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The Horse Head Demon

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Abstract: *An unpublished curse tablet in the Musée Bargoin depicts a horse head demon, which is also attested in DTAud 155A, 167, and 248. The images on the first two items were published by R. Wünsch, and I discovered the drawing of DTAud 248 in the bequest of Audollent. The Roman Alexamenos-graffito, which is usually considered an Anti-Christian caricature, is probably another representation of the horse head demons used in the context of chariot races.*

Resumé: *La tablette de défixion inédite de la collection du Musée Bargoin est illustré d'un démon à tête de cheval, tout comme celles du DTAud 155A; 167 et 248. Les relevés des deux premiers objets ont été publiés par R. Wünsch, j'ai découvert celle du DTAud 248 dans l'héritage d'Audollent. Le démon à tête de cheval des courses de chariots figure probablement aussi sur le graffiti romain d'Alexamenos, qui est considéré généralement comme une caricature anti-chrétienne.*

Keywords: *horse head demon, Seth-Typhon, defixio, Alexamenos-graffito*

Mots clé: *démon à tête de cheval, Seth-Typhon, défixion, graffiti d'Alexamenos*

Two fragments of an unpublished lead lamella from the private collection of Auguste Audollent are kept in the Musée Bargoin¹. Inventory number is found only on the smaller fragment (72-1-217), which is 95 mm wide and 75 mm high. The bigger fragment, measuring 90 mm both in height and in width, formed the top right corner

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1. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mme Chantal Lamesch, the conservateur of the Musée Bargoin, for her support of my research, and also to the mayor of Clermont-Ferrand, who consented to the publication of the photos taken from the finds, which are the property of the town. This study forms part of OTKA [Hungarian Scientific Research Fund] programme no. K 81332 (Ancient magic, parallel researches: Curse tablets and magic gems), and the Zaragoza project titled *Espacios de penumbra: Cartografía de la actividad magico-religiosa en el Occidente del Imperio romano* (Ref. FFI 2008-01511 / FISO).

of the lead tablet and it preserved the edge of the original on the right and part of the edge on the left. The smaller fragment formed the bottom right corner of the tablet, preserving parts of the original edges. Consequently the unbroken lamella used to be somewhat wider at the bottom than at the top. The inventory of the museum reveals that the item was found in the amphitheatre of Bir-el-Djebbana in Carthage, thus we have good reason to assume that it was used to manipulate a race².

Scarcely anything can be worked out from the inscription of the larger fragment. The *defixio* was probably written in Latin, since the letters are not Greek. Still, one of the few clusters of decipherable Latin letters (*telet*) may be part of Greek *telête*. Traces of several written lines can be seen on the smaller fragment. These letters might be read on the spot with a microscope, but I did not have a chance to try. The most significant part of the larger fragment is a drawing frontally depicting a naked male figure in standing position. The creature, portrayed with an erect phallus, holds a wand and a palm branch (i.e. a symbol of victory) in its extended right hand. Magic *characteres* are inscribed under the branch and over the creature's left shoulder³. Its left arm rests next to the body. A star consisting of four lines can be seen between the legs⁴. The facial part of the head (facing right) was broken off, yet the back of the neck and its hair does not hint at a human being. Though the ears are not visible, either, the magician probably intended to portray a human figure with a horse head. We can find such horse head demons in the drawings of Roman curse tablets published by Richard Wünsch, which were clearly designed to manipulate chariot races⁵.

Wünsch described the demons as having a donkey's head and identified them with Seth⁶. K. Preisendanz pointed out that Wünsch's interpretation is wrong and the tablets depict a horse head demon but do not mention either the name of the demon or that of Seth⁷. Preisendanz labelled this demon as gnostic and brought it into connection with Eulamón⁸.

2. However, I have to remark that the inventory of the museum does not always provide authentic information. According to this register, the provenance of a lead container (inv. nr. 72.1.201) with a lead tablet broken into three parts is Bir-el-Djebbana, though the find was presented to Audollent by Dr. Louis Carton's widow and although it is indeed from Carthage, nothing confirms that it was found in the cemetery of Bir-el-Djebbana. Moreover, at two other tablets (inv. nr. 72.1.275 and 72.1.276) the register records «Afrique du Nord», though we know that these items were found in the Fontaine aux mille amphores in Carthage, see G. NÉMETH, «Audollentiana», in *ActaClDebrec* 48, 2012, p. 144.

