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# Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Abbreviations | | i |
| Preface | | iii |
| Karin Blomqvist | *Reading, Learning and Discussing. Being a Student at Athens in the Early Roman Empire* | 1 |
| Sven-Olav Back | *On the Areopagus Speech and its Reception in Second-Century Apologetics* | 15 |
| Jerker Blomqvist | *Apologetics and Rhetoric in the* Ad Diognetum | 31 |
| Dimitrios Karadimas | *Justin's* Dialogue with Trypho *Revisited: Philosophy, Rhetoric and the Defence of the Christian Faith* | 49 |
| Anni Maria Laato | *The Trophy and the Unicorn – Two Images of the Cross of Christ in Justin Martyr's Texts, with Special Regard to Reception History* | 69 |
| Nicu Dumitrașcu | *Reconsidering Anthropology: A Note on Soul and Body in the Thinking of Justin Martyr* | 81 |
| Anders-Christian Jacobsen | *What has Athenagoras to do with Athens? A Geography of Athenagoras' Life and Thought* | 93 |
| Pablo Argárate | *The Doctrine of God in Athenagoras'* Legatio | 103 |
| Serafim Seppälä | *Aristides and Athenagoras of Athens on Angels: From Christian–Jewish Polemics towards Universalism* | 127 |
| Gunnar af Hällström | *Providence* (Pronoia) *in the Early Apologists and Creeds* | 143 |
| Aspasia Kaloudi | *The Characteristics of Greek Religion According to Origen's* Contra Celsum | 155 |
| List of Contributors | | 167 |

# The Trophy and the Unicorn – Two Images of the Cross of Christ in Justin Martyr's Texts, with Special Regard to Reception History

Anni Maria Laato

## Introduction

In the second century, one of the most important tasks of Christian theologians was to define the Christian identity – on the one hand in relation to the Jews, on the other hand to the religions and culture of the Roman Empire. The apologists used several strategies in dealing with this task. In some cases, they chose to pinpoint similarities between the two groups in question, but often they concentrated on differences, wishing to prove the superiority of Christianity.

One central theme in both discussions – with the gentiles and the Jews – was the cross of Christ.[1] The cross recurred so often in the early Christian teaching and practices that even outsiders had noticed it. Therefore, in apologetic literature, there are several passages where the Christians defend themselves against the accusation of worshipping the cross.[2] In addition to the texts, there is also visual material making mockery of the alleged worship of the cross, e.g. the famous Alexamenos graffito in the Palatine museum (about AD 200).[3]

The Christian theologians answered the accusations of worship in two ways: by correcting the claim that the Christians worshipped the cross, but also by counterattack. In discussing this theme with the Jews, they set out to show that the cross was nothing wrong or new, but in fact prophesied already in the Old Testament; and in discussing with the gentiles, they could say that the cross is nothing strange or shameful, for the gentiles themselves have crosses everywhere, even in their symbols of victory. In Justin's texts, we find both strategies. For Justin, the Old Testament prophecies and figures are central in his dealing with the matter of the cross; in his *First Apology*, we find him trying to make Christian teaching and practices understandable for the pagans by drawing attention to images of the cross in his contemporary milieu and in common artefacts.

The purpose of my paper is to look more closely at two images of the cross that are found in Christian literature for the first time in Justin, and have been influential in later literature and art: the *tropaion* of a ship, as he terms it, and a unicorn with its horns.[4] I shall seek the possible backgrounds of these images, discuss their purpose in Justin's argumentation, and have a look at their later reception history. To appreciate symbols used by Justin in a broader context, I shall also discuss the images of cross and crucifixion in Early Christian

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[1] A standard work for the Cross and Crucifixion in early Christianity and the ancient world is Hengel 1977.
[2] Tert. *Apol.* 16.1; 12; *Marc.* 3.22; Min. Fel. *Oct*. 29.6; Or. *Cels.* 2.47.
[3] The graffito is located in the Palatine Antiquarium, Rome. Solin and Itkonen-Kaila 1966, no. 246.
[4] One explanation offered to the puzzling idea that a unicorn has two horns, is that when they are looked at sideways, the two horns may look like one.

art. An earlier commonly held view that the cross and the crucifixion appear in public Christian art only in the fifth century has been lately challenged. The unicorn as a symbol for Christ appears probably for the first time in a fifth-century mosaic in San Giovanni in Fonte, Ravenna, and becomes popular in the Middle Ages.[5]

