

From Individual Inscriptions and  
Images to Conceptual Issues:  
Response to Jutta Dresken-Weiland and Mark Reasoner

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Archaeology continuously adds to our source material, producing new evidence from excavations and reassessment of old findings, their dating and interpretation. Jutta Dresken-Weiland, expertly looking at gems as long-underestimated Christian testimonies, adds a late second-century gold ring from the Domitilla catacomb and an early third-century martyr inscription (*-us martyrs*) from the Pretestato catacomb to our evidence of Roman Christians of the first two centuries, documenting two Christ believers of the second century. She convincingly also adds anonymous members of a family who in the late second century commissioned a stela in the Vatican necropolis. Among the stela's Christian symbols, "the acrostic IXΘΥΣ," according to Dresken-Weiland, "marks the first use of the fish as a symbol of Christ." However, an IXΘΥΣ graffito at the Via Appia under San Sebastiano possibly is as old. At the Via Appia, around the middle of the second century, three pagan mausoleums were constructed in a pit of tuff. They were used until the middle of the third century, when they were given up and their entrances blocked up with amphorae. The whole place was filled in, and above it a new site, the Memoria Apostolorum of San Sebastiano, was built. Descending the stairs in the middle mausoleum to the lower and less-decorated region of the vault, a Christian scratched the acrostic IXΘΥΣ into the still-fresh plaster of a pillar, adding the letter *tau* (T), a depiction of a cross, to IXΘΥΣ by inserting it between the *iota* and the *chi*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See further Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003; repr., London: T&T Clark, 2010), 28–29 and the figure on v.

The plaster would not have been applied shortly before the hypogeum was abandoned. There also did not seem to have been a continuity between the Christian of the acrostic and the Christian builders of the Memoria Apostolorum who filled in the pit of tuff and thus abandoned at least one Christian *loculus*, if not more. Perhaps around 200 CE or earlier, therefore, the acrostic was put on. With its T cross, it finds its closest parallel in the acrostic poem of the Sibylline Oracles (8.218–250). Written already under Marcus Aurelius,<sup>2</sup> thus earlier than Dresken-Weiland suggests, the acrostic poem displays the initials IXΘΥΣΣ, with the second sigma representing *σταυρός* and the poem's ending pointing at Jesus's saving suffering on the cross, "the wood among the faithful ... the scandal of the world" (Sib. Or. 8.245–246, 250; see also 1 Cor 1:17–25; Rom 9:33).

Apart from the second-century Christian persons discussed by Dresken-Weiland, a Roman marble inscription from the Via Appia, previously always thought pagan, in my opinion adds to the list of known *Jewish* persons in Rome in the first century BCE.<sup>3</sup> It shows a *C(aius) Ateilius Ser-rani l(ibertus) Euhodus margaritarius de Sacra Via*. Euhodus sold pearls at the Via Sacra and in his will allowed other freedpersons, most probably his own, to be buried in his tomb. In the metric inscription the remains of Euhodus are called *ossa hominis boni misericordis amantis pauperis*. For the first time in the west of the Roman Empire, this epigraph shows the combination of *misericordia* and *amor pauperis*,<sup>4</sup> that is, the idea of giving to economically weaker persons on the basis of empathy and affection. This is paralleled in Jewish sources such as T. Benj. 4, where the entire word field of "good man," "compassion," "merciful," "good," "love," and "mercy to the poor" reoccurs (4.1: τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἀνδρὸς τὸ τέλος, μιμήσασθε οὖν ἐν ἀγαθῇ διανοίᾳ τὴν εὐσπλαγχνίαν αὐτοῦ; 4.2: ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἄνθρωπος ... ἐλεᾷ γὰρ πάντας; 4.3: οὗτος ἀγαθοποιῶν ... ἀγαπᾷ; 4.4: τὸν πένητα ἐλεεῖ, τῷ ἀσθενεῖ συμπαθεῖ; 4.5: ἀγαπᾷ). Even the singular of the abstract "the poor" is paralleled (*pauper*/*πένης* do not denote persons living under the subsistence minimum but people not having some capital to sustain themselves and therefore having to work). The combination of "love for the poor" and

2. Sib. Or. 8.65–74 wrongly prophesies Nero's return during Marc Aurelius's reign.

3. CIL 6.9545; CIL 1.1212; ILS 7602; ILLRP 797.

4. The nominative needs to be *homo bonus misericors amans pauperis*, not *pauper*, because a pearl trader at the Via Sacra with his own freedpersons and a tomb at the Via Appia, built by him for others and himself and decorated with a metric inscription on a marble slab, hardly could be considered *pauper*.

