

Introduction

In the fifth century, Pope Leo the Great chastised Juvenal, the bishop of Jerusalem, claiming that the bishop was “blind to the Lord’s incarnation.” Juvenal, of course, believed in the incarnation, but considering his participation in the Robber Council of Ephesus and the danger of association with monophysite heresy, Leo believed he needed some Christological correction. Leo found Juvenal’s recalcitrance confusing, especially since he was in close proximity to the holy places in Jerusalem. For Leo, Juvenal could not disbelieve since he was in the presence of the holy by virtue of being surrounded by places such as the Holy Sepulcher, Gethsemane, and Bethlehem. Leo praises Juvenal’s subsequent return to orthodoxy, but still calls his break inexcusable due to his physical location, writing to the bishop, “Why is the understanding in difficulty, where the eyes are its instructors? And why are things read or heard doubtful, where all the mysteries of man’s salvation obtrude themselves upon the sight and touch?”¹ Leo’s diatribe emphasizes the important place material culture and the visual tradition held in early Christianity: to see is really to believe. Leo even preaches that words may be useful but “the activity of sight was teaching them.”² The early

1. Leo, *Ep.* 139 (NPNF 212.98).

2. Leo, *Serm.* 37. See *Sermons*, Fathers of the Church Series (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1995).

Christian visual language was critical in the development of the religion, particularly after Constantine when it was recognized as an official *religio*. Whether gazing upon an image of Jesus or visiting a church in Jerusalem, sight was the master for the early Christian.

Christian art, however, did not arrive or develop *ex nihilo*. It borrowed and adapted elements of the existing visual examples of its Roman context. Early Christian narrative and non-narrative art utilizes prototypes from Roman cultic art and from Jewish art as well. This phenomenon has been well documented in recent years by scholars such as Jas Elsner, Thomas Mathews, and Robin M. Jensen. This book focuses on one such influence, the imperial influence, upon early Christian art. Images of the emperor and the practice of the imperial cult had an obvious impact upon early Christianity. But how much of an impact is a subject that has caused some rancor among art historians and religion scholars.

Constantine's conversion in 312 CE and the subsequent Edict of Milan were seen by art historians of the twentieth century as climactic events for early Christian art. The art historian André Grabar was not the only voice that emphasized the imperial influence upon Christian art, but his was arguably the most influential. Grabar believed that *ante-pacem* Christian art was relegated to the private sphere and rarely went beyond the symbolic. The art was incohesive and uncomplicated. This perspective, though deeply ingrained, is not without flaws. By exploring third-century catacomb evidence this viewpoint can be challenged. For example, it seems clear that from the beginning Christian art was narrative art. Images served as visual "pages," with the medium of wall painting serving as the manuscript.³ At the catacomb of Vigna Massimo, one painting features scenes of Daniel, Jonah, and Lazarus that are congruent with a funerary

3. Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 90–91.

atmosphere. The images are integrated and intentionally placed within the surrounding examples, creating a cohesive whole rather than isolated images.⁴

Grabar argued that in the second half of the fourth century, beginning with the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, the central theme on Christian sarcophagi is Christ enthroned (what he calls “Christ in Majesty”).⁵ Following Constantine, Christians adopted the entire imperial style for portraying Jesus. What was once imperial art was appropriated by Christians and placed upon the person of Jesus. Grabar memorably argued that “the mark of imperial iconography in Christian art is recognizable everywhere and in different ways: appropriation of themes and subjects, borrowings of iconographic details, utilization of more remote models for the creation of analogous images. It is to the theme of the supreme power of God that imperial art contributed the most, and most naturally so, since it was the key theme of all the imagery of the Christian image-makers with a series of tested models, and they profited from them largely.”⁶

The art historian Hans Belting argues that Christians clearly adapted the imperial cult and the cult of images associated with the imperial cult for Christian purposes. Belting states that showing the emperor in a *clipeus* in a monument such as the Arch of Galerius, was borrowed by Christians who placed figures such as Jesus and John the Baptist in a *clipeus* in iconography. Moreover, Belting’s work repeats a popular assertion that ritual action involving imperial images was appropriated by the church. Such ritual actions would include paying homage to certain images of Jesus or even parading images on festival

4. Mathews disputes the long-held view that early Christian images held no connection from one image to another to create a programmatic whole. See Mathews, *The Clash of Gods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 13.

