

СТАТЬИ

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FUNERARY ART OF PTOLEMAIC ALEXANDRIA
AS A MODEL FOR AN EARLY CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHIC CLICHÉ

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Abstract: *The subject of the study – the phenomenon of cultural appropriation of ancient pagan iconography by early Christian art – is approached through the funerary art of Ptolemaic Egypt. The study aims to trace back the origin of an important early Christian scene – Jonah under the Gourd Vine – by methods of semiotic analysis and historical contextualization. In the 3rd–4th centuries AD it used to be the most popular Biblical subject throughout the Roman Empire. Some scholars argue that a mythological scene of Endimion's dream, often carved on late Antique sarcophagi, served as a model for visualization of the story of the prophet. However, this hypothesis does not explain the origin of the gourd vine motif, which is yet another iconographic sine qua non detail of the Jonah resting scene. Before the 'birth' of early Christian art, the motif had appeared just once – in Wardian necropolis of Alexandria. The Wardian tomb III dates back loosely to the 3rd – 1st centuries BC. The gourd was first mentioned in Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible made by Alexandrian Jews in the 3rd century BC. It substituted another plant originally mentioned in the Hebrew text. Both the Bible translators and Alexandrian painters had been well familiar with the gourd that was seemingly largely cultivated in Alexandrian suburbs. At some point of the city's history, Alexandrian painters adopted the pagan visual cliché for visualization of the Old Testament episode, and the new iconographic cliché was lately imported by Roman and provincial Christian milieu.*

Keywords: early Christian art, Graeco-Roman funerary art, Alexandrian tomb painting, Wardian tomb, early Christian iconography, Jonah under the Gourd Vine, cultural appropriation.

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The famous Old Testament episode of Jonah resting under the Gourd Vine used to be by far the most popular Biblical subject matter of the Early Christian art [Dresken-Weiland, 2010, p. 18–21]. The popularity of the rebellious prophet was not accidental, for his story simultaneously alluded to theological fundamentals of the new religion – the baptism, resurrection and salvation of the

believers. Moreover, the story of Jonah was one of the soundest early Christian allusions to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the 3rd and 4th centuries AD the scene also served as a symbolic representation of happy afterlife in Paradise.

The iconography of the scene is believed to have originated from the late Antique depictions of Endimion's dream [Grabar, 1980, p. 130; Mathews, 1995, p. 30–31]. The latter was a popular visual metaphor of eternal afterlife dream. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD it was often included in the pictorial programmes of carved Roman sarcophagi. Despite the visual omnipresence of *Jonah under the Gourd Vine* throughout the late Roman Empire, its iconography seems very strict, almost canonical and easily recognizable. No matter where the particular artifact was made and how skillful its creator was, the basic iconographic conventions of the episode always remained the same (fig. 1)¹. It looks like the visual pattern had been all of a sudden established in its definitive form. No evidence of the scene's iconographic evolution can be traced through the extant monuments of early Christian art. Basically, the development of early Christian iconography followed two major paths. The artists either designed the scenes in accordance with written descriptions offered by Early Christian texts, or appropriated suitable iconographic patterns from pagan pictorial heritage. The amazing iconographic stability of *Jonah under the Gourd Vine* allows to assume that some pagan visual models had been adopted by the early Christian artists.

The prophet's pose does not give a hint at what might have served as such a model. In fact, Endimion was not the only ancient character to be rendered as a reclined nude male figure with an arm placed under his head. Ancient Greco-Roman art had chosen the pose as a visual symbol of serene sleep. In the meantime, the origin of yet another *sine qua non* motif of the episode – the gourd vine with elongated fruits – remains rather obscure. Neither Greek nor Roman pagan monuments contained depictions of the gourd. Opposed to symbolically charged ivy, grapes and other famous plants of the Mediterranean flora, Ancient art stayed indifferent to profane and simple vegetables like marrow-pumpkins or gourds. The rustic landscapes did not attract attention of Macedonian artists, for the Macedonian elites remained military and didn't associate themselves with agriculture. The only exception was the scenes of grape harvesting that symbolically visualized the Dionysian cult. The rustic landscapes gradually entered Alexandrian funerary painting under the influence of Egyptian funerary art. Later on, the new Alexandrian fashion has likely been adopted by Roman funerary painting.

