

Slumber under divine protection: from vague pagan hopes to Christian belief

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The relationship between man and the divine must have been a key concern of human beings ever since they developed a notion of the latter. Since the divine is typically conceived as a power beyond human control, its nature, and questions of how to negotiate with and appease this force shaped human behaviour to a considerable extent. The change from belief in a multitude of gods, each with their own fields of power and competence, to the monotheism of Christian religion was undoubtedly a major one, and it hardly comes as a surprise that this change is generally expected to have affected both the conceptual thinking, and a multitude of aspects of the daily lives of those adhering to this new faith. Yet, while this is clearly what the ecclesiastical literature wants us to believe, and it is true in the long term, the situation is more complex than is often suggested. The other chapters in this volume demonstrate the wide range and sophisticated nature of conceptualisations of monotheism in philosophical, literary, and dogmatic theological discourse already from an early stage. In contrast, unequivocally Christian images are only known from the turn of the second and third centuries onwards. Moreover, they address the nature of the divine only indirectly through biblical narratives that show God's workings, while Christ is depicted only very rarely and God not at all until much later. This is surely one reason why images are often treated as derivative, largely expressing, to varying degrees of success, what texts tell us anyway, but not having a voice of their own.

This chapter aims to challenge this unconditional primacy of the text, and to demonstrate that early Christian images are an important source of their own for our understanding of early Christianity.¹ Their relationship with texts is not tautological but supplementary in that they add a voice (or voices) that reflect attitudes specific to both different contexts and different groups in (Christian) society than those represented by the ecclesiastical literature. In particular, they can qualify further the view promoted by Christian authors (but scrutinized by some recent scholarship) that Christianity affected all aspects of life to the same degree, and that adopting the new faith involved a radical break with the 'pagan' world surrounding them.

¹ I would like to thank the organisers of the conference for which an earlier version of this paper had originally been written, Gian-Franco Chiaia and Nicola Hömke, for their kind invitation, and the audience for their helpful interventions. I am also very grateful to Henry Heitmann-Gordon for ironing out my worst linguistic blunders, and for his helpful comments on the text. Obviously, any remaining errors are my own.

In Rome, the earliest Christian images originate from the funerary sphere. I have therefore chosen to focus my study on the most popular Christian and non-Christian narrative images from this context during the second to early fourth century AD in order to explore the extent to which, and the way in which Christian faith may have changed ideas and practices.

It is by now commonplace that Christian iconographies are firmly rooted in, or at least based on, pagan precursors. But what exactly the relationship between the two was, is still a matter for debate. Often the pagan legacy is mainly seen in iconographic patterns, artistic or stylistic conventions, which Christians were more or less unable to avoid when creating or commissioning their images². At least for their more sophisticated artworks that required technical skills, Christians inevitably had to draw upon workshops trained in conventions, and working in the tradition of non-Christian art. This argument typically assumes that the non-Christian traditional elements either had no meaning of their own, that they were pure form and could thus be fitted out with whatever meaning one wanted them to convey. Or that their original meaning was irrelevant for their Christian adaptations, that the form could be separated from and stripped off its original meaning. Both of these ideas raise serious methodological concerns, as it is precisely easily recognisable iconographic patterns that guarantee the readability of an image³. Implicitly or, more rarely, explicitly⁴ scholars thus often assume that the meaning of specific iconographic patterns was so fluid, so open to a wide range of interpretations that they could even be appropriated by Christians. What is common to all these approaches is a strong tendency to downplay the non-Christian legacy, to focus on, or even specifically search for those aspects of early Christian concepts that are new and specific to this faith, and that differ from already existing concepts, be they Jewish, pagan, or even non-religious⁵. To some extent, this is perfectly understandable since novelties are often more exciting objects of study than the continuation of longstanding traditions. But this practice has helped to marginalise these continuities. It helped to reinforce the view that Christian art and the ideas it conveyed were essentially different from pre- or non-Christian

² For some prominent examples see Sichtermann (1983), 241, 246; J. Engemann in: *RAC* 18 (1998) 694 s.v. Jonas, and elsewhere; Elsner (1998), 152-5; Snyder (1985), 92-3, and elsewhere.

³ For an excellent discussion of this aspect, see Hijmans (2000).

⁴ E.g. Elsner (1998), esp. 152-4, on which see below n. 73; Balch (2008).

⁵ But see Mathews (1993), 30-3, who suggests with reference to the Jonah story that "the Christian subject had to be bent somewhat to fit what the artist was familiar with and this bending in turn suggested new ways of interpreting the new subject." (33).

art and thought, and to assert the very idea the Church Fathers were so anxious to uphold, namely that Christians were also quite distinct from the rest of society as a social entity.

This approach has methodological implications, too. Scholars of early Christianity often feel obliged to read into the Christian images a surplus of meaning that is not necessarily easy to reconcile with the images themselves. To the extent to which images were denied their own language – their iconography as meaningful visual rhetoric – scholars had to establish their specifically Christian meaning by drawing on the ecclesiastical literature, even giving primacy to the latter where image and text did not easily agree. Obviously, it would be absurd to ignore the ecclesiastical writings; but we need to beware of their limitations with regard to our project. It has often been stated (but is frequently forgotten) that these writings were not just incoherent and even contradictory, thus rendering problematic an approach that absolutizes an interpretation simply because it seems to fit our expectations. These writings with their sophisticated arguments were also inaccessible to the majority of early Christians. We are therefore well advised to scrutinize which ideas are likely to have filtered down to (a given local group of) lay Christians. The images should be taken seriously and studied in their proper context, physical, social, and historical⁶. Secondly, it is interesting to study the often ignored or marginalized continuities and commonalities between pagan and Christian ideas and modes of expression in their own right, not in order to demonstrate a supposed lack of originality or ‘hybridity’ of forms and ideas, but from a sociological point of view. My interest here is therefore not only in a better understanding of Christian ideas, but also of pagan ones since the study of any process of reception also highlights the nature of what has been received.

One caveat must be added and concerns my use of the terms Christian and pagan as binary oppositions. It has often been stressed, and quite rightly so, that these two terms do not refer to groups as distinct as some writers, ancient as well as modern, wished them to be. First, pagans were only a coherent group in the eyes of Christians – namely in that they were neither Christians nor Jews –, but among themselves they differed widely in their beliefs. Secondly, Christians were not a coherent group either, both with regard to their Christian beliefs and their rejection or otherwise of pagan and Jewish ideas and practices. However, for heuristic reasons I shall continue to operate with these two terms, if only to demonstrate how some

⁶ With special attention to ancient viewing practices see e.g. Elsner (1998), and Hijmans (2000), each with bibl.

Kommentiert [NH1]: Verstehen wir Sie richtig, dass der Unterscheid zwischen beiden Gruppen darin besteht, dass die einen meinen, die Christen hätten sich paganer Bild-Versatzstücke bedient und ihnen einen neuen Sinn gegeben, während die andere Gruppe zwar Bildkontinuität annimmt, aber nur nach Unterschieden sucht? Wenn nicht so: Könnte man dann den richtigen Unterschied noch schärfer ausformulieren?

Kommentiert [BB2]: Bei genauerer Überlegung denke ich nun, dass die zweite Gruppe eigentlich mehr oder weniger mit der letzten Variante der ersten identisch ist, und ich habe den Absatz nun umformuliert.

