Abstract

The apostles have always been considered important characters of the biblical narrative. They were the primary witnesses of Christ’s presence on earth. Many Christian writings were ascribed to an apostle to enhance their authority. Moreover, Peter, the leader of the apostles, was considered to legitimize the position of the Roman bishop. Therefore, in early Christian art and poetry the apostles occur regularly. Due to the fact that only very little information about their lives was given in the books of the New Testament, artists and poets had to be creative in their references to the Twelve. The third and fourth centuries witness the representation of the apostles in Christian art and poetry. A variety of poetic genres (epic, epigrams, hymns) cultivated by poets of different backgrounds (Proba, Damasus, Prudentius, Paulinus of Nola) makes clear that each poet used the apostles for his or her own purpose. In the pictorial arts of the period, mosaics and sarcophagi form important objects to study the earliest depictions of the apostles. The apocryphal writings are important sources of information, as the death of Peter and Paul was the main (non-biblical) theme in the representation of the apostles in early Christian art and poetry.

When the emperor Constantine assumed absolute power over an undivided Roman Empire in the year 324, the majority of Europe unexpectedly found itself governed by a man favourably disposed towards Christianity. Nearly all his successors were Christians too (except for Julian the Apostate, emperor in the period 361-363). Consequently, Christian culture soon became dominant, with the age-old traditions incorporated in this new framework.

I would like to thank the editor of the present collection for her useful suggestions and dr. Claire Stocks (Radboud University Nijmegen) for correcting the English text.
Early Christian literature provides telling examples. Every Roman aristocrat in the fourth century AD received a traditional rhetorical and literary education. He knew many great Latin authors by heart, especially the most popular poet of Rome: Vergil. Literary texts were often discussed among friends. Even a pagan aristocrat might, therefore, come across someone reading the following passage:

And as soon as the light gives itself back to earth tomorrow, there will be only one against me and for the ruin of my people, while he presents himself as a peace mediator regarding our body.\(^2\)

Our Roman aristocrat would easily recognise the components of these verses, because they were all written by Vergil,\(^3\) but not in this order. He would have been astonished because he would have never seen such a text and probably could not have made sense of it. Most modern readers will understand his embarrassment very well.

The obscure text cited above, which will be explained below, reflects the situation of a time in which Christianity changed society in many aspects. This article focuses on such changes in art and poetry. The appearance of the apostles in early Christian poetry and art is investigated by providing some general characteristics of the representation of the apostles in both media, with particular focus on the use of apocryphal apostle stories. A brief comparison of apocryphal stories in art and poetry follows, focusing on Peter and Paul.

The world of early Christianity and its apocrypha

Following the intermittent persecution of the Christians in the first centuries of our era, the Christian religion quickly became the most

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\(^3\) Verse 593 = *Aenied* 8,170; v. 594 is taken from *Aen. * 5,814 and *Aen. * 8,386 respectively; the beginning of v. 595 is from *Aen. * 7,536. The last three words of v. 595 could have been taken from several verses in Vergil's oeuvre. M. Bazil, *Centones Christiani. Métamorphoses d'une forme intertextuelle dans la poésie latine chrétienne de l'Antiquité tardive*, Turnhout, 2009, p. 281-313 presents Proba's entire text and the verses from Vergil on which it is based.
important and influential religion of the empire in the fourth century. The conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine (306-337) made the Christian religion acceptable for all strands of Roman society. In 391, only seventy years later, the emperor Theodosius (379-395) stated that Christianity was the only religion allowed in the whole empire, marking a change in direction for an empire which had, up to this point, been known for its tolerance to a variety of religious convictions.

What Christians actually believed, was derived from their collection of sacred books that we still know now as the Bible. However, there were many Christian texts in circulation at the time that presented dogmas and stories resembling those found in the Bible, but which were not included in the biblical canon. These were (later) called apocryphal texts. The formation of the biblical canon was a long and chaotic process and we should be aware of the fact that the councils of 393 (Hippo), 397 (Carthage) and 417 (Carthage), which confirmed the canon as we know it today, were local meetings: rather than promulgating new ideas about the corpus of authentic Christian writings, they simply confirmed what was already common practice. The first list in which all of the books that together we call the New Testament occur is in Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica* (3,25), written in the first half of the fourth century. Nevertheless, most parts of the New Testament were generally accepted before Eusebius (cf. e.g. the canon Muratori from the second century): therefore, I feel free to use the words Bible and New Testament when referring to the period of Late Antiquity, for the sake of convenience.

