The Labarum – from Crux Dissimulata and Chi-Rho to the Open Image Cross

Initially, the battle banner called the labarum was presented in the form of crux dissimulata crowned with the Chi-Rho symbol. This practice dates all the way back to Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 264–ca. 340). In the next century, the continuers of his Church History, Socrates of Constantinople and Sozomen, kept only the cross-shape of the banner, excluding the christogram. In this article, I will try to explain why this happened.

The creation of the labarum was associated with the so-called Constantine breakthrough and the conversion of Constantine the Great to Christianity. The reformation of the emperor was said to have taken place suddenly¹, as a result of a vision² which the ruler supposedly experienced before defeating his rival, Maxentius. It has aroused serious controversy and, in the literature of the subject, there is an ongoing discussion about its historicity and the form of the sign revealed to the emperor. Information about it comes basically from two sources: the accounts

¹ Hence, A. ALFÖLDI (The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome, trans. H. Mattingly, Oxford 1969, p. 7) pointed out that Constantine’s conversion happened without any warning, and as Ramsay MACMULLEN put it (Constantine and the Miraculous, GRBS 9, 1968, p. 81): One day saw Constantine a pagan, the next a Christian. H. SINGOR (The Labarum, Shield Blazons and Constantine’s Caeleste Signum, [in:] The Representation and Perception of Roman Imperial Power, ed. L. Blois, Amsterdam 2003, p. 500) noted that the aforementioned vision from 312, which resulted in the emperor’s sudden conversion, played the symbolic role of the ruler’s baptism.

of Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea, which differ in detail. In a fairly common opinion of researchers they both were trusted imperial advisers. When writing about the vision, Eusebius referred to the testimony of the ruler himself. However, there are also supporters of a thesis that this vision was preceded by a pagan one. A pagan panegyric from 310 informs that it happened near the Temple of Apollo Grannus, identified with Sol Invictus, located in the city of Grand. Some historians think that in reality, only the latter took place, but over time, it was interpreted in the Christian spirit. Others, on the other hand, considered Constantine’s vision of Lactantius and Eusebius. In a fairly common opinion of researchers they both were trusted imperial advisers. When writing about the vision, Eusebius referred to the testimony of the ruler himself. However, there are also supporters of a thesis that this vision was preceded by a pagan one. A pagan panegyric from 310 informs that it happened near the Temple of Apollo Grannus, identified with Sol Invictus, located in the city of Grand. Some historians think that in reality, only the latter took place, but over time, it was interpreted in the Christian spirit. Others, on the other hand, considered Constantine’s vision...
to be literary fiction\(^9\). Some see it as a supernatural phenomenon\(^10\), whereas others as a natural phenomenon associated with the conjunction of several planets\(^11\), or with an optical phenomenon (the so-called halo)\(^12\). Discussion about it is extremely difficult because neither party is able to prove their case\(^13\).

According to Lactantius and Eusebius, be it in a dream\(^14\) or in reality, the ruler allegedly saw a sign that was an announcement of victory in the war against Maxentius\(^15\). Lactantius wrote about “the heavenly sign of God” (*caeleste signum dei*)\(^16\), while Eusebius described a triumphal sign in the form of a luminous cross...
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(σταυροῦ τρόπαιον ἐκ φωτὸς)17, or the symbol of the trophy of salvation (σωτηρίου τροπαίου σύμβολον)18. According to Eusebius, it took the shape of a military banner (vexillum) crowned with the chrismon, and called labarum19. When describing its appearance, Eusebius claimed that Constantine used to wear the monogram of Christ on his helmet, which was the quintessence of the revealed sign20. In the account of Lactantius, on the other hand, the celestial sign of God was placed on the shields of Constantine’s soldiers21. In his description of Constantine’s vision, Eusebius only mentioned the creation of the sign revealed to the emperor in the material form of a banner. However, a little further in his work, he also mentioned that Constantine ordered the placement of the sign-trophy of salvation (σωτηρίου τροπαίου σύμβολον) on the hoplon22. The term used can mean both the general armament of soldiers, but also large shields – scutum23.