The suddenly omnipresent motif of the gourd vine seems to have originated from a very influential cultural center. The only pagan depiction of a male figure reclining under a pergola entwined with the gourd vine was found in one of the tombs of the Wadian necropolis in Alexandria (tomb III, or the Saqiya tomb) (fig. 2). The walls of the tomb were decorated with frescoes of stunning quality. Their dating has caused a vivid discussion among scholars. The suggested dating is surprisingly loose, basically staying within the time span from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD [Riad, 1967, p. 89–96; Weitzmann-Fiedler, 1979, p. 273–274; Barbet, 1980, p. 99; Venit, 1988, p. 89; Rodziejewicz, 1993, p. 14–15; Seif El-Din, Guimier-Sorbets, 1997, p. 406; Venit, 2002, p. 116; Dresken-Weiland, 2010, p. 116]. Such vagueness seems to be caused by the presence of a poorly preserved scene which seems to be almost identical to early Christian depictions of Jonah resting under the gourd vine. It was painted on the far wall of the burial chamber (fig. 4). Strong visual associations with early Christian art prompted some scholars to ignore both stylistic and iconographic features pointing at much earlier date. Yet another episode alludes to Early Christian iconographic conventions – a depiction of a man carrying a sheep on his shoulders.

Three more of the five extant figured scenes also represent exquisite rustic landscapes (fig. 3), while the last one offers an intriguing combination of Egyptian and Hellenistic sacral symbols, both connected to the funerary cults. According to H. Riad, the landscape paintings decorated

¹ All the drawings are on a colored insert.

the tomb court and occupied the southern part of its eastern wall, including the square pylon at the court entrance [Riad, 1967, plan 3] (fig. 4). The largest scene depicts a couple of oxen turning a water wheel (*saqiya*) under the supervision of a boy. The left part of the mural is largely destroyed, and yet the composition gives an impression of integrity. The agricultural works take place in a plantation, under the sprouts of some vining plants that entwine wooden trellis visually framing the scene. The foreground of the pictorial space contains a depiction of a pond with some water birds picking at the flowers. At right angles to the *saqiya* scene there is a painting of a herm standing atop the square stone slab and serving as a vertical support for the fence grill. In the background behind the fence a groove is painted in greenish and blueish colors. The third figured scene is located at right angles to the herm picture. A shepherd carrying an animal on his shoulders (unfortunately, the upper part of the mural is poorly preserved) is depicted in the upper part of the composition, while below the ground line on which he stands there are two sheep foraging for grass.

J. Weitzmann-Fiedler compares the rustic scenes of the Saqiya tomb to the paintings of the Roman catacomb of Dino Compagni [Weitzmann-Fiedler, 1979, p. 273]. There are indeed certain similarities between the Wardian episodes with the *saqiya*, herm and the shepherd and some of the Dino Compagni paintings, primarily those of *cubiculum* F. The *cubiculum* contains depictions of bulls rendered in three-quarter views, a herm installed on the cruciform stand, a shepherd with a flock, and – in the foreground – birds foraging in the flowers. The cross-like shape of the herm is reminiscent of that of the Saqiya tomb herm. Yet another depiction of herms installed on a grilled fence in the so called mausoleum *Domus Petri* in San Sebastiano catacomb provides a visual parallel to the Wardian mural. Both paintings date back to the 1st century AD.

The similarities between the Saqiya Tomb and the Dino Compagni catacombs go beyond the iconographic coincidences. M. S. Venit argues that the Wardian figure's half-seated pose is not identical to the conventional iconography of Jonah, as the prophet is usually depicted lying on his back [Venit, 2002, p. 109]. However, one of the Dino Compagni frescoes portrays him half-seated on some kind of bench. In the study dedicated to the paintings of the Dino Compagni catacombs, W. Tronzo pays attention to an unconventional architectural layout of the hypogeum that has no parallels in Roman funerary architecture but is reminiscent of the layout of the Wardian catacombs [Tronzo, 1986, p. 19]. In the meantime, there are no strict matches between the Dino Compagni and Wardian paintings, their similarities staying more in the area of some particular iconographic motifs. The former was a private hypogeum; its owners could have been connected to Alexandria in some way or another, and thus familiar with Alexandrian funerary art and architecture.

The amazing spaciousness and three-dimensional illusionism of the landscapes of the Saqiya tomb come from the skillful spatial recession, transparent backgrounds and scintillating blueish and brownish coloration of the tree foliage. Very few Roman frescoes can boast of the same pictorial qualities. For instance, the painting of Heracles in the Garden of Hesperides from Villa Poppea in Oplontis,² dating back to the first years of the 1st century AD [Zarmakoupi, 2018, p. 90], offers some parallels in rendering the atmospheric coloration (fig. 5), while the painting of Heracles and Ness the Centaurus from the Jason house in Pompeii (1st quarter of the 1st century AD [Ling, 1991, p. 120–121]) provides a similar treatment of space and spatial relationship between the figures.³ The frescoes of the same style mostly date back to the mid-1st century BC – mid-1st century AD. Since then, the style of Ancient painting had been gradually losing its impressionistic quality. The Dino Compagni frescoes are far from the impressionistic style of those of the Saqiya tomb. Their similarity is limited to some iconographic matches.

