



Tomb of the Julii (Mausoleum M)

405px-christus_sol_invictus.jpeg



[1]

Mosaic of Christ-Sol

Original Location/Place: Vatican Necropolis, St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Vatican Necropolis, St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

Thematic keywords:

- [syncretism](#) [2]
- [early-Christian art](#) [3]
- [Sol Invictus](#) [4]
- [Apollo](#) [5]
- [Roman decline](#) [6]
- [imperial order](#) [7]
- [imperial unity](#) [8]
- [dominion](#) [9]
- [Roman power](#) [10]
- [Aaron](#) [11]
- [sun god](#) [12]

Description: Among the mausolea of the Vatican lies the famous so-called “tomb of the Julii.” The tomb contains images of a fisherman (north wall), a shepherd (west wall), and of two figures in a boat with a third individual being swallowed by a sea creature (east wall). However, of central concern here is the central mosaic, set on an octagonal panel in the dome of the basilica, which depicts a figure riding in the chariot of the sun, drawn by white horses (originally four, but just two survive owing to a hole made in 1574 to access the tomb), and holding a blue globe in his left hand. The figure is dressed in a tunic with a cloak floating out behind him. Radiating from the head of the figure are rays, which extend upwards and sideways. The right hand of the figure is missing, but possibly was “raised in an act of benediction” (John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 19). The mosaic features a gold background with twisting green vines surrounding the charioteer. It can be seen from where tesserae have fallen from the mosaic that the plaster underneath was coloured in order to aid the mosaicist in following the design.

Date: 266 CE

Measurements: 198 x 163 cm

Commentary:

Beneath St Peter's Basilica in Vatican City lies the Vatican Necropolis, which houses several tombs which were once part of an open air cemetery. During the 1940s Pope Pius XI had the catacombs excavated in order to find the location of Peter the Apostle's remains, so that he himself could be buried closely to him. These excavations uncovered sections of a necropolis from the imperial period, including the tomb of interest to us here (although this tomb was actually already accessed through a hole in 1574), known as Mausoleum M or more commonly the tomb of the Julii, originally built for the Julian family in the late-second or early-third century CE. An inscription over the



doorway, now lost, recorded that the tomb was built for Julius Tarpeianus and his family.

In the 1940s the images in the tomb were identified as Christian. Matthew 4:19 has Jesus teach Andrew and Peter to become “fishers of men,” and John 10:11 has Jesus identify as the Good Shepherd (see also the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:10-14 and Luke 15:1-8). The sea creature, of course, was presumed to be that which swallowed Jonah. The charioteer follows the iconography of the Roman sun God, Sol, which was particularly popular during the period that the tomb’s artwork is dated to (see, for example, the numismatic depictions of Sol which are roughly contemporaneous to the present mosaic, linked to below, which similarly show him holding a globe, and/or riding a chariot, with the sun’s rays extending from his head). This has led many scholars to argue that it is actually Christ depicted in the style of Sol, to portray Jesus as the Sun of Justice or the New Light (this is the view, for instance, of Martin Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol*). This has come to be the view of a strong majority, who posit that the figure can be imagined as the new “*Sol Invictus*, *Sol Salutis*, *Sol Iustitiae*,” with the popular pagan image of the sun god in his chariot, or an emperor at his apotheosis, adapted to represent the risen Christ, whose worldwide dominion is implied through his holding the globe (Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 19).

However, not all agree. Steven Hijmans sees the mosaic as purely representing Sol, and suggests that the so-called Christian identity of the other images should be questioned. He argues that the fisherman and the shepherd could easily be pagan, and looks to the Greek myth of the ketos, the sea monster which devoured maidens. In some version of their myths, Hijmans points out, Hercules and Perseus are swallowed by the monster they are attempting to rescue Hesione and Andromeda from respectively, before killing it from within (“Sol,” p. 571). Hijmans understands the tomb to be entirely pagan, with all of the imagery together representing the cosmos, with the sea, land, and the heavens depicted; this explains why the mosaic of the charioteer, which for Hijmans is Sol, is on the ceiling. Such themes, Hijmans argues, are common in Roman funerary art (“Sol,” p. 575-576).

Nonetheless, the overwhelming opinion sees the mausoleum as Christian. Some even see the vines covering the walls of the tomb as representative of Christ as the True Vine (John 15:1-17), rather than as the vines of Dionysus (e.g., Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, p. 19). For Allen Brent, the charioteer is unmistakably Christ, who has been intentionally modelled on the sun god. Brent describes this type of Roman iconography as a desire to depict “a synthesis of imperial order and divine order,” rooted in the emperor Aurelian’s championing of the cult of Sol Invictus, who could also be identified with Apollo. For Brent, by synthesising Christ with the sun god, the later Christian owners of the tomb wished to tap into a Roman expression of cosmic order and portray their own saviour as firmly in control of this (*Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, p. 229-230). Indeed, Clement of Alexandria (writing in the late-second century CE) in his *Exhortation to the Greeks* XI describes Christ in language which seems to draw upon the motifs associated with the sun god, referring to Christ as the “sun of righteousness” who “rides over the universe” and banishes darkness and death. According to Brent’s view, the Christians responsible for the artwork in the tomb of the Julii can be compared to those described by Cyprian of Carthage in his *On the Lapsed*, expressing a desire to participate in imperial unity and triumph over the metaphysical chaos believed to be responsible for many of the problems the empire was facing in the third century (see the discussion of Decius’s response to this by imposing an edict of universal sacrifice to appease the gods; [Papyrus Rylands 12](#) [13] and [112a](#) [14]). *On the Lapsed* describes those Christians who chose to participate in the universal sacrifice despite their Christian beliefs. For Brent, then, by representing Christ in the iconography of Sol, the imagery of this mosaic is not attempting to challenge Roman religion or imperial dominion (via the globe held in the figure’s left hand), but rather operate willingly alongside it.

It remains a matter of debate to what degree the images in this mausoleum represent Christian appropriation of pagan imagery, if indeed at all. However, if we do have here a syncretisation of Sol and Christ, then this tomb evidences the way in which Christians understood their saviour—as cosmic ruler, whether this be as a direct opposition to Roman imperial power, or as a powerful force within and behind it.

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["Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome"](#) [22]

Hijmans, Steven "Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome"

Other sources connected with this document: Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 112a](#) [23]

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 112a](#) [23]

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 12](#) [24]

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Links

- [1] https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/sites/default/files/styles/large/public/405px-christus_sol_invictus_0.jpeg?itok=hPa5etKw
- [2] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/syncretism>
- [3] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/early-christian-art>
- [4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/sol-invictus>
- [5] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/apollo>
- [6] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-decline>
- [7] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-order>
- [8] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-unity>
- [9] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/dominion>
- [10] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/roman-power>
- [11] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/aaron>
- [12] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/sun-god>
- [13] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/papyrus-rylands-12>
- [14] <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/papyrus-rylands-112a>
- [15] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/understanding-early-christian-art>
- [16] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/clash-gods-reinterpretation-early-christian-art>
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- [18] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/necropolis-under-st-peter%E2%80%99s-basilica-vatican>
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- [22] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/%E2%80%99sol-sun-art-and-religions-rome%E2%80%99D>
- [23] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/papyrus-rylands-112a>
- [24] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/papyrus-rylands-12>
- [25] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/erc-team/kimberley-fowler>