

The Sponge-Stick: Scatological Undertones to Christ's Humiliation at the Crucifixion

Benjamin J. Rusch (B.A. Biblical Languages, Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN)

Abstract: Scholarship has routinely overlooked the identification of the sponge-stick used to offer drink to the crucified Jesus. This study proposes that the object in question was the *xylospogium* or *tersorium*, common in Roman toilet use. This hypothesis satisfies exegetical queries such as (i) why the drink was a mockery and not an act of mercy; (ii) why a reaching tool was used together with crosses that typically were short; (iii) why the gospels bother to specify the stick and the sponge. Objections to this identification are not insurmountable.*

Introduction and a Brief History of the Hypothesis

The sponge-stick that was offered to Jesus to drink from on the cross appears explicitly or implicitly in all four canonical gospels.

Matt 27:47-49 τινὲς δὲ τῶν ἐκεῖ ἐστηκότων ἀκούσαντες ἔλεγον ὅτι Ἡλίαν φωνεῖ οὗτος. καὶ εὐθέως δραμῶν εἷς ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ λαβὼν **σπόγγον** πλήσας τε ὄξους καὶ **περιθεις καλάμω** ἐπότιζεν αὐτόν. οἱ δὲ λοιποὶ ἔλεγον, Ἄφες ἴδωμεν εἰ ἔρχεται Ἡλίας σῶσων αὐτόν.¹

Some of those who were standing there, after having heard, began to say, “This man is summoning Elijah!” And immediately one of them ran and took a **sponge** and filled it with vinegar, and he tried to give it to him to drink by **putting it on a stick**. But the others said, “Let it be! Let us see if Elijah is coming to save him!”²

Mark 15:35-36 καὶ τινες τῶν παρεστηκότων ἀκούσαντες ἔλεγον· ἴδε Ἡλίαν φωνεῖ. δραμῶν δέ τις [καὶ] γεμίσας **σπόγγον** ὄξους **περιθεις καλάμω ἐπότιζεν** αὐτόν λέγων· ἄφετε ἴδωμεν εἰ ἔρχεται Ἡλίας καθελεῖν αὐτόν.

* The author would like to thank the tireless research assistance of Robert W. Rowe during the preparation of this paper. This paper reflects the opinions of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of their church body or employer.

¹ All Greek New Testament citations are from *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Nestle-Aland, 28th ed., unless noted otherwise.

² All Greek and Latin translations are the author's unless noted otherwise.

And some of the ones present, having heard, said, “Behold! He is summoning Elijah!” Someone also having run and filled a **sponge** with vinegar, **he tried to give to him to drink** by **putting it on a stick**, saying, “Let it be! Let us see if Elijah is coming to take him down.”

Luke 23:36-37 **ἐνέπαιξαν** δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ στρατιῶται προσερχόμενοι, ὄξος προσφέροντες αὐτῷ καὶ λέγοντες· εἰ σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, σῶσον σεαυτόν.

The soldiers also **mocked** him by coming up and offering him vinegar, and by saying, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!”

John 19:28b-30a λέγει· διψῶ. σκεῦος ἔκειτο ὄξους μεστόν· **σπόγγον** οὖν μεστόν τοῦ ὄξους ὑσώπῳ **περιθέντες** προσήνεγκαν αὐτοῦ τῷ στόματι. ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβεν τὸ ὄξος [ὃ] Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· τετέλεσται

He said, “I thirst.” A vessel full of vinegar was set there; so **by putting a sponge** full of the vinegar upon hyssop, they brought it to his mouth. Then, when he received the vinegar, Jesus said, “It is finished.”

Commentators routinely neglect to stop and examine the sponge-stick *qua* sponge-stick mentioned in the passion accounts. Is it even worth elaborating on? Maybe its two components, the sponge part and the stick part, are worth expanding on—but surely the two combined is self-explanatory, right? This author would like to suggest that another option has been overlooked. The sponge-stick may have been the Greek and Roman toilet tool, the *xylospogium* or *tersorium*.³ A person sitting on the latrine would wet this sponge-on-a-stick in a trough or basin of water and use it to clean his or her rear end.

Why bother postulating such a nauseating hypothesis? It has surprising explanatory force. The latrine *xylospogium* was perhaps the most infamous use of a sponge on a stick. It explains why the gospels seem to portray the drink as one of many mockeries against Jesus. It explains why the perpetrators used the sponge-stick as an ostensible reaching instrument despite the fact that most

³ In this paper, we shall use both *xylospogium* and the late Latin word *tersorium* interchangeably (including but not limited to the infamous toilet sponge-stick.)

Roman crucifixes were so short that extra reach was unnecessary. Finally, attempted arguments against it being a *tersorium* are not at all insurmountable.

Most recently, the proposals that Jesus was offered a drink from a latrine *tersorium* come from bloggers,⁴ internet memes, those outside the field of history or the New Testament,⁵ etc.⁶ A dedicated scholarly study has, to this author's knowledge, never been published on this hypothesis.

One publication confidently proposing it is the popular book, *They Turned the World Upside Down*, by Charles Martin.

