The research field of late antique and early Christian sarcophagi has been fiercely disputed by archaeologists, as well as art historians for more than one hundred years now. The history of research in this case could therefore be the main subject for a quite revealing study, particularly because some of the biggest idols of art history, like Otto Pächt or Erwin Panofsky, applied themselves to this subject. The reasons for this intensive interest can be explained quite easily: the body of preserved objects is relatively big, with rich and elaborate decoration of the pieces themselves. The themes shown in the reliefs are various as well as sophisticated relating to death, hope and afterlife right at the site of the tomb, yet few written sources that could explain how the sarcophagi reliefs were actually perceived by the contemporaries have been preserved. Furthermore the complexity and diversity of multicultural Roman society in late antiquity where a lot of ideas and concepts could exist parallel to each other or even melt into one amalgam makes it difficult to come to one final interpretation.

All these circumstances contribute to the exciting and almost mysterious effect that late antique and early Christian sepulchral art has on us even nowadays, as Josef Engemann mentioned: “The main difficulty of image interpretation is extant in the fact that various meanings can be supposed or proven in one and the same image
content […]. An image or motif can have no figurative meaning at all, but can also have several of them.”

In this paper, I will attempt neither to solve one hundred year old problems of archaeology or art history nor will I try to debate universal definitions in the sarcophagi reliefs. Instead I would like to delve into an insight and overview of the late antique sarcophagi sculpture before I present the sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua in its early Christian context. This piece, which was probably made in the second half of the 3rd century AD, is considered to be the earliest preserved sarcophagus with distinct Christian meaning and will serve as a typical example to illustrate which part the specific Christian perception plays in the conceptions of the scenes shown next to the tomb.

The 3rd century AD is clearly a very early period in the development of Christianity – there can be no talk of an exegetical interpretation of the Bible or any kind of clerical, institutional dogmas at that time. Instead we will enter a field of very private, individual construction of early Christian expression in sepulchral art that can give us some vivid indication of reception and perception concerning death and afterlife in the late antique amalgam of cultures.

**Roman Sepulchral Culture and Arts in Late Antiquity**

Late antiquity is generally known for its rich art production which especially focuses on the tomb and on the sepulchral space as its medium for artistic output. Lavishly decorated funeral monuments, sumptuous necropolis, ash containers, steles and more provided space for a diversity of iconographic as well as stylistic image programmes. Particularly skilful was the production of sarcophagi which reached its climax in Rome between 200 and 400 AD, but remained

1 Engemann 1997, 1: „Die Hauptschwierigkeit der Bildinterpretation besteht darin, dass für ein und denselben Bildinhalt oft verschiedene Bedeutungen zu vermuten oder nachzuwie- sen sind […]. Ein Bild oder Bildmotiv braucht überhaupt keine übertragene Bedeutung zu haben, kann deren aber auch mehrere verschiedene besitzen.“
2 Riegl 1927.
as a role model throughout the Middle Ages until Renaissance times. The scenes shown in the Roman sarcophagi reliefs are fairly diverse, complex and ambivalent.

Regarding content and intention, two basic categories can be differed: retrospective and prospective scenes. Retrospective elements are expressed in motifs that relate to the life of the deceased, as well as the personal circumstances and virtues of the dead. Especially popular were retrospective themes like battle or hunting scenes, marriage ceremonies or sometimes images of the profession of the dead, that not only refer to biographical details, but also symbolic virtues. Hunting scenes, like the boar or lion hunt for example, symbolise male strength and courage, just like the images of battle scenes that were often used for imperial pieces.

![Fig. 1: General's sarcophagus, 2nd century, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua; from: Zanker – Ewald 2004, fig. 52.](image)

The sarcophagus of a general (fig. 1) shows on the left side the virtue of *clementia*, moderation and clemency, by presenting the benevolent general next to a number of defeated barbarians. In the centre, the young commander offers a sacrifice to the Gods to be conquering in his future fights, expressing the virtue of *pietas*, or piety. On the right side of the relief the very popular motif of conjugal handshaking symbolises marriage as well as marital harmony and unity, the virtue *concordia*. This example illustrates very clearly the double meaning of the Roman sarcophagi concept: on the one hand the person buried in this sarcophagus was actually a military commander, so the references to battles, enemies etc. make perfect sense. On the other hand
the representation goes much further than the actual facts of his life: he was not only a general, but as a general he was also mild, moderate, pious as a believer and blessed with marital unity.

