11.
Image and Rhetoric in Early Christian Sarcophagi:
Reflections on Jesus' Trial

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Introduction: Art and Rhetoric

Roman art is strikingly rhetorical.¹ In particular, sarcophagi – with their highly distinctive and restricted spatial field for visual representation and the relatively narrow range of formal devices employed to decorate them – are strongly so.² By formal devices I mean the repertoire of compositional elements that make up sarcophagi,³ the repetition of iconographic types (whose differences and specific identities may depend on no more than a single attribute being present or absent, or the juxtaposition with another scene) and the particular (relatively restricted) range of treatments of the carved surface.⁴ The relatively limited range of formal elements, combined with a marked creativity and variation in their deployment, creates what is simultaneously an interrelated corpus of copious material (both pagan and Christian) and one in which many figurative images allude (at different levels) to narratives that may range from myth and oral tradition to scriptural texts. But each item claims rhetorical specificity and difference from the others through its employment (including its position, thematic juxtaposition, formal and technical treatment) by contrast with other standard elements.

Since the era of Roman sarcophagi (at its heyday between roughly 100 and 400) coincides so closely with what is called the Second Sophistic, the great

1 A point at the heart of Meyer 2007.

2 For some general discussion of formal matters (not in relation to rhetoric), see Koch and Sichtermann, 1982, 62–84 and Koch, 2000, 29–64.

3 For instance, lids with separate scenes and a central block for an inscription, tondi with representations of the deceased, framing choices like colonnades with varieties of entablature, the use of unusual spaces created by such framing – such as, the spandrels of an arch – and so on.

4 Such treatments include the shallower relief of end panels by comparison with fronts, the different choices of abstract decoration such as strigillation (curving to the left or the right) or conch-shaped patterning and so forth, or the fluting or strigillating of columns in colonnades, and the willingness to alternate such patterning with figural decoration.

flowering of Greek rhetorical education and performance in Roman culture, and then the rise of Christian rhetorical culture in the fourth century, it is hardly surprising that parallels between visual and literary rhetoric have been drawn.⁵ In this paper, concentrating on later Roman sarcophagi with Christian themes, I want to emphasise one aspect of the rhetorical nature of Christian sarcophagi – namely, their powerful investment in issues of apology and polemic. Two things need to be stressed at the outset. First, this is only one aspect of Christian sarcophagi and it is an arena in which they differ in certain respects from the pagan (or, perhaps better, pre-Christian) sarcophagi that preceded them, since no other set of sarcophagus iconographies has the same confessional insistence or makes similar claims to an overt religious sectarian identity, unless one were to grant much stronger cultic meanings to the large corpus of sarcophagi with Dionysiac themes than has become popular in recent years.⁶ Second, by focusing on apology and polemic, I turn to a central issue in Christian culture – especially in the many pamphlets written by Christians against pagans and against each other – whose inflections in literary discourse are clearly modulated differently from how they operate in visual imagery. But, whether in texts or in art, the edge of both polemic and apology is highly dependent on a series of rhetorical tropes such as *synkrisis* (comparison), encomium and panegyric (both forms of praise), *psogos* (invective), *topos* (the amplification of faults or virtues), and *antirrêsis* (the contradiction of another's argument), which all have notable theoretical literatures in the many rhetorical handbooks used in ancient education which survive from our period.⁷ Apology and polemic were at the heart of how people were trained to think and to express themselves, and so it is hardly surprising to find such qualities invested and reflected in the art of the early Church.

5 For instance, Müller 1994, 139–70; Zanker and Ewald 2004, 110–115.

6 The current consensus (of Dionysiac imagery as a 'Glücksvision') is perhaps best represented by Zanker and Ewald 2004, 135–67 by contrast with the earlier and much more religious interpretations of Turcan 1966, 368–632.

7 All these technical terms within rhetoric and their specific associations with arguments of praise or blame (hence apology or polemic) are to be found in our earliest such handbook, the *Progymnasmata* of Aelius Theon from the first century (ed. M. Patillon and G. Bolognesi, Paris, 1997 and tr. Kennedy, 2003, 1–72). Most are repeated with some elaboration in the later *progymnasmata* collected in Spengel, 1854–6 and translated in Kennedy, 2003. Likewise, Menander Rhetor, the works attributed to whom belong to the late third or early fourth century, divides all epideictic oratory into encomiastic (*enkomiastikous*) or invective (*psetikous*), which are respectively to do with praise (*epainos*) and blame (*psogos*): 331.1–15 (the opening of Book 1, ed. and tr. D. Russell and N. Wilson, *Menander Rhetor*, Oxford, 1981).

Apology and Polemic in Early Christian Sarcophagi: The Case of the Trial of Jesus

Our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ was silent when false witnesses spoke against him, and answered nothing when he was accused; he was convinced that all his life and actions among the Jews were better than any speech in refutation of the false witnesses and superior to any words that he might say in reply to the accusations... It might well cause amazement among those with moderate intellectual powers that a man who was accused and charged falsely did not defend himself and prove himself not guilty of any of the charges, although he could have done so.⁸

So begins Origen's great defence of the faith, *Contra Celsum*, written in about 248. Of course, there is a certain knowing elegance in the irony that Origen (c. 185–255) begins his eight book refutation of the false accusations against Christianity made by Celsus with reference to the Saviour's silence in the face of false witness.⁹ But there is also a substantial point, which Origen makes by citing the Gospels of Matthew and Mark,¹⁰ in the scandal – from the pagan point of view – of Jesus's silence at the moment when a wise man of the world of ancient philosophy, sophistic rhetoric or polytheism (a Socrates, an Apuleius, an Apollonius) would have delivered a brilliant and lengthy speech of apology.¹¹ Indeed, insofar as pagan assaults on Jesus have survived (preserved by the excerpts of, and ripostes to, them in apologetics like Origen's), Jesus' meekness was one obvious and direct target.¹² As the great pagan apologist and Neo-Platonist, Porphyry of Tyre (234 – c.305) wrote sometime between 270 and 300:

How is it that Christ uttered nothing worthy of a wise and divine man either when brought before the High Priest or before the governor, when he could have instructed the bystanders and made them better people? Why instead did he tolerate being hit with a reed, spat on, crowned with thorns, and not act like Apollonius, who spoke freely to the emperor Domitian and then vanished from the royal

8 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, praef. 1–2, translated by Henry Chadwick. For a historian's discussion of the Gospel account of the trial (something very different from early Christian and pagan interpretations of the Gospels and from Origen's employment of them), see Millar 1990.

9 On Jesus' silence in *Contra Celsum*, see Frede 1999, 136, 143–5, and Perrone 2005, 105–111.

10 The key texts are Matt. 26. 59–63 and 27.11–25; Mark 15, 2–15; Luke 23.1–25. Origen explicitly quotes Matt. 26. 59–63 and 27.11–14.

11 See Frede 1999, 144: 'There was no apology – let alone a triumphant, self-assertive one. This the pagans found impossible to understand, unacceptable and ignominious.' Further on this topic and its place in the development of Christian notions of uniqueness, see Elsner 2009.

