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Phoenix and *Delphinus Salvator*: The History of the Forgotten Images of Early Christian Iconography

ABSTRACT

Art in the 3rd and 4th centuries underwent transformations and adapted certain representations which were typical of ancient iconography to the new needs and tasks of Christian art. Among the abundant examples of this process, many continue to be popular and recognizable, such as the representation of Hermes Kriophoros, which evolved to become Christ the Good Shepherd, or the sleeping Endymion, which became part of the “Jonah cycle.” The adaptation of patterns from antiquity for the purposes of Christian iconography was both popular and quite common, but only a fraction of the representations developed in that period survive today. This paper discusses the representations that have been forgotten. Relying on the examples of the phoenix and the dolphin-rescuer, the paper analyzes factors that affected the partial (phoenix) or complete (*delphinus salvator*) disappearance of images which were typical of early Christian art and which relied on ancient imagery.

KEYWORDS: history of the ancient church, history of early Christian art, phoenix, *delphinus salvator*, *Christus Delphinus Salvator*

STRESZCZENIE

Feniks i *delphinus salvator*. Historia zapomnianych wyobrażeń ikonografii wczesnochrześcijańskiej

W sztuce III i IV wieku dochodziło do transformacji i dostosowania niektórych przedstawień ikonografii antycznej do nowych potrzeb i zadań, jakie stawiała przed nimi sztuka chrześcijańska. Przykłady można mnożyć, zaczynając od tych bardziej znanych i do dziś rozpoznawalnych, jak chociażby przedstawienie Hermesa *Kriophorosa*, które ewoluje do figury Chrystusa Dobrego Pasterza, czy śpiącego Endymiona, które wejdzie w skład tzw. cyklu Jonasza. Zjawisko akomodacji wzorców antycznych dla potrzeb ikonografii

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chrześcijańskiej było wówczas działaniem popularnym i dość powszechnym, ale jedynie część z powstałych w tym czasie przedstawień przetrwała do dzisiaj. Właśnie takim zapomnianym wyobrażeniom poświęcono poniższe rozważanie, gdyż na przykładzie przedstawień feniksa i delfina ocalającego prześlędzono czynniki, które wpływały na częściowy – feniks, lub całkowity – *delphinus salvator*, proces zanikania niektórych obrazów sztuki wczesnochrześcijańskiej, bazujących na wzorcach antycznych.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: historia Kościoła starożytnego, dzieje sztuki wczesnochrześcijańskiej, feniks, *delphinus salvator* – *Christus Delphinus Salvator*

Since the end of the 2nd century, the issue of the existence or non-existence of art in the early Church and—in a broader context—the adoption or rejection of the ancient culture, was vividly examined not only by the elites, the Church fathers, but also by all the faithful who tried to find their own place in the ecclesiastical community. Insofar as the first two centuries were strongly dominated by the iconic Judeo-Christian tradition, this topic was also considered marginal, since the Christian community was consumed by a variety of other issues that needed to be tackled at the early stages of forming the Church structure. Such issues included the abandonment of the Judeo-Christian tradition which was prevalent until the mid-2nd century, the first attempt at forming the Church discipline and doctrine, or the place of the Church in the often hostile environment of the Roman Empire, among other things.

As a result, starting in the early 3rd century, the problem of the approval of local and commonly recognized cultural traditions became urgent. This was a consequence of the integration of the Christian community beyond the religious/confessional level, into the area of cultural symbols as well. The Church as such faced the task of building something specific to it and inherent to its own identity in the multicultural environment of the Empire (Zanker, 2000). The “domestication” of the Christian religion by way of endowing it with familiar, often regional references—common-place cultural “codes”—was important, as it fostered relationships between members of the Church which strongly emphasized unity, or even familial bonds between its members (Prigent, 1997).

However, the adoption of ancient culture and its visual aspects—in this case being art—posed a risk, as it dangerously bordered on idolatry (a sin against the first commandment).¹ Thus, at the beginning of the 3rd century

1 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me! You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the

we find evidence of a heated debate in the Church about the very existence of Christian art. Radicals, such as Tertullian, Origen, or Epiphanius of Salamis explicitly rejected art as idolatry (Buchheit, 1974, p. 134; Wronikowska, 1978, pp. 5–12). Meanwhile, the theologians with a pastoral bent, including Clemens of Alexandria, St. Basil the Great, and St. Ambrose—the archbishop of Milan—emphasized the value of art as a facilitating factor for integration, but also—more importantly—for evangelization, due to its power to teach the illiterate (*Biblia pauperum*) or to serve as a universal carrier of the Good News for non-believers (Drączkowski, 1988, p. 39 ff.; A. Quaquarelli, 1994, pp. 5–22). The dispute continued, but Christian art developed anyway, somewhat in the background, fueled by the perennial human need to express our emotions—and religious beliefs in particular—in a permanent, visual way.

