



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

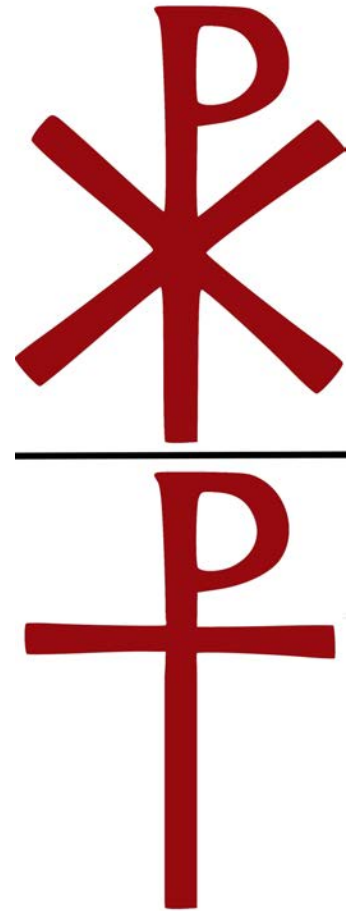
“In This, Conquer . . .”

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Thus read the divine vision of Constantine as reported by Eusebius (ca. 260–340 CE), bishop of Caesarea and author of Constantine’s posthumous biography. The brief phrase (ἐν τούτῳ νίκα/en toutō níka) was said to have been accompanied by a glowing cross above the sun. Eusebius goes on to report that an additional symbol was revealed to Constantine in a dream that evening. That symbol is described as the ligatured chi-rho, the first two letters of “Christ” in Greek (ΧΡΗΣΤΟΣ). Eusebius further explains that Constantine showed him a standard emblazoned with the symbol, which the emperor had made shortly after the vision, but the author remains vague about when and where the vision took place. It is generally assumed that the divine revelations took place before the famed Battle of the Milvian Bridge, when Constantine defeated his contender for the throne in 312 CE. Lactantius (ca. 250–325 CE), a religious advisor to the emperor and tutor to his son, gives a conflicting account, describing the symbol as a *staurogram*.

It would be Eusebius’ account that maintained currency in future generations, along with a lengthening of the original phrase, often quoted today as “*By this sign, you shall conquer.*” Some scholars have cast doubt on details provided by Eusebius, calling attention to the fact that no Christian symbols are present on the Arch of Constantine, erected in 315 CE as a victory memorial after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. Contrarily, scholars

point to a persistent use of solar imagery by Constantine as late as 326 CE, and the fact that the Arch was aligned with the colossal bronze statue of the deity Sol Invictus (“unconquerable sun”), which stood beside the Colosseum. Additionally, a natural phenomenon known as a “sun dog,” when beams emanating from the sun form a cross shape, is also noteworthy, given Eusebius’ account of the solar cross. Moreover, the chi-rho seems to be absent from Rome in the early years of Constantine’s reign, only gaining wider use by the 320s.*



Comparison of chi-rho and *staurogram*



Example of a “sun dog”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_dog

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Symbols aside, scholars agree that Constantine converted to Christianity, though he would not be baptized until his deathbed. The reasons for his conversion, whether political or personal, are still debated. What is certain is that the new emperor strengthened Christianity as never before, beginning with the Edict of Milan of 313 CE, which not only decriminalized the Christianity but also allowed freedom of religion throughout the empire. He would also financially back the Church and return its property confiscated by the anti-Christian emperor, Diocletian (r. 286–305). Tax exemptions for clergy and appointments of Christians to high offices furthered the Church’s mission and visibility. Constantine would also embark upon magnificent building campaigns around the Mediterranean, most notably for churches, including St. Peter’s in Rome, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Church of the Holy Apostles in his new capital of Constantinople. He would be interred in the latter and later granted the title “Equal of the Apostles” by the Orthodox Church.

Attributed to Johann Wenceslas Grauer
(Bohemian, active 1720–1750)
St. Constantine, ca. 1720
Polychrome on wood
Museum purchase (65.18.1)

Constantine’s mother, the empress Helena, was likely an influential force on her son. Her conversion to Christianity is said to have taken place before his, and some believe she convinced her son to follow suit. She was undoubtedly a co-planner in Constantine’s grand vision of church building and relic collection throughout the empire. In 326 CE, at about age 80, Helena set out on a pilgrimage to Palestine, with the proverbial “blank check” from Constantine, providing her unlimited funding for what must have been an expensive trip. She would oversee the building of several churches, including the Church of the Nativity. Perhaps most notably, she was said to have recovered the True Cross and nails from the Crucifixion on the site of a pagan temple, which locals reported had been built over the tomb of Jesus. Excavating nearby, three crosses were located, and the True Cross was revealed when its contact with a sick woman immediately healed her. According to Eusebius, Constantine ordered the building of

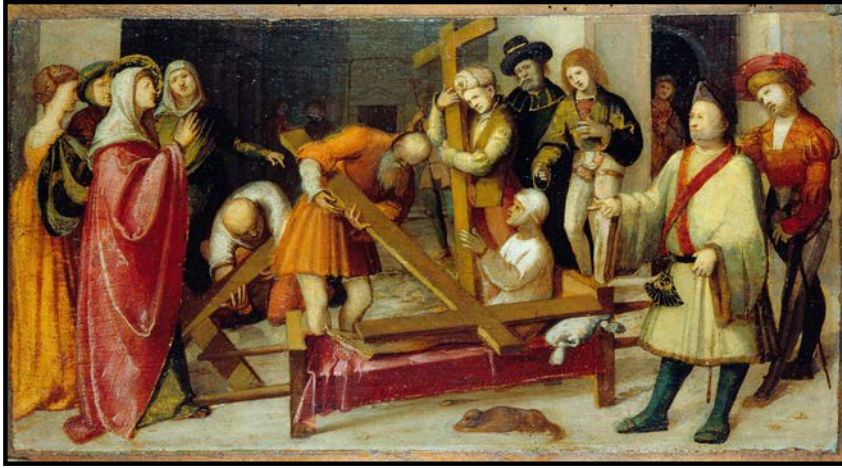


Attributed to Johann Wenceslas Grauer
(Bohemian, active 1720–1750)
St. Helena, ca. 1720
Polychrome on wood
Museum purchase (65.18.2)

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Attributed to Altobello Melone (Italian, ca. 1491–1543)
The Proving of the True Cross, 1516
Oil and tempera (?) on wood panel
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (98.2.2)

the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on the site of the former temple, but the author does not mention the finding of the cross. The cross discovery is related by Socrates Scholasticus (ca. 380–439 CE) in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, probably completed the year he died. Other sources claim that Helena also found the tunic Jesus wore to the Crucifixion. With her cache of relics in tow, Helena returned to Rome in 327 CE where she would die three years later, her son dutifully at her side in her final moments. Constantine would survive her by only seven years. Both would later be canonized in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. ■



Dean Cornwell (American, 1892–1960)
The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 1926
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Schriever (75.197)

*The Constantinian church was destroyed by fire in 614 CE.
It has been rebuilt many times since then.*

* The chi-rho is known first on medallions from Ticinum (modern Pavia, Italy) from about 315 CE and then on a few coins of Siscia (modern Sisak, Croatia), but those may date into the 320s.