2022-05-03

The Greco-Roman Influence on Early Christian Art

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CLAS 399: Honors Bachelor of Arts Capstone Thesis

May 3, 2022

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Introduction

It cannot be denied that early Christian communities used familiar Greco-Roman symbols, images, icons, and ideas in their own ways. For this reason, it will be necessary to examine why these communities in Rome took parts of Greco-Roman society that were familiar to them and used them in a different way, in addition to exploring the varying degrees of effect that these images had on the Christian communities themselves and on the society around them. By "early Christian communities," I mean Christians living in Rome at the beginning of the third century until the late fifth century.[1] For these communities, nautical imagery like the anchor and the fish are still nautical motifs, yet they are now interpreted through a new, Christian lens. Images that already signified peace in certain contexts, such as the dove and the olive branch, maintained that same meaning in Christian interpretation. However, it is more difficult to determine if images such as the Good Shepherd and the Virgin Mary were intended to be reinterpretations of earlier pagan images or replacements of them. These early Christian communities also produced images that had never before been seen in the Greco-Roman world, such as the crucifix and the crown of thorns, which indicate Christianity's rise to power and its eventual usurpation of that power in the west, the power of which had already been declining as Christianity was becoming more dominant.[2] By making use of both familiar and non-familiar Greco-Roman symbols, images, and icons, early Christian communities were able to situate their new religion among the already existing Greco-Roman culture, which allowed Christianity to

[1] The earliest surviving Christian art can be found in catacombs at Rome, and while dating is uncertain, the general consensus is that the oldest images in the catacombs date to the third century. See Williamson (2004), especially page 4.

[2] For a fairly outdated and oversimplistic perspective, see Lot (1931) and Rostovtzeff (1926) who argue that the inhabitants of fourth-century Rome were impoverished and living amongst the ruins of Rome's former greatness. They argue that "golden age" Rome was socially, economically, and culturally dead by the end of the third century. For a newer and a more widely accepted perspective, see Brown (2012).

establish a cultural cohesiveness and identity. All of the images, icons, and symbols which will be discussed in this thesis are popular amongst and easily recognizable by Christians today. It is not the goal of this thesis, however, to explain why these images, icons, and symbols have stood the test of time.[3]

In chapter one, I will examine various symbols of early Christian art, which were already fixtures of Greco-Roman society. These symbols include the anchor, the fish, the dove, and the olive branch. When examining these symbols, I will discuss the symbols themselves, any scriptural references to these symbols, and pertinent scholarship in order show how early Christian communities in Rome used these images to situate themselves in the Greco-Roman world.

In chapter two, I will examine two symbols—the crucifix and the crown of thorns—which are uniquely Christian. While crucifixion was a common practice in Rome, crucifixions were not depicted in art, the reasons for which will be discussed in chapter two. One could expect, though, to find a variety of crowns depicted in Greek and Roman art; however, one would never find a crown of thorns in Greek or Roman art. In order to show that the creation of these uniquely Christian images indicates the establishment of a unique, Christian cultural identity, I will, again, examine the symbols themselves, scriptural references, and pertinent scholarship.

Finally, I will include my concluding insights, followed by two appendices, which will examine certain symbols that are ambiguous in their meaning and for which further research is needed. These symbols include the Good Shepherd and the Virgin Mary.

[3] For comprehensive examinations of Christian art, see Williamson (2004), Loverance (2007), Morey (1958), Murray (2004), and Apostolos-Cappadona (2020).

Chapter 1: The "Christianization" Non-Christian Images

In a society where the majority of the population was illiterate, images, icons, signs, and visual symbols were effective modes of communication.[4] Elsner writes, "With the vast majority of the empire's inhabitants illiterate and often unable to speak the dominant languages of the elite…the most direct way of communicating was though images."[5] Because of this, every image and symbol communicated a specific message, had an intended meaning, and was therefore rhetorical. Many symbols that were common and were frequently found in the Greco-Roman world carried over into Christian art, which is not surprising since these groups of early Christians did not exist in a vacuum but in an already flourishing culture. The earliest symbols that Christians used in their art reflect the culture in which they were living, so many of these images were nautical or natural. The introduction of these images, therefore, in the earliest Christian art represents the beginning of the establishment of what will eventually become the Christian identity. To show that this is the case, I will examine images of the anchor, the fish, the dove, and the olive branch.

1.1: The Anchor

Anchors are heavy objects attached to a rope or chain which are used to moor a boat or vessel to the bottom of a body of water. In antiquity, anchors were generally large, perforated stones but became more complex as the need for specially designed anchors became greater.[6]

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[4] See Harris (1989) for his discussion of Greek and Roman literacy, as well as the function of literacy and illiteracy in the Greco-Roman world

[5] Jas Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.

[6] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology* (3rd ed.), s.v. "anchor."

While there is no direct evidence that those living in the Greco-Roman world saw the anchor as a sign of hope and safety, many scholars agree that it is appropriate to make this assumption.[7] Because anchors kept seafarers safe, especially during storms, it is not a stretch to say that anchors carried a metaphorical meaning of hope and safety in the Greco-Roman world; to those who travelled the seas, the anchor represented hope for a safe harbor because anchors make one stationary.

Anchor, Catacomb of Priscilla, via Salaria, Rome, 2nd or 3rd c. CE

In early Christian art, the anchor is one of the commonest symbols of hope and occurs most often on graves and on seals.[8] Often, anchors are accompanied by the words *spes* or ἐλπίς.[9] St. Clement of Alexandria, in giving instructions to Christians writes, "Let the seals [of their rings] be of a dove or a fish or a ship in full sail or of a musical lyre, such as Polycrates used, or of a ship's anchor."[10] In scripture, a popular passage which makes explicit reference to the anchor is Hebrews 6:17-20:

> [17]In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, [18]so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. [19]We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, [20]where Jesus, a

[7] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 28.
[8] *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture* (2nd ed.), s.v. "anchor."
[9] Richard H. Hiers and Charles A. Kennedy, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist: In the Gospels and Early Christian Art," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 3, no. 1 (1976): 23.
[10] *Paedogogus*, III.11.59, trans. Wood (1954).

> forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.[11]

Here, the anchor symbolizes hope for the promises which God has made.[12] The anchor is one of the first images that we see Christians using.[13] The anchor, however, begins to disappear around the beginning of the fourth century. Jones, Murray, and Murray argue that the crossbar of the anchor represented a cross in disguise, but after the Edict of Milan was issued in AD 313, Christians no longer needed "private" symbols; therefore, the anchor fell out of use as the cross became more preferred.[14] Up until AD 313, if Christians wanted to symbolize Jesus or the cross, they would use the Chi-Rho symbol or the anchor, which both contain a cross, but one that is inconspicuous.[15] According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture*, the Chi-Rho symbolizes Jesus with Chi and Rho being the first two letters of Christ in Greek. The Chi-Rho symbol, then, is considered a "hidden symbol" of Jesus and possibly of the cross. This symbol was especially popular during the period of iconoclasm when the Chi-Rho symbol was one of the only symbols allowed to represent Jesus.[16]

Kennedy makes an interesting argument that the anchors found in Roman catacombs are actually "word-symbols," or symbols that stand in the place of a phrase on epitaphs.[17] Kennedy's argument is worth considering because he believes that the anchor is not just a visual symbol but a symbol that represents a common phrase. Oftentimes, the anchor is found at the end of an

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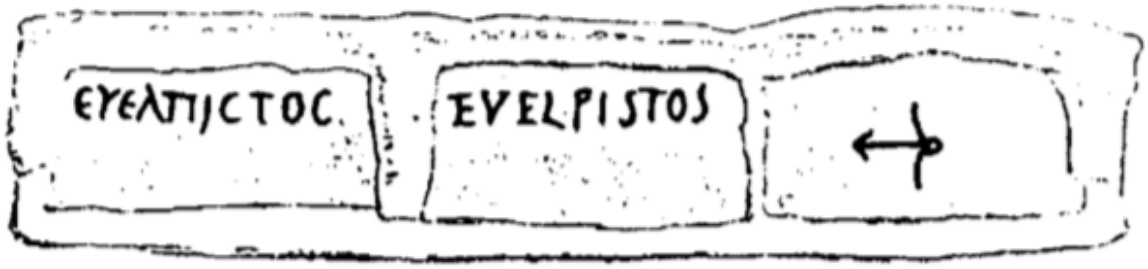
[11] According to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, the Letter to the Hebrews dates to somewhere between 60 and 100 CE. There is no sufficient evidence to identify an author, though it has often been incorrectly attributed to Paul.
[12] *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture* (2nd ed.), s.v. "anchor." See also, Kennedy (1975).
[13] Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 27.
[14] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Tom Devonshire Jones, Linda Murray, and Peter Murray (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2013).
[15] *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture* (2nd ed.), s.v. "cross."
[16] For more information on iconoclasm, see Jensen (2017).
[17] Charles A. Kennedy, "Early Christians and the Anchor," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 38, no. 3-4 (1975): 122.

epitaph (in the Catacombs of Priscilla, it is found about seventy times[18]). Kennedy claims that the Greek word for anchor, ἄγκυρα, is a play on words of the Greek phrase, ἐν κυρίω, meaning "in the Lord." The phrase ἐν κυρίω on epitaphs derives from Rev 14:13, which reads, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord [ἐν κυρίω].' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them." Kennedy argues that in the letters of Paul and in Revelation, the phrase "in the Lord" is always written without the article before κυρίω when referring to Jesus, even though it is written with the article when referring to the day of the lord, for example, and Kennedy believes that this is enough proof to confirm his ἐν κυρίω-ἄγκυρα hypothesis.[19] Therefore, when we see an anchor at the end of someone's epitaph—in Greek—we know that they died "in Christ."



Anchor sign from the catacombs in Rome[20]

Unlike the scholars above who argue that the anchor dies out in Rome in the fourth century when the Edict of Milan allowed Christians to do away with their "private" symbols, Kennedy argues that the disappearance of the anchor was caused by Latin's replacement of Greek on catacomb epitaphs and only "coincided" with the emergence of the cross.[21] The Latin equivalent of ἐν κυρίω is *in domino*, which makes the ἐν κυρίω-ἄγκυρα pun meaningless.

[18] Kennedy, "Early Christians and the Anchor," 117.
[19] Kennedy, "Early Christians and the Anchor," 123.
[20] This image is found under "Ancre" in *Dictionnaire d'Archeologie Chretienne et de Liturgie*.
[21] Kennedy, "Early Christians and the Anchor," 123.

Kennedy's arguments are worth considering because not many scholars have commented on the anchor in early Christian art and because Kennedy's interpretation is rather unique, which indicates that the interpretation of not only the anchor but of all other early Christian symbols is not set in stone. For this reason, the anchor is an important symbol of early Christian art to consider because its meaning can be interpreted in different ways and because it is so prevalent in churches today. Early Christians were by no means the first people to use the anchor as a visual symbol denoting safety and hope, which were already commonplace associations for a nautical image. They did, however, apply these associations to their own way of thinking in order to situate their new religion among the already existing Greco-Roman culture. To them, the anchor still represented safety and hope, particularly safety in God and hope of an afterlife ἐν κυρίω. The anchor, therefore, is a perfect example of early Christians using an already familiar symbol for their own purposes.

1.2: The Fish

Floor mosaic, Rome, 350-375CE

In Greco-Roman art, especially on floor mosaics, fish are very popular. Fish are common on floor mosaics in particular because the mosaic medium allowed artists to depict the scales of fish in a realistic way. That is, by creating a fish mosaic, the shininess of the fish could be emphasized. In addition, mosaicists often tried to include the biggest variety of fish in the space

allotted to them.[22] Marine resources were very important for the economies of people who relied on the sea for food, transportation, and trade, which is why nautical motifs feature prominently in Greco-Roman art.[23] *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* notes that fish were an integral source of food all over the ancient world and that fish were also very expensive—almost twice the price of pork. Fish would have also represented commerce as fishing was a very important and necessary occupation. Though some types of fish could be very expensive and therefore only eaten by the elites, other types of fish, such as tuna, mackerel, anchovies, and sardines were enjoyed by the masses.[24]

A marble *titulus* with two fish and an anchor, Rome

The fish is one of the commonest symbols in Christianity. Fish are found all over early Christian art and are used as both decorations in the catacombs as well as included alongside of other nautical imagery like anchors and boats. Both early and modern Christians use the fish symbol to represent Jesus or the Eucharist, especially when considered with the "Feeding of the

[22] Alexandra Kankeleit, "Fisch und Fischer: Mosaikbilder in Greichenland," *Antike Welt* 34, no. 3 (2003): 273.
[23] Joao Pedro Bernardes, "Figurative Elements in Mosaics and Roman Painting at Algrave (Portugal)," *Journal of Mosaic Research* 10 (2017): 73.
[24] Kankeleit, "Fisch und Fischer," 273.

