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How the cross became Christianity’s most popular symbol Steven Shisley January 26, 2025 34 Comments 169179 views Throughout the world, images of the cross adorn the walls and steeples of churches. For some Christians, the cross is part of their daily attire worn around their necks. Sometimes the cross even adorns the body of a Christian in permanent ink. In Egypt, among other countries, for example, Christians wear a tattoo of the cross on their wrists. And for some Christians, each year during the beginning of Lent, they receive the cross on their foreheads in ash. Clearly, today the cross is accepted as the most popular symbol of Christianity. But, interestingly, most scholars believe that early Christians did not use the cross as an image of their religion because crucifixion evoked the shameful death of a slave or criminal.1 Scholars believe that the first surviving public image of Jesus’s crucifixion was on the fifth-century wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina, which is located on the Aventine Hill in Rome.2 Since it took approximately 400 years for Jesus’s crucifixion to become an acceptable public image, scholars have traditionally believed that this means the cross did not originally function as a symbol for Christians.3 Jesus and the cross: Jesus’s crucifixion is displayed on the fifth-century C.E. wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome. Photo: Jim Forest. So how, then, did the cross become the preeminent symbol of Christianity? The Cross in the Roman World The word “cross” was offensive to Romans. One Roman insulted another by using it on a graffito discovered in the Stabian baths of Pompeii: “May you be nailed to the cross!” Classical texts similarly use the term “cross” in curses. The Roman writer Plautus, for instance, uses the phrase “go to an evil cross” as slang for “go to hell” (e.g., Pseudolus 331).4 In fact, even the Latin word for cross (crux) sounded harsh to the ears, according to St. Augustine (De Dialectica 10.10). In 70 B.C.E., Cicero accused a former governor of Sicily named Gaius Verres of crucifying a Roman citizen. According to Verres, the Roman citizen named P. Gavius was guilty of espionage. Cicero reports that while Gavius was flogged in the marketplace, the only sounds from his lips were the words, “I am a Roman citizen.” Despite his claim of Roman citizenship, a cross was prepared for him. “Yes, a cross,” says Cicero, was prepared for this “broken sufferer, who had never seen such an accursed thing till then” (Against Verres 2.5.162).5 Worst of all, Verres ordered for Gavius to be crucified on the shore facing the Italian mainland since he claimed Roman citizenship. This incident recorded in Cicero’s speech against Verres reveals that, at least for Roman elites, crucifixion was extremely rare to witness or suffer. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of Jesus In this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. Unlike the Roman elites, slaves and members of the lower class were unfortunately very familiar with the cross. In a play by Plautus, a slave comments that his death on the cross is inevitable: “I know that the cross will be my tomb; there my ancestors have been laid to rest, my father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather” (The Braggart Soldier 372–373). Slaves, in fact, could be crucified for even the smallest mistakes. The Romans primarily reserved crucifixion for criminals and rebellious foreigners. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records numerous instances when the Romans crucified fractious Jews in Palestine (e.g., Wars of the Jews 2.75). Of course, when the Romans crucified rebels and criminals, the cross was more than a penalty; it was also a deterrent. For instance, the Romans crucified Spartacus and his rebellious slaves on the Appian Way for everyone to see from Capua to Rome (Appian, The Civil Wars 1.120). A long row of crosses with rebellious slaves fastened to them must have discouraged other slaves from similarly revolting against their masters. As the most extreme penalty in the Roman world, a person could suffer crucifixion in several ways. Seneca recalls seeing victims with their head down to the ground, others who had their private parts impaled, and still others with outstretched arms (De Consolatione ad Marciam 6.20.3). When not impaled, the condemned person usually carried the horizontal beam called the patibulum to the place of execution outside the city walls. Either a soldier or public executor fastened the condemned person who was naked or wearing a loincloth to the cross with ropes or nails. Material evidence suggests that a person’s feet were nailed separately on each side of the vertical beam of the cross. A crucifixion image discovered in Puteoli, Italy, for instance, shows a man, who had been severely flogged, with outstretched