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**ВИЗАНТИЙСКО
И ПОСТВИЗАНТИЙСКО ИЗКУСТВО:
ПРЕСИЧАНЕ НА ГРАНИЦИ**



**BYZANTINE
AND POST-BYZANTINE ART:
CROSSING BORDERS**

ART READINGS

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Words and Images in Early Christian Inscriptions (3rd–7th Century)

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Abstract. The use of both words and images in the epigraphic medium is already attested in the very first Christian inscriptions (mid 2nd century). This inscriptional habit continued uninterrupted until the end of Late Antiquity (7th century) providing us with an important insight – also corroborated in the works of contemporary historians and Church Fathers – into the transformation of the notion of ‘exposed writings’, associated with inscribed texts that were intended to be seen rather than read.

Key words: Late Antiquity, Epigraphy, Early Christianity, Rome.

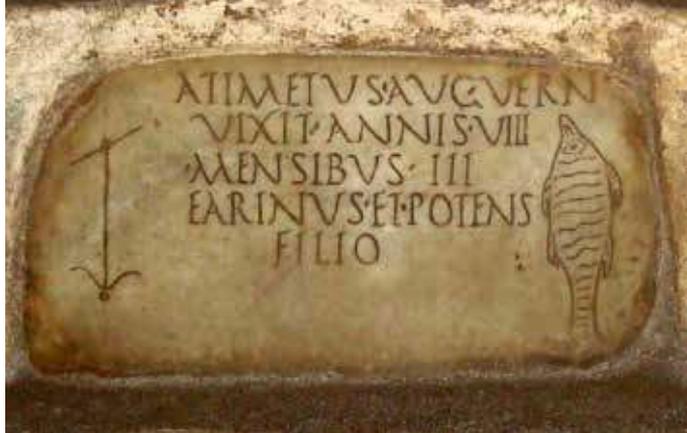
In Greek and Roman Antiquity, both words and images appeared as elements of an organized joint communicative stream². In funerary monuments, epitaphs and portraits of the deceased are used together in order to create a long-term memorial of the dead. On painted vases, inscribed words gave identity and voice to the people

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2 *Cavallo*, Guglielmo. Testo e immagine: una frontiera ambigua. In: *Testo e immagine nell’Alto Medioevo*. Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, XLI (Spoleto, 15 – 21 aprile 1993). Spoleto, 1994, 31-64, part. 31-32.



a



b



c



d

Fig. 1. Rome, via Appia. Necropolis under St Sebastian out-of-the-walls (around 150–220 CE). (a): ICVR, V 12905 [EDB 4294]; (b): ICVR, V 12892 [EDB 781]; (c): ICVR, V 12891 [EDB 780]; (d): ICVR, V 12900 [EDB 791]

represented on them. In public buildings and monuments, as well as in reliefs and statues, monumental inscriptions display the provisions of the foundation by their texts and by the arrangement and materiality of their writing. From Classical Greece to the height of the Roman Empire in 2nd century AD, inscribed letters and sculpted or painted images each played their respective roles. Although they complemented one another, they still tended to occupy their own distinct space³.

In Rome, the funerary settlement found under the basilica of St Sebastian, along the *Via Appia* (the ancient *Basilica Apostolorum*), preserved the very first examples of epigraphs by Christians of Rome still in their original places: they are dated between the middle of 2nd

³ Cfr. Petrucci, Armando. *Le scritture ultime*. Torino, 1995, 18.

and the beginnings of 3rd century. Some of these epitaphs display texts closely associated with images in a manner that differs greatly from the rest of their contemporary epigraphic milieu.

The most ancient inscription in the complex is the epitaph that Μάρκος Ούλπιος Καλόκαιρος dedicates to his mother Σεμπρωνία Ἀγαθοῦς (**Fig. 1,a**)⁴. In the space below the text, where we cannot detect any Christian reference, a fish is sculpted as swimming through the sea waves. Regardless of the possible meanings of this image, the composition as a whole follows the classical tradition of separating text and image, although only in form; indeed, the presumable relation between the deceased and the image of the fish is not made clear at all⁵.

In the same context, there are also other epitaphs – produced within the first years of 3rd century – displaying the image of the fish, but this time consistently associated with the representation of an anchor (**Fig. 1b-c-d**)⁶. In these inscriptions, the images are not set in a distinct place on the slabs, as was the case with the epitaph of Σεμπρωνία Ἀγαθοῦς: here the figures share with the text all the available space, constraining the written text to alternate its normative articulation. Evidently, here the images are considered a *structural* part of the epitaph, whose message is thus expressed by both the words *and* the figures. This particular feature also occurs among other early Christian funerary inscriptions in Rome: I here refer to the epitaph of *Licinia Amias* (**Fig. 2a**), with the unquestionable connection between the representations of two fishes on each side of an anchor and the unique – and somewhat odd – Greek expression Ἰχθὺς ζώντων⁷; and to the two similar inscriptions of *Iulia Calliste* and *Valeria Fotine* (**Fig. 2b-c**), whose Latin texts seem to be in some way “completed” by the final combination of Greek letters and images, the precise meaning of which continues to elude

4 ICVR, V 12905 [EDB 4294]: Μ(άρκος) Ούλπ(ιος) Καλόκαιρος Σεμπρωνία / Ἀγαθοῦτι μητρὶ εὐ/σεβηστᾶτη ἐποίη/σεν ἔνεκε μνείας / ((piscis in undis)).

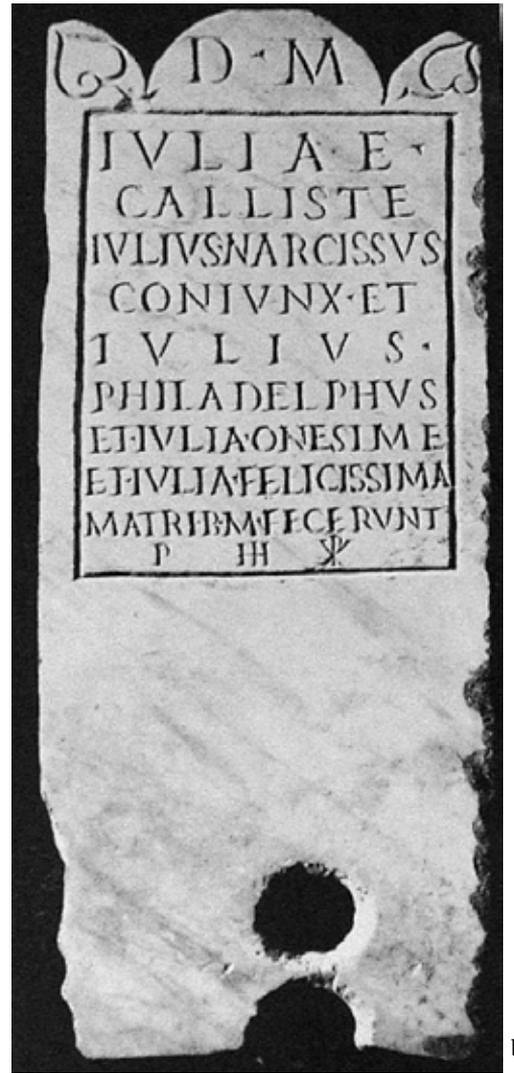
5 Also considering the epitaph of Τολλία Ἀσκληπιακή, found nearby the Roman catacomb of Hermes, along the *via Salaria vetus* (ICVR, X 26971 [EDB 13438]), it is really hard to establish an immediate relation between the mentioned deceased woman and the largely prevailing image of the shepherd, bearing the sheep on his shoulders.

6 They are the epitaphs of the *Augusti verna Atimetus* (ICVR, V 12892 [EDB 781]); of *Ancotia Auxesis* (ICVR, V 12891 [EDB 780]) and of her mother Ἀγκωτία Ἰορήνη (ICVR, V 12900 [EDB 791]).

