



HAL
open science

The Orphic Singer in Clement of Alexandria and in the Roman catacombs: comparison between the literary and the iconographic early Christian representation of Orpheus

Fabienne Jourdan

► **To cite this version:**

Fabienne Jourdan. The Orphic Singer in Clement of Alexandria and in the Roman catacombs: comparison between the literary and the iconographic early Christian representation of Orpheus. *Studia Patristica*, 2014. hal-02426843

HAL Id: hal-02426843

<https://hal.science/hal-02426843v1>

Submitted on 9 Jan 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

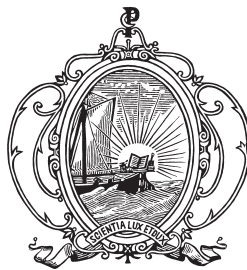
L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. LXXIII

Including papers presented at the Conference on
Early Christian Iconography,
held in Pécs, Hungary

Edited by
A. BRENT and M. VINZENT



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – WALPOLE, MA

2014

Table of Contents

Allen BRENT and Markus VINZENT, London, UK	VII
Preface	VII
Allen BRENT, London, UK	
Methodological Perspectives in the Interpretation of Early Christian Artefacts	1
Olivér GÁBOR, Pécs, Hungary	
Early Christian Buildings in the Northern Cemetery of Sopianae	39
Zsolt VISY, Pécs, Hungary	
The Paradise in the Early Christian Cemetery of Sopianae	59
Gaetano S. BEVELACQUA, Rome, Italy and London, UK	
Observations on Christian Epigraphy in Pannonia	75
Fabienne JOURDAN, Paris, France	
The Orphic Singer in Clement of Alexandria and in the Roman Catacombs: Comparison between the Literary and the Iconographic Early Christian Representation of Orpheus.....	113
Eileen RUBERY, Cambridge, UK	
From Catacomb to Sanctuary: The Orant Figure and the Cults of the Mother of God and S. Agnes in Early Christian Rome, with Special Reference to Gold Glass.....	129
Luise Marion FRENKEL, Cambridge, UK	
Some Theological Considerations on the Visual Representation of the 'Suffering on the Cross' in the First Half of the Fifth Century.....	175
Levente NAGY, Pécs, Hungary	
Zoltán Kádár and the Early Christian Iconography of Roman Pannonia. Some Problems of Interpretation	195
György HEIDL, Pécs, Hungary	
Remarks on the Iconography in the 'Peter-Paul' (No. 1) Burial Chamber of Sopianae	219
Péter CSIGI, London, UK	
Deliberate Ambiguities in Early Christian Wall Paintings in Sopianae	237
Krisztina HUDÁK, Hungary	
Technical Observations on the Paintings in the St. Peter and Paul (No. 1) Burial Chamber in Sopianae.....	249
István M. BUGÁR, Debrecen, Hungary	
Theology on Images? Some Observations on the Murals in the Peter and Paul Burial Chamber of Pécs.....	281
Markus VINZENT, London, UK and Erfurt, Germany	
Conquest or Shared Backcloth – On the Power of Tradition.....	297

The Orphic Singer in Clement of Alexandria and in the Roman Catacombs: Comparison between the Literary and the Iconographic Early Christian Representation of Orpheus

Fabienne JOURDAN, Paris, CNRS, UMR 8167 'Orient et Méditerranée'

ABSTRACT

To exhort the Pagans to convert to Christianity, Clement of Alexandria praises Christ as a new and better Orpheus. For this purpose, he resorts to the figure of Orpheus as the singer whose miraculous song charms even wild animals. In the Roman catacombs of the third and fourth centuries, the Christians represent also Orpheus as a singer surrounded by animals. After an overview of Clement's method to depict Christ as a new Orpheus in order to describe the Word as a new and powerful song and an examination of the possible meanings of the pictural representation of Orpheus in early Christian art, the question of the possible link between the literary and the iconographic representation is dealt with. Even though no actual influence can definitely be traced between the two, it appears that a common method of addressing a well-educated audience is used in both cases and that the motif of the Golden Age which seems to permeate the pictural representations find an echo in Clement's 'apocalyptic' manner of praising the Christian Mystery.

In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*,¹ Clement of Alexandria is the first one to draw the portrait of Christ as a new and better Orpheus.² This portrait's main characteristic is that it is essentially built on the same legendary image as the one used in the iconography, namely that of the singer and of his miraculous power to charm wild beasts, trees and even stones with his songs.

We are certainly more familiar with a comparison between Orpheus and Christ based on their respective descent to the underworld. But the interpretation of Orpheus' journey into Hades to bring back Eurydice as an allegorical picture

¹ This article is the written version of the conference I held at the Department of Theology and Religious studies at Kings' College on May, 26, 2011 at the invitation of Markus Vinzent and Allen Brent as part of their BARDA research project on 'Early Christian Iconography and Epigraphy'. I have kept the original form and most of its content. I am grateful to Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, Allen Brent, Carol Downer and Markus Vinzent for their valuable comments and to Philippe Charles for checking the English. I would also like to apologize for referring mostly to my own works, but the topic of the conference was very close to the one in these books and I didn't want to clutter up the footnotes with too many references the reader can easily find there.

