

'De Rossi's School' and Early Christian iconography, ca. 1852–1894

Georgi R. Parpulov

'Ma è poi vero tutto questo? Non è possibile qui nessuna illusione?' (Pius IX, Pope of Rome, 11 May 1854)¹

De Rossi has 'the rare merit of stating his facts exactly and impartially, precisely as he finds them' (Wharton Booth Marriott, schoolmaster, 1870)²

'Si en contemplant les phénomènes, nous ne les rattachions point immédiatement à quelques principes, non-seulement il nous serait impossible de combiner ces observations isolées, et par conséquent, d'en tirer aucun fruit, mais nous serions même entièrement incapables de les retenir ; et, le plus souvent, les faits resteraient inaperçus sous nos yeux.' (Auguste Comte, philosopher, 1829)³

The fall of Rome

Rome became the capital of reunified Italy on 20 September 1870. Piedmontese troops captured the city soon after Prussia's victory over France toppled the Pope's erstwhile protector Napoleon III. Pius IX spent the last eight years of his life in voluntary captivity at the Vatican – deprived of secular power but proclaimed by con-

I was encouraged to write this article by Jaś Elsner. Its topic was suggested to me by Maria Lidova. I thank Jean-Michel Spieser for his helpful comments on the text.

¹ Paolo Maria Baumgarten, *Giovanni Battista de Rossi, fondatore della scienza di archeologia sacra*, Rome: Cuggiani, 1892, 44. 'But can all this be true? Is no deception possible here?' The pope spoke these words upon first visiting the Roman Catacomb of Callixtus excavated by de Rossi; cf. Massimiliano Ghilardi, 'Giovanni Battista de Rossi, Pio IX e le catacombe di San Callisto in un gesso dimenticato di Aniceto Marinas', *Studi romani*, 40, 2012, 277–291, at 282–3.

² Wharton Booth Marriott, *The Testimony of the Catacombs, and of Other Monuments of Christian Art, from the Second to the Eighteenth Century, Concerning Questions of Doctrine Now Disputed in the Church*, London: Hatchards, 1870, 3.

³ Auguste Comte, 'Considérations générales sur la philosophie positive', *Revue encyclopédique*, 44, 1829, 273–309, at 279. 'If we were to observe phenomena without immediately relating them to certain principles, it would not only be impossible to sum up such isolated observations and thus to derive from them any result, but we would be unable even to remember them; more often than not, the facts would be seen without being perceived.'

iliar decree to be doctrinally infallible. After 1868, the Holy See enjoined Catholics not to vote in Italian state elections. From 1871 to 1878, the Berlin government legislated against papal political influence in Prussia's South and East.

Franz Xaver Kraus (1840–1901) and Joseph Wilpert (1857–1944) came to Rome, respectively, in 1870 and 1884.⁴ Kraus hailed from the Rhineland, Wilpert from Silesia. Both were ordained priests; neither had a particularly keen sense of pastoral duty.⁵ 'How are you going to arrange things, so as to be able to stay in Rome for more than [the initially allotted] two years?', Wilpert was asking himself as soon as he had arrived.⁶ The two learned clerics sought to meet not the supreme pontiff but 'the prince of Christian archaeology', who at that time inhabited a spacious *palazzo* on the foot of the Capitoline Hill.⁷ The building no longer stands: it was demolished around 1900 to make room for a grand monument to Victor Emmanuel II, the unifier of Italy.⁸ The owner had died on 20 September 1894.

De Rossi's circle

'The prince of Christian archaeology' was Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–1894), known across Europe as explorer of the Roman catacombs.⁹ Handy epitomes of de Rossi's multi-volume *Roma sotterranea cristiana* promptly appeared in English, French, German (under Kraus' auspices), and Russian.¹⁰ By 1870 he held the keys to the catacombs, so that any scholar wishing to study them needed to secure his permission.¹¹

De Rossi declined a chair at the papal university La Sapienza, with the excuse that his research would not allow him to bind himself to a regular teaching

⁴ On Kraus and Wilpert: Stefan Heid and Martin Dennert, eds, *Personenlexikon zur christlichen Archäologie*, Regensburg: Schnell und Steiner, 2012, 758–61 (M. Dennert), 1323–5 (S. Heid).

