

Chrestians before Christians? An Old Inscription Revisited, by Erík Zara, Th.D. (rel. expt)

In the 18th century the Italian historian Lodovico Antonio Muratori collected many ancient inscriptions in the work *Novus Thesaurus Veterum Inscriptionum*. Amongst them, one marble inscription, originally from Rome,¹ has puzzled some scholars. The inscription, an epitaph, given the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* identity number CIL VI 24944,² reads:

D. M
M. T. DRVSI . PATERES
PRIMICINIO³. QVI VIXIT
ANN. XXXXII. DIES VII

FAVSTVS. ANTONIAE. DRVSI. IVS EMIT. IVCVNDI. CHRESTIANI. OLL⁴

According to Dr. Heinrich Chantraine, the stone cutter severely disfigured the text and it is “nicht sicher zu heilen.”⁵ “D.M.” is an abbreviation of “Diis Manibus”, “to the gods of the underworld”, and has been said to indicate that the grave was a pagan’s grave.⁶ The text, being difficult to interpret as it is missing “essential” words, *could* be interpreted as saying that M. (and) T.⁷, the father/fathers⁸ of Drusus, dedicated the tomb to his/their first born⁹ son, who lived for 42 years and seven days, and Faustus, the son/slave/freedman of Antonia, the daughter/wife¹⁰ of Drusus, bought (*emit*) the right for the urn (with cremation ashes) to be put in a certain *columbarium* or other burial place (*jus oll.*),¹¹ from Jucundus, the Chrestian.

“Antonia” has often been interpreted as referring to Antonia Minor (36 BCE - 37 CE),¹² the daughter of Mark Anthony the triumvir, and mother of the emperor Claudius. She was married to General Nero Claudius *Drusus*, from (18 or) 16 BCE until he died in 9 BCE.¹³ Faustus has been regarded as a freedman¹⁴, servant¹⁵ or slave¹⁶ of Antonia. It is not possible,

¹ For references, cf. Henzen, de Rossi, Bormann, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. VI, pars IV, fasc. I: *Tituli sepulcrales: Plotia-Zozon, Inscriptiones Varii Argumenti, Fragmenta*, (CIL VI:IV), p. 2509.

² E. Jory, D. Moore, *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, vol. VI, pars VII, fasc. IV: *Indices vocabulorum*, p. 4262.

³ Dr. Münter found that the words “pateres primicinio” ought to be interpreted as “patris primigenii”; cf. Friedrich Münter, *Sinnbilder und Kunstvorstellungen der alten Christen*, Altona 1825 (Münter 1825), p. 14.

⁴ Lodovico Antonio Muratori, *Novus Thesaurus Veterum Inscriptionum*, vol III. Class. XXIII, Mediolani (Milan) 1739-1742, p. 1668, no. 6. Rendering here after Manni, Gaetano, *Principi della religion cristiana in Firenze : appoggiati a' più validi monumenti o si dica monumenti appartenenti alla medesima religione*, 1764, p. 3.

⁵ Heinrich Chantraine, *Freigelassene und Sklaven im Dienst der römischen Kaiser: Studien zu ihrer Nomenklatur*, Wiesbaden 1967 (Chantraine), p. 307.

⁶ Münter 1825, p. 14.

⁷ Prof. Orelli suggests Marcus and Titus/Tiberius; cf. Johann Caspar von Orelli, *Inscriptionum Latinarum Selectarum Amplissima Collectio et Illustrandam Romanae Antiquitatis*, vol. II, Fuessli 1828 (Orelli), p. 290. Theodor Mommsen interprets the text as “*Montanus Tyche Drusi servi parentes*”; cf. CIL VI:IV, p. 2509.

⁸ If *pateres* is taken literary as “fathers”, one is the biological father and one the adoptive father, according to Orelli, p. 290.

