

EARLIEST CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTION

Bishop Avercius's Last Words Document Emergence of the Church

LAURENCE H. KANT

Every so often, when historians find incongruities in an ancient text, they err by throwing the baby out with the bathwater: They dismiss the entire document as unhistorical. This is what happened with one of the most important documents from early Christianity, an undeservedly obscure poem commissioned by Avercius, an early bishop of the church, and inscribed on his tombstone. This second-century C.E. poem, written in Greek, is the oldest existing, datable and identifiable Christian inscription. It contains one of the earliest extant extrabiblical references to the apostle Paul. It is the earliest Christian text outside the Bible to mention in one place several of the most potent and lasting Christian symbols: a shepherd, a fish and a virgin. Further, the beautiful yet enigmatic poem offers a unique glimpse of Christianity in this transitional period, as the church quietly, at times tentatively, began to establish itself in the public sphere.

Despite its importance, hardly anyone today knows this poem—or remembers Bishop Avercius.

ΕΙΣ ΤΟ ΜΗ
ΕΜΕΝ ΒΑΛΛΕΙ
ΚΑΙ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣ
ΤΟΛΟΝ ΧΙ
ΛΑΟΝ ΔΕ ΤΑ ΟΥ
ΣΦΡΑΓΕΙ ΔΑΜΙΝ
ΚΑΙ ΔΥΡΗΣΤΗ
ΚΑΙ ΣΤΕΑΤΙΑ
ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΤΙΝΑ
ΤΗ ΔΕ ΚΟΝΣΕΝ
ΚΑΙ ΤΙΣ

ΚΑΙ ΤΑΙ ΟΥΚ Ε
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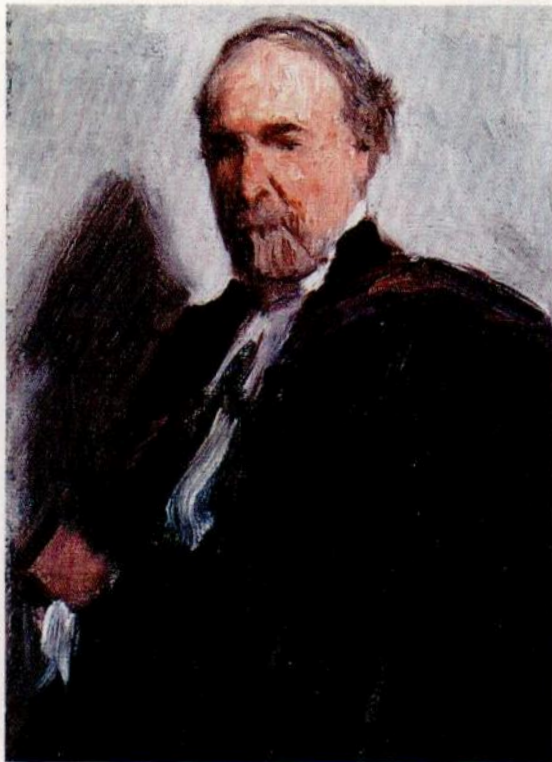
PRECEDING PAGES: The earliest extant extrabiblical reference to Paul, the New Testament letter writer, appears in the Greek poem engraved on this battered block of marble. Dating to about 200 C.E. and now in the collection of the Vatican, the inscribed stone once marked the grave of Avercius, an early Christian bishop from the town of Hierapolis of the Pentapolis, in west-central Turkey.

Though only a portion of the inscription has survived, the full poem is known from medieval accounts of the bishop's life. The elegant yet often cryptic verses shed light on a transitional stage in the establishment of the early Christian church.

Familiar with the poem from an account of Avercius's life, the 19th-century Scottish classicist and New Testament scholar Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (shown in a portrait by Sir George Reid, below) set out to discover the actual funerary inscription in Turkey. With some clever historical detective work, he succeeded in 1883. *Photo on the preceding page by A. Bracchetti, Vatican Museums.*

Avercius served as bishop of the city of Hierapolis, in the region of Phrygia, in western Turkey, during the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180 C.E.). He was later canonized (October 19th is his feast day). His life story was recorded several centuries later. Today we have almost 50 ancient manuscripts of the *Life of Avercius*, nearly all of them in Greek.

So highly respected was Bishop Avercius that some of the versions of his *Life* dub him "equal to the Apostle," that is, equal to Paul. His life story portrays him as one who imitated Paul, traveling about the Mediterranean world and performing miracles and preaching. Avercius's greatest deed, according to the *Life*, was



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to exorcise a terrible demon afflicting the daughter of Marcus Aurelius (in about 163 C.E.). The *Life* describes Avercius as punishing the demon by forcing him to carry a stone altar from the hippodrome in Rome to Hierapolis.

Avercius, the legend goes, commissioned his own funerary epitaph to be carved on the altar. The *Life* records all 22 lines of the inscription, which begins: "As a citizen of a favored city, I have had this monument made while alive in order that I might here have a prominent place for my body. My name is Avercius, a disciple of a holy shepherd." (The entire poem appears in the box on p. 15.)

