Hades Stabbed by the Cross of Christ

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A BYZANTINE IVORY carved with the crucifixion of Christ (Figure 1) has long been considered one of the treasures of the medieval collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Adolph Goldschmidt and Kurt Weitzmann published it as the central plaque of a triptych of the tenth century and characterized its lively narrative style as “painterly.” In its masterly execution it is similar to the ivories of the Koimesis in Munich, the Entry into Jerusalem in Berlin, and the Nativity in the British Museum. The plaque’s iconography is unique among surviving Byzantine representations of the Crucifixion. While the mourning Virgin, St. John, the two angels, and the three soldiers dividing Christ’s garment are frequent witnesses to Christ’s sacrifice for mankind, the bearded reclining man stabbed by the cross (Figure 2) is found only on this ivory. He was identified in the late nineteenth century by Gustave Schlumberger as Hades, unfortunately without documentation; but modern scholars, for example Kurt Weitzmann, believe him to be Adam. This article will present evidence to support Schlumberger’s earlier identification and to show that Hades’ presence transforms this representation of Christ’s crucifixion into a celebration of the triumph of his cross and his victory over Death.

The difference in the identification of the reclining figure stems from various sources. The inscription flanking the figure is ambiguous: ‘Ὁ στ(αυ)ρος ἐν τη κοιλια του Αδου (the cross implanted in the stomach of Adou). Αδου can be read either as ‘Αδου (Hades or Hell) or ‘Αδμου (Adam). Weitzmann’s preference for the latter probably stems from the well-established imagery of the skull of Adam depicted buried in the Hill of Golgotha, the place of the skull, beneath the cross. The legend that Christ was crucified over the grave of Adam was early promulgated by Christian theologians. Athanasius describes Christ as being “crucified in no other place but the Place of the Skull where Jewish doctors say was the tomb of Adam. For it is fitting that the Savior, wanting to renew the first Adam, suffered precisely in that place, in order that, atoning for his sin, he removes it from all his race.”

An artistic expression of this idea was slow in devel-

1. A. Goldschmidt and K. Weitzmann, Die byzantinischen Elfenbeinskulpturen des X.-XIII. Jahrhunderts II (Berlin, 1934) no. 6, p. 26, pl. n.
oping; only a few examples are known before the Iconoclastic Controversy. But by the Middle Byzantine period it was a common theme (Figure 3). The portrayal of the live Adam at the foot of the cross, however, never occurs in the art of Byzantium. To find him there, one must turn to the art of Western Europe. A Beatus manuscript of 975 at Gerona, the earliest surviving example, shows him still in winding cloth laid out in a sarcophagus beneath the cross (Figure 4). In a thirteenth-century missal from Mt. St. Eloi, he rises from his coffin and lifts a chalice to catch Christ's blood, illustrating the belief that the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side cleansed Adam of his sin. A more sophisticated treatment of this subject occurs on the thirteenth-century rood screen in the Schlosskirche at Wechselburg, where Adam reclines gracefully at Christ's feet (Figure 5).

The initial resemblance between the pose of the Adam at Wechselburg and the figure on the Museum's ivory is striking. Kurt Weitzmann proposed that the figure on the ivory derived from a classical river or mountain god. While the Adam at Wechselburg may depend on such classical personifications, the Byzantine figure suffers a fate more appropriate to a vanquished enemy. The cross transfixes his stomach; his blood is graphically portrayed welling up from the wound. Since Christ's crucifixion redeemed Adam, why should he be portrayed as disemboweled by the instrument of his salvation?

