THE LABARUM, SHIELD BLAZONS, AND CONSTANTINE'S CAELESTE SIGNUM

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The conversion of Constantine to Christianity is one of those momentous events in history of which nobody doubts the importance but of which it is nearly impossible, or so it seems, to grasp the reality of what actually occurred. What was it that had led Constantine to his choice and how and when did he first reveal it? Contemporary pagan sources hardly take notice of any change and where they do it is in circumspect and ambiguous phrases, never offering an explanation. Contemporary Christian sources, that is the Latin teacher of rhetoric Lactantius and the Greek bishop Eusebius, do give us stories of what 'really happened' but these are in part contradictory, besides being full of the miraculous in the shape of dreams and a wonderful vision in the sky. Modern scholars usually point to the differences between these accounts, following either the one or the other, trying to combine the two, or again ignoring them both.¹ In my view, attempts to reconstruct what happened too often try to build on these explanatory stories offered to us by the pious professor and the bishop. They were, however, written two years and a quarter of a century, respectively, after the events they describe, and have as their core not so much an inner change on the part of the emperor, but more materially the creation of some specific objects that by themselves explained the victory of Constantine and thus Christ's support for the emperor and, by implication, the latter's embrace of Christianity, i.e. shields with christianised blazons and a new, christianised banner. When trying to assess what happened we should, I believe, start with these *realia*, for the Christian stories are, so to speak, the aetiological myths meant to explain the existence of those sacred things.

A few years after Constantine had openly embraced Christianity, perhaps as early as 314, Lactantius, writing his little book on the deaths of the emperor's predecessors who had persecuted the Church, tells us how Constantine had assured himself of Christ's assistance on the battlefield by adding a symbol or *nota* of Christ to the shields of his soldiers on the eve of

¹ The literature on Constantine is enormous. In the following notes I shall refer only to those publications which are in my opinion representative or otherwise relevant for the views in discussion without claiming any completeness. For a recent survey of the history of Constantinian scholarship see K. Nowak, 'Der erste christliche Kaiser. Konstantin der Grosse und das "Konstantinische Zeitalter" im Widerstreit der neueren Kirchengeschichte', in: E. Mühlberg, Hg., *Die Konstantinische Wende* (Gütersloh 1998), 186-233.

his final victory over Maxentius in October 312. The emperor had been admonished to do so in a dream in which he had been ordered to note 'the heavenly sign of God' (*caeleste signum dei*) on the shields before going into battle.² The same Lactantius tells us elsewhere in his work of another divine instruction sent in a dream to an emperor: when half a year later Licinius, Augustus of the East, was facing his rival Maximinus at Campus Serenus in the Balkans in the spring of 313, he dreamt of an angel dictating to him a special prayer addressed to 'the highest god' (*summus deus*); after waking, Licinius had the prayer written out and given to his officers, so that next morning his whole army could send up the pious words to heaven – an amazing spectacle, no doubt, and the consequent victory proved, so we are meant to believe, the prayer's efficacy.³ The text that Lactantius cites resembles the text of another prayer written for those of his soldiers who were then still pagan by Constantine himself, when he proclaimed the observance of Sunday rest for his army and indeed for most of the city-population in his realm in 321, according to bishop Eusebius.⁴ No dreams are mentioned in that case, but when telling us elsewhere in his 'Life of Constantine' his version of the campaign against Maxentius in 312 Eusebius goes out of his way to relate first the vision in the sky that Constantine and his whole army saw – the famous light-cross above the sun with the words 'By this conquer!' – and then a dream in which Christ himself ordered Constantine to make a copy of the sign he had seen in the shape of a military banner. It was that banner, the famous labarum, adorned with the first two letters of the name of Christ, which brought the emperor victory over his foes ever since. The bishop himself, we are told, saw the awe-inspiring staff with all the paraphernalia and jewellery that then adorned it, no doubt in Constantinople on the very occasion when the emperor, so the bishop claims, told him the story of the wonderful vision in the sky.⁵ Years before, around 315, when writing his 'History of the Church', the bishop of Caesarea had not been aware of that miracle and had presented Constantine as a pious Christian who from the outset of his campaign had put his trust in God.⁶ A rumour of some special banner, though, had reached him even then, for he describes a statue of the emperor 'in the busiest spot' in Rome which had received on Constantine's orders, after his entry into the city in 312, 'the

² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.5

³ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 46.3–6

⁴ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 4.20 (cf. *Oratio Tricennalia* 9.219)

⁵ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.28–31.

⁶ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.2

trophy of hail-bringing suffering' into its hand.⁷ This is Eusebian language for the sign of the cross. Since Christ had conquered Death and the Devil by his Resurrection, that victory had made the Adversary's weapon, the cross, into a trophy of the Victor, promising more victories for those who believed. Christians were inclined to recognize the victorious sign in various natural or man-made shapes, not the least important of which was the *vexillum* or military banner, made of a spear-like shaft with a cross-bar from which a flag or banner hang down. I have little doubt that Constantine's statue, which has disappeared since, had a *vexillum* in its hand.⁸ That by itself was already a novelty, for never before had an emperor been represented bearing a

⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.10-11. For the problem of this statue, usually identified with a seated colossus of approximately 10 m. in the north-western apsis of the Basilica of Maxentius at the Forum, remains of which can be seen in the courtyard of the Conservatori Palace in Rome, see among others: H.G. Thümmel, 'Die Wende Constantins und die Denkmäler', in: E. Mühlenberg, Hg., *Die Konstantinische Wende* (Gütersloh 1998), 144-185, esp. 158-162; 171-179; W. Kuhoff, 'Ein Mythos in der römischen Geschichte: Der Sieg Konstantins des Grossen über Maxentius vor den Toren Roms am 28. Oktober 312', *Chiron* 21 (1991), 127-174, esp. 170-171; R. Leeb, *Konstantin und Christus* (Berlin 1992), 33-38. I retain some doubts, though, whether this seated statue, if it represented Constantine in heroic or divine nakedness or semi-nakedness, was the one that Eusebius (or rather his informant) had in mind. A standing statue in military attire would be more to the point, as it would also provide the prototypes for the coin images of first Constantine ca. 320 and then his two eldest sons ca. 326 showing the Augustus and the Caesars, respectively, holding a military standard, as argued by P. Bruun, 'The Christian signs on the coins of Constantine', *Arctos* 3 (1962), 5-35, esp. 28 n. 2, identifying Eusebius' statue with the remains of a bronze colossus in the Lateran. If the statue in the basilica of Maxentius wore a cuirass and *paludamentum* it could indeed have been the one referred to by Eusebius, see also J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital. Rome in the fourth century* (Oxford 2000), 78-82. It has also been identified, however, as a former statue of Maxentius. See O.J. Hekster, 'The city of Rome in Late Imperial Ideology: The Tetrachs, Maxentius and Constantine', *Mediterraneo Antico* 2 (1999), 717-748. The identity of the statue mentioned by Eusebius may never be established, but the sign in its hand must surely have been a *vexillum*, which could rather easily have been identified with a cross by the Christian informant of Eusebius. That banner, then, must have been something special and to my mind that means that it must have been 'the sign' of Christ that had brought the emperor victory, the difference between this banner and the labarum described by Eusebius being the absence of the Chi-Rho monogram on its top: instead it must have shown it on its cloth, as is also the case on most of the coins showing the labarum. See also, e.g., J. Vogt, 'Die konstantinische Frage', in: *Relazioni del X. Congresso Internazionale di Scienza Storica. II. Storia dell' Antichità* (Florence 1955), 377-423 = H. Kraft, Hg., *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt 1974), 345-387, esp. 371-372 (the statue held a *vexillum* that was combined with "das von Laktanz bezeugte Siegeszeichen").

