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Sol

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Chapter 8.
Image and Word: Christ or Sol in Mausoleum M of the Vatican Necropolis?

In chapter seven we concluded that the dominance of Apollo/Sol and Diana/Luna as the defining deities of the *Carmen Saeculare* can be explained through their joint symbolic meanings in Roman art. They establish the underlying theme of that ode as *aeternitas*, stability counterbalancing the transition from one century to the next that was being celebrated. But this raises a methodological question. Can we legitimately transfer symbolic meanings from the visual to the verbal in this manner? In chapter two I argued that one cannot assume that a verbal metaphor can be directly translated into the visual, but can we then accept my argument that visual symbolism provides the key to Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*? And if we do accept that argument, does that not cast doubt on the principle of non-equivalency of visual and verbal meanings that I posited in chapter 2?

The aim of this chapter is to elaborate on the issue of visual and verbal meanings related to Sol and the image types [sol], and in particular the issue of translating from the one to the other. In chapter two I emphasized the impossibility to do so *exactly* - no image can *equate* words, and a thousand words cannot be enough to capture every essence of an image. But the concepts evoked, whether by words or images, are shared social concepts, the signifieds for which the verbal or visual signifiers are merely the communicative vehicle of choice. Some signifieds are more suited to visual signifiers, others more to verbal ones, but many can be communicated by either type - or indeed by both simultaneously. Roman oratory - indeed any powerful oratory - has a significant visual component in the facial expressions and bodily stance and gestures of the orator. In fact, gestures were highly meaningful in all contexts in Rome.[1] The example of oratory also draws our attention to the aural aspect of communication which is not wholly verbal either. Not only are there the important roles of volume and intonation, but beyond that the major roles of rhythm, music and the like. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, the same can be said of the tactile and spatial aspects of the visual, and we need but think of Catullus' devastating lines about the armpits of his rival Rufus to remember the power of olfactory "messages".[2] We all know that communication utilizes all the senses and normally the various types of communication complement each other. We may not be able to translate an image into words or vice versa without losing something in translation, but it is difficult to imagine an image that evokes no words, or words that do not, in some manner or another, give rise to images and other associated forms of communication.[3]

In other words we must counterbalance the principle of non-equivalency with a principle of non-exclusivity. Communication is never wholly verbal or exclusively visual (nor solely tactile, aural or olfactory). Two of the most important tasks in successful communication are

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[1] Corbeill 2003.

[2] Catul. 69, 5-6: *laedit te quaedam mala fabula, qua tibi fertur / ualle sub alarum trux habitare caper* (A certain ill tale injures you, that you bear housed in the valley of your armpits a grim goat - transl. L.C. Smithers).

[3] As an example of an archaeology of sound cf. the importance of the aural qualities of certain artefacts in French colonial Louisiana as explored by DiPaolo Loren 2008.

striking the right balance between the different forms of communication and correctly perceiving that balance. This is rather obvious, but in Classics we have tended to be easily seduced by the verbality of our academic discourse and hence have long overlooked the non-verbal components of a given communication. How many publications of the *Res Gestae* of Augustus have treated it as anything other than text? How well do we understand the purpose and the impact of the *Res Gestae* if we interact with it as a book to be read, while for Romans the text was primarily an integral - but for practical purposes illegible - component of a larger monumental complex, or actually a whole series of monumental complexes in many parts of the empire?[4] As text the *Res Gestae* is obviously of enormous interest, but it is only part of the story.

All the same, the complementary interaction between the various systems of communication should not distract us from their fundamental differences. In the following, we will explore a famous image of Sol, the so-called "Christ-Helios" of the Vatican Necropolis, that in my opinion has been misinterpreted as a result of an untenable "translation" of verbal metaphor to the visual. I will propose a different, more "visual" reading of this mosaic. We will then return to the broader issue of visual meanings in Roman art and in the conclusion of this chapter we will discuss the problem of gauging the interaction between verbal and visual meanings in the light of our two case studies, the *Carmen Saeculare* of Horace and the mosaic of "Christ-Helios" in the Vatican.

Sol, Christ, and the Mosaics of Mausoleum M in the Vatican.[5]
In the 16th century, during the building of the new basilica of St. Peter in Rome, an extensive necropolis of Roman imperial date was discovered below the old Basilica. Sealed under the new Basilica, this necropolis was largely forgotten until the 1940s, when extensive excavations were carried out under the high altar of St. Peter's and adjacent areas. A substantial number of second century mausolea were uncovered, the smallest of which – mausoleum M - is the focus of our attention here.

Mausoleum M was first discovered in 1574 when it was entered through a hole in the ceiling. Reports from that period record an inscription over the doorway, since lost, identifying the mausoleum as that of the Julius Tarpeianus and his family.[6] After its rediscovery in the 1940s, mausoleum M soon became famous for its rich mosaic decoration, and in particular for the solar charioteer in the vault, widely interpreted to represent Christ.[7] The mausoleum was built in the

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[4] Cf., e.g., the most recent English edition of the *Res Gestae* by P. Brunt and J. More, first published in 1969 and still in print. A new edition by Alison Cooley (Cambridge 2009) was not yet available when this book went to press. It must compete with the excellent new Budé edition by John Scheid (2007), but it too has little to say about the monumental aspects of the inscriptions (cf. J. Osgood's review, *BMCR* 2007:10:40). Interest in the monumentality of the *Res Gestae* has recently become much more marked. Cf. Elsner 1995; Botteri 2003, 2006.

[5] For an earlier discussion of the views I present here, cf. Hijmans 2000.

[6] CIL VI, 20293.

