Gazing at the figured panels of early Christian sarcophagi, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the imposing double-portraits framed at the center of many reliefs, representations of the married couples for whom the monuments were made (Figure 20.1). Elsewhere one encounters similar portraits on much humbler, less expensive objects. A small silver seal bears the confronted busts of a man and woman, their daughter depicted between them, doves and a wreath-crown above, all encircled by an inscription addressing the man: “Maxentius, may you live happily with your loved ones” (Figure 20.2). Incised gold foil at the base of a glass vessel depicts a family group—wife, husband, son, and daughter—a christogram placed at the center, an inscription above toasting the married couple: “Pompeianus and Theodora, may you live!” (Figure 20.3).
The emergent Christian art of the third and fourth centuries includes many such works containing portraits of individuals, couples, and family groups (e.g., Figures 2.7, 2.11, 3.8, 8.7, 15.6, 19.7, 19.9, 22.1–3, 23.3). These depictions of relatively ordinary Christians comprise a major category of early Christian portraiture in addition to images of Christ, apostles, Mary, and other saints and martyrs. They are sometimes classed as “secular” portraits to distinguish them from representations of religious figures. The term *secular* echoes the use of the word *saeculares*.
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(“people of the world”) by clergy and ascetics in Late Antiquity to refer to the majority of lay believers whose lives were characterized by such “worldly” pursuits as marriage, childrearing, wealth, working in a profession, and civic service. However, the term masks the religious imagery that often appears with the portraits to express religious commitment and claim piety and blessedness on behalf of the individuals portrayed.

Images of Christ and saints have traditionally received more academic attention, but secular portraits (also called “private” portraits) have been of increasing interest in recent years. This rising awareness follows in the wake of social historical work that has widened focus from the great men, deeds, and events of political or ecclesiastical history to encompass the experience of ordinary people, including women, children, slaves, and the middling and poorer strata of society. Of course, many individuals represented in secular portraits were not “ordinary” in a socioeconomic sense—they were wealthy enough to purchase and own works of art, sometimes at considerable expense. Sarcophagi, for example, were extremely costly and available only to the elite, upper strata of Roman society, while gold-glass vessels and metal seals would have been affordable to a greater proportion of the population, though still not the poorest. Nevertheless, the portraits on these objects do represent people who were not religious elites; they comprised a segment of the early Christian population beyond those who authored Christian texts, oversaw congregations, or met in church councils. Their representations broaden the reconstruction historians can produce of the early Christian world, casting light on such subjects as the Christianization of the Roman populace, the perspectives of lay believers, and the late antique reconceptualizing of the Roman household.

The work of portraits

The term portrait may be defined as a manufactured image (eikōn, imago, simulacrum) representing an individual or group of persons. Ancient and late antique portraits usually took the form of busts (showing the head and shoulders) posed frontally or in profile, or depicted persons standing either frontally, turned three-quarters, or in profile. The general intention of a portrait was to designate a person or persons in order to evoke thoughts or memories of them, suggest certain ideas about them, and create a sense of their presence; more specific purposes of portraits related to their various forms, uses, and physical contexts as they appeared in such media as sarcophagus reliefs, wall paintings in family tombs, free-standing sculpture, panel paintings, gold-glass vessel bases, finger rings, gems, seals, belt ornaments, and domestic silver. Portraits of living persons served to honor them, enhance their reputation and status, and create a public persona if displayed for view, or foster a more intimate connection if carried on a small object. Funerary portraits, made either after death or during life, preserved the memory of deceased persons and facilitated “interaction” between the living and dead in funerary ceremonies.

These purposes could be accomplished without necessarily replicating an exact likeness of individuals. Roman portraits at various times gravitated toward either realism or idealization, often employing degrees of each. Late antique and early Christian portraiture reveals an even greater willingness to forego detailed and accurate individualizing, and a growing preference for generic or even stylized representation. On many sarcophagi the heads of figures intended to represent the deceased or a patron were left unfinished. Evidently a symbolic depiction was often felt sufficient to designate an individual. Consequently some historians have preferred to speak in terms of “portrait-style,” “an image of a portrait,” or “self-representation” rather than “portraits” in a strict sense.

Portraits were highly idealized, making use of stock types, poses, and attributes that signaled key characteristics or encoded certain social and gender roles. Though such images may be a
“Secular” portraits

means of identifying the discourses and social negotiations in which patrons and viewers participated, they are less likely to represent the complex realities of their actual lived experience. Nevertheless, idealized images spoke to certain values and a desire to be perceived and remembered in association with those values. Thus, portraits may be approached as visual rhetoric.

