Pr. conf. univ. dr. Cristian Gagu,
Facultatea de Istorie, Filosofie şi Teologie,
Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos" din Galaţi

THE CEMETERY ENVIRONMENT AND THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIAN SACRED ART

Abstract: Any general perspective on Christian sacred art and, therefore, on its history and evolution, implies a reference to its beginnings, which, as evidenced by the evidence that has come down to us, are related to the cemetery environment. The specialized works, which investigate, catalog and interpret the evidence regarding the beginnings of Christian art are numerous, and their authors agree in stating that the beginnings of Christian art are related to the cemetery environment. The present study aims to highlight, once again, the causal link between the cemetery environment in the catacombs of Rome, and not only, and the beginnings of Christian sacred art, with the means and ways of its manifestation, with the first iconographic themes used and their significance. and, last but not least, with the worship of the early Church.

Keywords: catacomb, cemetery, sarcophagus, symbol, icon, sacred art, painting / sculpture.

Introduction

As exponents of the Jewish religious milieu from which they came out, for which the prohibition of the Second Commandment of the Decalogue was the norm, the Holy Apostles, being concerned with preaching the gospel through the word, spoken or written, did not address the issue of Christian reporting in their writings to the sacred images, although they also addressed the pagans, for whom they played an important role in religious life. The warning *"beware of idols"* (I Jn 5:21), by which Saint John the Apostle drew the attention of the early Christians, at the conclusion of his first catholic epistle, to the danger of idolatry, without insisting on this subject, fully reflects the attitude

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initial general view of Judeo-Christians towards the representations that could be associated with idols.

The aniconic attitude of Judeo-Christians has been perpetuated during the first three centuries of Christian life in the midst of Christian currents and we find it in the writings of some of the Christian apologists addressed to the heathen. In *Protrepticus* addressed to the Greeks, Clement of Alexandria (150-215) strongly opposes any use of art by Christians, whether figurative or sculptural. Clement's arguments are based, on the one hand, on Christian teaching, which states that "the image of God is not an object of sense made from matter perceived by the senses, but a mental object. God, that is, the only true God, is perceived not by the senses but by the mind"[1] and, on the other hand, on the immoral use of art by the Greeks. Clement accuses them of using the tools of art, whether figurative or sculptural, to depict the "shameful desires of the gods" and to adorn their homes with "obscene paintings"[2].

> "Look, too, at other of your images – Clement wrote to the Greeks – little figures of Pan, naked girls, drunken satyrs; and obscene emblems, plainly exhibited in pictures, and self-condemned by their indecency. More than that, you behold without a blush the postures of the whole art of licentionsness openly pictured in public. [...] We declare that not only the use, but also the sight and the very hearing of these things should be forgotten"[3].

After such a description of the immorality promoted by pagans through art, the statement by Clement summarizes the attitude of some Christians toward art, "we (Christians) are expressly forbidden to practice a deceitful art"[4], it imposes itself.

Tertullian (155/160-220), addressing the question of the arts in general and the representation of the gods in particular, stated neither

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1. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Cohortatio ad gentes (Protrepticus)", cap. IV, in: J. P. MIGNE, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca (P. G.)*, vol. VIII, col. 145A.

2. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Cohortatio ad gentes (Protrepticus)", cap. IV, *P. G.*, vol. VIII, col. 160A.

3. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Cohortatio ad gentes (Protrepticus)", cap. IV, *P. G.*, vol. VIII, col. 160C.

4. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Cohortatio ad gentes (Protrepticus)", cap. IV, *P. G.*, vol. VIII, col. 161B.

more nor less that sculpture and painting were suggested to man by demons.

> "Further, as regards the arts, he wrote in *De spectaculis*, we ought to have entered our demurrer at an earlier point and pled that the demons from the very beginning took thought for themselves and among the other pollutions of idolatry devised those of the spectacles for the purpose of turning man from his Lord and binding him to their own glorification, and so inspired these ingenious arts"[5].

The aniconic attitude also characterized Bishop Eusebius (265-339) of Caesarea of Palestine, who stated that the representation of the face of the Savior Jesus Christ with lifeless lines and colors could not be allowed. In his *Epistle to Constantia Augusta*, Eusebius stated:

> "Who would be able to represent with the help of lifeless colors and of the inanimate lines the flashing radiance of such worthiness and glory, when even his wonderful disciples could not bear to see Him in this appearance and covered their faces, thus showing that they could not bear the sight?"[6]

We find in Eusebius the same argument that Clement of Alexandria produced a century earlier.

At that time we could speak not only of the individual voices of some bishops from the eastern part of the Christian world, but also of that of the bishops gathered around the year 305 or 306 at the synod of Elvira, in Spain. In its canon 36, the synods stated: "We liked to decide that paintings should not be in the church and that what is honest and adored should not be painted on the walls"[7].

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5. TERTULIANUS, "De Spectaculis", cap. X, in: J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina (P. L.)*, vol. I, col. 643BC; in French, TERTULIEN, *Les spectacles*, X, 12, introduction, texte critique, traduction et commentaire de Marie Turcan, dans *Sources chrétiennes*, 332, Paris, 1986, p. 197.

6. EUSEBIUS Caesareae, "Ad Constantiam Augustam", *P. G.*, vol. XX, col. 1545C; cited also in Joannes MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, vol. XIII, Florence, 1767, col. 314A.

7. G. BAREILLE, "Elvire, Concile d'", in: *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, IV/2, 1924, col. 2378; C. J. HEFELE, *A History of the Christian Councils, from the original documents*, vol. I, book I, chap. III, sec. 13, translated and edited by William R. Clark, second edition, revised, Edinburgh, 1872, p. 151; Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*,

However, the prohibition of canon 36 of the synod of Elvira does not seem to be based on the Second Commandment of the Decalogue. Its purpose, given the historical context against the Church at that time, at the beginning of the last and most cruel persecution of antiquity, would have been to protect the icons from desecration, rather than to prohibit their representation and worship. In support of this interpretation can be cited the case of the church in Nicomedia, desecrated and destroyed in 303 by soldiers of the imperial army in the presence of Emperor Diocletian, on which occasion, according to Lactantius[8], was sought "simulacrum dei"[9].

And yet, even at a time when some important representatives of Christians, such as Tertullian, Clement, Eusebius of Caesarea, and others, had such an attitude contrary to figurative art, Christians, especially those from the heathen, began to use the tools of art to assert one's Christian identity, for latreutic or catechetical purposes. Even Clement noted the use of symbolic images by Christians, which he did not reject, showing instead that a Christian could not represent on the seal of the ring any symbolic image, but only those that referred to the Christian faith:

> "And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, wich Polycrates used, or a siph's anchor, wich Seleucus got engraved as a device; and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water"[10].

prefață Nikolai Ozolin, traducere Ciprian Vidican și Elena Derevici, Ed. Renașterea / Patmos, Cluj-Napoca, [2]2012, pp. 20-21; Frédérick TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine. De la simbol la icoană secolele II-VI*, traducere de Elena Buculei și Ana Boroș, Ed. Meridian, București, 2002, p. 137.

8. LACTANȚIU, *De mortibus persecutorum / Despre moartea persecutorilor*, XII, ediție bilingvă, traducere de Cristian Bejan, studiu introductiv, tabel cronologic, note explicative și anexe de Dragoș Mîrșanu, Ed. Polirom 2011, pp. 68-69.

9. Remus RĂDULESCU, "Icoanele în Biserica creștină primară", în: *Cinstirea sfintelor icoane în Ortodoxie, Retrospectivă istorică, momente cruciale de stabilire a teologiei icoane și de criză majoră*, Ed. Trinitas, 2008, pp. 56-59.

10. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Pedagogus", III, cap. XI, in: *P. G.*, vol. VIII, col. 634B.

In turn, Eusebius of Caesarea recorded in *Ecclesiastical History* that the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and healed by touching the lap of the Savior's robe had erected a statue of Him in front of her house[11], concluding that

> "nor is it strange that those of the Gentiles who, of old, were benefited by our Savior, should have done such monument to him, since we have learned also that the likenesses of his apostles Paul and Peter, and of Christ himself, are preserved in paintings, the ancients being accustomed, as it is likely, according to a habit of the Gentiles, to pay this kind of honor indiscriminately to those regarded by them as deliverers"[12].

