

**John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*
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John Granger Cook's monograph is a most welcome addition to the succession of important scholarly publications on crucifixion that have taken forward the work done forty years ago by Martin Hengel and others. There have been major recent works from David Chapman (2008) and Gunnar Samuelsson (2011), and a sequence of previous articles by Cook himself (2008, 2011, 2012, 2013). At over 500 pages, Cook's book provides systematic coverage of all known Latin and Greek texts relating to crucifixion, and gathers much of the visual evidence in one place, such as the Puteoli and Palatine graffiti, the British Museum amulet, and a photo of the famous crucifixion nail in a foot bone discovered in 1968.

To assess Cook's contribution, it is useful to think of it in terms of three major challenges that any scholarly investigation of crucifixion must address. First, the lack of detailed accounts of crucifixion in ancient writings. Second, the complexities of language and terminology in Greek and Latin. Third, a visual sense of crucifixion that has been shaped by centuries of Christian art, and which contributes towards a highly-sanitised impression of the shame and stigma around crucifixion. Cook's book is an outstanding long-term contribution towards addressing the first challenge, and a detailed argument in response to the second. However, judged against the third challenge, it is a further example in a long line of otherwise very distinguished works that nonetheless avoids any discussion of sexual violence.

The first difficulty in work on crucifixion is the lack of any detailed description in ancient accounts. It is intriguing that despite widespread references to the cross and crucifixion by ancient writers, there are no accounts that go into sufficient detail to allow for a clear picture of what precisely was involved. There is no doubt that the Romans used crucifixion as a supreme punishment, and there is broad consensus that this involved both unbearable physical suffering and a deeply humiliating shame, but exactly how it did this is not explained in the ancient texts. The gospels offer the most detailed accounts that have survived, but are still very sketchy in terms of the mechanics and details of crucifixion. The omission of this information in ancient sources is all the more notable because crucifixions were not conducted in clandestine torture cells, but in public places as a spectacle to be seen by a public audience. It is possible that since crucifixions were held as public events, ancient writers did not feel the need to go into great detail. They might have expected their readers already to know, or at least imagine pretty well, what a crucifixion would have involved. In addition, in some places it is hinted that crucifixion is too shameful a subject on which to comment at length, and so any

detailed description should be avoided. Whatever the reason might have been, the inevitable consequence of this reticence is that despite the many brief references to crucifixion and the cross, any serious historical investigation into what crucifixion actually involved is nonetheless forced to work with very fragmentary evidence.

There is no question that Cook's contribution towards this first challenge is an outstanding achievement. He offers a complete and convenient presentation of Greek and Latin texts organised in a clear and orderly chronological manner. English translations (often his own) are included along with the Greek and Roman texts. In many ways, this aspect of the book echoes and extends the short but influential work by Martin Hengel. In fact, Cook reports (VII) that after some of his earlier articles were published, Martin Hengel initially invited him to undertake the work as an update of Hengel's book (1977). It quickly became apparent, however, that something bigger was required. Cook's work on this score is likely to become the long-standing reference work and starting point for any future research on the subject.

The second difficulty, which compounds the lack of sustained treatments, is the problem with terminology and cross-cultural application. Roman crucifixions are described in both Latin and Greek sources, but the Latin term *crux* (cross) is more precise than the Greek term *stauros* (cross, stake or pole). Since the gospels use the less precise Greek to describe a Roman practice, their accounts seem to be more open to different interpretations than is commonly realised. Indeed, Chapman (2008) had argued that it is often difficult to differentiate too rigidly between the categories of crucifixion and impalement. Gunnar Samuelsson (2011) had gone even further, arguing that almost nothing can be known with certainty about the form and shape of the structure on which Jesus was executed.

Cook describes Samuelsson's book as a "muse" for his own writing (2). One of the key issues that he picks up on is whether the Greek and Latin terms support a clear distinction between crucifixion and impalement. Cook notes that in ordinary use, the Greek term *stauros* could serve to signify impalement, and acknowledges that this meaning cannot be excluded with certainty (3). Nonetheless, he argues that in the vast majority of cases, the context provides clues that suggest the more conventional picture of a victim tied or nailed rather than impaled. Much of his discussion involves sifting through each passage with detailed attention to the terminology and language issues raised. Based on this, he concludes that there is no evidence for using *crux* or *stauros* for live hangings or impalements, and the conventional term "cross" rather than stake or pole is still the most appropriate translation of both the Latin *crux* and the Greek *stauros*.