In order to help stem the flow of sickness and maintain a sanitary army, soldiers are issued two things: a jar of vinegar and a *tersorium*. Or, sponge on a stick. After using the bathroom, they would dip the sponge in the vinegar,⁷ clean their backside, and repeat as needed. You can see where this is going. “Immediately, one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed and offered it to Him to drink.” ... What we do know is that Roman society used **sponges on sticks**

⁴ Bert Gary, “Was Jesus Crucified in the Manner Shown in Paintings and Movies?,” *Infinity Now*, 24 January 2009, <https://bertgary.blogspot.com/2009/01/was-jesus-crucified-in-manner-shown-in.html>; Hans Jakob Bürger, “Jesus Und Der Schwamm Des Tersorium,” *Catholic News Agency, CNA Deutsch*, 16 April 2022, <https://de.catholicnewsagency.com/article/jesus-und-der-schwamm-des-tersorium-1734>. Wikipedia’s Entry for “Holy Sponge” even links to its *xylospogium* article under “See Also.”

⁵ Ask Katzeff, “In Your Face!: Unidentified Objects Flying in the Face of Power.” *Øjeblikket* (2010): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1000/ISBN87-90426-35-5>, <https://hal-hprints.archives-ouvertes.fr/hprints-00507534>.

⁶ In BAR’s “Queries & Comments” to the editors, one letter in reaction to ancient latrine features pondered: “I was reminded of the sponge on a stick that was used to give Jesus sour wine during the Crucifixion, according to three of the Gospels.... Is this sponge-on-stick just a coincidence, or was the use of this ‘toilet paper’ one more insult the Roman soldiers inflicted on crucifixion victims?” “Queries & Comments,” *BAR* 29.1 (2003), <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/29/1/18>.

A disgusted BAR reader, two issues later, reacts, “I have read, with disbelief and shock, the letter of Tim Philabaum on the ‘final insult’ [suggesting that the sponge offered to Jesus on the cross had been used in a toilet—Ed.]” “Queries & Comments,” *BAR* 29.3 (2003), <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/29/3/24>.

⁷ Although it is persistently repeated in literature, this author cannot find any primary source support for the claim that vinegar was used with the latrine *xylospogium*, and therefore treats the claim with suspicion. There are primary sources talking about medical sponges being cleaned another way: “let the sponge be new; if such a sort is not at hand, let one of the others be cleaned using saltpeter, or better, the ash called lye.” (Oribasius, *Collectiones Medicae* 44.28.3)

as toilet paper, and there on the cross they shoved it in Jesus' mouth. "Eat this and die!" It tells us what they thought of Him.⁸

The earliest instance of this hypothesis that this author is aware of comes from the pen of the Chair of Roman History and Archaeology at the University of Durham. In a short appendix to a discussion of Roman latrine features, he speculates:

Did one carry one's own [toilet] sponge, and merely fit it into a communal stick? This possibility is suggested by the events at the Crucifixion: it was of course by means of a sponge, **certainly a toilet sponge**, that the soldier offered army wine ("vinegar") to Christ on the Cross.⁹

The third and most important instance occurs in the magisterial volume, *Roman Toilets: Their Archaeology and Cultural History*. In passing, Andrew Wilson considers a possible connection between a *xylospungium* and the drink offered to the crucified Christ. However, he soon dampens the possibility. The paragraph is worth citing *in toto*:

It is possible that the scene in the Gospel accounts of the Crucifixion, when one of the onlookers puts a sponge dipped in vinegar on a reed and offers it to Jesus is intended to recall the *xylospungium* of Roman latrines. Although in the Victorian and later tradition this has been seen as an act of charity, a bitter liquid is anything but comfort when one is in pain, and if the sponge on a stick was normally seen as a piece of latrine equipment intimately associated with excrement, it is conceivable that it was intended to represent the ultimate humiliation. Against this interpretation, however, is the fact that sour wine was a common drink and that the implement in the Gospel accounts is not a ready-made sponge stick, but a sponge which, naturally, has to be put on a reed in order to get the liquid up to Jesus on the cross.¹⁰

His proposed objections will be addressed below.

⁸ Charles Martin, *They Turned the World Upside Down: A Storyteller's Journey with Those Who Dared to Follow Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, 2021), 2. Emphasis added.

⁹ John Cecil Mann, "The Housesteads Latrine," *Archaeologia Aeliana, Or, Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquities*, 5 17 (1989): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5284/1060841>. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Andrew Wilson, "Urination and Defecation Roman-Style," in *Roman Toilets: Their Archaeology and Cultural History*, ed. Gemma C. M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, and Eric M. Moormann, *Babesch Annual Papers on Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement 19* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 103.

What Was the *Xylospogium*?—A Look at Primary Sources

Sponges were ubiquitous tools in antiquity and attaching one to a stick (either to further one's reach, or to put more distance between oneself and the sponge) only seems common sense. Hence the name *xylospogium* (sometimes also spelled *xylospogium*), derived from the two Greek words: ξύλον (stick) + σπόγγος (sponge). In Latin, the Greek word is simply left transliterated. A later Latin term *tensorium* also is used as a synonym; however, this word, strictly speaking, simply means “wiper”. **Common consensus seems to be that Romans used this sponge-on-a-stick as surrogate toilet paper.** Because it was a humble device made of organic materials, and because of very low interest among archaeologists until recently, there are no surviving *xylospogia* in the archaeological record. There are, however, sponge spicules found “in quantity” in latrines.¹¹ We have several primary sources talking about the infamous device.

In the port of Ostia Antica, archaeologists have unearthed what was possibly the dressing room of the Baths of the Seven Sages, along with their impressive wall paintings, dating to the second century.¹² The philosophers on the walls have *dipinti* speech captions, and their topic of conversation is scatological. The images of Thales of Miletus and Solon of Athens (holding a teaching rod) are captioned with joking advice about constipation. A caption spoken by a figure beneath Thales mocks the philosopher's teaching staff by comparing it to the *xylospogium* in the

¹¹ Wilson, “Roman Toilets,” 103–4. Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, “Roman Latrines: How the Ancients Did Their Business,” *Archaeology Odyssey* 7.3 (2004), <https://www.baslibrary.org/archaeology-odyssey/7/3/9>.

