

Pompeii: Reassessing the Evidence for the Importance of the Christians at Pompeii

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The short answer to the question many ask ‘Were there Christians at Pompeii?’ must be yes. With two verified pieces of graffiti, one referring to Christians, the other to Christ, no other explanation can be possible. Other evidence exists but appears to be not as strong, is frequently ambiguous and can have other explanations.

A more important question remains; what does the evidence reveal about the beginnings of Christianity? The short answer must be a good deal as some of that evidence may radically change how we see Christianity’s origins.

Christianity remains the world's most influential belief system. It has survived Communism and the rise of its major religious rival Islam, a belief system which was greatly influenced by Christianity. Despite this, very little evidence emerges about Christianity from the time of Jesus and of those who were the first generation of Christians, those who had living memories of him and his disciples. What written evidence we have clearly emerges as extremely biased. The letters of Paul and his contemporaries are of course extremely slanted towards favourable images. A less obvious problem is that these writings are much concerned with spiritual matters. Some ideas about how ordinary Christians lived, thought, practiced their religion and were seen by their neighbours and overlords can be gleaned from these texts, but not all that much. The writings of their Roman rulers are even worse: brief, scarce and ignorant of what Christianity meant, their tone mixes contempt and bafflement.

Archaeology also reveals little from before the rule of the Christian Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. Amongst those few finds are the controversial evidence at Pompeii, these being important both because of their location and because they are amongst the very earliest and therefore rarest Christian finds. The scarcity of the finds are a problem. With little to compare them to they cannot be judged to be another example that can be fitted into a category. Are they a rare example used only in one untypical locale? Or should they be rejected as Christian because they do not fit the known pattern established by earlier finds elsewhere? How they are to be interpreted? Fortunately what usually unfolds as the most massive problem does not emerge here. Whatever they are, they are not planted forgeries. The finding of these objects under several feet/meters of volcanic rock, and the precise archaeological records and documentation precludes the possibility of hoaxes. Dating, usually another common problem, can only be certain due to the eruption's date being known.

Another problem concerns the general state of Pompeii. Pompeii and Herculaneum are perfectly preserved, supposedly: this fallacy still has a hold.¹ Plundering began not long after the eruption, and tunnels were dug in Medieval times.² In 1771 Johan Winckelmann, a German visitor described the excavations being performed with tools for housebreaking: the result was

¹ Cooley, Allison E. and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook. Second Edition*. Routledge, 2014. 1-2

² *Ibid*,

that about half the found objects were saved but the other half were wrecked.³ His reference to the workforce as brigands implies looting.⁴ In 1943 British and American bombers left 243 widespread bomb craters but the nearest crater to the major source for known evidence about Christians fell a hundred yards away.⁵ Even so other related evidence may have been destroyed.

While the remaining evidence cannot be as pristine or as complete as generally believed, it remains the best available for what life was like in a Roman locale at the time Christianity emerged. How typical of Roman towns was Pompeii? It was something of a resort town and while not a literal port, its proximity to the ports of Herculaneum and Puteoli made it a centre for cosmopolitan trade. The large number of brothels, pornographic images and sexual references in graffiti suggest that tourism and being a port city may have combined to fuel a sex industry not typical of Roman towns.

The surviving pagan elements are of interest as they show what type of environment some early Christians lived in and why Christianity had an appeal at that time.

Allison E. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley in *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook* assemble evidence showing that pagan religion played a pervasive and important role in the two towns. The authors record nine separate known temples in Pompeii, those for Apollo, Minerva, Dionysus, Jupiter, Hercules, the city's patron Venus, the imported Egyptian Goddess Isis, the deified Augustus and another unnamed temple.⁶ Two others for Venus were on the harbour front at Herculaneum.⁷ The Cooleys mention incomplete evidence from inscriptions suggesting others may have existed.⁸ The large number of known temples is despite the fact that much of

³ Paul Berry, *The Christian Inscription at Pompeii*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995. 21-22.

⁴ *Ibid*,

⁵ Berry, 32-33 quoting a post-war report by Amedeo Maiuri superintendent of the site.

⁶ Cooley, 117 and Map of Pompeii, Figure 6.1 169.

⁷ Cooley, 117.

