

‘A light to lighten the Gentiles’: witnessing change in the Roman Empire

by Martin Henig¹

In a drawer lie a silver crucifix and various lapel badges or pendants: an enigmatic symbol, apparently related to the crucifix but with sloping arms to be interpreted as ‘Ban the Bomb’, a purple badge proclaiming ‘glad to be gay’, a green oak-leaf device signifying membership of the National Trust, a Medusa medallion reproducing a Roman one in the British Museum, and a badge proffering the advice ‘when in doubt panic!’. On my mantelpiece is another veritable *lararium* containing a selection of pebbles from various parts of the world, a number of reproductions of small bronzes from Roman Britain (including the hound from Lydney Park, Gloucestershire), another cross made of palm-leaves, which I acquired on Palm Sunday, various photographs of friends and a pendant depicting a married couple I have never met, hardly surprising as they were citizens of Roman York 1700 years ago and this is a reproduction jet pendant whose original, as Catherine would know, is in the Yorkshire Museum. What is a future archaeologist to make of it all? Quite clearly everything in the collection has played some part in my life, but some objects probably have a more profound significance than others. Not surprisingly, in a culture self-evidently derived from a Graeco-Roman predecessor, we articulate our thoughts and beliefs through a series of *signa*. John Onians (1999), indeed makes the use of such symbols combined with a memory system expressed through the art of rhetoric, one of the salient features of *Romanitas*, the other being imagination.

And the life was the light of men

Which of these objects means most to me and which would have been understood in Roman times? The question is worth asking because I would want to claim that in essentials the beliefs to which I adhere now are much the same as those of the early Christians, and most of what

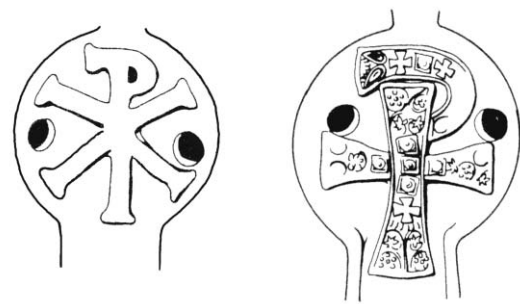


Fig. 1 — Discuses of two early Christian lamps depicting the chi-rho (after Bailey 1988, fig. 33, Q.1760, fig.34, Q.1763). Not shown to scale.

has changed is superficial. Some of the objects would mean nothing, for example the CND and 1970 gay motto badges. One is a reaction to the Cold War and the other to transient, puritanical ideas of sexual morality which would, for example, have meant little in Flavian Rome (see Clarke 1998). The crosses would have evoked the Egyptian life symbol, the ankh, and the monogram of Christ, the chi-rho, and, looking at the discuses of Roman lamps in Don Bailey’s great four volume catalogue of lamps (Bailey 1975-88), we can see how one symbol elides into another (Fig. 1). Catherine’s books, *The Jewellery of Roman Britain* (1996) and her catalogues of *The Snettisham jeweller’s hoard* (1997) and *The Thetford Treasure* (Johns & Potter 1983) are also splendid introductions to the world of Roman images and symbols.

I have not yet written a best-seller like Catherine’s *Sex or Symbol* (1982), which I remember as being available in all bookshops in the Charing Cross Road, including those which one’s parents used to warn one against! About ten years earlier, I did, indeed, purchase a little red exercise book in which I intended to record observations about

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Roman sexuality, but I only got as far as noting the Warren cup before losing interest. Catherine has moved on to consider the depiction of genital organs of cats – or rather dogs – in Roman provincial art (2003), but let us for the moment remain with the Warren cup.

The Warren cup

With regard to sex, it is of course perverse to deny that for much of the past two millennia, the body was mistrusted as a source, perhaps the source, of sin (Brown 1988) and the ramifications of this are still being felt in the aftermath of the ‘Jeffrey John’ affair, concerning the position of homosexuals in the Church. The conservative doctrine ultimately springs from a Gnostic belief that the material is essentially corrupt and that celibacy is best, marriage merely limiting the damage for the non-celibate: sex outside marriage, and even more same sex relationships, put those who indulge in such practices beyond redemption. If the establishment of an inclusive Church has been increasingly the theme closest to my heart, it seems appropriate to the subject of this paper to ask what light the arts, more especially the minor arts, might throw on this aspect of Christian morality in its very earliest years.

