimization of the religion in the fourth century. The expansion of the church had a direct impact on the development both of literature (homiletic and commentary) and art in educating new converts in the content of scripture. Letters and poetic works document vigorous discussion among church leaders and aristocratic patrons about the merits of art in the service of faith. Just as exegetical writings between the fourth and fifth centuries probed correspondences between the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament literature, some believed that art could pictorially explicate the meaning of stories to new converts. As a result of this vibrant exegetical activity and growing interest in the pictorial arts a wider range of biblical subjects was illustrated, including events from the Passion narrative. Yet even as the setting for the image of Jesus more closely followed biblical text, these new subjects, and the pictorial cycles in which they appeared, remained faithful to the focus on deliverance and the triumph over death established in the previous century, and disinterested in suffering and death. For the illustration of the Passion, there were three general trends: increasing allusions were made to the Passion-theme within loose text-based cycles; an increasing number of events from the narrative were now illustrated; and Passion cycles emerged.

Typology: alluding to the Passion

Early in the fourth century a sophisticated system of referring to the theme of the Passion had emerged. Within cycles of text-based images, stories from the Hebrew Bible were interspersed among stories from the New Testament in order to allude to, but not illustrate, individual events from the Passion narrative. The Sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22) is one example, discussed by the Church Fathers as a parallel to the Passion of Jesus and symbolizing Christian triumph over death. Such visual allusions could express three principal theological interpretations of the crucifixion and death of Jesus in the early Church: the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecy of suffering and the culmination of Old Testament sacrifices; a victory over death and evil and so a passage to Jesus’s Sovereignty; and events into which the faithful were baptised, and in which they could thus participate (according to Pauline teaching, as in Rom 6.3–4; 2 Tim 2.10–12). The last understanding was aided by the complicated memories of persecution and martyrdom, and particularly the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, which appear in the catacomb paintings and on sarcophagi in the fourth century. One monument could articulate several of these beliefs simultaneously. Within the complex typological arrangement of Old and New Testament scenes on the sarcophagus carved in Rome for the urban prefect of 359, Junius Bassus (Figure 18.5), the figure of Jesus as law-giver at the center expresses his universal and eternal authority while biblical stories of suffering, dispersed across the sarcophagus, foreshadow the Passion (the sacrifice of Isaac; Daniel in the lion’s den); original sin articulates the need for that suffering (Adam and Eve); and additional Passion scenes underscore Jesus’s Passion victory and ongoing authority (the individual arrests of Peter and Paul; Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem; Pilate’s judgment).
In striving to express these understandings, some episodes from the Passion directly allude to the death and resurrection of Jesus but reflect interests that extend beyond the narrative from which they are taken. The episode of Jesus washing Peter’s feet (John 13.1–5), which appeared on sarcophagi after 350, carried several layers of significance, illustrating Jesus’s command to serve others and also his specific relationship with Peter, who became head of the church. When paired with the episode of Pilate washing his hands, unique to Matthew’s narrative (Matt 27.24), it made a typological reference to baptism and the cleansing of sin.

Individual Passion episodes

By c. 350, explicit episodes from the Passion narrative began to appear within loose cycles of images and were illustrated more regularly across the century. The prophecy of Peter’s denial (Matt 26.33–5, Mark 14.29–31, Luke 22.31–34, John 13.37–38) may have emerged c. 315, and Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem was known by c. 330. The former story originally belonged to a sequence of Petrine scenes; nonetheless, as an individual moment in which Peter vows to lay down his life, it could allude to Christ’s own death and be understood as an event in which all Christians, like the apostles, could participate. The latter scene, as the prelude to the Passion, was enormously popular in fourth-century Roman funerary art. In some contexts, surrounded by miracle scenes and Hebrew Bible stories foretelling mankind’s salvation by Christ, it could be emblematic of Jesus’s entry into the heavenly Jerusalem, thereby symbolizing his defeat of death and the redemption from sin won for all the faithful.

