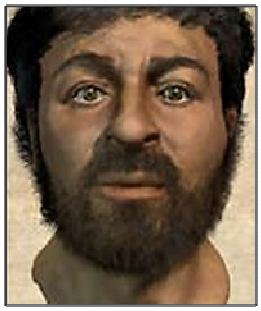
The chameleon Christ

One does not have to be very observant to notice that the human characteristics of Jesus Christ appeared in a variety of different ways during the early centuries of Christianity. He was sometimes depicted as very young and vigorous and at other times older and more mature. He could appear as masculine and virile in some images and noticeably feminine in others. Sometimes he was shown bearded and sometimes clean-shaven[183].



183 ***An Artist's Rendering* of what a 1st c. Jewish male may have looked like.**

BBC ONE did a television series that researched and attempted to recreate what type of head and face Jesus might have had, based on the skull of a 1st century Jewish man.

There are several conflicting accounts in early Christian texts of how Jesus looked. Some said that Jesus would actually appear differently to each person, his appearance to any one person apparently depending upon the needs and abilities of that person and the kind of savior that person needed. St. Augustine of Hippo said that the fact that there were so many different descriptions of Jesus proves that there was no consensus as to what he looked like. To Augustine, the only thing important was that Jesus Christ look like a human being, a male human being.[1]

A feminine Christ

It is a little unsettling to some people when they view for the first time images of Christ from the fourth and fifth centuries which depict him as very young and obviously feminine. Such images are very different from what we have come to recognize as the physical characteristics of Christ: mature and with long hair, bearded, and quite masculine. Yet, youthful and feminine images of Jesus have indeed survived from the late third through sixth centuries. One such image is a statuette that had been labeled a *"Seated Poetess"*[185] when it was added to the collection of the *Musao Nazionale della Terme* in Rome, Italy, as it looked like a female poet *type* common for the period of time and place in which it was created (ca. 350). In 1914 however, it was found that the statuette was strikingly similar in appearance to the figures of Christ used on sarcophagi.[2] The sculptures depict a smooth-skinned beardless youth with gorgeous untied flowing locks of hair and noticeable breasts. After the comparison the statuette was re-titled *"Seated Christ."*

184 ***The Vision of Ezekiel,* apse mosaic in Blessed David Chapel, Thessalonica, ca. 425-50.**

185 ***Statuette of Seated Christ,* ca. 350, Rome, Museo Nazionale della Terme.**

Another interesting example of a feminine type Christ is in the *Blessed David* apse mosaic of Thessalonica entitled *"The Vision of Ezekiel"*[184]. While the text from Ezekiel to which the image refers is terrifying, the Christ depicted in the mosaic is *"mild as milk"* feminine with wide hips, long flowing hair, smooth face and generally feminine curves throughout.[3]

Yet a third example of a feminine Christ can be seen on the front panel of a sarcophagus[186] that depicts a *"Dominus Legum dat Petro."* To the sides of the main scene are shown the parons, the husband on the left and wife on the right. Christ, in the center, is shown with a body exhibiting the same feminine characteristics as the wife with breasts, thin

186 ***Traditio Legis,*** **detail from a sarcophagus front, 5th c., Museo Archeologico, Ravenna.**

Detail, and edited from original source

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) 130

187 (below) detail from ***The Good Shepherd*** **, 3rd c.**

http://www.listphile.com/Yoda_Quotes_with_Video/Do_or_do_not_The_Force_is_strongly_felt

188 (right, middle) ***Apollo in Women's Dress*****, 1st c. B.C., Akademisches Kunst-museum der Universtat Bonn.**

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) 137

189 (far right) ***Serapis Seated Between Eagle and Cerberus,*** **2nd c., London**

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) 136

waste, and wide hips.[4]

Contributing to the great variety of images of Christ, including those depicting him with feminine characteristics, was probably the influx of less committed converts to Christianity, in the 3rd century, from the wider pagan society. An even larger influx of such converts followed upon the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century.