⁸ *Ibid*,

Herculaneum and a quarter of Pompeii remains unexcavated.⁹ Herculaneum's population at the time of the eruption was around four thousand, while the Cooleys estimate that Pompeii's was about ten to twelve thousand, but Jerry Toner's estimate is around twenty thousand, while giving possible range of 6,400 to 30,000.¹⁰ Even the higher population estimates suggest a high ratio of temples to population.

There was also the training centre for youth near Pompeii's forum which specialised in athletics and physical health and perhaps philosophy.¹¹ The building being named after Hercules was giving the students more than an exemplar, or a cultural figure. As a demi god Hercules would have been associated with the pagan gods and so this important educational institution would have had a religious aspect, but to what degree is unknown. Herculaneum was named after Hercules and Pompeii for his procession (pompa) of cattle through the area, so the city's identity, culture and celebrations were linked to the state religion.¹² Apart from nomenclature, the Hercules school site and the proportion of temples to residents, other evidence for religious dominance exists. This includes graffiti, messages, herms, commemorations, family shrines, decorated niches, mosaics, murals, paintings, statues various types of inscriptions and the preserved scrolls at Herculaneum. All these things show how religion had a pervasive and varied role in life in the towns. The Cooley's list almost a hundred such archaeological finds connected in some way to religion.¹³ Any group such as Christians who believed pagan life was an evil to be avoided must have lived a secluded, probably despised and dangerous life. Who wants to be told by a tiny little group that their sex lives are evil and will lead to being burned alive forever? The notorious Roman ways concerning gluttony, enslavement, conquest, usury and gladiatorial games would have lead to the same Christian denunciations and responses.

⁹ Cooley, 117 and Map of Pompeii, Figure 6.169.

¹⁰ Cooley, 2; Jerry Toner, *Roman Disasters*. Polity, 2013. 15 21 188 Mary Beard quoted from her *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town*. Profile, 2008 10.

¹¹ Lawrence, Ray. *Roman Pompeii: Space and Society*. 2nd Edition. Routledge, 2007. 169-170.

¹² Cooley quoting several ancient sources, 10-11.

¹³ Cooley, Chapter 5 'Religion.' 117-159.

The question of did Jews and Christians reside in Pompeii causes controversy. Mary Beard has accurately described Pompeii as a small town with a world view.¹⁴ As she explains, seaborne trade meant that goods and people came from great distances to Pompeii. She gives two examples found in the city, an Indian statuette and the skull of an African killed in the AD 79 eruption. The archaeologist she interviewed stated that the skull was that of a person from sub Saharan Africa.¹⁵ With trade and migration routes as long as this Judea as a source of Jewish and Christian migration to cosmopolitan Pompeii appears very plausible.

At the time of Vesuvius's eruption Jews were still prominent in the Christian movement. While not linking their finds to Jewish Christians, the Cooleys have assembled the small amount of tentative evidence for a Jewish presence in the city.¹⁶ Three Jewish names, David, Martha and Maria were found, as were references to a special fish sauce being made for Jewish and other eastern religious rites.¹⁷ This relates to two amphorae apparently inscribed with the word 'Kosher' and definitely inscribed 'garum' while four other amphorae containing imported wine had 'Judean' inscribed. The Cooleys treat most of this evidence for the existence of a Jewish community as inconclusive, pointing out that the first names and that the sauce were not exclusively Jewish. Like the Cooleys many also state that s no unequivocal evidence for Christians residing in Pompeii and Herculaneum exists.¹⁸ This is now outdated.

The arguments against a Christian presence in the two towns has a basis on the following points: The charcoal inscriptions which have the word 'Christianos' or 'Christian' no longer exist and so cannot be verified, let alone evaluated.

The supposed crosses have other explanations.

The rotas square also has other explanations.

¹⁴ Mary Beard, *Pompeii: Life and Death in a Roman Town*. U Tube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnIY6AE4m6E> accessed 25/3/2016.

¹⁵ Mary Beard, *Pompeii: Life and Death in a Roman Town*.

¹⁶ Cooley, 159

¹⁷ Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 31.95) in Cooley, 159.

¹⁸ Cooley, 159

Much of the evidence could be from a Jewish community, not a Christian one.

Much of the evidence is written in Latin, the language of the Roman conquerors. Early Christian writings in Europe usually exist in Greek.

The Cooley's statement and the statements made above represents one side in this is a controversial matter. Since the controversy began in the second half of the nineteenth century with the revelation of evidence concerning Christians from Pompeii and Herculaneum, sceptics and believers have battled over the evidence. Fortunately the dating and authenticity of the material remains unquestioned, the argument continues over what the evidence means.

