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## Wall paintings in the Icarus Street Tomb, Pafos

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My exploration of the frescoes of the Icarus Street tomb accompanies the description of its distinctive architecture by its excavator, Dr Eustathios Raptou. I am very grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to research the compelling, if fragmentary, fresco painting from the tomb.

### THE DECORATIVE SCHEME

Wall painting extended the impressive effect of the vaulted architecture of the Icarus Str. tomb, placing a decorative skin of vibrant garlands, flowers, and birds over the shapely arched niches. Varied images painted on the two *arcosolia* on the right of the tomb entrance, and on the elegant central *arcosolium* opposite, show the long span of the tomb's use. Here the decorative schemes indicated beliefs about the afterlife, and were associated with individual burials from the first century B.C. to possibly the fifth century A.D. (Fig. 1). By contrast, the faint traces of colour on the painted plaster that once existed in the two *arcosolia* on the left of the entrance, have deteriorated beyond any recognition of specific imagery.

This brief study will describe each painted section that was recorded at the time of excavation, and shortly after.<sup>1</sup> The extensive use and re-use of the Icarus Str. tomb in medieval and later periods, both as a ceramic workshop and an animal byre, had damaged the painted plastered surfaces on the sandstone. Despite this, the freshness of what remained was remarkable. Green, red and gold colours were still vivid, especially on the painting underneath the arch on *arcosolium* 1 (Fig. 11).

The pigments of the Icarus Str. tomb frescoes

echo the tones and hues of the colours observed in the wall painting of the nearby Pafos theatre *parodos* (Wood Conroy and Atkinson 2003; Green and Stennett 2002). The plaster on the sandstone in the tomb, laid on in several layers, varies from 1.5cm. to 2cm. in thickness. Difficult conservation issues apply in a tomb subject to flooding. Many areas of the Icarus tomb plaster remaining on the wall were encrusted with opaque crystallised particles. Although stabilised by conservators in the initial excavation, the fragile painted surfaces were affected by flooding in winter 2001. A dark grey to black encrustation inhibited clear viewing in some areas and made photography very difficult.

### *Arcosolium* 1 (Fig. 2)

A precisely painted myrtle wreath in shades of green, with gold berries and a red tie defined the full curve of the *arcosolium* above the now vanished sarcophagus (Figs 3, 4 and 5). On the ceiling of the niche were traces of red purple colour. Below the arch, on the facing wall just to the left of centre, two life size objects were clearly and accurately represented.

The yellow ochre oil vessel with a cork was shown hanging from a nail by cords twined with a small-leaved plant. Nearby, a double strigil was painted in green with a dark brown outline. The

1. With the help of equipment from the Pafos Museum in November 2002 I traced as many areas of the painted surfaces as possible as the basis for the drawings presented in this report. At the time I was working at the Pafos theatre excavation with the University of Sydney team, directed by Professor Richard Green. I am most grateful to Professor Demetrios Michaelides for his helpful comments on the tomb imagery and its likely date.