From the 19th century on, most scholars doubted the historicity of the *Life* (and thus the epitaph) for several reasons: First, the *Life* was written at a late date, at least 200 to 400 years after Avercius lived. Second, the miracles performed by the bishop and the encounters he had with spirits seem too farfetched to be historical. Third, the *Life's* descriptions of Hierapolis do not jibe with the geography of the city that has long been identified as ancient Hierapolis—modern Pamukkale, in western Phrygia (see map, opposite). Fourth, the *Life* seems to contradict the writings of the early church historian Eusebius (c. 260-339 C.E.), who indicates that someone named Claudius Apollinarius, rather than Avercius, served as bishop of Hierapolis in the mid- to late second century C.E. Consequently, scholars discounted the entire text. Many regarded the epitaph as a fanciful fiction, one of many tall tales dreamt up by the fertile imagination of an early Byzantine hagiographer. It was dismissed as unhistorical and "late" (a dirty word among scholars).

And so it would have remained if not for Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939), the great Scottish classicist, who pioneered the archaeological study of the Roman province of Asia Minor. In 1881, as a Fellow at Exeter College at Oxford, Ramsay—with the aid of a guide—trekked through the out-of-the-way, mostly unexplored region of west-central Phrygia. At the time, Ramsay was not familiar with the controversy surrounding Avercius. But he soon would be. Indeed, his discoveries in Phrygia would prove the historicity of at least some elements of Avercius's *Life*—including the funerary epitaph. And his discoveries would remind scholars that even when a text is late and contains unbelievable elements, it should not be immediately dismissed as entirely unhistorical.

While exploring Phrygia, Ramsay established that there were actually two ancient cities in this region known as Hierapolis: the well-known city at Pamukkale and a second located in a rural region to the northeast, at modern Koçhisar. This northeastern Hierapolis and four other cities were part of an ancient district known as the Pentapolis (the Five Cities).¹ Ramsay identified the district and then Hierapolis through his



SONIA HALLIDAY PHOTOGRAPHS



AVERCIOUS'S HOMETOWN? The mineral-rich hot springs of Hierapolis, Turkey (modern Pamukkale), have attracted visitors since Roman times. The dazzling white landscape is produced by steaming water that pours from the springs, cutting shelves and basins in the adjacent cliffs and coating the area with layers of calcareous rock.

According to the medieval *Life of Avercius*, the bishop lived in the ancient town of Hierapolis. But the *Life's* description of Avercius's town does not match the topography of the white city of Pamukkale, leading many to question whether Avercius ever really presided here. In 1883, Ramsay solved the problem: Inscriptions found in a rural region east of Pamukkale indicated that there were two ancient cities with the same name: Hierapolis of the famous hot springs and a less well known city called Hierapolis of the Pentapolis, which had hot springs outside the village—just as the *Life* describes.

discovery of inscriptions in the area. In a small village outside the Hierapolis of the Pentapolis (Koçhisar), in front of a modern mosque, Ramsay discovered a marble column in secondary use (that is, it had been removed from its original setting) bearing an ancient Greek inscription. The inscription (now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum; see drawing, p. 18) was a Christian funerary epitaph for a man named Alexander, son of Antoninus, who had lived in Hierapolis of the Pentapolis. According to the epitaph, Alexander had

commissioned the inscription in 216 C.E. Written in verse, Alexander's poem begins: "As a citizen of a favored city, I have had this monument made."

Readers will immediately recognize the striking resemblance between Alexander's epitaph and Avercius's. Further inspection of the Alexander inscription found by Ramsay and the poem recorded in Avercius's *Life* reveals that the two epitaphs share the same first and last three verses.

Ramsay, however, did not immediately recognize

the parallels between the two texts, since he had never studied Avercius's *Life*. (Remember, Ramsay was a classicist and an early church historian, not a Byzantinist.) But as Ramsay researched his find, he soon learned of the *Life of Avercius* and its epitaph. Back in Scotland, Ramsay surmised that Avercius's epitaph was historical, and that it must have served as the model for Alexander's later tombstone. Of course, critics could claim that Alexander's tombstone served as the model for the poem recorded in Avercius's *Life*. To prove that the Avercius inscription was the earlier text, Ramsay had to find the actual inscription dating to the second century C.E.—not just the poem recorded in the later *Life*. Ramsay decided to return to Hierapolis in search of Avercius's tombstone.

In June 1883 Ramsay embarked on a four-month expedition to Turkey. He was accompanied by the epigrapher John Robert Sitlington Sterrett, then a student at the American School at Athens, who was later to become the chair of the Greek department at Cornell University. Using the description in the *Life* as a guide to the region, the two men began their quest.

The *Life* locates Avercius's tomb near hot springs at the outskirts of Hierapolis (a description that accords well with the Hierapolis of the Pentapolis [Kochisar], but not with the other Hierapolis [Pamukkale], whose hot springs lie in the center of the city).² In Ramsay's day, the hot springs outside Kochisar supplied the water for a public bath. In the

"I HAVE HAD THIS MONUMENT MADE," Avercius explains in the opening lines of his funerary epitaph, "that I might here have a prominent place for my body." In this reconstruction of Avercius's tombstone, in the collection of the Vatican, the lines highlighted in red replicate the few readable lines from the ancient fragment discovered by Ramsay (shown on p. 11). The altar-like design is borrowed from typical Phrygian tomb monuments from Avercius's day (as seen in the drawing of Alexander's tomb, p. 16). The laurel wreath that helped Ramsay identify the tombstone would have been on the left face of the altar.