The Warren cup was long familiar to me from an electrotype in the Ashmolean Museum (Henig 2001a), but since the purchase of the actual vessel by the British Museum (Williams 1999) it has become much better known. It is a splendid example of Graeco-Roman toreutic art of the 1st century AD, fashioned as normal at that time *en repoussé*, and showing rather idealised and classicising male figures. Unlike other well-known drinking-vessels, the subject is not a mythological tableaux but two pairs of homosexual lovers, engaged in penetrative sex. An additional element in the scene, a boy peeping through the door, reminds us of the coy, amused prurience of Petronius’ *Satyricon*. The subject dwells on the more obvious and physical manifestations of love, but this and similar depictions on Arretine ‘make both males as attractive as possible and show them mutually attracted to each other, even though in most cases one is a man and the other a boy’ (Clarke 1998, 78; see also Henig 2001a, 133-4, 141-2). Perhaps we are not so far after all from the world of Plato’s great dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. Love may start with physical attraction but it grows, expanding and filling the very ground of our being. This is not, of course, any sort of spiritual treasure but nor should it be seen as deviant iniquity.

The cup, it appears, was found near Jerusalem, probably at Bittir about six miles west of the city (Williams 1999, 35). Maybe it belonged to a Jew of liberal and Hellenised tastes, but it is inherently more likely that it belonged to an officer in the Roman army. It is said to have been associated with coins of Claudius and the cup itself should be dated to the Julio-Claudian period; it most probably was buried during the insurgency of the First

Jewish war which broke out late in Nero’s reign. How might a Christian Platonist take the message of the Warren cup?

In what follows I am indebted to Canon Jeffrey John’s insights in his scholarly and moving study of Jesus’ Miracles as recounted in the Gospels (John 2001). The healing of the centurion’s servant at Capernaum is recounted in three of the Gospels (Matthew 8: 5-13; Luke 7: 1-10; John 4: 46-53). An unnamed centurion comes to see Our Lord in some desperation, because his ‘servant’ (*pais*) is desperately ill. He does so with diffidence, although, according to Luke, he had advocates amongst the local community elders who were grateful to him for having built their synagogue. Even so, as a Gentile, he would have known enough to face up to the likelihood that a rabbi might regard him as unclean, the more so if the relationship between master and servant had a sexual element, common in Graeco-Roman life but normally not indulged in by Jews (see John 2001, 158-9). Jews normally disapproved of such liaisons, though they were frequent in the Graeco-Roman world, and what chance was there that he would get a sympathetic hearing from a Jewish healer when asking for help for his male beloved.

As we know from the Gospels this particular rabbi was rather different and did not reject those outside the mainstream, but increasingly took them as seriously as he took his Jewish followers. Although as a pious Jew brought up in a strict orthodox Galilean society, there seems no question of him entering the centurion’s house; it was faith and love that counted with him rather than the letter of the law, the capacity for goodness within an individual soul rather than a notional ‘sin’.

Incidentally, although statistically there is little likelihood (though the date is about right), is it just conceivable that the Warren cup was used as a loving-cup by the centurion and his *pais*? The miracle of the centurion’s servant is depicted in early Christian art, including a piece of bronze sheeting found at Uley in Gloucestershire, now in the British Museum (Henig 1993, 107-10). The centurion, identified by his Roman tunic and *vitae*, is smaller than the dominating figure of the Saviour. The power of this world, the power of Rome, thus yields precedence to a higher truth. The preservation of a miracle story has, together with the cup, allowed us to glimpse an ancient lifestyle and to contextualise an object which might otherwise have been misunderstood.

The ‘gayness’ of the centurion is simply a normal part of his Graeco-Roman lifestyle, provided he followed society’s rules and conventions. The centurion is likely to have been the active partner. His ownership of a cup like the Warren cup would in no way have raised any question with his peers or superiors, nor would the ownership of a gem like that now in Leiden inscribed in Greek, ‘Live in luxury, embrace. You must die, for time is short.’ (Clarke 1998, 38-42). This somewhat morbid sentiment was appropriate to the Roman feast as those familiar with Trimalchio’s infamous party can testify. There are, inci-

