Miracles—particularly miracles involving healing—elicited sincere devotion and faith in early Christianity. Miracles additionally addressed the maladies of human existence that afflict the general population. An argument for rationality simply could not quell the intense desire to believe in miraculous cures. In Late Antiquity, this desire manifested itself in art and material culture. In the early fifth century, the theologian and bishop Augustine notably adapted his negative stance on miracles due to the arrival of the relics of St Stephen in his bishopric of Hippo. Laity flocked to the relics, some by desire of receiving a healing miracle. After witnessing the frenzy of belief by the laity, Augustine eventually recognized the value in miraculous healings procured by the relics of Stephen. The healing miracles not only educed faith, they provided comfort; and comfort in fifth-century Hippo was likely difficult to come by.

This brief allegory involving Augustine reveals the power and importance the laity placed in miracles in Late Antiquity. Miracles were in fact the currency of the faithful in Late Antiquity, so powerful that it forced an early church author and notable theologian to soften his well-entrenched rational position on the subject. One vehicle for this nascent devotion to miracles was art and material culture. The subject of miracles was omnipresent in early Christian art and imagery. Augustine’s Hippo provides just one example of their relevance and importance, as material culture and miracles converge, illustrating the desire to obtain relief, comfort, and proximity to God.

This chapter will discuss the prevalence of miracles in early Christian art by focusing on the mediums in which they appeared, and the specific categories of miracles that were depicted. Early Christians created their art in a funerary environment that included catacomb wall paintings and relief sculpture on sarcophagi. Art and imagery were also featured in the private sphere that included gold/glass objects, many of which depict miracles. These included healing miracles from the gospels such as the healing of the paralytic, the healing of the blind man, and the woman with the hemorrhage. Other miracles depicted could be classified as nature miracles such as the Cana miracle and the multiplication of loaves. Finally, an often-depicted miracle that defies classification is the raising of the dead. When Christ is depicted in the act of performing miracles, he bears a stylistic implement that appears to be a staff. This chapter will be structured to discuss each of these categories of miracles in due turn.

General observers typically wonder why miracles were so important and popular in early Christian art and why early Christians preferred to depict the miracles of Christ rather
than Christ crucified. This chapter, by examining some of the evidence and explaining the historical context in which these images appeared, will offer an answer: miracles promoted the power of Jesus in a pluralistic religious environment, and provided comfort to a people that desired such support.

The historical context of miracle imagery in early Christian art

Early Christians were very visually oriented, cultivating an artistic language during their development. This point challenges the well-entrenched maxim of prior scholarship that early Christians refrained from creating art. Scholars such as Ernst Kitzinger in the twentieth century maintained that early Christians were hostile towards visual art, holding the position that it is tantamount to idolatry, and thus stunting its growth. However, not only have discoveries from the third century at Dura-Europos revealed that early Christians (and Jews) were very invested in creating their visual culture, but also textual examples survive that support the notion that early Christians were interested in art. Notably, the third-century bishop Clement of Alexandria instructed his flock to avoid certain images and symbols such as swords and rather choose “a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding in the wind, or a musical lyre” to use as decoration. Clement’s edict reveals that the laity were so interested in creating imagery that it had to be vetted.

Thus, both text and material evidence suggests that early Christians were not against creating a visual language, but were perhaps influenced by their religious neighbors and their Roman context. The image of Jesus performing miracles was a primary motif in early Christian art through the fifth century. Viewers may be surprised that early Christians chose not to visualize the death of Jesus on a cross. Images of the crucifixion are stark in early Christianity, and do not appear readily in the visual record until the fifth and sixth centuries (see Felicity Harley-McGowan’s chapter on the subject in this volume). Rather than show Jesus suffering on a cross, early Christians preferred to show a powerful Jesus performing wonders. When Christian supremacy was far from secured, early Christians deemed it important to show their savior god vibrant rather than dying a thief’s death.

This choice also reflects the context of miracle-working imagery in Late Antiquity. The images of a miracle-working Christ did not appear ex nihilo. The images of Christ healing and performing miracles were similar to images of heroes and Olympian gods. The images of a healing Christ emphasize the efficacy of Jesus’s miracles over against those touted by non-Christian cults. Moreover, these images largely occurred in a funerary environment, reminding observers of the future resurrection and life through Christ. Images of Jesus provided a sense of understanding and identity to early Christians. Viewers could witness their chosen healer and miracle worker as greater than any rival, efficacious both in performing earthly healings and providing for the future life.

By the late fourth century, the image of Christ healing and performing miracles had not only persisted but increased. In a post-Constantinian age, when Christians were more or less secure from persecution, the image of Jesus performing healings and miracles was more popular than in the earlier age of Christian persecution. Miracle imagery likely proliferated in post-Constantinian Christianity partially because church leaders did not desire their congregations to be fractured in their observance, and it speaks to a continued rivalry with competing Greco-Roman religions.

