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RIB 508: CHRISTIAN NOT PAGAN

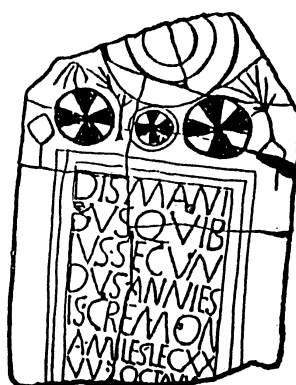
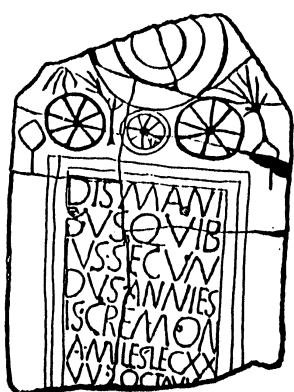
aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 97 (1993) 225–226

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RIB 508: CHRISTIAN NOT PAGAN

Interpreting iconography is a major and well-known problem in identifying Christian as opposed to pagan Romano-British inscriptions. The inscription RIB 508, an epitaph, is an illustration of this problem. Although it is generally believed to be pagan, on the basis of the following arguments I believe that this inscription can be identified as Christian.

RIB 508



Dis mani
bus Q Vib-
ius Secun-
dus Annies
is Cremon
a miles leg XX
VV cO

There appear to be Christian elements depicted on the inscription in the form, from left to right, of an eight-pointed star enclosed by concentric circles, which I have interpreted as a double monogrammatic cross (sometimes called a cross-pattée),¹ - that is, two crosses within the one circle (as indicated by the shading in the circles in the iconography of RIB 508 above); a tree (the tree of life?); two more double monogrammatic crosses, of which the third is larger in size; and a second tree. The tree symbol has been interpreted in Christian art and is particularly apparent on the Hinton St. Mary mosaic as the tree of life.² Various forms of

¹ As called, by, for example, S.Frere, 'Roman Britain in 1985: Sites Explored', *Britannia* 17 (1986), p.403.

² See J.M.C.Toynbee, *Art in Roman Britain* (London, 1962), p.64 and 'Pagan Motifs and Practices in Christian Art and Ritual in Roman Britain', in M.W.Barley and R.P.C.Hanson (eds.), *Christianity in Britain 300-700* (Leicester, 1968), p.193 and C.Thomas, *Christianity in Britain to AD 500* (London, 1981), p.92. On religious symbolism in general see D.Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London, 1991), Chapter 5 pp.146ff.

crosses in a close association with concentric circles have been discovered in the Roman catacombs.³ Since these elements occur in Christian contexts, and since the three crosses on the inscription may even be a reference to the Trinity, I propose that the iconography of RIB 508 is Christian.

Also of significance is that this epitaph is the earliest example of the double monogrammatic cross as a Christian symbol in Roman Britain. Although it has been stated in the most recent study of Christianity in Roman Britain that the first example of a double monogrammatic cross as a Christian symbol in Roman Britain is found on the Oxborough tank (fourth or fifth century AD),⁴ RIB 508, which is third century, clearly predates this. Thus we see the importance of linking iconography with epigraphy.

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³ J.Stevenson, *The Catacombs* (London, 1978), pp.66-67.

⁴ Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain*, pp.163 and 164 Fig. 25(a).