Kommentiert [BEB3]: doch, das ist im Wesentlichen was ich meinte, obwohl die Grenzen nicht wirklich scharf zu ziehen sind. Tatsächlich handelt es sich hier nicht so sehr um zwei Gruppen/Schulen von Forschern, sondern um Weisen des Umgangs mit dem Material, die auch bei denselben Personen zu finden sind.

shared ideas could easily blur the borderline between the two. Moreover, the material I want to focus on is normally still discussed in these categories, so that, by using them as well, I can demonstrate their limitations⁷.

Mythological sarcophagi

By far the most popular story on mythical sarcophagi is that of Endymion being visited by Selene in his sleep (Fig. 1)⁸. Like some other popular narratives, including Persephone's rape by Hades (Fig. 2), Adonis and Aphrodite, and Dionysus discovering the sleeping Ariadne on Naxos (Fig. 3), the images have been suggested to depict, in an allegorical way, the deceased's hope for an afterlife⁹. But this is hard to maintain. Endymion was indeed immortalized, his beauty frozen in time. Yet, he remained asleep forever, deprived of any sensation, and without the prospect of ever waking up again. As Helmut Sichtermann has duly pointed out, several ancient sources therefore describe his fate as rather undesirable¹⁰. Cicero tells us:

The prospect of the most delightful dreams would not reconcile us to falling asleep for ever: Endymion's fate we should consider no better than death. (*fin.* 5.20.55, transl. H. Rackham)

To be sure, in the mythical narrative, both Persephone and Adonis returned from the underworld for half the year. While their stories are not necessarily ideal as an allegory or paradigm of eternal life – after all, they had to stay in Hades for the other half of the year – they would at least be suitable as paradigms for a cyclical concept of life and death. Hanfmann has demonstrated that this was a key idea of the equally popular Season sarcophagi, which he related to written sources that focus on the contrast between the finitude of each individual life, and the eternity of life in general with its perpetual seasonal cycle¹¹. The stories of Persephone and Adonis could easily be understood in a similar way. However, this idea is

⁷ I hereby follow the argument of Cameron (2011), 14-32, namely that the term constituted a largely neutral designation of a non-Christian (outsider).

⁸ Koch & Sichtermann (1982), 144-6; Sichtermann (1992), 32-58, 103-63 cat. 27-137; Koortbojian (1995), 63-99. For the frequency of specific themes on sarcophagi see Zanker (2005), 245 fig. 1.

⁹ Persephone: Robert (1919), 358-421; Koch & Sichtermann (1982), 175-9; Adonis: Koch & Sichtermann (1982), 131-3; Grassinger (1999), 70-90, 211-21 cat. 43-67; Koortbojian (1995), 23-62; Ariadne: Matz (1969), 360-404 cat. 207-29; Koch & Sichtermann (1982), 193. For (a range of) eschatological interpretations of Greek myths on Roman sarcophagi see most influentially: Cumont (1942); Turcan (1978); Wrede (1981). For an eschatological interpretation of Ariadne-sarcophagi see Matz (1969), 374-5, of Endymion and Selene see Koortbojian (1995), 77-9, 83-4; of Persephone see Dresken-Weiland (2005), 112-4.

¹⁰ Sichtermann (1992), 41-4.

¹¹ Hanfmann (1951); similarly E. Simon, *Gnomon* 58, 1986, 351; Müller (1994), 51-64.

strikingly different from, and even contrasts with the idea of individual life after death¹². Moreover, Persephone's (or Adonis') return is never illustrated on sarcophagi, and in epitaphs the rape is always a lamentable event and a poetic metaphor for death¹³.

This can hardly be mere coincidence. Roman artists were perfectly capable of inventing iconographies that expressed what they wanted to convey. Had they (and their patrons) chosen Persephone's, or Adonis' stories in order to express hope for an afterlife, would it not have been a good idea to include an image of these heroes' return to the upper world? Even in the images of Dionysus' discovery of Ariadne, no effort is ever made to indicate that she would eventually wake up – an easy opportunity for the artists to express the idea of life after death had they wished to do so.

The more general question of whether there was any pagan belief in an afterlife, that is, life as an individual rather than as a member of the anonymous collective of shades that constituted the *Dii Manes*, is hotly debated, highly complicated, and cannot be discussed here in full detail¹⁴. My position can be summarized thus: While such hopes or even expectations existed among Pythagoreans and the members of some mystery cults, there is no indication that they were shared by the Romans at large. Their outlook as it is expressed in a range of written sources from the funerary realm is typically rather gloomy and full of lament¹⁵; at best, death is seen as relief from all hardship of earthly life. Especially epitaphs normally stress that there is no return, and that death is the end of everything¹⁶.

Any more specific descriptions of a world beyond are only found in poetry – the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* being the most famous examples –, and they are anything but consistent. Moreover, they are largely absent from both consolatory literature and epitaphs, where positive comments are very rare. In inscriptions, the deceased are wished life among the stars¹⁷, among the Muses, in Elysium or on the Isles of Bliss¹⁸, among the heroes of old, or among the

¹² Müller thus suggests that cosmic images should be understood as saying: 'You are part of the cosmos, and therefore mortal.' (1994, 56).

¹³ For epitaphs using this metaphor see e.g. Brelich (1937), 20-1; Lattimore (1942), 147-9.

¹⁴ See e.g. Harkness (1899); Cumont (1942); Nock (1946). More recent summaries of the debate include Esteve-Forriol (1962), *passim*, esp. 147-8; Brandenburg (1967), 242-4; Koch & Sichtermann (1982), 583-617; Müller (1994), 98-106; Pekáry (1994); Zanker & Ewald (2012), Zanker & Ewald (2004), 26-7, and elsewhere; Hope (2007), 211-47; Hope (2009), 97-120.

¹⁵ Harkness (1899); Brelich (1937); Peres (2003), 26-59.

¹⁶ Harkness (1899); Brelich (1937), esp. 54-61; Pekáry (1994).

¹⁷ Kajanto (1978), 34 n. 37; Orth (1994); Peres (2003), 86-9.

¹⁸ Esteve-Forriol (1962), 147-9; Peres (2003), 75-81.

gods¹⁹, but no details are given. Normally only the soul advances to these spheres while the body is said to remain in the tomb, and there is a distinct sense of loss of individuality in the process. Most notably, these ideas are rarely presented with great confidence, and always remain quite vague²⁰. It is telling that often several of them are listed as options to choose from, and that they are sometimes qualified by the addition “if the poets are right”²¹. Moreover, they are largely restricted to metric epitaphs, more frequent in Greek than in Latin ones, and they pertain almost exclusively to the prematurely deceased (i.e. children and young people)²². This suggests that they are more a poetic device than an indication of any firm beliefs²³. Accordingly, Lattimore observed that the hundreds of epitaphs he studied showed a “strong will to believe, rather than belief as such.”²⁴ Most, though not all scholars have therefore now moved away from the idea that the myths just mentioned (and others) allegorically refer to the expectation of an afterlife²⁵.

