

EARLY ICONS

Christian Image Veneration Before 325 AD

Volume I: Written Evidence and Paintings

Michael Garten

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Early Icons

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Foreword

Although the claim of classical iconoclasts and their modern sympathizers that the Christians in the first three centuries did not have images of any kind has been greatly undermined by archaeology and recent theological studies, there still remains the question of veneration. Did early Christians venerate images, or are such practices idolatrous corruptions introduced later on by half-Christianized pagans? The merit of Michael Garten's present study is that he unpacks the word veneration and the meaning behind it to show that Christians in the early centuries most probably did honor worthy objects and persons—showed respect and homage to them—through various physical gestures, and this without feeling they were breaking the 2nd commandment.

Michael brings forward several lines of evidence. He draws attention to a number of passages (some quite striking) from early Christian authors attesting to holy images or image veneration that have not previously been considered in the study of this issue. He highlights the cultural background of some familiar texts in ways that show image veneration was done, and draws attention to how early Christians adapted types of images from the Roman world that would naturally be venerated. Michael also makes several arguments that some of the early Christian paintings which survive were venerated. This study includes a number of quotes from mainstream scholars acknowledging there was image veneration in the first three centuries of Christianity. The conclusion is obvious: the veneration, that is,

the honoring and respecting of icons, as witnessed to and defended by Nicaea II, is but the continuation of much earlier, non-idolatrous gestures made to honorable objects and persons.

—Father Steven Bigham, Former Professor of Orthodox Theology Institut de théologie orthodoxe de Montréal Author of *Early Christian Attitudes Towards Images*

Preface

Early in 2023, my godson brought to my attention a video lecture which attempted to make the case that Christian holy images and their veneration were late "accretions." I was not completely unfamiliar with the question. Years prior to this, a Protestant Restorationist friend of mine had challenged me on whether the Church before 325 AD ever had practices of venerating images. As the year 2023 continued, it became increasingly obvious that this question of early image veneration was an issue which attracted a lot of attention. The video by Dr. Gavin Ortlund was frequently being put forward as a strong internal challenge to Orthodoxy and perhaps to Catholicism too: "If the earliest Christians lacked or rejected the veneration of images, how could your Church claim to be the authentic continuation of the early Church?"

The Seventh Ecumenical Council—accepted by Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians—affirms the legitimacy and necessity of venerating images. This Council, also called the Second Council of Nicaea, is very suspect in the modern West. There are several challenges:

1. **Scriptural Challenge:** What is the Scriptural basis for icon veneration, especially since the practice of bowing towards icons *appears* to violate the second commandment with its

prohibition against bowing down to idols? Scripture seems to contradict the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

2. **Historical Aniconism Challenge:** What evidence is there in the early Church for the practice of venerating images? Contemporary Protestant scholars and others claim that the vast weight of written evidence from the earliest Christian authors shows a firm rejection of all image veneration. History seems to contradict the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.
3. **Ethical Challenge:** Even if image veneration were allowed, why would it be legitimate for the Seventh Ecumenical Council to pronounce an anathema on those who refuse to venerate images? A basic, face-value reading of the Gospel and Christ's message of non-coercive love seems to contradict the teaching of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

This series of books will first focus on responding to the second criticism —the Historical Aniconism Challenge (henceforth referred to as the "Aniconism Challenge"). The first book will focus on evidence from written sources and surviving Christian paintings from the pre-Nicene era. The second book will consider post-Nicene written attestation to pre-Nicene images, the role of hostile sources in confirming Christian image veneration, surviving artifacts and inscriptions, as well as pre- Nicene teaching on Old Testament images. Treatment of the Scriptural Challenge and the Ethical Challenge will be addressed in the third and last volume.

In presenting evidence that images were venerated in the pre-Nicene Church, I do not mean this claim can be proven with certainty, or that the arguments given will be convincing for all readers. Nevertheless, I do think that the arguments presented are strong and should be persuasive to the open-minded. I hope they will challenge skeptical Protestants and cautious Catholics to reconsider this issue.

Readers who are not looking for in-depth argumentation on this issue can afford to skim this book, looking at the conclusions of each chapter and any images which interest them. While the number of texts quoted and arguments given may seem excessive to some, the motivation is to correct

an imbalance. There are numerous people today who boldly proclaim that the early Church rejected all image veneration, and purport to prove this with direct quotations from early Christian authors. Such a challenge to the Church's teaching has been persuasive to many. It should be answered directly and strongly instead of waved aside.

I hope this book will glorify Christ, the True and Living Icon of God. In addition, I hope it will be edifying to all, showing an incorruptible continuity of Orthodox Christian faith and practice from the earliest centuries down to today.

Through the prayers of Saint John of Damascus, O Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and save us.

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My first and greatest thanks to those on earth go to my sweet wife Tatyana. She is a living image of faithfulness and love, with such undivided beauty, inner and outer. I am grateful for her encouragement in this endeavor and her numerous insights. This book in many ways reflects her aesthetic discernment and wisdom.

I also wish to express gratitude to my family for a lifetime of education, and my children for their sweet queries about how close the book was to completion, as well as their prayers.

An initial outline of my arguments was first published in a series of videos on Seraphim Hamilton's YouTube Channel. I am grateful for his help in spreading the word about this project; additionally, many of his insights have affected and developed the content of this book.

My thanks also go to Suan Sonna, Kyle King, Luther Menard, and Fr. Jonathan Ivanov for providing me with platforms to present these ideas and receive feedback about my arguments.

I am grateful to the following people who contributed encouragement, resources, feedback, or expertise in making this book possible: Mark Krause, Edward Jun, Perry Robinson, Craig Truglia, Christian Marino, Max Whitlock, John Elmore, Dr. Zachary Porcu, Evangelos Nikitopoulos, Matiyas Alemayehu, Daniel Palamino, Seth Brim, Dave Sims, Jose de Oliviera and an online author who goes by the name Byzantine Architect.

Thanks go out to Fr. Joseph Thornburg for reviewing and evaluating this book for conformity to Holy Orthodoxy.

Finally, Father Steven Bigham played an invaluable role in editing this book. I hope that this book will help carry the torch he lit many years ago when he wrote *Early Christian Attitudes Towards Images*. The example he set helped me build my case, and many of the argumentative strategies of this book find their source in his writings.

Part I: Introduction to the Series

1

Explaining the Controversy about Early Christian Images

The Argument of this Book

This book will argue that the pre-Nicene Church had Christian holy images and venerated them. Evidence will be presented from multiple early Christian authors, including several which are often misunderstood as rejecting the veneration of images. In some written sources, a careful examination of the author's wording shows that gestures of honor were done towards images. Many early authors also witness to Christians having intrinsically honorable images—images which by cultural definition would have been venerated. This book will also examine three categories of evidence from surviving pre-Nicene paintings: images of orants, the Good Shepherd, and the Theotokos and Christ child. When formal qualities, context, and comparable images are considered, we have strong reason to think some of these paintings were venerated. We will consider the cultural background of how certain types of images were used, as well as quotes from scholars affirming pre-Nicene image veneration. The combined force of all these considerations makes a powerful case that early Christians venerated images.

The Aniconism Challenge

Beginning in January 2023, Protestant professor and pastor Gavin Ortlund started airing a series of video lectures on the topic of icon veneration and the early Church. [1] His thesis is that the Scriptures and the pre-Nicene Church both reject the veneration of images. The challenge regarding the early Church is significant and centers on four propositions:

1. **Lack of Material Evidence:** Images existed in the early Church before 325 AD, but were used for decorative, commemorative, and teaching purposes. We have no good reason to think these images were venerated.
2. **Invectives Against Cultic Use of Images:** A plentitude (or consensus) of pre-325 AD Christian writers who speak about images denounce their veneration. This is not just a denunciation applicable only to idols, but is relevant for all image veneration.
3. **Lack of Written Evidence:** There are no known instances of mainstream Christian authors attesting to the practice of venerating images before 325 AD.
4. **Scholarly Consensus:** The scholarly consensus affirms the previous three points.

Ortlund puts forward what he believes to be strong evidence for each of these claims. Together, they constitute an “internal critique” of Orthodox theology and Roman Catholic theology which affirm that image veneration is good and even vital to true Christian practice. The teaching that image veneration is necessary was expressed in 787 AD at the 7th Ecumenical Council called Nicaea II. How can these Churches claim to have the mindset and practice of the early Church if their way of life (on this point of icon veneration at least) is the complete opposite of what early Christians

did and said in rejecting image veneration? I will call the criticism based on these four propositions, “The Aniconism Challenge.”

To give some examples of Dr. Ortlund’s claims, he offers the following characterizations of the ante-Nicene Church’s stance on images and their veneration:

> . . .here's the shocking truth: the position anathematized at Nicaea II as a damnable heresy is in fact the universal resounding witness of the early church and the Scripture. Not only does the veneration of icons not go back to the first century, the only question is whether it originated in the sixth or the seventh century. And for hundreds and hundreds of years prior to that time, the early Christians are so clear and vigorous in their opposition to the veneration of icons, and the use of images in worship in any way, that you can't see this as a doctrinal development because it's a doctrinal U-turn. Nicea II is the triumph of a late patristic innovation, because it is anathematizing what was once shocking and unheard of… The evidence is just overwhelming for what is actually pretty shocking, namely, an ecumenical council anathematizes what is actually the universal and resounding view of the early Church… All of them [pre-Nicene Christian authors commenting on images]—resoundingly, unanimously—are against any sort of cultic usage of images (ever praying to an image, venerating an image, anything like that). You just see that everywhere. [2]

The claims being made here are absolute, as seen in the phrases “clear and vigorous,” “use of images in worship in any way,” “resounding view” and “against any sort.” There is also a universality to what Dr. Ortlund says that rules out any exceptions or qualifications; the phrases “universal. . . witness,” “once shocking and unheard of,” and “all of them. . .unanimously” make this abundantly clear. It is precisely the absolute and universal character of these claims that gives them their force as an internal

critique Nicaea II. If the claim was that “early Christians disapproved of some image veneration practices but accepted others” or “total rejection of cultic use of images was characteristic of some early Christians but not by others” this would not be sufficient grounds for claiming that Christian image veneration is a “doctrinal U-turn” or a “late patristic innovation.”

The videos Dr. Ortlund has made about the alleged lack of early Christian image veneration have gained significant traction online, with total views exceeding 250,000 at the time of this publication. There have been numerous responses from vocal Catholic apologists and a few from Orthodox Christians as well. And yet, the general attitude online is that these responses have not been very strong. Most replies have focused on undercutting Dr. Ortlund’s inferences from the evidence he puts forward to the conclusion that there is an internal contradiction in Orthodoxy or Catholicism. Some have tried to undercut part of Dr. Ortlund’s claims about how to interpret the early evidence (as clearly rejecting all image veneration), while others have conceded Ortlund’s point to some degree and simply attempted to show that it is not a problem if the pre-Nicene Church was basically aniconic.

To defeat an internal critique, all that is strictly needed is to undercut the evidence put forward that the viewpoint being criticized includes a contradiction. It is not unreasonable, then, for Orthodox and Catholic Christians to note problems with the alleged evidence against pre-Nicene image veneration, and be satisfied with saying that “this doesn’t actually disprove that the early Church rejected holy images and their veneration.” Orthodox Christians are not beholden to the conclusions of modern scholarship, and have other avenues for knowledge about God and Christian teaching.

But undercutting the strength of someone else’s critique is, of course, not the same as putting forward strong positive arguments for one’s view, and may not be persuasive to others. There have been a few apologists who have attempted to give some amount of positive evidence of image veneration in the pre-Nicene Church. However, most of the constructive responses have claimed that the doctrine and practice of Christian image veneration is an appropriate inference permitted by scriptural teaching and practice, or a legitimate accretion which developed organically from prior practices related to relics, etc.

Other publications over the past two decades have taken a similar approach to that of Dr. Ortlund. David Bercot's *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* [3] and corresponding lecture on images [4] highlight a large number of passages from early Christian writings which appear at face value to support an aniconic interpretation of the early Church. He briefly considers the evidence for image veneration based on surviving images in the Roman catacombs and the Dura Europas house church, but claims there is no reason to think these images were venerated.

Similarly, Pastor John Carpenter's articles claim that the early Church did not venerate images. [5] His view is summarized as follows:

> The Eastern Orthodox Church claims that their practices have been preserved unaltered from the early church, thus making them the pristine church in perfect continuity with the apostolic church. Eastern Orthodox Apologists use this claim to offer potential converts certainty amid competing truth claims. In particular, they claim that the early church venerated images (icons) in the liturgy just as the Eastern Orthodox (and often Roman Catholics) do now. However, a careful examination of the evidence, both archaeological and written, reveals that despite the claim to continuity with the early church, the Eastern Orthodox practices of iconography directly contradict the consistent teachings of the early church. The early church, with only varying degrees of vehemence, strictly prohibited icons.

Carpenter also claims that it is misleading to bring up the mere existence of images from the early Church, as though this proves that such images were in some way venerated. [6] It would appear to be a form of trickery to infer from the mere existence of certain images that they were in fact shown honorific gestures (venerated).

In addition to these claims about the evidence, aniconists often point to contemporary scholarship as supporting their interpretation of the early Church's stance. Dr. Ortlund cites important scholars such as Fr. Richard

Price, Mike Humphreys, Peter Brown, Leslie Brubaker and John Haldane. He summarizes the currents of scholarship as follows:

> There are two basic schools of thought in the scholarship. . . the traditional view. . . [is that] there's a gradual increase in the practice of venerating icons sometime toward the end of the reign of Justinian I (emperor from 527–565). . . the revisionist view. . . is represented by Leslie Brubaker and John Haldane. . .they use the year 680 AD. . .

A sample of quotes from these academics are brought forward by Gavin Ortlund to represent his claims about the scholarship. For example:

> The iconoclast claim that reverence towards images did not go back to the golden age of the fathers, still less to the apostles, would be judged by impartial historians today to be simply correct. The iconophile view of the history of Christian thought and devotion was virtually a denial of history. (Richard Price, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea* [787], p. 43)

> There is little support for a 'cult of sacred images' in pre-iconoclast Byzantium. The textual and material evidence agree that sacred portraits existed, but there is no indication that these images received special veneration in any consistent fashion before the late seventh century. (Leslie Brubaker and John Haldane, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850: A History* [Cambridge University Press, 2011], p. 62)

Key support for his claim to be siding with scholarly consensus are two quotations taken from the recent (2021) compilation of essays by Mike

Humphreys, *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*. First, Dr. Ortlund quotes Humphreys' reference to a “long scholarly tradition dating the rise of the icon from relative obscurity to ubiquity to (the 6th and 7th centuries).” [7] Second, Ortlund quotes Humphrey's statement that "Any mentions of icon veneration before this point are either interpolations or referring to the *acheiropoieta* images, which were relics" [8] in reference to the year 680; this language expresses agreement with the revisionist view of Brubaker and Haldane. This would mean that Humphreys, as editor of a volume compiling the most recent scholarship, holds to the revisionist view. If this is the case, the view that icon veneration began in the 6th or 7th centuries and possibly as late as 680 is presumably a credible default position to take.

By leaning on the consensus of experts, Dr. Ortlund presents his view as the one held by all the most experienced and informed persons in the study of early Christianity. While not resting entirely on scholarship, he does strongly emphasize its importance, saying that “every other leading scholar” could hardly be accused of being “dishonest in the exact same way” [9] as himself on this topic. Ortlund mentions that “maybe there's an obscure book here or there” [10] arguing a contrary position to what he construes as the mainstream scholarship, but in saying this he makes clear his view that this is not the position of serious academics.

Expert Disagreement About Early Image Veneration

However, is it actually the case that all major scholars firmly believe there was no image veneration in the pre-Nicene Church? On the contrary, it turns out that mainstream scholars of early Christian art hold a range of views about topics such as when image veneration began in Christianity and which image practices the pre-Nicene Church opposed.

Let us begin with Dr. Ortlund's pivotal quotation from Humphreys mentioning a “long scholarly tradition dating the rise of the icon from relative obscurity to ubiquity to (the 6th and 7th centuries).” Though presented by Dr. Ortlund as a clear statement of a fairly unified scholarly

field, Michael Humphreys' words have a nearly opposite meaning in their context:

> Study of 6th- and 7th-century Christian-Roman art is overwhelmingly focused on icons, with a long scholarly tradition dating the rise of the icon from relative obscurity to ubiquity to this period, at least in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, as Benjamin Anderson tells us, this attention to the icon is not a fair reflection of what actually happened at the time. If one were to judge the period entirely on its own merits other changes were more obviously significant, such as the ending of the production of statuary. Moreover, when one looks at surviving Christian art, including the small corpus of extant icons, one is struck more by continuity than change. Therefore, considered purely from the material remains, if there was a “rise of the icon” it was as much due to the relative falling away of secular imagery than any absolute increase in Christian figural art. [11]

It is extremely significant that rather than siding with this "long scholarly tradition," Humphreys immediately qualifies it and shifts away from it. Citing another contributor in the volume, he instead stresses how the new prominence of icons was a prominence relative to a loss of emphasis on secular art. It was also a comparatively small increase when measured against the more dramatic change of Christians at the time as they moved away from statuary. What's more, Humphreys puts forward Anderson's contribution as supporting strong continuity between the icons of this period (500s and 600s) and earlier Christian art.

Why, then, does Humphreys elsewhere state that "Any mentions of icon veneration before this point are either interpolations or referring to the *acheiropoieta* images, which were relics"? Read in context, this statement is simply a small part of a six-paragraph summary of Brubaker and Haldane's views. This summary opens with the statement "While Brubaker and Haldon do not adopt all of Speck’s conclusions, and nuance others, they do

endorse the majority." The summary is bookended by the statement "These and the many other arguments, both particular and general, have elicited much debate and a wide range of reactions" at the end of that section of the introduction. The "reactions" referred to are clarified by the accompanying footnote 36, describing a range of scholarly responses to Brubaker and Haldane. What is clear is that Humphreys was describing the views of the two revisionist scholars, not endorsing these views.

In fact, Humphreys essentially rejects the proposal of Brubaker and Haldane (that icon veneration in the strict sense was sparse before 680AD) and opens up the question of an unspecified earlier date for when image veneration began. This becomes even more clear when he frames the way his volume interacts with the work of those two revisionist scholars:

> Not only is [Brubaker and Haldane's *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c.680–850: A History]* a monumental piece of scholarship in itself, it represents something of a culmination of a wave of revisionist scholarship that has challenged virtually every facet of our understanding of Byzantine iconoclasm. Every contributor to this *Companion*, to greater or lesser extents, has been influenced by this wave in general and by this book in particular. Overall, the present volume, or more precisely its individual components, pushes back against some of Brubaker and Haldon’s arguments, especially those based on the brilliant but often speculative work of Paul Speck. [12]

Elsewhere Humphreys tactfully suggests some influence of an ideological program of revisionism on the work of Brubaker and Haldane, mentioning "a highly sceptical approach to the sources" in which "Interpolations and rewriting abound" [13]—an approach that follows in the footsteps (though less vigorously) of the "radically revisionist" [14] Paul Speck. Unlike the earlier quotes which simply summarize Brubaker and Haldane's work, the statements just listed from Humphreys indicate reservation and even disagreement by himself and the contributors to his volume. Ironically, it

turns out that the "obscure book" containing arguments for a contrary position to that of Dr. Ortlund is in fact the most important source he quotes from and relies on, and which reflects a high level of up-to-date scholarship.

If it is not the view of the most current scholarship that icon veneration began in the year 680, how early could it have begun? Humphreys mentions the magisterial essay, “Iconoclasm as Discourse,” [15] by Oxford historian of late antique art history Jas Elsner. Elsner acknowledges that many academics believe that Christian image veneration developed after the time of Saint Constantine and the First Council of Nicaea. However, he also points to a widespread scholarly rejection of the idea that pre-Nicene Christian authors’ anti-image statements were talking about Christian images:

> The traditional view that the early church was hostile to the visual arts has been strongly resisted in the last generation. The modern consensus is that the attacks on idols by the early fathers and Christian apologists are primarily directed against pagan polytheist practices in the Greco-Roman environment rather than against the Christian cultivation of religious images. But strong versions of the modern view need a certain amount of nuance. . .

The nuance Elsner ends up suggesting is a careful consideration of certain apparently anti-image writings in fourth century Christian authors such as Eusebius of Caesarea and St. Epiphanius of Salamis, which "may be forgeries contrived by the iconoclasts in a much later period as patristic evidence for their position, but they may also be genuine." Instead of saying that the entire early Church was firmly aniconic and rejected all image veneration, Elsner begins to explore the possibility that the early Church "had no consistent view on the matter of images."

In saying there was not a unified opposition to image veneration, Jas Elsner opens up the question of whether it may have been practiced sometimes in the early Church. Here Elsner does not close the investigation,

but considers a range of evidence which may indicate some Christians (and their sometime imitators among the Gnostics) venerated images:

> At the same time, a number of Early Christian texts—both pre-Constantinian and fourth-century... appear also to give evidence of significant image cultivation by people who saw themselves as Christians... On the level of material culture, we have no images from the early period that we can definitively prove to have been devotional icons, but equally, we cannot prove any of our surviving images were not usable as icons for veneration by someone. We have some portraits of saints (for example, the gold glass medallions of Christ and a number of saints from the Roman catacombs) that have no obvious narrative context. There is every possibility that these kinds of images were put to private devotional use, whether in a funerary context, where the surviving materials were found, in a liturgical space, or in the domestic arena... [16]

Elsner concludes his consideration of the question of early image veneration by arguing that the lack of widespread discussion about Christian image veneration in the earliest days of the Church may not indicate the absence of this practice. He stresses what some writers neglect —that "the early evidence is important"—and points out an often unquestioned presupposition of the view which says that lack of discourse about image veneration points to its absence. Such a theory

> . . .assumes that because we have more textual evidence about the cult of images for the sixth to the eighth centuries, it means there really was more of a cult of images in that period rather than a shift in what texts decided to highlight: a shift, in other words, in rhetoric rather than reality. I do not myself see any reason for preferring reality to rhetoric as an

> interpretative historical move in this context, given the rich earlier evidence—up to the third and fourth centuries, for varieties of image cultivation, both pagan and Christian. The choice to privilege realism is a value judgment, and I myself would prefer to leave the matter open. It is possible there was no rise in the cult of images, just a rise in the textual noise about the cult in the materials that have survived to us.

Thus for Elsner, the lack of “textual noise” about the veneration or “cult” of images in the first three centuries of Christianity may not indicate its absence at all. Increased conversation about this topic as Christian history progressed could be nothing more than a “shift. . . in rhetoric” instead of a sign that the practice was becoming established.

These comments show that mainstream art historians do not all treat this as a closed question. Many such as Elsner view the possibility of early image veneration as an open topic for discussion, one requiring further investigation. For example, the historian of early Christian art Robin Jensen (whom Dr. Ortlund also quotes) commenting on the beginnings of Christian image veneration, notes how the Synod of Elvira’s (ca. 305–306 AD) apparent prohibition [17] against putting images on the walls of churches to be venerated would imply that this was a practice some Christians had adopted. As a possible example of venerated Christian wall art, she considers the paintings from the third century Christian house Church in Dura Europas Syria (while not regarding it to be portrait-type iconography typically tied to veneration):

> The need for the Council's prohibition, of course, indicates that such pictures were, in fact, appearing on church walls and that groups of Christians were offering prayers or veneration in their presence. The decorated walls of the mid-third-century Christian house church in Dura Europos serve as a possible example. Yet, here the iconography mostly presents biblical narrative scenes; for example, the

> Samaritan woman at the well, and Jesus healing the paralytic or walking on the water. They were not iconic representations of God, Christ, or the saints. [18]

In her more recent book *From Idols to Icons*, Jensen acknowledges that the Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-339AD) refers to how "painted likenesses of Peter, Paul, and Christ have also received veneration" and although these are (in her view) made by "newly converted pagans" she points out Eusebius "neither is surprised by their existence nor condemns them outright." [19] Given that Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History was written sometime between 312 and 324AD, Jensen is here acknowledging that there was Christian image veneration before the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 325AD.

These two reputable mainstream scholars use the theological vocabulary of "veneration" in considering the uses of early Christian art. But we shall see that art history scholars can also use different terminology to express that pre-Nicene Christians used art to interact with or devote themselves to what was represented. This is similar or equivalent to what is called veneration in theological conversations, and we must avoid the “word=concept fallacy”—demanding that scholars or early Christian sources use the exact word veneration instead of noting when they express something that is equivalent in different words. [20] Whether describing art being viewed for "cultic commemoration" [21] of the depicted person, seeing art as an inscribed prayer or "visual litany" [22] to the One imaged, or speaking of its consecratory [23] or “apotropaic” functions [24], the point these scholars make is essentially the same. These uses of art are all either the same as image veneration or (in the cases of consecratory and apotropaic functions) immediately adjacent to and plausibly entailing such devotional use. Thus, current scholarship actually does acknowledge that early Christians had interactions with art through a variety of activities and gestures in a way that acknowledged the honorable status of the image.

Towards a New Response to the Aniconism Challenge

Using the comments of Elsner and Jensen as a point of departure, this series of books will explore a new response to the aniconism challenge. In reply to the charge of internal inconsistency between the facts of history and Orthodox and Catholic teaching, the arguments contained herein will help build a cumulative case that images were venerated in the early Church (pre-325 AD). This will constitute not merely an undercutting of the evidence Protestant critics have given against early image veneration, but a positive case for significant pre-Nicene iconodulia (icon veneration). Many of the arguments made from written and physical data will be corroborated by an examination of scholarship, which increasingly has shifted away from older, aniconist interpretations of early Christian images and towards an emphasis on "ritual-centered visuality." I will also offer intermittent explanations for why the evidence Dr. Ortlund and others bring up for proposition (2.) about allegedly anti-image veneration texts does not count against the claim that iconodulia is a well-attested practice in the pre-Nicene Church.

Common pitfalls on this topic are to be avoided. For instance, the mere existence of some kind of unspecified Christian visual art before 325 AD should not lead us to conclude that images were venerated. If one wanted to bring forward arguments that some of the specific images which survive were venerated that would be one thing; in the absence of any reason to think they were venerated, it is not enough to just note the existence of images.

We must also set reasonable standards for evidence. For example, if we find no evidence of bowing to and kissing images in the second century (which are two of several typical modern Orthodox veneration practices) but do find other forms of veneration practiced (such as crowning images or praying through them) we should not say that "images were not venerated" but rather "images were venerated, but we cannot confirm the forms of veneration included bowing and kissing." The absence of some species of a genus does not show the absence of the genus itself. To give an example, if someone enters a room full of dalmatians and collies and insists that "there are no dogs in this room" because there are no bulldogs or rottweilers, this is an error. Likewise, even if certain modes of veneration were absent from the pre-Nicene record (species), this would not discount evidence for the

presence of other modes of veneration, or imply the category of veneration itself (genus) was absent.

We should also note that evidence can come in the form of image veneration being either done or alternately approved by early Christians. A Christian author who does not clearly describe his own image veneration practices, but who glowingly praises or sympathetically describes someone else's acts of veneration towards certain images, does count as part of the evidence that the early Church was pro-image veneration. Thus, approval of these kinds of practices has equal evidential value to a description of the practices actually being done.

How much evidence is needed to overturn the Aniconism Challenge? It may be tempting to hold the pre-Nicene written sources to a very high standard, and insist that we only call image veneration a practice in the Church if every single early Christian author affirmed it explicitly. However, this would not be a fair expectation since it is possible to form reasonable judgments about what the early Church was like even though almost no doctrine or practice is universally attested in the first 300 years of Christianity. Pre-Nicene Christian writings have many different purposes, and few of them take as their goal the detailed explanation of all the Church's practices and worship. Very few Christian practices are universally attested in the first three centuries of Christianity.

The Aniconism Challenge's claims about the absence of veneration of images in the pre-325 AD Church are universal and absolute; as such, only one counterexample showing early image veneration is strictly needed to overturn it as stated. Since the Challenge can be modified slightly to state that "the vast weight of evidence is against image veneration," this series will endeavor to bring forward multiple lines of evidence, making a cumulative case that image veneration was approved of and practiced by a variety of pre-Nicene Christians at different times and locations.

A final consideration before outlining the evidence to come is whether the distinction between veneration of images and worship of idols is a credible one. Most Christians living in the West today will be familiar with honorific practices related to certain kinds of symbolic images, such as monuments and especially flags. It is taken for granted by people who stand for the American flag, or who put flowers on monuments, that these actions are reverential but not in a way that conflates the reverenced object with the

worship of God. For a more detailed defense of the claim that idol worship is different from the Christian practice of venerating holy images, see **Appendix A: Distinguishing Christian Image Veneration from Idol Worship**.

1. Ortlund's first video was titled, "Icon Veneration Is CLEARLY An Accretion" and subtitled "This Alone Will Make You Protestant." *Youtube*, January 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ytYX4dXpRo&t=1152s
2. Ibid.
3. Hendrickson Pub. (1998).
4. "What the Early Christians Believed About Images and Prayers to Saints", Youtube. Link: https://youtu.be/kh65VvPhJcY?si=udijE2ufEEU5XOAN, accessed 4/20/24.
5. "Answering Eastern Orthodox Apologists regarding Icons"; *Themelios*, Volume 43, Issue 3. Link: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/answering-eastern-orthodox-apologists-regarding-icons/
6. "Eastern Orthodox Apologists' Bait And Switch", link: https://warhornmedia.com/2023/04/19/eastern-orthodox-apologists-bait-and-switch/ accessed 4/20/24.
7. Humphreys, Mike, "Contexts, Controversies, and Developing Perspectives," in *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, ed. Mike Humphreys (Companions to the Christian Tradition, 99 Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 54; cited in Ortlund, "Icon Veneration Is CLEARLY An Accretion."
8. Ortlund, Gavin "Icon Veneration is STILL an Accretion (Response to Hamilton/Garten), Youtube, 5/20/24. Quotation from Humphreys, "Contexts, Controversies, and Developing Perspectives," in *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm* pg. 14.
9. Ortlund video "The BEST and WORST Responses to my Icons Video", Video on "Truth Unites" Youtube Channel, February 2023 (link: https://youtu.be/fEb73HYP-iY?si=1lq-VThIRlt6etvq), accessed 2/28/23.
10. From Ortlund, Gavin "Icon Veneration in the Early Church? Response to Craig Truglia." *Youtube*, January 19 2023.
11.

Humphreys, pg 54

12. Ibid., pg. 4
13. Ibid., pg. 13
14. Ibid., pg. 12
15. "Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium", The Art Bulletin 94.3 (2012) pp. 368–394.
16. The full content of Elsner's comments deserves a far more detailed consideration, but here I will raise just two issues: (1) how to articulate the influence of pagan art on the origins of Christian image veneration and (2) whom to consider a Christian source. Regarding (1), while Elsner is not entirely wrong to say Christian images and their veneration in some sense have "pagan precursors. . . in the corpus of votive or cult panels depicting deities or heroes," it is important to note that this is not referring to idol statues in temples, and it is extremely important to stress that venerated panel portraits could also be of mere humans. As Katherine Marsengille has argued, the view of Thomas Matthews which sees images as originating primarily from the matrix of panel paintings of deities is less plausible than the view which traces their origin to portraiture of human beings. With respect to (2), Elsner appears to subscribe to the idea of a disunified collection of early "Christianities," and

therefore includes the Carpocratian Gnostics mentioned by Saint Irenaeus as one of his four examples of Christians from the pre-Nicene era who venerated images. A more complex argument would view the Carpocratians as following a general Gnostic tendency of “one-upping” the orthodox and apostolic teachings and practices by claiming connection to marginal new Testament figures (see the so-called *Gospel of Judas* for another example). The Carpocratians can be plausibly taken as impersonating and distorting Christian image practices—changing the honorable royal image of Christ into something shameful like a dog or fox (see *Against Heresies*, Bk 1, chapter 8, sec 1; chapter 9, sec 4). The Carpocratians may count as evidence that the Church venerated images, but only because these heretics seem to be mirroring something that actual orthodox Christians had in order to make themselves appear legitimate. This question will be considered in the second volume in this series. However, Elsner’s claim that there is pre-Nicene evidence floats free of this particular example, and therefore does not hinge on the assumption that the Carpocratian Gnostics are just as legitimate claimants to the title “Christian.”

17. Both the authenticity and the meaning of this Council’s prohibition have been disputed by scholars. See William Albrecht's interview of scholar Jesus Galisteo Leiva, who notes the disputed authenticity of the canon related to veneration of images on Church walls. Albrecht, William "Iconic Christianity: Councils & Canons-Examining Elvira, Hieria, & Frankfurt", Youtube. link: https://youtu.be/K-zw7EUzl7A?si=U7zpJXF4z9AxUl0_

18. Jenson, “Visuality” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Barbette Stanely Spaeth (Cambridge, 2013), p. 329. Jenson’s views about the art of Dura Europas appear to have developed somewhat since this time, and she now tends to regard the images contained there as distinctly participatory as we will see in Chapter 12.

19. Jensen, Robin, *From Idols to Icons: The Emergence of Christian Devotional Images in Late Antiquity (Volume 12) (Christianity in Late Antiquity).* University of California Press (2022) pg 84

20. To use a familiar example: the absence of the term "Trinity" in the New Testament does not mean the Trinity is not taught by means of other doctrinal content: the full divinity of Jesus and the Spirit, their distinction from the Father, etc. Similarly, if gestures and actions which acknowledge the honorable status of an image are affirmed by scholars or can be shown via text and artifact, it does not matter whether scholars use the precise word "veneration." Content trumps terminology.

21. In chapter 9 explore this phrase used by Norbert Zimmerman in relation to portraits in the Roman catacombs. See his “Catacomb Painting and The Rise of Christian Iconography In Funerary Art” in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; Routledge (2018). pp. 28–29.

22. In chapter 10, I discuss this phrase by Alan Faber and how it relates to prayers to Christ through the image of the Good Shepherd. See Faber, Allen, “Early Christian Art”; article located on Smart History https://smarthistory.org/early-christian-art/

23. See my discussion of James Hadley’s comments in chapters 7 & 8. The references in Hadley’s article to this use of early Christian art are various. Hadley, James T., “Early Christian Perceptions of Sacred Spaces,” *Material Culture Review* 80–81 (Fall 2014/Spring 2015),

24. The scholar Margaret Mitchell describes Christian signet ring seals as having “apotropaic, protective powers”; see discussion in Chapter 5. Mitchell, Margaret M., “The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism in the Abercius Monument,” pp. 1773 fn. 129, and pp. 1773 main text.

2

Framework for a New Response to the Aniconist Challenge

Before examining the written evidence for veneration of images before 325 AD, it will be useful to lay out the exact claims this series will argue for and sketch the evidence to be provided.

Six Alternative Claims About Early Image Veneration

Just as the claims of the Aniconist Challenge are multi-part and nuanced, so also it is important to elaborate what is meant by "images were venerated in the Church before 325 AD." The *Early Icons* series of books will be arguing for six alternative claims about the pre-Nicene Church and images. The first four of these claims are essentially alternatives to the claims which compose the Aniconism Challenge, while the last two claims point to considerations outside the focus of the original challenge:

1. **Material culture iconodulia:** Several kinds of images we have from the pre-325 AD Church were very likely to have been used ritually and venerated

2. **Idol-Focused Invective:** Those early Christian authors who attack cultic image practices are specifically targeting idolatry. The attacks often target cultic practices which clearly state or suppose that pagan idols are in question. Some quotes are unclear in their wording, but cultural context suggests idols are in view. It cannot be assumed that what they say about idols would apply to Christian images.
3. **Written Proponents of Veneration:** Several mainstream, pre-Nicene Christian authors attest to Christians having or approving image veneration.
4. **Scholarly Dispute:** The scholarly consensus is actually divided, and increasing numbers of scholars accept one or more of the following: (a) pre-325 attacks on imagery are precisely targeting idolatry; (b) there was some liturgical use of images; (c) there was some image veneration; (d) we cannot rule out that the images we have were venerated before 325.
5. **Additional Evidence:** There is other evidence for iconodulia before 325AD and beyond the writings of pre-Nicene authors and archeology; these include post-325AD attestations to earlier practices, manuscript and epigraphic evidence, hostile witnesses, and early reflections on the veneration of holy images in the Old Testament.
6. **Iconodule Principles:** Four fundamental principles of later iconodule theology were used and formulated in a “seed form” in the pre-325AD Church: (A) the distinction between veneration and worship; (B) the prototype principle (honor given to an image passes to its prototype); (C) the Incarnation-image principle (the Incarnation of God grounds the legitimacy of images of God); and (D) the holy images principle (that images are capable of bearing God’s power, and He can work wonders through them)

Having laid out the claims to be argued for, it will be important to elaborate on and qualify the kind of evidence to be brought in their favor.

What Counts as an Image?

This series does not claim that every early Christian dogmatically expressed a fully articulated theology and practice of honoring images that resemble later Orthodox practices of kissing and bowing towards Byzantine-style portrait icons. For each piece of evidence, it will suffice to show that a some kind of hand-crafted image is being referred to, and that some sort of bodily gesture is being done toward it.

There are a variety of other images which are not portraits of persons' faces, but instead count as "symbolic images". Calling coats of arms, state seals, flags, monuments, or small non-portrait images "symbolic" does not in any way reduce the extent to which it counts as an image. For something to be an image, [1] (1) it must be a visible, hand-crafted object and (2) it must have a representational quality (it must be meant to refer to or stand in for something). Symbols such as flags are still man-made and represent something, even if they do not visually resemble what they represent.

Critics sometimes claim that the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea was only concerned with panel portrait icons which represented the faces of Christ and the Saints. Such a view, however, does not hold up to a thorough reading of the Council or its minutes. During the debates which led to the final horos (decree) of II Nicaea, Pope Adrian argued for the legitimacy of icon veneration by closely examining the Old Testament traditions related to the veneration of symbolic images—the pillar set up by Jacob at Bethel, the Ark of the Covenant, the bronze serpent, and so forth. His argumentation progressed from these symbolic images by noting the role that human freedom and ingenuity played in their creation. While the basis for crafting these representations was always God's self-revelation, some of these images (such as the pillar at Bethel) were not commanded by God; instead, making them was a natural human way of honoring God and acknowledging how He manifested Himself. If holy symbolic images are the product of human ingenuity in response to divine revelation, Pope Adrian reasoned, how much more are portrait icons a legitimate response to the human face of God in Jesus Christ?

As we turn to pre-Nicene Christian evidence, we can continue with Pope Adrian's reasoning. Images which are not portraits, such as some battle standards, signet seals, engravings and paintings on ritual cups, and epigraphic figures, can count as legitimate images. Consequently, the veneration of such representations is actually image veneration, even if it is not always a portrait image in view. Even objects such as buildings or altars can count as images of the symbolic type if they are visual representations of something. We will return to this at the end of this chapter when considering various modes of veneration that are presented in the Scriptures.

The Relevance of Evidence for Veneration of the Cross

While it is true that the later iconoclast Council of Hiereia (754 AD) introduced a distinction between veneration of icons and veneration of the cross (endorsing the latter), I will regard this distinction as irrelevant for the purpose of this series. The refusal to draw a sharp distinction between cross-veneration and image veneration is not arbitrary. There are three reasons why evidence of cross-veneration is in fact relevant to the question of whether images were venerated in the pre-325 AD Church:

First, Christian crosses are images (of the True Cross on which Christ our God died) since they are hand-crafted, visible representations of something. The fact that they are not portraiture is irrelevant, since symbolic images do count as real images. Thus, evidence that they were venerated is evidence that (at least some) images were venerated. It does not prove that other kinds of images were venerated, but that does nothing to undermine the fact that this is one type of image veneration.

Second, any Protestants who are looking for what early Christians practiced will care about this, since it differs from their typical contemporary practices. Discovering that visual representations of this kind were venerated is relevant to those who are looking to the early Church for clarity about how to be a Christian.

Third, if the evidence about early Christianity indicates that the Church practiced veneration of the cross, this affects how we interpret quotations

from early Christian writers that denounces rituals involving images. If an early Christian author loudly and repeatedly denounces practices involving devotional actions towards images, but then the same author clearly also attests to and approves of the practice of venerating crosses, we can only conclude that in those other passages this author is not denouncing all image veneration practices. The author's target of criticism, then, is most plausibly just idols. [2] [3]

Thus, evidence for veneration of Christian visual representations of the form of the cross is in fact relevant to the question of whether images were venerated. Several lines of evidence will be brought forward for the claim that the cross was honored in the early Church.

Inherently Honorable Images: Shifting the Burden of Proof

One novel category of evidence for early Christian image veneration which this series introduces is that of the *inherently (or intrinsically) honorable image*. To call an object "inherently honorable" means that it was seen as having a certain kind of status in its cultural context, and that this recognized status was evocative of honorific gestures (veneration) by the people who owned, circulated, or acknowledged that image. To understand what is meant by an inherently honorable image, consider a hypothetical scenario. Imagine that a surviving image is newly discovered in an archeological dig, or a reference to an image is noticed in a classical text for the first time. If the newly-discovered image is of a widely-recognized kind, and we have prior evidence (whether textual or archeological) indicating that this image-type was broadly seen as having a certain status or value which evoked veneration by its owners, then we can conclude that the mere presence of this kind of image counts as evidence that veneration occurred. This is so even in the absence of further evidence for veneration in that particular archeological dig, or in that particular literary source.

An objector might say: "How do we know that image x, which meets the criteria for being *intrinsically* honorable, was venerated if there is not evidence in this specific text that people responded to it that way?" To this we can reply that the objector has misunderstood the implications which

follow from the occurrence of an image of this kind. The very mention (or presence) of the image in question already contains the evidence that veneration occurred in connection to it, and nothing further is needed. To give an analogy, imagine that you are with a friend and point to a walking stick which belongs to you. You declare “that over there is a walking stick,” to which the friend earnestly replies “so, is it for sitting on? Is it for riding?” In a situation like this, we can only conclude that the friend does not understand the culturally set definition of what a walking stick is. Likewise, the objection “how do we know that this intrinsically honorable image was venerated if that veneration ~~isn’t~~ described in the text?” is ignoring what follows from the fact that the image in question is intrinsically honorable (i.e., we know that this image-type in this cultural context was venerated by its owners).

Further examples illustrate the same point. In an ancient Egyptian cultural context, discovering in the textual record that a certain family possessed a shrine with an idol statue automatically implies that they worshipped it with sacrifices (whether of incense, animals, or something else). Even if no description in the text is given of their worship, it is more than reasonable to assume that they worshipped the idol. In a modern context, imagine that a vehemently patriotic American spoke about how much he disliked another country's flag-honoring ceremonies. Nevertheless, if this same American was discovered to have a large American flag in front of his house, it can be assumed that he would have treated it reverently, at least by how it was placed in relation to other imagery (not below a state flag, for example), not allowing it to drag on the ground, etc. Thus, even alongside invective against one kind of image veneration, we can discover from the fact that someone was the possessor of an intrinsically honorable image that they revered said image.

Thus, when an inherently honorable image is mentioned, there is a shift in the burden of proof: instead of saying “show me evidence this image was venerated,” the detractor must provide significant evidence *that it was not venerated*. The question is not “does the mention of this kind of object imply veneration in all contexts, such as in my own experience?” since in the modern world we tend to shy away from making overt gestures of image veneration (or at least acknowledging that’s what’s going on). Instead, inquiry about whether an image is intrinsically honorable must be

culturally-indexed: “in that culture, does the mention of this kind of object imply veneration by its owners?”

Throughout this series, several kinds of intrinsically honorable images will be considered: battle standards, signet ring seals, ritual drinking cups with images of spiritual beings, and honorific portraits of great men. For each of these kinds of images, it will be necessary to first lay out evidence of their status and the ways in which they were shown gestures of honor in the ancient Mediterranean context. Once this has been established, their presence in early Christianity can be examined and contextualized.

Do Intrinsically Honorable Images Matter?

A claim of this series is that the very mention of inherently honorable images being used by pre-Nicene Christians is evidence of early image veneration. Absent evidence to the contrary, the mere existence of such images in the written or historical record counts as evidence of Christian image veneration in the pre-Nicene Church.

To this, some may reply that regardless of how pagans used those kinds of images (standards, signets, ritual cups, honorific portraits) Christians could not have had any image veneration practices during the period before the Council of Nicaea, since they are alleged repeatedly denounce image veneration. This response, however, is not adequate. First, a careful analysis of the quotations which express invective against images tends to show that they are specifically a denunciation of idolatry and related practices. Any attempt to apply these passages to Christian image veneration practices will have to claim that idols and icons are relevantly similar; this is a non-starter. This series will consider and analyze several such quotations (following in the footsteps of scholars such as Fr. Steven Bigham).

A very significant second response is this: if Christians wanted to avoid venerating images they would have simply not adopted the creation or use of standards, signets, ritual cups, and honorific portraits. If they actually had an aversion to venerating images they could have simply chosen not to use these specific objects, much like they chose not to use idols out of loyalty to the True God and a refusal to worship such cult statues. For a subgroup in

the Roman population that did in fact choose to make or own idols, we would automatically assume they worshipped such objects *because that way of treating idols is built into the culturally set definition of what they are*.

The fact, then, that Christians did adopt particular kinds of objects—battle standards, signet rings, ceremonial cups, honorific portraits—would have been deliberate and highly significant given that they had a set cultural use which would include veneration. We might speak of the image and practice as a "pair," or consider the image as coming with an unwritten "instruction manual" which included veneration. Thus, the Christian act of adopting these intrinsically honorable kinds of images brought with it the adoption of non-idolatrous image veneration practices (just as their rejection of idols stemmed from an awareness of their culturally set use).

A final point is this: while the occurrence of the intrinsically honorable images in the early Christian textual and archeological record suffices as evidence of veneration, there are additional aspects of early Christian texts which give information about how these images were used. These details about use corroborate that these images were venerated. This evidence will be considered in Part 2 of this first Book.

Modes of Veneration

When looking at pre-Nicene written and material sources, it is important to acknowledge that there are many kinds of veneration. Sometimes veneration of icons is identified with bowing, kissing, and praying through images. But these are not the only honorific gestures that count as veneration. Dr. Ortlund acknowledges a number of modes: "behavior given towards the icon is transferred to what the icon represents...prostration, deep kneeling, kissing, lighting candles..." [4] are some of the actions that count as veneration. Elsewhere, Ortlund acknowledges other modes of veneration when commenting on the question of relics. He considers and ultimately rejects the idea that the treatment of a holy person's remains (in this case the body of the prophet Elias) in Scriptural narratives foreshadows

later Christian practices of relic veneration. In treating this Scriptural example, he distinguishes a number of modes of veneration:

> When Elijah has his dead body thrown into the sepulcher and there's a resurrection... after it happened, no one is saying we need to exhume the bones of Elijah, elevate them, parade them around, so people can adore them and gaze upon them and honor them with candles and venerate them and invoke them for help, and so on and so forth. There's a big difference between a one-off event like this and a regular liturgical practice and theology. [5]

Noteworthy here is an acknowledgement of the following modes of veneration towards an object: bowing before it, kissing it, praying through it, kneeling towards it, lighting candles in front of it, elevating or exaltating it, and processing with it. Also acknowledged is the category of ritualized or honorific looking. This is something which anthropologists call the “cultic stare”—differentiating the reverent attitude and way of looking that people exhibit towards something or someone honorable or holy, as distinct from the way one would listlessly observe the movements of an ant.

To these modes of veneration, we can add that the act of decorating something can be a way of venerating that object as well. The idea behind decorative activity is surely to manifest something as glorious or beautiful, and therefore deserving of attention and respect. This can often be directed in a way to acknowledge the honor which someone or something already deserves, as when a gravestone is decorated in order to show honor to the person buried there. Similarly, the act of crowning a person or image acknowledges not just an honorable status but a specific connection to authority and rule.

A more elusive but very important category of veneration is that of ceremonial use. When we consider the way that the American flag is treated, it becomes easier to grasp the meaning of this category. The flag is not supposed to be placed on the ground. It is not to be burned, or handled in a haphazard manner. When being put away, the flag is to be folded neatly

according to a certain triangle-forming pattern. Even more fundamentally, access to the flag is restricted: a special officer—the color guard—is supposed to bear and finally present the flag in state ceremonies. The flag is not supposed to be flown lower than other flags, but requires a place of honor, and Americans will pledge allegiance to the flag and even sing songs in praise of it. While these protocols might be followed more or less strictly depending on situations (i.e., whether typical civilians, scouts, or military are involved), they all are ultimately geared towards honoring not the flag itself considered as painted fabric, but the country it represents. We can here distinguish a number of modes of veneration in the broader category of ceremonial use: entrusting an object (in a restricted way to a privileged person or persons), honorable placement, reverent handling, and extolling or praising.

A final mode of veneration that can be mentioned is ritualized acknowledgement. Acknowledgement is one of the most basic kinds of honor that can be shown. Depending on the inner attitude involved, the kind of image, and its use, we can see acknowledging an image as a mode of veneration. If in order for an object to be used for ritual purposes the image on the object must receive proper acknowledgement, this is a form of veneration.

Modes of Veneration in Scripture

Many of these modes of veneration appear in Scripture in certain contexts. For instance, in Mt 23:29-31, the Lord Jesus Christ mentions an example of veneration by decoration:

> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build

> the tombs of the prophets and *decorate the monuments of the righteous*, saying, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

While the Pharisees are condemned for their hypocritical refusal to live like the prophets they claim to follow and adhere to, the action of decorating the prophets' tombs is not spoken against. Instead, the accusation of hypocrisy implies that the action itself is inherently positive, and stands in stark contrast to the failure to live like the prophets in other respects.

The idea of honorable placement is implicit in statements about "the place of honor at feasts" (Mt 23:6) or "a place of honor" (Lk 14:8). Such language seems to show that there is such a thing as showing honor to a person (including oneself) by means of being in a certain location. There is also the act of "exaltation"; many psalms speak of exalting God, or exalting His name:

> Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together! (Ps 34:3)

It is interesting to note that the name of God can be considered as having a created, even sense-perceptible aspect to it. The sounds or letters we make to represent God's holy name are apparently supposed to be treated with great reverence by being treated as "higher" (even if this does not always involve placing something physically higher).

Exaltation involves placing something higher than oneself, which is ultimately very similar to bowing to someone or something. After all, in both exalting something and in bowing to something, the person becomes lower with respect to what they are reverencing. The action of bowing is very common in the Scriptures. One of the strongest examples is found in 1 Kingdoms 29:20 (or 1 Chronicles 29:20):

> Then David said to all the assembly, "Bless the LORD your God." And all the assembly blessed the LORD, the God of their fathers, and bowed their heads and paid homage to the LORD and to the king.