⁹ The word “primicinio” seems to be elsewhere unknown; cf. Hugo Schuchardt, *Der Vokalismus des Vulgärlateins*, Leipzig 1866, p. 397. *Primigenius*, as Münter corrects “primicinio” to, means “first born”.

¹⁰ The genitive form does not indicate which relation these people had to each other. The suggestions are from Dr. Münter (op. cit.), Dr. Chantraine (op. cit.), and from private correspondence I have engaged in.

¹¹ Bishop Friedrich Münter, *Christinden i det hedenske Huus för Constantin den Stores Tider*, Det Kongelige danske Videnskabernes Selskabs filosofiske og historiske avhandlingar, tredje deel, Kjöbenhavn (Copenhagen) 1827 (Münter 1827), p. 411.

¹² E.g. Hermann Lehmann, *Claudius und Nero und ihre Zeit*, Gotha 1858, p. 5, Münter 1825, p. 14, 1827, p. 411.

¹³ David L. Vagi, *Coinage and History of the Roman Empire*, Taylor & Francis 2000, p. 134.

¹⁴ Münter 1825, p. 14, Johann Repomuk Sepp, *Das Leben Christi*, Regensburg 1845 (Sepp), p. 98.

based only on the information given, to conclude with absolute certainty that the Antonia and Drusus in the inscription actually are the famous Antonia and Drusus mentioned above.¹⁷

“Jucundus Chrestianus” has by some been interpreted as referring to a Christian person, who no longer needed the right to put his urn in a certain place (because Christians did not cremate their dead) and thus sold this right to a pagan.¹⁸ Jucundus¹⁹ (meaning pleasant, delightful or agreeable²⁰), was by Dr. Johann Sepp thought of as one of the earliest Christian believers in Rome.²¹ Others believe that *Chrestianus* (perhaps deriving from the Greek word *chrēstos*, meaning good, useful, and service-able²², which was a common name²³) was the person’s proper name.²⁴ If *Chrestianus* is not a servant’s name, it could be referring to a person belonging to the new religion (i.e. Christianity), Dr. Marta Sordi concludes.²⁵ Dr. Joseph B. Lightfoot has stated, regarding *Chrestianus*, that the name is improbable and that it is not known to have existed, and the name is rarely used, and seems unused in the 1st century CE.²⁶

Regarding the dating of the inscription, it has been said that it cannot have been made later than 37 CE, the year Antonia Minor died.²⁷ Dr. Martin Karrer, who seems to agree about this dating, calls the inscription the earliest documentation of the word *Chrestianus*,²⁸ a word non-Christians used, referring to Christians, in the days of Tertullian (very late second century).²⁹ The genitive *Antoniae* could indicate that she was still alive; otherwise one would perhaps expect her being called *Augusta*, or a word indicating that she was deceased, or perhaps her

¹⁵ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity*, The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, Rome 1977, p. 188.

¹⁶ Chantraine, p. 307. Even Jucundus has been regarded a slave; cf. Martin Karrer, *Der Gesalbte: die Grundlagen des Christustitels*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991 (Karrer), p. 71.

¹⁷ Mason Hammond concludes, though, that amongst the relevant inscriptions there are “relatively few instances where a woman was indicated a wife of so-and-so except in the case of the imperial house”; cf. Mason Hammond, *An Unpublished Latin Funerary Inscription of Persons Connected with Maecenas*, in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 69, Harvard University Press, 1965 p. 271, n. 16. I have not found any book or article in which a scholar is questioning that the Antonia Drusi in the inscription is the famous Antonia Drusi.

¹⁸ Münter 1825, p. 14, Münter 1827, p. 411, Sepp, p. 98.

¹⁹ The name has been born by several Christians, such as Saint Jucundus (martyr, d. c. 250), Saint Jucundus (martyred in Rheims c. 451), Saint Jucundus of Bologna (d. 485), Saint Jucundus (Bishop of Aosta, d. c. 522).

²⁰ Albert Harkness, *Practical introduction to Latin composition: for schools and colleges*, 1874, p. 216.