According to most Christians in the fourth century, canonical texts were inspired by the Holy Spirit, were accepted as a source for readings during Mass, and were deemed authoritative in a way comparable to the books of the Old Testament. Doubts were primarily uttered about the Revelation of John and the New Testament letters that were not transmitted on the name of Paul.

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4 See for the problematic definition of apocryphal texts and the circumstances in which these texts were produced the contribution of Rémi Gounelle in the present collection of articles.


ties to the present. This tradition was linked to the apostles because they were seen as the most reliable witnesses to Christ's presence on earth. They had walked with him, had seen his miracles, and had felt his power. Whilst Paul had not 'seen' Christ on earth, he was accepted as member of the twelve by most Christians since he claimed to have seen Christ in his vision on the way to Damascus.

Yet the biblical canon lacked many of the details in which people were interested, such as how the apostles died, and so several non-canonical texts that completed the canon went into circulation. In as far as they did not contradict the Bible they were tolerated by the Church. Among them were many texts about the apostles.

We have seen that the apostles were associated with authenticity and canonicity. But they were also used as a means of legitimising the position of the bishops, in particular that of the bishop of Rome. This idea was vigorously propagated in the fourth century by the Pope (and poet) Damasus. Damasus claimed to be the direct successor of Peter, to whom Christ had said: 'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 16, 18).

The apostles thus had an important position in the early Church. Their role in poetry and art became especially important from the fourth century onwards. In the first Christian poems, e.g. those written by the obscure poet Commodianus (fl. 260), they had only a minor role: the poets paid more attention to Jesus Christ than to his disciples. The same attitude can be discerned in early Christian art. The first figurative Christian art was created towards the end of the second century, shortly before the first Christian poems. However, it was under Constantine that both art and poetry really developed. In that period, more intel-

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9 For translations of biblical texts I cite the New International Version Bible (NIVB).

lectuals – who were able to write verses and to contribute to the high costs of sarcophagi or the decoration of monumental churches – became members of the Christian Church. Monumental art began to emerge, whereas previously Christian art was mainly to be found underground, in the catacombs.

The apostles in early Christian poetry

Let us return to the middle of the fourth century, to the Roman aristocrat whom I mentioned earlier. After he had heard the strange verses cited above, he would wonder who had maltreated Vergil so irreverently and why. The man reading the text to him would explain to him that these verses were written by Proba, a female Christian poet who believed that the great pagan author Vergil was an *anima naturaliter christiana*, 'a naturally Christian soul'.¹¹ Proba used entire verses and parts of verses from Vergil to write a new poem in which she told biblical stories. This is called a cento.¹² Inevitably, the new poem was very obscure. Proba summarised the Bible in only 694 hexameters and she did not add any non-Vergilian words. For that reason, she could not mention biblical names. That is one of the problems of our passage:

And as soon as the light gives itself back to earth tomorrow, there will be only one against me and for the ruin of my people, while he presents himself as a peace mediator regarding our body.¹³

Who is it whom the text is talking about? For a Christian knowing the Bible, the context of the passage makes clear that Christ is speaking about Judas. The words used to designate Judas – whose name is of course not found in Vergil – are taken from positive contexts in the *Aeneid* which is – in the words of Gérard Genette – the hypotext of Proba’s cento:¹⁴

¹¹ See the *prooemium* of Proba’s cento, verse 23: *Vergilium cecinisse loquar pia munera Christi*: 'I will tell how Vergil has sung the sacred duties of Christ.’


¹³ *Cento Probae* 593–5: *et lux cum primum terris se crastina reddet, unus erit tum in me exitiumque morum, dum paci medium se offert de corpore nostro.*

¹⁴ Cf. the contribution by Evina Steinová to the present collection of articles.
Unus erit tantum is said about Palinurus, the helmsman of the Trojan hero Aeneas who is about to found Rome. Palinurus has to die as a peace offering for the sea god Poseidon, who is not willing to grant Aeneas and his companions a safe passage to Italy.15 This is even more remarkable because in the Christian epic tradition, which had started two decades earlier with the Spanish priest and poet Juvenecus, Aeneas is sometimes put on a par with Christ. *Paci medium se offert* in the original context of the *Aeneid* refers to Galaesus. Galaesus is an enemy of the Trojans, the ‘good guys’ of the *Aeneid* – just as Judas is an enemy of Christ. But the passage about Galaesus in the *Aeneid* is more positive than one would expect:

(...) and (...) old Galaesus, slain as he throws himself in between to plead for peace – he who was of all men *most righteous* and once *wealthiest* in Ausonia’s fields; for him five flocks bleated, five herds came back from pasture, and a hundred ploughs turned the soil.16

This positive characterisation of Galaesus is called to mind by the reader of Proba’s versification of Judas’ betrayal. It is difficult to interpret this: did Proba have ambiguous feelings about Judas’ role, comparable to those included in the recently discovered gospel of Judas?17 Or should we emphasize the ironical fact that Galaesus is called *ditissimus* by Vergil and Judas became *ditissimus* after his betrayal of Christ for thirty silver pieces (Mt 26, 15)? Whatever the answer is, it is clear that Proba wrote exclusively for a Christian elite audience. It is hardly possible to appreciate her work without knowledge of the Bible and Vergil (and the other great Latin poets). At the same time, Proba’s cento is only one example


of the various ways in which Latin Christian poets creatively combined the classical heritage with the new Christian faith.

Proba’s literary play with classical texts was too daring for most early Christian poets and despite the passage in the cento, Judas certainly did not become a popular apostle in early Christian poetry. For most of the early Christian poets in the first half of the fourth century, the most important motive for referring to the apostles was the desire to emphasize unity. They presented the apostles together, as a collegium. This could be called concordia duodecim, an analogy for the more common designation of concordia apostolorum which referred to the unity of Peter and Paul. Hilary, bishop of Poitiers (315-368) said about Christ in one of his hymns: ‘He approved twelve men, through whom life is learnt.’

The apostles’ lives and the unity among them were used as an example for the Christian community: the uita apostolica derived from the canonical book ‘Acts of the Apostles’ (Acts 4, 32-35). In general, the symbolic value of the apostles as followers and witnesses of Christ was more important in early Christian poetry than stories about the apostles as individual saints.

In the second half of the fourth century, the cult of the saints developed rapidly. Pope Damasus (366-384) wrote about the martyrs in epigrams (in hexameters), which were attached to the walls of martyr churches. The Pope actively promoted the idea that the bishop of Rome


19 Most apocryphal narratives also focus on acts of individuals instead of on the twelve as a group (exceptions are the Gospel of the Twelve Apostles – now lost – and the Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles for which see H.-M. SCHENKE, ‘Die Taten des Petrus und der zwölf Apostel’, in W. SCHNEEMELCHER, Neutestamentliche Apokryphen. II. Apostolisches, Apokalypsen und Verwandtes, Tübingen, 1999, p. 368-80 and ID. (ed.), Neutestamentliche Apokryphen. I. Evangelien, Tübingen, 1999, p. 300). This probably had to do with the prestige that the canonical gospels acquired at a very early stage: these texts already told the story of the group of the twelve apostles and it was difficult for other traditions to discuss this topic too. See R. GOUNELLE, ‘Actes apocryphes des apôtres et Actes des apôtres canoniques. État de la recherche et perspectives nouvelles (I)’, Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses 84 (2004), p. 3-30 and ID., ‘Actes apocryphes des apôtres et Actes des apôtres canoniques. État de la recherche et perspectives nouvelles (II)’, Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses 84 (2004), p. 419-441 for an extensive discussion of the relationship between canonical and apocryphal acts of the apostles. Non-canonical stories could discuss events that were not described in the canon without being necessarily condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities: e.g. the lives of the apostles after they were sent into the world by Christ were an acceptable subject matter.
was more important than other bishops, since Peter and Paul died in Rome. This idea is most clearly expressed in his epigram 20:

![Figure 1. A copy of Damasus’ epigram in the modern San Sebastiano fuori le Mura (formerly known as Basilica apostolorum) in Rome.](image)

Figure 1. A copy of Damasus’ epigram in the modern San Sebastiano fuori le Mura (formerly known as Basilica apostolorum) in Rome.

You must realise that once the saints dwelt here, you, whoever you are, who asks for the names of Peter and Paul alike. The East sent these disciples, something we freely admit, and – having followed Christ beyond the stars because of the merit of their blood – they have reached the celestial heartlands and the realms of the pious: Rome has deserved more (sc.: than other cities) to claim them as its own citizens. These things Damasus wants to mention, new stars, as your praise.

Damasus’ pride is felt in every verse. This epigram was placed in the Basilica apostolorum, which is today’s San Sebastiano fuori le mura on the Via Appia.