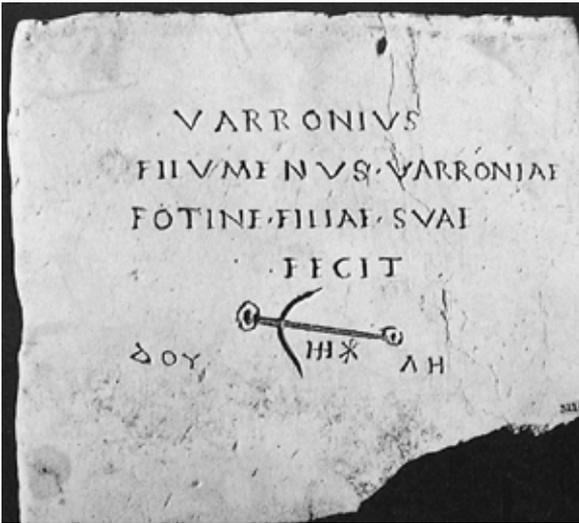
7 ICVR, II 4246 [EDB 8818]; now cfr. also *Carletti*, Carlo. ΙΧΘΥΣ ΖΩΝΤΩΝ. Chiose a ICVR, II 4246 – *Vetera Christianorum*, 1999, No. 36, 15-30.



a



b



c

Fig. 2. (a): Rome, National Archaeological Museum. ICVR, II 4246 [EDB 8818]; Rome, Vatican Museums: (b): EDB 41832; (c): ICVR, I 1778 [EDB 9815]

modern scholars⁸. Another meaningful case in point is the single – and at first glance inexplicable – word *ιχθύς* roughly scratched on a wall in the lowest room in the mausoleum of the *Innocentiores*, in the same complex of St Sebastian (Fig. 3), in front of the epitaphs discussed above⁹. In this graffito, the image of a *crux* (in the shape

⁸ Respectively see EDB 41832 and EDB 9815.

⁹ ICVR, V 12889 [EDB 778]. Longenecker, Bruce W. *The Cross before Constantine*. Minneapolis,



Fig. 3. Rome, via Appia. Necropolis under St Sebastian out-of-the-walls. Mausoleum of the Innocentiores (160–220 CE). ICVR, V 12889 [EDB 778]

of the letter *tau*) is positioned *inside* the word itself, between the first two letters¹⁰. Other examples, from Asia Minor¹¹, Greece¹² – or from Roman Africa as in the *Hadrumentum* funerary mosaic panel found in the area of the so-called catacomb of *Hermes* (Fig. 4) – illustrate that a shared language, made by both words and images, was used in other 3rd century Christian communities outside of Rome¹³.

2015, 84-85 and footnotes 14-15 mentions there *two* graffiti with the word *ιχθύς* but, actually, there is only one. It seems that Longenecker never saw the monument he mentions.

10 Similar to the discussed inscriptions of *Iulia Calliste* and *Varronia Fotine*, the graffito makes a direct reference to the passage of the *Epistle of Barnabas* 9, 8: λέγει γάρ· και περιέτεμεν Αβραάμ εκ του οικου αυτου άνδρας δεκαοκτώ και τριακοσίους. Τίς ούν η δοθεισα αυτω γνώσις; μάθετε, ότι τους δεκαοκτώ πρώτους, και διάσθημα ποιήσας λέγει τριακοσίους. Το δεκαοκτώ ιώτα δέκα, ήτα οκτώ· έχεις Ιησούν. ότι δέ ο σταυρός εν τω ταυ ήμελλεν έχειν την χάριν, λέγει και τους τριακοσίους. Δηλοί ούν τον μέν Ιησούν εν τοις δυσίν γραμμασιν, και εν τω ενί τον σταυρόν. “For it (the Scripture) says: “Abraham circumcised eighteen and three hundred men of his household”. What knowledge, then, was given to him? Notice that first he mentions the eighteen and then, after a pause, the three hundred. The number eighteen consists of an Iota (10), and an Eta (8). There you have Jesus (IHCOYC). And because the cross was about to have grace in the letter Tau [‘T’], he next gives the three hundred Tau. And so he shows the name Jesus by the first two letters, and the cross by the other” (English text from *The Apostolic Fathers*, II ed. and transl. by B. D. Ehrman [Loeb Classical Library, 25], Cambridge (USA) – London, 2005(2), 44-45). The *Epistle of Barnabas* is dated between the last thirty years of 1st century and the first thirty years of 2nd century AD.

11 MAMA VI, 224 from *Apamea* in Caria (Turkey).

12 See for example *Feissel*, Denis. Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédoine du III^e au VI^e siècle. Paris, 1983, no. 80 (from *Nea Chalkedon*, near Thessaloniki); nos. 116, 118, 119 (from Thessaloniki).

13 But not in the same terms: the well-known funerary monument of the bishop of *Hieropolis* *Aberkios* follows the usual epigraphic habit in every sense, although its text is explicitly reserved for the initiates. Other 3rd-century funerary monuments by Christians in Phrygia plainly declare their religious identity by words in the texts – clearly separated from the images. A fish is represented in the pavement of the Christian basilica in *Stobi* (4th century): cfr. *Feissel*, Denis. Chroniques d’épigraphie byzantine 1987–2004. Paris, 2006, 35, no. 124.

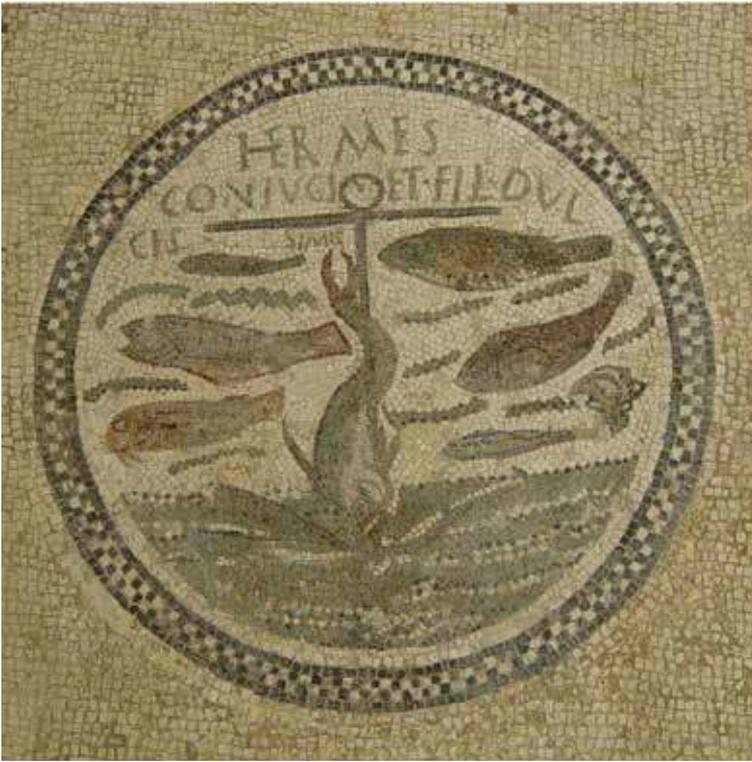


Fig. 4. *Hadrumetum* (now Sousse, Tunisia). Funerary mosaic of *Hermes*, with fish(es) and central anchor. Gems with the same image Spier 2007, no. 261 (Rome, Camposanto Teutonico, 3rd cent.); Spier 2007, no. 300 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, 3rd century)

The shared language of words and images is noted as a typical feature of Christian practices in the *Octavius* by Minucius Felix, written between the end of 2nd century and the beginning of 3rd century – the same period as our inscriptions. The text by Minucius explicitly states that the Christians “*occultis se notis et insignibus noscunt*” (“*recognize each other by secret marks and insignia*”)¹⁴. Among the *notae et insignia* recalled in the *Octavius*, we could identify not only figures as fishes, anchors, doves, shepherds (according to the well-known list given in the contemporary *Paedagogus* by St Clemens of Alexandria¹⁵), but also combinations of words and single letters: obscure to

¹⁴ Min. Fel. *Octavius* 9, 2 (cfr. CSEL 2, 13).