This raises the question of whether there are times in the Scriptures where humans are even described as venerating any created or hand-crafted objects by bowing. As it turns out, the psalms express precisely this in a number of verses:

- But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. (Ps 5:7)
- Exalt the LORD our God; worship at His footstool! Holy is He! (Ps 99:5)
- Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy! (Ps 99:9)
- Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool! (Ps 132:7)
- I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. (Ps 138:2)

These verses attest to the pious practice of bowing towards created objects such as God's holy hill (Zion, where the temple was situated), the temple itself, and the "footstool" of God—plausibly taken as a reference to the Ark of the Covenant. [6] The verb in both the Hebrew version of these verses (which uses שָׁחָה transliterated šāḥâ) and the Greek (which uses προσκυνέω or proskyneō) makes it clear that the action of bowing down is being done, and this word has as its object the temple, footstool, or

mountain of God. The Greek or Hebrew word for “bow down” in these psalms is the same as is used in the prohibition of Ex 20:5 against idols:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me

These verses therefore point to the legitimacy of bowing to the temple hill, the temple, or the ark as a non-idolatrous act of veneration. But we can take this even further by noting that all three of these objects are indeed representations, images. The temple and its mount can be seen as images of creation as a whole, but also of the heavenly throne of God in particular. The ark as footstool can be seen as symbolizing the earth, since this is where God stands in distinction to heaven which is his throne [7] that He sits upon. But the ark itself, like the temple and all of its furniture, is also created as an image of heavenly things which Moses saw when he went up to God on the mountain to receive the law:

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. **They serve a copy (ὑποδείγματι) and shadow (σκιᾷ) of the heavenly things.** For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you **make everything according to the pattern (τύπον) that was shown you on the mountain**." (He 8:5-6)

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are **copies (ἀντίτυπα)** of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (He 9:24)

We are therefore left with the surprising conclusion that the very Scriptures which condemn bowing down towards cult statues (idolatrous images) of the false gods affirm the legitimacy of bowing to representations or copies (symbolic images) of God’s throne and footstool. As noted in **Appendix A on “Distinguishing Idolatry and Image Veneration,”** the reasoning behind these actions is completely different. In one case, bowing treats the object reverenced as being a literal living god in an immanent sense; in the other case, bowing treats the object as being a holy sign that points to heavenly and transcendent realities beyond itself. Bowing is therefore an acceptable mode of veneration towards created persons and objects—including symbolic images—in the Scriptures. [8]

Conclusion

To properly approach the case for pre-Nicene image veneration, we need clarity about what images and veneration are, and the kind of evidence we're looking for. To speak of images is not to exclusively speak of panel portrait icons; even the minutes of the Second Council of Nicaea acknowledged the legitimacy of symbolic images from the Old Covenant. Objects such as the pillar of Jacob at Bethel, the Ark, the Bronze serpent were understood to have been venerated images, and provided grounding for legitimate veneration of portrait icons. Evidence for the veneration of crosses or altars therefore counts as evidence of image veneration.

An important kind of evidence this series will utilize is the **intrinsically honorable image**. There are certain image-types which we know were given gestures of honor in their ancient contexts: battle standards, signet seal images, images on ritual drinking cups, and honorific portraits of emperors, heroes, and philosophers. When we discover physical remains of these images or references to them in the textual record, it is safe to assume they were venerated (unless we have strong reason to think otherwise). It is therefore extremely significant that there are many references to early Christians having images of these kinds. Part 2 of this book will focus on written evidence of such intrinsically honorable images.

Finally, we should note that veneration cannot be narrowly defined as a limited set of gestures—bowing, kissing, praying towards an object. Any action which acknowledges the honorable status of a person or object can count as veneration. Other modes of veneration include actions such as raising something up, adorning it, looking at it with reverence, and handling it in a ceremonial manner.

1. As distinct from a more metaphorical “image,” to mean something that has representational quality, or striking resemblance to something else, but which is not hand-crafted with the intention to represent. Examples include mental “images” which we generate using the faculty of fantasy, the image of God that humans are created in as a participation in God’s authority, and “images” of virtue which are humans with exemplary lives worthy of imitation.
2. While it is technically possible that such an author’s critiques could still be intending to cover actual or potential practices of image veneration within the Church, this becomes less likely. Why? Because we know for certain that pagan idols are a common object of criticism by the early Christians, whereas the matter in dispute is whether the critical language covers Christian practices involving (at least putatively) non-idolatrous images. The author who accepts veneration of the cross is endorsing some image veneration practices within the Church, and we know for certain this person accepts at least one category of image veneration within Christianity, while also knowing for certain that they would utterly reject and decry idolatry. Additional evidence would need to be supplied, then, to show that the passages denouncing some kind of rituals involving images are indeed aimed at something within Christianity.
3. It should also be noted that one early Christian writer’s statements about the veneration of the cross—or any endorsement of image veneration by an author who also simultaneously speaks negatively about “images” of some sort—should affect our view of early Christianity more broadly, and should influence how we view other authors’ language about images too. For if one early Christian author can speak of Christian rejection of images in one breath but talk about honoring the cross in the next breath, this sets a precedent that should affect how we read this language elsewhere. It doesn’t give decisive proof that in other authors, we should definitely think they endorsed image veneration despite language that appears to be in tension with this. But it does undercut the inference from “this author speaks negatively about some kind of cultic use of some sorts of images” to “this author denounces all cultic use of images” because it provides an instance in which this is not the case.
4. Ortlund, “This Alone Will Make You Protestant: Icon Veneration Is Clearly an Accretion”
5. "The BEST and WORST Responses to my Icons Video," Youtube, February 6, 2023 (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEb73HYP-iY&t=1468s)
6. See 1 K 28:2 (numbered as 1 Chr 28:2 in most Protestant translations of the Scriptures): Then King David rose to his feet and said: "Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building. . .”
7. See Is 66:1: Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?”
8. It may be responded, “bowing to these holy spaces was only legitimate because God dwelt there; this is completely different from icons. ” Even if true, this does not deny that the object in question was bowed towards, and that the object itself was a symbolic image. If I say “I only bowed to the king’s throne because it is where he usually sits,” it doesn’t mean I didn’t bow to his throne. This approaches the logic of icon veneration. If venerating the temple because of its connection to God is legitimate, it is hard to see how this is very different from venerating an icon because of its connection to God. After all, the one who venerates the icon does not honor wood and paint, but the person connected to the icon via his or her depiction.

Part II: Image Veneration in Pre-Nicene Christian Writings

3

Venerating Images of the Cross

This chapter will argue that images of the cross were venerated in the first 200 years of the Church. The holiness of Christian images of the cross is clearly attested in the writings of Tertullian (c. 155-220AD), but strong evidence of their status can be found earlier in the letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 108-140) and the Epistle of Barnabas (written c. 70-132). Saint Justin Martyr (c. 100-165AD) indicates that the practice of making holy cross-images finds its basis not in later development within the Church but in the life of Christ Himself. The veneration of these images is seen in how Christians speak of their interaction with them, as well as in their description as a Christianized version of battle standards, a common part of Roman imperial iconography. The standards—and notably the trophy standard—were clearly venerated in the Roman world. Christian creation and ownership of images of the cross as trophy indicates the veneration of these images. And as we shall see, there are even surprising written and archeological evidences that the practice of cross veneration originates in the first century.

Tertullian on the Veneration of Images of the Cross

In his study *The Terminology Of The Holy Cross In Early Christian Literature*, the scholar G. Q. Reijners notes a passage in the Latin apologist Tertullian's *Against the Nations* which attests to the existence of Christian images of the cross, their holiness, and their veneration:

> The Christians were apparently called by the pagans 'adorers of the cross.' Tertullian rejects this libel as applicable only to the Christians: 'Whosoever declares us to be priests of the cross, will be our partner in the priesthood.' In order to prove this proposition Tertullian, having first postulated that the cross (crux) is a signum de ligno [sign of wood], gives a description of it: 'Every piece of wood which is fixed in an upright position, is a part of the cross and, indeed, the largest part. But we (the Christians) are reproached with the cross in its entirety, that is, with its transverse beam (antemna) and with that projection for sitting upon (cum illo sedilis excessu). In this respect you (the pagans) deserve more blame, who have attributed a divine devotion to a piece of wood that is incomplete in shape, which others (the Christians) have consecrated complete in shape.' [1]

Several important features of this passage deserve comment. First, Tertullian contrasts pagans' use of a somewhat cross-shaped wooden frame for idol statues (composed of a vertical wooden beam but lacking a horizontal one) with the fact that "we (the Christians) are reproached with the cross in its entirety" (in other words, for having full crosses with a horizontal beam also). From this it is abundantly clear that Christians had hand-crafted wooden images of the cross of Christ. Second, this contrast continues later in the passage as Tertullian distinguishes between pagan sculptural frames ("a piece of wood that is incomplete in shape") and Christian images of the cross "consecrated complete in shape." Here Tertullian uses the word "consecrated" in reference to Christian images of the cross. This is extremely significant, for consecration of an object is the act of setting it apart as holy for ritual use. The implication is that these

images of the cross were considered sacred by Christians. Third, Tertullian's comments show the cross was venerated, for the passage begins with Tertullian accepting the pagan accusation that Christians are "adorers of the cross," or "priests of the cross." He turns this polemic against his opponents: because they use cross-shaped (albeit incomplete) structures to hold up their sculptures, they "will be our partner in the priesthood." We thus have confirmation that Christians in Tertullian's time (late 100s and early 200s) had images of the cross, consecrated them as holy, and venerated these images with some kind of gesture.

The only question that remains is how far back this practice of venerating images of the cross goes. To understand this, we can begin examining the description of the cross as "standard" and "trophy" which appears repeatedly in early Christian literature. In his *On Idolatry*, while describing the reasons why Christians cannot participate in the Roman imperial military cult, Tertullian makes a passing reference to "the standard of Christ":

> But now inquiry is made about this point, whether a believer may turn himself unto military service, and whether the military may be admitted unto the faith, even the rank and file, or each inferior grade, to whom there is no necessity for taking part in sacrifices or capital punishments. There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament (sacramento divino et humano), the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Caesar. And yet Moses carried a rod, and Aaron wore a buckle, and John (Baptist) is girt with leather and Joshua the son of Nun leads a line of march; and the People warred: if it pleases you to sport with the subject. But how will a Christian man war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed; still

> the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbelted every soldier. No dress is lawful among us, if assigned to any unlawful action. [2]

The parallels Tertullian draws between Rome's emperor worship and the Church's worship of Christ are instructive. They provide a layout of the spiritual and physical composition of Christian worship which accentuates its vague similarity— and fundamental opposition—to the imperial cult. The Roman sacrament of emperor worship with Cesar as false lord contrasts with the worship of the True Lord Jesus in the Eucharistic meal of bread and wine. The "camp of darkness" (gathering of Roman soldiers) is utterly separated from the "camp of light" (the Christian ecclesia, the assembly which is the Church).

This leads us to the question of what Tertullian here means by "the standard of Christ" which stands in opposition to "the standard of the devil." This object is clearly present in the Christian gathering alongside the sacrament of the Eucharist (just as the Roman army clearly has a standard as well). To more deeply understand what a standard is, we will begin with the Roman practice of venerating standards, and then look at passages from early Christian authors who connect the cross to standards. This identification of the cross as a standard will allow us to see how widespread the practice of cross veneration was, and how likely it is that the cross was venerated from Christianity's earliest days.

Battle Standards as Inherently Honorable Objects

The cult of standards in the Roman army was the practice of honoring the imperial banner images. The modes of honor given to standards include adornment with a victory wreath, their exaltation, the act of presenting or displaying standards to be gazed upon in adoration, and carrying them in military processions (Fig. 3.1). Standards also had their own special sanctuaries called the "Aedes" inside the headquarters of Roman military

fortresses; part of the way they were honored was by being placed in these appointed holy spaces.



Figure 3.1: Renaissance era portrayal of a procession with trophy standards. From the School of Andrea Mantegna, "Triumph of Caesar: Soldiers carrying Trophies" (ca. 1490) from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24

All of this was connected to the status of the state, its rulers, and its gods. Suetonius records that when the emperor Caligula fell ill, the visiting Parthian King Artabanus made a gesture of goodwill and “paid homage to the Roman Eagles and standards, and to the statues of the Caesars.” (Suetonius' Life of Gaius [Caligula], 14.3) In-depth evidence of the practice of venerating battle standards can be found in **Appendix D: The Veneration of Battle Standards in the Roman world**.

One significant category of standard was the trophy (Greek τρόπαιον, Latin tropaeum). Roman trophies were wooden vertical poles. To these, a victorious Roman commander would attach remaining armor and weaponry of the defeated enemy. There are several notable Greek and Roman traditions regarding trophies which help us understand their nature as objects of veneration. First, when a trophy was set up, it was exalted by being “placed on a raised platform and dedicated to the patron deity.” The result of this consecration was that “trophies were considered inviolable” [3] and this holy status meant they were not destroyed or desecrated even by the losing side. Second, different trophies had degrees of honorableness, and “the trophy known as "fat armor" (spolia opima) was particularly honorable. Only the commander of the army (king or consul), who personally killed the enemy commander in a duel and took off his armor,” [4] could offer it. Third, the importance of being able to honor trophies by beholding and gazing reverently upon them is evident in a number of instances from Roman history and literature. Virgil describes Aeneas enacting the rite of preparing a trophy (likely relying on contemporary Roman conventions) which seems to be connected to the “fat armor” tradition:

> as victor, at first light, [Aeneas] discharged his vows to the gods. He planted a great oak trunk, its branches lopped all round, on a tumulus, and decked it out as a trophy to you, great god of war, in the gleaming armor stripped from the leader, Mezentius: he fastened the crests to it, dripping with blood, the warrior’s broken spears, and the battered breastplate, pierced in twelve places: he tied the bronze shield to its left side, and hung the ivory-hilted sword from

> its neck. Then he began to encourage his rejoicing comrades: ‘We have done great things, men: banish all fear of what’s left to do: these are the spoils of a proud king, the first fruits of victory, and this is Mezentius, fashioned by my hands. Now our path is towards King Latinus and his city walls. Look to your weapons, spiritedly, make war your expectation, so when the gods above give us the sign to take up our standards, and lead out our soldiers from the camp, no delay may halt us unawares, or wavering purpose hold us back through fear. Meanwhile let us commit to earth the unburied bodies of our friends, the only tribute recognized in Acheron’s depths. [5]

Aeneas’ construction of the trophy requires the “branches lopped all round”, transforming the oak trunk into a simple vertical beam of wood which would then need a cross-bar for the sake of mounting armor. This object is holy, dedicated to Mars. His men gather around and behold the consecrated monument. The leader both exhorts his soldiers and encourages them to contemplate the holy object in front of them, pointing out the value of the “gleaming” armor (“spoils of a proud king”) and the significance of this monument as “first fruits”, precious to behold and symbolic of total victory to come. The phrase “This is Mezentius, fashioned by my hands” points to a strange quality of a tropaeum, namely its humaniform appearance. The fact that such objects were set up for veneration and had a form resembling that of a man was a source of controversy when Herod established copies of a Caesar’s trophies in a stadium. Josephus notes that Jews accused Herod of setting up idols in human shape but hidden underneath the armor, and were only satisfied after seeing the armor removed to reveal the simple wooden pole underneath. [6]

The Connection Between the Cross and Standards

Several early Christian texts attest to an awareness of Roman battle standards and their honored status. What is particularly interesting is the way pre-Nicene Christian authors emphasize the visual similarity between the standards of Rome and the Christian cross, especially the trophy standards. The Christian apologist Minucius Felix's comments in his dialog *The Octavius* show a familiarity with the cult of the standards, and the way honorific gestures would be conferred on these images. But he also draws attention to how the vertical wooden beam of a trophy standard seems to mimic the upright wood of a cross:

> Crosses, moreover, we neither worship nor wish for. You, indeed, who consecrate gods of wood, adore wooden crosses perhaps as parts of your gods. For your very standards, as well as your banners, and flags of your camp, what else are they but crosses gilded and adorned? Your victorious trophies not only imitate the appearance of a simple cross, but also that of a man affixed to it. We assuredly see the sign of a cross, naturally, in the ship when it is carried along with swelling sails, when it glides forward with expanded oars; and when the military yoke is lifted up, it is the sign of a cross; and when a man adores God with a pure mind, with hands outstretched. Thus the sign of the cross either is sustained by a natural reason, or your own religion is formed with respect to it. (Octavius, 29)



Fig. 3.2: Silver handle from a serving dish, Early 200s AD. Depicts triumphal procession of Dionysius returning from India, "an important aspect of the mystery cult, symbolizing triumph over death." (Met) Cross-shaped trophy standards feature on the far right and far left. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24

Felix's comments combine two contentions: first, that all of reality contains cross-based patterns, and secondly that Roman military insignia include this form preeminently. This subverts the pagan disdain for

Christian loyalty to the cross by showing that pagans ignorantly showed honor to the very thing they thought was supremely shameful. All of this shows that the cross is either an inescapable trope in imagery, or is the covert object towards which devotion is directed through the very way imperial insignia were designed.

Saint Justin Martyr makes a number of similar comments about the connection between the cross of Christ and the Roman standards in his First Apology. He calls the cross of Christ "the greatest symbol of His power and rule" and then notes its covert presence in Roman imperial iconography:

> But in no instance, not even in any of those called sons of Jupiter, did they imitate the being crucified; for it was not understood by them, all the things said of it having been put symbolically. And this, as the prophet foretold, is the greatest symbol of His power and rule; as is also proved by the things which fall under our observation. For consider all the things in the world, whether without this form they could be administered or have any community. For the sea is not traversed except that trophy which is called a sail abide safe in the ship; and the earth is not plowed without it: diggers and mechanics do not their work, except with tools which have this shape. And the human form differs from that of the irrational animals in nothing else than in its being erect and having the hands extended…And the power of this form is shown by your own symbols on what are called vexilla [banners] and trophies, with which all your state processions are made, using these as the insignia of your power and government, even though you do so unwittingly. And with this form you consecrate the images of your emperors when they die, and you name them gods by inscriptions. Since, therefore, we have urged you both by reason and by an evident form, and to the utmost of our ability, we know that now we are blameless even though you disbelieve; for our part is done and finished. (1 Apology LV)

Language such as “the power of this form,” “with this form you consecrate,” and “by an evident form” all drives home the importance of the actual visual appearance of the cross. It seems that this visible form itself has a kind of inherent power, connected to the order of the cosmos (as examples such as the sail, the plough, and the shovel indicate). Like Minucius Felix, Saint Justin acknowledges the existence of several kinds of state symbols including vexilla and trophies. These are venerated by having an honored role in processions (commonly depicted in Roman art, as in Fig. 3.2P). Because they bear the form of the cross, this veneration is seen by Saint Justin as ultimately directed to the cross itself (though Romans “do so unwittingly”). Here we see the subtle presence of a common theme in early Christian teaching about the connection between the visible and the invisible: that the honor given to the image passes to the prototype. What is striking in this Saint’s comments is how this shape itself—imprinted in the visible world by the skill of craftsmen—has “power” as a “symbol” and can also be called a “trophy.” [7] To call the form of the cross a “trophy” and say it is imbued with the power of God in the same context as talking about Romans’ veneration of standards makes it quite plausible that Saint Justin would have regarded Christians’ own visual representations of the cross as worthy of honor. As we shall see later in this chapter, Saint Justin does acknowledge the creation of visible, hand-crafted images of the cross as part of Christian practice.

Saint Ignatius on the Cross of Christ as Battle Standard

The developed association that mid-second century authors such as Saint Justin and Minucius Felix see between the cross and battle standards raises a question: when did Christians start to see the cross of the Lord Jesus as a Christianized version of this kind of imperial image? In the late first or early second century, Saint Ignatius of Antioch opened his Epistle to the Smyrneans (Section I) with the following discourse on the cross:

> I Glorify God, even Jesus Christ, who has given you such wisdom. For I have observed that ye are perfected in an immoveable faith, as if ye were nailed to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, both in the flesh and in the spirit, and are established in love through the blood of Christ, being fully persuaded with respect to our Lord, that He was truly of the seed of David according to the flesh and the Son of God according to the will and power of God; that He was truly born of a virgin, was baptized by John, in order that all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him; and was truly, under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch, nailed [to the cross] for us in His flesh. Of this fruit we are **by His divinely-blessed passion, that He might set up a standard for all ages, through His resurrection, to all His holy and faithful [followers], whether among Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of His Church.** [8]

The Greek word Saint Ignatius uses for standard is sýssimon (σύσσημον). It is connected in meaning to “sign,” but goes far beyond the concept of a sign communicated by one individual to another, and entails a kind of public, corporately understood visible token of meaning. Niko Huttenen classifies St. Ignatius’s use of this term as outside the category of typical Christian military metaphor which tends to internalize or spiritualize the meaning of military terms (“put on the whole armor of God”, “we battle not against flesh and blood” etc.) which is common in the New Testament and early Fathers. He instead states straightforwardly, "Ignatius of Antioch says that Christ lifted up a ‘standard’ or a ‘flag’ (σύσσημον) (Ign. Smyrn. 1.2)" [9]

Saint Ignatius’s language of “set up” should be more precisely worded “raise up” (ἵνα ἄρῃ) and is identical to that used in Matthew 27:32: “And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.” (ἠγγάρευσαν ἵνα ἄρῃ τὸν σταυρὸν) This makes the identification between the standard and Christ’s cross quite clear (though this is already implicit in the visual similarity between the cross of Christ and a trophy standard), and emphasizes the physicality of what is being described. The lifting up is also spoken of as being “for all ages”,

suggesting an object of remembrance that has permanent visibility. The language of Saint Ignatius emphasizes the cross’s exalted status in a way that tracks with its description as standard.

The other striking claim that is made about the cross as standard is that it is raised up "to all His holy and faithful [followers], whether among Jews or Gentiles, in the one body of His Church." According to Joseph Lightfoot, this is a reference to the Septuagint version of the prophecy of Isaiah. In three places, the Greek version of Isaiah uses the word sýssimon to describe a banner by which God gathers His people and the nations:

- And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly (Isa 5:26)
- Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in [their] arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon [their] shoulders. (Isa 49:22)
- Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. (Isa 62:10)

We can bolster Lightfoot's argument that Saint Ignatius’s use of sýssimon is referencing Isaiah by considering the Saint’s mention of Gentiles and his idea of an in-gathering. Saint Ignatius emphasizes the unifying role that the standard plays with language such as "all”, “holy” (since it implies being in the special group of those set apart), “Jews or Gentiles”, and “in the one body of His Church.” This shows that what Saint Ignatius has in mind is the cross being gathered around as a point of attention. Looking at the passages from Isaiah also clarifies an aspect of Saint Ignatius’s text: the fact that Saint Ignatius describes Christ Himself as lifting up the cross as standard would naturally lead to it being lifted up by His followers. The quotations

from Isaiah make it clear that the banner of the Lord can be raised up by Him (5:26, 49:22) by means of His people raising it up (62:10).

It has been objected that what Saint Ignatius says does not here attest to physical images of the cross being present in Christian gatherings. [10] However, four considerations show that this passage is evidence of venerating images of the cross.

Church as Location: Saint Ignatius says this standard is raised up "in the one body of His Church." The most straightforward inference to draw from this is that the standard (which we should recall is a kind of image) is in fact present where Christians physically meet. For Saint Ignatius and other early Christian authors, the word Church (ecclesia, ἐκκλησία) implies a concrete, local gathering—not a dispersed worldwide group existing apart from assembly together. [11] Additionally, the phrase "to all His holy and faithful followers, whether among Jews or Gentiles" further reinforces that what is in view is Christians actually gathered together and to whom the image is presented. This language of location makes it hard to deny the standard is lifted up in actual Christian gatherings. [12]

Connection to Physical Depictions of the Cross: Tertullian (late 100s or early 200s) clearly speaks of Christians having wooden images of the cross in the Church ("camp of light") and describes these images of the cross as "the standard of Christ." It is unlikely Saint Ignatius would mean something completely different by speaking of the standard that Christ lifts up. Since the terminology of "raise up" is the same as that for Simon of Cyrene lifting and carrying the cross, Saint Ignatius' identification of the cross as standard seems connected to its appearance (as a vertical wooden beam). Further, the word sýssimon (σύσσημον) already distinguishes that the symbol in question is public as opposed to something private or invisible. These considerations indicate there were images of the cross in Churches at the time of Saint Ignatius.

Permanence and Display: Saint Ignatius' language tracks with the physical veneration practices related to Roman trophy standards. Trophies were "raised up" or set in elevated places of honor. This consecrated them as inviolable "for all ages." [13] We have also noted how a victorious commander presented trophies to his warriors to look upon as sacred objects, matching the language of "to all His holy and faithful followers,

whether among Jews or Gentiles." These repeated descriptions track with physical acts of honor towards Roman trophies, making it difficult to see how Saint Ignatius could not have in view physical images of the cross in the Church.

Following the Conqueror, Duplicating Standards: We have noted that the Prophet Isaiah describes the Lord lifting up a banner (5:26, 49:22). But it is important to focus on how this action is participated in by the people:

> Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. (Isa 62:10)

This background in the prophecies of Isaiah shows that the natural result of the conquering Lord raising up a standard is for His people to do the same. This would involve having actual images of crosses exalted in Churches. [14]

This biblical background can be supplemented by the widespread and deeply-ingrained Roman practice of duplicating trophy standards for distribution and veneration throughout the empire. There are several different ways in which the images of trophies and were replicated and spread for acts of loyalty and veneration, including their duplication as metal-cast trophy monuments and their depiction on gems and signets. Numismatic (coin) images of honored civic objects like trophies and victory monuments are particularly important for understanding this. These coin images are described by scholars as "miniature monuments" with a somewhat "magical" quality that makes the prototype present to you. They served as "a mobile medium that could channel attention to gain new viewers for the Arch by virtue of its multiplication and its circulation" [15] (though such images could also be disfigured to dishonor the prototype). It was therefore the default instinct in the Roman world to duplicate a trophy and distribute it for veneration. (For a more in-depth justification of this claim, see **Appendix D: Image Duplication, Remote Viewing, and Honoring Trophies**) The biblical and Roman backgrounds of Saint

Ignatius's language points to Christians' practice of making representations of the cross and venerating them.

Veneration of the Cross as Standard in Saint Ignatius

We have already noted how Saint Ignatius' language shows the standard of the cross within the Church gathering is consecrated, exalted and set in a place of honor, and then gathered around and gazed at with devotion. This treatment of the cross mirrors how Romans venerated their trophy standards, and anticipates how Tertullian describes the treatment of the cross in *Against the Nations* I.12. The fact that the very placement of an honorable or holy image is itself an act of veneration is acknowledged by scholars such as Fr. Richard Price and Hans Georg Thummel. Price writes:

> Hans-Georg Thummel has rightly observed that there was no clear boundary between setting up an image and venerating it, or between venerating the one imaged and venerating the image itself: setting up an image was itself an act of veneration and veneration of the one imaged would then be performed in front of an image. [16]

Though veneration is indicated in the exalted placement and presentation of this trophy-image of the cross, we can also ask whether further gestures would be done to it. In his *Letter to the Ephesians* 18:1 Saint Ignatius honors the cross, [17] speaking of making himself nothing before it. The passage in question has been translated in a variety of ways:

- "Let my spirit be counted as nothing [περίψημα] for the sake of the cross." (Schaff and Wade translation)

- “I am content to give up every-thing, and to become myself as nothing, for that Cross in which others find only a stumbling-block’’ (Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 74)
- “My spirit is scum of the cross, which is a stumbling block to unbelievers but to us salvation and eternal life.” (Alexander N. Kirk)
- “My spirit is a sacrificial offering bound to the cross, which is a scandal to those who do not believe but salvation and eternal life to us” (Bart Ehrman)

Alexander Kirk argues that Ehrman’s translation is perhaps excessively ritualistic. The Greek word used for “nothing” is often translated “offscouring,” (περίψημα) and is the same word Paul uses in 1 Cor 4:13. While this wording can have sacrificial overtones, to conclude that Saint Ignatius views himself as an actual sacrifice is questionable. Nevertheless, Kirk acknowledges the intense devotion and honor implied by the use of this language, following in the footsteps of the scholar William Schoedel. [18]

G. Q. Reijners draws out the implications of Saint Ignatius describing himself using the terminology of περίψημα in relation to the cross. If we lean away from the sacrificial interpretation of Erhman, Reijners sees the self-abasement in terms of an attitude of prostration:

- "my spirit bows itself at the foot of the Cross" [19]

It is hard to imagine that with this kind of spiritual attitude of self-lowering or bowing, Saint Ignatius and his congregation would not have bowed to the physical form of the cross, present in the standard which was raised up in the Church.

How Early was Veneration of the Cross Practiced?

Saint Ignatius's writings are from the transitional period between the Apostolic age and the rest of Church history. As a disciple of the Apostle John, Saint Ignatius would likely not have held to a post-apostolic corruption of the faith. This raises the question of whether other early Christian authors give evidence that veneration of the cross originates in the first century.

In the early Christian text called the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the author makes a typological connection from the wording of Psalm 1 to Christian baptismal water and the wood of Christ's cross:

> Let us further inquire whether the Lord took any care to foreshadow the water [of baptism] and the cross… And again He says in another prophet, The man who does these things shall be like a tree planted by the courses of waters, which shall yield its fruit in due season; and his leaf shall not fade, and all that he does shall prosper. Not so are the ungodly, not so, but even as chaff, which the wind sweeps away from the face of the earth. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in judgment, nor sinners in the counsel of the just; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish. Mark how He has described at once both the water and the cross. For these words imply, Blessed are they who, placing their trust in the cross, have gone down into the water; for, says He, they shall receive their reward in due time: then He declares, I will recompense them. [20]

This statement about "placing their trust in the cross" can be seen as paralleling St. Ignatius's proclamation of loyally binding himself or bowing to the cross. The idea that one would hope in an object is clearly an attitude of veneration. Additionally, hand-crafted images of the cross are in consideration throughout this letter, most prominently in the Epistle of Barnabas 9.7-9 with its extensive meditation on the visual form of the cross as prefigured in the number symbolism of 318 (see Genesis 14:14), and

consequently physically depicted by early Christians. The key phrase is translated by Robert Button as follows:

> and because the cross in the T [/ tau] was about to have grace, he says the three-hundred [21]

It is clear that this statement would not make sense unless already in the late first or early second century (when Ep. Barnabas was written) Christians actually visually depicted the cross using the shape of the Greek letter "tau" (T). We can also note how in Chapter 11 and elsewhere, the Epistle of Barnabas connects the cross of Christ to trees; this highlights its wooden composition, and foreshadows Tertullian's statements some 100 years later about Christians consecrating their own images of the cross, "the sign of wood." It makes sense that alongside its physical description of those who "go down into the water," the Epistle of Barnabas is describing Christians displaying an actual wooden image in the shape of the "T" cross to help initiates place "their trust in the cross" during baptism.

Further evidence that veneration of the cross began in the first century comes from a little-known passage in Saint Justin Martyr's *Dialog with Trypho*. In conversing with his Jewish interlocutor, the Saint makes a statement about how Jesus constructed "ploughs and yokes" during his earthly life:

> He appeared without comeliness, as the Scriptures declared; He was deemed a carpenter (for He was in the habit of working as a carpenter when among men, making plows and yokes; by which He taught the symbols of righteousness and an active life). . . [22]

There are several noteworthy parallels in language and content with the other passage from Saint Justin's we previously considered (1st Apology 55). Both passages mention plowing or plows (ἄροτρα/ἀροῦται); both texts speak of symbol/symbols (σύμβολον/σύμβολα) to describe either the plow's

shape (which is identified as that of a cross) or the plow itself. The texts speak of order or righteousness in connection with the symbol, and it is noteworthy that the proper administration of the world in Apology 55 happens in miniature when land is plowed by the form of the cross. Finally, the word translated "yokes" (ζυγά) means "crossbeams." [23] Saint Justin's teaching thus indicates that Jesus' own actions as a carpenter in His earthly life provide a template or pattern for the Christian practice of making the "symbols of righteousness"—images of the cross. G. W. Clarke comments:

> In Just. *Apolo.* 1.55 there is the illustration of the plow [as paradigmatically showing the form of the cross]. . . In Just. *Dial.* 88, however, Christ is declared to have made "plow and yokes" (or "crossbeams," ζυγά) by which He taught men "the symbols of righteousness." [24]

Here, we should recall how Saint Justin speaks of the cross as the "greatest symbol of [God's] power and rule" in the context of talking about the venerated Roman standards as "insignia of your power and government." Clearly, Saint Justin is portraying the cross as itself a standard, a holy and honored object. And if "the power of this form [ie. the form of the cross]" is why the Romans honor their insignia of power and government, how much more does this imply the standards of the cross —"the symbols of righteousness"—were venerated? These considerations show that Saint Justin regards Christians' own visual images of the cross as objects for veneration, and grounds the practice of making and venerating these images in the life and actions of Christ Himself in the first century.

The Archeology of Cross Veneration

The Epistle of Barnabas, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, and Saint Justin Martyr provide a remarkably early and consistent testimony that the making and veneration of images of the cross which Tertullian attests to is a practice

tracing back to the earliest days of Christianity, and quite plausibly to the apostolic era. With this in mind, it is very significant to find depictions from the ante-Nicene era which also indicate the cross was reverenced in the same way that Roman trophies were. Roman images on coins and sculpted reliefs (Fig. 3.3) portray the placing of wreaths on trophies as a way of honoring them and proclaiming the victory of an emperor.



Fig. 3.3: Detail from the cuirass of a statue of an unidentified Roman military commander, first century BC. Above: a goroneion. Below: two winged victories decorate a battle trophy. Munich Glyptothek inv. no. 527. (Image and caption credit: Erin Babnik)

This is mirrored in pre-Nicene Christian tombstones from Rome and Phrygia that depict the cross (or the related symbol of the staurogram, Fig. 3.4) adorned by a wreath. The Phrygian tombstone depicting a cross adorned with a focal wreath is dated to the 200s by William Calder and this

date is accepted by Bruce Longenecker. It is one of several similar and unambiguously Christian tombstones from the region (the inscription on this stone says “Christians for Christians”) [25]. The Roman tombstone is similarly dated to the 200s or 300s. The simplest explanation for these portrayals is that like their Roman counterparts, the Christians venerated their trophies (the images of the cross of Christ).



Figure 3.4: Roman Christian tombstone depicting the adornment of the cross-like staurogram with a wreath. 200s or 300s AD; Vatican Museum. ((Image and caption credit: Lanmas)

There is also evidence from the first century for the veneration of the cross from the city of Pompeii and possibly also Herculaneum, a town near Pompeii. The evidence from Herculaneum is the presence of a figure of a cross (Fig. 3.5) which exists on a light colored patch of wall several feet off the ground (around eye level) located inside the House of the Bicentenary. Beneath this figure is a tiered structure that looks like it could have been an altar. Some scholars have argued that this cross shape was just the

impression left by the presence of a shelf, and it is considered doubtful evidence by many despite its conspicuous appearance.

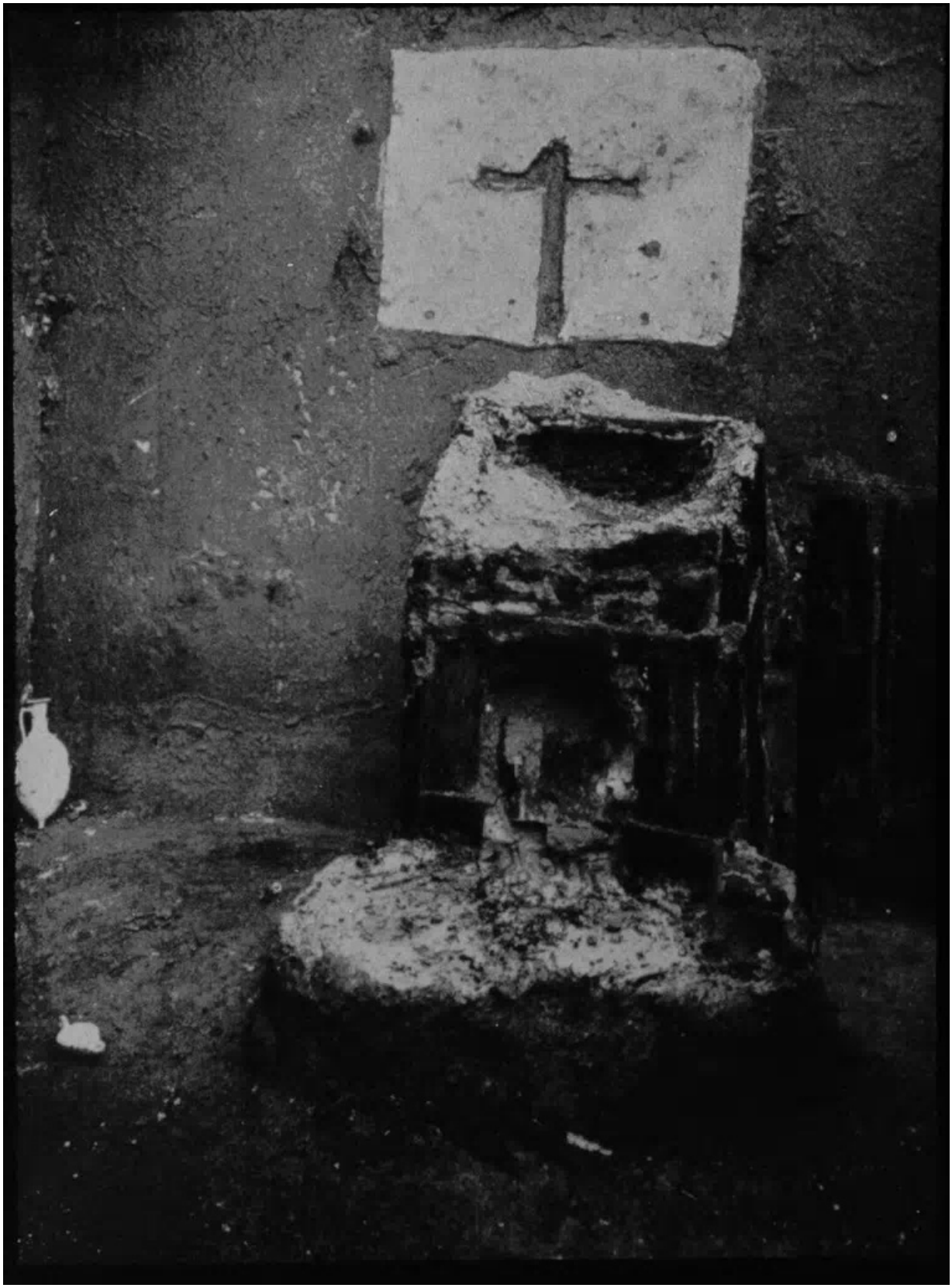

Fig. 3.5 Cross-shaped impression above pedestal on the wall of the House of the Bicentenary, Herculaneum. The city was destroyed alongside nearby Pompeii in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79AD. Image credit: Piemags

The evidence from Pompeii is stronger. A cross-shaped object whose design features indicate it was not a fragment of furniture was mounted on the wall of a bakery around eye level. After presenting evidence for a Christian presence in Pompeii [26] and specific evidence that the object in question was a cross symbol, Longenecker concludes that it most likely was a Christian object. His own view is that "this artifact is a relic of Jesus-devotion in Pompeii" and that "it served primarily an apotropaic function within the bakery." [27] If this conclusion is correct, then this early Christian cross provides stunning archeological corroboration of what the written record indicates: that the ante-Nicene Church had images of the cross and ascribed spiritual significance to them.

Conclusion

Early Christians understood the cross as a Christianized version of a Roman trophy standard. This type of image was venerated in the Roman world by being exalted, gathered around to be gazed upon, or adorned with victory wreaths, and Christians adapted these practices. Tertullian provides a clear witness to the veneration of holy images of the cross, and its presence in the Church as "the standard of Christ." But even before him, Christians connected the cross to a standard because of its form (Minucius Felix).

Several sources point to a first century origin of this practice of cross veneration. Saint Ignatius of Antioch speaks of a kind of spiritual bowing before it as "standard," "set up for all ages" in "the one body of the Church." The Epistle of Barnabas witnesses to images of the cross and its status as an object of devotion. And Saint Justin Martyr, after connecting the form of the cross to the honored battle standards, describes the cross in the same terms and expresses that the Lord Jesus Himself pointed the way to making the cross as a symbol of power. All of this is corroborated by

archeological depictions of the cross adorned with crowns that parallel Roman portrayals of trophy-veneration. And there are even physical evidences from Pompeii that indicate Christians used the cross as a spiritual symbol of protection in the first century. These findings can be summed up as follows:

Exaltation, gathered focus, adornment, and probably bowing (honor) given to the trophy standard of the cross (image) passes to the true cross of Christ (prototype) and ultimately to Christ the Lord and Conqueror Himself.

1. Reijners, Gerardus Quirinus, *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature*, Dekker & Van De Vegt (1965), pp. 81. The passage Reijners is commenting on is *Against the Nations* I, 12 (p 3 off). The parentheses are in the original but I've added the brackets.
2. *On Idolatry*, Section 19
3. From article entry "Trophies" at X-Legio (link: https://x-legio.com/en/wiki/tropaeum) website by Anton Evseenkov (accessed 8/4/24)
4. Ibid.
5. See book XI, lines 1–40. Translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* by A. S. Kline (2002), (link: https://www.yorku.ca/pswarney/Texts/aeneid-kline.htm). Accessed 8/4/24.
6. See *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII, 8.1-2
7. As we shall see in Chapter 5 on Clement of Alexandria, the visible form of a sailing ship is an image that early Christians had engraved, and its classical background relates it to the cross of Christ in the early Christian context. It is likely that what Saint Justin here says about the sail as a trophy extends and applies to Christian artistic representations of the cross. This strongly suggests that such representations were venerated, since a tropaeum is an intrinsically honorable image.
8. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, translated by Schaff and Wade. All quotations of patristic sources throughout this book are from the Schaff and Wade translations unless otherwise noted.
9. Huttenen, *Early Christians Adapting to the Roman Empire*, Chapter 4. Novum Testamentum, Supplements, Volume: 179, Link: https://library.oapen.org/viewer/web/viewer.html?file=/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/38003/9789004428249_webready_content_text.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
10. Dr. Ortlund (See "Icon Veneration is STILL an Accretion [Response to Hamilton/Garten]", *Youtube*, 5/24) claims St. Ignatius's language of the cross as battle standard does not imply the existence of physical images of the cross. This is because the standard is spoken of as singular (not "standards" implying multiple images in various Churches). Additionally, he claims that in Isaiah 5:26 and 49:22 it is not obvious that a literal physical standard is being spoken of (does God literally "whistle" to summon the nations?). However, prophecies lacking a known physical referent can have a more concrete fulfillment later (Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," is only completed in the birth of Christ). These considerations do not undercut the physicality of the standard St. Ignatius references.
11. This understanding is expressed later in the same epistle when Saint Ignatius says, "Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." (Smyrnaeans 8, Schaff and Wade Translation) The idea of a generalized Church made up of individuals of similar belief who are not in fact gathered together for Eucharistic worship is not in view here for Saint Ignatius. Instead, the Church's catholicity here speaks of its complete presence in the local gathering—everything that makes up the Church is totally present in the Eucharist presided over by the Bishop. This helps us understand why Saint Ignatius speaks of the standard as singular (instead of saying "standards"). Just as he says "where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church" (instead of Catholic Churches) to speak of many specific congregations, so also it would make sense to speak of many images of the cross in local Eucharistic gatherings by speaking of how "the standard" is raised up in the Church. By analogy with the American flag, it seems Saint Ignatius sees the trophy of the cross as "set up for all ages" by means of its copies (images which replicate the original flag). This is just how the Star-Spangled

Banner can “yet wave” after the original physical material of that particular flag is destroyed: its reality continues in copy-images which are based on the original flag as prototype. Thus, the statement that the cross is being displayed, looked at, and exalted to Christians “in the one body of the Church” is most plausibly talking about something that occurs within Christian worship gatherings.

12. We might ask, by analogy, how someone would interpret a hypothetical statement in an early Christian author that said “the icon is lifted up forever in the Church.” We would assume such a statement is meant literally. Even someone who doubts this would have difficulty denying that the author of such a statement approved of the practice of exalting icons. Even readers who doubt Saint Ignatius was referring to such a practice with the standard of the cross must reckon with *his evident approval of it*.

13. The holiness of Christian worship gatherings, and their repeated identification as “temple” by Saint Ignatius synchronizes with the Roman practice of placing battle standards in an aedes. Just as Romans had a special sanctuary for honorific placement of their aquilas, trophies, and other standards, so also Christians have the true holy place—the Church, the Christian gathering—in which the exalted cross becomes the focus of devotion. The language of the Church as location indicates veneration by honorable placement in a sacred space. Eph 9 describes Christians “as being stones of the temple of the Father” echoing 1 Peter 2:5. In Magnesians 7, he says, “As therefore the Lord did nothing without the Father, being united to Him, neither by Himself nor by the apostles, so neither do anything without the bishop and presbyters. Neither endeavor that anything appears reasonable and proper to yourselves apart; but come together into the same place, let there be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope, in love and in joy undefiled. There is one Jesus Christ, than whom nothing is more excellent. Therefore run together as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from one Father, and is with and has gone to one.” This displays both a great emphasis upon Church as a concrete gathering place and an understanding that the Christian gathering can be described as a temple. It is also noteworthy that in chapter Ephesians 14 Saint Ignatius says, “Let us therefore do all things as those who have Him dwelling in us, that we may be His temples”; the idea that the individual Christian is a holy temple does not, however, negate the holiness of Christians gathering as Church.

14. It is hard to see how this verse from Isaiah could be non-literal. Saint Ignatius views the gathered Church as participating in the actions of Christ in his Letter to the Ephesians chapter 5 and elsewhere: “I reckon you happy who are so joined to [your bishop] as the Church is to Jesus Christ, and as Jesus Christ is to the Father, that so all things may agree in unity.” This identification between the Church as gathered body and Christ Himself makes it natural to see Christ’s act of raising up a standard as continued in the Church’s own exaltation of the cross. This would be a concrete way to celebrate what the Gospel itself proclaims—the victory of Christ over sin, death, and the devil. But in the process of doing so, Christians would be making, lifting up, and focusing on images of the cross—the supremely honored and true trophy of God. If Christ exalted the cross by transforming it from weapon of shame to trophy of glory, Christians would continue to do this as they “lift up a standard for the people.”

15. de Angelis, Francesco, “Paying Attention: Images of Monuments on Roman Imperial Coins.” *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SymZL3hDDjw) 2/17/22.

16. Price, Richard, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea (787)*, pg 6. In footnote 27 Price comments that “Thummel[...] observes that this is why Epiphanius was not satisfied to say that images could be set up but should not be adored.” In other words, the ancient mindset saw no sharp separation between setting up images and their veneration; this is why the second commandment instructs people abstain from making idols, not just from worshipping them. It seems impossible to make and not express some kind of attitude—of honor or dishonor—as one places and sets up an image. This makes “honorable placement” a mode of veneration in the mind of Price and Thummel. Thanks go to John from the YT channel “According to John” for drawing attention to this passage,

and Seraphim Hamilton for pointing to the Scriptural inseparability of making and interacting with an image.

17. Note that for Saint Ignatius, “cross” is not a metonym for “the suffering and death of Jesus.” Instead, the cross is an object in its own right, though with no power or significance apart from its connection to Christ. In his epistle to the Ephesians, section IX, Saint Ignatius says the cross is the “mechanism” (μηχανῆς) by which humans are drawn to heaven and united to God. He also describes it as the means by which God calls us (Trallians XI). He speaks of the cross as a tree, and says that any people who are planted by God the Father will "appear as branches of the cross, and their fruit would be incorruptible." (Letter to the Trallians XI) This is an identification of the cross with the tree of life, possibly the earliest clear identification of this kind in Christian writings. Such passages treat the cross as distinct from Christ Himself and His suffering. Nevertheless, it is inseparable from Him, being a manifestation and token of His passion.

18. Schoedel states “Ignatius’s use of περίψημα and related terms expresses somewhat more conventional sentiments of devotion or dedication to Christ and the church. At the same time, however, the language does not reflect merely polite self-effacement. What remains of sacrificial overtones is the presumption of the low and despised character of the victim.” Schoedel, William. *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*. Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. Pp. 64 quoted in Kirk. This comment references passages such as Ephesians 8 where St. Ignatius uses the same wording to express deep reverence but directs it not to the cross, but to fellow Christians. Michael W. Holmes’ translation of Eph. 8 reads as follows: I am a humble sacrifice for you and I dedicate myself to you Ephesians, a church which is famous forever.” (Holmes, Michael, *The Apostolic Fathers*. Baker; MI, 2006. Pp. 98. Schoedel’s explanation of this language is that, while intending to express reverence and not actually implying a salvific sacrifice, it nevertheless means a total lowering of oneself in relation to what one is expressing devotion to (here, the Church at Ephesus). St. Ignatius uses the same language in Eph. 18 that he uses in Eph. 8. Thus, Eph. 18 implies that it is the cross which the Saint is expressing devotion to and making himself lower than. This is a self-lowering, acknowledging the supreme claim that the cross has on his life and loyalty.

19. Reijners, pp. 20.

20. *The Epistle of Barnabas*, Chapter 11

21. In Greek, ὅτι δὲ ὁ σταυρὸς ἐν τῷ T [/ ‘ταυ’] ἤμελλεν ἔχειν τὴν χάριν, λέγει καὶ τοὺς τριακοσίους. A more thorough treatment of Robert Button’s analysis of this important passage and its relationship to Christian holy images will be covered in a separate volume. For now, it is worth noticing as Button points out that this reference to the cross having a “T” shape actually inscribes the grace-filled cross. Button calls this an allograph—where words or letters take on image-like properties—and this point can be pressed further to say that this letter-image actually mediates grace from the very text of the page according to the author of the Epistle of Barnabas. Button, *Envisioning the Sign of God*, 64-65

22. *Dialog with Trypho*, 88

23. The suggestion of a horizontal and level bar is a common thread in other uses of this word: “balance beams” (used sometimes as a description of the scale-shaped constellation Libra); “even” (as juxtaposed with odd when singular).

24. G. W. Clarke, *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix*, Paulist Press, 1974; page 332, footnote 488. The relevance of this quotation from *The Dialog with Trypho* as evidence of holy and honorable images being approved of in the Apostolic age will have to be assessed in a later book.

25. See Longenecker, *The Cross Before Constantine*, pg. 111: “the monument places a body cross front and center within its facade, highlighted by a circular wreath.” He cites William M. Calder, “Early-Christian Epitaphs from Phrygia,” *Anatolian Studies* 5 (1955) plate 2c. Longenecker notes the public nature of such displays, and mentions there are “a dozen other tombstones that depict the body cross in focal wreaths,” with the phrase “Christians for Christians” on them. He cites William

Tabbernee, “Christian Instriptions from Phrygia,” in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley and S. R. Llewellyn (Grand Rapids: Eeerdmans, 1978).
26. He notes (pg. 122-124) that Saint Paul preached in a city near Pompeii, and an inscription in Pompeii contains an insult against Christians. Longenecker mentions the “Sator Square,” which may be evidence of Christian apotropaic cross symbolism. He also notes another inscription that appears to have referred to Christians. Longenecker expresses agreement with the classicist Alastair Small’s statement that “The evidence for Christianity in Pompeii and Herculaneum is of uneven value, and has been much debated, but when the more dubious arguments are discounted, there remains a residue of archeological documentation which should leave no doubt that there were Christians in Pompeii before the eruption.”
27. Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine, pg 143.

4

Veneration of Holy Signet Images

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) is often considered the first author to attest to Christian use of images in his comments about symbols on signet rings. What has gone virtually unnoticed is that such images were spiritually powerful and would have received honorific gestures. This chapter begins with Clement's view of images, then explores signets and related objects which were venerated in late antiquity. Passages from Clement and Tertullian about the Christian baptismal signet will be examined which point to the apotropaic power and ceremonial handling of the signet. Finally, three evidences will be considered for the use of Christian signet images in the first century.