⁸ Bruun, op. cit. (n. 8), 28 n.2; A. Alföldi, 'In hoc signo victor eris. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Bekehrung Konstantins des Grossen', in: *Pisciculi. Studien zur Religion und Kultur des Altertums, Franz Joseph Dölger zum 60. Geburtstag* (München 1939), 1-18 = H. Kraft, Hg., *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt 1974), 224-246, esp. 237 and Abb. 3.4. Rufinus, writing his Latin version of Eusebius' *Church History* in the 390s, speaks of a *vexillum dominicae crucis* (i.e. with the sign of the cross, which maybe a mistake for the christogram or an echo of Eusebius' view that the cross was represented) and, in citing the inscription, of a *singulare signum* (Rufinus, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.10-11).

military sign or standard. But from Constantine's reign onwards the emperor as *signifer* or bearer of a *vexillum* made a regular appearance on the coins.⁹ Eusebius, who never visited Rome, heard of the statue with its banner and rightly judged it worthy of mention in his *Church History*, as well as later in his *Tricennalian Oration* and his *Life of Constantine*, together with the inscription that proclaimed that by "this sign, the real proof of manly power" (*andreia* or *virtus*) Rome had been freed from the tyrant's yoke and been restored to its former liberty and glory.¹⁰ Such a special sign, newly put into the emperor's hand, cannot have been anything else than the christianised banner that Eusebius tells us elsewhere Constantine had made on the eve of his campaign against Maxentius.¹¹

What we have, then, as the *realia* for which Lactantius and Eusebius offer us their explanatory stories, are shields with the *nota* of Christ on the surface as well as a special banner with the first letters of the name of Christ. To my mind, these things belong together. For what I want to argue is this: Constantine introduced a new military banner, not for any particular army unit but one closely bound to his own person and one that by its design pointed to the emperor's special relationship with his protecting divinity, for it had the sign of his divine *comes* or companion on its drapery. The divinity it at first referred to was the Sun. The new banner was guarded by a special troop of soldiers who at some moment on the orders of the emperor had their shields marked out by an emblem that was the same as the sign on the banner, which, now, referred to Christ. It was but a small group and its military value must have been equally small in comparison with the moral or religious value it provided for the emperor. With their labarum, as the banner

⁹ Alföldi 1939, op. cit. (n. 8), 236-239.

¹⁰ For the meaning of *andreia* (*virtus*) see F. Heim, *Virtus. Idéologie politique et croyances religieuses au IV^e siècle* (Paris 1991), 9-12; 17-18; idem, *La théologie de la victoire de Constantin à Théodose* (Paris 1992), 39-42; 64; esp. 98-105 (Constantine's *signum*). The authenticity of the inscription cited by Eusebius has been questioned by, among others, Kuhoff 1991, op. cit. (n. 7), 176-177; Thümmel 1998, op. cit. (n. 7), 178; Th. Grünewald, *Constantinus Maximus Augustus. Herrschaftspropaganda in der zeitgenössischen Überlieferung*. Historia Einzelschr. 64 (Stuttgart 1990), 70-71. In my view these doubts are unwarranted. The inscription is ambiguous, for 'the real proof of *virtus*' could be interpreted as the vexillum itself as the sign in which the Divine Power (*Virtus*) resided, or it could, in the eyes of Christians who recognized a cross-shape in the sign, point to Christ's courage in overcoming Death by his suffering and resurrection. Eusebius in any case highly valued the sign in the hand of the statue and the inscription that belonged to it, for he refers to them repeatedly: *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.9.10-11; 10.4.16 (speech at the dedication of the church at Tyre); *De Laudibus Constantini* 9.8 (in the *Tricennalian Oration* of 335); *Vita Constantini* 1.40.

¹¹ Thus, among others, Alföldi 1939, op. cit. (n. 8), 237-238. See also R. Egger, 'Das Labarum, die Kaiserstandarte der Spätantike', *Sitzungsberichte Wien, Philologisch-historische Klasse* 234 (1960) 1, 3-26, esp. 11.

was called, these soldiers constituted the first open manifestation of Constantine's embrace of Christianity. In fact, it was a manifestation on a small scale, one could almost say: timid. In that respect it resembled Constantine's coinage policy, for his coins too remained overwhelmingly but not exclusively non-Christian in design, which may have resulted from a still existing lack of Christian imperial iconography¹². I have no doubt that Constantine was a Christian from at least 312 and probably from already 311 on, but he could use one language when speaking to the bishops, for many years he used another, much more subdued and circumspect, when addressing the army or the public at large.

To start with, we have no need for the wonderful vision in the sky, be it a special constellation of the planets at night - as has been suggested¹³ - or a halo around the sun in the afternoon.¹⁴ That is not to say that Constantine at some point did not see anything in the sky which seemed to him out of the ordinary - he might very well have or at least have imagined so, for as we shall see, in the years 310-312 he probably had some reason to look up at the sun with more than usual attention - but we do not need a solar or heavenly vision on his part to explain what happened. There are at least two arguments for this. First: a halo or any similarly spectacular phenomenon must have been noticed by many more people - indeed, Eusebius says that the whole army witnessed it - but that makes one wonder how Constantine could have presented his divine inspiration as being known only to him or at least to an extremely small circle. For that is implied by the panegyric orator in Trèves in 313, who, looking back on Constantine's victory the year before, says in phrases that must have had the stamp of official approval that the emperor had been prompted by an inner divine force known only to himself and at variance with the advice of his officers and *haruspices*.¹⁵ This is surely incompatible with a wonderful sign in the sky seen by many.¹⁶ Second: the 'sign of Christ' on both the shields and the labarum was the Chi-Rho monogram or Christogram (on which see below) and I fail to understand

¹² See Hekster 1999, op.cit. (n. 7).

¹³ M. Dimajo, J. Zeuge & N. Zotov, 'Ambiguitas Constantiniana: the Caeleste Signum Dei of Constantine the Great', *Byzantion* 58 (1988), 233-260.