## The idea with types (lat. *typus*) and symbols

Both the *tropaion* and the unicorn belong to the rather large group of images or categories for the cross of Christ in Justin's texts.[6] Before looking more closely at these specific images, we shall shortly discuss why Justin felt the need to make use of such symbols and prefigurations. By the term 'symbol' is here meant any kind of image that has been used to represent the cross. Use of symbols in art was common in antiquity, but presenting types or prefigurations found in the Old Testament is a specifically Christian technique in art and literature.[7]

Justin wrote about the cross of Christ with three audiences in mind: Jews, pagans and Christians. In discussions with the Jews, he aimed to explain how a suffering Messiah dying on a shameful cross can at the same time be victorious. For this purpose, he needed interpretive models from an authoritative source, namely the Old Testament. In doing this, he had New Testament examples to follow as, for example, in *Acts* 7 Stephen gives Joseph and Moses as examples of God's chosen men who had to suffer at the hands of their own people, but who eventually led them to salvation. Justin presents both of these persons as types of Christ both suffering and victorious.[8] In order to persuade his audience to accept his method, he claims that even the Jews admit that typological and allegorical interpretation is a legitimate way to read the Scriptures:

> You know that what the prophets said and did, they veiled by parables and types, as you admitted to us; so that it was not easy for all to understand the most [of what they said], since they concealed the truth by these means, that those who are eager to find out and learn it might do so with much labour.[9]

In his mentioning of several types of and prophesies concerning the cross, Justin is dealing not only with Christology, but also with ecclesiology, in particular the universal character of the church. For him, it is Christ on the cross who calls the nations to him and rejects those Jews who do not believe in him. Among the many Old Testament texts as proof that Justin presents for the summoning of the nations and thereby the formation of the church, there are two kinds: texts containing prophecies he says have been fulfilled (such as *Mal*. 1:10–12 in *Dial.* 41.2–3, 117.5 and *Ps*. 72:17 in *Dial.* 121.3), and texts that were interpreted as being types of New Testament events and persons.

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[5] Murray and Murray 1996, 551.
[6] Others include the brazen serpent (*Num*. 21:6–9) and Moses' upraised arms in the battle against Amalek (*Ex.* 17:11–12). These two examples occur together already in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 12 (without a connection to the blessing of Joseph), and in Justin several times (*Dial*. 90; 111–112; 131). See Skarsaune 1987, 215–217; 393–394; 398.
[7] Jensen 2015, 3.
[8] Later, Tertullian, too, presents both of them as types of suffering on the cross (*Marc.* 3.18).
[9] *Dial.* 90.2.

In discussions with the gentiles, the Old Testament images and proof-texts were not that important. What they could prove was the ancientness of Christianity – in the *First Apology* 44.8 Justin claims that Moses is in fact older than all the Greek authors, and that they have learned their wisdom from him. More importantly, Justin introduces examples from the contemporary life of his audience, intending to show that the cross is not shameful, but in fact glorious.

The third group of addressees, Christians, were probably those who actually mainly read Justin's texts. For them, the arguments Justin presents against or for Jews and pagans were to function as models they could employ when discussing with these others.

## *Tropaion* and a mast with a crossbar as a symbol for the cross

In his *First Apology* 54.1, Justin claims that the gentiles have fabricated several myths in imitation of the truth in order to mislead humanity. He adds a little later that no one, however, has tried this with the crucifixion, which is the "greatest symbol of the power and authority of Christ" (*1 Apol*. 55.1–2). He then lists some everyday things that are in the form of a cross, like tools, the human body with outstretched arms and a human face with a nose through which people breathe, to show that nothing in this world can be connected with anything else, without involving the form of a cross. Among these cross-shaped necessary things is what he terms 'a trophy' of a ship, without which it is impossible to cross the seas. He writes:

> For the sea is not traversed except that 'trophy' which is called a sail (τρόπαιον, ὃ καλεῖται ἱστίον) remains safe in the ship.[10]

A few lines down he adds that even the symbols his addressees carry in their processions – banners and trophies – have the form of a cross, and these, too, prove the power of this sign.[11]

It is not immediately clear what Justin means by the term 'trophy'. A *tropaion* originally has nothing to do with a ship, but denotes a memorial set up after a victory and, especially, one that has forced the enemy to flee the field. It was a stump of a tree where the arms of the enemy could be displayed. It did not have to be in the place where the victory had been won, but usually was found in the city where it could be honoured.[12] This kind of *tropaion* did indeed somewhat look like a mast with a crossbar (known in nautical terminology as the yard), and a cross, too. Later, *tropaion* meant any emblem of victory.