¹⁵ Clem. Alex. *Paed.* 3, 11, 59-60 (SC 158, 123; GCS p. 270): Αἱ δὲ σφραγίδες ἡμῖν ἔστων πελειὰς ἢ ἰχθύς ἢ ναῦς οὐριοδεομοῦσα ἢ λύρα μουσική, ἢ κέχηρηται Πολυκράτης, ἢ ἄγκυρα ναυτική, ἢν Σέλεοκος ἐνεχαράττετο τῇ γλυφῇ κἄν ἀλιεύων τις ἢ, ἀποστόλου μεμνήσεται καὶ τῶν ἐξ ὕδατος ἀνασπασμένων παιδίων. “And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre, which Polycrates used, or a ship’s anchor, which Seleucus got engraved as a device; and if there be one fishing, he will remember the apostle, and the children

a common audience. These *notae et insignia* – recurrent on Christian gems, even before Constantine – must have been clear signs to initiates of the same religious identity.

It is truly remarkable that the same terms *notare* and *signum* appear one century later in the *De mortibus persecutorum* by Lactantius, in a well-known passage about the *caeleste signum* appeared to Constantine in order to be displayed on the shields of his soldiers before the final battle with Maxentius¹⁶. Although the “heavenly sign” actually consists of two letters, Lactantius’ passage does not refer to it as a word: consequently, it is not *written* on the shields, it is *delineated* as a mark in order to evoke not only the name of Christ, but also Christ himself (“*Christum in scutis notat*”: *notare* is not a synonym of *scribere*).

Later on, in the passages of Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini* about the mystical vision of the future emperor, the letters are mentioned not as making up words but as creating a sign. Rather than referring to writing as such, the words represent *visual* communication describing the inscription τούτω νικά strictly connected (συνῆφθαι) with the τρόπαιον that appeared to the emperor, in the sky, over the sunlight¹⁷. Following his vision, Constantine commands that an *im-*

drawn out of the water” (English text from: Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., Cleveland Coxe, A. (eds.). The Ante-Nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol. II: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras and Clement of Alexandria. New York, 2007 (first edition: 1885), 285).

16 Lact. *de mortibus persecutorum* 44, 5: *Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut caeleste signum Dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret. Facit ut iussus est et transversa X littera <I>, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat. Quo signo armatus exercitus capit ferrum. “Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top, being the cipher of CHRIST. Having this sign, his troops stood to arms”* (English text from Roberts, Alexander, Donaldson, James (eds.). The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Vol. 7. Buffalo (NY), 1905, 318. Here the annotations about this passage by the editor, J. Moreau, in Lactance, *De la mort des persécuteurs*, II [SC 39, 2, 433-436]: “*Caeleste signum, employé seul, ne peut, en effet, signifier monogramma Dei [Altheim, Franz. Literatur und Gesellschaft im ausgehenden Altertum, I, Halle, 1948, 145, no. 13]. Mais le verb notare a un sens très particulier: il signifie exprimer un mot, une idée, au moyen d’ue abbreviation, en une ou deux lettres; notare signum, c’est significare nota (cfr. Christum notat et SERV. Ad Aen. III, 44: la Sybille fait connaître ses prophéties par des signa ce qui veut dire notis litterarum, ut per unam litteram significet aliquid... dans le cas qui nous occupe, signum est déterminé par Dei, et signum Dei notare signifie Deum nota significare, inscrire le nom de Dieu au moyen d’un signe, d’un monogramme”.*

17 Eus. *Vita Const.* I, 28: αὐτοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἰδεῖν ἔφην ἐν αὐτῷ οὐρανῷ ὑπερκείμενον τοῦ ἡλίου σταυροῦ τρόπαιον ἐκ φωτός συνιστάμενον, γραφὴν τε αὐτῷ συνῆφθαι λέγουσαν τοῦτω νικά. (“He said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light and a text attached to it which said: ‘by this conquer’.” (English

age (εἰκόν) of the heavenly sign¹⁸ is made, consisting of the initials of the sacred name “Christ” and a cross-shape trophy (σταυροῦ τροπαιον)¹⁹. It is remarkable that Eusebius here no longer mentions the words of inscription ‘τούτω νικά’.

The “heavenly sign” appeared to Constantine was very probably the Chi/Rho monogram. It should be included among the ancient “secret marks and insignia”, because it has been attested among Christian artifacts (such as papyri, gems and some inscriptions) that predate the references by Lactantius and Eusebius²⁰. It appears used essentially as an abbreviation meaning the *nomen sacrum* of Jesus, the Christ²¹, a *compendium scripturae*²²: we find it in some gems

translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine. Oxford, 1999, 81).

18 Eus. *Vita Const.* I, 30: τοῦ σημείου τὴν εἰκόνα φράζει... “... Then he summoned goldsmiths and jewelers, sat down among them and explained the shape of the sign, and gave them instructions about copying it in gold and precious stones”. (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 81).

19 Eus. *Vita Const.* I, 31: Ἦν δὲ τοιῶδε σχήματι κατεσκευασμένον. ὑψηλὸν δόρου χρυσοῦ κατημφισμένον κέρασ εἶχεν ἐγκάρσιον σταυροῦ σχήματι πεποιημένον, ἄνω δὲ πρὸς ἄκρῳ τοῦ παντός στέφανος ἐκ λίθων πολυτελῶν καὶ χρυσοῦ συμπεπλεγμένος κατεστήρικτο, καθ’ οὗ τῆς σωτηρίου ἐπιγραφίας τὸ σύμβολον δύο στοιχεῖα τὸ Χριστοῦ παραδηλοῦντα ὄνομα διὰ τῶν πρώτων ὑπεσήμαινον χαρακτήρων, χιαζομένου τοῦ ῥῶ κατὰ τὸ μεσαιτατον. “It was constructed to the following design. A tall pole plated with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name ‘Christ’, formed the monogram of the Saviour’s title, rho being intersected in the middle by chi” (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. Life of Constantine, 81).

20 For example, see the epitaph of the bishop Aurelios Glykonides, found in Eumeneia in Phrygia (Isikli, Turkey): SEG 6, no. 201 [ICG 1049] and a ring, found in *Brigetio* (O-Szoeni, Hungary), now in Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (cfr. *Spier*, Jeffrey. Late antique and early Christian gems. Wiesbaden, 2007, no. 114.

21 See *Hurtado*, Larry W. The Earliest Christian Artifacts. Manuscripts and Christian Origins. Cambridge, 2006, part. 95-134 (*nomina sacra*) and pp. 135-154 (about the stauogram). For example, the *nomen sacrum* of Christ is abbreviated XY in the well-known epitaph of *Flavia Sophe* from Rome: cfr. *Snyder*, H. Gregory. A Second-Century Christian Inscription from the Via Latina. – *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2011, No. 19.2, 157-195; <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2011.0018>). See also the mosaic inscription discovered in a very early Christian “prayer hall” found in 2005 in Megiddo: προσένυκην Ἀκέπτους / ἢ φιλόθεος / τὴν τροπέ/ζαν θε(ε)ῶ Ἰ(ησοῦ) Χ(ριστ)ῶ / μνημόσυνον: cfr. *Tepper*, Yotam. – *Di Segni*, Leah. A Christian prayer hall of the third century AD at Kefar ‘Othnay (Legio): excavations at the Megiddo prison 2005, Jerusalem, 2006. See also *Markschies*, Christoph. Was lernen wir über das frühe Christentum aus der Archäologie des Heiligen Landes? – *Zeitschrift für Antike und Christentum* 2007, No. 11, 421-447 (against the proposed pre-Constantinian dating).

22 The Chi/Rho monogram appear still used with this specific meaning in the graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” near the believed tomb of saint Peter under the basilica Vaticana (see their only edition until today: *Guarducci*, Margherita. I graffiti sotto la confessione di s. Pietro in Vaticano. Città del Vaticano, 1958). Because of their positioning, these graffiti are to be dated within 320–330: more or less contemporary to Lactantius and well before the *Vita Constantini* by Eusebius. One of them (*Guarducci*. I graffiti, No. 2) displays in Latin just the same words that

and inscriptions, as in some graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” near the believed tomb of St Peter, under the Vatican basilica in Rome (Fig. 5).