Retrospective motifs therefore mainly transport higher values and virtues, which the deceased was said to have achieved or proved during his lifetime and are often connected with prospective depictions.

![Fig. 2: Shepherd's sarcophagus, 3rd century, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome; from: Zanker – Ewald 2004, fig. 157.](image)

Prospective motifs refer to the afterlife, to conditions and analogies that were conceived or wished for the deceased after death. A shepherd’s sarcophagus (fig. 2) presents an extensive idyllic landscape, structured in different levels with several shepherd figures, most of them shown in relaxed position, accompanied by various animals – the landscape as a whole radiates bucolic idyll.

The pastoral bucolic poetry, originally an antique literature genre,\(^3\) glorifies the simple and reduced life of the shepherds and idealises it into a utopian lifestyle of tranquillity, placid contemplation and peace surrounded by beautiful nature. Images with such content were very popular in late antique sepulchral art. The peaceful character of the nature scene was intended to essentially symbolise the simple, fulfilled state with no worries that was wished for after life. Nature

---

3 The bucolic poetry has a long history, starting in Antiquity and going forth until the 19th century.
and landscape were intended to soothe the fears and worries that came along with the idea of death. For that reason there were several landscape themes used in late antique sepulchral art such as depictions of the seasons of the year, in particular the harvesting of the grapes. Besides, and as a counterpart to the shepherds’ landscape, there is a group of sarcophagi with maritime scenes: pretty female nymphs gather with wild, male sea creatures in a joyful, calm and almost erotic state at the seaside. Theodor Klauser identified cases like this as vita felix-allegories, as indications of a happy life in close connection to nature, landscape and the seasons of the year and therefore symbolising, almost prefiguring the eternal circle of life, peace and tranquillity that was wished for the dead in the afterlife. Barbara Borg named depictions like this representations of felicitas temporum and noted: “They evoked idyllic and joyful imaginary worlds that could recall the privileged lifestyle the deceased had enjoyed, visualize the vague hopes for some pleasant condition after death, enhance the current atmosphere of the funeral and festivals of the dead, and remind the living to enjoy life while they were still able to do so.”

Both aspects, retrospective as well as prospective, can also be figured in the form of mythological allegories. Retrospective depictions of a general’s virtues for example, could also be presented by identifying him with a mythological personality like Dionysos, referring to his wife as Aphrodite. Furthermore, narrative mythological motifs were very popular, especially in the first centuries AD. One of the most prominent on sarcophagi was the Endymion myth (fig. 3).

5 Borg 2013, 199.
Endymion was a beautiful young hero, sometimes named a shepherd, a hunter or a king, who caught the attention of Selene, the moon goddess. She fell in love and, in order to conserve his beauty and youth, sent Hypnos, the god of sleep to charm him into an eternal soft slumber. Every night Selene came down to be with her sleeping lover and they conceived many children. This story can clearly be identified with a prospective intention, symbolising eternal life after death in a relaxed peaceful calmness, especially because death has quite often been equated with sleep, as Cicero mentions concerning the symbolism of the Endymion myth: *habes somnum imaginem mortis.*\(^6\) Additionally a love story that persists even in the next world like the one between Selene and Endymion, combined with the bucolic shepherds’ environment\(^7\) was quite adequate for the taste of the time.