12 As in Celsus' attack in Origen, *Contra Celsum* II.33–5 and 67–8; and probably in Hierocles's attack on Jesus by contrast with Apollonius of Tyana to judge by Eusebius's comments in his *Contra Hieroclem* 38.

chamber to appear a few hours later very clearly in the city of Dicaearchia, now called Puteoli? As for Christ, even if he had to suffer in accordance with God's commands, still he did not have to undergo his suffering without speaking freely. He could have pronounced some words of goodness and wisdom to Pilate, his judge, and not be insulted like some commoner from the street corner.¹³

This fragment, among the many cited and refuted by Macarius of Magnesia in his *Apocriticus* written in the later fourth century,¹⁴ indicates the scandal of Jesus' silence to be still a live issue well beyond the Peace of the Church and into the Theodosian era.

My point in opening with this polemic is to foreground the charged and not purely Scriptural basis of at least one particular theme in the iconography of early Christian art. Just as certain topics in Christian imagery may be taken to have an implicit polemical intent against paganism (notably the refusal of the three Hebrews, later put into the fiery furnace, to worship an idol),¹⁵ so others – such as the representations of the miracles and not least the trial of Jesus – may be said to offer an apologetic edge that justifies and elevates Christianity above its ancient religious competitors as the (one) true religion. In this sense, early Christian art is much closer to the world of polemic and apology which characterises most early Christian writing, both before Constantine's conversion and in the century after his death, than has usually been assumed. The representations of Christ before Pilate, many of which date from between Porphyry's late pagan attack on the Christians and Macarius' refutation of Porphyry (indeed most of them cluster within the later fourth century), cannot be said to portray the theme that made this subject so controversial in the polemical and apologetic literature – namely, Jesus' silence. Indeed, how can silence be unambiguously represented in visual form? Nonetheless these images may be taken to make a special emphasis of his trial, and consequently to use it as the basis of a visual claim for Christian primacy. It is impossible to say how many of those who saw such images knew also of the fierce literary polemic on the same Scriptural theme, with which Origen chose to open his *Contra Celsum*,

13 Porphyry *Adversus Christianos* fr. 63 in von Harnack 1916, no. 1, 84–5 (also in von Harnack 1911, 32) and in Goulet 2003, 72–3. The translation here is after Jones 2006, 139–41. On Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos*, see Riedweg 2005, with extensive bibliography at 188–98.

14 For discussion of Macarius and a date of about 375 for his text, see Goulet 2003, vol. 1, 48–65, esp. 65.

15 Most famously perhaps in the fourth century Adelfia sarcophagus in Syracuse (lower register, far left side) – see *Rep.* II, 20, pp. 8–10. See also *Rep.* I, 28, pp. 24–6 and *Rep.* I, 160, pp. 100–101 (both from lids); *Rep.* II, 10, pp. 3–4; *Rep.* II, 63, pp. 20–21; *Rep.* III, 32, p. 16; *Rep.* III, 38, pp. 24–5; *Rep.* III, 41, pp. 28–9; *Rep.* III, 42, pp. 29–31 (the image here is lost and hypothetically restored to a unique position at the right of the upper tier); *Rep.* III, 118, pp. 72–4 (on the left side); *Rep.* III, 438, p. 205 (a fragment). See e.g. Carletti 1975, pp. 64–87 and Wegner 1980.

but it is hard to imagine that any who did would not have found their responses to the visual rendition enriched.

The case for the significance of the theme of Christ's trial lies in the number of sarcophagi which depict the topic and the emphasis they give it.¹⁶ Invariably the trial is placed in a privileged position at the far right of the sarcophagus front – that is, the end point of a narrative reading, if one reads the images from left to right as in a text (see Figures 11.1 and 11.2).¹⁷ The scene functions as an end point not only through position, in relation to its placement on the plane of a sarcophagus front or lid, but it serves also as an end to the story of Christ's life and mission in the sense that the trial is used as a metonym for the entire Passion narrative.¹⁸ The trial depiction often stands for the Passion – either alone (in the majority of cases) or alongside one other scene from what would later become the Passion-cycle, such as the entry into Jerusalem or the washing of the feet.¹⁹ Interestingly, in that the scene – whether as metonym for the

16 The surviving examples (excluding quite a few small fragments) are *Rep.* I, 28, pp. 24–6; *Rep.* I, 45, pp. 43–5 ('the Two Brothers' sarcophagus, where Pilate washes his hands but Jesus does not appear); *Rep.* I, 49, pp. 48–9; *Rep.* I, 57, pp. 54–5 (fragmentary); *Rep.* I, 58, p. 56; *Rep.* I, 189, pp. 119–20; *Rep.* I, 667, p. 268; *Rep.* I, 677, pp. 274–7; *Rep.* I, 679, pp. 278–9 (the sarcophagus of Pius II); *Rep.* I, 680, pp. 279–83 (the Junius Bassus sarcophagus of 359 from the Vatican); *Rep.* III, 41, pp. 28–9; *Rep.* III, 42, pp. 29–31 (the much damaged Servanne sarcophagus – here the trial of Christ is exceptionally placed at the centre of the lower tier); *Rep.* III, 53, pp. 39–40; *Rep.* III, 291, pp. 143–4; *Rep.* III, 412, pp. 191–2; *Rep.* III, 416, pp. 194–5 (lost but known from a seventeenth century drawing); *Rep.* III, 452, p. 210 (fragmentary); *Rep.* III, 453, pp. 210–11 (fragmentary but known from an eighteenth century drawing); *Rep.* III, 498, pp. 235–6 (the so-called sarcophagus of Mary Magdalene); *Rep.* III, 512, p. 245 (fragmentary); *Rep.* III, 646, pp. 296–7 (fragmentary). To this list (from the volumes of *Rep.* I–III) must be added Saggiorato 1968, no. 14, pp. 46–7 (a lost columnar sarcophagus from Narbonne known in a seventeenth century drawing) and no. 17, pp. 56–7 (a fifth-century example now in Milan). For some discussion, see e.g. *ibid.* 88–93; Aixalà 1994; Koch 2000, 179; Hourihane 2009, 68–83 and the list of examples in his Appendix A, 375–81.

17 The only exception to this placement is the restored example of *Rep.* III, 42 in Arles. See the handy scheme in Table 1 of von Campenhausen 1929, after 85.

18 See Saggiorato 1968, 81–88 and Schiller 1972, 64. On the Passion sarcophagi generally, see von Campenhausen 1929; Gerke 1940a; Schrenk 1995, 35–51.

19 The Trial and entry into Jerusalem: *Rep.* I, 28 and 680; the Trial and washing of the feet: *Rep.* I, 58 and 679; *Rep.* III, 53 and 412. On the washing of the feet, see Giess 1962, 43–7, 95–6; Hourihane 2009, 76–80. On the entry into Jerusalem, see Dinkler 1970, 17–27. There are two exceptions: *Rep.* III, 41, which offers an entire Passion cycle in its lower zone, and *Rep.* I, 49, a fourth century columnar sarcophagus from the Domitilla Catacomb, known in the older literature as 'Lateran 171'. This has a central scene of the cross with chi-rho and sleeping soldiers flanked by Jesus with the crown of thorns and the carrying of the cross (by Simon of Cyrene?) to the left and the two trial images to the right; see Campenhausen 1929, 67–8 and Gerke 1940a, 71–5.