17 Eusebius, I, 28, 1–2.
18 Eusebius, IV, 21.
19 Probably the name labarum was of Celtic origin; cf. J.-J. Hatt, La vision de Constantin au sanctuaire de Grand et l’origine celtique du labarum, CRAIBL 1, 1950, p. 83–86; W. Seston, La vision païenne…, p. 373–395. The labarum must have resembled a Roman cavalry banner made of fabric hung on a horizontal bar (vexillum). Cf. M. Desroches, Le Labarum, Paris 1894; R. Egger, Das Labarum, die Kaiserstandarte der Spätantike, Wien 1960. C.M. Odahl, The Celestial Sign on Constantine’s Shields at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge, JRMMRA 2, 1981, p. 15–28. Adam Łukaszewicz (A propos du symbolisme impérial…, p. 506) emphasized that the crown, which was on top of the labarum, but also surrounded the christogram, was a symbol of victory and an imperial attribute at the same time. In this way, Christ, who was symbolized by the sign, received imperial attributes. According to Henry Chadwick (The Early Church…, p. 126) the fact that the labarum was abolished during the reign of Julian the Apostate indicates that it was commonly attributed with a Christian meaning.
21 Lactantius, XLIV, 5.
22 Eusebius, IV, 21.
23 In the late Roman Empire or early Byzantium’s iconography, the tradition of decorating shields with the chrismon must have been present in the public consciousness if imperial propaganda referred to it. Aside from coins, there is evidence of it, e.g. on a gilded silver missorium with the portrait of Constantius II, probably on horseback (see S.G. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1981, p. 43); reliefs from the column of Theodosius I (see the preserved fragment of the Theodosius column in the Beyazıt Hamam Museum); the base of the Arcadius column in Constantinople (see J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, Barbarians and Bishops. Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom, Oxford 1992, p. 275), and a mosaic from the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna depicting the emperor Justinian and his entourage (see S.G. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony…, p. 259–266). As for the coins, in particular, we can point to the solidi of Constantius II, on which he was depicted with a shield decorated with the chrismon The Roman Imperial Coinage, vol. VIII, The Family of Constantine I, ed. J.P.C. Kent, London 1981 (cetera: RIC 8), Rome, 225, 232. Cf. D.M. Chico, F.L. Sánchez, Une nouvelle variété de solidus au nom de Constance II avec le chrisme à l’intérieur du bouclier, BSFN 71, 2016, p. 138–141; U. Westermark, A New Silver Medallion of Constantius II, NNA, 1968, p. 5–10), followed by similar coins minted by emperors Honorius (the solidus minted in 422, The Roman Imperial Coinage, vol. X,
Therefore, it seems that the aforementioned discrepancy is only apparent. Firstly, we have iconographic evidence of both the military banner called the labarum, crowned with the monogram of Christ: the Chi-Rho, and shields decorated with that monogram. Secondly, the sign placed on the shields was intended not only to defend the soldiers, but also to lead them to victory, because according to Lactantius: *quo signo armatus exercitus capiit ferrum*24. Eusebius, however, emphasized that the emperor used the labarum as a means of defense against all enemies25. Therefore, this banner was meant to lead them not only to the victorious attack but also to provide an effective defense against enemy assaults. Thirdly, when Eusebius and Lactantius described the difficult situation in which Constantine found himself on the eve of the battle at the Milvian Bridge, their accounts show that each of them saw the danger that threatened his army elsewhere. According to Lactantius, the emperor’s worries were caused by the military superiority of Maxentius, who had capable commanders in his ranks. Moreover, aside from his army which he had brought from Africa and Italy, he also had his father’s former army transferred from Severus26. Eusebius, on the other hand, thought that the emperor was troubled mainly by the wicked and deceptive magical practices employed zealously by Maxentius (I, 27)27. It is therefore not surprising that Lactantius paid attention to the sign placed on the shields, which was put there primarily to protect individual soldiers and ultimately, bring victory to Constantine, while Eusebius focused on the *tropaion*-banner, which was to be followed by the entire army, and by protecting Constantine’s forces against magic, lead to victory.

