

Chapter 11

PAGANS, CHRISTIANS, AND JEWS

The Art of Late Antiquity

Summary:

This chapter deals with Christianity and its impact on Rome. This chapter introduces the student to the religious traditions, pagan and Jewish, from which Christianity drew its resources, not only the visual vocabulary, but also the philosophical tenets.

I. Lecture Model

The social and iconographic methodologies can be useful in gaining an understanding of the work commissioned. These approaches can help to establish the importance of the religious commissions and their use in establishing important religious control as well as secular authority.

1) In 315 CE, Constantine (10-78)



issued the Edict of Toleration, which gave the Christians the right to follow their religion openly, but he did not outlaw the other religions.

Although Christianity became the official religion of the Empire in 325 CE, Constantine did not have himself baptized a Christian until he lay dying in the year 337 CE.

After Constantine recognized Christianity he decided to build himself a new Christian city. He chose a site on the Bosphorus, the ancient city of Byzantium, which he renamed after himself: Constantinople - it became the capitol of the Eastern Empire.

- The two halves of the empire were severed in 395 CE. This is the later history of the Empire. In the 2nd century CE, however, Christians, Jews and Pagans co-existed, sometimes in peace and at other times in open hostilities.

- The religious tolerance that the Empire sometimes practiced can be seen in the community of *Dura Europas* (Syria). In this community, a Roman garrison town existed almost literally side by side a Jewish synagogue and a Christian community house. What makes this remarkable is their existence in a Roman occupied town. Due to the nature of the area, constant shift of dominant power structures, *Dura Europas* soon fell again to another invading power in the late 3rd century CE. The town was evacuated and the buildings were left to the Syrian Desert to cover, which occurred.

- It was at the end of World War I, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire that led to serious archaeological excavations and the discovery of the wall paintings in the city. The significance of these works has led to a re-evaluation of figurative work forming an important part of the Jewish religious program.

- An important point to note is *the figure of God is never depicted beyond a hand emerging from the heavens (11-1).*

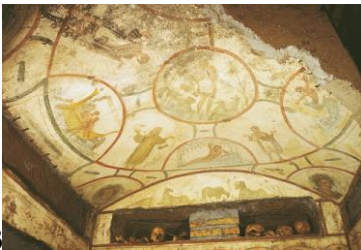


11-01 Interior of the synagogue at Dura-Europos, Syria, with wall-paintings of Old Testament themes, ca. 245-256. Tempera on plaster.

Could these Old Testament scenes have influenced the Early Christians? The scenes are presented in a stylized format, never indicating movement. Could this be in answer to the Second Commandment, prohibiting graven images? Perhaps the Rabbi or Rabbis, in response to this commandment, allowed the images as long as they did not show action and hence life. The multiculturalism of Dura Europas is seen the murals as well. The figures depicted show a certain affinity to Late Roman Empire figuration, for example the chariot procession from the *Arch of Septimius Severus 203 CE (10- 66).*



- The togas worn by the Romans are seen in the clothing of the Old Testament figures as well. This imitation of Roman garb will be seen in later works and does mirror the impact the Empire had on subsequent generations. The catacombs show the use and re-use of Roman iconography being adapted by the Christians to create a visual vocabulary for their new religion.



11-3



11-5



11-6

Compare the image of

- the youthful Christ as the Good Shepherd from the catacomb of ST. Peter and Marcellinus, Rome early 4th C. CE (11-3)

with

- the Christ Enthroned from the top register, center scene, from the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus c.359 CE (11-5) and
- lastly the small sculpture of Christ Seated c.350-75 CE (11-6).

- All three images present a youthful figure of Christ. The detail from the sarcophagus and the small sculpture present this figure as an enthroned Caesar. They are taking the motif and adapting it to fit a new meaning and a new context.
- The catacomb figure reflects the more humble origins of the man.
- Perhaps this is also a direct translation of the figure and an attempt to focus on the humble status the man represented. He was after all a carpenter.
- One of the draws this new religion had was its appeal to the lower strata of society. It could also be argued that people of wealth who commissioned the sarcophagi also illustrated their support for this new religion with visual references to the important protagonists, certainly that is true of *Junius Bassus* who was *Prefect of Rome*.



The image of *Christ as Sol Invictus* from the mausoleum of the Julii in Rome (11-12)

- Shows Christ as a young pagan god. Yet the mosaicist has also shown the figure with the Christian cross, a symbol of salvation, and a halo indicating even more clearly the importance of this figure.
- Once again the *richness of the material* suggests the *rising importance Christianity* was having within Rome itself.
- To the Christians, Christ had always been a god, but in terms of the Roman State, Constantine made him a god, by this acceptance. Constantine granted this new religion legal status.
- Now the Christians could practice openly with no fear of reprisals, even more importantly, now the iconography could seriously search for the appropriate vocabulary in order to gain more converts and they could begin serious construction projects for their places of worship, churches.



The mosaic of *Christ as Good Shepherd* in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia c.425 CE, Ravenna (11-15)

- Illustrates even more clearly the *imperialization of Christ*,
- For we see him here still as the young beardless shepherd, but he now wears the gold and royal purple mantle of Imperial Rome.
- There is still a naturalistic blue sky and an attempt at shading in the rocks; the figure of Christ is regally enthroned yet tenderly guarding and securing the flock.
- This youthful figure hold his cross, his symbol of salvation, he looks out while the sheep look toward him. Possibly a device to hold the attention of the faithful and guide them toward salvation, the mosaicist used all the visual devices at hand to create an image of imperial yet divine order.

Still in Ravenna, but now in the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, the changing depictive style can be seen.