In their rhetorical function secular portraits have been of growing interest in the study of identity—the conception and expression of individuality (self-identity) or group affiliation (social, religious, or ethnic identity). Portraits and the images placed around them were means of constructing and maintaining a sense of identity in the changing social landscape of Late Antiquity. Recent studies have explored the ways portraits of early Christians served to articulate degrees of assimilation and differentiation in relation to broader Roman society. Studies have also highlighted the ways these portraits, especially in funerary contexts, connected persons with biblical images of salvation and expressed hope for a blessed afterlife, marking a shift in emphasis from commemorating individuals to making religious statements.

A case study: reading identity on the sarcophagus of Catervius and Severina

The late fourth-century sarcophagus of Catervius and Severina at Tolentino illustrates many of the functions of portraits described above. Commissioned by Septimia Severina for the burial of her deceased husband, Flavius Julius Catervius, the large monument later served as her own burial place alongside her husband. Severina had the sarcophagus and lid carved on all four sides and paid for the construction of a mausoleum where it could be seen in the round. (Its current display in a chapel within the cathedral of San Catervo preserves this viewing experience.) The couple’s son and heir, Bassus, died unexpectedly at age eighteen and was also buried in the sarcophagus, while an inscription lamenting his death and the end of the family line was crowded into unused space on the front. Before that tragedy, however, Severina evidently intended the sarcophagus and its mausoleum to perpetuate the memory and example of her husband and herself in her son’s family and among future generations of descendants and local residents.

Portraits of Catervius and Severina appear on both the front and back of the sarcophagus. On the front, acroteria on the lid contain individual busts of Catervius (left) and Severina (right) turned slightly towards each other. Between them an inscription announces the pair’s full names, their senatorial rank, the length of their marriage (16 years less 13 days), Catervius’s service as praetorian prefect, his age at death (56 years 18 days), the dates of his death and interment, and Severina’s commissioning of the sarcophagus and mausoleum. Catervius is shown wearing a toga and tunic, bearded (in his older years of civic office), and clutching a scroll; Severina also holds a scroll and is attired as an aristocratic Roman matrona.

The inscriptions and portraits are fairly conventional. They eulogize the pair and locate them as Roman elites who prize learning (symbolized by scrolls), the husband’s activity in the public sphere, and the wife’s familial piety, evident in her fulfillment of the duties of commemoration. Though nothing in these portraits or the inscription identifies the pair as Christian, the strigillated casket below depicts a sheep-carrying shepherd in the center panel and scroll-bearing apostles, who stand with bundles of scrolls at their feet, in the panels at the left and right corners. Christian visitors to the tomb would have recognized these figures as Christ the Good Shepherd, Peter (left, beneath Catervius), and Paul. Viewers could have discerned a message that Catervius’s departed soul, like the carried sheep, was in Christ’s care. The alignment of the spousal portraits with the apostles, all holding scrolls, presents Catervius and Severina as not just educated, but more specifically as possessors of the faith and knowledge taught by the church—a claim for the couple’s orthodoxy and religious harmony.
Processing around the sarcophagus to its back side, the viewer encounters a more intimate representation (Figure 20.1). At the center of the panel Catervius and Severina appear together in a large clipeus (circular frame) set within a square that fills the casket’s vertical height. They are posed frontally, their eyes staring straight ahead at the viewer, their right hands joined in the dextrarum iunctio, a traditional gesture that here symbolizes marital harmony. In addition to this gesture, Severina’s veiled head and Catervius’s more youthful appearance (with only hints of beard stubble) invite the viewer to think of the couple on their wedding day. Here their likenesses appear with key religious symbols. Above their heads a hand (the hand of God or Christ) extends a jeweled, ribboned wreath-crown, an iconic symbol of spiritual victory (see Figure 18.6) that could simultaneously allude to the couple’s wedding (wreaths of flowers or laurels were customarily placed on the heads of the bride and groom in wedding celebrations). The spandrels above contain the chi-rho with alpha and omega, symbols of Christ suggesting divine protection and blessing upon the couple’s life, marriage, tomb, and afterlife. The spandrels beneath feature inward-facing doves clutching olive branches, symbols that might have led the viewer to think of peace, divine assurance (as with Noah’s dove), the Holy Spirit, the couple’s own departed souls, and their marital devotion even beyond death.²³

The symbolism in this portrait resonates with an inscription directly above it, evidently carved on the occasion of Severina’s burial alongside her husband (likely according to her instructions and overseen by their bishop Probianus, who seems to have left his signature):

