

John the Baptist and John the Evangelist in the Monticelli frescoes dated 1315-19 and the heritage of Christian religious art from the Greco-Roman period.

By Giuseppe Tullio (Janury 2011)

The apse of the Monticelli chapel faces East, the exact direction of the sun rise. The frescoes contain a Christ on the cross of roughly human size and, just below it, a smaller Madonna with Child, **with St. John the Baptist on her right and St. John the Evangelist on her left.** In the figure below I report only the frescoes which are situated under the Christ on the cross.



St. John the Baptist marks the beginning of the cycle of the revelation of the Divine Word on earth and St. John the Evangelist, the author of the Apocalypse, the end.

It is my intention to illustrate how in Christian religious art **the image of Christ is closely related to the sun** and how significantly the Greco-Roman art and craft tradition influenced Christian art. I will also show how deep is the similarity in Christian religious art **between the two St. Johns and the winter and summer solstices.** But before starting with the analysis of the meaning of the two St. Johns with Christ in the middle, it is helpful to make a short introduction.

Christianity assimilated some germs of naturalism in the anti-spiritual sense of the word. Its latent naturalism became more evident every time there was a weakening of the spiritual consciousness, even well before the Renaissance, when the definite break with the deeply spiritual tradition took place. **Christian religious art development was determined in part by Greco-Roman craft tradition.** This is the case in Christian architecture (building of churches), **painting, sculpture and in the work of goldsmiths and glazers** (stained glass-windows).

The design and construction of **church portals** with their opulent and beautiful sculptures and great geometric harmony were influenced as well by Greco-Roman craft tradition. Titus Burkhart, the notable art historian dedicated one full chapter in his 1958 edition of "Sacred Art in East and West-

The foundations of Christian Art” to the portals of Christian Churches. Of the other 6 chapters, only 2 are devoted to Christian art. **Christian craft tradition which simulates the formation of the cosmos out of chaos, is primarily cosmological with pre-Christian roots.**

The point of junction between the purely Christian tradition, which is theological in essence, and the pre-Christian cosmology, is evident in some symbols used in the Catacombs, for instance the Greek letters Chi (χ) and Rho (ρ). These symbols are to be found either alone or with the cross. **The first figure on the next page** represents the monogram with the cross. When this symbol is inscribed in a circle, the latter acquires the meaning of a cosmic wheel, and demonstrates its solar origin.

In some Christian inscriptions the circle emits rays with an open hand being positioned at the end of each ray. This is a feature derived from the solar emblems in ancient Egypt. The loop in the Rho garnishes the vertical axis like a polar star and the monogram below if combined with the cross shows a relationship with the “**Egyptian ankh**”. The ankh is also known as “key of life” or “crux ansata”, which in ancient Egypt represented “eternal life”. The monogram in the figure below represents Christ and is often placed in the catacombs between the letters Alpha and Omega, **symbolizing the beginning and the end**. The combination of the cross with the monogram and the circle **denote the Christ as a spiritual synthesis of the universe. He is the all, He is the beginning, the end and the timeless centre. He is the victorious and the invincible sun, the Sol Invictus.** His Cross rules the cosmos.

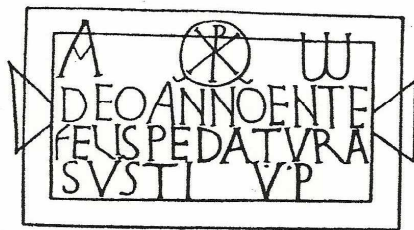
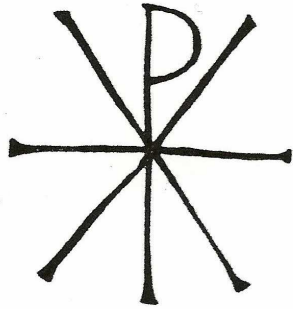
In the second figure on the next page there is a monogram of Christ with the Alpha and the Omega drawn from a Roman catacomb copied from the previously cited book by Titus Burkhart (1958). **It is clear that Christ is linked to the Sun in Christian art by the following:**

- a) the circle of the second figure below,
- b) the fact that the circle emits rays having hands,
- c) the eastern orientation of many Christian churches, including the one at Monticelli,
- d) in the painting of the Last Judgement, when depicting the face of Christ, Michelangelo found inspiration in the face of the Greek statue of the **Apollo del Belvedere**¹ and
- e) the proximity of Christmas to the winter solstice in the Christian liturgical year.