[7] On the excavations, see Apollonj-Ghetti *et al.* 1951; Mielsch *et al.* 1986-1995. On mausoleum M and the image of Sol, see Perler 1953, Toynbee & Ward Perkins 1955, Lawrence 1961, Murray 1981, Wallraff 2001, and Snyder 2003, 120-123 (with further references).

late second century A.D. in a restricted space left open between mausolea L and N. It is tiny, measuring a mere 1.98 m by 1.63 m and only 2 m in height, but as if to make up for its small size it is finely decorated with a magnificent mosaic covering the entire vault as well as the upper half of the walls. The lower half of the walls was decorated with a fresco rather sketchily imitating marble. The transition from fresco to mosaic is articulated by a simple, molded ledge

This mosaic and fresco decoration do not date to the building phase of the mausoleum, but to a later restructuring. The date of that refurbishment is not clear. Two cremation burials predate it, while four inhumation burials postdate the redecoration. Like all mausolea in the necropolis, mausoleum M ceased to be accessible following the construction of the Constantinian basilica of St. Peter, begun around 320. It is therefore clear that the refurbishment must be dated somewhere between the late second and early fourth century A.D., but a more precise date has proven to be elusive, with suggestions spanning the whole range of possibilities. In my view, style, parallels, and the fact that four of the six burials in the mausoleum postdate the refurbishment combine to suggest an earlier rather than a later date, presumably in the first half of the third century A.D.[8]

The polychrome mosaic immediately commands attention, even in its current poor state of preservation. A large section of the actual mosaic has disappeared, but can be reconstructed because the sinopia have mostly survived. It consists of a set of continuous vine scrolls springing from each of the corners and covering three of the four walls as well as the vault against a golden background. The scrolls frame an open space in the center of the vault and on each of the three walls, and each space is occupied by a specific scene. Seen from the entrance, the scene on the left hand (West) wall depicts a man carrying a sheep on his shoulders; on the rear wall (North) facing the entrance an angler is catching a fish while a second fish swims away (plate 80.3); on the right hand wall (East) we see a ship with two men on board, each raising his right arm. Between them, but outside the ship, is an upright man whose legs are disappearing in the jaws of a large sea monster with a magnificent spiraling tail swimming alongside (plate 80.5). In the vault a man stands on a chariot obliquely behind two rearing horses (plate 80.4). The chariot was actually a quadriga, for it is clear from the position of the horses that there must have been two more, now destroyed by a large hole in the vault - the hole in fact through which the mausoleum was entered in 1574. The charioteer is dressed in long chiton and chlamys. He has raised his right hand and holds a blue globe in his left. His head is nimbate, with seven projecting rays.

From the moment they were (re)discovered these mosaics exerted a strong appeal on art historians. The scenes on the walls were immediately identified as Jonah (East), the Angler (North) and the Good Shepherd (West), all well-known in early Christian art. This led scholars to conclude that the mausoleum was decorated by and for Christians, making it the sole Christian mausoleum in the excavated part of the necropolis. Given the proximity of St. Peter's tomb (area P), the lack of other Christian mausolea was a disappointment to the Vatican scholars excavating the area, which further explains the exceptional amount of interest generated by mausoleum M. In fact, the single most famous image from the Vatican necropolis is without a doubt the vault

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[8] The best parallel for this mosaic is a depiction of Sol in a mausoleum, now lost, in the Vigna Moroni necropolis studied by Ficoroni between 1705 and 1710 (E1c.2). The association of cremation burials with inhumation burials as well as the inscriptions found there suggest a date in the late second or early third century A.D. for that mausoleum.

figure of mausoleum M, which has become widely known.

The fame of this image is due in part to the fact that its Christian character is not at first glance apparent. Iconographically this is Sol, the Roman sun, in every respect. To explain the presence of Sol in a Christian mausoleum, scholars suggested that in this case he was not Sol, but Christ depicted in the guise of Sol as the New Light and the Sun of Justice. In the words of Lawrence: "This is the Sun God, Sol Invictus, but also Christ the light of the world (Augustine), the radiant light of God (Philo), in the brightness of His Glory (Hebrews 1, 3). Christ the conqueror with the globe in His hand (...)".[9] In this way Sol in mausoleum M has become the image of choice to illustrate the gradual ascendency of Christianity in the third century AD and in particular of its appropriation of Roman imagery for Christian purposes.

Can the image type [sol] depict Christ?
Scholars have relied primarily on literary metaphors in early Christian texts to support the suggestion that Sol here is Christ. Perler in particular quotes numerous passages to demonstrate the existence of a solar imagery in relation to Christ, the Sun of Justice, rising brightly.[10] More recently, Wallraff (2001) has devoted a significant amount of attention to this mosaic and to solar imagery in general in early Christianity. While Perler, Wallraff, and others differ on details of the meaning of this Sol-Christ, all agree on the basic Christian interpretation and the identity of Sol as Christ. But how self-evident is this notion that Sol here depicts Christ? Iconographically there is no element in this image that diverges from the standard image type for Sol in a quadriga. From a semiotic perspective that fact alone is enough to cast serious doubt on the Christ-Sol identification. The line of reasoning, of course, is that the Christian context provided by the images on the walls (Jonah, the Angler, and the Good Shepherd) necessitates a Christian interpretation of the image in the vault. But it is not that straightforward. One cannot change the fundamental meaning of a stock image type merely by placing it in a different context. The primary result would simply be a disconcerting clash of incompatible meanings. In written texts it is no different. One cannot replace *Christ* with *Sol* in a Christian text at will. One must compose the text in such a way that the audience is prepared for and participates in the process of temporarily redefining *Sol* to metaphorically mean *Christ*.

To achieve this, written texts exploit their diachronic dimension, i.e. their ability to control the order in which the audience apprehends the elements that build up the textual meanings. Thus the text can establish first that it is about Christ, and then deploy the word *Sol* to refer to Christ. Visual texts do not have this diachronic control. As a visual alternative, images can deploy iconographic elements to redefine an image away from its standard type. This can be achieved through the omission of key attributes and the addition of anomalous ones as well as variations in pose or gestures which differentiate the figure from the norm. The depiction of Sol in armor, for example, alerts the viewer to the fact that a particular tradition of solar divinity is meant, associated with Syria (where armor is a standard element of the iconography of various celestial deities) rather than Rome itself.

