

## The Funerary Character and Symbolism of the First Christian Images\*

Sabina-Maria Azoitei \*\*

**Abstract:** *The first two centuries of our era constitute a period devoid of sacred images, and this aniconic phase of Christianity was not only determined by the observance of the Old Testament prohibition. The lack of interest of Jesus and the apostles towards the idea of preaching through images, the absence of information about the appearance of Christ, but also the precarious economic situation of the Christian community before the legalization of Christianity, are important factors that must be taken into account when discussing this absence of cultic representations characteristic of the first two Christian centuries. However, despite the initial aniconism, the development of the new cult in the Greco-Roman world, where images of divinities were omnipresent, led to the emergence of a Christian art. The first spaces dedicated to visual representations of the sacred are the catacombs. On the walls of the underground cemeteries, the adherents of the new religion depicted various symbols taken from the funerary repertoire of pagan imagery, which they adapted to acquire Christian significance, the cross, the fish, the vine and the lamb, included.*

**Keywords:** *aniconism, sacred images, symbols, catacombs, pagan imagery, Christian meaning*

### Aniconism from the dawn of Christianity

Historically, early Christianity, spanning from the 1st century to the end of the 5th century, can be divided into two main stages, before and after the year 313, when the Christian cult is officially recognized by the emperor Constantine the Great, using it as the ideological support of his imperial power. Christianity becomes the sole state religion at the end of the 4th century, in 380, under the reign of Emperor Theodosius the Great (379-395), who puts an end to the religious tolerance specific to the reign of Constantine, banning pagan cults. In the 5th century, the unity of the Roman Empire, already administratively divided, is destroyed by the barbarian

---

\* This article is an excerpt from my PhD thesis entitled *The Image of Christ in Christian Art. The transgressions of the representational canons in contemporary times.*

\*\* PhD student in the second year at the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, George Enescu University of Arts, Iași, sabinaazoitei@yahoo.com.

invaders, which will determine different artistic developments of Western and Eastern Europe.

In a first stage of development (1st and 2nd centuries AD), Christian art goes through an aniconic phase<sup>1</sup>, being influenced by Judaism, a religion constantly concerned with the implications of idolatry<sup>2</sup>, refusing the figurative representation of the sacred<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the divine command given to Moses and his people in Exodus 20:4 is respected: *You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any likeness of those who are above, in heaven, or below on the earth, or in the water and under the earth. Do not worship them.* For Jews, making images (especially statues) of God, the supreme being, constitutes an act of desecration<sup>4</sup>, since these are man-made objects, contain no divine essence, and are therefore not fit to depict the sacred. In any case, over the following centuries, the acceptability of the depiction of the deity would be debated by Jewish, Christian, as well as Islamic religious authorities.

Thus, at the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Titus, in 70 AD<sup>5</sup>, the commandment in the Decalogue is interpreted to mean a strict prohibition that does not admit visual representations of the divinity, nor of living beings, nor the display of such images in synagogues. This fear of idols also extends to the effigy of the emperor and the military insignia of the Roman armies. Therefore, the image of the emperor is not allowed either, because it implies a cult, a form of idolatry<sup>6</sup>. However, in environments where the influence of the scribes and Pharisees is not so strong, there is a more liberal tendency, which manifests itself from the second century onwards<sup>7</sup>, and which allows especially symbolic representations (the candlestick with seven arms – the *menorah*, the ram's horn with ritual function, the ark containing the Torah scroll. Diaspora Jewish communities also adopt plant, animal, and figurative motifs from the Greco-Roman iconographic repertoire. In other cases, synagogues may even house images from the Old Testament, such as the one at Dura-Europos, where you can see forty or fifty murals depicting episodes from the Hebrew Bible<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Very few material artifacts that have survived to the present day can be clearly associated with the Christians of the first two centuries of our era (Robin Margaret Jansen, Mark D. Ellison, *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, Routledge, 2018, *Introduction*).

<sup>2</sup> The word *idolatry* first appears in the New Testament, but equivalent terms exist in Hebrew and rabbinical literature (Cf. François Boespflug, *Dieu et ses images*, Ed. Bayard, Paris, 2008, p. 61).

<sup>3</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine/ First Christian Images*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 2002, p. 30.

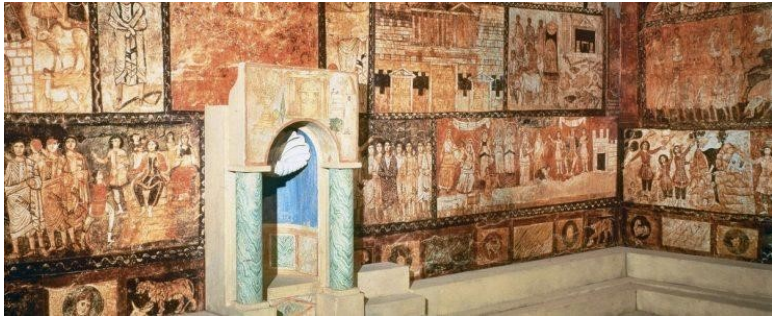
<sup>4</sup> François Boespflug, *Dieu et ses images*, Ed. Bayard, Paris, 2008, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *Ghid de artă creștină/Guide to Christian Art*, Ed. Casa Cărții, Oradea, 2009, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 16.



