



JOURNAL FOR LATE ANTIQUE
RELIGION AND CULTURE

E-ISSN: 1754-517X; Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.1754-517X>

Journal website: <https://jlarc.cardiffuniversitypress.org>

Volume 15, 2021, 37-64; Volume DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.v15>

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OF ROMAN MILITARY STANDARDS

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Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18573/jlarc.117>

Date Accepted: 20 December 2020

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Cardiff University Press
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THE CONSTANTINIAN *LABARUM* AND THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF ROMAN MILITARY STANDARDS

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Abstract

In this paper I will address the *labarum*, a war standard introduced by Constantine the Great, and the problem of the Christianization of the Roman military signs between Constantine's reign (AD 306-377) and the Theodosian period (AD 379-457). Many scholars have referred to the *labarum*, but usually indirectly when discussing Constantine's conversion. There are several open questions and gaps in our knowledge regarding this emblem, and I will attempt to answer some of them. First, this paper refers briefly to the precedents of military and religious standards in Antiquity and Pagan Rome. Then, it explores the origins, form, function and meaning of the *labarum* under Constantine and his successors through the literary and iconographic sources. The *labarum* started as symbol of victory granted by an ambiguous "supreme divinity", and towards the last decades of Constantine's reign the interpretation of it as a Christian apotropaic sign became dominant. Constantine's successors used the *labarum* as a declaration of continuity, and the standards caused controversy under Julian the Apostate. Finally, this paper addresses the transformation of the standard under the house of Theodosius. I argue that in this period the cross surpassed the Chi-Rho symbol and the *labarum*-cross became the main banner of the Christian Roman Empire.

Key words: *Labarum*, Chi-Rho, Constantine, Late Roman, Military standards, Christianization, 4th-5th centuries.

Precedents: Ancient military standards

The use of symbols, banners and images in war is an ancient practice. The Egyptian *Narmer Palette* (c. 3200-300 BC) is one of the earliest pieces of evidence of it but the practice is probably even older, likely as ancient as war itself. The essential and original function of

¹ This paper is part of my PhD thesis project titled "Crosses and relics of the Cross in Late Antique and Byzantine War", supervised by Dr. Yannis Stouraitis and Prof. Niels Gaul. My PhD at University of Edinburgh is funded by the National Agency of Research and Development (ANID) of the Chilean Ministry of Science and the Global Research Scholarship.

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these objects was the identification of the group in battle, both in a practical sense and in a symbolic and ideological one.²

Since the origins of war in Prehistory, and until the development of smokeless gunpowder and repeating firearms in the mid-19th century, keeping cohesion in the troops was a key tactical factor. In the chaotic conditions of combat – amidst screams, dust and blood – one of the ways of accomplishing this was through standards or insignia that acted as beacons and rallying-points for the fighters. The same kind of item could also function as a “totem” that gave symbolic identity to a group and delivered an ideological message. For instance, the standards in the *Narmer Palette* were probably related to the idea of royal power of the first Pharaohs who united Egypt under a single rule.³

Some ancient military emblems depicted religious motives and were even considered sacred. For example, certain Egyptian and Assyrian standards consisted of images of gods. These included inscriptions in which the god promised victory, and there are even Assyrian representations of priests making offerings to the standards in a military camp. Whether such objects should be considered military standards or sacred icons, or if there even was a clear line between these categories is unclear.⁴

Early Roman military standards – *signa militaria* – were quite simple, spears or poles with some minor decoration. The growth of the army necessitated a greater variety of symbols, which the Romans developed themselves or adopted from other cultures. For example, some evidence suggests that the *vexillum*, a square rigid banner, was copied from the Hellenistic kingdoms, maybe through the encounter with Pyrrhus. From the military reforms of Marius (late-2nd century BC) onwards, the eagle – *Aquila* – became the main standard of the legions, abandoning other animal motifs that they used to carry. Eventually, the eagles became the most characteristic standard of the Roman army.⁵

Along with the *Aquila*, each legion also carried a “heraldic” standard of the unity, with animal, zodiac symbols, or other motifs. The *vexillum* usually acted as an emblem of cavalry and other specific units, but there were also non-military forms of *vexillum*, used by the civic or religious *collegia* or by temples. The word *signa* or *signum*, described the general category of all military emblems, but it also referred to the oldest and simplest version of them. This was a decorated spear or pole, which survived during the Republican and Imperial periods, to constitute the insignia of smaller units and the most common field-standard.⁶

² Faulkner 1941, 12; Sanz 2007, 83–84; Töpfer 2011, 1–2; Kavanagh 2012.

³ Sanz 2007, 84–85, 90–91.

⁴ Faulkner 1941, 15–18; Töpfer 2011, 1–2.

⁵ Roberts 2007; Parker, Watson, and Cornell 2016; Töpfer 2011, 18–35.

⁶ Töpfer 2011, 18–35; Hebblewhite 2003.

During the 1st century AD, an image or bust of the emperor came to be included among the insignia of the legion, and from the 2nd century AD onwards, the *draco*, a snake-headed windsock adopted from the Sarmatians, started to be used by the cavalry. Different types of decorations could be added to most of the Roman standards, as *phalerae*, disks of gold or silver sometimes with images of animals, gods, or emperors. Additionally, moons, hands, and crowns were common. Crowns, among other decorations, were awarded to the unit after a victory or heroic action.⁷

As in many other cultures, the basic function of Roman standards was tactical as well as symbolic, representing the *esprit de corps* of the unit. To lose the standards, particularly the eagles, during war, was considered a great dishonour and disgrace. Individual heroic actions and military campaigns were undertaken to recover them.⁸

Roman military emblems also had a religious dimension. They were kept in the camp shrine (*sacellum*), where the soldiers stored their savings, trusting that nobody would dare steal it from a holy place. Inscriptions show soldiers making offerings and dedications to the standards, and there were festivals dedicated to these. The troops swore their military oath (*sacramentum*) on the standards, in Imperial times also before an image of the emperor. In literary sources many divine portents and auguries are attested that were associated with the *signa*.⁹

Tacitus (d. AD 120), referring to a portent, called the eagles “divinities” or “spirits” of the legions (*propria legionum numina*). He described the legions carrying images of the gods (*simulacra*) along with the eagles and other emblems during a military display.¹⁰ There is iconographic evidence of Roman pole standards with images of gods, like winged victories, on top. It is not clear if Tacitus was referring to these or to another type of idol. Neither the origins nor specific functions of these idol-standards are known. It seems probable that these images of gods were carried by the legions to their campaigns, but not into battle, and kept safe in the camp shrine.

The Christian writer Tertullian (d. c. AD 220) claimed that the standards themselves were worshipped as gods by the army. Although this was probably a rhetorical exaggeration to mock and criticise paganism, it was probably rooted in some truth, as there is considerable evidence of the cult of the standards.¹¹

In Syria and the wider Middle East there is considerable iconographic evidence of cult-standards, emblems with symbols or images of divinities that were kept in temples, and that

7 Idem.

8 Shean 2010, 61:44–48; Töpfer 2011, 35–70; Hebblewhite 2016.

9 Shean 2010, 61:48–54; Hebblewhite 2016; Töpfer 2011, 29, 179–98.

10 Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, 2, 17; 15, 29. Hebblewhite 2016; Töpfer 2011, 29.