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20 All photos in this article were taken by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

According to legend, the heads of both Peter and Paul were kept for a while in this place. Damasus presented the two apostles as citizens of Rome (suos ciues), since their bodies were buried in the eternal city.22 This poem is the first we have in which Peter and Paul are presented together: the so-called concordia apostolorum that was popular throughout art and literature in the second half of the fourth century.23 Like Proba’s poem, Damasus’s epigram is part of a long tradition: Vergilian


23 See J.M. Huskinson, Concordia apostolorum. Christian propaganda at Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries. A study in Early Christian iconography and iconology, Oxford, 1982 passim. Huskinson largely ignores poetry, but he does discuss this epigram, see e.g. on p. 89: ‘However, it is the placing by Damasus of an inscription proclaiming the nova sidera in the Basilica apostolorum that must be seen as the unmistakable act of propaganda which underlined the concordia apostolorum.’
references are abundant. Moreover, Peter and Paul are called 'new stars', novâ siderâ: this probably refers to the Dioscuri or Castor and Pollux (who were also represented as stars, the constellation Gemini), the traditional pagan defenders of Rome. Peter and Paul are presented as the new, Christian defenders of the city.24

Several poets were involved in projects that concerned the construction and decoration of churches. Paulinus of Nola (355-431) is famous for his efforts to create a complex for pilgrimage in Nola (modern Cimitile) in honour of the otherwise completely unknown saint Felix.

Figure 3. The Basilica vetus in Nola (tomb of saint Felix behind the third arcade from the left), modern Cimitile.

He decorated his churches with images, a practice that he apologised for in his famous *Carmen* 27. According to Paulinus, the images would divert the minds of the peasants visiting the churches from earthly matters like feasting and eating. Paulinus also added captions in verse to his images. These captions or *tituli* explicitly link poetry and the visual arts as ways of expression that were meant to embellish a message which could also be told in plain prose. The *tituli* were not Paulinus’ invention, however. We also have *tituli* written by Ambrose and a collection of *tituli*, called *Dittochaeon*, by Prudentius. *Tituli* are short poems, in the form of epigrams, which probably elaborated on what could be seen in the accompanying images. Unfortunately, no *titulus* has survived *in situ* with the image it explained. Therefore, the genre of the *tituli* is one of the mostly debated genres of late antique literature.25 The main discussion is about their purpose. The *tituli* were probably depicted high on the wall or in the apse and therefore illegible. Moreover, 85 to 90 percent of the populace in Antiquity was illiterate. Maybe well-informed guides or priests in churches informed visitors about the content of the *tituli*. Moreover, the written word was held in great esteem in Late Antiquity. Therefore, the depiction of a text could even impress illiterate church-goers. The *tituli* were also used in another way: they were exchanged as intellectual gifts in letters between aristocrats (Paulinus included some of them in his letters).

The confined space of this article does not allow for further discussion of Christian poetry, but there is one more fact worth observing – namely that all great Christian poets of the fourth century referred to the apostles: Ambrose in his hymns, but also the most famous early Christian poets Prudentius and Paulinus of Nola in their poetry dedicated to the martyrs.26 The apostles were even mentioned in satirical poetry by

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26 In my dissertation – *Portraying witnesses, The apostles in early Christian art and poetry* (2014) – I discuss all examples of the representation of the apostles in early Christian Greek and Latin poetry and also provide a much more detailed account of what is summarily presented in the following.
the poet Claudian – working at the court of emperor Theodosius at the end of the fourth century – to mock the cult of the saints.27

The apostles in early Christian art

We have seen the role of the apostles in poetry and the emphasis on the concordia duodecim and concordia apostolorum. More or less contemporary to these developments in poetry was the emergence of examples of Christian (figurative) art.28 Most early Christian art derives from a funerary context (catacomb paintings, sarcophagi). Unfortunately, almost no church interiors survive; the only surviving images with apostles from churches are the mural paintings from a house church in Dura Europos, modern Syria, the apse mosaic in the church of Santa Pudentiana in Rome, and the mosaics in the Battistero di San Giovanni in Fonte in the cathedral of Naples. The other remaining mosaics with apostles from our period – two mosaics in the mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome – are also from a funerary context: a private memorial for Constantine’s daughter.


