

## Diabolical appearances in late antiquity: the case of exorcism

### *Introduction*

The Devil and his minions, the demons, were omnipresent for late antique Christians. As the large array of surviving works by late antique bishops and monks show, Christians were constantly being reminded by their priests and bishops that the Devil was lying in wait for them, both in the desert and the city, and whether in excessive self-indulgence or in prideful self-abnegation. If the Devil is powerfully and vividly evoked in early Christian literature, what of his appearance in early Christian art and in the visual imagination? Two major historians of the Devil have stated that Christian art does not portray the Devil before the sixth century, and that it is not known why this was so.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago I decided to explore the problem that these scholars had posed: why were there no early Christian pictures of the Devil? However, I realized quickly that I was asking the wrong sort of question. Asking for reasons for the *absence* of an anthropomorphized image of the Devil in late antiquity, which we know to have developed and flourished in the middle ages, is looking down the wrong end of the telescope; it would be better to investigate the reasons why new images were introduced in the church, rather than seek reasons for explaining their previous non-existence. The question also proceeds on a false basis, because when one goes demon-hunting in Christian art it *is* possible to find the presence of the Devil and his minions, but in surprising, and often subtly suggestive forms. The Devil's presence is implied and required, if not depicted, in scriptural scenes of exorcism and temptation. Furthermore, the Devil is typologically suggested in depictions of particular animals and beasts which were either explicitly linked to the Devil in the Old Testament, or had been linked to the Devil by early Christian exegesis (the

---

<sup>1</sup> J.B. Russell, *Satan: the early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 12: 'Why Christian art does not portray the Devil before the sixth century is not known'; Luther Link, *The Devil: a mask without a face* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 44: 'When it came to painting the Devil, artists [in late antiquity] had a difficult time indeed. There was no literary tradition to speak of, and more vexingly, there was no pictorial tradition at all. In the catacombs and on the sarcophagi, there is *no* Devil.'

serpent in Eden; Jonah's sea-monster; Daniel's lions). So I have turned to excavating the ways in which early Christians suggested and pictured the presence of the Devil, both visually and in literature, in the period before the visual proliferation of anthropomorphic demons.

I am concentrating on the period between c. 200 and c. 600, a relatively long late antiquity. The rationale for this is that there are no Christian images before c. 180, a fact which has aroused interest and debate among scholars,<sup>2</sup> and that, in the field of diabolical imagery, the shift towards explicitly depicting demons is found in the mid-sixth century. The subject of what happens in later Christian images of the Devil has also been covered by historians such as Jeffrey Burton Russell, Luther Link, and Michael Camille.<sup>3</sup>

#### *An exorcism in the gospels*

One part of my project is to examine the ways in which late antique craftsmen depicted biblical stories in which the Devil and/or demons are present, even if invisible. The most obvious example of this is to be found in the story of Jesus exorcising demoniacs, often referred to as the story of the 'Gadarene swine', found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Although the three gospel accounts differ in some small details, they share enough for us to surmise that they are recounting the same event.<sup>4</sup> The lines of the shared story are that Jesus encounters living wild among tombs one (or in Matthew two) violent and a-social possessed man/men. The demons in the demoniac(s)

---

<sup>2</sup> Scholars are divided over whether the absence of images in the earliest church indicates an iconoclastic sensibility, or was a pragmatic result of the church being, at least initially, poor and persecuted. For an influential statement of the former position, see H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen* (Göttingen, 1917). For the latter view, see P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God. The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See Russell, *Satan*; Link, *The Devil*; M. Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> The stories are found at Matthew 8.28-34, Mark 5.1-13, and Luke 8.26-33; the fuller accounts which tally most closely with each other are found in Mark and Luke. The problem of the priority of the texts of the three synoptic gospels has long vexed scholars. Some, following Griesbach, argue for the priority of Matthew, some for Mark; and a third solution is that all three gospels are reliant on a lost common source, known as Q. On Griesbach, see B. Orchard and T. R. W. Longstaff (eds.), *J. J. Griesbach: Synoptic and Text-Critical Studies 1776-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); on the Markan hypothesis, see G. M. Styler, 'The Priority of Mark', *Excursus IV* in C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd edition (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1962); on the Q solution, see C. M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

recognize Jesus as the son of God, beg him not to torment them and to send them out into a herd of swine feeding nearby. This he does, with the result that the pigs run amok and throw themselves off a cliff and drown. In Mark and Luke, the story ends with an evangelical exhortation by Jesus; he orders the cured demoniac, who has begged to join him, to go home and tell his family how much the Lord had done for him.

