

What of the cross?

It is a curious fact that there is an absence of the plain cross in the pictorial presentation of the Christian faith between the first century and the early years of the fifth century. Even when it finally did appear it did not represent the cross of Christ's passion and death but was a symbol of his transfiguration, his victory over death, and his pledge of the second coming. The crucifix —the cross with the image of the body (corpus) of Christ affixed appeared even later.

We are dealing in this chapter primarily with the pre-Constantine period of Christian art and so our focus on the development of the cross as the preeminent symbol of Christianity will primarily explore the possible reasons for its absence in during the earliest centuries of the faith. We will include a brief look at the first use of disguised crosses that appeared with the ascendancy of Constantine as the period of the catacombs and sepulchral art overlaps his tenure as emperor.

The absence of images of the plain cross from the earliest period of Christian art has been a difficult puzzle for art historians and theologians to solve. It has been difficult because the redemptive power of Christ's passion and death on the cross was not a theme avoided by early Christian writers. In addition, the "sign of the cross" was a common part of the liturgical life of the earliest Christians. In fact, it was in the liturgy where the first association of the passion and death of Christ with salvation was made (Hippolytus ca. 200).⁵⁵ Early in the third century Clement of Alexandria speaks of the Cross as *tou Kyriakou semeiou typon*, i.e. *signum Christi*, "the symbol of the Lord"⁵⁶ and in the first half of the third century Tertullian referred to the body of Christians as "crucis religiosi", i.e. devotees of the Cross⁵⁷. St. Augustine said that by the sign of the cross and the invocation of the name of Jesus all things are sanctified and consecrated to God. In addition to the tracing of the sign on the forehead of candidates for Baptism, individuals daily made the gesture when beginning various activities (although more likely to ward off evil than to recall the passion.⁵⁸) But, while the cross was a primary subject of interest to the teachers and theologians of the early church, the earliest artists and those responsible for commissioning images, ignored it. They chose, instead, to present the itinerant, miracle-working ministry of the rabbi, Jesus. It was the very human Jesus of the gospels that captured the imagination of those responsible for early Christian art. The salvific power of a crucified transcendent deity popular in the early texts does not get any play in the earliest visual arts of the faith.⁵⁹

Some assign the discrepancy in emphasis to a lack of popular interest on the part of the ordinary faithful in Christ's passion and death.⁶⁰ The whole atonement thing, they believe, was a construct of the professional theologians and not really the gospel message received by the common, ordinary person Jesus was interested in. This interpretation does not ring true, however, as the visual exegesis of the Christian faith used in the catacombs and on sarcophagi would have been directed by the leaders of the church in Rome and not by individuals or private families, although individuals and families probably had some say. Even today, when planning a wedding or a funeral the family is presented by the local church

authority with a list of appropriate readings and hymns from which to choose.

Additional evidence of the unity of belief between the professionals and the faithful is the consistency of visual expression found among the thirty-two Roman catacombs dug under the private property of different families. The symbols and stories as well as their artistic presentation is consistent from catacomb to catacomb. In fact, many artisans probably had a hand in decorating several different sites utilizing catalogues of images and scenes available to all the professional workshops. Also, the *fossores* (excavators), the professional diggers of the catacombs, additionally were charged with the preparation and internment of the dead. In the third century they were considered among the clergy in the lowest rank.⁶¹ All this is evidence of the active involvement of the local church leaders in the administration of the catacombs and so it is difficult to see how a difference in faith between the professional leaders and the common ordinary Christian could have crept in.

We have to search out other reasons for the discrepancy between the emphasis laid on the passion and death of Christ in early Christian texts and worship, and its absence in the art of the catacombs.

Christians may have feared that their pagan neighbors would not have understood. Crucifixion was a particularly horrible and humiliating form of execution reserved for the worst criminals, law breakers who occupied the lowest strata of society, peasants and slaves. As a result of misunderstanding, scorn and mockery would have been heaped upon Christians. This would be a particularly difficult problem for Christians during periods of persecution. In fact, there seems to have been real reason for Christian fear as graffito was discovered in 1857 in a building on the Palatine Hill of Rome used as a *Paedagogium* or boarding-school for the imperial page boys.⁶² It depicts a figure with a human body but the head of an ass hanging on a cross. [40]



To the left stands a male figure—probably meant to be the Alexamenos referred to in the inscription—pointing or worshipping. The complete inscription translates something like, “Alexamenos, worship(s) (his) God!” There is no certainty as to the date this was made but sometime before the end of the third century is likely. No doubt

Alexamenos was a Christian and he was being mocked for his worship of a crucified man/animal god. It was a common accusation that Christians practiced *onolatry* (worship of donkey). Tertullian, mentioned ca. 200

40 Alexamenos graffito, prior to 313.

This is the first known representation of the crucifixion.