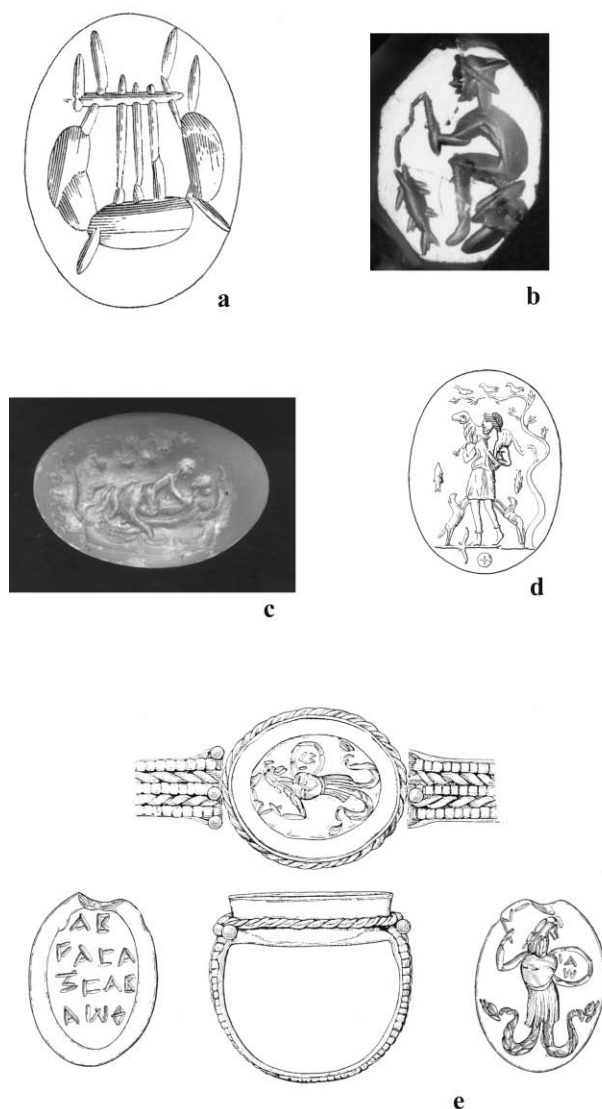


Fig. 2 — a...Cornelian intaglio from the Snettisham Roman jeweller's hoard showing a lyre (after Johns 1997, n° 219), 9.5 x 7.5 mm; b...Cornelian intaglio from Gadara, Jordan, showing a man fishing (Henig & Whiting 1987, n° 290), 10 x 8 mm; photo: R. Wilkins, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford' c...Chalcedony intaglio from Gadara, Jordan, cut with an erotic scene (Henig & Whiting 1987, n° 303), 15 x 19 mm, photo: R. Wilkins, Institute of Archaeology, Oxford; d...Cornelian intaglio from Old Capua showing the Good Shepherd (after Middleton 1892, 53), 15 x 19mm; e...Bloodstone intaglio showing Iao-Abraxas-Sabaoth set in a gold ring from the Thetford treasure (after Johns & Potter 1983, n° 13). 15 x 18 mm, ring diameter 20 mm. Objects not shown to relative scale.

dentally, heterosexual couples likewise shown on portable objects, such as a cameo in the Content collection (Henig 1990, 51 n°144).

Gems for a new age

This conveniently introduces the question of the emergence of Christian art, and a new range of storytelling different from those long established in classical antiquity. Engraved gems, by the Roman period set in rings, were

needed both as bearers of a man's legal identity (his seal), and as a badge of status. This is clear from one of the most touching of the Parables. When the Prodigal son is forgiven, the father puts the best robe on his son and a ring on his finger (Luke 15: 22), implying that the boy is again accepted as one of his heirs. The symbolism would have been well understood by Jesus and his audience. As for devices, we do know that some Jews employed figural types on their gems, perhaps for instance reinterpreting Hercules with the lion as David or Samson, and a remarkable cache of clay sealings from rings worn by Samaritans in the mid 4th century BC found in the Wadi Daliyeh (Leith 1997) demonstrates a like relaxed attitude, but no doubt the non-figural types of device seen on independent Jewish coinages (Reifenberg 1953) would have been the general rule amongst pious Jews. Amongst such devices attested in Jewish numismatics are cornucopiae, corn-ears, chalice, palm-tree and lyre, and that specifically Jewish emblem, the seven-branched menorah (Henig 1983); all of these are known on gems.

The process by which Judaism and nascent Christianity diverged took time, and eventually the rivalry between the two faiths became increasingly acrimonious and unbridgeable. Yet when we come to the important advice which Bishop Clement of Alexandria gives to Christians concerning the devices they should wear or avoid on their rings (*Logos Paidagogos* iii, 59.2-60.1), it is still cast in the same mould we might expect, knowing the nature of contemporary Graeco-Roman art and the Jewish origins of the Christian faith. There are figural scenes, animals and inanimate objects. Approved subjects are a dove, fish, ship, lyre (Fig. 2, a), anchor and a man fishing (Fig. 2, b). By contrast, rejected themes are 'idols', sword, bow, drinking cup, male lovers (as seen in toreutic on the Warren cup) and prostitutes/mistresses (Fig. 2, c). Some in both categories are obvious. Doves, fish and anchors are not only reasonably common gem types but have a close connection with Christianity; the first designates the Holy Spirit, the second the very name of Our Lord, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour', while the third evokes the Egyptian ankh 'life' symbol, which came to be melded with the Cross. On the other side the pagan gods, swords and bows are equally clearly out of sympathy with Christian ideals.

