

Lauren Sapikowski

Advised by Kathleen Schowalter

Washington & Lee University

Art History and Theater Double Major, class of 2008

### Abstract

#### THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SARCOPHAGUS OF JUNIUS BASSUS

Lauren J. Sapikowski (Dr Kathleen Schowalter) Department of Art, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia 24450.

The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus is a prominent example of early funerary Christian art, completed in 395 CE. It was made specifically for Junius, the son of a consul who followed his father's footsteps to become prefect of Rome. Given the Christian nature of the sarcophagus, it is curious that Junius was not baptized until he was on his deathbed. This is probably because he was in public office, and most public officials were pagan at the time, as were most Romans. Most of the sarcophagus has been damaged, but one of the more interesting sides remains intact. This side contains scenes from the Old Testament as well as from the life of Christ. Despite the fact that this side of the sarcophagus has been highly studied, art historians have yet to clear up some remaining questions about the arrangement of the scenes on this panel. I will argue that the images on the sarcophagus were arranged in a pattern where like images were placed in opposition to one another. For example, the sacrifice of Isaac in the upper left panel relates directly to the sacrifice of Daniel in the lower right panel. Connecting these images creates a cross – an X. The arrangement of the scenes in such a cross was no mistake; it has symbolic meaning for Christians as it represents the Chi in the Chi-Rho. The Chi-Rho is the symbol of Christ, which is significant, particularly at the time of Junius' life. In fact, Constantine dreamt he would win a major battle if he rode under the Chi-Rho. The battle was indeed won, which inspired his conversion and the legalization of Christianity. The image pattern of a Chi and potentially a Rho for the sarcophagus is noteworthy. For the newly baptized Junius, it was important that his show of faith last for an eternity. The longevity of his devotion to Christianity would not only be important to him, but also make an incredible statement for the religion itself.

**Biography of the Author, Lauren Sapikowski**

Lauren Sapikowski was born in Englewood, Colorado to Jim and Alison Sapikowski. She grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with her two older brothers. She attends Washington & Lee University intending to get a Bachelor of Arts in both Art History and in Theater (with an emphasis in scenic art). While she lost her parents in 2005, Lauren remains a strong student and dedicates much of her work in the theater and art world to the memory of her parents. She is also a member of BRAVE, Pi Beta Phi Sorority and University Theater. She will graduate in June 2008.

The sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (Figure 1) is a prominent example of early Christian art. This marble sarcophagus was made specifically for Junius, and was completed in 395 CE by an unknown artist.<sup>1</sup> The son of a consul, Junius followed in his father's footsteps and became prefect of Rome – the highest available position next to emperor. Probably because of his high political status, Junius hid the fact that he was a Christian, and he was not baptized until he was on his deathbed. Because he was so hidden in his religious beliefs, this sarcophagus is a particularly strong move for Junius to make. Despite the fact that most of the sarcophagus is eroded or destroyed, one can tell that this sarcophagus is highly Christian. In fact, in looking at one of the intact sides, we see that it contains six scenes from the New Testament and four from the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Juxtaposing the New and Old Testaments was not new in art, but it was an extremely strong statement for a political figure to make at a time when Christianity was controversial. While this side of the sarcophagus is highly studied, art historians have yet to clear up some remaining questions about the exact depiction and order of the scenes on this panel. I believe that the images of the sarcophagus were placed in a pattern where like images were placed opposing each other.

When looking at each scene, the images match up so that the center images are linked, followed by the other images in a pattern that crosses along the sarcophagus. First, the sacrifice of Isaac matches the sacrifice of Daniel, then the arrest of Peter relates to the arrest of Paul, followed by the arrest of Christ paired with Job in distress, and ending with Pilate washing his hands, which links to the scene of Adam and Eve in the Fall of Man (Figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Snyder. The sarcophagus is thought to be made by only one unnamed artist and completed in 359CE, the year Junius died. The remains of the scenes in the sarcophagus are limited to one of the longer sides and most of the front and back panels. *Peace and Refreshment After Death*.

<sup>2</sup> Jas Elsner. The top of this sarcophagus was almost completely lost, as was the side opposite the scenes at which we are looking. In the speculation of Elizabeth Malbon, the top of the sarcophagus could have been masks and writings using imagery more Roman than Christian, though so much is lost one cannot be sure. Fortunately, this side of the sarcophagus is generally well preserved to the point where everything is identifiable. Elsner, Jas. *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1998), 193-196.