After its adoption as an “official sign” of the Roman imperial power, justified and protected by the God of the Christians²³, the Chi/Rho monogram with its different variations – a former secret Christian mark – became *the Sign par ex-*

Eusebius reported talking about the inscription appeared to Constantine: *hoc vin[ce]* corresponds exactly to the Greek inscription τούτω νικά: see Carletti, Carlo. Il “monogramma” di Costantino: una storia (forse) decapitata. In: Tessa Canella (ed.). *L'impero costantiniano e i luoghi sacri*. Bologna, 2016, 239-269, part. 251-252.

23 The “Sign”, as φυλακτήριον, was placed “in the principal apartment of imperial palace itself”, according to the text of Eus. *Vita Constantini* III, 49: τοσούτος δὲ θεῖος ἔρως τὴν βασιλείωσ κατελιήφει ψυχὴν, ὡς ἐν αὐτοῖς τοῖς ἀνακτόροις τῶν βασιλείων, κατὰ τὸν πάντων ἐξοχώτατον οἶκον τῆς πρὸς τῷ ὀρόφῳ κεχυρωμένης φατνώσεως κατὰ τὸ μεσαίτατον, μεγίστου πίνακος ἀνηλωμένου μέσον ἐμπετήχθαι τὸ τοῦ σωτηρίου πάθους σύμβολον ἐκ ποικίλων συγκείμενον καὶ πολυτελῶν λίθων ἐν χρυσῷ πολλῶ κατεργασμένον. φυλακτήριον δὲ δοκεῖ τοῦτο αὐτῆς βασιλείας τῷ θεοφιλεῖ χερσὶ ποιηθῆσαι. “So great was the divine passion which had seized the Emperor’s soul that in the royal quarters of the imperial palace itself, on the most eminent building of all, at the very middle of the gilded coffer adjoining the roof, in the centre of a very large wide panel, had been fixed the emblem of the saving Passion made up of a variety of precious stones and set in much gold. This appears to have been made by the Godbeloved as a protection for his Empire” (English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, 140).

About this notion of the Chi/Rho monogram, see also Eus. *Vita Constantini*, I, 29: ἐνθα δὴ ὑπνοῦντι αὐτῶ τὸν Χριστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σὺν τῷ φανέντι κατ’ οὐρανὸν σημεῖω ὀφθῆναι τε καὶ παρακελεύσασθαι, μίμημα ποιησάμενον τοῦ κατ’ οὐρανὸν ὀφθέντος σημεῖου τούτω πρὸς τὰς τῶν πολεμίων συμβολὰς ἀλεξήματι χρῆσθαι (“Thereupon, as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy”). English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, 1999, 82. Furthermore, see Eus. *Vita Constantini*, I, 31: τούτω μὲν οὖν τῷ σωτηρίῳ σημεῖω πάσης ἀντικειμένης καὶ πολεμίας δυνάμεως ἀμυντηρίῳ διὰ παντὸς ἐχρήτο βασιλεὺς, τῶν τε στρατοπέδων ἀπάντων ἡγεῖσθαι τὰ τούτου ὁμοιώματα προσέταττεν (“This saving sign was always used by the Emperor for protection against very opposing and hostile force, and he commanded replicas of it to lead all his armies”). English translation reprised from Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart G. (eds.). Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, 82. For other significant passages making reference to the notion of the “Sign”, see Eus. *Vita Constantini*, II, 7; II, 9; II, 16,2.

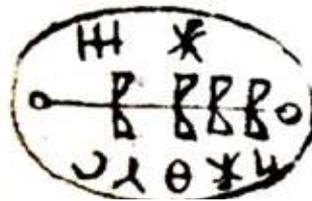


Fig. 5. Rome, Vatican necropolis. (a): some of the graffiti scratched on the so-called “wall g” (from Guarducci 1958); (b): gem (drawing from Spier 2007, no. 151; Perugia, Archaeological Museum – maybe lost)



Fig. 6. (a): Rome, catacomb of Apronianus. Now in Rome, church of St Sabina (4th cent.): ICVR, VI 15602 [EDB 5390]. (b): Cherchel (Algeria). Now in Algeri, Archaeological Museum (4th cent.): CIL, VIII 9591

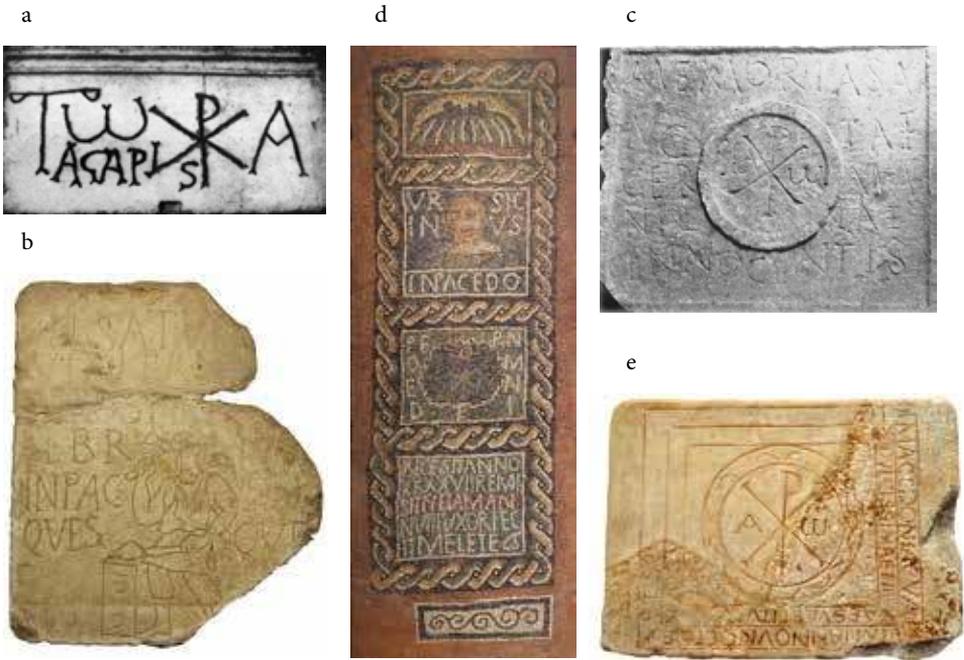


Fig. 7. (a): Rome, catacomb of St Pancratius: ICVR, II 4298 [EDB 16938]; (b): Aquileia, Museum: CIL, V 8580; (c): Tebessa (Algeria): CIL, VIII 9591; (d): Madrid (Spain), Museo Arqueologico; (e): Trier (Germany), Rheinisches Landesmuseum

cellence, signifying both the Deity and the Empire²⁴. From the first decades of 4th century onwards, it ceased to be read as a monogram indicating a sacred *word* – the name of Christ – but instead it represented an *ideogram*, immediately recognisable in spite of its complex meaning. The earlier Christian in-group language, from the Constantinian age onwards, was transformed into a publicly legitimated code.

Indeed, in these same decades, the synergy between writing and visual languages found other examples, from the very sophisticated “lettered art” by Optatianus (continued in the long series of the Early Medieval *carmina figurata*, starting from Venantius Fortunatus)²⁵ to the common type of Christian funerary inscriptions (Fig. 6). The joining of images and figures with words or their embedding within texts strongly increase in the course of the 4th century, no longer in order to hide, but with the aim of clearly displaying both the religious and social identities of the deceased.

Around twenty years ago, Armando Petrucci, an Italian historian of writing culture, identified the insertion of images, figures and symbols *within* the space usually reserved only for writing as a feature peculiar to Early Christian inscriptions. According to the data stored in the *Epigraphic Database Bari*, one quarter of ca 40,000 inscriptions from Christian catacombs in Rome display images or generic non-alphabetical signs. From this evidence, we cannot deduce that using images in inscriptions was a typical and characteristic feature of *all* Early Christian epigraphs, as suggested by Petrucci, but the fact remains that such an occurrence was very widespread: in Rome (Fig. 7a), Italy (Fig. 7b), Roman Africa (Fig. 7c), and also elsewhere in the West (France, Spain, Germany: Fig. 7d-e).