One of the factors contributing to the escalation of this dispute was the ancient or even mythological origin of certain Christian iconographic motifs. This is a very broad and multi-dimensional topic which has already been discussed in the literature on the subject (Rahner, 1966; Bisconti, 2016).² Although certain examples of mythological motifs which were adopted for the purposes of early Christian iconography, such as Hermes Kriophoros,³ *Sol Invictus*,⁴ Orpheus,⁵ or Endymion⁶ are well-known today, over the centuries we have lost other interesting ancient iconographic motifs that were initially modified to satisfy the needs of budding Christian art. For various reasons, they have lost their power over time, being gradually sidelined by more universal and catchy images which

form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Ex 20:2–6)

- 2 For an introductory sketch on the issue of adaptation in the Constantine period, see Bisconti (2016, p. 961–986).
- 3 It is a common belief that the semiotic/iconographic layer of the representation of Christ the Shepherd derives, on the one hand, from the personification of the humanitas virtue, reflected in the bucolic shepherding scene, and on the other hand from the representation of Hermes Kriophoros (Schumacher, 1977, pp. 253–287).
- 4 The process of transformation of the *Sol Invictus* representation into Christ the Sun of Justice has been described by J. Miziolek (1991, p. 63) and J.C. Kałużny (2004, pp. 47–72), among others.
- 5 To Christians, Orpheus, who descended to Tartarus for the love of Eurydice, resembled Christ descending to hell so much that the iconographic adaptation of this representation seemed obvious (Bisconti, 1988, pp. 429 ff.; Prigent, 1997, pp. 139–156).
- 6 As in the other cases, the iconographic and content-related similarity between the story of Endymion and the prophet Jonah inspired the adaptation of the sleeping Endymion and its use in what is known as the Jonah cycle (P. Prigent, 1997, pp. 174 ff.; Utro, 2016, pp. 936–937).

made better vehicles for new theological messages. At this point I would like to describe two lesser-known adaptations of this type and attempt to explain the reasons for the disappearance of such representations. The first case is the representation of the phoenix, the messenger of the sun, while the other is *delphinus salvator*—the dolphin-rescuer.

Phoenix, a Resurrected Christ

Apart from the stories of Ulysses, Orpheus, or Endymion, the myth of phoenix—the fiery messenger of the sun god, *Sol invictus*—was one of the most persistent themes in antiquity, in both literature and art (Ferrua, 1941, pp. 167–176; 1954–55, pp. 273–285). The representation of the phoenix typically involved the symbols and cult of the sun, which enjoyed vast popularity in the East from where it seems to have spread to the Roman Empire (Kaliszewski, 2001, pp. 99–101). In consequence, we should not be surprised by its form, which consists of the royal bird with a bright radial nimbus around its head, evoking the representation of Helios. Whoever knows the myth of the phoenix, a bird incinerated in its own nest in order to be reborn, will not be surprised that Christians perceived this divine bird as auguring the resurrected Christ (Kleinbauer, 1972, pp. 29 ff.; Miziołek, 1991, p. 63).

Meanwhile, at the end of the 2nd century, Christians started uncovering God's plan of salvation as revealed in messages directed at pagans as well.⁷ The story of salvation was identified in events that took place in history, religion, or even mythology. This was a consequence of the fact that such studies in Christian communes were undertaken by Church fathers of pagan origin, who were brought up in the ancient culture and educated in pagan schools (Quaquarelli, 1994, pp. 5–22). Those thinkers, though exercising a high degree of prudence and often being affected by strong prejudice themselves (Buchheit, 1974, pp. 134 ff.), included the immense heritage of antiquity into their research (Drązkowski, 1988, pp. 39 ff.), pondering in awe over the economy of God's salvation plan, which knows no limits of origin, culture, or even religion. This process, referred to by one of them (Eusebius of Caesarea) as *praeparatio evangelica*,⁸ gained

7 Marcel Simon discusses this issue in great detail, pointing out that *praeparatio evangelica*, meaning the preparation of God's plan of salvation, is traceable not only in the Jewish tradition, but also in the cultural and religious heritage of antiquity (Simon, 1979, pp. 46–94).