11 Tertullian, *Apology*, 16,8, *Ad Nationes*, 1.12. Hebblewhite 2016; Töpfer 2011, 29.

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did not have any known military function. The cult-standards date back at least from the 2nd millennium BC and continued to be used until the Late Roman Empire. Some representations of these show similarities in the structure, form, or decoration with the Roman *signa militaria*. This resemblance has triggered a debate among scholars, regarding the possibility of cross-influence from the cult-standards to the Roman *signa* or vice versa, a problem that has not been completely solved yet.¹²

Drawing on literary, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence, Kai Töpfer argued that the *signa* probably had a religious dimension and were considered somewhat holy, at least since the late Republic, particularly the *Aquilae* and the heraldic standards. This religious significance of the *signa* increased during the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Consecrations indicate that a proper cult of the standards among the army emerged in this period. It is possible that the *signa* even acquired a god-like quality over time. The causes of this are uncertain. It was probably linked to general changes in culture and spirituality of the period, but could also be related to the influence of the oriental cult-standards previously mentioned.¹³

In summary, from very ancient times, the military standards, along with their basic tactical function, had a symbolic-ideological one, as a totem of group identity. As part of this, in various cultures of Antiquity, certain military emblems had a religious dimension and were understood as symbols of the gods, sacred items and objects of worship. In Rome, military symbols were considered holy since the Republic, and during the 2nd-3rd centuries AD a cult of the standards emerged. For the modern scholar studying Antiquity it is occasionally difficult to distinguish between idols of the divinities, holy military signs, and standards with images of the gods, because of the close association among all of these.

Constantine's conversion and the *labarum*

The first known use of a Christian symbol in warfare dates to the reign of Constantine the Great (AD 306-337). In the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius it is linked with the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (AD 312) and the controversial issue of Constantine's conversion to Christianity. This conversion is probably the most debated episode in the history of Late Antiquity.¹⁴ I will attempt to address the Christianization of the military emblems without diving into the “conversion debate” more than necessary.

The main evidence for the debate comprises two literary sources, Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum* and Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* (*DMP* and *VC* from here on), as well as several coins and one medallion issued during Constantine's reign. The interpretation of these

¹² Töpfer 2011, 179–86.

¹³ Töpfer 2011, 186–98.

¹⁴ Burckhardt 1949, 258–335; Grégoire 1930; 1939; A. H. M. Jones 1948; Alföldi 1969, 1–4, 16–24; MacMullen 1969, 72–78; Baynes 1972; Elliott 1999, 61–72; Weiss 2003; Barnes 2011, 6–8; Stephenson 2015, 182–87.

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sources has triggered an academic discussion regarding the dating, form, meaning and function of the Constantinian military emblems.

The traditional narrative of the Christian sources is that Constantine, before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, saw the “sign of Christ” in a dream or a vision. The use of this sign, on the shields of his troops or as a standard, granted him victory and led to his conversion.¹⁵

This narrative has been questioned because of differences between the two main Christian literary accounts, some inconsistencies on the dates of the literary and iconographic sources, and the existence of a panegyric that describes Constantine having a similar but pagan vision in the year AD 310, among several other problems.¹⁶

However, shared elements of the different sources indicate that during his war against Maxentius (AD 310-312), Constantine introduced a new symbol for his army. P. Bruun, P. Weiss, J. Bardill, J. Shean and F. López Sánchez have suggested that this probably represented the idea of a victory granted by a supreme “solar” or “celestial” divinity, in connection with the different accounts of visions. It is not clear if this sign had, in its origins, an exclusively Christian or pagan meaning for Constantine or his army. Perhaps it started as an ambiguous emblem, open to varied interpretations? Not only the meaning of the sign is uncertain but also its form, represented as a solar symbol, Christ's monogram, or a cross by the different sources. Between the war against Licinius (AD 316-324) and the last years of Constantine's reign, the interpretation of this emblem as a distinctive Christian symbol became dominant.¹⁷

The first literary description is in Lactantius' *DMP*. It states that Constantine marked the shield of his troops with a “celestial sign” that he saw in a dream: a Christogram.¹⁸ One of the earlier representations of this is the Ticinum Medallion, issued between the years AD 315 and 319. The piece shows Constantine with what appears to be the Chi-Rho monogram on his helmet and an unusual cross-shaped staff (fig 1).¹⁹ From 319, several coins display the Christogram as a small mint mark. Yet a few others integrate it into the main design,

¹⁵ Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XLIV; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 28-31.

¹⁶ The most sceptical approach to this narrative was advanced by Henri Grégoire, who considered almost everything in this story as a later invention. His arguments were criticized by Norman Baynes and Andreas Alföldi, who validated the narrative, or a part of it, as authentic and real. Some of Grégoire's arguments regarding the account of Eusebius were later disproven by A.H.M. Jones, F. Winkelman, and others. However, many historians are still sceptical regarding one or several aspects of this narrative, for example Ramsay MacMullen, or Patrick Bruun, while others like Charles Odahl are more inclined to accept it. The theory argued and defended by Peter Weiss, in my opinion, has the merit to conciliate almost all the inconsistencies of the different sources in a logical way. The analysis of Jonathan Bardill is also very insightful. Grégoire 1930; 1939; 1953; Alföldi 1969, 1-24; Baynes 1972, iv-vii; A. H. M. Jones and Skeat 1954; Winkelman 1962; MacMullen 1969, 72-78; Bruun 1997; C. Odahl M. 1983; Weiss 2003; Bardill 2015.

¹⁷ Bruun 1997; Weiss 2003; Shean 2010, 61:269-75; Bardill 2015, 174-83; López Sánchez 2016; Garipzanov 2018, 27-65.

¹⁸ “Commonitus est in quiete Constantinus, ut caeleste signum dei notaret in scutis atque ita proelium committeret. Facit ut iussus est et transversa X littera, summo capite circumflexo, Christum in scutis notat. Quo signo armatus exercitus capit ferrum”. Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum*, XLIV, 5.

¹⁹ Lenski 2018; C. Odahl M. 1983, 67.

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generally as part of Constantine's helmet or a military emblem, for instance, the obverse of a copper coin of 327 where the Chi-Rho is at the top of a standard, over a serpent (fig 2).²⁰

Fig 1.- Ticinum Medallion (c.315-319), The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Inventory N°: OH-A-ДР-15266.



Fig 2.- Constantine copper coin (327), The British Museum, London. Inventory N°: 1890,0804.11.



