CHRISTIAN IMAGERY ON THE IMPERIAL COINAGE
OF THE CONSTANTINIAN DYNASTY
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The Conversion Experience and Christian Education of Constantine (A.D. 312-315)

The Italian Campaign against Maxentius and Revelatory Experiences on the Road to Rome
Constantine’s account of his vision of a cross and dream of Christ, and use of the *crux et nomen Christi* at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge (Euseb., *Vita Const* I, & Lact., *De Mort Pers* 44)

Byzantine MS Illustration of Constantine’s Cross Vision

Adventus Celebrations in Rome and Earliest Witness to New Christian Orientation
*Donativa* to the Senate and people, *privilegia* to the Church and clergy, the victory coins with traditional military imagery, and the *Basilica Nova* colossal statue with the Christian Labarum and inscription

Bronze S P Q R OPTIMO PRINCIPI Coins of the Rome Mint (312-13)
(Odahl Collection)
Remains of Constantine’s Basilica Nova in the Roman Forum

Extant Parts of Constantine’s Colossal Basilica Nova Victory Statue
(Now on the Capitoline Hill)

Return North with the Milan Conference and Residence in Trier
“Edict of Milan” with Licinius, and religious freedom in the empire with continued use of pagan gods on the coinage for a few years – esp. Sol and Jupiter
Christian Education at Trier with Ossius (Bible) and Lactantius (Divinae Institutiones), and involvement with Catholic Bishops in the west (Donatists and Council of Arles)
Increasing knowledge of the Christian religion and growing sense of a religious mission
The Decennalia and the First Usage of Christian Imagery on Imperial Coinage (315)

The Tenth Anniversary Celebrations of Constantine’s Imperial Acclamation in Rome
Dedication of the Arch of Constantine with neutral religious motifs – INSTINCTU DIVINITATIS
Issue of special silver SALUS REIPUBLICAE medallions with Christogram badge on helmet and globular
cross scepter above shield – graphic expression of emperor’s new Christian imperial theocracy views

Aerial over Rome with Constantine’s Arch to the Left of the Colosseum

Silver SALUS REIPUBLICAE Decennalia Medallions of the Ticinum Mint (315)
(Staatliche Münzsammlung, Munich)

Beginning of the Constantinian church building program around Rome which changed the city from a pagan capital to the Apostolic See – with San Giovanni, San Pietro and San Paolo among the most important
The Lafrére Engraving of the Pilgrimage Churches of Rome Largely Built by Constantine and His Family with San Pietro in the Foreground (1575) (Vatican, Rome)

The Disappearance of the Pagan Gods and the Use of Christian Signs on Imperial Coins (316-323)

Constantine’s Fidelity to the Christian Faith and Patronage to the Catholic Church Increases in These Years – churches built in his provinces, laws passed in favor of the clergy (appeals allowed from secular courts to bishops), and the faith (manumissions in churches permitted, and Sunday made a legal holiday)

The Pagan Gods are Systematically Taken off of Imperial Coinage in Constantine’s Domains (Britain, Gaul, Spain, Italy & North Africa, and after 317 Pannonia & Greece), with Sol remaining the longest until 318 as a bridge between pagan polytheism through Solar syncretism to Christian monotheism

They are largely replaced by military motifs, but regional mint officials supportive of Constantine’s new religious policy are allowed to use Christian symbols as control marks and decorative designs - examples are Christian Greek or Tau crosses used as marks of issue on the reverses of the last of the SOLI INVICTO COMITI bronze coin types in the Ticinum and Rome mints (316 & 318); Christograms and crosses employed as decorative designs on the obverse helmets of the VICTORIAE LAETAE PRINC PERP bronze types in the Siscia mint (318- 19); and an iota-chi Christogram used as marks of issue and/or imperial rank on the reverses of the VIRTUS EXERCIT bronze coin types in the Ticinum, Aquileia, Siscia, and Thessalonica mints (319-21); and the chi-rho monogram found on the obverse shield of the BEATA TRANQUILLITAS bronze type minted at Trier, the western capital of Constantine’s son and Caesar Crispus (322-23) – reflecting Lactantius’ story of the emperor’s conversion and monogrammed shields at the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge
The Eastern Crusade and Constantine’s Re-Unification of the Roman Empire (324-25)