¹² Alf. Merlin, “L'Année Épigraphique: Revue Des Publications Épigraphiques Relatives à l'antiquité Romaine,” *Revue Archéologique* 18 (1941): 303–58; Guido Calza, “Die Taverne Der Sieben Weisen in Ostia Antica,” *Die Antike* 15 (1939): 99–115; John R. Clarke, “Look Who's Laughing: Humor in Tavern Painting as Index of Class and Acculturation,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 43/44 (1998): 27–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4238756>; Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow and Eric M. Moormann, “The Paintings of Philosophers in the Baths of the Seven Sages in Ostia,” in *Roman Toilets: Their Archaeology and Cultural History*, ed. Gemma C. M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, and Eric M. Moormann, *Babesch Annual Papers on Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement* 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 178–81.

latrine: “*Verbose tibi / nemo / dicit dum Priscianus / [u]taris xylosphongio nos / [a?]quas.*”¹³ It is translated various ways (e.g. “Nobody talks to you much, Priscianus, until you are using **the sponge-stick**; [let] us [give you some] water.”¹⁴), but all proposed interpretations suggest that the sponge-stick was used right after defecation for cleaning up.

Martial, in his Epigrams, talks about being offered tasty lavish feasts by potential hosts. He jokes about the personal integrity of the host *captator* who would offer these meals and about the consequences of eating such lavish dinners. That is, the food ends up as putrid bodily waste that needs to be cleaned up by a *xylospongium*.

“Yeah, but it is a luxurious feast!” Sure, I admit, very luxurious. But tomorrow, it will be nothing. Or rather, today. Or rather, it will be nothing right away—
It will be the sort of thing that **a wretched sponge on a godforsaken stick** might know about,
or a random dog, or a urinal pot by the road.
This is how red mullet fish and hare meat and sow udder end up.¹⁵

Seneca narrates a dreadful story about a German gladiator fighter involving a sponge-stick. The gladiator decides that he would rather commit suicide than be forced to play blood sport with animals for entertainment. To this end, he asks to go to the only place where he knows that he’ll have privacy—the toilet.

Not long ago, one of the Germanics in the animal-gladiator school, when he should have been getting prepared for the morning exhibition, withdrew in order to relieve himself. That was the only thing allowed of him to do in private without a guard. There he crammed the entire **stick** (which was put there **for the purpose of**

¹³ Merlin, “L’Année Épigraphique,” 304.

¹⁴ Wilson, “Roman Toilets,” 103.

¹⁵ Martial *Epigrams* 12.48.5-9

cleaning off filth¹⁶, with a sponge stuck on) down his gullet. And with his airway blocked up, he strangled his breath. This was to make an insult of death. Yes, absolutely! Not very prettily and not very tastefully, but what is more foolish than to face death squeamishly? What a brave man! How suitable that he should be given the choice of his fate!¹⁷

Aristophanes' *The Frogs* contains a humorous moment between Dionysus and Xanthias involving a sponge and defecation. Dionysus (disguised as Heracles) arrives at the palace of the King of the Dead. He has such a terrifying experience with the doorkeeper that he collapses and soils himself. Dionysus calls his servant Xanthias to get him a sponge, supposedly to soothe his startled heart with a wipe of cool water, but he ends up using the sponge to wipe himself *someplace else*.

Xanthias: Hey! What have you done?

Dionysus: I pooped myself. Beckon the god.

Xa: Oh, ridiculous! Yes, get up! Quick, before a stranger sees you!

Di: But I am fainting! Bring a sponge against my heart!

Xa: Ta-dah! Take it! Apply it!

Di: Where is it?

Xa: Egads, Golden Gods! You keep your heart *where*?!

Di: For it got frightened—downward into my colon it crept.

Xa: Oh, you most cowardly of gods and men!

Di: Me? A coward? In what way? Who begged you for a sponge?—no other man would have acted thus.

Xa: What would he do?

Di: He would have laid down, smelling putrid, if indeed he were a coward. I, on the other hand, got up. And, over and above, I wiped myself.

Xa: How manly!—Oh, Poseidon!¹⁸

¹⁶ Lat. *obscena*. This word's lexical range is somewhat broad, so here we translate it "filth." However, it often tends to connote excrement, and even private parts; cf. Lewis & Short s.v. *Obscenus*. Cf. also Seneca Ep. 77.14, where the word is unmistakably connected to slave chamberpot duty.

¹⁷ Seneca Ep. 70.20-21.

¹⁸ Aristophanes Ran. 479-491. Translated from the Greek text of Kenneth Dover, *Aristophanes: Frogs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

In an early 2nd century Latin papyrus letter P.Mich.inv. 5393,¹⁹ we get a look into the life of one Roman soldier Claudius Terentianus. In unpolished Latin, he complains about one family friend Saturninus, who is financially mistreating him. “I tell him: ‘Come and intercede, if you can help Ptolemaeus, my father.’ He did not care for me more than for a sponge stick, but for his business and his things.”²⁰ The vulgar Latin grammar (or the errors therein) is difficult, but his intent is clear: “he treated me like crap,” we might paraphrase.