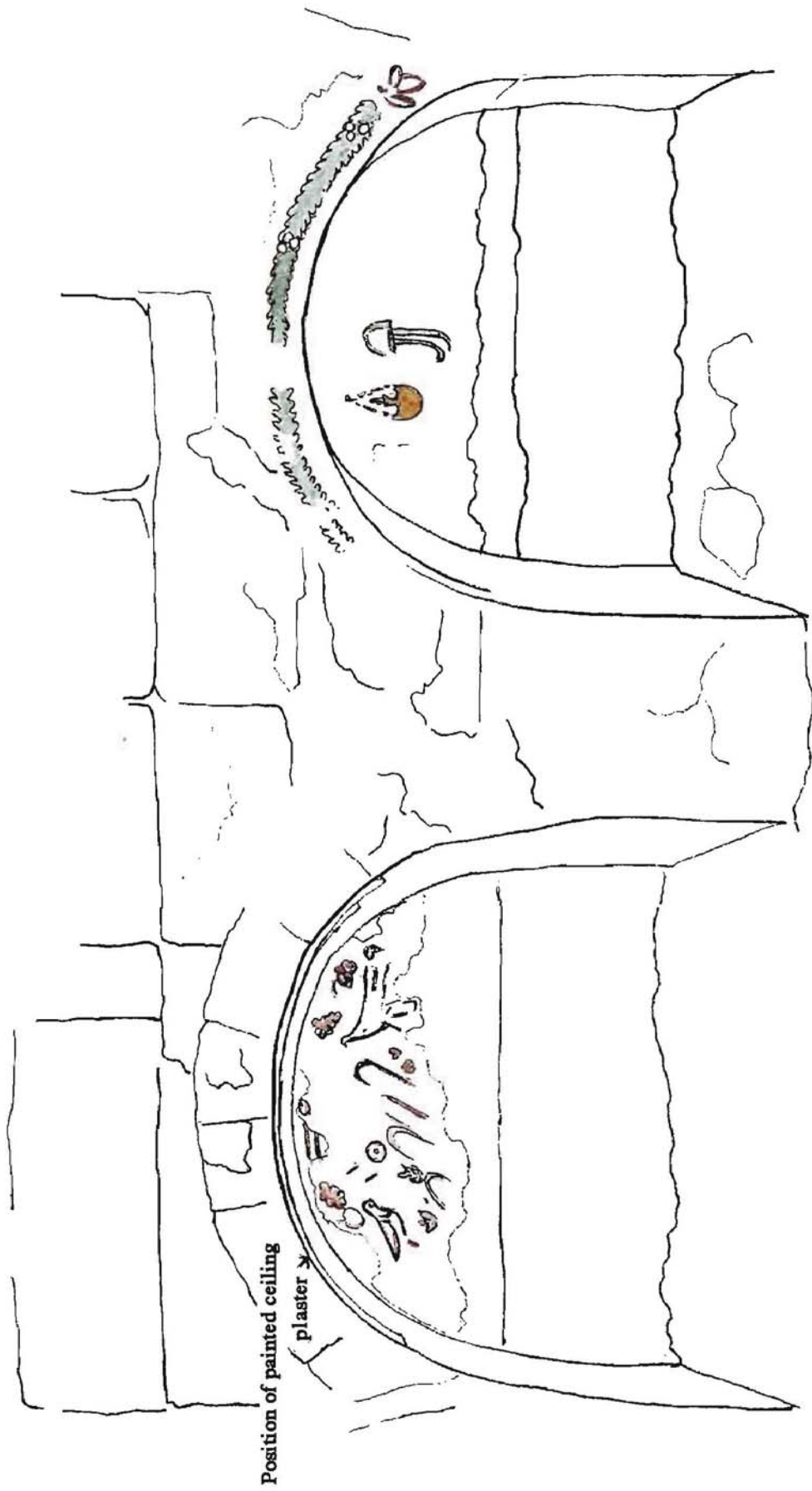


Fig. 1. Decorative scheme of two arched niches (Sketch plan of frescoes drawn 15 November 2002).



Fig. 2. View of *Arcosolium* 1, with strigil and oil flask (Photograph: David Hempenstall).



Fig. 5. Arched Niche (*Arcosolium*) 1. Details of fresco on facing wall (oil vessel and strigil). Actual size of images on wall: 33.2×33.2cm. (Traced from surface and drawn to scale 15 November 2002).

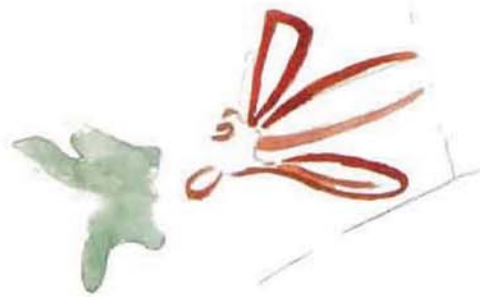


Fig. 3. Arched Niche (*Arcosolium*) 1. Detail of red tie (right side of arch). Actual size of detail: 10×8cm. wide. Width of arch: 1.85cm. (Traced from surface and drawn to scale 15 November 2002).