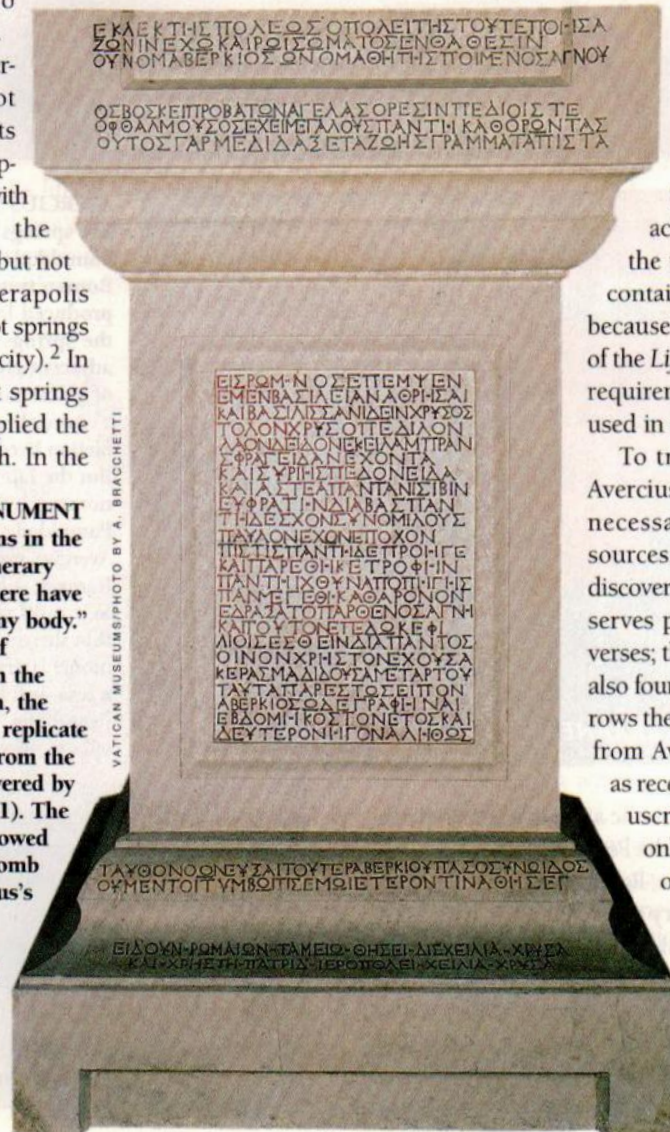
entrance to the men's bathhouse, Ramsay and Sterrett found two fragments of an ancient inscription carved in white marble; the marble had been reused in the construction of the bathhouse. From the decorative carving, they knew that the broken marble slab had originally been a tombstone. On the left face of the slab, a stonemason had carved a double molding surrounding a laurel wreath with tufts of leaves tied together with a ribbon—a common motif on grave markers. The remains indicated that the stone had been square, carved in the so-called altar (*bōmos*) form, which characterized local Phrygian funerary monuments. To Ramsay and Sterrett, the shape of the stone recalled Avercius's tombstone, which the *Life* described as having been made from a stone altar. The text carved into the marble confirmed their suspicions: Ramsay immediately recognized the inscription as a significant section of Avercius's original funerary epitaph. The fragmentary monument preserves parts of the middle nine verses, which include such key identifying words as "Paul," "Rome," "queen," "people,"

"seal," "Syria," "Euphrates," "Faith," "fish" and "friends."

Despite the accuracy of the *Life* in indicating the inscription's existence and location, the actual stones show us that the transcription in the *Life* contains several errors, partly because the late antique writers of the *Life* did not understand the requirements of Greek meter as used in earlier poetry.³

To translate the text of the Avercius inscription today, it is necessary to examine three sources: the marble inscription discovered by Ramsay, which preserves parts of the middle nine verses; the Alexander inscription, also found by Ramsay, which borrows the first and last three verses from Avercius; and the epitaph as recorded in the various manuscripts of the *Life*. This has only increased the challenge of transcribing and translating this beautiful, complex poem.⁴

Like many Phrygian tomb inscriptions from Greco-Roman antiquity, Avercius's poem opens with a description of



VATICAN MUSEUMS/PHOTO BY A. BRACCHETTI

The Last Words of Avercius

Several sources have aided author Laurence Kant in piecing together and translating Avercius's entire poem. The lines shown in red are copied from the extant remains of Avercius's funerary monument; lines 1-3 and 20-22 match the few lines quoted a few years later in the funerary monument of a Christian man named Alexander. The bulk of the Greek poem is based heavily on versions recorded in medieval manuscripts of the bishop's *Life*.

- ¹ As a citizen of a favored city I have had this monument made while alive in order that I might here have a prominent place for my body.
My name is Avercius, a disciple of a holy shepherd, who pastures flocks of sheep on mountains and on plains,
⁵ (and) who possesses huge eyes, which he casts down everywhere.
For he has taught me faithful writings [- - -],
he who has sent me to Rome to gaze upon a kingdom and to see a golden-robed and golden-sandalled queen.
There I saw a people who had a radiant seal,
¹⁰ and I saw the soil of Syria and many cities, including Nisibis, after I crossed over the Euphrates. Everywhere I had brethren while I had Paul in my carriage. Faith led me everywhere and everywhere served a fish from a spring as nourishment, (a fish) which was enormous and pure, (and) which a holy virgin grasped.
¹⁵ And she (Faith) bestowed it among friends so that they could always eat it,
as they had excellent wine and as they gave it in its mixed form with bread.
While present I, Avercius, said that these (words) were to be written here,
when I was in fact in my seventy-second year.
Let everyone, who understands these (words) and who is in unison (with them), pray on his behalf.
²⁰ Absolutely do not let anyone put another person in my tomb. If anyone does this, he or she will pay two thousand gold coins to the Roman treasury
and one thousand gold coins to my eminent city of origin, Hierapolis.