Healing miracles

The baptistery in the Christian house church of Dura-Europos and the catacomb of Callistus in Rome both feature some of the earliest wall paintings in the Christian visual lexicon.
The catacomb of Callistus dates from the beginning of the third century CE while the Dura house church dates from the early to mid-third century CE. Both environments feature a similar portrayal of Jesus healing the paralytic, which also serves as one of the earliest images of Jesus. At Dura, Jesus stands at the top of the healing scene, stretching forth his right hand as if directing the action that takes place below, featuring the paralytic lying on his bed and, moments later, standing and holding his woven bed frame on his back (Figure 19.1). Immediately adjacent to the scene of Christ’s baptism in the catacomb of Callistus is an image of the healed paralytic. This scene does not include an image of Jesus. Rather, the solitary figure of the healed paralytic is shown holding his bed frame above his head in a manner that becomes emblematic of Christ’s healing act (Figure 19.2). The position of this scene next to the portrayal of Jesus’s baptism is appropriate at Callistus, and its baptismal significance is also emphasized at the site of Dura where the earliest Christian baptistery was uncovered. Narratively, the healing of the paralytic is not the first miracle of Christ’s ministry in the synoptic gospels. Mark begins with Jesus’s baptism, and immediately follows with several of Christ’s healings and miracles. Matthew, Mark, and Luke include the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law as well as the cleansing of a leper directly after Jesus’s baptism and before the healing of the paralytic. The Gospel of John uses the episode in the healing scene at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:2–9. Christ encounters an invalid near the healing pool and orders him to take up his mat and walk.

Figure 19.1  Fresco of the healing of the paralytic, Dura-Europos baptistery, Syria, ca. 232 CE. Yale-French excavations at Dura-Europos 1932.1202. Yale University Art Gallery.
Why the Christians at Dura and the catacomb of Callistus chose to depict the paralytic rather than the earlier scenes of Jesus’s healing is curious. Particularly at Callistus, following Jesus’s baptism, a scene in which he heals the leper or casts out demons would follow narratively in the order of Jesus’s ministry. However, few catacomb painting depictions of such exorcisms survive in the corpus of early Christian art. Similarly, the cleansing of the leper was not a depiction included in the catacombs. The healing of the paralytic was a popular story due to its dramatic assertion that Jesus was unique with formidable authority to perform such miracles on the Sabbath. Jesus orders the paralytic to “Get up” (ἐγείρω), which the King James Version translates as “Arise.” Such language serves as a metaphor for resurrection. Just as the paralytic rises up, so do the Christian dead. Mark and Luke ended the miracle narrative with the crowd exclaiming, “We have never seen anything like this” (Mark 2:12; Luke 5:26). Such a reading informs the paralytic’s appearance at both Callistus and Dura. The funerary environment of Callistus obviously informs such an interpretation of “rising,” and the baptismal environment of Dura contributes to a similar interpretation as the liturgical action of baptism is partly read through Romans 6: dying and rising with Christ as one is immersed and emerges from the font.

Around fifteen catacomb examples of the healing of the paralytic have been recovered. Along with the representation at the catacomb of Callistus, one more exists at the catacomb under the Vigna Massimo and another in the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus. In the catacombs, the paralytic scene conveys the nature of narrative imagery in early Christian art and correlates to the cognate images in its immediate environment. While the paralytic scene is not the most duplicated of all the scenes depicting Christ as a miracle worker, it does portray a successful healing; the paralytic is walking proof of Christ’s powers. While restoring sight to the blind, healing the woman with the issue of blood, or even raising Lazarus emphasizes the dramatic moment of the miracle itself, the healing of the paralytic more deeply captures the end result of the healing—the restored life of the man who was healed.

The iconography of the paralytic story in Christian relief sculpture is very similar to the scene’s representation in the catacombs. The standard portrayal of the young man as little more than a boy, carrying his mat after the act of healing, continues on sarcophagi in the Museo Pio Cristiano of the Vatican Museums (Figures 19.3–4). These relief sculptures include more surrounding figures (Figure 19.3). The disproportionate size of the figures in the art is significant.
Christ is depicted on a larger scale than the recipients of his healing power; the paralytic is portrayed as much smaller than his healer and miracle worker. Other scenes of miracles often flank images of Christ performing his healing. Occasionally, sculpted columns or barriers frame each scene. With few significant narrative details, the identification of each scene usually relies upon repeated symbols such as the paralytic’s mat. In the example immediately to the left of the paralytic scene, the cock at the feet of the bearded apostle indicates the figure as Peter and symbolizes his betrayal from the gospels (Figure 19.3).