Fig. 4. Arched Niche (*Arcosolium*) 1. Detail of wreath with berries (right side of arch). Actual size of detail: 26×6.5cm. wide. Width of arch: 1.85cm. (Traced from surface and drawn to scale 15 November 2002).



Fig. 6. Central *Arcosolium* (Photograph: David Hempenstall).



Fig. 7. Decorative scheme of main *arcsoolium* opposite entrance. Width of arch: 2.1m. (Sketch plan of frescoes drawn 15 November 2002).

objects give an immediate sense of an individual owner, such as a young man or athlete. Vassos Karageorghis described several Roman tombs in the eastern necropolis, Pafos (within half a kilometre of the Icarus Str. tomb) one with an *arcosolium* painted with a vegetal design and possibly household utensils, and one with floral ornament and birds (Karageorghis 1986, *ibid.* 1988/89). The aesthetic of representing significant attributes of the dead is very ancient in funerary tradition. For example, the signs of the dead warrior, helmet, greaves and weapons are painted hanging on nails in the Greek Tomb of Lyson and Kallicles, ca 250 B.C. As in the Icarus Str. tomb, the objects are accompanied by hanging garlands on a white ground (Clarke 1991, 37, figs 13; Rouveret 1989, 187-98).

The refinement of the painting technique in the Icarus Str. tomb is comparable to that seen in the *Ammoi* Tomb no. 1 less than a kilometre to the north west. This tomb is dated to the first century B.C. Although the curved garland in the Icarus Str. tomb is more restrained than the hanging wreaths of the *Ammoi* Tomb no. 1, the images have the same particularity and delicacy (Karageorghis 1978, fig. 75; Michaelides 2002; Młynarczyk 238-39; Wood Conroy and Atkinson 2003).

### The central *arcosolium* (Figs 6 and 7)

The decorative scheme of the central, tallest *arcosolium* repeated the theme of the green wreath on the curve of its arch. The facing wall had faint remains of three looped festoons or fillets in red on a cream ground with traces of red flowers, red painted bunches of grapes and green leaves, just visible beneath the opaque crystalline encrustation that covered the plaster. Imitation marble panels (Fig. 8), bordered in red, with red curved and broken lines on a yellow ochre ground added to the rich effect of the main arched niche of the tomb. The painting technique was less careful than in *arcosolium* I and less well preserved (Fig. 7).



Fig. 8. Detail of imitation marble. Central *Arcosolium* (right) (Photograph: David Hempenstall).

The central *arcosolium* was similar in the organisation of its decorative scheme to the Hellenistic *Ammoi* Tomb I, yet parallels can also be found in the third and fourth century catacomb paintings in Rome. For example, in the Catacomb of Panfilo an arch is painted with garlands and surrounded by panels of imitation marble (Grabar 1967, pl. 235). Again, the red fillets or festoons on the main *arcosolium* of the Icarus tomb bear a strong resemblance to the brushy red wreaths or fillets defining every curve of the architecture in Cubiculum C of the Via Latina catacombs (Ferrua 1991, 93, fig. 71).