⁵ Ernst Hauviller, *Franz Xaver Kraus: ein Lebensbild aus der Zeit des Reformkatholizismus*, Colmar: Walther Roock, 1904, 15; Joseph Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse im Dienste der christlichen Archäologie*, Freiburg: Herder, 1930, 4 (in 1929, after forty-five years spent abroad, Wilpert remained, nominally, a cleric of the diocese of Olomouc).

⁶ Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse*, 4.

⁷ On Kraus's contact with de Rossi: Hauviller, *Franz Xaver Kraus*, 18

⁸ Stefan Heid, 'Joseph Wilpert in der Schule de Rossi's', in Heid, ed., *Giuseppe Wilpert: archeologo cristiano*, Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 2009, 139–207, at 144.

⁹ On de Rossi: Heid and Dennert, eds, *Personenlexikon*, 400–5 (S. Heid); Jamie Beth Erenstoff, *Controlling the Sacred Past: Rome, Pius IX and Christian Archaeology*, PhD thesis, State University of New York at Buffalo, 2008, 173–96 [I owe this reference to Nadia Ali].

¹⁰ James Spencer Northcote and William Robert Brownlow, *Roma Sotterranea, or Some Account of the Roman Catacombs, Especially of the Cemetery of San Callisto, Compiled from the Works of Commendatore de Rossi with the Consent of the Author*, London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1869; Paul Allard, *Rome souterraine: résumé des découvertes de M. de Rossi dans les catacombes*, Paris: Dider, 1872; Franz Xaver Kraus, *Roma Sotterranea, die römischen Katakomben: eine Darstellung der älteren und neueren Forschungen, besonders derjenigen de Rossi's*, Freiburg: Herder, 1879; Alexei von Fricken, *Римские катакомбы и памятники первоначального христианского искусства*, 4 vols, Moscow: Soldatenkov, 1872–85.

¹¹ Heid, ed., *Giuseppe Wilpert*, 147–8.

schedule.¹² He would, however, give tours of the catacombs, as well as eloquent public talks – delivered, because his audience was largely international, in French.¹³ He invariably attended the monthly seminars of the Roman Society for the Promotion of Christian Archaeology, where papers were read by both local and visiting scholars. He also corresponded with many colleagues outside Italy. His scholarly influence was thus exercised primarily through personal contact.

It was through personal contact, too, that de Rossi first rose to prominence: he had managed to impress Pius IX by bringing him to the site of his catacomb discoveries, and later had the pope's name prominently printed on the title pages of *Roma sotterranea*.¹⁴

The rise of a scholarly discipline

A Commission for Sacred Archaeology founded by Pius IX in 1852 provided an institutional basis for de Rossi's work. In 1863, he started publishing a *Bollettino di archeologia cristiana*, which circulated both in the original Italian and in a French translation. The main purpose of this periodical was to give brief up-to-date reports of new discoveries. It was followed in 1887 by the weightier *Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte*, which – unlike the *Bollettino* – continued publication after de Rossi's death. In 1894, the international Congress of Christian Archaeology marked the discipline's coming of age.¹⁵

At first Christian archaeology was centred on the Vatican. The founding congress met in the then Austrian port city of Spalato: all participants were Roman Catholic, and almost all spoke either Italian or German.¹⁶ The *Römische Quartalschrift* was – and still is – based at a small college, the Campo Santo Teutonico, that hosts German clerics who wish to study first-hand the Christian antiquities of Rome.¹⁷ It was there that Wilpert settled when he arrived in the city – with the expressed intention 'to dedicate himself to Christian archaeology'.¹⁸

¹² Paul Maria Baumgarten, *Giovanni Battista de Rossi, der Begründer der christlich-archäologischen Wissenschaft: eine biographische Skizze*, Cologne: Bachem, 1892, 45–6.