Clement on Images and Idols

It is sometimes alleged that Clement was an aniconist who rejected any ritual use of images. In his work the *Stromata* (Miscellanies) he states "Works of art cannot then be sacred and divine." This has been taken as evidence Clement rejected the practice of venerating images, since it seems to show he did not believe images were capable of having a sacral status. [1] However, context makes it clear this is narrowly talking about idolatry:

> It was indeed ridiculous, as the philosophers themselves say, for man, the plaything of God, to make God, and for God to be the plaything of art; since what is made is similar and the same to that of which it is made, as that which is made of ivory is ivory, and that which is made of gold golden. Now the images and temples constructed by mechanics are made of inert matter; so that they too are inert, and material, and profane; and if you perfect the art, they partake of mechanical coarseness. Works of art cannot then be sacred and divine.

The fact that idolatry is the concern is clear from his comment that it is ridiculous "for man, the plaything of God, to make God, and for God to be the plaything of art". This sentence unambiguously frames his comments as a response to the standard understanding of an idol as a living god, or the body of a god. [2] Clement's continual insistence that the material components of idols are "inert" or lifeless shows that he is interacting with the idea of animated statuary, and rejects that such images come alive when filled with evil spirits. From this it is clear that by "sacred and divine" he specifically means "to literally be a living god made out of divine substance." Since Christian image veneration does not claim that holy images are gods, living, or composed of divine substance, this quote has no clear connection to Christian image veneration.

Clement is also thought to teach that the cherubim images in the Mosaic tabernacle and Solomonic temple were non-literal in Stromata 5.6:

> For He who prohibited the making of a graven image, would never Himself have made an image in the likeness of holy things. Nor is there at all any composite thing, and creature endowed with sensation, of the sort in heaven. But the face is a symbol of the rational soul, and the wings are the lofty ministers and energies of powers right and left; the voice is delightsome glory in ceaseless contemplation. Let it suffice that the mystic interpretation has advanced so far.

However, this does not deny there were visible, hand-crafted images of the cherubim. Instead, it indicates such images were symbolic and lacked a strict visual likeness. Greco-Roman art was often characterized by a drive to imitate life, and making images that were extremely lifelike and could even trick viewers into thinking they were real was a problem that led towards idolatry. In saying there was no "likeness of holy things," (ie. exact representation) Clement is not denying each aspect of a cherubim image (face, wings, mouth, etc.) existed and symbolized something. Further, Clement has positive comments about the Egyptians' use of sphinx images in the same book, [3] which makes a denial of cherub images among Israelites extremely unlikely.

Are there other places in Clement where he approves of holy symbolic images? Robert Button draws attention to a passage in Stromata 5.6 where Clement speaks of the visible form of the cross being present in the menorah of the Jewish temple as a prefiguration of the "sign of Christ" (the visible shape of the cross):

> In Stromateis 5.6, Clement speaks of the symbolic meaning of the golden lamp stand of the temple referred to in Exodus 25:31-40. He writes: "The golden lamp conveys another enigma as the sign of Christ (τοῦ σημείου τοῦ Χριστοῦ), not in respect of form (τῷ σκήματι) alone, but in his casting light, 'at sundry times and divers manners,' on those who believe on Him and hope, and who see by means of the ministry of the First-born." Here, the lampstand is a symbol of the cross—τοῦ σημείου τοῦ Χριστοῦ—not only by virtue of an iconic connection between its shape and that of the cruciform, but in the additional sense of its illuminating function for the faithful. [4]

Button's use of the word "iconic" precisely captures the sense of what Clement teaches about the lampstand or menorah. The visible form of the image, as well as its lights, have a spiritual aspect. These features simultaneously point beyond the lamp to their prototype—the cross, which

Clement customarily calls “the sign” of Christ—and make the visible form of that sign a conduit for divine illumination. This would imply the presence of this symbol or shape elsewhere would have the power of spiritually “casting light.” Such an understanding of an image shows that Clement has a highly developed icon theology that anticipates later Orthodox understandings of holy images as conduits for divine grace, connecting the viewer to the prototype.

This view of the visible depicted shape of the cross is an extension of Clement’s broader understanding of how visible creation is a conduit for connection to God. Dr. Doru Costache notes that in Clement, “the cosmos as both revelation and doxology mediates access to the divine in the way an icon does.” He points to a passage in which Clement states that “through (contemplating) things created” Christians “revere God’s energy and will” (*Stromata* 7.14.86.2, Costache’s translation). Costache draws out the implication of Clement’s statement: such spiritually advanced Christians “view the cosmos, reverentially, as theophany” and “privileged locus for meeting the divine.” [5] Far from being aniconic or having a “Platonic” hesistancy about the material world, Clement’s teachings are an early version of iconodule theology.

Clement and Honoring Golden Signet Images

In his text *The Instructor* (Logos Paidagogos) Clement of Alexandria gives ethical counsel to prepare Christians for baptism. His teaching includes parameters for the use of signet rings by Christians:

> And if it is necessary for us, while engaged in public business, or discharging other avocations in the country, and often away from our wives, to seal anything for the sake of safety, He (the Word) allows us a signet for this purpose only. Other finger rings are to be cast off, since, according to the Scripture, instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man. (Sirach 21:21)

The purpose in view in wearing signet ring images comports with their general use in Roman society and biblical narratives as a way of sealing property or documents by imprinting the seal image. The significance of such images goes further than being mere ownership markers. These images were not expressions of idiosyncratic preference, but connected to the sources of honor and authority for a household or officeholder:

> The signs engraved upon rings were very various, as we may judge from the specimens still extant: they were portraits of ancestors, or friends, subjects connected with mythology or the worship of the gods; and in many cases a person had engraved upon his seal symbolic allusions to the real or mythical history of his family… Sulla [the Roman dictator] thus wore a ring with a gem, on which Jugurtha [his rival for power] was represented at the moment he was made prisoner. Pompey used a ring on which three trophies were represented, and Augustus at first sealed with a sphinx, afterwards with a portrait of Alexander the Great, and at last with his own portrait, which was subsequently done by several emperors. [6]

As a modern state seal on a document would indicate the status and authority associated with the document, so also a signet imprint carried weight depending on who it was associated with. This would in turn be connected with the kind of image on the ring, extending the authority represented such as that of the emperor (Fig 4.1) into the visible world. The equivalence of such images with state seals and coats of arms points to how such images would be placed in order to receive reverent focus and gestures of honor (as when a family coat of arms is imprinted on an exalted flag).



Figure 4.1 Gold ring with carnelian intaglio portrait of Tiberius, ca. 14-37

AD, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24

This becomes especially important in the case of the emperor himself, since "the ring of a Roman emperor was a kind of state seal." [7] Here, it is highly significant that such rings were composed of gold, and could only be bestowed to those of lower rank by the emperor (or during the non-imperial phase of the Republic, the Senate). Pliny the Elder, a first-century scholar and associate of the Roman emperors, notes in his *Natural History* the evolution of practices relating to use of gold in Roman culture. Gold naturally evokes a respectful response and it is a "disgrace" and "an insult upon nature" [8] to use it for lowly purposes. The concern about honor and proper use of gold led to restriction in who could receive and handle a golden signet: initially such rings were worn by those "who were about to proceed on an embassy to foreign nations…Nor was it the practice for any person to wear these rings, except those who for this reason had received them at the public expense." [9] Pliny notes that certain citizens were given the "distinction… of wearing the likeness of the emperor engraved in gold upon a ring." [10]As Margaret Mitchell notes, in the late 100s, "Roman rule was exercised from a distance by imperial and senatorial decree, marked by the signet-ring seal of the emperor, which was also borne on golden rings carried by his legates." [11]

It is important in this context to re-emphasize the lack of distinction between political and religious authority in the Roman world: not only the emperor, but also the Senate was widely acknowledged as "sacred" (an appellation which even a Christian such as Saint Justin Martyr uses in his *First Apology*). The receipt of a gold signet ring image—imbued with honor and status from a sacred authority—should therefore be seen as following a mode of image veneration which we see in handling of a state flag and other authority-laden images. By the act of restricting who granted, carried, and used the imperial signet image, its honorable status was acknowledged in a concrete way. Just as having a color guard who officially receives from above and reverently bears a flag-image is a way of showing it honor, so also in the case of Rome. The Roman emperor would grant permission to

his legates to bear the authority-laden imperial signet, handled with reverence to acknowledge its sacral status. [12]

Within this Roman framework, Clement's teaching about the source and use of Christian signet rings is striking. Here also he states that such ring-images are for exercising authority, and emphasizes that these images (or the ring housing them) are to be made of gold. Then he states that they can only be worn by Christ's own permission:

> The Word [Jesus], then, permits them a finger ring of gold. Nor is this for ornament, but for sealing things which are worth keeping safe in the house in the exercise of their charge of housekeeping. For if all were well trained, there would be no need of seals, if servants and masters were equally honest. But since want of training produces an inclination to dishonesty, we require seals.

The language of "permits" has a dual importance. It points to restraint about ornamentation [13] but this cannot be taken too far; the use of gold is very exalted not only because of gold's universal significance in symbolism (glory, divinity, royalty, eternity, incorruptibility) but also since the right to wear a golden signet came from an emperor. Margaret A. Mitchell, who was cited above as noting the official entrusting of the golden imperial signet to legates, states, "Clement accords to Jesus the imperial prerogative of granting the right to wear a gold ring (anulus aureus)." [14] This is the gesture of ceremonial handling done towards the Christian signet image—in other words, an act of veneration. Such a picture fits very well with the broader early Christian material culture which followed the rest of the Roman world in identifying gold as evoking veneration. (See **Appendix I: The Hierarchy of Materials in Early Christianity)**

Ceremonially handling an image (such as assigning color guards to bear the American flag) often includes a concern about proper decorum in how the object is handled. For Americans, this includes the color guard's proper folding, presentation, and storage of their flag. In the Roman context, Isidore of Seville recounts that Gracchus attacked his enemy Manus using

the accusation of improper ring-wearing in his trial by saying “look upon the left hand of this man to whose authority we bow, but who, with a woman's vanity, is adorned like a woman.” [15] Clement exhibits the same interest in the reverent handling of the ring when he instructs “men are not to wear the ring on the joint; for this is feminine.” [16]

The fact that Christian signets were restricted in their use, give only “from above,” and entrusted in the context of ritual is confirmed by the testimony of Tertullian. Applying the parable of the prodigal son to baptism, Tertullian states that the newly baptized

> receives again the pristine garment—the condition, to wit, which Adam by transgression had lost. The ring also he is then wont to receive for the first time, wherewith, after being interrogated, he publicly seals the agreement of faith, and thus thenceforward feeds upon the fatness of the Lord's body—the Eucharist, to wit. This will be the prodigal son, who never in days bygone was thrifty… [17]

This restriction on receiving the signet is another testimony affirming what Clement says: by His action in the Church of giving life to the baptized Christian, the Logos is the One who gives permission to wear the honorable Christian signet image. Such images were venerated by ceremonial handling (through restriction, bestowal, and reverent handling) of an honorable golden image.

Honoring Images of Authority

As we turn to a consideration of which specific kinds of images Christians used on their signets, we find further reinforcement that ring-images received veneration. We have already considered how signets generally bore images of emperors, ancestors, heroic deeds, trophies, deities, and other sources of honor for a family or office holder. Small objects such as

signets and coins which bore these images would become conduits for the transmission of honor or dishonor to the prototype depicted. (See **Appendices E and I**)

The veneration of the imperial likeness—very common on coins, and very powerful when placed on signets—happened in a variety of different contexts. What is particularly interesting is that such images were apparently given attention and honor regardless of the size and quality of the representation. The statesman and tutor Marcus Cornelius Fronto wrote the following to his pupil Marcus Aurelius about images of the young emperor:

> You know how at all the money changers' tables, and in booths, shops, colonnades, entrance-courts, and windows, anywhere and anytime, there are your images on display to the crowds. They are quite badly painted, and many of them are sculpted and carved by heavy-handed (or more probably, talentless) artists. But even though I think your visage never looks more unlike you as I pass by, it still never fails to force a kiss from my mouth. [18]

While acts of reverence such as a kiss could be given to he emperor's image could also be dishonored through defacement of the coins bearing his likeness. The connection between who is represented and the way an image should be treated is so widespread that even the Lord Jesus Himself expresses this principle in the dialog with the Pharisees about the coin stamped with the imperial image:

> And Jesus said to them, "**Whose likeness (εἰκών, eikon)** and inscription is this?" They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mt 22:20-21 ESV)

Like miniature royal images, signet images of ancestors were also seen as having a status which should evoke loyalty and a reverent response. In his study of finger rings, the scholar Kunz notes the following incident from Cicero:

> A strong appeal to the memories aroused by a signet bearing the effigy of a renowned ancestor, was made by Cicero in one of his orations against Catilina. He declared that when he submitted to Publius Lentulus Sura, who was involved in the great Catilinian conspiracy, an incriminating letter believed to be his, asking him whether he did not acknowledge the seal with which it was stamped, Lentulus nodded assent. Thereupon Cicero addressed him in these words: “In effect the seal is well known, it is the image of your ancestor, whose sole love was for his country and his fellow citizens. Mute as it is, this image should have sufficed to hold you aloof from such a crime.” [19]

Incidents such as this show that viewers were expected to engage with the images engraved on signet rings or created by their impress, and acknowledge them with the reverence due to the source of honor and authority portrayed.



Fig. 4.2 Gold ring with a carnelian or glass intaglio (draped female bust), 100s or 200s AD. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24

When coins portray sources of authority or blessing, this is generally indicative that they are officially dedicated to the god or royal figure portrayed. Nero minted coins with an image of Jupiter "the Vindicator" after he survived a conspiracy against his life. It has been noted by numismatic scholars that according to Tacitus, Nero took the dagger which

was intended for his murder and engraved on it “IOVI VINDICI” (Jove the Vindicator) which was a way of “consecrating it to this god and invoking his protection. The denomination of this coin then makes a great deal of sense” as existing for the purpose of supplicating Jupiter. This role of the coin image in prayer is particularly important because “invoking Jupiter religiously bound those who swore by him to comply with tasks or obligations. In this same regard, Jupiter was linked to upholding the law and protection of those in political office.” [20] Consequently, even on very small media such as coins, sources of benefaction and honor such as a deity could be used as a way of supplicating for aid.

Bearing in mind how power and veneration were associated with images of authority, Clement’s instructions about the specific seal images Christians should use are very important:

> And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship running with a fair wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus had engraved; and if the seal is a fisherman, it will recall the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to depict the faces of idols, we who are prohibited from attaching ourselves to them, nor a sword, nor a bow, since we follow peace, nor drinking cups, since we are temperate. Many of the licentious have their (homosexual) lovers engraved, or prostitutes, as if they wished to make it impossible ever to forget their erotic passions, by being continually reminded of their licentiousness. [21]

At first we might be inclined to take the instructions about proper seals as merely selecting designs which would be less offensive to Christians than imagery connected to idolatry or the passions (including portraits of former lovers, perhaps resembling Fig. 4.2). However, upon careful examination of Clement’s writings, each of the permissible images is actually a way of appropriately representing the Holy Spirit (dove), the trophy of the cross (ship, anchor, Figure 4.3), or Christ (fish, lyre, fisherman, Fig. 4.4). (For an

in-depth justification of this, see **Appendix G: The Iconography of Clement's Seals**) These seal images of sources of authority or honor meet the conditions that in the Roman context would lead to their veneration by a kiss of reverence, gazing at them in contrition, or using them to invoke divine protection.



Fig. 4.3 Engraved gem depicting anchor and two fish. Note the cruciform appearance of the anchor's upper bar. The gem-seals of signet rings

bearing this kind of engraving are generally dated to the 200s AD. Photo credit: Artokoloro



Fig 4.4 Engraved gem depicting boat with two sails, fisherman, and small fish. Note the cruciform appearance of the boat's mast. This gem is dated to the third century BC; its iconography could serve as a prototype for the fisherman and ship seals that Christians used in the 100s and 200s AD. Photo credit: Artokoloro

Even the act of wearing a signet seal was seen as a gesture of reverence directed through the image to the prototype represented. Clement follows this typical Roman practice to equate ring-wearing with veneration in a number of places (see **Appendix H: Ring Wearing as Image Veneration**). Consequently, the fact that Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the cross are imaged on these golden rings provides additional reasons for thinking such images were venerated.

Signets as Spiritually Powerful and their Veneration

Once we acknowledge that the image on a ring connects to its prototype, it naturally leads to the question of whether rings in the ancient world were seen as having spiritual power. [22] It would make sense that a ring would have some connection to the power of whatever is represented. The ancient Meditteranean world has many stories of magic rings such as the ring of Gyges from Plato's *Republic*. Isidore of Seville records that a Roman named Crassus believed that by wearing two rings he would increase his already immense wealth. Clement of Alexandria also notes that the tyrant Execestus had rings with powers of divination (though they apparently could not help save him from the assassination they predicted). [23]

In the Roman world, it was not only the rings of emperors that were held in high regard and protected as sacred. A Roman property owner cherished his signet image in a way that indicates it had a degree of sacredness. Pliny notes how customs had developed such as ornamentally wearing "proxy rings" to indicate the worth of one's signet image which remained safe in a special box at home:

> Some people thrust several rings upon the little finger alone; while others wear but one ring upon this finger, the ring that carries the seal upon the signet ring itself, this last being carefully shut up as an object of rarity, too precious to be worn in common use, and only to be taken from the coffer as from a sanctuary. And thus is the wearing of a single ring

> upon the little finger, no more than an ostentatious advertisement that the owner has property of a more precious nature under seal at home. [24]

The reverence which typical Romans had toward their family's signet images has parallels with how the imperial signet was venerated by ceremonial handling. Pliny's language of bringing the ring out "as from a sanctuary" is an act of veneration which makes complete sense when the signet image is seen as a miniature coat of arms, imbued with the status of the family (as derived from the divinely-ordained structure of the world).

Pliny's cultic terminology ("sanctuary") to describe the storage box shows that the concealment of the ring in its special box (called in Greek "dactyliotheca") was a form of veneration by veiling or concealment. The dactyliotheca had a quasi-sacral status. It was a paradigmatic votive offering, as seen when Pompey dedicated a signet box to the Capitol after he despoiled it from Mithridates (an action later copied by Julius Caesar at the temple of Venus Genetrix). [25] Signet boxes could even be seen as having spiritual properties. One inscription matched to such boxes states that "often does the heavy ring slip off the anointed fingers; but if you confide your jewel to me, it will be safe" [26] and dactyliotheca are portrayed as attended by spirits (putti) in wall art from Pompeii.

Further evidence for the ceremonially handling or concealing of signets and similar images comes from the practices of mystery religions. The Roman author Lucius Apuleis (123–170AD) described the role that a small emblem played in his initiation into one of the mystery cults (that of "Father Liber", a god similar to Dionysius). He was given "emblems" by the "priests" (called hierophants) and charged to "preserve with the utmost care" this object. In his trial, he addressed his audience, saying those "initiated into the mysteries of Father Liber alone, know what you keep hidden at home, safe from all profane touch and the object of your silent veneration." Such objects were hidden "in a linen cloth, the purest of coverings for holy things" (in Egyptian contexts he says it is "a veil for sacred things"). [27]

In light of all this, it is very significant that in his *Protrepticus* Clement speaks of Christian initiation in parallel terms. He contrasts the pagan mysteries with the "truly sacred mysteries" of Christian initiation:

> O truly sacred mysteries! O pure light! In a blaze of the torches, I have a vision of heaven and of God. I become holy by initiation. The Lord is the hierophant; He marks the worshipper with His seal (σφραγίζεται), gives light to guide his way, and commends him, when he has believed, to the Father's care, where he is guarded for ages to come. These are the Bacchic revels of my mysteries! If thou wilt, be thyself initiated, and thou shalt dance with angels around the unbegotten and imperishable and only true God, the Word of God joining with us in our hymn of praise. [28]

As in the passage from *The Instructor* about the acceptable ring symbols for Christians, Clement here describes the seal from the Lord given to initiates (in baptism). [29] He connects to the mysteries the role of Jesus as High Priest of the ritual ("hierophant") who specifically marks the initiate with a visible holy sign ("His seal"). Robert Button acknowledges how signet rings form the conceptual background of the phrase "He marks the worshipper with His seal," which describes baptism making holiness permanent in a person, like wax or clay stamped by a ring. The fact that the sealing process of baptism is embodied in the giving of the baptismal signet is explicitly stated by Tertullian, who speaks of "a renewal of the ring, the sign and seal of baptism." [30] This ring was not given until baptism, indicating the same kind of sacral status as the "emblems" that initiates like Apuleus received. Since the signet seal was their emblem of initiation, this indicates Christians treated it similarly, gazing reverently at it as a holy object, veiling it to show honor.

A related practice exists in ancient Judaism is the wearing of tefillin (Fig. 4.5)—Torah scrolls encased in boxes that attach to the head and other body parts during prayer. [31] This is attested to in the Hebrew Bible, and in the New Testament, the tefillin is briefly referred to using the word

“phylaktērion.” This Greek word is often used in the Greco-Roman context to refer to protective magical amulets. The common second Temple Jewish practice of binding a tefillin to oneself during prayer is referenced in Jesus’s criticism of the Pharisees:



Fig. 4.5 Phylactery in their original leather box, dating from 1st. century

A.D. Found in one of the Qumran caves. Photo credit: Zev Radovan, BibleLandPictures

> But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, (phylaktēria, φυλακτήρια) and enlarge the borders of their garments (Matthew 23:5)

The use of the word "phylaktēria" shows that these objects were seen as having a protective role—guarding the mind from wandering, and (through the prayers offered up) guarding the wearer more generally. What Christ criticizes is an excess of outward appearance, not the practice itself. The use of tefillin is also described favorably by Saint Justin Martyr in his dialog with the Jewish teacher Trypho:

> Moses commanded you (i.e., the Jews) to put on a phylactery (φυλακτήριον, phylaktērion) with certain texts, written upon very thin parchment, something which we undoubtedly consider as sacred (α πάντως άγια νοουμεν είναι).

Saint Justin very clearly identifies the tefillin (phylacteries) as holy objects. The piece of the Scriptures contained inside the protective box was venerated by concealment in a miniature holy space, much like Apuelis' emblems and Pliny's signets. [32] Given that they were seen as holy it is likely that a Christian version of the phylactery would have been used by early Christians such as Saint Justin for spiritual protection in a limited way. [33] What might such Christian phylacteries have been like?

Clement recounts an incident from the life of Saint John the Evangelist and Theologian in which the baptismal seal is called "phylactery." In this account, the Apostle entrusts a youth to a certain bishop. This bishop rears the child, and eventually baptizes him. Clement describes the incident using terminology connected to the baptismal signet ring:

> And the presbyter taking home the youth committed to him, reared, kept, cherished, and finally baptized (ἐφώτισε, literally “enlightened”) him. After this he relaxed his stricter care and guardianship, under the idea that the seal of the Lord (ἡ σφραγίς του Κυρίου) he had set on him was a complete protection (φυλακτήριον, phylaktērion) to him. But on his obtaining premature freedom, some youths of his age, idle, dissolute, and adepts in evil courses, corrupt him. [34]

The description of the baptismal “seal of the Lord” as “phylaktērion” gives evidence that Clement saw the signet as having the same protective and sacred quality that was commonly ascribed to the tefillin. Much as in Saint Justin’s understanding of those objects, the “seal of the Lord” cannot prevent apostasy but has a limited apotropaic (spiritually protective) use, which indicates a sacred status. As Margaret Mitchell says, “Roman Christians likely did have Christian symbols on their rings in this period, some of which may have included baptismal symbols, and such rings, like baptism itself, were surely thought to have apotropaic, protective powers.” The baptismal symbols she mentions are those of Clement, especially the image of the fisherman pointing to “the children drawn out of the water.” [35]

Robert Button echoes this claim: the figure of the cross is contained in the anchor and ship’s mast on Clement’s seals. [36] This shape gives “apotropaic protection” in Clement’s theology. [37] We can recall how for Clement, the visible design of the cross as sign of Christ has the power of “casting light” or “illuminating the faithful.” That these ring-images were holy and a source of protection indicates their veneration. Dr. Richard Price notes the close connection between an image having spiritual power and honor being paid to that image. He acknowledges the clear and decisive significance of images "being attributed with the power to work miracles (which implies veneration, whether before the miracle or afterwards)." [38] Images with the spiritual power to protect the wearer should be classed in the same category as images which impart healing. The spiritually-powerful quality of

Clement's signet-images can therefore be taken as prima facie evidence of their veneration.

This apotropaic understanding of Christian signets finds support in the pre-Nicene material record. Some pre-Nicene Christian signets depict praying figures. Jeffrey Speir [39] catalogs several of these signets, but perhaps the most significant has an engraving depicting Daniel in the lion’s den in the lower register praying in the orans stance to Christ the Good Shepherd above with His sheep (Fig. 4.6). The visual form of the signet is itself suggestive of a devotional use since it depicts prayer to Christ using the visual figure of the Good Shepherd, and this was a common devotional title for Jesus in the early Church.



Fig. 4.6 Signet ring depicting Daniel in the lion's den praying to Christ the Good Shepherd above (200s AD). 3D Model designed by Jose de Oliveira

Looking at the ring, a believer would either be imitating Daniel's prayer or potentially asking for his intercession. To imitate Daniel's prayer while looking at his image would, of course, mean that the wearer of the signet would then be looking at the image of Christ the Shepherd while addressing Him in prayer. In other words, the images on such rings were *prayed through* and treated the way Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians treat icons. All of this fits naturally with what we know about signets—their evocative depictions of sources of authority and honor, and their commonly accepted apotropaic and spiritually binding qualities. Additionally as we shall see in our discussion of orants in early Christian art, (see Chapters 9 and 10) the fact that Daniel is presented in this particular stance (which in

art is meant to impart an attitude and posture of piety to the viewer) clearly commends him as a model for emulation in prayer to the Christ Who was depicted. [40]

This spiritual power of holy images on signets continues to be evidenced shortly after the first Council of Nicaea in Saint John Chrysostom's homily commemorating Saint Meletius (d. 381AD). After the death of Meletius, people continued to "have that name in mind and to have that holy man in their heart" by using his name "as a repellent for every irrational feeling and thought." But this veneration and invocational power of the Saint's name can also attach to his depiction. Saint John states:

> "But you didn't experience so much just at the name, but even at the depiction of his body. At least, what you did with names, this you practiced too, in the case of that man's image. For truly, many carved that holy image on finger rings and on seals and on cups and on bedroom walls and all over the place so that one didn't just hear that holy name, but also saw the depiction of his body all over the place and had a double consolation for his loss." (section 3)

The description of the Saint's likeness "on finger rings and on seals" for a (like his name) "repellent for every irrational feeling and thought" ascribes apotropaic power to the signet image of the Saint. Veneration of the image is further indicated in its being called "holy image" and the fact that "this you practiced too, in the case of that man's image" connects back to the honorific language of "have that holy man in their heart." [41] The fact that Saint John the Archbishop of Constantinople refers to this as a widespread practice shows how firmly rooted the use of signets for protection and veneration was in the period immediately following I Nicaea. If image veneration was so widely-approved at official levels this early, it raises significant questions about the origins of this practice, and whether it was present in the opening years of Church history.

How Early was Veneration of Signet Seals Practiced?

By the time of Clement and Tertullian, it is clear that baptismal practice involved the bestowal and ceremonial handling of Christian signet rings. Clement's testimony has powerful bearing on the question of Christian practice in the apostolic age, since he preserves a story of the bishop known to the Apostle John placing the baptismal "seal of the Lord" described as "phylaktērion." Its apotropaic nature implies such a seal would have sacral status and be shown veneration; this gives us evidence that the veneration of holy signets dates back to Apostolic times.

But the language of seal also shows up in an even earlier text dated between 95 and 140AD. In Chapter 8 of the early Christian sermon known today as 2nd Clement, the author (who is not Clement of Alexandria, but whom some considered to be Clement the early Pope of Rome) speaks of the need for baptism, and its permanent effect on believers. Towards the end of the section in question, the author speaks of the need to maintain ethical standards in relation to "the seal":

> 8 …by doing the will of the Father, and keeping the flesh holy, and observing the commandments of the Lord, we shall obtain eternal life. For the Lord says in the Gospel, "If you have not kept that which was small, who will commit to you the great? For I say unto you, that he that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much." [42] This, then, is what He means: Keep the flesh holy and the seal undefiled, that you may receive eternal life.

This is not the first time that the topic of baptism and the seal is presented, and earlier on the author speaks of how we must "keep our baptism pure," and the danger to "those who have not kept the seal" [43] by an upright life. As Robert Button notes in his comments on Clement of Alexandria's Protrepticus, the association with signet rings is always

hovering in the background when baptism is described as seal. It is reasonable to see “keeping the flesh holy and the seal undefiled” as referring to a pair of baptismal practices that Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian both attest to—the giving of the pure white baptismal robe and the baptismal signet. [44] That the baptismal signet is in view also becomes more plausible when we pair the phrase from chapter 7 “those who have not kept the seal” with the phrase from chapter 8 “If you have not kept that which was small, who will commit to you the great?” Keeping what is “small” connects to keeping “the seal,” which would be very natural if a baptismal signet (a small seal—holy, and of immense value) is part of what this involves. Keeping the “small” leads to receiving “the great,” which matches with the topic of inheritance and how a son would inherit his father’s signet. This may be an early example of the baptismal exegesis which Tertullian gives to the parable of the prodigal son, complete with the signet which betokened divine sonship and the authority that came with it.

The necessity of treating the seal a certain way is implied in the instruction to “keep” the seal, or “keep the seal undefiled.” This shows that the seal in question was regarded as pure and honorable—holy, even—and deserving of respect. The form of this respect clearly includes at least ethical conduct, which can be a form of veneration when it is done in relation to an object. Failing to keep or maintain the purity of the signet seal is like “dishonoring the uniform” or “dishonoring the badge.” [45] But there are those who “live up to” their uniform or “honor their badge” by their reverential conduct and obedience that matches the honorable image. Because it likely references the baptismal signet, the witness of 2 Clement about keeping and preserving the purity of this seal points to a first century practice of reverencing such holy ring-images.

Finally, we can note the existence of a first century signet ring from Pompeii bearing a cross-like design. [46] This ring belonged to a man named Meges, and the figure which appears to be the cross is shown next to a symbol which likely signifies eternal life. Longenecker notes that "the cross in the signet ring conforms closely to the patterning of the cross on the wall of the Pompeii bakery" [47] and dismisses as unsatisfactory a variety of explanations of the designs that don't imply a devotee of Jesus used the ring. If we have further evidence of Christianity’s presence in Pompeii, and

cross designs in particular, this makes it plausible that the cross-shaped figure engraved on the ring is indeed a Christian design. Longenecker's claim that cross images during this time period were apotropaic would make it likely that the ring owner, Meges, wore it for spiritual protection like Clement's signets. He also notes the existence of three signet rings engraved with a depiction of a dove with an olive branch found in Pompeii and Herculaneum; these are comparable to the seemingly-aptropaic cross signet in "referencing the story of salvation." [48] While we cannot know for sure, it is entirely possible these are Christian "phylactery rings" like the one that was Clement implies was given by the bishop to the orphan in his narrative about the Apostle John. If so, it would likely have been venerated by the ceremonial handling characteristic of objects that have a similar status and function.

Conclusion

The early Christian baptismal seal ring followed common beliefs and practices about signets in the Roman world that marked out their honorable status as images. The golden imperial signet was venerated when the Emperor ceremonially granted it to official signet bearers, just as the modern practice of having a color guard recognizes the honor of a flag. Clement of Alexandria assigns the same imperial kind of role to Christ when he says "The Word, then, permits them a finger ring of gold," treating Christians as his signet bearers to carry these honorable images, and Tertullian confirms that these seals were bestowed in the ritual as "sign and seal of baptism." The designs on Clement's signets represent sources of honor and authority—Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the cross—the kinds of images that would have been venerated in the Roman civilization. Further, these Christian signet seals were apotropaic, providing spiritual protection; the spiritually-powerful quality of small images and other objects is typically associated with their holy status and veneration. Surviving Christian signet seals from the 200s confirm this understanding, sometimes even depicting the act of prayer to Christ as recipient of prayer, which likely implies they were given devotional use or "prayed through" as Saint John

Chrysostom's homily on Meletius seems to indicate. Additionally we can note traces in written and archeological records pointing to a first century origin for the holy baptismal signet. We can express this understanding of the ring images as follows:

The gestures of ceremonial reverence (honor) given to the signet seal (image) pass to Christ, the Spirit, or the Cross (prototype).

The devotional binding (honor) given by wearing the signet seal (image) passes to Christ, the Spirit, or the Cross (prototype).

While it is specifically to Roman householders that this instruction is given and for the preservation of their property and dominion, the use of Christian images to produce signet impressions would best be understood as also extending the presence of God’s own Kingdom into the world. By filling the world with purified images that contrast with the sensuality and darkness of the pagan world, we see here a beginning of Christian transformation of the visible earth to become “as it is in heaven.” We can see here also the roots of a practice that continues in the Orthodox Church today and among Roman Catholics with the giving of crosses and icons at a person’s baptism. Such images become emblems of faith, bound to the wearer or reverently incorporated into their home, affording an invaluable connection to Christ and His Kingdom.

1. This way of arguing is sensible. It puts forward reasoning based on the characteristics ascribed to images which would indicate veneration, as opposed to just looking for descriptions of actions like "the Christian bowed to the icon" etc. The same strategy of inferring how an image was or was not used based on the qualities ascribed to it stands behind the concept of the intrinsically honorable image put forward in this book.
2. Another quote which appears to reject image veneration in Clement is from Protrepticus: "But it is with a different kind of spell that art deludes you, if it leads you not to the indulgence of amorous affections: it leads you to pay religious honor (τιμᾶν) and worship (προσκυνεῖν) to images (ἀγάλματα) and pictures (γραφάς)." While a detailed treatment of this text will have to wait for a separate work, we can note that reading it as talking about all art leads to the absurd consequence that Clement thinks even Christian signet seals and Old Testament temple imagery are avenues of deception. This quote has textual resonances with the passage from Stromata just considered about idolatry. In context, it is not talking about the idea that the honor given to licit symbolic images passes to their prototypes, but is instead warning against the dangers of treating realistic artistic representations as a substitute for reality itself. This is evident from Clement's mention here of the famous deceptively realistic dove painting by Sosus of Pergamon (a lifelike image or ζωγραφίας [zografías] to use Clement's term) and the story of Pygmalian (in which a statue actually becomes animate and living).
3. "Therefore also the Egyptians place Sphinxes before their temples, to signify that the doctrine respecting God is enigmatical and obscure; perhaps also that we ought both to love and fear the Divine Being: to love Him as gentle and benign to the pious; to fear Him as inexorably just to the impious; for the sphinx shows the image of a wild beast and of a man together. " (Stromata 5.5) Like sphinxes, cherubim are hybrid creatures and temple guardians. It is absurd to think Clement thought Egyptian statuary was real and good and that extremely similar Israelite temple images were actually not even ordained by God to be made.
4. Button, Robert, *Envisioning the sign of God: the rhetorical figuration of the cross in the Epistle of Barnabas and the writings of Clement of Alexandria - semiosis, performance, and incarnation*. Dissertation presented to the University of Exeter, (2022) p. 115;
5. Costache, Doru *Humankind and the Cosmos: Early Christian Representations*. Brill, 2021, pp. 132–133.
6. Leonhard Schmitz "Annulus," in *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, ed. William Smith; John Murray, London, 1875.
7. Ibid.
8. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXXIII. 14
9. Ibid., XXXIII. 6
10. Ibid., XXXIII. 12. Pliny also notes that in his own day, "we [now] see in every quarter persons even who have been but just liberated from slavery, making a leap all at once to the distinction of the golden ring: a thing that never used to happen in former days, as it was by the ring of iron that the equites and the judices were then to be recognized." XXXIII. 8.
11. Mitchell, Margaret M., "The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism in the Abercius Monument" in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism in Early Judaism, Greco-Roman Religion, and Early Christianity*, ed. David Hellholm (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), volume 1, pp. 1769.
12. The Roman historian Cassius Dio attests to the permission given by Emperor Vespasian to General Mucianus to bear the imperial signet and exercise the authority connected with it: "Mucianus, who claimed that he had bestowed the sovereignty upon Vespasian, plumed himself

greatly upon his honors, and especially because he was called brother by him, and had authority to transact any business that he wished without the emperor's express direction, and could issue written orders by merely adding the other's name. And for this purpose he wore a ring, that had been sent him so that he might impress the imperial seal upon documents requiring authorization. In fact, he and Domitian gave governorships and procuratorships to many and appointed prefect after prefect and even consuls." *Histories,* 66.2, published in Vol. VIII of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1925. Other cases are mentioned by Kunz *(Ring for the Finger*, pg 13): the Roman dictator Sulla permitting a gold ring to Roscius (effectively moving him from plebeian to patrician) and a gold ring accorded to Gallus which entitled him to seats of honor in public.

13. As we saw in Pliny's comments. Clement is not decrying physical adornment, but offering a blueprint for making forms of physical beauty harmonize with the inherent meaning of Christian life. He sums up his teaching on the connection between "the native beauty which has its seat in the soul" and physical adornment by saying,"it is incumbent on us not to seem, but to be free, trained by God, adopted by God. Wherefore we must adopt a mode of standing and motion, and a step, and dress, and in a word, a mode of life, in all respects as worthy as possible of freemen."

14. Mitchell, Margaret M., "The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism in the Abercius Monument," p. 1773 fn. 129, and p. 1773 main text. She notes that the famous early Christian epitaph of Abercius references his seeing people in Rome having a "resplendent seal" (lamprán sfrageídan, λαμπρὰν σφραγεῖδαν). She opts for a multilayered interpretation of the enigmatic epitaph: in addition to referring to the Roman state seal, this has a spiritual and Christian referent in Abercius' apprehending that Roman Christian ecclesial life was characterized by the spiritual sealing resulting from baptism. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that the "seal" is a metonymy for baptism in the inscription, and concedes, "The symbolic, after all, need not preclude the literal."

15. Kunz, pp. 52–-53

16. In addition to the color guard example used earlier, we can add the instructions in the Old Testament about who is to handle the Ark of Covenant and how, and the limits on where it should be placed. This is clearly part of how the Ark's honorable status was acknowledged through concrete actions.

17. Tertullian, "On Modesty", 9.

18. Fronto, Marcus Cornelius, *Epistle to Marcus Aurelius* 4.12.

19. Kunz, *Ring for the Finger*, pg 127; the passage from Cicero is "In Catilinam" iii, cap. v.

20. "Nero and Jupiter" by the committee for Julio-Claudian Coinage at the Otago Museum (2018) (link: https://julioclaudiancoinage2018.omeka.net/exhibits/show/use-of-deities/nero-and-jupiter) accessed 8/6/24.

21. Translation by Jeffrey Spier in "Early Christian Engraved Gems." In *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; Routledge (2018). Pg 141–142.

22. Jonathan Pageau, the renowned icon carver who has done much to awaken the contemporary western world to the symbolic patterns within all reality, notes several examples of magical rings from a variety of cultures. See "Lord of the Rings: Symbolism of the Ring of Power" (2019) accessed at: https://youtu.be/QafvZZTtNpE?si=0nJ7pKbqcW49WXfx

23. *Stromata*, Book I, Chapter 21

24. Natural History XXXIII. 6

25. See Damen, Giada "Antique Engraved Gems and Renaissance Collectors", from Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History hosted on The Metropolitan Museum of Art (March 2023) (link: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gems/hd_gems.htm) accessed 6/23/24

26. Kunz, pg 54

27. Apuleius, Lucius, *Apologia* 55–56; quoted in "Mystery Cults in the Greek and Roman World" from Facts and Details, October 2018 (link: https://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub405/entry-6288.html) accessed 6/11/24

28. Clement, *Protrepticus* 12. Translation taken from Robert Button, “Envisioning the Sign,” pps. 269-271)
29. In “And let our seals (σφραγῖδες, sfragídes) be. . .”; here he says that Jesus “marks the worshipper with His seal (σφραγίζεται, sfragízed).” The golden signet is specifically worn by the permission of Jesus (“The Word permits”), just as the Lord is described here as sealing in baptism: “The Lord is the hierophant; He marks the worshipper. . .” It is also noteworthy that the New Testament connects becoming a child of God to baptism and the seal of the Holy Spirit in a number of passages. Christ’s gift of a ring would enact God granting Christians the authority or “right to be children of God” (John 1:12)..
30. The quote in its entirety shows how Christians used the Parable of the Prodigal Son as a model for baptism, giving an actual ring as a part of the processing: “Security in sin is likewise an appetite for it. Therefore the apostate withal will recover his former garment, the robe of the Holy Spirit; and a renewal of the ring, the sign and seal of baptism; and Christ will again be slaughtered; and he will recline on that couch from which such as are unworthily clad are wont to be lifted by the torturers, and cast away into darkness,—much more such as have been stripped. It is therefore a further step if it is not expedient, (any more than reasonable), that the story of the prodigal son should apply to a Christian. . .He remembers his Father, God; he returns to Him when he has been satisfied; he receives again the pristine garment—the condition, to wit, which Adam by transgression had lost. The ring also he is then wont to receive for the first time, wherewith, after being interrogated, he publicly seals the agreement of faith, and thus thenceforward feeds upon the fatness of the Lord's body—the Eucharist, to wit. This will be the prodigal son, who never in days bygone was thrifty.” We can also note that the idea of a “seal (signet gift) upon a seal (baptism)” which is in view here is entirely natural; Romans would use a separate ring seal to close up their dactyliotheca and encase the signet inside.
31. “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” (Deuteronomy 6:6-8)
32. *Dialog with Trypho*, Chapter 46. Saint Justin thus refers to the phylactery in the context of another visible feature of Jewish devotion, the practice of having a fringe of purple dye (Numbers 15:3815:38) on one’s garments, and notes that these also have a function of bringing about the memory of God. Both practices are connected to keeping God “continually, and in every action, before your eyes,” emphasizing their visual significance—showing that devotion to God through these objects is routed through the reverence of the eyes. Saint Justin notes that ultimately these objects do not succeed in creating genuine, enduring righteousness and piety, but instead function to limit evil and remind the wearer of how they have fallen short of truly following God.
33. The fact that Saint Justin does not denounce these objects but calls them “sacred” makes it quite plausible that he himself used a Christian version of them or knew Christians who did.
34. *Who Is The Rich Man That Can Be Saved?*, 42.4
35. She Mitchell, “The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism,” pg. 1773. In footnote 129 she understands the “children drawn out of the water” as a reference to “baptizands,” and while this is correct, the baptism in question is that of the Apostles by Christ the Fisherman in John 22, whose word “children” draws “the Apostle” (Peter) and then the rest of them out of the water. For further discussion, see **Appendix G: The Iconography of Clement’s Seals**.
36. Button, “Envisioning the Sign”, p. 270, fn. 64
37. Ibid., p. 271
38. Price, The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea, page 42. In this context, Price only cites evidence of wonder-working images that is mentioned in the 2nd Council of Nicaea.
39. Speir, Jeffrey, “Engraved gems and amulets”, p. 145. In *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; Routledge (2018).

40. It is also possible to see a devotional use of signet images in prayer based on some of Clement's comments. The association of the signet with the phylactery points to it having a use in prayer in order to bring the mind to the memory of God (Jewish tefillin tend to be worn specifically in prayer). Clement's comment that if there is an image of a fisherman it will recall to mind the Apostle can be seen as reinforcing this usage, providing concentration on Christ the Fisherman; Clement addresses Christ as Fisherman at length in his hymn, showing this is a devotional title. The anchor image can be interpreted similarly. If its meaning is understood as "*en kurion*" (see **Appendix G**) then wearing it could be seen as a supplication: "may I be found in You, O Lord". There are several further considerations which can be brought forward to expand this point, but full consideration will have to wait for a separate volume.
41. In his homily, he explains that Saint Meletius of Antioch (who was likely born before the Council of Nicaea) was of such holiness that people received a blessing from hearing, touching, or seeing him. This frequent use of the Saint's name, and his continual presence in the hearts of the faithful, is likely connected to his role as intercessor who they invoked by name; Saint John ends his homily with an instruction to "Let us all pray together... taking blessed Meletius himself as a shareholder in this prayer (for truly he has greater boldness now and a more fervent love towards you)." (section 10) Additionally, while Meletius was presiding at the Second Ecumenical Council (I Constantinople) in defense of the Nicene faith, Saint John Chrysostom says that "bishops all over the world, by looking at his holiness as if at an archetypal image and receiving from him a clear example of service associated with this office, might have a secure and absolutely clear standard by which they ought to administer and govern the Churches." (section 7) The protection that comes from Saint Meletius image seems specifically related to how this image connects you to the prototype through prayer offered to the Saint.
42. The language here is similar to that of Luke 16:10-12: "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another, who will give you that which is your own?" However, the quote is inexact. Michael Holmes identifies the apocryphal "Gospel of the Egyptians" as the likely source for this quote based on Clement of Alexandria's similar quotation. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 80
43. In Chapter 6, the author of 2 Clement says ". . .what assurance do we have of entering the Kingdom of God if we fail to keep our baptism pure and undefiled? Or who will be our advocate if we are not found to have holy and righteous works?" In Chapter 7 he writes ". . .What will be done to the one who cheats in the heavenly competition? For concerning those who have not kept the seal, He says that 'their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched, and they will be a spectacle for all flesh.'" (Michael Holmes' translation)
44. Garments are often associated with flesh and impurity or purity, as in Jude 1:23. That the pairing of the garment (illumination) and signet (sealing) is present here also makes sense of the question at the beginning of section 9: "in what stated did you recover your sight, if it was not while you were in the flesh?" This presents baptism as a bestowal of enlightenment. Tertullian references the "pristine garment" of baptism alongside the "ring" (*On Modesty*, 9) and Clement references the wearing "simple clothing, and of a white color" in his baptismal teaching in *The Instructor* prior to his comments about which signets are acceptable to wear. This enlightenment of the spiritual eye in baptism would have clothed Christians in light for their bodies as well, which they participated in by the giving of the white baptismal garment.
45. We noted previously that Cicero upbraided the Roman citizen Lentulus for failing to be moved with reverence by the seal image of his ancestor to not take part in a crime.
46. Longenecker, *The Crosses of Pompeii*, pg 167-191
47. Ibid., pg 184
48. Ibid., pg 185

5

Origen on Veneration of Altars

It is widely believed that the early Christian thinker Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254 AD) held a negative view of images, denied that Christians used them, and denounced cultic use of images. He is regarded as having spiritualized and denied the physicality of various elements of worship (altars, temples, and images), preferring to see these as aspects within the soul of believers. Although he is not being regarded as a Saint or Church Father, he does attest to various facts about the early Church, and thus his statements about images are relevant to trying to understand what early Christian worship was like.

Since Origen is widely regarded as strictly aniconic, it is very significant that he affirms the veneration of at least some images in two passages. I will begin by considering Origen's attitude towards images more broadly, and then the imperial image specifically. Then, in a little-known passage in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua* we will consider his belief that Christians should venerate images of a certain kind within the Church: the Eucharistic altar.

Origen on Images and Honoring the Imperial Image

It is widely known that in his apologetic work “Against Celsus” and elsewhere, Origen gives an invective against images. One such passage is the following:

> Those who, being taught in the school of Jesus Christ, have rejected all images (ἱδρύματα) and statues, and even all Jewish superstition, that they may look upward through the Word of God to the one God, who is the Father of the Word. (*Against Celsus* VII, 41)

The word which gets translated as image is ἱδρύματα. This is better translated “shrine” or even “temple”, however, which makes clear that images in general are not in view here. Rather, it is a specific kind of pagan structure for cultic use in the idolatrous worship of false gods. No basis can be seen here for thinking Origen opposes all images, or the veneration of images.

Origen does have a passage in *Against Celsus* where he appears to affirm that Christians have temples, altars, and images. However, he clarifies that such images are actually ways of talking about inward realities of the soul which are purely spiritual, not physical representations:

> . . .We regard the spirit of every good man as an altar from which arises an incense which is truly and spiritually sweet-smelling, namely, the prayers ascending from a pure conscience. . . And the statues and gifts which are fit offerings to God are the work of no common mechanics, but are wrought and fashioned in us by the Word of God, to wit, the virtues in which we imitate the first-born of all creation, who has set us an example of justice, of temperance, of courage, of wisdom, of piety, and of the other virtues. (*Against Celsus* VIII, 17)

This passage confines the praise of images to what Fr. Stephan Bigham calls the “ethical image”—resemblance between God and humans due to virtue. Some have used this passage and other similar ones to argue that Origen did not acknowledge any kind of physical material to be involved in Christian worship at all. However, as we shall see Origen’s spiritualization of the altar in this passage does not imply belief that physical altars are not part of Christian worship. By the same logic, we cannot take Origen’s spiritualization of images as a denial that some kind of image is involved in Christian worship as well.

In another passage in “Against Celsus”, Origen applies the second commandment to the Christian and Jewish rejection of image-worship:

> Christians and Jews have regard to this command, You shall fear the Lord your God, and serve Him alone; and this other, You shall have no other gods before Me: you shall not make unto you any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: you shall not bow down yourself to them, nor serve them; and again, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve. It is in consideration of these and many other such commands, that they not only avoid temples, altars, and images (ἀγάλματα), but are ready to suffer death when it is necessary, rather than debase by any such impiety the conception which they have of the Most High God. (*Against Celsus* VII, 64)

It is clear from the context of this quote that it is referring to idols. The burden of proof is on the opponent of Christian image veneration to show that there are relevant similarities between idols and icons that would make it reasonable to extend Origen’s condemnation to something else. Additionally, significant problems arise if we read Origen’s statements about images as extending to non-idolatrous images and having applicability to Christian material culture at his time. What Origen says is

not that Christians avoid venerating images, but they avoid them entirely. But we have surviving images from Christianity around Origen's time. We know that there were images in Christianity before Origen's time, and even his teacher Clement has a doctrine which acknowledges the legitimate place (and arguably even veneration) of signet images. If read in this manner, Origen would be contradicting the material and written record on a matter which he would not likely be ignorant of. It is therefore much easier to read "images" in a restrictive sense as not applying to all images, but only to ones used in pagan worship.

