ARCHAEOLOGIES AND AGENDAS: REFLECTIONS ON LATE ANCIENT JEWISH ART AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ART*

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(Plates VIII–XV)

There are (at least) two ways to approach the history of religious art in Antiquity. One is to study what was going on in the ancient world, to tell the story as *they* (the subjects of our inquiry) saw it and as *they* did it. Another is to ask how *we* know how *they* saw it and did it. The first might be called 'history', the second 'critical historiography'. Both are crucial to the historical enterprise, and I in no way intend to demean the first by saying that this paper is largely of the second kind. My project is to examine what are the grounds for our assumptions in creating the generalizations of 'Late Ancient Jewish Art' and 'Early Christian Art' as real categories of visual production in Late Antiquity with specific and discrete audiences and constituencies of patrons and producers. Both fields are venerable, with long historiographies and complex guiding-agendas of the sort that are perhaps inevitable given the kinds of ancestral investments made by scholars and indeed members of the general public (which is to say, also adherents of the two faiths) in both fields. In addition to prising apart the history of some of these investments, I want to question the methodological basis for many of the assumptions about what can rightly be classified under either the heading of 'Jewish' art or of 'early Christian' art.

Another way of formulating the concerns that prompt this article is to ask what the history of art would look like if we thought of 'Jewish' and 'Christian' art as *religious* categories like Mithraic art, and not as areas akin to (say) 'Greek' and 'Egyptian' art. What happens to the history of the religious arts of the Roman Empire if we align their study with recent approaches to Mediterranean religions between the first and fourth centuries A.D.? Religious historians see a fluid set of relationships between Jews, Christians, and the numerous varieties of pagans (traditional polytheists) — none of which religions is itself a monolithic or exclusive category. If this model of inter-cult fluidity is applied to the visual productions that were used by the adherents of these religions, what does it do for our understanding of their art and for our more general understanding of the arts of the Later Roman Empire?

I. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

The archaeological evidence for both Jewish and early Christian art in the Roman world is messy. In both religions, the archaeological record in respect of decorated artefacts is small (and in the case of Christianity non-existent) before about A.D. 200,[1] but rich across the Roman Empire from Syria and Palestine in the East to the City of Rome in the West in the third century and thereafter. Both groups of evidence (Christian and Jewish) face significant problems of interpretation, which have in general not been subjected to sufficient analysis. We have to ask, and keep asking, on what grounds we

[1] On Judaism see e.g. R. Hachlili, 'Synagogues in the land of Israel: the art and architecture of the late antique synagogue', in S. Fine (ed.), *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (1996), 96–129, esp. 113. On Christianity, see P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (1994), 99–104.

allow an object (usually unprovenanced and only datable by stylistic comparisons) to be Jewish or Christian; and once we make that choice, we need to be quite clear what we mean by the application of the definition.[2] It is not at all clear that an unprovenanced object — a terracotta lamp or a gold glass disk, for example — with a menorah on it is certainly, unambiguously, and exclusively a 'Jewish' object manufactured for or by Jews with a usage that would have excluded all pagans or Christians. Similarly, it is equally unclear that a clay lamp of the later second or early third century with iconography such as the Good Shepherd, which ultimately came to be associated with Christianity (for example the 'Annius' lamps from central Italy), was certainly manufactured for exclusive use by Christians, even though it is possible that such lamps may have been especially favoured by Christians.[3] It is, moreover, not at all clear that Judaism and Christianity were as distinct and exclusive religious categories in the third and early fourth centuries as they may have been thereafter or as the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature wanted them to be (for reasons of its own, both apologetic and polemical). It is in part because of my doubts about the validity of both terms (Jewish and Christian) when used in an exclusive sense — especially in relation to the visual materials before the fifth century — that I have my doubts about the traditional art-historical focus on Jewish and Christian art in Late Antiquity to the exclusion of the parallel religious arts of the Graeco-Roman environment.

In the case of Jewish art, the evidence from the City of Rome itself is broadly funerary,[4] while most of the other surviving materials come from liturgical spaces — especially the more than one hundred synagogues discovered in the main in the last century.[5] This means that we have a plethora of artefacts — small finds like clay lamps, gold glasses, tomb slabs, sarcophagus fragments, all connected with burial and adorned with symbols which have led to Jewish identification for the specific objects labelled 'Jewish' — as well as some catacomb paintings (all mainly from Rome), and a rich record of decorative furnishings for synagogue buildings (especially in the form of mosaic floors) from diverse sites in the Empire spanning Aegina, Delos, Priene, North Africa (Hammam Lif), and Ostia as well as Syria and Palestine.[6] While the material from Rome is mainly third- and fourth-century, that from elsewhere spans the long period from the first to the sixth centuries A.D., with the bulk being from the third century and after. That these two classes of visual evidence — from different functional contexts, from different parts of the Empire, and of different dates — can be read straightforwardly to tell a seamless history, as Rachael Hachlili attempts for instance when she moves smoothly from synagogue art to figurative art to funerary practices to Jewish symbolism in her 1998 book on ancient Jewish diaspora art, is not at all obvious to me.[7] Moreover, there is the persistent problem of defining what Jewish art is to be.

A good example for analysis of this problem is the gold glass from Rome illustrated in Fig. 1. It is clearly Jewish in its imagery, showing a shrine (some have said a tomb, others a Torah shrine)[8] flanked by free-standing columns.[9] It stands in a closed compound with vases and a lit menorah before it, and palm trees and smaller buildings

[2] See further in relation to Christian art, J. Elsner, 'Art and architecture 337–425', *CAH* 13 (1998), 736–61, esp. 744–8.

[3] See Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 116–31.

[4] See esp. L. V. Rutgers, 'Überlegungen zu den jüdischen katakomben Roms', *JAC* 33 (1990), 140–57; idem, 'Archaeological evidence for the interaction of Jews and non-Jews in Late Antiquity', *AJA* 96 (1992), 101–18; idem, *The Jews in Late Antique Rome* (1995). The great exception, of course, is the Ostia synagogue, on which see now B. Olsson, D. Mittermacht and O. Brandt (eds), *The Synagogue of Ancient Ostia and the Jews of Rome* (2001), with bibliography.

[5] See S. Fine, *This Holy Place: On the Sanctity of the Synagogue in the Greco-Roman Period* (1997), 95.

[6] For an overview see L. V. Rutgers, 'Diaspora synagogues', in Fine, op. cit. (n. 1), 67–95.

[7] R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (1998).

[8] Tomb: E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World* (1953), vol. 2, 113; Torah shrine: H. Gressmann, 'Jewish life in ancient Rome', in *Jewish Studies in Memory of Israel Abrahams* (1927), 170–91, esp. 180–2 and E. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha* (1932), 20–1.

[9] For discussion, see A. St Clair, 'God's House of Peace in Paradise: the Feast of Tabernacles on a Jewish gold glass', *Jewish Art* 11 (1985), 6–15, with full earlier bibliography at n. 1; H. Kessler, 'Through the temple veil: the holy image in Judaism and Christianity', *Kairos* 32/33 (1990/1), 53–77, esp. 56–60; Fine, op. cit. (n. 5), 154–6.

FIG. I.   FRAGMENTARY GOLD GLASS DISK FROM THE CATACOMB OF MARCELLINUS AND PETER, ROME. REMOVED, WITHOUT
MORE PRECISE INFORMATION OF PROVENANCE, IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND NOW IN THE VATICAN MUSEUMS.
PROBABLY FOURTH CENTURY A.D. THE ICONOGRAPHY IS SOMEWHAT CONTROVERSIAL, SHOWING A FLAMING MENORAH
BEFORE EITHER A TOMB OR A SHRINE FLANKED BY FREE-STANDING COLUMNS IN AN ENCLOSED COMPOUND WITH VASES AND
OTHER RITUAL(?) PARAPHERNALIA. OUTSIDE THE COMPOUND TO THE RIGHT ARE SMALL AEDICULAE AND PALM TREES.
After the diagram in Goodenough (1953), vol. 3, no. 978.

outside the perimeter wall. Not the least interesting part of the object is its inscription,
which reads:

οἶκος ἰρή[νη]ς λά|βε εὐλογιά . . . μετὰ τῶν σῶ[ν] πάντων

House of Peace. Accept a blessing . . . with all yours.[10]

Taxonomically it fits with a group of thirteen known gold glasses from Rome that have
Jewish iconography.[11] But the problem is that the piece was found in the mainly fourth-
century catacomb of St Marcellinus and St Peter (in 1882), a site which is usually classed
as Christian.[12] In a classic and giveaway piece of special pleading, Hachlili adds to this
information that it 'may have come from the Jewish catacomb of the Via Lubicana

[10] See D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe.
2. The City of Rome* (1995), 421–2.
[11] ibid., 471–85; Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 81–5,
with bibliography.