Themes needing interpretation by the wearer include the lyre. On the Jewish coin cited above the lyre presumably stands for King David, composer of the Psalms, and the music of the Temple, or both, and would naturally fall within the Christian dispensation. Additionally, as noted below, it would stand for Orpheus, who taught the true doctrine to men and might be seen as a metaphor for the Divine Wisdom (Clement, *Protrepticos*, ch.1). The ship is, no doubt, a ready symbol of the voyage through life, though it should be observed that the only early Christian scene on which it appears is the vessel from which the luckless reluctant prophet Jonah is thrown into the sea! Why the stricture against a drinking cup? Clement is trying to tell his congregation to be abste-

mious, but of course he could just as easily have recommended the theme as representing the Eucharist. On Jewish coins, and later almost universally in Christian art, it will represent the Wine of Life, the Eucharist. There is always a temptation for archaeologists to take a determinist view of iconography. We do not allow enough for the beholder's imagination. Clement rejected the wine cup because of its association with inebriation but despite, or perhaps because, of this connection it became a symbol of the Good Vine. Indeed, if Jesus's major pagan competitor was the god Dionysos/Bacchus, the victory of the former was as much achieved by merger as by total suppression. More positively, Clement tells us that the fisherman can be taken to be St Peter. Here we see a case of the same type of interpretation as that which turned a pastoral image, a shepherd with his sheep, into the Good Shepherd (Fig. 2, d; Henig 1975, n° 138).

The subjects listed by Clement can, with the exception of the anchor, be paralleled amongst the gems found in Britain. In the mid 2nd-century Snettisham Roman jeweller's hoard we note a lyre (Fig. 2, a) like the one Clement mentioned, as well as parrots, which could have been reinterpreted as doves, and dolphins, which might have been seen as fish (Johns 1997, nos 193-195, 204-215, 219, 237), though actual fish do appear on Roman intaglios, for instance on one from Chester (Henig 1978, n° App. 192). For a ship we should note a gem from Caistor St Edmund, and there are fishermen on gems from Charterhouse-on-Mendip (a cupid fishing) and Caerleon (Henig 1978, nos 125, 506, 538). Portrayals of drinking cups include one on an onyx found in the fort at Elginhaugh in Scotland (Henig 2001a, fig. 3) and another on a glass gem from Wroxeter (Henig 1978, n° App. 199). Corby Finney (1994, 111-5) rightly stresses that these were on the whole ordinary subjects which could be purchased ready made from *gemmarii*. Although one was supposed to avoid the vast number of divine images like Jupiter, Mars or Mercury (Johns 1997, nos 222, 185 and 223 respectively), educated Christians continued to read the classics, and how many others went on visiting local shrines 'just in case'? The position with regard to images is not cut and dried. One 'deity', the god Iao (derived from the Jewish god) appears on many amulets as a warrior with cock's head and snaky legs. One such gem was included in the Thetford Treasure (Johns & Potter 1983, 88-9, n° 13), inscribed with the name 'Iao' on his shield and 'Abraxas Sabaoth' on the reverse of the gem (Fig. 2, e). Maybe Clement would have been anxious about the wearing of such amulets, but these and others continued to be popular among all classes in Egypt into Byzantine times. Incidentally, we may note a cock-headed figure appearing on a mosaic at Brading, Isle of Wight, which has long been claimed by some to be Abraxas, while I have suggested Iao (in truth the same idea). It is true that Roger Ling (1991, 150-2) believes it was merely a misunderstood extract from a North African pavement showing a disguised huntsman, but the new evidence provided by the presence of a similar figure in the centre of a mosaic

floor of a church at Antigoneia, southern Albania, shows that such strange 'Gnostic' figures could still very much find a place in a Christian context as late as the 6th century (Bowden 2003, 131-2, figs 6.20-6.21; Mitchell forthcoming). Later Christian art was, indeed, to find personifications of continuing use both with regard to literary imagery with concepts like Sophia (Holy Wisdom; see Henig 2004, 75-6; though at a more profound level cf. Ford & Stanton 2003) and with Victory/Nike figures which eventually elide into the forms of angels.