Figure 11.1: The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, dated by inscription to 359 AD and found in the Vatican. Now in St Peter's. The trial of Christ before Pilate appears in the top two intercolumniations to the far right. Photograph: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, negative A24/276.

Passion or as Origenic evocation of Christ's exceptional silence – is an end also in the sense of a triumphant apology for Christianity, it contrasts specifically with the regular (almost invariable) positional deployment of the polemical three Hebrews scene, which is almost always at the left end of a sarcophagus.²⁰ Effectively, the polemical and apologetic tendencies of iconographic types have a rhetorical placement visually in early Christian art as the opening and closing of arguments conducted through pictorial space. In a now almost wholly lost sarcophagus from the Vatican, known from Antonio Bosio's seventeenth century engraving (Figure 11.2), the Hebrews theme opens the visual argument at the top left (on the lid) and the trial of Jesus closes it on the bottom right (on the main base).²¹ Likewise, in a two-tier frieze sarcophagus from Arles, Pilate washes his hands (though Jesus does not appear) at the far right of the upper register of the main coffin while the three Hebrews scene is depicted at the far left of the lower register.²²

20 The one exception to a far-left place in the three Hebrews iconography is (again) *Rep.* III, 42, where the subject is hypothetically restored.

21 *Rep.* I, 28, pp. 24–6.

22 *Rep.* III, 41, pp. 28–9.

Figure 11.2: A now lost sarcophagus from the Vatican cemetery, probably last third of the fourth century. Lid: the Hebrews before Nebuchadnezzar, the Hebrews in the fiery furnace and the Epiphany; main front: the Entry to Jerusalem, Christ between Peter and Paul and the Trial before Pilate. Photograph: from Antonio Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea*, Rome 1632, p. 63.

In the case of columnar sarcophagi – the most common type by far to include the scene – the trial of Jesus has the unusual distinction of being the one iconographic type to operate across the demarcation of a column, occupying the two intercolumniations at a sarcophagus' right end (and in the case of double register sarcophagi at the right of the upper tier, see Figures 11.1, 11.3 and 11.4).²³ The expansion of an important scene across two intercolumniations in early Christian art is rare but not unique to this theme – Moses' crossing of the Red Sea occupied two intercolumniations in the highly influential mid-to-late fourth century frescoes of Old Testament narratives in Old St Peter's and, perhaps consequently, the full face of several late fourth century early Christian frieze sarcophagi.²⁴ This expanded visual space for the trial of Christ is echoed on the lid of the Brescia Casket, a very high-quality ivory box (perhaps a pyxis for Eucharistic bread or possibly a reliquary) from the later fourth century. There, an abbreviated Passion cycle in two bands, which excludes any typological Old Testament imagery (such as it appears in the iconography on the

23 The columnar examples are *Rep.* I, 49; *Rep.* I, 57; *Rep.* I, 58; *Rep.* I, 189; *Rep.* I, 677; *Rep.* I, 680; *Rep.* III, 53; *Rep.* III, 291; *Rep.* III, 412; *Rep.* III, 416; *Rep.* III, 452; *Rep.* III, 498; *Rep.* III, 512; *Rep.* III, 646. Of these 14 examples, only *Rep.* I, 679 and *Rep.* III, 53 have the trial scene within a single intercolumniation; all others extend the subject across two. See Lawrence 1932, 103–85, esp. 109.

24 Our principal source for the Old St Peter's frescoes is Grimaldi 1972, 140 with discussion by Kessler 2002, 9, 53, 76–7, 98–9. Note that the Red Sea theme is reproduced in the fifteenth century cycle of mural copies of the St Peter's cycle in the Oratory of the Annunicata in Cori (ibid. 54, 101 and plate 3.9). On the Red Sea sarcophagi, see Rizzardi 1970.

Figure 11.3: 'Lateran 174' – sarcophagus from the Vatican cemetery, third quarter of the fourth century AD. In the intercolumniations from left to right: the sacrifice of Isaac, Peter and an attendant, Paul turning to Christ in the centre, Christ enthroned, Peter receiving the Law, Christ arrested and Pilate washing his hands. Photograph: DAIR 1933.0151.

Figure 11.4: 'Lateran 171' – sarcophagus from the vicinity of the catacomb of Domitilla, dated to about 350 AD. Now in the Vatican Museum. In the intercolumniations from left to right: Simon of Cyrene carrying the Cross, Christ crowned with the crown of thorns, the *crux invicta* with soldiers beneath, Christ arrested and Pilate washing his hands. Photograph: DAIR. 1933.0155 (Brügner).

casket's four sides), has Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, his arrest and Peter's denial on the upper level and the two trials of Jesus – before Caiaphas and Pilate – placed side by side as the culminating images of the Passion in the lower band.²⁵

²⁵ On the Brescia Casket, see Volbach 1976 (o.v. 1916), no. 107, 77–8; Kollwitz 1933; Delbrueck 1952; Watson 1981, 283–98; Tkacz 2002; Elsner 2008, 21–38, esp. 31–3. On the trial of Jesus on the casket in relation to some of its very complex visual typologies, see Tkacz 2002, 28–30, 76–9, 82–3.

As late as the sixth century, the trial of Christ retains exceptional visual importance in the two full-page miniatures devoted to the theme in the Rossano Gospels (fol 8r and fol 8v) where the trial appears to be the culmination of a visual narrative depicting the Passion and some parables.²⁶ This pictorial cycle draws on events from the four Gospels and seems to have served as a prefatory visual frontispiece to the text of all four.²⁷ Oddly, neither image represents Pilate washing his hands and it has been supposed that a third page depicting this event has been lost.²⁸ Two other manuscripts, the Syriac Rabbula Gospels of 586 and the Latin Gospels of St Augustine (made in Italy in the sixth century), include images of the trial within a larger Passion cycle but without special emphasis.²⁹ Likewise, the two scenes of Christ before Caiaphas and Pilate survive as small panels from the fifth century wooden doors of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, where they figured within a substantive Passion cycle.³⁰ It is worth noting that the theme appears to be entirely absent from the other major category of early Christian art besides sarcophagi, namely catacomb painting, as well as from our surviving ivories other than the Brescia Casket.³¹ Again, the trial is rare, though not unknown, in surviving or textually attested early Christian monumental church decoration.³² From this swift iconographic

26 See Cavallo, Gribomont and Loerke 1987, 109–114 on the pictorial cycle and 145–54 on these miniatures; also Loerke 1961, 171–95; Kessler 2007, esp. 162–4; Hourihane 2009, 47. These identify both miniatures as representing the trial of Jesus before Pilate, while Lowden 1999, 19 says the second (fol. 8v.) is the trial before Herod. The disagreement is interesting but irrelevant for my purposes here. The manuscript is in Greek and probably from the east.

27 See Lowden 1999, 18–21.

28 There are now nine prefatory folios surviving out of what originally may have been as many as twenty (see Cavallo, Gribomont and Loerke 1987, 113). For the postulation of a third trial miniature, see Loerke 1961, 175–6.