5. André Grabar, *The Beginnings of Christian Art, 200-395* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1966), 249.

6. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 42.

days. Belting asserts that in the sixth century and beyond, “icons of Christ and of the emperor were even worshipped side by side, with more or less the same rituals.”⁷ This position neatly explains *post-pacem* images of the enthroned Jesus. Scholars following Grabar’s and Belting’s arguments would interpret an ecclesial image of Christ enthroned as having imperial antecedents and connections.

Thomas Mathews famously rebuts the imperial argument in his book *The Clash of Gods*, now in its second printing. In the first chapter, titled “The Emperor Mystique,” Mathews includes this term to describe the continual reaction to art of this period as imperial. In Mathews’s estimation, Christian art had a variety of influences, many of them nonimperial, that must be taken into account. In his introduction, Mathews delves into a social-historical critique of scholars such as Grabar, claiming that their arguments for an imperial influence are evidence of their own historical context. According to Mathews, those who advanced the imperial argument—Ernst Kantorowicz, Andreas Alföldi, and André Grabar—were blinded by their social upbringing in failed empires such as Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Prussia.⁸ Mathews suggests that Grabar saw Jesus as an emperor out of nostalgia for a Russia of the tsars, for example. Grabar’s arguments in Mathews’s estimation thus reveal more about Grabar than about early Christian art.⁹

Such claims make Mathews an easy target to refute. Critics such as Liz James pointed out his characterization of the “Emperor Mystique” as flawed due to his unfortunate personal critique of Grabar’s social background.¹⁰ While Mathews’s book was pivotal, forcing a conversation and reevaluation of art of this period, his thesis was

7. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 106.

8. Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 15–16.

9. Mathews, *Clash of Gods*, 16.

10. Liz James, “Review: *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* by Thomas F. Mathews,” *The Burlington Magazine* 136, no. 1096 (July 1994), 458–59.

never entirely accepted by art historians.¹¹ In his review of Mathews's book for the *Art Bulletin*, Peter Brown critiques Mathews but also points out that this was a "book that needed to be written. . . . Classical scholars tended to assume that the art and culture of the Christians were virtually non-existent; that they needed a 'head start' from imperial and upper-class patrons to flourish at all."¹² Mathews's work still tends to be divisive for art historians rather than a unifying voice in the field.

This book follows in the wake of Mathews, and desires to continue the conversation regarding the imperial influence on early Christian art. As the reader will see, the authors of the essays in this volume are not unified in their assessment of the imperial influence. However, despite our different viewpoints, the authors agree that this is a conversation worth having without retreating behind disciplinary lines or staid theories. Art historians and religion scholars have much to share to illuminate our conception of the art of Late Antiquity. We contend that the art and imagery of Late Antiquity require a deeper understanding of the context of the imperial period before and after Constantine. And a variety of voices, rather than one, can help gain perspective on art in this era. Thus a volume of different essays is perhaps the best approach to begin reevaluating Christian art of Late Antiquity. These chapters each treat an aspect of the relationship between early Christian art and the rituals, practices, or imagery of the empire. The persistent assumption that fourth-century Christian art was influenced primarily by Constantine's acceptance of the religion and incorporated elements of the imperial cult must be challenged. These chapters offer a new and fresh perspective on the development of Christian art in its imperial background.

11. Reviews of Mathews's book such as James's and Annabel Wharton's in *American Historical Review* (December 1995).

12. Peter Brown, "Review of *The Clash of Gods* by Thomas F. Mathews," *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 (September 1995), 499.