**Fig. 1** Synagogue interior, Dura Europos



**Fig. 2** *Moses Bringing Water Out of the Rock*, 3rd century, wall painting, Synagogue of Dura-Europos, Syria

The absence of cultic representations characteristic of the first two centuries of our era cannot be justified only by the Jewish origin of the Christian religion. There are several factors that should be considered when discussing this topic. From the beginning, Christianity is meant to be a faith without visual support – Christ shows no interest in images, and neither do the apostles. They do not embrace the idea of preaching through pictorial or sculptural images<sup>9</sup>, encouraging at the same time to abstain from everything that could have reminded of the cult manifestations specific to the Greco-Romans. In the case of Saint Paul<sup>10</sup>, the reluctance towards them takes the

<sup>9</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, pp. 57-60.

<sup>10</sup> Paul of Tarsus (AD 5-62) whose real name was Saul, was born into a wealthy Jewish family in the province of Cilicia, Asia Minor. This ensures him a classical education, being trained at

form of a declared aversion, harshly criticizing in his writings the cultic practices of the pagans<sup>11</sup>: *And they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of the image of the corruptible man and of the birds and of the four-footed and creeping things* (Romans, 1:23). This hostility is also present in the early Christian writers, especially the apologists – the Church Fathers of the first two centuries (Athenagoras, Justin the Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, etc.) generally concerned with defending the Christian faith. They express their disapproval of the making and use of images, arguing that God and matter are irreconcilable, and true faith does not need visual representations of the sacred<sup>12</sup>. Tertullian (155-220), one of the earliest Christian theologians and moralists<sup>13</sup>, regards idolatry as the fundamental sin of pagan mankind. Of all art forms, sculpture or the *carving of faces* is indisputably associated with idols, being considered by both Jews and Christians to be the archetype of Greco-Roman culture<sup>14</sup>.

Another factor worth considering, which may have delayed the appearance of Christian art and depictions of Christ, is the lack of information regarding his appearance. The New Testament writings are the most authentic sources that should inform us about the physical appearance of the Savior<sup>15</sup>. However, neither the Gospels nor the other New Testament epistles provide almost any information related to the physiognomy of Jesus. They speak only of His sermons and the miracles He performed, illustrating rather the beauty and gentleness of *His inner countenance*<sup>16</sup>. Even the episode of the *Transfiguration* on Mount Tabor does not give clues about his physical features: *And his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light* (Matthew 17, 2). Thus, we cannot speak of a literary portrait of Christ, as if his actions and teachings eclipsed his appearance<sup>17</sup>. In any case, this ignorance regarding the external appearance of Jesus opens the way to many hypotheses and divergent opinions and explains the diversity of

---

the same time in the mysteries of the Torah. He begins by persecuting Christians, but converts after having a vision of the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Shortly after his conversion, Saint Paul begins his missionary activity, propagating Christianity outside of Judaism, among the pagans. He dies as a martyr in Rome in the year 62, during the reign of Emperor Nero (Cf. Mircea Eliade, Ioan P. Culianu, *Dicționar al religiilor/ Dictionary of Religions*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2007, pp. 138-139).

<sup>11</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Numerous works on themes such as the defence of the faith, prayer and devotion, morality, as well as the first Christian book on baptism are linked to his personality, *De baptismo* (\*\*Enciclopedia Universală Britanică/ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Ed. Litera, București, 2010, pp. 184-185).

<sup>14</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-62.

<sup>15</sup> Archimandrite Sofian Boghiu, *Chipul Mântuitorului în iconografie/ The Face of the Savior in Iconography*, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2001, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

appearances attributed to him in apocryphal, theological writings, in hagiographical literature and, for several centuries, in art, determining, in the first millennium of the Christian era, a *polymorphism* of the figure of the Savior<sup>18</sup>.

We should also take into account other aspects that contribute to the maintenance of this aniconic phase of early Christianity, such as the precarious economic situation of the Christian community before the Constantinian era. A cult that glorifies the suffering of the oppressed does not generally attract citizens from the elite of society (who can afford to commission works of art), but from the humbler and poorer classes, such as servants or simple manual workers<sup>19</sup>. They are considered atheists and accused of all sorts of illegal acts by the authorities who resort to torture and persecution to stop the spread of Christianity. So, the unfavorable nature of their life circumstances does not allow them to leave behind many material possessions, let alone artistic expressions of their faith<sup>20</sup>.

However, the development of the new faith in the Greco-Roman world, where images are present everywhere, both in public spaces and in temples and private homes, eventually leads to the emergence of a Christian art, beginning in the 3rd century. Perhaps the followers of the new faith are beginning to realize the power of images in the spread of Christianity. Clement of Alexandria is the first Christian theologian to explicitly authorize the representation of certain iconographic motifs (*Paedagogus*, work written in the late 2nd or early 3rd century AD) on portable objects such as rings or seals<sup>21</sup>. The symbols are taken from the funerary repertoire of pagan imagery, being chosen due to their neutral character from a religious point of view and the semantic malleability that allows the appropriation of a Christian meaning – the dove, the fish, the ship pushed by the wind, the anchor, etc. These ornamental motifs, to which figurative ones and biblical narrative scenes will be added shortly, will be part of the iconographic ensemble characteristic of the funerary art of underground cemeteries and sarcophagi, marking the way to salvation through faith.

