

SUPPLEMENTS TO  
VIGILIAE CHRISTIANAE

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# Living Water

*Images, Symbols, and Settings  
of Early Christian Baptism*



ROBIN M. JENSEN

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BRILL

Living Water

Supplements  
to  
Vigiliae Christianae

Texts and Studies of  
Early Christian Life and Language

*Editors*

J. den Boeft – B.D. Ehrman – J. van Oort –  
D.T. Runia – C. Scholten – J.C.M. van Winden

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# Living Water

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Early Christian Baptism

*by*

Robin M. Jensen



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Dedicated to my teachers, Richard Brilliant and Richard A. Norris,  
and to my dear friend and traveling companion, Anne Fry.



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## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Modern Sources*

<i>AB</i>	<i>Art Bulletin</i>
<i>AC</i>	<i>Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>ACIAC</i>	<i>Congresso Internazionale di Archeologia Cristiana—Atti</i>
<i>ACW</i>	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>AM</i>	<i>Arte medievale</i>
<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>AnTard</i>	<i>Antiquité Tardive</i>
<i>Atti Pontif. Acc. Arch</i>	<i>Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia—Atti</i>
<i>BAC</i>	<i>Bollettino archeologia cristiana</i>
<i>Boll. d'Arte</i>	<i>Bollettino d'Arte</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Bible Review Magazine</i>
<i>Bull. soc. nat. ant.</i>	<i>Bulletin des société nationale des antiquaires de France</i>
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Cahiers archéologiques</i>
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum: series Latina</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>DACL</i>	<i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i>
<i>DBL</i>	<i>Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy</i>
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
<i>EEC</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Early Christianity</i>
<i>EJ</i>	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i>
<i>FOC</i>	<i>Fathers of the Church</i>
<i>GCS</i>	<i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>ICUR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae</i>

JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JRH	<i>Journal of Roman History</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JThS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
JWCI	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
LA	<i>Liber Annuus</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCI	<i>Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MDAI(R)	<i>Mitteilungen des Deutschen archäologischen Instituts (Römische)</i>
<i>MedSt</i>	<i>Medieval Studies</i>
NBAC	<i>Nuovo bollettino di archeologia cristiana</i>
OCP	<i>Orientalia christiana periodica</i>
PL	Patrologia cursus completus: Series Latina
PLRE	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i>
PTR	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
RAC	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>RevScRel</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>RivAC</i>	<i>Rivista di archeologia cristiana</i>
<i>Riv. Stud. Liguri</i>	<i>Rivista di studi Liguri</i>
RQ	<i>Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskund und Kirchengeschichte</i>
SC	Sources chrétiennes
<i>StLit</i>	<i>Studia Liturgica</i>
<i>StPatr</i>	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Quarterly Review</i>
TIP	<i>Temi di Iconografia Paleocristiana</i>
<i>TRev</i>	<i>Theologische Revue</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VCS	<i>Vigiliae christianae, Supplementary Series</i>
<i>VetCh</i>	<i>Vetera Christianorum</i>
ZKG	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>

*Ancient Authors and Works*

<i>Acts Pil.</i>	<i>Acts of Pilate</i>
<i>Acts Thom.</i>	<i>Acts of Thomas</i>
Ambrose	
<i>Enarrat. Ps.</i>	<i>Enarrationes in XII Psalmos davidicos</i>
<i>Exp. Luc.</i>	<i>Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam</i>
<i>Exp. Ps.</i>	<i>Expositio Psalmum</i>
<i>Hel.</i>	<i>De Helia et Jejunio</i>
<i>Myst.</i>	<i>De mysteriis</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>De sacramentiis</i>
<i>Spir.</i>	<i>De Spiritu Sancto</i>
<i>Virg.</i>	<i>De virginibus</i>
Aphraates	
<i>Hom.</i>	<i>Homiliae</i>
Athanasius	
<i>Vit. Ant.</i>	<i>Vita Antonii</i>
Augustine of Hippo	
<i>Bapt.</i>	<i>De baptismo contra Donatistas</i>
<i>Civ.</i>	<i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>C. Jul.</i>	<i>Contra Julianum</i>
<i>Doctr. chr.</i>	<i>De doctrina christiana</i>
<i>Ennarat. Ps.</i>	<i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Nat. Orig.</i>	<i>De natura et origine animae</i>
<i>Pecc. Merit.</i>	<i>De peccatorum meritis et remissione</i>
<i>Serm.</i>	<i>Sermones</i>
<i>Tract. ep. Jo.</i>	<i>In epistulam Johannis ad Parthos tractatus</i>
<i>Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i>
<i>Ant. Lat.</i>	<i>Anthologia Latina</i>
Apuleius	
<i>Metam.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses</i>
Aristophanes	
<i>Nub.</i>	<i>Nubes</i>
Bede	
<i>Hist. ecc.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Locis Sanct.</i>	<i>De locis sanctis</i>
<i>Can. Hippolytus</i>	<i>Canons of Hippolytus</i>
Cassiodorus	
<i>Ex. Ps.</i>	<i>Expositio Psalmorum</i>

Cassius Dio

*Ep.*                    *Epistulae*

Clement of Alexandria

*Paed.*                *Paedagogus*

*Strom.*               *Stromata*

Clement of Rome

*I Clem.*              *I Clement*

*Cod. Justin.*        *Codex Justinianus*

*Cod. Theo.*          *Codex Theodosianus*

Cyprian

*Ep.*                    *Epistulae*

*Hab. virg.*          *De habitu virginum*

*Laps.*                 *De lapsis*

*Unit. Ecc.*          *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*

Cyril of Jerusalem

*Cat.*                  *Catecheses illuminandorum*

*Hom. para.*         *Homilia de paralytico*

*Myst.*                *Catecheses mystagogial*

*Procat.*             *Procatechesis*

*Did. Apost.*        *Didascalia apostolorum*

Egeria

*Itin.*                  *Itinerarium*

Ephrem

*Epiph.*               *De epiphania*

*Hymn Virg.*        *Hymnos de virginitate*

Epiphanius

*Pan.*                  *Panarion (Adversus haereses)*

Eusebius

*Coet. sanct.*       *Ad coetum sanctorum*

*Vit. Const.*         *Vita Constantini*

*Hist.*                 *Historia ecclesiastica*

*Onom.*               *Onomasticon*

Firmicus Maternus

*Err. prof. rel.*     *De errore profanarum religionum*

*Gel Sac.*             *Sacramentarium Gelasianum*

*Gos. Thom.*        *Gospel of Thomas*

*Gos. Phil.*          *Gospel of Philip*

Gregory of Nazianzus

*Carm. th.*           *Carmina theologica*

*Or.*                    *Orationes*

Gregory of Nyssa	
<i>Diem lum.</i>	<i>In diem luminum (De baptismo Christi)</i>
Gregory of Tours	
<i>Mir.</i>	<i>De miraculis Sancti Martini</i>
Herodotus	
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historia</i>
Hesiod	
<i>Frag.</i>	<i>Fragmenta</i>
Hippolytus	
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Refutatio omnium haeresium</i>
<i>Trad. ap.</i>	<i>Traditio apostolica</i>
Ignatius of Antioch	
<i>Eph.</i>	<i>Ad Ephesios</i>
<i>Smyr.</i>	<i>Ad Smyrnaeos</i>
Irenaeus	
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Adversus haereses</i>
Isidore of Seville	
<i>Eccl. off.</i>	<i>De ecclesia officiis</i>
<i>Etym.</i>	<i>Etymologiae</i>
Jerome	
<i>Lucif.</i>	<i>Altercatio Luciferiani et orthodoxi seu dialogues contra Luciferianos</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Ep. ad Praesid.</i>	<i>Epistula ad Praesidius</i>
<i>Hom.</i>	<i>Homiliae</i>
<i>Vigil.</i>	<i>Adversus Vigilantium</i>
John Chrysostom	
<i>Catech. illum.</i>	<i>Catecheses ad illuminandos</i>
<i>Hom. Rom.</i>	<i>Homiliae in epistulam ad Romanos</i>
<i>Hom. Jo.</i>	<i>Homilae in Joannem.</i>
<i>Stat.</i>	<i>Ad populum Antiochenum de statutis</i>
John the Deacon	
<i>Ep. ad Sen.</i>	<i>Epistula ad Senarius</i>
John Moschus	
<i>Prat. Spir.</i>	<i>Pratum spirituale</i>
Josephus	
<i>B.J.</i>	<i>Bellum judaicum</i>
Justin Martyr	
<i>I Apol.</i>	<i>Apologia I</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i>

Lactantius	
<i>Ave Phoen.</i>	<i>Ave phoenice</i>
Leo I	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>Liber pont.</i>	<i>Liber pontificalis</i>
Macrobius	
<i>Som. Scip.</i>	<i>Somnium Scipionis</i>
Martial	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Maximus the Confessor	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Maximus of Turin	
<i>Contra. pag.</i>	<i>Contra paganos</i>
Minucius Felix	
<i>Oct.</i>	<i>Octavius</i>
Mishna	
<i>Miqw.</i>	<i>Miqwa'ot</i>
Optatus of Milevis	
<i>Donat.</i>	<i>Adversus Donatistas</i>
Origen	
<i>Cels.</i>	<i>Contra Celsum</i>
<i>Comm. Jo.</i>	<i>Commentarii in evangelium Joannis</i>
<i>Hom. Gen.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Genesim.</i>
<i>Hom. Josh.</i>	<i>Homiliae in Joshuam</i>
<i>Mart.</i>	<i>Exhoratio ad martyrium</i>
Ovid	
<i>Am.</i>	<i>Amores</i>
<i>Metam.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses</i>
Palladius	
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogus</i>
<i>Hist. Laus.</i>	<i>Historia Lausiaca</i>
Paulinus	
<i>Carm.</i>	<i>Carmina</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Peter Chrysologus	
<i>Serm.</i>	<i>Sermones</i>
Philo	
<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>QG</i>	<i>Questiones Genesi.</i>

Piacenza Pilgrim	
<i>Itin.</i>	<i>Itinerarium</i>
Pilgrim of Bordeaux	
<i>Itin. Burd.</i>	<i>Itinerarium Burdigalense</i>
Pliny the Elder	
<i>Nat.</i>	<i>Naturalis Historia</i>
Pliny the Younger	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Proclus	
<i>Cat.</i>	<i>Catecheses</i>
Prudentius	
<i>Carm.</i>	<i>Carmina</i>
<i>Perist.</i>	<i>Peristephanon</i>
Ps. Ambrose	
<i>Laps. virgin.</i>	<i>De lapsu virginis consecratae</i>
<i>Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i>
Ps. Augustine	
<i>Mir. Sanc. Steph.</i>	<i>De miraculis Sancti Stephani Protomartyris</i>
Ps. Dionysius	
<i>Ecc. Hier</i>	<i>De ecclesiastica hierarchia</i>
Ps. Prosper of Aquitaine	
<i>Prom. praed.</i>	<i>Liber promissionum et praedicatorum Dei</i>
Quodvultdeus	
<i>Symb.</i>	<i>De symbolo</i>
<i>Sac. Veron.</i>	<i>Sacramentarium Veronese</i>
<i>Sibylline Or.</i>	<i>Sibylline Oraculum</i>
Sidonius Apollinaris	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Socrates	
<i>Hist. ecc.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Symmachus	
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
Tacitus	
<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annals</i>
Tertullian	
<i>Adv. Jud.</i>	<i>Adversus Judaeos</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apologeticus</i>
<i>Bapt.</i>	<i>De baptismo</i>
<i>Cor.</i>	<i>De corona</i>

<i>Idol.</i>	<i>De idololatria</i>
<i>Pall.</i>	<i>De pallio</i>
<i>Res.</i>	<i>De resurrectione carnis</i>
<i>Scap.</i>	<i>Ad Scapulam</i>
Theodore of Mopsuestia	
<i>Bapt. hom.</i>	<i>Homiliae de baptismo</i>
Theodoret	
<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Exp. Ps.</i>	<i>Expositio psalmorum</i>
Theon of Smyrna	
<i>Exp. math.</i>	<i>Expositio rerum mathematicarum</i>
Venantius Fortunatus	
<i>Carm.</i>	<i>Carmina</i>
Zeno	
<i>Inv. font.</i>	<i>Invitatio fontis</i>
<i>Tract.</i>	<i>Tractatus</i>

## FOREWORD

This book began as my doctoral thesis, completed almost two decades ago but never published. I set it aside while I pursued other writing projects, began teaching first at a theological school and then a university, and raised two children. For their guidance and patience, I must again thank the professors who oversaw the work, Richard Brilliant at Columbia University and Richard Norris of the Union Theological Seminary in New York. In the interim years, Richard Brilliant has retired and Richard Norris has died, leaving two institutions bereft of their fine teaching and service. I dedicate this work to them.

Other individuals have helped along the way, encouraging me to bring this to publication at last. They include Paul Corby Finney, Mary Charles Murray, Patrick Alexander, J. Patout Burns, and my colleagues at Vanderbilt University. I am exceedingly grateful to the editors at Brill, especially Loes Schouten, Mattie Kuiper, and Renee Otto, as well as Sible de Blaauw, who read the manuscript in its penultimate draft and made excellent suggestions for its improvement. I also wish to acknowledge the generous assistance and helpful comments (and corrections) of the anonymous readers as well as members of the editorial board of the *Vigiliae Christianae* series.

I also had the able and invaluable assistance of students who took on the task of proofreading and indexing. For this help I thank Gerald Liu, Michael Domeracki, Andrea Thornton and John Burnam. My daughter, Libby Brown, produced some of the architectural drawings—the first of many such favors I expect to ask of her. Finally, I want to thank Anne Fry, my friend and companion on more than one adventure seeking the remains of an early Christian baptistery.



## INTRODUCTION

This study was prompted by the conviction that examination of early Christian art and architecture is essential to scholarly comprehension of how early believers practiced and understood their religious faith. In particular, I believe that a study of liturgical theology or ritual practice that focuses only on textual evidence and does not incorporate consideration of visual art and physical environment attends to only half of the story. At the same time, visual artifacts always are embedded in a context and serve a special purpose in that context. In many cases they fulfill a practical function. Often they also transmit messages or meaning. Thus, in addition to enriching such work by adding non-textual data and dimension to the scholarly enterprise, the joint consideration of material and documentary data reveals instances of discontinuity as well as complementarity, makes the story more complex, and demonstrates that historians can learn much by studying these two bodies of evidence in tandem. A study of early Christian art and architecture is immensely enhanced by knowledge of the history of theology and liturgy; at the same time a study of early Christian worship and doctrine is illuminated by attention to the physical settings and pictorial expression of the lived faith.

To these ends, this survey of baptismal iconography and architecture integrates the history of Christian art and architecture with the study of ritual practice and sacramental theology, aiming to produce an interdisciplinary analysis of the Christian baptismal ritual from the third through the sixth century CE. Because historians of early Christianity typically concentrate on documentary sources, this work begins with a study of pictorial art before it moves to the liturgical texts. Then it proceeds to a study of purpose-built baptismal spaces, examining their symbolism and the possible purpose or meaning of their interior decorative programs. This strategy—treating the works of art prior to studying the relevant texts—is intended to counter the text historian's tendency to explain religiously inspired iconography by immediate recourse to literary evidence. When documents are introduced they are discussed in the context of artworks, and treated as supplementary and illuminative, rather than as primary and decisive. In other words, this work attempts to avoid the danger of making the material

evidence reinforce or, worse, merely illustrate already analyzed documentary data. A principle focus on monumental or material evidence hopefully provides new insight or perspective on the ritual's meaning to those who experienced it. Although usually this perspective is enriching without being contradictory, in some instances the physical and textual data appear to differ, raising questions about the variability or divergence of ritual performance, or the predictable distinction between ideal and actual practice.

The first chapter offers a catalogue of known pictorial representations of baptism found in Roman catacomb painting. The second turns to baptismal iconography on sarcophagus (or other funerary) reliefs from Rome, Gaul, and Spain. The third chapter considers images of baptism found in non-funerary contexts, especially in ivories and mosaics. At the end of each of these three chapters, certain issues are raised with reference to specific artworks discussed therein. The fourth chapter systematically synthesizes texts and artworks through analysis of various aspects of the baptismal rite that appear in the iconography. Because the selection of these aspects is driven by the imagery, the documentary evidence is cited more as supportive than as explanatory. In other words, written texts do not serve as conclusive guides for interpreting the imagery, but rather as helpful hermeneutical aides or even as invaluable witnesses to the ancient christian initiation ritual.

The fifth and sixth chapters turn to the design and décor of early Christian baptisteries, analyzing the potential symbolism of their architectural structure and iconographic programs. The baptisteries considered in Chapter Five were chosen mainly on the basis of their having some surviving decorative art that could be evaluated in addition to their physical plans; however, that chapter mostly considers the possible models and meaning or significance of particular shapes of baptismal chambers and fonts. An analysis of the potential meaning of the decorative schemes of the baptisteries takes up most of Chapter Six.

The chronological spread of this study (from the late second to the early sixth century CE) was set in order to consider the earliest recognizably Christian artworks up through the beginning of the early Byzantine era. The limited geographic range of the examples (mainly consisting of architecture from Italy, Gaul, and North Africa) reflects the relative paucity of iconographic evidence from the Christian East before the fifth or sixth century. Since the surviving literary evidence

regarding early Christian baptism has a much larger geographic range, and because few artifacts and documents can be coordinated in terms of place and date, the textual evidence only rarely speaks directly to contemporary (and regionally related) visual data. The difficulty of finding documents that share the locale and date with available art objects makes assertions risky. Yet, when one considers as much extant evidence as possible, patterns emerge that can be identified across place and time, and certain general questions arise that benefit from examining and synthesizing different types of data.

One important aspect of studying physical evidence is its immediacy. Even though an object may have been damaged, restored (often badly), or removed from its original context and placed in a museum, the material is closer to the original than most documents, which have been transmitted in translations and copies made through centuries. A researcher studying a monument or artwork sees history first hand, in a sense. Yet, since the cultural distance between modern and ancient viewer is vast, related documents can offer context, a wider basis for analysis, and some basic criteria for historical speculation or judging hypotheses. In some instances texts are even critical for understanding a work of art or the function of an architectural structure. Accordingly, while documents and artifacts do not necessarily compliment one another, they are more related than they are independent witnesses to past events or ideas.

Nevertheless, such integration is complicated by the distinct and often different goals of text historians and art historians. Artworks are functionally different from texts; their aims and purposes differ, and they cannot be made submissive to documentary analysis as they were not intended to embody or expound clear doctrinal systems. Yet, like homilies or even theological treatises, they were the products of faith experienced and artistically expressed—in this case in visual rather than verbal form. Whatever their content, and whether they served symbolic, didactic, narrative, or iconic purposes, works of art emerged from a common culture; those who commissioned or produced them shared a religious milieu with preachers of sermons and writers of dogmatic tracts. Furthermore, artworks were made to be placed within settings that were built for religious purposes or formal liturgical celebrations (e.g., tombs, shrines, baptisteries, and churches). To the extent that they were viewed within those contexts, they conveyed theological ideas and imparted religious meaning to visitors to those places.

Ultimately, this study's value will be measured by its contribution to understanding early Christian baptism. The rite of baptism was not a mental exercise that required intellectual assent to rational arguments about the nature of reality. Rather it was an enacted, bodily ritual that signaled an individual's internal cleansing from sin, identity change, spiritual illumination, personal regeneration, and eternal salvation (i.e., resurrection at the end time). Enactment was paramount. The ceremonial players (clergy, candidates) and actions (movements, gestures, use of oil, water, etc.) performed these ideas and caused them to have tangible, and not just ideal, effects upon the recipient. The iconography and architecture associated with this Christian sacrament reinforced these effects by visually pointing to baptism's benefits: purification, rebirth, sanctification, and life after death. Initiates did not simply understand in a conceptual way, rather they experienced it in their bodies—bodies with eyes to see as well as ears to hear.

The iconography and architectural setting of early Christian baptism reveals visible references to a visible ritual that effected a real (though invisible) transformation in the believer who received it. This study therefore considers the objects not only as historical documents that reveal information about actions of the past, or even symbols that convey the significance of those actions to participants, but artworks that have intrinsic value, beauty, purpose, and potency. In this respect they are reflections of the elements of the rite itself, the water in the font or the oil in the vessel held by the bishop. The one who gazes earnestly upon these things may see their manifold meanings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This last sentence refers to a line in a hymn Ephrem's *Hymn on Virginity* 7.14.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BAPTISMAL ICONOGRAPHY IN CATACOMB PAINTING

#### *Introduction: Evidence and Method*

The earliest pictorial representations of baptism appear in the Roman catacombs. These subterranean wall paintings belong to a fairly limited repertoire of images that survived primarily because of their venue—underground burials sites that generally escaped demolition caused by renovations or urban renewal. However, their sepulchral setting contributed not only to the survival of these paintings but also to their selection and content. Although scholars surmise that Christians produced non-funereal art from a fairly early date (that for the most part has been lost), these scenes' occurrence in a burial context suggests that they bore some particular relationship to early Christian beliefs about death or the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> A depiction of baptism is especially appropriate for a tomb because baptism serves both as the Christian ritual of membership and as the passage from an old to new self, enacting an individual's spiritual death and rebirth. Moreover, baptism is the means by which a believer lays claim to the promise of salvation in the afterlife.

Baptism scenes in catacomb painting generally include certain distinguishing details: a small nude youth or child standing in or under a stream of water, a larger, clothed male with his right hand on the youth's head, and a dove hovering above both figures. Sometimes trees or rocks indicate an outdoor setting. Variations are relatively minimal; the baptizer's clothing changes from image to image, and the dove is not always apparent. Occasionally, a third party stands to the side.

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<sup>2</sup> The obvious example for comparison is the baptistery in the Christian building at Dura Europos, which (perhaps significantly) lacks a recognizable representation of an actual baptism among its still visible wall paintings. The sepulchral significance of this particular catacomb iconography is the premise of Alfonso Fausone's monograph, *Die Taufe in der frühchristlichen Sepulkralkunst* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1982). Christian iconography is also found on non-funereal objects, including lamps, gems, and ceramic dishes, but almost none of this is relevant to this discussion of baptismal images in early Christian art.

Related images sometimes appear within the same frame (e.g., a man fishing).

These simple compositions belong to a corpus of more or less stock figures that includes certain conventional decorative or symbolic motifs that closely parallel the decoration of non-Christian tombs (e.g., birds, garlands, shepherd, praying figure, banquet scene) as well as abbreviated references to particular biblical narrative scenes that generally allude to the Christian story of salvation or divine intervention. Adam and Eve, Noah in his ark, Jonah being cast overboard and thrown back up on dry land, Abraham and Isaac, Moses striking the rock in the wilderness, Daniel with his lions, and the three youths in the fiery furnace all also occur on sarcophagus reliefs of the later third and early fourth centuries. Scenes from the Christian New Testament, including the Adoration of the Magi, and Jesus healing or working wonders, also appear in catacomb iconography. That the majority of these images depict specific biblical narratives allows identifying the baptism scene as Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.<sup>3</sup>

Such images were popular only for a century and a half at most. By the mid-fourth century most of them began to disappear from both catacomb painting and sarcophagus reliefs. Jonah and Noah almost completely vanish. Likewise, baptism scenes are absent from the fourth-century paintings in the Via Latina catacomb and no longer appear on sarcophagi by the early fifth century. Meanwhile, a new repertoire of images—Moses receiving the tablets, the crossing of the Red Sea, an enthroned Jesus giving the new law to his apostles, scenes from the Passion, and saints' portraits—emerged to take their place. Additionally, most of the early images, including depictions of baptism, were omitted from the oldest monumental narrative programs that show scenes from the Old Testament as well as from the life of Christ. For example, the fifth-century mosaics of Rome's Sta. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch or the wooden panels on the doors of Rome's Sta. Sabina from about the same date depicted the Adoration of the Magi but not the baptism. When baptism scenes reappeared in other non-funerary contexts in the fifth and sixth centuries (e.g., in the baptisteries of Ravenna and in numerous small ivory carvings)

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see discussion at the end of this chapter, pp. 26–9. For a recent, overview essay on baptismal iconography, see Fabrizio Bisconti, "L'iconografia dei battisteri paleocristiani in Italia," *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 406–40.

their compositions differ in key respects from that of earlier Roman catacomb paintings.<sup>4</sup>

Actual depictions of baptism (as described above) are not the only early Christian images that bear baptismal significance, however. Although this study focuses primarily on scenes of baptism, it also examines the ways other images refer to, or even symbolize, the sacrament of baptism. Such figures include many of the aforementioned types. Along with multiple possible meanings, depending on their context, episodes from the Jonah story, Noah in the ark, Moses striking the rock, and even some scenes of Jesus' healing also allude to, or pre-figure, the Christian initiation rite.

Because of their polyvalent quality, these images cannot be simply decoded; they need to be considered in a larger framework that examines them in light of relevant contemporary social, historical, and theological events or developments along with aspects of their composition and physical context. For example, theories about the initial popularity and then the gradual disappearance of certain types should take account of changes in the social or political circumstances of the Christians who produced (or purchased) the artworks. Such theories should attend to evolution in the matters of faith or practices of those communities. Hence, this study not only describes and discusses the artworks in light of their particular composition and specific context but also attempts to infuse those discussions with data about relevant sacramental teachings and practices as these are recorded in extant, contemporary documents.

Furthermore, because the baptismal scenes, like most early Christian iconographic motifs, refer to a specific biblical narrative (the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist), verbal interpretation of that narrative in homilies, catecheses, liturgical, or theological documents gives valuable insight into how these images may have been perceived. Ancient viewers' religious beliefs were shaped by participation in worship through preaching, prayer, and hymns. The ways that early Christians heard the Bible stories interpreted would have influenced how they understood their rendering in visual art. As a consequence, while this study considers artworks independently of texts, it also draws upon available and relevant literary evidence as key to discerning the images' possible meanings for their ancient viewers.

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 3, pp. 90–106.

Potential meaning cannot be established merely by juxtaposing discrete images with relevant literary evidence, however. Because representations of baptism rarely occur alone, they should be regarded as one element of a broader decorative scheme. Presuming that compositions were not randomly assembled, but organized according to some rationale, they may have an unified message to which a baptism scene contributes. This seems even more likely when a similar set of figures occurs frequently in other contexts. The physical context itself might be decisive. Most of the following examples come from a funerary context, which presumably guided the selection of images for a composition as well as affected the way viewers saw and interpreted them. Finally, stylistic or technical aspects of these artworks would have communicated directly to observers independently of their content. These factors can be overlooked if analysis turns too quickly to textual data to establish the significance of a visual (iconographic) message.

This chapter examines existing examples of baptismal imagery in catacomb paintings from the environs of Rome that date from the third and fourth centuries. The earliest of these frescoes are the oldest extant visual representations of Christian initiation.<sup>5</sup> The discussion attends to their composition and programmatic context, noting questions that emerge regarding style, prototype, or unusual aspects of their presentation. Following these short descriptive entries, the chapter considers

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<sup>5</sup> The dating of Roman catacomb painting has been much disputed by scholars for generations and is usually based upon stylistic analysis as well as iconographic developments. For general discussion of this problem see Norbert Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen römischer Katakombenmalerei*, JAC 35 (Münster Westf., Aschendorff, 2002), as well as specific attention to the state of research and analysis of the catacombs of Domitilla and Peter and Marcellinus, noted below; Johannes Deckers, "Wie genau ist eine Katakombe zu datieren? Das Beispiel SS. Marcellino e Pietro," in *Memoriam sanctorum venerantes: miscellanea in onore Monsignor Victor Saxer* (Studi di Antichità Cristiana 48: Vatican City Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1992); 217–38; and Louis Reekmans, "La chronologie de la peinture paléochrétienne, Notes et réflexions," *RivAC* 49 (1973), 271–91. Some hypotheses about date are tied to the general (but possibly mistaken) assumption that Pope Callixtus was assigned to be caretaker of the cemetery which now bears his name in the early years of the third century while he was deacon under Pope Zephyrinus. Earlier discussions that are still useful are those of Hugo Brandenburg, "Überlegungen zum Ursprung der frühchristlichen Bildkunst," *ACIAC* 9.1 (1978), 331–61; and Friedrich Gerke, "Ideengeschichte der ältesten christlichen Kunst," *ZKG* 59 (1940), 1–102. In general, questions of date are only broadly relevant to the discussion that follows, and thus are addressed only occasionally and not exhaustively.

general matters that pertain to the images as a group. These issues include the identification of the figures in the scenes, the relevance of adjacent iconography for the interpretation of the images, and the textual sources and exegetical methods that may shed some light on their overall meaning. Underlying the analysis of these visual artifacts is a conviction that they were not randomly chosen and placed but consciously selected and included in a meaningful program.

As one part of a larger composition, a baptism scene functions as one element of an overarching visual theme. That some or all of the surrounding images in that larger composition refer typologically or symbolically to the baptismal ritual is also possible. A more inclusive category of “baptismal iconography” is thus composed of a repertoire of particular symbols or biblical narrative scenes that occur in parallel documents as references to, or as figures (or “types”), of baptism. As such they functioned both didactically and symbolically for the ancient viewer and—to the modern viewer—offer insight into the theological significance of certain ritual actions. For this reason, parallel and (as much as possible) spatially and chronologically related documents are incorporated into the analysis.

### 1.1. *Early Christian Painting*

Christian iconography did not emerge *de novo* in an exclusively Christian environment. Early Christians lived in a cosmopolitan Roman society, to which they belonged, even if they saw themselves as a persecuted minority group within it. Just as they spoke the verbal language of their wider world, they used and adapted its visual idioms. While some historians have posited a Jewish influence on early Christian iconography (and sometimes vice versa), most have recognized the parallels between extant early Christian imagery (particularly that from the area around the city of Rome) and the style and conventions of Roman (pagan) art in Late Antiquity. Painting styles show the use of common workshops and popular techniques, such as simple borders that framed narrative scenes. Christians, like their non-Christian neighbors (including Jews), drew upon a popular repertoire of decorative motifs for tomb adornment, including garlands, birds, grapevines, marine animals, and harvest scenes. Certain standard figures in the early Christian iconographic canon such as the shepherd, praying figure, or seated philosopher have nearly exact

parallels on contemporary Roman non-Christian monuments. Certain others, like Jonah or Daniel, show marked resemblance to contemporary representations of mythological figures such as Endymion, Narcissus, or Hercules.<sup>6</sup> In time, Christians developed a distinguishable iconographic canon of their own which, even so, should be considered a subsection of imperial Roman art.

Some scholars believe that the widespread and early employment of narrative images based on the Hebrew Scriptures indicates the prior existence of Jewish iconographic prototypes. They argue that the mid-third century frescoes in the Dura Europos synagogue demonstrate a wide-spread (but subsequently lost) Jewish tradition of biblical narrative painting or book illumination.<sup>7</sup> While the possibility of Jewish prototypes cannot be excluded, the paintings in the Roman Christian catacombs seem to bear little similarity in either subject or style to the frescoes of the Dura Synagogue. Another explanation for the popularity of Hebrew Bible narrative scenes in early Christian art is more simple. The Greek translation of those texts (the Septuagint) was also the Bible of early Christians. These sacred writings acquired Christological significance and were understood to be filled with prophetic and symbolic allusions to the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Christian community with its particular rituals (including baptism).

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<sup>6</sup> On the question of the continuity between Roman and early Christian iconography see Robin M. Jensen, in "Toward a Christian Material Culture," in the *Cambridge History of Christianity, vol. 1: Early Christianity*, ed. Margaret Mitchell and Frances Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 568–85; Mary Charles Murray, "The Emergence of Christian Art," in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 51–63; and (more generally) Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> One of the first scholars to posit a Jewish influence on early Christian art was Josef Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1902). Erwin R. Goodenough also posited a Jewish source for the Christian catacomb frescoes, "Catacomb Art," *JBL* 81 (1962), 113–42, perhaps leading Henry Chadwick to take the Jewish model theory as nearly conclusive in his influential history, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1967), 279–80. Two decades ago, Kurt Weitzmann proposed that early Christian iconography was directly derived from a Jewish tradition of illuminated biblical manuscripts for which no evidence survives. See Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990). Weitzmann's theory has been enormously influential. See, for example, K. Schubert, *Jewish Influence on Earliest Christian Paintings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). Weitzmann's theory also has had much critique. See for instance Joseph Gutmann's review of *Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue* in *Speculum* 67 (1992), 502–4.

Although they share stylistic qualities with contemporary Roman artworks, Christian catacomb paintings generally have a sketchier appearance than typical of contemporary Roman wall paintings. Very few of them approach the fine quality of paintings found in wealthy Roman houses. They seem to have been produced quickly, assembled from a set of stock images, and not intended to be works of lasting aesthetic value. Compositionally they lack detail and little attempt is made to render landscape or perspective; colors are generally limited and lack subtlety. While a few paintings seem more carefully crafted than others or have a kind of fresh, impressionistic appeal (e.g., some Via Latina Catacomb paintings), the overall effect indicates modest artistic skill. The contrast between these and other exceptionally developed Roman wall paintings has led some scholars to describe these as exemplifying “popular” or “middle-class art” and their patrons as having either a lack of money or taste to pay or employ more skilled artisans.<sup>8</sup>

Other scholars attribute the insubstantiality of style or sub-standard technique to a Christian reticence to glorify the human body or resistance to worldly values.<sup>9</sup> Whichever explanation best accounts for the arguably low quality of the paintings in the Christian catacombs, their importance for this discussion lies less in their style or aesthetic merit than in their theological or religious signification. They provide data about the kind of faith these early Christians espoused as well

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<sup>8</sup> For example see John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 26: “The style of all these paintings is that of the declining art of cosmopolitan Rome . . . It is quite clear that in the second and third centuries a very high proportion of the well-to-do middle classes in Rome was of east Mediterranean stock, and that a substantial percentage of this number was of servile origin. This accounts in part for the eclecticism of late antique art, but in any case, aesthetic standards were low.” See also, André Grabar, *Christian Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 7–8, Walter J. Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1947), 23–4; and John Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 27–9.

<sup>9</sup> A recently produced BBC special, *Art of Eternity: Painting Paradise* (2007) made this point explicitly. Max Dvorák, “Katakombenmalereien: die Anfänge der christlichen Kunst,” in *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, ed. Karl M. Swoboda and Johannes Wilde (München, R. Piper, 1928), 13–17. Dvorák makes much of the frontality of the forms and their lack of solidity as evidence of a new artistic purpose corresponding to a de-emphasis of the body and a new spirituality. Dvorák’s work has been translated into English and published as *The History of Art as the History of Ideas*, trans. J. Hardy (London: Routledge, 1984), see 12–17. Pierre du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art*, trans. Thomas Burton (New York: Reynal, 1971), 74, explains the lack of “pagan craftsmanship” to “the variety of surfaces to be decorated and the facility that goes with the use of the brush” but also to “a religious feeling less strongly attached to the material goods and conventions of their world and hence freer and more truly original.”

as evidence that at least some of them were not averse to expressing that faith in a visual form from a fairly early date. Moreover, that this visual form borrowed liberally from those themes or figures that appeared on the walls and tombs of their pagan neighbors seems not to have inhibited these early Christian patrons. Fairly quickly, artisans developed a set of recognizably Christian motifs, largely drawn from biblical narratives.

The pictorial image of a baptism is one of those recognizably Christian images.<sup>10</sup> While not nearly so popular as an image of Jonah at rest, Daniel, or Moses striking the rock, it occurs nearly a dozen times in the Christian catacombs. Those from the Catacomb of Callixtus probably pre-date the Constantinian era, while those from the other catacombs described below are more likely to be mid-fourth century.

### 1.1.1. *Catacomb of Callixtus*

Traditionally associated with Pope Callixtus (217–222), assumed to be the caretaker of this catacomb during the reign of his predecessor Pope Zephyrinus, this catacomb is assumed to contain the earliest extant examples of Christian visual art.<sup>11</sup> This catacomb has three examples of baptism scenes: one in the so-called Crypt of Lucina, the others in two of the six “sacraments chambers.” All of these images probably date to the early or mid-third century, although this dating has been somewhat controversial.<sup>12</sup> The crypt of Lucina is named for a Christian matron who, according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, owned both the hypogeum and the land above and near to the Catacomb of

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<sup>10</sup> Nothing quite like it exists in pagan iconography, although see discussion of certain parallels with pagan ritual and iconography below, Chap. 4, p. 164. Other studies of the iconography of Jesus’ baptism include Günter Ristow, *The Baptism of Christ*, trans. H.H. Rosenwald. (Recklinghausen: Aurel Bongers Verlag, 1967); Gertrude Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. 1, trans. J. Seligman (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1971), 137–52; Anton de Waal, “Taufe Christi auf vorconstantinischen Gemälden der Katakomben,” *RQ* 10 (1896), 335–49; and Josef Strzygowski, *Ikongraphie der Taufe Christi, ein Beitrag zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst* (München: Verlag von Theodor Riedel, 1885).

<sup>11</sup> The association of this catacomb with Bishop Callixtus comes from a document attributed to Hippolytus which actually disputes the validity of Callixtus’ election; *Haer.* 9.12. According to this document Zephyrinus recalled Callixtus from exile and assigned him (rather vaguely) “*eis to koimeterion*.” Callixtus is thought to be buried elsewhere, however—in the Catacomb of Calepodius on the Via Aurelia.

<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth century Giovanni Battista de Rossi dated these two chambers to the end of the second century, *Roma sotterranea* (Rome: Cromo-Litografia Pontificia, 1864–77), 3.8 and appendix, note e.

Callixtus. She herself buried Pope Cornelius there.<sup>13</sup> The designation “sacraments chambers,” was first applied by Giuseppe Marchi in the mid-nineteenth century because of the number of images that seemed to him to symbolize baptism and eucharist. Although Josef Wilpert and others objected to this terminology, it has become a customary name for this area of the catacomb.<sup>14</sup>

#### 1.1.1.1. *Crypt of Lucina*

This double chamber, now a part of the Callixtus Catacomb but probably originally an independent hypogeum, contains the oldest extant example of a representation of Christian baptism. The crypt is usually dated to the early years of the third century because it was the supposed burial site of Pope Cornelius, whose death date (253 CE) serves as a *terminus ad quem* for the frescoes in the crypt.<sup>15</sup>

The baptism scene appears over the door of Chamber 1 (fig. 1.1). A baptizer, garbed in a short tunic, stands above and to the right of the naked recipient, reaching out to assist him up out of the water onto a rocky bank. The two figures appear to be about the same stature. A series of blue lines, just barely visible over the recipient’s head represents a shower of water, and a dove flies into the scene from the upper left. The other frescoes in this chamber are more decorative than narrative, consisting of vases of flowers, birds in flight, grazing sheep, and doves.

#### 1.1.1.2. *Sacraments Chamber 21*

The baptismal scene on the back wall of this barrel-vaulted chamber has a painted geometric frame and depicts a bearded baptizer dressed in a long tunic and *pallium*, standing on the left and placing his hand

<sup>13</sup> *Liber pont.* 22 (Cornelius).

<sup>14</sup> Giuseppe Marchi, *Monumenti delle arti cristiane primitive nella metropoli del cristianesimo* (Rome: Tip. Di C. Puccinelli, 1844), 161–3; Josef Wilpert, *Roma sotterranea: le pitture delle catacombe romane* (Rome: Desclée, Lefebvre, 1903), 152. Wilpert agrees, however, with this designation and it is used throughout his work.

<sup>15</sup> On the burial of Cornelius, see above, pp. 12–13, fn. #. Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #1, 84–9. Alternatively Lucien De Bruyne dates the paintings on the crypt to the last years of the second century. See “La peinture cimétériale Constantinienne,” *ACIAC* 7 (Berlin, 1965), 159–214; and “L’importanza degli scavi Lateranesi per la cronologia della prime pitture catacombali,” *RivAC* 44 (1968), 81–113. See also Hugo Brandenburg, “Das Grab des Papstes Cornelius und die Lucinaregion der Calixtus katakombe,” *JAC* 11/12 (1968–69), 41–54. By contrast, H.G. Thümmel dates the paintings to 220 CE in “Die Anfänge der Katakombenmalerei,” *ACIAC* 7 (Berlin: 1965), 745–52.



Fig. 1.1 Catacomb of Callixtus, Crypt of Lucina. Rome, early third century. Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.



Fig. 1.2 Catacomb of Callixtus, Chamber 21, back wall, third century. Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.

on the head of a small, childlike, naked figure who stands up to his ankles in water; no dove is visible (fig. 1.2).<sup>16</sup> Two additional scenes appear also on the back wall: one of a tempest-tossed ship with a single passenger kept aboard by a helper from above and one figure in the water below. The other, to the right of the baptism, shows a seated figure, usually identified as Job.

On the left wall, a long panel between two loculi shows the following scenes (from left to right): Moses striking the rock, a fisherman (center) and seven young men attending a banquet. On the ceiling and right wall of the chamber are images of a shepherd; Jonah at rest; Jonah cast into the sea; the resurrection of Lazarus; and a banquet scene with seven baskets, bread, fish and wine.

### 1.1.1.3. *Sacraments Chamber 22*

Although this chamber is just adjacent to the previous one, its frescoes are generally better preserved. At the center of the flat ceiling (in somewhat poor condition) is a shepherd surrounded by peacocks, flowers, and *putti* (fig. 1.3). The baptism scene, which is on the left wall, shows the recipient, again youthful, naked and standing ankle-deep in water. To his right is the much larger figure of the baptizer, who stoops over him to place his right hand on top of his (the recipient's) head. This baptizer is bare-chested, wears only an apron-like loincloth or perhaps the one-shouldered short (*exomis*) tunic worn by manual laborers or farmers. He has a short beard and short hair. A barely visible dove flies into the scene from the right.<sup>17</sup>

The baptism here is part of a series of water-related images, beginning with the scene just to the left of the entrance—a representation of Moses striking the rock (gushing forth with water). The side wall portrays a fisherman and the paralytic carrying his bed away from the healing pool at Bethesda (John 5:2–9) on either side of the baptismal scene; above, Jonah is tossed into the sea. The back wall of the chamber shows the following scenes (in left to right order): a grave digger, Jesus performing the miracle of the loaves and fishes, a veiled *orante*, a seven-person banquet scene, the sacrifice of Isaac, and another grave digger (*fossor*). To the right of the entrance a seated teacher holds a scroll; below, one sees the figure of the Samaritan woman at the

<sup>16</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #2, 89–92.

<sup>17</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #3, 93–97.



Fig. 1.3 Catacomb of Callixtus Chamber 22 (A3), left hand wall, third century. Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.

well. Additional scenes from the Jonah cycle appear on the back and right-hand walls: Jonah resting (back), and Jonah tossed onto the land (right).

#### 1.1.2. *Catacomb of Domitilla*

Although most of the wall paintings date to the early fourth century, the Christian nucleus of this catacomb probably dates to the late third century, connecting to and adapting earlier pagan hypogea for subsequent use, the catacomb is named for one or another of the women called Domitilla who were members of the extended Flavian clan, as attested to by several inscriptions found in the oldest section of the site.<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of the fourth century, the bodies of the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus were translated and enshrined. Eventually an underground basilica was constructed and dedicated to them. The

<sup>18</sup> According to tradition, one of the first-century Domitillae was a Christian, the wife of Flavius Clemens, mentioned in Cassius Dio, *Ep.* 67.14, as being exiled for the crime of judaizing. See also Eusebius, *Hist.* 3.18.3.

two baptismal scenes in this catacomb are both in arcosolia that most likely date to the early or mid-fourth century.

#### 1.1.2.1. *Arcosolium 42*

The baptism scene occurs on the underside of the arch, along with two other scenes: the multiplication of the loaves and a shepherd (in the center), each framed by simple painted borders. Above and in front is a veiled *orante*. The lunette fresco portrays vases with flowers and doves. Although the baptismal scene is in poor condition and the lower part of the baptizer is missing, he is clearly short-haired and beardless, wears a long tunic with two vertical stripes (*clavii*), and rests his right hand on the head of the recipient who faces the viewer. This latter figure is naked, male, and very small. No dove is visible.<sup>19</sup>

#### 1.1.2.2. *Arcosolium 77*

By contrast to the previous example, this is a richly decorated arcosolium. The upper register displays the following scenes: the healing of the paralytic, the resurrection of Lazarus, the Adoration of the Magi, and Moses striking the rock. Under the arch are (from left to right) the baptism, the miracle of the loaves—Christ standing with five bread baskets—and Adam and Eve (fig. 1.4). Flower gardens decorate the lunette, and purple, brown, and white borders frame the baptism scene. The beardless, short-haired baptizer stands on a rocky bank to the right of the recipient and seems to be wearing an animal skin. His right hand rests on the naked and childlike recipient's head; a large dove descends.<sup>20</sup>

Various elements—the garments, colors, expressions and ornamentation—have been used to date the paintings in both these arcosolia to the mid-fourth century.<sup>21</sup>

#### 1.1.3. *Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus*

This catacomb is connected to the cemetery church of Peter and Marcellinus, which is also next to the mausoleum of Constantine's mother, Helena (d. 330 CE). Most of the burials on this site date from the

<sup>19</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #4, 98–100.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 155–65; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #5, 100–5.

<sup>21</sup> De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 186; Aldo Nestori, *Repertorio topografico delle pitture delle catacombe romane* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1993), 124, #42 and 129, #77; and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 98–101.



Fig. 1.4 Catacomb of Domitilla, Arcosolium 77, mid fourth century.  
Photo: G. Wilpert, *Roman sotterranea: le pitture delle catacombe romane* (1903), taf. 240.

early fourth century, including the two for whom the cemetery was named, who are believed to have been martyred in the Diocletianic persecution (ca. 303–5). The decoration of the catacomb began around that time and continued throughout the fourth century.<sup>22</sup> The paintings employ familiar Roman painting styles and motifs, most of them portraying the popular images found elsewhere in the catacombs (Jonah, Noah, Daniel, the banquet scene, shepherd, *orante*, etc.). Five of the paintings depict baptism, two of which are unique.<sup>23</sup>

#### 1.1.3.1. *Cubiculum 43*

Scenes of *putti* and *fossori* surround the doorway of this chamber. The vaulted ceiling depicts Christ enthroned as a teacher holding a book, his baptism, the miracle of loaves and fishes and a scene whose subject is disputed but probably represents Moses striking the rock.<sup>24</sup> The scene of baptism is especially notable: it shows a naked and youthful recipient standing beneath a shower of water (painted black and dark blue) that comes from the beak of a dove just over his head (fig. 1.5). His face is exceptionally well defined, his eyes particularly arresting as they stare straight ahead. His arms hang down with his hands slightly turned inward. Almost nothing remains of the figure of the baptizer apart from his right hand, placed on the head of the recipient. Lucien De Bruyne proposed a mid-fourth century date for this iconography while Fabrizio Bisconti argued for a date at the end of the fourth century. Norbert Zimmermann proposes a date in the latter half of the fourth century.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Johannes Deckers, *Die Katakombe "Santi Marcellino e Pietro": Repertorium der Malereien* (Münster, Aschendorff, 1987); and Johannes Deckers, "Wie genau ist eine Katakombe zu datieren?"

<sup>23</sup> See De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 162–3.

<sup>24</sup> Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 228–30; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #8, 112–16. Nestori identifies this image as the raising of Lazarus, *Repertorio*, 53, while Enrico Josi refers to it as a scene of judgment, "Scoperte nel cimitero dei Santi Marcellino e Pietro sulla Via Labicana," *NBAC* 24/25 (1918–19), 78–87, esp. 80.

<sup>25</sup> De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 206–8; Fabrizio Bisconti, *Memorie classiche nelle decorazioni pittoriche delle catacombe romane*, in *Historiam pictura refert. Miscellanea in onore di p. Alejandro Recio Veganzones* (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1994), 32; Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 230.



Fig. 1.5 Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Cubiculum 43, right hand side of arch, mid fourth century. Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.

### 1.1.3.2. *Cubiculum 17*

Because of water damage to the ceiling frescoes, historians now rely on outlines and ancient sketches of the iconography in this chamber.<sup>26</sup> According to these reconstructions, the painting at the apex of the vault portrays Jesus seated, holding a scroll with eight figures seated on either side of him. At his feet sits a basket containing seven other scrolls. The curving sides of the vault contained the following scenes: the three magi looking up to the star, the annunciation, two magi presenting gifts to the child, and a baptism; the four pendentives have alternating shepherds and *orantes*. Decorative borders define these different panels as alternating ovals and rectangles.

The baptism scene apparently depicted a baptizer wearing the one-shouldered *exomis* tunic or animal skin and a nude recipient who is considerably smaller than the baptizer. The baptized one assumes the traditional *orans* (praying) posture with outstretched arms, which is extremely rare in such a baptismal scene. The water covers his bare feet, and a dove descends into the picture, beak down, directly above his head. Representations of three miraculous healings surround the entrance: the paralytic, the woman with the flow of blood, and the blind youth. An illustration of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman appears to the right of the door. De Bruyne accepts Johannes Kollwitz's dating of this chamber to the end of the third century; more recent scholarship has dated it to the fourth century.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.1.3.3. *Cubiculum 21*

A shepherd is seen at the center of this small room's barrel vault, and the lunettes that circle the shepherd contain the following four scenes: Daniel and the lions, the sacrifice of Abraham, Noah in the ark, and a baptism. The scenes are decoratively bordered and set off by flying birds and springing gazelles. On either side of the chamber's entrance are frescoes depicting gravediggers.

The baptizer stands on the left side of the baptism scene and bends over the recipient, right hand outstretched to help him out of the water.

<sup>26</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #6, 105–8. The source of the Fausone's sketch is Josef Wilpert, *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakomben der heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus* (Freiburg i. Br., 1891), plates 1–4. See also Nestori, *Repertorio*, 50, #17.

<sup>27</sup> See Johannes Deckers, *Die Katakomben "Santi Marcellino e Pietro."* Also De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 175–6, following Johannes Kollwitz, *Das Christusbild des dritten Jahrhunderts* Orbis Antiquus 9 (Münster: Achendorffsche, 1953), 336–8.

He wears a *pallium* and long tunic, while the recipient is naked and considerably smaller than his baptizer. No dove appears in the scene. Based on style analysis, Fausone cautiously dates this iconography to the end of the third century; more recent studies are inconclusive.<sup>28</sup>

#### 1.1.3.4. *Cubiculum* 62

This chamber is really a double cubiculum, probably decorated in the late third century.<sup>29</sup> The baptism scene occurs under the arch of one of the two arcosolia in the second cubicle (fig. 1.6). On the left is the baptism scene, a veiled *orante* (praying figure) takes the center, and on the right, a man, wearing a tunic and *pallium* points outward (fig. 1.7). Wilpert and De Bruyne both identified this latter character as Moses (striking the rock) despite the absence of the rock and gushing water. Zimmermann and Alfonso Fausone (the latter following Aldo Nestori) identify him as Balaam.<sup>30</sup> The lunette fresco portrays a banquet with seven guests. To the left stands a servant, and to the right are six large jugs. Jesus holds a magic wand, presumably to transform the water to wine, an illustration of the miracle at the Cana wedding.

The baptism scene shows the baptizer standing on the left and placing his right hand on the recipient's head. Much larger than his companion, the baptizer is beardless and wears a long tunic and *pallium*. The naked recipient stands up to his knees in water, indicated by horizontal grey lines. No dove is visible in the composition.

#### 1.1.3.5. *Cubiculum* 78

The baptism scene in this room is again part of the ceiling decoration. The delicately painted and detailed images are bordered by decorative bands and conform to what De Bruyne refers to as the "illusionistic style."<sup>31</sup> The chamber has two arcosolia: one on the left wall, one on the rear wall. Each lunette shows a funeral banquet.

<sup>28</sup> Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 206, 214–15; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 109–111. Fausone cites De Bruyne's description of this catacomb's decoration as a "Kymation" of type 5. See De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 162–3 (figure 114.5).

<sup>29</sup> De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 199–201.

<sup>30</sup> J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg im B.: Herder, 1903), 266; De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 199; Nestori, *Repertorio*, 57–8; Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 219; and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 117–120.

<sup>31</sup> See Zimmermann, *Werkstattgruppen*, 169–74; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #10, 122–6; De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 165 and 182 (figs. 120, 134).



Fig. 1.6 Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Cubiculum 62, late third century. Photo: G. Wilpert, *Roman sotterranea: le pitture delle catacombe romane* (1903), taf. 57.

The back wall also depicts two large *orantes*, which might be portraits of the deceased buried in the *arcosolia*, or perhaps more generic references to the individual's soul. The ceiling of the room has, at its apex, a shepherd in the middle of two concentric circles. A picture cycle surrounds this image and has the following images: baptism, Job in misery, Moses striking the rock, the raising of Lazarus, Daniel among the lions, the healing of the paralytic, Noah in the ark, and the multiplication of the loaves. The scenes are broken up by decorative borders, leaf garlands, flying birds and *putti*. In the baptism scene, the baptizer stands to the right of the recipient, almost stooping over him, and places his right hand on the recipient's head (fig. 1.8). His foot rests on the border of the picture, breaking out of the frame. Short-haired, clean-shaven, wearing tunic, *pallium* and sandals, the baptizer is significantly larger than the naked and childlike recipient. The water is particularly deep in this picture, reaching to his hips. Once again, no dove appears. Most scholars agree that this chamber dates to the first quarter of the fourth century.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Zimmermann, *Werkstattgrupper*, 1; De Bruyne, "La peinture cimétériale," 186; and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 125.



Fig. 1.7 Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Cubiculum 62, detail.  
Photo: G. Wilpert, *Roman sotterranea: le pitture delle catacombe romane* (1903), taf. 58.



Fig. 1.8 Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Cubiculum 78, early fourth century. Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.

#### 1.1.4. *The Catacomb of St. Ermete (Bassilla)*

Believed to have been built by Pope Damasus (366–384) to house the tomb of St. Hermes (Ermete), this catacomb on the Via Salaria had a series of hypogea as well as an underground basilica dedicated to the saint.

##### 1.1.4.1. *Arcosolium 3*

This arcosolium's lunette contains an extremely indistinct picture that was, until fairly recently, identified as the healing of the demoniac. Fausone, following De Bruyne, argues for its identification as a baptismal scene.<sup>33</sup> De Bruyne's argument is based on the nudity of the smaller figure and the placement of the scene between the healing of the paralytic and Daniel among the lions; he dates the painting to the mid-fourth century.

The lunette's iconography also includes representations of Moses striking the rock, a shepherd, Jonah in repose, and the resurrection of Lazarus, which appear under the arch and are all in very poor condition.

<sup>33</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 127; following Lucien De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains dans l'art chrétien ancien, *RivAC* 20 (1943), 156. Those who identify it as a healing scene include Nestori, *Repertorio*, #3, 3.

The supposed baptismal scene shows a man with tunic and *pallium*, his hand on the head of a small person standing to his right. No dove is visible.

## 1.2. *Discussion*

### 1.2.1. *Identification of the Scenes and the Figures*

Most of these baptism scenes portray a large male standing next to and placing his right hand on the head of a small youth. Water appears in the majority, along with a kind of rocky landscape. In about half of them a dove appears overhead. These details account for the usual identification of these scenes as baptismal, which this study has not questioned.

However, in one or two instances, the paintings in the Crypt of Lucina in the Callixtus Catacomb and the image in the Catacomb of St. Ermete, the identification of the scene as a baptism is not certain. In the first, the extension of the baptizer's hand to grasp the hand of the recipient is unusual, and at least one scholar has argued that it ought to be understood as the reconciliation of a penitent, noting that the gesture known as the imposition of hands (the right hand upon the head of the recipient) is not limited to a baptismal context and, in the catacombs, is most often otherwise associated with healing.<sup>34</sup> The other image is too vague for any certain identification.

Setting this alternative interpretation aside for the moment, the undisputed baptismal images have been identified on the basis of their having the following common aspects: the presence of water, the smallness and nakedness of the recipient, the dress of the baptizer (an animal skin, *exomis* tunic, or long tunic with *pallium*), and the dove (where included). A problem exists nevertheless because these images neither accurately illustrate the scriptural account of Jesus' baptism by John, nor portray what could have been contemporary ritual practice. Some also lack the dove, although this might be due to the state of the painting's preservation.

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<sup>34</sup> See De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains," *passim*, for a long discussion of this gesture and its significance in early Christian art. The laying on of hands can indicate blessing and judgment as well as healing and the communication of the Holy Spirit after baptism. See discussion below, Chap. 4, pp. 171–5.

Wilpert argues that these baptism scenes are of two types: those of Jesus' baptism by John and those that depict a bishop baptizing an unidentified catechumen. The two types are distinguished by the baptizer's garb. In Wilpert's view, John the Baptist is indicated by the short, one-shouldered tunic or animal skin, whereas a bishop-officiant is signified by the tunic and *pallium*, which Wilpert understands to approximate the vestments of a cleric. The dove's presence only in the scenes where the baptizer wears the shorter garment suggests that these two attributes identify the scene as showing Jesus' baptism. Nestori follows Wilpert in these distinctions.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the paintings in the Lucina crypt, Callixtus chamber 22, Peter and Marcellinus chambers 17 and 43, and Domitilla arscolium 77 are all designated "baptisms of Christ," while Callixtus chamber 21, Peter and Marcellinus chambers 21, 62, and 78, and Domitilla arscolium 42 are deemed to represent a church official (bishop) baptizing a catechumen.

Clothing conveys a visual indication of a person's status or identity, in art as well as in life.<sup>36</sup> The New Testament describes John the Baptist as wearing a camel's hair garment and a leather belt (Mark 1.6; Matt 3.4). Visual representations of him as wearing a short, *exomis* tunic, however, associate him with members of the working classes, i.e., with artisans, shepherds, farmers, or fishermen.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, other biblical figures, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, regularly appear in a long tunic with a square, draped mantle (*pallium*), a Greek garment (*himation*) that had been adopted by Roman men in place of the more formal and unwieldy toga but which still conveyed the costume of a philosopher. The *pallium* was favored by Tertullian as specifically appropriate for Christian men.<sup>38</sup> Given its associations both with Christianity as philosophical teaching and with the clerical vestments, the tunic and *pallium* could be suitable garb for John the Baptist, as prophet and herald of the Christian gospel. Nevertheless, it was arguably

<sup>35</sup> Wilpert, *Die Malereien*, 258–9.

<sup>36</sup> One introductory but helpful source for information on this topic is *The World of Roman Costume*, eds. Judith L. Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). See also Michael Koortbojian, "The Double Identity of Roman Portrait Statues: Costumes and Their Symbolism at Rome," in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*, ed. Jonathan Edmonson and Alison Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 71–93.

<sup>37</sup> For more detailed discussion of early Christian iconography of John the Baptist, see Alexandre Masseron, *Saint Jean Baptiste dans l'art* (Paris: Arthaud, 1957).

<sup>38</sup> Tertullian, *Pall.* 1–2. See T. Corey Brennan, "Tertullian's *De Pallio* and Roman Dress in North Africa," in *Roman Dress and the Fabrics of Roman Culture*, 257–70.

inappropriate to depict a contemporary bishop in a short tunic. Rather, one would expect a bishop to be represented in the garb he normally wore on ceremonial occasions: a tunic with *pallium*.<sup>39</sup> Ergo, a figure wearing a short tunic must be identified as John the Baptist.

These points are far from decisive, especially considering certain additional problems. Whatever the garb of the baptizer, he is much larger than the naked, childlike recipient. The Gospel accounts say nothing about nudity and portray Jesus as an adult at his baptism (according to Luke 3.23 he was about thirty years old). Furthermore, all other catacomb representations of Jesus depict him as an adult, usually wearing a tunic and *pallium*. Unlike other Roman heroes or youthful gods (e.g., Hercules or Apollo) an adult Jesus is never shown as nude in catacomb art.

An alternative interpretation of these scenes would account for the nudity of the recipient and possibly his age. Documentary evidence confirms that candidates were stripped of their clothing but not that they were all children. Moreover, by the fourth century, the rite was normally held indoors, in a pool and a room specifically built to accommodate it, rather than in a natural setting.<sup>40</sup> Thus, it seems most likely that this iconography neither illustrates the scriptural account precisely nor depicts a contemporary practice. Rather, the images had a two-fold purpose: to remind the viewer of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism and to associate that foundational moment with the subsequent baptism of new Christians. Additionally, the imagery incorporates a theological idea through visual symbolism: that the newly baptized person has been returned to the innocence of infancy and—in this case—is both united to and conflated with the figure of Christ (also a small child). Finally, including such iconography on the walls of a tomb confirms that the deceased had been baptized and consequently (as a member of the body of Christ), had hope of resurrection.

Many scholars concur that this iconography intentionally associated the deceased Christian's baptism with Jesus' as a reassuring reminder

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<sup>39</sup> The earliest mention of special liturgical clothing for clergy comes from Theodoret's *Hist.* 2.27, where he refers to Constantine's presentation of a special baptismal robe to the bishop of Jerusalem (ca. 330). Before that time we have little information about specific types of clerical garb, although early Christian iconography is one of the best sources for such information.

<sup>40</sup> See the discussion below, Chap. 4.

that this person had, through his or her baptism, been granted salvation.<sup>41</sup> To some extent, this argument parallels the theory that mystery cult initiates reenacted the cult of a dying and rising god and then incorporated references to their membership in their tomb decor.<sup>42</sup> Paul's description of baptism as "clothing oneself with Christ" (Gal 3.27) suggests such an association. These pictures, however, are not literal representations of actual liturgical rites but references to Jesus' baptism as the model or prototype for all subsequent Christian baptisms, thus conflating a foundational event with a timeless liturgical action.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, those images that might be depictions of an unspecified catechumen's baptism appear less to be attempts at commemoration of a particular event than the expression of a symbolic link to the John-Jesus scenes. As such, they relay an important ritual function. In baptism Christians reenact as well as enter into a moment in the life of the incarnate God, thereby making that historical event accessible to the present, and uniting them with the savior figure. Thus, these scenes are particularly appropriate for tombs, because in the Christian tradition baptism is more than the cultic initiation that grants future salvation; it is actually the sharing of the Christian in Christ's death, burial and resurrection (cf. Rom 6.3–4). In this way, the images are both narrative and symbolic. In overlapping realism and typology, they depict both Jesus and the baptized Christian.

### 1.2.2. Contextual and Programmatic Analysis

As discussed above, individual catacomb frescoes should be considered contextually, as belonging to some unified program, rather than

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<sup>41</sup> Ernst Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung durch Taufe, Busse und Martyrerfürbitte in den Zeugnissen frühchristlichen Frömmigkeit und Kunst* (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1973), 99–103 and 348–353; Lucien De Bruyne, "L'initiation chrétienne et ses reflet dans l'art paleochrétien," *RevScRel* 36 (1962), 27–85; Kollwitz, *Das Christusbild*, and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 87–88. Dassmann, 349, furthermore discusses Josef Fink's theory that this scene really refers to the extension of forgiveness to the penitent sinner, Fink, "Rezension," *TRev* 50 (1954), 172–4.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Arthur Darby Nock, "Sarcophagi and Symbolism" *AJA* 50 (1946), 140–70.

<sup>43</sup> Both the Mark ivory and the Riha paten are well-published. See entries #456 and #547 in *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), for photos and bibliography. One exception to the more generic iconography is the image of baptism on the Aquileia grave relief, below, Chap. 2, pp. 71–5, fig. 2.12.

as isolated images. The limited range of subjects found in the Christian catacombs moreover indicates that certain motifs were intentionally chosen and preferred, possibly because of the given sepulchral context. Thus baptism scenes belong to the broader iconographic program especially designed for tombs. A particular theme or idea governed the selection and arrangement of all the images, and the baptism scenes held a key place in that scheme. Interpreters have taken different approaches to evaluating the Christian catacomb paintings, and thus arrived at different conclusions. Each raises particular problems or leaves certain questions unresolved.

The simplest approach is to read the images as illustrative references directly related to certain scripture texts or stories. From this point of view, the pictures in the catacombs are just what they seem to be—and no more. Paul Styger, one of the leading proponents of this interpretation, believes that each scene was a fairly realistic portrayal of a Bible scene, intended both to educate the illiterate and foster religious feelings. Styger rejects any symbolic interpretation of the imagery, in contrast to Josef Wilpert, who believes the whole corpus of images was associated with death and beliefs about the afterlife.<sup>44</sup> Problematically, however, Styger ignores the distinctions between Bible story and catacomb painting. The images do not represent simple illustrations. Rather than narrating Bible stories, the images simply refer to them. In some cases, artists have rearranged or changed key details in the written narrative. In other places artists have omitted what would seem to be main points or have condensed the details of the story in its written form. For instance, certain important scenes in the Jonah story are absent (e.g., Jonah's fleeing from God's call, and the sailors' casting lots) while others are oddly depicted (Jonah reclining nude under the gourd vine). The Book of Genesis no more portrays Noah as alone, in a cramped wooden box than the Gospels describe Jesus as a small nude youth at his baptism. Catacomb art clearly does not literally replicate scriptural details.

Additionally, certain scenes that modern viewers might expect to appear in early Christian painting (based on their experience of later

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Styger argues against symbolic interpretation and for historicity in *Die altchristliche Grabekunst, Ein Versuch der einheitlichen Auslegung* (Munich: J. Kösel and F. Pustet, 1927), 75–7. Also see Paul Styger, *Die römischen Katakomben* (Berlin: Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1933). Wilpert's interpretation is summarized in *Die Malereien*, 141.

Christian art) are rare or altogether absent. In contrast to the numerous examples depicting Jesus healing or working other miracles (changing water to wine, or multiplying loaves and fishes), Jesus is never shown as a youth in the Temple, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and rarely depicted as crucified before the fifth or sixth century. The first and most frequent representations of Moses show him striking the rock in the wilderness, not floating in the reeds, speaking to the burning bush, or leading the people out of Egypt. Simply considering the choice of subjects of the catacomb paintings leads one to reject a purely narrative and didactic explanation for their significance.

While scholars reasonably imagine that many patrons and painters relied on familiar and handy prototypes, the original selection of these themes had a purpose other than textual illustration. Extracted from their broader narrative context and juxtaposed with scenes referring to other texts or scriptures, they must have been accorded new meaning that justified their placement in the larger visual program. Thus, while these narrative images referred to a particular biblical story on one hand, they also gained a secondary significance that becomes clear when viewing the decorative scheme as a whole. At least two possibilities exist: first is that they reflect ancient prayers for the dead, and second that they typologically allude to the sacraments.

### 1.2.3. *Ancient Prayer for the Dead as Iconographic Source*

According to many interpreters, the key to explaining these iconographic programs are found in documents that allude to certain narratives as models or exemplars. For example, some ancient prayers recounted instances of God's divine assistance in earlier times by citing the cases of Noah, Daniel, Susannah, etc. The suppliant not only praised God for such assistance but also asked for similar aid. Because many of the figures evoked in such prayers also appear in the catacomb paintings, some scholars have concluded that the paintings are themselves visual prayers, that is, the deceased (or the bereaved) are calling upon God for deliverance from death or the justification of the righteous one. André Grabar, a prominent supporter of this hypothesis, proposes that the source of Christian catacomb iconography could be found in the ancient Christian office for the dead.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the only existing

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<sup>45</sup> André Grabar, *Early Christian Art: From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), 102–5.

form of such a prayer cannot be dated prior to the ninth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, Henri Leclercq, who has himself argued for a prototypical Jewish “Prayer for the Recommendation of the Soul” has identified such prayers in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* (the *commendatio animae*) as well as a prayer from Pseudo-Cyprian that refers to Noah, Jonah, Enoch, Abraham, Lot, Rahab, Elisha, Elijah, Job, Moses, and Daniel.<sup>46</sup> Although these prayers were likely based on earlier forms or even Jewish originals, it is impossible to be certain of this lineage.

Nevertheless, attributing the iconographic motifs in early Christian tombs to the pattern of ancient prayer forms, especially for the office of the dead, seems sensible in consideration of the sepulchral context of the imagery. In fact, Josef Wilpert cites the prayers as evidence for seeing all the art as related in some way to death and Christian hopes regarding the afterlife.<sup>47</sup> Despite the logical appeal of this thesis, many of the biblical heroes named in the extant prayers identified by Leclercq are missing from catacombs iconography (e.g., Enoch, Lot, and Rahab). Yet, as Pierre du Bourguet points out, many of the biblical figures who do appear, including Jonah and Daniel, also show up in the few existing pre-Constantinian non-sepulchral contexts (e.g., the Dura Europos baptistery, lamps and redware bowls, and the pavement of the cathedral at Aquileia).<sup>48</sup> If more examples like these were available for comparison, the assertion of the importance of a funereal origin might be less tenable.

Graydon Snyder is unwilling to grant an exclusively funereal interpretation of the catacomb iconography. Admitting the possible existence of these ancient prayers, Snyder pointedly asks, “does the ancient prayer reflect the art, or does the art reflect the ancient prayer?”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Henri Leclercq, *Manuel d'archéologie chrétienne I* (Paris, 1907), 187–9 and 110–116; and “Défunts (commémoration des)” in *DACL IV.1*, cols. 427–56 (esp. 434–7). Those who follow Leclercq include Antonio Ferrua, “Paralipomeni di Giona,” *RivAC* 38 (1962), 7–69; and Erich Dinkler, “Abbreviated Representations,” 396–9 Weitzmann, Kurt ed. *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), as well as Grabar (see above). For a full study of these prayers see the article by Aimé Martimort, “L'ordo commendationis animae,” *Maison Dieu* 15 (1943), 143–60.

<sup>47</sup> Wilpert, *Die Malereien*, 141.

<sup>48</sup> Du Bourguet, *Early Christian Painting*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 2nd edition (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 96, objecting to the interpretations of Alfred Stuibler, *Refrigerium Interim, Die Vorstellungen vom Zwischenzustand und die frühchristliche Grabeskunst*, in

Responding that the art preceded the prayer, Snyder interprets the catacomb imagery as originally representing the desire for peace and security in the face of the pre-Constantinian church's fear of persecution. In a sense, Snyder also sees these images as visual prayers for deliverance, but from life-threatening danger, not necessarily from death itself. This theory, however, does not account for the baptism scenes particularly well. A general commendation for the soul would almost logically refer to the baptism of the deceased and thus make the inclusion of a pictorial representation of the rite of baptism understandable in a sepulchral context.