But this is a fundamentally different process from the diachronic redefinition of the word

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[9] Lawrence 1961, 334. Cf. Toynbee & Ward Perkins 1955, 74; Murray 1981, 77-84.

[10] Perler 1953, 13-32; Mal. 4.2 (Sun of Justice).

Sol into a metaphor for Christ in Christian texts. In these texts, the sign *Sol* retains its signifier unchanged but its signified is carefully, and temporarily, redefined by the text itself. In visual texts this is not possible. One cannot depict Ajax in the shape of a lion to illustrate him standing over the body of Patroclus "as a lion who, when leading his cubs through a forest, stands over them if hunters chance upon them".[11] One can depict Ajax crouching, tense, catlike, but definitely in his own guise as Greek warrior. Depicting a lion in the midst of a battle would be disconcerting and incomprehensible, even to those who know their Homer by heart.

The ability of context or "surrounding text" to manipulate and transform meanings of individual signs thus differs essentially between verbal and visual texts because of the central importance of diachronic reception to the verbal (a text read in random order is incomprehensible) and the lack of diachronic control in the visual (there is no fixed order in which to view the elements or signs composing an image). We can illustrate this with the image cycle of mausoleum M. If it were a verbal text, and Sol were indeed Christ, then the diachronic organization of the text would be such that it would establish its Christianity first, and thus leave us in no doubt as to how we should redefine "Sol". But because the visual cycle of the mausoleum cannot do that, we cannot establish which "context" is supposed to transform which "meaning". The Christian images on the wall, it is suggested, transform the meaning of the figure in the vault from Sol to Christ, but one can just as well argue that the presence of Sol, a quintessentially "pagan" image, demonstrates that the sheep-bearer, angler, and man-swallowing *ketos* cannot be Christian here.

Does this mean that we have reached a dead end? It is beyond dispute that the sheep-bearer and angler would be perfectly at home in a pagan environment.[12] Whether that was also the case with Jonah is less certain. Most scholars consider the Jonah scene to be invariably Christian, but we should bear two things in mind. The first is that at the time of the decoration of the mausoleum the depiction of Jonah was still relatively new in Rome. The second is that there are indications of pagan interaction with, or perhaps even pagan precursors for the Jonah story. Wischmeyer (1984) and others have argued that the story of Jonah is a relatively late inclusion in the old testament and point out that it is situated in Jaffa, which was not a predominately Jewish centre. There are parallels for the Jonah story in Greek myths of the *ketos*, the maiden-devouring sea monster, because in certain versions either Perseus (rescuing Andromeda) or Hercules (rescuing Hesione) is swallowed by the monster before killing it from inside.[13] A close connection between the *ketos* and Jaffa is attested in ancient sources.[14] Without concerning ourselves in detail with the question what direct connection (if any) there was between the Jewish story of Jonah and Greek myths of the *ketos* situated at Jaffa we must conclude that we cannot postulate that every depiction of "Jonah" in late Roman art can have been made *only* by and for

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[11] Hom. *Il*. XVII, 133-5.

[12] Cf. Engemann 1983, 257.

[13] Perseus: Lycoph. *Alex*. 834-840; Plin. *NH* 5, 128. Hercules: Hellan. frgmt. 136-137; Lyc. *Alex*. 33-37 (cf. 476-478). Weicker (*RE* VIII, 1241 s.v. Hesione 5) believes this to be the oldest surviving version of the myth.

[14] Plin. *NH* 5,69; 9,11.

Christians. In theory at least, an *interpretatio pagana* of early images of Jonah is conceivable.

The contextual argument used to assert that Sol here must be Christ is thus reduced to the following question: Would an ancient viewer, entering the mausoleum immediately after its refurbishment in the third century AD, consider the Jonah-scene on the East wall so strictly Christian that he would view all other depictions as Christian as well (including Sol in the vault), or would he consider Sol so quintessentially pagan that he would view even Jonah here as a "pagan" scene. Framed in these terms the question reveals that we do indeed reach a dead end if we follow this line of reasoning. With either scenario, we are obliged to redefine one image's fundamental meanings quite drastically, either by turning Sol into Christ or by redefining Jonah as, in this instance, a non-Christian image. Neither redefinition is attractive.

Parallels

While contextual "redefinition" of images does not sit well with the manner in which visual meanings are constructed, matters would be different, of course, if it could be shown that no redefinition is needed because the images of mausoleum M fit a pattern of wider practice. Are there other more or less contemporary instances in which Sol is Christ or Jonah is not Christian? Is "Christ" one of the standard meanings the image type [sol] could acquire in the third century AD under specific circumstances? In both cases the answer appears to be no. As far as Jonah is concerned I am not aware of any clear "pagan" parallels. As for Sol, we can state with a significant degree of certainty that there are no instances in which the image type [sol] is used to depict Christ. Nonetheless, proponents of the notion that this is how we should identify Sol in mausoleum M cite a number of images that they believe are parallels. We cannot ignore these, and as Wallraff (2001) is the most recent scholar to discuss the various images extensively, we will focus our attention on his study.

Wallraff analyzes what he considers to be the "solarisation" of Christianity in the third and fourth century AD against the background of more general Sol-oriented tendencies in the religions of the Roman world at this time. Most of his book is based on and rooted in textual analyses, but an important section focuses on Sol- and light-imagery in Christian art. Naturally the notion that Sol in mausoleum M is actually Christ is accepted by Wallraff and plays a prominent role in this section.