3. For a male figure with an erect phallus and naked upper body, wearing a short under-dress, also holding a wand in the right hand see item nr. 10 in R. WÜNSCH, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln aus Rom*, Leipzig 1898, p. 12. The text of the lamella was re-edited by Audollent (DTAud 149).

4. The same type of star can be seen between the legs of Hekate in a Bologna *defixio* against Porcellus, see C. SÁNCHEZ NATALÍAS, «The Bologna *defixio*(nes) Revisited», in *ZPE* 179, 2011, p. 204; C. SÁNCHEZ NATALÍAS, «Fistus difloiscat languat ... Re-reading of *defixio* Bologna 2», in *ZPE* 181, 2012, p. 141.

5. WÜNSCH, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln...*, *cit.*, nr.16A=DTAud 155A, 20B=DTAud 167.

6. WÜNSCH, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln...*, *cit.*, pp. 86–114.

7. The name of Seth occurs in a Roman curse tablet from the fountain of Anna Perenna, see J. BLÄNSDORF, «The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae», in R. GORDON, F. MARCO SIMÓN (edd.), *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, Leiden, Boston 2010, p. 218.

8. K. PREISENDANZ, «Fluchtafel», in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 8, 1972, pp. 1–30.



1. Fragment A of 72-I-217

Preisendanz mentioned a curse tablet (DTAud 248) found in the amphitheatre of Carthage and dated to the 3rd century by A. Audollent, who provides the following description: «*Daemon stans longis auribus et asinine (?) capite insignis, pateras (?) duas sinistra gerens, fascem (?) dextra.*» The curse is meant to harm a gladiator named Ziolus, yet Audollent did not publish its drawing — a deficiency remarked also by Preisendanz. As opposed to the Roman material, this curse is not against chariot racers. Notwithstanding, we can assume that the tablet contained the drawing of the horse head demon. Audollent described the ears as those of an ass (with question mark), since Wünsch envisaged donkeys in the Roman drawings, because this made them fit the set of gnostic Seth-spells⁹.

9. For Seth in magical texts, see J. FOSSUM, B. GLAZER, «Seth in the Magical Texts», in *ZPE* 100, 1994, pp. 86-92.



2. Fragment B of 72-I-217

Audollent's drawing is today in the archive of Clermont-Ferrand¹⁰. It depicts a naked creature with an animal head holding a longish object, perhaps a whip in its right hand. The head is portrayed in side-view, looking at the object in the right hand. The left arm is not visible, though we see the figure in front view taking a step or standing astride. A long mane is hanging down to the chest of the creature. The ears are not those of a donkey; they rather resemble the pointy ears of a dog or a horse. The face has disappeared in a breach of the lamella. The figures of DTAud 248 and the unpublished *defixio* in the Musée Bargoin are both portrayed naked

10. NÉMETH, «Audollentiana», *cit.*, pp. 141-142.

in front view, stretching out with their right hand and turning their head towards the object in their hand. The mane of the figure in Clermont-Ferrand does reach the chest but only the corner of neck and shoulder. The genitals are not visible in DTAud 248, though originally they might have also been depicted in the drawing.

Consequently, this anonymous demon is attested only in *defixiones* manipulating amphitheatre or circus games. There is, however, another drawing of a similar horse head creature: the famous graffito from the Palatine Hill in Rome, portraying a crucified human figure with a horse's or donkey's head, accompanied by a Greek inscription: *Ἀλεξάμενός | σέβετε (= σέβεται) | θεόν*¹¹. The drawing has been interpreted (with few exceptions) as a caricature mocking Christians since its discovery in 1856¹². Heikki Solin's authoritative edition summarizes the debate on the interpretation of the inscription and the image. It was pointed out directly after the discovery that ancient Jewish people¹³ (and later also Christians) were commonly accused of worshipping a donkey's head: *Audio eos turpissimae pecudis caput, asini, consecratum inepta nescio qua persuasione venerari: digna et nata religio talibus moribus*¹⁴. Minucius Felix gave a witty rebuttal to these conceptions: *Inde est quod audire te dicis, caput asini rem nobis esse divinam. Quis tam stultus ut hoc colat?*¹⁵ Solin dated the drawing to the 2nd/3rd century¹⁶ but he does not expressly classify it as a caricature of Christ¹⁷. Nevertheless, he posited that «I cristiani non usarono mai pubblicamente la croce sotto nessuna forma prima di Costantino»¹⁸. This assertion queries the Anti-Christian reading of the graffito.