While the boy carrying his bed frame clearly signifies the paralytic account in the synoptic gospels, reliefs on fourteen sarcophagi recall the Johannine account of the pool at Bethesda (Figure 19.4). On a typical Bethesda sarcophagus, such as one featured in the Museo Pio Cristiano, a pool represents the setting of the miracle in John 5. In the central scene separating the upper and lower zones, a carved barrier with wavy striated lines suggests water. Since this central scene involves a ritual at a pool, the typical interpretation is that it alludes to baptism. The association between water and a healing signals the restorative washing that takes place during this event. What makes this sarcophagus distinctive is the illustration in the central panel. In the lower register, the paralytic lies on his bed in the posture of Jonah/Endmyion (the mythic figure lured into eternal sleep by the moon goddess Selene), although the paralytic is not nude. The figure represents one of the disabled people whom John describes lying near the pool. Above the depiction of the paralytic lying in repose, Christ orders him to walk, gestures toward the paralytic with his hand and almost appears to touch the top of his mat.
In these and other examples, the focus is the moment when Christ delivers his instruction and the paralytic takes up his mat and walks, highlighting Christ's authority and power. Jesus holds a scroll in his other hand as in cognate representations, emphasizing his authority, just as the biblical scene affirms his ability to forgive sins on earth. With few exceptions, in Christian relief sculpture the healing of the paralytic reminds its audience of the power associated with Jesus, also indicated by the scroll. And the healing act is signaled ambiguously by Jesus’s gesture of speech or more blatantly through the touch of his hand. By contrast, depictions such as the healing of the blind more clearly underscore the power of touch in the execution of Jesus’s miracles.

In the recovered evidence there are more instances of the healing of the blind man in relief sculpture than in catacomb wall painting, however it seems early Christians were interested in depicting the miracle.\(^\text{15}\) Paintings in the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus portray Christ touching the eyes of his patient, whose arms are raised in the position of prayer (Figure 19.5). Other scenes render Christ touching the patient with his entire hand. The healing of the blind exhibits Christ physically encountering and healing his supplicants. While few examples can be found in the catacombs, this healing image was popular in fourth- and fifth-century examples of Christian relief sculpture and is the most frequently represented healing image in extant Christian relief sculpture.

In the surviving Roman examples, the healing of the blind man appears more often than any other healing story.\(^\text{16}\) The scene portrays Christ physically touching the patient with his hand or fingers. Unlike the healing of the paralytic represented in relief sculpture, which includes several divergent representations, those that portray Christ healing the blind man are fairly consistent. The representation describes the comparatively large figure of Christ touching the eyes or face of the patient, who is depicted on Jesus’s left or right. All of the gospels include the story of Christ healing blind persons. Some accounts describe the events as predicated by the patients’

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**Figure 19.5** Wall painting of Christ healing a blind man, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, late 3rd century. Image from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903).
faith, as Christ affirms that their faith has healed them. Other accounts in the gospels (Mark 10:51; Matt. 9:27–30; 20:29–34; Luke 18:35–43; John 9:1–41) detail Christ’s healing touch as the catalyst of the event. In Christian relief sculpture, the representations of Christ healing the blind man follow the accounts that describe the power of Christ’s touch. That is, instead of emphasizing the gesture of Christ’s hand, implying the healing action that is taking place, the healing power of Christ’s touch is on display in the healing of the blind man.

Representative examples of the scene in relief sculpture from Rome offer insight into its significance. Certain Roman examples include the healing of the blind man along with a representation of the seated paralytic on his bed. The blind man is usually depicted as much smaller than the figure of Christ, and he is shown holding a staff similar to the one the Jesus occasionally wields. Christ places his hand or fingers on the blind man’s face or touches the top of his head. The scene stresses Christ’s touch; his fingers upon the face of the afflicted are shown in detail, and occasionally in other examples the blind man’s sightless eyes are given definition.17

Images that feature the healing touch of Christ have an underlying message. His touch demonstrates his curative power, since his healings were a result of real physical interaction between physician and patient. By contrast, the healing god Asclepius’s remedies were provided through the power of dreams. Temple priests would supply a prescription after the patient had slept in the Asclepieion. An image of Christ healing through touch spread the message of his superiority, since his healing power was depicted as a tangible action taking place between healer and patient. The power of the healer is promoted in these images. In other words, Jesus healed his patients immediately in the physical world, not through the power of dreams.

While miracle images promote the power of Jesus, they also reveal the importance of the faith of the patient. For example, the faith of the woman with the hemorrhage is indicated by Jesus as part of the healing process (“your faith has made you well”), and the viewing audience would be reminded of the text by witnessing the image in a funerary context (Luke 8:48). The woman in the image is depicted as reaching out to touch Jesus’s clothes. She touches Jesus rather than Jesus touching her. This is a possible visual reinforcement of the gospel message where the main actor in the scene is the “patient” rather than the healer. In a funerary context, such images visually realized the connection between faith “making one well” in this world and faith in the resurrection.

While the narrative of the woman with the blood issue asserts that the woman’s faith made her well, the story nevertheless emphasizes healing touch, although the normal direction is reversed. The woman touches Jesus out of her desire to be healed. The episode appears in all three synoptic gospels, while it is absent from the gospel of John.18 The scene of the woman with the issue of blood appears in catacomb art that emphasizes physical contact in a healing context. At the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, the woman kneels below the figure of Christ, clutching the hem of his tunic. The woman touches him, recalling the moment when Christ realizes the healing power “goes out from him.” Christ gestures toward the woman with his hand, possibly in recognition of the event or in blessing.19 Christian relief sculpture depicts the scene of the woman with the issue of blood in a way similar to the catacomb painting of Peter and Marcellinus. Christ touches the woman while she touches him; it is a scene centered upon physical contact. Some examples include only the woman touching Jesus’s robe, while others show Christ withholding his touch while motioning toward her in the gesture of address.