Five Thousand" story found in Mt 14:13-21, Mk 6:30-44, Lk 9:10-17, and Jn 6:1-15.[25] Others, however, may think of the Greek word for fish, ἰχθύς, and the acrostic that reads, **Ἰ**ησοῦς **Χ**ριστός **Θ**εοῦ **Υ**ἱός **Σ**ωτήρ, or "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." Hiers and Kennedy note that the acrostic began to come into use in the third century but that the fish symbol actually preceded it.[26] Though it is impossible to determine the origin of the ἰχθύς acrostic, Tertullian, who lived from AD 155 until AD 220, must have been familiar with it. In his *de Baptismo*, he writes:

> Sed nos pisciculi secundum ἰχθύν nostrum Iesum Christum in aqua nascimur, nec aliter quam in aqua permanendo salvi sumus.
>
> But we little fish, according to our ἰχθύν Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor are we saved in any other way than by staying in water.[27]

In this passage, written in Latin, Tertullian switches to Greek when referring to Jesus, the ἰχθύς. If Tertullian was not familiar with the acrostic, there would be no reason for him to use ἰχθύν instead of *piscem*. Though Tertullian's familiarity with this play on words seems clear, the origin of this acrostic is unfortunately obscure.[28]

All four gospels, for example, recount the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with only a few loaves of bread and a few fish. We also find paintings in Christian catacombs in Rome from around AD 200 that depict seven or eleven men eating bread and fish.[29] For these reasons, some early 20th century scholars believe that scenes like these represent the eucharist.[30] The painting below is found in the Callistus Catacomb in Rome, specifically in the Chapel of the Sacraments. The image includes seven men, possibly apostles, as well as two platters holding

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[25] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3rd ed.), s.v. "fish." See also, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (2nd ed.), s.v. "fish."
[26] Hiers and Kennedy, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist, 21-22.
[27] Translation is my own.
[28] Synder, *Ante Pacem*, 32.
[29] Hiers and Kennedy, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist, 22.
[30] See Morey (1910), Elliger (1934), and Finnegan (1946).

fish. Hiers and Kennedy argue that, like the anchor, which is the earliest Christian symbol, the fish represents a sense of hope for the deceased, or even just hope for the resurrection.[31]

The Callistus Catacomb, Rome

Because fish were already so common in the ancient world, early Christians living in Rome, who were also familiar with the gospel stories of Jesus feeding the five thousand, chose to depict fish as well. Snyder notes that the fish is very symbolic of the communal meal as "there is no early representation of the Christian meal without fish" in Rome.[32] This meal was most likely a common meal of fish, bread, and wine that grew to become religiously significant. Eventually, though, the fish comes to directly symbolize Jesus. The earliest direct association of the fish with Jesus comes from St. Paulinus of Nola who writes in AD 396:

> I see the gathering being divided amongst separate tables, and all the people being filled with abundance of food, so that before their eyes there appears the plenty bestowed by the Gospel's blessing and the picture of those crowds whom Christ, the true Bread and the Fish of living water, filled with five loaves and two fishes.[33]

Here, Paulinus refers to Jesus as "the true Bread and the Fish of living water." Before this, the fish represented hope or the eucharist. In this case, Paulinus is taking the comparison one step further by associating the fish with Jesus, whose body is the eucharist.

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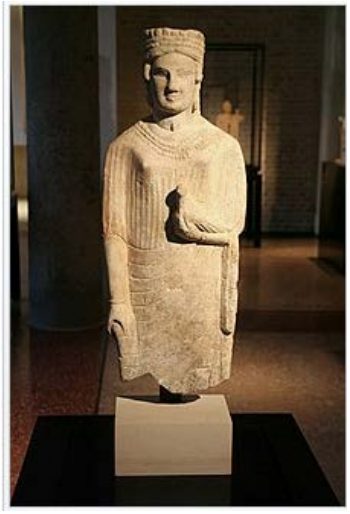
[31] Hiers and Kennedy, "The Bread and Fish Eucharist, 23.
[32] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 31.
[33] *Epis*. 13.11. Translated by P.G Walsh.

Fractio Panis, the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome (AD 100-150)

Snyder admits that the history of the fish symbol is more complex than any other symbol in Christianity and that its interpretation is extremely contentious.[34] However, amid this complexity, early Christians in Rome clearly used it in a new and unique way. For early Christians in Rome, a fish was not only a form of physical sustenance or a commodity to be bought or sold. It represented *spes* and ἐλπίς, and more importantly, it represented the eucharist, Jesus himself, who could sustain the soul. Though non-Christians in antiquity used fish images, adopting this image allowed early Christians to situate their new religion among the already existing Greco-Roman culture. This symbol had multiple layers of meaning for Christians, which helped them establish a cultural cohesiveness and identity.

1.3: The Dove and the Olive Branch



[34] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 31.

Aphrodite holding a dove, Cyprus,
5th c. BC

Aphrodite with dove, volute-krater,
Southern Italy, 365-355 BC

Aphrodite is the Greek goddess of beauty and love, and her Roman counterpart is Venus. One of her main attributes is the dove.[35] Before Aphrodite, her near Eastern ancestor, Inanna-Ishtar, also had the dove as one of her main attributes.[36] Moreover, the Greek word for dove, περιστερά, could be derived from the Semitic phrase *perah Istar*, which translates to "bird of Ishtar," though this etymology is uncertain.[37] During the Aphrodisia, which was Aphrodite's main festival, the temple of Aphrodite Pandemos would be purified with the blood of a dove.[38] Before early Christians started to use the dove in their own iconography, the dove was used in the Greco-Roman world—mainly through its association with Aphrodite—to represent femininity, sexuality, and both human and divine love.[39]

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[35] Manfred Lurker, *The Routledge Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons* (London: Routledge, 2004): 15.
[36] Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and Sian Lewis, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries* (New York: Routledge, 2017): 335.
[37] Llewellyn-Jones and Lewis, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity*, 335.
[38] Ericka Simon, *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Companion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983): 48.
[39] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 39.

A *titulus* with a dove, olive branch, and Orante, Rome

Christians today might think of peace or of the Holy Spirit when they see an image of a dove. According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, in the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the synoptic gospels, the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit[40], the meaning of which, Gero argues, was first created by Mark.[41] But even before the Christians began using the dove in their iconography, the dove was associated with peace. The dove, for example, is the messenger of peace in the story of Noah (Gen 8:10-11): "**10**He waited yet seven days more and again released the dove from the ark. **11**In the evening the dove came back to him, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! So Noah knew that the waters had diminished on the earth." Here, the dove bringing back an olive branch indicates that the floodwaters have finally receded and that God has reestablished peace on earth. Peppard also notes scholars agree that the spirit which descends upon Jesus at his baptism is an allusion to the spirit which was hovering over the waters at creation (Gen 1.2).[42] According to Suetonius (*Aug.* 94), Caesar's adoption of Octavian is signaled by a flock of doves:

[40] "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (Mt 3:16). "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove" (Mk 1:10). "And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." (Lk 3:22). "And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him'" (Jn 1:32).
[41] Stephen Gero, "The Spirit as a Dove at the Baptism of Jesus," *Novum Testamentum* 18, no. 1 (1976): 17.
[42] Michael Peppard, "The Eagle and the Dove: Roman Imperial Sonship and the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1.9-11)," *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 442.