¹³ Cf. the amusing anecdote recounted by Baumgarten, *Rossi, der Begründer*, 71–2.

¹⁴ Baumgarten, *Rossi, der Begründer*, 49–57. On the political motives of Pius IX's interest in Christian archaeology: Erenstoff, *Controlling the Sacred Past*, 101–72.

¹⁵ On the rise of Christian archaeology as an academic discipline: William Hugh Clifford Frend, *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996, 76–84; Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, *Einführung in die christliche Archäologie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983, 20–25.

¹⁶ Emilio Marin, ed., *Radovi Proog međunarodnog kongresa za starokršćansku arheologiju*, Vatican City and Split: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana and Arheološki muzej, 1993.

¹⁷ On the *Quartalschrift's* founding editor Anton Maria de Waal (1837–1917): Heid and Denner, eds, *Personenlexikon*, 410–12 (S. Heid).

¹⁸ Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse*, 3.

Objectivity

Portraits of de Rossi show him wearing thick spectacles: he was seriously nearsighted. Young Wilpert had much better vision and was a good draughtsman. This, coupled with perhaps a natural affinity of temperaments, brought the two men together, making the German the Italian's amanuensis.¹⁹

De Rossi's decisive methodological innovation, outlined in his introduction to *Roma sotterranea*, was to move from the antiquarian study of single artefacts to that of entire archaeological sites. He called this, in the context of his work, 'the topographical method', meaning that each catacomb was first to be explored exhaustively on its own.

[P]ublishing monuments is one thing, producing a scholarly corpus is another. He who assumes the former task practices analytical scholarship, he who assumes the latter one, synthetic scholarship. In order to be perfectly and entirely recorded and prepared for scholarly synthesis, monuments should not be separated from their original surrounding or arbitrarily divided into classes according to the opinion, research interest and often, according to the preferences of a given author. Accuracy of this sort is above all required in the publication of early Christian monuments: for these do not belong to a dead civilization of the past..., but by their nature serve the lofty aim of illuminating the origins of [our] most holy religion...²⁰

De Rossi's brother, a geophysicist, took active part in his explorations and certainly must have subscribed to this novel standard of scientific accuracy.²¹ But it was Wilpert who, at a time when photography was first coming into general use, brought the method to fruition. He would order photographic prints of catacomb murals, sometimes on a one-to-one scale, then have them coloured in wash by a painter specially trained as copyist.²² Wilpert notes with satisfaction that the replicas thus obtained would at times supersede the originals, which when exposed to the elements deteriorated.²³

Wilpert's process allowed, in many cases for the first time, for the accurate identification of a painting's *content*. He was confident that *meaning* could be deduced from that with virtual certainty. 'What catacomb painters depicted is, by its very nature, almost always *easily and generally understandable*: the content must

¹⁹ Heid, ed., *Giuseppe Wilpert*, 148–68.

²⁰ Giovanni Battista de Rossi, *La Roma sotterranea cristiana*, vol. 1, Rome: Cromo-litografia pontificia, 1864, 78–9.

²¹ On Michele Stefano de Rossi (1834–1898): Heid and Dennert, eds, *Personenlexikon*, 405–6 (F. Salvatori).

²² Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse*, 31.

²³ Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse*, 114, 150.

needs correspond to the simple form of composition.'²⁴ 'Given the compositional simplicity of these images, their interpretation must also be clear and definite.'²⁵

Interpretation

In 1878 Kraus who, unlike de Rossi, had not declined a professorial chair, gave his inaugural lecture at Freiburg. Aware that not all of his listeners were being trained for academic careers, he stressed that the study of Christian monuments had practical and pedagogical importance for every Christian, and especially every clergyman: 'No other scholarly pursuit apart from this one lets him catch a breath of the spirit of that ancient Christianity which lies as an eternal ideal behind us.'²⁶ The history of Christian art, Kraus later pointed out in his introduction to a large work of the same title, is concerned not so much with the form of monuments as with their content.²⁷