The standard represented in this coin is the *labarum*, referred to in this way on the basis of the chapter heading which the first editor of the *VC* added very shortly after Eusebius' death. It is apparently a word of Celtic origin.²¹ The only contemporary literary description of this object is found in the *VC*, written a few years after the death of Constantine. The Bishop of Caesarea claimed that the Emperor himself showed the *labarum* to him.²²

The form of the *labarum*

According to Eusebius, the *labarum* consisted of a golden pole with a transverse bar “forming the shape of a cross”, crowned by a wreath with the monogram of Christ (Chi-Rho). A squared tapestry covered with precious stones hung from the transverse bar and, between

²⁰ Bruun 1984, 562–72; 1997; C. Odahl M. 1983, 68–69. Jonathan Bardill considers that this object could be a representation of the *labarum* crowned by a solar disc. Bardill 2015, 178.

²¹ P. Weiss believes that the word came from the Gallic priests associated with the “pagan vision” and that it originally described the sign in the sky, and later the standard based on the vision. T.D: Barnes links the word with the high number of Gauls and Germans in the army of Constantine. Weiss 2003, 254–55; Barnes 2011, 78.

²² Eusebius describes this object in relation to the vision of Constantine in 310-313, his account has been considered anachronical because he is writing decades later, and some details do not have sense. But for the purpose of this study the precise chronology of his description is not relevant. Alföldi 1969, 16–18.

the monogram and the cloth, portraits of Constantine and his sons. Eusebius described the Chi-Rho as a “trophy of the cross” and said that this a “saving sign” used by Constantine as a protection against enemies, and that his armies carried replicas of it.²³ He also referred to a statue of Constantine holding the *labarum* in Rome, but this has not been preserved.²⁴

On the basis of this description and the iconographic evidence, scholarly consensus is that this emblem was based on a Roman *vexillum*.²⁵ If the *labarum* had a pagan origin, as Bruun, Weiss and others have suggested, it may have been linked with the religious *vexilla* of Syria and the Middle East. The same region where the cult of the *Sol Invictus*, held by Constantine before his Christian conversion, came originally. Michael Rostovtzeff argued that the *labarum* was a Christianization of the banners of the “oriental solar religion”, while for John F. Shean it was originally linked with the wheel symbol of the North-European Sun god.²⁶

Besides being a standard of the “*vexillum* type”, the exact form of the *labarum* is not completely clear. While many later sources speak about the Constantinian vision as the “vision of the Cross” and describe his sign in this way. The only contemporary source that does so is Eusebius’ *VC*, and it does so only ambiguously.

Eusebius most often designated the vision and the *labarum* as a “salvific sign”, but on occasion he referred to the sign as a cross-shaped trophy, because the pole and the transverse bar of the *labarum* formed a cross. Hence technically, the *labarum* was a cross, but also, every Roman standard of the *vexillum* type was too.²⁷ In fact, Tertullian noticed this and ridiculed the Roman soldiers who worshipped their standards as inadvertently worshiping crosses.²⁸ Perhaps Eusebius was thinking in this passage and pointing to the fact that now the standard was not just cross-shaped, but also a symbol of Christ.

Except for the cross-shaped object on the Ticinum Medallion, there is no contemporary evidence of any crosses associated with the *labarum*, only different versions of the

23 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 31. “Ἦν δὲ τοιῷδε σχήματι κατεσκευασμένον. ὑψηλὸν δόρυ χρυσοῦ καταμψισμένον κέρας εἶχεν ἐγκάρσιον σταυροῦ σχήματι πεποιημένον, ἄνω δὲ πρὸς ἄκρῳ τοῦ παντὸς στέφανος ἐκ λίθων πολυτελῶν καὶ χρυσοῦ συμπεπλεγμένος κατεστήρικτο, καθ’ οὗ τῆς σωτηρίου ἐπιγραφῆς τὸ σύμβολον δύο στοιχεῖα τοῦ Χριστοῦ παραδηλοῦντα ὄνομα διὰ τῶν πρώτων ὑπεσήμενον χαρακτήρων, χωρισμένου τοῦ ῥῶ κατὰ τὸ μεσαίτατον· ἃ δὲ καὶ κατὰ τοῦ κράνους φέρειν εἶθε κἂν τοῖς μετὰ ταῦτα χρόνοις ὁ βασιλεὺς. τοῦ δὲ πλαγίου κέρως τοῦ κατὰ τὸ δόρυ πεπαρμένου ὁθόνη τις ἐκκρεμῆς ἀπηόρητο, βασιλικὸν ὕφασμα ποικιλία συνημμένων πολυτελῶν λίθων φωτὸς αὐγαῖς ἐξαστραπτόντων καλυπτόμενον σὺν πολλῷ τε καθυφασμένον χρυσοῦ, ἀδιήγητόν τι χρῆμα τοῖς ὁρῶσι παρέχον τοῦ κάλλους. τοῦτο μὲν οὖν τὸ φᾶρος τοῦ κέρως ἐξημμένον σύμμετρον μήκους τε καὶ πλάτους περιγραφὴν ἀπελάμβανε· τὸ δ’ ὀρθιον δόρυ, τῆς κάτω ἀρχῆς ἐπὶ πολὺ μῆκυνόμενον ἄνω μετέωρον, ὑπὸ τῷ τοῦ σταυροῦ τροπαίῳ πρὸς αὐτοῖς ἄκροις τοῦ ἱδρυομένου ὕφασματος τὴν τοῦ θεοφιλοῦς βασιλέως εἰκόνα χρυσῇν μέχρι στέρνων τῶν τ’ αὐτοῦ παίδων ὁμοίως ἔφερε. τοῦτο μὲν οὖν τῷ σωτηρίῳ σημείῳ πάσης ἀντικειμένης καὶ πολεμίας δυνάμεως ἀμυντηρίῳ διὰ παντὸς ἐχρήτο βασιλεὺς, τῶν τε στρατοπέδων ἀπάντων ἡγεῖσθαι τὰ τούτου ὁμοιώματα προσέταττεν.

24 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 40. Cecchelli 1954, 11–44.

25 Rostovtzeff 1942, 104; Stephenson 2015, 182–87; Coulston 2018.

26 Rostovtzeff 1942, 104; Shean 2010, 61:271; Töpfer 2011, 179–86. These are exciting possibilities, but mainly speculative.

27 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 28–31.

28 Tertullian, *Apology*, 16, 6–8.

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monogram that the Christian sources identify with Christ's name. Weiss suggested that the original form was a cross-shaped symbol that represented the solar halo, and could be interpreted either as a solar symbol, the IX monogram (*) or a cross.²⁹ This is possible, but the Chi-Rho is much more common on the earlier sources than the IX form.

