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CATACOMB PAINTING AND
THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN
ICONOGRAPHY IN
FUNERARY ART

Norbert Zimmermann

For more than a hundred years, from the late first to the late second century CE, the Christian religion, then only one of many oriental resurrection cults in the Roman Empire, left no material traces, and the Christians produced no identifiable artifacts nor developed a distinctive iconography or art. This changed from the early third century onwards, when members of the Christian community of Rome started to imitate the behavior of their surrounding society, expressing their religious hopes and beliefs through images, and so inventing the first stages of a Christian, mostly biblical, iconography. This emergence of Christian art is best documented for us in the Roman catacombs—the extensive subterranean parts of Christian collective cemeteries, dug along the consular roads outside the city walls. The catacombs were used for burials from ca. 200 CE until the early fifth century, when Christianity had become the official religion. The Roman catacomb paintings gain particular importance because of the loss of nearly all other Christian paintings that may have existed at the same time outside the catacombs. As the only surviving evidence, the funerary paintings at graves preserve the first images of western Christian iconography.

Tracing the development of catacomb painting, one follows the first stages of development in Christian art. This art is usually of a quite modest quality, and in most cases it is an individual expression of self-representation and hope for an eternal life of a private owner/commissioner. The care for the deceased was a duty of the family, and every painted monument reflects a single, private order and not an official, public statement of the church. Only very few examples, usually in topographical contact with a tomb of a venerated martyr, show better quality and a richer decoration, and eventually also an ecclesiastical and therefore somewhat official commissioner.

Today we know up to 70 catacombs or hypogea outside the Roman city walls, and in total a grid of more than 150 kilometers of catacomb galleries extended under the earth, with certainly hundreds of thousands of buried persons. In the catacombs only the subterranean parts of the cemeteries are preserved, and they without doubt contained mostly the tombs of the poorer part of the society. The majority of the burials remained anonymous, without any kind of decoration or inscription. About 400 painted units are known to us today, either in entire rooms (cubicula) or in single graves (arcosolia or loculi) in the galleries. The paintings therefore form a relatively small group of monuments; statistically, every year during the 200 years of catacomb use, only two paintings were created. In comparison with the thousands of Christian sarcophagi from
Rome, it is clear how unusual it was to order a painting within the context of a catacomb burial. Catacomb research has been able to identify most of the iconographic scenes, and to reconstruct their chronology at least in general lines. However, without evidence that could support an absolute dating, the paintings often remain ordered only by more or less uncertain stylistic arguments.

The introduction of images at graves

Experimentation and the first biblical scenes

Until the end of the second century, it is practically impossible to distinguish between Christian and pagan burials. But, from that time on, the Christian communities began to create their own cemeteries, as is best documented in both written and archaeological sources for the catacomb of Callixtus (San Callisto), on the via Appia, where the bishop Zephyrinus (198–217) sent the deacon Callixtus as supervisor of the coemeterium. Callixtus’s name was later given to the cemetery, and he later became the bishop himself. This oldest region of the Callixtus catacomb (so-called Area I) not only had a cubiculum that collected the burials of the third-century bishops (today known as “Crypt of the Popes”), but also contained a line of six private family cubicula with wall paintings, the so-called “Chapels of the Sacraments,” A1–A6. It is in these small, cubic rooms with rectangular loculi-openings on all three main walls that we find the earliest attempt to depict biblical stories in images (Figure 2.1). Around the grave openings, on the ceiling, and left and right of the entrance door appear selected stories of the Old and New Testament. They were set among traditional decorations like flowers, birds, or masks on a white ground and usually without any background painting.

The most interesting aspect is that the S Callixtus scenes themselves document the creative moment of formation, showing on the one hand some iconographic innovations that became from then on the standard form of certain biblical scenes, while revealing on the other hand that some images had less success, and later found a different standardized form. Moreover, a few additional scenes had no success at all, and were later eliminated. For example, one of the most meaningful scenes at the tombs, the rising of Lazarus, was painted here in a cubiculum (A5) in a quite literary way, with Jesus holding his right hand elevated, calling Lazarus out of his tomb, and Lazarus obeying him directly, stepping out of the grave architecture (Figure 2.2). Later versions of this story usually depict Lazarus in the way the deceased were brought into their tombs beneath the painting, wrapped in linen strips, and not striding out but immobile, appearing within the tomb aedicula (Figure 2.3). Jesus touches Lazarus’s front with a virga, a staff representing his supernatural power, to indicate even more clearly the salvific action.

