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The Alexamenos *Graffito* as Christian Self-Parody

Isaac Soon

Department of Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada
Email: isaac.soon@ubc.ca

Abstract

Against the near-universal consensus that it was created by a pagan (non-Christian) in order to satirise Christian worship, this article contends that the Alexamenos *graffito* can plausibly be read as a Christian self-parody, created by the enslaved Alexamenos himself. It is the first full-length treatment of the authorial origins of the Alexamenos *graffito*. The article first provides an overview of the visual and scholarly histories of the image since the nineteenth century. Then it addresses evidence for and against reading the text as non-Christian or Christian in origin, focusing on the apparent sexualisation of Jesus, early Christian receptions of satirical depictions of Jesus, the *graffito's* use of a *titulus*, the solidarity of the image with enslaved workers and the relevance of nearby Christian *graffiti*. Finally, it places the *graffito* in conversation with ancient self-parody practices from wider Greek, Roman and Christian sources. While it is impossible to argue definitively about the identity of the *graffito's* creator, this article contends that scholarship cannot exclude the possibility and potential likelihood that it may be Christian in origin.

Keywords: Alexamenos; graffiti; self-parody; literate workers; enslaved persons; satire; titulus; Tertullian; Palatine; fidelis

1 Introduction

The Alexamenos *graffito* is one of the most easily recognisable and well-known depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Since its discovery and the publication of its finding in 1856, both image reproductions and analyses of the *graffito* have permeated large swathes of published early Christian and New Testament scholarship as a unique example of anti-Christian, satirical iconography in the heart of the Roman Empire. Traditionally dated to sometime in the late second- or early third-century CE, the image supposedly mocking Christian worship is tantalisingly close to periods in Mediterranean history where popular martyrdom literature narrated localised persecution and violence towards Christians.

Against the near-universal consensus that it was created by a pagan (non-Christian) in order to satirise Christian worship, this article contends that the Alexamenos *graffito* can plausibly be read as a Christian self-parody created by the enslaved Alexamenos himself. It is the first full-length treatment of the authorial origins of the Alexamenos *graffito*. The article first provides an overview of the visual and scholarly histories of the image since the nineteenth century. Then it addresses evidence for and against reading the text as non-Christian or Christian in origin, focusing on the apparent sexualisation of Jesus, early Christian receptions of satirical depictions of Jesus, the *graffito's* use of a *titulus*, the solidarity of the image with enslaved workers and the relevance of nearby Christian *graffiti*. Finally,

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it places the *graffito* in conversation with ancient self-parody practices from wider Greek, Roman and Christian sources. While it is impossible to argue definitively about the identity of the *graffito's* creator, this article contends that scholarship cannot exclude the possibility and potential likelihood that it may be Christian in origin.

2 The Alexamenos *Graffito* as Non-Christian Mockery

The Alexamenos *graffito* (typically dated to the second and third centuries CE) was found in Room 7 of what has come to be known as a *paedegogium* in the imperial complex of the Palatine Hill in Rome.[1] In some instances, people wrote about 'leaving the paedegogium' (*exit de paedegogio*) on the walls of the building where the Alexamenos *graffito* was found.[2] This has led scholars to understand the building as a *paedegogium*, a term that is both toponym (a name for a place of study) and a group of often enslaved male workers.[3] Few archaeological details remain for us to speak with any precision other than the likely use of the room and a general date range. For this reason, the attention of scholars has remained focused on the depiction of the *graffito* itself in its ancient Roman and early Christian contexts.

Both the line drawings and low-quality images of the *graffito* have misled or obscured details for interpreters. In this article, I have provided my own line drawing based on the best images I could find of the *graffito* (Figure 1).

The Alexamenos *graffito* depicts a man standing before another man who has been crucified on a cross. While the man on the ground has a human head, the crucified man has an equine head, usually understood to be the head of a donkey. The man on the ground appears to wear short clothing and has one hand raised in a gesture (possibly of worship?) towards the crucified person.[4] The hybrid person, part-donkey part-human, stands on a lower beam with his arms stretched out to the upper beam of the cross (*patibula*) which has been secured to the *crux*, the vertical beam on which both the lower and upper beams have been attached. The detail of the cross is simplistic, represented only by simple lines without any dimension of width. At the top of the cross is another line attached to a square-shaped object, probably a *titula*, as I argue below. The donkey-man wears the same kind of clothing as the man on the ground. Above the crucified figure is an orphaned upsilon (Υ), usually taken as a mistake (though I include it in the depiction because its omission obscures the fuller context of the image).

The style of the *graffito* in some ways reflects wider *graffiti* found on Palatine Hill, especially graffitied depictions of male busts, as found in the *Domus Tiberiana* nearby. There are at least half a dozen or so depictions of heads, each of them varying in physical detail. Some are rough but simple sketches (*Pal. Graf.* I.32, I.35, I.40, I.44, I.47), and others display higher levels of details (*Pal. Graf.* I.45, I.128) and physical variation (*Pal. Graf.* I.230).[5] Amid

[1] For a thorough examination of the historical use of the *paedegogium* see Peter Keegan, 'Reading the "Pages" of the *Domus Caesaris: Pueri Delicati*, Slave Education, and the Graffiti of the Palatine *Paedegogium*', *Roman Slavery and Roman Material Culture* (ed. Michele George; Phoenix Supplementary Volumes 52; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) 69–98. The critical introduction to the archaeology of the complex remains Heikki Solin and Marja Itkonen-Kaila, eds., *Graffiti del Palatino. I. Paedagogium* (Acta Instituti Romani Finladiae 3; Helsinki: Tilgmann, 1966).

[2] E.g. *Pal. Graf.* I.13.

[3] On this see Keegan, 'Reading the "Pages"', 73–5. On the enslaved workers in the *paedegogium* see Tyler Schwaller, 'Picturing the Enslaved Christ: Philippians 2:6–8, Alexamenos, and a Mockery of Masculinity', *JECH* 11 (2021) 54–5.

[4] The common interpretation is that this is meant to imitate a kiss of greeting, e.g. Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 210. On passages that allude to this see Martial, *Ep.* 1.3; Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.118.

[5] The *graffito* figures referenced correspond to the numbers in Paavo Castrén and Henrik Lilius, eds., *Graffiti del Palatino. II. Domus Tiberiana* (Acta Instituti Romani Finladiae 4; Helsinki: Tilgmann, 1970).

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Figure 1. 'Alexamenos worships God', *Pal. Graf.* I.246. Line drawing by Author © 2024. Published under CC by-SA 4.0

this diversity, one particular *graffitio* of a head (*Pal. Graf.* II.23) from the *Domus Tiberiana* resembles the depiction of Alexamenos.[6] The shape of his eyes corresponds to the depiction of Alexamenos; both figures are viewed from a profile perspective, and the shape of their single right eye is the same reaching to the very centre of their face and nose.

Inscribed between the crucified figure and his worshipper are the words: ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ ΣΕΒΕΤΕ ΘΕΟΝ.[7] The name Alexamenos is usually attributed to the figure who is not crucified. The inscription has usually been translated as 'Alexamenos worships God' (αλεξαμενος σεβετε θεον) with the ΣΕΒΕΤΕ being read as ΣΕΒΕΤΑΙ.[8]

[6] Castrén and Lilius, *Palatino*, 121.

[7] The artist originally had written ΘΕΩ and then changed the omega (Ω) to an omicron (Ο).