Figure 4. The apse mosaic (heavily restored) in the Santa Pudenziana in Rome, with Christ enthroned, amidst his apostles. The symbols of the four evangelists are depicted in the sky, above the heavenly Jerusalem. *Photo: Centre for Art Historical Documentation, Radboud University Nijmegen (henceforth CKD, RU Nijmegen).*

Most remaining objects of early Christian art are from Rome and its surroundings, but we also have many objects from the rest of Italy, Gaul, Spain, and the Balkans. Little is left from the Eastern part of the empire. Many early Christian artefacts may have been demolished during a period of iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire (especially the period 730-787).  

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The iconography of the earliest surviving works of art is characterized by an emphasis on Jesus Christ, as is the case in poetry of the same period, with the focus on his life and the miracles that he performed. Certain Old Testament scenes are also very popular, e.g. Jonah and the big fish. Some images have Christian as well as pagan connotations, for example the Kriophoros or sheep bearer, an image that functions as a pagan symbol for fortune, but can also be encountered in a Christian context as an image of Christ as the Good Shepherd. This is also explained by the fact that many people probably went to the same craftsmen to produce paintings or sarcophagi. Many scenes were standardized, probably due to the fact that most people would have chosen from a format.30

In the fourth century, Christian imagery became more varied and the apostles had a more prominent position. Still, there are only two main types of images of the apostles: either Peter and Paul alone are depicted, or the twelve together. In both types, Christ is often present as well. Thus we encounter a trend that we have already observed in early Christian poetry, namely the emphasis on the concordia apostolorum or the concordia duodecim.

The apostles are almost always depicted in the same way: they wear a white folded tunic, a *pallium*, and sandals. They are depicted as ancient philosophers. Comparable to the intertextual references that linked early Christian poetry to classical literature (as we saw in the example of Proba above), craftsmen of early Christian art used traditional visualisations to depict the apostles. They do not have individual features or attributes: each man is an anonymous part of the whole group. Even if they seem distinguishable, it is not possible to ascribe particular characteristics to a particular apostle. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is probably the lack of information on the physical appearance of the apostles in early Christian texts.\(^3\) Very recently, the so-called catacombs of Thecla

\(^3\) D.R. Cartlidge – J.K. Elliott, *Art & the Christian apocrypha*, London – New York, 2001, p. 172-235 discuss images of the apostles, focusing on images derived from apocryphal texts; p. 174-176 are devoted to descriptions of the apostles in texts. The physical appearance of the apostles (or other figures) is only rarely hinted at in the biblical canon, see A.J. Malherbe, ‘A physical Description of Paul’, *The Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), p. 170-175, at p. 172. In the apocrypha, the most famous pas-
were discovered in Rome, allegedly containing the first distinctive portraits of Andrew and John and the first iconic images of Peter and Paul.  

The appearance of the apostles is also based on aesthetical concerns: artists often tried to make a symmetrical picture by alternating between the apostles when depicting them with or without a beard. Variation is particularly important in earlier images, while in later images symmetry becomes the most important consideration when depicting the apostles. There is a tendency to add an attribute to each apostle, in most cases a scroll or a book that served as a sign of their learnedness and dignity and possibly also was a nod to their authorship of canonical and apocryphal texts. The attributes indicating the way they died appear much later.

Despite the apostle lists of twelve men in the canonical NT (Mt 10, 2-4; Mk 3, 16-19; Lk 6, 14-16; Act 1, 13), depictions of the apostles did not always consist of twelve men: if space was limited, a smaller number of apostles was depicted. Nevertheless, these images were clearly meant to represent the twelve. If apostles are not central to the meaning of an image, they are often depicted as witnesses to the miracles of Christ: very often, a man is shown behind Christ as he is performing a miracle. This man functions as a witness and as a messenger for people after him who did not witness the event themselves. In most cases an apostle who functions as a witness has no beard. The role of the apostles as witnesses also explains the frequently restricted interest in the exact number of apostles depicted.


34 Id., p. 71.

35 Id., p. 70.
Even Peter and Paul only acquired individual features from the fourth century onwards and not in all images in which they were depicted (e.g. fig. 8). The representation of Paul is the most consistent, probably because his position in (early) Christianity is most univocal: he is the magister or teacher of the Christians. Paul is pre-eminently an apostle who appeals to the intellectual elite. He is therefore depicted as a professor: he is bald, with a pointed beard and a sharp nose. Sometimes, he is clearly modelled on Socrates.