Nature miracles

Along with healing miracles, early Christian art includes multiple instances of the wedding at Cana and the division of loaves, miracles that can be classified as “nature miracles” since they
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deal with the natural world rather than a human patient. Although these instances do not appear in the earliest catacomb art, the nature miracles are more apparent in Christian relief sculpture. Both stories imply sacramental and liturgical application. Both Jerome and Prudentius reveal in early Christian writings the practice of worshipping in the catacombs that possibly could have included meal rituals. Jerome writes of the funerary environment of the catacombs as an aid in guiding his prayer, leading scholars like Margaret Miles to argue that the catacomb paintings were visual mnemonic devices to remind viewers of the liturgical action. Paulinus, Ambrose, and Augustine all recall the habit of the laity of “dining with the dead,” ritual observances that reflect Roman influence that, more often than not, became quite rowdy. Thus, it seems quite unsurprising that Jesus’s transformative miracles of turning water into wine and dividing loaves were depicted in early Christian art that was largely funerary.

The Cana miracle appears only in the gospel of John, inaugurates his miracles, and points towards the cross. The miracle itself, taking place at a wedding banquet, seems to overtly foreshadow the Last Supper and the establishment of the eucharist. Its appearance in art supports such a conclusion. At the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus from the late third century, Christ is portrayed standing above the large jars, gesturing to them with a staff while a banquet scene takes place behind him (Figure 19.6). The scene recalls other banquet scenes at the same catacomb, in which captions indicate that the dinner guests are issuing orders for more wine to the servants Irene and Agape. Similarly, in artistic representations of the division of loaves, Jesus either points a staff towards baskets at his feet, or he holds bread in two outstretched hands indicating the miraculous action occurring. The eucharistic overtones in the Cana miracle and the division of the loaves are apparent. In a funerary environment where people either dined with the dead or celebrated the eucharist, the nature miracles of Christ mirrored the sacramental

Figure 19.6 Wall painting of the Cana miracle, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, late 3rd century. Image from Joseph Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms (Freiburg: Herder, 1903).
action occurring within the sacred space. Recalling John 6 where Jesus feeds the five thousand, he proclaims “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). In a funerary context, the nature miracle images reinforce and point towards a time where there will be no earthly life in the participant, but eternal life. In this environment, image, text and ritual point towards resurrection.

Nature miracles, chiefly the Cana miracle and the division of loaves, are also popular subjects in Christian relief sculpture (Figure 19.7). Typically, on a sarcophagus example, Jesus holds two outstretched hands with baskets at his feet, revealing the subject of the miracle that is depicted. However, on the Sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus that also resides in Rome, Christ’s wonder-working staff is featured in both nature miracles, which flank a central orant figure (Figure 19.7). In the scene of the Cana miracle, Christ points the staff toward several small jars at his feet, indicating the miraculous transformative action that is occurring. In the representation of the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus also points his staff towards diminutive baskets of bread at his feet. Notably, many of the extant sarcophagi were discovered within the catacombs. As in the catacombs, representations of the Cana miracle and the multiplication of the loaves on funerary relief sculpture likely reflect the sacramental action proceeding in the immediate space, be it a catacomb or another environment. The representations of these miracles reflect dining practices, and point towards sacramental action that family members of the dead may have been enacting in the sacred space itself, exhibiting the function of miracle images in early Christian art.

Raising the dead

Four major scenes of raising the dead appear in early Christian art: Jesus raising the widow’s son at Nain, Jesus raising Jairus’s daughter, Jesus appearing as a type of Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones, and Jesus raising Lazarus. Typically, each scene features Jesus gesturing toward a
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body with his miracle-working implement, beckoning the figure to awake and rise. The raising of Lazarus is the most easily identifiable, since it normally features a mummified body within an aediculum (burial house). The other three scenes are slightly more challenging to identify, since they do not bear the iconographic hallmarks of the Lazarus scene. In the other three scenes, Christ uses his staff to touch either the bed of Jairus’s daughter, a burial box containing a rising figure, or a figure lying inert at his feet. The viewer must make some interpretive decisions in order to discern which resurrection narrative is being depicted.

The scene of the raising of Lazarus is distinct in its popularity in Late Antiquity and its mode of depiction. Lazarus is another prominent miracle of Christ that is depicted first at the catacomb of Callistus and then at several other catacomb locations; it is also represented frequently on Christian funerary relief sculpture such as sarcophagi (Figure 19.8). The resurrection scenes are slightly more varied in Christian relief sculpture than in catacomb wall paintings. However, the raising of Lazarus is still a primary motif, along with the healings of the widow’s son at Nain and of Jairus’s daughter. The raising of Lazarus occurs in sixty-five extant examples of Roman sarcophagi, and the image appears over twenty-three times in examples from Gaul and North Africa. Considerably more recovered evidence featuring Lazarus survives than any other miracle depiction of raising the dead.