Peaceful sleep: pagan and Christian

This of course raises the question of what, then, *was* the meaning of these sarcophagus images that were so popular. Let us start with the sleeping heroes. Their most basic meaning in funerary contexts is relatively obvious. Sleep has been perceived as the brother of death ever since Homer²⁶, and referring to a dead person as sleeping is a euphemism that has currency until today. To this extent, the images are a poetic visualization of the event that is commemorated, a soothing way of talking about death, and a means of elevating the occasion by means of a heightened, poetic style. But figures such as Endymion, Ariadne, or Rhea Sylvia do not simply visualize a poetic metaphor; they visualize hope for sleep of a particular quality, a peaceful and undisturbed repose. This is suggested by the bucolic or idyllic environments

Kommentiert [NH4]: Lässt sich das durch einige Lit.-verweise evtl. noch präzisieren?

Kommentiert [BEB5]: ich finde es schwierig, hier nochmals einzelne herauszugreifen. Auch ergeben sich die Namen implizit aus Anm. 8 und 13.

¹⁹ On this idea see below ■.

²⁰ Esteve-Forriol (1962), 147-8; Brandenburg (1967), esp. 206, 242; Müller (1994), esp. 95-6.

²¹ Esteve-Forriol (1962), 148. Even the famous and unusually optimistic epitaph for M. Luceius Nepos is uncertain which of the various, poetry-inspired options may be true: *CIL* 6.21521 = *CLE* 1109 II. 31-46. For an English translation see Erasmo (2008) 201-3.

²² Orth (1994), 156, for stars. Harkness (1899).

²³ Harkness (1899); Pekáry (1994); cf. below n. 29; on mythical sarcophagus images as poetic devices see now the lucid article by Newby (2014).

²⁴ Lattimore (1942), 44 n. 169, also quoted by Müller (1994), 98.

²⁵ On rare occasions, wall paintings in tombs do allude more explicitly to the poetic images of a life beyond, but there is no reason to believe that they are being taken any more seriously as an illustration of specific eschatological expectations than the poetic texts. In contrast to Christian imagery, even pagan sarcophagus images with religious connotations such as garlands or *paterae* “emphasize cult or ritual offerings, rather than any kind of belief system or doctrine”: Elsner (2014), 320.

²⁶ Ogle (1933); McNally (1985); for early allegories of sleep and death see also Borg (2002), 117-19.

that these protagonists typically inhabit²⁷. They rest in a hilly or rocky landscape, surrounded by herdsmen with their flock, who sometimes tend to their dog or milk a sheep or goat. Syringes lie on the floor, and often there are baskets of fruit and/or personifications with cornucopiae and similar items. Dionysus is accompanied by his usual entourage. Cupids add to the light-hearted atmosphere.

Such environments, to the extent that they existed in the real world, were highly valued by the Romans for a number of reasons, one of them being the idea that rural life, typically enjoyed in a villa context, was a simple, self-sufficient lifestyle, which contrasted with a life of *luxuria*, and balanced out the busy and onerous activities of city life²⁸. The ways in which authors describe their villa life are sometimes strikingly similar to visions of ideal worlds inhabited by the spirits of the dead in literature, and the vague hopes that people have derived from such descriptions for their own fate after death²⁹. When Statius characterizes his villa life at the Bay of Naples, it could as well be a description of the world beyond (*silv.* 3.5.85-6):

pax secure locis et desidis otia vitae et numquam turbata quies somnique peracti

Peace secure is there, the leisure of a quiet life, tranquillity undisturbed, sleep that runs its course. (transl. K. Coleman)

And Pliny echoes: *placia omnia et quiescentia*; "There is complete calm and quiet." (*epist.* 5.6.45).

"Secure and everlasting sleep" is what T. Flavius Hymnus wishes for his wife Flavia Melitina in an epitaph starting: *DM et somno aeternali securitati memoriaeq(ue) perpetuae* (*CIL* 6.18378)³⁰. As Kajanto has demonstrated, the expressions *somno aeternali* and *somno aeterno* are rather popular in Rome³¹, and concern for *securitas* is also expressed in dedicatory formulae such as *securitati perpetuae*, *securitati aeternae* or *quieti aeternae*. Kajanto has already noticed that they are shorthand for the more elaborate consolations we find

²⁷ This has been observed by most scholars (e.g. Sichtermann (1992), 50; Koortbojian (1995), 78-84), many of whom interpret the bucolic world as an image of the afterlife or Elysium. Himmelmann (1980), 125, strangely denies that the setting held any deeper meaning and regards it merely as an indication of the myth's setting in the Latmos mountains.

²⁸ For moral connotations: Wallace-Hadrill (1988); Bodel (1997).

²⁹ On the interdependence of literature and epitaphs see e.g. Hoogma (1959); Zarker (1961); Ramsby (2005), and Ramsby (2007), with bibl.; Erasmo (2008) 154-204; for an overview of Roman literary concepts see *RAC* 17 (1996) 295-302 s.v. Jenseits (Jenseitsvorstellungen) (P. Habermehl), and Hope (2009), 97-120.

³⁰ Kajanto (1974), 59 and 63 (165 CE); cf. Lattimore (1942), 82-3.

³¹ Kajanto (1974), 60, 64-5.

elsewhere, where death is characterised as not such a bad thing after all, and even as bliss, since it entails the deliverance from the pain and toil of everyday life³². The epitaph of P. Atilius claims: "I fled the miseries of sickness and the great ills of life; I am now free of all its pains and enjoy a peaceful calm"³³. In the same way that villa life is (or could be) a refuge from the busy world of the city and the forum, from exertion and hard work, so is death often described as emancipation from all hardship and suffering. This idea later became an essentially Stoic one, detailed, for instance, in Seneca's *Consolation to Marcia* where he explains what great men would have been spared to suffer had they died as young as Marcellus did (6.20). Accordingly, he reassures Marcia that Marcellus has reached *magna et aeterna pax* (19.6).

That this idea could be embodied by Endymion can already be seen in Theocritus' claim that he is to be envied for the eternal sleep (*atropos upnos*) that was his death (3.49-51). Hesiod even knew a version of the story according to which Endymion was rewarded with eternal sleep by his father Zeus on his own request³⁴, just as Cleobis and Biton were on their mother's³⁵. It may be no coincidence that the abovementioned expressions *somno aeternali* and *somno aeterno* are largely unique to Rome, and came into use in the mid-second century³⁶, that is, precisely when the sarcophagus images began depicting sleeping heroes.

The key terms, *pax*, *somnus*, *securitas*, and *quietas*, used to describe both villa life and death, naturally ring a bell with those studying Jewish and Christian epitaphs, where all these terms also occur, and, from the fourth century onwards, are sometimes further specified as *in deo* or *in Cristo*. Indeed, taking Christian ownership of the Roman catacombs, where most of these inscriptions originate, for granted, it is often assumed that the frequent acclamation *in pace* or *en eirene*, in peace, is an indubitable indication of Christian patronage³⁷.

But things are not as simple as that. Interestingly, the notion is more frequent in Latin inscriptions than in Greek ones³⁸, although it is often expected that the majority of early

Kommentiert [NH6]: Das sollte vielleicht eher in griech. Schrift geschrieben werden

³² Kajanto (1974), 65-8. For the general idea of death as relief from toil and pain cf. Brelich (1937), 59-60; Lattimore (1942), 209-10, 213-4 with n. 304; Brandenburg (1967), 221 with n. 84, 237, 242 n. 134; Esteve-Forriol (1962), 152; Pekáry (1994), 97-8; each with examples.

³³ *CL* 5.5278, transl. Hope (2009) 101.

³⁴ Hes. *cat. frg.* 8, cf. Apollod. 1.7.5; Koortbojian (1995), 63.