Although motifs like the Endymion myth, were especially popular and common in late antiquity, there was no canon, no philosophical or religious programme of images. The tomb decoration was rather an individual issue in which vague ideas about afterlife could be put in an allegorical or symbolic expression. References to the virtuous life of the dead and meaningful wishes and hopes of a condition in

---

6 Cicero, Tuscul. I 38, 92; quoted in: Gerke 1940, 61.
7 In some examples of Endymion sarcophagi the young hero is even dressed in the traditional shepherd’s clothing. Mostly he is presented in heroic nakedness like in the example shown in this context.
the beyond were much more important than specific imaginations about what would really happen after death, just as Bernard Andreae mentions: „With a plenty of images [...] the Romans envision their indefinite and only in poetic figures comprehensible hopes for their afterlife. [...] These people try lesser to express a specific imagination of afterlife in their pictures, but rather try to satisfy their hopes and wishes of eternal life and bliss through a mass of mythological exempla that can undertake an afterlife or translation to a better place.“

In the heyday of late antique sarcophagus production the Christian community was still in the making and had all the structural features of a kind of underground organisation. Christianity of the 1st and 2nd century AD was a minority facing a Pagan majority, an illegal denomination within Roman society. The early Christian community was confronted with finding its own particular nature, facing a complex combination of Jewish heritage and Pagan environment. An important intersection with Jewish heritage and quite obstructive for Late Antique art production was the aniconism based on the 2nd Commandment of the Decalogue. Only around 200 AD were the restrictions of the pictorial production first eased by Clement of Alexandria. In his Paedagogus (203–211), Clement wrote about the simple lifestyle of a good Christian who was meant to relinquish luxuries and embellishment, but mentioned one important exception: explicitly allowed was the use of signet rings to claim ownership of belongings, and thereby protect them. For the image in the signet ring Clement suggested rather neutral engravings like a dove, a fish, a ship or an anchor. Pictures like such impressions already existed in the Pagan gem cutter workshops and could be turned into a Christian symbol through the eye of the Christian: for example the ship,

8 Andreae 1963, 127: „Mit einer Fülle von Bildern [...] vergegenwärtigen die Römer ihre unbestimmte, nur in poetischen Bildern fassbare Jenseitshoffnung. [...] Diese Menschen versuchen weniger einer klaren Jenseitsvorstellung bildlichen Ausdruck zu geben, als vielmehr durch die Masse der mythologischen Exempla, die ein Weiterleben nach dem Tode verbürgen oder auf die Entrückung an einen besseren Ort anspielen, ihre Hoffnung auf ewiges Leben und Seligkeit zu befriedigen."

9 Most of the belongings back then were stored in earthenware vessels which were sealed and identified by signet. See Klauser 1958, 21 ff. and Klauser 1966, 5 ff.

the fish or the anchor could be seen as references to the Apostles who were fishermen, or even the Baptism in Jordan. After this first disruption of the biblical aniconism the artistic development took its course: before long the early Christians wished to have signet rings with scenes from the Old Testament, which were made by Jewish diaspora gem cutters due to the fact that they were already closer to their specific Christian beliefs. In the end, Christian gem cutters started producing images of the New Testament and thereby founded a new form of artistic expression.

The development of the signet rings reveals the difficulties the first Christians seemed to have with being surrounded by an abundance of pictures in the Pagan society. Although the signet ring had mostly an economic function, this trend shows how early Christians seemed to have a deeper longing to develop unique Christian symbols and images that would finally exceed gem cutting and be used in sepulchral art. Theodor Klauser wrote in this context: “It must have been difficult for the more wealthy Christians to leave their sarcophagi and burial chambers unadorned for the sake of the Second Commandment while their fellow non-Christian citizens, even their own in the same family crypt entombed relatives were allowed to decorate their sarcophagi and tombs with figurative images. Why, lots of them might have asked, should be prohibited for sarcophagi and burial chambers what was allowed with signet rings?” In sepulchral art, the early Christian longing for figurative adornment can already be found before the first specific Christian motifs were invented, just like the case of the sarcophagus of Prosenes (fig. 4) demonstrates.