[8] This is the reading found in Felicity Harley-McGowan, 'The Alexamenos Graffito', *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries. Volume 3: From Celsus to the Catacombs. Visual, Liturgical, and Non-Christian Receptions of Jesus in the Second and Third Centuries CE* (ed. Chris Keith, H. K. Bond, C. Jacobi and J. Schröter; London: T&T Clark, 2020) 112 n.16. Line drawings and transcriptions misconstrue the placement of ΣΕΒΕ and ΤΕ next to one another. Upon consulting images of the *graffito* itself, the ΤΕ is notably distant and not aligned with ΣΕΒΕ. In every other word in the sentence (except the beginning of ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ, due to space between the drawings), there is no gap in spacing as conspicuous as the one between ΣΕΒΕ and ΤΕ. ΣΕΒΕ could be read as σέβε, an imperative second person singular form of the verb σέβω (to worship, to honour). ΤΕ could be understood as τε, which is a singular accusative Doric irregular form of συ (your). This reading was already recognised in the nineteenth century by Josef Haupt, 'Das Spott-Crucifix im kaiserlichen Palaste zu Rom', *Mittheilungen der K.K. Central-Comission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale* (ed. Joseph Alexander; Vienna: August Prandel, 1868) 166. Franz Kraus

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Harley-McGowan argues that if an imperative command were intended, ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ would have been in the vocative ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΕ.[9] Given the irregularity of spelling and prevalence of errors in *graffiti*, I think that it is ambitious to expect the author of the *graffito* to adhere to strict grammatical rules, especially given the variation in spelling, should one consider ΣΕΒΕΤΕ as meaning ΣΕΒΕΤΑΙ. Also, it is not unusual in ancient Greek to have the nominative case as a substitute for the vocative.[10] Additionally, it is possible that ΣΕΒΕΤΕ could be read as an imperative, even though ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ is in the nominative.[11] Therefore, the inscription could also be read 'Alexamenos, worship God'. For the sake of this article, since I am contesting the common interpretation, we will proceed with the usual rendering and translation of the inscription as 'Alexamenos worships God', acknowledging that another reading is possible.

Since its initial publication in 1856, the near-total consensus among scholars has been that the *graffito* was created by a non-Christian in order to mock or satirise another Christian, Alexamenos.[12] When it was first released by Raffaele Garrucci, he named it 'blasphemous' ('blasfemo').[13] Early work on the image among German scholars caused them to even coin a new term to describe it. Ferdinand Becker in 1866 called it Das Spott-Crucifix ('The Satirical Cross').[14] To be sure, some scholars have, in the past, hedged their language about whether it is satirical or not.[15] Nevertheless, even though scholars recognise

argued forcefully against Haupt, saying first that he used a corrupted reproduction of the image (which we now know to be false based on images of the actual *graffito*) and that no one in the Roman Empire spoke with the Greek dialect where ΤΕ referred to the second person pronoun. Franz Xaver Kraus, 'Das Spottcrucifix vom Palatin und dessen neuste Deutung', *Österreichische Vierteljahresschrift für katholische Theologie* 8 (ed. Theodor Widemann; Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1869) 237–8; Franz Xaver Kraus, *Le Crucifix blasphématoire du Palatin* (trans. Charles de Linas; Arras: Rousseau, 1870) 11–12. While Haupt's drawings were not false, it technically does not make syntactical sense to read ΤΕ as an accusative pronoun, since ΤΕ would serve as an object in opposition to θεον. Therefore, ΣΕΒΕΤΕ should be read as a single term.

[9] Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos', 112 n.16.

[10] E.g. Smyth §1287. I am grateful to Florence Yoon for this point.

[11] The imperative second person plural form of the verb σέβω (to worship, to honour).

[12] Candida Moss, *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2024) 20–2; Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos'; Felicity Harley-Mcgowan, 'Picturing the Passion', *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art* (ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison; London: Routledge, 2018) 290–307; Keegan, 'Reading the "Pages"', 92–3; Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 19–20; G. Rinaldi, *La Bibbia dei pagani. Quadro storico* (La Bibbia nella storia 19; Bologna: EDB, 1998) 1.121-3; Kraus, 'Spottcrucifix', 230; Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2023) 206, 207; Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Volume 1; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017) 241; Peter Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 108; Peter Lampe, *Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries: From Paul to Valentinus* (trans. Michael Steinhauser; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 338; Everett Ferguson, 'Alexamenos', *Encylopedia of Early Christianity: Second Edition* (ed. Everett Ferguson; London: Routledge, 2013) 29; Paul A. Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice: 1 Peter in Social-Psychological Perspective* (WUNT 244; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 64; Ferdinand Becker, *Das Spott-Crucifix der römischen Kaiserpaläste aus dem Anfange des dritten Jahrhunderts* (Breslau: Max Mälzer, 1866) 30–1; Carlo Lodovico Visconti, *Di un nuovo graffito palatino relativo al cristiano Alessameno* (Rome: Tipografia delle belle arti, 1870) 5. Based on the perceived connection between anti-Jewish depictions of the God of Israel as a donkey, Yarbrough raises the potentiality that the artist was from Alexandria in Egypt. Oliver Larry Yarbrough, 'The Shadow of an Ass: On Reading the Alexamenos Graffito', *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch* (ed. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011) 249.

[13] Raffaele Garrucci, 'Un graffito blasfemo nel palazzo dei Cesari', *Civiltà Cattolica Anno Settimo* (vol. 4 of 3rd series; Rome: Coi tipi della civiltà cattolica, 1856) 529–45.

[14] Becker, *Das Spott-Crucifix*; Kraus, 'Spottcrucifix'.

[15] E.g. Harley-Mcgowan, 'Passion', 291; Jane Heath, 'Sight and Christianity', *Sight and the Ancient Senses* (ed. Michael Squire; London: Routledge, 2015) 231. See also David Balch who cautious argues, 'It remains a possibility that this *graffito* caricatures the worship of Christ dying on a cross.' David L. Balch, *Roman Domestic Art and Early House Churches* (WUNT 228; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 104.

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the ambiguity in the Alexamenos *graffito*, they largely agree that it was likely created by someone who was not a Christian.

Because the vast consensus has been that the image is non-Christian in origin and antagonistically satirical, no scholars, to my knowledge, have made an extended case for why the *graffito* should be understood this way.[16] There are a few isolated reasons that scholars do raise to support this interpretation that I will outline in brief detail here, but deal with more fully in the following section. First, scholars universally agree that the inscription about Alexamenos concerns someone in the *graffito* itself; since the 'god' is quickly isolated as being Jesus, as I mentioned above, the other figure is usually thought to be Alexamenos. Because the image describes someone named Alexamenos, it is presumed that the artist and the subject of the image are two different people. If they are two different people, then Alexamenos could not have been the one who created the image, and, therefore, it was not created by a Christian. Second, based on early Christian traditions that record pagan mockery of Jesus as a donkey-man (e.g. Tertullian, Minucius Felix), the depiction of Jesus with a donkey head is understood to be a pagan image, and thus created by a non-Christian. Additionally, some interpreters understand the *graffito* to display Jesus' buttocks. This sexualisation is further evidence for the likelihood of the *graffito's* non-Christian origin. Some of these claims are dubious, while others are more ambiguous than scholars have acknowledged or may realise. As I argue in the next section, none of them *necessarily* mean that the Alexamenos *graffito* was made by a non-Christian.

3 The Alexamenos *Graffito* as Christian in Origin

In this section, I re-analyse sporadic evidence usually used to interpret the *graffito* as a non-Christian creation. Then, I analyse evidence that suggests the *graffito* could be Christian. Typically, scholars understand both Alexamenos and the crucified man as wearing *colobia* (sg: *colobium*, a sleeve-less piece of clothing that served as an undergarment).[17] *Colobia* were not strictly used for enslaved persons, as argued by John Granger Cook, but were certainly a sign of the underclass.[18] Given the context of the *paedegogium*, however, it is likely the clothing denotes a servile status (even if the clothing is not innately servile). The short sleeves are evident from the way the artist makes curvatures around the upper arms of both Alexamenos and the crucified man. These are, however, the same kinds of curvatures we see on the thighs of the crucified, what some interpreters in the past have instead said are the crucified man's buttocks.[19] Such lewdness suggests a non-Christian origin.

