CHRISTIANISATION ET IMAGES
4 - LE DOMAINE PRIVE

CHRISTIAN IMAGES IN THE HOME

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Images chrétiennes dans l'habitat privé

Cet article traite de la fonction des thèmes de l'imagier chrétien en contexte domestique, en se concentrant sur les images permanentes : mosaïques, peintures murales et sculptures architecturales. Après identification, trois catégories principales peuvent être distinguées dans ces images : celles associées au rituel, celles utilisées pour protéger, ou encore celles pour indiquer le statut et l'identité du propriétaire. On constate que, dans l'habitat antique tardif, les images chrétiennes mises en œuvre faisaient appel à un choix très individualisé, mais ne s'en adressaient pas moins à un large public (visiteurs). La relation complexe du domaine privé au spectacle public se traduit d'ailleurs souvent par des images qui résistent aux catégories interprétatives modernes, parfois trop faciles. [Trad. de la Rédaction.]

John Chrysostom marveled that the faithful so loved the bishop Meletios that they set up images of him in their homes, and impressed that image on rings, seals and bowls! Theodoret reported that images of Simeon Stylites the Elder were hung on Roman shop-fronts as protection against evil. And even Sidonius Apollinaris could laconically report that in the sumptuous villa of Pontius Leontius of Bordeaux, between the weaving chamber and a cozy living room, lay an apartment decorated with scenes from the Old Testament.

This paper addresses this phenomenon of Christian domestic images. It is a phenomenon whose ubiquity seems assured by texts like those quoted above, but for which we have very little clear-cut physical evidence. The best evidence is, in fact, textual, and that textual evidence often seems to describe portable objects – panel paintings, rings, pilgrim's tokens and textiles. These objects are rarely found in situ and thus practically all the extant physical examples are disjecta membra, sat in museum cases, whose domestic context can be only guessed at. Thus the discussions of Christian images in the home have largely been

footnotes to discussions of the objects qua objects, that is, to discussions of icons, pilgrimage tokens, phylacteries, and textiles, or to the objects' iconographic content – images of the Virgin or so-called magical symbols. The "domestic" aspect of Christian domestic images has thus been understandably somewhat sidestepped.

This paper departs from a different corpus of evidence, namely Christian images actually known to have derived

from houses and thus from images found in situ—wall paintings, mosaic floors and architectural sculpture. That is, it focuses on Christian images permanently inserted into the home. In doing so, it seeks to accomplish two goals: to better understand how Christian images operated within specifically domestic contexts, and to expand our understanding of the many functional roles such images served. Beneath the “phenomenon” of Christian images in the home lurks a multitude of functional phenomena, in which Christian images were not only used as ritual objects and agents of protection, but also as statements of Christian affiliation and vehicles for the construction of personal identity.

I. DEFINING “CHRISTIAN” AND “HOUSE”

The history of Christian archaeology is littered with announcements of the discovery of Christian domestic images, announcements later generations of scholars have often dismissed. The grounds for dismissal are typically one of two reasons: the image in question cannot be shown to be discernably “Christian,” or the space in question cannot be proven to be a house.

The perils of the scholarly quest for Christian domestic images are most evident in the excavations of Aquileia. Here no less than five domestic “oratories” were identified, three on the basis of the mosaic imagery5. The “Oratorio con la Scena di Pesca” featured a fishing scene, thought to represent the Christian faithful, while a carpet of medallions containing animals were interpreted as the earthly paradise. The “Oratorio del Buon Pastore” featured a central image of a shepherd, flanked by sheep and goats and holding a syrinx, and was assumed to represent Christ as the Good Shepherd (fig. 1); while the so-called “Oratorio del Buon Pastore dall’Abito Singolare,” depicted the only likely Christian shepherd, here clad pants and tunic, a hand raised in blessing (fig. 2). As later scholarship showed, all of these rooms were probably reception or dining rooms, not oratories, and only the Buon Pastore dall’Abito Singolare has probable Christian imagery6.

Why these mosaics should ever have been considered Christian is due principally to their local context: Aquileia

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the home was the sole preserve of pre-Nicene Christianity, while post-Nicene activity was located in public basilicas.

Similar historiographic temptations have long been at work in Ostia, with its close ties to Rome, its rich corpus of domestic architecture, and its presumed early and numerous Christian communities. It also provides several useful lessons for distinguishing a house from other sorts of buildings. The "Edificio con Opus Sectile," located outside the Porta Marina, encapsulates the problem (fig. 3). The building varies from a typical peristyle domus: set at the terminus of the decumanus, which literally opens into one of the house's reception rooms, the large L-shaped complex consisted of a raised portico flanked by rooms on three sides. Probable western and southern wings were seemingly destroyed—had they existed the plan would have seemed more house-like. The extant northern wing contained the large hall with opus sectile decoration, including a nimbate figure with long beard and hair, his hand raised in the two-fingered sign of either speech or blessing. The figure seems an astonishing prefiguration of the bearded Christ maestus domini of the 5th and 6th centuries and was identified as such by its excavator, Giovanni Becatti, who interpreted the complex as a Christian collegium. Alfred Frazer countered that Ostia's collegia must be have been defunct by the later 4th century and claimed the building was a house, as has Federico Guidobaldi, while Paul Zanker contested the Christ identification, noting similarities with contemporary images of philosophers, and returned to the notion of a public philosophical school.