Wallraff's emphasis on the importance of integrating non verbal sources is very welcome,[15] but in his actual analyses he runs afoul of the rather precise iconographic principles governing depictions of Sol. This is the case for instance in his discussion of representations of symbolic light, such as nimbi and emanating rays. Wallraff rightly differentiates between the nimbus (disc of symbolic light) and rays or radiate light, but is somewhat contradictory in his statements about the different connotations of these symbols. While he first states that the solar connotations of the nimbus had "receded to the background" by the time of Constantine,[16] he subsequently links the nimbus to Sol directly on numerous occasions,[17] and claims that nimbus

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[15] Wallraff 2001, 15-16.

[16] Wallraff 2001, 145

[17] E.g. Wallraff 2001, 147

and radiate crown were closely similar in their "imperial and solar symbolic meanings".[18] By page 172 the nimbus is, for Wallraff, a "primarily solar epithet" that was still understood as such in late antiquity.

This is incorrect. As we saw in chapter three, the symbolic force of the nimbus was a very different one, for Roman art had already developed clear distinctions between the meanings of nimbus and rays centuries before Constantine.[19] No later than the beginning of the first c. AD, nimbi, generally blue, had become an attribute for basically any god or major figure without solar or astral aspects,[20] and in late antiquity this remained equally the case.[21] These nimbi were never combined with rays and had no astral or solar connotations, but simply amplified or accentuated the elevated status of the nimbate figure. Specifically astral figures could also be depicted with a nimbus only, but for them it was normally yellow or gold, and more often than not combined with rays. The iconography of Sol differs yet again, for whenever he is depicted with a nimbus it is *always* combined with rays. We can state quite categorically that there was no tradition of depicting Sol with a nimbus only. Thus the nimbus was quite the opposite of what Wallraff takes it to be, in that it was actually incompatible with Sol and thus had no solar connotations in Roman Imperial art.

Wallraff makes comparable errors in his discussion of mausoleum M and its presumed parallels. One parallel he adduces is the figure driving a biga, depicted in cubiculum 45-2 in the catacombs of SS. Marcellino e Pietro, that we discussed at the beginning of chapter six. This figure definitely does not represent either Sol or Christ. Whether he is, in fact, Elijah, as Deckers suggests, is difficult to say, but certainly more likely.[22]

Wallraff's other major parallel is an apse mosaic in the S. Aquilino in Milan. Although this mosaic is in a poor state of preservation, the sinopia indicate that there was a quadriga in the lost upper part representing the sky. There is no conclusive indication who the *quadrigatus* was, however, and his identity is disputed, some claiming that he was Elijah, others Sol. Siding with the latter, Wallraff contends that the charioteer cannot be Elijah, but I can see no reason for that contention. Iconographically we are on fairly secure ground, for besides the substantial sections that have survived we also have sinopia for significant parts of the mosaic that were lost, and while it is true that the mosaic was substantially restored in the 1930s - Wallraff stresses this - Nordhagen has carefully analyzed the restorations, concluding that they had significant *stylistic*

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[18] Wallraff 2001, 148.

[19] Chapter 3; Bergmann 1998, 45.

[20] Bergmann (1998, 45 n. 235) quotes numerous examples from Pompeii.

[21] In the mosaic of the 4th c. AD in room A of House of Aion in Paphos, for example, the following figures are nimbate: Theogonia, Krisis (in the guise of Nike), Aion, Doris, Thetis, Zeus, Athena, Galatea, and Apollo. This mosaic includes the possibly nimbate depiction of Sol, discussed above. In the Via Latina catacombs in Rome, dating to the same period, non-Christian nimbate figures include: Tellus (cub. E), Hercules and Athena (cub. N), and a portrait of a young woman (cub. O).

[22] Wallraff 2001; Deckers 1987, 267-8.

consequences only, but did not affect the iconography of the mosaic in any meaningful way.[23]

Depicted in the mosaic was a quadriga in the sky (sinopia and a small part of the horses survive) above a pastoral scene. There can be no doubt that the general composition of this scene is closely reminiscent of roughly contemporary Elijah scenes, such as the one in the right-hand arcosolium of cubiculum B in the Via Latina catacomb in Rome, dating to the mid fourth c. AD,[24] and - though of a very different size and medium - the beautiful wooden panel on the door of the S. Sabina in Rome, dating to the 5th c. AD.[25] In all three cases we have a pastoral scene at the ground level in a landscape characterized by rocky outcrops, a waterfall and a stream. In the catacomb painting there is one shepherd, reclining on the right in a pose that echoes a similar figure in the S. Aquilino mosaic. At the left a river emerges from the rocks in the form of a waterfall. Elisha stands in front of the waterfall and receives the cloak from Elijah in his quadriga. On the S. Sabina panel, Elisha stands at the centre, flanked by two shepherds. Here too, the one on the right is lying on the ground, albeit in a different pose from the figure in the Via Latina catacomb; he appears to be hiding his face in terror. The one on the left is stepping back in apparent amazement as he leans on his staff. Below him is what appears to be a cave, from which a stream emerges.

What is left of the S. Aquilino mosaic adheres in all its details to the type of Elijah imagery represented by these two examples, the only difference being that the larger space allowed for a more elaborate bucolic scene that includes a fair number of sheep. To the far right is the reclining or sleeping shepherd, and at the left side, in front of a waterfall and river from which one of the sheep drinks, the startled shepherd stands, raising his hand to his mouth. The S. Aquilino mosaic also includes a third shepherd, standing slightly right of centre and apparently leaning on a staff. He is poorly preserved and recognizable mainly from the (restored) sinopia. Just to the left of centre in the S. Aquilino mosaic is a fourth figure, also preserved only partially, gazing straight up at the quadriga. While the two outer shepherds are both bare-headed and wear brown cloaks over their tunics, this figure has a blue cloak and is wearing some sort of cap. He is thus clearly set apart from the shepherds iconographically, and I really see no grounds why we should reject the suggestion that he is Elisha.[26] It is true that he is under the chariot, according to the sinopia, rather than behind it where Wallraff feels he would have to be if he were Elisha receiving Elijah's cloak, but given that the surviving sections of the horses do not actually correspond to the *sinopia* (they are smaller and a bit lower), too much should not be made of this. It seems likely that the chariot and its charioteer were actually closer to the blue-cloaked figure than the sinopia suggest, and in any case, irrespective of the exact location of the chariot, one can easily imagine Elijah handing his cloak straight down to Elisha directly under the chariot. For as the panel on the fifth century door of the Santa Sabina in Rome demonstrates, it was perfectly possible to depict Elisha under Elijah's chariot rather than behind it, if the artist so desired or

[23] Nordhagen 1982, 90.

