

## THE CHRISMA AND THE LABARUM.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE religious societies of the first and second centuries of our era had marks which were somewhere impressed upon the bodies of the devotees, probably on the shoulders, and on festive occasions the mark was borne on the forehead. It is certain that the Christians, too, had their mark, which may at various times have been either a simple cross  $+$ , or the ineffable name יהוה, Yahveh, or the  $\Lambda\Omega$ , or exceptionally some other symbol.



CHRIST EXORCISING WITH THE  
CHRISTOGRAM.<sup>1</sup>



CHRISTIAN GEM WITH  
CHRISTOGRAM.

In the Revelation of St. John we read of a beast (xiii. 16)<sup>2</sup> who “caused all, both great and small, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads.”

And in chap. vii. 4 the pious are protected by the seal of the living God. The angel holding the stamp cries to the four angels to whom it is given to hurt the earth and the sea: “Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in the foreheads.”

Judging from the catacombs of Rome, the favorite Christian emblem of the fourth century was the Chrisma, or Christogram,

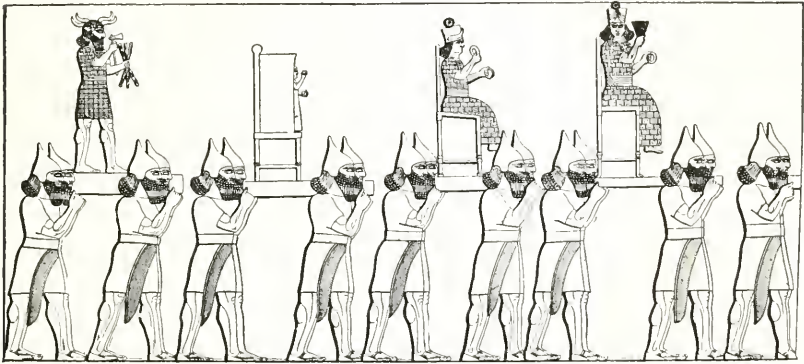
<sup>1</sup>Didron, *lc.*, II., p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>Again referred to in chap. xx. 4.

which is a cross in the shape of the Greek Ch ( $\chi$ ), surmounted by the Greek letter R, which has the shape of a Roman P, thus  $\text{✠}$ . This is the most common, but by no means the only, form of the Chrisma. There are other variations, thus  $\text{✕}$   $\text{✧}$   $\text{✡}$ , among which the upright form  $\text{✡}$  appears to be a reminiscence of the Egyptian key of life  $\text{⦿}$ , especially as the head of the P frequently resembles an elongated circle.<sup>1</sup>

Another form of the Christogram is the six-rayed star  $\text{✧}$  which is intended as an abbreviation of I. and X., i. e., Jesus Christus. It occurs for the first time (in its Christian significance) in the year 268, on a dated tombstone in the Catacombs. (Zoeckler, p. 139.)

Before the Christians thought of the star as a monogram of Jesus Christ, it served in pagan times as a symbol of various de-



PROCESSION OF THE GODS.

Bel, the god in the upper left-hand corner holds in his hand the fagot-shaped thunderbolt. (After Layard.)

scriptions. In Rome it was the coat of arms of Cæsar's family the *gens Julia*, in which significance it is called the "*Sidus Julium*." Bar Kochba, the pseudo-messiah, uses the same figure with knobs at the end of each ray on one of his coins. Further the star was the emblem of divinity in the ancient cuneiform writing, and in Egypt it occurs on tomb-slabs of the earliest dynasties.<sup>2</sup>

The Babylonian god Bel holds a thunderbolt in his hand, which is a six-cornered star, only compressed in the middle ( $\text{✧}$ ), thus giving the impression of a labarum without the loop of the P on top of it.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the image of Christ whose head is adorned by an Egyptian key of life.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Flinders Petrie, *The Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties* in the 21 Egypt Exploration Fund, 1901, Part II., pl. xxviii, fig. 53.