[12] See Noy, op. cit. (n. 10), 471, with earlier
bibliography.

nearby'.[13] Of course it is by no means impossible that a Jewish piece might have found its way into a Christian site,[14] but the point is that this kind of assertion makes huge, unargued (and in my view unwarranted) definitional assumptions in using the terms 'Jewish' and 'Christian'. The Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter has rooms with clearly Christian decoration (although we should pause here to note that 'Christian decoration' means a mix of Old and New Testament scenes which we usually read typologically as if they were Christian, even though they would not have been wholly unsusceptible to a Judaizing interpretation at the time). But it also has cubicula with mixed Christian and pagan imagery. In Room 79, for example, dated to the third quarter of the fourth century, images on the same wall juxtapose Orpheus playing the lyre, Peter striking water from the rock, Daniel in the lions' den, and the raising of Lazarus.[15] Orpheus might be 'de-paganized' by being interpreted as a mythological rather than scriptural type of Christ,[16] but even in this case he is not a type in the same sense as Daniel. Also possible is a syncretistic interpretation which makes the room a strange conflation of pagan and Christian motifs that may evoke an equally odd range of mixed beliefs. The same catacomb has a room (No. 66) apparently decorated with paintings of athletes, which seem difficult to define with respect to any religious affiliations,[17] while other catacombs (most famously that at the Via Latina) have pagan imagery such as the deeds of Hercules.[18] The contextual issue is no less the case with Jewish art,[19] where scholarship has traditionally dismissed paganizing iconography in synagogues as 'merely' decorative by contrast with 'meaningful' Jewish themes, or has subjected non-Jewish themes to strongly Judaizing interpretations.[20]

The need to force a catacomb like that of Marcellinus and Peter or the catacomb of the Via Latina to represent a single religious constituency, or for artefacts like our gold glass to gesture to a single monolithic religious affiliation, is inherently problematic.[21] It necessarily belongs to the game of apologetic archaeology. The one thing we can say with certainty is that many of the Roman objects with Jewish iconography are unprovenanced, and of the few which do have contexts or findspots — like the glass from the Catacomb of Marcellinus and Peter — all we can say is that these are hardly Jewish in any exclusive or normal sense of the term. I myself think that we have to be aware of the possibility that Jewish symbols like the menorah or Torah shrine were not necessarily and exclusively used only by Jews, although in their use by Jews they may have developed some specific meanings which came to be seen by some Jewish communities as definitional of their faith.[22] They may have been used also by some Christian constituencies and even by syncretistically-minded pagans. The representation of the Jewish Church (as opposed to the Gentile Church) as a personification in unproblematically Christian fifth-century art (for instance in the mosaic above the door at Santa Sabina in Rome)[23] makes it not impossible that the so-called Jewish gold glasses

[13] Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 7), 298; eadem, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (1988), 234–73.

[14] cf. Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 78.

[15] See J. G. Deckers, H. R. Seeliger and G. Mietke, *Die Katakombe 'Santi Marcellino e Pietro'* (1987), 348–50.

[16] On Orpheus, see Sister Charles Murray, *Rebirth and Afterlife: A Study in the Transmutation of some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art* (1981), 37–63 and R. M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (2000), 41–2.

[17] See Deckers *et al.*, op. cit. (n. 15), 319–20.

[18] See J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (1995), 271–80, with further bibliography.

[19] For example in the Jewish catacombs of Beth Shearim, on which see S. Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Identity 200 BCE to 640 CE* (2001), 154–7, with bibliography.

[20] See the acute comments of Schwartz, op. cit. (n. 19), 133–5. The first of these strategies (which he characterizes rightly as 'non-interpretation')

Schwartz associates with M. Avi-Yonah, the second with E. R. Goodenough.

[21] On the problems of mixed burials see e.g. J. Magness and G. Avni, 'Jews and Christians in a Late Roman cemetery at Beth Guvrin', in H. Lapin (ed.), *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Late Roman Palestine* (1998), 87–114; M. Johnson, 'Pagan-Christian burial practices of the fourth century: shared tombs?', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997), 37–60.

[22] On these symbols, see Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 7), 312–46, 360–73; on the menorah, see L. I. Levine, 'The history and significance of the menorah in Antiquity', in L. I. Levine and Z. Weiss (eds), *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity*, JRA Suppl. 40 (2000), 131–53, and now at length R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-Armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form and Significance* (2001). For Samaritan and Christian uses of this symbol, see ibid., 263–74.

[23] See e.g. G. Matthiae, *Mosaici medioevali delle chiese di Roma* (1967), 77–81.

from Rome might have been used to perform some kind of similar function in a fourth-century Christian context. What I have said here about Jewish art applies equally, *mutatis mutandis,* to imagery with what we define as Christian and pagan symbolism in the third and fourth centuries.[24]

If we cannot be certain of the affiliations of the users of such objects (and indeed if we are made positively *uncertain* on the basis of the archaeological record when it does record findspots accurately), then the identification of artists is still less helpful. It is pretty certain that the same Roman workshops painted gold glasses with Jewish and Christian subjects — perhaps but not certainly for Jewish and Christian customers respectively;[25] that the same workshops produced terracotta lamps with Jewish, pagan, and Christian decorative themes;[26] that the same workshops made pagan, Christian, and Jewish sarcophagi,[27] for instance the famous early fourth-century seasons sarcophagus (now in a fragmentary state), whose central portrait medallion was at some point recut (on a second use or as a last-minute change on its first purchase from the workshop?) with a menorah (Pl. VIII);[28] and equally that the same workshops of painters were employed to decorate catacombs with imagery that implied different religious affiliations.[29] In all these cases, as with the gold glass from the Marcellinus and Peter Catacomb, we find Jewish examples in non-Jewish contexts and pagan and Christian examples in what are called the Jewish catacombs. As Leonard Rutgers has rightly concluded, all this means that the Jewish and Christian catacombs were of broadly similar dates and that earlier arguments for the isolation of the Jewish community in Rome from other communities (mounted among others by Momigliano) are unsustainable.[30] Where Rutgers does not go far enough is in his basic choice to preserve the discrete identities of pagans, Christians, and Jews in the late third- and early fourth-century burial sites of Rome. He argues that the use of common workshops 'can only serve to explain technical aspects', that the presence of non-Jewish material in Jewish catacombs is the result of later movement, the collapse of galleries, and the introduction of extraneous pieces at later undetermined periods, and concludes that 'Jewish catacombs and hypogaea were used exclusively by Jews'. My own view is that none of this is warranted by the archaeological evidence and that at best it remains an interpretative assumption. It is certainly worth considering the more radical proposition, that religious boundaries were less fixed and identities more fluid.

Likewise, the suggestion has been made that the painters of the Dura synagogue belonged to the same workshop in the town as those who decorated the Christian

[24] The issue arises especially in the classification of new finds, particularly in the (all too frequent) absence of archaeological context. For example, the eleven marble statues purchased by the Cleveland Museum in 1965 (if they are not fakes) have been classified as works of mid- to late third-century Christian art from the East (in the absence of eastern parallels it might be said): see W. Wixom, 'Early Christian sculptures at Cleveland', *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 54 (1967), 67–88, P. Du Bourguet, *Early Christian Art* (1972), 116–18; W. Wixom in K. Weitzmann (ed.), *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Centuries* (1979), 406–11. But the combination of four unique Jonah statuettes (a Jewish theme?), some (like the bearded and clothed prophet beneath the gourd vine) iconographically unprecedented, with the Good Shepherd (not necessarily a Christian theme: see T. Klauser, 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst', *JAC* 1 (1958), 20–51) and with three pairs of male and female portrait busts apparently representing the same two individuals, clearly gives rise to questions about function, context, and indeed religious significance if these sculptures really are authentic and a single group found together, as alleged (Wixom (1967), 67 and (1979), 411). Are the Cleveland marbles part of a single group? Were they made for burial? Or originally for some liturgical

purpose? Or for domestic decoration (for example, a nymphaeum) with a Jewish-Christian 'mythological' theme in place of a more familiar pagan subject? For a handy corpus of pre-Constantinian Christian art, see G. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (1985).
[25] See J. Engemann, 'Bemerkungen zu römischen Gläsern mit Goldfoliendekor', *JAC* 11/12 (1968/9), 7–25; Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 81–5.
[26] See Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 85–8.
[27] For the 'Jewish' sarcophagi see A. Konikoff, *Sarcophagi from the Jewish Catacombs of Ancient Rome* (1986) and Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 77–81. For the same workshops making pagan and Christian sarcophagi as well as other relief sculpture, see H. P. L'Orange and A. von Gerkan, *Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinsbogen* (1939), 219, 222–5.
[28] See Konikoff, op. cit. (n. 27), 38–41 (no. III.14) and P. Kranz, *Jahreszeiten Sarcophage* (1984), 204 (no. 69).
[29] Shared artists for Jewish and Christian catacombs: Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 261–3 and Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 73–7; shared artists for pagan and Christian cubicula: W. Tronzo, *The Via Latina Catacomb: Imitation and Discontinuity in Fourth Century Roman Painting* (1986), 32–49.
[30] See Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 92–9, with 43–9 on the isolationist case.

building and several of the contemporary pagan temples.[31] This use of non-religion-specific workshops is even more clearly the case with the decorated roof tiles of the synagogue (described by Carl Kraeling as 'in large measure a "commercial" job'),[32] which used all kinds of mass-produced motifs from flowers and fruit to the signs of the zodiac to animals and birds to female busts that appear derived from personifications of Demeter and Persephone (Pl. IX).[33] None of these can in any sense be defined as exclusively Jewish and all are generally and broadly familiar from the span of imagery available in the Graeco-Roman environment. Moreover, tiles from the same workshop, with the same themes and almost certainly used for the same purpose, were found in domestic contexts in Dura in the House of the Large Atrium and the House of the Roman Scribes (Pl. X).[34] In other words, the religion we require to imbue the artefacts we label 'Jewish' or 'Christian' or 'pagan' was pretty certainly not put there by their artisanal creators, does not inhere unquestionably in their particular iconography, and is not certainly applicable even through a clear context of use like the Dura synagogue. It would have been a matter of individual viewer investments and of ritual charging in specific liturgical contexts. The same object might have changed its Christian or Jewish or polytheistic identity depending on its different owners and users over time. Moreover, in the case of the Dura synagogue specifically, however Jewish one makes the frescoes, the ceiling was clearly an absolutely standard local job of the sort that adorned domestic buildings and probably also the temples of other cults.