At first it seems that Justin indeed likens the cross to a mast with a crossbar, which has the form of a cross, but then he adds that this *tropaion* is called *istion*, a sail. It has been suggested that there is a mistake in the text here,[13] but Hugo Rahner thinks that the difficulty in interpretation arises from the fact Justin has compressed many concepts into a short (too short) formulation.[14] He argues that even if Justin does not mention the word

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[10] *1 Apol*. 55.3.
[11] *1 Apol.* 55.6.
[12] Neumann 1979, 986–987.
[13] Dölger suggests that instead of a 'sail', it should be 'mast'. Dölger 1918, 137.
[14] Rahner 1964, 378.

'mast', he must have had it in mind too (this is important for later texts where the mast itself is identified with the cross). Nor does Justin explain that the victorious ship denotes the church (which later Hippolytus and others do). Rahner thinks that Justin envisages the trophy as the sail hung up on a mast, as a mark of a victory; and the mast and crossbar which give the trophy the form of a cross are implied. Rejners agrees with him and, in order to make this thought clearer, translates *istion* as "mast and a yard".[15] There is no evidence that in antiquity the masts of a ship were called 'trophies', and therefore McDonald concludes that the metaphor of mast-trophy is a Christian innovation.[16]

As noted, a few lines lower down Justin mentions those 'banners and trophies' which signify authority and power and which the people carry in processions.[17] His idea is, therefore, to argue that the cross, which for the gentiles seems to indicate humiliation, in fact and already in their own world shows the contrary: authority and power. Jean-Marc Prieur notes that several of the other everyday objects where Justin chooses to see the form of the cross also in their ways symbolize power, abilities and victory.[18]

## Old Testament background

Where did Justin get this idea from? My suggestion is that he does not only call upon contemporary nautical imagery and military trophies in his intention to stress the magnificence of the cross, but that he also has the Old Testament background in mind. In his writings, he is heavily dependent on the Old Testament, and presents an impressive list of Old Testament types and prophecies of the cross. Therefore, it is perhaps to be expected that even behind the figure of the trophy lurks some Old Testament reference: such could be found in the Ark of Noah, banners and standards and his version of *Ps*. 96:10.

Justin's nautical references are otherwise often connected to the texts about the Ark of Noah as presented in *Genesis* 6–9, *Isaiah* 54:8–9 and *1 Peter* 3:20–21.[19] In particular, in *Dial.* 138.1–2 he explains that in *Is*. 54:8–9 "I saved you (Jerusalem) in the flood of Noah" is a reference to Christ and the people who obey him. As Noah and his family were saved from the waters by wood, so has Christ "regenerated another nation (the Christians) through water, and faith, and wood." Christ has become a ruler of this nation, and the "wood is the mystery of the cross." With these Ark of Noah passages Justin lays the foundation for later interpretations of a wooden ship with a wooden mast as an image of the church, ruled by Christ on the cross. Other passages about Noah often refer to him being a father of all nations, and being saved as uncircumcised.[20] Justin ends his interpretation of *Is*. 54:8–9 by returning to discuss the concept of Jerusalem. For him it is clear that by Jerusalem God did not have in mind the actual place, but the Christians. He adds that God has prepared for them a resting-place in Jerusalem, which he explains as follows: "I mean, that by water, faith, and wood, those who are afore-prepared, and who

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[15] Rejners 1965, 190.
[16] McDonald 1994, 280.
[17] Rahner 1964, 378–379.
[18] Prieur 2006, xxiii.
[19] See for example *Dial.* 19.4.
[20] *Dial.* 19.4, 92.2, 119.4.

repent of the sins which they have committed, shall escape from the impending judgment of God."[21] It can be concluded that Justin uses Noah-related texts to motivate the salvation of the uncircumcised, that is, the nations. For the depiction of Noah in early Christian art, see below in this article.