The richest source of evidence for the development of Passion iconography in the fourth century is the group of sarcophagi produced around 340–370 in workshops in North Italy and Gaul, which focused specifically on events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection.
The growing interest in depicting such scenes in funerary art must also have existed in other media, although there are few surviving examples. In the late fourth and early fifth centuries for example, from Milan to Constantinople, ivory had become an important medium in the luxury arts, preserving, for instance, highly sophisticated depictions of post-resurrection episodes and complex narrative cycles.

One of the earliest and finest examples of the “Passion” sarcophagi, the so-called sarcophagus of Domitilla, illustrates four episodes from the narrative (Figure 18.6): Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross of Jesus (Matt 27.32, Mark 15.21, Luke 23.26); the crowning with thorns; and two episodes from the trial—Jesus led towards Pilate and Pilate preparing to wash his hands. In the gospels, these events present extreme moments in Jesus’s humiliation and challenge his authority and, for these reasons, the trial, presented as a kind of mini-narrative, was chosen. However, the specter of suffering, prominent in the text, is altered. The crowning episode, noted above, is transformed from a moment of shame to one of glory. The crux invicta, or triumphant cross, which drew on traditional Roman symbols of victory, now celebrates the eternal authority of Jesus. Evoking the structure of the Roman victory standard, the cross is shown as trophy, crowned by an eagle with a jeweled laurel wreath (traditional Roman symbols of victory and immortality). The wreath frames the monogram of Jesus, the chi-rho (the first letters of the name Christ in Greek) and the sun and moon sit above the eagle’s wings denoting the cosmic significance of this victory. These symbols become fixtures in Byzantine art of the sixth century, including manuscript illumination as well as mass-produced items for private devotion, and throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods when they are traditionally interpreted as giving pictorial expression to narrative: the darkness that descended during the crucifixion (Mark 15.33, Matt 27.45, Luke 23.44–45). In a further allusion to the story of the resurrection, the figures of two Roman soldiers guarding the tomb sit on either side of the cross (Matt 27.64, 28.4, 28.23).

This composite symbol, at once representing Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, remained popular as the central motif on Passion sarcophagi into the 390s. Other visual strategies were
attempted, however. Two engraved gems dating from the late fourth century (one from Constanza, Figure 18.3, the other now lost) indicate that experimentation with the theme took place in which the victorious, resurrected body of Jesus was placed onto the cross itself: in this image, Jesus had entered the heavenly Jerusalem as the crucified and resurrected savior, symbolically acclaimed by the smaller figures of the twelve apostles who assemble either side of him.\(^\text{26}\)

We have seen a different method of expressing this victory on the Junius Basus sarcophagus, where the exalted Christ is flanked by just two apostles as the new ruler of the cosmos—usurping Caelus, the god of the sky, depicted beneath the throne and literally trodden underfoot (Figure 18.5). This celestial scene of glory has no basis in scripture, but was devised to emphasize the primacy of Peter and Paul as princes of the apostles and martyrs, having further, eschatological, meaning signifying Christ of the second coming. Similarly, the composition on the gems has no basis in scripture and is suggestive of the eschatological meaning of the cross. For the depiction of Jesus, it draws on the earlier model for crucified figures (T cross, wrist ties, head in profile), but foreshadows literal unions of the body and the cross in the fifth century where, in a narrative context, Christ’s authority, and the connection between the crucifixion and resurrection, was maintained in new ways.