II.   SOME MODELS OF ANALYSIS

The existence of a distinct art-historical category of 'Jewish art' has a complex historiographic genesis, but in relation to both Rome and the East is dependent on the need to make some sense of archaeological discoveries.[35] In the study of Rome, it was in the Christian archaeology, born with Antonio Bosio's great Counter-Reformation project of unearthing the material culture of the early Church but developed especially in the attempt during the nineteenth century to derive the phenomena of Christian catacomb burial from Jewish archetypes (in parallel with other forms of Christian typology),[36] that Jewish art developed an effectively instrumental position as the necessary non-pagan precursor to be surpassed by triumphant Christianity.[37] Its independent existence was necessary both because of the material remains and because of an ancient narrative of Christian roots in Judaism; but an alternative case whereby Jewish and Christian burial customs (and the arts that accompanied them) developed entirely without relation to each other as separate entitites — thus preserving the pristine purity of the Christian faith from any taint by Jewish or pagan custom — was

[31] See A. J. Wharton, *Refiguring the Post-Classical City* (1995), 60–1; R. M. Jensen, 'The Dura Europos synagogue, early Christian art and religious life in Dura Europos', in S. Fine (ed.), *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue* (1999), 174–89, esp. 185–7; J. Elsner, 'Cultural resistance and the visual image: the case of Dura Europos', *CP* 96 (2001), 271–306, esp. 301.
[32] C. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Final Report VIII.I: The Synagogue* (1956), 54.
[33] See ibid., 41–54 and E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols of the Greco-Roman Period* (1964), vol. 9, 48–59.
[34] See P. V. C. Baur, M. I. Rostovtzeff and A. R. Bellinger (eds), *The Excavations at Dura Europos: Preliminary Report of Fourth Season of Work* (1933), 31, 42–53; M. I. Rostovtzeff, A. R. Bellinger, C. Hopkins and C. B. Welles (eds), *The Excavations at Dura Europos: Preliminary Report of Sixth Season of Work* (1936), 283–91; Kraeling, op. cit. (n. 32), 52; Goodenough, op. cit. (n. 33), vol. 9, 48–51.
[35] A useful synopsis of the emergence of the field, but

with no articulation of the underlying racial politics, is L. I. Levine, 'The emergence of art, architecture and archaeology as recognized disciplines in Jewish studies', in M. Goodman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies* (2002), 824–51.
[36] For an excellent survey of the Roman material see Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 5–42, with 8–14 on Bosio. On Bosio's *Roma Soterranea* of 1632, see S. Ditchfield, 'Text before trowel: Antonio Bosio's *Roma Soterranea* revisited', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church Retrospective* (1997), 343–60.
[37] As in the arguments of G. Marchi (1844) and V. Schultze (1882), as discussed by Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 30–2 and 38–9, themselves building on some suggestions in Bosio's original text which were cut from its posthumous publication by the editor Giovanni Severano; see Ditchfield, op. cit. (n. 36), 355 and n. 25 for Bosio's unpublished discussions of Jewish influence (implicitly contra Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 11–14, which is reliant only on Bosio's published work).

also made.[38] The core issues at stake are to do with theological questions about the uniqueness of Christianity within apologetic clerical archaeology as a wing of Church history.[39] While Jewish art could not be denied, its place and significance were scripted according to prior (and competing) theological narratives.

The rise of a strong category of Jewish art — with a role other than to be surpassed by its Christian successor — was initially motivated by the need to respond to a series of major archaeological discoveries in the East in the first third of the twentieth century. It belongs in part to an attempt by pro-Semitic apologists, especially in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, to make sense of the new finds from Palestine — such as the synagogues with mosaic floors at 'Ain Dûk (or Na 'aran) near Jericho in 1921, Beth Alpha (Pl. XI) and Jerash in 1928,[40] and above all the painted synagogue from Dura-Europos discovered in 1932.[41] But it is equally the product of a proto-Nazi art history which blamed the demise of all things Graeco-Roman on the Oriental, and specifically Semitic, take-over of early medieval European and Christian forms by the arts of the East. This proposition — first advanced in Josef Strzygowski's *Orient oder Rom* (1901)[42] as a theoretical cause of decline — appeared proved by the archaeological finds of the 1920s and 1930s, which themselves coincided with the onward march of the movement that was to establish the 1000-year Reich in the year after the discovery of the Dura synagogue. In this context, we need to remember that art history before 1939, in both its ancient and later periods, was overwhelmingly a German discipline.[43]

The insularism of Jewish influence on early medieval Christian art — which has remained a fundamental model in the discipline — needs to be seen in the context of the agenda guiding that model's development in the 1930s from what in nineteenth-century Vatican archaeology had been an instrumental originary phase to be surpassed by Christians. Suddenly, in 1930s Germany, Jewish art — as a powerful and active force of wide influence — was a politically useful, perhaps even necessary, historical tool to explain cultural and spiritual degeneracy. It was the ancient equivalent of the contemporary *Entartete Kunst* of which the new regime would soon cleanse the Nordic consciousness. While no scholar of Jewish art after the War has explicitly upheld any of the outrageous political views which informed Nazi art history (and many of those concerned with the theme, like Kurt Weitzmann, were notable opponents of the Nazis), the fact remains that they failed to question, let alone contest, the Orientalist model of cultural development which they inherited from Nazi scholarship, even when they gave it different meanings.[44] It might be added that the Orientalist historiographic model of Jewish art has not been applied — not even in the 1930s — to the Jewish art of Rome. I suspect this is principally because the Roman material proved useless from a formal point of view for making the big historical-political case underlying the agenda of Semitic degeneracy.[45]

From its start in the 1930s, the strong theory of an independent Jewish art was historiographically linked to, indeed determined by, the malign influence such Jewish

[38] For example by G. B. de Rossi (1864) and N. Müller (1912), with Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 37–9.

[39] For a critique of the category of 'uniqueness' in religious comparisons (and especially in relation to Christian origins) see J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (1990), 36–46.

[40] For a brief contemporary synopsis of these finds, see E. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (1934), 27–37.

[41] I see no reason why L. M. White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture* (1997), vol. 2, 272, says it was discovered in 1921 and excavated from 1922–33. The excavators themselves date the find to November 1932: see Baur *et al.*, op. cit. (n. 34), 1 and C. Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (1979), 127–39.

[42] J. Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom* (1901). For some background see M. Olin, 'Alois Riegl: the Late Roman

Empire in the Late Hapsburg Empire', *Austrian Studies* 5 (1994), 107–20; S. Marchand, 'The rhetoric of artifacts and the decline of classical humanism: the case of Josef Strzygowski', *History and Theory: Theme Issue* 33 (1994), 106–30; J. Elsner, 'The birth of Late Antiquity: Riegl and Strzygowski in 1901', *Art History* 25 (2002), 358–79, esp. 359–61 and 371–4.

[43] On these issues, see the excellent account of M. Olin, ' "Early Christian synagogues" and "Jewish art historians": the discovery of the synagogue of Dura-Europos', *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 27 (2000), 7–28, reprinted as ch. 5 of M. Olin, *The Nation without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (2001), 127–54.

[44] See the fine critique of persistent Orientalism in this area in Wharton, op. cit. (n. 31), 1–14 and 15–23 (specifically on Dura). Also Olin, op. cit. (n. 43), 14–22.