Yet we see attempts by the artist to render the same kinds of sleeved curvatures on Alexamenos' thighs as well. Did the artist intentionally portray these figures as flashing the viewer, or is it simply the lower short-sleeved pant legs of enslaved clothing? I think the latter is more likely the case for a number of reasons. One, because the curvatures match the sleeves on the upper arms of both figures. Second, because in other Roman depictions of enslaved workers, we can see that they sometimes wore materials that looked

[16] In the history of scholarship, there has been one scholar who argued that it may not have been a non-Christian and that it might not be satirical. Richard Wünsch argued the *graffito* was a Sethian gnostic image and not meant to be mockery at all. He argued that the *graffito* could be read as coming from Alexamenos himself, in which it should be considered a confession of faith, whereas if it is from a friend who also professed gnostic allegiance, then it should not be considered mockery. Richard Wünsch, ed., *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1898) 112. While I disagree with Wünsch's assessment that it is a Sethian image, I do agree that it might not be mockery from someone outside of Christianity.

[17] Keegan, 'Reading the "Pages"', 92.

[18] John Granger Cook, 'Envisioning Crucifixion: Light from Several Inscriptions and the Palatine Graffito', *NovT* 50 (2008) 284–5.

[19] E.g. Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 209; Schwaller, 'Picturing', 52.

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remarkably like the short-sleeved materials that cover the upper thighs of the crucified donkey-man's legs. For example, a fresco from a *fullonica* in Pompeii (VI.8.20) shows two young enslaved men working, one of whom brushes wool in a short-sleeved outfit that matches, more or less, the arm and thigh shape of the *colobia* portrayed in the Alexamenos *graffito*.[20] Alternatively, it may also depict a *subligaculum*, a Roman undergarment. The lines across both Alexamenos and the crucified man's waist may be intended as a representation of their belts; the author depicts the beams of the cross as simple lines, so the notion that a single line could represent a tied sash or belt is not too far-fetched. The artist may also have depicted a combination of a short piece of clothing and a *subligaculum*. It has even been suggested that the image draws from ancient mime parody in Rome, with 'a crucified mime wearing hose, singlet, and a donkey mask'.[21] There are many possibilities, and it is not obvious that buttocks are clearly intended. Additionally, as Harley-McGowan observes, in the example here of veneration of a deity, the depiction of a god from a rear-view perspective would be unusual as 'the customary iconography shows the deity in strict frontality to receive the gesture of adoration'.[22] It is therefore unlikely that the Alexamenos image mocks Jesus by exposing his buttocks. If anything, it tells us more about the servility of Jesus than his sexualisation.[23]

In addition to the exposed buttocks, scholars frequently connect the Alexamenos *graffito* to early Christian accounts of a donkey-Jesus. Such an image offended Christians greatly and therefore, by implication, the author of the *graffito* could not have been Christian. But something that should caution modern interpreters about whether Christians would have found the Alexamenos image offensive are Tertullian's comments in his *Apology*. In multiple places, Tertullian relays the story of a person who depicts the Christian God as a toga-wearing donkey-man, given the title 'the "donkey-fucking" God of the Christians' (*Apol.* 16.12):

> *sed nova iam dei nostri in ista proxime civitate editio publicata est, ex quo quidam frustrandis bestiis mercennarius noxius picturam proposuit cum eismodi inscriptione: 'deus Christianorum* ὀνοκοίτης*'. is erat auribus asininis, altero pede ungulatus, librum gestans et togatus. risimus et nomen et formam.*[24]

> 'But presently in a nearby city, a new representation of our god has been made public, since a certain criminal, hired to trick the wild beasts, exhibited a picture with the following inscription: 'The "donkey-fucking" God of the Christians.' He had donkey's ears, one hoofed foot, held a book, and wore a toga. We laughed both at the name and the figure.'[25]

[20] Now housed at the Museo Archaelogico Nazionale di Napoli (Inv. No. 9974).

[21] Charalambos Bakirtzis, 'Late Antiquity and Christianity in Thessalonikē: Aspects of a Transformation', *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē: Studies in Religion and Archaeology* (ed. Laura Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzis and Steven J. Friesen; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) 413.

[22] Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos', 112.

[23] Even if, however, we read such lines as depicting Jesus' buttocks and thus sexualising him, it is not necessarily the case that this is a non-Christian parody. As the following discussion of Tertullian shows, Christians did respond positively (or at least Tertullian portrays Christians responding positively) to overtly sexualised caricatures of Jesus, even sexually explicit ones. While Tertullian's portrayal of the donkey-Jesus seems to have non-Christian origins, we should not presume that all Christians, even enslaved ones, would have had the same level of decorum just because they were Christian.

[24] Text from Henricus Hoppe, ed., *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Apologeticum* (CSEL 69; Vindabonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1939) 44.

[25] With my own modifications, the translation has been based on that of John E. B. Mayor and F. Oehler, ed., *Q. Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Apologeticus* (trans. Alexander Souter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1917) 55–7. While *Christianorum* is a genitive plural, ὀνοκοίτης is a genitive singular, likely modifying *deus* as an adjectival genitive. On the translation of ὀνοκοίτης as 'donkey-fucker' and not as commonly translated as 'ass-begotten' see

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The hybridity of this figure, clearly meant to depict Jesus as a half-human, half-equine, centres on a critique of Jesus' divine father as one who has sex with donkeys, but may also suggest the sexual lasciviousness of Jesus himself as half-donkey: donkeys in the ancient world were sometimes characterised as hypersexual because of their very visible equine erections.[26]

While scholars frequently cite ancient Jewish (e.g. Josephus, *C. Ap*. 2.79) and early Christian sources that deal with ancient satirical representations of the God of Israel or Jesus as a donkey, especially Tertullian, few seem to pay attention to the reactions or arguments that Tertullian (or Minucius Felix) had towards such an image. Their responses are often flattened and generalised as contempt towards the image.[27] Yarbrough argues that 'Tertullian's linking the picture to the slander directed at Christians for worshipping an ass-headed God makes it clear he would have recognized what the street artist was doing – and refuted it vigorously.'[28] But speaking about 'the "donkey-fucking" God of the Christians' parody in his *Apology,* Tertullian says: 'We laughed both at the name and figure' (*risimus et nomen et formam*). This is not the kind of response for which interpreters have usually deployed Tertullian's comments on this depiction. The plural 'we' indicates that it was not just Tertullian but Christians in general who heard about the story and found it funny. Tertullian even emphasises that Christians recognised the humour of both the image – of the hybrid donkey-headed and educated Roman citizen – and also the *ascription*. Where is the offence and outrage so frequently implied in studies on the *graffito*, with some even going so far as to call such a depiction 'blasphemous'?[29] It is true that we must also remember the possibility that Tertullian may be shaping the response of Christians as positive in order to show the resilience of the Christian community. He and other Christians may have taken offence at such an image. Nevertheless, in the rhetoric of his writings, Tertullian portrays a positive Christian response to this image. Tertullian's portrayal of himself and other Christians at the time is meant to convey that such images were not blasphemous but humorous.

Did early Christians think themselves and their faith threatened by the depiction in this way? Tertullian traces the origins of the donkey-god to multiple traditions. One origin stems from Roman rumours of Jewish worship from Tacitus.[30] Another origin, represented in *Apol.* 16.12 above, is where a certain person trying to tame wild beasts conjures this image. A variation of this story is repeated by Tertullian in an anti-Jewish frame, this time with the characterisation that the beast tamer was in fact a Jew who, like all Jews (according to Tertullian), conspired against Christians.[31] Although Tertullian uses forceful language to refute this myth, on balance, we must remember that in one account he says that the

Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos', 127. For a thorough review of the lexical data surrounding -κοίτη terms in ancient Greek see John Granger Cook, 'Μαλακοί and Ἀρσενοκοῖται: In Defence of Tertullian's Translation', *NTS* 65 (2019) 337–42.