arms and feet nailed separately to the vertical beam. The crucifixion image from Puteoli, Italy. An ankle bone pierced with a nail found at Givat ha-Mivtar likewise attests to the practice of using one nail per foot.6 Finally, after the humiliating procession to the place of execution and the preparations for crucifixion were completed, the Romans raised the cross high in the air, so as to allow people to see the condemned person die from a long distance.7 The crucified ankle bone of a man named Yehohanan found at Givat ha-Mivtar is the only archaeological evidence yet found of the Roman practice of crucifixion. Photo: Israel Museum/P. Lanyi. To die on the cross was not only humiliating, but a slow and agonizing experience—sometimes lasting days. St. Augustine suggests that the purpose of crucifixion was to inflict as much pain as possible while prolonging death (Tractate 36.4 [John 8:15–18]). Of course, in order to maximize the amount of pain inflicted on an individual, the Romans typically tortured the victim before fastening them to the cross. While medical theories traditionally assert that people died on the cross from asphyxia (respiratory failure), recent studies contend that the victims most likely died because of a variety of physiological factors.8 Regardless of the actual cause of death, crucifixion was a slow and excruciatingly painful death. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of Jesus In this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. Each of the Synoptic Gospels recounts that at the moment of Jesus’s deepest agony as he hung on the cross, the soldiers and people in the crowd mocked him, saying, “Save yourself, and come down from the cross!” (Mark 15:30; Matthew 27:40–44; Luke 23:37–39). This sarcastic insult may certainly reflect the attitude of Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences when they first heard Paul and other early Christians preach in the first century. Simply put, their message about a crucified messiah and son of God who did not have the power to save himself from the cross seemed offensive to the Jews and foolish to Greeks and Romans (1 Corinthians 1:23). Although the very word “cross” was so repulsive that Cicero and other Roman elites wanted nothing to do with it, each of the Gospel writers recounts Jesus’s crucifixion with astonishing detail. Jesus’s death on the cross, according to Mark, is not only necessary but an example of the service required for true discipleship (8:34–38). Similarly, Jesus’s death on the cross is not portrayed as being shameful or humiliating in John’s Gospel; there Jesus’s crucifixion is envisioned as a saving event foreshadowed by Moses when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14). Despite its negative connotation to Jews, Greeks, and Romans, Paul repeatedly uses the word “cross” in his letters when responding to the conflicts created by his opponents (e.g., Galatians 2:18–20). Interestingly, Paul may have deliberately focused on the modality of Jesus’s death on the cross for at least two reasons. First, Paul most likely knew that, although his message about the cross was not going to easily appeal to his Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences, still it would certainly attract their attention. And second, the Jewish and Gentile criticism of Jesus’s crucifixion may have encouraged Paul to focus even more of his attention on this gruesome subject since he believed Jesus demonstrated his selflessness, humility, and abundant love for humanity by suffering on the cross. By the end of the first century, some Christians already may have viewed the cross as a significant symbol. For example, in the last decade of the first century, the author of the Book of Revelation may have referred to the mark of the cross in the seal that the servants of God receive on their foreheads (Revelation 7:2–3). Thus, the Book of Revelation possibly refers to the cross as a Christological identity marker.9 Christians and the Cross in the Second and Third Centuries Greek and Roman elites continued to criticize Christians because of their veneration of the crucified Jesus in the second century. Perhaps the most explicit criticism came from the second-century Greek philosopher Celsus, who called the manner in which Jesus died “the most humiliating of circumstances” (On the True Doctrine 3). It was common knowledge in the second and third centuries—even among the poorer classes of the Roman Empire—that the founder of the Christian movement suffered the most shameful death as suggested by the well-known Palatine graffito discovered in the imperial training school for slaves in Rome in 1857. This graffito depicts a donkey’s hands nailed to the horizontal beam of a cross. A person beneath the cross, who is dressed like a slave in a short-sleeved shirt that extends from the shoulder to a little below the waist, gazes upward at the crucified