Evidence from outside Pompeii supports the idea of Christians being in Pompeii. Primary source evidence shows that Christians were in Italia before the AD79 eruption. Tacitus refers to them as a multitude during their persecution in the city of Rome under Nero after Rome's great fire of AD 64.¹⁹ In AD 58 Paul of Tarsus wrote his famous letter to the Romans, saying he would visit them.²⁰ While voyaging to Rome he was stopped by a south wind at Puteoli, across the Bay Of Naples from Pompeii, about 15 miles/22 kilometres away. In Puteoli Paul "found brethren and were desired to tarry with them seven days."²¹ Finding by chance the only Christian community on the Tyrrhenian coast would be a massive coincidence, but would not be so massive if other similar groups were similarly located.

Assembled evidence for a Christian community in the two cities appears on a u-tube segment *Evidence of Christianity in First Century Pompeii*. Three professors, Rebecca Benefiel, an expert in Pompeian graffiti and also James Tabor and Doctor Finkel. Explain different

¹⁹ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. Chapter XV 32-47

²⁰ Paul mentions his intention to visit Rome in 'The Epistle of Paul to the Romans' Chapter I verses 10 13 15. The dating of this letter and the social composition of the Roman Christians are in *The International Encyclopedia (sic) and Concordance: A Treasury of Bible Facts*. Jesse Lyman Hurlbut and Alfred J.P. McClure, editors. The John Winston Company, 1948. 300. This is an addition to *The Holy Bible King James Version*.

²¹ Saint Luke "The Acts of the Apostles' Chapter 28. Verses 13-14.; An uncredited reviewer of Paul Berry's book *The Christian inscription at Pompeii* mentions Saint Paul's Puteoli stopover but does not fully develop the implications.

onscreen evidence. At first these speakers, the narrator and their evidence appear convincing, but the end titles show the bias: ‘Historical Evidence for Christ.’ ‘Eternal Life through Jesus Christ’ and ‘The Gospel.’ They also refer to ‘The House of the Christians’ while Paul Berry refers to this building with more caution as ‘The House of the Christian Inscription.’ A second very careful look at *Evidence of Christianity in First Century Pompeii*. with pauses causes doubts. The supposed carved fish sign, the early symbol for Christ, appears so worn and weakly delineated that it might be something else. Of the two supposed crosses, the carved one from the bakery of a supposed Christian has no trace of wear, damage or age, it also looks as much like a depiction of a sword as of a cross.

The second weak point concerns what is claimed to be where a cross was nailed into the wall. This fitting and “the stone altar” below it are placed exactly in the centre of the wall, just as religious objects would be, but for what religion? The battered object does look like a lectern, a very old Christian custom still used in Christian services. Is this the oldest surviving example? Possibly. Mary Beard stated that the cross indentation could have been shelving support.²² This may well be, support for a pagan statue perhaps? Other signs resembling crosses were found on lampstands.²³ A more conclusive piece of evidence was a roughly carved cross in a courtyard, just two straight small intersecting lines but with the palindrome Viv near it.²⁴ Palindromes were beloved by those using codes. As Simcha Jacobovici, an interviewer in *Evidence of Christianity in First Century Pompeii* suggests in ‘Christians at Masada’ this might be the first syllable in ‘Vivat.’²⁵ This means “live” in Latin and such an exhortation beside a cross is nearly impossible to be anything else but Christian. In that same article Jacobovici presents several examples of likely First Century Christian crosses found in Israel. He also notes that the “viv” cross example only appeared in one little known Italian language journal before he wrote of it in 2013. He also states that the fallacy that the crucifix was not a Christian symbol before the fourth century

²² Mary Beard, ‘Where their Christians at Pompeii? The Word Square Evidence. *Goodreads* 2016. 1 http://timeonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2012/11/were-there-christians-at-pompeii-the-word-sqaure-evidence... Accessed 26/3/2016

²³ Berry, 24

²⁴ Simcha Jacobovici, ‘Christians at Masada’ *The Times of Israel* September 13th 2013. 2 www.timesofisrael.com. Accessed 23rd April 2016

²⁵ Jacobovici, 1-2

remains firmly established.²⁶ That situation will change with the spreading of ideas contained in Bruce W. Longnecker's *The Cross Before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol* (2015). He assembles the large number of examples of crucifixes existing before Constantine popularised it.