36 Id., p. 47-8.
Paul was rarely depicted before the Constantinian period and only became more important in the second half of the fourth century. The depiction of Peter and Paul together, the most obvious expression of the *concordia apostolorum* idea, was also developed in this period.39

![Image of Concordia apostolorum on a gold glass from fourth century Rome, Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City.](image)

Some scholars have suggested that after Constantine's reign, the middle of the fourth century was another turning point in the history of early Christian art: the Church had first doubted whether images should be allowed in Christian religion (given the Second Commandment), but now decided that they could be used for the Christian cause. Moreover, images were already abundant in the private sphere; thus the Church was most likely adapting to common practice. From this moment onwards, theologians, i.e. the higher clergy, actively engaged in designing imagery, and Christian images became more complex. This meant that greater attention was paid to images of scenes

39 *Bisconti, 'La sapienza',* p. 168-71; cf. footnote 23 above.
and situations that were not literally described in the Bible. For example, images with Peter and Paul surrounding Christ, Christ giving the keys of heaven to Peter – or a scroll depicting his new law – now came to the fore.

This hypothesis is debatable. Certain bishops certainly stimulated the development of early Christian art, as is clear from the examples of the clerical poets Ambrose and Paulinus of Nola. However, it is far from certain that the Church directly controlled early Christian imagery. An indirect influence is more likely: sermons and liturgy naturally affected the Christians who listened to them. Therefore, the ideas of leading Church officials would have influenced indirectly expressions of early Christian culture such as poetry and art.

The only individual apostle who has been frequently depicted in several different scenes is Peter. He already figures on one of the very first

Figure 9. Peter’s water miracle and arrest, Roman sarcophagus, 325-350, Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio Cristiano, Vatican City.

images of Christian art, in the house church of Dura Europos. In this image, showing Peter’s attempt to walk on the waves, Christ is the main figure. Images in which Peter is the most important figure do not occur before the Constantinian period. In that period, three scenes from the life of Peter (known as the Petrine trilogy) became extremely popular: the water miracle – referring to an apocryphal story of Peter who, during his imprisonment, baptized two soldiers with water that he had miraculously procured from a rock –, his arrest – a scene that replaces more explicit depictions of Peter’s martyrdom (cf. p. 106-108) –, and a scene which reminds us both of his denial of Jesus and of his conversation with Christ at the sea of Galilee (Jn 21, 15-19); the scene functioned as an exemplum for Christians and emphasized the remission of sins. On a few other occasions, Peter is depicted also as a teacher.


stable type of Peter in the earliest forms of Christian art as far as his outer appearance is concerned. Only in the second half of the fourth century do two types of fixed representation of the apostle appear: showing him with long, but thin, hair and a long curly beard or with a short beard and a small round face.46

Figure 10. Scene with Christ, Peter (with beard) and a cock, sarcophagus found in the St. Callixtus catacombs, 325-350, Musei Vaticani, Museo pio Cristiano, Vatican City.

The role of non-canonical stories about the apostles in art and poetry

The most popular story about the apostles in early Christianity was the apocryphal story of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome. This story was so well-known that it seems to have been considered as authentic from the outset, even if it was not described in the New Testament. For reasons explained earlier, the bishop of Rome (who had much influence in literary and artistic circles) had a vested interest in promoting this story – although he may well have believed it to be authentic. It is still a matter of debate whether the apostles really died in Rome, but it must be said that the sources are remarkably early. Whatever the outcome of this debate, the most important fact is that the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome was generally accepted. However, it was not depicted in a direct way: it has often been noticed that early Christian art does not include many gruesome images, despite the fact that violent martyr stories were in abundance. Examples of images of the crucifixion of Christ were rare before the year 400.

Figure 11. Magical gemmae with the crucifixion of Christ, third-fourth century, British Museum, London.

48 See in primary sources e.g. Irenaeus, Adversus haereses 3, 3, 2-3 and Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica 2, 25, 7-8.
This has often been explained by the fact that death by crucifixion was considered a shameful death, even more so for the son of God. But Peter and Paul were honoured precisely because they died for the faith. Still, their death as such is never depicted, but only referred to in art. As noted above, Peter’s arrest was depicted frequently; Paul was also sometimes depicted, accompanied by soldiers and awaiting his martyrdom. In most of the cases, Paul’s martyrdom is depicted together with that of Peter.

Figure 12. Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, 359, Museo Storico del Tesoro della Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican City. Peter’s arrest (leading to his martyrdom) is depicted second from the left above, Paul’s martyrdom in the right corner below. Photo: CKD, RU Nijmegen.