In fact, the existence of an icon of the Savior Jesus Christ since the middle of the third century seems to be confirmed by the Roman historian Aelius Lampridius. According to him, the Roman emperor Alexander Severus (222-235), in the morning, whenever time allowed,

> "he would worship in the sanctuary of his Lares, in wich he kept statues of the deified emperors – of whom, however, only the best had been selected – and also of certain souls, among them Apollonius, and, accordind to a contemporary writer, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus, and others of this same character [...]"[13].

The symbols listed by Clement, the most important of those used by Christians in the II-IV centuries to confess and assert their Christian identity, were engraved by them not only on rings, but also on light bulbs, on lamps of oil, on amphorae or on some objects for domestic use. Also, some of them were included in the

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11. This fact was also recorded by Antipater de Bostra, his account being quoted in the fourth meeting of the VIIth ecumenical council, not that of Eusebius of Caesarea, cf. MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum...*, vol. XIII, col. 14E, 575CE; C. J. HEFELE, *A History of the Council of the Church, from the original documents*, vol. V, book XVIII, chap. II, sec. 351, translated and edited by William R. Clark, Edinburgh, 1896, p. 368.

12. EUSEBIUS Caesareae, "Historia Ecclesiastica", VII, cap. XVIII, in: J.-P. MIGNE, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca,* vol. XX, col. 680C-D.

13. Aelius LAMPRIDIUS, *The Life of Severus Alexander,* chap. XXIX, coll. *Historia Augusta*, part II, Loeb Classical Library, 1924, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Severus_Alexander/2*.html, accessed on 02. 09. 2021; André GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395),* Gallimard, 1966, p. 287.

compositions of the figurative images represented on the walls of the baptisters and those of the catacombs in which the Christians were buried, indicating the identity and the Christian meaning of these compositions[14]. Unfortunately, due to the destruction caused in the East by the iconoclasts, in the VIII-IX centuries, by the battles fought by Muslims and crusaders, as well as by the passage of time, except for the church-house from Dura-Europos whose baptistery was preserved until in our time[15], the only sources for documenting the emergence and evolution of Christian sacred art in the I-IV century have remained the catacombs, especially those in Rome, which are in greater numbers and have been much better preserved[16]. To these are added a few others from Naples, about which A. Grabar states that, although not in a very good condition, it preserves the oldest Christian paintings, which probably belong to the beginning of the second century[17], Sicily, Malta, Tunisia[18], necropolises from Egypt[19],

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14. L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 58.

15. Carl Hermann KRAELING, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II: The Christian Building*, with a contribution by Charles Bradford WELLES, New Haven & Dura-Europos Publications, New York, 1967; Michael PEPPARD, *The World's Oldest Church. Bible, Art, and Ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria*, Yale University Press, New Haven&London, 2016; Lisa BRODY and Gail HOFFMAN, *Dura-Europos: Crossroads of Antiquity*, Boston: McMullen Museum of Art/Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011; M. PEPPARD, "Illuminating the Dura-Europos Baptistery: Comparanda for the Female Figures", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2012, pp. 556-571; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 59-63, 67-80.

16. H. D. M. SPENCE-JONES, *The Early Christians in Rome*, book IV, Methuen & Co., London, 1910, pp. 219-289; Walter LOWRIE, *Christian Art and Archaeology, being a handbook to the Monuments of the Early Church*, Macmillian and Co., New York / London, 1901.

17. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 81.

18. J. STEVENSON, *The Catacombs. Rediscovered monuments of early Christianity*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978, pp. 7, 131-153.

19. Matthew MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel, Bagawat Necropolis, Kharga Oasis, Egypt", in: John BURKE, Ursula BETKA, Penelope BUCKLEY, Kathleen HAY, Roger SCOTT, Andrew STEPHENSON, (eds.), *Byzantine Narrative, Papers in Honour of Roger Scott*, Byzantina Australiensia, 16, Melbourne, 2006, pp. 233-257; Charles DELVOYE, *Arta bizantină*, vol. 1, traducere de Florica-Eugenia Condurachi, prefață de Vasile Drăguț, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1976, pp. 38-39.

Palestine[20], Thessaloniki[21] and even in the Lower Danube area[22], as well as sarcophagi used by Christians for burial.

1. The symbols and themes
of Paleo-Christian sacred art from the catacombs of Rome

Domitilla, Priscilla, St. Callixtus, St. Peter and Marcellinus, Coeme-terium Majus, are the most important catacombs in Rome where the frescoes of Paleo-Christian art, depicted on the walls and arcosoliums[23] of the hypogea[24] where Christians were buried, have been preserved. In this environment appeared and have been preserved the most important symbols and themes of Christian sacred art, inspired either by the Old and New Testament scriptures or by the cult of the Church, whose princeps role was to express and transmit the Christian faith[25].

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20. Emma MAAYAN-FANAR, "An Early Christian Tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot: Formation of Christological Symbolism", in: *Eastern Christian Art*, 7(2010), pp. 71-89; Emma MAAYAN-FANAR, "Unknown Early Christian Tombs in Shefar'am – in Pursuit of a Solution to an Iconographic Enigma", in: *ΣΥΜΜΕΙΚΤΑ*, Collection of Papers Dedicated for the 40ᵗʰ Anniversary of the Institute for Art History, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, 2012, pp. 27-39.

21. Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 48, nota 1; Robin JENSEN, "Art", in: Philip F. ESLER (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, volume I-II, Routledge, London & New York, 2000, pp. 751, 753; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 81.

22. Ioana MUREŞAN, "The Painted Roman Tomb on the Lower Danube. Aspects Regarding the Crossover from Paganism to Christianity in Funerary Symbolism", in: *Studia Academica Šumenensia*, 3, 1916, pp. 125-153; Ivana POPOVIĆ, "The Architectural Elements of the Profane Structures and the Motif of 'Railing of Paradise' in the Early Christian Tombs in Sirmium", in: *Studia Academica Šumenensia*, 3, 1916, pp. 224-238; Julia VALEVA, "Les nécropoles paléochrétiennes de Bulgarie et les tombes peintes", in: *Actes du XIᵉ congrès international d'archéologie chrétienne. Lyon, Vienne, Grenoble, Genève, Aoste, 21-28 septembre 1986, Publications de l'École française de Rome*, 123, Rome, 1989. pp. 1243-1258; J. VALEVA, "La peinture funéraire dans les provinces orientales de l'Empire Romain dans l'antiquité tardive", in: *Hortus Artium Medievalium, Journal of the International Research Center for Late Antiquity and Middle Ages*, vol. 7, Zagreb, 2001, pp. 167-208.

23. Arcosolium – arched niche, hollowed out in the soft rock of the catacombs, used as a burial place.

24. Hypogeum – a building or room dug in stone, most often underground, with several rooms, in which several sarcophagi could be deposited.

25. L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 49.

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1.1. The symbols of Christian art in the cemetery environment in the I-IV centuries. The most common symbols depicted by Christians in the first two centuries were taken over by them under the influence of Jewish messianic circles, whose followers used such symbols, which they obviously gave a strict meaning related to faith in Christ. Of these symbols, generally used in the cemetery environment, either carved or painted on the walls of catacombs, or carved on sarcophagi or funerary stars, some have become widespread over time, being adopted by all Christians, while others, over time, were abandoned.

The first symbol in this category, found especially in the Palestinian area, is *thav* (+; x), the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This symbol is loaded with messianic meanings and refers to the prophecy of Ezekiel, by which God commanded the angel to mark on the forehead with this sign all the elect. During the period when Judeo-Christians used this sign as a symbol, they did not yet associate it with the sign of the cross[26]. Soon, converted Christians among the pagans tributary to the Greek language replaced the Hebrew *thav* with the Greek *tau* (τ), due to the homophony of the two letters, and x, the graphic sign of the Hebrew *thav*, was absorbed into the Greek *hi* (χ), the initial of the Greek name XPISTOS. The other spelling of *thav*, +, as well as the letter τ, T, were assimilated with the sign of the cross[27]. Already in the second century, the sign of the cross incised in *tau* form (T) appears frequently in the catacombs of Rome, most often disguised by its integration in the name of the deceased, so as not to be probably desecrated. This is how it appears about thirty times in the cemeteries of Priscilla, Domitilla, Saint Callixtus, Saints Peter and Marcellinus, as well as on sarcophagi, funerary stars[28] or on some gems[29].