In a video lecture dedicated to ancient toilet hygiene, Classics professor Stephen M. Trzaskoma is hesitant to accept the hypothesis that the sponge on a stick was directly used to wipe one’s hindquarters.²¹ He dismisses it as mere googling, and claims “it was never established by the scholarship.” He defends his position by spending generous time examining Greek and Latin primary sources that mention it.²² Regardless, what all scholars accept is that Roman latrines

¹⁹ Also categorized as P.Mich. 8.471, or at the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri

²⁰ Christian Lehmann, “On the Latin of Claudius Terentianus (P. Mich. VIII, 467-472),” *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica*. XXI (1988): 11–23. Translation synthesized from Lehmann’s English and accompanying commentary.

²¹ *Ancient Toilet Hygiene*, UNH Classics (University of New Hampshire, 2020), https://media.unh.edu/media/Ancient+Toilet+Hygiene/1_solbb3ig.

²² For something allegedly “never established by the scholarship” this is the clear majority position that appears in specialized works discussing ancient sanitation and toilets. This scholarly debate, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. For several experts and comprehensive studies of ancient Roman toilets which explicitly acknowledge that sponge-sticks were used directly on the body, see: Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, *The Archaeology of Sanitation in Roman Italy: Toilets, Sewers, and Water Systems*, Studies in the History of Greece and Rome (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Gemma Jansen, “Roman Toilets of the City of Minturnae. A Preliminary Report,” in *Minturnae: Nuovi Contributi Alla Conoscenza Della Forma Urbis* (Rome: Eizioni Quasar, 2015), https://www.academia.edu/25699094/Roman_toilets_of_the_city_of_Minturnae_A_preliminary_report; Gemma C. M. Jansen, Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, and Eric M. Moormann, eds., “Roman Toilets: Their Archaeology and Cultural History,” *Babesch Annual Papers on Mediterranean Archaeology Supplement* 19 (Leuven: Peeters, 2011); Alex Scobie, “Slums, Sanitation, and Mortality in the Roman World,” *Klio* 68.68 (1986): 399–433, <https://doi.org/10.1524/klio.1986.68.68.399>; Michelle Harrison-Sim, “Aqua, Aqua, Undique: Aspects of Roman Domestic Water Use” (University of Otago, Thesis, 2007), <https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/handle/10523/2988>.

For a contrary theory proposing that the toilet xylopongium was not directly used on the soiled body, see especially: Gilbert Wiplinger, “Der Gebrauch Des Xylopongiums: Eine Neue Theorie Zu Den Hygienischen Verhältnissen in Römischen Latrinen,” in *SPA. SANITAS PER AQUAM. Tagungsband Des Internationalen Frontinus-Symposiums Zur Technik- Und Kulturgeschichte Der Antiken Thermen* (Peeters, 2012), <https://www.academia.edu/5333789/Xylopongium>. Against this hypothesis, however, Seneca Ep. 70.20-21 (see above) makes it clear that they are used for cleaning *obscena*. To this author’s knowledge, *xylopongia* were not used

commonly included sponge-sticks, and these infamous devices got thoroughly fouled in the most revolting manner.

Act of Mercy or Malice?

It is important for the establishment of this study's hypothesis that the offering of a drink was done in mockery or malice, or at the very least with *mixed* motives. If the drink on the sponge was offered in mercy, that makes the probability of a latrine *xylospogium* substantially weaker.

Luke 23 is the clearest account that the offer of vinegar to drink was done out of mockery. It is the second element of three (possibly four) revilements in a row: the rulers sneering (v.35), the soldiers mocking (v.36), the *titulus* put above Jesus' head (v.38), and the first criminal blaspheming him (v.39). The mockery is only interrupted by the second criminal's rebuke (v.40). R.C.H. Lenski confidently accepts that the soldier's drink is an insult based on the participles like προσφέροντες ("offering") following the main verb ἐνέπαιξαν ("they mocked"): "All three participles denote mode and manner, all three modify 'they were mocking' and show how it was done. It will not do to confine the mockery only to the words the soldiers spoke."²³ This does seem to be the most plausible construal of the participles.

Many commentators see that Psalm 69:21²⁴ (LXX 68:22) is purposefully in view of the gospel authors when the drink of vinegar is mentioned. Even if the psalmist's drink was something offered

to clean commodes like chamberpots, which Seneca also calls an *obscena* duty in Ep. 77.14. Presumably, we may therefore conclude that the *obscena* that a *xylospogium* cleans in Ep. 70.20-21 is the filthy body part.

²³ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 1138.

²⁴ Some others suggest Psalm 22:15: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." This alternative would not be opposed to this study's thesis.

in mercy, it is clearly accepted by the psalmist as if it were just as poisonous as the cruel gall given as food.

(LXX Ps 68:22) καὶ ἔδωκαν εἰς τὸ βρωμά μου χολήν |
καὶ εἰς τὴν δίψαν μου ἐπότισάν με ὄξος.²⁵
And they gave gall for my food,
and they gave me vinegar to drink for my thirst.

The ill will and mercilessness is unmistakable in the psalm. Shame and humiliation and cries of rescue are a recurring motif. This also seems to support the interpretation of the drink as an act of malice.