Another possible background influencing Justin's idea of a trophy is the image of the raising of banners and standards, which is a frequently occurring figure in the Old Testament, and often connected to theme of calling on the nations (e.g. *Is*. 49:22). In *Dial.* 26.3 Justin quotes one of these passages, *Is*. 62:10–63.6, where the raising of a banner is closely connected to restoration of Zion and the summoning of the nations:

> Lift up a standard (*sysseismon*) for the people; for, lo, the Lord has made it heard unto the end of the earth. Say to the daughters of Zion, Behold, your Saviour has come; having His reward, and His work before His face: and He shall call it a holy nation, redeemed by the Lord. And you shall be called a city sought out, and not forsaken.[22]

Justin tells that the nations who believe in Christ and repent of their sins are saved together with the righteous of the Old Testament, even if they are uncircumcised.

Yet another source for Justin's idea of cross as a symbol for victory and rule is his reading of *Ps*. 96:10. He quotes this verse in *Dial.* 73.1–3 with an early Christian interpretation, according to which the Lord reigns 'from a tree', and claims that the Jews have censured these words from their Scripture.[23] In this passage, Justin again combines the tree with the idea of dominion over the nations. This interpretation became popular in the West through Old Latin translations.[24]

It seems plausible, even if it cannot be proven, that behind Justin's short sentence about a ship with a sign of victory as a symbol for the cross, there are Old Testament interpretive traditions. The trophy expresses the idea of the Cross of Christ as a victory. It is used to make the cross of Christ fathomable and acceptable for both Jews and pagans.

## Reception history

The reception history of this short passage in Justin is impressive. The idea of the cross as a trophy spread and made its way even into medieval hymns and art. This passage has also been regarded as a first witness, or starting-point, for a significant tradition, where the tasks, different parts, personnel and even the building-material of a ship have been given symbolical, ecclesiological interpretations.[25]

It is apparent that Tertullian and Minucius Felix have used Justin's idea of a *tropaion* and amplified it.[26] Both authors use the same words used by Justin (but in Latin):

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[21] *Dial.* 138.8.
[22] *Dial*. 26.1.
[23] See Skarsaune 1987, 35–42; 443.
[24] These words are attested in one Septuagint manuscript and in later Latin traditions, e.g. Tert. *Marc.* 3.19.1; *Adv. Iud.* 10.11; Ps.-Cypr. *De montibus* 9. See also Julian 1892, 1220.
[25] Rahner 1964, 306–313; 375–385.
[26] Tert. *Apol.* 16.2; *Ad nat.* 1.12.14; Min. Fel. *Oct*. 29.6–8. Lindblom 1925, 106–107 noted that Justin, Tertullian and Minucius Felix use the banners and trophies of the Roman army as symbols of the cross of Christ. See also Schubert 2014, 553–557.

*tropaeum* and *vexillum* (sail).[27] Both use this image to the same purpose as Justin: to argue against the gentiles that not only do the Christians not worship a cross, but the gentiles themselves have trophies, flags and banners that, in fact, are in the form of a cross. Both claim that wooden crosses are parts of pagan images of Gods and that pagans may worship them.[28] Minucius Felix writes:

> For your very standards, as well as your banners; and flags of your camp, what else are they but crosses gilded and adorned? Your victorious trophies not only imitate the appearance of a simple cross, but also that of a man affixed to it. We assuredly see the sign of a cross, naturally, in the ship when it is carried along with swelling sails, when it glides forward with expanded oars; and when the military yoke is lifted up, it is the sign of a cross; and when a man adores God with a pure mind, with hands outstretched. Thus the sign of the cross either is sustained by a natural reason, or your own religion is formed with respect to it.[29]

In *Adversus Marcionem* 4.20.5, Tertullian develops this image further. The cross is a *tropaeum*, a sign of victory, no longer understood as a visual symbol of a cross: "For with the last enemy Death did He fight, and through the trophy of the cross He triumphed."[30]

Minucius Felix and Tertullian do not yet develop the later and very popular idea of a ship as a figure for the church. In another context, though, Tertullian shows that he is aware of this idea, as he admits that the boat of the apostles (*Matth*. 8:23) in one sense can be seen a figure of the church, as he writes:

> But that little ship did present a figure of the Church, in that she is disquieted 'in the sea,' that is, in the world, 'by the waves,' that is, by persecutions and temptations; the Lord, through patience, sleeping as it were, until, roused in their last extremities by the prayers of the saints, He checks the world, and restores tranquillity to His own.[31]

Tertullian's ship-references are, however, mostly about real ships or the shipwreck of faith (*1 Tim*. 1:19, *Pud*. 13.12). Once, in *Adversus Marcionem* 3.18, Tertullian presents a list of Old Testament types for Christ's suffering on the cross. He names Isaac and Joseph, as explained above, and in explaining how Joseph prefigures Christ, he quotes *Deut*. 33:17 in a Latin version which mentions the horn(s) of a unicorn (*cornua unicornis*). This passage shall be discussed below. Here we only note that as a type of the cross Tertullian likens the tip of a mast (*antenna*) to the horns of a unicorn.