[45] On the historiography of Jewish art in Rome, see Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 1–49.

art was supposed to exercise on Christian art. That influence (malign or otherwise) has been contested by numerous scholars who were anxious nonetheless to preserve a strong category of Jewish art (thus inheriting the particular Vatican approach that had attempted to insulate Christian from Jewish art as entirely independent entities).[46] But it remains a powerful model in the art-historical arena of Christian origins — parallel to, but oddly rather independent of, the model that locks the origins of Christian art firmly (and perhaps too exclusively) into the Graeco-Roman visual tradition, to the extent that it is often difficult to tell pagan images and iconography from that of pre-Constantinian Christians.[47] The model of Jewish influence on early Christian art, as summarized by Herbert Kessler, one of its most articulate critical adherents (who goes as far as calling it an 'axiom') runs like this:

> Just as Hebrew Scripture had preceded the New Testament and provided a basis for it, Jewish art was necessarily a source of Christian iconography and served as its foundation.[48]

Putting the 'axiom' even more generally in his Final Report on the Dura Baptistery, Carl Kraeling wrote in 1967:

> The case that can be made for the priority of Jewish representational art and the Christian dependence upon it seems most impressive.[49]

Or as E. R. Goodenough put it in the last volume of his great series on *Jewish Symbols*, in 1965:

> A Jewish art must lie behind the Christian.[50]

Effectively, following the discovery of the Dura synagogue with its highly sophisticated images — certainly an artistically more complex programme than that of the contemporary and nearby Christian building — it proved possible to write a progressive linear narrative of Jewish influence. The range of archaeological materials that might be summoned into the equation then provided the range of hypotheses for how this progression might have worked. Theodor Klauser proposed gems and seal rings, used by both Jews and Christians, as a source of iconographical transmission.[51] André Grabar prefered large-scale paintings in synagogues (all lost except of course for Dura) as a key influence on Christian church decoration.[52] Kurt Weitzmann insisted on the primacy of lost Jewish illustrated manuscripts — not only as the inspiration for the decoration of the Dura synagogue but also for much later Christian art.[53] It would be an injustice to each of these scholars to suggest that any of them supposed that *everything* in early Christian art was derived from Jewish sources. Rather, the effect of the establishment of Jewish art as a significant and independent entity in the 1930s meant that it had to be specifically accounted for in the discussion about the rise of Christian art.[54] Where this differed from nineteenth-century Vatican archaeology, that had derived Christian

[46] For example Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 7), 424–32, esp. 431–2; J. Gutmann, 'The synagogue of Dura-Europos', in H. C. Kee and L. H. Cohick (eds), *The Evolution of the Synagogue: Problems and Progress* (1999), 73–88, esp. 86–8 (summarizing much of his earlier work).
[47] See, for example, A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: a Study of its Origins* (1968), xlvi–vii, 5–6; Murray, op. cit. (n. 16), esp. 5–8; Elsner, op. cit. (n. 18), 1–2, 251–60 (on some of the problems of distinguishing 'pagan' from 'Christian' art).
[48] H. Kessler, 'The Sepphoris mosaic and Christian art', in Levine and Weiss, op. cit. (n. 22), 65–72, quote on p. 65.
[49] C. Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Final Report VIII.II: The Christian Building* (1967), 216; cf. Kraeling, op. cit. (n. 32), 398–402.
[50] E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (1965), vol. 12, 1.

[51] T. Klauser, 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst IV', *JAC* 4 (1961), 128–45, esp. 139–45; idem, 'Erwägungen zur Entstehung der altchristlichen Kunst', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 76 (1965), 1–11.
[52] A. Grabar, 'Recherches sur les sources juives de l'art paléochrétien', chs I–III in *L'art de la fin de l'antiquité et du moyen age* (1968), vol. 2, 741–94.
[53] K. Wetizmann, 'Zur Frage des Einflusses jüdischer Bilderquellen auf die Illustration des Alter Testaments', in *Mullus: Festschrift Theodor Klauser*, JAC Erg. 1 (1964), 401–15; K. Weitzmann and H. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (1990). In many ways Weitzmann was following the lead of C. Roth, 'Jewish antecedents of Christian art', *JWCI* 16 (1953), 24–44.
[54] For a differently organized summary of the influence question, see Jensen, op. cit. (n. 31), 176–8.

catacomb use from an earlier and more primitive Jewish practice, was that now there
was not just a gesture to a mostly lost set of origins, but a detailed working out of a major
lineage of influence between two separate and independent visual traditions in which
much of the Christian tradition could be explained by its Jewish precursor.

Needless to say, this one-way street of influence (all from Jewish art to Christian)
has finally been challenged. In his recent piece on the Sepphoris mosaic, a discovery of
1993, Herbert Kessler has expressed his 'serious doubt about the notion of a progressive
linear evolution from Jewish to Christian art' and suggested 'the far more interesting
possibility of cross-fertilization between the two traditions, not only during the
formative period, but over several centuries'.[55] While this picture of mutual and
competitive influence over several centuries is attractive, it is perhaps more plausible
that the Jews of fifth-century Sepphoris looked at its churches as models to emulate than
that the city's dominant Christians looked at the synagogue.[56] What Kessler labels
'cross-fertilization' may be better defined as minority groups (both Christians and Jews
before Constantine, Jews as opposed to Christians from the mid-fourth century)
drawing on the dominant cultural forms of the religious establishment. Anyway, what is
striking in Kessler's revision of the 'one-way street' model is the continued isolation of
Judaeo-Christian visual traditions from those of the Roman environment. Like the
strong one-way view of Jewish influence, Kessler's much more subtle suggestion
remains rooted in the 1930s invention of Jewish art as an exclusive and special category,
insulated (fundamentally on racist grounds in its 1930s incarnation) from its Graeco-
Roman context. At issue here is not so much the question of Christian origins but the
nature and status of Jewish art.

Both these accounts — both the 'one-way street' school and Kessler's nuancing of
it — are fundamentally based on iconographic analysis and (in the case of Grabar's and
Weitzmann's hypotheses of lost cycles or lost manuscripts) on iconographic speculation.
They trace patterns and parallels, such as that between the early fifth-century Sepphoris
Helios (in a chariot without a deity), the sixth-century Beth Alpha Helios, and the late
third-century Christ as Helios from the Tomb of the Julii at St Peter's in Rome,[57] or the
sacrifice of Isaac (the 'Aqedah) from the mid-third-century Dura synagogue (Pl. XII)
via Beth Alpha in the sixth century (Pl. XI) to the Via Latina Catacomb in fourth-
century Rome (Pl. XIII) and San Vitale in sixth-century Ravenna.[58] But it might be
added that stylistic analysis — firmly following Strzygowski's original Orientalist lead
in deriving non-naturalistic Christian art from the corrupting embrace of the East rather
than from developments within the Graeco-Roman tradition — has supported the
insulation of Durene art from that of the Graeco-Roman environment,[59] and its
assimilation to Parthia,[60] or at least to a provincial Syrian style influenced by Parthia but
including Palmyra for example.[61] Extraordinary in this regard are the conclusions of
Avi-Yonah and Hachlili on the Oriental nature of Jewish art in Palestine — their
emphasis on expressionism, stylization, patterning, and emotionalism are all a direct
lifting of the categories and terms of Strzygowskian Orientalism, with only
Strzygowski's pre-Nazi agenda removed.[62]

[55] Kessler, op. cit. (n. 48), 65; cf. Kessler in Weitz-
mann and Kessler, op. cit. (n. 53), 178–93.
[56] For an interesting reading of the Sepphoris mosaic
that emphasizes instability of meanings and their
flexibility, see Schwartz, op. cit. (n. 19), 245–63.
[57] See for instance Kessler, op. cit. (n. 48), 65–6, 72.
[58] See for example E. Kessler, 'The 'Aqedah in
early synagogue art', in Levine and Weiss, op. cit.
(n. 22), 73–81 and H. Kessler in Weitzmann and
Kessler, op. cit. (n. 53), 154–7, 177–9.
[59] R. Brilliant, 'Painting at Dura-Europos and
Roman art', in J. Gutmann (ed.), The Dura-Europos
Synagogue: A Re-Evaluation (1932–72) (1973),
23–30, esp. 29.
[60] M. I. Rostovtzeff, Dura-Europos and its Art (1938),
57–99; Kraeling, op. cit. (n. 32), 366–7; A. Perkins,
The Art of Dura-Europos (1973), 114–26.

[61] See Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 7), 190–3; Gutmann, op.
cit. (n. 46), 75–7.
[62] See M. Avi-Yonah, Oriental Art in Palestine
(1961); idem, 'Oriental elements in the art of Palestine
in the Roman and Byzantine periods', Art in Ancient
Palestine (1981), 1–117; Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 13),
366–8. Inevitably this model of analysis (still it seems
to me the dominant one) leads to a version of the
'decline' theory of late antique art. Take for instance
G. Sed-Rajna's recent and lavish Jewish Art (1997),
126, where we read of the Dura paintings 'of a gradual
detachment from the values of Greco-Roman art,
leading to a resurgence in the ancestral traditions of
the Orient'.

It might, however, be objected that we would expect iconographic analysis to tie Jewish and Christian art together — since they share a scriptural mythology to which their respective iconographies necessarily allude and which excludes the mythological narratives of other religions and of the Hellenistic environment. In this context, and given other potential connections between two religions outside the Graeco-Roman mainstream, it would not be wholly surprising to find them sharing iconographies and even artists to render these visually. So, using the method of iconography is only to confirm the results presupposed by the Jewish influence model. Stylistic analysis faces a more complex set of problems. The Jewish arts of Rome are clearly no different on most counts — including style, form, function — from either the pagan or the early Christian arts, whether we look at terracotta lamps, gold glasses, or sarcophagi.[63] They differ of course in iconography, as we might expect, but even then the difference is small — amounting to the inclusion of some symbols to which we (perhaps mistakenly) ascribe exclusively Jewish meaning (like the menorah,[64] or the Tabernacle[65]) and the possible exclusion of some themes which we (perhaps mistakenly) assume to be offensive to antique Jewish sensibilities.[66] But the material from Rome is neither as impressive nor has proved as significant historiographically as the Dura synagogue. Yet the dominance of the Dura material over the general field of Jewish art must constitute an extreme example of special pleading. Dura is after all only one synagogue in a town which can hardly be presented as of cardinal significance in its time, whose programme and decorations (in being extensive painted murals rather than mosaic floors) are unique among surviving synagogues.[67] It is a classic case of being led so far by the surviving objects that one risks being *misled* in the absence of all the range of materials now lost.