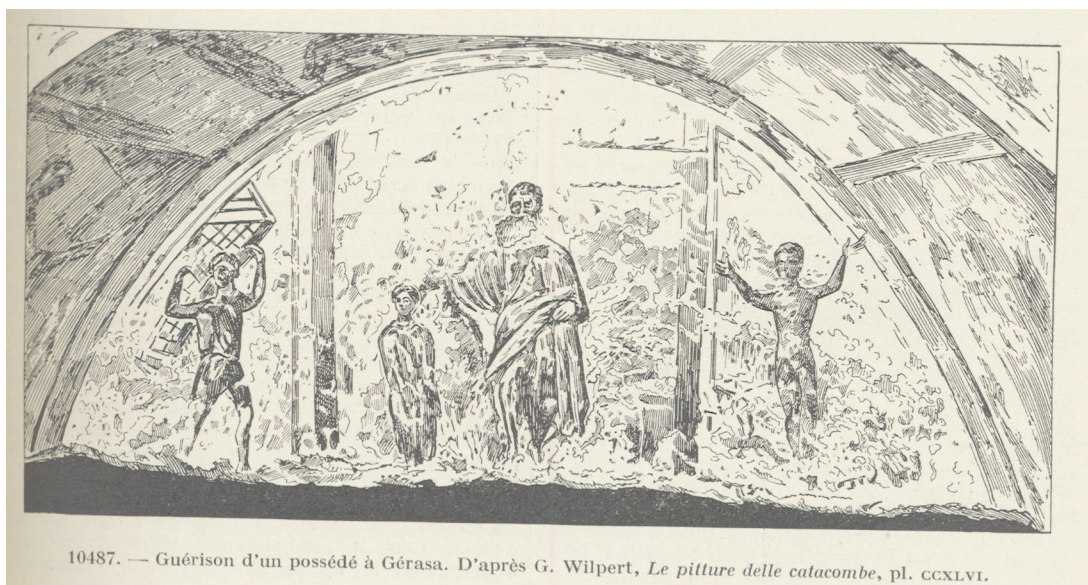
Before proceeding to look at some examples of early Christian images which, typically, compress the essentials of this story into one frame, I should remark briefly on the relationship between the Devil and his demons. The Greek word δαιμών and its Latinized equivalent *daemon* referred long before Christianity to a sort of intermediate spirit. Classical demons were somewhere between gods and men, not completely spiritual, not completely corporeal. They were also morally ambiguous, sometimes good, sometimes bad, and often mischievous. In Christian language and usage, demon came to have *only* negative associations – to describe malevolent minions of the Devil, himself the supreme spiritual enemy of God and mankind. This negative association was logical; demons belonged to the pagan spiritual world, and Christians regarded anything connected with pagan gods or spirits as real and malevolent.<sup>5</sup> Although there is a significant difference between the Devil (a superior angel who fell from God's grace and then proceeded to assault God's newly created man) and his demons (lesser spiritual beings who aided and abetted the Devil in his work of temptation), accounts of exorcisms in the New Testament and in late antiquity frequently fudge this distinction. The demons are the Devil's minions, but the terms διαβολος and δαιμών in Greek and *diabolus* and *daemon* in Latin are used of both, sometimes to ambiguous effect; in Latin, the lack of articles sometimes occludes the difference between The Devil, and a devil.

---

<sup>5</sup> Christians were sometimes accused by pagans of being 'atheists', of rejecting and denying pagan gods and spirits. But this is misleading. For many Christians, the pagan gods and spirits existed, but were evil, and lesser beings than their own God. Thus the pagan emperor Julian's frequent charge against the Christians, that they were atheists, was disingenuous; what he meant was that they did not believe in (his) true gods.

*Images of exorcism: implied demonic presence*

In early Christian art, depictions of Jesus exorcising are not nearly as common as those of his other miracles of healing, feeding and raising from the dead.<sup>6</sup> However, there are a handful of images of this biblical story in different media from the late fourth to mid sixth centuries which allow us to chart different ways of envisioning a biblical demonic story, and to identify the shift from implying demonic presence to depicting demons. An early image of the exorcism is found in a fourth-century fresco in the lunette of an *arcosolium* tomb at the catacombs of S. Ermete in Rome, positioned between images of the miraculous healing of the paralytic (left) and Daniel in the lions' den (right). [fig. 1]



**Fig. 1. Illustration of exorcism (central scene) from catacombs of S. Ermete, Rome.**

This is an extremely rare (possibly the only?) example of an exorcism in catacomb art, where images of Daniel, Jonah, the last supper, Christ as the good shepherd are much more popular

---

<sup>6</sup> A search of the comprehensive Princeton *Index of Christian Art* (<http://icadb.princeton.edu:8991/F>) confirms this.



images. An early fifth-century Roman ivory shows the same scene, but with different details [**figs 2 and 3**].