8 This issue was discussed by Eusebius of Caesarea in a separate treatise (4th century/2012). The scholar returns to this matter in his magnum opus as well (Eusebius, 4th century/1994, pp. 20–23).

momentum, while the search for God's presence in ancient tradition and culture continues to surprise us with its bold interpretations and daring accommodations to this day.

In consequence, the inclusion of solar symbolism, the phoenix included, into the repertoire of Christian art came about smoothly, since the symbol was associated with the concept of rebirth in ancient art as well (Kobielus, 2002, pp. 93 ff.). The hope for rebirth is well-illustrated by the text of the ancient epitaph on the tomb of Ostia. It states that the deceased, having lived a life full of joy, hopes to be reborn along with the phoenix, who waits for him with the Manes:

D M
C DOMITI PRIMI
HOC EGO SU IN TUMULO PRIMUS NOTISSI
MUS ILLE VIXI LUCRINIS POTABI SAEPE FE
LERNUM BALNIA VINA VENUS MECUM
SENVERE PER ANNOS HEC EGO SI POTUI,
SIT MIHI TERRA LEBIS. SET TAMEN AD MA
NES FOENIX ME SERBAT IN ARA QUI ME
CUM PROPERAT SE REPARARE SIBI
IN ARA QUI MECUM PROPERAT SE REPARARE SIBI
L D FUNERI C DOMITI PRIMI A TRIBUS MESSIS HERMEROTE PIA ET PIO
(Dessau, 1887, p. 113, no. 914)

In consequence, it is quite obvious that one should look for the first renderings of this motif with a clearly Christian message in Roman catacombs. However, to tell the truth, it is necessary to add that Clement, the bishop of Rome (92–101), even made references to this myth in his teachings on the resurrection: “Let us consider the marvelous sign which is seen in the regions of the east, that is, in the parts about Arabia. There is a bird, which is named the phoenix” (Clement, ca. 96/1973, p. 285). Further on, Clement describes the death and rebirth of the bird, to conclude:

Do we then think it to be a great and marvelous thing, if the Creator of the universe shall bring about the resurrection of them that have served him with holiness in the assurance of a good faith, seeing that he showeth to us even by a bird the magnificence of his promise? (ca. 96/1973, p. 285)

In this case, it is very likely that iconography borrowed an image which had already existed in Christian circles. This is even more likely given that over the centuries its popularity in the texts written by Church scholars not only did not decrease, but in fact increased (Wójtowicz, 1984, pp. 376–383).



Figure 1. Phoenix in a Burning Nest: Fresco from the “Greek Chapel” (*Capella Greca*) in the Catacomb of Priscilla, Mid-3rd Century, Rome. Photo by J.C. Kałużny.



Figure 2. Phoenix in the Palm Tree: Fragment of the Sarcophagus from the Czartoryski Museum, Mid-4th Century, Krakow (Ostrowski, 1986). Photo by J.C. Kałużny.



Figure 3. Phoenix in a Palm Tree: Mosaic from the Apse at Saints Cosmas and Damian Basilica, Mid-6th Century, Rome. Photo by J.C. Kałużny.

Just like other portrayals of Christ, the role of the image of the phoenix in Christian art is rooted in sepulchral art. The representation model typically refers to a colorful bird sitting in a flaming nest or perched on palm branches, often supplemented by the motif of a radial nimbus placed around its head. The first example of this representation—a fresco in the “Greek Chapel” of the Catacomb of Priscilla dating from the second half of the 3rd century (Fig. 1)—clearly refers to the sign of hope and rebirth into a new life (Ferrua, 1954–55, pp. 273–277). Obviously, the image referred to the hope of resurrection which the painting—in the Christian context—was supposed to convey (Bisconti, 1979, pp. 39–40). The same image can be also encountered later, for instance in a Neapolitan baptistery from the turn of the 4th century. At that time, the symbol of the phoenix was associated with the resurrection, understood as rebirth through the waters of a holy baptism.

In the Christological sense, the image of a phoenix symbolized the resurrected Christ.⁹ In this case, however, it seems that the Christ-phoenix was also meant to augur the universal resurrection. This interpretation seems to be supported by iconographic sources as well, because as early as the 4th century we find images of the phoenix directly accompanying images of the Christ.¹⁰ Thus, the Christological representation is not only reinforced, but it receives a new, deeply eschatological meaning. Written sources also seem to extend the symbolic meaning of the phoenix by adding this new aspect, as the Church fathers since the 3rd century often resorted to the image as a symbol of hope for the resurrection of all the faithful in the final times (Bisconti, 1979, pp. 22–26).