> As the Deified Julius was cutting down a wood at Munda and preparing a place for his camp, coming across a palm tree, he caused it to be spared as an omen of victory. From this a shoot at once sprang forth and in a few days grew so great that it not only equalled the parent tree, but even overshadowed it; moreover many doves built their nests there, although that kind of bird especially avoids hard and rough foliage. Indeed, it was that omen in particular, they say, that led Caesar to wish that none other than his sister's grandson should be his successor.

In ancient literature, doves are often paired with eagles. This pairing, though, is antagonistic. For example, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we find, "So lambs flee the wolf, so deer flee the lion, so doves with trembling wings flee the eagle, all things flee their enemies."[43] In Horace's *Odes*, we also find, "Courageous eagles do not beget unwarlike doves."[44] Overall, the meaning of images of doves in pre-Christian contexts varies.

Inscription of Bicentia, Catacomb of San Sebastiano

From Gen 8:10-11, the olive branch is representative of peace as well since the dove was carrying it in its mouth when it appeared to Noah. Most of the time, olive branches are depicted with doves, and they symbolize two types of peace: peace of the dead and peace during conflict.[45] Before the Edict of Milan was issued, the dove and olive branch represented peace after death since images of doves in Roman catacombs were often accompanied by *in pace*.[46]

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[43] *Meta*. 1.504-507.
[44] *Odes* 4.4.29-32.
[45] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 39.
[46] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 40.

Snyder believes that the *in pace* acclamation originated from meals for the celebration of the dead.[47] Doves and olive branches also symbolized peace in the face of conflict as seen in the stories of Noah and the Ark and Jonah and the Whale. Both of these stories are pre-Christian and depict the God of Israel keeping his people safe: Noah inside of the ark, and Jonah inside of the whale. To the early Christians, then, who used images of the dove and the olive branch in their own art, representing peace must have been their main intention.[48]

[47] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 40.

[48] For an interesting discussion of whether or not the pictures we see in Classical art—and therefore early Christian art—are illustrations of texts, see Small (2003). Small argues, "No evidence, including statements in classical texts, indicates that the pictures we have are illustrations of texts. Even for the Hellenistic period and later, the evidence remains sparce" (1). In the ancient world, reliable texts were not easily obtainable, so an artist painting a vase, for example, would have had to rely on memory, which resulted in "the fidelity of the text…being less than good" (4). Depicting scenes from tragedy also adds to this confusion: Is this a depiction from the text or from a performance?

Chapter Two: Symbols Unique to Christianity

Unlike the images examined in chapter one, the symbols that I will examine in this chapter are both examples of early Christian communities in Rome creating their own images—unique to them—by using already-familiar ideas in order to establish their cultural cohesiveness and identity. The crucifix and the crown of thorns, in particular, stand out as two of the primary symbols which were uniquely Christian but which incorporated pagan images. The gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are long and detailed; in fact, they are the longest accounts of any crucifixion in the ancient world.[49] In fact, crucifixion was not something that ancient writers tended to devote much time to; the reason for which will be discussed later in this chapter.[50] The crown of thorns is also an interesting image because early Christians used what the centurions at the crucifixion considered a joke to represent their God.[51] These images are important to consider because they are two of the most common symbols associated with Christianity today. Moreover, these images indicate an important leap in Christianity's establishing their cultural cohesiveness and identity.

2.1: Crucifixion in the Ancient World

> Executed publicly, situated at a major crossroads or on a well-trafficked artery, devoid of clothing, left to be eaten by birds and beasts, victims of crucifixion were subject to optimal, unmitigated, vicious ridicule.[52]

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[49] John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 216.
[50] See Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1977), 25, 28, 38. See also Habermas and Shaw's "Crucifixion in the Ancient World: A Historical Analysis," 8.
[51] John N. Suggit, "Jesus's True Crown: *Lucubrationes Senectutis*," *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 3 (2016): 113-114.
[52] Joel Green, "Crucifixion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 91.

Much extensive scholarship has been done on the topic of crucifixion in the ancient world, and this section will by no means be exhaustive. The purpose of this section is to explain the social implications of crucifixion in the ancient world in order to understand why the use of the crucifix in early Christian contexts was unique.[53] Rutledge writes that "it is formidably difficult to understand the cross today in its original context, after two thousand years in which it has been domesticated, romanticized, idealized, and misappropriated."[54] From the ancient sources, it seems that crucifixion began with the Persians, according to Herodotus, Thucydides, and Ctesias. Herodotus recounts how Astyages had the Magi impaled, how Oroetes crucified Polycrates in a way "unworthy of him," how Egyptian physicians were almost impaled for being less skilled than the Greeks, how Darius impaled three thousand men after taking Babylon, how Xerxes impaled the Carthaginian Sataspes for raping the daughter of Zopyrus, how Artaphrenes and Harpagus impaled Histiaeus, and how Darius crucified Sandoces but eventually set him free.[55] Thucydides recounts how Inaros, the king of Libya was betrayed and impaled.[56] Ctesias recounts the same story of Inaros, he recounts how Zopyrus' grandmother, Amestris, crucified the Caunian who killed her grandson by throwing a rock at his head, and he recounts how Parysatis had Bagapatos flayed and crucified for removing the head and hands from Cyrus's body.[57] Other sources describe crucifixion as a punishment carried out by other barbarian peoples.[58] All of these writers have no problem with recounting the use of crucifixion by the

[53] For further analysis and references, see Habermas and Shaw (2021), Samuelsson (2013), and Cook (2015).
[54] Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 57.
[55] Herodotus 1.128.2; 3.125.4; 3.132.2; 3.159.1; 4.43.2; 6.30.1; 7.194.1f.
[56] Thucydides 1.110.1.
[57] Ctesias F14.39; F14.45; F16.66.
[58] See Hengel's (1977) discussion of the Indians (Diodorus Sicululus, *Bibliotheke* 2.18.1); the Assyrians (Diodorus Sicululus, *Bibliotheke* 2.1.10; Lucian, *Iuppiter Confutatus* 16), whose king Ninus crucifies Pharnus, the king of the Medians; the Scythians (Diodorus Sicululus, *Bibliotheke* 2.44.2), who crucify Cyrus; and the Taurians (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 1429f.), whose king, Thaos, wants to have the strangers fastened to a stake. He also notes that

barbarians, but they do have a problem with recounting the use of crucifixion by their own cultures.