The *labarum* as an apotropaic Christian banner

Regarding the use and function of the Constantinian standard, the *VC* is the only contemporary source. In the context of the war against Licinius, that Eusebius described as a conflict between Christianity and paganism, the *VC* claims that this standard always led Constantine's army, and that wherever it was present, it filled the soldiers with strength and energy, and caused the enemies to flee.³⁰ Additionally, Eusebius' *Life* claims that the Emperor appointed more than fifty of the best men of his personal guard for carrying and guarding the *labarum*. According to Eusebius, Constantine personally related several miracles linked to the standard. For example, one guard who abandoned it and then was immediately killed, while nobody holding the *labarum* was ever struck by an arrow.³¹

The *labarum* was described by Eusebius as an apotropaic device, a miraculous banner that granted protection and victory in battle. This was consistent with the Roman tradition of the *signa militaria* as holy items, and objects of divine portents. It also appears to be related with the ancient belief in apotropaic images of the gods. However, it had no precedent in the Christian tradition, and it is surprising that no Christian contemporary source rejected these beliefs, that for the modern perspective appears so close to pagan idolatry.

In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius compared the defeat of Maxentius with the drowning of the Egyptian Army in the *Exodus* 14. In the *VC*, immediately after narrating the miracles of the *labarum*, Eusebius compared Constantine with Moses and the tent he raised to pray with the tabernacle.³² Considering this, it is possible that the Bishop of Caesarea thought of the *labarum* as a new Ark of the Covenant, a holy device that was used in war by the Israelites and was kept in the tabernacle. However, he did not make this comparison explicitly.³³

According to the *VC*, the *labarum* was entrusted to a special unit of Constantine's guard. Concordantly, the iconographic evidence depicts the *labarum* and the Chi-Rho as always

29 Weiss 2003, 254–56. Independently of the solar halo theory, other scholars including J. Bardill and J.F. Shean, also consider that the *labarum* could originally have been linked with a pagan solar symbol.

30 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, II, 3-7. Constantine probably presented the conflict to his Christian subjects as a defence against the attacks of Licinius, is not clear how much of this was real and how much was only propaganda. Barnes 2011, 103–11.

31 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, II, 8-9.

32 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IX, 9, 2-5; *Vita Constantini*, II, 12.

33 The use of the Old Testament as a model for Christian rulers is also a practice that began with Constantine and continued all through the Middle Ages and Byzantium. Rapp 2010; C. M. Odahl 1974; C. Odahl M. 1983.

associated with the Emperor or his bodyguards. Based on these facts, many historians concluded that the *labarum* was the personal banner of Constantine.³⁴ However, in his description of the standard, Eusebius claims that Constantine sent copies of it to all his armies, and that this banner always led his forces.³⁵ Also, in a later passage and referring to Constantine's army, Eusebius notes that the Emperor made “the saving trophy to be a mark on their shield” and that only the *labarum* and not “any golden images” or “golden statues” led the army.³⁶

Charles Odahl interpreted this passage as a replacement of the pagan images from the standards with “Christian talismanic emblems” by Constantine.³⁷ However, there is no evidence, besides the *VC*, of such reform on the *signa militaria*, and it seems that, at least the *aquilae*, were kept for some time.³⁸

According to Kai Töpfer there was a shift during the 4th century AD whereby the old pole-signs of the *centuriae* and the cohorts were replaced by *vexilla* and *dracones*. For Töpfer this was part of the Christianization of the army. The traditional *signa* of the units that had become objects of pagan worship were replaced, not by Christian symbols, but by banners without any religious meaning. It is unclear when exactly during the 4th century this occurred, but it was likely closer to the reign of Theodosius than to Constantine.³⁹

It is also possible that the *VC* is not referring to the images of the regular pole standards in this passage, but to the sacred icons of the gods (*simulacra*) which Tacitus mentioned as carried in military displays, and that were possibly kept in the camp shrine.⁴⁰ Whatever the case, if Eusebius' narrative is accurate, it probably referred to one category of standards, not to a complete reform of all the *signa*.

The *VC* holds a potential clue for understanding the function of this standard. Eusebius mentions that the *labarum* included a portrait of Constantine and his sons. The legions were

34 Alan Cameron 2010, 104–7; Stephenson 2015, 182–87 Constantine disbanded the old praetorian guard and replaced it with a new unit of bodyguards, possibly this guard eventually become the Scholae Palatinae, the palace guard. A. H. M. (Arnold H. M. Jones 1964, 54, 613–14; MacMullen 1969, 45–49

35 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 31.

36 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, IV, 20. « Ἡδὲ καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῶν τῶν ὀπλῶν τὸ τοῦ σωτηρίου τροπαίου σύμβολον κατασημαίνεσθαι ἐποίει, τοῦ τε ἐνόπλου στρατοῦ προπομπεύειν χρυσῶν μὲν ἀγαλμάτων, ὅποια πρότερον αὐτοῖς ἔθος ἦν, τὸ μὴθέν, μόνον δὲ τὸ σωτήριον τρόπαιον. »

37 C. Odahl M. 1983, 66.

38 Vegetius and Ammianus, writing several decades after Constantine, mention the eagles. However, Vegetius described the old costumes of the legion, based on ancient sources. The testimony of Ammianus is clearer, although his expression “the eagles and the standards” could be a literary motif, so it is not completely clear if the eagles were really used by the army in the 4th century. There are also coins issued under Constantine and Magnentius that depict eagle-standards. Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, III, 5, 8; Ammianus, *Rerum gestarum*, XV 8, 4, XVII 13, 25, XX, 5, 1, XXVIII, 5, 3. Töpfer 2011, 197–98.

39 Töpfer 2011, 138–40, 197–98.

40 Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, 15, 29.

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known to carry an image of the emperor, to evoke the presence of their supreme commander in his absence. This image received honours and oaths.⁴¹ Perhaps the *labarum* was originally a personal banner of Constantine, custodied by his guard, but then copies of it, with *phalerae* depicting him and his sons, were sent to other forces, invoking the presence of the *Imperator*. If this is the case, the *labarum* replaced the previous imperial images, and the sacred icons of the pagan gods, and was carried along with other standards, as the eagles and the emblems of each unit.⁴²

Finally, Constantine and his personal guard could have used the Christogram on their shields, helmets, armours, or uniforms as well, as a distinguishing feature.⁴³ This was in fact described by Lactantius and Eusebius, that without having an accurate knowledge about the organization of the Roman military maybe assumed this was a practice shared by the entire army. It is also possible that Constantine commanded some of his troops to make a small mark on their shields with the sign, and this later evolved into a permanent design on the shields of his personal bodyguard.⁴⁴

Constantine's successors and the *labarum*

There is not much evidence concerning the usage of the *labarum* during the civil wars that followed Constantine's death, except for coins. While they were not the most popular designs on contemporary coinage, the Christogram and the *labarum* motif became more frequently used than they were during Constantine I.⁴⁵

According to Patrick Bruun, this trend was part of the “struggle for the Constantinian Heritage”, a way in which different pretenders linked themselves with Constantine in an attempt to strengthen the legitimacy of their claims. During this period, the Christogram started to appear regularly inside the *labarum*, instead of crowning it on the top as in earlier representations (fig 3).

From the year AD 358, some coins show this sign accompanied by the Greek letters Α and Ω (fig 4), while others started to accompany this image with the legend, *Hoc signo victor eris*, linking them explicitly with the Christian story of the vision.⁴⁶

41 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, I, 31. Töpfer 2011, 18–35; Hebblewhite 2003.