The ears of the crucified figure are unquestionably shorter than those of an ass, thus they rather take after horse ears¹⁹. In my view, the head has been interpreted as that of a donkey under the influence of Minucius Felix and Tertullian. This theory was reinforced by the inscription itself, since Alexamenos worshipped the crucified figure as a god. Indeed, crucifixion reminds all Christians to Christ. However, we know from Plautus that crucifixion was a common punishment of slaves as early

11. GR I 178 (b); ILCV 1352 C. adn.; IGCVO 402; SEG 14, 618; 46, 2293; 47, 1512. The best edition: H. SOLIN, M. ITKONEN-KAILA (edd.), *Graffiti del Palatino I: Paedagogium*, Helsinki 1966, p. 209, no. 246. «Uomo crocifisso visto di dietro, con testa di asino (o di cavallo?)...».

12. A. HELTTULA, «Epigraphical Laughter», in S. JÄKEL, A. TIMONEN (edd.), *Laughter down the Centuries*, vol. 2, Turku 1995, pp. 145-159; P. LOMBARDI, «Le iscrizioni greche cristiane nei Musei Vaticani», in I. DI STEFANO MANZELLA (ed.), *Le iscrizioni dei cristiani in Vaticano. Materiali e contributi scientifici per una mostra epigrafica* (Inscriptiones Sanctae Sedis 2), Città del Vaticano 1997, pp. 45-51.

13. Iosephus Flavius, *Contra Apionem*, 2. 7; Tacitus, *Historiae*, 5, 4.

14. Minucius Felix 9, 3.

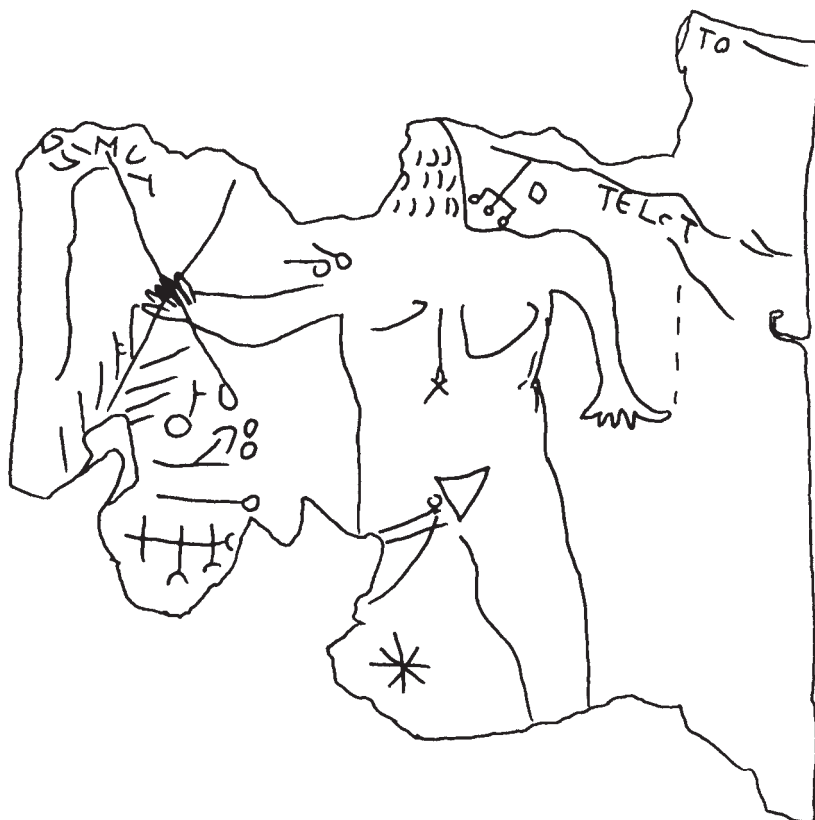
15. Minucius Felix 28, 7. Further references to the worship of the donkey head among Christians: Tertullian: *Apologeticum*, 16, 1-8; *Ad nationes* 1, 11; 14.

16. ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, cit., p. 47.

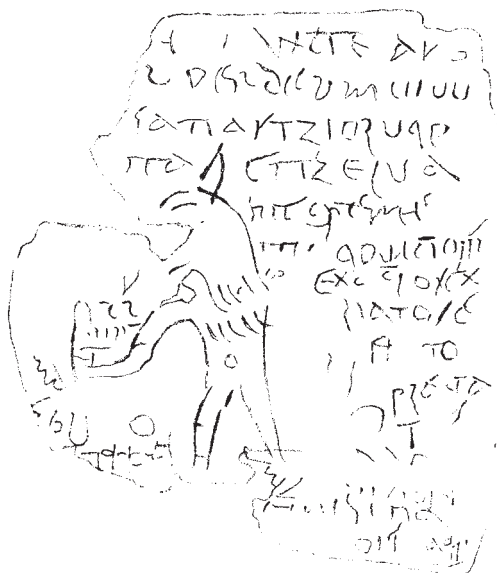
17. It is referred to only in an accidental remark, see ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, cit., p. 46: «caricatura di Cristo».

18. ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, cit., p. 210.

19. As seen also by A. Alföldi, see ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, cit., p. 211.



3. Fragment A of 72-1-217, drawing of G. Németh



4. DTAud 248, drawing of A. Audollent

as in the 3rd century BC²⁰. Therefore, a non-Christian Roman was more likely to see a punished criminal in the drawing, and definitely not Christ, who was perhaps entirely unknown to him.

R. Wünsch studied the Alexamenos-graffito in great depth, drawing a connection between the crucified figure and the demons of the Roman curse tablets — all with a donkey's head, as he saw them. He identified the demons with the Egyptian deity Seth, the murderer of Osiris²¹. Since Seth was commonly depicted with an ass's head, Wünsch thought that drawings on the tablets are unequivocal portrayals of the donkey head Seth-Typhon. Another important element of his argumentation is based on another inscription from the Palatine Hill, reading *Ἀλεξαμενὸς fidelis*. If this inscription was written by a friend of Alexamenos or by Alexamenos himself, then the crucified Seth-Typhon cannot be interpreted as a caricature. This notion seems to be confirmed by a capital Y of considerable size inscribed at the right side of the image, next to the head of the crucified figure. Wünsch connects this symbol to the Y-shaped *character* inscribed next to head of Seth on the curse tablets. He writes: «Dieses Y aber ist natürlich ein geheimes Kultzeichen, nur dem Eingeweihten bekannt und verständlich; ein Spötter aber würde sich nie die Mühe gemacht haben, solch einzelnes Zeichen, das Seinem Spotte an Schärfe nichts hinzufügen konnte, anzubringen»²². Consequently, he regards the crucified figure with an ass's head not as mockery but rather as evidence for the syncretism of the Seth-Typhon cult and of Christianity.

However, Heikki Solin highlighted the untenable points of this bold hypothesis. He proved that the Y is a subsequent element of the image, deriving from a second hand, thus it is no evidence to assume a secret, mysterious symbol, whereas the inscription *Ἀλεξαμενὸς fidelis* «non sembra affatto autentica», therefore it cannot support Wünsch's hypothesis, either²³. E. Staedler considers the word *Ἀλεξαμενός* not a name but a participle meaning «I have been set free» i.e. from the madness of chariot racing²⁴. In spite of this appealing assumption, it is more probable to presume that this part of the inscription contains a personal name and not a participle. Furthermore, Staedler's explanation requires an extensive (though highly uncertain) complementation of the inscription²⁵. It is important to remark, however, that the

20. Plautus, *Miles gloriosus*, 372-373. According to Dionysius Halicarnasseus (5, 51, 3.), crucifixion was applied as early as in 501 BC but most scholars disbelieve this early date, see W.A. OLDFATHER, *Livy 1.26 and the supplicium de more maiorum*, *TAPhA* 39, 1908, 49-72.