Breakdown in the Joint Rule of Constantine and Licinius and a “Religious Cold War”

Constantine becomes a more zealous Christian and patronizes the Catholic Church in the west. Licinius comes under the influence of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus and champions a Jupiter-focused pagan revival in the east - they have an early political-military break in 316-17 by which Constantine takes over the Balkan provinces; after a brief peace, they have a “religious cold war” as they go their separate directions in religious policy, and then fight an apocalyptic struggle to see which dynasty will rule the empire and which religion will be favored therein. Constantine wins battles at Hadrianople, Gallipoli, and Chrysopolis in 324, and sets up a Christian Tetrarchy with himself as Augustus and his sons Crispus, Constantine II, and Constantius II as Caesars in the autumn of 324, and begins rebuilding Byzantium as a votive city in honor of his victory – the Christian Capital of Constantinople.
Edicts and Laws Favoring Christianity and the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea

Over the winter of 324-325, Constantine issues an “Edict of Restitution,” an “Edict on Religion,” and letters to Christian bishops urging the building of churches which make Christianity the favored religious cult in the Roman Empire.

In the summer of 325, he calls the bishops of the Church together to unite the faithful in A creed of belief, in a common Easter festival, and unitary practices in the Church at large.

Aerial over Byzantium, up the Bosporus Strait, and out to Chrysopolis where Constantine Defeated Licinius and Began Building Constantinople in 324

Byzantine Icon of Constantine at the Council of Nicaea
The Labarum Coinage after the Eastern Triumph and the Vicennalia Events (325-28)

Apocalyptic Imagery at the Constantinople Palace and Mint
In the aftermath of his military victory over Licinius and theological victory over Arius, Constantine put up a painting in front of his rising palace in Constantinople showing himself and his Christian sons piercing a dragon and wriggling serpent with their Christian Labarum in the shape of a cross and topped with the Christogram – evoking biblical apocalyptic prophecies about the defeat of the Devil and his agents, and the millennial reign of the Saints (Rv 12-13, 17-18, & 20). The palace painting is no longer extant, but the first bronze coins minted from the new mint at Constantinople represent this powerful Christian imagery (Euseb., Vita Const. III. 3)

Aerial View over the Blue Mosque and Hippodrome where the Apocalyptic Imagery was set up at the Entry Gate of the Palace in Constantinople

Bronze SPES PUBLICA coins of the Constantinople mint Displaying the Apocalyptic Reverse Motif of Constantine’s Christian Labarum Piercing the Wriggling Serpent Falling to the Abyss (327-28) (British Museum, London)
Labara on the Vicennalia Coins in the Western Mints
The loss of his son Crispus and his second wife Fausta in a dynastic tragedy in the west resulted in numerous pious acts for redemption of the Christian first family – church dedications in Rome, pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and special silver and gold medallions depicting Constantine posing with a simplified Christian standard (now with the sacred monogram on the banner itself)

Silver CONSTANTINUS AUG Medallions of the Rome Mint with the Reverse Showing the Emperor Holding his Chi-Rho Monogrammed Christian Standard (326)
(Dumbartobn Oaks Museum, Georgetown)

Gold GLORIA SECULI coins of the Siscia Mint Depicting Constantine in the Prayer Pose on the Obverse and Holding his Christogrammed Standard on the Reverse (326-27)
(National Museum, Belgrade)

The Celestial Gaze-Prayer Pose Coins and Medallions in Later Years of the Reign (325-337)