² Villa Poppea, Room 8, East wall with recess in Caldarium (1–10 AD), Oplontis (Torre Annunziata), *in situ*.

³ House of Jason (20–25 AD), Pompeii, National Archaeological Museum of Naples. Inv. 111474.

In the meantime, the Macedonian painting of the 4th–3rd centuries BC offers interesting examples of this style, combining effortless drawings on light-colored backgrounds and sophisticated spatial relationship between the figures rendered in strong recession. A frieze of the burial chamber in the Kasta tumulus in Amphipolis, which is unfortunately very poorly preserved, demonstrates the same pictorial approach. Two dancing figures – a male and a female – and a sacrificial bull are depicted in entwined poses, in three-quarter rear and frontal views. The spatial recession techniques are reminiscent of that of the Saqiya Tomb. Yet another monument provides stylistic parallels to the Wardian paintings – a hunting frieze in the so-called Tomb of Philippos the Second in Vergina [Δρούγου, Σαατσόγλου-Παλιαδέλη, 2004, p. 47–49, fig. 60–61]. The artists of both paintings opted for multiple layering of the background that enhances the three-dimensional impression. M.S. Venit pays special attention to their stylistic similarities, such as strong recession and three-quarter views [Venit, 2002, p. 111].

The lightness and translucence of the Alexandrian murals and their unmistakably Hellenistic style suggest rather early dating – not later than 1st BC. In addition to the style, some other characteristics of the Saqiya Tomb murals speak in favor of their late Ptolemaic date, the use of Egyptianizing motifs being one of such characteristics. In fact, only one of the five extant murals contains an Egyptianizing detail. The sacral scene combining Hellenistic and Egyptianizing visual elements was painted on a carved sarcophagus located just opposite the burial chamber with the depiction of a man reclining under the gourd vine [Riad, 1967, plan 3]. A *ba*-bird sitting on a papyrus flower faces a typically Greek *perirrhanterion* standing on the round base [Venit, 2002, plate VII]. M.S. Venit and M.-A. Guimier-Sorbet argue that the pictorial technique is identical to that of the rustic episodes, which is especially noticeable in the treatment of plants and three-dimensional rendering of the *perirrhanterion*. The plant stems in all murals are painted with thin brownish lines covered by thicker transparent green lines. The *perirrhanterion* finds its parallel in the Macedonian tomb of Lyson and Kallikles, dating back to the late 3rd – first half of the 2nd century BC [Rhomipoulou, 1997, p. 44; Balakhvantsev, 2017, p. 90, fn. 307]. The treatment of the *ba*-bird is more graphic and two-dimensional, which seems to have been a result of conscious imitation of Egyptian style. The careful introduction of Egyptianizing motifs into predominately Greek iconographic programmes is consistent with the conventions of Alexandrian funerary art of the first half of the 1st century BC [Adriani, 1966, p. 133]. Before this period Alexandria had taken no interest in the Egyptian funerary painting, while after the Roman invasion the painters preferred to mix a lot of Egyptianizing elements into the pictorial programmes of the tombs.

An important detail of the Saqiya Tomb design contributes to more precise dating of the paintings. The south wall of the court preserved a fragment of decoration combining three popular Alexandrian motifs – the imitation of alabaster veneer, long white rectangular blocks and alternating black and white squares imitating faience tiles [Venit, 2016, p. 103, fig. 85; p. 106, fig. 90]. Both A. Adriani and M.S. Venit attribute the imitation of white rectangular blocks and alabaster veneer to the early and mid-Ptolemaic periods [Adriani, 1966, p. 133; Venit, 1988, p. 89], while the faience tile imitation dates back to the 1st half of the 1st century BC [Adriani, 1966, p. 133]. The latter motif was found in Alexandrian tombs Anfushi II, Anfushi V and Ras al-Tin 8. All of them date back to the 1st century BC. M.S. Venit's dating of the Saqiya tomb (2nd century BC) is partially based on the assumption that the imitation of white rectangular blocks (borrowed from Macedonian painting) had lost its popularity by the 1st century BC [Venit, 2002, p. 115]. In fact, even in the 2nd century AD it was still in use, at least in Macedonia, which kept close contacts with Alexandria. Even more important is the fact that faience tile imitations never appeared before the 1st century BC. Considering the stylistic and iconographic characteristics of the Saqiya tomb, the 1st century BC seems to be the most reasonable dating.