### **The Art of the Catacombs**

Before the Constantinian era and the official recognition of the Christian religion, the preferred spaces reserved for various representations with a sacred theme were the catacombs, those necropolises arranged along the circulation routes, beyond the edges of the big cities. They are set up in a terrain made of volcanic rocks, composed of galleries with many

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Hollingsworth, *Arta în istoria umanității/Art in Human History*, Ed. Enciclopedia Rao, București, 2008, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

ramifications that are usually arranged one above the other, thus forming several floors<sup>22</sup>. *Cubicles* are larger burial chambers found at the end of the galleries. *Loculi* are dug into the walls of these spaces, that is, individual graves, arranged one above the other to receive the bodies of the deceased, being similar to rectangular niches, closed vertically by a thin wall of marble, tiles or bricks. Epitaphs accompanied by symbols, engraved or painted, were found on these closing materials. The larger tomb is called *arcosolium*, being dug under an arch and closed by a horizontal slab<sup>23</sup>.



**Fig. 3** Catacomb of St. *Callistus*, Rome



**Fig. 4** Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome

---

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Christen, *Arta paleocreștină/Early Christian Art*, in \*\*\**Istoria artei/ Art History*, Larousse collection, coord. Albert Châtelet, Bernard Philippe Groslier, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2006, p. 310.

<sup>23</sup> Frédérick Tristan, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

Contrary to popular opinion, the catacombs were not clandestine meeting places of a persecuted religious community<sup>24</sup>, nor spaces where worship was celebrated in secret. Community graves dug underground were more reserved for funerary ritual and decoration. The followers of the new religion were against cremation because of their belief in the immortality of souls and the resurrection of bodies, and they could not even afford to buy plots of land for their own grave<sup>25</sup>. The authorities also knew about the catacombs, confiscating them twice, thus prohibiting them from practicing their new religion. The first time they were confiscated under the reign of Emperor Valerian (258-260), and the second time under Emperor Diocletian (303-310)<sup>26</sup>. The authorities considered them centers of rebellion, wanting to ban public gatherings in these spaces.

In the catacombs of Rome, Naples and Sicily, the earliest evidence of images with Christian significance has been found. Such cemeteries were not only discovered on the territory of Italy, but also in North Africa and Asia Minor. In Rome there is the most important set of catacombs<sup>27</sup>, and the area of these necropolises is very large, like the cemetery of Domitilla on Via Ardeatina or the catacomb of Saint Priscilla on Via Salaria, or that of Saint Callistus on Via Appia. In the same way that they take up and adapt Greco-Roman imagery to create images with Christian meaning, believers establish brotherhoods (*cultores*) after the pagan model. Those confraternities of Hercules, Jupiter, Diana and other deities are transformed by the first Christians into the confraternities of Lucinae, Priscillae, etc., the names of the first martyrs<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the underground cemeteries receive the names of those associations founded by them. Starting with the 5th century, these spaces were abandoned, the catacombs being transformed into places of pilgrimage<sup>29</sup>.

---

<sup>24</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Hollingsworth, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Frédérick Tristan, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> Jürgen Christen, *op.cit.*, p. 310.



**Fig. 5** *Hypogeum of Tellus*, catacomb on the Via Latina, Rome

Images depicting fish, sheep, crosses, vines, palm trees, anchors, seven-armed candelabra, doves, *canthari*, peacocks, etc. are some of the symbols most frequently used for the decoration, in the form of fresco<sup>30</sup> or engraving, of vaults and walls catacombs, carrying *the spiritual charge of the transition from the worldly, ephemeral life to the eternal one*<sup>31</sup>. They also appear on the walls of houses of prayer, as bas-relief on sarcophagi, as decoration on various household objects (glasses, cups, clay lamps, ceramic tableware), or on jewellery. The symbols most often represented on the latter

---

<sup>30</sup> The people in charge of creating these images generally used the *fresco* technique, which was most popular in the Mediterranean area. The walls were first plastered with a layer of gritty lime and sand mortar. On top of the first layer lay the second, thin one. After it dries, the third layer is applied. After the execution of the three layers of plaster with sand mortar, the putting began. The first layer of plaster was made with slightly grained marble mortar, and when this was spread and almost dry, a second layer of medium-thick marble mortar was spread. After it was well rubbed, a third thinner layer was spread. Thus, the walls, further to reinforcement with three layers of sand mortar and marble mortar, did not crack or suffer other damages (Cf. Bogdan Maximovici, *Arta tehnicilor murale/ The Art of Mural Techniques*, Ed. Art XXI, Iași, 2009, p. 162).

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Stoleriu, *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului/ Visual Representation of the Sacred*, Ed. Institutul European, Iași, 2013, p. 85.



are the anchor, the fish, the ship or the lyre<sup>32</sup>. All these symbols are reminiscent of those used by the Romans to illustrate the much-loved maritime, pastoral and harvest themes that often adorned the interiors of their homes. If in Greco-Roman art, these images suggested the beauty and richness of nature or alluded to the attributes of a god, in the Christian funeral context, the symbols acquire other meanings, referring to the person of the Savior, the Eucharist, the Resurrection or eternal life. There are also numerous wall paintings illustrating episodes from the Old Testament.

Although numerous symbols found on catacomb walls or sarcophagi may have Christic significance, only the cross, the fish, and the lamb are the symbols which, in the context of the catacombs, clearly refer to the person of the Savior<sup>33</sup>. Later to these simple symbols another suite of figures will be added, namely, the Good Shepherd, Orpheus among the wild beasts, Christ-Helios, and the ancient Teacher or Philosopher. The images that depict Christ in these poses will be enriched by joining the representations that narrate the miracles performed by the Savior or various episodes from the Old and New Testaments.

