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## The Cross in the visual culture of late antique Egypt

Gillian Spalding-Tracey, *The Cross in the visual culture of late antique Egypt. Texts and studies in Eastern Christianity*, 19. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020. Pp. xxiv, 242. ISBN 9789004411593 €164.00.

### Review by

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### Preview

The book has emerged in recent years as a useful symbolic basis for assessing the visual, social, and historical dynamics operative in late antique Mediterranean Christianity.<sup>[1]</sup> Gillian Spalding-Tracey has entered into this conversation with her investigation of the diverse designs and uses of the cross within early Egyptian Christian visual culture. The book includes 26 figures (pp. 73–85), maps of the distribution of the different types of crosses, an appendix of selected anaphoras (which focus on the cross), a bibliography, and a general index. The reader should note that, despite the title of the volume, the evidence she discusses extends well into the medieval period.

In addition to an introduction, which situates her study within the field of art history and isolates some of the relevant analytical challenges (e.g., the dating of objects and the degradation of sites), the book is divided into seven chapters that fall broadly into two primary sections. The first section consists of Chapters 1–3, in which Spalding-Tracey highlights the significance of the cross within Christianity (Chapter 1), surveys a range of visual crosses and the contexts in which they are found (Chapter 2), and examines the production of crosses (Chapter 3). In this section, Spalding-Tracey also develops her initial four-fold typology of the crosses in early Christian Egypt, which consist of the Ansaté cross, the Latin cross, the Greek cross, and the Pattée cross.

The second section, which comprises Chapters 4–6, is more interpretive in nature. Spalding-Tracey expands her typology to include eight sub-types of crosses and contiguous designs (i.e., ceremonial, vegetal, faunal, geometric, symbolic, figural, plain, and cryptic) and grapples with the controversial relationship between the Egyptian Christian Ansaté cross and the earlier Egyptian *ankh* sign (Chapter 4). She also offers a detailed discussion of the problems associated with assigning dates (and provenances) to the crosses and the contexts—principally monastic—in which they are found (Chapter 5). She also provides a functional/symbolic analysis of many of the crosses in her survey, which is organized according to a secular-sacred binary (Chapter 6). The reader is confronted with a wealth of detail in this section. Spalding-Tracey’s analysis also yields important insights into the visual history of the cross in Christian Egypt, including the dominant in Egypt of the Greek- and Latin-styled crosses and the likelihood that the inspiration for the Ansaté cross was drawn from both the earlier Egyptian *ankh* sign and the so-called Resurrection crosses, such as those found on Roman sarcophagi from the Severan era.

The book concludes with a seventh chapter, which synthesizes the finds from the earlier chapters and addresses larger themes, such as the creative capacity and willingness of artisans to modify established cross patterns, developments in the designs of the crosses, and a general trend toward ornateness in the extant record (especially within “sacred” or “sacralized” spaces).

Spalding-Tracey has made several important contributions to the study of early Egyptian Christian views of the cross. Indeed, this book deftly demonstrates that early Egyptian Christian art constitutes a valid genre in and of itself. Moreover, some of her analyses of the crosses (especially within their archeological contexts) offer large-scale insights into late antique and early medieval Egyptian Christianity. For instance, her close comparative examinations of the braided crosses from Kellia, Isnā, and in the ninth/tenth century CE codices from al-Ĥāmūlī, on the one hand, and of the draped crosses from Dayr Abū Fānah, Dayr al-Suryān, and Dayr Anbā Antuniyūs, on the other hand, not only demonstrate a development from relative simplicity to complexity, but they also allow her to draw broader implications about social context, including the substantial resources invested in these Christian visual projects at a time when Islam was dominant in the region (199).

On a methodological level, her study both raises probing challenges to facile analytical rubrics, such as “influence” and “decorative,” and contributes to the now widely recognized scholarly need to identify and trace the provenances and purchasing histories of ancient material artifacts. In particular, Spalding-Tracey underscores in multiple instances—sometimes in great detail—the difficulties endemic to dating crosses on account of our lack of knowledge about the circumstances of their discoveries. The reader will appropriately walk away from this study much less confident about the authenticity and antiquity of many crosses—and objects inscribed or painted with crosses—that are currently housed in museums.