As the iconographic programme of the tomb is purely pagan, the introduction of the gourd vine motif needs some additional consideration. Its connection to the Old Testament prophet's story used to be so close that early Christian artists sometimes preferred to refer to Jonah by simply depicting the gourd fruits. For instance, the 4th century gold-glass fragment from the Corning Museum of Glass (300–399 AD) contains a depiction of fish under the gourd vine,⁴ both elements being distinctively Christological symbols. The iconographic programme of the 3rd century Thessalonian tomb on Nestoras street comprises a depiction of three gourd-like vegetables [Μαρκή, 2006, Πίλ. 1^α] (fig. 6). The early Christian artists believed that a simple image of gourd fruits was sufficient to refer to the whole body of meanings standing behind the episode of *Jonah under the Gourd Vine*. The outstanding iconographic stability suggests that at some point of the Ancient history the familiar visual pattern was adopted by early Christian artists. Many other pagan visual clichés shared the same path of visual “migration” to the early Christian art, including the famous Good Shepherd (an extremely popular scene depicting a shepherd bearing a sheep on his shoulders), that also made part of the pictorial program of the Saqiya tomb.

The time and place of introduction of the pagan visual motive in which a man is resting under the gourd vine into the repertoire of early Christian art are very intriguing. The murals of the Saqiya tomb prove that the visual cliché was already in use in Alexandria as early as the 1st century BC. In the meantime, the Book of Jonah of the Hebrew Bible did not refer to the gourd. According to the Hebrew version, Jonah rested under a plant named *qī-qā-yō-wn*. This is a tall fast-growing bush with wide palmate leaves (most likely the castor oil plant). The first mention of the marrow-type pumpkin (*κολοκύνθη*) appeared in the Greek version of the Old Testament – Septuagint. The early Christian visualization followed the Septuagint description of the episode. The shift from one plant to another has likely been made in the course of translation of the Hebrew Bible into the Greek language, which was made in Alexandria in the 3rd–2nd centuries BC (The Pentateuch was translated in the mid-3rd century BC, while the translations of prophetic books were probably performed over the 2nd century BC [Jobes, Silva, 2000, p. 409]).

When translators encounter specific objects in the source language that do not have strict analogues in the translation language (such as plants, minerals, endemic animals etc.), they have a tendency to select an approximate analogue from the range of similar objects existing in the translation language. The gourd – a fast growing plant with large leaves and shadowy foliage – turned out to be such an approximate analogue. As the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was performed in Alexandria, it seems that the gourd used to be a common agricultural plant cultivated in the rural Delta surrounding the city. The depictions of agricultural works, the waterwheel and the gourd plantation in the Saqiya tomb reflected typical landscapes and episodes of the everyday life in Alexandrian suburbs.

The famous Palestrina mosaic, which was most likely performed by a workshop of Alexandrian origin [Meyboom, 1995, p. 91–96], gives a hint at the popularity of episodes of rest under shadowy pergolas in Ptolemaic art. It contains a banquet scene with several figures reclining on the benches installed under the pergola entwined with a grape vine [Meyboom, 1995, fig. 21]. The pergola banquets used to be a common entertainment in Egyptian Delta in Graeco-Roman Egypt [Meyboom, 1995, p. 70]. The Palestrina mosaic dates back to around 100 BC [Moffitt, 1997, p. 227; Glebov, Dedyulkin, 2022, p. 269].

Unfortunately, late Antique Jewish art took no interest in the visualization of Jonah's rest episode. Thus, there is no chance to compare the early Christian visual cliché to the Jewish one. However, another episode of the Jonah cycle – *Jonah and the whale* – gained its place in both visual traditions. Here again the scholars encounter a situation where the translators of the Septuagint substituted the Hebrew *dag gadol* (great fish) mentioned in the Hebrew Bible with the

⁴ Corning Museum of Glass. Accession # 66.1.205.

name of Greek mythological monster *Κήτος* (ketos/whale). The Roman painting had developed an iconographic type of the Romanized *Cetus*, which was later appropriated by the early Christian art. In the meantime, the Jewish artists rendered the monster from the famous episode as a huge fish. The Greek translation influenced the visual perception of the Old Testament beast by the Gentiles, as well as their selection of a suitable visual cliché from the rich repertoire of Roman art. The iconography of *Jonah under the Gourd Vine* seems to have followed the same path, with the only difference that the adopted visual pattern had been found in the Alexandrian – instead of Roman – funerary art.