³⁵ Herodotus 1.31. The story was used at least once in Roman funerary imagery: Fittschen (1970).

³⁶ Kajanto (1974), 60, 64-5.

³⁷ Dresken-Weiland et al. (2012). For Jewish references to peace see Frey (1936); Noy (1995), and now A. Angerstorfer in: Dresken-Weiland et al. (2012), 277-386; generally on *pax*, *eirene*, and *šālôm* see Dinkler (1972) and Dinkler (1974).

³⁸ Dresken-Weiland et al. (2012), 58.

Christian inscriptions were written in Greek. A considerable number of epitaphs with the *in pace* formula also feature a dedication to the Dii Manes³⁹. While it is possible, especially where the formula occurs with unambiguously Christian phrases or symbols, that the dedication to the Spirits of the Dead continued to serve as an indication of rightful ownership and legal protection of the grave as a *res religiosa*⁴⁰, or that it is simply an indication of the fuzziness of the boundaries between the faiths, it is problematic to attribute all these instances to Christians on the sole evidence of location. Scholars increasingly agree that the catacombs were not exclusively used by Christians, and I have argued elsewhere that the majority of third-century catacombs – and the large ones in particular – are likely to have been established for the *familiae* (households) of the imperial and other élite families⁴¹. When location does not help to establish Christian patronage, a dedication to the Dii Manes should be treated as a sign of non-Christian patronage unless unequivocal evidence stands against it, especially since the formula was generally used more rarely by pagans from the later second century onwards, and may in fact have been a more deliberate choice than before. The formulae *in pace*, *requievit in pace*, *dormit in pace*, and similar may thus have been used by non-Christians as well as Christians⁴². After all, as we have just seen, the general idea had already been familiar for centuries; was occasionally expressed, albeit in slightly different terms, in epitaphs;⁴³ and became particularly prominent on mythological sarcophagi of the second and earlier third centuries. With the myths' disappearance from sarcophagi⁴⁴, it seems that the idea changed media, and was now expressed more often in writing rather than imagery.

Accepting this conclusion has consequences for identifying early Christian epitaphs. On the one hand, it means that epitaphs with these formulae, but without a dedication to the Dii

³⁹ Carletti (1994), 40-1 nn. 32, 33, 35, 39, who also identifies these inscriptions as Christian solely on the basis of their find spot.

⁴⁰ Thus e.g. Harkness (1899), 57; Caldelli (1997); Carletti (1994), 40-1 with nn. 26, 29, 30, 34, 36-8.

⁴¹ Borg (2013), 72-121.

⁴² Carletti (1994), 40-1 for a different view with examples using the Dii Manes formula in nn. 32-3, 35, 39, and 38: *in pace*: ICVR I 1167, 1377, 1966, 2924, 2966, 3327, 3446, 3523, 3671, 3689, 3762, 3775; III 7121b, 9088; IV 9616, 11896, 11987, 12465, 12794; VI 15913, 16184, 17097, 17271; VII 17781, 18796, 19123, 20090; VIII 20722, 20951, 22052, 22662, 22673; IX 23994; and an inscription possibly coming from the Hypogeum at Roma Vecchia (dei cento scalini): Flocchi Nicolai et al. (2000), 98-100 no. 15 fig. 52; *requievit in pace*: ICUR IV 11758 (a. 362); *dormit in pace*: ICUR II 4346; III 9221, 9233; IV 11205; *anima dulcis in pace*: ICVR IV 11896; *in deo refrigera*: ICVR III 6721a. The same would apply to the use of *depositio* (ibid. n. 31; ICVR I 1518, 1851, 3623, 3651; II 4345, 4374; III 9088; IV 10889, 12465, 12794; V 15330, 15394; VI 15663, 15667, 15676; VII 14440 (a. 361); IX 24024, 24130); cf. Carletti (2008), 45-8.

⁴³ See also a first-century AD epitaph from Rome for a praetorian with the closing formula *hic secura requiesquit* (!): AE 1966, 33; Kolb & Fugmann (2008) 80-2.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of potential reasons for the disappearance of mythological images see Borg (2013), 177-8.

Manes, could nevertheless mark non-Christian graves. More importantly, it also suggests that core ideas of what might come after death were shared by pagans and Christians.

Jonah's Rest

Against the background of the popularity of sleeping heroes on Roman sarcophagi, it is interesting to note that by far the most popular figure in third- and early fourth-century Christian funerary art is also a sleeper: Jonah⁴⁵. He has probably received the most attention from scholars discussing the pagan legacy in Christian images, since the iconography of this Christian hero strongly resembles that of sleepers in pagan myth. Jonah's story is often depicted as a cycle of three episodes: Jonah jumping or being thrown off the ship and engulfed by the ketos; being disgorged by the ketos; and peacefully sleeping under a gourd vine or an arbour (Figs 4-5)⁴⁶. The most common modern interpretation suggests that the story symbolises resurrection. This idea is suggested by Matthew 12.38-42 (cf. Mt 16.1-4) and Luke 11.29-32 as well as the Church Fathers, who compare Jonah's survival of three days and nights in the ketos' belly with the time Christ spent in the tomb after his death on the cross. Jonah's disgorgement thus becomes a symbol and prefiguration of Jesus' resurrection, and that of his faithful followers⁴⁷.

However, this reading is relatively rare in ancient texts and does not work very well at the level of images⁴⁸. To start with, while the image of Jonah's ejection by the monster surely had the potential of being read as, not just a symbol of salvation in general, but of resurrection, in the images this scene neither appears on its own nor is it ever depicted in a particularly prominent position when shown as part of a cycle. It can even be omitted between the scenes of Jonah being thrown overboard and resting under the vine⁴⁹. It is this latter scene that is shown as the culmination of events, either featuring at the end of a chronologically ordered sequence,

Kommentiert [NH7]: zur Markierung, in Fn: Hier sollte vermutlich noch eine Seitenangabe ergänzt werden

⁴⁵ For statistics see Dresken-Weiland & Weiland (2005), 28-31, but without chronological differentiation.

⁴⁶ The literature is vast; see e.g. Ferrua (1962); Narkiss (1979); Crossan (1992); Engemann (1996), 553-6; J. Engemann in: *RAC 18* (1998) 670-99 s.v. Jonas; Davis (2000); Snyder (2003), 90-5; Dresken-Weiland (2010), 96-119; all with further bibliography.

⁴⁷ E.g. Narkiss (1979), 64-7 with n. 31; Davis (2000), 73-5; Elsner (1998), 153; J. Engemann in: *RAC 18* (1998) 678-85 s.v. Jonas; Dresken-Weiland (2010), 96-100; 111-15.

⁴⁸ As is occasionally noted, e.g. Snyder (1985), 90-2; Engemann (1996), 554-5; Engemann, J., in: *RAC 18* (1998) 692-4, s.v. Jonas. Christian authors of the first three centuries do not refer to Jonah's story in the context of resurrection. The only potential exception is Tertullian, who uses Jonah's unharmed survival in the ketos' belly as proof that coffin and decay cannot harm a deceased's body (*res.* 32.3): see the overview in *RAC 18* (1998) 678-85, s.v. Jonas (J. Engemann). The comparison with Jesus' rest in his tomb is drawn by several of the Church fathers, but does not feature very prominently: *ibid.* 688-9.