[The two] whom the all-powerful Lord joined in sweet marriage with equal merits,
The grave guards for eternity.
Catervius, Severina rejoices that she has been joined to you.
May you two rise together among the blessed with the help of Christ,
Whom Probianus, the priest of God, baptized and anointed.²⁴
The programs on the front and back present the pair in their public and private life, typical of elite commemoration in the period. They serve to locate Catervius and Severina within society as citizens worthy of honor for their civic service and domestic harmony, yet distinguished from traditional Romans in terms of religious identity. This differentiation is reinforced by the reliefs on the small sides. The scene on the right side has been interpreted as the magi turning away from Herod, who is depicted as a Roman ruler flanked by two soldiers; a bust of the ruler behind him recalls the biblical story of the three Hebrew youths who refused to worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar (Figure 20.5). On the left side, the magi bring their gifts to the seated Virgin and Christ child. Together the scenes suggest a rejection of Rome’s past religious policy (both its emperor worship and its persecution of Christianity, embodied by Herod), and turning to worship the divine King. The background of city gates and walls on these panels might evoke for the viewer the earthly or heavenly city, and the tensions between them. Severina distanced herself and her husband from aspects of Rome’s past even as she claimed a place of honor for them in its transforming present.

She and Christian aristocrats like her felt a need to articulate continuities and exclusions in a climate where competing visions of society vied for preeminence. In Rome, Severina’s non-Christian contemporary, Anconia Fabia Paulina, erected a monument for her deceased husband, the senator Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, that similarly proclaimed their merits, their patron deities (Cybele, Attis, Ceres, and Hecate), and Paulina’s anticipation of a happy reunion with her husband after death. Her defense of traditional Roman religions drew the ire of Jerome. The late fourth century was a time of “competitive commemoration” in which couples like...
Severina and Catervius, Paulina and Praetextatus, were visualizing alternate conceptions of Roman society, the ideal Roman household, and the God or gods who watch over it.30

**Christianizing the Roman household: married couples and family groups**

In addition to expressing social and religious identity, secular portraits of couples and family groups give visual evidence of the development of Christian discourses and practices regarding marriage and family life, and reflect the participation of lay believers in the Christianization of the Roman household. Interpreting portraits in this way entails recognizing their forms and then identifying what may be particularly “Christian” in their appearance—the modifications or additions they made to prior Roman iconography.31 It also requires comparing this imagery with the evidence of Christian texts.

**Roman precedents**

Prior to the emergence of Christian art, depictions of married couples and family groups in Roman art appeared in several forms. Portrait busts, often set within a circular frame, were popular in funerary and domestic display (see Figures 12.1–2). An example of high quality in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an Antonine relief that once topped a funerary pillar: a man and woman appear side by side, looking forward, the smaller figures of their two sons in front of them (Figure 20.6). The woman’s veil alludes to her motherhood.32 The same portrait form was used for the famous panel painting of emperor Septimius Severus with his wife Julia Domna and their sons Caracalla and Geta (whose face was removed in an act of damnatio memoriae) (see Figure 12.7).33

![Figure 20.6](image-url)

**Figure 20.6** Marble funerary relief with tondo portrait of a family group, 2nd–3rd century CE. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org, Fletcher Fund, 1949. Accession no. 49.69.5.
"Secular" portraits

The circular tondo or more elaborate shell frame was also popular for portraits of married couples without their children (see Figure 22.6; 23.3). Typically the wife appeared on the viewer’s left, partially behind the husband at right. The husband clutches a scroll and makes a speaking gesture, while the wife rests her right hand upon her husband’s right arm or chest, and may drape her left arm over his shoulders. The pose emphasized the gendered social expectations of an authoritative male head of household, supportive wife, and domestic concordia.

Another popular form of spousal portraiture was the depiction of husband and wife standing, turned towards each other and clasping right hands in the dextrarum iunctio. (The gesture could also be incorporated into portrait busts, if awkwardly.) In earlier Greek and Etruscan art the handclasp signified close relationship, and in Roman art it was used in military and familial contexts to signify a bond of loyalty. It became especially popular in depictions of married couples as a symbol of conjugal harmony, and might have alluded to a ritual joining of hands during marriage ceremonies.

Beginning in the mid-second century CE a female figure (sometimes wearing a diadem) was added to the image, standing between the spouses and resting her hands on their shoulders as she joined them in marriage (Figure 20.7). Historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries interpreted her as Juno pronuba, patron goddess of marriage, but more recent interpretation
has favored identifying her as a personification of Concordia. Viewers might have seen her as a goddess, a symbol of harmony, an allusion to an actual matrona who as pronuba oversaw the joining of spouses in the wedding ceremony, or a combination of these. This “wedding scene” originated in public statues and coins made during the reigns of emperors Antoninus Pius and his successor Marcus Aurelius, in which the emperor and his wife appeared as models of domestic harmony. The image fostered a public valorization of the marital concordia that was held to stabilize the household, city, and empire. In the late second century it began appearing in Roman private art where individuals could portray themselves as upholders of the social order in both the domestic and public sphere.