42 M. Hebblewhite argues that the *labarum* was the personal standard of the emperor: Hebblewhite 2003, 83.

43 In several images from later times soliders that stood near the Emperor – presumably, his bodyguards – are depicted with the Chi-Rho on their shields, for example in the famous Justinian Mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna. The use of the Chi-Rho on the helmet appears mainly in representations of Constantine himself.

44 Constantine disbanded the Praetorian Guard and some of the units that fought for him at the Milvian Bridge later became part of his bodyguard, such as the famous Cornuti depicted in the Arch of Constantine. Shean 2010, 61:258–59.

45 J. Kent 1981, 32–49, 234–381, 459–596.

46 Bruun consider the use of the Α Ω to be the earliest reference to biblical imagery on coins and the first iconographic evidence of the Constantinian sign as an undeniable Christian symbol. Ildar Garipzanov argues that these letters could have been used to emphasizes the divine nature of Christ in the period of the Arian controversy. Bruun 1997, 47–53; Garipzanov 2018, 68–70.

Fig 3.- Silver coin of Constans (AD c. 347-348), The British Museum, London. Inventory N°: 1313312001.

© The Trustees of the British Museum.⁴⁷



Fig 4.- Bronze of Magnentius (AD c. 350-353), ANS 1944.100.20460, American Numismatic Society: Public Domain Mark.



Nevertheless, this tells us little about the actual use of the *labarum* as a military banner. If the pretenders continued using the Christogram iconography in coins to associate themselves with Constantine, it seems likely that they also continued with the practice of using his standard in battle. However, the literary sources of this period do not describe such a thing, neither do they mention the fate of the original *labarum*, nor indeed which of Constantine's sons utilised it. Also, it is unclear to what degree the changes in the coin iconography reflect transformations of the real banner. For instance, it is possible that the Chi-Rho was incorporated on the design of the tapestry, but this could also be just a conventional or easy way of representing a *labarum* in the coinage.

In the year AD 351, during the war between Constantius and Magnentius, Cyril of Jerusalem wrote a letter to Constantius II telling him about a vision of the Cross in the sky as a sign of God's favour towards the Emperor. This letter has been interpreted in connection with the Constantinian vision. The "celestial sign", that Magnentius also used in his coins, was a symbol of legitimacy and God's favour. Therefore, it is likely that several pretenders of this period carried the *labarum* onto battle to strength their images and claims.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Image shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

⁴⁸ Van Dam 2011, 50–52.

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There is some suggestive literary evidence from the reign of Julian “the Apostate” (AD 361-363 AD). Gregory Nazianzens’ *Oration against Julian*, mentions that this emperor acted against the “great symbol” that led the army along with the Cross.⁴⁹ The *Church History* of Sozomen claims that in order to habituate the troops to the pagan worship, Julian restored the ancient form of the banners changing the “sign of the Cross” established by Constantine.⁵⁰ A hagiographic work of the period, the *Passio* of Bonosus and Maximilianus, tells the story of two Christian standard-bearers who were martyred because they refused to remove the “Christian sign” from the standards of their units.⁵¹

It is noteworthy that while Gregory mentioned that the “great symbol” marched “along with the cross”, Sozomen referred to the symbol as a cross. For Sozomen, as for many later Christian writers, the Constantinian symbol and the cross were equivalents, but Gregory made a distinction. Is it possible that by his time there were two or more different standards, one with the Chi-Rho and another with the cross? From the reign of Valentinian I (AD 364 to 375) onwards, a few images in coins used a cross instead of the Chi-Rho inside the *labarum* (fig 5). It is unclear if this trend reflects a change in the style of military banners, if there were two or more different standards, or just a variation in the design of the same one.

Fig 5.- Gold Solidus of Valens I (AD 364-367), American Numismatic Society, Identifier: 1965.4.6



49 Gregory Nazianzen, Oratio 4, 66: “Τολμᾷ δὲ ἤδη καὶ κατὰ τοῦ μεγάλου συνθήμα τος, ὃ μετὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ πομπεύει, καὶ ἄγει τὸν στρατὸν εἰς ὕψος αἰρόμενον, καμάτων λυτήριον ὃν τε καὶ κατὰ Ῥωμαίους ὀνομαζόμενον καὶ βασιλεῦον, ὡς ἂν εἴποι τις, τῶν λοιπῶν συνθημάτων· ὅσα τε βασιλέων προσώποις ἀγάλλεται, καὶ πεπετασμέ νοις ὑφάσμασιν ἐν διαφόροις βαφαῖς καὶ γράμ μασιν, ὅσα τε δρακόντων φοβεροῖς χάσμασιν ἐμπνεό μενα ἐπ' ἄκρων δοράτων αἰωρουμένοις, καὶ διὰ τῶν ὀλκῶν ριπιζόμενα φολίσιν ὑφανταῖς καταστίκτων, ἥδιστόν τε ὁμοῦ καὶ φρικτὸν θέαμα προσπίπτει ταῖς ὄψεσιν.”

50 Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History, 5, 17, 2-3: “ἀτεχνῶς δὲ διὰ πάντων ἐλληνίζειν προσεθίζων μεταποιεῖν ἔγνωκεν εἰς τὸ πρότερον σχῆμα τὸ κορυφαῖον τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν συνθημάτων, ὅπερ Κωνσταντίνος κατὰ θεῖον πρόσταγμα, ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν εἴρηται, εἰς σταυροῦ σύμβολον μετετύπωσεν.”

51 I have not had direct access to this source, but several passages are quoted in Latin and translated in David Woods’ paper, that also contrast this *Passio* with other sources and interpreted some of it content: Woods 1995b.

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Gregory, Sozomen and the *Passio* are Christian polemical sources, that were written after the fact with obvious purpose. Also, they are likely not accurate concerning the practices of the Late Roman army. Sozomen and the *Passio* seemed to refer to all the *signa militaria*, which is highly unlikely. Beyond these details, the three sources suggest that the Constantinian *labarum* or some kind of Christian emblem was kept by the Roman army until the time of Julian and that, during the brief pagan revival of his reign, the motifs of some standards became a subject of religious controversy. How significant or extended this controversy was is unclear. It is probable that the Christian sources exaggerate here, but there was some level of controversy over the military standards during the reign of Julian.⁵²

The Christian emperors that followed Julian: Jovian, and the house of Valentinian, restored the favourable position that Christianity had previously held. Their coinage makes repeated use of the *labarum*, with the Chi-Rho or cross. The attempt to restore some of the pagan icons or the “dechristianization” of the *signa* started and ended with the reign of Julian. In the second half of the 4th century AD, the *labarum* became the main emblem of the Roman rulers and their Christian *Imperium*.⁵³

The *Labarum* and the Cross in the Theodosian Period

The half-century between the reigns of Constantine I (AD 306-337) and Theodosius I (AD 379-395) was marked by the imperial acceptance of Christianity, and the development of close relationship between Church and government. The speed and degree of Christianization across the Empire, and the decline of paganism, have been discussed by scholars, yet clearly there was a gradual process of identification of the Roman imperial regime as a Christian power during this period.⁵⁴

The iconographic evidence suggests strongly that some version of the Constantinian *labarum* continued to be used by the house of Theodosius (AD 379-457). The motif of the emperor holding this banner appears regularly in their coinage (fig 6). Also, some coins from this period depict Victory with the Chi-Rho on a shield (fig 7).⁵⁵ The consular diptych of Probus (AD 406) represents the emperor Honorius (AD 395-423) as a soldier, holding a standard crown by a Chi-Rho, with the words “In nomine XPI [Christ] vincas semper”, inscribed in the tapestry of the banner (fig 8). This shows that Theodosius I and his successors deliberately appealed to Constantine through this iconography.⁵⁶

⁵² For the discussion about this: Woods 1995a; 1995b; Alan Cameron 2010, 105–6.