**Fig. 2. Half of ivory diptych with Christ's miracles**



**Fig. 3. Detail of ivory diptych, with Christ exorcising demoniac**

**Early 5<sup>th</sup> century Roman ivory in Louvre (H. 19.70 cm; W. 7.90 cm; D. 0.80 cm)<sup>7</sup>**

Here Christ gestures at a man with wild loose hair. In front of him three very swinish looking pigs are depicted in full flight against a watery backdrop, indicating the resolution of the incident; the demons leap from the possessed man into a herd of swine and propel them off a cliff into the sea. Finally, there is a sixth-century mosaic of this exorcism in a cycle of Christ's miracles, high up on

---

<sup>7</sup> The other half of this diptych, depicting other of Christ's miracles, is now in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin.

the northern wall of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna [fig. 4]. As in the Roman ivory, Christ gestures at the demoniac, who is kneeling; to their right, three pigs zoom towards a watery grave.<sup>8</sup>



**Fig. 4. B&W photo of mosaic of exorcism from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna**

In none of these image is there a depiction of the demons being expelled from the demoniac and entering the swine, although their presence is more strongly implicit in those images which include the swine running towards the water; viewers are to infer that the pigs have been newly possessed from their broader knowledge of the scriptural story depicted.

All four images occur in the context of a larger cycle of biblical images, mainly of Christ's miracles, such as the healing of the woman with the issue of blood, and the healing of the paralytic. Quite how we treat the significance of the juxtaposition of images is tricky, since they are both alike and different. Both miracles and exorcisms were believed to be salvific acts and

---

<sup>8</sup> There is some similarity between the composition of the Roman ivory and the Ravennese mosaic, especially in their rare depiction of the pigs against a watery background. Although produced more than a century apart, the 'Roman' style of the Ravenna mosaic is not surprising given that Theoderic, the Ostrogothic king who commanded a programme of building, had Roman craftsmen come to Ravenna for the purpose of decorating his new churches. See Cassiodorus, *Variae* 1.6.

were used as evangelical tools; in them, Christ showed himself to be specially privileged by God and able to bend the laws of nature. However, an exorcism involved the forceful and salutary expulsion of evil spirits from a possessed man, where other miracles of healing and multiplication did not involve demonic forces.

Scholars have tended to treat the visual juxtapositions of different biblical stories, of New Testament miracles and Old Testament stories, as subtly meaningful, having a common thread of, say, salvation, bodily resurrection, and of divine protection from harm.<sup>9</sup> But I am uneasy with these explanations because they tend to be univocal, suggesting that an object has one ‘meaning’. This excludes the possibility of a variety of interpretations, and too often fails to separate the ‘intentions’ of commissioner and craftsman, from the possible reactions of ancient and modern viewers. Modern exegeses may also err in tending towards the most sophisticated interpretation possible, *lectio difficilior* if you will. But how can we know the level of sophistication of commissioner, craftsman, let alone of the multitude of viewers? What about the possibilities of more simplistic (even wrong-headed) interpretations of images? What about the possibility that the selection of images in the first place was not inspired by some subtle and rich theological understanding, but determined by the ability of the craftsman to produce a (perhaps limited) number of images?

Furthermore, the three images I have cited would all have received very different viewings dependent on their accessibility and context. The Roman ivory was a small, portable luxury object, either an ecclesiastical object or an item for personal meditation and devotion.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the position of the smallish Sant’ Apollinare mosaic in the upper regions of the church’s northern wall [*upper left on picture below*] would have made it all but invisible. [fig. 5]

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, admirably sophisticated interpretations of the juxtaposition of images on particular objects can be found in C. B. Tkacz, *The Key to the Brescia Casket: Typology and the Early Christian Imagination* (Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), and E. S. Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus: Neofitus Iit Ad Deum* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> On late antique ivories, see W. F. Volbach, *Elfenbeinarbeiten der Spätantike und des frühen Mittelalters* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1976).





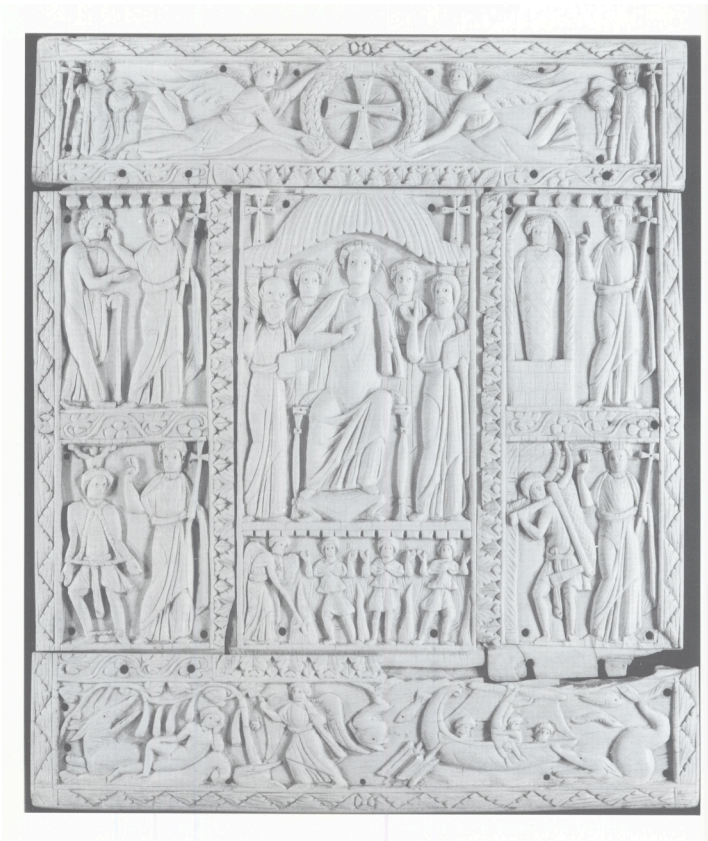
Fig. 15 - S. Apollinare - dopo l'anno 1997