Images are placed next to the text, at its beginning or its end, but

24 The celebratory inscription in the figural mosaic on the floor of the Basilica of St Maria, mentioning the bishop of Aquileia *Theodorus* (who attended the Council of Arles in 314), is one of the first examples of the use of the Christogram in public spaces. The monogram – used absolutely, not as a *compendium scripturae* – placed in a prominent position as the *incipit* of the epigraph, dates to the time around 320. About the use of the Chi/Rho monogram on imperial coins, see Carletti, Carlo. Il “monogramma” di Costantino, 240-254.

25 See, most recently Squire, Michael. Optatian and his lettered art. A kaleidoscopic lens on late antiquity. In: Michael Squire and Johannes Wienand (eds.). *Morphogrammata / The lettered art of Optatian. Figuring Cultural Transformations in the age of Constantine* [*Morphomata*, Bd. 33], Paderborn, 2017, 55-121; and also Lunn-Rockliffe, Sophie. The Power of the Jewelled Style. Christian signs and names in Optatian’s *versus intexti* and on gems. In: Michael Squire and Johannes Wienand (eds.). *Morphogrammata*, 427-459.



Fig. 8. Paris, Louvre.
Bulla of the Empress
Maria, first wife of the
emperor Honorius

also *inside* the text, breaking the well-ordered and established ancient pattern: these hybrids force their viewer to change dynamically their reading strategies, switching between the written and the visual code of communication²⁶. The *bull*a of the empress Maria, Stilicho's daughter and the first wife of the emperor Honorius (she died in 408), is a clear example of an established synergy between written and visual codes (Fig. 8). The visible composite monogram (made up of an alphabetical Christogram and a figured Stauro-

26 "One of the elements of great significance in the graphic texture of the earliest paleo-Christian epigraphy is the insertion by the stone carver of figurative symbols within and in connection with the text sometimes to break it up and sometimes to give it visual rhythm, as it were. (...) These symbols sometimes stand as marginal comment on, or conclusion to, the text, and are sometimes internal to it, with the result that they break the *consecutio*, split it into different and contrasting portions, and give it spatial and formal movement. The outcome is a new and extremely lively complex of signs, no longer arranged in a linear schema, one line above the next, but centering on groups of letters and signs linked in a variety of ways and laid out in deliberately chaotic fashion within a space no longer firmly bounded by a cornice, as in the traditional formal model, but left free, and hence freely occupied. (...) The phenomenon was certainly widespread and uniform throughout the western provinces... What strikes one as the real novelty here is the intrusion into the writing space of an iconographic element made up of densely packed and highly meaningful religious symbols. They helped constitute a wholly religious and self-referential funerary epigraphy, the purpose of which was to give voice to the chorus of the living and the dead, of the witnesses (the martyrs) and the *fratres*, of God and man". English text reprised from: *Petrucci, Armando. Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition* (translation by M. Sullivan). Stanford (CA, USA), 1998, 26-27 (Italian original edition: *Petrucci, Armando. Le scritture ultime*. Torino, 1995, 37-39).

gram), is made up of engraved letters spelling out the names of the Empress's family members, who were at the same time the intended readerships of the text written within the gem.

The shared space between words and images can be also explained by spatial reasons: for example, the funerary slabs covering the *loculi* in the catacombs (Fig. 9a) have only their obverse side to display both the written and the visual memorials of the deceased (not only their portraits, but also other images, for example related to their occupation or age); on portable objects (Fig. 9b), the amalgamation of words and images can be caused by their own small dimensions.

These reasons do not apply to monumental inscriptions in public



b

a

Fig. 9. (a): Rome, catacomb of Domitilla. Epitaph of *Creste* (4th century): ICVR, III 6618 [EDB 22533]; (b): Goldglass from Rome catacombs. Rome, Vatican Library (4th century)

spaces: there, the blending of words and images is, naturally, slower and more gradual, although the theory of such a habit can be found elucidated in the works of some Church Fathers²⁷. The *incipit* of the very first known official Christian inscription in Rome, the now-lost dedicatory epigraph from the Vatican basilica, *quod duce te mundus surrexit ad astra*, completely omits the essential data about the identity of the said *dux*²⁸: evidently, the text was intended as a complement to the image, with which it also shared space and context. A further, now lost, commemorative inscription in the *Basilica Vaticana* is fully understood only by considering the accompanying images: the ambiguous phrase “father and son” could be made clear only in conjunction with the portraits of Constantine – the founder of the building – and his son Constantius – the patron, who completed the building work²⁹.

The direct link between words and images finds a clear and explicit definition in the first decades of the 5th century, inside the sanctuary for the martyr Felix in Nola (Southern Italy), by the patron of the Martyrium, the bishop Paulinus: according to his own words, both letters and images are explicitly considered as elements of *only one* language³⁰: the figural representations are in the service of “explain-

27 Basil. Caes., *Hom. 19 In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses*, 2 [PG 31, coll. 508D-509A]: Ἐπει καὶ πολέμων ἀνδραγαθήματα καὶ λογογράποι πολλάκις, καὶ ζωγράφοι διασημαίνουσιν, οἱ μὲν τῷ λόγῳ διακοσμούντες, οἱ δὲ τοῖς πίναξιν ἐγχαράττοντες, καὶ πολλοὺς ἐπήγειραν πρὸς ἀνδρίαν ἐκάτεροι. Ἀ γὰρ ὁ λόγος τῆς ἱστορίας διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς παρίσθησι, ταῦτα γραφικῆ σιωπῶσα διὰ μιμῆσεως δείκνυσιν. “When often both historians and painters express mainly deeds of war, the one embellishing them onto tablets, they both arouse many too to bravery. The facts which the historical account presents by being listened to, the painting silently portrays by imitation” (English text from *Leemans, Johan; Mayer, Wendy; Allen, Pauline and Dehandschutter, Boudewijn*. ‘Let us die that we may live’. Greek homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine and Syria (c. AD 350 – AD 450), London – New York, 2003, 68). Cf. also Greg. Nyss. *De Sancto Theodoro* [PG 46, 737D]; Nyl. *Sinait., Ep. IV*, 61 [PG 79, 557D].

28 ICVR, II 4092 [EDB 17047]: *Quod duce te mundus surrexit in astra triumphans / hanc Constantinus victor tibi condidit aulam*. (“Because with you as leader, the world triumphant arose to the stars / victorious Constantine dedicated this hall to you”): English translation by Dale Kinney, reprinted from http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/htm/kd/ma_kd_discuss_osp_inscript.htm.

Indeed, we can only speculate about the identity of the *dux* and about the correct interpretation of the term *mundus*, which can be understood as either a noun (as in the translation by Kinney) or an adjective describing Constantine himself (I agree with the latter interpretation).

29 ICVR, II 4094 [EDB 14382]: *Iustitiae sedes, fidei domus, aula pudoris. / Haec est quam cernis pietas quam possidet omnis / quae patris et filii virtutibus inclyta gaudet / auctoremque suum genitoris laudibus aequat*. (“Seat of justice, house of faith, hall of modesty / this what you see, which all piety possesses / which rejoices, renowned, in the virtues of the father and the son / and equals its author in the praises of his parent”): English translation by Dale Kinney, reprinted from http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/htm/kd/ma_kd_discuss_osp_inscript.htm.

30 Paul. Nol., *Epist.* 32, 10-17 (year 404).

ing the writing” for the illiterate audience of the pilgrims: the faithful, according to the bishop’s recommendations, can understand the Holy by considering both the figured images *and* the written words³¹.