6. For example, a silver nielloed cross in the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design: R. Berliner, "A Palestinian Reliquary Cross of about 590," Museum Notes 9 (1952); Wessel, Die Kreuzigung, pp. 24-34.
Hades would appear to be a more likely candidate for such rude treatment. He is chained, trampled, and speared during Christ’s descent into Hell. In the Anastasis mosaic at Daphni, he is sprawled beneath Christ’s feet, crushed and helpless, amidst the wreckage of his formerly invincible kingdom (Figure 6). He is as much the defeated and subdued warrior as are the barbarians trampled and speared by victorious emperors on late Roman triumphal art that was surely the source for this imagery. A gold solidus of Honorius (395–423), for example, issued at the mint in Milan after 402, shows the emperor placing his foot on the enemy’s prone body while holding a victory and the labarum in his hands (Figure 7). Christ’s standard at his descent into Hell is his cross. It is also the weapon with which at Daphni he threatens Hades at the throat. In

a more gruesome representation in an eleventh-century Exultet Roll at Velletri, Christ thrusts his cross into the mouth of Hades, again an image derived from ancient portrayals of conquered and conqueror (Figure 8). On an ivory in Lyon and in a twelfth-century manuscript illumination in the Vatican (Figure 9), Hades assumes a more languorous pose, like that on the Metropolitan Museum’s ivory, but his helpless state is still clearly perceived.

Several descriptions of Christ’s conquest of Hades by the early church Fathers strengthen the connection between the figure on the ivory and Hades in the Anastasis. According to Ephraem the Syrian (d. 378), in his sermon on the Precious and Life-giving Cross,

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paineth me." In the Gospel of Bartholomew Satan says: "Be not troubled, make safe thy gates and strengthen thy bars: consider, God cometh not down upon the earth. Hades saith unto him: These be no good words that I hear from thee: my belly is rent, and mine inward parts are pained: it cannot be but that God cometh hither."

A sermon among the spuria of St. John Chrysostom of the fifth to seventh century is more explicit. The infernal serpent laments that a nail is implanted


Christ thrust his cross into Hades’ stomach: “With this precious weapon Christ tore apart the voracious stomach of Hades and blocked the treacherous fully opened jaws of Satan. Seeing this, Death quaked and was terrified, and released all whom he held beginning with the first man.”

A similar theme appears in the popular dialogue between Hades and Satan in the apocryphal accounts of Christ’s descent into Hell. In the Acts of Pilate, Hades, fearing the consequence of Christ’s crucifixion, reminds Satan of Lazarus, who was “by force snatched out of mine entrails by a word alone,” and fears more may happen: “Behold, I perceive that they [all whom he has swallowed up] are unquiet, and my belly

(ἐμπηχός, the same verb used on the ivory, ἔνταγῆς) in his heart and a wooden lance pierces him, tearing him apart.17

These are short passages in otherwise lengthy discussions between the protagonists. Romanos the Melodist in the sixth century, however, took full advantage of the dramatic implications of Hades’ gastric troubles. In his fourth hymn of the Resurrection sung on Easter Sunday, he has Hades lament:

“O snake, evil counselor, three-headed dragon, what have you done?

For I heard you, and I am myself worsted,”

Hades answered the wily one. “Let us both bitterly lament,

Since in His descent He has attacked my stomach,

So that I vomit forth those whom I formerly devoured. But now lament with me for we are despoiled of our common glory.”18

Again in Romanos’ fifth hymn on the same theme:

And Hades, lamenting, cried out:

“I am pierced in the stomach; I do not digest the One whom I devoured;

“Just so, on the third day, the whale disgorged Jonas. Now I disgorge Christ and all of those who are Christ’s;

Because of the race of Adam I am being chastised.”

Hades here is pierced in the stomach, ξεντώμαι τὴν κοιλίαν, like the figure on the Museum’s ivory, ἄσπαγης ἐν τῷ κοιλία.19

17. “In adorationem venerandae crucis,” Patrologia Graeca, 62, col. 748:

τῷ ὑμνήσεις ὁ φῶν τῷ καρδίᾳ μου; ζολίγε με λόγοχο λαστίχος, καὶ διαβρόσυμαι, ὡς σκλάγχαν ποιῶ, τὴν καρδίαν μου ἀλγῶ, τὰ αλωθητήματα μου διαφεροῦσαν, τὸ κτώμα μου μαμάσασα.