[26] Peter Mitchell, *The Donkey in Human History: An Archaeological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 144–5; Guy Michael Hedreen, *Silens in Attic Black-Figure Vase-Painting: Myth and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992) 16–17; François Lissarrague, 'The Sexual Life of Satyrs', *Sexuality: Before The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 55. From our visual archive, a relief now at the National Archaeological Museum in Naples (Inv. 27712) depicts the god Pan riding on an ithyphallic donkey, which has its glans slightly exposed.

[27] E.g. Kraus, 'Spottcrucifix', 230.

[28] Oliver Larry Yarbrough, 'The Alexamenos Graffito: Street Art in Ancient Rome', *Engaging the Passion: Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (ed. Oliver Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) 235.

[29] Stephen L. Caiger, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (London: Cassell and Company, 1948) 149–50.

[30] *Nat*. 1.11, cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.79.

[31] *Nat.*1.14–15.

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image and name made Christians laugh.[32] Furthermore, in his slightly alternative account in *To the Nations*, he diminishes the significance of the image and argues that it was really only a rumour that circulated for nine days (*Nat.* 1.14–15). In other words, Christians did not seem to feel threatened by this donkey-god image because it was baseless, clearly satirical and not pervasive. Some treated it as something temporary to laugh at, and not something to be greatly concerned about.

Another reason that Christians were not concerned with the image was because, as Tertullian and Minucius Felix argue, there were many pagan deities, gods and figures in wider culture who had animal-hybrid features: dog-heads, lion-heads, horns of animals, goat legs, serpent legs, wings upon their legs.[33] Tertullian argues that while all manners of herds are celebrated by Greek and Roman gods, the critique of Christians is merely that they focus only on donkeys (as per the caricature) (*Nat.* 1.11). Minucius Felix expands Tertullian's critique by pointing out how pagans also sacrifice to animals and honour snakes, crocodiles and other animals upon punishment of death (*Oct.* 28.7–8.). In other words, the image of worship directed towards a donkey was not too much out of the ordinary for the deities and honoured figures in the ancient pagan world.

In fact, since so many other deities were also associated with animals, Jesus' depiction as a donkey actually *reinforces* his divinity. This is why, on the whole, Tertullian does not think such a depiction is that effective. Though it was humorous, to be sure, it was by no means unique, and in a way, supported theological claims about Christ's divine status. As Michael Squire notes, early Christian scriptures were ambiguous about how Jesus' physical incarnation, his alleged divinity and humanity, could be represented physically, since Jesus was 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1.15).[34] Though satirical, the Alexamenos *graffito,* like the image of the donkey-man in Tertullian's writings, is theologically useful for depicting both the humanity and divinity of Jesus. The horror of such hybridity is simultaneously a statement about the divine identity of this crucified messiah.

If theriomorphic divine images really were unexceptional, as Tertullian and Felix argue, then how might the Alexamenos *graffito* function as self-parody? Although Tertullian and Felix generalise about the theriomorphic gods of the Greeks and Romans, from a Roman point of view, these theriomorphic gods (e.g., snakes, crocodiles, etc.) are culturally tied to particularly ethnicities, specifically the Egyptians. Although they were governed by Rome, aspects of their culture were nevertheless marginalised (e.g. hybridity of gods, circumcision). The association of a donkey with a Jewish messiah might not have meant much to a Christian, but in a wider Roman context where eastern peoples like Judeans were marginalised as 'barbarian' this would have added to the parody.[35] Thus, Romans who saw the *graffito* and were familiar with the Jewish origins of this messiah would have found it parodic, even if Christians might have situated donkey-Jesus among what they understood to be a larger Greek-Roman pantheon of divinities.

One of the principal pieces of evidence that suggests the artist of the *graffito* might have been a Christian is the often-ignored depiction of a *titulus* attached to the cross.[36] Only a few scholars have noticed this detail.[37] The *titulus* has purposefully been drawn, extending from the upper *patibulum*. Artistically, the *titulus* is a standout feature of the cross. It has

[32] Few interpreters over the past two centuries have noted this, with the exception of Becker, *Das Spott-Crucifix*, 24.

[33] Tertullian, *Apol.* 16.13–14; *Nat.* 1.14–15.

[34] Michael Squire, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 175–6.

[35] For examples of this and the ways that both Egyptians and Judean customs were marginalised as ethnically other, see Isaac T. Soon, *A Disabled Apostle: Impairment and Disability in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023) 95–111, 112–23.

[36] It was noted by Holloway, *Coping with Prejudice*, 239.

[37] Though it was noticed long ago by Garrucci, 'Graffito blasfemo', 530.

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both length *and* width, which is more than can be said of the *patibula* and the *crux* that have been depicted as simple lines; it is the only feature that has breadth other than Jesus' body on the cross.

The appearance of some kind of inscription above Jesus' body is something found in all of the canonical gospel accounts.[38] In his exhaustive survey of ancient Mediterranean sources on crucifixion, John Granger Cook raises only two other sources that suggest the presence of a *titulus* during crucifixion, but in neither of the two sources is it clear that the *titulus* was attached to the cross itself, but merely nearby (e.g. around their necks).[39] Although it may have been prevalent to have *tituli* attached to a cross, given the paucity of representations in our historical sources, the presence of a *titulus* on the *graffito* attached to a cross reflecting early Christian gospel texts betrays a suspicious familiarity with Christian traditions. Out of all the details of Jesus' crucifixion, this feature is a strangely specific thing to include, especially if you were not a Christian. If the artist was not a Christian, this possibly might mean that he had heard the gospels' story or perhaps read it himself with close enough attention to detail in order to prepare for the *graffiti*; this seems like a little bit too much commitment for an on-the-wall invective. Alternatively, it could have been that the author was a Christian (or perhaps a former Christian?) and was already familiar with gospel traditions.

Felicity Harley-McGowan argues that it is unlikely that a *titulus* is represented: 'The function of the line is unclear, and Garrucci's identification may result from a desire to read back into this image both a prominent element of the gospel narratives and a standard element of later crucifixion iconography.'[40] Unfortunately, the line drawing that Harley-McGowan uses does not correctly chart the *titulus* (even though the photograph in the next facing page explicitly shows the *titulus* inscribed). There is no need to read later images of crucifixion back into the image, since, as Harley-McGowan notes, there is already an earlier textual precedent for the *titulus* in gospel materials. The simplest explanation is that, given its prominence in the gospel narratives, the *graffito* draws iconographically from the textual details of the Gospels themselves. By establishing a connection between Christian scriptures and the image, we establish another connection between the image and its possible Christian origins.

The fact that the inscription seems to describe Alexamenos also cannot discount the possibility that Alexamenos might have been its author. The many other names graffitied on to the walls of the complex are likely to have come from the persons inscribing on the walls. For example, for those leaving the *paedegogium* (e.g. 'Corinthus leaves the *paedegogium*', *Corinthus exit de pedagogio, Pal. Graf.* I.70), it is more likely that the named person in the inscription is the author. Graffiti as a medium lends itself to a third-person point of view, since the first person renders a marking anonymous except by those who are physical witnesses to the inscribing.

While the inscription 'Alexamenos worships God' might be taken as satirical given the perceived content of the *graffito*, it is also possible that it can be read as a positive statement about both the crucified man and his worshipper. In other words, it could be read as an earnest, even if caricatured, demonstration of worship. Jane Heath draws attention to the fact that interpreting the image depends not on physiology but perspective: 'There are two ways of looking at such visual signs: to look upon them in faith is to be built up, whereas to look without faith is to have one's faith opposed. Physiological sight does not differentiate the one from the other: it is the eyes of faith that draw the distinctions.'[41] Heath's point, as

[38] Mark 15.26; Matt 27.37; Luke 23.38; John 19.19.