Drawing a line connecting the parallel images would create a cross (X) along the side of the sarcophagus with a line cutting through its center. The arrangement of the scenes in such a cross was no mistake, as it has symbolic meaning for Christians, representing the symbol of Christ: the Chi-Rho. In fact, in the same century as this sarcophagus was made, Constantine rode into battle under the sign of the Chi-Rho to show his faith. The Chi-Rho image pattern on the sarcophagus is very Christian, particularly for the time, and was a definite sign of faith.

The first images that clearly connect to one another are the images placed at center in both the top and bottom panels. This connection would be the Rho of the Chi-Rho. As clearly noted, the center scenes are of Jesus in triumph. On the left, Christ is enthroned between Peter and Paul, and on the right is Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The image of Christ enthroned between Peter and Paul is a common image that later would be seen in the apse of churches such as the apse in S. Paolo Fouri le Mura<sup>3</sup>. One should note that Jesus is enthroned with a man beneath him. This man under the arch is a personification of the celestial<sup>4</sup> indicating that Christ is beyond the real world. This personification alludes to the paradisiacal world where Christ passes Judgment on mankind at the apocalypse. This scene clearly belongs on a sarcophagus because Junius has died, and the last judgment is an indication of death. The idea is that Junius will die and be able to see Christ, which works into Junius' ultimate salvation because of his beliefs.

The scene to the right depicts Christ on a donkey as he triumphantly returns to Jerusalem. While this is not related to death and judgment, it does bear a strong link to the image above it. As one art historian, Snyder, pointed out, "both are related to the imperial theme of *adventus*, or

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<sup>3</sup> This imagery in an apse is very common all over Italy in various churches. The idea of paradise is also in such prominent churches as Old St. Peters.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Silver specifically points this paradisiacal imagery: "The bearded figure below [Christ's] throne is a personification of heaven." Silver, Larry. *Art in History*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 1993), 87.

the coming and reception of an emperor before the people”<sup>5</sup>. Both images present the idea of Christ as an emperor and as a triumphant figure before the world. It is clear that the center images are of the triumph of Christianity. Both show the power of Christ and all of his glory. The celestial Jesus on the top tier is where the deceased will be going, and the triumph of Jerusalem below reflects the triumph of Christianity in Junius’ mortal life.

The next pairing is the Sacrifice of Isaac, to the left, and the Sacrifice of Daniel, to the right. This is part of the left arm of the Chi in the Chi-Rho. These scenes parallel each other because they show how sacrifice in God’s name can lead to great things. Both sacrifices were not completed because the men had faith in God and showed their devotion by risking all that they had. The idea of the incomplete sacrifice connects the two stories.

For Daniel, the Emperor told him that he could no longer pray three times a day, as his religion instructed him. Daniel refused to deny his faith, and thus the Emperor threw Daniel into the lions den. It was because of Daniel’s devotion, however, that God protected him from the lions until he was released, saving Daniel’s life. He was not sacrificed due to his faith in the Lord. In this way, Daniel was to be sacrificed, but the sacrifice was never completed by God’s will.

This is the link to the left panel since faith saved Isaac from death as well. The story tells that God demanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son and heir, Isaac. Abraham agreed to do this, having faith that God had good reason for such a loss to Abraham. With blind faith, Abraham brought Isaac to the sacrificial hill and was just about to slit his son’s throat when he was stopped at the last second by God who gave him a ram to sacrifice instead. The request of

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<sup>5</sup> The connection between the imperial and the religious was very strong in the beginnings of Christian art because the artists of the time were used to carving for the Emperor or other officials. The theme of a grand emperor was very common in Roman art at this time. Snyder, *Peace and Refreshment After Death*. p23

sacrifice by God was a test for Abraham, and it is because Abraham was faithful that God chose to spare Isaac. Once again, this is a sacrifice that is incomplete by God's will.

This connection of almost sacrificing life for faith interestingly proves a greater Christian point in linking the Old and New Testaments. These are both Old Testament stories, but they both directly relate to the story of Christ. For example, the sacrifice of Isaac foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus, as both show the sacrifice of a son. This unfinished sacrifice of Isaac is said to be *at last* fulfilled with God's sacrifice of his own son<sup>6</sup>. Daniel also makes a sacrifice for his religion, but his death is not completed. Thus, Christ completed these two tales of salvation. Christ's sacrifice was, after all, for the salvation of all mankind. Perhaps this means that Christ's death completed the unfinished sacrifices of other men, such as Daniel and Isaac, who could have been sacrificed by their religion but were spared.

The next mirrored group shows the arrests of Peter to the right and of Paul to the left. This connection is very clear as Peter and Paul are the two greatest known apostles and are often depicted together in Christian art. Since these two men are both strong icons among the followers of Christ, and since both pictures show the men getting arrested, it is very easy to see how the two directly relate.