Wilpert, a more practical researcher than Kraus, recognized that content was not a sufficient criterion for dating. He proceeded from the premise that early Christian art followed the same general course of change as Roman imperial art. 'I use the word "decline" because early Christian art shared with the pagan art of that period the sad lot of being art in *decay*.' 'As a rule, the style already permits conclusions about a painting's age. The principle "*the older the image, the better the execution*" holds here, as well.'²⁸

But chronology was secondary to Wilpert's main task:²⁹ interpreting the imagery. For this, de Rossi's 'topographical method' had provided a foundation by focusing on the spatial setting of frescoes and combining iconography with stratigraphy and epigraphy. Wilpert formulated the following principles:

[H]aving reached full certainty about the content of a religious catacomb painting, its interpreter must attempt to penetrate the ideas of its artists or rather, of those who guided them. To this end he will consult – beside Scripture, whence the subject matter of most early Christian imagery is taken – all those sources that are either directly funerary (such as epitaphs, relief sarcophagi, ancient prayers for the deceased) or of similar spirit (such as the *Commendatio Animae* and the pseudo-Cyprianic orations). It is also particularly important to examine the painted cycle of each chamber (arcosolium, regular tomb) individually, comparing it to other similar ones: for the juxtaposition of scenes may indicate the intentions of those who inspired a painted

²⁴ Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms*, Freiburg: Herder, 1903, 141.

²⁵ Wilpert, *Erlebnisse und Ergebnisse*, 54.

²⁶ Franz Xaver Kraus, *Über Begriff, Umfang, Geschichte der christlichen Archäologie und die Bedeutung der monumentalen Studien für die historische Theologie*, Freiburg: Herder, 1879, 25.

²⁷ Franz Xaver Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, vol. 1, Freiburg: Herder, 1896, v.

²⁸ Wilpert, *Malereien*, 136, 125.

²⁹ Wilpert's chronology is now deemed to be off by a hundred years: he assigned the first catacomb paintings to the end of the first century AD, now these are dated to the early third century AD. See most recently Fabrizio Bisconti, *Le pitture delle catacombe romane: restauri e interpretazioni*, Perugia: Tau, 2011.

cycle. Once the interpreter has ascertained in such a way, from the monuments themselves, the meaning of these monuments, he will, in order to secure his explanation even further, also look for patristic witnesses. The interpretation is thus based on a solid, incontrovertible basis.³⁰

In practice, this approach proved flexible enough for Wilpert to distinguish non-religious or genre images from religious ones,³¹ and to subdivide the latter into historical, typological,³² and symbolic.

The sign of the fish

I now focus on de Rossi's, Wilpert's, and Kraus' interpretation of a single symbolic image: partly because it reveals both the strengths and limitations of their methodology,³³ and partly because the image in question is well represented in the collections of the British Museum.³⁴ According to the initial definition of the word 'symbol' given in Kraus' dictionary, 'from a sign or image we are to infer something else, so that what we see is simply a symbol, a tangible token (*Sinnbild*) of another thing.'³⁵ Wilpert specifies, with regard to early Christian art, that

early Christian symbolism is a matter for reason, not fantasy. It is based on simple, sound, rational laws and principles, which can be established only through comparative study of *all* surviving monuments, both written and figural: namely, what *inscriptions* sometimes state in words, *figural art* represents in images.... The two explain and complement each other. Such agreement shows that the symbolism found in them was not something under-

³⁰ Wilpert, *Malereien*, 149–50.

³¹ Joseph Wilpert, 'Ein unbekanntes Gemälde aus der Katakomba der hl. Domitilla und die coemerialen Fresken mit Darstellungen aus dem realen Leben', *Römische Quartalschrift*, 1, 1887, 20–40.