“mercy/merciful acts” also surfaces in the Christian Pseudo-Clementine *Epistulae de virginitate* (1.2.3: ὁ γὰρ ὄντως φιλόπτωχος ἀκούει τοῦ λέγοντος· Ἐλεημοσύναι), as well as in other Christian or Byzantine writings, but *not* in pagan ones found in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.<sup>5</sup> If not Euhodus himself, at least the persons who commissioned the inscription, most likely his freedpersons mentioned in his will, appear to have been Jews or Sebomenoi at the fringes of a synagogue. Dealing in pearls was well documented for Jewish merchants.<sup>6</sup>

Looking at the unique Christian lamp from Rome in the Bode Museum, which was produced in the pagan workshop of Florentius around 200 CE, Jutta Dresken-Weiland rightly hypothesizes that there already seems to have been a small Christian market for such a lamp production, with Christian subterranean burials picking up at that time.

How big were the groups that buried their members in various Roman hypogea of the early third century? For future potential research, I suggest extrapolating Christian group sizes from the extant graves, such as in the Callisto Area I at the Via Appia, to provide one example. Between 200 and 230 CE, on average 38 burials per year took place in this area, altogether about 1,130.<sup>7</sup> For lack of reliable data from the Roman

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5. It is true that moralists such as Democritus (Frag. 96; 282), Aristotle (*Eth. nic.* 1162b; 1167b; *Rhet.* 1385a17) and some Stoics (Seneca, *Ben.* 2.31.1, 3) advocated doing good without expecting a reward and sometimes even mentioned mercy and compassion as motivations for generous giving (Democritus, Frag. 255; Demosthenes, *Or.* 53.7–8; Lysias, *Phil.* 19). But these were rare voices and focused mainly, if at all, on compassion for persons in need who were *equals* as friends (Demosthenes) or citizens (Democritus) capable of reciprocating, which Democritus (Frag. 255) even mentions explicitly. Moreover, Epictetus considered it a vital goal to be free from caring feelings and pity. These emotions, in accordance with the Stoic ἀπάθεια ideal, were expected to be superficial, not touching one’s inner self (Epictetus, *Ench.* 16 as well as 11–12; *Diss.* 2.1.21, 24; 4.1.82–84). See further Peter Lampe, “Social Welfare in the Greco-Roman World as a Background for Early Christian Practice,” in *Perspectives on the Socially Disadvantaged in Early Christianity*, ed. D. F. Tolmie, *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 23 (Bloemfontein: University of the Free State, 2016), 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00025646>.

6. See Sigrid Lampe-Densky, “Gottesreich und antike Arbeitswelten: Sozialgeschichtliche Auslegung neutestamentlicher Gleichnisse” (PhD diss., University of Hannover, 2011), 222 n. 50.

7. Vincenzo Fiocchi Nicolai and Jean Guyon, “Relire Styger: Les origines de l’Area I du cimetière de Calliste et la crypte des papes,” in *Origine delle catacombe romane: Atti della giornata tematica dei Seminari di Archeologia Cristiana*, Vincenzo Fiocchi

Empire, the annual mortality rate of a modern-day population in a traditional agrarian country is around 1–2 percent, the 2 percent reflecting the rate from fifty years ago.<sup>8</sup> This suggests a group of about 1,900 (to 3,800) people behind the annual 38 deaths. From other early third-century Roman catacomb areas analogous numbers would emerge. Added up, they would produce a rough minimum<sup>9</sup> estimate of the Christian population in Rome of that time. Bishop Cornelius in the middle of the third century already counts 1,500 recipients of ecclesiastical relief and 155 clerics in the city (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.43). It would be interesting to subtract these 1,500 from an estimated total of the Roman Christian population in the middle of the third century to realize how many Christians in the city lived above the subsistence minimum, that is, how many fed these 1,500 with their donations.

Dresken-Weiland rightly points at the coexistence of pagan and Christian burials in close proximity,<sup>10</sup> at the gusto for traditional pagan imagery of even clerics, and at the many marble sarcophagi on which pagan and Christian elements mingle.<sup>11</sup> We may want to add that ordinary Christians often gladly maintained pagan customs particularly in the funerary domain, continuing libation and celebrating meals for the deceased at their tombs.<sup>12</sup> A freedman of mediocre education such as Hermas comfortably mixed pagan motifs into his Christian writing,<sup>13</sup> and Christian philosophers such as Justin took over numerous elements particularly of Middle Platonism.<sup>14</sup> The manifold osmotic processes on several levels—burial space, art, customs, writings—show little fear of contact. Many

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Nicolai and Jean Guyon (Vatican City: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2006), 121–61.