As for the color range, it was quite limited. The walls of the underground cemeteries were covered with a white background on which a geometric network of red, white, green and black lines was detached, the white of the walls and ceilings giving more depth to the surrounding space. Considering the fact that we are talking about an art that developed in the darkness of the catacombs, it was necessary for Christian artists to use bright and contrasting colors<sup>34</sup>. One can even speak of a symbolism of colors. White, the color of deities in many ancient beliefs, can be in Christianity a sign of grace, transcendence, revelation, but also a harbinger of death. Or it is the uncreated light that suggests divine love and the presence of the Holy Spirit<sup>35</sup>. Red symbolizes earth and life, vital energy, but it also refers to sacrifice, love, or it can mean hell fire. Green is symbolic of spiritual regeneration. Black, often having negative connotations, in early Christian art could suggest the night of divine ignorance or the mystery of the original creation<sup>36</sup>. Yellow, used later in Byzantine art especially in the rendering of halos, refers to Christ and eternal life.

---

<sup>32</sup> Codrina-Laura Ioniță, *Simboluri ale artei medievale/ Symbols of Medieval Art*, Editura Artes, Iași, 2009, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Arhim. Sofia Boghiu, *op.cit.*, p. 39

<sup>34</sup> Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, Wildwood House, 1988, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Codrina-Laura Ioniță, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.



**Fig. 6** *The Good Shepherd*, fresco, Cubiculum of the Veil, catacomb of St. Priscilla, Rome

Jews and Christians alike tended to avoid statuary art because of its widespread use in the cults of pagan Greco-Roman deities<sup>37</sup>. Instead, bas-reliefs are made on sarcophagi and small figures. Many of the sarcophagi from the early Christian period are decorated with the complex symbols of the Good Shepherd, the Teacher or the Philosopher. Of Oranta, with scenes of Old Testament salvation and with images of Baptism. At the end of the 3rd century, Christ begins to be represented in New Testament scenes. An example of an early Christian sarcophagus is the one housing the remains of Junius Bassus, from the 4th century, discovered under St. Peter's Basilica, Rome. The ancient colonnades frame scenes treated in a naturalistic manner illustrating: *Traditio legis*<sup>38</sup>, *Sacrifice of Abraham*, *Arrest of Peter*, *Arrest of Christ*, *Christ before Pilate* (upper register); *Job*, *Adam and Eve*, *Entry into Jerusalem*, *Daniel in the lions' den*, *St. Paul on his way to martyrdom* (lower

<sup>37</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> The transmission of the New Law by Christ to Saints Peter and Paul.

register). This iconographic arrangement tries to associate the martyrdom of the Fathers of the Roman Church with the passions of Jesus and with the Old Testament prophecies concerning him<sup>39</sup>.



**Fig. 7** *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 4th century, Treasury of St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican

\*\*\*

During the turbulent times at the dawn of Christianity, believers adopted various symbols taken from the pagan artistic ensemble and adapted them in such a way that they acquired a Christian meaning or depicted the Incarnate Christ. Not obviously suggesting belonging to the new cult, these iconographic motifs offer protection to Christians and have a very important role in the practice of the new cult, being a secret, initiatory recognition sign<sup>40</sup>, through which they can identify themselves as part of this religious community. Through the use of signs, the first Christians can manifest their faith, even if in a clandestine way; this was also a way by which they communicated more easily with each other. The first works of Christian art depict plant and animal symbols, to which later anthropomorphic ones will be added. These reasons can be found both in the culture and iconography of several ancient peoples and in the writings of the Old Testament, which have the role of transmitting the prophetic message.

Also, the importance of the symbol in the Paleo-Christian period resides in the fact that it assumed a detachment from polytheistic beliefs, through the attempt to reproduce the immaterial. For a pagan those images were part of Greco-Roman iconography and had a certain meaning, unable to penetrate their new meaning. Christians are the only people able to decode or

---

<sup>39</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Codrina-Laura Ioniță, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

interpret those symbols, as if access to salvation and eternal life is reserved only for those who have renounced paganism, embracing the new faith in Christ.

Therefore, these signs used by the first Christians during their life to prove their belonging to the new religion and to recognize each other, accompany them in the afterlife, being present on the walls of the hypogea and on the sarcophagi housed at their turn in crypts or chapels. In this funereal setting, they suggest the belief in the immortality of souls as well as the hope of resurrection.

The cross, the emblematic symbol of the Christian religion, is originally a universal sign, present in the culture and art of many ancient civilizations (Egypt, China, Crete), often symbolizing the meeting between heaven and earth<sup>41</sup>, between material and immaterial. According to some oriental legends, *the cross is the bridge or ladder on which human souls climb to God*<sup>42</sup>. This is a totalizing symbol, with a function of synthesis and measure, pointing to the 4 cardinal points and constituting the basis of all symbols of orientation, at the different levels of human existence<sup>43</sup>.