The domestic identification is just as thorny as the identification of the putative Christ, and hinges around the absence of bedrooms and other "private quarters," the very public access to the building, and the fact that as much as a third of the complex may be missing. On the other hand, new work has suggested a far more vibrant commercial and social Ostia than heretofore suspected, and thus the notion of a 4th century collegium cannot be dismissed out of hand. The controversies surrounding the "Edificio con Opus Sectile" throw into sharp relief the difficulties of parsing a clear separation between "domestic" and "public" or "collective" buildings in all Roman periods, and the high stakes involved in such

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12. D. Boin, The Late Antique Landscape of Roman Ostia, Forthcoming.
attributions – Christian club, Christian mansion, pagan-revivalist strong-hold – when putative Christian images are involved.

While listing the troubles that confront a study of domestic Christian images, we should not neglect its equally troubled textual corpus. The textual sources mentioning such images have typically been plumbed as though they were mere descriptions. Rather, the most oft-cited sources – Theodoret’s description of Roman shopkeepers with images of Simeon Stylites, John Chrysostom’s mention of Christian images and crosses proliferating in Christian homes, the Vita Symeonis’ miracles before domestic images of the saint – form a subtle but important trope13. The ubiquity of Christian triumph is described through a public/private binary – the public church or holy man, surrounded by a constellation of Christian homes and families14. The tableau of the saint’s image or the Christian cross in the house, attended upon by the Christian family or individual makes concrete the physical permeation of Christian belief, or the fame of a particular holy man, into society’s smallest unit – the home. These carefully constructed images of ubiquity should not be taken to describe real ubiquity.

These difficulties in parsing our subject matter need not only point in negative directions. The difficulties distinguishing the ‘Christian’ from the ‘pagan’, the house from other spaces suggests a similarly ambiguous ancient world, in which “Christian” and ‘domestic’ were not the most important or at least not the most ready, categories in which people consumed images. Many of the houses containing Christian images discussed here also displayed ‘pagan’ imagery – Rape of Europa and Bellerophon at the Lullingstone villa with its chapel, or even erotic mythological love scenes in Villa Fortunatus with its blatantly Christian dominus15. Sometimes the pagan images were older, retained in the more recent ‘Christian’ phases, other times they were contemporary. In each case, pagan and Christian images were both visible. Scholars typically explain such pairings as evidence for ‘secularization’ of pagan imagery and its consumption by Christians merely aesthetic or antiquarian, or as evidence of syncretic beliefs16. But as Christian authors, particularly in the 4th and 5th centuries make clear, there was a host of ways of reading ‘pagan’ texts and images as a Christian – as use, negative exempla, as a muse to inspire Christian hermeneutics, as aesthetically beautiful objects17. The pairing of ‘Christian’


15. On Lullingstone, see below; on Villa Fortunatus, see below and M. Guardia Pons, *Los mosaicos de la antigüedad tardía en Hispania*, Barcelona, 1992, pp. 91-96.


and ‘pagan’ images in the domestic sphere again questions an easy definition of ‘Christian’ domestic images.

Lurking behind many of these problems is the question of how images were viewed in the domestic sphere. As has been long noted, all religious groups in the late ancient world shared a common image vocabulary. The distinction between a ‘pagan’ Good Shepherd and a ‘Christian’ Good Shepherd, long discussed by art historians, was most often made by the viewers themselves and the hermeneutic baggage each viewer carried with them, that is, their intent to view subjects in certain ways. This intentionality would have been particularly present in homes – homes that were themselves the product of individual families and their tastes. At the same time, homes were public spaces, open to a much wider set of audiences, and thus viewers, than the modern term ‘private’ conveys. Images in the late ancient house were produced by highly individualized choices, yet were also consumed by a wide range of viewers on whom the householders might be expected to push their own intentions and interpretations. This complex of viewers would have been particularly acute in late antiquity as the religious perspectives of both family and visitors multiplied. As will be discussed throughout this essay, the need to cater to individual and general viewers often produced imagery that resists modern interpretative categories and easy interpretation.

II. IMAGES, RITUAL AND THE HOME

The presence of religious imagery in traditional Greco-Roman houses – from the sacro-idyllic landscapes of Boscoreale to the Bacchic themes in the villa of Piazza Armerina – is rarely interpreted as evidence for concomitant rituals in those spaces. Conversely, the discovery of Christian images in a house often results in the suggestion that the space in question functioned as a church or oratory. Of late, archaeologists have been more cautious in their assumptions, but the tendency remains and reveals yet another important scholarly assumption: Christian images don’t only indicate religious affiliation they also indicate ritual practice. Belief and practice are thus often assumed to be inextricably linked, far more so than in our interpretation of Greco-Roman paganism.

To my knowledge, only two sites preserve Christian images in a domestic space probably used for Christian ritual – the villa of Lullingstone, Britain and a townhouse in Alexandria, Egypt. At Lullingstone, the much-discussed room is a small church built into the villa’s

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22. The exception seems to be late Roman Romano-British mosaics, for which see below.
north side in the later years of the 4th century\(^{23}\) (figs. 4-5). Entering from the outside (another, secondary entrance was probably through the villa itself) the visitor would pass through two vestibules, in the second of which s/he would be immediately faced with a large chi-rho. The symbol was repeated on the south wall of the church itself, visible from the vestibule and thus guiding the viewer into the complex. The main church room was covered with paintings, all but the western wall of which were heavily damaged. The western wall paintings, like the chi-rhos, respond to the viewer's own experience: depicting a group of well-dressed worshippers, their arms raised in prayer, the painted congregation imitated the actions of the real one (fig. 6). The church's side walls contained figurative scenes, but the fragmentary remains could not be made to yield any of the stock Old and New Testament imagery of the period, both because of their poor state of preservation and because it is very likely that such scenes were not depicted. Rather the room seems to have been covered with a more eclectic choice of Christian imagery, seemingly of the villa-owner's own making.

