The Tombstone of Abercius

The queen of ancient Christian inscriptions

Jason Borges May 13, 2026

Reconstruction of the late second-century CE Abercius tombstone inscription, as displayed in the Museum of Roman Civilization in Rome. *Photo by Giovanni Dall'Orto, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Abercius was a prominent Christian from Hierapolis, Phrygia (western Turkey), in the late second century. Before passing away, he inscribed a 22-line autobiography upon his tombstone, which has become known as the "queen of Christian inscriptions." Abercius's epigram is the longest and most explicit early Christian inscription, making it among the most popular and

thoroughly studied of all early Christian artifacts. The story of Abercius's tombstone not only reveals intriguing aspects about ancient Christianity, but also offers a fascinating tale of how an ancient text was identified and rediscovered with the help of modern archaeology.

Around the year 190 CE, Abercius inscribed a poetic autobiography on a 3.25-foot-tall funerary altar. The engraved stone stood atop Abercius's ornate marble tomb just outside the city gate of Hierapolis. The tomb's prominent location and lengthy text memorialized his elite status for all to see. The inscription reads:

> A citizen of an elect city, I constructed this tombstone while still alive, so that I might have a notable resting place for my body here. I am Abercius, a disciple of the holy shepherd, who pastures his sheep on the mountains and plains, and who has great eyes that see everything. For he himself taught me trustworthy texts.
>
> He sent me to Rome to behold the royal city, to see a queen with golden robes and golden sandals. I saw there a people having a shining seal. And I saw the land of Syria and all its cities, including Nisibis beyond the Euphrates.
>
> Everywhere I had fellow brothers, and Paul accompanied me in my wagon. Faith led me everywhere, and everywhere it provided me fish from a great, pure spring. A virgin caught the fish and gave it to friends to always eat, along with good wine mixed with bread.
>
> Abercius stood and dictated these things to be inscribed. I lived 72 years, indeed. May those who understand and approve these words pray for Abercius.
>
> No one shall place another body in my tomb. But if someone does, he shall deposit 2,000 gold coins into the Roman treasury and 1,000 gold coins into my good hometown of Hierapolis.

The epitaph, which presents Abercius as a Christian sage, recounts his lengthy journey west to Rome and east to Syria. In second-century Roman society, elites sought to portray themselves as traveling intellectuals. Abercius claims that, during his wide-ranging travels, he was guided by the divine shepherd, learned about "trustworthy texts" (probably early Christian scriptures), was accompanied by the apostle Paul (presumably referring to his epistles), and joined fellow saints in sacred meals. Especially intriguing is Abercius's note that he journeyed to Rome to see a "queen" with golden attire, which most scholars have taken to be a coded reference to the city's primacy in the early church. Thus, the autobiographical text, along with the tombstone's prominent location, portrayed the deceased both as a pious orthodox Christian and a Roman elite.

Equally remarkable, however, is the story of how Abercius's inscription came to be preserved. A few decades after Abercius's tombstone was erected, it enamored a certain Alexander son of Antonius. When Alexander died in Hierapolis around 215 CE, he copied Abercius's epitaph upon his own gravestone. He changed the name but kept the details—as if his life followed the same course as Abercius's!

In the late 300s, an anonymous author composed the *Life of Abercius*, a hagiography of the Phrygian saint. The lengthy narrative reconstructed Abercius's life using the funerary monument (which the author describes and transcribes in the conclusion), oral legends about Abercius, and some historical imagination. Scribes in the medieval period then copied and retained the *Life of Abercius*, though by that time the original funerary monument had long been lost to history.

Recovered fragments of the original Abercius tombstone inscription, as displayed in the Museo Pio Cristiano in Rome. *Photo by Fabrizio Garrisi, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Then, in 1881, Sir William Ramsay discovered Alexander's inscription and recognized the text from *Life of Abercius*. Two years later, Ramsay revisited the area with J.R.S. Sterrett and found two large fragments from Abercius's original tombstone, reused in the walls of an Ottoman bathhouse. The discovery was spectacular and sensational. The pioneer of Christian archaeology, G.B. de Rossi, famously hailed it as the "queen of Christian inscriptions." Ramsay gifted the two fragments to Pope Leo XIII and Ottoman Sultan Abdul-Hamid II. The fragments were soon reunited in Rome and remain on display at the Museo Pio Cristiano, one of the Vatican museums.

The narrative arc of Abercius's tombstone is all too ironic—the monument that recounts Abercius's journey to a queen in Rome itself traveled to Rome and became a "queen."
Ever since Ramsay's initial publication, scholars have interpreted Abercius's inscription in light of the struggles between proto-Orthodox groups and Phrygian Montanists (the charismatic prophetic movement that emerged from Phrygia around 170 CE and was later condemned as heretical). That is, Abercius's autobiography displays his commitment to orthodoxy and opposition to Montanism. The base upon which the gravestone now stands at the Vatican Museum claims that the inscription "testifies to the unanimity of the universal church in one faith."

Abercius erected his tombstone so that later generations would remember him as an important person. Considering the tombstone's subsequent history, we can say that Abercius achieved his objective—Alexander emulated the gravestone, the fourth-century hagiography cited the funerary monument, and the rediscovered fragments remain prominently displayed in the Vatican in Rome. Abercius has been well-remembered and much discussed by posterity, just as he intended.

Additional Reading

Much more could be (and has been) said about Abercius's legendary tombstone. Margaret Mitchell has two insightful chapters: "Looking for Abercius" in *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context* (de Gruyter, 2007), and "The Poetics and Politics of Christian Baptism in the Abercius Monument" in *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism* (de Gruyter, 2011). Blank's *Die Grabinschrift des Aberkios: ein Kommentar* (Schnell & Steiner, 2023) is a monographic commentary. For an English translation of *Life of Abercius*, see Appendix 1 in Paul McKechnie's *Christianizing Asia Minor* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019). Jason Borges's article "Travel in Abercius's Epitaph" (*Journal of Early Christian Studies* 34.1 [2025]) analyzes the original intent and modern interpretations of the epigram.