In the initial chapter, Robin M. Jensen examines the topic of how imperial procession rituals heavily influenced Christian liturgical rituals and early Christian art. Art historians and liturgical scholars simply presumed that after Constantine, Christianity merely transplanted imperial rituals and imbued them with a Christian understanding. Imperial rituals such as divinizing the emperor, worshipping his genius in official proceedings, witnessing triumphal processions in the city of Rome, and ritual practices involving temple sacrifice and the eating of sacrificial food were practices observed and understood by an early Christian audience. Among the most commonly cited examples of imperial ceremonies that influenced early Christian material culture are the presentation of tribute, the imperial *adventus*, and the apotheosis or consecration of an emperor after his death. Art historians have linked these three particular ceremonies with three parallel events in the life of Christ, all of them depicted in fourth- and fifth-century Christian art: the adoration of the magi, the entrance into Jerusalem, and the ascension. What Jensen shows is that the “imperializing” of Christianity through these artistic examples is overstated and much more complex than initially realized. Jensen goes even further, suggesting that these artistic examples could even be understood as counter-imperial rather than pro-imperial, an argument that has received little attention in prior scholarship.

An early Christian artistic motif that is utilized to support the well-entrenched theory that Christian images prior to Constantine were relatively humble while post-Constantinian images exude glory is the *traditio legis*. Thomas Mathews challenged this theory in his book *The Clash of Gods*, calling such a theory the “Emperor Mystique.” Despite some misgivings of art historians, examining Mathews’s theory through the lens of the *traditio legis* illuminates the logic behind his argument. In his chapter, Lee Jefferson explains how the image of an

enthroned Jesus giving the law seemingly represents a triumphal Jesus and recalls the imperial cult. But Jefferson argues that the focus of the *traditio legis* is not the enthroned Jesus at all, but rather the action that Jesus is performing. In giving the law, the image represents and reflects ecclesial authority, an interpretation that can be illuminated by the historical context of fourth- and fifth-century Rome. By focusing on several examples of the *traditio legis*, Jefferson believes that the interpretation of the *traditio legis* as an image suggesting church hierarchy and authority can be realized.

As the author of the pseudepigraphic letter 1 Peter saw it, writing in 80–90 CE, many early Christians lived as “sojourners” in an empire that was not really their own. Speaking in the guise of the apostle Peter, the author advised them not to draw attention to themselves, to show respect to everyone in their daily interactions, and above all, to “honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:17). Despite the apoplectic protestations of their peers, many Christians did just that by taking part in Rome’s imperial cult. In his chapter, Douglas Boin points out that from the text of Revelation to the writings of Tertullian, Christians can be seen participating in festivals and sacrifices for the emperor. Seen in light of other Christians who are known to have taken part in imperial festivals, this appeal to Peter as a voice of cultural resistance can now emerge as a highly “selective” social memory of certain writers within the Christian movement. According to Boin, the stereotype of Christians as a self-isolated minority that did not participate in festivals and celebrations of Roman civic life should be discarded. His study illuminates what it meant to be “Christian” in the time of Constantine and beyond.

The execution of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the heart of the Christian faith. An image of Jesus crucified is exceedingly rare in visual art and material culture prior to the sixth century. However, images of the instrument of his death, the cross, rather than a crucifix,

appear in post-Constantinian art as references to salvation and victory instead of suffering. Felicity Harley-McGowan explains the Roman practice of depicting the conqueror over the vanquished as a trophy and symbol of victory. In early Christian literature, Jesus' triumph over death is occasionally described as a military conquest, but it is curious how this imperial influence corresponds to early Christian art. Harley-McGowan points out that the symbol of the captive in Roman imperial examples, the trophy that was so critical, is absent in representations of Christian triumph. By utilizing the work and theory of André Grabar, Harley-McGowan explains how Christian art reversed the imperial prototype, and the victim was transformed into the victor. The effect was important for the development of Christian iconography, for it created a new genre of imagery: Christian suffering. However, Harley-McGowan examines how imperial themes were incorporated and understood in the development of Christian iconography.

