

THE HERCULANEUM CROSS

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In 1939 there appeared in the reports of the Roman Pontifical Academy of Archeology a lecture which I believe to be of great significance for early Christian archeology. This lecture, by Professor Amadeo Maiuri, the Superintendent of Antiquities in Naples, deals with the discovery of the Herculaneum cross.¹ The lecture was referred to, and photographs of it reproduced, in E. L. Sukenik's article "The Earliest Records of Christianity,"² but since the conclusions at which Sukenik arrived in his article have been called into question, his reference to Maiuri's work has not received the attention due it. The only other noteworthy mention of Maiuri's discovery in America with which I am familiar is by Carl H. Kraeling,³ and his description of the discovery was apparently based on second-hand descriptions, since he misstates the details of the discovery. It is my task in this article to summarize Maiuri's findings and conclusions and evaluate them.

In the spring of 1938 there was discovered on the wall of an upper room of the Bicentenary House in Herculaneum a stucco panel in which was incised the sign of a cross, and on the floor beneath, an unusual piece of wooden furniture which may be an altar.

The Bicentenary House originally seems to have belonged to a patrician nobleman, but later some shops were built on the ground floor. The upper story has a large living room and several small servants' cubicles, and it is in one of the smallest of these that the cross was found. The room measures 3.00 m. x 2.70 m. There are no windows. The door to the room is on the east side; the cross and the supposed altar are on the west side; toward the north-west corner are the remains of a wooden wall-facing; in the north-west corner there are traces of a couch; in the south-east corner there is a crude shelf made of a piece of tile, and there

are scattered household implements in various parts of the room. The room evidently had some quantity of volcanic soil in it at the time of its excavation.

The west wall is composed of a rough sort of plaster, and over this plaster, at the approximate center of the wall, is a rectangular panel of stucco; the surface of the stucco is thus raised from the wall. The panel measures 63-65 cm. x 82 cm. Within the panel is embedded a cavity shaped like a Latin cross. The cavity extends the full depth of the stucco so that the wall-plaster shows through. There are four nail-holes in the wall-plaster inside the cavity, in two pairs: one pair in the upper arm of the cross, and one toward the bottom of the lower arm. The edges of these nail-holes are not well-defined. The stucco is delicately raised at the edge of the cross cavity. The cross measures in its vertical and transverse arms respectively 43 cm. and 36.5 cm. At the angle formed by the intersection of the upper and dextral arms of the cross there is a missing triangle of stucco. The stubs of two rusty nails or hooks are to be found in the wall plaster near the panel, one near each lateral edge. One of the excavators recalls having seen the remains of a strip of wood 8 cm. in width on the rough plaster of the wall, a strip presumably held by one of nails or hooks. Numerous nail-holes with ill-defined edges are scattered on the stucco panel itself, of which six are noteworthy: three in each of two vertical lines on either side of the cross cavity, unevenly spaced and not perfectly in line.

Underneath the panel, but displaced a little to the north, is a kind of wooden cabinet completely unlike anything hitherto uncovered at Herculaneum. When found, this cabinet was completely covered by volcanic soil. Of rather common workmanship, it is small and low: 104 cm. high with the feet, 43 cm. wide on the front, and 42 cm. deep. At its top is a rim enclosing on three sides a kind of shelf. There

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are four crude feet. On the front there is a small, low square door; inside, two shelves. Leaning against the cabinet, below the door, is a kind of low footstool which is decorated in a herring-bone-pattern inlay. Inside the cabinet were found two crude lamps, a fragment of a wooden pot, and a bone die with the numerical signs from *one* to *six* on its sides.

There are two other facts to be noted. First, there are no relevant graffiti on the walls. Second, it is perfectly certain that the room was not occupied after the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

Since there are nail-holes inside the cross cavity, Maiuri concludes that the cross was a wooden one and that it was nailed there. Further, since the wall-plaster shows in the cavity, he concludes that the cross was first nailed onto the wall and that the stucco panel was plastered around the cross afterwards. (There are parallels in Pompeii, where a picture is sometimes "inlaid" and framed by plastering around it.) Now wood has survived in a carbonised state at Herculaneum, as is shown by the existence of the wooden cabinet, so it is remarkable that there are no traces of the cross inside its cavity; it must have been removed purposefully.

The two nail- or hook-stubs on either side of the panel suggest to Maiuri that there were originally lateral strips nailed on either side of the panel as the base for doors or shutters which would have covered the cross when not needed; hence his mention of the strip of wood about 8 cm. wide. (These nail- or hook-stubs suggest to Sukenik that there may have been lamps hung on either side of the cross.)⁴ Maiuri is puzzled by the six nail-holes in sets of three on the panel itself, flanking the cross, and suggests that either there was a smaller door covering the cross, or else that "at a certain moment, for impromptu reasons of security and defense, there was the deliberate wish to nail down the folding doors [on the frame held by the two outer nails or hooks] to prevent any indiscretion, disclosure by outsiders, or even the profession of the cult itself."⁵ Maiuri believes that the wooden cabinet served as an

