

8. ALEXAMENOS CRUCIFIXION GRAFFITI*

The manner in which early Romans viewed Christianity and its Jewish savior Jesus, was found in 1857 on Palatine Hill in Rome. A graffiti (known as *graffito*) depicting a Christian worshipper of Jesus on the cross was discovered, though its exact location is somewhat cloudy. Everett Ferguson in his *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*¹ says it was “scratched on a stone in a guard room on Palatine Hill near the Circus Maximus in Rome.” Orazio Marucchi, in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*² says, “On a beam in the *Pædagogium* on the Palatine there was discovered a *graffito* on the plaster, showing a man with an ass's head, and clad in a perizoma (or short loin-cloth) and fastened to a *crux immissa* (regular Latin cross).” Last of all, Graydon Synder, in *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*³ places the location of discovery “in the servants’ quarters of the Imperial Palace.” It is uncertain as to the exact location, though the original guardroom may have been used later for a school, so that the individual authors may be referring to the same location.

This *graffito*, which is now located in the Kircherian Museum in Rome, depicts an early Christian, named Alexamenos, worshipping at the feet of a man on a cross who has the head of a donkey. There is what appears to be the Greek letter Y (upsilon). At the left of the drawing is a young man that apparently is Alexamenos, whose name is scrawled on the plaster. His hand is raised in an act of worship, it is assumed.

The reading of the *graffito* is as follows:

ΑΛΕ (ALE)

ΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ (XAMENOS)

ΣΕΒΕΤΕ (SEBETE)

ΘΕΟΝ (THEON)

The literal translation is problematic if *σεβετε* (*sebeta*) is understood as an second person imperative, because it would need to be translated “Alexamenos, worship God!” though it could be a second person indicative, so “Alexamenos, you are worshipping (your) God.” If the word is spelled incorrectly,⁴ and should read *σεβεται*, it could be a third person middle indicative, and be translated Alexamenos, “Alexamenos is worshipping (his) God.”⁵ Why the word for “worship” is written as a plural rather than a singular is uncertain, but most agree that the text should read “Alexamenos worships God” or “Alexamenos worships (his) God.”

That Christians were accused of worshipping an ass’s head may be seen in the words of late second century apologist, Tertullian. He indicates that both Christians and Jews were accused of worshipping a god with a donkey’s head,⁶ and even mentions that a certain Jew carried a caricature around Carthage that had a Christian with a donkey’s ears and hooves, entitled *Deus Christianorum Onocoetes* (“the God of the Christians begotten of a donkey”).⁷

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¹ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 475.

² Marucchi, Orazio. "Archæology of the Cross and Crucifix." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 4. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. 11 Nov. 2011, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04517a.htm> (Last visited November 11, 2011).

³ Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine* (Mercer Univ. Press, 1985), 27-28.

⁴ This has been suggested by Rodney Decker. Rodney J. Decker, *The Alexamenos Graffito* (http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/alex_graffito.htm).

⁵ Orazio suggests a third singular, but this would need to be a present middle indicative third singular since the present active indicative third singular would be *ει*, not *ετα*.

⁶ Tertullian, *To the Nations* 11.1-2. Alexander Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 121, and Tertullian, *Apology* 16.1-2 Alexander Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 30-31.

⁷ The text reads,

This graffiti is an important attestation to the fact that early Christians used the crucifix in their worship at least by the third century, something that has been disputed.⁸ As Orazio rightly says, “It would not have been possible for Alexamenos' companion to trace the *graffito* of a crucified person clad in the *perizoma* (which was contrary to Roman usage) if he had not seen some such figure made use of by the Christians.”⁹

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But lately a new edition of our god has been given to the world in that great city: it originated with a certain vile man who was wont to hire himself out to cheat the wild beasts, and who exhibited a picture with this inscription: The God of the Christians, born of an ass. He had the ears of an ass, was hooped in one foot, carried a book, and wore a toga. Both the name and the figure gave us amusement. But our opponents ought straightway to have done homage to this bifurcated divinity, for they have acknowledged gods dog-headed and lion-headed, with horn of buck and ram, with goat-like loins, with serpent legs, with wings sprouting from back or foot.

Alexander Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 31.

⁸ See David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek, *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 103, footnote 83.

⁹ Orazio, “Archaeology of the Cross and Crucifix.”