Although a liturgical influence on the choice of images for the catacombs makes good sense, Snyder's point that such influence need not be limited to specific prayers for the dead bears consideration. Such a limit excludes many of the early images, including the image of baptism, which is neither directly cited in these prayers for the dead (and certainly not in the Jewish sources) nor is a logical inclusion among portrayals of biblical heroes. The raising of Lazarus or representations of healing miracles would appear to fit the pattern as instances of rescue and resurrection, but scenes of Jesus working wonders (i.e. the multiplication of loaves, changing water to wine) do not so clearly allude to God's direct intervention in a life-and-death situation. Nor do they have any obvious sepulchral relevance. Instead, these particular figures, along with the representations of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, can symbolize a particular kind of rescue, one that is effected through the sacrament of baptism, which guarantees life beyond the tomb.

#### 1.2.4. *Typological Interpretation of Scripture as Iconographic Source*

An alternative interpretation of the iconographic programs in the Christian catacombs views much of the imagery as referring indirectly to the sacraments of baptism or eucharist. This approach also presumes a liturgical context or source for the iconography, but instead of looking for particular documents of early Christian worship to account for the subjects presented in the art, it draws upon established methods of biblical interpretation and catechesis.

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Theophaneia 11 (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1957), 136–51; and Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung*, 222–32.

Undoubtedly, the actual representations of baptism refer to that sacrament, but other images might have sacramental signification. For example, the catacomb imagery includes banquet scenes in which baskets of bread, wine, and fish appear on semi-circular tables around which five or seven diners recline. These scenes might depict actual Christian liturgical, funerary, or sacramental meals (e.g., agape meals, funeral banquets, or even eucharists), but they also imply certain biblical stories of meals or even miraculous multiplications of food.<sup>50</sup> Certain other depictions such as Noah in the ark, Jonah being thrown into the mouth of the sea creature and re-emerging, Moses striking the rock in the desert, the healing of the paralytic, Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, the wine miracle at Cana, and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, refer to specific literary narratives (cf. figs. 11–13). By borrowing a widespread interpretative strategy employed in early Christian homilies, scriptures commentaries, treatises, and liturgical texts, and then transferring it to the interpretation of these visual images, they appear as more than mere illustration of scripture stories. Like the stories to which they refer, they validate the sacraments by showing them as part of the divine economy.

Although a large number of early Christians were literate, viewers of these images would not necessarily have read theological tracts or even Bible stories to be aware of this recondite interpretive system and to make these typological associations. Whether through hearing oral preaching on biblical lessons, catecheses used to prepare candidates for baptism, or popular hymnody and prayers in daily or weekly liturgies, the majority of early Christians could have supplied the links between figure and rite. Because the sacraments themselves are symbolic rituals that draw the viewer to a higher level of reality that is not attained simply through the senses (visible signs of an invisible action), it seems even more fitting to refer to these great mysteries with another language of symbols. Early Christian literature is filled with allegorical or typological interpretation of biblical narratives. According to the New Testament, Jesus himself referred to Jonah as a paradigm of death and resurrection (Matt 12.39, 16.4; Luke 11.29). The

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<sup>50</sup> Various identifications have been posited. See Elisabeth Jastrzebowska, "Les scènes de banquet dans les peintures et sculptures chrétiennes des III<sup>e</sup> et IV<sup>e</sup> siècles," *Recherches Augustiennes* 14 (1979), 30–90 and short illustrated discussion by Robin M. Jensen, "Dining in Heaven," *BR* 14.5 (October, 1998), 32–9, 48–9; also Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 124–6.

author of 1 Peter (3.20–1) associates Noah’s salvation with baptism, and Paul (1 Cor.10.1–5) makes such a connection with the Red Sea crossing, the cloud, and the rock miracles of Moses. This kind of exegesis is also apparent in the writings of the Greek and Latin fathers. Both Origen and Ambrose, themselves probably familiar with a Jewish parallel in Philo’s moral or ethical reading of the Israelites’ passage through the Red Sea or the crossing of the Jordan as a liberation from the bodily passions, understood these texts instead to signify baptism, the Christian sacrament that liberates the individual from bondage to sin.<sup>51</sup>

Symbolic expositions of other Old Testament stories similarly appear in the homilies and catechetical lessons of almost all early Christian writers. Dated around the turn of the third century, Tertullian’s *Treatise on Baptism* provides a whole catalogue of Old and New Testament “figures” of baptism. They include the Genesis account of creation in water, the Flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, the miracle at Cana, Jesus walking on the water, Pilate washing his hands, the water from Jesus’ wound at the crucifixion, and John’s baptism of Jesus (the foundational paradigm).<sup>52</sup> A half-century later, another African, Cyprian, expanded and explained that “every time that water is named by itself in the Holy Scriptures, there is a prophetic allusion to baptism. . .by the term ‘water’ baptism is always signified and that is how we ought to interpret it.”<sup>53</sup> This interpretive approach could be applied also to visual presentations of these scripture narratives that is whenever one sees a reference to or inclusion of water in the image, the ritual of baptism is signified. By the late fourth century, these typological tropes were commonplace in catechetical literature, as evidenced in the writings of Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, and John Chrysostom, among others.

As noted above, these symbolic associations led early archaeologists to designate certain chambers in the Callixtus catacomb as “sacraments

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<sup>51</sup> For examples see Philo, *Abr.* 151; Origen, *Hom. Josh.* 6.1. text GCS 30 (1921); and Ambrose, *Myst.* 12–13. For a careful study of Ambrose’s use of Philo see Hervé Savon, *Saint Ambroise devant l’exégèse de Philon le Juif* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977).

<sup>52</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9.

<sup>53</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 63.8.1–9.1, trans. Graeme W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage*, vol. 3, ACW 46 (New York: Newman Press, 1986), 101–2. Here Cyprian is objecting to the use of water only for the eucharist, rather than a mixed cup of wine and water.

chambers". These chambers contain depictions of baptism or banquet scenes, which led historians to interpret many of the remaining images in them as references to these same rituals, especially those specifically identified in the patristic literature as sacramental types.<sup>54</sup> For instance, the two "sacraments chambers" in the Callixtus catacomb have episodes from the Jonah cycle, Moses striking the rock, banquets, a fisherman, the healing of the paralytic, and Abraham's offering of Isaac (that might point toward the eucharistic sacrifice) in addition to the baptism scene.<sup>55</sup>

The extent of the baptismal significance of certain iconographic themes depends on familiarity with the narrative. The Samaritan woman, for example, was offered the water of "eternal life" and never thirsted again (John 4.7–15). The paralytic came to the water to be healed and was cured instead by Jesus who told him to "sin no more" (John 5.2–15). The representations of a shepherd with his sheep at a stream or of deer drinking from a spring might refer to pertinent lines from Psalms texts (Ps 23, 42) that could have been used during the baptismal liturgy itself.<sup>56</sup> Other images are more indirectly baptismal, such as the fisher or the phoenix—symbols of the one safely in the water of the font or of the resurrection offered through the sacrament.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> The designation of six cubicles in the Callixtus catacomb is fairly traditional and seems to have been first used by Marchi in the mid-nineteenth century: *Monumenti*, 161–3. Wilpert, although he objected to the terminology, continued to use it in *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Freiburg im B.: Herder, 1903), 152.

<sup>55</sup> Among scholars who identified certain biblical scenes as baptismal references are Wilpert, *Die Malereien*, 264–6; Erich Becker, *Das Quellenwunder des Moese in der altchristlichen Kunst* (Strassburg: J.H. Ed. Heitz, 1909); R.P.J. Hooyma, "Die Noe-Darstellung in der frühchristlichen Kunst," *VC* 12 (1958), 113–35; and Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung*, 353–73.

<sup>56</sup> Johannes Quasten argues that Psalm 23 was sung at baptism in Naples, "Das Bild des Guten Hirten in den altchristlichen Baptisterien und in den TaufLiturgien des Ostens und Westens" in *Pisciculi: Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums*. Franz Joseph Dölger zum sechzigsten Geburtstage, dargeboten von Freunden, Verehrem und Schüler ed, Theodor Klauser (Münster: Aschendorff, 1939), 220–44. See also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst. cat.* 4; Ambrose, *Myst.* 8.43 and *Sacr.* 5.3.12; Prudentius, *Perist.* 12.43; and Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32.5 for evocations of Psalm 23 in the baptismal liturgy. Both the shepherd and sheep, and deer drinking from streams were common decorations in baptisteries; see Chap. 5, pp. 252–8.

<sup>57</sup> The fisher or fish symbol was among the symbols deemed appropriate for Christian rings by Clement of Alexandria (*Paed.* 3.11.59) to remind those who owned them of the "apostle and the children drawn out of the water," trans. ANF 2, 285–6. Also see De Bruyne, "Initiation chrétienne," 58–9, who sees multiple meanings or applications of the fish symbol, particularly as a direct reference to baptism." On the baptismal

While banquet scenes or other representations of certain foods (e.g., bread, wine, or fish) may be interpreted as references to the eucharist, some narrative scenes might be allusions to both baptism and eucharist. For example, because water was turned into wine in the Cana wedding story, it might be a symbol pointing to either eucharist or baptism. Although the specific appearance of wine would seem to indicate that the eucharist is being symbolized, an image of the baptism is adjacent. Moreover, water was both consecrated and miraculously transformed in the font during the baptismal liturgy, an act that was judged to have been prefigured in the miraculous changes at Cana.<sup>58</sup> The Cana miracle may even signify both sacraments (eucharist and baptism) simultaneously, or represent an early Christian practice of eucharist as the culmination of the original, integrated baptismal ceremony. Furthermore, the early Christian eucharist had much in common with a variety of early Christian meal practices, including funeral meals (*refrigeria*), that were carried over from customary Roman commemorations at the burial site and adapted for martyrs' feasts held at the shrine of the saint. The popular banquet images could depict either type of feast, often held within the catacombs themselves.<sup>59</sup>

These sacramental scenes or types were also found in early Christian baptismal chambers as well. For example, the Samaritan woman at the well and the healing of the paralytic were found in the mid-third-century baptistery at Dura Europos, while the miraculous catch of fish, wedding at Cana, the woman at the well, shepherd and sheep, and the harts and streams, all appear in the fourth-century baptistery of S. Giovanni in Fonte, Naples (figs. 5.6–7, 6.9).<sup>60</sup> However these images' presence in this specific non-funerary context only raises the question of whether baptismal allusions were judged to be particularly suited for decorating sepulchral settings, or whether baptisteries themselves have sepulchral associations. The Christian theological and conceptual links

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associations of the phoenix see Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 18.8–9; and Lactantius' poem, *Ave Phoen.* in *Minor Latin Poets*, trans. J. Wight Duff, LCL (1934), 643–65.

<sup>58</sup> Tertullian makes this connection *Bapt.* 9.4; and it also appears in the *Gel. Sac.* 44 (91) as well as the *Bobbio Missal* 236, see latter two texts trans. into English in E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd edition, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 234, and 271.

<sup>59</sup> On the relationship between traditional Roman funeral meals (also practiced by Christians) with the Christian eucharist see Robin M. Jensen, "Dining with the Dead: From Mensa to Altar," in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, ed. Laurie Brink and Deborah Green (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 107–42.

<sup>60</sup> See discussion of these baptisteries below, Chap. 5, pp. 82–4, 191–4.

between death, burial, resurrection, and baptism (cf. Rom 6.4) are critical to this discussion of the sacramental interpretation of catacomb art, but these links rarely appeared in theological discussions before the fourth century. Christians were taught that their baptism was a kind of death (to an old self) and rebirth not only to a new life but the promise of a blessed afterlife. The baptistery was accordingly both a tomb and a womb.<sup>61</sup>

Some cautions should be noted in relation to this line of interpretation. First, although Christians undoubtedly heard sermons that incorporated such strategies, artists would not necessarily have replicated the exact symbolic equations of those theologians whose writings have survived, even though as André Grabar suggests, those theologians (Origen, Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and Augustine) invited the image makers to do so.<sup>62</sup> A safer conclusion posits these pictorial figures or literary allusions as sharing a common and more general aim: to draw out the hidden or deeper implications of stories from scripture.<sup>63</sup>

Second, not all of the imagery obviously fits the model. For instance, scenes of the raising of Lazarus, Daniel in the lion's den, and Adam and Eve are not usually considered part of these sacramental/baptismal cycles but frequently are represented in the catacombs. They could have borne baptismal significance, however, as visual references to resurrection, rescue from death, or the repudiation of sin. Nor does the model always match the imagery, because some of the most obvious types from the literature rarely appear in the paintings. No known images of Jesus walking on the water occur in the catacombs although such an image appears in both the Dura and Naples baptisteries and referenced in an inscription the Orthodox baptistery in Ravenna.<sup>64</sup> The crossing of the Red Sea (the most prevalent type of baptism in the patristic literature and first noted in Paul's letter to the Corinthians) appears relatively later than other images that might bear a baptismal significance (e.g., Noah, Jonah, Moses striking the rock etc.). Similarly, portrayals of Naaman the Syrian's cleansing, Elisha throwing the axe-head into the Jordan (2 Kings 6. 5–7), Nicodemus asking about

<sup>61</sup> See discussion of these themes below, Chap. 6, pp. 237–40, 247–51.

<sup>62</sup> Grabar, *Christian Iconography*, 143.

<sup>63</sup> See essay by Robin M. Jensen, "Early Christian Images and Exegesis," in *Picturing the Bible*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 65–85.

<sup>64</sup> See Chap. 5, p. 202.

being born again, or the blood and water flowing from Christ's side at the crucifixion do not occur in early Christian visual art although these all occur in the fourth-century catechetical documents as types of baptism.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, many of the wall paintings that contain the potentially typological scenes occur in chambers that have others of this category but, interestingly, none of the actual baptism itself. The proximity of the baptismal representations to these others was the initial basis for a sacramental interpretation. However, a question remains of whether the interpretation of a symbol falters when its archetype is absent; was the symbolism was so perfectly clear that the reference was unnecessary?<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the gradual phasing-out of many older images (e.g., Noah, Jonah, and the fisher) as well as the depiction of actual baptisms in the early fourth century indicates that typologies may have changed in the fourth century, making some earlier figures less useful. As noted above, fourth-century Christian art in general (especially sarcophagus relief compositions) introduced a new iconographic repertoire, including episodes from Genesis and Exodus (e.g., the story of Cain and Abel, Abraham and the three visitors, Moses receiving the Law, the crossing of the Red Sea) and from the New Testament, including depictions of Christ enthroned or handing the new law to his apostles, early scenes of the Passion, and the arrests of Peter and Paul. Some of the new scenes could have replaced Noah or Jonah as baptismal types, such as the representation of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the raising of Lazarus, Jesus washing the apostles' feet, or Pilate washing his hands. However, in almost every case, these images seem more explicitly illustrative of the narratives they depict and to be signaling the new status of Christianity as a state-sponsored cult rather than symbolically pointing to sacramental promises of salvation or indicating personal Christian identity.

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<sup>65</sup> See for example, Ambrose *Sacr.* 2.4.10; 5.13–14, and *Spir.* 10.63. Also see John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 3.16–17.

<sup>66</sup> For an example of this see Otto von Simson's discussion of S. Apollinare Nuovo's mosaics and how, despite their lack of any realistic depiction of baptism he interprets them as constituting a "baptismal program." *Sacred Fortress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 103–10.

*Conclusion*

That sacramental themes are symbolically referenced in the Christian catacomb frescoes seems reasonable to conclude. However, a sacramental allusion need not rule out other possible interpretations. None of these narrative images are straight-forward illustrations of biblical stories only, and they are not randomly chosen or haphazardly placed in their contexts. Each of them undoubtedly calls the viewer's mind to a number of different significations, from the assurance of rescue from danger or death to more complex allegorical or typological associations. As part of larger programs in funeral settings, these images both imply something about Christian teachings regarding death or the afterlife, as well as call to mind other instances of God's assistance in human crises.

However prevalent the symbolism may be, an exclusive interpretation of the catacomb imagery as either merely narrative or sacramental is too restrictive. Baptism, both symbolically and literally represented, as well as typologically indicated through representation of certain biblical stories, is an appropriate subject for catacomb painting because baptism—a central sacrament in the early church—confers the benefits of membership particular, the faithful one's resurrection from death. Furthermore, the rite of baptism was fundamentally a proleptic sepulchral rite because participants underwent a symbolic death followed by a second birth in its enactment. Those who had undergone the rite would almost certainly include assertions of their status (and the promises it carried) as part of the visual decoration of their tombs. Tertullian's explanation from his treatise *On Baptism* describes the benefit: "With such simplicity, without pomp, without novel apparatus, and even without payment, a person is immersed in water and washed while only a few words are spoken, and emerges no cleaner, yet incredibly the effect is to impart eternal life. . . . is it not a marvel that by bathing death is washed away?"<sup>67</sup>

Neither theology nor iconography remains static. By the late fourth century, Christianity's circumstances had changed with regard to its place in the wider Roman culture. The iconography also changed to reflect the new status of the church at the center of power instead of at odds with political authority. Baptism ceased to be a counter-cultural,

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<sup>67</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 2.1–2, trans. author (CCL:1.277).

even dangerous, undertaking. Baptism still served as the gate to salvation, but individuals no longer received it automatically upon conversion, sometimes remaining life-long catechumens and baptized only on their death beds. Israel's history, as told in the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, was no longer simply mined for prefigurations of Christ or of the sacraments, but it came to be understood as the sacred pre-history of the Church, the "New Israel." The new iconography, such as depictions of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea or Pilate the Roman governor washing his hands, and Peter and Paul receiving a scroll with the New Law, has more to do with this new self-understanding than it reflects on Christian baptism.



## CHAPTER TWO

### BAPTISMAL ICONOGRAPHY ON SARCOPHAGUS AND GRAVE RELIEFS

#### *Introduction: Early Christian Sarcophagi*

Stone sarcophagi were the repositories, not only of bodies, but also of early Christian sculptural imagery. The shift in Roman burial practice from cremation to inhumation that became increasingly common during the second century was always the practice of Christians and Jews.<sup>68</sup> Arguably the most impressive examples of Roman sarcophagi from this period were made for pagan owners. They bear a wide variety of imagery from the simple decorative motifs such as garlands and masks to episodes from mythology, battle scenes, and images from daily life.<sup>69</sup> For Christian art historians, sarcophagi that depict motifs and images that are specifically Christian provide a rich treasury of material for examination.

Early Christian sarcophagi were produced in Italy, Gaul, North Africa, and Spain out of materials extracted from quarries around the Empire. Even so, with two exceptions—a sarcophagus from Ancona and one from Madrid—the extant examples that portray representations of baptism were found in Arles and Rome.<sup>70</sup> Their construction

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<sup>68</sup> No evidence suggests that the Jewish and Christian practice influenced the Roman, but rather that the Roman shift reflected a revitalization of an older Roman practice. See John Bodet, “From Columbaria to Catacombs: Collective Burial in Pagan and Christian Rome,” in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, ed. Laurie Brink, O.P., and Deborah Green (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 177–242. Also see the classic article by Arthur Darby Nock, “Cremation and burial in the Roman Empire,” *HTR* 25 (1932), 32–59 [reprinted in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 277–307]; and Ian Morris, *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> The bibliography on Roman sarcophagus iconography is extensive. See Michael Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning, and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) a good discussion and helpful bibliography.

<sup>70</sup> Sarcophagi that represent lambs either performing or receiving baptism are not discussed here, although they are included in Fausone’s collection, *Die Taufe*, #22, 23, 163–8. A sarcophagus fragment formerly in Freiburg is not discussed here, as it is both fragmentary and (now) lost. However, it probably was produced in Rome at the end

dates span approximately one hundred and fifty years, from about 260 C.E. to the early fifth century. Dating is determined on stylistic and technical grounds, as well as on the basis of composition and the appearance of certain iconographic themes.<sup>71</sup> Made from marble or limestone, they were worked with chisel and drill and often enhanced with pigments. The depth of the carving, the degree of polish, and the compositional skill vary considerably from object to object. The variance in quality and style was, presumably, based on the artisans' skill and the patron's ability to pay. The imagery might be clumsily crowded and carved in unvarying depth, or beautifully composed and crafted, in alternating high and low relief.

### 2.1. *Iconography of Early Christian Sarcophagi*

Many of these sarcophagi were decorated with generic floral garlands, vases, birds, or animals or customized with portraits of the deceased and spouse within a scallop shell or a shield (*clipeus*). Others portray shepherds, praying figures, or seated readers (perhaps philosophers) that are commonly found in pagan iconography but in a Christian context could be interpreted respectively as allusions to Christ as savior, the faithful believer, or the truth of Christian teaching. Depictions of small children (*putti*) harvesting grapes or wheat, making wine, milking sheep, or fishing from boats could be allusions to the eucharist or to Jesus calling his disciples to fish for people, but more likely are simply adaptations of the popular pastoral and maritime motifs of standard Roman decorative art.

In addition to these conventional motifs, the fronts, lids and often the sides of a large group of sarcophagi have complicated frieze-style compositions of one or two registers. They usually display a group

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of the third century and shows a portion of the baptizer's torso and right arm on the left and the head and body of the recipient on the right. See Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Giuseppe Bovini, and Hugo Brandenburg, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, vol. 2: *Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1967–2003), #9, 3; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #16, 151–2; Josef Wilpert, *I Sarkofagi Cristiani Antichi* (Rome: Pontificio istituto di archeologica cristiana, 1929–36), 1, 21.

<sup>71</sup> The dating of the sarcophagi discussed below is broad and based, primarily, on the suggestions of Friedrich Deichmann, et al. (noted above), in the multi-volumed *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*.

of scenes from both Old and New Testaments. The oldest examples have iconographical parallels with early catacomb paintings, although they are often more precisely rendered with added detail. Jonah, Noah, Adam and Eve, Daniel, Moses, and the three youths in the fiery furnace are among the earliest figures to be depicted in such relief sculpture. Scenes of Jesus healing and working wonders are also frequent. As in the catacomb frescoes, representations of baptism occur more frequently in the older monuments, gradually disappear, and are gone by the late fourth century. Like the catacomb wall paintings, these images reflect the influence of pagan types and suggest that Christians and pagans patronized the same workshops. For example, the coiled sea monster's tail in the Jonah cycle is based on the tails of similar monsters on pagan sarcophagi; Daniel's heroic posture and nudity are reminiscent of Hercules'.

As Christianity became established as the faith of the ruling elite, the sarcophagus iconography became more identifiably Christian. The stages of this transition are a basis for dating the monuments as much as other stylistic or technical evidence.<sup>72</sup> Like iconographic evolution in catacomb painting, post-Constantinian Christian sculpture developed and expanded its repertoire, adding such new images as Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the ascension of Elijah, Job with his wife, and the arrests of Peter and Paul. The Adoration of the Magi became more popular than before and a wider series of images of Christ healing and working miracles appeared as well as Christ entering Jerusalem and giving the law to his apostles. After the mid-fourth century, scenes from the Passion emerged, including an empty cross surmounted by a wreath of victory, and Christ before Pilate. While the wealth and authority of the Christian emperor fueled a building program, the wealth and piety of upper-class converts supported the creation of private devotional monuments. Christian art objects became both more numerous and more opulent and their iconography projected the new status, security, and confidence of the faith.

This chapter examines most of the extant baptismal images on Christian sarcophagi and compares them to their counterparts in the Christian catacombs. Even more than in the catacombs, the scenes

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<sup>72</sup> As noted above, the author tends to follow the dating proposed in Deichmann, et al, *Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage*, referred to hereafter as *Repertorium*, with specific objects noted by volume, catalogue number, and page.

function as elements within unified decorative programs rather than as isolated images haphazardly placed among a number of random figures. Although some artisans produced partially finished works that clients could purchase and customize, these were not inexpensive or easy-to-produce monuments.<sup>73</sup> Given their cost, their iconography was likely selected according to some criteria. Whereas the popularity of certain themes indicates a widely disseminated group of prototypes (probably taken from pattern books), no two art objects are exactly alike.

The discussion of each of the monuments below briefly considers specific iconographic problems of the baptism scene (e.g., the appearance of a river deity, the lack of the dove, the presence of a sundial, and the presence of a “witness”) as well as general comments on the pictorial program as a whole. Following these individual descriptions is an examination of some broader issues or questions that emerge from this data, including whether certain other images (e.g., the foot washing scene or the healing of the paralytic) are typological references to baptism; whether the iconography is particularly suited to a funerary context or reflects Christian beliefs about the afterlife; and whether any of the programs have an overarching sacramental significance.

### 2.1.1. *Italian Sarcophagi*

#### 2.1.1.1. *Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus*

Orazio Marucchi discovered this *lenos* (tub-shaped) sarcophagus in 1901 during the excavation of the church of Sta. Maria Antiqua in the Roman Forum (fig. 2.1). Historians usually date this piece to the years 260–270, making it one of the oldest surviving works of early Christian sculpture.<sup>74</sup> The imagery, all in one zone and only on the front (although it

<sup>73</sup> The theory that Christian clients might customize partially finished monuments that were initially carved with religiously inoffensive iconography see Julie Märki-Boehringer with Friedrich W. Deichman and Theodor Klausner, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage in Bild und Wort* (Olten: Urs Graf-Verlag, 1966) 23; and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 141–6.

<sup>74</sup> On the dating of this sarcophagus see the excavation report: Orazio Marucchi, *NBAC 7* (1901), 206–16. Also: *Repertorium I (Rom und Ostia)*, #747, 306–7 (also for full bibliography); Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #13, 141–6; Friedrich Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1940), 36; Charles R. Morey, “The Christian Sarcophagus in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome,” *Papers of the American School at Rome*, Suppl. 1 (1905), 148–56. *Lenos* sarcophagi were often decorated with images from the Dionysus cult. On this point see Robert Turcan, *Les sarcophages romaines à représentations dionysiaques* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1966), 62ff. and 533.



Fig. 2.1 Sarcophagus, Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, ca. 260–270.  
Photo: Author.



Fig. 2.2 Sarcophagus (detail of baptism), Santa Maria Antiqua. Photo:  
Author.



Fig. 2.3 Sarcophagus (detail left end), Santa Maria Antiqua. Photo: Author.

continues around the curve of the “tub”), proceeds from left to right. On the far left end, a river deity (with trident) empties a water jug (fig. 2.3); around the curve, Jonah’s ship in full sail carries two sailors, one of them in the standard prayer posture, his arms outstretched. Omitting the usual image of Jonah being swallowed, the iconography turns directly to the happy ending—Jonah reclining (nude) under a vine-covered shelter on top of which three rams safely rest.

A veiled female and a man seated on a cross-legged stool and reading a scroll are roughly in the center of the frieze. The female has on the veil (*stola*) of a Roman matron and raises her hands in the posture of prayer (*orans*); the reader wears the wide *pallium* of the philosopher; his feet and (apparently) his chest are bare. Next to them a beardless

shepherd, wearing a short *exomis* tunic and high boots, shoulders a ram and has two rams at his feet.

The baptism scene (fig. 2.2), to the right of the shepherd, shows a large, full-bearded baptizer standing to the small, naked recipient's right. He is bare-chested and wears a *pallium* over his left shoulder in the characteristic dress of a Greek philosopher. He stands barefoot on dry ground above the flowing water and lays his hand upon the recipient's head. The small, childlike recipient has been much restored, partly based on his appearance in later iconography. Water runs over his feet, and he turns away from the baptizer, reaching down to touch one of the shepherd's sheep. The two—baptizer and recipient—are markedly disparate in size. Overhead, to the left, a dove descends. This image is compositionally similar to many of the baptism scenes found in the catacombs, but most like that of Domitilla arcosolium 77 (fig. 1.4), although in that case the baptizer is wearing a short tunic.

The right end of the sarcophagus (around the curve) depicts two nude fishers emptying their nets. The fisher on the left turns back, looking over his right shoulder as if at the baptism scene. Tall trees separate all the figures/scenes as if to set them apart.

The three figures that form the central group (praying figure, shepherd, and seated reader) are not specifically Christian, although the rest of the sarcophagus' imagery indicates that these three popular non-Christian motifs were endowed with a Christian significance. The praying figure (*orante*) and shepherd are well-known from the catacomb frescoes as either Christian or conventional Roman sepulchral images. The shepherd, although usually identified as the Christian "Good Shepherd" (John 7.11), is adapted from representations of shepherds in Roman art, and may be a direct borrowing from the iconography of Hermes as a caretaking shepherd.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, the seated reader is common to both pagan and Christian art. Here, it may have been meant to typify the deceased as a man of learning. Nevertheless, the image might be a more general allusion to the virtue of wisdom

<sup>75</sup> This identification with Hermes ("Hermes criophorus") was proposed most notably by Theodor Klauser, "Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst," *JAC* 1 (1958), 20–51. For a skeptical view see Walter N. Schumacher, *Hirt und "Guter Hirt"* (Freiburg im B.: Herder, 1977) and a review of Schumacher by Nikolaus Himmelmann, *Über Hirten-Genre in der antiken Kunst* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1980). See also Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 188–91; Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 37–41; and Snyder, *Ante Pacem* 43–4.

or more specifically, in this context, a reference to Christianity as true philosophy.<sup>76</sup> The reader is the only one of the center group shown in profile. An analogous figure sometimes occurs on pagan sarcophagi to represent the poet (often visited by his muse). As a group, these three prominent figures can be interpreted as allegorical allusions to the deceased's piety (*orante*), philanthropy (shepherd), and learning (philosopher).<sup>77</sup>

Both the reader's and the *orante*'s faces were found in an unfinished state, suggesting that they were intended to be customized as portraits of the deceased (and his/her spouse) some time after the original carving of the piece. Scholars have speculated that at least two artisans worked on this piece, which would explain the figures' contrasting styles. The *orante*, seated reader, and Jonah are more classically modeled by comparison with the shepherd and baptizer who are more roughly rendered, perhaps to give them a more rugged or rustic appearance, or perhaps simply the consequence of different hands involved in the making of this work.<sup>78</sup>

Jonah, shown resting under his gourd vine, reclines on his left side, legs crossed, and right arm raised over his head. This posture, arguably one that implies sexual availability, may have been adapted from conventional representations of Endymion, the youth who was visited by Selene in his sleep—a scene frequently represented in Roman domestic and funeral art. This posture—standard for Jonah in early Christian art—may have been adapted in order to imply that death is a blissful and restorative (even fecund) sleep.<sup>79</sup> However, the Jonah iconography might also refer to baptism. Jonah's nudity both going into the sea monster's mouth and then emerging from it could allude to the naked-

<sup>76</sup> For discussion of the interpretation and possible relationship between the Shepherd, *orante*, and reader, see Klauser, "Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte," 112–33; and Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 39, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Another example of the group (shepherd, reader, and orans figure) can be seen on the well-known Via Salaria sarcophagus in the Vatican Museum, which is presumed to be a Christian monument, although its religious identity seems ambiguous.

<sup>78</sup> Klauser accepts the theory that different stone workers carved this sarcophagus, Märki-Boehringer, Deichman, and Klauser, *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, 49–50. Also see *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, 307.

<sup>79</sup> On the figure of Endymion on Roman sarcophagi see Koortbojian, *Myth, Meaning, and Memory*, chaps. 4–5, 63–99 and David Balch, "From Endymion in Roman *Domus* to Jonah in Christian Catacombs: From Houses of the Living to Houses of the Dead," in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context*, ed. Laurie Brink, O.P., and Deborah Green (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 274–301.

ness of candidates as they enter and emerge from the baptismal font, passing again through the watery womb and being born again.

The figures on the curved ends also have parallels in pre-Christian Roman iconography. On the left, Neptune (or a river deity) holds a trident in his left hand and a jug disgorging water in his right. On the right two nude fishers drag a net filled with fish, a popular theme in Roman art, but here it is a possible reference to the calling of the disciples (Matthew 4.19–22) or the miraculous catch of fish in John's Gospel (John 21.6–8). Although much of the iconography is religiously ambiguous, the inclusion of the baptism scene certifies the sarcophagus' Christian associations. By extension, their inclusion argues for a particular Christian significance for the shepherd and the fishers.<sup>80</sup>

Except for the three central figures (*orante*, reader, and shepherd), the iconography from left to right is thematically united by the water that flows from the god's jug on the far left to form the sea for Jonah's boat, the river for the baptism scene, and, finally, the lake for the fish on the far right.

#### 2.1.1.2. *Strigil Sarcophagus in the Museo Nazionale Romano*

This sarcophagus was found in 1904 in one of the houses by the *Farne-sina* on the *Via Lungara*, near the *Tiber*.<sup>81</sup> This lidded, one-zoned sarcophagus's most characteristic details are its pair of strigillate (wavy-lined) front panels, separating the central and corner figurative reliefs. Based on stylistic considerations, the sarcophagus is dated to the late third century (ca. 280 C.E.).<sup>82</sup>

Trees with roosting doves stand on either side of a veiled *orante* on the center pedestal and within a niche formed by columns and an arch. The strigillate panels lie to the right and left. On the far left, a fisherman, dressed in a short tunic, holds a rod and sack of fish; on the far

<sup>80</sup> For a useful discussion of the problem of differentiating pagan from Christian monuments see Jocelyn Toynbee, "The Religious Background of Some Roman Sarcophagi of North Italy and Dalmatia," *JAC* 18 (1975), 5–18.

<sup>81</sup> Excavation report: G. Gatti, *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*, (1904), 47–51; catalogue description in Antonio Giuliano, *Museo Nazionale Romano: le sculture* (Rome: deLuca, 1979–), 1.8.1, #3.5.

<sup>82</sup> On this sarcophagus and its dating Paola Baldassarri, "III.5. Sarcofago con orante, buon pastore e pescatore (inv. N. 23893)," in *Museo Nazionale Romano: le sculture* 1.8, ed. Antonio Giuliano—with excellent bibliography. Also see *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, #777, 324–5 (also with full bibliography); Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #14, 146–9; J. Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi*, 20, 79, 132, 149 and plate 19.3–6.

right a bearded shepherd, also wearing a short tunic, shoulders a ram. To the immediate left and right of the lid's central (blank) inscription tablet are four rather typical monsters: a ram, a bull, a sheep, and a cow, all with dolphin tails. Actual dolphins are carved in the lid's upper corners. Dolphins were a common motif in Greco-Roman iconography, appearing with Aphrodite and Poseidon, but especially associated with the Dionysiac cult. In the latter it probably symbolized many things, but primarily rescue from death, based on the myth of Dionysus' heroic escape from pirates.<sup>83</sup> Dolphins also frequently occur in early Christian iconography. Although conventional images in Roman art, they may have alluded to the Christian hope of resurrection.

The baptism scene is shown on the sarcophagus' left end. The baptizer stands to the recipient's left. He is barefoot and bare-chested and wears only a *pallium* draped over his left shoulder, like the baptizer on the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus. His left hand grasps a scroll, and his right rests on the recipient's head. The diminutive, naked recipient stands in water up to his knees. A bare tree (or perhaps a river plant) rises out of the water on the right, while a leafy tree grows to the left on the bank. The scene includes no dove. On the opposite (right) end, eleven rams, possibly symbolizing the apostles, are arranged in three parallel rows.

Water and baptism are prominent on this sarcophagus but to a lesser extent than on the Sta. Maria Antiqua frieze. Both fisher and dolphins are symbols associated with the baptismal rite (because of their watery context), the making of disciples, and rescue from death. The dolphin-tailed monsters are water creatures as well, and even the undulating lines of the strigillate panels suggest water.

Both Marcel Simon and Friedrich Gerke maintained that the shepherd and the baptism scene on this sarcophagus are iconographically linked. Simon associates the shepherd with the fisher especially because of their relative placement on this sarcophagus. According to Simon, the two figures have the same symbolic value.<sup>84</sup> Gerke connects the shepherd with Christ's baptism, and notes that the Sta. Maria Antiqua

<sup>83</sup> See Karl Lehmann-Hartleben and Erling C. Olsen, *Dionysiac Sarcophagi in Baltimore* (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, 1942), fig. 29. According to the mythological tradition, Dionysus was kidnapped by pirates who were transformed into dolphins in retaliation.

<sup>84</sup> Marcel Simon, "Symbolisme et traditions d'atelier dans la première sculpture chrétienne," *ACIAC* 5 (1954), 309–21: "S'il faut, comme je le pense, voir dans le Pêcheur un simple réplique du Pasteur, il est clair au'il doit avoir sensiblement la même

Sarcophagus incorporates these figures, although the fishers on the two sarcophagi are different in appearance. (The Sta. Maria sarcophagus shows two fishermen with a net rather than a single fisherman holding a rod.)<sup>85</sup>

Although the dove's omission might militate against a baptismal interpretation of the left end image, the garb (*pallium*) and bare chest of the standing figure point to his identification as John the Baptist, shown here as a philosopher type.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the presence of water, the imposition of the hand, the figures' relationship, and the nudity of the recipient are all evidence that this is a baptismal scene and not some other action associated with a laying-on of hands (e.g., healing). Lucien De Bruyne argues that two elements define a baptismal scene (in addition to the baptized person): the bath and the Holy Spirit. He also observes that these two defining elements are not always indicated in the same ways. The Holy Spirit can be represented by the imposition of hands, or the dove, or both. The bath is indicated either by the presence of water, or nudity, or both.<sup>87</sup>

### 2.1.1.3. *Sarcophagus Fragment in the Museo Pio Cristiano*

Discovered by Orazio Marucchi in the excavations under the Vatican in the mid-nineteenth century, this monument has been dated to the late third century on stylistic grounds (e.g., the use of the drill on the figures' hair and beards).<sup>88</sup> A fragment from the front of a sarcophagus depicts a joyous banquet (fig. 2.4). Four (or possibly five) persons recline on a dining couch; in front of them are seven baskets of bread and a platter of fish. Hurrying to join the group is a figure carrying a loaf in one hand and a fish in the other.<sup>89</sup>

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valuer symbolique...S'ils sont ainsi associés dans l'iconographie chrétienne, s'est surtout parce qu'ils l'étaient déjà dans l'art païen."

<sup>85</sup> Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 143. note 5; also Orazio Marucchi, "Di un sarcofago cristiano recentemente scoperto ed ora collocato nel museo delle Terme," *NBAC* (1906), 199–205, plates 1–6.

<sup>86</sup> See discussion of the association of John's garb with a philosopher, below, p. 82.

<sup>87</sup> De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains," 244–6. The possibility that the dove of baptism is instead represented by the roosting doves next to the orans figure is implausible, because the dove often appears with an orans figure.

<sup>88</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, #150, 97; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, # 15, 149–50.

<sup>89</sup> See the discussion above regarding the banquet scene's funerary and sacramental significance, Chap. 1, p. 34.



Fig. 2.4 Sarcophagus fragment in the Museo Pio Cristiano, late third century. Photo: Author, with permission, The Vatican Museum.

Only part of the baptism scene remains on the left—a small, boyish recipient standing up to his knees in water. On the right, a bearded baptizer wears a skimpy *exomis* tunic (his left shoulder and right hip are both exposed), and his feet are bare. The baptizer places his right hand on the recipient's head. Most of his head is missing, but the recipient's perceptibly round face and body appear particularly child-like, especially in contrast with the baptizer. The area where a dove most likely would have been (if it were included) is missing.

A sundial on a tall column stands between the baptism and meal scenes. Gerke argues that the sundial's presence in the scene, taken together with the particular garb of the baptizer, supports the identification of the baptizer as John the Baptist.<sup>90</sup> The sundial points to the biblical designation of John as the last in the line of the prophets or a new Isaiah or Elijah (cf. Luke 3.3–4). A curious addition, its appearance here may allude to time's passage and death's inevitability.

Because of the baptism scene's proximity to the meal scene (on the right), Alfonso Fausone, Gerke, and others propose a thematic connection between eucharist and baptism in this sarcophagus's imagery.<sup>91</sup> Although the meal may allude to the sacramental meal, this almost certainly is not a eucharist but some other type of festive meal—probably a funeral banquet given the context of the image.

<sup>90</sup> Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 143. Gerke considers this a philosophical type and compares John's clothing here with that on the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus.

<sup>91</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, 96–7; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 149–51; and Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 366.

Additionally, the multiple baskets of loaves link this meal typologically to the stories of the miraculous feeding in the gospels, adding some eschatological iconography to this funerary monument. These miraculously abundant meals prefigure the heavenly banquet, to which the deceased will be welcomed.

#### 2.1.1.4. *Museo Pio Cristiano Sarcophagus*

This sarcophagus was discovered about 1632 near the portico of the church of Sta. Maria Maggiore and published and illustrated in Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea*. The frieze was damaged and subsequently restored and now looks significantly different from Bosio's mid nineteenth-century drawing.<sup>92</sup> Considerations of style, particularly the use of a drill to create drapery folds, eyes, and locks of hair but also the relative proportions of heads to bodies, indicate this sarcophagus had been dated to the early fourth century.<sup>93</sup>

As it appears today the frieze shows the following (from left to right (fig. 2.5)): a scene, probably, of Christ before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin; the imprisonment of Peter; a manger scene with ox, ass and two shepherds (in the center); the baptism; and a scene usually identified either as the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5.35–43 and parallels) or the son of the woman of Nain (Luke 7.11–17). This latter designation seems more apt considering the presence of the mother of the child in the scene.<sup>94</sup>

Except for the depiction of Peter (which might be an episode from Jesus' trial), this frieze portrays selected episodes from the life of Christ. The baptism scene shows the recipient as a naked male child, standing in water up to his knees and turning toward his baptizer (fig. 2.6). The bearded baptizer wears a short *exomis*-type garment made from an animal skin (the head of the animal is still visible between his legs). His feet are bare. He leans into the scene, his left knee bent and his left foot resting on a rock. Because of the surrounding images and the specific dress of the baptizer, this image should be identified as the baptism of Christ, although no dove is visible. Interestingly, the restorer chose not to include a dove in a space that could have accommodated it.

<sup>92</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)* #13, 12–13; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #19, 156–60.

<sup>93</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 159.

<sup>94</sup> Fausone's argument, *Die Taufe*, 157–8 can be countered by the fact that a mother is present also in the Jairus story. *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, 12–13 also identifies this as the raising of Jairus' daughter.



Fig. 2.5 Sarcophagus panel, Museo Pio Cristiano, early fourth century.  
Photo: Author, with permission, The Vatican Museum.

A pillar-like waterfall divides into two streams behind the recipient. One stream provides the water that runs over his legs while water from the other runs into a vessel (a cup-shaped object) held by the baptizer. The baptizer's hand, the stream that runs into the cup, and the head of the recipient are all speculative reconstructions. De Bruyne points out that only three examples of early Christian baptismal images exist in which John is shown holding a vessel and pouring—or preparing to pour—water over the head of the recipient: this reconstructed sarcophagus, the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna (fig. 3.10), and a silver spoon from Aquileia.<sup>95</sup> De Bruyne contends that this detail in the Ravenna mosaic, along with this sarcophagus carving, were changed

<sup>95</sup> De Bruyne, “L'imposition des mains” 222–3. The Aquileia spoon only exists in documentary records (and drawings), see Henri Leclercq, “Aquilée,” *DACL* 1.2, 2674 fig. 877.2. To De Bruyne's list, one might add the Egyptian ivory from the British Museum, which also shows a paten, although not (apparently) held by John. (fig. ##); See discussion of the Ravenna mosaic and the Egyptian ivory below, Chap. 3, pp. 104–5, 109–110, and discussion, Chap. 4, pp. 142–3.



Fig. 2.6 Sarcophagus panel (detail of baptism), Museo Pio Cristiano.  
Photo: Author, with permission, The Vatican Museum.

by restorers, thus giving a false idea of the baptismal rite in antiquity and should be discounted.<sup>96</sup> However, one may wish to consider a sixth-century ivory plaque with a similar vessel (fig. 3.8).

The seemingly vertical waterfall represents the Jordan River, as it does in other early Christian baptismal iconography of baptism, as

<sup>96</sup> Fausone also argues that the reconstruction of this sarcophagus is inaccurate in this respect as well, *Die Taufe*, 159. See also Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 146.

well as images of Peter striking the rock.<sup>97</sup> This odd-looking detail could be a somewhat clumsy (or perspective-less) attempt to show the water as a river. It also could be meant to illustrate the idea that at Jesus' baptism the Jordan River stopped flowing and was "gathered up." This tradition is based on a line from Psalm 114, which was given a baptismal significance in early exegesis: "The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back" (Ps 114.3). Documentary evidence shows that early Christian writers interpreted this psalm verse as a foretelling of the Jordan's "stopping" at John's command when Jesus was baptized, itself a parallel to Moses' parting of the Red Sea and the "stopping" and "standing in one heap" of the Jordan's water while the priests bearing the ark crossed over (Josh 3.13, 16).<sup>98</sup> The miracle repeated itself for pilgrims later coming to the Jordan for baptism on the Feast of Epiphany.<sup>99</sup>

#### 2.1.1.5. *Frieze Sarcophagus Fragment from St. Lawrence Outside the Walls*

This much-damaged sarcophagus, now in the cloister of Rome's basilica of St. Lawrence Outside the Walls, was reconstructed in a drawing of Josef Wilpert, who filled in the rest of a baptism scene between the Adoration of the Magi on the far right and a standing male on the left. All that is clearly discernable today is part of the figure of John the Baptist (with *exomis* tunic) and the water, tumbling from the top of the scene (fig. 2.7). Wilpert also proposed that the central section depicted Peter's denial, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, and the healing of the man born blind, based on fragments of a rider, a tree, a man holding a scroll, and a

<sup>97</sup> See the discussion of the iconography of Peter striking the rock below, pp. 76–78.

<sup>98</sup> On this traditional interpretation see Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 12.15 and Jerome, *Hom.* 89, as well as a discussion of other possible sources in E. Baldwin Smith, *Early Christian Iconography and A School of Ivory Carvers in Provence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1918), 15–16. Smith points out a seventh-century Alexandrian text, the *Chronicon Paschale* which may have been based on an earlier document with third- or fourth-century versions circulating in the West. Clement F. Rogers, in *Baptism and Christian Archeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 277–8 noted a fourth-century epiphany sermon which he argues was based on a lost church order associated with the Syriac *Didascalia*. This sermon declares that at Jesus' baptism the Jordan "fled back" and then "rose up in a heap." According to Rogers later pilgrimage narratives report that this miracle was annually repeated. Rogers was dependent and also critical of the work of Adolf Jacoby, *Ein bisher unbeachteter apokrypher Bericht über Taufe Jesu* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1902).

<sup>99</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 3, p. 122, specifically the account of the sixth-century Piacenza Pilgrim, *Itin.* 11.



Fig. 2.7 Frieze Sarcophagus, St. Lawrence Outside the Walls, Rome  
ca. 320–330. Photo: Author.

small person on the far left, all of which can be seen in other representations of these particular scenes.<sup>100</sup> This sarcophagus has been dated to 320–330 C.E., based on certain technical and stylistic details including slim figures standing in a dense row, large flat faces with rugged features, solid contours of hair locks and strands, and garments having numerous closely packed lines to represent deep, thick folds.<sup>101</sup>

Wilpert's reconstruction of the missing section to the left of the Adoration as a representation of Jesus' baptism is extremely tenuous, however, because it requires a larger space than is available on the sarcophagus slab as it actually exists. Although the elements that

<sup>100</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)* #692, 287–8; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #18, 153–6. Fausone is in favor of identifying the “denial scene” as a *traditio legis* image instead, *Die Taufe*, 154. J. Wilpert's reconstruction is in *I Sarcophagi* 2, 287f. and 312f., plate 225.3. See also Pasquale Testini, “Gli apostoli Pietro e Paolo nella più antica iconografia cristiana,” in Salvatore Garofalo, ed, *Studi petriani* (Rome, 1968), 103–130.

<sup>101</sup> This dating is proposed by *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, 287–8, and accepted by Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 155. However, René Grousset, *Étude sur l'histoire des sarcophages chrétiens* (Paris, 1885), #156, 98 proposed a late fourth-century date.

Wilpert relied upon to justify such a reconstruction—a few swirling vertical lines and a figure wearing a short *exomis* tunic who raises his right hand—have parallels on other sarcophagi as well as in the catacomb paintings, they are not exclusively associated with baptism iconography. These details also characterize depictions of Moses (or of Peter) striking the rock, which incorporate a column of water and a raised right hand.<sup>102</sup> Yet, the space is not large enough to accommodate the two small figures who ordinarily are shown reaching for the water in the Moses scene. Hence, cautiously assuming that the missing elements compose the rest of a baptismal scene, the iconographic program would display a series of episodes from Jesus' life (the Adoration of the Magi, baptism, the entrance into Jerusalem, and the performance of a healing miracle).

#### 2.1.1.6. *Sarcophagus Lid Fragment from the Catacomb of Domitilla*

This fragment has been dated to the first thirty years of the fourth century.<sup>103</sup>

It depicts two scenes: a baptism and the Adoration of the Magi. Wilpert discovered this piece in the Domitilla catacomb and identified it as a baptism scene based upon the column of water flowing behind a small nude. Only part of a baptizer's leg remains—in the same raised position that is found on the Pio Cristiano sarcophagus. No dove appears in the actual fragment, although Wilpert added it in his restorative sketch.<sup>104</sup> Wilpert's reconstructions demonstrate that he consistently restored these scenes to include a bearded baptizer in a short *exomis* tunic, a small nude recipient standing in front of a column of water that is tumbling out of an overhead rock, and a descending dove.

#### 2.1.1.7. *Lid of Sarcophagus of Flavius Gorgonius in Ancona Diocesan Museum*

This sarcophagus, an example of the "city-gate type," is heavily restored, having been seriously damaged in the Second World War. Unusual because the object is sculpted on all four sides, it also has an

<sup>102</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, #692, 287–8. On the identity of this as Peter see discussion below pp. 76–8.

<sup>103</sup> *Repertorium 1 (Rom und Ostia)*, 287–8; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #20, 160–2.

<sup>104</sup> J. Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi* 1, 23, plate 8.1.

intact lid similarly covered with relief sculpture. In the middle of the lid is the inscription:

*FL(avius) GORGONIUS V(ir) C(larissimus) EX COMITE LARGITIONUM  
PRIVATARUM EX Praefecto) PR(a)ET(orio) FIE(ri) SIBI IUS(sit).*  
("Flavius Gorgonius, of highest senatorial rank, officer of the treasury,  
praetorian prefect ordered this for himself").<sup>105</sup>

Based on considerations of style, proportions of heads to bodies, articulation of forms, as well as the possible identity of Flavius Gorgonius himself, the sarcophagus has been dated to the late fourth century.<sup>106</sup>

On the left side of the lid's inscription are depictions of Christ's Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi. On the right are images of Moses receiving the law; David and Goliath; the baptism scene; and a man with tunic and *pallium* holding a scroll. The baptism scene shows a nude recipient under a stream of water that tumbles out of a rosette (or a rosette-shaped stone). The baptizer, here again bare-chested, bare-foot, and wearing only a *pallium*, stands to the left and puts his right hand on the boy's head. The scene does not include a dove. Whether the figure to the right, holding a scroll, is meant to be part of the baptismal scene is unclear nor, if he were, whether he is a witness to the event, an apostle, a sponsor, or some church official.<sup>107</sup>

The main front frieze of the monument shows Christ giving the law to his apostles (*traditio legis*). Jesus is shown in a center niche in front of a concave entablature, standing on a rocky mound with two

<sup>105</sup> See *Repertorium 2 (Italien mit einem Nachtrag Rom und Ostia, Dalmatien, Museen der Welt)*, #149, 54–6. The identity of this Flavius Gorgonius may be filled in on the basis of other documentary evidence. The sarcophagus inscription tells us that he held at least two offices, *comes largitionum privatarum*, and *praefectus praetorio*. Symmachus, in a letter to Ausonius (*Ep.* 1.39), mentions a certain Gorgonius, who vacationed (*indulgebit quieti*) near Ancona in Picenum. *Cod. Theo.* 10.13.1, also records a communication from Emperors Valentinian, Theodosius, and Arcadius to Gorgonius, "*comes rerum privatarum*" (Count of the Privy Purse), dated to June 6, 386 (in the year of the consulship of Honorius and Evodius). See A.M.H. Jones, et al., *PLRE I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 399 for more detail. If these Gorgonii are the same, the dating of the sarcophagus may be fixed to a few years after 386.

<sup>106</sup> On the use of the specific iconographic elements of these "city gate sarcophagi" in order to date them see Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 174, as well as Rina Sansoni, *I sarcofagi paleocristiani a porte di città*, *Studi di antichità cristiane* 4 (Bologna: R. Pàtron, 1969); and Marion Lawrence, "City Gate Sarcophagi," *AB* 10.1 (1927), 8–11,

<sup>107</sup> See discussion below, pp. 156–8.

prostrate figures at his feet. Flanking Jesus are ten apostles, dressed in long tunics and *pallia*, holding scrolls.<sup>108</sup>

### 2.1.2. Gallican and Spanish Sarcophagi

#### 2.1.2.1. Sarcophagus from Aire sur l'Adour

This sarcophagus was found in the crypt of the church of St. Quitterie du Mas and is presumed to have been manufactured in Gaul.<sup>109</sup> Iconographic and stylistic considerations are used to date this sarcophagus to the late third or early fourth century.<sup>110</sup>

The program on the single zone front frieze comprises five scenes, including (from left to right), the raising of Lazarus, an uncharistically clothed Daniel with his lions, a matron with a young girl in a group with the shepherd, Adam and Eve on either side of the tree (wound with a serpent), and an ambiguous scene sometimes identified as a baptism (fig. 2.8).<sup>111</sup> The lid, which also has Medusa heads on both ends, has relief sculptures comprising (left to right): the sacrifice of Isaac, the healing of the paralytic, Jonah being spewed from the sea monster's mouth, and Tobias wrestling with the fish. In the lid's center is a blank inscription tablet. The right and left end of the base each contain a scene from the Jonah cycle: on the left is Jonah being tossed from the ship; on the right Jonah reclines under his gourd tree.

In the presumed baptism scene, the baptizer stands to the right and places his right hand on the head of a naked youth, seeming to push him down enough to cause his knees to bend. The "baptizer" is beardless and dressed in a tunic and *pallium*. He also wears boots that come

<sup>108</sup> On the particulars of this sarcophagus, see Lawrence, "City Gate Sarcophagi," 31.

<sup>109</sup> The place of production of the sarcophagi found in Gaul has been the subject of much dispute, which I will not summarize here. See the summary of the scholarship, bibliography, and conclusions of Mat Immerzeel, "Quelques remarques sur l'origine des sarcophages paléochrétiens en Provence. Marbre, perçoir, et style," *ACIAC* 12 (Bonn: 1991), 855–63. Based on an examination of style, fabric, and carving technique, Immerzeel determines that some of the Gallican sarcophagi were produced in that region, while others were imported either from Rome or Ravenna.

<sup>110</sup> *Repertorium* 3, 7 confidently dates this to the early fourth century. On the question of dating see De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains," 238, and Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 309.

<sup>111</sup> See; Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 82; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #26, 179–84; J. Marki-Boehringer et al., *frühchristliche Sarkophage*, #3, 24, 51–2; plates 5.1 and 6.1–2. Also Frédéric van der Meer, "A propos du sarcophage du Mas d'Aire," *Mélanges offerts à Mademoiselle Christine Mohrmann* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1963), 169–76.



Fig. 2.8 Sarcophagus, Church of Sainte Quitterie, Aire sur l'Adour, France, late third or early fourth century. Photo: Graydon Snyder, used with permission.

over his ankles and holds a book in his left hand. Because his garb and facial features are similar to that of Jesus raising Lazarus, which appears on the far left of the frieze, he could be identified as Christ, rather than as John the Baptist. The nude “recipient” is only slightly smaller than the “baptizer” and much less child-like than in other images. His right arm is bent at the elbow, and his left hand held palm open. A bird perches in the tree that forms a central backdrop to the scene. The image, however, lacks any indication of water—which undermines its designation as a baptism scene. Nonetheless, both Theodor Klauser and Gerke identify this image as a baptism.<sup>112</sup>

Other identifications have been proposed, such as “the creation of Adam,” a label that seems to be based on certain early Christian sculptural representations of a small nude Adam and Eve before the throne of God.<sup>113</sup> Wilpert, citing the figure’s nudity and the analogous

<sup>112</sup> Klauser, “Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte,” 132; Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 308–9, after Edmond Le Blant, *Leres sarcophages chrétiens de la Gaule* (Paris, 1886), 98–9, plates 26.1–3.

<sup>113</sup> *Repertorium 3 (Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien)*, #18, 6–8, following Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia dell'arte cristiana 5* (Prato: G. Guasti, 1873–1881), 11, plate 301.3. Also, van der Meer, “A propos du sarcophage,” 172. In other representations of the creation of humanity Eve also appears and the figures are quite small, although still more adult in appearance than child-like. See Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian*

position and composition of the Jesus-raising-Lazarus scene on the other end of the front frieze, tagged the episode as the “healing of the demoniac” (Luke 8:27), a designation that Graydon Snyder accepts.<sup>114</sup> De Bruyne, by contrast, after considering the varying identifications of this particular image, admits that a baptism scene without water is unusual, but not unthinkable. He points out that the presence of other elements of a standard baptism scene—the nudity of the recipient, the imposition of a hand, and the dove—all designate this as a baptismal image.<sup>115</sup> In addition to De Bruyne’s argument, consideration of the overall iconographical context justifies designating this as a baptismal image, especially given the presence of the Jonah cycle scenes on the two ends and the lid, as well as the fisher and paralytic also on the lid.

#### 2.1.2.2. *Arles Sarcophagus I*

The Musée de l’Arles Antique contains an early Christian sarcophagus that was broken in two longitudinally. Discovered in the crypt of St. Honorat and used for the burial of Bishop Aeonius (491–502 CE), it was (according to local tradition) originally intended to be Constantius II’s coffin (fig. 2.9). The remains of a wreathed christogram (the monogram is itself missing) surmounting a central cross indicates a late fourth century date. It may be compared to the Constantinian military *tropaion* usually associated with imperial iconography.<sup>116</sup>

Because this sarcophagus shows aspects of the so-called “Asiatic” style, its source may be an eastern workshop, or possibly a local (Arles) atelier staffed by sculptors from the East.<sup>117</sup> Two imposing processions of six scroll-bearing apostles on each side marches toward the wreathed, empty cross in the center. Originally, two doves perched

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*Art*, 178–180; and Jensen, “The Trinity and the Economy of Salvation on Two Early Christian Sarcophagi,” *J ECS* 7 (1999), 527–46.

<sup>114</sup> Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi*, 1.83, plates 65.6; Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 82. See also the arguments by E. Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung*, 365, following Wilpert.

<sup>115</sup> De Bruyne, “L’imposition des mains,” 327–39.

<sup>116</sup> See *Repertorium* 3 (*Frankreich, Algerien, Tunisien*), #49, 35–6; Fernand Benoit, *Sarcophages paléochrétiens d’Arles et de Marseilles* (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1954), #58, 153; and Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 190.

<sup>117</sup> On the style and technique of this sarcophagus, see Marion Lawrence, “Columnar Sarcophagi in the Latin West,” *AB* 14.2 (1932) 112–15. Lawrence argues for the Asiatic origin or influence on the iconography. For more on the dating of this sarcophagus see Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 146 as well as Benoit and Fausone (noted above).



Fig. 2.9 Sarcophagus (left end—baptism scene), Musée de l’Arles Antique, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

on the cross’ transverse arm; now all that remains are traces of their feet. Two guards crouch at the cross’ base, one staring up at the cross, the other apparently asleep. By borrowing standard motifs referring to Roman military victory, this composition expresses the triumph of Christ’s empty cross. The “apostles” are dressed in tunics and *pallia*. Wreaths are suspended above their heads, and a garland of stars hangs behind them. Victories hold the tablet, while *putti* grasp the two portrait medallions on the lid.

On both ends, a column-like waterfall divides the scene in half. A baptism is shown on the left end; on the opposite end a figure—in this instance Peter—strikes a rock and causes the waterfall (fig. 2.10).<sup>118</sup> In the baptism scene the bearded, barefoot baptizer, dressed in an animal skin, stands to the left of a small, naked recipient who just steps into the water that cascades from overhead rocks. A dove flies into the scene right over the baptizer’s left hand. To the right of the water column stands a tall beardless male holding a scroll in one hand and turning

<sup>118</sup> On the identification of this as Peter, see discussion below, pp. 76–8.



Fig. 2.10 Sarcophagus (right end—rock-striking scene), Musée de l'Arles Antique, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

to look at the baptism to the left. On the right end, Peter stands in almost the same position and place. He strikes the rocks (at the level of his head) with a wand and watches the water pour out of them. Two small figures, dressed as Roman soldiers, reach for the water as it cascades down.

### 2.1.2.3. *Arles Sarcophagus II*

Another sarcophagus, now in the same museum as the Arles Sarcophagus I, was designed with five niches, separated by elaborately fluted or carved columns. On the basis of its rich ornamentation, iconography, and other stylistic details, this sarcophagus probably dates to the late fourth century.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>119</sup> See Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 146–7, fn. 5 on the dating of this sarcophagus. Gerke concludes this sarcophagus' Theodosian characteristics are directly reflected



Fig. 2.11 Sarcophagus (left end fragment—baptism scene), Musée de l'Arles Antique, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

In the center a bearded Christ gives the law while standing on a rock from which the four rivers spew. Lambs stand near his feet. Behind Christ's head an architrave forces his body somewhat forward and into high relief. Slightly below Christ's shoulders are palm trees, one of which shelters a phoenix (a symbol of the resurrection). Peter (identifiable by his facial type) is in the niche to the right of Christ. He holds a cross (or staurogram—the top is missing) over his left shoulder and accepts the scroll of the law from Christ's left hand. A rooster appears near his feet. Another apostle stands behind him, holding a scroll and looking back at Christ. In the niche to the left of Christ, Paul and another standing apostle turn toward Christ; both men hold scrolls. In the far left niche, Jesus washes Peter's feet while another disciple looks on. In the far right, Jesus stands before Pilate, who is about to wash his hands.<sup>120</sup> The two pairs of arches are decorated with carved designs, scallop shells, and tritons' heads. Including the four springs gushing from the rock upon which Christ stands, certain elements of the general decoration (e.g., scallop shells, tritons' heads), Pilate's hand washing, and Jesus' foot washing are thematically linked with the baptism and rock-striking images sculpted on the sarcophagus ends.

These images on the sarcophagus' ends appear to duplicate the iconography on the Arles sarcophagus just discussed. Unfortunately, only half of each end remains. However, because each half-side fragment shows a nearly (but reversed) identical image to those on the ends of the Arles sarcophagus just discussed (e.g., the baptism and water-rock miracle, figs. 2.9–10), the lost halves of each scene can be reliably reconstructed. In the baptism scene on the right end, a tall beardless male stands at the left dressed in a long tunic and *pallium* (fig. 2.11). An olive tree fills the space behind him. In the center (at the breaking point), a vertical column of water cascades from a high rock. The arm of a small nude appears within this cascade, rather than next to it as on the other Arles sarcophagus. The missing section would almost certainly have shown a bearded baptizer wearing an animal skin and placing his hand upon the head of the recipient. A descending dove likely filled the space

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in the baptismal imagery, particularly in its inclusion of a third figure as witness, and the parallels to the Peter rock-striking scene.

<sup>120</sup> See *Repertorium 3 (Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien)*, #53, 39–40; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #31, 199–204; Marki-Boehringner et al., *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, #16, 36–37 and 72–77, pl. 23–24; Benoit, *Sarcophages paléochrétiens*, #5, 36, figures 4.2–4 and 5; Lawrence, “Columnar Sarcophagi,” figs. 1 and 3.

between the lid and the right arm of the baptizer. The similarly broken, opposite (left) end shows the companion scene of Peter striking the rock. In this case all that remains of the imagery are the two Roman guards holding out their hands to a stream of water flowing down the center of the stone.

#### 2.1.2.4. *Arles Sarcophagus III*

This fragmentary two-registered sarcophagus is now housed in the Musée de l'Arles Antique. Usually dated to the late fourth century, its iconography is complex and densely crowded on the two zones of the front frieze.<sup>121</sup> Wilpert proposed a reconstruction of the missing elements, resulting in the sarcophagus' present form.<sup>122</sup>

The upper zone of the frieze illustrates a combination of Old and New Testament episodes that are difficult to identify. From left to right are the following images, at least two of them conjectural: Moses carrying the law from Mt. Sinai (?); Moses before the burning bush (?); the Adoration of the Magi; Joseph before the tower of Bethlehem; the baptism scene; Jesus calling the disciples; the three youths and Nebuchadnezzar have been proposed for the far upper right by restorers. The lower zone contains a Passion cycle: Christ in Gethsemane, the betrayal (Judas' kiss), Christ before Pilate who washes his hands, Christ appearing to the women and the apostles at the empty tomb, the death of Judas, and (on the far right) Christ ascending a rocky mound in the resurrection, the hand of God reaching down to assist him.

The baptism scene requires reconstruction because only the remains of the baptizer in a short *exomis* tunic and a column of water are visible. Only vestigial traces of the dove survive, as well as the remains of the recipient's feet at the base of the waterfall.<sup>123</sup>

#### 2.1.2.5. *Sarcophagus from Soissons*

According to tradition, this sarcophagus, formerly in the church of St. Mary in Soissons, was used as the tomb of St. Vodalis (d. 720). Now lost, the sarcophagus was first published in the *Annales Ordinis*

<sup>121</sup> See *Repertorium 3 (Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien)*, #42, 29–31; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #30, 194–9; Benoit, *Sarcophages paléochrétiens*, #46, 48, pl. 16.2.

<sup>122</sup> Wilpert, *I Sarcophagi* 1. 24, pl. 15.2, based on drawings by Peiresc and Beauméni in E. Le Blant, *Études*, 46f., pl. 29.30 (as Fausone notes). The scenes described here are those identified by Fausone, after Le Blant.

<sup>123</sup> See also Friedrich Gerke, *Die Zeitbestimmung der Passionssarkophage* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1940), 110–119.

S. *Benedicti* in 1703–9, illustrated by an inexact drawing of Jean Mabillon.<sup>124</sup> The central empty cross is the primary argument for dating this sarcophagus to the late fourth century.

The sarcophagus' front is divided into five niches divided by spiral columns with Corinthian/Ionic (combination) capitals. The center niche contains a scene much like that on the first Arles sarcophagus (fig. 2.9). The “empty cross” of the resurrection, gem-studded and surmounted by a wreath with the *chi rho* monogram, has two doves perched on its cross-arm. Two Roman soldiers sit on the ground beneath the cross. One of them beholds the miracle of the Resurrection; the other sleeps, leaning on his shield.

In the far left niche is the baptism scene, next to a representation of Jesus healing the woman with the issue of blood. On the right of the center image a niche contains a scene probably meant to show the Centurion of Capernaum petitioning Jesus to heal his servant.<sup>125</sup> In the far right niche, Peter, wearing a long tunic and *pallium*, strikes the rock that produces a column-like waterfall for the baptism of the two Roman soldiers.

These four scenes are quite symmetrical. The images on the far right and left sides each have three figures, whereas the healing scene—the woman with the issue of blood—like its counterpart on the other side of the empty cross, has four figures (Jesus, one petitioner, and two witnesses). The baptism scene varies from others by showing the witness standing behind, and to the left of the baptizer, gazing over his shoulder at the scene (rather than standing to the right of the water column). The baptizer, beardless and barefoot, wears a short tunic. The small, naked recipient is underneath the water that seems to flow behind and not over him. A dove descends into the scene from the upper right.

<sup>124</sup> See *Repertorium 3 (Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien)*, #510, 242–244; Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #29, 191–4. The drawing of Mabillon probably is better than Wilpert's relatively newer, but idiosyncratic version: Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi* 1, 22, pl. 9.

<sup>125</sup> See Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 193, where he follows Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi* 1, 22.

### 2.1.2.6. *Sarcophagus in Madrid*

This seven-niched columnar sarcophagus, found at Hellin in 1834, is now in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional.<sup>126</sup> Christ stands holding an open book in the central niche of this sarcophagus. A lidded, upright scroll is near his right foot. In two adjacent niches are the apostles, among them Peter and Paul, who reach across the column to Jesus. The far left niche encloses the scene of Peter striking the rock. Here the water column is on the scene's far left. Two small figures kneel and reach for the water. The center-left niche shows Jesus healing the blind man, stretching out two fingers to touch the petitioner's eye with his spittle (Mark 8.22–26). The baptism scene occurs in the center right niche, and the far right niche depicts Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac.

The baptism scene shows only two figures and a dove. Water falls on the scene's right and flows over the feet of a nude, who appears particularly small in comparison with the bulky, bearded baptizer. The baptizer is barefoot and wears a short tunic. The dating of this sarcophagus has been disputed, although it seems best dated to the mid-to-late-fourth century.<sup>127</sup>

### 2.1.3. *Marble Grave Marker from Aquileia*

Now in the Museo Archeologico di Aquileia, this marble slab (about 14 × 19 in.) is inscribed with the following epitaph (fig. 2.12): *INNOCENTI SP(irit)O QUEM/ELEGIT DOM(inu)S PAUSAT/IN PACE/FIDELIS/X KAL(endas) SEPT/SEPTEMBR(es)*. The best translation of this difficult inscription probably reads: "To the innocent (in) spirit whom the Lord elected, who rests in peace, a believer on the tenth before the Kalends of September (August 23)." The deceased's name and age are not

<sup>126</sup> See Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #32, 204–8; Manuel Sotomayor, *Datos históricos sobre los sarcófagos romano-cristianos de España* (Granada: Universidad, 1973), 78–82; and Giuseppe Bovini, *I Sarcofagi paleocristiani della Spagna* (Vatican City: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1954), #19, 125–8 (with bibliography); and Lawrence, "Columnar Sarcophagi," 170.

<sup>127</sup> On the dating of this sarcophagus see Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 207; and Bovini, *I Sarcofagi- Spagna*, 128, fns. 2–5. Bovini cites A.F. Guerra y Orbe as giving this object an early date and Hübner and Leclercq as proponents of a fourth-century date. Lawrence, "Columnar Sarcophagi," #51, 170, dates this object to the year 380.