Titus Burkhart maintains that the integration into Christianity of the Greco-Roman craft tradition, including the cosmological perspective, had been providentially prepared for **by the institution of the solar calendar by Julius Caesar**, who had drawn inspiration from Egyptian science **and by the transposition of the Julian calendar and the principal solar feasts into the Christian liturgical year**. As an aside, Dante considered Caesar the artisan of the world destined to receive the light of the Christ for the adoption of the Julian calendar and for his tremendous role in the widening and strengthening of the Roman empire.

The reference to the cosmic cycle is fundamental also in Christian architecture. In temple building there is a crystallization of the celestial cycle and as in the cosmos, the temple is produced out of chaos, by transforming inanimate, inert materials (materia in Latin) into something which has an harmonious form (forma in Latin).

¹ Apollo is the Greek god of the sun. The statue of Apollo called del Belvedere was and still is in the Vatican. The similarity between the two faces is striking, although the face of Apollo **is relaxed and truly solar**, while Christ seems to be suffering, as if Michelangelo wanted to tell us that pronouncing the final judgment is, after all, not such a “natural” task.



The cross inscribed in the circle is at the same time a symbol of the Christ and the synthesis of the cosmos. The circle represents the totality of space and therefore also the totality of existence and the celestial cycle, the natural division of which is indicated by the cross of the cardinal axes. The plan of the Church corresponds not only to the Christian meaning of the cross, but also to its cosmological role in pre-Christian architecture. The sacred building represents first and foremost the Christ as Divinity manifested on Earth. It also represents the universe built up of visible and invisible substance, plus “man” and his various “parts”. The apse represents the Head and the Altar the Heart. The Hindu symbolism of Purusha is incarnated in the plan of Hindu temples, where the holocaust makes peace between Heaven and Earth.

Previously in this discussion there have been references to the foundation of Christian religious art and to Greco-Roman art and crafts. **Egyptian symbolism and Hindu architecture and religion have been mentioned also.** With this in mind it is time to explain the meaning of the two St. Johns in the chapel at Monticelli.

In Monticelli St. John the Baptist on the left of Christ and St. John the Evangelist on the right are **associated with the Alpha and the Omega and the Christian monogram of the catacombs.** **These two frescoes of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist represent the cyclical and temporal aspect of Christianity.** Their respective functions mark the beginning and the end of the cycle of the revelation of the Divine Word on earth. This is portrayed in their feasts, which are positioned approximately at the times of the winter solstice and the summer solstice. These dates correspond to the two tuning points of the sun. The sun itself being the cosmic image of the Light “which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John, I. 9). The feast of St. John the Baptist is June 24th and that of St. John the Evangelist is December 27th, while the summer solstice is on June 21st of that of the winter solstice on December 21st.

Solstices are called “doors” (januae in Latin) because through them the sun “enters” the ascending or the descending phase of the annual journey, or because two opposed cosmic tendencies “enter” through them into the terrestrial world, a cyclical and temporal reality being thus translated into the relatively spacial symbolism of the door.

At this junction the symbolism of Janus is now relevant. The Roman god Janus was **the protective deity of the “collegia fabrorum”** (Roman Craftsmen Unions). Their heritage appears to have passed to the craft corporations of the Middle Ages. As a result one can say that Christian art owes a lot to the “collegia fabrorum”. **The two faces of Janus become identified in Christianity with the two faces of the two St. Johns.** The third face, the invisible and eternal facial expression of the god, showed itself in the person of Christ.

Janus’ symbol are two keys of gold and silver. These may be representing also the sun and the moon and hence the cosmic cycle. The two keys appear in the hand of St. Peter in the Romanesque portal of the Cathedral of Basle. In the frescos of Monticelli St. Peter stands to the right of Christ holding something in his hand. It was undoubtedly a key or keys. Unfortunately this part has been washed away by seven centuries of time and at least 50 years of neglect of the church (roughly 1950-2000). Rain and humidity has caused great damage to these precious frescos. As a result, we will never know how many keys the St. Peter fresco of Monticelli held and if they were of gold or silver.