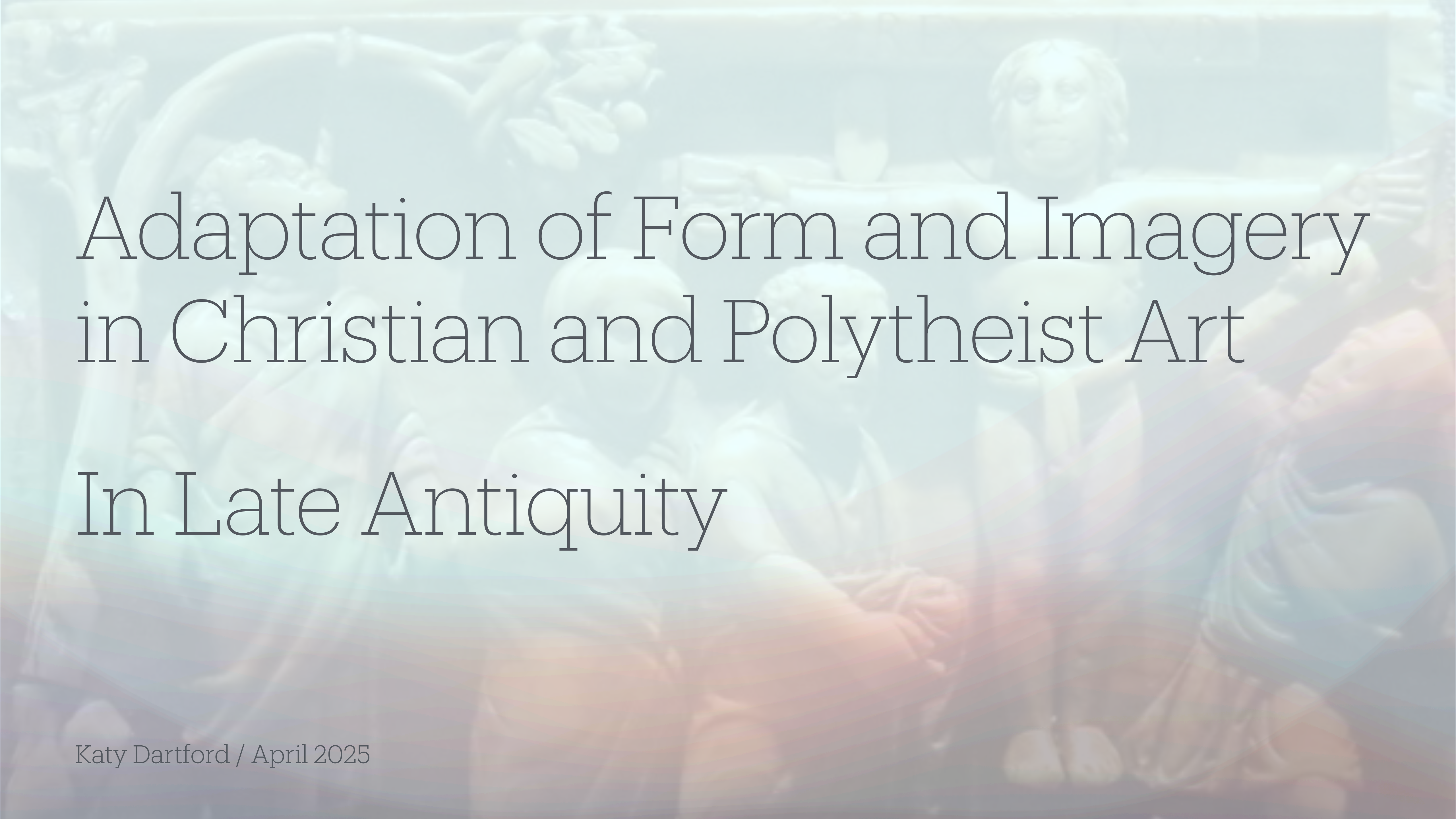




Adaptation of Form and Imagery in Christian and Polytheist Art

In Late Antiquity

Introduction & Key Questions

Key Questions

- Why does Late Antique art blend Christian and polytheist imagery?
- What role did adaptation play in religious transformation?
- How did visual strategies like allegory and symbolism shape Late Antique art?