In Mark and Matthew’s accounts, the drink is sandwiched directly in the middle of the “He’s summoning Elijah!” mockeries—implying that this, too, was one of the mockeries being perpetrated. John is silent on the motive, leaving it ambiguous. Celsus (although it is unclear which accounts he was aware of) concluded in several places that the drink offered to Jesus was a matter of shame, something that ought to invoke the full fury of God’s wrath.²⁶

Commentators on all four gospels are seemingly utterly divided on whether the offer of the drink was done in sympathy or done with malice. To those examining Luke, the gesture seems clearly to be mockery. To those examining Mark, Matthew, and John, it seems to be mixed, confusing, or ambiguous. Those scholars cross-referencing gospels may express doubts of authenticity or they might assign conflict to the gospel authors. For example, Raymond E. Brown sifts the four canonical accounts in search of harmony and disharmony in them all:

²⁵ LXX Greek text taken from Rahlfs, Alfred, and Robert Hanhart, eds. *Septuaginta: SESB Edition*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006.

²⁶ Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (Oxford University Press, 1987), 65, 78, 107.

The motive [in Luke] is clearly mockery, a motive that is not clear in the Marcan/Matthean description where the action could be a sympathetic gesture.... John agrees with the second incident in Mark/Matthew against the Lucan version in situating the incident just before Jesus' death, in mentioning the sponge, and perhaps in not seeing the gesture as mockery.... It really defies imagination to detect a pattern or motivation in such a selection and addition of details (only the thirst and the hyssop have discernible symbolism).²⁷

Similarly, Ulrich Luz expresses confusion in harmonizing the accounts: “Does Matthew regard giving Jesus something to drink as a good deed? Or is it, as in Mark, part of the malicious mocking? ... The latter is more probable not only on linguistic grounds but also for substantive reasons...”²⁸

It would be advantageous to accept the *xylospongium* hypothesis. Even if a drink of vinegar might, in extremely similar circumstances, be an act of mercy to a crucifixion victim—this added detail clearly turns it into an unmistakable insult that harmonizes all four gospels. By accepting this identification, the confusion and ambiguity haunting New Testament commentaries (is it malice or a merciful act?) is thus helpfully resolved.

There is at least one alternative method by which the offer of vinegar would be an act of malice or mockery. James W. Voelz offers the possibility that hydrating the victim was a way of prolonging the victim's torture. “[T]he reception of the liquid might have had, *not a pain-deadening effect* (cf. ἔσμυρνισμένον οἶνον in [Mark] 15:23), but a *quickenning effect*. Jesus, upon receiving it, may well become *more alert, more sensitive to his pain, and, therefore, more acutely aware of the suffering that he is undergoing*. In other words, his suffering may thereby by

²⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday, 1970), 928.

²⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, vol. 3 of *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 552.

intensified.”²⁹ This is plausible. It is also fully compatible with the delivery instrument being a *xylospogium*.

Other scholars have suggested that “the use of a sharp potion was not an uncommon practice” for executioners as a form of sadistic torture, citing Aristophanes *Ran.* 620, where vinegar is poured into the nostrils as torture.³⁰ Similar to Voelz’ suggestion of rousing the victim, a vinegar-soaked sponge was also supposedly used to rouse narcotic-sedated patients,³¹ a practice that certainly existed in the middle ages.³² This might also be plausible—and it is also compatible with this *xylospogium* hypothesis.

Why a Reaching Instrument?

Contrary to much sacred art, typical Roman crucifixes were not tall. Using a sponge-stick as a reaching instrument was not required. By far, the most common crucifix was the so-called *crux humilis*, which did not raise the victim very high, his feet only 10-18 inches off the ground.³³ This allowed nature to assist in the death of the victim. The unconventional *crux sublimis* was higher,

²⁹ James W. Voelz and Christopher W. Mitchell, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2019). Emphasis original.

³⁰ Erkki Koskeniemi, Kirsi Nisula, and Jorma Toppari, “Wine Mixed with Myrrh (Mark 15.23) and Crurifragium (John 19.31-32): Two Details of the Passion Narratives,” *JSNT* 27.4 (2005): 386, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X05055745>.

³¹ Roberto Pronzato and Renata Manconi, “Mediterranean Commercial Sponges: Over 5000 Years of Natural History and Cultural Heritage,” *Marine Ecology* 29 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1439-0485.2008.00235.x>; Renata Manconi and Roberto Pronzato, “On the Current Status of *Spongia Officinalis* (the Sponge by Definition), and Implications for Conservation. A Review of the Current Position,” 2018, 3, <http://www.geocities.ws/soasspongesconference2018/>.

³² Plinio Pioreschi, “Medieval Anesthesia – the *Spongia Somnifera*,” *Medical Hypotheses* 61.2 (2003): 213–19, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9877\(03\)00113-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0306-9877(03)00113-0); G. Kasten Tallmadge, “Some Anesthetics of Antiquity,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 1.4 (1946): 515–20.

³³ F. P. Retief and L. Cilliers, “Christ’s Crucifixion as a Medico-Historical Event,” *Acta Theologica* 26.2 (2006): 298, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v26i2.52582>; John J. Collins, “Exegetical Notes: The Archæology of the Crucifixion,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 1.2 (1939): 154.

with the feet off the ground about a yard.³⁴ However, this was reserved for victims that the state very intentionally wanted displayed in a truly spectacular way, because of the considerable inconvenience compared to an ordinary crucifix. There is little reason to think that this was Jesus' cross. A famous example of the *crux sublimis* is Galba commanding that a victim be given a higher crucifix after he had appealed to his Roman citizenship: "He lightened the penalty to some extent, as though it were a sort of comfort and honor – he ordered a whitewashed crucifix higher than the others to be set up, and the man moved to it,"³⁵ and Suetonius solemnly describes these anecdotes as Galba being especially "violent and furious" in his punishments. When a tall cross is used, it seems to be a notable enough event that primary sources will specifically remark about it. The New Testament text is silent on the height of Christ's cross, with the possible exception of Jesus' prophecy in John 12:32-33, "'And I, if I am to be lifted up from this earth, I will draw all people to myself.' He said this, indicating by what sort of death he was about to die."³⁶ But this prophecy is equally applicable to Christ's enthronement on a short *crux humilis*.