Another example of an iconographic form that did not endure is a scene of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac (again room A2, Figure 2.1), with both father and son praying to God with upraised arms. In all later versions, Abraham holds a knife uplifted for the offering, and is prevented by the hand of God. In the neighboring room A5, however, the scene of Moses striking the rock with the water appearing is shown already in the same iconography that would last essentially unchanged until the end of catacomb painting. Finally, and curiously, in room A2 an enigmatic scene with a man holding his hand over perhaps a loaf of bread on a table, and a woman beside him preaching as an orant (with raised, extended arms) has often been interpreted as a eucharistic meal. It remains completely unique and did not find its way
into the broader Christian funerary repertory. This diversity of innovations for biblical scenes has rightly been characterized as the first moments of Christian art and as a laboratory of iconography.

The repertory of Christian scenes at the end of the third century

By the end of the third century, a relatively limited repertory of scenes had developed in catacomb paintings and had begun to appear also on Christian sarcophagi.

Incorporation of traditional motifs in a Christian perspective

Four traditional pagan motifs were incorporated into the Christian repertory of images: (1) the former bucolic shepherd, becoming now Jesus the Good Shepherd of John’s parable; (2) Orpheus, the mythical singer who went to Hades and calmed the wild animals with his singing and playing, both aspects that gave reason to identify him with Christ; (3) the orant, the figure of a woman or man with hands raised in prayer personifying piety to men and gods, becoming a Christian pietas or prayer and often at the same time a representation of the deceased; and (4) the banquet scene, becoming both a refrigerium (funerary meal) for or with the bereaved and symbolizing therefore an eternal meal.
Figure 2.2  Chapel of the Sacrament A5, entrance wall, raising of Lazarus, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903)

Figure 2.3  Raising of Lazarus, Domitilla catacomb, arcosol 73, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 192 (part.).
Scenes from the Old and New Testament

In addition to the appropriation of existing images, completely new iconographies were invented for what may be called the “new myths,” or the Christian—usually biblical—stories: a group of over twenty biblical scenes, illustrating intense moments of salvation, healing, or revelation.7

We find quite regularly about eleven scenes from the entire Old Testament, given here in order of their statistical occurrence: Moses striking the rock (Exod 17:1–6, Num 20:1–11); Jonah’s story (Jonah 1–4); Daniel between the lions (Dan 14); Noah in the ark (Gen 7–8); Adam and Eve (Gen 3); Abraham offering Isaac (Gen 22:1–18); the three Hebrews in the fire (Dan 3); Job (Job 2:7–8); Moses removing his sandals (Exod 3); Moses receiving the law (Exod 24); Susanna with the elders (Dan 13); and finally Balaam pointing to the star (Num 24:17). A similar number of at least twelve scenes from the New Testament were often requested, listed again in order of the frequency with which they occur: the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–24); the multiplication of bread (Matt 15:32–39); the healing of the paralytic (Figure 2.4) (John 5; Matt 9:5; Mark 2,9; Luke 5:23); a baptism (Matt 3:13–17; Mark 1:1–9; Luke 3:21); the healing of a blind person (Luke 18:35–43; Mark 10:46–52; John 9:1–7); Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4); the transformation of water to wine (John 2), which often appears in conjunction with the multiplication of the bread; the healing of the bleeding woman (Matt 9:18–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48); and finally the less frequent scenes of the annunciation (Luke 1), the healing of the demoniac (Matt 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–40), the healing

Figure 2.4 Miracle of the paralytic, Domitilla (detail from Figure 2.9), from Joseph Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 239.
of the leper (Matt 8:1–4; Mark 1:40–45), and a very few instances of the parable of the wise virgins (Matt 25).