Only half a kilometre from the Icarus Str. tomb, in the partially excavated 'Tomb of the Surgeon' in the eastern necropolis of Pafos, a



Fig. 9. View of *Arcosolium 2*, with ceiling painting (Photograph: David Hempenstall).

conical basket is painted between red wreaths in the corner of the vaulted ceiling.<sup>2</sup> Vassos Karageorghis referred to more tomb paintings in *arcosolia* in tombs in the Eastern necropolis of Pafos which I have not viewed (Karageorghis 1986, 1987, 1988/89).<sup>3</sup>

Many fragments of painted imitation marble have been found in the great Roman houses of Pafos, such as the House of Aion and the House of Orpheus, as well as the *Ammoï* tomb (Dziewski 1990 and 1977; Nicolaou 1967, 1976, 1981; Młynarczyk 1990). A vibrant example of imitation alabaster is the stone block no. 2314 from the Pafos theatre, painted with scalloped lines in red on gold. Such motifs are comparable to examples from Roman painted houses in Ephesus, published by V.M. Strocka in 1977, as well as to the panels in the Icarus tomb.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Arcosolium 2* (Figs 9, 10 and 11)

The imagery in *arcosolium 2* stood out as exceptional within the known examples of Roman painting in Pafos, when the tomb was first

documented by Dr Raptou of the Pafos Museum in 2001.

On the ceiling of the arched niche, above the sarcophagus site and invisible to a viewer standing in the tomb, a collection of images were scattered over a cream ground, with an enigmatic relationship one with the other (Figs 9, 10 and 11). The painting was curved, and was approximately 90×45cm. in size. A green partridge stood amongst red heart-shaped flowers and pomegranates, beneath green gourd-shaped forms. Above, there was a yellow disc bordered with red, and

2. This tomb is close to the swimming pool, and part of the foundations of the Annabelle Hotel in Kato Pafos. I photographed what could be seen of the frescoes in 2002.
3. I have not been able to view material from other Roman tombs, such as that published by Maria Hadjicosti, "Pylakoutsopetria", *BCH* 118 (1994), 689-91.
4. I discussed aspects of imitation marble frescoes in Pafos and the wider Mediterranean in relation to the Pafos theatre in Wood Conroy and Atkinson, *RDAC* 2003.





Fig. 10. Detail of ceiling painting, *Arcosolium* 2 (Photograph: David Hempenstall).