Some commentators have made the same observation. They come to the sponge-stick, and mention that it ought to be an unnecessary device for reaching Jesus' mouth. Leon Morris, for example, says, "a very long rod was not needed as the crucified were not normally raised very high. All that was necessary was that the feet be clear of the ground, so that Jesus' mouth would

³⁴ Collins, "Archæology of the Crucifixion"; Mark Finney, "Servile Supplicium: Shame and the Deuteronomic Curse—Crucifixion in Its Cultural Context," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 43 (2013): 124–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107913493561>.

³⁵ Suetonius Galb. 9a. Translated from Maximilian Ihm, "De Vita Caesarum," in *Perseus Digital Library*, n.d., <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi1348.abo017.perseus-lat1:9>.

³⁶ For a useful overview of crucifixes, their uses, their mechanics, and their appearances, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah—From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives*, vol. 2 of *The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library* (Yale University Press, 1998), 947–52. See also his remarks on the expression "to go up on the cross" on p. 948f, where he regardless concludes that Jesus was hung on a short cross.

probably be within reach of a man of average height.”³⁷ D.A. Carson, as well, agrees that “Roman crosses were not very high; the soldiers needed to raise the sponge barely above their own heads.”³⁸ Ernst Haenchen, too: “The one being crucified did not hang there high above the crowd. as it is represented in many paintings; rather, his feet were close to the ground.”³⁹ Gary M. Burge prefers this as well: “This is possible because the cross was not elevated in the air, but low, no higher than the height of one of the soldiers.”⁴⁰ Conversely, some commentators reason in the opposite direction. For them, if a reaching instrument was utilized, this is evidence that Christ *must* have been placed on the taller crucifix.⁴¹ However, this is not without weakness. For example, some have attempted to calculate the length of this supposed “reaching instrument” and end up concluding that Jesus must have been crucified on a short cross, anyways.⁴²

If most crucifixes, including Christ’s, were low to the ground, then the sponge-stick must have had a function other than merely extending reach. What would be the point of going to the trouble of utilizing a *xylospongium* if the victim was so close to the ground that the extra reach was totally

³⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 814.

³⁸ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1991), 621.

³⁹ Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 7-21*, trans. Robert W. Funk, vol. 2 of *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 194.

⁴⁰ Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000).

⁴¹ Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, 551–52; Adela Yarbro Collin, *Mark: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Fortress Press, 2007), 757; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 934.

⁴² William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *JAMA* 255.11 (1986): 1455–63, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1986.03370110077025>; Johannes W. Ylvisaker, *The Gospels: A Synoptic Presentation of the Text in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — With Explanatory Notes* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1932).

unnecessary? We suggest instead that the function was humiliation, by offering the victim a *tersorium* as a debased drink receptacle.

Drinking Sponges?

What if the sponge offered to Jesus was a drinking sponge, as some sources assert?⁴³ Primary sources for the claim that sponges were used as drinking vessels are very thin. For all their manifold uses, sponges do not often seem to be considered, in and of themselves, drink containers.⁴⁴ Marine Biologist Roberto Pronzato and Zoologist Renata Manconi suggest that sponges were used as ancient portable drinking vessels. However, their only evidence is to beg Matthew 27—but this is precisely what is under question.⁴⁵

Although sponges may be used in a number of ways *in the interest of drinking*, it does not seem that a sponge was itself considered the drinking vessel. It was to be squeezed into a drinking vessel. In Theodoret of Cyrus' *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Julian Saba and his companions would bring the following provisions for passing through the deserts near Mount Sinai: “They carried on their shoulders the necessary food—I mean bread and salt—and also a cup made from wood and a sponge tied to a piece of string, in order (if ever they found the water too deep) to draw

⁴³ For example, G.S. Cansdale, “Sponge,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 5, says, “According to Pliny it was standard practice for Rom. Soldiers to carry a piece of sponge for use as a drinking vessel, precisely as described in the gospels.” A search in the Loeb Edition does not seem to confirm this claim that sponges were drinking vessels.

⁴⁴ Eleni Voultziadou, “Sponges: An Historical Survey of Their Knowledge in Greek Antiquity,” *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom* 87.6 (2007): 1757–63, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0025315407057773>. Note that this work nowhere mentions “drinking vessel” as one of its many uses.

⁴⁵ Pronzato and Manconi, “Mediterranean Commercial Sponges,” 147. R. Pronzato et al., “The Millennial History of Commercial Sponges: From Harvesting to Farming and Integrated Aquaculture,” *Biologia Marina Mediterranea* 7.3 (2000): 132–43.

it up with the sponge, **squeeze it into the cup, and so drink it.**⁴⁶ St. Basil reports a story in which sailors desalinate water by boiling it, gathering the condensation by putting a sponge over the mouth of the boiling vessel, and squeezing the drinkable water out of the sponge.⁴⁷ One possible exception where a sponge is loosely a “drinking vessel” is Greek pottery portraying figures dipping a sponge into an amphora of wine in order to taste-test it before it is purchased or used.⁴⁸

The sponge might have dispensed drink as a medical utensil. Symeon Stylites was said to have spent forty days sealed in a hut without eating or drinking, and a priest revived him via a “sponge to wet and rinse his mouth, he brought him [Symeon] the symbols of the divine mysteries; and so strengthened by these, he raised himself and took a little food.”⁴⁹ This action of reviving a heavily dehydrated man via a wet sponge to the mouth seems to be conceptually closer to *a medical act* than an imbibing act. That said, this medical use of the sponge is admittedly similar to the drink offered to Christ on the cross.⁵⁰ This might lend support to the hypothesis that the intent of the drink was to maliciously revive the victim for further torture. However, a medical utensil does not explain the humiliation in the crucifixion offer, nor the stick handle.