'The House of the Christians' as the narrator described it, once contained some charcoal graffiti which after being exposed, was soon worn away by rain and exposure. Discovered in 1862 when it was fresh, 1860s tracings exist in which the word 'Christianos' appears. Many considered this to be insufficient or spoiled evidence but in the 1990s these tracings were verified as were the surrounding words. An Industrial strength telescope which could magnify the remaining carbon from the charcoal inscription on a stucco wall was used.²⁷ This proved that the 1860s archaeologists got it right. What was unusual in archaeology at that time were their precise, careful and conscientious efforts.

Archaeologist Guiseppe Fiorelli stated that the words above Christianos were part of a wine list:

VINA = wines

VARIA= various

AET= aetatis meaning of age of a vintage

Christians would be unlikely to link wine prices with their saviour, but any modern urban resident knows how graffitists habitually clutter each other's work regardless of relevance.



The Christianos graffiti

²⁶ Jacobovici, 2

²⁷ Berry, 1. Diagrams showing the revealed carbon pattern are used. Introduction v.

Professor Tabor states that surrounding words are Aramaic written in Latin letters. Jesus and many Galileans and Syrians spoke Aramaic but the message is cryptic: “A strange mind has overtaken ‘A.’” The u tube narrator assumes this refers to someone becoming a Christian. Perhaps, but it could refer to almost anything, including the exact opposite, a Christian turning pagan. The fact that this possibility remains unconsidered shows the narrator’s bias. Many commentators on the inscription assume that inscribing the word Christianos is an act of religious affirmation with Christ. Actually “os” as a suffix makes this a Latin plural ‘Christians.’” This supposedly makes the people in the house identified as Christians. Why would they do this to themselves after Nero’s savage purges? This would be a giveaway which could lead to persecution. While the Latin wording fits in with a hostile creator this is not necessarily so. There probably were Latin speaking Christians. Jesus spoke to Pontius Pilate and in an earlier situation the Roman centurion after curing his wife. No mention of translators exists in these accounts, although it is possible that Jesus and the Romans communicated in Greek. Paul defended himself in Roman courts where Latin was the usual language and he travelled to Rome after writing to the Romans. The apparent large numbers there that Tacitus mentions surely must have included some Latin speakers.

What must be more likely is that this inscription was not written by Christians but was written as an expression of hate and contempt, just as racists today scrawl ethnic names on the house walls of minority groups. The “strange mind” graffito should be read again after considering that possibility. It could be that the mind of “A” was punished by murder, jailing or martyrdom and the graffito was a smug, sneering combination of boasting and warning.

‘The house of the Christian Inscription’ itself provides other evidence - or rather a lack of it, which in itself becomes evidence as it indicates something. As mentioned the houses, villas and Pompeii’s walls provides an abundance of pagan and pornographic decoration, but nothing of the kind appears in this house. The only reproduced wall picture shows a man and a woman both fully dressed, standing in a garden. Like the house this decoration has an austere atmosphere consistent with what is known of the early Christians. The interior contains four bedrooms, four other small rooms a reception room, two dining rooms and an enclosed garden.

While debris, food, furniture and preserved objects have been found in other houses, due to the suddenness of the explosion, here the house was empty. Was this because of the eruption’s

destruction, later looting or because persecuted Christians had been taken away or evicted? What appears to be odd is that occupants would have tolerated the strange graffiti inside their house if they were still there.

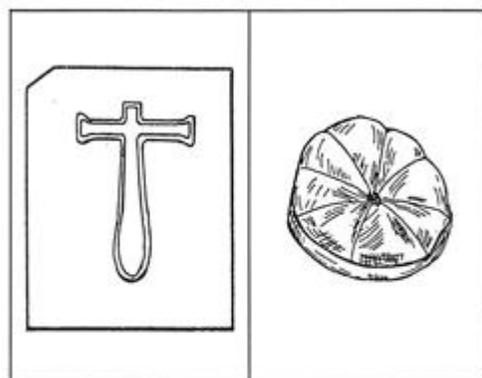
On the outer wall of the house another partly legible find was also found in 1862 by Jacob Kiessling. What could be made out was:

PG VI Gavdi-christiani

8X SICV-SO-ORIIS

IGNI-GAUDE CHRISTIANE

Kiessling interpreted this to be “to the fire, with joy, O Christian.” and believed it to refer to the great fire of Rome under Nero, for which Christians were believed by many Romans responsible.²⁸ It could also be a gloating hate filled reference to the way many Christians were executed by being made into human torches.²⁹ What remains unsolvable is the number eight. Arabic numerals were not in use in Europe for several hundred years into the future. The X is usually the Latin number ten.