8. See, e.g., the country of Burundi: in 1970, 2.08 percent; in 2019, 0.78 percent. See <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress4220f7>.

9. We only know a fraction of the actual Christian burials of that time period, many Christian graves, especially *sub divo*, remaining unknown to us.

10. See also Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 29–32, 112, 333, 353; see also 61, and, e.g., the pagan mausoleum under S. Sebastiano with its Christian acrostic, above. Even Jews did not have scruples about burying their dead beside pagans, as the Jewish funerary inscriptions of Ostia show (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 30 n. 35).

11. For one of the earliest examples, see Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 330–34.

12. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 112–13 with n. 32, as well as Augustine, *Conf.* 6.2.

13. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 227–31 and 218–19.

14. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 417–25.

ordinary Roman Christians lived peacefully side by side with their pagan neighbors, as Christ-believers in other regions of the empire did as well, also in rural areas.<sup>15</sup> Only church officials such as Cyprian got upset about osmotic processes between Christ-followers and pagans.<sup>16</sup> However, with regard to the cemeteries, a methodological problem remains unsolved. Dresken-Weiland claims that “the choice of pagan motifs does not indicate a religious belief; the choice of pagan ... decoration is a question of cultural affiliation or personal taste.” But where does that leave us when interpreting the close proximity of two cubicula decorated with pagan and Christian motifs, respectively? Does such a finding mean that the area of these cubicula is Christian, with the cubiculum decorated in pagan fashion having been commissioned by Christians following their personal taste?<sup>17</sup> Or do we have before us a close proximity of cubicula of both Christian and pagan persons connected by *familia* ties, for example? The only option we have is carefully to look at each find context individually while avoiding generalizations. Dresken-Weiland makes an excellent point regarding the Callisto Cubiculum of Orpheus used by clerics. Yet things seem different, for example, in the anonymous private hypogeum on the Via Latina, dating from the fourth century. It exhibits gorgeous frescoes of both Christian and pagan contents in close proximity. In Room 11, sol-

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15. For Phrygia, e.g., see Peter Lampe, “Methods of the Archaeological Surface Survey,” in *Pepouza and Tymion: The Discovery and Archaeological Exploration of a Lost Ancient City and an Imperial Estate*, by William Tabbernee and Peter Lampe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 144.

16. Cyprian, *Ep.* 67.6. Ordinary Christians had more than one reason to absorb or maintain pagan elements. It was not only naiveté or lack of fear of coming into contact with other religious cultures. Tertullian adds another aspect. According to him, Christian women defended their elegant attire and their ornaments by arguing that this was a sort of camouflage (*Cult. fem.* 2.11). If they did not wear it, everyone would find out that they were Christians. Interestingly enough, the Christians’ personal names usually were pagan until the middle of the third century. Specifically Christian or biblical names were usually avoided, which was also true of the Jews in both Rome and the diaspora (see Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 141–42). One did not want to invite denunciations or molestations by constantly publicizing one’s faith in daily life. This may even be true for Christian frescoes and reliefs of the third century that place biblical figures—Daniel among the lions, the resting Jonah, and others—within traditional idyllic scenes known from pagan art, with the pagan motifs dominating the biblical ones, almost camouflaging the latter (see further Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 142).

17. And how does “cultural affiliation” differ from “religious” affiliation in antiquity?

diers gamble for Jesus's tunic and Jonah plunges into the ocean, while in Room 12 Hercules steals apples from the Hesperides, kills a hydra, and offers Athena his hand. The finding seems to reflect a symbiosis of pagans and Christians within the same *familia*.

Finally, Dresken-Weiland rightly describes the impressive diversity of the early catacombs and the diverse burial rituals reflected in the inscriptions. I am tempted to correlate this subterranean finding with what I called the "fractionation of Roman Christianity," showing the large heterogeneity of Roman Christians,<sup>18</sup> particularly in second-century Rome, where we encounter not a monolithic Christianity but Christianities. The capital city at that time was an experimental laboratory in which a multiplicity of Christian identity formations was tried out,<sup>19</sup> based on ethnic, educational/socioeconomic, and theological differences.