Potential Objections

⁴⁶ Vita II.13 in Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, trans. R.M. Price, Cistercian Studies 88 (Liturgical Press, 2008), 29. Emphasis added.

⁴⁷ James D. Birkett, “A Brief Illustrated History of Desalination: From the Bible to 1940,” *Desalination* 50 (1984): 18, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0011-9164\(84\)85014-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0011-9164(84)85014-6).

⁴⁸ Henry R. Immerwahr, “An Athenian Wineshop,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 79 (1948): 184–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283360>. This article also notes that sponges seem to have been used as stoppers for wine vessels.

⁴⁹ Vita XXVI.7 in Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *A History of the Monks of Syria*, 163.

⁵⁰ See Koskenniemi, Nisula, and Toppari, “Wine Mixed with Myrrh.” which explores whether the crucifixion’s wine mixed with myrrh might have been a medical soporific and analgesic.

Andrew Wilson, cited above, offered objections to doubt the *xylopongium* hypothesis. His two reasons were: (i) “sour wine was a common drink” and (ii) “the implement in the Gospel accounts is not a ready-made sponge stick, but a sponge which, naturally, has to be put on a reed in order to get the liquid up to Jesus on the cross.”⁵¹ These are reasonable, but are ultimately inconsequential to the hypothesis.

Most commentaries observe that the ὄξος (“vinegar”) that was offered to Jesus was probably the humble beverage of soldiers and common laborers called *posca*. *Posca* is not wine that merely has been allowed to go rancid or sour due to neglect, but it is a known beverage. Moulton & Milligan notes a receipt which clearly distinguishes this ὄξος “sour wine” vinegar beverage from οἶνος “wine”.⁵² It is also clearly distinguished in Plutarch’s account of Cato the Elder: “He used to drink water on campaign, except when, with his thirst burning, he demanded vinegar [ὄξος]. Or if his strength afforded it, he would take a little wine.”⁵³ In Ruth 2:14, ὄξος is also the beverage of field laborers.

This first objection, that the “vinegar” was a common beverage, is not a strong objection. Whatever the beverage’s identity, it is fully compatible with the delivery instrument being a latrine *xylopongium*.

The second objection, that the sponge-stick seems to be manufactured on-site, is more interesting. The sponge on a stick offered to Jesus does appear (at least on first glance) to be assembled on-the-spot. However, the low height of the crucifix implies that an *ad hoc* reaching

⁵¹ Wilson, “Roman Toilets,” 103.

⁵² James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930). s.v. ὄξος

⁵³ Plutarch *Cat. Maj* 1.7

instrument was totally unnecessary (at least, unnecessary *for reaching*.) This supports the hypothesis that the sponge in question *actually was* Wilson’s “ready-made sponge stick.” Regardless, either of these—the *ad hoc* manufactured or the ready-made sponge stick—can be supported by the grammar of the biblical text.

Let us assume for argument’s sake that the device in the gospels was an *ad hoc* manufactured device. Does this therefore mean that it was not a toilet *xylospogium*? Not at all! It is not certain that toilet *xylospogia* were always ready-made devices. Primary sources talking about it are ambiguous as to whether the toilet device is assembled on-the-spot. John Cecil Mann suggests that a person would assemble their own toilet *xylospogium* on-site.⁵⁴ Or both kinds of sponge-sticks could exist. There is simply not enough evidence to be sure. In both Mark and Matthew,⁵⁵ the Aorist Active participle περιθεις καλάμῳ (“put on a stick”) is commonly translated as an adverbial temporal participle, e.g. “after he put [the sponge] on a stick”. Jeffrey Gibbs’ commentary suggests rendering it an attendant circumstance participle, which would make Matthew’s account a manufacture of a sponge-stick.⁵⁶ An adverbial means participle is also possible:⁵⁷ “by putting [it] on a stick.” This way, the participle describes the method by which the main verb, the giving-to-drink, was done. How did the soldiers try to give Jesus vinegar to drink? By putting it on a stick. This translation leaves the narrative fully compatible with a latrine sponge-stick manufactured on-the-spot.

⁵⁴ Mann, “The Housesteads Latrine,” 3.

⁵⁵ Cf. also ὑσσώπῳ περιθέντες in John’s account.

⁵⁶ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1-28:20*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 1556.

⁵⁷ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 628.

Let us assume for argument's sake that it is the other way around: that *xylosporgia* were ready-made devices, and not constructed by the user. Why don't the gospels explicitly call the device by its proper name: *xylosporgium*? If it were a sponge-stick, why are the gospel authors avoiding using the actual word for the device? It is possible that Matthew, Mark, and John refer to the *xylosporgium* by a *pars pro toto* synecdoche (part for the whole).⁵⁸ So rather than "filling a *xylosporgium*", the person by synecdoche "fills a sponge". And rather than offering a drink "by putting a drink on a *xylosporgium*", they offer Jesus a drink "by putting it on a stick".