**Fig. 8** Cross and peacocks, bas-relief on sarcophagus, Basilica of *Sant'Apollinare in Classe*, Ravenna

In Christian iconography, the cross is the symbol of Christ, referring to his death by crucifixion and the Resurrection, constituting one of the characteristic symbols by which the followers of the new cult acknowledged

---

<sup>41</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *A Guide to Christian Art*, published by T&T Clark, London, 2020, p. 231.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionar de simboluri vol. I A-D/ Dictionary of Symbols vol. I A-D*, Ed. Artemis, București, 1994, p. 398.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 395.

themselves<sup>44</sup>. Artists of the early Christian centuries took up and adapted this symbol to suggest Christ's sacrifice and the permanent presence of Jesus: *where the cross is, there is the crucified*<sup>45</sup>. The cross, as a sign associated with Christ, becomes a symbol of victory over hell<sup>46</sup>. Sometimes the cross appears disguised under other symbols of pagan origin, such as the anchor or the trident.

In the art of catacombs but also as a decoration on sarcophagi, this symbol is rendered in various forms, such as the Latin cross with unequal arms, the Greek cross with equal arms, the cross of the Resurrection, thinner, etc. According to Christian tradition, Christ would have been crucified on a Latin cross, thus becoming a symbol of the Savior's Passion. The Greek cross, with its four equal arms, came to symbolize the church and to be used as the plan for most sacred edifices<sup>47</sup>, especially in the Orthodox space. Also, the cross can sometimes be associated with the Tree of Life, as it is an ancient tradition that the cross on which Christ was crucified was made of this wood<sup>48</sup>. Later, especially in Byzantine art, the cross will be represented on the nimbus of Christ, on the Gospel that he holds in his left hand when he is rendered as the Pantocrator, or in various scenes from the Passion Cycle, the best example being the Crucifixion. The cross, given that it is a symbol of the intermediary, of the meeting between the sacred and the pagan, is not only an image of sacrifice and redemption, but can also suggest the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human.

This Christian sign is often accompanied by various symbols that also refer to Christ or the Christian faith. The Chi-Rho symbol, an X over which a P is superimposed, these coming from the Greek letters chi, X, and rho, P, represents an abbreviation of the Greek word Christos, meaning *the Anointed One*. These together with the sign of the cross form the monogram of Christ, a hook-like sign on the right upper arm<sup>49</sup>. Other symbols that represent the Savior are the letters Alpha and Omega, also from the Greek alphabet, which mean the Beginning and the End: "I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End", says the Lord God, He who is, He who was and He who is comes, the Almighty (Revelation 1:8).

---

<sup>44</sup> Arhim. Sofian Boghiu, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, p. 397.

<sup>46</sup> Gabriel Herea, *Mesajul eshatologic al spațiului liturgic creștin. Arhitectură și icoană în Moldova secolelor XV-XVI/ The Eschatological Message of the Christian Liturgical Space. Architecture and Icon in Moldova in the XV-XVI Centuries*, Ed. Karl A. Romstorfer, Suceava, 2013, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *op.cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>48</sup> Arhim. Sofian Boghiu, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>49</sup> Michelle P. Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 18



**Fig. 9** Chi Rho and Alpha and Omega symbols,  
4th century, Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican

Also, dove or peacock symbols accompany this cross symbol in certain early Christian works. In Greco-Roman art, the dove, a symbol of love, was the bird of Aphrodite, suggesting the harmonious union of erotic love and purity, as well as the bond of affection between two lovers. This motif often appears on Greek funerary vessels, probably alluding to the immortal soul of man<sup>50</sup>. In Christian art, the dove primarily symbolizes the Holy Spirit, based on the Gospel according to Matthew: *As soon as He was baptized, Jesus came up from the water. And at that moment the heavens were opened and He saw the Spirit of God descending in the form of a dove and coming toward Him* (Matthew 3:16). But it can also suggest the spirit that leaves the body after death<sup>51</sup>. In the writings of the Old Testament, the dove was used in purification rituals<sup>52</sup>, thus being a symbol of purity, but it signifies hope and peace, especially when it brings an olive branch to Noah's Ark (Genesis 8:11).

<sup>50</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionar de simboluri vol. II E-O/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol II E-O*, p. 122.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 123.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Couchman, *The Art of Faith. A Guide to Understanding Christian Images*, published by Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 2012, p. 159.



**Fig. 10** Dove, catacomb of *St. Lorenzo*, Rome

The symbol of the peacock is also of pagan origin, being an image of beauty, pride and vanity, due to its special plumage. In Greco-Roman mythology, the peacock was the bird of Hera, the wife of Zeus, and was considered a solar symbol because it twirled its tail. It often appears on Roman funerary sarcophagi. This motif is also found in the culture of Asian peoples, especially in India, being associated with energy and solar rays, as well as the element of fire<sup>53</sup>. In the early days of Christianity, this sign appeared countless times on the walls of the catacombs. Christian artists assimilated this symbol to suggest immortality and eternal life, as it is said that after death, their flesh would not rot. Thus, the image of the peacock may represent Christ.



**Fig. 11** Peacock, fresco, catacomb of *St. Priscilla*, Rome

---

<sup>53</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri vol. III P-Z/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol III P-Z*, pp. 59-60.

The symbol of the vine, and by extension that of grapes and wine, was frequently represented in Greco-Roman art, especially in images depicting harvest scenes, being closely linked to the cult of Dionysus. This cult of the god of wine was associated with knowledge of the mysteries of life after death. Dionysus' connection with the mysteries of death, which are also of rebirth and knowledge, gave the vine a funerary symbolism that was later taken up by Christianity<sup>54</sup>.