2.2: The Purpose of Crucifixion

Even though the Romans practiced crucifixion, it was considered a barbarian method of punishment. Despite this, they continued to practice this form of punishment. Aubert argues that crucifixion's "primary purpose is to emphasize the victim's final and irrevocable rejection from the civic and international community."[59] Rutledge argues that crucifixion, over all other forms of torture and death, was the "ultimate insult to personal dignity."[60] Hengel argues that crucifixion proffered the utmost humiliation, which is heightened by the fact that victims of crucifixion were often not buried and left to be food for birds of prey and dogs.[61] Dewey writes, "The intent [of crucifixion] was to wipe a person out, physically and socially. The victim was not simply executed, but rendered a 'nobody.'"[62] Crucifixion was especially offensive for people familiar with Deuteronomy 21:23, which states, "When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all

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crucifixion was practiced by the Celts (Diodorus Sicululus, *Bibliotheke* 5.32.6), who crucify those who break the law; the Germanii (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.61.4, 4.72.3; Dio Cassius 54.20.4; Florus *Epitome* 2.30), who hang deserters and traitors to trees; and the Britannii (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.33.2), who practice crucifixion. Moreover, Hengel argues that the Romans may have learned the practice of crucifixion from the Numidians and the Carthaginians (Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum* 14.15; Caesar, *Bellum Africum* 66; Polybius 1.11.5, 24.6, 79.4f., 86.4; Diodorus Sicululus, *Bibliotheke* 25.5.2, 10.2, 26.23; Livy 22.13.9, 28.37.2, 38.48.13; Valerius Maximus 2.7; Justin, *Epitome* 18.7.15; Silius Italicus, *Punica* 1.181, 2.435f.

[59] Jean-Jacques Aubert, "A Double Standard in Roman Criminal Law? The Death Penalty and Social Structure in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome," *Speculum Iuris* 4 (2002): 23.

[60] Rutledge, *The Crucifixion.*

[61] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87.

[62] Arthur J. Dewey, *Inventing the Passion: How the Death of Jesus Was Remembered* (Salem: Polebridge, 2017): 11.

night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."[63]

Moreover, crucifixion was a punishment that was generally reserved for slaves, brigands, prisoners of war, and political revolutionaries.[64] Like other forms of Roman execution, crucifixion was meant to be a spectacle.[65] For this reason, crucifixion took place on the busiest roads so as many as people as possible could witness it; Roman executions were public in order to deter criminal behavior, to entertain, and to bolster the values of the Roman empire.[66] The spectacle of extreme physical suffering was an important part of punishment, according to Roman custom; nowhere can we find anyone in the written record who objected to suffering as a necessary facet of punishment.[67] Crucifixion differs, however, from other forms of entertainment like gladiatorial bouts because, as Whitaker notes, "The gladiator was transformed into a model for virtue in much literature: he was a model of a manly and courageous attitude towards death

[63] According to the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, "Public exposure of the corpse of an executed criminal, which was not the norm, was a form of reproach directed against enemies of the state (Josh 8:29; 10:26; 1 Sam 31:10; Esth 9:6-14). Out of respect for the body, to prevent it from serving as carrion (2 Sam 21:10), this law sets stringent limits to that procedure. It continues, "*Hang…on a tree*, the Hebrew word for 'tree' is broader; the law could also refer to suspension from 'gallows' (Esth 9:13) or a "pole" (Gen 40:19), or possibly, based upon Neo-Assyrian precedent, impalement upon a stake."

[64] Kobus Kok, "The Chaos of the Cross as the Fractal of Life: The Birth of the Post Resurrection, Missional Dimension in John," *Neotestamentica* 45, no. 1 (2011): 132. Cicero considers crucifixion the *summum supplicium*, or "the extreme punishment" (*In Verrem* 2.5.168). Josephus recalls how Felix, the procurator of Judaea, crucified brigands (*War* 2.253). He also writes about how Titus had prisoners of war crucified: "Titus indeed commiserated their fate, five hundred or sometimes more being captured daily…but his main reason for not stopping the crucifixions was the hope that the spectacle might perhaps induce the Jews to surrender, for fear that continued resistance would involve them in a similar fate. The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies" (*Wars* 5.450). Josephus also recounts how Varus two-thousand revolutionaries crucified in Jerusalem (*Ant* 17.295).

[65] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 35.

[66] Robyn J. Whitaker, "A Failed Spectacle: The Role of the Crowd in Luke 23," *Biblical Interpretation* 25 (2017): 400.

[67] Melissa Barden Bowling, *Clemency & Cruelty in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009), 10.

and of a well-trained athlete in competition."[68] There is nothing manly and courageous about crucifixion because the victim of it is entirely passive; he cannot fight back, and he is not a model for virtue. Fagan speaks of the "gladiator ethos," which describes the desire for gladiators to give the audience a good performance.[69] Victims of crucifixion, however, could not give a performance; they lacked any form of agency whatsoever. While Roman writers tended to shy away from the subject of crucifixion because of its barbarity, it is clear that crucifixion was a common facet of Roman society that people enjoyed witnessing.

It has often been assumed that Roman citizens could not be crucified. Even though the majority of those crucified were slaves and non-citizens, slaves, foreigners, Roman citizens, and even women were crucified.[70] Hengel notes that according to Paulus' *Sententiae*, crimes that could be punished by crucifixion include "desertion to the enemy, the betraying of secrets, incitement to rebellion, murder, prophecy about the welfare of rulers (*de salute dominorum*), nocturnal impiety (*sacra impia nocturna*), magic (*ars magica*), and serious cases of the falsification of wills."[71] *Sacra impia nocturna* definitely applied to the earliest groups of Christians in Rome. Regardless of someone's status, crucifixion was meant to humiliate, to shame, and to erase the memory (*damnatio memoriae*) of the criminal who was attached to the cross. By crucifying someone, Rome was saying that they were not human and were worth nothing, not even of commemoration after death. Crucifixion was not a heroic, glorious, or

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[68] Whitaker, "A Failed Spectacle," 401. See Cicero, *Tusc. Disp*. 2.41; Epictetus, *Diss*. 1.29; and Pliny, *Pan.* 33.1 for their discussions of gladiators as models of Stoic virtue. See also Fagan (2011), who writes, "Gladiators have long been analyzed as manifesting Roman *virtus* ('manliness, courage, virtue'), in that they displayed martial skill, discipline, endurance, bravery, and a contempt for suffering and death. That members of the lowest social class could behave so nobly made the point all the more starkly" (200).

[69] Garret G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 236.