[24] Lenski 2006, fig. 31.

[25] Ferrua 1991, 79 fig. 52.

[26] Nordhagen 1982, 90.

compositional considerations so required.

What survives of the S. Aquilino mosaic adheres in every detail to the main iconographic elements that characterize roughly contemporary, undisputed Elijah representations, and has an excellent candidate for Elisha in the blue-cloaked figure just left of centre. Conversely, there is literally not one representation of Sol in his chariot that even faintly resembles this mosaic. In short, there is nothing in the mosaic that perforce points us away from Elijah, far less anything that points us towards Sol rather than Elijah. There is no reason, therefore, to reject the identification as Elijah outright, as Wallraff does, and to claim that the charioteer is "undoubtedly" Sol is quite simply wrong.

Not Christ, but Sol

There are no parallel examples of images of Sol used to depict Christ,[27] which means that we are still at the dead end of the line of reasoning we have taken so far to interpret the imagery of mausoleum M. Interpreting Sol here as Christ leaves us with an iconographic cycle that is unparalleled, which is always a problem, the more so because the individual elements (vine, sheep-bearer, angler, Jonah/ketos and Sol) are all quite common in Roman imperial art. This interpretation also hinges on a mode of viewing that is "verbal" rather that "visual" insofar as it postulates contextually redefined rather than iconographically redefined meanings for the Sol-image. We have seen that this mode of constructing meanings requires the type of diachronic control that words can achieve but images cannot. In short, the Christ-Helios hypothesis is untenable.

It is time reenter the mausoleum with Roman eyes, if possible, avoiding premature and possibly anachronistic assumptions about the nature and identity of the figures in the mosaic. If we look again at the mausoleum as a whole, without labeling the figures, a different, quite obvious, and very Roman pattern reveals itself. To begin with, the vine and the lack of borders emphasize the interconnectedness of the scenes. Clearly the images combine to form a single theme, and it is quickly apparent which. On the East wall, with its ship and the sea-monster, we have the ocean. On the West wall, opposite the sea, we have the sheep-bearer signifying land. On the North wall the angler occupies the area of transition from sea to land. The vault, with Sol, represents the sky and light, while darkness and the underworld are below, represented by the lower parts of the mausoleum and the tombs therein. In short, the imagery defines mausoleum M as a "cosmos", or at least as a "world", and endows it with a basic visual rhythm for which there are many parallels in Roman art.

That rhythm is one of land, sea, and sky articulating the image, and we find it both in Roman art in general and, more specifically, in Roman funerary art. In the third century AD the sheep-bearer and the angler were particularly common as antithetical figures denoting land and

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[27] A possible exception is an intaglio in Kassel (H5a.37) with Sol on one side and a possibly Christian inscription on the other. But we cannot be certain the image does not predate the inscription, nor that the inscription is unequivocally Christian.

sea reaspectively.[28] Sometimes Oceanus replaces the angler and the basic pattern may be expanded to include other figures.[29] Such scenes do not provide parallels in a strict sense for mausoleum M, but show that the basic pattern we have identified in the mosaic is one which would not take a Roman viewer by surprise.

With this basic pattern we sidestep the question whether the mausoleum is pagan or Christian. Sol is the sun and represents the heavens, and the man-devouring ketos represents the sea. But there can be little doubt that the meanings of the mosaic and its scenes extend beyond this basic level. There are clear dualities here, between light (Sol) and darkness (tombs) or sea and land, for example, and there is also cyclical movement from lost (*ketos* swallowing man) to saved (shepherd with a lost sheep on his shoulders) with the moment of capture (angler) in the mediating position, or in the ascent and (implicit) descent of the sun. It is tempting to interpret this cyclical component in particular as referring to death and salvation or rebirth. The fundamental balance between the basic elements of earth - expressed through the dualities - is depicted in harmony with the cyclical fluctuations of life and death, loss and recovery, ascent and descent of the sun.

How much further can we push the analysis? Can we, for instance, situate the mausoleum in a specific religious milieu? A Christian interpretation remains a possibility, though not one that identifies Sol as Christ. Sol is the sun, and the image type here is that of [sol]. But as a matter of principle, at least, it is not unthinkable for Christians in the third century AD to depict the sun in this way. The language of early Christian art is essentially Roman, and in Roman art the only way to depict the sun was with one of the image types [sol]. The choice was not influenced by, nor indicative of one's religious convictions. As we have seen, the image type [sol] could even take central position on synagogue floors in late antiquity, not as the sun *god*, but simply as the sun (cat. D1a.2-7). *If* the mausoleum is Christian we must have something similar here, for it is clearly as the sun clearly plays a key role in establishing the basic visual patterns of the mausoleum.[30] That said, however, the actual use of the image type [sol] in early Christian art is rare, and its pagan connotations were strong. In the time-span of mausoleum M's refurbishment and subsequent use hardly a year went by in which the mint at Rome did not issue at least one high-circulation bronze or silver coin bearing the image of Sol on the reverse. In the popular

