

[Working Paper] Pagan Motif or Christian Symbol? How Early Christians Expressed Their Faith Visually



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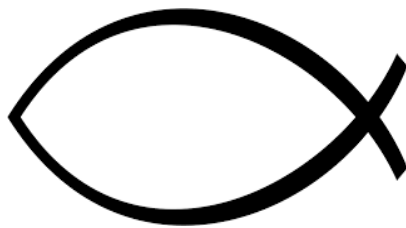
Early Christians of the first few centuries, living in Roman times, interacted with the varied cultures of the western Empire. They searched for visual ways to express their faith. Sometimes they chose a new visual symbol, perhaps to conceal secret understandings; sometimes they adapted symbols from surrounding culture or from other religions. When they borrowed Greco-Roman designs they manipulated the motifs on their own terms. We can see this process in various art forms: architecture, wall paintings, mosaics, signet rings, funerary art, sculpture, and even physical gesture.

As we consider examples from the first few centuries we may ask: Why did they choose a particular motif? Was it unconscious enculturation? Was it to teach doctrine? Was it to imprint biblical stories to be understood as allegories or analogies? Did it have a place in devotional practice? Does the motif show up in liturgical settings? Can a motif distort gospel truth? Might the motif communicate the gospel to outsiders?

Early Christians employed visual motifs in a variety of ways:

1. Sometimes they created uniquely Christian motifs with no precedents in secular, pagan, or other religions' use (for example, the fish motif).
2. On other occasions, they borrowed from pagan mythic art to express Christian meaning (for example, sculpture or painting of a shepherd with a sheep on his shoulder, the phoenix bird, the ankh).
3. And in still other instances, they drew from themes embedded in and that later shaped Christian theology (for example, the architectural design of the basilica).

I will describe in more detail how some of these visual motifs were embraced and gave life and meaning to believers in the first centuries of the Christian movement.



Fish. The fish symbol had no parallel among other religions or in secular use. We see it in many Christian media: catacomb paintings, sculpture on tombs and stone coffins called sarcophagi, literary essays, teachings, and sermons. The fish, of course, featured in biblical stories: Jonah, Jesus's miracle of multiplication, and post-Resurrection meals. Visuals served as illustrations and undergirded the church's teachings.

There was a strong association between fish and bread. Illustrations of the Eucharistic table frequently show bread and fish rather than bread and wine. In the early third century, Tertullian often used the fish symbol in his writing and preaching. Christ himself was “fish of the living water.” “We as little fishes, with our big fish Jesus Christ, are born in water.”



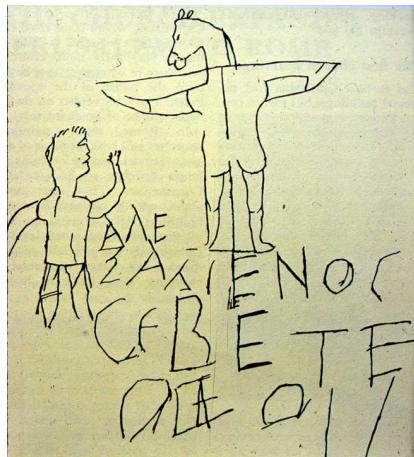
The Greek word for fish forms an acronym. It is made up of the first Greek letters of the phrase: “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior” (IXΘΥC). There is the appealing but possibly apocryphal account of Christians recognizing one another by one person beginning and the other completing the fish symbol scratched on the ground.

Many nautical scenes depict fish with anchor symbols in catacomb paintings and sculpted on sarcophagi. The word “piscina” (fishpond) became a name for the baptistery. The fish was truly a unique Christian visual symbol.

Signing the Cross. Even earlier than the fish symbol was the physical gesture of crossing oneself. It was encouraged in everyday life as protection against evil and as a reminder of one’s faith. The sign of the cross evoked the shape of the cross through a gesture made on the breast or the face. Crossing oneself was used outside the liturgy and was eventually incorporated into liturgy in the fifth century.