³² Joseph Wilpert, 'Das Opfer Abrahams in der altchristlichen Kunst mit besonderer Berücksichtigung zweier unbekanntener Monumente', *Römische Quartalschrift*, 1, 1887, 126–160.

³³ Cf. Alejandro Recio Veganzones, 'G. B. de Rossi: iconografo ed iconologo', in Nenad Cambi and Emilio Marin, eds, *Radovi XIII Međunarodnog kongresa za starokršćansku arheologiju*, vol. 1, Vatican City and Split: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana and Arheološki muzej, 1998, 223–274; Fabrizio Bisconti, 'Giuseppe Wilpert: iconografo, iconologo, storico dell'arte', in Heid, ed., *Giuseppe Wilpert*, 249–260. No similar study of F. X. Kraus's methodology has been undertaken yet.

³⁴ London, British Museum, inv. 1856,0425.3, 1856,0425.9, 1856,0425.10, 1856,0425.12, 1856,0425.13, 1856,0425.18, 1856,0425.19, 1867,0508.665, 1872, 0604.1380, 1886,0830.4, 1901,0413.3174, 1986,0501.153, OA.6505.

³⁵ Franz Xaver Kraus, ed., *Real-encyklopädie der christlichen Alterthümer*, vol. 2, Freiburg: Herder, 1886, 804 (Dipper). This volume also contains Wilpert's first publications in print: *ibid.*, 729–32, 781–2, 956–8. – Cf. Jean Wirth, 'Symbol', in Jane Turner, ed., *The Dictionary of Art*, vol.13, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 163–168.

stood and used by individual Christian communities but was common property of the entire Church.³⁶

De Rossi's first published work, 'to which he was ever fond of alluding, having apparently conceived for it an extra-scientific affection',³⁷ was a letter on the subject of the Christian ΙΧΘΥΣ -sign, sent in July 1855 to Jean-Baptiste-François Pitra (1812–1889).³⁸ Given that the Frenchman had that letter printed as an appendix to his own text-based study of the fish as an allegory and symbol,³⁹ de Rossi only dealt with the purely archaeological side of the problem. Exhaustive examination of surviving *artefacts*, he points out, is the only way of understanding symbolism historically, i.e. establishing *when* a fish image or the Greek word ΙΧΘΥΣ could in principle stand for more than an actual fish.⁴⁰ (An ancient text about fish symbolism, on the other hand, may have been copied and read at any point after its original time of composition.) Dating can be based either on internal criteria (visual and, in the case of inscriptions, literary style) or on a monument's findspot.⁴¹ Given that fish images all but disappear from Christian art after about AD 400, we are evidently dealing with an *arcane* sign that fell into disuse once Christianity was legalised and the *open* sign of the cross could be displayed.⁴² An arcane sign's meaning is of course hidden, but its correct interpretation must be one that 'can apply to all monuments, wherever they occur'.⁴³ A fish is often depicted on pre-Constantinian artefacts together with an anchor, a ship, bread, or a dove - sometimes with an olive branch in its beak. According to de Rossi, such combined images form, like hieroglyphic writing, a statement that can be equated to verbal formulas, e.g. dove ('peace') + fish ('Christ') = *spiritus in pace et in Christo*; anchor ('hope') + fish ('Christ') = *spes in Christo*.⁴⁴ His readings, together with the corollary 'fish = Christ', are confirmed by the fact that the anchor in some images is shaped like a cross or that the word *spes* may be joined in inscriptions to Christ's Greek monogram XP.⁴⁵ Reasoning of this sort marked the first yet decisive steps of a 'young science of symbolography'.⁴⁶

It is possible to find exceptions to almost any general conclusion. In the case of 'a fish symbolizes Christ', the first scholars to do this had the bad luck of being

³⁶ Joseph Wilpert, *Ein Cyclus christologischer Gemälde aus der Katakomben der heiligen Petrus und Marcellinus*, Freiburg: Herder, 1891, 12.