Fig. 2.12 Marble Grave Marker, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Aquileia, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

mentioned.<sup>128</sup> Aspects of the inscription support a date for this object to the late fourth century. One scholar argues that it cannot date later than 452, the year Attila sacked Aquileia.<sup>129</sup>

The iconography is unparalleled. Rather than representing the baptism of Christ, this shows the baptism of a particular candidate, in this case probably a young female, who wears some kind of necklace and stands in a large bowl. Water streams over her from above. Its source is the crescent-shaped lower edge of a star-studded celestial orb that encircles a diving dove. On the left a haloed, beardless figure wearing a

<sup>128</sup> Trans. author, see entry #38 in *Picturing the Bible*, ed. Spier, 206 (a catalogue entry prepared by author). Also see Fausone, *Die Taufe*, #25, 176–8; Giovanni Brusin and Paolo Zovato, *Monumenti paleocristiani di Aquileia e di Grado* (Udine: Deputazione di Storia Patria per il Friuli, 1957), 374; Sergio Tavano, *Aquileia—Guida dei monumenti cristiani* (Udine: Arti grafiche friulane, 1977), 196–7; Giuseppe Bovini, *Le antichità cristiane di Aquileia* (Bologna: R. Pàtron, 1972), 455–8 (with bibliography); Gian Carlo Menis, “Il battesimo ad Aquileia nella prima metà del IV secolo,” *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 705–8; and Bisconti, *L'iconografia dei battisteri*, 417–19.

<sup>129</sup> Argument of Erika Dinkler-von Schubert, “Abbreviated Representations,” #394, 437—without explanation.

tunic and *pallium* gestures either to the recipient or to the orb. On the right another man (also beardless) places his right hand on the recipient's head. He wears the conventional shepherd's costume—laced boots and a belted tunic although long sleeves, here with shoulder ornaments (*segmenti*), and two vertical stripes (*clavi*). Two framing trees and some small plants or flowers along the image's lower edge suggest an outdoor setting.

Based on the apparent lack of male genitalia and the necklace, the naked recipient is almost always assumed to be female. Giovanni De Rossi, however, argues that only a man would be represented as naked in the presence of two men.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, he points out that the object around the recipient's neck could be the golden or leather amulet known as a *bulla*, worn by pre-puberty freeborn male children—an object laid aside when the adult toga was donned for the first time.<sup>131</sup> Yet, this necklace looks more like a simple necklace (with four beads), than the customary *bulla*, and, overall, the figure appears to be a youthful female.

Scholars likewise disagree on the identification of the two standing individuals. Considering his attire (a short tunic and boots as on the sarcophagi of Sta. Maria Antiqua and the Aire sur l'Adour sarcophagi), the figure on the right might be meant to be the Christian shepherd. Lacking his usual sheep, however, he can be paralleled with the baptizer who wears a short *exomis* tunic. Neither parallel is exact. Apart from his halo, the figure on the left, in dress, bearing, and gesture, generally resembles the third party on the Arles sarcophagi (figs. 2.9–10). His chest is not bare like those baptizers on the Sta. Maria Antiqua (fig. 2.2) or the Museo Nazionale sarcophagi, and his garb and general appearance is more like some of the baptizers portrayed in the Peter and Marcellinus or Domitilla Catacombs (fig 1.7). Henri Leclercq argues that the scene portrays the Trinity (which would have been invoked during the baptismal liturgy). He proposes the shepherd represents Christ, the haloed male is God the Father, and the dove is the Holy Spirit.<sup>132</sup> Giovanni Brusin and Paolo Zovato,

<sup>130</sup> See discussion of this problem of nude females being baptized by male officiants, below, Chap. 4, pp. 164–5.

<sup>131</sup> See Judith L. Sebesta, "Symbolism in the Costume of Roman Women," and Ann M. Stout, "Jewelry as a Symbol of Status in the Roman Empire," in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith L. Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 46–7, and 77–8.

<sup>132</sup> Henri Leclercq, "Baptême," *DACL* 1.2, 2672–2674.

following Wilpert, identify the two as John the Baptist and Christ (on the left).<sup>133</sup> Erika Dinkler-von Schubert maintains that the two figures are persons who would have participated in the actual, contemporary baptismal liturgy—a “saintly bishop” and an assistant or a sponsor.<sup>134</sup> A similar figure seen on a glass fragment in the Vatican (fig. 3.9) has been speculatively identified as a sainted bishop or martyr and not as an ordinary minister of baptism.<sup>135</sup>

By contrast, Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch considers the general setting to be paradisiacal (noting the flowers and the trees) and thus the ritual is a posthumous baptism, attended by John the Baptist and some other unknown individual, perhaps a pre-deceased bishop or sponsor.<sup>136</sup> Another possibility is that the haloed figure wearing a tunic and *pallium* is the sainted bishop of Aquileia, Chromatius (388–407 CE), who played the role of mediator between Jerome and Rufinus during the “Origenist” controversy and who was revered as a defender of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine. Fausone, in fact, argues that Chromatius’ role in the controversy supports the argument that the Trinity appears in this image—the Father (with halo), Son (as shepherd), and Holy Spirit (within the orb).<sup>137</sup>

Kötzsche-Breitenbruch likewise calls attention to the symbolism of the starry orb and pointed out its parallels in the baptisteries of Naples (fig. 5.6) and Albenga (fig. 5.15). She proposes that it represents both the baptismal night and the heavenly vault from which the dove descends.<sup>138</sup> This complex symbol combines an orb for the sun and the cosmos, stars for the heavens, and a crescent representing the moon.

The most recent study of this artifact, by Gian Carlo Menis, suggests that the figure on the right (in the short tunic) is the presbyter while the figure on the left is the celebrant, inviting the newly baptized to the eucharistic table. Menis compares this image with the imagery on a now-lost silver spoon, found nearby (San Canziano of Isonzo) and of approximately the same date. Known, now, only from a late

<sup>133</sup> Brusin and Zovato, *Monumenti paleocristiani di Aquileia e di Grado*, 374.

<sup>134</sup> Erika Dinkler v. Schubert, *Age of Spirituality*, 437.

<sup>135</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 3, pp. 106–8.

<sup>136</sup> Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, “Das Elfenbeinrelief mit Taufszene aus der Sammlung Maskell im British Museum,” *JAC* 22 (1979), 195–208, esp. 198–9.

<sup>137</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 178.

<sup>138</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 178.

nineteenth-century drawing, it shows a youth (male) in a shallow round fount. To his left a figure in an *exomis* tunic holds a paten to catch water from a dove's beak. To his right another figure—this time in a long tunic and pallium merely observes. This latter figure has neither nimbus nor beard and appears to be shown again, to the left near a small altar, perhaps making a gesture of invitation.<sup>139</sup>

## 2.2. Discussion

### 2.2.1. *The Third figure in the Baptism Scene*

The difficulty labeling the two male figures on the Aquileia grave marker (fig. 2.12) parallels the problem of identifying the third party in other sarcophagus reliefs, including the ones from Ancona, Arles, and Soissons (figs. 2.9, 2.11). He is depicted as a beardless male wearing a long tunic and *pallium* and (sometimes) holding a scroll. He stands and gazes at the action either from over the shoulder of the baptizer or from the other side of a column of water. Varying interpretations make this character out to be a prophet or one of the evangelists (holding a Gospel scroll), witnessing John's baptism of Jesus. Other identifications have specified persons who might have attended any baptism—a deacon, presbyter, or sponsor—or even an angel.<sup>140</sup>

As discussed earlier, the tunic and *pallium* were worn by upper class Roman men in place of the more formal toga. By the early fourth century the *pallium* had become the distinguishing garb of a Christian cleric, in particular the bishop. At the time these sarcophagi were sculpted, however, no particular significance can be assigned to these fairly common garments. Thus, the third male in the scene might as easily be a presbyter or a deacon—both participants in the baptismal

<sup>139</sup> Menis, "L'iconografia dei battisteri paleocristiani," 705–8. This silver spoon was first published by V. Cortenovis in 1792: "Sopra una iscrizione greca d'Aquileia con alcune altre antichità," Bassano, 1792, pp. VI. It is included in several collections, including Garrucci, *Storia*, 6.91, pl. 462.8.

<sup>140</sup> Theodor Klauser identifies the figure as an angel, "Engel X (in der Kunst)," *RAC* 5.258–95. Lawrence concludes that he is a prophet or evangelist, "City Gate Sarcophagi," 11. Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch sees him as a baptismal assistant (presbyter or deacon), "Das Elfenbeinrelief," 201–2 and cites Eduard Stommel, "Christliche Taufriten und antike Badesitten," *JAC* 2 (1959), 5–14. Gerke, *Christlichen Sarkophage*, 146, sees him as an evangelist.

ritual liturgy with the bishop (who could be represented in the character of John the Baptist). Because his scroll might allude to a candidate's official enrollment for baptism, the figure might also be meant to be a sponsor or catechetical teacher. Nevertheless, given its context (an image of John baptizing Jesus) his scroll most likely identifies him as an evangelist who witnesses the event he will later record. This identification accords with the appearance of the evangelists elsewhere in early Christian iconography.<sup>141</sup>

### 2.2.2. *Moses/Peter Striking the Rock*

The two Arles sarcophagi, along with the examples from Soissons and Madrid reveal an iconographic association between “rock-striking” and baptism imagery (cf. fig. 2.10). As discussed above, most of the early catacomb frescoes (especially those in the Catacombs of Callixtus and Peter and Marcellinus) that portray Moses striking the rock can be interpreted as a recurrent typological reference to baptism. During the fourth century, this popular image was significantly transformed in frescoes and sarcophagus reliefs to show Peter instead of Moses, and Roman soldiers (dressed in short tunics and fur caps) instead of Israelites reaching for the water gushing forth from the rock. Whereas Moses' typical representation includes a long beard, high forehead, and a receding hairline (the facial type often given to intellectuals and prophets as well as the Apostle Paul), Peter is almost always depicted with a short beard and low forehead.<sup>142</sup> In addition, the representation of Peter striking the rock is commonly juxtaposed with the arrest of Peter and the appearance of a rooster—the symbol of Peter's denial of Christ.

The Peter-and-rock imagery is not based on any canonical scripture, but rather on a tradition known best in visual art. Interpreters have offered different theories to explain it. Wilpert posits that the scene drew upon biblical story in which Peter baptizes the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10. 17–48). Unfortunately this episode has no obvious

<sup>141</sup> On the angel as present in the iconography see Chap. 3, pp. 115–17. The roles of other clergy or sponsors is discussed in Chap. 4, pp. 156–8, which argues that this third party probably represents the evangelist.

<sup>142</sup> See Erich Becker, *Das Quellenwunder des Moses in der altchristlichen Kunst*, 131–45 for a discussion of the facial type connections. See also Erika Dinkler, “Die ersten Petrusdarstellungen,” *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 12 (1939), 1–80.

similarities with the iconography, nor does it mention a miraculous water source.<sup>143</sup> Klauser argues that the rock-striking scene from Exodus was joined with the Lukan parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16. 19–26). In the story the rich man, sojourning in Hades, begs Lazarus, sheltering in the bosom of Abraham, for a drink of refreshing water. Klauser claims that Peter tapped the source of the water for the refreshment of the deceased soul in *refrigerium interim*. Still, the soldiers, so eager for the water, seem less to be representatives of the soul than wandering Israelites transformed into Roman soldiers.<sup>144</sup> More recently, Snyder argues that the identification of Peter (Rome's primal bishop) with Moses (the leader of the Israelites) transformed the theme of deliverance from an enemy into the theme of deliverance through baptism. Peter consequently became the model baptizer.<sup>145</sup>

A little known late apocryphal document offers a fourth potential explanation for this iconography. An insertion into the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (that gives no information about events in time between Peter's arrest and execution) by the (pseudo) Bishop Linus narrates a story of Peter baptizing his Roman jailers, Proclus and Martinus, in water he has produced miraculously from a rock. Unfortunately, the text seems to post-date the iconography. Charles Pietri, who cites this document, notes that scholars date the Latin version of the text to the sixth century, a transmission from an older (fifth-century) Greek original—theoretically too late to have been known by fourth-century Christians.<sup>146</sup> Therefore, Pietri explains the scene as simply an adaptation of the Exodus episode in which Peter supplants Moses, and the Israelites, described as a wandering "army," are dressed as Roman soldiers. He then points out the patristic associations of the rock-striking story with baptism, and baptism, in turn, with the sacrament of the Roman soldier.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>143</sup> See Wilpert, *I Sarcophagi* 1, 110; Also Charles Pietri, "Pierre-Moïse et sa communauté," *Roma Christiana* (1976), 336–340; E. Weigand, "Die spätantike Sarkophagskulptur im Lichte neuerer Forschungen," *BZ* 41 (1941), 132; and Antonio Giuliano, *Misc. Francescana* 64 (1965), 280.

<sup>144</sup> Marki-Boehringer et al., *Frühchristliche Sarkophage*, 50–1.

<sup>145</sup> Snyder, *Ante-Pacem*, 101–2. See also Eduard Stommel, *Beiträge zur Ikonographie*, 81–3; Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung*, 196–08; H. Schlosser, "Moses" *LCI* 2. 282–97; A.M. Nieddu, "Miracolo della Fonte," and U. Utro, "Mosè" in *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*, 216–19, 223–5.

<sup>146</sup> Also Charles Pietri, "Pierre-Moïse et sa communauté," 336–340.

<sup>147</sup> Charles Pietri, "Pierre-Moïse et sa communauté," where he calls attention to Tertullian, *Bapt.* 9.3; and Firmicus Maternus, *Err. prof. rel.*, 20.1–27.

However, the *Acts of Peter* episode, late as the textual version may be, might certainly reflect an earlier conflation of Peter and Moses parallels that also could have been the source for the iconography. Additionally, the dating of the extant version is based on a complicated reconstruction from short and long versions, and may not account for prior (but now lost) documents. A legend known earlier to the Greek-speaking world may even have found its way to the West through the transmission of artistic models.<sup>148</sup>

Certainly Paul, in Corinthians (10.1–5) associates the rock (as water source) with baptism. Peter's name (Petrus), of course, means "rock." Whereas Paul very plainly says that Christ was the "rock that followed them in the wilderness," a later association of another rock (Peter, the founder of the Roman church and legatee of the "new law") with the popular Christian image of Moses (the giver of the "old law") seems quite plausible. Moreover, as Snyder points out, Peter as the first bishop of Rome is the natural prototype of a baptizing official (apart, obviously, from John the Baptist).<sup>149</sup>

In the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo actually took a line quite similar to this. Elaborating on the text of 1 Cor 10:4, he extends Paul's typology by making Moses the figure for Peter (just as he made the rock the figure of Christ). He further points out that Moses was uncertain of the Lord's good will, just as Peter denied Christ during the trial and doubted that he would be resurrected as he promised.<sup>150</sup> Such a typology makes sense out of the frequently combined sarcophagus images of Peter's arrest, the rooster, and the striking of the rock. The iconography likewise confirms that Peter, particularly in Rome, is the new leader of God's people taking the place of Moses in the "old dispensation."

### 2.2.3. *Jesus' Foot Washing and Pilate's Hand Washing*

Both Jesus' washing the apostles' feet and Pilate's washing his hands are episodes that belong to the iconography of Christ's Passion. On

<sup>148</sup> A study of this text and its transmission, along with its various problems can be found in the *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha* I, ed. Lipsius, 1–22. Also see the short notice by W. Schneemelcher and A. de Santos in E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha* 2, ed. W. Schneemelcher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 572, A.1; and Pietri, "Pierre-Moïse," 337–8.

<sup>149</sup> Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 102.

<sup>150</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 352.4.

one of the Arles sarcophagi, these two scenes are on the right and left sides of the front frieze, adjacent to the remains of the images of Moses striking the rock (left) and Jesus' baptism (right). As noted above, the two end scenes might be typologically related to the images in the far left and right niches on this sarcophagus' front frieze. On the double-frieze Arles sarcophagus, described above, the hand washing appears between the depictions of Judas' betrayal and the resurrection.

The depiction of Pilate washing his hands (Matt 27.24-25) occurs frequently on sarcophagi of the mid-to-late-fourth century.<sup>151</sup> Pilate's action is one of symbolic cleansing: he absolves himself from responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus. Christian apocryphal literature and other early documents depict Pilate as recognizing Christ's divinity, converting to Christianity, and even dying as a Christian martyr.<sup>152</sup> Pilate's hand washing also serves as one of the biblical "types" of baptism mentioned by Tertullian.<sup>153</sup> The washing of hands symbolizes the cleansing of sins, according to Cyril of Jerusalem, which is why the bishop and presbyters wash their hands before celebrating the eucharist: "the ablution is a symbolic action, a symbol of our obligation to be clean from all sins and transgressions. The hands symbolize action; so by washing them we signify evidently the purity and blamelessness of our conduct... the hand washing, then, is a symbol of innocence."<sup>154</sup>

Whereas only Matthew's Gospel mentions Pilate's hand washing, only John's records the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, an action that took place during his last meal with his disciples (John 13.3-16). Depictions of foot washing are rarer than those of Pilate's hand washing in early Christian art, although they frequently occur in manuscript illumination, ivories, and relief sculpture from the early Middle Ages.<sup>155</sup> Only a few additional examples are found on fourth- or fifth-century sarcophagi. Often, like the iconography on the Arles

<sup>151</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, "How Pilate Became a Saint," *BR* (Dec. 2003), 22-31, 47.

<sup>152</sup> See *Acts Pil*, (which may date to the fourth century); Tertullian, *Apol.* 21; Eusebius, *Hist.* 2.2; Augustine, *Serm.* 201.2.

<sup>153</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 9.4.

<sup>154</sup> Cyril, *Myst.* 5.2, trans. Leo McCauley S.J. and Anthony Stephenson, *The Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2, FOC 64 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1970), 191-2. On the probability that Cyril was not actually the author of the *Myst.* (as is traditionally held), but rather the work of his successor John of Jerusalem, see Juliette Day, *The Baptismal Liturgy of Jerusalem: 4th and 5th Century Evidence in Jerusalem, Egypt, and Syria* (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub., 2007).

<sup>155</sup> See the work of Hildegard Giess, *Die Darstellung der Fusswaschung Christi in den Kunstwerken des 4.-12. Jahrhunderts* (Rome: Herder, 1962).

sarcophagus, images of foot washing are symmetrically balanced with the portrayal of Jesus before Pilate, who washes his hands.

The foot washing, usually interpreted as a symbolic action expressing humility and charity, was sometimes referred to as the “baptism of the Apostles” in the East, at least according to a lost work of Clement of Alexandria, the *Hypotypōseis* (“Outlines”).<sup>156</sup> Augustine, in his commentary on Ps 92 apparently refutes a popular tradition that Christ’s washing the disciples’ feet represented a ritual cleansing.<sup>157</sup> In the seventh century, a monk named John Moschus also quoted from Clement’s lost writing, which (according to him) affirmed that the apostles were baptized at the time that Jesus washed their feet.<sup>158</sup>

Even though no clear evidence demonstrates that the early Greek-speaking church had a rite of foot washing, the action was understood as a baptismal type, and even as a preparation for the reception of the eucharist (just as the celebrant would later wash his own hands before beginning the eucharistic prayer). This latter function was prophetically symbolized when Abraham washed his visitors’ feet before offering them food (Gen. 18.4–5).<sup>159</sup> By comparison, non-Roman churches in the West (those in Turin, Milan, Gaul, Spain, North Africa, and Ireland) included foot washing as part of the baptismal rite.<sup>160</sup> Eventually, the Roman church, asserting its authority and wishing to establish western liturgical conformity (possibly worried about Donatist practices), condemned the association of foot washing and baptism.

<sup>156</sup> This work is mentioned by Eusebius, *Hist.* 6.14,

<sup>157</sup> Augustine, *Enarrat.* Ps. 92.3: “But his washing their feet did not signify a cleansing as much as a sign of humility” (*Non ergo ad sacramentum tamquam mundationis pertinebat, quod lauit eis pedes, sed ad exemplum humilitatis*- CCL 39, 1293). Interestingly, a textual variant contains the word “*tantum*” rather than “*tanquam*” which suggests that some editors believed that Augustine must have meant the opposite—that the action signified *both* cleansing and humility.

<sup>158</sup> John Moschus, *Prat. Spir.* 176. For a full discussion of this tradition in both East and West see Ernst Kantorowicz, “The Baptism of the Apostles,” *DOP* 9–10 (1956), 205–51; and Harry A. Echle, “The Baptism of the Apostles: A Fragment of Clement of Alexandria’s Lost Work *Hypotypōseis* in the *Pratum Spirituale* of John Moschus,” in *Traditio* III, ed. Johannes Quasten and Stephan Kuttner (New York: Cosmopolitan Science and Art Service Co., 1945), 365–8.

<sup>159</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz offers much of this evidence, but see Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.2, and Aphraates, *Hom* 12.6 (on the Pasch). Also, John Chyrostom insists that apostles were baptized by John the Baptist, *Hom. Acts* 1.

<sup>160</sup> See Olof Brandt, “Structure del IV secolo per la lavanda dei piedi in due battisteri romani,” *AM* 2 (2003), 137–44.

In fact, Augustine's vigorous denunciation of the rite only indicates its popularity.<sup>161</sup> Augustine's teacher, Ambrose, had defended the rite, however, and held it to be repudiation (or cleansing) of the serpent's bite, the sign of the hereditary (original) sin.<sup>162</sup>

In the Johannine story, Jesus specifically tells Peter that he is already "clean" except for his feet but that he (Jesus) can have nothing to do with him until his feet are washed: "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me" (John 13.8). Peter's particular role in this scene may be significant for this sarcophagus' iconography. An obvious connection exists between these washings and ritual immersion. The baptismal bath was intended to wash the stain of sin from the soul just as the bathing of the feet quite literally washed the body. Pilate's hand washing freed him from responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. Peter's cleansed feet were the mark of his being "clean" in every respect.

### *Conclusion*

For the purposes of review and summation, the "baptismal" sarcophagi can be divided into four general groups, mostly in terms of their imagery. Because its iconography is both unique and problematic, the Aire sur l'Adour sarcophagus (fig. 2.8) is omitted from this classification. Also because of its unique characteristics, the Aquileia grave marker (fig. 2.16) is not included. The four groups are as follows:

1. The "philosophical group" (260s–290s). This set includes the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus (figs. 2.1–3), Museo Nazionale Romano sarcophagus, and the Pio Cristiano fragment (fig. 2.4).

These one-zoned sarcophagi, usually dated to the late third or early fourth century, have certain characteristics in common. First, all of them depict John the Baptist in the garb associated with Greek philosophers, in particular having a bare chest. In one instance he holds a scroll (fig. 2.4). Second, two of the three sarcophagi share a common iconographic program: a shepherd, a fisher, and an *orante* in addition to the baptism scene.

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<sup>161</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 55.33. For more discussion of the tradition of foot washing at baptism, see below, Chap. 5, p. 230.

<sup>162</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 3.1.7.

2. The “life of Jesus” group (320s–330s). This set includes the Pio Cristiano sarcophagus panel (fig. 2.5–6), S. Lornzo fragment (2.7), the Domitilla catacomb fragment and, possibly, the double frieze sarcophagus from Arles.

Except for the Arles sarcophagus, these are all single frieze sarcophagi that depict episodes from Jesus’ life; in particular the Nativity, Adoration, and Passion scenes. In each of these sarcophagi John the Baptist wears a short *exomis* tunic (usually an animal skin) a dove appears to be present in the scene, and the water tumbles like a waterfall. This group comes the closest, especially considering the whole iconographic program of each sarcophagus, to illustrating the New Testament episode of Jesus’ baptism.

3. The “Passion” and “*traditio legis*” group. This set includes the Ancona sarcophagus, the two single frieze Arles sarcophagi (figs. 2.9–10), the Soissons sarcophagus, and the Madrid sarcophagus. These sarcophagi, almost all of the “columnar” type, date from the Theodosian period, or (generally) to the mid-to-late fourth century. Four of these five sarcophagi show a scene of Peter (Moses) striking the rock, in three cases directly juxtaposed with the baptism, either on opposite ends of the sarcophagus or on either end of the front frieze (the exception is the Ancona sarcophagus, which has no rock-striking scene). Four of the five also give a third-party “witness” to the baptism event. In all of them John the Baptist is shown wearing a short tunic or—in one case—an animal skin.

Such grouping allows one to conclude that the baptismal imagery on sarcophagi developed according to definite patterns. The earliest examples show more allegorical or typological patterns of baptismal representation (philosopher-type baptizer in a program including the fisher, Jonah, the shepherd, dolphins, etc.). The second groups shows the development of a more narrative style, based on the Gospel story of Jesus’ baptism by John, set in the context of other Gospel-story illustrations and baptismal typologies. In the last group John the Baptist is likewise identified by his garb, and the imagery is generally more biographical (or narrative) and less symbolic.

The overall message of the iconography arguably displays a theological development in the understanding of baptism’s function or effect, moving from a concern with the salvation of the individual soul—and baptism’s guarantee of that salvation—to an association of baptism with Jesus’ Passion and Resurrection. This development might

also signal a change from a preoccupation with individual faith and recompense to a focus on the institutional church as the mediator of salvation through the ordained sacraments. The association of baptism with Christ's Passion may reflect a growing emphasis on the specific symbolic link between baptism and Christ's death and resurrection, a resurrection promised to the initiated member of the community.



### CHAPTER THREE

## BAPTISMAL ICONOGRAPHY IN IVORY, GLASS, AND MOSAIC

### *Introduction: Transformation of Christian Visual Art in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries*

The fourth-century church's transformation from an illicit minority sect into a religion patronized by the Roman emperor and other elites is reflected in the changing content, style, and quality of its visual art. No longer primarily private or sepulchral, the extant monuments, from this point on, include extensive (and impressive) public displays. Monumental mosaic apse and nave programs adorned the new churches built with funds drawn upon the imperial fisc or funded by the inherited family wealth of a new Christian aristocracy.<sup>163</sup> Individuals, laypersons and clergy, commissioned costly devotional and liturgical objects (including illuminated manuscripts) for personal use as well as church treasuries.

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine alone endowed the Lateran basilica with a huge number of priceless and beautiful furnishings, including a hammered silver *fastigium* (an interior columned pediment that separated the nave from the apse area) weighing more than 2,000 pounds. This object was decorated on both sides (facing both apse and nave). The front showed Christ seated among the twelve apostles; the back had Christ enthroned and flanked by spear-carrying angels. From this fantastic object, four golden crowns were suspended along with a gold lamp adorned with fifty golden dolphins.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> For example, Paulinus of Nola decorated his basilica-shrine dedicated to Felix with paintings in order to attract pilgrims inside to worship. See Paulinus, *Carm.* 27.

<sup>164</sup> *Lib. pont.*, (Sylvester) 34.9. On this object see Sible de Blaauw, "Imperial Connotations in Roman Church Interiors: The Significance and Effect of the Lateran *Fastigium*," in *Imperial Art as Christian Art, Christian Art as Imperial art: Expression and Meaning in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Justinian: Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 15 (Rome: Institutum Romanum Norvgiae, 2001), 137–46; and Sible de Blaauw, "Das Fastigium der Lateranbasilika: Schöpferische Innovation, Unikat oder Paradigma?" in *Innovation in der Spätantike: Kolloquium* Basel 6. und 7. Mai 1994, ed. Beat Brenk (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1996), 53–65.

The emperor also ensured that the walls, ceiling, and floors of his basilica would be lavishly ornamented with gilded beams, colorful marble pavements (*opus sectile*), and a mosaic in the apse. This application of colored small tesserae to walls and vaults was a technical innovation, replacing the painted walls of the previous era. An image placed in this large curved space would have replaced the cult statue in earlier Roman basilicas. Rather than the idol-like dominance of a three-dimensional figure, the Christian church developed the two-dimensional, but yet curved and glittering glass mosaic, making the apse an architectural and a liturgical focal point, as well as a place for artistic experimentation.

Although Constantine's apse may not have had figural decoration, a bust of Christ surrounded by angels was added sometime in the early fifth century. When this original was destroyed centuries ago, it was replaced by a mosaic presumably based upon it. The upper portion shows the bust of Christ surrounded by angels. Below, a gemmed cross rises from a rocky mound from which spring the four Edenic rivers. Deer and sheep drink from these living waters (a reference to Psalms 23 and 41). Saints stand to the right and left looking toward the cross. A river, populated with sea life, boats, and fishing cherubs flows across the bottom, a possible allusion to the Jordan as a passage to Paradise.<sup>165</sup>

St. Peter's apse (probably completed by Constantine's son Constans) was destroyed in the thirteenth century, but, based on external evidence and the decoration of certain pilgrimage objects, scholars have surmised that it showed Christ handing a scroll of the law to Peter and Paul—the *traditio legis*. In general, the narrative iconography found on third- and early fourth-century relief sculpture gradually gave way to dogmatically oriented motifs, such as an ascended and enthroned Christ among his apostles.

While this development of new venues, funds, and patrons for Christian art was underway, the Roman catacombs were themselves largely abandoned as places for ordinary burials and, especially during Damasus' pontificate, began to be converted into shrines for the veneration of the martyrs, saints, and bishops buried within. These shrines' decoration inspired a new type of Christian iconography—

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<sup>165</sup> See Hugo Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 2004), 20–28.

iconic portraits of the saints and apostles as well as of Christ and his mother Mary.<sup>166</sup> This new imagery coincided with their change in status from private tombs to pilgrims' destinations.

By the fifth century, the most common sarcophagus imagery consisted of simple decorative motifs—peacocks, garlands, palm trees, empty thrones, christograms, deer drinking at streams, or a lamb standing upon a rock from which four rivers flow. Narrative iconography (including the baptism scene) continued after the late fourth century but mostly in new media—mosaic, ivory carving, metalwork, glass, and manuscript illumination. These images were produced to inspire, delight, or edify the living worshiper rather than to honor the dead, affirm the promises of resurrection, or console mourning family members.

### 3.1. *Baptismal Iconography in Non-Funerary Art*

Although representations of baptism no longer appeared in funerary art (catacomb paintings and sarcophagus reliefs) by the late fourth century, the theme found its way into glass mosaics and ivory carvings in the mid-fifth century. In addition, some rare carved gems or medallions are also known to depict the baptism of Christ.<sup>167</sup> These new compositions show both continuity and divergence from the older iconography, which raises questions about whether a shift in context (from sepulchral to monumental), a change in material (from paint and stone to mosaic and ivory), and evolution in style and technique reflects certain developments regarding the theology and practice of the rite itself.

One historical datum may be important in regard to this last consideration—that by the mid-fifth century, baptism was no longer a sacrament received by a minority of adults living in the Empire. Instead, it signified membership in the religion of the urban majority—even of the upper classes who inhabited the inner circles of the imperial

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<sup>166</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 173–9.

<sup>167</sup> Two examples of rock crystal gems depicting the baptism of Jesus seem to have been made in Syria and likely date from the sixth century. One of them is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), inv number 31.123. A gold medallion with scene of Jesus' baptism from Constantinople is discussed in the *Age of Spirituality*, #287.

bureaucracy—and included children. Even those who chose to live most of their lives as catechumens (seeking baptism only when death threatened) understood themselves as living under the aegis of its promises and as respectable members of the mainstream culture.

These later images show more variation among themselves than the earlier baptism scenes. As a group, though, they seem to be more closely related to the biblical narratives of Christ's baptism than the paintings from the catacombs or sarcophagus reliefs. The dove appears in all of them. John is nearly always garbed in an *exomis* tunic or an animal skin. Perhaps most important, in the mosaics of Ravenna, Christ is depicted as an adult rather than as a small child. In addition, the larger programmatic context of the iconography suggests that the baptism scenes contribute to an overall theological narrative, rather than belonging to a set of sacramental images. For example, Christ's baptism occurs with other images that show previously unknown scenes from Christ's infancy and youth, occur within compositions that emphasize Christ's healing and miracle working powers, or depict his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Yet, certain details indicate that earlier prototypes still influenced this iconography. Most (but not all), continue to represent Christ as a small child-like figure, sometimes standing under a vertical stream that cascades from an overhead rock.

In addition to the more narrative character or context of this later iconography are other elements that distinguish these new images from their earlier counterparts. In some, angels appear as witnesses to Christ's baptism (figs. 3.2, 3.7). And, much like early crucifixion depictions, the figures of the moon and sun appear in the upper left and right corners—identified by a crescent or radiate crown (as in the Lyons ivory, 3.1.1.6). Most interesting, is the addition of the figure that personifies the Jordan River, either seated to the side emptying his jug to provide the water or partially submerged and turning away from the momentous event (figs. 3.3, 3.8, 3.10–11). In either case he witnesses the descent of the holy into his watery realm. These details emphasize the extraordinary character of Jesus' baptism and its interpretation as a theophanic moment.

This new iconography emphasizes the sacrament's mystery and power as an encounter with the divine that permanently transforms human life, and they illustrate some of the rich theological discussions exemplified in the late fourth and early fifth-century liturgical and catechetical literature. If the rite of baptism was ever a simple and

unpretentious rite, as Tertullian claimed at the beginning of the third century (compared with the magnificence of pagan initiation rites),<sup>168</sup> by the fifth century it had become a richly elaborated and awe-inspiring ceremony.

Many of these images are found on small, portable, ivory objects that are neither funereal nor monumental. They may have originated in parts of the empire far distant from where they were ultimately discovered. Thus, they (or their artisans) may have come from areas other than the Western Roman Empire. Their material and fine craftsmanship make them luxury items. As small caskets for precious objects (e.g., sacred relics or consecrated bread), Gospel book covers, and diptychs (hinged covers for wax tablets), they were made for individuals, perhaps as votive gifts to a church or shrine.

Glass mosaics, by contrast, were constructed for public rather than private viewing. Even more expensive to produce, they were made of expensive materials and required the highest level of skill and artistry. Among the oldest Christian examples of such craft are the vault and apse mosaics that decorate the mid-fourth century mausoleum of Constantine's daughter, Constantina. By the early fifth century, the mosaics had become a primary form of church, shrine, and baptistery decoration—the nave and arch mosaics of Rome's Sta. Maria Maggiore (ca. 435) are perhaps the best early examples. In the middle of the fifth century, two important monuments had been built in Ravenna and covered with beautiful mosaic work: a chapel, once associated with the ruined church of Sta. Croce and now referred to as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, and the cathedral baptistery (the so-called Orthodox baptistery). The baptistery is notable for here, for the first time, a depiction of Jesus' baptism was crafted in colored tesserae, set at the apex of the baptistery's dome, and surrounded by an intricate program of processing apostles, thrones, gospel books, birds, flowers, and palm trees. This beautiful and glittering work of art must have impressed all who saw it, especially those who stood directly below, in the font at the very moment of their own baptism.

This chapter's first section describes a set of extant early examples of baptismal iconography in both ivory and mosaic. The second part discusses a number of issues that arise in relation to these images, including the nature of the shower that is emitted from the dove's beak,

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<sup>168</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 4 and 2.

the appearance of angels in the baptism scene, and the significance of the Jordan River personification in the baptismal imagery. Finally, because the two dome mosaic images of baptism from Ravenna are placed in baptisteries belonging to two competing sects—the Arian and the Orthodox communities—this chapter’s last section examines whether this theological controversy had a distinguishable influence on the iconography on those two monuments.

### 3.1.1. *Minor Arts: Ivories*

#### 3.1.1.1. *Ivory Plaque in Berlin (Das Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin) with Scenes from Christ’s Life*

Originally this ivory plaque, dated to the early fifth century, was part of a diptych whose other half is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris.<sup>169</sup> The baptism scene is shown in the middle of three vertically arranged sections. The top section (above the baptism) depicts the massacre of the innocents, and the bottom section (below the baptism) illustrates the miracle at Cana. An egg and dart patterned frame borders all three sections (fig. 3.1).

In the baptism scene, the Baptist wears an *exomis* tunic and holds a shepherd’s crook (*pedum*). On the right the small, naked, and child-like Christ, with a halo, stands in front of a waterfall and directly under what looks like a stream of water or a ray of light coming from the dove’s beak.<sup>170</sup> Christ’s halo could have been added after the ivory had been carved because the Jordan’s waves can be seen through it.<sup>171</sup> The child-like Jesus seems to stand on dry ground.

<sup>169</sup> See Arne Effenberger and Hans-Georg Severin, *Das Museum für spätantike und byzantinische Kunst* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1992), #49, 135–6; Lieselotte Kötzsche, *Age of Spirituality*, #406 446–447; Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz am Rhein: Von Zabern, 1976), #112, 80; Klaus Wessel, “Eine Gruppe oberitalischer Elfenbeinarbeiten,” *MDAI(R)*, 63/64 (1948–1949), 122–4; Smith, *Early Christian Iconography*, 237–48; Joseph Natanson, *Early Christian Ivories*, #12 (London: Alec Tiranti, 1953), 26; Ormonde M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 203; Ernst Kitzinger, “The Hellenistic Heritage of Byzantine Art,” *DOP* 17 (1963), 19–115; Edward Capps, “The Style of the Consular Diptychs,” *AB* 10 (1927), 64–70.

<sup>170</sup> The stream from the dove’s beak has often been interpreted (here and elsewhere) variously as a stream of water, rays of light, breath or even oil. See discussion below, pp. 112–15.

<sup>171</sup> Smith proposed that the halo was a later addition, *Early Christian Iconography*, 242. His argument is partly based on iconographic parallels to this image which have no haloes. It might also be the result of an artist trying to achieve a transparent effect.



Fig. 3.1 Ivory Plaque (right side of diptych), with scenes from Christ's life, from Rome or Milan, Das Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin, fifth century. Photo credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

The origins of these and other ivories have been controversial. Early in the twentieth century, E. Baldwin Smith argued that the Werden casket (fig. 3.3), the Milan book cover (fig. 3.5), and this plaque are related and probably came from the same atelier or, at least, were products of the same school in Provence—judging from their iconographic similarities to the Gallican sarcophagi. Smith also believed this plaque had originally been connected to an ivory now in the Nevers Museum.<sup>172</sup> Much later, Lieselotte Kötzsche-Breitenbruch asserted a metropolitan Roman source for this ivory and grouped it with several others that show analogous characteristics including soft modeling of the garments and positions of the figures' heads.<sup>173</sup> Evidence that the Paris cover is this diptych's other half, includes the comparable styles, details like the egg and dart border on both, and the apparent copy of the scenes from both on an ivory book cover from the Carolingian era (now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford).

Hypotheses about the provenance of this and other ivories are extremely complicated. Active workshops existed in Italy, Byzantium, and Egypt, and because the items were easy to transport, both stylistic and iconographic details were passed from one art center to another. Whatever these pieces' origin (and a western provenance is at least probable), these pieces were discovered (and presumably used) in the West, where their imagery must have been at least comprehensible (if not normative).

### 3.1.1.2. *Ivory Plaque in the British Museum*

Little is known about this ivory's origin. Part of the Maskell Collection in the British Museum, it most likely dates to the early fifth century (fig. 3.2). Two separate scenes are visible: on the left is the baptism of Christ and on the right is a rare representation of the youthful Jesus' visit with the Temple elders (Luke 2.46).<sup>174</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Smith, *Early Christian Iconography*, 238. Smith follows earlier scholars (Easeloff, Stuhlfauth, and Stryzgowski in connecting this plaque to the Nevers ivory (Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #114).

<sup>173</sup> Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, *Age of Spirituality*, #447. To some extent the arguments about provenance have been based on iconographical and stylistic comparisons to the consular diptychs, which can be dated with some certainty. See Capps, "The Style of the Consular Diptychs," 64–70.

<sup>174</sup> On this object see Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, "Das Elfenbeinrelief," 195–208; Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #115, 82; with ref. to O.M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Ivory Carvings of the Christian Era with examples of Mohammedan Art and Carvings in Bone in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British*



Fig. 3.2 Ivory Plaque from the Maskell Collection, British Museum, London, early fifth century. Photo: Author, used with permission, The Trustees of the British Museum.

In the baptism scene a small, naked Christ child stands to his knees in water. He has a halo. Above, water comes from the beak of a descending dove. On the left, a large winged and bearded angel wearing a tunic, *pallium*, and sandals makes the gesture of benediction. The figure of John the Baptist on the right, bearded, barefoot, and dressed in an *exomis* tunic or animal skin, lays his right hand on Christ's head. Two tall candles stand on either side of the scene and traces of masonry and draperies appear in the background. The presence of these details indicates either an interior setting or a portico of some sort, which seems incongruous in an illustration of John baptizing Christ. This appears, rather, to depict a catechumen's baptism in a candle-lit interior space.<sup>175</sup> This may be the first visual representation of a baptism being conducted indoors, specifically in a baptistery.

The bearded angel is nearly without precedent in Christian iconography. The closest parallel is from a depiction of Pharaoh's dream on the Maximianus cathedra in Ravenna.<sup>176</sup> Here also is the first clear example of the angel as a figure in the baptism scene. Its inclusion

*Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1909), #9, 7–8. Note that Edward Capps' review of Volbach's *Elfenbeinarbeiten* in *AJA* 60 (1956), 83–5, argues that this object could not be early Christian and assigns it to the Carolingian era instead.

<sup>175</sup> See discussion of candles in baptismal iconography below, Chap. 6, pp. 264–7.

<sup>176</sup> See Georg Stuhlfauth, *Die Engel in der altchristlichen Kunst* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1897), 247; Theodor Klauser, "Engel X (in den Kunst)," *RAC* 5, 258–95, "Engel," *LCI* 1 626–42. The Maximianus cathedra is discussed below (fig. 3.7–8).

alludes to the invited presence of an angel (as witness) at the baptism of a regular Christian catechumen.<sup>177</sup>

### 3.1.1.3. *Ivory Panel from the Werden Casket*

The baptism scene on this casket is found on one of three panels of an ivory casket, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The panels, now separated but still having grooves for hinges or metal mounts, portray scenes from the life of the Virgin and Jesus. They have been dated to 425–450.<sup>178</sup>

The depictions of the annunciation to Mary at the spring and the entry of the Virgin into the temple for the trial by bitter water are based on the second-century apocryphal text, the *Protevangelium of James*. Both scenes also appear on the Milan gospel cover described below (fig. 3.5). They appear among other images relevant to the infancy and childhood of Jesus including Joseph's dream, the Visitation, the Nativity, and the Adoration of the Magi.<sup>179</sup>

The shortest of the three panels depicts three scenes (from left to right): the arrival of the Pharisees and Sadducees to witness John baptizing, the “axe laid to the root of the tree”—a reference to John's preaching (cf. Mt 3.10), and John's baptism of Christ. The baptism scene includes two iconographic developments: a cruciform halo on the head of Jesus (which may have been added at a later date), and the personification of the Jordan River (fig. 3.3). Otherwise the imagery conforms to earlier representations: Jesus is nude, childlike, and up to his ankles in the flowing stream; John is clothed in the *exomis* tunic (looking very much like the John from the ivory in the British Museum, fig. 3.2). John carries the *pedum* (as in the Berlin ivory, fig. 3.1) and places his right hand on Jesus' head. The dove descends into the scene.

<sup>177</sup> See discussion of the angel in the scene below, pp. 115–17.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, *Early Christian Iconography*, 221–21, dates these panels to the first half of the sixth century. See also Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #118, 83–4; Dalton, *Byzantine Art*, 203; John Beckwith “The Werden Casket Reconsidered,” *AB* 40 (1958), 1–11; Dalton, *Catalogue of Ivories*, 608; and Georg Stuhlfauth, *Die altchristliche Elfenbeinplastik* (Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1896), 71. Dalton, and Stuhlfauth both consider the casket to have originated in Milan and date it to the fifth or sixth century. Smith's somewhat later date is based on his theory that Roman artisans, fleeing the Gothic invasion in the fifth century, established a school in Arles where they produced this and other ivories. Smith sees an iconographical similarity here with the Gallican sarcophagi. Beckwith, by contrast, after summarizing dating and workshop issues, concludes that although a precise origin and date are probably impossible to establish, the ivory may be as late as 9th century.

<sup>179</sup> These identifications are Beckwith's: “The Werden Casket Reconsidered,” 1–2.



Fig. 3.3 Ivory Panel, Werden Casket, Milan, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, ca. 425–450. Photo: Author, used with permission, The Victoria and Albert Museum.

The personification of the Jordan bears similarities to the figure of Neptune or the river god on the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus (fig. 2.3). He is half-reclining and empties the contents of a jar that supplies the stream for the baptism. Here, rather than a trident (as on the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus), he holds a water plant in each hand and, together with the jug spilling water, he has all the usual attributes of a classical river god.<sup>180</sup>

#### 3.1.1.4. *The Samagher (Pula) Casket*

This casket, now in the Museo Archeologico, Venice, was discovered in 1906 in Samagher (near Pula in Croatia), beneath the apse of the ruined Basilica of St. Hermagoras. It has been dated to around 440.<sup>181</sup> According to Margherita Guarducci, the casket was a gift of either Pope Sixtus III or Leo I to the Emperor Valentinian III and his wife Licinia Eudoxia in

<sup>180</sup> See discussion below, pp. 117–25.

<sup>181</sup> See Angela Donati, *Pietro e Paolo: la storia, il culto, la memoria, nei primi secoli* (Milan: Electra, 2000), entry #95, 225–6; Margherita Guarducci, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher. Un cimelio di arte paleocristiana nella storia del tardo impero*, (Trieste: Società Istriana di Archeologia e Storia Patria, 1978); Paul Künzel, “Das Petrusreliquiar von Samagher,” *RQ* 71 (1976), 22–41; Anna Angiolini, *La capsella eburnea di Pola* (Bologna, R. Pàtron, 1970); Helmut Buschhausen, *Die spätromischen Metallschreine und frühchristlichen Reliquiare*, vol. 1 (Katalog) (Vienna: Kommission bei Hermann Böhlau Nachf., 1971), 219–23; Tilmann Buddensieg, “Le coffret envoire de Pola,” *CA* 10 (1959), 157–200; and Anton Gnirs, “La Basilica ed il Reliquiario d’avorio di Samagher presso Pola, *Atti e Memorie della Società Istriana di Archeologia e Storia Patria*, 24 (1908), 4–48. The provenance, date, and iconography of this object have been much debated. Suggested dates range from 380–425. See also Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #120, 85; Johannes Kollwitz, “Elfenbein,” *RAC* 4 (1959), 1122 (who places the casket’s origin in the region of the upper Adriatic); Kötzsche-Beritenbruch, “Das Elfenbeinrelief,” 207–8; Alexander C. Soper, “The Italo-Gallic School of Early Christian Art,” *AB* 20 (1938), 153–7 (who argues that the casket came from Ravenna or Milan).



Fig. 3.4 Ivory casket, back side, Samagher (Pula), Croatia, 440.  
Photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

the early fifth century, and then traveled from Ravenna to Pula in the mid-sixth century.<sup>182</sup>

Scholars have advanced various interpretations of the images on the casket's sides. The lid of the casket depicts Christ giving the law to his apostles (*traditio legis*), the front of the casket shows an empty throne (*hetoimasia*), and the other three sides appear to present events taking place in major Roman shrines. Following Anton Gnirs, Helmut Buschhausen proposes that one of these events is a marriage (*dextrarum iunctio*) at the Apostle's shrine in St. Peter's and the other two are the presentation and the baptism of a child.<sup>183</sup> Tillman Buddenseig views the panels as depicting stops along a fifth-century pilgrimage to Rome, among them a visit to the shrine of St. Peter in the Vatican on the back (but not necessarily a marriage—fig. 3.4), baptism in the Lateran Baptistery on the right side, and confirmation in another church,

<sup>182</sup> Margherita Guarducci, "La capsella eburnea di Samagher", 123–9.

<sup>183</sup> Soper concurs with these identifications of three rituals (marriage, presentation, baptism), "Italo-Gallic School," 154.

possibly St. Paul's Outside the Walls on the left side.<sup>184</sup> Guarducci, however, believes three different buildings could be identified: St. Peter's, S. Croce in Gerusalemme, and the Anastasis Basilica in Jerusalem. Davide Longhi has argued that the left side shows the no-longer surviving crypt in the ancient basilica of St. Lawrence Outside the Walls.<sup>185</sup>

Because of the six twisted columns (recognizable features of St. Peter's basilica), interpreters mostly agree with Buddenseig and Gnirs that the back panel either depicts or at least alludes to the shrine of St. Peter in Rome.<sup>186</sup> Buddenseig furthermore judges that the casket had originally been produced for a wealthy Roman consul and only secondarily became a reliquary casket. Paul Künzel believes the casket never held relics but rather had a private use—possibly a baptismal gift.<sup>187</sup>

Although the so-called “baptism” scene on the right side of the casket is almost completely lost, Buddenseig argues that its setting was the Lateran Baptistery interior, because of the octagonal architectural structure formed of an entablature resting on eight columns (four are visible, four are assumed to be behind them).<sup>188</sup> Lunettes decorated with foliage rise above the entablature and draperies hang from the central columns. According to Buddenseig, the perplexing decorated lunettes were meant to depict either the vaults of the baptistery or the upper zones near the windows.<sup>189</sup>

In this scene a woman apparently takes the hand of a mostly missing child (her child, in the view of Gnirs and Buschhausen). She raises her right hand in a gesture of prayer or speech. Because nothing remains of the central image (no visible font or male partner), the intended action is unclear, even though scholars surmise that it is meant to show a baptism. In any case, next to the “mother” stand two other

<sup>184</sup> Tillman Buddenseig, “Le coffret,” 157–200.

<sup>185</sup> Davide Longhi, “Il lato sinistro della capsella di Samagher e a memoria costantiniana di S. Lorenzo,” *Felix Ravenna* 141–44 (1991), 95–128.

<sup>186</sup> Against Buddenseig see Josef Wilpert, “Le due più antiche rappresentazioni della ‘Adoratio Crucis,’” *Atti Pontif. Acc. Arch* 111 (1928), 144–9, maintained that the interiors depicted on the casket were more or less imaginary. In agreement with Buddenseig in identifying the shrine of St. Peter are Künzel, “Das Petrusreliquiar von Samagher;” Molly T. Smith, “The Lateran Fastigium,” *RivAC* 46 (1970), 169–75; and J.B. Ward-Perkins, “The Shrine of St. Peter and Its Twelve Spiral Columns,” *JRS* 42 (1952), 20–33.

<sup>187</sup> Künzel, “Das Petrusreliquiar,” 40–1.

<sup>188</sup> See discussion of this baptistery below, Chap. 5, pp. 184–88.

<sup>189</sup> Buddenseig, “Le coffret,” 184.

veiled women who gesture toward the action at the center. On the left, the remains of two similarly positioned men can be seen.

The opposite side depicts a parallel grouping. In this case, the man, woman, and child are all visible. Whether this is a presentation or confirmation—in a different pilgrimage church—of the same child is impossible to say with any certainty. Both scenes, along with the image of St. Peter's shrine on the casket front, represent some kind of action within an ecclesial space. Here a man and woman and, in two instances, a child are joined by two groups of two attendants. They may simply be pilgrims—a married couple, their child, and some attendants—visiting major Roman churches.

### 3.1.1.5. *Milan Gospel Cover*

The Milan cathedral treasury contains two ivory book covers dated to the late fifth century. These book covers are comprised of five separately carved plaques, each of which contains scenes from the canonical and apocryphal life of Jesus and the Virgin. The front cover has a cloisonné enamel Lamb of God at its center standing within a wreath. Surrounding the lamb are New Testament and apocryphal scenes including the following (starting at the top and moving clockwise): the Nativity, Mary in the temple for the trial by bitter waters, Jesus in the temple with the elders, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocents (bottom), the baptism, the three magi following the star, and the annunciation at the spring. In the four corners are busts or symbols of two evangelists: Matthew and Luke (fig. 3.5).<sup>190</sup>

A gemmed, cloisonné cross set on a mountain from which flow the four rivers of paradise appears on the back cover. Surrounding it are the following scenes (clockwise from the top): the Adoration of the Magi, Christ seated on a starry globe presenting wreaths to Peter and Paul, the Last Supper, Christ (again seated on a starry globe) receiving the widow's mite, the water/wine miracle at Cana (bottom), the raising of Lazarus, Jesus healing the paralytic, and Jesus healing the blind man. The four corners again have busts and symbols of two evangelists: here, Mark and John.

<sup>190</sup> See Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, "Das Elfenbeinrelief," 197; Natanson, *Early Christian Ivories*, 17; Smith, *Early Christian Iconography*, 206–21 (where he argues for a somewhat later dating); Vollbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #119, 84–5, pl. 63; Dalton, *Byzantine Art*, 202; and Stuhlfauth, *Die altchristliche Elfenbeinplastik*, 70–1.



Fig. 3.5 Ivory Gospel Cover, northern Italy, now in Tesoro del Duomo di Milan, late fifth century. Photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

The small baptism scene on the front cover shows John the Baptist with an *exomis* tunic similar to the tunic on the ivory in the British Museum (fig. 3.2) and on the Werden casket (fig. 3.3). His stance, with two bent knees, is also like his posture on the Werden casket. Likewise, as on the Werden casket and the Berlin diptych, John holds a *pedum* and places his right hand on Jesus' head. This Jesus seems a little taller and older than in the other ivories. He stretches out his left forearm toward John. Behind Jesus is a waterfall analogous to those seen on some of the sarcophagi (cf. figs. 2.2, 2.9, and 2.11).<sup>191</sup> The water flows onto the ground and covers Jesus' feet up to his ankles. A dove, in very high relief, flies into the scene. Some lines behind the dove might indicate a spray of water from its beak.

#### 3.1.1.6. *Ivory in the Lyons Museum*

An ivory in the Lyons Musée des Beaux Arts, dated to the sixth century and possibly once part of a book cover with five small compartments, contains a baptism scene unlike any of those discussed above.<sup>192</sup> A bearded John the Baptist with an especially large head, long hair and a full mantle fills most of the frame. He places his right hand on Jesus' head. Jesus, standing naked in the Jordan, is here more mature than his earlier child-sized representations. Here, as in the Milan ivory, Jesus' figure more closely resembles a classical youth than a chubby *putto*.

The river may have been intended to recede into the background, but the lack of perspective in the composition makes it look more like a waterfall. Overhead, a large dove hovers and holds an olive branch in its beak. Busts of Sol and Luna fill the top right and left corners. Sol and Luna are relatively rare in baptism scenes but often appear in images of the crucifixion. Whereas the crucifixion scenes most likely include the solar and lunar deities as a reference to the sun's light failing and darkness covering the land at the death of Christ (Matt 27.45 and parallels), in the baptismal context these personifications may be associated with the splitting of the heavens when the Spirit descended upon him like a dove... (Matt 3.16 and parallels).

The partially submerged Jordan River figure, at the bottom center, empties a vase or jug of water and, turning toward the front, raises

<sup>191</sup> See the discussion of this phenomenon, above, Chap. 2, pp. 57–8.

<sup>192</sup> See Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, #149, 98–9; Henri Stern, "Quelques ivories," *CA* 7 (1954), 109–12.

his hands in a gesture of acclamation or fear. The Baptist's weight is on his bent left leg, as in the images where he leans with his left foot upon a rock, but here he seems to place his left foot upon the back of the river god.

### 3.1.1.7. *The Cathedra of Maximianus, Ravenna*

Scholars have long assumed that this famous object, now in the Archiepiscopal Museum in Ravenna, was the cathedra of Bishop Maximianus (546–556 CE). Differences of style suggest at least two, and up to four, separate artists worked on the carving.

Full-length portraits of John the Baptist and the four evangelists take up most of the front below the seat. Horizontal panels above and below them have images of vines, animals, and peacocks along with Maximianus' monogram (top center).<sup>193</sup> The seat's back depicts scenes from the life of the Virgin and Christ (including his baptism), which continue around on the back of the cathedra itself. The sides have ten panels with episodes from the story of Joseph.

The panel with the baptism depicts Jesus in water up to his waist. Jesus, as on the Lyons ivory (3.1.1.6), looks more like a youth rather than a young child (fig. 3.7). Short horizontal lines in the carving indicate water give a transparent effect. On Jesus' left stoops a large, ascetic looking Baptist wearing a long robe and a long beard. Above and to the right, two angels observe or act as assistants while a dove dives from above. Here the personified Jordan turns his back to the action and looks back at the scene, his water jug acting as the river's source. His gesture, an upraised palm, is like those on both the Lyons ivory and an Egyptian ivory in the British Museum (fig. 3.8)

Although most scholars date the cathedra to Maximianus' reign, its provenance is disputed. One analysis places its origin in a Western workshop, but earlier arguments have claimed an Alexandrian or Constantinopolitan source, and even that the chair may have been a gift to the Bishop from Emperor Justinian. In the 1940s, E. Baldwin Smith argued determinedly for an Alexandrian origin (based largely

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<sup>193</sup> The presence of this monogram is the most convincing evidence that this chair does, in fact, date to the mid-sixth century and had been made for Maximianus. However, the monogram may have been a later addition. See the discussion of this problem in Carlo Cecchelli, *La cattedra di Massimiano ed altri avorii romano-orientali* (Rome: La Libreria dello Stato, 1936–1944), 72; and in Charles R. Morey, "The Early Christian Ivories of the Eastern Empire," *DOP* 1 (1941), 41–60.

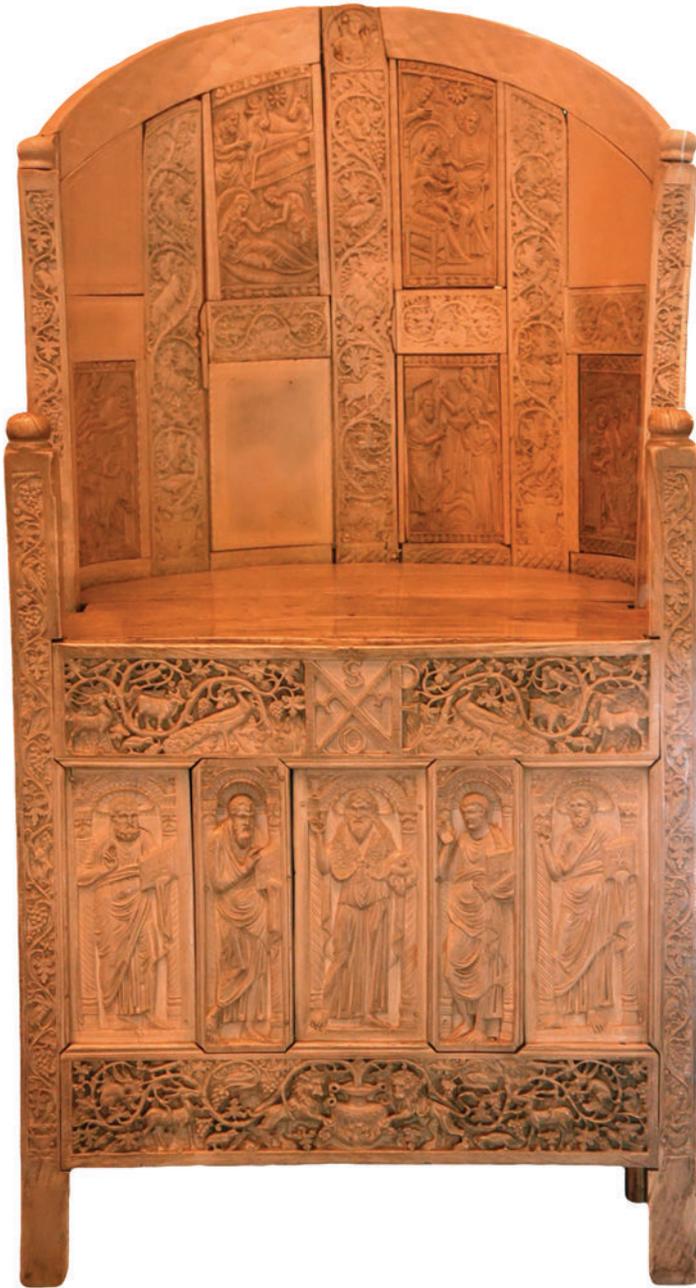


Fig. 3.6 Cathedra of Maximinus, Archebiscopal Museum, Ravenna, 546–556. Photo credit: Sacred Destinations Images.



Fig. 3.7 Cathedra of Maximinus (detail of baptism), Ravenna, 546–556.  
Photo: Author. Alternatively, Photo credit: Alinari/Art Resource, NY.

on iconographic evidence), whereas Günther Morath believed that the cathedra was bought from a workshop in Constantinople; W.F. Volbach speculated that the cathedra was made in a Ravenna atelier (that also produced the Milan Gospel covers) by several artists, the chief of which was Constantinopolitan-trained. Nothing conclusive is known about the object's date, place of manufacture, or original ownership.<sup>194</sup>

Carlo Cecchelli argued that both this baptism scene and the Lyons ivory share a prototype. Furthermore, he believed that prototype included the two observant angels and the image of the fleeing Jordan. He pointed to a fresco from a Coptic monastery in Bawit, Egypt to support his conclusion. In this fresco, one of the angels has a cloth draped over his arms, and the Jordan is submerged and turned away. These details also appear in the sixth-century Egyptian ivory in the British Museum (fig. 3.8).<sup>195</sup>

### 3.1.1.8. *Ivory Plaque in the British Museum*

This small plaque is thought to have been brought from Egypt or Syria and produced around the mid-sixth century (fig. 3.8). However, as it has compositional parallels to the baptism scene on the Maximianus chair (fig. 3.7), as well as the representation found on the Lyons ivory, it could have been produced in Constantinople.<sup>196</sup> John the Baptist, on the left, places his right hand on the head of a youthful Jesus, who is immersed up to his waist. Horizontal lines incised over Christ's lower body indicate water and give the impression of transparency. John bends his left knee and leans forward with his left foot on the rocky bank. The

<sup>194</sup> The scholarly arguments are too complex to be easily summarized here. See Friedrich Deichmann, *Geschichte und Monumente. Ravenna: Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes, Kommentar 1* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1969–1974), 128–9, and *Kommentar 3*, 348. Also see Giuseppe Bovini, *La cattedra eburnea del Vescovo Massimiano di Ravenna* (Ravenna: Edizioni Giorgio La Pira Soc. Coop. a.r.l., 1990); W.F. Volbach, *Avori di scuola ravennate nel V e VI secolo* (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), 21–38. A general survey of the various scholarly analyses includes Dalton, *Byzantine Art*, 204–7; Natanson, *Early Christian Ivories*, #35, 30; E. Baldwin Smith, “The Alexandrian Origin of the Chair of Maximianus,” *AJA* 21 (1917), 22–37; Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 63–8; Cecchelli, *La cattedra*; Günther W. Morath, *Die Maximianskathedra in Ravenna* (Freiburg in B.: Herder, 1940).

<sup>195</sup> Cecchelli, *La cattedra*, 165.

<sup>196</sup> On this object see Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten*, n. 141, taf. 46, 70; O.M. Dalton, *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1901), 294; and Smith, *Early Christian Iconography* 79, fig. 67.



Fig. 3.8 Ivory plaque from Egypt or Syria, now in the British Museum, Egypt, mid sixth century. Photo: Author, used with permission, The Trustees of the British Museum.

somewhat fragmentary Jordan figure, in the lower right corner, raises his arm in what appears to be a gesture of astonishment and seems to be turning away from the action. Above, the dove descends from the hand of God, his beak pointed toward a small dish or paten, perhaps for water or oil.<sup>197</sup> Light rays radiate around God's hand. An angel stands behind to the right; tree branches can be seen on the scene's right and left sides.

### 3.1.2. *Minor Arts: Glass*

#### 3.1.2.1. *Glass Fragment in the Vatican Library*

This unique image is found on a fragment of engraved glass, dated to the fifth century. It was found near the Roman Baths of Diocletian and is now in the Vatican Library.<sup>198</sup> The piece shows a fully clothed young woman standing under a stream of water that appears to be flowing from an overturned jug (fig. 3.9). The only part of the baptizer that remains is his forearm and hand, laid upon the neophyte's head. A haloed figure to the left gestures toward the woman but looks away from her. A dove flies into the scene from the right, carrying an olive branch in its beak. Above and to the left of the woman's head are the letters *ALBA*, possibly the beginning of the word *albata*, referring to her status as one newly baptized and wearing the white robe given to neophytes after they emerge from the water.<sup>199</sup> To the left of the haloed figure, the letters *MIR-AX* appear.

Scholars have given various interpretations of this image. Both the candidate's gender and clothing make it unique. De Rossi never doubted that it was a baptismal scene, believing it depicted the point when the candidate was re-robed after leaving the font. He further argues that the jug was a realistic depiction of an actual baptismal vessel that was suspended over the font and inverted during the rite.<sup>200</sup>

<sup>197</sup> See discussion of this controversial object, below, Chap. 4, pp. 142–3.

<sup>198</sup> Published by Giovanni de Rossi, "Insigne vetro, sul quale è effigiato il battesimo d'una fanciulla," *BAC* 3 (1876), 7–15; and discussed by Franz J. Dölger, "Die Firmung in den Denkmälern des christlichen Altertums," *RQ* 19 (1905), 1–41, esp. 21–25; Garucci, *Storia* VI, 93f, pl. 464.1; De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains," 240–5; and Bisconti, "L'iconografia dei battisteri," 419–21.

<sup>199</sup> See discussion of this robe below, Chap. 4, pp. 168–71. De Rossi, "Insigne vetro," 13–14, argues against restoring the word *albata* here, preferring to see this as part of the woman's name, possibly Albana.

<sup>200</sup> De Rossi, "Insigne vetro," 12. Here he cites a parallel hydraulic system in Milan described by Ennodius. See discussion below, Chap. 5, pp. 194–5.



Fig. 3.9 Glass Fragment, Vatican library, Rome, fifth century.  
Photo: from R. Garrucci, *Storia dell'Arte Cristiana* VI (1879), pl. 464.1.

Raffaele Garrucci proposes that because the woman was clothed and not naked the image more likely depicts the woman's confirmation—a second anointing intended to impart the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he believes that the material flowing from the jug was divine grace rather than water. He does allow, however, that the image might actually depict both the rites of baptism and confirmation simultaneously.<sup>201</sup> Franz Dölger agrees that the scene was of a confirmation but thought that substance flowing from the jug was meant to be holy oil.<sup>202</sup> Against these interpretations, Cecchelli believes the stream was of baptismal water, and cited its similarities to the stream in the painting in the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (fig. 1.5) and on the Aquileia grave marker (fig. 2.12).<sup>203</sup>

Lucien De Bruyne notes that the woman's clothing was a major stumbling block to a straight forward interpretation: that the engraver had attempted to express the idea of baptism being both a gift of water

<sup>201</sup> Garrucci, *Storia*, 93–8.

<sup>202</sup> Dölger, "Die Firmung," 25.

<sup>203</sup> Cecchelli, *Cattedra*, 166.

and the Holy Spirit and points out that almost all other images of baptism depict a simultaneous imposition of hands and water.<sup>204</sup>

The identity of the other two figures in the scene is equally controversial. De Rossi proposes that the haloed figure was the minister of the sacrament. Because of his halo, he argues, the individual (a male based on his being vested in a tunic and *pallium*) must be a dead saint—possibly a Greek martyr or an earlier, now-deceased bishop of Milan—rather than a living cleric. This possibility would parallel an analogous speculation about the haloed figure on the Aquileia grave marker.<sup>205</sup>

De Rossi also tries to decipher the word *mirax*, ultimately arguing that it was a rare cognomen (it occurs on no known hagiographic list).<sup>206</sup> He then identifies the other figure (whose hand and forearm are all that we now see) as either a deaconess or godmother on the basis that a woman would have been needed to attend to a female at her baptism.<sup>207</sup> The difficulty with this analysis is that the gesture here is most like the episcopal imposition of hands that would have been given at the confirmation and after the neophyte had been re-robed in the post-baptismal alb.

### 3.1.3. *Mosaics*

3.1.3.1. *San Giovanni in Fonte, the Orthodox Baptistery at Ravenna*  
Ravenna's Bishop Ursus built this baptistery in the first quarter of the fifth century, although a subsequent bishop, Neon (451–459 CE), was responsible for the mosaic decoration and dome. The medallion at the dome's apex has a famous mosaic depiction of Jesus' baptism, which subsequent restoration work has undoubtedly changed (fig. 3.10).<sup>208</sup> This mosaic medallion is centered directly above the font, and would have been

<sup>204</sup> In this he agreed with Profumo. De Bruyne, "L'imposition des mains," 242–3.

<sup>205</sup> See above, Chap. 2, pp. 71–5.

<sup>206</sup> De Rossi, "Insigne vetro," 8–10. No one proposed that "*mirax*" might be derived from the Latin verb "*miro/mirari*," meaning "to wonder."

<sup>207</sup> See discussion of deaconesses below, Chap. 4, pp. 151–6.

<sup>208</sup> The date of the mosaics in this building to the time of Neon is based on the ninth-century attestation of Andrea-Agnello in the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* 18.28 (Neon Episcopus). See Spiro K. Kostof, *The Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), 67–8; Deichmann, *Ravenna* 1 (1969), 131–51 and 2 (1974), 17–47.



Fig. 3.10 Dome mosaic, Orthodox Baptistery (San Giovanni in Fonte), Ravenna, mid-fifth century. Photo: Author.

the focal point of a neophyte's upward gaze upon emerging from the water.<sup>209</sup>

Here, clearly for the first time in baptismal iconography, Jesus is depicted as a mature adult with a beard, long dark hair, and a halo. He stands nude, arms at his sides, in water up to his waist. The water's transparency is beautifully expressed in the mosaic work. John the Baptist stands to the left upon a high rocky bank that sprouts grass and flowers. He also has a halo, is barefoot, and wears an animal skin. He holds a tall, jeweled cross in his left hand and with his right pours water from a paten over Jesus' head. Overhead and partially covering the cross, a dove dives into the scene. The semi-submerged Jordan figure here observes the action rather than turning away. A green cloth veils his right hand and his left hand grasps a marsh plant. His name is inscribed above his head: "IORDANN."

<sup>209</sup> See the discussion of this as a kind of visual divine grace in an essay by Geir Hellemo, "Baptism: the Divine Touch," *Acta ad archaeologiam et atrium historiam pertinentia* 18 (2004), 101–13.