Creator of the birds has for his own saints. These he does not allow to perish, just as he does not permit in the case of one sole bird when he willed that the phoenix should rise again, born of his own seed. Who, then, announces to him the day of his death, so that he makes for himself a casket... Your casket, your sheath, is Christ, who protects and conceals you in the day of evil. (Ambrose, 4th century/1961)

9 Many contemporary scholars refer to the phoenix as a motif representing the resurrection of Christ, including G. Schiller (1966, pp. 129–131), E.W. Kleinbauer (1972, p. 28 ff.), J. Miziołek (1991, p. 63), and S. Kobięłus (2002, p. 96 ff.).

10 There are a few examples of Christ (the *traditio legis* scene) depicted with a phoenix perched on his palm, dating from the end of the 4th century:

- 1) Sarcophagus of Verona—the church of San Giovanni in Valle (Bisconti, 1979, Fig. 3)
- 2) Marble slab of the Catacomb of the Jordanians (Bisconti, 1979, Fig. 6)
- 3) Fresco of the Ad Decimum catacomb at via Latina (Filarska, 1986, Fig. 89)
- 4) Fragment of a columnar sarcophagus (Grabar, 1999, p. 155)



Figure 4. Phoenix in a Palm Tree: Mosaic from the Apse at St. Praxedes Basilica, Mid-9th Century, Rome. Photo by J.C. Kałużny.



Figure 5. A phoenix in a Burning Nest: Mosaic from the Apse of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of London, 20th Century. Photo by J.C. Kałużny.

It seems that the popularity of phoenix imagery is due not only to the above-mentioned features that suggest its vicinity to Christian ideology, but also to the popularity of the cults of the sun with which the image was, quite rightly, associated. This is why we can repeatedly come across the sun's messenger in the depictions of the apocalyptic Christ which follow the *Sol invictus* model. The phoenix in this layout can be found on sarcophagi (for example, a fragment of a sarcophagus from the Czartoryski Family Museum in Krakow, mid-4th century [Fig. 2]) and mosaics alike (Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian, mid-6th century [Fig. 3] or the Praxedes Basilica, mid-9th century [Fig. 4]; both specimens are in Rome). This motif was not as spectacular as, for instance, the Good Shepherd theme, and was typically placed in the background. However, the association of the phoenix with rebirth and resurrection, and its inclusion in the popular iconography of the apocalyptic Christ in the *Sol invictus* motif, made this image survive in Christian art until today (Warsiński, 1991–1992, pp. 125–137), as manifested by the mosaic from the apse of the London Catholic cathedral (Fig. 5).

Christ—*Delphinus Salvator*

Delphinus salvator, which became the image of Christ the Savior in Christian iconography, has extensive mythological origins, very close to those of Christianity.¹¹ According to Greek beliefs, dolphins escorted the souls of the dead to the Blessed Islands. They were either towing Poseidon's carriage or carrying news as his emissaries. The dolphin figure itself was often associated with the legendary singer Arion, who was attacked by pirates while returning from Corinth to Sicily. He was saved from imminent death in the sea by a dolphin attracted by the song coming from the pirates' ship. The animal transported the divine minstrel to Corinth.¹² Young Dionysus turned Tyrrhenian privateers into dolphins, and made them for repay their sins by helping castaways (Fig. 6). At the same time, one should remember that life in antiquity focused around the Mediterranean Sea, which largely determined the existence or non-existence of major civilizations of that

11 This image is not one of the most popular Christological ones, which, along with the peacock or—later—the pelican or eagle, enter Christian iconography with their luggage of ancient symbolism. See Forstner (1990, pp. 243–247, 256–257) and Iwaszkiewicz (1974, pp. 402 ff.).

12 Stanislaw Kobielius talks about the similarity between these events and the story of Jonah the prophet (Jon 1,1–4,11). However, the adaptation of this representation in Christian art more likely resulted from the popularity of the image of a dolphin-rescuer—*delphinus salvator*—in ancient literature and iconography (Kobielius, 2002, p. 85).



Figure 6. Young Dionysus Transforming Tyrrhenian Pirates into Dolphins: A Mosaic from a Roman Villa, 3rd Century, Dougga, Museum in Bardo. © CC by Dennis Jarvis.



Figure 7. Arion with a Lute Seated on a Dolphin: Mosaic from Piazza Armerina, Early 4th Century, Sicily (Cander, 1998, pp. 90 ff, 94 ff). Photo by J.C. Kaluźny.