² See Fabienne Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 1, Anagôgê 4 (Paris, 2010).

of Christ's journey into hell and his victory over death does not appear before the Middle Ages.³ Early Christian authors who used the figure of Orpheus focussed mostly on its religious nature, namely Orpheus' status as founder of Greek religious institutions and more precisely the Mysteries. But more generally they also see in him the founder of paganism itself. It is striking for us modern scholars that they do not make of Orpheus the doctor of a small sectarian group, but the creator of the Greek religion itself. This picture is certainly based on three features: the pagan representation of the character, the consideration of the Mysteries as the most tangible pagan way to have contact with the gods, but it is also based on the Christian perception and presentation of Orpheus as a barbarian, as the Christians themselves were indeed represented, a barbarian the Jews claimed had become a convert to monotheism and that conversion eventually led him to sing the Biblical message. So, in their polemics with the Pagans and with this complex picture in mind, the early Christian writers made use of the figure of Orpheus in the following three ways:⁴ First, they attacked the poet and his verses directly in order to denounce the atrocity and impiety of pagan traditions.⁵ Secondly and in contrast to this, other writers pointed out certain of the merits of Orpheus and his works, but also with a view to discrediting Greek traditions. For instance, they praised Orpheus as the barbarian inventor of many Greek cultural institutions, in order to deny any originality to the Greek culture itself⁶ – we must not forget that after the Jews, the Christians were also perceived as 'barbarians' and sometimes even described as such; so, in this context, Orpheus has something in common with them. Finally, a last group of Christian polemicists presented Orpheus and his poems as real models that 'sing', if I may put it this way, in agreement with the Biblical message. For this last purpose, they relied on the Jewish-Hellenistic forgery just mentioned which ascribed to Orpheus a poem praising the only God.⁷

³ The picture appears for the very first time in the *Moralised Orpheus*. See John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* ([Cambridge, 1970] New York, 2000), 86-146. Celsus, the enemy of the Christians, proposed such a comparison in the second century, but in order to denounce Christ as a charlatan similar to Orpheus. See Origen, *Against Celsus* II 55.

⁴ I am summarizing the conclusions of *Orphée et les chrétiens*, 1 and 2, Anagôgê 4 and 5 (Paris, 2010 and 2011), here 2, 13-8 and 243-58. Detailed references and examples are given there.

⁵ This is the attitude typical of Athenagoras (*Embassy for the Christians*), Tatian (*Address to the Greeks*), Theophilus of Antioch (*Apology to Autolykos*), the Pseudo-Clementine novel, Origen (*Against Celsus*) and Gregory of Nazianzus (*Discourses, Poems*). We also find it in Clement of Alexandria (*Exhortation to the Greeks*), Eusebius of Caesarea (*Preparation for the Gospel*) and Theodoret of Cyrus (*Cure of the Greek Maladies*). It should also be noted that the reference to Orpheus nourished the polemics against the so-called heretics who were accused of imitating pagan sources. On this point, see the summary in F. Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 2 (2011), 215-6.

⁶ This attitude is typical of Tatian (*Address to the Greeks* 1,1). We also find it in Theodoret of Cyrus (*Cure of the Greek Maladies*).

⁷ This attitude is that of Pseudo-Justin (*De monarchia, Address to the Greeks*), Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis*), Cyril of Alexandria (*Against Julian*) and of the *Tübingen Theosophy*. We also find it in Eusebius of Caesarea (*Preparation to the Gospel*). In the same way, Orpheus

These different attitudes are not exclusive and can be found in the same work. But Clement of Alexandria is the only early Christian writer who introduces the image of the singer (Eusebius will follow him in his *Eulogy of Constantine*⁸) and who makes the most of it in order to depict Christ as a new Orpheus. And this is how he transforms Orpheus himself into a prefiguration of the Lord.

In this context, what is at stake is the possible link between the literary and the iconographic representation of Orpheus as singer in the early Christian tradition. More precisely the questions which arise are the following: How does this picture of Orpheus, which was so central for Clement, appear in Christian iconography? What meaning does it have there or, more precisely, in what way is it linked to Christ? Finally is there any connection at all between Clement's singing Orpheus and the cither-playing Orpheus of the catacombs?

The first step to take to answer these questions is to shed some light on the way Clement creates his picture of a new Orpheus by using the image of the singer, and how, by doing so, he transforms Orpheus into a prefigurative counterpoint to Christ. Then an overview of the early Christian iconography of Orpheus will enable us to go through the possible meanings of the mosaics. Eventually a short comparison might be drawn between the painters' aims and Clement's.

