


From the Desk of Pastor Jim

“The Staurogram” – The Earliest Depiction of Jesus’ Crucifixion

In the Greek, the language of the Early Church, the capital *TAU*, or **T**, looks pretty much like our “**T**”. The capital *RHO*, or **R**, however is written like our “**P**”. And if you superimpose these two letters, it looks

something like this: . The earliest Christian use of this tau-rho combination is what is called the staurogram. This name comes from the Greek verb “to crucify” which is the Greek word *sauroo*; or a “cross” which is the Greek word *stauros*. In scholarly terms, a combination of letters like this is called a compendium or a monogram-like device. In this case (in the earliest Christian uses) this combination actually became a pictograph, representing a crucified figure hanging on a cross.


It is common belief among modern historians that the Early Church did not emphasize Jesus’ crucifixion because it was so shameful, and so (the theory goes) Christians would have been hesitant to draw attention to the crucified Jesus. So much for the theory of modern historians!?! The existence of the staurogram directly contradicts these modern historians. We find examples of the staurogram used in Christian Literature as early as 150-200 A.D. (see examples below).

The earliest example is a papyrus copy of the Gospel of John known as P⁶⁶ (Papyrus-Bodmer II), dated about 200 A.D. The staurogram appears in the Greek words for “crucify” and “cross” in John 19:6, 15, 16, 18, 19, 25, and 31. Likewise, in another early Gospel codex P⁷⁵ (Papyrus Bodmer XIV-XV), including portions of Luke and John and dated about the same time, there are two further instances of the staurogram in the same two Greek words in Luke 9:23; 14:7, 27. (See examples of both of these in the inset to the right.)


Perhaps a bit later, the Vienna fragment P⁴⁵, the earliest existent codex containing all four Gospels and Acts (200-250 A.D.), we have an additional instance preserved in Matthew 26:2. Here, the word *staurothenai* (“to be crucified”) is written in a contracted way with a staurogram forming part of the abbreviation.

The staurogram is only one of several christograms, that is, monogram-like devices used by Christians to refer to Jesus. The most widely known christogram is the *chi-rho* combination using the first two Greek letters







THE STAUROGRAM, a combination of the Greek letters *tau* and *rho*, looks like a human figure hanging on a cross and stands in for parts of the Greek words for “cross” (*stauros*) and “crucify” (*stauroō*) in Bodmer papyrus P⁶⁶, a copy of the Gospel of John (200 C.E.). The staurogram is the earliest visual reference to Jesus’ crucifixion.