Figure 8. Dolphin Wrapped Around an Anchor: Mosaic from the Catacomb of Hermes in Tunisia, 4th Century (Filar-ska, 1986, p. 146, Fig. 47; Cander, 1998, p. 111 ff; Foucher, 1960, p. 92).



Figure 9. Dolphin Carrying a Cross: Relief on Limestone, Egypt, Mid-6th Century, Czartoryski Museum in Krakow, Ref. No. IX-995 (Burckhardt, 1992, Fig. 43). Photo by J.C. Kałużny.



Figure 10. Dolphin Inside a Chalice: Mosaic Floor from Domus dei Pesci in Ostia, 4th Century. Photo by J.C. Kałużny.

period. This is why in early Christian compositions, marine motifs were as popular in ornamentation as bucolic scenes (Cander, 1998, pp. 83 ff.). Meanwhile, dolphins, including the representation of *delphinus salvator*, were frequently encountered in marine-style decorations. This iconographic motif consists of the maritime mammal being ridden by a putto or—alternatively—saving Arion, as is the case with the mosaic of Piazza Armerina in Sicily from the early 4th century (Fig. 7).

Christian art employed the *delphinus salvator* theme, yet not as an independent representation, but rather as an element of a larger composition (Kobelius, 2002, p. 85)—similarly to ancient art, where a dolphin on its own serves a purely ornamental purpose, devoid of any deeper meaning. It is only thanks to its attributes—a putta, Arion, Dionysus—that the animal gains any meaning. In Christian iconography, we can find several pieces where an additional element in the form of a dolphin reinforces and determines the composition: a dolphin entwined around an anchor (mosaics of the Hermes catacomb in Tunisia, 4th century [Fig. 8]); one attached to a trident (Victorina epitaph of the St. Calixte catacomb, 4th century);¹³ a cross carried by a dolphin (a limestone slab of the Czartoryski Museum, dating from the 6th century [Fig. 9]¹⁴); a dolphin placed inside a chalice (floor mosaics of the “House of the Fishes” in Ostia Antica, 4th century¹⁵ [Fig. 10]); or a dolphin below a staurogram (the mosaic in a baptistery in Tunisia, 4th/5th century [Fig. 11]). It seems that the image of the sea mammal refers to Christian symbolism, revealing the truth about the redemptive sacrifice of Christ; hence *delphinus salvator*, an important element of ancient iconography, naturally infiltrated Christian iconography in the context of *Christus—Delphinus Salvator*.

As shown above, no fixed composition with Christological meaning was developed with a dolphin alone, while depictions of *Delphinus Salvator*—despite numerous soteriological references—carried a variety of meanings, additionally determined by the presence of attributes. Moreover, despite their popularity they did were not one of the key forms conveying Christological content. They are typically encountered in sepulchral art, including frescoes and reliefs on sarcophagi,¹⁶ but they lacked

13 In both of these cases we are most likely dealing with the “*crux dissimulata*” (Kobelius, 2000, pp. 139–162).

14 A pendant from this slab, its right equivalent, is now at the Louvre Museum in Paris, in the ancient art section.

15 For more on the Christian nature of the mosaic in the House of the Fishes, see Becatti (1961, p. 182).

16 Relying on the repertoire of historic Christian art, as many as 34 examples of *Delphinus salvator* can be found dating to before the end of the 4th century. For examples of sarcophagus reliefs, see Deichmann (1967, Figs. 87, 128, 129, 137, 140, 223, 238, 301, 326, 471, 476, 564, 614, 683,

the same power that determined the success of other compositions coming from antiquity (Kałużny, 2004, pp. 54 ff.).

Why then did the motif in question disappear? It seems that at least several causes came into play. First of all, it was a consequence of the frequency with which it was used without any fixed, typical composition being developed. As a result, the impact of the image “fades away” in the eyes of the viewer, thus losing its expressive power and, as a result, its importance as well. Between the 4th and 6th centuries, the dolphin figure become a popular “addition” in Christian art, found on reliefs, frescoes, and finally—on mosaics.¹⁷ Sometimes it is mentioned as a side note in the discussion on a huge topic in Christian iconography: the symbolism of Fish, IXYC (Dölger, 1928, pp. 257, 297 ff.; Forstner, 1990).

Moreover, the dolphin still remains a popular ornamental motif in marine representations of pagan art.¹⁸ In consequence, this topic became commonplace not only in Christian art, but in pagan art as well. Additionally, in the latter, no original composition was developed for a dolphin anyway. Despite its popularity, this motif supplemented others nearly from the very beginning. And hence, since it lacks its own characteristic and independent compositional form, it “dissolves,” so to speak, becoming a mere background for something else.