Among the Jewish symbols taken over by Judeo-Christians were the palm branch, the crown, the vine. The palm branch symbolized, in

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26. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, p. 29.

27. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 52-53.

28. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 58-60; Emilian Popescu, *Crucea și răstignirea Mântuitorului Iisus Hristos în creștinismul timpuriu*, Basilica, București, 2016, pp. 9, 13.

29. E. Popescu, *Crucea și răstignirea Mântuitorului Iisus Hristos...*, pp. 18-20.

a messianic context, the paradisiacal era, the Last Judgment, while the palm or laurel wreath symbolized participation in the divine glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. Over time, under the influence of Greco-Roman symbolism, the palm branch came to signify Christ's victory over death through His resurrection[30]. The vine referred to the "vineyard" that the right hand of the Lord planted, to the new Israel, which are the Christians[31]. In the Christian tombs from the 4th-5th centuries in the area of the Holy Land, another symbol borrowed from the Jewish tradition appears, unknown to the Roman cemetery environment, namely the pomegranate, as a symbol of immortality[32].

To protect the sign of the holy cross from desecration, Christians disguised it in graphic symbols similar to it, taken from the pagan tradition with the increase in the number of converts among the Gentiles, such as the *ascia* (*fossoria* or *lapidaria*), the sign of a carving tool, in the stone, in the woods, or digging the earth, the shape of today's pickaxe most likely, and the *anchor*, called by researchers *crux dissimulata*.

The first of these symbols is closely linked to the cemetery environment even through the use of the tools to which it refers, the *ascia fossoria* being used to clean the surface graves of the grasses that attacked them, while the *ascia lapidaria* was used to carve sarcophagi or catacombs. There is also a spiritual symbolism transmitted through this symbol, namely that just as graves are cleansed of weeds with *ascia fossoria*, so souls are cleansed of sins by the power of the sign of the Holy Cross[33].

The other pagan symbol in the form of which the cross was concealed was the *anchor*[34]. Like the *ascia* and the T (*tau*) sign, the

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30. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 82-89, for the whole symbolism of the palm tree; E. MAAYAN-FANAR, "An Early Christian Tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot...", p. 71.

31. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 30-41; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 52; E. MAAYAN-FANAR, "Unknown Early Christian Tombs in Shefar'am...", p. 28.

32. E. MAAYAN-FANAR, "An Early Christian Tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot...", p. 72.

33. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 67-71.

34. Emanuele CASTELLI, "The Symbols of Anchor and Fish in the Most Ancient Parts of the Catacomb of Priscilla: Evidence and Questiones", in: *Studia Patristica*, LIX,

anchor appeared in the Roman cemetery environment since the second century, being discovered in the cemeteries of Priscilla, in no less than a hundred epitaphs, Domitilla, Saint Callixtus and Coemeterium Majus. For Christians, the anchor symbolizes the hope of faith in the resurrection and happiness of eternal life. The anchor was most often associated with fish, *ichthys* (fig. 1).

Represented as a dolphin, which was associated with the idea of salvation, given the accounts of the rescue from drowning of sailors by dolphins, the fish, *ichthys*, symbolized Jesus Christ himself as the Savior of man. In fact, in Greek the letters of the word *ichthys* represent the acronym of the phrase Ἰησοὺς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Ὑιὸς Σωτήρ – "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Savior". It also symbolized the water of baptism, so the purity and entry into the nave of the Church, symbolized, when the fish was depicted hanging in the anchor, the Christian "caught" for Christ, and, last but not least, symbolized the Eucharistic mass[35]. Often, the fish is figured together with the loaves, almost always in number five, with direct reference not only to the miracle of the *Multiplication of the two fish and the five loaves*, but especially to the Eucharistic agape. The oldest representation of fish and bread is dated to the end of the second century and has been preserved in the cemetery of Comodilla[36].

Among the zoomorphic symbols present in the cemetery environment, next to the dolphin, we must mention the *dove*, whose Christian significance is easy to understand. The dove appears figuratively in the cemetery environment of the Christian catacombs accompanying the ark, with reference to Noah's ark, which, in turn,

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Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford, 2011, vol. 7: Early Christian Iconographies, Peeters, Leuven – Paris – Walpole, 2013, pp. 13, 15.

35. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 72-81; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 232-236; E. Popescu, *Crucea şi răstignirea Mântuitorului Iisus Hristos...*, pp. 12-15; L. Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei*, pp. 52-55; Tuomas Rasimus, "Revisiting the ICHTHYS: A Suggestion concerning the Origins of Christological Fish Symbolism", in: Christian H. Bull, Liv Ingeborg Lide, John D. Turner (eds.), *Mysteri and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices, Studies for Einar Thomassen at Sixty*, Brill, Lieden / Boston, 2012, pp. 329-332; E. Maayan-Fanar, "An Early Christian Tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot...", p. 86.

36. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 48.

symbolizes the Church, drinking from a vessel or nibbling from a grape, with obvious Eucharistic symbolism, accompanying to heaven or symbolizing the pure soul of the Christian who has reached heaven, or who looks with adoration at the monogram of Christ. Pictured in pair with another dove, it symbolizes the Church-Bride of Christ, pure as a dove. The *peacock*, also most often represented in pairs, face to face, was used by Christians as a symbol associated with the idea of resurrection and immortality. As in the case of the doves, two peacocks face to face symbolize the Church, the guardian of the Eucharist and the glory gained through the Resurrection[37].

The lambs represented face to face have the same meaning as the peacocks. The *lamb* and the *sheep* symbolized, when there were two or more, the community of believers. However, the lamb was the most commonly used symbol for Christ the Lamb. Sometimes the lamb was depicted sitting, with a cross above its head, and looking at a dove with an olive branch in its beak. At other times, he was represented standing on a mountain, which evokes Mount Zion, with four rivers, symbolizing the four rivers of Paradise, but also the four Gospels, with other lambs at their feet, and in the upper register is Christ Himself, having on the left and to His right the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. This last scene, made in the form of a fresco in a crypt, already belongs to the fourth century[38] (fig. 2).

From the symbol of lamb or related to it developed the iconographic theme of the *Good Shepherd* (fig. 3), in which Christ carries on his shoulders the lost sheep, according to the text from Lk 15:4-6. Probably the earliest representation of this theme was discovered in the baptistery of the only surviving church house, that of Dura-Europos in Syria, which dates from the middle of the third century[39]. In this

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37. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 93-99; I. MUREŞAN, "The Painted Roman Tomb on the Lower Danube...", pp. 134-136; J. VALEVA, "La peinture funéraire dans les provinces orientales de l'Empire Romain...", pp. 179, 187; E. MAAYAN-FANAR, "Unknown Early Christian Tombs in Shefar'am...", pp. 29-30.

38. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 100-106; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 55.

39. C. H. KRAELING, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II...*, pp. 51-55; M. PEPPARD, *The World`s Oldest Church*, pp. 99-104.

baptismal context, the scene evokes the Good Shepherd as the One who leads the souls of his disciples to the water of Baptism, who anoints them and prepares the Eucharistic Supper for them. In the context of the cemetery environment, on the other hand, it refers rather to the sacrifice of the Shepherd, who laid down his life for His "sheep"[40].

The theme was very widespread, being common to the cemetery environment in the necropolises of Egypt, the catacombs of Rome and the tombs in Thessalonica, above-ground places of worship, such as Dura-Europos, but is also represented on various vessels, cups, amphorae, used in cult[41].

The source of inspiration for the *Good Shepherd* scene would be, according to the researchers, Orpheus singing from the lyre and enchanting with his song the sheeps, as in the San Callisto cemetery, or other animals, as in the Domitilla cemetery. The image of the *Good Shepherd* includes other versions than the one with the sheep or the ram carried on the shoulders, the cryophore type, or the sheep listening to the Shepherd's song on the panpipes. On the sarcophagi from the third century appears the *Good Shepherd* as Judge, receiving a flock of rams on his right and driving away a flock of goats on the left side of the stage[42].

Among the symbols used by the Christians of the first four centuries, we must mention that of the *oranta*, which depicts a virgin praying with her hands raised to heaven. The *oranta* symbolized the soul of the past to the eternal, either in the moment of ascension from the body, as in the case of the martyr who suffered for Christ, or in the judgment seat[43]. The *oranta* could also signify the martyr chosen as the protector of a Christian, and who prayed in heaven, interceding for him. In the more

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40. M. PEPPARD, *Early Christian Art and Ritual*, Routlege Handbook of Early, Christian Art and Ritual, 2018, pp. 277, 281.

