

The Mysteries of the Crucifixion Gem

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Published on JesusOrigins.com, August 2020.

Abstract

The “Crucifixion Gem” in the British Museum is the earliest known Christian depiction of the crucifixion. This paper identifies new features in the central three lines of the obverse inscription. The name Maria is partially spelt out across the fifth line, positioned at the centre of the whole inscription. There is also an alternating alpha-omega theme that runs all through the central three lines. In particular, the name Maria is interlinked symmetrically with an alternating pattern of three alphas and two omegas. Probabilities have been calculated to check that these features are non-random. The probability of finding something as close to the name Maria is 1 in 1,100, the probability of the entire alpha-omega pattern is only 1 in 390,000, and the probability of the interlinked sequence is 1 in 35,000. In each case, we can rule out chance. I explore a connection with the “Thomas Code”, the formula involving the prime numbers two and three that I have proposed was used to structure the Gospel of Thomas. The alpha-omega pattern is explained if the number three, representing the Father, has been translated into alpha and the number two, representing the Son, into omega. The Thomas Code in alpha-omegas has been interlinked with “Maria” at the centre of the inscription. Several other features of the inscription support the hypothesis that the designer was aware of the Thomas Code.

The earliest depiction of the crucifixion in Christian art is probably a little-known engraved gem, a bloodstone intaglio, in the British Museum. This gem was produced around the same time, or a little earlier, than the more famous Alexamenos graffito in Rome. Whereas the graffitist was mocking Alexamenos’ Christian religion by showing him worshipping a crucified donkey-headed Jesus, the gem was undoubtedly produced by Christians. The stone is tiny, measuring only 3cm by 2cm, and could be

as early as 170-190 AD.¹ In many ways, it is typical of the “magical gems” produced in Syria and Egypt in the second and third centuries. But what is not typical is that the gem depicts the crucifixion. Although such visual representations of the crucifixion became very common later, they are scarce indeed in the early centuries.

The gem features the crucified Jesus on the obverse and an inscription in Greek on both obverse and reverse. This paper depends heavily on the reading of the obverse inscription as set out in a recent paper by Roy D. Kotansky. The Kotansky paper clarifies some of the inscription letters which have been hard to discern; it, in turn, uses the prior work and photographs of Jeffrey Spier. Another useful resource is a book chapter, “Picturing the passion” by Felicity Harley-McGowan which places the gem in its early context and compares it to similar objects and images.²

Given the unique nature of the gem and the lack of original provenance (as is typical of such items) it must be asked whether it is a forgery. Kotansky is in no doubt that the gem is genuine: “The gem’s fabric, composition, style of lettering, engraving, and drilling technique all point to ancient workmanship.”³ We might add that the gem is not at all what we would expect from a forgery. It does not show the traditional form of the crucifixion and would not appeal to the lucrative US evangelical market. And although the inscription shows many puzzling features, it is far from meaningless and not the type of random association of letters and words produced by some less sophisticated forgers.

This paper will show that it is not useful to think of the gemstone obverse as a “magical gem”. It is not intended to invoke a magical power but encodes fundamental beliefs and mysteries of the Christian religion as seen by a second-century Christian. The reverse does contain magical words, but it was engraved at a later date and by a different hand. At some point, the original gem has been reused on the reverse to give it more magical “power”. In this post we will concentrate only on the obverse.

Tangible objects, such as this gem, often preserve early traditions better than texts produced at a similar time. Perhaps this is because they are not dependent upon scribal transmission through the later church. Or perhaps because they reflect the faith of the ordinary people, passed down generation to generation, rather than the elite writings of the church fathers. The crucifixion gem holds mysteries which have not been previously fully understood. It provides very early evidence for the central importance of Mary; it features an early development of the Alpha and Omega theme;

¹ Roy D. Kotansky, *The Magic ‘Crucifixion Gem’ in the British Museum* (Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 57, 2017), pp. 631–659, n.5.

