

# BOWL WITH INSCRIPTION



This ceramic bowl was discovered in the *Portus Magnus* in Alexandria, close to the modern Corniche, at the foot of the peninsula that stretches towards the island of Antirhodos on the former coastline now submerged, fronting the *Caesarium*, one of the most beautiful temples in antiquity.



It was found in an even layer from the first half of the first century AD, the second stratigraphical layer, associated with eastern sigillata, thin-walled goblets and imported cooking wares.

The bowl itself could date to the first century BC (pre-Augustan period). It is a **well preserved** careened cup with handles. Similar forms are present in Pergamon, dating between the late second century BC and the early first century AD. Bearing in mind the technical characteristics and the





typology of this specimen, this bowl is very likely to have come from a workshop from western Asia Minor.

## Inscription

The bowl is engraved with the Greek inscription ΔΙΑ ΧΡΥΣΤΟΥ Ο  
ΓΟΙΣΤΑΙΣ, which was done after the bowl was fired. This inscription, which dates to the 1st century BC (according to the dating of the ceramic) or to the first half of the 1st century AD (according to the dating of the occupation layer where it was found) is enigmatic to say the least. Several hypotheses have been put forward for its translation and consequent significance.



## Different interpretative hypotheses

For Pr. Angelos Chaniotis of Oxford and Princeton, it might be a dedication or a present made by a certain **Chrêstos** to an association (maybe religious) called the **Ogoistais**. In the same vein, Pr. Klaus Hallof, director of the Institute of Greek inscriptions in the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Inscriptions, believes that it is necessary to assimilate “ogoiatai” to known Greek denominations of religious associations such as the Hermaistai, the Athenaistai, or the Isiastai, which gathered worshippers of the god Hermes or the goddess Athena and Isis respectively. “Ogo”, according to this hypothesis, would be a divine form of expressing the god Osogo or Ogoa of whom Strabo and Pausanias talk with regard to a divinity worshipped in Milas, in Caria.

The problem with this interpretation is that the Greek texts use Osogo and not Ogoa. This latter is used by most of Pausanias' commentators which is

misleading and can cause misinterpretation. To establish a parallel between Osogo and Ogoistai, it would be necessary to suppose an erroneous spelling, which is far from evident.

## The goet?

According to the interpretation of Pr. André Bernand goistais might be an erroneous spelling of goestes, the “goet”, that is, the “magician, the sorcerer, the charmer, the magus”. This hypothesis is made more compelling by the fact that the expression introduced by the preposition “dia” is typical of these readers of chance and soothsayers well-known from the classical texts.

According to this supposition, the writing could then be translated either as “**by Chrêstos the magician**”, or “**the magician by Chrêstos**”. Steve Singleton believes that “chrêstos” is simply the Greek term translated as: “good, kind, clement” and that “goistais” is a dative plural. He therefore proposes to translate the text as: “**[Given] through kindness for the magicians**”.



## A lecanomania?

A certain number of elements lead us to imagine that this bowl was used by a magus to tell the future by evoking gods or the dead, questioning about the content of the vessel. This hypothesis could therefore be based on lecanomania which is one of the **oldest forms of artificial divination**. It has been known in Mesopotamia probably since the 3rd millennium BC; the soothsayer interprets the forms taken by the oil poured into a cup of water in an interpretation guided by manuals.

## Chrêstos and Christ?

Chrêstos is a widely accepted name in Greek onomastics. Chrêstos is also the Greek word that translates the Hebrew “Messiah”, “Christ”. According to the interpretation of Pr. André Bernand, the goet would refer to **Jesus-Christ** to legitimise his many magical abilities: the transformation of water into wine, the multiplication of loaves, miraculous cures, resurrection and so on, not to forget the magi-kings whose astrological

knowledge told them to follow a star in order to find the birthplace of the divine child. The “story of Christ” must have been true manna for the magician who could find there precedents to his questions and concerns.

## **An account of early Christianity?**

The problem with reading Chrêstos as “(Jesus-)Christ” is the date of the inscription. If we retain this reading and the date of the archaeological context – the middle of the first century AD – for the inscription, this one would be the first mention of Jesus-Christ, at least an account of early Christianity in Egypt (even if the possible invocation of Christ in a magic ritual does not allow us to conclude that the person using it belonged to the Christian faith).