- ¹ [Ἐκ]λεκτῆς πόλλεως ὁ πολεί[της τ]οῦτ' ἐποίησα
[ζῶν, ἵν' ἔχω φανερῆν] σώματος εἶθα θέσιν,
οὐνομ< > Ἀβέρκιος <ὦν ὁ> μαθητῆς ποιμένος ἀγνοῦ,
ὅς βόσκει προβάτων ἀγέλας ὄρεσιαν πεδίοις τε,
⁵ ὀφθαλμοὺς ὅς ἔχει μεγάλους πάντη καθορώωντας.
Οὗτος γὰρ μ' ἐδίδαξε [- -] γράμματα πιστά,
εἰς Ῥώμην ὅς ἔπεμψεν ἐμὲν βασιλείαν ἀθρῆσαι
καὶ βασιλίσσαν ἰδεῖν χρυσόστολον χρυσοπέδιλον.
Λαὸν δ' εἶδον ἐκεῖ λαμπρὰν σφραγιδαὶν ἔχοντα,
¹⁰ καὶ Συρίας πέδον εἶδα καὶ ἄστυα πάντα, Νίσιβιν,
Εὐφράτην διαβάς· πάντη δ' ἔσχον συνο[μαίμους],
Παῦλον ἔχων ἐπ' ὄχῳ· Πίστις πάντη δέ προῆγε
καὶ παρέθηκε τροφήν πάντη ἰχθὺν ἀπὸ πηγῆς
παιμεγέθη καθαρὸν, ὃν ἐδράξατο παρθένος ἀγνή,
¹⁵ καὶ τοῦτον ἐπέδωκε φίλοις ἔσθην διὰ πάντος,
οἶνον χρηστὸν ἔχουσα, κέρασμα διδοῦσα μετ' ἄρτου.
Ταῦτα παρεστῶς εἶπον Ἀβέρκιος ὧδε γραφῆναι,
ἐβδομηκοστὸν ἔτος καὶ δευτέρων ἡγῶν ἀληθῶς.
Ταῦθ' ὁ νοῶν εὐξαι<θ> ὑπὲρ <αὐτοῦ> πᾶς ὁ συνωδός.
²⁰ Οὐ μέντοι τύμβῳ τις ἐμῷ ἕτερον τινα θήσει.
Εἰ δ' οὔν, Ῥωμαίων ταμείω θήσει δυσχείλια χρυσᾶ
καὶ χρηστῆ πατρίδι Ἱεροπόλει χεῖλια χρυσᾶ.

(The square brackets indicate letters missing from the stone of the Alexander inscription. Letters inserted by the author are marked with angle brackets, and those the author believes are incorrect are enclosed in wavy brackets.)

how the monument came to be built and a declaration of civic pride. Avercius describes himself as "a citizen of a favored city" who commissioned the monument so that his body will rest in "a prominent place" (verses 1-2). We are then introduced to Avercius's teacher, "the holy shepherd," who commands him to travel from the remote Pentapolis city of Hierapolis, in western Turkey, to the largest Mediterranean city, Rome (verses 3-6). Avercius then returns east by carriage, traveling through Syria, into the easternmost regions of the Roman Empire, to Mesopotamia (verses 7-11a). Avercius catalogues what he sees: In Rome, he gazes upon a "kingdom," "a golden-robed and golden-sandalled queen"; he watches "the people"—probably a reference to the Christian community of Rome. He sees "the soil of Syria" and numerous cities across the Euphrates, all unnamed except for Nisibis (modern Nusaybin), in southeastern Turkey, which was one of the major centers of early Christianity in Mesopotamia. A solitary traveler, Avercius does not

engage with those around him but prefers to keep a distance as he carefully observes his surroundings. In so behaving, Avercius follows the example of the poem's "shepherd" with "huge eyes" that see "everywhere."

The poem then shifts from recounting Avercius's activities to describing his traveling companions (verses 11b-12a): the "brethren," "Paul" and the "holy virgin." Faith, too, serves as a sort of tour guide: "Faith led me everywhere," Avercius declares. Two of the bishop's escorts—faith and the holy virgin—supply our traveler with an enormous, pure fish, caught in a spring (verses 12b-16). At this point, the tone shifts. Avercius is not merely the observer of the previous verses. He dines with his friends as they partake of fish, bread and wine—probably a lightly veiled reference to the sacrament of the Eucharist. Avercius is no longer the prime mover behind the activities described. He receives food, for example, rather than gives it. Avercius is not the agent of this meal, but



THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY. Bishop Avercius's tomb monument so impressed a Hierapolis resident named Alexander that he quoted its first and last lines—verbatim—on his own funerary monument, shown here in a drawing published by Ramsay, who discovered it in 1881. Fortunately, Alexander included a date in his inscription—"the year 300" of the Roman period (which began in 84 B.C.E.), or 216 C.E. This provides a firm end date for Avercius's inscription, making the bishop's poem the earliest datable Christian inscription.

the recipient, the epitaph seems to imply. The eucharistic meal seems to have been understood as a prized gift from a higher power.*

The poem culminates with a description of the "enormous and pure" fish (verse 14). The poet has used all his tools to emphasize this passage: This line alone of the poem has five trisyllabic dactyls (DA-

*The eucharistic sacrament is a reenactment of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. While bread and wine (which represented the body and blood of Christ) predominated as the tangible elements in the eucharistic rite by the end of late antiquity, fish apparently had a sacramental role in earlier periods. This should not be surprising to us, given that for early Christians the Eucharist constituted a genuine meal and was not simply an emblematic ritual.

da-da, as in the word BAR-na-cle). In addition, the fish section is full of alliteration: The *p* sound (Greek *pi* and *phi*) appears 13 times here.

Avercius's poem closes with a standard type of Phrygian postscript, in which the bishop asks all who "understand" his epitaph to pray for him, and threatens anyone who buries someone else in his grave (verses 17-22).

So when was this inscription carved, and who was this Avercius? In the inscription Avercius says that he commissioned the monument "while alive" (a common practice in Phrygia in his day), at the age of 72. We know it was written before the Alexander inscription of 216 C.E., which quotes it. As we have already seen, the church historian Eusebius identified the bishop of Hierapolis in this period as one Claudius Apollinarius. But we now know there was more than one Hierapolis in ancient times. Claudius must have been bishop of the western city (Pamukkale). Eusebius also refers to one Avircius Marcellus, who was apparently heavily involved in the church in the Phrygian Pentapolis region in the early 190s C.E.⁵ I believe this is our Avercius.

This makes the Avercius epitaph the oldest Christian inscription that we can date with a high degree of certainty (between 190 and 216 C.E.). It is thus one of the oldest pieces of physical evidence of early Christianity, along with some wall paintings from Roman catacombs and the earliest New Testament papyri.⁶ Of course, much of the New Testament and other early Christian texts (such as the writings of the apostolic fathers) originated earlier than the Avercius inscription (c. 50 to 150 C.E.), but the extant manuscripts date hundreds of years later.** Furthermore, unlike texts transmitted over a span of centuries, the Avercius inscription comes to us, at least in good part, unmediated by copyists.

The enigmatic text provides us with some of our earliest information about the Christian movement—its geographic extent, its emphasis on travel, its liturgy (especially the Eucharist), its close relation to the greater Greco-Roman world, its emergence as a religion that built monuments and created beautiful poetry. It is thus tempting to look at the inscription for historical evidence of the social world in which Avercius lived. Can Avercius's meal of fish tell us anything about ritual dining or the rulers of Rome in his day? Ramsay favored this sort of literal reading of certain passages. For example, he insisted that Avercius had traveled to Rome to meet a historical king and queen.⁷ But Ramsay failed to recognize that this carefully con-

**For example, one of the most important New Testament manuscripts, the Codex Sinaiticus, from the monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai, dates to the fourth century—and that is relatively early as far as New Testament codices go. See Leonard Greenspoon, "Major Septuagint Manuscripts—Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus," *BR*, August 1989.

structed text is a work of art—a masterpiece of early Christian literature, replete with allegory and metaphor.

The epitaph of Avercius, like other ancient inscriptions (even those that are not written in poetic meter), should not be viewed as a transparent window on ancient times. Indeed, the epitaph probably tells us more about the symbolic language employed by the early Christians than about any specific historical events. For example, Avercius's journey to Rome and Mesopotamia may have been real, but the reference to Paul ("I had Paul in my carriage") is clearly symbolic; Paul was long dead by the time of Avercius. Avercius apparently wanted to suggest that he saw himself as extending the work of Paul further east, beyond the reach of the apostle's mission. And perhaps Avercius was reading the New Testament letters of Paul. Everywhere Avercius goes, he finds like-minded compatriots with whom he shares ritual meals—evidence of the success of early Christian evangelists. Avercius emphasizes the widespread success of the early mission and the universality of Christianity by repeating a variant of the Greek word *pas* (English, *pan*, meaning "all," "every" or "always") no fewer than eight times. He reinforces *pas* by frequently repeating the sound of its first letter, *pi*, throughout the poem.

Christianity had begun to permeate Avercius's entire world, the Mediterranean region that earlier writers had referred to as the "inhabited world" (*oikoumenē*). The Greco-Roman religious terminology scattered throughout the poem led the earliest interpreters to try to demonstrate that Avercius was not Christian at all, but pagan or syncretistic (combining elements from various religions). The German scholar Gerhard Ficker argued that Avercius was a priest of the Phrygian god Attis who journeyed to Rome to see a sacred stone from a statue of Attis's consort, Cybele. In 1896 the great German historian of religion Albrecht Dietrich proposed that Avercius visited Rome for the unusual marriage of the emperor Elagabalus⁸ (218-222; born

"ONE ALTAR STONE HALF BURIED," the epigrapher John Robert Sitlington Sterrett recorded at the discovery of the Avercius inscription. A student at the American School at Athens, Sterrett accompanied Ramsay on his journeys through Phrygia, carefully copying into his notebook the many inscriptions they encountered. His drawing of the Avercius inscription (below left) is accompanied by notes detailing the location, with mention of the town of Sandikli (just north of the findspot), some hills "immediately to the right" and a nearby fork in the road.