Eusebius’ Account of Gold Coinage Depicting the Emperor “with Eyes Uplifted as in the Posture of Prayer to God” (Euseb., Vita Const IV. 15)
In the last dozen years of his reign, Constantine issued gold solidi and medallions showing himself on the obverse in the ancient Christian manner of prayer with eyes upraised to heaven (see Tertullian, Apol 30, and Canon 20 of the Council of Nicaea for this)
The mints of Trier, Ticinum and Rome in the western, Siscia, Sirmium and Thessalonica in the central, and Constantinople and Nicomedia in the eastern areas of the empire produced this type regularly, and these and a few other mints also used this imagery on silver and bronze issues as well. It represented Constantine as a Christian imperial theocrat seeking inspiration from the true Deity to model his terrestrial empire below in imitation of the celestial kingdom above
The Constantinople Dedicatio Coins (330-37)

The Expansion of Byzantium into Constantinople as a Nova Roma for the East
Greek colony on the Bosporus Strait quadrupled in size and outfitted with imperial palace and
hippodrome, government buildings and baths, patriarchal palace and great churches of
Hagia Sophia and Hagia Eirene, a Constantinian forum and column, grand avenues, mansions,
apartments and cisterns, church of Hagioi Apostoloi, and land and sea walls fit for a new capital
After Six Years of Building, the Official Dedication Ceremonies were held on 11 May 330
The Dedicatio coins depicted a personification of the city on the obverse holding a globular cross
scepter, and a victory figure standing on a prow on the reverse – a Christian capital city by the sea

Bronze CONSTANTINOPOLI Coins of the Heraclea Mint with the City’s Personification
Holding a Globular Cross Scepter over her Shoulder on the Obverse (330)
(Odahl Collection)
The Buondelmonte Map of Late Byzantine Constantinople Showing the Eastern Capital with its Walls, Columns, Hippodrome and Churches between the Golden Horn inlet above, the Sea of Marmora below, and the Bosporus Strait to the Upper Right (1420) (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

Christian Symbols Used as Marks of Issue or Rank by Individual Mints Late in the Reign (330-37)

The Three Standard Bronze Coins in the Last Years of Constantine’s Reign were the CONSTANTINOPOLI Type Celebrating the “New Rome,” the URBS ROMA Type Commemorating “Old Rome,” and the GLORIA EXERCITUS Type honoring the imperial army.

They were minted in mass quantities from all the dozen mints across the empire – only the type celebrating Constantinople had Christian symbolism in the prototype design; but some Christian mint officials in the Aquileia and Arles mints added crosses and Christograms as control marks showing their religious predilections and reflecting the dynasty’s Christian mission.

Bronze GLORIA EXERCITUS Coins of the Aquileia Mint with an Ankh Style Latin Cross Employed as a Mark of Issue between the Two Soldiers and Standards on the Reverse (334-35) (Odahl Collection)
Bronze CONSTANTINOPLI Coins of the Arles Mint with the Christogram Used as a Mark of Issue in the Reverse Field (334) (Odahl Collection)

Bronze URBS ROMA Coins of the Arles Mint with the Christogram Used as a Mark of Issue in the Reverse Field (334) (Odahl Collection)

Bronze GLORIA EXERCITUS Coins of the Arles Mint with the Christogram Employed as a Mark of Issue Between the Two Soldiers and Standards on the Reverse (334) (British Museum, London)

Bronze GLORIA EXERCITUS Coins of the Arles Mint with the Christogram Employed as a Mark of Issue on the Standard Between the Two Soldiers on the Reverse (336) (Odahl Collection)

Use of a New Form of the Christian Monogram at the Antioch Mint at the End of the Reign

Gold *solidi* were issued for Constantine and his heirs from the mints where they resided at the end of his reign in 336 – the VICTORIA CONSTANTINI AUG type at Antioch displayed a new type of Christian monogram combining the cross and name of Christ (the crossogram) on those for Constantine

Gold VICTORIA CONSTANTINI AUG Coins of the Antioch Mint Using a Crossogram as a Mark of Rank for the Augustus in the Reverse Field (336-37) (Dumbarton Oaks, Georgetown)