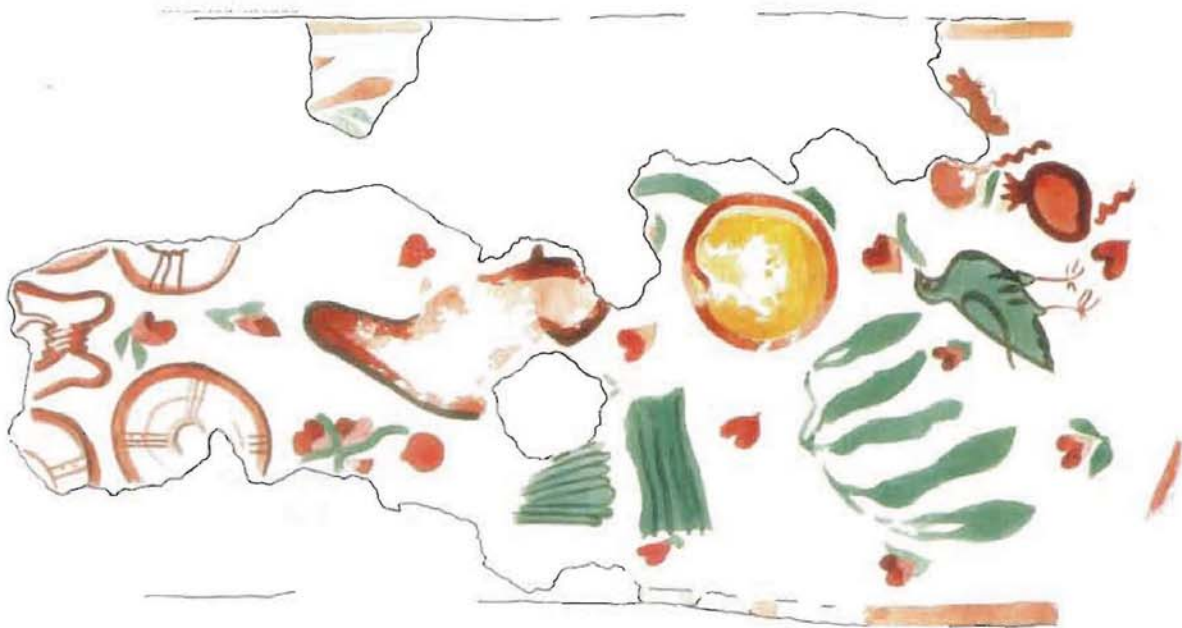


Fig. 11. Ceiling of Arched Niche (*Arcosolium*) 2. Maximum width of painted surface: 73cm., with traced paintings 1.4m. in length (Traced from surface and drawn to scale 15 November 2002).

two rectangular green shapes with parallel lines and a scalloped edge. A deep red semicircular shape, rather damaged, resembled a fish, with a rosette nearby. Beyond the fish shape were four circular images, two of them fragmentary. Spokes on the circles suggested wheels, or loaves of bread. Amongst these was the lower part of a lyre. The whole panel was bordered with red bands 3cm. wide.

On the facing wall below the ceiling, images were just discernible beneath the crystalline encrustation that had affected the plaster. A pair of birds, perhaps peacocks, faced each other amongst fragmentary flowers, bunches of grapes and sprigs of foliage, with several unclear curved motifs (Fig. 1). The semi circular space was outlined with red bands.

The same format of scattered emblems found on the underside of *arcosolium* 2 was described by Joan du Plat Taylor in a water cistern with Byzantine paintings at Salamis (du Plat Taylor 1933, 103-105, fig. 2). One of the earliest Christian paintings on Cyprus, the 'Nilotic' motifs of ducks, a flamingo and a fish surrounded a central head of Christ, within a decorative red band with inscriptions (Michaelides 1998, 224-27). The date of the building and the paintings is estimated to be late fifth or early sixth century A.D.

The decorative scheme in the Icarus Str. tomb may also be compared to the painted *arcosolia* of the tombs in S. Sebastiano (Ling 1991, 188-89) or the Via Latina in Rome (Ferrua 1990a, 158). Free-floating floral and garland motifs, with paired birds in green and red on a cream ground covered the barrel vaults and arched niches within red bands that emphasised architectural structures. The enigmatic grouping of the images in the ceiling fresco, floating like filling ornaments on a plain cream ground, have their nearest parallels in the stylisation of classical imagery in the Late Roman period, a time when Christian imagery overlapped with older funerary traditions across the Roman provinces. For example, in Merida, Spain of the late fourth or fifth century, a mosaic of Dionysos and Ariadne has circu-

lar filling ornaments and even a lyre, between the main figures (Dunbabin 1999, 163).

## THE PRINCIPAL MOTIFS OF THE ICARUS STREET TOMB

### *Vegetation and bird imagery*

'I would like fruit of every kind to grow around my ashes, and wine in abundance', said Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon* (Della Portella 1999, 105). Flowers and foliage, grapes and baskets evoked paradise in the next life and provided a pervasive decorative theme in tombs.

In Alexandria, once sister city to Pafos, the second century (Hadrianic) painted tomb from Tigranes Pasha Str. described by Venit included floral decoration of scattered red and green flowers and red garlands or fillets (Venit 1997 709, fig. 8, 717-18, fig. 20; Empereur 1998, 37).

The robust bunches of grapes painted on the facing wall of *arcosolium* 2 and the central *arcosolium* have many resonances in mosaic art of the fourth and fifth centuries. The vine panel from the nave of the Basilica of Chrysopolitissa, close to the Icarus Str. tomb, showed the same clustered fruit. Christian symbolism took over from the exuberant vine carpets of an earlier Roman period, such as that seen in the second century House of Dionysos in Pafos (Michaelides 1992, pls 11 and 37). Mosaic 'carpets' of scattered birds, animals and plants, with vines and peacocks occur in churches in Syria and Palestine in this period, for example in Antioch, or the Church of Multiplication at el Tabgha (Dunbabin, pls 193 and 207). The superb mosaic vault at the Mausoleum of Constantia in Rome (mid-fourth century) gives a clue to the scattered motifs of the Icarus ceiling painting. In the mosaic vault, vessels of all shapes, some fluted, some circular or cone shaped, are spread with a variety of birds amongst vines and strewn branches (Dunbabin 1999, pl. 264).

