
THE EARLY ANCIENT CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS IN THE CHRISTIAN EPIGRAPHY

Peter Caban*

*Catholic University at Ružomberok, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Hrabovská cesta 1, SK 034 01
Ružomberok, Slovakia*

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Abstract

Christian epigraphy is the science about Christian inscriptions which existed in the ancient world. It studies the inscriptions of monumental nature, i.e. all the inscriptions and texts which were written on solid material. As the historical discipline it studies the inscriptions in all their cultural and historical contexts. It makes the inscriptions available for further scientific research. The Christian epigraphy studies the inscriptions in the West until the time of Caroline renaissance and in the East until the time of iconoclasm. Christian epigraphy studies the external form of inscriptions and their arrangement because the ancient written expression was an important source for other scientific disciplines such as Palaeography, Orthography, Linguistics, development of Latin and Greek languages (*κοινή* – koiné) and for morphology of late classic languages. Christian epigraphy studies not only a form but also the contents of the ancient Christian inscriptions and texts and it enables to look at the private and public life of first Christians. Ancient Christian inscriptions enable us to understand the inner Church organization, its legal norms, liturgy and artistic expressions of first Christians but chiefly the dogmatic truths of the early Church.

Keywords: inscriptions, Christian epigraphy, life, Christians, Christian archaeology

1. Introduction

Ancient Christian inscriptions studied by Christian epigraphy are on the *solid material* of various kinds. It was usually marble, calcite, travertine, sandstone... Sometimes they were precious kinds of stone but we can find the ancient Christian inscriptions on wood or metals. Usually a local material was used for inscriptions. It was easily accessible. For example in Rome it was stone (tuff), in Greece and Africa marble and in the East calcite and sandstone. As for the Palaeography, ancient Christian inscriptions in the 1st and 2nd centuries achieved very high level. They were written by capital letters of monumental forms, classic inscription capital letters with aesthetic value. In the following centuries cursive was used in the tomb inscriptions. In the Roman catacombs tomb inscriptions were used on stone plates which were used for closing of

*E-mail: caban@centrum.sk, phone: +42144 4304693, fax: +42144 4304694

horizontal tomb niches, *loculi*. Sarcophagi had the tomb inscriptions on the frontal side of the coffin.

2. Ancient Christian inscriptions and their forms

Inscriptions engraved into the solid material are called *graffiti*. Inscriptions made by charcoal or dye are called *dipints*. Some inscriptions were made of small stones and the artist used the style of *mosaic* – several stones of various colours next to each other. In the Roman catacombs wide brick plates were used for tomb inscriptions. Epigraphs in the late antiquity had the form of *stela*. It was a wide stone plate with the inscriptions indicating the name of the dead or other data.

As for Christian epigraphy we can distinguish several types of artefacts from the antiquity. These artefacts are related to the method of burying and Christian inscriptions could be made in them:

Epitaph – a plate with the inscription about the dead person with rich and epigraph form. Epitaph was not connected with the grave but it could have various forms – a simple inscription plate in the wall or monumental three-dimensional artefact. Epitaph is almost identical with the tombstone including the inscription and dating.

Sepulchre – it is a form of sarcophagus but the remains of the dead person are not inside but in the venue under the sepulchre. From the original sepulchres just decorated cover plates were preserved. Many sepulchres were destroyed or secondarily used as an altar mensa. The cover plates of tombs are sometimes considered as tombstones.

From the technical viewpoint inscriptions in the surface burial places were on higher level than the inscriptions in the catacombs where it was necessary to make the inscriptions on the site under minimal technical conditions and absence of sufficient lighting. Despite this fact in the catacombs there are several inscriptions painted by minate dye. These inscriptions were found in places combining the function of physical cover of the grave and the function of individualization of the space. Some written information about the buried person was preserved. Typical ancient Christian tombstone was in the form of a plate in the size of the buried person [1].