And G. Dorival highlights, “the origins of Christianity in Egypt is one of the thorniest issues in the history of the origins of Christianity”.

## New religious constructs in Alexandria

In Alexandria paganism, Judaism and Christianity never evolved in isolation. All of these forms of religiousness merged into magical practices that seduced both the humble layers of the population and the most well off classes. It was in Alexandria that new religious constructs were created to propose solutions to the problems of men, and of God's world. The cults of Isis, mysteries of Mithras, and early Christianity all bear witness to this.

Thus, "Christ" was known in Alexandria around the mid first century AD. But that some magicians considered him to be a deity, new and perhaps therefore more efficient for the accomplishment of magic rituals, at present there is not enough evidence: firstly, because no contemporary sources referred to it; secondly because we would have to believe that the "story of the Christ" had already travelled far beyond the narrow circle



of the first Christians in Alexandria in order to feed the sorcerer's imaginative universe. It's difficult to make this leap considering the paucity of evidence. Nevertheless it is acceptable, as a hypothesis, if always presented with caution.

It's also acceptable to read the word *chrêstos* – the Greek translation of the Hebrew messiah – as a reference to a ritual anointment (with “holy” oil), which invests in a divine manner the anointed. The word could be related to the rite itself, the *lekanomancy*, in which the oil has a presumed divine origin. The graffito would thus read: “by (dia) the oil (*chrêstou*) the sorcerer (*o goistai*)” is invested in a divine manner and so obtains the necessary status to realize his ritual.

## **The last but not the least interpretation...**

According György Németh (Eötvös Loránd University, Ancient History, Faculty Member), the inscription might

be the **recipe of an ointment**, the ingredients of which were measured by the cup. The writer of the inscription may well have had διάχριστος in his mind, i.e. DIACHRISTOS, meaning ‘anointed’, ‘salve’, or ‘ointment’ (the name of Christ is derived from the same stem).

The word is attested in ancient medical literature, especially in the works of Galen, Oribasios, Aëtios, Paulus Medicus, and Dioscorides. Most recipes recommend it to produce lip-salve.

The first O in OGOISTAIS may stand here to abbreviate oinos ‘wine’, since wine was one of the most common materials in ancient medicine. GOIST means GO 16, where GO stands for the measure. According to this hypothesis, the translated inscription reads “(A cup) of ointment. Of wine, 16 ounces, of a 16 (?)”

## Conclusion

Considering the difficulty in interpreting the graffito and the different interpretative possibilities and the historical problems that they raise, the hypothesis according to which it might be a dedication or a present made by a certain Chrêstos to an association called ogoistais in reference to a god Osogo, could perhaps appear the most “reasonable”.

But it is not self-evident, because this, like all the hypothetical readings, is only possible by emending the original text. This raises other problems, particularly the question of the **identity of the person who wrote the graffito**. Was he/she Greek, Egyptian, or other? It equally raises the question of the level of his fluency in the Greek language, in the Greek speaking but cosmopolitan city of Alexandria.

To conclude, we can ascertain that contemporaries and the immediate posterity often accused Christ and his



followers of using sorcery, and that the name of Christ was applied as a demonic or divine name both in pagan and in Christian magical practice, still, the Alexandrian cup does not fit into this picture. It was **probably used to produce ointment**, probably employed in healing and not necessarily in magic... and it would have nothing to do with Christians or their Saviour...

**Object:** Bowl, Ceramic, Roman times (1st Century BC and 1st Century AD)  
Alexandria Maritime Museum (C1\_3557)

**Source:** Original description by David Fabre in conference paper “By Christos the magician? The bowl C1\_3557 discovered in the Portus Magnus of Alexandria: misunderstanding and clarification”, OCMA Conference “Cleopatra and the end of the Hellenistic world”, 29-30 September 2010, The Franklin Institute and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology”. The final version will be published in Franck Goddio (dir.) Alexandria. The topography of the Portus Magnus. Underwater archaeology in the eastern port of Alexandria in Egypt. OCMA. Oxford

**Photos:** Christoph Gerigk © Franck Goddio/Hilti Foundation