29 The Rabbula Gospels read from right to left (as normal in Syriac), and the trial before Pilate (fol. 12 b) is part of a life and Passion cycle rendered as marginal illustrations to the Canon tables. Pilate faces Christ here and does not wash his hands. However, the Rabbula illustrator reserves the climax of the Passion cycle for full page miniatures of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the Ascension, Christ enthroned and the Pentecost. See Cecchelli, Furlani and Salmi 1959, 66–7. The Gospels of St Augustine include the trial before Pilate as one of 12 small scenes in the Passion cycle miniature (fol. 125r, alongside the arraignment before Caiaphas) which begins with the entry into Jerusalem and ends with the carrying of the cross. See Wormald 1954, 1 for date and captions to plates v and vi.

30 See Jeremias 1980, 56–7, 58–9.

31 Pilate washing his hands appears in one of the small ivory panels from an early fifth century box now in the British Museum, to the left of a scene that includes both the carrying of the cross and Peter's denial. See Volbach 1976, no. 116, 82.

32 The trial before Pilate appears, as well as the arraignment of Christ before Caiaphas, in the sixth century mosaic cycle devoted to the Passion to the western end of the southern wall above the clerestory of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. See Deichmann 1974,

survey we may say that the trial scene has a climactic and significant place in Passion narratives of the fourth century (although it does not occur in every medium of early Christian art in that period) and exceptionally after that in the Rossano Codex. Otherwise, if the scene is included at all, it is as one among many and not used climactically.

The Trial Scene in Fourth Century Sarcophagi

In discussing the employment of the trial scene on sarcophagi of the second half of the fourth century, one might isolate two principal uses. First, when the theme appears as the sole narrative image from the Passion alongside images evoking the martyrdoms of the two principal apostolic Roman saints – Peter or Paul, or both. Second, when the scene occurs in a group of images that focus on narratives from within the Passion cycle.³³ In both these cases, the meekness of Jesus – as emphasised by Origen and of a kind that caused incomprehension to apologists of traditional culture like Porphyry – stands as a paradigm, a model for his martyred successors and a contrast to other kinds of authority, notably the temporal power of the Roman state as embodied in Pilate within the trial scene. Silence as such may not be at issue here, but that characteristic rejection of all that the state and the culture stands for through a striking form of non-violent and non-verbal resistance – which Jesus' silence certainly came to mean to both pagan and Christian writers – is certainly at stake.

Let us begin with the incorporation of the trial in what may be termed a Roman martyrdom context. A series of sarcophagi – of which the most famous is that of Junius Bassus from 359 (Figure 11.1) – emphasise the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul alongside that of Jesus. All have Christ between two apostles, probably Peter and Paul, in the centre, or the image of the *crux invicta* flanked by two soldiers (one awake and one sleeping)³⁴ with the two trial intercolumniations to the right. On the left are a variety of scenes including the arrest or martyrdom of Peter or Paul (or both).³⁵ The images which appear

175, 176–7, 186–7. It is attested also in Choricus' description of the sixth century mosaics at the church of St Sergius in Gaza, see Choricus *Laudatio Marciani* 1.74.

33 I do not follow the categories established by von Campenhausen 1929, and largely accepted with minor adaptations by Gerke 1940a, and Sotomayor 1962, 101–113.

34 *Crux invicta* at the centre: *Rep.* I, 667; *Rep.* III, 412, 416, 498. On the early Christian iconography of Peter, see Sotomayor 1962; on Paul, see Dassmann 1982, and Cooper 2005, 41–87 with bibliography.

35 The examples are (with scenes read from left to right): *Rep.* I, 57, originally found in the Vatican and now much cut down showing the arrest of an apostle, identified as Paul by von Campenhausen 1929, 58 and Gerke 1940a, 76; *Rep.* I, 58, which has the washing of the feet alongside Peter carrying his cross; *Rep.* I.189, from the San Sebastiano complex in Rome, a very early cult centre for both Peter and Paul, which shows both the

in addition to those that specifically allude to the martyr narratives of Peter and Paul include Christ washing Peter's feet, the stoning of Paul at Lystra (arguably an ante-type to his martyrdom), Christ appearing before Paul and the Sacrifice of Isaac. To this group might be added one further sarcophagus, known as Lateran 174 (Figure 11.3), which shows – in addition to Christ between saints and the trial – the sacrifice of Isaac and Peter with an attendant (which may be a rather triumphant rendition of his arrest), as well as a range of Petrine imagery on the two ends.³⁶ Of the non-martyrdom scenes, all but the Sacrifice of Isaac may be said to represent significant moments in the life-cycles of their respective apostles. The Isaac scene, by contrast, employs typology to give an Old Testament prototype for the sacrifice of Christ as epitomised in the trial scene.³⁷ Interestingly, a number of these objects are known to have come from the sites in Rome that specifically venerated Peter and Paul,³⁸ implying iconographic allusion to local cult.³⁹ Clearly in this usage, the trial scene is the largest single narrative theme overlapping two intercolumniations in all the examples that are columnar. It always occupies the right side of the coffin, with the martyr images to the left. Rhetorically, the trial serves both as the model imitated by the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul (especially in the images where Peter bears his own cross,⁴⁰ or where the arrest of Peter visually mirrors the arrest of Christ before Pilate)⁴¹ and as scriptural authorisation for those martyrdoms as themselves an exemplary witness to the Christian salvific dispensation. Indeed, the fact that (in a left to right reading of these sarcophagi) the trial scene is always the last image, appears to support an interpretation of its rhetorical use as validation and mimetic archetype for the Petrine and Pauline passions rather than offering any sense of chronological patterning.

martyrdom of Paul and Peter carrying his cross; *Rep.* I, 667, a frieze sarcophagus from the cemetery of St Valentino with the martyrdom of Paul and Peter carrying his cross; *Rep.* I, 680, the Bassus sarcophagus found at the Vatican, which is exceptional in having two tiers of intercolumniations with the sacrifice of Isaac and the arrest of Peter at the left side of the upper tier and the martyrdom of Paul below Pilate at the right of the lower tier; *Rep.* III, 291 from Marseilles with Christ before Paul and the stoning of Paul at Lystra; *Rep.* III, 412 from Nîmes, with the washing of Peter's feet alongside Peter carrying his cross; *Rep.* III, 416 which is lost but had the martyrdom of Paul and the arrest of Peter; *Rep.* III, 498 with the martyrdom of Paul and the arrest of Peter.

³⁶ *Rep.* I, 677.

³⁷ See e.g. Malbon 1990, 43–7 with earlier bibliography. Note that the Two Brothers sarcophagus (*Rep.* I, 45) pairs the Sacrifice of Isaac with Pilate washing his hands to the right of the upper tier beside the portrait medallion.

³⁸ *Rep.* I, 57, 189, 677, 680.

³⁹ See Elsner 2003, esp. 89–94.

⁴⁰ *Rep.* I, 58, 189, 667; *Rep.* III, 412.

⁴¹ *Rep.* I, 680; *Rep.* III, 416, 498. Generally on the arrest of Peter, see Sotomayor 1962, 63–7.