victim in adoration as suggested by the inscription: “Alexamenos, worships god.” Most likely, although it is not certain, the context of this graffito is one slave mocking another for worshiping the crucified Jesus. The inspiration for this satirical image of Jesus’s crucifixion may trace back to the Greek and Latin authors who accused Christians, like the Jews, of worshiping a donkey.10 In any case, the graffito indicates that even the poorer social classes criticized the Christian belief in the crucified Jesus with sarcastic enjoyment. The so-called Alexamenos graffito. Although the image of Jesus on the cross was not very popular in the second and third centuries, still scholars have identified at least a few instances in which Christians depicted it. Perhaps the earliest portrayal of the cross by Christians occurred in the iconography of their papyrus manuscripts, specifically the Staurogram, or shape of the cross made by the overlapping of the Greek letters “Rho” and “Tau” ().11 A more obvious depiction of the cross is seen in a third-century gem in the British Museum, which depicts a crucified Jesus with an inscription that lists various Egyptian magical words. Furthermore, some Christians continued to mark their forehead with the image of the cross in the second and third centuries as an identity marker (e.g., Revelation 7:2–3; cf. Tertullian, On Crowns 3).12 Moreover, some scholars argue that the depiction of figures with outstretched arms in early Christian artwork may be the archetype representation of Jesus on the cross.13 Such a theory is supported by second- and third-century Christian texts, which mention Christians (especially martyrs) making the sign of the cross by stretching out their arms (e.g., Odes of Solomon 27; Acts of Paul and Thecla 22). This third-century C.E. gem in the British Museum depicts Jesus’s crucifixion with an inscription that lists various Egyptian magical words. Photo: British Museum/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. During the second and third centuries, Christians were aware that the cross was still what Paul calls a “stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for Greeks and Romans” (1 Corinthians 1:23), and most Christians were reluctant to depict it. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the Christian apologists, such as Justin the Martyr and Tertullian, may have encouraged at least some Christians to illustrate the cross in their art and iconography. Thus, by the end of the third century, what had once been universally a repulsive image in the ancient Mediterranean world was well on its way to becoming the preeminent symbol of Christianity. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of Jesus In this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. In his history of the Christian Church written in the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea recounts that the gesture of outstretched hands used by Christian martyrs in the arena represented Jesus’s crucifixion (History of the Church 8.7.4). If Eusebius’s account is historically accurate, then the gesture of outstretched arms was widely recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike. Undoubtedly, though, Constantine’s adoption of the cross was the most important development that resulted in its becoming the preeminent symbol of Christianity. According to Eusebius, the day before the Battle of Melvian Bridge, Constantine earnestly prayed for victory against his co-emperor Maxentius. Constantine’s prayer was answered, and a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven. Eusebius relates that Constantine saw a cross of light in the sky, above the sun, bearing the inscription, “Conquer by this” (Life of Constantine 28). That night, Eusebius reports, Jesus explained to Constantine the meaning of the vision. Constantine was directed by Jesus to create a new banner with the symbol of the cross created by the Greek letters “Chi” and “Rho.” This well-known symbol in Christianity, which is usually referred to as the Chi-Rho (), became known as the standard of the cross. FREE ebook: Frank Moore Cross: Conversations with a Bible Scholar. Download now. According to the fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen, Constantine abolished crucifixion in special reverence for the power and victory he received because of the symbol of the cross (History of the Church 1.8). This abolishment certainly changed the Roman perception of the cross. Simply put, Constantine’s public endorsement of the cross changed its connotation from a repulsive device for executing slaves, foreigners, and Roman citizens of low social standing into a revered, public symbol. Constantine did not create the symbol of the cross. Rather he adopted it as a new symbol for his empire that had converted to Christianity. Of course, this means that when the artisans depicted the crucified Jesus on the wooden