Another instance of a flag which reminds one of the labarum occurs on a bas-relief of the Bharhut stupa. Since the flag-staff covers the middle of the field we cannot tell whether the design consists of eight rays or only six. If the staff covered a vertical line, this flag would be an Indian anticipation of the British Union Jack.

The most ancient Union Jack in existence is (so far as I know) a neolithic ornament of prehistoric cave-dwellers, found in Franconia and now preserved in the Museum of Munich.

The Chrisma bears in some of its forms a remarkable resemblance to various pre-Christian symbols, especially to the ensigns of the Roman legions of Constantine, called the labarum.<sup>1</sup>



AN ANCIENT INDIAN ENSIGN WITH FLAG ON A WAR ELEPHANT.<sup>2</sup>  
(Medallion of Bharhut Stupa.)

That the Chrisma is a Christian interpretation of a pagan symbol becomes obvious from the fact that it was from the beginning actually called by this old pagan name, Labarum, a word of Celtic origin with an unknown etymology.

Constantine used the labarum before his conversion to Christianity, and he did not hesitate to combine it with pagan symbols. Among the coins of Constantine there is one exhibiting Mars leaning on a shield bearing the labarum with the legend *Marti Patri Conservatori*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pronounce "la'-būrum," with the accent on the first syllable.

<sup>2</sup> Alex. Cunningham, *The Stupa of Bharhut*, pl. xxxii, 4.

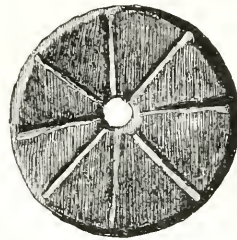
<sup>3</sup> Another coin shows a cross with the legend *Marti Conservatori*. For an enumeration of more instances see S. D. Parson's *The New Christian Cross*, Chapter XI.

The best known coin of Constantine gives the glory not to Christ but to the army. The inscription reads: *Gloria exercitus*.

The legions of Constantine were stationed in Gaul and most of them were sun-worshippers. From the many Mithraic monuments of that age discovered in those parts near the Roman camps

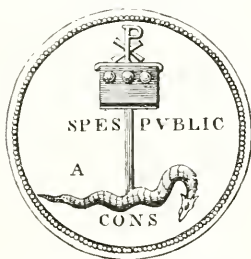


LOCK OF HAIR OF HAR  
PA KHRAD (i.e., Hor  
the Child)

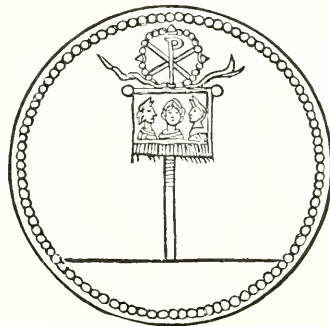


THE EIGHT-RAYED STAR  
ON A CHARM OF THE  
CAVE-DWELLERS OF  
FRANCONIA. (Museum  
of Munich.)

we must assume that Mithra worship was one of the most favorite forms of faith among them. We cannot say whether the labarum is originally Celtic or Mithraic. In either way it must have been a solar emblem and originally seems to have been simply the solar disc (☉) mounted upon a lying cross (X).



COIN OF CONSTANTINE.  
(From Holland's *Cruciana*.)

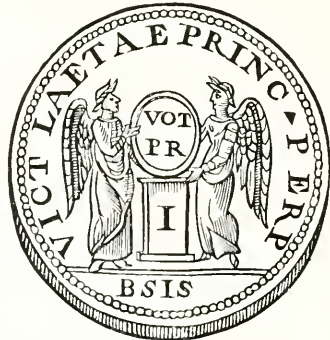


THE LABARUM. (After Bosio's  
*La Trionfante e gloriosa croce*.)

