

# Art & Belief: The Anastasis Icon

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The gospels never directly describes Christ's resurrection. Instead, we conceptualize it through indirect descriptions— an empty tomb, an angel dressed in clothing white as snow, the stone that sealed the tomb, guards (often sleeping), and a vision of a risen Christ by a disciple (Matthew 27, 29). So, it is not surprising that two dramatically different artistic traditions emerged: the western "Resurrection" imagery (in place since c. 400 CE) and the eastern orthodox "Anastasis" icon (emerged c. 700 CE). Both traditions show Christ triumphant over death, but the Anastasis shows why Christ conquers death. The Anastasis icon is not simply Christ rising, but also Christ raising up, pulling Adam and Eve out of their sarcophagi.

The western "Resurrection" pictorial tradition began with the guards sitting in front of a cross capped with a victory wreath borrowed from Roman culture but bearing the symbol Chi Rho. This concept evolved to a depiction of Christ sitting or stepping out of the tomb and by the 1300s, Christ hovers gloriously over an open tomb with perhaps an angel sitting atop the stone, guards, and three women in the periphery. This composition can be seen on Roman sarcophagus from Domitilla (c. 350 CE) to Resurrection paintings by Fra Angelico, Raphael, Dieric Bouts, Paolo Veronese, Matthias Grünewald, Rembrandt, and El Greco.



Matthias Grünewald, "The Resurrection of Christ" (right wing of the Isenheim Altarpiece), c. 1512-1516. Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, Alsace, France



Anastasis fresco, c. 1315-1321, Chora Monastery, Constantinople (Istanbul)

The theology of the image reminds us of Christ's glorious triumph over death, but the beneficiaries of Christ's victory over death are undefined.

In the "Anastasis" icon, Christ

tramples down the gates of the shadowy world of death "... so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil..." (Hebrews 2:14).

Christian converts might describe this as the underworld, Shoal, Abyss, or the Asphodel meadows of Hades. Beneath Christ, the personification of Death (Devil, Satan, or Hades) is tied and bound. Broken gates, locks, and chains float useless in the shadowy space: the world of death is forever conquered and

all the locks are useless.

Christ pulls Adam and Eve up from their tombs into his mandorla of light by grabbing their wrists. His body strides forward toward Adam as he looks back over his shoulder towards Eve. This body position was a well-known "leading out" motif used on Byzantine coinage: a helmeted soldier holds a spear at rest at rest in his left arm and grasps the wrist of a smaller figure with



Leading out motif seen in coin minted by Constans I Centenionalis Struck by Constantius II, 337-350 CE. Available from NGC Collectors Society.

his right. Though the soldier strides right, he looks back toward a smaller figure (perhaps a Frank) who is leaving a hut (barbarism). The propagandistic meaning is that the emperor is liberating the people who were oppressed by the emperor's defeated foe. The writing on the coin "FEL [icis] TEMP[oris] REPARATIO" roughly translates into "Happy Days are Here Again." The leading out motif in the Christian icon says that in Christ's conquering of death, He leads all of us (represented by Adam and Eve) toward freedom from the oppression of death.

The "Anastasis" icon affirms universal resurrection— Christ descended into Hell/Hades to rescue all who had died in the flesh. Christ is centered in the icon, wearing