doors of Santa Sabina in the fifth century, the cross was no longer an offensive image. Rather the image of the cross had already transformed from an execution device to a symbol of Christianity. And soon the image of the crucifix would adorn the walls and steeples of churches throughout the world, making the cross the preeminent symbol of Christianity. Steven Shisley, who has a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University, is currently teaching at California Lutheran and as an online instructor at Brigham Young University, Idaho. His research focuses on early Christian worship, architecture, and art. This post first appeared in Bible History Daily in March, 2018 Notes: 1. For an overview of the literature and history of crucifixion, see the excellent study by John Granger Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); also the classical study by Martin Hengel, Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). 2. See Allyson Everingham Sheckler and Mary Joan Winn Leith, “The Crucifixion Conundrum and the Santa Sabina Doors,” Harvard Theological Review 103.1 (2010), p. 67. 3. See George Willard Benson, The Cross: Its History and Symbolism. An Account of the Symbol More Universal in Its Use and More Important in Its Significance Than Any Other in the World (Buffalo: George Willard Benson, 1934), pp. 28–29; for another opinion, see Bruce W. Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 11. 4. CIL 4.2082. See John Granger Cook, “Envisioning Crucifixion: Light from Several Inscriptions and the Palatine Graffito,” Novum Testamentum 50 (2008), p. 277, where Cook comments that this inscription might read, “Get crucified,” the equivalent of the English expression, “Go to hell.” 5. Unless otherwise noted, this article uses the translations of classical texts in the Loeb Classical Library. 6. The crucified Jewish man was named Yehohanan. For an analysis of his ankle bone that was pierced with a nail, see Joseph Zilas and Eliezer Sekeles, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at Ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,” Israel Exploration Journal 35 (1985), pp. 22–27. 7. See Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World, pp. 423–30 for an overview of the practice of Roman crucifixion. 8. See Matthew W. Maslen and Piers D. Mitchell, “Medical Theories on the Cause of Death in Crucifixion,” Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 4.99 (April 2006), pp. 187–88; Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World, pp. 430–435. 9. See Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine, pp. 61–71. 10. Josephus quotes Mnaseas of Patras (second century B.C.E.) as claiming that the Jews worshiped the head of a golden donkey; see Against Apion 2.9. Also, Plutarch comments that the Jews abstained from eating the flesh of the hare because it resembled the donkey, which they worshiped; see Table Talk 4.3. Since the Romans identified Christians as a branch of Judaism, this mean that they were likewise accused of worshiping a donkey; see Minucius Felix, Octavius 9.28; Tertullian, First Apology 16. 11. See Larry Hurtado, “The Staurogram: Earliest Depiction of Jesus’s Crucifixion,” Biblical Archaeological Review, March/April 2013. Although it is debatable, some early Christians may have used the cross as a symbol in Pompeii; see Bruce W. Longenecker, The Crosses of Pompeii: Jesus Devotion in a Vesuvian Town (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016). 12. Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine, pp. 86–93. 13. This is the argument of Sheckler and Leith, “Crucifixion Conundrum.” Related reading in Bible History Daily The Staurogram Roman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of Crucifixion Tour Showcases Remains of Herod’s Jerusalem Palace—Possible Site of the Trial of Jesus Where Is Golgotha, Where Jesus Was Crucified? All-Access members, read more in the BAS Library Crucifixion—The Archaeological Evidence Conversion, Crucifixion and Celebration Two Questions About Crucifixion Jesus’ Triumphal March to Crucifixion Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. Romans likely used ropes rather than nails Marek Dospěl April 16, 2025 0 Comments 13687 views How was Jesus crucified? Crucifix showing Jesus with his palms and feet nailed to the cross (Spain, 12th century). Photo: The Met Cloisters, public domain. How was Jesus crucified? This question sounds so trivial it is almost confusing. Christian tradition has always portrayed Jesus hanging from the cross with his palms and feet painfully pierced with nails. Nail wounds feature prominently in the graphic representations of the crucified Jesus. We may then be surprised to learn that the otherwise detailed gospel accounts of Jesus’s execution never actually specify how Jesus was secured to the cross. Although Roman execution methods did include crucifixion with nails, contemporary