¹⁴ Recently: P. Weiss, 'Die Vision Constantins', in: J. Bleicken & K. Bringmann, *Colloquium aus Anlass des 80. Geburtstages von Alfred Heuss* (Kallmünz 1993), 143-169, arguing for a date of the solar vision in 310 and combining that vision with the revelation of Apollo in the sanctuary at Grand as described by *Panegyrici Latini* 6.21.3-7 in the same year.

¹⁵ *Panegyrici Latini* 12. 2.2-5

¹⁶ R. MacMullen, *Constantine* (New York 1969), 73: "...if the sky-writing was witnessed by forty thousand men, the true miracle lies in their unbroken silence about it".

how anyone could have seen such a sign in or above the sun, halo or not. In fact, Eusebius speaks of a cross of light above the sun and then goes on to tell us that the copy to be made of it was the Chi-Rho monogram on top of the labarum. The latter certainly, as a vexillum, as we have seen, was cross-shaped, but its essential feature, the Christogram, which made it into the banner of Christ, had in itself little to do with the shape of the cross. Indeed, Eusebius places the Christogram in a crown of precious stones and gold on top of the pole, thereby destroying any cross-shape that the labarum as a vexillum would have had.

Eusebius' sacred tale of a light cross in the sky with the words of God ("By this conquer!") and of Christ appearing to the emperor in a dream to instruct him to make the labarum, largely evaporates as a source of historical information. To the solar vision I shall come back once more at the end of this contribution. The dream mentioned here might to some extent be a copy or a reflection of the dream attributed to Constantine by Lactantius, whose version of the events must have been known to the emperor and may be assumed to have influenced Constantine's memory when many years later he spoke to Eusebius. Alternatively, the story of the dream arose with Eusebius as a, to his mind, completely normal explanation of such a momentous innovation as the introduction of the first Christian banner in the Roman army. Dreams and visions, portents and oracles were, after all, the language of the day. It was an explanation given all the more readily by Eusebius if he had some knowledge of the dream that Licinius had proclaimed as the inspiration for his prayer to the *summus deus* in 313. That latter dream has every appearance of being a piece of official propaganda made on the occasion of a decisive battle and both Lactantius and Eusebius may have felt the need to attribute a similar dream to Constantine when writing their versions of this emperor's appeal to the Christian god a little later, in 314/5 and 337/9 respectively.¹⁷ What is left to us as the hard core of Eusebius' information, then, is his description in the *Life of Constantine* of the new imperial banner or labarum. In fact, he had already, in his 'Church History', unwittingly hinted at its existence, as we have seen above, when he mentioned the 'sign of the cross' in the hand of Constantine's statue, a sign

¹⁷ Licinius' dream might have been a piece of official propaganda, at any rate the prayer for his army 'can scarcely be a complete invention': J.L. Creed, *Lactantius. De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Oxford 1984), XLV. For imperial dreams generally see G. Weber, *Kaiser, Träume und Visionen in Prinzipat und Spätantike*. Historia Einzelschr. 143 (Stuttgart 2000), 273-296; for the contemporary climate of ready belief in 'the irrational': R. MacMullen, 'Constantine and the Miraculous', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968), 81-96.

that must in reality have been a *vexillum* of some very special importance and should in my view be identified with an early form of the labarum.

In the case of Lactantius' story there is no mention of a banner but solely of shields that were to receive the sign or *nota* of Christ. We are told that Constantine, at a moment when the outcome of the war against Maxentius hung in the balance, on the eve of the decisive battle, had a dream in which he was instructed to apply 'the heavenly sign of God' to the shields and doing so he put the *nota* of Christ onto the shields: *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.*¹⁸ The words, which I have written out in capitals are most often understood as 'the letter X turned upside and curved at the top', which would yield a cross-sign (+) with a loop at the upper end of the vertical bar. This sign is the so-called staurogram and occurs in fragments of New Testament manuscripts already before 312 as a contraction of tau and rho; preceded and followed by a sigma it forms the *nomen sacrum* 'stauros' or 'cross'.¹⁹ I do not believe, however, that this sign, standing alone, could in 312 be interpreted as 'Christ' or, for that matter, as 'the heavenly sign of God': even if the *nota* on the shields were this staurogram it could not have referred to either Gods 'heavenly sign' or to the name of Christ but at most to the cross and only indirectly to Christ. Yet we are told that Constantine *Christum in scutis notat*. I have little doubt that by this Lactantius meant the first two letters of the name of Christ, i.e. the Christogram, just like it was described later on top of the labarum by Eusebius. Only the Christogram could in that time have functioned as a *nota* or shorthand for the name of Christ. It is shown clearly, albeit in miniature, on Constantine's helmet on the famous silver medallion from Ticinum dating from 315, one year or less after Lactantius wrote.²⁰ Three coin issues from Siscia, dating from 319, show the same sign on the side of the emperor's

¹⁸ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 44.5.

¹⁹ M. Black, 'The Chi-Rho Sign – Christogram and/or Staurogram ?' in: W.W. Gasque & R.P. Martin, eds., *Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (Grand Rapids 1970), 319-327; W. Wischmeyer, 'Christogramm und Staurogramm in den lateinischen Inschriften altkirchlicher Zeit', in: C. Andresen & G. Klein, Hg., *Theologia Crucis – Signum Crucis. Festschrift für Erich Dinkler* (Tübingen 1979), 539-550; H.R. Seeliger, 'Die Verwendung des Christogramms durch Konstantin im Jahre 312', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 100 (1989), 149-168.

²⁰ K. Kraft, 'Das Silbermedallion Constantins des Grossen mit dem Christusmonogramm auf dem Helm', *Jahrbuch für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte* 5/6 (1954/55), 151-178 = H. Kraft, Hg., *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt 1974), 297-344; Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 29-42; Thümmel 1998, op. cit. (n. 7), 165-169.

helmet.²¹ Moreover, all the evidence from various monuments showing the labarum and/or the shields has the Christogram for a design and not a staurogram (see below). Then how are the words *TRANSVERSA ...CIRCUMFLEXO* to be explained? One could assume that Lactantius simply blundered and described a staurogram where a Christogram would have been in order, but that would perhaps be unfair to the rhetor. More to the point has been the suggestion that the words in question are an interpolation that has crept into the text of the manuscript from a gloss in the margin made by some pious reader later in the 4th or 5th century when indeed a staurogram could symbolically refer to the Crucified Christ.²² Alternatively, the word *TRANSVERSA*, translated here as 'turned upside', might already in Lactantius' text be understood as 'pierced through', in which case the meaning would be a X crossed in the middle by a vertical bar with a curve at the top, i.e. the Christogram. This latter interpretation, however, is usually rejected on philological grounds, which leaves us with the interpolation as the most plausible solution.²³ Lactantius, then, most probably wrote: *Facit ut iussus est et Christum in scutis notat.*

According to Lactantius the shields of Constantine's soldiers received the new design shortly before the battle, one presumes in the early morning after the emperor had woken up from his dream, if not already in the preceding hours of the night. This, of course, we do not have to believe.²⁴

²¹ Bruun 1962, op. cit. (n. 7), 10-14.

