

The Iconography of Barbarian Arianism

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Scholarly discussions of the Arian controversy have generated an inordinate amount of discussion in any number of regards, ranging from the nature of theological debates between Nicenes and Arians to the role of Arianism in imperial politics of the mid fourth century, to the social and political ramifications of barbarian Arianism. The literature is vast.

A question that has been much less thoroughly studied, much less resolved, however, is the nature of Arian iconography. Did the Arian churches, and in particular the Germanic Arian churches, have an iconography that was in any way identifiable as Arian? Did Arians portray Christ in a manner that at all identified Christ as an Arian Christ as opposed to a Nicene Christ? Did Arians favor any particular saints, and perhaps represent them in a manner that was identifiably Arian? Did the barbarian bearers of the Arian tradition, including the Burgundians, Visigoths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, and Lombards, transfer any of their own cultural markers to the architecture and iconography of their Arian churches?

The lack of surviving examples of Arian-sponsored iconography (the best examples being the Arian baptistery, the mausoleum of Theoderic, and the church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna and the church of Sant'Agata dei Goti in Rome) makes it difficult even to approach an answer to these questions. Yet, this has not kept scholars from suggesting, for example, that the difference between a bearded and beardless Christ is to be attributed to an Arian connection to Nestorianism.

This paper will consider the ways in which barbarian Arianism could have had an impact upon the religious iconography of barbarian peoples.