[70] John Granger Cook, "Roman Crucifixions: From the Second Punic War to Constantine," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 104, no. 1 (2013): 2.

[71] Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 34.

victorious process for the person being crucified, but the power of the symbol for Christians, as we will see, came from the inversion of its non-Christian meaning.

2.3: The Crucifix

All four gospel writers include an account of Jesus' crucifixion. The writer of Matthew tells us that the governor's soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross and that they crucified Jesus once he reached Golgotha. Mark's account is very similar to Matthew's: Simon of Cyrene happened to be passing by when the soldiers forced him to carry Jesus' cross. From there, they crucified Jesus at Golgotha. Luke's account is more detailed than Matthew's and Mark's; in Luke, three times the Roman officials find that Jesus is not worthy of death, but the common people demand it. The soldiers seize Simon of Cyrene and force him to carry Jesus' cross. Before they reach Golgotha, though, Jesus comforts a group of women who are weeping for him. From there, he is crucified. Like Luke, John tells us that Pilate does not think that Jesus should be crucified but that the crowd demands it because they believe that anyone who opposes Caesar should be put to death. Jesus then carries his own cross to Golgotha where he is crucified. While on the cross, Jesus talks to his mother, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and "the disciple whom he loved," and he tells the soldiers that he is thirsty.[72]

[72] For an interesting discussion of the height of the cross, see Marcus (2006). Marcus argues that the height of the cross depended on the status of the person being crucified. He notes that John uses the verb ὑψοῦν, meaning "to raise" or "to lift" when describing the process of Jesus being attached to the cross. This verb also is "elsewhere associated with royal enthronement and other forms of conspicuous societal advancement." For John, then, Jesus' crucifixion is not an act of execution but rather an enthronement and coronation, which is an idea expressed in later Christian art and which is the general view of Jesus' crucifixion today.

While the first images of the crucifixion that are produced by Christians do not begin to appear until about the fifth century[73] (with the first being the Maskell Ivories and the doors at S. Sabina in Rome), Christians were producing crosses in the catacombs in the second and third centuries.[74] Snyder notes that the sign of the cross has been prevalent throughout antiquity, though anthropologists have yet to nail down its pre-Christian meaning; perhaps, he contends, the sign of the cross represented a defense against evil since it is found in funerary art.[75] The lack of crucifixion imagery between the time of Jesus' death and the fifth century is notable. It has already been stated that the emergence of Christian art in general was slow, which could explain why it took so long to depict Jesus' death. Jensen suggests that it was not until the third to the mid-fourth century that both the Church and its art began to be patronized by Roman elites.[76] Once the Edict of Milan was issued, it was easier for Christians to ingratiate into Roman society, thus allowing for their art to be patronized. Jensen also notes that early Christian sects were not, theologically, on the same page. Gnostic and docetic Christians, for example, abhorred crucifixion because they believed that it was inappropriate for a deity to suffer.[77] Others argue that Jesus' crucifixion was too mysterious and taboo to be depicted.[78] Another hypothesis

[73] There are two exceptions. The first is the so-called Alexamenos Graffito, dated to the late 2nd century, which depicts a donkey-headed man on a cross. Under this image reads, "Alexamenos worships his god." Most likely, this is meant to mock both Jesus and his followers. The second exception is a Syrian amulet, dated to the 3rd century, which shows Jesus on a cross. Under this image reads, "Son, father, Jesus Christ." Dewey (2017) argues that these exceptions actually serve to support the scarcity of crucifixion imagery up until the 5th century. The former is an image of mockery; the latter is an apotropaic instrument meant to "turn away" evil. Dewey writes, "Neither piece plays into the developing narrative material of the death of Jesus. Instead they provide tantalizing slivers of popular prejudice and fears. Thus, it would seem that the oral and literary traditions were the sole avenues through which the memory of the death of Jesus was transmitted" (10). For further discussion of the Syrian amulet, see Kotansky (2017).
[74] E. J. Tinsley, "The Coming of a Dead and Naked Christ," *Religion* 2, no. 1 (1972): 26. See also Danielou (1964), especially p. 139.
[75] Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, 60.
[76] Robin Jensen, "The Suffering and Dead Christ in Early Christian Art," *ARTS* 8, no. 1 (1995): 22.
[77] Jensen, "The Suffering and Dead Christ," 23.
[78] See Murray (1977) and Grabar (1980).

suggests that the depiction of Jesus' crucifixion was avoided because early Christians, who were living relatively close to the time of Jesus' death, were hesitant to depict their god suffering such a heinous death.[79] Again, crucifixion was not manly or virtuous like other forms of torture were. When images of Jesus' crucifixion do appear, though, they do not emphasize suffering; rather make the image of Jesus on the cross an image of deliverance from death instead of an image of the fact of death.[80]

Below is the first known depiction of Jesus' crucifixion.

The Maskell Passion Ivories, Rome, AD 420-430

To Jesus' left is Judas who is hanging from a tree for having betrayed Jesus. On the right is Jesus himself attached to a cross, which reads *REX IVD*, Latin for "King of the Jews." In this depiction, Jesus is barely higher than those around him. Jesus does not appear to be suffering, and he is stiff, emotionless, and obviously alive while Judas is clearly dead; by juxtaposing the living Jesus with the dead Judas, the crucifixion is not meant to be a sign of defeat and death, but of hope in the resurrection and of eternal life.[81] The messages in the Maskell Ivories are thus

[79] See Syndicus (1962) who writes, "Fear of profanation of the holiest may have contributed to this result…the sublime idea of redemption could not be made into the act of execution with which fourth-century Christians were still familiar from their own experience." See also Millburn (1988) who argues that the image was too inappropriate to depict before the sixth century.
[80] Felicity Harley-McGowan, "Death is Swallowed up in Victory: Scenes of Death in Early Christian Art and the Emergence of Crucifixion Iconography," *Cultural Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2011): 103.
[81] Harley-McGowan, Death is Swallowed up in Victory, 119.

simply communicated. This particular depiction of Jesus' crucifixion is not as elaborate as later depictions of Jesus' crucifixion, but it does reinforce the Christian focus on resurrection and eternal life, not on suffering.

As Christianity becomes more established and dominant, depictions of Jesus' crucifixion no longer resemble the Maskell Ivories. The image below is taken from the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome and dates to about AD 1130.