Between the two wings of these sarcophagi with their insistence on Christ's Passion in Jerusalem and the post-scriptural passions of his senior apostles in Rome itself, are images of either Christ between Peter and Paul or of the *crux invicta* with the soldiers beneath. In the former group, there are a number of themes.⁴² Christ may appear with a jewelled cross, and with the waters and trees of paradise surrounding him and his chosen apostles.⁴³ He may appear as teacher, seated or standing before two or more disciples.⁴⁴ He may appear in cosmic majesty seated over a personification of the earth and handing his law to Peter and Paul (Figures 11.1 and 11.3).⁴⁵ But in all these cases, the central scene effectively unites the temporal distinctions between the two sides (that is the priority of Christ's Passion and its emulation by the later martyrdoms) by placing Jesus *together* with his chosen apostles in an image that simultaneously evokes eternity and the handing down of spiritual authority through Peter and Paul. The movement of such images outside the places of cult directly dedicated to Peter and Paul effectively implies a further transfer of Episcopal authority through the blessing of their imagery to other sites valorised by their presence in Rome and in distant Gaul. It is worth noting that in many of these sarcophagi there is a deliberate differentiation in the facial type used for Jesus between the Pilate scene and the central glorification of Christ.⁴⁶ In the Pilate scene, Jesus is always beardless – emphasising his youth and perhaps the meekness which pagan polemicists found so unnerving. In the central scene, he is usually bearded and often elevated or enlarged,⁴⁷ and when beardless (as in the Bassus sarcophagus or Lateran 174, Figures 11.1 and 11.3) he is otherwise elevated, for instance by being enthroned over the world or carrying a jewelled cross.⁴⁸ At the very least this deliberate contrast between the meek Jesus of the trial and the triumphant Christ of the central scene – especially in the examples of Jesus enthroned over the world – calls into question recent attempts to deny any appropriation of imperial (as well as other kinds of) authority to the image of

42 For a survey of Christ types, see Gerke 1948.

43 *Rep.* I, 57.

44 *Rep.* I, 58, 189; *Rep.* III, 291 (on this last, 'the Sarcophagus of the Companions of St Maurice', see Drocourt-Dubruel 1989, 19–25).

45 *Rep.* I, 677, 680. On the *traditio legis*, see Davis-Weyer 1961, esp. 7–15, which includes *Rep.* I, 58 as an example of this iconography at p. 10; Sotomayor 1962, 125–52; Hellemo 1989, 64–89; and most recently Cooper 2005, 67–87 with further bibliography.

46 For discussion and detailed illustration, see Gerke 1948. More recent accounts include Jensen 2000, 113–120, and Jensen 2005, 142–59.

47 Bearded: *Rep.* I, 28, 58, 189; *Rep.* III, 53.

48 Otherwise elevated: *Rep.* I, 57, 677, 680; *Rep.* III, 291.

Jesus in early Christian art.⁴⁹ The glorification of the cross, with its magnificent appropriation of the martyr crown around a chi-rho above the cross itself alludes both to the Crucifixion, with the soldier to the left of the cross typically looking up awake, and to the Resurrection, with the soldier to the right of the cross typically asleep. It effectively underlines the martyrdom dynamic of the sarcophagi in which it appears, nuancing the implications away from questions of ecclesiastical authority to those of martyrdom and cult.⁵⁰

Among the sarcophagi, the coffin of Junius Bassus (Figure 11.1) calls for special attention since its two-tier programme of intercolumnar images (with yet a third tier of smaller-scale scenes with actors in the form of lambs that fill the spandrels of the arches that frame the lower register) is so much more extensive than the other examples. A long and still inconclusive discussion has raged since 1900 about how exactly to interpret the mass of potential iconographic and typological connections in a satisfactory, which is to say theologically coherent, manner.⁵¹ Suffice it to say that no agreement has been reached or is likely to be. But it is interesting that while the upper tier closely resembles the iconography of Lateran 174 (with the Sacrifice of Isaac and the arrest of Peter to the left, the *traditio legis* at the centre with Christ enthroned over the earth, and the two trial intercolumniations to the right, Figure 11.3),⁵² the lower tier of the Bassus sarcophagus includes a series of scenes that appear either in the other sarcophagi of the trial or in other sarcophagi with a strong emphasis on the martyrdoms of the Roman apostles. These are (to the lower right) the martyrdom of Paul,⁵³ (in the centre) the entry into Jerusalem,⁵⁴ (to the far left) the distress of Job.⁵⁵ Interspersed between these images, flanking the entry into Jerusalem, are two characteristic typological scenes of the Fall (with Adam, Eve, the Serpent and behind them sheaves and a lamb alluding to the Sacrifice of Cain and Abel) to the left, and of the Resurrection, in Daniel in the Lions' Den to the right. The Old Testament scenes thus evoke the Resurrection (Daniel), the Fall (Adam and

49 I have in mind T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, Princeton, 1999 (revised edition), 3–22, with the reviews (of the original edition) by Kinney 1994, and Brown 1995, 499–502. Jensen 2000, 98–103 follows Mathews but is restrained and judicious.

50 On the *crux invicta* on sarcophagi (focussing on Lateran 171, *Rep.* I, 49), see Hellemo 1989, 98–100.

51 See de Waal 1900; Gerke 1936; Schefold 1939; Gaertner 1968; Malbon 1990; Tkacz 2002, 191–3.

52 See e.g. Malbon 1990, 32.

53 Also on *Rep.* I, 189, 777; *Rep.* III, 416, 498.

54 Also on *Rep.* I, 28.

55 Also on *Rep.* I, 61, a tree sarcophagus originally from St Paul's outside the Walls in Rome, with from left to right Sacrifice of Cain and Abel, the arrest of Peter, the *crux invicta*, the martyrdom of Paul and the distress of Job; and *Rep.* I, 215, a now fragmentary tree sarcophagus from San Sebastiano (also a cult site of Peter and Paul) with same iconography as I, 61.

Eve), Sacrifice (Isaac) and the testing of a saintly figure by God (Job).⁵⁶ Rather than looking for an overarching intellectual, aesthetic or theological harmony in the orchestration of these images, it may be wiser to see them as including as full an account as possible of all the options (iconographic but also rhetorical) within the fourth-century sarcophagus tradition that evoked and commented upon the triple martyrdoms of Christ, Peter and Paul as well as invoking their collective triumph.

Given the significance of this particular sarcophagus as the tomb of the City Prefect, its size and the inclusive nature of its iconographic mix – especially if one adds the six spandrel scenes which show the Hebrews in the fiery furnace, Moses (or Peter) striking the rock, Christ's miracle of the loaves, the Baptism, Moses (or Peter) receiving the law and the Raising of Lazarus (with all figures rendered as lambs) – one might argue that its aim is for a kind of visual totality within the highly reductive frame of a sarcophagus' shape and form, rather than for an ordered or clearly assimilable set of meanings. This Christian totality needs to be set beside the highly traditional scenes of the lid (insofar as the iconography of a very damaged artefact is recoverable), the inscriptions and the seasonal imagery of the ends.⁵⁷ The Bassus sarcophagus appears to be attempting to evoke not only a fullness in its Christian images but to situate or frame that within as full an account of traditional Roman 'daily life' and 'passing time' imagery (both themes typical of Roman funerary art) as was possible in an object of its size and shape.⁵⁸

My second group of sarcophagi including the trial of Jesus have fronts with centres of the same kind as the first group, but with images all drawn from within the Scriptural cycle of the Passion.⁵⁹ That is, to the left side one or two Christological images are selectively offered to counterpoint against the trial. *Rep.* I, 28 (Figure 11. 2) – a lost sarcophagus known from Antonio Bosio's engraving – put the entrance to Jerusalem to the left, playing on a contrast between Jesus' earthly triumph (which is particularly marked in the adventus

56 For discussion of these typologies, which I adduce loosely and not with reductive precision, see Malbon 1990, 42–7, 54–68. On the image of Job prefiguring the martyrs, see Dassmann 1973, 273–9.