The Good Shepherd, Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome

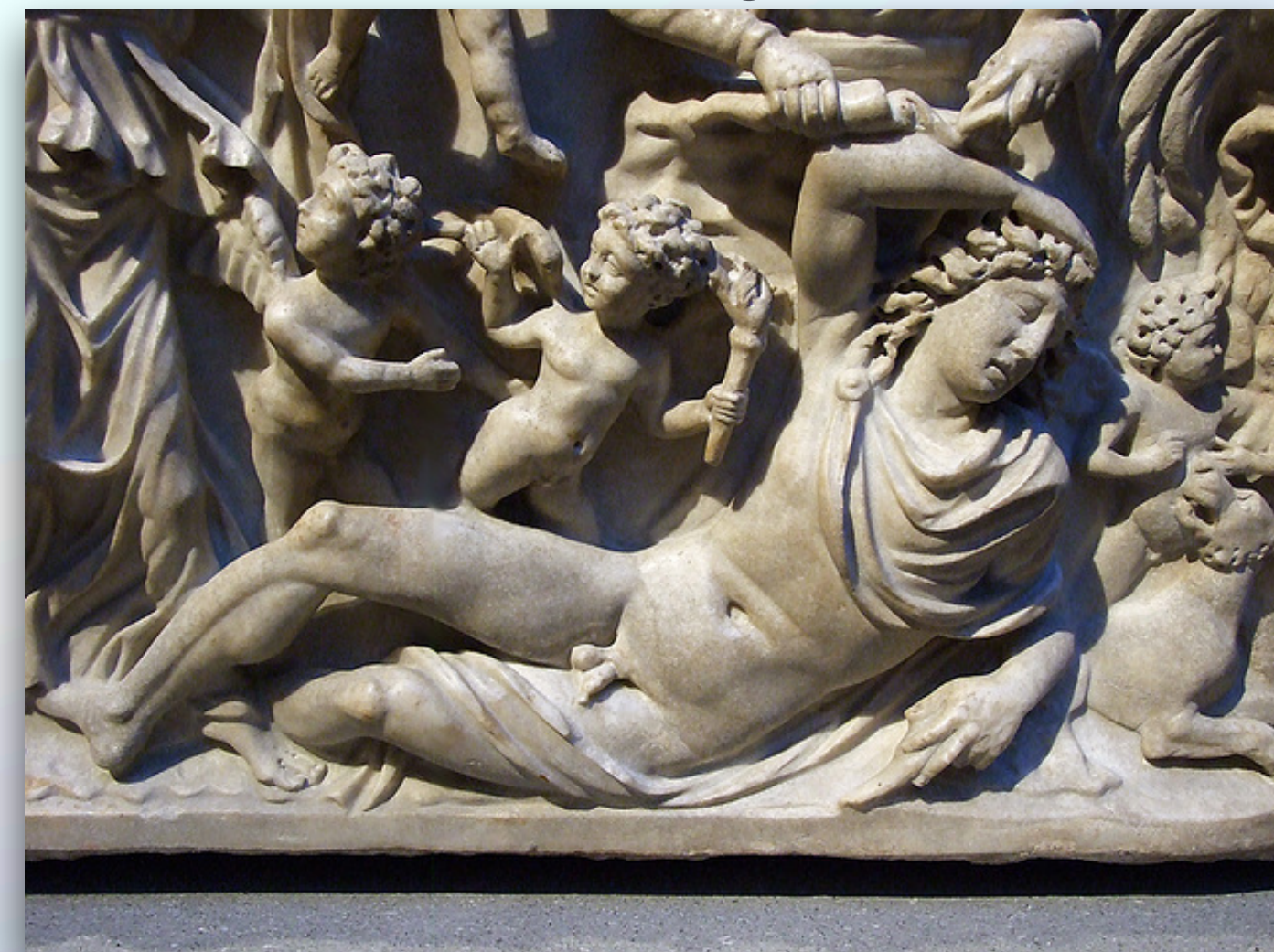
Theoretical Approaches & Scholarship

Key Theoretical Approaches

- Levine (2016): “Interpretive juxtaposition” and visual ambiguity in early Christian art.
- Jensen (2022): Shift from narrative to devotional portraiture; caution against idolatry.
- Francis (2009): Religious images as active, numinous, and relational.
- Harley (2009): Christian art as a transformation of classical forms.



