I would like to give this dissertation on the apostolic world of thought in early Christian iconography the subtitle of ‘In the land of the blessed’—‘Μακάρων ἔνι χῶρῳ’. This phrasing is derived from an inscription on a sarcophagus from the second half of the third century (fig. 3). The complete text is as follows: ‘Here rests Paulina, in the land of the blessed. Pakata rendered her the last honours, as her sweet wet-nurse, holy in Christ.’ The suggestive formula μακάρων ἔνι χῶρῳ conveys to my mind very well the way the body of thought of the Apostles, at least like it is expressed in iconography, is to be interpreted. And let me be clear from the start: particularly in the first three centuries this ‘land of the blessed’ is in no way to be interpreted as the heavenly paradise, as the funeral context suggests. It means more than life after death: it means the blissful state of the believer whose life was fundamentally changed by the coming of the Empire of God. Initially for this overwhelming blissful state no distinction was made between the past, the present and the future. Only after c. 350 do a few explicitly eschatological scenes situate the Christian pax/εἰρήνη particularly in a superterrestrial future.

How to proceed? On the global interpretation of early Christian iconography a consensus appears to have been reached since a few decades. Nearly everybody assumes that Christians and non-Christians used a common late ancient iconographical repertory. Christians, however, selected only those depictions that allowed a deeper meaning for them. Moreover, a number of explicitly biblical-ecclesiastical depictions were selected as well. There even seems to be agreement on the ideological background and nature of Christian iconography. Most early Christian depictions are said to display a strong parallelism with a number of prayers for salvation and with the texts included in the lectionaria (a selection of lectures from the Bible, intended for catechesis). Elsewhere I have already tried to demon-
strate why this holistic interpretation based on the salvation paradigms is difficult to maintain and why I choose an alternative vision.\(^1\) Here I can take a step further thanks to the recent research I conducted on funerary early Christian iconography in Rome and Ostia. Through the inventory, interpretation and quantitative processing in the catacombs in Rome and on sarcophagi from Rome and Ostia, the body of thought from the early period of Christianity can almost be completely represented, for Roman funerary iconography, we may assume, is representative of the whole of early Christian iconography, at least what concerns the better off (the poor could normally at best permit themselves a simple engraved or painted epitaph).\(^2\)

No less than 403 fresco ensembles and 1394 sarcophagi are available, of which 22 examples (1.22\%) are to be situated \(c. 150–250; \) 957 (53.25\%) \(c. 250–325; \) 526 (29.27\%) \(c. 325–375; \) 279 (15.25\%) \(c. 375–500; \) and 13 (0.72\%) \(c. 500–800. \) This first made it possible—as for Rome anyway, and presumably also what was known as oikoumen at the time—to verify exactly when a certain theme or motif was first used, how long and to which degree it remained popular, and when it disappeared. The same can be done with certain thematic clusters, and with the spheres of influence. It is obvious that such a quantitative approach will also give us information on important qualitative aspects, notably the content and influence of the apostolic body of thought.

Basically we shall sort the iconographical material according to six cultural-anthropological contexts (which concur, broadly outlined, with the traditional periods). For each context we shall establish its characteristic features and, in addition, at least for the most important contexts, try to give, through the analysis of a few representative examples, an as concrete view as possible of the ideas and sentiments that have determined the face of the representations. In

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