The same can be said of the description of the death of Peter and Paul in poetry. The most famous example is probably the twelfth hymn of Prudentius, whom many consider to be the most talented early Christian poet. In his hymn he describes the feast day devoted to Peter and Paul (29th June).

Prudentius explains that both apostles died on the same day, but one year apart, so providing yet another reason for relating their deaths to one another.50 Verses 11-20 and 21-28 are devoted to the death of Peter.

and Paul respectively. Prudentius mentions Nero, probably to emphasize (again) that Peter and Paul died more or less in the same period. Nero has a considerable role in the story about the death of Paul in the apocryphal Martyrium Pauli, part of the Acta Pauli. In the martyrium of Peter in the Acta Petri (30-41), Nero is mentioned in the last section (41). However, he is mostly neglected in poetry.\textsuperscript{51} Although without the horror-like details which are often displayed – apparently much to people’s pleasure – in late antique literature,\textsuperscript{52} the way in which Peter died (on the cross, upside down) is described fairly accurate by Prudentius (Peristephanon 12,11-20).\textsuperscript{53} This richness of detail is not equalled in the visual arts. To indicate his martyrdom, images of Peter’s arrest often show the apostle bearing a cross on the way to his death, but the actual moment of death is never depicted.

In the case of Paul, the location of his death and the sword with which he was beheaded are sometimes depicted on sarcophagi, but as with Peter, the moment of his death is never depicted.\textsuperscript{54} The only aspect of Paul’s martyrdom referred to by Prudentius is that he was beheaded.

Elsewhere, Prudentius emphasizes the differences between Peter and Paul. Another hymn in his collection (Peristephanon 2) is devoted to the famous Roman martyr Lawrence. But Peter and Paul are also mentioned (vv. 461-64):

\begin{quote}
\textit{alter vocator gentium;  
alter, cathedram possidens  
primam, rechulit creditas  
aeternitatis ianuas.}
\end{quote}

‘The one calls the Gentiles, while the other occupies the foremost chair and opens the gates of eternity which were committed to him.’

Paul is the apostle who spread the Word among the gentiles or pagans (cf. 2 Tim 1, 11); this is in accordance with the idea that Paul represent-
ed the gentiles and Peter the Jews in the Christian Church. Peter’s status is described in a more detailed way. He is linked to the Roman church, called the most important (primam) church of Christianity. Like the Church, Peter not only reigns over the earth (vv. 462-3), but also in heaven (vv. 463-4). He is represented as the gatekeeper of heaven.

It appears that this conspicuous function of Peter was receiving more attention in Prudentius’ time. This seems to hint at a general aspect of early Christian art: that it was aimed at a Christian audience. Ideas about Peter were stronger in early Christian society than those about Paul. Moreover, most works of art (at least those that we still have) are from Rome, the city for which the position of Peter was particularly important. The importance of Peter was in most cases indicated by his position next to Christ: sometimes Jesus was depicted presenting a scroll containing his new law. This scene is traditionally called *traditio legis*. It appears difficult to interpret this allegorical image, for which there is no parallel text.

Some images show a text on the scroll saying *Dominus legem dat*, which seems a more appropriate title for the scene. The composition shows Christ proclaiming his new law, with Peter (catching the scroll) and Paul (acclaiming Christ) on his side. Contrary to the traditional interpretation (Christ handing over a scroll to Peter), it has been argued that Christ only shows the law to Peter, because he is standing and the roll is open and (often) in his left hand, whereas in traditional Roman imperial art, laws or other official documents are handed over by someone who is sitting with a closed scroll in his right hand. Probably, the apostles are depicted as authoritative witnesses. The image thus confirms the special position of Peter and Paul, with emphasis on the position of Peter in particular.

55 In verse 473, Prudentius uses the word *princeps* again, but this time to denote the emperor Theodose. In this way, worldly and heavenly power are both mentioned. In Peristephanon 11, 31-32 the episcopal see is referred to: *Una fides uigeat, prisco quae condita templo est, / quam Paulus retinet quamque cathedra Petri.*

56 This is consistent with Mt 16, 19. Other poets who refer to Peter’s special position are Juvenecus (*Evangeliorum libri quattuor* 3, 283-284), Damasus (*Ep.* 4, 2) and, in Greek, Gregory of Nazianzus (*Carmina moralia* 1, 488 or I, 2, 1488 in Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* 37).