Jonas Sarcophagus, 3rd CE, Sant Maria Antiqua, Rome - Jonah resting beneath the gourd vine



Marble sarcophagus with the myth of Selene and Endymion
Roman, Severan period, early 3rd century AD

Early Christian Art & The Problem of Idolatry

Ambiguity & Avoidance of the Cultic Gaze

- Early Christian art favoured narrative scenes over portraits:
- *“Christians of the second and third centuries consciously avoided non-narrative, portrait-type subjects.” – Jensen (2022, p. 81)*
- Figurative imagery was cautiously used to avoid associations with pagan idolatry.
- Symbolism (e.g., the Good Shepherd, Jonah) provided meaning without “cultic gaze” association.



Good Shepherd, Orants and the Story of Jonah,
from the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus.

4th century

A good example of syncretism: Jonah under the vines is similar to a sleeping Endymion, Christ is shown in a classical pose as the Good Shepherd.

Allegory & Symbolism in Late Antique Art

Visual Allegory Across Traditions



Orpheus as a Christ figure.

4th CE

Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome.

Orpheus went into the underworld to save his wife, just as Christ did to save all the faithful



Daniel in the lion's den

4th CE

Catacombs of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome

- Christian imagery used Old Testament stories as allegories of salvation (e.g., Jonah, Daniel, Noah).
- Pagan motifs (e.g., Orpheus, Hercules) were reinterpreted allegorically.
- Shared symbols helped bridge religious and cultural worldviews.
- “Ambiguity meant that these images could convey several ideas at once.” – Murray in Levine (2016, p. 33).

From Narrative Cycles to Devotional Portraits

Toward the Cultic Gaze

- Fourth–fifth century shift: from narrative to static, frontal portraits.
- Increasing use of halos, labels, and gaze to signify sacred authority.
- Christian art became more recognisably devotional.
- “Portraiture began to prompt veneration, not just instruction.” – Jensen (2022, p. 87)



Christ with Peter, Paul, and four martyrs, Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, 4th CE



Bust of Christ from the ceiling of a hypogeum in the Roman Catacomb of Commodilla, late 4th CE