Generally, one can summarize that nearly all these newly created scenes were carefully selected from the entire biblical text (both Old and New Testament) and show a common semantic line: They all illustrate moments of dense salvific history, reporting stories of salvation from danger to life, like Daniel between the lions, the three Hebrews in the fire, or Moses striking the rock for water. Some tell miracles of healings of an illness, like the paralytic or the blind, or they relate miracles of immediate salvation from death, like Lazarus. Finally, they also document moments of a direct contact between God and men during a salvific act, speech, or lesson, such as Moses who receives the law at Mount Sinai, or the Samaritan woman at the well who is told by Jesus himself about the meaning of the holy water. The criteria of selection seems quite clear, as the plot of each story is usually, with only a very few exceptions, directly salvific and therefore meaningful in the funerary context.

However, the images do not try to tell the biblical story as a narration, but they concentrate the attention directly on the salvific content. The narration is always reduced to one emblematic moment and is restricted to the most important persons, normally only one or two. For example, in the image of Daniel the lions are usually shown as docile, primarily as attributes to identify the scene. The image of Noah does not show the punishment of men in the flood, but concentrates exclusively on the moment when Noah receives the branch announcing the end of the flood. In the New Testament scenes, Jesus is often present in person (Figures 2.1, 2.2), but he can also be absent, as in the miracle of the paralytic (Figure 2.4). If he is present, he can talk or act with his hand or, more often, with his virga, the non-biblical attribute of his divine power.

Generally, other figures are limited to the main protagonists, and one can assume that for the creators and viewers of these images, textual literacy was not as important as a general familiarity with the biblical narratives. Sometimes no attention was paid to specifying which miracle among several in the synoptic texts was intended, as, for example, the healing of a blind person. One can imagine that not only literary sources but also oral traditions served as the bases for the images.

Because the images possess a static character, concentrating on the most important part of the story in order for it to be readable, art historians have commonly classified them as symbolic. That is true even for scenes of the prophet Jonah, the only subject that is illustrated, from its first appearance, in a cycle of first three and later even four scenes. While the text of his story focuses on the inhabitants of Nineveh and their sinful behavior, the images of the cycle accent a secondary aspect of the story. Jonah is thrown in the mouth of the fish (represented as a sea dragon, called ketos in Greek literary sources), and after three days disgorged, to finally rest, saved from the sea monster, lying under a pergola like the sleeping Endymion. In this case, it becomes clear that the motivation for illustrating this story with this particular iconography was only partly based on the biblical narrative. Rather, the painted cycle follows the same common salvific line, displaying an early Christian typology between Jonah and the anticipated future salvation from death and the following rest, in the pattern of Christ’s own rising after three days (like Jonah was delivered from the sea monster after three days; Matt 12:40).

**Embodying of the funerary portrait**

Imbedded in this clear repertory of mostly biblical scenes, at the very end of the third century, a further new, most important image, widespread in the traditional art, was added to this meaningful content: the portrait of the deceased. Even though it appears relatively late, it soon became the statistically most represented single motif of catacomb art, appearing in different
forms and places around the graves. The portraits may be classified in six sometimes overlapping categories: (1) orants, surely the most popular image, sometimes stand as a group without distinction between bereaved and deceased; (2) busts in medallions or frames; (3) standing or sitting persons holding codici or rotuli (books or scrolls); (4) persons representing their professions; (5) members of agape or refrigera meals; and (6) persons in scenic moments, for example showing the deceased already resting in a paradisiacal place like a garden (Figure 2.5), or as part of a biblical scene. Two emblematic examples are the scene of Susanna between the elders, where Susanna becomes a portrait of the deceased woman, evidently in praise of her virtue, and the Samaritan woman beside Christ at the well, possibly to identify the deceased as a person in close contact with Christ.