3. The language of inscriptions

A specific question of ancient Christian inscriptions is the problem of language. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries the original language in Rome was *Greek*; therefore in the West besides Latin inscriptions also Greek inscriptions were numerous. For example in the tombs of the popes in Calixt's catacombs there are many Greek inscriptions. Gradually *Latin* was developed in Rome. In Egypt we can find the inscriptions in *Coptic* language but we have also *Syrian*, *Armenian* and *Ethiopian* early Christian inscriptions. Some inscriptions in Roman

catacombs reflect the linguistic battle between Latin and Greek languages. They are interesting Greek-Latin inscriptions with mixed letters from both languages. Sometimes grammatical and orthographic errors can be explained by the fact that the inscription was written in a dialect. For example in some inscriptions we have to read a letter **B** as **V**: for example BIBAS, BIXIT must be read as VIVAS, VIXIT. In other cases **V** must be read as **B**, for example SAVINVS means SABINUS or **E** must be read as **I**: DVLCES, MERETO, i.e. DULCIS, MERITO. But it can be just the opposite: PONTIFIX, FRATIR, i.e. PONTIFEX, FRATER etc. **K** and **Q** as **C**, for example IN PAKE, **V** as **O**, IN NVMINE. In some cases we must consider the errors of the stonemasons who made the tomb inscriptions in the era of literary decadence [2]. In later times Latin was prevalent in the ancient Christian inscriptions. In the 4th and 5th centuries there are specific Christian data in the graves (for example names of contemporary popes or bishops etc.). It can be illustrated by the inscriptions from the 4th century, for example SUB LIBERIO EPISCOPO, SUB DAMASO EPISCOPO and others. The inscriptions were dated according to the emperors, consuls etc.

4. Methods of making, localization and contents

According to the method of making the ancient Christian inscriptions were made by: chiselling, engraving, pouring, and painting, placing into the fresh plaster, combining into the mosaic form, writing or scratching in the wall. According to the primary localization the inscriptions were found in the catacombs, basilicas, tombstones and in the graves of Christians generally. Names in the inscriptions were written by the traditional Roman system: *praenomen, nomen a gentilium* (ante name, name and family).

Other date could follow. Most often names with certain significance were used: for example **VC** – *vir clarissimus* (famous man), **CF** *clarissima femina* (famous woman), **CP** *clarissimus puer/puella* (famous boy/girl). In the graves of slaves their patron can be mentioned. Later Christian baptismal names appeared in the inscriptions such as *Maria, Stephen, John*, etc. In the Roman catacombs such names as *Peter* and *Paul* were used. Inscriptions found in the early Christian era may include:

- **PAX** – (*peace*)
- **BONUM** – (*goodness*)
- **LUX** – (*light*)
- **REFRIGERIUM** – (*place of repose*)
- **PAX AETERNA TECUM** – (*Eternal peace with you!*)
- **IN PACE** – (*in peace*)
- **RIP** – *Requiescat in pace!* – (*Rest in peace!*)
- **PAX TECUM IN DOMINO** – (*Peace be with you in the Lord*)
- **PAX TIBI A DEO** – (*Peace to you from God!*)
- **BONUM ET LUX** – (*Goodness and light*)
- **VIVAS IN CHRISTO IESU** – (*Long live in Christ Jesus!*)
- **VIVE IN DEO** – (*Live in God!*)

Some ancient Christian inscriptions expressed the dogmatic teachings of the Church, for example:

- Ἅγιος ὁ Θεός – **Hagios o Theos!** (Holy God)
- Ἅγιος ἀθάνατος – **Hagios Athanatos!** (Holy Immortal)
- **In unum Deum credidit** (He believed in one God)
- **In Domino nostro Deo Christo** (In our Lord God Christ)
- **In Spiritu Sancto** (In the Holy Spirit)

A good help for the dating of the tomb inscriptions are some palaeographic peculiarities. According to them and according to similar specific signs we can date the tomb inscriptions reliably. Palaeography studies the punctuation of ancient Christian inscriptions, i. e. auxiliary signs used for the division of sentences or words. The division signs were written in half size of the letter. Full point or *hedera* (ivy leaf) and rarely *virgula* (vertical comma) were used. In the text it could be replaced by asterisk, palm branch or small triangles in various positions.

5. Abbreviations in the Christian inscriptions

In Christian antiquity various abbreviations were used. The writer could gain more time and he saved the space because material was quite expensive. The importance of abbreviation can be seen in the fact that a writer could write quickly [3]. It was very needed especially in the catacombs and during persecutions. In general in the ancient world abbreviations were used for the memory of the dead, for example: **B. M.** = *bonae memoriae* (good memory), for the age, for example: **V. A... M... D... H...** = *vixit annos..., menses..., dies..., horas...* (He lived... years, months ... days ... hours). First Christians did not use pagan formulas, for example **H. I.** = *hic iacet* – here lays, **H. S. E.** = *hic sepultus est* – here is buried or **H. O. S.** = *hic ossa sunt* – here are the bones but they made a specific Christian term **DEPOSITVS** (abbreviation **D** or **DEP**) = here is deposited – and it was written at the end of the tomb inscription usually [4]. Abbreviations were used in Latin and Greek Christian inscriptions. Four kinds of abbreviations were used:

5.1. *Litterae singulares (singulae litterae - sigles)*

Are the oldest abbreviations of the Latin lettering (for example **A.** = *Aulus*, **AP.** = *Apus*, **AVR.** = *Aurelius*, **C.** = *Caius* = Gaius, **F.** = *Filius*, **FL.** = *Flavius*). Fertility was denoted by a sign turned to the left side (for example: **C.** = *Caius* = Gaius; **↵** = *Caia* = Gaia). Plural was denoted by double (and triple) writing of the initial letter of the abbreviated word (for example **D.** = *Dominus* (one), **DD.** = *Domini* (two), **DDD.** = *Domini* (three), **DD. NN.** = *Domini nostri* (our two lords). If a word was abbreviated by writing of several initial letters, in the plural only the last letter was doubled, for example: **AVG.** = *Augustus* (one), **AVGG.** = *Augusti* (two), **AVGGG.** = *Augusti* (three), **IMP.** = *Imperator*, **IMPP.** = *Imperatores* (two). This method of abbreviating of words was used since the 2nd

century AD. But we can see some changes, for example not only the initial letter (letters) of the word was written but also the initial letters of syllables (for example: N = Nobis, FCR = Fecerunt, HR = Heres, HRD = Heredes). The full point after a letter is missing and since the 2nd – 3rd centuries AD it was replaced by a horizontal comma

5.2. Tiron notes

Tiron notes were a system of tachygraphy used in the Latin texts made by the liberated slave and friend of Cicero *Markus Tullius Tiro*. They were used for abbreviation of written documents. Tiro registered long speeches of Cicero and he found this system so that he could register everything. The system is named after him. The most known Tiron note was a sign representing the connection *et*.

5.3. Nomina sacra

It was a special way of abbreviating of sacred names in the inscriptions. The origin of this abbreviating of words is not clear but it is evident that the abbreviating does not have Christian origin. Only the initial and end letters of the words were written. Some of the middle letters were omitted. In such inscriptions besides Latin syllables even Greek words or Greek letter were used. These words were introduced into the Latin manuscripts by Christian writers in the 4th century. The oldest proofs of contraction in the Latin manuscripts include: **DS** = *Deus*, **XPS** (XP) = *Christus* a **SPS** = *Spiritus*. In the 5th and 6th centuries other abbreviations were added, for example **DMS** = *Dominus*, **EPS** = *episcopus*, **DIACS** = *diaconus*, **PBR** = *presbyter*, **REUS** = *reverendissimus* or pronouns: **NI** = *nostri*, **NO** = *nostro*, **NM** = *nostrum*. These abbreviations were used not only in the ancient Christian inscriptions but it was a normal practice of that time when the classical works were copied or when the legislative books were written. *Nomina sacra* can be found in the oldest Latin translations of the Bible.

5.4. Notaeiuris

These were abbreviations used in Rome for the manuscripts of juridical contents.

6. Acrostic and telestich

Acrostic inscriptions are a peculiarity of Christian epigraphy. They were used rarely but they have very interesting literary structure. In the so called *Pectorius' inscriptions* from the end of the 2nd century or the beginning of the 3rd century there is an interesting acrostic inscription where the initial letters of first five verses make the symbolic word $\text{IX}\theta\acute{\upsilon}\varsigma$ – IXThYS (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Pectorius' acrostic inscription.

Greek word ιχθύς – fish consisted of first letters of the following sentence in the ancient Christian symbolism: Ιησούς Χριστός Θεού Υιός Σωτήρ – **I**esus **C**hristos **T**heou **U**ios **S**oter – *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Saviour*. Lodovico Muratori commented this kind of verse in the ancient Christian inscriptions: “*Nomina sanctorum lector si forte requiuris, ex omniversu te litera prima docebit.*” - “*Reader, if you are searching for the names of the saints, first letters of each verse will teach you.*”

Other inscriptions of similar nature are denoted as **telestich**. The last letters in the verse make another word and reveal its hidden meaning, for example:

.....P
A
U
L
U
S
 ⇒**PAULUS** (Paul)