Compare also col. 752. On the authorship of this sermon, see J. Grosdidier de Matons, Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes, Sources chrétiennes, 128 (Paris, 1967) p. 270. See also note 24.

18. Grosdidier de Matons, Romanos, p. 524:

— ἵνα δεδόξασθε διὰ, τί δέδομαι, ὡς τρικάψαλα δράκους;

Πέτρου γὰρ σου καὶ ἤπτης Ἐγώ, πρὸς τὸν πλανόν ὁ Δίσιμος ἀντῆλε γερμηνευόμενοι πικρῶς οἱ τάμφορος,

ὁ δὲ κατελθὼν τῇ γαστρί σου καθήματα.

ὁ δὲ ελεημόνως ὡσερ κατέφωρ πρῶτος

ἀλλὰ δράμανον νῦν σὺν ξιφίν τῇ γαρ δόξαι καυκῶς λυτρηθῆναι.


19. Grosdidier de Matons, Romanos, pp. 558–560:

Ὁ Ἀδὰμ δὲ δόξαις ἀνεβονθεῖς φωνᾶς

«Κατώμαι τὴν κοιλίαν, δι’ αὐτῶν οὐ τέτω...»

Οὕτως ἵσταται τό ἐστιν ἑξώσειν

τὸν καθὼς ἐκστηθη Χριστόν καὶ πάντα τοῖς ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ ἑρείκεν γάρ τοῦ γένους τοῦ Ἀδὰμ τιμωροῦμαι.

Carpenter, Kontakia of Romanos, pp. 277–278. Illustration of the dialogue between Satan and Hades is rare despite its widespread literary popularity. The only representation in Eastern Christendom occurs in a fifteenth-century Russian icon of the Anastasis at the Hermitage, Leningrad (V. N. Lazarev, Storia della pittura bizantina [Turin, 1967] p. 376, fig. 532). Satan and Hades appear more frequently together in such Italian representations of the Descent into Hell, as in those in the eleventh-century Exultet Roll at Velletri (Figure 8) and the twelfth-century ciborium columns in San Marco in Venice (E. Lucchesi-Palli, Die Passions- und Endzenzen auf der Ciboriumsäule von San Marco in Venedig (Prague, 1942) pp. 105–111; Lucchesi-Palli, “Hades,” Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie (Freiburg, 1970) II, cols. 205–206).
So far these texts have centered on the actual descent of Christ into Hell after his crucifixion. Another hymn by Romanos, however, relates the theme of the piercing of Hades’ stomach to the events of Good Friday. His hymn on the Triumph of the Cross begins:

Pilate fixed three crosses on Golgotha, 
Two for the robbers, and one for the Giver of life.
When Hades saw Him, he said to those below:
“O my priests and forces, who has fixed the nail in my heart?
A wooden spear has pierced me suddenly and I am torn apart.
I am in pain—internal pain; I have a bellyache;
My senses make my spirit quiver,
And I am forced to vomit forth
Adam and those descended from Adam, given to me by a tree.
The tree leads them back
Again into Paradise.”

In the second verse, Satan tries to calm Hades by saying that he had the wood fashioned to kill the second Adam. Hades replies:

“Run and uncover your eyes, and see
The root of the tree within my spirit;
It has gone down into my vitals,
So that like iron it will draw up Adam.
Elisha once painted in advance its likeness
When he raised up the axe from the river.

The hymn continues in the same vein until it becomes apparent to Satan that he has made a fatal mistake.

Romanos draws his imagery from the work of his predecessors like Ephraem the Syrian, but he specifies that the cross pierces Hades’ stomach at the actual time of the crucifixion. In his hymn on the Triumph of the Cross, Romanos clearly sets the stage with the planting of the three crosses on Golgotha. Hades’ immediate reaction was to cry out “A wooden spear has pierced me suddenly and I am torn apart.”