**Passion cycles**

The third broad implication of the increased attention on biblical imagery was that around 340 CE, along with a growing repertoire of Passion scenes and the establishment of conventional compositions for their depiction (for example, for the betrayal or kiss of Judas, denial, women at the tomb, incredulity of Thomas, and ascension), the Passion began to be depicted as a sequence of events following the gospel narratives. This interest emerged gradually. The treatment of the trial scenes on the Domitilla sarcophagus of c. 350 clearly illustrates a concern for sequence (Figure 18.6), but especially important is the Servanne sarcophagus, c. 370–380 CE (Figure 18.7), which preserves (in fragments) the earliest surviving Passion cycle.\(^\text{27}\) Eight episodes were originally illustrated in sequence from left to right, beginning with the agony in the garden (Matt 26.36–46, Mark 14:32–42, Luke 22.39–46), through the betrayal (Matt 26.47–56, Mark 14.43–52, Luke 22.47–53, John 18.1–12), Christ taken to Pilate (Matt 27.2, Mark 15.1, Luke 23.1, John 18.28), Christ before Pilate (Matt 27.11–14, Mark 15.2–5, Luke 23.3–5, John 18.28), the women and soldiers at the tomb (Matt 28.29, Mark 16.1–6, John 20.14–17), Christ appearing to the disciples (Matt 28.16–20, Mark 16.14–16, Luke 24.48–49), suicide of Judas (Matt 27.3–5), and ending with the ascension.

![Figure 18.7](image-url) The Servanne sarcophagus, marble, Rome, c. 370–380. Arles, Musée de l’Arles et de la Provence antiques. Photo: © DAI, Rome.
Significantly, it is the encounter between Jesus and Pilate that forms the central, pivotal moment in the narrative and dictates the overarching theme: victory. As one of the most popular Passion episodes in the later fourth century, often used to represent the entire narrative story, the trial stands here for the death itself, and as such is the turning point in this narrative sequence: Roman judicial authority will be overcome by a greater authority, a fact declared in the post-resurrection scenes and underscored by the remorse of Judas (whose suicide according to Matthew (27.5) effects a powerful statement about Jesus’s own defeat of death) and affirmed in the ascension. In the final order of scenes, the cycle refers to Acts (1:3–12) where, after his suffering, Jesus appeared to the disciples before being taken up to heaven from the Mount of Olives. In that text the future second coming is also implied; hence the cycle opens with the disciples sleeping in one garden and closes with an active farewell in another, anticipating his return. The frieze exhibits a new interest in unfolding the Passion narrative, yet, in presenting it as a victory, there is the same concern for the ongoing significance of those events now and in the eschatological future as was observed on the gems (Figure 18.3).

The sequence of events in the Passion cycle of the Servanne sarcophagus does not follow a single gospel narrative, but presents a synthesis of textual accounts, a tradition that would continue in Christian art to demonstrate the unity of the texts in their structure and detail. Individual episodes can also combine versions of the same story. The tomb composition recalls Matthew (28.9) where three women leave the empty tomb, encounter a man they recognize to be Jesus and subsequently worship him, but Jesus appears to be in motion, at once walking away from the women, while turning back to look at them. In this, and the subtle twist of the body as he gestures back towards them, the artist evokes the intimate exchange between Jesus and Mary Magdalene (Jn 20.17, known as the Noli me tangere episode), a composition that will persist in Medieval and Renaissance art. By the fifth century, an image in which the angel meets the women (Matt 28.1–7, Mark 16.1, Luke 24.1–8) had become standardized. Other Passion scenes also are first attested on this sarcophagus (Judas’s suicide), the earliest preserved depictions of what will become traditional compositions in western Christian art (Judas’s kiss).