According to another supposition, which is less probable, the labarum may have been the Roman letter P in a crossed field, meaning "*Legio Princeps*," and have served as the emblem of the Emperor's life-guards.

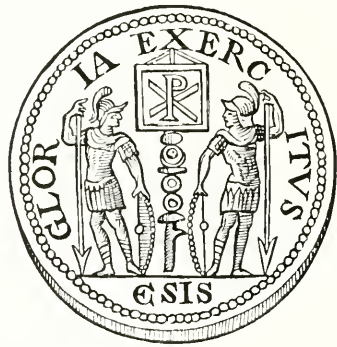
We know that the soldiers of those days were quite supersti-

tious and believed in the efficacy of the symbols written on their ensigns. When experience proved that the legion which bore the letter P or the Mithraic emblem of the disc of the sun ( $\odot$ ) on its standard, again and again came out victorious, it was quite in keeping with the spirit of the age to inscribe the same letter on all the standards.



CONSTANTINE WITH LABARUM ON HELMET.

The Christians may not have known of the labarum when they began to use the Chrisma as a symbol of their faith. They may have adopted it from other quarters and the coincidence may have



COIN OF CONSTANTINE. (After Bosio.)

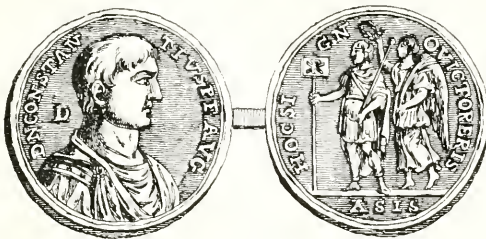
On the reverse the labarum guarded by two Roman soldiers, with the inscription *Gloria exercitus*, i. e., the glory of the army.<sup>1</sup>

been incidental. But this much is sure, that, when Constantine became convinced of the magic power of the sign of his soldiers, he heard with satisfaction of its Christian significance and became

<sup>1</sup>Another coin with the same reverse (published by Gretzer and reproduced by Seymour) shows on the obverse the emperor seated, a Victory in his left hand bearing the inscription PONTifex MAXImus POT.COIIIH.

well disposed toward the creed that gave an additional meaning to the emblem of his cause.

The shape of the labarum is almost identical with the Egyptian symbol of Horus which is a six-rayed star, from the elongated upper ray of which hangs a curl, called the "lock of hair of Hor." The similarity is striking, and Professor Petrie thinks that in the Christian Era it was changed into the Chrisma.<sup>1</sup>



COIN OF CONSTANTINE.

A goddess of victory is crowning the Emperor. (From Walsh, *Ancient Coins, Medals, and Gems*.)

The Labarum is further identical with an Asiatic emblem which was chosen by Bactrian kings and also by the Ptolemies as a stamp for their coins.



MARTYRDOM GEM WITH  
CHRISTOGRAM.<sup>2</sup>



COIN OF CONSTANTINE  
WITH LABARUM.



SEAL WITH CHRISTOGRAM.  
(British Museum.)

Professor Zoeckler, when speaking of the origin of the Labarum, says:<sup>3</sup>

"The origin and significance of the ancient Bactrian labarum cross is shrouded in darkness. It is undoubtedly of pre-Christian origin, but although it exhibits a striking similarity to the labarum of Constantine, it is not certain that it served as a prototype for the cross-decorated ensign of the first Christian emperor. There is no difference between the form of this sign as it appears on the coins of the Bactrian king Hippostratos (about 130 B. C.), and that which appears on the coins of Constantine the Great, except that in the latter the handle of the "P"

<sup>1</sup> See Professor Petrie's contribution to *Universal Religion*, p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Smith and Cheetham.