11 Dresken-Weiland (2010, 23–33) dedicated a bigger part of her publication to the anchor and the fish as early Christian sepulchral icons.
12 Klauser 1966, 5 ff.
13 Klauser 1966, 6: „Vermögenderen Christen musste es schwer fallen, um des zweiten Gebotes willen ihre Steinsärge und ihre Grabkammern schmucklos lassen zu müssen, während ihre nichtchristlichen Mitbürger, ja sogar ihre eigenen, in der gleichen Familiengruft beigesetzten Angehörigen Sarkophage und Grabstätten mit figurlichen Bildern schmücken durften. Warum, so werden sich viele gefragt haben, sollte bei den Sarkophagen und Grabkammern verboten sein, was auf den Siegelringen zugelassen war?“
An inscription on the piece tells us about Prosenes who was a courtier and, according to the formula *receptus ad deum*\(^{14}\), of Christian belief,\(^{15}\) although the scenes on the relief are quite pagan and do not express unique Christian motifs. Still, the chosen themes do not oppose the Christian confession, there are neither battle nor war scenes which would have offended Christian pacifism nor depictions of mythological narrations. Instead, quite neutral and common symbols of Roman sepulchral culture were chosen for this piece: two little naked figures with wings – *genii of death* – are depicted holding the plate with the inscription, along with pedestals with urns, torches and griffins on the narrow sides. All of those motifs express the Roman demand for representation and match the stylistic taste and concept of the time. This sarcophagus could as well be a Pagan piece, if it was not for the inscription. Because of a larger number of similar pieces

---

\(^{14}\) Translation: "received by the one God". The singular of *deum* implies the monotheism of Christianity.

\(^{15}\) Deichmann 1983, 124.
the recent studies have concluded that these sarcophagi may be neutral, which means they are suitable for both, Pagan and Christian community members. It is therefore highly possible that the sculptors produced neutral sarcophagi in a stock\(^\text{16}\) and costumers like Prosenes chose the one that suited their confession and personal taste most.

![Fig. 5: Sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua, main relief, probably around 270, Rome; from: Zanker – Ewald 2004, fig. 232.](image)

**The Sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua and Christian Reception in the 3rd Century**

The so-called sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua (fig. 5), probably produced around 270 AD,\(^\text{17}\) is the oldest preserved piece with clearly recognisable Christian motifs. The relief presents in the left corner a sea deity (fig. 6) next to parts of the Jonah-story, which is the ship and Jonah resting underneath a pumpkin bower. In the centre a praying female figure is depicted with a sitting and reading male person, next to a shepherd with sheep. On the right side a baptism scene is set next to two fisherman in the corner (fig. 7).

\(^{16}\) Koch 2000, 7–10.

\(^{17}\) For the issue of dating this sarcophagus see: Kapsreiter 2014, 34 f. The latest publication suggest a dating either around 270/280 (Koch 2000, 228) or, more general, in the second half of the 3rd century (Dresken-Weiland 2010, 103).
At first glance, it is already quite obvious that the themes in this relief were not conceived as a narrative whole, but as an addition of single motivic elements. The formal arrangement of the relief with trees structuring and almost dividing the single scenes, underlines the additive character.

Although the Jonah motifs on the left and the baptism scene on the right indicate that the person buried in this sarcophagus\(^\text{18}\) must have been Christian, the design intention of the relief is rather bound to late antique Kunstwollen as a closer look at these motifs will reveal.

The middle group\(^\text{19}\) (fig. 5) – the praying female and the reading male – are thematically as well as formally based on non-Christian models: the so called ‘inspiration group’\(^\text{20}\) was a widespread retrospective motif and can often be found on Pagan sarcophagi. It was meant to allegorise concordia, marital unity, as well as education in and
knowledge of the myths, \textit{paideia}.\textsuperscript{21} In the most common version, a male in ancient philosopher’s costume is displayed sitting and reading with a female, usually a muse, listening to him and contemplating his words. In this context the philosopher symbolises knowledge and traditional education, in combination with a female who contemplates his words, figures martial unity.\textsuperscript{22} In the case of S. Maria Antiqua the philosopher was directly adopted, but the muse has been replaced by a praying female figure: an Orant. The motif of the Orant can be traced back to ancient Egyptian art, was used in Pagan Roman art and can also be found in the first Christian catacombs, which were painted during the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century AD, symbolising in all cases worship and piety.\textsuperscript{23}