The paten that John holds is immediately below the dove's beak, so it appears the dove's mouth is the water's source. This somewhat awkward arrangement suggests the original image lacked the paten altogether, and scholars agree that this was the addition of a later restorer, probably incorporated some time in the nineteenth century. John's holding a paten in his right hand moreover precludes the imposition of hands. Nevertheless, that some sort of vessel could have been used for baptism by this date is suggested by the vessel depicted in the Egyptian ivory in the British Museum ivory but not—in that instance—held by John (cf. fig. 3.8).<sup>210</sup>

The jeweled cross in John's left hand likewise could have been a later addition, possibly a substitution for the *pedum* that occurs in many of the ivories (figs. 3.3, 3.5, and 3.8). Friedrich Deichmann, however, believes the cross was part of the original scheme and included as a reference to Jesus' triumphant second coming.<sup>211</sup> Unprecedented as the cross is in this particular iconographic context, it also occurs in other—roughly contemporary—Ravenna mosaics, most prominently in the Galla Placidia Mausoleum, where both the Good Shepherd and St. Lawrence are depicted as carrying it.<sup>212</sup> Additionally, the cross in combination with the Jordan personification might allude to the cross that was erected on the banks of the River Jordan to mark the actual site of Jesus' baptism.<sup>213</sup>

Because this mosaic has been heavily restored, the paten, the gemmed cross, and Jesus' beard need to be viewed skeptically because they are iconographic anomalies. A large section of the heads of Jesus and The Baptist, most of the cross, the dove, and the paten were reworked from the eighth through the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>214</sup> Even so, the maturity of Jesus' face and body distinguishes this image from earlier baptismal iconography and seems to have been part of the original composition.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Discussion of the paten's use in baptism below, Chap. 4, pp. 142–3.

<sup>211</sup> Deichmann, *Ravenna*, vol. 1, 137.

<sup>212</sup> See the discussion of the cross as an attribute of John the Baptist in E. Schäfer, "Die Heiligen mit dem Kreuz in der altchristlichen Kunst," *RQ* 44 (1936), 98–102.

<sup>213</sup> The cross marker in the Jordan river is mentioned in the accounts of pilgrims to the site, including the venerable Bede, *Locis sanct.* 12. See discussion below, pp. 121–2.

<sup>214</sup> See Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 86–7 on the work of the restorers and the dates of various phases of the work. Kostof doubts that they can be exactly dated, or that the original ever recreated without great speculation.

<sup>215</sup> See discussion of Jesus' beard and mature body type, below, pp. 123–5.

### 3.1.3.2. *Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna*

This octagonally-shaped building was constructed during the rule of the Arian Ostrogothic King Theodoric, at the end of the fifth century (about the same time that the Arian cathedral, the Anastasis Gothiconum, was built).<sup>216</sup> Although the similarities in their dome mosaics indicate that this decoration was modeled after the Orthodox Baptistery, this depiction of Jesus' baptism has some signal differences. Furthermore, this mosaic has been almost perfectly preserved with few major restorations.<sup>217</sup>

The medallion displays a three-person composition on a shimmering gold ground (fig. 3.11). Here, however, John the Baptist stands on a rocky bank to the right while the Jordan figure sits on the left. John, barefoot, bearded, and dressed in an animal skin, holds the *pedum* in his left hand and places his right hand on Jesus' head. Jesus, in the center, is represented as a haloed nude adult up to his hips in water (indicated by wavy lines running across his lower body). However, here Jesus has no beard and his torso seems far more youthful. Jesus stands, facing forward with his arms at his sides, his eyes focused ahead and slightly to his left.

The Jordan personification appears quite different from that in the Orthodox Baptistery image (cf. fig. 3.10). He sits fully out of the water and is draped only from the waist down in the manner of a classical Roman river god. He is fully bearded and has long hair; crab claws form a diadem for his head and a marsh plant serves as his scepter. His left hand is raised, in an open-palmed gesture that suggests awe or wonder. Below his left elbow, an overturned water vessel serves as the river's source.

The dove dives straight down, over Jesus' head. Its beak issues a stream of silver colored fluid, probably water, but possibly either breath or oil. As in the Orthodox baptistery, the font's central placement, immediately under the dome and dome medallion, means that the one being baptized stood directly below the image of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, perhaps imagining him or herself as participating in a kind of historical reenactment.

<sup>216</sup> More extensive discussion of this building in Chap. 5, pp. 204–6.

<sup>217</sup> See Deichmann, *Ravenna*, vol. 1, 208–12 and 2, 251–8, and Deichmann, *Frühchristliche Bauten*, 249–73. For additional bibliography prior to the 1960s consult Giuseppe Bovini, "Principale bibliografia su Ravenna romana, paleocristiana e paleobizantina," *Corsi di Cultura sull'Arte ravennate e bizantina* 9 (1962), 30–42.



Fig. 3.11 Dome mosaic, Arian Baptistery (Santa Maria in Cosmedin), Ravenna, late fifth century. Photo: Author.

### 3.2. Discussion

#### 3.2.1. *The Dove's Beak as Source of Holy Water, Oil, or Breath*

The question of what substance is streaming from the jar in the Vatican glass fragment (fig. 3.9) is analogous to the debate over what appears to be emitted from the dove's beak in one catacomb fresco (fig. 1.5), several ivories (fig. 3.1, 3.2, 3.5), the Arian Baptistery mosaic (fig. 3.11), and a mosaic in a font from Kélibia, Tunisia (fig. 5.20).<sup>218</sup> Most scholars assume the dove is the source of baptismal water, but some argue that the dove is generating rays of light or holy oil, which are particularly associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit in the church's baptismal rite.<sup>219</sup> Of course, none of these substances is represented literally in the gospel narratives of Jesus' baptism.

<sup>218</sup> Discussion of this font mosaic below, Chap. 6, pp. 273–4.

<sup>219</sup> See Friedrich Sühling, "Die Taube als religiöses Symbol im christlichen Altertum," *RQ Supplementheft* 24 (1930), 150–54; Dölger, "Die Firmung," 1–41.

A fourth possibility, advanced by Friedrich Deichmann, views the dove as breathing on Jesus, or performing the ritual of “exsufflation,” an ancient rite in which the bishop blew on candidates’ faces. Deichmann believes that this symbolized the giving of the Spirit to the neophytes. As a testimony to this significance, Deichmann cites the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus when he breathed on the apostles saying, “Receive the gifts of the spirit” (John 20.22). Deichmann argues that two rites associated with the baptismal liturgy, the priest’s breathing over the baptismal water (consecrating it for the sacrament), and the exsufflation of candidates, were derived from this text and represented here in the iconography by the silvery substance being emitted from the dove’s beak.<sup>220</sup>

Exsufflation was part of the baptismal liturgy in Italy, North Africa, and Spain. It prepared the candidates prior to their entering the font—a means of “blowing” the devil out of them.<sup>221</sup> Tertullian, in his treatise against idolatry, uses the verb “*exsufflo*,” referring to the Christian practice of blowing or spitting upon the smoking incense on pagan altars or images of the gods.<sup>222</sup> Augustine similarly compares baptismal exsufflation to exorcistic behaviors also directed at images of the emperor:

For by the laws of this world a person who hisses at the image, though a lifeless image, of the emperor is held guilty of no other crime. But little ones undergo exsufflation in the rite of exorcism before they are baptized; living images, then, not of some ruler, but of God, are subjected to exsufflation. Or rather, in exsufflation the devil is blown out who holds the little one guilty by the infection of sin so that, when he is driven out, the little one is transferred to Christ.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Deichmann, *Ravenna*, vol. 1, 210, and *Ravenna*, vol. 2, 257. See also Strzygowsky, *Iconographie der Taufe*, 11–13. For Deichmann, the breath of the dove is a “himmlische Analogie zum Taufwasser... *fons spiritus sancti*” On the rite of exsufflation see below, Chap. 3, pp. 113–4.

<sup>221</sup> See John the Deacon, *Ep. ad Sen.* 3; Isidore of Seville, *Eccl. off.* 2.21.3 Ps. Dionysius, *Ecc. hier.* 2.3.5.

<sup>222</sup> See Tertullian, *Apol.* 23.16; also *Idol.* 11.7; *Scap.* 2; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 8.4. Athanasius described Anthony hissing at a demon (*Vit. Ant.* 40) See also Origen, *Cels.* 8.38; 8.41, which speaks of mocking and reviling statues of the gods; and discussions by Franz J. Dölger, “Heidnische Begrüssung und christliche Verhöhnung der Heidentempel: *despuere* und *exsufflare* in der Dämonenbeschwörung,” *AC* 3 (1932), 192–203, and Graeme Clarke, “Four Passages in Minucius Felix,” *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, vol. 2 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), 499–501.

<sup>223</sup> Augustine, *C. Jul.* 3.199, trans. Roland Teske, *Works of St. Augustine* 1/25 (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1999), 379 (CSEL 85.1.498). Teske notes here that the word translated here as “exsufflation” also has the meaning of “hisses at.” Exsufflation is

This rite is related to the *ephetha*, known primarily from the writings of Ambrose and John the Deacon, both of whom associated it to the healing stories of the deaf-mute and the man born blind. Whereas for Ambrose, the action was intended to open the senses (following the meaning of the idea to be opened), in particular to be able to hear the preaching of the minister and to smell the sweet fragrance of sanctity, John the Deacon interpreted the action as closing the sensory organs. Once exorcised, the individual was safer if he or she was closed to any evil influence. Accordingly the ears, protected by a kind of holy wall, could admit nothing noxious that might lure the baptized one to lapse back into sin.<sup>224</sup>

This exorcistic aspect of the rite makes it difficult to associate with the communication of the Holy Spirit (or with Jesus' act of breathing on his disciples).<sup>225</sup> And although the modern Roman Catholic and Orthodox baptismal liturgies instruct the officiant to breathe on the water in the font, no early Christian document records such an act. In most early liturgical documents, the giving of the Holy Spirit (often referred to as "illumination") was usually associated with the laying on of hands or anointing after baptism, and not with the water bath—a point that strengthens the argument for identifying the substance coming from the Dove's beak as either light or oil. However, one late but suggestive piece of supporting evidence for Deichmann's thesis comes from the seventh- or eighth-century Gallican *Bobbio Missal*, which directs the priest to breathe into the candidate's mouth three times and say, "[name], receive the Holy Spirit, may you guard him in your heart."<sup>226</sup>

Depictions of the dove emitting a substance occur only in a minority of baptismal representations in any case. Many more of these baptism images show the dove as present (in two instances carrying an olive branch in its beak, fig. 3.11 and the Lyons ivory), but not as the source of

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recorded also in the tenth-century *Amb. Man*, 28, in which the officiant is told to blow upon the candidate from head to foot in order to mock the devil.

<sup>224</sup> Ambrose, *Sac* 1.2–3. For more discussion of the *ephetha* rite, see discussion below, Chap. 3, pp. 113–4, and Bernard Botte, "La sputation antique rite baptismal?" *Mélanges Christine Mohrmann* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1963), 196–201.

<sup>225</sup> This is the position of Franz Dölger, who argued that the exorcistic rite of breathing on candidates is unrelated to the Johannine passage mentioned above, "Der Exorzismus im altchristliche Taufritual," *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums* 3, Heft 2–3 (1909), 118–20.

<sup>226</sup> *Bobbio Missal*, 233; text, E.A. Lowe, *The Bobbio Missal* (Henry Bradshaw Society 58, 1920); reprinted in *DBL*, 270.

any substance. Nevertheless, the “breath” hypothesis does explain the iconography of the Berlin ivory (fig. 3.1), in which the dove otherwise seems to be a source of water apart from the column of water behind the recipient. If the dove is, rather, the source of ordaining or empowering breath, certain confusion or iconographic redundancy is eliminated in examples where it would otherwise serve as second source of water.

### 3.2.2. *Attendant Angel(s)*

One or two attendant angels appear in the two British Museum ivories (figs. 3.2 and 3.8) and the baptism panel from the Maximianus cathedra (fig. 3.7). A similar composition appeared in a monastery wall painting in Bawit (Egypt). Henri Leclercq, discussing the British Museum ivory that shows Jesus in the Temple on the right, suggests (but does not strenuously argue) that the angel represents God the Father or, possibly, an assistant, such as a deacon.<sup>227</sup> Lieselotte Köttsche-Breitenbruch, who identifies this same ivory scene as the baptism of an actual catechumen (rather than of Jesus’ baptism), says the angel figure here represents either a baptismal sponsor, or the officiating bishop. She cites passages from Ambrose and Tertullian to explain the inclusion of both an angel and John the Baptist in the iconography.<sup>228</sup> Ambrose, explicating the ritual after the fact, told the neophytes that when they entered the baptistery:

There you saw the Levite [deacon], there you saw the priest, there you saw the high priest [bishop]. Do not consider their bodily appearance, but the grace of their ministrations. It is in the presence of angels that you have spoken, just as it is written: ‘For the lips of the priest guard knowledge, and from his mouth they seek the law, because he is an angel of the Lord Almighty. There is no mistaking and no denying that this is the angel who announces life eternal and the reign of Christ. This one is not to be esteemed by you according to appearance, but in virtue of his function. Consider what he gives you, ponder his role, recognize his status.’<sup>229</sup>

<sup>227</sup> Leclercq, “Baptême de Jésus,” *DACL* 1.2, 366.

<sup>228</sup> Köttsche-Breitenbruch, “Das Elfenbeinrelief,” 202–3.

<sup>229</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 2.6, trans. author (SC 25: 158.6). See also Ambrose, *Sacr.* 2.3–4, where Ambrose speaks about the angel at the pool of Bethesda (and see discussion immediately below).

Almost a century and a half earlier, Tertullian similarly described the presence of God's angel in the baptistery. According to him angel that moves the water in the font is prefigured by the angel who troubled the healing waters in Bethesda (John 5.2–7):

Lest anyone think it hard for a holy angel of God to be present in order to stir up the waters for the sake of human salvation, while a wicked angel of the evil one often traffics in that same element in order to cause human damnation, or lest it seem novel that an angel should disturb water, [let that one consider] an example that prefigured the future. An angel used to agitate the pool of Bethsaida... Not that we are given the Holy Spirit in the water, but in the water that has been cleansed by the angel we are prepared for the Holy Spirit. Here then a type is revealed beforehand. Just as John was the Lord's forerunner, preparing his ways, so also the angel, the witness of baptism, prepares the ways for the Holy Spirit who follows.<sup>230</sup>

Tertullian's reference to the angel at Bethesda has a parallel in the seventh or eighth-century gallican rite, in a collect for the benediction of the font: "O God, who for the salvation of human souls did sanctify the waters of the Jordan, may there descend upon these waters the angel of your blessing;" and in the *contestatio* "...who [Lord], by the angel of healing did watch over the waters of Bethsaida, who by the condescension of Christ thy Son did sanctify the bath of Jordan: look down, O Lord, upon these waters which are made ready to blot out human sins; may the angel of your goodness be present in these sacred fonts."<sup>231</sup>

From these texts, and from simple observation of the images, it seems that the most plausible identification is the most obvious; the angel represents an angel. Cecchelli, when considering the angels in the baptism scene on the Maximianus cathedra (fig. 3.7), argues against designating them as baptismal officiants (deacons or the bishop), and cites the wider context of the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism. The baptism is immediately followed by the wilderness scene in which Satan tempts Jesus and then angels minister to him (Matthew 4.11 and Mark 1.13).<sup>232</sup>

<sup>230</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 5.6–6.1, trans. author (CCL 1: 281–2). See also Origen, *Hom. Jo.* 9.4; Ambrose, *Sacr.* 2.3–4 (noted immediately above); and Opatatus of Milevis, *Donat.* 2.16.

<sup>231</sup> *Missale Gothicum*, 256–257; text ed. L.C. Molhberg, *Missale Gothicum* (Rome: Herder, 1961); English trans., *DBL*, 258–63, altered slightly by author.

<sup>232</sup> Cecchelli, *La cattedra*, 166.

Leclercq also associates the angels in the cathedra panel with those angels who attended Jesus in the wilderness, whereas Günther Morath speaks of the “assisting angels” in relation to the angels’ appearance at Bethlehem.<sup>233</sup> However, even though modern authors often describe the angels as assistants who hold towels or dry garments in their hands (like deacons might have done for the neophytes as they emerged from the water), early Christian iconography actually shows them veiling their hands (*manus velatae*), a conventional gesture of respect in the presence of the holy (cf. fig. 3.7).<sup>234</sup>

Based on the above-cited texts, the angels may represent the heavenly equivalents of rite officials (e.g., bishop or priest), or perhaps depict the angel that “stirs up” the waters of the font. The presence of the angels in these scenes arguably links two or three gospel narratives, the birth of Christ, the baptism, and the temptation.<sup>235</sup>

### 3.2.3. *Personification of the Jordan River*

The appearance of a river personification (or water deity) on Christian monuments often strikes viewers as out of place—a pagan god on a Christian monument. Possibly the oldest extant appearance of this figure in Christian iconography is on the left end on the Sta. Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus (fig. 2.3), although here he is shown, incongruously, with a trident—symbol of Neptune.<sup>236</sup>

This figure is found on the Werden casket (fig. 3.3), the Lyons ivory, the ivory panel from the Maximianus cathedra (fig. 3.7), and in both Ravenna baptisteries (figs. 3.10–11) as well. The personified Jordan also appears elsewhere in Christian art, including an apse mosaic of the enthroned Christ at the early fifth-century church of Hosios David

<sup>233</sup> Leclercq, “Baptême de Jésus”, 365; Morath, *Maximianskathedra*, 48.

<sup>234</sup> This mistake is a common one. See Katharine Reynolds Brown and Archer St. Clair in *Age of Spirituality*, #287, #526, and #527. Later western artists may have mistaken this gesture, being unfamiliar with the custom.

<sup>235</sup> Cecchelli, *La cattedra*, 166, quotes an invocation from the liturgy: “*Venite potenze angliche, scendete da Bethlehem al Giordano*,” which he argues links the birth narrative with the baptism.

<sup>236</sup> On the Jordan in Christian art see Robin M. Jensen, “Jordan” in the *ECAA* (forthcoming); Robin M. Jensen, “What are Pagan Gods Doing in Scenes of Jesus’ Baptism?” *BR* 9 (1993), 34–41; Gunter Ristow, “Zur Personifikation des Jordan in Taufdarstellungen der frühen christlichen Kunst,” in *Aus der byzantinistischen Arbeit der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, ed., Johannes Irmscher (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 120–6; and O. Waser, “Vom Flussgott Jordan und anderen Personifikationen,” *Festgabe Adolf Kaegi* (Frauenfeld, 1919), 191–217.

in Theossalonika. Some of these examples are modeled, more or less directly, on the classical type of a personified river: a reclining, bearded male, naked to the waist, wearing a headdress, reclining or holding a vessel that pours fourth water, brandishing a scepter of river animals and plants, or bearing other attributes associated with the river (or geographical region) he is meant to represent. These conventional figures were not actual deities, although they may have been understood as tutelary spirits.<sup>237</sup> The Jordan figure, then, should not be seen as an example of religious syncretism as much as a geographical marker, connecting John's baptism of Jesus with an actual place.

All the same, while this image may be an allegory of place, it bears a particular symbolic significance. In early Christian exegesis, references to the Jordan River almost always are taken as typological references to passages not only from bondage to freedom, but also from illness to healing, defilement to purification, and death to life and—even more significant—they prefigured Christian baptism.

For example, crossing the Jordan River marked the Israelites' entrance into the Promised Land (Josh 3). Early commentators interpreted this event, like the passage through the Red Sea, as a type of baptism.<sup>238</sup> Just as the people were passing, God caused the waters to "rise up in a heap," allowing the priests carrying the ark to pass on dry ground (Josh. 3.13–17). The Gospel of John (10.40–42) notes that Jesus crossed the Jordan and then waited three days before re-crossing in order to raise Lazarus (cf. Joshua 3.2). Early exegetes saw this three-day period as a type of Joshua's three-day wait, Jesus' three days in the tomb, and the three-fold baptismal immersion—and noted that Jesus and Joshua shared a name that means "God saves."<sup>239</sup> Because Joshua's leading the Israelites across the Jordan paralleled their earlier crossing of the Red Sea, it was often interpreted as the type of the "new covenant" versus the "old" (i.e., the crossing of the Red Sea). This crossing was symbolized in the liturgy when the catechumens entered

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<sup>237</sup> On the river gods in classical art and literature see article by Corina Weiss, "Fluvii" in *LIMC*, 4.1 and 4.2 (plates), 139–48 (with bibliography); J. Toutain, "Les cultes des fleuves, sa forme primitive et ses principaux rites, chez les peuples de l'antiquité classique," *L'ethnographie*, ns 13–14 (1926), 1–7; Lehnerdt, "Flussgötter," *Roscher Lex.* 1.2, 1487–96; Erika Dinkler-von Schubert, "Fluss II (ikonographisch)," *RE* 8, 73–100; and H. Leclercq, "Fleuves," *DACL* 5, 1760–1.

<sup>238</sup> For example Origen, *Hom. Josh.* 6.1; and Ambrose, *Myst.* 12–13.

<sup>239</sup> See Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 10.11; and Gregory of Nyssa, *Diem lum.* NPNF ser. 2, vol. 5, 522.

the baptistery.<sup>240</sup> Jerome personifies the Jordan and even gives it foreknowledge in his commentary on that passage: “The Jordan River that dried up when Joshua led the Israelites into the Land of Promise, now longed to gather together all its waters into one place, if it could, to bathe the body of the Lord.”<sup>241</sup>

Early Christian preachers saw almost every reference to the River as a typology of baptism. The Jordan was also the site where Elijah ascended into heaven after striking the water to make it passable via dry ground (2 Kings 2.6–12—recalling the Red Sea crossing). It was the stream from which Elisha miraculously recovered an iron axe head, lost while he was cutting wood to build a dwelling for the sons of the prophets—a story that prefigures Christ’s cross as well as his baptism (2 Kings 6.5–7).<sup>242</sup> Even more evocative, the Jordan’s waters cured the Syrian general, Naaman, of his leprosy (2 Kings 5.10–14). One of Gregory of Nyssa’s sermons for Epiphany (a baptismal day in the Eastern church) begins:

When Naaman the Syrian, who was diseased with leprosy, had come to him [Elisha] as a suppliant, he cleansed the sick man by washing him in the Jordan, clearly indicating what should come, both by the use of water generally, and by the dipping in the river in particular. For Jordan alone of rivers, receiving in itself the first-fruits of sanctification and benediction conveyed in its channel to the whole world, as by itself, the grace of Baptism.<sup>243</sup>

In addition to interpreting particular scriptural texts referring to the Jordan as prefiguring Christ’s baptism, some early writers maintained that by his baptism Jesus had purified the Jordan water, an act that in

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<sup>240</sup> See Franz J. Dölger, “Der Durchzug durch den Jordan als Sinnbild der christlichen Taufe,” *AC* 2 (1930), 6309 Per Lundberg, *La typologie baptismale dans l’ancienne église* (Leipzig: A. Lorentz, 1942), 146–66; and Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 99–113.

<sup>241</sup> Jerome, *Hom.* 89, trans. Marie Ewald, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1963), 230. Note the tradition that the Jordan waters miraculously fled back and then rose in a heap as an annual display for visiting pilgrims, discussed above, Chap. 2, p. 58.

<sup>242</sup> See, for example, Justin, *Dial.* 86.6; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.17.3; Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 13; and Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 3.5, where he explains that before Elijah could be taken up to heaven he first had to cross the Jordan.

<sup>243</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Diem lum.*, trans. *NPNF* ser. 2, vol. 5, 522. See also Hippolytus, *Sanct. Theoph.* 2.

turn made all water the source of purification for ordinary humanity.<sup>244</sup> The Jordan was, clearly, the prototypical “river of life” and special witness to a divine epiphany. A baptismal font might even be referred to as “Jordan,” another link between the baptism of a catechumen and its archetype—the baptism of Jesus. Ambrose notes that this river alone turns, so that one descending into it might be brought back to God, the source of all life.<sup>245</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, explaining why water is the fundamental element of life, recalls that the world began with water and the Jordan witnesses the beginning of the Gospels.<sup>246</sup>

Christian visual representations of the Jordan River appear to have two distinct types. One of these is more like the classical figure described above, whereas the others appear quite different. For example, in the Orthodox baptistery in Ravenna, the Jordan figure is partially submerged so that only his upper torso is visible. His hands are covered as a sign of respect for the sacred event that he witnesses (cf. the images of the angels discussed above). By contrast, the iconography of the later Arian baptistery (which was clearly modeled on the Orthodox), presents the Jordan in a more traditional manner, reclining and seated on the dry ground holding a jug that spills forth water. This figure likewise occurs on the sarcophagus of Sta. Maria Antiqua (fig. 2.2) and the Werden casket (fig. 3.3).

The partially submerged river figure also appears on the Lyons ivory, the cathedra of Maximian (fig. 3.7), and the Egyptian ivory in the British museum (fig. 3.8). Because this type is so distinct from the classical prototype, it has been described as “eastern,” primarily because it is this representation, more than the other, which continues to appear in Byzantine and later Orthodox icons of Christ’s baptism. The submerged figure appears, for instance in the fifth-century mosaic at Hosios David in Thessalonica, a sixth-century fresco from the Coptic monastery in Bawît, Egypt, and the eleventh-century apse of Hosios Lukas in Delphi.<sup>247</sup> These figures are not only partially

<sup>244</sup> See Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 18.2 and Ambrose, *Sacr.* 1.18. Also see discussion below, Chap. 4, pp. 135–6.

<sup>245</sup> “*Solus Iordanis retrorsum conversus est,*” according to Ambrose, *Enarrat. Ps.* 61.32 (CSEL 64, 396); see also Cyril of Jerusalem *Myst.* 3.1.

<sup>246</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 3.5.

<sup>247</sup> On the apse mosaic of Hosios David see Ralph F. Hoddinott, *Byzantine Churches in Macedonia and Southern Serbia* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963), 173–9. The sixth- or seventh-century fresco of Jesus’ baptism from the monastery in Bawît shows the river deity as feminine, perhaps because in the older Greek artistic convention,

submerged, but often have hands upraised and turn away (like the water), as if in fear or flight.

In his book on the Orthodox Baptistery in Ravenna, Cyril Kostof cites a sermon of Peter Chrysologus, Neon's immediate predecessor at the see of Ravenna, to explain what he interprets as a calm and reverent appearance of the personified Jordan in the Orthodox Baptistery, but which applies, even more, to the figure in the Arian baptistery: "Why is it that the Jordan, who fled in the presence of the ark of the covenant [ref. Josh. 3:16–17], did not flee from the presence of the Holy Trinity? Why? Because he who yields to piety begins not to be afraid."<sup>248</sup>

Beginning no later than the fourth century, the Jordan River was a destination for Christian pilgrims, many of them seeking baptism, presuming its waters to be particularly blessed. The site of Bethabara (Bethany beyond the Jordan, John 1.28) is mentioned by Jerome, Eusebius, and the Pilgrim of Bordeaux.<sup>249</sup> According to Eusebius, Constantine had wished to be baptized in the Jordan.<sup>250</sup> It is even depicted on the sixth-century Madaba map as "Bethabara, the place of baptism of St. John".<sup>251</sup> At some time before the mid-sixth century, local officials placed a marker at the place where Jesus' baptism was traditionally believed to have taken place. The sixth-century topographer, Theodosius, describes a marble column topped with an iron cross erected at the place of Jesus' baptism, along with a church constructed by the Emperor Anastasius (ruled 491–518) and dedicated to John the

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rivers were often personified by female spirits. This image was published by Jean Clédat, *La monastère et la nécropole de Baouït* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1904).

<sup>248</sup> Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 160 (PL 52, 621–2), quoted by Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 87. See also Carl O. Nördstrom, *Ravennastudien; ideengeschichtliche und ikonographische Untersuchungen über die Mosaiken von Ravenna* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1953), 33.

<sup>249</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 108.12; Eusebius, *Onom.*, 58.18–20; Pilgrim of Bordeaux, *Itin. Burd.* 98. See also Egeria, *Itin.* 15.1. Egeria mentions only the site of Aenon near Salim, where John was baptizing according to John 3.23.

<sup>250</sup> Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4.62.

<sup>251</sup> The Madaba Map is very well published. For example see Herbert Donner and Heinz Cüppers, *Die Mosaikkarte von Madeba* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977); John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aries and Phillips, 1977), 31 and end papers; also Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Mosaic Map with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1954), esp. 38–91.

Baptist.<sup>252</sup> The late sixth-century Piacenza Pilgrim recounts the events at the Jordan River on the Feast of Epiphany, which included the miracle of the water rising up and standing still, the rites of baptism, and the gathering of holy water for the blessing of boats:

At dawn . . . the priest goes down to the river. The moment he starts blessing the water the Jordan turns back on itself with a roar and the water stays still till the baptism is finished. All the ship owners of Alexandria have men there that day with great jars of spices and balsam, and as soon as the river has been blessed, before the baptism starts, they pour them out into the water and draw out holy water. This water they use for sprinkling their ships when they are about to set sail.<sup>253</sup>

These pilgrims (like those of any age) collected mementos of their visits to the Holy Land, in particular souvenir *ampullae* or medals with scenes of Jesus life, including his baptism.<sup>254</sup> Extant examples of these souvenir objects, dating from the sixth century show John in a tunic and *pallium* baptizing a nude figure of Christ, either small and beardless or large and bearded. One or two angels witness the event, and a dove descends from above. In some, the hand of God reaches down (cf. fig. 3.8). Almost all of them portray the Jordan River figure, usually submerged and turning his back. Legends inscribed on the borders of these small objects often read: “Blessing of the Lord from the holy places,” (*eulogia kurion tōn hagiōn topōn*).<sup>255</sup>

<sup>252</sup> Theodosius, *De Situ Terre Sanctae*, 20. See Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 69. The cross marker is illustrated in manuscript illuminations, icons, and mosaics from at least the tenth century, but also see Bede’s eighth-century description of the site, which includes the cross-marker and, in the midst of the stream itself, a square church “supported by four stone arches, covered with burned tiles, where the Lord’s clothes were kept while he was baptized,” in *Locis Sant.* 12, text PL 94, 1179–90. A shrine-like chapel still exists at this site.

<sup>253</sup> Piacenza Pilgrim, *Itin.* 11, trans. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 82.

<sup>254</sup> On these ampullae see Gary Vikan, *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982); André Grabar, *Ampoules de terre sainte (Monza, Bobbio)* (Paris: C. Klincksiek, 1958), Bobbio: #18, 40–41; #19, 41–42; Monza: #2, 18–19 (this last with a personification of the Jordan). See also Josef Engemann, “Palästinische Pilgerampullen im F.J. Dölger Institut in Bonn,” *JAC* 16 (1973), 5–27.

<sup>255</sup> See the two examples described by Archer St. Clair in *Age of Spirituality*, #526 and #527, 587–8. See also the close iconographic parallel to this last example on the gold commemorative medallion from Constantinople, K. Reynolds Brown, *Age of Spirituality*, #287, 312–13. The legend on the medal reads “This is my beloved son in who I am well pleased” (*ontos estin ō neois mou ho agapitos en hō eudokēsa*). Reynolds Brown agrees with those scholars who believe this medal was struck to commemorate the baptism of a prince of the imperial family, Theodosius, son of Maurice Tiberius, *On Epiphany*, 584. She identifies the three figures shown below the baptism as, “Ior, Dan, and the Sea” and cites Ps 114.3 as the source of that identification. A bronze medal with the scene of Christ’s baptism under the legend “*Redemptio Filiis Hominum*”

The place of the Jordan River in the pious imagination and poetry of early Christians may be seen in the praise of Gregory of Nyssa who equates it with the glory of the mount of Carmel or the cedars of Lebanon, "For as great Lebanon presents a sufficient cause of wonder in the very trees that it brings forth and nourishes, so is the Jordan glorified by regenerating men and women and planting them in the Paradise of God."<sup>256</sup>

The Jordan thereby found its place in Christian iconography as nature's witness to Christ's baptism. Although in some instances he appears to turn away or flee, his gestures may be interpreted as awe as much as fear. He is not a competing deity, or even a carry over from pagan beliefs. Rather his presence is affirmation of creation's awareness of divine events. The Jordan's particular significance is, of course, that it is the boundary to the Promised Land and a place of healing (cf. Naaman's story). As candidates enter the font they symbolically enter that very river to receive its unique benefits.<sup>257</sup>

### 3.2.4 *Christological Implications of the Orthodox and Arian Baptistery Iconography*

The two Ravenna mosaic images of John baptizing Christ are similar, but their differences suggest that contrasting theological agendas may have influenced their composition. Constructed first (ca. 450), the Orthodox Baptistery must have served as a model for the Arian, which was built approximately a half century later. Each shows three figures (John, Jesus, and the Jordan River) on a predominately gold ground, bisected by horizontal blue lines indicating translucent blue water. Christ's lower body is immersed in this water but still clearly visible through it. In both images John wears an *exomis* tunic (in the Arian baptistery it is clearly made of an animal skin) and is barefoot. A dove dives from above, just over Christ's head. Both images show the Jordan River, although in the Orthodox Baptistery the Jordan is partially submerged and on the right, while the Arian Jordan sits to the left side and out of the water. Just around these medallions is a band of apostles processing with their wreaths of victory.

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and above the word "*Iorda*" was published by G.B. De Rossi, *BAC* (1869), 58; Garrucci, *Storia* 6, 480, #15; Strzygowski, *Ikongraphie der Taufe*, 14, #6; and Leclercq, "Baptême de Jésus," 374, fig. 1309.

<sup>256</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Diem lum.*, trans. NPNF. ser. 2, vol. 5, 523.

<sup>257</sup> A parallel is the earthquake and darkness at Christ's death (cf. Mt 27.45–54).

However, whereas the Orthodox Baptistery (fig. 3.10) portrays Christ as a gaunt, nude adult with a long pointed beard, the Arian Baptistery (fig. 3.11) shows Jesus as having a more plump and youthful body and as beardless. Such conscious iconographic changes could be due to different beliefs about the person of Savior. Unfortunately, because nothing definitive can be said about the christology of the Ostrogothic Arians, arguments must be made on the basis of the iconography alone. One potentially helpful parallel exists: the cycle of images from the life of Christ in the nave of the Arian-built basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (originally dedicated to Christ the Savior). This latter building has no image of Jesus's baptism but does show him as beardless in thirteen images that decorate the upper part of the left nave walls. These images portray Jesus teaching, healing and working wonders. On the right side of the nave are thirteen analogous images beginning with the scene of the Last Supper and moving back toward the door with images from the Passion, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. However, in these Christ wears a beard and seems to have aged.

The distinction in this single cycle between the bearded and beardless Christ calls for an explanation. One possibility is that, during his ministry Jesus has not yet come into his full glory, a change that happens at the beginning of the Passion story. This conforms to the way the Gospel of John is often described as being made up of two parts, "the book of signs" and the "book of glory."<sup>258</sup> The transition begins in John 12, at the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry, and is vividly proclaimed when Jesus washes the apostles' feet and then excuses Judas from the table: "When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified'" (John 13.31). In this iconography, then, the beard could be seen as indicative of full or "mature" divinity. An interesting parallel from Roman art are the ways younger gods (e.g., Apollo, Hermes, or Dionysus) are portrayed as beardless and the older, more mature gods (e.g., Jupiter or Neptune) are shown as full-bearded.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> This is, for instance, the way that Raymond E. Brown's commentary is divided. See Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible vols. 29–29A (New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970).

<sup>259</sup> See Jensen, *Face to Face*, Chap. 5 and esp. 159–465 for a discussion of the bearded and beardless Jesus in early Christian art. One of the problems with this

The differences between the figure of Christ in the Orthodox and Arian baptisteries are similar to the difference between the figures of Christ on Sant' Apollinare Nuovo's right and left sides. Perhaps the Arian image illustrates the belief that at his baptism Christ had not yet attained his full glory—and so not shown as a mature male (or divinity) but still as a youth or “developing” divinity. This could indicate that the designers of the image held a modified form of adoptionism, a heresy that Arians were often accused of teaching. The fact that John holds a shepherd's *pedum* rather than a cross might indicate a reluctance to refer—in this scene—to the passion.

### Conclusion

The iconography of baptism on the artworks as described above seems to fall into two very general categories, each with some fairly distinguishing features with respect to the images of Jesus, John the Baptist and the Jordan River.

The first group, comprised of the Berlin ivory (fig. 3.1), the British Museum ivory (fig. 3.2), the Werden casket (fig. 3.3), the Milan book cover (fig. 3.6), and the dome of the Arian Baptistery (fig. 3.11) have several of the following distinguishing characteristics, linking them with each other as well as with certain baptismal images on sarcophagi: a depiction of John with an animal skin or *exomis* tunic and a *pedum*, a column-like waterfall, and a youthful (or relatively youthful), haloed Jesus who is only in water to his feet (except for the Arian Baptistery mosaic). In almost all of these images, the dove emits water (or breath) on to Jesus' head. The personification of the Jordan in this group most closely follows the model of the classical reclining deity, holding marsh plants and emptying a jug. The figures in this group are, in general, conventionally rendered and somewhat stocky.

The second group seems to have a different spirit. Breaking with the classical past, its perspective or mood make it seem a link to early Medieval or Byzantine baptismal imagery. Comprised of the Lyons ivory, the Maximianus cathedra (fig. 3.8), and the mosaic from the Orthodox Baptistery (fig. 3.11), the distinguishing features of this group include John in a long robe (except for the Orthodox Baptistery

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theory is the appearance of a beardless, resurrected, and enthroned Jesus in the apse of the “orthodox” basilica of S. Vitale.

mosaic) and lacking a *pedum*; an older, gaunt, and bearded Jesus in waist-high water, and without halo; the presence of angel assistants (or, alternatively Sol and Luna); and a partially submerged river deity.

Baptismal iconography, from the earliest catacomb paintings to the fifth-century ivories, is noticeably consistent even though distinct iconographic groups are discernable, as well as a gradual evolution from impressionistic or symbolic catacomb imagery to the more literal or narrative imagery. Generally, then, little distinguishes the imagery of the first period with its sepulchral context from the post-fourth-century imagery that has a non-sepulchral context. However, by the end of the sixth century, the imagery had changed, most significantly by presenting Jesus as an adult at his baptism. Art works based on biblical scenes had become more faithful to the written story, at least in certain respects. This may have been influenced by the appearance of illuminated Bibles, as well as monumental narrative programs in such churches as Sta. Maria Maggiore and Sant' Apollinare Nuovo.

From the ninth century on, the iconographic depiction of Jesus' baptism became more or less standard in the East. The composition typically shows a bearded Jesus standing between the Jordan's banks, up to his waist in water and making the gesture of benediction with his right hand. The Baptist stands on the rocky bank (usually to the left), somewhat above Jesus, and places his right hand on Jesus' head. Two or three attendant angels hover to the right, a cloth veiling their hands. Behind John, a tree has an axe at its root. The hand of God appears at the top of the image, and the dove of the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus. In the water, one or two river deities (elderly and youthful) hold their urns. Sometimes a cross on a pedestal marks the holy spot. Jesus is almost never shown either as nude or youthfully beardless. The river god is retained as a compositional fixture.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ASPECTS OF BAPTISMAL IMAGES IN LIGHT OF EARLY LITURGICAL DOCUMENTS

#### *Introduction: Intersections of Image and Text*

Because early baptism depictions either illustrate or allude to certain ritual actions, their evaluation profits from comparison with contemporary parallel textual data. Considering documents and images together yields some insights, for example, why certain gestures, postures, or actions are commonly portrayed in the iconography. Whereas art historians have paid considerable attention to such questions of interpretation, liturgical historians rarely consider these images as primary evidence of ritual practice. Thus, reversing the usual pattern of historical-liturgical research by starting with the images rather than the documents de-emphasizes certain features of the baptismal rite (e.g., the catechumenate, exorcisms, and professions of faith) that are central in the writings but not actually depicted in extant visual images (although they may be alluded to symbolically).

This approach also draws attention to sacramental details that are prominent in the iconography but mentioned only in passing (if at all) in the documents. In addition, comparing visual and textual evidence sometimes reveals conflicts and dissonance between them that can be difficult to resolve if either or both types of evidence present idealized rather than actual practices. At other times, artistic and textual testimonies seem to parallel each other, but to different ends. Exploring these possibilities, this chapter examines a series of questions that are prompted by the iconography and draws upon documentary evidence to offer perspective. Throughout this discussion, an essential question is whether the imagery is symbolic, illustrative, or illuminative. In other words, whether illustrations of baptism refer to the meaning of the sacrament, depict actual liturgical acts, or illustrate a foundational narrative, or some combination thereof.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Of course parallel considerations (e.g., the problem of discerning descriptions of actual practices versus idealized ones) when evaluating ancient documents.

The fact that most visual representations of early Christian baptism perform more than one of these functions complicates their interpretation. For example, while many depict Christ's specific baptism as reported in Scripture, they also allude to Christian baptism more generally. Common iconic elements drawn from the narrative of Jesus' baptism by John (e.g., John the Baptist wearing an animal skin, the Jordan River's rocky banks, the descending dove) are joined or replaced by details that seem to reflect the community's later ritual practice (e.g., a baptizer wearing garb more suitable to a church official, the use of certain vessels, indications of an interior setting, and the initiate's child-like appearance). This is not necessarily a case of importing contemporary dress or settings into scripture illustration. Rather, it allows a single image to represent two events; in effect, something that took place in the past serves as a type of a present action.

A further complication is the problem of contemporaneity between textual and art historical data. Relevant documents rarely belong to the same place or period as art objects under consideration.<sup>261</sup> The visual evidence is overwhelmingly western, whereas the written sources come from a much wider geographical region. In fact, no existing document completely corresponds with any of the monuments described in the preceding three chapters. At the same time, because such sources provide the only other witness to the sacrament presented in the imagery, their testimony must be considered (albeit with some caution). In the end, study of the images identifies aspects of the baptismal rite that a document-based study might overlook. For example, because the iconography overwhelmingly represents baptism in an outdoor setting, this chapter opens by examining why an original practice of open-air baptism was illustrated well into the fourth and fifth centuries and what the iconography might suggest about the symbolic or conceptual value of showing baptism in a natural setting.

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<sup>261</sup> There are few examples in which text, image, or even architectural space completely overlap in both time and space, although we do have the remains of a baptistery contemporary with Augustine in ancient Hippo, and archaeological remains from the baptistery of Ambrose in Milan. See discussion below, Chap. 5, pp. 195–8.

4.1. *Baptismal Settings: Outdoor Versus Indoor Spaces*

As noted above, most early baptismal representations show baptisms taking place in flowing water, possibly because nearly all of them either portray or allude to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. Such scenes normally depict a baptizer standing on a bank (or a rock), with trees, shrubs, grass, and a running stream or waterfall tumbling from a crag. One or two catacomb frescoes, the baptism scene in Peter and Marcellinus, for example (fig. 1.5), provide little indication of setting, apart from the appearance of the dove which alludes to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. Yet, at least one fifth-century representation—on the British Museum ivory (fig. 3.2)—seems to portray an indoor venue. The two large candelabra and some faint traces of masonry and draperies indicate an interior setting. However, a stream flowing across the bottom of the image confuses the matter.

John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. Most other New Testament accounts of baptisms are set in unspecified but, presumably, outdoor places. The notable exception is Ananias' baptism of Paul, which might have taken place inside a private house (Acts 9.17–18). Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in water along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8.36). The mass, post-Pentecostal baptism of three thousand people, described in Acts 2, could only have taken place outside, but the text does not name the body of water in or near Jerusalem that could have accommodated so many individuals (perhaps an indication that the story is not an obvious, historical chronicle).

Some second-century documents indicate that baptism was an outdoor activity. Justin Martyr (ca. 150) reports that candidates are led to a place where there is water and, after being baptized, are escorted back to where the community is assembled.<sup>262</sup> According to Tertullian, although Peter baptized in the Tiber, whether a person is baptized in the sea, a pond, a river, a fountain, a trough, or a tub makes no difference—a list that presumes practice of outdoor baptism.<sup>263</sup> In another place, Tertullian writes that the candidates' initial renunciation of the devil and all his works takes place in the assembly before they go to the water, which suggests a change of venue but not

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<sup>262</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 61, 65.

<sup>263</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 4.3.

necessarily a move from inside to outside.<sup>264</sup> By contrast, the *Apostolic Tradition* specifies that candidates be brought to a place with water, away from the congregation, and adds that baptism should take place at “cock’s crow” in “pure and flowing” water.<sup>265</sup>

Baptism in the sea or a river would seem to be an ancient practice, following a custom established by Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism or even pre-Christian initiatory practices.<sup>266</sup> According to tradition, Ravenna’s first bishop, Apollinaris, baptized in the river and sea outside the town.<sup>267</sup> However, Agnellus’ ninth-century summary of Apollinaris’ episcopacy asserts that the saint also baptized in the church of Santa Eufemia (also called Ad Anetem).<sup>268</sup> Perhaps Apollinaris initially baptized outside simply as a practical matter. The Venerable Bede reports that the seventh-century English missionary Paulinus of York baptized in the rivers Glen and Swale until baptisteries could be built.<sup>269</sup> Such testimonies indicate that outdoor baptism was practiced

<sup>264</sup> Tertullian, *Cor.* 3.

<sup>265</sup> Hippolytus, *Trad. ap.* 21.1–2. The *Apostolic Tradition*, commonly assigned to Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 215), has many variants due to its complex manuscript history and transmission. The dating and authorship of the document as a whole and with respect to different sections are controversial. For this reason, the document is referenced, below, simply as *Trad. ap.* For translations and discussion of the problems of composition, date, and transmission of variants see Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) as well as a response to their reconsideration of authorship and date by Alistair Stewart-Sykes, “*Traditio Apostolica*: The Liturgy of Third-century Rome and the Hippolytan School or *Quomodo historia liturgica conscribenda sit*,” *SVTQ* 48.2 (2004), 233–48.

<sup>266</sup> See discussion below, p. 164.

<sup>267</sup> See Hippolyte Delehaye, “L’hagiographie ancienne de Ravenna,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 47 (1929), 5–30. According to Agnellus, *Lib. Pont. Ecc. Ravennatis* 1, Apollinaris was ordained by St. Peter himself. Agnellus drew upon an earlier document, the *Passio of Sancti Apollinaris*, for much of his information. On the *Passio of St. Apollinaris*, see the bibliography provided by Mauskopf Deliyannis in *Agnelli Ravennatis*, CCL 199 (Turnhour: Brepols, 2006), 2006, 39–43 and fns. 70, 72.

<sup>268</sup> Deliyannis’ introduction to the text of Agnellus (CCL 199) is an excellent introduction. In addition see Elisabeth Will, *Saint Apollinaire de Ravenne* (Strasbourg: Strasbourg Commission de publication de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg, 1936), 15–21; and the *Codex pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, ed. A. Testi Rasponi in *Raccolta degli storici italiani* 2.3, fasc. 196–7, 36–7 (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1924). Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistry*, also cites the *Passio Sancti Apollinaris* as found in L.A. Muratori, *Rerum italicarum scriptores* 1.2, 529–33; and Surius, *Vita Sancti*, July 23 2.4.11. Apollinaris’ dates and even his actual existence are uncertain. He is supposed to have been martyred at Classe where his remains are still venerated. The first extant documentary mention of Apollinaris comes from Peter Chrysologus (ca. 450), *Serm.* 128.

<sup>269</sup> Bede, *Hist. ecc.* 14, trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 186–9.

by missionaries who had to make use of available space and resources, but only until church buildings could be constructed that included baptismal installations.

The first archeological evidence of such a building is also the oldest known indoor baptistery built into in one room of the house church at Dura Europos in eastern Syria (ca. 249).<sup>270</sup> Perhaps coincidentally, archaeologists discovered this structure in the same general geographical region as the earliest documentary evidence for indoor baptism. One of the Syriac versions of the third-century *Acts of Thomas* (which may have originated around Edessa) specifies that the apostle baptized King Gundaphorus in a public bath.<sup>271</sup> This text, however, also contains descriptions of both indoor and outdoor baptisms.<sup>272</sup> Likewise, the mid-third century *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* report that Paul baptized Xanthippe inside Philotheus' house.<sup>273</sup>

Adapting private bath chambers—or even domestic pools (*impluvia*) designed for the atria of grander homes—for baptism would have been a practical way to ensure privacy (candidates were baptized in the nude), protect the secrecy of the sacrament, and avoid the public eye during times of persecution. Although archaeologists have theorized about the transformation of Roman atrium houses into church halls, little physical data supports the practice of converting *impluvia* into baptismal fountains.<sup>274</sup>

Documentary evidence for built church spaces with annexed baptismal structures slightly pre-dates the Constantinian era. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, at the beginning of the fourth century, Pope Marcellus (304–309) organized the twenty-five titulus churches

<sup>270</sup> See discussion of this baptistery below, Chap. 5, pp. 182–4.

<sup>271</sup> See M.R. James' translation of *Acts Thom* 26, which incorporates some of the Syriac manuscript versions, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 375–6. Compare with the more recent translation in J. Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 457. See also Albertus F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Judas Thomas* (Leiden: Brill, 1962).

<sup>272</sup> *Acts Thom* 121, 132, and 157—in one case by use of some kind of vessel or basin (132). See also Socrates, *Hist. ecc.* 6.18; and Palladius, *Dial.* 9 which describe the followers of the condemned John Chrysostom celebrating Easter at the public baths.

<sup>273</sup> Montague R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota* 2.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 43–85.

<sup>274</sup> See the rejection of the atrium house theory in L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 1 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 12–20. White here particularly cites Gregory Dix as arguing that domestic pools or *piscinae* were adapted into fountains. See Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* 2nd ed. (London, Dacre Press, 1945), 19–35, esp. 23.

in Rome “as dioceses for the baptism and repentance of many converts from paganism.”<sup>275</sup> This text does not actually say that all these churches included separate baptismal rooms (as at Dura Europos). It merely emphasizes the number of churches that were needed to accommodate the growing Christian community. In fact, extant archaeological remains of built, indoor baptisteries in Rome date from the time of Constantine, who built the Lateran Basilica (and presumably its free-standing baptistery) shortly after his conversion to Christianity and signing of the Edict of Milan (313). By the fourth century’s end, Pope Damasus (366–384) had constructed at least one more font in Rome—for St. Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican.<sup>276</sup>

Although such buildings indicate that by the mid-fourth century, baptism had moved indoors (at least in many places), the iconography continues to depict baptism as an outdoor event. These images portray Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan as well as allude to the baptism of unspecified catechumens. Meanwhile, existing baptistery décor from this era depicts lush natural vegetation, birds, animals, and starry night skies, perhaps recalling (or even recreating) baptism’s original outdoor setting. The iconography, as well as interior decoration, may also have indicated the hoped-for destination of the faithful Christian after death: a paradisiacal garden with fresh, flowing streams.<sup>277</sup>

## 4.2. *Water and Its Application*

### 4.2.1. *Importance of Flowing or “Living” Water*

The iconography depicts water flowing both from above and along the ground. Ancient documents also indicate a preference for fresh, flowing water. According to the *Didache*, cold, fresh, running water was best, but if that was unavailable, appropriate substitutions existed:

Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water (*hudati zōnti*), but if you do not have living water, baptize in other water. If you are not able to baptize in cold (water) than in warm (water). And if you have neither, then pour water three times

<sup>275</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 31 (Marcellus), ed. and trans. Raymond Davis, *The Book of Pontiffs* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 13.

<sup>276</sup> Damasus, *Carmen.* 36. See discussion of these baptisteries, Jensen, “Inscriptions from Early Christian Baptisteries.”

<sup>277</sup> See below on the iconography of the baptisteries (Chap. 5).

on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>278</sup>

The *Didache's* classification of water likely reflects contemporary Jewish views of the relative value of different kinds of water for ritual baths. Later rabbinic documents rank water in order of preference from lowest to highest as follows: (1) water in ponds, cisterns, ditches, caverns and rain ponds holding less than sixty gallons so long as they are not too close to the roadway or city (and thus liable to pollution); (2) rain caught before the rain stream has stopped; (3) water in a pool of sixty gallons or more and deep enough for immersion; (4) well water increased by drawn water; (5) "smitten waters" (i.e., salty water or hot spring water); and (6) "living water," (i.e., cold running water in a natural conduit such as a stream or river).<sup>279</sup> Water in a mikveh also was supposed to be moving. Before the era of electric pumps, this was accomplished by emptying the water from above with a scoop because drains into the ground were disallowed.<sup>280</sup> Water baths administered to converts to Judaism had approximately the same requirements as water in the mikveh. They were customarily filled (at least at first) with forty portions (*se'ah*) of rainwater.<sup>281</sup>

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, baptism should take place at "cock's crow" in "pure and flowing" water. Most versions of the text further specify that the stream should either flow through the baptismal basin or be poured from above. If water was scarce, any water was acceptable.<sup>282</sup> This passage shows significant parallels to the *Didache's* instructions but indicates that baptisms were being administered in basins that were most likely indoors.<sup>283</sup>

The very word "font" (*fons*) denotes a fresh, bubbling spring. The documents, however, indicate that such a water source was often unavailable. Tertullian's assertion that any kind of water was permissible provided for such circumstances.<sup>284</sup> Except for the

<sup>278</sup> *Didache* 7.1–3, trans. author (LCL, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, 318–20).

<sup>279</sup> *Miqw.* 1.

<sup>280</sup> *Sipra* 6.3. See Abraham D. Kotlar, "Mikveh" *EJ* 11, 1535–7.

<sup>281</sup> Forty *se'ah* was a Talmudic liquid measure, probably equal to between 750 and 900 liters.

<sup>282</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.1–2, noted above.

<sup>283</sup> See Bradshaw et al., *Apostolic Tradition*, 124. The date of this document is controversial, but appears to have been—at least in part—a fourth-century compilation of earlier church orders.

<sup>284</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 4.3.

(arguably) fourth-century portions of the *Apostolic Tradition* and the *Canons of Hippolytus*, after the mid-third century, textual evidence no longer indicates a preference for running or “living” water, nor discusses baptisms in rivers, waterfalls, or in fountains.<sup>285</sup> Even so, almost without exception, the water depicted in the baptismal iconography appears to be a stream poured out from some kind of vessel (sometimes held by a river god, figs. 2.2, 3.3, 3.11) or flowing from a natural source.

Moving baptism from outdoor water sources to indoor fonts necessarily changed the way the water could be understood as “living,” because it no longer was possible to have the same kind of flowing and fresh water that was available in nature. Nevertheless, so long as flowing water could be simulated, the symbolic significance was maintained. The archaeological evidence, especially the common appearance of drainage holes in fonts, suggests that the water could have been kept moving in some fashion (i.e., by pouring from above while it slowly drained out).<sup>286</sup> An imitation of a gushing spring might also have been provided by fountains (e.g., the spouts in the mouths of animal statues that adorned the Lateran Baptistery). At least one other font may have had a water installation attached to its canopy that simulated rain.<sup>287</sup> These fixtures attempted to create “living water” in indoor locations, perhaps in the same way that the iconography continued to depict baptism out of doors in a flowing stream.

#### 4.2.2. *Water’s Sanctification*

By including angels (fig. 3.2) or the personified Jordan River (especially as in figs. 3.7 and 3.8, where he seems to be turning his back or fleeing), the images may allude to certain rites that sanctified, purified,

<sup>285</sup> *Can. Hippolytus* 19 specifies that the water must be from a river, running, and pure. This document was likely derived from the *Trad. ap.* See Theodor Klauser, “Taufet in lebendigem Wasser!” *Pisciculi: Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums*. Franz Joseph Dölger zum sechzigsten Geburtstage, dargeboten von Freunden, Verehrem und Schüler, ed., Theodor Klauser (Münster: Aschendorff, 1939), 157–63. Also Martin Ninck, *Die Bedeutung des Wassers im Kult und Leben der Alten: eine symbolgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 7.

<sup>286</sup> See below, Chap. 5, pp. 229–30.

<sup>287</sup> On the Lateran Baptistery, see the discussion Chap. 5, pp. 184–8. Also see discussion of the Milanese baptistery, which may have had a canopy over the font that could produce a shower of water, Chap. 5, pp. 194–5.

or exorcised the water in the font. Tertullian argues that the angel's action in Bethesda's healing pool (John 5) prefigured the angel that sanctified baptismal water. He further remarks that demons lurked in or around the same water intent upon snatching victims before they could receive their salvation.<sup>288</sup> The Jordan figure's presence in the iconography, whether as submerged or sidelined witness, illustrates the ancient claim that Christ purified that particular river and, by extension, all water when he descended into it.<sup>289</sup>

Documents from the late third century onward demonstrate that baptismal water (by then mostly contained in indoor fonts) required special sanctification. A priest's invoking the Holy Spirit over the water caused it to change from ordinary to sacred. Earlier sources claim that Jesus' baptism in the Jordan proleptically consecrated all water for that purpose (e.g., river, lake, and seawater). At the end of the first century, Ignatius of Antioch wrote that Jesus was "born and baptized, in order that by his passion (*tō pathei*), he might purify (*katharisē*) water."<sup>290</sup> Tertullian expounds at some length on the consecratory power of the Spirit who dwelt on water at its creation. Insisting that this original presence made water a particular conduit for the Holy One, Tertullian also notes a special invocation inviting the Spirit to come down into the water and grant it the ability to sanctify those who are baptized in it. The *Apostolic Tradition* similarly calls for a consecratory prayer over the water.<sup>291</sup>

The earliest extant reference to an episcopal consecration of baptismal water occurs in one of Cyprian's epistles (ca. 250): "Now so that water may be able to clean away someone's sins by its baptismal washing, it must first be cleansed and sanctified by the bishop."<sup>292</sup> More than a century later, Ambrose describes the consecration of the water in the font that followed the candidates' exorcism and explains the order of

<sup>288</sup> Tertullian *Bapt.* 5–6. See text and discussion above, Chap. 3, p. 136.

<sup>289</sup> On the Jordan figure in the iconography, see discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 117–23.

<sup>290</sup> Ignatius, *Eph.* 18.2, trans., author. (LCL, *Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, 192). Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 12.15 says something similar, that Christ came in order to be baptized and to sanctify baptism.

<sup>291</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.1 and Tertullian *Bapt.* 4. This section of the document may not date to the third century, however, because the ritual appears to reflect later liturgical practices. See Paul Bradshaw, "Who Wrote the *Apostolic Tradition*? A Response to Alistair Stewart Sykes," *SVTQ* 48.2 (2004), 195–206; and response by Stewart-Sykes, "Traditio Apostolica," 233–48.

<sup>292</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 70.1.3, trans. author (CCL3C: 503.29–30).

actions. Jesus first exorcised the water when he entered the Jordan; the subsequent descent of the Holy Spirit then sanctified it:

Christ descended; the Holy Spirit also descended. Why did Christ descend first, the Holy Spirit afterwards, when normal form of baptism has it that first the font is consecrated, then that the one who is to be baptized descends? For when the bishop enters, he performs the exorcism according to the creation of water; afterward he offers an invocation and prayer, that the font may be sanctified and that the presence of the eternal Trinity may be present. But Christ descended first, and the Spirit followed. For what reason? Not so the Lord Jesus himself might seem to need this mystery of sanctification, but so that he himself might sanctify, as well as the Spirit.<sup>293</sup>

Ambrose's assessment that one of the purposes of Christ's baptism was to cleanse and sanctify water answers the question of why it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized. Water needed a general cleansing and consecration for the purpose. This is echoed in an earlier assertion of Tertullian, that watery places are favorite haunts of demons. They especially hovered around baptismal pools, hoping to snatch catechumens about to escape their wiles:

And even apart from the sacrament, unclean spirits have settled on water, affecting that primordial action of divine spirit, as known in the case of shady springs, and out-of-the way streams, and in the pools of baths and channels and in domestic cisterns and in wells said to snatch, obviously by the power of a pernicious spirit.<sup>294</sup>

The belief that that ancient, dangerous spirits needed to be exorcised from baptismal water might be illustrated by the image of a fleeing river god at Christ's baptism.<sup>295</sup> For their part, the angels could represent the power of the water to cleanse and save. Tertullian assures his readers that as God's grace makes progress in the world, both angels and water increase in their powers to heal both body and spirit.

#### 4.2.3. *Baptism by Immersion, Affusion, or Aspersion*

Moving, or "living," water was a key component of the baptismal rite from the beginning. However, no text accounts for the water that appears to tumble from a rocky ledge or to be falling in a vertical

<sup>293</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 1.5. 18, trans., author (SC 25: 70.18).

<sup>294</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 5.4, trans. author (CCL.1: 281.23–27).

<sup>295</sup> See discussion of this figure, Chap. 3, pp. 120–1.

stream in some of the images (e.g., figs. 2.6, 2.9). The waterfall iconography may reference the idea that the Jordan River stopped and “rose up” when Jesus was baptized, but it also may depict one way that water was imposed on subsequent recipients of baptism.<sup>296</sup> Based on available documents, historians have sometimes assumed that baptism was usually accomplished by full immersion—or submersion—of the body (dunking).<sup>297</sup> However, the archaeological and iconographic evidence is ambiguous on this point. Many—if not most—surviving baptismal fonts are too shallow to have allowed submersion.<sup>298</sup> In addition, a significant number of depictions show baptismal water being poured over the candidate’s head (affusion), either from a waterfall (figs. 2.6, 2.9, 3.5), an orb (fig. 2.12) or some kind of liturgical vessel (figs. 3.8, 3.10). Depending on how the image is interpreted, water may also be coming from the dove’s beak (cf. figs. 3.1, 3.11, and 5.20).<sup>299</sup>

Representations that lack an overhead water source normally show the recipient standing ankle-deep in a running stream. The depth shown in these images does not preclude submersion of the recipient’s head and body, but it does not show it. Furthermore, the water’s shallowness would seem to make submersion difficult—even requiring the candidate to lie prone in the pool.<sup>300</sup> Without doubt, since visual representations of a dunking (head under water) would have been difficult to render, artists might well have depicted the baptizer with his right hand upon the candidate’s head in order to push him down under the water (rather than performing the imposition of hands after the candidate’s reemergence). This interpretation, however, fails to account for the waterfall, overhead stream, or shower in so many of the images, which suggests that water was poured upon recipients while they stood in the pool. Pouring (affusion) certainly could bathe the entire body and thus be understood as an immersion by those who witnessed or experienced it. In fact the Latin word for immersion,

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<sup>296</sup> On the tradition that the River Jordan stopped or rose up, see discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 118–19.

<sup>297</sup> This is especially evident in the recent work of Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 849–52.

<sup>298</sup> Note the varied depths of fonts and discussion below, Chap. 5, pp. 227–9 in general.

<sup>299</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 112–5.

<sup>300</sup> This mode of immersion has been proposed for Milan by Silvia Lusuardi Siena and Marco Sannazaro, “I battisteri del complesso episcopale Milanese alla luce delle recenti indagini archeologiche,” *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 657–70.

derived from the verb “mergo,” does not necessarily imply submersion but only being fully drenched.<sup>301</sup>

Nevertheless, “baptism” comes from the Greek words *baptō* or *baptizō*, both of which connote the idea of dipping or plunging into water. A different Greek verb *louō* (or *apolouō*) generally refers to bathing or washing dirt off the body. Greek-speaking Jews used the term *apolouō* for ritual cleansing, and the noun *loutron* for ritual baths, but reserved *baptō* and *baptizō* for a particular kind of purificatory baths that were administered to converts. The Latin term, *baptismus*, was merely a transliteration of the Greek and applied only to the Christian baptismal rite.<sup>302</sup>

But even though neither iconography nor archaeology universally supports it, most ancient documents specify baptism by immersion. One prominent exception is the *Didache*, which does not stipulate immersion, but merely says that if cold running water is unavailable, the administrator should pour (*ekcheon*) water three times on the recipient’s head.<sup>303</sup> Justin Martyr describes only a washing in water, giving no details about how this might be done.<sup>304</sup> By contrast, Tertullian’s synopsis of the rite states that the newly baptized come “up from the washing” (*egressi de lavacro*) after being immersed in the water” (*in aqua mergimur*).<sup>305</sup>

One witness to baptism by affusion comes from Gregory of Nyssa’s catechetical orations in which he describes water being poured over the head of those being baptized. This, he says, signifies the way the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the neophytes. He adds, however, that following this, the one baptized will emerge from the water signifying Christ’s resurrection from the tomb.<sup>306</sup> The method of baptism is not Gregory’s point here, although he seems to assume the action of pouring water over the head of the recipient who may have been kneeling or, perhaps, sitting in the font.

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<sup>301</sup> See Ambrose *Sac.* 2.20, for example. Here the verb “mersisti” appears for all three immersions.

<sup>302</sup> See a discussion of the terminology in Joseph Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology* (Nijmegen: Dekker and Van de Vegt, NV, 1962). In regard to pagan usage, Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.23 uses the term *lavacro* for the ritual washing in preparation for initiation. When Tertullian refers to the rites of “baptism” in the mystery cults, he uses the words “*per lavacrum*” rather than “*baptismus*” (e.g. *Bapt.* 5.1.).

<sup>303</sup> *Didache* 7.

<sup>304</sup> Justin, *1 Apol.* 61.

<sup>305</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 7.1–2.

<sup>306</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Orat.* 35 (on the Holy Spirit).

The *Apostolic Tradition*, instructs the administrant to put his hand on the candidate's head and dip (*baptizet*) after each interrogation (= three times).<sup>307</sup> In the mid- fourth century, Zeno of Verona appears to invite catechumens to undertake their own baptism: "Immerse [*immergite*] yourselves confidently...for you will plunge naked [*nudi demergitis*] into the font...Put yourselves under the waves of an overflowing river."<sup>308</sup> These lines imply that the candidates dipped themselves rather than submitted to a dunking. Although possibly only rhetorically, Zeno does suggest that candidates submerged themselves "under the waves."

Like the *Apostolic Tradition*, Greek and Syrian fathers explain the way submersion baptism would have been accomplished. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 400), for example, provides the following instructions to candidates:

Then the bishop lays his hand on your head with the words "In the name of the father" and while pronouncing them pushes you down into the water. You obediently follow the signal he gives you by word and gesture and bow down under the water...you bow your head when you immerse yourself to show your sincere agreement with the bishop's words. You bow your head down under the water, then lift your head again. Meanwhile the bishop says 'And of the Son," and guides you with his hand as you bend down into the water as before...You raise your head, and again the bishop says, "And of the Holy Spirit," pressing you down into the water again with his hand. You bend beneath the water again, humbly acknowledging by the same sign that you hope for the blessings of baptism from the Holy Spirit.<sup>309</sup>

Similarly, John Chrysostom instructs the priest to use his right hand to push the candidate's head down into the water three times and lift it out again three times.<sup>310</sup> This action may be the one depicted in the iconography. Nevertheless, nothing definitive in the iconography refers to or symbolizes the practice of triple immersion or indicates its

<sup>307</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.14, trans., Bradshaw et al., *Apostolic Tradition*, 116.

<sup>308</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 5, 7 (*Tract.* 2.23; 1.12), trans. author (CCL: 22, 197, 51). See discussion of these documents in Gordon P. Jeanes, *The Day Has Come! Easter and Baptism in Zeno of Verona*, Alcuin Club Collection 73 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995).

<sup>309</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt hom.* 3.18–19, trans. Edward Yarnold, S.J., *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, second edition (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 191–2; see also Alphonse Mingana, *Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord's Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1933), 62.

<sup>310</sup> John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 2.26.

correspondence to the three-fold confession of belief in the persons of the Divine Trinity—a widespread understanding of such a practice in surviving textual evidence.

Although three-fold immersion (or submersion) seems to be the favored form of baptism in the documents, hints of other methods also occur. As noted above, the *Didache* allows affusion as an option (if neither running water nor “other water” is available).<sup>311</sup> In the third century, Pope Cornelius, discussing the case of Novatian in his letter to Fabius of Antioch, observes that because Novatian was baptized on his sickbed (as a *clinicus*) by affusion, he should have been excluded from ordination to the priesthood.<sup>312</sup> In contrast, Cyprian sees no advantage to immersion over affusion, and rejects the idea that clinical baptism would disqualify and individual from clerical office. In Cyprian’s view, baptismal water is inherently redemptive, no matter how applied or in what circumstances. He adds that, in its power, baptism is different from mundane bathing because the former washes away sin whereas the latter only washes away external dirt.<sup>313</sup> If the baptisms that Novatian administered as bishop were invalid, it was not because of the manner of Novatian’s own baptism, but because he was a schismatic.

To support his point, Cyprian cites a number of Old Testament passages that refer to sprinkling in connection with cleansing from sin (Ezek. 36.25; Num.19.17–21, 8.5–7) and reiterates that sprinkling with water had the same effect as immersion baptism, provided that it was performed within the “true church.”<sup>314</sup> He also reminds his reader of one biblical sickbed recipient of baptism—the paralytic in the Gospel (John 5.1–9, cf. Matt. 9.2–7 and parallels)—who was not barred from the full forgiveness of the Lord. However, because he recognizes that some people would not be convinced by his arguments, Cyprian allows that “if anyone is of the view that such people have obtained nothing on the grounds that they have only been sprinkled with the water of salvation, if they are, in fact, empty and without grace, then

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<sup>311</sup> *Didache* 7. Note Heb 10.22, which implies baptism by both aspersion and by immersion.

<sup>312</sup> Eusebius, *Hist.* 6.43.13–15.

<sup>313</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 69. 12.1.

<sup>314</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 69, 12.3.

let them not be misled; if they recover from their serious illness and regain their health, let them be baptized.”<sup>315</sup>

However, treating the water as merely symbolic contrasted with baptism’s parallel Jewish ritual, the practice of proselyte baptism that, like other Jewish purificatory baths, required complete nudity so that the water would reach (and cleanse) all parts of the body. This requirement is specified in one of the catechetical orations of Gregory of Nyssa, who insists that the entire body be anointed with nothing interposing between skin and oil.<sup>316</sup> Regulations also stipulate that the water’s depth allow for full bodily submersion, even (if necessary) requiring the bather to lie down in it.<sup>317</sup> Submerging the whole body also enacts, in a way that sprinkling cannot, the action of dying to an old life, being buried, and rising newly born from the font (cf. Rom 6.3–4). Full submersion’s ability to express this transition is explained in Pope Leo I’s fourth letter to the bishops of Sicily (ca. 447): “For, in the rite of baptism, death comes from the slaying of sin, and the triple immersion imitates the three days of burial, and the rising out of the water is like his rising from the tomb.”<sup>318</sup> John Chrysostom likewise declares: “When we submerge our heads in the water, as in a type of tomb, the old self is buried and, while submerged, it is hidden below and thence we rise again to a new self.”<sup>319</sup>

This preference for some form of full immersion, with a practical allowance for other methods, continues through the Middle Ages in the West. Thomas Aquinas states that though immersion (of babies presumably) was the general practice in his day and more literally accomplished the corporeal cleansing from original sin, other methods were also valid: “baptism can be conferred by sprinkling or pouring on water . . . At times there might be a great crowd to be baptized . . . Sometimes also there might be urgent necessity because of a scarcity of water or because of the feebleness of a minister . . . or the candidate himself

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<sup>315</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 69.13.3

<sup>316</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Orat.* 35.