Christian Burial and Consecratio Coins (337)

Constantine’s Christian Baptism and Burial in the Church of the Holy Apostles

The Christian emperor was baptized shortly before his death at Pentecost in 337, and according to his wishes was buried as the *Isapostolos* in his *Hagioi Apostoloi* Church in Constantinople
Constantine’s older sons issued *consecratio* coins in the western and eastern mints depicting their father veiled in the shroud of death on the obverse and in a chariot rising skyward with the hand of God reaching down to welcome Rome’s first Christian ruler to his heavenly reward (337-40)

Aerial View over the Conqueror’s Mosque which sits above the ruins of the Church of the Holy Apostles on the Highest Hill of Constantinople where Constantine was entombed

Bronze *Consecratio* Coins Issued from the Mints of Constantine II and Constantius II Depicting Their Deceased Father Riding in a Chariot to Heaven (337-40)
(Odahl Collection)

Epilogue: Constantine’s Sons and the Regular Use of Christian Imagery on Imperial Coinage (337-61)

Constantine’s Sons (Constantine II in the west, Constans in the center, and Constantius II in the east) expanded their father’s cautious use of Christian imagery on the coinage by making the Christogram a regular feature on the GLORIA EXERCITUS coins from all imperial mints early in their reigns (337-40); Constans and Constantius II used it more often in their joint rule as Augusti (340-50), particularly in the reformed bronze FEL TEMP REPARATIO coinage for the 1100th anniversary of Rome’s founding (347-50); and when a usurper overthrew his brother, Constantius II and his sister Constantina issued special HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS coins recalling their father’s vision and divine selection to hold the central European troops loyal to the dynasty (350-51); with the overthrow of the usurper and the
reconquest of the west, SALUS AUG NOSTRI coins displaying a large Christogram with Greek Alpha and Omega letters to either side were issued for Constantius’ arrival in Trier (353), and special silver medallions with a Chi-Rho on the imperial shield were issued for his Vicennalia in Rome (357)

Bronze FEL TEMP REPARATIO Coins Issued Empire Wide for Constans with a Reverse Motif Depicting Him in a Boat Holding a Christogram Standard on a Campaign to Britain (347-50) (Odahl Collection)

Bronze FEL TEMP REPARATIO Coins Issued Empire Wide for Constantius II with a Reverse Motif Depicting Him Holding a Christogram Standard after a Victory over Persians (347-350) (Odahl Collection)

Bronze HOC SIGNO VICTOR ERIS Coins of the Siscia Mint Depicting Constantine Crowned by an Angel and Holding his Christian Standard under the Message of his Vision (351) (Odahl Collection)

Bronze SALUS AUG NOSTRI Coins of the Trier Mint Displaying a Chi-Rho Monogram Surrounded by Alpha and Omega Letters on the Full Reverse Flan (353) (Odahl Collection)

As Christianity triumphed over paganism in late Roman world, Christian imagery (crosses, monograms, Christian scepters of power, etc.) became common on late Roman and early Byzantine coinage
The Standard Gold and Bronze Coins of the Theodosian Empresses Carried a Reverse of an Angel Marking a Shield with a Christogram - Evoking memories of Constantine’s Dream as on this Bronze SALUS REIPUBLICAE Coin of Aelia Flaccilla (383) (Odahl Collection)

Gold VICTORIA AUGG Coins of the Mint of Constantinople Celebrating the Re-conquest of Italy under Justinian with the Obverse Depicting the Emperor Holding a Globus-Crucifer and the Reverse Showing an Angel Holding a Crossogram Standard (542) (Odahl Collection)

Bibliography of Related Works by the Presenter*

General Works on Constantine and His Reign as the First Christian Emperor


Comprehensive Articles on Christian Symbolism on Constantinian Coinage


Case Studies of Individual Mints and Coin Types


*All these works are available for downloading on the author’s website:

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