In Christian iconography, the vine is the image of Christ, actually being a reference to his words: *I am the vine, you are the branches* (John 15:5). The connection between Jesus and the believers is like between the vine and its cords, and the wine is the symbol of his blood<sup>55</sup>. The symbol of the vine is closely related to that of the cross, because the latter represents the instrument of the Savior's Passion, and the color of the grapes and the wine, which are the fruit of the vine, recall the drama of Christ and his redemptive death, being at the same time a reference to the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Maritime themes are popular subjects in both Greco-Roman home decoration and ancient funerary art. However, the fish and the fisherman could have a specifically Christian resonance<sup>56</sup>, as they appear frequently in the writings of the New Testament, such as the Gospel of John, Luke or Matthew. The apostles are the fishers of men, and the future Christians are the fish. But it should not be overlooked that the fish motif has a universal character, as it was present in the art and mythology of several peoples of Antiquity (Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Phoenicians, Indians), being associated with cyclical birth or restoration<sup>57</sup>. At the same time, the fish is a symbol of fecundity, fertility and knowledge, because it, living in the seas and oceans, penetrates the mysteries of the unknown.



**Fig. 12** *Fish and basket of loaves*, fresco, catacomb of St. Callistus, Rome

<sup>54</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>55</sup> Arhim. Sofian Boghiu, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Robin Margaret Jensen, Mark D. Ellison (edit.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, Routledge, Philadelphia, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, p. 72.



In Christian iconography, the fish primarily represents Christ, as the Greek word *ichthys* (fish) is considered to be an ideogram, each letter of the word being the initial of a word in the phrase *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter* (Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Savior). This phrase thus summarizes the Christian doctrine, being its first confession of faith<sup>58</sup>. The fish can be a baptismal symbol (Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1). Baptism, through immersion in water, implies a spiritual rebirth<sup>59</sup>, Christ being the guide of people in this internal metamorphosis. On the walls of the catacombs, the fish may be an allusion to one of the foods eaten during the funeral meal<sup>60</sup>, but at the same time it may refer to the miracle of the sharing of loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13-21) or to the Eucharist, if accompanied by a basket with bread, as can be seen in a fresco in the Catacomb of St. Callistus, Rome. In this context, bread is the sign of essential, spiritual food<sup>61</sup>, representing the body of Christ. When the fish is represented next to an anchor, it represents the disciples of Jesus caught by the anchor of faith. The image of the fish on funerary inscriptions suggests belief in resurrection and hope in the afterlife<sup>62</sup>. The fish symbol is used in Christian art with these meanings until the 4th century, when it begins to be depicted less and less, especially in ornamentation, having a decorative character<sup>63</sup>.



**Fig. 13** *Fish caught by the anchor of faith, catacomb of Domitilla, Rome*

The symbol of the Dolphin is closely related to that of the fish, and can be considered a precursor of the latter in Christian iconography. It is par excellence a symbol of water and transfiguration, often depicted alongside

---

<sup>58</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>59</sup> Codrina-Laura Ioniță, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>60</sup> François Boespflug, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>61</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>62</sup> Codrina-Laura Ioniță, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>63</sup> Arhim. Sofian Boghiu, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

the trident and anchor. It appears frequently in Roman art, being associated with the image of Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon and Dionysus. According to a mythological legend, Dionysus was tied to the mast of the ship of some pirates who, after getting drunk, fell into the sea and were changed into dolphins. Thus, the dolphin becomes a symbol of regeneration<sup>64</sup>, and also of metamorphosis. In Roman funerary art, this water mammal is often depicted on sarcophagi, suggesting the passage of souls to the afterlife and its role as psychopomp, guide of the dead, an image that will be taken over by early Christian art. Thus, Christian iconography uses the symbol of the dolphin to depict Christ as the guide of people in the afterlife.

The dolphin symbolizes salvation and resurrection, due to its habit of swimming alongside the boats to show them the way, in the same way that Christ, through his words, guided his disciples and other believers. In certain early Christian depictions of the Jonah story, the dolphin replaces the whale. Also, in certain situations, in order not to create ambiguity between pagan and Christian meanings, the dolphin was associated with a cross, but when accompanied by the trident, it can be a reference to the Christian sacrifice<sup>65</sup>.



**Fig. 14** *Dolphin chained around the anchor,*  
mosaic from the House of the Trident, Delos

---

<sup>64</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri vol. I A-D/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol I A-D*, p. 439.

<sup>65</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *op.cit.*, p. 182.

The lamb which, in Christian art, became the symbol of Christ and His Passion, can be found in the culture of Mediterranean civilizations, suggesting innocence, renewal, the cyclical victory of life over death, as well as the salvation achieved through sacrifice<sup>66</sup>.



**Fig. 15** *Lamb of God among the saints, fresco, Catacomb of St. Peter and Marcellin, Rome*

The lamb, along with the other sheep (sheep and ram) occupies an important place in the Bible and the Koran, as well as in the religious iconography and symbolism of the Mosaic, Christian and Muslim communities. Lambs, sheep and rams were sacrificed in rituals, being sacrifices of salvation. The symbols of the lamb and the sheep appear frequently in the Old Testament because the patriarchs, being shepherds, had flocks of sheep<sup>67</sup>.

In early Christian art, the image of the lamb was used by believers to portray Christ, influenced by a passage in the Gospel of John, in which John the Baptist calls Christ the lamb of God: *Behold the Lamb of God, behold the One who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29). In Christian iconography, Christ is the sacrificial lamb for the forgiveness of people's sins. However, the figure of Jesus under the pose of a lamb could also have been determined by the prophecies of the Old Testament regarding the sacrifice of the Savior, such as the one in which Isaiah (53, verse 7 especially) announces

---

<sup>66</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionar de simboluri vol. II E-O/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol II E-O*, p. 299.