Before turning away from the problems of these interpretative models, I should refer to one final and powerful school of 'influence' which yokes Judaism and Christianity together but does so (ironically in the light of all this visual material we have just been discussing) as paradigms of aniconism.[68] Just as early twentieth-century studies of early Medieval art, in the wake of Strzygowski, saw the pure ethnic stream of Hellenism as polluted by the rise of the Semitic, so from a Christian theological angle Protestant scholars following Adolf von Harnack, like Herman Koch, viewed the pure early Christianity of the highly moralistic Semitic circle of Jesus as being progressively corrupted by Hellenic influences such as the visual arts.[69] A grand tradition of early and mid-twentieth-century scholars, including Ernst Kitzinger and Theodor Klauser, followed this lead — and of course the textual prohibitions of the Second Commandment, as well as of some rabbis and Church fathers — to assert that Judaism and Christianity were both essentially aniconic (indeed, anti-iconic) until the third century, and only gave way to images in relation to various forms of spiritual weakness from lay enthusiasm to heresy. This position, while broadly accommodating the visual evidence, has been rightly refuted in the last quarter of the twentieth century — not only by the overwhelming force of the archaeological record and the difficulties involved in putting it all down to corruption, but also by rereadings of the prohibitive texts, which show them to be more complex, subtle, and ambivalent then literal Protestantism could

[63] See e.g. Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 247–63; Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 4, 1995), 50–99.
[64] See e.g. Fine, op. cit. (n. 5), 118–21, 141, 152, 154; Levine in Levine and Weiss, op. cit. (n. 22).
[65] For an overview, see G. Sed-Rajna, 'Images of the Tabernacle/Temple in late antique and medieval art: the state of research', *Jewish Art* 23/24 (1997/8) [= B. Kühnel (ed.), *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art* (1998)], 42–53.
[66] See Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 230, 263.
[67] A new move in the context of Dura is the attempt to read the synagogue frescoes in the light of liturgy — assuming that Dura's Judaism participated in what has been called 'Common Judaism' within a Rabbinic context (as discussed by E. P. Sanders, *Judaism:*

Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE (1992)). See e.g. S. Laderman, 'A new look at the second register of the west wall in Dura Europos', *Cahiers archéologiques* 45 (1997), 5–18 and S. Fine, 'Liturgy and the art of the Dura Europos synagogue', in S. Fine and R. Langer (eds), *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue* (forthcoming) (I am grateful to Steven Fine for letting me see this excellent paper in advance of publication).
[68] For a historiography of Jewish aniconism, see K. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (2000).
[69] See H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen* (1917), with the discussion of Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 7–10.

allow.[70] We might say that the reversal of the iconophobe position has become so strong that it needs some reinforcement, since it remains a fact that *some* rabbis and *some* church fathers remained worried about the effects of images on grounds that do have some scriptural rooting, although they are parallel to some élite and philosophical pagan objections, such as Plotinus' response to his proposed portrait as reported by Porphyry (*Life of Plotinus* 1).

I hope it is clear by now that I do not believe we should retain either Jewish or Christian art as monolithic categories in the period before Constantine or even through much of the transitional fourth century when paganism was still relatively free from judicial and state-derived impediments. Before putting my own suggestions for the nature and rise of these arts in the third century (and perhaps somewhat earlier, if we believe the Dura synagogue to be the product of a developing visual tradition, as is I think likely), let me repeat my grounds for objection. When Rachael Hachlili writes of her major two-volume project on ancient Jewish art and archaeology that its whole purpose is to 'prove that during late antiquity there evolved a specific Jewish art', she wants a late Roman Judaism which is sufficiently assimilated to its environment to use 'local traditions and fashions when constructing . . . religious edifices' and burying the dead, but one which asserts its fundamental identity and difference from the rest of the world through the promulgation of Jewish symbols.[71] This formulation presupposes that we can accurately and certainly divine religious faith (in this case Judaism) from iconography. It implies that we can isolate Jews from their environment by such iconographic means and that there was one identifiable Judaism, more or less, to which such iconography points — as opposed to a morass of more or less competing Judaisms (as is suggested by Goodenough's not wholly tenable distinction between rabbinic and popular or hellenizing Judaisms in Late Antiquity).[72] As I hope I have shown, we do not have the evidence to make this case on the basis of the archaeology.[73] So it stands on its plausibility in relation to other comparable material of the period.

In the case of early Christian art, we have a variation of the same problem. The standard handbooks (despite concessions to the Roman visual context for the genesis of Christian art)[74] assume a real and existent entity — something comparable to 'Greek' or 'Etruscan' or 'Egyptian' art — to which a handbook can be devoted. Yet, again, all that distinguishes Christian art from the other art categories of Roman Antiquity is the evolution of a series of iconographies (both specific symbols, as in the case of Judaism, and also the visual expression of a particular mythology).[75] Again, it requires faith on the part of the scholar to derive unambiguous Christian belief or affiliation from iconography. And again the presumption of such affiliation elides the problems of multiple and conflicting Christianities. Finally, as in the proposition of Jewish art, that of Christian art makes the implicit demand that these arts be separated from the general arts of the Graeco-Roman environment as in some respect fundamentally different, and it demands further that their promulgators, patrons, users, and viewers be equally so separated. The question is whether this model is plausible. My response is that it is not.

It is worth repeating here that my attack is not at all on the view that Jews and Christians produced and used art in the years before the fourth century. They certainly did. My problem is rather with the methods and agendas underlying modern definitions of what that art was, which tend to give it an ontologically stronger and more exclusive emphasis than I think the evidence warrants or the materials deserve. The argument

[70] See on the Christian side e.g. M. C. Murray, 'Art and the early Church', *JTS* 28 (1977), 305–45; Murray, op. cit. (n. 16); Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 15–68. On the Jewish side, e.g. J. M. Baumgarten, 'Art in the synagogue: some Talmudic views', in Fine, op. cit. (n. 31), 71–86.

[71] Hachlili, op. cit. (n. 7), 459.

[72] cf. Goodenough, op. cit. (n. 50), 184–5. On the problems of 'Judaism', 'rabbinic Judaism', 'Judaisms', and 'Common Judaism', see L. V. Rutgers, 'Some reflections on the archaeological finds from the domestic quarter on the acropolis of Sepphoris', in Lapin, op. cit. (n. 21), 179–95, esp. 192–4.

[73] cf. the interesting methodological discussion of how to extrapolate identity from archaeology in Rutgers, op. cit. (n. 72).

[74] My exhibits might include Grabar, op. cit. (n. 47), with the concession at p. xli; G. Koch, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (1995), with no concession whatever; J. Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (1997), with no concession; Jensen, op. cit. (n. 16), concession at pp. 15–16.

[75] For Christian symbols, see Snyder, op. cit. (n. 24), 13–29; for narratives, ibid., 31–65.

might be rephrased in terms of the extent to which the free-play and fluidity of meaning possessed by symbols in the period came to be limited and hence more specifically defined. The answer must be that meanings could be limited and that particular symbols (not least the cross and the fish in Christianity and the menorah in Judaism) did come to acquire specific meanings of cult affiliation for particular religious groups at the local level. But whatever specific meanings such symbols may have come to hold for local Jewish and Christian communities, these cannot be certainly generalized to meanings for 'Judaism' or 'Christianity' as a whole before the end of the fourth century at the earliest, and they cannot be certainly held to have exclusive use or significance for any one community until the same time.

III.   AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Let me attempt to tell the story a different way. The Roman Empire in the second and early third centuries was a large, multi-cultural, and pluralist domain characterized by an extraordinary number of religions — some very local and some international — most of which were tolerated for most of the time.[76] This was the hey-day of religious pluralism.[77] Moreover the range and plurality of religions is not just a phenomenon on the empire-wide level; it is also specific (with different mixtures of cults in different contexts) to the various cities, provinces, and locales that made up the Roman imperium.[78] One means employed by the different groups — whether to attract adherents or to help establish a more coherent sense of community and identity among existing members — was the use of art.[79] This visual material was especially employed for the decoration (which may also mean sanctification through visually-rendered cult mythologies) of holy places and of sites of burial, but also extended to amulets, talismans, portable pictures, and statues for more private and domestic worship. Jewish and Christian art are both typical developments of this process — cultic gestures within a large range of religions whose span is from the semi-official (like the Imperial cult), via the long-established traditional civic religions (like that of Artemis of Ephesus, say, and a whole range of comparable cults), and the ancient mysteries (like Eleusis and its cognates), alongside ethnically-related cults (such as Judaism), to the numerous new religions (such as those associated with Mithras, Jesus, or Mani).[80] In other words, my model puts the rich spectrum and range of Graeco-Roman religion first and sees Jewish

[76] On the limits of toleration, see M. Beard, J. North and S. Price, *The Religions of Rome* (1998), vol. 1, 228–44.