I. Christ as a new Orpheus in Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Greeks*

Clement depicts Christ as a new Orpheus by making use of two features of the character, namely,⁹ first, the picture of the cither player and, even more precisely, of the singer who fascinates even wild animals; and secondly, the picture of the founder of the Mysteries and of the poet who wrote texts for these cults. As poet Orpheus was also seen as the priest who reveals these cults and, through them and their sacred objects, provides the possibility to perceive something of the gods themselves.

By applying such characteristics to Christ, Clement portrays him as a new and better Orpheus, while bringing into being a new kind of pagan Orpheus, namely the Orpheus who becomes the prefiguration of Christ. How exactly does he go about this?

Clement's method is original. He does not resort to allegory.¹⁰ If he had done so, it would have led him to assert that Orpheus *does* represent Christ with

could also be praised as a valuable model of Christian 'orthodoxy' against the heretics, see Didymus the Blind, *On the Trinity* II 27 (PG 39, 756,4-7).

⁸ II 14, 4-5. See also *Theoph. Syr.* III 39.

⁹ I am here summarizing the conclusions of *Orphée et les Chrétiens* (2010), 1.

¹⁰ On this point, I disagree with Maria Tabaglio, 'La cristianizzazione del mito di Orfeo', in *Le metamorfosi di Orfea* (Verona, 1999), 78-80. See F. Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 1 (2010), 262-3.

pagan features and that these features need only be correctly interpreted so that their highly Christian meaning can be seen. The use of allegory concerning Orpheus as singer does not appear before Eusebius.¹¹ Eusebius follows Clement in resorting to the portrait of Orpheus,¹² but he lives in a period in which Paganism represents a less serious threat to Christianity and therefore he can use the mythological figure more easily to evoke Christ directly. Likewise, Clement does not use typology, the theological method through which a character of the past is interpreted as foreshadowing a figure of more recent history. At the time, this method is only used to enhance the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In this context, David is a type of Christ, but Orpheus is not.¹³ Nor does Clement have any predecessors among the Gnostics for this depiction, even if the Gnostics sometimes exploit Orphic lore, namely the verses attributed to Orpheus.¹⁴ He does not even have any predecessors among the Jews. Admittedly, the Jews ascribed a Testament or Sacred Discourse to Orpheus in which the poet is supposed to have praised the only God.¹⁵ But they were making use of the figure of the religious founder and not of the either player charming animals. Moreover, the Jews did not draw comparisons between David and Orpheus, at least, according to our sources, not before Clement. Of course, we have two mosaics in which David is represented as a lyre player reminding us of Orpheus, the mosaic of Doura-Europos and that of Gaza. But first, these pictures are not unequivocal and even if we are sure that David is depicted, we are not sure that Orpheus is too: his portrait could have been used by the artist as a pattern, but it was not necessarily the intention of those who commissioned the mosaics to show any links between the two musicians. Secondly, these pictures were made after Clement (the mosaic of Doura-Europos dates from 260 A.D. and that of Gaza from 508 A.D.) and they may well have been influenced by Christian iconography. Because of the Biblical link between David and Christ, the Christian link between Christ and Orpheus as musicians could easily have been extended to David and Orpheus and have thus spread.¹⁶

¹¹ See the texts mentioned in note 8.

¹² Eusebius' text is a rewriting of the beginning of the *Exhortation to the Greeks*.

¹³ For a typological use of Orpheus in the Middle Ages, see Jean-Michel Roessli, *Postface à John Block Friedman, Orphée au Moyen Âge* (Fribourg, 1999), 308.

¹⁴ The source of information on this point is essentially constituted by the Heresiologists and Gnostic detractors, see for instance Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* V 1, 4 and 20, 4-5 (on this text see F. Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 1 (2010), 265-8 with updated bibliography). In this context, it is difficult to evaluate whether and to what extent the Gnostics really made use of Orphic lore.

¹⁵ On this text, see F. Jourdan, *Poème judéo-hellénistique attribué à Orphée* (Paris, 2010), with updated bibliography.

¹⁶ On the debate about these pictures, see F. Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 1 (2010), 366-73, with updated bibliography. For another presentation and interpretation of the question, see J.-M. Roessli, *Postface* (1999), 297-305; *id.*, 'Imágenes de Orfeo en el arte judío y cristiano', in *Orfeo y la tradición órfica. Un reencuentro*, Religiones y mitos 280 (Madrid, 2008), 180-7.

The originality of Clement's process lies in fact in the goal of his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, which was to urge the Pagans to convert to Christianity. Clement himself describes his method as follows: to make use of pagan imagery in order to convince his listeners that the new religion is superior to their old traditions.¹⁷ This method consists of three stages: a critical or oppositional stage; a transpositional one, and finally a full appropriation of pagan lore. These three stages are developed in the following way.