<sup>67</sup> Frédérick Tristan, *op.cit.*, p. 100.

the arrival of a tormented Messiah, symbolized by the image of a lamb to be sacrificed (Acts 8, 32)<sup>68</sup>.

Depending on how lambs or sheep are depicted, these sheep acquire various meanings within Christian art. On the walls of catacombs or on sarcophagi, flocks of lambs or sheep grouped around Christ the Shepherd may represent the faithful or the apostles. The lamb carrying the cross and bleeding from a wound is the *Lamb of God (Agnus Dei)*, which symbolizes Christ, also suggesting the Mystery of the Eucharist. A lying lamb was an image of the tortured Christ, while a standing lamb was a symbol for the triumphant Church. When the lamb is depicted with a cruciform nimbus it is a reference to the Risen Jesus<sup>69</sup>. Instead, when it appears represented on a mountain from which four rivers flow (the four rivers of Paradise and the four Gospels), the image is an evocation of a passage from the Apocalypse<sup>70</sup>: And I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion (Revelation, XIV, 1).

In early Christian art (up to the 4th century) images depicting the lamb and the cross could symbolize the Crucifixion, because in the first centuries of our era, Christians refused to paint Christ crucified, believing that a scene of torture would frighten the members of the new religious communities. Thus, the symbol of the lamb is represented to replace the crucified Jesus. In any case, starting from the 7th century, this image of Christ as a crucified lamb will no longer be used, as a result of the decisions of the Second Trullan Council held in Constantinople in 692 which decided that the image of the lamb should be replaced with the figure of the Saviour, to depict His incarnation, passions and redemptive death<sup>71</sup>.

The motif of the lion, in contrast to that of the lamb, was taken over by Christian iconography to portray Christ as well as the evangelist Mark. In a general sense, the lion is a solar symbol, of authority and wisdom, but at the same time it suggests arrogance, pride and ferocity. In Paleo-Christian art, the lion symbolizes regeneration and rebirth, and certain sarcophagi are decorated with this motif. The lion can also be a symbol of the Father, the Master and the Sovereign, being an image of God. At the same time, it can refer to the tyrant blinded by the power he possesses, or even to the devil<sup>72</sup>. Also, the lion appears on the walls of the catacombs alongside Daniel, signifying death that was conquered by Christ or being an allusion to the persecution of Christians.

---

<sup>68</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

<sup>69</sup> Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>70</sup> Frédéric Tristan, *op.cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>71</sup> Gabriel Herea, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>72</sup> Codrina-Laura, *op.cit.*, p. 88.



**Fig. 16** *Samson fighting the lions, fresco, Via Latina catacomb, Rome*

If in the Old Testament most of these symbols had the quality of a verbal image of a revelation, in Christianity they acquire visual qualities, associated with the destiny of Christ and his redemptive death. Although after the emergence of Christian art from the darkness of the catacombs, the anthropomorphic representation begins to prevail as a visual symbol of the sacred, based on the fact that Christ became incarnate and suffered on the cross, the prophetic symbol is not completely removed, it continues to be part of the whole Christian iconography, with the function of suggesting the fulfilment of prophecy<sup>73</sup>.

Translated by Ana-Magdalena Petraru, lect. PhD

---

<sup>73</sup> Gabriel Herea, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

**List of illustrations:**

**Fig.1** Synagogue interior, source Dura Europos, <https://silouanthompson.net/2008/07/duraeuropos/>.

**Fig.2** *Moses Bringing Water Out of the Rock*, 3rd century, wall painting, Synagogue of Dura-Europos, Syria, source <https://ro.pinterest.com/pin/68187381840093744/>

**Fig.3** Catacomb of St. *Callistus*, Rome, source <https://www.ancient.eu/uploads/images/9304.jpg?v=1539076675>

**Fig.4** Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, source By Dnlor 01 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32602960>

**Fig.5** *Hypogaeum of Tellus*, catacomb on the Via Latina, Rome, source <https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/zearly/1/2mural/5vialati/latina1.html>

**Fig.6** *The Good Shepherd*, fresco, Cubiculum of the Veil, catacomb of St. Priscilla, Rome, source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombs\\_of\\_Rome#/media/File:Good\\_shepherd\\_02b\\_closet.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacombs_of_Rome#/media/File:Good_shepherd_02b_closet.jpg)

**Fig.7** *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 4th century, Treasury of St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican, source personal archive

**Fig.8** Cross and peacocks, bas-relief on sarcophagus, Basilica of *Sant'Apollinare in Classe*, Ravenna, source <https://ar.pinterest.com/pin/393361348696563419/>

**Fig.9** *Chi Rho and Alpha and Omega* symbols, 4th century, Pio Cristiano Museum, Vatican, source <https://earlychurchhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Chi-Rho-Symbol.jpg>

**Fig.10** *Dove*, catacomb of St. *Lorenzo*, Rome, source <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/319051954824547914>

**Fig.11** *Peacock*, fresco, catacomb of St. *Priscilla*, Rome, source <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/88312842662750670/>

**Fig.12** *Fish and basket of loaves*, fresco, catacomb of St. *Callistus*, Rome, source <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/385620786820761131/>