The shepherd on the left side of the middle group is also a Pagan motif with a long history of different contexts, having its origin in the \textit{kriophorus} of ancient Greek art, the ram-bearer who carries his sacrifice, the ram, on his shoulders. In Roman art of the first centuries AD the \textit{kriophorus} becomes part of the bucolic scenery, one formal shepherd’s figure among others.\textsuperscript{24} In the context of S. Maria Antiqua this shepherd has to be understood coming from such scenery, representing the prospective idyll as an emblematic abbreviation,\textsuperscript{25} concentrated in one single figure, framed with two little lambs on the ground. The same function is intended in the two fishermen and the sea deity in the corners (fig. 6 and fig. 7) of the sarcophagus: as quotes of maritime idyll they display a setting of peaceful, joyful rest in the same way the sarcophagi with sea creatures do.

\textsuperscript{21} Zanker (2005) suggested to interpret allegories concerning education and knowledge of the myths as \textit{paideia}, Greek learnedness, which was a popular way of self-representation in 2\textsuperscript{nd} century Rome.
\textsuperscript{22} Klauser 1960, 120.
\textsuperscript{23} Compare Fink 1997.
\textsuperscript{24} Klauser 1958, 27 ff.
\textsuperscript{25} According to Himmelmann (1980, 121) the bucolic allegory was so widespread in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century that a single shepherd or even a single lamb could function as a code for the whole allegory.
The motif that most directly refers to a Christian confession in the relief of S. Maria Antiqua is the baptism scene on the right side. In a watery scene the Baptist is displayed in the costume of an ancient philosopher, the baptizand is a young naked boy. Similar depictions can be found in early Christian catacomb paintings where the baptism was already a common motif from beginning of the 3rd century on. In academic research, the question whether such depictions figure the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan or the exemplified baptism of a new Christian in general has been widely discussed, because in actual fact both possibilities would make sense. Alfonso Fausone wrote about the case of S. Maria Antiqua: “It was a concern of the artist to highlight a theme and make it understandable in quite a narrow space. It was probably not the intention [...] of the sculptor, to display the course of a baptism ceremony; instead they wanted to make use of a ‘language’, that could be understood spontaneously by the insiders.” Whether this scene presents Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan or an average baptism would then be of secondary relevance because the intention of the motif in this context anyhow seems to act as an emblematic abbreviation figuring a Christian confession, in a similar manner to the retrospective scenes of Pagan tradition.

The story of the prophet Jonah of the Old Testament is not displayed according to the Bible text, but strongly shortened and reinterpreted. In the biblical story, the destiny of the prophet is rather tragic: God orders Jonah to go to Niniveh and to prophesy the doom of the city if there is no repentance of their sinful behaviour, but instead Jonah decides to flee and sail in the other direction. At sea he gets caught by a huge storm sent by God to make him return. Jonah admits his guilt and is thrown overboard by his fellow sailors in order to ease the storm. A sea creature saves his life by swallowing Jonah.
and carrying him to the next shore where he is released. He spends several days at the shore resting in a shelter, covered by a bower,\textsuperscript{28} contemplating his destiny and God’s orders, before finally returning to fulfil his calling, whereupon the citizens of Niniveh repent and God therefore spares the city from destruction.