The catacomb of Priscilla image of Lazarus, like the paralytic scene, includes several typical elements (Figure 19.8). Christ stands to the side of a small aediculum that houses the wrapped figure of Lazarus. In this image Jesus is captured in the act of touching his staff to the burial house. Lazarus is small and diminutive, bearing no distinctive features other than the noticeable burial wrappings. The wrapped figure became the standard for portraying Lazarus. Arguably, the clear emphasis on the wrapped body could reveal a close reading of the Johannine text, where Lazarus’s linen wrappings foreshadow the empty tomb scene with only Jesus’s burial wrappings left behind on the floor (John 20:6). Thus, Lazarus’s wrapped body is a sign that points towards the glory of the resurrection.

On Christian sarcophagi, a larger-than-life Christ touches the aediculum with a wand or staff-like instrument, sometimes with Mary or Martha at his feet in the position remarkably similar to the woman with the blood issue (Figure 19.7). Christ wears a tunic with a pallium, and his staff emphasizes the miraculous action occurring. On the Marcus Claudianus sarcophagus, the scene appears on the far right side, bookending all of the miracles that appear on this front panel. On other Roman versions, the face of Lazarus is more distinctive while the linen wrappings are emphasized. Lazarus’s sister is at Jesus’s feet and flanking Jesus is what appears to be

![Figure 19.8](image-url) Wall painting of the raising of Lazarus, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, early to mid-3rd century. Image from Wilpert.
a nude youth. This iconographic feature is rare, appearing in one other example at the Museo Pio Cristiano.

One question lingers: why was Lazarus featured more prominently than any other miracle of Jesus raising the dead? Arguably, it could reveal a fourth-century emphasis on the gospel of John. For example, all of the miracles involving Jesus on the Marcus Claudianus sarcophagus could be representative of a solitary reading of John, as Cana and Lazarus are unique to John’s gospel (Figure 19.7). However, the canonical gospels portray Jesus’s miracles differently than those of Moses or any Greco-Roman god in that he requires no intermediary (such as the God of Israel). In scripture and in Christian art, Jesus heals by virtue of his personal power. With his voice or his touch, Christ heals and performs miracles directly. In the miracles that include the use of a staff, such as the resurrection images, touch is still involved. This emphasis on the physicality of Jesus’s miracles could intentionally contrast the mode of healing of Asclepius.29

The prominence of the raising of Lazarus exhibited Christ performing a successful resurrection. In his myth, Asclepius performed the same action, but it brought about his death. Zeus killed him for raising the dead as he did not have the authority to restore life to the dead. The scene established the divine authority of Jesus as compared with Asclepius or any other god. In the imagery, Jesus accomplished his miracle through the power of physical touch. Jesus encountered and touched his patient Lazarus, and the art includes a witness with Lazarus’s sister, vouching for his physical presence and the resulting miraculous act. Indeed, Origen argued against Celsus along these lines, claiming that Christ’s miracles were real, since he had eyewitnesses.30

Lazarus’s prominence seems more akin to a devoted interest in the Johannine narrative, and its usefulness in exhibiting the divine ability of Jesus over and against any rival or critic. Images of Jesus raising the dead were intended to remind viewers of the eternal life that was secured for Christians. The raising of the dead scenes also reiterated Jesus’s power in a very clever way, in that they depicted Jesus as evocative of other gods and then as performing greater feats than those gods. The images conveyed the distinct abilities that set Christ above any other rival and his divine authority, proved by his work as a miraculous healer.

Early Christian art served many purposes in Late Antiquity. Images illustrated scenes from Scripture, exhibited theological understandings of Jesus, and served as propaganda. Images of Christ performing miracles like raising the dead fulfilled all of these functions marvelously. Featured in these particular miracles quite prominently is the curious inclusion of the miracle-working implement Jesus wields. It is to this tool that we now turn.

**Wand or staff?**

The curious tool (vīga or rabdos) Jesus wields in the miracle images demands an explanation. In many of these miracle images, Jesus holds either a thin reed-like instrument or a thicker, ruddier tool. Upon initial examination, Jesus holds what appears to be a wand, thus suggesting that Jesus was a magician. Such a conclusion is based upon centuries of visual conditioning, and clichés concerning magicians wielding wands to enact their spell or feat of wonder. Through this lens, audiences may suggest that if a figure is performing a feat of wonder and bears a pointed tool, then it must be a wand. This identification of a “wand” is flawed, and the miracle-working tool should be identified as a “staff” rather than a “wand.”