<sup>3</sup> *Das Kreuz Christi*, pp. 21-22 and pp. 152-154.

does not pass beyond the square, but remains within the oblique cross (X), thus:



"A figure similar to this stamp of the Bactrian coins appears on the coins of the Egyptian Ptolemies and also on Attic Tetradrachms of a more recent date, thus:



"The stamp of silver coins of Mithridates, of Pontus, is similar, thus: ✠<sup>1</sup>

"This and other modifications of the pre-Christian labarum ✠, exhibiting the very same form, with the handle or the opening of the "P" passing above the square, are reproduced on the Roman coins of Constantine and his successors, down to Arcadius, for which reason some archæologists feel justified in accepting the identity of the labarum of the Hellenic Diadochi with those of the Christianised Roman emperor."<sup>2</sup>

Professor Zoeckler deems "a direct imitation of the pre-Christian sign ✠ by the Christian emperor probable"; or, to say the least, "there is an obvious survival of former signs," which exerts a noticeable influence on the contemporaries of Constantine.



COIN OF PTOLEMY OF EGYPT. (From Gretser.)

Between the feet of the eagle a symbol appears which resembles the Christogram and the Labarum.

In another passage of the same book Professor Zoeckler says :

"It is difficult to say whether Constantine thought of the abbreviations of this form ✠ in its various modifications on Egyptian or on Bactrian or on Pontic coins of Asia Minor, or (a case which is less probable) on the Attic Tetradrachm, because it reminded him of the monogram of the Christian X, and the six-cornered star ✠, or the labarum ✠; but at any rate, a comparison of these and similar cruciform figures, as was the case with the swastikas which were used by Christians, and also of the handled-cross of the Egyptians, must have led him to the adoption of this monogram. Among all the signs of that kind known to him, when he passed them before his mind in review, not one certainly can have been a more pregnant embodiment of the Christian religion than the figure combining the initials of the name of Christ in a simple way with the sign of the cross. This thoughtful monogram of both Christ and the cross, this symbol with which he probably became acquainted through his conversations with Christians, naturally appealed to his

<sup>1</sup> Stockbauer, p. 87. Münter, Lenormant, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Zoeckler, *Das Kreuz Christi*, pp. 21-23.

love of mysticism, in its ambiguous significance and with its similarity to the mystic signs of the Orient; and, from the moment in which God luminously exhibited this figure in that famous vision to his mind's eye, as His holy emblem, it became to him the expression of his adhesion to the new religion."—*Ibid.*, 152-154.

Professor Zoekler contradicts himself when he first recognises the pagan character, name, and origin of the labarum and then assumes that Constantine intended it as a Christian symbol. It is historically certain that Constantine believed in the magic power of the symbol. He was a pagan when he had the famous vision or dream and he remained a pagan long afterwards. He became acquainted with the symbol as the labarum, not as the Christogram, and he had it displayed on the standards and helmets of his soldiers and on Roman coins, together with pagan inscriptions. He became a convert to Christianity much later in life and was baptised only shortly before his death, so as to preserve as long as



CHRISTOGRAM GEM. With name of owner. (King.)



COIN OF FLAVIUS VALERIUS CONSTANTINUS.<sup>1</sup>

possible the convenient liberty of sinning of which he did not hesitate to make ample use. He never was a true Christian in the sense in which the word is now used. He only believed superstitiously in the efficacy of Christian ceremonies and sacraments.

Constantine accepted the labarum for his standard, first as a sign of heavenly sanction without any reference to its Christian significance, but merely because he believed it to be a potent charm, and had it emblazoned on the shields and helmets of his soldiers.

Lactantius, a contemporary of Emperor Constantine and a Christian, writes:<sup>2</sup>

"Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X with a perpendicular

<sup>1</sup> The Emperor stands on the prow of a ship with a phoenix perched on a globe in his right and a standard exhibiting the labarum in his left hand. Walsh, No. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Anti-Nicene Christian Library*, xxii., ii., p. 203.