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 Akrotaria 257
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 Akrotaria 246

ΕΙΣ ΡΩΜΗ
 ΕΜΕΝ ΒΑΣΙΛ
 ΚΑΙ ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣ
 ΤΟΛΟΝ ΧΡ
 ΛΑΘΝΔΕΙΔΟΝ
 ΣΦΡΑΓΕΙΔΑΝΕ
 ΚΑΙ ΣΥΡΗΣΟΕΙ
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 ΕΥΦΡΑΤΗ ΔΙ
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 ΤΡΑΥΟΝ ΣΥ
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ΚΑΙ ΠΑΡΕΘΗΚΕ
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 ΕΔΡΑ ΣΑΤΟΠΑΡΘ
 ΚΑ ΤΟΥ ΤΟΝΕΤΕ
 ΙΙΣΙΛΙ

Phrygia
 Phrygia

Left R. 9 28 935 approximate
 cross on rocky creek
 9 41 mesardyle with 9k
 remains; one altar stone
 half buried must have
 had inscription 958 char com-
 ing up beneath from main
 side of road to bathos head-
 ing toward Sandikli from
 north. 10.6 you reach fork in
 road. 10.14 road forks to
 char right, hills remain
 straight to the right. 10.50 char-
 kiem; hence point where left
 Ramsay 247
 You reach houses 251
 Well at bathos 266
 Sandikli 10
 Karasandikli 22 approx
 Ak Dagh 247
 11.5 left char kiem up the char
 no water 11.23 conspicuous
 willow grove along char
 extend to mountain water
 strikes, 11.25 same char
 + grove to left of going S.E. 130 over hill
 11.45 cross char road turns
 all way south, road was nearly
 turns just to east. 12.00 an-
 altar char, dry, all steel run in
 a westerly direction

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus), who identified himself as the sun god, to the heavenly moon goddess Urania.⁹ Around the same time, the church historian Adolf von Harnack suggested that the epitaph reflects a form of Gnostic Christianity and traced the “golden-sandalled queen” to Gnostic mythology.¹⁰

It was not only the oblique language that led to these interpretations of the text. Some Protestant scholars (especially Ficker) were eager to dismiss the inscription as pagan in order to prevent Catholics from seizing on the reference to Rome as early proof of the primacy of Rome and the papacy.

Despite these attempts to identify the text as pagan, there is considerable internal evidence that this is a Christian text—not least of which are the references to the “holy shepherd,” that is, Jesus, and to Paul, who is almost certainly the New Testament apostle.¹¹ There are also external factors: The *Life* suggests that many Christians from the second century C.E. through late antiquity were familiar with the location of the Avercius inscription, recognized it as Christian and made transcriptions from the stone. We even have one example: Alexander’s tombstone. Clearly the members of Avercius’s community would have recognized his tombstone as a Christian monument.

The confusion over the identity of the inscription is nevertheless understandable. The text is extremely enigmatic, even oblique. Although conveying a Christian message, it seems deliberately to draw on Greco-Roman imagery. Further, almost every word in the epitaph bears several connotations: some pagan,

some Christian and some that are not religious at all. For example, the phrase “holy shepherd” could suggest the Phrygian god Attis, who was often described as a shepherd, or it could refer to pagan shepherds who brought offerings of sheep for ritual sacrifices. Or it could simply refer to any shepherd, thereby conjuring up the bucolic atmosphere valued by so many Greek and Roman poets. It could refer to the respected virtue of philanthropy, as it did in Greco-Roman literature and art. Or it could refer to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The same is true of the “enormous and pure” fish from a “spring,” which might recall the sacred fish that inhabited the hallowed springs of sanctuaries devoted to Greco-Roman divinities, or might simply

A PURE FISH AND A HOLY SHEPHERD—two of the images of Avercius’s poem—are common themes in the earliest Christian art, which began to appear in Roman catacombs between about 175 and 200 C.E., around the time the poem was written. The detail of fish and loaves, below, is painted on the walls of the catacomb of Callistus; the roundel at right, depicting the Good Shepherd flanked by two birds, a ram and a sheep, is from the catacomb of Priscilla.

Both images may be interpreted in diverse ways: Depending on the context, the fish could illustrate a popular meal, a ritual sacrifice in Greco-Roman tradition or the Eucharist; the shepherd might represent a pastoral theme, a pagan deity or the Christian Good Shepherd. According to Laurence H. Kant, the emerging Christian community designed its new public funerary monuments and art so that fellow Christians could understand their fuller meaning while outsiders were left to make their own, more limited interpretations.



refer to the prized dish served by the wealthy at ancient banquets. It might also refer to the Christian fish symbol, which represented Jesus, his followers and the Eucharist. In addition, in Greco-Roman times fish were sometimes used to represent fertility and productive power, which could have both nonreligious and religious connotations, implying growth and life in the face of death, suggesting the missionary success of Jesus (as in the New Testament fishing passages) or simply demonstrating the wealth of the host who could afford to serve such a sumptuous meal.