The first elaborated description of the church-as-ship is found in Hippolytus' *De Antichristo* 59 (written ca AD 200). He likens the ship to the church, traveling on the sea of the world. This ship carries a *tropeum*, which he interprets as the cross of the Lord. The topsails are identified as the prophets, martyrs and apostles:

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[27] In *Cor*. 11, Tertullian claims that a Christian soldier cannot carry a military banner (*vexillum*) that is in conflict with Christ.
[28] Min. Fel. *Oct*. 29.6: *Cruces ligneas ut deorum vestrorum partes forsitan adoratis,* cf. Tert. *Apol.* 12.3.
[29] Min. Fel. *Oct.* 29.
[30] *Cum ultimo hoste, morte, proeliaturus (Dominus) per tropaeum crucis triumphavit*. See Rejners 1965, 193.
[31] Tert. *De bapt.* 12.12.

> The sea is the world, in which the church is set, like a ship tossed in the deep, but not destroyed; for she has with her the skilled pilot, Christ. And she bears in her midst also the trophy which is erected over death; for she carries with her the cross of the Lord.

Hippolytus' direct dependence on Justin cannot be proven with certainty, but it is possible. He uses the word *tropaion*, 'trophy', for the cross, but by this time it could already have become a common usage. What is noteworthy is that Hippolytus, and after him several other writers, combines the mast/cross metaphor (without any mention of a trophy) with Homer's story of Odysseus binding himself in a mast to resist the Sirens.[32] He admonishes his readers to act like Odysseus: they should bind themselves to the Cross of Christ (he actually uses the word 'wood') and not listen to the heretics.

Later, the idea of a mast or a trophy as a symbol of the cross became very popular and was developed in many ways. Ambrose tells that the ship of the church voyages well in this world when driven by sails full of the cross of the Lord (*pleno Dominicae crucis velo*),[33] and Paulinus of Nola speaks about the saving faith that "we enjoy in the power of the banner of cross of God Christ" (*Christi dei vexillo crucis*).[34] Venantius Fortunatus (d. 609) used the image of a ship with a mast several times in his hymns. *Antenna crucis* (the cross as mast) is mentioned in the context of the soul's navigating to anchor in the port of eternal life: "Christ, I hope that you steer our souls through these waves by the tree and direct the sail with the cross-mast."[35] He can also use this imagery without any connection to a nautical context, as in his famous hymn *Vexilla regis*, written for the feast of the True Cross on the 19th of November 569.[36] In this hymn, the regal banner of the cross is celebrated, the *patibulum* (crossbar) is mentioned and the above-mentioned construal *regnavit a ligno deus* is used, too.[37]

The 'church as a ship' tradition without any specific mention of a *tropaion*/*tropaeum* developed quickly.[38] It was used to describe the spiritual journey of the church or a Christian to heaven, but also to deal with questions of hierarchy and discipline in the church. Not only the mast and sail, but all parts and even building-material of a ship acquired allegorical interpretations.

## Horn(s) of a unicorn as a symbol of the cross

We have already mentioned another image of the cross, which Justin uses, namely the horn (or horns) of a unicorn. He is the first Christian author to present this image, and his purpose is to show the Jews that the crucifixion of the Messiah is predicted in the

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[32] *Haer*. 7.1; Cf. Clement of Alexandria *Protreptikos* 12.18.1–4; Ambrose *Expositio in Lucam* 4.2, Paulinus of Nola *Ep.* 30. McDonald has shown that the apocryphal *Acts of Andrew*, written at the end of the second century or beginning of the third, joins this tradition and combines it with Greek mythology (McDonald 1994, esp. 257–262).
[33] *Virg*. 18.119.
[34] *Ep*. 16. 8.
[35] *PL* 88.276.
[36] Julian 1892, 1220; Rahner 1964, 344.
[37] For the history of this hymn, see Julian 1892, 1219–1220.
[38] For the Ark/Ship as an image of the church, see Stuhlfauth 1942, 131–132; Peterson 1950; Goldammer 1950; Rahner 1964, 239–564; Ferguson 2016, 17–19.