57 On the lid, see Himmelfmann 1973, 15–28; Daltrop 1978–80; Wischmeyer 1982, 23–36. On the verse inscription see Cameron 2002, correcting the fundamental errors in Malbon 1990, 114–6. On the ends, see Malbon 1990, 99–103 and Elsner 2000, esp. 272–5.

58 For some reflections on the theme of time in the Bassus sarcophagus, see Elsner 2003, 82–7, 89 and on the framing of its Christianity within secularizing and traditional imagery, see Elsner 2008, esp. 26–31.

59 They are *Rep.* I, 28, 49, 679 and *Rep.* III, 53.

scene of the lower centre in the Bassus sarcophagus)⁶⁰ and his meekness and humiliation in the trial by Pilate. Two other schemes – one shared by sarcophagi in Rome and Arles and the other on a unique sarcophagus in Rome – are of particular interest and complexity.

The sarcophagus, which once stood behind the high altar of the church of St-Honorat-les-Alyscamps in Arles, is one of the most impressive, coherent and complex of all surviving early Christian sculptural monuments (Figure 11.5).⁶¹ Its iconography is closely replicated by an unfinished coffin in the Vatican subsequently re-employed for the burial of the fifteenth-century Pope Pius II (Figure 11.6).⁶² It has a bearded Christ at the centre towering above the flat entablature of the colonnade in which he stands, flanked in the arcades to either side by two apostles. Christ hands the law to Peter, who carries a jewelled cross in reference to both Jesus' Passion and his own, to the immediate right, and holds his hand in blessing over Paul to the immediate left. The apostles behind Peter and Paul are not identifiable but carry palm branches. Lambs appear to either side of Jesus and immediately beneath the figures of Peter and Paul. In the arcade to the far right is the scene of the trial – this time relegated to a single intercolumniation where Jesus stands before Pilate who washes his hands. To the far left, Jesus washes Peter's feet, with the apostle enthroned in a parallel posture to Pilate.⁶³

The imagery of water is insistent and brilliantly deployed. In the centre Christ stands in Paradise with the four rivers flowing from a rock on which his feet rest. To the far right, Pilate washes his hands with a low three-legged table and a fancy wash-stand beneath him and an attendant carrying jug and patera (Figure 11.7). To the far left, Christ washes Peter's feet with a simple bowl in place of Pilate's elaborate lion-legged table and wash stand (Figure 11.8). The dynamic moves from Jesus doing the washing of feet, via Christ standing over the waters of Paradise, to Pilate washing his hands. In the now fragmentary ends, scenes of the Baptism of Jesus on the right and Peter striking water from the rock (an apocryphal legend particularly popular in catacomb painting for which a source appears not to have been identified yet)⁶⁴ on the left have been restored. Despite the loss of the figures of Christ and John the Baptist on the

60 See e.g. Malbon 1990, 53–4 with bibliography. Mathews 1999, 27–30, despite a discussion of the entry into Jerusalem which is important to his anti-imperial thesis, fails notably to account for the Bassus sarcophagus at any stage.

61 *Rep.* III, 53, 39–40 – a particularly acute entry by C. Christern-Briesenick. See also Klauser 1966, no. 16, 72–77; Saggiorato 1968, no. 30, 78–80; Spier 2007, no. 64, 242–3.

62 *Rep.* I, 679.

63 On this parallelism (which occurs on a number of surviving sarcophagi), see Hourihane 2009, 76–80.

64 See Malbon 1990, 78–9 with bibliography in the notes.

Figure 11.5: Sarcophagus from St Honorat-les-Alyscamps, in Arles, last third of the fourth century AD. Now in the Arles Museum. In the intercolumniations from left to right: Christ washing Peter's feet, two apostles of which the one on the right is probably Paul, Christ on the rock of paradise with lambs and four rivers flowing, two apostles of which Peter stands to the left and receives the Law, Christ before Pilate. Photograph: J. Elsner.

Figure 11.6: Unfinished sarcophagus from Rome, last quarter of the third century AD, reused in the fifteenth century in the Grotte Vaticane for the burial of Pope Pius II. In the intercolumniations from left to right: Christ washing Peter's feet, two apostles of which the one on the right is probably Paul, Christ on the rock of paradise with male and female worshippers and four rivers flowing, two apostles of which Peter stands to the left and receives the Law, Christ before Pilate. Photograph: Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, negative A74/290.

right and of St Peter on the left, this is likely to be correct, as the iconography is parallel to the sides of another sarcophagus from Alyscamps now in the Arles Museum of roughly the same date and probable Roman provenance.⁶⁵ But what

⁶⁵ *Rep.* III, 49, 35–6, with Saggiorato 1968, 72–8.

cannot be certain is whether the miracle maker at the rock is Peter or Moses functioning as his ante-type, or indeed a figure that could stand for both.⁶⁶ However, whatever precise interpretation one were to put on the sides, there is no doubt that the water imagery of the front flows into them in the form of the liturgically central and scripturally sanctioned waters of Baptism and the waters of miracle. If the figure conducting the miracle is Peter, then his own command over the waters is directly related to the rock imagery of the waters of Paradise on which Jesus stands in the centre and the washing of his own feet by Jesus to the left of the front. If Peter's striking of water from the rock is at all an allusion to his baptism of Cornelius (*Acts* 10. 44–8), then the imagery of the left side emulates and fulfils the Baptism of Jesus himself on the right. Likewise, Jesus' command over the waters – both in the central scene where they flow from beneath his feet and the washing of Peter's feet, where their flow is through his hands – is related to his baptismal chrism at the right end. The active nature of Christ's and Peter's relations with water in all the scenes of the front and ends other than the trial, where Pilate does the washing, is a superb visual device for emphasising the trial as the denial of pagan Rome's authority over the Saviour through his silence, as indicated visually by his having nothing to do with the water motif in that scene.

The contrast of Jesus and Pilate is pointed – with the two squeezed into a single arch (Figure 11.7). Pilate sits like a late Roman emperor in military dress with a jewelled diadem on his head.⁶⁷ He gestures flamboyantly – the hand he is about to wash filling the middle of the visual field in the intercolumniation. Jesus, clean-shaven by contrast with his image at the centre, almost bows before him, the epitome of the meekness and the spiritual rather than temporal authority which the trial supremely encapsulates. Yet the other key counterpoint is between the trial scene and the washing of the feet (Figure 11.8). There Peter sits in a posture that mirrors Pilate, although in tunic and pallium, gesturing not just with one hand but with both – and with his left hand occupying the centre of the scene in direct parallel with Pilate's right. Again Jesus is meek – standing, lower than the seated Peter, performing the ultimate obeisance in washing his disciple's feet. The juxtaposition of authorities is not between Pilate and Christ but between Pilate and Peter – the temporal representative of imperial paganism and the spiritual representative of Episcopal tradition, the former washing

66 See Saggiorato 1968, 79 and – in the context of the Bassus sarcophagus' lamb scene of the same subject – Malbon 1990, 78–82. Generally on the water miracle, see Sotomayor 1962, 57–63.

