

ILLNESS AND DISABILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE CHRISTIAN ART (THIRD TO SIXTH CENTURY)

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First of all, I should like to explain that the misshapen bodies we are looking at in late antique Christian art are not the result of artistic incompetence or mediocre quality. Rather, our interest is to explore the way artists represent sick or disabled bodies, and to see where we can find evidence of this. Since we would expect the images of the deceased to provide us with some signs of illness, this study will first focus on examples from the catacombs and late antique Christian sarcophagi, which are characteristic of these representations. Since the sick and the disabled who are depicted often interact directly with Christ, the second part of the paper will concentrate on the images of miraculous scenes in late antique Christian art, with particular attention paid to the depiction of the injured body. This study closes with an analysis of the depiction of bodies in unusual states (e.g. pregnant women, the crucified Christ) and with concluding remarks on the perception of illness and disability in late antique Christian art.

1. THE DECEASED IN LATE ANTIQUE ART: EVIDENCE OF ILLNESS OR DISABILITY?

Late antique Christian iconography is very complex. The private sepulchral art of catacomb paintings not only represents the dead in various iconographical Christian contexts, but also provides an illustration of their hope for salvation and the Christian afterlife.¹ The images of the deceased are more frequently reproduced on Christian

¹ Zimmermann 2007: 154-79. A large number of representations of the deceased are illustrated in this material. The results of Zimmermann's study prove that the customer played an important part in the design of many of the paintings in the catacombs.

sarcophagi than on the pagan ones.² The sculptors of Christian sarcophagi wanted not only to give expression to Christian hopes of an eternal life, through a multitude of images of salvation, but also to create a concrete link between the representation of the deceased and the chosen image of salvation.

The following question arises: how can one recognize the deceased in catacombs or on the sarcophagi? Since the resemblance of the portrait was not a priority in the fourth century, it is necessary to have a broad understanding of the definition of the term “representation of the deceased”. The depiction of the dead consisted of an individualized portrait, of a portrait with idealized features, or an unfinished face. The phenomenon of unfinished heads already appears on Roman sarcophagi of the second and the third centuries.³ It is usually assumed that artists would then add particular facial features, which would have turned the empty faces into individual portraits, but that for some reason, this never happened. There is more than one explanation for these unfinished heads, which are also depicted frequently on Christian sarcophagi of the third and fourth centuries.⁴ They testify without any doubt to a certain indifference with regard to the portraits on the sarcophagi.⁵ Since other images confirm this complete disregard for the resemblance of the portrait to the deceased, this representation is certainly not an image of disability.⁶ There was in fact no technical possibility in catacomb paintings to leave a face without preliminary elaboration, in order to provide it later with individual traits. Nowhere do we see a sign of illness or disability of the deceased on the funeral material (fig. 1).⁷

² Studer-Karlen 2012. Like the majority of researchers, I believe that the majority of the sarcophagi, except for the less elaborate ones, were made to order. The participation of the commissioner can be considered as a starting point for catacomb paintings and for sarcophagi.

³ Bergmann 1980: 24-7; Koch, Sichtermann 1982: 610-14; Andrae 1984: 109-28; Huskinson 1998: 129-58.

⁴ Huskinson 1998: 129-58; Koch 2000: 108-9; Dresken-Weiland 2003: 85-7; Studer-Karlen 2012: 18-23.

⁵ It must be noted that no sarcophagi with unfinished heads designed for children have been preserved.

⁶ This refers, for example, to the representation of the female *orans* for male deceased, see above.

⁷ In addition to busts or *orans* figures, other representations of the deceased exist in paintings or on sarcophagi, such as assimilations to biblical characters (see



Fig. 1: Arles, Musée de l'Arles antique (Photo: Musée de l'Arles antique).

In both categories, in paintings and on sarcophagi, the departed are characterized by attributes. Like their pagan predecessors, the bust representations provide us with indications of the deceased's social status, such as rank, wealth, education, and beauty; the specific attitude of *Concordia* points to their marital status (fig. 1).⁸ For example, the young woman on the loculus wall in Domitilla wears a precious veil and earrings⁹, and the roll the boy holds on a sarcophagus in the Vatican marks him out as a cultured and wise person.¹⁰ Children are regarded as miniature adults.¹¹ The *pallium*, a roll the deceased holds

Zimmermann 2007: 174-9; Studer-Karlen 2012: 174-202). These images are more rare and more difficult to recognize. They provide a portrait that is even less like the deceased person.

⁸ Zimmermann 2007: 164-6; Studer-Karlen 2012: 64-73, 219. For the representation of the *Concordia* on sarcophagi see for example: Studer-Karlen 2012: figs. 4-5, 30, 55-57, 60. In these images, the wife is always adorned with jewels and has an elaborate hairstyle. See also: Deckers 1996: 139.

⁹ Nestori 1993: 128; Zimmermann 2007: 165, fig. 20d.

¹⁰ Brandenburg 1967: 36-37, n. 41; Studer-Karlen 2012: 41, 48, 49, 50, 52, 53, 68, 69, 150, 227, fig. 43. The length of the sarcophagus is only about one meter (1.15m), so it was certainly a little boy.

¹¹ On Christian sarcophagi designed for children, see: Jastrzebowska 1989: 783-804; Jastrzebowska 1991: 35-44; Huskinson 1993: 114-8; Koch 2004: 161-83;

in his hands, and such attributes as the *capsa*, remain present throughout the fourth century in the representations of the deceased. Indeed, these elements highlight the deceased's education. In the catacombs, their social status is reflected by the position of each tomb and their paintings within the cubiculum.¹²

The *orans* figure especially, which was the most common image for the deceased in catacombs and on sarcophagi, has an important place and is endowed with personalised characteristics, so that the departed can be identified with certainty.¹³ Whilst portraits, even as *orans*, are rather rare, figures are provided with distinctive signs such as jewels, clothing or hairstyle. For example, the female *orans* in niche 8 of the Anapo catacomb is characterized by her transparent veil, beauteous *dalmatica* and precious jewellery.¹⁴ These individualized *orans* figures are also very frequent on sarcophagi, especially in the period of Constantine.¹⁵ Unlike Christian coffins, the male version of the *orans* figure does not appear on pagan sarcophagi.¹⁶ The male *orans* figures were used for a specific age group only, namely, for small boys or very young men. For this group, it seems relatives preferred the individualized *orans* with marked male characteristics.¹⁷

We have to conclude that the resemblance to the deceased was not essential in Christian funeral material; the elements describing his or her social status and presenting the faith were regarded as more

Studer-Karlen 2008: 551-74.

¹² Zimmermann 2001: 43-59.

¹³ For examples on catacomb paintings, see: Zimmermann 2007: 168-171. For examples on Christian sarcophagi, see: Studer-Karlen 2012: 118-70. For the *orans* figure also: Dresken-Weiland 2010: 38-77.