On the sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua, the ship in which Jonah tries to flee is shown, as well as the sea creature. The emphasis in the relief, however, is on Jonah resting underneath the bower with the most important attribute of the prophet, the city of Niniveh, missing.\textsuperscript{29} Instead, the figure and the whole posture of Jonah in this relief refers to a clearly pagan motif: Endymion, resting in his endless sleep (fig. 3) Jonah lies naked, just as Endymion, in a relaxed pose, the arm above the head. Early Christian sarcophagi sculpture borrows the figure of Endymion for the Biblical Jonah-story. The very tragic destiny of Jonah in conflict with God and his own calling as a prophet then becomes unattended and the focus of the story turns towards Noah’s rest, concentrating on the idyllic scenery of a shepherd’s landscape, which is outlined by the sheep on top of the bower.\textsuperscript{30} Alfred Stuiber noted: „Because Noah resting in the bower appears so non-biblical, we have the right to interpret this figure non-biblically and unhistorically as a representation of the decedent; the more Jonah is displayed in accordance with the biblical report, the less he can actually be identified with the decedent.“\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{28} The kind of plant, which formed the bower varies from translation to translation and according to interpretation. Early Christian art mostly imagined a pumpkin bower in this context.
\textsuperscript{29} Stommel 1958.
\textsuperscript{30} Engemann 1973, 73 ff.
\textsuperscript{31} Stuiber 1957, 142: „Gerade weil der in der Laube ruhende Jonas so unbiblisch erscheint, haben wir das Recht, diese Gestalt unbiblisch und ungeschichtlich als Repräsentation des Toten zu deuten; je mehr Jonas in Übereinstimmung mit dem biblischen Bericht dargestellt wird, desto weniger kann in ihm der Tote unmittelbar gemeint sein.“ Moreover, we have to keep in mind, that, although the biblical story of Old Testament only seems to be a motivic suggestion for the bucolic rest in this relief, an educated Christian with deeper knowledge of the Bible probably still recognized the substantial Christian quote.
Interpretation of S. Maria Antiqua: The Art of Reception

Both of the two Christian motifs actually originate, and refer intensely to the Pagan sepulchral conception: the baptism scene seems to follow the concept of a retrospective scene, representing the Christian confession in an abstract and emblematic motif, just like the middle group displays the virtues of education and marital unity. The Jonah-story on the other side relates quite directly to the Pagan Endymion-motif, transferring the originally biblical narration into a prospective allegory of eternal peaceful rest in an idyllic environment.

Looking at this relief as a whole, the single motifs seem quite additive in formal structure, but still reveal some kind of leitmotif: the idyllic scenery. The corners of the sarcophagus display a sea deity and two fishermen, quotes of a maritime environment, just like the ship in the Jonah scene and the water in the baptism motif. Bucolic elements are represented by the shepherd and the sheep above Jonah’s bower: going a step further even little bird at the feet of the Orant and the trees structuring the relief could also be understood as indicators of a bucolic landscape. Those elements of bucolic and maritime idyll correspond to the development of the Christian signet rings: they don’t offend the Christian ideology, because they do not show any battle scenes or myths, but rather represent a general happy state in the soothing idyllic landscape that was wished for the next life.

The sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua is quite an illustrative example of the various levels of reception in late antique Roman sepulchral art. On the one hand the relief’s single elements show the artistic reuse of Pagan motifs in Christian context, like the modified retrospective ‘inspiration group’ in the middle or the borrowing of the Endymion-figure for Jonah’s resting underneath the bower.

On the other hand this relief tells us a lot about the viewer’s reception of the tomb in general which is strongly shaped by an experience of facing death as the ultimate other, as Georges Didi-Huberman phrased it very remarkably: “In front of a tomb our perception
turns into something more monolithic and our ideas become characterized more instantly and urgently by the meaning of the tomb, in other words, what the tomb contains. Hence the tomb looks back at me, while I look at it, with a glare – and will thereby influence my capability of simply and calmly facing it – as it shows me that I have lost the body which is buried inside. It also looks back at me because it confronts me with an image impossible to view wherein I will resemble a haggard, motionless [...] body in my own future destiny. In front of a tomb [...] I fall, fear attacks me [...]. It’s the fear of looking into the depth, into the place of what looks back at me, the fear of being handed over to the question of knowing (in reality: not knowing), what will become of my body [...].”