⁴⁹ Ferrua (1962), p. 60.

or else occupying the centre of a triptych⁵⁰. The image is sometimes even abbreviated to just a branch of the vine with its fruit, or only a single suspended gourd (Fig. 6)⁵¹, which further demonstrates the centrality of the theme of sleep. If the early Christians' intention had been to use Jonah as a symbol of resurrection, it would have been far more sensible to focus on the image of his disfigurement – and two late *loculus* slabs in fact do so⁵².

A closer comparison of the events as narrated in the images and in ancient texts further adds to the confusion. In all literary sources, the prophet's rest under a vine features in a rather different context from that of his maritime adventures. It occurs only after his gloomy prophecy to the Ninevites, their ensuing repentance, and God's merciful sparing of their lives. Frustrated by the damage done to his credibility as a prophet and the lack of 'appropriate' punishment of the sinners, he retreats to an arbour, over which God grows a shady vine, determined to watch the ensuing events at Nineveh from a distance. Yet his rest lasts for only a day and a night, and is followed by God's destruction of the tree and another lesson to learn for Jonah, the self-righteous prophet, who lamented the death of a vine that grew without his contribution, but blamed God for showing mercy to the 120,000 Ninevites (*Jonah* 4). The episode is therefore cited in both Jewish and Christian writers in the context of repentance and God's forgiveness of sins⁵³. Overall, Jonah's rest and the gourd vine in particular do not feature prominently in any Christian writings, including the later patristic literature⁵⁴, and in epitaphs, references to this theme are extremely rare and late⁵⁵.

Thirdly, independently of these difficulties, it is hard to see how the image of the prophet's slumber could signify the same idea as Jonah's ejection does. While the unconsciousness of sleep may seem blissful to those who do not believe in a happy afterlife, this state could hardly be desirable as the eventual fate of the faithful after the Final Judgement. Descriptions of this fate, and of paradise as the final abode of the righteous, are rare and vague in early texts and

⁵⁰ Ferrua (1962), with examples pp. 7-24.

⁵¹ Ferrua (1962), 46-52 figs 30-3.

⁵² *JCUR* 5.15420; Ferrua (1962), 41, 67; cf. Partyka (1987); Calcagnini (2006), 66-7 no. 40; Dresken-Weiland (2010), 113-5 fig. 46.

⁵³ *RAC* 18 (1998) 692-4, s.v. Jonas (J. Engemann). – For further deviations from the story as told in the *Book of Jonah* see Snyder (1985), 91. In the De Rossi version of *Midrash Jonah*, the episode of Jonah's rest does follow immediately after Jonah's rescue from sea, but its significance remains the same as in all the other sources: Narkiss (1979), 63-6 with n. 6 on a first-century AD date, which may, however, be contested. The only other reference to this sequence of events occurs later in the Koran (Surah 37.145-8).

⁵⁴ *RAC* 18 (1998) 687-9, s.v. Jonas (J. Engemann).

⁵⁵ Dresken-Weiland (2006), 294; Dresken-Weiland (2007), 286, 302; it typically occurs in connection with the Final Judgement.

Kommentiert [NH8]: zur Markierung, in Fn: An anderer Stelle wurde mit AD und BC datiert. In welche Richtung soll vereinheitlicht werden?

show quite a range of variation later on⁵⁶. Yet, the *Book of Enoch* explicitly states that, after Judgement Day, “those who sleep not stand in the presence of your [i.e. God’s] glory” (1 *Enoch* 39.12-13; my emphasis), and Carletti has demonstrated more generally that, while the notion of *pax* does occasionally occur in visions of paradise, sleep does not⁵⁷.

There is, however, a context in which sleep features prominently in both Jewish and Christian authors, and that is the interim state between dying day and the Final Judgement followed by resurrection. Marbury Olge has examined the metaphor of sleep to denote death in antiquity, and demonstrated its widespread occurrence in a range of Jewish writings from the Old Testament onwards⁵⁸. As he further showed, Christian authors from the imperial period onwards equally use this metaphor, often either quoting passages from the Old Testament or else using phrases very similar to those in the Hebrew texts. In particular, in Christian authors, the state of sleep is explicitly referred to, and contrasted with resurrection and life in paradise. The *Gospels of John*, for instance, tell us (11.11-13):

[H]e [i.e. Jesus] said to them [i.e. his disciples], “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” ... Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

The Church Fathers regularly quote from the Old and the New Testament as well as from apocryphal texts when talking about resurrection, again juxtaposing the intermittent sleep of death with the resurrection and life to follow the Final Judgement⁵⁹.

This state of sleep is often specified as a *peaceful* rest. While Jewish epitaphs frequently use the phrase ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοίμησις, combining the idea of peace and sleep in a condensed formula, similar phrases are absent from Christian epigraphy before the fourth century. But the idea was clearly there before as the phrase *in pace sepultura eius* used by Christian authors including Cyprian and Jerome demonstrates⁶⁰. We also need to keep in mind that the earliest

⁵⁶ Famously, Augustine still attests to the multitude of opinions in *De genesi ad litteram* 8.1. The bibliography on Paradise is enormous; see most recently: Bregni (2005); Bockmuehl & Stroumsa (2010); Dresken-Weiland et al. (2012).

⁵⁷ Carletti (1995). For the notion of *pax* see also Kajanto (1978), esp. 37-42. His observation of *pax* referring to the final state after resurrection is only attested late, and these occurrences do not combine with the notion of sleep. Ironically, some scholars have therefore pointed to the resemblance of Jonah at rest with the sleeping Endymion on sarcophagi, which they claim to be a pagan image of life after death; e.g. Narkiss (1979), 67; Mathews (1993), 33.

⁵⁸ Olge (1933), esp. 89-117.

⁵⁹ Olge (1933), 95-7.

⁶⁰ Cyprian, *Test.* 2.14; Jerome, *Comm. in Is.* 59.3-4; cf. Olge (1933), 91.

Kommentiert [NH9]: klingt etw. missverständlich, da auf den ersten Blick 3 Komponenten statt 2 → evtl. umformulieren?

Christian epigraphy is very laconic, and more extended formulae as well as metric epitaphs appear only over the course of the fourth century. Andreas Merkt and Jutta Dresken-Weiland have recently identified references to *pax/eirene* as the most frequent motif in inscriptions from the catacombs, appearing in almost 50% of them⁶¹. While the notion sometimes does describe the deceased's state after resurrection, early unambiguously Christian epitaphs that provide more detail than just the acclamation *in pace/en eirene* always refer to the interim state; any explicit reference to resurrection and paradise features in epitaphs only from around the mid-fourth century onwards, and almost exclusively in those for clerics⁶². It is therefore most likely that also the simple acclamations refer to the deceased's rest during their interim state.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jonah illustrates and symbolises this interim state, acting as a visual equivalent to the *in pace/en eirene* formula⁶³. This interpretation of Jonah's rest is not entirely new, and was first proposed by Alfred Stuibler⁶⁴. He has been widely criticised, and today few if any agree with his views⁶⁵. This is not the place to review his arguments in full, and there are clearly problems with the way Stuibler tried to support it⁶⁶. The main objection has been that references to the *refrigerium interim* and/or ideas of an afterlife were rare and mostly late⁶⁷. But as we have seen above, the interim state of the deceased's peaceful sleep features prominently in Christian accounts of the resurrection right from the beginning, albeit not under the term *refrigerium interim* which was coined and used almost exclusively by

⁶¹ A. Merkt in: Dresken-Weiland et al. (2012), 58. Their conclusion, however, that they are all Christian is based on the assumption that all epitaphs from the Roman catacombs are Christian.