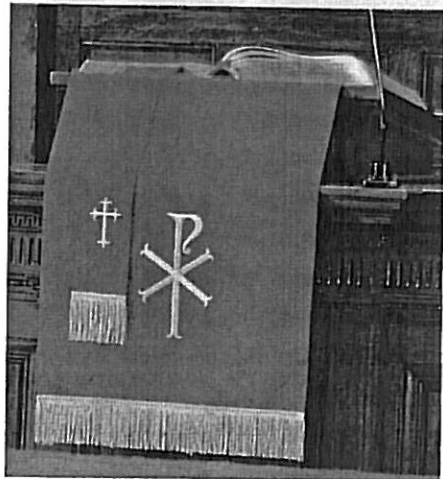
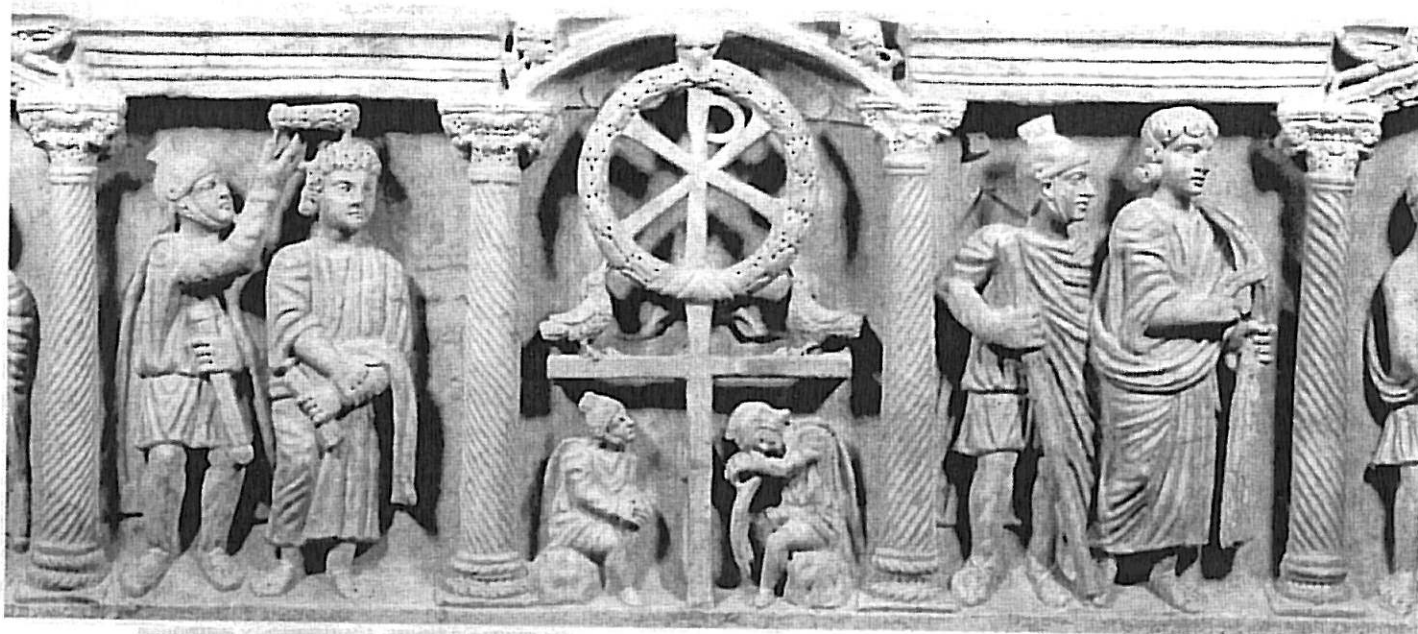
REFERENCES TO CROSSES AND CRUCIFIXION are again depicted by staurograms in statements by Jesus to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke in Bodmer papyrus P⁷⁵, dated to about the same time as Bodmer P⁶⁶.





of Christ. It is frequently seen on liturgical vestments as well as in icons and other ecclesiastical items. None, however, is as early as the examples of the staurograms cited above.

The staurogram is different from other christograms in another respect. The staurogram does not refer to any name or title linked with Jesus. It refers only to the crucifixion; it is a simply kind of picture. By contrast, the *Chi-Rho* sign refers to the word “Christ.” This is true of other christograms as well. The *iota-chi* combines the first letters of the Greek words for “Jesus Christ” and the *iota-eta* is composed of the first two Greek letters of the word “Jesus”



ABOVE: A CHI-RHO CHRISTOGRAM appears in a wreath atop a cross, and flanked by scenes of Jesus' life in this high relief marble sarcophagus (c. 340 C.E.), located in the Vatican Museum, Rome.

LEFT: IN CONTRAST TO THE STAUROGRAM, the christogram *chi-rho* refers directly to the word “Christ.” Unlike the staurogram, however, it is not a visual representation. It is often seen on liturgical vestments and other ritual implements such as the pulpit cloth shown here.

Unique among the christograms, the letters of the *tau-rho* combination seem to be intended to refer visually to the crucified Jesus. This places the staurogram among the earliest expressions of a distinctive ancient Christian “visual culture.”

In time, christograms came to be used not only in texts but as free-standing symbols of Christ or the Christian faith, for example on liturgical vestments and church utensils. This was probably also true of the staurogram, *tau-rho*; where it would represent simply the crucified Christ. As such it is the earliest surviving depiction of Jesus' crucifixion.

Blessed Easter to You,

Pastor Jim