Scripture, and to point to the address to the nations and the rejection of the unbelieving Jews. The idea of a unicorn as a symbol for Christ is based on a Septuagint version of the blessing of Joseph (*Deut*. 33:13–17), where instead of a young bull with horns (as in the Hebrew text), one speaks about a unicorn (*monokerootos*) and its horns (*kerata*). With these horns the unicorn "shall he push the nations from one end of the earth to another."[39] Justin quotes this verse in *Dial.* 91.1–3, where he says that this prefiguration and prophecy is being fulfilled in his own time as "some out of all the nations, pricked in their hearts, have turned from vain idols and demons to serve God" and at the same time, those who do not believe are pushed away.

Tertullian has taken his view on the unicorn from Justin. Like Justin, he, in *Marc*. 3.18.3–4 presents Joseph as a type of Christ. He quotes the same Old Testament passage as his predecessor and gives a similar interpretation, with some additions. According to him, Christ is "to some as severe as a Judge, to others gentle as a Saviour" like a unicorn with horns, or like a bull, but not like a minotaur. With his horns, which symbolize the extremities of his cross, Christ "pushes nations through faith, bearing them away from earth to heaven; and will then push them through judgment, casting them down from heaven to earth."[40]

In *Adversus Iudaeos* 10.7, Tertullian connects both images we have discussed in this paper, the mast of a ship and the horns of a unicorn:

> But Christ was therein signified: 'bull,' by reason of each of his two characters - to some fierce, as Judge; to others gentle, as Saviour; whose 'horns' were to be the extremities of the cross. For even in a ship's yard (*antemna navis*) - which is part of a cross - this is the name by which the extremities are called; while the central pole of the mast is a 'unicorn' (*unicornis autem medio stipite palus*). By this power, in fact, of the cross, and in this manner horned, he does now, on the one hand, 'toss' universal nations through faith, wafting them away from earth to heaven; and will one day, on the other, 'toss' them through judgment, casting them down from heaven to earth.

It seems plausible that it is not only a visual likeness of the horns with a cross that inspired Justin to connect the horns of a unicorn with Christ's power and authority to divide the peoples to those who are saved and those who are not. In the Old Testament and in Near Eastern culture, the horn-motif has over the centuries symbolized power and strength, and it is easy to believe that this has influenced Justin.[41]

Justin and Tertullian, however, connect the horns of a unicorn with Christ on a cross in another way too: when speaking of his humiliation and suffering. In *Dial.* 98.5

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[39] Rejners 1965, 99–100.

[40] *Ioseph et ipse Christum figuraturus (nec hoc solo, ne demorer cursum, quod persecutionem a fratribus passus est ob dei gratiam, sicut et Christus a Iudaeis carnaliter fratribus) cum benedicitur a patre etiam in haec verba, Tauri decor eius, cornua unicornis cornua eius, in eis nationes ventilabit pariter ad summum usque terrae: non utique rhinoceros destinabatur unicornis nec minotaurus bicornis, sed Christus in illo significabatur, taurus ob utramque dispositionem, aliis ferus ut iudex, aliis mansuetus ut salvator, cuius cornua essent crucis extima. Nam et in antenna, quae crucis pars est, extremitates cornua vocantur; unicornis autem medius stipitis palus. Hac denique virtute crucis et hoc naore cornutus universas gentes et nunc ventilat per fidem, auferens a terra in caelum, et tunc per iudicium ventilabit, deiciens de caelo in terram.*

[41] Rejners notes (1965, 98–99) that the main source for Justin's usage of this image is the Old Testament, but that even the visual similarity in form between horns and cross, as well as widespread symbolism of the horns as a sign of physical strength have played their part.

and 105.2, Justin quotes *Ps*. 21(22):22 to show that the prayer of Christ on the cross did "save me from the horns of a unicorn" fulfilled the prophecy uttered in the Psalm. Tertullian, in *Marc.* 19.1, explains Christ's prayer on the cross: "Save me from the lion's mouth" that is, the jaws of death, "and my humiliation from the horns of the unicorns", in other words, from the extremities of the cross. In these passages, the horns of unicorns stand for the power of evil.