The above-mentioned reasons eventually resulted in the fact that since the end of the 5th century representations of a dolphins have been treated as Christian in nature, but their use was still limited to a supplementation of other compositions. Unlike the phoenix, which sporadically but consistently persisted as a symbol of rebirth—the resurrected Christ—a dolphin, deprived of such attributes, was not an explicit and immediately recognizable symbol of the Savior. Paradoxically, one could conclude that the well-established position of Christianity in late antiquity sealed the fate of this rather unclear representation of Christ. This is a consequence of the fact that *delphinus salvator* was understandable in a world that not

688, 769, 777) (17 specimens) or Ulbert (1998, Figs. 239, 240) (2 specimens). For specimens and numbering of frescos, see Nestori (1975): Aurelia hypogaeum No. 2; Calixtus catacomb Nos. 1, 13, 21; Domitilla catacomb No. 10; Hermes catacomb No. 10; Pancras catacomb No. 3, Peter and Marcellino catacomb Nos. 53, 71; Prix catacomb Nos. 7, 14, 17; Priscilla catacomb Nos. 15, 28; Sebastian catacomb No. 3 (15 specimens). In total, there are 19 sarcophagus reliefs and 15 frescoes.

17 Interestingly, even today, when reviewing basic studies on iconography from that period, it turns out that the symbol is discussed very little, if at all. See, e.g., material from the lexicon of early Christian symbolism in Ladner (2000, pp. 147 ff.).

18 In this case, we have a plethora of examples; it is sufficient to take a walk and admire monuments in ancient cities: Ostia Antica, Pompei, or the Roman villa near Piazza Amerina which was mentioned above.



Figure 11. Dolphin with a Monogrammatic Cross: Mosaic from the Baptismal Font, Tunisia, 4th/5th century (David, 2007, p. 60, Fig. 15).



Figure 12. Dolphins Intertwined in an Arch in the Presbytery of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna: Mosaic, Mid-6th Century. Photo by J.C. Kaluźny.

only knew mythical texts, but also lived by them. Once the Christian order was installed, the memory of myths started to fade away; *delphinus salvator* simply stopped being a clear symbol of *Christus Delphinus Salvator*. This is why, as time progressed—as shown by the mosaics of Ravenna—this motif started to simply perform the role of an intermedium separating key themes of Christian art (the dolphins of the rainbow in the chancel of San Vitale church in Ravenna, mid-6th century [Fig. 12]).

At this point, the following conclusion comes to mind: in ancient art from the turn of the 3rd century, certain representations do not so much as disappear, but they become transformed and adjusted to meet the new needs and tasks faced by Christian art. Moreover, it can be said that the diversity and popularity of the ancient “vest” in which new ideas were clothed went much farther than expected. This phenomenon is commonly considered positive. The great heritage of antiquity was not rejected, but rather a bridge between the two cultures was built—the ancient culture slowly fading away on the one hand, and the budding Christian civilization emerging, largely on ancient foundations, on the other. Examples of this process can be found in famous and recognizable images, such as Hermes Kriophoros, Helios (Sol Invictus), Orpheus, or Endymion, as well as in those harder-to-identify or even forgotten ones, such as the phoenix or a rescuing dolphin, which represent the divine interference in Christ’s resurrection (the phoenix) or salvation (*delphinus salvator*).

This brings us to the following conclusion: although the borrowing of patterns from antiquity for the purposes of Christian iconography was both popular and quite common, only a fraction of the motifs developed in early Christianity that were grounded in ancient symbols survive today. The above-mentioned representations of the phoenix and the dolphin belong to this very group of forgotten images of early Christian art. The image of the phoenix is still present in Christian symbolism, though sporadic. It is found quite rarely and mainly recognized by specialists, but it has nevertheless permanently entered the culture as a symbol of the resurrected Christ.¹⁹ By contrast, one sadly needs to conclude that *delphinus salvator* read as Christ *Delphinus Salvator*, which lost its original soteriological nature as early as the end of the 5th century, gradually lost its Christological identity, and thus disappeared from the canon of Christian iconography completely.

19 The individual specimens which survive today are a very faint trace of the attempts to disseminate iconography of this type, which failed to generate broader interest. Nevertheless, the image continues to be a symbol of the resurrected Christ (Kollwitz, 1957, col. 9 ff.).

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