¹⁴ Furthermore the figure is positioned among Christian salvation images. Deckers, Mietke, Weiland 1991: 58-9, fig. 4; Nestori 1993: 18; Zimmermann 2007: 169-70, fig. 23a.

¹⁵ In the context of depictions of the deceased, it is particularly necessary to note that throughout the period of the manufacturing of Christian sarcophagi, the *orans* figure was the most significant and widespread identification of the tomb owner.

¹⁶ However, even on Christian sarcophagi, female *orans* figures are much more numerous. Male *orans* figures can be found on Christian sarcophagi dating back to the beginning of the fourth century, but they remain rare. At the end of the fourth century, representations of adult men as *orans* figures are very sparse.

¹⁷ For examples of male *orans* figures on Christian sarcophagi see: Studer-Karlen 2012: 158-64. Male *orans* figures appear in catacomb paintings, but are much less frequent.

important. Illness and disability were not depicted on catacomb paintings and Christian sarcophagi. Instead, artists chose to emphasize the exact opposite: beauty, faith, virtues and culture. The images represent the themes of the hope for salvation by Christ: The position of the deceased's picture, placed prominently in the *cubiculum* and surrounded by Christian images, and the direct integration of private representations into the biblical scenes, is typical of the catacombs.¹⁸ And this is how the dead were remembered.

It is worth looking at unusual representations, especially those rare instances when an entire family was depicted on a sarcophagus.¹⁹ For example, on a sarcophagus of the end of the fourth century, which can be seen today in Marseilles, parents present their dead child to three apostles, among whom the boy is depicted standing as an *orans* figure.²⁰ This image displays the parents' hopes that their child will be admitted to Heaven. It seems that this representation was meant to comfort the mourning family. The child appears to be healthy. General information, such as the cause of death, usually does not appear on sarcophagi or in catacombs. The examples where various inscriptions provide complementary information are of particular interest. Whilst the inscriptions accompanying the image of the deceased, on Christian sarcophagi or paintings, give information concerning his or her social status and age, the cause of death is never mentioned or depicted.²¹

We have only a few examples on Christian sarcophagi that prove that one did not hesitate to make necessary changes to the portraits of the deceased, causing a discrepancy between the unfinished sculpture and the actual identity of the dead person. This is the case of the boy *Atroni* *Fidelicus*.²² The eight-year-old boy was buried in a

¹⁸ Zimmermann 2001: 43-59; Zimmermann 2002: 174-9.

¹⁹ On family representations on Christian sarcophagi, see: Studer-Karlen 2012: 55-8.

²⁰ Christern-Briesenick 2003: 146-7, n. 296; Studer-Karlen 2012: 56, figs. 91, 110, 111.

²¹ Concerning these inscriptions, see in particular: Dresken-Weiland 2003. The mention of the cause of death in the long inscription on the sarcophagus of Pontia, today in Spoleto, is an exception (second half of the fourth century). Dresken-Weiland 1998: 34, n. 107; Studer-Karlen 2012: 92-4. For the inscription, see: Dresken-Weiland 2003: 33, 51, 54, 95-6.

²² Brandenburg 1967: 266-7, n. 663; Studer-Karlen 2008: 552, 556, 558, 561-63, 566; Studer-Karlen 2012: 23.

1.75 m long sarcophagus in the catacomb of Novation in Rome. The deceased is represented as a female *orans* with a long tunica, in the middle of a sarcophagus that was certainly intended for a woman. After the boy's sudden death, only the head of the figure was adapted. Another example, the fragment of a sarcophagus today in Frankfurt, shows the head of a child depicted on a woman's bust, thus providing a strange representation of the deceased.²³ The necessary changes on the portraits of the departed are the only discrepancy we know of on Christian sarcophagi. These are makeovers due to a sudden death.

2. THE BODY IN MIRACULOUS HEALINGS

Since the early days of Christian art, the Bible has been an important source for artists.²⁴ We should note that Jesus' healings and exorcisms are attested in all the major sources we know for Jesus' life.²⁵ Among the activities ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament gospels, healings are the most prominent; healing the sick and restoring broken or dead bodies were features that were central to the depiction of the ministry of Christ. He was perceived as an effective healer and exorcist by his contemporaries and in the Christian world of the fourth and sixth century, which we will be examining in this paper. The aim of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive study of the iconography of the scenes mentioned nor to do exegesis, but to describe the depiction of the injured body.

The forms of Jesus' healing are recorded in the biblical texts.²⁶ They present Jesus interacting directly with the sick and disabled. For example, Jesus is shown calling Lazarus back to life, talking to the blind men, healing the woman with the flow of blood and touching

²³ Dresken-Weiland 1998: 14, n. 33; Studer-Karlen 2008: 23. See, for more makeovers on Christian sarcophagi: Studer-Karlen 2012: 23-9.

²⁴ On this subject, see recently: Spier 2007.

²⁵ Porterfield 2005: 21-22; Meggitt 2011: 18-20, with indicative examples. The sources make it clear that Jesus was thought to cure people of illness as well as heal them of disease. References to the Christian healing miracles: Nauerth 1983: 339-46; Knipp 1998.

²⁶ Meggitt 2011: 41. There is some evidence that Jesus used techniques associated with folk practice at this time and actions familiar from the work of other healers.

the leper who asks him for healing. In both canonical and apocryphal writings, children are among the immediate beneficiaries of acts of healing or of the restoration of the body from disability. While the list of child illnesses appearing in the New Testament is rather limited, parents who were relying on their faith in Christ's healing power are shown to have called upon Jesus to heal their sick children with some regularity.²⁷ It has to be noted that in early Christian art, in contrast with later periods, miracles were by far the largest type of depicted subjects.²⁸ Healings scenes were represented on objects for everyday use, on ecclesiastical objects and in funeral art.²⁹

A series of different scenes are depicted on the front of the sarcophagi, mostly miraculous scenes of healing by Christ (fig. 2).³⁰ The healing scenes pictured on sarcophagi include the paralytic carrying his bed on his shoulders, the blind man, sometimes depicted with a stick, who is healed through the anointing with clay, the woman with an issue of blood seizing Christ's hem, and Lazarus coming back to life from his tomb. Jesus touches the sick person³¹ or he heals them with a wand (*virga*), an unbiblical instrument, which conveys power by touch.³² People are touched and healed. In these examples from the sarcophagi, the sick person who comes to Christ for the biblical

²⁷ Narratives of children's healing are found in the synoptic gospels in the stories of the Syro-Phoenician woman who asked for the cleansing of her daughter from an unclean spirit (Mark 7: 24-30 and Matt 15: 21-28), of the father who brought his epileptic son to Jesus for healing (Mark 9: 14-29; Matt 17: 14-20; and Luke 9: 37-42), of the synagogue leader Jairus, whose daughter Jesus raised from the dead (Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43; Matt 9: 18-19, 23-26; and Luke 8: 40-42, 49-56), as well as of the son of the widow of Nain, whom Jesus likewise brought back to life (Luke 7: 11-17).