[www.skepticforum.com/viewtopic.php
f=30&t=10112](http://www.skepticforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=30&t=10112)

that Christians along with Jews, were accused of worshipping a deity with the head of an ass. In the *Histories*, Tacitus tells how the Jews, exhausted and dying of thirst in the desert, followed a herd of wild asses that led them to water. In appreciation they consecrated an image of the animal.(V.3) in the Jerusalem temple. This story, Tertullian claimed, probably is the source of the rumor that Christians worshipped an ass. (*Apology*, XVI).⁶³

Fear of mockery, persecution, class hatred, or sarcasm may seem initially to be a good reason for the absence of passion images in the catacombs but it fails to satisfy for the simple reason that the catacombs were, for the most part, not public locations. They were extensive, true, but they were private, Christian, and visited only by relatives and friends of the faithful buried there. In addition, the *fossares* were Christian and so there is no reason to suppose the painters were not as well. The opportunity for pagans in any numbers to visit the catacombs was probably quite limited and so the cross could have been displayed without much fear of misunderstanding.

There may be a reason, however, that is somewhat related to a fear of sarcasm. Passing by a crucified criminal must certainly have been within the experience of most citizens. The gruesome nature of the torturous death of a man was no doubt overwhelming to nearly all who witnessed it, even given the taste for blood sport favored by the ancient Romans. Of course, as a deterrent to crime, it was the intention of the authorities that the execution be gruesome and very public. Might the graphic display of the crucifixion—even of a simple cross—be too much for the earliest Christians themselves to handle? How do you depict this humiliating and horrible event truthfully and yet respectfully communicate a sacred mystery?⁶⁴ It seems likely that the cross, and most especially the crucifix, could not be used as symbols of the redemptive suffering of Christ until people began to forget just exactly what that torturous death entailed. That would not happen until Constantine outlawed crucifixion out of respect for the way Christ died.⁶⁵ That action, however, falls just outside the time frame we are confining ourselves to here.

41 Abraham Offering Isaac, catacomb painting.

Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice.

www.ferrum.edu/dhowell/txt_cntxt/abe_site/images/priscilla_abraham.jpg



While the passion of Christ was not symbolized explicitly, many feel that it was addressed indirectly in the Old Testament story of Abraham offering his son, Isaac. The story of Abraham's faith in God was among the repertoire of images in the catacombs.[41] In this story the early Christian theologians and teachers found a prefigure-

ment of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. Abraham was directed by God to take his son, Isaac, and sacrifice him. Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders and they set off for the top of a mountain. Isaac said to his father that they had everything needed except for the lamb to be sacrificed. Abraham responded that God would provide. At the place, Isaac was bound and laid on the altar and Abraham raised his knife to offer Isaac. The sacrifice was halted at that point by God and a ram substituted for Isaac.

This story has several features that make it a 'figure' of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. Thus, there is the father offering-up his son; the son who surrenders to his father's will. The son carries the wood on his shoulders to the hill of sacrifice just as Christ would carry the cross on his shoulders to the hill of Golgotha. The wood of the cross was the altar of Christ's sacrifice. In addition, some of the early church fathers saw the ram as a prefigurement of Christ insofar as the ram was sacrificed in the place of Isaac just as Jesus was sacrificed for our sake.

A certain redemptive value to Isaac's submissiveness was even noted in Jewish tradition.

While the offering of Isaac was commonly cited by early writers as a 'type' of Christ's passion and sacrifice one does have to work at trying to make it fit into the funerary context of the catacombs. Some scholars reject the interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac as a prefigurement of Christ's passion. They interpret it as symbolizing "deliverance from danger, which might imply resurrection from death."⁶⁶ Some might feel that this interpretation is more in line with what can be considered appropriate to the early sepulchral art of the catacombs.

There is a recognized danger among historians today of the temptation to read too much into the catacomb images. It seems that perhaps we need to emphasize again that the funerary context here was probably a qualifying factor in determining which images were chosen and which interpretations intended. While the passion and death of Christ redeemed mankind and offered eternal life with God, the overwhelmingly traumatic lived experience of crucifixion to the early Christians may have mentally blocked any thought of its graphic use as a symbol of hope appropriate in a funerary context. Surprisingly, the resurrection of Christ, a supremely appropriate scene in this context, is also not depicted in the catacombs. On the other hand, there is no description of the actual event in the gospels, either.

Disguised crosses?

The reluctance to graphically represent the crucifixion and yet still refer to the sacrificial nature of Christ's passion and death may have been ameliorated by the use of what many historians refer to as disguised crosses. Some of these "cross markings" include the anchor, the T-shaped *tau* cross, the Egyptian looped cross (the *ankh*, a symbol of life), and the mast of Jonah's ship. Most historians would agree, however, that it is very difficult to determine if any of these refer specifically to the crucifixion. Identifying the intended meaning of any of these symbols is

42 Christian Roman epitaph of Atimetus from the catacombs of St. Sebastian on the Via Appia, Rome. Inscription flanked by Christian symbols, an anchor and a fish.