²² The suggestion was made by J. Rougé, 'À propos du manuscrit du De Mortibus Persecutorum', in: *Lactance et son temps. Recherches actuelles. Actes du IV^e colloque d'études historiques et patristiques. Chantilly 21-23 septembre 1976* (= *Théologie Historique* 48), 13-23, who, however, himself did not prefer it; it was accepted by, among others, T.D. Barnes, 'The Conversion of Constantine', *Echos du Monde Classique* 29 (1985), 371-391, esp. 383-384; K.M. Girardet, 'Die Konstantinische Wende und ihre Bedeutung für das Reich. Althistorische Überlegungen zu den geistigen Grundlagen der Religionspolitik Konstantins d. Gr.', in: E. Mühlberg, Hg., *Die Konstantinische Wende* (Gütersloh 1998), 9-122, esp. 25, n. 56 and 42. For the wider use of the staurogram and the cross later in the 4th and 5th centuries: Wischmeyer 1979, op. cit. (n. 19), 539-540; 549-550.

²³ I refrain from judgement on the philological question of *transversa*. I find it highly improbable, however, that Lactantius described a staurogram while somehow 'meaning' a christogram, as Seeliger 1989, op. cit. (n. 19), 155 and Thümmel 1998, op. cit. (n. 7), 157 suggest.

²⁴ J. Vogt, 'Die Bedeutung des Jahres 312 für die Religionspolitik Konstantins des Grossen', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 61 (1942), 171-190 = H. Kraft, Hg., *Konstantin der Grosse* (Darmstadt 1974), 247-272, esp. 268, argued that the signs were painted on the shields for the occasion and were not meant to be lasting emblems, referring to Caesar, *Bellum Alexandrinum* 58.3; 59.1 and Cassius Dio 42.15.5 for a parallel during the Civil Wars: some troops of Caesar in Spain rebelled against his legate and painted the name of Pompey on their shields, only to erase it again when some of their allies objected to such a political statement. To my mind the situation of Constantine in 312 can hardly be compared with this. The Christian monogram was a sacred sign of quite another status than the name of a military leader and would not have been erased so quickly. But

Nor is it credible that at some other point in time, perhaps already during the preparations for the campaign in 311, the whole army – let us say some 30,000 men – were instructed to change the blazons of their shields. Roman shield blazons were not that easily changed and certainly not for a whole army at the same time. And if such a drastic change had occurred, it would surely have left some trace in the record. But neither in the pagan historians, nor in monuments as the Arch of Constantine, fitted out in 315, with all its military scenes, is there any trace of a Christian sign to be found. Nor is it likely that, if not the whole army, perhaps some particular unit might have received new shield emblems. We know that Constantine, ever since his rise to power in 306, but particularly after his elimination of Maximian and his rupture with Maxentius in 310, had been busy amassing troops. Indeed, the mobile field army of the Late Empire owes many of its core units to the *legiones*, *auxilia* and *vexillationes* recruited by Constantine in Gaul and along the Rhine.²⁵ But considering the conservative nature of shield designs one would, again, expect such a strikingly new emblem, particularly one that so clearly proclaimed the triumph of Christianity, to leave some traces in our record. But there is nothing. Especially the collection of some 200 shield emblems in the manuscript of the *Notitia Dignitatum* of the beginning of the fifth century is revealing for the complete absence therein of any Christian design.²⁶ Since most of the units of Constantine's army of 312 survived, at least on paper, for a century or more, I find it hard to believe that in that year there had been an *auxilium* or *vexillatio* with so outspokenly a Christian emblem that had mysteriously disappeared in the years thereafter.

Yet there were, in 312 and later, some soldiers with shields showing Christograms for their emblems. We can see them on a few monuments. A coin from 321 showing Constantine's son Crispus with the Christogram on his shield does not prove very much; Crispus had been too young to participate in the war of 312 and his shield with the Christian emblem on the coin of 321 should probably be interpreted more symbolically as pointing to Christ's

it is very unlikely that all the shields in the army would have taken over the new emblem, for that certainly would have interfered with the function of shield blazons to distinguish various units (for which see Ammianus Marcellinus 16.12.6; Vegetius 2.18.1-2). See also Kuhoff 1991, op. cit. (n. 7), 173 n.124.

²⁵ D. Hoffmann, *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die Notitia Dignitatum* (Düsseldorf 1969), 131-208; R.S. Cromwell, *The Rise and Decline of the Late Roman Field Army* (Shippensburg PA 1998), 5-12.

²⁶ This remains significant even if a large proportion of the blazons as depicted in the manuscript are fictitious, as argued by R. Grigg, 'Inconsistency and lassitude: the shield emblems of the *Notitia Dignitatum*', *Journal of Roman Studies* 73 (1983), 132-142.

favour for the young prince than to his actually having such a shield.²⁷ But at least the connection between the Christogram and a shield is there. More to the point, the so-called Niello cup from St. Petersburg has a soldier marching behind the emperor Constantius II and armed with a shield that clearly has the Chi-Rho monogram depicted on it, while a silver plate with, probably, Valentinian II, shows the labarum but no shields with the christogram.²⁸ A little later there is the base of the column of Arcadius at Constantinople, known only from an 18th century drawing. Here soldiers with clearly decorated shields follow the two emperors Arcadius and Honorius in two symmetrically composed groups. Of both groups the soldier closest to his emperor has a shield with the Christian monogram, while in the lower panels labarums are shown in the shape of *vexilla* with the Chi-Rho sign on the cloth.²⁹ What we have, then, is imperial bodyguards or at least some very special soldiers in the immediate proximity of the emperor, equipped with shields that show the Christian blazon.

The testimony of Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine* on the labarum guarded by a small elite force of fifty men in my view points to the close connection between the sacred banner and the shields born by its guardians.³⁰ Constantine, I believe, created these shield-bearers around his new banner, for the latter was to function not as an ordinary military *vexillum* but as a visible guarantee that the Highest God or rather the Force of His human-shaped Emanation, Christ, was there to protect the emperor and his realm. Both banner and shields bore the Chi-Rho sign, a *nota* that was, according to Lactantius, at the same time ‘the heavenly sign of God’. We have now to ask what that expression – *caeleste signum dei* – means. It is either ‘God’s sign in heaven’ or, metaphorically, ‘God’s divine sign’. I find the latter meaning rather pleonastic and have little doubt that Lactantius meant ‘the sign of God in heaven’ or ‘in the sky’. What sign could that be? Not, to my mind, a cross of light as Eusebius was later to describe the emperor’s vision, if only because

²⁷ Cf. Bruun 1962, op. cit. (n. 7), 17.