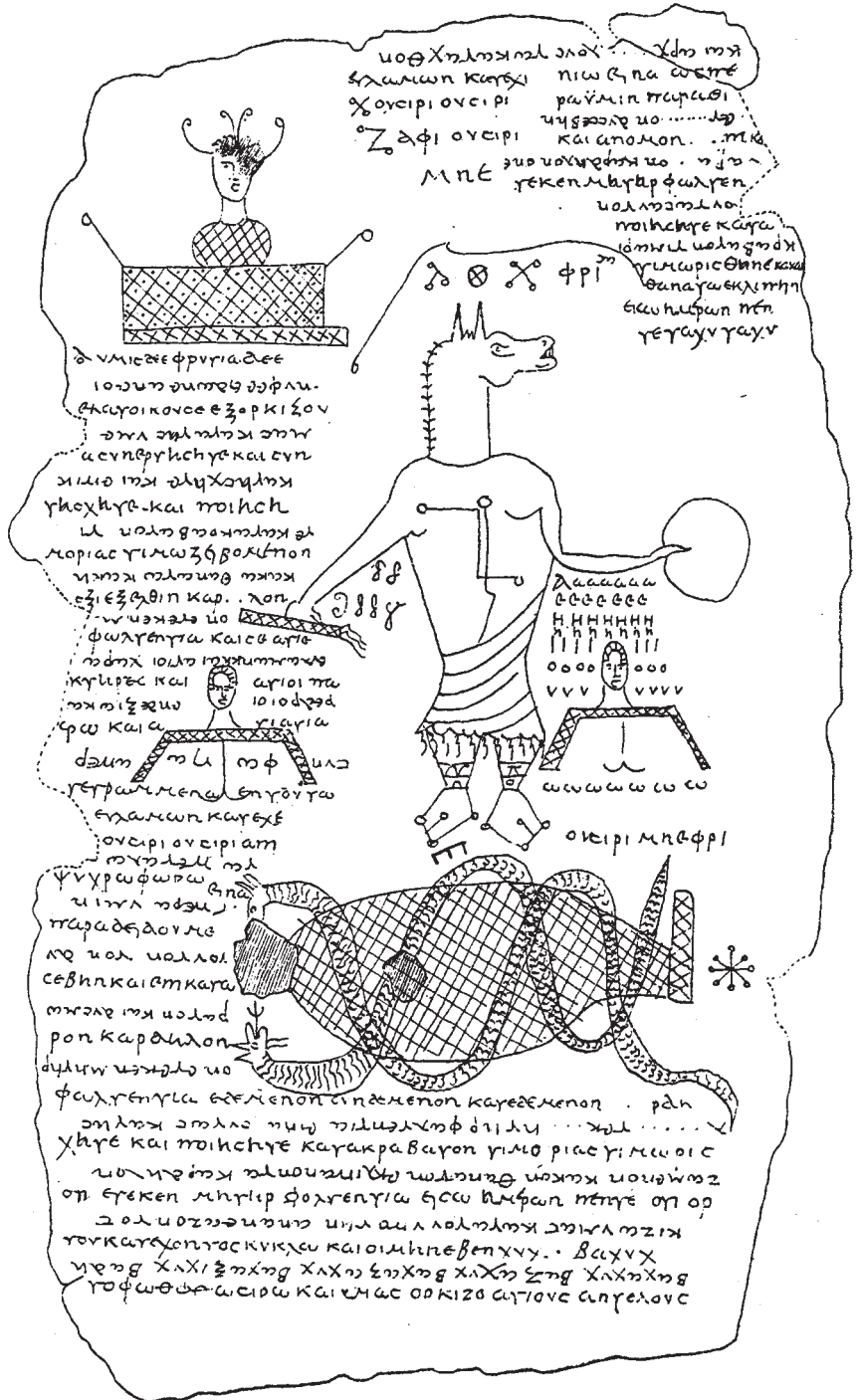
21. WÜNSCH: *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln...*, *cit.*, pp. 86-118. The Alexamenos-graffito is treated on pages 110-114.

22. WÜNSCH: *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln...*, *cit.*, p. 112.

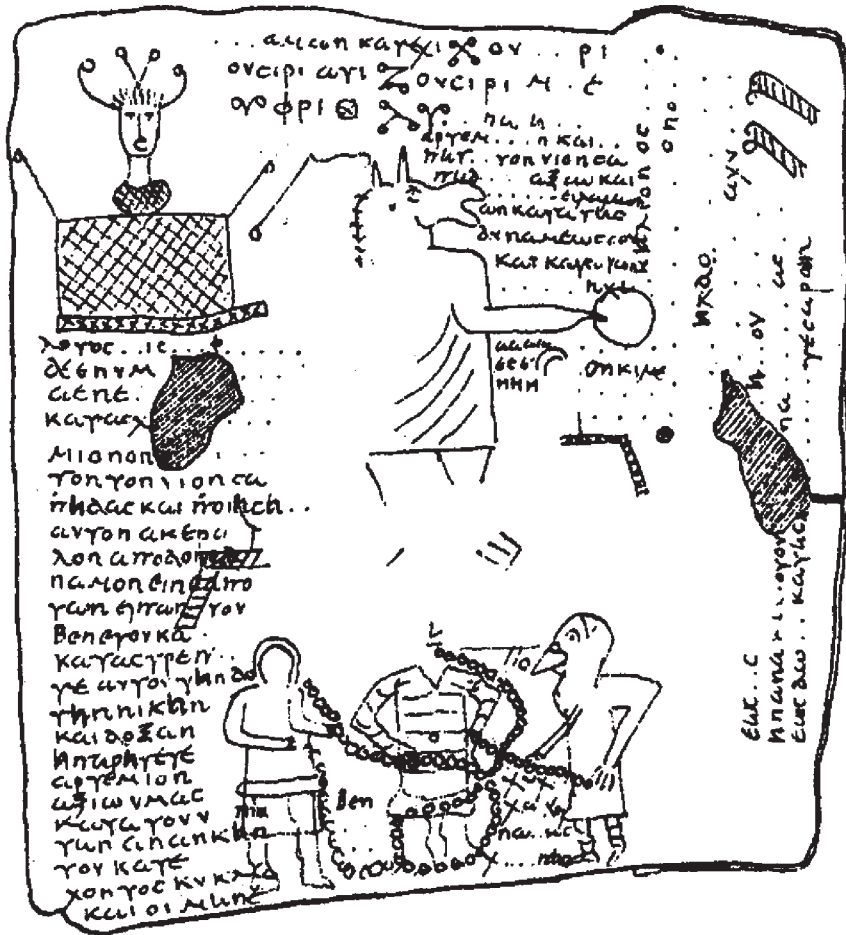
23. ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, *cit.*, p. 211.