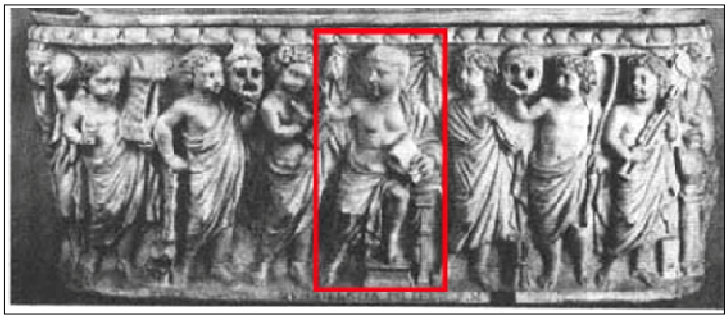
Those new converts to Christianity often came from the privileged classes of Roman society and were sometimes opportunists converting for reasons of social and career advancement. After all, Christianity had become the favored religion of the imperial household. It was from among this group of converts, wealthy as they were, that important works of art were commissioned from artists who did not create innovative Christian imagery but, rather, produced from an existing repertoire of pagan images. We saw this appropriation and Christianization of pagan imagery before in the Christian art of the catacombs. The images employed then, and in the case of the new converts in the 3rd and 4th centuries, seemed to fit at least some of the thinking about Jesus. Certainly he was a many faceted individual. Sometimes he was referred to as human and sometimes divine -sometimes both in one person. Some talked about him as if he had been young and full of vitality, like Apollo. Others described him as wise well beyond his years, like a very wise young philosopher. At times he seemed like a lawgiver and yet, at other times like a mother hen gathering her brood. Then, of course, there was that statement made by Paul about the unity of believers *in Christ*: that they were no longer *"...Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female."*[5]

Wealthy new converts were no doubt delighted that the images of Christ their artists created for them seemed so much like the images of the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheons. Such imagery had always been important to the upper classes to display in their homes so as to maintain the appearance of being educated Romans of high social standing. A feminine looking Christ with breasts would have met with their approval as the figure would appear like what a civilized Roman might possess — something like a youthful Apollo[188] wearing women's clothing, as Apollo often did.[6] Dionysus too, had feminine leanings and characteristics especially his loose untied hair, described by Euripides[7] as *"golden tresses tossed"*[187]. Seneca describe Dionysus as a *"pretended maiden*

with golden ringlets." Ovid adds *"unshorn"* and *"girl-faced."*[8] The Roman father god Jupiter had a feminine aspect in that he gave birth to Athena from his forehead and to Dionysus from his thigh.[9] The Egyptian god Serapis[189], the equivalent of Jupiter, had nurturing and fertility powers and was sometimes depicted with breasts.[10] Like Apollo, Hercules in his health-giver capacity dressed as the Thracian woman, Omphale.[11] Christ, bringer of *new life*, seemed to fit into this category of gods that was associated with fertility and health restoration. Heretical Gnostic Christians especially liked sexually ambiguous images since they emphasized the concept of God as both male and female. Salvation, to the Gnostics, was symbolized by the unification of the opposite sexes (the reconciliation of the two sides of human personality).[12]

The young Christ and the mature Christ

The most noticeable contrasting characteristics of Christ during these early centuries are depictions of him as youthful or mature.[13] It is very difficult to discern an underlying reason for the sharp contrast as both types can often be found in the same church and even in the same carving or mosaic program.[14] It is as if the early Christians simply could not settle on an image and so included all types in order to illustrate the totality of Christ's nature.[15]



190 detail from ***Sarcophagus of an Intellectual Wunderkind*, ca. 280, Rome, Vatican Museums**

An intellectual child instructs the "Muses" in the guise of boys his own age.

<http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/viecId=ft3f59n8b0&chunk.id=d0e5616&toc.id=d0e5616&brand=eschol>

191 ***Seated Christ, detail of a sarcophagus in San Francisco, Ravenna, 5th c.***

Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) 131

The earliest image type used in depicting Jesus seems to have been the clean-shaven and sometimes feminine looking one. This image type may have actually been derived from pre-Christian *child-intellectual* types[16] or *child-prodigy* types popularly found in Roman funerary art in the late third century[190]. These images depicted the deceased as a child but as a child in an intellectual setting. Such editorializing was meant to imply that the deceased had been learned and philosophical even in childhood. The poses, gestures and drapery of these image types are clearly similar to such works as a *"Seated Christ"* relief sculpture in Ravenna, Italy.[17][191]. Once again we see images adopted for Christian use that already existed in the wider culture. They were established images in the traditional repertoires of artists. We have seen that the feminine characteristics of some images of Christ may have had an association with the gods Apollo and Dionysus. But these gods were also youthful and the depiction of Christ as a youthful teacher or philosopher seated among his disciples suggested that he also possessed a powerful wisdom from birth, a wisdom not earned through any effort,[18] experience, or maturity. He possessed a wisdom that came directly from God because he was the son

of God —a divine youth.