⁵³ Bruun 1997, 54–58; J. Kent 1981, 8; Pearce 1951.

⁵⁴ Averil Cameron and Garnsey 1998; Millar 2006; Alan Cameron 2010.

⁵⁵ Pearce 1951; J. Kent 1994.

⁵⁶ Alan Cameron 2007, 191–202.

Fig 6.- Bronze coin of Theodosius I (AD 392-395), American Numismatic Society, Identifier: 1984.146.580.



Fig 7.- Gold solidus of Theodosius II (AD 414), American Numismatic Society, Identifier: 1948.19.1947.



Fig 8.- Consular diptych of Probus (AD 406), Cathedral treasure of Aosta, Aosta Valley.



Detail:



Since the reign of Valentinian I (AD 364 to 375) crosses started to appear on coinage, sometimes within the *labarum*. Between the late-4th and early-5th centuries, the symbol of the Cross became the most prominent Christian artistic motif and was very common on imperial coinage (fig 9).⁵⁷ Under the house of Theodosius, most representations of the *labarum* in coins do not include the traditional Chi-Rho. Usually, the tapestry shows an X, that could be interpreted either as a simplification of the Christogram or a diagonal cross (fig 10).

Fig 9.- Gold solidus of Theodosius II (AD 416), American Numismatic Society, Identifier: 1977.158.988.



Fig 10.- Gold solidus of Arcadius (AD 393-395), Münzkabinett, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Inventory N°: RÖ 29957.



Since the late-4th century, a few coins included a Latin cross in the tapestry design of the *labarum* (fig 5, fig 11). This led several scholars, from André Grabar onwards, to argue that between Valentinian and Theodosius I, the Chi-Rho and the cross became interchangeable symbols and that, during the 5th century, the cross eventually surpassed the Chi-Rho in relevance, but did not replace it in all spaces.⁵⁸ For instance, while some *semissis* of Aelia Eudocia depict the Chi-Rho within a laurel wreath, some *tremissis* of the same empress, issued a few years later, show a cross inside the same wreath. Garipzanov argued that this implies a new hierarchy of Christian symbols.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Garipzanov 2018, 90–106; Pearce 1951; J. Kent 1994.

⁵⁸ Grabar 1971, 32–38; Gag  1933, 383; Bruun 1997, 55–58.

⁵⁹ Garipzanov 2018, 73–74.

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Fig 11.- Bronze of Theodosius I (AD 378-383), American Numismatic Society, Identifier: 0000.999.10232.



If there was a hierarchy in the period, its structure is not clear. The Chi-Rho and the cross seem to be interchangeable in most of the coinage motifs, and while both symbols could be associated with the imperial power, they also appear in non-imperial contexts, for example in church mosaics.⁶⁰

The sixteenth to eighteenth century drawings of the lost column of Arcadius, erected in the year AD 403, show both the Chi-Rho and the Cross as an imperial symbol of victory in the base of the column. Following the Freshfield Album, on the east and west sides of the column's base, the upper part depicted two angels holding a Latin Cross, while the southside displayed the Chi-Rho with A and Ω in a wreath. On all sides, below these symbols, the ruling emperors were represented in military attire, with Victory crowning them, flanked by their soldiers, senators, and other dignitaries. Military trophies and other traditional symbols of victory complemented the composition (fig 12).⁶¹ Therefore, if the drawings of this lost monument are accurate, they also suggest that the Chi-Rho and the cross were interchangeable symbols that represented the notion of Christian imperial victory in the Theodosian period.

⁶⁰ Garipzanov 2018, 51–106.

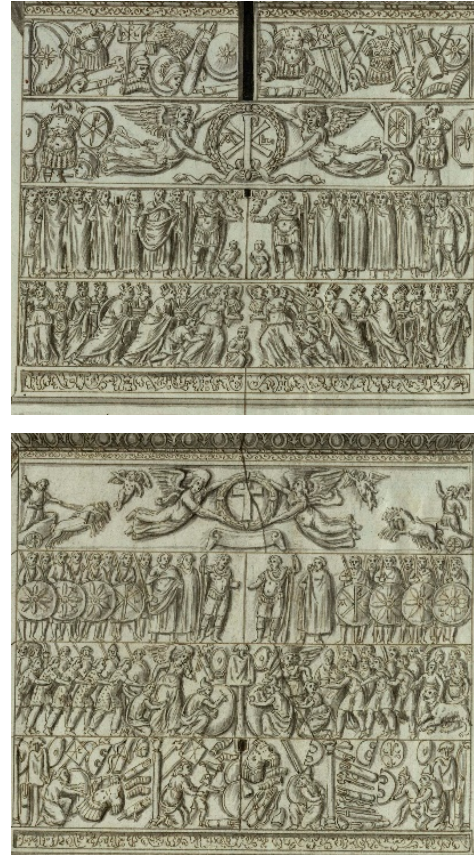
⁶¹ Kelly 2006.

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Fig 12.- Drawings of the lost Column of Arcadius (403), Freshfield Album (1574), Trinity College Library, Cambridge, MS O.17.2, 11-13.



Details of the base:



These illustrations also include several standards with the Chi-Rho and an X cross, some of them curiously among the captured trophies. The column represented the victory against the rebel Gainas, the only victory of Arcadius. If the sketches are correct, they would show that, by the early 5th century, the *labarum* was not just the personal banner of the emperor, but the main symbol of the Christian *Imperium* carried by the Roman armies.⁶²

⁶² The *labarum* depicted among the trophy could had been Imperial banners taken by Gainas and then recovered, however the point is the same, emperor Arcadius never participated directly in any campaign, so the *labarum* represented the Emperor, without the need of his physical presence.