It is the *fractionation* term that Mark Reasoner calls into question, not the diversity within Roman Christianity itself, although the latter also was contested by a German Catholic theologian, without my recent refutation needing to be reiterated.<sup>20</sup> Fractionation, translated from the German *Fraktionierung*, may lead to misunderstandings for English readers, needing further clarification. The term simply attempts to denote the many Christ-believing factions and separate groups in the city of Rome that the sources present. It does not imply an originally unified community that broke apart later. Just the contrary. Roman Christianity was diverse *ab initio*, and most of its variety was imported into the capital city, especially in the second century. Pace Reasoner, he and I in this respect do not have different social models in mind; the dissent simply regards the choice and definition of the fractionation term, from which Reasoner deduces associations that I never championed. For instance, like Reasoner and Jean Daniélou, I also emphasized that most leaders of the various Christ-groups had immigrated into Rome. But contrary to Reasoner, I do not see any evidence that in the first two centuries the centripetalism of the capital city had anything to do with "the Roman see" of a (monarchical) bishop

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18. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 359–412.

19. See Peter Lampe, "Vielfalt als intrinsisches Merkmal frühen Christentums (1./2. Jh.)," in *Christliches Europa? Religiöser Pluralismus als theologische Herausforderung*, ed. Klaus Viertbauer and Florian Wegscheider (Freiburg: Herder, 2017), 47–65, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress4220f8>.

20. Peter Lampe, "Zugereiste aus dem Osten: Die ersten christlichen Gemeinden Roms," *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel* 25 (2020): 8–15, esp. 14.

for which the Christians of the Mediterranean held “respect” and from which these “foreign” teachers tried to gain “validation.” Even later, this was not the case (see below).

Mark Reasoner wants to replace *fractionation* with epigenesis because Roman Christianity, *ab initio* diverse, “became [even]<sup>21</sup> more pluriform due to outside influences, a model of organic growth in response to outside stimuli.” While this is true, the outside stimuli also existed at the very beginning of Roman Christianity; in fact, the nascent Christian groups in Rome in the middle of the first century were immigrant groups themselves importing “outside stimuli.” Alternative terms for fractionation simply would be diversity, pluriformity, and heterogeneity. I concur with Reasoner that “unity” of the various groups, paralleled by relatively long-lasting tolerance among the groups,<sup>22</sup> was predominantly based on common praxeis, rituals such as baptism and eucharistic meals. Within this practice-oriented unity, the rituals could be interpreted differently and paired with various belief systems.

What pushes my highly regarded Catholic colleague Reasoner and me into an agreement to disagree are the origins of the monarchical bishop in Rome, “the Roman see.” Reasoner, backed by the tradition of the Church, wants to date these origins much earlier. However, there is still no evidence of the office of a monarchical Roman bishop before the *second* half of the second century, at which time this office gradually developed.<sup>23</sup> With regard to persons before the middle of the second century, who only later were considered bishops of Rome (Linus, Clement, Sixtus, etc.), there is no evidence contemporary to them that an office of a monarchical Roman bishop existed in their lifetime.

Reasoner therefore moves to speculative likelihood assumptions. He observes, for example, that at the end of the second century, “Victor holds excommunication over churches in Asia as a potent threat.” Reasoner

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21. My addition.

22. Also here my text (Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 381–96) is not always rendered accurately. For example, one of my points was that Cerdo’s group was not excommunicated by the other Christ-groups in town but actively separated *itself* from them, showing that these other groups tolerated the Cerdo group until it withdrew from existing fellowship itself (see Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.4.3). Reasoner’s twist sounds like this: that the Cerdo-Christians separated themselves from fellowship “does not exactly prove tolerance. There is no need to excommunicate those outside of a communion.” So true, but this isn’t the point.

23. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 397–408.

continues, “It is possible but unlikely that Victor would have threatened excommunication if he had been effectively the first Roman bishop.” Reasoner does not mention that this threatening writing by Victor met harsh rejection by bishops of other cities (αἱ τούτων φωναὶ πληκτικώτερον καθαπτομένων τοῦ Βίκτορος), including Irenaeus (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.24.10). This precludes that Victor, as Roman bishop, had authority over other bishops.

