

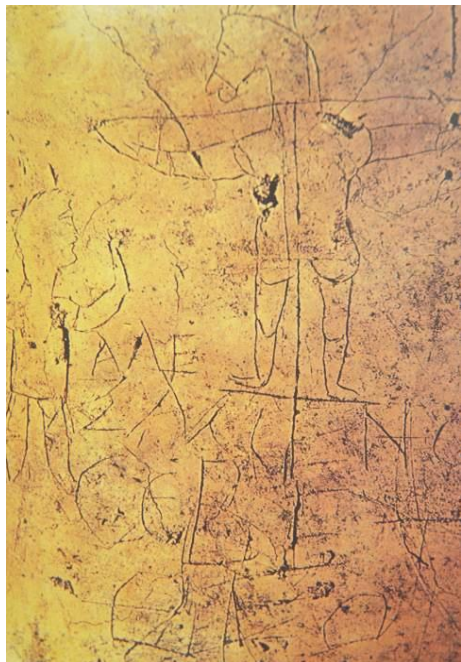
EARLY CHRISTIANITY AFTER THE NEW TESTAMENT

The transition between New Testament Christianity and post-apostolic Christianity is not well-known to most modern Christians, since our knowledge of this period relies upon texts and artifacts that are not easily accessible. The earliest Christian writings beyond the New Testament are collected together in a body called “The Apostolic Fathers,” but there is little if any archaeological data in them. The closest thing to a transition would be the seven churches addressed by John in the Book of Revelation near the end of the 1st century. Even here, other than at Ephesus, these church sites remain largely uninvestigated archaeologically. Further, Christianity was now no longer a *religio licita*, which is to say, it was an illegal religion. This, in turn, underlies the rise of persecution.

The Rise of Persecution

If the First Jewish Revolt made clear that Christians were not simply a sect of Judaism, the bitterness of the Jewish community against Christians reinforced that conclusion. Sometime in about the mid-80s, a curse was added to the Jewish synagogue liturgy called the *birkat ha-minim* (= cursing of the deviants), recited each service along with the traditional eighteen benedictions. This effectively forced Christians out of the synagogues, since this curse seems to have had Jewish Christians in view.¹ Christians were now on their own without the covering protection of legal religion.

The persecution of Christians by Roman authorities began during the time of Claudius. Luke mentions that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Ac. 18:2), and Suetonius verifies this event and says that the expulsion was because of riots at the “instigation of Chrestus” (*Lives of Caesar* 5.25.4). There are compelling reasons for believing that the reference to *Chrestus* is an allusion to Christ, and the disturbances apparently were disputes between Christians and Jews, probably over the claim that Jesus was the Jewish messiah.



*Early graffito mocking Christians,
Palatine Hill, Rome*

More serious opposition began under Caesar Nero. Rome’s great fire in AD 64 was blamed upon the Christians, according to Tacitus, since such calamities usually were perceived to derive from the wrath of the gods. Upon the Christians was exacted “the most exquisite punishments.” These included crucifixion, public burning, and animal baiting, in which Christians were covered with skins and torn apart by dogs. Tacitus himself implies that the Christians were innocent but became scapegoats for Nero (*Annals* XV.44).

By the late 1st century, the persecution against Christians was becoming more pronounced. Tacitus reflects on the public

¹ The content of this curse is as follows: *For apostates let there be no hope, and the dominion of arrogance [i.e., Rome] do Thou speedily root out in our days; and let the Nazarenes [Christians] and the heretics perish as in a moment, let them be blotted out of the book of the living and let them not be written with the righteous. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.*

image of Christians in the empire, and he describes them as “a class hated for their abominations,” “a deadly superstition,” people convicted of “hatred of the human race,” and “criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment.” Anti-Christian graffiti began to appear, such as the one excavated on the Palatine Hill in Rome, where a Christian named Alexamenos is mocked in a depiction of him praying to a crucified God with the head of an ass and the inscription, *Alexamenos sebethe theon* (= Alexamenos prays to [his] God”). By the early 2nd century, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, was writing to Emperor Trajan to ask how he should prosecute Christians in his realm. Eventually, all citizens would be required to sacrifice to the emperor and/or the pagan deities as a sign of political loyalty, and any who did not were liable to punishment or imprisonment. Emperor Decius (AD 249-251) vigorously pursued the imperial verdict, and a certificate or *Libellus* verifying such sacrifices was issued to citizens who complied.