The mature and bearded type Christ did not really begin to appear until the middle of the fourth century. The more mature type Christ shared with the youthful images the long shoulder length hair. In contrast, however, to the youthful locks of hair which were often quite feminine and flowing —curling and twisting to abandon— the mature Christ's hair was full, parted in the middle at the top and allowed to fall to the shoulders freely, covering the ears.[192] This mature hair style used to depict Christ was not really common among Roman males of this period, no matter what their rank in society.[19] The closest Roman male type with which we could associate this style would be philosophers who deliberately violated norms to stand out from the rest of society.[20] But even the philosophers did not allow their hair to fall totally free. It was always gathered and carefully controlled at the sides and back, leaving

192 (left) ***Bust of Christ*, Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome, mid to late 4th c.**

193 (middle) ***Aulus Cornelius Celsus*, 25-50 B.C.**

Roman encyclopedic and possibly, although probably not, a physician.

<http://www.summagallicana.it/lessico/c/Celso%20Aulo%20Cornelio.htm>

194 (far right) ***Jupiter***

<http://www.beaconhillacademy.org/lessons/rel-greekgods.html>

the ears uncovered or partially uncovered [193]. The mature Christ types, however, would share the full beards of the philosophers.

The mature male gods like Jupiter[194], (father of the gods) and Asclepius (god of cures) had full and freely falling shoulder-length hair styles and large full beards. Can we conclude, then, that the long hair style, –either for the youthful or the mature Christ— was a deliberate association of Christ with divinity; that Christ was the source of all wisdom and *'knowledge?'*

A Christ like us

An explanation for the variety of types is possibly the Christological debates swirling around the issue of the nature and person of Jesus Christ during the second through sixth centuries. Those were theological debates concerning the subject of Jesus as to whether he was human or divine. The debates most likely impacted how he was depicted in art —on the one hand as the eternal Word of God, or on the other hand as an individual human being adopted by God or *from* God but not eternal with the Father. It is the argument that we referred to in our discussion of the *Pudenziana* mosaic when we considered the advent of dogmatic images. Long, shoulder length hair and a beard had a divine appearance and therefore, perhaps, suited the purposes of those who opposed the Arian heresy, a heresy that held that Christ was a creature and not eternal with the Father. Arians, perhaps, might approve of a more youthful Christ, one

that would suggest subordination *to* or generation *from* the Father. Orthodox Christians may have selected the more mature Christ type to counter the Arian belief.

It is possible, however, that images of Christ as something of a philosopher or a god may actually have had something to do with how Christians dressed and the kind of image they wanted to project in the society of their time.

Like the philosophers, Christ and his apostles were depicted wearing the Greek mantle called the *pallium*[195], a badge of an intellectual. But, none of the apostles were educated men. None-the-less, Church Father, Tertullian, declared the *pallium* to be the suitable garment for a Christian to wear.[21] Also, from the third century on, Church fathers recommended the wearing of a beard. Clement of Alexandria, for example, recommended that every Christian man grow a beard on the grounds that it lent a dignified and awe-inspiring appearance.[22]

195 ***The Raising of Lazarus,*** **on a sarcophagus in the Lateran, ca. 340, Musei Vaticani, Rome**

The pallium was worn up over the left shoulder, across the back, under the right arm and across the front, and then up over the left shoulder again, and allowed to hang down in the back. Sometimes, as in this picture, instead of going over the left shoulder again, the last part was draped over the left arm even including the left hand.

This is an edited version of the original illustration.

<Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003) 55>

Roman society generally looked down on Christians as uneducated and as members of the lowest classes. Did Christian males combat this prejudice by following the recommendations of Tertullian and Clement and dress above their social grade? If they did, did Christ end up looking like what every self respecting Christian wanted to be seen as –an intellectual, a philosopher?