In fact, this authority of the Roman bishop was shaky for a long time, which Reasoner ignores. To give just one example, still in the fourth century the Roman bishop struggled rather unsuccessfully for supremacy in the Mediterranean East. The San Sebastiano inscription by Damasus (366–384 CE) pushed the local cult of Peter and Paul, whom he glorified like emperors to underpin a supremacy of the Roman bishop. He makes them citizens of the city of Rome (*cives*) because of their Roman martyrdom, attempting to usurp their authority and move it from the East to Rome. He does this in the context of attempts of the West to influence Eastern affairs, for example, in the Antioch church, where Rome backed Paulinus against Meletius in their power struggle—yet Meletius prevailed. In 382, the West convened a general council in Rome, presided over by Damasus. But Eastern bishops did not bother to show up, not being interested in Western meddling. They only sent three emissaries.<sup>24</sup>

To give another example of speculative argumentation, Reasoner claims, “Tertullian’s description of the bishop of Rome is possible if the office effectively began in his lifetime, but its sarcastic edge would be dulled if it did not have a basis preceding Victor.” How this can be inferred from *Nat.* 1.7 remains elusive. But I do not even deny a “basis preceding Victor” because I assume a gradual development in the second half of the second century from a presbyter in charge of the foreign affairs of the Roman Christians to the office of a single bishop, which was fully developed with Victor.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, Reasoner argues, “Details in the tradition of the line of bishops that emerge elsewhere, such as the martyrdom of Eleutherius, seem to point to a basic reliability to the tradition” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.10.1). True, but this reasoning can as well be turned upside down. The list appears

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24. See further Peter Lampe, “Traces of Peter Veneration in Roman Archaeology,” in *Peter in Early Christianity*, ed. Helen K. Bond and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 273–317, esp. 287, 304–5, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress4220f9>.

25. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 397–408.



to incorporate historical persons who filled leadership functions in the past and from whom details such as martyrdom were handed down. But these details do not contain any old information claiming that these persons had a (monarchical) Roman bishopric, that is, no information older than the second half of the second century.

Future research faces a host of challenges, including a thorough contextual reading of the Gospel of Mark, which I now locate in Rome after especially Martin Hengel accumulated convincing evidence.<sup>26</sup> Another challenge also should be mentioned briefly. The traditional urban-versus-rural concept needs critical scrutiny.<sup>27</sup> It hardly can be conceptualized any longer as strict dichotomy, because there was a significant transient zone connecting both spaces. As far as the Roman Christ-believers were concerned, they used the famous suburban zones of Rome not only for burials but also for worship meetings and social banquets, for example, a Valentinian group meeting for their rituals and banquets in a suburban villa at the Via Latina in the second century<sup>28</sup> or another group celebrating social refrigeria banquets in a cult for the apostles Peter and Paul in the Memoria Apostolorum at the Via Appia (San Sebastiano) from the late 250s to about 325 CE.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, city inhabitants did farming in the countryside. The Roman Christian Hermas, a freed slave and businessman in the first half of the second century, had gained some fortune by engaging in different business ventures until his businesses suffered losses. Thus, his upward social mobility from slave to a freed and successful businessman was reversed to some extent. After this crisis, he withdrew from the buzzing business activities in the city because he realized that one often needs to be dishonest to be successful in business life. Instead, although living and writing in Rome, he turned to more simple work and cultivated a field

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26. For the Gospel of Mark as a source illuminating Roman Christians, see Peter Lampe, "Roman Christians under Nero (54–68 C.E.)," in *The Last Years of Paul: Essays from the Tarragona Conference, June 2013*, ed. Armand Puig i Tàrrach, John M. G. Barclay, and Jörg Frey, WUNT 352 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 111–29, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress4220g1>.

27. With regard to Corinth, see David K. Pettegrew, "The Changing Rural Horizons of Corinth's First Urban Christians," in *The First Urban Churches 2: Roman Corinth*, ed. James R. Harrison and Larry L. Welborn, WGRWSup 8 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 153–84.

28. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 298–312.

29. See Lampe, "Traces of Peter Veneration," 286–90.

outside the city on the Via Campana, growing spelt, thus combining urban and rural life in the hope of gaining more moral integrity in this way.<sup>30</sup>

Not only ordinary people combined city and country life but also aristocrats in particular (e.g., Pliny, *Ep.* 1.3, 9, 12; 3.11; Martial, *Epigr.* 7.17). In the crisis of the third century, the upper classes generally shifted their orientation from the cities to the country,<sup>31</sup> although the senators also had a residence in Rome, among them Christian members of senatorial families.<sup>32</sup> The interplay between urban and rural spaces needs further scrutiny, looking at the Christians in particular. A lot still remains to be done.

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30. See further Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 218–24.

31. See, e.g., Geza Alföldy, *Römische Sozialgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), 157–58.

32. See Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 117–19.

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