In antiquity a reader could have understood this text on multiple levels: nonreligious, Greco-Roman and Christian. Avercius himself seems to realize this. In the last verses of the epitaph, Avercius asks those who understand his poem to pray for him: "Let everyone, who understands these (words) and who is in unison (with them), pray on his behalf." Avercius knows that some readers will *not* get it and will read the poem on a different level.

I believe that the Avercius inscription represents a shift among early Christians to a more public stance during the reigns of the Antonine and Severan emperors (175-225 C.E.). It is in this period that Christian art emerges (especially in the Roman catacombs) and New Testament papyri appear. Earlier Christians may well have produced monuments, but they were probably not identifiable as specifically Christian. The move to public acknowledgment likely indicated that Christians had attained a large enough membership, sufficient wealth and appropriate status to promote themselves to others and to one another in the form of monuments (funerary stones and inscriptions, graffiti, art, buildings etc.).

Like the earliest catacomb paintings, the Avercius inscription displays its Christianness more openly than ever before, yet its message remains hidden, at least for some, in the oblique language. Christians would immediately recognize the references to the Eucharist and to the apostle Paul, just as they would recognize the face of Jesus in a catacomb fresco of a young beardless man bearing a sheep on his shoulders. But those people outside the Christian community who were not "in unison" with the message, as Avercius himself



put it, would simply not understand.

Today we find ourselves in a different position from both the Christians and non-Christians who lived in the time of Avercius.

We no longer possess the personal connections to the historical and social contexts that made this poem so evocative and moving for those who first heard and read it. And yet our historical distance enables us to explain the language and images in ways that individuals in antiquity probably could not have articulated for themselves. Only by reconstructing the cultural context of the text and the motivations of its author, as well as translating its beauty and power, will we rescue this wonderful poem from obscurity.

BR

¹The other cities of the Pentapolis were Brouzos, Otrous, Eukarpia and Stektorion.

²The fragments were found 2.5 miles south-southwest of Koçhisar.

³The Greek language changed considerably between the classical period of the fifth century B.C.E. and late antiquity. By the late Hellenistic and Roman periods, accents rarely indicated pitch (a musical tone) to Greek speakers, but rather signified stress (presumably emphasis and volume). Likewise, in Greek speech vowel quantities (long and short vowels) lost their oral and aural significance, no longer indicating differences in sound (phonetics) or in time quantity (long vowels having originally taken more time to enunciate than short vowels). This disconnected the literature of Greek poetry from the spoken language, since meter was dependent on the phonetic and quantitative differences between long and short vowels. Through much of the Roman period most literate Greeks still understood the significance of vowel quantity in Greek meter, but by the fourth century C.E. this comprehension had declined by a considerable degree. The *Life of Avercius* indicates a hagiographer whose knowledge of Greek quantitative meter was substantially less than that reflected in the original text of the Avercius inscription and thus must have been written at a much later date.

⁴I am preparing a critical commentary that will update many of the readings in my Ph.D. dissertation; see Laurence Kant, "The Interpretation of Religious Symbolism in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism" (Yale Univ., 1993), pp. 761-764. My work stands on the shoulders of giants such as Sir William Ramsay and A. Abel ("Étude sur l'inscription d'Avercius," *Byzantion* 3 [1926], pp. 321-411).

⁵In his *Ecclesiastical History* (5.16.1-5), Eusebius refers to an anonymous anti-Montanist writer who sent a treatise to one Avircius Marcellus. (Montanism was a second- to third-century Christian prophetic movement centered in Phrygia.) Eusebius also refers to "our presbyter, Zoticus of Otrous," that is, a fellow presbyter of the anonymous author and possibly also of Avircius Marcellus. Given that Eusebius mentions Otrous—almost certainly the Phrygian Pentapolis city—in the same passage in which he writes about Avircius (whose epigraphic namesake comes from the same area), it is probable that the man named Avircius Marcellus is identical with our Avercius of Hierapolis. The two references to two very important early Christian individuals—each involved in some way with church affairs, living in the same time period, bearing virtually the same name, and most likely living in the same region of Phrygia—suggests that they are one and

endnotes continue on page 47



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Christian Inscription continued from page 19

the same. A date of 192/193 C.E. would be the earliest possible, since Avercius probably received the anti-Montanist treatise of the anonymous author at the same time. (The difference in spelling—Avercius or Avircius—is minor. Eusebius's addition of Marcellus, a Roman cognomen, simply makes this a Roman-style name.)

⁶Two inscriptions with images of fish carved on them from the Catacomb of Saint Sebastian in Rome may well date to c. 150 C.E., but their date and their Christian identity are not as certain as those of the Avercius inscription. The vast majority of attempts by historians, archaeologists, art historians and epigraphers to find archaeological evidence of Christianity from 40 to 165 C.E. have foundered for lack of critical evidence, though not for want of desire or effort.

⁷Apparently, Ramsay so wanted to describe Avercius visiting a particular emperor and empress that he translated the Greek for "kingdom" as "king." Ramsay claimed that he originally saw the letter *eta* on the stone at the end of the verse, that this letter was somehow broken when the stone was shipped from Turkey to Rome, and that he lost his original squeeze of the inscription. But in fact, the stone shows no indication of breakage in that spot, and the on-site notes and drawings by Ramsay's colleague prove that there never was an *eta*.