The staff in Christ’s hand is not an empty symbol, the mark of a magician, or an example of the influence of non-Christian artists and workshops. And the staff of Jesus is more than just a symbol of power; it indicates his miracle-working and restorative ability. The staff shows Jesus as a powerful miracle worker, just as other iconographical features serve as symbols (Adam’s nudity as recalling the ritual nudity at baptism, for example).
The term “staff” is a better identification for the implement, since it intentionally recalls not magic but the tool of another miracle worker that appears in early Christian art: Moses. The stylistic connection with Moses illustrates that early Christians utilized the visual medium to express the portrait of Christ as the superior wonder worker. The staff defines the consistent desire to portray Christ with a familiar stylistic accessory that places Moses in the minds of their viewers, so Jesus will be viewed not only as the fulfillment of prophecy but also as greater than Moses. Moses’s miracles appear in the canon of early Christian art, particularly the separation of the waters of the Red Sea and the striking of the rock; both feature Moses using a staff as Jesus does (Figure 19.7; see also Figure 3.6). One other figure appears bearing a staff in early Christian art: the apostle Peter. Peter wields the staff in multiple scenes on early Christian relief sculpture. On the sarcophagus of Marcus Claudianus as well as certain Vatican examples, Peter is depicted releasing water from the rock (far left side, Figure 19.7). These scenes recall a legend of Peter baptizing his Roman jailers before his martyrdom. The legend is not from the canonical gospels but from the apocryphal Acts of Peter. The story describes Peter striking the “rock” of his cell walls, which released water he used to baptize the Roman converts, Processus and Martinianus. The staff is meant to connect Jesus and Peter to Moses, and with the miracle of striking the rock, Peter is highlighted as a “new Moses” to a Christian audience.

The staff of Jesus has been explained as a relic of non-Christian influence or as evidence that early Christians considered Jesus to be a type of magician. Viewers still may find it irresistible to quickly assume that Christ wielding a wand-like staff is an intentional evocation of Jesus as a magician. The chief reason any portrait of Jesus as a magician fails is that magic was greatly maligned by Christians in Late Antiquity. Magic, like the Asclepius cult, offered a viable alternative for convalescence in a world where there were few options. People used magical incantations in Late Antiquity, much to the consternation of ecclesial leaders. The church fathers attacked the use of magic and any characterization of Jesus as a magician. Origen’s rebuttal against Celsus, pointing out that Jesus did not use magical incantations, could work just as well against Smith. Origen, Augustine, and Chrysostom all advocated for magic’s banishment but found it persistent in Christian communities despite their vociferous attacks.

From the comments of the church fathers, it appears that the hatred of magic and refusal to distinguish among levels of magic comes from the top down, not the ground up. Publicly, Christian leaders denounced magic, but privately, magic was likely practiced by individuals who felt it was their only alternative to meet certain ends. “Magic” and “magician” were terms of slander and ridicule in Late Antiquity, and early Christians would not likely associate their savior with such a negative designation. Moreover, Paul Corby Finney points out that no artistic renderings exist of magicians from Late Antiquity. Images of purported magicians possibly existed; however, there were no known images of a magician in the act of exercising his trade. There was no precedent for such an image in late antique art.

Depictions of the miracles of Jesus that also feature the staff appear in different media besides wall paintings or relief sculpture. Some fourth-century gold-glasses depict Jesus performing miracles. One fourth-century gold-glass bowl base in the Metropolitan Museum of Art includes three instances of Jesus bearing the staff in a miracle-working context (Figure 19.9; see also Figure 8.7). Jesus is depicted healing the paralytic, adjacent to the three youths in the fiery furnace, and on the lower left touches his staff to jars indicating the Cana miracle.

On another smaller example also at the Metropolitan Museum, Jesus is featured bearing the staff, touching it to the side, although the specific miracle is unclear (Figure 19.10). These two examples reiterate the popularity of the theme of Jesus performing miracles. Notably, instead of a funerary communal environment, these two art objects more likely come from the private sphere.
Figure 19.9  Gold-glass bowl base with miracle scenes surrounding central portrait, 350–400 CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org, accession no. 16.174.2, Rogers Fund, 1916.

Figure 19.10  Gold-glass medallion with Jesus holding miracle-working staff, 300–500 CE. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org, accession no. 18.145.8, Rogers Fund 1918.
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The bowl indicates early Christians may have desired such themed art in a domestic setting, while the medallion shows that early Christians may have desired to “wear” the miracles of Jesus deriving some apotropaic value, and projecting the miracle in the public and private sphere. The broad dating of the medallion could indicate that this object was from post-Constantinian Christianity. In an age of Christian acceptance, viewers wanted to visually see and physically “wear” the miracles of Jesus.

Conclusion

Rather than declining after Constantine and the edict of Milan, appearances of the miracles of Jesus continued consistently for a period of time in the fourth and fifth centuries. Post-Constantinian Christian material culture illustrates that early Christian piety largely consisted of sincere devotion to the miracles of Christ. Early Christians surrounded themselves with this emphasis on miracles in their visual language, especially in funerary art. The images themselves provide a platform and an opportunity to examine how early Christians conceived this person called Christ. Combined with a study of textual evidence of the church fathers, the priority of miracles for a Christian audience seems apparent. The rise of pilgrimage and the cult of relics serves as a further testimony of their importance into the Middle Ages.