Cook's discussion includes two passages from Seneca that are of particular interest because they are in Latin not Greek and both mention impalement and crucifixion together. The first is well-known and from the *Letter to Marcia On Consolation*:

I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made differently by different individuals: some individuals suspended their victims with heads inverted toward the ground; some drove a stake (*stipes*) through their excretory organs/genitals; others stretched out their arms on a *patibulum*; I see racks, I see scourges, and separate instruments for separate members and joints, and I see death. (cited in Cook 2014, 96)

According to Cook (97), Seneca's use of *stipes* shows that *crux* is not the specific word that Seneca uses for impalement. This is true, but it seems to ignore a much bigger question on the connection of sexual violence and genital impalement to crucifixion indicated in this passage. The other passage, in Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* (cited by Cook, p. 101), describes the misery of crucifixion on the "piercing" or "sharp" cross (*acuta ... cruce*). Samuelsson (2011) suggested that this is some form of impalement but Cook rejects this, arguing that the context suggests it does not involve immediate death, which one would expect from full bodily impalement (3). Instead, Cook suggests that it is a probably a reference to the *sedile*, or peg, that was sometimes incorporated into the upright of a cross to support the body and thereby prolong crucifixion, as attested by Justin Martyr (70). Cook's insistence that full bodily impalement inevitably causes an immediate death is open to challenge. However, he is correct that this passage can be read as a reference to the *sedile*, rather than the upright, but this does not mean Samuelsson is wrong about impalement. A plausible explanation is that a *sedile* could be used to anally impale a victim. Cook mistakenly assumes that impalement must always be full-body impalement on the upright (which Seneca refers to in another Letter to Lucilius, *Epistles* 14.3-5, using *stipes* rather than *crux*). It is quite possible that a *sedile* could be angled to enact a limited impalement of a victim nailed or tied to the upright or crossbeam. Indeed, if the suspended victim had to repeatedly raise himself (or herself) to breathe, the *sedile* could re-enact the impalement at every raising and slumping of the body. This priapic violation could have been an intentional part of the punitive display. This would fit with Justin's description of the *sedile* as a 'horn' (*Dialogue with Trypho* 91.2), and conform to well-established Roman codes around bodily penetration and masculinity (Hallett and Skinner 1997, Williamson 1999).

This brings up the third major difficulty into any historical investigation of crucifixion. Regardless of the precise meaning given to the Seneca passages on impalement, there should not be any way to read them without raising questions about the role sexual violence may have played in Roman crucifixions. It is commonplace to mention the shame and stigma around crucifixion, but centuries of Christian art have shaped such a highly-sanitised image of crucifixion that the role of sexual violence is almost never considered. It is extraordinary how easily these passages in Seneca can be discussed in some detail, without the issue of sexual violence being named or addressed.

There is a widespread scholarly consensus that victims were crucified naked, and this alone should be sufficient to foreground a connection between crucifixion and sexual humiliation (Tombs 1999, Trainor 2014). When the Seneca passages on impalement and crucifixion are added to this, they suggest that sexual violence may have been a much more significant and integral aspect of some

crucifixions than hitherto supposed. This is not to say that crucifixion of Jesus therefore involved sexualised impalement, but it is to recognise that the evidence that sexual impalement was an element in at least some forms of crucifixions cannot be simply ignored.

Cook stresses that references to crucifixion must always be read with context in mind, but this invites inquiry as to which context is brought to bear. Feminist insights on sexual violence as a form of power and control offer a widely-neglected context for viewing Roman crucifixions as an instrument of state terror. Cook is hardly unusual in avoiding the sexualised element of crucifixion. Exactly the same point might be made about the same omission in Hengel, or Chapman, or Samuelsson. It is quite common for the Seneca passages to be noted, but the questions raised are not pursued. If the shame and stigma around crucifixion is to be adequately understood, it is passages like this on sexual violence that surely require much more detailed critical attention in future works. It is regrettable that Cook himself ignores these questions. Despite this, the other strengths in his work mean anyone who wishes to pursue these important issues can be grateful for the way his book makes the evidence on crucifixion available in such a clear, convenient, and comprehensive form.

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