**Fig. 5. Photo of the (restored) interior of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna. The exorcism scene is located in the uppermost cycle of mosaics on the left hand wall, above the top layer of windows.**

The flat and non-reflective surface of the catacomb fresco was, by its subterranean location and funereal associations, likely to have evoked different associations than the Ravennese mosaic, where the exhaustive decoration of the interior of the church in glittery mosaics is more evocative of heaven than the underworld.

#### *Images of exorcism; explicit demonic appearance*

Two of the earliest known explicitly anthropomorphic images of demons are to be found in depictions of the story of the Gadarene swine. One such scene is found on a sixth-century ivory, known as the Murano diptych, which was probably carved in Alexandria [figs 6 and 7].



**Fig. 6. B&W photo of Murano diptych with miracle scenes**



**Fig. 7. Detail of exorcism scene**

### **Murano Diptych, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Ravenna**

It depicts the exorcism of the single demoniac. Sprouting from the top of the possessed man's head is a tiny torso of a man, arms spread. This is one of the earliest known depictions of a spirit emerging from an exorcised man. The emergence of the homuncular demon from the man's head tallies with the literary descriptions of late antique exorcisms, which often ascribe the exit of the demon from the mouth or head.<sup>11</sup> Notably, the demon is not monstrous or semi-bestial, he is just a mini-man. His size may be a merely pragmatic choice, forced by the constraints of space in the panel, or it may have stressed the power of Christ and man against the diabolical and rendered the demon impotent. At first glance, the demon's pose suggests that of the classical and Christian 'orant', a man praying with his arms raised up on either side of his head, which could indicate an

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the passage from Sulpitius Severus' *Life of St Martin*, 17.7 [cited below p.?](#)



acknowledgement of Christ's power. However, a depiction of the Hebrew boys in the furnace is placed to the immediate right of the exorcism; in this scene the boys are in the orant pose and it is clear that this is a slightly more relaxed pose, with arms bent by the sides, not thrust above the head like the demon exiting from the possessed man. That is, far from being in an orant pose, the demon seems to thrust its arms up in urgency, desperation, and possibly surrender.

A final demon which presages the slew of impish, horned winged creatures in medieval art is to be found in marginal illustrations to a set of canon tables (juxtaposing corresponding passages in Mark and Luke) in the so-called Rabbula Gospels, a Syrian production of 586 [fig. 8].



**Fig. 8. B&W photo of Rabbula Gospels, fol. 8b, in Florence, Biblioteca Laurentiana**

This depicts Jesus' exorcism of the two demoniacs. In the picture, we see two open-mouthed, crazy-haired men gesticulating wildly. They stand next to a square structure, which should be

taken to indicate the tombs which had been their habitat. On the other side of the page we see Jesus blessing them across the text of the canon tables; and above the two men's heads, we see two creatures emerging from above their heads. They are small and indistinct, red,<sup>12</sup> semi-human, semi-monstrous with clawlike arms extended, perhaps in desperation or surrender.

### *Recognizing images of exorcisms*

All the images I have cited so far make sense if one knows the story to which they allude; to a pagan viewer, they would have been confusing. Christians (and indeed, scholars now) had to recognize the biblical story to which all of these compressed images, with and without the explicit rendering of demons, refer, through the visual representation of significant details and inferences from the text of one of the Gospel stories. In the catacomb fresco at S. Ermete, the demoniac is naked (indeed, his nakedness alongside Christ's gesturing is what really identifies this as an exorcism), tallying with the reference in Luke to his nakedness (Luke 8.27), and the telling reference at Mark 5.15 to the fact that the demoniac was clothed after his exorcism (from which we can infer that he was naked before it).<sup>13</sup> In the Roman ivory and the Ravennese mosaic, the swine function as the key indicator of the story. In the Rabbula image, there are two demoniacs (as in the Matthew account); in all the other images there is only one demoniac (as in the accounts of Mark and Luke). In the Murano ivory, the demoniac is chained, as described at Mark 5.4 and Luke 8.29. In the Roman ivory, and the Syrian Rabbula Gospels, the demoniacs have the wild hair (disordered compared to Christ's hair, anyway) suggested by passages in all three accounts recounting the violent and asocial nature of the possessed men.

---

<sup>12</sup> They are not, *pace* Link, 102, 'black'. The body of the right-hand demon has also been lopped off in the process of marginalization.