The portraits are not intended to depict the exact likenesses of the pictured persons—in fact the modern concept of portraying an individual in his or her natural physiognomy is far from these images. Only very few portraits seem to give a concrete idea of what the persons really looked like. More often they offer, instead of a natural aspect, a “typical” view, presenting a vision of a young/old man/woman, characterized as a member of a certain social class, a rich family, an educated person dressed in precious clothing and with a certain haircut. Inscriptions sometimes help to identify the individual deceased (Figure 2.6). These portraits send messages of the status of the depicted in society and identify membership in a group or class in life or hopefully in the afterlife. Some of them become proper prayers when the deceased is shown making eye contact with Christ, bringing personally the wish for salvation before his face. A good example is in arcosolium 70 of the Domitilla catacomb: Christ appears

Figure 2.5 Wall of the “Cubiculum of the 5 Saints,” Callixtus catacomb, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 111.
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Figure 2.6 The deceased Elio-(dora), in a cubiculum of catacombs of Sts Peter and Marcellinus, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 43,2.

Figure 2.7 Christ as the Good Shepherd with the deceased as orants in the flock, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 190.

as the Good Shepherd, and the deceased as part of his flock, a female orant at his right side looking directly at him, as if praying personally for her salvation (Figure 2.7). However, in the majority of portraits the individual depicted looks straight ahead out of the image, as if to make eye contact with the viewer. And this seems to be their function in most cases: to
communicate directly with the viewer in the moments of cultic commemoration and contemplation. At least two times a year the family held a meal and visited the tomb, during the *rosalia* (feast of roses), the commemoration day for the deceased, and the day of passing away, regarded by Christians as the deceased’s birthday to the eternal life. It is interesting in this context to observe the nearly complete lack of any indications of personal sorrow, one of the regular themes of traditional Roman funerary art. At least in the imagery, Christians concentrated faithfully on the hope for salvation.

**Effects of the “Constantinian turn” on architecture and imagery**

The historical process usually called the “Constantinian turn,” meaning the changes following Constantine’s victory against Maxentius on the Milvian Bridge (312 CE) and the recognition of the Christian religion as *religio licta* in east and west as arranged between Constantine and Licinius at Milan (313 CE), initiated the general process of the Christianization of the Roman empire. In Rome, the persecutions had ended under Maxentius, but Constantine’s orientation on Christ and his subsequent long reign caused a rapidly growing number of Christians in all social classes, including the rich and members of the court. For the church now everything changed drastically: its members turned in less than ten years from public enemies to imperial friends, supported and promoted in many ways by the emperor. If we look, for example, at the basilicas and their decoration, we see the clear imprint of the imperial court. From that moment on, we can really talk about an official, ecclesiastical art and architecture.

This process of Christianization is clearly visible also in the catacombs. There is an enormous topographical extension in fourth-century areas, reflecting the growing number of members. Additionally, one sees a proper monumentalization of the dimension and architectural forms of *cubicula* and their paintings. The chambers became larger and their architecture became more impressive, with groined vaults resting on columns and important burials being emphasized by *acrosolia*. These new structures offered new spaces for images in the arches of *acrosolia* and in their *lunettes*—spaces that were used to distinguish and differ layers of content and to specify pictorial hierarchies. However, despite the fact that there were now often larger spaces available for decoration, there was not usually a larger total number of scenes.

**A new image of Christ**

While in the third century more scenes from the Old Testament were depicted, at the time of Constantine the attention gave slightly more focus to the New Testament. At the same time, beside the figure of Jesus represented as a young philosopher in the biblical scenes, a new image of a long-haired and bearded Christ was developed for non-biblical scenes. Adopting the model of a Father God, Christ appeared now with all honors of imperial iconography, such as the nimbus, the throne, the *suppedaneum* (a little footrest), and the imperial purple as the color for his mantle or *chlamys*. From at least the late Constantinian time or the mid-fourth century on, this image in the form of a bust or full figure takes the central positions, usually getting the highest attention (Figure 2.8). This new image did not completely replace the older images, and Christ as Orpheus or the Good Shepherd also appear here and there, always in central positions.