**Fig.13** *Fish caught by the anchor of faith*, catacomb of Domitilla, Rome, source <http://www.jesuswalk.com/christian-symbols/fish.htm>

**Fig.14** *Dolphin chained around the anchor*, mosaic from the House of the Trident, Delos, source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaics\\_of\\_Delos#/media/File:Delos\\_Haus\\_des\\_Dreizacks\\_05.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaics_of_Delos#/media/File:Delos_Haus_des_Dreizacks_05.jpg)

**Fig.15** *Lamb of God among the saints*, fresco, Catacomb of St. Peter and Marcellin, Rome, source <https://www.akg-images.co.uk/archive/Lamb-of-God-between-Saints-2UMDHU1GIJWM.html#/SearchResult&ITEMID=2UMDHU1GIJWM&POPUPPN=1&POPUPID=2UMDHU1GIJWM>

**Fig.16** *Samson fighting the lions*, fresco, *Via Latina* catacomb, Rome, source [olarey.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Samson-wrestling-with-the-lions-00.jpg](http://olarey.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Samson-wrestling-with-the-lions-00.jpg)

**Bibliography:**

\*\*\*, *Age of Spirituality. Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 19, 1977, through February 12, 1978, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979.

\*\*\*, *Arta. O istorie ilustrată/ Art. An Illustrated History*, editorial consultant Andrew Graham-Dixon, Ed. Litera, București, 2020.

\*\*\*, *Istoria vizuală a artei/ The Visual History of Art*, coord. Claude Frontisi, Editura RAO, București, 2007.

\*\*\*, *Enciclopedia Universală Britanică/ Encyclopedia Britannica*, Editura Litera, București, 2010.

**APOSTOLOS-CAPPADONA, Diane**, *A Guide to Christian Art*, T&T Clark Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, 2020.

**ARHIM. BOGHIU, Sofian**, *Chipul Mântuitorului în iconografie/ The Face of the Savior in Iconography*, Ed. Bizantină, București, 2001.

**BECKWITH, John**, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, Yale University Press, 1986.

**BOESPFLUNG, François**, *Dieu et ses images*, Editura Bayard, Paris, 2008.

**BROWN, Michelle P.**, *Ghid de artă creștină/ Guide to Christian Art*, Ed. Casa Cărții, Oradea, 2009.

**CHÂTELET, Albert** (coord.), **GROSLIER, Bernard-Philippe** (coord.), *Istoria artei/ Art History*, Larousse collection, Ed. Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2006.

**CHEVALIER, Jean, GHEERBRANT, Alain**, *Dicționar de simboluri vol. I A-D/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol I A-D*, Editura Artemis, București, 1994.

**CHEVALIER, Jean, GHEERBRANT, Alain**, *Dicționar de simboluri vol. II E-O/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol II E-O*, Editura Artemis, București, 1994.

**CHEVALIER, Jean, GHEERBRANT, Alain**, *Dicționar de simboluri vol. III P-Z/ Dictionary of Symbols Vol III P-Z*, Editura Artemis, București, 1994.

**COCAGNAC, Maurice**, *Simbolurile biblice, Lexic teologic/ Biblical symbols, Theological Lexicon*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1997.

**COUCHMAN, Judith**, *The Art of Faith. A Guide to Understanding Christian Images*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, 2012.

**DANIÉLOU, Jean**, *Les symboles chrétiens primitifs*, Points, 1996.

**ELIADE, Mircea, CULIANU, Ioan P.**, *Dicționar al religiilor/ Dictionary of Religions*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2007.

**ELIADE, Mircea**, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase, vol.2. De la Gautama Buddha până la triumful creștinismului/ History of Religious Beliefs and Ideas, vol.2. From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, Editura Polirom, 2011.

**GOMBRICH, E.H.**, *Istoria artei/ Art History*, Editura Art, București, 2020.

**HEREA, Gabriel**, *Mesajul eshatologic al spațiului liturgic creștin. Arhitectură și icoană în Moldova secolelor XV-XVI/ The Eschatological Message of the Christian Liturgical Space. Architecture and Icon in Moldova in the XV-XVI Centuries*, Ed. Karl A. Romstorfer, Suceava, 2013.

**HOLLINGSWORTH, Mary**, *Arta în istoria umanității/ Art in Human History*, Editura Enciclopedia Rao, București, 2008.

**IONIȚĂ, Codrina-Laura**, *Simboluri ale artei medievale/ Symbols of Medieval Art*, Editura Artes, Iași, 2009.

**JENSEN, Robin M.**(edit.), **ELLISON, Mark D.** (edit.), *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, Routledge, 2018.

**JENSEN, Robin-Margaret**, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, Routledge, New York, 2000.

**MAXIMOVICI, Bogdan**, *Arta tehnicilor murale/ The Art of Mural Techniques*, Ed. Art XXI, Iași, 2009.

**MILBURN, Robert**, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, Wildwood House, 1988.

**STOLERIU, Adrian**, *Reprezentarea vizuală a sacralului/ Visual Representation of the Sacred*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2013.

**TRISTAN, Frédérick**, *Primele imagini creștine. De la simbol la icoană secolele II-VI/ The First Christian Images. From Symbol to Icon II-VI Centuries*, Editura Artă și Religie, București, 2002.

**WILLIAMSON, Beth**, *Christian Art. A very short introduction*, Editura Oxford University Press, New York, 2004.