<sup>13</sup> Arguably, the connection of the picture of the demoniac to the picture of Daniel in the lions' den next to it is not just the symbolic spiritualism of a man freed from the clutches of evil, but the iconography of nakedness. That is one could (rather defiantly) explain the juxtaposition of particular images on pragmatic grounds (a particular craftsman was fond of, or limited to, nudes) rather than on deliberately sophisticated allegorical grounds.



However, this presupposes that all Christian viewers had a minute and encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, and an ability to apply their knowledge of text to the interpretation of image. Modern scholars have tended to use the sophisticated literary exegesis of scripture by Christian intellectuals as a justification for the idea that Christian craftsmen intended, and Christian viewers were able to interpret the visual juxtapositions of biblical stories as having subtle and complex spiritual and theological significance. However, there are instances where text and image are brought together more explicitly, and where correspondence could easily have been sought between the two. In the case of the Rabbula Gospels, the depiction of the exorcism of two demoniacs flanks canon tables which unite relevant passages in Mark and Luke. There is also some evidence that pictures in church were sometimes united with text, which would allow for the easy identification of the image – at least, for the literate.

*Prudentius* (second half of 4<sup>th</sup> century – early 5<sup>th</sup> century)

Prudentius deals with Jesus' exorcism of the demoniac(s) in his *Dittochaeon*, or *Tituli historiarum*. These are a series of stanzas dealing with particular biblical stories, which either describe, or were intended to be placed beneath, pictures in church. In a stanza entitled 'demon sent into the pigs', he wrote:

A demon broke his iron chains in the prison of a tomb; he breaks out and drops to his knees before Jesus. But the Lord claims the man for himself and orders the Enemy to enrage herds of swine and to plunge into the sea.<sup>14</sup>

This passage suggests that images in church were sometimes accompanied by descriptions identifying and relating the story. There is other patchy evidence from the fourth to the sixth

---

<sup>14</sup> Prudentius, *Dittochaeon* 36 (*daemon missus in porcos*):  
*Vincla sepulcrali sub carcere ferrea daemon*  
*fraegerat: erumpit pedibusque advolvitur Iesu.*  
*Ast hominem Dominus sibi vindicat et iubet hostem*  
*Porcorum furiare greges ac per freta mergi.*

centuries for this sort of programmatic decoration of church interiors.<sup>15</sup> In Prudentius' verse the story has a temporal dimension, moving from a single allusion in the perfect tense to the demoniac breaking out of his chains, to a sustained description in the present tense which telescopes the moment of his kneeling before Jesus with Jesus' subsequent exorcism of the demons into the pigs, which then spectacularly self-destruct. The events which unfold in scripture in a relatively relaxed, linear fashion are compressed by Prudentius into two timeframes: past and present. This helps us to understand how stories could be visually compressed still further into one frame. In the case of Prudentius' poem, his explanation of the picture with which it was intended to be matched would make this very clear. However, arguably his description of the image would not be much help to the illiterate viewers whose eyes could see the picture but not understand the accompanying text.

Further, Prudentius' poem, despite being short and to the point, is in itself an exercise in creative interpretation of the scriptural texts. Firstly, he elides demoniac and demon; the biblical story makes it clear that the possessed man is living among the tombs, and yet Prudentius introduces the demon as the protagonist, only calling him a man when he describes Christ ordering the Enemy (surely Satan) to transfer to the pigs. It was common in late antiquity to identify the demon with the person he had possessed until the demon had departed, when the possessed was once again treated as him/herself; this was part of the 'drama of reintegration' which some say exorcism allowed.<sup>16</sup> It seems that Prudentius is applying such extra-textual assumptions about the relationship between demon and possessed in his narration. Secondly, and referring back to my earlier question about the relationship between a singular Devil and a

---

<sup>15</sup> See Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 27, 511 ff, relating the inscription to be placed under an apse mosaic, and Gregory the Great, *Letter* 11.13 to Serenus of Marseilles on the use of images in church to educate the illiterate.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brown coins the phrase 'drama of reintegration' to describe exorcisms in his *Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 112. For another example of the elision between demoniac and demon, see Sulpitius Severus, *Life of St Martin* 17.5-7 cited below, p ??, conflates and elides the possessed man and the possessing demon in his syntax until the moment when the demon is excreted.

multiplicity of demons, Prudentius casts this story in terms of a singular possessing spirit, despite the fact that in the Gospel accounts, the demons are plural; indeed, in Mark and Luke they declare themselves to be 'Legion'. So Prudentius plays somewhat fast and loose with the text of scripture.