7. Roman ciphers in the ancient inscriptions

In ancient Christian inscriptions Roman ciphers were used quite often. Ancient Roman used the signs for expressing numbers. The basic signs were: **I** = 1, **V** = 5, **X** = 10, **L** = 50, **C** = 100, **D** = 500 and **M** = 1000. Romans expressed the higher values by simple combination of these signs. The explanations of experts about the origin of these signs are not uniform. Some expert considers all the signs (I, V, X, L, C, D, and M) as the letters of Latin alphabet. Other experts think that first three signs (I, V, X) are older than the Latin alphabet and their origin is in the number of fingers and picture of open hand. The oldest graphic forms of the other signs (L, C, D, and M) are derived from Greek signs. By combination of signs I, V, X it is possible to write any numbers up to 50. For number 4 and 9 the signs IIII and VIII were used in the ancient times and it took longer time until both numbers were written in such a way that the nearest higher value was decreased and the signs IV and IX were formed as we know them today. Later other numbers were expressed analogically [5]. First

Christians used Roman ciphers in their tomb inscriptions. In Greek inscriptions numbers were expressed by the letters of Greek alphabet [6]. Roman ciphers are used in *chronogram* as well. It is an inscriptions or its compact part where the letters with cipher value are used as the sum to express a year or other numeric data. The inscription can be in Latin or other language and the letters are highlighted by change of size or colour. Metric chronogram is called *chronostich*.

8. Damasus' inscriptions

The so called *Damasus' inscriptions* are a special group of ancient Christian inscriptions. Pope *Damasus I* (366 – 384) highly venerated the ancient Christian martyrs and he wrote inscriptions at their epitaph plates. He wrote most of the inscriptions in the form of verse (in hexameters). His activities were so prolific that he acquired the honorary title *poeta catacubarum* – a poet of the catacombs. His scribe *Furius Dionysius Filocalus* made the inscriptions. He did not use the traditional Roman system of the inscriptions lettering but he created a new type of lettering in Rome. He was influenced by Hellenist East probably. One of the valuable Damasus' inscriptions is found in the Calixt's catacombs, in the papal crypt with the text from Figure 2 [7].

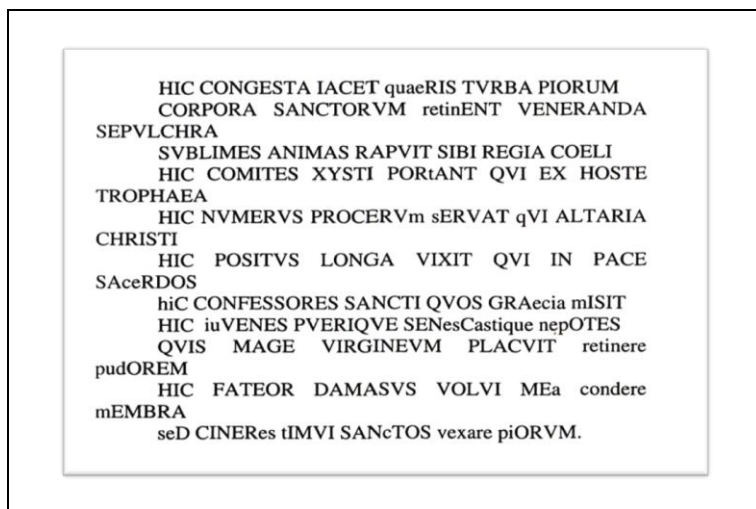


Figure 2. Damasus' inscription.

“If you ask who lies here, know that many pious people repose in this place. The venerable graves preserve the bodies of the saints and heaven took their magnificent souls. Here lie the companions of Sixtus who won over their enemy. Here are (buried) many priests who served at the altar of Christ. Here reposes a priest who lived in the era of peace. Here are holy confessors who were sent by Greece. Here are young men, men and elderly and chaste descendants who wanted to preserve their virginity. I confess that I, Damasus, would like to

deposit my bones. But I would be afraid to disturb the peace of holy and pious bodies.”

In other hexameters the pope mentioned some important historical graves. In the first place he mentioned the graves of the Pope Sixtus II. and his successors. There is very interesting Damasus’ inscription dedicated to a young martyr, Saint Tarsicius, who died as a martyr when he brought the Eucharist to the imprisoned Christians. He was attacked by pagan boys who beat him to death. In the inscription Damasus compared Saint Tarsicius to Saint Stephen, the martyr. He also preferred to be killed. He did not want to give God’s body to the hands of pagans:

***Tarsicium sanctum Christi sacramenta gerentem
cum male sana manus premeret vulgare profani
ipse animam potius voluit dimittere caesus
prodere quam canibus rabidis coelestia membra.***

“Saint Tarsicius bringing Christ in the Eucharist, when murderous hand requested that he give the Eucharist for desecration, he preferred to lose his life and he did not want to give the God’s body to the dogs.”