altar. He points out that it is of uncommon design, that the size of its door renders it almost useless for ordinary household use, that the cabinet has a raised rim at the top, that the stool is suitable for kneeling, and that the cabinet might have held worship materials. He believes that the cross was violently torn out by someone hostile to the cult; he reasons that several circumstances suggest such violent removal of the cross: a piece of stucco is missing at the joining of the two arms of the cross; the cross is missing, and the edges of the various nail-holes are ill-defined. He believes that the cross was a sacred object of Christian worship, that the room was the kind of private chapel used in the earliest period of Christianity, and that this cult of the cross was due to the preaching of Paul. He points out that Paul stopped with Christians in near-by Puteoli for seven days (Acts 28:14)—he dates the visit in A.D. 60—and that there were close commercial relations between Puteoli and Herculaneum. He points out that the cross is of the Latin and not of the *tau* type. He believes that the altar is a *θυσιαστήριον* (Heb. 13:10) or *τράπεζα κυρίου* (I Cor. 10:21). He points to the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64 as the reason for the "violent interruption" of the cult in the room; he feels that although this persecution was centered in the city of Rome, it must have had repercussions in the provinces. He believes that the cavity left by the removal of the cross was not disturbed because it was the wooden cross itself that was the true cultic symbol. Then, after the Christians left, the room returned to its original use as a servant's cubicle; hence the presence of the non-liturgical objects in the altar.

After pondering Maiuri's lecture and photographs, I have come to agree with him on his main thesis. I agree that a wooden cross was nailed onto the wall and a stucco panel plastered around it as a frame, that the wooden cabinet is an altar, that the stool was for kneeling, and that this room was a chapel used by Christians who had been converted to Pauline Christianity before A.D. 79. I have

some amendments and additions to make, however, to his conclusions.

I would hesitate to apply the term *τράπεζα κυρίου* to the Herculaneum altar, since it does not appear to be for the purpose of eating.

I do not believe that the cross was removed violently but, on the contrary, with a great deal of care. Plaster always crumbles at the edges when anything is pulled out of it, and the surprising thing is that the cross cavity has preserved the outline of the cross as well as it has. When nails are pulled out of plaster even carefully, the edges of the nail-holes become ill-defined. The triangular piece of stucco missing at the joining of the arms of the cross is not evidence of the violent removal of the cross but is rather the spot where a pry-bar was inserted to lift the cross out, near the two nails at the top of the vertical arm.

I think that Sukenik's suggestion of lamps fits the facts better than does Maiuri's of shutters or door. There is only one nail- or hook-stub on either side of the stucco panel, and one nail would scarcely secure either lateral strip holding a door-frame.

I have been at some pains to try to deduce the series of events which would leave the room in the state in which it was found. We must explain the presence of non-liturgical objects in the altar, the absence of the cross, and the presence of the two sets of three unevenly spaced, unaligned nail-holes flanking the cross.

The fact that the cross was carefully removed would indicate that it was taken out by the Christians when they left. The only two circumstances that would explain their leaving are the Vesuvius eruption itself, or a prior persecution either actual or threatened. That it was the Vesuvius eruption does not seem likely, for two reasons. First, non-liturgical objects were found in the altar, and if Christians used the room until the very last, we would have to believe that their altar doubled as an ordinary household cabinet. Second, we gain the impression from classical accounts that not many people escaped alive from Herculaneum in A.D. 79. Pliny the Elder,

sailing from Misenum to Stabiae the afternoon of the eruption, and approaching to within about fifteen kilometers of Vesuvius, was pelted by cinders and pumice stones; Herculaneum is only five kilometers from Vesuvius, and the eruption must have been overwhelming, so that it is problematical how much time Christians would have had to remove their sacred object.

If, then, it was a persecution that caused the Christians to abandon their room, we must accept Maiuri's suggestion of the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64 as the only persecution about which we have any knowledge that would fit the facts and the chronology.

The persecutors threatened the Christians, the Christians removed their cross and, to prevent discovery or perhaps desecration of the remaining emblematic cavity, nailed a mask over the cavity. Such a mask would explain the two sets of three nail-holes on the stucco panel, flanking the cross, for their spacing and alignment suggest hurried, impromptu nailing. (It is less likely that the persecutors themselves nailed such a mask, for why then would they take care to drive the nails in such a manner as to seem to respect the cross cavity underneath, unless perhaps out of a superstitious reverence for it?) If Maiuri's suggestion regarding doors or shutters is correct, these would have served as the mask; otherwise, we must assume that any handy piece of wood was used.

But why has this mask not been preserved until now,—for, as we have seen, wooden objects are preserved at Herculaneum? We must assume what in fact would be very likely: that after the persecution, after the cubicle returned to its intended use as servant's quarters, the servant became curious as to what the wooden mask was concealing and pulled it off.

At the time of the eruption, then, the sacred Christian meeting-place was no longer such, and we find inside the altar, which was adopted as an ordinary household cabinet, the objects without ritual significance.

This is an extremely exciting find, which I

believe is genuine. We have a chapel which was in use by Christians scarcely a generation after the crucifixion. We have archeological confirmation of the power of Paul's preaching and of the cultic use of the cross at a very early date. We have an early confirmation of the tradition preserved by the Church Fathers that the crucifixion cross was a Latin and not a *tau* cross. We have an altar from this period. This monumental discovery sheds new light on cross symbolism in early Christian archeology and deserves the widest possible scrutiny and dis-

cussion, and Professor Maiuri merits our gratitude for calling it to our attention.

REFERENCES

¹ Amadeo Maiuri, "La Croce di Ercolano," *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, Vol. XV (1939), pp. 193-218

² E. L. Sukenik, "The Earliest Records of Christianity," *American Journal of Archeology*, Vol. 51 (1947), pp. 351-365

³ Carl H. Kraeling, "Christian Burial Urns?" *Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (February 1946), p. 19

⁴ Sukenik, *op. cit.*, p. 364

⁵ Maiuri, *op. cit.*, p. 210; the translation is my own