Once again, the mainly fourth century catacomb paintings of Rome provided clear resem-

blances to the Icarus Str. tomb, and showed ambivalent pagan and Christian use of the same key images. The peacock and the pomegranate, like the vine and the fluted vase, were once associated with deities such as Dionysos, Demeter, Persephone or Hera, and were re-interpreted as Christian symbols of immortality and eternal life. The Catacomb of Domitilla in Rome has an *arcosolium* with paired birds on either side of a fluted vase, and a ceiling painting of looped garlands with floating vegetation on a white ground carefully divided by red bands into architectural fields (Grabar 1967, pls 75, 76).

The folkloric imagery of Coptic textiles of the fourth and fifth centuries offer comparisons to the Icarus Str. ceiling fresco. Fish, garlands, paired peacocks and other birds, rosettes, vine tendrils with grapes represented signs poised between pagan and Christian belief in a graphic and expressive style (Kybalova 1967, pls 40, 53; Rutschowskaya 1990, 9, 27, 45, 56).

### *Early Christian symbols*

'And let our seals be either a dove, or a fish, or a ship scudding before the wind, or a musical lyre', wrote Clement of Alexandria in his text *The Instructor*; commenting on the appropriate imagery for Christian churches (Vol. 1, Book 111, chapter XIV. Wilson (trans), vol. iv in the *Anti-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the writings of the fathers*, edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, T. and T. Clark (Edinburgh 1867, 1869) cited by Grabar 1980, 287). Three possibilities of a Christian influence in the *arcosolium* 2 ceiling painting are examined below.

1. Gourds. The imagery in the painting has intriguing resonances with the favourite early Christian story of Jonah, who wakes to a new life after being disgorged by the sea monster. The theme of Jonah's journey overseas was mirrored in the journey to the afterlife (Grabar 1967, 130). The long green plant forms on the *arcosolium* ceiling (Fig. 11) consistently appear as gourds above the sleeping figure of Jonah, set amongst fish and other sea monsters. A relevant example

among many is the mosaic from the Basilica of Theodore in Aquileia (Dorigo 1970, pl. 15). Jonah sleeps on a rectangular mattress with parallel lines across it, shapes similar to the barred rectangles in the Icarus tomb painting. Another comparison could be made to the green gourds in the painting of 'Jonah resting' in Cubiculum C of the fourth century Via Latina catacombs in Rome (Ferrua 1991, 95, fig. 73). Hanging down from a trellis amongst scattered signs of foliage, the cucumber shapes have striking similarities to the Icarus tomb painting in their summary style. Jonah rests on a folded green cloth, which could also be compared to the green rectangles on the Icarus Str. ceiling.<sup>5</sup>

2. Fish. The fish is not only associated with Jonah, but also with Christian symbolism, and the Greek name of Christ. A very close parallel to the tadpole-like form of the painted fish in the Ikaros Str. tomb can be observed in a fish in a tondo in the mosaics of the northern side nave of the nearby basilica Chrysopolitissa (Fig. 12). Professor Michaelides commented that in the second half of the fourth century, when the basilica was first built, animals, birds and plants rather than human figures were adopted to illustrate biblical allegories (Michaelides 1998, 200). Mosaic coverings of individual tombs near Kelibia and elsewhere in North Africa combined fish imagery with other funerary icons of peacocks and flowers, such as the fifth century tomb mosaic at the Bardo Museum, Tunis (Grabar 1980, 237, pl. 263). The fish in the Kelibia mosaics have similar shapes to the fish in the Icarus ceiling painting, with truncated fins and a bulbous head. In the mosaics of the Eustolius Complex at Kourion south of Pafos (also fifth century), fish and birds are set in rectangular panels within an intricate guilloche pattern, hinting at an ambiva-

5. The story of Jonah lying beneath hanging gourds is represented on many sarcophagus reliefs, e.g. in the Museo Laterano in Rome (Grabar 1967, pls 147-148) or the sarcophagus in Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome (Grabar 1967, pl. 130).