Orans. Another physical visual was the orans—the stance of a praying figure, well known in other religions. The orans positioned the human figure standing with arms lifted, face upward, eyes open.

What distinguished a Christian orans? In the context of catacomb painting, the surrounding scenes are of Christian meaning. The Christian orans shows large hands, which indicate giving and receiving in prayer. It is fascinating to notice that the posture of the orans evoked both prayer and mimicked the symbol of Christ on the cross.



Cross symbol. The cross did not appear explicitly in visual art for several centuries. The cross was painful and embarrassing. Christ’s crucifixion was possibly a rebuke to the Empire. The earliest known cross depiction was on a wall in slave quarters in Rome. Someone was making fun of a Christian. In this graffito, a boy raises his arm to hail his god, drawn as a crucified donkey. Words scrawled beside it say, “Alexamenos worships his god.”



Christians looked for hidden_cross symbolism. Cross symbolism was not certain and explicit until after the fourth century, when it appeared on panels of church doors or in sarcophagus sculpture.

Early Christians looked for hidden prefigurations of the cross as proofs of Christian truth. This might be a cross in Moses’s staff, in the tree of life, or in the mast and yard of a ship. Specific use of the cross symbol came later, as the liturgy developed with processions, vestments, altar appointments, and architectural



decorations. The cross as a motif was used widely after the fourth century, especially after Emperor Constantine placed the Chi Ro (the first two letters of the name of Christ) on military shields. From the fifth century onward, the cross motif appeared on door decorations, in tiny ivory carvings, on liturgical vessels, on household objects, and in paintings on church walls. The cross had become a decorative feature.



Dove. A white dove was sacred to worship of Aphrodite (Venus). It was a symbol from Semitic and Greek traditions to evoke humility and purity. The early Christians gave the dove several additional symbolic meanings. The primary meaning was the dove that descended at Jesus's baptism. The dove motif was understood as a sign of the Spirit and was always shown in baptismal pictures, hovering over Christ's head.

In a catacomb panel for a Christian slave girl, a dove hovers with the sprig of olive in its beak. "Eirene" (peace) is inscribed on the stone. Eirene was also the girl's name. Christians combined this pagan motif, with its meanings of purity and humility, with the story of Noah, a person's soul, the Holy Spirit, and peace.

Jesus images: From Good Shepherd to Christus Pantocrator. The shepherd, adopted early by Christians, had been a familiar motif for a long time in Roman mythology. The favored depiction showed the mythic hero Orpheus, a sheep over his shoulders, playing his flute for the enchanted animals clustered around.



Tertullian explicitly made the identification of the Orpheus image with Jesus the good shepherd and his parable of the lost sheep. Early Christians loved this image and chose the model of a young farmer, wearing a short tunic and boots, with a sheep over his shoulder as a depiction of Christ. We see it in catacomb wall paintings, baptismal fonts, and sarcophagus sculptures, and even in freestanding statuary.

Visual symbols indicate a clear shift in Christology after church and state allied in the fourth century under Constantine. In early centuries, Christians depicted Jesus as shepherd, healer, teacher, and miracle worker. Jesus, wielding a wand, is frequently shown raising Lazarus from the dead.



But these images gave way after the fourth century, when the Empire and Christianity became intertwined, to depictions of Christ as the dominating and fear-inducing Christus Pantocrator (the all-powerful one). This imperial Christ now dominated church dome decorations, wall

paintings, and mosaics as Christ enthroned: a bearded, god-figure with a halo. This was adapted from depictions of the principal god Zeus and was similar to iconography of the Roman emperor.



It was not long before Archangels Michael and Gabriel, attendants of the holy court, were shown as military officers. In one place, Christ himself, garbed as a Roman soldier, has the text, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Do these changes in iconography reflect Christological controversy, or do they reveal profound distortion of gospel meaning?

Basilica. Especially in the fourth century, Christians moved from primarily domestic gatherings to large public spaces for worship. They needed more room; they needed an architectural model.