Clement begins by emphasizing three major oppositions between Orpheus and Christ. He presents Orpheus as a sophist and magician whose words are deceitful and thus lethal,¹⁸ whereas Christ is shown as the real enchanter whose incantations are salutary.¹⁹ Then he contrasts Orpheus as a man who is not a real man²⁰ (certainly alluding to the pederasty attributed to him) with Christ as the perfect man *par excellence*, that is as the only human being who really resembles God because he *is* God.²¹ The third opposition consists in presenting Orpheus as the idolatrous founder of paganism and thereby as the servant of Satan,²² while Christ is depicted as the priest of the only God and thereby as revealing the only valid religion.²³

The second stage, I called the transpositional stage, is essentially based on comparisons using Orphic imagery to enhance the depiction of Christ. Two examples can be given, the first concerning Orpheus the singer, the second the religious founder. So, whereas the song of Orpheus is said to have charmed wild animals, the Word of Christ or Christ the Word is depicted as having charmed the wildest animals, that is human beings themselves.²⁴ Following the Biblical text, Clement can even add that the new Song can turn stones into human beings, that is non-believers into believers.²⁵ The second example pertains to the religious imagery. At the beginning of his book, Clement describes the Mystery of Eleusis and the cults of Dionysos which are linked to the name of Orpheus as shameful and lethal,²⁶ but in the middle of the book he uses this imagery and 'converts' it to describe in an apocalyptic manner the choir of the Just who sing of the only God.²⁷ In this light, Christ appears as a better and superior hierophant.²⁸

¹⁷ *Exhortation to the Greeks* XII 119,1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* I 3,1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* XI 115,2.

²⁰ *Ibid.* I 3,1 (ἄνδρες τινὲς οὐκ ἄνδρες).

²¹ *Ibid.* 17,1; 8,4; X 107,3; XI 113,2. See also *Stromateis* VI 14,114,4; VII 14,84,2.

²² *Exhortation to the Greeks* I 3,1; 7,4; II 13,3 and 5.

²³ *Ibid.* I 3,2; XI 111,2-3; XII 120,2.

²⁴ *Ibid.* I 4,1.

²⁵ *Ibid.* I 4,2 and 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.* II 17,2; 21,1; 74,3. For the condemnation of the Mysteries, see *Exhortation to the Greeks* II.

²⁷ *Ibid.* XII 119.

²⁸ *Ibid.* XII 120,1.

The final stage can be described as the appropriation of the imagery traditionally linked to Orpheus, without alluding to it any longer. At this stage, Christ is described on the one hand as the agent of metamorphosis (an activity which is highly orphic)²⁹ and, on the other hand, as the Mystery itself.³⁰

This last stage is inextricably linked with the conversion of Orpheus himself which occurs in the middle of the book when Clement mentions the Jewish-Hellenistic forgery. Clement quotes a series of verses which fit well with his exhortative message so that the words of this converted Orpheus already announce the final exhortation attributed to Christ.

Through this whole process, Orpheus becomes a prefiguration of Christ, namely through the intermediary of Clement's words, it is Christ himself who metamorphoses Orpheus into his own pagan predecessor.

This method uses the two features of the figure already mentioned, namely Orpheus' status as an enchanting singer and as a religious founder, but the most important is definitely the first and the whole of Clement's composition is actually based on the metaphor of the song. The song provides him with an image ideally suited to the evocation of the Word and Clement invests the latter with all the powers ascribed to Orpheus by the pagan tradition. But these powers are now superior because of their Christian origin. Consequently, the Word or the *Logos* not only corresponds to the Reason so highly praised by the Greeks, but also to the Biblical Word in all its meanings, that is a Word endowed with creative, prophetic and salutary powers. Finally the Word or the new Song, according to the Biblical phrase, is Christ himself. It is exactly in this choice of the song as intermediary to evoke the Word that Clement's originality lies bringing together Orpheus and Christ.

Clement's creation of this link between Orpheus and Christ is a temporal one; it implies a reading which develops in time. In contrast, the iconography offers an image which is extended in space and carries with it another way of seeing things.

II. Orpheus in early Christian iconography

Christian iconography³¹ emerges at the beginning of the third century by borrowing its motifs from popular Roman art. In this pagan art, during the Hellenistic

²⁹ *Ibid.* XI 114,4.

³⁰ *Ibid.* XI 111,2-3. See also *ibid.* XII 120,1.