The Servanne sarcophagus is part of a more extensive pictorial tradition illustrating the Passion that emerges by the close of the fourth century. Further evidence is furnished by an iconographically sophisticated ivory reliquary casket produced in a Northern Italian workshop (possibly Milan) and now in Brescia (Figure 18.8). This object represents an important innovation: the use of a wide range of biblical subjects, drawn from both the Old and New Testaments, placed in a complex arrangement that serve as typologies proclaiming the unity of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, specifically predicting the Passion and articulating its significance for the faithful. This format is abandoned for the lid however, where the Passion is prominently illustrated, envisaged as a coherent cycle of episodes laid out in sequence across two registers. The artist focuses on the first half of the Servanne cycle and so does not include the crucifixion; those biblical stories of salvation that had appeared alongside Passion scenes on sarcophagi to prefigure Jesus’s death and resurrection and interpret it are now dispersed across the casket. The cycle begins with an entirely new composition of Jesus alone in the garden and includes a fuller arrest scene and an abbreviated version of the highly popular subject of Peter’s denial, which was now preferred to the scene of Jesus’s prophecy and routinely included in Passion cycles after 400 ce. On the second register, the trial is expanded to include the arraignment of Jesus before Annas and Caiaphas (Matt 26.57, Mark 14.53, Luke 22.54), as well as Pilate. Judas’s suicide is displaced onto the back of the casket.
While explicit scenes of the crucifixion did not feature in Passion cycles up to this point, there can be little doubt that church decoration at this time provided the impetus for the further development of Christian imagery and narrative cycles specifically. While few monumental cycles survive, literary sources record that church leaders and aristocratic patrons, from Ambrose in Milan to Nilus in Sinai, promoted and experimented with large-scale pictorial programmes on the walls of churches for evangelisation, education, and spiritual nourishment. As part of this activity there was an increasing desire to draw out specific correspondences between the Jewish and Christian Scriptures (the “Old” and “New” Testaments) with the result that new contexts emerged for pictorial reflection on Passion episodes. An early model for the practice of decorating churches with cycles of images is documented by one of the most influential Latin Christian poets, Prudentius (348–405), in his poem of c. 400 *Tituli historiarum* (“Scenes from History,” also known as *Dittochaeon*, “Double Nourishment”). The poem’s verses describe biblical stories, and they likely functioned as captions for a sequence of images, whether imagined or written as a commission for a cycle that no longer survives. Six verses describe episodes from the Passion. Three of these are familiar from other contemporary monuments: Judas’s suicide, the tomb, and Christ appearing to the disciples. Three are new, and by introducing elements of violence into the pictorial narrative for the first time they document a significant shift of attention onto the process of Christ’s death: the buffeting of Jesus (Matt 26.67, Mark 14.65, Luke 22.64), his scourging (Matt 27.26, Mark 15.15, John 19.1) and crucifixion. The buffeting is not known from surviving pictorial evidence until the sixth century (Figure 18.11), and the scourging is otherwise unknown before the ninth century. The Brescia casket and Servanne sarcophagus demonstrate that the crucifixion was not regularly included in Passion cycles by the end of the fourth century; and conspicuous instances of omission can still be
found in the early sixth century (notably the mosaic cycle illustrating the life of Christ in the nave of the basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna). Nevertheless, the absence would become exceptional; and as extant engraved gems attest, images of Jesus crucified had begun to circulate among Christians by the fourth century. Hence, even if Prudentius’s poem was composed for a cycle of images that was not fulfilled, his inclusion of the crucifixion is important, further attesting that although the evidence is scant, designers and theologians were already considering public contexts for its representation in the fourth and early fifth century.

Beyond a growing interest in the gospel narrative, the influence of liturgy in the formulation of church cycles and the expansion of the pictorial repertoire must also be considered. Liturgies recalled and celebrated events that were historically and theologically important to Christianity. As liturgies enacted within churches might provoke particular interest in the celebration of the death of Jesus as the central feature of the Easter liturgy, so it might be seen to influence the development of literal representations of the last supper (Mark 14.22; Luke 22.19–20, Matt 26.26). A set of captions written by Bishop Ambrose (337–397) to accompany a cycle of biblical frescoes in the large basilica he erected and lavishly decorated in Milan c. 379 includes the supper, indicating that it was known in Milan by the fourth century, although it remained rare before the sixth. The iconography was probably similar to the earliest surviving representation of the subject, preserved on the extraordinarily detailed ivory book-covers made in the same city in the following century and that, in their selection of episodes from the lives of Jesus and Mary, recall contemporary church decoration extant in Ravenna. Following long-standing pictorial conventions for the depiction of formal dining, Jesus occupies the position of honor at the far right corner of a sigma-table, reclining with disciples on a circular couch, an iconographic composition that persists into the sixth century in the West and East. An alternative version that emerged by the sixth century in Italy shows liturgical influence in the interpretation of what was a narrative event: Jesus, seated behind and at the center of the table, now holds the bread while a cup stands prominently before him (Figure 18.11). The ancient gesture of speech or instruction, as given to the arrested Christ on the Domitilla sarcophagus (Figure 18.6), has here become one of blessing, seeming to consecrate the bread and wine as the priest would do at the altar; the story of the last supper is retold pictorially to recall the institution of the eucharist.