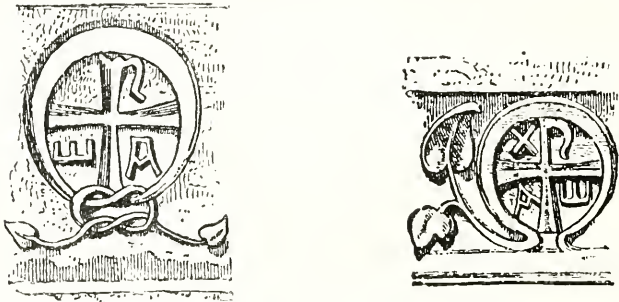


line drawn through it and turned round at the top, thus Ϟ, being the cypher of Christ."

The comment, "being the cypher of Christ," is an addition of Lactantius, and not an allusion to Constantine's opinion.

Eusebius the Church historian has written a *Life of Constantine* in which the miraculous vision plays a significant part. If we had not positive historical evidence that Constantine remained a pagan, using pagan symbols and following pagan practices long after the battle of the Milvian bridge, we might believe that Constantine was converted to Christianity on the eve of the battle. According to his description, the heavenly sign was the trophy of the cross (σταυροῦ τρόπαιον), but he describes it as the labarum. Eusebius says:

"When the sun had a little passed mid-day, Constantine said he saw with his own eyes the sign of the cross (σταυροῦ τρόπαιον) displayed in splendid light, out-



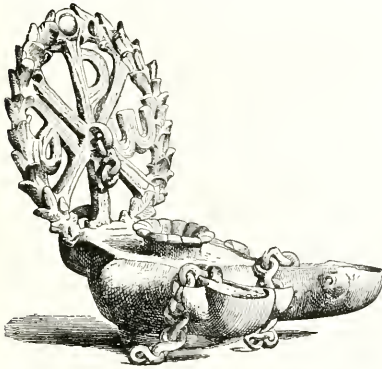
THE CHRISTOGRAM ON SYRIAN HOUSE-FRONTS.

shining the sun in the heavens, and upon it an inscription plainly written, *τοῦτ᾽ νίκα*, 'By this conquer.' Great astonishment seized him, and his whole army which accompanied him, and was a spectator of this prodigy. He asserted that he was yet in doubt why this display was made to him, and he thought much of it till night. Then, in his sleep, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign shown him in the heaven, and commanded him to use a standard of the pattern seen in heaven, for protection in joining battle with the enemy.

"Rising early the next morning, he told the vision to his friends. He called for workmen in gold and precious stones, and ordered them to make an image like it, which image I have seen with my eyes. For the emperor condescended, God graciously granting this, himself to show it me. It was of this form:—A spear, rather long and erect, was covered all over with gold, having a transverse yard in the form of a cross. On the top (of the spear) was a crown of precious stones, woven round with fine gold. Upon this were the salutary marks of the name of the Saviour, expressed by only two letters—the first two letters of the Greek name, Christ, P (*rho*, *R*), in the middle of the figure, and X (*chi*) curiously inserted,—

which plainly signifies the whole name Christ, . . . which letters the emperor always afterward wore in his helmet."<sup>1</sup>

Eusebius, even in his days of credulity, deems the story sufficiently improbable to render it necessary that the emperor should make his statement on oath, which may have been given honestly, not as Eusebius tells the story, but as the emperor told it, allowing Eusebius to interpret the facts in his own way. As he sees *plainly* the name of Christ and the cross of Christ in the labarum, so the deity that appears to Constantine in a dream is unhesitatingly called Christ by Eusebius. The whole story of the supernatural phenomena by which Constantine's cause gained the victory is told in a pagan way by Nazarius, a pagan author.<sup>2</sup>



LAMP WITH CHRISOGRAM AND  $\omega$  FROM THE CATACOMBS. (After Lübke.)



THE CHRISOGRAM AS A SANCTIFICATION OF MATRIMONY. Gilt glass. (Kraus, I., p. 166.)