Jumping forward to the 6th century and east Alexandria, a combination workshop/residence located in the city center was organized around a long, narrow courtyard (16 x 3 m) (fig. 7)\(^{24}\). Along the south wall of the courtyard at its mid-point was painted a large (1.5 m preserved, possibly 2 m total width) image of the Virgin enthroned holding an infant Christ, flanked by an archbishop and donor or saint on the left, a tableau which may have been repeated on the right (fig. 8). On the other side of the courtyard were found two iron brackets, presumably for lamps, whose placement exactly framed the paintings opposite. The excavators thus concluded that the Virgin and Child image were the focus of veneration by occupants of the house.

These two instances of permanent images used in ritual contexts have little in common. Lullingstone is an eccentric, very personal monument: one of a handful of Christian buildings from late antique Britain and set away in the countryside of Kent, it bespeaks the personal religiosity of a devout individual or family. In Britain in the late 4th century, the chi-rho seems to have been particularly potent sign of not only Christian affiliation

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also of a trendy Romanitas25. Its prominent, repeated use at Lullingstone to guide a visitor into the villa church, combined with the undecipherable narrative paintings, loudly proclaimed the individuality and piety of its patron. The over-large painting of the virgin and child in Alexandria, on the other hand, references the world of public Christianity. So imposing is the image and iconography for its small space that the excavators posited, probably rightly, that it copied the apse decoration of a local Alexandrian church26. By the 6th century, the images that adorned the great public basilicas had come to form a canon of Christian images. As is indicated by the imagery from pilgrimage ampullae, the apse decoration and other imagery from famous public basilicas might be copied and widely disseminated for use in more personal religious rites27. The images from public basilicas, in other words, assumed a holy power and were thus subject to appropriation in the private sphere.

That the reverse trend might also be true is suggested by the history of icon worship. Textual sources, like the above-mentioned Chrysostom encomium to bishop Meletios of Antioch or the Life of Symeon Styliites the Younger, seem to place the earliest documented veneration of holy images in the domestic sphere. Some scholars have taken this to mean that icon worship began as a private domestic rite, perhaps as a development of pagan practice, and from there moved to the public basilicas28. Judith Herrin has even credited women with the innovation, noting that many of the protagonists in these stories are women, although her conclusions have been hotly contested29. The only in-situ archaeological evidence for domestic image worship is the Alexandria fresco, for portable wooden images, possibly the most common medium for such objects, do not readily survive in archaeological contexts. We are thus reliant on the textual evidence, with the problems which as factual witnesses have been outlined above.

One the one hand, there seems little reason to doubt that devout Christians prayed before images in the home and that those images took many forms. The Alexandria fresco seems a culmination of a practice ultimately rooted in pagan domestic shrines, statuettes and panel "icons", and whose Christian expression can now only be sensed from out-of-situ portable objects like pilgrimage ampullae bearing images of Minas or Synneus, or portable reliquaries carrying images like the Sancta Sanctorum casket. On the other hand, some caution might be in order in assuming that such veneration necessarily moved from house to basilica. For

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26. Ibid., p. 263
one, the scholarly discussion has focused on portable images, thus reflecting a continued tendency to restrict conceptions of the ‘icon’ to wooden panel paintings and other portable objects. Late ancient Christians recognized no such distinctions and understood fresco and mosaic portraits in churches, panel paintings, and other kinds of images as equivalent, all reproductions of holy persons that might serve as agents for epiphany and connective tissue with the divine. Worship and miracles before this broader class of images appears in our sources in both church and home more or less at the same time, that is, during the later fifth and sixth centuries in the eastern empire. We should probably thus understand the use of devotional images in the home as part of the proliferation of Christian imagery of all kinds during this period.

III. PROTECTING THE HOME

Domestic rituals took many forms; Eucharistic rites and prayers occur to us first because they have a collective, public church counterpart, but other rituals were doubtless more common, and for the occupants of the house, more critical. Rites of protection—to guard against evil spirits, the evil eye, and other divine bringers of catastrophes big and small—were as critical to the fabric of the house as were its walls and doors. Scholars have often classed these rites as ‘magical’, a term that, for a variety of reasons is less than helpful. ‘Magic’ in the ancient world, and even in the eyes of early Christian writers, was not such a particular type of ritual as a moral container in which to put suspect ritual. Legally, it was restricted to rituals meant to inflict harm or provide its recipient with an unfair advantage—in love, in court, in the fields—while rhetorically it was used to lambast private rituals, nocturnal rituals, and rituals performed by women or slaves. Thus, rituals and ritual objects used to protect the home—the phallus over the door of the Pompeian house as we shall see, the cross over the door of a Syrian house—might be classed as ‘magical’ by some or as pious gestures by others. To term such practices ‘magical’ also artfully separates them from other kinds of practices which might have institutional counterparts, but to which they are fundamentally and structurally homologous. To light lamps and before the image of the Virgin and Child in an Alexandria home has the same ritual intention as carving an image of the cross, a Solomon’s knot and a Psalm over one’s door.

The in-situ material evidence for the protective use of images is spotty, but has some interesting characteristics, particularly in its iconography and domestic topography. The ‘images’ most readily identifiable as protective actually symbols—the cross, the chi-rho, or other symbols such as Solomon’s Knot or the swastika. These symbols typically appear at window and door lintels, jambs, or possibly in pavements near doorways. Indeed, it is in part from these liminal locations that their protective functions are evident: the doors and windows of buildings are their orifices, points of contact with the outside world, and thus the weakest point in its spiritual defenses where prying eyes, disease, and ill-intentions might seize. For instance, a set of four stone window grilles from a so-called Triconch Palace in Butrint, Albania, included two that contained the chi-rho motif embedded in a lunette (fig. 9). These windows originally stood higher in the inner wall of the triconch dining room, made invisible to visitors from the exterior by the covering wall of a portico below (fig. 10). While they could have been put once one entered the hall, it seems they were principly oriented towards an invisible viewership, the daemones against which they protected.