<sup>317</sup> *M. Miqw.* 1 9. b. *Yebam.* 47b; *Gerim* 60a 1:4. See Gary Porton, *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 132–3, 72–3, 9, 93–4; Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 (1989), 12–33 and “The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony,” *JJS* 41 (1990), 172–203.

<sup>318</sup> Leo, *Ep.* 16 (PL 54, 474f), trans. Edmund Hunt, *Pope St. Leo the Great, Letters* FOC 34 (New York, 1957), 72.

<sup>319</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 25, trans. author (PG 59.151).

might be so physically weak that total immersion would endanger his life... But it is accidental to baptism whether the washing be done in this or that way."<sup>320</sup>

The textual evidence demonstrates that ways of applying baptismal water varied, not only geographically and over time, but also according to circumstance or need. The iconography from the early church, however, seems to indicate that baptismal submersion was less common than documents imply. Whereas submersion might have been an ideal, a survey of the iconography and architectural remains indicate that, in practice, a common mode of baptism was by pouring (affusion).

#### 4.2.4. *Vessels for Administering Baptismal Water*

A small dish or jug, possibly resembling the *patera* used for libations in Roman religious ceremonies, appears as a vessel for pouring baptismal water on the (restored) sarcophagus in the Museo Pio Cristiano (fig. 2.6), the (also restored) Orthodox Baptistry mosaic (fig. 3.11), and on an ivory in the British Museum (fig. 3.8).<sup>321</sup> The paten, an object ordinarily associated with the eucharist (a container for bread), does not seem to be frequently depicted as a baptismal vessel, however.<sup>322</sup> A jug or vase seems to be a source of water (or oil) on the Vatican glass fragment (fig. 3.9).

The *Liber Pontificalis* (Sylvester) lists a baptismal basin (*pelvis*) that Constantine gave to the church at Ostia, weighing about forty pounds (slightly smaller than some of the patens that the emperor presented

<sup>320</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* 3a. Q. 66.art. 7, trans. James J. Cunningham, SJ, *St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae* 57 (New York: McGraw-Hill 1975), 33. The belief that immersion was preferable to sprinkling was very important in some of the Protestant Reformation debates as well. Anabaptist groups insisted on the necessity of immersion baptism, to symbolize the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. See George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 704, for a particularly good example. Liturgical renewal today often includes a recovery of immersion baptism as well.

<sup>321</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 2, pp. 55–8 of this sarcophagus, and Chap. 3, pp. 104–6, 108–110 of the mosaic and ivory. De Bruyne, “L’imposition des mains,” 222–3, argued that the paten must be the work of a later restorer on the sarcophagus and the mosaic, but noted that a silver spoon from Aquileia with a baptismal scene also shows the paten. He does not discuss the ivory example noted here.

<sup>322</sup> See examples of some sixth-century patens in Weitzmann, ed., *Age of Spirituality*, #546 and #547 as well as discussion by V. Elburn, 592–8. Patens are mentioned in the *Lib. Pont.* (Marcus, Hormisdas; Sergius, and Gregory II).

to that church).<sup>323</sup> The *Liber Pontificalis* also records that Sixtus III (432–440) gave the Basilica of Sta. Maria Maggiore a twenty-pound silver stag that would pour water into the font, and “all the sacred silver vessels for baptism, weighing five pounds.” Sixtus gave the church of S. Lorenzo a “service for baptism or penance, of silver, weighing five Roman pounds for use in either baptism or rites associated with penance.” This was somewhat smaller than another of his gifts to that church: an eight-pound silver hand basin.<sup>324</sup> One surviving object, a sixth-century ladle from the Hama treasure (today in the Walters Art Gallery) served this purpose. Its bowl has a spout for pouring and its long handle bears the inscription: “For the remission of the sins of Stephen.”<sup>325</sup>

If, as discussed above, baptismal water was poured over the recipient’s head, some kind of vessel would have been necessary. However, aside from these vessels mentioned in the *Liber Pontificalis*, little documentary evidence exists for the use of patens or any other vessels that might have been used for pouring water at baptism.<sup>326</sup> In general, discussion of liturgical objects is generally lacking in early Christian documents, making the *Liber Pontificalis*’ information difficult to corroborate.

### 4.3. *Individuals Involved in the Rite*

#### 4.3.1. *Recipients*

Almost all of the baptism scenes from the third through the fifth centuries show the recipient as a youth or young child and usually, but not always, male (cf. fig. 2.12 and 3.9 where females appear to be receiving baptism). The earliest and most significant exceptions to showing Jesus as a youth are the two Ravenna baptisteries that show Jesus as an adult being baptized by John (figs. 3.11, 3.12). If the other images are interpreted as depictions solely of Jesus’ baptism, they

<sup>323</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 34 (Sylvester), “*pelvim et argento ad baptismum pensantem lib. Xx.*”

<sup>324</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 46 (Xystus). See Van Dam, *Book of Pontiffs*, 37–8.

<sup>325</sup> Published in Weitzmann, *Age of Spirituality*, #537, 603: H. Buschhausen, “Ladle with Inscription.”

<sup>326</sup> See H. Leclercq, “Patene,” *DACL* 2392–2414 and A. Nesbitt, “Paten” *DCA*, 1571–73. Giovanni Bona’s seventeenth-century work, *Rerum Liturgicarum* 1.25.3 (1972) mentions certain *paternae chrismales ad usum baptismatis et confirmationis* but without date, description or explanation.

contradict the Gospel narratives that present Jesus as an adult at his baptism.<sup>327</sup> Many iconographic details point to just such an identification (e.g., the baptizer's wearing an animal skin, the dove, the rocky banks of a river etc.), however. As a result, the iconography appears to represent baptism in a more generalizing way—as a sacrament inaugurated by Jesus and shared by every Christian.<sup>328</sup>

Although it is tempting to view this iconography as evidence for the baptism of infants or small children, it seems more likely that it instead represents the symbolic return to childlike innocence through the ritual. Literary remains from the second century onward conclusively demonstrate that infants and small children were baptized, but do not suggest that pedobaptism was the prevailing practice in early Christianity.<sup>329</sup> Baptism of children is indicated by Irenaeus (ca. 177), who asserts that while Jesus was an adult male when he came to baptism, he came to save all people, whether infants or children, elders or youths:

He therefore passed through every age, and becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age... a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise he was an old man for the elderly that he might be a perfect master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise.<sup>330</sup>

This statement might explain why Christ was represented as a youth at his baptism, but it does not explain why he is almost never shown as an adult in early Christian art.

Evidence against ancient pedobaptism includes Tertullian's caution against baptizing young children because their sponsors could not

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<sup>327</sup> Luke 3.23 which says that Jesus was thirty years old when he began his ministry is usually taken as an indication of Christ's age at his baptism.

<sup>328</sup> This is the hypothesis presented above, Chap. 1.

<sup>329</sup> The debate between Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland in the 1960s is an example of scholarly differences over the interpretation of evidence—almost all of it based on documents and inscriptions, with little or no mention of the art historical data; Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism; A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland*, trans. D.M. Barton (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1963); and K. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). Both Aland and Jeremias agree that infant baptism first appears in the third century, but disagree on interpret the evidence from the first and second centuries. See also G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962).

<sup>330</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.22.4, trans. ANF 1, 391.

guarantee their future characters. Furthermore, Tertullian saw no urgent need for innocent little ones to be cleansed from their sins:

It follows that deferment of baptism is preferable, considering the character, disposition, and even age of a person; particularly in the case of children. For what need, if not an emergency, for their sponsors to be imperiled, because those little ones might forsake their promises through death or fail due to their development of an evil character? Indeed, the Lord said: "Forbid them not to come to me." So let them come when they are nearer maturity, when they are learning, when they are being taught what it is that they are coming to. Let them be made Christians when they are able to know Christ. Why should the innocent one rush to the remission of sins?<sup>331</sup>

Additional documentary evidence that both practices continued throughout the third and into the fourth century includes passages from the *Apostolic Tradition*, which made provision for children to be baptized first, before either the men or women, and allowed parents or other adults to speak for those too young to speak for themselves.<sup>332</sup> Both Origen and Cyprian permit infant baptism, Origen for the sake of their cleansing from sins, and Cyprian in order that they may join the church for safety's sake. Cyprian, perhaps primarily concerned for newborn infants in mortal danger, argues that baptism need not even be delayed the customary eight days after birth (to follow the ancient law concerning circumcision); he admonishes his reader not to imagine that God's grace "is distributed in greater or lesser degree according to the ages of the recipients."<sup>333</sup>

Augustine's mother, possibly heeding Tertullian's admonition, chose not to baptize her son as an infant and he remained a catechumen until he was a fully converted and mature Christian. Despite this, in his refutation of Pelagius and his followers, Augustine emphasizes the value (and often the necessity) of infant baptism. In one of the anti-Pelagian treatises, Augustine insists that infant baptism had scriptural authority and that little ones belonged to the flock of Christ only by baptism and would perish if they did not receive it.<sup>334</sup> Similarly Jerome,

<sup>331</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 18.4–5, trans. author (CCL 1: 293.23–34).

<sup>332</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.4.

<sup>333</sup> Origen, *Hom. Luc.* 14.5; Cyprian, *Ep.* 64. 2–3. Cyprian may have been mainly concerned with the necessity to baptize infants in danger of death.

<sup>334</sup> Augustine, *Pecc. Merit.* 1.18.23.

who was also baptized as an adult, urged parents to bring their children forward for baptism.<sup>335</sup>

Third and fourth-century funerary inscriptions indicate that small children received baptism, but possibly just before death.<sup>336</sup> For example, a third-century inscription from Rome's Catacomb of Priscilla reads, "*Ir[en]e, quae vix cum p[ar]entibus suis m[enses] X d[ies] VI acc[epit] VII id[es] April et redd[edit] id[es] A[p]ril*" ("Irene, who lived with her parents ten months and six days received [grace] on April 7 and returned [her soul] on April 13").<sup>337</sup> A fourth-century funerary mosaic from North Africa once covered the tomb of Victor, who lived eight years, three months, and twenty five days. He is proclaimed to be an "innocent" now in peace, an indication of his status as a baptized Christian.<sup>338</sup>

Gregory of Nazianzen's position illustrates the situation in his region of Asia Minor in the late fourth century. His *Oration on Holy Baptism*, admonishes unbaptized adults to receive the sacrament at the festival of Epiphany. Regarding infants, he says they are "conscious neither of the loss nor of the grace." They should be baptized, "if any danger presses." Otherwise, parents or sponsors should wait until the child is at least three years old, or mature enough to listen and answer questions asked of them about the sacrament.<sup>339</sup> Gregory acknowledges that Christ himself was not baptized before he was an adult but points out that Christ was in no danger of dying unbaptized, because he had no need of cleansing. Consequently, the risk of being unbaptized, Gregory explains, is that one could die without the sacrament—without being "clothed in incorruption."<sup>340</sup>

Gregory Nazianzen's advice that baptism be delayed until children are about three years old could account for those toddler-like

<sup>335</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 107.6 (to Laeta). We also know that Ambrose and Gregory of Nazianzen were baptized as adults, although both also raised in Christian households. Christian emperors, also, often were baptized later in life. Constantine was baptized on his deathbed, Theodosius I was baptized on a sick bed (as an adult), while Valentinian II died as a catechumen. On Constantine's baptism see Edward Yarnold, S.J., "The Baptism of Constantine," *StPatr* 26 (1991), 95–100.

<sup>336</sup> See Everett Ferguson, "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," *JThS* ns. 30.1 (1979), 37–46.

<sup>337</sup> Diehl 1532 (vol. 1, 298), cited in Ferguson, "Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," 42.

<sup>338</sup> The mosaic, from Furnos Minus, is now in the Bardo Museum in Tunis.

<sup>339</sup> Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orat.* 40. 28, trans., NPNF ser. 2.7, 370.

<sup>340</sup> Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orat.* 40.29.

recipients in early Christian art. However, this conclusion overlooks the great number of healing or resuscitation scenes in which the one healed (e.g., the man born blind, the paralytic) or returned to life (e.g., Lazarus or the widow's son) also is shown as small in stature—usually in direct contradiction to the Gospel narratives (cf. fig. 2.5). Similarly, representations of Adam and Eve's creation show them as being child-sized and nude.<sup>341</sup>

This frequency of child-sized figures in early Christian art suggests the possibility that the imagery adapts the common (and contemporary) Roman convention of substituting children, or *putti*, for adults in artistic compositions. Children were often portrayed as engaged in adult activities (e.g., harvesting crops or fighting in the arena). According to Grabar, Christians adopted this “playful genre” but adapted it to incorporate the abstract idea of the eternal, then quickly replacing the children with adolescents to lend a more “serious tone.”<sup>342</sup> Many Christian art works incorporate this familiar motif, including the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, the floor pavement of the double basilica at Aquileia, and the ceiling mosaics of the mausoleum of Sta. Constanza that show small children harvesting wheat, fishing, or making wine. Although the iconography may have adapted this Roman motif, the figures appearing in this guise are consistent; they are being baptized, healed, or rejuvenated. It may be that in each instance their stature symbolizes their status as being born-again.

A significant body of literary evidence refers specifically to recently baptized (adult) Christians as *pueri*, *infantes*, or *parvuli*—offspring of the mother church, newly born from her watery womb/font. In the mid-fourth century, Zeno of Verona vividly employs this metaphor while exhorting candidates to enter the baptistery:

For now the health-giving warmth of the eternal font invites you. Now your Mother adopts you so that she might give birth: but not according to the normal order (*ea lege*), the way your mothers gave birth, who groaned in childbirth, and delivered you, prisoners of this world, wailing, sullied and wrapped in squalid swaddling clothes; but rather [reborn] exulting, heavenly, free of sin, absolved of everything, not in fetid cradles, but abundantly nourished at altar rails among sweet-scents.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> On this see Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London: Routledge, 2000), 167–80.

<sup>342</sup> Grabar, *Christian iconography*, 34.

<sup>343</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font. 1 (Tract. 1.32)*, trans. author (CCL: 22. 83).

In a later invitation to the font Zeno urges: “Run quickly to the milky fluid [*lacteam laticem*] of the generative font.”<sup>344</sup> After their baptism, he tells the neophytes that their birth was without maternal labor and free from tears. All of them born from one mother, they are of one race and nation, joined in unity into one body.<sup>345</sup>

Augustine also spoke of the newly baptized as newborn babies. In his first treatise on John’s epistle he describes the neophytes:

Behold, now in the name of Christ [and] through his blood, whom they have now confessed, who are called infants [*infantes*], all their sins are forgiven. They went in old [*veteres*], they went out new [*novi*]. How is that they went in old and came out new? Old people [*senes*] they went in, infants [*infantes*] they came out. For old age is lethargic, an old life, but the infancy of regeneration is a new life.<sup>346</sup>

In a sermon for Easter Sunday Augustine explains why Easter week is called the “Octave of the Infants.” This week was set aside for the sacraments of those who were baptized at the Easter vigil. Whereas before baptism those individuals were called *competentes*, because they were striving to be born, after baptism they were addressed as *infants* or as *parvuli* (little ones).<sup>347</sup>

The well-attested practice of feeding a mixture of milk and honey to neophytes with their first eucharist not only symbolized their entrance into the promised land “flowing with milk and honey” but also their condition as babies unaccustomed to solid food (cf. Heb 5.12). Both the *Apostolic Tradition* and Tertullian record this practice; it is also mentioned by Zeno of Verona, and set out in a sacramentary attributed to Pope Leo I.<sup>348</sup> Around 500, John the Deacon, writing

<sup>344</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 7 (*Tract.* 1.12, Ps. 41), trans. author (CCL: 22.51).

<sup>345</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 4 (*Tract.* 1.55, *Ad neoph.*). See discussion of the font as womb below, pp. 247–51.

<sup>346</sup> Augustine, *Tract. Ep. Jo.* 1.6, trans. author (PL 35, 1982).

<sup>347</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 228. In *Serm.* 376, Augustine speaks again of the “Octave of the Infants” and describes those coming forward as *pueri*, *infantes*, *parvuli*, and even *lactantes*.

<sup>348</sup> *Trad. ap.* 3, Tertullian, *Cor.* 3; *Marc.* 3.22 (in which Tertullian indicates that this rite was also practiced by followers of Marcion); Zeno, *Inv. font.* 3; and the *Sac. Veron.*, trans. *DBL*, 206–8. See also Barnabas, *Ep.* 6.8–17. Although not recorded in Greek or Syriac baptismal texts, milk and honey is discussed at length by Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.6. The baptismal (or eucharistic) background of this discussion is implied in Clement’s comment that milk has a natural affinity for water, just like the spiritual washing has for the spiritual food.

from Rome to the aristocratic Senarius, discusses milk and honey's significance:

You ask why milk and honey are placed in a most sacred cup and offered with the sacrifice at the Paschal Sabbath... This kind of sacrament, then, is offered to the newly-baptized so that they may realize that no others but they, who partake of the Body and Blood of the Lord, shall receive the land of promise; and as they start upon the journey thither, they are nourished like little children with milk and honey... so that they who in their first birth were nourished with the milk of corruption and first shed tears of bitterness, in their second birth may taste the sweetness of milk and honey in the bowels of the church.<sup>349</sup>

On the basis of this documentary evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that a small nude child receiving baptism represents the symbolic transformation from old to young, dead to reborn, and embarking on a new life rather than the baptism of an actual child. This iconographic motif is used in the early depictions of Christ's baptism as well. By the mid-fifth century—a date at which infant baptism was becoming the norm—Christ is shown as an adult at his baptism, in accordance with the scriptural accounts.

#### 4.3.2. *Administrators*

Every baptismal image shows at least two persons: a recipient and an administrator. The baptizer, bearded and often much larger than the recipient, sometimes clearly depicts John the Baptist. In other instances, however, his identity is debatable. The ambiguity may have been intentional, allowing the image simultaneously to illustrate both John's baptism of Jesus and the baptism of any catechumen.<sup>350</sup> The first is the model for the second. Because candidates are sacramentally joined to Christ in the baptism, they mystically replicate that original event. Accordingly, the administrant plays the role of John the Baptist in the rite and probably should be identified with the local bishop.

Even though some of the oldest Christian documents (e.g., Justin Martyr's *Apology* or the *Didache*) say nothing about who may administer

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<sup>349</sup> John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen. 12.*, text André Wilmart, *Analecta reginensia; extraits des manuscrits latins de la reine Christine conservés au Vatican, Studi e Testi 59* (Vatican City: Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, 1933), 157–63; trans., *DBL*, 208–12.

<sup>350</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 1, pp. 29–30.

baptism, the bishop's key role in assuring the rite's validity emerged fairly early. Ignatius of Antioch was the first to claim that baptism without the bishop, or the bishop's approved representative, is unlawful.<sup>351</sup> According to Tertullian, the rules that have to be observed in regard to who can give and receive baptism include the assertion that on account of the church's dignity, "the high priest (who is the bishop) holds the first right, then presbyters and deacons. Yet none may do so without episcopal authorization, on account of the honor of the church, for when this is protected, peace is protected." However, he adds that in emergencies even laypersons have the right (and obligation) to perform baptisms.<sup>352</sup>

Cyprian likewise understands the bishop as the proper administrator of baptism, with presbyters (or even deacons) allowed to baptize those in danger of dying. He omits any mention of a lay person baptizing in emergencies, however.<sup>353</sup> Cyprian also explicitly reserves the imposition of hands upon the newly baptized to the bishop, and presumes that persons who were baptized in an emergency by a priest or deacon, and who subsequently recovered, would seek out the bishop for the necessary sacramental completion. If they died, they could seek Christ himself to supply heavenly equivalent of the episcopal supplement, just as he breathed on the apostles after his own resurrection (John 20.22).<sup>354</sup> The third century church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* also specifies the bishop as the essential baptism administrator and urged congregants to honor their bishops as the ones who released them from their sins through the sacrament.<sup>355</sup>

The *Apostolic Tradition*, likewise reserves certain actions to the bishop alone, including pre-baptismal exorcisms, the blessing of the oils used during the rite, the post-baptismal imposition of hands, the post-baptismal anointing on the neophyte's head, and the post-baptismal kiss and greeting ("The Lord be with you"). It also assigns specific ceremonial functions to presbyters and deacons. For example,

<sup>351</sup> Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 8.2.

<sup>352</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17.1, trans. author (CCL 1: 291.1–5). See also, Tertullian, *Apol.* 39.

<sup>353</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 18.1.2 and 2.2, addressed to presbyters and deacons.

<sup>354</sup> This supplement is not in Cyprian but rather described by the anonymous author of *Rebapt.*, who raises the problem in Chap. 4, and resolves it in Chap. 10, "if, by necessity of the case, [water baptism] should be administered by an inferior cleric, let us wait for the result, that it may either be supplied by [the bishop] or reserved to be supplied by the Lord."

<sup>355</sup> *Did. apos.* 9.

the priest and deacon enter the font with the candidate and perform the pre-baptismal anointing, actual immersion, and post-baptismal anointing with the oil of exorcism.<sup>356</sup>

Other ancient sources are less detailed and, arguably, imply a less hierarchal structure. More than a century after Tertullian, Jerome also argued that presbyters and deacons might baptize with the bishop's authorization and that even laypersons were permitted to baptize in emergencies.<sup>357</sup> The *Apostolic Constitutions* seems to allow presbyters to take the place of the bishop on occasion.<sup>358</sup> John Chrysostom, by contrast, claims that a great number of residents of a certain place had fallen under the "wrath of God" because a young deacon baptized them when the bishop was absent and presbyters were inattentive.<sup>359</sup>

But even making allowances for necessity, as the Christian population grew larger and more diffuse, the exclusive right of the bishop to perform the post-baptismal rites of "confirmation" or the imposition of hands became more clearly defined, particularly in the West.<sup>360</sup> For these reasons, the gesture depicted in the iconography—the imposition of hands—indicates that the individual depicted should be identified as either John the Baptist or the local bishop. The only possible exception is the unknown figure whose hand rests on the head of the neophyte on the Vatican glass fragment (fig. 3.9).<sup>361</sup> On the Aquileia grave marker, the two figures presiding at the baptism of a young woman are probably meant to be some combination of John the Baptist, a saintly bishop, or even Christ but not a presbyter or deacon (fig. 2.12).<sup>362</sup>

#### 4.3.3. *Presbyters and Deacons*

Although the art generally depicts only two persons in the baptismal scene, some of the images show a third person, as in the case of the Aquileia stone. And, as noted above, literary sources describe

<sup>356</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.

<sup>357</sup> Jerome, *Lucif.* 9 (PL 23,173).

<sup>358</sup> Compare, for example, *Ap. const.* 3.16 with 7. 22. The second text addresses either a bishop or presbyter as the administrator of baptism.

<sup>359</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom.* 46 (PG 60.325). The word *phrontizen*, translates as "paying attention" might also be translated as "concerned" implying that the presbyters were just not particularly worried about the deacon's actions.

<sup>360</sup> See Maxwell Johnson, Maxwell, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989), 203–7.

<sup>361</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 106–8.

<sup>362</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 2, pp. 71–5.

a complex rite involving several officials, including presbyters and deacons. The *Apostolic Tradition* in particular defined the various roles of deacons, presbyters, and bishop, giving the most responsibilities to the presbyter and a sort of supportive role to the deacons, who went down into the font with the candidates. Both Tertullian and Cyprian regarded presbyters and deacons as authorized to baptize in emergencies, but they did not say whether all three orders of clergy were normally present in the ritual or what their respective functions might be.

In the fourth century, however, Ambrose refers to the deacon as “the Levite who waits in the font along with a priest” and adds that more than one of these “Levites” waited in the font for the candidates as they entered.<sup>363</sup> Zeno of Verona mentions a bath attendant (*balneator*) who provided what was necessary to anoint, dry off, and present the neophytes with a “golden denarius sealed with a triple effigy.”<sup>364</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia describes the deacons as the “ministers” who were “put in charge of this awesome liturgy,” comparing them to the “ministering spirits” in Heb 1.14 and discusses their particular garb:

They wear vestments that are in keeping with their true role, for their garments give them a more impressive appearance than they possess on their own account... On their left shoulders they drape a stole [*orarium*], which hangs down equally on either, that is to say, in front and behind. It signifies that the ministry they perform is not one of slavery but of liberty, for the realities that they serve guide all who are worthy of God’s great household, the church, to freedom.<sup>365</sup>

From these documents one gets a picture of a small group of assistants serving the administrators and candidates in the ritual. However, except for the Samagher casket image (figs. 3.4), the iconography typically shows only one additional non-angelic male figure (if any at all) with the candidate and baptizer. He holds a scroll and wears nothing more distinctive than the Roman tunic and *pallium* (see figs. 2.9, 2.11)<sup>366</sup> Thus it seems likely that the figure in the iconography is meant

<sup>363</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 1.9 and 2.16. See text quoted above, Chap. 3, p. 115.

<sup>364</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23, Ps. XLI), trans. author (CCL: 22.70). Jeanes interprets this character as the bishop, however, not a priest or deacon, *The Day Has Come*, 179.

<sup>365</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 4.21–23, trans. Yarnold, *Awe Inspiring Rites*, 214–15.

<sup>366</sup> See discussion of the third figure on the sarcophagi, Chap. 2, pp. 75–6 and the angel at baptism, Chap. 3, pp. 115–17.

to be a Gospel writer, recording the story of Jesus' baptism and not a minor cleric attending the baptism of a catechumen.

#### 4.3.4. *Deaconesses*

De Rossi believes that the figure whose hand rests on the young female neophyte on the Vatican glass fragment belongs to a deaconess (fig. 3.9).<sup>367</sup> If the side panels of the Samagher casket depict a woman and a man presenting a child for baptism at the Lateran Baptistry and confirmation at another pilgrimage church, women, as some scholars argue, they might have had some official, ceremonial function.<sup>368</sup> In both those casket scenes, two women stand to the right in roughly parallel position, posture, and size to two men who stand to the left. These groups of male and female "attendants" might be sponsors, deacons, or deaconesses. They also might simply be attendants or companions of the couple in the center of the image.

Only two church orders expressly mention deaconesses in connection with baptism, both of them probably Syrian in origin. Based on these documents, historians have theorized that deaconesses assisted the priest or bishop with the anointing of women in both eastern and western traditions.<sup>369</sup> The *Didascalia Apostolorum* (ca. 250) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 475) are composite works. The older text may have been the foundation for the first six books of the later, which is a compilation of several earlier church order manuals. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* counsels against allowing women to baptize or being baptized by a woman because to do either would be to imperil one's salvation.<sup>370</sup> It did, however, make provision for deaconesses at the baptism of women, most likely for the sake of modesty or decorum.

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<sup>367</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 3, p. 108.

<sup>368</sup> See discussion of this object and the various interpretations, Chap. 3, pp. 95–8.

<sup>369</sup> On the role of women as deaconesses see Joseph Ysebaert, "The Deaconesses in the Western Church of Late Antiquity and Their Origin" *Eulogia: Mélanges offerts à Anton. A.R. Bastiaensen*, ed. G.J.M. Bartelink et al. (The Hague: Abbatia S. Petri, 1991), 421–36; Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986); Ellen Christiansen, "Women and Baptism" *ST* 35 (1981), 1–8 (who argues that for the sake of their modesty, women must have baptized women in the early church); J.G. Davies, "Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period," *JEH* 14 (1963), 1–15; and most recently Carolyn Osiek and Kevin Madigan, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>370</sup> *Did. apos.* 3.9.

In many other matters the office of a woman deaconess is required. In the first place, when women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men: but with the imposition of hands do thou anoint the head only... Let a woman deacon anoint the women. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine Names in the water.<sup>371</sup>

The later document, partially based on the former as well as on the *Didache* and the *Apostolic Tradition*, summarizes various duties of deaconesses including keeping the doors, carrying messages, caring for the women of the church, and maintaining decency when women are baptized. As the document's author explains, male admistrants had no need to see the women until the imposition of hands, when the bishop would anoint their foreheads with consecrated oil. Therefore, it seems the pre-baptismal anointing was given by a deacon to men, and a deaconess to women. This document also specifies that while a presbyter calls out the name of the Trinity over the candidates and baptizes them in the water, a deacon (for men) or a deaconess (for women) should receive them (*hypodechesthe*), lest the conferring of the "inviolable seal" be unseemly.<sup>372</sup>

Some documentary evidence for women functioning as assistants during baptism comes from the West as well. According to the Spanish collection of canons from the councils of Carthage, the fourth council (ca. 397) linked the roles of deaconess and catechist:

Widows and dedicated women [*sanctimoniales*] who are chosen for the administration of baptism of women should be instructed in their offices so that they might plainly and reasonably instruct ignorant and rustic

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<sup>371</sup> *Did apos.* 16, trans. Richard H. Connolly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 146–7. See also the *Ap. const.* 3.2.15–16. The chapter goes on to say that the deaconess should subsequently instruct the women on how to keep the seal of baptism unbroken and for this reason the ministry of women deaconesses is crucial, citing the examples of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus who ministered to Jesus.

<sup>372</sup> *Ap. const.* 3.16. Presumably the text is here referring to the full-body post-baptismal anointing. See also 3.19, 8.28 on the duties of the deaconess. The deaconess was a consecrated virgin or widow (6.17) and had a form of ordination by imposition of hands by the bishop (8.19). Note also 1 Tim. 5.9; 1 Council of Nicaea (325), *Can.* 19 and the Council of Chalcedon, *Can.* 15, which do not mention any role for the deaconess in baptism.

women who are about to be baptized, as to how they should respond to the interrogations at their baptism, and how they should live after they have been baptized.<sup>373</sup>

Allowing women this much authority may have been unusual, however. The heresy-fighting Epiphanius of Salamis (in Cyprus) denies that the role of deaconess in the baptismal rite was sacerdotal in any sense. He asserts that because deaconesses are not ordained (*epicherein*) to a priestly office (*to hierateuein*) they can neither baptize nor impose hands. According to Epiphanius, deaconesses are commissioned (*epitassetai*) exclusively for the sake of protecting the dignity (*semnotētos*) of women who during the time they are naked in the baptistery.<sup>374</sup>

In contrast to this limited role as baptismal assistants, some textual data implies that certain sects allowed women to administer the rite. According to Tertullian's *Prescription against Heretics*, groups of non-conformists permitted women to teach, to perform exorcisms and healings, and (perhaps) to baptize: "The very women of these heretics, how impudent! They dare to teach, to dispute, to perform exorcisms, to undertake cures—and perhaps even to immerse [*tingere*]."<sup>375</sup> And although Tertullian allows lay baptism in emergencies, he categorically forbids lay women the right and attacks the "spurious" *Acts of Paul and Thecla* that might justify it:

Let it suffice to use this right in circumstances of necessity, whenever either place, time or personal condition compel it; for then the persistence of the rescuer is acceptable, because the circumstances of the one in peril are urgent... But the impudence of that woman who undertook to teach will by no means also appropriate to itself the right of baptizing [*tinguendi*]<sup>376</sup>—unless perhaps some new serpent appears, like the original one, so as that one abolished baptism, some other should of her own authority confer it. But if certain Acts of Paul, which are written falsely, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize... How could it seem even somewhat true that he would give women the power of teaching or baptizing when he resolutely did not permit women to learn? 'Let them be silent,' he said, and take care of their husbands at home.

<sup>373</sup> Trans., author. See Charles Munier, ed., *Concilia Africae A. 345–A. 525* (CCSL 149, 345). On the accuracy of this canon (date and place) see Munier's introduction to the volume, xxi–xxii.

<sup>374</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 79.3. Greek text in GCS, Epiphanius 3, ed. K. Holl (Lepizig, 1933), 477–8.

<sup>375</sup> Tertullian, *Praescr.* 41.2; trans., author (CCL 1:221.4–7).

<sup>376</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 17.3–5; trans. author (CCL 1: 291–2.15–30).

Similarly in one of Cyprian's letter to Firmilian (on the matter of Novatian's baptism), the bishop of Carthage describes a worst case scenario of schismatic baptism—a baptism by a woman (in this case a "certain woman" in the area of Cappadocia or Pontus who was probably an adherent of Montanism):

And that woman... was attempting many things for the deception of the faithful, among other things with an invocation not considered invalid she pretended to sanctify the bread and to celebrate the Eucharist... She also baptized many, usurping the accustomed and lawful words of interrogation that nothing might seem to differ from the ecclesiastical rule.<sup>377</sup>

Whatever the practices of sectarian groups, the order of deaconesses in more mainstream churches seems to have gradually died out in the West. It was specifically forbidden by the Council of Orange, presided over by Hilary of Arles in 441.<sup>378</sup> In any case, this casket, fabricated in the mid-fifth century, probably did not depict deaconesses functioning in a baptismal or confirmation ritual. A child (whether girl or boy) would have had no need for such an attendant. The women in this scene might have been sponsors or witnesses, but more likely simply to represent attendants of the couple who commissioned this luxury object.

#### 4.3.5. *Sponsors and Witnesses*

As discussed above, in some scenes a third figure observes Jesus' baptism (cf. figs. 2.9, 2.11). Scholars have variously identified this third person as the bishop, deacon, God, gospel-writer, or sponsor, but because he sometimes holds a scroll, it seems most likely that he represents the Gospel writer recording the event.<sup>379</sup> The Samagher casket shows two groups of individuals attending what might be the baptism of a young child. That any of these figures was intended to be a baptismal sponsor

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<sup>377</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 75.10.5, trans. author (CCL 3C: 592.238–45). In paragraph 11, Firmilian continues that this is a case of the "most wicked demon baptizing through a woman." The woman herself is not identified nor associated with a particular heresy. All that we are told is that she turned up in Cappadocia about twenty-two years earlier in a "state of ecstasy" and announced herself as a prophet (para. 10.1–2). From this evidence we may presume that she was an adherent of the Montanist sect. On women clerics in Montanism see Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 185–97.

<sup>378</sup> Council of Orange, can. 26. See Caroli de Clercq, ed. *Concilia Gallicae A. 314–A. 506*, CCSL 148 (1963), 85–6.

<sup>379</sup> See argument above, pp. 75–6.

or witness seems possible. The Aquileia grave marker (fig. 2.12) and the Vatican glass fragment (fig. 3.9) might depict saintly sponsors.<sup>380</sup>

Textual evidence demonstrates that the sponsor's role was especially important in baptism from at least Tertullian's time, so this possibility cannot be entirely discredited.<sup>381</sup> Although the *mystagogos* who presented the neophytes in the mystery cults performed an analogous role to the baptismal sponsor, the Christian office seems more likely an adaptation of Roman legal procedure. Baptism had a certain contractual quality because a sponsor was required to attest to the candidate's piety, sincerity and character, and also be responsible if something went wrong. Tertullian argues that the role's gravity is one reason why children should not be baptized too young.<sup>382</sup> Similarly, the *Apostolic Tradition* specifies that sponsors must "bear witness" to the fitness and "ability to hear" (the word of God) of those who have come forward for examination and baptism. Slaves could only apply for baptism with the master's permission and character reference.<sup>383</sup>

Egeria's account of her Holy Land pilgrimage (c. 390) includes a summary of the sponsor's role and the character traits that he or she needed to affirm:

In this manner the candidates are brought forward one by one, if they are men they come with their fathers, and if women, with their mothers. Individually, the bishop questions their companions about them asking: "Is this person leading a good life? Does he or she respect his or her parents? Is this person a drunkard or a boaster?" He asks about all the serious human vices... If someone is a traveler, unless that person has a witness who will give a testimonial, it is not easy to advance to baptism.<sup>384</sup>

Once infant baptism became the common practice, the sponsor's role was all the more significant. This person spoke for the child because she could not speak for herself. Of course, a sponsor could not know what the child actually believed, or whether she or he would grow up

<sup>380</sup> See discussions of these objects above, Chap. 2, pp. 71–5 and Chap. 3, pp. 106–8.

<sup>381</sup> See discussion of the different theories above, Chap. 2, pp. 75–6.

<sup>382</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 18.4, trans., author (CCL 1: 293.21–26). See discussion above, pp. 144–7 (on the question of infant baptism).

<sup>383</sup> *Trad. ap.* 16.1–4.

<sup>384</sup> Egeria, *Itin.* 45, trans. author. Latin text in Louis Duchesne *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution* 5th ed., trans. M.L. McClure (London: SPCK, 1919) appendix 2 518–19. Also see John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1981), 143–44.

to be good or wicked. By way of an answer to this problem, Augustine explains that the sacrament gave the gift of faith and righteousness, and was not “earned” by confession of belief or by good works. By this he lifts the burden from parents or sponsors of children coming for baptism, who dared to promise something about the children’s future behavior or confidently affirmed the child’s intention to live a Christian life.<sup>385</sup>

#### 4.4. *Nakedness and Clothing*

Baptism imagery consistently depicts the (young) recipient as nude and, with rare exceptions (e.g., female initiates figs. 2.12, 3.10), as male. As discussed above, the recipient’s gender may have to do with the images, illustrating the baptism of Jesus. The reason for the nudity may reflect contemporary baptismal practice.

Nudity at baptism is extensively demonstrated in literature. Many of the documents not only describe the candidates’ being stripped of their clothing but also give practical as well as symbolic reasons for it.<sup>386</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem both describes this part of the rite and explains its meaning:

Upon entering you took off your clothing, and this symbolized your stripping off of “the old nature with its practices [Col. 3.9]” Stripped naked, in this too you were imitating Christ naked on the cross, who in his darkness, “disarmed the principalities and powers” [Eph 6.12] and on the wood of the cross publicly triumphed over them. Since hostile powers lurked in your limbs, you can no longer wear your former clothing; I do not of course refer to visible apparel but to “your old nature which is corrupt through deceitful lusts [Eph 4.22].” I pray that the soul which has once thrown off that old nature may never resume it, but rather speak the words of Christ’s bride in the Song of Songs: “I had put off my garment; how could I put it on? [Song 5.3]” This was a remarkable occasion, for you stood in the sight of all and you were not ashamed. You truly mirrored our first-created parent, Adam, who stood naked in Paradise and was not ashamed.<sup>387</sup>

<sup>385</sup> Augustine. *Ep.* 98.7, 10.

<sup>386</sup> See for example, *Trad. ap.* 21.3, 5, 11; Zeno of Verona, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23); John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen.* 6; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 2.2; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.8; John Chrysostom *Catech. illum.* 2.24; and *Ep. Innocent; Can. Hippolytus* 19; and Ps. Dionysius, *Ecc. hier.* 2.2.7.

<sup>387</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 2.2. trans. Leo McCauley, S.J. and Anthony Stephenson, *The Works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1970), 161–2.

In this text, baptismal nudity manifests at least two key aspects of the rite in the fourth century—sharing in the passion of Christ and renewing the pre-lapsarian condition of Adam. Theodore of Mopsuestia likewise refers to Adam’s original state as being “naked and not ashamed.” He only needed a covering because he disobeyed God’s commandment. Therefore, Theodore insists, “you must first take off your clothes. For they are proof of mortality, convincing evidence of the humiliating sentence which made man need clothes.”<sup>388</sup>

#### 4.4.1. *Nudity and Modesty; Christians and the Public Baths*

Nudity at baptism has sometimes been discounted on the grounds that early Christians practiced bodily modesty.<sup>389</sup> However, attitudes toward public nudity varied somewhat in the ancient world for both pagans and Christians. Romans were more reserved than Hellenistic Greeks, but, in their art (if not in daily life), they shared the convention that athletic nudity (at least) was a sign of civilization.<sup>390</sup> Furthermore, nudity in public was a socially charged mark of class and status. The wealthy upper classes regarded nudity in front of an inferior (a servant or slave) as no more shaming than nudity in front of a household pet. By contrast, nakedness forced upon members of the servile classes, criminals, or prisoners of war was a part of their general humiliation. This distinction was particularly displayed in the public baths. According to Peter Brown: “This was not a society bound together by the implicit democracy of sexual shame... The essential role of the public baths as the joining point of civic life ensured that nudity among one’s peers and in front of one’s inferiors was a daily experience... As for women, the social shame of exposure to the wrong person, rather than the fact of exposure itself, was the principal anxiety.”<sup>391</sup> Because baptism was a kind of bath, and included full body immersion or (at least) drenching, it adopted certain aspects

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<sup>388</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.8, trans. Yarnold, *Awe Inspiring Rites*, 184–5.

<sup>389</sup> See, for example, Laurie Guy, “Naked Baptism in the Early Church: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *JRH* 27 (2003), 133–42.

<sup>390</sup> See Larissa Bonfante, “Nudity as Costume in Classical Art,” *AJA* 93 (1989), 543–70; Christopher Halleth, *The Roman Nude* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>391</sup> Peter Brown, “Late Antiquity: The Wellborn Few” in *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, eds. P. Airès and G. Duby (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 245–6.

of ordinary bathing, especially disrobing. In that regard, however, it also overturned certain conventions and class perceptions.

Historians and archaeologists have extensively studied Roman bathing habits, in large part because of the excellent preservation of so many remains of the public structures that housed them. The baths in any city were cultural institutions as well as palaces of personal hygiene (some included lecture halls).<sup>392</sup> Public baths were part of the Roman social life for both males and females. Only the wealthy few had private baths within their homes; most Romans went regularly to the public baths, sometimes paying a modest fee (although some were free) for a spa-like experience that could include physical exercise, steaming, soaking, moisturizing, and massage.<sup>393</sup> In general, these activities were done in the nude, although a few ancient documents mention bathing robes or some minimal covering. However, most Roman baths were built to segregate the sexes and so had a women's side separate from a men's side, or alternatively offered separate times of the day for each sex. Some mixed bathing is attested in the sources, although its extent is the subject of scholarly debate.<sup>394</sup>

Despite (or perhaps because of) the general acceptance of some degree of public nudity in Roman culture, Christian authorities sometimes prohibited going to the public baths, believing that in these situations members of their flock might be exposed to idolatry, immodesty, decadent behavior, or moral corruption and vice. The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a late fourth-century church order, forbids mixed sex bathing, as well as women bathing with hermaphrodites, and urges bathing that is orderly, modest, moderate, infrequent, without occasion, and not in the middle of the day.<sup>395</sup> John Chrysostom scolded his congregation for complaining when the baths were closed in Antioch as a punishment for a city-wide riot against taxes (387), and claimed that the emperor's punishment actually brought the Christians certain advantages because closing the baths was hard only on those who led

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<sup>392</sup> A good source of information along with plans, illustrations etc. is Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1992).

<sup>393</sup> For example, see Libanius, *Or.* 2.242.

<sup>394</sup> See Garrett Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 24–9; also see Roy Bowen Ward, “Women in Roman Baths,” *HTR* 85.2 (1992), 125–47.

<sup>395</sup> *Const. Ap.* 1.3.9 (which recommends that the best time is late afternoon).

a decadent life.<sup>396</sup> The lack of temptations would lead others back (even if unwillingly) to the love of wisdom.<sup>397</sup> Augustine likewise associated the baths with such other unhealthy pleasures as frequenting taverns and theatres.<sup>398</sup>

But most church authorities were really only concerned about mixed bathing. Clement of Alexandria denounced morally lax women for allowing men other than their husbands to see them naked in their baths.<sup>399</sup> Cyprian warned women (especially dedicated virgins) against the baths, deeming them promiscuous establishments where they would see naked men and be seen naked by men. Rather than cleansing the body for healthful purpose, he claimed that such a washing defiled; for rather than purifying, it would sully. In these places, he said, modesty was shed along with clothing.<sup>400</sup> The *Apostolic Constitutions* similarly proscribed mixed bathing for women, but also urged that they make their visits to the all-women baths as infrequent as possible.<sup>401</sup>

Some authorities warned against nudity in general. Ambrose, writing on the duties of the clergy, urges modesty and reminded his audience that the ancient Romans avoided bathing nude with their grown children. He proposes that his followers wear clothing in the baths so that their bodies would be at least partially covered.<sup>402</sup> Jerome counsels Laeta against any nakedness, even in private:

I know that some people have laid down the rule that a Christian virgin should not bathe along with eunuchs or with married women, inasmuch as eunuchs are still men at heart and women big with child are a revolting sight. For myself, I disapprove altogether of baths in the case of a full-grown virgin. She ought to blush at herself and be unable to look at her own nakedness.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> These riots had actually begun in the baths, and their closing was deemed to be a special humiliation and hardship on the people (along with the closing of the orchestra and the hippodrome).

<sup>397</sup> John Chrysostom, *Stat.*, 17.9; 19.13. 464.

<sup>398</sup> Augustine, *Catech.* 16.25, where he warns his hearers about the "lasciviousness of the baths."

<sup>399</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.5; but see *Paed.* 3.9–10, where he gives instructions on how to use the baths properly and not for pleasure or indulgence, but instead for health and external cleansing.

<sup>400</sup> Cyprian, *Hab. Virg.* 19.

<sup>401</sup> *Ap. const.* 1.3.9.

<sup>402</sup> Ambrose, *Off.* 1.18. 79.

<sup>403</sup> Jerome, *Ep.* 107.11, trans. F.A. Wright, *Select Letters of St. Jerome*, 362–3 (LCL

Despite the disapproval of certain Christian leaders, baths were an important part of everyday Roman civic life. According to Irenaeus, John (the disciple) visited the baths at Ephesus.<sup>404</sup> Tertullian himself attended the baths and believed them healthful.<sup>405</sup> Augustine mentions going to the bath after his mother's death seeking comfort in his grief.<sup>406</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem points out that even Jesus visited the baths. In a sermon on the healing of the paralytic (at a public bath—John 5.2) Cyril reveals his civic pride in Jerusalem's bath structures saying: "When, as now, he [Jesus] visits the public baths, it is not out of interest in the architecture, but to heal the sick."<sup>407</sup>

Given its central importance in the daily lives of most early Christians (whether or not they obeyed their leaders on the matter), Roman bathing practices (nude and usually sexually segregated) most likely shaped certain practical aspects of the baptismal rite as well as lent those practices a certain symbolic meaning.

#### 4.4.2. *The Practice of Nude Baptism*

Unlike the practice of immersion witnessed in the written sources, but contradicted by both iconography and archaeology, nudity at baptism is both attested in the documents and represented in art.<sup>408</sup> The image of a small male nude in early Christian art changes to that of a fully adult Christ at his baptism in both the Ravenna mosaics (figs. 3.10–11). Depicting Jesus as nude continues in eastern icons into the modern era.<sup>409</sup>

<sup>404</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.4.

<sup>405</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 42.

<sup>406</sup> Augustine, *Conf.* 9.32 (despite his views on the baths as stated above, fn. #).

<sup>407</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Hom. para.* 1 (PG 33, 1131–4), trans. by Anthony Stephenson, *Works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1969), 209–22. According to Cyril, the paralytic was healed at a public bath. In fact, John 5.2 describes a pool that had five porticoes and that could have held a "multitude of invalids."

<sup>408</sup> This assertion has its critics. At least one author has argued that the Greek and Latin terms for "nude" (*gymnos* and *nudus*) need not have implied stark nakedness, but rather the wearing of minimal undergarments or even a short tunic. See Guy, "Naked' Baptism in the Early Church."

<sup>409</sup> According to Leonid Ouspensky, the nudity of Jesus in these icons "emphasizes the kenosis of His Divinity" and "shows the purpose of his kenosis for, by stripping His body, He thereby clothes the nakedness of Adam, and with him that of the whole of mankind, in the garment of glory and incorruptibility." See Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 164–5.

Among the earliest documentary witnesses to baptismal nudity is the *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* (c. 250), which describes Paul's baptism of Probus: "Paul replied, 'See, my son, the water is ready for the cleansing of those that come to Christ.' Straightway then, eagerly stripping off his clothes, Paul holding his hand, he leaped into the water..."<sup>410</sup> Likewise, in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Thecla, wearing only a girdle as she entered the arena, threw herself in a vat of water filled with seals in an act of self-baptism. According to this account, after the seals died from a lightening flash and floated to the surface, a cloud of fire appeared to hide Thecla's nakedness.<sup>411</sup>

The *Apostolic Tradition* specifies that candidates disrobe, and women specifically should loosen their hair and lay aside any jewelry (gold ornaments), lest they enter the font with any alien objects on their bodies.<sup>412</sup> Although undoing a complicated hairdo or removing hair ornaments symbolized rejection of feminine adornment, vanity, and artifice, it is more likely that this was merely a simple way to ensure that nothing got between the body and the water.<sup>413</sup> This concern is reflected in regulations for Jewish purificatory baths (*mikva'oth*), which prohibit wearing anything (even a hairpin) into the bath. According to the rabbis, for the water to truly cleanse, it was necessary that it touch all parts of the body. There should be no separation (*hasisah*) between the water and the recipient: "These interpose: strips of wool or flax; and the ribbons on the heads of girls... the matted hair over the heart and the hair of the beard and of the secret parts of a woman;

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<sup>410</sup> *Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena* 21, see M.R. James, *Apoc. Anec.* 1.43–85; trans., *DBL*, 21–2.

<sup>411</sup> *Acts of Paul*, 34.

<sup>412</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.3, 5, 11.

<sup>413</sup> Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 48–52 analyzes baptism in the fourth century and cites this passage in the *Trad. ap.* and argues that because loosened hair might symbolize wantonness, insubordination, and sexual availability, that the loosening on hair before baptism might represent a woman's penitence for the sin of Eve: "Was the requirement that women's hair be let down during Christian baptism a reminder, at the very moment of their initiation into the Christian community that all women participate in Eve's perennial guilt for the seduction of Adam and the human race? (50)" This explanation fails to note that the baptismal rite actually reverses the effects of the Fall (see discussion on this point below, pp. 167–8). On the demonic associations of hair ornaments or complex hair styles see Raphael Jehuda Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Baptismal Rite according to St. Hippolytus," *StPatr* 2 (1957), 93–105.

the rheum outside the eye, the dried pus outside a wound and the plaster thereon..."<sup>414</sup>

Literary and art historical evidence show that nude bathing was a part of initiation into Greco-Roman mystery cults as well. Aristophanes' *Clouds*, comically describes the nakedness of initiates at Eleusis.<sup>415</sup> Apuleius, the central character in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*), recounts his ritual bath prior to his initiation into the Isis cult: "Then, because the occasion demanded it, as the priest said, he escorted me to the baths nearby, surrounded by an escort of devotees. When I had taken the customary bath (*sueto lavacro traditum*), he began by asking the god's favor and then cleansed me with purificatory sprinkling (*purissime circumrorans abluit*)."<sup>416</sup> A relief found at Eleusis depicts the initiation of a naked figure, considerably smaller than the goddess Demeter, who holds a shallow dish (*patera*) over his head. A comparable Roman stucco relief from the Villa Farnesina portrays a small nude male figure being initiated in a Bacchic rite, and a nude initiate into the cult of Mithras is depicted in two fragments from the grotto at Capua.<sup>417</sup>

#### 4.4.3. *Segregations of the Sexes*

The written sources indicate that while deaconesses attended women and may have performed pre-baptismal anointings for modesty's sake, male clerics performed the baptisms and confirmations of nude women candidates.<sup>418</sup> This is visually represented on the Aquileia grave marker (fig. 2.12). The story of a timid sixth-century monk in Jerusalem who

<sup>414</sup> *M. Miqw.* 9. See also b. *Pesah.* 107a: "Nothing must interpose between flesh and the water."

<sup>415</sup> Aristophanes, *Nub.* 497. The character being initiated is sprinkled from head to toe with ritual flour, probably as a mockery of an actual ritual aspersion with water.

<sup>416</sup> Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.23, trans. J. Arthur Hanson (LCL vol. 2), 338–9.

<sup>417</sup> On nudity in mystery religions see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Garments of Shame," *HR* 5 (1966), 217–38 with bibliography. The images described above may be seen in in Johannes Leipoldt, "Darstellungen von Mysterientaufen," *Angelos* 1 (1925), 46–7 (Eleusis); Irene Bragantini and Mariette de Vos, eds. *Le Decorazione della Villa Romana delle Farnesina* 2.1, of Museo nazionale romano, *Le pitture* (Rome, De Luca 1982), tav. 79; and Maarten Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965), figs. 57 and 59.

<sup>418</sup> As noted above, Jewish proselyte immersion separated the sexes and even assigned a same-sex attendant to those undergoing the ritual bath required for conversion. *M. Miqw.* 9 and *Gerim* 60 a 1.4 clearly require the separation of the sexes and the assignment of same-sex attendants. See also b. *Yebam.* 47a-b and b. *Pesah.* 107a.

unsuccessfully entreated the bishop to release him from his responsibility for baptizing a beautiful young woman alludes to the potential problems with the practice. The monastery's leader thought of sending for a deaconess, but changed his mind, because deaconesses were not customary in that region. The poor monk panicked and fled, deciding to quit the monastery, when John the Baptist appeared to him, made the sign of the cross three times over his genitals that allowed him to return to the monastery and complete the woman's baptism. This gift of impotence allowed the monk to continue in this office for twelve years without any "movement of the flesh."<sup>419</sup>

This raises the general question of sexual impropriety and whether candidates were sexually segregated once inside the baptistery. Several documents specifically refer to the matter, suggesting that mixed sex, nude baptism typically was not practiced. For example the *Apostolic Constitutions* bluntly states that men should not see women, because of the imaginations of the "bad ones."<sup>420</sup> The *Apostolic Tradition* directs that children be baptized first, after them men, and women last.<sup>421</sup> Although some interpreters have seen this last-place position of the women as signifying their subordination or denigration, the primary reason for this procedure must have been to protect the modesty of the candidates.<sup>422</sup> At an earlier stage of the initiation process, Cyril of Jerusalem requires the catechumens to wait in sex-segregated groups:

During the actual exorcism, while waiting for the others, let men be with men, and women with women. For now I need Noe's ark that I may have Noe and his son together, separate from his wife and his sons' wives. For although the ark was one and the door was closed, yet decorum was observed. So now, though the church doors are barred and you are all inside, let distinctions be kept: men with men, women with women. Let not the principle of salvation be made a pretext for spiritual ruin. Keeping close together is a good rule, provided that passion is kept at a distance.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> This story recounted by John Moschus, *Prat. Spir.* 3, "Vita Coronis" PG 87, 2855. Ambrose made a Latin translation of it (PL 74, 124). The story is cited in Smith, "Garments of Shame," 222, n. 21, and in Henri Leclercq, "Nudité baptismale," 1805. See also Norman H. Baynes, "The Pratum Spirituale," *OCP* 13 (1937), 404–14.

<sup>420</sup> See discussion above, pp. 153–4.

<sup>421</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.5.

<sup>422</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.5. See M. Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 48; Miles posits that this ordering symbolized women's association to the sin of Eve.

<sup>423</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procat.* 14, trans. Anthony A. Stephenson, *Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, vol. 1, 80.

Such concern for preserving purity in pre-baptismal rites indicates that something similar would have been in place for the actual immersion in the font. In fact, a need to protect privacy and modesty was probably a major reason for the building of separate baptismal chambers. These rooms may have been equipped, as well, with curtained cubicles for disrobing and waiting.<sup>424</sup> The image on the Samagher casket shows draperies that could curtain off the font (if that is what it is), perhaps for modesty's sake, and men on one side with women on the other. However, that so few specific instructions concerning the maintenance of privacy or propriety exist perhaps means that it was taken for granted that the sexes would not be mixed in the baptistery.

Nevertheless, both Cyril of Jerusalem and Theodore of Mopsuestia argued that nudity in baptism signified the return of the recipients to the innocence of Adam and Eve before the Fall and that being naked together in the baptistery symbolized the original man and women in Paradise—naked and unashamed.<sup>425</sup>

#### 4.4.4. *Nakedness as Symbolic*

Baptismal nudity has at least five important symbolic functions. First, nakedness signifies the stripping off of an old identity and habits. This stripping of clothing is a graphic way, symbolically, to “die” as an old self so that a new one can be reborn. Augustine, using Pauline language (Col 3.9–14), exhorted the candidates to strip off the old nature (the old dirty clothes) and be clothed with the new.<sup>426</sup> Associated with the life transition symbolized in the removal of clothes is a disassociation of oneself from worldly possessions in general. Moreover, clothes are a general symbol for personal vanity, something perhaps also implied in the *Apostolic Tradition*, which required women candidates to remove their jewelry and other items of adornment.<sup>427</sup>

Second, nakedness suggests the innocence of the newly-born and the sacramentally reborn. The neophytes literally wear their birthday

<sup>424</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 5, p. 229.

<sup>425</sup> See above, pp. 158–9, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst. cat.* 2.2; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.8.

<sup>426</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 216.2, PL 38–39, 1077, “Exuite vos veterem hominem, ut induamini novo.” Theodore of Mopsuestia also specifies that the candidates should strip prior to the first anointing all over the body as a sign that they will be “receiving the cover of immortality” through their baptism, *Bapt. hom.* 3.26.

<sup>427</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.5. See Smith, “Garments of Shame,” 235–6.

suits, emerging from the mother's womb naked as they were at their first birth.<sup>428</sup>

Third, as the above-mentioned passages from Cyril and Theodore indicate, nakedness at baptism signifies a return to the primordial innocence of Adam and Eve and a casting off of the corrupted, lustful old life (Genesis 3.7–10).<sup>429</sup> Baptism is thus equated with a return to Paradise—a place without bodily shame, nor even consciousness of nakedness, even in “mixed company.” John Chrysostom elaborated on this symbolism:

After the anointing, then, it remains to go into the bath of sacred waters. After stripping you of your robe, the priest himself leads you down into the flowing waters. But why naked? He reminds you of your former nakedness, when you were in Paradise and you were not ashamed. For Holy Writ says: ‘Adam and Eve were naked and were not ashamed,’ until they took up the garment of sin, a garment heavy with abundant shame. Do not then feel shame here, for the bath is much better than the garden of Paradise. There can be no serpent here.<sup>430</sup>

Theodore of Mopsuestia's interpretation of baptismal nudity is very much like John's—that even though Adam was created naked and unashamed, once he became mortal he needed a covering. Clothing is nothing more than evidence of the fallen state of humanity. The act of baptism, however, begins to reverse the process, and offers renewal of innocence and immortality, and so nakedness is the sign and proof of this return.<sup>431</sup> This same theme is elaborated by Cyril of Jerusalem who saw a return to Edenic innocence in the ritual of stripping. The old person was trapped in sin and headed for death. By dying and being reborn, sin is lifted and eternal life is restored.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> This connection is explicitly made by Ambrose, *Exp. Ps.* 61.32; and Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.9–10.

<sup>429</sup> See H. Leclercq, “Nudité baptismale,” and “Nu dans l'art chrétien,” *DACL* 12.2 (1936), 543–70, and 1782–1808.

<sup>430</sup> John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 11.28–29, trans. P.W. Harkins, *St. John Chrysostom, Baptismal Instructions* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), 170. See also John Chrysostom's *Hom. Gen.* 6 (PG 62, 342). See also John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 2.24, where he speaks of the candidates stripping off their garments prior to the first anointing, and *Ep. Innocent* 3, which recounts an attack upon a church that caused women to flee in terror from a baptistery while they were still naked.

<sup>431</sup> Theodore, *Bapt. hom.* 3.8.

<sup>432</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 2.2. See above, p. 158. On the symbol of nakedness see also Hugh Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1974), 159–89.

Fourth, this paradisiacal innocence suggests not only a lack of bodily shame but also the possibility of genderlessness. For some Christian gnostic exegetes, a restored “original” humanity made no distinction between male and female. A post-baptismal society without such distinctions is first alluded to in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (3.27–29): “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” The *Gospel of Thomas* similarly maintains that there will be no male/female distinction in the new creation.<sup>433</sup>

Finally, nude baptism also signifies the body’s vulnerability and, accordingly, the font as a place of safety. To be naked ordinarily signifies a lack of protection from external and environmental dangers. The waters of the font, however, offer a shield from those dangers. John the Deacon, writing to Senarius in the early sixth century, reports that the candidates are instructed “to go in naked even down to their feet so that having put aside the carnal garments of mortality they may acknowledge that they make their journey upon a road upon which nothing harsh and nothing harmful can be found.”<sup>434</sup>

#### 4.4.5. *Re-Robing in White Garments*

The symbolism of nakedness at baptism must be considered in relationship to its opposite symbol, i.e., being clothed. The whole rite includes the taking off of clothing, being naked for anointing and immersion, and re-robing in new, white, garments. The symbolism of the whiteness of the robes may derive from descriptions of the worthy ones as arrayed in white linen vestments in Rev 3.4; 19.8 and 14. Tertullian believes that in the resurrection, all flesh will be white—like the transfigured body of Christ.<sup>435</sup>

Zeno of Verona (ca. 350), in his sixth invitation to the baptismal font juxtaposes these two states as he urges candidates to enter the

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<sup>433</sup> *Gos.Thom* Log. 23. See discussion of the Galatians text and the implications for genderlessness in the new creation in Wayne A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *HR* 13 (1974), 165–208 (esp. 180f). For an example of a lack of shame even when publically nude as an indication of being “dead to the world” see the story of Serapion in Palladius’ *Hist. Laus.* 37, trans. R.T. Meyer, *Palladius: The Lausiaca History* ACW 34 (New York: Longmans, Green, 1965), 105–14.

<sup>434</sup> John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen.*, trans., *DBL* 208–12.

<sup>435</sup> Tertullian, *Res.* 27.

living water, tempered by the presence of both the Holy Spirit and fire: “Already the girded bath keeper awaits you, ready to do the work of anointing and drying and furnish the gold denarius with the triple effigy. Be happy then. For you will plunge naked into the font but soon emerge thence, white [*candidati*] and vested in a heavenly garment. And the one who does not pollute [this robe] will enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>436</sup>

The reception of new clothing is not illustrated in the early iconography of baptism, probably because the imagery focuses on the moments of immersion and the imposition of hands. The portrayal of the recipient as nude seems to have been paramount, generally overruling any other representation. The fifth-century glass fragment depicting the baptism of a young woman, now in the Vatican Library, may be the only known illustration of the robe worn by neophytes after their baptism—in this case probably identified by the letters *ALBA[ata]* which probably refers to the woman having been clothed in a white robe (fig. 3.9).<sup>437</sup>

Although clothes indicate modesty generally, in this context garments symbolized the restored purity of the soul and the body. As noted above, Zeno promises that after plunging naked in the font and being dried off, the neophytes would emerge vested in a heavenly white garment that must remain “unsoiled” for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>438</sup> Theodore refers to the alb as “a dazzling garment of pure white.”<sup>439</sup> Ambrose describes angels looking down upon the neophytes approaching the altar and, seeing them in the natural human state, only a little while before soiled by sin, they are now suddenly resplendent. The angels exclaim: “Who is this, coming up from the desert clothed in white?” (cf. Song 8.5).<sup>440</sup> Although white clothes are like the garments of the saints in Revelation, they are also the color of priestly vestments,

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<sup>436</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23), trans. author. (CCL: 22.70). Notice here that Zeno transforms certain details of an actual Roman bath (e.g., the payment of a fee into a symbol of faith in the Holy Trinity).

<sup>437</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 106–8.

<sup>438</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23).

<sup>439</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.26, trans. in Yarnold, *Awe Inspiring Rites*, 197.

<sup>440</sup> Ambrose, *Sac.* 4.5, also see 6–8 (SC 25: 104).

and, as Tertullian noted, may also allude to the radiant whiteness of Christ's garments at the transfiguration (Matt 1.7).<sup>441</sup>

This metaphor of new clothes (or changing clothes) is a universal religious symbol, as is their color. Josephus reports that the Essenes always dressed in white and that their novices received white garments when they entered the community.<sup>442</sup> In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the character Lucius is given a fine linen robe after his preliminary purificatory bath, and then he is ceremonially re-vested (or invested) with a garment of fine linen, a cope and stole all elaborately embroidered with flowers and exotic beasts, following his initiation into the Isis cult.<sup>443</sup>

Before the fourth century, Christian initiates probably brought their own clean clothing to baptism for re-robing. The *Apostolic Tradition*, for instance, speaks only of neophytes putting on their (own?) clothing before being brought for the final anointing.<sup>444</sup> By the mid-fourth century, according to extant literary evidence, the re-robing ceremony had become an important symbol, and neophytes received new white garments known as "albata" or "albs." Ambrose explains the meaning of these robes, that they indicate the innocence of the neophytes and recall Jesus at his transfiguration:

After this you received white garments to indicate that you had shed your covering of sins, and putting on the chaste robe of innocence, of which the prophet said: 'Sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow [Psalm 50.9]. For the one baptized is seen to have been cleansed both according to the law and according to the Gospel; according to the law, because Moses sprinkled the blood of a lamb with a bunch of hyssop [Exodus 12.22] and according to the Gospel because the garments of Jesus were white as snow, when in the Gospel he showed the glory of his resurrection [Matthew 17.2]. As the Lord said through Isaiah: "Even though your sins are scarlet, I will make them as white as snow [Is 1.18]."<sup>445</sup>

Augustine likewise sees the robes as a signifier of innocence, and compares their color to the brightness of the neophytes' cleansed souls.

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<sup>441</sup> See John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen.* 6 for another example of this explanation of the white garments. On the symbolism of the priestly vestments see also Jerome, *Ep.* 64 (to Fabiola, PL 22, 607–22). See also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 4.8.

<sup>442</sup> Josephus, *B.J.* 2.123, and 2.137.

<sup>443</sup> Apuleius, *Metam.* 11.23–24.

<sup>444</sup> *Trad. ap.* 21.20.

<sup>445</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 7.34, trans. author (SC 25: 174.34). These white robes are not depicted in any of the extant early Christian iconography of baptism, probably because the traditional image shows only the moment of the naked candidate in the font.

Seeing the neophytes entering the church following their initiation, he urges them to “walk as children of light” (cf. Eph 5.8).<sup>446</sup> Cyril also admonishes the newly baptized to “go always in white,” by which he means that they should remember their baptism and keep their souls shining and pure.<sup>447</sup> John the Deacon compared the robes to the vestments of priests and wedding garments of brides.<sup>448</sup> Thus the alb as seen in some of the iconography reflects an important concluding aspect of a complete baptismal ritual.

#### 4.5. *Confirmation: Invocation of the Holy Spirit*

##### 4.5.1. *Imposition of Hands*

The baptizer places his hand on the head of the recipient in almost every early instance of early baptismal iconography. This particular gesture, always made with the right hand, has widespread possibilities for interpretation, from simple benediction to healing, ordination, imposition of penance, and the reconciliation of penitents.<sup>449</sup> Although the image may depict the administrator starting to push the candidate under water, it likewise could portray the moment the neophyte has risen from the water and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, shown (in most instances) descending into the scene. The dove, of course, also belongs to scene of Jesus’ baptism by John.

The imposition of hands has been described as the rite that “completes” the baptismal ceremony and which—along with the post-baptismal anointing with chrism—usually was reserved to the bishop. In the documents, this ordinarily takes place after the newly baptized have been re-robed.<sup>450</sup> However, in nearly all of the iconography, the

<sup>446</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 223.

<sup>447</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 4.8. See also John Chryostom, *Catech. illum.* 4.17–18; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Hom bapt.* 3.26; John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen.* 6; Zeno of Verona, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23).

<sup>448</sup> John the Deacon, *Ep. Sen.* 6.

<sup>449</sup> See De Bruyne, “L’imposition des mains,” for a detailed discussion of this gesture in Christian iconography with reference to these rituals. For a briefer but more recent discussion see Lrenza de Maria, “Gesti e atteggiamenti nell’iconografia battesimale paleocristiana,” *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 477–96. The left hand is never used for this gesture, presumably because it has inauspicious associations (see Gen. 28.13–20, Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, for example).

<sup>450</sup> For example, see the *Trad. ap.* 22.1. Post-baptismal anointing was not a universal practice of the early Church. The lack of a post-baptismal anointing in East

recipient still stands naked in the water, indicating that the baptizer is about to dunk him or pour water over his head. Yet, the iconography may be conflating several sequential actions into one single image: the immersion, the imposition of hands, and the post-baptismal anointing with chrism.<sup>451</sup>

The New Testament refers to the imposition of hands at baptism in three places, two of them in connection to baptism. Acts 19.5–6 describes Paul “rebaptizing” the Ephesian disciples who had only been baptized “into John’s baptism.” When Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came upon them so that they spoke with tongues and prophesied. In Acts 8.14–24, the Samaritan converts who have only been “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” had not yet “received the Holy Spirit,” who, the text implies, is transmitted through the imposition of hands. Other baptism accounts in Acts make no reference to the imposition of hands (Acts 8.38–40 and Acts 16.33–34). The third reference in Hebrews includes the imposition of hands as one of the things mature Christians needed instruction about, along with ablutions, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment (Heb 6.2). The New Testament never specifies that the act included anointing.

Neither the *Didache* nor Justin Martyr mentioned the imposition of hands or anointing at baptism.<sup>452</sup> Irenaeus was aware of and condemned the initiatory anointings of gnostic groups but did not mention the practice as part of sanctioned (orthodox) baptismal rites.<sup>453</sup> Certain gnostic texts, in fact, are quite emphatic about the importance of anointing in initiation and, in some cases, seem to prefer it to the water bath. The Marcosians, according to Irenaeus, contrasted the “perfect” spiritual baptism inaugurated by the Divine Christ who descended upon the visible Jesus with the merely material or “animal” baptism offered by John the Baptist. Although some of these groups may have administered an initial water bath, others asserted it superfluous to bring candidates to water. They used only scented oil or even rejected all material elements, maintaining that the “mystery

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Syrian rites has been discussed by liturgical scholars. See the summaries of Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 118–123; Leonel Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing* (London: SPCK, 1966); G.W.H. Lampe, *Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (London: Longmans Green, 1951), esp. 223–31.

<sup>451</sup> See Franz J. Dölger, “Dir Firmung,” 1–41, where this solution is suggested.

<sup>452</sup> For example, Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 61–65, and *Didache* 7.