²⁸ Niello cup: Seeliger 1989, op. cit. (n. 19), Abb. 8 opposite p. 165 (St Petersburg, Ermitage); misorium of Valentinian: *Aurea Roma. Dalla città pagana alla città cristiana*. Exposition Catalogue (Rome 2000), 576, ill. 258 (Genève, Musée d’Art et d’Histoire). Compare also the so-called Somerville Gem, showing the triumphal procession of an unknown 4th century emperor with the labarum prominently at his side: D. Nicolle & A. McBride, *Romano-Byzantine Armies, 4th-9th centuries* (London 1992), 7.

²⁹ A good illustration in Nicolle-McBride 1992, op. cit. (n. 28), 12; also: *Aurea Roma* 2000, op. cit. (n. 28), 610.

³⁰ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 2.8. The guards were presumably recruited from the imperial *protectores*. One wonders what, if any, connection there might have been between these elite *protectores* and the special corps of *candidati*, first attested in 350: Ammianus Marcellinus 15.5.16.

of the fact that a cross was not what was depicted on the shields. In my view it was the sun, that is to say: not the sun itself but a sign representing the sun.

The sun could be looked upon as a sign of the *summus deus* in the henotheistic beliefs current among educated people at the time. As such he could be seen as standing to the Supreme Deity in more or less the same relationship as Christ stood to the Father. A very common sign for the sun was the eight-, six- or four-armed star, known among various peoples, from the Celts in the West to the Iranians in the East.³¹ Christians could identify such a solar sign with Christ, Himself the Sol Salutis and the Light in the darkness of this world.³² More literally, the six-armed star could also be interpreted as a Chrismon or Iota-Chi monogram for *Iêsous Christós*, as occurred certainly later in the fourth century and probably already before 312.³³ When Constantine had the *caeleste signum dei* put onto the shields, thereby producing a shorthand for the name of Christ, he either had a real vision of the sun or a sign in the shape of a four- or six-armed star to work from. To derive a Christogram from the very real and visible sun in the sky would have required a lot of adaptation and interpretation, for a connection between the two was far from obvious. But if the emperor had already such a sign on his new banner he now had only to have a loop added at the top of the vertical bar or to add such a bar going through the middle of the 'star' in order to change it into the Christian monogram. I believe that this is what happened. The banner, i.e. the labarum, was already there as solar emblem. At some point, no doubt under the influence of some learned Christians in the emperor's entourage, that emblem was, quite easily, made into the Christogram.³⁴

We must take into account the strong probability that Constantine's introduction of his new banner together with its guards should be dated to the period of preparations for his campaign against Maxentius. To raise new army units, to train and to equip them must have taken considerable time, perhaps a

³¹ A. Roes, 'An Iranian Standard Used as a Christian Symbol', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 57 (1937), 248-251; M. Green & J. Ferguson, 'Constantine, Sun-symbols and the Labarum', *Durham University Journal* 49 (1987), 9-17.

³² See, among others, Girardet 1998, op. cit. (n. 22), 40 and n. 127.

³³ W. Seston, 'La vision païenne de 310 et les origines du chrisme constantinien', *Mélanges Franz Cumont* (Brussels 1936), 373-395, esp. 384-391. A well-known example from the later 4th century on a sarcophagus in Istanbul (the *chrismon* held by two flanking angels): *Aurea Roma* 2000, op. cit. (n. 28), 393 (cf. Weiss 1993, op. cit. [n. 14], Abb. 2,5).

³⁴ Something to this effect was already suggested by Roes 1937, op. cit. (n. 31) and by Seston 1936, op. cit. (n. 33), 390; J.J. Hatt, 'La vision de Constantin au sanctuaire de Grand et l'origine celtique du labarum', *Latomus* 9 (1960), 427-436 (suggesting that Constantine saw in the Gallic sanctuary in 310 a statue of Apollo as a horseman with a labarum-like standard in his hand); see also Green-Ferguson 1987, op. cit. (n. 31), 14.

few years. The probably Celtic etymology of the word *labarum* also points to Gaul and to the period up to the spring of 312, when the expedition against Maxentius started, as the region and the time of its origin.³⁵ It is tempting, then, to connect that origin with Constantine's earlier choice for the Sun-god as his divine companion in 310. The anonymous panegyric oration of that year tells us of Constantine's vision of Apollo in the Gallic temple near Grand. It does not matter much in this context whether or not Constantine really saw anything out of the ordinary in that sanctuary.³⁶ What is important here is that the emperor is officially said to have recognized himself in the appearance of the god; in other words, Constantine wanted it to be known that he, the emperor, had the features of the Sun-god. Perhaps this stress on physical likeness was an attempt to make his claim of 'companionship' with Sol the more credible.³⁷ In any case, it is certain that from 310 onwards the Sun as *Sol Invictus* figured prominently on Constantine's coinage, while the solar attribute of *Invictus* became a regular ingredient of the imperial titulature.³⁸ At the same time, the panegyric of 310 publicized a new lineage: Constantine, the orator now dares to reveal, was descended from Claudius II, the warrior-emperor who had also been a devotee of Sol. All this, of course, had political significance, for it signalled Constantine's break with the political and theological system of the Tetrarchy, coming as it did just after the death or enforced suicide of Maximian.

It was in this context, then, that I think Constantine introduced his new banner or *vexillum*, guarded by a troop of elite imperial bodyguards. Perhaps the basic innovation was precisely this: to conjure up by the device of the *labarum* the presence of the Divine Companion to ensure victory in battle. That the emperor would be protected and sustained in battle by the gods, especially by the traditional *dii militares* Jupiter, Mars and Victoria, was a familiar idea, but the *signa* of the various units, equipped with the *imagines* of these gods, functioned more like rallying points and signalling instruments in the field

³⁵ Egger 1960, op. cit. (n. 11), 14-17; 20; Barnes 1985, op. cit. (n. 22), 387.

³⁶ For Constantine's 'pagan vision' of 310 see, among others: B.Saylor Rodgers, 'Constantine's Pagan Vision', *Byzantion* 50 (1980), 259-278; Grünwald 1990, op. cit. (n. 10), 50-54; C.E.V. Nixon & B. Saylor Rodgers, *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors* (Berkeley 1994), 211-253; Heim 1991, op. cit. (n. 10), 14-17; S.N.C. Lieu & D. Montserrat, *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views* (London 1996), 63-96.

³⁷ Compare the well-known gold medallion of 313 showing Constantine and the Sun-god as practically identical twins: (e.g.) Girardet 1998, op. cit. (n. 22), Abb. 30.