The largest corpus of such protective symbols comes from Syrian villages of the northern Massi. To a large


32. E.g. H. Maguire, Magic and geometry, cit. (n. 4); Id., Garments pleasing to God, cit. (n. 4); E. Maguire, H. Maguire and M. Duncan-Flowers, Art and Holy Powers, cit. (n. 4).


degree, this is a result of the particular material and preservation of these houses: Syrian village houses were built almost entirely of ashlar masonry, and the protective images and inscriptions were carved into the stone itself. Since so many of these villages lie more or less intact, image and/or inscription can be often paired with a certain or likely domestic context. Unfortunately, very few of these villages have been subject to modern excavation, and the evidence is recorded only in the various corpuses of inscriptions made by foreign missions in the early

Fig. 9 – Butrint, “Triconch Palace”, window grilles, early 5th c. (W. Bowden et al., The domus and the Triconch Palace, in W. Bowden and R. Hodges (dir.), Excavations in the Triconch Palace, Oxford, 2011, fig. 2.55).

Fig. 10 – Butrint, “Triconch Palace”, computer reconstruction of entrance from peristyle, showing window grilles in situ (W. Bowden et al., The domus and the Triconch Palace, in W. Bowden and R. Hodges (dir.), Excavations in the Triconch Palace, Oxford, 2011, fig. 2.34).
20th century. Often, these record only the text of the inscription, not its context, although sometimes a brief assessment of location – house, tomb, tower – appears. An overview of Prentice’s catalogue of the Greek inscriptions, which although not the most plentiful corpus nonetheless provides some helpful contextual information, indicates the ubiquity of the Syrian phenomenon.

The images consist typically of crosses, chi-rho’s and other symbols, which are often used to frame an inscription. While the texts obviously attracted the attention of the epigraphers, thus biasing what evidence was recorded, the unity of image and text in these Syrian houses is a useful reminder of how words and images might work in concert, particularly in protective rites. One inscription from Anasurtha states this as fact: “When we engrave your cross, O Christ the God…we escape every form of wickedness” (fig. 11). The cross, the act of engraving the cross, and the reformulation of Psalm 56:7 here all perform the same work, thus reduplicating the protective intent.

In general, the inscriptions praise God, and call on Christ’s help for protection from evil for the house’s denizens. In 6-Bahr, for instance, three houses bore the same inscription from Psalm 121:8: “The Lord shall preserve thy coming and going, from this time forth for evermore. Amen.” Similar to the protectants against the evil eye and against jealousy is the call for just treatment at the hands of one’s neighbors. At Katür, inscription on a house dated to 336, reads: “Christ of God, Help (us)! (There is) one God only. Thalasis built (this). Whatever you say, friend, (may that be) the same to you twofold. In the year 385. Enter, O Christ.” The phrase “whatever you say may that also be to you” seems a paraphrase of Matthew 7:12 but the sentiment is echoed in both the Old Testament and by various pagan writers. In a Syrian domestic context, the identical phrasing also appears on a pagan house in which the inhabitants call upon Zeus to guarantee its efficacy.

While there is no doubt that this use of Christian texts and images to protect houses extended beyond Syria, the size and cohesion of the Syrian corpus calls for some specific comment. Of particular importance is the context of these protective image/texts – namely, the rural village. Pre-modern rural villages, as Le Roy Ladurie’s study of Montaillou vividly describes, were closely-packed small worlds which, although they might show a unified front to outsiders, were rife with internal tensions – jealousy, petty slights, and conflict over limited resources. In late antique Syria, the social tensions between landowners and farmers, city merchants and locals, even husbands and wives could boil over into public quarrels. In these villages of the northern Massif, houses are packed cheek to jowl, and while internal courtyards and occasional precinct walls screened some activities from view, the houses’ many windows, and multi-story arrangements would have meant constant surveillance from one’s neighbors. The vulnerability of the house to prying eyes and thus to evil intentions, envy and neighborly malice rings out.

38. Of c. 300 inscriptions in the 1908 volume, some 30 are listed as coming from definite or likely domestic contexts.
39. IGLS 298.
42. Ibid., no. 116.
43. Ibid., no. 114.
46. Cf. the excavations at Débès: J.-P. Sodini et al., Débès (Syrie du Nord), Campagnes I-III (1976-1978), Recherches sur l’habitat rural, in Syria, 57, 1, 1980, pp. 1-181; 183-301; 303-304; and A. Sitz, Débès: A Late Antique Village in Context, Unpublished seminar paper. Thanks to the author for sharing this prior to publication.
from these inscriptions, placed, as they were, at the very doors and windows that admitted evil. Christian texts and images would thus have played a particularly important protective role in these rural village contexts.

The combined use of both clearly Christian symbols – the chi-rho and the cross – with other kinds of symbols – the circle, the rosette, the swastika – in many of the Syrian house inscriptions raises the question of how other geometric patterns found in houses should be read. Domestic mosaic pavements, such as the House of Eustolios in Kourion (discussed more fully below) often included so-called Solomon’s Knots, swastikas and other symbols with possible apotropaic properties. As the fragmentary remains of Egyptian textiles indicates, the fabrics that served as doors, window dressings, and wall decorations would also have been covered with interlaced circles, simple crosses and other symbols that in other contexts might have magical content. Henry Maguire has emphasized the power and ubiquity of this symbolic language in the domestic sphere, and suggested that the very multiplication of these signs, rather than diluting their signification actually increased their protective powers. Yet as he also admits, sometimes a knot is just a knot, that is, symbols might have a plurality of meanings, or, given their ubiquity as part of decorative motifs, no meaning at all. How are we to know the difference, or more importantly, how did ancient viewers?