Even more problematic for claiming Origen was aniconic based on the above passage is the word for "images" (ἀγάλματα). While Origen's language is typically translated to say Christians "avoid temples, altars, and images", a better translation would be "temples, altars, and statues." This reference to statuary connects to other mentions of this kind of imagery that Origen makes in *Against Celsus*, where objects of this kind are very clearly understood as idols, the recipients of sacrifice. This is evident in another one of the passages in which Origen presents the "ethical image" within the Christian soul:

> Christians strive to raise altars and statues as we have described them and these not of a lifeless and senseless kind and not to receive greedy spirits intent upon lifeless things, but to be filled with the Spirit of God who dwells in the images of virtue of which we have spoken, and takes His abode in the soul which is conformed to the image of the Creator. (Against Celsus VIII, 18)

The statues mentioned here are described as "of a lifeless and senseless kind", but as having the potential to be inhabited by demons. This is evident when we consider Origen's total statement: "Christians strive to raise. . . statues. . . and these not. . . to receive greedy spirits intent upon lifeless things." The "lifeless things" that these spirits desire seem to be sacrifices, which become the food of the indwelling spirit within the idol. Such "greedy spirits" that dwell in the physical statues made by pagans are set in

contrast to the “images of virtue” (as in the virtues within the soul) which are “filled with the Spirit of God.” It is evident that the pairing of “altars and statues” in Origen is meant to reference pagan worship with its sacrifices to cult statues specifically. All of these considerations show quite decisively that *Against Celsus* VII.64 with its mention of how Christians “avoid temples, altars, and statues (ἀγάλματα)” should not be held up as evidence of a general aniconic attitude in Origen.

The fact that Origen’s invective against images should not be read as a categorical rejection of all images or even image veneration practices becomes even clearer when considering his teaching that images of the emperor are to be shown respect. In his comments on Psalm 73 verse 10 which says, “Remember this, that the enemy hath reproached, O Lord, and that the foolish people have blasphemed thy name,” Origen offers an explanation of the reproach against God that connects it to reproach against human beings who are made in the image of God. To illustrate this point, the Alexandrian exegete first discusses Matthew 25, in which the actions of love done to the “little ones” applies to Christ and concludes that “someone reproaching the just person reproaches the Lord.” After considering this teaching given from “the Savior”, Origen moves on to what he refers to as “the holy letters.” The content which Origen regards as present in “the holy letters” is a teaching about the honorable status of the imperial image and the proper way to comport oneself respectfully around it:

> And so that you may be more persuaded that if you revile your neighbor, you have reviled Christ, I will also present this from the holy letters: **if anyone abuses the wooden or waxen image of an emperor, he is condemned as if he had abused the emperor, since he commits an abuse against the image.** And you, if you abuse or revile someone who has already restored the “in the image” of the Creator, it is his image that you have abused and reviled. Therefore, one must beware of speaking ill and reviling one’s neighbor or acting in any way wickedly. For Christ receives all that

> happens to himself, either good or bad, that you do to the neighbor. This will suffice for “An enemy has reproached the Lord." (Homily 3 on Psalm 73, Section 6)

It is plausible that Origen has in view one of the passages from Paul’s letters (Romans 13:1-7, especially v7) or Peter’s (1 Peter 2:17) which speak of honoring civil authorities, and that he interprets these passages as implying a measured respect for the imperial image that excludes sacrifice. Further consideration of this question will have to wait for a later volume. Regardless of whether this is meant to be an interpretation of a New Testament passage, Origen’s statement presupposes that Christians must interact with the imperial image with an honorific attitude and the need for bodily restraint; this amounts to image veneration connected to the emperor’s image. Any attempt to read Origen’s allegedly aniconic statements in “Against Celsus” as rejecting all image veneration will have to deal with this evidence. Instead, it is far more plausible to acknowledge that Origen’s invective against images was directed only at pagan idols.

Early Christian Altars as Holy Images

We turn now to the consideration of Origen’s teaching about Christian altars. The idea that a Christian altar is an image may be surprising to some people, but upon reflection it becomes quite obvious. The Epistle of Hebrews notes that the tabernacle of the Old Testament was a shadowy copy of the heavenly tabernacle. The Old Covenant tabernacle and furniture are described as follows:

> Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary

> for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. **They serve a copy (ὑποδείγματι) and shadow (σκιᾷ) of the heavenly things.** For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you **make everything according to the pattern (τύπον) that was shown you on the mountain**." But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. (Heb 8:1-6)

> For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are **copies (ἀντίτυπα)** of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Heb 9:24)

Language of “copy”, “shadow”, “pattern” (type) and “copies” (antitypes) show a consistent and repeated understanding that liturgical furniture on earth within the Temple has a similarity and correspondence to the heavenly temple where God resides. This would, of course, include “the golden altar of incense” which Saint Paul references in the same passage. The altar on earth was therefore seen as a shadowy copy of the heavenly altar of God.

The New Testament Scriptures not only speak of the “altar” or “Table of the Lord” (1 Cor 10:21, Heb. 13:10) on which the offering of communion takes place, which seems to have a relation to the heavenly altar (Isaiah 6:6, Rev 8:3). Christ presents Himself to the Father on this holy, heavenly, and ideal altar (Heb. 9:23-26), and if Communion is indeed Christ Himself, there is a firm relationship between the two altars. The altar in the Christian Church should plausibly be taken as imaging and representing the heavenly altar. But even more than this, it participates in the reality of what it images so that His kingdom comes down and this sacrificial worship of God according to His will is “on earth as it is in heaven.”

The scholar Jennifer Awes Freeman notes this iconic relationship in the nature and meaning of early Christian altars:

> The altar is both the signifier and the signified—an essential element in the celebration of the Eucharist and the physical setting for many liturgical actions and objects, which directs the faithful to the heavenly altar while also being invoked in iconography in contexts outside the Eucharistic liturgy. The Christian altar connoted both sacrifice and ritual meal, uniquely combining elements of Jewish and pagan precedents, particularly temple sacrifice and celebratory meals at burial sites. The early practice of celebrating the Eucharist at the tombs of Christian martyrs would have occurred on the stone tabletops already present for funerary banquets, but the earliest Christian altars outside of a funerary context were four-legged wooden tables. With the legalization of Christianity in 313 CE and subsequent imperial-funded building campaigns, altars became increasingly ornate and physically substantial. [1]

Freeman's characterization of altars as "signifier", as something which "directs the faithful to the heavenly altar", and as "invoked in iconography in contexts outside the Eucharistic liturgy" all reflect a fundamental understanding that the Christian altar is a physical image of something else. It provides a visible, crafted, material representation ("signifier") of the holy, heavenly, ideal altar that Christ presents Himself to the Father on. [2] At the same time, the Christian altar is also "signified", as Freeman points out —an actual place on which the Eucharistic sacrifice occurs. The relationship between the two is intrinsic and participatory and not just a relation of resemblance.

Among the early extant references to the Christian altar outside the New Testament is an inscription in the Meggido Church in Israel (Fig. 5.1). Dr. Jonathan Henry [3] provides the following translation:

> “The god-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial.”

Much like the phrase “We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (Hebrews 13:10), this inscription shows an understanding that Christians designated certain objects as sacred—reserved for God both in terms of who could approach them or what they would be used for. James Hadley notes the following regarding the object and its inscription:

> In terms of the Christian architectural record, it cannot be avoided that the earliest clearly cultic space discovered to date, the Megiddo church, is a large 54-square-meter formalized space dating well before Constantine to ca. 230 CE. Like other cultic spaces of the time it contains an elaborate mosaic floor, including the early and iconic symbol of the fish. Most tellingly of Christian attitudes of the time, are the three inscriptions on the floor. All three are typical of Roman ex voto offerings found in temples, imperial basilicas and funerary spaces asking that the reader remember the donor in prayer. The most significant of the inscriptions is for a table (τράπεζα) at which the Christians celebrated the Eucharist. Whether it was a wooden/portable or stone/fixed altar is not clear. In any case, the table altar receives a dedicatory inscription itself in the same manner as the majority of altars did within the Roman Empire in the Late Antique period. It is doubtful that Christians employing typical pre-existing religious devices according to established patterns of sacred space were at the same moment rejecting sacral-spatial designations involving the divine. In fact, the dedicatory inscription in traditional Roman religion recalled the elevation of a space to a sacred, inviolable status. [4]

Hadley's quote accentuates the participatory aspect of early Christian altars, and the language of "elevation" points to the joining of the altar on earth to the heavenly altar of God. This would imply that how one treats the earthly altar would bear directly on one's relation to what it represents. His comments reinforce that early Christian altars are best understood as holy images in a straightforward way. The fact that they did not have a portrait likeness with faces is not significant, because there are many kinds of images which lack personal facial features. What matters is that the altar was a materially composed visual representation of some other reality, and one's interaction with this image transferred to one's interaction with the heavenly altar it signified and participated in.



Fig. 5.1 Megiddo mosaic: The whole mosaic includes a depiction of two fish (not featured) and a dedicatory inscription for the altar (which appears in the upper right corner). Image credit: Zev Radovan, Bible Land Pictures

Among Christians born immediately after the time of the Council of Nicaea 1 (325 AD), Saint Jerome clearly articulated an understanding that the altar of the Old Covenant was venerated. Writing in the 386 AD, he stated the following in a letter to Christian woman named Marcella:

> The Jews of old reverenced the Holy of Holies, because of the things contained in it—the cherubim, the mercy seat, the Ark of the Covenant, the manna, Aaron's rod, and the golden altar. Does the Lord's sepulcher seem less worthy of veneration?

Saint Jerome’s comparison between the New Covenant tomb of Christ and the Old Covenant temple furniture such as the golden altar of incense clearly establishes an early Christian understanding that this kind of holy object could be given non-idolatrous reverence. His enthymeme involves an a fortiori consideration: if the Old Holy of Holies was venerated because of its contents (holy furniture, holy objects, holy images), how much more so is the New Holy of Holies to be venerated? The underlying presupposition, of course, is that if its holy contents made it worthy of veneration, those contents themselves would rightly have been shown gestures of honor (including the altar). This attestation from not long after 325 AD, and accompanying representations of Christians using altars for the mysteries (sacraments) of the Church (Fig. 5.2), suggests that pre-Nicene Christians could plausibly have held similar views about the appropriateness of giving ceremonial gestures of reverence to the altar of God.



Fig. 5.2 This Roman gold glass appears to depict an altar between the Christian couple. The connection to the mystery of marriage and the wedding crown above point to the holiness of the altar. "Bowl Base with a Marriage Scene," 300s or 400s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24

Origen on the Veneration of Altars

Origen himself acknowledged the existence of Christian altars. In his Homilies on Joshua, Origen notes the difference between the Old Testament animal sacrifices, and the Christian altars made holy by the blood of Jesus:

> But when you see the nations enter the faith, churches built, altars not covered with the blood of animals but consecrated by the "precious blood of Christ," when you see the priests and the Levites no longer administering the "blood of bulls and goats," the word of God by the grace of the Holy Spirit, then say that Jesus has taken the place of Moses and that he possesses the princely powers, not of Jesus son of Nun but Jesus Son of God. [5]

This text already establishes the idea that altars are set apart or ritually dedicated to God; this harmonizes with the material evidence at Megiddo and the early Christian understanding of altars more broadly. His understanding of the fulfillment of the Old Covenant here also paves the way for understanding the Christian altar as a holy symbolic image in Origen's thought. To do this, we must continue to delve into his exegesis of Joshua.

In his Homily 17 on Joshua, Origen first notes the shadow-reality relationship articulated in Hebrews, saying of the old Israel, "those who submit to the Law, which is the 'shadow' of that true law, diligently serve a 'shadow and copy' of 'heavenly things.'" The fact that the temple and its furniture was a shadow and not a complete image that allowed for deep participation is shown, for Origen, by the total overthrow of the earthly Jerusalem. [6] But this does not mean that we do not have a more complete and substantial image now in the "table of the Lord"—the altar of Christian worship. Rather, Origen connects the sanctifying activity of the Eucharist on Christians' earthly altars to the High Priesthood of Christ in heaven:

> . . .search for a heavenly city instead of an earthly one. Look above! And there you will discover "the heavenly Jerusalem that is the mother of all." (Galatians 4:26) If you see the altar forsaken, do not be sad; if you do not find the high priest, do not despair. There is an altar in heaven and there stands a high priest "of good things to come, according to the order of Melchizedek," one chosen by God.

Here, Jesus Christ is described as a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” in a way that shows the fulfillment of the “shadow and copy” from the Old Covenant. The fact that Melchizedek’s offering is of bread and wine is the key to understanding this. Whereas the “altar forsaken” in Jerusalem only pointed to the reality of Christ’s heavenly sacrifice extrinsically as shadow, Christians now have “altars not covered with the blood of animals but consecrated by the ‘precious blood of Christ,’” namely the Eucharistic sacrifice of bread and wine. Old Testament types and shadows have been fulfilled by New Testament holy symbols or images; in the language of Hebrews which is surely on Origen’s mind as he wrote:

> . . .the law having a shadow (Σκιὰν, skia) of good things to come, [and] not the very image (εἰκόνα, eikona or icon) of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. (Heb 10:1 KJV)

Because Christ is the heavenly High Priest who stands at the heavenly altar, and Christian ministers at the altar offer “the precious blood of Christ,” Origen expresses an iconic resonance between the two.

But in another place we see Origen go even further and express that the symbolic image of the altar is to be given an honorific gesture. In Homily 10, Origen gives an extended reflection on the strange characters from the Old Testament called Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were Gentiles who tricked the ancient Israelites into a treaty for their own self-preservation. Instead of being utterly destroyed, they were punished by Joshua the son of Nun who made them become their servants in the maintenance and beautification of Israel’s worship spaces:

> And Joshua made them that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the LORD, even unto this day, in the place which he should choose. (Jos 9:27)

This did not, however, mean that the Gibeonites had inward piety and a proper regard for God's holy works in salvation history.

Towards the end of the Homily, Origen makes an application of the story of the Gibeonites to life in the early Church. Just as there were Gibeonites whose minds and spirits were absorbed in a coarse lifestyle characterized by self-preservation and deception, but served the altar and congregation with physical expressions of honor and piety, so also such people exist in the Church. They can show honor to God externally, but they do not honor Him inwardly with their spirit:

> Nevertheless, the great extent to which we are instructed by semblances of figures of this kind must be known. Because if there are any such persons among us whose faith is characterized only by this, that they come to church and bow their head to the priests, exhibit courtesy, honor the servants of God, **even bring something for the decoration of the altar** or church—yet they exhibit no inclination to also improve their habits, correct impulses. . .those who are like this. . .let them know they will be assigned a part and lot with the Gibeonites by the Lord Jesus. (Origen, Homilies on Joshua, X) [7]

Origen is referring to a pious practice of decorating altars and Churches, and compares coarse Christians (who show only outward piety) to the Gibeonites. This is one in a series of pious actions that show honor to God and the Church. Clearly, these are outward acts of veneration, meant to mirror the Gibeonites' own external piety: bowing to priests, showing courtesy or respect, honoring the servants of God, and adorning or decorating things which are holy. This act of adornment may even be presented as loftier than the honor shown to clergy or the servants of God (likely referring to other Christians). It is listed last among these deeds of veneration and does, after all, go further as a self-giving act of outward piety than the other actions of veneration. The other actions don't involve giving up anything per se, but beautifying the Church or altar with flowers,

lamps, candles, or other items is somewhat more intense. It involves letting go of something valuable and beautiful that belonged to you.

It is important to note that this is a literal physical altar and a literal church that Origen is talking about. While we have noted that elsewhere Origen teaches that the spirit of a righteous man can be called an altar, it leads to absurd consequences to say that what he is referring to here is the inner spiritual altar of the heart. After all, an inner spiritual altar is precisely what Origen is saying these "Gibeonite-ish" Christians lack. These Christians lack a rich interior life of worship, and can only handle base external piety instead of the union of inner and outer life that Christ offers:

> "First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside may also be clean." (Matt 23:26)

In condemning these coarse Christians as having a "lot with the Gibeonites" Origen is not saying it is bad or impious to decorate and venerate altars. In fact, this would only produce a contrast with having "no inclination to also improve their habits" if it were an inherently meaningful and positive action which showed respect. The problem, then, is just that this physical action must be accompanied by inward transformation and devotion in order for it to ultimately matter. As Hans Boersma notes about this passage in Origen, "Gibeonites are people who go through all the right motions in church while making no effort to restrain their vices and to cultivate virtuous habits." [8]

Conclusion

Thus, for Origen, Christians can perform an honorific action towards a holy symbolic image—namely the altar. We have seen that he understands the honor or dishonor given to an image passes to its prototype, as is the case with the image of the emperor. While at first it is not natural for us to think of altars as images, the consistent teaching of the book of Hebrews

identifies all temple furniture as a shadowy image of the true heavenly temple. Origen also speaks of the Christian altar as a fulfillment that supersedes the shadow-copy altar of the Old Testament temple worship, following the early Christian view that it is a representation of God's heavenly altar. This altar is not only made holy by the offering of Christ's body and blood on it, but is even venerated when Christians bring something to adorn it (one in a series of honorific actions done in Church: bowing, respecting, honoring, and adorning). Since the Christian altar is a consecrated visual representation of the heavenly altar at which Christ ministers, we can express Origen's teaching in terms of a type-prototype principle:

Decorating (honoring) the earthly altar (image) reverences the heavenly altar (prototype) of God.

1. Jennifer Awes Freeman, “Altar-ed Arks: Form as (Theological) Function in Late Antique and Early Medieval Reliquaries,” in *Death and Rebirth in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of Robin M. Jensen*, ed. Lee M. Jefferson; Fortress Academic, 2022
2. Dr. Freeman (email correspondence 7/6/24) has clarified that by “invoked in iconography in contexts outside the Eucharistic liturgy” she means both (1) that early Christian altars are in some sense to be understood as part of the total iconography of an early Christian cultic space and (2) that images of altars appear in early Christian art/iconography for various biblical narratives which aren't simply of the Eucharist (i.e. Noah's ark as altar-morphic, the altar on which Isaac was offered looking like a Eucharistic altar, etc.).
3. Henry, Jonathan, “Excavation at the Roman camp near Megiddo in Israel. Lecture by Dr. Jonathan Henry” from the Youtube channel of Ilya Gotlinsky (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ty173eqjhw&list=PLMJAEBspgXe37oCy6z4pEOowo4jnfM7vW&index=416), pub. 3/8/21; accessed 6/13/24
4. Hadley, James T., “Early Christian Perceptions of Sacred Spaces” Material Culture Review 80–81 (Fall 2014/Spring 2015), p. 92
5. Origen, Homilies sur Josué H (Sources Chrétiennes 71) A. Jaubert, tr., Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1960, p. 117. Quoted in Bigham, endnote 285
6. Hans Boersma comments, “Origen regards the earthly Jerusalem, the temple and the altar there, the visible worship with its priests and high priests, as well as the various regions and towns of Judea, as imitations of ‘heavenly things.’” In “Joshua as Sacrament: Spiritual Interpretation in Origen”, CRUX: Fall 2012/Vol. 48, No. 3, p. 25
7. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J Bruce, ed. Cynthia White. The Catholic University of American press, 2002. Pg. 112. The Latin preserved in Furmentius reads “ad ornatum quoque altaris vel ecclesiæ aliquid conferant.”
8. Ibid., pgs. 26–27

6

Tertullian and Ritual Cup Paintings

The early Christian apologist Tertullian attests to the existence of paintings of the Good Shepherd on the cups of some North African Christians. This chapter will argue that these paintings provide evidence of Christian image veneration, and that Tertullian probably approves of this practice. [1] Understanding Tertullian's comments will require an examination of ceremonial or ritual cups in the Roman world, as well as archeological considerations related to Christian use of gold glass cups.

Painted Cups, Tertullian's "On Modesty," and the Shepherd of Hermas

Tertullian makes two clear references to images of the Good Shepherd on cups belonging to Christians in his treatise "On Modesty." The first is in the context of biblical interpretation of the parables of Christ:

> You shall have leave to begin with the parables, where you have the lost ewe re-sought by the Lord, and carried back on His shoulders. Let the very paintings upon your cups come forward to show whether even in them the figurative meaning of that sheep will shine through (the outward

> semblance, to teach) whether a Christian or heathen sinner be the object it aims at in the matter of restoration. (On Modesty, 7)

The second reference to the paintings is focused around Tertullian's invective against his opponents' use of the text of "The Shepherd of Hermas":

> But I would yield my ground to you, if the scripture of the Shepherd, which is the only one which favors adulterers, had deserved to find a place in the Divine canon; if it had not been habitually judged by every council of Churches (even of your own) among apocryphal and false (writings); itself adulterous, and hence a patroness of its comrades; from which in other respects, too, you derive initiation; to which, perchance, that Shepherd, will play the patron whom you depict upon your (sacramental) chalice, (depict, I say, as) himself withal a prostitute of the Christian sacrament (and hence) worthily both the idol of drunkenness, and the brize of adultery by which the chalice will quickly be followed (a chalice) from which you sip nothing more readily than (the flavor of) the ewe of (your) second repentance! I, however, imbibe the Scriptures of that Shepherd who cannot be broken. (On Modesty, 10)

These passages are fairly complex, and therefore careful consideration of them is required. It has been suggested by Walter Lowrie that this is a reference to early Christian productions in the style of Roman gold glass. Several Christian examples of gold glass drinking cups survive, and this is a live possibility (see the section in this chapter, "Christian Gold Glass Cups and Veneration by Acknowledgement"). Lowrie's understanding of Tertullian, however, is that such cups were not Eucharistic and that the images on them were thoroughly condemned by Tertullian himself:

> Tertullian in North Africa mentioned, only to condemn it fiercely, the Christian custom of drinking from glasses adorned in gold leaf with the figure of the Good Shepherd. It should be understood that these were not Eucharistic chalices but vessels used at convivial banquets of a semi-religious sort which were associated with funerals. By this furious denunciation of a harmless religious picture, Tertullian may evidently be classed as a thoroughgoing opponent of religious art. He thundered against idolatry of all sorts. [2]

However, the interpretation of the cups as non-Eucharistic seems to be contradicted by several of Tertullian's phrases. The fact that what is in view is a Eucharistic cup and not something else seems clear from the reference to "the Christian sacrament" ("ipsum Christiani sacramenti") in section 10 in the context of drinking ("sip…flavor"). This provides strong evidence given the definite article "the" (ipsum) and numerous references to communion and excommunication throughout *On Modesty* that the cups are specifically Eucharistic, and not merely part of some semi-religious funerary banquet or the table fellowship of the Agape Meal. This also fits best with the emphasis on the way the cups connect to "the matter of restoration" in section 7. The "restoration" spoken of is specifically restoration of sinners to communion in the Body and Blood of Christ. All of this seems to make it clear that the cup is Eucharistic.

One of Tertullian's aims in this treatise is to criticize those Church leaders who claim Christians who have committed adultery can make a second repentance. These clergy believed that even those who committed idolatry or adultery could receive absolution of sins and be restored to normal participation in the Sacrament within the Church. This explains Tertullian's interaction with the question of "whether a Christian or heathen sinner" is symbolized by the sheep in the parable of the Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:1-7), since the answer to this question would have implications for whether a second repentance from grievous sins (and restoration to communion) is possible after baptism.

The fact that the matter of second repentance is in view in “On Modesty” also explains Tertullian’s intense invective throughout against the early Christian writing, “The Shepherd of Hermas.” This apocalyptic text portrays Hermas (a Roman Christian) receiving revelations from an angel (“the angel of repentance”) appearing in the form of a shepherd. Some early Christians were making of use of “The Shepherd of Hermas” and treating it as though it were part of the Christian Scriptures. The text clearly teaches that a second repentance and absolution are possible. Tertullian was an early rigorist Christian who did not believe that grievous sins (idolatry, apostasy, adultery) could be absolved except by martyrdom. Tertullian therefore regarded the text of the Shepherd of Hermas as permissive to the point of essentially allowing adultery and idolatry, in addition to believing it was not part of the New Testament canon of books. This is why Tertullian says, “I would yield my ground to you, if the scripture of the Shepherd, which is the only one which favors adulterers, had deserved to find a place in the Divine canon.”

The Ceremonial Cup in Ancient Mediterranean Context

Within his language of mockery and ridicule for the text of the Shepherd of Hermas is evidence that the cup (Lat. “calice”) being referenced is a cup whose image dedicates it to whichever authoritative or divine being is depicted. This category of object—the ceremonial or ritual cup—will be somewhat unfamiliar to modern readers, so a bit of introduction is needed before we delve into the precise significance of Tertullian’s wording.

James Hadley ties Tertullian’s mention of the Good Shepherd image upon the Eucharistic cup to a shared Roman (and more broadly, ancient) understanding of the significance of images of the divine on objects reserved for sacred use, such as cups:

> Significant in the material culture of the time is the cup of the Christian Eucharist. Already at the outset of the 2nd century Tertullian's De Pudicitia [“On Modesty”] mentions Eucharistic cups bearing the image of the Pastor bonus as did terra-cotta lamps of the time (1945b, vol. 2: 1301). De Pudicitia is an initial indication of a formalized ritual life that on the level of materiality is little distinguishable from the use of cultic cups and ritual dining found throughout the Mediterranean. While a particular group might interpret its actions or beliefs in divergent ways one can say that at the level of materiality and ritual such religious life is not dramatically divergent from the larger cultural context (Scheid 2007: 270; Klinghardt 2012:11-12). Ritual cups in late antique ritual dining were distinguishable from daily items by design and decoration. The cups were often identified by images of the deity in whose worship they were utilized (Vikan 1995:13). Identifiable cult objects, like the cup with the image of the Pastor bonus referred to by Tertullian, illustrate that Christians also exhibited a type of religious experience that separated out and reserved particular objects as more appropriate for ritual acts. Christian communities of the time thought to distinguish between daily and religiously meaningful objects thereby exhibiting belief in the material mediation of religious experience. . . [3]

Hadley’s claim is significant, and a consideration of some examples will help us to see what he is saying. His essay incorporates an image of a lamp depicting the good shepherd from the mid-to-late 200s, as well as an image of the Lycurgus Cup. This was a Roman drinking cup from the 300s that depicts Dionysius (Bacchus) and Pan protecting a follower of Dionysius and destroying her attacker (Pentheus), along with images of beings (satyr, panther) which were associated with the worship and symbolism of Dionysius. The glass of this cup is unique among ancient artifacts, since it is known for its color-changing properties depending on how light shines

into it. The compositional qualities of the object relate to its meaning and status: the fact that the cup changes colors from green to red connects to the frenzied mutability introduced by Dionysius as wine god and characteristic of his cult, and also indicates how the cup was a significant object during ritual.

As Euripedes' play" *The Bachae* illustrates, initiation into the cult of Dionysius was deeply participatory. It involved a union with Bacchus in connection with indulgence in wine, sexual excess, and potentially violence. The celebratory aspect of Dionysius-worship is paradigmatic of the general idea of sacrificial worship in paganism: union of life between the worshipper and the worshiped deity by sharing a meal. Given that the Lycurgus cup was used in Bacchic celebration of the god, the image on the cup is directly connected to the worship of the one who is imaged. The fact that the iconography of these kinds of cups was meant to be interacted with and focused on in ritual is acknowledged by Dorothy Burr Thompson. She notes how depictions of satyrs (Fig. 6.1) and silenuses on Greco-Egyptian drinking vessels seem to be designed for ritual engagement:

> The masks that are set at the base and at the top of the handle fall into two distinct types, that of the Satyr and that of the Papposilenos. The Satyr projects from the top of the handle; the Silen is set at its base. They are both Dionysiac types, but not theatrical. They must allude to the wine contained in the jug, which is protected by their potency. These two masks make an effective pair: the Satyr's eager face invites drinking; the Silen's benevolence intimates the joy of repletion. [4]

The ascription of aptropaic significance ("protected by their potency") and interactivity ("the Satyr's eager face invites drinking") show how these design elements were not just decorations, but iconography that connected the viewer to the power of the prototype depicted. These images on the Ptolemaic cups were meant to be engaged with ritually; and this

corroborates that the depiction of a satyr on the Lycurgus cup had the same purpose.

Another Roman wine cup depicting Dionysius and his mortal lover Ariadne would likely have been given similar use (Fig. 6.2). As we shall see in Chapter 10, depictions of these two characters were often connected to union with Dionysius in worship. The very act of ritually using these cup would involve an act of acknowledgment directed to the image of Dionysius, which would direct the activities of the worshippers to the god who was imaged. The fact that engraved or painted images on objects could have a ritual and participatory significance is also attested in Clement of Alexandria's comments on Roman art (See "Establishing How Art Was Used: Formal Qualities, Context, and Comparanda," in Chapter 8).



Figure 6.1 Head of a satyr for attachment to a jug. Egypt, 246–221 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 12/2/24



Fig. 6.2 Roman wine cup depicting Dionysius and Ariadne. Image credit: Gibon Art

Other examples of such ceremonial cups abound. In the first century in Northern France, a set of silver drinking vessels consecrated in worship to Mercury was discovered at the site of a sanctuary dedicated to that god. Archeologists have noted the extensive process required to produce some of the multilayered drinking cups, and their precious composition from gold, silver, and mercury. Several of the cups portray ritual scenes with Dionysian resonances (centaurs and cupids pouring wine) while some of the larger

bowls include full portrayals of Mercury himself etched into the bowls. These vessels were connected to ritual dining in a space set apart for worship of Mercury which also included an idol statue of the god. Art historian Nancy Real notes:

> Besides funding civic architecture, a leading citizen's status was elevated by making dedications in a sanctuary to a god or goddess. [These were] silver treasures gifted by donors to a religious sanctuary near the modern town of Berthouville in Normandy. The sanctuary was dedicated to Mercury Canetonensis, a local version of the Roman god Mercury. [5]

The connection to status is particularly interesting in the case of these objects, since Mercury was considered the god of wealth. A kind of reciprocity may be understood as underlying these cups, with this deity of commercial exchange bestowing greater riches on someone who was able to honor him with libations from a silver vessel (an honorable material) depicting him (the patron from which such blessings were dispensed).

A surviving intact black cup dedicated to the gods Castor and Pollux (called the "Dioscuri," twin sons of Zeus) displays an array of golden imagery connected to their role as protectors of seafarers and voyagers. The sons of Zeus themselves are portrayed according to common patterns of representation as twin stars above the sea, instead of with portrait-like images of their faces. The inscription corresponds to the image, indicating that the cup was consecrated to these two gods ΚΑΣΤΟΡΠΟΛΥΔΕΥΙΚΕΣ ("KASTORPOLYDEUIKES"). Regarding the designs, art history scholars Commander and Allen note:

> . . .the wreath, garlands, and bucrania (skulls of sacrificial bulls) decorating the cup's body all evoke religious ritual. Although a common decorative motif in ancient Greek art, the band of running waves must also have reminded viewers of the gods' special role as saviors of seafarers. [6]

In addition to its golden representations of the twin deities and worship-oriented designs, there is a peculiar hidden feature of the cup relating to ritual use. The vessel contains two beads concealed inside the rim which circulate and make a rattling noise when the cup is shaken. While it is tempting to write this off as a design flaw or mere novelty trick, there was a Greek practice of rattling black noisemaking ritual cups to worship Zeus:

> The rattle may also have had something to do with the inscription to the Dioskouroi. The fourth century B.C. poet Eubulus mentions a glossy, black "pebble-rattling" cup (*ψηφοπεριβομβήτριαν* or "psephoperibombetrian" in Greek) used as part of a libation ceremony that took place at the end of a meal before a symposium began, in which wine was offered to Zeus Soter (Zeus the Savior). Ritual events in antiquity were often accompanied by the sound of rattles, cymbals, and tambourines, which were thought to have magical and protective properties. At the same time, the novelty of a rattling cup may have been intended to entertain the god. [7]

We can extend the hypothesis of Commander and Allen by noting the strange symmetry between having two stars as representations of the gods, and twin noisemaking pebbles associated with the worship of Zeus. These twin noisemakers may have indeed been ways of representing these deities giving honor towards their parent.

Greek symposium cups or bowls (cylixes) are also relevant for understanding ritual dining. Symposium dining rituals themselves could range in wildness from mild-mannered philosophical conversations and contests of self-control to outbreaks of unbounded and immoral passion. The iconography of the drinking cups can be curious and bordering on the bizarre. Many of the cylixes have shapes like enormous eyes painted on the upper edge of the bowl's front. As the bowl was passed around and the consumption of wine progressed, the bowl would be tilted further and further back. This would create an impression that the huge eyes in the front

of the bowl were in fact the eyes of the person drinking. The bizarre appearance of the person who was drinking at any given moment would be mirrored by an increased lack of inhibition and disconnection from normal life. The interior of the bowls would have a progression of images downward, from familiar to strange. At the bottom of many such bowls would be a painted image of Dionysius himself, indicating that he was the deity which ritual participants had mystically received by drinking all of his wine. [8]

The fact that cups of this kind are not an exclusively Greco-Roman phenomenon is also noteworthy. Gary Vikan points to Egyptian cups with the face of Isis which would be used as votive offerings. [9] Vikan's interpretation confirms the cross-cultural understanding that the image of a deity's face establishes the function of the object: it dedicates the object to the worship of that being, and makes it so that acknowledgement of the image directs worship to the one who is imaged.

All of these surviving ritual cups are set apart (consecrated) for ceremonial purposes by the fact that they have images on them. To perform a deity-honoring ritual with them would therefore require engaging with the presence of the image of that deity on the cup. Even their composition connects to the deity and engages with the senses. The Lycurgus cup is color-changing in a way that draws attention to the figure of Dionysius who is symbolized by this intense flux. The precious metal composition of the dishes and cups dedicated to Mercury as god of commerce emphasizes that their transactional nature as votives to him particularly would be perceived and experienced by celebrants. The symposium cups that contain the image of Dionysius at the bottom or the great eyes on their rim give a sense of drinking the god or becoming a transformed being. And the cup for the twin Dioscori's doubled noisemaking quality shows very clearly that this object was focused on during worship. In each case, various qualities of the cup ensure that the vessel and the image upon it will be attended to in ritual.

Ceremonial cups also included celebratory cups depicting emperors and their triumphs. In his essay "Roman Imperial Iconography and the Social Construction of Early Christian Identity" Harry Maier describes such cups:

> Most of the monuments and trophies erected across the Empire have long since disappeared. But, as Paul Zanker has shown, the imagery of Rome's theology of victory was appropriated everywhere across the Empire, from furniture to jewelry, from rings to clay lamps to roof tiles and marble ash urns. The users of the two silver cups from the villa of Boscoreale near Pompeii imported Rome's victory theology into domestic life when they translated from contemporary monuments scenes of vanquished Germans in supplication before an enthroned Tiberius. (pg. 66)

We have already considered in Chapter 4 that the practice of honoring the imperial image was common regardless of the context or medium in which that image appeared. The portrayal of physical veneration in the Germans' stance of supplication, together with the presence of the emperor's image, make it reasonable to think this image established the set use of this cup. Additionally, portrayals of monuments were often understood as being monuments made present in miniature form for the interaction and even veneration of the viewer (see **Appendix E**). The emperor's gesture of generosity and clemency would resonate with the drinking of fine wine in the villa near Pompeii. This cup, therefore, would have been distinguished as uniquely suited for ceremonially honoring the anniversary of this event, for toasting the empire and its armies, or specifically for drinking to pledge loyalty to and honor Tiberius.



Fig. 6.3 Head, Ptolemy III: "The head is broken away from a vessel, probably a shallow cup or a bowl. These types of vessels served for

libations in Greek culture, their centers adorned by a relief head (termed an emblema) of a figure from the circle of Dionysius." (Met) 200s BC. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 11/12/24



Fig. 6.4 Fragment of a Vase Depicting Berenike II. Egypt, 246–221 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 12/2/24

Similarly, iconography on oinochoai, the "types of vessels served for libations in Greek culture" (Fig. 6.3) would sometimes replace depictions of Dionysius with the face of one of the Greco-Egyptian rulers of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Images (Fig. 6.4) with "portraits of the queens were libation vessels associated with the royal cult, most likely with the Arsinoeia, the festival established in honor of Arsinoe II"; in other words, the depiction of a ruler meant the cup was to be drunk from in honor of the person depicted, and was to be used in ceremonies honoring that ruler. [10]

This would not change the underlying logic behind such vessels; the image on the cup or bowl would still imply that the ruler depicted was honored by drinking from a vessel with his image. All of these considerations show that as with signets and coins, the use of images on ritual cups had a dedicatory function. It might be objected that this dedicatory function of images is a feature of paganism, and would not have been used by Christians. But it has already been noted in the section on altars that the idea of consecrating an object using inscriptions was done by Christians. The fact that such inscriptions are a common feature of Roman pagan sacred architecture did not discourage Christians from doing this. To recall the earlier discussion about the consecration of altars, Hadley describes the inscription at the Megiddo Church ("The god-loving Akeptous has offered the table to God Jesus Christ as a memorial") as "a dedicatory inscription itself in the same manner as the majority of altars did within the Roman Empire in the Late Antique period." He states:

> It is doubtful that Christians employing typical pre-existing religious devices according to established patterns of sacred space were at the same moment rejecting sacral-spatial designations involving the divine. In fact, the dedicatory inscription in traditional Roman religion recalled the elevation of a space to a sacred, inviolable status.

Again we see the same consistent pattern with early Christian art. All early Christians rejected idolatry, but they appropriated various stylistic and functional features of Roman art and architecture according to whether or not they found them compatible with Christianity.

Icon for Directing Worship

Returning to Hadley's original quote we can note how he attributes to the Shepherd image on the cups a role in mediating honor to Christ. He calls the "cup with the image of the Pastor bonus (Good Shepherd)" an "identifiable cult object" and acknowledges that the use of these cups is "virtually indistinguishable" from how Romans used their ceremonial cups. As with Roman ritual cups then, the Christian chalices were "identified by images of the deity in whose worship they were utilized." The image is therefore why the cup was "separated out and reserved…as more appropriate for ritual acts" (the Eucharist). Because it consecrated the cup for honoring Christ, the image was involved in giving "material mediation of religious experience"—specifically the experience of "worship" referred to earlier. The image was a conduit for routing honor-giving action to Christ.

Hadley's interpretation and the implied iconic quality of the image of the Good Shepherd is reinforced by phrases in Tertullian's "On Modesty" which show these were ceremonial cups. This is evident from the paintings' consecratory role, the mystagogic [11] kind of instruction the image gives, and the character of the cup's iconography.

A Consecratory Image: An initial and obvious point is that both in terms of imagery and stated function, the object described in the text appears to fit within the ritual cup category in a straightforward manner. We have already noted that Christ as Good Shepherd is represented on the chalice and that the Eucharist is what the cup is used for ("the Christian sacrament"). This is the same pattern as with the ceremonial cups already considered: by portraying someone worthy of honor—royalty or a divine being—the object is consecrated for honor-giving activity, being dedicated to whoever is

depicted. The cup with the painting of Christ was specifically used to honor Christ.

James Hadley notes that such an understanding of cups being specifically consecrated to be used in the Eucharist is present in a trial inventory which "records the confiscation of numerous liturgical objects at Numidia, North Africa, in 303 during the Diocletian persecution: 'two golden cups, six silver cups, six silver jugs, a silver casket, seven silver lamps and eleven bronze lamps with chains.'" [12] Early Christians had a developed association between the golden composition of an object and its veneration; this theme (and the quote above) are explored in more detail in **Appendix I: The Hierarchy of Materials in Early Christianity**. The fact that chalices were in at least some cases made of gold is quite significant for the holy status and veneration of the cups with the image of the Good Shepherd which Tertullian alludes to.

Didactic or Mystagogic?: A similar point can be made about the language in section 7: "Let the very paintings upon your cups come forward to show whether even in them the figurative meaning of that sheep will shine through (the outward semblance, to teach) whether a Christian or heathen sinner be the object it aims at in the matter of restoration." This phrase is sometimes understood as showing that the image of the Good Shepherd here has only didactic use: it gives instruction about how to interpret Scripture, working like a "book for the illiterate." But is this all that is going on?

The fact that the painting has far more significance is obvious when we consider what the image gives instruction about. These paintings carry theological authority. The quote given above shows that these paintings correct those who think that the sheep in the Parable of the Lost Sheep is an apostate Christian. This is extremely significant, for in this way the painting (which includes both sheep and Shepherd) actually designates who is truly eligible to be restored (the non-Christian) and receive the Eucharist.

What follows is clear: in designating who can receive Communion, the painting of the Good Shepherd carrying the sheep establishes the use of the cup itself. The cup is after all Eucharistic, and the proper approach to the Eucharist is the painting's meaning. We see that the instruction from the painting of the Shepherd is not merely didactic, but mystagogical

(concerned with initiation into knowledge of mysteries or holy things). [13] As Dr. Zachary Porcu notes:

> Imagery from scripture has specifically been placed on the chalice to indicate what its purpose is, that is, it's for the Christian and not the heathen. . . It seems to make the same point as "Holy things are for the holy.". . . The fact that [Tertullian is] making this kind of argument assumes that he accepts that images have a teleology to them, and that it's correct to put this specific image on the chalice because it images (verb) what the chalice does. That sort of logic was universal in antiquity—from pagans to Jews—and therefore no one at that time would feel the need to defend or even explain it. . . [F]or Tertullian, ritual use of images has theological authority. . . like everyone else in antiquity. [14]

The image of the Good Shepherd and sheep, then, sets the function of the cup for "restoration"—in other words, for bringing those lost and wandering in the wilderness of sin back to union with the Good Shepherd. Such an image is meant to be interacted with. It must, in fact, be acknowledged properly for a person to approach the chalice rightly.

Iconography of Patronage: Further, the biblical portrayal of the Lord as Shepherd reinforces the interactive quality of the cup's iconography. The 23rd Psalm describes the generosity and protection of the Lord as Shepherd:

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
death,
I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

More than just delivering His people, this Psalm shows how Jesus provides constant provision, making it so the Christian “shall not want”. The Lord “restores the soul” and will “prepare a table before me” and make it so that “my cup overflows.” Early Christians saw the clear Eucharistic connection. The portrayal of Christ as Shepherd on the chalice implies a kind of reciprocal movement in ritual: He will “prepare a table before me” on which He Himself will be worshipped by the overflowing cup of His blood. The Shepherd Who provides will be the honored focus of celebration, and it is precisely as Shepherd that He is celebrated and praised.

The strange phrase “the flavor of the ewe of your second repentance” reinforces this interactive aspect of the figure of the Shepherd and sheep. Walter Lowrie notes how catacomb art uses the milk jug or pail (accompanied often by a Shepherd’s crook or by sheep) to portray the Eucharist as sheep’s milk provided by the Good Shepherd. [15] The Acts of Saint Perpetua (2nd or early 3rd Century) give a vision which clarifies this symbolism:

> I mounted and beheld a garden of vast extent, and in the midst of this garden a man seated, having white hair and the dress of a shepherd, milking sheep: and standing round about him thousands of men clothed in white. And he raised his head and looked at me, and said to me: Thou art welcome, my daughter. And he called me and he gave me some of the warm milk which he had just drawn, and I

> received it with folded hands and I ate it: and all about me said, amen. And at the sound of the voice I awaked, with an indescribable taste of sweet in my mouth.

Lowrie notes that “from this it is evident that the jug of milk carried by the Good Shepherd is a mystic symbol of the Eucharist.” Louis Charbonneau-Lassay draws attention to the fact that for early Christians, “milk had two principal symbolic meanings: for one, it was the emblem of the excellent doctrine which nourishes the Christian’s mind and for the other, it stood for the Eucharist, the necessary food for his soul.” [16] Such an understanding of milk as doctrine is evident in Saint Paul’s comment “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food” (Heb 5:12). This helps us to comprehend why Tertullian speaks of Himself “imbibing the Scriptures of the Shepherd Who cannot be broken”: the Eucharist is a tasting of true doctrine, and doctrine is only fully expressed in the truth which is the Eucharist.

All of this shows a tight connection between the painted image of the Good Shepherd on the cup and the Shepherd as the One we partake of in the cup. The “milk-offering” of Christians was ultimately provided by Him to begin with, for He fed and milked the sheep: “Thine Own of Thine Own, we offer unto Thee, on behalf of all and for all” as the Divine Liturgy expresses. This understanding of the Shepherd as providing means of sacrifice, receiving sacrifice, and ultimately giving Himself in the cup adds texture to Tertullian’s phrase “the patron whom you depict upon your (sacramental) chalice.” The ancient understanding is that a feast’s patron as guardian establishes the direction and order of a feast. A patron often makes provision for celebration, and in the case of sacrificial worship to a deity, would be the object of celebration. [17] The fact that this is an image of the Christ as Shepherd and described as Patron emphasizes how this image would have served a visual function to focus Christian worship on Him since it is precisely as Shepherd that He is recipient of celebration, praise, and gratitude.

In sum, the Patron’s image consecrated the cup to honor Him, the image was interacted with to perceive the cup’s ritual function, and the image

depicted Christ precisely under His aspect of receiving worship. Taken together, these considerations confirm James Hadley's judgment that the image served as a conduit for routing worship to the Christ depicted.

Tertullian's Invective: "Idol of drunkenness"

However, some of Tertullian's other language in the chapter is confusing. Tertullian speaks of the "that Shepherd, will play the patron whom you depict," which raises the question of what is meant by "play" in this context. Tertullian appears to call the depicted Shepherd "prostitute of the Christian sacrament", and "brize (fly) of adultery." As if to make his condemnation of these paintings perfectly clear, he appears to describe them as "idol of drunkenness." This seems to show that, even if these are Christian ritual cups, Tertullian disapproves of their use and regards this practice as thoroughly idolatrous as Walter Lowrie thought:

> Tertullian in North Africa mentioned, only to condemn it fiercely, the Christian custom of drinking from glasses adorned in gold leaf with the figure of the Good Shepherd. . . . By this furious denunciation of a harmless religious picture, Tertullian may evidently be classed as a thoroughgoing opponent of religious art. He thundered against idolatry of all sorts. [18]

Before turning to Tertullian's stance towards the paintings, it is worth pointing out that the other Christians he is chiding (which would include clergy) do not think the Good Shepherd image on the cups is an idolatrous image (they are using it, after all). And since Tertullian is known for stances as extreme as his rhetoric, we should not regard it as too significant if he regarded this as an idolatrous image. He is, after all, importantly wrong about some of his ethical rigorism: grievous post-baptismal sin can be absolved, and should not permanently prevent Christians from receiving the

sacraments. Tertullian does not have ultimate and final credibility as a broad judge in all matters related to Christian conduct. [19] Even if he opposes these images, he still is a witness to priests or bishops using them.

However, is Tertullian actually opposed to the use of the Shepherd image on the cups? Firstly, Tertullian thinks these images have a theological authority to correct misunderstandings of the Lord's parables. To recall, he says "Let the very paintings upon your cups come forward to show whether even in them the figurative meaning of that sheep will shine through (the outward semblance, to teach) whether a Christian or heathen sinner be the object it aims at in the matter of restoration." We have also noted the evidence that this image consecrates the cup, and that therefore the painting of the Good Shepherd becomes a conduit for routing worship to the person depicted.

Secondly, the problem in view throughout section 10 of "On Modesty" is clearly the use of the "Shepherd of Hermas" book to justify forgiveness of adultery after baptism. In connection with this, Tertullian insists that adultery is the natural result of idolatry. When he speaks of partaking of the "ewe (ovem) of your second repentance" it connects back to his critique of "The Shepherd of Hermas" which teaches second repentance. Language of "prostitute of the Christian sacrament" points to the laxity of "The Shepherd." The language of "idol of drunkenness" is therefore best understood as attacking the lax practices which proponents of "The Shepherd of Hermas" adopted—not as a critique claiming that the use of Christian art in ritual is inherently idolatrous.

This understanding of Tertullian as concerned with moral laxity and not the paintings on cups is affirmed by scholars such as Robin Jensen, Jim Papandrea and Zachary Porcu. Jensen comments that "Tertullian described cups adorned with images of the Good Shepherd; unlike Clement [in his comments about seal rings], however, he discussed with with displeasure, if only because he associated such objects with The Shepherd of Hermas, an early Christian text that allows some leniency toward sinners." [20] Jim Papandrea notes that section 10 of "On Modesty" can only be properly understood in the context of the overall purpose of Tertullian's invective against "The Shepherd of Hermas." He paraphrases Tertullian as follows:

> “You have images of a shepherd on your chalice for communion. But you are looking for your inspiration from the wrong shepherd. You’re reading this other document about a shepherd who isn’t Jesus.” Tertullian is calling them hypocrites saying, “You have Jesus on your chalice, so why do you try to use as a proof text this document (“The Shepherd of Hermas”) that is from a different shepherd? Tertullian is calling them hypocrites for having Jesus on their chalice as the Shepherd, but pointing to this other shepherd. He says, “I don’t want to hear about that shepherd in the document called ‘The Shepherd of Hermas’; I want to know about that Shepherd that John tells us about in his Gospel—the Good Shepherd. ” When you read that in context, it’s not at all about [the legitimacy of] icons. Tertullian is simply acknowledging that there are images of the Good Shepherd on chalices. . . this is an argument about reconciliation, and about the canon of Scripture, but in context it is not a prohibition or even a criticism of the image on the chalice itself. [21]

Along the same lines, Dr. Zachary Porcu offers the following paraphrase of Tertullian:

> “The text of the Shepherd [of Hermas] is the one that favors adulterers, but it was rejected from the canon, etc., because it favors adultery, which is, of course, what we would expect from the likes of you. . . That text, then, is really your source of initiation [as opposed to the correct scriptures], so maybe the Shepherd depicted on your chalice is really the Shepherd of Hermas, which would make it [the figure portrayed on the chalice] a prostitute of the Christian sacrament.” [22]

Porcu characterizes the flow of the passage in a way which makes clear that the text of the "Shepherd of Hermas" is the target in view. As with Papandrea's gloss, the denunciation "idol of drunkenness" is seen as part of a criticism of these lax Christians as promoting debauchery (sexual immorality) and reliance on the angelic messenger "the Shepherd" who Tertullian sees as permissive about giving the Eucharist—not the use of Christian art in a ritual context. [23] Such a reliance on this angelic messenger would mean he is effectively the shepherd depicted in the paintings on the chalices, "playing the patron" in place of Christ.

A final consideration is how little time Tertullian spends criticizing the use of the painted cups. If he thought use of ritual art idolatrous in itself, his treatise would be far more focused on it. We must also consider that the Good Shepherd image is based on the Kriophoros ("ram bearer") image from Hellenistic art, and this image is often a representation of Mercury (Hermes). If Tertullian wanted to complain about the taint of pagan idolatry in Christian worship in this context he would have had no small reason to do so at length. All of these considerations indicate that the negative language, and the specific phrase "idol of drunkenness" is connected to a misuse of the image, treating it (in Tertullian's opinion) as though it represents the Shepherd of Hermas (an angel) as patron worshipped at the Eucharist.

Tertullian and Veneration by Acknowledgement

It is clear that Tertullian thinks the paintings on the cups are actually of Christ the Good Shepherd based on section 7 (since he says the cup reveals the meaning of Christ's parable of the Lost Sheep with "the lost ewe re-sought by the Lord, and carried back on His shoulders"). Yet as Papandrea and Porcu both note Tertullian's rhetoric implies that in welcoming adulterers to the chalice, it is as though Christ as sacramental Patron has been supplanted by the angel-shepherd of Hermas who is said to "play the patron". Instead of honoring Christ, the angel-shepherd acts as "patroness"—language which is probably intended as a condescending jab at the shamefulness of his enemies' laxity.

All of this highlights the importance of the image to the ritual of communion. In Tertullian's understanding, the one depicted is the one to be honored. The worship is given through the image, which in consecrating the cup acts as conduit and directs glory to the depicted patron. Thus, failure to properly acknowledge Christ on the chalice makes it so that the ritual is misdirected towards honoring the alternate patron, the Shepherd of Hermas. This has turned the icon of the good shepherd into an "idol of drunkenness". If Christ were actually acknowledged as the one imaged (The Good Shepherd), no former adulterers would be admitted to the chalice.