²⁸ The paintings in the catacombs show a similar repertory to that of the sarcophagi, but the first depiction of Christian scenes on sarcophagi happens a generation later, at the end of the third century. While catacombs of the third century tend to be painted with scenes from the Old Testament, on sarcophagi scenes from the New Testament are more frequent. We should also note that many healing images cannot be identified precisely. This problem is not discussed here.

²⁹ Nauerth 1983: 339-46; Knipp 1998. Healing scenes are reported from the third to the sixth centuries, for example, in catacombs, on sarcophagi, ivories, glass objects, textiles, in manuscripts and in mosaics.

³⁰ Miraculous images are frequent on sarcophagi, see: Koch 2000: 249-60.

³¹ De Bruyne 1943: 132-40; Korol 1986: 504-5.

³² Nauerth 1980: 126-3; Utro 2000: 300-2; Mathews 2003: 54-92; Tsamakda 2009: 25-46.

miracle is always smaller than the other figures depicted on the sarcophagi, without necessarily being a child (fig. 1, 2). The only feature that distinguishes the ailing person is her smaller size. Almost all depictions of healing persons in late antique art have one common feature: the attributes held by these figures give evidence of the kind of illness or disability the person wanted to be cured of.



Fig. 2: Rome, Museo Nazionale (Neg. D-DAI Rom 57.72).

One of the miraculous scenes that appear early and often in Christian art is the healing of the paralytic.³³ The images show the result of the miracle;³⁴ Christ's presence is not even required.³⁵ In most cases, the upright walking of the depicted man conveys the joy of the paralytic,

³³ The Gospels recount two healings of a paralytic, one in Capharnaum (Matt: 9: 1-8; Mark 2 :1-12; Luke 5: 17-26) and one at the pool of Bethesda (John 5: 1-9). A series of sarcophagi from the end of the fourth century present the scene in Bethesda in a prominent way; see for these sarcophagi especially: Monfrin 1985: 979-1020; Knipp 1998: 140-2; Koch 2000: 299-302, 314-5; Tsamakda 2009: 28-9. Both types are represented in the sixth-century mosaics in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, see: Deichmann 1969: 181-3; Deichmann 1974: 170-3; Mauskopf Deliyannis 2010: 154-8.

³⁴ In catacombs: see the Index: Nestori 1993: 211, for example: Deckers, Seeliger, Mietke, 1987: Taf. 43, 53, 60b; Tsamakda 2009: Abb. 9. For this scene on the sarcophagi see: Koch 2000: 164.

³⁵ It is not the goal of this paper to discuss all examples of each miracle scene. However, the early depiction of the paralytic (in two scenes) from the second third of the third century in the Christian house of Dura Europos should be mentioned: Kraeling 1956: 58, 183-5, 208-9; Korol 2011: 1621-1832-5, figs. 48-51. For the scene, see: De Bruyne 1943: 132-40; Minasi 2000a: 241-243; Tsamakda 2009: 25-31 (with many parallels and bibliography); Dresken-Weiland 2010: 259-266.

who has been cured of his disability and is leaving with his bed on his shoulders (fig. 2). The representation of the healed lame man, whose upper body shows through the bed frame, is also characteristic of early Christian gold glasses.³⁶ A series of late antique ivories show the same scene, but on these objects, the paralytic is rarely depicted without Christ.³⁷ All these representations emphasize the result of the miracle in general; only two images on ivories provide an exceptional depiction. On one ivory plate of the *cathedra* of Maximianus in Ravenna³⁸ and on one pyxis from La Voute-Chilhac, today in Paris,³⁹ both from the sixth century, a lame man leaning on a stick is lifting his weak leg (fig. 3). The difference in these images is that the accent is on the sick body rather than on the attributes. To these images we can add a further example of a weak body, in this case an episode from the Acts of the Apostles. The image on the bottom of the second plate of the diptych in Florence, from ca. 400, depicts the sick men of Malta who are brought to Paul to be healed.⁴⁰ One of them is Publius' father, who was plagued by 'recurrent bouts of fever and dysentery'; the other suffers from a paralyzed arm. Due to these ailments, they are characterized as drastically ill. But unlike the sarcophagi of the fourth century, the pyxis depicts them life-sized.

No other miraculous action by Christ is related in the biblical text so often and in so many variants as the healing of the blind man.⁴¹ Christ is touching the head or the eyes of the blind man, who is, on sarcophagi, usually depicted as smaller than Christ (fig. 1, 2).⁴² The blind man often holds a stick as an attribute of his sickness.⁴³ On one field of an ivory panel of St. Lupicin in Paris, from the sixth century, the blind man healed by Christ holds a stick in his left hand, and a

³⁶ Tsamakda 2009: 29-31.

³⁷ See Volbach 1976: 81, 84-5, 87, 94-5, 97, 100, 105, 108, 112-3; ns. 113, 119, 125, 142, 145, 152, 163, 170, 179, 180, 182.

³⁸ Deichmann 1969: 75; Volbach 1976: 93-4, n. 140.

³⁹ Volbach 1976: 114-5, n. 185; Durand 1992b: 83, n. 32.

⁴⁰ Acts 28: 1-6. Volbach 1976: 78, n. 108; Kessler 1979d: 505-7, n. 454; Kessler 1979a: 113-4, fig. 10; Nauerth 1983: 344-5.

⁴¹ Luke 7: 21; 18: 35-43; Matt 9: 28-31; 15: 30-31; 20: 29-34; 21: 14; Mark 8: 22-26; John 9: 1-41.

⁴² For the scene: Korol 1986a: 504-5; Ranucci 2000: 200; Dresken-Weiland 2010: 247-58. For the scene in catacombs, see Index: Nestori 1993: 196; on sarcophagi see: Koch 2000: 172-3.

⁴³ This stick is not mentioned in any scriptural record.



Fig. 3: Ivory pyxis from La Vôte-Chilhac, Louvre OA 5524 a, detail: altar and healing of the lame man (Genevra Kornbluth).

further detail individualizing the patient is added in the form of a little leather bag tied on his left forearm.⁴⁴ In the *Rabula Codex* (fol. 11 r) from the end of the sixth century, the illustration of the miracle is more complex and enriched by many participants.⁴⁵ The body language of the sick men, especially, is clearer: the blind are sitting or guided by a boy. The person lifting a leg could be lame.

A woman kneeling beside Christ and sometimes touching his tunica is often depicted in early Christian art, especially on sarcophagi.⁴⁶ Since we have no more indication relating to attributes or

⁴⁴ Volbach 1976: 97, n. 145; Gaborit-Chopin 1992: 74-8, n. 27, Cutler 2000: 167-9. A basket is carried by one of the two blind men in the depiction of the scene in the *Sinope fragments* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, supplément grec 1286, fol. 29 r), see: Kessler 1979c: 491, n. 442; Sevrugian 1990: 88-89, fig. 23; Germain 1992: 143, n. 97.