³⁸ Seston, op. cit. (n. 33), 384-391; Vogt 1955, op. cit. (n. 7), 373-378; M.R. Alföldi, 'Die Sol Comes – Münze vom Jahre 325', in: *Mullus. Festschrift für Theodor Klauser* (Münster 1964), 10-16; Grünwald 1990, op. cit. (n. 10), 46-61; Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 9-12; 21-26.

than like religious objects meant to install the confidence that divine help was present. Jupiter's eagle too had long become the soul of the legion to which it was attached and was no longer a device to enforce the high god's presence. Moreover, these traditional war-gods, closely connected with their visible symbols on the *signa*, had suffered substantially in appeal since victory had in the course of the 3rd century ceased to be the natural companion of Roman arms. The rise of Sol Invictus as the emperor's Companion in war, especially under Claudius II, Aurelian and Probus, can be seen as partly filling this gap, while the need for a tangible presence of the deity on campaign reflects perhaps the revival of certain archaic notions that can be observed more widely in the second half of the third century.³⁹ Yet it remains unknown where Constantine got the idea to introduce the Sun-god in the shape of the labarum at his side. We do know, however, that before 305 he had spent many years in the East, both in the army and at court. The story that the emperor Aurelian had seen an apparition of the Sun-god during his final battle against Zenobia's army in 272 was, if historical, probably known to him and provides a certain parallel. Participating in the campaign of Galerius against the Persians in 297 Constantine might very well have become acquainted with Persian banners as well. Already in Achaemenid times the Persians had various banners for army units as well as a royal banner accompanying the person of the king. Among the former were X-shaped designs, while on the latter figured the winged shape of an eagle.⁴⁰ Under the Sassanids there were regimental banners, royal banners (changing with every rule), and an imperial banner of mythical origin and carried by a small troop of *mopeds* or priestly nobles.⁴¹

The idea of an exclusively imperial banner, which was at the same time a personal banner for the emperor who introduced it and on which the safety of both emperor and empire was believed to depend, might very well have occurred to Constantine from his memory of these Persian institutions, when in Gaul in 310 he entered into a new politico-theological relationship with the Sun-god. For the demise of Maximian in that year disqualified the

³⁹ For the revival of archaic religious notions: G. Alföldy, 'Die Krise des Imperium Romanum und die Religion Roms', in: W. Eck, Hg., *Religion und Gesellschaft in der Römischen Kaiserzeit. Kolloquium zu Ehren von Friedrich Vittinghoff* (Cologne/Vienna 1989), 53-102, esp. 87-94; for the crisis in the traditional religion and the need for an all-powerful god as helper in war, also: Heim 1992, op. cit. (n. 10), 25-27.

⁴⁰ Iranian standards: F. Sarre, 'Die altorientalischen Feldzeichen, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung eines unveröffentlichten Stückes', *Klio* 3 (1903), 333-371, esp. 344-361; Roes 1937, op. cit. (n. 31); C. Nylander, 'The standard of the Great king – a problem in the Alexander Mosaic', *Opuscula Romana* 14 (1983), 19-37.

⁴¹ Sarre 1903, op. cit. (n. 40), 356-360; Nylander 1983, op. cit. (n. 40), 27.

whole theological fabric of the Tetrarchy with its bonds between Jupiter and Hercules on the one side and the Augusti of the first and second rank respectively on the other. In 310 Constantine could no longer be *Herculius* and did not want to be *Iovius*, for that title would have been too provocative towards the other emperors in the East at a moment when a war with Maxentius loomed on the horizon. Besides, these gods were all too familiar and, ultimately, no longer inspiring the confidence needed for an attempt at attaining the highest power. Constantine, therefore, had to create another divine relationship that would not only legitimise his rule but also provide help and protection in the wars that he knew lied ahead. That it was the gods or rather the 'highest god' alone who bestowed the imperial power on whom they chose, was part of the imperial ideology at the time. So Constantine turned to the Sun-god, the Unconquerable, who had long favoured his devotees in battle, as Aurelian and Constantine's so-called ancestor Claudius II had already known. An inner circle received knowledge of his 'vision' of Apollo, after which, perhaps already in 310 or later in 311, the new banner with its special guard made its appearance in his army. Not only the idea might be ultimately derived from Sassanid Persia, the solar connections and even the design on the cloth of the banner too could well be Iranian in origin.⁴² But in Gaul it was easily assimilated to other four-, or six-armed solar signs. Here too, probably, it received its Gallic name *labarum*.

Then, at some moment, the sign was changed into the Christian monogram. That could have been most easily done, as we saw, by adding a loop to the top of the vertical bar in a six-armed star or by piercing a four-armed star through the middle with a vertical bar curved at the top. Only a minority of soldiers in the army would have realized that the new sign was an abbreviation of the name of Christ, for to the vast majority the sign must still have looked very much like that of the Sun.⁴³ When this happened is unknown, but I prefer to think that it was after the edict of Galerius, which also bore Constantine's name, had been issued in April 311, putting Christianity on the same level as the traditional cults of the Roman state – or perhaps as late as at the beginning of Constantine's Italian campaign in the spring of 312.⁴⁴ It proclaimed the fact – but to a relatively small circle – that

⁴² Roes 1937, op. cit. (n. 31); also M. Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', *Journal of Roman Studies* 32 (1942), 92-106, esp. 104 (the *labarum* as a continuation of the religious banners – in the shape of vexilla – venerated in especially the eastern provinces).

⁴³ Green – Ferguson 1987, op. cit. (n. 31), 15-16.

⁴⁴ The significance of Galerius' edict in this respect is rightly stressed by Girardet 1998, op. cit. (n. 22), 37-39.

Constantine now saw Christ as his companion instead of the traditional Sun-god. How he came to this step we shall never know. We may accept, I believe, his own assertion, later, that he had been trying to find the 'real' god of his father Constantius before he received his revelation about Christ.⁴⁵ This god could in his eyes no longer have been Hercules or Jupiter, whereas the Sun-god too had been discredited by the persecuting emperors of the East who had venerated him next to Jupiter and Mars. Constantine had himself seen the turmoil and the bloodshed of the Great Persecution in the East till 305 and had ended every anti-Christian measure in his domains as soon as he became emperor in the western provinces in 306. Galerius' cancellation of the persecutions in April 311 could be seen as an admission of defeat, in which case not only the traditional Jupiter but also the Sun-god had shown themselves to be inferior to the god of the Christians.⁴⁶ For someone who clearly aspired to the supreme position of imperial power the capitulation and inglorious end of Galerius in 311 must have given food for thought. The God of the Christians had proved himself to be a match for the gods of the Roman state in whose midst He was now officially admitted. Moreover, Maxentius, ruler of Italy, the Alpine provinces and Africa, had been tolerant and generous towards the Christians in his realm, with the result that the rich and large community of Rome itself should have no special reason to prefer Constantine over Maxentius as long as both were perceived to be pagans; presumably it could be expected to pray for the latter as the ruler who had benefited the Christians and thus to invoke the awesome power of the Christian God against Constantine. In 311 war between Maxentius and Constantine was in the air, while the rulers of the East, Licinius and Maximinus, were positioning themselves on either side. The Sun to whom Constantine had turned in 310, therefore, may have lost some of his exclusive attractiveness already when, I presume, it occurred to him that Christ, in Whom the Supreme Deity of the

⁴⁵ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.27. Already in his letter to the synod at Arles in 314 Constantine speaks of a clear break in his life between the past and the present, cf. Girardet 1998, op. cit. (n. 22), 28. Such statements make it hard to believe that Constantine had been a Christian all his life, as was suggested by T.G. Elliott, 'Constantine's conversion: do we really need it?', *Phoenix* 41 (1987), 420-438. Certainly, in his later years Constantine interpreted his own life as driven all along by the Christian God Who had chosen him from the start: T.G. Elliott, 'Constantine's explanation of his career', *Byzantion* 62 (1992), 212-234.