²¹ Sepp, p. 98.

²² Lawrence A. Tritle, *Phocion the Good*, University of Chicago, rev. ed. 1988, p. 143.

²³ Kurt Linck, *De antiquissimis veterum quae ad Iesum Nazarenum spectant testimoniis*, Giessen 1913, p. 106.

²⁴ E.g. Orelli, p. 290.

²⁵ Marta Sordi, *Autocoscienza e rappresentazione dei popoli nell'antichità*, Vita e pensiero, 1992, (Sordi), p. 217.

²⁶ “... a proper name Christianus or Chrestianus; but no such proper name is known to have existed, or indeed is probable in itself prior to the use of the word to designate ‘a follower of Christ’”; cf. Joseph Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Georg Olms Verlag, (1880s), 1973, p. 416. The name must not be a Latin name; cf. n. 49. A now lost charcoal inscription of Pompeii was once said to have been about *Chrestianos* (in e.g. Orazio Marucchi, *Manual of Christian Archeology*, [1935], Kessinger Publishing, 2003, p. 21), but the drawings of the inscription clearly reads (C)hristian(os); cf. William Newbold, *Five Transliterated Aramaic Inscriptions*, *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1926), p. 291; see also below. Only in one single inscription (CIL VI 1056, r. 83, dated to 205 CE), someone (a watchman in the 1st *Cohors Vigilum*) used the cognomen *Chrestianus*: *Herennius Chrestianus*. This was during the reign of Septimius Severus, in which a Roman watchman perhaps could not have been a Christian; cf. Karrer, p. 81, Orsolina Montevecchi, *Nomen Christianum*, *Paradoxos Politeia: studi patristici in onore di Giuseppe Lazzati*, Vita e pensiero, Milan 1979 (Montevecchi) p. 493. A 4th century CE sarcophagus inscription in Turkey is interpreted as Χρησ[τι]ανου, (the last four letters damaged), “[the tomb of] Chrestianos” (Christian?); cf. Reynolds, Roueché, Bodard, *Inscriptions of Aphrodisias*, 2007, inscription 15.350.

²⁷ Sordi, p. 217, Montevecchi, p. 491.

²⁸ Karrer, p. 71.

²⁹ Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 3.5, written c. 197 CE.

name not being mentioned at all, if Faustus was a free man. Dr. Münter believes that Cajus was emperor of Rome when the inscription was made.³⁰ *Cajus* must be a reference to Caligula (whose full name was *Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus*), who reigned during the last months of Antonia's life in 37 CE, and until 41 CE. Even though the identification of Antonia is not totally certain, I will assume a dating not later than 37 CE,³¹ but not, as Münter, limit myself to the reign of Caligula, since there seems to be no reason to.

To determine if *Chrestianus/Chrestiani* could refer to Christians, we have to establish if this term, or rather *Christianus/Christiani* (Christians), was used referring to them in the days of Antonia Minor. *Christiani/Chrestiani* is indeed used in literature, about the days of Nero,³² and later days,^{33,34} but not regarding the days of Tiberius or Caligula, or even Claudius.^{35,36}

A charcoal inscription, in Latin, found at Pompeii in 1862, was once interpreted as "Bovos listens to the Christians [*Christianos*], the cruel haters", but this interpretation (one of a few interpretations, that I know of) cannot be tested, as the inscription already in 1864 was lost, and is only available in two conflicting drawings.³⁷ On the whole, no indisputably Christian inscriptions seem to exist, which can be dated to earlier than about 200 CE, and most Christian epigraphs are from the 3rd century or later.³⁸ No non-canonical evidence for any usage referring to Christians, of *Chrest-/Christiani*, during Antonia's life, can thus be found.

Concerning canonic evidence, the word Christian/Christians is used only three times in the New Testament – twice in the Acts of the Apostles, and once in the First Epistle of Peter.³⁹ In Acts 11:26 it is said that "in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." In Acts 26 the apostle Paul is making a speech before King Agrippa II. Paul says: "Do you believe what the

³⁰ "[The epigraph was] in das apostolische Zeitalter, als Cajus Kaiser war, hinaufsteigt"; cf. Münter 1825, p. 13.