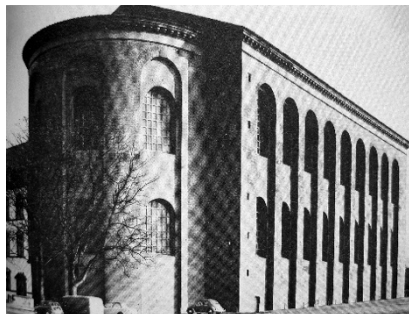
The design of a pagan temple did not suit Christian worship because there was no place for assembly. Temples were shrines to house cultic images of a deity.

But the civic building, the basilica (meaning throne room), served very well. In the Empire, the basilica served the courts of law, with the judge (the emperor) sitting centrally in the apse.



A basilica was an enormous building with a long central space (the nave) headed with a semicircular apse, and with two or four columned aisles along the sides. Basilica design was widely used for churches after official recognition of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. In fact, Constantine gave basilicas for public worship to many principal cities of the Empire.

The architectural form sprouted theological meaning: With the addition of a transept, the basilica assumed the cross shape. The vast interior space was understood as heavenly space. Remembering that a civic basilica was



the place of law courts, we might ask what lingering effect that association had on Christian worship? Christ was now depicted in glorious heavenly scenes, in the dome above as heavenly law giver and royal judge, and represented at the altar, the visual focus for throngs of worshipers. There is a saying that “the building always wins.” Did the basilica “win”?

Egyptian ankh. When a temple to Serapis in Alexandria, Egypt, was destroyed, Christians found stones inscribed with hieroglyphs shaped like a cross, with a loop replacing the upper shaft.

Because they were looking for symbolic precursors to Christianity, some claimed this was a Christian symbol. But others, recent converts from the worship of Serapis, explained that it really meant “the future life.” So, Christians accepted this interpretation, too. The ankh appears with a double Christian meaning—the cross of Christ and hope for future life.



Phoenix. The phoenix is a legendary bird of immortality which miraculously regenerated itself out of its decomposing remains. This image probably originated in India or Arabia, but it moved into many cultures from Syria and Egypt and all the way to China.

Emperors Constantine and Hadrian used it on the reverse of coins to symbolize the eternity of their empire. Some Christians saw it as a pagan anticipation of Christianity, and so the phoenix became a symbol for Christ’s resurrection. The phoenix is commonly seen on sarcophagi, mosaics, amulets, paintings, and funerary epitaphs.

In Summary

- Christians chose the **fish** as a unique visual; it both illustrated and helped them imagine and design meanings from Scripture and from experience.
- Christians developed **gestures** for prayer and for personal protection in symbolic physical gestures.
- **The cross** was a difficult symbol with a strange story. At first hidden, it was later made explicit and eventually transposed (distorted?) as a military symbol. For years it has been employed in many liturgical and domestic, decorative settings.
- The **dove**, already associated with virtues of purity and humility in Roman culture gained Christian biblical allusions (Noah and the baptism of Jesus). But it pointed particularly to the descent of the Holy Spirit and to peace.
- **The Good Shepherd** was prominent in pagan art, associated especially with the hero Orpheus. Christians superimposed Jesus as the good shepherd. Even though in the earliest years, they depicted Jesus as healer, miracle worker, and teacher, the **Good Shepherd** eventually gave way in the Imperial period to the **Pantocrator** (the all-powerful one). Political meanings were thus grafted onto biblical, religious meanings.
- The building that housed their worship, the **basilica**, profoundly affected worship.
- The **phoenix** and **ankh**, drawn from other cultures, were likewise imbued with Christianized meanings.

We have considered some examples of visual symbols from the first few Christian centuries in the western Roman Empire. We have asked why Christians chose particular motifs. Many other questions remain: Were the

choices simple enculturation or were they didactic? Were they intended to present biblical stories as allegories or analogies? Were they chosen for devotional or liturgical practices? Did the adopted motifs effectively communicate the gospel to outsiders? We can't definitively answer these questions about early Christians. But perhaps we can consider in what ways—to express or advocate for our faith—we employ or adapt visual motifs from our own cultural surroundings today.