In their visual representation, the miracles and healings of Christ are portrayed with less frequency after the fifth century, with only the requisite miracles such as the raising of Lazarus remaining the most depicted in circulation. More images involving a crucified Jesus or a Jesus enthroned begin to proliferate. Miracle images played an important role in establishing Christianity as a powerful religion in early Christianity and, when that position appeared secure, their appearances began to wane. The belief in miracles did not, as material relics of the saints became more dominant. However, the image of Jesus the miracle worker was less omnipresent after the fifth century, including representations of Jesus’s staff. When Jesus performs healings and miracles in post fifth-century iconography, he emphatically demonstrates his divine power without paraphernalia. The staff of Christ is left to the era when Christ’s miracles and healings were given more visual emphasis. After the fifth century, the staff of Jesus is not depicted as consistently. Perhaps the explanation for this is that the staff’s depiction is not necessary. To repeatedly assert Jesus or Peter as the “new Moses” in art and imagery was inessential when that connection was already well established. For the nascent church the staff was an unnecessary accouterment, written out of the art and replaced with a cross, a hand, or nothing at all.

When early Christians began making and owning visual art in the third century, they favored scenes of the miracles of Jesus. The miracles touted Jesus visually as a superior miracle worker without rival, they asserted Christian dominance in a pluralistic landscape, they adapted existing Greco-Roman and Jewish visual themes making them “Christian,” and they endowed the paragon of the Christian church in Rome, Peter, with unquestioned authority by exhibiting him as a miracle worker like Moses. Moreover, the miracles of Jesus served as visual “signs” of the Christian belief of the resurrection, particularly as the images appeared in a funerary context. Miracles that recalled the gospel of John such as the nature miracles or the raising of Lazarus certainly evoke a Christ that secures the ultimate miracle of eternal life. Miracles were undoubtedly valuable and powerful tools in early Christian visual culture, and their ubiquity serves as strident testimony that must be considered alongside textual evidence of the early Christian period.
Lee M. Jefferson

Notes

1 See Augustine’s position in his treatises Of True Religion and On the Usefulness of Belief, Augustine, True Religion 25.47 (CSEL 77.33; Burleigh): “nec miracula illa in nostra tempora durare permissa sunt;” Augustine, The Usefulness of Belief 15.33 (CSEL 25.41; Burleigh). In 415, a priest named Lucian discovered the remains of Stephen through revelation in a dream. It usually is cited that Orosius is responsible for returning with the relics of Stephen in 416. This is clouded slightly by City of God 22.8 (CSEL 40.604) where Augustine refers to Bishop Praejectus bringing the relics of Stephen. It is more likely that Augustine was referring to a specific establishment at Aquae Titilianae, rather than the general advent of the relics of Stephen into North Africa. See Augustine’s contrasting position to his earlier treatises in Serm. 323.4 (PL 38, 1440). Augustine’s situation is not out of the ordinary, note the discovery of the relics of Gervase and Protase in Milan.


4 Clement, Paedagogus: Christ the Educator, 3.11 (ANF 2.286).

5 For example, in Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Giuseppe Bovini and Hugo Brandenburg, Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage, Bd 1 Rom und Ostia (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1967), a catalog of Christian sarcophagi in Rome and Ostia, miracles and healings outnumber images of Christ enthroned in majesty or the traditio legis by a considerable margin. The enthroned images of Christ make up a little more than half of the number of occurrences of Christ healing the blind. There are over 40 examples of the traditio legis compared with 71 occurrences of the Healing of the Blind, see Deichmann, Ikonographisches Register, Band I, 122–24. As will be discussed later, the number of scenes of Christ’s miracles in catacomb art and relief sculpture make it the predominant theme in early Christian art of the third and fourth centuries.


8 It is extremely difficult to depict an exorcism, and there was no direct precedent in pagan or Jewish art for such a scene. Consider Bosio’s drawing, where the interpretation remains unclear; cf. Paul Corby Finney’s figures 41.3 and 40.2 in “Do You Think God is a Magician?” in Akten Des Symposiums Frühchristliche Sarkophage, ed. Guntram Koch (Marburg: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, 1999), fig. 40.2 and fig. 41.3.

9 Early church authors such as Augustine found the paralytic story useful in preaching of the curative power of Christ. Augustine demanded that his listeners lower Christ the physician through the roof of their homes by expounding on Scripture, thereby binding up any fractures or maladies caused by greed or pride. Augustine, Serm. 46.13.

10 Joseph Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche Verlagshandlung, 1903), 218–24. Some themes are more prominent than others, as Wilpert noted fifteen instances of the healing of the paralytic and seven instances of the healing of the blind man.


13 David Knipp, “Christus Medicus” in der frühchristlichen Sarkophaguskulptur: Ikonographische Studien der Sepulkalkunst des späten vierten Jahrhunderts (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 154–6. However, he points out that it also reflects a competition with the Asclepius cult, arguing that this scene is a representation of a successful healing similar to the incubation treatment in a temple of Asclepius.