Fig. 12. Detail of mosaic of fish in northern side aisle, Ayia Chrysopolitissa, Pafos (Photograph: Diana Wood Conroy).

lent relationship between old and new beliefs (Michaelides 1992, 6, pl. 45).

**3. Bread.** The Eucharistic meal of bread and fish in a celestial banquet was a common image in the Roman catacomb paintings. The loaves of bread were often cursorily shown as circles, in conjunction with baskets and sometimes fishes. The yellow disc and circles of the Icarus Str. ceiling fresco (Fig. 11) could possibly be interpreted as an offering dish and loaves of bread. An example in the Crypt of Lucina in the Catacomb of San Callisto (late third or early fourth century) showed a fish with circular loaves in a basket, painted in a truncated signage (Grabar 1967, pl. 82). Another banquet with simplified circles of bread is represented in the Catacomb of Priscilla (Grabar 1967, pl. 110.) The sarcophagus of Baebia Hertofila, in the Museo delle Terme, Rome had a similar composition of circular loaves on a table, spoked like wheels (Grabar 1967, pl. 137).<sup>6</sup>

According to André Grabar the quickly painted image-signs of Late Roman tomb painting represented the major sacraments, baptism and communion. “When these highly schematised scenes are painted in the catacombs, their presence next to the body of the dead has the same

meaning as the prayer of the burial” (Grabar 1980, 10). The images in the painting continued the longstanding pagan cycles of ritual, and were thought of as ‘active’ in prophylactic and apotropaic ways (18). The artist used particular signs like words in a vocabulary, combining them in a widely understood grammar.

The hidden position of the Icarus Str. ceiling fresco in the *arcosolium* suggested a personal connection to the deceased person. We could read the key symbols—the bird, the pomegranates and gourds, the fish and loaves of bread, and even the part of a lyre—as offering to the individual buried in the sarcophagus the possibility of paradise, of immortality and transformation to another dimension.

## CONCLUSIONS

The vibrant Icarus Str. tomb paintings echoed the flowering of mosaic and sculpture in the increasingly palatial houses and public buildings of Hellenistic to Late Roman Pafos. Some of the occupants of the tomb may have lived in a sophisticated dwelling such as the House of Aion or the House of Orpheus. Elements of the tomb paintings such as the floating red flowers with green leaves on a cream ground, are closely tied to the motifs in the Pafos theatre wall paintings, showing the indisputable parallels between funerary and theatrical iconography.

With the building of the great basilica Agia Chrysopolitissa in the later fourth century, 500 metres to the south of the Icarus Str. tomb, Christianity became the major religion in Pafos as the theatre was abandoned and its marbles plundered (Green and Stennett 2002). The Icarus Str. tomb

6. Other relevant examples: the Tomb of Trebius Justus in Rome with a fresco of the dead man and his parents holding a cloth with circular forms and a vase (Grabar 1967, pl. 244); the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes on the wooden doors of S. Sabina, Rome, ca 432 A.D. (Beckwith 1970, pl. 34); the Last Supper, with fish on a circular plate. Mosaic in nave of S. Apollinare Nuovo. Early sixth century (Beckwith 1970, pl. 86).

painting demonstrated a web of stylistic and iconographic connections and influences across the eastern, southern and western Mediterranean. The three painted arched niches described from

the tomb represented several phases in the art of Pafos and showed changing traditions of Greco-Roman funerary imagery, and a significant engagement with the emerging era of Christianity.

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