[39] John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (2nd ed.;WUNT 327; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019) 110, 180–1.

[40] Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos', 110 n.12.

[41] Heath, 'Sight and Christianity', 232.

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I understand it, here is less that a historical interpreter must *have faith* (in a religious sense) but that in coming to understand ancient perceptions of visual imagery like the Alexamenos *graffito*, religious faith can affect the way such an image is received. Heath provides an important corrective to scholarly approaches towards Alexamenos. Instead of prioritising only a single form of sight, from the perspective of an outsider (e.g. a non-Christian), multiple, even *faithful* (i.e. Christian) ways of seeing the *graffito* are possible.

The inclusion of Alexamenos throwing a kiss towards the God suggests a genuine act of adoration, at least on the surface. Imagine for a moment that we removed the donkey head, and the crucified figure was portrayed with a normal human head. Scholars would argue that rather than a caricature, all of the evidence of this *graffito* points to a pious representation of Alexamenos' worship. But, as Tyler Schwaller argues, Jesus' crucifixion already has parody built into the very story itself: 'Christians worship a crucifiable figure, and crucifixion is particularly slavish.'[42] Alexamenos worships someone who is dying a shameful kind of Roman death. In other words, were we to remove the donkey head, the caricature of someone worshipping a crucified person would remain, and earnest worship directed to an image of what would widely be considered a caricature would still be characterised by scholars as a Christian image.

The reintroduction of the donkey head does not necessarily subvert a pious reading. Recently, interpreters of the *graffito* have emphasised how donkeys could be viewed as synonymous with enslaved workers in the ancient world. In Room 8 of the *paedegogium*, adjacent to the room where the Alexamenos *graffito* was found, we find a detailed depiction of a donkey tied to a mill, grinding some kind of grain.[43] Inscribed under the image are the words: 'Work, Little Donkey, as I have worked, and you will profit by it' (*labora, aselle, quomodo ego laboravi et proderit tibi*).[44] The use of the second-person perspective to speak to enslaved workers working in these parts of the building make obvious the enslaved origins of the artist. Another enslaved worker, donning the persona of a donkey, speaks to other donkeys, other enslaved workers, reassuring them of the end goal of their productivity. While genuine in message, this depiction involves enslaved self-parody. Whatever enslaved worker made this was neither ashamed to be equated with a donkey nor ashamed to equate their fellow workers with donkeys.

This has important implications for our reading of the Alexamenos *graffito.* Although the donkey-headed Jesus was a trope known among Roman audiences, as attested by Tertullian, in light of the fact that enslaved workers could self-present as donkeys, the addition of the donkey head to Jesus does not need to be read as a mockery. The donkey-headed Jesus, dressed in the clothes of an enslaved person, dying a slavish death, becomes not an image of mockery but an image of solidarity for Alexamenos or any other enslaved Christian.[45] The image of the enslaved mirrors the image of the enslaved saviour. While non-Christians might have mocked the image, they might also have recognised themselves and the precarity of their own situations. To a Christian slave like Alexamenos, the image of the *graffito* could be one of pride. As Alexamenos worships his God, a viewer might draw a parallel between the milling donkey in the adjacent room: 'Sacrifice, Little Slave, as I have sacrificed, and you will profit by it.'

There is one final piece of contentious evidence that may serve as proof that the Alexamenos *graffito* (or at least its inscription) was made by a Christian. In Room 6, adjacent to Room 7 where the Alexamenos *graffito* was found, there is a bilingual inscription

[42] Schwaller, 'Picturing', 59.

[43] *Pal. Graf.* I.289.

[44] Translation and text from Harley-McGowan,'Alexamenos', 116.

[45] Schwaller acknowledges that the image would have proved meaningful for an enslaved viewer. Schwaller, 'Picturing', 60.

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that reads: ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ FIDELIS (*Pal. Graf.* I.*2).[46] Since it was brought to light by Carlo Visconti in 1870, many interpreters have taken it as a single statement.[47] That it is written in two different hands suggests that one part – probably *fidelis* – was added at a later time by someone else, or perhaps they are two different but adjacent *graffiti* that have been grouped together.[48] The presence of the name ΑΛΕΞΑΜΕΝΟΣ is relevant, of course, for the Alexamenos *graffito*. Based on the line drawing by Visconti, the *graffiti* hand looks similar to the writing in the Alexamenos *graffito*, although there are some differences. In particular, the omicron of the *fidelis graffito* is more oval-like than the omicrons in the Alexamenos *graffito*. Additionally, and most noticeably, the *xsi* in the *fidelis graffito* looks very different from the *xsi* in the Alexamenos one. Nevertheless, Richard Wünsch once proposed that both inscriptions were written by the same hand, and as such, the Alexamenos *graffito* might not be taken as a mockery but as a drawing by Alexamenos' own hand.[49] As much as can be discerned, the palaeography does look very similar, especially in comparison to other Greek *graffiti* in the *paedegogium*.[50]

Out of the hundreds of *graffiti* found in this complex, only twenty-three (23 out of 374, 6%) are in Greek. Of the twenty-three, in addition to the two *graffiti* involving Alexamenos, eight are significant for palaeographic comparison.[51] Three are written with a very clean epigraphic style, both in terms of consistency and symmetry of shape and depth of each letter.[52] One is very clean and probably reflects the most literary-like style.[53] Four others are written in a rougher style similar to the two Alexamenos *graffiti*. Yet none of their palaeography matches either each other or the Alexamenos *graffiti* to the same extent that both Alexamenos *graffiti* match each other. For example, *Pal. Graf.* I.208 (ΑΡΙΣΤΟΔΗΜΟΣ) has a much narrower *mu*, a drawn-out bottom line to the *sigma*, and serifs on the *iota* and *tau*. *Pal. Graf.* I.220 (ΑΡΙΩΝ) displays a much thicker and denser line and has a mixture of upper- and lower-case letters (the *omega* is lower case). *Pal. Graf.* I.230 (ΒΑΣΣΟΣ ΠΥΓΙΔΖ[ΕΙ], 'Bassos ass-fucks') has a similar *omicron* as that found in the *fidelis graffiti*, but other letters are different in shape and have been executed more cleanly. *Pal. Graf.* I.235 (ΑΡΕΙΩΝΟΣ) has a completely different palaeographic hand, much shakier, with more corrections and overlaps, and jagged curves. In light of these wider *graffiti* comparisons, it is possible that the *fidelis* and the donkey *graffiti* may have come from the same creator.

Critical scholarship has been reluctant to use the *fidelis graffito* because its authenticity was questioned from early on. Solin and Itkonen-Kaila remarked that while it only was observed in 1870, some fifteen or so years after the initial publication of the Alexamenos *graffito*, it was later destroyed, sparking speculation that 'the author repented and wanted to destroy what he had written' ('l'autore si sia pentito e abbia volute distruggere quanto aveva scritto?').[54] Given this problematic history, scholars have been reluctant to use it.[55] Indeed, there are other Christian *graffiti* in Room 6 of the *paedegogium*, such as a chi-rho (*Pal. Graf.* I.*3). Like the *fidelis graffito*, because Garrucci contested its authenticity from early on, it has been relegated, perhaps unfairly, to the inauthentic. It is conspicuous, however, that

[46] Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 250–1.

[47] See Visconti, *Nuovo graffito*, 5.

[48] The serifs on the lettering are similar to other uncontested *graffiti*, e.g. *Pal. Graf.* I.93, I.104, I.144, I.189, I.232

[49] Wünsch, *Verfluchungstafeln*, 111–12.

[50] Though perhaps not 'completely matching' as posited by Wünsch, *Verfluchungstafeln*, 111.

[51] A number have been recorded but were not significant enough or were too fragmented to warrant drawings: *Pal. Graf.* I.247, 248, 249, 250, 254, 255, 256, 258, 265, 276, 277, 315, 316, 330, 344.