It is, however, not nearly as purple and extended a version of the story as that which we find in his *Hymn for every hour*:

A man who was accustomed to dwell in chains in a tomb cave, gnashing his teeth, out of his mind, driven by wild frenzies, leaps forth and flings himself to his knees when he sees that Christ is present. The thousand-formed plague of treacherous demons is driven out, and grabs an unclean, filthy herd of swine and plunges itself and the maddened beasts into the black waters.<sup>17</sup>

Here, the profusion of dynamic adjectives evokes a sense of movement that is particularly hard to capture in sculptural relief: the demoniac *gnashes* his teeth, is *driven* by wild frenzies, *leaps* forth and *flings himself* to his knees. The demons are *driven* out, *grab* the pigs, and *plunge* into the water; all again highly dynamic descriptions. Thus Prudentius tells this story in two very different ways. One is a fairly bald, but nonetheless idiosyncratic description to accompany an image which presumably would add more in its own visual language. The other is a more luridly detailed re-telling of the story, which while appearing to be vividly visual, is nonetheless in its dynamic, temporal quality difficult to depict.

### *The sight of exorcism*

The visual clues in these images of exorcisms may have evoked in Christian viewers a memory of either the Gospel story itself or a clerical re-telling and indeed further interpretation of the story.

In the case of images accompanied by text, the literate viewer would not even have to make the

---

<sup>17</sup> Prudentius, *A Hymn for every hour* 9:

*Suetus antro bustuali sub catenis frendere,  
Mentis inpos, efferatis percitus furoribus  
Prosilit ruitque supplex, Christum adesse ut senserat.  
Pulsa pestis lubricorum milleformis daemonum  
Corripit gregis suilli sordida spurcamina,  
Seque nigris mergit undis et pecus lymphaticum.*

connection between the story and the image him/herself. But Christians' visual imaginations were not only shaped by their reading and hearing of scripture, commentaries, treatises and sermons. They were also influenced by the profusion of contemporary stories about and experiences of exorcism.

Exorcisms were neither a Christian innovation nor confined to the biblical era. In late antiquity Jews, pagans and Christians all performed exorcisms. By the third century, Christians were regularly exorcised as part of the ritual of baptism, so that conversion to Christianity involved not just an embrace of faith in Christ but also a rejection of Satan and his works.<sup>18</sup> And baptism was just the beginning. Christians continued to be vulnerable to diabolical possession even after they had received a general cleansing from sin and the Devil through baptism. Hagiographies in particular are stuffed full of stories of miracle-working and exorcisms. What, then, did onlookers see, or claim to have seen, during an exorcism? And what did late antique Christians expect to *see* in an exorcism from contemporary accounts, particularly hagiographies? How visually clear was it that a demon had once inhabited a human, and had then left? Did onlookers believe or claim to have *seen* the demon leaving? This will get us some way to understanding how an artist, especially one working from a biblical text, might get round to producing an image of an exorcism which is not just recognizable from details taken from texts themselves, but also from post-biblical texts of exorcisms, and even personal observation and experience.

Let's start by fast-forwarding, to see if we can first identify, and then lay aside, the later visual associations of exorcism. Exorcisms are staple fare in medieval art, and they generally include a visual representation of a demon exiting from the possessed, normally in the form of a

---

<sup>18</sup> Baptismal exorcism was first developed by Gnostics in the Eastern church, but it was absorbed into mainstream Christianity at Rome by the early third century AD. See E. A. Leeper, 'From Alexandria to Rome: the Valentinian connection to the incorporation of exorcism as a pre-baptismal rite', *Vigiliae Christianae* 44 (1990), 6-24; P. Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c. 200 - c. 1150* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); H. A. Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology and Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

little winged, clawed, impish figure leaving the mouth or head of the possessed.<sup>19</sup> These have a parallel in literary accounts, which make it clear that onlookers regularly ‘saw’ demons exiting. The earliest datable such image that I can find is in the 586 Rabbula Gospels. But if one examines closely all the gospel accounts of Jesus’ exorcism of the demoniacs, there is absolutely no description of the appearance of the demons themselves, only an agreement that they left the possessed men and entered the pigs. The departure of the demons was thus deduced from the changed appearance and behaviour of the protagonists. The possessed men/man, once wild, asocial creatures banished from society and accustomed to living among the tombs, were becalmed and clothed. The pigs were impelled by the demons to throw themselves over a cliff.

In the gospel accounts, the demons did not manifest their presence visibly, but through speech; they conversed with Jesus. Other ancient pagan, Jewish and Christian accounts of exorcism in antiquity all agree that demons were noisy and chatty, demonstrating their existence through the speech and behaviour of the possessed (manic laughing, speaking in tongues and so on).<sup>20</sup> It was primarily through the sound, not through the sight, of demons, that onlookers understood an individual to be possessed. Even when a visual clue was provided to the demon’s existence, it tended to be at one remove. Sometimes, the demon, itself invisible, would perform a particular act, often of violence, when (and to signify that) it had left its victim. We see this in Josephus’ tale of Eleazar, a Jewish exorcist who freed a possessed man in the presence of the emperor Vespasian and various other hangers-on:

He would hold a ring to the nose of the possessed victim - a ring that had one of those roots prescribed by Solomon under its seal - and then, as the victim got a whiff of the root, he would draw the demon out through the victim's nostrils. The victim would collapse on the spot and Eleazar would adjure it never again to enter him, invoking Solomon by name and reciting incantations that Solomon had composed. Since Eleazar was always determined to captivate his