⁶² Dresken-Weiland (2006), 294, 297-300; Dresken-Weiland (2007), 286-8. On the frequent connection of *pax* with terms meaning rest or sleep see also Dinkler (1972), 485-7.

⁶³ Where, on sarcophagi, Jonah is depicted underneath the portrait of the deceased, his function as a visual acclamation becomes particularly obvious. For 12 known examples see Dresken-Weiland (2010), 104 with n. 47. Ibid. 109 she notices the visual acclamation but reads it as the wish for resurrection.

⁶⁴ Stuibler (1957), 136-51.

⁶⁵ See already the review De Bruyne (1958); for a summary of later comments see Engemann (1996) 551-2. Some authors accept the possibility of this reading of Jonah's rest, but only in addition to a reading as an image of the resurrected in paradise: see e.g. C. Colpe in: *RAC* 17 (1996) 398 s.v. Jenseits; J. Engemann in: *RAC* 18 (1998) 694, s.v. Jonas.

⁶⁶ For instance, for Stuibler, much of his interpretation hinged on Jonah's nudity, which was interpreted as an image of the soul of the deceased. However, his nudity can be explained in various ways, either as part of a hellenistic iconographical tradition, or else as an indicator of the resurrection of the body. The latter suggestion (drawing on Tertullian, e.g. Davis (2000), who proposes that the image of Jonah at rest was added to the story in order to illustrate *bodily* resurrection by presenting a beautiful classical body) is perhaps not impossible but hard to support by any evidence since there are doubts as to how widely known or accepted the idea of bodily resurrection was; cf. n. 48. Moreover, Stuibler sees Endymion as a model for Jonah, and assumes that the former had already been an allegory of life after death in the pagan world, an assumption which we have seen to be highly problematic, and in any case **could not help an argument** for the *refrigerium interim*.

⁶⁷ e.g. Kajanto (1978), 38; J. Engemann in: *RAC* 18 (1998) 694, s.v. Jonas; Snyder (2003), 92.

Kommentiert [NH10]: zur Markierung in Fn: Wortwiederholung evtl. beseitigen? Hintere Markierung.: Fehlt hier Text?

Kommentiert [BEB11]: Wortwiederholung beseitigt, aber es fehlt kein Text

Tertullian. Resurrection and references to the faithful's fate after the Final Judgement are indeed rare and late⁶⁸, but the frequency with which the interim state is mentioned in epitaphs before the middle of the fourth century demonstrates that we have to differentiate between the two, and that the latter was clearly on people's minds⁶⁹. The term *refrigerium* is one of the most popular notions on early Christian epitaphs, and often clearly refers to the interim state⁷⁰. And it is interesting to note that the cessation of epigraphic references to the interim state roughly coincides with the disappearance of Jonah from the image repertoire⁷¹.

Let us return briefly to the Jonah narrative in both text and image. As we have seen, the use of the image of Jonah at rest is not easily compatible with the narrative as we find it in the written accounts. Yet, in the wider context of how the ancients treated image and text, this should not bother us too much. Images were rarely used to illustrate a text. Traditional stories were often used to exemplify a range of different ideas, and both writers and artists could manipulate the stories, or be selective in choosing only those parts of a story that suited their aims⁷². Similar manipulations and selective readings are generally accepted for Christian stories as well⁷³. In our case, there are two ways of looking at this relationship. The majority view is that the scene of Jonah at rest was an addition to the story, which supplemented a specific aspect that the artists and their patrons wanted to convey in the funerary context. This reading could be supported by the observation that, in many instances, the ketos seems to spit Jonah right underneath his vine, which suggests that the two episodes are considered to be immediately subsequent. In contrast, Antonio Ferrua suggested that no additions to the written accounts of the story need to be assumed, but that we are dealing with a selection of episodes. The artists had simply chosen Jonah's brief period of bliss after God had grown the vine, without much regard for what happened before and after⁷⁴. This view is potentially

⁶⁸ *RAC* 17 (1996) s.v. Jenseits: C. Christlich 395-6 (C. Colpe); Dresken-Weiland (2006), 295-6 with figs 1 and 2; Dresken-Weiland (2007), 287-8 with figs 2-3.

⁶⁹ Cf. n. 64 above.

⁷⁰ Dresken-Weiland (2006), 292-3 with figs 1 and 2; Dresken-Weiland (2007), 287-8 with figs 2-3. Olge (1933), 104-8, 111, has also argued convincingly that the description of the interim state as sleep must have been popularized through prayers and rituals. For a discussion of the term and its alternative meaning as the refreshments brought to the tombs of the dead by their friends and relatives, see also Jensen (2008).

⁷¹ Chronological distribution: Dresken-Weiland (2010), 101, 103.

⁷² For the use of myths on sarcophagi see Borg (2014), esp. 238-40, with bibl.

⁷³ With reference to Jonah see e.g. J. Engemann in: *RAC* 18 (1998) 692-3 s.v. Jonas; Snyder (2003), 90-2.

⁷⁴ Ferrua (1962), 53. Snyder (2003), 90-2, equally opposes the idea of a narrative sequence, but does not explain in detail how this should work. A rather curious explanation is offered by Dresken-Weiland (2010), 100, who speculates that the image of Jonah's rest had to be added in order to fill more space on the walls etc., and that the exact vision of the 'pleasant condition' after the disgorgement was not important.

Kommentiert [BEB12]: nein, ich denke es sind nur zwei; was Sie als c) bezeichnen, ist nur meine Erweiterung von Ferruas argument

Kommentiert [NH13]: Genau genommen folgen hier drei Wege: a) the majority view b) Ferrua c) One could even argue... Soll daher dieser Einleitungssatz irgendwie modifiziert werden?

Kommentiert [NH14]: "need to be"?

supported by the later images, which also include Jonah under the *withering* vine⁷⁵. One may even go one step further and argue that the idea of this sleep being only intermittent fits the temporary sleep of death. Whatever the correct interpretation may be – and as the images do not illustrate a text anyway, the question is probably moot – in early Christian funerary contexts, the story of Jonah has been de-specified. The episode with the Ninevites has been removed to make the story more universal, and his blissful sleep in particular, is the visual equivalent of the faithful's main interest and concern, the temporary sleep that was their death. The vision of what this state would be like coincides with the most popular pagan hopes for what death might entail: the deliverance from toil and pain⁷⁶.

Proximity to the divine

After we have established the core meaning of our sleeping figures in funerary contexts, and have seen that it remains largely unchanged also in Christian contexts, it is time to return to the more specific aspect of the deceased's relationship with the divine. It has often been overlooked that there is yet another aspect to the most popular pagan sarcophagus images that link them to Christian ideas: Their heroes are humans in a blissful state *under the protection of a god*. The images came complete with the association of divine presence⁷⁷. To be sure, Selene, Dionysus, or Mars were not substituted by God in the Jonah images. **Whatever the reason, God is not depicted at all before the later fourth century when the Jonah episodes had long gone out of fashion. But his presence was inherent in both the story and the conception of the interim state.** After all, it was God who grew the gourd vine, and the interim state is granted and protected by him. Accordingly, the formula *in pace/en eirene* is sometimes extended by a reference to Christ or God. It is Christ's or God's peace in which the deceased wishes to rest until the day of the Final Judgement, after which they hoped to live in His presence forever.