The failure to acknowledge the painted image of Christ is not some incidental detail, but key to why the ritual is being dangerously misdirected to honor the angel shepherd. Tertullian's instruction "let the paintings on your cups come forward. . ." in connection to whether "a Christian or heathen sinner" is to be admitted to the chalice has been disregarded. This is the root of why the sacrament is being given out by a "prostitutor."

What follows is that the acknowledgement given to the painting passes to the Patron. The underlying logic of what Tertullian thinks is going on with the painted cups follows the type-prototype principle embedded in early patristic thought as expressed in Saint Basil's statement "The honor given to the image passes to the prototype." Acknowledgement is in one sense the most basic kind of honor, since it involves simply attending to someone or something which is deserving of respect. In this ritual context, such acknowledgement is no doubt more intense because of how it leads to union between the worshipper and He Who is imaged. Mundane examples bear this out: refusing to acknowledge someone of status in public is disrespecting them. This act of acknowledging the painting could be accompanied by additional ritual gestures (such as bowing or kissing, as may have been done with the emperor's visage on the Pompeiian victory cups).

Christian Gold Glass and Veneration by Acknowledgement

Surviving gold glass cups found in the Roman catacombs give additional evidence for the idea of veneration by acknowledgement in contexts of

ritual dining. The scholar of early Christian art Sean Leatherby draws our attention to a similarity in form between a Roman gold glass cup designed for remembrance of a pagan couple and a Christian gold glass by the same manufacturer. He explains that the first image

> depicts a man and a woman, presumably a married couple, in front of whom hovers a small figure of Hercules (Cameron 1996; Figure 19.1). In this representation, his feet attached to a raft-like base, Hercules appears to be a statuette, the kind of object given to the god as a votive gift after he provided assistance. This identification is strengthened by the inscription that runs around the image and spills into the central field: “Orfitus and Constantia, may you live, drink happily in the name of Hercules of Acerentia,” the latter the name of a small town in Italy that perhaps played host to a cult of the god. What is interesting is that though the iconography of this glass appears to be "pagan" in character, commissioned by a couple (probably an aristocratic couple, as argued by Cameron 1996) who were devotees of Hercules, its iconography, if not its style, is not far removed from that of a large group of glasses depicting saints, including Peter and Paul, with a figurine of Christ hovering between the two, as on a second glass in the British Museum, dressed like a proper Roman (Howells 2015, 198; Figure 19.2). While the iconographies and visual formats of the two glasses are not identical—the figure of Christ does not stand on a disk as Hercules does, and the two saints' faces are depicted in strict profile rather than in three-quarter view—the two glasses are cut from the same imagistic cloth. The latter glass also features an inscription that encircles the image, connecting the object with its function as a vessel for the funerary or commemorative banquet: “Biculus, (be?) the dignity of (your) friends, drink that you may live:” Absent the names of the two male saints (Petrus, Paulus) on the glass, it could be argued that these

two glasses, produced in Rome by associated workshops (a fact made clear by the lettering of their inscriptions), do not signal their religious affiliations through iconography alone (a topic raised by Elsner 2003).

An interesting consequence of the nearly identical form of these two Roman gold glass cups is that we are in a position to make reasonable inferences about the intended use of both cups. On the one hand, the fact that the pagan cup is meant to be used to toast and honor Hercules is quite clear from the wording of the inscription ("drink happily in the name of Hercules of Acerentia"). This function of the cup is built into the cup by means of its imagery, specifically the presence of Hercules's idol statue in a "position of honor" above the heads of the Roman couple. We would expect that a similar cup with people positioned analogously on it and a holy being above their heads in the position of honor would be specifically designed for the honor and commemoration of the deity pictured. It is therefore of immense significance that Christ is positioned in exactly this spot on the Christian version of the cup. He is shown between the heads of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in the place of honor instead of a "statuette" of a pagan god. [24]

The use of gold for the design on this cup is also quite significant, because gold was the material most evocative of veneration (see **Appendix F**). Additionally, we can note that instead of having a base under his feet to indicate an idol (cult statue), this image has a directness and immediacy towards Christ. This cup therefore not only illustrates an instance of Christian image veneration, but also helps show the differentiation between the veneration of Christian holy images and the practice of idolatry. Several similar cups (such as Fig. 6.5) depicting Christ in the place of honor between two Saints have been discovered in the Catacombs.



Fig. 6.5 Bowl Base with Christ Giving Martyrs' Crowns to Saints Peter and Paul (embedded in mortar). The inscriptions read "joyful in Christ, worthy of friends" and "Peter, Paul" (Met) Rome, C. 350 AD. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 12/5/24



Fig. 6.6 The Attarouthi Treasure - Chalice. With a youthful Christ with a cruciform halo, a deacon saint with a censer (probably Saint Stephen), the Virgin Mary in orant pose, and a youthful saint with staff Inscribed in Greek: "In completion of a vow and for the salvation of him whose name is known unto the Lord." (Met) 500–650. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "The Met Collection," Accessed 12/7/24

Shortly after the Council of Nicaea, the practice of venerating liturgical vessels continues to be directly referenced and appears to have been widespread. Saint Jerome wrote in 405 AD to Pope Theophilus expressing approval for his instructions to venerate the Cup of the Lord:

> I admire in your work its practical aim, designed as it is to instruct by the authority of scripture ignorant persons in all the churches concerning the reverence with which they must handle holy things and minister at Christ's altar; and to impress upon them that the sacred chalices, veils, and other accessories used in the celebration of the Lord's passion are not mere lifeless and senseless objects devoid of holiness, but that rather, from their association with the body and blood of the Lord, they are to be venerated with the same awe as the body and the blood themselves.

It is noteworthy that Saint Jerome in Jerusalem is praising the Bishop of Rome for this practice; this implies the practice was likely a part of the liturgical life of many regional Churches. Numerous surviving Eucharistic chalices from the 400s onward bear images of Christ and various Saints, [25] serving the same consecratory function that we noted in the Good Shepherd image on the chalices Tertullian references. The famous Syrian chalices from the "Attarouthi Treasure" (crafted sometime between the years 500 and 650) feature iconographic depictions of Christ and the saints. The vessels contain votive inscriptions, showing that the chalices and images on them were used to thank and invoke God in prayer. Given that Eucharistic chalices were venerated, and were dedicated for Eucharistic worship

because of consecratory images on them, the image of Christ would get caught up in the act of veneration. Such representations would therefore be focused on in an attitude of veneration towards Eucharist, chalice, and the icon that connected the two.

Conclusion

Tertullian refers to paintings of Christ the Good Shepherd on cups used for the Eucharist. These chalices are a Christianized version of the ceremonial type of cup, used to honor the deity, emperor, or other figure who is depicted. The presence of the image sets the cup apart as a consecrated object for use in the worship of the one who is imaged; these paintings therefore served as a conduit to direct honor Christ. Tertullian's comments the image was meant to be looked at and interacted with ("let the very paintings upon your cups come forward"). The portrayal of the Lord as Shepherd was uniquely suited for giving the viewer a sense of gratitude for Christ's provision of bread and wine, and a sense of directedness in worship to the Patron Who laid down His life and was being worshipped.

Tertullian complains that his opponents have turned the painting into an "idol of drunkenness" by acting as though it represents not Christ, but another shepherd—the angelic messenger from the early Christian apocalyptic text "The Shepherd of Hermas." His complaint reveals that the image of the Good Shepherd must be properly engaged with, and honored with acknowledgement, for Eucharistic worship to ascend to God. Surviving gold glass drinking cups sometimes contain representations of Christ in a position of honor that would be given acknowledgement in ceremonial dining. By the fourth century, Saint Jerome attests to an authoritative and widespread practice of venerating the chalice. Because Tertullian and others would see the image of Christ on a Eucharistic cup as a holy image that was focused on to worship God, we can articulate this teaching in terms of a type-prototype principle:

Acknowledging (honoring) the painting (image) directs worship to the Patron (prototype)

1. A more complete treatment of Tertullian's attitude towards images and religious images will be provided in the second volume in this series, where his view of images can be integrated with his comments on a "mock icon" which he attests to an opponent of Christianity making. For now, I will simply note that those who allege Tertullian is a strict aniconist will have to account for how he witnesses to Christians making images of the cross and calling the cross a standard (see chapter 3), baptismal signets (see chapter 4), and apparently approves of paintings on ritual cups. The best way to account for this data alongside his apparently aniconic statements is to simply note that his invective against images is focused on the issues similar to those that Clement critiques: idolatry, excessive concern for lifelike realism especially when concerned with God and holy things, as well as possibly opulence and excess adornment.
2. Lowrie, Walter, *Art in the Early Church* (Pantheon Books, 1947) p. 30
3. "Early Christian Perceptions of Sacred Spaces" by James Thomas Hadley. Material Culture Review 80–81 (Fall 2014/Spring 2015) pp. 95–96
4. Thompson, Dorothy Burr 1973. *Ptolemaic Oinochoai and Portraits in Faience, Aspects of the Ruler-Cult*. Oxford, p. 41
5. Nancy Real, "The Fine Art of Feasting in Roman Gaul", (link: https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/the-fine-art-of-feasting-in-roman-gaul/ accessed 3/2/24)
6. Julia Commander and Ruth Allen, "We Shook an Ancient Cup and Lived to Tell the Tale", https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/we-shook-an-ancient-ceramic-and-lived-to-tell-the-tale/#_ftnref5; accessed 3/2/24
7. Ibid. The passage from Eubulus is recorded in the catalogue of cups by grammatician Athenaeus of Naukratis (see Deipnosophistae 11.471d) "Only just now they were draining a big lusty vessel—a thericleian—bubbling the brim, lipped like a Spartan flask, shaped like a buzzing ballot box [psephoperibombetrian], dark, beautifully rounded, pointed bottom, glistening, reflecting the rays of light, nicely washed, its head wreathed with teeming ivy leaves; and as they swigged, they named the draught in honor of Savior Zeus. " (Athenaeus: The DeipnosophistsBOOK 11, translated by C. B. Gulick [1933]. https://www.attalus.org/old/athenaeus11b.html, accessed 3/2/24)
8. See lectures by the interestingly-named professor Michael Scott of Warwick University: "The Greek Symposium (drinking party)" *Youtube*, 12/10/21; additionally see his "#AskAnAcademic Prof Michael Scott The Ancient Greek Symposium Part One." *Youtube*, 4/24/19
9. Vikan, Gary, *Catalogue of the Sculpture in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection from the Ptolemaic Period to the Renaissance*, Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks (1995), pg 13
10. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Fragment of a Vase Depicting Berenike II." The Met Museum, 2000-2024. Accessed 12/2/24. link: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/551799
11. Pertaining to participation in holy mysteries
12. In his "Early Christian Perceptions of Sacred Space" he explains: "About a century after De Pudicitia [Tertullian's "On Modesty"] the Gesta apud Zenophilum ["Trial before Zenophilius"] records the confiscation of numerous liturgical objects at Numidia, North Africa, in 303 during the Diocletian persecution: 'two golden cups, six silver cups, six silver jugs, a silver casket, seven silver lamps and eleven bronze lamps with chains' (MacMullen 1992: 249)." (pg. 96)
13. Other wording such as "derive initiation" and "imbibe the Scriptures" points to the mystical knowledge of the Good Shepherd Who is depicted. The teachings of the Shepherd Who is worshipped are somehow partaken of in the Eucharist. This is similar to the identification between the signet as a "golden ornament" and divine "instruction" in Clement's use of the quote from Sirach,

“Instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man.” Additionally, the depicted Patron makes one a member of the flock by means of this participation in the sacrificial meal that He provides. While the language of “derive initiation” immediately connects to the “scriptures of the shepherd [of Hermas]”, we shall see in the next section that it is indeed the shepherd angel from this text which Tertullian is accusing these Christians of implicitly depicting on the chalice.

14. Email correspondence, 6/16/23

15. “The importance of this apparently trivial detail is shown by the fact that the sheep and the pail of milk sometimes appear apart from the shepherd. In the crypt of Lucina, two sheep are represented on either side of a rustic altar of stone on which rests the jug of milk and the shepherd's staff. There are somewhat similar representations in the catacomb of Domitilla and in the house of SS. Giovanni e Paolo.”

16. “To represent milk allegorically in painting and sculpture, the artists of the time made use of the image of the rustic container used by shepherds for milking the ewes in the pasture, the *mulctra* of the Latins. It was made of metal or wood, depending on the locality, and had a carrying handle. To identify it in its symbolic sense, the artist usually placed near the vessel one or several lambs or sheep, or the *pedum*, the shepherds crook of the ancient world. It is interesting to note that on the early monuments the vessel of milk is accompanied by no other animal than a sheep; so the milk that in its vessel represents the Eucharist is specifically the milk of the ewe, not that of the cow, or the she-goat, or the doe. . . For the early teachers of the Christian faith, milk had two principal symbolic meanings: for one, it was the emblem of the excellent doctrine which nourishes the Christian’s mind and for the other, it stood for the Eucharist, the necessary food for his soul. At one moment of the Church’s early life, some of its priests adopted milk as a true sacramental substance, and celebrated the holy mysteries with bread and coagulated milk” Charbonneau-Lassay, Louis, *The Bestiary of Christ* transl. D. M. Dooling (Penguin Books; Reprint edition May 1, 1992), pp. 79–81.

17. King, Crystal “The Food of Ancient Rome” link: https://www.crystalking.com/thefoodofancientrome (accessed 6/7/24

18. Lowrie, Walter, *Art in the Early Church*, p. 30

19. Tertullian also had some kind of association with the Montanist heresy in his later years (when “On Modesty” was likely written) and if he became a Montanist he could have been one by the time he wrote this treatise. Additionally, while it is known that Tertullian was a teacher in the Church and apologist, it is somewhat less certain that he became a priest later in life. Even assuming he did, if he were objecting to the Good Shepherd image on the cups, this would simply put him into a position of disagreement with other priests as equals (and perhaps bishops as his superiors) who were using the cups with the image of the Good Shepherd.

20. Jensen, Robin *From Idols to Icons: The Emergence of Christian Devotional Images in Late Antiquity (Volume 12) (Christianity in Late Antiquity*). University of California Press (2022). Pg 77.

21. Papandrea, Jim from his interview “Are Icons Idols and Accretions? w/ Dr. Jim Papandrea”, 1/25/23 on Michael Lofton’s Youtube channel, “Reason and Theology.” (link https://www.youtube.com/live/8ySAVa957SA). First accessed 3/25/23.

22. Email correspondence, 6/28/23

23. This has echoes of Saint Paul’s warning, “Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!” (1 Corinthians 6:15, ESV)

24. While Leatherby uses the language of “figurine” to describe the image of Christ, he notes the critical absence of the “raft-like base” that so clearly implies the Hercules image is a “votive gift” and “statuette”. It seems therefore that by “figurine” he means “small image.”

25. Elsner (“Iconoclasm as Discourse”, p. 381) displays an example believed to be from Antioch and which he dates as crafted between 400 and 530 AD (though this assumption was disputed, and some previous scholars claimed it was from the second century).

7

Saint Methodius and Images of Angels

The *Discourse on the Resurrection* by Saint Methodius the bishop of Olympos (c. 260–311) is quoted by Saint John of Damascus in his defense of holy icons. This text is an early witness to image-veneration practices, and shows that much of the content of later iconodule theology was present in the pre-Nicene era. When the type-prototype principle that the Saint articulates is properly analyzed and applied to the category of angel images in early Christianity, it becomes clear that Saint Methodius is teaching the veneration of these images. The objection that Saint Methodius is only talking about venerating imperial images will also be shown to be implausible on several grounds.

Saint Methodius's Type-Prototype Principle

The quote preserved in Saint John of Damascus's writings and in a surviving Slavonic copy of Saint Methodius's *Discourse on the Resurrection* [1] reads as follows:

> For instance, then, the images of our kings here, even though they are not formed of the more precious materials—gold or silver—are honored by all. For men do not, while they treat

> with respect those of the far more precious materials, slight those of a less valuable, but honor every image in the world, even though it be of chalk or bronze. And one who speaks against either of them, is not acquitted as if he had only spoken against clay, nor condemned for having despised gold, but for having been disrespectful towards the king and lord himself. The images of God's angels, which are fashioned of gold, the principalities and powers, we make to His honor and glory. (Second Discourse on the Resurrection)

In his statements, Saint Methodios references a common Hellenistic practice of making images of philosophers, statesmen, emperors, and other figures regarded as "saviors". This is distinct from the idolatrous practice of worshipping pagan gods, though the case of Roman emperors straddles the two categories sometimes. Early Christians were martyred often for refusing to offer incense to the genius of Caesar, the indwelling divine spirit that was believed to guide certain emperors. This does not mean that all image-honoring practices would be rejected by Christians, however, and Methodius is an example that shows this.

He considers several materials which can be used to make images to honor a king. The most precious material (gold) appears to be something that incites further expressions of honor to a higher degree, while the images made of less precious material receive some honor of a lower degree and are not "spoken against". Methodius speaks of how images of kings "are honored by all" but appears to extend this practice beyond images of kings: "men. . . honor every image in the world" regardless of the material it is composed of.

This practice carries with it a danger, for dishonoring an image of clay is a sign of disrespect "towards the king and lord himself." In these remarks, we have a primitive version of the principle "The honor given to the image passes to the prototype" but expressed in a negative form: the dishonor given to the image passes to the prototype. Such a principle has a firm grounding in the practices of many civilizations related to their images; it is to this context that we now turn.

Damnatio Memoriae And Slandering Images

A very ancient example of a practice of targeted destruction of images comes from Egypt. A royal law which may date to as early as 2,170 BC threatens disinheritance and spiritual desolation on those who harm statues in a burial ground:

> As for anyone in this entire land who may do an injurious or evil thing to your statues . . . my majesty does not permit that their property nor that of their fathers remain with them, nor that they join their spirits in the necropolis, nor that they remain among the living. [2]

This written evidence is mirrored by the archeological record. Because of the Egyptian belief that statues were capable of being alive, graves which had statues in them were often filled with some of the wealth and food of the deceased for their use and enjoyment. This made such tombs a favorite target of looters, and it appears the need to destroy statues came from fear of reprisal from a living image. While it can be expected that statues will corrode or receive damage from human carelessness over the course of thousands of years, this is different from cases where there are signs of targeted destruction. Elizabeth Treptow notes:

> as archaeologists have found, ancient looters did dare to damage statues in tombs, which would have been stocked with grave goods (luxury goods and daily necessities). Along with stealing this booty, raiders often attacked images of the tomb's owner, especially the eyes and noses. Scholars interpret this as the looters' attempt to prevent retaliation by the tomb owner's soul. Such statues were understood to be "alive," with a need to eat, drink, and breathe. Cutting off

> the nose would, in theory, be an effective way to cut off the statue's source of breath with only a few blows of the chisel. [3]

It is not surprising that successor civilizations such as Greece and Rome would have a similar image-destruction practice to Egypt. We can note how idol statues in late antiquity sometimes show signs of destruction on the nose like the statuary of Egypt; this can be explained as Christian destruction of these objects which functioned as bodies of fallen gods (via a believed inbreathing in the nostrils). However, the reasoning behind the destruction of Roman portrait images of kings (for instance with the blotting out of eyes and other facial features) does not seem to serve the same purpose. Such portraits were generally not seen as alive, but rather as a medium for knowledge of a person via the face, for the transmission of honor and loyalty, and as somehow maintaining the power of a ruler's presence in their absence. We have already noted various examples of honor being given to the imperial image in various Roman contexts (as with the veneration of Marcus Aurelius' likeness by his tutor Marcus Cornelius Fronto). It should come as no surprise that such portraits of emperors could just as easily become a medium for transmission of dishonor.



Fig. 7.1 The Severan Tondo shows Septimius Severus, his wife Julia Domna, their younger son Caracalla (lower right of the picture) and the obliterated image of his murdered co-heir, Geta. Located at Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo credit: Carlo Bollo

The most notable surviving example of this comes from the imperial panel portraiture of Septimius Severus. While his own face, and that of his wife and one child are intact, the face of a second child shows signs of targeted destruction. The common interpretation is that this damaged image

is of the emperor's murdered co-heir, Geta. If this is correct, someone favorable to the other son Caracalla attempted to wipe out the memory and reputation of Geta by destroying his facial likeness on the panel image. Elsner notes that this is one of several typical signs of the loss of favor within (or in the cycling out of) a dynasty. [4]

The degree to which this practice was embedded in Roman society is evident in a passage from Eusebius of Caesarea from towards the end of the pre-Nicene period. He references the overthrow the General Maximinus—a great enemy of Christians—and how the treatment of his statues and portraits after his death showed the extreme disrepute the Romans generally held him in:

> For Maximinus himself was the first man to be proclaimed by the rulers the common enemy of all, and posted in public edicts on tablets as a most impious, most hateful and God-hating tyrant. As to the portraits which were set up in every city to his honor and that of his children, some were hurled from a height to the ground and smashed to pieces, others had their faces blackened over with dark-colored paint and so rendered useless; the statues likewise, as many as had been set up in his honor, were cast down and broken in the same manner, and lay as an object of merriment and sport to those who wished to insult or abuse them. (Eus. *Ecclesiastical History* 9.11.2, trans. Oulton.)

Eusebius's comment confirms the ubiquity of the imperial image across the empire, the use of both portraiture and statuary, and the variety of methods that could be used to transmit dishonor: total destruction, discoloration of the face, and even verbal insult. But what is interesting here is the mention of "insult or abuse" being directed towards an image. The fact that damnatio memoriae could specifically take the form of insolence helps us to see the statement of Saint Methodius about those who "speak against" the imperial image as part of this known cultural phenomenon.

Early Statements of the Type-Prototype Principle

With the cultural background of Saint Methodius's type-prototype principle in mind, it is interesting to compare this to Origen's version of the type-prototype principle. As previously noted, he states that "if anyone abuses the wooden or waxen image of an emperor, he is condemned as if he had abused the emperor, since he commits an abuse against the image." The language of "abuse" seems to correspond to Saint Methodius's language of "speaks against." Both of these use a category of honor by "abstention" (not doing a disrespectful action, as opposed to showing some positive honorific gesture). The materials differ (Saint Methodius mentioning chalk, bronze, and clay vs. Origen referring to wood and wax) but the point seems to be the same: even lowly composition does not excuse words of disrespect to an image of a royal and honorable person. Saint Methodius adds the positive version of this that images of "our kings" made of the more honorable substances, "gold or silver—are honored by all." For both of them, the key to the connection to the prototype is found in a likeness to the person imaged—in other words, in the fact that the image represents a person.

Saint Irenaeus describes the distorting effect of various Gnostic sects' interpretation of Scripture using the analogy of a mosaic image of a king. "The beautiful image of the king. . .the likeness of the man. . .admirably fitted together" (Against Heresies, Bk 1, chapter 8, sec 1) corresponding to the true Gospel and correct interpretation of the Scriptures, is distorted by a rearranging of each of the pieces of biblical teaching (jewels). The result is a mutilated image, which Saint Irenaeus describes in terms that are specifically connected to dishonor being given to the archetype: it is a "poorly executed. . .miserable likeness" of a "dog" (connected to unholiness, Matthew 7:6) or "fox" (related to dishonorable evil and criminality, Luke 13:32). This dishonoring mutilation of the mosaic corresponds to the Gnostics' "blasphemous use" (Against Heresies, Bk 1, chapter 9, Sec 4) of Scripture—an ultimate and absolute dishonoring of the Incarnate Christ Whom the Scriptures attest to. While some may object that Saint Irenaeus is presenting an analogy here and is not describing a literal image belonging to Christians, this misses the point. The Saint is utilizing

an accepted and understood principle, embedded into how ancient people understood images and their connection to royal status. Saint Irenaeus's wording shows a strong connection between how you treat a representation (type, whether image or text) and the way this ultimately applies to what is represented (prototype). This passage shows again how widespread and early the Christian belief about the honorableness of royal images was. It operates on the same underlying type-prototype principle that we see in Saint Methodius: the dishonor given to the image passes to the prototype since the mutilation of the image is ultimately an attack on the one who is imaged.

The type-prototype principle also finds an extended application in ante-Nicene sources in contexts beyond typical human-crafted artificial images. The image of God within humans is repeatedly portrayed in early Christian sources as the ground for human dignity. But this dignity is derivative such that how an image-bearing human is treated transfers to God as a prototype. Clement of Alexandria speaks of how the human body as a "well-proportioned and beautiful image of the Word is adorned" with the practice of virtue and acquisition of health. Evil and unhealthy habits are described as "monstrous for those who are made in the image and likeness of God" since they "dishonor the archetype by assuming a foreign ornament, preferring the mischievous contrivance of man to the divine creation." (De Pedagogus Bk 3, chapter 11) This passage picks out the category of adornment as a mode of veneration, and spiritualizes adornment as acquiring virtue in relation to beautifying the spiritual image of God in human beings.

The belief that how one treats a human being (type) created in the image of God either honors or dishonors God (prototype) is also seen in the Epistle of Barnabas, Chapter 19:

> You shall be subject to the Lord, and to [other] masters as the image of God, with modesty and fear. You shall not issue orders with bitterness to your maidservant or your manservant, who trust in the same [God], lest you should not

> reverence that God who is above both; for He came to call men not according to their outward appearance, but according as the Spirit had prepared. . .

This passage shows a connection between reverence shown to an authority and that authority functioning as "the image of God." It makes sense that if reverence is due to a leader because they function as a representation of God, the honor and deference shown to that leader would ultimately be directed at God. However, Barnabas then takes this principle in a different direction: he emphasizes the importance of masters respecting *those that are under them*. It is when a *pater familius* mistreats those in his household that God is not reverenced. In this emphasis on how problematic it can be to show even mere verbal disrespect for those who are lower on the hierarchy, he focuses on the divine image within people who were seen as lower. The acknowledgement of the universally distributed presence of the image of "that God who is above both" becomes key in properly honoring God as an archetype. This restraint on the behavior of a typical Roman property owner—seen by his society as often entitled to treat servants like tools at his disposal—shows the surprising influence of the Gospel on households in the empire. Now even slaves, women, and children were seen as marked by the honorable image of God.

After the Nicene period, we have the famous statement of the principle by Saint Basil the Great. It is sometimes claimed that when Saint Basil said that "the honor given to the image passes on to the prototype" he was speaking only of the relationship of the Father and Son in the Trinity. However, a more careful read of this passage shows that he is making a broader claim about reality, and uses the connection between a king and the image of the king to illustrate a certain aspect of unity within the Holy Trinity:

> How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a king, and of the king's image, and not of two kings. The majesty is not cloven in two, nor the glory divided. The sovereignty and authority over us are one, and

> so the doxology ascribed by us is not plural but one; because the honor paid to the image passes on to the prototype. Now what in the one case the image is by reason of imitation, that in the other case the Son is by nature; and as in works of art the likeness is dependent on the form, so in the case of the divine and uncompounded nature the union consists in the communion of the Godhead. [5]

While not alluding to any other kinds of icons, it is clear that the example Saint Basil uses for the purpose of illustrating this principle (about unity in the Godhead) is the imperial image—a piece of imagery crafted by human hands (likely a panel portrait such as that of Septimus Severus). In this way, he carries on a tradition which was formulated in reference to hand-crafted images at least as early as Origen, but which in its broadest application has potential to be traced back to the earliest days of Christianity. It is very important to note that by the time of Saint Basil, emperors were Christians (with the exception of Julian the Apostate) and would even be considered holy (as in the case of Saint Constantine). What Saint Basil therefore attests to is not just a secular action, but can involve venerating saintly emperors by gestures of honor towards their images. [6]

Saint Methodius's Testimony About Images of Angels In Its Early Christian Context

Turning to the phrase "The images of God's angels, which are fashioned of gold, the principalities and powers, we make to His honor and glory," we can note that it connects several distinct ideas.

First, there is the idea that God is honored by image making; this can be taken to reference back to the cherubim fashioned in the Old Testament. The commandment given to make images of the cherubim on the ark out of gold and woven into the temple veil sets a precedent, showing that image making of the right kind is intrinsically honorable. The glorification of God

in his tabernacle or temple presupposed that the people formed the tabernacle "according to the pattern that was shown [to Moses] on the mountain." (Hebrews 8:5, ESV) This pattern included the cherubim within it. Consequently, having images of the correct, divinely ordained kind was part of how the honoring of God was facilitated.

A second point can be developed about the tabernacle and temple images of angels. The cherubim show a directionality: the images of the angels mystically lead the mind away from a purely material orientation, and back towards God as their origin and Creator. The locations of the angel (cherubim) images are significant, since they are positioned as guardians of holy space, the veil being holy and the mercy seat of the ark being most holy. As images of God's throne guardians, they can serve a gatekeeping function, preventing one's spiritual perception from ascending towards God with illegitimate ideas about the spiritual realm, such as a belief that God resembles in any way animals under the earth, on the earth, or in the sky. If one is ready to look towards God, it is by means of looking towards holy space—a space which is established by the ordering and guardianship of the cherubim. This understanding of the function of images of angels was present in the early Church. Commenting on Clement of Alexandria's interpretation of the temple's curtains (which had cherubim images on them), Eunice Maguire notes the following:

> In a telling early metaphor, Clement of Alexandria (150–215) pictures the curtained entrance of five columns in front of the Tabernacle as a representation of the five senses, beyond which ordinary persons cannot perceive. Exodus, in describing two sets of five joined curtains for the Tabernacle, emphasizes doubling by pairing; in referring to this passage, it is as if Clement had been thinking of how our eyes, ears, nostrils, and hands, if not our taste buds, come in pairs. To extend the metaphor, we might say that while readers closer to our own time may understand sensory acuity as opening the pathways of perception to the physical world, present and past, Clement suggests that the senses, like stretched curtains, close off or veil the perception of

> spiritual and eternal things. The biblical text, in calling for these curtains outside the Holy of Holies to carry images of ‘cherubim, the work of a skillful workman’ (Exod. 26:1), justifies Clement’s reading of the curtains as an imposing barrier, divinely secured. [7]

The understanding of the early Church is that these images of cherubim were not mere decorations, but ways of establishing holy space. The angel images were for directing spiritual perception towards God in the most holy space, thereby keeping the worship of God pure from an excessively matter-oriented mindset. They thus were seen as serving a cultic function, and their acknowledgement (a form of honor) was part of the path to worship of God.

Third, we have previously noted the teaching of Saint Jerome from his letter to Marcella (386 AD) which implies that the furniture and imagery within the Holy of Holies was venerated by the Israelites:

> The Jews of old reverenced the Holy of Holies, because of the things contained in it—the cherubim, the mercy seat, the Ark of the Covenant, the manna, Aaron's rod, and the golden altar. Does the Lord's sepulcher seem less worthy of veneration?

It is likely that in mentioning “the cherubim”, Saint Jerome has in mind specifically the two cherubim statues whose wings overshadowed the ark of the Covenant (although he may be thinking in a secondary way about the cherubim images woven into the veils covering the Holy of Holies also). By identifying the golden images of the cherubim as part of what grounded the reverence which was given to the Holy of Holies, Saint Jerome implies that these images were themselves venerated. Such an understanding of these images may stand in continuity with the prior teaching of Saint Methodius, and the practice that the early Christian practice he points to. This connection is reinforced by the fact that “the images of God’s angels” are

specifically described by him as “made of gold”—the substance out of which the cherubim statues on the ark were composed.

Fourth, when we combine the fact that St. Methodius says “men. . . honor every image in the world” with the fact that he says Christians make “images of God’s angels”, it amounts to an icon-venerating practice. While he is not specific about the kind of veneration, we can conjecture based on how images of kings were treated. It would make complete sense that the images St. Methodius speaks of would be kissed, adorned with flowers, have candles lit in front of them, that they would be crowned, bowed to, and so forth.

Response to an Alternate Interpretation

At this point, one could object that the comment “men. . . honor every image in the world” is only in reference to images of kings. The objector could say, “If taken literally, this leads to the absurd conclusion that Romans venerated their decorative images of rocks and grapes!” It is true that the statement is immediately preceded by the claim that “the images of our kings. . .are honored by all.” Further, the statement “one who speaks against either of them” [i.e., honorably composed images or commonly composed images] is “condemned for. . . having been disrespectful towards the king and lord himself.” This focus on the “king and lord himself” seems to show that Saint Methodius’s claim that men “honor every image in the world” is a reference to particular instances of the royal image, not all types of images in a purely general way. If this quote is not talking about all images, but only royal ones, then (so the argument goes) we cannot use this statement as a reason to accept that Saint Methodius believed in the veneration of images of angels.

On this way of reading St. Methodius, the statement that making images of God’s angels gives Him honor and glory could be interpreted in a way that doesn’t involve having a ritual interaction with the images of angels. It would instead be interpreted as merely meaning that the making of the angel images is itself a way of honoring God. If this interpretation is

allowable, it would undercut the use of this passage in St. Methodius as evidence of pre-Nicene image-veneration practices.

However, this interpretation is very unlikely to be correct for the following reasons:

First, it is implausible that if Saint Methodius approves of honoring the image of the emperor, he would also think it is wrong to honor the images of angels. An image of a pagan emperor is a much more suspicious object of reverence than an image of one of God's holy angels, since such images had a connection to idolatry in cases where an emperor came to identify himself as a god or a "son of god". Since the Saint approves of honoring the Roman imperial image, it makes it highly likely that he would approve of honoring Christian images of angels.

Second, it is confusing what the purpose of Saint Methodius's statement of the type-prototype principle about images was if he did not mean to apply it to the very images he meant to talk about—images of the angels. Why did he talk about the honor passing from the image to the prototype, and then immediately afterwards talk about images of God's angels, if he did mean to apply the principle to this specific image? It is hard to see what function the example of the imperial image was supposed to serve in this passage if not to illustrate a principle which can be applied a fortiori in the case of images of God's angels: since the imperial image is honored by all to respect the emperor, we naturally honor images of God's angels to acknowledge the servants of the True King, and ultimately that King Himself.

Third, we can note that Saint Methodius's statements in the first part of the passage seem to provide context and clarification about how an image can be made to someone's "honor and glory." The explanation we receive for how this works is found in his statements about honorific gestures towards the imperial image, presented in vivid contrasts to the "slander" and dishonor given through the image to the prototype. If that is the way honor is routed through images to a prototype in the surrounding context, it further reinforces the fact that honor is actually being given to the angel images, and that this is not simply talking about honoring God by the mere making of images. [8]

Fourth, there are parallels which reinforce the continuity between “men. . . honor every image in the world” and his statement that “the images of God’s angels. . . we make.“ Saint Methodius’s statement that men honor every image in the world is situated in the middle of a series of claims about honorable and common metals. We have noted that the images made of more precious material seem to be given a higher kind of honor, with gold naturally eliciting the highest degree of veneration to an image. The fact that angel images are then described as being made of gold already points to the idea that gestures of honor and respect were done towards these images. When read with the broader background of how Christians elsewhere embraced the hierarchy of materials, this is even clearer (see **Appendix I** for further evidence that early Christians acknowledged a hierarchy of materials, with some being more honor-evoking than others).

Fifth, an additional parallel can be drawn between the reference to the emperor as “king and lord” and his description of the angels as “principalities and powers”. At the level of formal textual quality, the double description (and specifically double ascription of authority) creates a strong sense of parallelism between one kind of image and the other. This is even more significant when we consider the content of what is being said: the very qualities about an emperor who would induce people to honor his images (namely his authoritative, honor-deserving status grounded in his office) is being predicated more strongly of the angels whose images Christians are to make. This establishes a strong sense that the angel images would be appropriately honored in a way that relates to (or better, exceeds) the honor of the imperial image. It is most natural, then, to see this as connected to honor transmitted through ceremonial gestures towards such images.

Sixth, this quote comports well with what Saint Justin Martyr (2nd century) states about the early Christian practice of paying honor to angels. In his First Apology, he corrects a pagan misunderstanding (echoing the accusations of “atheism” by the Athenians against Socrates) of the Christian Way by pointing out that Christians do acknowledge and honor heavenly beings:

> Hence are we called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God, the Father of righteousness and temperance and the other virtues, who is free from all impurity. But both Him, and the Son (who came forth from Him and taught us these things, and the host of the other good angels who follow and are made like to Him), and the prophetic Spirit, we worship and adore, knowing them in reason and truth, and declaring without grudging to every one who wishes to learn, as we have been taught. (*First Apology*, VI)

In Saint Justin's statement, the words "worship and adore" mean something other than what is meant in English when people speak of worship (as ascribing honor in a manner only appropriate to God) since Saint Justin obviously thinks these are creatures which are made to resemble the Son as Prototype. But it is clear that the object of "worship and adore" is encompassed by the entire preceding series: "God. . . the Son. . . the host of the other good angels. . . the prophetic Spirit." Consequently, this quote provides evidence angels were being honored in the Church in an officially approved practice. This corroborates what Saint Methodius says, and reinforcing that an appropriate kind of honor would be given in the Church to the angels who were depicted. While Saint Justin does not explicitly refer to images, it is interesting that the type-prototype relationship is also present here in the description of the angels as those "who follow and are made like to Him." The practice of honoring angels who are patterned after the Angel of Great Counsel (Jesus the Son of God) would doubtless be seen as honoring their Eternal Prototype as well. And this, of course, is precisely the logic of what Saint Methodius seems to say: that honoring the angels honors Christ. Therefore, this passage from the *First Apology* reinforces the idea that there is a common, shared practice being referenced by both Saints. [9]

Conclusion

Overall, the most natural way to construe the flow of Saint Methodius' thought sees the entire passage as a unity. His initial discussion is of how the honor or dishonor given to an image (such as that of the emperor as "king and lord") passes to the prototype, and how gold is most evocative of honor. When he speaks of golden images of God's angels ("principalities and powers") which are made to honor and glorify Him, it is most natural to read him as affirming that these Christian images are venerated. Reworking the passage backwards, its statements can be summarized as follows:

"God is the ultimate source of authority and glory in the universe, and he communicates this power and glory to creatures. This is especially true of the angels that he gives dominion and oversight of creation to; they serve as images of His authority in the world. When creatures honor the angels, the honor passes to God Whose dominion they image. This honor can be communicated through the physical images of God's angels which Christians make. This is an extension of the principle that the honor given to the image passes to the prototype, flowing upward from physical images through spiritual ones and ultimately arriving at the God of glory."

1. Saint John of Damascus *Defense of the Holy Images* III. The Slavonic copy of Saint Methodius' *Discourse on the Resurrection* which includes the passage Saint John quotes has been used by Peter Pashkov (email correspondence 8/7) and is quoted in Pashkov's article, "Icon Veneration." His citation there is "*Methodius of Olympus, Hieromartyr.* On Free Will // Works of St. Gregory the Wonderworker and St. Methodius, Bishop and Martyr. Moscow, 1996. Page 271 (2nd page)." For the translation of Pashkov's article into English 8/5/24 see, https://kalebatlantaprime.medium.com/icon-veneration-by-peter-pashkov-fa6179c35535

2. Cited by Treptow, Elizabeth, "Why Are the Noses Broken on So Many Ancient Egyptian Statues?" *The Brooklyn Museum Website*, 1/2/24.

3. Ibid.

4. Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse”, p. 370, and fn. 28 on p. 388.

5. *On the Holy Spirit*, 18.45

6. Johannes Nusias points out the connection between the veneration of the imperial image in the 300s and the veneration of saints (NOTE: need link to video

7. Eunice Dauterman Maguire, “Curtains at the Threshold: How They Hung and How They Performed,” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019), https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/essays/maguire . Accessed 6/15/24

8. It is possible that there is a distant textual echo here of Jude 1:8, since this also speaks of the danger of slandering (verbal acts of dishonor) angels (in this case evil ones), which are distinctly referred to as “dignities” (emphasizing authoritative status, much like Saint Methodius’s “principalities and powers”). Though the context there is evil angels, the idea of words of dishonor towards heavenly beings seems to be present. While this is not an explicit reference to the passage in question, it does show that the question of how to avoid communicating dishonor to a heavenly power is one that early Christians considered.

9. One further additional problem with attempting to read St. Methodius as only talking about veneration of the imperial image concerns consistency. An interpretation of Saint Methodius which insists the phrase “men. . . honor every image in the world” must be seen as narrowly referring to the imperial image will face a dilemma: should we interpret other pre-Nicene Christian statements about images in an extremely context-narrowed way as well? If so, it becomes hard to find any statements among pre-Nicene Christian authors in which they can be taken as condemning anything other than idols. On the other hand, if someone wants to insist that statements in Clement, Origen, etc., which seem to be rejecting “images” could potentially be applied outside their specific context of invective against idols, it becomes difficult to explain why St. Methodius’s statement about men honoring “every image in the world” wouldn’t extend beyond the context of the imperial image (to the angel images he mentions, etc.).

Part III: Veneration and Pre-Nicene Christian Paintings

8

Orant Images and Veneration

Much of the Christian art of the catacombs predates the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. But what is the nature of this art? What was it used for?

In this chapter, we will examine one category of images in the catacombs —images of orant figures, including portraits of the deceased Christian in the form of an orant—and argue that it was intended to be used ritually by Christians. Some orants facilitated the veneration of images of Christ, while others were also themselves venerated. Support for this way of understanding these images will be drawn from statements by mainstream historians of art and early Christianity.

Establishing How Art Was Used: Formal Qualities, Context, and Comparanda

We have already noted that the mere existence of some unspecified early Christian art does not show that such art was venerated. Not all art has the same use, and just because someone has paintings in his or her house, it doesn't mean he or she venerates said paintings. Even if one's aunt owns a Thomas Kinkade, she probably (hopefully) does not bow her head and light a candle in front of it.

However, inquiry about veneration of an existing piece of material culture does not end here. Because some images **are** given a ritual, cultic use, it is possible to show that a given image was venerated. This can be done even in the absence of written instructions about the use of an image or accounts of how people interacted with them. To argue for how an image was used, the defender of image veneration can undertake an examination of the formal qualities of the image (shape, directionality, relationship between elements within an image, etc.), compare it to other images whose usage we know (called “comparanda”), and adduce considerations of context as well (where the image is located, who likely composed it, other images around it, etc.).

These arguments will not be conclusive since we cannot always know with precision what the intended purpose of a surviving artifact is. But saying the arguments are not going to grant certainty does not mean we cannot come to conclusions about the use of objects that have a high likelihood of being true. By analogy, we cannot come to decisive and absolutely certain conclusions about how to interpret ancient texts (or really any texts at all). Yet a very likely interpretation can be given if we approach a text with the proper interpretive framework. Thus, in many cases, archeologists and historians can conclude with high probability and considerable clarity how an object was used. It will not be a complete explanation. But to bring up the comparison to text again, a complete explanation of what an author meant by something is not necessary to draw some very firm but limited conclusions about what he or she meant.

Scholars of early Christian art are increasingly drawn to the concept of “ritual-centered visuality” [1]: early Christian images were made to be interacted with. Aspects of this view can be found in mainstream scholars such as Michael Peppard, Robin Jenson, Beat Brenck, James Hadley, and Norbert Zimmermann, who each acknowledges that some early Christian art appears “open-ended.“ It is meant to be interacted with by the viewer, not just looked at. Images of this kind can provide a pattern of ritual behavior which is enacted by those who behold it. Alternately, it can provide an “end point” towards which ritual activity proceeds.

For example, Michael Peppard in his paper “Early Christian Art and Ritual” notes the existence of an early Christian altar from the 400s in

surrounded with floor mosaic iconography designed for interaction. The image on the floor has four loaves and two fishes:

> But there's a problem with the mosaic, or so it seems. Astute readers of the Bible know that Jesus begins with five loaves of bread; the mosaic here shows only four. Would the mosaicist have made such a glaring error, here at the very pilgrimage site for this event? One might conjecture that the fifth loaf needs to be imagined within the picture, as if buried down in the basket, behind or under the other four. However, when we examine other examples of the multiplication in early Christian art, a scene relatively common among depictions of Jesus's miracles, we do often see either five loaves or five baskets. By comparison, this famous version at Tabgha seems unfulfilled, incomplete, in tension with its corresponding biblical narrative. The resolution of the tension, the completion of the artistic program, and the fulfillment of the story only occur when one realizes the ritual context of the art. Early Christians consistently interpreted this miracle as foreshadowing the ritual meal called the Eucharist or the Lord's supper. Egeria herself described how that rock, near which the mosaic was laid, was used as an altar for consecrated bread, a loaf multiplied through its fracture and distribution to pilgrims. The artistic form thus evokes an expectation in its viewers; in order to represent its biblical text faithfully, the art requires them to enact the text ritually, to break bread physically and share it graciously. In other words, the fifth loaf is not hiding there in the imagined basket; it is really there on the altar above. The mosaic, in its ritual context, invites present viewers to experience the Eucharist as an extension of the past miracle. In this particular space, art and ritual work together to collapse time and fulfill the image. When the ritual context is taken into account, the supposed problem of this mosaic dissolves.

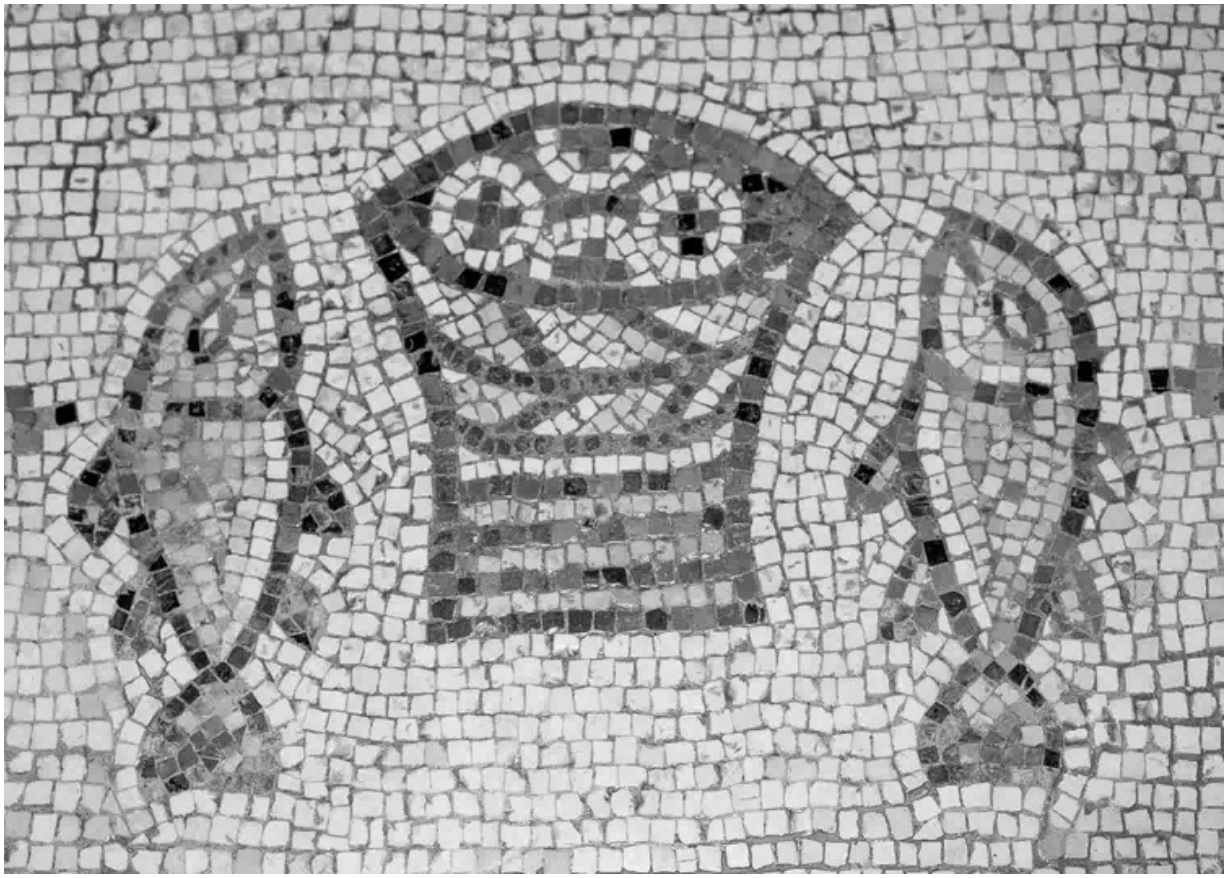

Figure 8.1 Floor Mosaic at Tabgha from the 400s AD featuring two fish and four loaves. This is in proximity to where an early Christian altar for the Eucharist was built, and is connected to the story of the multiplication of the loaves (which assumes the presence of a fifth loaf). Peppard proposes that this image is completed and the story is participated in by the offering of bread on the nearby altar. Image Credit: Greg Balfour Evans

When we formalize and organize Peppard's argument by bringing into consideration this mosaic's formal qualities, context, and artistic comparanda it is easy to see why his interpretation of this image is so plausible.

Formal qualities: Within itself, the floor mosaic has an incompleteness of a relevant, significant kind which is evident to the viewer from the shapes present. It is lacking a visual element (the shape of a fifth bread) that would be expected to be present given the Scriptural pattern the image is

based on. This on its own provides occasion for anticipating that the image will be interacted with.

Context: This floor mosaic is near the actual site where Jesus is believed to have multiplied the five loaves; the stone on which this miracle occurred was even used as an altar for the bread of the Eucharist. Given the connection in early Christian teaching between the Eucharist and the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, we can firmly assert that the surrounding context of the image would dispose viewers to see it as a template for ritual interaction.

Comparanda: It is widely known that much Roman art was seen as open-ended or interactive. In addition to images which were meant for veneration such as trophies, monuments, and the imperial portrait, there are cases of domestic art which are clearly participatory in nature. Clement of Alexandria recounts some of the more evil and unsavory examples of art that is meant for interaction by Romans:

> wedded to impurity, they adorn their bedchambers with painted tablets hung up in them, regarding licentiousness as religion; and lying in bed, in the midst of their embraces, they look on that Aphrodite locked in the embrace of her paramour. And in the hoops of their rings they cut a representation of the amorous bird that fluttered round Leda —having a strong predilection for representations of effeminacy—and use a seal stamped with an impression of the licentiousness of Zeus. Such are examples of your voluptuousness, such are the theologies of vice, such are the instructions of your gods, who commit fornication along with you. . . (Protrepticus 4)

Clement's description of the use of this art indicates how it was seen as a means of participation, designed for interactivity with the divine. Regardless of the space they were located in, images in the Roman world were very commonly understood as designed for ritualized engagement that went beyond aesthetic appreciation or even commemoration. We will return

to this aspect of late antique imagery periodically over the next few chapters (see especially Chapter 11, section “Participatory Narrative Art in Pompeii”).

The kind of reasoning employed above using the categories of formal qualities, context, and comparanda captures the intuitive sense we have that certain images are most plausibly interpreted as having ritual significance, and as being designed for interaction. We now turn to the application of this framework towards discerning how a variety of surviving pre-Nicene Christian images were used, beginning with the orant.