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[28] Andreae 1963, 131-162; Engemann 1969, 1071-1074; Engemann 1983, 583-587. Cf. a sarcophagus in Rome, Mus. Naz. 23893, *Museo Nazionale Romano, Le sculture* I 8.1, 128 nr. III 5;

[29] Cf. the sarcophagus of the nine-year-old Florentius Domitius Marinianus in the Vatican (Museo Pio Cristiano 31661). Marinianus himself is depicted in the centre, flanked by Tellus (left) and Oceanus (right) reclining opposite a ketos. On the right-hand corner there is a sheep-bearer, on the left-hand corner a hunter carrying a rabbit and accompanied by a dog. Another example is the sarcophagus from La Gayolle in southern France (cat. C3b4.1), on which are depicted (from left to right) the radiate bust of Sol, an angler, an orant, a seated philosopher, a sheep-bearer, and a bearded figure thought to be Hades. Here the central figures are flanked by sky and sea on one side (Sol and angler), and by land and the underworld on the other side (sheep-bearer and Hades). Cf. Wallraff 2001, 159-160.

[30] For early Christian use of the image type [sol] cf., e.g., C4.28.

races at the Circus Maximus Sol played a prominent role as pagan divinity.[31] In the circus itself as well as in other parts of the city there were temples or shrines for Sol, served by priests proud of their position, as we saw in chapter 5. In short, Sol was a regular fixture of Roman society, in particular among those below the upper class - i.e. among the segment of Rome's population to which the Julii who built mausoleum M belonged. By depicting Sol in the vault, they introduced into their mausoleum an image that was indistinguishable from the numerous images of Sol depicted in those pagan Roman contexts.

Thus the indications that the mausoleum was designed with a specifically Christian identity in mind are weak. They now hinge on the Jonah-scene which in our analysis so far has emerged more as carefully chosen emblem for the ocean and death or "loss" than as a biblical tale. That it is indeed the Jonah-story that is depicted here seems likely, and adds a further element to the rhythm of the images, for it would appear that the duality and cyclicity that we discerned is also captured by each image individually. The shepherd can only find a sheep that was lost; Jonah is swallowed by the whale to his apparent death, but will be spit out eventually, spiritually cleansed and reborn; the sun ascends as a shining light but will inevitably make way for darkness, only to rise again undefeated. Whether the angler also fits into this pattern is less clear, although it is noteworthy that one fish swims away while the other is caught.

Be that as it may, we do not have to give a strictly Christian interpretation to Jonah in order to understand these basic patterns. On the contrary, only the least exclusively biblical part of the story is depicted and deployed here.[32] We have already remarked on the ketos in Greek myth, located by some at Jaffa and reported by some to have swallowed the Greek heroes in combat before they killed her from inside. Nor should we forget that M. Scaurus transported what was reputed to be the skeleton of the ketos from Jaffa to Rome in 58 BC.[33] There was clearly a Graeco-Roman context for the part of the Jonah-story depicted here. And there was also a potential Roman audience beyond the Christian community: lapsed Christians, mixed families, "heretics", Jews perhaps and, simply, Romans. If Severus Alexander could number Christ among the gods he revered, then it is not far-fetched to imagine that a near contemporary Roman could chose Jonah as the perfect image for the west wall of mausoleum M without necessarily being Christian.[34]

In short, a definitive religious identity does not emerge from the imagery of the mausoleum, although closer analysis may well shed further light on this issue. We should look ina particular at third and fourth century depictions of Jonah for parallels of that image type in iconographic cycles with patterns similar to the ones in mausoleum M. A closer examination of parallel images of anglers, shepherds, and the vine may also prove informative. But that is

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[31] Tert. *Spect.* 8,1; 9,3.

[32] The third century Jonah imagery in general does not adhere closely to the biblical text. Cf. Snyder (2003, 91-95) for a brief overview of the main theories concerning pre-Constantinian Jonah-imagery (with references to the key studies). See also Thelamon 2000, Cambi 1994.

[33] Plin. *NH* 9.11.

[34] Severus Alexander's inclusion of Christ is reported by the *Historia Augusta* (29.2, 43.6-7, cf. 52.7) and is hence suspect.

outside the scope of this study. Our goal was to establish whether Sol in this mausoleum depicts Christ. We have concluded that this cannot be the case, and that identifying him simply as what he depicts - sol, the sun - allows a far more straightforward interpretation of the image cycle, firmly embedded in standard Roman visual themes and practice. While our analysis does not exclude the possibility that the mausoleum was Christian it does not support it either. In fact, a likely conclusion would appear to be that the mausoleum is not explicitly religious at all. Further study is needed.

Image, text, and concept
To conclude this chapter we return to our original question: if the direct translation of verbal metaphors like *Christus Sol verus* into image is not really possible, can visual symbolism such as the image type [sol-luna] then be translated into words as we suggested for the *Carmen Saeculare* in chapter seven? That would certainly appear to be the case and it is tempting to see this in terms of a difference in flexibility of the two semiotic systems, the visual and the verbal. Language, with its diachronic dimension can "translate" the imagery because it can build and shape its message until it has achieved its goal. Images, on the other hand, lacking that diachronic control, are far less capable of translating language. But such an explanation misses a key point, as we can illustrate with mausoleum M. Seduced as we are by the words of our verbal academic discourse we (or, at least, I) easily overlook the fact that the analysis of mausoleum M that I have given above fails to touch on what may have been the essence of that funerary room and its decoration in the eyes of the Julii who owned it. The dead Julii entombed there are housed in their own world, defined by its imagery as one of light and darkness, loss and salvation, death and life just as our own. Julius Tarpeianus, named in an inscription above the doorway, was one year, eight months, and twenty-seven days old when he died and was the first to be buried in the new family tomb built by his parents Julia Palatina and Maximus. If, for the sake of dramatic effect, we ignore for the moment the fact that the mosaic decoration belongs to a later phase, let us try to imagine what it meant to Julia and Maximus to entrust the ashes of their toddler to this "alternate world" that the mausoleum was. And as the funerary chamber came to house more of the family's deceased, what effect did the decorations have on the living visitors when they entered the world of their dead (or should I say *their* world of the dead) during the annual parentalia. What did the mosaics contribute to making the mausoleum "feel" that way? What sense of space and belonging (or not-belonging) did they create?