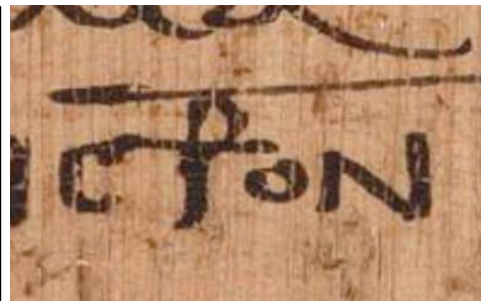
Nomina Sacra

Early on, due to the concentration of Christians within the Jewish community, “art” was often considered to be idolatrous. However, as Christianity spread,² the non-Jewish elements of the church came to develop artistic symbols for their faith. Initially, this began with the embellishment of biblical texts, where Christian scribes began to use special abbreviations for the *nomina sacra* (= sacred names). The Greek letters *Tau-Rho* (T-R) in words like “cross” and “crucify” were superimposed as a stylistic representation of the cross. This so-called staurogram was employed as part of the spelling of the Greek word **CTAYPON** (= cross) in early papyrus manuscripts like $\mathfrak{p}66$, $\mathfrak{p}45$, and $\mathfrak{p}75$. If one merges the two letters, it looks something like this.

It was also common in manuscripts of the 3rd century and earlier to abbreviate divine names and other special words, designating their special value by drawing a line over them. These abbreviations were an act of reverence, not a space-saving device as is the case with modern abbreviations. Sometime in the 2nd century, the words *Jesus*, *Christ*, *Lord*, *God*, and *Spirit* were so treated. By the end of the 2nd century, these *nomina sacra* began to appear in Christian tomb inscriptions as well. By the

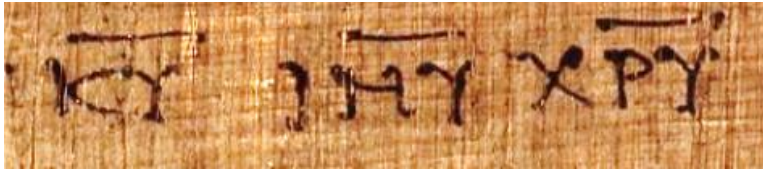


Libellus, c. AD 250: certificate proving that one had sacrificed to the Roman gods
(University of Michigan)



In Luke 14:27 of $\mathfrak{p}75$, the word “cross” has been stylized as a staurogram.

² By AD 100, about 64% of Roman port cities had a Christian community. By the end of the 2nd century, Christian communities could be found in more than half of the inland cities as well.



From the last verse in the Book of 2 Corinthians, the sacred names "Lord," "Jesus," and "Christ" are all abbreviated, p46 (ca. AD 200), University of Michigan

middle of the 3rd century, several other words, like *Savior*, *Jerusalem*, and *Son*, among others, were treated similarly.

Another very early form was the *Chi-Rho* combination, the first two letters in the name "Christ," one letter superimposed over the



Marble plaque on a 4th century sarcophagus

other, similar to the *Tau-Rho* staurogam. While this Christogram was not used in New Testament Greek texts themselves (though it is found in Latin translations), it became widely used as a symbol of Christ, and appeared on carpet pages, coins, and inscriptions. After Constantine (4th century), it became the official *imperial insignia*, even appearing on the helmets and shields of Roman soldiers. Added to the symbol were often the letters Α and Ω/Ω, the alphabetic letters *alpha* and *omega* used to describe Christ in the Revelation of John (Rv. 1:8, 11; 21:6; 22:13).