If weapons (Henig 1978, n° 413) are generally distasteful, though not in the hands of soldiers of the faith, the palm of Victory had another significance from the beginning, with Our Lord's *adventus* on Palm Sunday. Clement's naked boys and girls engaged in erotic acts stand out as unusual themes to bring up until it is realised that the Bishop is making a point, though not necessarily the expected one and for a sophisticated Alexandrian audience, not centred on prudery (after all, nudity was *de rigueur* at the baths) but on philosophy, and Platonic philosophy at that. He makes the very reasonable request to Christians that there are better things to do than lust over an image on a signet ring, like the one in the Sa'd collection, inscribed ΚΑΛΟ ΙΚΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΙΑ, 'Bittersweet love' (Fig. 2, c; Henig & Whiting 1987, n° 303). Love, however, transcends the merely sensual in Plato's great dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, as well as in Christian writings. Christians should not live simply for the present moment but for eternity. The passage in Clement is, in short, a pattern of how to behave rationally and responsibly in choosing a device to represent the individual, not a puritanical diatribe against any manifestation of sexuality. Essentially such 'Manichaean' ideas came later (see Brown 1988). The outlook here is the same relaxed, inclusive attitude as that apparently displayed by Our Lord when confronted by a worried, but deeply caring, centurion. Greeks (Graeco-Romans) indulged in such activities which, like so much else, might not be the ideal basis for a Christian life but the true (Christian) philosophy had to start from the reality of life as it was lived at the time by the majority of the population.

For some reason not yet fully understood, the use of engraved gemstones in rings began to decrease in the 3rd century, and examination of later Roman jewellery finds such as the Thetford treasure (Johns & Potter 1983) suggests that many people were using gems engraved in previous centuries. For Christians who needed devices more individual than the ready-made intaglios recommended by Clement, this was not an option, and so it is only from this time that a Christian glyptic emerges. Indeed these early Christian gems run altogether counter to the decline in quality. Although comparatively rare, these little stones are fully the equal of the best Catacomb art, and just as vibrantly direct and moving as memoirs of faith. The inventiveness found in Clement is developed to tell specific stories from the Bible, both Old and New Testament, in abbreviated form. These are generally



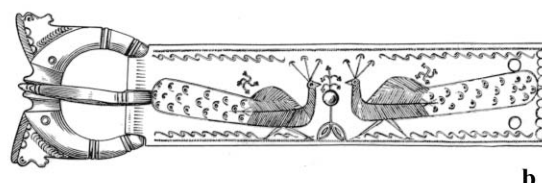
Fig. 3 — Cornelian intaglio from Risano (*Risinium*) showing sower, sheep and amphora, with a chi-rho above (after Middleton 1991, n° 284). 12 x 9 mm.

concerned with salvation, and make considerable use of symbolism, so characteristic of Roman art. The impact of the stones is sharpened with the introduction of new emblems such as the chi-rho, a device bringing to mind the name *Christos*, the sun, and the life-symbol of the Egyptian ankh as well as the Cross, now all merged into a standard of victory. A letter sent to one's brother or sister in Christ would, in its sealing, immediately advance a greeting from one family member to another, thus building up a feeling of sisterhood/brotherhood within the community.

A few examples show how abbreviation might convey a great deal of meaning. Thus a dove perching on the head of a man standing in a group of wavy lines, evidently representing water, is a powerful evocation of Our Lord's Baptism. Equally economical are gems showing other Old and New Testament scenes, Adam and Eve, Jonah being thrown from a ship and sleeping under a gourd (Dalton 1915, n° 527), the raising of Lazarus or, on a gem from Risano in Dalmatia, an amphora, a sheep and a man sowing grain standing respectively for the marriage at Cana, the lost sheep and the parable of the sower (Fig. 3; Middleton 1991, n° 284). The pastoral image of the shepherd, derived from the rustic types of the Augustan age, took on the very special meaning of Christ the Saviour (Fig. 2, d). There is one example from Britain, a glass intaglio from Barnsley Park (Henig 1978, n° 361). Most early Christian signet-rings from Britain are all metal and include two silver examples from Fifehead Neville villa, Dorset, figuring a chi-rho, one of them with a dove (*ibid.*, n° 795) and a ring from Suffolk, first published by Catherine, bearing on its octagonal bezel a chi-rho, a tree of life and a bird, perhaps a dove (Fig. 4, a; Johns 1984; 1996, 67, fig. 3.28). My own favourite, from a villa at Moor Park, Hertfordshire (on an excavation by my old school, and I suppose my first memory in the world of glyptics) is a bronze ring showing on its bezel two doves flanking a palm, evoking the triumph of the Holy Spirit (Henig 1983-86). These are all included in



a



b

Fig. 4 — a...Late Roman gold ring from Suffolk with octagonal bezel showing chi-rho, tree of life and dove (after Johns 1984, 394, fig. 9); b...Late Roman bronze buckle from Caves Inn (Tripontium), Warwickshire (after Hawkes 1973, pl. 22). Scale 1:1.