The question raises again the problem of viewing inside the ancient house and how, precisely, such images were thought to work. Was it enough that the symbol be placed in its desired place, that is, was the principal agent the intention of its patron/maker, or was it necessary that other viewers understood its meaning? Did a rosette or Solomon’s Knot on a doorframe do its work simply by virtue of an intention-filled act of making, or did visitors also need to recognize it as potent symbol? The evidence supports both scenarios. The Syrian houses insistently (although not always) use text – typically quotations from the Psalms or simple invocations of Christ to help – to make precise the protective meaning of crosses and other symbols through a ritual of protection that addressed both outside viewers as well as the invisible world. Likewise, the Solomon’s knots that appear in the House of Eustolios surround an inscription that reads “Enter to your good fortune and may your coming bless the house.” The protective function of otherwise ambiguous images was made specific to outsiders through textual framing. Yet in most other domestic contexts, the knot, the swastika, the spiral all appear without comment, heavy or empty with meaning depending on the viewer’s perspective. In these cases, their intention is irrecoverably lost to us. Were they meant to act protectively, it would seem that, in these instances, it was enough that the homeowner caused them to made and placed at doors and windows for them to do their protective work.

IV. CHRISTIAN IMAGES, STATUS AND IDENTITY

One of the few scholarly consensus about early Christian images is that they are principally about religion, that is, Christian images reflect Christian piety, ritual practice, hopes for the afterlife, or connections to the divine. Christian images in the home, however, demand to be examined from other perspectives. The Roman house was a machine for the production and maintenance of status, crafting and manipulating a particular image of self and family through domestic space and imagery. Late antique houses were still very much Roman in this sense, and performed the same self-fashioning on behalf of their owners as those of Pompeii had done centuries earlier. Some Christian images, when examined within their domestic and/or local contexts, seem principally intended to make claims about the homeowner’s learnedness and power. Perhaps surprisingly, proclaiming the homeowner’s Christian affiliation is not always central, but rather these Christian images assume a variety of other roles, from discursive agents to symbols of seigniorial power.

Some of the best candidates for such an interpretation might also seem the most unlikely, for they have been typically plumbed for complex cultic readings. The mosaic floors unearthed in two Romano-British villas, at Hinton St. Mary and Frampton, both in Dorset and both dating to the middle of the 4th century, contain the only Christian imagery found on domestic floor mosaics. Neither villa was ever fully excavated, and the Frampton mosaics are preserved only in an 18th century drawing. The Hinton St. Mary pavement is divided into two unequal portions separated by two short walls, but seemingly laid as a piece (fig. 12).  

The smaller section depicts scenes of stags fleeing dogs and Bellerophon killing the chimaera. The larger portion is organized around a central roundel depicting a young man clad in a toga, his head framed by a chi-rho and flanked by two pomegranates (fig. 13). Surrounding this central images are semi-circular frames containing trees, more stages hunted by dogs, while in the corners are four bust portraits of men. The central image is generally, although not universally, thought to be Christ, while the corner images are variously identified as the personification of the winds or the four evangelists. Further excavation and geophysics has still left its domestic context uncertain, but the fact that the covering figural imagery left no undecorated space left for couches, and that the imagery itself has two different planed viewing points has argued against its use as a dining room.

The Frampton mosaic's context is slightly better understood: the villa's main entrance was through a main fronting corridor, whose two ends were capped by two wings, or "end rooms", a common arrangement in Romano-British villas (fig. 14). The north "end-room" contained a mosaic depiction of Neptune, while the south included a vestibule depicting Dionysius and his panther, flanked by images of men hunting stags, and separated from the main apsed room by a boarder of pellae—a motif that resembled an axe and shield and which has thus been read as having apotropaic qualities (fig. 15). Once inside the room the visitor pass over another mosaic boarder containing an image of cupid and half of an inscription (the other half is lost) reading, "...and no service unless you will it, Cupid." Both cupid and the inscription are oriented towards a viewer already in the main room. The central roundel of the main room showed Bellerophon atop Pegasus killing the chimaera, and was flanked by four scenes of mythological loves, three of which survive—Venus and Adonis (or Selene and Endymion), Attis and Sagaris (or Paris and Oenone) and possibly Venus and Cupid. Three bands of mosaic marked the cord of the apse: the first contained an inscription, "the head of Neptune, whose dark blue figure is flanked by two dolphins, is

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55. [Incipit unus perfecit illum / si di]gnare cupidio.
allotted the domain stirred by the winds, the second hand contained the aforementioned mask of Neptune with a band of dolphins emerging from his mouth, and the third, on the chord, a row of leafy spirals framed the chi-rho symbol. The apse itself was paved with geometric motifs, including Solomon’s Knots, and a central image of a kantharos, or two-handled cup.

These pavements have been subject to decades of analysis, typically by “de-coding” the pavements’ individual iconographic components using contemporary texts and sarcophagi. The Bellerophon image has been read as the triumph over evil, the hunting of stags the struggle of the soul, Dionysius as an image of immortality, the mythological lovers the relationship between humans and the divine, all of which are overseen by the ultimate Christian triumph, represented by the Christ or the chi-rho, placed in a central position. Scholars have thus read them as statements on temptation and salvation, as representing “Gnostic” theologies, or, on the contrary, as evidence for the Romano-British elite’s “lukewarm” Christian commitments.

