

Origins of Christian Art

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The estimates vary but some peg it as long as Italy itself. That is the combined length, if laid end-to-end, of all the underground burial tunnels that we know as the Christian catacombs of Rome. Other estimates place the number of people who were buried there at over 2,000,000.¹ Whatever the actual size, the catacombs are hugely important in the history of Christian art.

1 Gallery of the Christian catacomb of Saint Callixtus, outside of Rome; 3rd or 4th century.

The niches for bodies are called 'loculi' and were sealed with stone slabs, inscribed with the deceased's name, dates, and perhaps a prayer, symbol or image.

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You may have learned in school that the catacombs were not only underground cemeteries but that they were also used for Christian worship and for people to hide in times of persecution. Those are stories that persist even though there has never been any evidence that the catacombs were used for those purposes. Those legends apparently originated with the novels of Romanticism written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Above the catacombs—above ground in barn-halls—is where the early Christians gathered to worship; first, in the celebration of culturally traditional funerary banquets held in honor of deceased relatives and friends and, second, in worship.

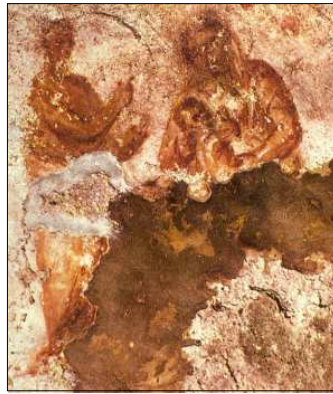
The Christians buried their dead in the midst of a pagan society that, for the most part, cremated its dead. There was certainly nothing that would have prevented Christian use of cremation but, the body, according to Christian belief is destined for resurrection and so burial had a cer-

2 *Virgin and Child with Balaam the Prophet, Catacomb of*

Image of the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus. This is earliest known image of Mary and the infant Jesus other than depictions of the story of the Magi. The figure at the left is the prophet Balaam pointing to a star (not visible here). The star is from *Numbers 24:17*.

3 A third or fourth century catacomb.

There are many 'rooms' in the catacombs like this one, called 'cubicula.' They served as mausoleums for wealthier families and were usually decorated with fresco paintings. They are the earliest known examples of Christian art.



tain symbolic value. In contrast, there was no bodily resurrection theology in pagan belief—only, for the most part, a ghostly afterlife. Nevertheless, many of the Roman families buried their dead. The Jews had always used burial rather than cremation.

While the catacombs were cemeteries and not gathering places for worship it is in the catacombs that we find, by far, the largest concentration of the earliest examples of Christian art. Cubicles or small family tomb rooms were painted with scenes from the Old and New Testaments as well as other symbols.

4 Inscription on a 4th century catacomb tomb slab.

"Kalimere, may God refresh your soul together with that of your sister, Hilara." Epitaph from a Roman catacomb.



Courtyard of the Lateran Basilica, Rome.

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

The origin of Christian images

Kalimere, may God refresh your soul together with that of your sister, Hilara[4]. That is how the words translate on a 4th century marble niche slab from a Christian catacomb. But what is interesting is not so much the inscription as the image we see of a young male shepherd in a short tunic holding a lamb on his shoulders with two sheep standing on either side of him. To the right of the shepherd we see a dove perched in an olive tree. On both ends of the slab are vines. The images look like doodling we might do during a boring meeting. The image would have been easy enough for early Christians to understand but maybe not so easy for us, today: "The souls of the deceased and his sister Hilara (the sheep) are commended to God (Christ, the *Good Shepherd*), who dutifully cares for his flock in the peaceful, refreshing pastures of paradise (dove, olive tree, and vines)." ²

It is an interesting story how the early Christians came to use such images in their religion since Christianity was an outgrowth of Judaism, a religion that seemingly forbade the creation of representational images.

5 Dura-Europos synagogue.

The oldest surviving Jewish synagogue dated by inscription to AD 231-32. The images are the oldest surviving cycle of biblical narratives.

This image, illustrating a scene from the *Book of Esther*, was taken from Goodenough, Erwin Ramsdell (1968) [1953] *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, New York: Pantheon Books. A complete copy of the fresco is on display at the History of Art Department at Yale University.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_synagogue



The commandment given to Moses banning graven images³ was, in practice, interpreted as banning the representation of God *only* and not the making of *all* representational images. Even the Ark of the Covenant itself was decorated with images. A Jewish synagogue at Dura-Europos [5] from the mid third century has entire walls decorated with images of people, animals, and objects —none, however, of God. Perhaps, then, it did not really represent a radical change when early Christians employed images in their art.