[77] For the 'market place' metaphor for religious competition in the Empire, see J. North, 'The development of religious pluralism', in J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak (eds), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (1992), 174–93, esp. 178–9; also ibid., 'Introduction', 1–8, on the issue of models. The notion of pluralism has become a fundamental assumption about Roman religion, especially in the Empire: e.g. Beard, North and Price, op. cit. (n. 76), 245–363 and A. Bendlin, 'Looking beyond the civic compromise; religious pluralism in late Republican Rome', in E. Bispham and C. Smith (eds), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome* (2000), 115–35. Precisely for this reason we should perhaps ask what is at stake in the pluralist model and what assumptions it entails. Among other questions, we might ask whether pluralism must imply some kind of capitalist model of religious competition (following e.g. North (1992), in this note) and whether its essentially Durkheimian framing of religion as replicating wider social structures is certainly, exclusively or only partially correct (for a good summary of ancient Roman religion as 'reflecting and reinforcing social relationships' see M. Goodman, *Mission and*

Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire (1994), 15–17). Note that Goodman, esp. 1, 17–18, argues that the co-existence of numerous religions does not necessarily imply competition.

[78] e.g. for Rome, see Beard, North and Price, op. cit. (n. 76), 245–312; for Palestine, the papers in Lapin, op. cit (n. 21).

[79] On art as a means of promulgating competing religions in the period, see Grabar, op. cit. (n. 47), 27–30; T. F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (1993), 3–10; J. Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450*, (1998), 211–21.

[80] For a different expression of this spectrum, see Beard, North and Price, op. cit. (n. 76), 245, which emphasizes the span between collective civic cults on the large scale and small private or local religious associations, and between religions whose adherence is ethnically linked (like those of the Palmyrenes or the Jews) and religions whose worship was essentially elective (like Mithraism, Christianity, and the cult of Isis). For a sensitive account of the inter-relations among the adherents of this jumble of new and old religions, see J. North, *Roman Religion* (2000), 68–75, with bibliography.

and Christian art as equivalent to Mithraic or Isiac art rather than, for instance, to Greek or Assyrian art.[81] The difference is that religious arts represent a collective flowering of a development within Roman culture, whereas Assyrian and Greek art define broad cultural generalizations in their own right. The religious arts of the Roman world taken together are characterized by great stylistic diversity (as indeed is Roman art as a whole) and by the need to gesture visually to founding myths or core associations that may make highly particular iconographic statements. Hence Mithras looks Persian (as do the Magi in Christian art), Isis and her imagery tend to borrow Pharaonic forms, the so-called 'Orientalism' of Jewish or Palmyrene art in the East makes a specifically local stylistic gesture which is hardly separable from the local concerns of most of their respective mythologies.

The entailments of a model like this are significant. First, none of these religious arts is independent of the others. Indeed, the iconographies and visual strategies of any one cult are a complex mixture of structural rejections of the particular forms favoured by the others (take Mithraic sacrifice, as represented in the tauroctony, for instance, Pl. XIV)[82] and the borrowing of motifs (like the Dionysiac grapes that infuse so much Christian art as well as the vine above the Torah Shrine in the first phase of decoration at the Dura synagogue).[83] Nowhere is this referentialism so well represented as in the Dura synagogue's obsession with images showing the efficacy of the Jewish God and Jewish sacrifice alongside the failures of local gods (the Canaanite deities Dagon and Baal, who are surely intended to be not entirely separable from the various gods worshipped by the contemporary polytheists of Dura, Pl. XV).[84] But it appears equally in the gold glass with an image of an ass or the graffito of an ass crucified from the Palatine, which may be interpreted as an unusual variation of Christianity that fostered ass-worship (as Mathews would have it), but are more likely to reflect pagan visual polemic against Christianity.[85] This kind of visual cultic inter-reference is not always necessarily polemical. The late antique cults of Dionysus and Isis both appear to have borrowed iconographic mother and child motifs from emergent Christianity in the later fourth and fifth centuries, as in the Nea Paphos floor showing the epiphany of the child Dionysus cradled by Hermes or the various late images of Isis Lactans, giving the breast to the infant Horus.[86] Again the cross-cultic referentialism of the late Roman religious arts led to potent cases of syncretism, of which the Christian use of Jewish themes as types of Christian scripture is by far the most extensive,[87] but which is marked also by Christian uses of plenty of pagan material as well as much inter-cult syncretism within different polytheisms.[88]

Moreover, the picture of an interlocking net of religions — structured by segmentary opposition against one another but also with many features in common — needs to be further complicated by the denial of unitary or monolithic orthodoxy to any one of them. To put the case in relation to Mithraism, the question is whether the

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[81] For attempts to see the rise of Christian art in this light, see Mathews, op. cit (n. 79), and Elsner, op. cit. (n. 79). So far as I know, Jewish art has hardly been treated in this way. While, on an architectural front, one might cite L. M. White, *Building God's House in the Roman World* (1990) and White, op. cit. (n. 41) (the sequel), it remains the case that he places Christian evidence against a broad mix of comparanda that puts Judaism and Mithrasim together effectively as background (op. cit. (n. 41), 259ff.). This is an example of what Smith, op. cit. (n. 39), 108 rightly calls 'poor method' (though speaking of a literary rather than archaeological context).

[82] cf. R. Gordon, *Image and Value in the Greco-Roman World* (1996), study IV, 49, which is formulated as a discussion of 'the structured system of differences' between Mithraism and the other Graeco-Roman religions, but is evidentially based (fortuitously for my point here!) on the differences between their imagery.

[83] See Kraeling, op. cit. (n. 32), 62–5; Goodenough, op. cit. (n. 33), vol. 9, 79–82.

[84] See Elsner, op. cit. (n. 31), 283–301.

[85] See Mathews, op. cit. (n. 79), 48–50.

[86] See Elsner, op. cit. (n. 79), 220–1. On the house of Aion from Nea Paphos, see W. A. Daszewski, *Dionysos der Erlöser* (1985), 35–8 and G. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (1990), 49–53. On Isis see V. Tran Tam Tinh, *Isis Lactans* (1973), esp. 40–9 and L. Langener, *Isis Lactans-Maria Lactans* (1996).

[87] On Christian typology, see S. Schrenk, *Typos und Antitypos in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (1995) and Elsner, op. cit. (n. 18), 279–87.

[88] On syncretism see Elsner, op. cit. (n. 18), 251–60, 271–9; Elsner, op. cit. (n. 79), 218–20. Much of the evidence usually attested as Christianization (for instance in J. Huskinson, 'Some pagan mythological figures and their significance in early Christian art', *PBSR* 42 (1974), 62–97; Murray, op. cit. (n. 16); J. Engemann, 'Christianization of late antique art', in *The Seventeenth International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers* (1986), 83–115) can equally be seen as examples of syncretism.

undoubted stereotypy not only of the chief cult image (the tauroctony), but also of much other imagery, points to a single and recognizable empire-wide form of Mithraism or to the desire of various ad hoc sects and groups to aspire to a vision of unity while in fact practising and believing whatever they liked. The question cannot be resolved in the absence of sufficient written evidence, but it applies equally to empire-wide worship of other cult images like the Ephesian Artemis, to more general symbolic imagery that appears to assert unitary identity (like the cross in Christianity or the menorah in Judaism), and to the repetition of cult myths and typologies, as in Christian art. But with the Christians we can be certain from literary evidence that theirs was a highly fissile community — divided not only by beliefs whose textual exposition fostered polemic within the cult but also by different traditions of worship across the Empire. In the case of Rome, our very earliest Christian art includes the frescoes that adorned the cult site on the Via Appia associated with the Callistus sect and the statue of Hippolytus (including a Paschal calendar and calculations for the dates of Easter) probably from the rival centre of the Hippolytus Christians at the Castro Pretorio.[89] In other words, our earliest Christian images in Rome seem as much the result of rival adornments of sanctuaries within a divided Christian community as of relations to other cults, although both choices of images (frescoes and a statue) clearly show emulation of the chosen decorative schemes of other religions.

   This model, really a model of imperial Roman religion, but also inevitably a model of the arts produced by the different religions,[90] has the merit of applying Occam's razor to all special pleading about iconographic meanings and implications. The existence of countless ambiguous cases and examples is exactly what we would expect in a context where every cult reflected a range of views and practices, some of which will have been mutually exclusive and some syncretistic with other cults. Indeed a given religion was not so much an identity to be conferred on believers as an identity to be claimed and competitively redefined by different groups of adherents. While the religions were inevitably related to each other in complex ways, there is a good case for their also being united in competition with the Roman state's increasing tendency towards establishing its own religious universalism in the third century.[91] This tendency might itself be seen as a result of the success of the spectrum of cults in marshalling religious commitment and a spirit of collective subjectivity in their members. The art of the religions is no more than a visual weapon in this process — simultaneously a sign of religious identity and also potentially a claim for that identity, both a gesture of affirmation of a specific cult community and a sign that excluded other cults which were not one's own. The art both reflected the broader process and helped to create it.