It should be emphasized, however, that both in the account of Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius, the chrismon played a very important role in the vision of Constantine. The thread of the cross also appears in both texts – in the account of Eusebius directly and Lactantius indirectly. Eusebius claimed that in the afternoon, Constantine saw a triumphal sign in the sky above the sun. The sign had the form of a cross and was made of light. Later, according to the bishop of Caesarea, when the ruler commissioned a visual reproduction of the sign revealed to him (per Christ’s direct command), its long shafts formed the shape of a cross.

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24 LACTANTIUS, XLIV, 6.
25 EUSEBIUS, I, 31, 3.
26 LACTANTIUS, XLIV, 3: Maxentiani milites praecubabant.
27 The description of Lactantius, chronologically closer to the described events, seems to better reflect the difficult situation in which Constantine’s armies found themselves on the eve of the battle at the Milvian Bridge.

*The Divided Empire and the Fall of the Western Parts AD 395–491*, ed. J.P.C. Kent, London 1994 (cetera: *RIC* 10), Ravenna, 1332) and Majorian (RIC 10, 2605–2608; 2612–2614; 3748). According to D. Woods (*Eusebius, VC 4.21, and the Notitia Dignitatum*, [in:] SP 29, 1997, p. 196), the shield with the Chi-Rho was a special imperial shield. There are also a number of coins with the image of empresses: Aelia Flaccilla, Galla Placidia, Eudoxia and Pulcheria, on whose reverse an angel or Victoria is painting the chrismon on the shield.
whose transverse rod was arched. Eusebius called this rod, to which a square piece of fabric was attached, the transverse cross beam. Below the sign of the cross, as described by the bishop of Caesarea, were the portraits of the emperor and his children. Eusebius described the banner as a sign of salvation. In his Church History, he indirectly confirmed his account from Vita Constantini on the subject of the labarum. Mainly, he wrote about the statue of Constantine exhibited in Rome “with the sign of the Savior in his right hand”, on which the emperor himself supposedly ordered the inscription: “in this sign of salvation, a real mark of bravery, I saved your city…” In fact, he quoted the inscription again in Vita Constantini, mentioning the statue in whose hand the tall, cross-shaped shafts were placed. Hence, at that point already, Eusebius saw the cross in the labarum. However, his detailed description suggests that he meant the crux dissimulata. In a way, the very shape of the christogram also referred to the idea of the cross, since it was formed of the intersected Greek letters chi and rho. This can be seen even more clearly in Lactantius’ text, where these intersected letters take the form of a monogrammatic cross.

He points out that the cross was clearly interpreted as a sign of victory, where Eusebius wrote about the cross as a symbol of immortality, a triumphant sign of Christ overcoming death. Since the beginning of Christianity, the cross has been seen as a glorious sign of Christ’s victory. Judeo-Christian theology was also a theology of glory. There, the cross was almost a living being, accompanying Christ in the works of His power, in the abyss or during the Parousia. Sometimes it was identified with Christ himself, usually with His victory. In the First Apology, Christian Justin the Martyr calls the cross the greatest sign of power, Christ’s might and His victory. Justin explained to the pagans:

You also have the symbols that signify the power of the cross, that is, banners and trophies that go everywhere at the forefront of your army, showing a sign of might and power the way you cannot even surmise.

28 Eusebius, I, 31.
29 Eusebius, I, 40.
31 Eusebius, I, 32, 2.
33 Justin (Iustinus, I Apologia, 55, 1–5, [in:] Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, Apologies, ed. D. Minns, P. Parvis, Oxford 2009 [= OECT], cetera: Iustinus) indicated that he is symbolically present everywhere as a hidden cross. According to him, nothing in the world can exist or make a whole without this sign. Its shape can be found in the masting of a ship, in hand and agricultural tools, and even in the human body.
34 Iustinus, 55, 6.
For Eusebius of Caesarea, the true sign of victory-triumph was therefore the cross of Christ, and although the labarum was a military flag, he saw it as the crux dissimulata.