Edward Gibbon in his famous *History of Christianity* condenses the pagan account of the miracle as follows :

"Nine years after the Roman victory, Nazarius describes an army of divine warriors, who seemed to fall from the sky : he marks their beauty, their spirit, their gigantic forms, the stream of light which beamed from their celestial armor, their patience in suffering themselves to be heard as well as seen by mortals ; and their declaration that they were sent, that they flew, to the assistance of the great Constantine. For the truth of this prodigy, the pagan orator appeals to the whole Gallic nation, in whose presence he was then speaking ; and seems to hope that the ancient apparitions<sup>3</sup> would now obtain credit from this recent and public event."

<sup>1</sup> *Bar. Ann.*, A.D. 312, sec. 19 ; and *Eus., Life of Constantine*, b. i., sec. 28 to 31.

<sup>2</sup> Nazarius, *Inter Panegy. Vet.*, X., 14, 15.

<sup>3</sup> The apparitions of Castor and Pollux, particularly to announce the Macedonian victory, are attested by historians and public monuments. See *Cicero de Natura Deorum*, ii. 2. iii. 5, 6. *Florus*, ii. 12. *Valerius Maximus*, l. i. c. 8. No. 1. Yet the most recent of these miracles is omitted, and indirectly denied, by Livy (xlvi. i).

Although the labarum is not a cross, we notice how anxious Eusebius is to speak of it as a cross, and the artists of the Roman Church add concreteness to the vivid imagination of Eusebius, by replacing the labarum by a cross.<sup>1</sup>

When paganism broke down before victorious Christianity, the old religious symbols were not discarded but changed their meaning. The symbols that lent themselves readily to Christian interpretation survived the general bankruptcy of paganism, while the others disappeared from sight and were forgotten. The cross became the chief symbol of Christianity, but it retained frequently the pagan form of an equilateral cross, and the cruciform flower of Gothic architecture has no resemblance to a real cross of any shape. In the same way the labarum, originally a pagan symbol, was Christianised as the Christogram and became a favorite Christian emblem.

\*            \*            \*

A few words may be added regarding other cruciform symbols:

The emblem of Venus is a cross bearing a disc ♀, which, owing to an after-thought of the Greek mythologists, is now commonly regarded as the looking-glass of the goddess; but how the handle of a looking-glass can have the shape of a cross remains unexplained. It is probable, however, that we are here confronted with an emblem that, in its original significance, is kin to the prototype of the labarum. The cross signifies the world, and the disc is the sun, representing the light and life-giving divinity that hovers above and governs its destinies.

The inversion of the symbol of Venus (⚬), denoting the earth, is a later invention and as such does not date back to pre-Christian times. It signifies the earth surmounted by the cross of Christ.

While the astronomical symbol of the earth is of relatively recent date, it is not without traces of pagan origin, for its form contains an allusion to the globe as an emblem of royal power, which since the days of Theodosius who ascended the throne in 379 A. D. has been mounted with a cross.

The globe as a religious symbol was originally an apple. It is the apple which Venus holds in her hand as the emblem of the fruit of life. The apples of the Hesperides, which possess the same significance as the apples of the Northern goddess Iduna, afford immortality.

<sup>1</sup> For details see Gibbon's *History of Christianity*, Peter Eckler's edition, p. 311.

In Germany the emblem of royalty, the golden globe surmounted by a cross, is still called the apple of empire or *Reichsapfel*.

The Bible does not give us any information as to what kind of fruit tempted Eve ; but the apple being the symbol of regeneration, St. Augustine, probably following the common acceptance of his time, identified the fruit of the tree of life with the apple.

The staff of Hermes showing two serpents intertwined was originally also a Sabaistic symbol which occurs frequently on the oldest monuments of mankind, especially in Assyria. It is a combination of sun and moon, the crescent being placed above the solar disc, thus  $\gamma$ . The staff of Hermes gradually disappeared, because there was no way of giving it a Christian interpretation.