

The Program at Dura-Europos

Other than the Roman catacombs only a house-church on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire provides another large scale example of the earliest Christian images. Constructed during the third century in the town of Dura-Europos in modern day Syria, it is typical of the kind of worship site used by the Christians prior to the legalization of their faith. Private homes served as the location for worship and other activities of the local Christian community and at this particular site the private home was modified slightly to serve solely as a worship place. The largest room was reserved for the Eucharistic Liturgy or Mass. If it was decorated with images, they have not survived. Another room[28] was set

28 *Baptistry, Christian House Church, Dura-Europos, 231-2, Syria.*

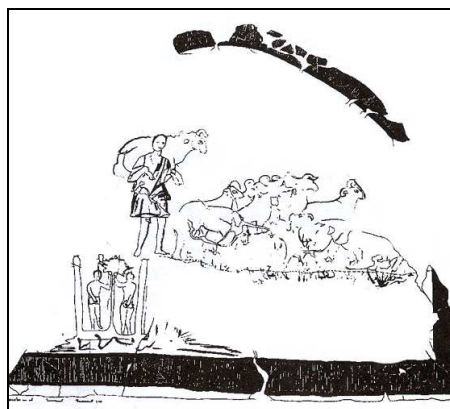
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29 *Good Shepherd* (line drawing of the painting); baptistry, house church at Dura-Europos.

Because it is placed over the font, the *Good Shepherd* image is the intended focus of the 'program' in this room. The message is clear: salvation is through the person of Jesus Christ and Baptism is the ritual washing that takes away all sins and initiates the new life in Christ. All of the other stories reinforce that theological point through analogy.

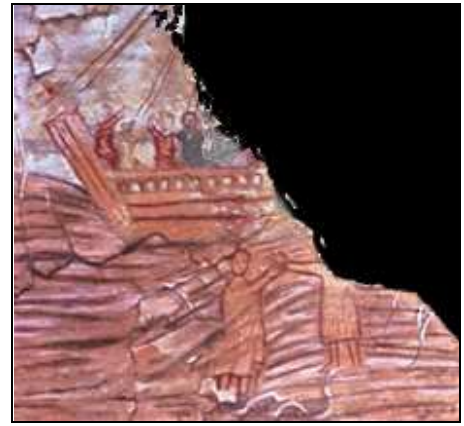
Image: John Pfordresher, *Jesus and the emergence of a Catholic Imagination, An Illustrated journey*, (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press 2008) p 129



aside for baptisms and had a baptismal font (similar to a bathtub) set into one niche-like wall. An arch served as a ceiling over the font the underside of which was painted sky blue and patterned with stars. Behind the font, on the wall between the top of the font and the arched ceiling, is a painting of the *Good Shepherd*[29]. With him are sheep standing on a hill. Also, in the lower left hand corner of the wall are small

nude images of Adam and Eve and, with them, a serpent. At a right angle to the font wall is a longer wall with images from the New Testament: *The Three Women at the Tomb*⁴⁴[32] (closest to the font wall), *The Healing of the Paralytic*[30], and the story of *Christ and Peter Walking on*

30 *The Healing of the Paralytic*; wall fresco, baptistery, Dura-Europos.



31 *Jesus and Peter Walking on Water*; wall fresco, baptistery, Dura-Europos.

Water[31].⁴⁵ On the opposite wall, there are two entry doors. Between the doors is a painting of *The Woman at the Well*[30] from the New Testament and a small niche beneath which is a painting of *David and Goliath*.⁴⁶

Iconographic ‘program’

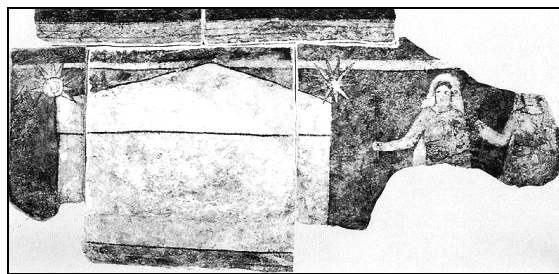
The decoration of the baptistery at Dura-Europos provides us with an excellent example of what is called an iconographic ‘program.’ By program is meant a deliberate selection and grouping of images in a sequential arrangement that creates an orchestrated relationship for the purpose of expressing a comprehensive or concentrated theme. The program in this baptistery appropriately presents us with the role of Baptism in God’s plan of redemption. Let us briefly summarize an interpretation of each image that would have revealed the significance of the ritual to those about to undergo Baptism.⁴⁷

The shepherd depicted over the font is a metaphor for Christ who has “carried” the baptismal candidates to this room where they will go down into the water dying to sin, and rising out of the water, to new life. The image of *Adam and Eve* reminds us that through Adam, all have died but through Christ, all are made to live (*I Cor.15:2*). Jesus is the shepherd

who saves the lost sheep and—in this instance—the lost sheep are the third century gentiles living in Dura-Europos, presenting themselves for Baptism.⁴⁸ Once found and cured through Baptism, the lost sinner, like the paralytic, is able to walk upright. Christ offers “life-saving water” to the

32 *The Three Women at the Tomb*; wall fresco, baptistery, Dura-Europos.

Only two of the figures in the painting have survived the ravages of time. The women are approaching the tomb Jesus had been placed in following his crucifixion. He is not there, of course, as he has risen. The image of the large tomb is immediately adjacent to the wall of the font. Candidates for Baptism could not possibly miss the symbolism: they too will go down into the ‘tomb’ of the water but will rise to new life when they come up out of the water.