⁷⁵ For these images see Speigl (1978), 6-7; Davis (2000), 77; *RAC* 18 (1998) 691, s.v. Jonas (J. Engemann); Dresken-Weiland (2010), 99; D'angela (2006).

⁷⁶ It is therefore hardly a coincidence that the Jonah story occurs most frequently with other biblical scenes of deliverance (thus already Davis (2000), 79, who proceeds to a different interpretation). Henry Heitmann-Gordon points out to me that the Jonah story in general seems almost obsessed with ways of escaping toil and suffering. Jonah falls asleep and wishes for death to achieve this escape on numerous occasions: 1.5, 4.3, 4.8, 4.9.

⁷⁷ For Endymion, this aspect was already noted by Jahn (1847), 51, and also by most later authors; however,, , their conclusions differ from the ones presented here; for an overview see Sichtermann (1992), 42-3; Zanker & Ewald (2004), 102-8. Images where the protagonists feature portrait heads of the deceased obviously need to be interpreted differently, and clearly refer to the love between the two mortals: Koortbojian (1995), esp. 100-11 on reunification in a dream; Borg (2013), 167-9.

Kommentiert [NH15]: Das ist ein ganz zentraler Aspekt für unser Tagungsbandthema! Ließe sich dieser Gedanke nicht nach vorne stellen, um zu begründen, warum man aus archäologischer Sicht zwar keine Aussagen zu den verschiedenen Gottesvorstellungen der Gesellschaft des 3./4. Jhs. treffen kann, aber aus den Bestattungsriten/Grabbildern Rückschlüsse auf das Zusammenleben einer gemischt-pagan-christlichen Gemeinschaft ziehen kann?

It is normally thought that this specification (with its temporary nature) is what makes the Christians' sleep radically different from the pagan one. But looking at the most popular myths on Roman sarcophagi, it becomes obvious that the theme of divine presence and protection is not new at all. Endymion is visited by Selene (Fig. 1), Ariadne by Dionysus (Fig. 3), Rhea Sylvia by Mars. In contrast to the scenes of sleeping beauties, in the case of Persephone and Adonis, and in line with a huge number of more gloomy epitaphs, the violence of death is not denied but rather dramatized – just note Persephone's frantic struggle (Fig. 2) or Aphrodite's despair. But it is mitigated by the interest that the gods take in their victims, a mitigation that may well explain why these myths were so much more popular than those of Medea or Niobe. I therefore suggest that the reason for the images' popularity – the Persephone story is the second most frequent myth on sarcophagi – is first and foremost that they present consolation; not a concrete expectation of life after death, but hope – or at least desire – for a peaceful existence in the presence, or under the protection of a caring deity.

This idea is also occasionally expressed in texts. The vague non-Christian desire that the soul may live among the gods was noted above. Others make it clear that life in Elysium, on the Isles of Bliss, or among the stars is cherished especially because there the blessed souls are close to the gods⁷⁸. Such passages very rarely comment that the deceased themselves become gods or heroes. They rather suggest that the gods' company is a guarantor of an eternal, blissful state after death, while at the same time it elevates the deceased to the status of the gods' favourite.

While such ideas are more frequent in Greek epitaphs, Latin ones also allude, on occasion, to this idea⁷⁹. On a loculus cover from the Coemeterium Maius, for instance, we find the acclamation *vivas in deos*, where the plural indicates that we are dealing not with a Christian text but a pagan one that draws upon the old idea⁸⁰. The dead body of L. Staius Onesimus is said to rest in the grave while his soul is received among the gods (*in hoc tumulo iacet corpus ex animis, cuius spiritus inter deos receptus est; CIL VI 9663*). He gained this favour, as well as

⁷⁸ Peres (2003), 106-21, 141-8, 196-207, 217-32, and the following note.

⁷⁹ Peek (1955), nos 613, 743, 770, 909, 1146, 1768, 1773, 1830; Moretti (1979), no. 1143; *CIL* 6.26251 and 26282; *IG* 14.1856.

⁸⁰ Derossi (1877), 191-3; Diehl (1925-1967), no. 3387.2; Carletti (1997), 143, 146; all authors infer the Christianity of the inscription only from its provenance.

Kommentiert [BEB16]: Im Prinzip könnte man darüber einen weiteren Aufsatz schreiben. Haben sie denn irgendetwas Bestimmtes im Sinn? Ich dachte, dass das Argument zu sehr zerfasert, wenn man hier ins Detail geht. Die Kernidee wird durch Endymion bestens verdeutlicht, und die weiteren Beispiele dienen nur als sozusagen statistische Untermauerung der Tatsache, dass diese Idee nicht auf den Endymionmythos beschränkt ist. Aber wenn Sie mir sagen, was Sie noch ergänzen möchten, mache ich das gerne.

Kommentiert [NH17]: Lässt sich evtl. über die Darstellung dieser anderen Götter auf den Sarkophagen noch etwas mehr sagen?

eternal recognition, through his extraordinary and very traditional merits⁸¹. The dedication to the Dii Manes, the boastful tone, and especially the plural *inter deos* renounce Christian patronage. A similar metrical inscription wishing the deceased life among the gods (*CIL* 6.2160) was set up for M. Ulpius Maximus, a knight who is proudly said to have performed at the festival of the Lupercalia⁸².

These formulas are very close to Christian ones, which differ mainly in replacing the plural with the singular or with the name of Christ⁸³. They demonstrate that the desire to live in the proximity, and enjoy the care of the divine was prevalent among both pagans and Christians, with the latter referring explicitly to Christ from the fourth century onwards⁸⁴. While pagans – at least during the second and early third century – made this idea explicit more frequently in images than in texts, Christians preferred it the other way round. Texts and images were not tautological but complemented each other when used in tandem.

Conclusion

I hope to have shown that, at least during the first three centuries AD, Christians and non-Christians shared key ideas about what may come after death. They hoped for peaceful rest, for delivery from the toil and pain of earthly existence, and for divine presence and protection. This state was often illustrated by sleeping figures, who constituted the single most popular narrative subject in both Christian and non-Christian funerary art. It is therefore not the case that the early Christians simply happened to use a traditional iconography as it was familiar, convenient, or just the kind of thing that an artist with traditional training would suggest, when they wanted to illustrate a biblical story. On the contrary, they deliberately manipulated the Jonah story in order to convey ideas that were relevant in the given context. They re-interpreted the narrative by letting it culminate, against any written account, in the prophet's blissful sleep under the gourd vine, the symbol or paradigm of what they hoped for after their

⁸¹ Cf. Cic. *rep.* 6.6-8. *RAC* 17 (1996) 297-9 s.v. Jenseits (Jenseitsvorstellungen) (P. Habermehl) with bibl. In other instances it seems to be the innocence of a deceased child that resulted in reception among the gods, e.g. *CIL* 6.30552 where the deceased *in deo[rum nume]ro receptus est*.

⁸² Šterbenc Erker (2009), 155. To be sure, the Lupercalia were celebrated well into late antiquity, by both Christians and pagans (see esp. Gelasius, *Letter to Andromachus*, of AD 494: Lançon (2000), 95-6). But the early date of the inscription, Maximus' equestrian status, and the fact that he himself participated in the pagan rites and mentioned the fact in his epitaph suggest that he is unlikely to have been Christian. Mclynn (2011), 584; cf. Dresken-Weiland (2006), 298.