³⁷ Charles Rufus Morey, 'The Origin of the Fish-Symbol', *Princeton Theological Review*, 8, 1910, 93–106, 231–46, 401–32; 9, 1911, 268–89; 10, 1912, 278–97, at 96.

³⁸ Giovanni Battista de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', in: Jean-Baptiste Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense complectens sanctorum patrum scriptorumque ecclesiasticorum anecdota hactenus opera*, vol. 3, Paris: Didot, 1855, 544–577.

³⁹ Jean-Baptiste Pitra, ' ΙΧΘΥΣ , sive De pisce allegorico et symbolico', in Pitra, *Spicilegium Solesmense*, vol. 3, 499–543.

⁴⁰ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 546.

⁴¹ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 549, 551.

⁴² de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 548, 559.

⁴³ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 562.

⁴⁴ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 561–3.

⁴⁵ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 563.

⁴⁶ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ΙΧΘΥΣ exhibentibus', 564.

Protestants.⁴⁷ Wilpert's book-length polemic against them concludes that serious scholarship can only be based on 'impartial, thorough study of de Rossi's writing, as well as of the monuments themselves'.⁴⁸ Without doubting the author's sincerity, it ought to be noted that at the time he was personally dependent on de Rossi's benevolence.⁴⁹ His defence, its title notwithstanding, does not contain programmatic statements of methodological principle other than that a monument is explained through other monuments (e.g., certain inscriptions state in words what other epitaphs illustrate with images).⁵⁰ If monuments are to agree among themselves, then within a single class of them – for instance, in early Christian funerary art – a fish, once found to be a symbol, must always be symbolic and never just a meaningless decorative motif.⁵¹ Kraus confirms this conclusion, stating that the funerary imagery of early Christians 'at the same time had a symbolic and allegorical character'.⁵²

Two small case studies



Figure 1 Gold finger-ring with an emerald intaglio bezel, 3rd–4th century AD.

London: British Museum, inv. 1856,0425.3

Figure 2 Red carnelian intaglio set in a gold finger-ring, 3rd–4th century AD (intaglio).

London: British Museum, inv. 1856,0425.9

De Rossi's letter to Pitra in July of 1855 ends with a list of one hundred and six early Christian artefacts carrying the sign of the fish. Many were only known to the author indirectly, from older publications. One finds there, *inter alia*:

⁴⁷ Adolf Hasenclever, *Der altchristliche Gräberschmuck: ein Beitrag zur christlichen Archäologie*, Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1886, 203, 228–36; Hans Achelis, *Das Symbol des Fisches und die Fischdenkmäler der römischen Katakomben*, Marburg: Elwert, 1887. On the two authors: Heid and Dennert, eds, *Personenlexikon*, 47–8 (M. Teubner), 640 (M. Dennert).

⁴⁸ Joseph Wilpert, *Prinzipienfragen der christlichen Archäologie, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der 'Forschungen' von Schultze, Hasenclever und Achelis*, Freiburg: Herder, 1889, 100.

⁴⁹ Heid, ed., *Giuseppe Wilpert*, 149–50, 169–74.

⁵⁰ Wilpert, *Prinzipienfragen*, 82–3.

⁵¹ Wilpert, *Prinzipienfragen*, 83.

⁵² Kraus, *Geschichte*, 82, 91–6, esp. 91. – The glass bowl mentioned by Kraus on p. 94 is not in the British Museum but in the Römisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne.

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97. Gold ring decorated with two gemstones, one displaying a fish, the other, a tree with a dove perched on it and the letters AEMILIA.