Samaritan woman at the well. In the story of *Christ Walking on Water*, we see Jesus saving Peter from sinking into water that kills, not water that saves[31]. Peter’s faith had weakened and he began to sink in the

water but Jesus saved him. The shepherd, in other words, can always be depended upon to save regardless of the Christian's own weak faith.

The image of the three women approaching the tomb[32] on the day of Jesus' resurrection would have reminded the candidates for Baptism, who were now approaching the "tomb" of the font, that they would rise from the font/tomb to new life. The David/Goliath painting is included in the program as it is understood as a prefigurement of Christ—descendant of David—conquering sin.

33 *Livia's Garden*, detail, wall painting from her Roman villa ad Gallinas Albas, Prima Porta, now in the Museo Massimo, Rome.

www.brandeis.edu/~Faculty/faculty%20list.html
 (Photographic Credit: Ann Raia, 1999), courtesy of the Roman Project: http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/liviahouse2.jpg.



All the images in this room were selected to stress the fall of mankind and the subsequent redemption of mankind through Jesus Christ. Those who came to this room to be baptized would have understood that they were being initiated into that redemption which was wrought by Christ.

Iconographic programs such as these in the house-church at Dura-Europos have been characteristic of Christian art from its inception.

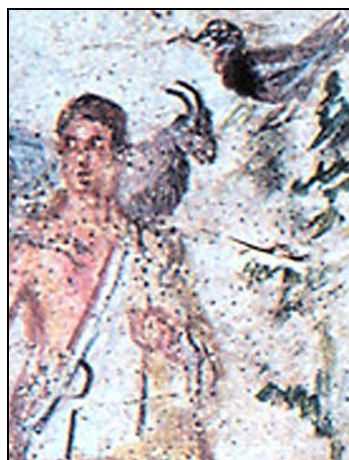
34 *Christ Teaching the Apostles*, detail of a catacomb painting.



Visual characteristics of early Christian art

The technique used to render the images in the catacombs might be described by most as "sketchy." It is actually a slightly debased version of the prevailing Roman style of painting at the time which utilized free and fluid brush strokes[33]. Free—sometimes called, "open"—brushstrokes are

35 *The Good Shepherd*, detail of a catacomb ceiling painting.



applied without blending which results in a fresh and "quickly stated" appearance[34&35]. Fluid strokes are confident and flowing ones --not labored or "worked." The technique was popularly used in the frescoes of Roman homes and villas during the late antique period and is often described as "impressionistic."⁴⁹ Some historians suggest that the style was perhaps a reflection of a growing anti-materialistic attitude in the prevailing culture, presumably influenced by the art and thought of the Near East.⁵⁰

The good to inferior—mostly inferior-execution⁵¹ of the catacomb paintings may have been due to the dark and dismal condi-

36 *The Healing of the Paralytic*, detail of wall painting on baptistery wall at Dura-Europos.



37 *Jonah Swallowed by the Sea Monster*, one of a set of three pieces depicting the story of Jonah; third century, Asia Minor, approx. 16 inches high. The Cleveland Museum of Art.



38 *The Good Shepherd Sarcophagus*, detail.

A Christian sarcophagus.

[christ.church.montreal.music.googlepages.com/.. /](http://christ.church.montreal.music.googlepages.com/)

39 *The Grande Ludovisi Sarcophagus*, ca. 250 A.D.

This is a pagan sarcophagus.

faculty.cua.edu/~LudovisiSarcophagus.htm



tions under which these artists had to work. The poor air quality, poor lighting, high humidity, and cramped environment⁵² probably contributed to a *get it done and get out of there* approach that could account for the sketchy characteristics of the images. If professional decorating workshops were used, and they most certainly were, then it is likely the poorer quality of rendering was due to cost cutting strategies. Instead of using more costly figure painters the shop manager/owner would have relied on his less skilled background painters to do the figures.

The paintings at Dura-Europos are even cruder, however, than the ones in the catacombs and appear as mere sketches on a light, neutral background color.⁵³ They are similar to the “schematic” figures painted on the walls of other buildings in the town from the same period[36].⁵⁴ The frontier nature of the location, then, may account for the poor quality. We can assume that art produced in larger urban centers would have been more sophisticated.

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Early pre-Constantine Christians were apparently suspicious of free-standing sculpture. Perhaps it reminded them of the statues and statuettes of the pagan gods and goddesses. Except for a few statuettes of the *Good Shepherd* and a beautiful white marble set of figures depicting the story of Jonah[37], Christian sculpture was limited to the relief carvings on the sides of sarcophagi[38], jewelry or such utilitarian objects as oil lamps. Christian sarcophagi carvings imitated the style of pagan ones with spaces sometimes crammed with scenes of complex imagery. The perspective in these scenes is flattened, produced by carving smaller figures toward the bottom of the composition and increasingly larger ones toward the top --the reverse of illusionist perspective[39]. There is no background; everything exists on the same plane resulting in a “piled-on”⁵⁵ look. The rendering is realistic in terms of surface details, texture, animated poses and anatomical detail. Proportions, however, are sometimes sacrificed to the overall plan of the composition or to hierarchic perspective --the importance of a figure in a composition is indicated by its relative size[38].

⁴⁴Mark 16:1

⁴⁵Matthew 14:25-31

⁴⁶1 Samuel 17:45-51

⁴⁷Pfordresher 133—136

⁴⁸Matthew 15:24

⁴⁹Louise Gardner, *Art Through the Ages, Ninth Edition*, (Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers 1991) p 258

⁵⁰Veronica Sekules, *Medieval Art*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2001) p 16

⁵¹Gardner 258

⁵²Gardner 258

⁵³Marilyn Stokstad, *Medieval Art, Second Edition*, (Boulder, Westview Press 2004) p 15

⁵⁴Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2000)

p 13

⁵⁵Gardner 267