The Bakery Cross

A loaf of bread

The Cross in the Bakery

²⁸ Berry, 24 Tacitus, Chapter 14 365; John Bishop, *Nero: The Man and the Legend*. Robert Hale Limited, 1964. 79-83

²⁹ Tacitus, Chapter 14 365

Other buildings held other evidence. What has been called the Christian bakehouse held evidence. The two possible crosses and the possible lectern have been mentioned. The carved phallic symbol being plastered over does fit with Christian ideas of modesty, but is at best only indicative of Christian beliefs.

Sodom and Gomorrah

With other Pompeiian graffiti found elsewhere Professor James Tabor tells us that the word ‘cheren’ is Hebrew for divine retribution and ‘ponivaa’ is Greek for to strike with utter retribution. The nearby scratched pentangles he says are Solomon’s seal and were carved as amulets against the approaching disaster. His interpretation that ‘ponivaa’ and ‘cheren’ were connected to Vesuvius’s eruption which led to the eradication of the two towns as divine punishment seem more likely to fit in with that event than the enigmatic pentangles. These hexagramic drawings seem to be the first representations of Solomon’s Seal and would tend to

verify the earliest account of their existence. In this a Jewish elder presented a hexagramic ring to Vespasian, who died just before the eruption.³⁰

The Cooleys give a similar explanation for the graffito ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ but see this as being written by Jews.³¹ Knowledge of the Old Testament could have also been known by Christians or Jewish Christians. Where it does not appear is in Roman or Greek culture.

The way this charcoal graffiti appeared at a height of 1.8 metres and on a painting suggests that it was written after the eruption and as a comment on the eruption’s destruction. Sodom and Gomorrah were cities punished for their sexual debauchery by God with total eradication by fire and brimstone. Considering the number of brothels in Pompeii and the ubiquitous pornographic art, the comparison to the twin cities on the bay of Naples with the twin cities on the Lake of Galilee would seem apt to a First Century Christian.

One piece of much publicised evidence that has been claimed as proof for Christianity existing in Pompeii is the rotas square as it has become known. This palindromic anagram, may be the earliest example of a magic square. From the Dark Ages onwards these would be used for protective magic, their power held by believers to reside in their coded incantations.³² It remains unclear if this belief also existed in the ancient world or if such things were an amusement, an ancient version of something like Rubric’s cube.³³ In many parts of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages the words on this square would go on to be used in magic charms and would spread from there, lasting into the middle of the nineteenth century in Brazil as a chanted cure for dog bites and for snake bites!³⁴

Found in 1936, this magic square supposedly contains a coded Christian message in Latin. This square was on a column in a public concourse in the amphitheatre.³⁵ Why would a

³⁰ Solomon’s Seal (Symbol) *Wikipedia*

³¹ Cooley, 159

³² Duncan Fyshwick, ‘An Early Christian Cryptogram?’ *CCHA Report 26* (1959) 29-41 No pagination is given in this essay’s computerised form.

³³ *Ibid*

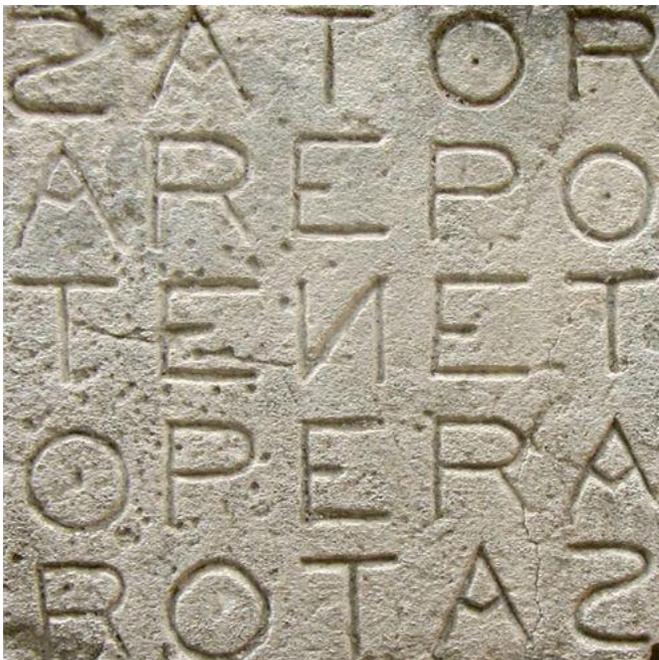
³⁴ Fishwick, 2 10

³⁵ Berry, 10.