Yet another text connects the trophy-motive with the unicorn-motive: shortly before above-quoted words, Tertullian quotes the Christian interpolation to *Ps*. 96 *Dominus regnavit a ligno*, discussed above. Christ on the cross is both victorious and suffering. Rejners notes that 'unicorn' was never a common name for the cross of Christ in early Christian literature.[42] It is, however, found, for example in Hippolytus (*Benedictiones Moysis*), Cyprian (*Test* 2.7) and Basil, commenting on Psalm 92:10. Basil connects the image of Christ as a unicorn in its power and glory, as he writes:

> On the whole, since it is possible to find the word 'horn' used by Scripture in many places instead of 'glory', as the saying 'He will exalt the horn of his people' [*Ps*. 148:14] and 'His horn shall be exalted in glory' [*Ps*. 112:9] or also, since the 'horn' is frequently used instead of 'power', as the saying 'My protector and the horn of my salvation', Christ is the power of God; therefore, he is called the Unicorn on the ground that he has one horn, that is, one common power with the Father.[43]

Basil's text supports the interpretation that already Justin had the power and glory of Christ in mind as he presented the unicorn as a symbol for Christ. Therefore, both the *tropaion* and the unicorn have the same function in Justin: to emphasize the glory and victory of Christ.

The unicorn is naturally known even in Jewish tradition. Günther Stemberger has noted one peculiar interpretation in the Babylonian Talmud: when discussing what kind of animal Adam sacrificed in the Paradise, one proposal is that it was a unicorn. He quotes a discussion on *Ps*. 69:32: "For said R. Judah: The ox that the first man offered was a unicorn, as it is said: 'And it shall please the Lord better than an ox whose horns extend beyond its hooves'."[44] Thus, the animal Adam killed was not a real animal.

## The cross and crucifixion in Early Christian art

It is worthwhile here to shortly discuss the cross and crucifixion in early Christian art, because images from the third to fifth centuries recall similar topics and ideas as found in Justin's texts, namely the discovery of the cross hidden in everyday phenomena and also prophesied in Old Testament types.[45]

It has long been discussed why the cross and the crucifix appear rather late in public Christian art compared to other themes, such as the miracles of Jesus.[46] It has been

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[42] Rejners 1965, 106.
[43] *Hom. in Ps*.13.5.
[44] *b. Šabb*. 28b. Stemberger 2017, 230–231.
[45] For the discussion on the cross in early Christian art, see Jensen 2017.
[46] In private art there are a few earlier examples, see Sheckler and Leith 2009, 4–7.

claimed that before Constantine there are no Christian images of a cross.[47] Distinctively Christian art in general indeed first enters the world at the beginning of the third century.[48] The first surviving public image of the crucifixion is on the wooden panel doors of Santa Sabina in Rome from the fifth century, and even there the cross itself is only vaguely visible.[49] As an explanation for this absence of images, the embarrassment the shameful cross could produce in ancient contexts has been put forward, as well as a reluctance to produce non-symbolic images of God.[50]

Recently, this view has been challenged as too narrow. Bruce Longenecker has collected evidence which shows that already before Constantine there actually are painted or sculpted crosses, even if not many.[51] Paul Finney notes that the early Christians were well aware of the use of symbols in pre-Christian art, and it was natural for them to continue this praxis.[52] Therefore, one should not just look for direct images, but symbols too. Robin Jensen adds that in its earliest stage, Christian art typically used symbols, and these did not radically differ from non-Christian images.[53] Jensen points out that there also are crypto-crosses, that is, crosses hidden within other images, such as anchors and masts.[54] Many scholars argue that in the catacombs and sarcophagi the omnipresent *orant*-figure hints at the cross – this idea even has a textual basis.[55] It is easy to understand that if even outsiders interpreted this prayer-position as a symbol of a cross, it would well explain why the apologists sought to counter criticism of Christians worshipping the cross. Therefore, one should see crosses only in direct presentations, but also in symbols, types and gestures. This idea is fully in line with Justin's examples of the *tropaion* and the unicorn.[56]

By the third century, recognizable Biblical themes had become customary in Christian art. As noted above, one of the possible sources for Justin's idea of a trophy in a ship is the story of Noah's Ark, which in early Christian art was among the first images that became popular in catacomb art and sarcophagi.[57] Noah is almost always presented alone, in the *orant*-position and in a box with an open lid.[58] The image is clearly intended