Nevertheless, the book also has shortcomings. First, Spalding-Tracey explicitly informs that reader that she will exclude much of the scribal/papyrological evidence (p. 10), despite the occasional and passing reference to select Nag Hammadi codices, Codex Glazier, the codices from al-Ĥāmūlī, and a few others. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with limiting one’s corpus for analysis. But attention to the papyrological record would have qualified some of the conclusions she draws about early Egyptian Christian uses of crosses, especially within so-called magical contexts. Despite frequent references to “magical practice” (e.g., p. xvi), “amuletic symbol” (e.g., p. 1), and “talismanic function” (e.g., p. 172), she engages in only a limited way with a few late antique stone and metal amulets (pp. 177–79). In other words, there is a general lack of critical engagement with the late antique Egyptian Greek and Coptic amulets and handbooks written on papyri, parchment, and other materials, many of which include crosses. In fact, not only do the crosses in this corpus of material reflect various designs (e.g., staurograms, Christograms, the *crux immissa*/Latin cross, the Ansaté cross, the tau-cross, and the gamma cross), but the objects on which these symbols are found typically include texts that could be used to interpret those crosses. Attention to this conjunction of text and image would have helped her fill out the interpretive analyses of the crosses in Chapter 6, which I found to be rather superficial. Indeed, Spalding-Tracey laments on several occasions that the objects at the center of her study are primarily non-textual and, therefore, provide limited evidence for their interpretation (e.g., p. 104). Spalding-Tracey’s study would have especially benefited from a close reading of Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, an early Coptic seventh-century CE exorcism spell, which engages considerably with the cross and crucifixion of Jesus on both textual and visual registers.<sup>[2]</sup> Close examination of the crucifixion/cross of Jesus on this artifact would in fact undermine—or at least qualify—many of the (broader) conclusions and approaches in the book, including the heuristic utility of a secular/sacred binary (with “magical” objects classified under the “secular”);<sup>[3]</sup> her claim about the general lack of crosses from Thebes;<sup>[4]</sup> and the suggestions that in late antique Egypt there was an absence of images of Jesus on the cross (p. 90) or narrative scenes in images of the crucifixion (p. 120). At the same time, focused engagement with this Coptic exorcistic spell would have also supported her claim about the creative freedom ancient artisans had in their engagement with the cross (p. 124) and would have provided her with important comparanda from a lived context for the juxtaposition of the cross and the unicorn at Shaykh Sa’id and the visual depictions of crosses with platforms/steps (p. 100).

The structure and presentation of the corpus of primary sources also warrants critical comment. First, her survey of the primary sources in Chapter 2 in fact focuses primarily on the monastic contexts in which the crosses were found. As a result, this chapter largely consists of digressive—albeit, at times, quite interesting—descriptions of monastic sites, often leading to the conclusion that the evidence is late or that crosses play a secondary role or even no role. Extended analyses of monastic contexts, for instance, might lead to the conclusion that at Dayr Anbā Bula “the art at this monastery is primarily figurative with no emphasis on or special appearance of crosses” (p. 38) or that, “while Bāwīṭ is famed for its figurative art, it does not have a significant repertoire of crosses” (p. 31). Unfortunately, the reader is never given a clear understanding about the actual corpus of materials; a chart or list of objects would have been helpful in this regard. In addition, although she usefully includes several figures (pp. 73–85) that facilitate engagement with her analyses, she does not provide images of the so-called “cryptic” crosses (pp. 122–23). The reader would have especially benefited from the inclusion of images for this discussion since, as Spalding-Tracey appropriately notes (p. 122), the claim that some of the “cryptic” motifs, such as the “six-pointed motif” found at Isnā and Saqqārah, are cross-shaped has been disputed in scholarship.

In the end, Gillian Spalding-Tracey has produced a handy book, which facilitates critical reflection on the social contexts in which crosses were designed and used and on the methodological challenges facing scholars interested in late antique Egyptian visual culture. Although her analyses of the primary sources may leave some readers wanting more detail, this book is a necessary addition to the libraries of those of us intrigued by the uses of the cross in Egyptian Christianity, in particular, and by Egyptian Christian visual culture, more generally.

### Notes

[1] E.g., Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) and Robin M. Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). This emphasis on the cross itself forms part of a broader trend in ancient and late antique studies, which has treated the crucifixion of Jesus in a broader context than the cross itself, e.g., David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) and John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

[2] See, for instance, Joseph E. Sanzo, “The Innovative Use of Biblical Traditions for Ritual Power: The Crucifixion of Jesus on a Coptic Exorcistic Spell (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796) as a Test Case,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015): 67–98. Spalding-Tracey merely gestures toward this object with an incomplete reference in a footnote (p. 179, n. 63) along with the following words: “...an example of an exorcism spell contains a stylised crucifixion image that is more obviously part of the invocation.”

[3] To be sure, Spalding-Tracey acknowledges in passing the problems with this binary (p. 182); however, the secular/sacred dichotomy does not contribute substantially to her analysis, and the inclusion of the magical objects under the category “secular” is analytically unhelpful, especially since many of the objects were most likely created by monks.

[4] On the possible Theban identification of Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, see Walter Crum’s forward to Angelicus M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte*, vol. 1 (Bruxelles: Édition de la fondation égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1931), xi.

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