⁴⁵ Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 64-5; Bernabò (2008): 102-3, plate XXI, figs. 52-3. The codex is from 586.

⁴⁶ For the catacombs, see Index: Nestori 1993: 199. For the sarcophagi, see: Koch 2000: 165-8; Studer-Karlen 2012: 191-198.

disabilities of the body, the identification of the scene is uncertain.⁴⁷ This iconography proves that the most important point was the miracle accomplished by Christ, and certainly not the identification of a specific miracle or sickness. Only in one illustration of the Rabula Codex (fol. 6r) from the end of the sixth century does the woman beside Christ hold a stick.⁴⁸ In this case, it is certain that we have a depiction of the woman who was bent over.⁴⁹

The raising of Lazarus is an important image in sepulchral art (fig. 2).⁵⁰ The illustration of the most significant moment of the miracle is emphasized: Christ stands before the grave of Lazarus, who is recalled to life. Lazarus is mostly pictured in his *aedicula* in the form of a mummy with open eyes, an unquestionable sign of life and a striking proof of the miracle. Lazarus is never portrayed as a dead figure. The observer of these images understands that they concern sick persons, or persons who have been cured, even if the illness is not obvious. It seems that neither the representation of the sickness or the disability, nor the cause of the illness, is important; this society did not find it appropriate to depict bodily suffering in art, since it is the actual healing by Christ that counts⁵¹. In the scriptural record, these ailing bodies existed and were described in detail, but in the pictorial evidence, the emphasis is on their recovered health, with the exception of the above-mentioned illustrations.

In this context, one possible exception as early as the fourth century can be seen on the right border of one of the two fragmentary plaques with biblical scenes from ca. 300-310 (fig. 4). A pathetically misshapen man leaning on a stock is depicted; perhaps it is the curing of the leper.⁵² In this most unusual image, a bearded Christ places his

⁴⁷ For these scenes, see: Knipp 1998: 97-109; Perraymond 2000a: 171-3; Finney 2002: 102. This scene is mostly interpreted as the healing of the woman with the issue of blood (Matt 9:1 8-22; Mark 5: 25-34; Luke 8: 43-48).

⁴⁸ Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 57; Bernabò 2008: 92-3, plate XI, figs. 28-30.

⁴⁹ Luke 13: 10-1. This representation cannot be identified with certainty in catacombs or on sarcophagi; see for example: Koch 2000: 168.

⁵⁰ John 11:1-44. For this scene, see: Partyka 1993; Guj 2000: 201-3; Dresken-Weiland 2010: 213-32.

⁵¹ Harley-McGowan 2011: 107.

⁵² Mark 8: 1-4. Though the interpretation of the single scene must remain tentative, no iconographic analogies exist. On these two fragments, the scenes do not follow the usual pattern, except for the paralytic carrying his bed and the feeding of the multitude. Brandenburg 1967: 320-322, n. 773; Dinkler 1979:



Fig. 4: Rome, Museo Nazionale (Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali — Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Roma, M. Studer-Karlen).

hand on the chest of the sick person. The weak posture of the sick person is obvious, and is in fact unique on Christian sarcophagi.

The frequent repetition of the miracle images, especially on sarcophagi, implies that Christ was identified as a healer, a miracle-man, and that Christians depicted spiritual purification through images of physical integrity.⁵³ The primary purpose of these scenes is to represent Christ's curing power; the representation of illness or disability is ancillary to this.

Narratives of children's healings, which are represented in late antique art, are found in the synoptic gospels, such as the story of

414-416, n. 372-373; Nauwerth 1983: 340-1; Sapelli 2002, 187-206; Mathews 2003: 70-72, fig. 49. The function of the plates likewise remains uncertain. For the scene, see: Bisconti 2000d: 203.

⁵³ Mathews 2003: 61; Porterfield 2005: 7-8.

the synagogue official Jairus, whose daughter Jesus raised from the dead.⁵⁴ Similarly, there is the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (fig. 1).⁵⁵ We note that the story of the widow's son does not appear on objects for everyday use or in catacombs, and it is a very rare motif on Christian sarcophagi.⁵⁶ The dead boy is wrapped up like a mummy without a sign of life, but also without a sign of illness. We do not know the reason for his death. Christ touches the coffin and the boy is healed. Nor is the image of the raising of Jairus' daughter often depicted on Christian sarcophagi.⁵⁷ The girl is brought back to life by Christ and does not show any characteristics of sickness that might have induced her death. This is also the case on the left side of the Brescia casket from ca. 400⁵⁸ and on an ivory pyxis from Pesaro, from the sixth century: the dead girl is awakened by the hand of Christ.⁵⁹

The superiority of Christ as a healer is the principal theme that gives coherence to the imagery from the third to the sixth century.⁶⁰ These images must have been affirmations of faith in salvation through Christ, which were equally valid in life or in death.

Beside the "classical" healing scenes known from catacomb paintings or sarcophagi from the third and fourth centuries, there are new types of healing images, such as the miracle of the midwife at the Nativity of Christ, which is a completely new element in the

⁵⁴ Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43; Matt 9: 18-19, 23-26; and Luke 8: 40-42, 49-56. For the scene, see: Calcagnini 1993: 225-46; Calcagnini 2000: 269-70; Koch 2000: 164-165.

⁵⁵ Luke 7: 11-17. For the scene, see: Nauerth 1980: 5-33; Calcagnini 1986: 121-45; Calcagnini 2000: 268-9.

⁵⁶ There are only three known examples of this scene: Brandenburg 1967: 12-13, 219-220, ns. 13 and 527; Dresken-Weiland 1998: 47-8, n. 138. See: Koch 2000: 166-7; Studer-Karlen 2012: 197-8.

⁵⁷ Examples of the scene on sarcophagi: Brandenburg 1967: 7-8, n. 7; Dresken-Weiland 1998: 3-4, n. 10; Christern-Briesenick 2003: 15-7, n. 32. See: Koch 2000: 164-5; Studer-Karlen 2012: 196.

⁵⁸ Volbach 1976: 77-8, n. 107; Kessler 1979a: 109-19; Watson 1981: 283-98; Tkacz 2001: 43-6, 230; Harley-McGowan 2011: 108-9.

⁵⁹ Volbach 1976: 114, n. 183; Rizzardi 1986: 609-20; Rizzardi 2000: 217-8, n. 73.