[52] *Pal. Graf.* I.337, 346, 347.

[53] *Pal. Graf.* I.333.

[54] Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 250.

[55] E.g. Harley-McGowan, 'Alexamenos', 114.

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out of five suspected forgeries, the only two explicitly Christian *graffiti* in the *paedegogium* have had their authenticity questioned.[56]

Raffaele Garrucci was the most vocal opponent to the authenticity of the *fidelis graffito*, in part, because his reputation as an archaeologist was on the line. In 1880, ten years after the *graffito* was published by Carlo Visconti, Raffaele vehemently rejected the authenticity of the *graffito* arguing that his team did a thorough job copying everything and that if he did not notice it, and if no one else noticed it for six years, then it must not have actually been there; for him (or anyone else) not to see it the first time would have been a kind of inconceivable blindness.[57]

But no historian is free from mistakes. It is now clear to scholars that Garrucci (and even Visconti to some extent) did make transcription mistakes and even questionable conjectures.[58] Jessica Della Rosso in reviewing ancient Jewish inscriptions with Garruci's own manuscript notes observes: 'Reviewing this material, it is clear that many variations among the copies are found. Letters, words, and even lines of text can be omitted; images are not necessarily drawn or recorded with attention to detail, and the form, size and execution of the letters are not always considered in the haste to copy the entire text.'[59] Garrucci himself is not immune to recording something allegedly there that is in fact not. In analysing depictions of the 'forbidden fruit' of Genesis 2–3, Azzan Yadin-Israel notes: 'Though admirable in many ways, the forbidden fruit drawings in Garrucci's *Storia* [*della arte Cristiana*] consistently represent apples where none exist. Indeed, Garrucci goes to almost comical extremes in his sketch of the Fall of Man scene from the Cimitero di S. Gennaro in Napoli, representing Eve with an apple, which in fact is nothing more than a blemish in the fresco's plasters.'[60] Additionally, though the *graffiti* in the *paedegogium* in critical editions are presented neatly and separate from one another, on the plastered walls they overlap with one another in a dizzying array of scribbles and markings, sometimes dozens on top of one another on a single wall. It is both possible that Garrucci and his team simply missed the inscription the first time.

What can we say about the destruction of the *fidelis* inscription and whether it was purposefully done to hide the guilt of a forger? The reality is that since there were no witnesses, these conjectures are all speculation. We cannot say that a forger destroyed it to hide evidence, any more than we can say that Garrucci, upon his return to the site to see the *fidelis* inscription for himself, destroyed it in order to preserve his reputation. In reality, the instability and lack of preservation of the site are reflected in the other inscriptions that are preserved and known only through the use of diaphanous paper. For example, the donkey of *Pal. Graf.* I.289 ('Little Donkey') was destroyed in 1886, apparently by an 'unscrupulous

[56] Peter Keegan argues that there might have been other Christian *graffiti* on the walls of an adjacent room, Room 6 (dating from the second-century CE), that perhaps poke fun at Christians. Two names are inscribed on the walls, Libanus and Quintio, and each is described with the words *episcopus* (*Graf. Pal.* I.183, 213, 118). Even though the term *episcopus* could refer to a supervisorial member who oversaw enslaved people, a fact that Keegan himself observes, he offers the potentiality that *episcopus* was added by a second hand as 'humorous or derogatory jibes' against Christian slaves. Keegan, 'Reading the "Pages"', 91–2. Without further historical context, it is not possible to say that these *episcopi* are Christian without first presuming an anti-Christian context for the Alexamenos *graffito* in Room 7 and reading that antagonistic context into Room 6, to inscriptions that may date from half a century earlier.

[57] '…nè posso ammettere tale e tante cecità in me e in persone recatesi a solo scopo di tutti e diligentemente trascrivere quei graffiti…' Raffaele Garrucci, *Storia della arte cristiana nei primi otto secoli della chiesa* (Prato: Gaetana Guasti, 1880) 137.

[58] Jessica Dello Russo, 'Raffaele Garrucci and the Jewish Catacombs of Rome', *Roma Subterranea Judaica* 6 (2012) 33–7.

[59] Russo, 'Raffaele Garruci', 30.

[60] Azzan Yadin-Israel, *Temptation Transformed: The Story of How the Forbidden Fruit Became an Apple* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022) 80.

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tourist'.[61] Presumably, this was not someone who had forged it and then come back to cover up the evidence of their forgery. In the same way, then, because visitors were allowed to come and go over the years, and since it is known that more and more of the fragile plaster has been destroyed over the years, it is more likely that the *fidelis* portion was *accidentally* destroyed, rather than *purposefully* removed. By itself, this evidence is not enough to prove that the Alexamenos *graffito* may have been created by a Christian, perhaps Alexamenos himself. Yet, the methodological issues surrounding the authenticity of the *fidelis graffito*, alongside the rest of the arguments as presented in this section above, raise enough doubt to question whether the Alexamenos *graffito* was indeed non-Christian in origin.[62]

4 The Alexamenos *Graffito* as Self-Parody

So far, I have provided six arguments for the possibility of a Christian origin for the Alexamenos *graffito*: (a) the image does not necessarily sexualise Jesus through the display of his buttocks, (b) early Christians were not offended by a donkey-Jesus but rather amused, (c) how presence of a *titulus* may suggest someone knowledgeable of Christian traditions and thus potential a Christian, (d) a donkey-headed messiah might actually generate solidarity with an enslaved Christian, (e) the inscription might be self-referential, and (f) that an adjacent *graffito* (*fidelis*) may have been written by the same person who created the Alexamenos *graffito*. Even if none of the above arguments were possible, there is still the possibility that the image (if taken as satire) is a self-parody.

Anyone familiar with ancient Roman *graffiti* knows that the medium lends itself to the comedic. In the adjacent room to where the Alexamenos *graffiti* was found (Room 6), there are two *graffiti* that depict phalluses, one simpler in nature (*Pal. Graf.* I.134) but the other a side profile image of a man from the abdomen and upper thigh, depicting his buttocks, his erect phallus, pubic hair and what look to be lines of ejaculation (*Pal. Graf.* I.92).[63]

But while comedy often took aim at others, sometimes comedians turned on themselves in self-parody. One of our earliest comedic parodies comes from the 6th to 5th century BCE Athenian Old Comedy poet, Cratinus.[64] At the very end of his life and even after his death, Cratinus was made the butt of jokes in the plays of the young and up-and-coming Old Comedy poet Aristophanes. In 424 BCE, in his *Knights*, Aristophanes pokes fun at Cratinus' age and its effect on his ability to write, mocking his poetry and his body, and depicting him as a washed-up celebrity and drunk whose golden prime has long passed (*Eq.* 526–36). The very next year, Cratinus wrote his most well-known (and the first-place prize-winning) play, known as the Pytine ('The Wine Container'). Although only fragments of it survive in our ancient sources, we know from ancient scholia on Aristophanes' *Knights* more or less the plot and purpose of the play:

> It seems to me that he [Cratinus] got very angry at this [Aristophanes' comments at Knights 526–36] and although he had retired from writing and competing, he wrote another play, Wine-Flask, about himself and Drunkenness, employing the following plotline: Cratinus made Comedy his wife, wanting to stop living with him and to lodge

[61] Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 224.

[62] Against previous interpreters, Peter Keegan actually argues that both the Alexamenos *graffito* and the *fidelis graffiti* are actually caricatures of Christians: 'a pagan sentry or doorkeeper in the imperial palace first sought to condemn a fellow guard by scratching on the wall, "Alexamenos is a Christian"; when this did not result in the desired effect, he sketched a caricature of Alexamenos as the worshipper of a crucified god.' Keegan, *Graffiti*, 108. Keegan imagines that the writers were not fellow slaves but Roman soldiers who may have been antagonistic towards Christian slaves.

[63] Solin and Itkonen-Kaila, *Palatino*, 131, 152.