Before endorsing any one of these interpretations, some very basic facts might repay consideration. The two sets of pavements have important commonalities that, I would argue, encouraged comparison, not only by modern scholars but also by their original patrons. Stylistic similarities suggest they were laid by the same group of mosaic craftsmen, the so-called Durnovarian School, employed by various villa owners around the region’s major town of Dorchester. The similarities are so great that some have even suggested the same craftsman was at work. They contain the only two instances of a chi-rho in a domestic mosaic pavement in Britain, and one of only three extant

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in the Roman world. Finally, the two villas lie less than 30km apart. In short, it seems very likely that these two very unusual projects were commissioned in dialogue with one another, possibly in the context of competitive learned exchange that lay at the heart of the creation of elite status. In short, it seems likely that the viewing context for these mosaics was one of comment, response, and dialogue.

If the modern analysis of these images has gone astray it has been in assuming the presence of a single meaning that only wants decoding to deduce its substance. Rather, I would suggest that Frampton and Hinton St. Mary were deliberately composed to resist straightforward analysis and provoke debate between the dominus and his visitors peers. A number of elements in their composition suggest this: both sets of mosaics are composed around multiple viewpoints a fact that has puzzled modern scholars who have tried, unsuccessfully, to extract room function from viewing perspective. The mosaics’ numerous orientations (two at Hinton St. Mary, three at Frampton) require the viewer to move around to properly view the whole assemblage; they are interactive by design. Second, while the inscriptions on Syrian houses restrict meaning, the inscriptions at Frampton are teases. The fragmentary couplet on Cupid might be read as lighthearted commentary on the power of love, even over the servants, while the Neptune inscription might represent an ekphrastic musing over the mosaic itself, but above all they do not tell us what the mosaics mean. Rather, they model the acts of looking and interpreting and encourage viewers to do the same. Finally, there is the plurality of images themselves: at Hinton St. Mary is combined Bellerophon, Christ (?), Seasons/Winds and hunts; while at Frampton the viewer was presented with Dionysius, hunts, Cupid, Bellerophon again, mythological lovers, Neptune, chi-rho. In selecting so many scenes and symbols with so many possible signifiers, the patrons produced a veritable tangle of meanings. Those who argue for syncretistic or “Gnostic” meaning claim these multiple references reflect these groups’ tendency towards allegorical readings and arcane connections. But the allegorical reading of a Plotinus or Porphyry is teleological, as quotations from Homer or Plato are insistently forced towards a single interpretative end – the illumination of the Good, the final ascent of the soul. Very much unlike the texts that have been used to interpret them, these images, embedded in symmetrical compositions around central motifs, fail to push interpretation in one direction. Rather, their very composition encourages open-ended connections around their central images of Christ (?) and Bellerophon, respectively.

Promoting discourse was one road to status, but there were more straightforward ways, ways in which Christian affiliation might play a simpler role. Two villas in Hispania suggest variants on a process. At Villa Fortunatus, near

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Lleida, a large peristyle villa was remodeled during the later 4th century to include an entryway audience hall, new baths, and centered on one side of the peristyle, a raised exedra, carved out from earlier cubilcusa (fig. 16)⁶⁴. The rectangular room seems to have acted as a kind of viewing pavilion, possibly for dining, from which to look out over the garden, but the mosaic was oriented to be seen from that same garden. The pavement's center is covered with images of bounteous nature - fruit, legumes, ducks, rabbits, vases sprouting vines, frolicking putti, while at the head of an acanthus bordure appears the dominus' name, "FORTUNATUS," bisected by a chi-rho with alpha and omega (fig. 17)⁶⁴. The chi-rho may be a sign that Fortunatus is a Christian, but just as importantly, in the context of seigniorially-derived abundance, also a symbol of power that enhances and specifies the landowner's power to grant prosperity. If the images of fruit baskets and small animals are additionally interpreted as xenia, or host-gifts provided to guests⁶⁵, the chi-rho reinforces Fortunatus' claims to beneficence. Thus, the Christian symbol not only marks religious affiliation, but surrounded by images of plenty and placed, literally, at the head of the villa, it also reinforces particular aspects of seigniorial power⁶⁶.

Somewhat more complex is the much-debated villa of Centelles, outside of Tarragona⁶⁷. The main entrance to the L-shaped villa is a domed hall, which in turn provided access to an impressive tetracchon room next door (fig. 18). The dome was covered with mosaics in three tiers separated by a thick band of decorative scales: the lowest depicted hunting scenes, the second Old and New Testament scenes, and the third heavily damaged images of seated figures flanked by attendants, all backed in gold tesserae and separated by personifications of the seasons. The apex of the dome is almost entirely gone, but was also laid with gold tesserae and traces of two heads are still visible (fig. 19). The domed room and indeed, the entire later phase of the villa were never completed, and thus the room lacks paving. Centered beneath the dome is a small subterranean room, whose chronological relationship with the building above is hotly debated.

The first comprehensive study of Centelles by Helmut Schlunk and Theodor Hauschild took the use of gold tesserae, the enthroned figures and the general splendor of the program to indicate an imperial sponsor, identified as the emperor Constans, said to have been murdered in Spain in 350 A.D. The subterranean chamber was thus identified as a tomb and whole thus an imperial mausoleum⁶⁸. A more recent conference organized by Javier Arce revisited these conclusions; a re-survey of the ceramic evidence pointed to a date in the later 4th or even early 5th century for the final

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64. On the mosaic and its context, see M. Guardia Pons, Los mosaicos, cit. (n. 15), pp. 96-98; D. Fernández-Galiano, Mosaicos romanos del Convento Clarisas del Santuario de Centelles, Zaragoza, 1987, pp. 86-87.
65. Cf. ibid., p. 87.
phase of the villa; the function of the subterranean room as crypt was contested; and the identification of an imperial patron subject to harsh criticism on both iconographic and chronological grounds. The overall conclusions of the conference have placed the villa once again in a possible, if not probable, domestic, elite ambit, and it is in this context it is considered here. The location of the domed room at the apex of the villa's courtyard, and its large doorway both suggest it was intended as a grand vestibule to the tetraconch reception room beyond.