Only some years later, the pope Sixtus III (432–440) marked the dedication of his great basilica to the Virgin on the Exquiline Hill in Rome by two very different mosaic inscriptions. The first one – now lost – was placed on the inner wall of the church façade. It was a long metrical text about the dogma of the *Theotokos*, just stated by the Council in Ephesus in 431³². The other epigraph is very short and simple: it is still today in its original place, in the middle of the former apsidal arch of the church³³. Despite its prominent position, the *tabula ansata* bearing the dedication of the pope to the *plebs Dei* (Fig. 10) is actually ‘drowned’ in a deep sea of images that completely enclose the written words. In the contemporary mosaic decoration of the baptistery of Albenga in Northern Italy (Fig. 11), the inscriptions, although positioned in front of the triumphal arch, appear eclipsed by the three-times reverberated, large and impres-

31 “... sed turba frequentior hic est / rusticitas non cassa fide neque docta legendi... propterea visum nobis opus utile totis Felicis domibus pictura ludere sancta... quae super exprimitur titulis, ut littera monstret quod manus explicuit” (Carm. XXVII, 547-548; 580-581; 584-585: year 403): “Now the greater number among the crowds here are country folk not without belief but unskilled in reading... This was why we thought it useful to enliven all the houses of Felix with paintings on sacred themes... Over them are explanatory inscriptions the written word revealing the theme outlined by the painter’s hand” (from *The Poems of St Paulinus of Nola*, translated and annotated by P. G. Walsh [Ancient Christian Writers. The works of the Fathers in translation, no. 40], New York 1975, 290-291. See also the famous passage of Aug., *Serm.* 319, 8 (about a tetrastichon celebrating the martyr Stephen: *legite quattuor versus quos in cella scripsimus (. . .). Propterea enim eos ibi scribere voluimus, ut qui vult, quando vult, legat. Ut omnes teneant, ideo pauci sunt; ut omnes legant, ideo publice scripti sunt. Non opus est ut quaeratur codex; camera illa codex vester est*). “Read the four lines of the verse which I have had written up in the shrine; read them, hold onto them, have them by heart. The reason I wanted to have them written there, after all, was so that any who wanted could read them, read them whenever they wanted. So that all could remember them, that’s why they are few; so that all could read them, that’s why they are written up in public. There’s no need to go looking for a book; let that little room be your book” (English text from *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons*, III/9 (306-340A) – *On the Saints*, translation and notes by E. Hill, OP, ed. by J. E. Rotelle OSA, New York 1994, p. 154). On the same topic, cfr. also Aug. Hipp. *in Ioh. evang. tract.* 24, 2 [= CChSL 36, 245]; *Id. de cons. evang.* I, 10 [= CSEL 43, 16].

32 ILCV 976: *Virgo Maria tibi Xystus nova tecta dicavi / Digna salutifero munera ventre tuo / Tu Genitrix ignara viri te denique faeta / Visceribus salvos edita nostra salus / Ecce tui testes uteri tibi praemia portant / Sub pedibusque iacet passio cuique sua / Ferrum, flamma, ferae, fluvius saevumque venenum / Tot tamen has mortes una corona manet* (“Virgin Mary, I, Xystus, I dedicated for you a new building, worthy to your salvific breast. You, Mother who has not known a man, you pregnant while keeping your bowels intact, you gave birth to our Saviour. Here are the witnesses of your womb, they bring to you the prizes, under their feet, the instruments of their own pains: the sword, the fire, the wild animals, the river, and the cruel poison; all they died, but for each one crown remains”).

33 *Xystus episcopus plebi Dei* (ILCV 975a): “Xystus, the bishop, in favour of the people of God”.



Fig. 10. Rome, basilica of S. Maria Maggiore, absidal arch. Inscription by pope Sixtus III (431–440): ILCV 975a



Fig. 11. Albenga (Liguria, Northern Italy), baptistery (5th century): ICI, IX, 40



Fig. 12. Kélibia (Tunisia). Now in Tunis, Bardo Museum (5th century): EDCS13500222

sive Christogram with alpha and omega placed on the vault of the building³⁴.

This growing hybridization between words and images achieved by means of shared space, is vividly exemplified by a baptismal font from Kelibia, now displayed in the Bardo Museum in Tunis (Fig. 12), also datable to the 5th century³⁵, on which we see no distinction between written and figured space. Writing has become part of the image, and images do not consist only of figures, but also of letters and words – as we can see also in the use of different colors in the letters: they are all considered, unequivocally, *signs* (according to the proper meaning of the Greek term *γραφή*).

The notion of the significance of words and images is well expressed by the meaningful change of the relic associated with Jesus preserved in the city of Edessa. The famous letter written by Jesus himself to the king Abgar, mentioned by both Eusebius and Eteria³⁶, in 5th century Syriac *Doctrina Addai* is substituted by an image: a painted portrait of Christ³⁷. From the second half of 6th century, according to Evagrius of Epiphania (Scholasticus), this man-made image of Christ was replaced by the so-called “Acheiropoietos”, the Holy Face miraculously imprinted on a cloth by the Lord Himself, as was later confirmed by the words of John of Damascus³⁸: this was

34 See ICI, IX, no. 40.

35 See EDCS 13500222, with previous editions.

36 A Greek translation of the Syriac text of the Jesus' letter is reported by Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* I, 13, part. 5-10); the *epistula Domini* is referred to as a powerful relic by Egeria in her report of her visit to Edessa on 19-21 April 384 (*Ether., Peregr.* 19, 8-19 [SC 296, Paris 1982, 206-213]).

37 *Doctrina Addai*, 6 [*Histoire du roi Abgar et de Jésus*, trad., intr. et notes par A. Desreumaux, Turnhout, 1993, 59]: “Puisque Jésus lui parlait ainsi, l'archiviste Hannan, qui était peintre du roi, mit en peinture l'image de Jésus avec des pigments de choix et la rapporta au roi Abgar son maître. Quand celui-ci la vit, il la reçut avec grande joie et las plaça avec grand honneur dans l'une des pièces de son propre palais”. Cf. *Amerise*, Marilena. La scrittura e l'immagine nella cultura tardoantica: il caso di Abgar di Edessa. – *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 2001, No. 67, 437-445. Cfr. anche *Ruggieri*, Vincenzo. La flessione della scrittura nell'immagine (V-VI sec.). In: *Comunicazione e ricezione del documento cristiano in epoca tardoantica. XXXII Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana* (Roma, 8 – 10 maggio 2003) [Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum, 90], Roma, 2004, 75-87, part. 79-82.

38 Evagr. Schol. *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 27 (in PG 86, 2748C8-2749A2): Ως δ' οὖν ἐς πᾶσαν ἀμηχανίαν ἦλθον, φέρουσι τὴν θεότευκτον εἰκόνα ἣν ἀνθρώπων μὲν χεῖρες οὐκ εἰργάσαντο, Ἀγβάρω δὲ Χριστὸς ὁ θεός, ἐπεὶ αὐτὸν ἰδεῖν ἐπόθει, πέπομφε. Ταύτην τοίνυν τὴν παναγίαν εἰκόνα κατὰ τὴν εἰργασμένην (10) σφίσιβ ἐσαγαγόντες διώρουγα ὕδατι τε ἐπικλύσαντες. “They brought the divinely created image, which human hands had not made, the one that Christ the God sent to Abgar when he yearned to see Him”. Cfr. also John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 89 (= *de fide orthodoxa*, IV, 16 [see *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskus*, II, besorgt von P. Bonifatius Kotter OSB [Patristische Texte und Studien 12], Berlin, 1973, 206-208, part. 208, ll. 50-56): Φέρεται



Fig. 13. Rome, ss. Cosmas and Damian, apse.
Mosaic with the inscription by pope Felix IV (526–530): ILCV 1784

the well-known “Mandyllion”, the relic which remained in Edessa until its transfer in Constantinople in 944³⁹.

δὲ καὶ τις ἱστορία, ὡς ὁ κύριος τῷ Ἀβγάρῳ τῆς Ἐδεσσηῶν πόλεως βασιλεύοντι ζωγράφον ἀποστείλαντι τὴν τοῦ κυρίου ὁμοιογραφῆσαι εἰκόνα μὴ δυνηθέντος τοῦ ζωγράφου διὰ τὴν ἀποστίλβουσαν τοῦ προσώπου λαμπρότητα αὐτὸς ἱμάτιον τῷ οἰκείῳ καὶ ζωοποιῶ προσώπῳ ἐπιθειεὶς ἐναπομάξασθαι τῷ ἱματίῳ τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἀπεικόνισμα καὶ (55) οὕτως ἀποστείλαι ποθοῦντι τῷ Ἀβγάρῳ. “Furthermore, there is a story told about how, when Abgar was lord of the city of Edessians, he sent an artist to make a portrait of the Lord, and how, when the artist was unable to do this because of the radiance of His face, the Lord Himself pressed a bit of cloth to His own sacred and life-giving face and left His own image on the cloth and so sent this to Abgar who had so earnestly desired it” (English text from *Saint John of Damascus. Writings*, translated by F. H. Chase JR. [*The Fathers of the Church. A new translation*, Vol. 37]. Washington D.C., 1958, 1970 (2), pp. 372-373.