<sup>453</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.21.2–4.

of the unspeakable and invisible power” ought not to be perverted by the use of visible or corruptible things.<sup>454</sup>

Tertullian’s treatise on baptism, possibly written as a polemic against those who eschewed use of water in baptism, nevertheless cedes an important role to the imposition of hands and post-baptismal signing with chrism because they represent the descent of the Holy Spirit.<sup>455</sup> He described the union of water and Spirit in terms of hands playing upon a wind instrument to produce a supernatural tune:

Next [after the anointing] follows the imposition of the hand in benediction, inviting and welcoming the Holy Spirit. Truly by means of human invention, it is permitted to summon spirit [or breath] into the water, and by application of hands over the result of this union, to animate by another spirit of great splendor [or tonal clarity]; shall not God be also allowed a musical instrument [so that] the sacred hands might play a sublime pipe... At this time that most holy Spirit descends willingly from the Father on to bodies cleansed and blessed and comes to rest upon the waters of baptism as if revisiting a primal dwelling place and as it descended upon the Lord in the figure of a dove, so that the nature of the Holy Spirit could be revealed through a creature that is both simple and innocent, because even in its own body the dove is without gall.<sup>456</sup>

Cyprian of Carthage argued with Stephen of Rome over validity of schismatic baptism, especially about which aspect of the rite was invalid if performed by a non-catholic bishop. Stephen recognized the efficacy of schismatic baptism so long as those returning to the “true church” received an imposition of hands in reconciliation (akin to the rite in a penitential usage). Cyprian believed that Stephen’s solution placed baptism’s validity solely in the apostolic imposition of hands, the rite that conveyed the gifts of the Spirit. Against Stephen, Cyprian defended the essential symbol of the water saying that those who had been baptized outside the church were thereby stained and polluted by the unholy water of heretics and schismatics. It is not enough, he insisted, to lay hands upon them only in order to receive the Holy Spirit, because a person must be born of [both] water and the Spirit (John 3.5) to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>457</sup>

<sup>454</sup> See also the *Gos. Phil.* 67, for an emphasis on anointing in initiation.

<sup>455</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 1.3, see Robin M. Jensen, “With Pomp, Apparatus, Novelty, and Avarice: Alternative Baptismal Practices in Roman Africa,” 44 (2010), 77–83, *StPatr.*

<sup>456</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 8.1–3 trans. author (CCL 1: 283.12–17).

<sup>457</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 72.1.1–2.

Consequently, both sides of the debate assumed that it was through the imposition of hands that the Holy Spirit was conferred. However, whereas Stephen viewed the imposition of hands as a distinct rite that would offer the necessary sign of reconciliation for a schismatic and conferral of a “missing ritual element,” Cyprian maintained that any aspect of baptism conducted outside the “true church,” including the water bath, lacked the power to save.

The conflict became more pronounced during the fourth-century Donatist controversy, in which both parties claimed to have the only valid baptism. The Council of Arles in 314 determined that those who had been baptized by heretics should not be re-immersed, but simply be given the gift of the Holy Spirit through the imposition of hands.<sup>458</sup> As late as 458 the matter still required clarification, as Pope Leo I writing to Nicetas, the bishop of Aquileia, explained: “Those who have been baptized by heretics, not having been baptized previously, are to be confirmed by the imposition of hands, while only the Holy Spirit is invoked, because they have received the bare form of baptism without the power of sanctification.”<sup>459</sup> Therefore the washing is viewed as unrepeatable and efficacious, but the act of imposition of hands was invalid if received from a heretical or schismatic bishop.

Thus the post-baptismal episcopal imposition of hands was an ancient and paramount means for establishing the validity of the rite. Post-baptismal anointing, not mentioned in the New Testament or in the Apostolic Fathers, seems to be a subsidiary ceremony, perhaps first developed among gnostic Christians and subsequently adapted by more orthodox communities, arguably in the late second century, to symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>460</sup> Nevertheless, the *Apostolic Tradition* regards the Spirit as transmitted in the imposition of hands and not through the anointing that follows it. The latter act is identified, instead, as an act of “sealing” (*sphragidzein*). From the fourth century onward, however, the practice and understanding of both of these gestures changed according to time and place, and eventually, they were combined into one action that symbolized sealing, confirmation, and

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<sup>458</sup> Council of Arles, *Can.* 8.

<sup>459</sup> Leo, *Ep.* 166, trans. Hunt, *Pope, St. Leo the Great*, 250–51.

<sup>460</sup> This is the argument of Lampe, *Seal of the Spirit*, 80. Here he contradicts Gregory Dix, “The Seal in the Second Century,” *Theology* 51 (1948), 7–12.

the reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>461</sup> Because of the universal and unique importance of the post-baptismal imposition of hands for giving the Holy Spirit, the iconography most likely represents that act rather than either dunking or anointing.

#### 4.5.2. *The Dove*

According to the above analysis, the imposition of hands in baptismal iconography signifies the invocation and conferring of the Holy Spirit. This moment is also represented by the dove's appearance in many of the early images. According to De Bruyne, a scene might lack one of these two signs (gesture and dove) and still portray the giving of the Holy Spirit.<sup>462</sup> In addition, the dove appears in all four Gospels, when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus "as a dove" (cf. Mt 3.16). Later interpreters regarded this as an epiphany of the Holy Trinity: Jesus is in the water (as a man), God the Father is represented as a voice from heaven ("This is my beloved Son") and the dove is the Holy Spirit.<sup>463</sup>

The dove's descent sometimes is understood as the moment when Jesus is anointed as Messiah-Christ. For this reason, the dove is associated with post-baptismal holy unction. As we have seen, some interpreters have identified the substance that some images depict coming from the dove's beak as the oil of chrismation (cf. fig. 3.11).<sup>464</sup> However, a study of the catechetical and theological writings reveals no unanimity on this point. Irenaeus, for example, speaks in these terms: "The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus, for he had promised through the prophets that he would anoint him, that we, laying hold

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<sup>461</sup> In general, both post-baptismal imposition of hands and anointing (consignation) are episcopal acts in North Africa, but not necessarily in Rome, where a post baptismal anointing could have been given by a presbyter, followed by an imposition of hands and yet another anointing (signing) by the bishop (*Trad. ap.* 21). The Eastern rites omit the post-baptismal anointing altogether in many instances. Local variations make a discussion of this too complicated to summarize here. See Johnson, *Rites of Christian Initiation*, 77–85, 123–4, and 138–40.

<sup>462</sup> DeBruyne, "L'imposition des mains," 245. and n. 3.

<sup>463</sup> In later iconography, the hand of God appears as a way of representing God's voice, and in the Middle Ages, the hand is often replaced by a bearded "Father God" figure. Ambrose specifically says, "So Christ descended into the water, and the Holy Spirit descended as a dove; God the Father also spoke from heaven: You have the presence of the Trinity," *Sacr.* 1.5.19, trans. R. Deferrari, *FOC* 44, 275.

<sup>464</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 3, pp. 112–5.

of the abundance of his anointing, might be saved.”<sup>465</sup> Centuries later, however, Augustine nuanced such an interpretation, explaining that Christ’s anointing also happened at his conception in the womb of the Virgin and that the anointing of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism was a second anointing meant to prefigure the anointing of the church, given in baptism.<sup>466</sup>

Ambrose, by contrast, connected the dove’s descent with the sanctification of the waters in the font, which, he explained, is why the priest consecrates the water before the candidate goes into it, a custom that reversed the Gospels’ order of events in which Jesus descended into the water before the dove appeared. Jesus needed no sanctification but descended so that the waters should be ready for sanctification.<sup>467</sup> Furthermore, Ambrose views the dove as a figure, stressing that it was only a “likeness,” which is easily destroyed or changed, rather than the unchangeable “truth” itself (God). As a symbol it had another purpose: “Therefore, the Lord also says: ‘Be as wise as serpents, and as guileless as doves.’ Accordingly then, [he] ‘descended like a dove, in order to admonish us to have the simplicity of a dove (Matt 10.16)’”<sup>468</sup>

The dove certainly represents the descent of the Spirit at baptism, but it might carry other secondary meanings as well, including innocence. The dove by itself, of course, has many possible meanings in early Christian art, and countless parallels in contemporary Roman iconography, where it might be seen drinking from a cup or as a part of a lovely garden scene. In a funeral setting, a dove is often depicted with an olive branch in its beak, sometimes with an *orante* and the words “*in pace*.” The dove also appears with Noah in early Christian iconography, obviously taken from the textual narrative, but also symbolizing rescue or salvation from death. Thus a dove, even in a baptismal scene (and especially one in a burial context), conveys the idea of deliverance from death and the promise of a peaceful afterlife.<sup>469</sup>

<sup>465</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.9.3, trans. author.

<sup>466</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 15.46.

<sup>467</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 1.5.18. See discussion above on the sanctification of the water in the font, Chap. 4, pp. 134–6.

<sup>468</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 4.25, trans. author (SC 25: 168.25).

<sup>469</sup> Sühling, “Die Taube;” Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 38–41; and Barbara Mazzei, “Columba,” *TIP*, 153–4, for more examples and discussion.

*Conclusion*

The amount of correspondence between iconography of baptism and references to ceremonial actions or contexts in documentary sources is relatively small, perhaps because the iconography was not intended to record actual practices but rather to refer to the ritual's origin, purpose, or meaning. For example, the iconography continues to depict Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist rather than the baptism of an ordinary neophyte, and to place it in an outdoor setting (the Jordan River) long after baptism would have been moved to an indoor venue and conducted in private. In the same way, the Holy Spirit's descent upon the one being baptized follows the biblical narrative by showing it as a dove. The depiction of the recipient (Jesus) as a small naked child is more likely a way to symbolize the initiate's regeneration (rebirth) and return to innocence, than evidence of regular or common pedobaptism. Moreover, the continuing portrayal of Jesus' baptism, especially in baptismal spaces (e.g., the two Ravenna baptisteries where the image would have been directly over the head of the one standing in the font), must have been intended to demonstrate the neophyte's union with Christ in the sacrament.

At the same time, certain elements of the iconography refer to what must have been contemporary ritual practices, such as the administration of the water by pouring it (often from a vessel) over the head of a fully nude candidate. In the case of depicting affusion rather than immersion, the iconography departs from most of the documentary evidence, where emphasis is laid on the submersion of the body. Another instance of iconographic correspondence with liturgical texts is the portrayal of the imposition of hands upon the neophyte by the rite's presider. However, because of the conflation of several actions in a single image, this act is often shown as if it was simultaneous with the administration of water. According to the documents, these two actions normally would have been quite distinct, separated in time and space within the sacrament, the water bath preceding the laying-on of hands, which usually would have taken place after the initiate was dried off and re-robed. Moreover, some ceremonial elements are not depicted in the images, including the exorcism of the candidates, anointing or sealing with the sign of the cross, and the robing of the newly baptized in white garments after they have emerged from the water.

Some elements in baptismal iconography are perhaps clarified by surviving documents. These include the presence of several persons in the scene in addition to John the Baptist or the bishop/administrant. These additional figures might have indicated the presence of sponsors, witnesses, and ritual assistants (e.g. presbyters, deacons, and deaconesses). The dove's presence in most of the iconography may be coordinated with the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism, sanctifying and sealing the neophyte following the water bath.

The iconography, therefore, typically has a different function from the documentary source. It does not bear a direct correspondence along the lines of an illustration, nor does it offer a representation of the sacrament for the purpose of instruction or modeling. Rather, it interprets the act in its context, gives it a religious origin, and elaborates on its meaning and significance.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE DESIGN AND DECORATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN BAPTISTERIES

### *Introduction*

Although with possible exceptions (e.g., the baptism of Paul in Acts 9.17–18 which may have taken place in Ananias' house), baptism seems to have been, originally, an outdoor ceremony, administered in a place with accessible, flowing water. This is attested in other New Testament baptisms (e.g. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the Ethiopian's baptism in Acts 8) and is evident in the instructions provided in the *Didache* as well as in the allusions of Justin Martyr and Tertullian to moving candidates from an interior to an exterior setting.<sup>470</sup> Based on the existence of a baptistery in the third-century Dura Europos house church,<sup>471</sup> it appears that by the mid-third century the rite had begun to be administered within specially-designed or renovated interior rooms. These chambers would have been equipped with fonts large enough to accommodate adult candidates, although not necessarily to provide for full immersion, since water might be poured from above, as shown in the extant iconography.

Rather than being at some distance from the church, surviving examples show that these purpose-built rooms were either directly annexed to the main worship hall or free standing buildings adjacent to the congregation's assembly space.<sup>472</sup> The Dura Europos' specially

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<sup>470</sup> See the discussion of this development above, Chap. 4.1, pp. 129–32.

<sup>471</sup> See discussion of Dura Europos below, pp. 182–4.

<sup>472</sup> See the major study of Sebastian Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* (JAC 27m 1998); as well as the earlier work of André Khatchatrian, *Les baptistères paléochrétiens* (Paris: Impr. National, 1962); and John Gordon Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London: Barrie and Rockcliff, 1962). A brief, but important entry by Marina Falla Castelfranchi, "Battistero" occurs in the *Enciclopedia dell'arte medievale III* (1992), 214–17. A more recent study of baptisteries was published by Sible de Blaauw, in a subsection ("Baptisterium") of the entry "Kultgebäude," in the *RAC* 20 (2008), 227–393. In English, a chapter-length summary of early Christian baptisteries is included in Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture*, 203–14; and a more popular, but useful, work is by Anita Stauffer, *On Baptismal Fonts: Ancient and Modern* (Bramcote: Grove Books, Ltd., 1994). A forthcoming catalogue, *Baptisteries of the*

renovated baptismal chamber probably was not unique.<sup>473</sup> Baptism also might have taken place in existing domestic pools (*piscinae*) or even in private or public baths.<sup>474</sup> In fact, the Latin word, *baptisterium*, generally referred to a large basin or *piscina*, found in the *frigidarium* of a Roman bath. Pliny the Younger in a letter to Apollinarius describes just such a bath arrangement at his house in Tuscany.<sup>475</sup>

Tertullian, by contrast, refers to the font as a *piscina*, which literally meant “fishpond.”<sup>476</sup> Using this term, *piscina*, for a baptismal font had a double suitability because the fish symbol occurred in both the iconography and theology of Christian baptism.<sup>477</sup> The decoration of many fonts, especially in North Africa, with fish and other sea creatures indicates that artists skilled in building and decorating domestic pools may have been employed for building fonts (see fig. 5.19, for example). Other fonts bore similarities to pools built for the public baths, lined in their interior with seats and embellished with colorful mosaic designs.

### 5.1. Purpose Built Baptisteries

Known and still existing structures from the fourth century demonstrate that by that time indoor baptismal spaces had become the norm. The Emperor Constantine’s legalization and personal patronage of the Christian church resulted in a major building program both in Rome and the Holy Land. According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine (or one of his sons) may have built what was probably the earliest and

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*Early Christian World*, ed. William Caraher, Robin M. Jensen and Richard Rutherford will provide an English-language survey of baptisteries and fonts from the fourth through the seventh centuries.

<sup>473</sup> Some evidence for baptizing in private homes occurs in the *Passio S. Callisti*, Cod. Vat. Reg. 316, 449–50, which speaks of well-water used for baptism and the blessing of a font inside of a house that served as a church.

<sup>474</sup> Tertullian refers to baptism in an *alveo*, which might refer to a tub in a bath, *Bapt.* 4. 3. The Syriac *Acts of Judas Thomas* state that King Gundaphorus was baptized in a public bath. The Pilgrim of Bordeaux describes a visit to a private bath in Caesarea, believed to be the site of Cornelius’ baptism. See *Itin. Burd.* 13.

<sup>475</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 5, 6. 25–26; also *Ep.* 2.17.11.

<sup>476</sup> See also Gregory of Tours, *Mir.* 1.1.34 (PL 71.725). Other terms sometimes appear as well. Tertullian uses the term *lavacrum* in *Cor.* 3 and *Bapt.* 7 and 11. Paulinus of Nola uses the term *lavacrum* in *Ep.* 12 (to Severus); while the *Lib. Pont.* 48.2 (Hilarius) uses the term *nymphaeum* to refer to the Lateran baptistery.

<sup>477</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 6, pp. 234–7.

most significant detached baptistery in the West at the Lateran Basilica, which he founded shortly after his victory over Maxentius in 313.<sup>478</sup> The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, also built under his direction in the early 330's included a baptismal room that accommodated both local converts and pious pilgrims.<sup>479</sup> A few traces of what may have been pre-Constantinian baptisteries in the West are not well preserved but appear to be built along the same lines as the Dura baptistery—rectangular rooms attached to church buildings that were converted from domestic structures or early church halls. Unfortunately, unlike the Dura building, these remains are harder to date. The rectangular baptistery room attached to the basilica of S. Crisogono in Rome, for example, might be pre-Constantinian or may have been annexed to the main part of the building as late as the fifth century.<sup>480</sup>

The factors that led to the construction of more elaborate baptismal spaces in the fourth century no doubt included the increasing need for a space and for a regulated, impressive rite to accommodate the large number of converts following the emperor's lead; the lack of need for secrecy once the religion was legally tolerated; the increasing sense of hierarchy and control of the bishop over the central mysteries of the church; and the desire of wealthy and imperial patrons to build establishments that not only protected their privacy and added grandeur to the initiation rite but also attested to their generosity and piety. The building of baptisteries proximate to the main basilica of the region generally ensured that the rite remained in the local bishop's control, even though the material evidence indicates that baptism was not always restricted to the principal church of a diocese. Multiple baptisteries within one urban area (at a number of parish churches) may have been a practical solution to a rising demand for initiation to the faith, as well as a pious desire to be baptized in or near the shrine of a martyr.<sup>481</sup> In some cases, however, more than one baptistery in a

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<sup>478</sup> Constantinian construction of the Lateran Baptistery is not certain, however. See Olof Brandt, "Ipotesi sulla struttura del Battistero Lateranese tra Costantino e Sisto III," in *Ecclesiae urbis: atti del congresso internazionale di studi sulle chiese di Roma, (IV-X secolo)*, vol. 2 (2002), eds. Frederico Guidobaldi and Alessandra Guidobaldi, 923–32.

<sup>479</sup> Noted in Egeria, *Itin.* 38.1; 46.

<sup>480</sup> See Richard Krautheimer, et al., *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae* 1 (Vatican City, 1937), 144–54.

<sup>481</sup> See essay by Robin M. Jensen, "Baptismal Practices at North African Martyrs' Shrines," for *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism in Early Judaism, Graeco-Roman Religion, and Early Christianity*, ed. David Hellholm (DeGruyter, anticipated 2010).

single area could serve competing communions or schismatic congregations.<sup>482</sup>

For example, Rome's Christian congregation required more than one baptistery to accommodate the numbers of initiates. Although the principle baptistery was established at the Lateran Basilica, textual or archaeological evidence of additional Roman baptisteries from the fourth or early fifth centuries include fonts at St. Peter's (installed by Pope Damasus), S. Lorenzo fuori le Mura, S. Marcello in Corso, S. Clemente, and S. Lorenzo in Lucina. By the early Middle Ages, most of the important churches of Rome had their own baptismal structures, suggesting that the bishop's exclusive supervision of the ritual was probably no longer practical and parish churches (led by presbyters) gradually assumed some of the episcopal prerogatives.<sup>483</sup>

While few of the earliest baptismal chambers are intact, the rare examples with surviving walls or ceilings demonstrate that they were often elaborately decorated with elaborate polychrome stone pavements, wall paintings and (later on) decorative glass mosaics. The geometric, floral, and figurative motifs of these decorations vary considerably over time and space, although all relate to the theological significance of the rite in certain respects. This chapter describes the design and decoration of a select group of early baptisteries, noting existing inscriptions or other documents that describe their specific structures or furnishings.<sup>484</sup> It also considers the purpose and symbolic implications of architectural design in general, the possible meaning of the variety of shapes and sizes of both baptistery buildings and the fonts within them.

### 5.1.1. *The Dura Europos Baptistery*

The earliest existing example of specially built baptismal architecture is part of the Christian building at Dura Europos, which was discovered in eastern Syria and excavated by archaeologists from the French Academy

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<sup>482</sup> For example, multiple baptisteries in North African towns could have served competing Donatist and Catholic churches.

<sup>483</sup> See Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome, passim* but esp. 251–2; also Jensen, "Baptism at North African Martyrs' Shrines."

<sup>484</sup> The concentration, here, on baptisteries of Italy and North Africa (with the exception of the Dura Europos Baptistery) is partly because these baptismal structures have surviving or recorded iconography and inscriptions. Other baptisteries with surviving decoration include the Butrint Baptistery in Albania. For this baptistery see John Mitchell, *The Butrint Baptistery and its Mosaics* (London/Tirana: Butrint Foundation, 2008). This baptistery will be cited in the discussion of iconography in Chap. 6.



Fig. 5.1 Baptistry, Dura Europos, Eastern Syria, ca. 240. Photo: Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection.

of Inscriptions and Letters and Yale University beginning in 1928. A unique discovery, this early house church was built around 240 and abandoned during an attack by the Sassanians on this Roman garrison town in 256 (fig. 5.1).<sup>485</sup> The baptistery room was taken to the United States and reconstructed at the Yale University Art Gallery (fig. 5.1).

The room, on the north side of the house (probably part of the women's quarters) that was transformed into a baptismal hall was fitted with a rectangular font at its west end. This basin—measuring about 1.6 m. long by 1 m. wide and about 1 m. deep—was set into a niche covered by an arch. This arrangement bears similarities to the arched recess (arcosolium) over a sarcophagus in a Roman catacomb. In this instance the font replaced the rectangular tomb or sarcophagus.

Both the arch's vault and room's ceiling are painted with white stars on a blue field. The arch itself has a decorative band of pomegranates,

<sup>485</sup> Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos*, ed. Bernard Goldman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Carl H. Kraeling, *The Christian Building: Excavations at Dura Europos, Final Report VIII.2* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and L. Michael White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990), 123–31.

grapes, and wheat. The lunette under the arch shows an image of a shepherd with his sheep and a small Adam and Eve on either side of a tree; a serpent slithers along the ground between them. Paintings on two registers on the other three walls (south, north, and east) were mostly destroyed but the remaining scenes have been identified as the Samaritan woman at the well and David and Goliath (on the south wall); Jesus healing the paralytic, walking on water, and stilling the storm (on the north wall); and (below these) three women carrying torches toward a rectangular structure with a peaked roof, with stars at each corner. Scholars disagree about whether this painting shows the three women coming to the empty tomb on Easter morning (cf. Mark 16.1), or (alternatively) three of the five wise virgins approaching the bridegroom's tent (cf. Matt 25.1–13).<sup>486</sup>

The south wall of the room had two doorways—one opening into a central courtyard and the other into a western room that may have served as a private space for preparing the baptismal candidates. This connecting room led into what has been assumed to be the assembly space for the community on the south part of the house.

### 5.1.2. *Baptisteries in Italy*

#### 5.1.2.1. *Lateran Baptistery (San Giovanni in Fonte), Rome*

Historically, this is probably the most important early Christian baptistery in the West (fig. 5.2). It was one of the first free-standing baptisteries and was personally administered by the Bishop of Rome. It also belonged to the complex of the great Lateran Palace and its Basilica, which was built with an endowment provided by Constantine I in Rome, ca. 312. The *Liber Pontificalis* mistakenly asserts that Constantine himself was baptized there by Bishop Sylvester (a claim contradicted by the *Life of Constantine*, usually credited to Eusebius), and this tradition is reflected in a famous painting by Francesco Penni in the Vatican Museum.<sup>487</sup> Also,

<sup>486</sup> Either possibility could be argued as appropriate for a baptismal chamber, see below, Chap. 6, p. 277. On the iconography generally see Annabelle Wharton, *Refiguring the Post-Classical City: Dura Europos, Jerash, Jerusalem, and Ravenna* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51–63; Michael I. Rostovtzeff, *Dura Europos and its Art* (New York: AMS Press, 1978); and Ann Louise Perkins, *The Art of Dura Europos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

<sup>487</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 34 (Sylvester).13; Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4.62 writes that Constantine was baptized just before his death at the cathedral in Nicomedia. See Vincenzo Aiello, “Costantino, la lebbra e il battesimo di Silvestro,” in *Costantino il Grande, dall'antichità all'umanesimo*, vol. 1, ed., G. Bonamente and F. Fusco (Macerata: Università degli studi di Macerata, 1992), 17–58.



Fig. 5.2 Lateran Baptistery exterior (San Giovanni in Fonte), Rome, fifth century. Photo: Author.



Fig. 5.3 Lateran Baptistery interior (San Giovanni in Fonte), Rome, fourth century. Photo: Author.

according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine ordered the font to be built of porphyry and covered with silver inside and out. In the middle of the basin, a porphyry column supported a golden bowl burned over 200 pounds of balsam at Easter. This document additionally credited Constantine with providing the funds for a solid gold lamb and seven silver stags to pour water into the font, a golden and jeweled censor, and nearly life-sized silver statues of Christ and John the Baptist. John held an inscribed scroll that read: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”<sup>488</sup>

The building was constructed just fifty meters or so to the northwest of the Lateran Basilica, over the foundations of a bath (that might have facilitated the conveyance or drainage of baptismal water). For a long time, architectural historians have believed the original building was cylindrical in form, with a round basin in its center.<sup>489</sup> The end of a fourth-century sarcophagus now in the Vatican Museum depicts a building that some have identified with the Lateran baptistery.<sup>490</sup> The same historians who argued for an original cylindrical shape believed that at some point, perhaps during the pontificate of Sixtus III, the building was rebuilt to have an octagonal design, possibly following the model of other centralized church buildings and shrines (see fig. 5.2).<sup>491</sup> More recently, scholars have expressed doubts and re-read the archaeological evidence to propose that the original building had a circular foundation but octagonal elevation and probably was built some time well after the Lateran basilica was completed.<sup>492</sup> This also

<sup>488</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 34.13 (Sylvester). On the Constantinian endowments, and some doubts about the emperor’s actual patronage see Olof Brandt, “Deer, Lambs, and Water in the Lateran Baptistery,” *RivAC* 81 (2005), 131–56; and Brandt, “Ipotesi sulla struttura del Battistero Lateranese.” A reconstruction of this, drawn by B. Mazzei is reproduced in Bisconti, “L’iconografia dei battisteri,” 409.

<sup>489</sup> See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #403–4, 190; and Giovanni Pelliccioni, *Le nuove scoperte sulle origini del battistero lateranese*, Atti Pontificia Accad. Romana Arch. ser. 3, mem. 12.1 (Rome, 1973).

<sup>490</sup> This building, however, is otherwise meant to be in a Jerusalem context, which is why some interpreters have argued that it might have been based on the Holy Sepulchre. See Orazio Marucchi, “Un insigne sarcofago cristiano Lateranese relativo al primato de S. Pietro ed al gruppo dell’antico Laterano,” *RivAC* 2 (1925), 84–116.

<sup>491</sup> According to Eusebius, the Constantinian basilica in Antioch was octagonal in shape. See also the discussion of the Ambrosian baptistery below, pp. 195–8.

<sup>492</sup> Compare the dated arguments of Giovanni B. Giovenale, *Il Battistero Lateranense* (Rome, 1929), who believed that the round building was converted to an octagon in the 5th century with that of Richard Krautheimer, who thought the octagonal building was also Constantinian—*Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), 90–92, n. 47. The more recent work of Brandt, “Ipotesi sulla

suggests that the Lateran could have been the model for later fourth- and fifth-century octagonal structures.<sup>493</sup>

The *Liber Pontificalis* states that Sixtus had eight porphyry columns erected on spurs projecting from the font's outer edge to create an inner octagonal colonnade, using columns that Constantine had imported from Egypt and probably originally set against the inside walls of the building (fig. 5.3).<sup>494</sup> On these were placed an octagonal marble architrave that supported another octagonal colonnade (a second storey) and an upper clerestory with eight windows and a small dome. The lower architrave (or entablature) was inscribed with the following poem of eight stanzas, possibly composed by Leo I when he was a deacon (before he succeeded Sixtus as bishop of Rome):

*Gens sacranda polis hic semine nascitur almo  
quam fecundatis spiritus edit aquis.  
Mergere, peccator sacro purgande fluento:  
quem veterem accipiet, proferet unda novum.  
Nulla renascentum est distantia, quos facit unum  
unus fons, unus spiritus, una fides.  
Virgineo fetu genitrix ecclesia natos  
quos spirante deo concipit amne parit,  
Insons esse volens isto mundare lavacro,  
seu patrio premeris crimine seu proprio.  
Fons hic est vitae qui totum diluit orbem,  
sumens de Christi vulnere principium  
Caelorum regnum sperate hoc fonte renati:  
non recipit felix vita semel genitos.  
Nec numerus quemquam scelerum nec forma suorum  
terreat: hoc natus flumine sanctus erit.*<sup>495</sup>

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struttura del Battistero Lateranese," seems to have resolved the question. See also, Olof Brandt and Federico Guidobaldi, "Il Battistero Lateranese: Nuove interpretazioni delle fasi strutturali," *RivAC* 84 (2008), 189–282; and Marina Falla Castelfranchi, "L'edificio battesimale in Italia nel periodo paleocristiano," in *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 267–301. The archaeological questions, architecture, and function of this monument have most recently been summarized by Hugo Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome*, 37–54.

<sup>493</sup> See M. Castelfranchi, "L'edificio," 270–71.

<sup>494</sup> *Liber Pont.* 46 (Sixtus III). 7. The text here only records Sixtus' providing decorations that had not previously been there and the erection of the eight porphyry columns as well as the architrave with verses.

<sup>495</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, "Inscriptions from Early Christian Baptisteries in Rome," in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* 15 (Rome: Institutum Romanum Norvegiae, forthcoming). Also see Giuseppe Cuicito, "Epigrafi di apparato nei battisteri paleocristiani d'Italia," in *L'edificio battesimale in Italia. Aspetti e problemi: ACIAC* 8 (2001), 441–66. The argument that Leo I was the author of these verses was made by Franz J. Dölger, "Die Inschrift im Baptisterium S. Giovanni in Fonte

(A people to be consecrated to the heavens, here is born from a fruitful seed,  
 established by waters made fertile by the Spirit.  
 Plunge in, oh sinner, to be cleansed by the sacred flow.  
 whom it receives old, the wave returns new.  
 No differences exist among those being reborn,  
 whom one font, one spirit and one faith make one.  
 By a virginal birth, the mother church bears children.  
 Those she conceives by God's breathing, she births by this stream.  
 You who wish to be innocent, wash in the bath,  
 whether you are burdened by ancestral sin or your own.  
 This is the fountain of life, which cleanses the whole world,  
 its origin is Christ's wound.  
 Hope for the heavenly kingdom, once you have been reborn in this  
 spring;  
 that happy life does not admit those only once-born.  
 Let neither the number nor kind of their sins frighten.  
 Anyone reborn in the river will be holy.)

These lines plainly stress the understanding of baptism as a second birth, with the church as the mother.<sup>496</sup> However, baptism here also acts as a washing or cleansing from sin (both universal and personal). Furthermore, the waters of life are linked to Christ's redemptive passion, as their "source" is the wound in his side. Finally, both the references to the new race "born from fruitful seed" and the fountain that "waters the whole world" recalls the garden of Eden, the original birthplace of the race, watered by its four aboriginal rivers.

The building's other important character is its octagonal design. The exterior octagon is reinforced, inside, by the two sets of eight columns that rise above the font. The octagon as a symbol of the new creation is discussed at length below.

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der Lateranischen Basilika aus der Zeit Xystus III (432–440) und die Symbolik des Taufbrunnens bei Leo dem Grossen," *AC* 2 (1930), 252–57. His argument is based on literary parallels with Leo's sermons, especially his description of the font as the virginal womb of the mother church. Paul A. Underwood makes a similar argument in "The Fountain of Life and the Manuscripts of the Gospels," *DOP* 5 (1950), 56–61. The Latin text above is based on the reconstruction of Dölger, 258, although different ordering has sometimes been proposed.

<sup>496</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, "*Mater Ecclesia* and *Fons Aeterna*: The Church and Her Womb in Ancient Christianity," *The Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 137–55.

#### 5.1.2.2. *Font in the Catacomb of San Ponziano, Rome*

Apart from a possible baptistery in the catacomb of Priscilla, this is the only baptismal font so far discovered in the Roman catacombs. Dated no earlier than the fifth and as late as the eighth century, it lies at the base of a flight of steps and is essentially a rectangular basin about 1 m. deep, just under 2 m. across and 1.5 m. wide. A small landing at the foot of the steps allows room only for a candidate and a baptizer. This particular catacomb was built in sandstone rather than more durable tufa rock. Because of this, flooding probably occurred, leaving a pool of water that could have become a natural baptistery. The basin, also, may have been created as a storage area for the fossores who excavated the catacomb's tunnels and chambers. Later, after the translation of additional relics (probably of the martyrs Abdon and Sennon), the space was transformed into an underground shrine with a baptismal font.<sup>497</sup>

Although Alfonse Fausone argues that this was a suburban baptistery, not necessarily for pilgrims but for those living outside the city who desired a more convenient baptistery than the Lateran, it is hard to consider this particular place as convenient. By the fifth century, Rome already had many more baptisteries than the one at the Lateran.<sup>498</sup> Most likely this baptistery was associated with the cemetery church of St. Pontianus, bishop of Rome from 230–35 and is another example of a baptistery at a martyr's shrine.<sup>499</sup>

Above the font, several interesting frescoes reveal details that partly account for its dating. The conformity of the frescoes' composition to early Byzantine iconography of baptism points to a later date as more likely. The painting over the font (at the back) shows John baptizing Jesus, who is depicted as an adult, nimbed, and standing up to his hips in water (fig. 5.4). John, also nimbed, wears an animal skin and holds a shepherd's crook. An angel stands opposite and has veiled hands. A dove hovers over Jesus' head and a stag on the lower left drinks water from the Jordan River.

<sup>497</sup> The most recent study of this font is that of Monica Ricciardi, "Nuove ricerche sul battistero nella Catacomb di Ponziano a Roma," *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 957–74.

<sup>498</sup> Fausone, *Die Taufe*, 133–34; see also Pasquale Testini, *Archeologia cristiana* (Rome: Descée, 1958), 190 and Johann Kirsch, *The Catacombs of Rome* (Rome: Società Amici delle Catacombe, 1946), 182. On the number of baptisteries in Rome by the fifth century see discussion above, p. 182.

<sup>499</sup> See Jensen, "Baptism at North African Martyrs' Shrines."



Fig. 5.4 Baptistry, Catacomb of San Ponziano, Rome, fifth–eighth century.  
Photo: Estelle Brettmann, The International Catacomb Society.

Below the baptism scene rises a gem-studded cross, flowers sprouting from its base. The letters alpha and omega hang from its cross bar; lit candles rise above them. The adjacent wall shows a bust of Christ, his hands stretched out to present wreaths to the shrine's two martyrs Abdon and Sennon (whose relics probably were laid somewhere nearby).<sup>500</sup> Two other saints stand to either side in the prayer stance.

<sup>500</sup> See Bisconti, "L'iconografia dei battisteri," 424–7.

5.1.2.3. *San Giovanni in Fonte, at the Basilica of Sta. Restituta, Naples*

This relatively small (about 7 m. square), domed baptistery probably was built in the late fourth century, during the episcopacy of Severus (362–408), and remodeled during the episcopacy of Soter (465–486).<sup>501</sup> Annexed to the old church of Sta. Restituta (now part of the cathedral complex), it now can be entered through a chapel at the upper end of the right-hand aisle, behind the main apse. It has, in addition, a separate entrance, a rectangular portico, set off by four columns, which connects the baptistery to the archepiscopal palace by a flight of twelve steps.

Although the foundations and walls of this building form a square, the interior is transformed into an octagon by squiches that support the dome. The white marble basin of the font in the center is large (about 2 m. across) but rather shallow (about 45 cm. deep), round, and surrounded by a single step (fig. 5.5). The drainage hole for emptying the basin is still visible. The richly colored glass mosaics in the dome and on the squinches are still intact even though very much damaged.<sup>502</sup>

In the dome's center, a large gold chi-rho monogram floats on a blue, star-studded orb. It is flanked by an alpha and omega floats and over it the hand of God holds a jeweled wreath bound with a gold ribbon (fig. 5.6). This image would have been directly above the one being baptized. A wide decorative band of birds (peacocks, pheasants, and a phoenix), vegetation and vases of fruit and flowers surrounds the medallion. Eight bands decorated with vases (*canthari*) filled with flowers, fruit, and birds radiate from this center point and divide the dome into eight curved, triangular compartments. The upper part of each of these sections is decorated with blue and gold draperies looped

<sup>501</sup> The most recent discussion of this monument is in the article of Janine Desmulliez, "Le dossier du groupe Episcopal de Naples. État actuel des recherches," *AntTard* 6 (1998), 345–54; but the (now dated) work of Jean-Louis Maier is still valuable. See Maier, *Le baptistère de Naples et ses mosaïques: étude historique et iconographique* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1964), esp. 15–24. An ancient documentary source regarding the construction of the baptistery is the *Liber Pont. sanc. Neapol. sc.*, ed. G. Waitz (Hannoverae: Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani, 1878), 408.

<sup>502</sup> On the mosaic program see Katia Gandolfi, *Les mosaïques du baptistère de Naples: programme iconographique et liturgie*, in *Il Duomo di Napoli dal paleocristiano all'età angioina*, ed. Serena Romano and Nicolas Bock (Naples: Electa Napoli, 2002), 21–34; Maier, *Le baptistère*, 25–77; Bisconti, "L'iconografia dei battisteri," 433–5; Lucien De Bruyne, "La décoration des baptistères paléochrétiens," *ACIAC* 5 (1957), 341–69; and Georg Stuhlfauth, "Das Baptisterium, San Giovanni in Fonte in Neapel und seine Mosaiken," *Reinhold-Seeberg Festschrift* 2 (1929), 181–212.



Fig. 5.5 Baptismal font, Basilica of Sta. Restituta (San Giovanni in Fonte), Naples, late fourth century. Photo: Author.



Fig. 5.6 Baptistery mosaics, Basilica of Sta. Restituta (San Giovanni in Fonte), Naples, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

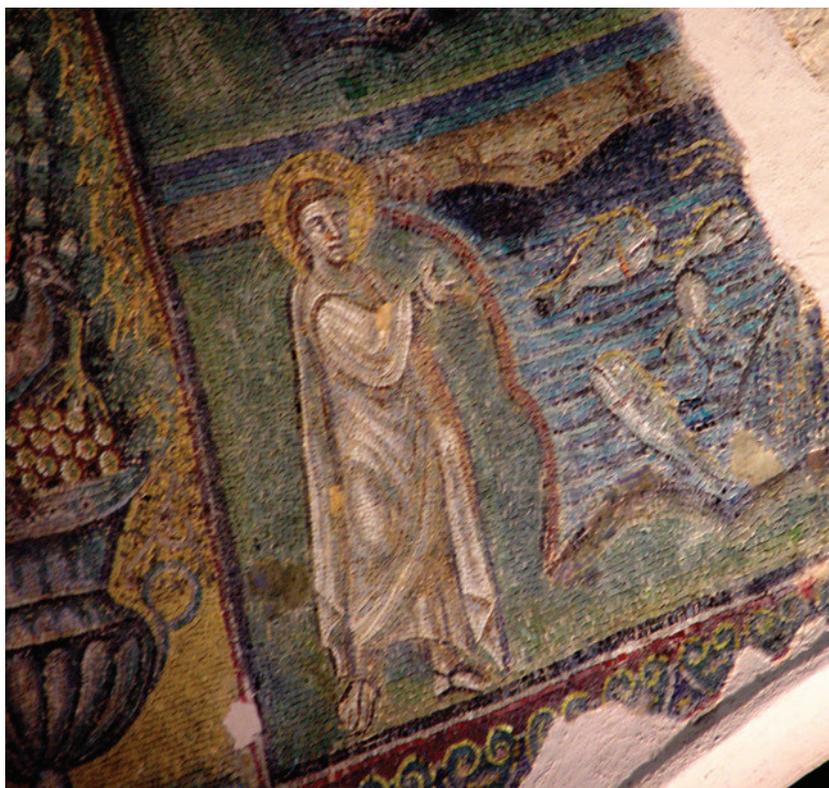


Fig. 5.7 Baptistery mosaics, Basilica of Sta. Restituta (San Giovanni in Fonte), Naples, late fourth century. Photo: Author.

over a geometrically decorated architrave on which perch birds flanking vases of flowers and fruit.

Below the birds and draperies are figurative scenes based on biblical narratives. Four are still visible: the miraculous catch of fish (fig. 5.7) as Christ stills the storm and walks on the water, the women and angel at the empty tomb, the Samaritan woman at the well appended to a rendering of the miracle at Cana (fig. 6.9), and Jesus giving the law to his disciples (the *traditio legis*—fig. 6.5). Lucien De Bruyne proposes that two of the lost panels contained healing scenes of the paralytic and the blind man. He also proposes that one of the heavily damaged panels contained a scene of the miracle of the loaves and fish.<sup>503</sup>

<sup>503</sup> De Bruyne, “La decoration,” 344. He mostly discounts Wilpert’s conjecture (based on the roughly contemporary cycle of mosaics at S. Matrona near Naples),

The images of the Samaritan woman joined to the wedding at Cana (fig. 6.9) reflect the symbolism of living water and the sacramental use of both water and wine. The scenes of Jesus walking on the water and stilling the storm have baptismal associations as well, primarily because they depict Jesus' rescue of the disciples while they are in the water. The women coming to the empty tomb point to the hope of the resurrection for those who have been baptized.

Beneath the dome, horizontal panels alternate with the squinches. The panels show saints or apostles clasping crowns of gold and jeweled oak leaves.<sup>504</sup> The four squinches that transform the square room to an octagonal base for the dome were decorated with the symbols of the four evangelists or the four living creatures from Revelation 4.6–8 (winged man, ox, lion, and eagle). Only three of these four survive (the ox is lost). Behind their heads are the same gold and white stars that decorate the central medallion. Above, an arched band frames each evangelist symbol, these bands contain pastoral scenes; two have deer coming to a stream of water and two show a Good Shepherd with his sheep. In one of these latter images the Good Shepherd carries a lamb on his shoulders and gestures invitingly toward the rock-fountain; in the other he reclines in a flower-filled meadow.

#### 5.1.2.4. *Baptistery of San Stefano, Milan*

A baptismal font lies below the sacristy of the Cathedral of Milan (built over the ancient Basilica of Sta. Maria Maggiore). This original baptismal chamber, probably constructed in the early fourth century and originally attached to the ancient basilica, was quite large (about 18 m. in diameter) and quite simple in plan (having neither apses nor niches). The octagonal basin is more than 2 m. wide and about 80 cm. deep. A single bench surrounds its interior, and a visible drainage hole at the base of the basin provides a means of emptying the baptismal water. The oldest known octagonal font, this may have been the

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that the lost images included an annunciation scene but he is more willing to allow Wilpert's and Stuhlfauth's argument that one of the scenes would have depicted John baptizing Jesus because the remains of some bare feet appear in this image. See Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien*, 230; and Stuhlfauth, "Das Baptisterium," 197.

<sup>504</sup> Maier discusses some of the variously proposed identities for these saints and argues that they are most likely apostles because their names are not given (as they often are in the iconography of saints). See Maier, *Le baptistère*, 52.

model for subsequent monuments.<sup>505</sup> At a later date it might have been reserved for the baptism of women.<sup>506</sup>

No material evidence has been found of the fantastic machinery described by Bishop Ennodius of Pavia (511–521) in his short poem on this baptistery titled: “On the baptismal font of St. Stephen and the Water Which Falls from Its Columns.”<sup>507</sup> According to the text, when Bishop Eustorgius (343–350) rebuilt the baptistery he provided a fantastic hydraulic apparatus that allowed water to fall into and fill the font from above, probably from the underside of a stone baldachin:

Behold, it rains without a cloud under the canopy—  
 a rain shower in a clear sky.  
 The clear face [form] of heaven provides the water;  
 Flowing rivers run down over sacred marble blocks.  
 See again, see! The stone brings forth water.  
 Truly the dry canopy poured forth pure springs  
 and the celestial wave has come renew birth.  
 Sacred water flows through the air from the vault  
 built while Eustorgius was bishop.<sup>508</sup>

#### 5.1.2.5. *Baptistery of San Giovanni at Sta. Thecla, Milan*

This baptistery dates to the mid-fourth century and may have been in use during Ambrose’s episcopacy (374–397) and at his cathedral (later dedicated to Sta. Thecla). Based on this dating, scholars assume that it was also the site of Augustine’s baptism in 387 (although not Ambrose’s own, which probably was in the older cathedral baptistery).<sup>509</sup>

<sup>505</sup> See Silvia Lusuardi Siena and Marco Sannazaro, “I battisteri del complesso episcopale Milanese alla luce delle recenti indagini archeologiche,” *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 647–74; Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #377, 184; Françoise Monfrin, “A propos de Milan chrétien: Siège épiscopal et topographie chrétienne, IV<sup>e</sup>–VI<sup>e</sup> siècles,” *CA*. 39 (1991), 7–46; Bruno Maria Apollonj-Ghetti, “Le Cattedrali di Milano ed i relativi battisteri,” *RivAC*, 63 (1987), 28–32; Mario Mirabella Roberti, “Battistero di S. Stefano alle Fonti,” in *Il duomo di Milano: Dizionario storico artistico e religioso* (Milan: 1986), 79.

<sup>506</sup> As proposed by Gino Traversi, *Architettura paleocristiana milanese* (Milan: Varese, 1964), 122.

<sup>507</sup> In Latin: “*De fonte baptisterii sancti stefani et aqual quae per columnas venit.*” Ennodius, *Carm.* 2.149, CSEL 6, 607.

<sup>508</sup> Trans., author: *En sine nube pluit sub tectis imbre sereno Et cadi fades pura ministrat aquas. Proflua marmoribus decurrunt flumina sacris Atque iterum rorem parturit ecce lapis. Arida nam liquidos effundit pergula fontes, Et rursus natis unda superna venit. Sancta per aetherios emanat limpha recessus, Eustorgi vatis ducta ministerio.*

<sup>509</sup> This baptistery was excavated by Mario Mirabella Roberti in the 1960s. See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #376, 183–4; Mario Mirabella Roberti and Angelo



Fig. 5.8 Baptistery, San Giovanni at Sta. Thecla, Milan, mid fourth century.  
Photo: Author.

Today visitors access the site by a stair descending from the rear of the present cathedral (Sta. Maria Maggiore). The original building was octagonal and about 19 m. in diameter. The interior walls have deep semicircular apses (that might have served as dressing rooms) alternating with rectangular entrance niches; the angles between these niches are marked by columns. The building seems to have been remodeled in the fifth century, probably according to the original plan of the earlier structure. The font is similarly octagonal and more than 5 m. across; it has two benches around its interior (fig. 5.8). Although the structure, along with its furnishings, is mostly destroyed, its appearance may be imagined by comparison to the contemporary mausoleum of S. Aquilino attached to the basilica of San Lorenzo in Milan.<sup>510</sup>

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Paredi, *Il battistero ambrosiano di San Giovanni in Fonte* (Milan: Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano, 1974); Mario Mirabella Roberti, *Il battistero antico di Milano*, *ACIAC* 6 (1965), 703–7; and Roberti, “I battisteri di Sant’ Ambrogio,” in *Agostino a Milano: Il Battesimo. Agostino nelle terre di Ambrogio (22–24 aprile 1987)*, ed. Marta Sordi et al. (Palermo: Edizioni Augustinus, 1988), 77–83.

<sup>510</sup> See Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 78–84 for plans of both buildings.

A poem of eight couplets, attributed to Ambrose, transcribed in the eighth century and now preserved in the Vatican Library is generally supposed by scholars to have been inscribed either on the baptistery's dome or on the perimeter of the font. It echoes the images found on the Lateran baptistery architrave but also provide important evidence for the theological significance of the baptistery's (and font's) octagonal shape:

*Octachorum s[an]c[t]os templum surrexit in usus  
 octagonus fons est munere dignus eo.  
 Hoc numero decuit sacri baptismatis aulam  
 surgere, quo populis vera salus rediit.  
 Luce resurgentis Xri[ist]i, qui claustra resolvit  
 mortis et e tumulis suscitatur examines.  
 Confessosq[ue] reos maculoso crimine solvens  
 fontis purifluid diluit in riuo.  
 Hic, quincunq[ue] volent probrosa[e] crimina vitae  
 ponere, corda lauent, pectora munda gerant.  
 Huc veniant alacres: quamvis tenebrosus adire  
 audeat, abscedet candidior nivibus.  
 Huc s[an]c[t]i properent: non expers ullus aquarum  
 s[an]c[t]us, in his regnum est consiliumq[ue] d[e]i,  
 Gloria iustitiae. Nam quid divinius isto  
 ut puncto exiguo culpa cadat populi?*

(The eight-sided temple has risen for sacred purposes  
 the eight-sided font is worthy for this task.  
 It is seemly that the baptismal hall should arise in this number  
 by which true health has returned to people  
 By the light of the resurrected Christ, who loosens the bonds of death  
 and revives the lifeless from the tombs.  
 Absolving those who have confessed from their sordid crime,  
 he washes them in the flow of the purifying font.  
 Let whoever who wishes to shed their shameful lives' transgressions  
 wash their hearts here; let them show their breasts clean.  
 Let that one come here quickly; however darkened by sin,  
 let that one dare to approach, and depart whiter than snow.  
 Let the holy ones make haste to this place; no holy person is unac-  
 quainted with  
 these waters. In them is the rule and counsel of God.  
 O glory of justice! For what is there more divine,  
 than that the people's guilt be abrogated in only a moment?)<sup>511</sup>

<sup>511</sup> Ambrose's authorship of these lines is controversial (they may also have been written by Milan's fifth-century Bishop Laurentius), although parallel themes can

This poem not only emphasizes the symbolic purpose of the octagonal design of the building but also the understanding of baptism as a death and rebirth, as well as the return to health, the washing and absolution of sin, and the transformation from the darkness of sin to the light of salvation.

5.1.2.6. *San Giovanni in Fonte, the Orthodox Baptistery, Ravenna*

This baptistery, erected by Bishop Orso in the early fifth century, still looks much as it did when it was remodeled and decorated by his successor, Neon in the 450s. Built near the cathedral, this freestanding octagonal building has a plain brick exterior and a peaked octagonal tiled roof (fig. 5.9). Low rounded apses also with peaked roofs jut from alternating walls. These apses appear to give the octagonal building a square base. Eight large arched windows, blind brick arches, and a few smaller, higher windows punctuate the eight sides of the building. Only one door allows entrance, and it is on the western side of the building.<sup>512</sup>

The undecorated brick outside contrasts with the building's architecturally complex and sumptuously decorated interior (fig. 5.10). The floor plan is a central square with four semicircular apses on the corners and four shallow rectangular niches along the main walls. The apses are big enough to have been used as dressing rooms, although no indication of curtain supports exists. Each of these eight recesses is set

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be found in many of his catechetical and mystagogical sermons. On this point see Othmar Perler, "L'inscription du baptistère de Sainte-Thècle à Milan et le 'De sacramentis' de saint Ambroise," in *RivAC* 27 (1951), 145–66; Franz Dölger, "Zur Symbolik des altchristlichen Taufhauses," *AC* 4 (1934), 153–87; and Underwood, "The Fountain of Life," 81–2. The text is in the Vatican Library, *Palatino Latin Codex* 833, transcribed by an unknown author of the ninth- or early tenth century. It has been published in several epigraphical collections including the *CIL* 5.617.2 and the *ICUR* 2.1, 161 n. 2; and—most recently—in the *Opera omnia di sant'Ambrogio. Inni, Iscrizioni, Frammenti*, ed. S. Banterle, et al. (Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1994), 145–166.

<sup>512</sup> On this building see Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #398–9, 189; Spiro Kostof, *The Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1965); Deichmann, *Ravenna* 1, 130–151 and 2, 17–47; Anna Maria Iannucci, "Nuove ricerche al Battistero Neoniano," *XXXIII Corso di cultura sull'arte Ravennate e Bizantina* (1985), 79–107; R. Trinci, "Il battistero Ursiano e la sezione aurea," in *ACIAC* 9.2 (Vatican City: 1978), 563–90; and Annabelle J. Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna," *AB* 19.3 (1987), 358–75. On its mosaics see Ittai Weinryb, "A Tale of two Baptisteries: Royal and Ecclesiastical Patronage in Ravenna," in *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 7 (2002), 41–58.





Fig. 5.10 Orthodox Baptistery interior (San Giovanni in Fonte), Ravenna, mid fifth century. Photo: Author.

off by a large arch, supported by eight attached columns. Above these is an arcade of eight arches, spanning three smaller arches consisting of columned niches on either side of a window. The upper colonnade rises to a large dome. Almost every surface is covered with marble or glass mosaic or stucco relief sculpture.

The width of the building from apse to apse is about 19.5 m. The original font was circular—or octagonal with a circular interior. The present octagonal white marble font is about 3.5 m. across. On the outside are eight decorative slabs of porphyry. A semicircular marble pulpit attached to one side of the font (possibly a later addition) would have allowed the administrator of the rite to address the catechumens from a raised platform.<sup>513</sup>

The decoration is divided into five zones. The lowest has the large arched apses and shallow rectangular niches. The apses, now bare of decoration, contain an altar and a large urn, neither of which were

<sup>513</sup> The current font may be a medieval renovation of the fifth century font, which Kostof believes had a circular interior. Kostof does, however, believe that the pulpit may have been original. See *Orthodox Baptistery*, 140.



Fig. 5.11 Orthodox Baptistery detail of apse mosaic (San Giovanni in Fonte), Ravenna, mid fifth century. Photo: Author.

original furnishings (fig. 5.11).<sup>514</sup> The rectangular niches, however, are covered by decorative opus sectile. The arches over each of the niches are decorated with a mosaic and geometric pattern and eight portraits of teachers or prophets surrounded by scrolling acanthus vines. This area, with the exception of the oval portrait medallions, has been heavily restored. The figures may either be specific persons or personifications of particular church doctrines.<sup>515</sup>

Over the four apses are mosaic inscriptions that probably refer to missing apse mosaics. Individual monograms, possibly referring to Bishops Neon, Peter Chrysologos, and Maxminian, appear at the center of the inscriptions.<sup>516</sup> Restored by Garrucci in the nineteenth century, they now read:

1. *IHS AMBULANS SUPER MARE PETRO MERGENTI MANUM  
CAPIT ET IUBENTE DOMNO VENTUS CESSAVIT*  
(Jesus, walking on the water, grasped Peter's hand as he was sinking, and the wind ceased at the Lord's command [a paraphrase of Matthew 14.29–33].)
2. *BEATI QUORUM REMISSAE SUNT INIQUITATES ET QUORUM  
TECTA SUNT PECCATA BEATUS VIR GUI NON IMPUTAVIT  
DOMINUS PECCATUM*  
(Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity [Psalm 32.1–2].)
3. *UBI DEPOSUIT IHS VESTIMENTA SUA ET MISIT AQUAM IN  
PELVEM ET LAVIT PEDES DISCIPULORUM SUORUM*  
(Then Jesus laid aside his garments and poured water into a basin and washed his disciples' feet [a paraphrase of John 13.4–5].)
4. *IN LOCUM PASCUAE IBI ME CONLOCAVIT SUPER AQUA  
REFLECTIONIS EDOCAVIT ME.*  
(He set me here, where there are pastures. He led me beside shining waters [from Psalm 23.2].)<sup>517</sup>

<sup>514</sup> On these objects see Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, appendix I, 139–43. The urn may have served as a font from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

<sup>515</sup> Four of these figures have beards and seem older than the others. They all wear tunics and pallia and hold books of scrolls. Theories about their identities include their being apostles, prophets, and fathers of the church. See discussion in Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 63; and Peter Van Dael, "Purpose and Function of Decoration-Schemes in Early Christian Baptisteries," in *Fides Sacramenti, Sacramentum Fidei: Studies in Honor of Pieter Smulders*, ed. Hans Jörg et al. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 113–35.

<sup>516</sup> Discussion of these monograms in Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 18–19.

<sup>517</sup> See Garrucci, *Storia*, 4.37. The texts included here are as they appear on the four arches following the ordering of Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 58–62.

An upper arcade of twenty-four small arches within eight larger ones constitutes the next zone. Flanking the eight arched windows are sixteen niches containing sculpted stucco figures (possibly the four Major and the twelve Minor Prophets) with alternating semicircular and triangular pediments, each of which holds a scallop shell. Above twelve of these pediments, pairs of animals flank a basket or a vase. Above four are representations of standard Christian themes: Jonah and the whale, Christ crushing the lion and the serpent underfoot, Christ giving the law (*traditio legis*), and Daniel and the lions (fig. 5.12). The tympana spanned by the eight big arches are filled with vine leaves and acanthus scrolls, deer flanking urns of water, and peacocks.

Three concentric bands that make up the dome mosaic form the top three zones. The lowest band is divided into eight tripartite structures, separated by clusters of flowers. Acanthus leaves rise from the triangular pendentives of the lower arches. Four of these tripartite structures show two chairs with jeweled wreaths on their seats on either side of an altar with an open gospel book (Matthew, Mark, Luke or



Fig. 5.12 Orthodox Baptistry, detail of interior, stucco with apostles (or prophets) and Daniel. Photo: Author.

John). The other four depict parapets on either side of a gem-studded throne that is draped with a purple cloak and surmounted by a cross.

Two processions of six apostles fill the next band. The processions are led by Peter and Paul and the apostles all carry jeweled wreaths or crowns. Their names appear in gold over their shoulders to identify them and they are separated from one another by candelabra. Above their heads, a looped drapery hangs from an inner band filled with an egg and dart motif.<sup>518</sup> The two processions meet under Jesus' feet in the central medallion, which constitutes the fifth zone. Here Christ's baptism by John is depicted on a gold background. This image, which includes the descending dove and the personified Jordan River has been discussed above (fig. 3.10).<sup>519</sup>

#### 5.1.2.7. *Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the Arian Baptistery, Ravenna*

This baptistery was built at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century to serve the Gothic Arian community of Ravenna during the reign of King Theodoric (493–526). Although somewhat smaller than the Orthodox Baptistery of Neon, it was also built on an octagonal plan but constructed to have upper and lower sections (fig. 5.13).<sup>520</sup> Like the Orthodox Baptistery its tiled roof has eight segments that cover an interior dome (see plan, fig. 5.14). Each wall of the upper octagon has an arched window that lights the interior, whereas the darker lower section was originally covered with a seven-sided annular ambulatory with a vaulted ceiling. The eighth side of this ambulatory was left open for an eastern apse that provided entrances into the passageway itself. Only traces of this structure survive (evidence of large masonry arches), along with three additional, smaller apses that originally jutted into the ambulatory space.

According to Deichmann, the ambulatory must have served two purposes: the northwestern side as an entrance to the baptismal hall proper and the two rectangular rooms on the northeastern and southeastern walls (adjacent to the apse) for preparatory rites (catechesis,

<sup>518</sup> On this iconography see Josef Engemann, "Die Huldigung der Apostel im Mosaik des ravennatischen Orthodoxenbaptisteriums," in *Festschrift für Nikolaus Himmelmann: Beiträge zur Ikonographie und Hermeneutik*, ed. Cain von Hans-Ulrich et al. (Mainz a. Rhein: P. von Zabern, 1989), 481–89; and Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 91–2.

<sup>519</sup> See Chap. 3, pp. 108–10.

<sup>520</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #397, 188; T. Bruno, "Il battistero degli Ariani a Ravenna," *Felix Ravenna*, ser. 3, vol. 37 (1963), 5ff.



Fig. 5.13 Arian Baptistery exterior (Santa Maria in Cosmedin), Ravenna, late fifth century. Photo: Author.

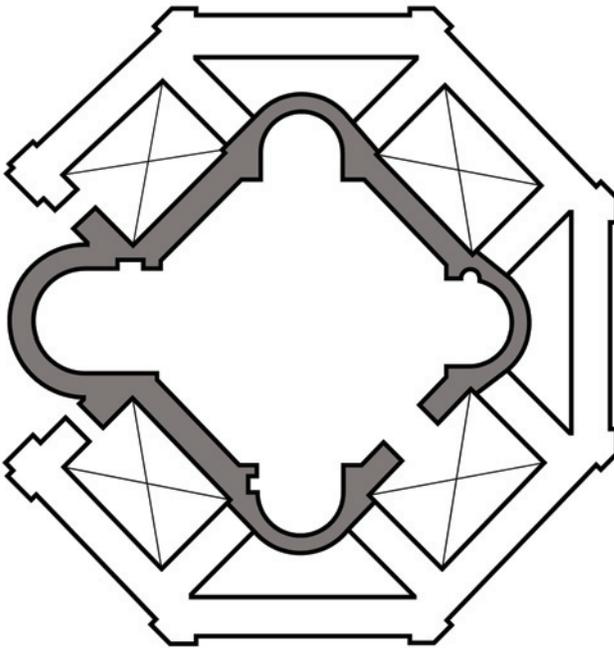


Fig. 5.14 Arian Baptistery plan, Ravenna, late fifth century. Drawing, based on plan in Deichmann, Ravenna, 2.a., plan 15.

exorcism, or disrobing) or concluding rites (consignation or vesting).<sup>521</sup> Including the apses and ambulatory, the original building would have been about 17 m. across. The original font no longer survives; probably having been removed after the baptistery was rededicated as an orthodox oratory in the mid-sixth century.

Of the original marble, stucco, and mosaic decoration, only the dome mosaic survives. Obviously modeled after the dome mosaic of the Orthodox Baptistery, it is smaller, and what remains is somewhat simpler in style, with only one wide band around the central medallion (fig. 3.11).<sup>522</sup> This circular band likewise bears a representation of processing apostles. In this instance palm trees separate the individual figures. The two processions (likewise led by Peter and Paul) meet at an empty throne surmounted by purple robe and cross, placed just above Jesus' head in the central medallion. Except for Peter (holding a key) and Paul (holding a scroll), the apostles carry jeweled crowns and, unlike the apostles in the Orthodox Baptistery, have halos. The scene would have been placed directly above the baptismal font in the center of the space.<sup>523</sup>

#### 5.1.2.8. *Albenga Baptistery, Liguria*

The fifth- (possibly sixth-) century baptistery in Albenga, on the Italian Riviera, has an octagonal core atop a decagonal base. Its upper octagon incorporates broad blind arches that surround smaller arched windows (fig. 5.15). Rather than an ambulatory, the lower decagon's thick interior wall is hollowed out to form eight niches of alternating squares and semi-circles, deep enough to have served as dressing rooms. Corinthian columns stand at the corners of these niches. Windows in alternate walls covered by decorative marble filigree bring light into this lower area that is about 14.5 m. across.<sup>524</sup>

<sup>521</sup> Deichmann, *Ravenna* 1, 209 and 2, 253.

<sup>522</sup> The original decoration has been lost, but excavators in the early twentieth century found evidence of polychromed stucco decoration and a huge amount of mosaic tesserae to suggest the original walls may have been as richly adorned as those of the Orthodox Baptistery. See G. Gerola, "Il restauro del battistero Ariano di Ravenna," in *Studien zur Kunst des Ostens. Josef Strzygowski zum sechzigsten Geburtstage von seinen Freunden und Schülern*, ed. Heinrich Glück (Vienna: Hellerau, Avalun-Verlag, 1923), 112–29, esp. 122.

<sup>523</sup> See Chap. 3, p. 111.

<sup>524</sup> See Guido Marcenaro, *Il battistero monumentale di Albenga: sedici secoli di storia; con guida in italiano, francese, inglese, e tedesco* (Albenga: Istituto internazionale di studi liguri, 2006); Alessandra Frondoni, "Recenti restauri e indagini al battistero



Fig. 5.15 Baptistery exterior, Albenga, Liguria, sixth century. Photo: Author.

The centered octagonal font has a surrounding parapet with spurs that could have originally carried columns that supported a ciborium. Its diameter is about 1.5 m. at the well and 2.25 m. at the top. It is about 1 m. deep. and was accessed by an interior step. A small basin to the side of the font—in the northeast niche—might have been used for foot washing—a part of the baptismal ritual in northern Italy, Spain, and North Africa. The vault of one of the four rectangular niches contains a mosaic that shows a tripled chi-rho monogram flanked by an alpha and omega in gold upon a blue ground. Surrounding this design are a red cross inside a small orb, twelve doves (possibly representing Jesus and the twelve disciples), and two fields of white stars. Above and below the vault are decorative floral borders bands and garlands,

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di Albenga,” *ACIAC* 8 (2001), 845–65; Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* #326, 172; Francisca Pallarés, “Alcune considerazioni sulle anfore del battistero di Albenga,” *Riv. Stud. Liguri* 53 (1987), 269–306; Mario Marcenaro, *Il battistero paleocristiano di Albenga. Le origini del cristianesimo nella Liguria Marittima* (Genoa: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio de Genova e Imperia, 1993); Marcenaro, “Il battistero di Albenga: storia di un restauro,” *Riv. Stud. Liguri* 53 (1987), 179–242; Valeria Sciarretta, *Il battistero di Albenga* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1977).



Fig. 5.16 Baptistry mosaic, Albenga, Liguria, sixth century. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

an inscription, and a scene of two sheep on either side of a jeweled cross (fig. 5.16).<sup>525</sup>

The partially surviving, abbreviated, and probably incorrectly restored inscription is difficult to interpret. The most likely transcription is: "...NAMUS QUORUM HIC RELIQUIAE SUNT ("...", name of those whose relics these are"). Below are names (in the genitive form) of saints whose remains may have been installed in the baptistery: "STEFANI [I]S IHOANNIS LAURENTI NAVORIS PROTASI...EVANGEL...FELICIS GERVASI."

### 5.1.3. *Baptisteries at Primuliacum (Gaul) According to Paulinus of Nola*

In the early fifth century (ca. 402), Paulinus of Nola described a baptistery built by his friend Sulpicius Severus. Paulinus and his friend had been in regular correspondence regarding the nearly simultaneous building of their respective ecclesiastical complexes as Nola and Primuliacum.<sup>526</sup> According to their letters, the two shared construction plans, drawings, and texts that could be inscribed in the buildings. Paulinus notes that Severus had surpassed him by building a baptistery between two basilicas at Primuliacum and professes mortification that Severus had chosen to put a portrait of himself along with Martin of Tours in his baptistery. He nevertheless complies with Severus' request that he provide poems to accompany the portraits. The two poems he wrote for this purpose reflect on the meaning of baptism and (in general) comment on the architectural relationship of the baptistery to the two adjacent churches—a single womb between the two breasts of the mother church.<sup>527</sup> The text that Paulinus intended to be set over the murals of himself and St. Martin, incorporated imagery that parallels the inscription in the Lateran baptistery in Rome (see above):

This font begets souls in need of restoration,  
it brings forth living water by divine light.

<sup>525</sup> See Nicolás Palamarini, "Simbolismo e gematria nel mosaico del battistero di Albenga," *Riv. Stud. Liguri* 53, 1987, 243–256; Mario Marcenaro, "Alfredo d'Andrade e il mosaico del battistero di Albenga," *RivAC* (1987), 203–243.

<sup>526</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 32. On Paulinus' own baptistery at Nola/Cimitile (and the poem he wrote for its dedication) see below, Chap. 6, p. 270. Also see Rudolf C. Goldschmidt, *Paulinus' Churches at Nola* (Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1940), 35–47; Dennis Trout, *Paulinus of Nola* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 242–43.

<sup>527</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 32.5.

The Holy Spirit descends from heaven into this river  
 and marries the water in the sacred, heavenly font.  
 The water receives God into itself and by this fertile fluid  
 a sacred progeny is brought forth from an eternal seed.  
 God's compassion is wonderful; the sinner is plunged into the flow  
 And soon emerges justified by the water.  
 Thus a person undergoes a blessed death and birth;  
 dying to earthly things and being born to eternal things.  
 Guilt is lost, but life returns; the old Adam perishes,  
 And the new is born for the eternal kingdom.  
 (cont.)  
 From the font, the bishop—as parent—leads babes  
 babes, snowy-white in body, heart, and garb.  
 And circling the novice lambs around to the festive altar,  
 the priest initiates their tender mouths with health-giving food.  
 Here the older generation of the community rejoices  
 together in a noisy throng.  
 And the fold bleats along in their new chorus:  
 "Alleluia!"<sup>528</sup>

#### 5.1.4. *Baptisteries in North Africa*

##### 5.2.4.1. *Jucundus' Chapel Baptistery, Sufetula (Sbeitla), Tunisia*

This small chapel most likely served as the baptistery for this North African city's fifth-century cathedral. It appears to have been a free-standing rectangular building set inside a peristyle court that provided an exterior ambulatory covered with geometrically patterned mosaics, and accessed by doors on three sides (north, south, and west) (fig. 5.17). An apse projects on the eastern side and is decorated with a mosaic depicting an urn sprouting with roses.

Inside, four columns supported a ciborium over the font. The font itself took up most of the space in this fairly large room (8 m. × 9.5 m.). The font—generally described as lip-shaped—is an elongated, lobed form, possibly meant to allude to the birth canal and the mother's vulva. Steps on the southern and northern ends provided the entrance and exit for the candidates.<sup>529</sup>

<sup>528</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 32.5, trans. author (CSEL 29: 279–80).

<sup>529</sup> See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #740, 263; Noël Duval, *Basiliques chrétiennes d'Afrique du Nord* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1992), vol. 1, 106–33 and 296–7; and idem with Françoise Baratte, *Les ruines de Sufetula: Sbeitla* (Tunis: Société Tunisienne de Diffusion, 1973), 44–48.



Fig. 5.17 Baptistery of Jucundus, Sufetula (Sbeitla), Tunisia, fourth–fifth century. Photo: Author.

The tomb of Bishop Jucundus was incorporated into the baptistery at some point in the late fifth or sixth century, based on an inscription in the floor that credits the discovery of his body to a certain later bishop named Amacius: *HIC INVENTA EST DP SCI IUCUNDI EPSC PER INQUISITION AMACI EPSCPI* (Here lie the remains of sainted Bishop Jucundus, according to the search conducted by Bishop Amacius).<sup>530</sup> A column inserted into the basin may have contained relics suggesting that at the point of discovery the baptistery was turned into a martyrium and no longer used for baptisms.

#### 5.1.4.2. *Vitalis' Baptistery, Sufetula (Sbeitla), Tunisia*

Built between two antechambers directly behind the apse of the new (sixth-century) basilica adjacent to the older cathedral of Sufetula, this

<sup>530</sup> Jucundus may have been martyred by the Vandals. He is listed as representing Sufetula at the Council of Carthage in 416. On North African baptisteries in general see Robin M. Jensen, "Baptismal Rites and Architecture," *People's History of Christianity*, vol. 2: *Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 117–144.