Christian Artifacts

The same symbols that appeared originally in texts found their way onto objects, like burial plaques and lamps. Other important artistic symbols include the fish, where the Greek word for fish was used as an acrostic in which the initial letters for *Ιησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱος Σωτήρ* spell the word fish (ΙΧΘΥΣ). In the early 200s,



Early circular fish symbol created from Greek Letters ΙΧΘΥΣ/ICHTHUS discovered at Ephesus

Tertullian wrote, "Be we small fishes, named after our great ICHTHUS, Jesus Christ, are born in water and only by remaining in water can we live." Other important Christian symbols include the anchor, the peacock, the dove, the lyre, the ship, and of course, the cross. By the early 200s, Christians were making the sign of the cross with their hands. A very popular icon was of Christ, the Good

Shepherd, which appears in the catacombs in Rome, when it was illegal to create more explicit Christian art. Early Christians in Rome created vast subterranean labyrinths, several kilometers long, with burial niches for their deceased loved ones. These they decorated with Christian symbols and paintings on the walls, using the caverns for burial from the 2nd through the 5th centuries. In the mid-3rd century, depictions of a man carrying a lamb on his shoulders was, to Christians at least, a clear picture of Jesus' teaching on the Good Shepherd, the One who went out searching until he found the lost sheep (Jn. 10:11-18; Lk. 15:3-7).

The four gospels also were represented by the four living creatures in Ezekiel and Revelation (Eze. 1:5ff.; Rv. 4:6ff.). The winged man (Matthew), the winged lion (Mark), the winged ox (Luke), and the

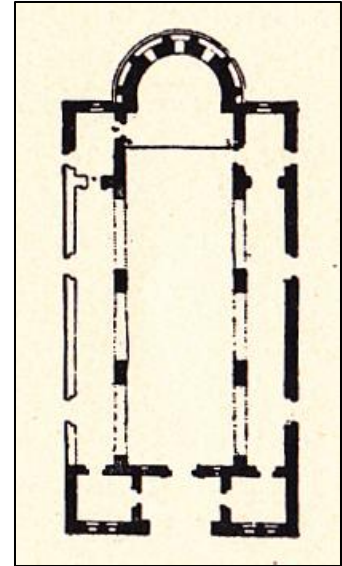


This is one of a number of catacomb paintings of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

eagle (John) became common motifs on church portals, apses, and other locations.

Christian Architecture

After Christianity became legalized in AD 313 by the Edict of Milan, it was now possible for Christians to establish places of worship without fear of reprisals. Christian places of worship began to take on some of the classical forms of Greek and Roman architecture with a rectangular ground floor divided into aisles separated by columns that supported the roof. The roof above the middle aisle was raised, allowing openings for air and light. The apse or altar area was elevated and formed as a half-dome extending out from the end



Floor plan of the Basilica church in Kalb-Luseh, Syria

of the rectangular floor plan. Examples of these *basilica* churches can be found from Galilee to Rome.

One feature of the new churches was the inclusion of floor mosaics. These mosaics, among other things, depicted stories from the Old or New Testaments, symbolic animals, and representations of Eucharistic bread and wine. One of the most beautiful examples was discovered at the Horvat Beit Loya church about 10 miles north-northwest of Hebron (ca. AD 500). It depicts a sailboat scene reminiscent of Jesus and his disciples in the fishing culture of Galilee. All the faces were intentionally damaged by Muslims in the early 8th century, following an edict by Caliph Yazid II, who ordered the destruction of all Christian icons. The church was abandoned in the same century, and its walls were

plundered for stones to use in other structures. Still, the church floor lay protected for centuries until it was excavated by archaeologists in the 20th century. Such mosaics were the predecessors of stained-glass windows in churches many centuries later.



Fishing boat mosaic from the floor of the Horvat Beit Loya church, ca. AD 500.