6 A drawing of a shepherd oil lamp ca. 175-225.

Such lamps with pastoral scenes on them were very popular all around the Mediterranean world at the time Christians were determining what aspects of the prevailing pagan culture they could comfortably adopt and which they needed to avoid. It is through such selective purchasing that Christian art may have got its start.

Lamp of Annius Ser....., with figure of the Good Shepherd. R. Lanciani, *Pagan and Christian Rome*, Boston and New York, 1892

http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Pagan_and_Christian_Rome/The_Transformation_of_Rome_from_a_Pagan_into_a_Christian_City



But the earliest Christians were faced with the problem of lacking a repertoire of Christian images from which to draw. It was a new religion, evolved from Judaism, yes, but with a slightly different theology and some new stories. How did they solve this problem? How did they decide the manner in which to represent their faith, visually?

It, actually, may not have been much of a problem. The solution may have been very simply arrived at; solved in a very ordinary way. Paul Corby Finney in his book, *The Invisible God*, offers an interesting suggestion as to how Christian art more than likely got its start.⁴ He notes that Christians were not a separate ethnic group; there was nothing distinctive about them. They came to be made up of representatives of all levels of society and different ethnic and societal groups. The only thing they held in common were their beliefs. In every other way they were part of the prevailing pagan culture. As Christians, however, they were selective regarding that culture, accepting those things that did not conflict with their Christian belief and rejecting those



**7 Calf-Bearer, ca. 570 BC,
Acropolis Museum, Athens.**

Christian imagery got its start through the adoption and modification of pagan images. If we were to substitute the calf in the pagan statue above with a lamb we might very well identify it as the Christian 'Good Shepherd'.

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things, that did.⁵

Finney notes that Clement of Alexandria wrote a work around the year 200 in which he gave advice to his fellow Christians on what kinds of images to select from among those offered on signet rings. Such rings were commonly used in the culture to 'seal' documents. The images he recommended —dove, fish, ship, lyre, anchor— would perhaps have reminded Christians of Christian themes. Other images, he suggested, should be rejected for conflicting with Christian belief —faces of idols (obviously), sword and bow (for Christians love peace), drinking cups (because Christians are sober), and "images... of lovers and favorite prostitutes" (because Christians are pure). Acceptable and rejected images listed by Clement were all abundantly available on signet rings in marketplaces all around the empire so Clement was not recommending that Christians begin making their own signet rings, but to shop carefully in the markets, selecting from among all the possible offerings only those rings sporting images that were, at least, not offensive. It is possible that Christian art got its start through this selective purchasing of images, on signet rings as well as other objects[6], already abundantly available in the Greco-Roman culture.⁶

Only when some Christians near Rome began to own significant amounts of land was it possible to commence large scale projects like the catacombs. The catacomb images —around the year 200— became the first material legacy of the Christian faith. The Christian owners of the land under which the catacombs were dug would have, in conjunction with church authorities, hired professionals to dig the tunnels and chambers, and professional plasterers and painters to decorate the ceilings and walls. Church authorities probably met with the manager of an artisan shop to choose, from among the shop's repertoire of funerary images, the ones least offensive for use in a Christian cemetery.⁷ Some images no doubt even offered possibilities for Christian interpretation.

It is not surprising then that the young shepherd that appears on the tomb slab we referred to above has a precursor in pagan Greek art. A male carrying a lamb or sheep or other animal on his shoulders was a very common image in Greek and Roman art[7]. The image was adopted by the early Christians and given a new meaning: the *Good Shepherd*.⁸

In the next two sections we will take a look at the origins of the earliest Christian imagery using Paul Corby Finney's theory as a torch to light our way.

¹Anton de Waal, *Roman Catacombs*, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. (New York: Robert Appleton Company 1908) 23 Dec. 2008, 21:28
<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03417b.htm>>

² James Snyder, *Medieval Art—Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, 4th-14th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989) p. 15

³ Exodus 20:4

⁴ Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God, The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) pp. 153-154

- ⁵ Finney 111
- ⁶ Finney 153
- ⁷ Finney 160
- ⁸ Psalm 23