Fig. 5.18 Baptistery, Vitalis' Baptistery, Sufetula (Sbeitla), Tunisia, sixth-century. Photo: Author.

baptistery's font replicates the lip-shaped design of the Jucundus chapel baptistery described immediately above (fig. 5.17). An apse projects from its southwest wall (mirroring the main apse of the basilica). Candidates would have entered and exited the font via steps on the eastern and western ends in this instance. Column bases surrounding the font indicate that a stone canopy was set over it (fig. 5.18).<sup>531</sup>

The font is covered with a mosaic design (heavily restored) that includes a floral and geometric border, roses, small crosses, and an alpha and omega hanging from a christogram at the base of the font's well.

On the font's edge an inscription appears in black letters separated by red lines: *VITALIS ET CARDELA VOTUM SN* (Vitalis and Cardela fulfilled their vow).

<sup>531</sup> See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien* #741, 263; Duval, *Basiliques chrétiennes*, vol. 1, 149, 278–97.

#### 5.1.4.3. *Baptistry of Kélibia, Tunisia*

This sixth-century font, discovered in 1949 by Christian Courtois, is now in the first gallery of Tunis' Bardo Museum. It comes from the village of Kélibia on Tunisia's Cape Bon peninsula where it was attached to the ancient Basilica of Clupea (fig. 5.19).<sup>532</sup>

The Basilica of Clupea was built in two phases. The sixth-century baptistry was constructed during the second phase on the site of an earlier, fourth-century font. Small apsed chapels (or martyria) were built out from the side aisles at the same time. The baptismal chamber,



Fig. 5.19 Baptistry, Basilica of Clupea, Kélibia, Tunisia, sixth century (now in the Bardo Museum, Tunis). Photo: Author.

<sup>532</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #728, 260; Christian Courtois, "Sur un baptistère découvert dans la région de Kélibia," *Karthago* 6 (1955), 97–127; Jean Cintas and Noël Duval, "L'Église du Prêtre Félix (region de Kélibia)," *Karthago* 9 (1998), 157–265.

For general discussion of the Vandal era in Roman Africa and its treatment of local Christian communities see J-P. Brisson, *Autonomisme et Christianisme dans l'Afrique romaine de Septime Sévère à l'invasion vandale* (Paris: Boccard, 1958); and W.H.C. Friend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).



Fig. 5.20 Baptistery detail, Basilica of Clupea, Kélibia, Tunisia, sixth century.  
Photo: Author.

part of a rectangular room that enclosed the basilica's west-oriented apse, was accessed through one opening from the apse and one from one of the lateral chapels in the south aisle. The font and the floor were both covered with mosaic.

The later, four-lobed font is covered with polychrome stone mosaic and set into a similar, mosaic covered square pavement. Including the surround it is just over 2.2 m. in diameter, and its well is slightly over 1 m. deep. Based on the evidence of footings for supporting columns it probably was covered by a ciborium. At its widest, the font is easily deep enough to allow for a standing candidate to be thoroughly drenched by scooping water from the basin over the head. The interior of the font itself has three steps or shallow seats that would allow a recipient to step down and even to sit while water was being poured from above.<sup>533</sup>

<sup>533</sup> On the matter of sitting during baptism see above discussion, Chap. 4, p. 138.

Around the edge of the font in four parts, each beneath one of the lobes, is the following inscription:

SCO BEATISSIMO CYPRIANO EPISCOPO ANTISTECUM SCO  
ADELFIO PRESBITERO HUIUSCE UNITATIS  
AQUINIUS ET IULIANA EIUS CUM VILLA ET DEOGRATIAS  
PROLIBUS  
TESELLU[M] AEQUORI PERENNI POSURUNT

(Dedicated to most blessed holy Saint Cyprian, Bishop and High Priest with the holy Adelphius, a priest in unity with him. Aquinius and Juliana, his [wife], with their household and—thanks be to God—their children, built these mosaics for the placid waters of eternity).<sup>534</sup>

This dedicatory inscription not only named the donors (Aquinius, Juliana, along with their children) but also the saints they wished to honor by their gift (Cyprian and Adelphius). Because of the titles given to Cyprian (saint, bishop, and high priest), the third-century martyr is likely intended here. The priest Adelphius may have been a local cleric (possibly martyred by Arian Vandals). Even more than in the converted baptistery/shrine of Jucundus at Sufetula, here baptism is directly associated with the cult of the martyrs.<sup>535</sup>

Another inscription at the main entrance to the font (a step leading up to the pavement surrounding the font) reads: “PAX FIDES CARITAS” (peace, faith, and love). The substitution (and prioritizing) of the word “*pax*” for “*spes*” in the list of virtues in 1 Cor 13.13 argues for its significance in this baptismal context.<sup>536</sup>

The font’s mosaics are unusual and beautiful.<sup>537</sup> At the pavement level, the decoration consists of a geometric border inside of which

<sup>534</sup> An alternative translation of the third line might be: Aquinius and Juliana (his wife), and Villa and Deogratias, their children. See Yvette Duval, *Loca sanctorum Africae. Le culte des martyrs en Afrique du IV<sup>e</sup> au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 1 (Rome, 1982), 54–58.

<sup>535</sup> See discussion below, Chap. 6, pp. 240–2.

<sup>536</sup> It may announce the church’s unity with one or other of the competing African communions (catholic, Donatist, and Arian), although the relatively late date of the font makes this suggestion a bit weak. However, the reference to Cyprian in the dedicatory inscription supports this possibility because Cyprian was invoked as champion by both Donatists and catholics against the other group.

<sup>537</sup> On the interpretation of the iconography Eric Palazzo, “Iconographie et liturgie: la mosaïque du baptistère de Kélibia (Tunisie)” *ALw* 34 (1992), 102–120; Paul-Albert Février and C. Poinsot, “Les cierges et l’abeille,” *CA* 10 (Paris, 1959), 146–156; Othmar Perler, “Die Taufsymbolik der vier Jahreszeiten im Baptisterium bei Kelibia,” *JAC* 1 (1964), 282–90; Paul-Albert Février, “L’abeille et la seiche,” *RivAC* 60 (1984), 277–92. Much discussed, in particular, was a small sea creature originally interpreted

are scrolling grape vines growing out of four vases (*canthari*) at the corners. A bird marks the center of each of the four sides. Each of the font's four lobes has specific images, one on the surface and three inside, corresponding to the three interior steps.

The top pavement bears only simple rosette-like or circle-in-square designs along with the four-part inscription (above). The first step down into the interior depicts four objects: a dove emitting some substance (breath, oil, water?) from its beak (fig. 5.20),<sup>538</sup> a cross beneath a canopy, a box-like object with an opened lid (a reliquary, Noah's ark, the Ark of the Covenant? [fig. 6.7]), and a brimming chalice. These objects are surrounded by birds, flowers, christograms, and candles. Separated from the first level by a geometric border, the second level functions as a seat or step as well. This register also has conventional motifs of sea life and four trees representing the four seasons: a date palm (spring), olive tree (winter), fig tree (summer), and another fruit bearing tree (autumn). A christogram with an alpha and omega appears in the well.

#### 5.1.4.4. *Baptistery of Bir Ftouha, Carthage, Tunisia*

The recently re-discovered (and re-excavated) Christian basilica complex at Bir Ftouha was built in different phases, probably beginning in the late fourth or early-fifth century and ending in the mid-sixth (early Byzantine, ca. 541–50).<sup>539</sup>

Excavations in the late nineteenth century uncovered a mosaic-paved octagonal basin, a tomb containing the remains of several individuals and dedicatory inscriptions, and (somewhat to the east) a Byzantine-era mosaic near a curved portion of a large semi-circular apse that depicted a stag and doe kneeling to drink under a palm tree (fig. 5.21). In the late 1920s, archaeologists returned to the area containing the octagonal basin and discovered that it had been connected to a late

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as a bee and related (by Palazzo in particular) to the candles in the font—making them to be paschal candles and the bee a reference to the Exultet, sung during the Easter liturgy.

<sup>538</sup> See discussion of this iconography above, Chap. 3, pp. 112–15.

<sup>539</sup> This church, originally excavated by Père Delattre in 1880 and then later by Paul Gaukler, and recently re-opened and further studied by a team of American archaeology students under the direction of Susan Stevens. See Susan T. Stevens, Angela V. Kalinowski and Hans vanderLeest, *Bir Ftouha: A Pilgrimage Church Complex at Carthage*, JRS Supplementary Series 59 (Portsmouth, 2005).



Fig. 5.21 Ambulatory mosaic, Baptistry of Bir Ftouha, Carthage, Tunisia, late fourth or early fifth century (now in the Bardo Museum). Photo: Author.

fourth- or early fifth-century tri-conch funerary chapel, accessed by two entrances and which contained ten Christian sarcophagi buried in two layers, most of them dated to the mid-fifth century.

When archaeologists returned to the site in the 1990s, they were able to reconstruct a large Byzantine-era basilica that lay somewhat further to the east and which seems to have been built in a single phase. The relationship of this basilica with the tri-conch funerary chapel is unclear, although a magnetometer survey suggested that a substantial cemetery may lie between the two structures.

The basilica was an enormous three-aisled edifice (approximately 37 m. × 18 m.), entered through an attached nonagonal, centralized, and colonnaded building that was later taken over by burials because it contained as many as eleven graves cut into its mosaic floor. Behind the apse, an ambulatory led into a huge peristyle courtyard paved with mosaic depictions of birds, crosses, and deer seeking living water. This hall served as the antechamber to an enormous round baptistry at the center of which lay a four-lobed font. The font had three interior steps descending into a well about 3 m. in diameter. Archaeologists discovered a drain at the bottom of the well was used to channel the sanctified water to a soak-away tank. Because no piping system was found to bring water to the font, it may have been filled by hand-carried buckets of water.

Scholars have speculated—albeit without decisive physical evidence—that this large cemetery/pilgrimage church at Bir Ftouha may be been one of the two main shrines of St. Cyprian (the *Mensa Cypriani*) at Carthage. The locale seems possible, based on the account of

Cyprian's martyrdom in the *Acta Cypriani* but the lack of pre fifth-century Christian remains militates against such identification.<sup>540</sup>

#### 5.1.4.5. *Baptistery of Bekalta (near site of Leptis Minor), Tunisia*

Discovered by archaeologists in 1993 at the site of a rural basilica, this eight-lobed baptismal font was covered with remarkably intact mosaics depicting different kinds of birds, acanthus vines, flowers, and fruit. The basin is set into a square of about 5 × 5 m., its eight lobes alternating between square and round. Each lobe contains two steps down into the font. On the surface of the first step is a scallop shell design. Throughout are geometric and floral borders and decorations. The well of the font is paved with a jeweled Greek cross and an alpha and omega.

A lip slightly raised from the border was inscribed with a text based on the angelic announcement from the Gospel of Luke (2.14): *GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO] / ET IN TERRA PAX [H]OMINIBUS BONE / VOLUM[TATIS L]AUDAMUS T[E]* (Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those of good will. We praise you).<sup>541</sup>

Archeologists date this font to the Byzantine era, perhaps the seventh century.

#### 5.1.4.6. *Baptistery of La Skhira, near Gabès, Tunisia*

This sixth-century baptistery was attached to the cathedral of La Skhira—a square room behind the church (to the southwest of the apse) with two rows of columns, creating a center nave and two aisles. The center aisle contains the font and (at the rear wall) emplacements for a small altar.<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> See the discussion of this in Jensen, "Dining with the Dead," 136–40. Stevens does not believe that Bir Ftouha is the Mensa Cypriani for the reasons stated above, as well as the lack of evidence for of a proconsular palace in the area (the site of Cyprian's martyrdom). See the *Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*, text and trans. Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 168–75. According to the *Acta*, Cyprian was taken to the *ager* (field) of Sextus, outside the city walls, where the proconsul had retired to recover his health, and it was in this place that he was executed. See also Liliane. Ennabli, *Carthage Une Métropole Chrétienne*, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1997), 135.

<sup>541</sup> Nejib Ben Lazreg and Noël Duval, "Le baptistère de Bekalta," in *Carthage* (1995), 307.

<sup>542</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #731, 261; Mohamed Fendri, *Basiliques chrétiennes de La Skhira* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), Noël Duval, "L'évêque et la cathédral en Afrique du nord," *ACIAC* 11 (1989), fig. 13 (366), 398.



Fig. 5.22 Baptistry mosaic, La Skhira, near Gabès, Tunisia, sixth century.  
Photo: Author.



Fig. 5.23 Baptistry mosaic, La Skhira, near Gabès, Tunisia, sixth century.  
Photo: Author.

The font is a cruciform basin, set into an octagonal surround that itself is set onto a square. At each corner of the square archaeologists noted footings for columns, indicating that a ciborium stood over it.

Mosaics from the pavement of this font are today in the Museum of Sfax. One panel shows two deer approaching a vase from which sprouts a tree of life (fig. 5.22) and another a series of gemmed crosses set within columned arches. Lamps hang from the arms of the crosses and birds fill the arches above the crosses (fig. 5.23).

#### 5.1.4.7. *Oued Ramel Baptistery, near Zaghouan, Tunisia*

At the end of the nineteenth century, archaeologists found a two-chambered, free-standing baptismal chamber (5 × 4.2 m.), possibly dating to the sixth century, slightly to the north and parallel to a basilica at this site. The west room contained a cruciform font with a square basin in the center and equilateral round-ended arms. This font was about 2.5 m. long by .6 meters wide, and a little over 1 m. deep. The north arm was cut off from the other three with a vertical marble slab, possibly to create a dry chamber for a deacon or presbyter to stand in while pouring water or assisting the candidate.<sup>543</sup> The remains of four column bases indicate the original existence of a ciborium over the font.<sup>544</sup>

The mosaic floor of the room with the font depicts two deer coming to drink from the four rivers of Paradise (on the west), four palm trees extending from the east/west arms of the cruciform font, and two peacocks flanking a chalice (to the east). A dove in flight decorated the floor of the font's well.

The east room, possibly used for the post-baptismal rites of hand-laying or anointing had a mosaic floor as well, has in this instance, a geometric border that encloses four roundels, each with a quatrefoil design having a bird at its center.

#### 5.1.4.8. *Hammam Lif (Naro) Baptistery, Tunisia*

A century ago, archaeologists found this sixth-century baptismal font about 100 meters to the south of the famous Hammam Lif synagogue some of whose mosaics can be seen today in the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>545</sup>

The font was about 4 m. across (including surround) and its well was 1.6 meters wide and 1.25 m. deep. It had seven lobes (one of them square in shape). Each lobe had a single step down into a large circular basin. Scallop shell designs covered six of the surfaces of these steps while the seventh had a fish design. The interior walls of the basin were also decorated with jeweled crosses, palm trees, and either flowers or

<sup>543</sup> A similar arrangement was put into place in another cruciform font at the baptistery of Bulla Regia—in this case two marble slabs separated the cross' arms from the central, rectangular basin. See Duval, "Le Dossier," 207–34. Compare with the closing off of the long axis of the cruciform font at the Basilica of St. John in Ephesus.

<sup>544</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #736, 262; Christian Courtois, "Sur un baptistère découvert dans la région de Kélibia," *Karthago* 6 (1955), 97–127. fig. 4.4.

<sup>545</sup> See Edward Bleiberg, *Tree of Paradise: Jewish Mosaics from the Roman Empire* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2005).

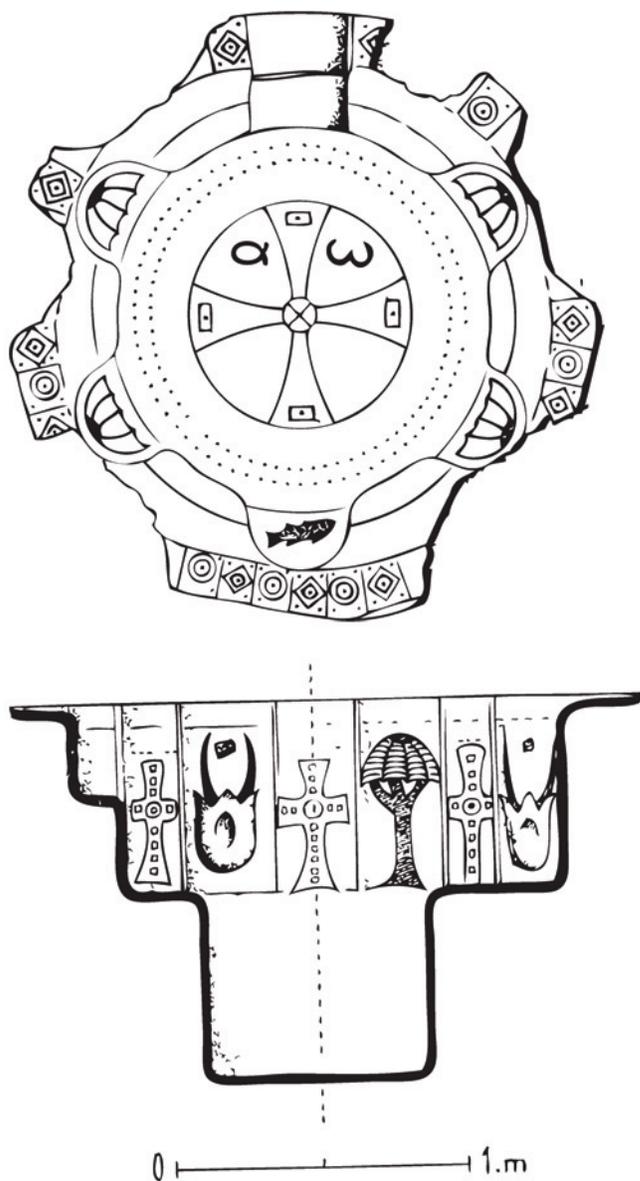


Fig. 5.24 Baptistry, Hammam Lif (Naro), Tunisia, sixth century. Drawing based on figure in Berry, *Early Christian Baptisteries*, 47.

sea creatures. A Greek cross covered the floor of the basin with an alpha and omega in the upper two quadrants (fig. 5.24).<sup>546</sup>

5.1.4.9. *Baptistry of Henchir Sokrine, Near Lamta (Leptis Minor), Tunisia*

A well-preserved square baptistry (approx.  $4.5 \times 4.5$  m.) lies directly behind the apse of an ancient, sixth-century church in this site not far from ancient Roman Leptis Minor. The font is essentially round in shape, with three lobes on each side (the middle one slightly larger than the other two). Each lobe has a small mosaic Latin cross as decoration. This basic round shape, however, is expanded by two opposing sets of stairs that allow access into and out of the basin. This resulting form is something like the baptisteries of Sufetula (figs. 5.17–18) but has parallels also at Sfax and Sidi Mansour.<sup>547</sup> This structure was set into a smaller square space ( $2.3 \times 2.3$  m.) that had a shallow wall that bore mosaic inscriptions that, apart from the word *FONTES* on one wall and *BAPTISMA* on another.<sup>548</sup>

The surrounding mosaic pavement was divided into several panels. The one nearest the entrance and now in the museum of Lamta depicts two sheep on either side of a Latin cross. An alpha and omega lie directly below the cross's arms. Fish, birds, and scattered roses fill the rest of the field (fig. 5.25). On the opposite side two deer appear in place of the sheep. The other pavements depicted clusters of grapes and vases, as well as geometric and floral designs.

5.2. *Discussion: Taxonomy of Structures, Font Shapes, and Placement*

The above list considers only baptisteries with still-existing interior decoration and inscriptions and, with the exception of the Dura Europos baptistry, is limited to extant baptismal structures in Italy and Tunisia. Despite this limitation, it includes a variety of building and font shapes as well as their iconography and symbolic significance.<sup>549</sup>

<sup>546</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #706, 255; Courtois, "Sur un baptistère," fig. 7.

<sup>547</sup> See the comparative plans in Courtois, "Sur un baptistère," fig. 6.

<sup>548</sup> Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #717, 257; Fathi Bejaoui, "Découvertes d'archéologie chrétienne en Tunisie," *ACIAC* 11 (1989), 1937–48.

<sup>549</sup> Other baptisteries (not included in the above individual descriptions) are included in the following discussion and occasionally will be cited in the discussion



Fig. 5.25 Baptistry mosaic, Henchir Sokrine, Near Lamta (Leptis Minor), now in the Lamta Museum, Tunisia, sixth century. Photo: Author.

Some baptisteries are free-standing and some attached, and their placements relative to the main church are consistent with early Christian baptisteries generally. The following is a categorization of the fonts discussed above according to these variations.

#### 5.2.1. *Attached Versus Freestanding Baptisteries; Placement Relative to Basilica Hall*

The earliest excavated baptistry (Dura Europos—fig. 5.1) was created by renovating one room of a private home. This room had an entrance off the central courtyard and communicated with another room that itself led into the main assembly space, as well as out into the central courtyard. This arrangement may have been designed to allow for privacy of the rite and a transitional space for disrobing and redressing neophytes. The baptistry at Naples (S. Giovanni in Fonte) is a rectangular room as well, although it sits behind (and to the right) of the apse of the basilica hall.

Most North African churches have baptismal chambers that were accessed through a transitional space or a series of communicating rooms. This configuration occurs at Sufetula (Vitalis), Bir Ftouha, La Skhira, and Henchir Sokrine, as well as at both churches at Timgad and Tipasa in present day Algeria.<sup>550</sup> The ancillary rooms may have served as places for pre-baptismal rites (e.g., exorcism, renunciation

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of symbolism below, Chap. 6. These include baptisteries in Algeria and Syria, as well as the Butrint Baptistry in Albania.

<sup>550</sup> See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #95, 121, and #92–94, 120–21.

of Satan, disrobing, or anointing), or they may have served as places for candidates to be vested in their white robes or receive the imposition of hands or post-baptismal anointing.<sup>551</sup> The placements of actual baptismal chambers vary, however. Some are behind the apse, as in Sufetula; others were set to one side of the apse, as at Kélibia, while still others near the entrance to the building. Examples of the latter are not described above but include baptisteries at Cathage (Dermech I) and Thuburbo Maius, both in Tunisia.<sup>552</sup>

Free standing baptisteries were far more common in Italy than in North Africa. The Lateran baptistery, both Milan baptisteries, both baptisteries in Ravenna, and the Albenga baptistery are instances of separate baptismal buildings constructed near (but not attached to) the churches they served. The baptistery at Primuliacum described by Paulinus was also one of these types. By contrast, the only known free-standing baptisteries in North Africa are at Sufetula (Jucundus) and at Oued Ramel.

### 5.2.2. *Baptistery Design*

The rooms or buildings that served as baptisteries not only differed in respect to whether they were attached or free standing, they also had varied architectural shapes and sizes. The baptismal chambers at Dura and Naples (S. Giovanni in Fonte) were rectangular or square rooms. Other attached baptisteries such as Kélibia, Bir Ftouha, and La Skhira were similarly rectangular.<sup>553</sup> Some of these chambers had a projecting apse as at Jucudus and Vitalis in Sufetula. These apses may have been designed to accommodate the bishop's chair or a small table for the consecrated oils for the rite of chrismation.<sup>554</sup> Several attached

<sup>551</sup> See discussion below, fn. 71.

<sup>552</sup> See Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #723, 259; and #715, 257. Subsidiary rooms are also very prominent at Gerasa (Jordan) and Salona (Croatia).

<sup>553</sup> This is also true in Timgad, Djemila, and Announa in Algeria, and Dermech I (Carthage), Belalis Minor, and Thuburbo Maius in Tunisia. Hippo's baptistery was a semi-round room. Rectangular rooms were more common in the East (e.g., Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine). The baptisteries of Servus in Sufetula and Djebel Oust were inserted into the *cellae* of former temples, and so naturally square in shape.

<sup>554</sup> Apses occur also in free standing baptisteries—as at Ravenna's Arian baptistery but also, for example, at Grado on the Adriatic coast. Some African baptisteries communicated with small apsed rooms (e.g. at Hippo, Dermech I (Carthage) and Servus (Sufetula) which may have served the same function as an apse inside the baptismal chamber itself—to be a place for the rite of confirmation with chrism. These rooms

baptisteries in Africa, on the other hand, have octagonal shapes. They include the baptisteries at Tabarka and Siaggu (Bir bou Rekba). A quatrefoil shaped baptistery was attached to the basilica at Tizirt.

The freestanding baptistery buildings in Italy are generally octagonal or at least partially so (Lateran, Milan, and Ravenna), while the two African examples, Jucundus and Oued Ramel, are rectangular.<sup>555</sup> The plan of Milan's cathedral baptistery (Sta. Thecla), built during Ambrose's episcopate, with its alternating hemispherical apses and rectangular niches, may have been the model for later baptisteries in northern Italy and southern France.<sup>556</sup> From the mid-fifth century on in the West, the octagonal plan was the most popular shape for both baptisteries and fonts.<sup>557</sup>

### 5.2.3. *Shapes and Depths of Fonts*

Scholars have commented extensively on the different shapes of early Christian baptismal fonts (as opposed to baptistery rooms) and their potential symbolic implications. Font shapes have been categorized according to whether they are rectangular (or square), round, polygonal (octagonal and hexagonal), polylobed, and cruciform, and some historians have argued that these different shapes evolved from simple rectangular to more complex designs.<sup>558</sup> Of course the earliest example, Dura's font, was a rectangular tub, built to fill one end of a narrow rectangular room. A rectangular font was also installed in the

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may also have served as rooms for the training of the catechumens (the apse accommodating the bishop's chair) or perhaps for exorcism, disrobing, or the pre-baptismal rites of the renunciation of Satan and commitment to Christ.

<sup>555</sup> See Olof Brandt, "The Lateran Baptistery and the Diffusion of Octagonal Baptisteries from Rome to Constantinople," *ACIAC* 14 (2006), 221–7.

<sup>556</sup> For example the baptisteries of Novara in northern Italy and Fréjus in southern France. The baptisteries of Poitiers and Riez in France, however, are exceptions to this.

<sup>557</sup> See Kostof's argument that the Neonian baptistery in Ravenna was probably modeled after the Milanese type, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 49–50. See also H. Winfeld-Hansen, "Édifices antiques à plan central d'après les architectes de la renaissance et baptistères paléochrétiens," *ACIAC* 5 (1954), 391–99. Octagonal fonts are still common in western Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.

<sup>558</sup> See Noël Duval, "Church buildings: the baptistery," *EEC*, vol. 1, 173; Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" *JWCI* 5 (1942), 1–33, esp. 22–30; Davies, *Architectural Setting*, 2–5; and Anita Stauffer, *Baptismal Fonts*, 17–44.

Catacomb of Ponzianus. In general, however, rectangular fonts were not common.<sup>559</sup>

Although the fonts at the Lateran, Naples (S. Giovanni in Fonte), and Ravenna (Orthodox) are round, the fonts in Italy tend to be polygonal, often octagonal or hexagonal in shape. This is true of the fonts in Milan and Albenga, as well as many others not discussed above (e.g., Grado, Novara, and Nocera Superiore, which are round in the interior and octagonal on the exterior).<sup>560</sup> Early Christian fonts found in France are similarly octagonal (e.g., the fonts at Aix-en-Provence, Fréjus, Riez, Poitiers, Marseilles, and Cimiez).<sup>561</sup>

North African fonts (like those in the eastern provinces) show more variety in shape. Some were round and made up of concentric circles (e.g., Mustis, Tebessa, Tigzirt, and Tipasa—not discussed above), and a few were octagonal (e.g., Siagu and Damous el Karita), or hexagonal (e.g. at Timgad, Tabarka and Dermech I—the latter with a round basin). A large number were a mix of shapes, and very frequently polylobed in some way. Even though such fonts were known elsewhere, those with more than four lobes are almost exclusively North African. For example, the Kélibia and Bir Ftouha fonts were four-lobed, the latter set within a round surround, while the Hammam Lif and Bekalta fonts were seven and eight lobed respectively.<sup>562</sup> Two, perhaps three, lobed fonts were elongated and might be described as vulva-shaped. These include the two fonts at Sufetula and the font at Henchir

<sup>559</sup> A well-known example of a square font can be seen at Mactaris in Tunisia, see Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #733, 261.

<sup>560</sup> On these others see Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #365, 181; #391, 187; and #386, 186. The Butrint Baptistery in Albania is a large circular structure (14.5 m. in diameter) built within a rectangular room. Inside, two concentric circles of eight columns emphasize the round shape, but with an added octagonal symbolism. See Mitchell, *Butrint Baptistery*, 19–25.

<sup>561</sup> On these fonts see Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #156, 134; #173, 137; #211, 147–8; #202, 145; #194, 143; and #199, 144.

<sup>562</sup> Other polylobed fonts in Tunisia include those at Hergla (eight lobes), Upenna (eight lobes), Hakaïma (eight lobes), Sidi Mansour (six lobes with two rectangular entrances), and Ouemetren (four lobes). In Algeria was the Announa (six lobes). The font at Djemila was four-lobed with a square basin set into a domed, round space. Polylobed fonts were also common in eastern Christian baptisteries. Milburn proposed that the lobes might be used to allow several people to be baptized simultaneously, but this seems somewhat improbable in the smaller fonts and group initiation unlikely from a liturgical and even practical standpoint. Some fonts were certainly large enough to hold more than one person at a time (e.g. the basin at Nocera Superiore or Bir Ftouha), but no textual evidence supports the idea that several candidates could be initiated at once. Milburn, *Early Christian Art*, 206.



Fig. 5.26 Baptistry, Bulla Regia, Tunisia, fifth–sixth-century. Photo: Author.

Sokrine.<sup>563</sup> A number of other African fonts were cruciform-shaped as well—a shape not found elsewhere in the West but common in the East, especially in Syria, Palestine, and Jordan, almost all dated to the Byzantine era.<sup>564</sup> Among these is the font at Oued Ramel, and others not discussed above including the fonts at Bulla Regia (fig. 5.26); El Kantara (now in the Bardo Museum, fig. 5.27); Thuburbo Maius (a circle with four equilateral arms), Sabratha, and Leptis Magna in Libya. The baptistry of Hippo Regius had a modified cruciform font (fig. 5.28).<sup>565</sup>

The size and depths of the fonts vary almost as much as their shape. A majority of fonts are installed below the floor level; they are entered by

<sup>563</sup> A font of this shape was also found in Gaul, at Civaux, see Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #166, 136.

<sup>564</sup> See Malka Ben Pechat, “The Paleochristian Baptismal Fonts in the Holy Land: Formal and Functional Study,” *LA* 39 (1989), 165–88. Ben Pechat provides an excellent chart of baptismal fonts from this region, showing them mainly to be round, polylobed, and cruciform in shape.

<sup>565</sup> These fonts could be compared with the fonts at Salona in Croatia, and, Alahan and Ephesus (Basilica of St. John) in Turkey.



Fig. 5.27 Baptistry, El Kantara (Isle of Djerba), now in the Bardo Museum, sixth century. Photo: Author.



Fig. 5.28 Baptistry from Hippo, Annaba, Algeria, early fifth century. Photo: Author.

steps down and then exited by stepping up and out. Some, however, were raised and stood on the floor, requiring candidates to climb up to enter (as in Hippo, Grado, or Mount Nebo). Some fonts were deep (more than one meter) and large enough to allow recipients to kneel and have their heads immersed (e.g., at Dura Europos, the Lateran Basilica, and Bulla Regia), while others were so shallow or small that candidates must have stood while water was poured from above (as so commonly illustrated in the iconography).<sup>566</sup> Smaller fonts might be monolithic and even set above the floor level within a church. The font at Hippo Regius is one such example.

Steps were sometimes symbolic in themselves. Isidore, a sixth-century bishop of Seville, explained that the font had “seven steps; three downwards representing the three things that we renounce, three others upwards for the three things we confess; the seventh is the same as the fourth, like the son of man, extinguishing the furnace of fire [Dan 3.15], a stable place for the feet and a foundation for the water, in which the whole fullness of divinity dwells bodily [Col 2.9].”<sup>567</sup>

#### 5.2.4. *Ciboria, Footbaths, Water Systems, and Drains*

Fonts were often covered by ciboria supported by columns (usually four).<sup>568</sup> The covering was likely meant to keep dirt or other pollutants out of the water and so functioned in much the same way as ciboria over altars but may also have been a way of attaching curtains that could close to ensure privacy. Curtains are depicted on the Samagher Casket, for example.

Few fonts had any surviving apparatus for being filled with water, although many had drains for their evacuation. Such drains are evident in Naples and in Milan. Cisterns probably for collecting rainwater to be used for the rite are sometimes found near to or inside of baptisteries.<sup>569</sup> In other instances wells were found nearby and in at in

<sup>566</sup> See discussion, Chap. 4, pp. 137–8.

<sup>567</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Ecc. off.* 25.4, trans. author, PL 83.821B. See also the derivative comment Hildephonsus of Toledo, *Cognit.* 11.

<sup>568</sup> Of the baptisteries described in Chap. 5, ciboria were noted at Albenga, Sufetula, Kélibia, La Skhira, and Oued Ramel. The baptistery at Dura Europos was set under an arch (*arcosolium*), and it is most likely that ciboria covered the fonts at the Lateran and in Milan.

<sup>569</sup> An above-ground stone cistern is very prominent near to the font at Mustis in Tunisia, and a small in-ground cistern was found near the font at Dermech I (also in Tunisia).

some instances fonts were built over existing bath structures (e.g., the Lateran Baptistery). The monumental baptisteries at Nocera Superiore in Italy and Butrint in Algeria, both built over ancient bathing complexes, made use of their systems of water supply, piping, draining, and even heating. At Butrint, archaeologists have found not only water tanks and an underground piping system but also a furnace for warming the font water. They also discovered a small fountain opposite the chamber's entrance.<sup>570</sup>

Some fonts would have had water installations based on designs for traditional Roman nymphaea. The seven silver water-pouring stags in the Lateran baptistery, as described by the *Liber Pontificalis*, or Bishop Eustorgius of Milan's reported elaborate hydraulic apparatus to create a rain shower are cases in point.

Footbaths to accommodate the rite of the *pedilavium* were identified in several baptisteries—at Albenga and Milan as well as in France at the baptistery in Fréjus. Recently, Olof Brandt studied the possibility that two fourth-century Roman baptisteries may have included structures designed for footwashing, one in the baptistery of S. Lorenzo in Lucina, and another in a chamber adjoining the Lateran baptistery (rebuilt in the fifth century as the chapel of S. Giovanni in Evangelistica).<sup>571</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Early Christian baptisteries and fonts show a marked degree of variance over both space and time. Some baptisteries were attached to the basilicas they served, while others were free standing. Although detached, octagonally-shaped baptisteries are more typically found in Italy and Gaul, exceptions also exist (e.g., the baptistery of Jucundus at the site of Sufetula or the monumental baptistery at Qal'at Siman in northern Syria). Those chambers that were built into or annexed to church buildings might be found almost anywhere in relationship to the main assembly space, from the entrance (narthex) to behind the apse.

In the same way, font shapes show a remarkable variety, especially in North Africa and in the eastern Roman provinces. These shapes range from rectangular to round, hexagonal to cruciform, to multi-

<sup>570</sup> See Mitchell, *Butrint Baptistery*, 21–2.

<sup>571</sup> Brandt, *Strutture del IV secolo per la lavanda*."

lobed. Many fonts also show a combination of shapes (found at the bottom and octagonal at floor-level for instance). Stages of rebuilding also caused transformation of font shapes over time in certain instances.

Certain decorative motifs are commonly incorporated, usually in polychrome mosaic. Particularly common motifs are fish, birds, lambs and shepherds, and deer coming to drink at a fountain. Other decorative schemes were often followed, however. Images of Christ's baptism, processing apostles or saints, wreaths, candles or lamps, and biblical scenes have survived in various places and from different eras. Some fonts appear to have been oriented to guide initiates' movements from west to east (from the region of darkness to the light of the rising sun). Some of the fonts would have accommodated immersion, but most are so shallow that recipients likely knelt in only a few inches of water while being drenched from an overhead flow, perhaps from a pitcher held by a deacon.

Apparently, no single plan was consistently followed (although some were clearly influential). Nor is it clear whether designs were guided by donors, church authorities, or local customs (although regional patterns are evident). Obvious chronological development of shapes or iconographic programs is not easy to discern, despite the insistence of some historians that shapes must have evolved from the simple (e.g., rectangular) to the more complex (e.g., multi-lobed), and that more elaboration in design tends to come at a later date.<sup>572</sup> For example, the Dura baptistery's walls were covered with narrative scenes and its font (a simple, rectangular tub) was covered by an arch that was supported by two columns. And while the surviving Byzantine-era fonts in North Africa tend to have richer mosaic embellishments, the sixth-century font at Sufetula's basilica of Vitalis was no more fancy than its model and predecessor, the fifth-century baptistery of Jucundus. Design choices must have been affected by the availability of skilled labor or the limitations of site, space, and available funds.

Finally, whether baptisteries were built to accommodate and elucidate certain actions or beliefs about what those actions effected and signified (form following function), or whether the actions conformed to the spaces that housed them (function following form), the interior

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<sup>572</sup> This is the argument of Davies, *Architectural Setting of Baptism*, and Stauffer, *On Baptismal Fonts*.

design, iconographic adornment, and general architectural plans of the baptisteries would have played a role in the shaping of the experience and retrospective understanding of those who underwent the baptismal sacrament within these places. Thus two trajectories are present. On one hand, the transpiring rituals simultaneously conformed to regional practice and theological construction while being adapted or elaborated to fit specific, local architectural structures, or, on the other, these structures were simultaneously shaped, and even remodeled, according to perceived and changing ideas and practices.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SYMBOLISM IN BAPTISTERY DESIGN AND DECOR

#### *Introduction: Visual Symbols and Ritual Actions*

Early Christian baptisteries were more than simply convenient shelters for liturgical rites. They functioned as symbols in themselves; their shape and decoration reflected and reinforced the theological significance or meaning of the ritual. Whereas the spaces and their furnishings were specially built to accommodate a complex ceremony having regional and indigenous variations, certain details of their design were intended to express the meaning and purpose of the rite.

This chapter considers such symbolic language of space and décor in light of what surviving documents reveal about how the ritual was performed and what participants understood its various components to achieve. It assumes that the architectural designs, shapes of fonts, and interior decoration were not haphazardly or arbitrarily chosen, nor of little consequence to those who built or used those structures. Certain architectural forms became standard because they were well suited, not only to liturgical movements but also to what the rituals meant to their participants. Similarly, particular images (or programs of images) were incorporated because they contributed to the sense or meaning of the actions taking place within the spaces they enhanced. These messages were transmitted through the adaption of existing architectural prototypes (e.g., baths or tombs), through the incorporation of certain symbolic shapes (e.g., octagons, or womb-like structures), and through visual images and inscriptions that resonated with core beliefs about the ritual or its foundational narratives (e.g., fish, sheep, or deer drinking from fountains of living water).<sup>573</sup>

Individuals who received Christian baptism understood that the ritual accomplished multiple objectives, all of which altered their spiritual

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<sup>573</sup> Several studies have preceded this one and are useful references. They include, Lucien De Bruyne, "La décoration," 341–69; Henri Stern, "Le décor des pavements et des cuves dans les baptistères paléochrétiens," *ACIAC* 5 (1957), 381–90; and Peter van Dael, "Purpose and Function," 113–35.

status. Although practices varied from region to region and over time, the rite generally achieved a consistent set of personal transformations. First of all, baptism was a ritual of membership—it joined the convert to the community. Rituals of enrollment were reinforced by metaphors (both verbal and visual) of families, flocks of sheep, cohorts of soldiers, or teams of athletes. Baptism was also a ritual of cleansing and regeneration. The newly baptized shed old sins and died to former lives, understanding themselves as reborn and given a fresh start. This aspect of the ritual was conveyed through the practices of exorcism, disrobing, bathing, and receiving new garments.

Baptism additionally imparted some kind of inner knowledge; in many places the newly baptized were referred to as “*illuminati*” and given lit tapers as a sign of their enlightenment. The imagery of light was pervasive in the texts as well as in the design and decoration of baptisteries. The post-baptismal anointing with scented oil sealed the newly baptized and signaled their having received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove at Jesus’ baptism. Their nakedness in a garden-like setting expressed their return to a pre-lapsarian innocence. All these transformations were articulated, visually, in the interiors of the baptismal chambers, in the design of fonts, and even in the basic structure of buildings that housed the ritual.

### 6.1. *Architectural Prototypes*

Certain types of Roman buildings have general similarities to the baptisteries built in the fourth through sixth centuries. The most apparent are those centralized and vaulted spaces that housed baths or served as mausolea. These kinds of buildings also shared a common purpose with baptism, which was simultaneously a bath and a symbolic burial. Candidates for baptism could have recognized the architectural parallels and derived meaning from the shape of the space. Scholarly opinions vary, however, on which of these pre-existing structures were most likely to have influenced the design of the baptistery and its font, and whether the modeling was intended to serve a symbolic purpose or merely the adaption of a useful centralized design.

#### 6.1.1. *Baths*

As discussed above, Christians living in almost any Roman city would have been familiar with—and even regular users of—the public baths

(*thermae*). Baptism, of course, was a form of washing and was discussed in terms that were borrowed from the baths (e.g., *lavacra* or *piscina*).<sup>574</sup> The Latin word, *baptisterium*, referred to a large basin or *piscina*, found in the *frigidarium* of a Roman bath, and only later to a basin for Christian baptism.<sup>575</sup> *Lavacrum*, meaning an ordinary bath, was another term often used in the Latin West for baptism.<sup>576</sup>

Cyprian of Carthage recognized the superficial parallels between an ordinary bath and baptism, but emphasized their profound differences. In an argument about the efficacy of schismatic baptism, he uses the distinction to make his point:

Nor is the washing away of the contagion of transgressions in the sacrament of salvation like that secular and corporeal washing of the dirt off the skin and body, where there is need of washing soda (*aphronitris*) and similar aids as well as a bathtub (*solio*) or bathing pool (*piscina*), by which our puny little bodies are able to be washed and cleansed. In another way the breast of the believer is bathed; in another way the mind of the person is cleansed—through the merits of faith.<sup>577</sup>

Later, and from a different part of the world, Gregory of Nyssa, saw a symbolic value in the parallels. In a sermon on Christ's baptism, preached on Epiphany, he proclaims: "But water serves to express the cleansing. For since we customarily wash in water to render our body clean when it is soiled by dirt or mud, we therefore apply it also in sacramental action, and display the spiritual brightness by that which is subject to our senses...do not despise the divine laver, nor think lightly of it, as a common thing, on account of the use of water."<sup>578</sup>

The fourth-century bishop Zeno of Verona echoes Gregory's points. He verbally depicts the inside of the baptistery by borrowing and transforming a scene from the Roman baths. The living water is warmed by both the Holy Spirit and by fire, and its enticing murmur invites

<sup>574</sup> On these terms, see above, Chap. 4, p. 138. Christians and the baths see above, Chap. 4, pp. 159–62.

<sup>575</sup> In a letter to a friend describing his villa in Tuscany, Pliny the Younger described the baths in some detail, using the terms *baptisterium* and *piscina*, *Ep.* 5.6.25–26; cf also *Ep.* 2.17, 11. The first recorded use of *baptisterium* in a Christian context comes from Sidonius Apollinaris, *Ep.* 2.2; 4.15.

<sup>576</sup> See, for example, Tertullian, *Cor.* 3, and *Bapt.* 2.2; 7.1; 11.4. On the similarities see Eduard Stommel, "Christliche Taufriten und antike Badesitten," *JAC* 2 (1959), 5–14.

<sup>577</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 69.12.2, trans. author. (CCL 3C: 487–8.257–66).

<sup>578</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Diem lum.*, trans., NPNF ser. 2, vol. 5, 518–24 (slightly adapted by author).

the bathers. Here a bath attendant (the bishop) who, rather than taking money, gives it and, rather than a coin with the emperor's portrait, the bather receives one stamped with the image of the Trinity: "Already the girded bath keeper awaits you, ready to do the work of anointing and drying and furnishing the gold denarius with the triple effigy."<sup>579</sup> This text suggests that the water in the font—at least in Verona—was warmed, perhaps even by a hypocaust system, and that the newly baptized received some kind of token.

Architectural equivalences complement the parallels. Ancient bathing complexes (*thermae*) contained chambers (especially the cold and hot plunge pools known as the *frigidaria* and *caldaria*) that were centralized, circular, and covered with domes; some also had apses.<sup>580</sup> Most of the pools had seats running around the interior to allow bathers to sit and soak, not unlike the seats or steps found in the fonts at Dura Europos, Kélibia, and Bekalta in North Africa.<sup>581</sup> Octagonal halls were more commonly built for public baths in Late Antiquity, especially in the third through fifth centuries.<sup>582</sup> It seems that some baptisteries were built near or over existing bath complexes (e.g., Rome's Lateran Baptistery, Bir Ftouha, and Djemila in Algeria).<sup>583</sup> Because of these structural and functional parallels, many architectural historians have viewed bath buildings as prototypes for Christian baptisteries.<sup>584</sup>

<sup>579</sup> Zeno, *Inv. font.* 6 (*Tract.* 1.23), trans. author (CCL: 22.70).

<sup>580</sup> For example the Stabian baths at Pompeii.

<sup>581</sup> See above, Chap. 5, pp. 228–9.

<sup>582</sup> See the examples in the catalogue of Roman baths by Inge Nielsen, *Thermae et Balnea: The Architectural and Cultural History of Roman Baths* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1991).

<sup>583</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 5, pp. 186, 217. Other baptisteries thought to have been built on or near older bath structures include those in Nocera (Italy), Djebel Oust (Tunisia), Damous el Karita (Tunisia), and Butrint (Albania). Djebel Oust was also the site of an earlier sanctuary of Aesclepius and is today still an active spa offering hot spring bathing.

<sup>584</sup> See, for example, Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, 21; Noël Duval, "Church buildings," 173; Emerson H. Swift, *Roman Sources of Christian Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 40; Dölger, "Zur Symbolik des altchristlichen Taufhauses," 184–7; Stauffer, *Baptismal Fonts*, 15–16; and C. Ricci, "Il battistero di S. Giovanni in Fonte," in *Atti per la Romagna* 3.7 (1889), 268–9, who argued that Ravenna's baptistery was founded on part of an earlier bath complex and that its octagonal plan with four corner niches is based on that earlier bath structure. This was refuted by Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 13–14, who saw no evidence for his hypothesis. See also Erika Brödner, *Die römischen Thermen und das antike Badewesen: ein kulturhistorische Betrachtung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 267–8.

Other historians see more differences than similarities, however. For example, Richard Krautheimer argues that circular *caldaria* and *frigidaria* were relatively rare and that the majority of centralized (round) rooms in thermal establishments were either *apodyteria* (dressing rooms) or *laconica* (steam rooms), neither of which had water basins or fixtures for ablutions.<sup>585</sup> Octagonally-shaped rooms were unusual, but not unknown. The baths of Agrippa had a central rotunda that was probably an open gathering space and not a bathing area. Nevertheless, the *caldarium* of Caracalla's baths was enclosed in a central, circular structure covered by a dome. The walls inside the room were varied by eight rectangular, arched niches (containing small heated pools) over which were tall arched windows. A central pool presumably filled the room's center. By contrast, Rome's famous baths of Diocletian were mostly rectangular in plan, with one small circular room that may have housed the warm bath (*tepidarium*).<sup>586</sup>

The strongest cautionary argument against seeing Roman bath architecture as the primary prototype for Christian baptisteries is that centralized round or octagonal free-standing structures were used for other types of buildings, including temples (e.g., the third-century Roman Temple of Minerva Medica), imperial reception rooms (e.g., Nero's *Domus Aurea*), and (perhaps most significantly) mausolea. According to Krautheimer, the combination of a vaulted center room with inner or closed and relatively low outer ambulatory typically occurs in a different type of Roman building—mausolea built during the third and fourth centuries.<sup>587</sup>

### 6.1.2. *Mausolea*

Mausolea also shared important functional and architectural similarities with early Christian baptisteries. The centrality of death and resurrection in the theology of baptism (cf. Rom 6.4) may have made a mausoleum a natural design prototype for a baptistery. Furthermore,

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<sup>585</sup> Krautheimer, "Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture," 115–50. Krautheimer argues that the rectangular baptisteries (e.g., the baptistery of Dura Europos) may have more in common with bath structures than centralized (round or octagonal) baptisteries.

<sup>586</sup> See Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 130–83.

<sup>587</sup> Krautheimer, "Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture," 23–5. Krautheimer, however, also called attention to the similarities between mausolea and centralized throne rooms. See also the argument of Paul Styger, below p. 238.

the building of centralized saints' tomb-shrines (*martyria*) in the fifth century and the association of baptism with martyrdom further reinforced these parallels.

Many scholars have argued for the mausoleum's influence on the design of freestanding baptismal structures. Paul Styger refutes the proposal that baptisteries were modeled on *thermae* rooms or *nymphaea*, arguing instead (with little evidence) that many baptisteries, including those of Naples and Ravenna, were originally built to be mausolea.<sup>588</sup> André Grabar's better-supported theory argues that *martyria* and baptisteries both belong to the general type of the mausoleum, so characterized by their centralized plans surmounted by vaults and domes. Grabar specifically distinguishes the longitudinal (rectangular) basilica plan that served regular congregational worship from the central-plan *martyria* and baptisteries with their distinct cultic functions. Although his research generally focused on the development of the *martyrium*, Grabar draws the parallels between those buildings and baptisteries.<sup>589</sup>

Krautheimer additionally identifies the features that (some) baptisteries share with mausolea that they do not share with other Roman monuments. These include inner ambulatories covered by barrel vaults that are separated by colonnades from domed central rooms. An excellent example of this plan is Rome's Mausoleum of Sta. Costanza (fig. 6.1), which originally was surrounded by both inner and outer ambulatories and which, according to Krautheimer, was the pattern for the Lateran Baptistery renovation.<sup>590</sup> A similar plan is seen in Ravenna's Arian Baptistery (fig. 5.14). This kind of interior ambulatory was also merged with a longitudinal basilica plan, enveloping the apse of cemetery (pilgrimage) Roman churches dedicated to Christian martyrs (e.g., Sta. Agnese, S. Lorenzo, and S. Sebastiano).<sup>591</sup>

In addition to the Mausoleum of Augustus in Rome, one of the best-known examples of a Roman imperial mausoleum was built for Diocletian at Split, at the beginning of the fourth century. Built inside Diocletian's palace, his unlit tomb was a centralized octagonal room with a niched, circular interior covered by a hemispherical dome that

<sup>588</sup> Paul Styger, "Nymphäaen, Mausoleen, Baptisterien," *Architectura* 1 (1933), 50–4.

<sup>589</sup> André Grabar, *Martyrium: recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, vol. 1 (London: Variorum, 1972), see 446–7 for example.

<sup>590</sup> Krautheimer, "Iconography of Medieval Architecture," 135–6. On this point see Antonio Ferrua, "Sul battistero di S. Costanza," *VetCh* 14 (1977), 281–90.

<sup>591</sup> See also Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. (New York: Viking, Penguin, 1986), 53–4.



Fig. 6.1 Mausoleum of Sta. Constanza, exterior, Rome, fourth century.  
Photo: Author.

on the outside looked like an octagonal pyramid. Inside, the niches were alternately rectangular and semi-circular. Against the wall, eight columns carried a projecting entablature.<sup>592</sup>

During Constantine's reign, two imperial mausolea were constructed in Rome, both with centralized, octagonal plans. The first was for Constantine's mother, Helena (although originally intended for Constantine), and the other his daughters' (Constantina's and Helena's). Since the Middle Ages, the latter often has been mistakenly referred to as the "Baptistry of Sta. Constanza," because its design suggested that it must have been meant it to be one (fig. 6.1).<sup>593</sup> A similar case of mistaken identity occurred at the octagonal Chapel of S. Aquilino in Milan's church of S. Lorenzo, probably because of its structural parallels with

<sup>592</sup> See the introduction to late antique architecture by Alfred Frazer, in *The Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 110; also Krautheimer, *Early Christian Architecture*, 64. The Cecilia Metella mausoleum on the Appian Way offers another early imperial-era example of a cylindrical mausoleum.

<sup>593</sup> See Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome*, 73–86.

the baptistery of Sta. Thecla.<sup>594</sup> Yet another example of a free-standing octagonal imperial mausoleum is that of the Ostrogothic King Theodoric, built in the early sixth century in Ravenna.<sup>595</sup> Somewhat by contrast, the so-called mausoleum of Galla Placidia, built between 425 and 450, had a centralized cruciform plan probably modeled after the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, a cruciform-shaped mausoleum-shrine constructed for Constantine.<sup>596</sup>

Constantine also built two famous structures in the Holy Land that merged a basilica with a mausoleum, neither of them (technically) tombs. One, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, featured a large octagonal hall attached to its east side to house the rock grotto that was traditionally identified as the site of Jesus' birth. The other was built on the site of Jesus' tomb and resurrection—the Holy Sepulcher. The rotunda, known as the Anastasis (Resurrection) as described in Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*, was a circular building topped by a hemispherical dome supported by twelve columns (to represent the twelve apostles).<sup>597</sup> This influential building was itself the prototype for many shrines constructed in later centuries, especially in Western Europe.<sup>598</sup>

Another kind of building, related to the mausoleum but somewhat different in function, was the martyr's shrine. Martyrs were understood to have been baptized in their own blood, and baptisteries were occasionally transformed into martyria by subsequent deposits of martyr's relics within (e.g., Albenga and Sufetula, discussed above).<sup>599</sup> The

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<sup>594</sup> See Roberti and Paredi, *Il battistero ambrosiano di San Giovanni in Fonte*, for an argument that the designs of the Milanese baptisteries were influenced by imperial mausolea.

<sup>595</sup> See Walter Kleinbauer, *Age of Spirituality*, #109, 122–3.

<sup>596</sup> See the *Vit. Const.* 4.60; and Cyril Mango, "Constantine's Mausoleum and the Translation of Relics," *BZ* 83 (1990), 51–62; and "Addendum," 434, which argues that Constantine actually planned a circular mausoleum on this site (for himself) attached to the cruciform shrine for relics of the twelve apostles.

<sup>597</sup> Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.38. Scholars often question whether Eusebius actually authored this work, but as it is traditionally assigned to him, the author has chosen to refer to it in this fashion.

<sup>598</sup> See Justin E.A. Kroesen, *The Sepulchrum Domini through the Ages* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

<sup>599</sup> On martyrdom as a baptism in blood see *Trad. ap.* 19; Tertullian, *Bapt.* 16.1 and *Apol.* 50; Origen, *Mart.* 30; Cyprian, *Ep.* 73.22.2, and *Orat.* 24; *Rebapt.* 14; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Serm.* 39, 15, 17; Cyril of Jerusalem *Cat.* 3.10; and *Can. Hippolytus* 19. For a general discussion of this theme see Gordon Jeanes, "Baptism Portrayed as Martyrdom in the Early Church," *StLit* 23 (1993), 158–76. On the baptisteries of Albenga and Sufetula, see Chap. 5, pp. 206–9, 210–12.

reverse happened as well; martyria were turned into baptisteries, as in the Catacomb of Ponzianus, which housed the relics of Saints Abdon and Sennon.<sup>600</sup> Grabar notes this phenomenon also at Nisibis.<sup>601</sup> Other baptisteries were built near martyria. Bir Ftouha's extraordinary baptistery was annexed to major pilgrimage church (possibly one of the two shrines of St. Cyprian in Carthage); a comparable structure was found at Tarragona in Spain.<sup>602</sup> The monumental baptistery at the site of the shrine of St. Simeon Stylites (Qa'lat Sim'an) in Syria is another instance of a baptistery built to accommodate pilgrims to a famous memorial or saint's tomb.<sup>603</sup>

The inclusion of images of saints and martyrs or processions of apostles carrying wreaths—as at the Naples baptistery, the two Ravenna baptisteries (cf. figs. 3.10–11), and Primuliacum—or inscriptions that refer to particular saints (as at Kélibia), may have been intended to remind the elect that they too were worthy of a crown of victory. Both Ambrose and John Chrysostom compare initiates to victoriously crowned athletes.<sup>604</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of Christ to a bridegroom, offering the bride (neophyte) a jeweled diadem.<sup>605</sup>

The fourth-century poet, Prudentius composed a cycle of hymns dedicated to martyrs called the *Crowns of Martyrdom* (*Peristephanon*). One of these is dedicated to a baptistery built on the site of the sufferings of two martyrs. In it, Prudentius explicitly relates the martyrs' victory with the victory of the newly baptized. He also points to Christ's death on the cross and his wound that gave forth both blood and water:

This is a place that Christ chose,  
 where proven hearts are carried to heaven by blood.  
 Here two men, killed for the name of the Lord,  
 bore the purple witness by means of a noble death.  
 Here as well grace flows clearly from the font  
 so that it cleanses old sins by a new stream.  
 Let the one who desires to go up to the eternal kingdom of Heaven  
 come here thirsty—for behold the way is provided.

<sup>600</sup> See above discussion, Chap. 5, pp. 189–90.

<sup>601</sup> Grabar, *Martyrium* vol. 1, 79.

<sup>602</sup> On Bir Ftouha, see above, Chap. 5, pp. 216–18. On the baptistery at Tarragona see Eduardo Junyent, "I monumenti Cristiani di Spagna: Studiati in questi ultimi anni," *ACIAC* 3 (1934), 283–85.

<sup>603</sup> See Jensen, "Baptism at North African Martyrs' Shrines."

<sup>604</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 1.4; 2 also *Hel.* 21.79; John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 3.8–9.

<sup>605</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 3.2.

Before now the crowned witnesses ascended to high gates,  
 now by their washing, souls seek the heights.  
 Here the Spirit, accustomed to descend eternally,  
 To bestow the palm here gives pardon.  
 The earth drinks the sacred drops, either of blood or from the spring,  
 and is perennially refreshed by the stream that flows from her God.  
 He is the Lord of this place, the one from whose wounds two fluids—  
 both blood and water—gushed.  
 Each will go from here through the wounds of Christ, in the way he is  
 able—one by the sword and the other by water.<sup>606</sup>

The idea that the newly baptized had earned their crowns like the martyrs, may have led to the giving of actual crowns. Since they had won victory over demons and death, they processed triumphantly into the main church where they were welcomed by the community and joined the celebration of the eucharist. Although no early documents attest to the practice, in later eras the newly baptized were crowned for this procession.<sup>607</sup>

In addition to the deposit of saints' remains, baptisteries were also used for ordinary burials. At least one tomb was found to be contemporary with the building of the Arian baptistery of Ravenna and others to have been added later.<sup>608</sup> According to Krautheimer, the Byzantine Baptistery of Santa Severina in Calabria was crowded with tombs dated as late as the ninth century.<sup>609</sup> Burial in baptisteries was apparently common enough that it had to be prohibited by the Council of Auxerre in 578.<sup>610</sup> Whereas early Christians sought burial near the tombs of saints, and then in time sought baptism at the shrines, some eventually came to regard a baptistery as an especially appropriate location for a grave.

These practices are rooted in the symbolic associations of baptism with both Christ's and the neophyte's death and resurrection (cf.

<sup>606</sup> Prudentius, *Perist.* 8, trans. author (CSEL 61: 366–7).

<sup>607</sup> Many later eastern rites included a post-baptismal rite of crowning. See Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Rites and Ceremonies of Christian Initiation: Developments in the Past," *StLit* 10 (1974), 13.

<sup>608</sup> See Giuseppe Gerola, "Il restauro del battistero Ariano di Ravenna," 112–29.

<sup>609</sup> Krautheimer, "Iconography of Medieval Architecture," 137, fn. 160 in which he cites P. Laicono, "Sull restauro compiuto al Battistero di Santa Severina," *Boll. d'arte* 28 (1934), 174f.

<sup>610</sup> See F.W. Unger, "Über die christlichen Rund- und Octogon-Bauten," in *Bonner Jahrbücher* 41 (1866), 52, fn. 2.

Rom 6.3–11). A baptistery is in some sense a mausoleum or martyr-ium structure, which in turn makes the tomb structure a logical architectural prototype for a baptistery. This reflexive symbolism turns up in fourth-century documents as well as in liturgy. Ambrose calls the font a kind of grave and makes the express comparison between the shape of the font and the shape of a tomb.<sup>611</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem makes a more direct association between the baptismal pool and the sepulcher of Christ.<sup>612</sup> Augustine reminds the newly baptized that they had been buried with Christ when they were plunged into the baptismal pool.<sup>613</sup> Paulinus of Nola likewise speaks of baptism as being buried with Christ.<sup>614</sup> This association of baptism with Jesus' crucifixion is undoubtedly the reason for cruciform fonts (see figs. 5.26–27)—a way of fully sharing in Christ's death and burial (Rom 6.3–4)—and the crosses that appear in baptistery décor.<sup>615</sup> By the fourth century, baptisms at Easter had become common (although not universal), which is another way of making this participation in Christ's death and resurrection explicit.<sup>616</sup>

Despite this coincidence of imagery and symbolism, more recent scholarship has been cautious about asserting such intentional symbolism in the design of early Christian baptisteries. Nevertheless, one may turn to the early theologians for at least an interpretation of a baptistery's design, after the fact.<sup>617</sup>

<sup>611</sup> Ambrose, *Sac.* 2.19 and. 3.1; also *Sac.* 2.23, 6.7.

<sup>612</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Myst.* 2.4; also *Cat.* 3.12, and *Myst.* 2.1, 3.5. See also John Chrysostom, *Ep. Rom* 10.4 and *Bapt. inst.* 10.7, where he explains baptism as a type of cross.

<sup>613</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 229A.1.

<sup>614</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 23.18.

<sup>615</sup> Cruciform fonts are common shapes in Africa as well as in the East. See discussion above, Chap. 5, pp. 226–7. Hexagonal fonts also may have connections to Christ's death, as they may have been meant to refer to the sixth day of the week, the day of his crucifixion (Friday). On the cross in the baptistery, see below, pp. 271–3.

<sup>616</sup> See Paul Bradshaw, "Diem baptismo sollemniorum" Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit; Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 137–47.

<sup>617</sup> See De Blaauw, "Kultgebäude," 340 for an example of this more cautious approach.

6.2. *Structural Symbolism*6.2.1. *The Octagon*

Most attached baptisteries were simple rectangular spaces. By contrast, freestanding buildings, especially in Italy and Gaul were often octagonal (e.g., the Lateran Baptistery, the two baptisteries in Ravenna, the baptistery in Albenga). In at least one case the octagonal design attracted an allegorical interpretation. This appears in the inscription that Ambrose is assumed to have written for the octagonal baptistery in Milan, which asserts that an eight-sided building and font serve and—in their shape—reflect a sacred purpose.<sup>618</sup>

In fact, that Milanese fourth-century octagonal baptistery was one of the first of its kind (in addition to the Lateran Baptistery, if it was—as is now likely—originally octagonal) and thus could have been a model for subsequent octagonal baptistery structures, including the baptisteries of Ravenna (figs. 5.9,13).<sup>619</sup> From the fifth century to the Middle Ages and beyond, the octagon continued to be one of the most popular shapes for a baptistery or font in the West. Added to octagonal fonts, perhaps, are those other instances of the eight-sidedness, for example, the eight columns in the Lateran Baptistery, the eight mosaic panels radiating from the dome medallion in Naples, or the eight lobes of the font at Bekalta.<sup>620</sup>

The mystical significance of the octagon, claimed but not actually explained by Ambrose, was likely an allusion to ancient numerological symbolism. In Christian tradition, the number eight generally refers to the eighth day—the new “first” day of the week—on which Jesus was resurrected from the dead and the creation would be renewed. The earliest known expression of this comes from the millennialist view presented in the *Epistle of Barnabas* in which God says: “after I have set everything at rest, I will create the beginning of an eighth day, which is the beginning of another world.” This is why, the author’s

<sup>618</sup> See above, Chap. 5, pp. 197–8.

<sup>619</sup> See discussion of the presumed influence on the Ravenna baptisteries in Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 49–54 and on the renovation of the Lateran Baptistery from circular to octagonal above, Chap. 5, pp. 198–206.

<sup>620</sup> See above, Chap.5, pp. 187, 191, 218. On the octagonal shape of the baptistery see Dölger, “Zur Symbolik,” 153–87, with extensive citations of early Christian writings; also Reinhart Staats, “Ogdoas als ein Symbol für die Augerstehung,” *VC* 26 (1972), 29–52.

letter explains, that Christians celebrate on the eighth day (Sunday), the day on which Jesus rose from the dead and, after appearing to his disciples, also ascended into heaven.<sup>621</sup>

Such symbolism may account for the emphasis given in 1 Peter (3.20–21) and reiterated in 2 Peter 2.5, to the eight persons who were saved through water in the story of Noah. The author interprets their number—as well as their watery rescue—as pointing to Christian baptism. Justin Martyr takes this further, claiming that these rescued eight symbolized the eighth day: the day of Christ’s resurrection. In his dialogue with the Jew, Trypho, Justin also draws a connection between Noah’s ark and the cross, explaining that Christians are regenerated through both water and wood.<sup>622</sup>

This numerology had a venerable pre-Christian history, especially in Greco-Roman philosophy that considered the number eight to symbolize perfection, eternity, and repose. It had cosmic associations too, as ancients claimed that eight spheres (or orbits) circled the earth. According to the first-century Greek philosopher and mathematician, Theon of Smyrna, the number eight symbolizes eternity, when God’s rule will prevail in the universe.<sup>623</sup>

Eight also was mathematically significant. It was the first cube ( $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ) and constitutes the number of corners in a geometrical cube. In the late fourth or early fifth century, the Neo-Platonist Macrobius elaborated on the geometrical perfection of the number eight, insisting that it had a special right to be called “full” because of its intimate association with the harmony of the spheres. He additionally notes that ancient Pythagoreans gave it the name “justice” because it was the produce of equal, even numbers, and could be equally divided into both halves and thirds.<sup>624</sup>

In certain gnostic cosmologies, the chief archon was enthroned in the eighth heaven: the fixed sphere and the point of the soul’s release from the lower spheres. Arriving at this place meant achieving eternal unity with the Divine. According to Clement of Alexandria, Basilides taught that Righteousness and her daughter, Peace, dwelt in that eighth

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<sup>621</sup> Barnabas, *Ep.* 15.8–9, trans. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 429.

<sup>622</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 138.

<sup>623</sup> Theon of Smyrna, *Exp. math.* 105.

<sup>624</sup> Macrobius, *Som. Scip.*, 1.5. 3–18; 2.2.10.

sphere.<sup>625</sup> Irenaeus discusses the different “primary *ogdoads*” of the Valentinus, Secundus, and the followers of Ptolemy and Colorbasus.<sup>626</sup> The so-called Valentinian “Hymn of the Revelation,” from the *Apocryphal Acts of John* includes a mention of the eight-fold power (the *ogdoad*) as “singing with us.”<sup>627</sup> One of the fragments from Theodotus, a Valentinian teacher in Alexandria, contrasts the death-bound one who was born of an earthly mother with the one who is transferred by the regeneration of Christ into life in the *ogdoad*.<sup>628</sup>

Philo, apparently influenced by Pythagorean and middle Platonic numerological speculation, identifies the number eight with God’s command to circumcise on the eighth day (Gen 17.12). He elaborates the beautiful properties of the number, claiming that the soul is composed of eight divisions, and that the number eight indicates the beginning of the second hebdomad (a second seven-day creation that included the covenant between God and the chosen people).<sup>629</sup>

A Christian Alexandrian, Clement likewise believed the number eight pointed to the new creation. He argues that this was even prophetically incorporated in Plato’s *Republic* (10.616B), which describes souls arising from seven days of rest in a meadow to set out on their journey again on the eighth. According to Clement, the meadow signifies the fixed sphere, the realm of the pious ones, and the seven days represent the motion of the seven planets that brings the time of rest to an end on the eighth day, when the journey to heaven begins.<sup>630</sup>

Augustine equated the number eight with the number one as a symbol of rebirth, which explains why Easter is always celebrated on a Sunday (it is both eighth and first day of the week). He points out that the mystery of this eighth day was known to the prophets and patriarchs and evident in their observation of circumcision on the eighth day. But the full meaning had been hidden until Christ’s resurrection on the eighth day.<sup>631</sup> In the last chapter of his *City of God*, Augustine

<sup>625</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.25.

<sup>626</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1. 11–12.

<sup>627</sup> *Acts of John* 95, trans. J. Keith Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 319.

<sup>628</sup> Theodotus, *Excerpt.* 80.

<sup>629</sup> Philo, *QG* 1.75; 3.49. For an analysis of the latter issue see Karl Staehle, *Die Zahlenmystik bei Philo von Alexandria* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1931).

<sup>630</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 5.

<sup>631</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 55.13.23; see also *Serm.* 260a.2–3, 260a.4. See Reinhart Staats, “Ogdoas als ein Symbol für die Auferstehung,” *VC* 26 (1972), 29–53.

discusses the perpetual Sabbath—the eternal repose. Counting each of the ages as one day, he claims that the sixth age, which is coming to an end, will usher in the time of blessing and leisure before the beginning of the new, eternal day (the eighth day of the Lord), which will grant rest to both body and soul.<sup>632</sup> This calculation was echoed in some manuscripts of the *Gregorian Sacramentary*, where six is said to stand for the present age, seven for the age of rest, and eight for the time of the general resurrection.<sup>633</sup>

Whether all octagonal baptisteries or fonts were specifically built to reflect this numerological significance or not, they subsequently could have been interpreted as doing so.<sup>634</sup> In either case, the octagon symbolized the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of each newly-made Christian. The baptistery itself pre-figures the destination of a journey to heaven as well as the renewal of creation. This paradisiacal dimension is reflected in the iconography of trees, flowers, fruit, and birds, which appears in the interior decoration of certain baptisteries (e.g., S. Giovanni in Fonte, Naples and the font at Bekalta).<sup>635</sup>

### 6.2.3. *The Font as Womb*

Several of the fonts discussed above have shapes that suggest a woman's vulva (cf. figs. 5.17–18). This design may have been specifically intended to emphasize the motif of rebirth from the womb of a spiritual mother. The candidate passes through the waters of the font by descending a few steps on one end, processing through the well of the font, and ascending up and out the other side. Some scholars have further proposed that round fonts (e.g., S. Giovanni in Fonte, Naples—fig. 5.5) also symbolized the maternal womb.<sup>636</sup>

<sup>632</sup> Augustine, *Civ.* 22.30.