⁸Growing up in the city of Emesa, in Syria, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus served in the priesthood of the sun deity known as Elagabalus. After defeating Emperor Macrinus, Antoninus set off to Rome, taking with him a conical black stone (perhaps a meteorite), a cult symbol of the sun god that is depicted on various coins of the period. The historian Herodian wrote: "This stone is worshipped as though it were sent from heaven." Envisioning himself as the incarnation of the god, Antoninus called himself Elagabalus. The new emperor built a temple on the Palatine, where he made daily sacrifices of cattle and sheep to the god, whom (much to the consternation of the Roman people) he tried to establish "before Jupiter himself." Antoninus/Elagabalus went on to offend more Romans by marrying and deflowering one of the Vestal Virgins, Aquilia Severa. In 219 C.E., apparently after an unsuccessful attempt to marry the Roman statue of Pallas (Athena, which Aeneas was said to have carried to Rome from Troy), Elagabalus officially married the moon goddess Urania (Carthaginian Tanit, more or less the equivalent of the Mesopotamian fertility goddess, Ishtar). The bride was probably represented in the form of an aniconic stone imported from Carthage.

In judging the character and actions of Elagabalus, we need to remain aware of the prejudices of the ancient writers who criticized him (primarily Herodian, Dio Cassius and Aelius Lampridius). Indeed, they do not provide us with an evenhanded portrait either of the emperor or of Syrian religion. In any event, stories of the sun god may well have influenced Avercius, especially given the reference to a shepherd who (like the sun) sees everywhere.

⁹While *laos* almost certainly means "people" in verse 9 (see n. 11, below), it is indeed possible that some who heard the Greek word would also have associated it indirectly with an aniconic stone deity (since *laos* can occasionally substitute for *laas*, which means "stone"). In the same verse, the word "seal" (*sphragis*), which can also refer to a precious gem or stone for a ring, would seem to suggest this. Likewise, its modifying adjective, "radiant," could implicitly describe the sun or a sun god. Yet Avercius does not refer explicitly to a stone, the sun or a sun god. And further, Avercius would likely not have referred to Antoninus/Elagabalus, since the inscription dates before 216 C.E., and Antoninus/Elagabalus became emperor in 218 C.E. On the other hand, given the language of our poem and the prevalence of sun worship during this period, Avercius may well have used Greco-Roman religious vocabulary that, for some readers and listeners, would have obliquely and subtly evoked images of the sun god and this stone.

¹⁰The term "Gnosticism" describes a broad movement that could incorporate many different groups and perspectives, some of which we might regard as orthodox. Probably an outgrowth of Jewish Gnosticism, Christian Gnosticism emerged in the second and third centuries C.E. as a major movement throughout the Mediterranean region, particularly in the Near East. Emphasizing the Platonic duality of body and soul, as well as of matter and spirit,

the Gnostics preferred to focus on the divinity of Christ and on the inherent inferiority of the material world. Denying that the God of the Hebrew Bible was the One God, the Gnostics developed a mythic system (including male-female pairs, or "syzygies") that explained the origins of physical creation and humanity. According to the Gnostics, the visible world resulted from the actions of higher spiritual beings who mistook or misinterpreted the One God (also the "All") and, in so doing, turned away and created an inferior realm of matter. Human beings need to acquire self-knowledge (*gnosis*) to learn the story of their true origins, and that is what the Gnostics sought to provide.

¹¹Several factors point against pagan identification: There is no mention of Cybele or of a statue; verse 7 does not mention a "king," but rather a "kingdom"; there is no citation of the sun; the attempt to interpret the Greek term for "people" (*laos*) as "stone" (*laas*) is very strained and based on occasional usage; there is no reference to a priest; and while Dietrich argues that Attis's priests could eat the sacred fish of the Syrian goddess Atargatis, all of Avercius's compatriots eat the fish. The identification of Attis as a "holy shepherd" is possible, but the connection to Jesus is suggested more decisively, as in Clement of Alexandria's hymn to Christ

(*Instructor* 3), which not only mentions Jesus as a holy shepherd but also cites holy fish!

Furthermore, the use of *laos* for "people" is much more common in Jewish and Christian epigraphic contexts than in pagan ones. Though the combination of fish, bread and wine is indeed possible in a non-Christian context, the religious ritual character of this meal fits a Christian context much better than a pagan one. The connection of a "disciple" to a "shepherd" more likely than not alludes to Christianity. In addition, the language of the inscription corresponds rather closely in places to language used in other Jewish and Christian texts, such as the inscription of Maritima in the Catacomb of Priscilla and several passages in Books Five and Eight of the Jewish- and, in places, Christian-influenced Sybilline Oracles. On the Maritima inscription, see Kant, "Fish Symbolism," appendix 5, chart 2.1.33. Three passages mention a "holy virgin" in the Sybilline Oracles: 8.270, 8.290-91 and 8.357-58. Sybilline Oracle 5.434-37 also uses the following words that match (or closely resemble) words in the Avercius inscription: "universal" (or, literally, "prevailing in all cities"), "mountains," "large," "kingdom," "golden-sandaled," "golden" (twice) and "Euphrates."

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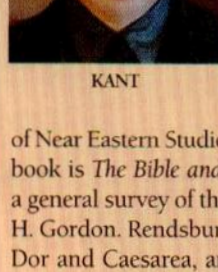


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