Historians from the 5th century emphasized the unique role of the sign of the cross in the religiousness of Christians in the first half of the 4th century, and in particular, Constantine’s, starting with his vision. When writing about it, they drew from the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius, but they did not mention the chrismon, which supposedly revealed itself to the emperor. According to Rufinus, Philostorgius, Socrates and Sozomen, the ruler saw a sign in the shape of a cross, whether he was awake or dreaming, and was instructed in the form of an inscription or an oral instruction of angels to triumph under this sign (τούτῳ νίκα). It is curious that these historians only saw the cross in the labarum. According to Socrates, Christ commanded that a legionary battle sign with the image of the cross be made by the ruler (σταυροειδὲ τρόπαιον). Sozomen, on the other hand, emphasized that from that point forward, the war banner preceding the emperor, made of precious materials, had the form of a cross (σταυροῦ σύμβολον), or that it was converted into a sign of the Holy Cross. On the one hand, the banner was a symbol of certain triumph, on the other, defense and assistance (ἀλέξημα, ἐπίκουρος), and a provider of victory (νίκης ποριστικόν).

In the account of Sozomen, who followed the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea, the priests who explained the meaning of the vision to the emperor indicated that the sign, which was revealed to him was a symbol of victory over hell. In the

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40 There is no mention of the labarum in the preserved fragments of Philostorgius’ Church History.
41 Socrates, I, 2, 6–7.
42 Sozomenus, I, 4, 1.
43 Sozomenus, V, 17.
44 Socrates, I, 2, 6: νυκτὸς δὲ ἔπιλαβούσης κατὰ τοὺς ὑπνοὺς όρα τὸν Χριστὸν λέγοντα αὐτῷ, κα- τασκευάσας ἀντίτυπον τοῦ ὄφθεν τοὺς σημεῖοι καὶ τοῦτο κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων ὡς ἐτοίμως κεχρῆσθαι τροπαῖῳ.
46 Eusebius, I, 32.
47 Sozomenus, I, 3, 4: τὸ δὲ φανέν αὐτῷ σημεῖον σύμβολον εἶναι ἔλεγον τῆς κατὰ τοῦ ἄδου νίκης, ἢν εἰς ἀνθρώπους ἐλθὼν κατώρθωσε τῷ σταυρωθῆναι καὶ ἀποθανεῖν καὶ τριτάῖος ἀναβιῶναι.
consciousness of Christians, it must have meant Christ’s cross. This seems to be the main reason why the 5th-century church historians only saw the cross in the labarum.

An excellent example of the connection between the cross and the chi-rho is an ornament from the porphyry imperial sarcophagus, nowadays located in the courtyard of the Hagia Eirene Church in Istanbul (fig. 1). Numismatic evidence also cannot be ignored. The coins, as early as during the reign of Constantine the Great, included the Chi-Rho symbol both on the shields and on the labarum. The oldest example of a coin with a shield decorated with a christogram (fig. 2) is a bronze coin from 322–323 with a bust of Caesar Crispus 48. Its counterpart with the labarum is a coin dated to 327, minted on the occasion of the founding of Constantinople, on the reverse of which is the banner decorated with three medallions showing the portraits of Constantine and his two sons, Constantius II and Constantine II, with a shaft stuck into a winding snake (fig. 3) 49. After Constantine’s death, starting with the reign of his sons, it happened that the coins minted then had a cross, instead of the Chi-Rho, on the labarum (fig. 4–6) 50. The cross also began to be placed on the shields, in their central part, where the chi-rho had been, an example of which is the follis of Emperor Arcadius from 401–403, minted in Antioch (fig. 7) 51. Over time, the cross replaced the entire labarum, as it happened during the reign of Valentinian III on the solidi of Gallia Placidia minted in Ravenna in the years 430–445 (fig. 8) 52. The iconography present on the coins may prove that the phenomenon of identifying the labarum or Chi-Rho with the cross was not limited to church historiography and was more widespread, although it should be remembered that coins continued to also be decorated with the letters Chi-Rho. Therefore, the representation of the cross did not replace this symbol. However, it cannot be ruled out that the increasingly common image of the cross on coins also contributed to the aforementioned perception of the labarum by church historians.