³¹ On the Pagan and Christian iconography of Orpheus, see for instance, for the most recent publications, Ilona Julia Jesnick, *The image of Orpheus in Roman mosaic*, BAR International Series 671 (Oxford, 1997); Laurence Vieillefon, *La Figure d'Orphée dans l'Antiquité tardive, De l'archéologie à l'histoire* (Paris, 2003); *id.*, 'Les mosaïques d'Orphée dans les maisons de l'Antiquité tardive. Fonctions décoratives et valeurs religieuses', *Bulletin de l'École française de Rome*, Antiquité, 116/2 (2004), 983-1000; J.-M. Roessli, 'Imágenes de Orfeo' (2008), 187-226;

period, the cither player surrounded by animals has become a real cliché which flourishes in the third and fourth centuries. In this context, the picture is always similar: Orpheus is represented frontally, holding the lyre in his left hand and playing with his right hand or just holding the plectrum. He is invariably placed in the middle of the picture, surrounded by animals. The variety of these animals is in keeping with the predilection of Roman art for representing animals. Orpheus wears Phrygian clothes. The fact that he is seated is remarkable because it contrasts with the representation of professional musicians. The idea is perhaps to show Orpheus as the hieratic figure of the wise man before his audience.

The ten most important Christian representations of Orpheus belong exactly to the period when the pagan image was flourishing. These representations are six frescoes in the Roman catacombs and four sarcophagi.³² The significance of the fact that these pictures originate from burial sites is not to be overestimated, because in the period, most occurrences of Christian art appear in burial sites. The Christian image is similar to the pagan. The only difference lies in the fact that sometimes Orpheus' audience is composed only of peaceful animals, such as birds and ewes. If there is no other means to distinguish the Christian from the pagan portrait, the Christian context, however, is in most cases explicit because of the presence of Biblical scenes around the picture: close to the musician, we can see Daniel in the lions' den and the resurrection of Lazarus three times each and Moses hitting the rock four times. Each time, Orpheus occupies a privileged place in these compositions.

The examination of three of these frescoes³³ leads to the question of their meaning in the Christian context.

A. *The evidence*

1. Saint Callixtus

The mosaic of the cemetery of Saint Callixtus is the oldest picture, usually dated from the beginning of the third century. It is situated in the middle of a vault. Orpheus is shown frontally seated, playing the lyre and wearing a long-sleeved, high-belted tunic and a long cloak. He has the Phrygian cap on his head. This picture belongs to the group of pictures where Orpheus is represented only with peaceful animals. On the right stands a sheep turning its head toward him, and there may have been a second sheep on the left, in the portion of the painting which is now obliterated. The figure is set within an octagon which is part of a geometric pattern of concentric circles and half-circles – a

Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui, *Orphism and Christianity in Late Antiquity* (Berlin and New York, 2010), 118-23.

³² For references, see the works mentioned in the previous note.

³³ For more details, see the works mentioned in the note 31.



Fig. 1. Orpheus, Saint Callixtus catacomb, Rome, early 3rd c.

characteristic type of catacomb painting. Here the only indication of the Christian context, apart from the presence of only peaceful animals, lies in the fact that the construction of the catacomb began with Pope Zephyrinus (203-218) and was completed under Pope Callixtus (218-228).

The Christian context of the two following pictures is much clearer because of the presence of Biblical scenes surrounding the representation of Orpheus.

2. Saint Peter and Marcellinus

In the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, Orpheus appears twice. From the first mosaic only a sketch remains, but the second one is well preserved. So the



Fig. 2. Orpheus, Peter and Marcellinus catacomb, Rome, early 4th c.

mosaic represented on figure 2 dates back from the beginning of the fourth century (310-330) and is painted in the tympanum of the left arcosolium. Orpheus is shown in the same dress and in the same frontally-seated position as in the mosaic of Saint Callixtus. With his left hand he touches the lyre which is resting on a rock. He seems, however, to have halted in his playing since his right hand in which he holds the plectrum is held out towards his left, while his large eyes gaze into the far distance. The figure is flanked by two trees which are bending towards him. In the tree on the right perches a bird of prey with outstretched wings. It may represent an eagle. The nature of the bird on the left is impossible to determine. There are no quadrupeds, but there may have been some in the lost part of the painting. Naturally, we do not know their nature, peaceful or ferocious.

3. Saint Domitilla

In the catacomb of Domitilla, there were two representations of Orpheus too. The first one only is known through the sketch of an archaeologist. The preserved picture dating from the end of the fourth century (*ca.* 360 AD) and situated on the tympanum of an arcosolium, resembles the one just described. It represents Orpheus in the usual dress and pose. Two slender trees form a



Fig. 3. Orpheus, Domitilla catacomb, Rome, around 360 AD.

frame around the figure and have several birds on their branches, including a peacock. On the right stand a lion, a camel and a sheep; on the left there might be an ostrich and another camel.

B. *Interpretation of the pictures*

Two questions arise from the scrutiny of these pictures. The first one pertains to the identity of the figure represented: Is it Orpheus? Is it Christ? Or is it an Orpheus-Christ? The second concerns the meaning of the presence of this either player in the catacombs. According to the assessment given above of Clement's picture of Christ as a new Orpheus, an additional question can even be raised, that of the link between the literary and the iconographic representations.