Another interesting Damasus’ inscription was for the tombstone of the Pope Eusebius (Figure 3).

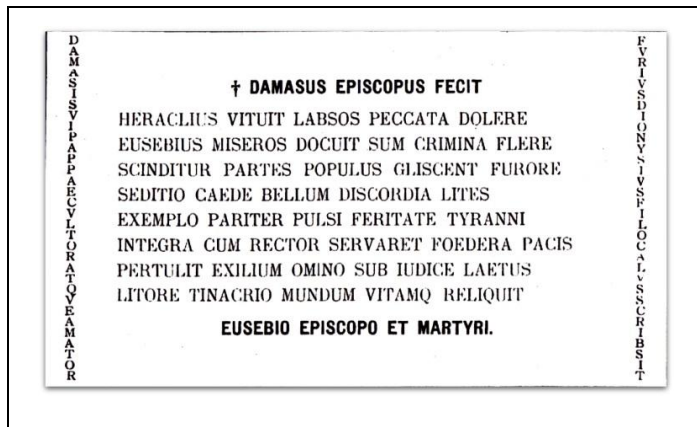


Figure 3. Damasus’ inscription for the tombstone of the Pope Eusebius.

“Heraclius did not allow the apostates to repent for their sins. Eusebius taught these poor people how to bemoan their guilts. People are taking sides. With increasing ferocity there begin disturbances, murders, wars, disputes and disunity. Both of them (Eusebius and Heraclius) were expelled by the wild tyrant, even though the pope remained peaceful. He suffered the exile joyfully and with the help of his Lord and Judge. At the Sicilian seaside he left this world.”

Besides this finding of the tombstone of the Pope Eusebius, there is other finding which documents the activities of the pope Marcellus. It was found in the catacombs of Saint Pricilla. It is a Damasus’ epigram and it was situated above the grave of the Pope Marcellus, the predecessor of Eusebius (Figure 4) [8].

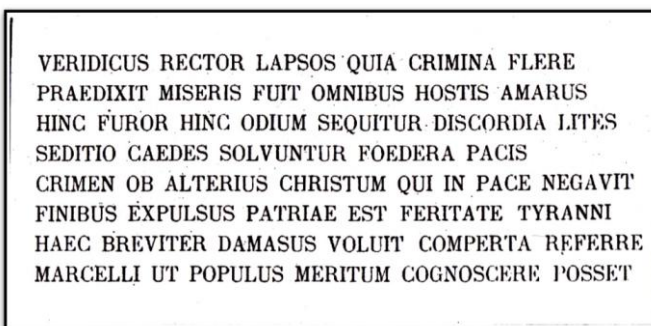


Figure 4. Damasus' epigram above the grave of the Pope Marcellus.

“Beloved guardian of truth, because he preached to the apostates so that they could repent for their sins, he was an enemy of these poor people. For this reason there comes ferocity, animosity, disunity, disputes, rebellion, murders, peace is broken. For the crime of the other who denied Christ in the time of people, he was expelled by a tyrant from his homeland. Damasus wanted to express that so that people could know the merits of Marcellus.”

Other interesting Damasus' inscriptions are found on the graves of martyrs (for example satins *Felix, Nereus, Achillus, Maurus, Marceline, Peter, Tuburtinus, Lawrence, Hyppolite, Saturnius, Agnes, Hyacinth* as well as on the grave of his sister or in the Roma baptistery. There are 61 extant Damasus' inscriptions. They attest about the high artistic and historically precious value. Saint Damasus had these verse written on his grave: *“A person who walked on the sea and silenced the rioting waves/ who gives life to the dying seeds of earth/ who could release the chains of death/ who could bring after three days of darkness/ brother from the grave and give him to his sister Martha/ I believe that one day he will resurrect Damasus from the earth.”*

9. Conclusion

Ancient Christian tomb inscriptions prove that first Christians did not perceive death and burial as the expression of sadness but as the transition into the new life. These inscriptions localized on the graves are full of hope for the eternal life and reunion in the eternity. In many inscriptions their authors used various acclamations from the liturgy of the first centuries. In the inscriptions of the first Christian there is no sadness but strong aspect of hope for the eternal life in Christ. Ancient Christian inscriptions are not only the memorials of history but also testimonies of the life of faith.

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