The three bands of imagery would seem to function independently of one another, but there are subtle clues that connect all three. The hunting scene is the most dynamic and closest to the viewer and thus sets the tone: it is actually two hunts, one for a stag and another for a boar that depart laterally from a cluster of men who mark the beginning of the hunt on the north wall and thus face the viewer as s/he entered. The group includes what appears to be a portrait of the dominus himself, underlining the personal stake in what transpires. The hunts run out to the east and west, each culminating half way around the dome in the death of the animal before returning in triumph to the villa over the south window. Thus, the cardinal points of the dome are each given dramatic emphasis.

Unlike the unitary hunt scenes, the Christian scenes above are separated by frames and include the "greatest hits" common in 4th-century funerary art – the Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace, the Good Shepherd, the Raising of Lazarus, Jonah, and the Whale, as well as some whose identity is unclear. Their internal arrangement seems to lack any programmatic or narrative coherence.

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70. H. Schlunk, Die Mosaikkapelle, cit. (n. 67), p. 120.
rather, their placement may be partially dictated by an effort to make connections with the hunt register below and the enthroned scenes above. The Good Shepherd is placed directly over the portrait of the dominus, and the excavators noted a deliberate similarity in their portraits. To the east, over the death of the stag, is placed the last of the two Jonah scenes showing Jonah at Rest; at the west over the death of the boar a two-part narrative of the Three Hebrews is interrupted by the Raising of Lazarus. The Christian scene over the southern villa scenes is unfortunately destroyed. The attempt to identify the dominus with the Good Shepherd is plain, thus subtly associating him with Christ in his role as caretaker. The images of Jonah at Rest and the Raising of Lazarus were two of the most oft used, and thus seemingly powerful statements on the Christian promise of resurrection. Tying them compositionally to the hunting scenes below, the dominus' virtus, as displayed in the hunt, is associated with the guarantee of bodily resurrection, as described in the Old and New Testament images of Jonah and Lazarus.

The damaged third-tier scenes have been hardest to identify, but almost certainly represent the dominus and his family in poses emphasizing their official capacities: convincing interpretations include the dominus as philosopher, the domina surrounded by servants bearing jewelry and mirrors, and perhaps, for the northern scene over the Good Shepherd, the awarding of prizes at the circus games. These scenes are also oriented at the four cardinal

71. R. Wurland, Die Kuppelnätsauen, cit. (n. 69); cf. Id., Status und Formular in der Verstümmelung der spätesten Führungszeichnungen, in Röm. Mitt., 101, 1994, pp. 175-202. I find the suggestion these represent an episcopal audience unconvincing, not least because there is no evidence the bishopric of Tarragona in this period by anyone wealthy or powerful enough to commission these mosaics: cf. A. Isla Frez, La epifania episcopal en los mosaicos de la villa de Centelles, in J. Arce (dir.), Centelles. El monumento tardorromano, cit. (n. 69), pp. 37-50.
72. The image contains a seated frontally facing figure holding a green object, perhaps a crown, flanked by attendants, one of whom holds a fringed blanket. In the background is what appears to be a bier. Previous suggestions included a funerary portrait of the deceased with ancestral images (Schlank) or an image of the dominus holding jewelry and gazing into a mirror (Wurland). None have, to my knowledge, noted the parallels between the fringed blanket and imagery on some Terracotta C plates in which the blanket seems to be offered as a prize in the hippodrome (J. W. Solonmeneon, Spätromische rote Tonware mit Reliefverzierung auf Nordafrikanen Werkstätten, in Bervorderung der Kennis van de Antieke
points, thus tying the public and private status of the family to their Christian faith and rural virtus below.

If the room in question were, in fact, the entrance hall to the villa, this interweaving of Christian promise and seignorial power would have summed up the identity of the dominus to the visitor upon his/her entrance to the villa. The elaboration of entrance complexes in late antique houses has been long marked upon, as rituals of entrance and arrival were marked with architectural and visual flourishes intended to announce the identity and character of the inhabitants. At Centelles, that identity includes Christian affiliation as part of the accouterment of virtus and potestas.

Yet another mode of interweaving status and Christian identity is found in the so-called Palace of Eustolios at Kourion on Cyprus. The large complex was built behind the theater on the acropolis and its final phases, including the Christian inscriptions, are dated to the late 4th or early 5th century. Centered on a large peristyle were a suite of baths on the north, a set of large, possible reception rooms to the east, unexcavated rooms to the south, and a suite of interconnected rooms to the west (fig. 20). Mosaics covered the entrance vestibule, peristyle and baths and contained a variety of inscriptions and images. In the entrance vestibule, an inscription (M1) flanked by Solomon’s Knots read “Enter for the good fortune of the house.” Passing into the peristyle, one confronted a sequence of inscriptions. The first, at the entrance to a large reception room centered on the peristyle (M2), is fragmentary but reads something like, “Eustolios, having seen that the Kourians, though previously very wealthy, were in abject misery, did not forget the city of his ancestors, but first having presented the baths to our city, he was then taking care of Kourion as once did Phoebus [Apollo] and built this cool refuge sheltered from the wind.” Two inscriptions marked the corner of the southeastern portico, near the large reception rooms. At the end of the east portico (M3) one reads: “The sisters Reverence, Temperance and Obedience to the laws tend this excelsa and the fragrant hall,” while at the start of the south (M4) a second claimed, “This house, in place of its ancient armament of walls and iron and bronze and adamant, has now girt itself in the much-venerated signs of Christ.” (fig. 21) The latter inscription is surrounded by a meander and four-petaled rosettes, but no clear oikos symbol. Finally, a personification of Ktesis or Founding, holding a measuring rod, appears in the frigidarium of the baths complex (M5), just before its main apsed pool.