² Felicity Harley-McGowan, “Picturing the Passion” in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (Routledge, 2018), pp. 290-307.

³ Kotansky n.4.

and it reflects the symbolism of the Thomas Code, expressed in letters rather than numbers.

A crucifixion without nails



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Figure 1: The Crucifixion Gem

The depiction of the crucifixion on the gem is surprising; a completely nude Jesus is suspended from a T-shaped cross to which he is tied—not nailed. The posture of Jesus is strange for anyone used to the conventions of later crucifixion art; his legs are akimbo, with his heels perhaps tied to another short crossbar, although this is not shown. We also find the T-shaped cross in other early depictions of the crucifixion such as the Alexamenos graffito. The gem emphasises the ropes by which Jesus is

suspended from the crossbar, so there is no doubt that he is not nailed. Jesus is also tied to the cross in another very early crucifixion scene, the Constanza gemstone dating from the fourth century and now in the British Museum. Given the extreme paucity of early Christian crucifixion images, it is striking that these two examples both show Jesus suspended by ropes.

We have all got so used to the idea that Jesus was crucified with nails that it may come as a surprise that none of the gospel crucifixion accounts mentions the nails. The gospels simply say that Jesus was crucified—not how. The first intimation of the nails comes in the resurrection appearance in Luke 24:39-40 when Jesus gives his disciples proof of his resurrection by showing them his hands and feet, something which makes no sense unless he had been nailed to the cross. The story is developed further in John 20:20-28 with doubting Thomas demanding to see the nail holes. Clearly, both the authors of Luke and John assumed that Jesus must have been nailed to the cross; this was the normal, although not invariable, Roman method of crucifixion.

Whoever engraved the crucifixion gem did not seem to be aware of the gospel crucifixion accounts. With the T-shaped cross there is no place for the charge displayed above Jesus in the gospels; that he was “the king of the Jews”. And the duration of the crucifixion in the gospels is very short, only six hours in Mark, less than six hours in Matthew and Luke, and only around three hours in John. This short crucifixion is hard enough to explain if Jesus were nailed. It becomes utterly incredible if he were only tied to the cross, which would involve a long drawn out death by exposure.

All of this is evidence that the crucifixion gem is drawing upon traditions that came before the gospels. It thus provides a valuable window on the earliest Christianity uncontaminated by the gospel accounts.

The inscription

The obverse inscription has one line above the cross, one line below (badly chipped), and the middle seven lines on either side:⁴

⁴ Inscription and translation from Kotansky, p. 636.

YIE
ΠΑΘΗΡΗ
COYXPICTE
COAMNWA
MWAWIA
EHIOYW
APTANNA
ΛΥCIOY
[Y]I[OY]

Note: the large lower-case omega is represented here as "W".

Some of this makes sense in Greek—and some does not. A pattern of three groups of three is apparent, and the following is the translation of the first and last groups by Kotansky:

[1] O Son,
[2] Father,
[2-3] O Jesus Christ

[4-6] (Analysed below)

[7] O Crossbeam of
[8] the redeeming
[9] Son

The first three lines form the pattern; the Son, the Father, Jesus Christ. The oddest feature here is the repeat of Jesus, first as the Son and then as Jesus Christ, with the Father in between. So we get a formula which resembles the trinity but which is not the trinity.

The translation of the last three lines involves some issues. Kotansky goes through the arguments for interpreting the expression in line [7] as “crossbeam”.⁵ The Greek *αρταννα* is taken as a development of the uncommon word *αρτανη*, meaning “rope, noose or halter”. Kotansky interprets this as meaning not the ropes by which Jesus is hung, but the hanging device, the crossbeam. This reading seems sensible in the

⁵ Kotansky, pp. 644-47.

context of Jesus hanging from the T-shaped cross. However, as we will see, the choice of word has been partly dictated by the three alphas in $\alpha\rho\alpha\nu\nu\alpha$. Rather than relating to just the crossbeam, it may have intended to refer to the whole crucifixion as a “hanging”.