When closing the loculi, the relatives of the deceased often inscribed messages on the slabs. The anchor could stand for faith or hope, or the role of Christ in one's life.

www.utexas.edu/courses/romanciv/Romancivimages18/catacombinsc.jpg

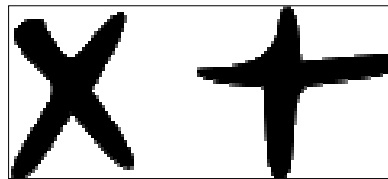


now understood as an uncertain quest.

The anchor symbol[42] is one of the earliest and most popular of markings. There is general agreement that the anchor itself is a symbol of hope as it refers to an anchored ship at rest in a secure harbor which is what every sailor hopes for at the end of the day. That it is a symbol for Christ is also generally accepted as Christ is the secure hope of all Christians. Some see in the vertical shaft and crossing arm of the anchor a reference to the cross which strengthens the identification of the anchor with Christ. Some writers at the time did make clear parallel associations between such things as anchors and masts with the cross. Given the funerary context of the catacombs, however, the more appropriate interpretation is probably that of simple hope or faith in God.

43 The Hebrew letter "tau".

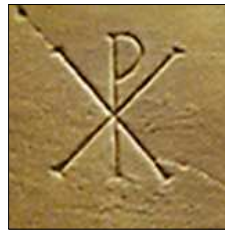
upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7a/Proto-Canaanite_letter_tau.svg/120px-Proto-Canaanite_letter_tau.svg.png



The *tau*[43] cross was derived from the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the *tau*, and eventually became identified with the cross of crucifixion through a transformative process. The "sign of the cross" as well as the graphic symbol of the cross probably grew out of the mark of the *tau* written on the foreheads of the righteous, referred to in Ezekial 9:4—6, to spare them God's wrath that was about to befall Jerusalem.⁶⁷

44 Chi Rho, Catacomb of San Callisto

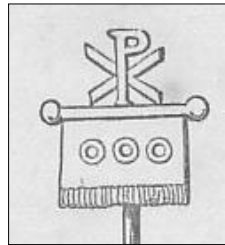
flickr.com/photos/jimforest/2553279181/



The *chi rho*[44] is one of the earliest cruciform symbols used by Christians. Formed by superimposing the first two letters of the word "Christ" in Greek, it is not technically a cross but did invoke the status of Jesus as the Christ. Reminiscent of the *tau* it did have associations with the cross. There is early evidence of the *chi rho* symbol on Christian rings of the third century (200's).⁷⁰

45 Labarum

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>



Constantine had a vision of the *chi rho* and was inspired to attach the symbol to the top of the *vexillum*, a military cross frame standard from which hung a flag, so that his troops could rally under the patronage of the "One God" rather than many different gods. In place of a flag was suspended a banner bearing portraits of Constantine flanked by his two sons. The Romans referred to the new design as the *labarum*.^[45]

46 Victory Cross, Rome, Vatican. Sarcophagus of Domatilla (from Catacomb of Domatilla), mid-4th century

On top of the cross form is the wreathed *chi rho* or *Christogram*.

campus.belmont.edu/honors/SarcPix/SarcPix.html



Derived from the labarum was the an image consisting of the cross form of the *vexillum* surmounted by a wreathed *chi rho*.^[46] The wreathed chi rho is called a *Christogram* and together with the cross form suggested triumph over enemies and death through faith in Christ. As the Christian church began to enjoy the patronage of Constantine the *victory crosses*, as they are called, and the *Christogram* eventually ap-

peared on every conceivable object from mosaics in basilicas to glass goblets.

⁵⁵ Jensen 136

⁵⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, VI, in P. G., IX (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913) Jan. 7 2009 10:57 <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0210.htm>>

⁵⁷ Tertullian, *Apology*, c. xvi, P. G., I, (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913) Jan. 7 2009 10:57 <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0301.htm>>

⁵⁸ Jensen 136

⁵⁹ Jensen 135

⁶⁰ Jensen 132

⁶¹ Walter Lowrie, *Art in the Early Church*, (Lowrie Press, 2007), p. 44

⁶² Augustus John Cuthbert Hare, *Walks in Rome*, Volume 1, (Adamant Media Corporation, 2005) p. 201 <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexamenos_graffito>

⁶³ James Grout, *Alexamenos graffito*, Jan. 7 2009 19:48 <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/graffito.html>

⁶⁴ Jensen 134

⁶⁵ Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *The Cross in Christian Tradition: From Paul to Bonaventure*, (Paulist Press, 2001) p. 21-22

⁶⁶ J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) p. 68

⁶⁷ Jensen 137

⁷⁰ Wikipedia, *Chi Rho*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chi_Rho>