14 This before-and-after portrayal of the scene is distinctive to this particular sarcophagus, dating from 375 CE. Also note the similarity with the Dura fresco.
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15 Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, 218–24. Some themes are more prominent than others. Wilpert noted in the catacomb of Praetextus and the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus fifteen instances of the healing of the paralytic and seven instances of the healing of the blind man compared with sporadic instances of the healing of the woman with the issue of blood.

16 There were seventy-one occurrences as recorded by Ulrike Lange, *Ikonographisches Register für das Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage Bd. 1 (Rom und Ostia)* (Dettelbach: Röll, 1996), 123, and forty-four in examples from Gaul and North Africa; see ibid., Bd. 3, 299.


18 For the woman with the issue of blood, Mark 5:21–34; Matt. 9:18–26; Luke 8:40–48.

19 See Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* 218–24. The woman with the issue of blood appears rarely in the catacomb evidence that has been uncovered. Only one other instance has been discovered in addition to the image at Peter and Marcellinus, and that is at the catacomb of Praetextus. Roman catacomb art includes fifteen examples of the paralytic but only two examples of the woman with the issue of blood.

20 Jesus walking on water constitutes a nature miracle. This appears early at Dura, but is not depicted as consistently as Cana or the Division miracle.


24 In the Roman body of evidence, the Cana miracle appears over forty-four times; in the Gallic and North African evidence, it appears over twenty-one times. See Deichmann, Bovini and Brandenburg, *Reportorium der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage*, Band 1, pt. 3, 122; and see Brigitte Christer-Briesenick, *Reportorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage. Dritter Band: Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien*, ed. Thilo Ulbert (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 2003), 303. For the division of loaves, the miracle appears in the Roman evidence over eight-four times; in the Gallic and North African evidence, over twelve times. Band 1, 122; Band 3, 299.


31 The scene of Moses striking the rock appears in twenty-two examples on Roman sarcophagi; Peter in cognate scenes occurs fifty-six times. See Deichmann, Bovini and Brandenburg, *Reportorium*, Band 1, pt. 3, 124. The Gallic and North African material is similarly conflated; see Christer-Briesenick, *Reportorium*, Band 3, 302. The problem is how to identify true Moses scenes and true Peter scenes. The evidence of the jailers and other symbols on the relief sculpture points towards a larger number of Peter scenes than Moses scenes.

33 Acts of Peter 5 (Linus text). The text certainly depicts Peter as a wonder worker. Processus and Martinianus are so grateful that they help Peter escape from jail. Upon his escape, Peter meets Christ on the road outside Rome and becomes aware of his destiny.


35 A leap that Thomas Mathews takes. See Mathews, Clash of Gods, 54–89.

36 Origen, Cels. 68.


38 There likely is a class element to the message expressed in the art. Patrons who could afford sarcophagi were likely middle- to upper-middle-class citizens, while adherents to magic were among the lower, uneducated classes. See Paul Corby Finney, “Do You Think God is a Magician?” 107. It seems logical that magical use would be associated with the poor. The relative accessibility of spells made magic a viable alternative. Pliny noted the use of herbal remedies by the magi, claiming Pythagoras and Democritus borrowed from their treatments, Natural History 24.99–10; and in Christian Late Antiquity, see Jerome, Life of Hilarion 21, for the use of a love spell. Sarcophagus art is also a genre that allows the patron to express outwardly noble qualities and beliefs, religious and self-serving, and magic would not fit into that sphere.

39 The early church evidence ridiculing magic is fairly considerable. See Justin Martyr, 1 Apol. 26; Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.13, 2.31.2; Origen, Cels. 1.68. For magic as the work of demons, see Tertullian, The Soul 57.7; Eusebius, Against Hierocles 26. Chrysostom ridiculed the wearing of amulets to little avail in Homily on Colossians 8.5. Also see Harold Remus, Pagan–Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1983), 56; N. Brox, “Magie und Aberglaube an den Anfängen des Christentums,” 157–80.

40 Paul Corby Finney rebuts Mathews in “Do You Think God is a Magician?,” 107. Finney simply answers that late antique art does not include a tradition of depicting a magician doing his job.

41 One possible image of a magician is Alexander Severus’s bust of Apollonius in his domestic shrine, One possible image of a magician is Alexander Severus’s bust of Apollonius in his domestic shrine, outside Rome and becomes aware of his destiny. The Clash of Gods, ed. A. Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 100–25. See Jerome, Life of Hilarion 21, for the use of a love spell. Sarcophagus art is also a genre that allows the patron to express outwardly noble qualities and beliefs, religious and self-serving, and magic would not fit into that sphere.

42 In later depictions, the staff of Jesus evolves into a cross. On the fifth-century Andrews diptych, the staff is still present; however, on an ivory diptych in Ravenna from just a century later, the staff has visibly transitioned into a cross, as Christ gesticulates with his hand toward the aediculum with a newly discernible Lazarus. See W. F. Volbach, Early Christian Art (London: Thames and Hudson, 1961), pl. 223.

Further reading


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