⁶⁰ Mathews 2003: 86. His miracles imply an authority of Jesus, derived from the ancient traditions.

iconography of the sixth century.⁶¹ The ivory panel in the British Museum shows the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi, and was made in the first half of the sixth century.⁶² Narrative details in the lower scene include the midwife whose hand was paralysed when she cast doubt on the virginal birth. The story of the disbelieving midwife Salome is recorded in the versions of the Protevangelium of James and Pseudo-Matthew.⁶³ As soon as Salome inspects the condition of the Theotokos, her hand begins to burn as if it had caught fire. In fact, the image corresponds more to the text of the Arabic infancy gospels.⁶⁴ These texts recount that a midwife with a crippled hand came to the Virgin asking for healing. Maria told her to touch the child for the miracle. On the ivory, we see the midwife kneeling before the infant Jesus and praying. In this case, it is the moment before the healing which is depicted; the midwife extends her crippled hand toward the infant Jesus lying in the masonry manger. The way the midwife holds her hand shows that it is weak and crippled. The body language of the midwife is very clear, and its prominence emphasizes the miracle of the healing in the Nativity scene. Exactly the same image of the disbelieving midwife is shown in ivory on a panel of the Maximianus cathedra in Ravenna, on a panel in Manchester and on an ivory pyxis in Berlin, all likewise from the sixth century.⁶⁵

The representation of the hydropic man standing before Christ is another healing scene which appears in only a few examples and for the first time in the sixth century on ivory, for instance on the ivory

⁶¹ Only one example can be adduced on sarcophagi, but the midwife does not have the same body language in this example: she holds her hands in her lap. See: Schmidt, 2002: 206-229. Dresken-Weiland 1998: 20-21, n. 63. For the iconography of the scene, see: Conidi 2000: 225-8.

⁶² Volbach 1976: 89-90, n. 131; Boyd 1979: 531-2, n. 476; Eastmond 2000: 266-7. It comes from a monastery in Thessaly, Greece, where it was framed for use as an icon. It was probably originally made in Syria or Egypt and formed the central panel of a five-plate diptych.

⁶³ "An angel appears and tells Salome to pick up the child; she does so, and her hand is healed" (Protoevangelium of James, 19: 20; Pseudo-Matthew 13: 2-7). See: Schneider 1995: 133-5, 223-7.

⁶⁴ Arabic Infancy Gospels 3: 1-2. See: Schneider 1995: 174-5.

⁶⁵ See: Deichmann 1969: 75; Volbach 1976, 89, 93-94, 120, ns. 130, 140, 199; Lucchesi-Palli 1979a: 509-12, n. 457; St. Clair 1979a: 497, n. 447; Germain 1992: 71, n. 24.

panel of Etschmiadzin, today in Erevan.⁶⁶ On this diptych, the hydropic man is easily recognizable because of his disfigured body. The reason for his suffering is made obvious by his bloated stomach: indeed, he has no other attributes. The other example of the hydropic man in late antique art is on a fragment of an ivory pyxis in Berlin.⁶⁷ This pyxis shows the same person with a bloated stomach standing before Christ. In our present context, it is essential to notice that the sick body has been very carefully depicted.

The healing of a man possessed by demons is often mentioned in the synoptic gospels; but this image appears only in the sixth century on ivories.⁶⁸ The healing of the Gerasene demoniac is represented on an ivory panel in the Louvre.⁶⁹ The possessed man stands, dishevelled, and stretches his arms, while, behind him, three pigs are running into the water.⁷⁰ Further depictions of other healings of possessed men show the sick with their hands bound, for example on the pyxis in Darmstadt.⁷¹ On the panel of St. Lupicin, today in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the possessed person is shown bound and dishevelled, so that it is easy to guess his condition.⁷² In one field of the five-plate diptych from Murano, preserved today in Milan, there is a little demon represented above the head of the possessed man, whose feet, hands and neck are bound.⁷³ The *Rabula Codex* (fol. 8 v) has a very similar illustration.⁷⁴ These miraculous images

⁶⁶ Luke 14, 2-5; Singelenberg 1958: 105-12; Volbach 1976, 94-95, n. 142.

⁶⁷ Volbach 1976: 115, n. 187; Effenberger, Severin 1992: 137, n. 51.

⁶⁸ The healing at Gerasa: Mark 5: 1-20; Matt 8: 28; Luke 8: 26. Jesus expelled the demons of Beelzebul: Matt 12: 24; Mark 3: 22; Luke 11: 15.

⁶⁹ See: Volbach 1976: 81, n. 113; Kessler 1979b: 446-8, n. 407; Gaborit-Chopin 1995: 43-63.

⁷⁰ The same representation is depicted on the mosaics of the south-side nave of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (6th c.); see: Deichmann 1969: 181-2, plate 177-8; Deichmann 1974: 172, fig. 132.

⁷¹ Volbach 1976: 108, n. 170.

⁷² Volbach 1976: 97, n. 145; Gaborit-Chopin 1992: 74-8, n. 27, Cutler 2000: 167-9. Further representation of the demoniac on ivory panel or pyxis: Volbach 1976: 94-95, 106, 112, ns. 142, 166, 179. The body of the sick person is so well depicted that the miracle scene is always easy to recognize. The same image can be found on the plate of Erevan: Singelenberg 1958: 105-12; Volbach 1976, 94-95, n. 142.

⁷³ Volbach 1976: 87, n. 125; Dinkler 1979: 402-3; Rizzardi 1994: 485-96.

⁷⁴ Red demons fly out of the men's heads. See: Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 59-60; Bernabò 2008: 98-9, plate XVI, figs. 41-3.

from the sixth century emphasize the sick body more strongly than the third- or fourth-century paintings of the catacombs or the sarcophagi. The attributes held by the sick or Christ's healing gestures are not the only characteristics which make the meaning of the scene clear. The images are more narrative, and the depiction of the body is more detailed. The tendency to individualize the disabled or sick person can be seen in particular on ivories of the sixth century.

In addition to the healing scene, the parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus also mentions an injured person: the traveller who is beaten, robbed, and left half dead along the road.⁷⁵ Finally, a Samaritan comes by and helps the injured man. We know this scene in Late Antiquity only in the *Codex purpureus* preserved in the Diocesan Museum of Rossano. The scene is divided into two episodes (fol. 7 v).⁷⁶ In the first of these, a bloody, nude and dishevelled figure is lying on the floor. Christ, assisted by an angel, bends over the man who has been attacked. In the second episode the man, still naked and covered in blood, is sitting on a horse led by Christ. In this sixth-century illustration, the poor, injured man is easily recognizable and his weak condition highlights the mercy of Christ, who acts the part of the Samaritan in this representation.

The so-called Andrews ivory diptych in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London consists of two sheets which are divided into nearly square fields by bands of acanthus.⁷⁷ Each square depicts one of Christ's miracles: on the front panel the Raising of Lazarus, the Miracle of Cana and the Healing of the Leper and on the back, the Feeding of the Multitude, the Healing of the Blind Man and the Healing of the Paralytic. Some scholars have considered it a work of the 400s but several others favour a date in the 800s, which is much more likely. We must conclude that the healing of the leprous man is not depicted in early Christian art. This is the only example, except for the unidentified image on the fragmentary plates mentioned above.⁷⁸ In this example, the patient is covered with numerous ulcers,

⁷⁵ Luke 10:29-37.

