

Crucifixion didn't start with Romans

By John Arnott

It's one of the most horrific ways to die ever devised by man. Crucifixion.

The condemned man was fastened to a large stake, arms stretched above head and tied or nailed through the wrists to it while large nails hammered through his ankles so feet would be above ground level. The stake was heaved upright into a hole where it was anchored securely. Sometimes legs were left dangling freely putting pressure on the hung body. Hanging for days the body gradually sagged as did internal organs slowing blood causing clots to form. Eventually, in excruciating pain, the man would die from asphyxiation as his lungs collapsed, heart attack or exhaustion. Crucifixions are still carried out in Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia. and by the Islamic State (ISSIS) in April 2014.

Crucifixion, designed to shame and degrade the victim, was usually reserved for deserters, criminals, traitors and slaves. It served as a warning to those tempted to flout authority.

Although crucifixion immediately brings the ancient Romans to mind with the Biblical account of Jesus' death, crucifixions were being carried out centuries before the Roman times. Persians in the ninth century BC employed this method of execution, probably copying their nomadic ancestors who would have fastened victims to a tree trunk. The Macedonians/Greeks learned from Persians ? Alexander the Great was said to have crucified 2,000 survivors of his siege of the Phoenician city of Tyre (Lebanon). The Carthaginians in North Africa took it from the Greeks and after the Roman conquest of Carthage (Tunisia) in 202 BC they adopted it using a T shaped form which later became a cross shape. In 71 BC, after the massive slave revolt led by Spartacus was bloodily crushed, the Romans crucified thousands of his men, hanging them on crosses that lined the Via Appia, one of Rome's major highways, for miles. The stench and horror greeted travellers to and from the city for months. Romans might flog the victim severely till he bled profusely or break his arms and legs which increased pain but hastened death. Most depictions of Christ's crucifixion show him still clad in his under garment, but those condemned to be crucified, a humiliating death for criminals, rebels and traitors were always stripped naked with most having had their genitals cut off to increase their humiliation ? Jesus would have been no exception.

There are accounts of men being reprieved and taken down still alive after three or four days.

Two early depictions of Jesus on the cross are miniatures in the British Museum, one carved into jasper the other into carnelian, both dating to the early Christian era. They show his wrists roped to the arms of the cross. None of Gospels say he was nailed. However after his resurrection he shows Thomas his hands and the nail holes. But nails through the hands wouldn't support a hanging man's weight and the nails would tear right through. Possibly Jesus was nailed through the wrists or they were tied on with rope. Perhaps there was an error the original account written many years after this tragic event or in the many translations that followed. He hung on the cross only a few hours because the Jewish authorities didn't want him there for Saturday the Sabbath. And he died when one of the Roman guards thrust him with a spear ending his suffering.

The Alexamenos Graffito, the earliest drawing of Christ's crucifixion yet discovered, dating from between AD 85 and 200, was found scratched into the plaster of house on the Palentine Hill, home to ancient Rome's elite And far from reverend, it shows the back of a naked donkey headed Christ fastened to a cross like structure with a male figure to the side (possibly a Roman soldier) with one hand raised in salute or sign of worship with the words ?Alexamenos worships his god? crudely inscribed under the figures. Obviously the work of someone mocking the Crucifixion and Christians, it can be seen today in the Palentine Museum.