41. H. D. M. SPENCE-JONES, *The Early Christians in Rome*, pp. 317-319; M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", p. 245; F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 106-114; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 105, 108; J. VALEVA, "La peinture funéraire dans les provinces orientales de l'Empire Romain...", p. 187.

42. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 110-113; J. STEVENSON, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 98-101; W. LOWRIE, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 216-221; L. USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 51.

43. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 105, 116-121.

complex compositions found on some sarcophagi, the *oranta* seems to symbolize the Church itself, the oranta-Church symbol merging, starting from the second half of the 4th century, in oranta-Virgo Maria, as a result of the overlapping meanings of the two representations[44].

Finally, another symbol used by Christians in the first four centuries was that of the *ship*, which symbolized, depending on the context in which it was represented, either the world or the Church[45].

1.2. Narrative or anecdotal representations in the cemetery environment. From the symbols of the second century, Christians gradually passed, probably under the influence of both the pagan and the Jewish[46] environment, as suggested by both the discoveries made in the synagogue and mithraeum at Dura-Europos, and in the catacombs, at narrative representations, which portray events from the Old and New Testaments and which carry a theological and symbolic message. Most likely, such representations of Old or New Testament events began to be made as early as the second century, adorning both the sarcophagi or the arcas in the catacombs in which Christians were buried, and the above-ground churches and mausoleums of Christians of the time pre-Constantinian, of which, unfortunately, only the house-church from Dura-Europos survived the time, which was certainly not an exception, but, on the contrary, a rule.

Christians in the second and fourth centuries used this type of narrative or anecdotal image to symbolize the Resurrection, Baptism and the Eucharistic agape. The scenes used in this sense are both Old Testament, they have a prefigurative character, and New Testament, and the chosen themes, and maybe even their representation, in the context in which the Christian intellectuals of the time, such as Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher, Tertullian, Minucius Felix or Clement of Alexandria, condemning any such representation as an idolater, seems

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44. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 115-121; L. Uspensky, *Teologia icoanei*, p. 55.

45. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 122-130.

46. C. H. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II...*, pp. 216-220; A. Grabar, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 72, 89, 103, 229-231; F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 147, 228-233; R. Jensen, "Art", p. 748.

to have been the work of catechetical priests, for whom it would have been easier to convey the message of the gospel to ordinary people using analogies transposed into images.

The role of members of the church hierarchy, at least in supervision, if not in the choice and representation of themes, is generally accepted by researchers. Pleads in favor of this statement, on the one hand, that not only the baptistery at Dura-Europos, but also the catacombs were places of worship for Christians, which involved the presence of members of the hierarchy to perform cultic rituals, and, on the other, that the iconographic themes from Dura-Europos and those in the catacombs are common, despite the distance of thousands of kilometers between the two locations, which implies a "religious approach" coordinated by the Church hierarchy[47]. In addition, at least in Rome, since the beginning of the third century, cemeteries and the burial of Christians have come into the care of the Church. Their first overseer was Deacon Callixtus, whose name is also associated with that of a catacomb, in which some of the bishops of Rome were buried[48].

The anecdotal scenes inspired by the Old Testament are more numerous than the New Testament ones. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Elijah, Job, Ezekiel, Daniel, Susanna, are the Old Testament characters who appear most often in the cemetery area in scenes representing the most important events of which they were the protagonists[49]. The New Testament had as source of inspiration, in addition to the canonical books of the New Testament, the apocryphal writings, especially those that fill the gap left by the canonical ones regarding the childhood of the Virgin Mary, the Baby Jesus or the descent into hell of the Savior Jesus Christ after the crucifixion. The scenes chosen to be represented, both the Old Testament and the New

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47. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 27, 67; F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 48; R. JENSEN, "Art", p. 753.

48. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 37-39; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 10-12, 27, 28.

49. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 193-227; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 228-230. J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 63-84; M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", p. 234.

Testament, had an important catechetical and symbolic role, often being polysemantic, depending on the context in which they appear, funerary or liturgical, and the composition of most of them it has become a classic for Christian sacred art since their appearance in the cemetery environment.

Probably the earliest theme in the catacombs of Rome, which some researchers believe belongs to the end of the first century[50], is *Daniel in the lion's den*. The theme also appears in the funerary environment in Palestine, both in the Jewish and in the Christian[51], in Egypt[52] and in the Balkans[53], but in these regions being late, the end of the fourth century-beginning of the fifth century, being taken, like other themes, from the Roman one. In the case of Christians, it refers to the persecution suffered by Christians and their martyrdom, caused by the refusal to obey the orders of the Roman emperors to sacrifice to the gods, reflecting the episodes so common and known to early Christians, which took place in the Roman arenas, in which they were fed to wild beasts[54]. The same ideas are transmitted through the scene *The Three Young Men in the Babylonian Furnace*[55], and it is quite common in the cemetery environment. These themes, like *David and Goliath*, a theme present in the baptismal environment of Dura-Europos, not only in the funerary one in the catacombs, in which, however, it appears only

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50. Regarding the period of time in which the earliest Christian images would have appeared, there are differences of opinion between the scholars who dealt with Christian sacred art during the first centuries. While some believe that the earliest Christian frescoes belong to the second century, such as A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, there are also researchers who descend this date until the end of the first century, such as W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archeology*.

51. E. MAAYAN-FANAR, "An Early Christian Tomb at Lohamei HaGetaot...", p. 72.

52. M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", pp. 240-241.

53. J. VALEVA, "La peinture funéraire dans les provinces orientales de l'Empire Romain...", p. 186.

54. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 224-225; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 208-209.

55. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 210; M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", pp. 244-245.

once[56], had the role of strengthening Christians in the belief that they too gain victory over the trials to which they were subjected and will save their souls by faith and trust in God.

In order to reproduce the idea of gracious regeneration through death and resurrection with Christ in the water of Baptism, the themes most often rendered are the *Ark of Noah*[57], which seems to have appeared in the same period as *Daniel in the lion's den*, at the end of the first century[58], and the *Baptism of the Savior Jesus Christ*[59]. Other Old Testament-inspired themes used as a foreshadowing of Baptism were the *Passage of the Jews through the Red Sea* and *Moses drawing water from the rock with his staff*[60]. As for the New Testament scene of Baptism, it is noteworthy that the Savior Jesus Christ, who is baptized by Saint John the Baptist and on whom the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, appears figuratively as a young man or a child, an image that will disappear only in the sixth century[61] (fig. 4).

Another New Testament scene that, both in the funerary context of the catacombs and in the liturgical one, symbolizes the living water of Baptism, through which the baptized receives the grace of the Holy Spirit in which he knows Christ as the Messiah, is the one who renders the *Conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman*. The scene appears in the Roman cemetery environment and, according to some researchers, in the baptistery of Dura-Europos[62].

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56. C. H. KRAELING, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II...*, pp. 188-190; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, p. 74; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 212.

57. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 169-173; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 66-67.

58. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 205.

59. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 174-181; M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", pp. 239-240.

60. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 207-208; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 69-71, M. MARTIN, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", p. 236.

61. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 176-181; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, p. 89; R. JENSEN, "Art", p. 756.

62. C. H. KRAELING, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II...*, pp. 186-188; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 101-102; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 214, 225.

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Regarding the scene from Dura-Europos, which most researchers consider to be the illustration of the theme the *Conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman,* there is also the opinion according to which the scene would represent, in fact, the *Annunciation*[63] (fig. 5). Although the baptismal setting in which the scene was painted would seem to tip the scales in favor of the interpretation of the majority, however, given the composition itself, the second hypothesis seems much more likely. In the scene in question, the young woman at the fountain is depicted very close to the left edge of the image frame, so that in front of her could not have been represented the Savior Jesus Christ, with whom she is supposed to have had a dialogue if the scene had referred at the meeting at Jacob's well with the Samaritan woman. In addition, the woman at the fountain is slightly turned backwards, over her left shoulder, in a pose in which the Virgin Mary appears in other representations of the Annunciation on 4th-century sarcophagi[64] or manuscripts from the 11th-12th centuries[65].

At Dura-Europos, Baptism, understood as a mystical wedding-union with Christ in the water of baptism, is symbolized by the scene *Procession of Women,* in which some scholars saw represented the *Parable of the Ten Virgins* (Matt 25:1-13)[66]. In the view of others, however, the same scene would refer to the Resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ, they called her the *Myrrh-bearing Women at the Tomb*[67] (fig. 6).