In the last line, one letter is visible with the remainder chipped off. Kotansky has recreated the line to give the expression “redeeming Son”.⁶ This gives a notable symmetry between the first and last lines; the “Son” appears both above and below the cross.

The middle three lines appear at first sight to make little sense. Only one word is discernible; “lamb”. But it is in these three lines that we will find the most interesting features. The key to understanding these lines is that they form an inter-linked and interlocking pattern of letters. As we will see, they cannot be read as a continuous inscription.

Mary

The symmetry of the inscription has already become apparent; there are three groups of three, and the Son appears at the start and end. Our attention should be drawn to the centre of symmetry, the fifth line. It is here that we find the name of Mary (MAPIA) at the very heart of the inscription:

MWAWIA

One letter, rho, is missing and there are two interloping omegas. But four out of five letters are present, all in the correct order. And the line starts with the first letter and ends with the last two.

Can we be sure that the author of the inscription intended to evoke the name Maria here? Or is it possible that a similarity to the name has arisen by chance? The second possibility can be quantified by calculating the probability that a random collection of six letters could resemble the name Maria as closely as this. For this purpose, “closely” is defined as (i) starting with M; (ii) ending with A; and (iii) having at least two of A, P and I in order within the middle four letters. Allowing for the frequency distribution of Greek letters, the probability of this occurring by chance is less than 1 in 3,500.⁷ There are only three lines in the inscription that do not have a

⁶ Kotansky, pp. 647-48.

⁷ The calculation assumes the following letter frequencies; A: 11.1%, I: 9.5%, M: 2.9%, P: 3.4%.

normal Greek meaning, so the probability that one of these lines would resemble Maria this closely is less than 1 in 1,100. This enables us to rule out chance.

It became common to abbreviate the name Maria. Her name could be indicated by the first and last letters, M with A, with the A sometimes superimposed upon the M to create a symbol analogous to a Christogram. Another example is the following Latin inscription in which the name is spelt out by just three letters (M_R_A) together with the image of the dove:



Figure 2: Christian epitaph in the Vatican Museum.

Finding Mary's name at the very centre of the gem inscription provides very early testimony to her importance. But why is the name not spelt out in full? And why are two omegas intermingled within the name? This brings us to the next theme.

Alpha and Omega

The alpha and omega are a pervasive theme of early Christian art. They can be found in the Roman catacombs in association with the Chi-Rho symbol and on either side of the head of Christ. The earliest source for the alpha and omega is the book of Revelation, in which they stand for God:

"I am the alpha and the omega," says the Lord God, the one who is and was and is to come, the almighty." (Revelation 1:8)

But they also stand for Jesus:

I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Revelation 22:13)

If we look at the central three lines, we can see that these two letters appear multiple times:

COAMNWA
MWAWIA
EHIOYW

There are 8 occurrences of either alpha or omega in 19 letters which compares to an expected number of occurrences of 2.7. Not only that, but the alphas and omegas start with alpha and always alternate. The probability of finding 8 alpha/omegas in 19 letters is 0.3% or 1 in 330.⁸ The probability declines to just 1 in 390,000 if we also take into account the alternating pattern.⁹ This calculation assumes the letter frequency distribution of the Greek language. We should also consider the possibility that this part of the inscription comprises magical words with a higher preponderance of vowels. To test this idea, the frequency of both alpha and omega is increased to 15% (approximately 1 in 7). Even with this extreme assumption, the probability of the observed pattern is only 1 in 2,000. We can conclude that the pattern is definitely non-random and that these three lines have been designed to reflect an alternating alpha and omega theme.