⁷⁶ Sevrugian 1990: 41-43.

⁷⁷ Volbach 1976: 137, n. 233; Kötzsche 1979a: 500-1, n. 450.

⁷⁸ The identification of the healing of lepers in catacombs is very difficult because of the lack of characteristic attributes and features of sick persons in the representations.

which is atypical of late antique art and more common in the ninth century. It has been suggested that the composition may have been based on the Old Testament scene of Job's suffering, which it closely resembles.⁷⁹

This brings us to our third part. We begin by examining the scene of Job's suffering.⁸⁰ We can therefore conclude that in the sixth century a sort of fascination begun to appear with the maimed body or, more precisely, with the depiction of bodily suffering in art.⁸¹ In this way the miracle of Christ is even more strongly emphasized.

3. THE DISABLED BODY IN LATE ANTIQUE ART

I began with a few examples, other than healings scenes, of representations of injured or disabled bodies, or of bodies in unusual circumstances. Satan has taken away Job's physical health, and his body is in a bad condition. Job is already depicted in the catacombs painting.⁸² He is sitting on a dunghill; his wife is rarely represented in front of him. Job is wearing only a *tunica exomis*, but his body does not show any injured or sick characteristics. This is even the case when Job is depicted on the sarcophagi.⁸³ In the more complex illustration of the Syriac Bible in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, Job's body is completely covered with red sores.⁸⁴ Job lies almost nude on the dunghill, with his wife and his three friends beside him. The very narrative image has no parallels in late antique art; the manuscript is dated to the beginning of the seventh century.⁸⁵ The observer notices the disease on Job's body at first glance. The design of the body is much more evident in the seventh century than on the earlier examples in catacombs or sarcophagi.

The body of Mary is in an unusual circumstance during the pregnancy. The physical pregnancy of Mary became popular only in the

⁷⁹ Kötzsche 1979a: 500.

⁸⁰ Job 2: 11-13. For the scene see: Perraymond 2000b: 190-1.

⁸¹ This question is treated for the Middle Ages in: Metzler 2006.

⁸² Examples in catacombs: Wilpert 1903: Taf. 226, 3 (Domitilla); Deckers, Seeliger, Mietke, 1987: Taf. 58 a. See: Index: Nestori 1993: 203.

⁸³ Examples on sarcophagi: Korol 1986b: 177-9; Koch 2000: 147. This scene is quite rare on sarcophagi.

⁸⁴ Syriac Bible 341, fol. 46 r. Sörries 1991: 29-31, 83, fig. 6.

⁸⁵ Sörries 1991: 10.

sixth and the seventh centuries in the scenes of the Visitation and the Journey to Bethlehem.⁸⁶ The earliest depictions of the Visitation of Mary and Elisabeth are from the sixth century. On the ivories or the *ampullae*, the pregnancy of the two women is only roughly recognizable.⁸⁷ By contrast, in the mid-sixth-century mosaic on the south walls of the apse of the Cathedral of Eufraſius at Poreč, the Visitation scene shows the two women, Mary and Elisabeth, with clearly swollen bellies.⁸⁸ Maguire was able to prove that the interest in the physical pregnancies of Mary and Elisabeth had appeared earlier in church literature.⁸⁹ In the sermons, the pregnancies bear witness to the Incarnation and ensure salvation. The pregnancy of Mary proclaims the physical birth of Christ. The other scene, the Journey to Bethlehem, is carved on a number of sixth-century ivories, such as a panel of the throne of Maximianus in Ravenna⁹⁰, a panel of two five-plate diptychs, one in Paris and the other in Erevan,⁹¹ another panel, today in Paris,⁹² and a pyxis, today in Berlin.⁹³ The Virgin is shown heavily pregnant. These examples emphasize the fact that the conception of the body is an important visual formulation to serve a didactic interest: in this case, the two natures of the incarnate Christ.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ The event of the Visitation is related in Luke 1:39-57. Essentially the same story is told in the Protevangelium of James, which places the event at the doorway of Elisabeth's house (ProtJac. 12: 2-5). Journey to Bethlehem: Luke 2: 1-5, see also: ProtJac 17: 1-3, PsMat 13.

⁸⁷ On the casket of Werden: Volbach 1976: 83-4, n. 118; Weigel 1999: 356-9. On one field of a panel of St. Lupicin: Volbach 1976: 97, n. 145; Gaborit-Chopin 1992: 74-78, n. 27, Cutler 2000: 167-9. The cathedra panel with this scene is unfortunately lost, see: Cecchelli 1936: 182-4. *Ampullae*: Grabar 1958: 18-20, 40-1, plates V, XLVII, ns. 2 and 18.

⁸⁸ Terry, Maguire 2007: 102-4, 173-4, figs. 126-128, 132, 223; Maguire 2011: 39-43.

⁸⁹ Maguire 2011: 40-3.

⁹⁰ Deichmann 1969: 75; Volbach 1976: 93-4, n. 140.

⁹¹ S. Lupicin: Volbach 1976: 97, n. 145; Gaborit-Chopin 1992: 74-8, n. 27, Cutler 2000: 167-9. Erevan: Volbach 1976, 94-95, n. 142.

⁹² Volbach 1976: 88, n. 128; Lucchesi-Palli 1979b: 512, n. 461; Gaborit-Chopin 1992: 71, n. 24.

⁹³ Volbach 1976: 110, n. 174; St. Clair 1979a: 497, n. 447; Stutzinger 1983: 694-6, n. 270; Effenberger, Severin 1992: 136-7, n. 50.

⁹⁴ As Maguire explains, the Visitation and the evidence of the pregnancy of the two women contrast with the spiritual conception for example in the scene of the Annunciation, see: Maguire 2011: 41-2.

In this context, one must look at one of the cruellest and most dramatic scenes, from the iconographical point of view, in early Christian art: the Massacre of the Innocents.⁹⁵ Whilst it never occurs in catacombs paintings, it is depicted, albeit rarely, on sarcophagi.⁹⁶ The naked corpses of children are sprawled on the ground, soldiers are smashing the new-borns to pieces and the mothers are crying with despair. Two images on ivory plates display the same type of representation; the plaintive gestures of women on the two ivory reliefs emphasize the intensity of the drama in a particularly impressive way.⁹⁷ Another example is the pyxis of La Voûte-Chilhac, today in Paris, also from the sixth century.⁹⁸ Since this is the only theme depicted on the pyxis, more space is available for the representation of women and soldiers. The scene of the Massacre of the Innocents is enriched on the pyxis with an episode which is recounted only in the *Protevangelium of James*: the escape of Elisabeth.⁹⁹ The iconographic formulation of the massacre of the innocents on the arch of Santa Maria Maggiore (432 – 440) is an isolated example in early Christian art, because it highlights the royal order to kill the new-born babies.¹⁰⁰ The illustration in the *Rabula Codex* (fol. 4 v) from the end of the sixth century shows the blood of a child: two soldiers

⁹⁵ Matt 2, 16-18. For the scene see: Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 104-15; Minasi 2000b: 281-2.