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63. Dominic E. SERRA, "The Baptistery at Dura-Europos: The Wall Paintings in the Context of Syrian Baptismal Theology", in: *Ephemerides Liturgicae,* 120 (2006), pp. 77-78; M. PEPPARD, *The World's Oldest Church,* pp. 156, 179-181.

64. M. PEPPARD, *The World's Oldest Church,* p. 165.

65. M. PEPPARD, "Illuminating the Dura-Europos Baptistery...", pp. 549-555.

66. M. PEPPARD, *The World's Oldest Church,* pp. 122-156; M. PEPPARD, *Early Christian Art and Ritual,* 282; M. PEPPARD, "Illuminating the Dura-Europos Baptistery:...", pp. 558-571; Sannea KLAVER, "The Brides of Christ: 'The Women in Procession' in the Baptistery of Dura-Europos", in: *Eastern Christian Art,* 9 (2012-2013), pp. 63-78.

67. C. H. KRAELING, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part II...,* pp. 190-197, 213; André GRABAR, "La fresque des saintes femmes au tombeau à Doura", *Cahiers Archéologiques* 8 (1956), pp. 9-26; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...,* p. 107.

To symbolize the resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ, the main themes were *Jonah*[68] and the *Myrrh-bearing Women at the Tomb*[69]. As an iconographic theme, *Jonah* knew three variants in the cemetery environment. The first two, *Jonah thrown from the ship and swallowed by the sea monster* (fig. 7) and *Jonah spit by the sea monster on the shore*, symbolize the Resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ. The third, *Jonah in the shadow of the wand*, a scene in which he appears represented naked, symbolizes the state of happiness of the soul arrived in the Kingdom of Heaven after death[70].

The most common painting used by the authors of Christian images from the II-IV centuries to transmit the teaching about the resurrection was the *Resurrection of Lazarus* (fig. 8), which appears in catacombs no less than 53 times. It was quite common and widespread, since it appears even on common household objects[71]. The *Resurrection of Lazarus* and the *Resurrection of Jairus'daughter*, which occurs less frequently, had the role of confessing and strengthening the faith in the resurrection of the sleeping, which shows the importance that the first centuries gave to the teaching of the resurrection.

The *Eucharistic Supper*, an important theological, liturgical and catechetical theme that frequently appears in the catacombs of Rome, is represented either in the form of the multiplication of the loaves, broken and divided to those present – *fractio panis*, or in the table prepared by Christ the Risen at the sea of Tiberias of the seven Apostles, or of a banquet. Depending on the context, the representation of a banquet can have a different meaning than the Eucharistic one, in the sense that in the cemetery the image of the banquet can symbolize an agape, and a commemorative mass in honor of a deceased, but also the table they take part in The Kingdom of Heaven the Dead. It

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68. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 149-158; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 207.

69. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 164-168.

70. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 207; M. Martin, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", p. 238.

71. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 159-163; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 213; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 92-93.

should be noted that in most scenes of this type, the number of those participating in the banquet is seven[72] (fig. 9).

As an Old Testament foreshadowing, the Eucharistic sacrifice was symbolized, either on sarcophagi or in catacombs, by the *Sacrifice of Isaac*. The scene, which has been fixed ever since, shows Abraham raising his right hand in a knife, ready to sacrifice his son Isaac, standing by an altar, kneeling with his hands tied behind his back. From the sky appears a hand that stops the human sacrifice and shows the ram that must take Isaac's place[73].

Another Old Testament theme that, given the funerary context in which it appears, can be considered to refer to the Eucharistic sacrifice is the *Hospitality of Abraham* (fig. 10). The fresco, most likely made in the first half of the 4th century, is preserved in a catacomb on Via Latina and illustrates the biblical account of Abraham's reception of the Three Guests at the Oak of Mamre (Gen 18:1-5)[74].

Although, in general, the representation of this biblical episode is considered the oldest icon of the Holy Trinity, and in the period when it was built, the Church was shaken by the first great heresy – Arianism, which denies the divinity and consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, is it is less likely that its author considered the teaching on the honorable honor of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. This hypothesis should not be completely ruled out, given that the gestures, clothing and size with which the Three Young Men are depicted are equal in honor. However, the cemetery environment in which the theme appears leads rather to its Eucharistic interpretation, given that the Eucharistic sacrifice was so often represented or symbolized in

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72. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 182-192; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 90, 94-97; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 226-232; I. Mureșan, "The Painted Roman Tomb on the Lower Danube...", pp. 129-131.

73. F. Tristan, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 200-202; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 208; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs*, pp. 67-68; M. Martin, "Observations on the Paintings of the Exodus Chapel...", pp. 241-243.

74. Gabriel Bunge, *Icoana Sfintei Treimi a Cuviosului Andrei Rubliov*, cuvânt înainte și traducere de diac. Ioan I. Ică jr., Ed. Deisis, Sibiu, 1996, p. 97; Pr. Cristian Gagu, "Reprezentarea canonică a Sfintei Treimi în iconografia ortodoxă", in: † Varlaam Ploieșteanul, Pr. Emanoil Băbuș (eds.), *Omagiu Profesorului Emilian Popescu la 90 de ani*, Ed.Basilica, București, 2020, p. 764.

catacombs. He pleads in this regard the presence of the calf figured to the right of Abraham, ready to be sacrificed. In addition, in the subsequent representations of the theme, in the center of the scene appears the table on which the sacrificed calf and the bread are, with obvious reference to the Eucharistic sacrifice. Last but not least, given the cemetery context, the hypothesis of transmitting the teaching about the importance of intercessory prayers for the sleeping ones that the saints bring before God should not be excluded either. This would, however, be a secondary teaching in relation to the composition of the scene, the primary teaching being, however, that of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

From the second century and the beginning of the next date the first representations, either in the form of frescoes or in the bas-reliefs on sarcophagi, of miracles performed by the Savior Jesus Christ, such as the *Transfiguration of the water in wine at the wedding in Cana* (Jn 2:1-11), *Healing the paralytic* (Matt 9: 2-6; Mk 2:3-10; Lk 5:18-24), *Healing the skinny from the bathtub Vitezda* (Jn 5:2-9), *Resurrection of the daughter of Jairus, The healing of the woman who had suffered for twelve years from the flow of blood* (Matt 9:18-26; Mk 35-43; Lk 8:49-56), *The healing of the blind man from birth at the bath of Siloam* (Jn 9:1-37)[75]. The teachings conveyed in the cemetery environment through these themes were about the importance of repentance and faith for the healing of bodily and bodily wounds, as well as the importance of intercessory prayers from family members or friends for those who suffered persecution, as well as for those asleep.

Among the important events in the life of the Savior, on the sarcophagi or in the catacombs are represented the *Conversation with the Samaritan woman* (Jn 4:5-42), the *Entry into Jerusalem* (Matt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19:29-38; Jn 12:12-15) and, from the cycle of passions, the *Peter's denial*, the *Kiss of Judas* and *Christ before Pilate*. It should be noted that the images in the cemetery environment from

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75. Norbert ZIMMERMANN, "The Healing Christ in early Christian funeral Art: the example of the frescoes at Domitilla catacomb", in: S. ALKIER, A. WEISSENRIEDER (eds.), *Miracles Revisited. New Testament Miracle Stories and their Concepts of Reality*, SRB 2, Berlin / Boston, 2013, pp. 151-174; F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 269-278; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, p. 91.

the II-IV centuries do not show any episode related to the suffering and humiliation of Jesus, nor the flogging, nor the ascent of Golgotha, nor the crucifixion, except for one scene, that of the *Crown of Thorns*, discovered in the catacomb of Praetextatus[76]. Although it seems that in the cemetery environment the *Crucifixion of Christ* was never represented, which suggests that the theme was either not known or avoided in Rome, it is still represented since the II-III centuries on a gem discovered in Tomis / Constanţa, in the former Schythia Minor, a gem preserved today in the British Museum[77].

In third-century scenes illustrating various moments in His life and activity, the Savior Jesus Christ was often depicted as a teacher / philosopher preaching and handing over the New Law – *Traditio Legis*, symbolized by a parchment or patella to the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul or a group of disciples, in turn symbolizing the Church[78]. This image, called "of the philosopher" by F. Tristan, in which the Savior was depicted with a beard, would contribute in the next period, according to the same researcher, together with two other types of analogical representations of Christ from the same period, Christ-Orpheus and Christ-Helios-Apollo[79], at the end of the iconographic portrait of the Savior.