During the first two centuries of Christianity, however, the term *philosophy* was always used pejoratively by Christians. It referred to pagan belief, never to Christian teaching or life.[23] Only after more than one hundred years of Christian history had some begun to go out on a limb by expressing Christian beliefs according to Greek and Roman philosophical thought.[24] Most Christians were opposed to such attempts. Even as late as the third century most of the rank-and-file Christians opposed philosophical ideas.[25] But, by the latter part of the second century the famous pagan physician Galen was describing Christian thinking as a "*philosophical school"* and not a *superstitious cult.*[26] By Galen's day, it seems, philosophy "had become less a way of thinking than a way of living."[27] There were still philosophers, of course, who dealt with metaphysical concepts and wrote books on such things, but many had turned to popular public teaching to offer citizens advice on how to live.[28] The term philosophy took on a second meaning that turned more on life-style and ethics than on the larger metaphysical or epistemological questions.[29] Philosophy had become a matter of moral discipline and its goal was a life of virtue.[30] This kind of understanding of philosophy fit comfortably the Christian image and understanding of Jesus. It certainly was an image the followers of Christ would want to emulate in their own personal appearance.

The shift back and forth from one type of Christ to another may actually be attributed to a mixture of all the various influences we have mentioned. But certainly the Church's resolution of the Christological debates —as well as other theological issues revolving around the Trinity and Christ role in redemption— must have had something of an overriding impact. As the church resolved the Christological and theological issues it utilize familiar artistic expressions from the culture at-large to indicate divinity, authority, and hierarchy. In every case where the church adopted images from existing ones those images underwent a transformation, an alteration —a Christianization— but they also retained aspects of their former meanings.[31] It is, after all, in the nature of societies to introduce new ideas using the language of the time. The terms and expressions in use are redefined or rearranged to communicate the new concept. It is the only way to do it without creating entirely new terms. That certainly must be the case in the development of Christian imagery in the early centuries.

The Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God

The very ancient image of Christ as the *Good Shepherd* continued to appear in catacomb art and on sarcophagi through the fourth and fifth centuries. The shepherd, of course, was a symbol of Christ and not a portrait.

196 ***Sarcophagus Fragment with the Good Shepherd,*** **early 4th century (Late Antique), The Walters Art Museum**

<http://art.thewalters.org/viewwoa.aspx?id=27994>

197 (far right) detail, ***Apse Mosaic*** in San Clemente, Rome

This is actually a 12th c. mosaic.

<http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2009/04/good-shepherd-sunday.html>

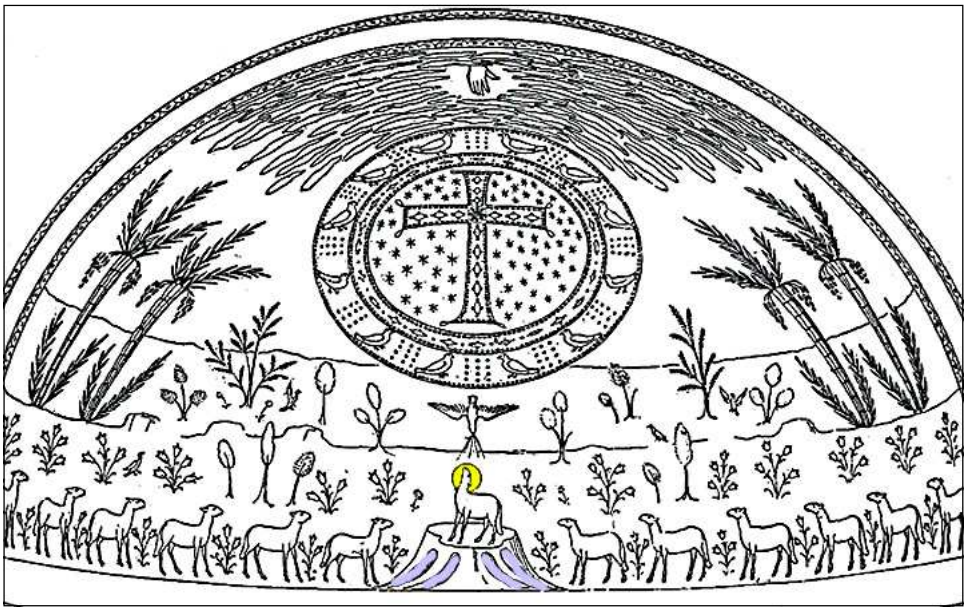
The shepherd symbolized Christ; it stood for Christ. But the lamb on his shoulders was also a symbol. The lamb symbolized the soul of the deceased carried by Christ into heaven[196].[32] Together they symbolized for believers a hoped-for afterlife in paradise.

