

BAPTISMAL IMAGES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

JUNE IS A SPECIAL MONTH FOR CHRISTIAN SAINTS. NOT ONLY ARE PETER AND PAUL CELEBRATED ON JUNE 29, BUT JOHN THE BAPTIST IS REMEMBERED ON JUNE 24. IN A SYMBOLIC TRIBUTE TO THIS IMPORTANT FIGURE, RAFFAELA FAZIO FOCUSES BRIEFLY ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF BAPTISM IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART.



Baptism of Christ, 4th century sarcophagus, Vatican Museums, Rome

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Early Christian art contains many images referring to baptism. The most explicit scene is, of course, the one portraying the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. John wears his distinctive animal skin tunic and places his right hand on Jesus' head (probably as an allusion to liturgical practises, namely the laying of hands or the anointing after the baptismal immersion). Jesus is usually represented as a small naked, child-like figure. This nakedness has several symbolic meanings. It suggests that Christ, through the incarnation, "emptied himself" and 'unclothed' himself of his regal nature to come "in human likeness" (Phil 2, 7). It also evokes purity and innocence (newly baptised Christians were called *infantes* in the West during the first week after their baptism). Furthermore, it refers to the rebirth afforded by the Holy Spirit during baptism (which was understood as a new creation and restoration of

Eden), and to Jesus as the new Adam who redeems sinful humanity. Baptismal rites did, in fact, include the renunciation of Satan which, in one sense, enacted the restoration of the primordial condition of humanity before the fall of our ancestors. The candidates faced west, standing barefoot on an animal skin (which also symbolised the garment given to Adam and Eve after their sin). Then, after renouncing Satan, they turned towards the east (referring both to the garden of Eden and to Christ, the "Sun of Justice") and proclaimed their faith.

Death and new life

In the third and fourth centuries baptismal scenes presented sometimes two symmetrical trees, one dry and lifeless and the other lush with foliage. Once again, the scene is one opposing death (sin) and new life (redemption and acceptance into the Church through baptism). These trees could also be a reference to the Baptist's admonition: "Even now the axe is being laid to the root of the trees, so that any tree failing to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire" (Mt 3:10).

The Jordan river

One of the modalities of depicting the flow of the river Jordan is the top-down perspective showing the waters streaming from above. When the river is personified, its figure recalls the classical representations of river-gods. According to certain apocryphal traditions, upon Christ's descent into the waters (Christ being the Supreme Fire) the Jordan took fright at the Lord's sight (this could be an implicit reference to Ps 77:16: "When the

waters saw you, God, when the waters saw you they writhed in anguish, the very depths shook with fear", and to Ps 114:3: "The sea fled at the sight, the Jordan turned back") and its waters withdrew; then it recognised the Lord and acclaimed its divinity with joy. Though the acclaiming figure of the Jordan is already featured in fifth century art, subsequent sixth and seventh century renditions also include actual personifications of the frightened river. The personified Jordan also typifies the decline of the pagan gods in the face of the true and only One.

Witnesses to the scene

Two or more angels witness the scene (like the deacons in the liturgical baptismal ceremonies) with hands covered with cloths in signs of respect and reverence. Other cosmic witnesses - the personifications of the sun and the moon (which were symbols of worldwide power in late antique representations of rulers) - are sometimes added thus indicating that Christ is the king of heaven, the creator and ruler of the Heavens and Earth. Christ's sovereignty is shown also by another Eastern iconographical element that appeared in the sixth-seventh centuries but remained rather marginal: the crowning of Christ by a dove holding a crown in its beak (catechumens were crowned during Syrian baptismal rites).

Beside the representations of the baptism of Christ, there are many others scenes and symbols containing a strong baptismal connotation in Early Christian art. Instead of analysing these images I will simply mention a few examples in the accompanying tables.

Other elements referring to Baptism

DEER drinking from rivers

The deer typify the catechumens at the baptismal fonts, and, more generally, the faithful's longing for Christ. The sources of water that are represented most frequently are: the Jordan; the 4 rivers of Eden; the streams flowing from the mount where Christ or the Lamb stand.

EAGLES looking for sources of water

The Physiologus recounts that the eagle, when it gets old and its sight deteriorates, flies towards the sun and burns its old wings; then, it plunges three times in a source of pure water that rejuvenates it.

KANTHAROS and FOUNTAINS (often with doves)

LIGHT / FIRE

Light can also symbolise baptism since Christ is the Light of the world and baptised Christians were called the "enlightened". Some early Christian writings also speak of a fire inflaming the Jordan at the moment of Christ's baptism.

Biblical events understood in connection with Baptism

References in the New Testament

- The well at which Jesus meets the Samaritan
- Jesus' healing the man born blind
- Water coming from Jesus' pierced side at the crucifixion

Pre-figurations in the Old Testament

- Flood (Noah saved in the ark)
- Jonah (saved from the belly of the sea creature)
- Different healings involving a sacred pool or a stream of water (eg, healing of Naaman by Elisha through the water of the river Jordan)
- Different episodes involving wells (eg, the well shown by an angel to Hagar in the desert; the well at which Abraham's servant meets Rebekah; the well at which Jacob meets Rachel)
- The Israelites guided by the cloud during their exodus
- The Israelites passing through the Red Sea
- Water from the rock struck by Moses
- The passing of the Jordan to enter the promised Land
- Eschatological references to rivers and streams of water as an allusion to the restored Eden
- The fire of the fiery furnace (ie, the three youths)



Baptism of Christ, 5th-6th century ceiling mosaic, Arian Baptistery, Ravenna