Frances Mawer's great survey of Christian small finds from Britain, together with other small items like buckle-plates and belt-tags, likewise showing trees of life, birds (normally peacocks), fish and the chi-rho (Fig. 4, b; Mawer 1995; Hawkes 1973). It is clear that such symbolism was very well understood. Nevertheless there were doubtless non-Christians or others whose acceptance of the Christian way was very far from fanatical and for whom all this imagery was acceptable. Peacocks, doves, fish, trees and sheep, and even the chi-rho, may have been powerful signs of Christian witness to some and of merely amuletic value to others. This is still true today: 'Is the crucifix you wear a fashion symbol, or an act of witness, a prayer, in itself?'. It is probably safe to say that in the majority of instances objects and symbols relating to Christianity, which date from the ascendancy of the faith, should be taken at their face value.

And the darkness comprehended it not

In the process of conversion, of moving from 'paganism' to 'Christianity' in Roman Britain, there must have been a strong temptation to re-interpret, in other words to Christianise, a pagan past. A most interesting find to consider in this respect is a cut nicolo-glass intaglio depicting Bellerophon slaying the Chimera, which is set in a beautiful openwork 4th-century gold ring (Fig. 5). It was found at Havering-atte-Bower, Essex (Henig 1978, n°362; Johns 1996, 79, fig. 4.2) and is one of the latest of the



Fig. 5 — Late Roman gold ring containing a cut nicolo-glass intaglio showing the hero Bellerophon, who is seated upon Pegasus, slaying the chimera, from 'Havering atte Bower', Essex. 15 x 11 mm. Photo: ©British Museum.



Fig. 6 — Cameo depicting the Triumph of the emperor Licinius in AD 313, showing the emperor in the persona of cosmocrator (Henig 2003). 33 x 31 mm. Reproduced by permission of Italo Vecchi.

regular series of gem-cut intaglios from Roman Britain and, as we will see, it is very probably Christian. It has to be interpreted alongside four contemporary mosaics from Dorset, Kent and Northamptonshire, depicting the same subject. Those at Hinton St Mary and Frampton in Dorset are both on mosaics also containing chi-rho monograms, while that on the Lullingstone villa has an inscription attached with possible Christian significance; certainly an upper room in the villa was frescoed with the chi-rho and representations of *orantes*, so here is a very possibly Christian, maybe Gnostic, allegory (Perring 2003).

In the past I rather discounted the Christianising explanation of the device (Henig 1986), though I am now far more ready to see Christianity embedding itself in the pagan world and bringing a new sort of light to human aspirations. The Roman owner of the Frampton complex was moving in a world where the cultural values of Graeco-Roman thought were strong, and his own loyalties could embrace pagan myth, the saving power of Bacchus and an understanding of the power that came from the Gospel. The same 'liberal' attitude appears at Hinton St Mary where Bellerophon again appears as the avatar of the Christ. Unfortunately the British Museum have not displayed this dynamic 'sermon in stone' for some time, and only an extract, the roundel containing the facing bust of Our Lord with the chi-rho behind it and the enigmatic pomegranates on either side, are available to the public. For the hounds chasing deer on this pavement Eriksen (1980) cites Psalm 22: 16, *For many dogs are come about me: and the council of the wicked layeth siege against me.*

A lunette below Christ shows a tree, the tree through which Adam and Eve fell, but it is also by implication the Tree of Salvation which is the Cross. The seeds of the

pomegranate are the seeds of life, and we need not totally reject Jocelyn Toynbee's primary observation (1964) that the deer and hounds evoke the teeming life of paradise. The placing of Jesus in relation to the animals around him is not unlike that of Orpheus and animals on other British mosaics, surely known to the Hinton St Mary mosaicist. This British Orpheus is, I believe, in fact none other than the Cotswold hunter-god.