Private, personal representation also usually takes an important position in the inner topography of the grave monuments, *acrosolia* or *cubicula*. The painters invented different ways to connect private portraits with scenes of biblical salvation, and often the funerary portrait and the image of Christ show a kind of concurrence for the most attractive position in terms of visibility and topographical hierarchy in a painted context.
More traces of imperial iconography

Some further images show their clear dependence on the imperial art. With eighteen images, the adoration of the magi (Matt 2) is depicted quite often (Figure 2.9, upper right). Normally centralized with two or four symmetrical magi, but also with Mary holding Jesus on her knees on one side and three magi arriving with their gifts from the other, the scene represents the moment of adoration itself. It seems doubtful that this scene emerged before the time of peace; it very much reflects imperial images with barbarians in adoration before the emperor. Therefore it should be dated from the time of Constantine onwards.

Another new image is Christ enthroned (and in one case standing) between the two most important Roman martyrs, Peter and Paul. Both appear in white clothing often with red stripes, like Christ’s senators of his heavenly court, in gestures of veneration. Finally, we find Jesus teaching, surrounded by his apostles, clearly influenced this time by images of the seven philosophers of Greece. This scene with Christ in the middle and his disciples seated to his left and right, identified as a gathering of the apostles, is also not an illustration of a biblical event, but rather a theme that transcends time and can clearly be traced back to theological reflection. The scene occupies a semi-circular pictorial space. It is therefore quite possible that the gathering of apostles first arose as an apse image in the emerging space of Christian worship—the church building in the form of a long basilica with an apse at the far end.

Monumental structures reached their high point in the middle of the fourth century. Cubicula were occasionally built as ovals or as four-, six-, or eight-cornered rooms, sometimes

Figure 2.8 Christ on his throne with his 12 apostles around; the so-called “Apostles council” of the crypt of mensores at Domitilla, from Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 193.
with columns in the corners and quasi-entablatures or domes (Figure 2.10). Imitations of marble in the base areas and geometric ornamentation on the surfaces of arches and vaults were popular painted forms of decoration.

**Private hypogea and co-existing traditional and Christian iconography**

A group of private hypogea from the mid-fourth century with articulated architecture and relatively high-quality wall paintings shows a very interesting co-existence of the Christian and the traditional Roman imagery. The most famous is the via Latina catacomb (Ipogeo of via Dino Compagni), a little, private hypogeum. Its galleries and rooms are nearly completely painted with an extraordinary selection of both unusual Christian scenes and traditional heroes and deities. In one room, Old and New Testament images including scenes of the exodus from Egypt appear on all the walls as a salvific narrative frieze, while close by, in another room, paintings portray Hercules, Athena, Ceres, and Proserpina. The large number of unique scenes has led to the supposition that the painters had a specific external model for their images, such as an illustrated Bible manuscript. In the fourth century, at least two generations of a family or an association buried their members here. The scenes were not ordered to show Christian and traditional figures, such as Christ and Athena, together in the same tomb, mixing completely both worlds. Rather, it appears that the hypogeum served members of an educated family with different approaches to the afterlife. The surprise with which modern interpreters have responded to this co-existence of Christian and traditional images, and the problems it has posed, reveal more about the modern concept of “struggle of religions” than about the late antique society these paintings document.14
In addition to multiple religious values, stylistically similar hypogeae from the mid-fourth century express in different ways the multiple expectations and hopes for the afterlife. While the hypogeum of Trebius Justus\textsuperscript{15} is limited to various kinds of representative images commissioned by the mourning parents with the intent of creating a visual memorial for their deceased son showing his wealth and his education, at the little private Vibia catacomb a priest of the god Sabazius depicted his wife on her way to paradise in narrative scenes in an arcosolium.\textsuperscript{16} Vibia is first abducted by Pluto and brought into the underworld on a chariot, in the pictorial tradition of the abduction of Proserpina. In the underworld, Hermes leads the deceased before the judge’s throne and, after a positive verdict, an angelus bonus (good angel) introduces her into paradise where she participates in the feast of the blessed. In the same spirit, in the Jewish catacomb of villa Torlonia, some paintings connect Jewish religious objects (menorah, Torah shrine, shofar, lulav) with cosmic symbols (sun and moon) to form an apocalyptic dimension.\textsuperscript{17} Together with the Christian paintings in the catacombs, these images document a common quest to express a more or less clear hope of a religiously or philosophically based afterlife.