persecuted minor sect put such a thing in a public place? It becomes more questionable when the question of permission to do this becomes a consideration. If permission was not granted why was it not removed? If it was permitted, giving permission to hated persecuted Christians to put up a cryptic coded message is extremely odd even inexplicable and dangerous behaviour. The unlikeliness of this square being Christian seemingly becomes more obvious when one interpretation of the supposed coded message is revealed:

sator (a sower) arepo (the sower's name) tenet (holds) rotas (the wheels) opera (to the work).

The words in brackets are a translation of what the Latin word shown means.



The mentioned similarity to Christian words are to Luke Chapter Nine Verse 62 but nobody named Arepo appears and in meaning very little similarity appears evident: “And Jesus said unto him, ‘No man having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.’”

Other supposed decoding interpretations include a paternoster cross (if some letters are left out) the forgiveness of the Rose of Sharon for Saint Peter's desertion of Christ in Jerusalem, the Patriarch Abraham's circumcising of hundreds, black magic in which Satan is invoked, and from Jesus: “as ye sow so shall ye reap.”³⁶ As Duncan Fyshwick explains and Berry admits, such

³⁶ Duncan Fyshwick, ‘An Early Christian Cryptogram?’ CCHA Report 26 (1959) 29-41

squares have been found elsewhere in the Roman Empire from the Euphrates to Hadrian's Wall.³⁷ Another was found in 1929 in a Roman's house at Pompeii. Fishwick does not give translations or explicitly state the religion of these ancient finds, but no link to Christianity is mentioned either. He does mention that making such things was "the pastime of the landed gentry."³⁸ Considering that and given that the rotas square is in Latin, that another contemporary example exists in a Pompeian house and that the rotas square was placed in a public place all this evidence would suggest that this is Roman, not Christian.

And yet all this good evidence, seemingly so conclusive, must be wrong. The Rotas Square could tumble our views of early Christianity and lead to a substantial revision. Several odd pieces of evidence are mentioned by Duncan Fishwick, who does not develop what they seem to clearly mean. He still concludes that the square appears to be Roman or perhaps Jewish rather than Christian, going against evidence he presents. There is no need for going into eccentric interpretations of codes, all that is needed are the words on the square.

Fishwick mentions that in 1665 *Arithmologia* the account of R.P. Kircher, a traveller to Ethiopia was published. Kircher claims that Ethiopians invoke the saviour with the names of the five nails used at the crucifixion, sador, alador, danet, Adera and rodas.³⁹ As Fishwick notes, these are obvious corruptions of the five words in the rotas square. In a Coptic tomb in Nubia the five words followed a Coptic phrase interpreted as "the names of the nails of Christ's Cross."⁴⁰ This find apparently went into print in 1897/1898 and then again in 1931.⁴¹ A third account published in 1695 stated that in eleventh century Ethiopia these five words denoted the five wounds of Christ.⁴² In 1925 French Jesuit and noted linguist and archaeologist Guillaume de Jerphanion had published works which revealed that in tenth century Byzantium and earlier two

³⁷ Berry, 10

³⁸ Fishwick, 3.

³⁹ Fishwick, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

⁴¹ Fishwick, 10.

⁴² Fishwick, 2

different sources used three of the rotas square words for the names of the three wise men in the nativity story. Is this information true? How could it not be? Coincidence? Five separate accounts by serious scholars not known to each other link similar words to the rotas words and in a similar context. That makes for long odds to justify a coincidence. Forgery? Forging these documents, published accounts and inscriptions recorded over a thousand year timespan would be impossible, especially as they all predate the finding of the Rotas square in 1936. Is the square itself a forgery? It was found under metres of ash and rock attached to a column. Fishwick's essay with the information about the finding of rotas square words was published in 1959. Any forger would have had to do a very great deal of research through a great many esoteric little known sources to find the information that Fishwick provides. Even those who dispute that it comes from Christians do not seem to believe it to be a forgery.