The Ritual Function of Orant Images Before Christianity

One motif that recurs in much early Christian imagery is that of the orant. An orant is a common figure in ancient Mediterranean and ancient near eastern art, and its pre-Christian history is instructive. In Roman contexts, it is usually presented as a veiled woman with hands outstretched upwards. This stance is one of prayer, and the orant is primarily an image of piety. Graydon Snyder explains one of the evidences which most explicitly connects this image-type to piety:

> On coins the Orante occurred as the obverse of coins struck from the time of Trajan to the time of Maximian. Frequently the inscription *pietas* or *pietas aug* appears with the Orante. The function of such propaganda on imperial coins can be debated, but there can be little doubt about the meaning of the Orante as pietas. . . Apparently, it was the imperial intention to use the Orante symbol to extend this family virtue (local) to *pietas erga patria* and *pieta erga deos* (translocal). [2]

As has been noted in previous sections, images on coins were commonly seen as intended for engagement by the viewer. In this case, Snyder sees the

image as designed to evoke the attitude symbolized. But there is the suggestion of something more; for instead of being primarily internal, piety for Romans was largely a matter of public civic cult involving physical practices. The orans stance was a typical prayer stance of ancient Roman people who engaged in various cultic activities. Arms outstretched in prayer (often with elbows remaining close to one’s body) suggest supplication, request, devotion, and a connection to a patron from whom generosity is expected. There is a deep unity between this physical stance of prayer and the piety which was symbolized by the orant and intended through such coins to be imparted to viewers. It is entirely natural to see a Roman empire full of such coins as more inclined to imitate the very gesture depicted than if something else had been displayed on that particular mint of currency. The fact that orant images in the ancient Mediterranean and ancient near east had a ritual use is well evidenced and not controversial. DiYanni Benton gives the following examples from a Sumerian context:

> . . .it appears that Sumerian people might have a statue carved to represent themselves and do their worshipping for them—in their place, as a stand-in. An inscription on one such statue translates, 'It offers prayers.' Another inscription says, 'Statue, say unto my king (god). . . [3]



Fig. 8.2 Spain. Collection of Iberian votive offerings. Bronze. 5th century BC to 1st century AD. Museo Frederic Maré, Barcelona, Spain. Image and Caption Credit: Lanmas

Among late ancient Egyptian (c. 400 BC) terracotta objects which are seen as having apotropaic power, Maria Chidiroglou notes, “Harpocrates and Thoth figurines, male and female orans figures, Baubo-type figurines, and the so-called Cypriot ‘temple boys.’” [4] Calling such objects apotropaic, of course, means that they were seen as spiritually protective. If so, the “male and female orans figures” could be taken as apotropaic in a number of different senses: either they were created as acts of prayer for protection; were meant to cause prayer in the viewer; were seen as animate objects

which actually did the action of praying like the Sumerian orants; or more likely, all of the above. Similar orant figurines have been discovered in Spain (Fig. 8.2).

Although not following the same visual format as other orants with their outstretched arms, one surviving Roman-Egyptian hairpin displays a praying female figure. One researcher proposes that this object had devotional use as a means of invoking a blessing:

> . . .while the pen's physical function secures the hair the person wearing it, it also serves or fulfills a spiritual purpose by bringing healing and light to life through the evocation of sacred beings and close proximity to the sacred space of the head. Figural hairpins depicted female deities as well, as can be seen in another Roman example also made of bone and measuring four inches in length made between the second and third centuries. Mirroring [a similar] Apollo pen, on this hairpin the female bust's eyes are turned downward, indicative of prayer, which is further emphasized by the visible downward tilt of the head. . . the depiction mirrors larger sculptural depictions of Persephone whose hair is traditionally carved in a similar manner. Acting as a potential devotional tool then, the pen could have been worn during performance of specific mysteries or daily routines to invoke divine blessing especially with the many dangers associated with maternity and childbirth. . . The abundance of Coptic hair pins and wood illustrates that the middle to lower classes not only used hairpins but also infused them with symbolic powers. [5]

This supplicatory role of the art shows that orants were not mere decorations. When we take the statements of Clement about the participatory use of Roman domestic art alongside the examples of venerated images already considered throughout this book (standards, the imperial image, signets, the ritual cup) it creates a strong presumption that

Roman images of this sort would be meant to evoke piety in viewers and stood as visual prayers made by their artisans or owners. The act of depicting an orant figure is therefore deeply connected with the activity of prayer itself. It would seem the orant depiction *is a prayer,* only drawn instead of written.

The Role of Christian Orant Images in Evoking Image Veneration

When we turn to the early Church, we can immediately note that Christians adopted this prayer stance as well. Saint Paul writes:

> I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. (1 Ti 2:8 ESV)

Early Christians included in their space-painted images of persons engaged in prayer, exemplifying the orans stance. In early Christian art, we can note three typical kinds of orant figures: orants that seem like more generic images of piety (often depicted without a clear face, of which Fig. 8.3 may be an example), biblical characters requesting salvation (like Noah in the ark), and portrait orants which appear to be representations of deceased historical persons buried within the catacombs.



Fig. 8.3 Painting of an orant from the Catacomb of Callixtus, Rome. Image Credit: Classic Image

Norbert Zimmerman, one of the foremost contemporary researchers of the catacombs, dates many of the orant images prior to 300 AD. He regards the salvation orants which portray scriptural events as generally older, but notes that portrait orants emerge prior to the end of the third century:

> Imbedded in this clear repertory of mostly biblical scenes, at the very end of the third century, a further new, most important image, widespread in the traditional art, was added to this meaningful content: the portrait of the deceased. Even though it appears relatively late, it soon became the statistically most represented single motif of catacomb art. . .” [6]

While not every image in the catacombs is pre-Nicene, at least some of the portrait orants are from the 200s AD; this is also the judgment of Robin Jenson. [7] This makes the question of whether they were connected to practices of image veneration particularly important for the purposes of an inquiry into pre-Nicene image veneration.

There are several good reasons to think that portrait orants were used in a ritual manner when we employ the categories laid out earlier of formal qualities, the context in which an image is situated, and comparison with other images whose use is known (comparanda).

The famous orant image called the “Donna Velata” (veiled lady) in the Catacomb of Priscilla is likely a portrait depiction of the person buried there. This image shows a directionality which relates to another image in its context. The gaze of the orant and her hands point upward. As an image of piety, she is meant to be emulated. But if this is so, the Christian should naturally have the same upward-directed spiritual focus. Thus, in looking at this orant, the attention of the pious Christian is thereby drawn to what is above, with eyes and hands pointed towards the ceiling also.

The Christian’s focus coalesces on an image of Christ as the Good Shepherd above. Gathered around Him are also adoring sheep or goats, representing Christians who are recipients of salvation. The sheep around the shepherd further gather one’s attention, directing prayer and love to the Christ who is shown in the highest place. This framing is met by the image of the Good Shepherd, a sign of divine presence in the underworld. Thus, the Christian’s attention ascends through prayer and piety (through the orant) into an attitude of total focus and reliance (through the sheep or goats), and finally to Christ Himself (through the image of the Good Shepherd).





Fig. 85. — Fresco of the third century, in the catacomb of Priscilla. A bishop veiling a consecrated virgin, the same virgin as orans, the Virgin Mary with the Child.

Fig. 8.4 Catacombs of Priscilla, Cubiculum of the Donna Velata (Veiled Lady), late 200s AD. The veiled female orant is often thought to portray the person buried in this chamber. Her overall posture, hands and eyes are all directed in prayer toward the image of Christ the Good Shepherd above. Image credit: ART Collection & The Reading Room

When we take into account the formal qualities of the orant (directionality of eyes, hands), its relationship to other images (Roman, Egyptian, and Sumerian), and the context in which the image is situated (beneath the Good Shepherd who is also surrounded by the gaze of the sheep) we have strong reason to conclude that this portrait orant is supposed to serve a cueing function. It was meant to elicit in the pious Christian an identical posture of outstretched hands towards the Good Shepherd as imaged above, and the corresponding inner attitude of prayer. In other words, the orant was meant to evoke veneration of the Good Shepherd image above.

Ritual Role of the Christian Orant Image According to Scholarship

This interpretation is not only plausible on the grounds of the above-listed evidences; variations of this view are widely accepted in scholarship.

Michael Peppard describes the ritual use of one particular orant image in the Coemeterium Maius along the Via Nomentana. This orant is identified as the buried Christian, and serves a cueing function. She is part of an "open-ended" image, referencing Christ's parable of the 10 virgins, but displaying five foolish and only four wise virgins. Where is the remaining wise virgin? The Christian buried in this space became the final "piece" of this image, and was represented as the orant in the center, praying upwards towards the Good Shepherd. However, the image was not just "open-ended" for the buried Christian—it was also completed by visitors to her tomb. Peppard remarks:

> "[In] the catacomb example. . .through the rituals of prayer and the refrigerium, the visitors to these graves joined with the body before them in order to move the orant on the wall one step closer to her banquet. The incomplete picture of the incomplete narrative was intended as such because the rituals performed in this space helped to complete it." [8]

This analysis does not explicitly state that the image facilitated a stance of prayer towards Christ through the image of the Good Shepherd above it. But the cuing of "rituals of prayer" which "joined with" the person who is buried to move her closer to the heavenly banquet would involve directionality. Part of the way the orant cues prayer is by directing people beyond herself, towards the Good Shepherd as a manifestation of the Christ who can answer those prayers and fulfill the request for participation in His heavenly table. Her image therefore imparts a directionality of the "rituals of prayer" which would easily evoke the believer's own orans stance (from Peppard's emphasis on "joined with"). This stance would involve

interaction with the image of the Good Shepherd, with prayers passing through it to supplicate Him.

Robin Jenson's interpretation of the orant figures coheres with and builds on Peppard's. She focuses on two female orant figures in the Catacombs. The first is the Donna Velata from the Catacomb of Priscilla:

> Often referred to as 'Donna Velata' (the veiled lady), this orant is garbed in a dark red dalmatic with two vertical bands and a while veil with dark stripes that reaches nearly to her waist (Figure 34.3). Vividly rendered, her hands reach up as if animated and she casts her eyes upwards and to her right as if in appeal to a heavenly being. Her relatively large size and central placement make her a commanding presence in this small chamber; she is the first image that catches the visitor's eye, perhaps meant to model the attitude they should affect as they entered her space. . .The Good Shepherd stands over her in the center of the cubiculum's vaulted ceiling. He either may be the focus of her prayer or simply a general reference to divine succor. [9]

The idea of cueing is clear here, not only in Jenson's comment about how the orant models the attitude which a visitor should have, but also in the language of "commanding presence", "catches eye" and "her space." The orant's attitude (which is meant to be modeled) is manifested and imparted to visitors in how "her hands reach up" and "she casts her eyes upward." While Dr. Jenson is here hesitant to specifically identify the Good Shepherd as the focal point of this orant's devotion, this is the most obvious candidate image to clarify Who is being prayed to, given the positions of both and the directionality of the orant.

Her second reference is to the Catacomb of San Gennaro, and here Jenson focuses on a woman named Cerula who is depicted as an orant similar to the Donna Velata:

> Above her head is a tau-rho figure flanked by an alpha and omega. To her right and left are books, identified by titles as the New Testament gospels. Her visage, as in the Priscilla catacomb, seems to portray a particular woman, possibly the individual buried in this cubiculum. Because she remains in perpetual prayer, her image prompts the faithful who enter to join her and, perhaps, to be attentive to the beloved scripture stories of God's reliable rescue. [10]



Fig. 8.5 Catacombs of San Gennaro, Cubiculum of Cerula. This orant displays the outward-facing quality of typical Roman portrait art; Zimmerman dates these kinds of orants to the last few decades of the 200s. Image credit: GpPhotoStudio

Jenson's description of the image of Cerula as being designed to "prompt" the faithful to "join her" in prayer is another instance of scholarly support for the interpretation of the catacomb art as having a cueing function, and imparting ritual participation. The tau-rho figure above the

depiction of Cerula is a staurogram, one of the earliest ways of visually depicting the crucified Christ. [11] This indicates the ultimate directionality of her prayer: towards the Son of God who died to save her. This orant figure was painted (at least) for a ritual function of bringing faithful visitors of her tomb to pray to Christ.

Zimmerman distinguishes different kinds of orant figures based on their directionality, and comments on their cultic use. Beginning with those portrait orants who are shown praying towards Christ the Good Shepherd, he states an interpretation of the catacomb art that is similar to Peppard and Jenson’s:



Fig. 8.7 Cubiculum from the Catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus. Christ the Good Shepherd is portrayed as the one prayed to by various orants. These may be depictions of the persons buried in the chamber. Jonah is depicted on the right said praying to Christ at the moment of his release from the sea monster. Image credit: Canali (Heritage Images)

These portraits send messages of the status of the depicted in society and identify membership in a group or class in life or hopefully in the afterlife. Some of them become proper prayers when the deceased is shown making eye contact with Christ, bringing personally the wish for salvation before his face. A good example is in arcosolium of the Domitilla catacomb: Christ appears as the Good Shepherd,

> and the deceased as part of his flock, a female orant at his right side looking directly at him, as if praying personally for her salvation. [12]

Zimmerman's interpretation is that the very composition of some orant images is a prayer. By depicting the deceased as an orant at the right hand of Christ, those who composed the painting were effectively saying that "we who are living join in her prayer to You." There is continuity here with Peppard's idea that some of the images of orants are meant to serve as requests that the faithful pray for the soul of the deceased person specifically.

The implications of this are very significant. Zimmerman is essentially saying that just as a prayer can be written down as an act of supplicating God at a given moment and then that prayer can be recited later, one could potentially inscribe a prayer by substituting a certain kind of image (in this case the salvation orants) in place of letters and words. But if the pictures are a way of inscribing prayer, what are we to make of the directionality of that prayer? These portrait orants in question are all directed towards the image of the Good Shepherd in the way the artist has rendered them. Anyone who is "reciting this prayer" by looking at the orants would also be praying with the same exact directionality as them: looking towards the image of the Good Shepherd to address prayers to the Good Shepherd Himself. And the image itself, crafted as a prayer, is directed through that image of the Good Shepherd to Christ. This act of "praying through" an image is image veneration in a straightforward sense.

Were Portrait-Orants Ever Venerated?

However, it is plausible that some portrait-orant images were intended for veneration themselves. This goes beyond the cueing function of directing a stance of prayer upwards towards the Good Shepherd or staurogram images, as we saw in the Coemeterium Maius and Catacomb of Priscilla. It would instead involve a ritual interaction with the painted image of the orant saint.

Zimmerman continues his section on orants, noting the fact that other orant portraits have a different directionality. Instead of facing and pointing towards the Good Shepherd, they point outward:

> However, in the majority of portraits the individual depicted looks straight ahead out of the image, as if to make eye contact with the viewer. And this seems to be their function in most cases: to communicate directly with the viewer in the moments of cultic commemoration and contemplation. At least two times a year the family held a meal and visited the tomb, during the rosalia (feast of roses), the commemoration day for the deceased, and the day of passing away, regarded by Christians as the deceased's birthday to the eternal life." [13]

The "cultic commemoration" by visiting, visually focusing on, and engaging spiritually with the departed Christian by means of a portrait is a form of image veneration. On Zimmerman's interpretation, the orant portrait becomes a means to do this because of what it is capable of doing as a ritual object: these portrait orants "communicate directly with the viewer" because they are composed "as if to make eye contact with the viewer." The language of "cultic commemoration" undeniably highlights that this is a cultic use of images. The modes of physical interaction mentioned above (visitation, beholding) and reverential attitudes (contemplating, remembering) acknowledge and honor the imaged person through their depiction. The honorific practices given to the image pass to the prototype.

Because this involves the ritual interaction with a Christian who has passed on from this life, we can see this practice as connecting to prayers to saints. Zimmerman's own interpretation does not necessarily identify the deceased as an intercessor, but rather as one for whom intercession is being made by the living. However, it is not too far-fetched to see how this can become prayer to a saint. Early Christian sources acknowledge the intercessory role of the deceased, and if someone lived with a certain level

of holiness (especially martyrs) it would automatically be more natural to ask *for* their prayers when ritually engaging with that person through his or her portrait. This question of the degree of holiness of a person may also change how we interpret orants who are facing Christ (like the one Zimmerman mentions in the arcosolium of the Domitilla catacomb). If painting the orant could be a way of joining in prayer *for* him or her, it is much more reasonable to think that the portrait of someone who has received abundant holiness (martyrs, confessors, etc.) would be a means of requesting prayer *from* that holy person.

Conclusion

Many portrait-orant images in the catacombs were used ritually. When we consider their directionality, relationship to other orant images whose usage was known, and position among other images, we can understand the purpose of these portrait orants. They were meant to evoke a visiting believer's prayer to Christ through his or her own orans stance directed to the Good Shepherd or staurogram image above. Other portrait-orant images that gaze towards the Christian viewer should be interpreted as meant to evoke spiritual interaction with the depicted deceased Christian through visiting, acknowledging, and focusing on the image.

Both ways of interacting with portrait orants are forms of image veneration: praying to Christ through hands outstretched towards an image of Him, or interacting spiritually with a departed saint by visiting, acknowledging, and focusing on the saint's image. We are on firm grounds in saying that these images (many of which are pre-Nicene) are evidence that early Christians had practices of image veneration.

1. A term attributed to Jas Elsner: “a ritual-centered attitude to images in antiquity, which influenced both ways of seeing and ways of thinking about art.” Jaś Elsner, Roman Eyes:Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 48. Quoted in Peppard, “Early Christian Art and Ritual.”
2. Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine
3. Benton, DiYanni, J. R, R (2008). Arts and Culture: An Introduction to the Humanities. Upper Saddle, New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p. 9.
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7. Jenson, Robin “Ritual and Early Christian Art” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, ed. Risto Uro. Oxford Univeristy Press (2018). p. 589
8. Peppard, Michael, “Early Christian art and ritual” in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; Routledge (2018). p. 284.
9. Jenson, “Ritual and Early Christian Art” pp. 591–592
10. Jenson, “Ritual and Early Christian Art” p. 592
11. The nature of the staurogram and its status as a holy image will be considered in the second volume in this series. Here, we can note that the presence of the alpha and omega letters next to the staurogram seem to make it quite clear that this is a symbolic image representing the crucified Christ, not merely some sign of the deceased’s Christian faith.
12. Zimmerman, “Catacomb Painting”, pgs. 27–28.
13. Ibid. 28–29.

9

The Good Shepherd as Early Icon

The image of the Good Shepherd is prominent in early Christian art, and its basic components may have been part of Christian awareness during the first century. [1] In addition to well-known instances in the catacombs, it shows up in the material record on Christian signet rings, sarcophagi, and lamps, and on the Eucharistic cups mentioned by Tertullian. I will argue that paintings of Christ as Good Shepherd often have a devotional use. Whereas portrait orants should often be seen as "cuing" the believer's devotional stance of focus and prayer away from themselves and upwards, these Good Shepherd images most plausibly functions as the prime point of attention, through which prayer for salvation would be directed to the Savior. To argue for this, I will bring forward considerations of the image's scriptural background, the context of its placement, and supporting quotations from scholars.

Scriptural Background

While at first the character-type of the shepherd seems quaintly pastoral or soft to modern people, in ancient and biblical culture there are strong connections between shepherding, royal authority, and divine power. Kings such as Hammurabi and Roman emperors such as Augustus were portrayed

(or conceived of themselves) as shepherding people. The blurry line between royal families and divine ancestry is significant in this regard, and several heroes and gods (Orpheus, Hermes) are distinctively shepherd figures in the Greco-Roman mythos. [2]

This makes the association between shepherding and kingship easier to see and understand in the Scriptures. Moses and David are both shepherds before being divinely commissioned to kingly roles that involve leading other humans on dangerous journeys and confronting adversaries. And it is in the Psalms of David that we particularly see an emphasis on God as shepherd. While we have previously considered Psalm 23 in connection to the Eucharist and divine patronage, there is also a foretaste Christ's saving acts of descent, and it is worth reconsidering the Psalm:

> 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
> He leads me beside still waters.
> 3 He restores my soul.
> He leads me in paths of righteousness
> for his name's sake.
> 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of
> death,
> I will fear no evil,
> for you are with me;
> your rod and your staff,
> they comfort me.
> 5 You prepare a table before me
> in the presence of my enemies;
> you anoint my head with oil;
> my cup overflows.
> 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of
> my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.
> (Ps 23:1-4)

Contemplation of this Psalm further informs our understanding of the Good Shepherd image, and the most plausible way to interpret its purpose in early Christian art.

First, we can note that the Psalm would have a particular resonance in the minds of early Christians with the sacraments of initiation. It mentions peaceful waters in the presence of which the soul is restored (baptism); the head anointed with oil, following the pattern of King David (chrismation); a table and an overflowing cup of blessings (communion). The Shepherd is thereby presented as the One who initiates Christians into the Paradise (green pastures) of the Church and her sacraments.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that these sacramental blessings come after obedience by means of attention: the sheep must allow the Shepherd to lead them. The gaze of the sheep, who are described in the Psalm as being led by the Shepherd, is presented as the characteristic behavior of the Christian towards Christ.

Third, the Psalm places an emphasis on Christ's salvific role in shepherding a Christian through what appears to be the underworld. The "valley of the shadow of death" is an expression that connects darkness, descent downward, and death. In the symbolic landscape of the Scriptures, there is no question that this must be associated with Sheol, and that God's presence with the Christian is the only source of comfort and salvation in this condition.

In Christ's own teaching in the Gospel of John, He portrays Himself as the Good Shepherd:

> 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. 11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (Jn 10:10-16)

As with Psalm 23, Christ portrays Himself as the supreme focus of the sheep. He is their point of attention and the One they are most familiar with

of all, since “they will listen to [His] voice.” The language of intimate reciprocal knowledge within the Godhead (“just as the Father knows me and I know the Father”) is transposed onto the relationship between Christ the Shepherd and the believers as sheep (“I know my own and my own know me”). All of this shows that the identification of Christ as the Good Shepherd points to God’s closeness to the humans whom He loves.

This is further reinforced by the decisive action of Christ, Who as Life-Giver comes “that they may have life and have it abundantly.” His love traverses the boundary between life and death for He will “lay down [His] life for the sheep.” This expands on the understanding of the Lord as the one who is with His people in the “valley of the shadow of death”, emphasizing how this divine protection and presence alongside believers are fulfilled in Christ’s life-bestowing death.

In Christ’s Parable of the Lost Sheep, He expands on this divine visitation to save humans who have wandered from God and His people:

> 4 What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Lk 15:4-7)

This parable expresses the sojourning of God as entrance into the earthly realm, with God descending from His “home” (heaven) in order to “go after the one that is lost.” The mystery of the Incarnation is indicated in this way, emphasizing again that to portray the Lord as shepherd is to speak of Him entering into human life, into the realm of danger, and potentially bearing death to save those who have left the company of the angels (“his friends and neighbors”).

The Good Shepherd Image as Icon in the Underworld

We have noted the Scriptural themes related to images of the Lord as divine shepherd: kingship, seeking and saving, descent into death and danger, and initiation into a community of intimate knowledge, plenty, and safety. In light of these connections, it is extremely important that the Good Shepherd image appears in the Dura Europas baptistry and the Roman Catacombs. Understanding its presence in these underworld contexts will show why it is best understood as a holy image, and will pave the way for arguments that it has a devotional role and was venerated.

A Christian's entry by burial (or alternately, visitation of deceased and buried loved ones) into the subterranean chambers of the catacombs corresponds spiritually to a descent into the underworld. It is this valley of the shadow of death that Christ leads the faithful through, since the insistence of the 23rd Psalm is on the divine presence of the Lord in this abyss. Consequently, the natural way of understanding the image of the Good Shepherd in the Arcisolium (dome-like structure in the roof) of underground chambers such as those of the Catacombs of Domatilla and the Catacombs of Callixtus is that this is not just a decoration or a reminder of Christ's saving descent into Hades, the land of the dead. The image of the Good Shepherd is instead a means by which Christ makes Himself present in the place of the dead which Christians enter in the catacombs. The image, after all, represents the presence of Christ as the Good Shepherd who enters the underworld to harrow it. But the image of the Good Shepherd is actually located in an underground place, a "valley of the shadow of death" where the dead are in fact buried deep in darkness. Because the image visually represents the presence of Christ which is actually in the very place the image is located, this image is most plausibly understood as an icon in the typical Orthodox sense—a holy image, manifesting spiritual reality visibly as a window to heaven.

This interpretation of the Good Shepherd image as communicative of divine presence in the underworld is reinforced by its continuity with the kiophoros figure. The kiophoros or "ram bearer" is an image of philanthropy connected to shepherd figures such as the hero Orpheus and

the god Mercury (Hermes), as well as protective spirits of the Roman household. Mercury was commonly understood as the god who escorted souls to Hades, while Orpheus entered the underworld to try and retrieve his wife. The image of Christ as Good Shepherd, however, inverts the meaning of Mercury: Christ is not the undertaker of souls, but the One Who invades Hades to bring the dead to the pasture of God. His descent is deeper and more majestic than that of Orpheus, for Christ succeeds as the invincible Creator in annihilating death itself, and raising all the dead. James Hadley ties together the depiction of Christ as Good Shepherd with the image's location in the Catacombs as follows:

> The catacomb complex of Callixtus (ca.190- 218) is the first known example of Christian painted art. . . Art in the catacomb formalized the setting and amplified its spatial qualities not only by distinguishing architectural volumes with characteristic red and green outlines but by positioning images upon discreet architectural surfaces, such as ceilings and vaults above cubiculum. . . [The] choice of the Callixtus Christians to incorporate images into their burial spaces implied an official status and material relationship between a specific place and the community. Moreover, given the dynamic of the image as a seen object that created a space event, it can be said that catacomb art represented the belief in religious experience that was mediated by location as the space took on an eventfulness in the watching of symbols and biblical images. . . Christian art seemingly played a significant role in stabilizing sacral perceptions in this expansion of Christian space. In the building of the Callixtus catacomb and the subsequent network of catacombs in Rome, the imaged space created a context in which the sacral nature of the space itself, the Christian dead, martyrs, biblical symbols of salvation, and the biblical promise of resurrection evoked a deeply felt character of the sacred (Bisconti 2013: 211-28). As to be expected, a primary image the viewer encountered in many of the hypogea was the

> image of Christ, either in the place of Hermes (the Good Shepherd), image of philanthropia, or later, Christ surrounded by the apostles. No greater pictorial affirmation of the space could have been made. [3]

This understanding that Christ is pictured as Good Shepherd in the Catacombs to acknowledge and manifest His presence as Harrower of Hades also explains the prominence of His image above the baptismal font in the early Christian Church at Dura Europas. As Michael Peppard has demonstrated, the art of Dura Europas is ritually connected to initiation of new Christians. The image of David and Goliath is plausibly connected to the nearby wall socket in which anointing oil could be placed. It mirrors and manifests the meaning of the rituals: the Spirit anoints you as part of the royal priesthood, to confront the powers of darkness and gain victory over them. The same applies to the paintings of women which likely portray the wise virgins who bear oil in their lamps and approach the bridal chamber. This is meant to correspond to the approach of catechumens to the nearby baptismal font, where union with the Lord is sealed and Christians arise to newness of life. In the words of art historian Vida Hall, at the Dura Europas baptistry, “You have the narrative events in the Gospel transformed into a ritual–kind of a timeless image.” [4]



Figure 9.1 Good Shepherd image above Dura Europas baptismal font, before 250 AD. The center of the picture includes the shepherd's flock grazing and perhaps drinking water, and the bottom left corner has Adam, Eve, and the serpent around the tree. Photo credit: The History Collection

In the lunette above the baptismal font is the image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Because baptism involves being "buried therefore with Him," (Rm 6:4) and consequently descending like Him into "the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40), there is an element of catabasis (descent into the underworld) in Christian baptism here. Christians go down into the waters and are drawn out by the Savior, who is master over chaotic water—hence the nearby images in Dura Europas of Christ pulling Peter out of the sea, and healing the paralytic by the pool. We cannot forget the way in which in

Peter's first epistle (3:18-22), he speaks of baptism as connected to salvation through (and from) dangerous water, by the power of Christ's resurrection—and connects it to Christ's own descent into the underworld. All of this reinforces how closely connected the Good Shepherd image above is to the baptismal waters below. There is something deeply iconic about the image in question.

This is not to say that the Good Shepherd image is an icon in the sense of a portrait with the facial likeness of Christ. However, it does seem to push the boundary between a merely symbolic image and a portrait. This is because such images of Christ use a human form and face (sometimes with considerable detail) to depict a Divine Person. When we compare this fact to the limits of holy images in the Old Testament, or the continual impossibility of representing God with human form in rabbinic Judaism, this is actually quite startling. The "image-incarnation principle" articulated by Saint John of Damascus and enshrined in the Second Council of Nicaea seems to be operating implicitly here in the background. This principle must have been present in a "seed form" [5] in order for Christians to find it justifiable to depict Christ using a human body and face as quasi-symbol. From this consideration of the iconic quality of the image, it is easy to begin establishing how these images of the Good Shepherd were interacted with ritually and venerated.

Veneration and Comparanda: Architectural Structures

We have noted how the close connection between tomb, baptism, underworld, and salvation resonates perfectly with the 23rd Psalm, Christ's self-identification as Good Shepherd, and His Parable of the Lost Sheep. This brings us back to the idea that the Good Shepherd image is meant to manifest divine presence invading the underworld. Already, such an understanding suggests that such an image would have a devotional function, serving as a focal point and inviting prayer to the actual Good Shepherd for salvation.

This is further reinforced by the image's context above the baptistry in Dura Europas, and its placement in the arcisolea of the catacombs. It is

widely acknowledged that an image's position in an architectural context can be geared towards evoking a devotional use. If an image follows the same form as various comparanda (artifacts or material remains that it resembles) whose purpose and use is known, this will allow us to draw conclusions about how the image under consideration would have been used. Beat Brenk has argued that in the Roman context, if images of holy things or divine beings are placed high up in a ceiling or an arched vault, they naturally invite an attitude of veneration:

> Mosaics and frescoes in the apses of cult rooms generated very particular effects, evoking in the viewer respect, admiration, awe and maybe even veneration. [6]

Brenk reinforces this later, when talking about cult rooms in Churches developed out of this Roman context to naturally and distinctly lead participants towards veneration, and eventually developing towards the image of Christ and the Theotokos so familiar at the center of most Orthodox Churches today:

> The Church sat back and watched how mosaics and frescoes in apses of cult rooms generated very particular effects, evoking in the viewer what I propose to call in this book 'visual worship'. The Virigin with the Child for example, being in full view of the believers, became the focal point of this visual worship. [7]

Brenk's comments concern a broad relationship between Roman architecture and Christian architecture that applies in the case of a semi-domed structure (arcisoleum) from the Roman catacombs. However, scholars commenting on the worship spaces at Dura Europas have noted the way in which structures in these places visually evoke ritual engagement. Sean Burrus, in his lecture "Jewish Art at Rome, Beit Shearim, and Dura Europas" applies this principle about how spaces are designed to facilitate

devotion to the synagogue at Dura Europas. He highlights the Torah scroll room, which mirrors the image of the Jerusalem temple in the arch above it, surrounded by Jewish liturgical objects such as the lulav, etrog, and shofar:

> The Torah shrine was the focal point of the hall, both spatially and visually. It was not only axially aligned with the entrance to the assembly hall, but it also held the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, during liturgies; and so because of that, it was a focal point of worship services and prayer. Architecturally, the Torah shrine featured a raised niche, set between two engaged columns, surmounted by a molded stucco conch. The major portion of the Torah shrine. . . was painted with panels of solid colors and geometric bands that mimicked polychrome marbles, and the face of the shrine above the niche is really where our attention is drawn. There, predominantly displayed against a blue field, is a frontal depiction of the Jerusalem temple with a rich golden yellow. . . [which contains] a central feature that has been alternatively identified as the temple doors or the ark of the covenant. . . [8]

Burrus' point that the raised niche with dome-like structure, jutting outward, and supported by two columns is key for facilitating devotion through the enclosed image can be applied further. This is very similar to the standard form for a recessed lararium (household shrine) in the Roman world: pointed arch above, columns mirroring typical temple structure to support it, and between them images of ancestors and household gods that would be points of devotional focus for the family. The same kind of niche structure is present in the Mithraeum at Dura Europas, and also the baptistry in the Christian House Church. As one lecturer notes:

The devotional focus for this [Mithraic] structure is a relief in a sacred niche, for the focus of worship, showing him slaying a bull. . .; images of the deity and his actions are the focus of this structure. . . [when we consider the synagogue,] the Torah niche on the wall, [is] the focal point of the room as indicated by columns and projection of the niche into space. This is where sacred Scripture would be kept, and makes the focus of devotion for this space the word of God. . . [In all three spaces, architectural elements] designate what is most sacred in their structures of worship using a niche, a recessed area, separated from the main space using similar visual cues, such as arches or columns, and decorated with imagery. The artists who decorated these structures, all of them—Christian, Jewish, Mithras worshippers, and Baal—were probably the same. They used the same style and similar materials to decorate these holy spaces. . . in a Roman way, the style of art endemic to this town. [9]



Fig. 9.2 Torah Shrine of Dura Europas. Photo credit: Zev Radovan



Fig. 9.3 Shrine to the god Mithras at Dura Europas. Image credit: Yale University Art Gallery

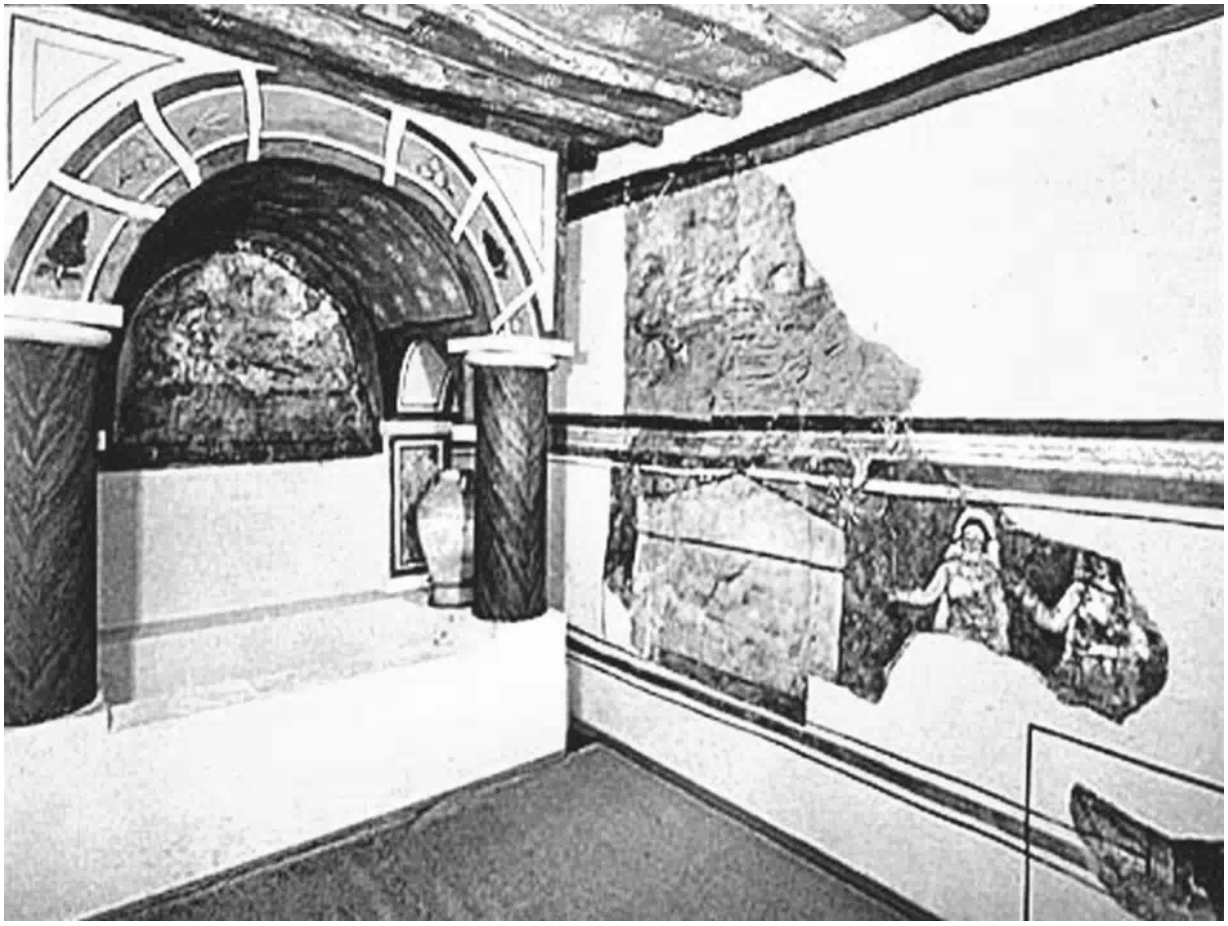

Fig. 9.4 Christian baptistry of Dura Europas. Partially reproduced at Yale University Art Gallery. Image credit: Darling Archive

In the above quotation, similar reasoning is employed to that used by Sean Burrus, but this time applied to the Christian baptistry. This kind of view appears also to have been held by the archeologist Kraeling who excavated Dura Europas. [10]Based on these considerations, it is most plausible to conclude that the use of known Roman architectural motifs in both the arcisolea of the Roman Catacombs and the lunette over the baptistry of Dura Europas is designed to facilitate focus and devotion through the Good Shepherd image to Christ Himself.

Veneration and Context: Salvation Orants and Prayer Practices

In both Dura Europas and the aforementioned catacombs, the gaze of the sheep (who in the Psalm are led by the Shepherd by the still waters, their souls restored by Him) can be seen as communicative to the baptized Christian. As I noted in the chapter on portrait orant images, the sheep help provide a model of piety which is characterized by attention towards the image of the Shepherd.

A similar principle is at work with what can be called “salvation orants” in the catacombs. These are images of characters from the Old Testament who are saved by God from danger: Jonah, Daniel, Noah, or the Three Holy Youths. Each is presented at the moment of salvation, and it is very noteworthy that in the Scriptural accounts such salvation involves rescue from the abyss—the underworld. Jonah is saved not just from the mouth of a sea monster but from “the belly of hell (Sheol or Hades)” (Jonah 2:2). Daniel is thrown into a pit and surrounded by lions, and the Three Holy Youths are cast into the fire. Even with Noah, we have noticed that the chaotic waters are associated with death, and that they wash away a generation of evil spiritual beings whom Peter would later describe as “imprisoned since the days of Noah.” Robin Jenson notes that Noah’s boat in Catacomb art is actually a box, shaped like a sarcophagus, and the frequent nudity of “salvation orants” such as Daniel is most naturally connected with baptism (which was done without clothes in the early Church). [11]

The images invite interaction between the viewer and the praying person from the Old Testament story being presented. The person who is visiting the catacombs is in the land of the dead, the underworld. He or she already knows that this is how to conduct oneself in an underground place of darkness—to pray, crying out to God for salvation. The images of orants in some sense reflect the spiritual state, therefore, of the person who is visiting the burial places of his or her loved ones. The salvation orants serve as an exemplar, reminder, and telos. But if you conform yourself to the directionality of their prayers, you will be praying towards the Good Shepherd above. The fact that these images inscribe and participate in the prayers of visiting Christians is acknowledged by Allen Farber in his article “Early Christian Art”:

> The appearance of these subjects frequently adjacent to each other in the catacombs and sarcophagi can be read as a visual litany: save me Lord as you have saved Jonah from the belly of the great fish, save me Lord as you have saved the Hebrews in the desert, save me Lord as you have saved Daniel in the Lion's den, etc. [12]

Faber's interpretation of this art as serving a cultic function can be taken a step further, in the same manner that we drew out the implication of Zimmerman's statement that some portrait Orants "become proper prayers when the deceased is shown making eye contact with Christ." [13] If a salvation orant is portrayed as a prayer that substitutes an image in place of letters and words, then portraying the prayer as happening towards the Good Shepherd image is quite significant. To "recite the prayer" by looking at the orants would involve praying with the same focus and attention towards the icon of Christ. Such a use of the Good Shepherd image would fall into the category of veneration by "praying through" an image.

The idea that the salvation orants are tied to a Christian's supplication of the Lord is corroborated by further facts about early Christian prayer practices in Rome. We know that during the time period that such images were first being painted in the early third century, prayers were made to some of the holy figures portrayed as salvation orants, such as the three holy youths in the fiery furnace:

> Tell me, you three boys, remember me, I entreat you, that I also may obtain the same lot of martyrdom with you, who was the fourth person with you who was walking in the midst of the furnace and who was hymning to God with you as from one mouth? Describe to us his form and beauty so that we also, seeing him in the flesh, may recognize him. (St. Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome, Commentary on Daniel, 30.1) [14]

The fact that this would be prayed by a bishop of Rome between circa 202–211AD, whose patronage would likely be related to the art of the Catacombs, provides additional support for the idea that these images had a cultic and devotional function.

A further way of developing this close connection between the Good Shepherd and the prayers of the "salvation orant" figures of the Old Testament righteous comes from the presence of this same pairing in a very different context: early engraved gems.

Jeffrey Spier notes the existence of signets depicting Noah in the Ark, Jonah, or the prophet Daniel in the lion's den. [15] The above example portrays Daniel in orans stance praying to the Good Shepherd surrounded by sheep above. The presence of these images in multiple contexts and their subject matter of holy people's request for divine favor and salvation suggest how important this image pair was to early Christians. The fact that this image would be inscribed on a signet—so deeply connected in the Roman context to sources of authority and honor, to the patronage of divine beings and ancestors, and often regarded as having apotropaic and spiritually binding qualities—further reinforces the devotional significance of images featuring the prayers of the Old Testament righteous and the protection of the Good Shepherd. It is quite possible that such an image would be looked at either to ask for Daniel's intercession or to follow his model of prayer to the Good Shepherd.

Additionally, after the ante-Nicene period, we find evidence that the Church in Rome had at some time developed prayer practices which were based on the actual physical images Christians made of Christ as the Good Shepherd. As Ethel Ross Barker notes, "the words of the ancient prayer for the dead in the Gelasian Sacrament are surely inspired by the actual fresco, 'Be merciful to him. . . Show Thyself to him the Good Shepherd and bear him on Thy shoulders." [16] Even if it cannot be proved that this prayer was used by Pope Gelasius in the 400s (to whom the ancient liturgical called the Gelasian Sacrament was credited in early Christianity), it is still very significant. This prayer specifically places emphasis on the image of the Good Shepherd, which is distinctively (though not quite exclusively) pre-Constantinian and therefore pre-Nicene. It is not unlikely on the basis of this quote that this practice of placing the Good Shepherd image in front of

someone, or bringing someone to such a holy image, would have originated in the pre-Nicene Church. Thus, the quote from the Gelasian Sacrament provides supporting evidence for the veneration of the Good Shepherd image.

Veneration and Formal Qualities: Baptism into the Good Shepherd

We have already noted how the art of Dura Europas is ritually connected to initiation of new Christians (the image of David connects to anointing, the processing virgins to baptism, etc.). But as we continue to reflect on the nature of baptism and its relationship to the Good Shepherd image above the baptistry, a number of considerations show how the ritual should be understood as baptism-into the Good Shepherd, using the image as a conduit for uniting Christians to Christ. Michael Peppard points to an interaction with the presence and activity of the Christ—through and by means of the image of the Good Shepherd—in the process of baptism:

> The painting of the shepherd and flock over the baptismal font also engages with the ritual movement in its location. The shepherd here carries a sheep aloft on his shoulders, while a flock of other sheep grazes or drinks water on the right side of the painting. The image is reminiscent of Psalm 23, a popular catechetical text across early Christianity, or parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7). When placed directly above a font, the image offers a striking interdependence between text, art, and ritual movement: the shepherd descends from above to lift a newly branded sheep from the pit of the font and add it to the number of the flock already congregated nearby. While it is not definitively clear whether the painted sheep are only grazing or are also drinking water, the combination of the two seems more likely. If so, an art-ritual transitive exchange also occurs between the depicted water of the painting and the physical

> water of the font. The “refreshment” or “restoration” of the “soul,” which Psalm 23 portrays as the result of the shepherd’s care, offered a biblical backdrop for the ritualized encounter with the art. [17]

The interactive aspect of the Good Shepherd image in the baptistry means that the acknowledgement of this image was key to participation in baptism. Christian baptism is always to be understood as baptism-into Christ, with water that becomes salvific by connection to Him as the one who officiates the sacrament. James Hadley comments on this participatory aspect of baptism images at Dura Europas, and how it relates to the Christian’s union with the presence of what is imaged:

> Execution of the baptistery images at Dura Europas indicates the community’s intention to create an affecting reality that involved the space and those who took part in ritual events. Viewing the baptistery images was not meant simply as a form of pedagogy representing Christian beliefs regarding baptism. Nor were the images simply signs or material representations of a dematerialized spiritual world. Rather, the image was intended to allow the viewer to partake in the induction of a number of effecting presences: The Shepherd, Adam and Eve, the Annunciation at the well, David and Goliath, the Healing of the Paralytic, Peter and Jesus walking on water, and the bridesmaids of Mt 25 (Serra 2006: 77–78). Consequently, the art was not intended to decorate but marked the house church as a space empowered to mediate religious experience and divine action. The images lent to the space a talismanic-like property which had the capability of eliciting the reality the images intended to represent. That is to say, images of healing and salvation pervaded the space and imaged the salvific event that took place through the Christians’ initiatory rites. At Dura Europas, the images should be considered then as what

> Fabrizio Bisconti has described as the movement in early Christian art toward the iconic; the actual mediated presence of the thing imaged through the gaze, which first becomes clear in the catacomb of Santa Tecla and then blossoms in Byzantine art (2013: 121, 303-10). [18]

Hadley's comment that the Dura Europas images are part of the "movement in early Christian art toward the iconic" is extremely significant. He speaks of "the actual mediated presence of the thing imaged through the gaze." This is for the sake of enacting a connection through the activity of baptism, since the image of the Good Shepherd allows one to "partake in the induction of" the effecting presence of Christ. [19] He denies attempts to reduce this to mere a merely didactic or decorative use of the images, and instead boldly says that the art was involved in mediating "religious experience and divine action" giving the space a "a talismanic-like property…eliciting the reality the images intended to represent." It is extremely significant that the images such as that of the Good Shepherd represented the character of the ritual done in the place where the image is located (we have noted the way the Good Shepherd is related to baptism). It is therefore most natural to take such images of "healing and salvation" as something to be interacted with that facilitated receiving the realities given in baptismal ritual.

For Peppard and Hadley, then, it is clear that there is a ritual uniting between the Christ Who is imaged and the baptized Christian through the image of the Good Shepherd. We can supplement their argument by noting how Paul presents baptism in sacrificial terms. This is particularly clear in Romans 6:12-13, wherein Paul further develops the baptismal teaching from earlier in the chapter by instructing the initiated in sacrificial and priestly terms:

> And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Regarding this passage, Alistair Roberts notes the following:

> The grounds for this exhortation are found in our union with Christ in his death and resurrection symbolically sealed in baptism. The sacrificial overtones in Paul's statement are to be seen not only in his use of the term 'present', but also in the notion of presenting 'members': sacrifices were offered to God in a dismembered form. This is also priestly in character: priestly initiation involved the symbolic devotion of limbs and organs to God's service. (cf. Ex 29:20) [20]

The idea that you are offering yourself towards God in baptism further confirms that the image of the Good Shepherd above the baptismal font is meant to "direct" worship to Christ through the image. This is made even clearer when we consider the way in which lambs are the paradigmatic sacrificial animals in the Old Testament. Additionally, the kiophoros-type image (which the Good Shepherd image of the Christians is stylistically based on) distinctly shows Roman piety as connected to the shepherd bringing a ram for sacrifice. The fact that Christians were offering themselves to God by dying and rising in the baptismal font below shows how the image of the Good Shepherd ritually functioned as a conduit for sacrificial worship.

Robin Jensen's comments about the relationship between the arch above the baptistry and analogous structures in tombs provides an interesting way of reinforcing the directionality of baptism, and the fact that it is baptism-into the Good Shepherd:

> The arched structure above the font is not simply a canopy but the exact image of an arcosolium placed above the tomb in many ancient hypogea, found in Syria as well as in the Roman catacombs. Consequently, candidates may have sensed they were being both immersed and buried. Immediately behind them is the reminder of the reason for

> this ritually symbolized death—the fall of Adam and Eve. Just above the image of the first man and woman (with a tree and serpent) is a reminder that baptism not only overcomes their sin, but also incorporates the faithful into the Good Shepherd's flock. [21]

While she does not make this explicit, the sense of being "both immersed and buried" as a result of the above arch points towards being "buried with" Christ (Romans 6:4, Col 2:12) in baptism, and the fact that baptism is baptism-into Christ: "As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:27; see also Romans 6:3) Taking these biblical insights and extending them into Jensen's perspective, it makes sense that the arched structure above the baptismal font and the iconography of the Good Shepherd embedded on the rear wall provide focus for the ritual activity of baptism. There is a devotional use of the image of Christ the Shepherd as the Savior whose death we are baptized into and as the One into Whom we are thereby incorporated. [22]

Turning this insight back to the Catacombs, it is not implausible to say that by burying Christians in a room underneath the image of the Good Shepherd, the result was an enacted prayer for the dead: "Good Shepherd, we place those buried here under your protection." When considering the close connections between Catacomb art and baptism as burial, and the fact that the Good Shepherd is an early way of portraying Christ saving the dead from Hades, this makes complete sense. It also places the Catacomb image in continuity with the visually similar image of the Good Shepherd in the baptistry at Dura Europas.

Conclusion

Given its background in biblical teaching as well as the artistic and architectural forms of the Greco-Roman world, it is very plausible that at least some instances of the Good Shepherd image are iconic—holy images that manifest God's presence and are useful as a focal point for devotion.

With this in mind, we can bring in considerations about its context with images and practices of prayer, make comparisons to similar images in architectural structures whose use we know, and attend to how the image's form orients the directionality of baptism. These evidences make it likely that the Good Shepherd image in the Catacombs and Dura Europas was meant to be venerated in several ways. It could be a central point of devotional attention during baptism, while visiting and commemorating deceased Christians. This image was meant to be used to pray towards Christ, asking Him for salvation from Hades for oneself and others. Finally, it was meant to provide directionality to baptism—baptism which is a burial into Christ, and a sacrifice of oneself to the Good Shepherd Who lays down His life for the sheep.