---

<sup>19</sup> See the images in N. Caciola, *Discerning spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> More cynical modern historians suggest that this was because the disordered speech of those suffering from severe mental ailments was construed as demonic.

audience and demonstrate he possessed this power, he would place a cup or basin full of water not far from the victim and would order the demon to tip these vessels over on the way out and thus demonstrate to the onlookers that it had actually taken leave of the victim.<sup>21</sup>

The phenomenon of a demon theatrically and often violently demonstrating his leave-taking is found in varying forms.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, in Josephus' telling, Eleazar has set up the vessels of water precisely to 'captivate his audience and to demonstrate that he possessed this power'. The exorcist sets up the stage for the demon to demonstrate his existence for his own ends – to draw his audience in and to enhance his status. This leads us to infer that the demon itself could not be seen, (unlike in later images and descriptions, when it could) as it left the possessed. But it is suggestively physical; the demon was drawn out through the *nose*; in other exorcisms, the mouth (or other orifice) was identified as the locus for departure.

However, there is one interesting exception to the invisibility of demons. Lucian's *Philopseudes*, in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, includes a fabulous account of an exorcist, probably not even a Christian:

I do not need to remind you of the master of this art, the famous Syrian of Palestine. Everyone knows this remarkable man already. When people fall down at the sight of the moon, rolling their eyes and foaming at the mouth, he calls on them to stand up and sends them back home healthy and free from their infirmity. Each time he charges a large amount for this. When he is with sick persons, he asks them how the demon entered into them. The patient remains silent, but the demon replies in Greek or a barbarian language, and tells what he is, where he comes from, and how he entered into the man's body. This is the moment to command him to come out. If he resists, the Syrian threatens him and finally drives him out. I myself once saw one coming out: it was of a dark, smoky complexion.<sup>23</sup> [μέλανα καὶ καπνώδη τὴν χροάν]

---

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.5

<sup>22</sup> See C. Bonner, 'The technique of exorcism', *Harvard Theological Review* 36.1 (1943), 39-49. He cites examples of demons smashing statues in a pagan exorcism recounted by Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 4.20, and in a Christian exorcism in the *Acta Petri cum Simone* 11. We remember that in the Gospel exorcism the demons possess the swine and impel them to a death-leap.

<sup>23</sup> Lucian, *Philopseudes* 16.

So far, so visual. But what seems to be a rare instance of an authoritative first-person witness to the physical appearance of a demon as it leaves the possessed is embedded in a narrative which makes us suspect that it is not a reliable account. The *Philopseudes* was written as an indictment of Lucian's contemporaries, easily gulled into believing charlatans' ever-more fantastical supernatural tales; the clue is in the title, which means literally 'Lover of lies'. Ion, who tells this story of an exorcist, is part of a circle of fabulists, whose gathering and expounding of ridiculous stories is being mocked by Tychiades. When Ion confesses that he has seen a demon, Tychiades responds, with heavy irony: 'Ah, that is nothing for you: your eyes can discern those 'forms' which are set forth in the works of Plato, the founder of your school: now they make a very faint impression on the dull optics of us men.' The idea that anybody could see the Platonic forms, which are by their very nature immaterial and invisible, not to be seen with the eyes but apprehended intellectually, is ridiculous. Tychiades is mocking Ion for claiming to see something that is impossible to see. Lucian has embedded the boastful claim to have seen a demon in an inherently unreliable narrative, and thus makes it clear to the reader that Ion is exaggerating, indeed fabulating.<sup>24</sup>

### *Discerning and recognizing demons*

Late antique demons were essentially invisible. They were the reverse of those proverbial children, heard and not seen. They could, nonetheless, and often did, choose to possess prosaic physical objects, animals and people, or to assume a fantastical or monstrous guise. Christians were thus confronted with the two problems: how to recognize demons when they took a deceptive physical form, and how to perceive or discern demons when they were invisible but present. Both these activities required exceptional patience, faith and holiness in the viewer. A trope of late antique lives of saints is the ability of the holy man (and, sometimes, woman), to

---

<sup>24</sup> It is nonetheless interesting to see what form the unreliable Ion ascribes to the demon; dark and smoky as you might expect of a mysterious creature at some remove from the brighter realm of the gods.



recognize and discern diabolical presence. Sulpitius Severus, in his early fifth-century life of the fourth-century Gallic saint St Martin, characterized his special qualities of perception thus, in insistently visual terms:

As to the devil, Martin held him so visible and ever under the power of his eyes, that whether he kept himself in his proper form, or changed himself into different shapes of spiritual wickedness, he was perceived by Martin, under whatever guise he appeared [*qualibet ab eo sub imagine videretur*].<sup>25</sup>

To take an example of the capacity of ‘recognition’, St Martin was said to have discerned the diabolical presence behind the apparently divine appearance of a king, who claimed to be Christ. He ordered the Devil to leave, which he did – leaving behind only a nasty smell.<sup>26</sup> Another story demonstrates Martin’s other special ability to discern diabolical and demonic presence when, rather than assuming some particular physical form, it is instead completely invisible:

About the same time, having entered the dwelling of a certain householder in the same town, [Martin] stopped short at the very threshold, and said that he perceived a horrible demon in the courtyard of the house [*dicens horribile in atrio domus daemonium se videre*]. When Martin ordered it to depart, it laid hold of a certain member of the family, who was staying in the inner part of the house; and the poor wretch began at once to rage with his teeth, and to lacerate whomsoever he met. The house was thrown into disorder; the family was in confusion; and the people present took to flight. Martin threw himself in the way of the frenzied creature, and first of all commanded him to stand still. But when he continued to gnash with his teeth, and, with gaping mouth, was threatening to bite, Martin inserted his fingers into his mouth, and said, "If you possess any power, devour these." But then, as if red-hot iron had entered his jaws, drawing his teeth far away he took care not to touch the fingers of the saintly man; and when he was compelled by punishments and tortures, to flee out of the possessed body, while he had no power of escaping

---

<sup>25</sup> Sulpitius Severus, *Life of Martin* 21.1.

<sup>26</sup> Sulpitius Severus, *Life of Martin* 24.4-8.

by the mouth, he was cast out by means of a defluxion of the belly, leaving disgusting traces behind him.<sup>27</sup>

### *Some conclusions*

The Devil and his demons were believed by Christians in late antiquity to be able to assume an infinite number of guises: as beautiful women, roaring lions and tigers, creepie-crawlies, troops of armed soldiers and so on.<sup>28</sup> But they themselves had no fixed form. As I show elsewhere [*in a chapter on the Devil and his demons as spiritual beings*], they were spirits, often described in Greek as *phantasmata*. To see such a thing was impossible. But this does not mean that the Devil is absent from late antique art. Quite the opposite. He, and especially his demonic minions, are present in allusive and subtle ways.

It should come as no surprise that artists did not, in late antiquity, depict the diabolical in anthropomorphic form. To start with, for late antique Christians in first five centuries of the church, the cities and countryside of the Roman empire were already teeming with diabolical images: statues of pagan gods. For the Christians, following biblical suit, the gods of the pagans were not neutral or non-existent, but existed and were malevolent; following from this, the statues of pagan gods were often believed to be the favourite haunts of demons, and were thus attributed evil presence. We do not know the extent of Christian campaigns of pagan statue-smashing; the archaeological record is patchy, and the literary record of both pagans and Christians unreliably shrill on the one hand or triumphant on the other. But it is clear that for many late antique Christians, their world was full enough with ominous, threatening demonic presence.<sup>29</sup> There was no need to coin ways of figuring the Devil and his demons.

Christian attitudes to holy images also give us some insight into why depicting the Devil might have been taboo. One attitude to holy images was that they were more than mere

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 17.5-7.

<sup>28</sup> All these examples of demonic deception are to be found in Athanasius' *Life of St Antony*.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Ambrose:

representations and in fact embodied something of their archetype; according to this logic, images of Christ, God and his saints shared something of the holy, and conversely, too explicit images of the demonic might embody an evil presence. What Christian would want images bearing evil in his church, house or tomb? The opposite attitude to holy images was that the divine was visually ineffable (and also better suited to words as the word of God had been mediated through scripture), and that an infinite, omnipotent and eternal God should not be limited by the attempts of craftsmen to depict him. This attitude, at the root of the iconoclastic campaigns waged in the eighth and ninth centuries, may have also accounted for a nervousness to express and perhaps limit the similarly ineffable horror of evil.<sup>30</sup>

The absence of diabolical depictions from late antique art is not, then, surprising. It is rather the choice to give demons a physical form in art which is surprising. What seismic shift in the imagination and conjuration of demons' habits and appearances occurred, to allow for the depiction of anthropomorphic demons in exorcism scenes, such as in the Murano diptych and Rabbula Gospels? Historians of medieval art may help us to conjecture some reasons for this innovation. Michael Camille, when dealing with the defacing of Christian images in manuscripts of pagan idols and of demons, suggests that 'nothing is more terrifying than that which we cannot see. Partly for this reason, I think, people in the Middle Ages sought to face the Devil more directly as a fact – to make him visible but also, because depicted and controlled through the agency of visual signs, capable of being overturned and erased.'<sup>31</sup> Was the eventual depiction and reification of demons a way of making visible what was necessarily invisible to the naked eye, and only to be perceived through faith? Was it a help to Christians who did not possess Martin's saintly super-powers of demon-perception, or who were unable to relate these compressed images to scripture and scriptural exegesis?

---

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 162, recounts the objections of iconoclasts to images of the *anastasis*, Christ's descent to Hell, which showed Hades and the Devil; the veneration of this image at Easter allowed Christians to venerate the diabolical, even if only accidentally. Nicephorus refuted this objection, claiming that people knew whom they must venerate, and whom they must not.

<sup>31</sup> M. Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 65.