Romanos’ Hymn on the Triumph of the Cross, according to Grosdidier de Matons, was sung on Good Friday in the Byzantine church, and this is the feast that the Museum’s ivory illustrates. His hymns on the Resurrection, which have no specific reference to the cross piercing the stomach of Hades on Golgotha, on the other hand, were sung at Easter, the illustration for which in the Byzantine feast cycle is the Anastasis. It seems most likely that Romanos’ hymn for Good Friday was the inspiration of the Museum’s ivory or of its pictorial prototype, and that the figure stabbed by the cross is not Adam but Hades.

The sources cited for the descriptions of Hades suffering by the “weapon” of the cross were all written before the Iconoclastic Controversy. It is difficult to
say whether this theme occurred in the illustration of the Crucifixion in the Early Christian period. The more general interpretation of the Crucifixion as Christ's victory over Death and the Devil was an important element in early patristic literature. Surviving early illustrations of the event, however, express this idea implicitly with the portrayal of Christ alive on the cross: Hades or Death are never physically present. Only the skull of Adam appears in the Hill of Golgotha, as it does throughout later Byzantine representations.

The presence of Hades occurs only on the Museum’s ivory among surviving monuments. Although, as Weitzmann proposes, the ivory probably depends on a pictorial model, a manuscript illustration, Hades’ depiction must have been rare. It probably developed from the search by artists and scholars in the late ninth and tenth centuries for earlier pictorial and literary sources to recreate a corpus of Christian imagery after the devastations of the Iconoclastic Controversy. The new images often contained elements that added drama and significance to important feast pictures. The classical model of Hercules drawing Cerberus from the Underworld, for example, was adapted for Christ pulling Adam from Hell in the Anastasis (compare Figure 6). The inclusion of Hades in the Crucifixion, recreating the epic victory of Christ over Death and the forces of Evil, probably also was created at this time. Judging from its brief appearance, however, compared to the long-lived popularity of Hercules-Christ in the Anastasis, it was not able to break through the basically conservative tradition of Byzantine Crucifixion illustrations.

One wonders whether the inclusion of Hades in scenes of the Crucifixion was caused by the immediate post-iconoclastic enthusiasm of the iconodules. Many illustrations in the so-called “monastic” psalters bear witness to the important role of polemics in their imagery. A most telling example shows the patriarch Nicephoros treading on the iconoclastic patriarch John the Grammarian in the same way that St. Peter triumphs over Simon Magus in the Chludov Psalter. Perhaps when the creator of the composition of the Museum’s ivory had Hades speared by Christ’s cross of victory he was thinking of the triumph of Orthodoxy over the heresies of the iconoclasts.

Whatever the explanation of the brief flowering of the theme of Hades pierced in the stomach by the cross, it was inspired by literary sources, particularly the hymn of Romanos the Melodist sung on the feast of Good Friday. The Byzantine ivory in the Museum’s collection, as a rare surviving illustration of this unusual subject, is a most important example of the imaginative recreation of imagery in the period immediately following the Iconoclastic Controversy.

27. An ivory plaque of the Crucifixion in the Hermitage, Leningrad, shows Adam and Eve and Solomon and David rising out of sarcophagi on either side of the three seated soldiers (Goldschmidt and Weitzmann, Die byz. Elfenbein., no. 201). Like the illustration of the Crucifixion in a late eleventh-century gospel book in Paris (Bib. Nat. gr. 74, fol. 59r; H. Omont, Evangiles avec peintures byzantines du XIe siècle I [Paris, n.d.], pl. 51), the presence of the resurrecting dead, adapted from the Anastasis, shows the immediate consequences of Christ’s triumph on the cross, as does Hades on the Metropolitan Museum’s ivory.
28. Weitzmann, “A 10th Century Lectionary,” p. 628. He suggests that this manuscript model was the illustration of the Crucifixion in the original feast cycle developed for a lectionary. Such a prototype would probably have spawned many more copies than this one ivory.