³¹ "In AD 37 [Antonia] is mentioned for the first time as 'Augusta' at Corinth ... and in the following year at Rome"; cf. Nikos Kokkinos, Franco Vartuca, *Antonia Augusta: Portrait of a Great Roman Lady*, Routledge, 1992, p. 35. A proper name, used by a female slave of Antonia, was *Chreste*; cf. *ibid.* p. 61; cf. also Karrer p. 72.

³² E.g. Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum, Nero* 16:2: "afflicti supplicii christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae", "[Nero] punished the *christiani*, a class of men devoted to a new and mischievous superstition". Cornelius Tacitus could have been writing *chrestianos* in *Annales* 15:44, the passage about the Great Fire in 64 CE, and the aftermath thereof, where the word now reads *christianos*; cf. Erik Zara, *The Chrestianos Issue in Tacitus Reinvestigated*, 2009, available at textexcavation.com, with references; cf. n. 50.

³³ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 10.96: "Interrogavi ipsos an essent *Christiani*", "I interrogated them whether they were Christians". Pliny the Younger wrote this c. 110 CE, over 70 years after the death of Antonia Minor.

³⁴ The Greek term is used in *Didache* 12:6, but this work (perhaps c. 100) is difficult to date.

³⁵ Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum, Divus Claudius*, 25:3: "Iudaeos impulsore *chresto* assidue tumultuantis", "the constantly rioting Jews, instigated by *Chrestus*" (see above), does not include forms of *Christiani* or *Chrestiani*.

³⁶ Flavius Josephus *could* have been writing *Χριστιανων*, *Christianon*, in *Antiquitates judaicae* 18:64, but the work was published in Greek in c. 94 CE, so even if the mention of *Christianon* is genuine, usage of it in 94 CE is not evidence for any usage of the term *Christiani*, in 37 CE or earlier. Neither is any later Christian usage.

³⁷ Leslie Barnard concludes that "as the graffito [dated to ~79 CE] is now lost Guarducci's reconstruction [from 1962, quoted above] cannot be put to the test. The precise rendering and meaning of the graffito therefore remains uncertain."; cf. Leslie Barnard, *The "Cross of Herculaneum" Reconsidered*, in William Weinrich (ed.), *The New Testament Age Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, Mercer University Press, 1984, p. 24f; cf. also n. 26.

³⁸ Regarding epigraphical data, virtually all Christian inscriptions that can be dated with any confidence are from the 3rd century and later, but if correctly dated the Aberkios inscription (c. 200 CE) is perhaps the earliest identifiably Christian inscription; cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006, p. 2. "Crosses do not necessarily imply the presence of Christians", Duncan Fishwick states, together with the statement that the usage of the cross as a Christian symbol "is not otherwise known before the Epistle of Barnabas, whose date of composition is probably A.D. 130-131"; cf. Duncan Fishwick, *An Early Christian Cryptogram?*, CCHA, *Report*, 26, 1959, pp. 29-41. Others argue for a first-century date of the epistle.

³⁹ Acts 11:26 and 26:28, 1 Peter 4:16. In the earliest extant complete bible, Codex Sinaiticus (4th cent), the Greek words are even spelled **ΧΡΗCΤΙΑΝΟΥ**, **ΧΡΗCΤΙΑΝΟΝ** and **ΧΡΗCΤΙΑΝΟC**, i.e. Chrestian/Chrestians.

prophets said? I know you do.” (26:27) and the king responds: “In such a short time do you think you can talk me into being a Christian?” (26:28), a question which has been interpreted as mocking of Paul.⁴⁰ Paul himself does not call himself a Christian, and neither does any other epistle writer. The author of the First Epistle of Peter says: “Don’t be ashamed to suffer for being a Christian” (4:16), perhaps using “Christian” as a derogatory outsider term,⁴¹ just like if a 19th century Mormon would have said “Don’t be ashamed to suffer for being a Mormon”, to another, when the term “Mormon” was used as a pejorative by outsiders.