In the same manner that the animals surrounding Christ in Hinton St Mary evoke the abundance of Life given by God, so the animals surrounding Orpheus at Barton Farm, Woodchester and Newton St Loe are also representative of the burgeoning life of the world which has its origin in the Divine dispensation, whether seen in polytheistic or monotheistic terms, or through pagan or Christian eyes (cf. Henig 2001b; 2004). We cannot be sure that some such mosaics are not subtle Christian allegories. Orpheus plays the same instrument associated with King David, and hence has reference to Our Lord, David's successor, while the lyre is the instrument favoured by Clement (see above). If any of the British Orpheus mosaics could be definitely associated with ownership by a Christian, it would show how both native and Graeco-Roman concepts of deity could be used to reflect the new, radical philosophical and religious dispensation (Black 1986). At Woodchester the Neptune head, nymphs and probably fishes are associated with a central octagonal feature, a *fons*. Might the room have sometimes served as a baptistery? It is worth noting that, just a century later, a baptistery of this shape was constructed within a villa at Bradford on Avon. If we take a Christian presence at Frampton seriously, then Neptune and the dolphins on the mosaic there have to be understood in Christian or

Christianising terms. Certainly they occur on spoon-like strainers from the Hoxne Treasure, which contains other items ornamented with chi-rhos and most plausibly belonged to a Christian family.

Arise, shine; for your light has come

What about the great light with which I began? It would have been most obviously physically manifested in the sun. The image of the sun-god was, indeed, conflated with that of Christ on a mosaic from the Tomb of the Julii under St Peter's (Weitzmann 1979, n° 467; Dorigo 1971, 121, pl. 79), where Christ has a rayed crown apparently in the form of an iota-chi evoking his name *Iesu Christos* but also the Cross. Interestingly, Helios is shown in the centre of mosaics on some synagogue floors, though these are later in date, e.g. at Hammath Tiberias (Fine 1996, 121, pls xlii, xliii), while a solar disc with rays, likewise borne upon a quadriga, is seen on a mosaic at Sepphoris (*ibid.*, 17, pl. viii). Such a conception is related to the idea of God ruling the Cosmos which can be symbolised by the sun, greatest of the heavenly bodies. The earthly equivalent is the Imperial *adventus* which is symbolised by a Tetrarchic cameo that recently came onto the London market (Fig. 6; Henig 2003). Of course the chi-rho itself was seen in the sky by Constantine before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and placed on his soldiers' shields, and thereafter this most characteristic of Christian emblems is in part symbolic of the life-giving rays of the sun.

One might have expected lamps to figure on Christian gems, but they do not seem to have been a predominant motif here. However, Christian lamps identified by the chi-rho became widespread, especially in North Africa, and those in the British Museum have been catalogued by Don (Fig. 1; Bailey 1988, 26-30, esp. pls 18-20)². The image was designed to encapsulate the message which was predominantly one of cosmic light and joy, rather than a reminder of the method of execution meted out on occasion by the Roman state. Now it was the ethos of the empire itself which was to be radically altered, as an earthly kingdom came to be challenged by a 'kingdom not of this world'. The silver-gilt chi-rhos on votive leaves from the Christian cache of silver at Water Newton (Painter 1999, 1-2) could well have been regarded by those who dedicated them as addressed to a god of radiance (Fig. 7), different from, and presumably more powerful than, Mars and other deities portrayed on gilt plaques from elsewhere. Amongst the early Christian rings from Britain figuring the chi-rho, is one from Brentwood, Essex, showing the monogram within a simple beaded border, especially redolent of the solar disc (Fig. 8; Johns 1985).

What characterises early Christian art in general, as I first experienced it in the great wall and vault mosaics of



Fig. 7 — Silver gilt votive leaf from Water Newton, Cambridgeshire. Height 157 mm. Photo: ©British Museum.

Rome and Ravenna as well as in liturgical jewels and objects of gold and silver, is a straining towards a vision of dazzling radiance. Others, such as Richard Reece, have felt this (Reece 1983) and presumably to those who first experienced such buildings and objects associated with them, here was a paradise on earth; but even so Christian art was certainly built on that of the past. In Britain, in a pagan culture far from Rome, it may, at least initially, have taken strange forms, amongst people who were happy to take up new concepts but unhappy about abandoning old ones. This has been eloquently shown by the mixture of pagan and Christian themes at Lullingstone, Kent, whose interrelationship has become a little clearer since Charles Thomas (1998) has found the name of Jesus embedded in the wording of an elegant literary hexameter upon the Europa and the Bull mosaic.

This paper suggests that a liberal attitude with regard to Gentile customs and art were common in a culture which had no desire to change radically and where old and new could be accommodated not only within the same household but in the same individuals. They all had 'cluttered

² See also Bussi re in this volume.