1. Orpheus or Christ?

As for the first question, it seems obvious that Orpheus and not Christ or even the good Shepherd is represented, especially since sometimes Christ and the good Shepherd are themselves represented in the same places. It can therefore be said that even if this picture of Orpheus is intended to make visitors think

of Christ, it is not actually a portrait of the latter.³⁴ The possible connection to Christ must however be more deeply examined. It is certainly made possible by the fact that the figure of Orpheus is what I would call a neutral but live symbol (the notion of neutral symbol is borrowed from Theodor Klauser,³⁵ that of live symbol from Erwin Goodenough³⁶). By neutral but live symbol I mean a figure which, on the one hand, is no longer tainted by the pagan idolatrous connotation, so in this sense, it is neutral and can therefore be used by the Christians, on the other hand, sufficiently 'live' to have kept its own ancient meaning easily taken on and renewed by the borrowers, exactly like the lyre, for instance, which became a Christian symbol.³⁷ As such, the figure of Orpheus can be associated with a complex of motifs such as harmony, peace and perhaps also salvation. This complex of meanings is proof enough that the portrait does not convey a unique meaning.³⁸

The different and possible reasons for the presence of this picture in the catacombs must therefore be analysed. What kind of thoughts can the visitors seeing Orpheus in the Christian burial have had?

2. The meaning of Orpheus' presence in the catacombs

Why did the commissioners of the paintings choose to represent Orpheus? Six of the answers proposed by the scholars to this question can be examined.³⁹

The first explanation consisted in recalling the Jewish-Hellenistic legend of the conversion of Orpheus and of the poem praising the only God which is attributed to him.⁴⁰ The problem with this idea is that the pictures do not present Orpheus as a religious figure, but just as a cither player. They do not show him as a priest or as teaching something to Museus, and that is why this explanation does not seem very convincing.

The second explanation aimed at enhancing the burial context. It was actually a twofold explanation. For researchers like John Block Friedman,⁴¹ Orpheus

³⁴ For a similar conclusion, see L. Vieillefon, *La Figure d'Orphée* (2010), 148-54 and M. Herrero, *Orphism and Christianity* (2010), 120-1.

³⁵ 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst I', *JbAC* 1 (1958), 20-51; *id.*, 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst IV', *JbAC* 4 (1961), 128-45; *id.*, 'Erwägungen zur Entstehung des altchristlichen Kunst', *ZKG* 76 (1965), 1-11.

³⁶ *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 12, Bollingen Series 37 (New York, 1965), 73.

³⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* III 11,59.2.

³⁸ M. Herrero, *Orphism and Christianity* (2010), 119.

³⁹ For another presentation of the debate, see J.-M. Roessli, 'Imágenes de Orfeo' (2008), 213-26.

⁴⁰ It was the interpretation of Antonio Bosio in the seventeenth century (*Roma Sotteranea. Opera postuma* [Roma, 1632], 627-31). See also A. Wrzészniowski, 'The Figure of Orpheus in Early Christian Iconography', *Archeologia* 21 (1970), 112-23; E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 5 (1956), 103-11, and 9 (1964), 89-104. See also Henri Stern, 'Orphée dans l'art paléochrétien', *CArch* 23 (1974), 8-9.

⁴¹ *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* ([1970] 2000), 39-40.

and Christ played the role of a psychopomp protecting the dead from evil influences – an explanation that actually does not really fit the pictures themselves as they do not show Orpheus as the shepherd of souls, nor does it seem to fit with the representations of peaceful animals only. The second theory linked with the burial context is more general and proposes to see in Orpheus the vehicle of the concept of immortality.⁴² Here, too, we must be cautious because it is not the meaning obviously conveyed by the image of the cither player surrounded by animals. André Boulanger seemed to be right then when he wrote that ‘the cither player of the catacombs is not the doctor of Orphism, the prophet of immortality and of monotheism’.⁴³

A third hypothesis is based on supposing the influence of a previous Jewish representation bringing together Orpheus and David.⁴⁴ I have already expressed some doubts about the existence of such a comparison in Jewish circles before the Christian association between Orpheus and Christ. Moreover the figure of David as psalmist and lyre player did not predominate among Christians in the first centuries.⁴⁵ However, it cannot be ruled out that the visitors thought of David when they saw Orpheus in the catacombs.⁴⁶

According to the fourth explanation, the picture of Orpheus stands as a representation of the Good Shepherd.⁴⁷ Of course, this interpretation seems to be very convincing when only peaceful animals and mainly ewes are painted. But firstly, it is not always the case and secondly, there already existed a Christian representation of the Good Shepherd which did not need to be replaced by a pagan figure and which was even sometimes present in the sites we are dealing with.⁴⁸ In addition, Orpheus’ dress is not that of a shepherd, and he has a cither instead of the syrinx which is certainly more characteristic of a shepherd.⁴⁹ Of course it cannot be excluded that the picture of the Good Shepherd came to

⁴² See Henry Leclercq, *Manuel d’archéologie chrétienne* (Paris, 1907), 127-8.