1. In Vision 5.3 of the Shepherd of Hermas (c. 90 AD - 130 AD), the author describes seeing “a man of glorious aspect, dressed like a shepherd, with a white goat's skin, a wallet on his shoulders, and a rod in his hand, and saluted me.” While this figure is “the angel of repentance” to whom Hermas has been entrusted and not Christ, the visual qualities described match “kiophorous” (ram bearer) images of philanthropy and Greco-Roman mythological characters.
2. My comments here and in the rest of this chapter are indebted to “The Good Shepherd and The Enthroned Ruler” by Jennifer Awes Freeman, in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context.*
3. Hadley, “Early Christian Perceptions”, p. 97
4. From Lecture “Early Christian: Dura Europus and Roman Catacombs” by Dr. Vida Hall, ETSU Online, link: https://youtu.be/YMQZ21lK8SA?si=qVWk9uvhleaAYVLp, accessed 5/21/24
5. A consideration which will be taken up in Volume 2.
6. Brenk, Beat, *The Apse, The Image, and The Icon: An Historical Perspective of the Apse as a Space for Images*, Reichert (2010). pgs. 109–110
7. Ibid.
8. Burrhus, Sean “Jewish Art at Rome, Beit Shearim, and Dura Europas”, Oregon Humanities Center, 2022. Link: https://youtu.be/PA9f9DdJcgk?si=uSWKkKnAXpMKPdcb. Accessed 5/21/24
9. From Lesson 31, Art and Religion in the Late Antique World Basic Small WEB MBL H264 400; lecturer is not identified. Link: https://youtu.be/5ebbr2RkAtg?si=aM7s63GwFjsOhDmH accessed 5/17/24
10. Lucinda Driven, summarizing the views of the early Dura Europas archeologist Carl Kraeling, notes how the image including the Good Shepherd with His sheep is in virtue of its “position above the font, the focus of the worshipper’s attention.” Kraeling’s view about the relationship between architectural structures and veneration seems to be similar to that of the other authors named in this section. See Driven, Lucinda “Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: The Meaning of Adam and Eve in the Baptistery of Dura-Europos,” ECA 5 (2008), p. 43.
11. Jensen, Robin. *Understanding Early Christian Art (2nd Edition)*, Routledge (2024). Pg. 104
12. Faber, Allen, “Early Christian Art”; article located on Smart History https://smarthistory.org/early-christian-art/; accessed 5/19/24
13. See Chapter 9, in the section “Were Portrait-Orants Ever Venerated?”
14. St. Hippolytus, Bishop of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel*, 30.1 trans. Thomas Coffman Schmidt 2010 T.C. Schmidt, 1st
15. Speir, “Engraved gems and amulets”, p. 145
16. Barker, Ethel Ross, “The Symbolism of Certain Catacomb Fescoes—I”; The Burlington Magazine, Vol. 24 (1913) pg 48
17. Peppard, “Early Christian Art and Ritual,” p. 281
18. Hadley, “Early Christian Perceptions”, p. 98
19. Similar point can be made about the various other figures
20. Roberts, Alastair, “Presenting Limbs and Organs: Baptism and Sacrificial Ethics”, Theopolis Institute (link: https://theopolisinstitute.com/baptism-and-the-body-2/ accessed 5/18/24)
21. Jenson “Ritual and Early Christian Art”, p. 600
22. Lucinda Driven reaches a very similar conclusion to Jensen: “Through immersion in the water, the neophyte retrieved the robe of glory; when the new Christian rose to his feet, he was greeted by the Good Shepherd and his sheep. They symbolize the Church, which is an anticipation of eschatological Paradise. The paradisiacal state that was lost with Adam and Eve was retrieved

through baptism.” This participatory understanding of the art treats it as meant to direct the baptized towards the Good Shepherd. See Driven “Paradise Lost” pg 55.

10

An Early Interactive Icon of Christ and the Theotokos

One of the earliest surviving images of the Theotokos and Christ Child is in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. The painting features a prophet, star, Mary, and Jesus. While at first appearing to many eyes to be simply narrative art which references a biblical event, there are a number of features which point to this being an open-ended or "three-dimensionally participatory" image which is meant to be interacted with ritually and venerated.

In what follows, I will first consider a particular program of Roman wall art in Pompeii, and how it was intended for interaction. Then I will highlight noteworthy features of the Theotokos and Child image from the Catacombs, building on the work of scholar Fabrizio Bisconti. Finally, the insights about interactive wall art in Pompeii will be applied to give arguments that the Christian image from the Catacombs was designed to be interacted with and venerated.

Participatory Narrative Art in Pompeii

There are many remarkably well-preserved wall paintings from this Roman city prior to its destruction by Mount Vesuvius. Among these is a mysterious wall mural in the "Roman Second Style" of painting. This

painting is found in Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries, and it is after this strange image which this residence is named. (Figure 10.1)

Looking at the image reminds one somewhat of Euripedes' "The Bacchae": women followers undergo some kind of change of consciousness as they approach the wine god Bacchus (Dionysius) who is accompanied by satyrs and Sileni. Its subject matter is not according to Christian tastes, but the meaning appears straightforward enough at first glance to someone familiar with the stories related to Bacchus.

However, what appear as simple narrative images are meant to be interacted with. Several considerations which point to this are laid out by Dr. Kleiner of Yale University [1]:

Mirroring/Resonance Between Art and Ritual Activity: The art depicts actual steps that would occur in a cultic initiation into the mysteries of Dionysius. Detail in this regard is very thorough, even including an image of a cultic assistant (a young child) reading the group's liturgy, and the purification process that certain ritual objects underwent by members of the sect before they would be used. This points clearly to an interactive purpose for the art, since it is almost certain that Room 5 was meant to be the location for meeting and initiation into the mystery cult of Dionysius. The art depicted what the inhabitants of the room did.

Processional Directionality from Art: The procession (as in, ritually walking in a direction) of figures in the room corresponds to how one would enter through the small doorway. Kleiner notes this:

> As you enter into the room and make a sharp left. . . you begin with the beginning of the story. The artist has orchestrated this in such a way so as to make it look like this woman who is standing here [at the beginning] has actually entered through the doorway of the room, and is now beginning to process from that doorway along the side of the room.

This woman, as it turns out, is an initiate who is being portrayed as a veiled bride for Dionysius in mystical marriage. The fact that she is

portrayed as entering where actual initiates would enter shows a profound convergence between the subject matter of the image and the reality it seems to mirror and instigate. The art provided a pathway of steps for interaction.



Figure 10.1 Wall Mural from Room 5 in the Villa of the Mysteries displaying a Dionysiac ritual. Image credit: Azoor Photo Collection

Cuing Function of Images: According to Kleiner, the mural's portrayal of Ariadne—the god of wine's mortal lover—is most plausibly interpreted as serving an "inspiring" (i.e., cueing) function. It would provide a model for participation, by instilling hope that these other mortal woman could enter into mystical marriage with Dionysius too. Several of the images of the ritual participants' faces show significant affect in response to the presentation of ritual objects. The least offensive of these (if you get my meaning) is a terrifying mask that strikes fear into one of the female figures. While this is more speculative, it is not unreasonable to claim that one could take these images as providing a kind of catharsis for new initiates in

response to the strange and terrifying nature of the mysteries they were being inducted into. The art was meant to elicit distinct attitudes to what was portrayed to facilitate disposition towards the rituals.

Facial Directionality as Window for Participation: One particular woman is pictured in the mural with a purple skirt and laurel wreath, wearing an arm bracelet. Kleiner notes that unlike many of the figures in the painting, this one faces outward in a way that seems extremely deliberate and purposive on the part of the artist:

> She really is one of the only figures that looks out at us, the spectator. She really is basically confronting us. We link eyes with her when we look at this particular painting, and the artist is obviously trying to establish fairly early on a connection between the viewer and what is happening in this scene."

This shows that a particular formal quality—namely the directionality of a portrayed person's face and eyes—can indeed be meant to evoke participation by the viewer. Anthropologists distinguish bland, generic, 3rd-person looking ("I'm watching an ant crawl on the ground") from the "cultic stare" with which art and objects of ritual significance are to be looked at ("I am rapt in awe, beholding a mystery or the presence of a spirit through this image"). For Kleiner and other art historians, an outwardly directed face on a painted figure is in many cases meant to be viewed in this more immersive and reverential way.

The above reasons are grounds for thinking this piece of Roman art which survives today was meant to be interacted with and participated in—not just viewed. The images' formal qualities coupled with their context as they coalesce around portrayal of a deity (Bacchus/Dionysius) show that ritual participation was part of this art's purpose.

The 3rd Century Painting of the Theotokos and Christ Child in the

Catacombs of Priscilla

Turning now to the image of Christ and Mary in the Catacombs, we can note the following. The scholar of the Roman catacombs Fabrizio Bisconti explains that Catacomb art in Rome tends to be according to the "Second Pompeiian/Roman Style" of painting, which connects it to the wall art in Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries:

> During the third century, the catacombs were decorated with a type of fresco characterized by this figurative typology, somewhat inappropriately defined as "red and green line style," which originates in the final synthesis of the Second Pompeian style and simultaneously appears in domestic buildings, especially those of Rome and Ostia, as the decoration of the Villa Piccola of San Sebastiano shows (Ferri 2015). This decorative typology evolves over time in the second half of the third century or throughout the following century. The lines become wider bands, and we see the introduction, especially on the socles and in the negative architecture, of faux marble and transennae (Bisconti 2006a). [2]

Bisconti contextualizes this pre-Nicene (late 200s) image of Mary in the Catacomb of Priscilla as follows:

> By the fourth decade of the third century, the paintings of the Roman catacombs begin to embrace scenes related to the infancy of the Savior. The fresco of the Madonna of Priscilla is emblematic, as it is represented in the central area of the first floor of the catacomb. Here appears a representation of a veiled Mary seated with the baby in her arms. In front of her, a prophet in a tunic and pallium points to a star,

resulting in a figurative reduction that condenses the prophecy of Balaam or Isaiah, and the fulfillment of the same by the birth of the Messiah.



Fig. 10.2 Catacombs of Priscilla, early third century. Image of Christ Child and Mary Theotokos with prophet pointing to star. Image credit: The Picture Art Collection

> This refined iconographic selection, which alludes, on the one hand, to the mystery of the incarnation and on the other to the harmony of the Old and New Testaments, marks a response to the Christological controversies that arose in the third century and evolved in complex ways in the fourth-century Trinitarian debates and the disruptive Arian controversy. (Ibid.)

Bisconti's characterization of this image of Mary and Christ shows a strong connection to later portrayals of Theotokos and Child, even in terms of the appearance of Mary (veiled, seated). It is interesting also to consider the way in which Mary is portrayed as encompassing and surrounding Christ. This can be seen as connected to the broader theme in portrayals of Mary in early Christian and Eastern Christian art as a place of manifestation or place of life: the temple, the throne, the paradise of God. Here, drawing away from her only temporarily towards those who approach the image, Christ is still close to the heart of His Mother who witnessed His holy birth; for, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Luke 2:19, ESV)



Fig. 10.3 Left: Detail of Christ child, Mary Theotokos from the Catacombs of Priscilla. Right: Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria. Byzantine era. Museum: Sinebrychoffin Taidemuseo, Helsinki. Image credit: Alamy (photographer unlisted).

Further, we can note that Christ is facing outward towards the viewer. This adds an additional element to how Mary is being portrayed: she is showing Christ to us. This is not quite visually identical, but connected in purpose to her portrayal in the “Directress” (Hodegetria) Icon. (Fig. 10.3) It is striking that such an early image of Mary in Rome would be in a pattern similar to this, for the Directress is the form of image attributed to the hand of Saint Luke the Evangelist. And while this harmony is not a proof of anything, it is exactly the kind of thing we would expect if the tradition about Luke as the first iconographer were authentic.

Bisconti notes that parallel images representing the Visitation of the Magi were present in the Catacombs at an earlier date:

> Other New Testament episodes related to Christological matters also appear in the third century. A cubiculum of the Catacomb of Priscilla depicts the first scene of the Annunciation (Mazzei, 1999), and the first adoration of the Magi appears in the Greek chapel, also datable to the middle years of the third century (Recio Veganzones 1980). In both examples, the scenes have a Christological character in the sense that the Madonna is not the true protagonist of the scene but appears as a functional figure in the description of the infantia Salvatoris, a long-running theme that will find its most solemn and complex application in the Sistine arch of the Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, where the canonical scenes that arose in the art of the catacombs are enhanced by episodes inspired by the apocryphal writings, especially by the Proto-Evangelium of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. (Ibid.)

These considerations suggest that by the time the image in the Catacombs of Priscilla under consideration was made, there was already an existing artistic association between the Theotokos and Child on the one hand, and the visitation of the magi on the other. The fact that this precedent existed in Rome beforehand ("middle years of the third century") increases the probability that this connection was intended by the painter who made this image in the fourth quarter of the third century. As we approach the question of the use of this image, it will be important to keep in our minds the fact that portrayals of the visitation of the magi are plausibly part of the artistic-theological background for this painting.

Arguments that the Image was Venerated

With the components, qualities, meaning, and background of the image in mind, we now turn to the question of its use. Several considerations support

the claim that it was venerated (interacted with ritually in a way that involved honorific attitudes and gestures):

First, as Bisconti notes, the Catacomb art in general follows the Second Pompeiian Style. This is the same style employed in the interactive ritual images from the Villa of the Mysteries. While it is possible to have images in this style which are not designed for ritual interaction, the fact that some paradigmatic and important surviving Second Style art had a ritual function does lay a foundation for the plausibility of the claim that other such images were interactive. The significance of this point is compounded if there are other features which the Catacomb painting has which find comparanda in the highly interactive art from the Villa of the Mysteries. And it turns out that this is indeed the case, as we shall see in what follows.

A second argument is the use of various formal qualities of an image as a way of directing attention within the image itself. In considering the art which was used for initiation into the cult of Dionysius, it was noted that certain gestures and facial expressions directed towards persons and objects would cue attention to specific parts of the painting and therefore the rituals it represented. When we turn to the image of the Theotokos and Child in the Catacombs, a similar internal logic of attention seems to be present. The fact that the prophet (whether Balaam or Isaiah) is pointing towards the star invites or cues a centering of attention on it. The star itself then becomes a means for directing attention towards Christ. This is present in the symbolic logic of the image already, since stars are signs of light which themselves point to some further referent (a wish, a never-land, etc.). But for the typical viewer who knows the biblical references which are being worked with, the need to re-center attention on Christ and His Mother is even more evident. And Mary looks at her child, providing us a model of attentiveness to the Word of God. Our focus naturally shifts as we look anywhere at the image, becoming redirected towards the One most deserving of attention.

Third, as we reflect on the scene from the Scriptures which forms the narrative background for this image—namely the visitation of the magi, led by the star to Christ—we come to an important realization. The magi are conspicuously absent. But why would this be the case?

We know that with several early Christian images, a scene can be presented as incomplete in order to invite participation. To recall Peppard’s examples in his “Early Christian Art and Ritual” if the floor mosaic by the

altar has four loaves of bread depicted in the basket, where is the fifth loaf of bread, to complete the reference to the feeding of the 5,000? If there is an image in a burial chamber of four wise virgins, where is the fifth attendant, to complete the reference to the parable? In both cases, it is plausible that the image is meant to be completed by the participation of the viewer—either offering bread on the altar, or praying for the soul of the deceased person buried in the chamber to become bridal attendant #5. The image is "open-ended" or "3-dimensionally participatory", with the viewer or participant becoming the third dimension of the image by means of interaction.

When viewed in light of these other images, the painting of the Theotokos and Child from the Catacomb of Priscilla can be seen as open-ended as well. As the Magi approach Christ guided by the star and prophecy, we are meant to approach the image of Christ guided by the star and prophecy. The viewer becomes a participant in the visitation of the Magi to honor the Divine King Who has come to earth. The image can therefore be seen as meant to evoke an honorific response from like that of the Magi: approaching, reverently beholding, rejoicing before Christ.

Fourth, we must again consider the interesting way in which Jesus Himself is portrayed as turning to view us. In the Villa of the Mysteries, we saw an outward-facing woman in the mural, whom Kleiner claimed was meant to be interacted with and to serve as an attention point during ritual. Something similar seems to be going on with this image of Christ. His outward-facing stance is best understood as inviting us to interaction with the person portrayed.



Fig. 10.4 Left: Detail of the Christ child with Mary Theotokos from the Catacombs of Priscilla. Right: Detail of initiate bringing sacrifice from the Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. Image credit: Art Media/Heritage Images. Note the outward-facing figures, displayed in a manner that blends representation of an event with portraiture.

When you think about it, it is a striking feature, and not at all necessary that Christ would be looking at us; He just as easily could have been looking at his mother only, or upward at the star, etc. The scholar of early Christian art Robin Jenson argues that portraiture or outward-looking images of a person's face is meant to be participatory and tends to cue interaction with the person depicted, especially in the context of ancient art:

> Portraits have special functions and power. They serve to represent a being, whether mortal or divine, rather than illustrate a story or symbolize an idea. By presenting the model's face to the viewer's gaze, they engage the viewer in a distinct manner, making eye contact as it were and even seeming to look back at the viewer. This prompts the viewer

> to address them, or to feel affection or fear for instance, as if the images were actually the persons they portrayed. Encountering a model's portrait face to face is entirely different than looking at a narrative image depicting an historical event or mythological scene, as pleasing, inspiring or edifying as that may be. The engagement with a portrait can be distinctly intimate and personal. [3]

Finally, we can recall what Beat Brenk says about how the convergence between architecture and images can evoke veneration. While his comments most directly referred to early built Churches, the fact that catacombs were clearly Christian cultic spaces and had many similar architectural forms implies that much of what he says can be applied to them. Brenk also helpfully points to the significance of a certain type of image—the Theotokos and Child—as having a growing significance in early Christian devotion:

> Mosaics and frescoes in the apses of cult rooms generated very particular effects, evoking in the viewer respect, admiration, awe and maybe even veneration. . . The Church sat back and watched how mosaics and frescoes in apses of cult rooms generated very particular effects, evoking in the viewer what I propose to call in this book 'visual worship'. The Virigin with the Child for example, being in full view of the believers, became the focal point of this visual worship. [4]

It is quite plausible to see in this early image from the Catacombs of Priscilla an early example of what Brenk refers to, and to identify it as one of the pre-Nicene Church's best-preserved devotional images of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Mother.

Conclusion

Because of artistic comparanda which follow the Second Pompeian style, the logic of attention in the formal qualities of the image itself, and the image's apparent incompleteness apart from the visitation of the viewer-as-magi, this early image of Theotokos and Child from the Catacomb of Priscila was likely venerated. These arguments are strengthened by further consideration of the outward-looking face of Christ, presented in quasi-portrait form indicating it was meant to be engaged with. Here, Mary's role as a place of manifestation and place of God is to provide a living canvas on which the Image of the Father can be painted. She points the way to Him, simultaneously directing us to her Son, and presenting Him to us to glorify.

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1. Kleiner, Diana E. E., "8. Exploring Special Subjects on Pompeian Walls", from Roman Architecture at YaleCourses (9/14/2009), accessed 6/18/24
2. Bisconti, Fabrizio. "The Art of the Catacombs", in *The Oxford Handbooks of Early Christian Archaeology* edited by W.R. Caraher, T. W. Davis, D. K. Pettegrew. Oxford University Press (2019)
3. Robin Jenson, From Idols to Icons Insert reference
4. Brenk, Beat, *The Apse, The Image, and The Icon*, pgs. 109–110

Conclusion to the First Volume and Preview

The project of this series is to show that there was Christian image generation before the time of the First Council of Nicaea 325 AD. After briefly considering the scholarship, a number of distinctions and definitions were introduced: veneration vs. worship, varieties of images, specific modes of veneration, and the concept of an intrinsically honorable image. With all of this in mind, we began to consider evidence of early image veneration.

This first volume has dealt with written evidence and paintings from before 325 AD. Among the written evidence are several testimonies to the veneration or intrinsically honorable status of the cross. Tertullian (c. 155-220AD), speaks of the cross as a "consecrated" (holy) sign, "the standard of Christ" and owns the pagan accusation that Christians are a "priesthood of the cross." The writings of Minucius Felix and Saint Justin Martyr (c. 100-165AD) show an awareness that battle standards such as trophies are objects of veneration. It is therefore very significant that both Saint Justin and Saint Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 108-140) describe the cross in terms of a battle standard, modeled after the Roman trophy (which is wooden with a cross-shaped form). Saint Justin describes the cross as "the greatest symbol of [Christ's] power and rule," present in the order of the cosmos and human craft (the sails of ships, ploughs, etc.). Saint Ignatius describes a total devotion to the cross (the scholar Reijners paraphrases the Saint as saying "my spirit bows itself at the foot of the Cross") and this standard of

the cross is described as “set up in the one body of the Church” indicating actual images of it. This raises the question of whether veneration of images of the cross originates in the apostolic age, and in addition to Saint Ignatius (who lived in the first century) we also have the testimony of the Epistle of Barnabas (written c. 70-132) which appears to describe the cross as an object of devotion during baptism. These testimonies are corroborated by Saint Justin Martyr’s teaching that through His work as a carpenter making plows and yokes (crossbeams), Jesus “taught the symbols of righteousness” which indicates holy images of the cross are authorized by the Lord Himself. Some pre-Nicene cross-shaped images depict veneration like that of the Roman trophy standards, and the possibility of surviving first century Christian images of the cross from Pompeii was briefly considered.

A second kind of inherently honorable image is the signet ring. The seals on such rings functioned as loci of authority, and the kinds of images, material composition, and spiritual power of signets could lead to them receiving gestures of reverence. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) taught that Christian baptismal signet rings should represent sources of authority and divine power (Christ, the Spirit, the cross), the kinds of images likely to be venerated in the ancient world. These rings were to be composed of gold (the most honor-evoking material) and by describing Christ bestowing the golden Christian signet, “Clement accords to Jesus the imperial prerogative of granting the right to wear a gold ring (anulus aureus). . .such rings, like baptism itself, were surely thought to have apotropaic, protective powers.” (Margaret Mitchell) Just as a flag is venerated by being entrusted and ceremonially handled by an appointed officer, so likewise the golden seal ring was ceremonially handled and honored. The ring’s status as set-apart and ceremonially bestowed is also attested in Tertullian, and given its apotropaic (spiritually protective) quality it makes sense it would be venerated like other small holy objects in the ancient world. Clement speaks of the seal of the Lord in ways that connect it to the emblems of mystery religions, and the phylacteries (tefillin) of Judaism—both of which are small holy objects. We also noted that a late first or early second century Christian sermon instructs Christians to “keep” the seal of baptism and prevent it from being “defiled” (which seems to be referring to signets, treated in a way analogous to “honoring the uniform”).

A possible Christian signet from Pompeii with the spiritually-powerful symbol of the cross was considered as well.

Origen of Alexandria is not an aniconist as some readers of him conclude; instead, he attests to early Christian belief in showing honor to the imperial image, and his invective against images was targeted against idols (cult statues which were believed to be the bodies of gods and were given sacrifices). Origen also affirmed the existence of early Christian altars, believing they were made holy by the offering of the Eucharist on them. Like the biblical book of Hebrews, he follows the early Christian understanding that the altar is an image of the heavenly altar of God. This holy representation can be honored, and Origen attests to the practice of adorning and decorating the altar as one of several pious actions of veneration to be done in Church (including bowing your head to clergy and honoring the servants of God).

Tertullian attests to a Christian practice of drinking from Eucharistic cups with paintings of the Good Shepherd on them. James Hadley notes that ceremonial cups were “identified by images of the deity in whose worship they were utilized,” and the visual qualities of such cups indicate the images were meant to be looked at during ritual. Tertullian’s own language points to the special role of the painting: it dedicates the cup to the worship of Christ, it is meant to be looked at to properly approach Communion, and plays a role in the union between Christ and the believer who approaches the chalice. It seems Tertullian himself is not opposed to this image, but rejects its misuse by Christians who act as though the shepherd on the cup is someone other than Christ. This points to the fact that such images must be given ritual recognition as representations of Christ in order for worship to be directed to him. The idea that honor is to be given through acknowledgement of the image seems to also track with an image of Christ on an early gold glass ceremonial drinking cup from the Roman catacombs. Additionally, evidence that at least some Eucharistic cups were composed of gold or silver indicates that they would be given honorific gestures, since early Christians held to a hierarchy of materials that saw gold and silver as most likely to elicit honor.

Saint Methodius of Olympus speaks of the existence of early Christian golden images of God’s angels which are made to glorify God. His context is a discussion of images of the emperor as “king and lord”, and his insists

“men honor every image in the world” especially the honorable imperial image of gold or silver. The Christian’s angel images are described in a way that parallels the Roman imperial portraits, both in composition (gold) and significance (emphasizing the authority of angels as “principalities and powers”). His teaching connects to the practice of venerating angels in Saint Justin Martyr, and a widespread early Christian belief that honor given to images passes to their prototypes.

Various lines of physical evidence from pre-Nicene Christian paintings confirm that the practice of image veneration is early. By analyzing the formal qualities of an image, its context in architecture and among other images, and by comparing to other images which seem to be similar in kind (and whose use is known) we can come to reasonable conclusions about how surviving images were interacted with. In the Roman catacombs, Christian images of orants (human figures with arms outstretched in prayer) bear resemblance to other ancient counterpart images. Sumerian, Egyptian, and Roman images of orants provided a model of piety and had functions of directing or evoking prayer. When placed underneath a depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd with eyes focused and arms stretched to Him, the Christian orant image seems designed to evoke prayer to Him as divine Patron. Scholars such as Allen Faber and Norbert Zimmerman confirm that these orants should be understood as a “visual litany” with the images as “proper prayers”; if so, the onlooker would participate in such prayers with the orant’s characteristic direction and focus towards the image of the Good Shepherd. This is an example of the veneration by “praying through” an image. Additionally, Zimmerman notes the following regarding portrait orant images from the late 200s:

> In the majority of portraits the individual depicted looks straight ahead out of the image, as if to make eye contact with the viewer. And this seems to be their function in most cases: to communicate directly with the viewer in the moments of cultic commemoration and contemplation.

This language of “cultic commemoration” is basically equivalent to what Orthodox and Roman Catholics mean by “veneration.”

The paintings of the Good Shepherd in the Catacombs and the Church at Dura Europas also seem intended for veneration and interaction. The presence of the image of Christ as Good Shepherd in these underworld contexts (since the baptistry at Dura has strong connections to a burial chamber like a catacomb) points to the Scriptural theme of the Lord shepherding His people through the valley of the shadow of death, and points to Christ’s incarnation and death by which He leads the lost sheep back to safety. The architecture of the spaces that house images of the Good Shepherd in the Catacombs and at Dura Europas are structured like other shrines that contain honorable images. The depiction of the Good Shepherd can connect to a variety of prayer practices, and its relationship to baptism and burial suggests it is far more than decorative, commemorative, or didactic. James Hadley notes that at Dura

> The art was not intended to decorate but marked the house church as a space empowered to mediate religious experience and divine action. The images lent to the space a talismanic-like property which had the capability of eliciting the reality the images intended to represent. That is to say, images of healing and salvation pervaded the space and imaged the salvific event that took place through the Christians’ initiatory rites. At Dura Europas the images should be considered then as what Fabrizio Bisconti has described as the movement in early Christian art toward the iconic; the actual mediated presence of the thing imaged through the gaze. . .

Finally, an early Catacomb representation of Christ and Mary the Theotokos has a number of features that point to its status as an early icon. This painting is composed in an artistic style associated with interactive imagery, and the logic of direction within the image naturally orients us towards Christ. The image also appears incomplete and “open-ended,”

inviting the viewer to approach and revere Christ like the conspicuously missing magi; and the outward-looking face of the Son of God provides a striking example of portraiture. As Robin Jenson notes, the outward-facing aspect of portraits "prompts the viewer to address them, or to feel affection or fear for instance, as if the images were actually the persons they portrayed." Such an image of Christ and His Mother was likely venerated.

The early Christian writings and surviving paintings explored in this first volume give multiple independent (but mutually reinforcing) lines of evidence that image veneration was practiced by pre-Nicene Christians. The next volume will consider post-Nicene written attestation to image veneration before 325 AD, looking at Eusebius of Caesarea's comments on a statue which was revered as an image of Christ, as well as his surprising claim that images of Christ and the Apostles have representations traceable to the Apostolic age; these images he puts in the same category as intrinsically honorable portraits of emperors, heroes, and philosophers. Accounts of pre-Nicene martyrs who are described as honoring images of Christ will also be considered. An array of enemy attestation also deserves our attention, with Roman "mock icons" (the Alexamenos Graffito and another "donkey-priest" portrait meant to mock Christ that Tertullian mentions) and Gnostic critique of Christian image veneration (the Acts of John). The case of the Carpocratian Gnostics mentioned by St. Irenaeus will also be considered, and it will be argued that they are plausibly taken as trying to "one up" an Orthodox practice of image veneration. There are several surviving early Christian artifacts and epigraphs which portray image veneration: gems depicting crucifixes, and cases of "inscribed veneration" in engravings where a Christian symbolic image is shown with a wreath around it). Other objects, such as lamps with Christian iconography and certain signet images, seem designed for devotional use. Pre-Nicene understandings of Old Testament symbols like the bronze serpent will be shown to support image veneration, as well as an examination of images inside of Christian texts (the "T" cross, the Staurogram). The third and final volume will offer a surprising reconsideration of Old and New Testament texts to look for evidence of image veneration, and will respond to theological criticisms of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

Appendix A: Distinguishing Christian Image Veneration From Idol Worship

The simple gestures of honor that many Western people give to flags and monuments contrast sharply with the idea and practice of idolatry in the ancient world. There is a range of beliefs and practices which can be associated with idolatry, but it typically involves believing that a divine being is identical to, or identified with, a material object, or has a cult statue as a body. This is reflected in the consecratory or nostril-opening ceremonies which were practiced in the ancient Near East. Once a temple was completed as a house for a god, a statue of that god was placed in the very center, and its nostrils were ceremonially opened so that the statue could be indwelt by the god's spirit (breath). An example of this can be found in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which speaks of one god as having the designated role of animating statues: "My mouth is opened by Ta with that chisel of metal by which he opened the mouth of the gods."

This belief in animated statuary tends to be accompanied by the idea that the spirit of a lower-level divine being is in search of a body and cannot live in the physical world without such a body. Having a body makes the lower-level divinity able to receive things from servants in the physical world (humans) which will sustain it and give it more life, thereby extending its bodily presence. Such spirits were in many cases understood as not being powerful enough to make themselves known to humans clearly apart from the use of the idol-as-body. This is connected to the idea that idols are

fashioned for the purpose of confining these spirits and can therefore be used to manipulate or bargain with them.

Successor civilizations to Egypt such as Greece and Rome continued the tradition of believing in idols as "animated (living) statuary." This is something Jaś Elsner documents in his lecture, "The Animated Figurine in Mediterranean Archaeology: the End of a History." [1] Prominent examples of Greco-Roman references to animated statuary include Alexander the Great's small bronze statue of Hercules, which Roman authors describe him as loving and treating as a companion in his journeys. He gave sacrifices to it, and even felt the need to apologize to the statuette when he destroyed Hercules's hometown of Thebes. The statuette had a kind of deceptive aspect in terms of size, appearing to have a magnitude and quality more appropriate to a life-size statue. At Alexander's death, the statuette changed its expression and the bronze began to sweat; Elsner comments that "effectively, the figurine foretells and arguably mourns its owner's immanent death." Another instance from the Roman world is the orator Lucius Apuleis, who recounts a number of his cultic practices while being tried for using sorcery. He describes a statue of Mercury that he possessed, towards which he expressed physical affection as though the object were indeed some god's body. To this statue, he describes himself as offering up wine and incense, and asking it to curse his enemies. A final example is the story of Pygmalion, the misogynistic sculptor in Ovid's poems whose hatred of women's inferiority drove him to fashion one out of ivory. In addition to forming lustful attachment to the lifelike image, he prayed to Aphrodite who made the statue come alive for him to marry and conceive a family with. We can add to Elsner's example by noting that the early Christian philosopher and theologian Clement of Alexandria preserves a detail from Philostephanus's version of the story that clarifies the element of idolatry in what Pygmalion did: "The image was Aphrodite, and it was nude." (*Protrepticus*, 4)

Such a view of idols as animated (living) statues explains all the accompanying practices associated with idolatry. Most importantly, there are sacrifices, which act as a way of feeding the idol since it is the body of the god. Sacrifice is primarily to be understood as a meal in which a divine being is welcomed to become present. By offering a bit of their substance

(whether food or drink), the worshippers entrust their lives to the divinity embodied in the statue. Other practices such as dressing up the idol make sense by analogy with the human need for clothes on the body. Ceremonies that involve violence or promiscuity follow a similar "logic" as a way of joining with or satisfying the passions of the spirit embodied in the idol, much like humans can wrongfully take pleasure in the sight of evil sensual action.

One thing which Christians clearly and resolutely claim is that idols foster attachment to created beings and materiality. The ceremonial practices towards idols "catch" on corporeality and get the participant stuck in the realm of desire and anger as opposed to passing through and fostering ascent to a higher spiritual reality. This is also connected to the idol's attempt to represent divinity itself in a physical way—a serious problem if divinity is transcendent and infinite as Christians say. Father Maximus Constas notes the following:

> Beyond their artistic differences, the idol and the icon indicate two modes of being, variations in the mode of visibility, which give shape to variations in the mode of divine apprehension. The idol delights in physical existence, in the delight we experience in vision itself, and its highest aim is to make that delight perceptible to us. In concretizing the splendor of the visible, the idol dazzles and so arrests our vision, confining it within a closed, self-referential system, allowing us to see nothing outside itself. The idol consequently reduces the divine to the measure of the human gaze, arresting the movement of ascent precisely at the threshold of the visible. [2]

This tendency to "obstruct" spiritual sight and anchor people in materiality is reinforced by the ways in which some idols were meant to imitate life, portraying the spiritual using a physically lifelike image. Many early Christians (such as Clement of Alexandria in his *Protrepticus*) expressed concern for the deceptive power of certain forms of art. That kind

of art which aimed at a strict and precise imitation of life could deceive people and trap them in a prison of attachment to the image-as-object. Stories such as that of Pygmalian provided an illustration of the sensuality connected with lifelike art, and its ability to excite passions and cloud objective awareness. Similarly, cult statues (idols) of the gods would often attempt to offer a realistic portrayal of divinity in a human-looking form to increase the impression that the being depicted was indeed embodied in the image.

Certain more sophisticated pagan authors gave a symbolic reinterpretation of the practice of idolatry. They claimed these images were indeed representations of transcendent reality, and provided a means of connection to higher reality and cosmic patterns via contemplation. A classic example of this can be found in Porphyry's text *On Images*. His rereading of traditional cult statues (idols) of the Greco-Roman deities has sometimes been compared to Christian understandings of iconography as symbolic and geared towards facilitating ascent to higher realities (archetypes). However, there are problems both with Porphry's reinterpretation of pagan practice and an attempt to connect it to Christianity. In brief, Porphyry very clearly endorses the practice of sacrificing to cult statues (idols). But because sacrificial worship clearly involves the presentation of a meal, and the ability to eat presupposes that someone or something is living, the practice of idolatry implicitly acknowledges that the cult statue is alive. Porphyry's reinterpretation of idolatry according to the categories of "symbol," "likeness," or "representation" appears therefore to be an ad hoc justification for the practice. To the extent that Porphyry would have accepted the practice of sacrificing to images, he implicitly acknowledged that his interpretation of the images of the gods was incorrect and not in line with the actual practices of paganism. Further, Porphyry's theory is utterly different from the Christian theology and practice of image veneration. (See **Appendix B** for an in-depth treatment of Porphyry and whether his teaching about images has any relevance to Christian understandings of holy images)

Now that we have considered the nature of idolatry, it becomes easy to contrast it with the Christian practice of image veneration (whether towards portrait icons or more symbolic images such as the cross). Essentially, none of the distinctive practices or beliefs involved in idolatry apply to Christian

image veneration. Christian holy images are not understood as gods or the bodies of gods. They are not seen as containing and confining a holy person who is imaged, and are not attempts to bring a spiritual being down into the world. Instead, Christian holy images are responses to the fact that God and His holy ones are already active in the world. Icons acknowledge the gracious and saving action of God, and in this way stand in continuity with holy symbolic images of the Old Testament—the Pillar of Jacob at Bethel and other memorials of the patriarchs, the Ark of the Covenant, or the Bronze Serpent. All of these are formed in response to God's revelation, and serve as signs of how God chose to show Himself.

Because these images are not bodies for deities, sacrifices are not offered to them. None of the forms of veneration which Christians exercise towards images can count as meals where you give food to extend or sustain the hand-crafted statue body of a god. The fact that genuine sacrificial meals are not offered to icons and only to the Living God is very crucial. In this specific difference, icons are acknowledged as being non-living and non-deity. Instead, holy images become (though not literally) translucent, porous, three-dimensional, mirrors. This description will take some unpacking, but is crucial for seeing how thoroughly different icons are from idols.

First, to call holy images translucent means they do not obstruct awareness of spiritual reality, but facilitate it as points of interaction. They are translucent with respect to God and His saints because they are not themselves properly objects of attention. Rather, they put the mind and attention in focus on the person who is imaged. The person is not, however, understood as in a way confined to the image or manipulable by it. This can be compared to a person on the other side of a door, who is in some sense present "within" the frame but in no sense captured or limited by it. Icons therefore put a Christian viewer in touch with persons who profoundly transcend their representations. The icon by design tends to lead beyond the wood, paint, and other materials that compose it, fostering an attachment to God and to the saints as opposed to a coarse attachment to materiality. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says, "Viewed in these terms, the icon acts as a point of meeting, a place of encounter," and he quotes the life of the icon-

defending martyr Saint Stephen the New (d.764): “The icon is termed a door.”’ [3]

Second, icons can be characterized as porous because they are not barriers to direct interaction between persons, but acknowledge and encourage interaction. We can speak of two different directions of activity involving the icon. First is top-down, wherein before an icon even exists, God or one of His Saints acts in the world, and is shown to be continually active in the world. But the natural and righteous impulse when seeing God’s action is to acknowledge it with a memorial; this is why Jacob set up the stone at Bethel as a pillar when He experienced God’s descent via a “ladder.” Thus, the bottom-up interaction in an icon is from the Christian to a holy person, first by constructing a representation of the fact that a holy person appeared; and then afterwards by acts of honor in the direction of the holy representation which acknowledge this, as when Jacob anointed the stone. The principle behind the action of the viewer towards the holy image is famously expressed by Saint Basil the Great: “The honor given to the image passes to the prototype.” This “Type-Prototype Principle”, is explored more thoroughly in Chapter 8. For now we can note that since God or His Saints are already active in the world, they can graciously act towards the viewer who is showing honor, by bestowing mercy and holiness at the meeting point of the holy representation which was set up—the icon.

Thirdly, the three-dimensionality of icons concerns their nature as evoking action. They are open-ended images, incomplete apart from the interaction of the viewer. The viewer is in some sense the 3rd dimension of the icon, and this is often signified in iconography by means of a “defiance of the frame.” A small part of the person imaged—whether Christ’s halo, the tip of an Angel's wings, or the shoe of a Saint—is often portrayed as extending outside of the painted rectangular frame within the image. This points to the fact that the image is not seen as confining the person who is represented, who profoundly transcends the image and cannot be captured by it. But if the presence of the person represented exceeds the image, this is an invitation to pray to whoever is represented, and to be aware of how Christ or the depicted Saint interacts with and blesses us.

Fourth, the status of icons as mirrors has three aspects. First, as Jonathan Pageau has argued in his works, an icon reflects in a condensed form the

fundamental patterns present in all of reality—the unity of heaven and earth, the duality of right and left, the hierarchical structure of the world God created, etc. Second, icons are mirrors in that they reflect back to us an ideal and holy image of what human life should be; in this way, they provide a standard of judgment by which we can evaluate ourselves and push ourselves on in spiritual pursuit of God and the good life. Thirdly, icons are mirrors in a special sense concerned with the representation of the faces of Christ and the saints. Father Maximos Constas explains this aspect of icons as a kind of modest or symbolic realism, which avoids an excessive attempt to depict the person and their faces in an absolutely realistic (or better, natural) manner:

> …the very word “likeness” implies that their resemblance is not absolute, and so the Damascene says that they are also “unlike their prototypes.” By definition, then, every icon is both continuous and discontinuous with its source; both similar and dissimilar to that which it reflects. From this point of view, icons are not so much transparent windows through which we may gaze more or less directly on physical objects but work more like mirrors, on whose surfaces we see, not the objects themselves, but only their distorted reflections. Objects seen in a mirror stand in a dynamic relation to their source, for they appear only in virtue of the immediate and continuous presence of the actual object, apart from which they have no existence. However, their appearance exhibits significant differences which make them essentially unlike the actual source of reflection. Most notably, the structure of the object appears reversed, so that its right side appears on the left, and we see it in only two dimensions, flattened to the surface of the distorting glass. Analogous to the model of reflection, all representation (literary or artistic) is a kind of distorting mirror, a shining surface on which we glimpse the adverted figure of an enigma, “for now we know in part, we see in a

> glass darkly" (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). And we cannot do without such mirrors, for despite their shortcomings they are all that we have. [4]

Now all of these ways of understanding the icon—as translucent, porous, three-dimensional and reflective—help us to understand why a Christian would venerate an icon. A grandfather on the other side of a window could press his cheek against the glass to receive a kiss from his granddaughter. While the surface of the window would receive the kiss physically, it would in fact be directed to the person who is his granddaughter. If grace can pass through an icon to us, and honor can pass through an icon towards God and the Saints, this makes veneration entirely natural. If the icon is "three-dimensional" and meant to be interacted with as an open-ended image that invites participation, it only stands to reason that we would engage with it.

The status of the icon as mirror is also especially important for our digital age. After all, we use cameras to stream images of ourselves to other people in real time. When we speak towards the images on the screen, this is meant to pass through the "reflection"—the likeness of a person's face—to the person who stares back at us virtually. It is obvious and intuitive that sticking out your tongue at a person's reflection in a mirror while standing behind them is a way of showing disrespect. Similarly, rolling your eyes at a person's likeness on a webcam feed is a way of disrespecting. This can be true despite the fact that the person is not in the room with you—they are only present in a limited manner by means of their likeness on the screen. [5] It is then entirely natural to apply this same understanding to the icon as a mirror. Indeed, the Greek word *eikōn* can be used to describe the visual phenomena of someone's reflection in a mirror. The icon's function as a reflection of a person's likeness makes it a natural medium for the transmission of either dishonor (in the case of breaking or defacing an image) or honor (in cases where we bow our heads, kiss the surface of the image or address the person depicted while facing the image). The same kinds of principles apply to other cases where an image is of a more symbolic sort, such as a flag. While such an image may not have a facial likeness, there is still a close relationship between the representation and

what it stands for; the treatment of the symbol expresses an attitude towards the reality it stands for, and in which it participates.

All of these considerations establish how thoroughly different the veneration of Christian holy images (whether icons or symbols) is from the worship of idols. Idolatry is the worship of cult statues where worship involves the presentation of a sacrifice (often a meal) intended to welcome and feed the spirit within the statue (as though it were a living god). The Christian veneration of images considers representations of a person or thing as a medium for expressing love, honor, loyalty, or focus on whoever or whatever is imaged, through a variety of different kinds of gestures. We now turn to outlining what a case for Christian image veneration would look like in the written and material records related to early Christianity.

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1. *Youtube*, February 17, 2019, Link: https://youtu.be/4dNLLzYPM38?si=FO2_FPgf2IXjfeiE
2. Constas, Maximus. *The Art of Seeing: Paradox and Perception in Orthodox Iconography (Contemporary Christian Thought Series Book 25).* Sebastian Press (2014) p. 22.
3. Ware, Timothy (Kallistos) “The Spirituality of the Icon” from *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (Oxford University Press. New York. 1986. pp. 195–199) Quotation from the *Life of St Stephen the Younger*, PG 100. 1113A.
4. Pg. 25-26
5. While it might be objected that such images only serve as a medium for transmitting honor or dishonor because one can see gestures being done through the webcam, we can respond by appealing to cases where the video feed is cut. Would we really say that just because someone’s feed got cut 10 seconds ago, and there was lag which made them still appear on the screen, that the people who stuck their tongues out or made disrespectful hand gestures at his likeness were not actually dishonoring the person depicted in the video feed? It seems far more plausible to say that there is not an absolute requirement that information be constantly passing through to update the image. Rather, some kinds of images just become conduits for honor or dishonor based on the fact that they are made with the intention of representing a person, nation, etc.

Appendix B: Porphry's Theory of Images

Certain more sophisticated pagan authors gave a symbolic reinterpretation of the practice of idolatry. They claimed these images were indeed representations of transcendent reality, and provided a means of connection to higher reality and cosmic patterns via contemplation. A classic example of this can be found in Porphyry's text "On Images". The passages below are characteristic of his interpretation of the symbolic significance of cult objects in different pagan cultures:

- Of the sun's healing power Asclepius is the symbol, and to him they have given the staff as a sign of the support and rest of the sick, and the serpent is wound round it, as significant of his preservation of body and soul: for the animal is most full of spirit, and shuffles off the weakness of the body. It also seems to have a great faculty for healing: for it found the remedy for giving clear sight, and is said in a legend to know a certain plant which restores life. . .
- The representation of the world itself they figured thus: the statue is like a man having feet joined together, and clothed from head to foot with a robe of many colors, and has on the head a golden sphere, the first to represent its immobility, the second the many-colored stars, and the third because the world is spherical. . .

- [Egyptians] did not, however, believe the animals to be gods, but regarded them as likenesses and symbols of gods; this is shown by the fact that in many places oxen dedicated to the gods are sacrificed at their monthly festivals and in their religious services. For they consecrated oxen to the sun and moon. [1]

The difficulty of accepting Porphyry's interpretation of pagan practices is that it conveniently avoids dealing with the actual practice of pagan civilizations. The reasoning behind idolatry—which is primarily embodied in offering sacrificial meals to idols—is that the image in question is a living god, or the body of a god. This is not compatible with the face-value meaning of sacrifice. Porphyry himself witnesses to the fact that the very images he relegates to the category of "symbol", "likeness", or "representation" are worshipped by means of sacrifices:

- In all these ways [i.e., by means of statues of these various kinds], then, the power of the earth finds an interpretation and is worshipped: as a virgin and Hestia, she holds the center; as a mother she nourishes; as Rhea she makes rocks and dwells on mountains
- At the city Elephantine there is an image worshipped, which in other respects is fashioned in the likeness of a man and sitting; it is of a blue color, and has a ram's head, and a diadem bearing the horns of a goat, above which is a quoit-shaped circle.

The fact that worship involves the presentation of a meal in Porphyry's understanding is made clear by an unusual anecdote he offers about the alleged worship of a living human man in Egypt:

> Moreover a man is admitted by the Egyptians among their objects of worship. For there is a village in Egypt called Anabis, in which a man is worshipped, and sacrifice offered to him, and the victims burned upon his altars: and after a little while he would eat the things that had been prepared for him as for a man.

The incident makes clear that what normal pagans on the ground meant by worship involved the presentation of a meal to a person or object. Because sacrificial worship clearly involves the presentation of a meal, and the ability to eat presupposes that someone or something is living, the practice of idolatry—offering meals to cult statues—implicitly acknowledges that the cult statue is alive. Porphyry's reinterpretation of idolatry according to the categories of "symbol", "likeness", or "representation" appears to be an ad hoc justification for the practice. To the extent that Porphyry would have accepted the practice of sacrificing to images, he implicitly acknowledged that his interpretation of the images of the gods was incorrect and not in line with paganism.

It is also not possible to draw a close connection between this philosophic pagan view of idols and Christian iconography. There are superficial similarities (i.e., an image of some sort is involved), but they fade away when we realize that what Porphyry meant by an image was "the kind of thing towards which a meal (sacrifice) can be given." This makes it abundantly clear that these are not just symbols at all, but somehow capable of being or containing a spirit which receives the meal.

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1. Porphyry, "On the Images of the Gods", transl. Edwin Hamilton Gifford. https://classics.mit.edu/Porphyry/images.html

Appendix C: Pope Hadrian's Biblical Case for Veneration of Symbolic Images at II Nicaea

While the first book of this series is not an exhaustive apologetic for Nicaea II, it is very important to consider an overlooked fact about a major way in which Nicaea II grounded the legitimacy of venerating portrait-type icons. Our surviving records of discussions in the Council's acts include the warmly received letter of Pope Adrian of Rome. The Roman Patriarch saw symbolic images from the Old Testament as predecessors to icons. As Pope Adrian argued, such examples show that icons and their veneration are licit. It is worthwhile to consider his reasoning in full and the insights he draws from Scriptural examples:

> Elderly Abraham as Scripture says, by his own will built an altar to give honor and glory to God who had appeared to him. And likewise Jacob fleeing Esau his brother, when in a dream he saw angels of God ascending to heaven and descending on a ladder and the Lord standing on the same ladder and speaking to him, rose at once and by his own will took the stone that he had placed under his head erected it as a pillar pouring oil on it and called it the place Bethel saying this is none other than the House of God and the gate of heaven. On account of this almighty God was in no way angry that he had set up that stone as a pillar by his own will

and reflection.... Consequently it is said a little later in the same book of genesis that God said to him I am the God of Bethel where you anointed a stone and made a vow to me.

And a little further down with reference to the covering of the ark and in it you shall place the testimony that I shall give to you there I shall command and address you above the mercy seat that is between the two cherubim who will be above the ark of testimony. In addition directions were given that on the curtains and coverings of the tabernacle there were to be cherubim and woven work and various colours. Worthy of reflection most tranquil Lords and great princes my sons is the fact that the Lord our God almighty deigned to speak for the salvation of his people between the same cherubim made by hand. A this makes it beyond doubt that everything that is placed in the churches of God for his praise and honor is holy and worthy of veneration. This too, most serene Lords and sons, should be added to satisfy the incredulous and to direct the straying, that God made this command to his servant Moses against the plague that he attacked them with. For so it runs in the book of Numbers: "'make a serpent and set it up as a sign. Everyone who is bitten and looks at it will live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it up as a sign, and when those bit and looked at it they were healed."

Oh, the madness of those who range against the Christian faith and religion, so as to assert that one should not worship or venerate the images on which are the figures of the Savior and his mother or of the saints, even though it is by the power of these [persons] that the world subsists and the human race obtained salvation? Do we believe that the people of Israel were freed by looking on a bronze serpent from the disaster inflicted and yet doubt that those who look

> at and venerate the effigies of Christ our God and the Saints are saved? God forbid that we give assent to such impious rashness let us follow the ancient tradition of the fathers and stray in no way from their teaching. [1]

Pope Adrian's argumentation has a number of interesting features. First, he emphasizes God's condescension as the condition for being able to represent Him. Only if God appears or speaks does it become possible to depict something pertaining to Him in response. Secondly, the Patriarch notes the relationship between how God revealed Himself and the kind of symbolic image set up. At Bethel, God revealed Himself through a "ladder"; Jacob set up a pillar. God would appear to Moses and the Israelites in a cloud of His glory containing angels; the veils of the Temple and the surface of the ark—which served as the place God would speak—had representations of angels. Thirdly, as the Pope notes, given that God would reveal Himself through these objects "this makes it beyond doubt that everything that is placed in the churches of God for his praise and honor is holy and worthy of veneration." This treats the holy Church—and all she contains—as a supreme fulfillment of the congregation of Israel, its tabernacle, and its temple. If you could anoint the pillar representing where God appeared, or pray to God through the cherubim images because He revealed Himself from the midst of them, it would make sense that holy representations in the Church would be honored conduits for communication with God in a similar way.

Fourthly, Pope Adrian notes the role of God-given human ingenuity. Not every example of an image he gives was commanded to be made by God, but humans followed a divinely implanted impulses of reverence, and did not refuse to memorialize the places and ways in which God showed Himself. This provides precedent for making portrait icons, because God the Logos has now revealed Himself not just descending a ladder or veiled in a cloud, but with a human face by His glorious Incarnation. Finally, we can consider the Bishop of Rome's a fortiori argument: "Do we believe that the people of Israel were freed by looking on a bronze serpent from the disaster inflicted and yet doubt that those who look at and venerate the effigies of Christ our God and the Saints are saved?" While his reasoning is

not spelled out entirely, it is easy to conjecture that like all readers of the Scripture, he felt a mild sense of puzzlement over the fact that God instructed Moses to have an image of a serpent crafted, and chose to save people through it. While the typological connection to Christ's Incarnation and Passion is the way that early Christian writers such as the Epistle of Barnabas and Saint Justin the Philosopher would explain the legitimacy of this image, it still remains strange and borderline scandalous that it is serpentine. But considering that a questionable image of a serpent was looked at in order to receive deliverance, why would it be wrong to use a portrait of Christ to direct prayer to Him for salvation?