Sometimes additional deities associated with weddings such as Venus, Cupid, or Hymenaeus stood in the scenes as attendants to the bride and groom. Images of still other gods—Sol, Hercules, Cupid—sometimes appeared instead of Concordia in the space between husband and wife as a patron deity of the married couple. The presence of these deities in spousal portraits corresponds to the practice of propitiating various gods in Roman wedding celebrations, and to wedding poems (epithalamia) that described a mythological retinue of divine figures who attended the festivities as the newlyweds’ unseen benefactors.

Patterns of Christian reception

A few early fourth-century Christian sarcophagi feature dextrarum iunctio portraits of the grave owners with a central Concordia figure, surrounded by biblical images placing the commemorands in a Christian context. By the mid-fourth century, however, images were appearing on gold glasses, and later on sarcophagi and jewelry, in which Concordia was replaced by the figure of Christ between the spouses, reaching out his hands to each to place crowns upon their heads (Figure 20.8). Variations of this “Christ between spouses” image multiplied. Couples were represented in portrait busts, facing forward or in profile, or standing turned three quarters toward each other. Between them the full-length figure of Christ might stand, a hand might extend a crown (Figure 20.1), or a crown might appear by itself as a symbol, as in a gold glass depicting a couple joining right hands beneath a floating crown and the inscription VIVATIS IN DEO (“May you [two] live in God”) (Figure 20.9). Instead of a figure of Christ or a crown, a symbol such as a christogram, cross, or staurogram might occupy the central position (Figure 20.3). The reception pattern is one in which a visual reference to Christ served as a central, defining element, either in figural representation or by a symbol of Christ’s spiritual victory and benefaction.

Alternatively, some portraits contain no religious elements but appear with inscriptions that present the couple or family group as Christian. Examples include the wreathed double-portrait on the lid of the Projecta Casket (see Figure 15.6) with the inscription, P SECVNDE ET PROIECTA VIVATIS IN CHRISTO (staurogram, followed by “Secundus and Projecta, may you [two] live in Christ”), and a gold glass in the Hungarian National Museum with busts of a married pair encircled by the inscription SEMPER GAUDEAT[IS] IN NOMINE DEI (“May you [two] rejoice always in the name of God”). Some historians have interpreted these Christian adaptations as mere markers of Christian identity, examples of “continuity by transference” that simply substitute a reference to a new patron deity in space formerly occupied by Juno, Concordia, Hercules, or Cupid. However, comparison with textual sources also makes it possible to consider these portraits as visualizations of distinctively Christian notions of marriage and familial life that were then developing.
Figure 20.8  Gold-glass medallion with portrait busts of a husband and wife, Christ placing crowns on their heads, and the legend DVLCIS ANIMA VIVAS (“Sweet soul, may you live”), ca. 360–390 CE. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, New York (photo flipped horizontally).

Figure 20.9  Gold-glass vessel base with woman and man dextrarum iunctio, floating crown, pillar, and legend VIVATIS IN DEO, ca. 360–390 CE. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, metmuseum.org, Rogers Fund, 1915.
References to Christ

Centrally placed references to Christ in spousal portraits, particularly the figure of Christ extending his arms to the pair, express the concept of a divine role in the couple’s relationship. In the image of Christus pronubus Christian viewers might have seen a connection to the biblical tradition that a husband and wife are “what God has joined together” (Matt 19:6; Mark 10:9)—a notion that grew in the consciousness of Christians at Rome over the course of the fourth century as they developed the practice of a nuptial blessing. The earliest unambiguous evidence for blessings pronounced by a bishop or presbyter upon a marrying couple comes from fourth-century Rome. The author known as Ambrosiaster, a presbyter writing at Rome between 366–384, alludes in several places to these blessings, indicating that the practice had become common by his time. Ambrosiaster refers to the divine formation of marriage when he states that the purpose of the blessing is “so that the creature of God may be joined under the blessing of God.”

The forming of marriage, traditionally a private matter that took place in the home, began to come under the authority of the church, whose clergy could speak to the role of deity in effecting the union. The bishop Ambrose, addressing his married parishioners, referred to “God, who is the author of your marriage,” and wrote, “Where there is harmony, God joins them together.” The reference to Catervius and Severina as “the two whom the all powerful Lord joined in sweet marriage” (possibly the statement of their bishop Probianus) likewise reflects this notion of marriage as a divinely-formed bond. Paulinus of Nola, too, expressed this concept in his wedding poem for Julian of Eclanum and Titia. Paulinus prays for the bride and groom, “Christ God, draw these paired doves towards Your reins, and govern their necks beneath Your light yoke [iugo, used figuratively of marriage].” The central role of Christ in the married relationship arises repeatedly throughout the poem. “Young people, you belong to Christ,” Paulinus reminds the newlyweds; “Christ as all in all must be our common Head.” Alluding to the wedding at Cana in the Gospel of John as one of the biblical examples of proper marriage, Paulinus states, “When Jesus' friends were married like this, He attended as a groomsmen [pronubus], and changed water into wine like nectar.”