⁸³ Janssens (1981), 37-42. The singular does not necessarily prove Christian patronage, but the question of 'pagan monotheism' must be excluded here. On the subject see more recently Mitchell & Van Nuffelen (2010), esp. 84, 87, 88, 97-8, on the shared pagan and Christian idea of monotheism.

⁸⁴ For the Christian notion see Dresken-Weiland (2006) 294-5; Dresken-Weiland (2010) 48-50, 64-8.

death and before resurrection. For that purpose, they chose an iconographic formula that had long served to express largely the same idea, and that was instantly recognisable to any viewer⁸⁵.

The precise nature of the caring divinity appears to have been secondary in this context. While, in the mythical stories, Selene's and Dionysus' interest in their sleeping counterparts is an erotic one, and a hint to the erotic attractiveness of the deceased may be implied by the sarcophagus images as well, this aspect is absent from the biblical story as well as the images, in which God is never shown. But it would be as misleading to conclude from the latter feature that God was irrelevant to the Jonah story or the interim sleep of the deceased as it would be to read the mythical images as a comment on the nature of the Greek gods. By the second century AD, their behaviour in traditional narratives had long been allegorized by those who found these stories all too human or even immoral. In the specific case, there can hardly have been an expectation that the goddess Selene took an erotic interest in the deceased in the casket, and where the deceased was female, this line of interpretation is outright absurd (at least in ancient terms). Selene's erotic desire, while integral to the mythical story, has become a metaphor for the interest she may take in the deceased. Why the Christian God started to be depicted only so late, is a matter for a separate debate, but the key point for those depicting the Jonah story was the effect he had on the fate of both Jonah and the deceased, not his exact nature. In case any of those using traditional myths or the biblical stories to decorate their tombs ever thought about the nature of their God(s) beyond what we have outlined above, they did not consider it relevant to the present environment.

I would like to conclude by indicating the wider context in which my observations may be relevant. In his masterly book *The last pagans of Rome*, Alan Cameron has forcefully argued, among many other things, that the opposition and even hostility between Christians and non-Christians during the fourth century that scholarship has long taken for granted, was neither persistent nor did it determine politics and social contacts except for individual incidents and authors. He contrasted this situation, however, with the third century, for which he accepts the traditional view: "Up to the age of Constantine, many Christians had looked on the entire

⁸⁵ It has often been noted that Jonah was not modelled specifically on Endymion but on sleeping figures more generally; e.g. Ferrua (1962) 54; Sichtermann (1992) 54. Elsner (1998), 152-4, has argued that images of blissful sleep lent themselves to a range of readings, depending on the viewer's predisposition. This is surely true, but the "fluidity of interpretation" and "flexibility of meaning" (p. 153) has very clear limitations in that the central idea remains unchanged and is common to large sectors of society of a range of different faiths.

Roman establishment as the enemy”⁸⁶. I believe that this assessment, certainly in its sweeping generalization, is overstated as well. Éric Rebillard has recently argued for an approach to religion – Christian religion in his case – that uses the insights gained from identity studies⁸⁷. One of these insights is that a specific identity is normally only activated and made explicit in certain contexts, especially when an individual or group feels the need to stress their difference from another individual or group. Another is that one and the same individual can have multiple identities, which he or she may activate in different contexts. Rebillard cautiously limits his conclusions to North Africa since his study is based on North African authors, but both his approach and his results can certainly be extended to Rome.

To start with the first insight, it was again Rebillard who has demonstrated previously that, according to the written sources, “many [early] Christians did not consider their Christianity relevant to their choice of a burial place”⁸⁸, and that Christians, like their pagan contemporaries, perceived the care of the dead primarily as a social obligation. Based on a contextual approach to the archaeological evidence for burials in the third century, I have argued elsewhere that many, if not most Christians were indeed buried amongst their pagan peers, thus confirming that for most religion was of minor importance to the choice of burial place⁸⁹.

It is consistent with these observations that both images and inscriptions from the catacombs and other tombs refer only very rarely to eschatological ideas, or to religious beliefs. On the one hand, religion was of little importance when it came to the mode of burial, and on the other, the joint use of the catacombs by pagans and Christians only triggered a desire to activate their Christian identity in a small minority of individuals.

That so many Christians did not feel offended by being buried among their pagan peers may, however, also be due to the fact that their ideas and hopes with regard to death and what may lie beyond did not differ radically from traditional ones⁹⁰. While there was considerable disagreement among the Church Fathers about the details of what this fate might be, Roman epitaphs suggest that the key ideas of peace and closeness to Christ or God were by far the

⁸⁶ Cameron (2011), 20. Similar views are paramount.

⁸⁷ Rebillard (2012).

⁸⁸ Rebillard (2012), 3; cf. Rebillard (2009).

⁸⁹ Cf. n. 41 above.

⁹⁰ A similar conclusion is drawn by Peres (2003), 246-7, 262-7, based on her comparison between Greek epitaphs and new testament eschatology.

most common ones among lay people, which were also shared by most clerics. In many ways, they were not so much a contrast to pagan hopes but an extension of these. While most pagans hoped for a peaceful existence free from the toil of earthly life, which they often envisaged as everlasting sleep, while their hopes for proximity to and protection by the divine were ever so vague, Christians were certain to one day wake up and enjoy peace and closeness to God in eternity. So, even where eschatological ideas were touched upon, there was no need for, and not even much room for a clash.

From a methodological point of view these results should encourage us to take images more seriously as a source, and discourage us from rushing to conclusions about their meaning by forcibly harmonizing them with literary texts. By doing so we miss much more than just the original meaning of these images; we miss entire sectors of ancient (Christian) life and thought. We are prone to ignore – or consider unknowable – the attitudes of the lay population, and we may miss the opportunity to observe in more detail the extent to which Christianity affected – or left largely unaffected – various areas of life during the transitional periods before Christianity became the majority faith. To be sure, some scholars have warned repeatedly against using theological treatises for the interpretation of early Christian images from non-ecclesiastical contexts.⁹¹ But the result of such caution is often the view that the images patronized by lay people were rather naïve and unspecific in their meaning, and resulted mostly from a desire to decorate and illustrate, and not to convey specific messages. The very rarity of biblical images in the catacombs is perhaps the most obvious counterargument to this view, and I hope to have demonstrated that these images, while clearly lacking the sophistication of the ecclesiastical literature, are still meaningful and contribute substantially to a better understanding of ancient society during its transition to a Christian one.⁹²

⁹¹ Josef Engemann has been one of the most relentless advocates of this view, e.g. Engemann (1996) 554.

⁹² Of course, another *caveat* needs to be expressed here: It is often assumed that images on sarcophagi and the walls of catacombs represent the 'common people'. But it is not clear at all what this should mean. At least the sarcophagi are expensive items and point to patrons of at least modest wealth. The rarity of wall paintings in the catacombs, especially in the early ones, also begs questions of who these people were who chose to use this decoration since, no matter what percentage of Christian users of these underground cemeteries we assume at any given point in time, there clearly were more Christians buried in them than used biblical image decoration. Ultimately, we are touching here on much-discussed question of the origin of the first Christian images, which reaches far beyond the scope of the present paper.

