



# The Traditio Legis: Anatomy of an Image

*By Robert Couzin*

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## **The Traditio Legis: Anatomy of an Image** By Robert Couzin

The bearded and mature figure of Christ stands majestically raising his right hand, open palm facing the viewer. In his left he holds an unfurled scroll. Saints Peter and Paul appear on either side, Peter approaching to catch or protect the dangling bookroll. This image, the so-called traditio legis, first appeared in late fourth-century Rome in a variety of media, from the monumental to the miniature, including mosaic, catacomb painting, gold-glass and, the most numerous group, marble relief carving on sarcophagi.

This monograph engages in a close reading of the traditio legis, highlighting its novelty and complexity to early Christian viewers. The image is analyzed as a conflation of two distinct forms of representation, each constructed of unusual and potentially multivalent elements. Iconographical details like the hirsute Christ, his gesture, Peter's covered hands and the unorthodox positioning of the two saints are examined in isolation and as elements of the whole. The synthetic composition invited alternative and over-determined meanings.

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