99. Good Shepherd, anchor, fish, Jonah, doves, and other Christian symbols on a bezel gemstone.⁵³

Less than a year later the same items were acquired by the British Museum and accessioned as follows:

1856,4–25.3. Gold ring, antique, on one side is set an emerald in which is engraved a fish, on the opposite side is engraved in the gold itself a bird on a tree with the inscription AEMILI. [sic] Found at Rome

1856,4–25.9. Red cornelian intaglio, various figures, the Good Shepherd and Jonah?, set in gold as ring.⁵⁴

Detailed descriptions of the two (de Rossi's '*accurata singularum rerum cognitio, quae synthesim necessario debet praecedere*')⁵⁵ were furnished by Ormonde M. Dalton (1866–1945).⁵⁶ While Dalton confidently classified both as 'intaglio gems with early Christian religious subjects', another cataloguer, in 2007, is far more hesitant: 'Although the fish and bird could have Christian significance, there is no explicit indication, and the ring is probably better regarded as pagan.'⁵⁷ The same writer observes that fish imagery possesses 'an extraordinarily rich and complex array of meaning, much of which remains obscure'.⁵⁸ Such a cautious approach is typical of present-day scholarship, where local, singular interpretations take precedence over a global, generally valid one. De Rossi was already aware of the particular difficulty that gems, rings, and other portable objects (the kind collected in museums) pose for the interpreter, having been completely severed from their original context.⁵⁹ General analogies are inapplicable if meaning has to be deduced independently in every case; interpretation becomes an exercise in reading a foreign text without a dictionary. The shorter the text, the more difficult to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words in it: note that the Christian reading of 1856,0425.9 – unlike that of 1856,0425.3 – has never been cast in doubt, since this second gemstone contains four or five separate

⁵³ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ἱχθύς exhibentibus', 577.

⁵⁴ British Museum Antiquities Register, vol. 9, February 1856–August 1857, page 9.

⁵⁵ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ἱχθύς exhibentibus', 545.

⁵⁶ Ormonde Maddock Dalton, *Catalogue of the Finger Rings, Early Christian, Byzantine, Teutonic, Mediaeval and Later*, London: British Museum, 1912, 1 (cat. 2); Dalton, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems of the Post-Classical Periods in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography in the British Museum*, London: British Museum, 1915, 71 (cat. 527), 73 (cat. 540).

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2007, 174 (cat. X40).

⁵⁸ Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*, 41. See also Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, London: Routledge, 2000, 46–51, 190; Laurence Harold Kant, *The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism*, PhD thesis, Yale University, 1993.

⁵⁹ de Rossi, 'De christianibus monumentis ἱχθύς exhibentibus', 555.

motifs, at least two of which are distinctly biblical.⁶⁰ Such certainty rests on the assumption that a single monument ought to be internally consistent, i.e. that one motif's Christian character presupposes the similarly Christian character of the other motifs with which it has been intentionally combined.

Subjective intentions

It remains to consider De Rossi's 'symbolographic' method in the context of present-day study of late antique religious images. Based on systematic logic and rigorous comparison, this method is among the lasting contributions made by nineteenth-century scholarship to art historical methodology. The fact that it was first applied to uncomplicated and often symbolic images allowed it to develop in pure, 'laboratory' conditions. Contrary to what Wilpert thought,⁶¹ however, extremely simple imagery is often not simple to interpret, being ambiguous by virtue of its very simplicity. The question whether such ambiguity was deliberately sought or merely inherent in the imagery itself is not to be answered through comparison. Explaining a monument with other monuments (*'Monumente durch Monumente erklären'*)⁶² has its limits – yet these are limits not simply of 'symbolography' but of the visual evidence itself.

It is what the buyer sees that determines the symbolic content of intaglio devices.... Two buyers can look at the exact same fish intaglio and see quite different things – perhaps the one calls to mind Peter, the fisher of souls, or baptizands washed clean of their sins or Jesus the big ΙΧΘΥΣ, whereas the other is reminded of his love of sport fishing and broiled tuna. The image does not change: a tuna is a tuna. But the subjective intention read into the image can be quite different.⁶³

Georgi R. Parpulov studies Byzantine and East Christian art. From 2014 to 2017, he was project curator in the Department of Britain, Prehistory and Europe and in the Middle East Department of the British Museum.

gparpulov@abv.bg

⁶⁰ Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*, 69 (cat. 429).

⁶¹ Note 25 above.

⁶² Notes 50 and 30 above.

⁶³ Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 114.

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