Iconographic Overlaps in Christian and Pagan Art

Syncretic Spaces & Blended Imagery



Healing of the paralytic, Dura-Europos, circa 230s AD



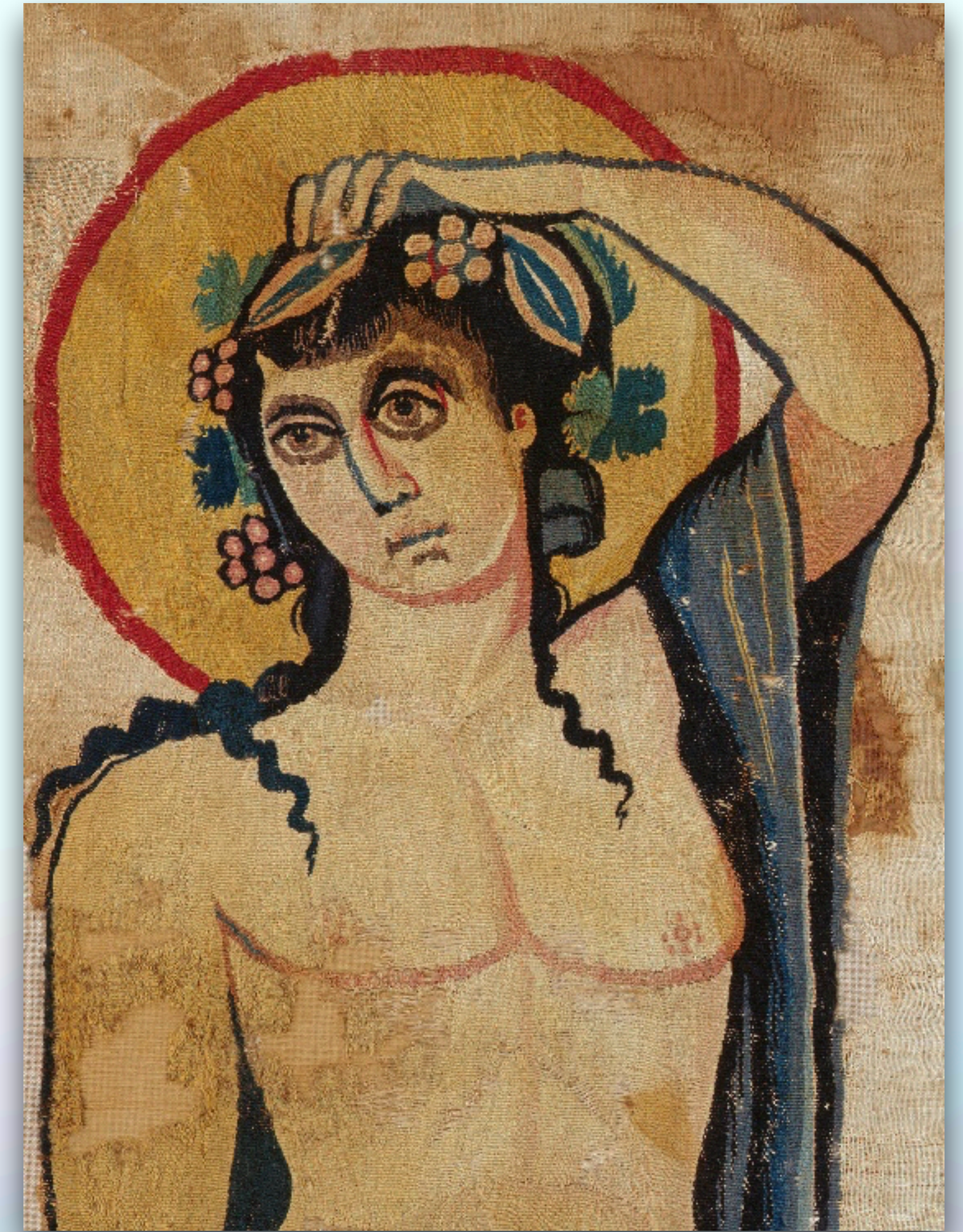
Christ as "Helios / Sol Invictus"
Tomb of the Julii 4th CE, Vatican
Necropolis, Rome

- Early Christian spaces like Dura-Europos and Via Latina show layered visual traditions.
- Pagan-Christian overlap was common in catacombs, sarcophagi, and mosaics.
- Shared symbols enabled familiarity and spiritual reinterpretation.
- "Christianity evolved in a syncretic culture and borrowed its visual language." – Levine (2016, p. 33)
- "Christian art developed on a foundation of iconographic diversity deeply indebted to syncretic origins." – Jensen (2022, p. 40)

Conclusion – Visual Dialogue, Not Displacement

Continuity Through Transformation

- Art in Late Antiquity reflects complex religious adaptation—not rupture.
- Shared forms, allegories, and symbols provided continuity between traditions.
- Gradual devotional shift marked by portraits, not rejection of the past.
- “Art in Late Antiquity reveals a dialogue, not a divide.”
- **Key Takeaways:**
 - Visual ambiguity allowed for broader engagement and reinterpretation.
 - Christian art absorbed familiar forms while reconfiguring spiritual meaning.
 - Allegory, symbolism, and visual context shaped evolving religious identities.



Close up image of Dionysus: Linen and wool tapestry from Egypt, fourth century AD