Mosaic from the Basilica of San Clemente,
Rome, AD 1130

This depiction of Jesus' crucifixion is much different than that on the Maskell Ivories. In this image, Jesus is pictured on a large cross, which is decorated with doves and which sits atop the tree of life. This scene is the crowning jewel of the basilica and is extremely ornate and detailed—in no way does this image depict the reality of Jesus' crucifixion and death. In fact, both the Maskell Ivories and the mosaic at San Clemente do not reflect the reality of crucifixion. The depiction of Jesus' crucifixion inside of San Clemente is meant to communicate a different message than that of the Maskell Ivories, though. The image above is not merely an image of

someone's death; rather, it makes suffering look virtuous and victorious.[82] This image makes suffering look virtuous and was meant to inspire viewers to be like Jesus, to be a martyr. A Christian martyr was the antithesis of a pagan gladiator whose goal was victory and applause. Christian martyrs, on the other hand, often subverted audiences' expectations. Perpetua and Felicitas, for example, entered the arena with smiles on their faces, and they stared at the crowd the entire time. They also threatened the crowd with eternal damnation and welcomed scourging. Perpetua and Felicitas were then attacked by a mad cow, but they welcomed this and considered it a victory. When the cow could not kill them, a gladiator slit their throats, subsequently killing them. Fagan writes:

> The harsh spectator reactions were sparked by the Christians welcoming their deaths or appearing indifferent to what was being done to them…this behavior challenged the spectators' social identity as 'lords' of the arena, and this was part of what frustrated and angered them.[83]

Their goal was to wear their blood as a sign of victory, but victory in a much different sense than that of the pagan gladiator.[84] Their goal was to resemble Jesus, who suffered a passive death and who accepted pain and suffering on the cross. Through the actions of the Christian martyrs and Jesus on the cross, it should be evident that the Christian identity was the complete antithesis of the Roman identity. As this Christian identity evolved over the 500 years after Jesus' death, depicting scenes of "victorious suffering" became more prominent because it had become a unique characteristic that came to separate Christians from pagans.

By making use of the crucifix, early Christian communities were able to situate their new religion among the already existing Greco-Roman culture, which allowed Christianity to establish a cultural cohesiveness and identity. Depicting a crucifix in art is a purely Christian

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[82] Nigel Spivey, "Christ and the Art of Agony," *History Today* 49, no. 8 (1999): 17.
[83] Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena*, 256.
[84] Spivey, "Christ and the Art of Agony," 17.

invention as we do not see such images in Greco-Roman art. This makes sense, though, because crucifixion was the way in which Jesus died. In order for Jesus to have resurrected, which is central to the Christian faith, he needed to have died. The juxtaposition of crucifixion and resurrection is striking, so the event that necessitated Jesus' resurrection is of utmost importance to Christians and becomes depicted in art as such. For this reason, the creation of the crucifix image was integral to the formation of the Christian identity. Even though some early Christians may have been repulsed by Jesus' crucifixion, confused by it, or not ready to accept it, what Christians in the fifth and sixth centuries did was to use the image of the crucifix to highlight Jesus' resurrection. In images of the crucified Jesus, he is shown with a serene face, not indicating any physical pain, which shifts the focus to his resurrection and victory over death rather than the process of death itself.[85] After Constantine made Christianity, and many other religions, legal in AD 313 with the Edict of Milan and after Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire in AD 380 by Theodosius, Christians were more empowered to publicize their religion. What Christianity offered was an alternative to the Roman Empire; it offered a new empire: the empire of God, where it did not matter if you were poor, sick, or an outcast. In Luke 4:18, Jesus proclaims, in the words of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."[86] This would sound attractive to anyone who was suffering under the Roman Empire who was never offered an alternative. In fact, the new empire which Jesus was offering to the masses was not designed for the rich, the powerful, and the greedy but rather for those described in Luke's passage above.

[85] Harley-McGowan, "Death is Swallowed up in Victory," 113-114.
[86] Luke's gospel, in particular, is very concerned with the poor, more so than any other gospel. To Luke, Jesus' messages are especially directed towards both the economically and socially poor, as well as the downtrodden, the oppressed, the forgotten, and the neglected.

The image of the crucifix, therefore, is an embodiment of the fulfillment of this promise because it symbolizes victory of death and hope of the resurrection.

Whereas earlier Christian symbols took their inspiration from pagan symbols, the crucifix is a uniquely Christian image, which helped establish a Christian identity centered around one moment, the crucifixion of Jesus. The image of Jesus on the cross utilizes the familiar practice of crucifixion but in a revolutionary way: what the Romans intended as a symbol of defeat and shame, the Christians reclaimed and redefined. While the crucifix was a symbol which the Roman worldview allowed to be anything but a symbol of shame, for Christians, it came to embody a central message of their religion—victory over death—as well as representing one of the most important moments in the life of Jesus. By the fifth century, Christians had already established that there was not a higher power than God, especially not a secular, political power, and the crucifix supports this narrative by showcasing Jesus' victory over the most extreme state-sanctioned punishment. The viewer was reminded that like Jesus, anyone can be saved and can have access to an alternative empire. When we look at a crucifix today, we too are reminded of Jesus' victory over death, but since it is so ubiquitous, we may not fully understand the implications that the crucifix itself carries. Regardless, by making use of the crucifixion image, early Christians were able to establish a cultural cohesiveness and identity.

2.4: The Crown of Thorns

Not much research has been done on the use of the crown of thorns by Christians in their early art, but a few conclusions can be drawn. In the ancient world, Olympic victors and triumphant generals were given crowns to wear as a sign of their victories. In the Greek world

specifically, crowns and wreaths (στέφανος[87]) were donned by priests during sacrifices, theatre choruses, public speakers, and those partaking in symposia. In addition, crowns and wreaths were worn as prizes for victors at the games and were also prizes for merit. The material out of which a crown or a wreath was made depended on the specific context.[88] In Rome, crowns and wreaths were given to signify valor. Like in Greece, the nature of someone's victory determined the type of crown or wreath that they would receive, with the most distinguished being the *corona obsidionalis* or *graminea* being awarded to anyone who completed a successful siege.[89] Generals who were celebrating a triumph were awarded the laurel crown. Having established that crowns were used in only official and triumphal contexts, the Roman soldiers placing a crown of thorns, not of laurels, on Jesus in the midst of being crucified was an act of mockery. By placing a crown of thorns on Jesus' head, the Roman soldiers were making a joke that this so-called "king of the Jews" was dying a slave's death. No *divi filius*[90] would have ever worn a crown made from thorns or would have been crucified, which highlights the irony of giving Jesus a crown to wear.