<sup>633</sup> See Henry A. Wilson, *The Gregorian Sacramentary under Charles the Great* (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1915), 304; also cited in Underwood, "The Fountain of Life," 83, n. 161.

<sup>634</sup> Not all scholars believe the octagonal shape was intentionally—or definitively—symbolic. See De Blaauw, *Kultgebäude*, 340, for example. De Blaauw argues that the baptistery's octagonal shape was meant, primarily, to enhance liturgical movement within the space. Nevertheless, baptismal fonts are still octagonal in many modern churches, with little obvious functional purpose.

<sup>635</sup> For an analysis of a particular baptistery that applies Pythagorean mathematical symbols as well as Euclidean geometry see Trinci, "Il battistero," 563–91. Baptismal fonts are still, commonly, designed as octagonal.

<sup>636</sup> See Davies, *Architectural Setting*, 21–2.

The first mention of baptism as a form of rebirth occurs in the Gospel of John's recounting the Pharisee Nicodemus' confusion over Jesus' claim that those not born from above would not see the Kingdom of Heaven (John 3.3–5). Although Jesus rebukes Nicodemus for being so literal-minded as to think that he meant that they would need to re-enter their mother's womb, early Christians fairly quickly adopted the idea that this was exactly what he intended. In a relatively short time, writers cited the Nicodemus story when referring to baptism as a form of regeneration. For example, Justin Martyr's description of baptism includes a reference to the Johannine text, when he describes candidates being led to a place where they could be regenerated in water. Slightly revising the Gospel text, he refers to Christ as asserting that "unless you be born again [vs. 'born from above'] you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."<sup>637</sup> This application of the John 3 text soon led to the description of the church as a spiritual mother who had a baptismal font for a womb.

This symbolism was reflected in the Lateran inscription's reference to new Christians being conceived in the womb (font) of the virginal mother church, which was fertilized by the breath or spirit of God (*spirante Deo*).<sup>638</sup> Leo I, probably the author of those inscribed verses, wrote a homily on Jesus' nativity that incorporates analogous expressions and emphasizes the parallels between Jesus' conception and the conception—leading to rebirth—of new Christians:

It is a spiritual birth that each one acquires in regeneration. To every one who is reborn, the water of baptism is like the Virgin's womb. The same Holy Spirit fills the font as filled the Virgin, so that the sin that was nullified there by that sacred conception may be removed also here by the mystic washing.<sup>639</sup>

The image of the font being fertilized by the Holy Spirit and so conceiving and giving birth to a sacred progeny from heavenly semen is graphically reflected in Paulinus of Nola's verses for Severus' baptistery at Primuliacum (cited above).<sup>640</sup>

<sup>637</sup> Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 61.

<sup>638</sup> See the discussion of this text above, Chap. 5, pp. 187–8.

<sup>639</sup> Leo I, *Hom.* 24.3, trans. author (SC 22:114). See also Leo I, *Hom.* 25. The impregnation of the font is still symbolized in some baptismal liturgies by the dipping of the paschal candle into the font as part of the blessing of the water in the Easter Vigil.

<sup>640</sup> See text and translation above, Chap 5, pp. 209–10; Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32.5.

The church as the pure and virginal spouse of God and the mother of Christians is a generally understood image, of course, but many early texts specifically describe the font as a womb—the place of the conception, gestation, and birth of the new believers' baptism—thus gaining a new Father and Lord of the Universe. Irenaeus, who introduced the church as a mother figure, also speaks of the church as the mother who offers the regeneration of a second birth out of her pure, virginal womb.<sup>641</sup>

This image of mother church with a font for a womb was especially popular with the North African writers who insisted on the necessity of being within the catholic communion (vs. a heretical or schismatic one). They explained this as being legitimately born from the true mother's womb, an image particularly favored by Cyprian, whose treatise on the unity of the church uses language that almost evokes a pagan earth goddess: "She spreads her branches abundantly over all the earth, she extends her flowing rivers even further; yet one is the head, one the source, one the mother who is prolific in her offspring, generation after generation: of her womb are we born, of her milk are we fed."<sup>642</sup>

Later African theologians transformed this imagery slightly during the controversy over readmission of schismatic Donatists to the catholic communion. Emphasizing the symbol of the church as the true Bride of Christ, Optatus of Milevis claims that the Donatists misconstrued the nature of a dowry, which belongs only to the bride, and cannot be transferred to some other woman.<sup>643</sup> Augustine compares those first baptized by Donatists to children born outside of legitimate marriage (e.g., Ishmael, born to Hagar in Gen 16, or the sons of Jacob born to Bilhah and Zilpah in Gen 30). Whereas Ishmael was disinherited because he refused to return to his spiritual mother, Sarah, all Jacob's sons received equal inheritance, no matter who their mother

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<sup>641</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.33.11; cf. *Haer.* 3.4.1; 3.24.1–6; and 5.20.2 (where he describes the church's "nourishing bosom"). On the theme of the church as mother see Jensen, "Mater Ecclesia," 137–54; Timoteo José Orfrasio, S.J., *The Baptismal Font: A Study of Patristic and Liturgical Texts* (Diss. publ. Pontificio Istituto Liturgico: Rome, 1990), 80–98; Walter Bedard, *The Symbolism of the Baptismal Font* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1951); and Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1943).

<sup>642</sup> Cyprian, *Unit. ecll.* 5. trans. author. See also idem, *Ep.* 73.19.2; *Laps.* 2.9. The idea of the church as mother appears frequently in Cyprian's writings.

<sup>643</sup> Optatus of Milevis, *Donat.* 2.10.

was—because they stayed within the extended family. As a result, those who rebelled against their mothers, like Esau (Gen 26.34–35), were rejected, but those who eventually and contritely came home, like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) were warmly received. Different baptismal wombs might produce children who would need to be joined—eventually—to the true family to receive their inheritance.<sup>644</sup>

In his sermons delivered to catechumens preparing for baptism, Augustine also cites Roman 8.22–23, referring to the baptismal font as mother church's uterus, groaning in labor to bring forth her children. He urges candidates not to agitate that womb with their impatience and thus constrict the birth canal.<sup>645</sup> After their baptism, he reminds them that their second birth is completely different from the first. Whereas their birth to the world was the result of the mingling of human flesh the second is from the mingling of God and the church; they have been born to Christ, as offspring of mother church.<sup>646</sup> No matter what their chronological age, for the first week of Easter Augustine addresses the neophytes as infants (*infantes*) or little children (*parvuli*).<sup>647</sup>

Ambrose, for his part, emphasizes the suffering-free virginal parturition, both of Mary's bringing forth Jesus and the font's birthing of new Christians. He adds that the church nourished its offspring by the teaching of the Apostles, rather than by the milk of her body.<sup>648</sup> In one of his Psalm commentaries, he points out that the nudity of the candidates reinforces their status as newly born babes.<sup>649</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia comments that the neophytes' white garments make them look like swaddled infants.<sup>650</sup> Theodore tells those entering the font that they are like fertilized embryos being placed into the womb. Formed by God's hand, these seeds are transformed from mortal to immortal, from corruptible to incorruptible (cf. 1 Cor 15.53–54).<sup>651</sup>

<sup>644</sup> Augustine, *Bapt.* 1.10.14; 4.17; Augustine, *Serm.* 56.

<sup>645</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 216.7. See also Augustine, *Sers.* 119.4 and 121.4. 1. Also compare Augustine's contemporary Quodvultdeus of Carthage's explanation of the creed to catechumens in which he explains that they have been born in the womb of the church, *Symb.* 1.

<sup>646</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 228.1–2.

<sup>647</sup> Augustine, *Sers.* 376a.1; 260; 260a.4; 228.1; and Augustine, *Ep.* 55.32.

<sup>648</sup> Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 2.7; *Virg.* 1.6.31; *Myst.* 9.5; *Sacr.* 3.2.

<sup>649</sup> Ambrose, *Exp. Ps.* 61.32.

<sup>650</sup> See Theodore of Mopsuestia on the swaddling clothes analogy, *Bapt. hom.* 4.1.

<sup>651</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 3.9.

John Chrysostom also extols the marvelous fecundity of the mother and her womb. He exalts the mother who can bring so many children forth from her womb in a single night.<sup>652</sup> He lauds the mother who, like Mary the mother of Jesus, can bear her children without the birth pains that were Eve's curse.<sup>653</sup> Zeno of Verona similarly contrasts the first (human) birth with the second (spiritual) one. In vivid (even disturbing) terms he characterizes the one as accompanied by groaning, travail, sordid rags, and babies nourished in filthy cradles with the other as followed by sweet feeding at fragrant altar rails.<sup>654</sup> He praises the "milky liquid of the font" as the sweet womb of the virgin mother where the new people are formed and brought to birth.<sup>655</sup>

These texts underscore the suitability of a womb-shaped font for a baptistery. The candidates enter this womb naked and emerge from the water-filled womb as if from a mother's birth canal. Nicodemus' question is answered in the liturgical rite of baptism: this is how it is possible to re-enter the mother's womb and to be reborn.

### 6.3. *Decorative Motifs*

A number of iconographic themes regularly show up in the existing decorative programs of baptismal chambers. Although the surviving evidence probably constitutes only a representative portion of what could have been a more expanded catalogue of images, these themes must have been deemed suitable because they conveyed certain meanings or alluded to aspects of the baptismal ritual in visual, symbolic form. Jesus' baptism by John as portrayed in the two Ravenna baptisteries (figs. 3.10–11) and in the seventh-century Ponzianus Catacomb fresco (fig. 5.4) is an obvious choice.<sup>656</sup> The dove of the Holy Spirit, as seen in those same baptisteries and in the fonts at Kélibia (fig. 5.20) and Oued Ramel, is also a coherent iconographic theme.<sup>657</sup> The following discussion considers the possible significance

<sup>652</sup> John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 4.1.

<sup>653</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. Jo.* 26.1.

<sup>654</sup> Zeno of Verona, *Inv. font.* 1 (*Tract.* 1.32); and *Inv. font.* 3 (*Tract.* 2.28). Compare Ephrem, *Hymn Virg.* 7.7–8.

<sup>655</sup> Zeno of Verona, *Inv. font.* 4 (*Tract.* 1.55); and *Inv. font.* 7 (*Tract.* 1.12).

<sup>656</sup> In particular in Chap. 1, pp. 27–8.

<sup>657</sup> See discussion in Chap. 3, pp. 112–3. The mosaic in the Albenga Baptistery also shows doves, but in this case because there are twelve of them, they probably represent the twelve apostles.

of other popular baptistery motifs that are not so clearly based on the scriptural accounts of Jesus' baptism but have resonance with certain liturgical texts associated with baptism, theological elaborations on the rites' meaning, or refer to constitutive elements of the ritual itself.

### 6.3.1. *Deer Coming to Water*

An image of two deer facing one another to drink from a stream, pool, urn, or flowing rivers is probably the most regularly incorporated iconographic motif in Christian baptismal contexts. It had been noted at the baptistery in the Ponzianus Catacomb (fig. 5.4), Naples' baptistery of S. Giovanni in Fonte, Ravenna's Orthodox Baptistery, and several of the North African fonts discussed above: Bir Ftouha (fig. 5.21), La Skhira (fig. 5.22), Oued Ramel, and Henchir Sokrine.<sup>658</sup> According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine presented the Lateran Baptistery with seven silver stags that were designed to pour water into the font.<sup>659</sup> This image certainly alludes to the first line of Psalm 42: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." In fact, this very line is inscribed in Latin on a mosaic pavement at the entrance to a sixth-century baptistery at Salona (fig. 5.33): *SICUT CERVUS DESIDERAT AD FONTES AQUARUM ITA DESIDERAT ANIMA MEA AD TE DEUS*.<sup>660</sup>

Documents indicate that Psalm 42 was chanted by candidates for baptism as they processed to the baptistery for their initiation. In his commentary on the Psalms, Augustine acknowledges that while this line urges all Christians to run like deer to the fountain of understanding, it is particularly associated with those who are not yet baptized, hastening to the grace of the holy washing. They solemnly chant it to express their longing for the fountain that remits sins in the same way that the deer longs for springs of water.<sup>661</sup>

<sup>658</sup> The motif also appeared in other Tunisian baptisteries including Upenna, Gamart, and Henchir Messaouda. Deer coming to a fountain also decorate the pavement of the baptistery of Butrint in Albania.

<sup>659</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 34 (Sylvester). See above, pp. 86–7.

<sup>660</sup> On this baptistery see Ejnar Dyggve, *History of Salonitan Christianity* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug and Co., 1951), 49–63; also see J.G. Davies, "The Arian and Orthodox Baptisteries at Salona," *Antiquity* 33 (1959), 57–60. This motif appears elsewhere in the East, including Stobi (Bulgaria) and Butrint (Albania).

<sup>661</sup> Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 41.1, trans. author (CCL 38:460).

The *Gelasian Sacramentary* (dated somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries) instructs that candidates sing Psalm 42 on their way to the font during the Easter Vigil. It adds the following prayer: “Almighty and ever-living God, look with favor on the devotion or your people at their second birth, who like the deer drawn to the fountain of water, grant that in baptism their thirst for faith may sanctify their souls and bodies.”<sup>662</sup>

In some of these images, deer drink from a bubbling fountain, from the Jordan River, or from a large vase (*cantharus*), as in a Byzantine era pavement found in Carthage and now in the British Museum (fig. 6.2).<sup>663</sup> In other instances the deer drink from four streams, as in the baptisteries of Bir Ftouha (fig. 5.21) and Oued Ramel. These four streams represent the four rivers of Eden (Gen 2.10–14), and—together with the imagery of birds and lush vegetation (flowers, fruit, and vines)—suggest the delights of Paradise awaiting those who have been reborn in the font.<sup>664</sup> Augustine also sees Eden, with its four rivers, as a type of the church and the four rivers as figures of the four evangelists.<sup>665</sup> Other early Christian writers, including Cyprian and Paulinus of Nola, likewise equate the four rivers with the four evangelists.<sup>666</sup>

An inscription found at the entrance to what may have been an early Christian baptistery at Ostia reads: “In Christ, take of the fountains of Christians: Geon, Fison, Tigris, and Euphrata.”<sup>667</sup> A sixth-century Carthaginian grammarian, Calbulus, records his gift to a baptistery of a marble deer that spouted water from its mouth into the basin (comparable to Constantine’s gift to the Lateran baptistery). He reports the words said by the bishop as candidates enter the chamber, descend into the font, ascend, and then face the bishop. He then offers these

<sup>662</sup> *Gel. Sac.* 87–88, trans. author. See also Paul Underwood, “The Fountain of Life,” 43–138, esp. 51–53.

<sup>663</sup> A related Byzantine-era mosaic in the British Museum has two deer coming to drink at four streams with the inscription *FONTES* above. This mosaic came from a mausoleum in Gammarth, near Carthage.

<sup>664</sup> On the symbolism of the four rivers see De Bruyne, “La decoration des baptistères,” 265–8; and Stern, “Le décor des pavements,” 383. The four rivers appear in other contexts as well, especially in images of Jesus or the lamb, standing on a rocky mound (from which the rivers flow), as in the apse mosaic of Rome’s basilica of Ss. Cosmas and Damian.

<sup>665</sup> Augustine, *Civ.* 13.21.

<sup>666</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 73.10 (cited above, p. 249); Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32.10.

<sup>667</sup> See G. Calza, “Una basilica di età Costantiniana scoperta ad Ostia,” *Atti della Pont. Accad. Rom. Di Archeol.* ser. 3, recond. 16 (1940), fasc. 1–2, 63–88; and recond. 18 (1941–2), fasc. 3–4, 135–48.



Fig. 6.2 Pavement mosaic, Carthage, now in the British Museum, sixth century. Photo: Author.

lines, presumably intended to be inscribed on the circumference of the font: “Calculus, in supplication, remembering the spring in which he was reborn, presents new gifts: a beautiful thing of marble—the form of a deer whose mouth is the source of the water.”<sup>668</sup>

### 6.3.2. *The Shepherd and His Flock*

A shepherd with his flock is seen above the font at Dura Europos (fig. 5.1), in the mosaic program of Naples’ S. Giovanni in Fonte baptistry, and at Albenga. Two lambs flank a cross at Henchir Sokrine (fig. 5.25) and a lamb appears in the font at Sidi Jdidi, also in Tunisia.<sup>669</sup> According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine presented the Lateran Baptistry with a golden lamb to complement silver statues of Christ and John the Baptist.<sup>670</sup> In addition to the examples, an inscription over one of

<sup>668</sup> *Ant. Lat.* 378, trans. author. Published in *Anthologia Latina*, ed. Franciscus Buescheler and Alexander Riese (Lepizig: Ver. Adolf M. Hakkert, 1973), 290–1.

<sup>669</sup> See Aïcha ben Abed ben Khader et al., “Les Deux Baptistères de Sidi Jdidi (Tunisie),” *AnTard* 11 (2003), 129–49; Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, #747, 264; cited in Underwood, “Fountain of Life,” 73.

<sup>670</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 34 (Sylvester). On the shepherd at Dura Europos and in other baptisteries, esp. S. Giovanni in Fonte, Naples, see Johannes Quasten, “The Painting of the Good Shepherd at Dura-Europos,” *MedSt* 9 (1947), 1–18. Notice, also, the small image

the niches in Ravenna's Orthodox Baptistry quotes Psalm 23 (for the sake of consistency), which suggests that the lost mosaic decoration might have shown a shepherd with a flock: "*IN LOCUM PASCUAE IBI ME CONLOCAVIT SUPER AQUA REFLECTIONIS EDOCAVIT ME* (He set me here, where there are pastures; he led me beside shining waters)."<sup>671</sup>

The Good Shepherd figure is ubiquitous in early Christian iconography. He turns up in hundreds of examples on catacomb paintings, sarcophagus reliefs, sculptures, lamps, gems, silver plates, and mosaics from the third through the fifth centuries (for example, fig. 6.3).<sup>672</sup> Although adapted from pastoral motifs in popular Roman art, the Shepherd is also a common biblical motif. In John's Gospel (10.11–16) Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd (*ho poimēn ho kalos*) who knows his flock and will lay down his life for them. He stresses that other sheep must be brought into the fold, because there can only be one flock and one shepherd. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke both recount parables of a shepherd who goes to seek the lost sheep (Matt 18.12–13//Luke 15.3–7). These images, along with the poetic use of pastoral images in the Psalms and numerous other writings found in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament, contribute to the dominance of this symbol for a care-taking savior and a faithful, devoted community.

Paulinus of Nola describes the newly born Christians as lambs brought up from their bath and led by their shepherd into the church.<sup>673</sup> Prudentius, describing the decoration of the baptistry at St. Peter's in Rome, refers to a shepherd and his flock, and combines the texts of Psalm 42 with Psalm 23 in his description: "There that shepherd waters the sheep in the icy cold font—the ones that he perceives to pant after the fountains of Christ."<sup>674</sup> About a century and a half later, Venantius Fortunatus wrote a poem to celebrate the construction of

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of a lamb baptizing another lamb on the fourth-century sarcophagus of Junius Bassus in St. Peter's treasury; discussed by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 73–76.

<sup>671</sup> See above, p. 202. For a discussion of the likelihood of this see Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistry*, 61–2; also Deichmann, *Ravenna* 1, 28.

<sup>672</sup> On the Good Shepherd in early Christian art see Jensen, *Early Christian Art*, 37–41; Paul Corby Finney, "Good Shepherd" *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990), 845–6; and Boniface Ramsey, O.P., "A Note on the Disappearance of the Good Shepherd from Early Christian Art," *HTR* 76 (1983), 375–8.

<sup>673</sup> Paulinus, *Ep.* 32.3.5. See discussion and text above, pp. 209–10.

<sup>674</sup> Prudentius, *Perist.* 12.43, trans. author (CSEL 61: 422).



Fig. 6.3 Good Shepherd mosaics, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, fifth century. Photo: Sacred Destinations Images.

the baptistery at Mainz. In it, he juxtaposes the imagery of shepherds and lambs, with the healing from original sin:

Shine, high hall of sacred baptism!  
 where Christ washes away the sins of Adam by a river,  
 Here the flock is plunged in the pure waves by the Shepherd God,  
 as long as the sheep's wool still shows stains  
 Birth by human seed brought death but the Father of the world  
 cleanses mortal sins by the medicinal waters.<sup>675</sup>

The text of Psalm 23 was, like Psalm 42, especially associated with the baptismal liturgy. Ambrose asks his catechumens how many times they had listened to the Psalm without understanding it. In baptism, he says, they will experience it all for themselves.<sup>676</sup> Afterwards, he cites this Psalm to explain how they will be led to water, have their heads anointed, and, when they join the congregation, receive the sacred cup.<sup>677</sup> Cyril urges the elect to repeat the Psalm as they prepared for baptism and reminds them of it later, after they have received the

<sup>675</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carm.* 2.11, trans. author (MGH aa 4.1.40–1).

<sup>676</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 5. 13–14.

<sup>677</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 8.43.

sacrament.<sup>678</sup> Augustine interprets the Psalm's second line ("he leads me beside still waters") as a direct reference to baptism.<sup>679</sup> Given these testimonies, one may conclude that Psalm 23 was commonly sung by neophytes as they processed from the baptistery to join the congregation.<sup>680</sup>

Ambrose and Cyril of Jerusalem both cite passages from the Song of Songs as well. Ambrose draws a parallel between the washing of the ewes (Song 4.2, 6.6) and the descent into the font, and Cyril chooses to interpret the image of those ewes bearing twins as a sign of the twin graces of water and Spirit.<sup>681</sup> Augustine links these lines in the Song with baptism.<sup>682</sup> In a sermon preached at Cyprian's shrine on the saint's feast day, Augustine refers to the just-completed ritual. He says the congregation had received the fleeces of shorn ewes: the flock that has just come from baptism.<sup>683</sup>

The washing of the sheep was not the only pastoral activity that resonated with the baptismal ritual. The sealing or marking with a cross (*sphragis*) that was given to the neophyte was like the branding that marked the animals as members of a single flock.<sup>684</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem compares the baptismal seal and the branding of an animal, claiming that the mystical seal would make the sheep recognizable by the Lord (their shepherd).<sup>685</sup> Augustine views Donatist Christians as sheep gone astray. The shepherd, looking for them can identify them by their baptismal brands. The brands not only identify them as his but mean that he has no need re-mark (i.e., rebaptize)

<sup>678</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 1.6, *Myst.* 4.7.

<sup>679</sup> Augustine, *Enarrat. Ps.* 22.1–2. See also Ps. Augustine, *Serm.* 366 (which specifically instructs the catechumens to memorize the text of the Psalm as they prepare for baptism); Theodoret, *Exp. Ps.* 22; and Cassiodorus, *Exp. Ps.* 22, all cited in Quasten, "Painting of the Good Shepherd," 11–13.

<sup>680</sup> That this took place in Naples was argued by G. Morin, *Étude sur une série de discours d'un évêque (de Naples?) du Vie siècle*, *RevBen* 2 (1894), 392 and by Johannes Quasten, "Das Bild des Guten Hirten in den altchristlichen Baptisterien."

<sup>681</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 3.8 (and see also *Sacr.* 5, 5–17); Cyril of Jerusalem *Cat.* 3.16.

<sup>682</sup> Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 2.6.

<sup>683</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 313B.3. This sermon was preached at the Mensa Cypriani, which some scholars have tentively identified with the basilica of Bir Ftouha, which had a monumental baptistery (see above, Chap. 5, no. 14), pp. 216–18.

<sup>684</sup> See Franz Dölger, *Sphragis. Eine altchristliche Taufbezeichnung. Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1911); and Dölger, "Profane und religiöse Brandmarkung der Tiere in der heidnischen und christlichen Antike," *AC* 3 (1932), 25–61.

<sup>685</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 1.2.

these sheep.<sup>686</sup> The fourth-century Syrian poet, Ephrem, incorporates this image into one of his hymns for Epiphany (a baptismal day in Nisibis): “The sheep leapt with joy to see the hand in readiness to baptize. O lambs, receive your marking, enter in and mingle with the flock; today the angels rejoice in you more than in all the rest of the sheep.”<sup>687</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia likewise connects the marking of sheep with the signing of neophytes: “The seal that you receive at this point marks you out for ever as the sheep of Christ...as soon as a sheep is bought, it is given a mark to identify its owner; it feeds in the same pasture and lives in the same fold as the other sheep that bear the same owner’s mark.”<sup>688</sup>

Thus, it is clear that the newly baptized recognized the sheep in these baptisteries as a reference to themselves: a flock of lambs with a Good Shepherd. In liturgical practice, the bishop acted for Christ, and so could be called the shepherd (pastor) of the flock. This idea is expressed by Leo I in a poem he wrote to be inscribed on a fountain in the courtyard of St. Paul’s Outside the Walls. Here he describes himself: “By his provident care for all things, Leo the Shepherd gives this brimming pool to his sheep, where they may wash stains from their bodies.”<sup>689</sup>

### 6.3.3. *Fishers and Fish*

The baptistery decoration of Naples’ S. Giovanni in Fonte included an image of men hauling fish into boats (fig. 5.7). Fish, dolphins, and other sea creatures are common also in North African fonts, including Kélibia (fig. 5.19), Hammam Lif (fig. 5.24), and Henchir Sokrine (fig. 5.25). Fishing scenes occur with images of baptism in the Catacomb of Callixtus (figs. 1.2–3) and on the sarcophagus of the Museo Nazionale and Sta. Maria Antiqua (fig. 2.1). The fonts, sometimes called *piscinae* (fish ponds) may have seemed appropriate places to include images

<sup>686</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 185.23. This is an often used metaphor for Augustine. See also *Ep.* 98.5; *Ep.* 173.3; *Serm.* 295.5; *Serm.* 299A (Dolbeau 4). 2; and *Bapt.* 6.1.1.

<sup>687</sup> Ephrem, *Epiph.* 6.6.15, trans. Sebastian Brock in Thomas Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 167; also see Ephrem, *Hymn. Virg.* 7.6.

<sup>688</sup> Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Bapt. hom.* 17, trans. Yarnold, S.J., *Awe-Inspiring Rites of Baptism*, 178. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 40.20.

<sup>689</sup> Trans., author (de Rossi, *IC* 2.80–1, no. 13).

of sea life and men fishing from boats, so popular in African mosaic decoration generally.<sup>690</sup>

The image of a fish can signify any number of things in early Christian art. The fish may refer to Christ, a Christian, or a specific biblical narrative (e.g., the miraculous catch, the multiplication of loaves and fish, Peter's fish, and a post-resurrectional meal of fish on the beach). Fish often appear on funerary inscriptions, lamps, gems, glass, pottery dishes, frescoes, and relief sculptures, often shown with the anchor (a symbol suggesting the Christian faith or hope of salvation, implying, that the deceased Christian believers were caught, like the fish of Matthew's Gospel (4.18–19), by the preaching of the apostles. One example is the third-century stele of Licina, currently in Rome's Museo Nazionale, that shows two fish on either side of an anchor (fig. 6.4). Above is the typical pagan funerary legend *D (is) M (anibus)* without the usual *S (acrīs)*—in this case perhaps intended to mean (*Dominus Manibus* or *Deo Magno*)—followed by the two Greek words (in an otherwise Latin inscription): “*IXTHUC ZWNTWN* (fish of the living ones—cf. Matt 22.32).” Beneath the fish is the epitaph: “*LICINIAE AMIATI BENE MERENTI VIXIT* (to Licinia Amia, worthy of merit, who lived...).” The word *IXΘYC* occurs also on a wooden panel of the early-fifth-century doors of the basilica of Sta. Sabina in Rome (on the scene of Christ's ascension) and in at least one instance in a monumental context, above the gemmed cross set upon a starry orb in the sixth-century apse of Sant' Apollinare in Classe (see fig. 6.8).

The earliest known literary reference to an image of a fish as a Christian symbol comes from Clement of Alexandria's treatise, *The Instructor*. Here he urges Christians to select appropriate figures for their signet rings, among them a dove, a ship at full sail, a lyre, an anchor, or a fish. The fish, he says, will remind the wearer of the apostle drawing the new Christians from the water.<sup>691</sup> In a hymn also attributed

<sup>690</sup> Examples can be seen in almost any publication on North African mosaics. For a specific study of this motif see Michèle Blanchard-Lemée, “The sea: fish, ships, and gods,” in *Mosaics of Roman Tunisia*, ed. Michèle Blanchard-Lemée et al., trans. by Kenneth Whitehead (New York: George Braziller, 1995), 121–45; Sabah Ferdi, *Mosaïques des eaux en Algérie: Un langage mythologique des pierres* (Paris: Régie Sud Méditerranée, 2000); and Katherine Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 125–30. Fish also appear in the Butrint baptistery.

<sup>691</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.11.



Fig. 6.4 Stela of Licinia Amias, third century, now in the Museo Nazionale, Rome. Photo: Author.

to him, Clement addresses Christ as a fisher of people, the one who saved them from a sea of evil by pulling them from a hostile tide.<sup>692</sup>

In his treatise on baptism, Tertullian makes the fish metaphor explicit by referring to believers as little fish following Jesus, the big fish. Like fish, Christians were born in water and needed to stay in the water to remain alive.<sup>693</sup> In this particular instance he inserts the Greek word *ιχθυς* (meaning fish). Such usage indicates that he knew the tradition of the Erythraean Sibyl who prophesied the coming of Christ based on an acrostic derived from this word, each letter of which stood for one of the Greek words “Jesus Christ, Son of

<sup>692</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.12.23–8.

<sup>693</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 1.3.

God, Savior.” Later Christian authors likewise referred to this famous acrostic, which was included in the Jewish-Christian Sybilline Oracles.<sup>694</sup> Eusebius recorded Constantine’s explanation of this in his *Oration to the Saints* and Augustine explained it in his *City of God*, saying that in the word *ichthys*, Christ was understood mystically because he alone was able to live without sin in the depths of mortality as a fish could live in the abyss of the waters.<sup>695</sup>

The late fourth century, North African bishop, Optatus of Milevis, makes specific note of this acrostic’s association with baptism:

This is the fish, who through invocation is joined to the waters of the font in baptism. Due to the fish’s presence in the water it [the font] is called a *piscina*; because the word for fish in Greek, *ichthys*, contains all that is sacred in its individual letters which indicate “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior”.<sup>696</sup> Optatus also calls the font an “ancient fishpond” (*antiquae piscinae*) and argues that a Donatist font does not come with the “Christ fish.” Continuing, he associates this fish, introduced into the font at baptism, with Tobit’s fish, capable of exorcising demons and healing blindness (Tobit 6.9–19).<sup>697</sup>

Cyril of Jerusalem reiterates the idea that the baptized faithful were fish caught by Christ and so rescued from death. Noting the superficial contradiction—a fish caught in order to be saved—he urges his catechumens: “Let yourself be taken alive; do not try to escape. It is Jesus who is playing you on his line, not to kill you, but by killing you, to make you alive.”<sup>698</sup> Ambrose likewise encourages candidates

<sup>694</sup> *Sibylline Or.* 8.217–50. See John J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1983), 423–4.

<sup>695</sup> Eusebius, *Coet. sanct.* 18–19; Augustine, *Civ.* 18.23. See also Maximus of Turin, *Contra pag.* trac. 4 and Pseudo-Prosper of Aquitaine, *Prom. praed. Dei* 2.39. Complete citations can be found in Charles R. Morey, “The Origin of the Fish-Symbol,” published serially in the *PTR* 8 (1910), esp. part 3, 401–32. Probably the most extensive work on the subject is that of Franz J. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ: Das Fischsymbol in frühchristliche Zeit* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1910); *Der heilige Fisch in den antiken Religionen und im Christentum* (=IXΘΥΣ, vols. 2 and 3—1922); and *Die Fisch-Denkmal in der frühchristlichen Plastik, Malerei, und Kleinkunst* (=IXΘΥΣ, vols. 4 and 5—1927–32).

<sup>696</sup> Optatus of Milevis, *Donat.* 3.2.8–12, trans. author (CSEL 26: 68–9).

<sup>697</sup> Optatus of Milevis, *Donat.* 3.2.1–8. The fishing figure in the Catacombs or on the Sta. Maria Antiqua sarcophagus (right end) might reasonably be identified as Tobit.

<sup>698</sup> Cyril, *Procat.* 5, trans. Stephenson, 74–5. Compare Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 13.10, in which Peter is the one with the hook and line and the fish the type of the Christian convert, willingly being caught. See also the late second-century epitaph of Abercius, which mentions a fish caught by a virgin from a spring and given to her friends to eat, and the fourth-century epitaph of Pectorius, which alludes to a spring of immortality

for baptism to be like fish, among the first living things brought forth on the fifth day of creation but—because it can swim—cannot drown, even in a raging tempest. He says, “Be a fish, that the water of the world not submerge you.”<sup>699</sup>

#### 6.3.4. *Christ Giving the Law (Traditio Legis)*

An image of Jesus passing the law to Sts. Peter and Paul appears in the dome of the baptistery of S. Giovanni in Fonte in Naples (fig. 6.5). It also occurs in one of the stucco panels in Ravenna’s Orthodox baptistery. In the Naples mosaic, Christ stands on an orb of the world, which indicates his ascension into heaven; Paul holds a staurogram (rather than a cross) over his left shoulder as he receives the scroll from Christ (the image of Paul is mostly missing). The scroll is inscribed with the words *Dominus legem dat* (the Lord gives the law). The image has no clear narrative context, although, could be an iconographic expression of Christ’s commissioning Peter as the foundation of the church and the one charged with the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16.18–19).

This image became popular in the mid-fourth century. Its earliest appearance may have been in the apse of St. Peter’s basilica on the Vatican.<sup>700</sup> Although that apse decoration was lost in the Middle Ages, similar compositions can be seen on sarcophagi, gold glass, and silver reliquaries. In most of these, Jesus is either enthroned, standing on the orb of the world (as in Naples), or standing on a rock from which the four rivers of Paradise spring. Christ usually passes an open scroll to Peter, but occasionally to Paul.

Jesus’ gesture is modeled after a conventional posture that signifies the transference or delegation of authority. Scholars have interpreted it as the commissioning of Peter or the transference from an old “law”

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that makes its recipients into divine children of the heavenly fish; both translated and discussed (with bibliography) by Johannes Quasten, *Patrology 1: The Beginnings of Patristic Literature* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 171–5.

<sup>699</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 3.3.

<sup>700</sup> That the *traditio legis* was the apse image of the first basilica of St. Peter is based, in part, on the discovery of the Samagher casket, with representations of four Roman basilicas (including St. Peter’s) with a *traditio legis* on the lid. See Margherita Guarducci, *La capsella eburnea di Samagher: Un cimelio di arte paleocristiana nella storia del tardo impero* (Trieste: Società istriana di archeologica e storia patria, 1978), 66, 125; and Tilman Buddenseig, “Le coffret en ivoire de Pola, Saint-Pierre et le Latran,” *CA* 10 (1959), 157–200, also discussed above Chap. 3, pp. 95–8. For a general survey of this motif see Geir Hellemo, *Adventus Domini, Eschatological Thought in 4th-Century Apses and Catechesis*, VCS, 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 75–7.



Fig. 6.5 Traditio legis from Naples, Baptistery of Sta. Restituta (San Giovanni in Fonte), fourth century. Photo: Author.

or covenant to a new one.<sup>701</sup> Peter may also have been identified as the new Moses in this scene, just as he supplants Moses in the scene of the striking the rock to provide water for the wandering Israelites. In this transposition, Peter strikes the wall of his Roman cell, in order to baptize his soldier-jailers.<sup>702</sup> Accordingly, the *traditio legis* points to a triumph of Christ's teachings over Jewish law and of Peter over Moses as leader of the faithful community, perhaps a reference to Acts 15.6–11. Moses also is shown receiving a scroll of the law in Christian iconography, but often in juxtaposition with Abraham offering Isaac—a symbol of Christ's sacrifice.<sup>703</sup>

<sup>701</sup> See Jean-Michel Spieser, *Autour de la Traditio Legis*, (Thessaloniki: Ephoreia Byzantinon Archaioeteton Thessalonikes, 2004); Herbert Kessler, "Bright Gardens of Paradise," in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. Jeffrey Spier (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 114.

<sup>702</sup> See Robin M. Jensen, "Moses Imagery in Jewish and Christian Art: Problems of Continuity and Particularity," *SBL Seminar Papers* (Fall, 1992), 389–418.

<sup>703</sup> See Galit Noga-Banai, "Visual Prototype Versus Biblical Text: Moses Receiving the Law in Rome," in Hugo Brandenburg and Fabrizio Bisconti, eds., *Sarcophagi*

In a baptismal context, the *traditio legis* motif might signify the transmission of teaching from bishop to catechumens.<sup>704</sup> Catechumens were given the creed (*traditio symboli*) two weeks or so before their baptism and then expected to recite it back (*redditio symboli*) just prior to their initiation. In Augustine's Hippo this ritual took place on Holy Saturday, just prior to their baptism during the Easter Vigil.<sup>705</sup> The symbols of the four evangelists in Naples and the four open gospel books in Ravenna's Orthodox Baptistry likewise might allude to the pedagogical preparation of catechumens in the meaning of the scriptures.

### 6.3.5. *Candles and Lamps*

Lit candles or lamps turn up frequently in baptismal iconography: on the British Museum ivory (fig. 3.2), and in the fonts of Ponzianus (fig. 5.4), Kélibia (fig. 5.19) and La Skhira (fig. 5.23). The women coming to the tomb (or wise virgins coming to the bridegroom's tent) in the Dura Europos Baptistry also are carrying torches (fig. 5.1).

Lights were undoubtedly necessary in these chambers, especially at night, but the candles might also have a liturgical and symbolic function as the whole ritual process was understood to illumine those who participated in it and the imagery of light is pervasive in many of the documents. In the East, the newly baptized were sometimes called "*photidzomenoi*." John Chrysostom, for example, drew a parallel between a life of doing good works and loving God with being a light for the world. Citing Matthew 5.16, he urges the newly baptized to let the light within them shine forth not only in their outer appearance but through the illumination of their souls, understanding, good deeds. Those who have been baptized shine with the light of virtue.<sup>706</sup>

Documentary evidence suggests that when catechumens were enrolled for baptism they were presented with lit tapers or torches to symbolize this promised illumination.<sup>707</sup> In his catechetical lectures,

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*tardoantichi, paleocristiani ed altomedioevali, Monumenti di antichità Cristiana* 2nd ser., 18 (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 2003), 175–85.

<sup>704</sup> This is the interpretation favored by Maier, *Le baptistère de Naples*, 115.

<sup>705</sup> Augustine, *Sers.* 212–214; On this practice in various places see William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 64–9, 96–8, 274–86.

<sup>706</sup> John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 4.19–20.

<sup>707</sup> See Cyril of Jerusalem *Procat.* 1; *Cat.* 1.1.

Cyril of Jerusalem describes the newly enlisted catechumens processing into the church arrayed in white garments like brides and carrying tapers in their hands. He tells them to take care to keep their candles lit, since they symbolize their faith. Gregory of Nazianzus similarly compares the torch-lit procession of the newly baptized to the wise brides of the parable (Matt 25.1–13); they keep the lamps of their faith shining while they wait for the bridegroom.<sup>708</sup> Proclus of Constantinople (d. ca. 446) specifically mentions giving lamps to the neophytes to signify the illumination of their souls.<sup>709</sup>

A pair of candles frames the baptism scene on the British Museum ivory. Coupled candles are seen more frequently in saints' portraits, for example in the fifth-century arcosolium of Cominia and Nicatiola, in the Naples Catacomb of S. Gennaro, in the sixth-century Capsella Africana, and in numerous North African Christian tomb mosaics from the fourth and fifth centuries (fig. 6.6). As in the British Museum ivory, these candles are tall and set upon tripod-like stands. Jerome defends this practice of lighting candles in saints' shrines in his treatise against Vigilantius of Calagurris, who had objected to relic veneration of this sort.<sup>710</sup> A later text (often incorrectly attributed to Augustine) recounts a vision of a woman named Vitula who visited the shrine of St. Stephen in Hippo and received assurance of her husband's conversion when the two candles near the saint's relics suddenly burned more brightly.<sup>711</sup> The occurrence of this motif in a baptismal context thus arguably strengthens the association of baptism with martyrdom.

The paschal candle seems to come into use some time in the fourth century, about the time that Easter baptisms were becoming common practice. Prudentius (ca. 348–413) wrote what most historians have taken to be a Vespers hymn, *For the Censing of the Lights*, but which he may have titled *Hymn for the New Light of the Paschal Sabbath*,

<sup>708</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 40.45. See also Ps. Ambrose, *Laps. Virgin.* 5.19.

<sup>709</sup> Proclus, *Cat.* 491. See citation and translation in Riley, *Christian Initiation*, 351.

<sup>710</sup> Jerome also defended a procession of candles for the reading of the Gospel in the liturgy. See Jerome, *Vigil.* 4.7. On the controversy see David Hunter, "Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: Ascetics, Relics, and Clerics in Late Roman Gaul," *J ECS* 7 (1999), 424. The doubled candles are discussed by Galit Noga-Banai, *The Trophies of the Martyrs: An Art Historical Study of Early Christian Silver Reliquaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70–8 and figures 44–60.

<sup>711</sup> Ps. Augustine, *Mir. sanc. Steph.* 2.2.4 (PL 41.846).



Fig. 6.6 Funerary mosaic of Bardo Museum, Tunis. Photo: Author.

since it refers to keeping a festive vigil on this holy night and contains typical paschal themes (e.g., the passage through the Red Sea).<sup>712</sup>

Despite Jerome's defense of candles in saints' shrines, he objected to the use of paschal candles. Around 384 he wrote a letter to Praesidius, a deacon in of Piacenza, in which he argued that these practices were influenced by pagan customs and had no biblical justification.<sup>713</sup> Jerome's criticism of the practice clearly demonstrates its popularity. By contrast, Augustine's Easter homilies explore the symbolism of lighting Easter lamps during the Vigil. Augustine also has been credited (probably incorrectly) with writing an Easter hymn that praises the paschal candle, now widely known as the *Exultet*.<sup>714</sup> That an Easter candle blessing ritual may have been introduced into the Roman liturgy by Pope Zosimus (417–18) is also attested in the *Liber Pontificalis*.<sup>715</sup> Two lengthy sixth-century formulae for the blessing of a paschal candle are included in the writings Ennodius of Pavia (d. 521), demonstrating that the custom was well-established by his time.<sup>716</sup>

#### 6.3.6. Noah's Ark

A box-like object with an open lid appears in the Kélibia font (fig. 6.7). This image has been identified by many scholars as a representation of Noah's ark.<sup>717</sup> This object does not look like a boat, so its designation as Noah's ark is controversial. Yet, Noah's ark, as it appears in third- and fourth-century Roman catacomb paintings and on sarcophagus reliefs, in fact generally looks more like a box

<sup>712</sup> See Prudentius, *Carm.* 5 (CSEL 61: 25–31). Different scholarly interpretations are summarized in *The Poems of Prudentius*, trans. Sr. M. Clement Egan, FOC 43.1 (Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1962), 29–31, fn. 1. The Red Sea story is used in Easter and baptismal contexts both. See Augustine, *Serm.* 352.3,6; 363.2.

<sup>713</sup> Jerome, *Ep. ad Praesid.* (PL 30, 182). Discussion of this text in J.N.D. Kelly, Jerome, 111; and, more recently, Thomas Forrest Kelly, *The Exultet in Southern Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 40–1.

<sup>714</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 223I (Wilmart 15); 223K (Wilmart 17); *Civ.* 15.22 (a possible transcription error: in place of “verses in praise of the Creator,” substitute “in praise of a taper”).

<sup>715</sup> *Lib. Pont.* 43 (Zosimus). The text is not clear that the candles were for the Easter celebration, although scholars have tended to interpret it that way.

<sup>716</sup> Ennodius' texts can be in in Fridericus Vogel, *Magni Felicis Ennodii opera* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1961), 18–20, 109–10. These are cited in Kelly, *Exultet in Southern Italy*, 42–3. See also Patrick Regan, “Paschal Lucernarium: Structure and Symbolism,” *Worship* 82.2 (2008), 98–118.

<sup>717</sup> The list of those who believe it to represent Noah's ark includes Paul-Albert Février, “L'Abeille et la Seiche,” *RivAC* 60 (1984), 278; Palazzo, “Iconographie et Liturgie,” 111; Dunbabin, *The Mosaics of Roman North Africa*, 190; and Stauffer, *Baptismal Fonts*, 39.



Fig. 6.7 Detail (ark), baptismal font from Clupea (Kélibia). Photo: Author.

than a boat. Nevertheless, in those instances, Noah usually shows up as well—inside the box. Although it is also possible that the Kélibia image was intended to represent a reliquary or even the Ark of the Covenant, the bird next to it with an olive branch could represent Noah's dove, which also is included in most other early Noah iconography and helps to identify the scene. The Kélibia font also has another dove, this one emitting a substance (water? breath?) from its beak: the dove of the Holy Spirit (fig. 5.20).<sup>718</sup>

Noah's ark was an important figure for the early church, especially among North African writers. Tertullian cites the story in his treatise on baptism, expressly linking the flood with baptismal cleansing and the dove with descent of the Holy Spirit and a sign of peace. The ark represents the church, where the neophytes are kept safe from the floods of the world.<sup>719</sup> In his treatise *On the Unity of the Church*, Cyprian likewise cites the story of Noah, saying that just as there was

<sup>718</sup> See discussion Chap. 3, pp. 112–5.

<sup>719</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 8.17–25.

no hope for anyone outside that ark, so there is no salvation outside of the church.<sup>720</sup> Cyprian extends this reference to include the text of 1 Peter 3.20–21, in which the eight righteous ones saved from the flood are compared to sinners justified through baptism. Cyprian elsewhere argues that because no one outside of the ark was spared, no one outside the church can be saved.<sup>721</sup> Augustine, following this line further develops the theme of the ark as a figure for the church. He adds that the wood of the ark prefigured the wood of the cross. Both offer salvation through a purifying flood.<sup>722</sup>

These interpretations and adaptations of Noah's story and 1 Peter 3 were not unique to African church fathers, however. The first-century writer of 1 Clement asserts that Noah's faithfulness proclaimed a second birth (*palingenesian*),<sup>723</sup> and Justin Martyr sees the water of the flood as a sign of baptism, the wood of the ark as a figure of the cross and Noah's righteousness of Noah as symbol of the faith of the elect.<sup>724</sup> This motif also turns up in fourth-century catechetical treatises of Ambrose of Milan and Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril enumerates all the ways that baptismal water is prefigured in other cleansing waters that show up in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ambrose specifically contrasts the raven sent out first by Noah (a symbol of sin) with the dove (a sign of God's forgiveness and a figure of the gift of the Holy Spirit).<sup>725</sup>

### 6.3.7. *Starry Sky*

The representation of a blue star-studded heaven appears in on the ceiling of the Dura baptistery (fig. 5.1), in the dome and around the four symbols of the evangelists (or four living creatures from Revelation 4.6–8) in lower arches of Naples' S. Giovanni in Fonte baptistery (fig. 5.6), and in the vault of the baptistery at Albenga (fig. 5.16). In the last two instances a christogram is superimposed on the starry night sky. Parallel celestial representations decorate the apse mosaic of Sant' Apollinare in Classe (fig. 6.8), the domed ceiling of the Galla Placidia Mausoleum, and the apse of the Archepiscopal chapel—all in or near

<sup>720</sup> Cyprian, *Unit. eccl.* 6.

<sup>721</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 69.2; 74.11.3.

<sup>722</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 264.5; *Catech.* 20.32, 34.

<sup>723</sup> *I Clem.* 9.4.

<sup>724</sup> Justin, *Dial.* 138.2–3.

<sup>725</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 3.5 (also *Procat.* 14 and *Cat.* 2.8); Ambrose *Myst.* 3.10–11, and *Sacr* 1.23, 2.1.

Ravenna. Paulinus of Nola describes another starry vault in a poem referring to the baptistery he built at Cimitile and written to celebrate its inauguration. A three-lobed font was installed in its center:

And, even more, in the interior of the larger church, a small room has been installed like a daughter, its dome brilliantly covered with stars and of a curving design because of its three recesses. It shines because of the piety of the font at its center and for the miracle of simultaneously making new and being made new.<sup>726</sup>

The imagery of the starry sky might have a biblical source. Paul, in his epistle to the Phillipians (2.15) urges the faithful to “shine like stars in the world.” This image refers back to the promise to Abraham, that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 15.5). John Chrysostom picks up this theme in one of his addresses to the neophytes. He describes them as stars come to earth, shining more brilliantly than those in heaven, even though it is full daylight. Night stars, he adds, hide themselves away at the rising of the sun, but day stars shine all the more brightly in the light of the Sun of Justice.<sup>727</sup>

#### 6.3.8. *Fruit-Bearing Trees*

The font at Kélibia (fig. 5.19) contains images of four fruit bearing trees, probably representing the four seasons: a date palm (spring), olive (winter), fig (summer), and apple (autumn).<sup>728</sup> Palm trees appear in the baptisteries of Oued Ramel and Hammam Lif (fig. 5.24). Palms also set off the processing apostles in the Arian Baptistery of Ravenna (fig. 3.11). Fruit bearing trees show up in the mosaic pavement of a sixth-century baptistery of the church at Mount Nebo in Jordan.<sup>729</sup> These trees may refer to the paradisiacal Garden of Eden (Gen. 2.8–9). A passage from one of Cyprian’s epistles that might explain the tree motifs in these baptisteries:

The church is like Paradise; within her walls she encloses on the inside fruit-bearing trees. Of those trees any which do not produce good fruit

<sup>726</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Carm.* 28.180–185, trans. author (CSEL 30: 299).

<sup>727</sup> John Chrysostom, *Bapt. inst.* 3.1–2.

<sup>728</sup> On the four trees as symbols of the four seasons see Perler, “Die Taufsymbolik.”

<sup>729</sup> See Michele Piccirilo and Eugenio Alliata, *Mount Nebo: New Archaeological Excavations 1967–1997* (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1998), 296–300, 405–8.

are cut out and cast onto the fires. And those trees she waters by means of fountains—that is by the four Gospels; by them she generously spreads in a saving and heavenly flood the graces of baptism.<sup>730</sup>

In addition to bearing fruit, palm trees are ancient symbols of victory and occur frequently in early Christian art: in apse mosaics, sarcophagus reliefs, and small objects made of gold, glass, silver, and ivory. The neophyte was worthy of a palm (as well as a crown) as one who had overcome sin and evil. This is illustrated by the hand of God, handing down the crown of victory to the newly baptized in the dome mosaic in S. Giovanni in Fonte, Naples (fig. 5.6).

### 6.3.9. *Cross and Christogram*

One of the paintings in the Ponzianus Catacomb baptistery shows a gemmed cross. Flowers spring from its base and lit candles hang from its transverse beam (fig. 5.4). In both Ravenna baptisteries (figs. 3.10–11, 5.10), crosses are set upon thrones. In the Orthodox Baptistery mosaic, John the Baptist holds a gemmed cross rather than a more customary shepherd's crook, a parallel to the cross held by the Good Shepherd in Ravenna's fifth-century Galla Placidia Mausoleum (fig. 6.3), or the cross set against the starry orb in Sant' Apollinare in Classe (fig. 6.8).<sup>731</sup> The Albenga baptistery also has a small gemmed cross in its lunette mosaic (fig. 5.16). The baptistery pavement mosaic from Henchir Sokrine shows two lambs on either side of a cross. In the field are the alpha and omega, birds, roses, and fish (fig. 5.25).

The image of an enthroned cross or lamb is often called the "throne of preparation" (*hetoimasia*) and symbolizes the Trinity (God as the Seat of Wisdom) as well as the enthronement of the Lamb in Revelation 4.2. The application of gems and the presence of the alpha and omega (referring to John's vision in Rev 1.8 and 22.13) transform the cross from a symbol of suffering to a sign of glory and triumph.

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<sup>730</sup> Cyprian, *Ep.* 73.10.3, trans. Graeme Clarke, *The Letters of Cyprian*, vol. 4 (New York: Newman Press, 1989), 59. This text also may have some bearing on the appearance of the four rivers (e.g., Oued Ramel) and the four evangelists or Gospels (at Naples and Ravenna). On the baptistery as Paradise see John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 11.29. The mention here of beautiful fruit may be compared with the fruit and flowers in so much baptistery décor (e.g., Naples, Ravenna, Kélibia, and Bekalta). See Perler, "Die Taufsymbolik," 282–90.

<sup>731</sup> On the cross in the Orthodox Baptistery of Ravenna being a later restoration, see discussion in Chap.3, p. 110.



Fig. 6.8 Detail, apse mosaic, San Apollinare in Classe. Photo: Author.

The empty throne shows up frequently in Roman basilica decoration, especially at the apex of the triumphal arch, as in Rome's Basilica of Sta. Maria Maggiore. As part of baptistery décor, it may indicate the Triune God, confessed by the elect and symbolized in their three-fold immersion.<sup>732</sup>

Christograms appear in baptistery vaults in Albenga (fig. 5.16) and Naples (fig. 5.6). The Albenga image emphasizes the Trinity in its three-fold repetition of the christogram, whereas the Naples image, with the hand of God above holding out a jeweled wreath, emphasizes the triumph won by the newly baptized one. The decoration of fonts with the cross or christograms in North Africa is striking, especially as they occur at the bottom of the basins in Sufetula, Kélibia, Bekalta, and Hammam Lif (figs. 5.20,24). In these places, the candidate would have to stand directly on the mystical monogram—a practice that seems to disregard an imperial edict promulgated by Theodosius and Valentinian III that forbade placing (by painting or inscribing) crosses on pavements lest they be trodden underfoot.<sup>733</sup> Perhaps, while being baptized, candidates would kneel on the sign of Christ, symbolically taking it as their own.

#### 6.3.10. *Birds: Doves, Peacocks, and Phoenix*

Birds of all kinds (e.g., partridges, guinea hens, pheasants) are found in the decoration of early Christian baptisteries, from Italy to North Africa, on the walls, pavements, and fonts. They are surrounded by vegetation and near vases of flowers or baskets of fruit. In general, they add to the overall splendor of the natural imagery that suggests a paradisiacal garden. Other birds, however, may have particular significance—doves, peacocks, and the (singular) phoenix.

Doves, of course, refer to the Holy Spirit as in the iconography of Jesus' baptism by John. A dove by itself shows up in the mosaics of the font at Kélibia (fig. 5.20) and the well of the font at Oued Ramel. Doves represent the twelve apostles in the baptistery at Albenga (fig. 5.16). In an address to the newly baptized Ambrose claims that the dove

<sup>732</sup> See Kostof, *Orthodox Baptistery*, 80–1, which provides a longer discussion of the *hetoimasia* images and provides some older bibliography.

<sup>733</sup> *Cod. Justin.* 1.8.1; reaffirmed in the Council of Trullo (692 CE), *Can.* 72. See Cyril A. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Harper Collins, 1972), 36.

could symbolize many things. Citing Matthew 10.16, he encourages them to be like guileless doves as well as like crafty serpents. He also reminds them that in the Gospels the Spirit descended only in the likeness of a dove and that a likeness was something that could easily be changed. In this way it was unlike the unchangeable truth of God.<sup>734</sup>

Peacocks appear in Ravenna's Orthodox Baptistery among the paired animals in stucco in the aedicules and over the windows. They also occur in the ornamental floral band surrounding the dome medallion in Naples' baptistery of S. Giovanni in Fonte (fig. 5.6), flanking a chalice in the baptistery pavements at Oued Ramel, and in Butrint, Albania. Peacocks are the bird of Juno in classical iconography and a favorite decorative motif in general because of their ostensible beauty. (according to Ovid, Juno's bird wore stars on its tail).<sup>735</sup> In addition to their beauty, peacocks were associated with immortality and regeneration. They were the birds of paradise. Pliny the Elder notes that their tail feathers, which fell out in the fall and grew back in the spring, symbolized nature's cycles of decay and rebirth.<sup>736</sup>

Peacocks also frequently turn up in Christian funerary art—a direct borrowing from Roman funerary art. In both instances they may have been meant to refer to a blessed afterlife.<sup>737</sup> The extant documentary evidence, however, for a Christian association of peacocks with life beyond death is slim. Augustine calls the peacock an example of an animal whose flesh does not putrify, and Isidore of Seville (560–636) says that since its flesh will not decay it is difficult to cook.<sup>738</sup>

More surviving Christian documents testify to the phoenix, which occurs in the Naples baptistery just above the hand of God (in the decorative band), as a symbol of resurrection. The phoenix occurs frequently in sarcophagus reliefs and, later, in apse mosaics (e.g., Ss. Cosmas and Damian in Rome). According to ancient legend, every

<sup>734</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 4.25. See also Tertullian, *Bapt.* 8.1–3.

<sup>735</sup> Ovid, *Metam.* 15.385.

<sup>736</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 10.20.

<sup>737</sup> Peacocks are common in the catacombs and on Roman funerary sculpture, but see also a fourth-century hypogeum in Nicaea. See Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), 40. On the symbol in general see Helmut, *Der Pfau in der altchristlichen Kunst: eine Studie über das Verhältnis von Ornament und Symbol* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1929).

<sup>738</sup> Augustine, *Civ.* 21.4, 7; Isidore of Seville, *Etym.* 12.7.48; Isidore quotes Martial, *Ep.* 13.70.

five hundred years this fabled bird is consumed by fire in its flaming nest. It then rises again, three days later, from its own ashes. The earliest known record of the Phoenix myth comes from Hesiod, but it occurs as well in the writings of Herodotus, Ovid, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus.<sup>739</sup> Christians then adapted the phoenix as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection as subsequently well as a sign of the future resurrection promised to all the baptized faithful.

The earliest surviving example of this tradition comes from the epistle of *1 Clement*, which is briefly mentioned in the writings of Tertullian, and Eusebius, and Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>740</sup> Augustine, in *On the Nature and Origin of the Soul*, argues that the phoenix symbolizes the resurrection of the (gendered) body.<sup>741</sup>

Perhaps the most well known example of Christian appropriation of the phoenix as a symbol of resurrection comes from a fourth-century elegiac poem attributed to Lactantius. At the poem's conclusion the author describes the phoenix as desiring nothing more than to die in order to be reborn. By the blessing of death, she gains eternal life.<sup>742</sup> Although not overtly Christian, the language of the composition parallels the description of baptism as a necessary death that brings rebirth and, ultimately, resurrection.

This connection is provided, however, by Cyril of Jerusalem who writes about the phoenix in one of his catechetical lectures. Here he reminds his audience that if resurrection from the dead had been granted to this irrational creature—one who did not even know Christ—then how much more will God do for those who confess their faith and are joined (in baptism) to the company of the faithful.<sup>743</sup>

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<sup>739</sup> Hesiod, *Frag.* 163.3–4; Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.73; Ovid, *Am.* 2.6.54 and *Metam.* 15.392–407; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 10.2.3–5; and Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.8.

<sup>740</sup> *1 Clem.* 25; Tertullian, *Res.* 13.3; Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 4.72; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 31.10. See also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carm. th.* 1.2.2; Ps. Ambrose, *Trin.* 34; and Maximus the Confessor, *Ep.* 13. See R. van den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix according to Classical and Early Christian Tradition*, trans. I. Seeger (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

<sup>741</sup> Augustine, *Nat. orig.* 4.20.33, where he argues that the phoenix had a corporeal body and was gendered, against Vicentius Victor who claimed that the soul—like the phoenix—had no gender. See Susan Holman, "On Phoenix and Eunuchs: Sources for Melitius the Monk's Anatomy of Gender," *J ECS* 16 (2008), 79–101.

<sup>742</sup> Lactantius (attributed), *Ave Phoen.*

<sup>743</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 18.8–9.

6.3.11. *Apostolic Procession, Saints, and Crowns*

In both Ravenna baptisteries, processions of apostles circle the central baptism image at the apex of the dome. Their hands are covered and they carry their crowns of victory (figs. 3.10–11). The Naples baptistery has no procession, but flanking the windows and in the same zone as the symbols of the evangelists, eight apostles stand, holding their crowns. The hand of God holds out a similar crown above the cristogram in the dome medallion directly over the font (fig. 5.7).

The iconography of a procession of martyrs or apostles with their crowns may have been based on an imperial ceremony, the *aurum coronarium*, in which dignitaries (senators, defeated enemies, or representatives of provincial cities) presented crowns to the emperor as a sign of submission or homage, especially after a great victory but also on other important occasions, including imperial accessions and anniversaries. A good depiction of such a procession appears on the column base of Arcadius in Rome.<sup>744</sup> The addition of palms, especially as in the Arian Baptistery in Ravenna, reinforces the idea of victory and triumph.

The direct relevance of this imperial or triumphant iconography to the liturgy of baptism is obscured by the fact that crowns appear in various contexts in Roman art, including scenes of marriage, and as trophies given to winning athletes. In images of the adoration, the magi (especially the first) sometimes offer crowns to the Christ child. However, in general, crowns (or wreaths) are held or offered to saints, as a sign of their victory over death and the devil. In like manner, the newly baptized are victorious over sins, heirs to the kingdom, and may anticipate a future resurrection from the dead. They belong, as Paulinus of Nola says, to an “eternal imperium.”<sup>745</sup> John Chrysostom used comparable imagery when referring to the neophytes’ garments as “royal robes” and the eucharistic table as the “royal feast.”<sup>746</sup> As Prudentius insists, they are partners with the martyrs—both are cleansed, in blood or in water, and both are crowned, receive the palm, and ascend to the heavens.<sup>747</sup>

<sup>744</sup> See Deichmann, *Ravenna I*, 38–9.

<sup>745</sup> Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32.5.

<sup>746</sup> John Chrysostom, *Bapt. Inst.* 1.25, 27.

<sup>747</sup> See Prudentius’ text above, pp. 241–2.

6.3.12. *New Testament Scenes*

Both the Dura Baptistery and the Baptistery of S. Giovanni in Fonte in Naples contain scenes based upon narratives found in the Gospels. Although many images have been lost from both baptisteries, the scenes that remain have a significant overlap: Jesus speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus stilling the storm and walking on the water, the miraculous catch of fish, and the three women coming to the empty tomb (unless the Dura image is of three wise virgins).<sup>748</sup> One of the lower arches in Ravenna's Orthodox baptistery includes an inscription that refers to Jesus stilling the storm and walking on the water, which might, originally, have been set over a depiction of that story. The Dura baptistery also included an image of Jesus healing the paralytic which at least one scholar has argued was included also in the Naples baptistery mosaic.<sup>749</sup> Naples itself has a unique image of the wedding at Cana (fig. 6.9).

All of these stories were traditionally understood to have baptismal significance, and some of them were routinely pointed to as figures of the ritual. For example, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa and Optatus of Milevis explicitly cite the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4.13–15) as a baptismal typology.<sup>750</sup> Jesus asks her for ordinary water, but he offers something better: the water of eternal life. Jesus calming the storm and walking (with Peter) on the water (Matt 8.23; 14.22–23 and parallels) is more rarely cited in the surviving documents, but it does merit a mention in Tertullian's treatise on baptism. For Tertullian, the boat on which Jesus slept during the tempest is a symbol of the church—like Noah's ark—and the storm a symbol

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<sup>748</sup> The identification of this scene is a subject of some controversy. Some reports have included the name "Salome" above the head of one of the women, strengthening the case for the women coming to Christ's tomb (cf. Mark 16.1). For an argument that the five wise brides ought rather to be seen here see Joseph Pijoan's argument, "The Parable of the Virgins from Dura Europos," *AB* 19 (1937), 594–7. For other views see Andre Grabar, "La fresque des Saintes Femmes au tombeau à Dura," in *L'art de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age*, vol. 1 (Paris: College de France, 1968), 517–28; David Cartlidge and Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (London: Routledge, 2001), 36 (who identify this as the virgins escorting Mary to the Temple in Jerusalem); and A. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post-Classical City*, 53–4, who cautions against identifying the scene with any particular biblical text.

<sup>749</sup> See discussion above, Chap. 5, pp. 193–4.

<sup>750</sup> Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.17.2; Tertullian, *Bapt.* 9.4; Jerome, *Ep.* 69.6; Gregory of Nyssa, *Diem. lum.*, NPNF ser 2, vol. 5, 523; Optatus of Milevis, *Donat.* 5.4–5.



Fig. 6.9 Woman at the well, wedding at Cana, from Naples, Baptistery of Sta. Restituta (San Giovanni in Fonte), fourth century. Photo: Author.

of the persecutions suffered by the saints.<sup>751</sup> The three women coming to the tomb could either reinforce the Easter aspects of baptism (the newly born is resurrected from an old life and born to a new one) or the neophytes as brides coming to the tent of their bridegroom,

<sup>751</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 12. Tertullian commented that some saw the baptism of the apostles in this story—that they were asperged by the waves during the tempest. See also *Gel. Sac.* 33.296, which included the story of Jesus walking on the water in the exorcism of the elect.

a parable that found a place in the catecheses of the fourth-century bishops.<sup>752</sup> The miraculous catch of fish (John 21.4–6) has already been discussed (above) as an instance of taking that story, along with the calling of the disciples to be fishers of people, to signify the converts as fish being caught (i.e. rescued) by Christ the fisherman in the net of the church. This particular story contains another baptismal allusion as well: Peter jumping overboard, naked, into the sea once he realized that it was Jesus on the beach who called to him (John 21.7).

Tertullian regards the Cana miracle as a figure of baptism because it was then that Jesus publically manifested his power by the element of water.<sup>753</sup> The Cana wedding miracle (John 2.1–11) might point to the bridal symbolism of baptism, but it also alludes to the transformation of ordinary water into a spiritual substance, thus prefiguring the eucharist that the newly baptized receive for the first time.<sup>754</sup>

The healing of the paralytic was even more commonly cited as a figure of baptism in the homilies and catecheses of the early church. Tertullian cites John's version of the story (John 5.2–9) in his treatise on baptism in order to compare the healing offered by baptism with ordinary healing of the body. Such bodily healing, he says, signifies his spiritual healing and the restoration of the image of God lost through sin. This, he explains, follows the general principle that carnal matters precede and point to higher spiritual truths. As God's grace makes headway, the angel and the water that once healed only bodies, now also heal spirits. That which used to give earthly health now offers spiritual remedy.<sup>755</sup>

Ambrose similarly refers to story of the paralytic, but in his view the angel that normally stirred the water prefigures Jesus because in that instance Jesus himself appeared and chose this single individual to heal.<sup>756</sup> Furthermore, Ambrose points out, although the water of this pool, like the water of the baptismal font, was miraculously consecrated for a restorative purpose, the paralytic needed the arrival of Jesus to

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<sup>752</sup> For example, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procat.* 1 and John Chrysostom, *Catech. illum.* 1.1–3.

<sup>753</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 9.4.

<sup>754</sup> On the wedding of Cana as a baptismal type see also the Lateran Baptistry inscription, above pp. 187–8, in which the Holy Spirit is said to “marry” (*maritat*) the water. A longer discussion of this theme can be found in Daniélou, *Bible and Liturgy*, 191–207.

<sup>755</sup> Tertullian, *Bapt.* 5.

<sup>756</sup> Ambrose, *Sacr.* 2.3–7.

make the water effective. Likewise, the font needs the descent of the Holy Spirit to make its cleansing power more than merely external.<sup>757</sup>

All these New Testament stories were interpreted as foreshadowing baptism. Interestingly, the selection draws largely from stories unique to the Gospel of John (the wedding at Cana, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the healing of the paralytic at the pool), which also contains the story of Nicodemus asking whether he needed to be reborn from his mother's womb. John's Gospel furthermore tends to dominate the subjects chosen for early Christian art, including Jesus healing the man born blind (John 9) and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11) as well.

### *Conclusion*

The design and decoration of early Christian baptisteries contributed to the meaning of the ritual and reinforced a whole complex of theological understandings of what the rite accomplished for the one who underwent it. The architecture and iconography of baptism thus conveyed messages similar to those delivered in the surviving sermons, poetry, or theological treatises. Bible stories that recounted miraculous healings or wonders performed with or near water provided a set of typologies that homilists and catechists could use to connect sacred text with ritual practices. These connections were reinforced in the iconography of the spaces that housed the rite. Pre-Christian sensibilities about the relationship of bathing to initiation and cleansing was underscored by the use of bath-like architecture and elements (e.g., stripping, anointing, and plunging into water). The community's assertion that the font was simultaneously a tomb for their burial and a womb for their rebirth was concretized in the shape of the baptismal pool. Their self-identity as members of a sacred flock protected by a caretaking shepherd was reflected in the iconography of a Good Shepherd with his sheep. The octagonal design of buildings or fonts symbolized their renewal and resurrection as well as the restoration of the original Paradise. Those who descended into the font were crowned martyrs, newborn children, and spiritually enlightened prophets. The simple, ordinary act of bathing was transformed into a triumphant

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<sup>757</sup> Ambrose, *Myst.* 4.24; see also Cyril of Jerusalem, *Hom. para.* 7.

battle of overcoming evil, of dying and being reborn, and of entering a company of saints.

Hence, baptism was enacted within and around visual symbols. The ritual's meaning and purposes were reinforced by the iconographic vocabulary of the early Christian church. Although none of these baptismal images was uniquely reserved for a baptismal setting, their symbolic value was developed in relation to that ritual context and fit into an overall decorative program. For example, the Good Shepherd almost always referred to a caretaking savior who would protect his flock. In a baptismal context, it most likely also referred to a specific aspect of the liturgy the singing of Psalm 23 by the neophytes as they went from the font to the eucharistic table. And while the presentation of crowns may be an imperial motif, transferred from the acclamation of an emperor to the recognition of a saint, the victory in a baptistery also belonged to the one who had overcome sin and death through a ritual of dying and being reborn.

In the end, if the symbolism of baptism and the decoration of a baptistery were to be summed and seen as a totality, rather than as many smaller symbolic units, its emphasis is on this very transformation: from death to life and from Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise to their triumphant reentry. This is expressed in the symbolism of the *ogdoad*, the iconography of the women at the empty tomb, the starry sky, the processions of saints, and the lush images of birds, flowers, fruit, trees, and bubbling springs that one would expect to find in Eden. These visual images paralleled with the administration of baptism at daybreak in living water that was poured over naked bodies. Fresh from their cleansing bath and robed in white garments like brides or swaddled babes, the new members of the flock carried their lit candles into the church to receive their first food: the promised cup of milk and honey.



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