We have no way of knowing, I think, at least not yet,[35] but that does not mean that the effect was therefore unimportant, or that attempting to account for it is unscientific. For it is in this area of the mausoleum's meanings that we confront the uniquely visual impact of the images: their embodied and embodying meanings through which they create an "atmosphere" (for want of

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[35] I first wrote here that "we have no way of knowing, of course", but upon reflection decided that such certainty was unsustainable. Much as I cling to the romantic notion that we are all unique and autonomous individuals, it is clear that great strides are being made in the social, cognitive and neurological study of emotion and affect. That such research has the potential to enhance historical studies goes without saying.

a better word).[36] It is hard to find words that can adequately label the type of effect, and far more so to describe an actual instance - the "home-sweet-home" feeling, or the sense of loss when a favourite mug is shattered and must be thrown away, or the love embodied in that drawing by your child stuck on the door of your study because she made it for you... These are real meanings, potentially profound meanings, but meanings embodied in and by material culture, ultimately ineffable and hence elusive, irreproducible, and therefore inevitably insufficiently recognized in the academic discourse of such fields of study as ours.[37]

It is not, then, a case of one system being more capable of communicating than the other, but it is what is being communicated. In the case of the *Carmen Saeculare* it is the *notion* of *Aeternitas* that is embodied by the sun and moon, and not by them alone. The words, the music, the rituals and the setting all contributed jointly to constructing a meaningful experience. In the case of Christ-Helios, however, the postulated process is fundamentally different. The argument of Perler, Wallraff and others is not that the notion behind the words *Christus Sol verus* or *Sol Iustitiae* was rendered in image in accordance with the rules of Roman visual semiotics. They suggest that the manner or, if you will, the form in which that notion can be successfully captured in words, namely through verbal metaphor, was copied literally into image. It is here that the fundamental error is made.

It remains striking nonetheless that Horace should use the Sol-Luna imagery to underpin the theme of *Aeternitas*. Of course he also establishes that theme in other ways,[38] but this use of Sol and Luna does, I think, confront us with one of the limitations of the rather straightforward semiotics that we have relied on. In chapters four and six I stressed the symbolic nature of the image type [sol-luna], noting in particular that mortals represented in solar or lunar guise are not assimilated with Sol and Luna but acquire the connotations of the image type [sol-luna]. I argued that the image type [sol-luna] as sign meant something quite different than the sun god and moon goddess together. This is simple semiotics, as what I am stating is merely that the signifier [sol-luna] has become an indexical sign with the notion of eternity (and Romanness) as signified. But the manner in which Horace deploys the two in his ode is far richer than this indexical sign [sol-luna] at first glance suggests. In the ode they are the complex deities Apollo-Sol and Diana-Luna, recipients of prayer, offerings and sacrifice, celebrated in a rich variety of their common guises - and, indeed, exponents of *aeternitas*. The *Carmen Saeculare* thus confronts us with the dynamic nature of the signifier in the [sol-luna]-sign, because in the ode that signifier - which in Roman art could be as simple as a bust of Sol and a crescent[39] - vacillates between Apollo, Sol, Diana,

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[36] On May 2nd, 2008, a conference was organized by th Institute of Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford to discuss how "objects act together to create mood." In the conference announcement the organizers noted that this aspect of the agency of objects is "an elusive matter in archaeology, where the practical focus inclines towards specific objects or connected material groups, rather than how disparate objects act in combination."

[37] For an archaeological study of the psychological underpinnings of how material culture constructs meanings, cf. Donley-Reid 1996.

[38] Hor. *CS* 2-3 (O colendi semper et culti), 9-10, cf. *supra* chapter 7.

[39] See, for example, L1.1, 4, 6, 11, L2.3.

Luna and [sol-luna]. Of course, Horace actually uses a number of different signifiers, each name being one, and he supplements the Apollo/Sol-Diana/Luna symbolism with additional, more specific words to ensure comprehension. But this raises a question. Art, as we have seen, uses simply an image type [sol] and one [luna], but how "simple" are they? Do they also continue to embody the full range of Sol- and Luna-meanings respectively that each image type has the potential to evoke? We have already implied this by pointing out that visual meanings tend to be broader and less defined. But this suggests that *aeternitas* may be too precise a signified for the [sol-luna] sign, that we should not dismiss the other potential meanings of the image types [sol] and [luna] respectively whenever we interpret them as the [sol-luna] sign for eternity, because their other connotations remain in force. Sol is still the sun, Luna still the moon, or rather: the image type [sol] retains its full range of potential meanings as does the image type [luna].

This is again an issue of visual meanings versus verbal ones. Horace uses a large number of lines and a substantial number of different words to construct, *inter alia*, the notion of *aeternitas* at the foundation of his ode. Art does not do that, being by its nature restricted to deploying a juxtaposition of two image types, [sol] and [luna]. But that does not mean that the image type [sol-luna] is the visual equivalent of merely one word, *aeternitas*. That would reduce art to a very poor and second rate alternative for verbal communication, consisting of a handful of almost random key terms, like *aeternitas*, thrown out at the viewer indiscriminately. That was not how Roman art worked. The image type [sol-luna] was not only one of the visual signs of choice to depict notions related verbally by the Latin word *aeternitas* and a number of other words as well. It is the visual form of the concept and as such it may well have incorporated a range of notions or emotions that are well beyond the scope of the word *aeternitas*.