Pope Adrian's argumentation continues later with a consideration of how representation of God ought to change once God reveals Himself by taking on a human face in the Incarnation, but the preceding arguments lay groundwork for this. If God's manifestation should be honored by making a representation which matches how He revealed Himself, this would point to the importance of making portrait icons of the incarnate Son.

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1. Price, Richard, *The Acts of the Second Council of Nicaea [787]*, pgs. 162-164)

Appendix D: The Veneration of Battle Standards in the Roman world

D. B. Campbell notes how intense this mindset was in the Roman military:

> "The various standards carried by Roman armies were not simply for show. Nor were they purely utilitarian symbols to mark a rallying point in battle, or honorific emblems representing tradition or unit pride. In fact, each unit's standards were venerated as deities that encapsulated the very spirit of the unit itself. It is no wonder that the loss or destruction of the standards was considered shameful and brought disgrace on the men, on the unit, and on Rome herself." [1]

In addition to being reflected in surviving iconography in Rome, this reverence for the standards—especially the Eagle standard or Aquila—is reflected in several paradigmatic occurrences in Roman history. One of the most famous incidents is from an account of a water invasion recorded in Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*:

> “But as the Romans still hesitated, chiefly on account of the depth of the water, the man who carried the Eagle of the tenth legion, after praying to the gods that his actions might bring good luck to the legions, cried in a loud voice: ‘Jump down, comrades, unless you want to surrender our eagle to the enemy; I, at any rate, mean to do my duty to my country and my general.’ With these words he lept out of the ship and advanced toward the enemy with the eagle in his hands. At this the soldiers, exhorting each other not to submit to such a disgrace, jumped with one accord from the ship, and the men from the next ships, when they saw them, followed them and advanced against the enemy.” [2]

The extreme importance of preserving the eagle standard is also reflected in an entire campaign fought by Rome to retrieve the stolen Aquila standards lost to the Germanic tribes in Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. This honorific action of protecting the holy image shows the extremely honorable status of these standards, and can also be seen in how such images were placed in their aedes or unique shrines made for the standards. Jessica Billing notes the following considerations from the architecture of these shrines and a historical account related to one such aedes:

> During his work at Caerleon legionary fortress in South Wales, George C. Boon discovered that much of the architecture within the crosshall (the area directly in front of the aedes) was associated with the monumental embellishment of the standards shrine room. He described the remains of two arches that were supported by massive piers, one in the centre of each colonnade that created a grand walkway into the *aedes*)… A good example of the extreme sacredness of the standards and their shrine room comes down to us from Tacitus, who describes how a Roman ex-consul, Munatius Plancus, who during the military mutinies of the Rhine armies in AD 15 fled into the

> head-quarters building and aedes of the first legion during the military mutiny in order to escape the chasing soldiers. Tacitus goes on to describe the events that followed: ‘Nor in his extremity had he any refuge but the quarters of the first legion. There, clasping the standards and the eagle, he lay in sanctuary; and had not the eagle-bearer Calpurnius shielded him from the crowning violence, then —by a crime almost unknown even between enemies — an ambassador of the Roman people would in a Roman camp have defiled with his blood the altars of heaven.’ (Tacitus, Annals 1.39) [3]

Billing notes that the phrase “altars of heaven” refers to the entire space of the shrine of the standards. This shows the idea of veneration by honorable placement: part of how standards were acknowledged as honorable and holy was by them being put into the aedes which was itself understood as sacred and valuable.

While it is true that at least some of the standards were similar or equivalent to idols (since they were seen as being inhabited by spirits or identified as gods) there are several considerations which show that this was not universally the case. First, it seems plausible that earlier Roman battle standards were not understood as idols. Leslie Barnard notes that “the most ancient Roman standard was a handful of straw fixed to the top of a spear or pole.” [4] This prototype of later standards would likely have received a simpler and more practical kind of veneration, since it was exalted and gathered around for the purposes of military organization. Second, some of the Roman standards displayed the head of the emperor, who was not universally and constantly understood as a deity. [5] Third, there are situations in which standards had the same appearance or form as weapons such as spears, and could be presented on altars as votive offerings. In a situation like this one, the standard was definitely not seen as a god, but was rather a gift set apart as a means of honoring a god. [6] Fourth, most of the ceremonial expressions towards the standards were not sacrificial, since they did not involve the offering of something to an image in order to animate it or increase its bodily presence in the world. Even if it was

possible to offer sacrificial worship to the Aquila standard as a representation of Jupiter, this does not mean that all the honorific gestures towards them would count as worship.

The fact that gathering around an image as it is presented is a form of veneration should be abundantly clear from the earlier considerations related to battle standards in the Roman context and the way soldiers both carried standards and followed them into battle. When a standard was set up and consecrated, it would be viewed with reverence by the victorious army (as was the case with Aeneas' troops who looked on at his tropaeum). [7]

Words of praise are one mode of veneration which can be given "remotely" at a distance from the person or thing being honored. In the American national anthem "The Star-Spangled Banner", honorific language focuses on how the flag stands tall, endures forever, and continues to be a point of reverent attention and remembrance:

> O say can you see, by the dawn's early light, What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming, Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight O'er the ramparts we watch'd were so gallantly streaming? And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air, Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there, O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Everything which is sung in this anthem can still be the case even long after the flag is no longer directly physically in front of the singer who praises it. The flag images the nation's life and power, and therefore this honor given to it passes to what is represented (the United States). Likewise, Saint Ignatius's language of making himself nothing before the cross and his insistence that Christ has raised it up as a trophy forever to gather all to Himself amounts to praise for this honorable image. The analogy shows that the cross of Christ was both venerated and viewed as a kind of image (a battle standard or trophy).

1. D. B. Campbell, “Eagles, flags and little boars: The Cult of the Standards in the Roman army", Ancient Warfare magazine, Vol. III, Issue 6, pp. 34–39.
2. Caesar, *Gallic Wars* 4.25.3, as quoted in Billing
3. Jessica Billing “The Military Standards of the Roman Legions: Symbolic objects of ideology, veneration and belief”, Ancient Warfare magazine, Volume VII, Issue 1, pgs. 41–45
4. Saint Justin Martyr, *First and Second Apologies*, fn. 340, pg 166
5. Attributions of deity varied depending on the specific period of Roman history and the particular emperor in question. See Told in Stone, “Did the Romans Understand Their Emperors as Gods?” link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWRyvwjChug&t=3s, accessed 5/17/24
6. Naso, Alessandro, “Etruscan and Italic Votive Offerings in Greek Sanctuaries”, lecture at Scuola Archeologica Italiana Atene, 5/15/24; link: https://www.youtube.com/live/r9BDXMEOFeU?si=GibU5ydZqOrE7q-d (accessed 6/9/24)
7. The fact that this is a form of veneration can be further emphasized by consideration of the contrary: if a flag or battle standard is lifted up to gather soldiers, and some refuse to come, is it not obvious that they have dishonored the standard?

Appendix E: Image Duplication, Remote Viewing, and Honoring Trophies

There are several different ways in which the image of the trophy was replicated and distributed for acts of loyalty and veneration on media such as monuments, gems, and coins throughout the Roman world. This provides a backdrop for the understanding that Christians would naturally want to make images of the cross which would then be venerated.

Trophy Monuments: We must differentiate between a trophy standard and a trophy monument. The trophy standard was set up on the battlefield immediately after a victory, composed out of the literal weaponry of the battle. A trophy monument, on the other hand, was a replica that allowed people to permanently honor and participate in that victory by viewing a copy of what was set up on the battlefield. One such monument survives from the Roman city of Hippo Regius: it is a bronze sculpture depicting a suit of armor on a horizontal beam fastened to a vertical wooden pole. Its similarity to a cross is as striking as Minucius Felix's quote would have led us to believe: "Your victorious trophies not only imitate the appearance of a simple cross, but also that of a man affixed to it." This act of creating a trophy monument would make it so that the original standard which was raised on the battle field could be preserved. To use Saint Ignatius's terminology, it made it so that the trophy standard which was "lifted up" in victory initially on the battlefield would now be able to endure "for all ages." People could continue to gaze upon it with reverence, visit it to pay respects, and gather around it to honor those who won a victory.

Trophies on Gems: Because a victorious military leader stood to gain from the acknowledgement and honoring of his trophies, there were other methods which emperors and generals employed to allow people to venerate them at a distance. Images of trophy standards were copied onto a variety of visual media. The famous engraved gem called the Gemma Augusta depicts in its upper register the victorious imperial court in peaceful session while its army subdues barbarians on a battlefield in the lower register. On the lower register, the Roman army raises up a trophy standard to declare its victory and receive recognition. Harry Maier [1] notes how the crafting and gifting of this gem would be a way of consolidating the status of the emperor—in other words, of directing honor to him. By means of the miniature relief version of the elevated trophy, this gem vividly depicts and allows one to participate in from the distance an event that Romans knew was very significant in the course of the battle—namely the erecting of the trophy standard. We can observe a similar phenomenon in the practice of engraving trophies on signet rings. The Roman dictator Sylla "used a signet with three trophies" [2] engraved on it. This became the official symbol of his rule, which he would stamp onto decrees and other official documents or possessions of the empire. The three trophies represented his victories in battle on three different continents. Consequently, the recognition and acknowledgement of this victory symbol by others became an important part of how his reign established itself and extended its influence.

Trophies on Coins: Finally we can note how the use of coins expanded the image of a tropeia throughout the empire through a kind of "remote (or participatory) viewing." Trophy standards were often depicted on Roman coinage above the heads of bound captive enemies as a way of spreading the commemoration of the victory to the populace. In other cases, tropeia were shown as components of monuments, such as that of Emperor Druses, where they appear in connection with the equestrian statue of the victorious emperor at the top. In his lecture to the American numismatic society, Francesco de Angelis noted how such coinage allowed for the "paying" of attention to such monuments remotely or from a distance:

> Viewing the arch of Druses on the coins of Claudius was something that was inextricably linked with the circulation of its image. The coins were not bound to a specific place, to the Arch's static topographical location on the Appian Road. The attention that the Arch with its decoration could draw is expanded beyond its actual physical setting thanks to the coins. In other words, the coins amplified the visual impact of the Arch, potentially spreading it to every corner of the empire, or in any case wherever they would circulate. . . they should be understood as expansions, amplifications, even enhancements of the arch's impact on the viewers. By assuming different postures on different coins, the monuments of Drusus come to life. . . suggesting that one posture, one statue was not enough. . . [T]he lack of correspondence between the monument and the details of the numismatic image is. . . an active response to the challenge that the monument posed, as a sign of engagement with its most significant component—namely the equestrian statue—an engagement that was mindful and took full advantage of the specific generative potential of the coins as a mobile medium that could channel attention to gain new viewers for the Arch by virtue of its multiplication and its circulation. [3]

John Cunnally reflects on de Angelis' explanations about how coins "amplified the visual impact" and "channel attention to gain new viewers for the Arch." Cunnally's comments build on this explanation, introducing the notion that loyalty becomes directed through interaction with the miniature image (of a monument including its tropeia) to the reign of the emperor celebrated as victor:

> These coins first entered circulation as payment to the military. Accepting the coin is thus acknowledging the authority of Caesar, one's commander, and his ability to

> provide victory. As the coins passed into broader circulation, the civilian users were also accepting the authority or legitimacy of the state by their use and possession of these miniature monuments…We know that in antiquity images were much rarer than they are today. We are surrounded and drowned in images; it would be hard to believe anyone in antiquity would not have looked at any coin that came into their possession and spent some time musing on the images. So in a sense there was something maybe magical or superstitious: that if you're looking at the Arch of Drusis on a coin, in a sense you are like the person who would look at the actual Arch on the Via Apia who would be there near Rome. And thus doing what Romans do.

The notion that the coin's image is a "miniature monument" the "accepting" of which is a way of "acknowledging the authority of Caesar" is both plausible and revealing. This is framed by the participatory idea of viewing which de Angelis and Cunnily propose: that if you're looking at an image of a monument on a coin, "In a sense you are like the person who would look at the actual Arch. . .thus doing what Romans do." Because of the image's participation in its prototype (the actual monument) "accepting the coin" transfers to "accepting the authority or legitimacy of the state." Honor (in the form of the loyalty-motivated action of "accepting") is given to the "actual monument" through interaction with its miniature image. This act ultimately involves "acknowledging" and thereby honoring the emperor whose power it represents. While it may seem strange to modern people to think of ceremonial gestures passing through a coin, we know that the emperor's likeness on coins could be defaced to dishonor him, and that Jewish and Roman coins sometimes had holes punched in them to be worn as badges of loyalty or apotropaic amulets. In the case of coins representing monuments or trophies, we effectively have a pledging of allegiance, like what Americans do to copies (albeit updated ones) of the original Star Spangled Banner routed through the action of loyally accepting or saying a pledge towards a copy.

This idea of virtual (or better, participatory) viewing shows us that in the Roman world it was already understood that monuments and trophies would be reproduced and distributed as part of the consolidation of an emperor's power. By increasing and expanding the availability of a trophy image, it came to be formally accepted and acknowledged with loyalty—that is to say, honored—more and more widely. The fact that trophies were distributed like this to receive veneration creates a presumption that the same would happen in the case of the cross as Christ's trophy. This is just part of what it meant for a conqueror to win a victory and set up a trophy.

This all helps to make sense of Saint Ignatius's singular language of "standard" (as opposed to "standards"). To bring in an analogy to the modern flag, Americans can stand in front of "tokens" or particular instances of the American flag, and still speak of how they "pledge allegiance to *the* flag" rather than referring to "this flag" or "one of the flags." And given Saint Ignatius's understanding of the Church as concrete gathering, the most natural way to speak of images of the cross in each location where the Church meets would indeed be to speak of "a standard", raised up to those in "the Church." [4]

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1. Maier, Harry, "Roman Imperial Iconography and the Social Construction of Early Christian Identity", Consensus, Volume 33 Issue 1, pp. 66–67
2. Kunz, *Rings*, p. 130
3. de Angelis, Francesco, "Paying Attention: Images of Monuments on Roman Imperial Coins." *Youtube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SymZL3hDDjw) 2/17/22. Cunnally's comments come towards the very end of the presentation.
4. The alternative would be Saint Ignatius saying Christ "raised up standards to all of His holy and faithful followers in the Churches."

Appendix F: Signet Rings in Scripture

Scriptural references to signet rings and seals show continuity with Roman views. In biblical context, signets have inherently honorable status and connection to the exercise of authority. We can begin by noting that there are instances where the use of a royal signet functions to seal a document or object. The seal imprint appears to carry a kind of authoritative and honorable quality which prevents others from breaking it:

> Now you may write decrees in the name of the king in the name of the Jews as you wish, and seal them with the king's ring; for no decree written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring can be annulled. (Esther 8:8)

This understanding of the seal imprint as carrying authority that expands the dominion of the Persian ruler resembles the Roman view of the Roman emperor’s signet. Based on this understanding, we would expect that in Scripture the seal image—whether on the ring or produced by it—was considered precious and meant to be treated honorably. This is confirmed in a number of passages:

- Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love [is] strong as death; jealousy [is] cruel as the grave: the coals thereof [are] coals of fire, [which hath a] most vehement flame. (Sng 8:6)
- In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts. (Hag 2:23)
- [As] I live, saith the LORD, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were the signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence; (Jer 22:24)

All of these passages show an understanding that a seal is not merely to be treated with regard because of the implied threat from an authority ("If you break this seal you will be punished"). Instead, a seal has status as something precious, and contains binding significance. In the passage from Haggai, the nature of the signet is a fit analogy for the glory and office conferred by divine election. The comparison only works if the signet has an honored or even quasi-sacred status.

The quote from Jeremiah expands on this connection by suggesting the indispensability of the signet as an analogy for a ruler who is under God's protection and holds an honored place. Once again, the comparison assumes that the protection and honorable placement to be given to the signet are based on its intrinsic status. While there is a limit to this inherent honor (since the ruler can be plucked out), the decision to disregard the ring is taken as surprising, since it is of precious quality.

This is expressed even more ardently in Song of Songs 8:6, where the seal image becomes the paradigm case of something or someone towards which commitment and devotion are shown without reserve or wavering. Only when understood in this light can we make sense of how placing the seal serves as an answer which mirrors in intensity the unquenchable divine fire of jealous love. The beloved requests of her lover that he treat her in the same way as the most important image in his life, the ruling and honored

signet image. The expert on ancient Mesopotamian seals Sidney Babcock notes how this passage connects to ancient burial customs:

> The importance of seals to their owners has survived in a biblical text from the Song of Solomon 8:6, in which the bridegroom tells his beloved, "wear me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm, for love is as strong as death, passion cruel as the grave. It blazes up like a blazing fire, fiercer than any flame." What this means is that since seals were so personal, they were buried with you. So if you were worn as the seal upon someone's heart, and therefore buried with that person, you would be together with that person for eternity, and that love would transcend death. [1]

Two other references to signets connect to veneration and set the stage for Clement's teaching. First, we note Moses's record of the Egyptian practice in Genesis, where Joseph is invested with the royal signet at his exaltation to Pharaoh's right hand:

> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. (Gen 41:41-43 ESV)

It is noteworthy that after bestowing the royal signet image upon Joseph, the people are instructed to venerate Joseph by bowing. This shows a strong association between the carrying of the image as a royal crest, the reception of an exalted status, and honor being ceremonially offered to the signet bearer. Much like with the Romans, bearing a royally bestowed signet is a unique privilege which results in being treated differently. We can compare

this to the idea of “honoring the uniform” in American military and law enforcement culture. People are expected to respond with honorific gestures such as salutes when they encounter people of higher rank who are bearing the relevant insignia. Honor is still given in casual contexts if one happens to run into a superior officer in civilian garb. But the degree of ceremony and veneration increases in the physical presence of the relevant images (emblems, badges, medals, etc.)

In the Gospels, we have Christ’s parable of the Prodigal Son, which references the practice of bestowing a signet ring on an heir:

> But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put [it] on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on [his] feet. (Luke 15:22)

This bestowal of a signet is part of a profound reversal of the prodigal son’s insistence on becoming a hired servant. The ring can be connected to the power appropriate to a son, since it would give the son a token of ownership for the household and an ability to extend its domain. This gift of an honorable and authoritative image, therefore, is part of the benefits proper to becoming a child of God. As we shall see, early Christian authors connect the bestowal of the signet with Christian initiation through the sealing covenantal event of baptism.

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1. “Rolling Stones: Looking at Ancient Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals” on The Morgan Library & Museum Youtube channel. Published 8/21/20 (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WJRYkd4e2U) accessed 8/6/24

Appendix G: The Iconography of Clement's Seals

Against the claims of some scholars that the seal images Clement favors are simply unoffensive motifs taken from the broader Roman world, a variety of arguments can be made for the iconic quality and spiritual power of each design. Let us first recall Clement's instructions about the seals:

> And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship running with a fair wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship's anchor, which Seleucus had engraved; and if the seal is a fisherman, it will recall the apostle, and the children drawn out of the water. For we are not to depict the faces of idols, we who are prohibited from attaching ourselves to them, nor a sword, nor a bow, since we follow peace, nor drinking cups, since we are temperate. Many of the licentious have their (homosexual) lovers engraved, or prostitutes, as if they wished to make it impossible ever to forget their erotic passions, by being continually reminded of their licentiousness. [1]

At the outset, it is obvious that Clement is favorable to some images and not to others. It is worthwhile briefly considering the specific images he allows, since some of them might seem to be neutral and purely decorative

at first glance. However, this is not the case, and each of the permissible images is actually a way of appropriately representing God or His supreme weapon of salvation—the cross. Each image (whether negative or positive) appears to follow the same pattern we noted about miniature images on coins and Roman signets: the image sets the “directionality” of the ring and influences its use and who or what it affords spiritual connection with. The understanding behind Clement’s comments on these signet images is that they are designed to be interacted with. While this is more obvious at first with the five negative categories of seal images that Clement rejects, a deep look at the significance of the six legitimate seal-images bears out that they tend to have a similar consecratory and interactive significance.

The dove is representative of the Holy Spirit, [2] based on Clement’s attention to the significance of the Spirit’s manifestation in the visible form of the dove in contradistinction to other visible forms. Additionally, the baptismal concept from the New Testament that the Holy Spirit seals Christians [3] points towards this identification.

The fish is an image of Christ [4] given that this understanding of fish symbolism based on the ICTUS acronym (and the connected idea of Christ as the Eucharistic fish eaten by the faithful) was already widespread at this time, and present in the writings and mindset of North African Christians. Even more decisive is an obscure passage in which Clement describes Jesus as the true pearl of great price, and then compares the magnitude of pearls purchased by women to “the bigness of a fish's eye of large size.” He continues the comparison, emphasizing that the pearls purchased out of vain desire for luxury are inferior to “the sacred jewel, the Word of God, whom the Scripture has somewhere called a pearl, the pure and pellucid (clear) Jesus, the eye that watches in the flesh—the transparent Word, by whom the flesh, regenerated by water, becomes precious.” [5] The symbolism of this passage associates both the pearl and the fish’s eye with the Logos due to their clear (symbolizing invisible and non-physical) and luminous (symbolizing consciousness and knowledge-giving) quality. Just as a fish has a governing and light-giving principle (the eye) embedded in materiality (the flesh), so also Jesus is the Divine Logos enfleshed. The image of the fish is therefore a symbol of Incarnation.

The ship running with a fair wind is a way of visually representing the cross of Christ [6] since Clement makes an extended comparison between the cross and the wooden mast of Odysseus's ship to which the hero was bound. [7] This is consistent with the passages in Saint Justin Martyr that describe the sail on a ship as the cruciform trophy.

The musical lyre is actually also an image of Christ. In his "Exhortation to the Greeks", Clement understands Christ the Word of God as a melodious and harmonious Word; He is "the Song", but the Alexandrian also says of Him "the Instrument of God. . . loves mankind" seeming to suggest that this divine song becomes incarnate in the mortal instrument which Clement identifies as a human being. This is all in the context of contrasting Christ with the harp playing of Orpheus and the Prophet-King David, and emphasizing how created humans are a musical instrument of God. [8]

The image of the anchor on Clement's signets Gary Vikan connects to the cross (because of its shape) and to hope (due to the allusion to Hebrews 6:19). [9] The connection to the visible form of the cross is confirmed by numerous early Christian representations of anchors which portray anchors that look like crosses [10], and towards which multiple fishes (plausibly taken as symbolic of Christians) direct their attention. However, it is very likely that more is going on, since it has been argued that the word *ankura* in some early Christian writings is inserted as a wordplay on *en kurion* ("in the Lord") used in funerary contexts in connection to the hope that a departed person will be with Christ. Inscribed anchors sometimes take the place of the words "in the Lord" that one would expect to find at the end of an epitaph. Thus, the anchor image is plausibly a way of symbolizing and invoking the protection of God, as an early kind of cross-symbolism. Several times in early manuscripts of Paul and Revelation, the words *en kurio* (in Lord) are used conspicuously without the definite article, while in other contexts such as "the Day of the Lord" the definite article is still present. [11] This makes it unlikely that it is merely a stylistic decision or a fluke; it appears to be a way of invoking Christ's protection by figuring His cross and perhaps Himself [12] either visually or in writing.

The image of the fisherman seems at first to be a representation of the Apostles, since it is said to "recall the Apostle" and this is not necessarily entirely the wrong way to think of it. However, its primary referent is Christ

Himself; “recall the Apostle” means recalling the Apostles’ mystical encounter with the risen Christ in the 21st chapter of John’s Gospel. This narrative begins when seven of the Apostles are fishing at night in the Sea of Tiberius, catching nothing. Jesus appears on the shore, and calls out “Children, do you have any fish?" Though they have none, Jesus instructs them to cast down their nets again on the right side, and they bring an enormous catch. John points out to Peter that it is Jesus on the shore, and Peter jumps into the water to go to shore before the others. Edwin Abbott notes that this is the incident captured in the signet image, and he identifies multiple layers of meaning in this seal:

> Where “an apostle and the children” are mentioned, it is implied that Peter, and those who are called “children” along with him, are caught up out of the water by the Fisherman previously mentioned as “one fishing.” In other words, *before Peter “catches fish,” he is regarded as being “caught” himself.* [13]

By calling from the shore “Children,” Clement notes that Christ acted as a Fisherman and drew the Apostle Peter out of the water that he jumped into an image of initiation which can be seen as connected to baptism (especially since it is followed by a meal of bread and fish with the Risen Lord). Clement describes the situation and connects it to the pedagogy (child teaching) of Christ in the following way:

> Accordingly, in the Gospel, “The Lord, standing on the shore, says to the disciples”—they happened to be fishing —“and called aloud, Children, have ye any meat?” [John 21:4-5]—addressing those that were already in the position of disciples as children. [14]

It is thus Christ Himself Who is the Fisherman imaged. In his hymn to “Jesus, Savior of our race” Clement employs the imagery of the fisherman

to describe Christ:

> Fisher of men, whom You bring to life; From evil sea of sin,
> And from the billowy strife, Gathering pure fishes in,
> Caught with sweet bait of life [15]

Here, Jesus's description as the Fisherman is connected to His power to draw people (fish) out of the "evil sea of sin." This hymn thereby references not only the mystical baptism of the Apostles in the sea of Tiberius, but also instances in the Gospels where Christ saves the righteous from hostile waters (such as Peter in the storm, and the parable of the fisherman in Matthew [16]). The Lord is the true Fisher of men, catching His pedagogues in the mystery of baptism. [17]

When considering the meaning of each seal, it is clear that these images are not merely decorative, but represent holy sources of power: the Spirit, Christ, or the cross. There also seems to be a baptismal connection with these seals. Several of them are nautically themed (fish, ship, anchor) while the image of the dove is remarkable for its source in the Gospel accounts of the Theophany (the Baptism of Christ) in which the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of the dove. Most significant of all is the image of Christ as Fisherman, since this seems quite directly connected to the baptism of the children of God.

The place in the text of *The Teacher* where the instruction on signet seals comes is also significant. It is right after the section where he instructs his hearers on the wearing of white baptismal garments, and is immediately followed by Clement's exhortation to receive baptism and the offering up of a baptismal hymn:

> And since the Instructor, by translating us into His Church, has united us to Himself, the teaching and all-surveying Word, it was right that, having gotten to this point, we should offer to the Lord the reward of due thanksgiving—praise suitable to His fair instruction.

It therefore seems quite clear that the instruction related to the signet is preparatory for baptism. The giving of proper signet seals is therefore part of baptism, a fact which is confirmed by Tertullian’s teaching about baptism and the signet.

1. Translation by Jeffrey Spier in “Early Christian Engraved Gems.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* eds. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; Routledge (2018). Pg 141–142.
2. See Clement’s Fragment 10.4. In this text, it is very noteworthy that the emphasis is upon semblance or likeness, showing an attention to the visual aspect of the Holy Spirit’s manifestation in the form of a dove: “Therefore God does not here take the semblance of man, but of a dove, because He wished to show the simplicity and gentleness of the new manifestation of the Spirit by the likeness of the dove. For the law was stern, and punished with the sword; but grace is joyous, and trains by the word of meekness. Hence the Lord also says to the apostles, who said that He should punish with fire those who would not receive Him, after the manner of Elias: ‘Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.’”
3. 2 Cor. 1:22, Eph 1:13, Eph 4:30. The word used is sphragizō, σφραγίζω related to σφραγίς
4. In his "Revisiting the Ichthys: A Suggestion Concerning the Origins of Christological Fish Symbolism”, Tuomas Rasimus shows that the fish is associated with Christ very early on via the ICTHYS acronym and the concept of the “Eucharistic Fish”. He quotes Tertullian, who wrote around the same time, nearby to Clement in North Africa: “’But we little fishes, according to our Fish (IXΘYN) Jesus Christ, are born in the water, nor are we saved in any other manner than by remaining in the water.’ (De baptismo, 1) Significantly, Tertullian, while writing in Latin, uses the Greek word for fish in the accusative without any explanation—he clearly assumes his readers’ knowledge of the acronym.” (Rasimus) The fact that this understanding of the Christological fish and Eucharistic fish was rather widespread already by the beginning of the third century is also shown by the famous Christian epitaph, the “Abercius Inscription” (late 2nd, early 3rd century): “Faith led me everywhere and furnished everywhere as nourishment a fish from a water spring (a fish) which was enormous and pure, and which a holy virgin grasped. And she (Faith) bestowed it among friends so that they could always eat it, as they had excellent wine and as they gave it in its mixed form with bread.”
5. The Teacher, Bk 2 Ch. 13
6. “Sail past the song; it works death. Exert your will only, and you have overcome ruin; bound to the wood of the cross, you shall be freed from destruction: the word of God will be your pilot, and the Holy Spirit will bring you to anchor in the haven of heaven. Then shall you see my God, and be initiated into the sacred mysteries. . .” (Protrepticus, 12). The similarity to the description of his signet image with a ship “running with a fair wind”, implying a vertical mast prominently displayed, is quite strong.
7. The Teacher, Bk 3 Clement identifies Christ as the “rudder” of Christians, which could imply that Christians or the Church are the ship, but this connection is loosely compared to the Odysseus reference.
8. “And David the king, the harper whom we mentioned a little above, who exhorted to the truth and dissuaded from idols, was so far from celebrating demons in song that in reality they were driven away by his music. Thus, when Saul was plagued with a demon, he cured him by merely playing. A beautiful breathing instrument of music the Lord made man, after His own image. And He Himself also, surely, who is the supramundane Wisdom, the celestial Word, is the all-harmonious, melodious, holy instrument of God.” (*Protrepticus*, I)
9. Vikan, “Security in Byzantium: Locking, Sealing, Weighing” in Dumbarton Oaks. Byzantine Collection. Publications, No. 2 (1980)
10. Jones, Murray, and Murray interpret the crossbar of the anchor as forming a tau cross for early Christians. “Anchor” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Tom Devonshire Jones, Linda Murray, and Peter Murray (Oxford: Oxford, 2013). Referenced in “The Greco-Roman Influence on Early

Christian Art," by Tim Ganshirt, Xavier University, Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons. Link: https://www.exhibit.xavier.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1051&context=habUniveristy Press, 2013)

11. Charles A. Kennedy, "Early Christians and the Anchor," The Biblical Archaeologist 38, no. 3–4 (1975)

12. In Stromata 4, Clement compares God to an anchor in how the Christian interacts with Him in the ascent towards virtue: "As, then, those, who at sea are held by an anchor, pull at the anchor, but do not drag it to them, but drag themselves to the anchor; so those who, according to the gnostic life [i.e., a life which seeks knowledge of God], draw God towards them, imperceptibly bring themselves to God: for he who reverences God, reverences himself. In the contemplative life, then, one in worshipping God attends to himself, and through his own spotless purification beholds the holy God holily; for self-control, being present, surveying and contemplating itself uninterruptedly, is as far as possible assimilated to God."

13. *The Fourfold Gospel, Section III: The Proclamation of the New Kingdom*, Cambridge University Press (1915) pp. 88–89), emphasis original.

14. *The Teacher*, 1.5

15. *The Teacher, Bk 3.* Edwin Abott (Ibid., pg 88) argues that this image is only meant to have a significance for memory as opposed to being connected to worshipping Christ: "Greeks were accustomed to worship Artemis as 'the Huntress.' Becoming Christians, they might be tempted to worship Christ as 'the Fisherman,' especially if they saw His figure engraved on Christian seals in that character. Clement warns them that they are not to worship Him thus. The figure is to arouse not worship, but remembrance—"remembrance of an apostle and of the [other] 'children'. . .," that is, those whom the Lord hailed as 'children' on the sea of Tiberias, where they had been fishing in vain, and He, the Fisherman, taught them how to fish to good purpose." However, Abbott also notes Clement's "hymnal appeal to Christ as 'Fisherman'" and the connection to baptism, which is distinctively an act of worship. Remembrance is also itself a potentially devotional concept. When it is merely remembrance of facts, it can be done with a neutral attitude. But when remembrance of a person is designed to be continual, this is a distinctively honorific action. If the person being remembered is God, it is hard to not see this as an honorific action directed through the wearing of the image and the act of looking at it.

16. *Stromata* 6.11: "I pass over in silence at present the parable which says in the Gospel: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a man who cast a net into the sea and out of the multitude of the fishes caught, makes a selection of the better ones.'" (Matthew 13:47-48)

17. The image can still be seen in a secondary way to represent the Apostles because they are also fishers of men by participation in the ministry which Christ began. But this is not the initial, prima facie meaning of the image, and it is of Christ Himself first and foremost. After all, the children drawn out of the water are the apostles drawn to the shore by Christ, who therefore "fishes" them out.

Appendix H: Ring Wearing as Image Veneration

Wearing as a Kind of Veneration: In addition to being venerated by how it is placed or handled, there is a common spiritual pattern which is present in all ring-wearing: the phenomenon of binding and its connection to hierarchy. Speaking of the continuity between rings in real life and their symbolism in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Jonathan Pageau notes the following:

> . . .the hierarchy of the (One) ring becomes a hierarchy of dark power which places the dark lord at its head. And so the rings given to the people become subject to the power of the owner of the One Ring. This binding appears in the very shape of the ring as a band or circle which marks and surrounds the wearer with its power. The notion that a ring is a form of binding to oneself is something we can still understand today, as this is the purpose of placing a wedding band around our spouse. It binds them to us just like it bound the owners of the multiple rings to Sauron who had made and given them the rings. [1]

Pageau's understanding of rings as binding the wearer to what is represented by the ring becomes even more obvious when we start asking

questions about hypothetical (hopefully not actual!) situations in which people are wearing rings. If a young child wears a ring with a picture of a dinosaur or a kitty cat, we will naturally conclude that “they really like dinos” or “they really like kitties.” But if they are still wearing that ring at age 15, it might raise an eyebrow. The devotional aspect becomes even stronger when we consider unacceptable uses of rings by adults. Just imagine the uproar if a husband wore a ring with a tiny image of an ex-girlfriend on one of his fingers and tried to convince his wife that although he wasn’t willing to throw the ring away—“It means nothing, I’m totally over her.”

It is obvious here that having or wearing a ring is a form of veneration, routed through interaction with the image, directed ultimately to the person depicted. If we ask whether the wearing outwardly shows devotion or causes one to remember and feel devoted, the answer seems to be both. And if a Christian were to wear a ring with an image of a false god or pagan symbol, nothing would be more natural than to point out to him or her that this outward act mirrors and even increases an inward confusion and divided allegiance. It would seem at face value to be at least a semi-idolatrous practice which involves honor passing through the ring to the false god inscribed.

Numerous incidents from Roman history demonstrate an understanding that to wear an image is to revere and bind oneself to what is depicted. Saint Ambrose of Milan noted that to wear a signet image of the treacherous Brutus or Cassius brought capital punishment; about this, Kunz comments that “the wearing of such a ring would imply not only an admiration of the person figured, but also devotion to his cause.” [2] The author also notes the following other instances of the Roman custom of wearing portrait images as a gesture of honor and devotion which passes through the ring to the person imaged:

> In ancient Rome it was not unusual for the admirer of a philosopher or poet to wear his portrait engraved on a ring stone. One of the elegies of Ovid, written during his banishment from Rome, by order of Augustus, alludes feelingly to this custom. The poem is addressed to a faithful

> friend, who wears the poet’s portrait in his ring, and Ovid says: “In casting your eye upon this, perhaps you sometimes say, ‘how far away is poor Ovid now!’” He died in exile in 18 A.D. [3]

"Scipio Africanus, the conqueror of Hannibal, had his father's portrait engraved on his signet, and his son followed the father's example in this respect. The idea seems to be an excellent one, as both family honor and filial love could thus find expression. [4]

The innate awareness which Romans had that binding an image to oneself was a way of conveying honor to what the image represented is expanded upon in the context of wedding rings. While his writings are somewhat later (4th-5th century), the Roman pagan Macrobius adds a biological component to his understanding of the binding function of rings. He postulates a “heart nerve” (which would later get characterized as the “vena amoris”) present in the finger on which wedding rings are placed, and which appears to physiologically ground the binding power that rings have:

> The custom of placing the betrothal or wedding ring upon the fourth finger seems undoubtedly to owe its origin to the fancy that a special nerve or vein, ran directly from this finger to the heart. Macrobius, in his Saturnalia, alludes to the belief in the following words: “Because of this nerve, the newly betrothed placed the ring on this finger of his spouse, as though it were a representation of the heart.” [5]

While it is unknown whether pre-Christian Roman authors would have offered a similar explanation of the binding power of rings, the fact that Macrobius offers an explanation at all is significant. Both the practice and its understood significance would have to be widespread and deeply accepted in order to deserve this kind of attention in someone’s theorizing. It is safe to say that Romans accepted the binding (devotion and honor

expressing) function that images can serve when they are shown reverence by being bound to a person's body.

Although they are not images, this same instinct seems to be behind the ritualized use of the tefillin/phylacteries: what you bind to yourself is what you bind yourself to. By attaching a piece of the Torah to the body, the worshipper of God showed devotion to God's words—and by extension, to God Himself.

Clement Of Alexandria on the Binding Power of Rings: This resonance between one's inner life and how it manifests in outward appearances—and connected with what is worthy, honorable—is applied to signet rings in Clement's use of a quotation from Sirach:

> And if it is necessary for us, while engaged in public business, or discharging other avocations in the country, and often away from our wives, to seal anything for the sake of safety, He (the Word) allows us a signet for this purpose only. Other finger rings are to be cast off, since, according to the Scripture, instruction is a golden ornament for a wise man. (Sirach 21:21)

In addition to again rejecting excessive adornment and restating a signet's usefulness for securing property, Clement grounds the legitimacy of wearing a gold ring in Scripture. The connection between the wearing of a ring and more spiritual matters is further developed here, since Clement makes what appears to be a mystical identification between the very teaching of Christ the Logos ("instruction is a") and the ring worn ("golden ornament"). The wearing of the ring becomes, then, a binding to Christ through devotion to His teachings.

In several texts Clement of Alexandria also speaks of rings using the language of binding:

> Wherefore also women ought to dress neatly, and bind themselves around with the band of chaste modesty lest through giddiness they slip away from the truth.

Here, to “bind” oneself with the “band of chase modesty” has precisely the function that Pageau refers to when speaking of the symbolism of the ring: sealing the relationship between the wearer and what is represented by that which is worn. The possibility of “slipping away from the truth” is mitigated by the wearing of the ring, which is inherently an act of devotion to her husband, her marriage and family, and to the truth of her faith—all of which are represented by the ring.

In the *Stromata*, Clement comments on the ways in which some parts of Pythagorean philosophy resonate with Old Testament teaching and even pave the way for New Testament doctrines. One such saying concerns signet images:

> And again, “Don't wear a ring, nor engrave on it the images of the gods,” enjoins Pythagoras; as Moses ages before enacted expressly that neither a graven, nor molten, nor molded, nor painted likeness should be made; so that we may not cleave to things of sense, but pass to intellectual objects: for familiarity with the sight disparages the reverence of what is divine; and to worship that which is immaterial by matter, is to dishonor it by sense. [6]

This teaching regards images of false gods as an attention vortex, preventing the mind from ascending to spiritual realities. There is no division between the physical act of wearing a ring with an idol’s face and spiritually cleaving (being bound and devoted) to what is represented. Clement’s concern about “cleaving to things of sense” is related to his teaching expressed elsewhere that ultimately the worship of idols fails to even be given to the demons who masquerade as gods and goddesses. Instead, “The makers of gods worship not gods and demons, but in my view earth and art, which go to make up images.” [7] The wearing of unholy images ultimately is a worship and spiritual binding to nothingness.

This binding is also evident in Clement's warnings about the intrinsic link between the image worn and the idol, immoral person, or immoral lifestyle that the image represents. But this idea of binding power is also present in

his statements about the Fisherman image, the wife's ring, and the connection between Christian ring-wearing and divine wisdom:

The negative forms of binding mentioned are very intense; they effectively amount to worship of a false god and dedicating oneself to a passionate lifestyle (whether one of anger or one of desire) through images of these things. There can be no mistake about the fact that ring-wearing spiritually devotes you to what is imaged, and makes you participate in it. The devotion is routed through honorific action (namely wearing) directed to the image, as is clear from Clement's concern that "to worship that which is immaterial by matter, is to dishonor it by sense" when talking about wearing the ring images of gods which Pythagoras decried and which the Alexandrian viewed as a violation of the second commandment. There is honor directed to the ring image by the very act of wearing it; that's just what wearing a signet amounts to.

When this binding is taken in a positive direction (using Clement's approved seals), it would instead devote one to Christ, the Spirit, or the Cross. This positive side of binding is also evident in his language about a wife's ring binding her to chaste modesty, and the language of a "golden ornament for a wise man." We can also interpret the comment about "remember the Apostle and the children drawn out of the water" as a form of binding. Since this is effectively shorthand for "remembering Christ, the original Fisher of men, who first caught the Apostles" this is an image of Christ, and Clement's comment amounts to a commemoration of and binding to Christ. The nature of this remembering would stand in contradistinction to the remembrance of passionate experiences of sin connected to the lover or prostitute in the same passage. Therefore, this remembering goes beyond intellectually recalling facts, and is instead participatory, concerned with the reverent devotion of the heart towards the Risen Christ who initiated one by baptism.

From both the positive and negative instances, it is evident that in Clement's theology of signets the wearing of a ring has a binding function. That image which you bind to yourself is that reality which you bind yourself to (honor).

1. Pageau, “The Symbolism of the One Ring.”
2. Kunz, *Rings*, p. 128
3. Ibid., pg 57
4. Ibid., pg 129
5. Ibid., pg 52
6. Stromata 5.5
7. Ibid., Bk 3. Some who interpret this passage take the phrase “to worship that which is immaterial by matter, is to dishonor it by sense” as reflecting a rejection of the use of images or any material objects in worship. However, the fact that Clement is not here rejecting the use of material objects in the worship of God is evident from the fact that he would affirm the Christian practice of the Eucharist. Further, since he accepts that Christians can use some signet images, it is clear that he does not oppose visible images per se (which a strict and aniconic reading of “familiarity with the sight disparages the reverence of what is divine,” would indicate). We have already noted how the lampstand of the Tabernacle iconically connected viewers to its prototype (the cross of Christ). It is in the already-established context of idolatry, then, that the comments here about the problem of trying “to worship that which is immaterial by matter,” should be read. The most natural way to take Clement’s statement is that worshipping matter (idolatry) confusedly identifies divine being with material elements—the same concern we already noted in several passages throughout Clement. “To worship what is immaterial by matter” would mean “to worship what is immaterial *by worshipping matter*.” The statement that “earth and art” are ultimately worshipped makes this clear too.

Appendix I: The Hierarchy of Materials in Early Christianity

There are several instances in the ante-Nicene Church where certain materials are picked out as uniquely evocative of honor and reverent treatment. This theme can be found in several texts in relation to a variety of objects: cups, containers, lamps, signet rings, relics, and images.

"The Trial Before Zenophilius." It is particularly interesting and important to consider the composition and quantity of the drinking vessels and lamps which were confiscated from a North African Church, and how this relates to their probable position and use in a liturgical setting. The exact passage in question with an inventory of Church items reads as follows:

> Two golden cups, six silver cups, six silver jugs, a silver casket, seven silver lamps and eleven bronze lamps with chains.

The objects can be seen as forming multiple layers or concentric circles of holy use. Gold seems designated as most holy, likely only used for two primary communion cups for the central Mystery of Christ. This is the most restricted material, used for the objects most distinctly set apart and honored. The silver is most reasonably seen as fit for holy use to a lesser degree; it appears as a kind of transitional layer towards more normal

objects. The silver cups, seem likely to have a direct liturgical use as communion cups for this parish, though they could have contained secondary liturgical substances for baptism (such as milk or honey, as were sometimes used) or for the fellowship of the Love Feast (Agape Meal). The "seven silver lamps" can plausibly be connected to the holy light of the Christian menorah. Their quantity suggests they were special and set apart. [1] When combined with the fact that they are not listed as having chains (like the bronze lamps) it makes it likely they would have to rest on a liturgical surface—in other words, the altar. The silver objects also include a casket and jugs, which seem to work as preparatory containers to carry things which would be set aside for direct sacramental use. These may have held wine, or been used for holy water. These secondary silver containers lead up towards the use of the most holy objects which would be communion chalices. These "layers" of holier materials (gold and silver) would be differentiated from less holy objects (such as the eleven bronze lamps with chains) which could still bear a connection to holy mysteries, but in a more indirect way on the periphery of liturgical action. It would make sense that these bronze lamps would hang towards the entrance area of the Church, giving light for the faithful during evening services. This more common space would be differentiated from the altar area where gold and silver vessels would be concentrated.

This differentiation of various physical materials as connected to degrees of holiness or honor seems quite embedded in the ancient mindset, and was shared by the early Christians. We can call this the hierarchy of materials. We have previously noted the fact that the Christian baptismal ring bore a holy image imprinted in gold or engraved in the gem on the "golden ornament" which connected to wisdom. As the golden imperial seal of Rome's Lord Caesar was honored by its restricted use and being entrusted to officers only at the emperor's permission, so also the "seal of the Lord" Jesus was uniquely entrusted to Christians as bearers—a ceremonial handling which acknowledged its honorable status. All of this is connected specifically to the gold composition of this signet; it is all similar and parallel to other Romans' comments about the honorable status of gold (especially those of Pliny the Elder).

The martyrdom of Polycarp also witnesses to the connection between honor or holiness and certain kinds of compositional materials. Saint Polycarp's flesh is described using the hierarchy of materials when he is being burned alive:

> And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace.

The scent given off by his body is “as if frankincense or some such precious (τιμίων, timíon, honorable) spices had been smoking there.” The bones of Polycarp which become buried relics that the Christians gather to commemorate him are described as “more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold.” This passage implies a positive comparison between gold, silver, precious stones, and incense and the body of Polycarp. It would not make sense to compare the Holy Martyr’s body to these types of materials if they were not themselves already considered to be evocative of honor. Such honorable materials also have a connection to interaction by the faithful. Prior to his martyrdom,

> . . .every one of the faithful was always eager who should first touch his skin. For, on account of his good behavior he was, even before his martyrdom, adorned with every kind of good.

After his death, his followers want to become “possessors of his holy flesh” but are thwarted. There seems to be an efficacy to the very act of touching the body of this holy man. All of this shows how various kinds of materials are connected to the honorable status and holiness of something, and various honorific actions that flow from this status.

Additionally, we have noted how Origen categorizes materials such as wood and wax as bearing the image of the emperor, which should be respected by not being spoken ill of. In this context, there seems to be a

kind of contrast between the lowly composition of the image (wood and wax) and the honor-inducing form that it bears (the emperor). This parallels the lowly composition of one's neighbors (made of mutable and corruptible matter) and the contrasting glory they bear in virtue of their form (Christ, the image of God). While it is in reference to this form that the honor is given, we can note the suggestion that a more exalted composition (gold or silver) would have made it more obvious that honor was due. There is an a fortiori consideration implied: if you should respect an image of an emperor made of wax or wood, how much more obvious would it have been that you should respect an image of the emperor made of silver or gold.

St. Methodius applies this hierarchy to various images, with focus given to the golden image of the emperor which is most evocative of honor. St. Methodius then differentiates other materials as being less evocative of honorific gestures to varying degrees (silver in second place, then chalk and bronze) while insisting that images of the emperor should not be dishonored even if placed on the less honorable substances. This mirrors the same hierarchy of materials we see implied in Origen's comments about the imperial image, but with slight differentiation in the lower tiers (chalk and bronze instead of wood and wax).

Saint Paul's own teachings utilize the hierarchy of materials. In 2 Timothy, he mentions "honorable use" and "dishonorable use" of various objects depending on their composition. This is used as an analogy for the ways in which God will find different ways to work through people who seek a pure lifestyle and people who remain unrepentant or uncommitted.

> 20 Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. 21 Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. (2 Ti2:20-21)

While this is a comparison, it seems very implausible that Saint Paul rejects the assumption behind the analogy (i.e., that gold and silver are more

fit for honorable use). He does not correct but rather uses and reinforces the belief his Roman hearers and readers would share that the objects are differentiated in their use by their honorable or dishonorable composition. He would probably be just as disgusted as Pliny was by Antonius's shameful misuse of gold vessels.

The hierarchy of materials and differentiation of vessels that Saint Paul refers to seems to play into even the way that tables were arranged in the ancient world. An image surviving from the Pompeian tomb of Gaius Vestorius Priscus portrays a variety of tableware at a funeral feast. The drinking vessels on top of the table appear to be all composed of silver, possibly with a gradation of purity towards the central containers (likely mixing bowls called kraters). The containers on the top of the table also seem to be more ornate toward the center, and the central cup may bear a design. The vessels underneath the table appear to be of inferior material and design, with a purpose of storage and transfer instead of being the special containers for ritual dining. This differentiation of composition, design, and function resembles the concentric circles of honorable and holy use that we noted in the inventory of "The Trial Before Zenophilius." The place of honor on the table towards the center corresponds to the kind of container that would be most likely to have direct use in ritual dining, and can be seen as honored by means of its placement—much like the guest of honor who sits in the seat of honor at a table.

The fact that this common ancient understanding of the hierarchy of materials can be seen throughout early Christian sources provides additional evidence that Eucharistic cups made of gold or bearing an image of Christ as Good Shepherd would be venerated using modes such as honorable placement. By forming these cups out of these finer materials and incorporating designs that set them apart for holy use, North African Christians can be seen as establishing them as focal points for use and acknowledgement. While it is not certain that Tertullian's cups of concern were composed of gold, or that the cups confiscated in the trial before Zenophilius had an image of the Good Shepherd on them, it is not at all implausible given that both are North African and appear to be the same kind of thing—holy cups consecrated for the Eucharistic worship of the Lord. [2]

1. The use of the number seven to identify representation of the menorah is employed by David Hendin (“Bar Kokhba Revolt: Secrets of the Coins”, lecture for the American Numismatic Society; 5/22/21 (link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fdk7CgjJDk). He points to the repeated presence of 7 branches on palm trees on the coins minted under Jewish leader Bar Kokhba, who attempted to restore the temple, as a sign that these meant to resemble the menorah.
2. These considerations raise the question of whether veneration can be ascribed to the image of the Good Shepherd on the cups Tertullian mentions simply on the basis of its incorporation and placement within holy worship. We have noted how something’s placement on a table for ritual dining could be seen as a way its status was acknowledged, and its status was grounded in its use as central in a ritual. But if the status of the object is determined by its use, which gets displayed outwardly by its central position in a holy space, then there is no reason to not see it as being actively honored simply based on our knowledge that it was incorporated into the ritual worship of the Lord. Thus, with design and composition as potential indicators of honored status, we can see physical placement and even just incorporation into worship as modes of veneration to the image of the Good Shepherd on the cup.