Following the legalization of Christianity, however, an image of a lamb begins to appear standing alone, often on a hillock[197]. This lamb takes on an entirely new meaning. We find it often incorporated into a unified program presented in the apses of basilicas. The basic program of most of compositions can be understood as described by St. Paulinus of the apse in the Basilica of St. Felix in Nola [198]. In the description we discover the meaning of the lamb:

> *"The Trinity gleams in its full mystery", the saint tells us. "Christ is represented in the form of a lamb; the voice of the Father thun-*

198 ***Hypothetical reconstruction*** **of the apse mosaic in the Basilica Apostolorum, Cimitile (James Snyder, after Wickoff), ca. 400-402**

James Snyder, *Medieval Art, Painting-Sculpture-Architecture, 4th-14th Century*, (New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1989) 63



ders from heaven; and through the dove the Holy Spirit is poured out. The Cross is encompassed by a circle of light as by a crown. The crown of this crown is the apostles themselves, who are represented by a choir of doves. The Divine unity of the Trinity is summarized in Christ. The Trinity has at the same time Its own emblems; God is represented by the paternal voice, and by the Spirit; the Cross and the Lamb denote the Holy Victim. The purple background and the palms indicate royalty and triumph. Upon the rock he stands Who is the Rock of the Church, from which flow the four murmuring springs, the Evangelists, living rivers of Christ"[33]

The hillock the Lamb (Christ) stands on represents a mystical mountain from which flows the four rivers of Paradise representing the four Gospels/Evangelists that provide life-giving water (the *"good news"*) to the world. It was also normal to be represented on either side of the Lamb six sheep –a total of twelve-- processing out to the Lamb from cities on both sides of the composition.

So, the new meaning for the symbol of the Lamb is Jesus Christ, savior of the world. The lamb being saved in catacomb art, carried into paradise on the shoulders of the *Good Shepherd* became, in the 5th century church apses, the Agnus Dei, savior of the world.

In the baptistery of the *Basilica of St. John Lateran* in Rome, a gold statue of a lamb pouring water was placed between two silver statues of Christ and St. John the Baptist. The Baptist holds a scroll with the words *"Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollis peccata mundi"*[34] (*"The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"*). This is the first instance in the Gospel of John that Christ is called the *"Lamb of God."* The prophet Isaiah had predicted (cf. Is 53:7) that the Messiah would suffer in order to redeem God's people. He likened it to the sacrifice of the lamb at Pass-

over and the blood of the lamb that was smeared on the doors of houses of the Israelites to protect their first-born from the death visited upon the first-born of the Egyptians.[35]

> *This was all by way of both a promise and a prefiguring of the true Lamb, Christ, the victim in the sacrifice of Calvary on behalf of all mankind. This is why St. Paul will say that 'Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed'(1Cor 5:7)…*
>
> *The Book of Revelation reveals to us that Jesus is victorious and glorious in heaven as the slain lamb (cf. Rev 5:6-14), surrounded by saints, martyrs and virgins (Rev 7:9, 14; 14:1-5), who render him the praise and glory due him as God.(Rev 7:10)* [36]

The Lamb therefore represents Christ as Savior, but as the sacrificed Savior foretold in the Old Testament.

Starting in the fifth century, the Lamb's head was framed with a halo, symbol of Divinity. In a number of works the Lamb's halo is inscribed with a cross or surmounted by various types of crosses. One work in Syria from the period shows the Lamb with the cross on its back.[37]

199 (detail) ***The Good Shepherd*, lunette mosaic in the north arm of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, ca. 425-50**

There is a *Good Shepherd* image (ca. 425-50) from this period that is rather interesting [199]. It is in the form of a lunette mosaic in the *Mausoleum of Galla Placidia* in Ravenna, Italy. The shepherd here, however, is less a symbol or metaphor for Christ and more of a portrait. He is of the young Christ type, slightly feminine in appearance, with a round head made so by a full head of hair that freely falls to the shoulders. He sits in a *contrapposto* pose of smooth curves as the body twists into opposing directions. Even the left foot and raised left hand contribute to the contrasting movements. He holds a staff shaped like a cross which further identifies him as the *"suffering servant"*, the *Good Shepherd*, who will lay down his life for his flock. Behind his head is a halo indicating his divinity. This shepherd is dressed, not in the humble earthy colors of a common shepherd but rather in gold, royal blue and purple, and his staff is made of gold —a royal scepter.[38]