24. E. STAEDLER, «Das „Spottkruzifix“ vom Palatin: ein Votivbild?», in *Theologische Quartalschrift* 117, 1936, pp. 253-260.

25. In the translation of H. Solin, see ITKONEN-KAILA, SOLIN, *Graffiti del Palatino...*, *cit.*, p. 211: «(io) che mi sono liberato (dal disgraziato incantamento, grazie all'aiuto di questo dio, io dico a voi tutti che vedete questo disegno): adorate (questo) dio».



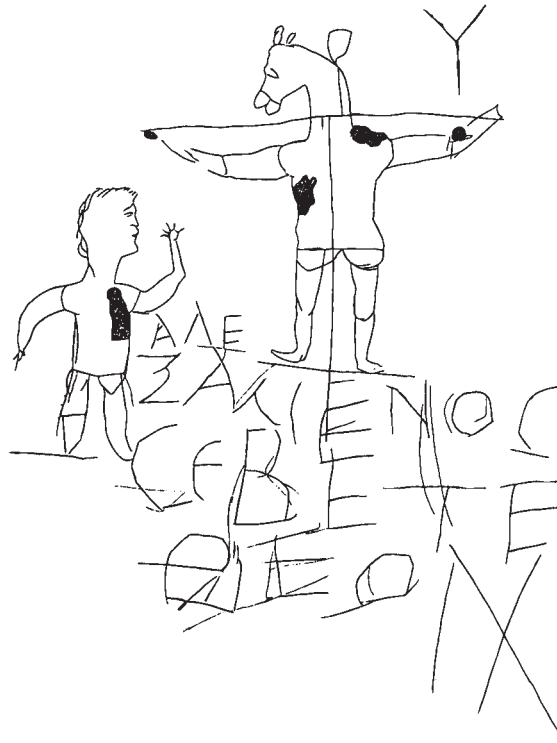
5. DTAud 155A, drawing of R. Wünsch



6. DTAud 167, drawing of R. Wunsch

Paedagogium building, where the Alexamenos-graffito was found, was situated in the direct neighbourhood of the Circus Maximus, thus in this area the occurrence of an inscription referring to circus games is much more probable than an Anti-Christian caricature. Moreover, chronologically it is very difficult to support this latter possibility, since we have seen that the cross was not yet used as a Christian symbol in the 2nd/3rd century.

To sum up, there are more arguments hinting at the link between the Alexamenos inscription and the horse head (not donkey!) demon of the curse tablets, and it seems less likely that the graffito was a pagan joke of an early Christian-mocker. Wunsch was right to argue for the connection, still, the identification of the demon and Seth-Typhon or his explanation referring to gnosticism is not sustainable any more. Simple Roman people wagering money at chariot races, who sometimes even



7. *The Alexamenos-graffito onianze*

employed magical practice to secure victory for their teams, were probably not very well-informed in gnostic literature. However, it is obvious that the anonymous demon of chariot races had the head of a horse and not of an ass. What could be the original function of the Alexamenos-graffito? Most probably we should consider Alexamenos an ill-fortuned gambler who lost all his property at chariot races. The image depicts the demon of the races crucified as a disobedient slave. Alexamenos is standing in front the cross, watching the painful agony of the demon that destroyed him financially. The inscription may indicate that Alexamenos (used to) worship a deity that makes his followers bankrupt.