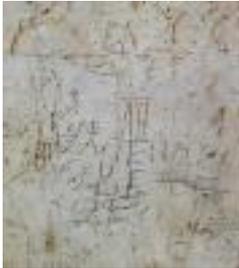




Alexamenos Graffito

[alexamenos_graffiti_1.jpg](#)



[1]

[alexamenos_graffiti_2.jpg](#) [2]



[3]

Graffiti mocking a Christian

Original Location/Place: Paedagogium of the imperial palace, Palatine Hill

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Palatine Museum, Rome

Date: 200 CE

Date: 2nd CE to 3d CE

Material: Plaster

Measurements: 33.5 x 38 cm

Original Inscription/Graffito:

?????????? ?????? ????

English translation:

The translation is my own.

“Alexamenos worships God.”

Literary reference:

Heikki Solin and Marja Itkonen-Kaila, eds., *Graffiti del Palatino. 1. Paedagogium* (Helsinki: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 1966), n. 246

Description:

This graffito consists of two rather crudely etched figures and an inscription below them, written in equally crude letters. There is a Greek upsilon (Y) above the central figure to the right. The central figure is a human body with an ass's head, and appears to be seen from behind judging by its visible buttocks. The figure is mounted on a T-shaped cross and appears to have its feet on a cross beam. The head is turned to the left, towards the other figure below. The crucified figure's mouth and left eye are detectable, and it seems to be dressed in a short, sleeveless



garment from shoulders to mid-buttocks. There are lines midway down the legs to indicate the knees, and lines from the forearms to the top crossbeam, which are fainter, may be ropes. The second figure, to the left of the crucified one, stands roughly level with the bottom of the vertical post of the cross. This figure is quite short in comparison to the other one, and also seems to be viewed from behind (a garment covers his buttocks, however). The disproportionately large head looks towards the crucified figure, and the right eye and mouth are visible. This second figure seems to have hair, represented by jagged lines, but no ears. His right arm is raised towards the other figure, bending at the elbow, and the left arm falls down and away from his body. The raised right arm (but not the left) has a hand with splayed fingers. The inscription is etched over four lines, with the first word divided.

Commentary:

This relatively famous piece of Roman graffiti, featuring what is thought to be the earliest pictorial representation of the crucified Christ, was discovered in 1857 on the Palatine Hill in Rome, in a complex of the imperial palace designed by Domitian's architect Rabirius in 92 CE. There has been some variation in the way the building complex has been described in scholarship. For instance, Everett Ferguson says that our graffiti was "scratched on a stone in a guard room on Palatine Hill" (*Backgrounds on Early Christianity*, p. 596; similarly, see also David Balch, *Roman Domestic Art*, p. 104, who argues that a soldier etched the graffiti). However, due to the presence of several other pieces of graffiti which use the phrase "exit the *paedagogium* (school)" (*exit de paedagogio*), along with various multi-regional names and references to professions, the building's function has been traditionally understood as some sort of training/living quarters for servants of Caesar's household (see Heikki Solin and Marja Itkonen-Kaila, *Graffiti*, p. 75-78; for Solin's plan of the palace where the graffiti was found, see p. 5, 10, 11; see also Oliver Yarbrough, "The Shadow of an Ass," p. 242; there are 369 pieces of graffiti in total from the complex, in both Latin and Greek).

The significance of this graffiti is multi-faceted. Firstly, it offers us a portrayal (via a mocking caricature) of early Christianity by an unknown individual working and residing in the imperial palace, through the common medium of graffiti. Secondly, depending on how one interprets the graffiti it may offer us some insight into anti-Jewish sentiment (see the discussion below), or alternatively represent an attempt out of fear or malice to expose the controversial religious beliefs of another member of the imperial household. There are many uncertainties, and so the best we can do is offer a range of possible interpretations, which may reveal to us something of the way in which Christians were understood and/or reacted to by their peers in a Roman society which viewed them as deviant and suspicious.