For the Pagan community afterlife was quite an undefined concept, but death was definitely the end of life itself. Because of that, they tried to compensate their very vague ideas about what would happen after death by referring to the virtues the deceased had when they were still alive (retrospective elements) as well as visualizing a good and happy state for the dead (prospective elements) to soothe the grief and loss death caused to the living. On the other side the Christian community had a very different outlook on death which was clearly not the end, but rather the beginning of a new life.

In the relief of the sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua both communities were able to receive a translation of their beliefs or ideas in pic-

32 Didi-Huberman 1999, 21: “Vor einem Grab jedoch bekommt unsere Erfahrung etwas Monolithischeres, und unsere Vorstellungen werden unmittelbarer und zwingender von dem geprägt, was Grab bedeutet, das heißt von dem, was das Grab enthält. Daher blickt mich das Grab, wenn ich es sehe, in dem Maße mit einem durchbohrenden Blick an – und wird dadurch im übrigen meine Fähigkeit, es meinerseits einfach und ruhig anzusehen, beeinträchtigen –, wie es mir zeigt, dass ich den Körper, den es im Inneren birgt, verloren habe. Es blickt mich auch deswegen an, weil es mich mit dem unmöglich zu sehenden Bild dessen konfrontiert, worin ich in meinem eigenen zukünftigen Schicksal eines ausgezehrten, reglosen [...] Körper gleich sein und ähneln werde. Vor dem Grab [...] komme ich selbst zu Fall [...], Angst befällt mich [...]. Es ist die Angst, auf den Grund – an (die) Stelle – dessen zu blicken, was mich anblickt, die Angst davor, der Frage ausgeliefert zu sein, zu wissen (in Wirklichkeit: nicht zu wissen), was aus meinem eigenen Körper wird, zwischen seinem Vermögen [...].”
torial rhetoric: a Pagan viewer would have seen allegories of the Roman virtues *pietas* and *paideia* besides single emblems and elements of a bucolic and maritime idyll – the common iconographic language of late antique sepulchral art – although the conception of the baptism scene might have been irritating or a little strange. A Christian viewer, however, could have understood the context differently: the baptism scene would clearly signify the Christian confession of the deceased. The virtues expressed in the modified ‘inspiration group’ could also be interpreted in a specifically Christian way: the motif of the studying philosopher could allegorise a deeper knowledge of the Bible and from a Christian point of view the Orant could be seen as a representation of a Christian prayer. A Pagan viewer probably received the sea deity, Jonah’s ship, the sea creature and the fishermen as maritime, then Jonah’s rest and the shepherd as bucolic quotes of *felicitas temporum*, a happy state that was wished for the uncertain path the deceased would walk after death in Pagan belief. Furthermore the combination of bucolic and maritime *felicitas temporum*-elements with an allegory of *paideia* seems to completely fit the 3rd century taste, as Barbara Borg noted: “Around 270, with the introduction of bucolic sarcophagi, the notion of idyllic country life became particularly prominent. […] From time to time, figures from *paideia* sarcophagi, such as philosophers, sages, and Muses, creep into bucolic scenes, giving the image another twist, and linking them with ideas of contemplation, wisdom, and spiritual guidance. It is via these connotations that bucolic images […] also appealed to Christians […]”.

For a Christian viewer who did not believe in the finitude of life, these prospective and soothing elements might have had a different meaning, representing a relaxed state of transition in anticipation of the resurrection of the body.

33 Borg 2013, 202.
34 Stuiber (1957) introduced the concept of a *refrigerium interim*, a very specific early Christian construction of a state of transition.
Although the depictions on the sarcophagus S. Maria Antiqua appear to be very Pagan in structure and conception, a Christian reception could turn them into representations of a more specific Christian confession and a promise of salvation. In this very early period of Christian artistic expression the unique Christian character cannot be found in a specific Christian iconography whatsoever, but in receiving and perceiving the images through the Christian eye.

Bibliography


Gerke 1940: F. Gerke, Die christlichen Sarkophage der vorkonstantinischen Zeit (Berlin 1940).


Koortbojian 1995: M. Koortbojian, Myth, Meaning, and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi (Berkeley 1995).