⁴⁶ In 306 Constantine had immediately put an end to whatever lingered on of the Great Persecution in the West: Barnes 1985, op. cit. (n. 22), 44-46. The significance of the failure of the Great Persecution for Constantine's move to distance himself from the gods of the Tetrarchy is well pointed out by P. Barceló, 'Zur Begegnung, Konfrontation und Symbiose von religio Romana und Christentum', in: G. Gottlieb & P. Barceló, Hg., *Christen und Heiden in Staat und Gesellschaft des zweiten bis vierten Jahrhunderts* (Munich 1992), 151-209, esp. 163-169.

Christians had taken human form, was related to that High God in the same way as the sun could be seen to be the visible manifestation of the *summus deus*. Christians in his entourage probably encouraged his thinking in that direction. The bishops of the cities of Arles, Autun and Cologne, along the great commercial and military road from the Mediterranean to the Rhine, were all of them visited by the emperor and in their turn attended his court, probably more than once.⁴⁷ It is tempting to think that it was one of them who suggested to Constantine that the solar sign on his new labarum could easily be changed into an abbreviation of Christ, for the sign was already the *caeleste signum dei* and the addition of a curved pole would make it more clearly into the *nota* of Christ. It has been said that Lactantius in his short description of Constantine's dream and of the new sign on the shields had no knowledge of the labarum.⁴⁸ But if my reconstruction is correct, it was precisely the labarum, to be identified as the *caeleste signum dei* that was depicted as a new shield design. When he had been convinced that the solar emblem 'was' already the sign of Christ but that it could be made more clearly the emblem of this god by adding a small loop, it occurred to Constantine also to adorn the shields of the special guard with the same design. Perhaps that happened at the same time in Gaul in 311 or in the spring of 312, but it could equally well have taken place later during the campaign of 312 and perhaps even not long before the final battle, as Lactantius implies. In any case, for the Christian rhetorician the *caeleste signum dei* was already there in the shape of the new banner, and it was the appearance of the same powerful sign on the shields that in his presentation of the events brought about the crowning victory.

What we can be sure of, is that it was this victory of 28 October 312 that not only confirmed in the eyes of Constantine the rightness of his choice for Christ, but that also elevated the labarum to the rank of a semi-mystical sacred object, charged with Divine Power.⁴⁹ This was the sign of Christ and especially of Christ as the God of Battles, of the Force that had chosen Constantine and had pushed and driven him from victory to victory, all along from the first beginnings in Britain in 306, as he now came to see it, to Rome in 312 and further to 324 and the defeat of Licinius, the reunification of the

⁴⁷ As was pointed out by W. Eck at the conference in Rome, March 2002 (it was not by chance that Constantine chose these three Gallic bishops to attend the hearing of the Donatists in Rome in 313); Girardet 1998, op. cit. (n. 22), 39 n. 124, though, is doubtful about the influence of these bishops.

⁴⁸ E.g. Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 46-47. Consequently Leeb dates the introduction of the labarum after 312, even as late as 324. Elsewhere, though, Lactantius is well aware of the symbolic significance of the military *signa*: *De Mortibus Persecutorum* 26.8; 27.3.

⁴⁹ Heim 1991, op. cit. (n. 10), 19-27; idem 1992, op. cit. (n. 10), 98-105.

empire and even beyond that to a possible great war with Persia. Years later Eusebius gives us his description of the sign in connection with his account of the emperor's vision of the light cross above the sun. In that form – a shaft with the Chi-Rho monogram set in a bejewelled crown on its top just above the cloth of the *vexillum* and hung with the medallions of the emperor and the Caesars his sons – it must date from at least 317 or later. On coins its first appearance is in 326.⁵⁰ It is often supposed that the labarum was actually introduced only in or after 317 or even as late as 324, but that is based on the supposition that its shape must have been invariably the same. In fact, the labarum had some variety of shapes, its permanent elements being only the cloth or *vexillum* and the Chi-Rho monogram that was either stitched to the cloth or set in a gilded laurel wreath on top of the pole.⁵¹ When it had the Christian sign on its cloth and it was still without the medallions of the imperial family attached to it the labarum must have looked very much like a normal *vexillum*. As stated above, I believe that the 'cross' in the hand of Constantine's Roman statue was in fact such a *vexillum* and thus the earliest known form of the labarum. In that shape it was still shown on coins later in the fourth century and on the base of Arcadius' column at Constantinople. The labarum with the monogram in a gilded wreath on top was perhaps created only after the battle at the Milvian Bridge in October 312, the gilded laurel wreath functioning as an old-style Roman emblem of victory that also adorned many ordinary military *signa*. The specimen that Eusebius saw in the palace at Constantinople could very well have been the original labarum fashioned out with all the trappings that it had in later years acquired and treated, beset with gold and jewels as it was, like a most precious and sacred relic. Of its use in the wars between Constantine and Licinius in 316 and 324 Eusebius has a little more to tell, presumably because by then it had been used more confidently and hence more openly than at the time of its first appearance in 312 as a magico-religious device of great power. For Licinius too, we are told, was aware of its presence in the army of his adversary and had ordered his soldiers not to look at it directly, let alone attack it, whereas on his part Constantine had sent the awesome banner to every danger spot on the battlefield – with invariable success.⁵² Thus the Christian labarum mightily enhanced the

⁵⁰ Bruun 1962, op. cit. (n. 7), 21-27; Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 43-48.

⁵¹ Green - Ferguson 1987, op. cit. (n. 31), 15-16; Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 45.