Much like the crucifix, the crown of thorns only takes on the meaning it has today because of Jesus' resurrection, and, like the crucifix, the crown of thorns is a uniquely Christian symbol that was inspired by a familiar image in the ancient world. Because Jesus triumphed over Rome by resurrecting, early Christians used the crown of thorns as a symbol of triumph, much like a general celebrating his triumph. Only this time, they still chose to depict Jesus wearing a crown of thorns, which is itself ironic because the Roman soldiers who gave him the crown were

[87] For a discussion of Luke's treatment of the crown of thorns (or a lack thereof) as well as an analysis of the noun στέφανος and the proper name Στέφανος, see Suggit (2016).
[88] *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. "crowns and wreaths, Greek."
[89] Pliny (*HN* 22.4) notes that only eight men ever received this crown, with the final man being Augustus.
[90] To any Roman citizen, the *divi filius* would have been the emperor. See Peppard (2011) for a much more detailed discussion of the term "son of god."

being ironic in the first place. In effect, this crown made use of the painful, uncomfortable nature of thorns in order to invert the meaning of the typical crown or wreath placed atop the heads of victors, consuls, and olympic victors. Much like the crucifix, the crown of thorns was a symbol meant to make the statement that the person wearing the painful, sharp crown was actually the victor, not the person wearing the crown made of olive branches, laurels, silver, or gold. Even though the crucifix and crown of thorns do not operate in this way today, when they were first produced, these images operated on a primarily rhetorical level intended in order to establish the Christian identity.

Conclusions

The images, icons, and symbols that early Christians used to express themselves and their new religion were not new and did not exist in a vacuum. It is easy to forget that the ways in which the first groups of Jesus followers worshipped looked nothing like a typical mass we might attend today. It is easy to forget that these people were living in the Greco-Roman world and were familiar with pagan cults and the Greek and Roman pantheon. It can sometimes be hard to wrap one's mind around that fact that the meanings behind symbols like the anchor, the fish, the dove, and the olive branch were not created by the first Christians but by people who lived centuries before. But if we are to remove ourselves from the modern-day Christian and Catholic mindset, it is completely logical that early Christians took the already-established meanings of familiar images, icons, and symbols and used them in their own ways. It is also logical to assume that as their new religion was becoming more established, Christians would begin to produce images that were uniquely their own, which helped cement the Christian identity and make it culturally cohesive.

Appendix A: The Good Shepherd

Moschophoros, c. 560 BC,
Acropolis Museum, Athens

The good shepherd image is an early Christian image which is taken directly from the classical *moschophoros* or *criophoros* image. The statue above is a man carrying a sacrificial calf or ram. This is a religious figure since the calf or ram on the man's back will be sacrificed to the gods.

Pope Francis' Pectoral Cross

Above is an image of Pope Francis' pectoral cross. This image resembles the *moschophoros* image in many ways, but it's meaning is entirely different. In it, we see Jesus, the good shepherd, carrying a lamb. Since Christianity is not a sacrificial religion in the same way that pagan religions were, he cannot be carrying this lamb to be sacrificed. The lamb, then, has to represent Jesus' "flock," his people. Because of this, the messaging behind the image of the good shepherd and the *moschophoros* is completely opposite. The image of the good shepherd was one of the most common images found in the catacombs at Rome. In fact, the image occurs over one-hundred times.[91] This image, however, seems to lose its popularity by the beginning of the fifth century when Jesus is pictured more in royal dress than in common dress.[92] This also happens to correspond with the emergence of the crucifixion image as well, which pictured Jesus in a different way. Below is the last image of the good shepherd of its kind, and it is found in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna and dates to about 425 CE. This mosaic indicates the aforementioned shift to portraying Jesus in a regal way, rather than like a common shepherd since this Jesus resembles the Jesus of the pectoral cross in no way.

I have chosen to include the *moschophoros*/good shepherd image in this thesis, but in an appendix, because more research is needed in order to determine what the creators of the good

[91] Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
[92] Boniface Ramsey, "A Note on the Disappearance of the Good Shepherd from Early Christian Art," *Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 3 (1983): 376.

shepherd image had in mind. Since the messages of the *moschophoros* and the good shepherd image are completely different, were early Christians trying to make a statement like they did with the crucifix and the crown of thorns, or were they simply co-opting an already-familiar image that would fit well with their new religion? Right now, it is unclear, but more research must be done on the origins and uses of *moschophorus*/*criophoros* image. Additionally, it is not always entirely clear who the shepherd is supposed to be. There is no logical reason to say that the man *has* to be Jesus. If so, then to whom or to what does the lamb refer? Is Jesus the sacrificial lamb in that case? Does the lamb still represent the church? Hopefully these questions will one day be answered, but right now, we can only speculate.

Appendix B: The Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary is an interesting image to consider because, like the good shepherd, it is not exactly clear what purpose early Christians wanted her to serve. Most images of Mary that we see today or which have been popular for centuries include the madonna and child (*theotokos*). The image of the madonna and child, however, almost exactly resembles imagery of Isis and Horus, Isis being the daughter of Geb, the Egyptian sky god, and Nut, the Egyptian earth goddess, as well as the queen of Egypt and Horus being her hawk-god son and eventual king of Egypt. The comparison of Horus and Jesus as king and of Isis and Mary as queen cannot be overlooked. Again the intention of this image is not clear, and more research needs to be done in order to answer these questions. Nonetheless, Luke is said to have painted the first image of the *theotokos* and is credited with much of the description of Mary that we know today.[93] There are

[93] Rene B. Javellana, S.J., "The 'Divinization' of Mary of Nazareth in Christian Imagination: The Iconography of the Virgin Mary," *Landas* 19, no. 1 (2005): 103.

also clear parallels between Mary and the mother-goddess Cybele.[94] It should be clear that Mary resembles pagan mother-goddesses, but it is not clear if that resemblance is intentional or just practical.

An interesting comparison is also drawn between Mary and Venus as she is depicted in the *Aeneid.* Starnone notices how Venus appears to Aeneas in the woods as both a virgin and a mother and how Christians applied the phrase *vera dea et mater* to the Virgin Mary, who they believed was also a true goddess and mother. It could be possible that early Christians were able to use Venus as a reference point of sorts in order to solve the paradox that Mary was both a virgin and a mother, which is impossible.[95] If we accept Starnone's argument, then it would appear that Christians were actually trying to understand their own images through already familiar images like Venus and Aeneas. However, not enough research has been done to show whether or not this is actually the case. Even though we are unable to pin down just what exactly early Christians had in mind when producing images of the Virgin Mary or the good shepherd, for example, it should be noted that these images, just like every other image examined in this

[94] Dana Kramer-Rolls, "The Emergence of the Goddess Mary from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages," *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 1 (2006): 34-50.
[95] Viola Starnone, "The Virgin in the Woods: Virgilian Traces in the Construction of Mary, Mother of God," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 27, no. 2 (2020): 153-170.

thesis, were not novel creations but were rather images that most likely anyone would have been able to recognize, even if they did not fully understand the meanings behind them.

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