Translated by Katarzyna Szuster-Tardi

50 Constans, struck 337–340, RIC 8, Siscia 100; Constantius II, struck 337–340, RIC Trier 39; Constantius II, struck 347–355, RIC 8, Cyzicus 84.
51 RIC 10, Antiochia 97.
52 RIC 10, Valentinian III 2020.
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Abstract. Based on the testimony of emperor Constantine the Great himself, Eusebius of Caesarea presented a labarum in the form of *crux dissimulata* crowned with the Chi-Rho. The continuers of his *Church History* in the next century, Rufinus of Aquileia, Philostorgius, Socrates of Constantinople, and Sozomen, only kept the cross-shape of the banner, excluding the christogram. This might have happened because in two main sources informing about the vision of Constantine – the accounts of Eusebius of Caesarea and Lactantius – it was not only the monogram of Christ that played a significant role. The motif of the cross also appears in them, in the account of Eusebius directly, and Lactantius indirectly. Furthermore, Christians interpreted the cross explicitly as a sign of victory. Eusebius wrote about the cross as a symbol of immortality, a triumphant sign of Christ overcoming death. In the account of the bishop of Caesarea, on the other hand, Constantine's supposed vision included a triumphal sign in the form of a luminous cross, or the symbol of the trophy of salvation. Numismatic evidence also cannot be ignored. Already during the reign of Constantine the Great, the Chi-Rho appeared on the coins both on the shields and on the labarum. However, starting from the reign of Constantius II, coins that were minted included the cross instead of the Chi-Rho on the labarum. It also began to be placed on the shields, in their central part, where the monogram of Christ used to be. Over time, the cross replaced the entire labarum. The iconography present on the coins may prove that the phenomenon of identifying the labarum or Chi-Rho with the cross was not limited to church historiography and was more widespread, although it should be remembered that coins continued to also be decorated with the letters Chi-Rho. Therefore, the representation of the cross did not replace this symbol. However, it cannot be ruled out that the increasingly common image of the cross on coins also contributed to the aforementioned perception of the labarum by church historians.

Keywords: labarum, Christ's cross, Constantine's vision, church historiography
The chi-rho is an ornament from the porphyry imperial sarcophagus, nowadays located in the courtyard of the Hagia Eirene church in Istanbul. All drawings in this article by Elżbieta Myślińska-Brzozowska.

Fig. 1. The chi-rho is an ornament from the porphyry imperial sarcophagus, nowadays located in the courtyard of the Hagia Eirene church in Istanbul. All drawings in this article by Elżbieta Myślińska-Brzozowska.

Fig. 2. The bronze from 322–323 with a bust of caesar Crispus (RIC 7, Trier 372).
Fig. 3. The coin minted in 327 on the occasion of the founding of Constantinople, on the reverse of which is the banner decorated with three medallions showing the portraits of emperor Constantine and his two sons, Constantius II and Constantine II, with a shaft stuck into a winding snake (RIC 7, Constantinople 19).

Fig. 4. The bronze of emperor Constans from 337–340, struck in Siscia (RIC 8, Siscia 100).
Fig. 5. The bronze of emperor Constantius II from 337–340, minted in Trier (RIC 8, Trier 39).

Fig. 6. The coin of emperor Constantius II from 347–355, struck in Cyzicus (RIC 8, Cyzicus 84).
Fig. 7. The follis of Emperor Arcadius from 401–403, minted in Antioch (RIC 10, Antioch 97).

Fig. 8. The solidi of Gallia Placidia minted in Ravenna in the years 430–445 (RIC 10, Valentinian III 2020).