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One space where the Chi-Rho remained much more common than the cross was its representation on shields, which can be observed in coins (fig 7), reliefs (fig 12) and others.⁶³ This could indicate that the Chi-Rho continued to be included in the design of the shields of the imperial bodyguard for some time.⁶⁴

The literary sources offer some insights on this problem. In the year 403 Saint Jerome, referring to the advances of Christianity and the decline of paganism, wrote: “The standards of the military are emblazoned with the sign of the Cross. The emperor's robes of purple and his diadem sparkling with jewels are ornamented with representations of the shameful yet saving gibbet”.⁶⁵

Some decades after, Sozomen also referred to the sign in the emblems as a cross. This could just be a conventional way of referring to the “salvific sign” that Eusebius described as “cross-shaped” and that later many writers identified as a cross. However, the images of the *labarum* on coins suggest that Jerome was describing the real design of the military standard in his period. If that is the case, at which moment did the *labarum* change the Chi-Rho for the cross? It is unclear, but based on the coin iconography, variations in the standard design could have been introduced by Constantine’s successors, and the cross became the most common of these different designs during the reign of Theodosius I.

In his *Book against Symmachus*, Prudentius, referring to the need of Rome to reject paganism, places the following words in the mouth of Theodosius I:

O queen [Rome], be ready to acknowledge my standards, on which the figure of the cross leads the van, either gleaming in jewels or fashioned of solid gold on long shafts. It was this standard that made Constantine invincible [...] The mark of Christ, wrought in jewelled gold, was on the purple labarum ; Christ had drawn the bearing on the shields, and the cross blazed on the crest atop.⁶⁶

Again, the imperial standards are described using the sign of the cross. This passage is noteworthy because it identifies explicitly the Theodosian cross-standard with the Constantinian *labarum*. It appears that when Prudentius said the “mark of Christ” (*insignia Christus*) he is referring to the Chi-Rho, because then he mentioned the cross as a different

63 For example, in one of the fragments attributed to the lost column of Theodosius kept in the Bayezid Hamam Museum.

64 As suggested by the representation of the Imperial guards in the Justinian mosaics in Saint Vitale, Ravenna.

65 Jerome, Ep. 107: Ad Laetam de Institutione Filiae. 2: “Vexilla militum, crucis insignia sunt. Regum purpuras et arduentes diadematum gemmas, patibuli salutaris pictura condecorat.”

66 Prudentius, Libri contra Symmachum, I, 463-469, 486-488, “agnoscas, regina, libens mea signa necesse est, in quibus effigies crucis aut gemmata refulget aut longis solido ex auro praefertur in hastis. hoc signo invictus transmissis Alpibus ultor servitium solvit miserabile Constantinus, cum te pestifera premeret Maxentius aula [...] Christus purpureum gemmanti textus in auro signabat labarum, clipeorum insignia Christus scripserat, ardebat summis crux addita cristis,”

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thing. But even if they were distinguishable, both symbols seem to have become equivalent. The passage also says that the cross could be “gleaming in jewels or fashioned of solid gold on long shafts”, suggesting that there were different standards with crosses or different designs of the same *labarum*, which is consistent with the iconographic evidence.⁶⁷

Referring to the famous Battle of the Frigidus (AD 395) between Theodosius I and the usurper Eugenius, Theodoret of Cyrus mentioned that the cross led Theodosius' army and that this Emperor attributed high power to this standard.⁶⁸ The narrative of 5th century Christian sources that presented the Frigidus as a confrontation between Christianity and paganism are criticized and proved unhistorical by Alan Cameron.⁶⁹ However, the passage shows that, by the mid-5th century, the imperial banner had come to be identified, at least metaphorically, with the cross. The cross was likely part of the design of this banner, and the same apotropaic properties of the *labarum* were attributed to it.

Another Christian text of the mid-5th century, narrating the war of Theodosius II against Persia, indicates that “he went to war with the Persians, assured of victory in advance by a sign-bronze crosses which appeared on the cloaks of his soldiers as they went into battle”.⁷⁰ Although this text has been considered historically inaccurate, it is important for its unique narrative. Instead of a standard it mentions miraculous bronze crosses that appeared in the uniform of the soldiers. These have been identified with cross-shape *fibulae* and related with the particular religious connotation of this war, as one of its causes was the persecutions of Christians in Persia.⁷¹ Perhaps this narration has some historical basis, and cross-shaped *fibulae* were a feature of the uniform of some units in the 5th century? Even if this was not the case, it reflects the general belief of the period in the apotropaic properties of the cross.

Considering all this evidence, it is odd that in the military *Epitome* of Vegetius there is no mention of the *labarum* or the cross among the standards: “The mute signals are eagles, dragons, ensigns, *flammulae*, *tufae*, and plumes”.⁷² In previous passages Vegetius also mentioned the eagles, and in referring to the officers he lists different types of standard-

67 In the 5th century, several coins show the emperor with a cross-shaped sceptre or staff. Mays and Grierson 1992.

68 Theodoretus, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, 24; 324, 21-325, 30: ὥστε τοῦ ἡρώδου ἀρχομένου στρατιὰν συναγεῖραι καὶ τῷ πλήθει περιγενέσθαι τῶν δυσμενῶν, οὐκ ἐδέξατο τὴν εἰσήγησιν ὁ πιστότατος βασιλεὺς. οὐ γὰρ ἔφη χρῆναι τοσαύτην μὲν ἀσθένειαν τοῦ σωτηρίου κατηγορεῖσθαι σταυροῦ, τοσαύτην δὲ προσμαρτυρῆσαι δυνάμει τῇ τοῦ Ἡρακλέους εἰκότι· «ταύτης μὲν γὰρ ὁ σταυρὸς ἡγεῖται τῆς στρατιᾶς· τῆς δὲ τῶν ἀντιπάλων ἐκείνη». τούτων οὕτω πιστῶς εἰρημένων καὶ τῆς ὑπολειφθείσης στρατιᾶς ὀλίγης τε οὐσίας καὶ λίαν ἀθυμούσης, εὐρὺν οἰκίσκον εὐκτῆριον ἐν τῇ τοῦ ὄρου ἀκρωνυχίᾳ ἐν ᾧ τὸ στρατόπεδον ἦν, πάννυχος διετέλεσε τὸν τῶν ὄλων δεσπότην ἀντιβολῶν.

69 Alan Cameron 2010, 93–131.

70 Liber de promissionibus et praedictionibus Dei, Part. 3, Chap. 43 : “bellum eum Persis confecit. Eo signo, antequam potitus victoria, jam coeuntibus in praelium militibus, aeriæ cruces in vestibis paruere.”. The attribution of this text has been debated between Prosper of Aquitaine and Quodvultdeus of Carthage. Holum 1977, 155–56.

71 J. P. C. Kent 1960; Holum 1977.

72 Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, III, 5, 8 “Muta signa sunt aquilae, dracones, uexilla, flammulae, tufae, pinnae”.