Jennifer Awes Freeman takes up the recognizable and important symbol of the Good Shepherd in early Christian art. Often the Good Shepherd is seen only through an imperial lens. She identifies the false dichotomy created by prior scholars, which pits the humble, grassroots Christ depicted in catacombs and sarcophagi against that of the triumphant enthroned Christ of apse mosaics. Freeman suggests that this understanding must be reexamined, and instead the two iconographic motifs are not so very different. Freeman argues that the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, with connections to kings like David, can in fact be interpreted as another possible dimension of imperial iconography rather than one of pastoral, peaceful humility.

Jacob Latham treats similar issues of negotiation and adoption, focusing on the *pompa circensis*. Latham describes the shift in imperial representations of the procession during the games in numismatic art. Rather than depict the gods, third-century coins depict the living

emperor as sponsor of the games. This shift was useful for *post-pacem* Christian emperors. As Latham points out, Christian critics such as Tertullian were merciless in their rhetoric against the games. Turning attention to the sponsor of the games occluded the presence of the gods, which allowed the procession (and so also the games) to appear neutral. Thus, the games and the procession that preceded them were sanitized of any patina of idolatry, and their practice could continue as a secular practice. Latham goes on to describe how the survival of the *pompa circensis* may have allowed it to be Christianized, with symbols of the Christian God appearing in representations in certain images, granting the practice a sense of legitimacy.

Roman statuary, even entering into the Constantinian period, included prominent images of the gods and of the emperor. The Colossal Constantine statue, the remains now housed in the Capitoline Museum, exhibit such a tendency in fourth-century art. Michael Peppard asks the question: Why did early Christians in the fourth century *not* populate their nascent visual language with statues of Jesus? There are some images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but few if any of Jesus as “Colossal” as Constantine. Peppard’s chapter is not as much about what Christians did but what they, for the most part, did *not* do—and will treat the decision ultimately not to reinstall the commissioned silver statues for the Lateran Basilica after the sack of Rome. Peppard examines how early Christians mediated the divine presence in the absence of statues through art, ritual, and symbols. The decisions made by early Christians regarding statues allow us to more fully analyze theories of how art functioned in early Christianity during the imperial period. As Peppard argues, the avoidance of statues allowed early Christians to negotiate visually between Jewish and Roman identities.

Late Antique Constantinople was far from Rome, and as Katherine Marsengill points out, the emperor Constantine mimicked elements

of Rome and also abandoned some of the visual aspects of Roman cultic influence. There certainly continued to be statues and images of the emperor in public spaces, but following Constantine, there were churches and also spaces for images of Christ. Marsengill argues that the development of Late Antique Constantinople is an apt example of the imperial influence on Christian iconography. It seems that there was space in which the emperor and his veneration could exist alongside a nascent Christian influence in the city. Marsengill claims that until around the turn of the fifth century the public spaces in Constantinople were dedicated to the adoration of the emperor. As time progressed, iconography expressed less of a severe dichotomy between Christ and the emperor and more of an intertwined relationship.

In the final chapter, Adam Levine analyzes a little-discussed image of Jesus from the fourth century. The Hinton St. Mary mosaic was discovered in Dorset in England. The central image features the only surviving image of Jesus from Late Antique Britain. The figure appears in a *clipeus* with a *chi rho* above his head. The central image has been generally interpreted to represent Jesus; however, it shares features with representations of the emperor. Levine argues that the Hinton St. Mary mosaic is more complicated than previously reported, and that imperial iconography is an important factor in discerning how a Christian in Late Antique Britain would interpret the central image.

Although varied in topic and stance, these chapters are united in the perception that Christian art in its imperial context deserves further attention. However influential, the work of previous scholars should be revisited and challenged. Providing more voices to the conversation rather than limiting them respects the complexity of Christian art in Late Antiquity and advances our understanding of the topic. This book, with its interdisciplinary methodology, hopes to

increase the awareness that early Christians were as visually oriented as Leo insisted. And early Christians were dedicated to portraying their relationship with their God with a variety of influences, including the most obvious one: the empire in which Christianity blossomed.

Lee M. Jefferson

Robin M. Jensen