Fifth century

The Passion narrative was gradually expanded and depicted in various cycles both in monumental art and in miniature. The most notable fifth-century addition is the crucifixion itself. Where the unvanquished cross was the visual and thematic focus on the sarcophagi, literal representations of Jesus crucified were now set alongside images of post-resurrection episodes that had been developed in the previous century. Jesus continues, however, to be shown victorious, for he is not represented as dead and hanging from the cross, but alive: he looks directly at the viewer, before whom he stands with compelling vigor, just as the figure on the gemstone was (Figure 18.3). Only two examples of these developments survive: the four relief panels known as the Maskell Passion Ivories (c. 420–430, Figure 18.9), and the near-contemporary wooden doors from the church of Santa Sabina in Rome (Figure 18.10). Other evidence may be gleaned from now-lost mosaic cycles, documented in literature.
Figure 18.9  Plaques with Passion cycle (the “Maskell Passion Ivories”), ivory, Northern Italy or Rome (?), c. 420–430. London, The British Museum. Photo: © Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 18.10  Panel with the Crucifixion, from the carved wooden doors of the church of Santa Sabina, Rome, c. 432 (in situ). © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, New York.
The four ivories originally formed the sides of a small box (the lid and base now missing), likely made in a Northern Italian workshop for the purpose of storing or transporting a portion of the consecrated host, or perhaps a relic. They are exquisitely carved in high relief with a sequential cycle of seven episodes from the Passion: Pilate's judgment, the way to Calvary (Jesus now carrying his cross), Peter's denial, Judas's suicide, the crucifixion, women and soldiers at the empty tomb, and the appearance of Christ to the disciples, incorporating the incredulity of Thomas. Although the crucifixion is included, the earliest surviving example in a narrative cycle, the emphasis of the cycle as a whole continues to rest confidently on the resurrection. The muscular body of Jesus stands boldly against the cross, impervious to the nails or spear that pierce his flesh. His heroic strength is emphasized through a remarkable visual and theological contrast with the limp body of Judas hanging dead alongside him, the noose having snapped the betrayer's neck. This affirmation of Jesus's dominion and divine power on the cross is further used to assert the triumph of the church: in the final panel, the risen Jesus appears among his disciples, announcing their mission as teachers in the church. Jesus extends his left arm as though in a gesture of speech; yet he simultaneously reveals to Thomas the wound in his side, which the artist shows being made by the soldier energetically thrusting his lance into the crucified Jesus. Thomas inserts the index finger of his right hand into the wound. This action had previously been depicted (on the sarcophagus of San Celso in Milan, second half of the fourth century), but the composition set forth here establishes the pictorial tradition that would prove most influential in western Medieval and Byzantine art.