Alpha and Omega: the lamb

The one Greek word identified in the three lines by Kotansky is $\alpha\mu\nu\omega$ which is “lamb” in the dative:

COAMNWA
MWAWIA
EHIOYW

The sacrificial lamb is a very appropriate image for Jesus in the context of the crucifixion. We find it in another early crucifixion gem; the carnelian called the Nott Gem, now preserved only in the form of a plaster cast.¹⁰ This shows Jesus crucified, with the twelve apostles around and below. The lamb comes at the bottom set between the final two letters of Christos. And the lamb also represents Christ in Revelation.

⁸ The calculation assumes a frequency of A: 11.1% and ω : 3.2%, to give a combined frequency of 14.3%. The binomial distribution with $p=0.143$ and $n=19$ is used to calculate the cumulative probability of 8 or more occurrences.

⁹ The binomial probability of m occurrences is multiplied by the probability that these m occurrences start with alpha and then alternate between alpha and omega. This calculation allows for the relative frequency of the two letters. The probabilities are summed for all $m \geq 8$.

¹⁰ Felicity Harley-McGowan, “The Constanza Carnelian and the Development of Crucifixion Iconography in Late Antiquity”, in C. Entwistle and N. Adams, *Gems of Heaven: Recent Research on Engraved Gemstones in Late Antiquity* (British Museum Press, 2011), p. 215.

We should note that “lamb” in the gem is symmetrical about the central cross with “AM” on one side and “NW” on the other. The word in the dative has doubtless been chosen because it starts with alpha and ends with omega.

Alpha and Omega: the central sequence

Starting with the alpha immediately after “lamb” there is a sequence of seven letters:

COAMNWA
MWAWIA
EHIOYW

This gives a symmetrical pattern of alphas and omegas interlinked with Mary’s name:

AMWAWIA

Here we have five alternating alpha-omegas in seven letters; the probability of this being random is 1 in 35,000.¹¹ As we have seen, the probability that the reading of Maria is random is 1 in 3,500. So we can be confident that both features are present in this sequence. The name Maria has been purposefully interlinked with an alternating alpha-omega pattern.

Alpha and Omega: the seven vowels

Finally, we find the seven Greek vowels in order, starting with alpha and ending with omega:

COAMNWA
MWAWIA
EHIOYW

The sequence of vowels was identified by Kotansky.¹² His interpretation is dependent upon reading the second letter as an epsilon without the central bar rather

¹¹ This time we allow the sequence to start with either alpha or omega.

¹² Kotansky, pp. 642-44.

than a sigma. The seven vowels symbolised the seven planets and the seven heavens, the totality of the ancient cosmos.

Unblemished lamb

One remaining puzzle is the significance of the initial sigma and omicron on the first of the three lines. Kotansky offers the interpretation that the sequence starting with these letters is an anagram:¹³

COAMNWA

MWAWIA

EHIOYW

We can see that this sequence is symmetrical with the vowel sequence above; one ends with the first letter of the central row 5, the other starts with the last letter. Kotansky shows how this is an anagram for the phrase “unblemished lamb” (cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19):

σοαμνωαμ

Is an anagram for:

αμνος αμω(μος)

This anagram requires the final three letters to be reused a second time to produce the ending. We should note that the phrase without these final three letters starts with alpha and ends with omega.

The Thomas Code

In my book, *The Thomas Code*, I draw attention to the importance of the prime factorisation of 108, which consists of the first two primes raised to their own powers; $108 = 2^2 \cdot 3^3$. Putting this factorisation in sequence gives the “Thomas Code”:¹⁴

3 • 2 • 3 • 2 • 3

¹³ Kotansky, pp. 638-40.

¹⁴ S.P. Laurie, *The Thomas Code: Solving the mystery of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: Hypostasis, 2018).

This sequence has unique properties; (i) the number of occurrences of each prime factor equals the factor (two twos and three threes); (ii) the two prime factors sum to give the next prime number (five) which equals the total number of factors; (iii) the factors alternate, so the sum of any two successive factors (either 3+2, or 2+3) equals this next prime. These mathematical properties uniquely define the Thomas Code—there is no other sequence of numbers that satisfies all three conditions.