Stylistically they are linked in a basic way. Both arrests show the apostle in the center with two arresting officials, one on either side. In both cases these officials are facing the apostle, creating more focus on the center image of the arrested man. In both cases the arrested man is looking to the right and not looking at the officer arresting him. Having a link in format draws the eye to recognize that there is a link between the two registers.

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<sup>6</sup> Malbon, Elizabeth. *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990) . This relationship is one often found in art as well, though not as often at this time, we see it come around more after Constantine.

As the stories go, both apostles were arrested for their loyalty to Christ and to Christianity, and both were made martyrs. In the case of Peter, he was killed under Emperor Nero, and Paul was beheaded in the Tre Fontane.<sup>7</sup> Once again we see the idea of sacrifice for Christian beliefs, perhaps commenting on Junius' own life sacrifices or simply on the general devotion of Christians to their beliefs. Either way, sacrifice is one of the strong themes on this sarcophagus and in Christianity.

These images also have a strong connection to the story of Christ's suffering. These two men are arrested on the sarcophagus, but so is Christ. They also appear together in the upper center register where Christ is enthroned between Peter and Paul. It is interesting to note that there are three arrests in this sarcophagus and all three people arrested appear in the middle register, showing the strength of the link between them. This connection emphasizes how this particular sarcophagus focuses on Christ's suffering. The two pairings we have seen so far focus on The Passion, with the images of Peter and Paul showing a before-and-after concept with the arrest being before and Christ enthroned being after. Normally one would consider the actual crucifixion an important image in The Passion. However, in 395 CE, the image of Christ on the cross was one of humiliation and degradation. So, instead of an image of the crucifixion, we have the arrest. The images of sacrifice show the importance of Christ's death, and they show the necessity of such a death to compensate for the lives of others. This theme will reappear often in the sarcophagus and is very significant overall.

The next pair of images, which occur on the right flank of the coffin, are another mix of Old and New Testament images, with these showing the arrest of Jesus and Job in distress. The connection between the two images is that both show the two men at a low point. Job lost everything that he had in the one panel, and in the matching panel Jesus is being arrested by the

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<sup>7</sup> Death of Paul is in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Death of Peter is in John 21:19. *The Holy Bible*.

people of Jerusalem. This is an example of Job's statement in Job 1:21: "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." These two men have experienced loss and take it with pride, because they are obedient to their God. Once again, it is faith that keeps these men willing to endure their suffering. Job was tested on his faith, and since he passed, all his possessions were returned to him by the will of God. In the case of Jesus, he was arrested and sacrificed for the benefit of mankind to ascend into heaven. Both men reached an ultimate low and were restored to greatness – Job to his riches and Jesus to the right hand of God.

The tale of Job's sufferings are actually noted for the *imitatio christi*<sup>8</sup> because Job lost everything in his possession. Living off of nature was something that Job did involuntarily but did not fight against. His situation is similar to the life of Christ, as Christ refused earthly possessions and believed that he did not need anything material, because he was bringing a message of God to mankind.

The remaining two scenes in the sarcophagus are connected in a more subtle way. These are the images of Pilate washing his hands and Adam and Eve at the Fall of Man. Both images are linked artistically, because they both contain a mysterious background figure which does not seem to fit the scene that is being depicted.

In the case of Pilate, one notices an extra person; this man in the background is a mystery to the onlooker as he does not seem to fit in with the rest of the scene. In this register we can clearly see the servant, facing a seated Pilate with a vase leaning to what appears to be a wash basin. This gives us the idea of the New Testament scene where Pilate washes his hands after sending Christ to die. These two people are the only characters necessary to convey what is going on in the register. Still, there is something else in the scene; in the center of this piece we

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<sup>8</sup> Imitation of Christ. This ideal was popularized by the Franciscan monks – living life in the style Jesus by embracing nature and poverty. For more on the imitation Christi in later Christian culture read Noble and Strauss's *Western Civilization* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company 2005).

have a man in the background. This mysterious man also appears to have a halo distinctly carved around his head. One would think that the halo refers to Christ, but the other two registers with Christ in them do not include any such halo, leaving his identity still uncertain. Still, in other depictions of Pilate washing his hands, a haloed Christ is present, making Christ a viable identity for the mystery man.<sup>9</sup> Also, while he does not closely resemble the other images, this mystery figure does have the same facial structure as the Christ enthroned in the center register. Even the robe consistently folds over the left shoulder in all images of Christ. It seems logical, then, that this is an image of Christ.