The First Epistle of Peter is “most likely ... a pseudonymous writing”, Rev. Donald Senior states,⁴² and it was probably written some time between 80 and 100 CE,⁴³ but according to the traditional view in the Neronian days, c. 64 CE, by the apostle Peter himself.⁴⁴ In any case, the use of *Christianos* in this letter does not indicate any use of the term in 37 CE or earlier.

If Acts is reflecting an actual chronology, the disciples would have been called Christians around 44 CE; Herod Agrippa, mentioned at first in Acts 12:1 (five verses after 11:26), who dies in 12:23, reigned in 41 – 44 CE. Dr. Paul Trebilco states that “the lack of usage in the rest of the New Testament ... suggest that in the mid to late first century ... the term 'Christian' was predominantly a name used by outsiders.”⁴⁵ “The term 'Christian' is a relatively late development in early Christianity,” Dr. Boring and Dr. Craddock concludes.⁴⁶ Thus, the term Christian - *Christianus/Christianos*, or even *Chrestianos* (“Chrestians”)⁴⁷ - was not used by the very early Christians themselves, if we may believe Acts, but was perhaps coined as a pejorative. The evidence for usage of the term in the first century is indeed not vast, and no evidence indicates that any believers in a *Iesus Christos* were called Christians so early as in the life time of Antonia Minor. Therefore, Dr. Karrer and Prof. Orelli conclude that *Chrestiani* in the inscription about Jucundus, is not a reference to Christians, but a proper name.⁴⁸ That the inscription is too early to be about a Christian, and that *Chrestianus* might be a proper name, was also the opinion of Dr. Joseph B. Lightfoot,⁴⁹ even though he, in another context, later stated that no such proper name is known to have existed (see page 2 above).

Since indeed no usage of the apparently very uncommon proper name or cognomen *Chrestianos* or *Chrestianus*, in Rome, during the life time of Antonia Minor, or the rest of the first century, can be confirmed, and since no known group seems to have been called *Christiani* or *Chrestiani* before 37 CE (and the Christians did not call themselves Christians until later, in their own documents), I conclude that the inscription, if correctly interpreted and dated, probably refers to something else.⁵⁰ Perhaps Jucundus was a part of a group called the “Chrestians”, but as no external evidence in support of such a notion exists, I will leave the subject without further conclusions about the meaning of the word *Chrestiani* here.

⁴⁰ “Agrippa's question is not serious, but ironic and sarcastic”; cf. M. Eugene Boring, Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 (Boring/Craddock), p. 458.

⁴¹ Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007 (Trebilco), p. 559.

⁴² Donald P. Senior, Daniel J. Harrington, *1 Peter*, Liturgical Press, 2008, p. 5.

⁴³ Dennis E. Smith, *Chalice Introduction to the New Testament*, Christian Board of Publication, 2004, p. 264.

⁴⁴ Everett Falconer Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1971, p. 407.

⁴⁵ Trebilco, p. 555, 559.

⁴⁶ Boring/Craddock, p. 406.

⁴⁷ It has been suggested that *Chrestian/s* was the original term, used by non-Christians; cf. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995, p. 657.

⁴⁸ Orelli, p. 290. Karrer seems to believe that *Chrestianus* derives from *Chrestos*; cf. Karrer, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Joseph B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (1868, rv.1903), Kessinger Publishing, 2003, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Francesco Carotta claims (*Jesus was Caesar*, 2005, p.149ff) that *chrestiani*, according to him deriving from the Greek word *chrêstês*, in Tacitus' *Annales* refers to usurers or construction speculators, but perhaps usurers selling burial rights would not be cited in epitaphs, so I will not discuss his theory here; cf. his book though.