Fig. 8 — Late Roman gold ring from Brentwood, Essex, with circular bezel showing the chi-rho, retrograde (after Johns 1985, 462, fig. 7). Diameter of bezel 8 mm; of ring 17 mm.



Fig. 9 — Impression of cornelian intaglio from Chester showing Venus holding a mirror (after Henig 1978, n° 277). 13 x 9 mm.

cupboards', in which the Lares lived alongside the emblems of the new order – just like the writer of this tribute. After considering the appearance of Christian themes in the minor arts, and the relation of Christian signet-rings to those of the Graeco-Roman world in general, attention turns to images of light and the sun where pagans, Jews and Christians shared a similar concept of the cosmic order. I am coming to accept that Christianity was of far wider importance in Roman Britain, let alone in other provinces, than I once thought (even for the 4th century), but everywhere it was moulded by older, prevailing cultural values. If this is so, it means that from the point of view of religion Britain was not so very different from other parts of the Western Empire. Just as the teacher and poet Ausonius was happy to live in a world of cultural paganism but also espouse the Christian faith without feeling any real conflict, so did the upper classes in Roman Britain. For the most part we see a world where different faiths, pagan and Christian, lived in harmony. There are profound lessons here for us today.

Such widely inclusive attitudes and beliefs are not those which are likely to appeal to uncompromising ideologues with a mission to enforce uniformity, but in fact Gildas, our first writer of this uncompromising kind, did not live and write until at least the 6th century, in a very different age from that of the fourth century. Before his time we are left with the testimonies of objects and structures, always ambiguous and capable of more than one interpretation, but nevertheless signposts to the truth.

I began my musings with an assortment of small objects, items of 'material culture', personal possessions, mine and those of an unknown soldier (maybe a centurion) in Roman Palestine. As Plato taught me as a Cambridge undergraduate years ago, the dialectic of the mind engaged in trying to understand the purposes of God will always initiate a lively search, which may well fall short of its goal but will always allow the pilgrim a premonition

of the radiance of the stars of heaven. The material object which St Paul presents to us as a metaphor of our journey in a wonderfully Platonic passage is a mirror of the usual ancient type, well known to the archaeologist, in which the world can only be seen 'darkly' (1 Corinthians 13: 12). Whenever I read those amazing words, I think at once of the ancient mirror which, for Greeks and Romans, symbolised the beauty of the goddess Venus-Aphrodite (Fig. 9), and then of how Christianity took hold of this concept and transfigured it, so that we now have a vision before us of the true beauty which lies beyond even that perfect human image. How much the simple act of looking in the mirror resonates for us.

By ending in a Christian milieu but surrounded by images that are not necessarily Christian, I have suggested that even though the crucifixes in my room have a sort of priority, they cannot be understood in isolation. I look back to the confident way in which I once decided what the Frampton mosaics or the Orpheus theme 'meant'. I was not necessarily wrong, but all interpretations must be hedged with circumspection because human beings always grow in their understanding of the Living God. Recovering and reconstructing our own past lives, let alone those of others, is never easy, and always infinitely nuanced. Our mission to seek after knowledge, a duty enshrined in Judeo-Christian Wisdom literature, cannot be divorced from the act of witness in its primary religious sense of observing and bearing testimony to divine truth. But do not despise the witness of those whose humble profession it is to understand and record objects. This work, too, demands close and rigorous analysis of material culture, and empathy with those who used so many things (as well as words) to express their beliefs.. They are *signa* as much as the ruins of structures such as churches, which are generally the aim of 'Christian archaeology'.

The great debt which I, and all workers on the minor arts, owe to Don and Catherine is inestimable, reaching

back to the time I was struggling to write a thesis on engraved gemstones. Because of their courage in fighting against the present mediocrity of scholarship, and preferring the reality of what happened to the inanities of ‘theory’, so destructively fashionable today, they remain the foremost Roman scholars of material culture in Britain. Let us hope that the new generation will maintain the standards they have set in promoting archaeology as a humane discipline within and outside the museum world. Don and Catherine certainly share with me a passionate belief that old things reflect all the great concerns of history. With this in mind I decided to cast a little illumination on the *major* theme of the past two millennia, and offer it to them with admiration and affection. Whether or not they agree with my views, I have endeavoured to at least write something of special moment to me, with something of the ‘smoke of battle’ in it. As many as possible of the examples I have illustrated are from the British Museum and reflect Don’s and Catherine’s massive scholarship.

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