⁵² Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 2.7-16. In the war against the Goths, as well, the labarum bestowed immediate victory: *Vita Constantini* 4.5. In his *Tricennialian Oration* of 335 Eusebius referred to the labarum repeatedly, stressing its apotropaic power and its inner divine force that guarantees victory: Heim 1992, op. cit. (n. 10), 67-87.

emperor's inherent quality of being ever victorious in war and became an attribute of the highest esteem of the now Christian Roman monarch. Understandably, various 4th century emperors show the banner on their coins.⁵³

During much of the 4th century, then, the labarum remained the symbol of the Roman emperor's victorious qualities in war. The sign with the powerful monogram on its top or on its cloth was a guarantee of the presence of the Divine Force that would bring victory to the pious emperor, God's servant. The task of the latter had now become primarily a priestly one: in prayer the emperor assured himself and his army of the Presence and hence of victory: no longer was the Emperor expected to commit himself personally to battle. Constantine himself contributed to his military successes by praying, like Moses with outstretched arms, and by bringing along on his campaigns a tent for Christian worship, filled with clergy, as a movable house of God. In the course of the 4th century we can see the emperors distancing themselves more and more from the actual battlefield. Julian is of course an exception and paid for this with his life but he was an anachronism in more than one respect. The trend could be seen in the behaviour of Constantius II at Mursa (350) or of Valens at Adrianople (378): while their armies were engaged in battle they spent their time in prayer at some distance behind the lines. Theodosius at the Frigidus (394) behaved likewise, standing with outstretched arms, visible to both armies, invoking the help of the God of Battles. The next step was for the emperor in time of war to stay at home altogether, so that his person could not be involved in any possible defeat of his troops. That behaviour became the rule from the death of Theodosius (395) till the accession of Maurice (582): while their generals were sent out to fight their wars, the ever-victorious Augusti remained in their palace at Constantinople. Perhaps already after Constantine the labarum had become more and more ceremonial in character and perhaps it had not even been carried into the field anymore after the death of its creator.⁵⁴ Certainly from 395 on this must have become the rule. It was then, if not already before, that the labarum acquired its purely ceremonial

⁵³ R. Grosse, 'Labarum', *RE* 12 (1925), 239-242; Egger 1960, op. cit. (n. 11), 9.

⁵⁴ Egger 1960, op. cit. (n. 11), 19. Eusebius tells us that Constantine had copies made of the labarum and sent to his armies (*Vita Constantini* 1.31). It is hard to see what this meant in practice. Presumably the *imagines* of the older gods were removed from the standards (cf. *Vita Constantini* 2.16) and replaced by Christograms or *vexilla* with that Christian sign. Julian then restored the *signa* to their former pagan quality (Sozomenos, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.17), a move that must certainly have been made undone under his successors, but after that we do not hear of the labarum in a military context any more. For practical purposes other signs and banners were used, especially the *bandon* from the 5th century onwards. Cf. R. Grosse, 'Die Fahnen in der römisch-byzantinischen Armee des 4.-10. Jahrhunderts', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 23/24 (1924), 359-372.

function, guarded by *praepositi* of senatorial rank from the early 5th century on, accompanying the emperors on their triumphal processions in the city or enhancing their majesty in the palace where as late as the 9th century two labarums flanked the imperial throne.⁵⁵ The guards too with the Christogram on their shields had become palace guards with presumably ceremonial functions, as we can see them on the grand mosaic of San Vitale in the presence of Justinian.

Finally, back to Constantine and his vision of the light cross in the sky as described by Eusebius. To repeat, it is not necessary for us to assume the reality of any meteorological or astronomical phenomenon, for the connection between sun or solar sign and Christian monogram could be and in my view had been made without it. But we can well imagine how the emperor, once he had turned to the Sun-god in 310 and especially since some Christian advisers probably had pointed out to him the resemblance between the sign for the sun and the monogram of Christ, supporting their view no doubt with the overall resemblance between the Sun and Christ as Sun of Righteousness and *Sol Salutis*, might really have looked up at the sky with more than usual attention and probed the sun in heaven for some visible sign: waiting for meaningful dreams, looking for signs and portents, searching out oracular texts, all this formed part of the decision-making process in any Roman government at the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century.⁵⁶ So perhaps Constantine did see something which seemed to him a sign of Christ or perhaps he just imagined so when many years later he told his story, in 325 or even as late as 335, to bishop Eusebius⁵⁷. The victory of October 312 had surely confirmed the emperor in his choice for Christianity and ever after he had devoted much of his energy to the affairs of the Church with the zeal of an honest convert. But he was slow and very careful in proclaiming his new allegiance to the world at large. Looking back after he had become sole emperor to the long years from 306 to 324, it seemed to Constantine to have been a slow but steady progress from the western ends of the world to the eastern borders of his realm, from a position of one among four or five emperors to that of sole ruler, from a dim and vague groping for the 'real god' to the recognition of Christ and the reassuring knowledge of being elected by Him.⁵⁸ Precisely

⁵⁵ Grosse 1925, op. cit. (n. 53), 42; Egger 1960, op. cit. (n. 11), 13.

⁵⁶ Weber 2000, op. cit. (n. 17); MacMullen 1998, op. cit. (n. 17).

⁵⁷ For the occasions when Eusebius met or could have met with Constantine: T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge Mass. 1981), 266.

⁵⁸ Elliott 1992, op. cit. (n. 45), 212ff. Also (*passim*) H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops. The politics of intolerance* (Baltimore/London 2000).

because in his first years as emperor he had not been a Christian or at the very least had not made it clear to anybody that he might be, the psychological need in later years to mark a clear break between the old and the new and to emphasize in sharper lines what had in reality most probably been a blurred transition, transformed his decision of 311 or 312 to mark the labarum and the shields of the soldiers with the sign of Christ into a momentous 'conversion'. What exactly Constantine told Eusebius we cannot know. But we may be sure that what we read in the 'Life of Constantine' is also the bishop's interpretation of the emperor's words about Christ and the sun and the sign of Christ that had to be made into a banner. It may explain how the banner becomes, as usual with Eusebius, a cross.⁵⁹ Probably Eusebius even more than Constantine himself made the vision of the light cross into the turning-point of the emperor's reign and indeed of the history of the Church. Essentially, the story of the wonderful vision in the sky acquired the meaning that an imperial baptism would have had, for it gave the unbaptised emperor the authority to be the de facto leader of the Church. Whereas in his 'Church History' Eusebius had depicted Constantine as a second Moses leading his Chosen People, in his later works it is Christ himself who seems to suggest the parallels. The scene of the solar vision has some reminiscence of baptismal ritual, as has been observed.⁶⁰ Its prototype in my view was not Moses before the burning bush nor Paul on his way to Damascus, but Jesus baptised in the River Jordan. Parallel to the cross of light in Constantine's vision we have the dove descending in light on Jesus in the Gospel story; in the latter there is God's voice from heaven, in the former we have God's words written in the sky: By this Conquer! The words are symbolic and programmatic: Christian initiation had, through Constantine, acquired the trappings of Triumph.

Leiden, October 2002

⁵⁹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 1.31.

⁶⁰ For the parallels with Moses see, among others, A. Cameron, 'Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* and the construction of Constantine', in: M.J. Edwards & S. Swain, eds., *Portraits. Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1997), 145-174. Leeb 1992, op. cit. (n. 7), 138, speaks of 'geistige Taufe'; for the imagery of baptism see: H. Montgomery, 'Konstantin, Paulus und das Lichtkreuz', *Symbolae Osloenses* 43 (1968), 84-109; F. Tiddia, 'Terminologia della luce e battesimo nelle iscrizioni greche cristiane', *Vetera Christianorum*. 38 (2001), 103-124.