**Damasus, the reliquary cult, and the church as commissioner**

As mentioned, with the construction and decoration of Christian churches, Roman catacomb painting from the middle of the fourth century onwards generally became less innovative...
but more reflexive: the monumental art outside the catacombs, mainly in the huge Roman basilicas, began to serve as examples for the subterranean images. Instead of the former biblical scenes, theologically motivated images now quite often appeared, such as Christ between his twelve apostles, certainly generated for apses or similar spaces. The experience of cultic rooms with images but without graves also profoundly changed the character of the decoration of the tombs: instead of little cubicula with images surrounding the tombs, we find more and more the architecture of little chapels, still with the same imagery of scenes, but now ordered into lateral friezes.

The promoter of this important step and of the final flourishing of catacomb painting was Pope Damasus (366–384). He patronized the ritual veneration of persecution-era martyrs and systematically ensured that their tombs were furnished with their own stairways, light wells, and monumental presentation, with marble inscriptions and architecture.\(^{18}\) Since Christian theology holds that only martyrs stand already in the presence of Christ without having to wait for the final judgment, only they could be direct advocates for the deceased who were forced to wait that final judgment. Accordingly, martyr theology was echoed strongly in the images.

At least two cases of Damasian sanctuaries conserve parts of their painted decoration: the chapel for SS Felix and Adauctus, at Comodilla,\(^{19}\) and the sanctuary of SS Nereus and Achilleus, at Domitilla.\(^{20}\) They are particularly important because they document for the first time not private but official, ecclesiastical commissioners (that is, bishop Damasus) decorating a cultic space. The stairways and the entrance to the saints’ tombs were decorated by crosses or christograms that served as a guiding system for visitors to find their way through the catacomb, and the saints themselves appeared in paintings, gesturing in veneration of Christ, in apsidal-like images over the entrances or over the graves. Every martyr’s tomb in the catacombs known to Damasus was adorned and enlarged in a similar manner, with impressive architecture, a marble inscription with a poem, and a proper painting. Channeling and structuring the veneration of the numerous Roman martyrs strengthened the position of the Roman bishop, and Damasus without doubt influenced the emerging supremacy of the papacy as it developed.

On one hand, the promotion of the martyrs as patrons for the deceased and their intercessors to God advanced martyr veneration and led people to choose a saint as their personal patron, as best documented in the post-damasian arcosolium of Veneranda at Domitilla. The wealthy matron Veneranda is introduced into the garden of paradise by her personal patron Petronilla, a legendary daughter of Peter (Figure 2.11). On the other hand, the former intimacy between the individual and Jesus became a more distant relationship.

From an art historical point of view, the Damasus-era images depict relatively large persons with big heads and limbs. These figures appear against a dark, often red or blue, surface rather than the white backgrounds used formerly.

The end of catacomb painting

The loss of the need of the subterranean space

Disregarding a few early medieval paintings in context with martyr sanctuaries,\(^{21}\) catacomb painting came to an end in the early fifth century, with the end of the use of catacombs as cemeteries. The Roman population shrank drastically, and open-air spaces (sub divo), especially in and nearby the huge cemetery basilicas, could satisfy the demand for tombs.\(^{22}\)

The so-called last painting in the catacombs is the ceiling of a monumental cubiculum close to the graves of SS Marcellinus and Peter in the homonymous catacomb (Figure 2.12). It shows all the characteristics of a late painting: Christ with nimbus and dressed in purple is sitting on his
throne in the upper register, between Peter and Paul. Scattered flowers around them indicate the place as an eternal, paradisiacal space. In the lower register, Christ is repeated in the center as a lamb standing on a hill with four springs, the paradisiacal rivers. On the left and right side, four martyrs of the catacomb, Marcellinus and Peter and Tiburtius and Gorgonius, approach the lamb, venerating with elevated arms both lamb and Christ on the throne. The image has left the direct contact with the graves that fill the wall beneath the ceiling, and no individual representation reaches Christ’s sphere. Instead, the prayers are conveyed by his saints, and expressed in their gesture. The image evidently had its origin in an apse, maybe in an above-ground basilica. Fortunately, at the same time the last catacomb paintings appear in the early fifth century, the open-air (sub divo) monumental tradition began.