In the case of Adam and Eve, there is another background figure. In the panel we see both Adam and Eve facing outwards on either side of the snake. This clearly shows the Fall of Man<sup>10</sup> with Adam and Eve ashamed at their nakedness. The snake in the middle shows the reason for the fall and contrasts the innocence of Adam and Eve with the devil who tempted Eve. One would believe that there is no need for an additional character in the scene as the message comes across quite clearly. There is, however, a tiny animal behind Eve's left shoulder. Any additional animal in this scene is odd since there is not another animal mentioned in this story. The animal itself is a mystery, but it seems to be a lamb. When looking at the lamb we also begin to see that there is something behind Adam as well: a sheaf of wheat. This background mystery is the key to linking these two panels.

The image of Pilate is alluding to the fact that Christ is about to be sacrificed. It is important to note that the scene with Pilate is clearly not a display of the crucifixion, but that it does allude to the fact that Christ is being sent to his death. Since the crucifixion was an image of shame at the time, it makes sense that the death of Jesus would not be shown literally, but

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<sup>9</sup> This image of Pilate has Christ in thousands of images, such as in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century Gospel Book of S. Augustine, or, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the many pictures within the Illustrated Bartsch collection.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 3:16-19 *The Holy Bible*.

through this allusion. Thus, this scene shows the sacrifice of God's son, which is the most important sacrifice in Christianity. At first, this sacrifice seems to be unrelated to the Fall of Man, where no sacrifice was made. However, it is in the sheaf of wheat and the lamb that sacrifice becomes the link between these two panels. Adam and Eve were the parents of Cain and Abel. As the story goes, Cain and Abel were both asked by God to make a sacrifice to him. Cain, a tiller, offered up his crops of wheat as a sacrifice, and Abel, the shepherd, offered up a lamb. For unspecified reasons, God accepts Abel's sacrifice and rejects the sacrifice of Cain's wheat. This acceptance of the sacrifice of the lamb is actually where Jesus gets his title of "The Lamb of God" as he is God's sacrifice for all mankind. Since the panel on the right shows Pilate having just sentenced Christ to death, there is a connection between the two panels of the preferred sacrifice. In the panel of Adam and Eve the sacrifice is alluded to by showing the actual offerings behind Adam and Eve, and in the Pilate panel the sacrifice of Christ is alluded to in the act of Pilate washing his hands.

It is important to note that in both panels we see God's choice of a sacrifice – preferring the lamb to wheat, and preferring the sacrifice of his own son. The idea of sacrifice has been present in earlier panels, but here the sacrifice is not about man, but about God and his choice of what a sacrifice should be. Once again, these panels show a unity of the New and Old testament, as the sacrifice of the lamb by Abel foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ. In fact, in the Bible, Christ refers to Abel's righteousness. This would be a well known fact at the time, and thus would easily link the idea of Cain and Abel in the panel of Adam and Eve with the sacrifice of Christ alluded to in the Pilate scene.

Also, Christ's death directly relates to Adam and Eve because he is the one who breaks the gates of hell to bring Adam and Eve from hell to heaven. This act is called the Koimesis and

happens as Christ goes down to hell to bring Adam and Eve to heaven, thus relieving man of their original sin.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, one can see that the panel indicating Christ's death is significant in conjunction with a scene of Adam and Eve's sin as Christ will be there to bring Adam and Eve from the very Fall we see in this panel. Both the connection between Christ's death and Cain and Abel and the connection between Christ and Adam and Eve show the strong connection between these two panels.

Again, all of these images have connected to form a very specific shape in the Chi-Rho. This connection of the images in a cross is very significant within Christian culture as the Chi-Rho was the symbol of Christ. The panels in this sarcophagus join the life of Christ and the Old Testament, putting emphasis on the validity of Christ as the messiah and the idea of his sacrifice. With this intent in the art already, it makes perfect sense that the panels were designed in the symbol signifying Christ. In this sarcophagus and in many other art works of the time, it was important for Christians to validate their belief in Christ. Since Junius was newly Christian, it made sense that his sarcophagus would confirm his choice in religion. As a public official, he could not openly admit his Christianity until his death, and thus it was important that his sarcophagus be definitively Christian in its individual panels and in how they combine as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> This act is called the Koimesis, which is depicted in Church decoration in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, such as in the Church of the Dormition at Daphni. At the time this sarcophagus was made, the Koimesis was considered to be fact, but not as concrete as it became later in Christianity.

**Figure 1** *The Junius Bassus Sarcophagus. (ArtStor.org)*



**Figure 2** *Sarcophagus image matched by color – a clear reflection*

Sacrifice of Isaac	Arrest of Peter	Jesus handing down law	Arrest of Jesus	Pilate washing hands
Job in distress	Adam & Eve – The Fall of Man	Jesus reentering Jerusalem	Daniel's sacrifice in the Den	Arrest of Paul

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