[64] I am grateful to Toph Marshall for drawing my attention to this tradition.

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> a complaint of abuse at his hands; his friends appear and ask her not to do anything rash and to find out the reason for her enmity; Comedy complains that he no longer lives with her, but spends all his time with Drunkenness.[65]

Rather than writing a play that refuted the base accusations of Aristophanes, Cratinus' play doubles down on the portrayal, reiterating his drunkenness (he's in a relationship with Drunkeness!) and his commitment to hedonism. As Storey argues, 'But however we reconstruct the comedy, it is clear that Cratinus presents himself in a purposeful negative light. He is seen to be an unfaithful husband, a poet who has abandoned his art, and an aging drunk and philander. What Cratinus has done is to take the comic picture that Aristophanes used in Knights and, rather than opposite it, reinforce it by agreeing to the points of caricature and recast himself as the lovable drunk for whom alcohol is the source of his comic inspiration.'[66] Had we not known who the author of the play was, we might have thought that it was written by someone who had picked up Aristophanes' critique and perpetuated it further in extended comic form. Cratinus doubles down, embracing rather than trying to dispel the critiques of young Aristophanes. Although the work is largely lost, through quotation we know that Cratinus' self-parody had a long shelf life, being quoted in the work of Athenaeus and Plutarch (2nd century CE), Julius Pollux (3rd century CE), up to Priscan's *Institutes* (6th century CE). Even the Christian author Clement of Alexandria quotes from Cratinus' play (cf. *Strom.* 6.20.3). So, it is not merely that self-parody was only known in Old Athenian Comedy.

It was carried forward into the Roman and Christian literary world in which the Alexamenos *graffito* was produced. In the poet Horace's *Satires*, on occasion, the satirist turns the ridicule on himself. In *Satires* 1.2.68–72, the satirist imagines a man having a conversation with his own *mutto* (his penis). When his member speaks, without missing a beat, the man answers back. As Kirk Freudenburg argues, 'No matter how earnestly the satirist may seem to intend the lesson at hand, one cannot escape the fact that he has here presented the picture of a man arguing with his own penis…This brilliant piece of parody takes as its primary target the satirist himself.'[67] Horace, thus, demonstrates his ability to not take himself too seriously. The parody of the self is always a possibility.

Plutarch, in his *Table-Talk*, mentions that at a party, 'It makes teasing less distressing, too, for those who tease to share in some way or other the condition ridiculed: for example, if a pauper speaks of poverty, or a low-born man of mean birth, or a lover of love. For, if it is done by similar people, the teasing seems to spring not from insolence but rather from a kind of playfulness; otherwise it is irritating and distressful' (*Quaest. conv.* 2.12 (634B–C)).[68] In other words, the best kind of public satire is self-parody. Within this same context, he also mentions Cratinus' self-parody: 'So some of the comic poets seem to take away bitterness by ridiculing themselves, as Aristophanes on the subject of baldness and Agathon's departure, and Cratinus brought out the *Wine-Flask…*' (*Quaest. conv.* 2.12 (634D)). Even by the second century CE, people like Plutarch recognised that self-parody and self-deprecation were strategies used both in high literature (e.g. poetry) and in everyday discourse.

Ancient self-parody was not limited to the literary or conversational realm, but also the iconographic. At the Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina in Sicily, there is an early

[65] Greek text and translation from Ian C. Storey, ed., *Fragments of Old Comedy, Volume I: Alcaeus to Diocles* (LCL 513; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 365, 367.

[66] Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy, Volume I: Alcaeus to Diocles*, 364–5.

[67] Kirk Freudenburg, *The Walking Muse: Horace on the Theory of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 25. For self-parody elsewhere in Horace's *Satires* see the article by Tadeusz Mazurek, 'Self Parody and the Law in Horace's "Satires" 1.9', Classical Journal 93 (1997) 1–17.

[68] Text and translation from P. A. Clement and H. B. Hoffleit, trans., *Plutarch. Moralia, Volume III: Table-Talk, Books 1-6* (LCL 424; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969) 134–7.

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fourth century CE mosaic of a circus featuring little humans on chariots being pulled by different types of birds (pigeons, flamingos, geese and perhaps plovers). Although typically identified as children, it is also possible that it represents short-statured people (people with dwarfism), as they were known to participate in public events (e.g., as boxers).[69] This mosaic image juxtaposes the many other images of the Roman Empire throughout the villa. Jaś Elsner detects visual irony in their iconographic contrast:

> The villa performs its *romanitas* through art by the iconographic staging of the empire's centre and its boundaries. But at the same time, it parodies this very construction of identity displaying a mock circus (obelisk and all) with images of children racing in chariots pulled by kitchen fowl, or cupids doing the honours of hunting against domestic animals. These scenes are much more than simply humorous asides on the serious themes of the villa's grandest floors. They cast the aspirations evoked by the villa's allusion to the public sphere within a frame which earths grand illusions as but the games of children. The commentary, by one set of the villa's images on another, makes explicit the fact that its portrayal of a cultural identity – the very setting for its owner's most private persona – is but an elegant construction.[70]

The persona reflected by images is constructed and not always reflective of reality. The self-parodying mosaic of the Roman circus makes vivid the illusion of athleticism and Roman masculinity. Rather than the subduing of horses, it is the subjugation of fowl. Rather than victory over other men in courage, it is a palm of victory among children (or perhaps, 'dwarfs'). Such athleticism and masculinity were not athleticism or masculinity at all, but merely the little playing in a sandbox. These are not the scribblings of *graffiti* by an enslaved person on the walls of a *paedegogium*, but are the commissioned mosaic works immortalised on *tesserae* in the house of an elite (and likely imperial) Roman figure. If iconographic self-parody is possible at such an elite level, how much more so is it possible at the social level of Alexamenos.

Self-parody was not only a Greek and Roman activity but also an early Christian one as well. No other figure in New Testament writings self-parodies themselves more than Paul the apostle. In his second letter to the Christian community in Corinth, Paul pretends to be a fool and parodies his beatings, floggings, whippings, calamitous seafaring travel, constant danger and weakness (2 Cor 11.16–29).[71] He boasts about being let down from the city walls in Damascus in a basket (2 Cor 11.30–3). While elsewhere he draws on his visionary abilities to reinforce his apostolicity (e.g. Gal 1–2), in 2 Cor 12.1–10, Paul parodies his apocalyptic experiences by talk about how 'someone' (a clear reference to himself) went up to the third heaven and was tormented by an 'angel of satan' he calls a 'thorn in the flesh'.[72] Earlier in the letter, he has raised the critique of some in the community who find his bodily presence and ability wanting (2 Cor 10.1, 10). Rather than denying the weakness of his body, he doubles down on its weakness, arguing that the shameful treatment of his body and his 'boasting of beatings', to use the phrase from Jennifer Glancey, is actually a sign of

[69] On this see Soon, *A Disabled Apostle*, 202–13.

[70] Jaś Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100–450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 45–6.

[71] The principal work on Paul, foolishness and self-parody in his ancient Greek and Roman oratorical context is L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (JSNTSup 293; London: T&T Clark, 2005).

[72] For the most recent treatment of Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' see Soon, *A Disabled Apostle*, 17–67.

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Christ working in him.[73] Early Christian self-parody had early moorings in Pauline textual traditions.

This wider context of Mediterranean self-parody does not make it more plausible that the Alexamenos *graffito* is self-parody. Rather, it shows that – given the evidence in the previous section – self-parody was a wider discourse that would have been known and accessible to the *graffito* author. Even though all of the examples here are from elite literary contexts, the self-parody of enslaved workers as donkeys in the *graffito* mentioned above (*Pal. Graf.* I.289), just two rooms over from the Alexamenos *graffito,* demonstrates that self-parody was not only something practised by elites but also by the enslaved in Alexamenos' very own context.