The book shows how the Thomas Code was used to organise the Gospel of Thomas as a collection of 108 sayings. Whoever placed the gospel in its final form attributed a mystical-mathematical meaning to Thomas Code with the number 3 representing the Father and the number 2 representing the Son (the significant sayings here are Thomas 16 & 30). The “three threes” and “two twos” are matched by the “single one” representing a disciple who has entered into the spiritual union. The numbers 3, 2, 1 comprise a proto-trinity of Father, Son, Disciple-Spirit.

The crucifixion gem shows awareness of the Thomas Code. Instead of numbers, it expresses the code through the theme of Alpha and Omega:

Alpha = the Father = 3
Omega = the Son = 2

So the Thomas Code formula becomes:

AWAWA

It is this formula that we find in the central gem sequence:

AMWAWIA

Where it is interlinked with the name MA(P)IA:

AMWAWIA

This, then, is the central mystery of the gem. The name of Mary and the Thomas Code expressed in alphas and omegas (the Father and the Son), intertwined on either side of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Other links to the Thomas Code

There are several other links to the Thomas Code in the gem inscription.

1. The two omegas interpolated into Mary's name represent Christ.

In the Thomas Code, the two twos represent Christ. They have become two omegas in the inscription, and we find them interpolated into MA(P)IA:

MWAWIA

This is part of the larger interlinked pattern combining the Thomas Code with Maria. But, significantly, it is the double omega representing Christ which has been placed within the name.

2. The grouping of lines into three groups of three evokes the Father.

In the Thomas Code, the three threes stand for the Father. This is echoed in the organisation of the inscription into three groups of three lines.

3. The double use of "Son" reflects the two twos in the Thomas Code.

The "Son" appears twice in the inscription; in the first and last lines. In the Thomas Code, the Son is represented as two twos or two omegas, so this doubling of the Son is appropriate.

4. The central triplet encodes the first three lines.

At the centre of the central line of the inscription is a symmetrical triplet:

WAW

In the Thomas Code, this represents; the Son – the Father – the Son. This matches the three lines [1-3] invoking the Son, the Father, Jesus Christ. The inscription substitutes "Jesus Christ" for the second "Son" here. This preserves the second appearance of "Son" for the last line of the inscription.

5. The crossbeam/hanging line has a symmetrical pattern of three alphas.

Line [7] features three alphas placed symmetrically:

APTANNA

The three alphas match the three threes of the Thomas Code. They balance the two omegas in Mary's name two lines above. We have seen that this expression meaning "crossbeam" (Kotansky) or perhaps more generally referring to the crucifixion as a "hanging" is unexpected. We can now see why this particular word $\alpha\rho\tau\alpha\nu\eta$ in this particular form $\alpha\rho\tau\alpha\nu\nu\alpha$ has been chosen.

Conclusion

There are many levels of meaning built into the obverse inscription. It would surely have first been worked out on papyrus or some similar medium before being engraved with the crucifixion image on the gem. Whoever made this gem recognised Mary as having importance beyond any of the apostles. They not only knew of the Thomas Code but designed several features of the inscription around it. They knew of the book of Revelation or at least had access to Revelation's source for the alpha-omega theme. They were either unaware of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion or chose not to treat them as a primary source. Instead, of a Roman-style crucifixion, we have the earlier "hanging from a tree".

The gem is a remnant of the original pre-gospel Christianity mediated by the shaman Mary; it reflects the traditions of this first Christianity preserved into the later second century. It interlinks the Thomas Code, recast in alphas and omegas, with Mary's name. The alpha and omega theme is also expressed through the lamb, the unblemished, perfect sacrifice, and the seven vowels, symbolising the seven planets and the seven heavens, the totality of the cosmos. Interwoven into the name Maria are two omegas, signifying the spiritual union of Mary and Christ. The Father and the Son, the alpha and omega, are invoked explicitly. In Revelation, they are the first and last. In the gem, Son and Father come first, and the Son again as the last.