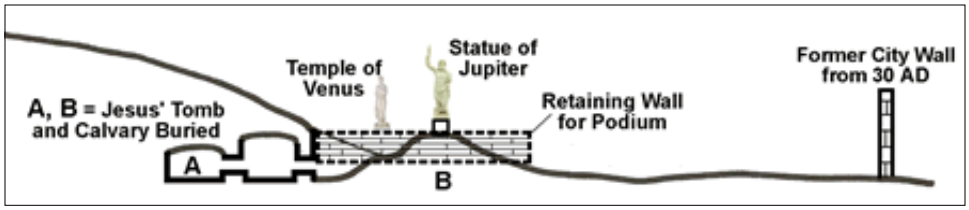
Good Shepherd images decreased in usage after this while the *"Lamb of God"* (*"Agnus Dei")* usage increased.

The Cross and the Crucifix

Discovery and veneration

Following the legalization of Christianity, Constantine ordered the

200 Cross section diagram showing the location of *Hadrian's temple* relative to the location of the Tomb of Jesus and the hill of Calvary. http://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/52-holy-sepulcher.html



search for —and excavations of— the sites important in the life of Christ. Jerusalem, after Christ, had been laid waste several times but the locations of the sacred places of Christ's passion, death, and burial had been etched into the memory of the local inhabitants was passed down to later generations. Following the custom of the Jews, the earliest Christians soon venerated the tomb of Jesus after the Resurrection, as Jews had venerated the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.[39] When Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in the year 70, the Jewish Christians fled but returned and re-established themselves, around the year 73.[40] Knowledge of the tomb's location was preserved and passed on for the next fifty years.[41] Hadrian's city of *Aelia Capitolina* included new structures deliberately built on top of the sites of Christ's passion and burial to stop Christian veneration of the sites but the new monuments actually served as markers to help later Christians identify where to excavate [200]

About 327 Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, had the sites excavated during the course of which the wood of the true cross was discovered.[42] A legend of the finding of the true cross by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine, became popular. Fact and legend have become mixed and difficult to sort out. At any rate, the finding of the cross and the excavations and the erection of church basilicas over the sites stimulated pilgrimages to the Holy Land by the faithful from all across the empire. Naturally, veneration of the cross became a major pious act for Christians. In Jerusalem, in 380, there was already a ritual veneration of the wood of the cross on Good Fridays. In a chapel built at the site of the crucifixion, a silver-gilt reliquary that held the cross was brought before the bishop and opened. The cross was placed on a table spread with a white cloth and the people filed past it bowing and venerating it by kissing it and touching it, not with their hands, but with their eyes.[43]

Pious veneration of the symbol of the cross was popular enough in 360-63 that Julian the Apostate, according to St. Cyril of Alexandria (Contra Julian., vi, in Opp., VI), made it a crime for Christians to not only adore the wood of the cross, but to trace its form upon their foreheads, and to engrave it over the entrances of their homes.[44] St. John Chrysostom (347-407) several times in his writings refers to the veneration of the cross.[45]

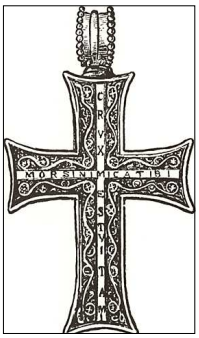
> *Kings removing their diadems take up the cross, the symbol of their Saviour's death; on the purple, the cross; in their prayers, the cross; on their armour, the cross; on the holy table, the cross; throughout the universe, the cross. The cross shines brighter than the sun.*

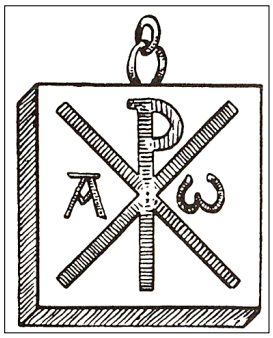
201 ***Early Pectoral Cross***

After Di Rossi
Herbert Norris, *Church Vestments Their Origin & Development*, (Mineola, Dover Publications, Inc. 2002) 135