The Verona Sacramentary, a collection of prayers compiled in the early sixth century, includes prayers for the nuptial veiling of a bride, and constitutes “the best claim to approximate the form of the blessing that would have been used in the late fourth-century church at Rome.” Three times the rite refers to the concept that the marriage is formed by God: “She is joined by your gift in the companionship of marriage”; “We beseech you, almighty God, . . . to keep in lasting peace those whom you will join in lawful union”; “Listen favorably, O Lord, to our prayers and graciously grant your help . . . so that what is joined by your authority might be preserved by your help.”

These liturgical and literary traditions suggest that a factor in the development away from Concordia wedding scenes was that Christus pronubus images could visually symbolize how Christians were conceptualizing the marriage of two believers as a divinely formed, blessed, and protected relationship. Though the role of an actual pronuba or pronubus at weddings might have been filled by a parent, family member, or priest pronouncing a blessing, Christians nevertheless imagined their unions created in an ultimate sense by deity, and developed visual and ritual ways to express this concept. It was an ideal Tertullian had extolled a century earlier:

What a bond is this: two believers who share one hope, one desire, one discipline, the same service! . . . Together they pray, together they prostrate themselves, together they fast, teaching each other, exhorting each other, supporting each other. Side by
“Secular” portraits

side in the church of God and at the banquet of God, side by side in difficulties, in times of persecution, and in times of consolation. . . . Seeing and hearing this, Christ rejoices. He gives them his peace. Where there are two, he also is present; and where he is, there is no evil.53

In portraits of a married pair with their children (Figures 20.2–3), centrally placed Christian symbols resonate with New Testament passages that re-described traditional household relationships between wife and husband, children and parents, and slaves and masters in terms of each member’s relation to Christ.54 The guiding hands of parents resting upon the shoulders of their children (Figure 20.3), a gesture often present in teaching scenes, visually suggests the role of parents in bringing up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Fourth-century homilies on these New Testament “household codes” urged the application of their ideals in Christian homes. John Chrysostom, for example, preached: “From the beginning God in His providence has planned this union of man and woman. . . . The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. . . . When harmony prevails, the children are raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbors, friends and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced.”55

Crowns

The iconographic element of the crown bestowed simultaneously on bride and groom (Figure 20.8) was a Christian innovation; as Ernst Kantorowicz remarked, it had not previously been a custom in Roman art to depict “the pronubus . . . acting at the same time as the stephanophorus, holding the bridal crowns over the heads of the couple.”56 The crown by itself also appeared above portraits of family groups.57 The form of crown in these Christian images is not the festive type seen in depictions of Dionysiac revelries, but the stephanos awarded to victorious emperors, military leaders, and athletes in prior Roman art.58 The iconography of the Christian coronation images seen especially in gold glasses was used not only for portraits of married couples, but also for pairs of saints such as Peter and Paul.59 Its form derived from imperial images; for example, a cameo of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus depicts the two emperors clasping right hands in mutual loyalty as a diminutive Victory between them places a wreath upon Marcus’s head.60

In fourth-century Christian art the crown became a symbol of spiritual victory, including the victory of Christ over death (see Figure 18.6), and the victory of martyrs. It evoked New Testament references to the crown of righteousness, the crown of life, and the crown of glory that would be the eternal reward of the faithful.61 When used in wedding scenes the crown could allude simultaneously to the practice of placing garlands on the bride and groom’s heads at wedding celebrations, and to a sense of religious merit in marriage, elevating the wedded pair to the status of spiritual victor. Some decades after these images began to appear in Rome, John Chrysostom remarked, “Crowns (stephani) are placed upon the heads of marrying couples as a symbol of victory, betokening that they approach the marriage bed unconquered by pleasure.”62