To summarize, the iconography of the male figure reclining under the gourd vine is likely to have first appeared in the Alexandrian funerary paintings. It matched perfectly the Septuagint description of the episode from the Book of Jonah and was probably first adopted by Alexandrian Christian milieu. As the city used to be one of the most influential cultural centers of the Roman Empire, the iconographic patterns of Alexandrian art easily found their way to the Italian peninsula and Roman provinces. Thus, the Hellenistic visualization of serene rural life found its way into the repertoire of early Christian art and soon became an omnipresent iconographic cliché symbolically representing the happy afterlife in Paradise.

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Fig. 1. Fragment of Early Christian sarcophagus, 3rd century AD, Italy, now in the Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin. Inv. 2704 (photo by V.Z. Kuvatova).



Fig. 2. East wall of the burial chamber, Tomb III Wardian, Alexandria (Photo courtesy of M.S. Venit).

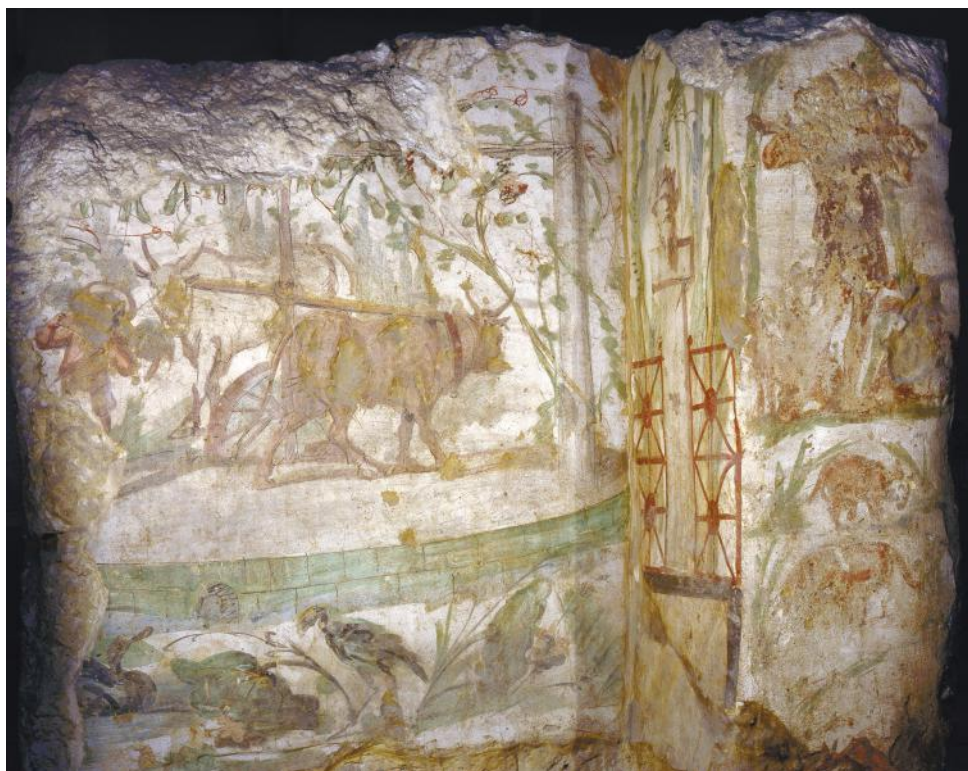


Fig. 3. Landscape paintings, south-east wall, Tomb III Wardian, Alexandria
(photo purchased for editorial use at www.alamy.com).

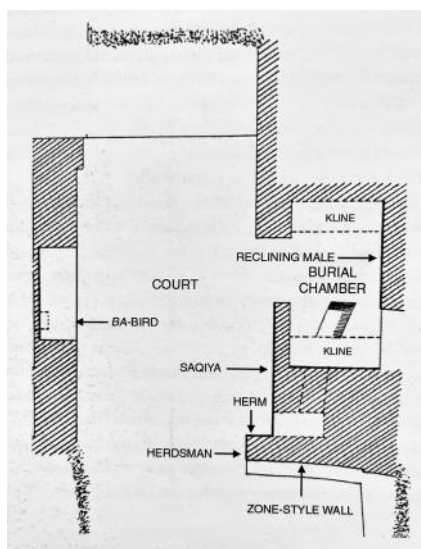


Fig. 4. Tomb III Wardian, the Saqiya Tomb layout (after: [Riad, 1967, plan 3]).



Fig. 5. Villa Poppea, Room 8, east wall, Oplontis, in situ (Photo courtesy of Jebulon. Use is subject to Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License v.4 International).



Fig. 6. Fragment of murals, tomb on Nestoras street, Thessaloniki, 3rd century AD. Now in Byzantine Museum of Thessaloniki (photo by V.Z. Kuvatova).