   The special isolation of Judaism and Chrsitianity from their Graeco-Roman environment (the spectrum of cults, as I have called it) not only distorts the context of their manifestation, at least in artistic terms in the third and fourth centuries, but it also inevitably reifies them into much more monolithic, self-contained, and less porous entities than I suspect they were. In the terms brilliantly outlined by Jonathan Z. Smith in his history of the enterprise of comparing early Christianities and other religions in Late Antiquity, it constitutes a form of comparison in which one set of items (here Judaism and Christianity) belong axiomatically to a qualitatively different category by virtue of their uniqueness.[92]

[89] On inter-Christian competition in third-century Rome, see A. Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century* (1995), 398–540. On the Callistus catacomb, see Finney, op. cit. (n. 1), 146–230 with bibliography; on the Hippolytus statue, see Brent, 3–114 with bibliography. On inter-Christian competition and art, see J. Elsner, 'Inventing Christian Rome: the role of early Christian art', in C. Edwards and G. Woolf (eds), *Rome: The Cosmopolis* (2003), 71–99, esp. 73–4.
[90] For a laudable art-historical attempt to put pagan, Christian, and Jewish together in the mosaics of Israel, see M. Schapiro's one venture into the field of ancient Jewish art: 'Ancient mosaics in Israel: late

antique art – pagan, Jewish, Christian' (1960) in his *Late Antique, Early Christian and Medieval Art* (1980), 20–33, though one might demure from the Strzygowskian final sentence about 'decorative symbolization . . . within a Christianized and Hellenized Oriental world' (33).
[91] On universalism, see G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1993), 37–60; J. Rives, 'The decree of Decius and the religion of Empire', *JRS* 89 (1999), 135–54; A. Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order* (1999), 251–309.
[92] See Smith, op. cit. (n. 39), 37–46, 116–17.

Yet if you compare the strictly archaeological evidence from Judaism and Christianity with that for the other cults, it is quite clear that Mithraism, for instance, offers a far richer record not only of cult-specific symbols and mythological iconographies (such as Judaism hardly demonstrates except at Dura) but also of cult centres.[93] Yet no one, in the absence of texts, not even the most assiduous Cumontian enthusiast,[94] has attempted to write a history of 'the mithraeum', as has been repeatedly and competitively attempted for 'the synagogue',[95] and even for the pre-Constantinian house-church, despite the fact that none certainly survives in even a sketchy archaeological state, except for the Dura Baptistery.[96] Of course, we have texts, which initially helped create these topics, for Christianity and Judaism, in a way we do not have for the other cults. But does the existence of a separate textual history — one that is élite, polemical, and hardly uncontestable in its own terms — allow a methodological transformation in our treatment of archaeological evidence so that the relatively sparse (and as I have argued very unfirmly grounded) shreds of Jewish and Christian evidence can be pressed to support the kinds of argument which no one in their right mind would attempt for the religions of Attis, Cybele, Isis, Jupiter Dolichenus, or Mithras? The traditional scholarly prejudicing of texts has inevitably invested the Jewish and Christian evidence with special weight and significance (by contrast with other comparable archaeological data) — beyond the investment inevitable and inescapable in the ancestral search for modern religious origins in the deep past.[97] Moreover, excluding the context against which Jewish and Christian artistic manifestations were created simply prevents us from any kind of accurate or nuanced understanding of how these art forms came about.

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[93] For the Mithraic record, see F. Cumont, *Textes et monuments figurés relatifs aux mystères de Mithras* (2 vols, 1896–99); M. J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae* (2 vols, 1956–60).
[94] On Cumontian Mithraism, see R. Gordon, 'Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism', in J. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (1975), vol. 1, 215–48.
[95] On the synagogue, see e.g. L. I. Levine (ed.), *The*

Synagogue in Late Antiquity (1987); White, op. cit. (n. 81), 60–101; Fine, op. cit. (n. 5) and op. cit. (n. 31); Kee and Cohick, op. cit. (n. 46); L. I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: the First Thousand Years* (2000).
[96] For optimistic surveys of pre-Constantinian churches, see Snyder, op. cit. (n. 24), 67–82; White, op. cit. (n. 41), 121–258.
[97] On the origins problem, see Smith, op. cit. (n. 39), 1–35, for example.

PLATE VIII

FRAGMENT OF A SEASONS SARCOPHAGUS FROM ROME (EXACT PROVENANCE UNKNOWN THOUGH OFTEN MISREPORTED AS FROM THE VIGNA RANDANINI CATACOMB, WHICH HAS JEWISH ICONOGRAPHY), NOW IN THE MUSEO NAZIONALE ROMANO. PROBABLY LAST QUARTER OF THE THIRD CENTURY A.D. THE CLIPEUS HELD BY THE TWO CENTRAL WINGED VICTORIES (WHICH WOULD HAVE ORIGINALLY BEEN FLANKED BY THE FOUR SEASONS IN THE GUISE OF WINGED EROTES, OF WHOM ONLY AUTUMN CARRYING A BASKET OF FRUITS IS INTACT) WOULD NORMALLY HAVE HELD A PORTRAIT TONDO OF THE DECEASED, BUT HAS HERE BEEN CUT (OR RECUT?) TO DEPICT A MENORAH. BENEATH THE MENORAH ARE THREE PUTTI TREADING GRAPES IN A BASIN, A COMMON MOTIF WITH POSSIBLE BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY DIONYSIAC INTIMATIONS, AS WELL AS OTHER PUTTI RIDING ANIMALS BY THE FEET OF THE VICTORIES AND SEASONS.

Photo: The Jewish Museum and Art Resource, New York (Alinari 28328).

1. PAINTED TERRACOTTA CEILING TILE FROM THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE, MID–THIRD CENTURY A.D. NOW IN THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY. *Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.*

2. PAINTED TERRACOTTA CEILING TILE FROM THE HOUSE OF THE LARGE ATRIUM AT DURA EUROPOS (ALSO KNOWN AS THE HOUSE OF THE COURT), MID–THIRD CENTURY A.D. NOW IN THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY. *Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.*

PLATE X

1. PAINTED TERRACOTTA CEILING TILE FROM THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE, MID-THIRD CENTURY A.D. NOW IN THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY. *Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.*

2. PAINTED TERRACOTTA CEILING TILE FROM THE HOUSE OF THE LARGE ATRIUM AT DURA EUROPOS (ALSO KNOWN AS THE HOUSE OF THE COURT), MID–THIRD CENTURY A.D. NOW IN THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY. *Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.*

PLATE XI

PANEL DEPICTING THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC FROM THE MOSAIC PAVEMENT OF THE BETH ALPHA SYNAGOGUE, PALESTINE, DISCOVERED IN 1929. PROBABLY SIXTH CENTURY A.D. TO THE LEFT ARE TWO YOUTHS WITH A SADDLED DONKEY THAT HAS A BELL AROUND ITS NECK. IN THE CENTRE IS A RAM BOUND TO A TREE WITH THE HAND OF GOD ABOVE. THE HEBREW INSCRIPTIONS READ 'AND BEHOLD A RAM' ABOVE THE RAM, AND 'LAY NOT [THINE HAND UPON THE LAD]' ABOVE THE TREE. BOTH ABRAHAM AND THE CHILD ISAAC, TO THE RIGHT BESIDE A FLAMING ALTAR, ARE NAMED IN HEBREW. *Photo: After Sukenik (1932), pl. xix.*