39 According to the *Narratio de imagine Edessena* by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus (see PG 113, 423-454). The relic of the Holy Face is ignored by Egeria in her account of her visit in Edessa in 384. Evagrius of Epiphania (536–594) in his *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 27, provides the first mention of the Mandyllion: Procopius (490–565), writing about the king Abgar of Edessa, makes note only of Jesus’ letter: cfr. Procop. *De bellis*, II (*de bello Persico*), 12, 24-27. Maybe an earlier reference to the miraculous Image of the Face of Christ is the “Hymn on the Great Church of Urha”: see *Du-*

But let us go back to Rome. In the first third of the 6th century, a commemorative metrical inscription was placed by the pope Felix IV (526–530) in the apse of the church dedicated to the Byzantine saints Cosmas and Damian⁴⁰. The epigraph is constituted as an essential part of the communicative streaming that uses both images and words, still occupying separate space following conventions of classical epigraphy (**Fig. 13**). But, because of its placement along the curve of the apse, the inscription is actually readable only by a very limited audience that can view it in close proximity: that is, only by members of the clergy. The common faithful could perceive from afar the entire decoration, where the celebratory inscription works only as a kind of “written frieze”.

In the same decades, in Byzantine Ravenna, publically displayed writing was also used in churches, but essentially *inside* the images, mainly in order to identify some of the represented people (**Fig. 14a-b**): the donors – for example, in St Vitale, the bishops Ecclesius and Maximianus (546–556) – or single saints in the long sequences displayed along the aisles (as in St Apollinare Nuovo). But, in the apse mosaic of St Apollinare in Classe (**Fig. 15a-b**), the captions of the prophets Moses and Elijah, just as the two epigraphs (one in Greek, other in Latin) structurally related to the central Cross (the ancient $\iota\chi\theta\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$ and the new *salus mundi*), are actually very hard to see and read. The only clearly legible inscription is the caption identifying the venerated martyr: *sanctus Apolenaris*.

A century later, Rome we can observe the same phenomenon in the apse of the basilica built over the tomb of the martyr Agnes by pope

pont-Sommer, André. Un hymne syriaque sur la cathédrale d'Edesse. – Cahiers Archéologiques, 1947, No. 2, 3-39; *McVey*, Kathleen E. The Domed Church as Microcosm: Literary Roots of an Architectural Symbol. – *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 1983, No. 37, 91-121, part. 95, str. 9; 100-101; *Palmer*, Andrew – *Rodley*, Lyn. The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia at Edessa. – *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 1988, No. 12, 117-248; cfr. *Karaulashvili*, Irma. The Date of the Epistula Abgari. – *Apocrypha*, 2002, No. 13, 85-111, part. 102-103. Another Syriac source about the Holy Face relic is the (perhaps) early 6th century *History of Daniel of Galas'* (cfr. *Nau*, François. Hagiographie Syriaque. – *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*, 1910, No. 15, 60-64, part. 61).

40 ILCV 1784: *aula Dei claris radiat speciosa metallis / in qua plus fidei lux pretiosa micat. / martyribus medicis populo spes certa salutis / venit et ex sacro crevit honore locus. Optulit hoc Domino Felix antistite dignum / munus, ut aetheria vivat in arce poli.* “With bright metals, the splendid hall of God shines, in which the precious light of faith flashes even more radiantly. From the martyr-physicians’ unshakable hope of being healed to the people, and the place has grown by virtue of [its] sacred honor. Felix has offered to the Lord this gift, worthy of a bishop, that he may live in the highest heights of heaven” (English translation reprised from *Thunø*, Erik. Inscriptions on Light and Splendor from Saint-Denis to Rome and Back. – *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia*, 2011, No. 24 (n.s.10), 139-159).

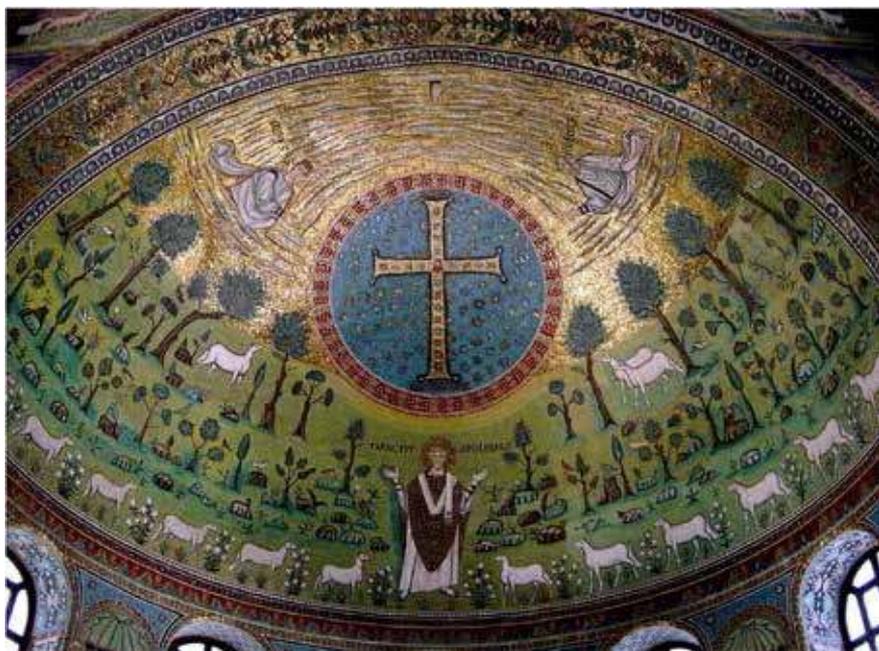


a



b

Fig. 14. Ravenna (Italy). (a): S. Vitale, apse. Mosaic panel with Justinian and the bishop Maximianus (546–556); (b): S. Apollinare Nuovo. Series of saints along the central aisle, detail (493–526)



a
b



Fig. 15. Ravenna (Italy). (a): S. Apollinare in Classe, apse (536–549);
 (b): detail of the central Cross with the inscriptions IXΘΥΣ and *Salus mundi*

Honorius in the first half of 7th century (625–638). With its curved dedicatory/honorary inscription⁴¹ (Fig. 16) as an essential part of the decoration of the apse, the church seems to recall the 6th century basilica of the Sts Cosmas and Damian; but here the epigraph is hard to read *also* by the clergy in the presbytery, because it is too high, its text is 12 verses long, and its letters too small to be easily deciphered. As in the Byzantine church of St Apollinare in Classe, the only inscription immediately visible and readable in the decorative schema of the apse is the one positioned over the central image of the martyr: the caption *s(an)c(t)a Agnes*.

According to our common notion of writing as a tool to preserve and to transmit information, these epigraphs are not necessary at all: everyone could understand that the central figure in the apse was the martyr commemorated in the church. In contrast, in the Roman church of St Agnes the two represented donors – the popes Symmachus and Honorius – are *not* identified by any caption.