The image of Christ-Orpheus, in which Christ is depicted singing for sheep from lyre, a scene signifying the proclamation of the gospel of men, seems to have been taken from the image of David-Orpheus, the psalmist king being the first assimilated to Orpheus and becoming inspiring for Christ-Orpheus. The image of Christ associated with that of Helios also appeared in the pre-Constantine era, Christ being depicted in a quadriga of the sun, with his head surrounded by a halo from which seven rays start. This last analogy will probably have been favored by the attempt of the Christians of that time to figure the divine glory of Jesus, on the one hand, and, on the other, by the

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76. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 286-292; J. Stevenson, *The Cata-combs...*, p. 105.

77. E. POPESCU, *Crucea şi răstignirea Mântuitorului Iisus Hristos...*, pp. 71-90.

78. Robert COUZIN, *The Traditio Legis: Anatomy of an Image*, Archaeopress, Ox-ford, 2015, pp. 1-140.

79. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 304-306.

use of such images by Clement of Alexandria[80], who called him Christ "The Sun of justice". Such statements soon led to the association of Christ with Sol invictus, for Christians He is truly the only Sol Invictus. This association finally facilitated the total replacement of Sol invictus, the honest god before conversion by the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great and the overwhelming majority of soldiers in the Roman imperial army, with Christ the Sun of Righteousness, the High East, whose feast of the bodily birth of the Virgin Mary was moved to the Constantinian era from January 6 to December 25, the day Mithra-Sol invictus had been honored[81].

It should be noted that in many of these representations Christ is depicted beardless, dressed in a toga[82] and with long hair[83]. But there are also scenes, but few in number, in which Christ is depicted with a beard and the Holy Apostle Peter, beardless, given that usually, in most scenes, Peter is bearded[84].

Beyond these differences, normal in the end during the birth of Christian sacred art, it is certain that the image of the Savior Jesus Christ that appears in the catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus (fig. 11) and in the catacomb of the Commodilla (fig. 12) is very close to the classic face of Eastern iconography. If the representations of His face in the two catacombs, most likely dating from the fourth century, were placed next to icons from the Byzantine period, one would immediately notice the very great resemblance that exists between them. This resemblance can be explained if the existence of a protoicon of the Savior Jesus Christ is accepted, which would have been the source of all other representations of His image.

The existence of this protoicon is supported by both the Eastern tradition of the *mandylion* and the western tradition of the *sudarium*, according to which the face of the Savior Jesus Christ was wonderfully imprinted on the cloth sent to King Abgar IV of Edessa – *mandylion*,

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80. CLEMENS ALEXANDRINUS, "Cohortatio ad gentes (Protrepticus)", IV, *P. G.*, vol. VIII, cap. XI, col. 231B.
81. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 307-308.
82. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 281, 283, 286.
83. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 312.
84. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 286.

as and on Veronica's towel – *sudarium*, these two not made by hand icons – *acheiropoietos*[85], being the source of all the others. Although it could be objected that these are late traditions, difficult to verify and argue with certain historical information, it must be said that the few existing data can outline a picture to support the existence of such a protoicon of the Savior Jesus Christ, printed by Himself in a divine way on the *mandylion* and the *sudarium*.

Thus, the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea records that the woman who had healed from the flow of blood by touching the lap of the clothes of the Savior Jesus Christ (Matt 9:20-22; Mk 5:25-34; Lk 8:43-48) she had erected a statue of him in front of the house[86]. *Acta Pilati*, an apocryphal writing from the 4th century, identifies this woman as Berenice, a name that in the latinized form, Veronica, derives from the expression *vera icon*[87]. Another apocryphal, *Mors Pilati*[88], from the 7th century, states that the Roman emperor Tiberius was cured of leprosy by this Berenice with the *sudarium*[89]. Last but not least, Aelius Lampridius reports on the veneration of the icon of Christ by Emperor Alexander Severus[90]. Corroborating the information, we can conclude that Berenice, after being healed by the flow of blood, remained near the Savior Christ and, on the way to Golgotha, wiped His bloody face with a towel, on which was printed His Holy Face.

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85. MANSI, *Sacrorum conciliorum...*, vol. XIII, col. 191B.

86. EUSEBIUS Caesareae, "Historia Ecclesiastica", VII, cap. XVIII, *P. G.*, vol. XX, col. 680C-D; this information is also presented by *The Acts of Mār Mārī the Apostle*, translated with an Introduction and Notes by Amir Harrak, Atalanta, 2005, p. 5.

87. Ștefan IONESCU-BERECHET, "Το αγιον μανδηλιον: istoria unei tradiții", in: *Studii Teologice*, seria a III-a, VI, 2/2010, pp. 109-150.

88. *Evangelia apocrypha*; adhibitis plurimis codicibus graecis et latinis maximam partem nunc primum consultis atque ineditorum copia insignibus, collegit atque recensuit Constantin von TISCHENDORF, *Lipsiae*, 1876, pp. 456-458.

89. This would explain the favorable attitude of the emperor Tiberius towards the first disciples of Christ, about whom they wrote TERTULIANUS, "Apologeticus", cap. V, *P. L.*, vol. I, col. 290B-291A and EUSEBIUS Caesareae, "Historia Ecclesiastica", II, cap. II, *P. G.*, vol. XX, col. 140BC.

90. Aelius LAMPRIDIUS, "The Life of Severus Alexander", chap. XXIX, coll. *Historia Augusta*, part II, Loeb Classical Library, 1924, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Severus_Alexander/2*.html, accessed on 02. 09. 2021; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien*, p. 287.

This Face will have been a model for the statue he erected in front of his house and, with the towel printed with this Holy Face, she healed the emperor Tiberius. This *sudarium* will either have remained at the Imperial Court and thus reached the emperor Alexander Severus, or it will have been a model for a representation of the image of the Savior that Alexander Severus honored. In turn, the statue with the image of the Savior erected by Berenice remained publicly exposed until the persecution of Maximin Daza (310-313), who ordered its relocation, so that it would eventually be destroyed by Julian the Apostate (361-363)[91]. The actions against the statue of these two persecuting emperors of Christians can only be explained by their hatred against them, and the destruction of the statue is a strong argument in favor of its authenticity and the image of the Savior Jesus Christ. There is, therefore, enough data to accept the existence of a protoicon printed on the *sudarium*, which formed the basis of the other representations, which explains their similarity.

From the II-III centuries, based on the canonical scriptural texts, but also on the apocryphal writings, the first representations of the Virgin appeared in the cemetery environment. However, the presence of the Virgin Mary in the iconography of the cemetery is not very consistent, compared to that of the Savior Jesus Christ, and some images that have traditionally been interpreted by most researchers as representations of the Virgin are refuted by others.

The theme of the *Annunciation* has been represented in Priscilla's catacomb since the 2nd century (fig. 13). On the right, the scene depicts a wingless angel, as a young man, dressed in Roman robes specific to the aristocratic class, standing in front of the Virgin, with his right hand raised, in a sign that he is speaking to her. The Virgin Mary, who, like the Archangel Gabriel, wears Roman clothes and hair in the fashion of the ladies of high Roman society, sits on a chair with a high back and spins purple from a notebook[92]. According to some

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91. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 215.

92. Catherine C. TAYLOR, "Painted Veneration: The Priscilla Catacomb Annunciation and the *Protoevangelion of James* as Precedents for Late Antique Annunciation Iconography", in: *Studia Patristica*, LIX, papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011, vol. 7, *Early Christian*

researchers, we find the theme in the catacombs of Domitilla and Peter and Marcellinus, in much simpler representations, which lack the spindle, fork and basket with purple wool[93]. For others, however, the lack of these elements in the scenes preserved in the catacombs of Domitilla and Peter and Marcellinus is a sign that the respective performances cannot be about the *Annunciation*. According to them, the only scene that comes from the cemetery environment, which can be said with certainty to represent the *Annunciation*, was kept on the cover of Adelfia's sarcophagus, executed around 340[94].

There is also the opinion, as we showed above, according to which the fragment from Dura-Europos that presents a young woman next to a well would actually render the theme of the *Annunciation*, and not the *Conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman*[95].