This wider comparison to Mediterranean self-parody also allows us to consider the rationale for why the Alexamenos *graffito* participates in this mode of discourse. Among sociologists and anthropologists, it is well known historically that communities that experience oppression (ethnic minorities, enslaved persons, occupied nations, 'low-class' folks) often combat oppression through self-parody and reflexive humour. Nazi-occupied communities in what was then Czechoslovakia during the Second World War would make self-parodying jokes about themselves and their occupiers, finding 'in anecdotes an intellectual and emotional escape from the disturbing realities'.[74] Dexter Gordon argues how contemporary African-American humour is influenced by American slavery 'in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd. This often included self-deprecation, as the slaves themselves were often the subjects of their comic tales'.[75] Self-abasement could also be found among 'low-status' occupations in twentieth-century North America, as in the case of an Indigenous Jewish 'puller' (a kind of door-to-door salesman) who would use self-abasement to build rapport with potential customers, especially those of high status. T. E. Levitin noted that this strategy allowed him 'role distance', meaning that 'if the puller made himself, as puller, an object of humor that *both* he and high status customers found ridiculous, he aligned himself with that customer and separated himself from that ludicrous low-status occupation'.[76] In the contemporary social sciences, studies are beginning to appear that examine how self-parody and self-abasement function among minoritised youth in North America and Europe.[77] Sociologist Jienian Zhang observes how Latinx students controlled perceptions of the self by using racial humour 'to play with oppression'.[78]

What we see is that self-parody can serve a variety of different strategic purposes, from escape to coping to control to resistance. In each of our ancient examples above, we see similar strategies employed. Cratinus resists Aristophanes' caricatures by controlling the narratival portrayal of his alleged drunkenness and reframing it as the source of his brilliant poetic abilities. Horace does not take himself or others like him so seriously, taking advantage of the humour that can arise in a preposterous situation. Plutarch's affirms people who live in poverty, 'low'-birth or passion-filled vice and who during parties with

[73] On the shame of Paul's body, see Jennifer A. Glancy, 'Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23-25)', *JBL* 123 (2004) 99–135.

[74] Antonin J. Obrdlik, '"Gallows Humor" – A Sociological Phenomenon', *American Journal of Sociology* 47 (1942) 710.

[75] Dexter B. Gordon, 'Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression', *Journal of Black Studies* 29 (1998) 256.

[76] T. E. Levitin, 'Role Performance and Role Distance in a Low Status Occupation: The Puller', *The Sociological Quarterly* 5 (1964) 254.

[77] Jienian Zhang, 'Playing with Oppression: Latinx Students' Use of Humor to Navigate Assumed Racism', *Soc Psychol Q* 86 (2023) 256–74; Anke Lion, '"I Need the White Pill!" – A Creative Exploration of How Minority Flemish Youth Employ Ethnic Humour for Identity Construction', *Cultural Sociology* (2024) 1–20.

[78] Zhang, 'Playing with Oppression', 257–60.

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the elite take the opportunity to debase themselves. From Plutarch's perspective, self-deprecation reminds the marginal of their place without contaminating the virtue of the elite. Alternatively, self-parody could have also been a strategy of the marginal to comfort themselves in contexts of social inequality. The image of the circus at the Villa Romana del Casale uses self-satire to critique and resist traditional Roman identity. Paul uses self-parody as a means of gaining the upper hand in a fight for authority in first-century Corinthian Christian communities.

In light of these patterns of self-parody, let us turn back to Alexamenos. These different examples, from the ancient to the modern, widen our perspective for the satirical possibilities latent in the *graffito* itself, possible historical contexts beyond simple anti-Christian antagonism. Like Cratinus, the creator of the Alexamenos *graffito*, instead of trying to show the legitimacy of his faith towards Jesus, might be doubling down on the shame of the image. Like Horace, perhaps the author does not take themselves too seriously as a Christian, acknowledging the preposterous nature of a crucified and slavish messiah. Like Plutarch, the *graffito* author might have recognised that self-parody about his own particular circumstances and religion was more appropriate than being the butt of the joke by someone else. Like the artist who made the mosaic of the circus at the Villa Romana del Casale, the artist, through self-parody, might be critiquing Roman ideals of masculinity and divinity, following Paul the apostle's rhetoric of 'strength in weakness'. The *graffito* might be an act of resistance to oppression and stigma experienced by the author and his Christian way of living.

One question remains, which is whether such a sophisticated and complex use of iconographic Christian self-parody was possible for an enslaved worker. The medium of the *graffito,* as a crude and satirical depiction, and its potential origins among enslaved workers in the imperial household, causes some scholars to minimise the complexity of its creation and context. Oliver Yarbrough contrasts the apparent simplicity of the *graffito* with the more complex critiques levelled at Christians by the second-century philosopher Celsus: 'It is not at all clear the Alexamenos artist would have understood Celsus's theological arguments against Christian belief and practice. They may have been overtly subtle for him. There is no doubt, however, that he would have appreciated Celsus's satirical humor.'[79] There are two significant issues with Yarbrough's comparison here. The first is a categorical distinction between theological and satirical argumentation, not in terms of genre but in terms of subtlety. On face value, one is more complex than the other. As I demonstrated above, however, the contexts and driving rhetoric behind satire and humour can be just as complex and subtle as early Christian theological argumentation. The second significant issue with Yarbrough's assessment of Celsus and the artist who carved the Alexamenos *graffito* is the implied difference between the philosopher and the slave, that complexity lies only with the former, while the latter does not have the capacity for intellectual subtlety. Indeed, many of the *graffito* in the *paedegogium* are quotidian, with some being crude. It is a mistake, however, to equate crudeness with simplicity, especially given that out of all the extant *graffiti* in the complex, the Alexamenos image is one of the most iconographically complex – not simply because it relates to ancient Christianity, but because of the complexities of the image itself. By minimising the complexity of the Alexamenos artist and the medium of *graffiti*, scholars minimise the historical possibilities that lie behind the creation of the image. In other words, when scholars assume a simplistic origin for the *graffito*, such a perspective imposes a simplistic frame that unduly forecloses real historical possibilities, short-changing our understanding of the *graffito* but also, in a way, de-intellectualising ancient, enslaved workers.

[79] Yarbrough, 'Alexamenos', 237.

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5 Conclusion

This article has argued that, in addition to being read as a non-Christian depiction of crucifixion, the Alexamenos *graffito* can historically be understood as Christian in origin (or, alternatively, perhaps even someone who might have formerly been a Christian). Its purpose is not to prove once and for all that the *graffito* is or is not Christian in origin. Rather, its primary task has been meta-critical. It analyses and critiques the historical and scholarly treatment of Alexamenos and his depiction to offer a methodological corrective in approaching such ancient material iconography, especially those concerning enslaved persons in the ancient world.

In this article, I argue that the ambiguity of the Alexamenos *graffito* historically points to multiple possible valences, one of which is the traditional, longstanding idea that it was generated by a non-Christian to satirise Alexamenos' Christianity, and another where Alexamenos generates the image as a point of Christian pride and self-parody, embracing the scandal of the cross to resist potential anti-Christian sentiment, while finding solidarity with an enslaved and sub-humanised Christ on the walls of his *paedigogium*.

With Alexamenos, it is possible and plausible that even what appears to be the most ardent satire of Christian worship and faith – a donkey-headed and enslaved portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth being worshipped by a slave strewn on the walls in Palatine Hill – might actually be an instance of earnest self-parody. Although nothing is definitive, as I argue in this piece, the threads of possibility are all there. Who knows that, for an enslaved worker in an elite Roman household, self-deprecation of this kind might have been a method of self-preservation in social situations, where growing suspicion of Christianity compounded prejudice and animosity towards a vulnerable and enslaved worker. By making his fellow workers laugh at the image, it may have redirected stigma away from himself. Maybe not all early Christians took themselves and their public image as seriously as we think they did.

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