67 A good parallel for the military uniform (from diadem down to sandaled boots) is the image of the emperor Honorius in the ivory Probus diptych now in Aosta, dated to 406 – which may be roughly contemporary with *Rep.* III, 53 (if we date it as late as 400) and certainly no more than 20 years after the sarcophagus was carved. See Delbrueck 1929, no. 1, pp. 84–7; Volbach 1976, no. 1, pp. 29–30; Kiilerich 1993, 65–7.

Figure 11.7: Detail of figure 5: last intercolumniation from the left: Christ before Pilate.
Photograph: J. Elsner.

himself in rejection of Jesus and the latter anointed by Jesus as his successor through the washing of his feet. In each case, the meekness of Jesus is both the counterpoint to their respective authorities and the attitude which not only

Figure 11.8: Detail of figure 5: first intercolumniation from the left: Jesus washes the feet of St Peter. Photograph: J. Elsner.

establishes that authority in the case of Peter, but also undermines its force with an authority, defined by Jesus' meekness, of a different order and nature from that displayed by both Peter and Pilate.

Against both these forms of authority stands the great central Jesus (Figure 11.5) – bearded, enlarged, bursting out of the architectural frame that incorporates all the other figures and scenes, no longer the meek figure of the left and right, but the triumphant Christ by virtue of whom Peter holds his episcopacy and the authority of a non-Christian empire (for which Pilate stands) is overturned.⁶⁸ The eschatological implication may be reinforced by the small figures in the arch spandrels at the far left and right sides of the front, which show tritons blowing trumpets and perhaps hint at the ending of days. The sea and dolphin imagery of the remaining spandrels again emphasises the water imagery which pervades this iconography and orchestrates its argument.

The other particularly striking scheme where the trial appears in a wholly Passion context is that of the sarcophagus known as Lateran 171, now in the Vatican Museums (Figure 11.4).⁶⁹ Here, uniquely, the trial of Christ – although in its usual place in the two intercolumniations (out of five) to the right of the main face – is the *first* depicted event of the Passion cycle, taken chronologically. In the centre is the *crux invicta*, which – whether read as a symbolic version of the Resurrection (given the martyr-crown, Chi-rho and sleeping soldier to the right) or of the Crucifixion (given the large central cross and the gesturing soldier to the left) – is the last chronological scene in the pictorial cycle.⁷⁰ To the immediate left of the *crux invicta* is a unique image of Christ being crowned with the crown of thorns,⁷¹ and to the far left, Simon of Cyrene carries the cross to Calvary.⁷² The architectural framing of the five niches has the two outer intercolumniations topped with pointed gables in the centre of which have been restored round wreaths.⁷³ These wreaths, immediately above and touching the cross carried by Simon to the left and above Pilate washing his hands to the right, are smaller versions of the great martyr-crown encircling Chi-rho of the central niche, with its large curved arch. As in the far left niche, in the centre the top of the cross touches the wreath (to create the characteristic *crux invicta* form). This dynamic of patterning matters because it picks up the motif of the crown of thorns in the second intercolumniation from the left, where Christ, who holds a scroll, is crowned by a Roman soldier holding a sword.

68 How Mathews 1999, 140 manages to make this image ‘feminine’, ‘a figure who is both and old man and a woman’ is entirely beyond me.

69 *Rep.* I, 49, where it is dated to the mid fourth century. See also the discussions of Gerke 1940a, 71–5; Saggiorato 1968, 20–3, 81–93; G. Spinola in Ensoli and La Rocca 2000, no. 306, 604–5; Spier 2007, no. 46, 219–20.

70 See Hellemo 1989, 98–100 on this scene.

71 See the discussion of Gerke 1948, 31–4.

72 So far as I know, this is a unique depiction of this scene.

73 The best guide to restorations and still the best available photograph is in Wilpert 1929, vol. I, tav 146 (where restorations are circled by a fine white line).

The crown of thorns scene – narratologically, the most extreme moment of Jesus' humiliation and the ultimate parodic inversion of his divine kingship – takes the meekness theme (usually epitomised by the trial images) to its extreme. But it is in fact portrayed with very little sense of humiliation: Jesus stands facing centre right and apparently untroubled while the soldier gently places the crown on his head. Given the insistent suggestion of martyr-crowns in the rest of the sarcophagus' imagery, the crown of thorns here may double up as a martyr-crown, a symbol of Jesus' triumph as supreme martyr. This scene with its level entablature and two figures of a Roman soldier to the left and Christ to the right, both facing rightwards, seems deliberately close to the imagery of the fourth niche which shows Jesus before Pilate. There, Christ's hand is in the gesture of blessing rather than holding a scroll, while the soldier (in very similar kit to his comrade in the crown of thorns image) holds a lance. But the flat entablature, two figures facing right with Jesus in front, and dress of both figures, are all parallel. If the scene before Pilate is the epitome of meekness, then the crowning with thorns is both the development of meekness to a still more extreme point and simultaneously its counterpoint as the proleptic embodiment of Jesus' triumph.

Interestingly, within the complex set of entablature choices that frame these intercolumniations, the narrative images are very simple with no background or context. The only exception to this is the last niche on the right with Pilate washing his hands, where the governor not only has an elegant lion-legged table and wash-stand, but appears to be seated in front of a large military building made from stone-blocks with crenellations and arched windows. It is as if only in the Roman-governor's scene is public, social and civic space allowed to intrude, while the remaining images operate at a more abstract or universal level – the salvation that lies beyond Pilate's washing of hands.⁷⁴ While this sarcophagus keeps carefully to Passion-centred iconography, its deployment and placement of scenes entirely disrupts any urge to a narrative or chronological reading. Rather, the imagery works from the centre outwards to the two images with Jesus that immediately flank it (all figures in both scenes facing to the right) and then to the far niches with Simon of Cyrene (on the left) striding with the cross leftwards out of the pictorial space, and Pilate (on the right) gazing rightwards away from the pictorial scene and both images of Jesus that turn towards him. These two outer images, especially when contrasted with the

74 The proliferation of furniture, toilet accoutrements and a castle-type building in the background is in fact common in the iconography of the Pilate scene (see e.g. *Rep.* I, 28; *Rep.* I, 680; *Rep.* III, 41; *Rep.* III, 53; *Rep.* III, 416; *Rep.* III, 453: I cite only examples where all these elements appear). However in all cases but Lateran 171, other scenes on the sarcophagus have background elements that socialise the imagery which are eschewed here.

two scenes including Jesus next to them, have an emphasis on surrogacy. Simon carries the cross in place of Christ, as his surrogate, while Pilate washes his hands as if this can absolve him of responsibility for his judgement. Pilate's hand-washing is also a kind of surrogacy, in place of his failure to free Jesus and as testament to the weakness of his authority (to do as he would wish) at precisely the point where his power is most directly enacted.