The naming of the nails provides a less puzzling explanation about why the square was found near the amphitheatre. This could have been the place where Christians were executed for entertainment during or after Nero's reign of terror and have been a memorial, implicitly comparing local martyrs to Christ's martyrdom. It may have been tolerated by a high ranking Christian official or because Nero's purges of Christians aroused pity as Tacitus says. Tolerating it would differentiate the officials from Nero in his successor's eyes and so perhaps avoid being purged themselves by Nero's successors.

The rotas square can be much more than just evidence for Christians in Pompeii..

First its existence challenges the idea that the worship of things supposedly from the time of Jesus, paganistic superstitions inlaid into Christianity and the invention of false facts about Jesus crept into an austere Christianity much later. The common view that these developed from the time Constantine's mother went on her relic hunt soon after Christianity became the state religion in the Fourth Century must now be reconsidered.

The names on the square and in the other five sources can only suggest the six share a common and obvious origin which we do not have. This lack suggests that more was going on in the development of Christianity than the New Testament tells us. We do not read there about fabrications in the life of Christ, superstitions or magic charms.

The naming of the nails obviously did not really happen during the crucifixion. Somebody must have added false embellishments to the crucifixion story around the time the last two gospels were written. Luke's gospel was written between about 60AD and 70AD.⁴³ John's gospel antedates Pompeii's eruption but not by much, being dated to between 80AD and 95AD.⁴⁴ If obvious fabrications and superstitions were around this early when the last two gospels were being written, when eyewitnesses to Christ's life were still alive, how reliable are the gospels? Did they absorb incorrect information such as this and present them as facts?

Alternatively the widely held idea that the gospels were written because the eyewitnesses were dying off and so their accounts needed to go from recitations into letters to keep alive the words of Jesus, may not be the full story. Such false information and superstitions as what the rotas square reveals must have surely alarmed Christianity's leaders, especially those who had known Jesus. Writing factual accounts may also have been intended as a clarification and a correction which would counter to such tendencies.

In summary because it is only one piece of evidence the rotas square may not reveal a dominant tendency in early Christianity or even an immediately widespread one. Even so, what the words mean and the spread of the words to the outmost lands within Christendom show that factual errors, the legend building incorporated magic and pagan beliefs developed early. This may leave us wondering if other early accounts of Jesus from his contemporaries contain false facts. The reason for creating the gospels may be different to what we think, at least in part.

Clearly not all of the evidence for Christians residing in Pompeii can be called strong and while some things are ambiguous and plausibly have several other explanations, some of the examples given has conclusive proof.

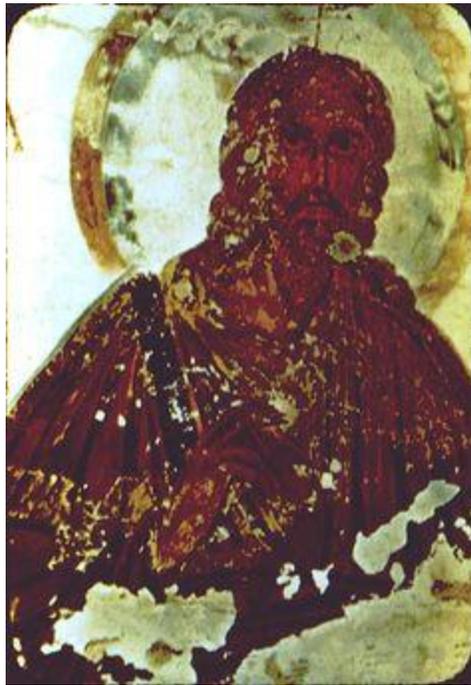
Despite some irrefutable evidence with other evidence modern Christians presenting a case are not fantasising, but are sometimes showing signs of wishful thinking in their interpretations. Uncertain, tantalising and ambiguous evidence usually leads to controversy. Pompeii provides such evidence about a Christian presence. However it also provides the first use of the word

⁴³ Hurlbut, 217

⁴⁴ Hurlbut, 196

Christian and important evidence that may revise how we see the beginnings of the world's most powerful religion.

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A very early image of Jesus, from the era when Christians worshipped in catacombs

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