On the basis of its large size and accompanying inscription seeming to imply that Eustolios gave the baths to the city, the complex has been identified as a public bath with attached “annex” cum social club. While it is certainly possible, there is no reason to suppose that “public” quality of the baths disqualifies the complex as a house — and indeed the complex is termed a domus oikos in the inscriptions. Domestic baths were regularly hired out for public use and after the mid-4th century earthquakes that damaged the city, it may be that Eustolios’ complex was one of the only bathing facilities in town. It is also possible that the inscription does not refer to these baths, but another facility built elsewhere. The “public” nature of the inscription is also explainable by its location: placed at the entrance to the house’s grand hall, it continues a trend in late antique houses of setting up inscriptions in the houses of benefactors to display their private munificence.

Beschaving te’s-Graafhage, 44, 1969, pp. 4-109). The “kam” image in the background would thus be the imperial images displayed in the kathisma, or main viewing box in the circus or amphitheater.


75. D. Soren (in D. Sorren and J. James, Kourion, cit. n. 74), p. 208 thought the “annex” was a private house, while the baths were pub...
The Christian inscription in the southeast corner has typically been read as a public statement of faith on the part of the Kourions. If the complex is Eustolios' private residence, as seems most likely, the inscription has more individual functions. It is composed in Homeric dactylic hexameters and claims that Christ, who has taken the place of regular building materials, supports the very fabric of the house. Those regular building materials are seemingly associated with a throw-off pagan past, but also reference Eustolios' role as builder after the earthquake. That is, the house's Christianity is subtly linked to Eustolios' building projects, proclaimed nearby and in the baths through the Ktesis image. As Eustolios has taken on the role of Apollo as city patron, his projects, i.e. his house with its baths, are built with the help of Christ. Finally, if Reverence, Temperance and Obedience to the Law are to be read as specifically Christian personifications (one scholar has read "Obedience to the Law of God" here), these virtues are explicitly tied to house's fine aspect and other gifts, again echoing sentiments expressed in the Eustolios inscription. Thus, Eustolios locates Christian protection and virtue not in himself, but in the very fabric of the house, while he describes himself as the successor to Apollo and benefactor of the city. Christian affiliation is thus attributed to Eustolios' projects rather than himself, and thus plays a secondary, more subtle role in the articulation of his status as homeowner than at Centelles. Unlike Centelles, too, is the deliberate, albeit subtle rejection of a pagan past in the articulation of that Christian sentiment: Eustolios replaces Apollo and his house rejects the "ancient" material world in favor of the signs of Christ.

V. CONCLUSIONS

It is hoped that the above discussion reveals the range of iconographies and functions of Christian images in late antique houses. Christian images might be used in ritual contexts, as objects of veneration or as signposts to guide ritual activity. They might serve as protective agents to keep evil forces from penetrating the house and its occupants. And they might simultaneously be part of the elite house' status apparatus, deployed in the complex interactions between aristocratic peers, or woven into statements about individual identity.

Many of these images and their functions seem puzzling to us as modern scholars. The majority of extant Christian images, and thus the basis for the study of early Christian art, are products of the public church. Christian images in homes, on the other hand, were produced by individuals and thus reflect their personal beliefs and needs as households.
Those impulses, and thus the full meaning of these images, are often difficult to recover with any precision. The institutional hand that regularized iconography and meaning in the public sphere need not apply so insistently in the home, and thus our own interpretative tools, so heavily shaped by that public church, often fail us. It is a salutary failing, for it recalls to us a more complex late antique reality, in which so much Christian life took place outside the bounds of the basilica and the regularizing impulses of its bishops.

Finally, it is worth asking whether there is anything particularly Christian about the use of Christian images in the home. Not only are many of the Christian examples discussed here embedded in a program of pagan imagery, but they also seemingly fulfilled many of the same basic functional roles: the veneration of images, the reproduction of symbols of power for protection, the use of religious affiliation to produce social status — none of these seems a specifically Christian use of images. I would argue that if there were something particularly “Christian” about Christian domestic images, it was not in the functions they served, but rather in the functions they didn’t.

As Susannah Muth and others have shown, generations of elite “pagan” householders used mythological scenes to think through the most basic problems of domestic life. By shaping their specific composition and iconography and carefully placing them in their respective rooms, Greco-Roman householders used these images to think about erotic love in marriage, faithfulness, domestic roles and other issues. Mythological narrative, in short, was tailored to think with. There is no Christian parallel for this kind of thinking that we can see either in the permanent domestic images or the numerous candidates among portable objects. Christian narrative scenes are largely absent from the home, and with the notable exception of Centelles, particularly from the admittedly thin corpus of permanent domestic images. While in the mosaic arts, mythological scenes continued to be produced through the 4th and 5th centuries in many regions and continued to be used to make sense of gender relationships and other issues, there was seemingly no impulse to do the same with Christian Old and New Testament images. That is, in the domestic sphere, Christian narrative images never assumed the same role as discursive agents on domestic life. If Christian images entered into discursive contexts, as has been suggested here for Hinton St. Mary and Frampton, they did so using symbols or single images, not stories, and the discourse engendered seemingly looked past the household to the issues of salvation and the soul.

This is doubly strange if we consider that churchmen were, in fact, using biblical narratives precisely for the purpose myth had served — for ordering, parsing and making sense of domestic relationships. Householders did not use Christian images to do the same thing. They may reflect the particular way they viewed such images — as emblems not musings, as symbols not stories, and above all, as pointers that gestured beyond domestic concerns to concepts of power and authority. If there is one commonality that unites permanent Christian domestic images, it is their strange reluctance to comment upon their human domestic communities.

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79. Ibid.