⁹⁶ Koch 2000: 160. We know three examples, but one sarcophagus is lost (Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 106, plate 17b). On the so-called “Lot”-sarcophagus: Brandenburg 1967: 116-9, n. 188. The best example is certainly on the lid of a sarcophagus from the end of the fourth century, kept in Saint-Maximin: Christern-Briesenick 2003: 236-7, n. 499.

⁹⁷ On the ivory plate in Berlin: Volbach 1976: 80, n. 112; Kessler 1979b: 446-8, n. 406; Effenberger, Severin 1992: 135-6, n. 49; Gaborit-Chopin 1995: 43-63. On one plate of the diptych in Milan: Volbach 1976: 87, n. 125; Dinkler 1979: 402-3; Rizzardi 1994: 485-96. See for both examples: Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 106-7.

⁹⁸ Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 107; Volbach 1976: 115, n. 186; Durand 1992b: p. 83, n. 32.

⁹⁹ ProtJac.22, 3. The escape of Elisabeth is also depicted on a clay medallion conserved today in Bobbio: Grabar 1958: 44, fig. 56; Vikan 1982: 17, fig. 12. The cathedra plate with the representation of this scene is lost: Cecchelli 1934: 184-5; Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 108.

¹⁰⁰ Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 108; Brenk 1975: 30-31; Schubert 1995: 81-9; Brandenburg 2004: 176-89.

hold him by one foot and kill him with the sword.¹⁰¹ In all of these dramatic representations, the children are commonly depicted nude; body injuries appear mainly in later illustrations.

Christ's death was not depicted until the fifth century, and images depicting the event of crucifixion are scarce.¹⁰² The representation on an ivory panel in London's British Museum is the earliest known portrayal of the crucifixion of Christ in a narrative context, from ca. 420 – 430 (fig. 5). This important scene of the Passion of Christ is shown with other scenes of the Passion on the second of the four ivory plates.¹⁰³ Christ's body is erect in rigid frontality, his hands stretched out. He wears only a *colobium*, and his eyes are wide open; he is the crucified Christ, raised from the dead. Christ is triumphant in death.¹⁰⁴ It is well known that the vigorous depiction of the body of Christ is explained in John Chrysostom's theology of the Cross, which provided a profoundly Antiochene interpretation.¹⁰⁵

On this panel, the crucifixion of Christ is juxtaposed and contrasted with the death of Judas. The stiff, clothed body of Judas is hanging from the branch of a tree at the left. An open purse, out of which coins are spilling, lies at his feet. The circumstances and the body language of Judas are clear and are already known from the

¹⁰¹ Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 54; Kötzsche-Breitenbruch 1968/69: 110; Bernabò 2008: 88-9, plate VIII, figs. 19-20.

¹⁰² The crucifixion could become a symbol only after the actual punishment was abolished in the Roman Empire in the first half of the fourth century. Hopkins 2000: 136-41.

¹⁰³ The other panels depict Pontius Pilate washing his hands, Christ carrying the Cross, the Fulfilment of Christ's Prophecy to Peter, the Empty Sepulchre and Doubting Thomas. See Volbach 1967: 82-83, n. 116; Kötzsche 1979b: 502-4, n. 452; Stutzinger 1984: 690-1, n. 267; Buckton, 1994 : 58-9, n. 45; Kötzsche 1994: 80-90; Harley-McGowan 2011: 101-4, 114-20, fig. 1.

¹⁰⁴ A plaque over Christ's head is inscribed REX IUD[AEORUM] ("King of the Jews"). (Mark 15: 26; Luke 23: 38; John 19: 19).

¹⁰⁵ "Because God loved the world (John 3:16), his temple, endowed with a soul, was crucified" (PG 59: 159.7-8). The intention of the anti-Monophysite John Chrysostom is to emphasize Christ's mortal corporality (e.g. by showing his open eyes) in order to reveal the inseparability of the divine Logos, the dead body of Christ and his living soul (only the body of Christ sleeps on the cross, while his divinity remains awake). On the complicated doctrinal problems relating to the definition of the Death of Christ, see: Kartsonis 1986: 35-68. Several apocryphal Acts give more information about the significance of the Crucifixion and the impassible body of Christ. See for this point: Hopkins 2000: 138-47.

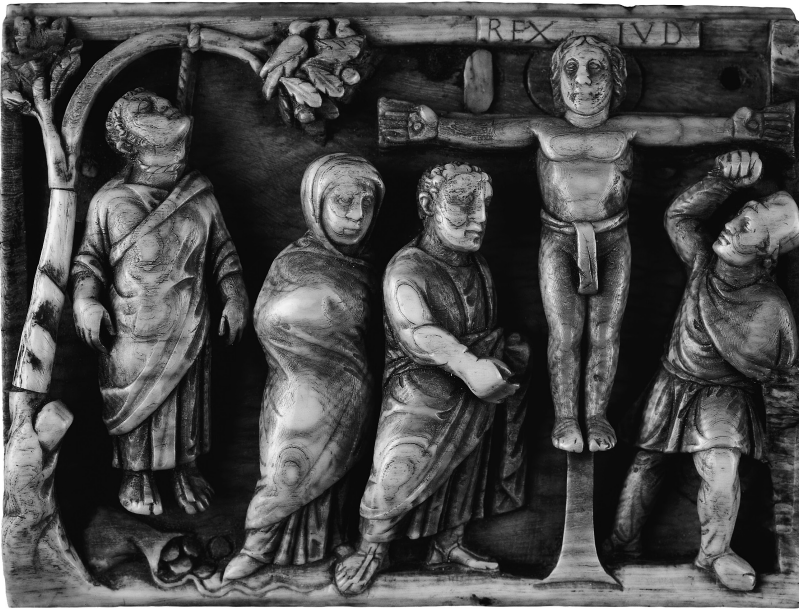


Fig. 5: London, British Museum, one of four ivory panels, carved in relief with the Death of Judas and the Crucifixion (1856,0623.5, AN34960).

depiction on the Brescia casket ca. 400.¹⁰⁶ Judas is pictured in a similar way in the Rabula Codex (fol. 12 r) almost two hundred years later. Here, his body is hanging lifeless from a branch of a tree.¹⁰⁷

The image of the crucifixion of Christ on the ivory panel from London includes Mary and John the Apostle standing in similar attitudes to the left of the cross, and Longinus on the right, who is apparently piercing Christ's flank with his spear (fig. 5). The widely opened eyes and the rigid, strong body of Christ are characteristic of the iconography throughout the early Christian period.¹⁰⁸ The wooden door of Santa Sabina in Rome is from around the middle of the fifth century and shows a very similar representation of the

¹⁰⁶ Volbach 1976: 77-8, n. 107; Kessler 1979a: 109-19; Watson 1981: 283-98; Tkacz 2001: 41-3, 103-4, 188, 241-2; Harley-McGowan 2011: 108-9, 111-2.