⁴³ André Boulanger, *Orphée. Rapports de l’Orphisme et du Christianisme* (Paris, 1925), 163.

⁴⁴ See Kurt Weitzmann, ‘The Psalter Vatopedi 761’, *Journal of the Walter’s Art Gallery* 10 (1947), 38; *id.*, *Greek mythology in Byzantine Art* (Princeton, 1951), 6 and 93; H. Stern, ‘The Orpheus in the Synagogue of Dura Europos’, *The Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes* 21 (1958), 1-6; *id.*, ‘Un nouvel Orphée-David dans une mosaïque du VI^e siècle’, *CRAI* (janvier-mars 1970), 63-79; *id.*, ‘Orphée dans l’art paléochrétien’ (1974), 1-16; J.-M. Roessli, *Postface* (1999), 306-7.

⁴⁵ See Robert Skeris, *XPΩMA ΘEOY, On the Origins and Theological Interpretation of the Musical Imagery used by the Ecclesiastic Writers of the First three Centuries, with special Reference to the Image of Orpheus* (Altötting, 1967), 229, n. 413.

⁴⁶ J.-M. Roessli, ‘Imágenes de Orfeo’ (2008), 226, supports the view that the Christian images of Orpheus in the catacombs represent Christ the Saviour as David’s heir.

⁴⁷ See Giovanni Battista De Rossi, ‘Nuovi scoperti nel cimitero di Priscilla per le escavationi fatte nell’anno 1887’, *Bulletino di archeologia cristiana* (1887), 29-35; J.B. Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* ([1970] 2000), 41-3.

⁴⁸ It was the case in the catacombs of Saint Petrus and Marcellinus I for instance.

⁴⁹ Even if it is not always the case, see J.-M. Roessli, ‘Imágenes de Orfeo’ (2008), 218-23.

the mind of the visitor, especially when there were only ewes around Orpheus.⁵⁰ But it was certainly not the prime intention of the commissioners of the mosaics to use the picture of Orpheus to represent the Good Shepherd.

Charles Murray supports the thesis that texts such as Clement's influenced the iconography.⁵¹ This fifth hypothesis is really difficult to accept because there is no evidence that Clement's book was well known at all and more precisely in Rome. However if the iconography did not influence Clement (we have no proof that he knew of any Christian pictures of Orpheus), they may well have influenced Eusebius – because in the period of the bishop of Caesarea, the Christian pictures were effectively known.⁵² But what is interesting in Murray's hypothesis is the link drawn between Clement's procedure and that of the painter or of the commissioners. According to Murray, the picture was the vehicle of the Greek conception of the wise and of culture, images without any real equivalent in Biblical scenes. In this specific case, the representation of the cithar player could even have been thought of, as it is in Clement, as the means of conveying the idea of the power of the Word. It is difficult to assert that the writer and the painter were pursuing the same aim, but the idea of a similar method used to reach the public is worth considering.

The last hypothesis, and, in my view, the most convincing one, consists in recalling the meaning of the Orphic picture in the Roman context. Catacombs were built and financed by rather rich Christians in Rome. They were there to honour the dead and in these cults families had meals and spent some peaceful time there. Moreover they were used during the time of persecutions as refuges and were therefore perceived as oases of peace and dream. It just so happened that in the same Roman period, the miracles of the cithar player were intimately linked with the representations of the Golden Age and its imagery of peace, the motif of animals leaving peacefully together was borrowed from it too and applied to the legend of Orpheus by Ovid and Seneca.⁵³ It is certainly through the combination of this archeological context with this mythological framework that the image of Orpheus integrated Christian iconography, perhaps as an echo of the messianic prophecy of another Golden Age which was to be brought by a descendant of David. Indeed, the background of the Christian picture of the singer enchanting animals could come from *Isaiah* (11:6-7):

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead

⁵⁰ About the connection between the image of Orpheus and that of the Good Shepherd, see the recent analysis of J.-M. Roessli, 'Imágenes de Orfeo' (2008), 218-24.

⁵¹ Charles Murray, 'The Christian Orpheus', *CArch* 26 (1977), 20-1; *id.*, *Rebirth and Afterlife*, International Series 100 (Oxford, 1981), 43-4, 120-1. It was also the thesis of A. Bosio, see note 40.

⁵² See J.-M. Roessli, 'Convergence et divergence dans l'interprétation du mythe d'Orphée, de Clément d'Alexandrie à Eusèbe de Césarée', *RHR* 219 (2002), 503-13.