From the same period date the first scenes depicting the theme of the *Virgin and Child*, whose prototype seems to be the fresco of the second century, according to some authors[96], or early third century, according to others[97], from the catacomb of Priscilla, depicting a woman covered with a veil carrying the baby who seems to be sketching a sign of blessing, while a man, probably Balaam, points to a star. More recently, it has been claimed that the image is in reality only a representation of the face of the deceased who was buried there and that the scene was altered during a recent restoration[98].

Another fresco of the third century, from Coemeterium Majus, depicting a busty woman, in a praying position, covered with a veil, with a ten-year-old baby represented on her chest, also bust, with the

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Iconographies, Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Walpole, 2013, p. 31; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, p. 85.

93. C. C. TAYLOR, "Painted Veneration:...", pp. 34-35, J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, pp. 85-88.

94. Elżbieta JASTRZĘBOWSCKA, "New Testament Angels in Early Christian Art: Origin and Sources", in: *Światowit*, VIII (XLIX) / A, 2009-2010, p. 154.

95. D. E. SERRA, "The Baptistery at Dura-Europos:...", pp. 77-78.

96. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 245.

97. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 246; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 99.

98. Mary Joan WINN LEITH, "Earliest depictions of the Virgin Mary", in: *Biblical Archeology Review*, March/April, 2017, pp. 48-49.

monogram of Christ on the right and left, is interpreted as an image of the *Virgin and Child*[99] (fig. 14).

From the second century, the oldest representation of the *Worship of the Magi* (fig. 15) is still preserved in Domitilla's catacomb[100]. The same scene, this time dating from the third century, appears in the Cappella Graeca in the catacomb of Priscilla, in a very damaged fresco (fig. 16). In the different representations of this theme there are compositional differences, the number of magi varying from two to four, although most often it is still three, the Holy Baby is portayed as either a newborn, wrapped and lying in the manger, either as a two-year-old baby, in the arms of the Virgin and the star is sometimes replaced by the monogram of Christ, to which a magus points. The pastors mentioned by St. Luke the Evangelist (2: 8-18) do not appear in all representations of this scene, but only in some[101]. The last character to appear in some depictions of the *Worship of the Magi* scene is the Right Joseph, the Virgin's fiancé. Depending on the source of reference from which the author was inspired, the Right Joseph was portrayed either as an old man with a beard, as described in the *Proto-Gospel of James*, or as a beardless young man, although he was one hundred and eleven years old, according to the apocryphal *The story of Joseph the carpenter*[102]. This is the most common theme in which the Virgin Mary appears, being represented mainly on sarcophagi.

The brief presentation of the themes that adorn the walls of the catacombs or sarcophagi shows that in the sacred art of the II-IV centuries already appear the holy angels, illustrated as young people, without wings[103] and that, along with the image of the Savior Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, the faces of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul were represented[104], as well as of other saints. Saints Felix and

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99. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 211.

100. C. C. TAYLOR, "Painted Veneration:...", p. 36.

101. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 255-259; J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs...*, p. 87.

102. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, p. 261.

103. E. JASTRZĘBOWSCKA, "New Testament Angels in Early Christian Art...", p. 153.

104. Eusebius Caesareae, "Historia Ecclesiastica", VII, cap. XVIII, P. G. vol. XX, col. 680C-D; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 212-213.

Adauct, Peter and Agnes appear twice in the Comodilla cemetery, and in the cemetery Peter and Marcellinus, along with the two martyrs who give the name of the catacomb, Gorgon and Tiburt are also represented[105].

2. The role of the cemetery environment in the birth of Christian sacred art

From all the specialized works dealing with the beginnings of Christian sacred art emerges the indisputable role that the cemetery environment had in the II-IV centuries, and not only that represented by the catacombs of Rome, but everywhere where Christians were buried at that time, from Palestine and Egypt to Thessaloniki and the Lower Danube, in the birth and development of this phenomenon. Certainly, this role was favored by some circumstances related to the historical, cultural and religious context of that era.

The historical context favored the birth and development of Christian sacred art in the cemetery environment as cemeteries in general, and especially the catacombs near Rome, were a place away from the watchful "eyes" of the authorities, especially during persecution. An advantage from this point of view was also the fact that the cemeteries were located at a fairly large distance outside the city walls[106]. Even in these conditions, when he initiated the persecution against Christians, Emperor Valerian (253-259) forbade them even the assembly in cemeteries, under the threat of very harsh punishments. Although the edict in question was revoked by Emperor Gallien (253-268)[107], the attention given by Emperor Valerian to Christian gatherings in cemeteries shows how important these places were for Christians. In fact, cemeteries, and especially catacombs, became during the persecutions, most likely, the only places that offered a safe space for the public liturgical service,

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105. Jaś Elsner, "Inventing Christian Rome: the role of Early Christian Art", in: Catharine Edwards and Greg Woolf (eds), *Rome the Cosmopolis*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 95-96.
106. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 35.
107. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 39.

which was impossible to perform in churches in those circum-stances[108].

Also, in the I-IV centuries, according to Roman law, any place owned by private persons where a deceased was buried acquired the status of *locus religiosus* and came under the protection of Pontifex Maximus, so that, although religiously Christians were persecuted and often condemned to martyrdom, their graves, including the monuments that were built above them, were nevertheless protected by law[109]. At the same time, it seems that the first Christians, who came under the incidence of that *non licet esse vos* from the edict of Emperor Nero (54-68), by which they were persecuted from a religious point of view, organized themselves in funeral colleges of *fossores* called *Cultores Verbi*, also to those of the pagans, colleagues who were recognized by Roman law[110].

Archaeological evidence preserved at Dura-Europos, corroborated with canon 36 of the synod of Elvira in 305/306, and with Lactantius'information on the desecration of the Nicomedia church in 303[111], proves, however, that sacred art was not used exclusively by Christians in the cemetery environment, but also in some surface churches. A. Grabar clearly states, moreover, that "what was done in a poor provincial city should have existed *a fortiori* (all the more so) in much more active centers"[112]. In addition, as Christians have built surface chapels, *caelle* or *memoriae*[113] over the tombs of martyrs since the first century, some of them will have been adorned with images like the tombs in the catacombs, but the images have been lost due to destruction. The opinion about the existence of holy images in surface churches is reinforced even by the decision of the synod of Elvira, as the synods would not have had to ban the painting of church walls

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108. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 47.
109. Mark J. JOHNSON, "Pagan-Christian Burial Practices of the Fourth Century: Shared Tombs?", in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 5 (1997), pp. 39-40; W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 53-54.
110. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 59-60.
111. LACTANȚIU, *Despre moartea persecutorilor*, XII, pp. 68-69.
112. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 25-26, 68.
113. W. Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, p. 49.

if this had not already been a fairly common practice. However, the churches were exposed to the possibility of desecration by pagans, their adornment with holy images was limited or even forbidden, as in Spain, and the destruction of many of them during the persecutions caused the holy images with which they were adorned to be lost. This explains why, with the exception of those from Dura-Europos, the holy Christian images preserved from the II-IV centuries are those in the cemetery environment.

The cultural context, in turn, played an extremely important role in the birth and development of Christian sacred art in the cemetery environment. It must be borne in mind that most Christians came from among the converted pagans, and they brought with them the entire baggage of Greco-Roman culture, a culture imbued with paganism, which in time they Christianized, but grafted on the vein of the teaching of the Holy Gospel. In this culture, decorative art played an extremely important role, sculpture, painting and mosaic being used either to narrate the great victories on the battlefields, or to express the myths of polytheistic beliefs. Statues or faces of pagan emperors and deities usually adorned temples, palaces, porticos and even tombs throughout the Greco-Roman cultural area. It was natural, then, that the custom of pagans to adorn their temples and tombs with sculptures and paintings should continue to be practiced by converted Christians among them. In fact, the pagans who converted to Christianity not only continued this custom, but also took over some themes from the cultural-religious environment from which they came, giving them a new, Christian meaning. Thus, according to researchers, in addition to some symbols, such as those mentioned at the beginning of the work, were taken by Christians from the tradition of Roman visual art and themes such as the *Good Shepherd*[114], *Oranta*[115], the *Virgin and Child*[116], the *Majesty*[117],

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114. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, pp. 110-113; R. JENSEN, "Art", p. 748; Donald C. McNEELEY, "Worship from the catacombs", in: *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*, 52 (2007), p. 37.

115. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 140; R. JENSEN, "Art", p. 748.

116. F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creștine...*, p. 247.

117. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, p. 44.

or elements of some Christian scenes, such as the woolen basket and the spindle in the composition of the *Annunciation*[118]. This phenomenon was favored not only by the common tradition of pagans and converted Christians among their ranks, but also by the fact that burial sites were common[119], as did the workers who carved sarcophagi and those who initially painted the walls of the catacombs was the same[120].

Not only the culture and burial customs of the pagans influenced Christians and contributed to the birth of sacred Christian art in the cemetery, but also the Jewish ones, given that an important part of the early Christian communities came from the Jewish environment. The Jews, especially those in the diaspora, abandoning the rigor regarding the Second Commandment of the Decalogue, resorted to the means of fine arts to adorn their synagogue, as in the case of Dura-Europos[121], and the tombs[122].

If initially the first sacred symbols and images in the catacombs probably had the role of a confession of faith either of the deceased whose tomb was adorned with sacred images or of his family, in time they were used to illustrate acts of worship performed in catacombs and the teaching of faith concerning them or preached in the context of their commission. Even if the main Christian liturgical acts were performed underground only exceptionally, during the persecutions, there is ample evidence that the Holy Gospel was preached in the catacombs, the Holy Sacrament of Baptism and that of the Eucharist were celebrated, that there were organized commemorative agape

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118. C. C. TAYLOR, "Painted Veneration:...", pp. 28-30.

119. M. J. JOHNSON, "Pagan-Christian Burial Practices...", pp. 50-59.

120. A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 89, 124-130; R. JENSEN, "Art", p. 757.

121. Carl Hermann Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos, Final Report VIII, Part I: The Synagogue*, with a contribution of Charles Bradford Welles, Bernhard Geiger, Charles Cutler Torrey, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956; Karen B. Stern, "Death and burial in the Jewish Diaspora", in: *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology*, 2013, pp. 274-276; A. GRABAR, *Le premier art chrétien (200-395)*, pp. 74-77, 103.

122. Karen B. STERN, "Death and burial in the Jewish Diaspora", in: Daniel M. MASTER (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Archaeology*, 2013, pp. 274-276; F. TRISTAN, *Primele imagini creştine...*, pp. 228--234.

in honor of martyrs and funerals or remembrance of deceased Christians.

In almost all the Roman catacombs in which Christians were buried in the 1st-4th centuries, there was a chapel or a baptistery. In the catacomb of Priscilla there is a water tank which is said to have "certainly served for the baptism of converts", according to tradition here preaching and baptizing even the Saint Apostle Peter[123]. Another baptistery functioned in the Pontianus catacomb on Via Portuensis. Of all the chapels in the catacombs, the best known is the so-called Capella Greca, in the catacomb of Priscilla, which was also used for worship.

Regardless of whether the liturgical service carried out in these underground chapels, whose capacity, including the related corridors, reached a maximum of one hundred people, was one of a private-family or community nature[124], certainly every liturgical act was accompanied by a word teaching, whether we are talking about homily or catechesis. In these circumstances, the presence of the images will have proved extremely useful because, illustrating the acts of worship performed by clerics in that funeral environment and the truths of faith preached, concerning the saving of the soul through Baptism and the Eucharist, the state of the soul after death, the resurrection, in the role of prayers and agapes for the sleeping, they made them easier to understand and contributed to their easier fixation and consolidation in the hearts of Christians. This role is obvious and is confirmed and reinforced by the images from the baptistery at Dura-Europos, which could not have another function. Therefore, the liturgical life influenced and contributed decisively to the development of Christian sacred art in the II-IV centuries, both in the catacombs and in the surface churches.

Conclusions

The brief foray into the history of the beginnings of Christian sacred art confirms that, despite aniconic attitudes expressed by some

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123. H. D. M. SPENCE-JONES, *The Early Christians in Rome*, pp. 270-271.

124. H. D. M. SPENCE-JONES, *The Early Christians in Rome*, p. 268; W. LOWRIE, *Christian Art and Archaeology*, pp. 43-47.

Christian writers and apologists in the second and fourth centuries, Christians have resorted to the tools of visual and plastic arts since the early second century to illustrate on the walls of the catacombs, of the churches and on the sarcophagi the teaching of faith which they confessed and for which they often died as martyrs. In the most natural way, in a natural process of transition from the old polytheistic beliefs to the new Christian faith to which they adhered, Christians, both those converted among the Jews, but especially those converted among the heathen, took over the cultural-religious tradition from which came some burial customs, such as burial in underground catacombs and adorning their walls with images, as well as sarcophagi. Starting from the representation of symbols and themes taken from the Jewish or pagan tradition, which received a new, Christian meaning, to which they added their own symbols and themes, specific exclusively to the Christian faith, such as the sign of the Holy Cross, the cycle of Old Testament scenes that foreshadowed Baptism and Resurrection, that of miracles and healings performed by the Savior Jesus Christ, *Worship of the Magi, Baptism of the Savior, Conversation with the Samaritan woman, Resurrection of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem,* Christians completed the third century true iconographic program. This program, to which other themes were added after the 4th century, was the basis of the Eastern iconographic canon, which was to be finalized under the pastorate of Saint Photius (858-867; 877-886), the patriarch of Constantinople.

Although, as the baptistery house-church from Dura-Europos, the canon of the synod of Elvira from the year 300 and the information from Lactantius's writing prove, in the II-IV centuries the holy images did not exclusively adorn the walls of the catacombs, but also those of the churches on the surface, however, the cemetery environment was the space in which Christian sacred art was born and developed and which has preserved over the centuries this sacred heritage of the early Church.

Fig. 1. Funerary stele of Liciniae Amia, the Vatican necropolis,
early 3rd century, National Roman Museum, commons.wikipedia.org

Fig. 2. Christ between Sains Peter and Paul, Catacombs
of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, 4th century, commons. wikipedia.org

Fig. 3, Good Sheperd, Catacomb of Priscilla,
second half of the 3rd century, commons. wikipedia.org

Fig. 4. The Baptism of Jesus Christ, Catacomb of the Saints Peter
and Marcellinus, commons. wikipedia.org

Fig. 5. Annunciation/ The Samaritan Womanat the well,
Dura-Europos, middle of the 3rd century, commons wikimedia.org

Fig. 6. Procession of Woman to the Empty Tomb, Yale University
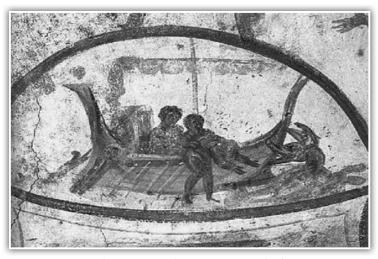Art Gallery artgallery.yale.edu

Fig. 7. Jonas thrown into the Sea, Catacombof Saints Peter
and Marcellinus, Rome, commons. wikimedia.org

Fig. 8. Ressurection of Lazarus, Via Latina Catacomb, 4th century
commons. wikimedia. org

Fig. 9. Fractio panis, Greek Chapel, Catacomb of Priscilla,
2nd-4th century, commons,wikimedia.org

Fig. 10. The Hospitality of Abraham, Via Latina Catacomb,
Rome, first half of the 4th century

Fig. 11. Jessus Christ between Saints Peter and Paul,
Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, 4ᵗʰ century,
commons. wikimedia.org

Fig. 12. Jessus Christ, Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome,
late 4ᵗʰ century, commons, wikimedia.org

Fig, 13. Annunciation, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome,
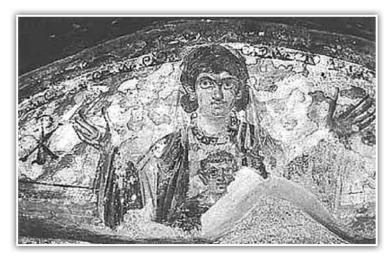first half of 3rd century, iconreader.wordpress.com

Fig. 14. Virgin and Child, Catacomb Coemeterium, Rome,
3rd century, commons. wikimedia.org

Fig. 15. Adoration of the Magi, Catacomb of Domitilla,
Rome, late 2nd / early 3rd century, almihaila.wordpress.com

Fig. 16. Adoration of the Magi, Greek Chapel, Catacombe of Priscilla,
Rome, late 3rd century, almihaila. wordpress.com