58 The city of Ravenna was aware of a tradition of Paul receiving the law, see esp. Uggeri, *San Paolo nell’arte paleocristiana*, p. 177-183.
Except for their martyrdom and position next to Christ in the apostolic college or the *Dominus legem dat* motif, early Christian art offered only a few other scenes that depicted events from the life of Paul and Peter. Thus, of all apocryphal stories circulating in Late Antiquity, only the Petrine trilogy and the martyrdom were frequently depicted: both testify to Peter’s pre-eminent position. One other apocryphal scene is present in both art and poetry: the scene of Peter with the dog of Simon Magus (*Acta Petri* 9), which is found five times on sarcophagi. In poetry it is referred to only once, in Commodianus’ *Carmen apologeticum* 626.59 However, the geographical and temporal distance between the appearance of the scene in both media of art and poetry and the apparent lack of popularity of the poet Commodianus suggest that art did not depend on the poetical version of the story.

Most poets, especially in the second half of the fourth century, did know at least some of the apocryphal stories. Paulinus of Nola, for example, refers to the missionary regions that were visited by lesser known apostles like Philip and Lebbaeus, but also those visited by Matthew and Thomas (*Carmen* 19, 81-3). Paulinus also refers to Andrew’s mission and death in Patras, in accordance with the Acts of Andrew (*Carmen* 27, 406-10). We also have a hymn devoted to Andrew, attributed to Damasus but probably not written by him.60 Ambrose, bishop of Milan, states that John survived a cauldron filled with boiling oil (hymn 6, 25-32), a legend already attested in a work by Tertullian (*praes. her.* 36, 3). Paulinus of Nola, again, refers to the apocryphal acts of John in which a story is told about John chasing Diana out of Ephesus (*carmen* 19, 95; cf. *Acta Johannis* 37-45). The only poet to mention apocryphal stories who lived earlier is Commodianus. He refers to two rare stories: apart from the story of Peter with the dog, he mentions Paul’s conversation with a lion (*Car-
men apologeticum 627-628; Acta Pauli 6), and a child of five months old speaking to Peter (Carmen apologeticum 627-630; Acta Petri 15).61

Conclusion

Both poetry and art in Late Antiquity had a restricted repertoire of stories about the apostles. The concordia duodecim (unity among the twelve apostles) and concordia apostolorum (unity between Peter and Paul) were popular concepts in both media. Especially in the visual arts, Peter as an individual apostle had a more prominent position than Paul.

The other apostles had a minor role, but they received slightly more attention in poetry than in the visual arts. In poetry, at least some stories about them were told, but in the visual arts they were not recognised as individual apostles until the year 400. Although the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, which told stories about them that were not in the Bible, were very popular, most stories did not make it into poetry and art. Poets who wanted to devote a poem to one particular apostle had to use some apocryphal material: a necessity due to a lack of information in the canon. But only few poems devoted to individual apostles were written before the fifth century.

If we look at the situation from another point of view, departing from the non-biblical repertoire of early Christian art, we see that a few apocryphal stories are depicted more frequently, especially those that depict Peter (his arrest and the water miracle). Some allegorical scenes do not have an equivalent poetical description, such as the Dominus legem dat motif, although they are few in number. In poetry, by contrast, a greater variety of apocryphal stories about the apostles are used, but still only incidentally, whereas in early Christian art some other stories – different from those that were popular in poetry, except for the martyrdom of Peter and Paul – were depicted quite often. Poets may have been better informed about the variety of Christian traditions than those who ordered and designed images, but we must not forget that many Christian artefacts have been lost. Unfortunately, we know only very little about the circumstanc-

61 However, it cannot be decided if Commodianus knew the whole of the Acta Petri and Acta Pauli, see Schneemelcher, Neutestamentliche Apokryphen. II. Apostolisches, Apokalypsen und Verwandtes, p. 245; cf. ID., p. 197. For modern editions of Commodianus see J.-M. Pointsotte, Commodien. Instructions (Budé, 392), Paris, 2009 and I. Martin, Commodianus: Instructionum libri duo – Carmen de duobus populis (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 128), Turnhout, 1960.
es in which art was produced and so it may be that the apocryphal stories were not as popular as sometimes has been thought, at least not among the elite who read poetry and commissioned Christian art.

Although stories about the apostles were used only sparingly in late antique poetry and art, early Christian culture laid the foundations of an artistic tradition. Originally firmly bound to traditional forms, as was the case with Proba, Christians soon found a way to express their ideas in a language and imagery of their own. It was in this late antique or early Christian culture that later generations (like the writers of the *Virtutes apostolorum*) ultimately found their inspiration.