The end of the unity of tomb and cult

To summarize, catacomb painting as private sepulchral art had two main subjects: the self-representation of the deceased and the illustration and expression of his or her hope for salvation and a Christian afterlife. All single paintings are unique and individual and are the result of a single contact between a private client or applicant and the executor, who may be called an artist or rather a craftsman. The images were part of the private funerary cult, as is best attested in the individual portraits that face the family visitors in most cases directly and break the real existing
Catacomb painting and iconography

The private funerary ritual at the graves was suppressed only at the very end of the fourth century, with the intervention attested by S Ambrose in Milan and S Augustine in North Africa. Although some continued to practice the traditional rituals, families were instructed to celebrate a eucharistic meal in the church instead of drinking and feasting in the cemeteries. To separate the place of the burial and the place of the cultic performance made the communicative portrait at the tomb useless, and this is one more reason why with the end of the catacombs came also the end of funeral portraits. To celebrate a mass instead of holding a meal at the tomb truly brought an ancient tradition to an end, and the former family duty was now taken over by the...
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church. One effect was that women who had before held an important role in the cultic event were now replaced by the clergy. In a certain way, this is one of the tesserae that describes the end of antiquity.

Notes


3 Norbert Zimmermann, Werkstattgruppen römischer Katakombenmalerei (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002).


10 Ibid.

11 Zimmermann, Werkstattgruppen römischer Katakombenmalerei, 146, Abb. 93.


13 Joseph Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), pl. 148.2.

14 Zimmermann, Werkstattgruppen römischer Katakombenmalerei.


16 Wilpert, Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms, pls 132–133.


18 Soreaaria Damasiana: atti del Convegno Internaz. per il XVI Centenario della Morte di Papa Damaso I (Città delVaticano, 1986).


22 Fiocchi Nicolai, Strutture funerarie ed edifici di culto paleocristiani di Roma, 49–62.


Catacomb painting and iconography

Further reading

The best introduction to the topic of the catacombs and the different approaches through the long history of research is still offered by Fiocchi Nicolai, Bisconti and Mazzoleni (1999), and Pergola (1997). Complex information on every single catacomb, with a comment on the ancient sources and a complete bibliography, is given in the LTUR, Suburbium. For the beginning of the catacombs, see Fiocchi Nicolai (2001), and Fiocchi Nicolai and Guyon (2006). All catacomb paintings are listed in the catalogue of iconography and topography by Nestori (1993); the biggest collection of images of the paintings is still Wilpert (1903). Three repertories for the catacombs of Marcellino e Pietro, Anapo, and Commodilla already exist: Deckers et al. (1987), Deckers et al. (1991), and Deckers et al. (1994). The repertory on Domitilla is in preparation (Zimmermann and Tsmakida in preparation). The via Latina catacomb is completely published by Ferrua (1991). The complex question of the dating of catacomb painting is discussed in De Bruyne (1969), Kollwitz (1969), Reekmans (1973), Deckers (1992), Guyon (1994), and Zimmermann (2002). Bisconti (2000) gives a comprehensive introduction into the iconography of Christian scenes; the results of recent restorations are published in Bisconti (2011) and Mazzei (2010). A scientific guideline to understand the content and meaning of the Christian imagery is given by Engemann (1997). Monographs on this topic are published in the series Monumenti di Antichita Cristiana, Roma Sotterranea Cristiana, Studi di Antichita Cristiana, and Sussidi allo studio delle Antichita Cristiane, published by the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana. A specialized journal is the PIAC’s Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana, publishing current research results, studies, and reviews related to catacomb research, and also the reports of the Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra, which manages the catacombs. Additionally, PCAS manages the archive of catacomb excavations as well as a photo archive, which contains many unpublished photographs (in part online: www.archeologiasacra.net/pcas-web/).


Zimmermann, Norbert and Vasiliki Tsamakda, eds, *Die Domitilla – Katakombe: Repertorium der Malerei* [forthcoming].