Trying to explore the image-type [sol-luna] to such broader or deeper levels of meaning is not yet possible, however. Roman art is a structured form of communication of which essential aspects still escape us. We have a shaky grasp of the vocabulary and grammar, so to say, of the system as a whole and are therefore hardly in a position to explore the more subtle shades of meaning of one specific element of that system. It is impossible to analyze and appreciate the subtleties of a poem before one thoroughly grasps the language in which it was written. Thus we could not offer a full analysis of the image cycle at mausoleum M because we do not have sufficient knowledge of the potential meanings and connotations of the image types [sheep-bearer], [angler], [ketos/Jonah], [vine], and even [sol].

An added problem, in the case of Roman art, is the lack of appropriate communicative tools to convey and debate the analyses. In this study I make do with the rather awkward [sol] whenever I refer to an image type of Sol, in order to differentiate between the notions conveyed by the image and the more or less subtly different ones conveyed by the word. But I still speak and write *sol* between those brackets, and rely on words to convey my understanding of the visual meanings the image types convey. I have no idea how to avoid this, but the ease with which we slip into the idea that the image type [sol-luna] equals *aeternitas*, or that the image type [sol] can sometimes metaphorically be Christ, illustrates how insidious this de facto verbalization of the visual in our discourse can be.

This chapter has placed in sharper focus some of the problems we face in the analysis of the visual in the Roman world, notably the lack of a suitable framework for the basic understanding of visual meanings. Images are not words but we have tendency to overlook or bypass the

implications of that obvious truth when we discuss - with words - what meanings an image conveyed. Worse, we transpose verbal modes of meaning to images without taking into account the very different nature of the visual semiotic system in Rome and, more in general of visual signs. It should be obvious that we cannot simply transfer a verbal metaphor into a visual one, but the notion that Sol represents Christ in mausoleum M is nonetheless widely accepted.

Two changes are needed. The first is that Classicists must rise to Zanker's challenge and recognize that we cannot simply place ourselves in the ancient viewer's shoes and assume that we see what they saw. This change is already underway,[40] but there is a long way to go before we can claim a firm grasp of the basic grammar and vocabulary of the language of images in the Roman world (the present study is a case in point).[41] The second change required arises indirectly from the first. It is not enough to construct a lexicon of *what* Romans saw or could see in a given image, we must also engage the question *how* they saw. How did images communicate in the Roman world, and what kinds of meanings did they generate?

To address these issues we will have to move well beyond the common-sense approach taken in the present study and seek inspiration from current research in visual theory for our understanding of Roman art. In chapter two I suggested that embodiment theory is one area that offers the promise of new perspectives because it may help break down the somewhat Cartesian dichotomy of traditional approaches to Roman art. This dichotomy manifests itself in our tendency differentiate between meaning (the signified; mind, word) and form (the signifier; body, image).[42]

One sees this even in Hölscher's landmark study on Roman art as a semantic system, in which he identifies form as meaningful, arguing that different Greek forms or styles were adopted by the Romans for different types of images because of the notions or concepts the Romans associated with those Greek styles. Specific virtues, he suggests, were considered to by characterized by particular styles. What is missing in Hölscher's analysis is reflection on how such meanings were apprehended and internalized. This is not to say that it would be reasonable to expect such an analysis from Hölscher. It is precisely around such questions that important theoretical debates currently revolve without, as far as I can tell, any emerging consensus. Indeed, the problem of what we mean with "meaning(s)" is one of the central issues in cognitive sciences in general.

This lack of a clear consensus on the major theoretical issues involved in the analysis of *how* the visual means raises the question why I have singled out embodiment theory rather than, for instance, the visual semiotics of Bal & Bryson (1991) or the more applied semiotics in many modern media studies,[43] the cognitive and neurological research adduced by Beck (2006), Parsonian sociological theory deployed by Tanner (2006), and the like. My sense is that where

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[40] Elsner 2007; Hölscher 1987.

[41] As Scott (2006, 637) notes, "In spite of this burgeoning interest in the social significance of art in the classical world, it is clear that traditional aesthetic frameworks are still entrenched".

[42] Cf., e.g., Lesure 2005, 237-8.

[43] Smith 2005; cf., e.g., Damisch 1975.

the emotive action of the visual - and the verbal, for that matter - is concerned, recourse to embodiment theory is an obvious choice for analyses of, say, hegemony and resistance, given the prime importance Foucault ascribes to the body as seat of power.[44] Likewise identity, as defined by Moore,[45] is in essence 'the lived experience of the body' . If we can find ways to persuasively link Roman art to human embodiment, this would allow us to firmly entrench our analyses of it in human experience (as opposed to human cognition or awareness), thus opening the way to a far more concerted analysis of non-discursive meanings relevant to issues of identity, religion, power, and the like.[46]

There have been major advances in material culture theory and the application of new cognitive, neurological, and sociological insights in material culture studies. The impact of these advances is already being felt in the study of Greek and Roman art, and that impact is certain to increase. To fully benefit from these advances, however, I think our field first needs more studies with a more modest theoretical scope, such as this one, that contribute to a basic framework for the understanding of Rome's visual semantic system. Our example in this chapter, mausoleum M, clearly illustrates some of the fundamental problems not just of fact but of methodology that hamper our field: a lack of insight into Roman modes of viewing; inadequate knowledge of the patterns of occurrence and common basic meanings or connotation of conventional image types such as the sheep-bearer or the vine; interpretative strategies that attempt to equate images with written texts; and the like. These are issues which can be resolved to a significant degree without recourse to more than the simple semiotics on which the present study relies. Yet such studies as this one are essential because they give us the firmer grasp we need of the parts, before we can begin any advanced analysis of the whole.

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[44] Fisher & DiPaolo Loren 2003, 227.

[45] Moore 1994: 3; cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962.

[46] Tanner 2001; cf. Gell 1998.