On the doors of Santa Sabina, still in situ, an even larger number of Passion episodes are recalled, not in sequence, but integrated within a complex cycle of Old and New Testament scenes: the prophesy of Peter's denial; the trial (Christ before Caiaphas and Pilate washing his hands), with Christ carrying his cross; the crucifixion; the women at the tomb; Christ appearing to two women; Christ appearing to the disciples; and, as on the Servanne sarcophagus, the ascension concludes the cycle. Some scenes offer a full visualization of previously seen episodes, continuing the significant role played by Passion narratives of the fourth century, such as those on sarcophagi and the Brescia casket. The trial occupies two panels: Pilate washes his hands while Christ is led away, and Jesus appears before Caiaphas in a densely populated scene. Despite this fulsome treatment, the trial is rarely found in other media before the sixth century. Other scenes are sparing in their narrative detail. Just three figures evoke the entire crucifixion scene (Figure 18.10): the large naked figure of Jesus stands (and does not hang) between the two crucified thieves, who are shown on a much reduced scale. As in the Maskell crucifixion, nails are visible: but in the pictorial strategies of differentiation in scale and the highly symmetrical arrangement of the composition around Jesus as the axial figure, and his standing posture, the scene directly recalls the design of the Constanza gem. This very symmetry, with Jesus as the central dominant figure in the scene—which also emulates the crux invicta in its strict division of iconographic elements either side of the cross—would emerge as the standard template upon which crucifixion iconography is henceforth developed.

Thus, by the end of the fifth century, the repertoire of Passion episodes was well-developed and the inclusion of the crucifixion more frequent, and it is likely that longer narrative cycles were already known to both Eastern and Western Christians. In Gaza, the sixth-century rhetorician Choricius writes that the church of Saint Sergius was decorated with a cycle of images that began with the annunciation, included numerous Passion episodes that had become standard during the early Christian period (the crucifixion, the women and soldiers at the tomb, the post-resurrection appearance to Mary and the women), and concluded with the ascension.

The manuscript known as the Gospels of St Augustine, written and illuminated in Italy in the late sixth century and taken to Canterbury before the end of the seventh century, attests to the continued iconographic connection to early Christian models and to the practice of conflating...
different gospel narratives versions to establish a single account of Christ’s Passion (Figure 18.11). On the recto of folio 125, twelve small scenes illustrate a cycle that begins with the entry and concludes with Jesus carrying his own cross, a choice that has been taken to indicate the existence of a second page on which the Passion, including the crucifixion and resurrection, was completed. The Passion story was familiar to the viewer, yet the choice and sequential arrangement of events in art reflected not the gospel narratives but the cycle of the Christian year, the liturgical celebration of feasts impacting on the way events were read together. This sort of reading is certainly true for the depiction of Passion episodes in Syria and Palestine in the sixth century, where celebration of the life of Jesus as a continuous liturgical cycle proved influential in the cyclical organization of images as well as in their depiction. The cycle of the annunciation, nativity, baptism, crucifixion, and the women at the tomb is subsequently found repeated across personal objects (such as marriage rings or bracelets), liturgical objects (such as censers), and items produced for the pilgrim trade (small flasks or *ampullae* for collecting oil or water blessed at the holy sites; clay tokens). At the same time, the iconography of individual narrative scenes could be inflected with liturgical symbolism. In depictions of the women at the tomb on sixth-century ivory pyxides produced in the eastern Mediterranean for example, the women swing censers as they approach the “tomb,” represented symbolically as an altar.

Figure 18.11 Passion cycle containing twelve episodes: page from the Gospels of St Augustine (MS 286, fol. 125r), written and illuminated in Italy in the late sixth century. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College. Photo: By permission of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
Conclusion

While evidence for the representation of the Passion is scarce, the various images of Jesus crucified produced before the fourth century and the distribution of that material across the western and eastern Roman Empires permits several observations. By the third century, the interest in Jesus as a crucified yet divine savior, as documented in literary sources, was beginning to find visual expression. The image of Jesus crucified was known across the ancient Mediterranean to be a powerful and efficacious symbol both to people who were and people who were not his followers; images were known to artisans, were familiar to the general populace, and remained influential as Christian art evolved in the fourth and fifth centuries. Parallels in iconography and the compositional arrangement of scenes across media also raise the possibility that models were developed and transmitted among artisans and designers as sketches, perhaps in manuscripts, pattern books, or other methods of direct copying within the workshop.