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[47] For this claim, see Jensen 2000, 130–131; Longenecker 2015, 2–5; 8–9.
[48] Finney 1994, 99–115 points out that the first Christians often used existing images and gave them new interpretations, thus it is not always easy to decide when a particular piece of art is Christian or pre-Christian.
[49] Sheckler and Leith 2009.
[50] Jensen 2000, 133–137 and Longenecker 2015, 5–8 have collected arguments presented in favor of this claim - in order to challenge them in their books.
[51] Longenecker 2015, 76–87.
[52] Finney 1994, 53.
[53] Jensen 2012, 69; Jensen 2015, 13.
[54] Finney 1994, 111; Jensen 2000, 137–140.
[55] Jensen 2000, 36; Scheckler and Leith 2009, 2.16. Tertullian points out this meaning in *Or*. 14–15 – in the latter chapter he mentions the three praying friends of Daniel, an image often occurring in art in connection with Noah, another reference to Christ (Jensen 2000, 80).
[56] The connection between Justin's examples of images of the cross and Christian art is pointed out by Longenecker 2015, 85 and Schekler and Leith 2009, 11.
[57] Jensen 2012, 18–20; 2015, 13–14.
[58] Jensen 2012, 18. An explanation for this way of presenting Noah has often been sought in how the story of Deukalion and Pyrrha is presented in pre-Christian art, Jensen 2012, 18. However, in Apamea, Asia Minor, similar images are found on Jewish coins from the time of Septimius Severus onwards. The reason for that imagery could be the same pagan story, but another explanation is also possible: a connection to the Ark of Covenant.

to be a type. Both in Justin and in this earliest art, the Ark is to be understood in context of baptismal imaginary. Just as eight persons were saved from flood in the Ark, so the baptism saves the Christians.[59] As shown above, Justin, Tertullian and Minucius Felix thought that the mast with its crossbar symbolized the cross, and from Tertullian and Hippolytus onwards, the ship (later even Ark) is interpreted as the church. Origen was the first who elaborated the idea of Noah as Christ, the architect and builder of the church.[60]

Robin Jensen thinks that the reason that the Christians chose to present the cross through symbols and types was primarily the typological exegesis.[61] In many ways, the Christian artists and writers continued traditions from pagan antiquity, but a typological presentation is new, and marks a distinctively Christian approach to the visual arts.[62] In this article, I have suggested that what others did in painting and sculpting, Justin does in literature. He both seeks connections to his contemporary culture and gives new interpretations to older images.

## Conclusions

In Justin's theology, the cross of Christ is the central concept for the Christian identity. In this article, we have dealt with two images, new in Christian usage, which Justin employs to teach about the cross and its functions. He writes with several audiences in mind and uses several strategies in his argumentation.

Against the mockery of the pagans that the Christians worship a humble cross, Justin claims that the cross in fact is a sign of power and authority, a pivotal point dividing the believing from the unbelieving. Additionally, by giving examples from their common and contemporary milieu, he seeks to demonstrate that the pagans honour crosses, without really knowing it. For or against the Jews, Justin argues that the cross of Christ is prefigured in many ways in the Old Testament. Several of these passages deal with the summoning of the nations and the rejecting of unbelieving Jews.

As Justin is the first surviving witness for both these images, his texts invite the reader to look for both their possible background and for their reception history. I suggest that Old Testament, and more broadly Near Eastern imagery, forms the source for both these figures. Justin then, in a creative way, combined earlier motives with his contemporary imagery. There can also be found a degree of parallelism with the presentation of the cross in early Christian art: the cross could be presented not only directly, but also through various symbols. The typologies of the cross and other references to the passages in the Old Testament concerning wood proved to be inspirational, and went on in several ways to influence later Christian literature and art.

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[59] This Noah explanation in *1 Peter* belonged to early Christian catechetical teaching. Jensen 2012, 206; Jensen 2015, 19.

[60] Or. *Gen. h.* 2.3–4. It is very interesting is to compare two images in the Museo Nazionale Romano Terme di Diocleziano. One is of Noah in his box, and below him, some strange items are depicted. Similar images, are found in a funerary inscription of an architect – and they can be identified as his tools. Could the artist who made this Noah-image have chosen these items on purpose so as to mark him/Christ out as an architect?

[61] Jensen 2015, 3.

[62] Jensen 2015, 24.

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