What is, then, the real *raison d'être* of these seemingly redundant inscriptions? Evidently these “unnecessary inscriptions” are not inscribed in order to identify the saints, rather, they serve as an essential part of their formal *visual* representation⁴². Here, the words have, *because they have been written*, an authoritative role⁴³ and the

41 ICVR, VIII 20757 [EDB 9577]: ((*crux immissa*)) *aurea concisis surgit pictura metallis / et complexa simul clauditur ipsa dies / fontibus e niveis credas aurora subire / correptas nubes roribus arua rigans / / vel qualem inter sidera lucem proferet irim / purpureusque pavo ipse colore nitens / qui potuit noctis vel lucis reddere finem / martyrum e bustis hinc reppulit ille chaos / / sursum versa nutu quod cunctis cernitur uno / praesul Honorius haec vota dicata dedit / vestibus et factis signantur illius ora / lucet et aspectu lucida corda gerens*. “A golden picture arises from specks of metal and daylight itself, shut out [from here], embracing it is in it enclosed. Dawn, you could believe, mounts over the gathered clouds as though from snowy fountainheads wetting the fields with dew. Or [you could believe] the sort of light that rainbow will produce among the stars and a purple peacock himself gleaming with color. He who was able to set the boundary of night or light has here beaten chaos back from the tombs of martyrs. Any who once casts an eye overhead sees these votive offerings the bishop Honorius has given. By his garments and offering, his works are signified, as also bearing light [inwardly] in his heart of hearts he shines [outwardly] to the beholder’s eye” (English translation taken from: *Thunø*, Erik. *The Apse Mosaic in Early Medieval Rome. Time, Network and Repetition*. Cambridge (USA), 2015, 25).

42 *Felle*, Antonio E. Visual features of inscriptions. An issue for EDB (and EAGLE). In: *Digital and Traditional Epigraphy in Context. Proceedings of the EAGLE 2016 International Conference*, Roma, 2017, 131-144, part. 141-143.

43 It is interesting that this notion of the captions of the saints’ images was not officially sanctioned in the East before the 8th century: “L’idée que l’image religieuse était sanctifiée par le nom du prototype se propagea à partir du VIII^e siècle”: see *Sansterre*, Jean-Marie. *La parole, le texte et l’image selon les auteurs byzantins des époques iconoclaste et posticonoclastes*. In: *Testo e immagine nell’Alto Medioevo. XLI Settimana di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo* (Spoleto, 15 – 21 aprile 1993), Spoleto, 1994, 197-243 (quotation from page 201). The second



Fig. 16. Rome, basilica of St Agnes on the via Nomentana. The apse with the inscription by pope Honorius (625–638): ICVR, VIII 20757 [EDB 9577+EDB 41685]

images are considered as texts, according to a common notion of *scriptura* and *figura* shared in both the West⁴⁴ and the East⁴⁵.

council of Nicaea in 787 rules that the written name of the saint with its own epithet ἅγιος makes unnecessary the prayer for the consecration of the image of the saint itself [see Mansi, XIII, 269E].

44 Cfr. Greg. Magn. *Epist.* XI, 10 (600, October): *Nam quod legentibus scriptura, hoc idiotis praestat pictura cernentibus, quia in ipsa ignorantes uident quod sequi debeant, in ipsa legunt qui litteras nesciunt; unde praecipue gentibus pro lectione pictura est.* ("For what writing provides for readers, this a picture provides for uneducated people looking at it, for in it the ignorant see what they should follow and the illiterate read the same from it, especially for pagans" (English translation reprised from *Martyn*, John R.C. (ed.). *The Letters of Gregory the Great*. Vol. 3. Toronto, 2004, 745). *Ibid.*, IX, 209 (599, July): *"Idcirco enim pictura in ecclesiis adhibetur, ut hi qui litteras nesciunt saltem in parietibus uidentur legant, quae legere in codicibus non ualent.* ("For a picture is provided in churches for the reason that those who are illiterate may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books" (English translation reprised from *Martyn*, John R.C. (ed.). *The Letters of Gregory the Great*. Vol. 2. Toronto, 2004, 674).

45 Particularly significant the texts by John of Damascus: cfr. *Die Schriften des Johannis von Damaskus*, III. *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*, besorgt von P. Bonifatius Kotter OSB [Patristische Texte und Studien 17], Berlin – New York 1975, 83 (I, 8); 86 (I, 13); 99, II. 57-60 (II, 10= III, 9a); 130 (III, 23); 159, II. 70-74 (I, 56= II, 52).

An English translation of these texts is offered by *Allies*, Mary H. (ed.). *St John Damascene on Holy images followed by three sermons on the Assumption*. London, 1898. On Byzantine writers who wrote about this topic, see *Sansterra*. Jean-M. *La parole, le texte et l'image*, 209-213 for John of Damascus.

This chronological overview of early Christian inscriptions and of epigraphs, conceived as structural elements of the rich visual programmes in the early Byzantine churches, allows us to conclude that Christians adopted written and visual codes from the very beginning, using a complex but consistent language of signs created from letters, figures and symbols.

Since the period of Early Christianity, words as images, and images as words, were used together not only in order to describe, to define, and to indicate, as in the classical epigraphic habit. They acquired another aim: to evoke the Ineffable.

Epigraphic databases, corpora and editions

EDB: *Epigraphic Database Bari. Inscriptions by Christians in Rome (3rd–8th century CE)* [<http://www.edb.uniba.it>]

EDCS: Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss – Slaby [<http://www.manfredclaus.de>]

ICG: *Inscriptiones Christianae Graecae* [<http://www.epigraph.topoi.org/ica/icamainapp>]

ICI: *Inscriptiones Christianae Italiae*, Bari, 1985-

ICVR: *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae septimo saeculo antiquiores. Nova series*, Voll. I–X, Città del Vaticano 1922–1992.

ILCV: *Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres*, I–III, ed. E. Diehl, Dublin – Zürich 1970(3); Vol. IV, *Supplementum*, edd. J. Moreau – H. I. Marrou, *ibid.* 1967.

MAMA, VI: *Monumenta Asiae Minoris antiqua*. Vol. VI: *Monuments and documents from Phrygia and Caria* (eds. William Hepburn Buckler and William M. Calder), Manchester, 1939.

SEG: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Leiden – Amsterdam, 1923-

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CSEL: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. Vindobonae – Lipsiae, 1866-

GCS: *Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*. Leipzig – Berlin 1897-

SC: *Sources Chrétiennes*, Paris – Lyon, 1942-

CChrSL: *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina*, Turnhout, 1953-Ether., *Peregr.* 19, 8-19 [SC 296], Paris, 1982.

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Слова и образи в раннохристиянските надписи (III–VII век)

Антонио Е. Феле



От епохата на класическата гръцка древност до зенита на Римската империя през II в. сл. Хр. изписаните букви заедно със скулптираните или нарисувани образи играят съвкупно хармонично свързана роля, но обикновено в отчетливо обособени пространства. Някои от най-ранните християнски епитафи обаче представят текстове, ясно свързани с образи по начин, който се различава от настоящия, обичаен, епиграфски подход, като същевременно стават отражение на посоките, засвидетелствани в съвременната им християнска книжнина: напр. произведенията на св. Климент Александрийски, Минуций Феликс Октавий, но и по-късните текстовете на Лактанций и Евсевий, където писаното слово и образите се възприемат като две различни лица на един и същи език.

Често изображенията се поставят край текста, в неговото начало или край, но пък и вътре в него, нарушавайки добре установения древен комуникационен поток: подобни хибридни форми заставят зрителя да променя динамично ролите си, редувайки разчитането на буквени и визуални кодове на комуникация.

След император Константин и най-вече след Теодосий в монументалните християнски надписи по църкви и на публични места се наблюдава конкуриране между слова и образи, както се отбелязва от някои църковни отци, в целия orbis christianus antiquus. Представата за стойностната идентичност на словото и образа е добре формулирана от съдържателната подмяна на своеобразните Христови реликви в гр. Едеса – от буква, изписана от Иисус, до самия му рисуван портрет, който впоследствие става „неръкотворен“ образ на Христовото лице, или т.нар. Убрус (Мандилион).

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Веднъж написани, думите имат авторитетна/водеща роля, докато изображенията постепенно започват да се възприемат като текстове според разпространените представи за *scriptura* и *figura*, съществуващи и на Изток, и на Запад.

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**ВИЗАНТИЙСКО И
ПОСТВИЗАНТИЙСКО ИЗКУСТВО:
ПРЕСИЧАНЕ НА ГРАНИЦИ**

**BYZANTINE AND
POST-BYZANTINE ART:
CROSSING BORDERS**

Институт за изследване на изкуствата, БАН

Institute of Art Studies, BAS

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