I have been arguing that the iconographic complexity of these sarcophagi cannot be fully accounted for without grasping some element of the simultaneously apologetic and polemical edge of the trial scene. Whether taken as a pictorial cue to the bigger exegetic problem of Jesus' silence, or interpreted more strictly visually, the scene both affirms Christian triumph and undermines traditional Roman power. The repeated iconography presents a confrontation of two kinds of authority in which the temporal one that does the judging, and will after all put the Saviour to death, is nonetheless depicted at the apogee of its weakness with Pilate in the concessive act of washing his hands to show that even he does not concur with the judgment he is himself perforce in the act of passing. By contrast, Jesus – although flanked by soldiers as a condemned prisoner at the first stage of his humiliation – stands making no concession at the outset of a path that will take him through public flogging and crucifixion to the triumph of Resurrection. The image of the trial – and indeed the total iconographic scheme of these sarcophagi – speaks simultaneously for an assertion of Christian supremacy in the form of the Saviour and an implicit denigration of pre-Christian Roman imperialism in the figure of Pilate. In the case of the most complex examples, such as the sarcophagus from Arles, Jesus stands in contrast with more than one form of earthly power – Peter's ecclesiastical authority which is visually shown to depend upon Christ's washing of his feet – and Pilate's judgment.

Visual Turns in the Rhetorical Image

We have seen something of the complex ways that the trial scene stands both apologetically for Christian triumph and polemically against pagan imperial authority. By way of conclusion, let us return briefly to a primarily *polemical* image, the scene of the three Hebrews refusing to worship the 'image of gold whose height was three cubits and the breadth thereof six cubits' which Nebuchadnezzar set up in the plain of Dura (see Figures 11.2 and 11.9).⁷⁵ The polemical potential of this scene against paganism is clear. In the case of the sarcophagi, by making the idol on its column (whether represented as a portrait bust or a painted panel) look as if it were the imperial image, the specific

⁷⁵ Daniel 3.1–18.

targeting of that polemic against the pagan imperial state (with Nebuchadnezzar effectively standing for the Roman emperor) is an effective visual turn to make the polemic more pointed. But what is striking is the iconographic appropriation of the form of this scene to a quite different narrative, from which it can hardly be distinguished save by virtue of the other images juxtaposed against it. This is the theme of the three Magi (who are usually portrayed like the three Hebrews in Persian dress and Phrygian caps) before Herod (e.g. Figure 11.10), who is always accompanied by an idol, like Nebuchadnezzar, before they go on their way to find the Christ child.⁷⁶ Juxtaposed against images of the epiphany (that is, the Magi before the Virgin and Child), the theme must in this case refer to the Magi rather than the three Hebrews, or potentially to both with the Hebrews doubling up as the Magi like whom they look.⁷⁷

In many ways this is a relatively simple switch, a case of the typical iconographic promiscuity that allows the Endymion type of Roman mythological sarcophagi to become Jonah in early Christian sarcophagi,⁷⁸ and indeed allows Ariadne to turn into Endymion (and back again) in non-Christian funerary sculpture.⁷⁹ But it also has a rhetorical role. It shifts the polemical edge from an undermining of Roman hegemonic culture, and specifically paganism, to an attack on idolatry in pre-Christian Jewish culture that is made explicitly by Herod's placement in relation to a graven image. What was once, and powerfully, part of the Jewish case against the polytheistic pagan environment (and accepted as such in early Christian art) now becomes part of the Christian case against Judaism, brilliantly effected by the sleight of hand that simply translates the iconography of one scene into that of another. There is no argument involved here, no justification of what has happened. Rather, the

76 Matthew 2.7. Spectacular examples include the great fourth century sarcophagi in the cathedrals of Tolentino and Ancona, as well as the so-called Stilicho sarcophagus at Sant' Ambrogio in Milan, respectively *Rep.* II, 148, 52–4 (right end of the main coffin); *Rep.* II, 149, 54–6 (right end of the main coffin); *Rep.* II, 150, 56–8 (left front of the lid). See also *Rep.* III, 492, 228–9 (a lid fragment) and the lid of a lost sarcophagus found in Trier and subsequently in Luxembourg in Gerke 1949, 13, 31–4 and illustrated from a drawing at taf. 3, abb. 5. For discussion, see Carletti 1975, 107–112 (also 83–7).

77 Indeed, given the significant placement of the epiphany beneath the main tondo at the bottom of the Adelfia sarcophagus (*Rep.* II.20), one does rather doubt the insistence of interpreters on the identification of the three Hebrews as the sole iconographic subject of the image at the left end of the bottom tier, since it could equally represent the Magi before Herod. See for example *Rep.* II, 20, 9, Carletti 1975, 71–2 or Sgarlata 1998, 23. Likewise, the scene on the lower tier of the right end of the St Trophime sarcophagus is usually seen as the three Hebrews (e.g. *Rep.* III, 118, 73 and Benoit 1954, no. 45, 48) but if read against the epiphany on the upper tier of the left end, then it could also be interpreted as the Magi before Herod.

78 See esp. Gerke 1940b, 120–9; also Mathews 1999, 30–3.

79 On Endymion and Ariadne, see e.g. Koortbojian 1995, 95–8, 135–40, with bibliography.

Figure 11.9: Detail from the left side of the lower register of the Adelfia sarcophagus from the Catacomb of San Giovanni in Syracuse, second quarter of the fourth century. Now in the Museo Archeologico Regionale P. Orsi in Syracuse. Nebuchadnezzar orders the Hebrews to worship his idol. Photograph: DAIR 1971.0863 (Singer).

argument is all in the rhetorical implications of the act of using the iconographic type of three Hebrews for the scene of the Magi before Herod. These are that the Christian dispensation will now rise in triumph over both the pagan Roman imperial origins and the Jewish ethnic and scriptural roots out of which jointly Christianity emerged. Moreover the consonance of imperial/royal portrait with that of the idol (Nebuchadnezzar looking just like his image of gold, in e.g. Figure 11.9, or Herod looking like his idol, something even more directly clear in the Tolentino sarcophagus than in Figure 11.10) implies not only a culture of idolatrous self-worship in the precursors of Christianity which the Incarnation of God has overturned but also a fundamental parallelism of pagan cult and Judaism by contrast with the triumphant and salvific new faith.⁸⁰

80 Further on ways in which early Christians used material culture and iconography rhetorically to affirm religious transformation from and triumph over ancestral origins, see Elsner 2008, and Elsner forthcoming.

Figure 11.10: Sarcophagus of Flavius Gorgonius, Ancona Cathedral, late fourth century AD, right side. The Magi before Herod with an idol on a pillar.
 Photograph: DAIR 1960.1416 (Boehringer).

Acknowledgements

This paper was first written as the Roberts Lecture, given at Dickinson College in 2008. I am particularly grateful to all who were involved, especially to Marc Mastrangelo, who invited me, and to Peter Struck, who responded. As ever, my co-editor has been characteristically generous and incisive in her comments.

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