¹⁰⁷ Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 60; Bernabò 2008: 103-4, plate XXIII, figs. 56-8.

¹⁰⁸ Kartsonis 1986: 33-68; Harley-McGowan 2011: 103-4, 117.

Crucifixion of Christ to the ivory panel in London. On the wooden panel, the body of Christ is fully erect and his hands are outstretched. He seems entirely unaffected by the rigors of his Passion.¹⁰⁹ He has glaring eyes; he is bearded, and almost naked, apart from a narrow cloth (*subligaculum*) around his loins. In this image, the crucified Christ is accompanied by the two thieves on either side. Their bodies, depicted in a smaller format, take the same attitude as Christ. Christ's unbending body and his intense gaze indicate the desire of the late antique Christian art to depict Christ as unaffected by his Passion and represented in his Resurrection.¹¹⁰ The body language is also the important, visual element that conveys a message: the power of Christ in defeating death. Christ's suffering and death on the cross became the new symbol of human salvation. By contrast, the closed eyes of the betrayer Judas leave no doubt about his death.¹¹¹ This symbolism of the Cross is an important element of the ideology of Christianity: the paradox that through his death on the cross Christ destroyed the power of death and prevailed over death. In this way, Christianity offers the hope of human salvation and eternal life.¹¹²

In the scene of the nativity, the Mother of God lies exhausted on her mattress.¹¹³ More generally, a person lying on a bed is the normal way to represent someone who is either sick or dead, if they are not

¹⁰⁹ The wooden door includes eighteen panels of narrative reliefs, most of them biblical scenes. See Delbrueck 1952: 139-45; Jeremias 1980: 60-3, Taf. 52, 54; Spieser 2001: 1-24; Hopkins 2000: 307-9.

¹¹⁰ The earlier representations of the Crucifixion share common features with later representations of Christ's body, such as the complex image in the Rabula Codex, but its many figures, and the symbolic images on the *ampullae*, have nothing in common with the earlier images. For representations of the Crucifixion of the late sixth century, see: Rabula Codex fol. 13 r (Cecchelli, Furlani, Salmi 1959: 69-71; Bernabò 2008: 105-7, plate XXV, figs. 61-69), the Sancta Sanctorum reliquary in Rome (Frazer 1979: 564-8; Vikan 1982: 18-9, fig. 13; Kitzinger 1988: 60-1) or the *ampullae* today preserved in the treasury in Monza and Bobbio (Monza: n. 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15; Bobbio: n. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 17, 18. See Grabar 1958: 18-20, 22-31, 34-6, 40-1, 55-8, plates V, XI-XIV, XVI, XVIII, XXII, XXIV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXXIII-XL, XLVI-XLVII; St. Clair 1979b: 585-6, n. 524; Vikan 1982: 41-3, fig. 31-2; Kitzinger 1988: 51-73).

¹¹¹ Harley-McGowan 2011: 103-4.

¹¹² Hopkins 2000: 76-7, 140.

¹¹³ See for example the already-mentioned ivory panel in London showing the Nativity with the midwife and the Adoration of the Magi: Vollbach 1976: 89-90, n. 131; Boyd 1979: 531-2, n. 476; Eastmond 2000: 266-7.

sleeping. This motif is well known and omnipresent in Christian art; as, for example, in the miniature from the Genesis of Vienna,¹¹⁴ which depicts the death of Deborah in the upper register, and the nativity of Benjamin and the death of Rachel in the lower register (fol. 13 v).¹¹⁵ Since neither of the dead bodies is characterized by illness or death, it is the known biblical context that dictates the interpretation of their physical state (namely, a recumbent position). The same simple characteristics are used to convey a message.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The scope of this paper is to highlight the fact that the representation of sickness, illness or disability did not need to be detailed in late antique art. It was much more important to show the deceased as wealthy, faithful and cultured (fig. 1). The existing inscriptions on Christian sarcophagi representing the image of the deceased, or the inscriptions which accompany the deceased's portraits in paintings, give information concerning the social status or the age of the departed, but the cause of death is never mentioned or depicted. The deceased is shown among Christian scenes which represent the themes of hope for salvation by Christ.

Even in miracle scenes, the image of a sick or a disabled body is very rare in late antique Christian art, especially in catacombs paintings of the third and the fourth centuries and on sarcophagi (fig. 2). It was more important to depict the healing accomplished by Christ; the sick or dead person is often recognizable only through attributes. We can therefore conclude that the depiction of a weak, sick, disabled or abnormal body was not a priority. However, in the images of the fourth century, Christ takes on the attributes and attitudes of a healer.¹¹⁶ Apart from depicting the miracles of Christ, late antique Christian art sought to confirm Christ's miracle power. We agree that the healing stories in the New Testament were more than literary devices

¹¹⁴ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. theol. gr. 31. Zimmermann 2003: 137-9, fig. 27.

¹¹⁵ Death of Deborah (Gen 35:8): nurse of Rebecca, death at the oak in Bethel. Nativity of Benjamin and Death of Rebecca (Gen 35:16-20).

¹¹⁶ Mathews 2003: 91. He calls Christ a magician.

meant to promote Jesus' power and that they ignore the health care issues voiced at that time throughout the Greco-Roman world.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the artists do not seem concerned to render realistically the sick body or the healing. The superiority of Christ as a healer is the principal theme that gives coherence to the imagery from the third to the sixth century. These images must have certainly been affirmations of faith in Christ's saving grace, and they were equally valid in life or death.

In contradistinction to the biblical texts, the few examples with more characteristics of illness that we have examined are unique and come from the sixth century. They use various compositions to emphasize the mercy and miraculous healings of Christ. Evidently, compared with the depictions of the third and the fourth centuries, the pictorial conception of the body changes in the sixth century, especially when new healing scenes are introduced. It seems that the conception of society changed, and the depiction of the impaired, maimed body is more appropriate in the sixth century. The representations are also more narrative, and the message of the miraculous power is emphasized. Besides the thaumaturgy of Christ, new scenes become popular in the sixth and seventh century, such as episodes from his childhood. The evocation of the physical birth of Christ through the depiction of the pregnant Mary conveys another important didactic message, namely, the incarnation of Christ. One notable exception should however be noted: the crucifixion of Christ, which appears for the first time in the fifth century. The earliest images of the crucifixion of Christ proclaim the divine nature of Christ, which appears though his open eyes and erect body (fig. 5), and the triumph over death. With the symbol of the Cross, Christianity offers hope of human salvation. In all, all these examples give evidence of the importance of making a statement with known iconographic elements, which have more to say than the merely graphic aspects.

¹¹⁷ For this aspect, see especially: Avalos 1999.