202 (far right) ***Reliquary*, 4th c.**

After Di Rossi
Herbert Norris, *Church Vestments Their Origin & Development*, (Mineola, Dover Publications,





During the 4th century some bishops took to wearing a *pectoral cross*[201] around the neck and allowed to rest on the chest. Often they held very small relics in a compartment in the back of the cross at the crossing of the arms.[46] Chrysostom also remarks that soon after the discovery of the true cross men and women wore around their necks particles of the cross held in gold reliquaries [202].[47]

203 ***Christ Carrying His Cross,*** **plaque on an ivory casket, 3 x 3½", ca. 420, British Museum, London**

204 (far right) ***Crucifixion,*** **plaque on an ivory casket, 3 x 3½", ca. 420, British Museum,**

An ivory casket made in northern Italy around 420 has seven scenes from the passion of Christ. One shows Christ carrying his cross, represented as a cross-staff [203]. Another scene is of the crucifixion itself which must be one of the earliest depictions of the episode [204]. In the crucifixion scene Christ is nailed to the cross but is still alive, his eyes wide open.[48] The erect and boldly symmetrical pose of his body suggests that he is not suffering but is, in fact, victorious over death. This of course, is a dogmatic image in that while Jesus did die on the cross and was seen as having died, being the Son of God, death could not hold him and eventually he rose from the dead, completely triumphant. This crucifixion scene compacts those two contradictory events into one image. It should be noted that all seven passion scenes on the casket were the same size. The crucifixion episode was not emphasized.

205 ***Crucifixion*, detail from the doors of Santa Sabina in Rome, ca. 428, 11 x 15¼"**

The crucifixion was also not emphasized in any way on the wooden doors for the church basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome (422-32). A rather small and strange crucifixion panel [205] appears in the upper left corner of the left door, well away from the center of the doors. The artist depicted Christ and the two thieves in the *orans* positions before a brick wall.[49] Hierarchic proportions are employed as Christ, the more important figure in the scene, is shown unnaturally larger than the thieves. Posts and gables mark the locations as there are no crosses![50] For these reasons the scene continues to mystify art historians and theologians especially when compared to the skillfully rendered ivory casket crucifixion scene from northern Italy.

The cross and crucifixion were beginning to tentatively make

their way into the repertoire of Christian imagery but had, as yet, not become the dominant symbol. The crucifixion was seen as one event among many from the life of Jesus.

206 **detail from *The Transfiguration*, Church of S. Appollinare in Classe, 549, apse mosaic, Ravenna, Italy**

207 **Golden cross at the peak of the central crossing of the *Mausoleum of Galla Placidia*, Ravenna, Italy, ca. 425-450**

The gem encrusted cross

Large crosses enclosed by circular bands of decorative motifs or displaying symbols of the twelve apostles [198] began to appear in the center of some apse mosaics in churches in the fifth century and were often of a ornamented type —the arms sometimes rendered as covered in gems [206]. Often depicted at the crossing was a medallion of Christ. The origin of this type of cross may have been a gem encrusted cross supposedly erected by order of Constantine upon the rock of Golgotha after the site of the crucifixion had been excavated.

Plain, gold crosses in mosaic were also employed, sometimes at the peak of stone vaulting, over the altar [207]. Both the plain crosses and the encircled crosses might be surrounded by gold stars on a blue field or background.

These large crosses were the first use of the cross on the back wall or apse ceiling of the chancel. They should not be interpreted as representing the crucifixion and death of Christ, however, but rather as symbolizing Christ in his transfigured state —glorified, transfigured and victorious over death. In some apses Peter, James and John are shown flanking the circle as if speaking with the gemmed cross, an obvious depiction of the event of the transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor, as reported in the Gospels.

The fourth century, then, inaugurates the use of the unambiguous cross as a very public Christian symbol. Images of the crucifixion scene make their first —reserved— appearances, in the fifth century.

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[1] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face, Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 139.

[2] Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods; a Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, Revised and Expanded edition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003), 128

[3] Mathews 118

[4] Mathews 128

[5] Galatians 3:28 *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* New International Version translation 1984

[6] Mathews 137

[7] Mathews 127

[8] Mathews 127

[9] Mathews 135

[10] Mathews 135

[11] Mathews 135

[12] Mathews 138

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