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bearers (*signiferi*) but without any allusion to the *labarum*.⁷³ The exact date of this text is uncertain and has been debated, but it is thought to have been written between the years 383 and 450, a period when all the other evidence suggests that the imperial banner with Chi-Rho or cross was in use.⁷⁴

The most convincing explanation for this omission is that Vegetius was referring to the old costumes of the Roman army (*veteris militia continent morem*). His text is a compilation of ancient sources and knowledge aimed at the restoration of the traditional legionary structure, equipment, and practices in a period of military change. The *Epitome* does not mention the *labarum* because this was not part of the classic *signa* of the legions. The “antiquarian character” of the source even makes dubious other emblems mentioned that were still used during Vegetius’ time. The omission could also be explained if the *labarum* was a special banner, a symbol of the Christian emperor that was only by carried by special elite units, as the *palatinae*, and not by any regular legion.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the only military treatise of the Theodosian period does not say anything about Christian banners.

If the cross surpassed the Christogram in the *labarum* and as a military symbol, as the other literary sources suggest, what was the reason? Patrick Bruun suggested that this was related to the Christological controversies, to the triumph of orthodoxy with Theodosius I, and to the discovery of the “True Cross”, but he does not fully elucidate his reasoning here.⁷⁶ The relevance of the cross was highlighted by some Nicene supporters, for example Cyril of Jerusalem. However, an emperor frequently associated with Arianism, Valens I, displayed a *labarum* with a cross on his coinage (fig 5). Hence, not all the evidence suggest that the cross was associated exclusively with Nicene orthodoxy.

The finding of the “True Cross” offers a more compelling explanation. The debate about the historicity, chronology, and details of this discovery (*inventio*) are too intricate to be address here. At some point between the years AD 325 and 350, an object that was believed to be the True Cross was found in Jerusalem, triggering a veneration which grew dramatically over the years.⁷⁷

The earliest mentions of this was made by Cyril of Jerusalem around the year 350. Coincidentally the iconography of the Cross became more frequent in the following years, including a few coins with the cross inside the *labarum* (fig 5). From the 380s there are

⁷³ Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, II, 6-7.

⁷⁴ Milner 1993, xxxvii–xlii.

⁷⁵ In this line, a possible explanation for the *labarum* banners depicted among the trophies in the illustrations of the lost column of Arcadius is that, these could had been taken by Gaïnas troops in a skirmish against the Scholae Palatina of the city, and then recovered, or that, among Gaïnas troops were some Scholae or other elite units allowed to carry the *labarum*. Regarding the “rebellion” of Gaïnas: Alan Cameron and Long 2018, 199–232.

⁷⁶ Bruun 1997, 55–58.

⁷⁷ Malik 2012; Borgehammar 1991; Drijvers 1992.

several references to the Holy Cross, overlapping with the iconographic trend in which the cross symbol became more common, the partial substitution of the Christograms for crosses and the evolution of the *labarum*-cross in the coinage.⁷⁸ The popularity of the cross motif seems linked with the finding and veneration of the “True Cross”.

The discovery was linked with the reign of Constantine the Great, at least since the times of Cyril who mentions this in his letter to Constantius II (see above). In the last years of the 4th century a legend started to take shape concerning this finding, Helena (Constantine’s mother), and several miracles. It is still discussed among historians whether the discovery happened during the reign of Constantine, but at from the second half of the 4th century onwards this was the common belief.⁷⁹

Furthermore, when Rufinus of Aquileia wrote his Latin translation and continuation of Eusebius’ *Church History* around the year 402, he included the story of Constantine’s vision and changed the “cross-shaped trophy” for a “flaming cross” (*crucis igneo*) and the Chi-Rho *labarum* used by Constantine for a standard with a golden cross.⁸⁰

Therefore, the popularity of the cross iconography in general and its military use from the mid-4th century onwards was probably linked with the finding and veneration of the “True Cross”. The Chi-Rho and the symbol of the cross became interchangeable alternatives, and the second one was included in some versions of the imperial banner.

Since Theodosius I, the interpretation of the Constantinian sign as a cross started to predominate, reshaping the memory of the past. Powerful apotropaic properties were attributed to the cross and consequently its military use developed. In connection with the relics of the “True Cross” and with the traditions of the Constantinian vision, the cross became the main Christian symbol of the imperial triumph, and the most common iconography in the *labarum*, surpassing the Chi-Rho symbol towards the 5th century. It is very likely that this trend was also linked with the rise of the cult of relics and other Christian apotropaic devices from the late 4th-century.⁸¹

78 Garipzanov 2018, 81–108; Drijvers 1992, 81–94.

79 Barnes 1993; Holum 1994.

80 Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 9, 9: “...videt per soporem ad orientis partem in caelo signum crucis igneo fulgore rutilare. cumque tanto visu fuisset exterritus ac novo perturbaretur aspectu, adstare sibi videt angelos dicente >Constantine, τοῦτ' ὁ νίκας<, quod est: in hoc vince. turn vero laetus redditus et de victoria iam securus, signum crucis, quod in caelo viderat ... exin signum, quod in caelo sibi fuerat demonstratum, in militaria vexilla transformat ac labarum, quern dicunt, in speciem crucis dominicae exaptat et ita armis vexillisque religionis instructus adversum impiorum anna proficiscitur.” Garipzanov 2018, 88.

81 Wiśniewski 2019, 27–69; Garipzanov 2018, 89–107; Crow 2017, 147–74.

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Conclusion

During his war against Maxentius, Constantine introduced a new emblem for his army: the *labarum*. This very likely represented the idea of a victory granted by a supreme celestial or solar divinity, allowing different Pagan and Christian interpretations.

The *labarum* was a standard of the “*vexillum* type” with a symbol on the top, although its exact original form and iconography is not clear. Between the war against Licinius and the last years of Constantine's reign, the interpretation of this standard as a distinctive Christian emblem, and its main symbol as Christ's monogram, became dominant.

The *labarum* was regarded by Constantine, Eusebius and probably some of Constantine's army, as a holy apotropaic device, that could encourage bravery in the allies, instil fear in the enemy and even miraculously protect his troops from physical harm. This was consistent with the tradition of the Roman *signa militaria* and other ancient military standards as sacred items, however it had no precedent in Christianity. The *labarum* was a symbol of the emperor, used personally by him but probably also carried by his armies, with his image, evoking the presence of a ruler favoured by God.

Constantine's successors continued using versions of the *labarum*, probably as a declaration of legitimacy and continuity. As part of the pagan reaction of reign of Julian, the military standards became the object of religious controversy, but the emperors that followed restored the status of the *Christian labarum*. From the 360s some variations of the *labarum* started to use a cross instead of the Chi-Rho monogram. There was a transformation of the other ancient Roman standards in the period between 350-450, but it is an obscure and unclear process.

The *labarum* continued to be used by the house of Theodosius. From the late-4th century the interpretation of the Constantinian sign as a cross started to predominate. This was probably related to the finding of the “True Cross” and the growing popularity of its cult. During the Theodosian period the cross became the symbol of Christian imperial victory and *labarum*-cross the main banner that led the army of the Christian Roman Empire.

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Abbreviations:

ANF: *Anti-Nicene Fathers*

LCL: *Loeb Classical Library*

MPG: *Migne, Patrologia Graeca*

MPL: *Migne, Patrologia Latina*

NPNF: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*

TTH: *Translated Texts for Historians*

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