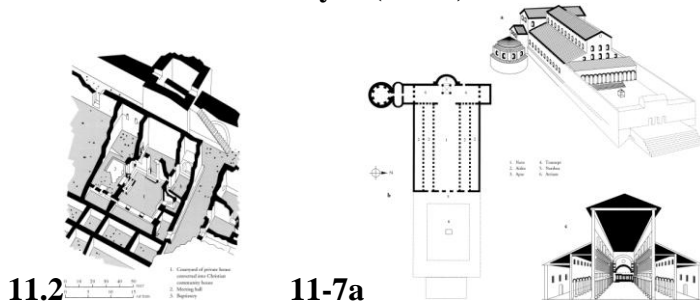


The story of the *Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes* c.504 CE (11-17)

■ Shows a rigid formality and compression of space, the figures have morphed into symbols rather than illusionistic bodies. The progressive disembodiment and flattening of the figures shows the slow transformation of the art form. This new two-dimensional art form was developing into a glowing, otherworldly magnificence.

2) Christian architecture was profoundly changed by Constantine's recognition of Christianity.

Instead of humble community houses constructed on the outskirts of the Empire (11-2) or chapels carved out of the tufa of the catacombs, great basilicas and shrines rose over the sites of Christian martyrs (11-7a).



■ This reconstruction of Old St. Peter's does show the resemblance to the Imperial basilica, which was the seat of justice in the Empire. The relationship between earthly justice and heavenly justice was linked. The early Church fathers sought to show the legal lineage of the Church descending from Constantine and going forward.

■ Also the basilica was a more efficient structure to contain large groups. The basilica that was erected over the site of the martyrdom of St. Peter in Rome (11-7) became the model for basilicas built all over the Christian world.

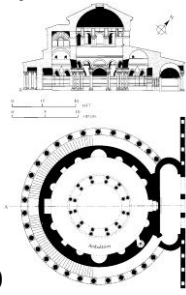
■ An open courtyard known as *an atrium* preceded it. Directly in front of the building was an entry porch called a *narthex*, from *the narthex* one entered *the high nave* lit by clerestory windows and flanked by double aisles (11-7c).

■ At the end of the nave was a transverse section called the *bema*, which ended in a semicircular apse, here one entered from the short side and the apse was moved around to the other end, creating a much more dramatic impression, and so, focusing the faithful toward one end of the structure.

■ This would allow the faithful to focus on the celebration of the ritual (Mass), it was *also a distinct change from the pagan temples*; the congregation would follow a carefully conducted ritual in a participatory fashion.



11-9



11-10

■ A circular building called *Santa Costanza* (11-9 and 11-10)

■ Was used as a tomb for Constantine's daughter.

■ The central rotunda of this building was surmounted by a semi-circular dome, which was surrounded by a circular ambulatory or walkway. This mausoleum also had used the iconographic program designed to *show the religious relationship* the emperor's daughter, Costanza, had with Christianity.

■ Twelve columns surround the interior rotunda (11-9), which housed her sarcophagus, a reference to the Twelve Apostles. The columns do show the imperial lineage, as they are Corinthian columns removed from an earlier Roman building.



■ The interior mosaic program shows a bucolic scene of wine production (11-11). It could be suggested that this is also a reference to the Eucharist, wine into the blood of Christ and a further reference to the theme of redemption.

3) Pagan themes in classical forms continued to appear. In the Luxury arts this ivory carving of the priestess of Bacchus (11-22) is, indeed, pagan.



11-22

■ This leaf from the diptych, *Symmachi*, is a representation of a *pagan priestess offering to Jupiter*. The date, c.400 CE, does indicate a certain defiance and resistance to the Christian faith.

■ But in a slightly later ivory, this from a casket details a New Testament version of the Crucifixion.



- In this plaque (11-21), the artist has conceived in narrative format some of the key events of the Passion.
- To the left of the Crucifixion, hangs Judas, his suicide a testament to his regret, the reward for his betrayal at his feet,
- Next to Judas, stand the Virgin and Joseph of Arimathea, he provided the tomb for the burial of Christ.
- And finally on the right side of the Crucifixion is the Roman, Longinus, in the act of piercing the side of Christ with his spear.
- The artist has created in a narrative format *the dogma of the new religion, salvation and redemption*.
- The artist has also, perhaps, shown the diversity of this new religion by showing the *Roman Longinus*. According to the tradition, known at this time, Longinus converts to Christianity.
- These are the themes that became very powerful images and they also became teaching tools for this new religion. The vast illiterate majority was able to understand and believe based on the images they saw.

Resources:

Videotapes

African Ascetics and Celtic Monks: Christianity in the 5th and 6th centuries 48 min.

BVL9361\$149

Trials and Triumphs in Rome: Christianity in the 3rd and 4th centuries 47 min. BVL9360
\$149

The Birth of a New Religion: Christianity in the 1st and 2nd Centuries 48 min. BVL9359
\$149.95

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The Old Testament in Art 76 min. BVL4655 \$149.95

Films for the Humanities

1-800-257-5126

<http://www.films.com>

Books

Claman, Henry N. *Jewish Images in the Christian Church: Art as the Mirror of the Jewish-Christian Conflict 200-1250*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000.

Elsner, Joseph. *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Ferguson, Evertt ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. New York: Garland, 1990.

Finney, Paul Carley. *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Houlden, Leslie ed. *Judaism and Christianity*. London: Routledge, 1991.

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Jensen, Robin Margaret. *Understanding Early Christian Art*. New York: Routledge,

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Matthews, Thomas F. The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

McManners, John ed. Oxford History of Christianity. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Web Resources

<http://www.underome.com/>

<http://ancienthistory.about.com>

<http://www.church--history.com>