sources paint a more complex picture. Writing for the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, Jeffrey P. Arroyo García revisits all the evidence we have for the crucifixion of Jesus. In his article titled “Nails or Knots—How Was Jesus Crucified?” García focuses on how exactly Jesus was secured to the cross—whether nails were used or not. FREE ebook, Who Was Jesus? Exploring the History of Jesus’ Life. Examine fundamental questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Professor of biblical studies at Gordon College who specializes in the Gospels and Greco-Roman Jewish literature, García first examines contemporary written sources—both Jewish and Greco-Roman. “Our historical and textual sources from the late Second Temple period are quite vague on how crucifixion was carried out,” summarizes García in his review of historical writings. Apparently, the Gospels use ambiguous Greek words meaning “to hang up” or “to hang on a stake” when describing the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls use the similarly ambiguous Hebrew word talah “to hang” when reporting on crucifixions of criminals. Heel bone from Givat HaMivtar with a nail driven through it (replica). Photo courtesy of the Photo Companion to the Bible. Intriguingly, archaeologists found a pierced heel bone (see photo above) at the Jewish burial site of Givat HaMivtar in Jerusalem in 1968. It was mixed with other human remains at the bottom of an ossuary dating from the period between the first century BCE and the First Jewish Revolt (66–74 CE). The ossuary (ancient bone box) was one of eight discovered in the Givat HaMivtar tombs. Although otherwise undecorated, this box featured an incised inscription Yehohanan ben hagaqol, where the first word is clearly a personal name. The term hagaqol, however, may describe the method of crucifixion with “knees apart,” as proposed by pioneering Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin. While there are no pictorial representations of crucifixion dating from the time of Jesus, García suggests that the crucifixion method from the Yehohanan’s ossuary inscription has parallels in later ancient depictions. The famous Alexamenos graffito (see drawing below), for instance, shows a deity with the head of a donkey, fixed to what looks like a cross. Dating from early-third-century Rome, the accompanying inscription identifies the bystander as one Alexamenos, who allegedly is worshiping the crucified figure as his god. Notably, the donkey-headed deity has knees apart. Alexamenos graffito showing a person worshiping his deity suspended on a cross (Rome, third century CE). Photo: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. But let us return to the initial question: How was Jesus crucified? Although some have suggested the gruesome find from Givat HaMivtar may date from the time of Jesus, it cannot be taken as a proof that Jesus was crucified using nails or that such a method was common in Judea. In fact, it is not until the Great Jewish Revolt, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, that we have written reports about this specific Roman execution method. In his Jewish War, which he wrote in the late 70s, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes the “nailing” of some of Judah’s elites to the cross (War 2.308) and then specifies that Roman soldiers similarly executed some of Jerusalem’s defenders (War 2.451). It would then seem that in Judea the Roman method of crucifixion with nails does not predate the First Jewish Revolt, while there is evidence that it continued well into the second century. Become a BAS All-Access Member Now! Read Biblical Archaeology Review online, explore 50 years of BAR, watch videos, attend talks, and more “Crucifixion was a common form of punishment in the Roman world. Yet when ancient texts and archaeological evidence are examined together, it appears that nailing a victim to a cross may not have been as common as most people think. And it might have been introduced in Judea only after the time of Jesus,” concludes García. To further explore the evidence for Jesus’s crucifixion, read Jeffrey P. Arroyo García’s article “Nails or Knots—How Was Jesus Crucified?” published in the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. Subscribers: Read the full article “Nails or Knots—How Was Jesus Crucified?” by Jeffrey P. Arroyo García in the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. Related reading in Bible History Daily Ancient Crucifixion Images A Tomb in Jerusalem Reveals the History of Crucifixion and Roman Crucifixion Methods Roman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of Crucifixion The Staurogram All-Access members, read more in the BAS Library Biblical Views: Images of Crucifixion: Fresh Evidence Two Questions About Crucifixion Crucifixion—The Archaeological Evidence Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today.