⁵³ Godo Lieberg, 'Arione, Orfeo ed Anfione. Osservazioni sul potere della poesia', *Rivista di umanità classica e cristiana* 5 (1984), 139-56.

them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The confluence of these prophecies with the bucolic tradition, already obvious in Virgil (at the beginning of the *Fourth Eclogue* for instance), was well received by the Christians.⁵⁴ With the latter, however, the secular pagan myth of the Golden Age, referring to the perfect beginning and echoing Hesiod's *Works and Days*, acquired a messianic and eschatological dimension which the Christians considered as manifested in the *adunata* or miracles characteristic of the last days as they were previously conceived by the Jews. For the Christians, these *adunata* announced an era of peace begun with the new Creation, *i.e.* with the Incarnation of Christ. So in both pagan and Christian imageries, having tame and wild animals leaving peacefully together could have been perceived as one of these *adunata* or miracles promising the coming of the Golden Age, an Age that had actually already begun for the Christians. In this context, the picture of Orpheus as an enchanting cither player may have been seen as recalling Christ's activity as promoter of this promised peace. When the audience was composed only of peaceful animals, it may have represented the achieved state of peace produced by the song, that is by the Word which makes of all animals its flock of sheep, in other words believers.

This last interpretation is naturally not the only one possible. More than one meaning of the figure may have motivated the choice of Orpheus in each site and, conversely, from one site to the other, different reasons may have led the painter or the commissioner to choose this figure. In addition, the possibility of the free association of ideas plays a major part in the iconography, which is less the case in literature. But, despite all these reservations, the motif of the Golden Age as a vehicle to evoke Christianity certainly played a crucial role in the decision to represent Orpheus in the Christian catacombs: Orpheus could, indeed, have been thought of as the image representing the creator of peace who necessarily made visitors think of Christ. This is exactly where we can perceive the link between the painted Orpheus and Christ or at least the figure of Christ as the one intended to make people think of.

III. Conclusion: the literary and iconographic Christian Orpheus

As a conclusion the comparison between Clement's Orpheus and the Orpheus of the catacombs can be drawn.

Clement's text does not seem to have influenced the pictures. Conversely it is difficult to imagine that he himself was influenced by them. Of course, a Christian picture of Orpheus, from which there would not be any more traces left because

⁵⁴ M. Herrero, *Orphism and Christianity* (2010), 122.

of the loss of many pieces of art due to the passing of time or to the rising water table,⁵⁵ could have existed in Alexandria in Clement's time.⁵⁶ But Clement does not make any explicit reference to such a picture and the mosaics we know were made later in Rome. Moreover, the principal topic and theological context are not exactly the same in each case: on the one hand, the pictures seem to promote the image of the Golden Age, on the other hand, Clement wants to enhance the role of the Word through the image of the song. But it is first and foremost the process which is similar, that is, by addressing a well-educated audience, to take on the values conveyed by the pagan figure as a positive and live symbol in order to praise Christianity. The pagan picture of Orpheus does not contain this meaning in itself. Neither is it allegorical. As in Clement, it has to be previously integrated into a Christian context to acquire this new meaning. It is in this sense that Clement's and the painters' methods show similarities.

Furthermore, the meaning of both types of representation is not so very different. Clement does not completely ignore the myth of the Golden Age linked to the figure of Orpheus. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, this motif, with its Christian eschatological dimension, is precisely bound up with the topic of the song and even more precisely of the New Song borrowed from John's Apocalypse.⁵⁷ In this framework, Christ's miracles could be interpreted as these *adunata* which announce the coming of a new Golden Age created by the Word. Since in this book Christ is shown as a new and better Orpheus, the motif of Golden Age announced by the miracles of the pagan Orpheus has been completely appropriated by the Christian discourse. Conversely, without being directly influenced by Clement's text, the Christian iconography of Orpheus seems to deliver a message which by certain features resembles it: the cither player, and perhaps more precisely the singer (in the fresco of Saint Peter and Marcellinus, indeed, Orpheus does not play, but seems to be singing) who transforms his listeners into peaceful creatures, could have been conceived as conveying the idea of peace, that is certainly also of salvation and resurrection.

But whereas the text, with its linear and temporal development, can in itself transform the pagan image to convey a clear new meaning of it, the pictures, because of their spatial, motionless dimension, let the visitors accomplish this transformation process themselves, with all the ambiguities such a liberty implies. It is indeed the role of the visitor to conjure up for themselves the Christianisation of the symbol achieved by Clement, here thanks to the context in which they encounter this symbol.

⁵⁵ One may think of the Kom el Shoqafa paintings of the third century which are known only from copies in the 1860's. See Jean-Yves Empereur, *Alexandria, Jewel of Egypt* (New York, 2002), 54.

⁵⁶ See the hypothesis of J.-M. Roessli, 'Imágenes de Orfeo' (2008), 215.

⁵⁷ *Exhortation to the Greeks* XII 119. On this topic, see F. Jourdan, *Orphée et les Chrétiens*, 1 (2010), 426-32.