The wording of the graffiti is usually translated along the lines of "Alexamenos worships god" (occasionally "Alexamenos worships his god"), although the subject and verb do not agree with one another. As Yarbrough points out, however, it makes most sense to read the word ?????? (*sebete*) as an itacism (the process whereby a Greek diphthong has altered in pronunciation) for ???????, thereby making the verb agree with its subject, ?????????? (*Alexamenos*) ("The Shadow of an Ass," p. 241, n. 5). Yarbrough further notes the problem of the Greek letter upsilon (Y) which sits above the crucified figure, and wonders whether there may be a connection with the letter representations of divine beings which have the forms of animals in magical amulets and "Gnostic" texts such as the *Apocryphon of John*. However, the being identified with a "Y," Yao does not have an ass's head (the ass-headed being is Eloaiou), so this is not particularly satisfactory ("The Shadow of an Ass," p. 241, n. 4). David Balch and others argue, however, that the upsilon is not actually part of the original graffiti ("Paul's Portrait of Christ Crucified," p. 103; see also Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Graffiti*, p. 211).

Peter Maser argues against the traditional interpretation of the graffiti as anti-Christian on the grounds that honouring images such as the cross did not really become popular until the fourth and fifth centuries CE ("Das sogenannte Spottkruzifix vom Palatin"). However, as Balch points out, this does not account for the fact that Christians themselves do not need to have been venerating the image of the cross in this manner in order for caricatures to represent them as doing so. Indeed ("Paul's Portrait of Christ Crucified," p. 103). Scholars have discussed the possibility that the portrayal of the crucified ass-man might stem from rumours that both Jews and Christians worshipped a god/image in the form of an ass. For instance, the Roman historian Tacitus, *Histories* V.3, claims that after being expelled from Egypt, the thirsty Jews wandering in the desert followed a herd of wild asses to a water source, which led to them consecrating an image of an ass in the temple. The Christian author Tertullian also later recounts that the Christians are accused of worshipping this same image, and having a god with an ass's head (*Apology* XVI; see also *To the Nations* I.XI.4). Moreover, Josephus in his *Against Apion* II.7, 10 also defends the Jews against similar charges. Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, p. 60-61, concludes that despite there being questions regarding Josephus's understanding of this information, it may have roots in Alexandrian anti-Judaism. Building on this, Yarbrough considers that there might be a connection with Alexandrian (or at least Egyptian) anti-Judaism in our graffiti, as several other pieces from the complex reference Africa (in this connection,



Yarbrough argues, it is also worth noting that Celsus, also associated with Alexandria, in his *On the True Doctrine* VI.34, mocks the notion of a crucified god, which our graffiti appears to do as well; “The Shadow of an Ass,” p. 249). Ultimately, however, this cannot be verified, as we have no identifying signature from our “artist” which tells us that he himself was from this region. Anti-Jewish sentiment remains a possibility for the motives behind our graffiti, therefore, but the fact that the figure is portrayed crucified points to a polemic that is more specifically directed at a Christian, and while the individual responsible may have drawn on circulating rumours which began as anti-Jewish, there is no reason to see him as specifically anti-Jewish rather than anti-Christian.

With this in mind, the question remains as to just how malicious the Alexamenos graffiti was intended to be. Was the artist simply engaging in what he/she thought was relatively harmless mockery? Or was he/she intending to uncover the religious beliefs of a fellow labourer in the imperial palace, perhaps out of fear or intimidation of sharing living and working quarters with a follower of what was viewed as a superstitious, deviant movement? It is entirely feasible that upon finding out that another member of Caesar’s staff belonged to this group, one of his fellow labourers sought to cruelly expose him, perhaps even in a bid to make clear his own opposition. Indeed, as Yarbrough states, while not in a totally public place, such as the forum, for example, the graffiti is etched in a location which was shared with numerous other members of the imperial palace (“The Shadow of an Ass,” p. 244).

Many questions are still unanswered, but essentially, the Alexamenos graffito offers us a window into a very “real” response to a Christian living in Rome (in that it is different from the often cited literary anti-Christian rhetoric of authors such as Celsus and Fronto of Cirta, whose speech against the Christians is preserved in the *Octavius* IX.6-7 of Minucius Felix). If the artist’s intentions were something more than pure mockery, this source might reveal to us something of a climate of discomfort (at least between certain individuals) among those working in the imperial palace, with this individual perhaps keen to distance him/herself from a belief system which the imperial system did not approve of.

Thematic keywords:

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- [Rome \(city\)](#) [5]
- [crucifixion](#) [6]
- [caricature](#) [7]
- [image](#) [8]
- [graffiti](#) [9]
- [anti-Judaism](#) [10]
- [imperial palace](#) [11]
- [imperial household](#) [12]

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