PLATE XII
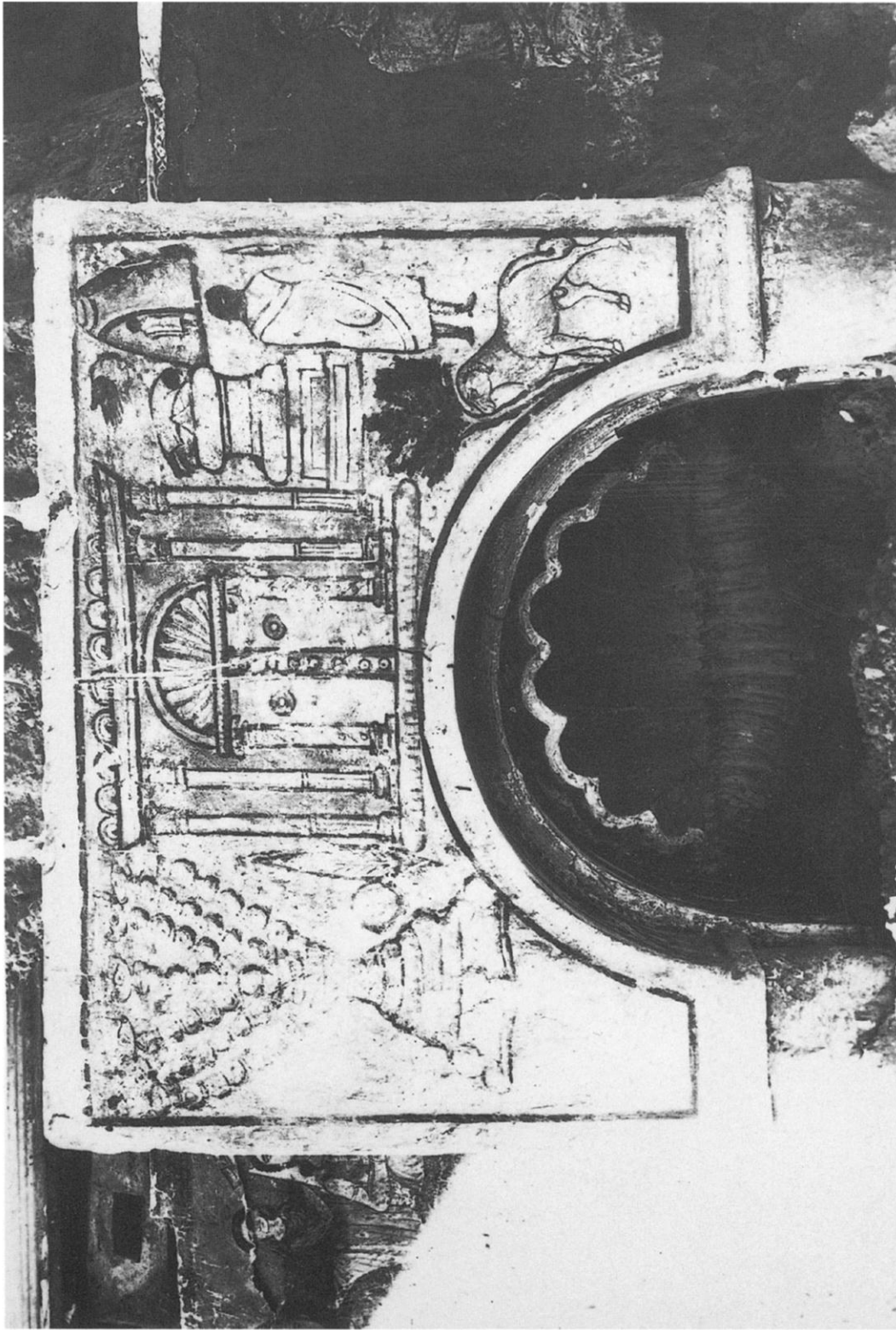
PAINTED PANEL ABOVE THE TORAH SHRINE FROM THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE, DISCOVERED IN 1932, NOW IN THE DAMASCUS MUSEUM. THESE IMAGES ARE FROM THE FIRST STAGE OF THE DECORATION OF THE BUILDING (FIRST OR SECOND QUARTER OF THE THIRD CENTURY A.D.) AND WERE PRESERVED AND INCORPORATED IN THE PAINTINGS OF THE SECOND STAGE (c. A.D. 240). THE IMAGES SHOW, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, A MENORAH, THE TEMPLE, AND THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC. IN THE SACRIFICE SCENE, ABRAHAM, SWORD IN HAND, STANDS WITH HIS BACK TO THE VIEWER, ABOVE THE RAM TIED TO THE TREE. TO THE LEFT IS THE ALTAR WITH ISAAC LYING ON TOP (ALSO WITH HIS BACK TO THE VIEWER, AND HIS HEAD TO THE RIGHT) AND THE HAND OF GOD ABOVE. TO THE UPPER RIGHT IS A DISPUTED IMAGE OF WHAT MAY BE A FIGURE (ALSO SEEN FROM BEHIND) IN A TENT. Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.
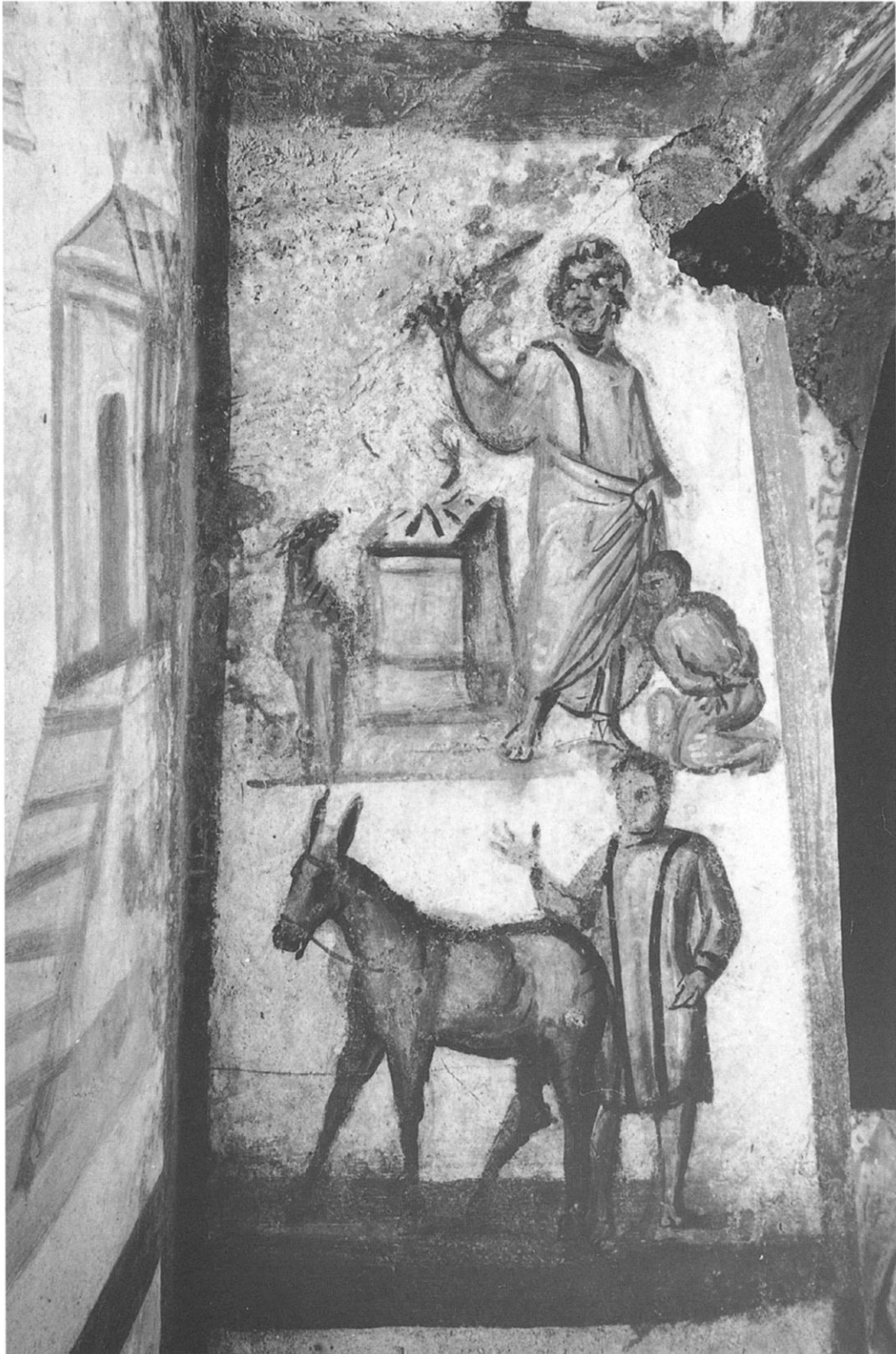
FRESCO OF THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC FROM CUBICULUM C OF THE VIA LATINA CATACOMB, ROME, DISCOVERED 1955. FIRST QUARTER OF THE FOURTH CENTURY A.D. ABRAHAM STANDS BY THE FLAMING ALTAR WITH ISAAC KNEELING BEFORE HIM. TO THE LEFT IS THE RAM, WHILE BELOW IS A SERVANT WITH A DONKEY. *Photo: Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra.*

PLATE XIV

WHITE MARBLE RELIEF OF THE TAUROCTONY FOUND IN 1931 IN THE MITHRAEUM UNDER THE PALAZZO DEI MUSEI DI ROMA, ROME. LATE THIRD CENTURY A.D. MITHRAS IN PERSIAN DRESS SLAYS THE BULL, WHOSE TAIL ENDS IN AN EAR OF CORN, STABBING HIM IN THE NECK (QUITE UNLIKE THE NORMS OF ROMAN BULL SACRIFICE) WHILE A DOG AND A SERPENT LICK THE BLOOD. A SCORPION GRABS THE BULL'S TESTICLES. TO THE LEFT AND RIGHT RESPECTIVELY STAND THE MITHRAIC TORCH–BEARERS CAUTES AND CAUTOPATES. TO THE FAR LEFT IN WHAT IS POSSIBLY AN EARLIER SCENE WITHIN THE SACRED NARRATIVE, A FIGURE (MITHRAS?) CARRIES THE BULL. AT THE TOP LEFT AND RIGHT ARE BUSTS OF SOL AND LUNA, WHILE A RAVEN ON THE ROCKS TO THE LEFT PECKS AT MITHRAS' CLOAK WITH ITS BEAK. THE INSCRIPTION READS: 'DEO SOLI INVICTO MITHRAE TI(TUS) CL(AUDIUS) HERMES OB VOTUM DEI TYPUM D(ONUM) D(EDIT)'. *Photo: DAI, Inst. Neg. 34.227.*

PLATE XV

FRESCO OF THE PROPHETS OF BAAL MAKING SACRIFICE ON MOUNT CARMEL, FROM THE LOWER TIER OF THE SOUTH WALL OF THE DURA EUROPOS SYNAGOGUE, NOW IN THE DAMASCUS MUSEUM. C. A.D. 240. THE PRIESTS OF BAAL, STANDING IN GROUPS OF FOUR TO EITHER SIDE OF THE ALTAR IN THE CENTRE, FAIL TO SUMMON FIRE FROM HEAVEN TO CONSUME THE GARLANDED BULLOCK ON THE ALTAR. IN THE NICHE BELOW THE ALTAR IS HIEL, WHO — ACCORDING TO JEWISH LEGEND — TRIED TO IGNITE THE WOOD MANUALLY WHEN BAAL FAILED TO INTERVENE SUPERNATURALLY, BUT WAS KILLED BY A SERPENT SENT BY GOD. *Photo: Yale University Art Gallery: Dura Europos Collection.*