Finally, although depictions of Passion events were slow to appear, sarcophagi, which furnish the richest source of evidence for their representation in early Christianity, indicate that a repertoire of imagery was known by workshops in Gaul and Rome by the mid-fourth century. The iconographic developments seen in funerary sculpture establish patterns that would be influential in the luxury arts of the fifth and sixth centuries, from manuscript illumination and ivory carving to monumental cycles in mosaic and fresco. As narrative cycles evolved in this process, post-resurrection scenes played a pivotal role in the presentation of a triumphant route to ascension: they effectively place understandings of the crucifixion in the concept of victory, a victory secured by Jesus over death in the resurrection. This anchoring speaks not to an active avoidance or downplaying of Christ’s sufferings, but powerful expression to contemporary theological priorities and early Christian preaching about the cross as a revelation of divine power.

These very priorities may be glimpsed in the use of the staurogram in specific literary contexts where the cross, and the figure of Jesus crucified, is understood as a sacred sign, and one of salvation. In the fifth century this focus on resurrection began to give way as curiosity about the events in Jerusalem arose, leading to the investigation of the historical remains of Passion events (notably the exposure of the rock of Golgotha and the discovery and veneration of the wood of the cross) and increased theological attention on the nature of Jesus’s suffering on the cross. These developments, including the liturgical celebration of the eucharist as the blood and body of the crucified Christ, allowed new avenues for engagement with the death and triumph of Jesus in public ritual, private devotion, and pilgrimage. In the sixth century, this focus was displaced by an intensified concern and emotional engagement with the sufferings of Jesus. This signals a new era in the art of the Passion, where Christ’s dominion is anchored in the historical crucifixion, and only then does pictorial interest come to focus on chronicling a more violent course to crucifixion.

Notes

6 Spier, Picturing the Bible, no. 56, 229.
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19 For example, Deichmann, Repertorium, nos 58, 56.

20 Schiller, Iconography, 42–43.

21 For example, Deichmann, Repertorium, no. 770, 316–317.

22 For example, ibid., nos 40 and 41, 35–37.

23 For example, ibid., no. 946, 394–395.


25 Deichmann, Repertorium, nr. 49; Spier, Picturing the Bible, no. 46, 219–220.

26 Harley-McGowan, “Constanza Carnelian,” with the lost gem illustrated at 215, plate 2.


28 Schiller, Iconography, 64.


32 Schiller, Iconography, 66.

33 Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, Ravenna in Late Antiquity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152–158.

34 Dijkstra, Apostles in Early Christian Art and Poetry, 52.

35 Spier, Picturing the Bible, no. 76, 256–258.


38 Schiller, Iconography, 64.


42 St Clair, “Visit to the Tomb.”

**Further reading**

Jaš Elsner, “Image and Rhetoric in Early Christian Sarcophagi: Reflections on Jesus’ Trial,” in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, eds Elsner and Huskinson (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 359–386. The trial often served to refer to the entire Passion story; this analysis of the pictorial evidence for its depiction sheds light not only on the methods of treating the scene, but more broadly illuminates ways by which Christians used imagery on sarcophagi, and specifically the broader function of the Passion theme in that pictorial context.

Friedrich Gerke, *Die Zeitbestimmung der Passionssarkophage* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1940). Still one of the most helpful examinations of the rich body of evidence that is the Passion sarcophagi.


Alexander Soper, “The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art,” *Art Bulletin* 20.2 (1938): 145–192. Excursus (no. III) furnishes an invaluable list of Western monuments documenting the emergence of the Passion cycle, even though it is no longer completely accurate. This should be read in conjunction with Schiller’s more detailed treatment of the episodes and theme as a whole, and Jensen’s overview.