These spousal coronation images seem quite bold when one bears in mind that crowns in early Christian art were typically reserved for exceptional heroes of the faith like apostles, saints, martyrs, and Christ himself. In addition to symbolizing the “crown of life” promised to the faithful, images of crowns over couples and family groups participate rhetorically in a long Christian conversation regarding the relative merits of marriage and celibacy. Christian teaching on this subject was complex from its origins. Some New Testament passages subverted
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traditional familial loyalties or at least subordinated them to the new “family” of Christ’s followers, praised the unmarried for their undivided dedication to God, and referred to an angelic afterlife in which the faithful would not marry. Other passages advanced an ideal permanence of marriage and reinforced traditional, hierarchical family structures within the Christian community. In the fourth century, a tradition that virgins and celibate widows would receive a greater heavenly reward than married believers came into conflict with both Roman values (which prioritized marriage, childrearing, and familial stability as crucial to society) and strands of biblical tradition (which emphasized the goodness of creation and saw the blessing “be fruitful and multiply” spoken to Adam and Eve as a sign of divine approbation of marriage and procreation). Episodes during the fourth century give evidence of efforts by both church teachers and married laypersons to resist extremes of the ascetic ideal and construct a position of honor for the great majority of believers who did not choose to practice lifelong celibacy. The images Christians commissioned of married couples and family groups with crowns of eternal reward added a visual component to this fourth-century endeavor.

Christograms and crosses

The chi-rho, by definition an abbreviation of Christ, provided a visual alternative to a figure of Christ better suited for placement within small spaces on objects like gold glass medallions, gems, seals, and jewelry, or within pediments and spandrels on sarcophagi (Figures 20.1, 20.5). It could also signify “in Christ” and impart that status to portrayed individuals, couples, or family groups. From the time of Constantine it was a symbol of victory, the defeat of enemies, and divine protection and patronage. In the decades after Constantine’s accession the christogram gradually became a religious symbol representing victory over death. Its use in portraits of couples and family groups could express their hopes of Christian salvation, as well as the patronage and protection of the Christian God on behalf of their household. The adoption of this symbol from the imperial sphere into the domestic sphere came naturally to Romans, who had long regarded the household as a microcosm of the city and the empire. As Constantine and his successors had employed the christogram as a symbol of the divine oikonomia in safeguarding the empire, Christian families now adopted it to signify the divine care of the individual oikos.

In the late fourth century the cross began appearing between portraits of spouses on seals and the bezels of finger rings. It too invoked divine protection upon the married pair, an amuletic function that seems to have been amplified in later Byzantine jewelry. It also alluded to the conception of marriage as divinely formed, as described above. When Paulinus of Nola told the newlyweds Julian and Titia, “Let the holy cross be the yoke that pairs you together,” it may be that he had in mind not only the notion of a Christian marriage but also an increasingly popular image. Christians were seeking visual ways to express the concept that their marriages were “in Christ.”

A new form of representation

In addition to the foregoing adaptations made to received forms of portraiture, fourth-century Christians innovated the new strategy of representing spouses on sarcophagi as diminutive figures kneeling or bowing at the feet of Christ (Figure 20.10; see also Figure 22.3). Typically Christ was depicted at the center of the scene as a teacher or deliverer of the law, seated or standing, often upon the mount of Paradise, accompanied by two or more apostles. The husband and wife were placed at Christ’s feet to the viewer’s left and right, respectively. This form of representation, like earlier ones, located Christ at the center between spouses, but unlike
earlier portraiture it emphasized the figure of Christ, and represented spouses generically, with little to no individualizing features, suggesting rather their humility and piety in “permanent acts of worship” with strong allusions to the afterlife.74

Some scholars detect in this new iconography a declining interest in personal commemoration and a waning of the earlier panegyrical functions of sarcophagi.75 However, sarcophagi with small worshiping spouses sometimes contain additional, larger portraits of the pair, along with identifying inscriptions.76 Representations of couples at Christ’s feet may constitute a new, different type of visual panegyric, a redefining of honor in the late empire.

The iconography of worshiping spouses drew in part upon strategies used in imperial art to depict relationships of hierarchy and benefaction. In liberalitas and congiarium scenes, the seated emperor is depicted larger in scale than the recipients of his largesse at his feet, as can be seen on both Antonine and Constantinian reliefs on the Arch of Constantine. Images of a ruler’s display of clementia portrayed defeated barbarians as war captives throwing themselves at the feet of a seated general, weeping or kissing the general’s hand. A more proximate source for this new portrait-type was the kneeling figures in earlier sarcophagus reliefs illustrating Jesus’s miracles such as the raising of Lazarus, the healing of the Canaanite woman’s daughter, and the healing of the hemorrhagic woman (see Figures 19.4, 19.7). These scenes evoke biblical narratives in which supplicants plead at Jesus’s feet, or recipients of his teaching and miracles express gratitude and adoration by bowing down at his feet, kneeling at his feet, taking hold of his feet, or bathing his feet with their tears.77

For fourth-century viewers, there was potential to discern multiple nuances in portrayals of married sarcophagus owners at Christ’s feet. The representation of Christ as a teacher rather than an emperor or military conqueror would seem to subvert Roman imperial notions of power. The small figures portrayed at Christ’s feet would have been seen not as subjugated enemies, but as supplicants, hearers, and worshipers in the tradition of biblical figures whose lives were
affected by Jesus. Posing married grave owners as kneeling figures cast them in the role of individuals who, like their biblical forebears, were recipients of divine, saving power (compare Figure 8.7). (Paulinus of Nola urged Pneumatius and his wife Fidelis to such imitation: “Both of you must lick the holy feet of Christ the Lord, wipe them with your hair, and wash them with your tears.”78) Yet they might also be seen as subjects and beneficiaries of a benevolent heavenly sovereign, with ultimate allegiance to the kingdom of God even as they participated in the culture of the Roman Empire on earth.