If the gospels are being evasive and euphemistic in talking about the toilet *xylosporgia*, they are certainly not the first to do so. Referring to *just the stick* or *just the sponge* as a synecdoche for *the whole sponge-stick* is already established in other primary sources talking about the latrine *xylosporgium* without any controversy. Seneca uses a euphemistic participial phrase, calling it a *lignum...adhaerente spongia* ("a stick...with a sponge stuck on").⁵⁹ Martial euphemizes it as *infelix damnatae spongea virgae* ("a wretched sponge on a godforsaken stick.")⁶⁰ In both of these classical authors, it is unmistakable that a whole latrine *xylosporgium* is being talked about.⁶¹ In the ancient mind, how strong was this connotation between just a sponge and its synecdochal partner, the horrid *xylosporgium*? Seneca frankly tells us. He prefers that an author not even

⁵⁸ e.g., "Hannibal killed 40,000 at Cannae" is a synecdoche for "Hannibal's armies killed", or someone who lives "three doors down" is a synecdoche for "three houses down".

⁵⁹ Seneca Ep. 70.20, discussed earlier.

⁶⁰ Martial *Epigrams* 12.48.7, discussed earlier.

⁶¹ Possibly against this, see Antigonus, *Compilation of Marvellous Accounts* 158(174) where Theophrastus says that "those who wish to draw water from [the river Styx] hold sponges fastened to sticks. (σπόγγους προς ξυλοῖς δεδεμένους)". It is a periphrastic way of saying "*xylosporgium*", but this is clearly not specifically talking about the latrine *xylosporgium*. Cf. the other uses of sponge-sticks, such as those used to wash tables.

mention the word "sponges" (or other "sordid" words like fleamint and vinegar), lest the *mere mention* of such things "pollute" someone's brilliant oratory.⁶²

The *xylospogium* hypothesis can succeed either way against this second objection. On the one hand: there is the possibility that the infamous toilet *tersorium* was, in ordinary usage, manufactured on-the-spot with a personal or communal sanitary sponge, and this was the way that the devious utensil was offered to Jesus at the crucifixion. The grammar of the New Testament passages allows for this. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the drink was offered on Wilson's "ready-made sponge stick". The grammar of the passages allows for this too, by euphemistically referring to the device via synecdoche, just like other classical authors have done when referring to the *xylospogium*.

More Sponges in the Greco-Roman World

Someone might object to the identification of the *xylospogium* on the grounds that sponges had countless varied uses in antiquity.⁶³ Aristotle says that they were used as protective padding in helmets and greaves (*Historia Animalium* V.16), and sponges could be soaked in water and kept on the head to prevent heat stroke (Erasistratus, *Testimonia et fragmenta* 190.2). Sponges were used to wash tables and chairs (*Odyssey* 22.453), and a *peniculus* was a sponge fastened to a handle for washing and wiping furniture (*Menaechmi* 1.1, *Martial Epigrams* 14.144.1).⁶⁴ Sponges were

⁶² Emily Gowers, "The Anatomy of Rome from Capitol to Cloaca," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 85 (1995): 30–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/301055>; Seneca *Controversiae* 7 prol. 3-5. An exception to this elitist queasiness would be in satire, such as in Seneca's own *Apocolocyntosis* which compares Claudius' Rome to an Augean sewer.

⁶³ For a thorough overview in Greek works, see: Voultziadou, "Sponges: An Historical Survey of Their Knowledge in Greek Antiquity."

⁶⁴ The Mishnah also discusses a sponge with either a stick handle or a leather strap handle used as a cleaning device. See: Steven H. Adams, "The Original Understanding of Sea Sponges in MShabbat 21:3," *Hakirah, The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* (2020), https://www.academia.edu/46886353/The_Original_Understanding_of_Sea_Sponges_in_mShabbat_21_3.

used for bathing, which is portrayed with some frequency in terracotta kylixes and amphorae, often alongside a strigil grooming scraper and aryballos flask.

Pliny dedicates much ink in *Naturalis Historia* to describing sponges at length—both as living creatures and as domestic instruments. He creates a taxonomy of three domestic kinds, along with their qualities like softness (31.47). They were used for bathing (31.47). Sponges were used to wipe down and clean baskets and other vessels (15.6). They were used as swabs to apply unguents and salves (22.49, 23.23, 24.73, 31.47). They were used to create medicated or unmedicated gauze or bandages for wound care (23.27, 28.18, 31.47). They were an instrument for absorbing contaminants that float to the surface of a liquid (33.34, 34.50). They were used as a painting tool (35.36). They were used, themselves, as an ingredient in the creation of potions and medicines. (28.50, 31.47). And they were used in tentmaking (31.47).

With such a broad taxonomy of sponges, what reason do we have to believe that the sponge offered to Jesus was the toilet *torsorium* sponge, and not one of these other mundane sponges? If it were specifically the latrine *xylospogium*, that would quickly and easily explain why its use was an insult. If it were one of the other mundane *xylospogia*, it would be more difficult to explain the insult. The latrine *xylospogium* can account for all the details in all four gospel accounts, and it is readily compatible with other hypotheses surrounding the offer of the drink. A mundane sponge-stick does not explain why a reaching instrument (a sponge extended upon a stick) was used in circumstances that didn't require a reaching instrument. A latrine *xylospogium* would explain that it was not a reaching instrument, but a humiliation instrument.