In the visual hierarchy created by the relative size and locations of Christ, apostles, and spouses, the married grave owners claimed a place simultaneously humble and honored, close to Christ and his most revered followers. The couple’s larger portraits elsewhere on a number of the sarcophagi, sometimes accompanied by inscriptions, announce that they are worthy of remembrance and admiration as ones devoted to the Son of God and the church’s apostolic tradition.

**Conclusion**

In the Christian art of the third and fourth centuries, portraits of “secular” subjects such as couples and family groups adapted prior forms of Roman portraiture by incorporating figures or symbols of Christ. In addition to communicating the memory, identity, and presence of those depicted, these images can inform questions of religious history, including the question of how lay believers contributed, by visual means, to the Christianization of the Roman household during the faith’s formative period.

**Notes**


4 Literary evidence suggests that as early as the third or perhaps even the mid-second century CE, Christians were creating visual representations of revered figures such as Christ, apostles, Mary, and various saints, and images with these subjects grew increasingly popular from the late fourth century forward; see *Acts of John* 26–29; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.25.6; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.18; see also Katherine Marsenigil’s chapter in this volume. On gold glass, over half the surviving pieces contain images of Christ and saints, while the second largest group is of secular portraits; see Lucy Grig, “Portraits, Pontiffs, and the Christianization of Fourth-Century Rome,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 72 (2004): 205.


See Robert Couzin, “The Christian Sarcophagus Population of Rome,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 27 (2014): 284, 287–290; Andrew Meek, “Gold Glass in Late Antiquity: Scientific Analysis of the British Museum Collection,” in *New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass*, eds Chris Entwistle and Liz James (London: The British Museum, 2013), 128; Howells, *Gold Glass in the British Museum*, 61, 64. The fine art of individuals depicted in some gold glass portraits might allude to their wealth or class, but might have a panegyric function, and so cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of the owners’ wealth, much as the attribute of the scroll was used somewhat gratuitously and might not necessarily signal the bearer's literacy. The cost of metal disc seals was likely the weight of the silver, perhaps 1–2 *siliquae*, plus a modest work fee (with thanks to Jeffrey Spier, personal correspondence).


13 See discussion in Jensen, *Face to Face*, 37–42.


21 For further discussion of how double portraits served commemoration and patronage of married sarcophagus owners, see Birk, *Depicting the Dead*, 23–31, esp. 25.

22 To a “pagan” viewer, the shepherd might have seemed to be the traditional Hermes *croiphoros*, the bearer of departed souls safely into the afterlife; the bearded, togaed men holding scrolls at left and right might have appeared to be philosopher-types alluding to the spouses’ learnedness.


24 CIL IX, 5566: QVOS PARIBVS MERITIS VINXIT MATRIMONIO DVLCI / OMNIPOPOTENS DOMINVS T JMLVVS CUSTODIT IN AEVVM / CATERVVS SEVERINA TIBI CONIVNCTA LAETATVR / SVRGATIS PARITER CRISTO PRAESTANTE BEATI / QVOS DEI SACERDVS
“Secular” portraits

PROBIANV’S LAVTT ET VNXTI; my trans., with assistance from Dr Max Goldman, and with thanks to Jutta Dresken-Weiland and Robin M. Jensen for discussing details of the inscription with me. To my knowledge, this is the first publication of an English translation of this inscription.


26 Several sources identify this image only as the magi before Herod: Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, 53; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, Andreas Angerstorfer and Andreas Merkt, Himmel, Paradies, Schalom: Tod und Jenseits in christlichen und jüdischen Grabinschriften der Antike (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2012), 163; Nestori, Il Mausoleo e il Sarcofago di Flavio Iulio Caterius, 82; however, the king’s bust atop a column, as well as the Persian-style caps worn by the three youths, allude to the story in Daniel. For more discussion of the Hebrew Youths/Magi image as anti-pagan visual rhetoric, see Elsner, “Rational, Passionate, and Appetitive,” 342–346.

27 See Robin M. Jensen, “The Three Hebrew Youths and the Problem of the Emperor’s Portrait in Early Christianity,” in Jewish Art in its Late Antique Context, eds Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 303–320. Note: pediments on the lid with two lambs at wreathed christogram (right side), two lambs at staurogram (left), could be seen as allusions to the faith of the grave owners. If viewers processed counter-clockwise around the sarcophagus (favoring the right), they would have seen the images in this sequence of rejection and adoration.


29 Jerome, Epistle 23.


31 As proposed by Grabar, Christian Iconography, 62.


33 Staatliche Museen, Berlin, inv. no. 31329.


37 See Reekmans, “La d’extrarum iunctio,” 31–37; Reinsberg, “Concordia.”


39 E.g., Deichmann, Repertorium I, nos 86, 853, 952.

40 Morey, The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library, nos 29, 109, 240, 310, 397; cf. 50, 278; for an example of this image on a sarcophagus, see Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 922, cf. Joseph Wilpert, I Sarcofagi Cristiani Antichi, Vol. 1 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1929), Tav. 74.3; for an example on jewelry, see the gold marriage medallion, Metropolitan Museum of Art accession no. 58.12, also Weitzmann, Age of Spirituality, 307–308, no. 281. For a couple portrait in which the figure of Christ is identified by the inscription CRISTVS, see Garrucci, Vetti ornati di figure in oro, 29.3.

41 For examples of these varieties on sarcophagi, see Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 922; Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 148; for gold-glass examples, see Morey, The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library, nos 29, 98, 109, 240, 259, 310, 315, 397, 420, 440, 441, 447.
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46 Huskinson, “Reading Identity on Roman Strigilated Sarcophagi,” 90.


49 E.g., Morey, *The Gold-Glass Collection of the Vatican Library*, nos 25, 26, 40, 42, 45, 47, 48, 63, 64, 65, 66, 79.


51 David G. Hunter, “Nuptial Metaphor and Nuptial Reality: Early Christian Marriage Liturgy and the Formation of a Scriptural Imagination” (paper given at the Patristic, Medieval, and Renaissance Conference, Villanova University, October 17, 2015), 5. With thanks to Dr Hunter for calling my attention to this text and sharing his paper with me.


60 Cleveland Museum of Art, loan no. 7.2013, evidently made ca. 166 ce to celebrate Lucius’s victory over the Parthians.

61 E.g., 2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:2; Rev 2:10; 4:4; 1 Pet 5:4.

“Secular” portraits


66 See, e.g., Eusebius, Demonstratio Evangelica, 1.8, PG 22, 76–77; W. J. Ferrar, trans., The Proof of the Gospel, Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Cesarea (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 1.48–50; Concilium Gangrense, canons 1, 4, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, and epilogue, Ecclesiae Occidentalis Monumenta Iuris Antiquissima II.145–214; the teachings of Ambrosiaster, Helvidius, and Jovinian and their reception; see Hunter, Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy.


69 With thanks to Dr David A. Michelson for this insight.


72 Paulinus of Nola, Carmen 25, 192; CSEL 30, 244; trans. Searle and Stevenson, Documents of the Marriage Liturgy, 38.

73 Deichmann, Repertorium I, nos 217 (uncertain because fragmented and damaged), 241, 675, 679; Dresken-Weiland, Repertorium II, nos 149, 150; Chirstern-Briesenick, Repertorium III, nos 25, 80, 81, 291, 428; in two instances the kneeling figures at Jesus’s feet are both men, so the scene was not always intended for the representation of a husband and wife: Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 10 (uncertain, left figure damaged); Christern–Briesenick, Repertorium III, no. 32; cf. Peter and Paul as diminutive figures at Jesus’s feet: Deichmann, Repertorium I, no. 58; a lone woman at Jesus’s feet: Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, no. 151; Christern–Briesenick, Repertorium III, no. 160.

74 Elsner, “Rational, Passionate, and Appetitive,” 336, with reference to the sarcophagus of Catervius and Severina; Studer–Karlen, Verstorbenendarstellungen auf frühchristlichen Sarkophagen, 209.


76 E.g., Dresken–Weiland, Repertorium II, nos 149–150; other sarcophagi with kneeling figures are missing their lids, which might similarly have contained additional portraits and inscriptions. Elsner, “Rational,
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Passionate, and Appetitive,” 335–336, includes the sarcophagus of Catervius and Severina (Repertorium II, no. 148), seeing the acroteria busts of Catervius and Severina as genuflecting toward the Good Shepherd below in a variation on the motif of small figures at Jesus’s feet. Alternatively, they could be seen as turning toward each other and borne aloft on the lid above the Good Shepherd, like the sheep on his shoulders, lifted up by Christ to a place of honor and remembrance.


Further reading


Spier, Jeffrey. Late Antique and Early Christian Gems. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2007 (especially pages 18–25).